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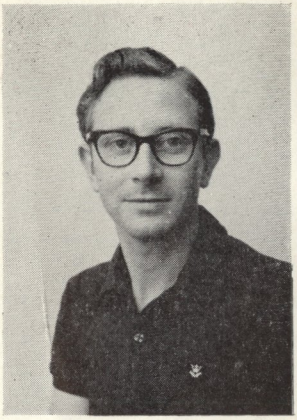
NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Lee Harding

Victoria, Australia



Not featured in this issue, but a new author who has been successfully selling to *New Worlds Science Fiction* for some time, is 25-year-old Australian Lee Harding, who discovered s-f via "Buck Rogers" and other comics (a most unusual introduction) and then graduated on to British reprint magazines distributed in his homeland. As with many prominent British and American writers, he became embroiled in fandom, eventually editing and publishing various Australian amateur magazines containing material by such unlikely contributors as Bertram Chandler, H. J. Campbell and even John Carnell.

From 1955 onward, however, he deserted the amateur publishing field and concentrated upon a career in photography, working on both portrait and commercial projects and from there to photo-journalism and fiction writing. He covered the filming of Nevil Shute's "On The Beach" when the Stanley Kramer unit was working in Melbourne and later the same year travelled to New South Wales to do a similar job on "The Sundowners."

Recently married to a beautiful Dutch girl, his present plans include a working trip to Europe, with an eye upon either a professional writing career or motion pictures.

Favourite s-f writers are Sturgeon, Blish, Clarke, Leiber, Aldiss and Ballard. Major interests, classical music, reading, cinema, pyschology, history.

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

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TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Editorial

1961 . . . In Retrospect

This month there is a temporary break in our highly successful and controversial Guest Editorials, but there are many more to come—by Harry Harrison, Jim Ballard, Philip E. High, David Rome, Robert Silverberg, Richard Wilson and others. The pause is to take a quick look at what happened during 1961.

1959 and 1960 were lean years in world science fiction ; if anything 1961 was even more dismal, yet, looking back on it in a few years time, I have a feeling that it will be called the Year of the Renaissance, if all the signs add up successfully. But, as the year ended, these were all under the surface and will not come to fruition until this year or even later. Meanwhile, let us look at what *did* happen.

For the first time in many years the British and American magazine field remained unchanged—none of the existing magazines ceased publication and no new ones appeared. This in itself is an encouraging sign indicating that a deeper measure of stabilisation has set in after the false inflation of the previous ten years. Stories, too were generally of a higher quality although nothing sensational appeared. In baseball terminology, a year of " Not Hits, No Runs, No Errors."

In direct contrast, the paperback field mushroomed on both sides of the Atlantic. A factor which had already been predicted. Analagous to the " little boom " during the middle 50's, when magazine production soared in the States and hardcover publishers in Britain thought they had found a new Klondyke, the quality declined sharply with the square of the quantity. Despite more titles available there were less good books to read, more oldies revived and a high percentage of novelettes rewritten and extended to book-length requirements. A tendency which is expanding as we enter 1962.

One noticeable factor, due primarily to the decline in hardcover publishing, was the increased number of "new" novels appearing first in paperback in America, a particularly worthwhile outlet for established writers but of little use to the unknown. In Great Britain the reverse policy still applied—existing paperback publishers refusing to look at any new

material but insisting upon reprinting either from previously published hard-cover titles or from already published American paperbacks. The complex situation I outlined last June—small-scale American distribution in the UK effectively stopping British publishers from buying British rights—has now come to a head and unless there is a policy change shortly 1962 will be a very lean year indeed for both hard- and soft-cover publishers in this country. Or they may have to drop S-F from their lists entirely.

For many years the slogan in Britain has been " There's a wonderful back-log of good s-f material available," on the assumption that the back-log would last for ever. It has been dipped into over the years until what is left is hardly worth considering—out-moded ideas and literary styles, books now too long to be produced economically or the dross left behind after the cream has gone. The backlog is a myth. The barrel has been rescraped so many times that we are now down to the hoops.

Meanwhile, to make matters even more difficult for the British publisher, American publishing houses are now buying into existing publishing and distributing companies here—Jonathan Cape Ltd., was recently saved from such a take-over bid by a group of British bookmen headed by Sir Allen Lane, chairman of Penguin Books. To quote the London *Daily Express* reporting the move to combat the American invasion : —" In the past few months American publishers have bought several British publishing firms—and failed to win take-over battles for others. They are eager to buy up firms in Britain because they have publishing rights throughout the Empire market as well as in Britain. Thus a take-over gives American firms coverage over the whole of the English-speaking territory."

With this two-edged sword hanging over their heads British publishers are also faced with the alienation of home writers, who see far greater dividends from across the Atlantic, where in many cases British rights are incorporated in publishing contracts for an extra payment—a payment, incidentally, that is equal to or exceeds what the British publisher would normally offer. Thus, one sale to USA is now the equivalent of a double sale.

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In any war both defence and attack rely heavily upon new scientific inventions. The side that obtains a slight edge often wins, though not always, providing the opposing force comes up with an antidote in time.

Flame In The Flux Field

by KENNETH BULMER

If they reached base ship in one piece then Clinton Naylor was going to suggest they built fluxwagons from repair patches from the start. More patch than hull surrounded the nine men of fluxwagon M30 as she staggered through the field homeward bound. M30 had been just about hacked out three missions ago. This was her forty-eighth and she'd never fly another.

But they'd really got the Octos by the short hairs on Five. Damascus on Five had been well clobbered.

Did the Octos have short hairs? Did they have hair?

They had interceptors, though, that killed fluxwagons.

The Octos had bracketted M30 unmercifully this trip. It had been a long one, right across the central rings of Gideon's shell of fifty or so planets. Right in to the long-established Damascus main base on Five. The fear that kept fluxmen sane and alive was draining away. Replacing it was a different brand—fluxmen knew more than normal Terrans about fear of every sort—that gnawed rather than savaged, that rode them from the knowledge that they might never make it back to base ship.

"Take over, will you, Clint. I want to check aft."

Captain Oliver Randall unbuckled his harness and stood up. He was a big man, easy-smiling and with crinkles around his

eyes—but that was normally. Now he looked like a fluxman who'd just ridden out a mission. *He looks like hell. Like me. Like us all.* Naylor nodded.

"Better take some chewing gum, Oliver. Case you run across a few holes the boys haven't spotted."

Unnecessary words. Corny. Everyone knew what was riding everyone's mind.

If it's true, Naylor thought, *it means the end of flux raiding. That's certain.*

Naylor liked Oliver Randall. Good pilot. Eighty-six—no, dammit—eighty-seven missions. The crew trusted him. He wondered what Randall made of the new situation. *If it's right, that is. If the Octos really have found a way of peering into the witches' broth of the flux field and spearing us by sight.*

He tried not to think about the traject over target and to bring back into his mind the memory of those winking lights on the plot panels going out, one by one, as the fluxwagons shuttled in to Five. The damned Octos *must* be able to spot the fluxwagons in the field. They'd shot their mines in with too much accuracy even for sheer numbers to account for the percentage of kills.

Randall cut out of the front office, walked quickly past the navigator's cubby where Jimmy al Mansour looked up worriedly at his captain's voice. Randall went on.

Up on his co-pilot's throne Naylor glanced over the office. Everything that hadn't been shot away seemed to be working satisfactorily. The auto pilot held them to the snaky red line that would, eventually, if al Mansour could add two and two, bring them back to base ship.

Another mission, That makes seventy-one. If we get back. A big total for a co-pilot. But I wouldn't leave Oliver now. Captain Oliver Randall, and all the gongs. I couldn't.

The wagon creaked and groaned and shuddered her way through the infinitesimal expansions and contractions of the fluxfield.

Another thirteen missions with Oliver—and then what?

The sight of Jomo Tchombe's black face rising up into the front office from the bombardier's pit below broke that disturbing thought. Tchombe looked as awful as the rest of them. Naylor looked him over critically.

Wrong. He looks worse. Shot. He'll never ride another flux mission.

Tchombe's state aroused no pity or anger in Naylor. There was even a suggestion of envy. A man can do so much. Then, like any other machine that is worn out, he'd be junked. Assuming always that M30 made it back to base ship Tchombe would go through on the hyperspace run to Mars base and from there wherever he liked to settle in the Solterran section of the galaxy.

Lucky guy.

He was as lucky, although in a different frame of reference, as Chin, the new ventral gunner, who was a red-streaked mass bundled in a grab bag. Chin wouldn't be flying any more missions, either. Nor would Aramadjian, the radio officer. Nor would little Lopez, the second engineer. All lying bundled in grab bags. And Bill Sturch, the new tail gunner, nursed a smashed left arm and reckoned that his fourth mission had been a rugged stint.

The ninth member of M30's crew, the Engineer One, Sergei Borisov, crouched over his fluxfield engines like a gnome spinning spells, praying they'd hold out under the punishment they had absorbed. All in all, decided Clinton Naylor wearily, the old wagon had taken a beating.

The hours drifted by, spelled out by the four chronometers each pegging the different time scales. Randall asked Naylor to serve around thermoed coffee and rations. The galley was in a mess ; must have taken a direct hit from a small calibre shell and Naylor could find only two intact thermos. He doled out the hot coffee sparingly. They had some way to go yet and the tension dried all their mouths.

He wondered, as so many other men had wondered in times of lowness and depression, why Homo sapiens bothered to space out at all. Here they were, a hundred light years from Earth, struggling for possession of the fifty plus planets circling the big sun Gideon. The Solterrans were working their way in and the Octos were spreading out from the centre. Supply paths crossed and snarled as the planets orbited around their astronomical paths ; navigators had to be hot to cope with shifting demands.

As co-pilot, Naylor's tasks were diversified. He shunted around the beaten up fluxwagon. All the time he was conscious of the comforting presence of Captain Randall up there in the front office, quietly and competently in command.

He spoke to Randall when the tension was draining fast with base ship coming up nicely on the screens.

" Why do we do it, Oliver ?"

Randall checked the air supply, grunted, and dug a hand into his pocket, came up with his pipe. As he filled and lit up, he said reflectively : " I suppose men are so damned nosey and inquisitive they have to find out about anything new and then boss it around." He puffed smoke. " Or get themselves broken up trying."

Naylor felt no surprise that Randall had known what he was thinking. As to the obvious answer to his question . . .

Because we do. Not because we're heroes or love warfare, machines had provenly fallen down on the job. So men had to step in and shoulder automatic machinery aside and risk their own soft flesh and blood out in space. Because the Octos would be down on Solterra without pity if no man stood up to them. Primitive. Bestial. But true and practical.

Sergei Borisov's heavy voice crackled from the squawk box. " We nearly there yet, skipper ?"

" Just about."

" Couldn't be any later. These rubber bands are going to go phuut ! any minute."

The reference to rubber bands was not entirely facetious. The engines contained the build up and collapse of the fluxfield, a pulse that had to be contained within very narrow limits of fluctuation bringing the mass of the wagon from one end of the scale to the other, anchored to the swarm of billions of neutrinos pouring out from the interiors of stars and punching through every segment of space. It was a cheeky conception, very fitting of Captain Randall's estimate of mankind, like hitching your wagon to a star.

You clung on for a neutrino wide slice of time and then let go, being flung onward and forward and then letting slip ready to catch on again for the next infinitesimal instant. And so this rubber band of science extended and relaxed and shunted the fluxwagon into a cloak of invisibility and hurled her across space.

Until the rubber bands broke under Octo punishment.

Tchombe had heard. He reared up through the orifice from his pit to the front office. He began to shout. He'd gone right through the fear stages all fluxers experienced and was starting in again on the primitive exhibitions of panic. Naylor leaned over and clipped him on the back of the neck. They

stowed the unconscious bombardier on a skeleton along with Bill Sturch, the maimed rear gunner.

On the screen the base ship showed as a steadily glowing blue dot. The sight pulsed warm reassurance through the crew. Base ship. Everything they could sense and grasp and taste of Earth was there. Like a beacon light it had guided and welcomed so very many men back from the depths of space.

The wagon gave her characteristic lurch and they had thumped out into real space. Stars glittered everywhere. Dead ahead the enormous complex of base ship showed, growing even as they watched under residual momentum from the traject over Five. Randall took her and under his square competent hands M30 crabbed into base from her last mission.

Inside the fluxer bays the crew secured their positions and dropped down through the hatch. As his feet hit the metal treads Naylor felt as usual the stomach jolt he always experienced on returning home. It was a good feeling.

They walked tiredly up the ramp past other fluxwagon bows neatly ranked in their bays, hearing the gong echoes of techs already at work, smelling the old familiar smells of oil and metal dust and canned air that was in so positive a way different from the individual stink of a fluxwagon.

The dead and wounded were wheeled away by medics.

Randall, Naylor, al Mansour, the only three left from the deck crew, headed for the de-briefing room. Naylor's legs felt heavy, dragged. He couldn't keep a coherent thought in his head. Another mission finished.

Seventy-one. Another twenty-nine. My odds will stay pretty even now. Past ninety they'll go down with a thump. If I last.

Then his thoughts skittered off like dead leaves in the wind. They went through to de-briefing. Deputy leader Armstrong spoke pleasantly to them as the Intelligence officers sucked their brains.

" As soon as your crew is rested up, Oliver," said Armstrong, a pugnacious, bulldog man with all of Leader Kurtven's dedicated belief in men mastering machines plus a streak of human understanding that he kept as tightly clamped down as a wagon hatch over Octo territory, " report to me. Things to discuss."

" Right, sir." They were all too tired to think.

When he lay down in his bunk Naylor saw the restful green overhead and the single lamp burning and then he was waking up and yawning and feeling as hungry as a starship man on pep pills only. He swung his feet out and planked them down hard. *Good. Good to feel the solidness of base ship under my feet.*

He showered and shaved then dressed correctly and went along for a meal. He hadn't looked at his watch yet and the meal could have been anything from breakfast to supper. They served him steak and kidney pie followed by strawberries and cream so he guessed it was dinner. Jimmy al Mansour sat at a nearby table and brought his plate across. Presently Sergei Borisov rolled in, his red face a high sign over the Cambridge blue uniform shirts.

" Armstrong wants to see us pronto," said al Mansour, sipping scalding coffee.

" Now what have we done wrong—?" demanded Borisov.

Captain Randall's voice brought all their heads around.

" The book, I'd say, Sergei, judging by the report I've had on M30. She'll never flux again."

" Now he tells us," said Borisov. " Only my genius held those damned engines together from the start—"

They wrangled on amicably, the four fit survivors from M30. Of the other five, three were dead, one was wounded and in sick bay and the last had gone the way plenty of fluxmen went. Nuts. Stark staring raving. Shipped back to Mars base apparently a perfectly normal and sane human being.

But Jomo Tchombe'll never be able to lift into a flux wagon again. If they tried to make him he might go homicidal, or comatose, or anything.

After the meal the four men headed up to the Deputy leader's flat and Randall checked them in. Up here in base ship the air was full of rapid competence, paper work and clerks, angled lights and filing cabinets. Armstrong hated it. Leader Kurtven had to give him strict orders not to flux unless given special permission.

They went into Armstrong's office and sat down. The deputy leader looked them over.

Armstrong picked up his pipe and began to fill it, nodding to the four fluxmen across his desk. *Get them relaxed—or as relaxed as a fluxer ever is outside a wagon. Break the big news gently. Leader Kurtven maybe doesn't really understand that men although better than machines aren't quite the same. Even Kurt's a human being, although he hates to admit it.*

" I've asked you up here," began Armstrong, puffing smoke and shaking out his match, " to impart a trifle of importance. M30's shot. I'm surprised you brought her back."

Randall cracked his long lips into a smile. " We had Borisov riding herd on the engines."

" You'll be taking command of a new wagon, Oliver." The Deputy leader glanced at Naylor. " Clint. You like to take a wagon, command a new one ?"

Despicable panic hammered at Naylor. He swallowed, kept his hands steady. "I—uh—that is—I'd kind of like to ride with Oliver until he's through his hundredth."

It had taken an effort to say that, to put into words what he vaguely sensed was a failing.

" Well, that fits in with our plans." Armstrong didn't push the point. " You put forward a tentative thought that the Octos could really spot us in the field, Oliver. You said at debriefing that the percentage of hits was higher even than increased numbers of mines would account for—"

" That was my opinion, sir. Of course, we can't be sure. But the plot board showed wagons going out fast—"

Quietly, Armstrong said : " We sent out twenty-three. Twelve came back."

No one commented on that. The plot board up in the front office showed the other wagons on the raid as chips of light surrounding the red course line. Naylor had only to think of that board on the run in and the way the little lights had blacked out as M30 shook under Octo mines to bring it all back. He didn't think about it. Instead he listened to the Deputy leader. Most things in this life were best forgotten.

" Captain Daker reported that he was attacked when late on a mission and he gained the impression he could be spotted in the field. Later he was unobserved when riding alone. But that was six missions ago." Armstrong pulled on his pipe. " I can tell you now, in confidence, that the most recent theory is that the Octos can see us in the field—"

The exclamations quietened. Armstrong went on. " This is really a matter of extrapolative science. Oh, sure, I know the fluxers are contemptuous of machines—and rightly so when it comes to their job—but also and equally true, science is what enables us to do our job at all. We think that the probability of a wagon being shot down over Octo territory and making

planetfall intact enough for the Octos to look her over is high enough for it to have happened."

" So they've had a look at all our gadgets—including the plot board," said Randall.

" That is what we think. If so, they can equip their watch stations with replicas of our flux plot boards and see us as plainly as the noses—well, we'll skip that. They can pick us up when we go in in the field and when we pull out."

" Well, then," asked Naylor, " why didn't they shoot us all down in the field ? How did any escape ?"

" The only possible answer to that is that the accuracy of the plot board as used by them, their own mine-flinging devices into the flux field and the movement of the wagons themselves —that combination of slight inaccuracies, rather—adds up to a fifty-fifty chance of a hit."

" Too damn high odds for us to win—"

" Yes, at the moment." Armstrong cut that off. " Flux Bomber Command's attitude is that we must go along with every new development. No war was one picture right back to the time they were using chemical explosives for guns. You start out with certain weapons and science faces up to demands and produces a whole new arsenal to finish the war. At the moment alien science is ahead. We have to change that."

" I accept that we have to look to science in just about every stage of life today," said Randall. " And if we could develop robots that could run a fluxwagon in on the button as efficiently as a human crew then I'd be the first to jump for joy. But we know that at the moment machines, no matter how clever, cannot react to the unpredictable. They are not original thinkers. We'll have to sort this new problem out fast, otherwise the advantage of using the flux field is negatived—"

" Precisely. And we have a lead on the next step. A Professor Hillary and team will be spacing in from Mars in the next few days. Your crew, Oliver, will be built up with fresh men. Oh—and you'll also get six flux gunners—"

" Six ! But—"

Armstrong chuckled. He flipped a photograph across the desk. " Have a look. You won't be taking command of an emma, Oliver. You're being selected for a real top honour !" The quiet irony was not lost. " You're being given Q1."

" Q1. What happened to N, O and P ?"

" The Nan's were dropped as merely extensions of the Emmas. The Onions had too many bugs. The Pips are being built and another wing will be using them, probably from another base ship. You see, FBC is expanding in a big way. Solterra has decided that the Octos have to be beaten rapidly here around Gideon. But that's high strategy. All we're concerned with right now is finding a way to put our wagons through the field without being picked up by the Octo watch stations."

Randall, Naylor, al Mansour and Borisov crowded to look at the photograph. " Whew !" said al Mansour. " She looks a beauty."

" Twice as long as the emmas, eighty feet. Deeper, too, but not much wider. A lot more rocket power to boost across planetary traject at higher speed. Oh, and, Sergei, tripled engines instead of doubles."

" More work for a down-trodden engineer," said Borisov cheerfully. His heavy red face lit up avidly at the photo of the Q wagon.

Armstrong let his lips stretch a little. Then he said : " She has six regular gun turrets ; bow and tail, chin and spine and two ventral. That's where your six gunners will do their stuff. There are also the usual turrets for added firepower by deck personnel."

" We ought to have a union," al Mansour said. " Time and a half for added duty."

" I'll send along your new men later today." Days aboard base ship were arbitrary, twenty four hours long. " The professor we expect will give us time for you to take a trial run in Q1. Oh—and I'll be along some of the time."

" Good," said Randall warmly. He meant it. " Glad to have you along, sir."

Tapping out his pipe, Naylor thought : *And that means he'll occupy my throne. So what do I do ? Hang on to a grab rail ? Oh, well.*

As the four fluxmen trooped out the door Armstrong looked up from his desk. His face expressed a mischievous humour. He sent the last barb after them with malicious glee. " Oh, and, gentlemen. Professor Hillary is professor of anti-Octo Technology, holding down that chair at FBC Academy on Mars. It's Professor Daisy Yolande Hillary."

The four men gawped.

Armstrong finished : " They call Professor D. Y. Hillary old Damn You Hillary, back on Mars. Happy fluxing."

They went straight to the Mess for a drink.

Borisov, gripping his glass of Martian Magic, said : " I've heard of old Damn You Hillary. He's supposed—uh—that is—she's supposed to be hell on wheels."

" Yes," corroborated al Mansour. " I've heard rumours from the greenies. I wondered why they smirked."

" Since my time," said Randall.

" A new chair," Naylor said. " We're getting old grey beards with over seventy missions."

And that's not a clever remark. Snap out of it, Clinton Naylor. Drink up ! The fluxfield just loves to eat up softies.

When they went down to the bays to look over their new wagon they were joined by an admiring throng of other fluxmen drifting over from their own wagons. Comment was ripe. The gist of it was that Randall and his crew had had to be singled out for cotton-wool treatment in a special wagon so they wouldn't get their feet wet. Randall and Naylor laughed it off but Borisov flushed all over his ugly face and wanted to beat a few skulls in.

" Stand back, peasants." The high, clear, strangely cutting voice pierced the jocular remarks. " Let the only member of the crew who matters have a look see."

Everyone looked around. A bombardier walked confidently along the metal walkway, jumped down beneath Q1's bow. He stared up at the wagon. He had fair, wavy hair, a jutting chin shown off to advantage in his present pose, and a lightness, an agility, about his movements that told of the trained athlete. Someone in the crowd blew a raspberry.

The newcomer didn't hear—or pretended not to. He looked down and said crisply : " I'm Waley. Bombardier assigned to Q1, Captain Randall."

Randall put out his hand. " I'm Randall." *A smart one*, his thoughts ran on despite his attempts to remain objective. *A Johnny know-it-all. So slick it hurts.*

For my sins.

Borisov caught all that too. He rolled his thick shoulders truculently. " I'm Sergei Borisov," he said without waiting for the skipper to introduce them. Then he put the question that lay uppermost in all fluxmen's minds. " How many missions?"

Waley moved a hand across his face as though to brush away the futility of the question. " Four," he said. " I've been doing a lot of research work. Frightfully hush-hush, you know."

" Yeah," someone in the crowd said. " We know."

" Let's take a look inside," said Randall hurriedly.

Following his captain up the ladder through that entrance hatch that hadn't been designed to be got out of fast, Naylor, too felt he had the measure of Waley.

A four mission man. Over the first shakes and thinks he has it all taped. Oliver'll cut him down to size.

Waley might have been joking about his remark that only the bombardier was of importance in a wagon, that all the other crew members' efforts were merely to put the bomb aimer over the target. But no one who'd flown any number of missions thought like that any more. A fluxwagon crew was a team. Every one was as important as everyone else. That way they did their job—and it helped them to fight the extremes of fear that they had to use to remain sane.

Inside Q1 the five men went to their positions. Naylor whistled as he looked around the flying cabin. " Some set up."

Jimmy al Mansour poked his head out of his navigator's cubby. " This and the Ritz," he said, and vanished.

After ten minutes of orientation—the Q1 was obviously the product of a lot of gripes from fluxmen riding emmas—a voice floated up hollowly from the hatch.

" Hey ! D'you mind if we have a look 'round ?"

Randall secured his pilot's section. " Sure. Come on up."

The invasion of admiring and greenly jealous fluxmen went on for some time. Naylor left them to it and headed for the Mess. The mail run from Mars had just come in and there was the expected letter from his mother. He went back to his bunk and slit the envelope. For the next half hour he was no longer aboard base ship orbiting an alien sun called Gideon. He was back home on Earth, watching his mother and elder sister as they went about their humdrum, ordinary, everyday tasks.

Naylor's father had been a structural engineer and he'd died when Naylor was eight. All he could remember now was a booming laugh and a bristly chin. His mother and sister had stood in for the missing man about the house. " I've had your room entirely redecorated," his mother wrote. " Miriam and I

argued about where some of your things should go back. We keep your room just as it was when you left."

Haze over the Blue Mountains from the back window and the neat exurban street from the front. His comfortable room with the big foam plastic bed, the spaceship models on their shelves, the books, the stereo recorder with loudspeakers all over. His motor bike in the empty garage. It had been a good life, studying to be a spatial engineer.

" How is Oliver keeping ?" wrote his mother. " His wife dropped by to see us the other day. Mary is such a nice woman. She flew herself up from Melbourne in her little jet helicopter. She even let young Oliver handle the controls. I'm so glad, dear, that you're actually serving with Oliver."

Borisov's head, ugly and grinning and red, thrust into Naylor's room. " Hey ! Clint. Whaddya know. My old woman's taken out divorce papers."

" I'm—I'm sorry, Sergei—" Naylor began, jerked back to base ship and the fluxers and his comrades.

" Sorry nothing. The old battleaxe finally did it. Do I feel a new man !"

Naylor had to laugh.

At the next meal—coq au vin and all the trimmings—the crew of the old M30 were regaled by Bombardier Waley with his reminiscences. Apparently he'd been the wingding man on his course, top in every section, could put a brick down a chimney pot from atmosphere traject.

" Perhaps the Octos don't use chimney pots," al Mansour shot in wickedly. Borisov guffawed.

Nothing, though, could stem Waley's exuberance. According to him he was the ultimate perfection of fluxmanship. His record, Oliver Randall confided later to Naylor, showed that all his talk wasn't hot air.

" That's why Armstrong sicced him on to us. He's only ridden four missions but he is a top man."

" What's Armstrong dreamed up for us ?"

" Something brilliantly nasty, you can bet." al Mansour had his perpetually worried expression back, a look that he didn't know he had, a look that was just part of his way of combating the strain of being a fluxman.

They were standing at the bar of the Mess, having ducked Waley as soon as they could. Borisov walked across with a new man.

" Meet Werner Stein, our new engineer." Borisov waited as they shook hands. Stein had crinkly, oily black hair, a magnificent nose, and a pair of the most brilliant, merry eyes Naylor had ever seen. He appeared to be quite at ease and fitted in with the rest of the crew at once. " Werner's an Engineer One, same as me," Borisov said. " But for this mission he's fluxing as the number two man. Off hand, I'd say the Deputy leader has really sorted us out for something highly diverting."

After their next sleep period they were joined by their new radio and electronics officer, N'Gomo Labiche, a serious faced Negro with sleepy eyes who seemed to possess eight arms when handling his equipment in the radio shack, and they spaced out minus the gunners for an amble around in the field. Stein had completed fifty-two missions. Labiche, thirty-eight. The old M30 crew found the new men eased into the command organisation well, knowing the teamwork involved and happy to take their lead from the old hands—both Borisov and al Mansour had notched sixty-seven missions — except for Bombardier Waley.

Waley was going to turn out a burr for all his smoothness.

" She's a sweet wagon," Randall said over the intercom.

" I'll second that." Borisov's voice over the squawk box was happy.

At this short distance from base ship the reassuring blue spot of light stayed comfortably close. Whatever mission they were going to be assigned, it would involve dropping bricks on Octos, and that blue dot would slide right off the plot board.

On their return they spaced out again, this time with Deputy leader Armstrong aboard. Naylor went aft to the engine bay.

