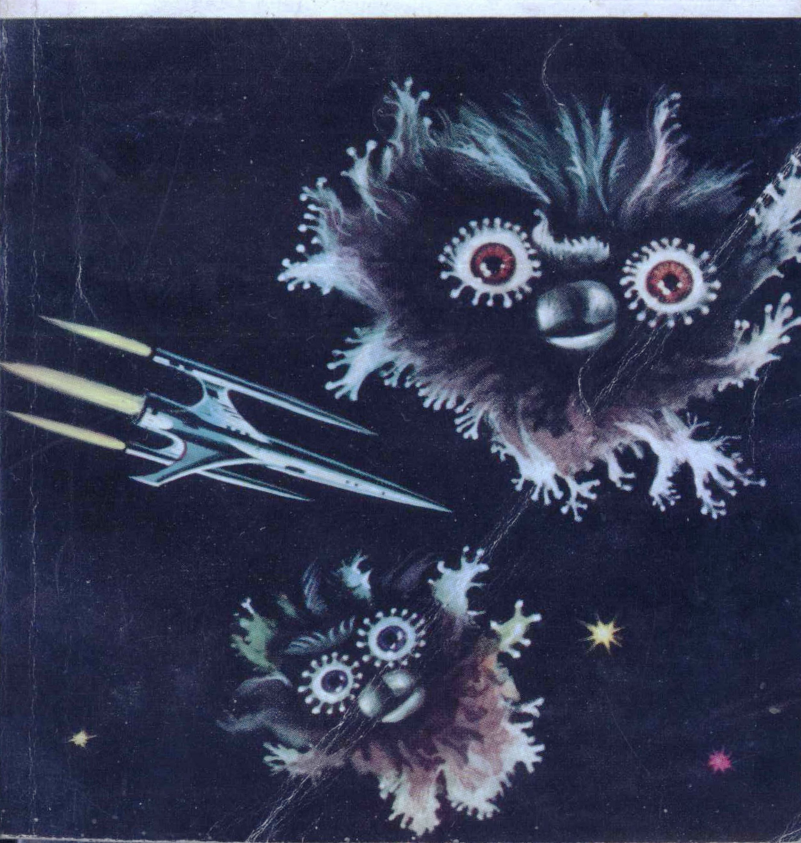
NEW WORLDS

COMPACT SF

2/6

HARRY HARRISON's

$E=mc^2$ . . . or BUST



NEW WORLDS SF

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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.

MAKING THE TRANSITION

ALTHOUGH THE SIX stories in this issue are all speculative and imaginative, two of them do not conform to the conventions of sf as we usually think of it. They are much closer to the imaginative fantasies of Kafka, Peake or Borges than to, say, the work of Heinlein or Asimov. We found them stimulating and, encouraged by the unanimous support of letter-writers on the subject of our 'Almost anything goes' editorial in NWSF 149, we decided to publish them.

They are both allegories and make strong use of symbolism. For instance in *The Golden Barge* the river represents the protagonist's life and the elusive barge, the elusive ambition that drives men to forsake what they have in order to try to reach for something they will probably never have. A simple enough theme, simply treated.

It's the job of good entertainment to throw fresh light on the human condition and while there may be nothing new under the sun there *are* new ways of getting the old messages across. The imaginative story—of which the sf story is an aspect—is well-suited for doing this. It should be easy for the reader used to interpreting the terminology of the conventional sf story (FTL, tri-di, hyper-warp and so on) to make the transition to interpreting the symbolism of less overt allegories like *Jake in the Forest* and its like. Such stories are not written from any desire to be obscure, but from a creative need to find fresh methods of telling a story and making a point.

RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY is a semi-professional magazine that concentrates primarily on the criticism and analysis of sf, both old and contemporary. Edited by Leland Sapiro from Box 82, University Station, Saskatoon,

Canada, it does not appear to have a British agent but at 35c. an issue is roughly 2/6, printed in off-set and containing material by Algis Budrys (a send-up of Ray Bradbury), Arthur Jean Cox, Leland Sapiro and others. Mr. Cox's article is about Harry Bates (author of 'Farewell to the Master' which became the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*) and the puzzle of an apparently meaningless novelette that he published in 1953. Mr Sapiro's article is the third part of *The Faustus Tradition in the early Science Fiction Story* and tends to stretch examples to fit the theme in some cases but is nonetheless interesting. Since NWSF cannot publish the amount of detailed criticism it would like, it is our policy to mention anything which will interest the reader wanting to read such criticism.

A point is made in the letter-column of the magazine. Though obvious, it often needs re-stating. In reply to a correspondent who asks 'but which is the more vital to sf: emotions or concepts?' Mr Sapiro replies 'In literary or "mainstream" writing, as opposed to the journalistic or pulp variety, ideas are conveyed indirectly, rather than by explicit statement; so that the reader can gain that emotional satisfaction involved in synthesizing the object for himself. *Such* emotion, I think, is the more poignant, since it results from an entire chain of mental associations rather than the single memory involved in *naming* something. In short, it is not a question of more or less emotion in sf, but a question of *how* this emotion is to be conveyed'. Our feeling is that some sf authors could well think about Mr Sapiro's statement.

Michael Moorcock

STORY RATINGS No. 153

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The third and last adventure of *Bill, the Galactic Hero*

$E=mc^2$ — OR BUST

Harry Harrison

one

"I WANT a lawyer, I have to have a lawyer! I demand my rights!" Bill hammered on the bars of the cell with the chipped bowl that they had served his evening meal of bread and water in, shouting loudly for attention. No one came in answer to his call, and finally, hoarse, tired, and depressed, he lay down on the knobbed plastic bunk and stared up at the metal ceiling. Sunk in misery, he stared at the hook for long minutes before it finally penetrated. A hook? Why a hook here? Even in his apathy it bothered him, just as it had bothered him when they gave him a stout plastic belt with a sturdy buckle for his shoddy prison dungarees. Who wears a belt with one-piece dungarees? They had taken everything from him and supplied him only with paper slippers, crumpled dungarees, and a fine belt. Why? And why was there a sturdy great hook penetrating through the unbroken smoothness of the ceiling?

"I'm saved!" Bill screamed, and leaped up, balancing on the end of the bunk and whipping off the belt. There was a hole in the strap end of the belt that fitted neatly over the hook. While the buckle made a beautiful slip knot for a loop on the other end that would fit lovingly around his neck. And he could slip it over his head, seat the buckle under his ear, kick off from the bunk and strangle painfully with his toes a full foot above the floor. It was perfect.

"It is perfect!" he shouted happily, and jumped off the bunk and ran in circles under the noose, going *yeow-yeow-yeow* by flapping his hand in front of his mouth. "I'm not stuck, cooked, through, and finished. They want me to knock myself off to make things easy for them."

This time he lay back on the bunk, smiling happily, and tried to think it out. There had to be a chance he could

wriggle out of this thing alive, or they wouldn't have gone to all this trouble to give him an opportunity to hang himself. Or could they be playing a double, subtle game? Allowing him hope where none existed? No, this was impossible. They had a lot of attributes: pettiness, selfishness, anger, vengefulness, superiority, power-lust, the list was almost endless; but one thing was certain—subtlety was not on it.

They? For the first time in his life Bill wondered who *they* were. Everyone blamed everything on *them*, everyone knew that *they* would cause trouble. He even knew from experience what *they* were like. But who were *they*? A footstep shuffled outside the door, and he looked over to see Deathwish Drang glowering in at him.

"Who are *they*?" Bill asked.

"*They* are everyone who wants to be one of them," Deathwish said philosophically twanging a tusk. "*They* are both a state of mind and an institution."

"Don't give me any of that mystical bowb! A straight answer to a straight question now."

"I am being straight," Deathwish said, reeking of sincerity. "They die off and are replaced, but the institution of theyness goes on."

"I'm sorry I asked," Bill said, sidling over so he could whisper through the bars. "I need a lawyer, Deathwish old buddy. Can you find me a good lawyer?"

"They'll appoint a lawyer for you."

Bill made the rudest noise he possibly could. "Yeah, and we know just what will happen with that lawyer. I need a lawyer to *help* me. And I have money to pay him—"

"Well why didn't you say that sooner?" Deathwish slipped on his gold-rimmed spectacles and flipped slowly through a small notebook. "I take a 10 per cent commission for handling this."

"Affirm."

"Well—do you want a cheap honest lawyer or an expensive crooked one?"

"I have 17,000 bucks hidden where no one can find it."

"You should have told me that first." Deathwish closed the book and put it away. "They must have suspected this, that's why they gave you the belt and the cell with the

hook. With money like that you can hire the absolute best."

"Who is that?"

"Abdul O'Brien-Cohen."

"Send for him."

And no more than two bowls of soggy bread and water had passed before there was a new footstep in the hall and a clear and penetrating voice bounced from the chill walls.

"Salaam there, boyo, faith and I've had a *gesundt shtik* trouble getting here."

"This is a general court-martial case," Bill told the mild, unassuming man with the ordinary face who stood outside the bars. I don't think a civilian lawyer will be allowed."

"Begorrah, landsman—it is Allah's will that I be prepared for all things." He whipped a bristling moustache with waxed tips out of his pocket and pressed it to his upper lip. At the same time he threw his chest back and his shoulders seemed to widen and a steely glint came to his eye and the planes of his face took on a military stiffness. "I'm pleased to meet you. We're in this together, and I want you to know that I won't let you down even if you are an enlisted man."

"What happened to Abdul O'Brien-Cohen?"

"I have a reserve commission in the Imperial Barratry Corps. Captain A. C. O'Brien at your service. I believe the sum of 17,000 was mentioned?"

"I take 10 per cent of that," Deathwish said, sidling up.

Negotiations were opened and took a number of hours. All three men liked, respected, and distrusted each other, so that elaborate safeguards were called for. When Deathwish and the lawyer finally left they had careful instructions about where to find the money, and Bill had statements signed in blood with affixed thumbprint from each of them stating that they were members of the Party dedicated to overthrowing the Emperor. When they returned with the money Bill gave them back their statements as soon as Captain OBrien had signed a receipt for 15,300 bucks as payment in full for defending Bill before a general court-martial. It was all done in a businesslike and satisfying manner.

"Would you like to hear my side of the case?" Bill asked.

"Of course not, that has no bearing at all on the charges. When you enlisted in the troopers you signed away all your rights as a human being. They can do whatever they like with you. Your only advantage is that they are also prisoners of their own system and must abide by the complex and self-contradictory code of laws they have constructed through the centuries. They want to shoot you for desertion and have rigged a foolproof case."

"Then I'll be shot!"

"Perhaps, but that's the chance we have to take."

"*We—?* You going to be hit by half the bullets?"

"Don't get snotty when you're talking to an officer, bowb. Abide in me, have faith, and hope they make some mistakes."

After that it was just a matter of marking time until the trial. Bill knew it was close when they gave him a uniform with a Fuse Tender First Class insignia on the arm. Then the guard tramped up, the door sprang open, and Deathwish waved him out. They marched away together, and Bill exacted what small pleasure he could from changing step to louse up the guard. But once through the door of the courtroom he took a military brace and tried to look like an old campaigner with his medals clinking on his chest. There was an empty chair next to a polished, uniformed, and very military Captain O'Brien.

"That's the stuff," O'Brien said. "Keep up with the G.I. bit, outplay them at their own game."

They climbed to their feet as the officers of the court filed in. Bill and O'Brien were seated at the end of the long, black, plastic table, and at the far end sat the trial judge advocate, a grey-haired and stern-looking major who wore a cheap girdle. Then ten officers of the court sat down at the long side of the table, where they could scowl out at the audience and the witnesses.

"Let us begin," the court president, a bald-headed and pudgy fleet admiral, said with fitting solemnity. "Let the trial open, let justice be done with utmost dispatch, and the prisoner found guilty and shot."

"I object," O'Brien said, springing to his feet. "These

remarks are prejudicial toward the accused, who is innocent until proven guilty—"

"Objection overruled." The president's gavel banged. "Counsel for the defence is fined fifty bucks for unwarranted interruption. The accused is guilty, the evidence will prove it, and he will be shot. Justice will be served."

"So that's the way they are going to play it," O'Brien murmured to Bill through half-closed lips. "I can play them any way as long as I know the ground rules."

The trial judge advocate had already begun his opening statement in a monotonous voice.

". . . therefore we shall prove that Fuse Tender First Class Bill did wilfully overstay his officially granted leave by a period of nine days and thereafter resist arrest and flee from the arresting officers and successfully elude pursuit, whereupon he absented himself for the period of over one standard year, so is therefore guilty of desertion . . ."

"Guilty as hell!" one of the court officers shouted, a red-faced cavalry major with a black monocle, springing to his feet and knocking over his chair. "I vote guilty—shoot the bugger!"

"I agree, Sam," the president drawled, tapping lightly with his gavel, "but we have to shoot him by the book, take a little while yet."

"That's not true," Bill hissed to his lawyer. "The facts are—"

"Don't worry about facts, Bill, no one else here does. Facts can't alter this case."

". . . and we will therefore ask the supreme penalty, death," the trial judge advocate said, finally dragging to close.

"Are you going to waste our time with an opening statement, Captain?" the president asked, glaring at O'Brien.

"Just a few words, if the court pleases . . ."

There was a sudden stir among the spectators, and a ragged woman with a shawl over her head, clutching a blanket-wrapped bundle to her bosom, rushed forward to the edge of the table.

"Your honours—" she gasped, "don't take away me Bill, the light of me life. He's a good man, and whatever he did was only for me and the little one." She held out

the bundle, and a weak crying could be heard. "Every day he wanted to leave, to return to duty, but I was sick and the wee one was sick and I begged him with tears in my eyes to stay . . ."

"Get her out of here!" The gavel banged loudly.

". . . and he would stay, all the time swearing it would be just one more day, and all the time the darlin' knowing that if he left us we would die of starvation." Her voice was muffled by the bulk of the dress-uniformed MPs who carried her, struggling, toward the exit. ". . . and a blessing on your honours for freeing him, but if you condemn him, you black-hearted scuts, may you die and rot in hell . . ." The doors swung shut, and her voice was cut off.

"Strike all this from the records," the president said, and glowered at the counsel for the defence. "And if I thought you had anything to do with it I would have you shot right alongside your client."

O'Brien was looking his most guileless, fingers on chest and head back, and just beginning an innocent statement when there was another interruption. An old man climbed on to one of the spectator's benches and waved his arms for attention.

"Listen to me, one and all. Justice must be served, and I am its instrument. I had meant to keep my silence and allow an innocent man to be executed, but I cannot. Bill is my son, my only son, and I begged him to go over the hill to aid me; dying as I was of cancer, I wanted to see him one last time, but he stayed to nurse me . . ." There was a struggle as the MPs grabbed the man and found he was chained to the bench. "Yes he did, cooked porridge for me and made me eat, and he did so well that bit by bit I rallied until you see me today, a cured man, cured by the porridge from his son's loyal hands. Now my boy shall die because he saved me, but it shall not be. Take my poor old worthless life instead of his . . ." An atomic wire cutter hummed, and the old man was thrown out the back door.

"That's enough! That's too much!" the red-faced president of the court shrieked, and pounded so hard that the gavel broke and he hurled the pieces across the room. "Clear this court of all spectators and witnesses. It is the judgment of this court that the rest of this trial will be con-

ducted by rules of precedence without witnesses or evidence admitted." He flashed a quick look around at his accomplices, who all nodded solemn agreement. "Therefore the defendant is found guilty and will be shot as soon as he can be dragged to the shooting gallery."

The officers of the court were already pushing back their chairs to go when O'Brien's slow voice stopped them.

"It is of course within the jurisdiction of this court to try a case in the manner so prescribed, but it is also necessary to quote the pertinent article of precedent before judgment is passed."

The president sighed and sat down again. "I wish you wouldn't try to be so difficult, Captain, you know the regulations just as well as I do. But if you insist. Pablo, read it to them."

The law officer flipped through a thick volume on his desk, found his place with his finger, then read aloud.

"Articles of War, Military Regulations, paragraph, page, etc. etc. . . . yes, here it is, paragraph 298-B . . . 'If any enlisted man shall absent himself from his post of duty for over a period of fourteen months, then was discovered in a hiding desertion even if absent in person from the trial and the penalty for desertion is painful death.' "

"That seems clear enough. Any more questions?" the president asked.

"No questions; I would just like to quote a precedent." O'Brien had placed a high stack of thick books before him and was reading from the topmost one. "Here it is, Buck Private Lövenvig versus the United States Army Air Corps, Texas, 1944. It is here stated that Lövenvig was AWOL for a period of one standard year in which time he secreted himself in a hiding place above the ceiling of the mess hall from whence he descended only in the small hours of the night to eat and to drink of the stores therein and to empty his potty. Since he had not left the base he could not be judged AWOL or be a deserter and could receive only company punishment of a most minor kind."

The officers of the court had seated themselves again and were all watching the law officer, who was flipping quickly through his own books. He finally emerged with a smile and a reference of his own.

"All of that is correct, Captain, except for the fact that the accused here *did* absent himself from his assigned station, the Transit Rankers' Centre, and was at large upon the planet Helior."

"All of which is correct, sir," O'Brien said, whipping out yet another volume and waving it over his head. "But in Dragsted versus the Imperial Navy Billeting Corps, Helior, 8832, it was agreed that for purposes of legal definition the planet Helior was to be defined as the City of Helior, and the City of Helior was to be defined as the planet Helior."

"All of which is undoubtedly true," the president interrupted, "but totally beside the point. They have no bearing upon the present case and I'll ask you to snap it up, Captain, because I have a golf appointment."

"You can tee off in ten minutes, sir, if you allow both those precedents to stand. I then introduce one last item, a document drawn up by Fleet Admiral Marmoset—"

"Why, that's me!" the president gasped.

"—at the onset of hostilities with the Chingers when the City of Helior was declared under martial law and considered to be a single military establishment. I therefore submit that the accused is innocent of the charge of desertion since he never left this planet, therefore he never left this city, therefore he never left his post of duty."

A heavy silence fell and was finally broken by the president's worried voice as he turned to the law officer. "Is what this bowb says true, Pablo? Can't we shoot the guy?"

The law officer was sweating as he searched feverishly through his law books, then finally pushed them from him and answered in a bitter voice. "True enough and no way out of it. This Arabic-Jewish-Irish con man has got us by the short hair. The accused is innocent of the charges."

"No execution . . .?" one of the court officers asked in a high, querulous voice, and another, older one, dropped his head onto his arms and began to sob.

"Well he's not getting off that easily," the president said, scowling at Bill. "If the accused was on this post for the last year then he should have been on duty. And during that year he must have slept. Which means he *slept on*

duty. Therefore I sentence him to hard labour in military prison for one year and one day and order that he be reduced in rank to Fuse Tender Seventh Class. Tear off his stripes and take him away; I have to get to the golf course."

two

THE TRANSIT STOCKADE was a makeshift building of plastic sheets bolted to bent aluminium frames and was in the centre of a large quadrangle. MPs with bayoneted atom-rifles marched around the perimeter of the six electrified barbed-wire fences. The multiple gates were opened by remote control, and Bill was dragged through them by the handcuff robot that had brought him here. This debased machine was a squat and heavy cube as high as his knee that ran on clanking treads and from the top of which projected a steel bar with heavy handcuffs fastened to the end. Bill was on the end of the handcuffs. Escape was impossible, because if any attempt was made to force the cuffs the robot sadistically exploded a pee-wee atom bomb it had in its guts and blew up itself and the escaping prisoner, as well as anyone else in the vicinity. Once inside the compound the robot stopped and did not protest when the guard sergeant unlocked the cuffs. As soon as its prisoner was freed the machine rolled into its kennel and vanished.

"All right, wise guy, you're in *my* charge now, and dat means trouble for you," the sergeant snapped at Bill. He had a shaven head, a wide and scar-covered jaw, small, close-set eyes in which there flickered the guttering candle of stupidity.

Bill narrowed his own eyes to slits and slowly raised his good left-right arm, flexing the biceps. Tembo's muscle swelled and split the thin prison fatigue jacket with a harsh, ripping sound. Then Bill pointed to the ribbon of the Purple Dart which he had pinned to his chest.

"Do you know how I got that?" he asked in a grim and toneless voice. "I got that by killing thirteen Chingers single-handed in a pillbox I had been sent into. I got into this stockade here because after killing the Chingers I

came back and killed the sergeant who sent me in there. Now—what did you say about trouble, Sergeant?"

"You don't give me no trouble I don't give you no trouble," the guard sergeant squeaked as he skittered away. "You're in cell 13, in there, right upstairs . . ." He stopped suddenly and began to chew all the fingernails on one hand at the same time, with a nibbling-crunching sound. Bill gave him a long glower for good measure, then turned and went slowly into the building.

The door to number 13 stood open, and Bill looked in at the narrow cell dimly lit by the light that filtered through the translucent plastic walls. The double-decker bunk took up almost all of the space, leaving only a narrow passage at one side. Two sagging shelves were bolted to the far wall and, along with the stencilled message BE CLEAN NOT OBSCENE—DIRTY TALK HELPS THE ENEMY!, made up the complete furnishings. A small man with a pointed face and beady eyes lay on the bottom bunk looking intently at Bill. Bill looked right back and frowned.

"Come in, Sarge," the little man said as he scuttled up the support into the upper bunk. "I been saving the lower for you, yes I have. The name in Blackey, and I'm doing ten months for telling a second looey to blow it out . . ."

He ended the sentence with a slight questioning note that Bill ignored. Bill's feet hurt. He kicked off the purple boots and stretched out on the sack. Blackey's head popped over the edge of the upper bunk, not unlike a rodent peering out the landscape. "It's a long time to chow—how's about a Dobbin-burger?" A hand appeared next to the head and slipped a shiny package down to Bill.

After looking it over suspiciously Bill pulled the sealing string on the end of the plastic bag. As soon as the air rushed in and hit the combustible lining the burger started to smoke and within three seconds was steaming hot. Lifting the bun Bill squirted ketchup in from the little sack at the other end of the bag, then took a suspicious bite. It was rich, juicy horse.

"This old grey mare sure tastes like it used to be," Bill said, talking with his mouth full. "How did you ever smuggle this into the stockade?"

Blackey grinned and produced a broad stage wink.

"Contacts. They bring it in to me, all I gotta do is ask. I didn't catch the name . . .?"

"Bill." Food had soothed his ruffled temper. "A year and a day for sleeping on duty. I would have been shot for desertion, but I had a good lawyer. That was a good burger, too bad there's nothing to wash it down with."

Blackey produced a small bottle labelled COUGH SYRUP and passed it to Bill. "Specially mixed for me by a friend in the medics. Half grain alcohol and half ether."

"Zoingg!" Bill said, dashing the tears from his eyes after draining half the bottle. He felt almost at peace with the world. You're a good buddy to have around, Blackey."

"You can say that again," Blackey told him earnestly. "It never hurts to have a buddy, not in the troopers, the army, the navy, anywheres. Ask old Blackey, he knows. You got muscles, Bill?"

Bill lazily flexed Tembo's muscles for him.

"That's what I like to see," Blackey said in admiration. "With your muscles and my brain we can get along fine . . ."

"I have a brain too!"

"Relax it! Give it a break, while I do the thinking. I seen service in more armies than you got days in the troopers. I got my first Purple Heart serving with Hannibal, there's the scar right there." He pointed to a white arc on the back of his hand. "But I picked him for a loser and switched to Romulus and Remus' boys while there was still time. I been learning ever since, and I always land on my feet. I saw which way the wind was blowing and ate some laundry soap and got the trots the morning of Waterloo, and I missed but nothing, I tell you. I saw the same kind of thing shaping up at the Somme—or was it Ypres? —I forget some of them old names now, and chewed a cigarette and put it into my armpit, you get a fever that way, and missed that show too. There's always an angle to figure I always say."

"I never heard of those battles. Fighting the Chingers?"

"No, earlier than that, a lot earlier than that. Wars and wars ago."

"That makes you pretty old, Blackey. You don't look pretty old."

"I am pretty old, but I don't tell people usually because they give me the laugh. But I remember the pyramids being built, and I remember what lousy chow the Assyrian army had, and the time we took over Wug's mob when they tried to get into our cave, rolled rocks down on them."

"Sounds like a lot of bowb," Bill said lazily, draining the bottle.

"Yeah, that's what everybody says, so I don't tell the old stories any more. They don't even believe me when I show them my good-luck piece." He held out a little white triangle with a ragged edge. "Tooth from a pterodactyl. Knocked it down myself with a stone from a sling I had just invented . . ."

"Looks like a hunk of plastic."

"See what I mean? So I don't tell the old stories any more. Just keep re-enlisting and drifting with the tide . . ."

Bill sat up and gaped. "Re-enlist! Why, that's suicide . . ."

"Safe as houses. Safest place during the war is in the army. The jerks in the front lines get their heads shot off, the civilians at home get their heads blown off. Guys in between safe as houses. It takes thirty, fifty, maybe seventy guys in the middle to supply every guy in the line. Once you learn to be a file clerk you're safe. Who ever heard of them shooting at a file clerk? I'm a great file clerk. But that's just in wartime. Peacetime, whenever they make a mistake and there is peace for awhile, it's better to be in the combat troops. Better food, longer leaves, nothing much to do. Travel a lot."

"So what happens when the war starts?"

"I know 735 different ways to get into the hospitals."

"Will you teach me a couple?"

"Anything for a buddy, Bill. I'll show you tonight, after they bring the chow around. And the guard what brings the chow is being difficult about a little favour I asked him. Boy, I wish he had a broken arm!"

"Which arm?" Bill cracked his knuckles with a loud crunch.

"Dealer's choice."

The Plastichouse Stockade was a transient centre where prisoners were kept on the way from somewhere to elsewhere. It was an easy relaxed life enjoyed by both guards and inmates with nothing to disturb the even tenor of the days. There had been one new guard, a real eager type fresh in from the National Territorial Guard, but he had had an accident while serving the meals and had broken his arm. Even the other guards were glad to see him go. About once a week Blackey would be taken away under armed guard to the Base Records Section where he was forging new records for a light colonel who was very active in the black market and wanted to make millionaire before he retired. While working on the records Blackey saw to it that the stockade guards received undeserved promotions, extra leave time, and cash bonuses for nonexistent medals. As a result Bill and Blackey ate and drank very well and grew fat. It was as peaceful as could possibly be until the morning after a session in the records section when Blackey returned and woke Bill up.

