

NEW WORLDS



COMPACT

SF

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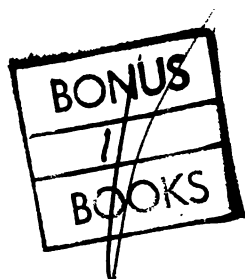
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HARRY HARRISON's
FINEST NOVEL

Bill, the Galactic Hero

The author of 'Deathworld' in a new and wildly
entertaining vein





NEW WORLDS



AUGUST 1965
Vol. 49 No. 153

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All manuscripts must be double-spaced, typed on quarto paper with a top-sheet containing title, author's name, word-length and author's address. A stamped, self-addressed envelope must accompany all submissions.

AN EFFECTIVE USE OF SPACE



WE DECIDED TO run Harry Harrison's new novel as a serial for several reasons. The main reason, of course, is that the book is as generous a piece of unpretentious entertainment as we have read for a long time. Another reason was because it fitted well into our editorial policy, illustrating how the space story can be used effectively to make a serious point in a light-hearted way. *Bill, the Galactic Hero* will be published at the end of October by Victor Gollancz Ltd., price 16s.

We were lucky to receive, at about the same time as *Bill*, Brian Aldiss's new story *The Source*. For the purpose of the story, Mr. Aldiss accepted that Jung's theories were completely valid, and went on from there. We had an ironic little story on file, *By The Same Door* by Mack Reynolds, which we felt matched the general mood of the issue, and the first episode of the adventures of Jerry Cornelius, which we hope does the same. *Preliminary Data* is something of an experiment, an example, if you like, of the anarchic approach to SF story-telling, all we ask is that you take it in the spirit the author intended and don't take it too seriously—further episodes should fill you in. The rest of the material, by Messrs. Collyn, Webb and Hoare make up what we feel is a well-balanced issue.

We felt that this month was a good time, too, to begin the first of 'Dr. Peristyle's' columns answering readers' queries on SF. The pungent and forthright gentleman made his debut in VECTOR, Journal of the BSFA, but we felt his opinions deserved a wider airing and invited him to contribute to NEW WORLDS. We hope you agree and would like to hear your views as well as your queries. Until your reaction is computed, Peristyle will alternate with the Letter Column.

The Hugo nominations have now been made and the winners will be announced at the forthcoming World Science Fiction Convention in August at the Mount Royal Hotel, Mayfair. One of the novels nominated is listed under its American title *The Whole Man*—this is the same novel as *Telepathist*, by John Brunner, published in this country earlier this year by Faber and Faber.

EYES AND BRAINS OF THE WORLD

the walls are being demolished
the mental probes are in every room

This is the start of an announcement issued by the publishers of ZIPPZAPP, AMAZING RAYDAY, BLATZ and THE BREATHLESS INVESTIGATOR, available from Future City Press, 14 St. Michaels Place, Brighton, Sussex. We suppose that some people will take one glance at a publication like AMAZING RAYDAY and reject it as nonsense. The issue of AMAZING RAYDAY we have to hand at first seems to be a wild effusion of unrelated words, drawings and photographs, but a closer look shows that this publication has a hysterical logic of its own. We are inclined to think that with their pointed use of SF terms and the imagery of the advertising and cinema world RAYDAY and its like are serving at very least a valuable revitalising function in literature. Diffusion and demolition-work must take place, and those who call the demolition squads irresponsible or juvenile may well be praising them. If you're interested, we suggest you send a couple of bob to Future City Press and have a look at what they send back.

We are still soliciting opinions of a 160-page issue costing 3/6 and should appreciate hearing from you on this score.

Michael Moorcock

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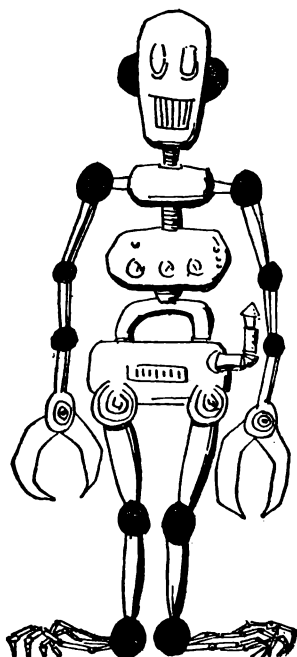
"HARRISON'S UNIQUE MIXTURE OF HORROR AND LAUGHTER . . . FROM NOW ON THE ARMY NOVEL IS OBSOLETE. NEVER HAS THE GALAXY BEEN THE TARGET FOR SUCH GENIAL CONTEMPT . . ."

Brian Aldiss

**HARRY
HARRISON'S
BILL,
THE
GALACTIC
HERO**

**First of
three parts**

**Illustrated by
the author**



o n e

BILL NEVER REALIZED that sex was the cause of it all. If the sun that morning had not been burning so warmly in the brassy sky of Phigerinadon II, and if he had not glimpsed the sugar-white and wine-barrel-wide backside of Inga-Maria Calyphigia while she bathed in the stream, he might have paid more attention to his ploughing than to the burning pressures of heterosexuality and would have driven his furrow to the far side of the hill before the seductive music sounded along the road. He might never have heard it, and his life would have been very, very different. But he did hear it and dropped the handles of the plough that was plugged into the robomule, turned, and gaped.

It was indeed a fabulous sight. Leading the parade was a one-robot band, twelve feet high and splendid in its great black busby that concealed the hi-fi speakers. The golden pillars of its legs stamped forward as its thirty articulated arms sawed, plucked, and fingered at a dazzling variety of instruments. Martial music poured out in wave after inspiring wave, and even Bill's thick peasant feet stirred in their clodhoppers as the shining boots of the squad of soldiers crashed along the road in perfect unison. Medals jingled on the manly swell of their scarlet-clad chests, and there could certainly be no nobler sight in all the world. To their rear marched the sergeant, gorgeous in his braid and brass, thickly clustered medals and ribbons, sword and gun, girdled gut and steely eye which sought out Bill where he stood gawking over the fence. The grizzled head nodded in his direction, the steep-trap mouth bent into a friendly smile and there was a conspiratorial wink. Then the little legion was past, and hurrying behind in their wake came a huddle of dust-covered ancillary robots, hopping and crawling or rippling along on treads. As soon as these had gone by Bill climbed clumsily over the split-rail fence and ran after them. There were no more than two interesting events every four years here, and he was not going to miss what promised to be a third.

A crowd had already gathered in the market square when Bill hurried up, and they were listening to an enthusiastic band concert. The robot hurled itself into the glorious

measures of "Star Troopers to the Skies Avaunt," thrashed its way through "Rockets Rumble," and almost demolished itself in the tumultuous rhythm of "Sappers at the Pithead Digging". It pursued this last tune so strenuously that one of its legs flew off, rising high into the air, but was caught dexterously before it could hit the ground, and the music ended with the robot balancing on its remaining leg, beating time with the detached limb. It also, after an ear-fracturing peal on the basses, used the leg to point across the square to where a tri-di screen and refreshment booth had been set up. The troopers had vanished into the tavern, and the recruiting sergeant stood alone among his robots, beaming a welcoming smile.

"Now hear this! Free drinks for all, courtesy of the Emperor, and some lively scenes of jolly adventure in distant climes to amuse you while you sip," he called in an immense and leathery voice.

Most of the people drifted over, Bill in their midst, though a few embittered and elderly draft-dodgers slunk away between the houses. Cooling drinks were shared out by a robot with a spigot for a navel and an inexhaustible supply of plastic glasses in one hip. Bill sipped his happily while he followed the enthralling adventures of the space troopers in full colour, with sound effects and stimulating subsonics. There was battle and death and glory, though it was only the Chingers who died: troopers only suffered neat little wounds in their extremities that could be covered easily by small bandages. And while Bill was enjoying this, Recruiting Sergeant Grue was enjoying him, his little piggy eyes ruddy with greed as they fastened on to the back of Bill's neck.

This is the one! he chortled to himself while, unknowingly, his yellowed tongue licked at his lips. He could already feel the weight of the bonus money in his pocket. The rest of the audience were the usual mixed bag of over-age men, fat women, beardless youths, and other unenlistables. All except this broad-shouldered, square-chinned curly-haired chunk of electronic-cannon fodder. With a precise hand on the controls the sergeant lowered the background subsonics and aimed a tight-beam stimulator at the back of his victim's head. Bill writhed in his seat, almost taking part in the glorious battles unfolding before him.

As the last chord died and the screen went blank, the refreshment robot pounded hollowly on its metallic chest and bellowed, "DRINK! DRINK! DRINK!" The sheeplike audience swept that way, all except Bill, who was plucked from their midst by a powerful arm.

"Here, I saved some for you," the sergeant said, passing over a prepared cup so loaded with dissolved ego-reducing drugs that they were crystallizing out at the bottom. "You're a fine figure of a lad and to my eye seem a cut above the yokels here. Did you ever think of making your career in the forces?"

"I'm not the military type, Shargeant . . ." Bill chomped his jaws and spat to remove the impediment to his speech and puzzled at the sudden fogginess in his thoughts. Though it was a tribute to his physique that he was even conscious after the volume of drugs and sonics that he had been plied with. "Not the military type. My fondest ambition is to be of help in the best way I can, in my chosen career as a Technical Fertilizer Operator, and I'm almost finished with my correspondence course . . ."

"That's a crappy job for a bright lad like you," the sergeant said, while clapping him on the arm to get a good feel of his biceps. Rock. He resisted the impulse to pull Bill's lip down and take a quick peek at the condition of his back teeth. Later. "Leave that kind of job to those that like it. No chance of promotion. While a career in the troopers has no top. Why, Grand-Admiral Pflunger came up through the rocket tubes, as they say, from recruit trooper to grand-admiral. How does that sound?"

"It sounds very nice for Mr. Pflunger, but I think fertilizer operating is more fun. Gee—I'm feeling sleepy. I think I'll go lie down."

"Not before you've seen this, just as a favour to me of course," the sergeant said, cutting in front of him and pointing to a large book held open by a tiny robot. "Clothes make the man, and most men would be ashamed to be seen in a crummy-looking smock like that thing draped around you or wearing those broken canal boats on their feet. Why look like *that* when you can look like *this*?"

Bill's eyes followed the thick finger to the colour plate in the book where a miracle of misapplied engineering caused

his own face to appear on the illustrated figure dressed in trooper red. The sergeant flipped the pages, and on each plate the uniform was a little more gaudy, the rank higher. The last one was that of a grand-admiral, and Bill blinked at his own face under the plumed helmet, now with a touch of crow's-feet about the eyes and sporting a handsome and grey-shot moustache, but still undeniably his own.

"That's the way you will look," the sergeant murmured into his ear, "once you have climbed the ladder of success. Would you like to try a uniform on? Of course you would like to try a uniform on. Tailor!"

When Bill opened his mouth to protest the sergeant put a large cigar into it, and before he could get it out the robot tailor had rolled up, swept a curtain-bearing arm about him and stripped him naked. "Hey! Hey!" he said.

"It won't hurt," the sergeant said, poking his great head through the curtain and beaming at Bill's muscled form. He poked a finger into a pectoral (rock), then withdrew.

"Ouch!" Bill said, as the tailor extruded a cold pointer and jabbed him with it, measuring his size. Something went *chunk* deep inside its tubular torso, and a brilliant red jacket began to emerge from a slot in the front. In an instant this was slipped onto Bill and the shining golden buttons buttoned. Luxurious grey moleskin trousers were pulled on next, then gleaming black knee-length boots. Bill staggered a bit as the curtain was whipped away and a powered full-length mirror rolled up.

"Oh, how the girls love a uniform," the sergeant said, "and I can't blame them."

A memory of the vision of Inga-Maria Calyphigia's matched white moons obscured Bill's sight for a moment, and when it had cleared he found he was grasping a stylo and was about to sign the form that the recruiting sergeant held before him.

"No," Bill said, a little amazed at his own firmness of mind. "I don't really want to. Technical Fertilizer Operator . . ."

"And not only will you receive this lovely uniform, an enlistment bonus, and a free medical examination, but you will be awarded these handsome medals." The sergeant took a flat box, offered to him on cue by a robot, and

opened it to display a glittering array of ribbons and bangles. "This is the Honourable Enlistment Award," he intoned gravely, pinning a jewel-encrusted nebula, pendant on chartreuse, to Bill's wide chest. "And the Emperor's Congratulatory Gilded Horn, the Forward to Victory Starburst, the Praise Be Given Salutation of the Mothers of the Victorious Fallen, and the Everflowing Cornucopia which does not mean anything but looks nice and can be used to carry contraceptives." He stepped back and admired Bill's chest, which was now adangle with ribbons, shining metal, and gleaming paste gems.

"I just couldn't," Bill said. "Thank you anyway for the offer, but . . ."

The sergeant smiled, prepared even for this eleventh-hour resistance, and pressed the button on his belt that actuated the programmed hypno-coil in the heel of Bill's new boot. The powerful neural current surged through the contacts and Bill's hand twitched and jumped, and when the momentary fog had lifted from his eyes he saw that he had signed his name.

"But . . ."

"Welcome to the Space Troopers," the sergeant boomed, smacking him on the back (trapezius like rock) and relieving him of the stylo. "FALL IN!" he called in a larger voice, and the recruits stumbled from the tavern.

"What have they done to my son!" Bill's mother screeched, coming into the market square, clutching at her bosom with one hand and towing his baby brother Charlie with the other. Charlie began to cry and wet his pants.

"Your son is now a trooper for the greater glory of the Emperor," the sergeant said, pushing his slack-jawed and round-shouldered recruit squad into line.

"No! it can't be . . ." Bill's mother sobbed, tearing at her greying hair. "I'm a poor widow, he's my sole support . . . you cannot . . . !"

"Mother . . ." Bill said, but the sergeant shoved him back into the ranks.

"Be brave, madam," he said. "There can be no greater glory for a mother." He dropped a large and newly minted coin into her hand. "Here is the enlistment bonus, the

Emperor's shilling. I know he wants you to have it. ATTENTION!"

With a clash of heels the graceless recruits braced their shoulders and lifted their chins. Much to his surprise, so did Bill.

"RIGHT TURN!"

In a single, graceful motion they turned, as the command robot relayed the order to the hypno-coil in every boot. "FORWARD MARCH!" And they did, in perfect rhythm, so well under control that, try as hard as he could, Bill could neither turn his head nor wave a last good-bye to his mother. She vanished behind him, and one last, anguished wail cut through the thud of marching feet.

"Step up the count to 130," the sergeant ordered, glancing at the watch set under the nail of his little finger. "Just ten miles to the station, and we'll be in camp tonight, my lads."

The command robot moved its metronome up one notch and the tramping boots conformed to the smarter pace and the men began to sweat. By the time they had reached the copter station it was nearly dark, their red paper uniforms hung in shreds, the gilt had been rubbed from their pot-metal buttons, and the surface charge that repelled the dust from their thin plastic boots had leaked away. They looked as ragged, weary, dusty, and miserable as they felt.

t w o

IT WASN'T THE recorded bugle playing reveille that woke Bill but the supersonics that streamed through the metal frame of his bunk that shook him until the fillings vibrated from his teeth. He sprang to his feet and stood there shivering in the grey of dawn. Because it was summer the floor was refrigerated: no mollycoddling of the men in Camp Leon Trotsky. The pallid, chilled figures of the other recruits loomed up on every side, and when the soul-shaking vibrations had died away they dragged their thick sackcloth and sandpaper fatigue uniforms from their bunks, pulled them hastily on, jammed their feet into the great, purple recruit boots, and staggered out into the dawn.

"I am here to break your spirit," a voice rich with menace

told them, and they looked up and shivered even more as they faced the chief demon in this particular hell.

Petty Chief Officer Deathwish Drang was a specialist from the tips of the angry spikes of his hair to the corrugated stamping-soles of his mirrorlike boots. He was wide-shouldered and lean-hipped, while his long arms hung, curved like those of some horrible anthropoid, the knuckles of his immense fists scarred from the breaking of thousands of teeth. It was impossible to look at this detestable form and imagine that it issued from the tender womb of a woman. He could never have been born; he must have been built to order by the government. Most terrible of all was the head. The face! The hairline was scarcely a finger's-width above the black tangle of the brows that were set like a rank growth of foliage at the rim of the black pits that concealed the eyes—visible only as baleful red gleams in the Stygian darkness. A nose, broken and crushed, squatted above the mouth that was like a knife slash in the taut belly of a corpse, while from between the lips issued the great, white fangs of the canine teeth, at least two inches long, that rested in grooves on the lower lip.

"I am Petty Chief Officer Deathwish Drang, and you will call me 'sir' or 'm'lord.'" He began to pace grimly before the row of terrified recruits, "I am your father and your mother and your whole universe and your dedicated enemy, and very soon I will have you regretting the day you were born. I will crush your will. When I say frog, you will jump. My job is to turn you into troopers, and troopers have discipline. Discipline means simply unthinking subservience, loss of free will, absolute obedience. That is all I ask . . ."

He stopped before Bill, who was not shaking quite as much as the others, and scowled.

"I don't like your face. One month of Sunday KP."

"Sir . . ."

"And a second month for talking back."

He waited, but Bill was silent. He had already learned his first lesson on how to be a good trooper. Keep your mouth shut. Deathwish paced on.

"Right now you are nothing but horrible, sordid, flabby pieces of debased civilian flesh. I shall turn that flesh to

muscle, your wills to jelly, your minds to machines. You will become good troopers, or I will kill you. Very soon you will be hearing stories about me, vicious stories, about how I killed and ate a recruit who disobeyed me."

He halted and stared at them, and slowly the coffin-lid lips parted in an evil travesty of a grin, while a drop of saliva formed at the tip of each whitened tusk.

"That story is true."

A moan broke from the row of recruits, and they shook as though a chill wind had passed over them. The smile vanished.

"We will run to breakfast now as soon as I have some volunteers for an easy assignment. Can any of you drive a helicar?"

Two recruits hopefully raised their hands, and he beckoned them forward. "All right, both of you, mops and buckets behind that door. Clean out the latrine while the rest are eating. You'll have a better appetite for lunch."

That was Bill's second lesson on how to be a good trooper: never volunteer.

The days of recruit training passed with a horribly lethargic speed. With each day conditions became worse and Bill's exhaustion greater. This seemed impossible, but it was nevertheless true. A large number of gifted and sadistic minds had designed it to be that way. The recruits' heads were shaved for uniformity. The food was theoretically nourishing but incredibly vile and when, by mistake, one batch of meat was served in an edible state it was caught at the last moment and thrown out and the cook reduced two grades. Their sleep was broken by mock gas attacks and their free time filled with caring for their equipment. The seventh day was designated as a day of rest, but they all had received punishments, like Bill's KP, and it was as any other day. On this, the third Sunday of their imprisonment, they were stumbling through the last hour of the day before the lights were extinguished and they were finally permitted to crawl into their casehardened bunks. Bill pushed against the weak force field that blocked the door, cunningly designed to allow the desert flies to enter but not leave the barracks, and dragged himself in. After fourteen hours of KP his legs vibrated with exhaustion, and his arms were

wrinkled and pallid as a corpse's from the soapy water. He dropped his jacket to the floor, where it stood stiffly supported by its burden of sweat, grease, and dust, and dragged his shaver from his footlocker. In the latrine he bobbed his head around trying to find a clear space on one of the mirrors. All of them had been heavily stencilled in large letters with such inspiring messages as KEEP YOUR WUG SHUT—THE CHINGERS ARE LISTENING and IF YOU TALK THIS MAN MAY DIE. He finally plugged the shaver in next to WOULD YOU WANT YOUR SISTER TO MARRY ONE? and centred his face in the O in ONE. Black-rimmed and bloodshot eyes stared back at him as he ran the buzzing machine over the underweight planes of his jaw. It took more than a minute for the meaning of the question to penetrate his fatigue-drugged brain.

"I haven't got a sister," he grumbled peevishly, "and if I did, why should she want to marry a lizard anyway?" It was a rhetorical question, but it brought an answer from the far end of the room, from the last shot tower in the second row.

"It doesn't mean *exactly* what it says—it's just there to make us hate the dirty enemy more."

Bill jumped, he had thought he was alone in the latrine, and the razor buzzed spitefully and gouged a bit of flesh from his lip.

"Who's there? Why are you hiding?" he snarled, then recognized the huddled dark figure and the many pairs of boots. "Oh, it's only you, Eager." His anger drained away, and he turned back to the mirror.

Eager Beager was so much a part of the latrine that you forgot he was there. A moon-faced, eternally smiling youth, whose apple-red cheeks never lost their glow and whose smile looked so much out of place here in Camp Leon Trotsky that everyone wanted to kill him until they remembered that he was mad. He had to be mad because he was always eager to help his buddies and had volunteered as permanent latrine orderly. Not only that, but he liked to polish boots and had offered to do those of one after another of his buddies until now he did the boots for every man in the squad every night. Whenever they were in the barracks Eager Beager could be found crouched at the end

of the thrones that were his personal domain, surrounded by the heaps of shoes and polishing industriously, his face wreathed in smiles. He would still be there after lights-out, working by the light of a burning wick stuck in a can of polish, and was usually up before the others in the morning, finishing his voluntary job and still smiling. Sometimes, when the boots were very dirty, he worked right through the night. The kid was obviously insane, but no one turned him in because he did such a good job on the boots, and they all prayed that he wouldn't die of exhaustion until recruit training was finished.

"Well if that's what they want to say, why don't they just say, 'Hate the dirty enemy more,'" Bill complained. He jerked his thumb at the far wall, where there was a poster labelled KNOW THE ENEMY. It featured a life-sized illustration of a Chinger, a seven-foot-high saurian that looked very much like a scale-covered, four-armed, green kangaroo with an alligator's head. "Whose sister would want to marry a thing like that anyway? And what would a thing like that want to do with a sister, except maybe eat her?"

Eager put a last buff on a purple toe and picked up another boot. He frowned for a brief instant to show what a serious thought this was. "Well you see, gee—it doesn't mean a *real* sister. It's just part of psychological warfare. We have to win the war. To win the war we have to fight hard. In order to fight hard we have to have good soldiers. Good soldiers have to hate the enemy. That's the way it goes. The Chingers are the only non-human race that has been discovered in the galaxy that has gone beyond the aboriginal level, so naturally we have to wipe them out."

"What the hell do you mean, *naturally*? I don't want to wipe anyone out. I just want to go home and be a Technical Fertilizer Operator."

"Well, I don't mean you personally, of course—gee!" Eager opened a fresh can of polish with purple-stained hands and dug his fingers into it. "I mean the human race, that's just the way we do things. If we don't wipe them out they'll wipe us out. Of course they say that war is against their religion and they will only fight in defence, and they have never made any attacks yet. But we can't believe them, even though it is true. They might change their religion or

their minds some day, and then where would we be? The best answer is to wipe them out now."

Bill unplugged his razor and washed his face in the tepid, rusty water. "It still doesn't seem to make sense. All right, so the sister I don't have doesn't marry one of them. But how about that—" he pointed to the stencilling on the duckboards, KEEP THIS SHOWER CLEAR—THE ENEMY CAN HEAR. "Or that—" The sign above the urinal that read BUTTON FLIES—BEWARE SPIES. "Forgetting for the moment that we don't have any secrets here worth travelling a mile to hear, much less twenty-five light years—how could a Chinger possibly be a spy? What kind of make-up would disguise a seven-foot lizard as a recruit? You couldn't even disguise one to look like Deathwish Drang, though you could get pretty close—"

The lights went out, and, as though using his name had summoned him like a devil from the pit, the voice of Deathwish blasted through the barracks.

"Into your sacks! Into your sacks! Don't you lousy bowbs know there's a war on!"

Bill stumbled away through the darkness of the barracks where the only illumination was the red glow from Deathwish's eyes. He fell asleep the instant his head touched his carborundum pillow, and it seemed that only a moment had elapsed before reveille sent him hurtling from his bunk. At breakfast, while he was painfully cutting his coffee-substitute into chunks small enough to swallow, the tele-news reported heavy fighting in the Beta Lyra sector with mounting losses. A groan rippled through the mess hall when this was announced, not because of any excess of patriotism but because any bad news would only make things worse for them. They did not know how this would be arranged, but they were positive it would be. They were right. Since the morning was a bit cooler than usual the Monday parade was postponed until noon when the ferro-concrete drill ground would have warmed up nicely and there would be the maximum number of heat-prostration cases. But this was just the beginning. From where Bill stood at attention near the rear he could see that the air-conditioned canopy was up on the reviewing stand. That meant brass. The trigger guard of his atomic rifle dug a

hole into his shoulder, and a drop of sweat collected, then dripped from the tip of his nose. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see the steady ripple of motion as men collapsed here and there among the massed ranks of thousands and were dragged to the waiting ambulances by alert corpsmen. Here they were laid in the shade of the vehicles until they revived and could be urged back to their positions in the formation.

Then the band burst into "Spacemen Ho and Chingers Vanquished!" and the broadcast signal to each boot heel snapped the ranks to attention at the same instant, and the thousands of rifles flashed in the sun. The commanding general's staff car—this was obvious from the two stars painted on it—pulled up beside the reviewing stand and a tiny, round figure moved quickly through the furnacelike air to the comfort of the enclosure. Bill had never seen him any closer than this, at least from the front, though once while he was returning from late KP he had spotted the general getting into his car near the camp theatre. At least Bill thought it was he, but all he had seen was a brief rear view. Therefore, if he had a mental picture of the general, it was of a large backside superimposed on a teeny, antlike figure. He thought of most officers in these general terms, since the men of course had nothing to do with officers during their recruit training. Bill had had a good glimpse of a second lieutenant once, near the orderly room, and he knew he had a face. And there had been a medical officer no more than thirty yards away, who had lectured them on venereal disease, but Bill had been lucky enough to sit behind a post and had promptly fallen asleep.

After the band shut up the anti-G loudspeakers floated out over the troops, and the general addressed them. He had nothing to say that anyone cared to listen to, and he closed with the announcement that because of losses in the field their training programme would be accelerated, which was just what they had expected. Then the band played some more and they marched back to the barracks, changed into their haircloth fatigues, and marched—double time now—to the range, where they fired their atomic rifles at plastic replicas of Chingers that popped up out of holes in the ground. Their aim was bad until Deathwish Drang

popped out of a hole and every trooper switched to full automatic and hit with every charge fired from every gun, which is a very hard thing to do. Then the smoke cleared, and they stopped cheering and started sobbing when they saw that it was only a plastic replica of Deathwish, now torn to tiny pieces, and the original appeared behind them and gnashed its tusks and gave them all a full month's KP.