Just as I said. Sitting up there on my throne. Oh, well.

Co-pilots were neither fish, flesh nor good red herring around a fluxwagon. Naylor dropped down and pre-flighted a ventral gun position, swung the big plastic sight around. He stayed around the wagon until time to hit base ship. Only then would he allow himself to walk along the catwalk and climb up into the front office.

" Familiarising myself with the layout," he said.

No one answered. Armstrong was bringing the wagon in and Randall was sitting with a cold pipe grinding down between his teeth.

Oliver trusts Oliver and no-one else when it comes to bringing a wagon in. Naylor's thoughts were snide. *Armstrong's all right but he doesn't have Oliver's touch.*

Back in the flux bays, Armstrong said : " Sweet wagon you have there, Oliver. Now let's go up and introduce you all to Damn You Hillary."

Walking through the warm metal bays with the smells of paint and oil and rubber plastic, Randall said : " Mary wrote me she flew up to see your folks Clint. They spoiled young Oliver, apparently." He was smiling, walking with his easy stride. " I wonder they forgive me for snaring you into fluxers."

" Best days' work I ever did, Oliver." He really meant that, too.

Up in Armstrong's office they met Professor D. Y. Hillary.

If Naylor had been expecting glamour, a long-legged redhead with stars in her eyes for the fluxboys, he had the grace to chuckle at himself. Daisy Hillary was short and chunky of body, clad in regulation grey coveralls, and her square, big-boned face was bare of make-up and crowned with a wiry shock of grey hair. A lank strand straggled across her forehead and every now and then she'd push it back. From what they'd found out she was the brightest brain in the anti-Octo technology field.

She possessed a voice like an out-of-phase flux motor.

" Glad to meet you, gentlemen. I believe the Deputy leader has explained that a lot of equipment will have to go aboard your wagon." She wasn't the silly sort of woman who called a fluxwagon a ship. " My team will begin that as soon as you give them the say so, captain."

" Right away, ma'am," said Randall politely.

" Call me Daisy." She flashed her jet eyes at them, suddenly. " Or D. Y. But I don't swear. Got it ?"

Damn You Hillary, then, didn't like her nickname.

" Oh, and," she said, " I'd like you to strap a cushion on my seat. My old bones are fragile."

" *Your* seat ?" said Captain Oliver Randall, thrown off stride for the first time Naylor could recall in years. " Surely—surely you're not going along ?"

She stared at him with a slow look of exasperated patience as though having to explain a simple problem to a dimwit. " It's my idea and my equipment. If I'm not along who's going to run it ?"

They left it like that. Next time Naylor went down to Q1 he found the Ritzy effect commented on by al Mansour had vanished. Strange equipment cluttered everything and six new aerials sprouted from the hull. The interior of the brand new Q1 had reverted to the usual cramped buggy wagon look of the emmas.

" Well," said al Mansour in an aggrieved voice, " I knew it was too good to last."

He pointed at a plastic arm chair with a thick cushion.

" The throne of the high and mighty Damn You Hillary—"

Professor Hillary's voice floated up through the hatch.

" If I catch you saying that, young man, I'll tan you harder than your mother ever did."

al Mansour looked around. He was trapped. There was only one way in and out of a fluxwagon, the round hatch beneath the pilot's compartment in the nose section. He scuttled aft along the catwalk to gang up with Borisov and Stein. Naylor chuckled and went through to the front office out of Damn You Hillary's way.

He was surprised at his own shock when Hillary and Bombardier Waley entered together, talking amicably, acting like old buddies. *Perhaps Waley's cockiness has foundations ? He must be good. His efficiency makes me look sick.*

Naylor was still nursing grievous thoughts when they were alerted. He and the rest of the deck crew entered briefing and at once, in the smoke-thick atmosphere with the curtain covered plot on the wall behind the briefing dais, the jokes and the horseplay and the corny gag-lines began. Fifty flux wagon deck crews were present. Fifty ! That meant—*if the Octos can see us one hundred and twenty-five of these men won't come back. Nor their engineers and gunners. Happy thought.*

Naylor turned to face Bob Pritchard, co-pilot on M90. They hurled insults at each other and swapped their current betting odds. Pritchard had completed sixty-three missions. Other fluxmen were jotting down bets on knee pads. There was in the room the usual pre-mission tension, quiet and controlled, but there, waiting to be transformed into the live fear that rode with all fluxers, guided and used.

The noise sliced off cleanly as Leader Kurtven stepped up on the dais. He stood for a moment, lean and authoritative in his Cambridge blue uniform, the silver badges of rank glinting in the lights. He looked down on his men.

Machines. Not just men. More than men. More than machines. But facing now a deadly new technology that means the end of flux raiding if we don't master it. Professor Damn You Hillary and her black boxes of tricks have to win this round for us. The Octos play for keeps. These men have to have a chance. Leader Kurtven stood still and straight and tall. *But even if we don't have an even chance, we'll still go on fighting. That's the way we're made.*

For our sins.

The waiting men knew at once that Leader Kurtven was not riding with them this trip. Had he been doing so he would have been dressed, like them, in drab grey coveralls.

Sitting waiting, his pipe going nicely, Clinton Naylor realised he must be feeling what all the men there felt ; the comradeship of one's own crew, the tightly-knit organism that could absorb and survive punishment and new members, the rightness that a man should flux out with friends and, if he was going to burn over Octo planets, well, then, he'd be burning in good company.

His eyes swung to the curtain covered plot. Where this time ? Coded Earth names rushed up like bubbles in his mind.

Eldorado on Thirteen ? *Dover on Eleven* ? *That's a sticky ring. Karlsbad and Cincy on Ten* ? *Wherever it is it'll be sticky. Stahlheim* ? *Oh, no—pray it's not Stahlheim. But fifty wagons. That's a big push. Oslo* ? *Luxor* ? *Tientsin* ?

Captain Randall leaned across. " We'll soon find out, Clint. And Leader Kurtven's got that look in his eye."

" Bet you a clear fifty," a voice rose overloud from two rows back. " It's Twelve. Aylestone and Piombino."

" Hit them a week ago," came the answer. " You're on."

Men bet on anything. Even on death.

Naylor noticed his hands. They were quite steady. That pleased him. He sucked on his pipe. It was out but he scarcely noticed.

Leader Kurtven must have heard that betting exchange, too. He didn't smile. He swept a cool grey gaze over the rows of faces. Then he nodded.

" Whoever made that bet loses," he said in his penetrating voice. The curtains swished back.

Plain to see on the plot the red course line began at the blue dot that was base ship and wandered erratically out dodging

known Octo watch stations to the fuzzy ball that simulated Five's atmosphere.

" But we've just been there !"

" Damascus again ! Well, well."

" Return-trip tickets line form on the left."

And so on and so on. Corny laughs to cover the mounting tensions and fears that would only be—could only be drained away—when the men struggled aboard their wagons and shuttled into the field.

Kurtven gave them their briefing. Courses to be steered. Reciprocals. Order of shuttle out. Wavelengths. Call signs—in case the Octos could decipher English. *If they had mouths to make sounds.* Information of Octo prowlers. Because of the relatively slow swing around of these planets about Gideon the course would be much the same as that steered last mission.

" You all know Damascus. Five presents no particularly awkward traject problems." Kurtven recognised the absurdity of that remark ; but in context with Stahlheim on Eight it made sense. " We believe the Octos have interceptor repair shops in Damascus. If they have you're doing yourself a favour by putting your bricks down right on the button."

" Right in the gold," Waley said. Randall turned his head; but away, towards al Mansour and Naylor.

Special briefing then began, the different departments huddling under Intelligence officers. Naylor trailed along behind Randall. Deputy leader Armstrong called to Randall.

" Bring your crew along after, will you, Oliver ?"

" Right, sir."

Naylor clenched down on his pipe until he felt his teeth grind. He was beginning to get the shakes and that was bad this early. He didn't bother to try to hide his fear. Let the thing boil out, purify it ; one kind of a bombardier over there had tears pouring down his face ; but he was taking down his briefing without faltering. It took people in different ways ; but you had to use it, not fight it.

At their special briefing Armstrong made it brief. "I'm not to be allowed to ride with you. Not enough room with Damn You Hillary and her team. She's got two men and two women with her. They'll all be hassling around inside Q1."

At least, thought Naylor with relief, *I'll have my throne.*

" This is the drill. You'll be going in fifteen minutes ahead of the advance body. The main group follow on in fifteen

minutes after that. Hillary's job is to blank off the Octo watch stations. If they *are* damn well watching us she's going to blind them. You've got to go through first."

" I understand, sir."

Oliver's calm. Now if only I could—hell of a mission ! God ! In first. To be shot at with everything they have.

" Do the others know this, sir ?"

" No. Fifty wagons is a big force. We hope to catch the Octos on Five with their pants down. If they have any—well." Armstrong stood up. " Good hunting."

They trooped out. The door shut behind them. The Deputy leader had returned to his paper work, his files and signals and dockets.

Why the hell won't Kurt let me flux out with them ? Stuck here on my rear suffocated by paperwork. A fluxman ! Hell !

And Deputy leader Armstrong switched on his recorder and began work with such violence he almost tore the switch loose.

Down in the guts of base ship the fluxwagons lay in their bays like eggs in packing crates. Crews walked the ramps to their wagons. Last minute adjustments sent tinny noise echoing in the metal shell. Electric motors whined. All the bombs had been loaded ready. Ammunition lay in trays ready to be fed into the guns. Rocket venturis had been resurfaced and polished mirror bright. Food and drink in plastic pre-cooks was stacked in the galleys. The bustle was purposeful and controlled.

Fifty wagons made up a big push.

There are a lot of Greenies fluxing this trip. Naylor kept his mind on the bets he had taken. *The law of averages skips a few rules when death throws the dice. My seventy-second mission. Twenty-nine golds and out. It's been a long time.*

Then he was shaking hands with the first of the six new gunners. They looked young—frightfully young—pink faces with eager eyes and a galaxy to conquer ; brown and black faces with a devouring ambition ; yellow faces with wisdom and, even in men so young, the capacity to handle their emotions on overloaded circuits.

" You'll be riding a brand new ship," Randall was saying. " Gun positions are those you're accustomed to, only there are more of them. We're on a mission that's going to shake the Octos up more than somewhat. Good hunting." And he, as captain, was first up that n arrow hatch.

Following on, Naylor climbed straight to his co-pilot's throne and began at once to pre-flight his position. All about him the smell of a fluxwagon rolled up ; but fresh, new, the bright paint stronger than usual, subduing the ozone, oil, plastics and canned air. He sniffed. Randall caught him from the corner of his eye.

" You smell it too, Clint ?"

" What—?"

Randall chuckled. An odd sound, that, in a fluxwagon. " We've company. D. Y. Hillary has a couple of girl techs along. Despite all, they're using perfume."

Borisov's heavy voice rattled from the squawk box.

" You been using after shave lotion again, skipper ?"

Someone giggled aft. The intercom filled with quips and tired cracks. The tension was applying the brain-crushing power that would mount now until the mission was completed.

Randall spoke with a bite. " Captain here. Check."

One by one they checked. " Co-pilot, checking. Navigator checking. Bombardier checking." *Waley sounds too damn cocky.* " Radio checking. Engineer One checking. Engineer Two checking." Then the gunners, one after the other, from bow and chin, via spine and the two ventrals, to tail.

All okay. All set. All ready to go.

The clock that told base ship time zeroed up to the red needle marking takeoff time. Randall pulled the wagon off the skids and eased her out. The rockets pulsed. They were in space, free of base ship, heading out and away.

The stars stayed in vision for perhaps three minutes ; then with that quivery little shake Q1 had shuttled into the fluxfield. The high drama of the deep space boys was entirely lacking for their long countdown would be a little absurd here ; the wagons just shuttled off into the fluxfield like factory hands when the whistle blew heading for the canteen.

The long haul to Five had begun.

" Like me to take a stroll around aft, Oliver ?" asked Naylor when they'd been fluxing for the best part of two hours.

" Sure. Bring back some coffee."

" Right."

Naylor unstrapped and walked the few steps aft to the central catwalk. Jimmy al Mansour's head was downbent on his plot and Naylor didn't disturb him. The navigator had to bring a wagon out of the field right on the edge of the planet's

atmosphere. *That's a hair-trigger job all right. But Jimmy's okay. The best in the Command.* Naylor prowled on, finding he had to edge past the organ-pipes and hi-fi equipment stacked everywhere by Hillary's team. The two men and the two girls were just about indistinguishable in their helmets and coveralls. He whiffed perfume. They were working on their equipment as though—*well, their lives and ours do damned well depend on it, don't they* ?

Professor Hillary pushed past him. She carried a clipboard bulging with papers of all shapes and sizes.

" Oh, Clinton," she said, as though realising who he was for the first time. " I'll want to see you and Oliver pretty soon. Up front."

" Right, D. Y.," Naylor said. *Can't seem to call the old bat Daisy. Sort of lese majeste, I suppose.* " I'll just finish out this check. Fifteen minutes ?"

" Suits me."

As she went back to her team and equipment and Naylor dropped down to the lower catwalk he imagined he caught a pale reflection in her of the fear driving all the fluxmen. Of course, this would be her first trip over Octo country. She didn't really know what she'd let herself in for.

Or, perhaps she did ? *Professor of anti-Octo technology. Perhaps she knows a sight more about them than we do.*

Sergei Borisov and Werner Stein greeted him with friendly abuse ; but they had little of which to complain. The new tripled engines of Q1 were functioning perfectly. Naylor dropped down on to the ventral gun positions, turning first to the starboard. The youngster there was pre-flighting his turret, over and over, it seemed. Naylor had a few words of encouragement for him—futile, really, in their context, and then crabbed across to port.

The gunner here turned his yellow face around, smiling slightly, giving a thumbs up sign. Naylor tried to return the smile but gave up. He went on aft. *They'll learn.*

The tail gunner was sitting with his feet perched on the transverse pressure bar, smoking a cigar and reading a spicy magazine. He looked up as Naylor put his head into the turret. He couldn't have been nineteen yet.

" Just fine, just fine," he said before Naylor spoke. " When do we hit traject ?"

" Plenty of time yet. You'll get the warning buzz."

" Sure. Just fine, fine."

Only when Naylor swung away did he notice the magazine was upside down.

Daisy's got to do her stuff, he thought savagely. *Science has got to figure a way out so these kids don't have to keep on being killed. Science started all this goddam business, let science sort it out.* He crabbed up forward again, checked the spine gunner, a lad with flame-red hair and a wide, loose grin. *If we hadn't started monkeying about with the secrets of the universe we wouldn't have bumped into the Octos. Then maybe I could be back on Earth—No. Wrong. If we'd sat tight on our mud ball the aliens would have come alooking for us. That's certain.*

Despite the size of Q1 Naylor still had that suffocating feeling of being pressed in on all sides by pipes and wiring and hole-perforated beams and girders. Equipment was lashed everywhere. Just moving about was like stepping over a floor-full of freshly laid eggs. He checked the squawk box connection points at intervals, made sure the oxygen bottles were lashed in their beckets, checked the patches, both manual and automatics. *That's one thing a machine can do. Sense air pressure drop and find the hole, slap a patch across it.*

The Octos hadn't figured a way of fouling up that yet. But they'd get around to it. No matter what scientific device was put into use the other side found a way to counter it, render it ineffective. Then poor old Homo saps had to step in and do the job by hand. As usual.

Naylor was getting ideas about the deck crew of Q1, including in that the scientific team under Damn You Hillary. al Mansour would be okay ; he always had been. Naylor knew enough to know that each mission was a fresh one, that nothing which had gone before really affected the current job ; so maybe Jimmy al Mansour would choose this trip to flake out. N'Gomo Labiche, the thirty-eight mission radio officer with his sleepy black face was an unknown ; he had seemed okay. But no one knew what anyone else was going to do under flux attack. And Waley—cocky Bombardier Joe Waley. He was going to misfunction. Naylor knew it. The writing had been on the plot too long.

He went back up front and said : " Coffee, Oliver."

Randall took the hot plastic cup gratefully. " D. Y. wants to chat to us. It won't be a social call, Clint."

Bring on the bright chatter, pep yourself up. " Similar to the call we're paying on the Octos, then, Oliver." Down in the sealed off bomb bays lay the bricks ready to take off when Waley pressed his bomb release. That whole compartment down there was isolated from the rest of the wagon. Had to be, when the bomb bay doors opened the place evacuated its air. Randall let go a soft chuckle.

" That's about it, Clint."

D. Y. Hillary pushed her head through the open hatch.

" Permission to come up," she said. As a question and in the best flux tradition, it was a dominating statement.

" Come on in, Dam—uh—D.Y." said Randall. She wriggled her squat body in and sat down on a folding seat. Her lined face looked tired and the strand of grey hair had curled free from her helmet rim. She pinched her nose hard, between the eyes.

" All right, boys. This is the drill. You're on this trip chauffering me. Let's get that straight for a start. My job is to blank out Octo watch stations with my gear so that the rest of the mission can flux through without being forked out of the field by mines."

Randall nodded politely. Naylor sat, chilled.

" The bombs you carry down there are of secondary importance. We'll go on through and traject for a bombing run afterwards, if you wish. I've checked the orbits out with Jimmy and he can put us into a holding spiral long enough for me. If we succeed it means that the wagons ought to break into real space and traject without prior warning to the Octos."

" That'll be good."

" Very good." She thumped the papers in the clipboard. " Oh, and, Oliver. Try not to use your radio officer, N'Gomo, too much. I'll be needing him a lot."

" Fair enough. He's of most use when we're fluxing home."

" I suppose," Naylor said off-handedly, " when you foul up these damned Octo watch stations, blur their plot boards or whatever it is you do, we'll still be okay ? I mean, we'll still be able to see the other wagons on our own board ?"

Slowly, Hillary shook her head. " 'Fraid not, Clinton."

" Hell," said Randall, sharply. " We have to traject in some sort of formation. Bombers have to flux in tightly to give some protection against interceptors—"

" That, my dear, foul-mouthed Oliver, is why we're fluxing this one solo. The other wagons may have difficulty ; but they should be able to get enough from their plot boards."

Randall reached across and switched off the squawk box as the distressing sounds of the Greenie Gunners being sick and the similar sounds from the scientists told that the new men—and women—were being indoctrinated as fluxers.

No matter how many times you fluxed in training, back on Mars base, for instance, you always reacted like that fluxing for the first time over Octo spaceways.

Seventy-two mlssions ago. A long time. A good run. And this time I cop a crazy female scientist and a suicide run. Oh, well. For my sins.

Naylor watched as Professor D. Y. Hillary levered herself back through the hatch. She'd perch over her equipment for the rest of the mission like a broody hen. Only a few more hours now and they'd be hitting traject—*no, by damn* ! They'd be stooging around trying to blank off Octo watchers while the other wagons went in.

Jimmy al Mansour punched through eta and thirty minutes short of that time they all donned their protective suits. Labiche had time to spare from Hillary to report through the presence of Octo prowlers. He was, he said, picking up their wails like punctured bagpipes all over the frequencies.

Fear began to ooze from the metal walls of Q1. Naylor clipped up his helmet, leaving the faceplate open, and slid in a new sweat band. He examined his hands. Still steady.

" Can those Octos see us, D. Y.?" asked Randall.

" If they did have a Flux wagon's plot board with them, I don't think it's working now." The squawk box made D. Y's voice more female, somehow.

" Good job. How about the watch stations ?"

" Not yet. They'll be—"

At that moment the wagon shook as though she'd run head on into some cosmic wall. Naylor's head snapped forward. The wagon lurched, staggered, righted and then jumped again.

" Mines !" Captain Randall said, incisively but equably. " They won't hit us at this range."

And, in that moment when the first mines from the invisible Octo watch stations began to some crackling about them, Naylor saw his hands start to shake.

The plot board showed the tiny flickers of light that were Octo mines reaching for them. Enough mines and a hit was a near enough certain bet. The wagon leaped.

The squawk box erupted. " A hit !" " Get that patch across fast !" " Drag him away, stow him in a grab bag."

" Quiet down there," Randall said. " We're still holding air. Jimmy. How much longer—" Then Randall stopped that. His fingers on the controls tightened.

We're not going straight in. We're circling about in the field. Putting down watch stations. While they sling mines at us. Probably see us clearly, too. Shooting fish in a barrel—

Naylor said : " We're the fish in the barrel, Oliver."

" Sure. Pepper and salt and all the trimmings."

A co-pilot can only *suggest* to the pilot. Randall was the skipper. Naylor opened his mouth—and Randall said :

" Care to wander down aft and see what they're doing, Clint ?"

Naylor had unstrapped and was out of his throne before he answered. " Right, Oliver. Won't be long."

The wagon shook him about with considerable force as he crabbed down aft. The hatches belted his waist and head as he dropped through. He looked in at the engine compartment. Borisov and Stein were leaning on their engine casings, staring at each other.

Borisov saw him. " Hey, Clint ! Whattaya know. These danged engines just go on running. No need to coax 'em."

" Bully—for—you," said Naylor. *Hope that sounds right. Cocky and confident. Hell—I wish we were out of this right now. Damn that Damn You Hillary* !"

The yellow-faced ventral gunner was sitting up in the tail position. A patch had slapped across the hull. A spicy magazine lay plastered to the deck with blood. Naylor didn't bother to look at the plastic grab bag.

A few words of reassurance. A quick return and an order to the spine gunner to slip down to the abandoned ventral position fast. When they trajected the Octo interceptors would be striking from below. *Take that spine position myself. No, better for Labiche. Must have a pilot on the job all the time, in case they get Oliver.*

Back in the front office Randall was taking steering co-ordinates from al Mansour and bringing the wagon around in stately circles in the field.

" Jimmy'll be doing his nut figuring our course now," Randall said. " All okay ?"

" Check." Naylor knew there had been no need for him to have gone aft. But it all helped.

" Steer five-four-oh, skip," said Jimmy al Mansour steadily over the intercom. As the wagon canted under Randall's capable hands the decks shook and shuddered and shook again. A rending crash shrieked from aft and a sudden gust of air past their heads told of a panel ripped out. Patches slapped across to hold air before there arose need to clamp up helmets. Flat smells of burning rubber and plastic drifted around. *No perfume now.*

The wagon's indicators were doing tangoes behind their transparent cases. The wagon was sliding off all askew.

" Hold the damn wagon steady !" came al Mansour's howl.

More eruptions of noise shattered Naylor's eardrums. Someone was yelling, high and madly, over the squawk box.

" Better pull her up, Oliver," said Naylor, his eyes on the instruments.

No answer. He half turned on his throne. Oliver Randall sat limply, his hands dangling, eyes sightless. A thread of blood dribbled erratically down his face.

Not Oliver. Dear God. Not Oliver.

Naylor pushed the captain back with one hand and tightened his harness. He eased his head back on to the rest and clamped down the faceplate, turned the oxy-helium on to medium. *In case we're punctured and evacuate.*

" Steer two-five-oh, skip." al Mansour's voice brought him back to immediacies. *Oliver* ! He coupled up his own control position and spoke evenly. " Steering two-five-oh, Jimmy. How much longer in this ?"

If al Mansour noticed that the co-pilot and not the skipper was talking at the crisis he gave no sign. " Another four and a half minutes. Damn You's doing swell. We'll—" al Mansour's voice cracked and the soggy sound over the squawk box jibed with the lurching roll of the wagon. Naylor hauled her back on course with swift, unthinking competence.

" Jimmy ! Jimmy, you okay ?"

A new voice. A woman's. " Stow him on that skeleton. Easy, now." A silence punctuated by thumps. Then : " what was the last course, skipper ?" The woman again.

Automatically, Naylor answered. " Two-five-oh."

Jimmy ! The wagon was filled now with noise and confusion. Smoke drifted. Naylor coughed a little.

" Steer one-seven-five, skipper." The woman's voice.

" Steering one-seven-five."

This is a hell of a mission. Stooging around in the field being

mined and unable to do a thing about it. Thirty minutes is twenty-nine and three quarter minutes too long.

" One minute to traject, skipper. Turn on to oh-oh-oh."

" Oh-oh-oh it is." *Thank God.* " Werner. Rockets." He pressed the traject alarm. From the fluxfield engine rooms Werner Stein would be scrambling down aft to ride herd on the rockets. Guns crews would be readying themselves. This was the moment when all the tensions and fears boiled up—and a fluxman was at last dunked into the crucible.

Borisov's voice over the squawk box. Thin. " Werner's bought it. I'm going aft."

Werner ! Hadn't known the man long ; nice type. Hello and goodbye. The wagon gave a last convulsive shudder. The Octos were flinging mines in desperately now, all around the planet. " Waley. You all set ?"

The bombardier's voice, cool and assured, like an ice jet in a steam bath. " Sure, all set. Right in the gold."

I thought he'd crack for certain. Smooth. And tough. Hell ! *Nobody on that spine turret.* " N'Gomo. Take the spine guns, will you ?"

Another voice. One of the scientists. " The radio officer is strapped down to a skeleton. I'm up on the spine. Okay ?"

Okay ? *It just damned well had to be okay, didn't it* ? *N'Gomo. We're all going, this trip.*

" Sure. Just knock 'em down fast—and first."

" I'll do my best."

Naylor gagged. The cool calm scientific manner—here ! Here in a battered fluxwagon about to make traject. He swung the controls, secured off the fluxfield section, broke open the already pre-flighted traject rocket position.

" Twenty seconds, skip."

" Right. Call 'em in fives then down to zero."

Have to tell her that. How would she know ? *Hell—how would she know anything about a fluxwagon's navigation* ?

Professor D. Y. Hillary's voice broke in. " You don't have to tell Madge how to navi—"

" Shut up, damn you, Damn You !" blazed Naylor.

Through that came Madge's voice. " Twenty." Then, " Fifteen." Almost at once they were down past ten, through five and rattling away to plummet out to zero.

Naylor did his job and real space came up with an almighty wallop. Sunshine from Gideon splashed in over the cockpit. Now he had to push Q1 across on her traject, using every bit of speed and height and the rockets, and take her out over the other side. If they got there.

He was no longer fluxing the wagon ; he was flying her.

They'd been brought out right on the edge of the atmosphere —*beautiful navigating*—and on the tail of the main force. All across the violet sky ahead trails of fluxers and interceptors snarled like strands of white wool torn and playfully pulled by a puppy in a sewing basket. He could see three nuclear explosion blasts settling. The picture presented a shocking, a stunning, panorama of the stupidity and heroism of intelligent beings quarreling in space over space. The wagon rode smoothly.

Waley called : " Hold her steady."

Unthinkingly, Naylor said : " Check."

The woman doing the navigating now that Jimmy was gone started to say something. Naylor concentrated on driving the wagon across ; now everything was in his hands. He could feel the steady trilling of the rockets vibrating the fabric of the wagon. Then the squawk box erupted. Gunners went into action, the thumping of their weapons shaking the wagon along with all the other thumps. Naylor sat up on his throne, unable to shoot back at the rising interceptors, just sitting up there in front coaxing the wagon across her traject, waiting for the bombs to go.

The bedlam in the wagon receded, incredibly, in Naylor's mind as he sat there flying the fluxwagon across traject. He took note of what went on, the yells of triumph and agony from the squawk box, the staccato rivetting as alien shells peppered the hull, the silence as air evacuated and the resumption of sound over his headphones as he snapped his faceplate across. The controls were hard and demanding under his fingers. The rim of the planet ahead spun slowly—so slowly—toward them as their traject carried them close in.

Waley called up a few course corrections. Then : " Bombs gone." His tones were almost conversational.

Naylor checked the bomb bay doors. Plenty of bombardiers had carried out a perfect run and bombed—with the doors closed. As he watched the lights changed, indicating the doors were closing. The next was that Waley had dropped into his second chin-gun position, was hammering destructive bursts at the few interceptors that clung, like crazy mosquitoes, to the flanks of Q1.