"Good news," he said. "We're shipping out."

"What's good about that?" Bill asked, surly at being disturbed and still half-stoned from the previous evening's drinking bout. "I like it here."

"It's going to get too hot for us soon. The colonel is giving me the eye and a very funny look, and I think he is going to have us shipped to the other end of the galaxy, where there is heavy fighting. But he's not going to do anything until next week after I finish the books for him, so I had secret orders cut for us *this* week sending us to Tabes Dorsalis where the cement mines are."

"The Dust World!" Bill shouted hoarsely, and picked Blackey up by the throat and shook him. "A world-wide cement mine where men die of silicosis in hours. Hellhole of the universe . . ."

Blackey wriggled free and scuttled to the other end of the cell.

"Hold it!" he gasped. "Don't go off half cocked. Close the cover on your priming pan and keep your powder dry! Do you think I would ship us to a place like that? That's just the way it is on the TV shows, but I got the inside

dope. If you work in the cement mines, roger, it ain't no good. But they got one tremendous base section there with a lot of clerical help, and they use trustees in the motor pool, since there aren't enough troops there. While I was working on the records I changed your MS from fuse tender, which is a suicide job, to driver, and here is your driver's licence with qualifications on everything from monocycle to atomic 89-ton tank. So we get us some soft jobs, and besides, the whole base is air-conditioned."

"It was kind of nice here," Bill said, scowling at the plastic card that certified to his aptitude in chauffeuring a number of strange vehicles, most of which he had never seen.

"They come, they go, they're all the same," Blackey said, packing a small toilet kit.

They began to realize that something was wrong when the column of prisoners was shackled then chained together with neckcuffs and leg irons and prodded into the transport spacer by a platoon of combat MPs. "Move along!" they shouted. "You'll have plenty of time to relax when we get to Tabes Dorsalgia."

"Where are we going?" Bill gasped.

"You heard me, snap it bowb."

"You told me Tabes Dorsalis," Bill snarled at Blackey who was ahead of him in the chain. "Tabes Dorsalgia is the base on Veneria where all the fighting is going on—we're heading for combat!"

"A little slip of the pen," Blackey sighed. "You can't win them all."

He dodged the kick Bill swung at him, then waited patiently while the MPs beat Bill senseless with their clubs and dragged him aboard the ship.

three

VENERIA . . . A FOG-SHROUDED world of untold horrors, creeping in its orbit around the ghoulish green star Hernia like some repellent heavenly trespasser newly rose from the nethermost pit. What secrets lie beneath the eternal mists? What nameless monsters undulate and gibber in its dank tarns and bottomless black lagoons? Faced by the

unspeakable terrors of this planet men go mad rather than face up to the faceless. Veneria . . . swamp world, the lair of the hideous and unimaginable Venians . . .

It was hot and it was damp and it stank. The wood of the newly-constructed barracks was already soft and rotting away. You took your shoes off, and before they hit the floor fungus was growing out of them. Once inside the compound their chains were removed, since there was no place for labor-camp prisoners to escape to, and Bill wheeled around looking for Blackey, the fingers of Tembo's arm snapping like hungry jaws. Then he remembered that Blackey had spoken to one of the guards as they were leaving the ship, had slipped him something, and a little while later had been unlocked from the line and led away. By now he would be running the file section and by tomorrow he would be living in the nurses's quarters. Bill sighed, let the whole thing slip out of his mind and vanish, since it was just one more antagonistic factor that he had no control over, and dropped down onto the nearest bunk. Instantly a vine flashed up from a crack in the floor, whipped four times around the bunk lashing him securely to it, then plunged tendrils into his leg and began to drink his blood.

"Grrrrk . . .!" Bill croaked against the pressure of a green loop that tightened around his throat.

"Never lie down without you got a knife in your hand," a thin, yellowish sergeant said as he passed by, and severed the vine, with his own knife, where it emerged from the floorboards.

"Thanks, Sarge," Bill said, stripping off the coils and throwing them out the window.

The sergeant suddenly began vibrating like a plucked string and dropped onto the foot of Bill's bunk. "P-pocket . . . shirt . . . p-p-pills . . ." he stuttered through chattering teeth. Bill pulled a plastic box of pills out of the sergeant's pocket and forced some of them into his mouth. The vibrations stopped, and the man sagged back against the wall, gaunter and yellower and streaming with sweat.

"Jaundice and swamp fever and galloping filariasis, never know when an attack will hit me, that's why they

can't send me back to combat, I can't hold a gun. Me, Master Sergeant Ferkel, the best damned flamethrower in Kirjasoff's Kut-throats, and they have me playing nurse-maid in a prison labour camp. So you think that bugs me? It does not bug me, it makes me happy, and the only thing that would make me happier would be shipping off this cesspool-planet at once."

"Do you think alcohol will hurt your condition?" Bill asked, passing over a bottle of cough syrup. "It's kind of rough here?"

"Not only won't hurt it, but it will . . ." There was a deep gurgling, and when the sergeant spoke again he was hoarser but stronger. "Rough is not the word for it. Fighting the Chingers is bad enough, but on this planet they have the natives, the Venians, on their side. These Venians look like mouldy newts, and they got just maybe enough I.Q. to hold a gun and pull the trigger, but it is *their* planet and they are but murder out there in the swamps. They hide under the mud and they swim under the water and they swing from the trees and the whole planet is thick with them. They got no sources of supply, no army divisions, no organizations, they just fight. If one dies the others eat him. If one is wounded in the leg the others eat the leg and he grows a new one. If one of them runs out of ammunition or poison darts or whatever he just swims back a hundred miles to base, loads up, and back to battle. We have been fighting here for three years, and we now control one hundred square miles of territory."

"A hundred, that sounds like a lot."

"Just to a stupid bowb like you. That is ten miles by ten miles, and maybe about two square miles more than we captured in the first landings."

There was the squish-thud of tired feet, and weary, mud-soaked men began to drag into the barracks. Sergeant Ferkel hauled himself to his feet and blew a long blast on his whistle.

"All right you new men, now hear this. You have all been assigned to B squad, which is now assembling in the compound, which squad will now march out into the swamp and finish the job these shagged creeps from A squad began this morning. You will do a good day's work

out there. I am not going to appeal to your sense of loyalty, your honour or your sense of duty . . ." Ferkel whipped out his atomic pistol and blew a hole in the ceiling through which rain began to drip. "I am only going to appeal to your urge to survive, because any man shirking, goofing off, or not pulling his own weight will personally be shot dead by me. Now get out." With his bared teeth and shaking hands he looked sick enough and mean enough and mad enough to do it. Bill and the rest of B squad rushed out into the rain and formed ranks.

"Pick up da axes, pick up da picks, get the uranium out," the corporal of the armed guard snarled as they squelched through the mud toward the gate. The labour squad, carrying their tools, stayed in the centre, while the armed guard walked on the outside. The guard wasn't there to stop the prisoners from escaping but to give some measure of protection from the enemy. They dragged slowly down the road of felled trees that wound through the swamp. There was a sudden whistling overhead, and heavy transports flashed by.

"We're in luck today," one of the older prisoners said, "they're sending in the heavy infantry again. I didn't know they had any left."

"You mean they'll capture more territory?" Bill asked.

"Naw, all they'll get is dead. But while they're getting butchered some of the pressure will be off of us, and we can maybe work without losing too many men."

Without orders they all stopped to watch as the heavy infantry fell like rain into the swamps ahead—and vanished just as easily as raindrops. Every once in awhile there would be a boom and flash as a teensie A-bomb went off, which probably atomized a few Venians, but there were billions more of the enemy just waiting to rush in. Small arms crackled in the distance, and grenades boomed. Then over the trees they saw a bobbing, bouncing figure approach. It was a heavy infantryman in his armoured suit and gasproof helmet, A-bombs and grenades strapped to him, a regular walking armoury. Or rather hopping armoury, since he would have had trouble walking on a paved street with the weight of junk hung about him, so he therefore moved by jumping, using two reaction rockets,

one bolted to each hip. His hops were getting lower and lower as he came near. He landed fifty yards away and slowly sank to his waist in the swamp, his rockets hissing as they touched the water. Then he hopped again, much shorter this time, the rockets fizzling and popping, and he threw his helmet open in the air.

"Hey, guys," he called. "The dirty Chingers got my fuel tank. My rockets are almost out, I can't hop much more. Give a buddy a hand will you . . ." He hit the water with a splash.

"Get outta the monkey suit and we'll pull you in," the guard corporal called.

"Are you nuts!" the soldier shouted. "It takes an hour to get into and outta this thing." He triggered his rockets, but they just went *pfffft*, and he rose about a foot in the water, then dropped back. "The fuel's gone! Help me you bastards! What's this, bowb-your-buddy week . . ." he shouted as he sank. Then his head went under, and there were a few bubbles and nothing else.

"It's always bowb-your-buddy week," the corporal said. "Get the column moving!" he ordered, and they shuffled forward. "Them suits weigh three thousand pounds. Go down like a rock."

If this was a quiet day, Bill didn't want to see a busy one. Since the entire planet of Veneria was a swamp no advances could be made until a road was built. Individual soldiers might penetrate a bit ahead of the road, but for equipment or supplies or even heavily armed men a road was necessary. Therefore the labour corps was building a road of felled trees. At the front.

Bursts from atomrifles steamed in the water around them, and the poison darts were as thick as falling leaves. The firing and sniping on both sides was constant while the prisoners cut down trees and trimmed and lashed them together to push the road forward another few inches. Bill trimmed and chopped and tried to ignore the screams and falling bodies until it began to grow dark. The squad, now a good deal smaller, made their return march in the dusk.

"We pushed it ahead at least thirty yards this afternoon," Bill said to the old prisoner marching at his side.

"Don't mean nothing, Venians swim up in the night and take the logs away."

Bill instantly made his mind up to get out of there.

"Got any more of that joyjuice?" Sergeant Ferkel asked when Bill dropped onto his bunk and began to scrape some of the mud from his boots with the blade of his knife. Bill took a quick slash at a plant coming up through the floorboards before he answered.

"Do you think you could spare me a moment to give me some advice, Sergeant?"

"I am a flowing fountain of advice once my throat is lubricated".

Bill dug a bottle out of his pocket. "How do you get out of this outfit," he asked.

"You get killed," the sergeant told him as he raised the bottle to his lips. Bill snatched it out of his hand.

"That I know without your help," he snarled.

"Well that's all you gonna know without my help," the sergeant snarled back.

Their noses were touching and they growled at each other deep in their throats. Having proven just where they stood and just how tough they both were they relaxed, and Sergeant Ferkel leaned back while Bill sighed and passed him the bottle.

"How's about a job in the orderly room?" Bill asked.

"We don't have an orderly room. We don't have any records. Everyone sent here gets killed sooner or later, so who cares exactly when."

"What about getting wounded?"

"Get sent to the hospital, get well, get sent back here."

"The only thing left to do is mutiny!" Bill shouted.

"Didn't work last four times we tried it. They just pulled the supply ships out and didn't give us any food until we agreed to start fighting again. Wrong chemistry here, all the food on this planet is pure poison for our metabolisms. We had a couple of guys prove it the hard way. Any mutiny that is going to succeed has to grab enough ships first so we can get off-planet. If you got any good ideas about that I'll put you in touch with the Permanent Mutiny Committee."

"Isn't there *any* way to get out?"

"I anshered that firsht," Ferkel told him, and fell over stone drunk.

"I'll see for myself," Bill said as he slid the sergeant's pistol from his holster, then slipped out the back door.

Armoured floodlights lit up the forward positions facing the enemy, and Bill went in the opposite direction, toward the distant white flares of landing rockets. Barracks and warehouses were dotted about on the boggy ground, but Bill stayed clear of them since they were all guarded, and the guards had itchy trigger fingers. They fired at anything they saw, anything they heard, and if they didn't see or hear anything they fired once in a while anyway just to keep their morale up. Lights were burning brightly ahead, and Bill crawled forward on his stomach to peer from behind a rank growth at a tall, floodlighted fence of barbed wire that stretched out of sight in both directions.

A burst from an atomic rifle burned a hole in the mud about a yard behind him, and a searchlight swung over, catching him full in its glare.

"Greeting from your commanding officer," an amplified voice thundered from loudspeakers on the fence. "This is a recorded announcement. You are now attempting to leave the combat zone and enter the restricted headquarters zone. This is forbidden. Your presence has been detected by automatic machinery, and these same devices now have a number of guns trained upon you. They will fire in sixty seconds if you do not leave. Be patriotic, man! Do your duty. Death to the Chingers! Fifty-five seconds. Would you like your mother to know that her boy is a coward? Fifty seconds. Your Emperor has invested a lot of money in your training—is this the way that you repay him? Forty-five seconds . . ."

Bill cursed and shot up the nearest loudspeaker, but the voice continued from others down the length of the fence. He turned and went back the way he had come.

As he neared his barracks, skirting the front line to avoid the fire from the nervous guards in the buildings, all the lights went out. At the same time gunfire and bomb explosions broke out on every side.

four

SOMETHING SLITHERED CLOSE by in the mud and Bill's trigger finger spontaneously contracted and he shot it. In the brief atomic flare he saw the smoking remains of a dead Venian, as well as an unusually large number of live Venians squelching to the attack. Bill dived aside instantly, so that their return fire missed him, and fled in the opposite direction. His only thought was to save his skin, and this he did by getting as far from the firing and the attacking enemy as he could. That this direction happened to be into the trackless swamp he did not consider at the time. *Survive,* his shivering little ego screamed, and he ran on.

Running became difficult when the ground turned to mud, and even more difficult when the mud gave way to open water. After paddling desperately for an interminable length of time Bill came to more mud. The first hysteria had now passed, the firing was only a dull rumble in the distance, and he was exhausted. He dropped onto the mudbank and instantly sharp teeth sank deep into his buttocks. Screaming hoarsely, he ran on until he ran into a tree. He wasn't going fast enough to hurt himself, and the feel of rough bark under his fingers brought out all of his eoanthropic survival instincts: he climbed. High up there were two branches that forked out from the trunk, and he wedged himself into the crotch, back to the solid wood and gun pointed straight ahead and ready. Nothing bothered him now. The night sounds grew dim and distant, the blackness was complete, and within a few minutes his head started to nod. He dragged it back up a few times, blinked about at nothing, then finally slept.

It was the first grey light of dawn when he opened his gummy eyes and blinked around. There was a little lizard perched on a nearby branch watching him with jewel-like eyes.

"Gee—you were really sacked out," the Chinger said.

Bill's shot tore a smoking scar in the top of the branch, then the Chinger swung back up from underneath and meticulously wiped bits of ash from his paws.

"Easy on the trigger, Billy," it said. "Gee—I could have killed you anytime during the night if I had wanted to."

"I know you," Bill said hoarsely. "You're Eager Beager, aren't you?"

"Gee—this is just like old home week, isn't it?" A centipede was scuttling by, and Eager Beager the Chinger grabbed it up with three of his arms and began pulling off legs with his fourth and eating them. "I recognized you Bill, and wanted to talk to you. I have been feeling bad ever since I called you a stoolie, that wasn't right of me. You were only doing your duty when you turned me in. You wouldn't like to tell me how you recognized me, would you . . .?" he asked, and winked slyly.

"Why don't you bowb off, Jack?" Bill growled, and groped in his pocket for a bottle of cough syrup. Eager Chinger sighed.

"Well, I suppose I can't expect you to betray anything of military importance, but I hope you will answer a few questions for me." He discarded the delimbed corpse and groped about in his marsupial pouch and produced a tablet and tiny writing instrument. "You must realize that spying is not my chosen occupation, but rather I was dragooned into it through my speciality, which is exopology—perhaps you have heard of this discipline . . .?"

"We had an orientation lecture once, an exopologist, all he could talk about was alien creeps and things."

"Yes—well, that roughly sums it up. The science of the study of alien life forms, and of course to us you homo sapiens are an alien form . . ." He scuttled halfway around the branch when Bill raised his gun.

"Watch that kind of talk, bowb!"

"Sorry, just my manner of speaking. To put it briefly, since I specialized in the study of your species I was sent out as a spy, reluctantly, but that is the sort of sacrifice one makes during wartime. However, seeing you here reminded me that there are a number of questions and problems still unanswered that I would appreciate your help on, purely in the matter of science of course."

"Like what?" Bill asked suspiciously, draining the bottle and flinging it away into the jungle.

"Well—gee—to begin simply, how do you feel about us Chingers?"

"Death to all Chingers!" The little pen flew over the tablet.

"But you have been *taught* to say that. How did you feel before you entered the service?"

"Didn't give a damn about Chingers." Out of the corner of his eye Bill was watching a suspicious movement of the leaves in the tree above.

"Fine! Then could you explain to me just who it is that hates us Chingers and wants to fight a war of extermination?"

"Nobody really hates Chingers, I guess. It's just that there is no one else around to fight a war with, so we fight with you." The moving leaves had parted and a great, smooth head with slitted eyes peered down.

"I knew it! And that brings me to my really important question. Why *do* you homo sapiens like to fight wars?"

Bill's hand tightened on his gun as the monstrous head dropped silently down from the leaves behind Eager Chinger Beager; it was attached to a foot-thick and apparently endless serpent body.

"Fight wars? I don't know," Bill said, distracted by the soundless approach of the giant snake. "I guess because we like to, there doesn't seem to be any other reason."

"You *like* to!" the Chinger squeaked, hopping up and down with excitement. "No civilized race could *like* wars, death, killing, maiming, rape, torture, pain, to name just a few of the concomitant factors. Your race can't be civilized!"

The snake struck like lightning, and Eager Beager Chinger vanished down its spine-covered throat with only the slightest of muffled squeals.

"Yeah . . . I guess we're just not civilized," Bill said, gun ready, but the snake kept going on down. At least fifty yards of it slithered by before the tail flipped past and it was out of sight. "Serves the damn spy right," Bill grunted happily, and pulled himself to his feet.

Once on the ground Bill began to realize just how bad a spot he was in. The damp swamp had swallowed up any

marks of his passage from the night before and he hadn't the slightest idea in which direction the battle area lay. The sun was just a general illumination behind the layers of fog and cloud, and he felt a sudden chill as he realized how small were his chances of finding his way back. The invasion area, just ten miles to a side, made a microscopic pinprick in the hide of this planet. Yet if he didn't find it he was as good as dead. And if he just stayed here he would die, so, picking what looked like the most likely direction, he started off.

"I'm pooped," he said, and was. A few hours of dragging through the swamps had done nothing except weaken his muscles, fill his skin with insect bites, drain a quart or two of blood into the ubiquitous leeches, and deplete the charge in his gun as he killed a dozen or so of the local life forms that wanted him for breakfast. He was also hungry and thirsty. And still lost.

The rest of the day just recapitulated the morning, so that when the sky began to darken he was close to exhaustion, and his supply of cough medicine was gone. He was very hungry when he climbed a tree to find a spot to rest for the night, and he plucked a luscious-looking red fruit.

"Supposed to be poison." He looked at it suspiciously, then smelled it. It smelled fine. He threw it away.

In the morning he was much hungrier. "Should I put the barrel of the gun in my mouth and blow my head off?" he asked himself, weighing the atomic pistol in his hand. "Plenty of time for that yet. Plenty of things can still happen." Yet he didn't really believe it when he heard voices coming through the jungle toward him, human voices. He settled behind the limb and aimed his gun in that direction.

The voices grew louder, then a clanking and rattling. An armed Venian scuttled under the tree, but Bill held his fire as other figures loomed out of the fog. It was a long file of human prisoners wearing the neck irons used to bring Bill and the others to the labour camp, all joined together by a long chain that connected the neck irons. Each of the men was carrying a large box on his head. Bill let them stumble by underneath and kept a careful count

of the Venian guards. There were five in all with a sixth bringing up the rear, and when this one had passed underneath the tree Bill dropped straight down on him, braining him with his heavy boots. The Venian was armed with a Chinger-made copy of a standard atomic rifle, and Bill smiled wickedly as he hefted its familiar weight. After sticking the pistol into his waistband he crept after the column, rifle ready. He managed to kill the fifth guard by walking up behind him and catching him in the back of the neck with the rifle butt. The last two troopers in the file saw this but had enough brains to be quiet as he crept up on number four. Some stir among the prisoners or a chance sound warned this guard and he turned about, raising his rifle. There was no chance now to kill him silently, so Bill burned his head off and ran as fast as he could toward the head of the column. There was a shocked silence when the blast of the rifle echoed through the fog and Bill filled it with a shout.

"Hit the dirt—FAST!"

The soldiers dived into the mud and Bill held his atomic rifle at his waist as he ran, fanning it back and forth before him like a water house and holding down the trigger on full automatic. A continuous blast of fire poured out a yard above the ground and he squirted it in an arc before him. There were shouts and screams in the fog, and then the charge in the rifle was exhausted. Bill threw it from him and drew the pistol. Two of the remaining guards were down, and the last one was wounded and got off a single badly aimed shot before Bill burned him too.

"Not bad," he said, stopping and panting. "Six out of six."

There were low moans coming from the line of prisoners, and Bill curled his lip in disgust at the three men who hadn't dropped at his shouted command.

"What's the matter?" he asked, stirring one with his foot, "never been in combat before?" But this one didn't answer because he was charred dead.

"Never . . ." the next one answered, gasping in pain. "Get the corpsman, I'm wounded, there's one ahead in the

line. Oh, oh, why did I ever leave the *Chris Keeler*! Medic . . ."

Bill frowned at the three gold balls of a fourth lieutenant on the man's collar, then bent and scraped some mud from his face. "You! The laundry officer!" he shouted in outraged anger, raising his gun to finish the job.

"Not I!" the lieutenant moaned, recognizing Bill at last. "The laundry officer is gone, flushed down the drain! This is I, your friendly local pastor, bringing you the blessings of Ahura Mazdah, my son, and have you been reading the Avesta every day before going to sleep . . ."

"Bah!" Bill snarled. He couldn't shoot him now, and he walked over to the third wounded man.

"Hello Bill . . ." a weak voice said. "I guess the old reflexes are slowing down . . . I can't blame you for shooting me, I should have hit the dirt like the others . . ."

"You're damn right you should have," Bill said looking down at the familiar, loathed, tusked face. You're dying, Deathwish, you've bought it."

"I know," Deathwish said, and coughed. His eyes were closed.

"Wrap this line in a circle," Bill shouted. "I want the medic up here." The chain of prisoners curved around, and they watched as the medic examined the casualties.

"A bandage on the looie's arm takes care of him," he said. "Just superficial burns. But the big guy with the fangs has bought it."

"Can you keep him alive?" Bill asked.

"For a while, no telling how long."

"Keep him alive." Bill looked around at the circle of prisoners. "Any way to get those neck irons off?" he asked.

"Not without the keys," a burly infantry sergeant answered, "and the lizards never brought them. We'll have to wear them until we get back. How come you risked your neck saving us?" he asked suspiciously.

"Who wanted to save you?" Bill sneered. "I was hungry and I figured that must be food you were carrying."

"Yeah, it is," the sergeant said, looking relieved. "I can understand now why you took the chance."

Bill broke open a can of rations and stuffed his face.

five

THE DEAD MAN was cut from his position in the line, and the two men, one in front and one in back of the wounded Deathwish, wanted to do the same with him. Bill reasoned with them, explained the only human thing to do was to carry their buddy, and they agreed with him when he threatened to burn their legs off if they didn't. While the chained men were eating, Bill cut two flexible poles and made a stretcher by slipping three donated uniform jackets over them. He gave the captured rifles to the burly sergeant and the most likely looking combat veterans, keeping one for himself.

"Any chance of getting back?" Bill asked the sergeant, who was carefully wiping the moisture from his gun.

"Maybe. We can backtrack the way we come, easy enough to follow the trail after everyone dragged through. Keep an eye peeled for Venians, get them before they can spread the word about us. When we get in earshot of the fighting we try and find a quiet area—then break through. A fifty-fifty chance."

"Those are better odds for all of us than they were about an hour ago."

"You're telling me. But they get worse the longer we hang around here."

"Let's get moving."

Following the track was even easier than Bill had thought, and by early afternoon they heard the first signs of firing, a dim rumble in the distance. The only Venian they had seen had been instantly killed. Bill halted the march.

"Eat as much as you want, then dump the food," he said. "Pass that on. We'll be moving fast soon." He went to see how Deathwish was getting on.

"Badly—" Deathwish gasped, his face white as paper. "This is it, Bill . . . I know it . . . I've terrorized my last recruit . . . stood on my last pay line . . . had my last short-arm . . . so long—Bill . . . you're a good buddy . . . taking care of me like this . . ."

"Glad you think so, Deathwish, and maybe you'd like to do me a favour." He dug in the dying man's pockets

until he found his noncom's notebook, then opened it and scrawled on one of the blank pages. "How would you like to sign this, just for old time's sake—Deathwish?"

The big jaw lay slack, the evil red eyes open and staring.

"The dirty bowb's gone and died on me," Bill said disgustedly. After pondering for a moment he dribbled some ink from the pen on to the ball of Deathwish's thumb and pressed it to the paper to make a print.

"Medic!" he shouted, and the line of men curled around so the medic could come back. "How does he look to you?"

"Dead as a herring," the corpsman said after his professional examination.

"Just before he died he left me his tusks in his will, written right down here, see? These are real vat-grown tusks and cost a lot. Can they be transplanted?"

"Sure, as long as you get them cut out and deep froze inside the next twelve hours."

"No problem with that, we'll just carry the body back with us." He stared hard at the two stretcher bearers and fingered his gun, and they had no complaints. "Get that lieutenant up here."

"Chaplain," Bill said, holding out the sheet from the notebook, "I would like an officer's signature on this. Just before he died this trooper here dictated his will, but was too weak to sign it, so he put his thumbprint on it. Now you write below it that you saw him thumbprint it and it is all affirm and legal-like, then sign your name."

"But—I couldn't do that, my son. I did not see the deceased print the will and Glmmpf . . ."

He said Glmmpf because Bill had poked the barrel of the atomic pistol into his mouth and was rotating it, his finger quivering on the trigger.

"Shoot," the infantry sergeant said, and three of the men who could see what was going on were clapping. Bill slowly withdrew the pistol.

"I shall be happy to help," the chaplain said, grabbing for the pen.

Bill read the document, grunted in satisfaction, then went over and squatted down next to the medic. "You from the hospital?" he asked.