"The human body is a wonderful thing," Bowb Brown said a month later, when they were sitting around a table in the Lowest Ranks Klub eating plastic-skinned sausages stuffed with road sweepings and drinking watery warm beer. Bowb Brown was a thotat-herder from the plains, which is why they called him Bowb, since everyone knows just what thotat-herders do with their thotats. He was tall, thin, and bow-legged, his skin burnt to the colour of ancient leather. He rarely talked, being more used to the eternal silence of the plains broken only by the eerie cry of the restless thotat, but he was a great thinker, since the one thing he had plenty of was time to think in. He could worry a thought for days, even weeks, before he mentioned it aloud, and while he was thinking about it nothing could disturb him. He even let them call him Bowb without protesting: call any other trooper bowb and he would hit you in the face. Bill and Eager and the other troopers from X squad sitting around the table all clapped and cheered, as they always did when Bowb said something.

"Tell us more, Bowb!"

"It can still talk—I thought it was dead!"

"Go on—why is the body a wonderful thing?"

They waited in expectant silence, while Bowb managed to tear a bite from his sausage and, after ineffectual chewing, swallowed it with an effort that brought tears to his eyes. He eased the pain with a mouthful of beer and spoke.

"The human body is a wonderful thing, because if it doesn't die it lives."

They waited for more until they realized that he was finished, then they sneered.

"Boy, are you full of bowb!"

"Sign up for OCS!"

"Yeah—but what does it *mean*?"

Bill knew what it meant but didn't tell them. There were

only half as many men in the squad as there had been the first day. One man had been transferred, but all the others were in the hospital, or in the mental hospital, or discharged for the convenience of the government as being too crippled for active service. Or dead. The survivors, after losing every ounce of weight not made up of bone or essential connective tissue, had put back the lost weight in the form of muscle and were now completely adapted to the rigours of Camp Leon Trotsky, though they still loathed it. Bill marvelled at the efficiency of the system. Civilians had to fool around with examinations, grades, retirement benefits, seniority, and a thousand other factors that limited the efficiency of the workers. But how easily the troopers did it! They simply killed off the weaker ones and used the survivors. He respected the system. Though he still loathed it.

"You know what I need, I need a woman," Ugly Uggleway said.

"Don't talk dirty," Bill told him promptly, since he had been correctly brought up.

"I'm not talking dirty!" Ugly whined. "It's not like I said I wanted to re-enlist or that I thought Deathwish was human or anything like that. I just said I need a woman. Don't we all?"

"I need a drink," Bowb Brown said as he took a long swig from his glass of dehydrated reconstituted beer, shuddered, then squirted it out through his teeth in a long stream onto the concrete, where it instantly evaporated.

"Affirm, affirm," Ugly agreed, bobbing his mat-haired, warty head up and down. "I need a woman *and* a drink." His whine became almost plaintive. "After all, what else is there to want in the troopers, outside of out?"

They thought about that a long time, but could think of nothing else that anyone really wanted. Eager Beager looked out from under the table, where he was surreptitiously polishing a boot and said that he wanted more polish, but they ignored him. Even Bill, now that he put his mind to it, could think of nothing he really wanted other than this inextricably linked pair. He tried hard to think of something else, since he had vague memories of wanting other

things when he had been a civilian, but nothing else came to mind.

"Gee, it's only seven weeks more until we get our first pass," Eager said from under the table, then screamed a little as everyone kicked him at once.

But slow as subjective time crawled by, the objective clocks were still operating, and the seven weeks did pass by and eliminate themselves one by one. Busy weeks filled with all the essential recruit-training courses: bayonet drill, small-arms training, short-arm inspection, greypfing, orientation lectures, drill, communal singing and the Articles of War. These last were read with dreadful regularity twice a week and were absolute torture because of the intense somnolence they brought on. At the first rustle of the scratchy, monotonous voice from the tape player, heads would begin to nod. But every seat in the auditorium was wired with an EEG that monitored the brain waves of the captive troopers. As soon as the shape of the Alpha wave indicated transition from consciousness to slumber a powerful jolt of current would be shot into the dozing buttocks, jabbing the owners painfully awake. The musty auditorium was a dimly lit torture chamber, filled with the droning, dull voice, punctuated by the sharp screams of the electrified, the sea of nodding heads abob here and there with painfully leaping figures.

No one ever listened to the terrible execution and sentences announced in the Articles for the most innocent of crimes. Everyone knew that they had signed away all human rights when they enlisted, and the itemizing of what they had lost interested them not in the slightest. What they really were interested in was counting the hours until they would receive their first pass. The ritual by which this reward was begrudgingly given was unusually humiliating, but they expected this and merely lowered their eyes and shuffled forward in the line, ready to sacrifice any remaining shards of their self-respect in exchange for the crumpled scrap of plastic. This rite finished, there was a scramble for the monorail train whose track ran on electrically charged pillars, soaring over that thirty-foot-high barbed wire, crossing the quicksand beds, then dropping into the little farming town of Leyville.

At least it had been an agricultural town before Camp Leon Trotsky had been built, and sporadically, in the hours when the troopers weren't on leave, it followed its original agrarian bent. The rest of the time the grain and feed stores shut down and the drink and knocking shops opened. Many times the same premises were used for both functions. A lever would be pulled when the first of the leave party thundered out of the station and grain bins became beds, salesclerks pimps, cashiers retained their same function—though the prices went up—while counters would be racked with glasses to serve as bars. It was to one of these establishments, a mortuary-cum-saloon, that Bill and his friends went.

"What'll it be, boys?" the ever smiling owner of the Final Resting Bar and Grill asked.

"Double shot of Embalming Fluid," Bowb Brown told him.

"No jokes," the landlord said, the smile vanishing for a second as he took down a bottle on which the garish label **REAL WHISKEY** had been pasted over the etched-in **EM-BALMING FLUID**. "Any trouble I call the MPs." The smile returned as money struck the counter. "Name your poison, gents."

They sat around a long, narrow table as thick as it was wide, with brass handles on both sides, and let the blessed relief of ethyl alcohol trickle a path down their dust-lined throats.

"I never drank before I came into the service," Bill said, draining four fingers neat of Old Kidney Killer and held his glass out for more.

"You never had to," Ugly said, pouring.

"That's for sure," Bowb Brown said, smacking his lips with relish and raising a bottle to his lips again.

"Gee," Eager Beager said, sipping hesitantly at the edge of his glass, "it tastes like a tincture of sugar, wood chips, various esters, and a number of higher alcohols."

"Drink up," Bowb said incoherently around the neck of the bottle. "All them things is good for you."

"Now I want a woman," Ugly said, and there was a rush as they all jammed in the door, trying to get out at the

same time, until someone shouted, "Look!" and they turned to see Eager still sitting at the table.

"Woman!" Ugly said enthusiastically, in the tone of voice you say Dinner! when you are calling a dog. The knot of men stirred in the doorway and stamped their feet. Eager didn't move.

"Gee—I think I'll stay right here," he said, his smile simpler than ever. "But you guys run along."

"Don't you feel well, Eager?"

"Feel fine."

"Ain't you reached puberty?"

"Gee . . ."

"What you gonna do here?"

Eager reached under the table and dragged out a canvas grip. He opened it to show them that it was packed with great purple boots. "I thought I'd catch up on my polishing."

They walked slowly down the wooden sidewalk, silent for the moment. "I wonder if there is something wrong with Eager?" Bill asked, but no one answered him. They were looking down the rutted street, at a brilliantly illuminated sign that cast a tempting, ruddy glow.

SPACEMEN'S REST it said. CONTINUOUS STRIP SHOW and BEST DRINKS and better PRIVATE ROOMS FOR GUESTS AND THEIR FRIENDS. They walked faster. The front wall of the Spacemen's Rest was covered with shatterproof glass cases filled with tri-di pix of the fully dressed (bangle and double stars) entertainers, and further in with pix of them nude (debangled with fallen stars). Bill stayed the quick sound of panting by pointing to a small sign almost lost among the tumescent wealth of mammaries.

OFFICERS ONLY it read.

"Move along," an MP grated, and poked at them with his electronic nightstick. They shuffled on.

The next establishment admitted men of all classes, but the cover charge was seventy-seven credits, more than they all had between them. After that the OFFICERS ONLY began again, until the pavement ended and all the lights were behind them.

"What's that?" Ugly asked at the sound of murmured voices from a nearby darkened street, and peering closely

they saw a line of troopers that stretched out of sight around a distant corner. "What's this?" he asked the last man in the line.

"Lower-ranks cathouse. Two credits, two minutes. And don't try to buck the line, bowb. On the back, on the back."

They joined up instantly, and Bill ended up last, but not for long. They shuffled forward slowly, and other troopers appeared and queued up behind him. The night was cool, and he took many life-preserving slugs from his bottle. There was little conversation and what there was died as the red-lit portal loomed ever closer. It opened and closed at regular intervals, and one by one Bill's buddies slipped in to partake of its satisfying, though rapid, pleasures. Then it was his turn and the door started to open and he started to step forward and the sirens started to scream and a large MP with a great fat belly jumped between Bill and the door.

"Emergency recall. Back to the base you men!" it barked.

Bill howled a strangled groan of frustration and leaped forward, but a light tap with the electronic nightstick sent him reeling back with the others. He was carried along, half stunned, with the shuffling wave of bodies, while the sirens moaned and the artificial northern lights in the sky spelled out **TO ARMS!!!** in letters of flame each a hundred miles long. Someone put his hand out, holding Bill up as he started to slide under the trampling purple boots. It was his old buddy, Ugly, carrying a satiated smirk and he hated him and tried to hit him. But before he could raise his fist they were swept into a monorail car, hurtled through the night, and disgorged back in Camp Leon Trotsky. He forgot his anger when the gnarled claws of Deathwish Drang dragged them from the crowd.

"Pack your bags," he rasped. "You're shipping out."

"They can't do that to us—we haven't finished our training."

"They can do whatever they want, and they usually do. A glorious space battle has just been fought to its victorious conclusion and there are over four million casualties, give or take a hundred thousand. Replacements are needed, which is you. Prepare to board the transports immediately if not sooner."

"We can't—we have no space gear! The supply room . . ."
"All of the supply personnel have already been shipped out."

"Food . . ."

"The cooks and KP pushers are already spacebound. This is an emergency. All non-essential personnel are being sent out. Probably to die." He twanged a tusk coyly and washed them with his loathsome grin. "While I remain here in peaceful security to train your replacements." The delivery tube plunked at his elbow, and as he opened the message capsule and read its contents his smile slowly fell to pieces. "They're shipping me out too," he said hollowly.

t h r e e

A TOTAL OF 89,672,899 recruits had already been shipped into space through Camp Leon Trotsky, so the process was an automatic and smoothly working one, even though this time it was processing itself, like a snake swallowing its own tail. Bill and his buddies were the last group of recruits through, and the snake began ingesting itself right behind them. No sooner had they been shorn of their sprouting fuzz and deloused in the ultrasonic delouser than the barbers rushed at each other and in a welter of under and over arms, gobbets of hair, shards of moustache, bits of flesh, drops of blood, they clipped and shaved each other, then pulled the operator after them into the ultrasonic chamber. Medical corpsmen gave themselves injections against rocket-fever and space-cafard ; record clerks issued themselves pay books ; and the loadmasters kicked each other up the ramps and into the waiting shuttleships. Rockets blasted, living columns of fire like scarlet tongues licking down at the blasting pads, burning up the ramps in a lovely pyrotechnic display, since the ramp operators were also aboard. The ships echoed and thundered up into the night sky leaving Camp Leon Trotsky a dark and silent ghost town where bits of daily orders and punishment rosters rustled and blew from the bulletin boards, dancing through the deserted streets to finally plaster themselves against the noisy, bright windows of the Officers' Club where a great drinking party was in progress, although there was much complaining because the officers had to serve themselves.

Up and up the shuttleships shot, toward the great fleet of deep-spacers that darkened the stars above, a new fleet, the most powerful the galaxy had ever seen, so new in fact that the ships were still under construction. Welding torches flared in brilliant points of light while hot rivets hurled their flat trajectories across the sky into the waiting buckets. The spots of light died away as one behemoth of the star lanes was completed and thin screams sounded in the space-suit radio circuit as the workers, instead of being returned to the yards, were pressed into service on the ship they had so recently built. This was total war.

Bill staggered through the sagging plastic tube that connected the shuttle to a dreadnought of space and dropped his bags in front of a petty chief officer who sat at a desk in the hangar-sized spacelock. Or rather he tried to drop it, but since there was no gravity the bags remained in mid-air, and when he pushed them down he rose (since a body when it is falling freely is said to be in free fall, and anything with weight has no weight, and for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction or something like that). The petty looked up and snarled and pulled Bill back down to the deck.

"None of your bowby spacelubber tricks, trooper. Name?"

"Bill, spelled with two L's."

"Bil," the petty mumbled, licking the end of his stylo, then inscribing it in the ship's roster with round, illiterate letters. "Two L's' for officers only, bowb—learn your place. What's your classification?"

"Recruit, unskilled, untrained, spacesick."

"Well don't puke in here, that's what you have your own quarters for. You are now a Fuse Tender Sixth Class, unskilled. Bunk down in compartment 34J-89T-001. Move. And keep that woopsy-sack over your head."

No sooner had Bill found his quarters and thrown his bags into a bunk, where they floated five inches over the reclaimed rock-wool mattress, than Eager Beager came in, followed by Bowb Brown and a crowd of strangers, some of them carrying welding torches and angry expressions.

"Where's Ugly and the rest of the squad?" Bill asked.

Bowb shrugged and strapped himself into his bunk for a

little shut-eye. Eager opened one of the six bags he always carried and removed some boots to polish.

"Are you saved?" A deep voice, vibrant with emotion, sounded from the other end of the compartment. Bill looked up, startled, and the big trooper standing there saw the motion and stabbed toward him with an immense finger. "You, brother, are you saved?"

"That's a little hard to say," Bill mumbled, bending over and rooting in his bag, hoping the man would go away. But he didn't; in fact, he came over and sat down on Bill's bunk. Bill tried to ignore him, but this was hard to do, because the trooper was over six feet high, heavily muscled, and iron-jawed. He had lovely, purplish-black skin that made Bill a little jealous, because his was only a sort of greyish pink. Since the trooper's shipboard uniform was almost the same shade of black, he looked all of a piece, very effective with his flashing smile and piercing gaze.

"Welcome aboard the *Christine Keeler*," he said, and with a friendly shake splintered most of Bill's knucklebones. "The grand old lady of this fleet, commissioned almost a week ago. I'm the Reverend Fuse Tender Sixth Class Tembo, and I see by the stencil on your bag that your name is Bill, and since we're shipmates, Bill, please call me Tembo, and how is the condition of your soul?"

"I haven't had much chance to think about it lately . . ."

"I should think not, just coming from recruit training, since attendance of chapel during training is a court-martial offence. But that's all behind you now and you can be saved. Might I ask if you are of the faith . . . ?"

"My folks were Fundamentalist Zoroastrian, so I suppose . . ."

"Superstition, my boy, rank superstition. It was the hand of fate that brought us together in this ship, that your soul would have this one chance to be saved from the fiery pit. You've heard of Earth?"

"I like plain food . . ."

"It's a planet, my boy—the home of the human race. The home from whence we all sprang, see it, a green and lovely world, a jewel in space." Tembo had slipped a tiny projector from his pocket while he spoke, and a coloured image appeared on the bulkhead, a planet swimming artis-

tically through the void, girdled by white clouds. Suddenly ruddy lightning shot through the clouds, and they twisted and boiled while great wounds appeared on the planet below. From the pinhead speaker came the tiny sound of rolling thunder. "But wars sprang up among the sons of man and they smote each other with the atomic energies until the Earth itself groaned aloud and mighty was the holocaust. And when the final lightnings stilled there was death in the North, death in the West, death in the East, death, death, death. Do you realize what that means?" Tembo's voice was eloquent with feeling, suspended for an instant in mid-flight, waiting for the answer to the catechistical question.

"I'm not quite sure," Bill said, rooting aimlessly in his bag, "I come from Phigerinadon II, it's a quieter place . . ."

"There was no death in the SOUTH! And why was the South spared, I ask you, and the answer is because it was the will of Samedi that all the false prophets and false religions and false gods be wiped from the face of the Earth so that the only true faith should remain. The First Reformed Voodoo Church . . ."

General Quarters sounded, a hooting alarm keyed to the resonant frequency of the human skull so that the bone vibrated as though the head were inside a mighty bell, and the eyes blurred out of focus with each stroke. There was a scramble for the passageway, where the hideous sound was not quite as loud and where non-corns were waiting to herd them to their stations. Bill followed Eager Beager up an oily ladder and out of the hatch in the floor of the fuse room. Great racks of fuses stretched away on all sides of them, while from the tops of the racks sprang arm-thick cables that looped upward and vanished through the ceiling. In front of the racks, evenly spaced, were round openings a foot in diameter.

"My opening remarks will be brief ; any trouble from any of you and I will personally myself feed you head first down the nearest fuseway." A greasy forefinger pointed at one of the holes in the deck, and they recognized the voice of their new master. He was shorter and wider and thicker in the gut than Deathwish, but there was a generic resemblance that was unmistakable. "I am Fuse Tender First Class

Spleen. I will take you crumbly, ground-crawling bowbs and will turn you into highly skilled and efficient fuse tenders or else feed you down the nearest fuseway. This is a highly skilled and efficient technical speciality which usually takes a year to train a good man but this is war so you are going to learn to do it now or else. I will now demonstrate. Tembo front and centre. Take board 19J-9; it's out of circuit now."

Tembo clashed his heels and stood at rigid attention in front of the board. Stretching away on both sides of him were the fuses, white ceramic cylinders capped on both ends with metal, each one a foot in diameter, five feet high, and weighing ninety pounds. There was a red band around the midriff of each fuse. First Class Spleen tapped one of these bands.

"Every fuse has one of these red bands, which is called a fuseband and is of the colour red. When the fuse burns out this band turns black. I don't expect you to remember all this now, but it's in your manual and you are going to be letter-perfect before I am done with you, or else. Now I will show you what will happen when a fuse burns out. Tembo—that is a burned-out fuse! Go!"

"Unggh!" Tembo shouted, and leaped at the fuse and grasped it with both hands. "Unggh!" he said again, as he pulled it from the clips, and again "Unggh!" when he dropped it into the fuseway. Then, still Ungghing, he pulled a new fuse from the storage rack and clipped it into place and with a final Unggh! snapped back to attention.

"And that's the way it is done, by the count, by the numbers, the trooper way, and you are going to learn it or else." A dull buzzing sounded, grumbling through the air like a stifled eructation. "There's the chow call, so I'll let you break now, and while you're eating, think about what you are going to have to learn. Fall out."

Other troopers were going by in the corridor, and they followed them into the bowels of the ship.

"Gee—do you think the food might be any better than it was back in camp?" Eager asked, smacking his lips excitedly.

"It is completely impossible that it could be any worse," Bill said as they joined a line leading to a door labelled

CONSOLIDATED MESS NUMBER TWO. "Any change will have to make it better. After all—aren't we fighting troopers now? We have to go into combat fit, the manual says."

The line moved forward with painful slowness, but within an hour they were at the door. Inside the room a tired-looking KP in soap-stained, greasy fatigues handed Bill a yellow plastic cup from a rack before him. Bill moved on, and when the trooper in front of him stepped away, he faced a blank wall from which there emerged a single, handleless spigot. A fat cook standing next to it, wearing a large white chef's hat and a soiled undershirt, waved him forward with the soup ladle in his hand.

"C'mon, c'mon, ain't you never et before? Cup under the spout, dog tag in the slot, snap it up!"

Bill held the cup as he had been advised and noticed a narrow slit in the metal wall just at eye level. His dog tags were hanging around his neck, and he pushed one of them into the slot. Something went *bzzzzz*, and a thin stream of yellow fluid gushed out, filling the cup halfway.

"Next man!" the cook shouted, and pulled Bill away so that Eager could take his place. "What is this?" Bill asked, peering into the cup.

"What is this! What is this!" the cook raged, growing bright red. "This is your dinner, you stupid bowb! This is absolutely chemically pure water in which are dissolved eighteen amino acids, sixteen vitamins, eleven mineral salts, a fatty acid ester, and glucose. What else did you expect?"

"Dinner . . . ?" Bill said hopefully, then saw red as the soup ladle crashed down on his head. "Could I have it without the fatty acid ester?" he asked hopefully, but he was pushed out into the corridor where Eager joined him.

"Gee," Eager said. "This has all the food elements necessary to sustain life indefinitely. Isn't that marvellous?"

Bill sipped at his cup, then sighed tremulously.

"Look at that," Tembo said, and when Bill turned, a projected image appeared on the corridor wall. It showed a misty firmament, in which tiny figures seemed to be riding on clouds. "Hell awaits you, my boy, unless you are saved. Turn your back on your superstitious ways, for the First Reformed Voodoo Church welcomes you with open arms; come unto her bosom, and find your place in heaven at

Samedi's right hand. Sit there with Mondongue and Bakalou and Zandor, who will welcome you."

The projected scene changed; the clouds grew closer, while from the little speaker came the tiny sound of a heavenly choir with drum accompaniment. Now the figures could be seen clearly, all with very dark skins and white robes from the back of which protruded great black wings. They smiled and waved gracefully to each other as their clouds passed, while singing enthusiastically and beating on the little tom-toms that each one carried. It was a lovely scene, and Bill's eyes misted a bit.

"Attention!"

The barking tones echoed from the walls and the troopers snapped their shoulders back, heels together, eyes ahead. The heavenly choir vanished as Tembo shoved the projector back into his pocket.

"As you was," First Class Spleen ordered, and they turned to see him leading two MPs with drawn handguns who were acting as bodyguards for an officer. Bill knew it was an officer because they had had an officer-identification course, plus the fact that there was a KNOW YOUR OFFICERS chart on the latrine wall that he had had a great deal of opportunity to study during an anguilluliasis epidemic. His jaw gaped open as the officer went by, almost close enough to *touch*, and stopped in front of Tembo.

"Fuse Tender Sixth Class Tembo, I have good news for you. In two weeks your seven-year period of enlistment will be up, and because of your fine record Captain Zekial has authorized a doubling of the usual mustering-out pay, an honourable discharge with band music, as well as your free transport back to Earth."

Tembo, relaxed and firm, looked down at the runty lieutenant with the well-chewed blond moustache who stood before him. "That will be impossible, sir."

"Impossible!" the lieutenant screeched, and rocked back and forth on his high-heeled boots. "Who are *you* to tell *me* what is impossible . . . !"

"Not I, sir," Tembo answered with utmost calm. "Regulation 13-9A, paragraph 45, page 8923, volume 43 of Rules, Regulations and Articles of War. 'No man nor officer shall or will receive a discharge other than dishonourable with

death sentence from a vessel, post, base, camp, ship, outpost, or labour camp during time of emergency . . .”

“Are you a ship’s lawyer, Tembo?”

“No, sir. I’m a loyal trooper, sir. I just want to do my duty, sir.”

“There’s something very funny about you, Tembo. I saw in your record that you enlisted *voluntarily* without drugs and or hypnotics being used. Now you refuse discharge. That’s bad, Tembo, very bad. Gives you a bad name. Makes you look suspicious. Makes you look like a spy or something.”

“I’m a loyal trooper, of the Emperor, sir, not a spy.”

“You’re not a spy, Tembo, we have looked into that very carefully. But why *are* you in the service, Tembo?”

“To be a loyal trooper of the Emperor, sir, and to do my best to spread the gospel. Have you been saved, sir?”

“Watch your tongue, trooper, or I’ll have you up on charges! Yes, we know that story—*Reverend*—but we don’t believe it. You’re being too tricky, but we’ll find out . . .” He stalked away, muttering to himself, and they all snapped to attention until he was gone. The other troopers looked at Tembo oddly and did not feel comfortable until he had gone. Bill and Eager walked slowly back to their quarters.

“Turned down a discharge . . . !” Bill mumbled in awe.

“Gee,” Eager said, “maybe he’s nuts. I can’t think of any other reason.”

“Nobody could be *that* crazy,” Bill said. “I wonder what’s in there?” pointing to a door with a large sign that read **ADMITTANCE TO AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.**

“Gee—I don’t know—maybe food?”

They slipped through instantly and closed the door behind them, but there was no food there. Instead they were in a long chamber with one curved wall, while attached to this wall were cumbersome devices each set with meters, dials, switches, controls, levers, a view screen, and a relief tube. Bill bent over and read the label on the nearest one.

“*Mark IV Atomic Blaster*—and look at the size of them! This must be the ship’s main battery.” He turned around and saw that Eager was holding his arm up so that his wrist watch pointed at the guns and was pressing on the crown with the index finger of his other hand.

"What are you doing?" Bill asked.

"Gee—just seeing what time it was."

"How can you tell what time it is when you have the inside of your wrist toward your face and the watch is on the outside?"

Footsteps echoed far down the long gun deck, and they remembered the sign on the outside of the door. In an instant they had slipped back through it, and Bill pressed it quietly shut. When he turned around Eager Beager had gone so that he had to make his way back to their quarters by himself. Eager had returned first and was busy shining boots for his buddies and didn't look up when Bill came in.

But what *had* he been doing with his watch?

four

THIS QUESTION KEPT bugging Bill all the time during the days of their training as they painfully learned the drill of fuse tending. It was an exacting, technical job that demanded all their attention, but in spare moments Bill worried. He worried when they stood in line for chow, and he worried during the few moments every night between the time the lights were turned off and sleep descended heavily upon his fatigue-drugged body. He worried whenever he had the time to do it, and he lost weight.

He lost weight not because he was worrying, but for the same reason everyone else lost weight. The shipboard rations. They were designed to sustain life, and that they did, but no mention was made of what kind of life it was to be. It was a dreary, underweight, hungry one. Yet Bill took no notice of this. He had a bigger problem, and he needed help. After Sunday drill at the end of their second week, he stayed to talk to First Class Spleen instead of joining the others in their tottering run toward the mess hall.

"I have a problem, sir . . ."

"You ain't the only one, but one shot cures it and you ain't a man until you've had it."

"It's not that kind of a problem. I'd like to . . . see the . . . chaplain . . ."

Spleen turned white and sank back against the bulkhead. "Now I heard everything," he said weakly. "Get down to

chow, and if you don't tell anyone about this I won't either."