Someone aft had found time to slap patches on. Naylor nodded to himself. No one wanted to make the long haul back inside a suit all the way. D. Y. Hillary put her head into the

front office. " Pull her sharp to starboard when we re-enter the flux field, Clinton," she said. " What sort of run is this ?"

" Easy," Naylor said. " That traject was chicken feed."

" Good. Seems we did blank off the watch stations, then."

Naylor scanned his instruments. Any minute now. He heard Hillary saying : " You needn't have carried on with the traject you know, Clinton. We had so many damned casualties I thought you'd turn back. We're only out here, after all, to see if our damned blanking gear works."

Naylor said : " Language, Damn You ! I'm surprised."

Professor Damn You Hillary laughed nastily and went back to her equipment. That would be needed as soon as they hit the field going out.

Not a bad old girl. Saved us—and the rest of 'em.

Clinton Naylor, co-pilot, watched his instruments and then, at the crucial moment, flung the wagon back into the flux field. He jinked her hard right at once. On the plot board a gaggle of Octo mines flared well off to port. He let a smile crack his taut lips.

So Damn You's equipment does work. Once more science has come up with a counter to a fresh scientific gimmick. And it'll go on. I feel bloody. Let down.

Now he would have to check casualties, tighten up the wagon, work out their chances of making base ship—*should be bright this trip—not like the old M*30—get a course from the navigator, whoever she was. Madge. Meant nothing. He'd never see her again after this one. She was just one of the faceless horde of scientists striving to work out a winning edge for humanity over the Octos here in space. At last he let his mind flutter painfully to the item he had submerged, tried to forget, drowned in the realities of the moment . . .

Oliver !

He began to swivel his head as the squawk box picked up, indicating that air was once again circulating in the wagon. Madge called out a course and he answered and turned on to it mechanically. His eyes slid sideways to Randall.

The captain was sitting jauntily on his throne, a trickle of blood down one cheek, watching his co-pilot from bright eyes.

" Oliver ! You—"

" You did fine, Clint. Fine and dandy. A nice traject."

" Get out of that suit and let me fix you up."

" Sure. Just a scalping, that's all."

Joe Waley put his head up from his bombardier's pit. His face was very white and his eyes were enormous.

" Clint," he said seriously, biting out each word. " Will you strap me down to a skeleton ?"

" Hit ? Where—"

" No. Not wounded. I hit the target, right in the gold, like I said. Always do. But now I'm going to scream and shout and struggle and make a damn fool of myself. You know, a machine running wild on overload. So just strap me down, will you ? I'll be okay in about an hour."

So that's his system of catharsis. No wonder he's so cocky. Efficient.

Captain Randall said : " I'll take over, Clint, put the wagon on auto. You go strap up Joe."

" Right, Oliver. Come on, Joe. Scream your head off if you like. We'll make you comfortable."

" Thanks, Clint," said Waley.

Q1 bumbled back through the fluxfield to base ship. The wounded were strapped down to skeletons, the dead stowed in grab bags. Professor Damn You Hillary said : " Well, we fouled up those Octo watch stations. The wagons came out right on the button. The Octos didn't know what had hit them."

The fears that had sustained the men and women of Earth through the bombing traject were draining away. His head bandaged, Randall pulled out his pipe, prepared to light up.

" You did a fine job, Daisy," he said. " But science will soon find a way of picking us up again, and then you'll have to figure out a new fazzle-dazzle scheme. It goes on, it goes on."

" But each time we do it just that bit quicker. The Octos are lagging. We'll win. We'll just damn well have to win."

" Whilst science stalemates itself poor old Homo saps goes in to finish the job," Naylor said. For some reason he was feeling very good, very good indeed.

He realised why when Randall said : " You handled the wagon okay, Clint. Always knew you would. Want to skipper your own now ?"

Easy enough to answer that—now.

" Sure, Oliver. But I'll ride co-pilot with you until you've shot your hundred. Then I'll take my own wagon."

A very satisfied Captain Randall said, softly : " Thanks, Clint."

Kenneth Bulmer

We have had stories before about the ecological balance of a planet being upset by Man's meddling, but not one with quite the astuteness of John Brunner's latest story. A change in the balance of a world's fauna could well produce a new species.

STIMULUS

by JOHN BRUNNER

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stimulus, n. 1. Something that rouses the mind or spirits, or incites to activity ; an incentive. 2. *Physiol.* and *Psychol.* Any agent or environmental change capable of influencing the activity of living protoplasm, as exciting the activity of a muscle or organ, of initiating an impulse in a nerve, or of exciting a specific end organ of sensation. (Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*).

Hostile, they watched Lee get down stiffly from the door of the helicopter. Probably, Lee reflected, they didn't see him as a human being like themselves. They saw a symbol, an agent from the Great Outside, with near-divine power to kick them off the planet if he so chose. It wasn't the first time he had encountered such an attitude among stage one colonists, but he always hoped that last time had been the *last* time.

And he was always disappointed.

Well, if that was the way they wanted it, it might be better to play along with their preconceptions than to try and ingratiate himself. The helicopter had put him down in the geometric middle of the large concrete courtyard behind the farmhouse, and they were waiting, clustered together, near the

back door of the dwelling. Instead of walking over to them, Lee stayed put and looked around.

The farmhouse was on a low hill ; the river draining the area ran in a valley at the foot of it. Between the house and the river was the human biosphere, of which he had had a glimpse as the helicopter droned down to its landing. There were pigs, cattle and poultry in roofless batteries, and several acres of Earth-green food-crops.

Beyond, the vegetation was native, and therefore yellow. Across the river the woods began, growing so dense within a couple of miles that they were almost to be called forest, but thinning at the edges into patchy scrub which continued, growing sparser and sparser, over the prairie-like terrain which formed the greater part of the homestead's two thousand five hundred square miles. That was larger than usual. But then, it had been assigned to a man of exceptional talents.

On the opposite side of the house from the actual farm which fed—which had fed—the family who lived here, were the experimental sheds and stock-pens, and then began the wild range.

Typical enough.

Lee glanced back towards the house. He saw that the waiting group of six—no, seven people had begun to move towards him. They came as a kind of irregular wedge, headed by a man much taller than Lee, light brown of complexion, his black hair peppered with grey. Just behind him was a sallow man with a pot-belly who rolled as he walked, and next to him a girl who might have been extremely pretty but for the look of cold distaste she wore. They were dressed alike in drab working coveralls. Their eyes were screwed up against the bright sunlight.

" Executive Lee," the man in the lead said. It wasn't a question. " They called us from Main Base to say you were on your way."

Lee nodded and put out his hand. For a moment he thought the tall man wasn't going to take it, but he yielded after a moment, unwillingly.

" My name is Bembo," he said. " I'm in charge. Dr. Kowalski "—the sallow man nodded—" Miss Rabin, Mr. and Mrs. Tula, Mr. Dyer, Miss Saleem."

" Bembo," Lee said thoughtfully. " You must be prime-generation here, then."

" That's right," the tall man said. " I was born on Thor."

He didn't have to put the rest in words. Lee knew how it would go—approximately, " And I've been on this planet from the beginning, and I've spent my working life on its development, and no outsider is going to pull me off of it."

Well . . . that remained to be seen.

" I guess we should make it clear right away that while we appreciate your taking the trouble to come here, you're most likely wasting your time," Bembo went on. " We have our best people working on this, and so far we haven't turned up anything we can't handle."

That was ingenuous. Lee shrugged. " That's the way I'd like it best," he said. " The situation is difficult, you realise. After all, it was an unapproved project which led to the disaster."

Again, he didn't need their answer in words. Their eyes said, " Why the hell should we have to ask you all the time what we can and cannot do ? Do you suffer if we make a mistake ? We do !"

He turned and began to hand down his baggage from the helicopter. None of them offered to help him. Only, when he had passed everything down and piled it on the concrete, Bembo said, " You have a lot of gear. Are you fixing to stay a long time ?"

" As long as necessary," Lee said. " It's that simple. Let's go inside and talk."

Four of them disappeared, presumably to attend to jobs in the farmyard ; Bembo himself, the girl he had introduced as Miss Rabin, and Dr. Kowalski showed him a room he could use, which had belonged to one of the homesteader's children, and then sat down with him in the living-space around a hand-carpentered table of native wood.

" I understand that a child survived," Lee said.

" The youngest one—Sara." It was Kowalski who answered " She's under sedation and she's going to stay that way for at least another week. She's only seven years old. And she got up in the middle of the night and found her father bleeding to death and her mother dead. I hope you'll agree that that excuses her absence from this conference."

He weighted the words heavily with sarcasm.

Lee gave him a steady look. He said, " Are you a doctor of medicine ?"

Kowalski bridled. " Of course I am !"

" Good," Lee said, and left the sallow man to make what he could of the remark. He went on, " First of all, I want to make sure the facts were correct as they came to me. This homestead was assigned to Achmed Khan—right ? Former ecologist in the Galactic Service, born a citizen of Sleipnir, moved here when he retired to settle down with his family. He lived here with his second wife, the two children of his first marriage and this daughter that you mentioned, Sara, the child of his second."

" That's correct," Bembo grunted.

" Khan was an outstanding ecologist—perhaps one of the best we have ever had. His family was prime-generation on Sleipnir and his great-grandfather was partly responsible for planning the terra-formation of that planet. It ran in the family, but he was the real genius of his line.

" He had ideas of his own about the terra-formation of your world, too. Finding that your planetary council was impatient at the slowness of the existing draft scheme for expansion here—"

" That's not true," Bembo cut in.

" I'm stating facts as I know them," Lee said. " I don't want to seem to be imputing motives. Put it this way, then. Your planetary council, respecting Khan as an ecologist, and being naturally eager to find faster ways of expanding the terra-formed areas on this world, were ready to fall in with his—somewhat unorthodox—proposals."

" You don't talk about orthodoxy when it comes to a man like Khan," the girl said, breaking her long silence. " It's the Khans of the galaxy who improve on orthodox ideas. That's called progress."

" In this case, maybe it wasn't progress," Lee said mildly. " Even geniuses make mistakes. And this, remember, was the first time Khan had a personal stake in a project. Ecologists in the Galactic Service work out plans for other people's benefit. They have no need to cut corners, hurry things, take risks. This induces an admirable caution—which was lacking in this case."

" Nonsense," Kowalski growled.

" You buried Khan and his family right here," Lee answered. " I call that the result of being incautious."

" He's right on that, Ludwig," Bembo said heavily. " Hear him out."

" Thank you." Lee leaned back in his chair. " So far the only area of the planet which is completely terra-formed is the island on which Main Base is sited. Through—well, some miscalculation, let's say—there's already population pressure there. I saw as I came through. Work is in progress on other islands, but so far only pilot projects have begun on the main land-masses, like this one here. Competition from indigenous life-forms is too acute."

" Exaggerated," Miss Rabin said. " The schedule for this continent is sixty-five years. It could be done in half that time. Achmed Khan calculated it."

Lee folded his hands. " Tell me, Miss Rabin," he said, " do you not believe in experimental evidence ?"

She flushed. " Of course I do," she snapped. " I had my training under Mr. Khan himself—and nobody was more insistent on proper evidence than he was !"

" The loss of his life and his family's," Lee said patiently, " is the evidence we have. Correct ? What is more, he was killed by the animals he was working with, during the course of an unapproved project."

" It's easy for you to say that !" she flared. " You had the chance to approve it, but it was too daring and too bold for your taste !"

" The projects we approve don't go wrong," Lee answered. " By and large, the ones we don't approve do. Can we continue, please ?"

Sullenly she looked down at the table.

" Mr. Bembo," Lee said, " there's competition from indigenous life-forms. True or false ?"

" True. And—yes, it's fierce. This planet is a close Earth-analogy ; the ecology matches on a one-for-one basis in all important respects. The biocycle is essentially the same. The protoplasm is parallel, but of course different in detail. This makes our world ideal for habitation."

" And also means, unfortunately, that we are competing with life-forms similar to our own which have the marginal advantage of being at home here. The closer a world is to Earth-type, the tougher the job becomes." Lee saw Bembo sigh as if in agreement, inaudibly.

" Now Khan's plan, essentially, was this," Lee went on. " He studied the local predators and selected one which, he felt, could be rapidly improved as a species to the point at which it would become unquestionably dominant. A species large enough to wipe out herds of herbivores and hungry and quick enough to turn to smaller creatures if necessary."

" Miss Rabin can tell you more about this than I can, or Dr. Kowalski," Bembo said. " Mandy ?"

The girl didn't look up. She said, " That's right. We call them spitcats. Their ecological niche is similar to that of the puma or lynx on Earth, but they live longer and continue growing long after they become independent of the dam. Achmed chose them on the basis of exhaustive studies. They breed rapidly, they are excellent material for eugenic breeding, and they are very docile."

" A docile carnivore sounds like a contradiction in terms," Lee objected.

" Achmed had bred four generations of them under supervision. He selected for intelligence. They were good when he started—they're cunning hunters in the wild state—but the fourth generation was improved out of all recognition. And self-interest is the first sign of real intelligence. Achmed's spitcats recognise human beings as food-givers, and he could stroke their heads, roll them over to examine their pads and claws, even open their mouths to check their teeth."

" How do they get by on terra-type food ?" Lee asked.

" It gives them indigestion. Just as the local vegetation does to us. That was another thing they learned—not to eat our pigs and cattle. After they'd made themselves sick with terra-type meat two or three times, they learned to avoid it altogether."

" I want to see Achmed Khan's figures on the development of these predators," Lee said. "Are there any of the creatures in captivity at the moment ?"

Kowalski gave a harsh laugh. Bembo glanced at him and then addressed Lee.

" No, we put down the only one that was not released," he said.

" Released ?"

There was a pause. Lee looked quickly from face to face. At last Bembo made up his mind to answer.

" Not by us," he said. " By other spitcats."

" No, it's not true !" Miss Rabin snapped.

" You were just boasting how intelligent your beloved spitcats have become," Bembo retorted. " The evidence points to it and it's got to be accepted."

Lee, sensing that he had caught the tail of a long-standing argument, looked inquiringly at him.

" It was like this, Mr. Lee," Bembo said. " As Mandy told you, Achmed's idea was to select for intelligence among the spitcats of the homestead. One in particular—Achmed called him Old Redeyes—seemed to sire highly intelligent progeny. So intelligent that Achmed was eventually breeding only from that line. And so intelligent that he changed his original plan of not releasing his selected stock to the wild state until the fifth generation. He turned loose some second and third-generation stock."

" What was the basal population ?" Lee said. His eyes had gone hard and cold. " And how many did Achmed Khan add ?"

" The basal population—" Bembo echoed. He turned to Miss Rabin.

Without looking up, the girl said, " About eighty to ninety on the homestead. Rivalry in mating season kept the numbers down. That's changed now. There's a trend towards gregariousness and hunting in packs which wasn't there before."

" If Achmed were here," Lee said, " he'd—well, perhaps he's glad that he isn't." He heard his voice shaking with rage. " How many did he turn loose ?"

" About a hundred and fifty altogether," the girl said. " Selected stock."

" You say ' selected stock ' as though that's an excuse !" Lee flared. " This is the biggest piece of ecological sabotage I ever heard of. The draft scheme for this continent will probably have to be done over from the beginning ! Bembo, you were going to say something."

" As I understand it," Bembo said, " Achmed wanted to check on the progress made by the wild-state generation sired by the first of the selected stock he turned loose. He followed the same procedure he'd always used before—deadfalls with anaesthetic bombs in the bottom—and secured about a dozen specimens. This was the day before he was killed.

" That night, probably about midnight, the spitcats came in off the wild range and opened the gates of the specimen

pens. They opened the doors of the house and came in and killed Achmed and his wife and his son and elder daughter. We found Achmed's body in here—right here near the table. We figure he heard a noise and had just got up to investigate."

" Opened the gates and doors ? Not broke them open ?"

" Opened. Sliding bolts inaccessible from inside the pens, in the one case ; ordinary turning handles in the other. Not spectacularly clever of them, perhaps—but too clever for my liking."

" I agree with you," Lee said emphatically. " What's your proposed answer to the problem ?"

" Hunt them down. Cut the population back to its wild-state level, and then pick up the original plan where we left off."

" I'm afraid it won't be that simple," Lee said. " It's obvious and attractive, but it may well not work."

" Why not ?" Kowalski demanded.

" You probably only have a vague idea of the complexity of ecological relationships. For one thing, the huge increase in the spitcat population will have been reflected in a decrease of the herbivores. The local carrion-eaters will have increased. Fewer herbivores mean less of the vegetation eaten. Follow me ?"

Kowalski went pale.

" And less vegetation eaten means more developed flowers and perhaps an increase in the insects dependent on them and more fruit and hence perhaps the risk of a species-explosion—oh, once you foul things up as badly as this, you have to go back to the beginning and work it out all over again." Lee wiped his face.

" It's going to be a long job, Mr. Bembo," he said. " I'll do my absolute damnedest to see what can be salvaged. Achmed Khan is dead, and if possible we'll let the blame be buried with him, but it's not exactly to the credit of your planetary council that you let him get away with it, is it ?"

Bembo shook his head reluctantly. He said, " But when it comes to an expert like Achmed, you don't question his word."

" I agree, his advice backed by his reputation must have been attractive if it offered the hope of halving the development time for this continent. Nonetheless, even geniuses aren't infallible." Lee pushed back his chair.

" I'd like to see a spitcat," he said. " Any chance of arranging that ?"

Kowalski gave a hollow laugh. " You'll see them all right," he said. " You can't help it."

Miss Rabin got to her feet. She said, " I'll take you out and see if I can show you one."

Rather surprised at the offer, coming from her in particular, Lee said, " Why, thank you, Miss Rabin. I'd appreciate it."

They used his helicopter ; it was quieter than any of the big load-lifting 'copters on the farm. They had flown some distance before Miss Rabin spoke without turning her head.

" It was nice of you to say you'd try and bury the blame with Achmed," she said. " We weren't expecting that."

" What were you expecting ?" Lee was looking down at the thick woods over which they were flying ; ahead, the quasi-trees thinned out and gave way to the prairie where the spitcats might be found hunting.

" I—don't really know. Mr. Bembo is very proud of his work here, and of course he's on the planetary council as you must have guessed, and he was terribly anxious that Achmed's plan should succeed because it would have meant a chance for him to see part of the continent terra-formed before he died. On the approved schedule, it would still be in the pilot stage otherwise."

Lee turned his head to study her. She was certainly very pretty. She had close-cut dark hair around an oval face, and her eyes were large and bright. He hadn't seen her smile yet, but he looked forward to that. He said, " And you ?"

" I was going to marry Achmed's son. Daoud. I suppose that explains a lot."

" It explains a good deal. But not how you, a pupil of Achmed's, could stand up so violently for such an obviously disastrous idea."

" That," the girl said, " is because I was Achmed's pupil. I can't imagine him *making* such a stupid and obvious error !"

She leaned forward, pointing. " There's a herd of grazers," she said. " Going down to drink. We'll probably see some spitcats nearby ; they often hunt in the afternoon, drink at sundown with the rest of the fauna, and then go back to their lairs in the woods for the night."

" They're definitely diurnal ?" Lee suggested.

" Yes. And I know what you're going to say. How come they changed their habits so radically as to attack Achmed's home by night ? I can't answer that, except by saying there have been a lot of changes in that species lately."

Lee put up his binoculars. The animals that she had called grazers were long-legged, long-necked, rather ungraceful-looking, but clearly efficient in design. Their hides were sandy, and they might well be hard to see against the background of yellowish scrub and meagre " grass " on which they roamed. Now, of course, standing up and moving together in a herd of about sixty, their shadows stood out black beside them and provided an easy clue to them.

" Watch !" she said. " I'm going down low now. I think I caught sight of a spitcat in that clump of brush left of the herd-leader—yes ! See him ?"

Lee snapped the binoculars around. Into the field of view leapt a spitcat.

It was not in the least the kind of creature he had pictured from its name. If it resembled any Earthly animal at all, it was like an overgrown baboon set back on its haunches and supplied with hindquarters as powerful as a kangaroo's. It was mottled sandy-yellow and grey.

" Is it—?" the girl said under her breath.

" Is it what, Miss Rabin ?" Lee said.

" Call me Mandy, why don't you ? Yes ! Of all the luck, that's Old Redeyes himself !"

" Was he released with the others the night of Achmed's death ?"

" No, no. Achmed released him last year. His progeny was so true-to-type it showed a dominant mutation in him. Achmed thought he'd be better off spending his declining years in freedom."

Lee stared down. The spitcat seemed not to care about the helicopter at all. He merely glanced up at it occasionally. Once, as he turned his massive-jawed head, Lee saw the sun flash in the eyes for which he was nicknamed, and they gleamed for a moment as red as rubies.

" Those eyes are certainly red !" he said.

" Yes—so are the eyes of his descendants. It's a linked characteristic. It was invaluable for keeping track of the line."

" What colour are the eyes normally, then ?"

" White. The red colouring is exactly analogous to the yellow that occurs in human beings with jaundice. For convenience, we classify the metabolic products of the native fauna as *q*- plus the appropriate terra-biological term. Loosely, we don't even add the *q*- prefix. The colour of those eyes is due to inefficient excretion of *q*-urea."

" Doesn't it have any adverse effect on the species ?"

" None whatever. If anything, the reverse—though it's hard to see why. You know, he can't be hungry this evening. He's just sitting there and letting the grazers go past."

It was true. Old Redeyes was sitting back on his haunches, his whole weight squarely on the long pads of his hind feet, his long forelimbs dangling in front of him with their 'knuckles' resting gently on the ground. As they moved past, the grazers raised their heads cautiously, and tended to move diagonally away from where Old Redeyes sat.

Fascinated, they watched for several minutes, during which time the herd moved further and further from Old Redeyes and nearer and nearer to some thickbrush on the side away from him.

The helicopter circled. Lee studied the spitcat most of the time. He would certainly be a formidable opponent.

Suddenly the girl beside him gave a cry. " Look at that !" she said, throwing her arm up to point at the grazers.

From among the brush towards which they had sidled to avoid Old Redeyes, three young spitcats had darted. Swift as lightning they pounced on the herd-leader ; one took the beast by the neck, the others by the hind legs. The rest of the herd took flight, but although the full-grown grazer was heavier than the three spitcat cubs together it could do no more than kick a few times before it was dead.

Old Redeyes rose from his haunches, as though he had been expecting this to happen. and padded over to join the feast.

Lee's mouth was dry. He said, " Did you say they recently learned to hunt in co-operation ?"

" That's right." The girl's voice shook. " Their whole pattern of behaviour is changing, and it's bound to upset the ecological balance of this continent beyond hope ! How could Achmed have *done* such a thing ?"

That was the important question. You didn't expect a man with Achmed Khan's record to make a stupid, hot-headed blunder of such magnitude. Yet anyone with the vaguest grasp of ecological principles ought to have seen that increasing the spitcat population would not merely reduce the population of herbivores, but would have other, less calculable consequences.

Naturally, he would have calculated them. Or tried to. It was daunting to be shown how much data Khan had left behind. Lee decided that the job of digging through the papers must wait for a day or two, while he inspected the entire homestead in detail.

He spent the rest of the afternoon prowling around the farm. He inspected the pens where the captured spitcats had been shut up the day of Achmed's death, and studied the bolts with particular care. He had already seen that Old Redeyes had forepaws capable of folding over to afford a grip. It would not have been difficult for him, or one of his children, to pull the knob of the bolt upwards and slide it back. It would have been far more difficult to figure out the sequence of movement involved. Still, Old Redeyes had been in captivity here for a long time—he had probably seen Achmed operate the bolts often enough.

The four people he had met briefly on arrival, Mr. and Mrs. Tula, Mr. Dyer and Miss Saleem, were still busy with the job of making good the ravages the spitcats had caused during their raid. The farm itself was almost completely automated, and had suffered little from the lack of attention which followed Achmed's death. The specimen pens and the specimens in them—for of course Achmed's interest in the native fauna did not end with the spitcats—and the laboratories which went with them were in worse shape, and Miss Saleem was trying to re-start several important experiments which Achmed had left. There was an omnivore rather similar to a jackrabbit which had proved capable of eating terra-type food in quantity, which was going to be a serious pest if not controlled ; there was a flying creature, warm-blooded but much closer to the reptile stage than terrestrial birds, whose thick gummy droppings were full of a parasite that could infect pigs. And there was other stock, in vast wire enclosures, which Achmed had been studying.

It was a promising planet, though. There had never been any doubt of that. In ten generations it could be quite heavily populated.

He had his first chance to find out how good the food produced on Achmed's farm was, when they met together for supper an hour after sunset. He had expected the atmosphere during the meal to be tense ; it was, but the fact that Mandy Rabin had thawed a little towards him was obvious and held back some of the tension.

After the main course of ham from Achmed's pigs and vegetables from his garden, there was fruit and cheese. The cheese was very good, and Lee said so appreciatively.

" Achmed knew what he was about," Dr. Kowalski said, and all the others at the table stopped eating and looked at Lee, as though all realising at once what the remark implied.

Better get it out of the way, Lee decided. He put down his knife with a clatter on the table.

He said, " Now you listen to me, will you ? For some reason, whenever they have to call in an executive of the Galactic Service, people jump to the automatic conclusion that his one dearest wish is to kick them off their hard-won planet. How many times in the history of the Service has that happened ?" He looked around the table. " Do any of you know ? I see you don't. Dr. Kowalski, make a guess."

" Dozens of times," the sallow man grunted.

" Ten times," Lee said. " Exactly ten times. And we have nearly a hundred worlds. And since people began to take serious notice of the Service's advice, they're staying on their worlds and not leaving.

" What in space are you thinking, anyway ? That we mete out punishment to naughty colonists who don't stick to the rules ? That I'm going to condemn you to deportation because Achmed Khan's enthusiasm ran away with him ? This is a good world—I've seen enough of it to know that—and if the worst comes to the worst and the spitcats turn into a real danger, they can be hunted down as has already been suggested. Then the terra-forming plan for this continent would have to be based on new data and revised, but that would only mean a set-back of a few years at most. We have as much interest in gaining new worlds as you have. Why not ?"

He was glad to see he had embarrassed them. Maybe that would start them thinking in more rational terms. He pushed his chair back.

" Tomorrow I'm going to start working through Achmed's papers and find out if he really did know what he was doing." He gave a pointed look at Kowalski. " I hope he did. It'll save us a lot of trouble."

He turned on his heel and walked out.

It was not long after he returned to the room which had been allotted to him that there was a hesitant rap at the door. He told the visitor to come in.

Unexpectedly, it was Kowalski. He hooked his foot under a chair, swivelled it round to face Lee's, and dropped his bulky body into it. He said, " You aimed that blast at me. I deserved it."

" You really did," Lee said. " You really did."

Kowalski frowned. " All right, I admitted as much, didn't I ? What I want is for you to set me straight on the rights and wrongs of this business. Up till the time they radioed me to come and attend to the kid, Sara, I knew nothing about Achmed and cared less. I theoretically had the flying doctor beat which included this homestead, but Achmed's wife was a qualified physician and surgeon and I'd never had a call from here. Sara was born in the Main Base hospital, so I even missed out on that one. Bembo can't think straight because he's worried about the planetary council's responsibility for the foul-up. Mandy Rabin ought to know the facts, but she's impossible to communicate with because she hero-worshipped Achmed and she was going to marry his son. And the rest of them were just roped in from wherever they could be spared to get this crucial homestead back on its rails and running. I guess they'll stay here and watch over it till the matter's cleared up and the homestead is assigned to someone else or discontinued."

He planted his pudgy hands on his knees, spread his elbows and leaned forward. " What am I to think ? Can you tell me ?"

" I got here at noon today," Lee said. " I came in late on a problem that's been bothering some of your best people for weeks on end. I can't tell you. Not yet."

" Then I guess you can't even say what will happen to us."