"You can say that again, and if I ever get back into the hospital I ain't never going out of it again. It was just my luck to be out picking up combat casualties when the raid hit."

"I hear that they aren't shipping any wounded out. Just putting them back into shape and sending them back into the line."

"You heard right. This is going to be a hard war to live through."

"But *some* of them must be wounded too badly to send back into action," Bill insisted.

"The miracles of modern medicine," the medic said indistinctly as he worried a cake of dehydrated luncheon meat. "Either you die or you're back in the line in a couple of weeks."

"Maybe a guy gets his arm blown off?"

"They got an icebox full of old arms. Sew a new one on and bango, right back into the line."

"What about a foot?" Bill asked, worried.

"That's right—I forgot! They got a foot shortage. So many guys lying around without feet that they're running out of bed space. They were just starting to ship some of them off-planet when I left."

"You got any pain pills?" Bill asked, changing the subject. The medic dug out a white bottle.

"Three of these and you'd laugh while they sawed your head off."

"Give me three."

"If you ever see a guy around what has his foot shot off, you better quick tie something around his leg just over the knee, tight, to cut the blood off."

"Thanks buddy."

"No skin off my nose."

"Let's get moving," the infantry sergeant said. "The quicker we move the better our chances."

Occasional flares from atomic rifles burned through the foliage overhead, and the thud-thud of heavy weapons shook the mud under their feet. They worked along parallel with the firing until it died down, then stopped. Bill, the only one not chained in the line, crawled ahead to reconnoitre. The enemy lines seemed to be lightly held and he

found a spot that looked the best for a breakthrough. Then, before he returned, he dug the heavy cord from his pocket that he had taken from one of the ration boxes. He tied a tourniquet above his right knee and twisted it with a stick, then swallowed the three pills. He stayed behind some heavy shrubs when he called to the others.

"Straight ahead, then sharp right before that clump of trees. Let's go—and FAST!"

Bill led the way until the first men could see the lines ahead. Then he called out "What's that?" and ran into the heavy foliage. "Chingers!" he shouted, and sat down with his back to a tree.

He took careful aim with his pistol and blew his right foot off.

"Get moving fast!" he shouted, and heard the crash of the frightened men through the undergrowth. He threw the pistol away, fired at random into the trees a few times, then dragged himself to his feet. The atomic rifle made a good enough crutch to hobble along on, and he did not have far to go. Two troopers, they must have been new to combat or they would have known better, left the shelter to help him inside.

"Thanks, buddies," he gasped, and sank to the ground. "War sure is hell."

ENVOI

THE MARTIAL MUSIC echoed from the hillside, bouncing back from the rocky ledges and losing itself in the hushed green shadows under the trees. Around the bend, stamping proudly through the dust, came the little parade led by the magnificent form of a one-robot band. Sunlight gleamed on its golden limbs and twinkled from the brazen instruments it worked with such enthusiasm. A small formation of assorted robots rolled and clattered in its wake, and bringing up the rear was the solitary figure of the grizzle-haired recruiting sergeant, striding along strongly, his rows of medals ajingle. Though the road was smooth the sergeant lurched suddenly, stumbling, and cursed with the rich proficiency of years.

"Halt!" he commanded, and while his little company braked to a stop he leaned against the stone wall that

bordered the road and rolled up his right pants leg. When he whistled one of the robots trundled quickly over and held out a tool box from which the sergeant took a large screwdriver and tightened one of the bolts in the ankle of his artificial foot. Then he squirted a few drops from an oil can onto the joint and rolled the pants leg back down. When he straightened up he noticed that a robomule was pulling a plough down a furrow in the field beyond the fence, while a husky farm lad guided it.

"Beer!" the sergeant barked, then, "'A Spaceman's Lament.'"

The one-robot band brought forth the gentle melodies of the old song, and by the time the furrow reached the limits of the field there were two dew-frosted steins of beer resting on the fence.

"That's sure pretty music," the ploughboy said.

"Join me in a beer," the sergeant said, sprinkling a white powder into it from a packet concealed in his hand.

"Don't mind iffen I do, sure is hotter'n h— out here today."

"Say *hell,* son, I heard the word before."

"Mamma don't like me to cuss. You sure do have long teeth, mister."

The sergeant twanged a tusk. "A big fellow like you should cuss a bit. If you were a trooper you could say *hell*—or even *bowb*—if you wanted to, all the time."

"I don't think I'd want to say anything like *that*." He flushed red under his deep tan. "Thanks for the beer, but I gotta be ploughing on now. Mamma said I was to never talk to soldiers."

"Your mamma's right, a dirty, cursing, drinking crew the most of them. Say, would you like to see a picture here of a new model robomule that can run a thousand hours without lubrication?" The sergeant held his hand out behind him, and a robot put a viewer into it.

"Why that sounds nice!" The farm lad raised the viewer to his eyes and looked into it and flushed an even deeper red. "That's no mule, mister, that's a *girl* and her clothes are . . ."

The sergeant reached out swiftly and pressed a button on the top of the viewer. Something went *thunk* inside of

it, and the farmer stood rigid and frozen. He did not move or change expression when the sergeant reached out and took the little machine from his paralyzed fingers.

"Take this stylo," the sergeant said, and the other's finger's closed on it. "Now sign this form, right down there where it says RECRUIT'S SIGNATURE . . ." The stylo scratched, and a sudden scream pierced the air.

"My Charlie! What are you doing with my Charlie!" an ancient, grey-haired woman wailed, as she scrambled around the hill.

"Your son is now a trooper for the greater glory of the Emperor," the sergeant said, and waved over the robot tailor.

"No—please—" the woman begged, clutching the sergeant's hand and dribbling tears onto it. "I've lost one son, isn't that enough . . ." she blinked up through the tears, then blinked again. "But you—you're my boy! My Bill come home! Even with those teeth and the scars and one black hand and one white hand and one artificial foot, I can tell; a mother always knows!"

The sergeant frowned down at the woman. "I believe you might be right," he said. "I thought the name Phigerinadon II sounded familiar."

The robot tailor had finished his job. The red paper jacket shone bravely in the sun, the one-molecule-thick boots gleamed. "Fall in," Bill shouted, and the recruit climbed over the wall.

"Billy, Billy . . ." the woman wailed, "this is your little brother Charlie! You wouldn't take your own little brother into the troopers, would you?"

Bill thought about his mother, then he thought about his baby brother Charlie, then he thought of the one month that would be taken off of his enlistment time for every recruit he brought in, and he snapped his answer back instantly.

"Yes," he said.

The music blared, the soldiers marched, the mother cried —as mothers have always done—and the brave little band tramped down the road and over the hill and out of sight into the sunset.

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William Barclay
THE GOLDEN BARGE

DAY GAVE WAY to night, inevitably, for the fourth time since wide-mouthed Jephraim Tallow had begun his chase. He slept at the rudder of his boat, trusting to his luck, and the next morning he awoke to find himself soaked to the skin, but still on course. The yellow overalls he wore had not been made for use outdoors and they had given him little protection. He had not slept well, for his dreams had been scarlet dreams ; but now that it was morning, he could forget. What was one man's life? How did a single murder matter when the golden barge, which was his goal, moved surely onwards?

The rain sliced down out of a grey sky, lancing into the waters of the river, spattering over the canvas of the boat. And a wind was beginning to blow. Instead of willows, rhododendrons now lined the banks of the river. They were heavy with the fallen water, sinking beneath its sodden weight. The wind was rising and bending the bushes into rustling nightmare beasts which reached out to tempt Tallow ashore. He laughed at them hysterically, and the wind filled his ship's sail, distending it until the mast creaked in unison with Tallow's laughter. But Tallow ceased to laugh when he realised his danger ; realised that he had no cause for laughter, for the wind was driving his vessel towards the luring bushes. Frantically, he attempted to adjust the sail, but the rig of the stolen boat was unfamiliar and in his panic he succeeded only in tangling the knots into a worse mess. The wind blew stronger, bending the mast, swelling the sail like a cannibal's belly.

He tore at the knots until his fingers bled and his nails were broken shreds catching in the tackle. Then, as the wind increased, he had to concentrate on controlling the rudder in order to keep the boat on some kind of course. He saw that he was nearing a bend in the river, and saw two other things: A white flash against the dark green mass of foliage and the golden barge just ahead, looming

tall. With an effort, he calmed himself, realising that in his panic he had not sighted his objective, the mysterious implacable barge. He had killed so that he should be able to follow it and now he dare not let it escape. He needed to stay on course just long enough to reach the barge and board her and he knew that he could, but, even as his boat's prow gashed the waters in furious speed, he came to the bend in the river and his ship lurched and shuddered to a halt. He realised that he had run aground on one of the many hidden sand-bars which plagued river traffic.

Angry, and screaming his disappointment to the wind and the rain, Tallow leapt out into the shallow water and attempted to heave the ship off the bar as rain smote him in the face and flayed his skin. His efforts were useless. In a second, the barge had disappeared from his sight and he had sunk to his knees in the water, sobbing in frustration. The rain began to fall with lessening intensity and the velocity of the wind dropped, but still Tallow remained on his knees, bowed in the swirling, dirty water, his hands above him, gripping the sides of the boat. The rain and wind subsided and eventually the sun dissected the clouds. The sun shone on the boat, on Tallow, on the river, on bushes and trees and on a white house, five storeys high, which gleamed like the newly-washed face of a child.

Tallow lifted red eyes and sighed. He tried once more to move the boat, but could not. He looked around him. He saw the house. He would need help. With a shrug, he splashed knee-deep through the water, to the bank, climbing up its damp, crumbling, root-riddled earth and cursing his luck.

Tallow, in some ways, was a fatalist, and his fatalism at last came to the rescue of his sanity as ahead of him he saw a wall of red-brick, patched with black moss-growths. His mood changed almost instantly and he was once again his old, cold cocky self. For beyond the wall he could see the head and shoulders of a woman. The barge could wait for a little while.

SHE WAS A sharp-jawed, pout-lipped beauty and her eyes were green as scum. She wore a battered felt hat and stared

at Tallow over the short stone wall which reached almost to her shoulder.

She smiled at him. One of her delightfully even teeth was stained brown ; two others were green, matching her eyes.

Tallow's senses for women had been dormant to the point of atrophy for years. Now he savoured the knowledge that he was going to form an attachment for this one. For the moment, he hugged the knowledge to himself.

"Good morning, madam," he said, straddling his legs and making a low, ungainly bow. "My sloop ran aground and I'm stranded."

"Then you must stay with me," she smiled again and put her head on one side by way of emphasising the invitation. "That's my house over there." She stretched a rounded arm and pointed. Her fingers were long and delicate, terminating in purple-painted talons. The house was the big white one Tallow had seen.

"A fine house it is, too, madam, by the looks of it." Tallow swaggered towards the low wall.

"It is fine," she admitted. "But rather empty. I have only two servants."

"Not enough," Tallow frowned. "Not enough." He could always catch the barge up, he thought. He vaulted the wall. This was a remarkable feat for one of his slight stature, and he achieved it with a delicacy and grace normally alien to him. He stood beside her. He looked at her from beneath half-closed lids. "I would be grateful for a bed for the night," he said. "And help in the morning. My ship must be refloated."

"I will arrange it," she promised. She had mobile lips which moved smoothly around the words as she spoke. She was slim-waisted and full-hipped. Her bottom was round and firm beneath a skirt of yellow wool. Her large breasts pushed at the shining silk of a black blouse and the heels of her shoes were six inches long. She turned and headed for the house. "Follow me," she said.

Tallow followed, marvelling at the way she kept her balance on her high heels. Without them, he thought gleefully, she was only an inch or so taller than he. She led him through the garden of spear-like leaves, finally arriving at a sandy road which wound towards the house.

A two-wheeled carriage stood empty, drawn by a bored donkey. The woman's flesh was soft and it itched at Tallow's finger tips as he helped her into the carriage, doing mental somersaults all the while. He grinned to himself as he got in beside her and took the reins.

"Gee up!" he shouted. The donkey sighed, and moved forward at a tired shuffling trot.

Five minutes later, Tallow tugged hard at the donkey's reins and brought the cart to a crunching-halt on the gravel outside the house. A flight of solid stone steps led up to big timber doors which were half-open. "My home," the woman remarked superfluously and Tallow felt a disappointed shock at this inanity; but the feeling soon passed as it was replaced by his glee for his good fortune.

"Your home!" he yelled. "Hurrah!" He didn't bother to mask his emotions any more. He bounced out of the carriage and helped her from it. Her legs were well-shaped and trim. She smiled and laughed and treated him to a gorgeous display of brown, green and white. They climbed the steps together, leaping up them like ballet-dancers, with their feet clattering in time. Her hand slipped into his as they pushed the door open and marched into a hall with rafters lost in gloom. It was a shadowy hall, hushed as a church. Dust flew in a single beam of sunlight which entered by way of the door which was apparently warped, for it didn't shut completely. Dust swirled into Tallow's nostrils and he sneezed. She laughed delightfully.

"My name's Pandora," she told him loudly. "What's yours?"

"Tallow," he replied, his eyes watering and his nose still itching. "Jephraim Tallow, at your service!"

"At my service!" She clapped her hands and the echoes reverberated around the hall. "At my service!" She clapped and laughed until the hall resounded with the applause and laughter of a vast audience.

A voice, like the last trump, boomed and crashed into Tallow's startled ear-drums. "Do you require me, madam?"

Staring through the gloom as the last echo fluttered in distant corners, Tallow was surprised to see that the hol-

low trumpet voice emanated from a bent and wizened ancient, clad in faded finery of gold and silver, tarnished and varnished with long years of wear. Pandora answered the servant: "Dinner, Fench!" she cried. "Dinner for two —and make it good!"

"Yes, madam." With a swirl of dust, the bent one vanished through a barely discernible door.

"One of my servants," whispered Pandora confidingly. She frowned. "The other one's his wife—damn her!" She cursed quite viciously; softly and sibilantly, like a snake spitting. Tallow, knowing nothing of the place, wondered how an old woman could arouse such wrath in Pandora. But a thousand reasons swam into his head and he rejected them all. He was not a man to jump to conclusions. Conclusions were too final—they led to death. She clutched his hand and led him through the hall to where wide oak stairs twisted upwards. "Come, Jephraim," she murmured. "Come my tender Tallow, and let us get you dressed!"

Tallow recovered his self-confidence and rushed like a rabbit up the stairway, his long legs stepping high. They polka'd hand in hand to the third floor of the vast, dark house. Their hair, his red, hers black as jet, flew behind them and they laughed all the while, happily insensitive to everything but themselves.

Up to the third floor they bounded, and she led him to a door, one of a number, as solid as its fellows. He was slightly out of breath, for he was not used to climbing so many stairs. As she strained to turn the knob on the door, using both hands, bending her body and screwing up her face until eventually the door creaked open, he began to hiccup.

Meanwhile, the wind which had driven Tallow on to the sand bar was howling around the golden barge as it pushed camly onwards towards whatever victories or dooms awaited it.

"JEPHRAIM," WHISPERED PANDORA, as he sat back in his chair, sipping brandy from a glass as big as his head.

He grunted questioningly, smiling foolishly. The meal had been liberally diluted with night-red wine.

"Jephraim—where are you from?" She leant forward across the small table. She had changed into a dress of dark, sentient blue which flowed off her smooth shoulders to cascade like dangerous ice down her body, to flare suddenly at the knees. She wore two rings on her left hand; sapphires and emeralds—and around her soft throat hung a thin chain of gold. Tallow's new emotions were rioting through him and a childish awe for his good fortune still stuck in part of his mind, even as he stretched out a hand and groped for Pandora's taloned fingers. Pinpricks of excitement and anticipation were becoming too much to bear and his voice throbbed as he spoke, echoing his heartbeats.

"From a town many miles away," he said, and this appeared to satisfy her.

"Where were you going, Jephraim?" This question was asked idly, as if she didn't expect him to answer.

"I was—I am—following a golden ship which passed your house just before I ran aground. Did you see it?"

She laughed, and her laughter hurt him causing him to withdraw his hand. "Silly Tallow," she cried, "No such ship passed—and I didn't see it for I was in the garden a long while—watching the river. I never miss the ships."

"You missed this one," he muttered, glaring into his glass.

"Your jokes are hard to understand, Jephraim," she said more softly. "But I'm sure I'll like them—when we know each other better." Her voice dropped lower and lower until it was almost inaudible, but the timbre of it was enough to churn Tallow's thoughts into other channels almost immediately. Some of his self-assurance, so badly shattered recently, returned to him and he folded his ten fingers around the brandy glass, lifted it, and poured the entire contents down his throat. He smacked his lips and gasped, then put the glass down with a bang, clattering the dirty cutlery.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, the scarlet sleeve of his new corduroy jacket somewhat impeding this action, and looked around the small candle-lit room until it blurred. Pettishly, he shook his head to clear it and,

supporting himself with hands spread on the table, stood up. He looked intently into her eyes and she smiled hesitantly.

"Pandora, I love you." He was relieved now that it was over.

"Good," she purred. "That makes it so much easier."

Tallow was too drunk to wonder what it was which would be easier. He ignored the statement and rocked towards her. She stood up, slowly, carefully, and glided towards him. He gathered her in and kissed her throat. As she was standing up, he couldn't quite reach her mouth. Her breasts pushed against his chest and her arms slid up his back, one hand caressing the nape of his neck. The other hand moved startlingly down his back and around his hip.

"Ouch!" he moaned a moment later. "That ring hurts!" She pouted, then smiled, and took her rings off. He wriggled in his tight, black velvet trousers and wished that he were naked. "Shall we go to bed, now?" she suggested at just the right moment.

"Yes," agreed Tallow with earnest certainty. "Yes." She supported his reeling body as they left the room and made their way up the flight of stairs to her own bedroom.

A WEEK THROBBED by. A bedded week, wearing for Tallow, but delightful. Pandora's expert lessons had taught him, among other things, that he was a man; a man, to boot, who had learned to please Pandora. The week had taught him something else, something subtler, and he now had a tighter rein on his emotions; could control both appetite and expression to a greater degree.

Tallow lay in bed beside a sleeping Pandora, attempting to shift the sheet which covered her. His eyes were as yet unsatiated by the sight of her lying naked and at his mercy. The truth was, he had to admit, that for the most part he was inextricably at her mercy. But Pandora was a woman, and took only the right and honest advantage of her superior position. Tallow remained in love with her and the love grew strongly and he was content. Her yielding and her occasional pleas were rare, but could be savoured

for their rarity. Weariness, however, was encroaching to make a wreck of Tallow. He slept longer, made love a trifle less violently, though with more skill, and even now, after ten hours of sleep, he did not feel rested, but nonetheless, he was content. He felt happiness and sometimes sadness when Pandora unknowingly outraged him, but the joy far outweighed the pain.

He had just laid bare her breasts, when she awoke. She blinked and then opened her eyes as widely as she could, looked at him, looked down and gently drew the sheet back towards her chin. Tallow grunted his disappointment, raised himself on one elbow, cushioned his head in his hand, and stared down at her.

"Good morning," he said with mock accusation.

"'Morning, Jephraim." She smiled like a schoolgirl, stirring tenderness and desire in him. He flung himself upon her in a flurry of sheeting. She laughed, gasped, was silent for some seconds and then kissed him.

"I earned it, didn't I?" she said, staring into his eyes.

"You did," he rolled over and sat up in bed.

"You need me, don't you?" she said softly, behind him.

"Yes," he said, and then paused, thinking—he had answered the question too quickly. Before he had considered it again properly, he had said: "At least—I think so."

Her voice was still soft, unchanged: "What do you mean —you think so?"

"Sorry," he smiled, turning towards her and looking down at her. "Sorry—I don't know what I meant."

She frowned then, and shifted in the bed. "I don't know either," she said. "I don't know what you mean. What did you mean?"

"I've told you," he said, deciding that he was a fool. "I don't know."

She turned over on her side, towards the wall, away from him. "Either you need me or you don't."

"That's not strictly true," Tallow sighed. "I can need you—and I can't. There are things to need at certain times. I need you sometimes." I'm right, he thought—for it was clear to him now and it had never been so, before.

She was silent.

"It's true, Pandora," he knew that he should stop. "Surely you see that it's true.

"Love isn't everything," he mumbled lamely, feeling uncertain and beaten.

"Isn't it?" Her voice was muffled and cold.

"No!" he said, anger coming to his rescue. He got up, pulled on his clothes and walked over to the window, viciously tearing back the curtains. It was raining outside. He could see the river in the distance. He stood by the window for a few seconds and then turned back to stare at the bed. Pandora still faced the wall and he couldn't see her expression.

He stamped from the room, on his way to the bathroom. He felt troubled and annoyed, but he couldn't analyse the feeling. He knew, somehow, that he was right; knew that he shouldn't have spoken to her as he had, but was glad, also, that he had done so. The floor was cold to his bare feet as he walked, and he could hear the rain beating to the ground and on to the roof. It was a drab, unsettled day and fitting for his mood.

AT BREAKFAST, SHE soon got over her former temper and, for the moment at least, they had forgotten their earlier conflict.

"What shall we do, today, Jephraim?" she said, putting down her coffee cup.

In a half-dream, not really aware of what he was saying, Tallow answered on the spur of the moment: "Ride! That's what we'll do! You have some horses, I've seen them."

"I have—but I didn't know you could ride."

"I can't," he grinned, "I can't sweetheart, but I can learn!"

"Of course you can!" She was now in his mood. "But what shall we do about the rain?"

"To hell with the rain—it can't effect us. Come, love—to horse!" He galloped like an idiot from the breakfast-room. Laughing, she ran after him.

They rode all through the day, stopping sometimes to

eat and to make love when the sun shone. They rode, and after two uncertain hours, Tallow soon learned how to sit his mare and to guide her. He was still an amateur, but a fast learner. Since the night, he had seen the barge, he had been learning many things, quickly. Ideas rushed into his open, greedy mind and he gratefully absorbed them. So they rode through the rain and the sunshine and they laughed and loved together, forgetful of anything else; Tallow with his tiny frame and long legs, perched high above the ground on a chestnut mare; Pandora, petite and voracious for his attention, sometimes gay, often enigmatic, always honest; Pandora, a woman.

They rode for hours until at last they came to a stretch of the river upstream, which Tallow had passed a week earlier when asleep. They came to a hill and breathless and excited, fell into one another's arms, dovetailed together, and sank onto the damp turf, careless and carefree.

"Your river," whispered Pandora, sometime later. "I'll always think of it as yours, now. I used to think it was mine, but I know it isn't."

Tallow was puzzled. He said: "It's everyone's river—that's the beauty of it. Everyone's."

"No," she said. "It's yours—I know."

"It's not just mine, darling," he said tenderly. "Anyone can sail on it, bathe in it, drink from it. That's why it's there."

"Perhaps," she compromised at last. "Perhaps it is, but I know what I shall always think. "The river is your life."

"One day, I may make you a present of it, sweetheart," he smiled, and he was right, though he didn't know it.

He stared at the river and then, just for a fleeting moment, he saw the golden barge, sailing calmly, as it always did, unruffled. He turned to her, pointing. "There!" he cried excitedly. "There—now you see I wasn't joking! The golden ship!" But when he looked again, it had gone and Pandora was getting up, walking towards the horses.

"You always spoil things," she said. "You always say something to worry me."

In silence, they rode away from the river and Tallow thought carefully of the barge and Pandora.

LATER THAT NIGHT, the rift unhealed, they sat in front of the dining room fire, morosely drinking. She was truculent, unapproachable, he was turbulent, wondering if, after all, the things he wanted were so unattainable. So they sat, until there was a disturbance outside and Tallow went to the window to see what was happening. It was dark and he couldn't see much. The night was a confusion of laughter and screams, flickering torches and shifting shadows. Tallow saw that a drunken group was coming towards the house. He welcomed the interruption.

"Visitors," he said. "Revellers."

"I don't want to see them."

"Why not—we could have a party or something?"

"Shut up!" she pouted.

He sighed and went downstairs into the dark, cold, draughty hall. By the time he reached it, people were thumping on the half-open door.

"Is anyone in?"

"Shelter for some poor weary travellers, I beg thee!"

Laughter.

"Are you sure this house belongs to someone?" A woman's voice, this. Answered by another woman: "Yes, dear, I saw a light in an upstairs window."

"Is anyone home?"

"We've got plenty of bottles!"

Laughter again.

Tallow pulled the door back and stood confronting the interlopers, who worried him. They represented a threat which he could not define. "Good evening," he said, belligerently now.

"Good evening, my dear sir, good evening to you!" A grinning, patronising corpulence, swathed in extravagant clothing, a cloak, knee-length boots, a top-hat, bearing a silver-worked cane and bowing theatrically.

"Can I help you?" said Tallow, hoping that he couldn't.

"We're lost." The man was drunk. He swayed towards Tallow and stared at him intently, his breath stinking of alcohol. "We're lost, and have nowhere to go! Can you put us up?"

"This isn't my house," said Tallow in stupefaction. "I'll

see. You'd better come in anyway. How'd you get this far?"

"By boat—boats—lots of boats. Fun. Until we got lost, that is."

"All right," Tallow walked back up the stairs and rejoined Pandora. She was still sulking.

"Who is it?" she said petulantly. "Tell them to go away and let's get to bed."

"I agree, dearest," Tallow's mood changed to its former state and his quick tongue babbled, though he didn't mean what he said. "But we can't turn them away—they're lost. They can sleep here—won't bother us, will they?"

"I suppose I'd better see them, Jephraim," she got up, kissed him and together, warmly, arm in arm, they went downstairs.

The revellers' torches were still burning, turning the dusty hall into a madly dancing inferno of leaping light and shuddering shadow. As the fat leader saw Pandora and Tallow descend the stairs, he leered at Pandora. "The lady of the house!" he bawled to his friends, and they laughed, uneasily; he was embarrassing them now. The noise in the dusty cavern of a hall became a zoo-like cacaphony.

Pandora said politely, but without feeling: "You may stay the night here, if you wish. We have plenty of beds." She turned to go upstairs.

"Beds!"

The drunken mob took up the word gleefully, chanting it round the hall. "Beds. Beds. Beds." After a short while, the sound became even more meaningless and they subsided into high-pitched laughter. Pandora and Tallow stood observing them. "Let's have some light, Jephraim," she suggested.