Bill blushed. "I'm sorry about this, First Class Spleen, but I can't help it. It's not my fault I have to see him, it could have happened to anyone . . ." His voice trailed away, and he looked down at his feet, rubbing one boot against another. The silence stretched out until Spleen finally spoke, but all the comradeship was gone from his voice.

"All right, trooper—if that's the way you want it. But I hope none of the rest of the boys hear about it. Skip chow and get up there now—here's a pass." He scrawled on a scrap of paper then threw it contemptuously to the floor, turning and walking away as Bill bent humbly to pick it up.

Bill went down dropchutes, along corridors, through passageways, and up ladders. In the ship's directory the chaplain was listed as being in compartment 362-B on the 89th deck, and Bill finally found this, a plain metal door set with rivets. He raised his hand to knock, while sweat stood out in great beads from his face and his throat was dry. His knuckles boomed hollowly on the panel, and after an endless period a muffled voice sounded from the other side.

"Yeah, yeah—c'mon in—it's open."

Bill stepped through and snapped to attention when he saw the officer behind the single desk that almost filled the tiny room. The officer, a fourth lieutenant, though still young was balding rapidly. There were black circles under his eyes, and he needed a shave. His tie was knotted crookedly and badly crumpled. He continued to scratch among the stacks of paper that littered the desk, picking them up, changing piles with them, scrawling notes on some and throwing others into an overflowing wastebasket. When he moved one of the stacks Bill saw a sign on the desk that read LAUNDRY OFFICER.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I am in the wrong office. I was looking for the chaplain."

"This is the chaplain's office but he's not on duty until 1300 hours, which is, as someone even as stupid-looking as you can tell, is in fifteen minutes more."

"Thank you, sir, I'll come back . . ." Bill slid toward the door.

"You'll stay and work." The officer raised bloodshot eye-

balls and cackled evilly. "I got you. You can sort the hanky reports. I've lost six hundred jockstraps, and they may be in there. You think it's easy to be a laundry officer?" He snivelled with self-pity and pushed a tottering stack of papers over to Bill, who began to sort through them. Long before he was finished the buzzer sounded that ended the watch.

"I knew it!" the officer sobbed hopelessly, "this job will never end; instead it gets worse and worse. And you think *you* got problems!" He reached out an unsteady finger and flipped the sign on his desk over. It read CHAPLAIN on the other side. Then he grabbed the end of his necktie and pulled it back hard over his right shoulder. The necktie was fastened to his collar and the collar was set into ball bearings that rolled smoothly in a track fixed to his shirt. There was a slight whirring sound as the collar rotated; then the necktie was hanging out of sight down his back and his collar was now on backward, showing white and smooth and cool to the front.

The chaplain steepled his fingers before him, lowered his eyes, and smiled sweetly. "How may I help you, son?"

"I thought you were the laundry officer," Bill said, taken aback.

"I am, my son, but that is just one of the burdens that must fall upon my shoulders. There is little call for a chaplain in these troubled times, but much call for a laundry officer. I do my best to serve." He bent his head humbly.

"But—which are you? A chaplain who is a part-time laundry officer, or a laundry officer who is a part-time chaplain?"

"That is a mystery, my son. There are some things that it is best not to know. But I see you are troubled. May I ask if you are of the faith?"

"Which faith?"

"That's what I'm asking *you*!" the chaplain snapped, and for a moment the Old Laundry Officer peeped through. "How can I help you if I do not know what your religion is?"

"Fundamentalist Zoroastrian."

The chaplain took a plastic-covered sheet from a drawer and ran his finger down it. "Z . . . Z . . . Zen . . . Zodomite

. . . Zoroastrian, Reformed Fundamentalist, is that the one?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, should be no trouble with this, my son . . . 21-52-05 . . ." He quickly dialled the number on a control plate set into the desk ; then, with a grand gesture and an evangelistic gleam in his eye, he swept all the laundry papers to the floor. Hidden machinery hummed briefly, a portion of the desk top dropped away and reappeared a moment later bearing a black plastic box decorated with golden bulls, rampant. "Be with you in a second," the chaplain said, opening the box.

First he unrolled a length of white cloth sewn with more golden bulls and draped this around his neck. He placed a thick, leather-bound book next to the box, then on the closed lid set two metal bulls with hollowed-out backs. Into one of them he poured distilled water from a plastic flask and into the other sweet oil, which he ignited. Bill watched these familiar arrangements with growing happiness.

"It's very lucky," Bill said, "that you are a Zoroastrian. It makes it easier to talk to you."

"No luck involved, my son, just intelligent planning." The chaplain dropped some powdered Haoma into the flame, and Bill's nose twitched as the drugged incense filled the room. "By the grace of Ahura Mazdah I am an anointed priest of Zoroaster. By Allah's will a faithful muezzin of Islam, through Yahweh's intercession a circumcized rabbi, and so forth." His benign face broke into a savage snarl. "And also because of an officer shortage I am the damned laundry officer." His face cleared. "But now, you must tell me your problem . . ."

"Well, it's not easy. It may be just foolish suspicion on my part, but I'm worried about one of my buddies. There is something strange about him. I'm not sure how to tell it . . ."

"Have confidence, my boy, and reveal your innermost feelings to me, and do not fear. What I hear shall never leave this room, for I am bound to secrecy by the oath of my calling. Unburden yourself."

"That's very nice of you, and I *do* feel better already.

You see, this buddy of mine has always been a little funny ; he shines the boots for all of us and volunteered for latrine orderly and doesn't like girls."

The chaplain nodded beatifically and fanned some of the incense toward his nose. "I see little here to worry you, he sounds a decent lad. For is it not written in the Vendidad that we should aid our fellow man and seek to shoulder his burdens and pursue not the harlots of the streets?"

Bill pouted. "That's all right for Sunday School, but it's no way to act in the troopers! Anyway, we just thought he was out of his mind, and he might have been—but that's not all. I was with him on the gun deck, and he pointed his watch at the guns and pressed the stem, and I heard it *click*! It could be a camera. I . . . I think he is a Chinger spy!" Bill sat back, breathing deeply and sweating. The fatal words had been spoken.

The chaplain continued to nod, smiling, half-unconscious from the Haoma fumes. Finally he snapped out of it, blew his nose, and opened the thick copy of the Avesta. He mumbled aloud in Old Persian a bit, which seemed to brace him, then slammed it shut.

"You must not bear false witness!" he boomed, fixing Bill with piercing gaze and accusing finger.

"You got me wrong," Bill moaned, writhing in the chair. "He's *done* these things, I *saw* him use the watch. What kind of spiritual aid do you call *this*?"

"Just a bracer, my boy, a touch of the old-time religion to renew your sense of guilt and start you thinking about going to church regular again. You have been backsliding!"

"What else could I do—chapel is forbidden during recruit training?"

"Circumstances are no excuse, but you will be forgiven this time because Ahura Mazdah is all-merciful."

"But what about my buddy—the spy?"

"You must forget your suspicions, for they are not worthy of a follower of Zoroaster. This poor lad must not suffer because of his natural inclinations to be friendly, to aid his comrades, to keep himself pure, to own a crummy watch that goes click. And besides, if you do not mind my introducing a spot of logic—how could he be a spy? To be a

spy he would have to be a Chinger, and Chingers are seven feet tall with tails. Catch?"

"Yeah, yeah," Bill mumbled unhappily. "I could figure that one out for myself—but it still doesn't explain everything . . ."

"It satisfies me, and it must satisfy you. I feel that Ahri-man has possessed you to make you think evil of your comrade, and you had better do some penance and join me in a quick prayer before the laundry officer comes back on duty."

This ritual was quickly finished, and Bill helped stow the things back in the box and watched it vanish back into the desk. He said good-bye and turned to leave.

"Just one moment, my son," the chaplain said with his warmest smile, reaching back over his shoulder at the same time to grab the end of his necktie. He pulled, and his collar whirled about, and as it did the blissful expression was wiped from his face to be replaced by a surly snarl. "Just where do you think you're going, bowb! Put your ass back in that chair."

"B-but," Bill stammered, "you said I was dismissed."

"That's what the chaplain said, and as laundry officer I have no truck with him. Now—*fast*—what's the name of this Chinger spy you are hiding?"

"I told you about that under oath—"

"You told the *chaplain* about it, and he keeps his word and he didn't tell me, but I just happened to hear." He pressed a red button on the control panel. "The MPs are on the way. You talk before they get here, bowb, or I'll have you keel-hauled without a space suit and deprived of canteen privileges for a year. The name?"

"Eager Beager," Bill sobbed, as heavy feet trampled outside and two redhats forced their way into the tiny room.

"I have a spy for you boys," the laundry officer announced triumphantly, and the MPs grated their teeth, howled deep in their throats, and launched themselves through the air at Bill. He dropped under the assault of fists and clubs and was running with blood before the laundry officer could pull the overmuscled morons with their eyes not an inch apart off him.

"Not him . . ." the officer gasped, and threw Bill a towel

to wipe off some of the blood. "This is our informant, the loyal, patriotic hero who ratted on his buddy by the name of Eager Beager, who we will now grab and chain so he can be questioned. Let's go."

The MPs held Bill up between them, and by the time they had come to the fuse tenders' quarters the breeze from their swift passage had restored him a bit. The laundry officer opened the door just enough to poke in his head. "Hi, gang!" he called cheerily. "Is Eager Beager here?"

Eager looked up from the boot he was polishing, waving and grinning. "That's me—gee."

"Get him!" the laundry officer expostulated, jumping aside and pointing accusingly. Bill dropped to the floor as the MPs let go of him and thundered into the compartment. By the time he had staggered back to his feet Eager was pinioned, handcuffed and chained, hand and foot, but still grinning.

"Gee—you guys want some boots polished too?"

"No backtalk, you dirty spy," the laundry officer grated, and slapped him hard in the offensive grin. At least he tried to slap him in the offensive grin, but Beager opened his mouth and bit the hand that hit him, clamping down hard so that the officer could not get away. "He bit me!" the man howled, and tried desperately to pull free. Both MPs, each handcuffed to an arm of the prisoner, raised their clubs to give him a sound battering.

At this moment the top of Eager Beager's head flew open.

Happening at any other time, this would have been considered unusual, but happening at this moment it was spectacularly unusual, and they all, including Bill, gaped, as a seven-inch-high lizard climbed out of the open skull and jumped to the floor in which it made a sizeable dent upon landing. It had four tiny arms, a long tail, a head like a baby alligator, and was bright green. It looked exactly like a Chinger except that it was seven inches tall instead of seven feet.

"All bowby humans have B.O.," it said, in a thin imitation of Eager Beager's voice. "Chingers can't sweat. Chingers forever!" It charged across the compartment toward Beager's bunk.

Paralysis prevailed. All of the fuse tenders who had witnessed the impossible events stood or sat as they had been, frozen with shock, eyes bulging like hard-boiled eggs. The laundry officer was pinioned by the teeth locked into his hand, while the two MPs struggled with the handcuffs that held them to the immobile body. Only Bill was free to move and, still dizzy from the beating, he bent over to grab the tiny creature. Small and powerful talons locked into his flesh, and he was pulled from his feet and went sailing through the air to crash against a bulkhead. "Gee—that's for you, you stoolie!" the minuscule voice squeaked.

Before anyone else could interfere, the lizardoid ran to Beager's pile of barracks bags and tore the topmost one open and dived inside. A high-pitched humming grew in volume an instant later, and from the bag emerged the bulletlike nose of a shining projectile. It pushed out until a tiny spaceship not two feet long floated in the compartment. Then it rotated about its vertical axis, stopping when it pointed at the bulkhead. The humming rose in pitch, and the ship suddenly shot forward and tore through the metal of the partition as if it had been no stronger than wet cardboard. There were other distant tearing sounds as it penetrated bulkhead after bulkhead until, with a rending clang, it crashed through the outer skin of the ship and escaped into space. There was the roar of air rushing into the void and the clamour of alarm bells.

"Well I'll be damned . . ." the laundry officer said, then snapped his gaping mouth closed and screamed, "Get this thing offa my hand—it's biting me to death!"

The two MPs still swayed back and forth, handcuffed effectively to the immobile figure of the former Eager Beager. Beager just stared, smiling around the grip he had on the officer's hand, and it wasn't until Bill got his atomic rifle and put the barrel into Eager's mouth and levered the jaw open that the hand could be withdrawn. While he did this Bill saw that the top of Eager's head had split open just above his ears and was held at the back by a shiny brass hinge. Inside the gaping skull, instead of brains and bones and things, was a model control room with a tiny chair, minuscule controls, TV screens, and a water cooler. Eager was just a robot worked by the little creature that had

escaped in the spaceship. It looked like a Chinger—but it was only seven inches tall.

"Hey!" Bill said, "Eager is just a robot worked by the little creature that escaped in the spaceship! It looked like a Chinger—but it was only seven inches tall . . ."

"Seven inches, seven feet—what difference does it make!" the laundry officer mumbled petulantly as he wrapped a handkerchief around his wounded hand. "You don't expect us to tell the recruits how small the enemy really are, or to explain how they come from a 10G planet. We gotta keep the morale up."

five

NOW THAT EAGER BEAGER had turned out to be a Chinger spy, Bill felt very much alone. Bowb Brown, who never talked anyway, now talked even less, which meant never, so there was no one that Bill could bitch to. Bowb was the only other fuseman in the compartment who had been in Bill's squad at Camp Leon Trotsky, and all of the new men were very clannish and given to sitting close together and mumbling and throwing suspicious looks over their shoulders if he should come too close. Their only recreation was welding and every off watch they would break out the welders and weld things to the floor and the next watch cut them loose again, which is about as dim a way of wasting time as there is; but they seemed to enjoy it. So Bill was very much out of things and tried bitching to Eager Beager.

"Look at the trouble you got me into!" he whined.

Beager just smiled back, unmoved by the complaint.

"At least close your head when I'm talking to you," Bill snarled, and reached over to slam the top of Eager's head shut. But it didn't do any good. Eager couldn't do anything any more except smile. He had polished his last boot. He just stood there now; he was really very heavy and besides was magnetized to the floor, and the fuse tenders hung their dirty shirts and arc welders on him. He stayed there for three watches before someone figured out what to do with him, until finally a squad of MPs came with crowbars and tilted him into a handcart and rolled him away.

"So long," Bill called out, waving after him, then went

back to polishing his boots. "He was a good buddy, even if he was a Chinger spy."

Bowb didn't answer him, and welders wouldn't talk to him, and he spent a lot of the time avoiding Reverend Tembo. The grand old lady of the fleet, *Christine Keeler*, was still in orbit while her engines were being installed. There was very little to do, because, in spite of what First Class Spleen had said, they had mastered all the intricacies of fuse tending in a little less than the prescribed year; in fact it took them something like maybe fifteen minutes. In his free time Bill wandered around the ship, going as far as the MPs who guarded the hatchways would allow him, and even considered going back to see the chaplain so he could have someone to bitch to. But if he timed it wrong he might meet the laundry officer again, and that was more than he could face. So he walked through the ship, very much alone, and looked in through the door of a compartment and saw a boot on a bed.

Bill stopped, frozen, immobile, shocked, rigid, horrified, dismayed, and had to fight for control of his suddenly contracted bladder.

He knew that boot. He would never forget that boot until the day he died, just as he would never forget his serial number and could say it frontward or backward or from the inside out. Every detail of that terrible boot was clear in his memory, from the snakelike laces in the repulsive leather of the uppers—said to be made of human skin—to the corrugated stamping-soles tinged with red that could only have been human blood. That boot belong to Deathwish Drang.

The boot was attached to a leg, and paralysed with terror, as unable to control himself as a bird before a snake, he found himself leaning further and further into the compartment as his eyes traced up the leg past the belt to the shirt to the neck upon which rested the face that had featured largely in his nightmares since he had enlisted. The lips moved . . .

"Is that you, Bill? C'mon in and rest it."

Bill stumbled in.

"Have a hunk of candy," Deathwish said, and smiled.

Reflex drove Bill's fingers into the offered box and set his

jaw chewing on the first solid food that had passed his lips in weeks. Saliva spouted from dusty orifices, and his stomach gave a preliminary rumble, while his thoughts drove maddingly in circles as he tried to figure out what that expression was on Deathwish's face. Lips curved up at the corners behind the tusks, little crinkles on the cheeks. It was hopeless. He could not recognize it.

"I hear Eager Beager turned out to be a Chinger spy," Deathwish said, closing the box of candy and sliding it under the pillow. "I should have figured that one out myself. I knew there was something *very* wrong with him, doing his buddies' boots and that crap, but I thought he was just nuts. Should have known better . . ."

"Deathwish," Bill said hoarsely, "it can't be, I know—but you are acting like a human being!"

Deathwish chuckled, not his ripsaw-slicing-human-bone chuckle, but an almost normal one.

Bill stammered. "But you are a sadist, a pervert, a beast, a creature, a thing, a murderer . . ."

"Why, thanks, Bill. That's very nice to hear. I try to do my job to the best of my abilities, but I'm human enough to enjoy a word of praise now and then. Being a murderer is hard to project, but I'm glad it got across, even to a recruit as stupid as you were."

"B-but . . . aren't you *really* a . . ."

"Easy now!" Deathwish snapped, and there was enough of the old venom and vileness to lower Bill's body temperature six degrees. Then Deathwish smiled again. "Can't blame you, son, for carrying on this way, you being kind of stupid and from a rube planet and having your education retarded by the troopers and all that. But wake up, boy! Military education is far too important a thing to be wasted by allowing amateurs to get involved. If you read some of the things in our college textbooks it would make your blood run cold, yes indeed. Do you realize that in prehistoric times the drill sergeants, or whatever it was they called them, were *real* sadists! The armed forces would let these people with no real knowledge absolutely *destroy* recruits. Let them learn to hate the service before they learned to fear it, which plays hell with discipline. And talk about wasteful! They were always marching someone to

death by accident or drowning a squad or nonsense like that. The waste alone would make you cry."

"Could I ask what you majored in in college?" Bill asked in a very tiny and humble voice.

"Military Discipline, Spirit-breaking, and Method Acting. A rough course, four years, but I graduated *sigma cum*, which is not bad for a boy from a working-class family. I've made a career of the service, and that's why I can't understand why the ungrateful bastards went and shipped me out on this crummy can!" He lifted his gold-rimmed glasses to flick away a developing tear.

"You expect gratitude from the service?" Bill asked humbly.

"No, of course not, how foolish of me. Thanks for jerking me back into line, Bill, you'll make a good trooper. All I expect is criminal indifference which I can take advantage of by working through the Old Boys Network, bribery, cutting false orders, black-marketing, and the other usual things. It's just that I *had* been doing a good job on you slobs in Camp Leon Trotsky, and the least I expected was to be left alone to keep doing it, which was pretty damn stupid of me. I had better get cracking on my transfer now." He slid to his feet and stowed the candy and gold-rimmed glasses away in a locked footlocker.

Bill, who in moments of shock found it hard to adjust instantly, was still bobbing his head and occasionally banging it with the heel of his hand. "Lucky thing," he said, "for your chosen career that you were born deformed—I mean you have such nice teeth."

"Luck nothing," Deathwish said, plucking one of his projecting tusks, "expensive as hell. Do you know what a gene-mutated, vat-grown, surgically-implanted set of two-inch tusks cost? I bet you don't know! I worked the summer vac for three years to earn enough to buy these—but I tell you they were worth it. The *image*, that's everything. I studied the old tapes of prehistoric spirit-breakers, and in their own crude way they were good. Selected by physical type and low I.Q. of course, but they knew their roles. Bulletheads, shaved clean, with scars, thick jaws, repulsive manners, hot pants, everything. I figured a small investment in the beginning would pay rich dividends in the end. And

it was a sacrifice, believe me, you won't see many implanted tusks around! For a lot of reasons. Oh, maybe they are good for eating tough meat, but what the hell else? Wait until you try kissing your first girl . . . Now, get lost, Bill, I got things to do. See you around . . ."

His last words faded in the distance, since Bill's well-conditioned reflexes had carried him down the corridor the instant he had been dismissed. When the spontaneous terror faded, he began to walk with a crafty roll, like a duck with a sprung kneecap, that he thought looked like an old space-sailor's gait. He was beginning to feel a seasoned hand and momentarily laboured under the delusion that he knew more about the troopers than they knew about him. This pathetic misconception was dispelled instantly by the speakers on the ceiling, which belched and then grated their nasal voices throughout the ship.

"Now hear this, the orders direct from the Old Man himself, Captain Zekial, that you all have been waiting to hear. We're heading into action, so we are going to have a clean buckle-down fore and aft, stow all loose gear."

A low, heartfelt groan of pain echoed from every compartment of the immense ship.

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THERE WAS PLENTY of latrine rumour and scuttlebutt about this first flight of the *Chris Keeler*, but none of it was true. The rumours were planted by undercover MPs and were valueless. About the only thing they could be sure of was that they might be going someplace because they seemed to be getting ready to go someplace. Even Tembo admitted to that as they lashed down fuses in the storeroom.

"Then again," he added, "we might be doing all this just to fool any spies into thinking we are going someplace, when really some other ships are going there."

"Where?" Bill asked irritably, tying his forefinger into a knot and removing part of the nail when he pulled it free.

"Why anyplace at all, it doesn't matter." Tembo was undisturbed by anything that did not bear on his faith. "But I do know where *you* are going, Bill."

"Where?" Eagerly. A perennial sucker for a rumour.

"Straight to hell unless you are saved."

"Not again . . ." Bill pleaded.

"Look there," Tembo said temptingly, and projected a heavenly scene with golden gates, clouds, and a soft tom-tom beat in the background.

"Knock off that salvation crap!" First Class Spleen shouted, and the scene vanished.

Something tugged slightly at Bill's stomach, but he ignored it as being just another of the symptoms sent up continually by his panic-stricken gut, which thought it was starving to death and hadn't yet realized that all its marvellous grinding and dissolving machinery had been condemned to a liquid diet. But Tembo stopped work and cocked his head to one side, then poked himself experimentally in the stomach.

"We're moving," he said positively, "and going interstellar too. They've turned on the star-drive."

"You mean we are breaking through into sub-space and will soon experience the terrible wrenching at every fibre of our being?"

"No, they don't use the old sub-space drive any more, because though a lot of ships broke through into sub-space with a fibre-wrenching jerk, none of them have yet broke back out. I read in the *Trooper's Times* where some mathematician said that there had been a slight error in the equations and that time was different in sub-space, but it was different faster not different slower, so that it will be maybe forever before those ships come out."

"Then we're going into hyper-space?"

"No such thing."

"Or we're being dissolved into our component atoms and recorded in the memory of a giant computer who thinks we are somewhere else so there we are?"

"Wow!" Tembo said, his eyebrows crawling up to his hairline. "For a Zoroastrian farm boy you have some strange ideas! Have you been smoking or drinking something I don't know about?"

"Tell me!" Bill pleaded. "If it's not one of them—what is it? We're going to have to cross interstellar space to fight the Chingers. How are we going to do it?"

"It's like this." Tembo looked around to make sure that First Class Spleen was out of sight, then put his cupped

hands together to form a ball. "You make believe that my hands are the ship, just floating in space. Then the Bloater Drive is turned on—"

"The *what?*"

"The Bloater Drive. It's called that because it bloats things up. You know, everything is made up of little bitty things called electrons, protons, neutrons, trontrons, things like that, sort of held together by a kind of binding energy. Now, if you weaken the energy that holds things together—I forgot to tell you that also they are spinning around all the time like crazy, or maybe you already knew—you weaken the energy, and because they are going around so fast all the little pieces start to move away from each other, and the weaker the energy the farther apart they move. Are you with me so far?"

"I think I am, but I'm not sure that I like it."

"Keep cool. Now—see my hands? As the energy gets weaker the ship gets bigger," he moved his hands further apart. "It gets bigger and bigger until it is as big as a planet, then as big as a sun then a whole stellar system. The Bloater Drive can make us just as big as we want to be, then it's turned the other way and we shrink back to our regular size and there we are."

"Where are we?"

"Wherever we want to be," Tembo answered patiently.

Bill turned away and industriously rubbed shine-o onto a fuse as First Class Spleen sauntered by, a suspicious glint in his eye. As soon as he had turned the corner, Bill leaned over and hissed at Tembo.

"How can we be anywhere else than where we started? Getting bigger, getting smaller doesn't get us anywhere."

"Well, they're pretty tricky with the Old Bloater Drive. The way I heard it it's like you take a rubber band and hold one end in each hand. You don't move your left hand, but you stretch the band out as far as it will go with your right hand. When you let the band shrink back again you keep your right hand steady and let go with your left. See? You never moved the rubber band, just stretched it and let it snap—but it has moved over. Like our ship is doing now. It's getting bigger, but in one direction. When the nose reaches wherever we are going the stern will be wherever

we were. Then we shrink, and bango! there we are. And you can get into heaven just that easily, my son, if only . . ."

"Preaching on government time, Tembo!" First Class Spleen howled from the other side of the fuse rack over which he was looking with a mirror tied to the end of a rod. "I'll have you polishing fuse clips for a year. You've been warned before."

They tied and polished in silence after that, until the little planet about as big as a tennis ball swam in through the bulkhead. A perfect little planet with tiny icecaps, cold fronts, cloud cover, oceans, and the works.

"What's that?" Bill yiped.

"Bad navigation," Tembo scowled. "Backlash, the ship is slipping back a little on one end instead of going all the other way. No-no! Don't touch it, it can cause accidents sometimes. That's the planet we just left, Phigerinadon II."

"My home," Bill sobbed, and felt the tears rise as the planet shrank to the size of a marble. "So long, Mom." He waved as the marble shrank to a mote, then vanished.

After this the journey was uneventful, particularly since they could not feel when they were moving, did not know when they stopped, and had no idea where they were. Though they were sure they had arrived somewhere when they were ordered to strip the lashings from the fuses. The inaction continued for three watches, and then the General Quarters alarm sounded. Bill ran with the others, happy for the first time since he had enlisted. All the sacrifices, the hardships would not be in vain. He was seeing action at last against the dirty Chingers.

They stood in first position opposite the fuse racks, eyes intent on the red bands on the fuses that were called the fusebands. Through the soles of his boots Bill could feel a faint, distant tremor in the deck.

"What's that?" he asked Tembo out of the corner of his mouth.

"Main drive, not the Bloater Drive. Atomic engines. Means we must be manoeuvring, doing something."

"But *what*?"

"Watch them fusebands!" First Class Spleen shouted.