" You mean the people of this planet ? I'll tell you what will most likely happen. People will go hungry at Main Base because the island's over-populated, thanks to the planetary council's over-hasty acceptance of Achmed's revised plan for development. But that's not my fault. I can sympathise, that's all. Maybe Achmed *was* right, and you'll be able to expand across this continent sooner than planned, in which case the population pressure won't matter. Maybe he was wrong, in which case it'll have to be put up with. If there's any reasonable chance of your staying here, you'll be allowed to take it. Is that what you wanted to know ?"

Kowalski nodded. He said, " I have two kids of my own, in school on Main Base island. I was figuring we'd move to open country when they graduated. Look, isn't it highly unlikely that Achmed made a fool of himself, and us ?"

" Yes. *Very* unlikely."

Kowalski lumbered to his feet. " Fair enough," he said. He hesitated. Then he put out his hand.

Lee took it. He didn't smile. He said, " Unlikely doesn't mean impossible, you know."

" I know," Kowalski confirmed, and went out.

The more he dug into Achmed's records, the more he realised this was going to be a very long job. There were files of written notes, hundreds and hundreds of spools of tape holding both speech and instrument data, and a stack of graphs a foot high. There were chromosome charts and photographs of stock, blood-test records and bio-analysis results, food-and-weight tables, fauna population estimates, bio-cycle schemata, and scores of other kinds of relevant information.

Naturally, Achmed had not coped with this without adequate computing equipment. Nonetheless, he must frequently have drawn on his unmatched knowledge, garnered during a long term of service as a professional ecologist, of relative probabilities in the establishment of an ecological cycle.

Even with Mandy Rabin to guide him, he spent the first few days just looking for a place to catch hold of Achmed's line of thought. Mandy had spent a year working with Achmed, but that was already three years ago, and since then the data had bred rabbitwise.

It was not until the third day of his stay that Bembo chanced to mention that Achmed had sent the planetary council a detailed draft of his revised scheme for developing the continent, on the basis of which they had agreed to support him. That would be his Rosetta stone, Lee decided, and went to hunt for the file copy which Achmed must have kept.

Achmed's papers went back fifteen years, to his arrival here. Lee was on the point of radioing Main Base for a transcript of the copy delivered to the planetary council, when Bembo fortunately remembered that it was during a visit to Main Base to see his wife in hospital after the birth of his daughter that Achmed had discussed it personally with the councillors.

That enabled them to locate it chronologically, and there it was indeed among the papers dated seven years before.

The moment he glanced at it, Lee's optimism vanished. It was forty pages long ; more than half of it consisted of complex interdependent variables meaningless to anyone except an ecologist, and requiring the painful, one-by-one identification of every single term involved.

" Tell me," he said, turning to Bembo who stood by with a hopeful expression, " how many of the planetary councillors do you think actually worked through this plan to see if it was accurate ?"

Bembo shrugged. " I certainly didn't," he said. " I would never be able to tell if an expert like Achmed was wrong."

" That's what I suspected," Lee said grimly. He flung the document on a table beside him. " Merely to check the values assigned to all the factors in this will be a week's work. And after that, there'll be the job of checking the math. I'm sorry, Bembo. You must be getting impatient."

" I'd rather have the record straight than as it is—confused," Bembo said. " But—ah—give us the benefit of the doubt if you can."

" I will," Lee said. " Mandy, find me the original spitcat counts, will you ? We'll have to start from there."

Ten days later, he stood with Mandy beside the humming bulk of Achmed's own computer and watched the figures print out. The moment the first one appeared, they knew. But they waited till the print-out was complete before they said anything.

Lee ripped the paper from the machine and looked at it. He said, " Well, now we know. Achmed wasn't infallible."

Mandy shook her head. " I can't believe it," she said. "A stupid error like that. How could he have done it ?"

" He paid for it," Lee said greyly. " But it is fantastic—an error of more than a century in his calculations, so that his revised scheme would actually have set the development of the continent back by that much time."

He folded the paper absently into four.

" Well, I suppose I'd better tell Bembo. He won't be glad at the news. But at least a positive decision can be taken now. And we'd better start investigating the probable con-

sequences of hunting the spitcats down, cutting their numbers back to the original level. Mandy ?"

" I—I'm going out for a while," she said. Her lip trembled. " I want to be alone."

He shrugged, and watched her walk to the door. On the threshold she turned defiiantly.

" I still don't believe it !" she flung at him, and strode out.

The others heard his news in silence. It was Bembo who eventually broke it, incredulously.

" A hundred years ?" he said. " But it's impossible !"

" It's true. We verified every single factor in that analysis he prepared. Making the spitcats the dominant species of this continent would have been a terrible handicap, not an advantage. One can't imagine Achmed Khan falsifying his figures—he must have had a brainstorm, that's all I can say." He looked around their stony faces. " I'm sorry," he said as sincerely as he could. " But it could have been worse. It was stopped in time. The disaster can be recouped."

Bembo shrugged. As if coming back from a great distance, he said, " The planetary council meets at Main Base day after tomorrow. Will you present your report then ?"

Lee nodded. " I'll fly back with you. By that time I'll have at least a preliminary scheme for cutting back the spitcats to normal levels. Even that has to be done carefully, you know. Random hunting can be as disturbing as unchecked breeding."

" All right," Bembo said.

But it wasn't all right.

He learned that definitely when he tried to settle down afterwards among the heaped stacks of data which he had drawn on to verify Achmed's ridiculously wrong calculations. A man who had served so long and with such a distinguished record in the Galactic Service simply would not have allowed wishful thinking to run away with him. Not without such serious mental disturbance that it must have been noticed.

He had been struggling for an hour or more when Mandy came back from her walk by herself, looking acutely depressed. He said nothing when she came in, but went on shuffling through the accumulation of papers.

Shortly, he came upon one which he had seen previously and set aside as irrelevant to the question of developing the continent. It was a study of the link between the red eyes of the exceptionally docile spitcats and their other characteristics. Idly, he turned the pages.

A long while afterwards, without looking up, he said, " Mandy, how well do you know the local biology ?"

" As well as you'd expect me to, after a year's work with Achmed Khan," she said wearily. " He was a perfectionist."

Lee sat on the edge of the crowded table. He said, " It says here that the red eyes of this strain of spitcat is due to what you mentioned—this *q*-jaundice effect. Tell me something, will you ? You talked about *q*-urea. Is there also in most local species *q*-allantoin ?"

" Yes, of course," Mandy said. " It's the form in which urea is excreted, generally speaking. Old Redeyes and his descendants are short on the enzyme which oxidises urea to allantoin. And the colour of *q*-urea happens to be red. That's all."

Lee let the paper fall from his hand. He said, staring at nothing, " Achmed Khan was no fool, was he ?"

" What ?" Mandy leapt to her feet. " What did you say ?"

The planetary council, as on most worlds in stage one of colonisation—those where terra-forming of continental landmasses was still in the pilot stage—consisted of the heads of a dozen specialist departments, including Bembo as officer responsible for homestead development, and representatives of the working colonists. As they took their places around the council table they all looked first at Lee and then at Bembo. Clearly they had already heard the probable decision.

Or they thought they had.

Bembo took the chair, since the matter under consideration fell in his department. Without ceremony, as soon as they were all assembled, he cleared his throat and declared the session open.

" We've met to consider action on the question of the death of Achmed Khan and the spitcat problem on the continent," he said. " As you've probably already heard, in spite of his reputation it seems that Khan was wrong in the recommendations he made to us. Executive Lee, of the Galactic Service, is going to make recommendations for setting the matter right, which won't be pleasant but which are inevitable. Executive Lee, the floor is yours."

Lee shuffled the papers before him—out of nervousness. He was not going to enjoy this. But he had to do it.

He said, " I must correct that. Khan knew perfectly well what he was doing."

A buzz of astonishment went through the members of the council. He cut it short with a glare.

" But he lied to you," he said. " He had to. As I just said, he knew what he was doing and he knew that you would never agree to the correct course of action in the circumstances—you had too much at stake. He did not even tell assistants who worked closely with him what was in his mind —true, he did not conceal the facts from his helpers, because he couldn't. They were there to be seen. But he didn't draw attention to the important points.

" Gentlemen, it is my decision that this world shall forthwith be evacuated."

Bembo was on his feet instantly, shouting something incoherent and pointing an angry finger at Lee. The other councillors were too stunned to react.

" Sit down, Bembo," Lee said coldly. " Listen to me, and you'll begin to understand. I don't ask you to like what I'm going to say.

" Is anyone here grounded in terra-biology ?"

" I am," said a man down on the left of the table " Rukeyser—senior medical officer, Main Base."

" Good. Please tell the other councillors what allantoin is."

Rukeyser frowned. " It's—well, in most terrestrial animals, not including man and the higher apes, urea, which is a necessary by-product of metabolism, is oxidised to allantoin and excreted in that form. It's a waste product."

" Thank you. Are you acquainted with the metabolic effects of urea ?"

" Metabolic effects ? No, I don't see what you mean."

Lee looked around the table. " Urea is slightly soluble. In solution, and in the human body, it has an effect similar to that of caffeine and other stimulants. That's to say, it enhances the activity of the nervous system.

" For at least five hundred years it has been suspected that the loss, in the course of evolution, of the enzyme which oxidises urea to allantoin may have resulted directly in the development of human intelligence. It has been compared with the permanent addition to the diet of an efficient pep-pill.

Since—short of tectogenetically equipping a human specimen with the ability to secrete allantoin—there was no way of settling this one way or the other, the theory has remained an interesting hypothesis. It's frequently mentioned in university courses as an example of sensible but unprovable speculation. I've no doubt that it must have come to the notice of Achmed Khan.

" Now the biology of this world presents a very exact parallel to the biology of Earth. The lower animals secrete *q*-urea and oxidise it to *q*-allantoin. If they did not, they would develop a slight jaundice—but red, instead of yellow. And exactly this has happened in the species we call spitcats."

Rukeyser caught on. He started out of his chair, his face going pale. Lee nodded to him.

" I see you've got my point, Dr. Rukeyser. Congratulations. Yes, thanks to a dominant mutation first noticed in a specimen called Old Redeyes, there is now a rapidly increasing number of spitcats who are short of the enzyme which renders *q*-urea ineffective as a nervous stimulant. The results have been incredible—changes in the habits of the species, a marked increment of intelligence, and the appearance of gregarious tendencies. Spitcats are learning to hunt in co-operation ; they have so marked a species-loyalty that when Achmed Khan captured a dozen of them in his usual manner they invaded his farm and released the captives, killing Khan and his family to prevent him doing it again.

" If you've seen a spitcat, you know that it's equipped already to grasp objects. It has a big head with room for a large brain. It grows to a size much larger than a man. And now a dominant mutation is spreading intelligence through the species.

" What would you have done, gentlemen, if Achmed Khan had placed his discovery before you ? You'd have said, and probably many of you would still like to say, ' Wipe them out before they can compete with us on level terms !' But Achmed Khan was unwilling that this should happen. We have never observed the evolution of intelligence from the brute before. Science could not possibly afford to waste the chance we now have.

" Accordingly, he presented you with a pack of convincing lies, designed to make you actively aid his project of turning spitcats into the dominant species first of one continent, then of this planet. None of you could see through his lies. But

then, neither could he hope to persuade you to support the cause of science at the expense of yourselves and your families. Not even because he was Achmed Khan, the ecologist.

" He gave them a helping hand on the way towards intelligence. We cannot afford to let his work be undone. That's why I'm using my power as an executive of the Galactic Service to order your evacuation from this planet. It is your privilege to resist if you wish. I hope you're not going to. As I see it, the emergence of another intelligent race alongside our own could be for us the greatest stimulus we have had since we first acquired the power of rational thought. Animals compete with each other. Rational beings—I hope—co-operate. If we cannot do at least as well as the spitcats, who are new to this business of thinking, then I believe we are a pretty poor species.

" Gentlemen, I shall await your decision with interest and hope."

John Brunner

Sour Grapes Dept . . .

It has happened again ! In ABC TV's " Tempo " programme on Sunday, January 21st, Kingsley Amis, speaking on contemporary culture for the masses, squeezed in a beautiful plug for science fiction. The visuals gave blatant free publicity to two American magazines regularly distributed in Great Britain. Apparently the producer did not want to use visuals of any British magazines, bearing in mind the " no free advertising " rule—but to show shots of foreign importations is an even greater insult.

What do we have to do to become recognised ?

Sweet Music Dept . . .

Peter Laurie, writing about " People " in the February issue of *Vogue* has a double-page spread on " The Space Merchants" —' the nucleus of British SF atomy ' as he describes Wyndham, Aldiss, Ballard, Brunner, book reviewer Flood and editor Carnell (with photographs). This time, *The* magazine's name *was* mentioned in a concise summary many readers will disagree about. Nevertheless, good publicity, and thank you Mr. Laurie.

The "disappearing trick" story has been with us a long time; in fact, it can form the basis of scores of different plots. In this new Philip High story the "disappearance" involves a highly complex computer still on the secret list and wanted by every foreign government.

PROBABILITY FACTOR

by PHILIP E. HIGH

Gedding was tall, thin and perfectly tailored. He was also, Hamersham sensed, hostile and exceedingly dangerous. Not that Gedding had been unpleasant, on the contrary he had been almost friendly, exhibiting at times a gentle, if slightly acidulated, sympathy.

Hamersham was not deceived. The Ministry of Defence had not appointed the most famous prosecuting counsel in the country for prestige reasons. In any case, taking place under the Official Secrets Act, the prosecution would be kept out of the press.

'Heads are going to roll,' thought Hamersham, bitterly. 'Mine and poor old Wren's of Army Intelligence.'

He looked at Gedding again, trying to read something which did not show in the thin pink face. Gedding was cold, the tiny effeminate mouth was pinched and without humour. The small faded-looking eyes reflected nothing but frigid detachment.

Hamersham looked quickly away and tried to appear at ease. Perhaps there was a certain ironic justice in a Security chief being put on the mat and grilled by an expert.

He watched Gedding flick on a recorder and look up. "As you are probably aware, Mr. Hamersham, I have had little time to study the case, but the facts, as I understand them, are these. Government equipment was being carried from A to B and was lost, stolen or destroyed in transit? "

" It's a little more involved than that, sir."

" Possibly, but it will serve for the moment as an outline." He paused, pulled a note pad towards him and opened it carefully. " I am a precise man, Mr. Hamersham, I like my information detailed and in order. One can deal with incidentals later, but, at the moment, facts. What was the nature of this equipment? "

" It was an electronic computer, sir, and, as far as is known, the only one of its kind in existence."

" Continue, please."

" Well, sir, it was unique insofar that it was capable of computing probabilities."

Gedding looked up quickly. "Am I to understand it was a *predicting* computer? "

" Er——yes, sir, it was. Given sufficient relevant data and fed a number of probabilities it could arrive at a *possible* conclusion."

" It was therefore of immense tactical value? "

" Immense, sir, after several demonstrations the Army jumped at it. A special underground shelter was constructed for it near Dover where it was to function as a military installation."

" Others were under construction, I assume? "

" Well, no, sir. The inventor and designer, Douglas Fox, unfortunately died of a heart attack just after its completion. Naturally, he kept records but he was something of an eccentric and obsessed with a fear of enemy agents—some of his wiring and circuit records were deliberately obscure. Tracing the circuits of the prototype and constructing another would have taken five years. In any case, sir, the computer was urgently needed for extensive testing."

" What you're trying to tell me is this, it cannot be replaced. This is a deplorable business, Hamersham."

The Security chief shifted uncomfortably in his chair. " Yes, sir."

Gedding frowned coldly, turned over a page of his note pad and looked up again. " I would like an outline of the

security precautions, please."

"Well, sir, we tried to be as thorough as possible——"

"But not thorough enough, apparently. What about the workmen who helped load this computer on to the transport?"

"All security checked, sir, and none of them knew the nature of the equipment which, once lifted into the eight-wheeler, was sealed in with electro-torches. Further, and at the same time, four exactly similar vehicles were dispatched to widely different parts of the country. All, like the vital one carrying the computer, had three security guards and a police motor cycle escort of five men."

"And the vehicle itself?"

"An eight wheel truck, sir, designed for carrying large but vulnerable equipment to and from areas under fire. It was powered by a heavy duty turbo-drive and had three-inch armour."

"One question, how long before transport were the security guards notified of this assignment?"

"About a month, sir."

"That was rather a long notice."

"The men were veterans, sir, I considered them absolutely trustworthy."

"Why were there only two guards when the vehicle departed?"

"Holmes tripped getting out of his car, sir, and broke a bone in his ankle. There was no time to get a replacement."

"I see. So in the transport were two security guards and the driver?"

"There was one civilian, sir. A Mr. Cooper, a security checked boffin——er——scientist from General Electronics."

"And the driver?"

"A specially drafted and security checked sergeant from the R.A.S.C., sir. He had no idea what the transport was carrying."

Gedding nodded and took something from a desk drawer. "Show me the last recorded position of the transport on this map."

"About here, sir, on the old A20. We deliberately chose a quiet road—the motorways were hardly suitable. The convoy was just about here, sir, with Lenham on the right."

"This is a recent map?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is this red shading?"

"Oh, that's a new housing estate, sir. You remember the air disaster last month, sir? That's where the Bombay to London rocket crashed, took the roof off the old sanatorium as it came down. The estate is still in ruins, sir, and there's a crater a hundred and seventy feet wide."

Gedding looked up. "How very convenient," he said, softly. "How very very convenient, but we'll come to that later." He opened a folder file beside him. "As for the reports of the individual guards, they are patently absurd or don't you agree?"

Hamersham swallowed uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "So absurd, sir, I was wondering if they might not be true."

Gedding said: "Ah!" and smiled thinly. "As you are aware, Mr. Hamersham, I have only skimmed the reports. I am told you have a phenominal memory, perhaps you would be good enough to summarise."

"Give you an outline of their individual reports, sir?"

"Exactly. Now, as I understand it, the transport and its cargo left the Ministry of Works at noon and had passed Maidstone by early evening. At seven five P.M., just after dusk, it was near the village of Lenham. What, according to the Security guards, happened then?"

"You want me to tell it near enough word for word, sir?"

"I should be obliged. I have special reasons for wishing to hear this fantastic explanation in—er—story form?"

Hamersham shrugged, stung by the implication and lit a cigarette defiantly. "Very well, sir, at seven five the transport was proceeding normally at the stipulated twenty-five miles per hour. At seven nine, however, it ran into an unexpected bank of fog..."

"What the hell!" Pine was not ready for the sudden stop and was almost flung from his seat. He had been about to eat, now spilled coffee trickled slowly to the floor of the driving cab and the sandwiches were soaked.

"Damn mist." Darian's voice was abrupt and accusing as if the phenomena was due to carelessness on the part of the route planners.

"Sorry, sir." Reed sounded distressed. "Came up so suddenly I had to slam on the anchors."

"Not your fault, sergeant." Darian leaned forward. "Can't see a thing."

"What's up?" Cooper appeared in the small doorway which gave egress from the driving cab to the main body of the vehicle.

"Mist." Darian was deliberately abrupt.. He was a highly intelligent but strictly conventional man and Cooper offended his sense of rightness. A professor of mathematics with honours in advanced electronics should be staid and slightly eccentric. He should not, in the first place, be thirty-five and have untidy lank hair falling over his forehead. He should *not* wear, of all things, an ancient duffle coat or effect a red and black striped scarf which was, Darian suspected, nearly twenty feet long. Cooper, the professor of mathematics, looked like a cross between a beatnik and a refugee from a minor university.

"Clearing a bit now." Reed eased his foot slightly off the brake.

"Don't rush it." Darian was still crouching forward. "Wait until we can see ten feet anyway."

"Anyone want a ham and coffee sandwich?" said Pine. "Alternatively, there is some rather soggy coffee."

"I've two spare flasks out here," volunteered Cooper. "I'll fetch them."

"Think I've enough round my ankles at the moment." Pine bent down and began to squeeze the bottoms of his trousers."

"Get moving," said Darian. "I can see nearly twenty feet now."

There was a hiss as Reed released the air-brake and the vehicle crawled slowly forward.

Reed began to frown. "Any reports of road repairs, sir? With independent suspension we smooth out a lot but this feels too rough to me."

Darian frowned at the map. "Nothing here." He sounded ill-tempered. He leaned forward again. "Hell, man, we're off the road—stop!"

Reed stopped and they all craned forward. In the limited range of the lights the ground was uneven, pitted and splintered with what looked like fragments of white rock.

"I've moved less than five feet, sir."

"Must have got on the verge somehow. Thank God the mist is clearing quickly now."

"The verge," said Cooper curtly, "is grass. I know this road, particularly this part, my people lived in Charing which is the next village."

Darian scowled at him. "It's not grass now." Then to Reed. "Get moving."

The eight wheeler began to creep slowly forward again.

"I can see a light ahead, sir." Reed was hunched forward over the wheel."

"Light or reflection," said Pine. "Watch it, it could be someone's windscreen."

"I think it's a signpost." Darians voice was patently relieved. "Probably ran up a side road—ease up, Sergeant."

They craned forward and there was a sudden silence.

"What the hell does that mean?" said Pine finally.

The notice was of an unfamiliar reflector material and perhaps owing to the mist, seemed suspended in mid-air. The printed words, in a curious gothic-type lettering, said:

FRAYT-SLIDE 5

"Could be the name of a house, sir," suggested Reed.

"Could be." Darian leaned forward. "Keep moving, I think. I can see the main road. Yes, there it is, straight ahead."

The vehicle crept forward and rolled down a slight incline on to the smooth unbroken surface of what was obviously a major road.

"My God!" Reed's foot came down hard on the brake and the vehicle jerked to an abrupt stop.

"*Now* what's the matter?" Darian, studying the map, had been flung half off the seat.

"It's the road, sir. As soon as the front wheels touched it the light came on."

Darian stared. Stretching ahead of them for a full sixty feet a soft white light illuminated the surface of the road.

"Cut your lights."

Switches clicked but the illuminated road surface remained.

"Roll her." Darian's voice suggested that he was ordering an advance on a superior enemy force. "Something damn funny here, that surface light is extending as we accelerate."

"Stop." Cooper's voice was so authoritative that Reed stopped without even looking at Darian for orders.

Cooper lit a cigarette. "Isn't it about time we stopped blundering into the unknown without some sort of discussion? Surely you're not still deluding yourselves this is the A20 or, for that matter any other road in the country?"

"What the devil are you drivelling about?" Darian sounded more alarmed than angry.

"Oh, for God's sake, man, use your head." Cooper tugged angrily at his striped scarf. "We run five feet into a patch of fog, find ourselves off the road and have travelled a hundred and twenty-five to get back to it. When we do get back the same road is so wide that the headlights fall short of the opposite verge—is that the A20? Again, if we had a road which lit interiorly for any vehicle passing over its surface don't you think we'd have heard about it?"

Darian glared at him but inwardly he was making a rapid re-appraisal. Cooper was obviously an alert man, furthermore, he was outwardly unshaken. Darian was, however, a stubborn man. "I'll concede we've lost our way somehow."

Cooper grinned faintly. "Well, that's a start." He stopped. "What's *that*?"

A hundred yards to their right part of the road surface, some eight feet wide, lit abruptly and streaked ahead of them like swiftly unwinding tape.

Suddenly there was a roar, Pine jumped visibly and the transport rocked and shivered as if struck by an explosion.

Something black hurtled past and went howling and exploding into the distance.

"What in the name of hell was that?" Sweat crawled down Reed's forehead.

"I think it was some kind of vehicle." Cooper's voice was still almost normal. "Judging by the area of road which lit before it and the general noise, it was clocking about seven hundred miles an hour."

"Don't be a fool." Darian half rose.

Cooper shrugged tiredly. "Take it or leave it. Those abrupt explosions were supersonic bangs, that thing was breaking the sound barrier."

Darian resumed his seat slowly, he was scowling. "All right, all right." He was developing a grudging respect for Cooper's calmness and logic but was loath to admit it. "Any bright explanations?"

"None that I'd care to air outside a padded cell."

"You're honest, anyway. Anyone care to improve on that?"

"I don't mind." Pine was elaborately casual. "I think we're in the future."

"The future!" Darian snorted contemptuously. "Sort of rot I might expect from M.I.5."

Pine glared at him. "I've seen considerable tripe from Army Intelligence."

"Gentlemen," Cooper's voice was curt. "Wherever we are, we're here together."

Darian flushed. "You're right. Sorry, Pine, bit on edge."

"Forget it, we all are." He looked at Cooper. "What do we do now?"

"All I can suggest is keep rolling, we're doing no good standing here."

"Right." Darian nodded to Reed. "Get moving but not too fast."

They moved forward again, the surface lighting of the road extending as they increased speed.

Cooper leaned forward. If they were on the A20, they should be able to see the pointer-arrows to Lenham and the lights of the Golden Slipper road house at the top of the rise. "Only I won't," he told himself. "Maybe I'll never see them again."

"Red strip in the road ahead." Reed's voice was not quite natural. "What'll I do?"

Darian frowned. "I suppose it means something—oh hell, keep rolling but cut your speed."

Silently, unconsciously holding their breath, they watched the red strip in the lighted road surface, creep towards them and disappear beneath their vision.

They were just beginning to relax when the voice came. It came from somewhere in the cab, curiously clipped, stilted and only partly comprehensible.

"Alt! Pleece-strip," said the voice.

"What'll I do?" Reed's voice was almost a whimper.

"Better stop, probably some sort of traffic signal." Grudgingly and much against his better judgment he was beginning to agree with Pine. Perhaps this *was* the future. God, this damn road must be nearly a mile *wide*.

The voice came again. "Why fault pleece-strip?"

There was silence, then Cooper answered. "I'm sorry, we'd no idea what it meant." He wore the acutely

embarrased expression of man caught in the act of talking loudly to himself.

There was a long pause, then: "Wotspeak?" The voice sounded puzzled and there was a muttered half heard conversation.

"Wotworld youcommen?" This time the voice sounded hopeful.

"I'm sorry, we don't understand you." Cooper kept his voice firm but he was sweating visibly.

"Like talking to a ruddy ghost," said Pine in an undertone.

Again there was a muttered conversation in which they heard the word "oldspeak" repeated several times.

"Galactaspeak?"

"No," said Cooper firmly.

"No?" There was another long pause, then: "Attention, please, do you understand?"

"We understand."

"Excellent. Your responses were referred to the vocal banks and identified as Oldspeak. I am, therefore, addressing you through a transvoce. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Why did you cross the police strip?"

"We told you—we'd no idea what it meant."

"No idea—but your automatics should have picked it up long before it became visible. Your vehicle is obviously unsafe. Which world do you hail from?"

"World?" It was Darian who answered this time. "Why this one, of course. Earth. This is Earth I suppose."

"Yes, this is Ert." The voice sounded puzzled. There was another muttered conversation, then: "Stand by, I'll be with you in less than a ter."

They waited, silently, staring through the windscreen of the driving cab. No one bothered to ask what a 'ter' was.

It turned out to be less than a minute. The man appeared suddenly in the area of light and walked slowly towards the transport.

"The future," said Pine. "I said so from the beginning, that or he's escaped from a ballet."

The man wore a black, skin-tight suit with a deep V neck. There was a wide belt at the waist but neither suit nor belt appeared to hold receptacles for personal belongings or

weapons. Beneath the black material the man's well-muscled body moved with the lithe ease of a trained athelete.

" He's bald." Pine's whisper was almost shocked. He found himself staring, fascinated, at the shiny hairless head as the man drew closer and stood staring up at the driving cab.

" May I enter? "

" Certainly." Cooper made to open the door but the man was suddenly among them.

With a kind of dazed disbelief Pine watched him settle himself in the only vacant space on the bench-type seat.

" Er—excuse me." Pine found he had to clear his throat noisily before his voice became audible. " Excuse me, you may get into a bit of a mess there."

The man was sitting comfortably on a flask, three sandwiches and a half filled cup of coffee.