With a shrug, Tallow reluctantly borrowed a torch from a reveller and began to ignite the wicks of the candles. The hall erupted with light, dazzling the occupants. Again the giggling began. In the centre of the hall was a long table, chairs lining the walls. This was the first time Tallow had seen the room lighted. Grime was everywhere and the paint was peeling. Mildew had formed in patches on the

ceiling and walls and the light only served to pick it out. Tallow shrugged and moved to return upstairs again, but Pandora put her hand on his arm. "We'll stay for a short while," she said. I wish she'd make up her mind, he thought glumly, now regretting the impulse which had driven him to allow the people admission. They were soft, these people, soft beyond Tallow's experience, pampered darlings to the last; slim, brittle-eyed women and fat, blank-eyed men, bewilderedly running over the surface of life, discontent with their own fear-moulded values and afraid to find new ones, fooling themselves that they were alive. Tallow could only pity them and loathe what they represented. Every second they remained, they drove him into himself, retreating into the embracing depths of his own dark soul.

He continued to stare at them from out of his skull; continued to stare as bottles were piled on the table and Pandora was lost among the others, absorbed into their shallowness. Tallow was vaguely terrified then, but his mind refused to control his body as he stood on the stairs watching them, unable to leave or to join them. Clothes were flung in all directions and Tallow saw a blue dress and a black cape flutter outwards together. Naked bellies wobbled and naked breasts bounced and white, unhealthy flesh was a background for dark hair. Tallow felt ill. At last his feet dragged him upwards back to the bedroom. His ego had been shattered; but the pain of his loss, of his humiliation, was greater. He lay on the bed, sobbing; thoughtless and emotionful, his whole world a timeless flood of self-pity.

He lay, his head throbbing and aching, for hours; eventually falling into a fitful slumber which lasted another hour. When he eventually awoke, he was calm. He knew that he had done wrong, had destroyed part of himself in denying the barge for Pandora's love—or his own love for Pandora. He had delayed too long, and the barge should be followed, if there was still time. That was his aim, his goal, his function in life—to follow the barge and to go where it led him, immaterial of what other things distracted him. He got a large woollen cloak from a cupboard and put it around his shoulders. Then he left, per-

turbed that he would have to pass through the hall on his way out. When he reached it, he was astounded.

In the centre of the room was a pulsating pyramid of flesh; clean flesh and dirty flesh; soft flesh and rough flesh. It was ludicrous. There were limbs of all descriptions in most peculiar juxtaposition. A pair of pink buttocks seemed to spring an arm; noses lay upon legs, eyes peered from beneath genitals, faces on torsos, breasts upon toes. Such a scene might have disgusted Tallow, instead he was bewildered, for the strangest sight of all was the arm which waved at the top of the throbbing human mountain. It clutched a corruscating wineglass. The fingers were purple-painted talons; Pandora's fingers. Every so often the arm would disappear into the pile and the glass would return, less full, held like Liberty's torch, to its place above the pyramid. Tallow swallowed, his eyes wide. On tip-toe, his bitterness surging inside him once more, he circumnavigated the heap and pulled on the door.

"Good night, Pandora," he called as he left.

The wineglass waved. "Good night, Jephraim, see you later!" The voice was muffled and slurred, tinged with a false gaiety which was not like honest Pandora at all; normally she was either happy or sad or troubled, never false in her feelings.

"No you won't, Pandora," he shouted as he at last pulled the door open and fled into the rain-sodden night, blindly running down the sandy path, towards the river. Running from something which remained inside him, which he couldn't flee from, which was destroying him and which he was powerless to combat. So Tallow fled.

THE BOAT WAS still on the sand bar, half-full of rainwater. Tallow looked at it dispiritedly. Then, with a shrug, he took off his cloak and lowered his legs into the cold, murky water. He shivered, tensed and forced himself forward. The boat's timber felt good to his hands as he hoisted himself into it. He stared through the gloom, searching for the baling pans. At last, he found them and began baling the water over the side.

When he had finished, he swung into the water again

and slowly made his way round the ship, inspecting it as much as he could in the dim moonlight. Then he returned to the stern and put his shoulder to it, heaving. The boat shifted slightly. He moved round to the port side and began rocking it, shifting some of the compressed sand.

Three hours later, the boat was afloat. Weary with his effort, he sank into it and lay on the wet boards, half-asleep. He eventually arose when he heard someone moving about on the shore. Levering himself upright, he looked over the side and saw Pandora standing there, framed against the moonlight, her hair wild and ruffled by the wind, a man's dark cloak around her.

"Jephraim," she said, "I'm sorry—I don't know how it happened."

Tallow, his heart heavy in him, his mind dull, said: "That's all right, Pandora. I'm going now, anyway."

"Because of—that?" She pointed back to the house.

"No," he said slowly, "At least, not just because of that. It helped."

"There's nothing I can say, of course." Her words were unoriginal but her eyes were frank, her body slack.

"No—nothing. It had to come, Pandora. You could have followed the barge with me, once, perhaps, but not now—never. I'd have liked you with me, but you'll always regard the barge as a rival—won't you?"

"No!" she cried. "Oh, no—I'll come with you—please!" She moved towards the water. "There's still time—I'll try to see the barge as well. I will."

"No," he said. "It's too late. I'm going alone. I love you, Pandora—but I know my destiny. You've lost your place in it. Perhaps it's my fault—perhaps not. I don't know."

"Take me with you," she repeated humbly. "I'll do whatever you want."

He was perturbed. "Don't, Pandora—don't lose your respect for my sake." He was shaking out the sail. "Goodbye!" But she flung herself into the water and grasped the side of the boat, pulling herself into it with desperate strength. "Go back, Pandora!" he shouted, seeing his doom in her action. "Go back—go back! It's finished—you'll

destroy me and yourself!" She made her way towards him, flinging her bedraggled body at his feet in horrible and uncharacteristic humility. "Take me!" she moaned.

The boat was now in midstream, making swiftly away from the bank.

"Oh, God, Pandora," he sobbed. "Don't make me—I must follow the barge."

"I'll come, Jephraim, darling, I'll come with you."

Tears painted his face in gleaming trails, he was breathing quickly, his brain in tumult, a dozen emotions clashing together, making him powerless for any action save speech.

"You'll destroy me," he said again. "You'll ruin me, darling ; my love." He gave in suddenly, ashamed for her degradation. He sank down beside her, taking her wet, heaving body in his arms and in sympathy with her grief. And so, locked together in their fear and bewilderment, they slept.

Dawn was vicious, cloudless, bright. Tallow's eyes ached. Pandora still remained in troubled slumber, but she was on the borderline of wakefulness. Tallow became lost in introspection, and he could not see a real end to his mental conflict. He loved Pandora, but the barge beckoned. Without her encumbrance, he might yet find it. He had a responsibility towards her—could he deny that in order to achieve the destiny he felt was his? It was responsibility to himself or to her—could there be compromise? There was none that he could find.

He didn't know. The words clamoured endlessly in his head—indecision racked him and sapped his strength. He didn't know. As she sighed and began to struggle towards consciousness, an overpowering feeling of pity for her welled up in him. Then he looked down the river where it stretched straight into the horizon. Gold glimmered. Tallow acted. It was now or never.

He picked her up in his arms. She smiled in her sleep, loving him. He wrenched her away from him and hurled her outwards—hurled her into the river.

She screamed suddenly, in horror as realisation came.

R. M. Bennett
HEAT OF THE MOMENT

TAKING HIS HAND away from the steering wheel Chris Parker mopped the soaking handkerchief across his forehead, over his thinning hair and down the back of his neck. He was hot and he was tired. With good reason. After hawking Han-D-Pac screws and bolts in three townships that day the long drive through the Arizona dustiness was beginning to take effect. He stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket and shook his head trying to battle away the weariness that threatened his eyelids. The desert heat reached in through the open windows of the car and struck him a series of blows that were almost tangible. God, what a life, he thought. Talk about *work*. Sweating one's guts out. . . . He grimaced slightly as the irony became apparent. What I need, he thought, is a good, long, cool drink.

And at that moment he saw the sign "FRESHEN UP AT THE YELLOW SANDS. MOTEL & BAR. THREE MILES. STRAIGHT AHEAD" which seemed a pretty fine answer to a maiden's prayer. Or even the prayer of a travelling salesman. He jammed his foot down harder, pushing his four wheeled oven along the narrow man-made ribbon of roadway set on the baking, shimmering endless sands.

He drove his car off the highway at the motel and left it at the side of the dirt yard. The Yellow Sands looked to be a typical western, country motel, a haven in an arid sea, with three lines of wooden cabins and with an office unit which merged temptingly into a small restaurant and bar room. Parker eased himself out of the car, taking care not to touch the baking metal. He kicked close the car door and stretched under the broad cloudless expanse of searing blue sky. Then he licked his lips and went into the bar.

The harsh contrast of the air conditioning cut shrilly through his thin shirt. He walked over to the bar counter, ignoring the juke box and the pin ball machines set against

the wall, a man with a mission. Across at the far side of the empty room the barman looked round from the television programme he had been watching and came over as Parker settled himself on one of the swivel stools.

"I know, I know," he said, "You want a beer, a long cool drink. Guy on the T.V. was just saying it's the hottest summer this century," he added by way of explanation.

Parker nodded. "Yeh, sure is hot out there." He took the poured beer, sipped at it slowly and then emptied the contents of the glass lovingly down his throat. He pushed the glass back at the barman who filled it up for him again.

"Driving far?" The barman asked.

"Making the circuit." Parker sipped at his beer. "Thought I'd go on to Winslow tonight and hole up somewhere before starting on the rounds tomorrow."

"Winslow, eh? That's close on a hundred and fifty from here mister."

Parker pulled on his beer. "One thirty-nine. I checked."

The barman picked up a glass and began to give it an unnecessary polish. "And you say you don't have to be be there until tomorrow?"

"That's right," Parker agreed. "I need an early start tomorrow morning. Someone in Winslow I want to catch before he opens up."

"Well," suggested the barman, "there's no point in wearing yourself out in heat like this. Why not save yourself a dusty ride? Stay here tonight and get a good start early in the morning before the sun really gets up."

"That's a good idea. It sure is hot out there right now and boy! I could certainly use some sleep." Parker finished off his drink and put down the glass.

"Fine," said the barman. "Come on into the office and I'll book you in."

Parker got up as the barman moved out from behind the counter. "Say," he said, "you've got a persuasive tongue. You should be in my line of business."

The barman laughed. "Used to be. Used to be. I was a salesman before I took up this game."

The two of them walked into the office exchanging chit

chat on The Life of the Travelling Salesman. Parker lit a cigarette and registered.

"Number one suit you? It's the nearest the road on the far line but there won't be much through traffic tonight. Mid-week is usually pretty quiet after around nine."

"Number one will be fine," Parker told him. "I feel so tired trucks could drive right through the cabin itself and I wouldn't notice." The barman laughed again and handed Parker his key. Parker stepped out into the oven heat of the evening to collect his suitcase from his car. He walked over to the wooden cabin and turned the key in the door. He threw down his cigarette and trod on it, opening the door as he did so. He humped his suitcase into the cabin and looked round the small, trim room. Fine, he thought, just fine. He looked at the neat, inviting bed. First, he thought, stripping off his shirt, a shower. He strode through into the bathroom. The water was slightly tepid and whilst it cooled him considerably it did not relieve his tiredness. He went thankfully to bed, sinking down into the welcoming foam mattress. He wrapped a single sheet round his naked body and let his thoughts drift through his next day's programme. Two orders in Winslow tomorrow, just two reasonable orders and the area bonus is in the bag. Shorrock first before he opens up and then I'll try Forsyth's. They should be good for at least a couple of . . .

Outside, on the wooden walk which ran along the line of cabin fronts, the gently smouldering cigarette took hold on a rotting board. . . .

They had him by the throat. They shook and tried to choke the life out of him. He coughed and tried to struggle. Something shapeless but dark and oppressive surrounded him.

He thrashed his arms. He felt hot. *Hot!* Without being aware of the transition he realised that he was awake. The nightmare of sleep gave way to the nightmare of reality. Heat. Smoke. Flames. *My God, the cabin's on fire!*

He struggled, coughing, with tears streaming down his face. He rolled on to the floor, dragging the burning sheet with him. Screaming with pain he tried to crawl to the door, clawing himself across the floor. Voices

reached out to him. A figure took shape through the smoke and hands dragged him out into the clear night air. He tried to say something but pain and blackness enveloped him.

Movement. He opened his eyes to an awareness of movement. Somewhere about him an engine pulsed and throbbed. He was stretched out on a white couch. An ambulance, he thought, I'm in an ambulance. They got me out in time. I'll be all right. He closed his eyes again and began to drift off. Through the fog of pain and overwhelming tiredness there filtered the realisation that something was missing, that something was wrong with the make-up of the scene. *Sound. No sound. An engine. Moving. Siren. Siren?* That's it, he thought, there's no siren. . . .

Countless moments later the thought reformed itself through the mistiness inside his head. *Siren. No siren. Where am I?*

WHERE AM I?

Parker sat up suddenly and looked around him.

He was in prison!

To all appearances the room he was in was a cell. He was sitting on a bunk fixed to a bare wall. There were no other furniture, no window, no door. There were no visible electrical appliances, yet the room was well lighted, the light seeming to be diffused by the walls themselves. Parker scratched his head, swung himself on to the floor and paced the room. He felt his arms, his legs, his body, hardly realising that he was still stark naked. He felt well and very much alive. The pain he had felt in the burning motel unit had left him. Even the tiredness had gone. I don't understand, he thought, trying to convince himself that he was really alive. *What has happened to me? Where am I?* He walked around the walls, running his hands over them, clawing for some opening. There was none and he fell back again on the bunk, becoming aware once more of the faint throbbing deep within the structure itself.

Where am I? Where *am* I? he thought again. He began to pound on the walls, shouting questions, shrieking obscenities.

Suddenly a section of the wall opposite the bunk slid

back into itself and two men entered the cell. Parker fell back in fear and confusion. They were giants! Each was nearly seven feet tall, proportioned like an athlete. They were dressed from head to foot in identical blue uniforms.

"What . . . what . . .?" Parker stammered as they crowded him back into the cell. He fell back upon the bunk and tried to cover himself with the thin white sheet there. The two men regarded him impassively.

"Just what the hell is going on here?" Parker growled, trying to gain the initiative. "Who are you? Where am I? What have you done to me?"

"Remarkable," said the slightly taller of the two without the slightest trace of emotion, "the being is able to articulate in the tongue."

"What?" Parker exclaimed. "Say, what is this?"

"Would the explanation be comprehended by the being?" said the smaller. "It is doubtful."

"Possibly we could hazard the essay," replied the taller. He turned to Parker and said mechanically, "We are correct in the assumption that you possess a certain comprehension of the vocalisation?"

Parker gagged on the stream of invective that was forming on his tongue. Burnt, dragged around, stuck in a cell and now *this*. "Do I get the drift of what you're saying? Sure I do, sure. Now, will somebody please be good enough to tell me just . . . what . . . is . . . going . . . on?"

"Difficulty is in the discovery of a comprehensible point of commencement," muttered the taller, almost apologetically. He pondered for a moment. "We are Collectors," he announced eventually.

"Great," said Parker, with a trace of sarcasm. "So . . .?"

The taller continued. "I am Zriff. My companion is Chrain." He gave the name a guttural, almost Germanic intonation. Chrain bowed slightly.

Parker looked him up and down. A faint suspicion began to nag at the back of his mind. He gripped the edge of the bunk and realised that he was beginning to sweat, the cold clammy perspiration of fear. No, he thought, that *can't* be it. It isn't true, it isn't real, it can't happen.

Chrain interrupted his thoughts. "We are Collectors of the Prime Government. The function is to collect specimens of fauna for our world. We . . ."

The suspicion crystallised into reality, a reality which was too immense to be understood, a reality which could not be faced. Parker's mind wavered upon the very brink of the thin line which divides sanity from the nightmare worlds. It wavered . . . and retreated. "World!" he shouted, jumping to his feet, "Did you say *world*? It can't be. It's some kind of a joke. And a damn lousy joke it is, too! Come on, come on, just what is going on here? What kind of a lousy gag is this, anyway?"

"It was thought that to essay an explanation would be beyond the comprehension of the being," Zriff said to his companion.

"Explanation!" echoed Parker. "Explanation! I ask you for a few lousy simple facts and all you can do is give me a run around about collecting. So, o.k., very funny and like that. Collecting and worlds . . ." He broke off and began to sob. "It's not true," he said. "It *can't* be true." The sobbing began to rack his whole body.

Zriff waved his hand at the wall adjacent to the bunk. A section slipped away to form a screen. Parker stared at it. On the screen, growing slowly but steadily smaller was a circle of reflected light. "Your world," said Zriff gently, "the third planet of Sol."

Parker's mind slipped swiftly across its intangible barrier. He went berserk. He yelled and screamed and rushed, clawing and kicking, at Zriff who withstood the attack calmly. The alien picked Parker up and placed him gently upon the bunk until the convulsions had subsided. Parker sank back, exhausted. "Take me back," he sobbed, "you've got to take me back."

"It is regretted," said Chrain, gently, "that this is impossible. We are entirely unable to prosecute any series of movements which would enable us to return to your planet."

Parker sagged. "What are you going to do with me? Where are you taking me?"

Zriff answered. "We are collectors of the Prime Govern-

ment of the Second Planet of Rigel. You are a specimen of the fauna of the third planet of Sol. It is our employment to visit with the utmost brevity various worlds for the collection of fauna specimens. We visited your world and collected you."

Parker buried his head in his hands. "What are you going to do with me?" he sobbed.

"We are civilised beings," said Chrain. "We shall make provision for your comfort. It is appreciated that you are disturbed mentally and physically and are without comfort at the present moment. The unhappy state of affairs will not be allowed to persist after the time our intergalactic vehicle has arrived on the Second Planet of Rigel. Our race prides itself upon the fact that our specimens are permitted to continue their existence in the manner to which each said specimen is so accustomed. You will be afforded a dwelling which will prove to be a perfect reproduction of that you knew on your own world. You will suffer no rigours of climatic variations and your every wish as regards food requirements will be rigidly granted. In brief, you will be afforded a luxurious existence free from any degree of care."

"And I'll be able to do just as I like?" asked Parker.

"The only restriction to be placed on you," said Zriff, "will be that of movement. You will be required to confine yourself to the dwelling provided for you."

"But that will be like living in jail," Parker protested.

"Jail?"

"Prison. I'll be a prisoner."

"A prisoner!" muttered Chrain. "On the Second Planet of Rigel those beings who have been unfortunate enough to have vented upon themselves the wrath of the judicial authorities are indeed confined to special dwellings, but each and every one of those beings would consider himself most fortunate were he permitted to exchange with you his manner of existence even for a minimum period of time."

"But why will I have to be kept confined?" Parker asked.

"A strict confinement is necessary to enable members of our race to view and wonder at the sweeping enterprises

of their Collectors. Specimens have been collected from a great number of worlds and you are by no means unique in the fact that you are being transported to the Second Planet of Rigel."

The situation became increasingly clear to Parker. "A zoo!" he exclaimed. "You mean that I'll be stuck in a zoo? You saved my life so that I can be stuck in some zoo for you creeps to come and stare at me! And a damn fine state I'm in to be stared at. Not even any clothes."

Zriff regarded him coldly. "Such minor considerations will of course be provided for with our usual thoroughness," he announced grandly.

"But you can't keep me in a zoo," Parker protested. "I'm an intelligent being, a man. I'm not a mere animal."

"Who are you to speak so of intelligence?" asked Chrain. "On the Second Planet of Rigel we find insects which possess a high order of intelligence, a structured and co-ordinated life. They build and they work and their entire existence is patterned."

"Ants," said Parker. "We have ants too, but I'm not an ant."

"To us you are an inferior being. There is no doubt but that you will be treated well, perhaps to a higher standard than you are deserving. You will not have any reason for complaint. If you are to be tiresome it may be that we shall return to the Second Planet of Rigel with a *dead* specimen," Zriff threatened. "Such an occurrence would not be unique. Let me remind you that you will be well treated and will want for nothing in material comforts. Everything in our extensive power will provide for you an existence reproductive of that known to you on your own world."

"Hell," said Parker, "what choice do I have? O.K., I'm in your hands. I don't suppose I'll be much worse off than slogging my guts out in Arizona trying to sell the Han-D-Pac range. Though I would rather have liked to have cleaned up that area bonus."

And the two aliens kept their promise. Parker was well fed during the long journey to the Second Planet of Rigel and after the spaceship had made a comfortable landing

he was whisked from the spaceport to the outskirts of a large town where he was housed in a cabin which was an exact replica of the motel unit in which he had spent his last moments on earth. That's only to be expected, he thought. After all, Zriff and Chrain had met him, if their encounter could be called a meeting, while he was occupying the motel unit. He was however surprised to discover that there was even a facsimile suit of clothing to replace the set lost in the fire. His surprise mounted when he slipped into the underwear and found a perfect fit. And the shirt, jacket, slacks and socks fit too. "Not bad, not bad at all," Parker commented to Zriff who had accompanied him and watched him dress.

"It is naturally appreciated," said the alien, "that all conditional requirements have not so far been fulfilled. This omission will be rectified within a short space of time."

A group of aliens had gathered outside the small stockade which surrounded the cabin. Parker watched them from the side window. They were pointing and seemed somewhat excited. He moved back from the window, keeping the group in sight. They continued to appear just as excited. They also continued to point.

"How the hell . . .?" Parker exclaimed. "They can *see me*! They can see through the walls!"

"This reproduction of your earth dwelling has been constructed both to your requirements and to those of our race, to allow our people to observe your movements," Zriff told him. "It is constructed so that its material is transparent to our eyes but opaque to the eyes of a being from the third planet of Sol."

"Oh, well, what the hell," said Parker. "I suppose it's only to be expected."

"I must leave now," Zriff said. "The conditions of temperature suited to your comfort will be harmful to us. May I meantime proffer my apologies for the lack of these conditions afforded to you until the present moment? This is to be rectified almost immediately."

He turned before Parker could answer and left the cabin. Parker watched as the alien strode majestically towards

the group of onlookers. They parted to let him through. He walked over to a pillar decorated with words and symbols and began to speak to the crowd. Parker could not hear what he said but watched as Zriff first pointed towards the cabin and then gestured towards the pillar The crowd listened with evident growing interest and excitement.

What have they to be so excited about? thought Parker. So I'm an earthman. So I'm an alien. Anyone would think I have horns and a green tail. What do they want? That I should burst into flames or something?

A terrible thought occurred to him. These jokers were setting him up in conditions equivalent to those he'd known on earth. Conditions *they* knew about. They were recreating his natural surroundings. *And they had pulled him out of a burning shack.*

Even as Zriff stopped talking and began to press a button on the pillar Parker recalled Zriff's last words. He threw himself at the door. It was locked. "No, no, no!" he shouted. "You've got to let me out of here. *You'll burn me alive!*"

Zriff pressed the button.

NEXT MONTH

NWSF 156 will feature the first part of James Colvins' novel *The Wrecks of Time* about the strange alternate worlds of sub space and the live-loving Professor Faustaff's attempts to save their inhabitants. A more conventional sf novel than we normally expect from Colvin—but we think you'll like it. Also in No. 156, out on the last Wednesday of next month, are stories by Langdon Jones (*The Music Makers*), Charles Platt, Terry Pratchett, Richard Gordon, and G. Harris.

Daphne Castell
EMANCIPATION

KRUG OF STOK unhooked the wooden hasp of the wives' pen, and stooped under the low lintel into the main yard, chilly and yellow-grey in the light of approaching dawn. None of the other men of the village were about yet—Krug was an early riser, liked to get out and about before the paths grew crowded and the communal rakers and sowers had all been rented out. Still, there were drawbacks to being a keen farmer; it was cold, for one thing, this early in the day—Krug's thick brown skin, tufted and warted as some of the reptile life of Stok, was crinkled in an effort not to shiver. He looked into the iron trough under the great boiler; the fire was low. Skag, the night-watchman was asleep on the other side of the boiler, skulking good-for-nothing. Krug growled—he would have to wake the fat fool up to tell him his duty was over—duty, pah! Any right-thinking Stokka would scorn to be a night-watchman over the wives' pen: it was a post given only to the slowest-moving and slowest-thinking of the race—not one of honourable service and renunciation, like being a nurse of children for instance, or a food-dresser. Definitely a post worthy of no respect at all. Krug kicked the slouched brown figure at his feet awake with a fierceness which was partly due to the knowledge that in a moment he would have to begin the other task which made early-morning work less than welcome. He would have to poke the fire and coax it into fresh vigour, before preparing the morning feed for the communal livestock in the wives' pen.

"Oh! Thak take you, master, that was a shrewd kick!" Skag lurched to his feet with a peevish moan.

"Anything to report?" Krug picked up a shovel and began heaving tash-dung on to the dying fire.

"The creatures were making a bit of a din round about the setting of the moons. Can't let a man take a nap, upsy swine," grumbled Skag. It was not quite clear whether he was referring to the livestock or to Krug. Just to be on

the safe side, Krug swung smartly at him with the shovel, and the nightwatchman went on his way more hastily, with a stifled yelp of pain.

As soon as the boiler fire burnt up properly, Krug ladled spoonfuls of rough cereal out into pots of broth, gargantuan vessels that were steaming slowly on top of the metal platform over the fire. Thak alone, since He had made the universe and put good and evil into it, knew why he had burdened the race of Stokka with wives. Why could He not have made them parthenogenetic or amoeboid? Of course, the creatures were useful in their clumsy way, apart from their reproductive characteristics. Krug made a wry face. He preferred not to think about the reproductive process on an empty stomach. Thak! What a man suffered for the sake of the race! Still, the wives were handy at the other end of a raker or sower, or a plough in the other seasons. They could pick fruit, if they were watched to see they did not eat it. They could make roads, under supervision always, and dig, and make stacks of thur-leaves, and learn a few simple words of command. And sometimes they bore additions to the men of Stokka, though frequently the new arrivals were merely another batch of girl-creatures, fit only to be handed into the wives' pen and cared for by the creatures, which would raise them to be of use to their masters, the men of Stok. It was a little worrying, sometimes, that so few men children were born to the race, to be nursed devotedly by the specialists who were bred to that task. The girl children increased year by year, and though of course it was a good thing to have large and healthy herds of livestock, it was equally important to have men who could train and direct them, feed them and punish them.