Bill was beginning to sweat—then suddenly realized that it was becoming excruciatingly hot. Tembo, without taking

his eyes from the fuses, slipped out of his clothes and folded them neatly behind him.

"Are we allowed to do that?" Bill asked, pulling at his collar. "What's happening?"

"It's against regulations, but you have to strip or cook. Peel, son, or you will die unblessed. We must be going into action because the shields are up. Seventeen force screens, one electromagnetic screen, a double-armoured hull, and a thin layer of pseudo-living jelly that flows over and seals any openings. With all that stuff there is absolutely no energy loss from the ship, nor any way to get rid of energy. Or heat. With the engines running and everyone sweating it can get pretty hot. Even hotter when the guns fire."

The temperature stayed high, just at the boundary of tolerability for hours, while they stared at the fusebands. At one point there was a tiny plink that Bill felt through his bare feet on the hot metal rather than heard.

"And what was that?"

"Torpedoes being fired."

"At *what*?"

Tembo just shrugged in answer and never let his vigilant gaze stray from the fusebands. Bill writhed with frustration, boredom, heat rash, and fatigue for another hour, until the all clear blew and a breath of cool air came in from the ventilators. By the time he had pulled his uniform back on Tembo was gone, and he trudged wearily back to his quarters. There was a new mimeographed notice pinned to the bulletin board in the corridor and he bent to read its blurred message.

FROM: Captain Zekial
TO: All Personnel
RE: Recent engagement

On 23/11-8956 this ship did participate in the destruction by atomic torpedo of the enemy installation 17KL-345 and did in concert with the other vessels of said flotilla *Red Crutch* accomplish its mission, it is thereby hereby authorized that all personnel of this vessel shall attach an Atomic Cluster to the ribbon denoting the Active Duty

Unit Engagement Award, or however if this is their first mission of this type they will be authorized to wear the Unit Engagement Award.

NOTE: Some personnel have been observed with their Atomic Clusters inverted and this is **WRONG** and a **COURTS-MARTIAL OFFENCE** that is punishable by **DEATH**.

s e v e n

AFTER THE HEROIC razing of 17KL-345 there were weeks of training and drill to restore the battle-weary veterans to their usual fitness. But midway in these depressing months a new call sounded over the speakers, one Bill had never heard before, a clanging sound like steel bars being clashed together in a metal drum full of marbles. It meant nothing to him nor to the other new men, but it sent Tembo springing from his bunk to do a quick two-step Death Curse Dance with tom-tom accompaniment on his footlocker cover.

"Are you around the bend?" Bill asked dully from where he sprawled and read a tattered copy of *Real Ghoul Sex Fiend Shocker Comics with Built-in Sound Effects*. A ghastly moan was keening from the page he was looking at.

"Don't you know?" Tembo asked. "Don't you know! That's mail call, my boy, the grandest sound in space."

The rest of the watch was spent in hurrying up and waiting, standing in line, and all the rest. Maximum inefficiency was attached to the delivery of the mail, but finally, in spite of all barriers, the post was distributed and Bill had a precious spacial-postal from his mother. On one side of the card was a picture of the Noisome-Offal refinery just outside of his home town, and this alone was enough to raise a lump in his throat. Then, in the tiny square allowed for the message, his mother's pathetic scrawl had traced out: "Bad crop, in debt, robomule has packing glanders, hope you are the same—love, Maw." Still, it was a message from home, and he read and reread it as they stood in line for chow. Tembo, just ahead of him, also had a card, all angels and churches, just what you would expect, and Bill was shocked when he saw Tembo read the card one last time then plunge it into his cup of dinner.

"What are you doing that for?" he asked, shocked.

"What else is mail good for?" Tembo hummed, and poked the card deeper. "You just watch this now."

Before Bill's startled gaze, and right in front of his eyes, the card was starting to swell. The white surface broke off and fell away in tiny flakes while the brown insides grew and grew until they filled the cup and were an inch thick. Tembo fished the dripping slab out and took a large bite from one corner.

"Dehydrated chocolate," he said indistinctly. "Good! Try yours."

Even before he spoke Bill had pushed his card down into the liquid and was fascinatedly watching it swell. The message fell away, but instead of brown a swelling white mass became visible.

"Taffy—or bread maybe," he said, and tried not to drool.

The white mass was swelling, pushing against the sides of the cup, expanding out of the top. Bill grabbed the end and held it as it rose. Out and out it came until every drop of liquid had been absorbed and Bill held between his outstretched hands a string of fat, connected letters over two yards long. VOTE-FOR-HONEST-GEEK-THE-TROOPERS'-FRIEND they read. Bill leaned over and bit out an immense mouthful of T. He spluttered and spat the damp shards onto the deck.

"Cardboard," he said sadly. "Mother always shops for bargains. Even in dehydrated chocolate . . ." He reached for his cup for something to wash the old-newsprint taste out of his mouth, but it was empty.

Somewhere high in the seats of power, a decision was made, a problem resolved, an order issued. From small things do big things grow ; a tiny bird turd lands on a snow-covered mountain slope, rolls, collects snow, becomes bigger and bigger, gigantic and more gigantic until it is a thundering mass of snow and ice, an avalanche, a ravening mass of hurtling death that wipes out an entire village. From small beginnings . . . Who knows what the beginning was here, perhaps the Gods do, but they are laughing. Perhaps the haughty, strutting peahen wife of some High Minister saw a bauble she cherished and with shrewish, spiteful tongue exacerbated her peacock husband until, to give himself peace, he promised her the trinket, then sought the money

for its purchase. Perhaps this was a word in the Emperor's ear about a new campaign in the 77sub7th Zone, quiet now for years, a victory there—or even a draw if there were enough deaths—would mean a medal, an award, some cash. And thus did a woman's covetousness, like a tiny bird's turd, start the snowball of warfare rolling, mighty fleets gathering, ship after ship assembling, like a rock in a pool of water the ripples spread until even the lowliest were touched by its motion . . .

"We're heading for action," Tembo said as he sniffed at his cup of lunch. "They're loading up the chow with stimulants, pain depressors, saltpetre, and antibiotics."

"Is that why they keep playing the patriotic music?" Bill shouted so that he could be heard over the endless roar of bugles and drums that poured from the speakers. Tembo nodded.

"There is little time left to be saved, to assure your place in Samedi's legions—"

"Why don't you talk to Bowb Brown?" Bill screamed. "I got tom-toms coming out of my ears! Every time I look at a wall I see angels floating by on clouds. Stop bothering me! Work on Bowb—anybody who would do what he does with thoats would probably join up with your Voodoo mob in a second."

"I have talked with Brown about his soul, but the issue is still in doubt. He never answers me, so I am not sure if he has heard me or not. But you are different, my son, you show anger, which means you are showing doubt, and doubt is the first step to belief . . ."

The music cut off in mid-peal, and for three seconds there was an echoing blast of silence that abruptly terminated.

"Now hear this. Attention all hands . . . stand by . . . in a few moments we will be taking you to the flagship for a on-the-spot report from the admiral . . . stand by . . ." The voice was cut off by the sounding of General Quarters but went on again when this hideous sound had ended. ". . . and here we are on the bridge of that gigantic conquistadore of the spacelanes, the twenty-mile-long, heavily armoured, mightily gunned super battleship the *Fairy Queen* . . . the men on watch are stepping aside now, and coming

toward me in a simple uniform of spun platinum is the Grand Admiral of the Fleet, the Right Honourable Lord Archaeopteryx . . . Could you spare us a moment Your Lordship? Wonderful! The next voice you hear will be . . ."

The next voice was a burst of music while the fusemen eyed their fusebands, but the next voice after that had all the rich adenoidal tones always heard from peers of the Empire.

"Lads—we're going into action! This, the mightiest fleet the galaxy has ever seen is heading directly toward the enemy to deliver the devastating blow that may win us the war. In my operations tank before me I see a myriad pin-points of light, stretching as far as the eye can see, and each point of light—I tell you they are like holes in a blanket!—is not a ship, not a squadron—but an entire *fleet*! We are sweeping forward, closing in . . ."

The sound of tom-toms filled the air, and on the fuseband that Bill was watching appeared a matched set of golden gates, swinging open.

"Tembo!" he screamed. "Will you knock that off! I want to hear about the battle . . ."

"Canned tripe," Tembo sniffed. "Better to use the few remaining moments of this life that may remain to you to seek salvation. That's no admiral, that's a canned tape. I've heard it five times already, and they play it to build morale before what they are sure is to be a battle with heavy losses. It never *was* an admiral, it's from an old TV programme . . ."

"Yippee!" Bill shouted, and leaped forward. The fuse he was looking at crackled with a brilliant discharge around the clips, and at the same moment the fuseband charred and turned from red to black. "Unggh!" he grunted, then "Unggh! Unggh! Unggh!" in rapid succession, burning his palms on the still hot fuse, dropping it on his toe, and finally getting it into a fuseway. When he turned back Tembo had already clipped a fresh fuse into the empty clips.

"That was *my* fuse—you shouldn't have . . ." there were tears in his eyes.

"Sorry. But by the rules I must help if I am free."

"Well, at least we're in action," Bill said, back in position and trying to favour his bruised foot.

"Not in action yet, still too cold in here. And that was just a fuse breakdown, you can tell by the clip discharge, they do that sometimes when they get old."

". . . massed armadas manned by heroic troopers . . ."

"We *could* have been in combat." Bill pouted.

". . . thunder of atomic broadsides and lightning trails of hurtling torpedoes . . ."

"I think we are now. It does feel warmer, doesn't it, Bill? We had better undress; if it really is a battle we may get too busy."

"Let's go, let's go, down to the buff," First Class Spleen barked, leaping gazellelike down the rows of fuses, clad only in a pair of dirty gym socks and his tattooed-on stripes and fouled-fuse insignia of rank. There was a sudden crackling in the air, and Bill felt the clipped-short stubs of his hair stirring in his scalp.

"What's that?" he yiped.

"Secondary discharge from that bank of fuses," Tembo pointed. "It's classified as to what is happening, but I heard tell that it means one of the defence screens is under radiation attack, and as it overloads it climbs up the spectrum to green, to blue to ultraviolet until finally it goes black and the screen breaks down."

"That sounds pretty way out."

"I told you it was just a rumour. The material is classified . . ."

"THERE SHE GOES!!"

A crackling bang split the humid air of the fuse room, and a bank of fuses arced, smoked, burned black. One of them cracked in half, showering small fragments like shrapnel in every direction. The fusemen leaped, grabbed the fuses, slipped in replacements with sweating hands, barely visible to each other through the reeking layers of smoke. The fuses were driven home and there was a moment's silence, broken only by a plaintive bleating from the communications screen.

"Son of a bow!" First Class Spleen muttered, kicking a fuse out of the way and diving for the screen. His uniform jacket was hanging on a hook next to it, and he struggled

into this before banging the RECEIVE switch. He finished closing the last button just as the screen cleared. Spleen saluted, so it must have been an officer he was facing ; the screen was edge-on to Bill, so he couldn't tell, but the voice had the quacking no-chin-and-plenty-of-teeth whine that he was beginning to associate with the officer class.

"You're slow in answering, First Class Spleen—maybe Second Class Spleen would be able to answer faster?"

"Have pity, sir—I'm an old man." He dropped to his knees in a prayerful attitude which took him off the screen.

"Get up, you idiot! Have you repaired the fuses after that last overload?"

"We *replace*, sir, not *repair* . . ."

"None of your technical gibberish, you swine! A straight answer!"

"All in order, sir. Operating in the green. No complaints from anyone, your worship."

"Why are you out of uniform?"

"I am in uniform, sir," Spleen whined, moving closer to the screen so that his bare behind and shaking lower limbs could not be seen.

"Don't lie to me! There's *sweat* on your forehead. You aren't allowed to sweat in uniform. Do you see me sweating? And I have a cap on too—at the correct angle. I'll forget it this time because I have a heart of gold. Dismissed."

"Filthy bowb!" Spleen cursed at the top of his lungs, tearing the jacket from his stifling body. The temperature was over 120 and still rising. "Sweat! They have air conditioning on the bridge—and where do you think they discharge the heat? In here! YEEOW!!"

Two entire banks of fuses blew out at the same time, three of the fuses exploding like bombs. At the same moment the floor under their feet bucked hard enough to actually be felt.

"Big trouble!" Tembo shouted. "Anything that is strong enough to feel through the stasis field must be powerful enough to flatten this ship like a pancake. There go some more!" He dived for the bank and kicked a fuse clear of the clips and jammed in a replacement.

It was an inferno. Fuses were exploding like aerial bombs, sending whistling particles of ceramic death through the air. There was a lightning crackle as a board shorted to the metal floor and a hideous scream, thankfully cut short, as the sheet of lightning passed through a fuse tender's body. Greasy smoke boiled and hung in sheets, making it almost impossible to see. Bill raked the remains of a broken fuse from the darkened clips and jumped for the replacement rack. He clutched the ninety-pound fuse in his aching arms and had just turned back toward the boards, when the universe exploded . . .

All the remaining fuses seemed to have shorted at once, and the screaming bolt of crackling electricity crashed the length of the room. In its eye-piercing light and in a single, eternal moment Bill saw the flame sear through the ranks of the fuse tenders, throwing them about and incinerating them like particles of dust in an open fire. Tembo crumpled and collapsed, a mass of seared flesh ; a flying length of metal tore First Class Spleen open from neck to groin in a single hideous wound.

"Look at that vent in Spleen!" Bowb shouted, then screamed as a ball of lightning rolled over him and turned him to a blackened husk in a fraction of a second.

By chance, a mere accident, Bill was holding the solid bulk of the fuse before him when the flame struck. It washed over his left arm, which was on the outside of the fuse, and hurled its flaming weight against the thick cylinder. The force hit Bill, knocked him back toward the reserve racks of fuses, and rolled him end over end flat on the floor while the all-destroying sheet of fire crackled inches above his head. It died away as suddenly as it had come, leaving behind nothing but smoke, heat, the scorched smell of roasted flesh, destruction, and death, death, death. Bill crawled painfully for the hatchway, and nothing else moved down the blackened and twisted length of the fuse room.

The compartment below seemed just as hot, its air as bereft of nourishment for his lungs as the one he had just quitted. He crawled on, barely conscious of the fact that he moved on two lacerated knees and one bloody hand. His other arm just hung and dragged, a twisted and blackened

length of debris, and only the blessings of deep shock kept him from screaming with unbearable pain.

He crawled on, over a sill, through a passageway. The air was clearer here and much cooler: he sat up and inhaled its blessed freshness. The compartment was familiar—yet unfamiliar—he blinked at it, trying to understand why. Long and narrow, with a curved wall that had the butt ends of immense guns projecting from it. The main battery, of course, the guns Chinger spy Eager Beager had photographed. Different now, the ceiling closer to the deck, bent and dented, as if some gigantic hammer had beat on it from the outside. There was a man slumped in the gunner's seat of the nearest weapon.

"What happened?" Bill asked, dragging himself over to the man and clutching him by the shoulder. Surprisingly enough the gunner only weighed a few pounds, and he fell from the seat, light as a husk, with a shrivelled parchment face as though not a drop of liquid were left in his body.

"Dehydrator Ray," Bill grunted. "I thought they only had them on TV." The gunner's seat was padded and looked very comfortable, far more so than the warped steel deck: Bill slid into the recently vacated position and stared with unseeing eyes at the screen before him. Little moving blobs of light.

In large letters, just above the screen, was printed: GREEN LIGHTS OUR SHIPS, RED LIGHTS ENEMY. FORGETTING THIS IS A COURTS-MARTIAL OFFENCE. "I won't forget," Bill mumbled, as he started to slide sideways from the chair. To steady himself he grabbed a large handle that rose before him, and when he did a circle of light with an X in it moved on the screen. It was very interesting. He put the circle around one of the green lights, then remembered something about a courts-martial offence. He jiggled it a bit, and it moved over to a red light, with the X right over the light. There was a red button on top of the handle, and he pressed it because it looked like the kind of button that is made to be pressed. The gun next to him went *whffle* . . . in a very subdued way, and the red light went out. Not very interesting; he let go of the handle.

"Oh, but you are a fighting fool!" a voice said, and, with some effort, Bill turned his head. A man stood in the door-

way wearing a burned and tattered uniform still hung with shreds of gold braid. He weaved forward. "I saw it," he breathed. "Until my dying day I won't forget it. A fighting fool! What guts! Fearless! Forward against the enemy, no holds barred, don't give up the ship . . ."

"What the bowb you talking about?" Bill asked thickly.

"A hero!" the officer said, pounding Bill on the back ; this caused a great deal of pain and was the last straw for his conscious mind, which let go the reins of command and went away to sulk. Bill passed out.

e i g h t

"NOW WON'T YOU be a nice trooper-wooper and drink your dinner . . ."

The warm notes of the voice insinuated themselves into a singularly repulsive dream that Bill was only too glad to leave, and, with a great deal of effort, he managed to heave his eyes open. A quick bit of blinking got them into focus, and he saw before him a cup on a tray held by a white hand attached to a white arm connected to a white uniform well stuffed with female breasts. With a guttural animal growl Bill knocked the tray aside and hurled himself at the dress. He didn't make it, because his left arm was wrapped up in something and hung from wires, so that he spun around in the bed like an impaled beetle, still uttering harsh cries. The nurse shrieked and fled.

"Glad to see that you are feeling better," the doctor said, whipping him straight in the bed with a practised gesture and numbing Bill's still flailing right arm with a neat judo blow. "I'll pour you some more dinner, and you drink it right down, then we'll let your buddies in for the unveiling, they're all waiting outside."

The tingling was dying from his arm, and he could wrap his fingers about the cup now. He sipped. "What buddies? What unveiling? What's going on here?" he asked suspiciously.

Then the door was opened, and the troopers came in. Bill searched their faces, looking for buddies, but all he saw were ex-welders and strangers. Then he remembered. "Bowb Brown cooked!" he screamed. "Tembo broiled! First Class

Spleen gutted! They're all dead!" He hid under the covers and moaned horribly.

"That's no way for a hero to act," the doctor said, dragging him back onto the pillows and tucking the covers under his arms. "You're a hero, trooper, the man whose guts, ingenuity, integrity, stick-to-itiveness, fighting spirit, and deadly aim saved the ship. All the screens were down, the power room destroyed, the gunners dead, control lost, and the enemy dreadnought zeroing in for the kill when you appeared like an avenging angel, wounded and near to death, and with your last conscious effort fired the shot heard round the fleet, the single blast that disembowelled the enemy and saved our ship, the grand old lady of the fleet, *Christine Keeler*." He handed a sheet of paper to Bill. "I am of course quoting from the official report; me myself, I think it was just a lucky accident."

"You're just jealous," Bill sneered, already falling in love with his new image.

"Don't get Freudian with me!" the doctor screamed, then snuffled pitifully. "I always wanted to be a hero, but all I do is wait hand and foot on heroes. I'm taking that bandage off now."

He unclipped the wires that held up Bill's arm and began to unwind the bandages while the troopers crowded around to watch.

"How is my arm, Doc?" Bill was suddenly worried.

"Grilled like a chop. I had to cut it off."

"Then what is this?" Bill shrieked, horrified.

"Another arm that I sewed on. There were lots of them left over after the battle. The ship had over 42 per cent casualties, and I was really cutting and chopping and sewing, I tell you."

The last bandage fell away and the troopers ahhhed with delight.

"Say, that's a mighty fine arm!"

"Make it do something."

"And a damn nice seam there at the shoulder—look how neat the stitches are!"

"Plenty of muscles, too, and good and long, not like the crummy little short one he has on the other side."

"Longer and darker—that's a great skin colour!"

"It's Tembo's arm!" Bill howled. "Take it away!" He squirmed across the bed but the arm came after him. They propped him up again on the pillows.

"You're a lucky bowb, Bill, having a good arm like that. And your buddy's arm too."

"We know that he wanted you to have it."

"You'll always have something to remember him by."

It really wasn't a bad arm. Bill bent it and flexed the fingers, still looking at it suspiciously. It felt all right. He reached out with it and grabbed a trooper's arm and squeezed. He could feel the man's bones grating together while he screamed and writhed. Then Bill looked closer at the hand and began to shout curses at the doctor.

"You stupid sawbones! You thoat doctor! Some big job—this is a *right arm*!"

"So it's a right arm—so what?"

"But you cut off my *left* arm! Now I have two right arms . . ."

"Listen, there was a shortage of left arms. I'm no miracle worker. I do my best and all I get are complaints. Be happy I didn't sew on a leg." He leered evilly. "Or even better I didn't sew on a . . ."

"It's a good arm, Bill," said the trooper who was rubbing his recently crushed forearm. "And you're really lucky too. Now you can salute with either arm, no one else can do that."

"You're right," Bill said humbly. "I never thought of that. I'm really very lucky." He tried a salute with his left-right arm, and the elbow whipped up nicely and the fingertips quivered at his eyebrow. All the troopers snapped to attention and returned the salute. The door crashed open, and an officer poked his head in.

"Stand easy, men—this is just an informal visit by the Old Man."

"Captain Zekial coming here!"

"I've never seen the Old Man . . ." The troopers chippered like birds and were as nervous as virgins at a defloration ceremony. Three more officers came through the door and finally a male nurse leading a ten-year-old moron wearing a bib and a captain's uniform.

"Uhh . . . hi ya fellows . . ." the captain said.

"The captain wishes to pay his respects to you all," the first lieutenant said crisply.

"Is dat da guy in da bed . . . ?"

"And particularly wishes to pay his personal respects to the hero of the hour."

"... Dere was sometin' else but I forgot . . ."

"And he furthermore wishes to inform the valiant fighter who saved our ship that he is being raised in grade to Fuse Tender First Class, which increase in rank includes an automatic re-enlistment for seven years to be added to his original enlistment, and that upon dismissal from the hospital he is to go by first available transportation to the Imperial Planet of Helior, there to receive the hero's award of the Purple Dart with Coalsack Nebula Cluster from the Emperor's own hand."

"... I think I gotta go to da bathroom . . ."

"But now the exigencies of command recall him to the bridge, and he wishes you all an affectionate farewell."

Bill saluted with both arms, and the troopers stood at attention until the captain and his officers had gone, then the doctor dismissed the troopers as well.

"Isn't the Old Man a little young for his post?" Bill asked.

"Not as young as some," the doctor scratched through his hypodermic needles looking for a particularly dull one for an injection. "You have to remember that all captains have to be of the nobility and even a large nobility gets stretched damn thin over a galactic empire. We take what we can get." He found a crooked needle and clipped it to the cylinder.

"Affirm, so he's young, but isn't he also a little stupid for the job?"

"Watch that lese-majesty stuff, bowb! You get an empire that's a couple of thousand years old, and you get a nobility that keeps inbreeding, and you get some of the crunched genes and defective recessives coming out and you got a group of people that are a little more exotic than most nut houses. There's nothing wrong with the Old Man that a new I.Q. wouldn't cure! You should have seen the captain of the last ship I was on . . ." he shuddered and jabbed the needle viciously into Bill's flesh. Bill screamed,

then gloomily watched the blood drip from the hole after the hypodermic had been withdrawn.

The door closed, and Bill was alone, looking at the blank wall and his future. He was a Fuse Tender First Class, and that was nice. But the compulsory re-enlistment for seven years was not so nice. His spirits dropped. He wished he could talk to some of his old buddies, then remembered that they were all dead, and his spirits dropped even further. He tried to cheer himself up but could think of nothing to be cheery about until he discovered that he could shake hands with himself. This made him feel a little bit better.

He lay back on the pillows and shook hands with himself until he fell asleep.

Next month Bill goes to Helior to collect his medal. Ever stopped to think what it would really be like to live in a planet-sized city? Bill finds out.

BRIAN W. ALDISS is to be Guest of Honour at the 23rd World Science Fiction Convention. To celebrate this event our next issue (154) will be a special Brian Aldiss appreciation issue with articles on Mr Aldiss by **EDMUND CRISPIN** and **PETER WHITE**, plus two new stories by Mr Aldiss. This issue will also include stories by Robert Silverberg, James Colvin and David Masson.

BRIAN ALDISS

says of this story—"If people can write stories strictly according to Einstein or Korzybski, I thought I'd have a shot at doing a Jung . . ." We think he's succeeded excellently.

THE SOURCE

ONLY TWO OF the detachment of Seekers left the human settlement and set off across the desert in the direction they had been advised to take. They were the leader of the whole expedition, Kervis XI, and his year-wife, Ysis, who sat beside him in the front of the crawler.

In the sand about them lay memorials of old time. Occasionally they passed a cultivated patch of ground, where men and women stood silent in ragged grandeur to watch them go by, framed perhaps in the entrance of a glass-less block of flats or an old railway-station.

Kervis said, "I don't understand it. I only hope this place Ani-mykey will offer a clue to where we can find mankind's greatest achievement, as the settlement promised it would."

Ysis regarded the sessions in the settlement as great nonsense. She said quietly, "You have made a mistake, Kervis, haven't you?"

He did not reply. His flow of thought had become confused over the last months as they spiralled through the unending light years towards Earth, and the confusion had increased since they landed. He had been a hard and crystal-clear man. As he grew woollier, Ysis became more indifferent to him and the crew of the Seeker ship more restless. Unhappy though he was, he welcomed the confusion in a curious way.

"This is Earth, *the* Earth," he said.

"It's primitive, more primitive than I could have imagined."

"That's right," he said eagerly. "It is, isn't it?"

"You can see it is," she said contemptuously. "It's a disgusting planet. You can't tell me this is what we are looking for."

"I don't find it disgusting," he said quietly.

"Stop being so simple, Kervis. From Andromeda to here, we have travelled through stupendous civilizations far more glorious than anything in our own remote galaxy. So wonderful is it, it seems as if science can have no end and man's achievements no limit. Yet we never found what we were searching for—"

"We were looking in the wrong place."

"No, no, it was there on Playder, on Doruchak, Millibine, on any one of a million planets encrusted with the tall towers of man's faith. But you did not stay to look. So you are a—well, I won't say you are a failure, because I believe a man to be a failure only when he pronounces himself one, but you have failed in your main Life Objective: to lead us instinctively to the peak of man's greatness."

He said gently, "Ysis, you speak above yourself. Do not forget I was trained on Ravensour itself for a hundred years to be a Seeker, and the instilled instinct of which you speak is still with me and my Life Objective is still untarnished. Accordingly, I have led the Seekers to Earth, which may have been the cradle of mankind, and you must hold your tongue."

"The cradle of mankind! Who needs to go back to the cradle?"