" Please? " Then he laughed, very softly, very gently and very understandingly. " Ah, I perceive you are unfamiliar with our technology. I am not real, not even solid, I am a projected image."

" Yes? " Pine fought down an inclination to draw back uneasily. Not real? He had a sudden vision of himself reaching into the man's side, withdrawing the coffee cup and draining it casually. With some effort he fought down an urge to laugh hysterically, for the moment it had been almost overwhelming.

The visitor, or his projection, looked at Cooper. " Why is your vehicle not fitted with sense-meters to react to police strips? "

" Sense-meters? " Cooper looked puzzled then shrugged. " Perhaps I had better explain. I've never heard of a sense-meter and certainly never seen a road like this. Something inexplicable happened, one minute we were on the A20, the old London to Dover road, the next we were here."

" London to Dover? " The man's fine eyebrows rose slightly. " You must be T.T's as Olis suggested—what year were you travelling this A.20? "

" Nineteen eighty-six.'

" That long—? I can hardly believe it. According to the records we had a man here once from twenty-one ninety-three. He'd been experimenting with a hyper-dimensional variator for a spaceship and accidentally stepped into the

flux field, but nineteen eighty-six! " He shook his head slowly. " How? "

" We don't know."

" You are quite sure you do not know? " He leaned forward, frowning. " What are the bulbous discs beneath your vehicle—reaction drives? "

" Bulbous discs? Oh you mean the wheels."

" Wheels! But—it's incredible, *wheels!* In this day and age only a few have even *heard* of wheels. You must be T.Ts, I must refer this matter to the Science Banks later, your appearance here is dangerous." He paused. " This is Standard Cycle 600 or, in your calendar five thousand and seventy-two."

They digested the information in silence.

" This road," said Darian, " It is a real road? " He sounded as if he were speaking through a gag.

" It *was* a road, really it's an ancient monument now, a preservation inspected and maintained by the robotics—it's the old Freight Slide 5." He paused frowning in concentration. " I've just advised the robotics to keep it clear. You'll have to keep moving you know, the static you're building up is a dangerous energy potential." He paused again, then, apologetically. " I am sorry I cannot guarantee your absolute safety, there are other dangers." He looked about him. " Of what substance is this vehicle constructed? "

" Three inch armour plate." Darian's voice had a certain firmness. " Stop a rocket-shell."

" But this armour plate—of what substance? "

" Steel—hardened metal."

" Metal! This, surely, is more archaic than wheels. With such a frail protection you stand no chance anywhere. Only a few miles more and you will be in Goldie territory— "

" Is there a war on or something? " Pine's effort to sound casual was praiseworthy but not wholly convincing.

" War? Ah, no." The other shook his head. " It is difficult to explain—please, what was the population of this London? "

" About fifteen million."

" Ah, now, today the whole planet has but twenty thousand people."

" Twenty thousand! " Pine sounded horrified. " Have they been killed or something? "

"Killed, no. They have gone, the galaxy is immense." He sighed. "Naturally you do not understand but when man reached the stars he learned the truth. Ert is a dump, a junk pile, no sane man would want to stay on Ert." He smiled gently. "Please do not look so shocked. Ert is the roughest, hardest, most exacting life-supporting planet in the known universe. The sun is too harsh, the radiation too fierce and erratic. The result is emotional instability leading to wars and similar outbreaks of violence. The radiation mutates minor life-forms which has bacteriological repercussions leading to a constant war against disease. No, there are far happier planets than Ert."

"The Goldies," said Cooper in a firm voice. "What about the Goldies?"

"Ah, now." The other made a resigned gesture. "People come and people go, they bring back souvenirs, the Goldie was one of them." He smiled a little sadly. "They were found on a heavy world nearly thirty centuries ago and were thought to be the art forms of a long dead civilisation. *Then* they were so big." He held his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "It was not known, of course, that they were living creatures of incredible organic density and a slower life-tempo. Travellers brought them back as curios and ornaments." He sighed. "On Ert they mutated, they grew in size but retained their density and in the course of a few hundred years their time cycle adjusted to local conditions. They have procreated and some areas of the planet they consider their own. They possess, you see, a certain off-beat intelligence."

"Why don't you get rid of them?" demanded Pine.

The other spread his hands. "They do *us* no harm, they do no material damage and they are intelligent enough to recognise robotics and leave them severely alone."

"But letting them over-run the place." Darian sounded incensed. "What about the people who live here?"

"No one *lives* here. We do our spells of duty and return to our homes. Ert is a memorial and a monument for a few sightseers, we maintain it from sentiment because it is our birthplace."

"But the Goldies?"

"Please, in your day did you worry about a few cockroaches in an old museum?"

" Old graveyard," said Pine bitterly.

The man smiled at him without comprehension and rose. " I must return and consult the science banks, I will contact you as soon as I receive an answer. In the meantime keep your vehicle moving."

" But look— "

There was a curious crackling sound and the man vanished.

" Roll her." Darian's voice was harsh.

" Yer." Reed's voice was slurred and his face colourless. He stalled the motor twice before they got moving and the first few feet were a series of jerks.

Darian rose abruptly. " If we're going to run into some sort of trouble— " He passed through the small door and returned a few minutes later with his arms full. " Use a Denning, Cooper? "

The mathematician smiled faintly. " I should hope so. I was in that little Southern revolution six years ago." He helped himself to one of the weapons and snapped open the breech expertly. " I hope they've improved on them since then, the pellets had a nasty habit of exploding prematurely in the barrel."

Darian nodded. " We heard, the insurgent forces bought cheaply, someone sold them rejected stock."

Pine changed the subject. " I suppose T.T. does stand for time travellers, it sounds a probability."

" Probability! " Cooper was suddenly pale. He put down the weapon, pushed past Darian and almost ran through the small door.

He returned some minutes later his face bitter. " Well, I've found the answer but I can't solve it, it's that bloody computer."

" What is? " They stared at him blankly.

Cooper made an irritable gesture. " Our reason for being here. God, it's difficult to explain outside mathematics, but with the new dimensional equations—Look, some lab techs who should have known better, have apparently been amusing themselves asking questions, one concerned the future. Normally, after answering the question, the machine blanks itself out but this time a circuit breaker stuck. Since then energy has built up to such an extent that the device has created its own probability field."

" And pushed us into the future? "

"Not quite, a future based on the information in its data banks, we've done a time/continuation shift. This world exists, but not in our time or even in our universe. This is a *probable* future, almost exact save for only minor discrepancies. As you probably noticed our visitor persisted in calling the place 'Ert.'

They stared at him then Darian said: "At the risk of appearing obtuse, can't we turn the damn thing off?"

"I wish I could, unfortunately it was designed as an independent unit and draws power from its own pile."

Pine said, "Thank you for nothing," bitterly. "What's the answer, if any?"

Cooper faced him grimly. "Destroy the computer, open the inspection panel and fire a burst into the circuits."

"No." Darian's voice was determined. "In the first place we're in charge of things and, in the second, even if that lark got us back they'd stand us against a wall."

There was a crackling sound in the air. "Attention, please. The time/continuum warp has been traced to a fault in some of your apparatus, a computer or similar device. It must be destroyed if you are to return, goodbye and good luck."

Darian scowled at the empty air. "And no to you too," he said savagely.

"You may have reason to change your mind." Cooper's voice was warningly controlled. "Nature only *abhors* a vacuum, she gets raging mad about a special warp."

Darian shrugged. "I have my orders, we'll have to wait and see what's ahead."

"From what we've been told we won't like that either," said Pine, bitterly.

His words proved almost prophetic.

"Something scuttled across the road, I saw it." Reed's voice was hoarse.

They leaned forward, then Darian said: "Up ahead there!"

The thing which stood directly in their path had the face of a crocodile and the wickedly upcurved tail of a scorpion. Some ten feet in length, it possessed six legs but faced them on two. The two forelegs, terminating in curiously humanoid hands, were outstretched but curving inwards like those of a wrestler.

Cooper, staring through the screen, felt as if something ice-cold had been pressed to the back of his neck. There was something off-beat about the thing which made him want to jump from the cab and run. Despite the resemblance both to crocodile and scorpion there was about it a sense of complete alienness, nothing like this could have come from Earth.

Despite a growing sense of alarm his vision seemed strangely acute. The creature's mouth was slightly open in what might have been a sardonic smile yet, curiously, there were no fangs. The teeth were white, square and although numerous, very even. The bulging luminous bright green eyes seemed filled with a bland assurance.

"Run it down." Darian was hunched forward showing his teeth.

"Don't be a fool." Cooper found himself shouting. "If that thing is organically dense it may weigh several tons."

"Round it."

Reed pulled frantically at the wheel and the creature seemed to slide past them on the left.

Cooper saw the head turn almost casually, somehow it was still wearing the same sardonic smile and then the body straightened abruptly He had a brief glimpse of it slithering inwards with incredible speed, then there was a thud and two dull reports.

"Two nearside tyres." Reed's voice was a little shrill.

Pine slid back one of the windows. "I'll give it a burst."

Cooper saw him flick off the safety catch and lean out, the weapon clutched in his hands. There was a brief burst of fire, then another.

When Pine slid the window back his face was strangely blank. "They bounced off, I saw the damn pellets actually explode on contact."

"It's coming up on the nearside." Reed's voice was no longer quite sane. "It's jumping at us."

There was a heavy impact, the transport shivered as if struck by a heavy shell and lurched sideways.

Reed let go of the wheel. "Let me out, let me out, I want to go home." Tears ran down his face and his eyes were no longer sane.

"Blast the man." Darian swung his fist angrily. There was an abrupt chopping sound and Reed went rigid. The whites of his eyes showed briefly then he crumpled sideways and rolled on to the floor.

Darian grabbed the wheel and fought the vehicle back to a straight course by sheer strength. He had no time to feel pity for Reed. Probably a damn good chap under normal circumstances but not here, not in this mad house.

He glanced in the driving mirror quickly. The thing was still coming up on the nearside in a series of long rolling leaps. "It looks," thought Darian distractedly, "like a dolphin, head going down and the back coming up. Undulating, the tiny golden scales catching the light—"

It struck him suddenly as incongruous that the road surface should light for a creature which had its beginnings on an alien world. A creature which had once been an inch and had taken a month to move its leg a fraction of an inch.

God, it could *move*. His toe was right down to the floor but two duff tires holding them back . . .

It leapt. He swung the wheel wildly in the vain hope of getting the tail clear but he was too late.

Literally the transport staggered and leaned over. There was an impact, a crumpling of metal, he was dimly conscious of a sharp report as another tyre blew out. He struggled frantically with the wheel, power-assistance had gone from the steering and he felt veins standing out on his forehead.

Somehow he got the vehicle straight, sweat was running down his face and his arms and shoulders shook from the effort.

Pine came in, he hadn't seen him go out but he was back now, his face pale.

"It dented us." Pine sounded as if he didn't believe it himself. "There's a dirty big bulge in the nearside and we must have sprung about thirty rivets."

"Look up ahead." Cooper's voice was almost casual.

Darian looked and felt something cold form in the pit of his stomach. Far ahead, were twenty or thirty tiny cubes of light, each cube held a shadow and an outline.

"Welcome committee," said Pine, bitterly. "There must be at least thirty of the things, they'll tear this transport apart like a cardboard box."

On the floor Reed groaned and shifted his limbs.

"If he comes round, chop him." Darian scowled ahead, keeping a wary eye on the driving mirrors. The Goldie had dropped back for a while but was now coming up on the offside and gaining on them rapidly.

"If only we had a two inch anti-tank rocket," said Pine. "Off hand it's about the only weapon I can think of that would really stop those things."

"It's close again." Darian felt a weary resignation and then sudden alarm. "Where's Cooper, you've got to—"

He never finished the sentence. From inside the transport came a brief burst of fire and, at the same time, he saw the Goldie leap. It went high and he saw that it was coming down on the top of them.

He heard the crash of impact, a groaning and splintering of metal and a crackling of sprung rivets. Then, strangely, his vision blurred and he seemed to be spinning over and over in a dense grey mist . . .

"So *that's* the story." The smile on Gedding's face was thin, feline and curiously self-satisfied.

"In broad outline, yes." If he smiles like that any more thought Hamersham, savagely, I'll get a saucer of milk and push his damned head into it.

"And the men themselves were found in a dazed condition at the side of the road four hours after the transport disappeared?" Gedding was still smiling.

"All except Reed, he was with them but he was in a bad way. He may need prolonged treatment in a mental institution."

"Really?" Gedding extracted a cigarette from a gold box on his desk, delicately with thumb and forefinger. "Convenient isn't it? Very convenient." He flicked a lighter to the cigarette and squinted at Hamersham through the flame. "I wonder what drug they used to cause that." He returned the lighter to his pocket and looked at Hamersham directly. "You expressed the opinion that the story was so absurd it might be true. Have you considered that such a fantasy could be concocted for precise reasons?"

"But—"

"Allow me to continue, please. I not only will *explain* this fantasy, I will give you precise reasons as to why it was told." Gedding had raised his voice slightly as if addressing an invisible jury. "I put it to you, heavy eight-wheeled army vehicles do not disappear even into an ingenious problematical future. In the idiom of the day, Hamersham, *be your age.*"

He paused and tapped ash from his cigarette with his finger. "It is natural, even commendable, that you should be loyal both to your department and your men but let us face facts. No man is incorruptible, loyalties can be bribed, bought or terrorised out of existence. However, and to continue, with espionage raised to the level of an exact science, as it is today, perhaps you will concede that certain powers may have got wind of the computer?"

Gedding stopped speaking and dropped the half smoked cigarette into the disposal slot. "A foreign power would pay—shall we say a hundred million for such a device and that is a conservative estimate. A hundred million split three ways is a sum few men could resist and—let us face it—these men were 'got at' first."

Gedding paused and smiled his thin feline smile. "Now, let us consider procedure which has the touch of a master, this is how it was done. Our foreign organiser, knowing the route and time table in advance, detonated an artificial fog cannister at the side of the road some seconds before the transport was due. Once in that fog the driver was slugged and the transport driven up the side road to the devastated and conveniently deserted housing estate. In the also convenient crater all the necessary equipment was waiting.

"There was, no doubt, a heavy duty covered transport painted with a familiar name. The back of the army vehicle was then opened with electro-torches and the computer transferred to the waiting truck—a first class team could do the job in fifteen minutes. The truck now carrying the computer was immediately driven away and a second heavy truck, probably bearing the name of a well known scrap merchant, takes its place. The experts now get to work on the army transport with electro-torches, cutting it down to manageable size and loading the parts on the second truck—say forty minutes work with modern equipment.

"One hour later a covered removal truck drives innocently past a worried police escort, it conceals, of course, the computer. Later it is followed by a scrap lorry, heavily loaded, canvas or sacking has been flung over the contents but fragments of scrap metal are clearly visible."

Gedding leaned back in his chair and intertwined thin pink fingers. "The computer is now in the basement of a country house or similar hiding place where experts are

tracing circuits, converting them to prints and getting them out of the country in coded form. This is a laborious method but our friends can afford to take their time, they are no doubt aware we cannot duplicate this device."

Hamersham wriggled uncomfortably in his chair feeling, he thought, bitterly, like an unreliable witness in open court.

"These men have been interrogated under drugs and voluntarily submitted themselves to lie-detectors."

"Really?" Gedding shook his head slowly. "My dear fellow, surely the explanation is simple enough. This story was devised and prepared *before* the incident. No doubt hours, even days were spent in its preparation with the participants under drugs or hypnotic techniques with a few subliminal impressions for good measure. These men *believed* the story *before* it happened."

"But why such fantasy?" Hamersham was not giving in without a fight. He still felt he could trust Pine, his own man, with his life.

Gedding's thin mouth twisted slightly at one corner. "Now there we have the touch of sheer genius. In the first place the story is uncheckable, secondly it will confuse a jury or board of enquiry and, thirdly, and most important, it is designed to leave in question the mental state of the accused men. Whether we prosecute publicly or under the Official Secrets Act the *vital* question of their mental state is a loop-hole we can never close. No matter what the verdict, our friends will get away with it because of their mental state. They may, of course, be sent for a few months to a psychiatric centre for treatment, but after that—" Gedding smiled coldly. "After that, when the excitement has blown over, they'll take a little trip abroad. A trip to a nice quiet country with no extradition laws and the equivalent of a king's ransom lying ready for them in the local bank."

"They could have killed the men and saved the money," said Hamersham savagely.

"My dear fellow, you're not thinking. *You,* of all people, should know better than that. In the last twenty years the whole science of espionage has been subject to the most drastic changes. Today fantastic sums are offered to men willing to betray cause or country with the proviso that the traitor will live to enjoy it. Usually this consists of getting the man safely out of the country he has betrayed. This sort of V.I.P.

treatment gets known and recruits other malcontents in positions of trust to betray vital secrets."

Gedding's face was suddenly bitter. "Since world war Two we have been tottering on the brink of world war Three, the loss of this vital equipment might precipitate it. Too many countries presented with such a technical advantage might consider outright aggression worth the risk." He shook his head slowly. "The law will see that these guilty men are released but true justice is another thing. Your department will have to arrange three very nasty accidents before these men escape to enjoy the fruits of their betrayal."

"But look, you haven't—" Hamersham realised he was raising his voice angrily.

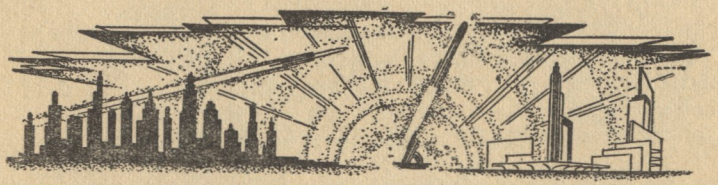
Gedding cut him short. "I know what you're going to say, I haven't considered the story, such as it is, on its own merits. I'll tell you why, there is no *evidence!* Did they bring back a fragment of a new substance, a scraping from this fairy tale highway? No, they brought nothing whatever to support this ingenius fantasy—"

The telephone rang and Gedding snatched up the receiver angrily. "I said I was not to be interrupted—I beg your pardon? Then the Chief Constable should—what? Oh, it is Sir Godfrey speaking, I'm extremely sor—" Gedding words trailed away.

Hammersham, watching, saw the colour drain from the pink supercilious face leaving a tracery of fine veins. He saw the eyes blank and the small mouth fall open weakly.

Shakily Gedding replaced the receiver. "It—it—has just—just—." He swallowed painfully and tried again. "There's a—a creature described as a golden crocodile attacking road traffic on the A20 . . . "

Philip E. High



The complex structure which is Sector General Hospital is slowly disintegrating as the forces of the Empire batter down its defences—and Dr. Conway finds himself in complete control of a wreck filled with injured combatants speaking scores of alien languages.

FIELD HOSPITAL

by JAMES WHITE

Conclusion

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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.

Refusing to brook any interference in its carefully balanced plan for Etla, the Empire uses the factor to start a war against Earth, but because of the vast distances involved, Sector Twelve General Hospital is the logical target for their opening attacks. The Monitor Corps decides to defend the hospital, patients and many of the staff are evacuated, the defence fleet is built up and the staff who remain prepare to attend to the wounded.

The attack gains momentum as the defence fleet is beaten slowly back to the vicinity of the hospital, which has become a giant fortress. More and more direct hits gouge out sections of the hospital and the casualties mount—even enemy wounded are brought in from outer space as floating wreckage is combed for survivors. During one fierce attack a major hit upon the hospital's communications centre effectively knocks out the Translator system and Conway and O'Mara find that no-one can now understand any speech other than their own.

fifteen

For a long time, although it might have only been a few seconds, Conway could not bring himself to leave the alcove which contained the intercom unit, and the Chief Psychologist would have been clinically concerned about the thoughts which were going through his mind just then. But slowly he fought down the panic that made him want to run away and hide somewhere, by reminding himself savagely that there was nowhere to run to and by forcing himself to look at the FGLIs drifting about in the antechamber. The place was literally filled with them.

Conway himself knew only the rudiments of Tralthan physiology, but that was the least of his worries because he could easily take an FGLI tape. What he had to do was to start things moving for them *now*. But it was hard to think of even the simplest things with the e-t nurses chittering at each other and the Corpsmen shouting to know what was the matter and the casualties, many of whom were conscious, making pitiful, frantic noises that were muffled only slightly by their pressure envelopes.

"Sergeant!" Conway bawled suddenly at the senior orderly, waving at the casualties, "Ward Four-B, Two-Hundred and Seventh level. Know where is it?"

The NCO bobbed his head, and Conway turned to the nurses.

He got nowhere with the Nidian and QCQL despite all his efforts at sign language, and it was only when he wrapped his legs around one of the FGLI's fore-limbs and by brute force twisted the appendage containing its visual equipment until the cluster of eyes pointed at where the casualties were going that he got anywhere at all. Finally he made the Tralthans understand—he hoped—that they were to accompany the injured and do what they could for them when they arrived.

Four-B had been given over almost entirely to FGLI casualties and most of the staff were Tralthan also, which meant that some of the patients could be reassured by nurses speaking their own language. Conway refused to think of the other casualties who did not have this advantage. He had been assigned Thornnastor's wards. One thing at a time.

When he reached O'Mara's office the Major wasn't there. Carrington, one of his assistants, explained that O'Mara was

busy trying to match up patients and staff into species wherever possible, and that he wanted to see Conway immediately the Doctor was finished in the Tralthan wards. Carrington added that as communications were either dead or tied up with e-ts yelling gibberish at each other would he mind either reporting back here or remaining where he was so that the Major could find him. Ten minutes later Conway had the tape he wanted and was on his way to Four-B.

He had taken FGLI tapes before and they weren't too bad. There was a tendency for him to feel awkward at having to walk on only two feet instead of six, and he wanted to move his head and neck about to follow moving objects instead of merely swivelling his eyes. But it was not until he reached the ward that he realised how fully his Tralthan mind partner had settled in. The rows of Tralthan patients became his most immediate and pressing concern, while only a small part of his mind was engaged with the problem of the Tralthan nurses who were obviously close to panic and whose words, for some odd reason, he could not understand. For the Earth-human nurses —puny, shapeless and unlovely bags of dough—he felt only impatience.

Conway went over to the group of shapeless and unlovely bags, although to the human portion of his mind a couple of them looked very shapely indeed, and said, " Give me your attention, please. I have a Tralthan tape which will enable me to treat these FGLIs, but the Translator breakdown means I can't talk to them or the Tralthan staff. You girls will have to help with the preliminary examinations and in the theatre."

They were all staring at him and losing their fear at being told what to do again by someone in authority, even though they were being told to do the impossible. There were forty-seven FGLI patients in the ward, which included eight new arrivals needing immediate attention. There were only three Earth-human nurses.

" The FGLI staff and yourselves can't talk now," he went on after a moment's hesitation, " but you use the same system of medical notation. Some method of communication can be worked out. It will be slow and roundabout, of course, but you must let them know what we are doing and get their help. Wave your arms," he ended, " draw pictures. Above all, use your pretty little heads."

Soft soap at a time like this, he thought ashamedly. But it was all he could think of at the moment, he wasn't a psychologist like O'Mara . . .

He had dealt with four of the most urgent cases when Mannen arrived with another FGLI in a stretcher held to the floor with magnets. The patient was Thornnastor and it was immediately obvious that the Diagnostician would be immobilised for a long time to come.

Mannen gave details of Thornnastor's injuries and what he had done about them, then went on, ". . . Seeing that you have the monopoly on Tralthans you'd better handle its post-op nursing. And this is the sanest and quietest ward in the hospital, dammit. What's your secret? Boyish charm, a bright idea, or have you access to a bootleg Translator?"

Conway explained what he was trying to do about the mixed species nurses.

" Ordinarily I don't hold with nurses and doctors passing notes during an op," Mannen said. His face was grey with fatigue, his attempt at humour little more than a conditioned reflex. " But it seems to work for you. I'll pass the idea on."

They manoeuvred Thornnastor's vast body into one of the padded frameworks used as beds for FGLIs in weightless conditions, then Mannen said, " I've got an FGLI tape, too. Needed it for Thorny, here. Now I've got two QCQLs lined up. Didn't know there was any such beastie until today, but O'Mara has the tape. It's a suit job, that gunk they breath would kill anything that walks, crawls or flies, excluding them. They're both conscious, too, and I can't talk to them. I can see I'm going to have fun."

Suddenly his shoulders drooped and the muscles holding up the corners of his mouth gave up the fight. He said dully, " I wish you'd think of something, Conway. In wards like this where the patients and some nurses are of the same classification it isn't too bad. Relatively, that is. But other places where the casualties and staff are completely mixed, and where singletons among the e-t staff have become casualties in the bombardment, things are rough."

Conway had heard the bombardment, a continuous and irregular series of crashes that had been transmitted through the metal of the hospital as if someone was beating on a discordant gong. He had heard them and tried not to think about

them, for he knew that the staff were becoming casualties and the casualties that the staff had been taking care of were becoming casualties twice over.

" I can imagine," Conway said grimly. " But with Thornnastor's wards to look after I've plenty to do—"

" Everybody has plenty to do !" Mannen said sharply, " but someone will have to come up with something quick !"

What do you want me to do about it ? Conway thought angrily at Mannen's receding back, then he turned to his next patient.

For the past few hours something distinctly odd had been happening in Conway's mind. It had begun with an increasingly strong feeling that he almost knew what the Tralthan nurses in the ward were saying. This he put down to the fact that the FGLI tape he had taken—the complete memory record of an eminent physiologist of that race—had given him a lot of data on Tralthan attitudes and expressions and tones of voice. He had never noticed the effect before—probably, he supposed, because he had never had to deal with so many Tralthans in so short a time before, and he had always had a Translator anyway. But working with mainly Tralthan patients had caused the FGLI recorded personality to gain greater than usual prominence at the expense of the human personality.

There was no struggle for possession of his mind, no conflict in the process. It happened naturally because he was being forced to do so much FGLI type thinking. When he did have occasion to speak to an Earth-human nurse or patient, he had to concentrate hard if the first few words they spoke were not to sound like gibberish to him.

And now he was beginning to hear and understand Tralthans talking.

It was far from perfect, of course. For one thing the elephantine hootings and trumpetings were being filtered through human rather than Tralthan ears to the FGLI within his mind, and suffered distortion and change of pitch accordingly. The words tended to be muffled and growly, but he did get some of them, which meant that he possessed a Translator of sorts. It was a strictly a one-way affair, of course. Or was it ?

When he was preparing the next case for the theatre he decided to try talking back.

His FGLI alter ego knew how the words should sound, he knew how to work his own vocal cords, and the Earth-human

voice was reputed to be one of the most versatile instruments in the Galaxy. Conway took a deep breath and gave forth.

The first attempt was disastrous. It ended in an uncontrollable fit of coughing on his part and spread alarm and consternation for the length and breadth of the ward. But with the third attempt he got through—one of the Tralthan nurses answered him ! After that it was just a matter of time until he had enough of the more important directions off pat, and subsequent operations proceeded more quickly, efficiently and with enormously increased chances for the patient.

The Earth-human nurses were greatly impressed by the odd noises issuing from Conway's overworked throat. At the same time they seemed to see an element of humour in the situation . . .

" Well, well," said a familiar, irascible voice behind him, " a ward full of happy, smiling patients, with the Good Doctor keeping up morale by doing animal impressions. What the blazes do you think you're doing ?"

O'Mara, Conway saw with a shock, was really angry—not just playing his usual, short-tempered self. In the circumstances it would be better to answer the question and ignore the rhetoric.

" I'm looking after Thornnastor's patients, plus some new arrivals," Conway said quietly. " The Corpsmen and FGLI patients have been taken care of, and I was about to ask you for a DBLF tape for the Kelgians who have just come in."