The large dim red sun came up, accompanied by its small companion moon, which would soon outrace it and plunge into the shadows on the other side of Stok.

The wives were clamouring for their food. Krug tipped the steaming gruel into huge troughs, and opened the shed doors, one pen at a time. It was always an amusing moment when the creatures came darting out, sidling and shaking their hair, making eager rushes towards the food, and then stopping at the last moment and sniffing at it in a

fastidious disdainful fashion, before they thrust both fists in and began gobbling it down.

Now all the wives were out in the yard, eating busily. Krag could see the long, dismal form of Prak approaching the further gate. Trust him to turn up too late to help with the feeding! The rest of the rota would be just behind him. One of the women was missing. Krug went into the pen to look for her. It was Ni—he had been right, when he had told Prak yesterday that he thought she would litter before daybreak. There she was, and the new-born child with her. A boy, too!

"Well, Thak be praised!" he exclaimed. "Well done, then, old lady!" He sometimes felt that Ni was almost intelligent—she watched him carefully when he gave her orders, and she spoke a few slurred words that he had taught her. He had almost a sense of pride, of personal possession, as far as one could feel it towards any member of the communal herds. She held out the boy child hopefully towards him and he took it, giving her a hearty pat on the flank.

"Good! Krug good!" she grunted and scampered with a cry of relief towards the feeding trough. He tucked the baby expertly under one arm, and started towards Prak, crying out a greeting. "Boy, eh?" said Prak, his sour face looking for once nearly amiable. The bluish shade above his eyebrows lightened as he examined the kicking, crying child. "Nice healthy one too. If you've finished feeding the wives, we'll take it round to the Nurses Street. Wonder when it was born? It's fretting already. Doesn't do any good to leave them too long with the mothers. They're not designed for it like the girls."

Krug nodded. "You know," he said, half-apologetically, "I once made the experiment of leaving a boy with the mother for a week, just to see what would happen. She was one of the younger, livelier ones, and I thought it mightn't be too bad." Prak looked faintly shocked. He was a conservatively-minded Stokka, and did not approve of genetic experiments. "And?" "Oh, it nearly drove her mad. She couldn't think what she'd raised. It was more like a zis-bird with a zat fledgeling than anything else I've ever seen."

"Poor dumb creature!" Prak spoke reprovingly. "I should have thought you were the last man on Stok to wantonly torment a helpless wife, Krug. You always pretend to be so fond of the silly things. Thak knows, I find them more distasteful than most men do, but at least I'm never deliberately unkind to them."

"Hold hard!" protested Krug warmly. "It didn't do her any damage, and it wasn't intended to. I merely wanted, in a spirit of good landcraftsman's curiosity to see what would happen. The moment she showed real signs of distress, I removed the child of course, and it's thriving with the Nurses now. And you're a fine one to be lecturing me on principles, Prak. If you did your duty better by our race, there might be a few more boy-children with the Nurses. What would we do if everyone refused to breed because they found the women distasteful? We simply steel ourselves and get on with the job, while you shrink back, and say, "Oh, no, I couldn't—I simply couldn't." After all, it's how the race was designed—that's what we're all intended for, isn't it, however unpleasant it is?" Prak lowered his head. "I know," he whispered, "but you simply don't know how difficult it is for me, Krug. Sometimes—sometimes I almost feel as if the selectors made a mistake in my jix-rating, and that I ought to be a Contemplative."

Krug looked remorsefully at his friend. He hadn't intended to wound the other so deeply. He realised how uncontrollable such feelings could be in the more sensitive Stokka, and he was sorry for the harsh words he had used. He patted Prak's horny elbow heartily, and muttered an apology.

A straggle of sleepy figures approached the enclosure, scratching, yawning, and hastily doing up various portions of their clothing—the rest of the week's rota of herdsmen. Prak looked at them with distaste, which deepened as he caught sight of the last figure in the procession. This was a Stokka of middle height, with a livelier eye and a considerably darker skin than most of his companions. He waved his third arm cheerily as he caught sight of Krug and Prak.

"I didn't know Lopp had got back," said Krug in surprise. "I thought he was still haring around the system,

seeing life." The Stokka were not a space-going nation—they were too poor in natural resources, and most of them were too lazy—but the other eleven planets of the red sun had spacecraft of varying degrees of crudity, and there was a certain amount of limping traffic between worlds. Some of the Stokka were authorised by their Council to employ such unusual talents as restlessness and curiosity, and wandered about the system at large by the simple method of walking aboard any ship that happened to land, and working their passages to its next destination. They combined the offices of vagabond, hitch-hiker and envoy extraordinary to the Grand Council of Stok, and their duties were to exchange information and convey goodwill —for what the goodwill of Stok was worth. Stok would rather have liked a space-navy of its own, but the sheer magnitude of the effort demanded by buying materials, making equipment, building ports, and training men to use them had discouraged the Council from any ideas it might have had in that direction. Visiting ships simply settled down in the most convenient patch of cleared land. This had led in the past to acrimonious disputes over dead gub-fowl and burnt shap-houses, but so far nothing that couldn't be settled by payment of extortionate damages; and nowadays the impending visit of a space-ship was often the signal for a landcraftsman to lead out any troks or other livestock that might be ridden by the spo-pest on to the nearest open space, and wait with pleased expressions of hopeful anticipation for manna from Thak to arrive.

Lopp, Prak's cousin, was a free-duty, range-permit man, cleared of all domestic encumbrances and responsibilities for life, and as such an object of both envy and shame to his relations.

He greeted his cousin heartily, by flattening the crest on his head with one heavy paw, and said, "Well, friends both, news and good news! There will be a Council meeting tomorrow. I have seen Trit. I returned from Sunwards 2, after a brief stay at Sunwards 3, and there seems no doubt that the information I have collected heralds the dawn of the most momentous day that the history of Stok has ever known."

"Stok is fortunate in having you around to keep it going," said Prak sourly. Lopp guffawed.

"Good old Prak Must have his little joke, mustn't he, eh, Krag? But I wanted to tell you both at once to make sure that you will be well prepared for my speech to the Council. You'll be there, in duty bound, and I want support from you."

"What about making sure it's the sort of speech we want to support, first?" suggested Krug. Then, seeing Lopp's mouth open, he added hastily, "We don't want the whole speech—just a brief summary. Half a dozen words, if you can manage in that."

"I can do it in two!" said Lopp triumphantly. "Space navy!"

Prak's mouth sagged in bewilderment, and Krug began to scratch both knees and the back of his neck, with a dubious expression.

"This had better be good, Lopp."

"It is good. It was on Sunwards 7, two trips ago that I first got a hint of it. I didn't mention it to anyone, because I didn't want them to call me more kinds of a fool than I—than they already do. But this trip, on Sunwards 3, I actually saw one!"

"A fool?" hazarded Prak, who had already lost the main track of conversation.

"A Terran!" bellowed Lopp. There was a short pause.

"Congratulations," said Krug feebly, at last.

"You don't understand, and I can't blame you," said Lop kindly.

"It's like this. It appears that a long time ago, in a remote corner of the galaxy, a race called Terrans arose. Well, for a long time, they were busy with this and that on their own planet, Terra, getting through the evolutionary process mostly and developing telepathy and matter transmissions and so on, but by and by they turned their attention to interstellar flight—they'd already got a minor form of space-travel, of course—and in the course of time they took in one system after another, and by and by they had what they apparently call a Galactic Empire."

"Nice for them," commented Prak. Krug cuffed one of the women away from a branch of the mildly poisonous

sog berries, grown for effect, muttering, "Come up, old girl, will you? Silly things, never learn, do they? Go on, Lopp."

"What they have in fact, is about half the Galaxy—and we're just on the fringe of it."

"Nice for us." Prak appeared to have reached the limits of conversational resources.

"Very nice, as you'll see in a minute. From time to time, these Terrans drop in on all the systems that they haven't yet managed to inform about their status as part of the Galactic Empire, and when I was on Sunwards 3, they'd just landed and were giving the members of that planet—they call it Brimbul—the benefits of their superior civilization."

"Benefits, eh?" Krug stiffened to attention.

"Yes." Lopp rubbed his hands. "Apparently they don't land on every planet in a system. Benevolent as they are, they simply haven't the time to spare on worlds that may not be inhabited. They simply pick one or two that obviously are, and shower them with the gifts of a conscientious landlord."

Krug's mouth was watering, and even Prak looked mildly impressed. "I don't know whether they'll get round to us," Lopp went on, "but personally I doubt it. What I think is, that we ought to summon all our dignity and individuality, all our pride and race heritage, and go to Sunwards 3, while they're still there, and ask them."

"Mighty Terran overlords—beneficent dieties, glorious in splendour—hear our supplication—look mercifully upon the starving wretches of this grovelling ball of mud." Krug was muttering experimentally.

"Sunwards 3?" Prak pursed up his mouth. "Isn't that the planet which you told us had the highly unpleasant and unhygienic custom—to say nothing of it's being anti-religious—of letting their wives into the house? Dressing them up like Servers or something, and letting them perform simple household tasks and hand food round." He looked as if he had accidentally bitten upon a drik, while devouring a luscious bunch of berries.

"Might as well dress up a trok," agreed Krug; and both men shuddered slightly at the mental image conjured up by this speech.

"Yes, well," said Lopp uncomfortably, "I mean, that's their own business, nasty though it is; and they don't acknowledge Thak's laws. But the gifts—remember the gifts of the Terrans!"

"How can we?" said Prak peevishly, rubbing his tufted warty head, "we don't even know what they are yet."

"Power!" said Lopp eagerly. "Undreamed of power! Something quite simple, I believe, when you know the trick of it. Something about the universe being composed of minute balls of something they call energy. If you do the right things to it, you have machines that will do all your work for you! The Terrans could give us the power and teach us how to use it."

"Machines that would help boil up the wives' food when the fire under the boilers has gone out?" queried Krug sceptically.

"Machines," said Lopp impressively, "that would get up themselves in the morning instead of you, cook the gruel in five skups, feed the wives, curry them, and turn them into the pastures for you! Machines that would run a skiff from here to the Horn of Krebs before you can turn round. Machines that could lift a new space navy into the sky. Machines that mean a new life for Stok!"

"I'm with you." Krug was decisive. But Prak hung back. "I can't help feeling there must be drawbacks about this," he complained. "Don't the Terrans want anything in return?"

"Very little," replied Lopp rather evasively. "A plot of land where they can set up a beacon for their space-navigation co-ordinates, and maintain a Galactic Embassy, and trading and repair post. And there are one or two minor customs of ours that it might be wise to change for fear of giving offence."

"I'd give up taking buk for life, if it meant I didn't have to feed the wives any more," said Krug firmly.

The meeting of the Stokka Grand Council was an impressive affair, taking place as it did in an immense wooden hall, lit by the flame of so many trok-fat candles, that the warmth, glare and quantity of dripping grease were equally impressive.

Trit, the senior counsellor, his noble face light orange with age, intoned the Greeting of Assembly for an Extraordinary Occasion, and the business of breaking Lopp's news began at once.

Before the meeting, Lopp had been everywhere, bending over a craggy shoulder here, whispering in a hairy ear there, clapping one on the shoulder, greeting another by name, behaving, as Prak murmured distastefully to Krug, as if political dignity did not exist.

Trit began, "Conveners and Convened, we are here to listen to a piece of news which has a truly solemn importance for the planet we love so well. Master Lopp will now speak."

Master Lopp spoke at some length. He mentioned all the details he had outlined previously to Krug and Prak, and several others beside. He urged their support for an immediate deputation to the Terrans on Sunwards 3. Then he waited. His knobbed face hung, sweaty and beaming anxiously under the glow of the stinking candles.

A very old Convened one rose, twitching peevishly with two hands at his cloak, while the third steadied him by the council table. He said much the same as Prak had said outside the wives' pen: "What do the Terrans want in return?"

Lobb reiterated the slightness of the Terran demands. He also mentioned, in passing, that if at any future date the Terrans should decide that there was an actual use for the planet Stok, they would be liable to come and plant their modest headquarters there, whether they had been asked to or no. They were reputed to have a short and effective way with native resistance, lordly and generous though they undoubtedly were in many respects. It was a distant possibility, said Lopp, but it should be taken into account, certainly. "And think, Conveners and Convened, of the advantages, if we ask and obtain! A space-navy of our own—lights that work by a mysterious principle without the use of trok-fat!" This brought several of the waverers over to his side immediately. "Water that runs through one's house in easily controlled pipes. Air that is as warm or cold as one wishes, and smells of whatever one desires. Metal creatures that stride about like Stokka and

do one's will. These are some of the many wonders that have already been presented to the Sunwards 3 people." Unanimous acclamation greeted his last speech, and Lopp flushed deep purple with triumph.

He lifted all three hands and prayed for silence, knowing that the most difficult part of his argument was yet to come. "There is, however, one small point. It concerns the wives."

"The Terrans would want us to have less wives? They want some themselves? Anything!" cried Tritt, overwhelmed with the general emotion.

"Not precisely." Lopp hesitated. "It is a matter that—well, to be brief—the Terrans already have wives, which they treat somewhat differently to ours. In fact—that is to say—they have somehow got into the habit of regarding these creatures as human—that is to say, as equals with themselves. They have a most extraordinary tradition of treating them as if they were lovable and worthy objects. It is said—" Lopp lowered his voice "—that they take one wife only in many cases; and that they do not regard the process of breeding as entirely objectionable—even enjoy it!" Tritt said uneasily. "The poor benighted creatures. But, Lopp, how did the Terran culture mix with the Sunwards 3 culture, without bitter dissension? Sunwards 3 are loose-livers, we all know, and allow their wives to dress and enter the house as servants, but they are not so far gone as to treat them as equals!"

"Such was their anxiety to receive the gifts of the Terrans," said Lopp regretfully, "that they have begun doing just that—or at least pretending to. Well knowing," he added pointedly, "that there was no possibility of receiving Terran aid, unless they did so."

The room took on a deep chilly hush, as the full meaning of Lopp's words sank in. A youthful voice at the back called, "Down with Terran aid!" It's owner was immediately removed, but it was evident that he had supporters.

"We can't do that!" protested the very old Convened one shrilly.

"It's against all the laws of Thak! We should freeze in ever-lasting outer space after death if we did that. Wives

are animals—you can't treat the poor creatures as human beings—why, they wouldn't be happy if we did!"

"There was very nearly a nasty incident on Sunwards 3," said Lopp musingly, "when the Terrans discovered a very old man driving his wives back into the pen for the night. He thought the new ideas were current only in the daytime. Naturally the governor of Sunwards 3 had to apologise profusely to the Terrans, and a really outstanding example was made of the offender."

The ancient Convened one shivered and pulled his cloak more closely round his bony shoulders.

Krug said hesitatingly, "I suppose it need not be for long—I mean, surely the Terrans would not remain here in any force. And we could avoid those who stayed with the base, after they had taught us what we had asked for. And since the base would be in one place, and the planet is wide—" he stopped.

"There is another possibility." Lopp cleared his throat. "The Terrans, as I have said, own in effect, half a Galactic Empire, and we are on the fringe of it. I understand that one of the reasons they are anxious to establish outposts is that, advancing from the opposite side of the Galaxy, is a rather different race of beings, the Sigmellei, who are in a somewhat similar position. Rumour says that their offers might be equally advantageous."

Drooping ears pricked, shaggy heads lifted hopefully. "I understand, though," pursued Lopp, "that if we accepted an offer, or went in search of one, from the Sigmellei, we might find ourselves having to make—ah, other concessions to them."

Prak growled, "For Thak's sake, don't tell me the whole Universe is crammed to the brim with perverted races like these Terrans!"

"Well, not exactly," said Lopp doubtfully. "But the Sigmellei appear to operate under a matriarchy. For the benefit of those who have never heard of a matriarchy, I should explain that the slaves and workers of such a community are all males, while the rulers are without exception—"

After several moments of uproar such as even the meeting-hall of the Grand Council of Stokka had seldom heard,

the assembly voted unanimously to send a deputation asking for Terran aid to Sunwards 3. They also passed a motion of no confidence in Lopp.

"But how are we going to train the wives to behave like Terran women?" asked Tritt, shouting to make himself heard above the noise.

"My old Ni's not so stupid," said Krug indignantly. He had already decided that if the wives were being divided up, as seemed to be the Terran idea of respectability, he would lay claim to Ni and make the best of a bad job. At that he would be better off than poor old Prak, who was sitting in a corner, shuddering with helpless emotion at the very idea of it.

"I thought we might use the tel-trops," said Lopp. There was a pause, while everyone considered this idea. The tel-trops were a species of hynotic device, used to make the last hours of criminals bearable. Crime was considered so outrageous by the Stokka that it was punishable invariably by excruciating torture. As, however, the Stokka were a kind-hearted race, they used the tel-trops to convey delightful impressions to the criminal's braincells, so that he died smiling. The impressions could be of whatever nature the user desired—so that theoretically there should be no barrier to the use of the device to impress intelligence into the minds of the wives. Lopp, everyone reluctantly admitted, had something.

"I'd be interested to see how my old Ni gets along," said Krug thoughtfully; and as if he had voiced a general feeling, the last opposition flickered and died.

The return of the successful Stokka envoys to Sunwards 3 coincided with the first serious attempts at re-education of the wives. This was naturally not accomplished without a good deal of upheaval. The rehabilitation of a major portion of a planet's inhabitants is no small undertaking. Several elderly Stokka committed respectable suicide, having left notes for their relatives, in which they intimated that if this was the new age that was to come upon Stok, they wanted no part of it. The rest of the Stokka simply accepted it, some with numb resignation, some with furious grumbles. The wives, oddly enough, appeared least

affected by their new experiences. Several of the Stokka mechanics, administrators, and artists—in a word, those who had least connection with the wives, except during the mating season—remarked how well the women behaved under the tel-trops, and how quickly they picked up the minor nuances of behaviour, such as polite eating with one's fingers out of a bowl, instead of the trough, and learning to wear clothes. Shoes the wives steadfastly refused to use. The farming population—Krug in particular—were less surprised by these signs of adaptability. Most of them had had their pets among the wives, and would boast to cronies of the startling way in which old Fo or Sa would work out a way round this or that difficulty, or manage to make her needs understood. The wanderers, such as Lopp, naturally took the whole process most easily of all, since they had no matrimonial duties by law; though Tritt hinted ominously that with the present distribution of wives what it was, two or three to a household, the laws would have to be changed to make wives mandatory to every male of the planet, like it or not. The Terrans, some of them at least, were reported to be open-minded to the extent of about four wives to a household, since some of their races had practised this from time immemorial; but anything more generous was likely to give serious political offence. And this they could not afford, not with the first Terrans already on the planet, being gawped at by sightseers, as they directed the founding of the huge station which was to act as their beacon and embassy, housing an ambassador, his staff, technicians, and a few scientists to be replaced in rotation of duty. Altogether, the Stokka realized, they were seeing a good deal more of the Terrans than Lopp had given them to believe was necessary.

"They're going to be around quite a bit," said Krug uneasily to Prak one morning, "one of them was touring the town, this time yesterday, taking pictures, he said, with one of those instant light things they've promised to give away free when the embassy station is officially opened. As far as I could make out, he was talking about picturesque old customs and dignified natives."

"Natives?" said Prak, puzzled.

"Us," explained Krug. "And the wives, too. He seems

to think they're picturesque as well." He shuddered slightly. Most of the Nurses had gone on strike, now that the girl babies were actually living in the houses with the women, and this meant that some of the boy babies had to be cared for by their male kinsfolk. His own house often appeared to him to be bulging faintly from within.

Prak was in bad case, too, though, as an infrequent breeder, he had less children to harass his way. But his crest hung limp and leathery, his skin was turning mottled yellowish-green, and his knobs had flattened. He looked well on the way to a nervous breakdown, thought Krug. It had done him no good to assert before the Council that he was allergic to wives. The Council had taken the view that it was the duty of every good citizen to suffer for his planet's betterment.

"Nasty creatures, these Terrans," said Prak peevishly, vainly trying to rub his knobs to a more imposing size, "they remind me of a skinned trok. All pink and floppy looking."

"Don't mention troks," grumbled Krug. "Of all things, my old Ni has had to take a fancy to one of them! They're developing quite a will of their own, these wives, you know, under training—they have all sorts of funny little ways. I had to be quite firm with her and chase it out of the house. I thought she was going to be silly about it. I must admit I shall be glad when the building's finished, and we haven't got Terrans popping about all over the place. We'll have to keep a few of the wives in official show-houses, just to be in the Terran eye, so to speak, but we shall be able to get the rest of them safely back in the pens where they belong. I'm fond enough of Ni, and Gu, and Ha, too, if it comes to that, but enough is enough." Prak nodded mournfully, and the two Stokka separated, Prak drifting away to gaze miserably into a gish-pool, and Krug stumping back to his house for the midnight meal. On the threshold, he halted in wrathful amazement. The two older women were playing some mystic game, leaning against the wall and waving their hands and singing. The children were prowling and howling, much as usual. But Ni, the youngest and most intelligent wife, was stroking the trok he had turned out of the house the day before, and plaiting gup-leaves into a

collar for its nasty little throat. "Ni," he growled, "that trok goes out. See? Out now!" Simple sentences were still best for the wives.

"He's nice," pouted Ni, "I keep him."

"No!" shouted Krug. "Get that into your thick head. No!" Ni patted the trok and gazed mutinously up at Krug. He bent and jerked the gup-leaves away from her.

"The sooner the Terrans leave and you wives are back in your pens the better. You're beginning to get downright uppish. Do as you're told, Ni." The other wives huddled against the walls and cried.

"Terrans not going," said Ni serenely. "Nice men. They stay and look after wives. I ask them."

"You what?" whispered Krug, the breath hissing out of him in a gasp.

"I say, 'Poor sad wives, back in pen, do all hard work, when nice Terrans go, no happy no more.' Nice Terrans, like trok." She stroked the trok. "Terran say very loud, 'No, they won't—we watch. We Terrans look every week, make sure poor wives in house. All over planet we watch. Take things away from Stokka who put poor wives in pens. Wives stay happy. Terrans watch—for ever.'"

"For ever?" said Krug feebly. "You must have got it wrong, Ni. How can they? Some of them have to go back to their own world—and those that are left aren't enough to watch the whole of Stok."

Dimly he was aware that something had gone immensely wrong with his whole world—it almost seemed as if using the tel-trops had been some kind of gigantic error. The wives—

"The wives," explained Ni kindly, "happy now. Want to stay happy in nice warm house. Not too many children, though. Terrans soon send many, many more Terrans. Have plenty Terrans. Settle here, all over. Look after poor wives. Called—" she wrinkled her brow, and enunciated with great effort—"Married Women's Property Act Society. Nice Terran wives help poor Stokka wives." The trok slithered onto her lap "He nice—clever little fellow. I make him do clever things. I make him talk. You hear. Say nice things to nice man, dillin," she coaxed. It lifted its horrid head. "I like it here," said the trok.

David Harvey
JAKE IN THE FOREST

IT WAS AT this time that Jake came into the forest land. For he remembered the words of Ibsen—seek beauty among the pines. And here in the forest his demand for unity and symmetry was almost satisfied. The forest appeared endless and only rarely gave way to any other form of land use. Each pine tree possessed an underlying form of conic symmetry and this pervaded everything. This gave Jake great pleasure, particularly when he surveyed the landscape from some panoramic viewpoint, for the vertex of each tree provided a series of focal points which guided the vision. And when Jake moved the parallax of vertices moved slowly and irrevocably too. And when he moved under the pines he was able to look up through the symmetrically spaced branches to the final conic of the sky above. Sometimes Jake felt disatisfied with the constant upward pointing of the conic shapes and then he would imagine that the roots of each tree pointed downward and outward into the earth. The most pleasurable moments of all came when he came to one of the numerous lakes, for here he was able to see the conic shapes pointing downwards into the water. Here the land was neatly balanced on the vertex of each tree and Jake trembled in case the crash of the axe should destroy the support of the land and leave nothing save the sky.

But there were unpleasant features about the forest. Jake could not always spare time to observe the perfect geometry of the shapes and silhouettes around him. Walking was often rough and difficult and Jake often stumbled and fell. Sometimes the forest was in the process of regeneration after fire or the axe had taken the highest stands, and then the young pines and the young birches were thick on the ground and difficult to pass among. Even where the timber stood tall and straight walking could be difficult. Boulders covered with mosses of many kinds were beautiful but slippery, and deep green mosses or lush green vegetation

otten concealed dark brown mud and decaying vegetation. There were no easy paths and Jake spent much of his time searching for a way through the forest. He made many detours and after one such detour around difficult marshland he came to the lakeside.

The lakeside is bounded by fine sand spread around a series of large stones, some of which point outwards into the water. Some stones lie partially submerged. Across the lake the conic shapes of the pines are silhouetted in the evening light and they appear to support the earth and grow out of it at the same moment. Jake sits on the largest boulder which is partly surrounded by sand and partly lapped by the water of the lake. And Jake looks long over the lake for he finds the sight a pleasing one. He rests after the hard journey.

Jake breathes deeply to absorb the scent of the pines. He climbs down from the large boulder and walks among the boulders admiring the even spread of the sand which is distributed around the boulders almost as evenly as the water. Soon he comes to the point where there are no more boulders and the lake is only bounded by sand. On the sand is an old cane chair placed as if someone wished for a permanent vantage point from which to gaze across the lake. Some distance back from the lake shore, in a direct line with the old cane chair, Jake sees a house surrounded by pine trees except for the side facing the lake and the chair. Without considering the possible consequences of the action, Jake changes the direction of his movement until he stands at the entrance to the house. The door is open and the house is made of wood. Jake enters the house.

The woman is standing beside the window. In the evening light Jake cannot see every detail. The woman is dressed entirely in white and her hair is long and fair, framing her face as it curls down past both cheeks and over each breast. Both hands rest lightly on the back of a chair and Jake can see two large rings on each index finger. Her face is difficult to describe since it gives no impression of age nor does it possess any distinctive features. Yet it is beautiful. The eyes give the impression of dark brown colour. In trying to be certain of this last

fact, Jake stares long into the eyes of the woman. He is suddenly embarrassed by this and to conceal his feelings he speaks:

"I'm sorry I just walked in like that . . . but I've travelled a long way and I'm rather tired and . . . well . . . I wonder if I could stay here and rest for the night. If so I should be very obliged and of course I should like to pay you as much as I can, although I'm afraid I've not too much money with me."