Kervis made no answer. He was tired, divided against himself. He acknowledged much of what Ysis said; yet there seemed nothing to do but press on with his investigation.

They had arrived at the settlement to experience only crushing disappointment. All the cities of Earth stood in ruins or sprawled into dust; only in the settlements was there a fair degree of order. But it was immediately obvious to them that political and governmental organisations, without which great civilizations cannot survive, were entirely lacking. The buildings were low and modest, hugging the ground with broad eaves; within, men and women could be seen going naked, though outside they wore casual clothing.

Kervis was immensely disturbed to find what he had been taught to regard as only semi-aware behaviour. The people were singing and making music with punctured wooden

pipes ; they danced together in the evenings in intricate patterns, round stinking wood fires. Even worse, they let their children run free and play with various species of animal which were allowed to foul where they would, and go into the dwellings. Throughout the rest of this galaxy, all this was unheard of. It seemed indeed that Earth was an unlikely place on which to go looking for man's greatest achievement.

Yet it must be said that the people in the settlement had some virtue. They listened quietly enough while the Seekers told them of the wonders of the universe, of the treatments that could make them purely rational creatures, or extend their lifespans for thousands of years, or transfer their intelligences to other minds. And they seemed willing enough to divulge their alarming habits to the recorders of the party. Among these alarming habits was religion.

It was when Ysis and the Senior Seekers found how much attention Kervis paid to the pathetic details of the local religion that they first officially voiced their impatience to him. Bandareich came before him and said ceremonially, "O Kervis XI, it was not to occupy our great minds with these trifles that we travelled these last two and a half thousand subjective years. The Machines report to us that on the last occasion when we were expunging our minds of dross, you did not undergo Ablution ; we believe that consequently your brain grows tired. We therefore ask you to undergo Ablution or not to stand at the next Election."

Bandareich's words had made it plain how seriously his leadership had slipped. Yet Kervis had not undergone Ablution. The truth was, it had been a psychic shock to him to visit the source of his race, and thus of his being. He had continued to listen to the vague rumours of the settlement's religion. He had become so interested that he had embarked on this expedition to find their place of pilgrimage, Ani-mykey. The declaration of his intentions had caused a serious split in the ranks of Senior Seekers, most of whom were for leaving Earth immediately. Under the guidance of Bandareich, they waited now in the settlement, letting Kervis go off with his year-wife in one vehicle across unknown land.

The desert outside the crawler was giving place to semi-

scrubland. He saw a small armoured creature scuttle away into thorn, but could not get a clear glimpse of it because the light was poor. In fact the light was extremely bad. Although the sun was shining, its rays seemed to be absorbed by the layers of cloud that piled up evenly from the horizon. The clouds were black and looked as if they would belch forth torrential rain at any moment. As Kervis stared up at them, he saw Ysis' face from the corner of his eye. She had withered and aged into an old crone.

The truck swerved under his shock. He swung round to see what had happened. Her face was as normal: pale, unlined, lofty of brow, thin of lip, dark of hair. She stared at him curiously.

"Kervis, are you ill?"

"I thought—I'm sorry, the light's so bad."

"Switch the searchlight on. Are you tired? Do you wish me to drive? Put it on automatic."

Muttering to himself, he switched on the searchlight. As he turned to do it, the crone was back there at the corner of his eye. This time, slowly and fearfully, he turned his head; the illusion vanished; Ysis was as usual, and looking at him in challenging and unfriendly fashion.

He shook his head and tried to concentrate on the road. From the half-seen seat next to his, the withered mummy mocked him.

Now trees were closing in on the road. In the distance, they reared against the smudgy sky where hills were. At any moment, the downpour would start, for though the sun still shone, the clouds made a sickly yellow light that seemed to baffle visibility.

The mummy said, "A suitable setting for your final hour, Kervis."

He watched it dissolve into the calm features of Ysis as he turned and asked, "What did you say?"

"I said that the sun will be set before our return. What are you so nervous about?"

"Nothing. It's curious country, don't you think?"

"It's vile country," she said contemptuously.

His hands shook on the wheel. The track was good through the forest, but it wound in baffling fashion. The trees seemed like smudges on the glass before his eyes and

he lost speed. What have I got next to me? he wondered. Has some change come over Ysis, once so loving; or is this some new thing that has taken Ysis's place; or is my mind collapsing because I have refused the Ablutions? And what do I do? How my mother, the Matriarch, would grieve to see me like this!

The mummy told him: "Incest won't help you."

Gritting his teeth, he swung round on it and demanded as it turned into Ysis, "What did you say then?"

"I said that it was as still as Hell here."

"Oh, you did, did you? And where did you find the concept of Hell?"

"You forget I had to attend those boring talks with the religious man in the settlement with you."

Had he nearly trapped her/it there? Hell: the primitive belief in a sub-world devoted to suffering; and some idea the Earthmen had that you had to go into Hell to rise a full man. Well, perhaps this forest was Hell; it was dark enough to be far underground.

"What's the matter with you, Kervis? It *is* still, isn't it? Why do you challenge every remark I make?"

Anxious, for some obscure reason, not to agree with her, he gestured at the landscape outside. "It's full of animals," he said.

As he spoke, he saw to his horror it was true. The sable trees were as blurred as a bad water-colour under the distortion of light. Among them, so that they themselves seemed to be alive, moved huge ungainly forms, more primitive than he could imagine. Try as he might, he could not get a clear glimpse of one. It seemed to him there were several varieties. He yanked the searchlight about, sending its yellow tooth biting into the foliage. The foliage heaved and glittered and kept its secrets; only an odd armoured scale or a vanishing hoof or eye could be caught.

"See those creatures?" he asked, turning to Ysis.

"They're only rodents," she said indifferently.

Struck by an idea, he turned away so that the aged crone was back beside him and said, "Would you mind repeating what you just said?"

"I said, 'You know them, don't you?'" the crone told him.

He nodded his head slowly, some of the fright leaving him. He found the crone's answer more reassuring than Ysis's evasive remark ; the crone at least faced him with the truth, awful though it was.

Kervis screwed up his eyes and pressed his forehead, wondering why he had just thought that ; for he didn't know the animals in the forest—did he? He looked again. They were still there, bigger perhaps now, for he fancied that now and again one stood on its hind legs and looked at him over the forest. He nearly drove over the tail of one, but it fortunately flicked out of the way just in time. At least he could not see anyone he knew walking in the forest, which was lucky. He had a suspicion that there might be—but that was silly, for he didn't know any Twins. At least. *Perhaps if he went back . . .*

"Why have we stopped?" Ysis asked, as his rolling eye sought her.

"It's so hot in here," he said. "Do you mind if I take my clothes off?"

Impatiently, she reached over and adjusted the air-conditioning, switching the fan on at the same time. "Are you ill? Shall I take over the driving?"

"I must keep control."

"You're losing your grip. Let me into your seat. You can rest. You're no longer responsible."

"No, no, it's important—I must steer us out of this—" And as he was talking, her fine flesh was withering and turning brown and her eyes sinking back into her skull and little blotches were rising through her flesh and her mouth altering shape, the lips turning a flecked purple, opening to reveal dusty old gums guarded by an odd broken bastion of tooth. And the old crone rocked with laughter and said—

As Ysis: "You're in too much of a state to drive. Let go!"

As Mummy: "You're too young and innocent to drive—let's go!"

She was right, though he feared her. He dived past her, opening the door as he went, and jumped down to the ground, rolling lightly over and picking himself up off his hands and knees. All round him was the barbarous and

moist dark. Though it was strange to him, he thought he recognized something, perhaps a haunting smell.

He walked swiftly along the track, which was so narrow that it could only be traversed on foot. As he went, he realised that he had been mistaken about the forest, that in fact what he had taken for conifers were gigantic ferns, their fronds rolling and uncurling as if under the pressure of accelerated growth. It was difficult to catch sight of the gorillas, although he could hear them clearly, but he was not afraid of them. His personal worry was that he should not miss sight of the mountain—the Jungfrau, was it?—that would guide him on his way.

But the thought was parent to the deed, or perhaps vice versa, for the forest of ferns was thinning, and beyond was the white-capped spire of the mountain, his landmark, shining clear in the murk. Ani-mykey must be very close.

It seemed that he had been a long while in the forest. As he stood looking ahead, a string of primitive men emerged from among the giant fronds, carrying amorphous objects; the mist prevented him seeing clearly. Ysis was among them, wearing a dress she had worn at the beginning of their association. He was glad to see that she was not entirely unfriendly to the Earth people, and he held out his arms to welcome her.

"I thought you were lost."

"I thought you were!"

He attempted to kiss her lips, but she turned in his arms and pointed ahead. "Is that where you are hoping to get?" she asked.

The ground sloped away steeply before them. In the depression, the spires of a stone building could be seen.

"That looks like Ani-mykey," he said. He took her hand and led her forward—she had lost her own volition.

They climbed down a steep hillside. At the bottom, there flowed a narrow but swift stream, with Ani-mykey standing on the further bank.

"Now we shall have to undress," Kervis said.

As they stood there, absolutely naked and hairless, he recalled how the primitive men had been covered with hair over their bodies. Ysis wanted to take her camera across, but he persuaded her to unstrap it from her wrist and leave

it on the bank. Similarly, he unstrapped the chronometer that fed him an injection against sleep every nine hours, and left it on the bank beside the microcamera. They plunged into the stream.

Fortunately, it was not deep, for neither could swim. He took her hand and led her across, the water splashing under her armpits. It was dauntingly cold; they flopped up the far bank in the mud like two sea creatures climbing from the sea.

"You'd have thought the pilgrims would have built a bridge here for their own convenience," Ysis said.

"The river may be part of the plan."

"What plan?"

"Finding whatever they seek in their religion."

"It's all nonsense to me, and I'm cold." As she spoke, she looked up at the building. The spires grew from the ground all round it, ancient and veined with moss. The great walls themselves, punctuated by windows of diamond shape, set high, were stone; and the stone was covered with obscure patterns. Kervis moved nearer to observe the pattern; any small area of it seemed to be intelligible, formed as it was from letters and leaves and the entwined bodies of man and animal; but the structure was so immense that the meaning of the overall pattern—if indeed there was a meaning—was impenetrable.

He began to stride along the walls, which proved to hold bays and towers and recesses, looking for an entrance. Ysis moved reluctantly behind him.

"Come on!" he exclaimed, generally dissatisfied with her. "Faster!"

"If you're looking for a door," she said, "you've just passed one."

He went back, amazed he could have missed it.

The entrance was set in a square tower, narrow and with a low threshold. The door was of wood, its carvings continuing the riot of carving on the stonework to either side.

Kervis exclaimed in disappointment. "This can't be the main door!"

"Why do you need the main door? Any door will do if you just want to get in. You do think a lot of yourself if you must have the main door!"

"You're mistaken. This is the main door."

"But you just said it wasn't! The whole thing's a trick, isn't it? You just want to prove that you're right."

"That's not so. I wish to better the whole human race. That's why we're here, aren't we?"

"I don't know why we're here. And I'm not coming in there with you."

"It's important that you should come in."

"I'm not coming. Sorry."

"Suit yourself. It doesn't matter to me."

"Oh? Then why did you say it was important?"

He looked at her searchingly; perhaps she had aged. "Did you ever think something might be important to *you*, Ysis?" He bowed his head, and made his way into Ani-mykey.

Inside, in the semi-dark, he tripped over a litter of stuff on the floor, and fell among it, squelching as he rolled over. His hands were sticky and slimy, and he saw the modest hall was littered with dead flowers and fruit, presumably offerings brought here by people from the settlements. As he climbed to his feet, he glimpsed robes hanging on one side, and gratefully took one to cover his nakedness. Moving carefully, he walked down the corridor ahead.

The corridor was perfectly plain and austere, only the thick gloom rendering it mysterious. It turned corners and divided more than once before he realised that he was well on the way to getting lost, and that it would be advisable to go back to the beginning if he could and start again. Then he saw something staring at him from the next corner, and dread blotted out thought.

From under lowered horns, eyes could be seen, eyes too full of evil to be other than intelligent, though the form seemed to be that of a beast. It appeared to be waiting. He seemed to discern that its eyes were four. In his ears was a roaring noise like organ music. He could only clutch his gown to him and shiver in it.

He stood there for a long time, and the thing waited patiently for him. Finally it occurred to him that it might be a statue or a model—at least not alive. Very slowly, he approached it. Very slowly, it dissolved into something else.

When he got to it at the corner, he saw that he was looking at nothing at all resembling the terrifying beast he had imagined. From here on, the corridor was elaborately decorated by carving that often stood away from the wall altogether. The horns were the end of an elephant's tusk, the eyes acorns clustered on a little bush bowing under the elephant's tread. Yet he still felt his fear as he walked along the new stretch of corridor, ducking and pushing through a forest of carving. The air was laden with ancient fears.

Whereas the carving on the stonework outside had been extremely formalised, approaching abstraction, here it was executed in the severely naturalistic vein. Fierce animals of prey raked the sides of ruminants whose wounds spurted beads of wooden blood; venomous thorn and gossamer creeper intertwined caught wooden pearls of dew between them; shy forest sprites, arrested in mid-motion, held their heads high with an inquiring eye that seemed to blink; scavenger birds leaned forward with ruffled grainy feathers.

In this unyielding forest which knew only simulated life, it was almost impossible to discover the next turn of the corridor, so prolific was the contorted wood. Kervis wished devoutly that he had brought an axe with him, or one of the weapons from the vehicle, but he was empty-handed. The noise still sounded in his ears. He thought it might be music; it was as loud and intimate as the sound of his bloodstream.

He passed the representation of a primitive being carrying a woman over her shoulder. The being was shown as almost noseless and without forehead; so bestial was its wooden glance that he shrank by it. The girl, tumbled carelessly over the brute's shoulder, had her eyes closed in a faint. Uneasily past them, he came up against a dead end. A jungle of unliving leaves and creepers united to bar his way. He stood there for a moment, looking and probing, and then was forced to return past the brute.

The girl's eyes were open.

As his own mouth hinged open in terror, so did hers, and she let out a piercing scream. Unthinking, taken over by a superior and mindless force, Kervis lashed out with all the force of his body and caught the brute between the eyes with his fist. It blinked and dropped the woman, slowly

raising its great oaken arm towards him. Ignoring the pains shooting up his arm, Kervis hit it again.

In a shower of splinters, it fell slowly forward. He ducked out of its grasp. One great paw rasped his shoulder and it hit the floor face down. Where it had stood, a new corridor lay open. Panting, sobbing with fright and hurt, Kervis jumped over the great riven body and ran down the new avenue.

Here the maze was wider and the walls free of all but the most elusive pattern. He leant against the wall, gasping the thick air into his lungs. He lifted his injured wrist and saw the dark hair growing on the backs of his fingers. Beyond surprise, he recalled only that before he had been naked ; now there was a light thatch of hair up his arms. Looking at his legs, he saw they too were not hairless as formerly. Opening the gown, his whole body was revealed, patched here and there with wiry hair in the manner of the people's bodies in the settlement.

The visibility had much improved for him to be able to glimpse such detail. Looking up, he saw that the source of illumination must indeed be bright, and was moving towards him.

By now, he took it for granted that he was in a maze. The light seemed to be several passages away ; only intuition told him it was approaching. Some of his former alarm returned, but in the main he felt only an apprehension that he might be somehow unprepared for whatever was coming next. He hurried forward down the corridor, clutching his robe about him.

At the next turn, the corridor divided. Instinctively, he took the left turn, ran through a shadowy arch, found himself in a circular chamber, to which four arches permitted entrance. Exhilaration filled him ; he knew he stood at the heart of the place.

The light was coming nearer. From the arch opposite him, a woman appeared, bearing in her hand a lamp that glowed with a living white luminance. She stopped before him and looked at him. Overcome, he went down on his knees.

Afterwards, he was unable to recall what she looked like ; he retained only the general idea that her beauty was of a

severe and yet exotic kind, and that there was a sort of seriousness about her that seemed as if it might easily melt, either into laughter or erotic welcome. Nor was their conversation any more easy to recall ; it always slipped away, though he knew it was the most momentous conversation in which he had participated.

He thought that at first she spoke about strange wild animals being wrenched from their natural habitat and being put to strange work under a yoke. He thought that he in some manner disclaimed all connection with this, and that she then produced a yoke which he did not recognize as such. Either she told him, or he gathered without being told, that a yoke might still be a yoke even when it was not recognisable. She seemed to talk of recognition, and say that millions of years might render things like yokes difficult to recognise without changing their essential natures. Someone—it was as if a third party were speaking for him at times—claimed something about essential natures: that man's essential nature was not known. But the woman knew it ; that was her function. He saw she knew it, and that she was unlike Ysis. He thought he said that he recognised her essential nature. It was enough, whatever was said, to release a great wave of loving trust between them. He thought she or he said that he had come here seeking something, and that it had been found. What happened, what was 'said' was on a plane below the vocal one ; but he understood, even when afterwards he was not sure if he did, and he had the task of interpreting the experience into words.

When she was gone, he walked dazedly through the nearest arch and out into the open air. He saw that it had rained heavily ; the air was fresh, everything gleamed. Ysis was coming towards him. He staggered forward in a faint.

That yoke had been very complex, an intricately manufactured thing, as elaborate in its own way as a city, and that he could not understand. He roused in puzzlement, to find Ysis had driven him back to the settlement. She was sitting by him, looking doubtful.

"I thought you would die."

"I'm all right."

"Bandareich is holding a meeting. I must ask you, Kervis—did you see the *thing* in the maze?"

"What thing?"

"I followed you in after a moment. I had to. But there was a hairy—a man, all hairy, with burning eyes, clad in steel. I ran away."

After a while he said, "I didn't see him." It seemed useless to pursue that subject; she was not like him. He said, heavily, "What is the meeting for?"

"They want to replace you. They say you are finished. They asked me if we found anything, and I had to say no."

"I'll speak to them." He rose. He felt curiously well. Ysis was dressed in one of her more elaborate and artificial costumes; he still had on his mud-spattered gown.

"You can't go in that," she said. "You know you'll lose your chance of winning if you appear like that. You look like an Earthman."

He took her face between his hands. "Do you love me, Ysis?"

"Darling, you know our year is nearly up, do try and be rational."

"Ha!" He pulled the gown round him and strode out into the open.

Bandareich and five of the Senior Seekers were approaching, their faces telling him much that he had guessed.

They raised hands to him in the traditional greeting, and Bandareich said, "Kervis XI, we come to you after a meeting convened according to the articles of Seeking, tabled—"

"Thank you, Bandareich, I'm satisfied it was all legal. I take it I've offended?"

"You know how you have offended, not only by refusing to undergo Ablution, but by leaving the vehicle of which you had command and by—"

"I have offended in more ways than you can know, Seniors, so spare me an incomplete list. If you wish to replace me, I am entirely willing to be replaced."

Ysis had come up beside him. She said, "Defend yourself! Your record was blameless until we reached Earth."

"Quiet, woman!" Bandareich exclaimed. But one of his companions, Wolvorta IV, said, "She has reason on her side. Kervis, have you anything to say in your defence? Did you find on your excursion any artifact or object that might be ranked among man's greatest achievements?"

"Nothing you would recognise as such," Kervis said.

The group of Seekers conferred among themselves. A crowd of Earthmen had come up and stood at a distance in easy attitudes, watching with an amount of leisurely interest.

Bandareich broke from the group and said, "Kervis XI, regretfully we must ask for your resignation as leader. You will be returned to home galaxy as soon as possible."

He looked down at his feet in the dusty ground. The blow was none the less heavy for being expected, even wanted ; no Kervis before him had suffered such disgrace—but the disgrace was imposed by them and no real part of him.

Looking across at his erstwhile companions, he said, "I offer you my resignation."

"Accepted," they said in unison. Bandareich snapped his fingers. "Then we will leave Earth immediately ; this idle mission has wasted enough time." As he spoke, he thumbed the button set in his metal lapel, and a ghostly cage descended from the sky and materialised before them. A door swung open. They began to move towards it. More cages were descending for men and vehicles, to carry them up to the great celestial city orbiting above the planet.

"Come along, Kervis," Bandareich called. "We can't leave you behind."

He said: "I'm staying behind."

Ysis wept, clung to him in unexpected pain, finally ran to the cage as its door was closing. They made one last gesture to him, he shook his head. He stood alone, the Earthmen coming slowly up to him. The cage door closed ; they were impatient to be off, seeking again man's greatest achievement. The cage vanished.

He stared upwards into the clear sky, wetting his lips, wondering what would become of them all. He sighed. "You idiots, you won't see that you have your hands on it as surely as I do! The greatest human achievement is to fulfil one's destiny."

He turned to the ragged Earthmen, nearer now, playing their simple pipes.

George Collyn AND WORLDS RENEWED

COMMISSION

THE TWO MEN could not have been more different.

There was Junter Firmole—rock-hard, ruthless, intolerant, ambitious, homicidal and leading entrepreneur in an era of cut-throat trade. Perhaps to his grandchildren he would appear as white-haired, lovable and gentle. To the peoples of Humankind he was an ogre with which to frighten naughty children; a man of blood who drank his wine from a human skull.

Then there was Nefo Setiri, environmental artist—an absent-minded and obsessed visionary with as much financial acumen as a two-week-old child. Twenty years would pass before he would reach his creative peak in the formulation of the Pleasure Worlds of Ilgadin with Hi Li City—his masterpiece—at their spangled heart. At the time of which I speak he had attempted nothing greater than continental construction—the remodelling of Antarctica was his graduation test-piece at the Slade. Nor, at that time, did he seem destined for greatness, since the range of his creative imagination was so undisciplined that those patrons who had planetary commissions in their gift fought shy of his genius.

Yeman Sorl, dictator of Tramothe and first prospective patron, laughed in Setiri's face where he would have crawled on his belly to Firmole, and the elaborate blue-prints for the remodelling of the Tramothe worlds hit the dictatorial cigars for a twelve-month.

At that time the concession for the carriage of freight between the worlds of Tramothe and the Sirius sector was in dispute between Firmole Freight and Pedersen Packaging. In theory the two companies operated a joint service in full amicable co-operation, until such time as their cases

were reviewed and the contract assigned by the Commercial Bureau of the Space Administration Agency of Terra. In practice both Junter Firmole and Gud Pedersen used piracy, hi-jacking, price-cutting, sabotage or any other device—legal, illegal or semi-legal—which might contrive to put the other out of business for ever.

Three days out of Tramothe the Pedersen Line cargo-liner *S.S. Nibelung*, bound for New Earth (Centauri), wallowed in true space between hyper-leaps. Before the F-M Drive was fully reactivated the ship was accosted by a sleek space-frigate in an anonymous livery of black. Nuclear fire flickered in the void between the two vessels, the control sphere of the Pedersen ship was cut away from the main stem and a party of armed men was aboard before a finger was raised in alarm. The cargo, comprising three gross of Vegan rabbits, worth an average two thousand dollsters a pelt, was hastily removed—to reappear some six months later as a fully-accounted-for cargo aboard a Firmole vessel. Then the five passengers were taken aboard the frigate for ransom negotiations—that normal hazard of space travel in those barbarous days—to begin.

Four of those passengers, Centauran businessmen whose hose-clad knees played a wild flamenco of terrified knocking, gave generously at the Captain's request to The Inter-galactic Clothe the Naked Fund. With this money the Fund Headquarters on Deneb X purchased clothing from Junter Textiles Inc., which clothing was transferred to the poor of the peripheral worlds on board the vessels of Firmole Freight. Thus (by pure chance of course) all the money donated (legally and gratuitously) by the ransomed found its way into the coffers of Firmole companies—all that is bar an administrative fee paid to Junter Firmole, chairman of the Fund.

The fifth passenger was a skeleton-thin young man with burning eyes, clad in the trousers and tunic and with the long hair of the Terran-born. To him the captain . . .

(i) Apologised once more for the unfortunate accident which had led to the activation of his armaments when in the vicinity of another vessel.

(ii) Assured him that he would be safely conveyed to his destination aboard the frigate.

(iii) Explained that while the firm he worked for would not dream of demanding money of a distressed traveller he would appreciate it very much if, in token of his gratitude, the young man could see his way to contributing generously to his (the captain's) favourite charity.

All this was done on the very friendliest of terms with not the veiled hint of a threat.

The young man—Setiri—was forced to explain that he would be delighted to contribute but unfortunately he did not have a penny to his name. The captain was angered by this and pointed out that anyone who could afford the exorbitant fares demanded by the Pedersen company could well afford a small sum for charity. To which the unhappy Setiri replied that he had journeyed to Tramothe at the expense of the ruler of that world but, such had been the reception accorded him by Dictator Sorl, that he was obliged to commit himself for every asset he possessed in order to obtain a passage to a destination so near to Terra as New Earth.

The captain's first impulse was to consign Setiri to the waste-disposal chute. But the motto of the Firmole companies, which is blazoned in thousand-foot letters over every branch office, rose before his eyes ; and that motto is "We Deal In Anything". Rather than waste any potential asset he ordered the young man to Rigel XXII as slave-labour for Junter Firmole's reconstruction scheme for that planet.

These two men—the entrepreneur and the artist—were fated to mingle their destinies.

The treatment meted out to the slaves on Rigel XXII was atrocious. Setiri was bound by chains—his left foot to the man in front, the right to the man behind ; he was whipped thrice daily—more often than he was fed ; and from dawn to dusk he wielded a laser-pick with as end-task the demolition of a mountain. It therefore says much for Setiri's dedication to his art that, despite this, he became intellectually involved in his work.

Setiri found that the discomforts of his condition paled into insignificance beside the utter distaste he felt for the artistic crime being inflicted on Rigel XXII by the man

who had supposedly designed the reconstruction plan. The artistic mode which then prevailed demanded the use of manual labour in order, so the theory stated, that the artist should have absolute and continued control over the smallest factor in the execution of his design. The revolution Setiri was about to unleash on the world of art swept all that aside.

"These men," he was to say in later years, "who progress in their design square foot by square foot are like hens pecking at the farmyard, never seeing more of the world than a few inches of dust. A planet is a massive object and for one's work to remain in scale it requires massive works to be wrought on its substance. These peckers may change the surface of the planet but they leave the essence unaltered. When I reconstruct a planet I do not want a mere change of outer garment, I want a world whose fabric is renewed to the very core. That is why I prefer the use of explosives to any other medium. To see the detonations throwing the pay-dirt of the planet into raw chrysanthemum blooms of primordial matter, then I see the true chaos out of which alone creation can come."