O'Mara snorted. " I'll send down a Kelgian doctor to take care of that," he said angrily, "and your nurses can take care of the others for the time being. You don't seem to realise that this is one level out of three-hundred and eighty-four, Doctor Conway. That there are ward patients urgently in need of the simplest treatment or medication, and they won't get it because the staff concerned whistle while they cheep. That the casualties are piling up around the locks, some of them in corridors which have been opened to space. Those pressure litters won't supply air forever, you know, and the people in them can't be feeling very happy . . ."

" What do you want me to do ?" said Conway.

For some reason this made O'Mara angrier. He said bitingly, " I don't know, Doctor Conway. I am a psychologist. I can no longer act effectively because most of my patients no longer speak the same language. Those who do I've tried to

chivvy into thinking of something to get us out of this mess. But they're all too busy treating the sick in their own neighbourhood to think of the hospital as a whole. They want to leave it to the Big Brains . . ."

" In these circumstances," Conway put in, " a Diagnostician seems to be the logical person to come up with a bright idea."

O'Mara's anger was being explained, Conway thought. It must be pretty frustrating for a psychologist who could neither listen or talk to his patients. But the anger seemed almost personal, as if Conway himself had fallen down on the job in some fashion.

" Thornnastor is out of the picture," O'Mara said, lowering his voice slightly. " You were probably too busy to know that the other two Diagnosticians who stayed behind were killed earlier today. Among the Senior Physicians, Harkness, Irkultis, Mannen—"

" Mannen ! Is he . . .?"

" I thought you might have known about him," O'Mara said almost gently, " since it happened just two levels away. He was working on two QCQLs when the theatre was opened up. A piece of flying metal ruptured his suit. He's decompressed, and before that poison they use for air escaped completely he breathed some of it. But he'll live."

Conway found that he had been holding his breath. He said, " I'm glad."

" Me, too," said O'Mara gruffly. " But what I started to say was that there are no Diagnosticians left and no Senior Physicians other than yourself, and the place is in a mess. As the senior surviving medical officer in the hospital, what do you plan to do about it ?"

He stood watching Conway, and waiting.

sixteen

Conway had thought that nothing could make him feel worse than the realisation some hours previously that the Translator system had broken down. He didn't want this responsibility, the very thought of it scared him to death. Yet there had been times when he'd dreamed of being Secto General's director and having absolute control over all thing medical within the gigantic organisation. But in those dream

the hospital had not been a dying war-torn behemoth that was virtually paralysed by the breakdown of communications between its separate and vital organs, nor had it bristled with death-dealing weapons, nor had it been criminally understaffed and horribly overcrowded with patients.

Probably these were the only circumstances which would allow someone like himself to become Director of a hospital like this, Conway told himself sadly. He wasn't the best available, he was the only one available. Even so it gave him a quite indescribable feeling, compounded of fear, anger and pride, that he was to be its head for the remaining days or weeks of its life.

Conway gave a quick look around his ward, at the orderly if uneven rows of Tralthan and Earth-human beds and at the quietly efficient staff. He had made it this way. But he was beginning to see that he had been hiding himself down here, that he had been running away from his responsibilities.

" I do have an idea," he said suddenly to O'Mara. " It isn't a good idea, and I think we ought to go to your office to talk about it, because you'll probably object to it, loudly, and that might disturb the patients."

O'Mara looked at him sharply. When he spoke the anger had gone from his voice so that it was merely normally sarcastic again. He said, " I find *all* your ideas objectionable, Doctor. It's because I've got such an orderly mind."

On the way to O'Mara's office they passed a group of high-ranking Monitor officers and the Major told him that they were part of Dermod's staff who were preparing to shift tactical command into the hospital. At the moment Dermod was commanding from *Vespasian*. But even the capital ships were taking a beating now, and the fleet commander had already had *Domitian* almost shot from under him . . .

When they arrived Conway said, " It isn't such a hot idea, and seeing those Corpsmen on the way up here has given me a better one. Suppose we ask Dermod to let us use his ship Translators . . .?"

O'Mara shook his head. " It won't work," he said. " I thought of that idea, too. It seems the only Translator computers of any use to us are on the big ships, and they are such an integral part of the structure that it would practically wreck the ship to take one out. Besides, for our absolute minimum needs we would require twenty capital ship computers. We

haven't got twenty capital ships left, and what we do have Dermod says he has a much better use for. Now what was your other not very good idea ?"

Conway told him.

When he had finished, O'Mara looked at him steadily for nearly a minute. Finally he said, " Consider your idea objected to, strongly. Consider, if you like, that I jumped up and down and pounded the desk, because that it what I'd be doing if I wasn't so blasted tired. Don't you realise what you'd be letting yourself in for ?"

From somewhere below them came a tearing crash with ridiculous, gong-like overtones. Conway jerked involuntarily, then said, " I think so. There will be a lot of mental confusion and discomfort, but I hope to avoid most of it by letting the tape entity take over almost completely until I have what I need, then I partly suppress it and do the translation. That was how it worked with the Tralthan tape and there's no reason why it shouldn't work with DBLFs or any of the others. The DBLF language should be a cinch, it being easier to moan like a Kelgian than hoot like a Tralthan . . ."

He would not have to stay in any one place for very long, Conway hoped, only long enough to sort out the local translation problems. Some of the e-t sounds would be difficult to reproduce orally, but he had an idea for modifying certain musical instruments which might take care of that. And he would not be the only walking Translator, there were still e-t and human doctors who could help by taking one or two tapes. Some of them might have done so already, but had not thought of using them for translation yet. As he talked Conway's tongue was having a hard job to keep up with his racing mind.

" Just a minute," said O'Mara at one point. " You keep talking about letting one personality come to the fore, then suppressing it, then bringing out two together and so on. You might find that you haven't that much control. Multiple physiology tapes are tricky, and you've never had more than two before at any one time. I have your records."

O'Mara hesitated for a moment, then went on seriously, " What you get is the recorded memories of an e-t high in the medical profession on its home planet. It *isn't* an alien entity fighting for possession of your mind, but because its memory and personality are impressed alongside your own you may be

panicked into thinking that it is trying to take over. Some of our tapes were taken from very aggressive individuals, you see.

" Odd things happen to doctors who take a number of long-term tapes for the first time," O'Mara went on. " Pains, skin conditions, perhaps organic malfunctionings develop. All have a psychosomatic basis, of course, but to the person concerned they hurt just as much as the real thing. These disturbances can be controlled, even negated, by a strong mind. Yet a mind with strength alone will break under them in time. Flexibility allied with strength is required, also something to act as a mental anchor, something that you must find for yourself . . .

" Suppose I agree to this," he ended abruptly, " how many will you need ?"

Conway thought quickly. Tralthan, Kelgian, Melfan, Nidian, the ambulating plants he had met before going to Etla, who also had remained behind, and the beasties Mannen had been treating when he was knocked out of it. He said, " FGLI, DBLF, ELNT, Nidian-DBDG, AACP and QCQL. Six."

O'Mara compressed his lips. " I wouldn't mind if it was a Diagnostician doing this," he objected, " because they are used to splitting their minds six ways. But you are just—"

" The senior medical officer of the hospital," Conway finished for him, grinning.

" Hm," said O'Mara.

In the silence they could hear human voices and a peculiar, alien gabbling go past in the corridor outside. Whoever was making the noise must have been shouting very loud because the Major's office was supposed to be soundproof.

" All right," said O'Mara suddenly, " you can try it. But I don't want to have to deal with you in my professional capacity, and that is a much stronger possibility than you seem to think. We're too short of doctors to have you immobilising yourself in a straight-jacket, so I'm going to set a watch-dog on you. We'll add GLNO to your list."

" Prilicla !"

" Yes. Being an empath it has had a hard time with the sort of emotional radiation that is going around recently, and I've had to keep it under sedation. But it will be able to keep a mental eye on you, and probably help you, too. Move over to the couch."

Conway moved to the couch and O'Mara fitted the helmet. Then the Major began to talk softly, sometimes asking questions, sometimes just talking. Conway should be unconscious for a multiple transfer, he said, he should in fact sleep for at least four hours for the best results, and he needed sleep anyway. Probably, O'Mara said, he had thought up this whole, harebrained scheme just to have a legitimate excuse to sleep. He had a big job ahead, the psychologist told him quietly, and he would really need to be in seven places as well as being seven people at once, so that a sleep would do him good . . .

" It won't be too bad," Conway said, struggling to keep his eyes open. " I'll stay in any one place only long enough to learn a few basic words and phrases that I can teach to the nursing staff. Just enough so they'll understand when an e-t surgeon says " Scalpel," or " Forceps " or " Stop breathing down the back of my neck, Nurse . . ."

The last words that Conway heard clearly were O'Mara saying, " Hang on to your sense of humour, lad. You're going to need it . . ."

He awoke in a room that was too large and too small, alien in six different ways and at the same time completely familiar. He did not feel rested. Clinging to the ceiling by six pipestem legs was a tiny, enormous, fragile, beautiful, disgustingly insectile creature that reminded him of his worst nightmares, the amphibious *cllels* he used to hunt at the bottom of his private lake for breakfast, and many other things including a perfectly ordinary GLNO Cinrusskin like himself. It was beginning to quiver slightly in reaction to the emotional radiation he was producing. All of him knew that the GLNOs from Cinruss were empaths.

Fighting his way to the surface of a maelstrom of alien thoughts, memories and impressions Conway decided that it was time to go to work. Prilicla was immediately available for the first test of his idea. He began searching for and bringing up the GLNO memories and experiences, sifting through a welter of alien data for the type of information which is not consciously remembered but is constantly in use—data on the Cinrusskin language.

No, *not* the Cinrusskin language, he reminded himself sharply, *his* language. He had to think and feel and listen like a GLNO. Gradually he began to do it . . .

And it was not pleasant.

He was a Cinrusskin, a member of a fragile, low-gravity, insect race of empaths. The handsome, delicately marked exo-skeleton and the youthful, iridescent sheen of Prilicla's not quite atrophied wings were now things which he could properly appreciate, and the way Prilicla's mandibles quivered in sudden concern at his distress. For Conway was a member of an empathic race, all the memories and experience of his GLNO life were those of a normally happy and healthy empath, but now he was an empath no more. He could see Prilicla, but the faculty which let him share the other's emotions, and subtly coloured every word, gesture and expression so that for two Cinrusskins to be within visual range was to be unalloyed pleasure for both, was missing. He could remember having empathic contact, remember having it all his life, but now he was little more than a deaf mute.

His human brain did not possess the empathic faculty, and it was not bestowed by filling his mind with memories of having had it.

Prilicla made a series of clicking, buzzing sounds. Conway, who had never spoken with the GLNO other than by means of the toneless and emotion-filtering process of Translation, heard it say " I'm sorry," in a voice full of concern and pity.

In return Conway tried to make the soft trill and click which was Prilicla's name, the true sound of the Earth-human word ' Prilicla ' was only a clumsy approximation. On the fifth attempt he succeeded in making something which was close to the sound he wanted.

" That is very good, friend Conway," Prilicla said warmly. " I had not considered this idea of yours possible. Can you understand me ?"

Conway sought the word-sounds he needed, then carefully began to form them. " Thank you," he said, " and yes."

They tried more difficult phrases then, technical words to put across obtuse medical and physiological details. Sometimes Conway was able to do it, sometimes not. His was at best only the crudest of pidgin Cinrusskin, but he persevered. Then suddenly there was an interruption.

" O'Mara here," said a voice from his room communicator. " You should be awake now so here is the latest position, Doctor. We are still under attack, but this has eased off somewhat since more volunteer e-ts arrived to reinforce us. These are Melfans, some more Tralthans and a force of Illensan chlorine-breathers. So you're going to have PVSJs to worry about, too. Then inside the hospital . . ."

There followed a detailed breakdown of casualties and available staff into species, location and numbers, with further data on problems peculiar to each section and their degree of urgency.

". . . It's for you to decide where to start," O'Mara went on, " and the sooner the better. But in case you are still feeling confused I'll repeat —"

" No need," said Conway, " I got it."

" Good. How do you feel ?"

" Awful. Horrible. And very peculiar."

" That," said O'Mara drily, " is in all respects a normal reaction. Off."

Conway released the strapping which held him to the bed and swung his legs out. Immediately he stiffened, unable to let go. Many of the beings inhabiting his mind were terrified by weightless conditions and the reaction was instinctive. Because of this it was very difficult to counter, and he had a moment of sheer panic when he discovered that his feet would not stick to the ceiling the way Prilicla's did. And when he did relax his grip on the edge of the bed he found that he had been holding on with an appendage that was pallid and flabby and horribly different to the clean, hard outlines of the mandible he had expected to see. But somehow he managed to cross his room into the corridor and traverse it for a distance of fifty yards.

Then he was stopped.

An irate medical orderly in Corps green wanted to know why he was out of bed and what ward he had come from. The Corpsman's language was colourful and not at all respectful

Conway became aware then of his large, gross, fragile, loathsome pink body. A perfectly good body, part of his mind insisted, if a little on the skinny side. And his shapeless, puny, monstrosity was encircled, where it was joined by its two lower appendages, by a piece of white fabric which served no apparent purpose. The body looked ridiculous as well as alien.

Oh damn ! thought Conway, struggling up through a smother of alien impressions, *I forgot to dress.*

* * * *

seventeen

Conway's first act was to install one representative from each species in the Communications room. A semblance of order had already been restored to the network by posting Corpsmen at every intercom unit to forbid their use—if the would-be user was not too persistent and well-muscled—to e-ts. This meant that Earth-human personnel could talk to each other. But with e-ts on the switchboard, calls by other species could be answered and redirected. Conway spent nearly two hours, more time than he ever spent anywhere else, putting himself *en rapport* with the e-t operators and devising a list of synonyms which would allow them to pass simple—*very* simple—messages to each other. He had two Monitor language experts with him on it, and it was they who suggested that he make a taped record of this seven-way Rosetta stone, and make others to fit the conditions he would find in the wards.

Wherever he went after that Prilicla, the language experts and a Corps radio technician trailed behind, in addition to the nursing staff he accumulated from time to time. It was an impressive procession, but Conway was in no mood to appreciate it just then.

Earth-human medical staff made up more than half of the present complement, but Earth-human Monitor casualties outnumbered the e-ts by thirty to one. On some levels one nurse had a whole ward of Corpsmen in her charge, with a few Tralthans or Kelgians trying to assist her. In such cases Conway's job was simply that of arranging a minimum of communication between the human and e-t nurses. But there were other instances when the staff were ELNTs and FGLIs and the patients in their charge were DBLF, QCQL and Earth-human, or Earth-humans in charge of ELNTs, or the plant-like AACPs looking after a mixed bag of practically everything. The simple answer would have been to move the patients into the charge of staff of their own species—except that they could not be moved for the reason that they were too ill, that there was no staff available to move them, or that there were no nurses of that particular species. In these cases Conway's job was infinitely more complex.

The shortage of nursing staff of all species was chronic. With regard to doctors the position was desperate. He called O'Mara.

" We haven't enough doctors," he said. " I think nurses should be given more discretion in the diagnosis and treatment of casualties. They should do as they think best without waiting for authority from a doctor who is too busy to supervise anyway. The casualties are still coming in and I can't see any other way of—"

" Do it, you're the boss," O'Mara broke in harshly.

" Right," said Conway, nettled. " Another thing. I've had offers by a lot of the doctors to take two or three tapes for translation purposes in addition to the tape they draw for current ops. And some of the girls have volunteered to do the same—"

" *No* !" said O'Mara. " I've had some of your volunteers up here and they aren't suitable. The doctors left to us are either very junior interns or Corps medical officers and e-ts who came with the volunteer forces. None of them have experience with multiple physiology tapes. It would render them permanently insane within the first hour.

" As for the girls," he went on, a sardonic edge in his voice, " you have noticed by this time that the female Earth-human DBDG has a rather peculiar mind. One of its peculiarities is a deep, sex-based mental fastidiousness. No matter what they *say* they will not, repeat not, allow alien beings to apparently take over their pretty little brains. If such should happen, severe mental damage would result. No again. Off."

Conway resumed his tour. It was beginning to get him down now. Even though his technique was improving the process of Translation was an increasing strain. And in the relatively easy periods between translations he felt as if there were seven different people all arguing and shouting inside his brain, and his own was very rarely the loudest voice. His throat was raw from making noises that it had never been designed for, and he was hungry.

All seven of him had different ideas for assuaging that hunger revoltingly different ideas. Since the hospital's catering arrangements had suffered as badly as everything else there was no wide selection from which he could have picked neutral items that would not have offended, or at least not completely nauseated, his alter egos. He was reduced to eating sandwiches with his eyes shut, in case he would find out what was in them, and drinking water and glucose. None of him objected to water.

Eventually an organisation for the reception and treatment of casualties was operating again in all the habitable levels—it was slow, but it was operating. And now that there were facilities for treating them Conway's next job was to move the patients who were currently jamming the approaches to the airlocks. There were actually pressure-litters anchored to the outer hull, he had been told.

Prilicla objected.

For a few minutes he tried to find out why. One of Prilicla's objections was that Conway was tired, which he countered by telling it that everybody in the hospital, including Prilicla itself, was tired. The other objections were either too weak or too subtle for the limited communications available. Conway ignored them and headed for the nearest lock.

The problems here were very similar to those inside the hospital—the major disadvantage being his spacesuit radio which hampered translation considerably. But to offset this he could get around much more quickly. The tractor beam men who handled the wrecks and wreckage around the hospital could whisk his whole party from point to point within seconds.

But he discovered that the Melfan segment of his mind, which had been seriously troubled by the weightless conditions inside the hospital, was utterly terrified outside it. The Melfan ELNT who had produced the tape had been an amphibious, crab-like being who lived mainly under water and had had no experience whatever of space. Conway had to fight down the panic which threatened his whole, multi-tenanted mind as well as the fear which all of him felt at the battle going on above his head.

O'Mara had told him that the attack was easing off, but Conway could not imagine anything more savage than what he was seeing.

Between the warring ships no missiles were being used—the attackers and defenders were too condensed, too inextricably tangled up. Like tiny, fast-moving models, so sharply defined that he felt he could reach up and grab one, the ships wheeled through their wild, chaotic dance. Singly and in groups they lunged, whirled, took frantic evasive action, broke formation or had their formations broken, reformed and attacked again. It was endless, implacable and almost hypnotic. There was, of course, no noise. What missiles were launched were directed at the hospital. a target too big to miss, and they were felt rather than heard.

Between the ships, tractor and pressor beams jabbed out like solid, invisible fingers, slowing or deflecting the target ship so that a rattler could be focussed. Sometimes three or more vessels would converge on a single target and tear it apart within seconds. Sometimes a well-directed rattler would rip apart the artificial gravity system an instant before it disrupted the drive. With the crew hammered flat by high acceleration the ship would go tumbling out of the fight, unless someone put another rattler on it or a tractor man on Sector General's hull pulled it down to look for survivors.

Whether or not there were any survivors the wreck could be used . . .

The once smooth and shining hull was a mass of deep, jagged-edged craters and buckled plating. And because the missile lightning did strike twice, or even three times, in the same place—that was how the Translator computer had been destroyed—the craters were being plugged with wreckage in an effort to keep the missiles from exploding deeper inside the hospital. Any type of wreckage served, the tractor men weren't choosey.

Conway was on a tractor-beam mount when one of the wrecks was pulled in. He saw the rescue team shooting from the shelter of the airlock, circle the hulk carefully, then enter. About ten minutes later they came out towing . . . something.

" Doctor," said the NCO in charge of the installation, " I think I goofed. My men say the beastie they've pulled out of wreck is new to them and want you to have a look. I'm sorry, but one wreck is like any other wreck. I don't think it is one of ours . . ."

Six parts of Conway's mind contained personalities whose memories did not contain data on the war and they did not think it mattered. As the minority opinion Conway didn't think it mattered either, but he knew that neither the sergeant nor himself had time to start an ethical debate on it. He had a quick look, then said, " Take it inside. Level Two-forty, Ward Seven."

Since being given the tapes Conway had been forced to watch helplessly while patients—casualties whose condition was such that they merited a fully qualified Senior Physician at least to perform the surgery—were operated on by tired, harrassed, but well-intentioned beings who just did not have the required skill. They had done the job as best they could because there was

nobody else to do it. Conway had wanted to step in many times, but had reminded himself and been reminded by Prilicla and the rest of his entourage, that he had to consider the Big Picture. Reorganising the hospital then had been more important than any one patient. But now he felt that he could stop being an organiser and go back to being a doctor.

This was a new species to the hospital. O'Mara would not have a tape on its physiology, and even if the patient recovered consciousness it would not be able to co-operate because the Translators were dead. Conway had got to take this one and nobody was going to talk him out of it.

Ward seven was adjacent to the section where a Kelgian military doctor and Murchison had been working wonders with a mixed bag of FGLI, QCQL and Earth-human patients, so he asked them both to assist. Conway put the new arrival's classification as TRLH, being aided in this by the fact that the patient's spacesuit was transparent as well as flexible. Had the suit been less flexible the being's injuries would have been less severe, but then the suit would have cracked instead of bending with the force that had smashed against it.

Conway bored a tiny hole in the suit, drew off a sample of the internal atmosphere and resealed it. He put the sample in the analyser.

"And I thought the QCQLs were bad," said Murchison when he showed her the result. "But we can reproduce it. You will need to replace the air here, I expect?"

Conway said, "Yes, please."

They climbed into their operating suits—regulation lightweight pattern except that the arms and hands sections ended in a fine, tight-fitting sheath that was like a second skin. The air was replaced by the patient's atmosphere and they began cutting it out of its suit.

The TRLH had a thin carapace which covered its back and curved down and inwards to protect the central area of its underside. Four thick, single-jointed legs projected from the uncovered sections and a large, but again lightly boned head contained four manipulatory appendages, two recessed but extensible eyes and two mouths, one of which had blood coming from it. The being must have been hurled against several metal projections. Its shell was fractured in six places and in one area it had been almost shattered, the pieces being

severely depressed. In this area it was losing blood rapidly. Conway began charting the internal damage with the x-ray scanner, then a few minutes later he signalled that he was ready to start.

He wasn't ready, but the patient was bleeding to death.

The internal arrangement of organs was different from anything he had previously encountered, and different from anything in the experience of the six personalities sharing his mind. But from QCQL he received pointers on the probable metabolism of beings who breathed such highly corrosive air, from the Melfan data on the possible methods of exploring the damaged carapace, and the FGLI, DBLF, GLNO and AACP contributed their experience. But it was not always helpful—at every stage they literally shrieked warnings to be careful, so much so that for seconds at a time Conway stood with his hands shaking, unable to go on. He was probing the recorded memories deeply now, hitherto it had only been for data on language, and *everything* was coming up.

The private nightmares and neuroses of the individuals, triggered off by being so inextricably mixed with the similar alien nightmares around them, and all mounting, growing worse by the minute. The beings who had produced the tapes did not all have e-t hospital experience, they were not accustomed to alien points of view. The proper thing was to keep reminding himself that they were not seperate personalities, Conway told himself, but merely a mass of alien data of different types. But he was horribly, stupidly tired and he was beginning to lose control of what was going on in his mind. And still the memories welled up in a dark, turgid flood. Petty, shameful, secret memories mostly concerned with sex—and that, in e-ts, was *alien*, so alien that he wanted to scream. He found suddenly that he was bent over, sweating, as if there was a heavy weight on his back.

He felt Murchison gripping his arm. "What's wrong, Doctor?" she said urgently. "Can I help?"

He shook his head, because for a second he didn't know how to form words in his own language, but he kept looking at her for all of ten seconds. When he turned back he had a picture of her in his mind as she was to him, not as a Tralthan or a Melfan or a Kelgian saw her. The concern in her eyes had been for him alone. At times Conway had had secret thoughts

of his own about Murchison, but they were normal, human thoughts. He hugged them to him tightly and for a time he was in control again. Long enough to finish with the patient.

Then suddenly his mind was tearing itself apart into seven pieces and he was falling into the deepest, darkest pits of seven different Hells. He did not know that his limbs stiffened or bent or twisted as if something alien had seperate possession of each one. Or than Murchison dragged him out and held him while Prilicla, at great danger to life and its fragile, spidery limbs, gave him the shot which knocked him out.

eighteen

The intercom buzzer awakened Conway, instantly but without confusion in the pleasant, familiar, cramped surroundings of his own room. He felt rested and alert and ready for breakfast, and the hand he used to push back the sheets had five pink fingers on it and felt just right that way. But then he became aware of a certain strangeness which made him hesitate for a moment. The place was *quiet* . . .!

" To save you the where-am-I-what-time-is-it ? routine," O'Mara's voice came wearily, "you have not been consciously with us for two days. During that time, early yesterday, to be exact, the attack ceased and has not yet been resumed and I did a lot of work on you. For your own good you were given a hypno treatment to forget everything, so you will not be eternally grateful for what I've done for you. How do you feel now ?"

" Fine," said Conway enthusiastically. " I can't feel any . . . I mean, there seems to be plenty of *room* in my head . . ."

O'Mara grunted. " The obvious retort is that your head is empty, but I won't make it."

The Chief Psychologist, despite his attempt to maintain his usual dry, sardonic manner, sounded desperately tired—his words were actually slurred with weariness. But O'Mara, Conway knew, was not the type who became tired—he might, if driven long and hard enough, succumb to mental fatigue . . .

" The fleet commander wants a meeting with us in four hours time," O'Mara went on, " so don't get involved with any cases between now and then. Things are running fairly smoothly now, anyway, so you can afford to play hooky for a while. *I'm* going to sleep. Off."

But it was very difficult to spend four hours doing nothing, Conway found. The main dining hall was jammed with Corpsmen—projector crews engaged on hull defence, replacements for the defending ships, maintenancemen and Medical Division personnel who were supplementing the civilian medical staff. Conversation was loud and nervous and too cheerful, and revolved around the past and possible future aspects of the attack.

Apparently the Monitor force had practically been pushed down on to the outer hull when an e-t force of volunteer Illensans had emerged from hyperspace just outside the enemy globe. Illensan ships were big and badly designed and looked like capital ships even though they only had the armament of a light cruiser, and the sight of ten of them popping out of nowhere had put the enemy off his stride. The attacking force had pulled back temporarily to regroup and the Monitors, with nothing to regroup with, were concentrating on increasing the armament of their last line of defence, the hospital itself. But even though it concerned him as closely as anyone else in the room, Conway felt averse to joining in the cheerfully morbid conversations.

Since O'Mara had erased all the physiology tapes and indulged in some curative tinkering with his mind, the nightmare of two days ago and the e-t language data he had gained had faded, so he could not indulge in polite conversation with the e-ts scattered about the hall. And the Earth-human nurses were being monopolised by Corpsmen, usually at the rate of ten or twelve to one, with an obvious improvement in morale in both directions. Conway ate quickly and left, feeling that his own morale was in need of improvement, too.

Which made him wonder suddenly if Murchison was on duty, off duty or asleep. If she was asleep there was nothing he could do, but if she was on duty he could very soon take her off it, and when she was off . . .

Strangely he felt only the slightest pricklings of conscience over this shameless abuse of his authority for his own selfish ends. In time of war, he thought, people became less bound by their professional and moral codes. Ethically he was going to the dogs.

But Murchison was just going off duty when he arrived in her ward, so he did not have to openly commit the crime he had

been intent on committing. In the same loud, too-cheerful tone that he had considered so artificial when he had heard it in the dining hall he asked if she had any previous engagement, suggested a date, and muttered something horribly banal about all work and no play . . .

" Previous engage . . . *play* . . .! But I want to *sleep* !" she protested ; then in more reasonable tones, " You can't . . . I mean, where would we go, what would we do ? The place is a wreck. Would I have to change ?"

" The recreation level is still there," Conway said, " and you look fine."

The regulation nurses uniform of blue, tight-fitting tunic and slacks—very tight-fitting so as to ease the problem of climbing in and out of protective suits—flattered Murchison, but she looked worn out. As she unhooked the broad white belt and instrument pouches and removed her cap and hair-net Conway growled deep in his throat, and immediately burst into a fit of coughing because it was still tender from making e-t noises.