Jake looks once more into the eyes of the woman and he is certain now that they are a very dark brown colour. She smiles at him and shakes her head slightly so that the fair hair is not disturbed as it rests against her breasts. This action is difficult to interpret. It could mean that she is politely rejecting his request, or it could mean that she is surprised or amused by the request, or perhaps she does not understand his language or, indeed, she may just be not committing herself.

The woman moves towards Jake and she extends her right hand out to him, not in the form of a handshake which could then be interpreted as a formal greeting, but in an upturned beckoning gesture. Jakes does nothing. The woman bends slightly and takes hold of his right hand and holds it lightly in her right hand with a slight pressure of the thumb. She leads him forward until they pass through an inner door to a small room lit by three candles positioned close to a washstand. She indicates that he should wash, and the water is already poured, the soap ready, and the towel lies over the rack close by. Jake washes. The woman takes his hand once more and leads him into a further room.

This room is lit by many candles which provide a multitude of focal points. But the most significant thing about the room is the table, round in shape, covered with a pure white cloth, decorated with a single orchid of deep mauve, and set with two places. To one of these Jake is led and he sits before the table.

The table is covered with foods of many kinds. Salmon garnished with potatoes and parsley, wild fowl, salad, cheeses, fruit, hard rye bread. The woman indicates that Jake shall begin with the salmon and she pours a glass of

white wine. Jake notices that the date on the label of the bottle is 1957, perhaps a vintage year. Jake hesitates to begin, for there is much he would like to know, but the hunger is great, so he eats. After the salmon comes the fowl, and then the cheeses are offered and then the fruit. Jakes eats a segmented orange and finishes a second glass of wine.

The woman then approaches Jake, and extending her hand once more, leads him away from the table where the remnants of the food are, to the corner of the room. Jake takes the chair which the woman indicates to him, sits, and watches as the woman moves gracefully over the room cupping her hand to her mouth and blowing gently to extinguish the candles until only seven are left burning. The table on which the remnants of the food lie is now scarcely discernible. The woman leaves the room, and then re-enters carrying a tray with coffee and cognac. She sets this down on the small table before Jake. He is relieved to see that the cognac is Martell Three Star. The woman draws a stool close to Jake's chair, sits, and then serves the coffee and the cognac.

Jake looks at the woman and sees once more the dark brown eyes that look into his so calmly.

"It is clear that you perhaps do not understand my language, but—"

The woman stretches out a hand in a gesture that indicates that she does not wish for any attempt at verbal communication. Either because this is impossible or because she does not wish to attempt it. Jake sits back in the armchair. He considers the situation in the following terms.

He had been met by a woman who had exhibited a most extraordinary behaviour pattern. The behaviour pattern and the situation were such that he, Jake, almost sensed that the action he was now participating in was of some past time, or of an entirely fictitious character. Although he had considerable confidence in the validity of his own sense perceptions, this was definitely a situation where he had some doubts. The situation and the behaviour pattern he had witnessed almost suggested some medieval fairy tale, or even some old Norse saga, and this was, considered Jake, the basic reason for his uneasiness in the situation.

By some strange transition to childhood memories and fears, he found himself mentally convinced that some ogre or monster was about to enter and to seize upon him for keeping company with this extraordinary, but rather beautiful woman Perhaps this strange, beautiful and obviously lonely woman was in fact held captive by, in fairy tale terms, some dragon or evil power with which he, Jake, was sooner or later to come into contact. Jake hardly relished the idea of violence and he hardly considered himself as either mentally or physically equipped for imitating St. George with any great prospect of success.

This train of thought, with its overtones of childhood fantasy, was hardly a satisfactory one. It was neither truly analytical nor was it based on the observed facts of the situation. Some better form of analysis, based on realities, was obviously essential, even if the feeling of unease was not to be entirely dismissed as irrelevant.

His doubts regarding the validity of his sense perceptions could be partially eliminated by simple reference to the 1957 vintage of the wine and the fact that the cognac he was drinking was a well-known contemporary brand. This at least proved that there had been no suitable elision of time in the course of his journey through the forest. Imaginings of medieval, mythical or fictional setting could be tentatively eliminated on these grounds. The wine and the cognac could, of course, be a subtle hoax, but on balance this possibility seemed rather unreasonable.

The one salient and striking feature of the situation was the peculiar and extraordinary behaviour pattern of the woman. This certainly had no immediate explanation. As far as he trusted his own memory, and it was true that the memory could play many tricks and was not, therefore, to be thoroughly relied upon as evidence, but as far as he was aware, he had never encountered this woman before he entered the house. Assuming, for the moment, that this hypothesis was correct, and that his memory was accurate, certain points of interest immediately arose.

The peculiar element of the situation was that his arrival was obviously expected. Yet if he, Jake, had been unaware of the existence of the woman before his entry to the house, then it logically followed that the woman could not

have been aware of his existence. And if she were unaware of his existence before his arrival, how could it be that she had accepted his arrival so surely, and prepared such an elaborate welcome. His memory may not be entirely true. It must, however, be also admitted that there was the possibility that the woman could have known of his existence before he became aware of her, by some short period of time. She could, for example, have observed him while he was sitting on the boulder admiring the beauty of the lake. Yet the phase of time between his arrival on the lakeshore and his entrance to the house was hardly sufficient for the woman to prepare so elaborate a welcome as the one he had in fact received. There was of course, the possibility that she had seen him afar off. But the house was surrounded by pine trees and the only view of any distance was across the lake and Jake had certainly not arrived from that direction. The woman may, however, have positioned herself at some vantage point where she could have observed his progress through the forest. But the country through which he had passed was thickly forested and therefore this possibility could be discounted because if he, Jake, could not see out from beneath the forest cover very effectively, then it was certain that the woman could not see in. But then perhaps she had some special means of detection at her disposal, or some special system of communication with observers in the forest. This possibility was a real one. But even if the woman was aware of his existence some way off, there was no certainty that he should arrive to this particular point on the surface of the land rather than any other. In this case the woman was taking one chance against infinity, for there were an infinity of compass directions which Jake could have followed in the forest, one chance against infinity that he would arrive here rather than at some other place. The woman would hardly prepare so elaborate a welcome on the basis of one chance against infinity. For these reasons, it therefore seemed reasonable to temporarily dismiss the proposition that the woman had prepared the food and extended this elaborate welcome on the certain knowledge of his arrival.

But perhaps the woman expected some other person. Suppose that she had been informed that a certain gentle-

man who she had never met before was intending to visit her at a certain time on a certain day and then, by some mischance, he had been prevented from coming, then by chance he, Jake, had arrived at the very moment when the other gentleman had been expected; under these circumstances the behaviour pattern of the woman became understandable, since she was merely confusing him, Jake, with the other gentleman. This was indeed a serious possibility. After all, everything was clearly ordered as if some visitor were expected, while the woman was clearly dressed as if for some important occasion. Perhaps the white dress was symbolic of some marriage contract about to be entered into. This might be embarrassing since he was now in the position of being mistaken for some gentleman who might be about to perform some vital function in the woman's life. Even if he were aware of the importance and nature of the function to be performed by the gentleman, he would hardly be in a moral position to carry out any action based upon it. Further difficulty might arise if the gentleman who had been delayed was only delayed a short time, for there would then be the complex problem of explaining the extraordinary situation as it now existed. Under these conditions the feeling of disquiet, the feeling that there was some monster or ogre in the vicinity, was perhaps justified in a more modern and perhaps more sinister context. Chivalry with lances always seemed infinitely more preferable to crude combat with flick-knives. And Jake always abhorred the prospect of physical combat.

But there was no certainty that this explanation was the correct one. Indeed it was only a hypothetical construction, albeit a reasonable one, that had the merit of forming an explanation for the peculiar behaviour pattern of the woman. Yet it must be admitted that the arrival of so important a visitor as the hypothetical gentleman, was hardly credible if the woman were not acquainted with him beforehand. It was surely unlikely that any total stranger could be of such fundamental importance to the woman. So perhaps the symbolic dress of white had nothing to do with the situation and was merely another chance factor. In any case there were other possibilities that had

to be considered. Perhaps the woman was of such a strange and curious nature that she always maintained a place for an extra person at table in the hope that some chance passer-by would enter and keep her company. For surely her life here was lonely and unrewarding? In this case the woman was nothing more than a permanent good samaritan with some deep rooted psychological reasons for acting in the way she now did. In this case the nature of her personality was a crucial factor in the situation and it was unfortunately impossible, under circumstances where there was no chance or even will to develop any form of verbal communication, to establish the nature of the psychological causes that might condition her present pattern of behaviour. The only chance of establishing some evidence of psychological disturbance was by close observation of the actions of the woman.

Jake looks at the woman. The light from the seven candles casts contrasting shadows across the beautiful face. The dark brown eyes disturb Jake and once more he is acutely aware of a certain fear, fear of some evil force that might snatch the woman away from him and exact retribution from him. There is no sign of disturbance on the face of the woman. She smiles slightly, acknowledging Jake's attention to her, and gently strokes her long fair hair with fingers that Jake sees are fine and delicate. Once more Jake notices the prominent ring on the index finger of the right hand. The rings are large and of old design. Perhaps Austrian in origin. The hand continues to stroke the hair that still rests almost undisturbed against the breast. The eyes of brown continue to gaze at Jake, but now their focus is not his own eyes for the focus of her vision moves slowly over his face, only occasionally and momentarily returning to his eyes. Jake moves nervously in the chair, uneasy and self-conscious. His skin feels hot. He passes his hand over his face. The woman observes his motions and, perhaps interpreting them as signs of tiredness or restlessness, she quickly rises to her feet, her right hand still poised in the motion of stroking the hair. She stands, smiling. Her hand extends to Jake in the upturned gesture. Jake takes the hand and is immediately led from the large room with its

seven burning candles and its now indistinct table covered with the remnants of the food. He is led into a smaller room. This room is already lit by two candles. The room contains a large bed, three chairs, a large wooden chest of rather old carved design, and a table close to the bed on which stands a glass and jug, the jug presumably full of water.

With a gesture of her left hand the woman indicates the bed, smiles, releases Jake's hand, and replaces her right hand to its former position half in the motion of stroking the long fair hair. Jake looks for some further sign from the woman, but he is easily embarrassed by the directness of her gaze. The woman turns gracefully and, pausing briefly to smile back at Jake from the doorway, she leaves the room. She closes the door quietly behind her.

Jake stands before the bed and considers the situation. It is true that he is tired and that the woman had surely meant by her motions that he was to sleep here. Yet there was some deep suspicion, undefined and illogical, that must surely be worked out and defined if he was to sleep in comfort in this bed. Would some monster come in the night or, to be more realistic, would the gentleman that perhaps the woman really expected arrive and discover him? Yet there was no evidence on which to base this shadow of fear. The woman had clearly left him to sleep in the comfort of the bed. It would be ungrateful of him to try to leave the house now and refuse the privilege that had been offered him, and it would be ungrateful too, to sit on one of the hard chairs all night and thereby betray his suspicions. He, Jake, was a grown man who had no faith in the irrational, and therefore he ought to dismiss all these notions with their childhood fears. Although it had to be admitted that the behaviour of the woman was hardly rational. But perhaps it was merely the inability to use verbal communication that made the situation so difficult. Perhaps there was some simple explanation for everything that would be revealed if verbal communication could only be established.

Jake feels the bed. It is clearly soft and comfortable. Jake moves across the room and finds that there is one window above and behind the wooden box. The window

is firmly secured and this is the only other possible point of entry into the room apart from the door. Jake confirms that the jug upon the table does indeed contain water. He feels the bed once more and senses his own tiredness. He moves to the door but can hear no sound from without. He moves back to the bed. He undresses and takes his clothes to lay them on the large wooden box of old carved design. He returns to the bed and enters gratefully into the softness of the bed. And Jakes lies in the deep comfort of the bed and is lulled by the warmth that builds up around him. He continues in his attempts to analyse the situation but not successfully for no new logical explanations of the behaviour pattern of the woman occur to him. So Jake concentrates more and more on the comfort of the bed. He rises and blows out the candles and then settles back into the bed. He considers the behaviour pattern, the nature of tiredness and sleep. Sleep now becomes the dominant motif of his thought.

But then Jake sees a faint shadow cast upon the wall. He turns his head and sharpens his vision to try to discover the source. A candle is alight and moves towards him across the room born by the hand of the woman. She approaches to the side of the bed and looks upon Jake. She stands for some time thus, motionless apart from the eyes which follow Jake's movement as he half rises to a sitting position in deference to his hostess. The focal point of the room is in the point of the candle flame. But somewhere between the eyes of blue and the eyes of brown there lies an undefined tension. A tension that Jake finds frightening for his legs are immobile. The index finger of his right hand juts out, slightly hooked, over the sheet, while the remaining fingers of his right hand are tightly curled so that the nails press hard into the palm. The left hand is in an almost identical state of tension, except that the thumb is tucked hard under white knuckles. Jake is aware of the discomfort and yet is powerless to act. The woman moves. She transfers the candle which was in the left hand to the right, and this action results in a shift of the focal point in the room, but not in the undefined meeting of tension. In the same movement, or to be more exact in the completion of it, the woman's left hand, now freed

from the candle, travels lightly through the air until it rests on Jake's shoulder. Jake comprehends the smooth and warm sensation of fingers pressed lightly against his own skin. The fingers are not static for the point of impact of the fingers against the shoulder is the source of some delicate undefined rhythm. Yet it is impossible to concentrate on this rhythm to learn its cadences, for all of his perceptions are absorbed in the study of brown eyes in which the black pupils are now large in the angled beams of the candle light. Jake has a sensation of total immobility, a sensation of complete subservience to the impact of external movements. The tension in his body is increasing. The nails of his right hand fingers cut hard into the palm. He has no choice of action. He finds it difficult to breathe. He is truly static. His breathing is constricted.

It almost ceases.

It ceases.

And he is in the forest and everything is static and symmetric about Him. The trunks and the branches of each tree cut the air around Him into perfectly bounded segments. He begins to move gently through the forest to observe the parallax and the gradual angular changes within each segment as squares are transformed to rectangles, then to trapezoids or more complex shapes, and all this through the power of His movement. He moves, at first slowly and carefully, but His feet do not stumble for the ground is smooth and the mosses are deep and soft; they are not slippery here nor do they conceal patches of mud or decaying vegetation. So He moves through the forest, moving faster, and joyfully through the conic forms of the forest. The trees are fewer, the mosses are replaced by grasses, and now the sunlight penetrates to form geometric patterns of light green bounded by darkness. Grasses, tall and spikey, jut upwards, distributed randomly among the geometric shapes of dark and light green. Now there are no trees to cut the impact of the sun, but there are low grasses and many flowers that pattern the surface. The flowers are white, yellow and deep mauve, and the most beautiful is the mauve. These hang from their long green stems permissively reacting to the

wind and occasionally rising up against it to reveal golden coloured stamen within the cup shape of deep mauve. He moves among these flowers and comprehends the enticement inherent in the scent of pollen. And as He moves so He progresses upwards over sloping ground until the forest trees below appear no larger than the flowers at His feet. The mountainside steepens and His perspective over the land becomes more impressive. He can see lakes among the trees, and patches of marsh, or light green segments of birch tree that contradict the pines in colour and movement. But the flowers at his feet are huge compared with the trees below. The glitter of the lakes irrelevant compared with the reflection of the sun from the surface face of His watch. But His mind still assumes that the forests and lakes are more important. And so He remains concerned with the patterns spread out distant and far away. The steep ascent of the mountainside gives way to the smooth shoulder of the mountain where the soil is deeper and the vegetation closely cropped and fine. Outlined against the sky He sees two mounds spread evenly on either side of a broad grassy path. These have the form of ancient burial mounds, built to nurture the modern memory in the food of the past. The mounds are smooth and gentle in outline. And the path is grassy and smooth only speckled with different kinds of mountain flower. On either side of the path the surface is rougher, occasionally broken by slight linear depressions where the sheep have run, or disrupted by tufts of coarse grass or hummocks where the frost has bitten deep below the surface of the earth and heaved out soil and rock. But here the path itself is smooth and the grass fine. He moves over the smooth surface and stands between the two mounds to observe the smooth round shapes that define the sky, perfect in their rotundity, moulded by the natural powers that attack rough edges and reduce surfaces to smooth morphology. These are easy profiles that lead the eye and, by progression, the man, off the rotundity to the knife edge where the forest, lake and cloud lie spread below. Here the totality of all is observable but the vision is momentary for as He aproaches the summit across the knife edge, so His concentration is focused on the one feature that dominates all others, a huge megalith that

stands far in the distance eternally etched against the pale evening light.

As He approaches the summit a proportional change is evident, as either He becomes smaller or the megalith increases in stature. He can see its structure clearly now; two huge stones jut upright out from the surface of the land and support a lintel stone of enormous dimensions. He can only pause before it and acknowledge its size. As He approaches closer He sees that the summit to which He is progressing contains a long deep triangular hollow and it is within this hollow that the two upright slabs of stone are embedded. He descends at the long apex of the triangular depression until His movement relative to the sides of the hollow eliminate the forests, lakes, marshes and clouds that had before been laid out below Him. He enters the shadow of the megalith and the sky darkens behind the three stones until they form an entrance to darkness. His muscles are tense, His lips are dry, His movement sparse. He rests His forehead against the cool rock. His head presses hard against the rock as He turns to look upward at the cavernous roof where He sees the parallelism between the supporting rocks that has some optical meeting point well-defined in projection beyond the cavern roof.

In the centre of the cavern entrance there is a pool of water, and here He briefly moistens His hands and face before He strides along the well-defined path that leads against the darkness. This leads downwards into the earth in the shadow of the two huge vertical stones that support the solid rock above. The path becomes steeper and ill-defined steps are cut into the loose soil. The steps are rather high and difficult to negotiate, cut deep into solid rock. He commits Himself with every leap downwards until the darkness makes each progression an act of faith. He turns upwards and looks outwards to the light that is now defined by the megalithic entrance far away. The huge rock is supported on the two vertical rocks. Slowly, irrevocably, the pressure of the mass of rock above presses the two vertical rocks into the ground until there is a cracking sound, at first like pistol shots, but then like cannon, and then like the booming of the deepest bells as the support-

ing rocks are pressed apart until the enormous mass of the one huge rock grinds downwards to shut out every vestige of the light. He stands momentarily to recognise the event, to commit it to memory, then He turns and leaps over the point where He calculates the next step ends. As He leaps He hears a cry, but He is never to know if this cry is from His own throat or from the rocks around Him. The fall is sharp, His clothes are ripped by His impact with angular rocks, His skin is pierced, His body is maimed, and He acknowledges pain. But there is nothing that will stop the force of gravity that pulls Him downwards into the dark. The sequence of His fall is patterned by moments of free ecstatic movement and moments of jagged impact that make Him cry out against the pain. But the moments of the free movement bring relief and all the terror of the preceding moment is lost and healed in the sense of joy and freedom that accompanies ecstasy.

The cushion of His fall is soft and horrible, softly lit in the deep cavern where the roof is lit from the light of fireflies. The softness is of decay, beautiful but horrible, decay of flesh and all around lie arms and legs that break the surface of the human compost. Some hands move in final gestures, some eyes move to acclaim Him as their saviour, some voices cry and beg salvation from decomposition. And within the skull of each lies a brain, grey and soft, which forms the catalyst of all this misery. He moves across this scene, and He laughs and kicks each skull that lies in His way, He treads on each outstretched suppliant hand, He kicks mud into the eyes that appeal to Him. And soon the dull grey of the reflection becomes pure crystal liquid. Now there are reflections that answer the fireflies, and the water glitters all around within the opening limits of the cavern.

And He sees the water's edge, water that is only indicated by the reflection of points of light. And He enters the boat and with a kick against the soft horror of the shore He sends it and Himself out across the many points of light. These points of light suffer only slight disruption through the passage of the boat. Otherwise all is calm and the points of light pattern the surface around, rotating or moving progressively according to the random movement

of the boat. The roof of the cavern is more diffuse, its colours merge to a dark blue and the firefly points of light are the stars and the water assumes the motion of the sea. The boat is within the ocean and moves gently and rhythmically to meet each surge of the waves. As the boat moves so the angles of the sea and sky and prow are intertwined. They become entangled in mysterious lines that sometimes follow far into the distance and sometimes terminate abruptly. Air flows over the waves and forms an added element of motion in the complex linear patterns that enevelop Him. Matter fuses and glides gracefully so that the angles of horizon, sea and boat approach and spring apart in regular contractions while the wind sweeps deceptively among them. Claws of light stretch over the horizon, weak at first, but then with a strength that draws everything to one focal point that now emerges as the vortex around which all other angles fuse, dizzy but ecstatic. The sway and twist of the boat subject His eyes to flashes of light and dark which only allow the consciousness a subliminal recognition of the harsh strength of the patterns all around. Angles surge together almost meeting in unison, flash apart, and then collide in a final convolution that directs all power and velocity to the one central point. And the vortex explodes. The sun is out. The angles rise gently in transfixed parallels to reveal the deep penetrating blue of the sky. The boat, the sea, the sky, the sun, and the man, are gone. Only the blue of the sky and the blue of the eyes remain to slowly merge in the final irreducible act of reconciliation.

The curtain is defined by light. Particles of fine dust indicate the path which the penetrating sunlight follows. These fine particles of dust trace out in a vertical plane the strip of light that stretches horizontally across the wooden floor. A whirl of fine dust billows into the sunlight as the man rises suddenly from the bed. The man hesitates momentarily, then moves to the wooden chest and dresses quickly, revealing, as he does so, an old carved design on the surface of the wood. He pulls back the curtains directly above and behind the wooden chest and smiles as he contemplates the shapes of the pine trees and the complex inter-

play of sunlight within this geometry. He turns and walks through the open door into the large room. Here he pauses, perhaps in doubt, perhaps in consternation. The room is clean and tidy, lit by the sunlight. The large round table is partially covered with a cloth of deep scarlet. On this there are many small dishes containing food—butter, preserved meats, cheeses, conserves, while a board with different types of bread placed on it lies near the centre. To the right of the one place laid at the table there is a glass and a jug of milk. There is a small delicately shaped vase of black containing a single rose of pure white at the very centre of the table.

The man moves from the large room into another, smaller, room containing several wooden chairs, a table, and a settle. In the corner there is an old iron range stove built in against the wall. The man moves to this. The stove is still warm and the embers glow beneath the range. He moves to the doorway and considers the view. He sees the lake bounded by sand. He sees the old cane chair upon the sand, placed as if someone desired a vantage point to observe the beauty of the lake beyond with its reflections in calm water. The man moves out through the open door into the sunlight and stands upon the sand. He rotates slowly on his heel, and as his body moves so his attention sweeps a circular range of vision. He walks slowly along the sand looking carefully about him. He turns and stares at his own footsteps in the sand, paces back, until he comes to the point where a deep scar on the surface of the sand indicates the point where he had formerly stood. He re-enters the house, kicking off the loose sand from his shoes as he passes through the wooden porch. He enters a small room. Here there is a wash basin with water ready poured, and the man takes the soap resting nearby, washes, and dries his hands, face and neck on the towel that lies close by on the rack. He moves back into the large room. Here he pauses.

He eventually sits at the place already laid at table, breaks open the freshly baked bread that lies on the board before him, takes the knife, spreads butter, takes meat, and slowly eats. He partakes of meats, cheeses and conserves. He drinks most of the milk, finishing the second glass at

the end of the meal. He rises from the table and moves into the room where he had slept. He stands quiet and thoughtful. He moves back through the large room, the passage, and the small room where the stove still is warm, and so out into the sunlight once more. He stands looking around him. But he is dissatisfied and walks across the sand to the old cane chair. He rests one hand on the chair and gazes about him, looking long at the conic shapes that are so prolific about him. But the image of conic symmetry is no longer satisfying.

He moves across the sand, first with his back to the angled beams of the sunlight. Then he turns suddenly to face the source of light, he retraces his steps past the old cane chair, and moves rapidly across the sand until he reaches the first small boulder. Beyond this the many boulders form a random patchwork with the elements of sand and water. He walks slowly among the boulders, looking around him and shading his eyes against the strength of the sun. He comes to the largest boulder of all, leaps up upon it and there on the flat upper surface sloping gently to the water's edge he sees the figure of a woman, dressed all in white, relaxed and calm. She is lying on the rock. The fair hair spreads out in long strands to cut across the silver glitter of quartz veins that etch the surface of the granite.

The rock and the woman are still, utterly still. The man kneels close beside the woman. He sees the lips slightly parted, the neck white and soft in the morning light, the arms relaxed, the upturned hands rest gently on the surface of the rock, the eyes are open, but focused nowhere except perhaps in the blue of the sky above. He sees the fair hair swept back until it falls casually in golden streaks across the surface of the rock. The man sees all these outward things. He kneels closer to the woman until his forehead touches the surface of the rock. He presses down harder against the rock. He clasps his stomach as if in pain. He turns his head slowly until the cheekbone forms the point of contact with the rock. He sees the profile of the forehead leading across the strong line of the nose to the gentle indeterminacy of the lips. He sees the slope of shoulder that leads to the ouline of breasts, breasts that

define the path of sunlight and define the curtain edge of the sky. He sees all these things.

But he is aware of the inner horror. He is full of pain. Pain born of guilt and negligence, pain born of his own gross deformity. He feels the monstrosity that pervades his own body, dwarfish, truncated, burgled, maimed. Every defect penetrates to the point of conscious pain and forms a unity in his stomach. A unity of nausea. He is sick. The vomit is yellow, not the fairness of the hair nor the fineness of the sand, but the coarse lumpy yellow of betrayal. He is sick once more. And the sweat and tears on his face glisten reflection of sunlight. He remains kneeling and bowed close against the surface of the rock. And the rock and the woman are still, utterly still.

For long he remains observing this stillness, drawing into himself its meaning, comprehending its significance. For long he senses his own pain and nausea, sensing its implications. The process is long and the messages complex. But at last his strength returns, and gradually the assurance of his own power returns. He feels the power that lies in his own limbs, in his mouth and thighs. He rises and stands firmly above the body. He looks at the lake and the symmetry of the pines, but these are comfortless. He glances up at the sky and once more at the pines. There is comfort in the blue of the sky and in the green of the pines. His hands rest firmly against the thrust of his own hips. His posture is decisive. His mouth firm and sure. And he remembers once more the words of Ibsen, murmurs them once, then lowers his gaze and cries aloud:

"Only that which is lost remains eternal."