But when Setiri clanked his working days away in chain gang number eight it was before he had found any verbal framework for his artistic vision and he merely raved inwardly and incoherently at the work he had to do. Setiri's fellow-workers cursed their chains, the warders, the food, the whippings, the living-quarters. Setiri was oblivious to that. Instead his face creased into lines of distaste at being forced to partake in the sterile creation of an artistic abortion.

Junter Firmole of course knew nothing about art. He kept his love for power and his creative ability for the making of money. He did however recognise that art patronage was expected of a man of his status and, since certain artists were widely acclaimed as the best, these he patronised—since he always bought nothing but the best. He personally could have lived quite cheerfully on the stark, rock-strewn, mountain-rearing, glacier-poled, inhospitable hunk of matter that was the natural Rigel XXII. But it was the current fashion that a planet must be

scientifically and artistically remodelled and it would not do for a leader of society to be behindhand in the current fad. The commission he had given to Amortiyado Moote F.I.A.T.C., who, years before, had created a sensation with his *New Earth à la mode des Jardins de Versailles* and had been turning out cheap replicas ever since, to the constant applause of the critical fraternity.

Junter Firmole did not know or wish to know the technical details involved. He was content that he would eventually live in a setting which culture-veneered visitors would admire. He wanted no more than to be complimented on his good taste and artistic discernment. In the meantime he felt it was his duty to himself to constantly supervise the work in hand.

Once a week, preceded by lackeys and followed by idle flatterers, attended by the artist-designer, Firmole was borne on a litter to each of the twelve sites of activity in turn, in order to inspect the chain-gangs at work. It was naturally expected that the men, far from feeling oppressed by their work, would be grateful for the honour bestowed upon them in being permitted to work for the greater comfort and glory of Firmole. Therefore whip-armed guards went before the party of inspection to ensure that for the duration of his visit the team in question would smile and sing and joke to show their appreciation of their benefactor's condescension. On the first of the visits after his arrival Setiri managed to laugh and smile with the rest—during the second he did not.

The mountain on which they were working was a magnificent block of archaic schist, strong-ribbed and solid-cored. As an isolated block it was the epitome of strength and endurance. Setiri had a vision of Rigel XXII as an essay in contrasted strength and meekness. In that plan the mountain he was forced to destroy in order to obtain Moote's drab conception was an essential pivot for the strength motif. In face of this desecration Setiri's face set in lines of disapproval and no amount of whipping could stop his sulking. The captain of the guards wanted him shot and the body disposed of before Firmole could see the discontent in his gang, but the litter hove into view before the plan could be put into operation.

The sulking man stood out from among his smiling fellows like a thundercloud in a blue sky. Firmole could not fail to notice him, and he did not.

"Bring that man to me," he yelled and Setiri was hastily unchained from the gang and half-dragged to stand before him.

"Do you know who I am?" thundered Firmole ; to which the artist replied with a quiet and uninterested, "No."

The matter-of-fact answer deflated Firmole before he had even begun to express himself. He had had a hundred different denunciations hovering on his tongue for use if Setiri had said yes. The use of the negative robbed him of anything purposeful to say. So he said.

"Why do you look so resentful? Don't you find the work interesting?"

"Interesting?" said Setiri, "Hack-work like this?"

"Hack-work?" screamed the entrepreneur.

"Yes; hack-work. Working out a plan designed by a man of as much freedom of expression as I have freedom of movement," and he pointed to the leg-chains held by the guard.

"Let me tell you," with ice in his voice and pointing to the flushing Moote at his side, "this plan was designed by a Fellow of the Imperial Academy of Tau Ceti."

"That may be so, but I repeat. Anyone who can smother the latent form of a planet with a superimposed and stereotyped image is no more than a hack."

It was five years, two months and two days since anyone had dared argue with Junter Firmole. Usually only an equal in status would dare to do so and with competition being as cut-throat as it was, the mortality rate of the trading clans made equals hard to find. None as humble as Setiri had ever even contemplated such an act. Nor when involved in an argument was Firmole accustomed to a discussion with a person whose values were so different from his own.

Which was a pity because there was nothing Firmole liked more than a good, slanging, stand-up row. A gesture produced a stool for him to sit on, another summoned refreshments and, there on the rough-hewn hillside, the trader and the artist sat and talked at one another from three in

the afternoon to ten, which was mid (Rigel) night. At the end of that time neither was convinced by the other, but Setiri was still unabashed at his temerity and Firmole was overcome by the young man's audacity. Nettled, he challenged Setiri to see if he could do better; Moote was dismissed and Setiri commissioned to the task.

PREPARING THE CANVAS

NEFO SETIRI PRESENTED a list of equipment required to replace the tools he had had to sacrifice on Tramothe to gain the price of his homeward passage. He wanted . . .

. . . Eight orbital weather-control satellites; two thousand megatons of high explosive; fifty-eight plane loads of dry ice; one hundred and thirty-five humidity-control stations; forty-four thousand miles of two-foot diameter lead pipe; plants and seedlings to specification—1 cont¹. measure each of tropical forest, prairie and everglade swamp—from the Intergalactic Research Botanical Station of Mars; fifteen nuclear pseudo-solar generators; plus all the orthodox tools of environmental reconstruction . . .

. . . These he obtained. Then he sat for twenty-eight revolutions of Rigel XXII, from an orbital station surveying in rapt contemplation the near-virgin planet while he ordered that . . .

. . . All living creatures should be removed from the planetary surface; all water and moisture should be directed to reservoirs and there contained until required; all vegetation should be burnt, uprooted or otherwise disposed of.

The sheet was blank and time for him to make his first mark.

BLOCKING IN

SETIRI INTENDED A work in three textures—climate, vegetation and physical configuration. The finished work to be a range of intensity across a spectrum from limpid water-soft to sun-baked hard.

In climate the planet would shade from insufferably hot at the equator to temperately cool at the poles; with no precipitation at the former but perpetual rain at the latter.

The poles would be seas of permanent water with no

island or peninsula to impinge upon their liquidity. At 10° latitude this would shade into a sheer insubstantiality of marshlands, a morass that would spread across thirty degrees of latitude. This would then give way slowly to two belts, each of twenty degrees; the first of tropical rain forest, the second of prairie grasslands. The central belt, stretching ten degrees north and south of the equator would be raw ochrous desert and each hemisphere would mirror the other.

The seas would necessarily be flat; the swamps interspersed by isolated hillocks; the forest clothing square-cut plateaux; the prairies, rolling hills of grass; but the desert would be a region of soaring mountains and plummeting canyons—a wasteland in all three levels.

The explosives roared, the old forests burned, the weather satellites alternately scorched and deluged, the pseudo-suns boosted the temperature of arctic regions, pipes bore water north and south from the regions planned as desert, mile-wide and two-mile-long bulldozers flattened some mountains and raised others to greater prominence.

DETAIL

THE ZONES NEXT the polar seas were the areas on which Nefo Setiri lavished the greatest attention as being his chief contrast to the stark sterility of the equatorial desert. The mountains that lay in these zones were whittled away into spires of rock with the texture of sponges. Slender puy's they were, riddled with a honeycomb of caves and tunnels, and rearing out of the mists and waters to a height of two thousand metres. At their feet land and water mingled indistinguishably. Wisps of grey and blue mist, shot with gold by the sun, blurred the lines of all material objects so that the whole region had as much substance as a dream. Regenerators pumped out carbon dioxide to heighten the hot-house effect and strange marsh flowers burst out in a carboniferous riot of primitive colour.

The centaurs of Procyon VI, half-simian, half-equine; the six-footed zebras of Tenebrae; the lion-headed wyvern of Deneb XII; the minute but elephantine Thors, odd denizens of Capella; and the duck-billed platypi of Terra.

These were the myth-like creatures that were imported by Setiri to inhabit his dream planetscape.

Firmole's palace stood between two needle-sharp peaks which bulked like guards of honour, and was itself a mountain, hollowed through, heated, watered, cooled, drained, powered and illuminated. It was massive, impressive and impregnable.

The planet was a world of hard and soft, harsh and gentle, wet and dry, high and low, open and confined and as a final surprise for the patron it contained one last secret in its make-up.

PRIVATE VIEW

WHEN JUNTER FIRMOLE first found out that Setiri would not allow him to oversee the work in hand it was as well that the artist was completely inaccessible save by viziphone because it was probable that the entrepreneur would have strangled the young man with his own bare hands. As it was he had to be informed that during reconstruction the planet was surrounded by an impermeable force-shield before he could be dissuaded from throwing against Setiri every armed ship in his fleet. Firmole's face took on an apoplectic purple, his eyes rolled in their sockets and for twelve hours continuously he blasted Setiri by means of the viziphone.

But Setiri's artistic daemon had made him invective-proof. He seemed to listen to Firmole but in fact he was involved in other thoughts and at the end of twelve hours he merely murmured something to the purpose that he could not work in front of an audience. Then, with Firmole still in full spate, he idly put up his hand and cut communication.

It was a month after his commission. Firmole's orders had gone out and Setiri had all the equipment and money he required. A vast expenditure on Firmole's part had descended to the surface of Rigel XXII and was now put beyond hope of repossession by the cordon sanitaire of the force-field. He was left to rage impotently above the planetary surface. For the moment, until Setiri should be accessible to vengeance, he turned to other things—to rail-roading the Tramoth contract through the SAA courts; to

three massive space-battles with the ships of Cunard ; to making a profit of eight million dollsters from a highly dubious deal in lys perfume—but while his mind was involved elsewhere his spies were not neglectful of the Setiri affair.

Disguised as a satellite service engineer, Dar Hekel of the Firmole Security Service bluffed his way down to the surface of Rigel XXII and one dark night rifled the contents of Setiri's private office. In dark secrecy he microfilmed the reams of blueprints he found amid the confused mass of personal possessions, restored from the pawnshops of the inhabited galaxy by Firmole gold. The results of his spying he carried back and gained much honour for the relief he gave to the mind of Firmole.

The plans photographed by Hekel were for a planet recast in the orthodox mould but executed with a breadth of imagination which enabled even the untrained eye to see that they were far superior to any concept envisaged by Moote. How were Firmole or Hekel to know that Setiri carried his current plans always on his person and the welter of papers in his office was a second-year student exercise kept as a souvenir of his days at the Slade—a copy and variations of a theme by Derwent ap Tapir?

So Firmole was happy and for nearly a year boasted of the spectacular new home-planet he was to obtain. In that spirit the invitations to the private view were sent out and in that spirit the acceptance by the chief luminaries of the trading claims were received.

The private views had come to follow a stereotyped pattern. Ever since, two centuries before, it had become the fashion to remodel the worlds on which Humankind must live, the art of so doing had grown and, like all arts, had been fitted into the prestige-seeking structure of the ruling class. The menfolk of the trading families patronised environmental artists like their wives consulted interior decorators and as in the case of their wives, the whole exercise became valueless if the masterpiece was not offered to the gaze of their friends and competitors, to impress them with the patron's artistic taste and ability to throw

money to the wind. These sessions became obligatory festivities which the members of the clans attended to grab as much as they could of an often hated rival's free food and drink, to stare at the repetitively similar planetscapes and afterwards to insult their host and his planet within the cat-sneering coterie of their own particular cronies.

The very cream of Trading Society attended the unveiling of Rigel XXII. The reception was held on an old Firmole freighter which, with its metal hull replaced by observation screens, had been placed in an elliptical orbit around the planet. North and south over the poles the orbit swept the ship close in to a height where the observers could pick out the close detail, and then swept them out into space again for an overall impression of the other half of the globe.

One by one the private yachts matched orbits with the observation ship and the representatives of the families came aboard, the men each harder and more ruthless than the one before, the women each wearing a dress a little more daring than the one preceding. Last of all came their host, Junter Firmole, accompanied by his daughter Sueran, come for their first look at the planet. Nefo Setiri stood silent to regard the finished design and said not a word to them, nor did they at first speak. While they waited for their host the early arrivals stared in uncomprehending horror at the world below them and isolated fragments of conversation illuminated their lack of understanding.

Yet no one wanted to be first to voice his criticism in case he should thus betray his artistic ignorance. All waited to follow the lead of their host who, as richest and most powerful of them all, was thereby the arbiter of taste.

As he entered therefore all eyes sought out Firmole's face where his emotions were all too obviously displayed. One pair of eyes—the eyes of Setiri—soon switched however and rooted on the daughter. A tulip-shaped bodice blue-belled up to cup snow-white breasts and shoulders which rose with the grace of marble to support a strong-pillared throat and neck of alabaster beauty ; unkempt hair of glossy blue-black framed a face of blue-veined delicacy in which large eyes darkly burnt with the intensity of liquid coal ; azure cullottes sheathed legs with the length and grace

of a young filly. In Setiri's mind there rose a vision of a world modelled on Sueran's beauty and he was in the grip of a love that was to last until the towers of Hi Li City perpetuated in marble that fleeting moment when Sueran Firmole led her father to the observation gallery.

The father's face purpled in the flush of fierce emotion as the ship raced over the deserts and forests and seas that Rigel XXII had become. As the ship topped the pole and headed out into space it seemed as if the flow of denunciation was about to start, but the clear contralto of Sueran's voice cut across the tension.

"Magnificent," she breathed in almost girlish enthusiasm, "It is absolutely magnificent." And in an impetuous gesture she linked her arm through Setiri's, committing him to hopeless love with the touch and adding her support to his stand. Her father was left with his mouth open and angry words trembling on the leash in his throat. Setiri was not yet safe and the assembled company waited for this impudent young artist to be blasted to the nothing he was. Then the surprise Setiri had prepared swept the tension into oblivion. From where they were poised high above the equatorial desert they could see the dawn-line racing toward them as Rigel-sol vaulted over the horizon. The moment was gone almost before they realised what they had seen but at that angle, with the rays of the sun almost horizontal on the planet's surface, the shadows deep-thrown by mountains and chasms resolved for a second into a configuration that was a two hundred square mile representation of Firmole's face. The promise was implied that, as long as Rigel should shine, Firmole's portrait would be etched onto the substance of the galaxy once every twenty hours.

A reluctant laugh was torn from the trader's throat. "Yes," he said, "truly magnificent." In a rare gesture of friendliness he placed his arms round the shoulders of Setiri and his daughter. As suddenly the guests also found the view equally magnificent and Setiri was overwhelmed by congratulations and back-slappings.

A new era in artistic expression was about to begin.

W. T. Webb

THE PULSE OF TIME

AFTER A BUSY day at the clinic Dr. Humbolt was tired but contented. Drawn blinds shut out the evening dark. His cheerful study fire combined with the central heating to negate any suggestion of the chill September weather. Following a tasty meal, his pipe felt good in his mouth. His thoughts drifted as vaguely as the layers of tobacco-smoke which hovered wraith-like in the still air of the room. Later he would do a little work on his paper "Gerontology and the Heart." But for the moment he was content to digest his dinner and dream about the long holiday he would spend among the ruins of Babylon or somewhere—if only he could afford it.

When the front door bell rang he paid it little attention. Gone were the days when he was at *anybody's* beck and call. Clinical routine had its set-backs. But it meant he could work reasonably regular hours, and once finished for the day he was rarely disturbed. And this, of course, carried the great advantage of leaving his evenings free for study and writing.

So that when Mrs. Maisey announced he had a caller seeking a consultation, he was surprised and a little annoyed.

"It's a Mr. Gee," she said excitedly. "He's got a whacking great car outside, more like a hearse than a private motor."

Mrs. Maisey had a tendency to judge people by their cars, he reflected. And she often extolled the virtues of her nephew's Jaguar mark something or other, to the detriment of his own modest Austin.

"Ask him to come in, please, Mrs. Maisey!"

Mr. Gee could have been any age from thirty to fifty. He was tallish, slim and fastidiously neat. His fingers, Humbolt noticed as they shook hands, were soft and well-kept—almost ladylike. His hair was either silver-grey or very blond. The complexion of his long, thin face was shiny and

smooth as a cherub's. Immaculate cuffs, gold cuff-links and wristwatch, and a discreetly expensive suit, spoke of some affluence. And he gave the impression of having a super-normal self-control that no emotion would ever ruffle.

"Dr. Humbolt," he said. "I have a very unusual proposition to make to you."

And Humbolt found himself strangely alert. His drowsiness of a short time ago had vanished as if an alarm-clock had roused him ; and he felt his own heart beating in a way that would worry many of his patients.

"Well," he said quietly. "I am listening."

"First," said Gee. "I would like your assurance that what I say will be treated as confidential."

"Very well."

Humbolt wondered what was coming next. He had a strong premonition that something remarkable was afoot and he wondered whether to accept the challenge or evade it.

And then Gee, moving with remarkable agility, turned suddenly and snatched open the study door to reveal the astonished housekeeper leaning behind it in the unmistakable attitude of an eavesdropper.

"That will be all for this evening, thank you, Mrs. Maisey," Humbolt said placatingly.

The housekeeper gave the visitor a look of outraged dignity and without a word swung round and walked away towards her own quarters. When she had gone, Gee closed the door again.

"I'm sorry about that, Dr. Humbolt," he said calmly. "But our dealings must be confidential."

"Well, you've nothing to worry about now. I don't think my housekeeper will give us any more trouble. And there is no one else in the house save you and me. Now what do you want, Mr. Gee?"

"I should like you to come with me tonight, to give a consultation."

Humbolt was intrigued. The job, he felt in his bones, would be no ordinary one. And the lust for adventure that bandied his daydreams to ancient Babylon, spurred him to accept it. But something warned him to be very wary. He

was no longer a hair-brained student but a key specialist with a reputation.

"I give consultations daily at the clinic attached to the Central Hospital," he said prosaically. "Perhaps you would care to attend . . ."

"I am not here on my own behalf," Gee said. "But on that of my employer, who is a very old man and never leaves the house."

"Then perhaps you will give me his name and address."

Gee smiled inscrutably.

"As a very old man, my employer sometimes has unusual ways of going about things. And I try as far as possible to do as he wishes. In this case he wishes the consultation to be entirely secret. Furthermore, strange as it may seem, he wishes to be referred to, throughout, as Mr. X. And, if you are agreeable, I am to take you direct to him this evening, by car."

Humbolt closed his eyes for a moment in a futile effort to think clearly. But his thoughts, which a few moments ago, seemed entirely under control, now slipped and slithered chaotically like drunken skaters in a darkened rink.

"I don't understand," he said helplessly. "If you have this patient, as you say, why can't he be visited in the normal way, like all my other patients? Why all this cloak and dagger business?"

Gee was unruffled by Humbolt's raised voice.

"Although my employer wishes to consult you it is not necessarily about himself. And he is prepared to pay you one thousand pounds for your visit, provided complete secrecy is assured."

"If you can imagine I can be bribed to perform an illegal operation," Humbolt replied furiously. "You are mistaken."

"Mr. X wishes to consult you as a heart specialist," Gee assured him. "He has asked for you personally because he has read of your work in *Lancet* and believes you to be the right man for the job. Am I to tell him you decline to come?"

Humbolt glanced at the clock.

"Give me ten minutes," he said, suddenly feeling ten years younger.

The car, a luxurious Rolls Royce, was driven by a uniformed chauffeur. Gee ushered Humbolt into the rear seat and sat down beside him. Immediately the door was closed the car purred forward as smoothly as a sleek black panther. Discreet chamber music issued from an unseen diaphragm. The upholstery, soft as swansdown, had a rich, illusive perfume. Green blinds blanked the windows. Subdued lighting gave a restful glow.

After five minutes Humbolt, lulled by his surroundings, stopped wondering where the car was going and what further surprises awaited him at the end of the trip. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and dozed. Coloured skeins of music wove a magic carpet upon which he floated over fragrant tropic trees. Helmets hung on smoke-stained rafters where the lyrebirds sang. When he woke again the Rolls was smoothly slowing down. He had no idea where they were or how far they had travelled. But his wristwatch told him they had been moving for nearly an hour.

"Here we are," Gee said in a tone which made it apparent that he had not been dozing. And Humbolt, with a glance at his uncrumpled immaculate outfit, wondered if the man ever slept at all.

Following him out of the car, he found himself on the wide drive of a big, isolated house some details of which showed up clearly in the radiance of a full moon. No light came from any window, but a gable, partly covered by Virginia creeper, shone almost white in the moonlight. And the two Ionic columns each side of the door gleamed like ivory. Beyond the house rose huge cedar trees, black as soot, their clumps of foliage sculptured into angular calligraphy. The place lay in a little valley amid low, wooded hills. And Humbolt had a notion that the sea was near.

"Shall we go in?" Gee said, making it more of a command than a question.

Together they strode up the four white steps to the pillared porchway. Without any fumbling, Gee produced a latchkey and opened the big, front door.

After the bright moonlight, the inside of the house seemed poorly lighted. The hall contained an ornate double staircase and several suits of armour standing upright in arched alcoves. Small lamps set high in the walls showed

the vague shapes of divers doors, and a vaguer array of dingy, spectral portraits. In the silence Humbolt could hear his own wristwatch ticking like a robotic pulse.

"This way please, doctor!"

Gee opened a door and projected a ray of light out into the dimness of the hall. For a moment Humbolt hesitated and then he stepped into a large, well-lit room where he was introduced to an aged man who had just risen from a chair.

"Mr. X, this is Dr. Humbolt, the heart specialist. Dr. Humbolt, Mr. X."

"Thank you, Gee! You may leave us now."

Gee departed, and Humbolt watched with some distaste as the old, old man crossed the carpet to greet him. Much of Humbolt's work had been connected with old people. But never in his career had he seen anyone so ancient as Mr. X. The man's eyes were sunken so that their dark sockets resembled those of a skull. His brow was a contour-map of wrinkles. His cheeks sagged like dried, shrivelled figs. No longer a horizontal slit, his mouth was a shapeless hole into which thick creases ran from all directions like rivers into a pool. And his hands were thin and brown, like those of a mummy. But the quality that Humbolt found most disturbing was the unnatural uprightness and vigour which Mr. X displayed.

He wore a quilted, scarlet dressing-gown which gave him something of the appearance of a withered but sprightly mandarin. And the bare shins and ankles visible between his dressing-gown and slippers, might have belonged to some tall wading-bird.

When Humbolt took his hand he was prepared for something dry and feeble. But Mr. X's wiry fingers gripped his own with a firmness that was uncanny.

"I'm so glad you found time to visit me, Dr. Humbolt."

"Your Mr. Gee is very persuasive."

"May I offer you a drink? Coffee, whisky, vodka? I don't take those things myself; but you are more than welcome . . ."

"No, thank you," Humbolt said shortly, with a puzzled glance round the huge, cluttered room. "You wish to consult me in my capacity as a heart specialist?"

"Yes, indeed! You are the only competent heart specialist I know of here who is young enough and adaptable enough to assimilate a drastically revolutionary idea. But please don't rush me, Dr. Humbolt. It will be better for both of us if we approach my problem by degrees."

"Just as you wish."

"Are you pressed for time?"

"No, Mr. X. My time is yours."

Mr. X smiled hideously and pointed with jerky movements to a series of objects in the room, which was furnished with specimen tables and glass show-cases like a museum. Antique clocks of many fashions, old weapons, cases of preserved insects, and a variety of masks shared the walls with numerous natural objects and artifacts at whose nature Humbolt could not even guess.

"Perhaps," said the very old man, "the best approach will be for me to show you a few of my collection of oddities and curios. Now that I am no longer able to move about the world as freely as I used to, I attempt to gather about me some of the things I find of interest."

Humbolt nodded. He knew enough about old people to humour them when possible. And a cynical voice within him demanded that in view of the fee the old boy was paying, who was *he* to complain about a little waste of time?

"Here, for example, are some carvings from Easter Island." X pointed to several grotesque statues on a silver tray. "Easter Island's huge stone giants, in my opinion, are no more remarkable than these smaller sculptures of that lonely little spot, which seem to have no counterparts anywhere else on earth. One wonders how they evolved."

"Haven't similar articles been found in Mexico and Peru?"

"No; nothing really similar to these."

Mr. X walked past a case of huge, tropical butterflies and an array of grim death-masks, and halted at a table which supported another ugly piece of sculpture, made even more grotesque by the stealthy vandalism of time.

"This is the head of a Babylonian daemon made from terracotta in the 7th Century before Christ. And this . . ." The scarlet dressing-gown flapped round his thin legs as he

moved to another table which bore a piece of flat rock about a yard square. "This is the fossil of a dragonfly with a wingspan of two feet one and a half inches. It is two hundred million years old."

He paused dramatically, pointing a bird-claw finger at the stone, and repeated: "Two hundred million years old."

Humbolt looked at the fossil of the dragonfly etched deeply into the dark stone and wondered what the old boy was leading up to. At the moment he could see no connection between the objects he had been shown save their remoteness from everyday routine. Perhaps Mr. X was simply crazy. Was it a rare case of senile mental decay without the usual physical debility?

A framed, abstract painting next attracted the old man's attention. The vivid reds and greens in which it was painted were cunningly juxtaposed in eccentric zigzags so that the whole picture seemed to twitch and writhe as Humbolt looked at it, like a mass of entrails displayed for haruspicy.

"A great artist, Sproll," Mr. X remarked, but vouchsafed no further comment or explanation.

They walked past some shelves which carried models of Russian and American rockets and satellites and several pictures of star groups and spiral nebulae. The next table bore numerous lumps of stone which looked like meteorites. Mr. X ignored them and went to a table where a number of photographs lay face upwards. Humbolt looked them over quickly. Some featured strange buildings of futuristic design, others were of unlikely-looking spaceships. One was a picture of earth seen from far out in space. Others were of unfamiliar mountainous landscapes with strange moons gleaming in the daylight sky. Mr. X stretched out a quick-moving hand, selected a half-plate photograph and looked at it for a while, his sunken eyes inscrutable in their dark sockets. Then, without a word he handed it to Dr. Humbolt.

It was the photograph of a man standing beside a weird-looking flying-machine. And it had been taken in front of Mr. X's house. The man wore some kind of fancy dress. His head and big, round face seemed too bulky for his body. And the features looked hardly human. There was something wrong about the settings of the eyes, and above

each eyebrow a small fleshy lump protruded like a pale bruise.

"Funny looking fellow," Humbolt remarked inadequately.

"That is my friend Wambol," Mr. X said watchfully. "He too is a heart specialist. But unfortunately he is much too far away for me to consult at the moment. Dr. Wambol was the one who made the article I wish to have your advice about."

"The article?"

"Yes; a special kind of clock," X said, making for a door.

"I know nothing about clocks," Humbolt protested, following him. His curiosity was alloyed with fear.