Murchison laughed, shaking out her hair and rubbing her cheeks to put some colour into them. She said brightly, " Promise you won't keep me out too late . . .?"

On the way to the recreation level it was difficult not to talk shop. Many sections of the hospital had lost pressure so that in the habitable levels overcrowding was severe—there was scarcely an air-filled corridor that was not also filled with casualties. And this was a situation which none of them had foreseen. They had not expected the enemy to use limited warfare on them. Had atomic weapons been used there would not have been any overcrowding, or, possibly, any hospital. Most of the time Conway was not listening to Murchison, but she didn't seem to notice. Perhaps because she wasn't listening to him.

The recreation level was the same in detail as they remembered it, but the details had been dramatically changed around. With the hospital's centre of gravity being above the recreation level what little attraction there was was upwards, and all the loose material normally on the ground or in the bay had collected against the roof, where it made a translucent chaos of sand-veined water, air-pockets and trailing watery globes through which the submerged sun shone a deep, rich purple.

" Oh, this is *nice* !" said Murchison. " And restful, sort of."

The lighting gave her skin a warm, dusky coloration that was wholly indescribable, Conway thought, but nice. Her lips—soft purple, verging on black—were parted slightly to reveal teeth which seemed almost iridescent, and her eyes were large and mysterious and glowing.

" The word," he said, " is romantic."

They launched themselves gently into the vast room in the direction of the restaurant. Below them the tree tops drifted past and they ran through a wisp of fog—cooling steam produced by the warm, underwater sun—which beaded their faces and arms with moisture. Conway caught her hand and held it gently, but their velocities were not exactly matching and they began to spin around their centre of gravity. Conway bent his elbow slowly, drawing her towards him, and their rate of spin increased. Then he slid his other arm around her waist and pulled her closer still.

She started to protest and then suddenly, gloriously, she was kissing him and clinging to him as fiercely as he was to her, and the empty bay, cliffs, and purple, watery sky was whirling madly around them.

In a calm, impersonal corner of his mind Conway thought that his head would have been spinning anyway even if his body hadn't, it was that sort of kiss. Then they spun gently into the cliff-top at the other side of the bay and broke apart, laughing.

They used the artificial greenery to pull themselves towards the one-time restaurant. It was dim inside, and during its slow fall ceilingwards a lot of water had collected under the transparent roof and on the undersides of the table canopies. Like some fragile, alien fruit it hung in clusters which stirred gently at their passage or burst into hundreds of tiny silvery globes when they blundered against a table. With the low ceiling and dim light it was difficult to keep from knocking into things and soon the globes were all around them, seeming to crowd in, throwing back a hundred tiny, distorted reflections of Murchison and himself. It was like an alien dream world, Conway thought ; and it was a wish-fulfilment dream. The dark, lovely shape of Murchison drifting beside him left no doubt about that.

They sat down at one of the tables, but carefully so as not to dislodge the water in the canopy above them. Conway took

her hand in his, the others being needed to hold them on to their chairs, and said, " I want to talk to you."

She smiled, a little warily.

Conway tried to talk. He tried to say the things that he had rehearsed to himself many times, but what came out was a disjointed hodge-podge. She was beautiful, he said, and he didn't want to be friends and she was a stupid little fool for staying behind. He loved her and wanted her and he would have been happy spending months—not too many months, maybe—getting her in a corner where she couldn't say anything but yes. But now there wasn't time to do things properly. He thought about her all the time and even during the TRLH operation it had been thinking about her that let him hang on until the end. And all during the bombardment he had worried in case . . .

" I worried about you, too," Murchison broke in softly. " You were all over the place and every time there was a hit . . . And you always knew exactly what to do and . . . and I was afraid you would get yourself killed."

Her face was shadowed, her uniform clung damply. Conway felt his mouth dry.

She said warmly, " You were wonderful that day with the TRLH. It was like working with a Diagnostician. *Seven* tapes, O'Mara said. I . . . I asked him to give me one, earlier, to help you out. But he said no because . . ." She hesitated and looked away. ". . . because he said girls are very choosey who they let take possession of them. Their minds, I mean . . ."

" How choosey ?" said Conway thickly. " Does the choice exclude . . . friends ?"

He leaned forward involuntarily as he spoke, letting go his hold on the chair with his other hand. He drifted heavily up from the table, jarred the canopy and touched one of the floating globes with his forehead. With the surface tension broken it collapsed wetly all over his face. Spluttering he brushed it away, knocking it into a cloud of tiny, glowing marbles. Then he saw it.

It was the only harsh note in this dream world, a pile of unarmed missiles occupying a dark corner of the room. They were held to the floor by clamps and further secured with netting in case the clamps were jarred free by an explosion. There was plenty of slack in the netting. Still holding on to Murchison, he kicked himself over to it, searched until he found the edge of the net, and pulled it up from the floor.

" We can't talk properly if we keep floating into the air," he said quietly. " Come into my parlour . . ."

Maybe the netting was too much like a spider's web, or his tone resembled too closely that of a predatory spider. He felt her hesitate. The hand he was holding was trembling.

" I . . . I know how you feel," she said quickly, not looking at him. " I like you too. Maybe more than that. But this isn't right. I know we don't have any time, but sneaking down here like this and . . . it's selfish. I keep thinking about all those men in the corridors, and the other casualties still to come. I know it sounds stuffy, but we're supposed to think about other people first. That's why—"

" Thank you," said Conway furiously. " Thank you for reminding me of my duty."

" Oh, please !" she cried, and suddenly she was clinging to him again, her head against his chest. " I don't want to hurt you, or make you hate me. I didn't think the war would be so horrible. I'm frightened. I don't want you to be killed and leave me all alone. Oh, please, hold me tight and . . . and tell me what to do . . ."

Her eyes were glittering and it was not until one of the tiny points of light floated away from them that he realised she was crying silently. He had never imagined Murchison crying, somehow. He held her tightly for a long time, then gently pushed her away from him.

Roughly, he said, " I don't hate you, but I don't want to discuss my exact feelings at the moment, either. Come on, I'll take you home."

But he didn't take her home. The alarm siren went a few minutes later and when it stopped a voice on the PA was asking Doctor Conway to come to the intercom.

nineteen

Once it had been Reception, with three fast-talking Nidians to handle the sometimes complex problems of getting patients out of their ambulances and into the hospital. Now it was Command Headquarters and twenty Monitor officers murmured tensely into throat mikes, their eyes glued to screens which showed the enemy at all degrees of magnification from nil to five hundred. Two of the three main screens showed sections of the enemy fleet, the images partly obliterated by the

ghostly lines and geometrical figures that was a tactical officer trying to predict what they would do next. The other screen gave a wide-angle view of the outer hull.

A missile came down like a distant shooting star, making a tiny flash and throwing up a minute fountain of wreckage. The tearing, metallic crash which reverberated through the room was out of all proportion to the image.

Dermod said, " They've withdrawn out of range of the heavy stuff mounted on the hospital and are sending in missiles. This is the softening up process designed to wear us down prior to the main attack. A counter-attack by our remaining mobile force would result in its destruction, they are so heavily outnumbered that they can operate effectively only if backed by the defences of the hospital. So we have no choice but to soak up this stage as best we can and save our strength for—"

" What strength ?" said Conway angrily. Beside him O'Mara made a disapproving noise, and across the desk the fleet commander looked coldly at him. When Dermod spoke it was to Conway, but he didn't answer the question.

" We can also expect small raids by fast, manoeuvrable units designed to further unsettle us," he went on. " Your casualties will come from Corpsmen engaged on hull defence, personnel from the defending ships, and perhaps enemy casualties. Which brings me to a point I would like cleared up. You seem to be handling a lot of enemy wounded, Doctor, and you've told me that your facilities are already strained to the limit . . ."

" How the blazes can you tell ?" said Conway. Dermod's expression became more frigid, but this time he answered the question.

" Because I have reports of patients lying beside each other finding that the other one is talking gibberish, patient's of the same physiological type, that is. What steps are you taking to—"

" None !" said Conway, so angry suddenly that he wanted to take this cold, unfeeling martinet by the throat and shake some humanity into him.

At the beginning he had liked Dermod. He had thought him a thoughtful and sensitive as well as a competent fleet commander, but during the past few days he had become the embodiment of the blind, coldly implacable forces which had Conway and everyone else in the hospital trapped. Daily conferences between the military and medical authorities in the

hospital had been ordered since the last attack had begun, and at all three of them Conway had found himself running across the fleet commander with increasing frequency.

But when Conway snapped, the fleet commander did not snap back. Dermod merely looked at him with his eyes so bleak and distant that Conway felt that the Commander wasn't seeing him at all. And it did no good at all when O'Mara advised him quietly to hold his tongue and not be so all-fired touchy—that Dermod had a war to fight and he was doing the best he could, and that the pressures he was under excused a certain lack of charm in his personality.

" Surely," said Dermod coldly, just as Conway had decided that he really ought to be more patient with this cold-blooded, military creature, " you are not treating enemy casualties the same as your own . . .?"

" It is difficult," said Conway, speaking so quietly that O'Mara looked suddenly worried, " to tell the difference. Subtle variations in spacesuit design mean nothing to the nursing staff and myself. And when, as frequently happens the suit and underlying uniform is cut away the latter may be unidentifiable due to the bleeding. Between the injection of anti-pain and unconsciousness the oral noises they make are not easily translatable. And if there is any way to tell the difference between a Corpsman and one of the enemy screaming, I don't want to know about it . . ."

He had started quietly, but when he ended he was close to shouting.

". . . I won't make any such distinction between casualties and neither will my staff ! This is a *hospital*, damn you ! Well *isn't* it ?"

" Take it easy, son. It's still a hospital," said O'Mara gently.

" It is also," Dermod snapped, " a military base !"

" What I don't understand," O'Mara put in quickly, trying desperately to pour on the oil, " is why they don't finish us with atomic warheads . . .?"

Another hit, more distant this time, sent its tinny echoes through the room.

" The reason they don't finish us off with an atomic bomb, Major," he replied, with his eyes still locked with Conway's, " is because they must make a conquest. The political forces involved demand it. The Empire must take and occupy this outpost of the hated enemy, the Emperor's general must

have a triumph and not a pyrrhic victory, and subjugating the enemy and capturing his territory, no matter how few or how little, can be made to look like a triumph to the citizens of the Empire.

" Our own casualties are heavy," Dermod went on coldly. "A space battle being what it is only ten per cent of the casualties survive to be hospitalised, and we are fortunate both in having medical facilities immediately available and in occupying a strong defensive position. The number of enemy casualties is much higher than ours, my estimate would be twenty to one, so that if they were to knock us out with an atomic missile now, when they could have done the same thing at the very beginning without losing a man, some very awkward questions will be asked within the Empire. If the Emperor can't answer them he might find that the war, and all the fine, martial fervour he has built up, will backfire on him . . . "

" Why don't you communicate with them?" Conway interrupted harshly. " Tell them the truth about us, and tell them about the wounded here. You surely don't expect to win this battle now. Why don't you surrender . . . ?"

" We cannot communicate with them, Doctor," the commander said bitingly, " because they won't listen to us. Or if they do listen they don't believe what we say. They know, or think they know, what we did on Etla and what we are supposed to be doing here. Telling them that we were really helping the Etlan natives and that we have been forced to defend our hospital is no good. A series of plagues swept Etla soon after we left and this establishment no longer behaves, outwardly, that is, like a hospital. What we say to them has no importance, it is what we *do* that counts. And we are doing exactly what their Emperor has lead them to expect of us.

" If they were really thinking," he continued savagely, " they would wonder at the large number of our e-ts who are helping us. According to them our e-ts are down-trodden, subject races who are little more than slaves. The volunteers who have come out to help us do not fight like slaves, but at the present stage that is too subtle a thing to make any impression. They are thinking emotionally instead of logically . . . "

" And *I'm* thinking emotionally, too !" Conway broke in sharply. " I'm thinking of my patients. The wards are full. They are lying in odd corners and along corridors all over the place, with inadequate protection against pressure loss . . . "

" You've lost the ability to think about anything *but* your patients, Doctor !" Dermod snapped back. " It might surprise you to know that I think about them, too, but I try not to be so maudlin about it. If I did think that way I would begin to feel angry, begin to hate the enemy. Before I knew it I would want revenge . . ."

Another hit rang like a loud, discordant gong through the hospital. The commander raised his voice, and kept on raising it.

" . . . You must know that the Monitor Corps is the police force for most of the inhabited Galaxy, and keeping the peace within the Federation for the constant application of the psychological and social sciences. In short, guiding and moulding opinion both on the individual and planetary population levels. So the situation we have here, a gallant band of Corpsmen and Doctors holding out against the savage, unceasing attacks of an overwhelmingly superior enemy, is one I could use. Even so it would take the Federation a long time to become angry enough to mobilise for war, far too long to do us personally any good, but think how we would be avenged, Doctor . . . !"

His voice was shaking now, his face white and tight with fury. He was shouting.

" In an interstellar war planets cannot be captured, Doctor. They can only be detonated. That stinking little Empire with its forty planets would be stamped out, destroyed, completely obliterated . . . !"

O'Mara did not speak. Conway couldn't, nor could he take his eyes off Dermod to see how the psychologist was reacting to this outburst. He hadn't thought it possible for the commander to blow up like this and it was suddenly frightening. Because Dermod's sanity and self-control, like O'Mara's, was something Conway had depended on even though he hated it.

" But the Corps is a police force, remember ?" he raged on. " We are trying to think of this as a disturbance, a riot on an interstellar scale where as usual the casualties among the rioters outnumber those of the police. Personally I think it is past the time when *anything* will make them see the truth and a full-scale war is inevitable, but I do not want to hate

them. This is the difference, Doctor, between maintaining peace and waging war.

" And I don't want any snivelling, narrow-minded doctors, who have nothing to worry about except their patients, reminding me of all the horrible ways my men are dying. Trying to make me lose my perspective, making me hate people who are no different to us except that they are being fed wrong information.

" And I don't care if you treat enemy and Corps wounded alike," he yelled, trying to bring his voice down but not succeeding, " but you will listen when I give orders concerning them. This is a military base and they are enemy casualties. The ones who are in a condition to move must be guarded against the possibility of them committing acts of sabotage. Now do you understand, Doctor ?"

" Yes, sir," said Conway in a small voice.

When he left Reception with O'Mara a few minutes later Conway still had the feeling of being charred around the edges. It was plain now that he had gravely misjudged the fleet commander, and he should apologise for the hard things he had been thinking about Dermod. Underneath all the ice Dermod was a good man.

Beside him O'Mara said suddenly, " I like to see these cold, controlled types blow off steam occasionally. Psychologically it is desirable, considering the pressures he is under at the present time. I'm glad you finally made him angry."

" What about *me* ?" said Conway.

" You, Doctor, are not controlled at all," O'Mara replied sternly. " Despite your new authority, which should make you set an example of tolerance and good behaviour at least, you are fast becoming a bad-tempered brat. Watch it, Doctor."

Conway had been looking for sympathy for the tongue-lashing Dermod had given him, and a little consideration for the pressures he himself was under, not criticism from another quarter. When O'Mara turned off towards his office a few minutes later, Conway was still too angry to speak.

• • • •

twenty

Next day Conway did not get the chance to apologise to the fleet commander—the rioters launched their most vicious attack yet and both the Station Inspector and the Police Surgeon were much too busy to talk. But calling the battle a riot, Conway thought cynically, made no difference to the nature and number of the casualties which flooded suddenly in, because it began with a near-catastrophe for both sides.

The enemy force closed in, stepping up the missile bombardment to a fantastic rate and englobing the hospital so tightly that there were times when they came within a few hundred feet of the outer hull. Dermod's ships—*Vespasian*, a Tralthan capital ship and the other smaller units remaining to him—dropped back to anchor with tractors against the hospital, there being no space to manoeuvre without obstructing the heavy armament below them. They settled and with their lighter weapons strengthened the fixed defences wherever possible.

But this must have been the move the enemy commander had been waiting for. With the rapidity possible only to a well-planned manoeuvre the ranks of the attacking blobe thinned, scattered and reformed over one small area of the hull. On this area was concentrated the total firepower of three-quarters of the entire enemy force.

A storm of missiles tore into the heavy plating, blasting away the wreckage plugging earlier damage and gouging into the more fragile inner hull. Tractors and rattlers seized the still-settling wreckage, shaking it viciously apart and pulling it away so that the missiles could gouge still deeper. Monitor defences took a frightful toll of the tightly packed ships, but only for minutes. The tremendous concentration of fire battered them down, hammered them flat, ripped and worried at them until they were one with the other shifting masses of savaged men and metal. They left a section of the outer hull completely undefended, and suddenly it became plain that this was not only an attack but an invasion.

Under the covering fire of the massed attackers, three, giant, unarmed ships were dropping ponderously towards the undefended section. Transports . . .

At once *Vespasian* was directed to fill the gap in the defences. It shot towards the point where the first transport was about to

touch down, running the gauntlet of Monitor as well as enemy fire and throwing everything it had as soon as the target appeared above the curve of the hull.

There were several excuses given for what happened then. An error in judgment by its pilot, a hit by one of the enemy—or even its own people's—missiles which deflected it from course at exactly the wrong moment. But it was never suggested that Captain Williamson deliberately rammed the enemy transport, because Williamson was known to be a clear-headed, competent officer and a one-to-one swap, even at this desperate stage of the battle, was a tactically stupid move considering how the enemy outnumbered them.

Vespasian struck the larger but more lightly constructed transport near its stern and seemed to go right through it before grinding silently to a halt. Inside the wreckage a single, small explosion lit the fog of escaping air but the two ships remained locked together, spinning slowly.

For a second everything seemed to stop. Then the Monitor fixed defences lashed out, ignoring all other targets if their projectors would bear on the second decending transport. Within minutes rattlers had torn off plating in three areas of its hull and were biting deeper. The transport withdrew ponderously, losing air. The third one was already pulling back. The whole enemy force was pulling back, but not very far. Only slightly diminished in intensity the bombardment continued.

It was not by any stretch of the imagination a victory for the Monitor Corps. The enemy had merely made an error of judgment, been a little premature. The hospital required further softening up.

Tractor beams reached out and gently brought the spinning wreckage to a halt and lowered it on to the ravaged hull. Corpsmen jetted out to look for survivors and soon the casualties were coming in. But by roundabout routes, because under the wrecked ships there now stretched other wreckage and other rescue teams working to free patients who were casualties for the second and third time . . .

Dr. Prilicla was with the rescue teams. The GLNO life-form was the most fragile known to the Federation, cowardice being acknowledged as one of their prime survival characteristics. But Prilicla was guiding his thin-walled pressure bubble over jagged plating and through wreckage which shifted visibly all around it

seeking life. Living minds radiated even when unconscious and the little GLNO was pointing out unerringly the living from the dead. With casualties bleeding to death inside their suits or the suits themselves losing pressure, such identification directed effort to where it did the most good, and Prilicla was saving many, many lives. But for an empath, an emotion sensitive, it was a hellish job in every horrible and painful sense of the word . . .

Major O'Mara was everywhere. If there hadn't been weightless conditions the Chief Psychologist would have been dragging himself from place to place, but as it was his extreme fatigue showed only in the way he misjudged distances and collided with doors and people. But when he talked to Earth-human patients, nurses and Corpsmen his voice was never tired. His mere presence had a steadying effect on the e-t staff as well, for although they could not understand him they remembered the person he had been when there were Translators and he could lift off their hides with a few pungent words.

The e-t staff—the massive, awkward Tralthan FGLIs, the crab-like Melfan ELNTs and all the others—were everywhere, on some levels directing Earth-human staff and on others aiding the nurses and Corpsmen orderlies. They were tired and harried and all too often they did not know what was being said to them, but between them they saved a great many lives.

And every time a missile struck the hospital, they lost a little ground . . .

Dr. Conway never left the dining hall. He had communication with most of the other levels, but the corridors leading to them were in many cases airless or blocked with wreckage, and it was the general opinion that the hospital's last remaining Senior Physician should stay in a reasonably safe place. He had plenty of human casualties to look after and the difficult e-t cases, whether combatants or casualties among his own staff, were sent to him.

In a way he had the biggest and most compact ward in the hospital. Since nobody had time to gather for meals anymore and relied on packaged food sent to the wards, the main dining hall had been converted. Beds and theatre equipment had been clamped to the floor, walls, and ceiling of the great room and the patients, being space personnel, were not troubled either by the weightlessness or the sight of other patients hanging a few yards above them. It was convenient for the patients who were able to talk.

Conway had reached the stage of tiredness where he no longer felt tired. The tinny crash and clangour of missiles striking had become a monotonous background noise. He knew that the bombardment was steadily eating through the outer and inner hulls, a deadly erosion which must soon open every corridor and ward to space, but his brain had ceased to react to the sound. When casualties arrived he did what was indicated, but his reactions then were simply the conditioned reflexes of a doctor. He had lost much of his capacity to think or feel or remember, and when he did remember he had no sense of time. The last e-t case—which had required him taking four physiology tapes—stood out amid the weary, bloody, noisy monotony, as did the arrival of *Vespasian's* injured. But Conway did not know whether that had been three days or three weeks ago, or which incident had occurred first.

He remembered the *Vespasian* incident often. Cutting Major Stillman out of his battered suit, stripping it off and pushing away the pieces which persisted in floating around the bed. Stillman had two cracked ribs, a shattered humerus and a minor decompression which was temporarily affecting his eyesight. Until the hypo took hold he kept asking about the Captain.

And Captain Williamson kept asking about his men. Williamson was in a cast from neck to toes, had very little pain and had remembered Conway immediately. While Conway had worked on him he asked about his crew. It had been a large crew and he must have known all their names. Conway didn't.

" Stillman is three beds away on your right," Conway had told him, " and there are others all over the place."

Williamson's eyes had moved along the patients hanging above him. He couldn't move anything else. " There's some of them I don't recognise," he had said.

Looking at the livid bruises around Williamson's right eye, temple and jaw where his face had struck the inside of his helmet, Conway had dragged up his mouth into the semblance of a smile and said, " Some of them won't recognise you."

He remembered the second TRLH . . .

It had arrived strapped to a pressure litter whose atmosphere unit had already filled it with the poison which the occupant called air. Through the twin transparencies of the litter wa and the TRLH's suit its injuries were plainly apparent—

large, depressed fracture of the carapace which had cut underlying blood vessels. There was no time to take the tapes he had used during the previous TRLH case because the patient was obviously bleeding to death. Conway nodded for the litter to be clamped into the cleared area in the centre of the floor and quickly changed his suit gauntlets for litter gloves. From the beds attached to the ceiling, eyes watched his every move.

He charged the gloves and pushed his hands against the sagging, transparent fabric of the tent. Immediately the thin, tough material became rubbery and pliable without losing any of its strength. It clung to the charged gloves, if not like a second skin at least like another pair of thin gloves. Carefully so as not to strain the fabric which seperated the two mutually poisonous atmospheres, Conway removed the patient's suit with instruments clipped to the inside of the litter.

Quite complex procedures were possible while operating a flexible tent—Conway had a couple of PVSJs and a QCQL a few beds away to prove it—but they were limited by the instruments and medication available inside the tent, and the slight hampering effect of the fabric.

He had been removing the splinters of carapace from the damaged area when the crash of a missile striking nearby made the floor jump. The alarm bell which indicated a pressure drop sounded a few minutes later and Murchison and the Kelgian military doctor—the entire ward staff—had hurried to check the seals on the tents of patients who were not able to check their own. The drop was slight, probably a small leak caused by sprung plating, but to Conway's patient inside the tent it could be deadly. He had begun working with frantic speed.

But while he had striven to tie off the severed blood vessels the thin, tough fabric of the pressure litter began to swell out. It had become difficult to hold instruments, virtually impossible to guide them accurately, and his hands were actually pushed away from the operative field. The difference in pressure between the interior of the tent and the ward was only a few pounds per square inch at most, barely enough to have made Conway's ears pop, but the fabric of the litter had continued to balloon out. He had withdrawn helplessly, and half an hour later when the leak had been sealed and normal pressure restored, he had started again. By then it had been too late.

He remembered a sudden impairment of vision then, and a shock of surprise when he realised that he was crying. Tears

weren't a conditioned medical reflex, he knew, because doctors just did not cry over patients. Probably it had been a combination of anger at losing the patient—who really should not have been lost—and his extreme fatigue. And when he'd seen the expressions of all the patients watching him, Conway had felt horribly embarrassed.

Now the events around him had taken on a jerky, erratic motion. His eyes kept closing and several seconds, or minutes, passed before he could force them open again even though to himself no time at all went by. The walking wounded—patients with injuries which allowed them to move about the ward and return quickly to their tents in the event of a puncture—were moving from bed to bed doing the small, necessary jobs, or chatting with patients who couldn't move, or hanging like ungainly shoals of fish while they talked among themselves. But Conway was always too busy with the newly-arrived patients, or too confused with a multiplicity of tapes, to chat with the older ones. Mostly, however, his eyes went to the sleeping figures of Murchison and the Kelgian who floated near the entrance to the ward.

The Kelgian hung like a great, furry question mark, now and then emitting the low moaning sound which some DBLFs made when they were asleep. Murchison floated at the end of a snaking, ten-foot safety line, turning slowly. It was odd how sleepers in the weightless condition adopted the foetal position, Conway thought tenderly as he watched his beautiful, adult, girl baby swaying at the end of an impossibly thin umbilical cord. He desperately wanted to sleep himself, but it was his spell on duty and he would not be relieved for a long time—five minutes maybe, or five hours, but an eternity in either case. He would have to keep doing something.

Without realising he had made a decision he found himself moving into the empty storeroom which housed the terminal and probable terminal cases. It was only here that Conway spared himself the time to chat, or if talking was not possible to do the essential and at the same time useless things which help to comfort the dying. With the e-ts he could only stand by and hope that the shattered, bloody wreckage of the Tralthan or Melfan or whatever would be given a tiny flash of Prilicla's empathic faculty so that they would know he was a friend and how he felt.

It was only gradually that Conway became aware that the walking wounded had followed him into the room, together with patients who had no business being outside their tents who were being towed by the others. They gathered slowly around and above him, their expression grim, determined and respectful. Major Stillman pushed his way to the front, awkwardly, because in his one good hand he carried a gun.

"The killing has got to stop, Doctor," Stillman said quietly. "We've all talked it over and that's what we decided. And it's got to be stopped right now." He reversed the weapon suddenly, offering it to Conway. "You might need this, to point at Dermod to keep him from doing anything foolish while we're telling him what has been going on . . ."

Close behind Stillman hung the mummified shape of Captain Williamson and the man who had towed him in. They were talking to each other in low voices and the language was both foreign and familiar to Conway. Before he could place it the patients all began moving out again and he noticed how many of them were armed. The weapons had been part of the spacesuits they had worn, and Conway had not thought about guns when he had piled the suits into a ward storage space. Dermod, he thought, would be very annoyed with him. Then he followed the patients out to the main ward entrance, and the corridor which led to Reception.

Stillman talked nearly all the time, telling him what had been happening. When they were almost there he said anxiously, "You don't think I'm . . . I'm a traitor for doing this, Doctor?"

There were so many different emotions churning inside Conway that all he could say was "*No* !"

twenty-one

He felt ridiculous pointing the gun at the fleet commander, but that had seemed to be the only way to do this thing. Conway had entered Reception, threaded his way through the officers around the control desk until he had reached Dermod, then he had held the gun on the fleet commander while the others came in. He had also tried to explain things, but he wasn't doing a very good job.

". . . So you want me to surrender, Doctor," said Dermod wearily, not looking at the gun. His eyes went from Conway's face to those of some of the Corpsmen patients who were still

floating into the room. He looked hurt and disappointed, as if a friend had done a very shameful thing.

Conway tried again.