And the words slowly die as they pass over the water and in amongst the pines.

Bob Shaw
. . . AND ISLES WHERE GOOD MEN LIE

LT.-COL. JOHN FORTUNE spat out a piece of chocolate wrapping paper and swung round in his swivel chair. Half a million miles beyond the orbit of the Moon the cylindrical

bulk of Nesster spaceship Number 1753 carried out a similar rotation. . . .

Still spitting noisily, Fortune pushed himself up and walked heavily to the window. Half a million miles beyond the orbit of the Moon the ship made a minute course correction. . . .

It was determined to land in Fortune's lap.

Or that was the way it seemed as he stared out across the Icelandic airfield on which United Nations Planetary Defence Unit N186 was based. It was a cold October afternoon and over the plateau the clouds were seahorses of frozen grey steel, moving across the sky with senseless clockwork precision. In the distant centre of the field a silver tactical transport rose vertically and drifted away, the punishing roar of its multiple lift jets animating the floor under Fortune's feet.

He had been intensely aware of Nesster ship 1753 since the moment, a week previously, the sweeping fans of the Lunar deep radar had shown it to be cruising north of the Line. He had promptly developed a suspicion that this one, this single out-of-line ship, was heading straight for his sector, and since then he had been able to feel it boring down through the sky towards him. When he walked or drove or changed position in any way he felt Number 1753 swing its blunt nose onto new bearings with the intent passion of a rifleman seeking the moment of maximum vulnerability. Which was crazy, Fortune told himself, because if anybody was going to be alarmed it ought to be the Nesster̀s on board that ship.

Lt. Griffin, the Unit's information officer, came in from the adjutant's office and saluted, his neat golden head almost luminescent in the gloom. He glanced reproachfully at the top three buttons of Fortune's trousers which Fortune had undone to ease the after-lunch pressure around his middle.

"We're almost ready to begin, sir," Griffin said. "We've got eight reporters and six cameramen." There was the faintest possible emphasis on the last word, which was Griffin's way of saying, smarten yourself up, slob, you're supposed to look like a hero.

Fortune fingered his straining shirt buttons. "What is it about the public relations business," he asked conversationally, "which makes it attract people who are completely hopeless in private relations?"

Griffin's blond eyebrows moved an eighth of an inch upwards, which for him was a violent display of emotion. "Being purely an *information* officer," he said, making a fine distinction which was lost on Fortune, "I'm not qualified to say much about public relations practitioners, but I suppose one is likely to encounter misfits in all walks of life, sir." His gaze travelled significantly round the drab green walls of Fortune's office then he walked out quickly.

A slob and then a misfit. Fortune pulled in his stomach angrily and did up the buttons. I must lose weight, he thought in sudden desperation, no more starch for a whole month.

From the outer office came sounds of Griffin organising his little group of local pressmen who were out to make the most of the possibility of Iceland's first Nesster landing. The country's first landing would be a big sensation, but the fact that *the* Col. Fortune would be there to handle it was an out-and-out gift—the legendary Captain Johnny back in action again after a lapse of four years, complete with piratical name and swashbuckling reputation. Yes, if it came off it would be a newsman's dream, and Fortune wanted nothing to do with it. He had done his share of defending the planet against the invaders during that first incredible year of 1983, but there was a limit to the amount of guilt he was prepared to accept.

Griffin herded the pressmen in from the adjutant's office. The reporters sat on the chairs which had been borrowed from other offices for the occasion and the cameramen moved to stratetgic corners.

"Gentlemen," Griffin began, "I don't think there is any need for me to introduce Lt.-Col. Fortune, so we'll get started right away. The colonel will outline the situation very briefly and afterwards you may ask any questions that occur to you." There was a quiet murmur of assent and Fortune realised that four years of obscurity had made no difference at all to his reputation. The newsmen were impressed by him.

"The first thing I must stress," Fortune said, "is that Nesster ship 1753 may not land in Iceland at all. There is, in fact, only a one-in-three chance of this happening. Preliminary computations based on reports from the Lunar radar bases indicate that the South Greenland and South Baffin Island Sectors are equally likely touchdown areas.

"The second point I want to bring out is that even if 1753 does select this sector, the chances of it putting down on top of a town or village are so small as to be negligible. I know you have all heard of towns being flattened, but it has only occurred in places like parts of Africa and Japan where the buildings were of a type which would not show up well on whatever radar system the Nessters use. A Nesster ship is huge and massive but, like any other space or aircraft, it needs a flat piece of ground on which to land. It will even avoid a properly constructed cowshed." Fortune smiled momentarily and was answered by appreciative grins from the group.

"In any case, no matter where the ship lands, we'll be waiting for it—and we have considerable experience in this type of work." There were more appreciative grins and Fortune knew he was going over well, opening up in response to their admiration. Slob, misfit—and traitor.

"Why did you come to Iceland, Colonel Fortune?" the reporter from the *Visir* made no apology for deviating from the main subject of the conference.

"I guess I started to feel sorry for those Nessters." There were outright laughs at that one and even Lt. Griffin smiled thinly. Fortune felt his shirt begin to stick to his shoulders with perspiration.

"The Captain Johnny series on television is said to be accurately based on your early exploits against the Nessters, Colonel. Was it really like that?"

"Well, for one thing, I don't remember all those pretty girls." This is just fine, Fortune thought. The ship up there has swung in closer, thousands of miles closer, and all I have done is turn into a quick-fire comedian. A five-year exposure to history was all it had taken to change him from a normal young engineering graduate to a fat, sweating clown. . . .

Looking back on it, he was not sure when he had begun to realise the truth about the Nessters. At first there had been no time to think. The big ships had begun to land at random points across the Earth and each one poured out several hundred black, scaly nightmares whose bacteria-laden breath was usually enough to kill any nearby human who was not properly masked. The Nessters were unarmed—if the word could be applied to fifteen-foot-long armoured bulldozers—but they made formidable opponents, and many men became heroes. John Fortune, an infantry lieutenant doing a two-year stint with the UNO Independents, was one of the first to discover the techniques of killing Nessters. He was involved in several spectacular actions, he was photogenic, he had a romantic, buccaneering name. He was, within a matter of months, Captain Johnny—the man of the moment.

It was not until the techniques of killing became comparatively easy, comparatively safe, that he had begun to ask questions. Why did the Nesster ships land one at a time at scattered points? Why did the drive engines of each ship run wild soon after landing, forcing the Nessters to abandon their shelter regardless of how hostile conditions outside were? In fact, why was a race with the technological prowess of the Nessters making such a painful, pitiful mess of taking over an unprepared planet?

The answer, when he found it, hurt. Captain Johnny, Earth's super-soldier, had made his name slaughtering unarmed families of immigrants.

Scientific intelligence teams had gradually uncovered the story. The big cylindrical ships displayed meteor erosion which indicated that they had been travelling for not less than six hundred years. They were fully automated—they had to be, because the generations of Nessters who had lived and died during the journey would have had no idea of how to handle them at landfall. The truth was that, in spite of being ugly, black and deadly, the Nessters were innocents walking blindly to the slaughter.

And the thing which destroyed Fortune was the discovery that the truth made no difference. The Nessters simply were . . . unacceptable.

"How does your wife like living in Iceland, colonel?"

"My wife likes it here very much," Fortune said carefully, aware of a brief feather-flick of apprehension which felt strange because it had nothing to do with the Nessters. If the papers got to know about Christine there could be an explosion of publicity which could blast Fortune out of his cosy Iceland command.

He had engineered the appointment to Sector N186 because it was one of the least likely to draw Nesster landings. It was a place where he could throw another log on the fire, serve tea and close bright curtains across the windows to shut out the darkness. There had been nothing else for him to do, for Earth was not going to stop killing Nessters and the Nessters were not going to stop arriving. One ship had been landing every twenty-two hours for five years and still the caravan stretched right out beyond the Solar System, beyond the farthest reach of Earth's deep space probes.

Estimates of how long the daily landings could continue varied considerably—the lowest figure was fifty years; the highest was in the region of twelve centuries. A few people on Earth were worried sick about the Nesster problem, but far more were putting their sons into the army. It was, as far as soldiers were concerned, a big, beautiful sellers' market.

As the pressmen dispersed at the end of the conference Fortune opened the right-hand drawer of his desk. In it was a shallow cardboard box, presented to him every month by a confectionery company, containing several dozen chocolate soldiers wrapped in brilliant foil. Slanted across the chest of each in yellow-limned red letters was the name, *Captain Johnny*.

"I think it went very well, sir," Griffin commented, returning from the adjutant's office. "They haven't forgotten about you."

"Some people have good memories," Fortune grunted ungraciously. Within the drawer, almost of its own accord, his hand moved along the top rank of chocolate soldiers, methodically snapping their necks.

At six o'clock Fortune rang his home and was answered

by an unfamiliar male voice which stated the number of his phone in precise, neutrally accented English.

Suddenly Fortune felt very tired. "I want to speak to Mrs. Fortune."

"Just a moment, colonel," the voice replied efficiently. There was a cotton-wool silence, like that caused by a hand blocking a telephone's mouthpiece, then the sound of Christine laughing.

"Hello, darl," she said. "What is it? I hope you aren't going to be late for the party."

"Purely as a matter of interest—who was that?"

"Don't be silly, darl," Christine said. "You remember Pavel very well. You've met him at lots of functions. He came early to help me with the preparations for the evening," Fortune remembered. Pavel Efimov was a Ukrainian who ran the International Hostel which had been set up in Reykjavik for the benefit of UNO personnel associated with the Unit. His willingness to use a free afternoon helping with Christine's party explained why she had been spending so much time at the Hostel over the last three months. Or was it the other way round?

"Ah, yes," Fortune said. "I'll be a little late this evening, Christine—I want to go over to Bill Geissler's place for a while."

"Do you have to, darl?"

"Yes, Christine. It's quite important. Tell Peter I'll be late and not to wait up for me."

Christine sniffed audibly and hung up without another word. Fortune shrugged and threaded his way out through the offices of the headquarters block. A cold, dark wind slapped aimlessly at him as he walked past the greenly lit hangars and workshops of the Unit. He switched on the heater as soon as he had closed the bubble of his staff copter, relaxing in the gusts of rubber-smelling warmth until the tower cleared him for take-off. At eight hundred feet he headed south-west across the trembling lights of Hafnarfjordr and followed the coastline for thirty miles before angling down on the familiar lights of Bill Geissler's works shining in the rolling blackness like a scimitar.

On the ground he walked towards Geissler's office, noting

that the big gun was out of its housing and probing almost vertically into the sky, which meant Geissler Orbital Deliveries was getting ready to put a package into orbit. Geissler was the only real-life genius Fortune had ever known and he looked nothing like the part. He was a stocky little man with ridged black hair and the hard, swarthy face of a Mexican bandit. Three years before he had bought a section of land on the south-west tip of Iceland, moved in with two common law wives and an ex-naval sixteen-inch gun, set up a workshop and since then had supported his *mènage à trois* by placing instrument capsules in orbit. He specialised in polar and near-polar orbits for a number of universities and new governments scattered across the globe.

Geissler was seated at his glass-topped desk making pencil marks on a dark grey punched tape. "Come in, John. I didn't expect you. What's the matter? You getting this 1753?"

"I think so, Bill. It's a one-in-three shot, but I have a feeling about this one."

"So have I, pal—and I'm never wrong. You'd better clear a space in your back yard for it." He snorted and pushed the coils of punched tape away. In the workshop beyond the glass wall of the little office an electric welder briefly drenched its surroundings in needles of violet brilliance.

Fortune unbuttoned his coat and sat down. "Have you had time to . . .?"

Geissler thrust out his hand like a traffic cop. "What have you forgotten, John?"

"Nothing. Oh, *that*! What the hell's the use of my asking you these things when I don't know if your answer is right?"

"Ask me anyway. You know I like the practice."

"All right, all right. What is . . ." Fortune began picking numbers at random, ". . . 973827 times 4264587"

Geissler's eyes darkened. "It's 415,296,314,766. Try another one."

"Can you get a message to Mars?" Fortune spoke

angrily, feeling the Nesster ship drumming down an invisible wire attached to the top of his head.

Geissler looked dubious. "I could, but I hate to think what it would cost. Private research organisations—that includes me, by the way—can buy time on the Cripple Creek dish but they charge about twenty thousand kroner, say five thousand dollars a minute at the present orbital positions, and if you want a reply the rate would be about twice that. Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?"

Fortune nodded. "Yes. It can't wait. I want them to run a check on our five suspects."

"Well, even if I condense the orbital data to the limit the transmission is bound to take at least three minutes, that's sixty thousand kroner. The reply won't take as long, of course, but I think there will be a minimum charge for a Mars-Earth transmission, possibly another twenty thousand." Geissler's brown eyes narrowed in almost physical pain—he was a business man as well as a genius. "That's big money for squirting a few electrons into the sky. If you could wait another month I think I can eliminate four of the suspects."

"I can't wait."

"But *eighty thousand kroner*! I know you made plenty out of the Captain Johnny thing, John, but you're bound to go broke at this rate. All the work you're getting me to do, and now this Mars transmission, should be financed by UNO money. I'm going to make some coffee. Think it over."

Waiting for the coffee, Fortune thought it over. He remembered how he had felt when the theory had first been propounded that the Nesster caravan was homing on Earth by means of signals from a scout satellite. It was easy to visualise the great train of fully automatic ships nearing the Solar System, the leader dispatching an advance probe into orbit around each planet, and the probe circling Earth suddenly emitting the signal which meant, yes—this world will support life. It was exactly what had always been done by tramps who put chalk marks on the gate posts of friendly houses. So, all that was necessary was to

rub out this particular chalk mark with an orbital interceptor and the tramps would stop coming to the door.

High-level action had been taken to check the theory, but there were snags—not the least of which was the fact that in 1983 the number of man-made objects tumbling round the Earth was in the region of fifty thousand. Only a fraction of these were useful satellites, the bulk being made up of bits and pieces of the vehicles which had placed them in orbit. Some of the more complicated experiments had been known to release as many as fifty sections of rocket motor casing and ejection mechanisms in one mission, which was why even by the later Sixties the number had risen well past the one thousand mark.

The profusion of sky litter had made it impossible simply to pin-point an alien satellite, so a series of capsules were thrown into distant, minutely precessive orbits to pick up possible transmissions to the Nessters. They had been given the inevitable tag, in this case PULP—for Precessive Unmanned Listening Posts. When these drew a complete blank the scout satellite theory was officially discarded and the main research effort put back into the, as yet unsuccessful, efforts to devise a deep space interceptor which could beat the meteor screens surrounding the Nesster ships.

Fortune's pre-Army years in the unfashionable field of sub-millimeter tight beam radiation had given him a few private doubts about the efficacy of Project PULP, but there was no arguing with fifty thousand orbiting pieces of scrap metal. Then one night he had met Geissler, the prodigy, in a bar in Reykjavik. . . .

The concept of instinctive mathematics had been new to Fortune, but according to Geissler everybody had the facility to some extent. It showed up in good gamblers as 'luck'; it showed up in even the most mediocre chess player, who could defeat any computer ever conceived because the machine would have had to spend its time methodically checking out whole regions of moves which are perfectly logical but which the man instinctively *knows* are not good enough. Geissler claimed the difference between him and anybody else was purely one of degree, but he had guaranteed that with access to the Unit's com-

puting equipment he could find the Nesster satellite—if it existed—in a year.

And Fortune had hired him on the spot.

"Sorry there's nothing to eat," Geissler said, setting the coffee on his desk. "Unless you want to come over to the house and have dinner with us. Jenny and Avis would be glad of an extra man to even up the score."

"Have one of these." Fortune pulled out three Captain Johnny bars with sagging heads held in place by foil only.

"No thanks. Why do you eat those things all the time, John? All that weight you carry around. . . ."

"Outside every thin man," Fortune replied, munching comfortably, "there's a fat man trying to get in. Now about this signal to Mars. We don't need to explain what's happening, do we? The Army objects strongly to Unit commanders who go in to research."

"No, that part is all right. If the scout satellite theory is correct we can make two assumptions—firstly, one of our five suspects is of Nesster origin; secondly, *every* planet in the Solar System will have an identical satellite in a predictable orbit corresponding to one of our five. I can send five sets of orbital elements to the Mars observatory and legitimately have them checked out—I could easily be doing some work on one of the dozens of old Mars probes."

"Will it take long?"

"No reason why it should. The scientific colony has been established for over a year now so they might even have the information on file. No it won't take long. I'll call you."

Fortune drained his coffee and stood up, buttoning his overcoat. "Sorry I can't stay for dinner. Christine's having one of her parties." He laughed briefly. "I think this is Nietzche's birthday."

They stood for a moment at the door watching three technicians in parkas wheel a gleaming miniature rocket out of the workshop towards the gun which would blast it up into near-vacuum before its motor was ignited.

"That's the third cis-lunar shot this year for the University of Nicaragua," Geissler said with satisfaction. "It's

costing them plenty too—even with off-the-shelf vehicles. I'd forgotten about Christine and Nietzche, John. It's funny, isn't it? You must have been a reasonable facsimile of a superman when she married you."

Fortune remembered, too late, that Geissler's intuitive faculty was not merely some kind of mathematical abstraction. He slammed the smaller man's back with a vague idea of short-circuiting the mental contact. "You don't know what you've just said, Bill."

He walked back to his staff copter, aware that more time had passed and the rendezvous with Nesster ship 1753 was closer. A sudden spasm of hunger made him grope for a chocolate bar, but his pocket was empty and the sense of disappointment was so keen that Fortune became alarmed. Let's get this thing out into the open, he planned. My subconscious mind reasons: children eat candy, so if I eat candy I'll be a child, and if I'm a child the Nesster problem doesn't exist. However, my conscious mind isn't so stupid—it *knows* I can't grow down towards babyhood, so I'm going to snap out of it and be a normal adult again. That's it settled then. I feel better already. . . .

The only trouble was that he was still hungry and in the darkness the staff copter's bulbous, glassy head and tapering tail suddenly resembled the shape of the primordial tadpole. Fortune accepted that he could not become a helpless, blameless baby again and yet he was strangely satisfied at the prospect of being carried upwards into the receptive convexities of the clouds.

The house was glowing like a Chinese lantern. Fortune walked up through the swarmed cars in his driveway, noticing that one of them had knocked a miniature rowan tree askew. It looked as though Christine's party would be a success.

Using his key he got into the lobby without being noticed, went upstairs and, grunting with the effort, quickly changed out of his uniform into slacks, open-necked silk shirt and sweater. In his son's bedroom he tiptoed around putting toys away then crouched beside the bed for a moment, looking closely into the sleeping three-year-old face with a kind of warm astonishment.

There were about twenty people having drinks in the orange-lit living room, filling the place with the aggressive yet slightly shame-faced atmosphere of a party in its early stages. His wife and Pavel Efimov were talking seriously in a corner. Christine Fortune was a tall brunette with a hard, snaky body and a knack of looking, even when fully dressed, as though she was not wearing enough clothes. She brought Fortune a drink.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, accepting the misty glass.

Christine glanced at his casuals with traces of anger—as far as she was concerned the uniform was just about all that remained of him.

"I see you've changed, darl. I didn't hear you go upstairs."

"I've still got my ident disc on—if that will help."

"Don't try to be funny, darl," she replied. "You haven't got the equipment. Now come and meet our guests." Fortune ambled softly round the room with her, being introduced. The people were much the same as always attended Christine's little gatherings ; writers who never wrote, artists who never painted, unknown celebrities. Most of them were properly impressed at meeting Captain Johnny in the flesh and he felt a responsive change in Christine. She hugged his left arm with both of her's, proudly possessive, and in spite of everything he enjoyed the contact. When they had completed the circuit he stopped by the portable bar and poured another drink.

"Tell me," he said quietly, "is there anybody here, apart from ourselves, who was born on *this* side of the Curtain?"

Christine laughed delightedly. "Come up to date, van Winkle. The cold war has been over for years. That's one thing we have to thank the Nessters for—people just don't think that way any more. How *passé* can one be?"

Fortune frowned into his glass, feeling himself forced into heavy dourness by her amusement. "Things don't change so easily. If the landings were to stop tomorrow most of this lot would hop the first East-bound jet." He took a long drink, staring over the rim at Efimov who was approaching through the orange twilight of the room.

"Good evening, colonel," Efimov said, positioning him-

self close to Christine. He was as tall as Fortune, but with the flat, rangy body of a tennis champion.

"Oh, there you are, Pavel," Christine said, leaning into him slightly. "Johnny's worried in case I'm going to get him investigated."

Efimov put an arm round her waist and smiled easily, challengingly. "Surely not! One has only to look at the colonel to see he is not the sort of man to become involved with the cloak and dagger."

Fortune felt his heart begin a slow, peaceful pounding which stirred the hair on his temples. Christine had had two previous boyfriends, both of whom had been almost pathetically grateful for Fortune's disinterest, but this man was of a different type. Perhaps Christine had deliberately chosen him for that reason.

"Quite right," Fortune replied calmly, aware of Christine's eyes. "I never thought much of the dagger as a weapon. If I had to choose from a medieval armoury I think I'd go for something like a mace."

"Too crude and unwieldy," Efimov commented predictably. "I'd prefer a . . ."

". . . rapier," Fortune finished for him. "Yes. I thought you would—it has such connotations of romance. What do you think, Christine? How would Mr. Efimov look in a curly wig and wading boots?" He laughed unpleasantly, wondering why he was taking the trouble. Insulting humans was hardly likely to be regarded by Christine as an acceptable substitute for the heroic slaughtering of poison-breathing monsters from another world.

Efimov's face hardened and he changed the subject. "Did you hear the news about today's landing, colonel? The ship came down in Loch Ness in Scotland, only a few miles from the position of the original landing. We had another complete victory, of course, but it was quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

Fortune nodded, suddenly realising it had been over nine hours since his last proper meal. He looked over the array of canapés and impaled savouries on the side table then went into the comparative silence of the kitchen and made coffee and ham sandwiches. When the coffee was ready he ignored the piles of disposable tableware in the

cupboard and lifted his old-fashioned delph cup from its hook, only to have it deposit a furtive little secretion of cold water in his hand. Christine refused to wash or dry the delph properly when perfectly good throw-away dishes were available. Muttering furiously, Fortune cleaned the cup, sat down to eat then decided to check his bank account to see what the Mars transmission would do to it.

He went back into the living room, worked through the throng, crossed the lobby and entered his study. Christine and Efimov looked momentarily surprised to see him, then Efimov began to smile.

"We thought perhaps you had gone to bed, colonel. Christine tells me you never enjoy yourself much at parties."

"What do you want, darl?" Christine said irritably. "Pavel and I were discussing his fee for this afternoon."

"If you two young things want to be alone," Fortune said shortly, "go somewhere else. I've work to do in here."

Efimov continued to smile but his eyes flicked briefly in the direction of Fortune's desk. Fortune followed his glance. The top drawer was open, the key he had left upstairs in his uniform trousers protruding from the lock. Fortune inhaled headily, aware that Christine and he had finally arrived at crisis point.

"Come on, Pavel." Christine pulled at Efimov's sleeve. "I need another drink."

"Not so fast," Fortune snapped, spinning her round by the shoulder. "What were you doing at my desk?"

Christine stared coldly at him for a moment then her familiar features flowed into strangeness. "Take your hand away," she screamed. "You want to be told? All right, I'll tell you, you selfish, fat, useless . . . I was telling Pavel how you treat me and he couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe how much of our money, *my* money, you've been paying to that horrible little Geissler. Who do you think you are, anyway? Having satellites tracked! Hiring computers! Why don't you . . .?"

Efimov drew her back a pace and stepped in front, looking at Fortune with contempt and a kind of satisfaction.

"You get out of here," Fortune warned. "I refuse to

fight for Christine. She isn't property. But you've been in my desk, and that's different."

"You'd be foolish to descend to violence, colonel. Not after training for so long on chocolate bars." Efimov dropped his long body into a professional-looking crouch and Fortune remembered he was a boxing instructor at the Hostel gymnasium.

Christine moved behind Efimov, heading for the door. Fortune lunged after her and saw Efimov throwing a fast, hooking left. He deliberately took the blow, smothering it in the great plaque of fat across his ribs, then he caught Efimov's wrist with both hands and leaned back, swinging the other man like a hammer. Efimov's feet pattered on the floor as he sped backwards into the wall. He was completely winded as he rebounded but Fortune punched him under the ribs anyway.

"What have you done?" Christine knelt beside the crumpled man.

Fortune got down and opened one of Efimov's eyelids. He touched the eyeball and there was a violent fluttering reaction. "He's all right," Fortune said, wondering what happened next.

"Pavel wants me to marry him, you know. He wants me to go away with him." Christine seemed to be talking to nobody but herself.

"Christine . . ." Fortune began to speak, but the telephone on his desk rang fiercely. He picked up the handset and heard a male voice ask for him. He recognised the voice of his adjutant, Major Baillie.

"Fortune speaking," he said flatly.

"Oh, hello sir," Baillie replied with uncharacteristic excitement. "I thought you ought to know at the earliest possible moment. We've just had confirmation from UNO Northern Command. Nesster ship 1753 is definitely going to land in our sector."

"Thanks for calling me, Brett. I'll be right there." Fortune set the phone down. He had been wondering what happened next. Now he knew.

The Unit swung over smoothly to a state of Red Alert,

and Fortune found himself slipping instinctively into the lethal complexities of his job.

The preceding Yellow Alert had lasted three days, from the moment the Lunar radar bases had predicted that Nesster ship 1753 was going to touch town in one of the three north-west Atlantic sectors. As the great black cylinder spiralled in past the orbit of the Moon the variable factors, based on observation of all its precursors, were gradually eliminated until Northern Command knew exactly when and roughly where it would land. At that point, Sector N186—shown on ordinary maps as Iceland—was brought to full alert and preparations were made for the big kill, forty hours in the future.

Fortune's command consisted of five hundred combatants, two hundred air and ground crew for the Unit's fifteen vertical take-off transports, and three hundred assorted technicians, clerks, storemen, cooks, batmen, drivers, etc. This meant that for every man who actually fought he had one in support, which was a pretty good ratio for a modern technical army. But, streamlined as the Unit's organisation was, poising it for the hammer blow involved a great deal of work.