Mr. X opened the door, entered the small room beyond it and switched on the light. On one wall Humbolt saw a clock-face rising above a cabinet made of flesh-coloured plastic. Mr. X opened the doors of the cabinet to reveal several glass globes joined together by transparent tubes. A red liquid circulated round the tubes and the globes and in and out of the clock-face. And the largest of the globes contained something that to him was horribly familiar.

"As you see," said Mr. X. "This clock has a human heart for a mainspring. It is not keeping good time. And I would like your advice on how to correct it."

Humbolt felt outraged. As a student he had often seen the heart of a chicken or a goat kept alive artificially. But this . . .

"You monster!" he said to Mr. X. "Don't you realise that I am fully aware that this heart must have been cut out of a living person?"

By way of reply Mr. X opened the lapels of his dressing-gown to reveal a thorax made of transparent plastic. Within it, immersed in colourless oil, a mass of machinery of alien design, worked rhythmically and constantly, like the mechanism of a clock.

Mack Reynolds

BY THE SAME DOOR

"... I RUN INTO a confounded wall of asterisks," Mr. Bowlen said indignantly.

"Asterisks?"

"Asterisks," Mr. Bowlen said definitely.

Mr. Demming gave his head a shake to achieve clarity. "I'm not quite sure I understand," he said.

Exasperation was Mr. Bowlen's way of life. "Look here, this is Alternatives, Inc., isn't it?"

"Ha ha, yes, of course, that far I'm with you," Mr. Demming said. A customer was a customer and Mr. Demming's job wasn't to run them off. He tried to look very earnest.

"You advertise that you can send a person into any world he wants. Any at all."

"Absolutely, Mr. Bowlen. If this universe doesn't please you, Alternatives, Inc. will send you into any other of the infinite alternate space-time continua." Mr. Demming was on more familiar ground now. "We have discovered, sir, that our universe is but one of an infinite number of universes. A moment's reflection on this will bring home various ramifications. Some of them, ha ha, rather startling."

"Yes, yes, I know. Somewhere everything *has happened, will happen and is happening*. Everything. You don't have to explain to me. Somewhere the South won the Civil War, somewhere in all these alternate universes are worlds in which Columbus never discovered America. In others, Hitler won the Second World War."

Mr. Demming beamed. "I see you have investigated the scientific laws upon which Alternatives, Inc. is based, Mr. Bowlen. But, now then, just what can we do for you? To what type of alternate space-time continuum would you like to be sent? Somewhere perhaps where you will be a millionaire, a TV star, a great lover? A sizeable percentage

of our clients relish stepping into the, ah, shoes of Don Juan of Spain, or Giovanni Casanova of Italy."

Mr. Bowlen was gesturing impatiently, making chopping motions with his right hand. "No, no. I'm not a frustrated Romeo, sir. Confound it, I told you why I'm here. I have decided that I will put up no longer with the innuendoes, the asterisks, the deletions. This has been frustrating me since youth. I read a novel and half way through the author mentions some secret perversion practised by one of his characters. What?"

Mr. Demming had lost him again. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said *what*, confound it. Or you read an account in one of these so-called men's magazines of the sin-cities of the Near East. Sly hints are dropped about unmentionable vice practiced by the Moslems, or Hindus. *What* vice? That's what I want to know."

"I'm not sure . . ." Mr. Demming hesitated.

Mr. Bowlen banged an emphatic hand on Mr. Demming's desk top. "Your rate is ten thousand dollars? Fine! Send me to an alternative universe where the people openly practice, without shame, without hesitation, without sense of wrongdoing, this confounded secret perversion that no one in this world of ours seems capable of coming right out and describing!"

Mr. Demming ran his hand back through his hair messing it terribly, a thing he *never* did.

"But . . . but . . . what perversion? How can I send you to a . . . Well, ha ha, Mr. Bowlen. If you can't describe it, how can I send you there?"

"Young man, you're confused. I hate inadequacy. Are you or aren't you in the business of sending paying clients to alternative universes of their desire?"

Mr. Demming was stung. "We shall try our best, sir." He pressed buttons, said into his inter-office communicator, "Send up Harry and one of the technicians. And you'd better send up Mr. Jeffers, too."

He leaned back in his chair, worried his mouth into a twist and said, "This is a rather different assignment, sir."

Mr. Bowlen snorted. "Let's get about it. Confound it, I want to get back to my office before closing."

The other was taken aback. "You mean you wish to spend only a short time in this alternative continuum of yours?"

"Confound it, yes! I didn't say I wanted to practise this secret vice, this unmentionable confounded perversion. All I want to do is find out what in the name of . . ."

He was cut off by the arrival of the various Alternatives, Inc. technicians, complete with their rather intricate appearing equipment.

Two impatient hours later the one named Harry was saying, "It's simple enough, sir. All you got to do is let me play this here light, like, on you. In maybe half a minute you kind of dissolve out of here and into this other world. You won't feel a thing."

"And how do I get back? I'm a busy man, I can't be . . ."

"All you got to do is press the button on that triggering device you got in your hand. That reverses it, like. Brings you right back. Got it?"

"I suppose so." Mr. Bowlen glared at Mr. Demming. But Mr. Demming had regained most of his lost composure and was able to smile in professional reassurance.

"Okay," Harry said. "Here goes." A light diffused Mr. Bowlen.

In another place Mr. Bowlen solidified. He looked about him. Glared would be the better word. With but one difference the world in which he found himself was remarkably like his own. Except for that one great difference. He looked for a long, long moment.

"So *that's* it," he snapped, before pressing the button to return.

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Details on Page 128

Here is the first piece in the jig-saw puzzle that is the world of Jerry Cornelius. What, where, how? That's your guess and we'd like to hear it . . .

PRELIMINARY DATA

Michael Moorcock

SERENE AND CARVED in ancient rock, the faces of Buddhas and the three aspects of Ishwara looked from terraces and archways, huge statues, bas reliefs, probably the greatest clutter of deities and devils ever assembled in one place. Beneath an extravagantly bloated representation of Vishnu the Destroyer, one of Ishwara's three aspects, a tiny transistor radio played good music. An expert might have recognized Zoot Money's Big Roll Band and *Zoot's Suite*.

Beside the radio, in the green-gold early afternoon sunshine, two men sat at leisure while mosquitoes buzzed and gibbons chattered in the trees and on the half-reconstructed terraces of Angkor. Be-shaven and be-saffroned, Buddhist monks passed by and brown children, direct descendants of the Khmers who had built great Angkor, played among the massive statues of gods, demons and heroes. A pleasant afternoon, with a slight breeze fanning the jungle. A good time for idle speculation.

The first man, a young European with long, black hair, carefully and stylishly dressed in spite of the heat, sat on the fallen stone hand of some minor Hindu divinity while the second, an owlish and pudgy Indian in shirt sleeves and cotton trousers, and with a certain resemblance to a nearby smiling buddha, sat on the ground his arms around his knees.

The European, a person of many parts, was Jeremiah Cornelius; the Indian was a Brahmin physicist of some reputation, Professor Hira. They had both met that morning whilst touring the city. It had been love at first sight.

"The Gnostics possessed a cosmology very similar, in many ways, to the Hindu and Buddhist. Interpretations varied, of course, but the figures were very close." The

Brahmin physicist patted at the mosquitoes settling on his arms.

"What figures?"

"Well, for instance, the cosmic history cycle—what we call *manvantara* in Sanskrit. Both Hindus and Gnostics give the figure as—um—432,000¹⁰. That is interesting, from any point of view, eh?"

"What about the *kalpa*—I thought that was your word for a time-cycle?"

"The day and night of Brahma, four thousand three hundred and twenty million years."

"I see."

"The *manvantara* is divided into four *yuga*—or ages. The current cycle is nearing its end. The present age is the last of four."

"What were they?"

"Oh, let me think—the *Satya Yuga*—the Golden Age. That accounted for the first four tenths of the cycle, then we had the *Dwaparu Yuga*—the Second Age—that took care of another eight hundred and sixty four thousand years. The Third Age—the *Tretya Yuga*—can you hear the echoes of an ancient common language?—only lasted for two-tenths of the whole cycle. The *Kali Yuga*, of course, is the current age. It began, as I recall, on February 18th, 3102 B.C."

"And what is the *Kali Yuga*?"

"The Dark Age, Mr. Cornelius. Ha! Ha!"

"How long did you say it was supposed to last?"

"Just one-tenth of the *manvantara*."

"Four hundred and thirty-two thousand years."

"That's right."

"That gives us plenty of time."

"Oh, yes."

"Then at the end of the *manvantara* the cycle repeats itself, does it? The whole of history all over again!"

"Some believe so. Others believe that the cycles vary slightly. It is basically an extension of our convictions concerning reincarnation. The strange thing is that modern physics begins to confirm these figures—in terms of the complete revolution of the galaxy and so on. I must admit

that the more I read of the papers published these days, the more confused I become between what I was taught as a Hindu and what I have learned as a physicist. It requires an increasing amount of self-discipline to separate them in my mind."

"Why do you bother?"

"My career, old man, at the University, would suffer if I let mysticism influence logic." The Brahmin spoke with some irony and Cornelius smiled.

"Yet the cosmologies mingle and absorb one another. There are people in Europe who believe that the *Vedas* describe a prehistoric civilisation as advanced—or more so—as our own. That would tie in with your first age, wouldn't it?"

"Some of my friends have speculated on all that, too. It is possible, naturally, but not likely. Exquisite parables, Mr. Cornelius, but nothing more. Not the mythical vestiges of a great science, I fear. The embroidered remnants of a great philosophy perhaps."

"I like the embroidery."

"You are kind to say so. Perhaps I should *not* say so, but it occasionally crosses my mind to wonder why, in all the mystic cosmologies, even in some of the modern, so-called para-sciences, our own age is always described as the age of chaos and contention. A comment, my logical side argues, on why people turn to mysticism. The past age was always better."

"Schooldays are the happiest days of your life except when you're at school."

"I understand you. A hackneyed idea, but a truism."

"Whereas your philosophers produce beautiful metaphors that are not truisms, maybe."

"You are pushing me too far, but you have studied the *Vedas*? It seems that more Westerners study Sanskrit than we. And we read Einstein and Hoyle."

"So do we."

"You have more time for everything over there, old man. You are at the end of your *manvantara*, eh? We have begun a new one."

"I wonder."

"I do not speak seriously—as a Hindu—but there are shorter cycles within the ages. Several of my more metaphysical acquaintances have predicted that we are at the end of such a cycle."

"But our affairs diminish in significance compared with a span of even four hundred and thirty-two thousand years."

"That's a Western idea, Mr. Cornelius." Hira smiled. "What is Time? How long is a millisecond or a millenium? If the old Hindus were right, then we have met in Angkor before and shall again—and the date will always be today's—October 31st 1966. Will anything have changed, I wonder, in the next *manvantara*? Will gods walk the earth. Will man be—?"

Jerry Cornelius got up. "Who knows? Let's compare notes then. I'll be seeing you, professor."

"This time next *manvantara*?"

"If you like."

"Where are you off to now?" The Indian also got up, handing Jerry the little transistor.

"Thanks. I'm going to Phnôm Penh Airport and then to London. I want to order a guitar."

Hira followed him through the ruins, climbing over slabs of stone. "You're at the Angkor-Hilton too, aren't you, old man? Why not stay one more night at the hotel?"

"Well, all right."

That night they lay in bed together talking and smoking.

"It makes you wonder just how close we are to finding the great equation." Rhythmically Hira's voice hummed like a mosquito through the warm air. "The total equation, the final equation, the ultimate equation. Will we ever?"

"The climate seems ripe."

"In your terms it is time for a new messiah—a messiah to the Age of Science. I suppose that is blasphemy. Has the genius been born yet? Will we recognize him when he comes?"

"That's what they all wonder, don't they?"

"Ah, Mr. Cornelius, what a bewildering, topsy-turvy world this is."

"Professor Hira and his Back o' Time Philosophisers with

Sing me that Old, Sweet Song." Jerry turned over on his side, his back to the professor. "I think the world is at last the right way up and steering a straight course."

"But to where?"

"That, professor, is the snag."

"She was talking about the final equation, this woman I met in Delhi last year. A passing affair, you know, and I'm glad it was. She gave me some very interesting food for speculation, this Miss Brunner, old man. She seemed to know . . ."

"Bully for her . . ."

"Bully? Yes . . ."

Jerry Cornelius fell asleep.

So naturally the time came when Jerry's flat at Konigs-gaten 5, Eskilstuna 2, Sweden, was visited. He came home from a session to find his pretty wife talking politely to Miss Brunner. They were both sitting on a divan sipping Maj-Britt's excellent coffee. The room was sunny, small but pleasant, neat but not gaudy. He could see them from the front door. He put his guitar-case in the hall and took off his coat of fine cord, put it on a hanger, hung it in the cupboard and walked in, hand outstretched, to greet his old friend with a confident smile.

"Miss Brunner. You're looking well. A little tired maybe—but well. How's the big project?"

"All but completed, Mr. Cornelius."

He laughed. "And what do you do with it now?"

"There's the rub," she smiled, putting her white cup on the low table. She was dressed in a black, plain sleeveless dress of good, rough stuff. There was a perky hunting bowler on her long red hair and a man's tightly rolled umbrella leaning beside her against the divan. Also beside her was a black leather briefcase and a pair of black gloves. Jerry had the feeling she had dressed for action. But he couldn't decide what sort of action, and if it directly involved him.

"Miss Brunner arrived about half-an-hour ago, Robby," Maj-Britt explained softly, not quite sure she had acted

wisely now. "I told her I was expecting you shortly and she decided to wait."

"Miss Brunner was a close business acquaintance in the past." Jerry smiled at Miss Brunner. "But we have little in common now."

"Oh, I don't know," Miss Brunner returned the smile.

"You bitch," said Jerry. "Get out of here—back to your caves and your farce." He spoke rapidly in English and Maj-Britt missed the sense, though she seemed to get the message.

"You've found something to keep and protect at last, eh, Jerry? Albeit a travesty of something you lost?"

"Excuse me, Miss Brunner," said Maj-Britt, somewhat coldly in her husband's defence. "But why do you call Herr Flanders 'Jerry' and 'Mr. Cornelius'?"

"Oh, they are old nick-names we used to have for him. A joke."

"Ha-ha! I see."

"Don't kid yourself, Miss Brunner," Jerry continued. "I'm fine."

"Then you're kidding *yourself* more than I'd guessed."

"Miss Brunner." Maj-Britt got up tensely. "It seems I made a mistake asking you to wait . . ."

Miss Brunner looked the tall girl up and down. One hand curled round the handle of the umbrella. She frowned thoughtfully.

"You and Professor Hira," she said. "A good pair of connections. I could go for you, dear."

Jerry moved in. He grabbed the umbrella and tried to break it over his knee, failed and tossed it aside. He and Maj-Britt stood over Miss Brunner, both with fists clenched. Miss Brunner shrugged impatiently.

"Jerry!"

"You'd better go back to Laplab," he said. "They need you there."

"And you—and this." She pointed at Maj-Britt.

They were all breathing rapidly.

After a few moments silence Miss Brunner said, "Something's got to happen."

But Jerry waited, hoping for the almost inevitable break

in tension that would weaken him but stop the sequence developing into the situation he could see Miss Brunner wanted.

The break didn't come. He did not glance at Maj-Britt, afraid that she would look scared. Things were getting worse. Outside the sun was setting. The break must come before the sun went down altogether.

The break didn't come. The tension increased. Maj-Britt began to stir. "*Don't move!*" he shouted, not looking at her. Miss Brunner chuckled warmly.

The sun was down. Miss Brunner rose in the grey light. She reached towards Maj-Britt. Jerry's eyes filled with tears as he heard a deep, desperate sound come from his wife.

"*No!*" He moved forward gripping Miss Brunner's arm as she took Maj-Britt's quivering hand.

"It—is—necessary." Miss Brunner was in pain as his nails squeezed her flesh. "Jerry!"

"Ohhhhhh . . ." He took his hand off her arm.

Maj-Britt stared at him helplessly and he stared helplessly back.

"Come along," said Miss Brunner, kindly but firmly, taking their hands and walking between them. "It is all for the best. Let us go and find Professor Hira." She led them from the flat to her waiting car.

Five days later, sitting at a table on the terrace, warmed by artificial sunlight, nose and eye delighted by the profusion of flowers below, Jerry listened to Miss Brunner talking. It was a square table. On the other three sides of the square sat Miss Brunner, opposite Jerry, Maj-Britt to his right and Professor Hira to his left.

"Well," Miss Brunner was saying cheerfully, "we've all got to know one another pretty well I think. It's amazing how quickly you settled in, Maj-Britt."

Jerry glanced at his wife. He and she were the beauties here, without a doubt, both elegant and delicate-seeming, she if anything paler than he. She smiled sweetly at Miss Brunner who was patting her hand.

Professor Hira was reading a two-day's old *Aftonbladet*.

"The only snag so far as I can see is this business of the

police believing that you kidnapped Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius, Miss Brunner," said the professor. "They have traced you to Lappland and must have found the outer signs of our establishment by now, this paper being out of date, you see."

"We do have defences, professor," she reminded him. "We can also seal off sections of the cave system if necessary. G-day is tomorrow and after that we shall be finished within 48 hours. Even an all-out attack on Laplab, which isn't likely, would not be successful unless nuclear-weapons were used and I can't see the Swedes doing that, can you?"

"Would it not help if Mr. Cornelius went out and spoke to the police searching the area?"

"No, professor. Positively not. We cannot afford the slightest chance of losing Mr. Cornelius at this stage."

"I feel flattered," said Jerry with a touch of bitterness. "On the other hand you could let a few in and I could speak to them. They needn't come far—they wouldn't see DUEL at all."

"They would ask to. Don't forget, Mr. Cornelius, that this land belongs to the Lapps under the protection of the Swedish government. They would be more than anxious to inspect us—particularly with the international situation in its present state and the Russian border close by. This is entirely the wrong time to hope to stall a nervous administration."

"I could go." Maj-Britt spoke hesitantly.

Miss Brunner stroked the girl's hair. "I'm sorry, my darling, but I cannot trust you sufficiently. You are still a bit of a weak link you know."

"I am sorry, Miss Brunner."

Jerry sat back folding his arms. "What then?"

"We can only hope for the best, as I said."

"There is another alternative." Jerry unfolded his arms. "We could send some men out to see what's going on, disguise the cave entrance and, if they get the chance, lure any search party inside and dispose of it."

"That would not really solve the problem, but I will have it done." She rose and walked into the room, picking up a telephone. "Then at least we shall be able to question a few

of them and find out exactly where we stand." She dialled a two-digit number and murmured instructions into the handset.

"And now," she said pleasantly, beckoning them in, "let us continue with our experiments. There is not much more to do, but there is little time before G-day."

"And then, I hope, you will tell us just what 'G-day' is, Miss Brunner. We are all very curious—though I have had a few hints, I think." Professor Hira laughed excitedly.

Vibrant, pulsing with enormous energies, flushed and light-headed, Jerry began to fold Maj-Britt's clothes and place them on top of Professor Hira's. He felt totally fit, totally purified, totally alive. What was more he felt replete, warm, at ease and at peace, like a great tiger in its prime, like a young god.

Miss Brunner lay on the bed. She gave him a knowing wink.

"How?" he said. "I didn't realise until it was over."

"It is a power," she said luxuriously, "which many have potentially. You had it. It is natural, isn't it?"

"Yes." He lay down beside her. "But I have never heard of anything like it. Not physically anyway."

"It is a trick. There had been a lot written in some form or other. The world's mythologies, particularly those closest to source, Hindu and Buddhist, are full of references. The secret was saved by over-interpretation. No one would believe in the literal truth, however dedicated."

"Ahhh."

"You regret nothing now?"

"I'm content."

"There is more to come. The connections brought us closer—"

The telephone was ringing.

She got up at once, walking swiftly from the room. More slowly, he followed her down to her office and entered as she replaced the receiver.

"Your plan worked. They have six policemen in the far cavern. They are talking to them. So far they have stalled them with a story about secret research sponsored by the

Swedish government. We must go and talk to them now while they are still comparatively unsuspicious. Let's get dressed."

The policemen were polite but uncertain. They were also, Jerry noticed, armed with revolvers.

Miss Brunner smiled at them. "I am afraid I shall have to keep you here until we have checked with Stockholm," she said. "I am director of the establishment. Our work is highly secret. It is a great pity that you stumbled upon us—and inconvenient for you. I apologise."

Her foolproof Swedish, brisk and polite, made them relax a little.

"The area is not marked on our maps," said the oldest man, a captain. "It is usual to mark restricted areas so."

"The work we are doing here is of maximum importance to Swedish security. We have guards on patrol, but we can't afford too many. Great numbers would attract attention."

"Of course. But in that case—" the captain paused, scratching his right hand with his left, "—why locate such an establishment out here? Why not in Stockholm or one of the other cities?"

"Could such vast natural caves be found in a city?" Miss Brunner waved a hand back at the cavern.

"Would it be possible for me to contact my superiors while you are checking with yours?"

"Out of the question. It is a puzzle to me that you are in this area."

"We believe that an Englishman and his wife—" He stopped short, staring for the first time at Jerry.

"Bugger me, why didn't we think of that," said Jerry under his breath.

"But this is the Englishman," said the captain. His hand went to his holster.

"I was not brought here by force, captain," said Jerry hurriedly. "I was contacted by your government to help . . ."

"That is unlikely, sir." The captain drew his revolver. "If that were the case, we should have been notified."

The four technicians who had brought the policemen in

were unarmed and so were Jerry and Miss Brunner. Apart from that they were evenly matched, six against six. Miss Brunner's tough boys were out of earshot. Things looked dicey.

"An oversight surely, captain?" Miss Brunner's delivery was a bit rough now.

"I cannot believe that."

"I don't blame you, frankly," said Jerry, noting that only the captain had actually drawn his gun. The rest of them were still trying to catch up on what was happening.

Jerry's body was full of power.

He jumped for the gun. Two yards.

The gun went off once before he had disarmed the captain and covered the surprised policemen.

"You had better take over, Miss Brunner." Jerry's voice was thick. From inordinate energy he had sunk to exhaustion, dizziness. As she took the gun from him and covered the Swedes, he glanced down.

The bullet seemed to have entered his chest just above the heart. Lots of blood.

"Oh, no. I think I'm going to die."

In the distance Miss Brunner's tough boys came running. He heard Miss Brunner shouting orders, felt her arm supporting him. He seemed to be growing heavier and heavier, sinking through the stone.

Was it muffled gunfire he heard? Was it hopeful imagination that made him think he caught the sound of Miss Brunner's voice saying: "There is still a chance—but we must work rapidly."

His mass became greater than that of the stone and he found he could walk through it with some difficulty, like pushing through a world that was the consistency of thin, liquid tar.

He wondered if it were tar and that he would be found in millions of years, perfectly preserved. He pushed on, knowing that this theory was stupid.

At length he emerged into the open, feeling light and fit.

He stood on a plain without horizon. Far, far away he could make out a huge crowd of people gathered around a

rostrum on which stood a single still figure. He heard the faint sounds of voices and began to walk towards the crowd.

As he got closer he recognised that the thousands-strong crowd consisted of all Miss Brunner's scientists and technicians and Miss Brunner was on the rostrum addressing them.

No one noticed him as he stopped at the back of the crowd and listened to her speech.

"You have all been waiting for the time when I would describe the ultimate purpose of DUEL—the biologists and neurologists may have guessed—and then decided that their guesses were too incredible and dismissed them. But they were right. I do not believe that our project can fail—unless Mr. Cornelius should die, which now seems unlikely—"

Jerry was relieved.

"—and I believe in it sufficiently to be, with Mr. Cornelius, the raw-material."

Jerry worked out that he must be experiencing some sort of hallucination crossed with reality. The vision was dream, the words were actually being spoken. He tried to haul himself out of the dream, but failed.

"DUEL's purpose was two-fold, as you know. The first job was to feed it the sum total of human knowledge and have it systemise and relate this knowledge into a single unified integer. This was at last achieved three days ago and I congratulate you.

"It is the second part which mystified most of you. The technical problem of how to feed this programme directly into a human brain was overcome with the help of notes donated by Doctor Leslie Baxter, the psycho-biologist. But what sort of brain could accept such a fantastic programme? That question is answered as I answer the question you have all been asking. DUEL's ultimate use is to satisfy an aim which, whether we realised it or not, has been the ultimate aim of all human endeavour since *homo sapiens* first evolved. It is a simple aim and we are near achieving it. We have been working, ladies and gentlemen, to produce an all-purpose human being! A human-being equipped with total knowledge, hermaphrodite in every

respect—self-fertilising and thus self-regenerating—and thus immortal, re-creating itself over and over again, retaining its knowledge and adding to it. In short, ladies and gentlemen, we are creating a being which our ancestors would have called a god!”

The scene wavered and Jerry heard the words less clearly.

“The conditions in modern Europe proved ideal for this project—ideal in every respect—and I believe that we succeed now or never. I have destroyed my notes. The necessary equipment has been constructed. Bring Mr. Cornelius forward please.”

Jerry felt himself being lifted up and floated through the ghostly crowd.

He drifted behind Miss Brunner as she walked away towards a large oval metal chamber. Then they were inside it together, in darkness. Miss Brunner began to make gentle love to him. He felt her, closer and closer, drawing into him. It was like the dream he had had before.

Deliciously he felt himself merge with Miss Brunner and he still wondered if this, too, were a dream inspired by his wound. And yet his body had breasts and two sets of genitals and it seemed very real and very natural that this should be so. Then he felt tiny pricks of pain in his skull and his memories and Miss Brunner’s, his identity and hers, merged for a moment and then slowly dispersed until his mind was blanked out and DUEL began to do its stuff.

The technician looked sharply at his watch. Then he looked at the metal chamber and at the dials thereon. Every dial was now still. Slowly, a green light blinked on and off.

“This is it,” said the technician to another technician very like him. He spoke crisply.

The chamber had been rolled on castors close to DUEL. The great semi-circle of the computer was joined by a huge semi-circle of scientists and technicians, making a full circle.

A spotlight had been turned on to the oval chamber. Scientists came forward to check that the indicators all registered correctly. They backed off, satisfied.

The middle-aged dietician who had won the honour through an elaborate draw, spun the handle of the chamber.

All was still, silent.

A tall, naked, graceful being stepped out. It had Miss Brunner's hair and Mr. Cornelius's eyes. Miss Brunner's predatory jaw softened by Jerry's aesthetic mouth. It was hermaphrodite and beautiful.