" Not surrender, sir," he said, pointing at the man who was still guiding Williamson's stretcher. " We . . . I mean, that man over there needs a communicator. He wants to order a cease fire . . ."

Stammering in his eagerness to explain what had happened, Conway started with the influx of casualties after the collision between *Vespasian* and the enemy transport. The interiors of both ships were a shambles and, while it was known that there were enemy as well as Corpsmen injured, there had never been time or the staff available to separate them. Then later, when the less seriously injured began to move around, talking to or helping to nurse the other patients, it became plain that almost half of the casualties were from the other side. Oddly this did not seem to matter much to the patients, and the staff were too busy to notice. So the patients went on doing the simpler, necessary and not very pleasant jobs for each other, jobs which just had to be done in a ward so drastically understaffed, and talking . . .

For these were Corpsmen from *Vespasian*, and *Vespasian* had been to Etla. Which meant that its crew were variously proficient in the Etlan language, and the Etlans spoke the same language as that used all over the Empire—a general purpose language similar to the Federation's Universal. They talked to each other a lot and one of the things they learned, after the initial caution and distrust had passed, was that the enemy transport had contained some very high officers. One of the ones who had survived the collision was third in line of command of the Empire forces around Sector General . . .

" . . . And for the last few days peace talks have been going on among my patients," Conway ended breathlessly. " Unofficial, perhaps, but I think Captain Williamson and Heraltnor here have enough rank to make them binding."

Heraltnor, the enemy officer, spoke briefly and vehemently to Williamson in Etlan, then gently tilted the plaster encased figure of the Captain until he could look at the fleet commander. Heraltnor watched Dermod, too. Anxiously.

" He's no fool, sir," said Williamson painfully. " From the sound of the bombardment and the glimpses he's had of your screens he knows our defences are hammered flat. He says that his people could land now and we couldn't do a

Continued on Page 114

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thing to stop them. That is true, sir, and we both know it. He says his chief will probably order the landing in a matter of hours, but he still wants a cease fire, sir, not a surrender.

" He doesn't want his side to win," the Captain ended weakly. " He just wants the fighting to stop. There are some things he has been told about this war and us which need straightening out, he says . . ."

" He's been saying a lot," said Dermod angrily. His face had a tortured look, as if he was wanting desperately to hope but did not dare let himself do so. He went on, " And you men have been doing a lot of talking ! Why didn't you let me know about it . . . ?"

" It wasn't what we *said*," Stillman broke in sharply, " it was what we *did* ! They didn't believe a word we told them at first. But this place wasn't at all what they had been told to expect, it looked more like a hospital than a torture chamber. Appearances could have been deceptive, and they were a very suspicious bunch, but they saw human and e-t doctors and nurses working themselves to death over them, and they saw *him*. Talking didn't do anything, at least not until later. It was what we did, what *he* did . . . !"

Conway felt his ears getting warm. He protested, " But the same thing was happening in every ward of the hospital !"

" Shut up, Doctor," Stillman said respectfully, then went on, " He never seemed to sleep. He hardly ever spoke to us once we were out of danger, but the patients in the side ward he never let up on, even though they were the hopeless cases. A couple of them he proved not to be hopeless, and moved them out to us in the main ward. It didn't matter what side they were on, he worked as hard for everybody . . ."

" Stillman," said Conway sharply, " you're dramatising things . . . !"

" . . . Even then they were wavering a bit," Stillman went on regardless. " But it was the TRLH case which clinched things. The TRLHs were enemy e-t volunteers, and normally the Empire people don't think much of e-ts and expected us to feel the same. Especially as this e-t was on the other side. But he worked just as hard on it, and when the pressure drop made it impossible for him to go on with the operation and the e-t died, they saw his reaction—"

" *Stillman* !" said Conway furiously.

But Stillman did not go into details. He was silent, watching Dermod anxiously. Everybody was watching

Dermod. Except Conway, who was looking at Heraltnor.

The Empire officer did not look very impressive at that moment, Conway thought. He looked like a very ordinary, greying, middle-aged man with a heavy chin and worry-lines around his eyes. In comparison to Dermod's trim green uniform with its quietly impressive load of insignia the shapeless, white garment issued to DBDG patients put Heraltnor at somewhat of a disadvantage. As the silence dragged on Conway wondered whether they would salute each other or just nod.

But they did better than either, they shook hands.

There was an initial period of suspicion and mistrust, of course. The Empire commander-in-chief was convinced that Heraltnor had been hypnotised at first, but when the investigating party of Empire officers landed on Sector General after the cease fire the distrust diminished rapidly to zero. For Conway the only thing which diminished was his worries regarding wards being opened to space. There was still too much for his staff and himself to do, even though engineers and medical officers from the Empire fleet were doing all they could to put Sector General together again. While they worked the first trickle of the evacuated staff began to return, both medical and maintenance, and the Translator computer went back into operation. Then five weeks and six days after the cease fire the Empire fleet left the vicinity of the hospital. They left their wounded behind them, the reasons being that they were getting the best possible treatment where they were, and that the fleet might have more fighting to do.

In one of the daily meetings with the hospital authorities—which still consisted of O'Mara and Conway since nobody more senior to them had come with the recent arrivals—Dermod tried to put a complex situation into very simple terms.

" . . . Now that the Imperial citizens know the truth about Etla among other things," he said seriously, " the Emperor and his administration are virtually extinct. But things are still very confused in some sectors and a show of force will help stabilise things. I'd like it to be just a show of force, which is why I talked their commander into taking some of our cultural contact and sociology people with him. We want to get rid of the Emperor, but not at the price of a civil war.

" Heraltnor wanted you to go along, too, Doctor. But I told him that . . ."

Beside him O'Mara groaned. " Besides saving hundreds of lives," the Chief Psychologist said, " and averting a galaxy-wide war, our miracle-working, brilliant young doctor is being called on to—"

" Stop needling him, O'Mara !" Dermod said sharply. " Those things are literally true, or very nearly so. If he hadn't . . ."

" Just force of habit, sir," said O'Mara blandly. " As a head-shrinker I consider it my bounden duty to keep his from swelling . . ."

At that moment the main screen behind Dermod's desk, manned by a Nidian Receptionist now instead of a Monitor officer, lit with a picture of a furry Kelgian head. It appeared that there was a large DBLF transport coming in with FGLI and ELNT staff aboard in addition to the Kelgians, eighteen of which were Senior Physicians. Bearing in mind the damaged state of the hospital and the fact that just three locks were in operable condition, the Kelgian on the screen wanted to discuss quarters and assignments with the Diagnostician-in-Charge *before* landing.

" Thornnastor's still unfit and there are no other . . ." Conway began to say when O'Mara reached across to touch his arm.

" Seven tapes, remember," he said gruffly. " Let us not quibble, Doctor."

Conway gave O'Mara a long, steady look, a look which went deeper than the blunt, scowling features and the sarcastic hectoring voice. Conway was not a Diagnostician—what he had done two months ago had been forced on him, and it had nearly killed him. But what O'Mara was saying—with the touch of his hand and the expression in his eyes, not the scowl on his face and the tone of his voice—was that it would be just a matter of time.

Colouring with pleasure, which Dermod probably put down to embarrassment at O'Mara's ribbing, he dealt quickly with the quartering and duties of the staff on the Kelgian transport, then excused himself. He was supposed to meet Murchison at the recreation level in ten minutes, and she had asked *him* . . .

As he was leaving he heard O'Mara saying morosely, " . . . And in addition to saving countless billions from the horrors of war, I bet he gets the girl, too . . . "

James White

Editorial (continued)

The hard-cover s-f field on both sides of the Atlantic, similar to its poor relation in the magazine field, has just about reached rock bottom again, although the tendency to spread into normal fiction channels without the label " science fiction " is still paying dividends in some directions. In USA Doubleday increased their s-f output but failed to produce anything of the quality they maintained some years ago when they were winning International Fantasy Awards. In the UK Gollancz commenced their twelve-a-year plan with the pick of good titles but it will remain to be seen how they get on during the coming year.

My short list of the best 1961 novels either bound or paper is a very mixed bag and I would not like to predict which one might well take the coveted ' Best ' trophy at this year's World Convention to be held in Chicago early in September—in alphabetical order :—*The Primal Urge*, Brian W. Aldiss (Ballantine) ; *Three Hearts and Three Lions*, Poul Anderson (Doubleday) ; *Titan's Daughter*, James Blish (Berkley) ; *A Fall Of Moon Dust*, Arthur C. Clarke (Gollancz, UK., Harper, USA) ; *Dark Universe*, Daniel F. Galouye (Bantam) ; *Some Of Your Blood*, Theodore Sturgeon (Ballantine). I suspect the Clarke will be strongest favourite.

For myself, however, *the* outstanding book of this or any recent year was Judith Merril's anthology *Sixth Annual S-F : Year's Best* (Simon & Schuster) topping even her outstanding Fourth and Fifth selections. Miss Merril cast a very wide net to produce the thirty-eight items comprising this outstanding gem of a collection, including blues and ballads, slick cartoons, articles, satire from *Punch*, as well as over twenty first-class stories (of which Brian Aldiss's specially written " Old Hundredth " for issue No. 100 of *New Worlds Science Fiction* was included).

On the British TV front the BBC went quietly mad with two atrocious serials, both suffering from low-grade script-writing. In *A For Andromeda* we apparently saw the marriage of science (by Fred Hoyle) with the scripting of John Elliot (the forthcoming book from Souvenir Press lists them as joint authors) and if this was an attempt to find something as good as the " Quatermass " serials it was a dismal failure. This was immediately followed by " R.D.7," in which viewers were

subjected to the antics of a dedicated but psycho woman scientist producing a new but deadly virus which, naturally, gets away from her. Also, in their " Storyboard " series, the BBC presented John Wyndham's " The Long Spoon," as a 30-minute play but it was a shadow of its original self.

ABC TV produced several good plays, notable amongst which was Robert Sheckley's " The Ninth Victim " which was retitled for the TV play. British viewers should keep an eye on this company—there may well be some more worthwhile material coming from them soon.

From movieland, the only really good film was " The Day The Earth Caught Fire," but what a good bet that is turning out to be—and may well be the pointer for future productions.

On the surface, my opening comment may seem out of place, but despite the poor year that 1961 turned out to be, a great many interesting projects are under consideration and my earlier contention some six months ago that science fiction was changing and being changed by more and more outside influences looks like maturing in 1962. Certainly it is commanding greater attention outside the old well-worn channels.

John Carnell

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Undoubtedly John Rackham's best story to date was " Goodbye, Doctor Gabriel," last August. We thought so at the time and readers have since agreed. While a sequel was not planned, we eventually prevailed upon John to think about it—and next month will see Part One of his new two-part serial, " The Dawson Diaries." The synthetic body of Johnny Dawson is revitalised and helps to save the mind of a crippled girl, Frances Walker, who is killed in a fire. The mechanics of educating her to a synthetic body is even more tremendous than the first story, but when the two minds are complete Rackham produces the strangest love story ever told.

Short stories as usual—with Lee Harding back again and also Kathleen James and a Guest Editorial by Philip E. High on that controversial psi subject.

Story ratings for No. 111 were :—

1. For The Love Of Pete - - - - - Colin Kapp
2. Cold Blood - - - - - - George Langalaan
3. Conviction - - - - - - - Lee Harding
4. Storm Wind (conclusion) - - - - J. G. Ballard
5. The End Of The Line - - - - - Lan Wright

On Guest Editorials . . .

Dear John,

I have just finished reading NW 114. I expected to catch some of the airy-fairy minded with that editorial of mine, but never hoped to snare such big fish as I did. Mackin quotes some roughshodding. He could look at history, almost any history, to see how the ' morals, the ethics, the traditional values, the historical abstraction' of that particular time, accepted as unshakeable ' laws of nature ' have been responsible for wars, murders, tortures, matyrdom and genocide, over and over again. The broad pathway of ' beliefs ' is knee deep in blood and tears. After taking such a salutory look, I invite him to rattle off any list of names of the scientific minded who have created, directly, one hundredth part of such carnage. And I do mean ' directly.'

I'm all for democracy. If he will only point to one, I'll go there. I'd like it better still if he could explain how a democracy can ever be achieved in the absence of any rational (scientific) method of measuring what the ' people ' want, plus some efficient way of seeing that they get it. Of course, if he wants to cling to the pathetic belief that the Russians have twisted the arms of their enslaved German technicians to make them produce better rockets than the so-called democratic free world can do, he will do so. He will ignore Tsiolkovski, for one. And the well-known datum that you cannot compel a slave to be wiser than you are. He would rather believe Bob Hope, a well-known authority on sociology.

As for scientists leading us to ' a new, saner and better world,' I wouldn't guarantee it, but organised science does have a way of making things work, when it is allowed. It is only a primitive superstitious hangover which leads people like Mackin to cling to the idea that science can work with

things, but not with people. The very term he uses, ' sane,' is incapable of definition in sociological terms, just because the task of defining it has never been handed over to the people best qualified. The map of Heaven may have all sorts of nonsense scribbled over it, but not in scientific handwriting. ' Dragon ' is hardly a scientific term.

I caught Aldiss, too. Dear me. I accept the stories he quotes, and could add a dozen more, and they are, indeed, an attempt to portray segments of reality, as those authors saw them, from their own viewpoints, heavily biased by their own emotional involvement. Evidence ? Aldiss provides it, himself, ' different sorts of reality ' he says, right there. All things are real, but some are realler than others, I suppose ? Talk about giving the game away ! Fact is, so long as Brian, and those who think like him, want to go on writing mythopoesy, so they will fail to see one cardinal fact about reality . . . that it changes, continuously. With very few exceptions, no current fiction attempts to deal with this, or to explore it, except to deplore and cringe from it. And, of course, every time s-f does, as it ought, people like Brian pop up and slap it down for daring to enter a field that ' lies away beyond its territory entirely.' As I've said elsewhere, just as soon as s-f tries to take a serious look at the way the world actually is made, and the way it is heading, so it is told to keep off, as being incompetent. This is what ' different sorts of reality ' he means . . . and this is why s-f will struggle along in the thriller and cowboy rut for a long time to come. Just so long as there are enough people to say ' don't bother us with a lot of hard, nasty, unpleasant facts, give us another dollop of that mythopoetical quality . . . that's what we like !'

" Basis for Negotiation " was a bust, and explains, all by itself, why Brian prefers mythopoetical purple. This, an attempt to write ordinary s-f, in plain English, is a pastiche of pseudo-politics, with cardboard characters striking attitudes and mouthing cliches. The plot-line itself offers one of the oldest gags in the business, the ' gadget out of the hat ' especially invented to rescue the author from an impossible situation of his own devising. I'll leave it to those better qualified than myself to scrag the pitiful politics. I was put off, among other things, by the careless mistakes . . . Aldermaston incorrectly spelled, twice . . . the dubious phrase ' rather identical ' . . . the terribly mixed-up ' bullet-proof polaroid glass ' which can be ' opaqued,' thus permitting one-

way vision, and much more. He was in his cups when he wrote this, I reckon.

But I really wanted to give the accolade, the palm and the laurel-leaves, to John Brunner, for that editorial. I couldn't agree more that there are whole universes of genuine science that s-f has hardly touched, yet, and plenty of writers only too eager to get going on the provocative and exciting possibilities they offer.

Thing is, will the readership take John's invitation, and ask . . . ? Does the readership want genuine ' new ' ideas, excitingly investigated . . . or does it prefer to stick with the standard stuff ? You should be one of the first to know the answer to that one.

John Rackham,
London, S.W. 6.

Dear Sir,

Mr. Brunner must think we are all very naive. Why he wastes so much space refuting the old idea that modern science is putting the s-f writer out of a job when such an idea is so *obviously* untrue defeats me.

The first manned Venus expedition (American) is not even scheduled until the early 1980's and the proposed powerplant (the SPUR 300 kW nuclear-electric system with high temperature liquid-metal Rankine cycle) is not yet past the initial design stage with the Garrett corporation. (These facts can be checked on page 4 of " Advanced Propulsion Technique," edited by S. S. Penner, a symposium sponsored by the AGARD combustion and propulsion panel and published by Pergamon Press in 1961 at 70s. net). No sign of spindizzies yet.

The tabu on subject matter which Mr. Brunner complains about is a point more worthy of consideration but again I think he is protesting far too much. If he think it is " challenging " to write stories about Lesbians, well then, let him go ahead and write them. If they are good enough they'll be published all right. Theodore Sturgeon has written sensitively about homosexuality, and indeed about far more " shocking " subjects than this, and the fact that I think his fantasies are often diseased and unhealthy is neither here nor there. They are well written stories and they have sold.

In any case Mr. Brunner's thirty-odd embryo novels bubbling happily away in his files shouldt ake care of the paychecks and give him plenty of opportunity for hawking his

Lesbians round the more intellectual heavies if he wants to. There is no reason why he should confine himself to a strictly s-f market.

May I say that I have read Mr. Brunner's work and while I greatly admire the energy of his imagination I think he has about as much chance of writing a " challenging story " as he has of writing a blank verse epic.

But I hope he will go on trying.

Rod McLoughlin (B.A.),
Oxford.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

Sellings makes a couple of good points in his editorial. Certainly, s-f has gained a bad name in many quarters, and this name is probably due to the garish covers, poor advertising and general bad publicity which was given s-f during the '30s and '40s. All this I will concede. Where Mr. Sellings and I disagree is on the desirability of changing the bad public image. I know this sounds peculiar—but do we really need popularity? Perhaps it would be possible to correct the wrong impression which many critics and writers have about s-f, and it might also be possible to establish s-f as a legitimate section of contemporary literature. But what will this gain us? More readers mainly, and it's been my experience that an increase in popularity results in a general lowering of standards, a coarsening of taste and a distinct drop in the quality of published material.

The actual quality of s-f won't rise because of an increase in popularity, even if the new readers are better educated and more literate than those who were drawn to the field during those dread '50 " Boom Years." S-f writers have to serve a kind of apprenticeship in the magazines, working themselves up to a position where they are able to turn out consistently good science fiction that is both technically feasible and entertainingly readable. It takes years—to my knowledge, there is no really good writer in s-f today who has not been working in the field for at least five years, and I would maintain, at the risk of getting my head chopped off by sticking my neck out this far, that five years is an absolute minimum.

So assuming the " image " of magazine s-f does change, and there is a corresponding surge in popularity, we will have nothing more than another boom, with a larger readership

but not enough writers to keep up the supply. Hack writers will scent easy money, pour their material into the prozines, and, though it won't perhaps be as juvenile or as tasteless as that presented by the poorer magazines of the Boom years, the s-f we get will be pretty damn awful.

Now about the second part of Mr. Selling's editorial . . . oh, yes, it's fine to go back to " the roots "—providing you know just where the " roots " are. This " return to basics " bit had a vogue in the jazz world recently, and, in view of the many resemblances between the fields of jazz and s-f, I think a comparison might be informative. Quite a few jazz musicians felt that present-day jazz was too stiff and stylised, that the old fire and feeling was gone. Consequently, a movement was launched to find the real source of jazz and, from that, gain new life and hope. It flopped. After going back down to the " Swing " music of the '30s, they found the genealogy of jazz tangled up past all unravelling. African drum rhythms, French chamber music, brass band pieces, cotton-picker's " field hollers," hog calling, folk music . . . they all had a part in the formation of jazz as we know it today, and it was impossible to work out just where one influence began and another ended. There were a few experimental groups formed, many of them trying to play a tangled mixture of traditional blues and modern sounds, but eventually they gave up and went back to the music they had been brought up on. It will be the same with s-f, I think.

Once we start looking for " the roots," we'll realise, I'm sure, that it's impossible to see just where s-f came from. We could go right back to fantasy, of course—to fairy tales, myths and so on—but that would hardly be realistic. Then there is the science fantasy of Burroughs, Merritt and others of that period, good but nevertheless unlikely to be popular in this sophisticated era. Then how about the doggedly scientific material put out by Gernsback in the *Wonder* magazines ? With the present accent on sociology, psychology and other " unscientific " sciences in contemporary s-f, I see no likelihood of this catching on either.

What do we need then ? I wish I knew. Looking back over the history of science fiction, we see very little logic, very few foreseeable occurrences. S-f will bumble along in its own way until something happens to it—that's been the trend up till now, and I see no chance of it changing appreciably in the near future.

One more thing . . . about the International Fantasy Award given to *Earth Abides*. Please don't accuse " the fans " of voting this book into top place. Like the Hugos now, IFAs were given on the basis of, at most, 400 or 500 votes, and it takes no more than a 10% majority to gain an award for a novel. If you're going to use IFAs and Hugos as an index of fannish critical opinion, then remember that books like *Starship Troopers*, *A Canticle For Leibowitz* and *The Demolished Man* all received awards of one kind or another, and these novels are some miles removed from the "simple" "basic" *Earth Abides*.

Harding is right about letterhacking—the letter column encourages readers to participate in fandom, and from there it is just a step to professional science fiction. Not many make it, of course, but the encouragement and the opportunity is there. However, I don't see why we need a lettercol in *Science Fiction Adventures*. The stories are straight action yarns, the scientific points raised are generally minor, and so there's not much one can say aside from " I like it " or " I hated it." Not good fuel to start a raging argument on. It would be a lot better to encourage readers to write to *New Worlds*, because it's in NW that the interesting ideas are thrown out. Some editorial comments on letters might help a lot—nothing encourages a writer like recognition.

John Baxter,
Sydney, Australia.

Encore for Mr. Harding . . .

Dear Mr. Carnell,

In *New Worlds* No. 113, Lee Harding would appear to blame the current s-f writers and editors (excepting those whom he mentions) for the present lack of the ' sense of wonder ' in science fiction. I agree that some of the fault does lie here, but not to the degree which he implies.

Mr. Harding claims that the professional writers have got themselves into a rut. I agree. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that science fiction first began with H. G. Wells, whose first stories appeared in 1893, this would mean that science fiction stories and novels have been appearing for over sixty-five years. During this time countless writers have written countless stories around the basic themes of s-f, such as inter-planetary travel and time travel. Here we have part of the

trouble, these themes should never have become basic. I was brought up on expeditions to the moon and planets and am now sick of them. With the exception of stories by Arthur C. Clarke, any story about a journey to the moon is to me just another journey to the moon story, overshadowed by those I read previously. So we have conquered the planets, time, etc. Fair enough. Now let's do something else.

The trouble may not lie entirely with the authors, but on the other side of the typewriter. The Count of Monte Cristo built up on immunity to poison by taking small amounts of it regularly. Perhaps the fans have built up an immunity to wonder in science fiction. I have no doubt that some of the things widely accepted by s-f readers in their stories would stick in the gullets of the uninitiated, hyperspace for example. The things which these readers once regarded as wonderful are probably not even noticed now, and any innovation will have to be much more wonderful than anything previous for it to appear wonderful at all.

On the other hand the pressure may come from outside the field altogether. There is a saying that truth is stranger than fiction, we have now come to a point where, to the general public, the inventions of science are more amazing than the inventions of science fiction, where they are not identical. (The vehicles s-f has assigned to the twenty-second century and beyond sound very similar to hovercraft). We are being caught up with, which could well be fatal. We are, of course, at a disadvantage since what science can do has always proved more interesting than what it might do, some day—perhaps.

Although I feel that science fiction is more fascinating than any other type of literature, it could obviously be improved. What should be done ? In the past s-f has successfully extrapolated current ideals, sciences, inventions and trends, but not far enough. We must now extrapolate as far as possible new ideals, inventions, trends and sciences (psionics ?). And what about attracting new readers ? In my opinion the gap between ' legitimate ' fiction and science fiction is bridged by the satires, but unfortunately the publishers seem afraid to label satires ' science fiction,' although Penguin Books have done so with *Limbo* '90. Please note : satires don't have to be cheap propaganda for CND ; J. G. Ballard's "Billenium" is the best story you've printed for some time.

Keith H. Otter,
*London, N.W.*10

Satisfied Reader . . .

Dear Sir,

Congratulations on this last year's issues. The stories are mostly good with the occasional exceptional one. ("Echo" and "Goodbye, Dr. Gabriel").

The Guest Editorials are a very good idea, and the covers are nearly always excellent.

I find the attitude of *New Worlds Science Fiction* very refreshing, after reading some of the American magazines. I too have not renewed my subscription to *Fantasy and S.F.*, and was seriously thinking of stopping *Analog*.

I believe that you have found the proper way to run s-f magazines, namely to keep changing the presentation and to encourage reader participation, whether it be by writing letters or sending stories. The success of any magazine depends on the treatment of the reader and contributor.

" Every care will be taken to avoid loss or damage " (of MSS) is so much better than " No manuscripts or artwork can be accepted for the British edition."

Again congratulations, and I wish you luck in the coming year.

C. R. S. Marsden,
Hull.

BBC-Television's last excursion into science fiction, *A For Andromeda*, was generally considered a lamentable failure, due in the main to scrappy and poor characterisation by an inept cast. Basically the theme had possibilities but it was lost in the general shambles. Now in book form—**A For Andromeda** by Fred Hoyle & John Elliot (Souvenir Press, 15/-)—the authors have managed to perform a magnificent salvaging operation. The plot emerges with clarity, and the excitement is genuine ; the characterisation and writing style is a very marked improvement on Fred Hoyle's previous fiction, and obviously points to the influence of the young BBC dramatist John Elliot, whose talents have lightened the heavy hand of Hoyle and produced a first-class science fiction novel. For those who missed the television serial the story is about a do-it-yourself-kit of radio signals picked up by a new radio-telescope from the direction of Andromeda, and with these instructions a huge electronic brain is built, which has malignant intentions toward mankind, and creates a synthetic hand-maided, whom the hero, a red-brick scientist . . . but why not try it and enjoy some good English science fiction ?

Mordecai Roshwald's first novel *Level* 7 was a sombre cautionary tale of the dangers of push-button nuclear warfare. His second, **A Small Armageddon** (Heinemann, 15/-)—blurbed by the publishers as a " serio-comic nightmare which combines the elements of wild extravagance and sober possibility. It is bound to cause serious reflection as well as widespread entertainment " (the last word was subtly misquoted as " comment " in a recent trade journal)—is sadly off-beam. My own serious reflection is that it falls flat on its face between those two elements, and that the wrong author worked on this idea (how much better would, say, Eric Linklater, have written this book !) My comment on its " entertainment " is that such a combination of farce (surely not unintentional ?) and horrific possibility, made me squirm.

Basically the preposterous plot concerns the secession of an American nuclear submarine under the assumed command of a

mentally-unbalanced officer (what a nut-case !) whose piratical demands, under the threat of nuclear bombardment of his homeland, include lots of money, liquor and strip-tease dancers (and eventually the hand of the President's daughter in marriage). This extreme example of Western moral decadence leads to similar insurrections and eventual general international blackmail. Of course, Mr. Roshwald is too good a writer not to make *something* of this theme, but generally it is rather embarrassing, like drinking flat lemonade from a glass which contains just a trace of its previous dry martini content.

My book of the month is also " SF Choice for January," now familiarly yellow-jacketed—Damon Knight's **Far Out** (Gollancz, 15/-) a most varied collection of thirteen stories culled from the American s-f magazines of the past decade. Messrs. Gollancz are to be congratulated on their initial presentation in England of the talented, entirely unpredictable, and very literate Mr. Knight, whose ingenious stories required a high level of intelligence and mental alertness for proper appreciation. Among my favourites are the two with twist-endings (" To Serve Man " and " Not with a Bang "), but he is equally adept with gadgets (" Thing of Beauty " and " Idiot Stick "), and bizarre situations involving alien interference (" Babel II "), dangerous looting of the future (" Anachron "), dangers in outer space (" The Enemy " and " Cabin Boy "), unborn malevolent genius (" Special Delivery "), satanic destiny (" The Last Word "), time-travelling (" Extempore " and " Time Enough "). And what can I say about " You're Another "—the farthest out of the whole brilliant collection ? Excuse me while I re-read them for the fourth time . . .

Leslie Flood