Fortune had been a long time on his feet when he drove back home along the road leading south of Hafnarfjordr. The early afternoon sun reached down across serried kingdoms of white cloud and sheep gleamed like pebbles scattered on the hillsides. It was a day on which Nessters simply could not be real—and yet, he reflected, on the afternoon of the following day approximately eight hundred of them would spill out of their ship right on this island. They would die, but it made them no less real. There was no alternative but to kill them, but it made the slaughter no less unpleasant. Fortune would not have to touch a single weapon, but his guilt was no less.

When he swung the big car into his drive Peter was kicking a bright pink ball in the garden, which meant Christine was still there. Fortune was relieved. He had not seen her since the débâcle in his study the previous evening and half expected to find the house empty. Christine and he were not making out too well but he felt that the family

unit was still important. Even the Nessters had family groups, and tried to preserve them when . . .

Fortune brought the heel of his hand down on the car's horn lever, soaking himself in the blast of sound. Tomorrow was going to be bad, too bad to think about except when it was absolutely necessary. He went into the house, waving to Peter, and found Christine in the living room. She was smoking a black cigarette and cleaning her typewriter with a toothbrush, brown eyes slitted with smoke and distaste.

"Peter threw his porridge into it this morning," she explained. "I don't think he'll ever get to like it."

The normality felt good. Fortune wanted to dive into the day before yesterday and close it round him. "Did Bill Geissler call?"

"No. Was he supposed to?"

"In a way."

"Well, he didn't."

Fortune stared out of the long window to where a lucky kick of Peter's had sent the pink ball up high, spinning lazily in the air like a soap bubble. "I'm sorry about last night . . ."

"Don't apologise, please. I've forgotten it already."

"Some of the papers in my desk . . ."

Christine raised her head and gave him a long, honest look of dislike. "I know about your desk, darling. Nobody is allowed to touch your desk."

"People aren't property, Christine," he said hopelessly. "We can talk later. I'm too tired now. I'm going to bed for a few hours." Fortune skimmed his braided cap viciously into a chair and stamped out of the room. Passing through the lobby he stopped abruptly, staring into his study at the telephone. Christine was left-handed; and it was one of his most triumphant little secrets that she never seemed to realise she set the handset down the opposite way to right-handed people. The phone was facing the wrong way now and, playing the hunch, he dialled Geissler's number.

"For God sake, John, where have you been?" Geissler shouted. "Did you not get my message?"

Fortune swallowed hard. "You know what Christine's like. She forgets things."

"Like hell she does. Anyway, I've got news for you. It was suspect number four, the pure polar orbiting job. Mars has one in a perfectly corresponding orbit. They didn't even have to check, the data was all on file up there,"

Fortune's forehead was ice cold. "Number four! That's one of the satellites officially ascribed to Russia, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. It's bound to be, but if you looked it up in the Russian records you'd find it ascribed to the States or Britain or France . . ."

"Bill, stop talking. I've a new proposition for you. How much to shoot it down?"

There was a long silence before Geissler spoke. His voice was gentle. "I know what you want, John, but there isn't any need now. You can go to UNO with this . . ."

"That would take weeks—I'm talking about tonight."

"It's illegal."

"To shoot down a Nesster satellite? Or are you not sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

"Or maybe you can't do it?"

"You needn't try to needle me, Fatso. It won't work. If I ever did something like this it would be for the publicity."

There'll be plenty of that, Fortune thought as panic geysered through his system. I've got to back out right now while there's still time. "That's more like it," he said aloud. "Start getting things ready right now. I'll be over there as soon as I can get there."

He set the phone down and looked up to see Christine standing in the doorway looking strangely small, defeated. "You always were impatient, John—it's the only thing about you that hasn't changed. You've been trying to eat yourself to death, but that takes too long . . ."

"You don't understand this, Christine."

"The thing I don't understand is why—if you can't face the action tomorrow—don't you do something less damaging to Peter and me? Shooting yourself in the foot is the usual thing, isn't it?"

"You're so far away from me that words just couldn't get there, Chris. Why can you not see it? Nessters are . . ."

". . . people," Christine cut in. "Nobody can talk to you, John. You don't communicate. Nessters are people. People aren't property. It's a syllogism that goes nowhere."

Fortune moved forward and took her awkwardly by the shoulders. He drew her in and she came submissively but twisted her head away from the kiss.

"Really, darling," she said coolly, "that only helps on television. I'm not going to let you go through with this, you know."

"I know it hasn't been working out," he said desperately, "but if we ever had *anything*—you've got to give me the next few hours."

Fortune walked away from her quickly, automatically retrieved his cap, and plunged out into the cool, impartial brightness of the afternoon. As the big car broadsided, with turbine howling, out onto the road he risked a backwards glance through the rowan trees. Christine's yellow dress glowed dimly in the window of his study. She was standing at the telephone.

Geissler Orbital Deliveries' main stock-in-trade was an obsolete sixteen-inch coastal defence gun which, as had always been customary for the gun launching of research projectiles, had been smooth-bored out by an extra half inch. For some missions eight-inch diameter missiles were used, their fins fitting snugly into the gun barrel. These were centred by plastic packing pieces and a circular steel pusher plate trapped the propellant gases underneath them in the barrel, enabling muzzle velocities of over five thousand feet a second to be obtained. Other missions used full-diameter projectiles with fins which flipped out after they had cleared the barrel. In all cases the projectiles' motors ignited near apogee, efficiently boosting the packages into orbit after the denser air strata had been left behind. The system was cheap and reliable, and although accelerations of thousands of gravities were experienced techniques had been developed permitting a wide range of experiments to stand the pace.

Fortune stood uneasily in Geissler's clinical-looking

payload assembly laboratory. There were no pockets in the lint-free cover-all Geissler had made him wear and with nowhere to put his hands he longed either to smoke or eat. Geissler stood beside him, similarly clad, his dark bandit's face ploughed with worry as he watched two technicians carry out checks on the new package.

"I'm not an electronics man," Geissler said, "but let's assume that you're right and that Project PULP simply failed to pick up transmissions from the Nesster satellite. Can you be certain that knocking it out will be enough? Perhaps each planet's scout satellite beams either a 'come in' or a 'stay out', in which case termination of the 'come in' signal won't be enough to stop the landings. The silence might be interpreted as transmitter failure or a meteor collision."

Fortune shook his head. "In the first place, the ships are fully automated and self-contained so if they do any interpreting at all it certainly isn't done on the basis of what happened to other ships that were years ahead in the line. It's a simple response to the 'come in' signal. No signal, no response."

"Yes, but it might not be enough to end that signal," Geissler persisted. "Supposing, as I said, there's a . . ."

"I don't think there is a 'stay out' signal. It's a question of reliability standards. Our own standards have improved tremendously in the last twenty-five years, but even now if we wanted to set up a similar scout satellite exercise we *would* have two signals. We couldn't trust our own handiwork far enough to use a one-signal system in which a satellite going into orbit around an unsuitable planet simply remains quiet. The silence might be the result of a malfunctioning so we would demand a positive 'stay out' signal.

"But the Nessters don't have reliability worries, not when they can build those ships. A one-signal system is the simplest and most logical for them. They don't . . ."

"I'm convinced, I'm convinced!" Geissler shouted. "Don't wear my ear out. Anyway, it's less than two hours to the big bang—we'll soon have the answer."

Fortune peered out of the window, looking through his

own reflection. A sharp, tiny moon was racing high, and a blustery, rain-seeded wind had sprung up.

"Don't worry about the weather," Geissler said. "The missile will be clear of that stuff in a couple of seconds—this is where gun launching really pays off. And talking of paying . . ." The wall phone rang, he picked it up, listened in silence for a while, then said, "Thank you, sweetie. I'll tell him." He set the phone back.

This is for me, Fortune told himself, something I don't want to happen is going to happen. He raised his eyebrows.

"That was Jenny calling from the house. She says there's an army turbojeep pulling up to the main gate."

Fortune went out through the laboratory's clean-air lock into the main workshop and began unzipping the coverall. The idea was a difficult one for him to accept but, as far as the world at large was concerned, he was a deserter. It had not actually been desertion in the face of the enemy although in the special circumstances of the Nesster 'invasion' the point might be arguable. The puzzling thing was that they had got on to him so *soon*. He had quit the Unit's headquarters at one thirty in the afternoon for a much needed sleep and had left the adjutant, Major Baillie, firmly in charge: and now—only seven hours later—an army vehicle had tracked him down to Geissler's place.

Headquarters must have rung his home for an urgent decision and Christine had told them what she knew. Or perhaps she had taken the initiative and rung them. Both explanations were feasible and yet this vehicle drawing up ostentatiously in the night did not quite have the feel of Major Baillie about it. Baillie was a cautious man and Christine speaking to him would have put him in a delicate situation. He would have wanted to speak to Fortune by telephone or radio before ordering the arrest of a colonel—unless he had driven out personally to talk it over.

"What are you going to do, John?"

"I'm not sure. I'll need a rifle. Your Swift will do."

Geissler shook his head. "I'm in too far already. If I lend you one of my guns . . ."

Fortune pulled out a handful of bills and stuffed them

into Geissler's shirt pocket. "It isn't your gun. I bought it from you weeks ago—now, get it!" They walked through the clutter of storage sheds and up the slight hill to where Geissler's white bungalow looked out over the Atlantic. While Geissler went in for the rifle Fortune stood on the front steps looking at the distant line of floodlights which marked the fence. The gun site was at the end of a broad spit and the only land access to it was by a single gravel track. Geissler had strung a high steel fence from one side of the spit to the other, with a remotely-controlled gate where it intersected the track. It was half a mile from the bungalow to the gate but the sound of the waiting turbo-jeep's horn was carried down on the wind, mixed with the uneasy sibilance of the surf.

Geissler came out with the rifle and thrust it into Fortune's hand. "The scope is zeroed at three hundred yards," Geissler said glumly. "You'll need to aim a couple of inches low for close work."

"I don't expect to use it," Fortune assured him. "It's just insurance. All you need to think about is zeroing on that satellite." He slung the Swift on his shoulder and walked along the moonlit track, resisting the buffeting of the wind. As he entered the amber radiance of the floodlights a tall, slightly familiar figure in grey civilian clothes got out of the vehicle's driving seat.

It was Pavel Efimov.

Fortune's first, wounded thought was—I needed you, Christine! Then, as his intellect reasserted itself—what the hell is going on here? He looked more closely at the green turbojeep and saw it was not one of the Unit's fleet, but a semi-military job from the UNO hostel in Reykjavik.

"You again, Efimov? When do you start squawking, 'Nevermore'?" Fortune made his voice sound bored, but he became aware of the buckle of the rifle sling cutting into his fingers and relaxed his grip. Time was needed, not action.

Efimov came forward, his lean face looking skeletal in the lurid brilliance, and held up a document. "I have here a copy of an injunction issued by the office of the District

Magistrate. It was issued at the request of my embassy against Geissler Orbital Deliveries. It forbids the company to violate international law by launching an orbital vehicle without first filing full orbital data with the central reference authority in Berlin, and without giving eight days notice of the launching."

"She told you then?"

Efimov permitted himself a faint smile. "We will leave personal relationships out of this matter, colonel. Please instruct Mr. Geissler to open the gate or I will be forced to break it down."

Fortune shook his head. "Mr. Geissler is too busy to see anyone at the moment, but he'll be happy to have a word with you in . . . ," he looked at his watch, ". . . ninety minutes from now."

"This is a serious matter, colonel. Mr. Geissler's business may be closed down permanently."

"Should you not have police here to back you up?"

"They'll be here," Efimov announced confidently.

"What's your interest in it, anyway, Efimov?"

"You forget, colonel, that I know exactly why this missile is being launched. The satellite concerned belongs to my country."

"I can almost hear the balalaikas," Fortune said, "but you must know as well as I do that the question of ownership is very much in debate."

"The law is still the law," Efimov replied, "regardless of who owns the satellite." A note of something like primness had crept into his voice.

Very suddenly Fortune made an intuitive leap, understanding the other man so perfectly that for an instant he almost physically saw himself through Efimov's eyes. "It isn't easy with Christine—is it, Efimov? You'd never stand the pace with her, you know. She drinks jealousy the way you drink vodka. It's because of her, isn't it?"

"We will leave personal relationships aside, colonel. I am interested only in preventing an ill-considered action by Mr. Geissler—one which will do him a lot of harm."

"It's because of Christine," Fortune elaborated. "I've no

doubt that you really are some kind of cut-price agent—but you're doing this because I'm Christine's husband. You're doing it because our little bit of quart and tierce last night didn't work out the way you expected."

Efimov took a deep breath and walked right up to the gate. "Are you going to get the gate opened, colonel? Or do I drive through it?"

Fortune unslung the Swift without speaking and bolted in the first cartridge.

"I don't think you'd go as far as killing anyone, colonel." Efimov went back to the vehicle and climbed in. A second later its turbine screamed up to maximum revolutions and gravel spattered from under the wheels as it hunched forward. Fortune sighted on the lower rim of the circular intake grill and squeezed off one shot. The vehicle bucked violently and slid to a halt as shattered blades chewed their way back through the turbine, demolishing the engine as they went. The air filled with kerosene fumes and Efimov leapt out of the cab.

"That was not very clever, colonel." He seemed strangely unperturbed, almost pleased.

Fortune ejected the empty brass case which had caused such an astonishing amount of damage and bolted in the next round. He slapped the rifle uncertainly, wondering if he looked as stupid and childish as he felt. He had gone too far to think of turning back, and yet everything had gone subtley wrong. The line of amber lights running from nowhere to nowhere, the gate and the immobilised turbojeep made a meaningless setting for a pointless play. He lowered himself carefully on to a rain-slimed rock, ate some chocolate and watched Efimov who loitered contentedly on the track beyond the vehicle occasionally kicking pebbles.

Behind Fortune out at the end of the spit the lights of the gun site shone brilliantly against the blackness of the ocean. There were still seventy-five minutes until the firing. As far as he could see things had reached a perfect impasse —yet Efimov looked like a man who was waiting patiently for something he expected to happen.

A few minutes later Fortune saw lights moving far back

along the shore. The lights grew brighter until he made out the massive bulk of a police cruiser swaying along the track like a motor launch in rough water. Fortune assessed the new situation and his initial alarm subsided. Efimov had not been bluffing. He really had stirred up the civil police, but even if the police were armed they would still have a natural human aversion to walking through a gate defended by a madman equipped with a high-velocity rifle. And that, Fortune admitted, was exactly what he was. He lay down behind the rock, positioned his elbows comfortably and watched Efimov through the rifle sight.

The police cruiser halted fifty yards beyond the turbojeep and its lights died, the reflectors glowing redly for an instant. Efimov ran to it, climbed aboard and slammed the door after him. Fortune lay waiting, his finger tight on the trigger, but the minutes went by and nothing happened. He was beginning to relax, imagining Efimov haranguing reluctant policemen, when he noticed the cruiser's radio mast which had been run up to its full height and was whipping gently in the wind.

Of course! The Unit's headquarters staff had not known where he was and, up until half an hour ago, telling them would not have done much good—or harm, depending on one's point of view. The Nesster landing was drawing near, but Fortune had left Major Baillie in full command and was entitled to visit Geissler if he wanted. Any wild story of his having deserted would have produced no more than a few preliminary phone calls from the phlegmatic Baillie.

But that had been the situation half an hour ago.

Since then, Fortune had menaced Efimov with a lethal weapon, written off an official UNO vehicle, and was lying behind a rock defying the civil police to come near him. On receiving that sort of information by radio Major Baillie would be obliged to take some kind of immediate action.

All at once, Fortune could feel the crushing bulk of Nesster ship 1753 bearing down on his exposed back, and now it was very close indeed. Swearing desperately, he put the scope's cross-hairs on the base of the radio mast. The mast was badly illuminated, he kept losing it in the darkness and his hands were numb with the cold. He fired four shots before the steel mast vanished, and he knew it

had been too late anyway. His watch showed that there were still fifty minutes to go.

The sentient bulk of the cruiser remained motionless after the loss of its radio antenna. Fortune had half-expected some kind of retaliation and he lay still, feeling the ground gradually suck the heat from his body, and tried to picture the scene at the base. The rain was quite heavy and the added hazard of the powerful gusting made it a bad night for flying, but in Baillie's shoes he would have sent a helicopter to land behind the fence. A copter would resolve the situation immediately.

At zero minus thirty a siren blew out at the end of the spit and he looked over his shoulder. The gun barrel was reared up into the night sky, which meant that the missile and propellant were safely loaded. All that remained was to wait for the proper instant to loft the glittering sculpture of the rocket into its proper element, far above the squalid human tangle which had conceived it. Christine and he were finished—that much seemed obvious, but what would he do about Peter? Was it possible that the boy might grow up with Efimov as his father? More minutes went by and he saw Efimov's face move behind the cruiser's windscreen. They must be getting impatient in the cruiser, Fortune thought, perhaps Baillie isn't going to act on the radio message. It had been a long time . . .

He heard the copter in the distance at zero minus eighteen.

It came in from the east, travelling low, and banked sharply over the gate with its flails punishing the quivering air. Fortune waited for it to come down near him, planning how he could cause the greatest delay, but it hesitated and began to drift off in the direction of the gun. That was bad—he had expected them to come solely for him, not to stop the firing which, although illegal, was not a military matter. Perhaps they had not been able to take in the ground situation from up there in their rain-spattered bubble. Fortune got to his feet and the aircraft pulled up with almost comical abruptness then sank down onto the grass. At the same instant the police cruiser's lights came on again and its engine roared.

There still was sufficient time for Efimov to reach the gun.

Fortune saw an officer and rifle-carrying troopers drop from the big machine. He could not fire at his own men, yet they would be on him in a matter of seconds. His numbed legs gave way as he began to run, instinctively heading away from the gun site. As he pounded through the grass he concentrated on trying to lock his knees for support at each step, but it was like a difficult party trick and at first he progressed by a grotesque combination of kneeling and running. By the time he reached the gate Fortune was moving almost normally but, swinging over the top bar, his hand slid on the smooth galvanised tubing and he felt himself go over off balance and with no hope of recovery. Falling, he caught a frozen movie frame glimpse of the police cruiser disgorging men and a fragment of unrelated audio track which sounded like a woman calling his name.

He landed face down, rose spitting blood and swung off the track, forcing his legs to reach for new ground. Behind him he heard the troopers clear the gate efficiently and tried to speed up. Efimov, coming out of nowhere, hit him with a shoulder charge from the left, and he was almost glad to go down. Then he felt the soldiers pull them apart.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Efimov said politely. "Now if you will detain the colonel for a few minutes, I have some business with Mr. Geissler. There is not much time."

The helmeted sergeant levelled his rifle at Efimov. "Stay where you are, friend."

"Stand aside," Efimov shouted incredulously. "I've got to get through that gate."

"Don't even think about it," the sergeant advised, "until the major says it's okay." The rifle muzzle remained steady and the civil police stood back looking uncertain.

With one hand cupped over his shattered nose Fortune turned towards the gate and saw Major Baillie help a woman over. She was enveloped in an army greatcoat, but he recognised his wife. They skirted the fuming turbojeep and the cruiser then cut across the grass to join the group.

Baillie saluted Fortune smartly. "Everything all right, sir?"

Fortune nodded dumbly—everything was all wrong, completely crazy, and why was Christine there?

Efimov took the document from his overcoat pocket and waved it in Baillie's face. "Major, you must instruct your goons to let me pass. In fact, they can probably help . . ."

"My goons, as you call them," Baillie interrupted stiffly, "are obeying orders. Turn out your pockets."

"You're mad! Why should I?"

Baillie remained as imperturbable and correct as ever. "Because this afternoon you visited Colonel Fortune's private residence and were seen by Mrs. Fortune removing from his telephone a recording device which you had placed there on a previous occasion for the apparent purpose of obtaining military information."

Efimov looked ill. "All right. I admit planting the recorder, but what military secrets could I hope to get *here*? Did you not get my message? This man is illegally destroying a satellite belonging to . . ."

"Oh yes," Baillie said affably. "I believe there was something about launching an unscheduled rocket. I'll have the matter investigated at the earliest opportunity—probably at the beginning of the week."

Fortune suddenly saw Baillie through new eyes. The emotionless major was unexpectedly but deliberately bending all kinds of regulations for his sake. Christine was right about me, he thought, I can't communicate with people. Even more suddenly he remembered that Christine had come through on his side. He put his arm round her shoulders, wondering how soon the years of coldness could be bridged.

"You've made a hell of a mess of your face," she said critically.

He grinned crookedly, painfully but contentedly. The communication business was not too difficult once you understood it.

Three hundred miles above the Earth's northpole Geissler's missile sought and found its mark.

The beautifully designed alien mechanism, which had

been transmitting one millisecond pulses of intelligence every ninety-three minutes for five years, finally fell silent.

There was no disappointment on board Nesster ship 1753 as it changed course, for they had not known of the imminent landing and, in any case, had long since forgotten how they had lived before The Journey. Gently the great caravan of ships swung towards the next suitable star. The new leg of The Journey would take eight hundred years, but the Nessters were a patient race.

And they built very patient machines.

Book Review

Self-Conscious Sex

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND (Robert Heinlein, Four Square, 5s.) is a remarkably dull book. Stylistically, cloying American cliché and banter merge with a coyness ('mammary gland' used instead of 'breast') inconsistent with the self-consciously bold aim to be frank about sex, the result being a sort of adolescent Playboy philosophy.

There is an amazing amount of superfluity: the meat of the book—the reaction to human society of a man reared in an alien environment—only begins after the first 150 or so pages, and the unreal-sounding situations are bogged down by painstakingly detailed 'authenticity'. This book could only have caused a stir in the naïve world of sf 'fandom'; the characters and action are entirely subordinated to Heinlein's arguments, and since these are as trite and shallow as the writing itself, it is difficult to find any kind of value here. Heinlein might do better to return to writing adventure fiction, to which perhaps his talent is better matched.

Charles Platt

Dr. Peristyle

No matter how funny your name, how ignorant your question, I will try to answer in a manner appropriate to my solemn station. And the first question this term (or semester if you are an American subscriber) is a particularly searching one.

Robert Lumley, Didmarton

What is your opinion of the sort of sf that sets out to prove the existence of God, or else proves that Jesus Christ, the Archangel Gabriel, or Satan, was an alien entity of some sort, or that Adam and Eve were manufactured by alien biologists, etc.? I'd call this the 'Bible-is-fact-but-not-necessarily-religious' syndrome.

You isolate a particularly nauseating type of sf, though I confess to a weakness for the tale where it turns out that all mankind originated from a pair of escaping experimental animals from the lab of a visiting spaceship. I believe F. L. Wallace wrote it, among others. The story-type is a species of lay blasphemy ; my label for it is "the shaggy god story", because the only possible response to the punchline, where all is revealed, is the damp groan that greets shaggy dog jokes. There is room in every sf reader's life for just *one such* story ; immediately after that, satiety sets in. My favourite in the genre is Bertram Chandler's "False Dawn", in 'Astounding' way back, where it turns out that the flood we have been reading about and think contemporary is in fact THE Flood. The shaggy god story is the bane of magazine editors, who get approximately one story per week set in a garden of Eden spelt Ee-Duhn.

Michael Thomson, Holyoake

What function, if any, is serious sf serving in literature today?

Your question suggests you think of literature as a sort of machine whose output of enlightenment, great

thoughts, fine prose, entertainment, and what-have-you, can be measured in units like candle power—though I could be doing you an injustice. For me, literature is the necessity that's left when one has taken away all the 'necessities'; in that residue, I should find not a little of science fiction. You will find this a useless answer, Mr. Thomson. I find yours a useless question.

Bill Ray, London, N.W.5

Have you any views about the number of unselective publishers who are these days producing sf in quantity rather than quality, and are thus likely, in the long run, to bring the field into disrepute?

Sir, you are doing Gollancz an injustice. The field was in disrepute before they came along with their excellent eagerness to publish twenty books a year, or however many it is—a reasonable target, I would have thought. The trouble is not with the publishers but the writers, who write so badly. Where are the young British writers, or the young Americans ones, come to that, or the young Japanese ones, to come even further? They have a seller's market—but are just not good enough. The publishers publish the best they can buy. You should see some of the stuff they reject! At the moment—it was different once—any competent sf writer can find a publisher.

J. L. Peters, Taunton

Assuming that some sf writers have deep political convictions—convictions that are an essential part of the writer's make-up—should they allow these convictions to take overt shape in their stories?

A writer owes more to himself than to any reader, if only because he has to spend a lifetime with himself. Don't you think a writer may owe it to himself not to distort his deep beliefs? But suppose the writer to be also an artist, a writer

of genius. Then it is possible that if he has fascist beliefs, say, and expresses them in a novel, he will embody them diffusely, and perhaps take care to embody the opposite view as well. You could take as an example that well-known sf writer, John Milton, who, in justifying the works of God to man in "Paradise Lost" took great care to make the Devil's view attractive too. Most politically-minded sf writers are not Miltons; with less care and less genius, their novels can easily become mere polemics. But you can always stop reading.

Miss Deanna Willitts, Glasgow

How much scientific accuracy should we expect?

If your first insistence is on the accuracy of the science, obviously you should be reading THE NEW SCIENTIST and SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, and knocking off the sf habit altogether.

The venerable doctor will answer more questions the month after next. Please send them to him c/o NWSF, 87a Ladbroke Grove, W.11.

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IN THIS ISSUE

NEW WORLDS

COMPACT SF

To Bill, the Galactic Hero, on trial for his life, the opening words of the Court President were not encouraging:
"*Let the trial open, let justice be done with utmost despatch and the prisoner found guilty and shot.*"
In this, the last of Bill's adventures, Harry Harrison takes a swipe not only at the insanity of military life and authority in general, but at one or two of sf's sacred cows as well. That's

$E=mc^2$ . . . or BUST

As a counterpoint to Harrison's entertaining farce, we have DAPHNE CASTELL's short satire, **Emancipation,** R. M. BENNETT's ironic **Heat of the Moment** and two imaginative allegories by DAVID HARVEY and WILLIAM BARCLAY. Also there is the return of BOB SHAW after a long absence from the sf field, with his sensitive study of character against the background of space warfare:

. . . AND ISLES WHERE GOOD MEN LIE

plus our usual departments and features.