The scientists and technicians murmured in awe and some of them began to clap and whistle. Others cheered and stamped.

"Hi, fans!"

The cavern reverberated with a massive shout of exultation. The scientists and technicians capered about, clapping one another on the back, grinning, dancing.

They surged towards their smiling creation, chaired it high and began to march around the computer singing a wordless, victorious chant which became a christening name:

"Corn-ee-lee-us Ber-un-ner!"

Cornelius Brunner was making a big scene.

"Just call me Corn," it grinned and blew kisses to one and all.

Distantly at first, growing louder, a siren or two began to sound.

Corn cocked an ear. "The enemy is at our gates!" It pointed a slender finger towards the outer cavern. "Forward!"

Lifted on a rolling tide of its jubilant sycophants, many thousands strong, Cornelius Brunner sat their shoulders as they flooded forwards.

Across the great hall of the hot lake, up the slope towards the cave-mouth, onward, they moved, their roaring thunderous, their exhilarated bodies swift.

The door of the cave opened for them and they rushed into the open air. Cornelius Brunner laughed as it rode their backs.

A small detachment of military was there. A few light guns and armoured cars.

The tide did not notice as the soldiers first backed away and then tried to run and then were engulfed, guns and cars and all, as the huge crowd coursed ahead in triumph.

Cornelius Brunner pointed to the south-west. "That way—to Finland first!"

The flow changed direction but not its speed and away it went in its entirety.

It streamed over the border, it swarmed down the length of Finland, it flocked through Western Germany, and it gathered greater and greater numbers as it moved on, Cornelius Brunner high in the centre, encouraging it, urging it, praising it. The thousands became millions as the new messiah was borne across the continent, whole cities abandoned, and the land crushed in its wake.

The vast swarm reached Belgium and, at its controller's behest, decimated Liege, depopulated Brussels, and carried half a nation with it when it crossed into France.

Its exuberant voice could be heard a hundred miles from Paris. The reverberations of its feet could be felt two hundred miles away. The aura of its presence rippled outwards over the world.

The millions did not march along—they danced along. Their voice was one melodious song. Their densely-packed mass covered fifty square miles or more, increasing all the time.

"To Paris!" cried Cornelius Brunner, and to Paris they went. Not once did they pause, apart from those who died of excitement.

Paris was passed and its four remaining inhabitants gathered to watch the disappearing deluge.

"Unprecedented!" murmured the Chief of State, scratching his nose.

"Perhaps, perhaps," said his secretary.

The tide rolled on and roared through Rome, leaving the Pope, its sole resident, sunk in meditation and speculation. After some time the Pope hurried from the Vatican Palace and caught up within an hour.

All the great cities of Italy. All the great cities of Portugal and Spain.

And then, with a slight note of boredom in its voice, Cornelius Brunner gave the last order.

"To the sea!"

Down to the coast, on to the beaches, and tide met tide as the gigantic assemblage poured into the sea.

Within six hours only one head remained above water. Naturally, it was the head of Cornelius Brunner, swimming strongly back towards the beach.

Cornelius Brunner stretched out on the well churned sand and relaxed. The waves lapped the peaceful shore and a few birds cruised the blue sky.

"This is the life," yawned Cornelius Brunner whose skull contained the sum of human knowledge. "I think I might just as well kip down here as anywhere."

Cornelius Brunner fell asleep, alone on an abandoned beach.

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Kenneth Hoare

SONGFLOWER

THEY MADE PLANETFALL soon after dawn at the capital. Sunlight, diffracted by miles of air, made everything seem to be preserved in amber. Bathed in an almost solid golden glow, the city slept below, its antique towers bright against the still-dark sky.

They disembarked into the prosaic squalor of the spaceport, like every other from Earth to lens centre and out the other side, and went through the usual thousand formalities before they were allowed out into the sleepy streets. The proctor had given them a sermon on the behaviour expected of an officer and gentleman of the Galactic Forces, and had implied that anyone who tried to cheat the natives with beads and hatchets for furs and diamonds would be most uncomfortable for his next seven incarnations.

Alec White tagged on to Mairhatz-7. He and his eight brothers (sisters? clansmen? friends?) were the only people in any part of the galaxy as far as he knew who could find their way back to a starship in pitch darkness after drinking a gallon of Heftz-spno ; that could be very useful on day-leave. As Alec walked along by his scaly green flanks, 7 was bumbling away happily to himself ; a sort of lively yet lazy sound, like boiling mud.

The city had just awoken and was yawning and stretching. An old, lavender-coloured Centauran was pulling a cycle-truck from its garage, ready-loaded with rugs and snout-trimmers and splegh-goblets. A little further on, they met a Rigellan skopt who waved his antennae at them in benediction. They bowed to him and walked on.

High above them the rocket-trains ran roaring under the curving white track that led to the city centre: they preferred to walk when they were on leave ; you see more that way. In about half an hour they reached the edge of the tourists' part of town and stopped off at a small dinomat which served a reasonable variety of food and drink. Alec sat munching a synthsteak while 7 chewed impassively at

a spugflower, his ears glowing yellow with embarrassment because it was badly cooked and he didn't want to offend his host by complaining. The fact that his host in this case was a 50-kilowatt cationic network controlling five hundred radionic cookers made no difference to the customs of five centuries.

Alec sat back with a sigh. "Where to now?" he asked.

"It depends on what you want to do. There are bars all over the city, of course, and they're open all day. The fun-houses are all in the west, but are highly spoken of in most of the officers' messes I've been in. Then there is the temple of A-jetsh, a most magnificent sight according to the guide-books. And there is the market: a thousand shops extending through four miles of tunnels."

"Let's go to a bar," said Alec.

The first one they visited was one of the old-fashioned kind with a barman, in this case a Betelgeusee, with eyes on top of his head and a great grin which split his face into two. His fat arms were covered in rubbery orange skin. Altogether, he was an extremely happy-looking person.

"Yes, gents?" he croaked in a somewhat guttural version of Galang. Alec ordered a goblet of moonmist. 7, as usual, had a pitcher of Heftz-spno, which he gulped down while White inhaled the purple mist which rose from the goblet, then replaced it on the spirit-lamp which was traditionally used to heat it.

He remembered the next bar: it had an automatic vendor and he had a bowl of Martian wine, made from tiny sour grapes and leading to delusions and blindness if drunk to excess. 7 again drank Heftz-spno. After that, things began to get a little fuzzy. The third bar was full of Aldebaranian tourists who insisted on buying them drinks when they saw their spacefleet uniforms. Slisht, of course, in long bamboo tubes. 7 took some persuading, but in the end he agreed to try one. Perhaps that was what started the trouble.

There followed three or four rather nondescript places: one of them had a cellular structure in steelwood. By now they were both wavering a little as they walked. The streets were lined with little booths where the natives displayed artifacts of the three continents which made up the planet.

Their orange and green patterns danced a little in Alec's vision; now and again little green dragons would come swimming through the air at shoulder height, then swell and turn black before disappearing; it was probably the Martian wine.

The next part was rather difficult. The roadway was made of some extremely strong transparent material. About a hundred feet below the road could be seen the roofs of shops in the market. It needed a strong stomach to cross this part of the road, which seemed to have been made for purely decorative purposes, and, unfortunately, both spacemen were feeling a little delicate. 7 had the advantage of being four-footed, but White took his courage in his hands and ran over the roadway. Suddenly it ceased, and both his feet were over the edge.

He floated slowly down. Evidently the gap formed the top of an antigrav shaft. He looked up. Above him 7 floated like a great green carnival balloon. At that moment he landed with a bump. By the time he had scrambled to his feet again, 7 had landed by him.

"A slight surprise, Alec," he said. "Where to now?"

Alec nodded in the direction of a small shop built into the side of the tunnel. Above it hung a sign: "The Admiral Benbow." It was decorated in an antique fashion, as they had expected, and the customers seemed almost as antique themselves. The barman, surprisingly, was not a Terran, but a lycanthrope in a tatty green tabard. At one table sat, or rather perched, a decrepit Sirian with a head like a mournful suitcase and a body like a dirty feather duster. At the opposite side of the bar a small Terran sat, smacking his lips over mouthfuls from a pewter tankard. He looked up as they came in.

"Ah, the fleet's in!" he said, grinning. "Two pints of ale for the spacemen!"

"Not for me, thanks," said Alec.

"Ale?" murmured 7.

"Terran. Contains ethyl alcohol," said Alec.

"Come now, you must. Spacemen who don't drink beer? It's unheard of."

The barman was already drawing two tankards of the

foaming golden liquid, so they were almost forced to take the drinks. At least, that was what they said later.

"Cheers," the man said.

"Er, cheers." They drank. It didn't seem too bad.

"The name's Ellington. Fred Ellington," said the man, without being asked.

"Alec White. And Mairhatz-7."

"How d'you do. May I be of service to tho-Mairhatz?"

He knew the correct form of address for a limb of an Ursan tho. You don't just greet the man himself, you greet all his clan. And they know about it, too. There's some sort of telepathy that keeps them in contact.

They sipped at their beer again. Alec had just settled back comfortably in his chair when 7 suddenly turned purple and slumped over the table. They both jumped up. Ellington stooped over the Ursan, listening to his heart beat. He stood up: "He's out cold. We'll have to see he gets home all right."

He walked over to the door and flicked over the "cab wanted" indicator. It flashed away unnoticed for a moment, then a hovercab pulled up by the door.

"Where to, gentlemen?"

Alec told him to go to the main starport, and, after lifting 7 into the cab, began to climb in after him, when Ellington pulled at his sleeve.

"Look. It's 13.00 now. How long have you got off?"

"Until 24.00 in theory. Say until 22.00 to be reasonable."

"Well, look, the cabman will look after your friend and when he gets to the ship his tho-tefs will see that he sleeps it off. I didn't know beer would affect him like that. Anyway, if you'd like to come along to my shop I'd be pleased to give you a meal. And if you want souvenirs I'll be pleased to sell them to you very cheaply."

"I thought there was a catch in it."

"No catch. If you don't want to buy, you don't have to. Come and see. I'm sure you'll find it interesting. And you need a rest after this morning."

"Yes, it was a bit hectic, wasn't it?" said Alec, grinning.

He told the cabman to go to the spaceport and deliver 7 to the "Radian" and collect payment. That way he could

be sure that the Ursan wouldn't be dropped off round the next corner, leaving the cabman richer by the fare.

Alec walked off with the Terran in the opposite direction to the cab. They came to a small and somewhat dingy shop. The windows were piled with the bric-à-brac of a thousand planets and five hundred years of history.

"Antiques," said Fred, "curios, rubbish." He grinned.

"Do you make a good living?"

"Quite good. Can't complain. No, can't complain. Come in."

He led the way through the shop, dusty despite the air conditioning, and into the room beyond. The contrast was so great that Alec drew in his breath in surprise. The walls were lined with fine scarlet fibres, shining in the light of an artificial sun, dimmed to the rich glow of an autumn evening. On the walls hung relics of many different cultures. On the carved chests that stood by the walls and on shelves by the old-fashioned electric fire, leaping and crackling with blue-white flames, stood bowls of plants.

Hundreds of exotic varieties were contained in that room, some in gastight containers to reproduce the conditions of their native planets. Some were tiny and starlike, others huge and fleshy in great stripes of contrasting colour. There were feathery water plants and spiky desert blooms. Representations of flowers in a dozen different art-forms stood or hung about the room.

"Flowers are my greatest interest," said Fred, "but I think you will find that I do not neglect the provision of a proper cuisine."

The change in the little Terran was very noticeable. He seemed to expand like one of his flowers in the exotic atmosphere of the room. The effect was enhanced when he shrugged off his drab street jacket and pulled on a scalloped robe designed for a Dafnian batrachian.

They sat down at a table constructed from the flat shell of some turtle-like creature. After a moment a robot appeared in answer to Ellington's signal, carrying a tray loaded with food in each of its four hands, and proceeded to set out the food.

An hour later, Alec declined another drink. "Not another mouthful. I really couldn't."

"Well, if you're sure. Perhaps you'd like to look at my plants."

"Very much."

They got up and wandered round the room while behind them the robot cleared the table. On the shelves were ranged plants of every colour and shape. There were, too, paintings on silk and wood, carvings of flowers; jade lotuses, golden roses, alien flowers in tri-di and sensory films.

And on a column of gold-veined rock stood the flower. It seemed to be made from faceted red and green jewels, veined within with more deeply glowing colours, the flower itself glittering red at the head of a gracefully curving prismatic stalk, between leaves built from cunningly fitted octahedral crystals. The whole beautiful sprang from the lip of a bleached sea-shell, built from scalloped sections to form a curving horn.

"It's . . . it's beautiful."

Ellington held a finger to his lips. He placed a hand on the shell. At the touch of some hidden button, the flower began to sing. And the song it sang was of ancient summer days on an alien planet, full of the drone of great blue insects and the nodding of a thousand flowers.

Then the song changed. It chanted of warriors and battles, of chivalric charges, of banners flying, beautiful in the wind. Then it keened a lament for blood on the white skin of warriors in silver armour, for brave banners trampled in the dust.

At last the song died away into silence, like the last breath of a winter wind. There was a long silence.

"Could . . . could I buy it?" asked Alec.

Fred pursed his lips. "I don't know; I certainly couldn't let it go under a thousand credits."

Alec thought quickly. This morning he had had a thousand one hundred credits, representing three months' pay. He pulled out the pocket register to see how much he had spent. He had nine hundred credits left.

"Look, I've got nine hundred. I'll send you the other hundred at the end of the month."

"Ah, but what security have I got?"

"If I give you a note of hand sealed with my thumbprint,

the Galactic Bank will debit my salary cheque. All you have to do is take the note to the computer clearing house."

"No, I'll tell you what. I'll let you have it for nine hundred."

"Well, it's very good of you. Do you think I could hear the music again?"

Ellington rested his hand on the shell, and again the plant sang. This time it was a jig, a lively dance tune, full of memories of harvests and dancing around great roaring fires.

"Where did you get it from?" Alec asked.

"It was brought to me by a trader. He got it from a native of some planet in Andromeda. I don't remember the catalogue number. I could look it up. It's in there somewhere."

He nodded towards a huge rack filled with reel upon reel of microfilm.

"No, it doesn't matter. Anyway, I'd better be getting back to the ship."

"I'd like you to take the container the plant came in."

He vanished into the shop and came back a few minutes later carrying a container made in two sections and painted in serpentine designs. He carefully placed the bejewelled plant on a pad of gauze, then shut down the lid.

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Ellington, for all you've done. If you're ever on Mars, don't hesitate to look up my family; I'm sure you'll be very welcome. Here's the address."

He handed over a slip of plastic. "Well, cheerio."

"Er . . . the credits?"

"Oh. I'm sorry," he said, embarrassed. "I really didn't . . . I mean I wasn't . . ."

"Of course not." He took the gaily coloured slips of paper. "Thank you very much."

"Thank you. Cheerio then."

"Cheerio," said Ellington. He showed Alec out and watched as he walked away down the deserted tunnel. Then he walked back through the shop and into the room beyond. He pressed a button and a panel slid back, revealing pile upon pile of rainbow-coloured notes, stacked

● *continued on p. 123*

The irascible and learned doctor, late of VECTOR, Journal of the BSFA, answers readers' questions . . .

Dr Peristyle

DON'T IMAGINE THAT my temper has improved by my being hi-jacked to these illustrious pages. Friend of SF, foe of ignorance, Peristyle bids you speak—and listen! Let your questions be good, and you are welcome here.

Peter Roberts, Walsall

Who in your opinion without pulling punches is the world's best living SF writer?

Why should you think you could induce me to pull punches? All the same, I refuse to answer so meaningless a question ; to do so would be to commit myself to an idiocy. Fortunately, we have no world heavyweight championships in SF.

But it might be worth saying that professional writers are generally better than non-professional ones. If a writer has ambition to write, it will be fed by the acceptance and publication of his stories ; consequently, he will write more, which will ensure more acceptances if he is any good. If the process goes on, he will eventually be able to throw up his job and follow his vocation. It is always possible for such a writer, given minimal luck, to procure steady literary work that will take up little time, help his writing, and earn some regular bread-and-butter. Many of Britain's SF writers are not accomplished enough to pursue this course.

Of the ones that do break free, some turn into hacks to support themselves and their families, and most of the others turn into drunks or neurotics. A mad world, my masters! The next time you read even a good story, never mind the best, think of these things, and be humble.

David Orme

What state will SF be in, in five years?

As now, dying. Ever dying, never dead. Just like the modern novel, on which SF has a secret and unacknowledged dependence.

Richard Lee Jones, Cardiff
Who really reads science fiction?

Possibly Richard Lee Jones of Cardiff? Do you so long for company in your lonely eccentricity that you ask this question? The answer a mere fifteen years ago might have been: SF is written by shop hands for factory hands. Now I believe a few enlightened engineers and dons have got in on the act—and some women, happily, for no literature can be reckoned healthy before women enjoy it. I know this is so without being able to explain why; perhaps it is because women have a balance that men lack, and would rather vent their love of chasing fashion on hats than literature. I'd be interested to hear readers' opinions on this one.

J. M. Creasey, London, S.E.17

What do you make of the Russians' announcement—followed by a speedy retraction—that messages from intelligent beings were received from a source CTA 102?

Why, sir, mine is just a theory, he said coughing deprecatingly, but the Russians live their salvationist literature where we write it. As the western world underwent the neurosis that resulted in the sighting of "flying saucers" during the early fifties (sightings are still reported but no longer make headlines) so the Soviet world now seems to be undergoing what may be termed "the SF syndrome". Russian scientists have claimed that the meteorite which felled several acres of trees in Siberia was an immense space ship, that some large terrestrial structures were the work of interstellar beings, that one of the satellites of Mars was artificial, and so on; the CTA 102 claim fits into the series.

This behaviour appears to belong with the flying saucer sightings in what Jung calls in his *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, a "visionary rumour . . . which expresses expectations of redemption". Heaven knows, we all need that.

David E. Mortimer

Assuming SF is written by technically advanced countries, did the Arabs write SF or something like it when they led the world in mathematics and astronomy?

Interesting question. Frankly I don't know the answer, learned though I am; I suspect it to be buried below the

desert sand, so that some Abdul Anderson, some Mohammed Moorcock, is forever lost to us. But evolution rather than technology is the real power behind SF, for it provides a speculative dimension to work in. And isn't SF essentially a city literature? Who ever wrote it in a tent?

End of session. Report back here next month for more erudition, and be sure to have your questions ready. Try and look intelligent in the back row, even if you can think of nothing to say.

If you have any questions for the doctor, please send them to him c/o NWSF, 17, Lake House, Scovell Road, S.E.1.

● *continued from p. 120*

plastic notes of hand and currency of a dozen different kinds from the neighbouring planets. He put the notes into the safe and was about to press the button to close it again when he heard a scratching at the door.

He went out through the shop and opened the door. The plant slid in on its broad stomach-foot, its shell reared high.

"Well done, my beauty," he said, picking it up. He took it into the back room and placed it on the table. "Well done, my beauty," he said, stroking its shell. The plant began to sing.

STORY RATINGS No. 151

1	The Life Buyer (3)	...	...	...	E. C. Tubb
2	Apartness ...	...	...	...	Vernor Vinge
3	The Ship of Disaster	...	...	...	B. J. Bayley
4	Last Man Home ...	...	...	...	R. W. Mackelworth
5	Convolutions ...	...	...	...	George Collyn

NEXT MONTH will continue the adventures of Bill in an instalment subtitled *A Dip in the Swimming Pool Reactor*, plus stories by Silverberg, and excellent new discovery David Masson. This will be our special Brian Aldiss appreciation issue, with two new Aldiss stories.

THE GOOD CRAFTSMAN AT WORK



H. L. GOLD WAS perhaps the most incisive editor ever to produce an SF magazine, on matters of technique he knew the craft of SF writing inside out and the fact that he re-wrote a considerable portion of the material published in *GALAXY* under his editorship earned him many writers' gratitude rather than their chagrin. I personally know several writers who feel they owe their present knowledge of technique to Gold's pungent comments on what he rejected and his doctoring of what he accepted. Some feel that this resulted, in the end, in a magazine that contained craftsmanly but characterless stories—stories, in fact, with *too much* ironed out. What is sometimes said of the last years of *GALAXY* under Gold's editorship might also apply to his own work and one is inclined to feel that if he never wrote a bad story, he never wrote a brilliant one, either.

Dennis Dobson has done a service to would-be SF writers in publishing *The Old Die Rich* (18s.), a collection of Gold's best stories with the author's working notes appended to each one. This volume enables us to see a clear and clever-minded craftsman at work. The notes seem almost impossibly precise, but there is no reason to suspect that they have been edited. The stories themselves are good light entertainment and make one of the most consistently readable collections I have read for a long time. Here you'll find, among others, the title story, which asks the question: Just why are so many old people found starved to death when they have plenty of money? The answer forms an ingenious twist on the time-travel idea. *The Trouble with Water* is one of Gold's best known fantasy stories written for *UNKNOWN*—a goblin puts a curse on a man and water will not touch him. There are several good twists in this one, too. Gold was a master of

the twist ending in SF, and one of the first of the modern SF writers to make it his trademark. This makes it almost impossible to describe the stories properly without spoiling them. *No Charge for Alterations* is about the need to adapt colonists to new environmental conditions. In his journal notes for *Love in the Dark*, Gold asks himself 'Why hasn't the succubus idea been given a thoroughly modern treatment?' and comes up with one of the few good stories that does just that. *The Man with English* is a convincing story of a man who has his senses completely reversed. *The Biography Project* is a nice example of the under-a-thousand-words short-short—I wish more writers would learn to write with such economy and not, as so many still do, write an 800-word short into an 8,000-word story. Many SF ideas that are essentially trivial but entertaining have been ruined by surplus wordage. *At the Post* is a rather conventional SF story in which Gold asks: 'What if catatonia isn't what the psychiatrists say it is?' and comes up with an explanation not as satisfying as most of his explanations. *Hero* is somewhat uncharacteristic, too, but mainly because it is a nice piece of restrained emotionalism about the first man to land on Mars and his problems when he gets back to Earth. Considering that this was written in 1939 it means that it was either way ahead of its time or else SF hasn't progressed very far since! *And Three to get Ready . . .* is about a man with the power to wish other people to death. *Problem in Murder* is a reversal of the *corpus delicti* situation—a mutilated corpse without a murder.

In many ways this collection contains the quintessence of a certain kind of slick, clever SF writing—writing which succeeded completely on its chosen level but which rarely ventured to investigate its subject matter in any sort of depth. Read it on its own terms and it can rarely be faulted, but don't expect the seriousness of intention that can be found amongst the newer SF writers like Aldiss, Ballard, Vonnegut—or even Moorcock.

Also from Dobson is the fourth volume in the *New Writings in SF* series (16s.), edited by John Carnell. Again the undemanding reader who is happy with fresh twists on old themes will find plenty worth reading—though the best

of these are the reprints from Isaac Asimov, *Star Light*, Dennis Etchison, *The Country of the Strong*, and William Tenn, *Bernie the Faust*. Other stories by Colin Kapp, Dan Morgan and Keith Roberts are up to the standard normally expected from these writers and a new writer, David Stringer, makes his début. Editor Carnell says in his introduction that readers are demanding more accuracy and authenticity in their SF. True enough—but this includes greater accuracy of character-observation, too, and this is in the main lacking in the stories so far published in this series.

James Colvin

SEARCHING FOR TRUTH

The Joyous Invasions (Gollancz 16s.) contains three novelettes from the magic pen of Theodore Sturgeon. *To Marry Medusa* tells of an alien life form which dominates personality in an attempt to create a gestalt of the whole of humanity, a gestalt which will bring to the surface of the mind the common subconsciousness of living creatures in a manner even Jung himself could not have imagined. *The Comedian's Children*, with its bitter cynicism of the reality behind the public image smacks somewhat of Al Morgan's *Great Man* and is the story of a television personality who uses a disease of possible extra-terrestrial origin to project that public image. The final and longest tale in this trilogy, *The [Widget]*, *The [Wadger]*, and *Boff*, is of an alien survey team which visits the earth in order to study the limited use made of synapses, internalised reflexes, and the team's catalytic effect upon a group of life's failures gathered under the common roof of a boarding house.

The description "trilogy," above, is used advisedly of this collection, for although the stories contain no bond of plot or character, they are stamped with Sturgeon's philosophy of a searching for truth, for better standards of human relationships. The characters, from the three-year-old Robin Martin in *The [Widget]*, *The [Wadger]*, and *Boff* to the stumbling Gurlick of *To Marry Medusa*, are no mere cardboard cut-outs, but live and have realistic problems.

Sturgeon tells these stories and writes of the characters who live them in a racy style which blends expertly with a poetry of thought. Where a lesser writer would allow

description to slow a story, Sturgeon knows well when to stop short, a quality exemplified here with a remarkable balance.

Some six months ago a certain university professor was reported to have deplored the fact that science fiction lacked literary merit, a sweeping generalisation proved to be completely unfounded by this excellent Sturgeon collection.

Ron Bennett

The Screaming Face (Corgi, 3s. 6d.) by John Lymington is an end of the world story in the form of a diary written for posterity by one of the men who knows the horrid secret. As the big saw comes nearer and nearer the writer becomes increasingly tormented by the question of whether he loves his wife or her sister and whom his wife loves. Only in the last thirty pages does the eternal quadrangle, played out in one of those detective-story English villages, give way to the author's real plot—planetary revelations, skin-saving in high places and guys fighting to get into the spacecraft.

The Thirst Quenchers (Gollancz 16s.) by Rick Raphael is a collection of four stories. The first two deal with crises in the work of the teams supplying water to a water-starved near-future world, and the third is a humorous story about a kind of interplanetary post office sorting rocket. In these stories Mr. Raphael is obviously fascinated by the machinery of achieving water supplies and postal services on a grand scale and with the lives of men working as a team in a complex and intricate job. The fourth story is a commonplace tale about a rugged individualist who happens to be farming 2000 acres of the national park which the government overlooked when making the original purchase. He wins in the end.

L. P. Davies wrote the frightening *Paper Dolls* (Jenkins, 15s.), a story of four possessed boys, quadruplets, who may have been created to destroy the world. His latest, *The Man from Nowhere* (Jenkins, 15s.), deals with a man who appears in a state of amnesia and proves to answer exactly the description of four separate men, all dead. Not such a thriller as the first book, but still very exciting.

Hilary Bailey

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