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THE MAN FROM EARTH

A Novel of the Future

By ALGIS BUDRYS

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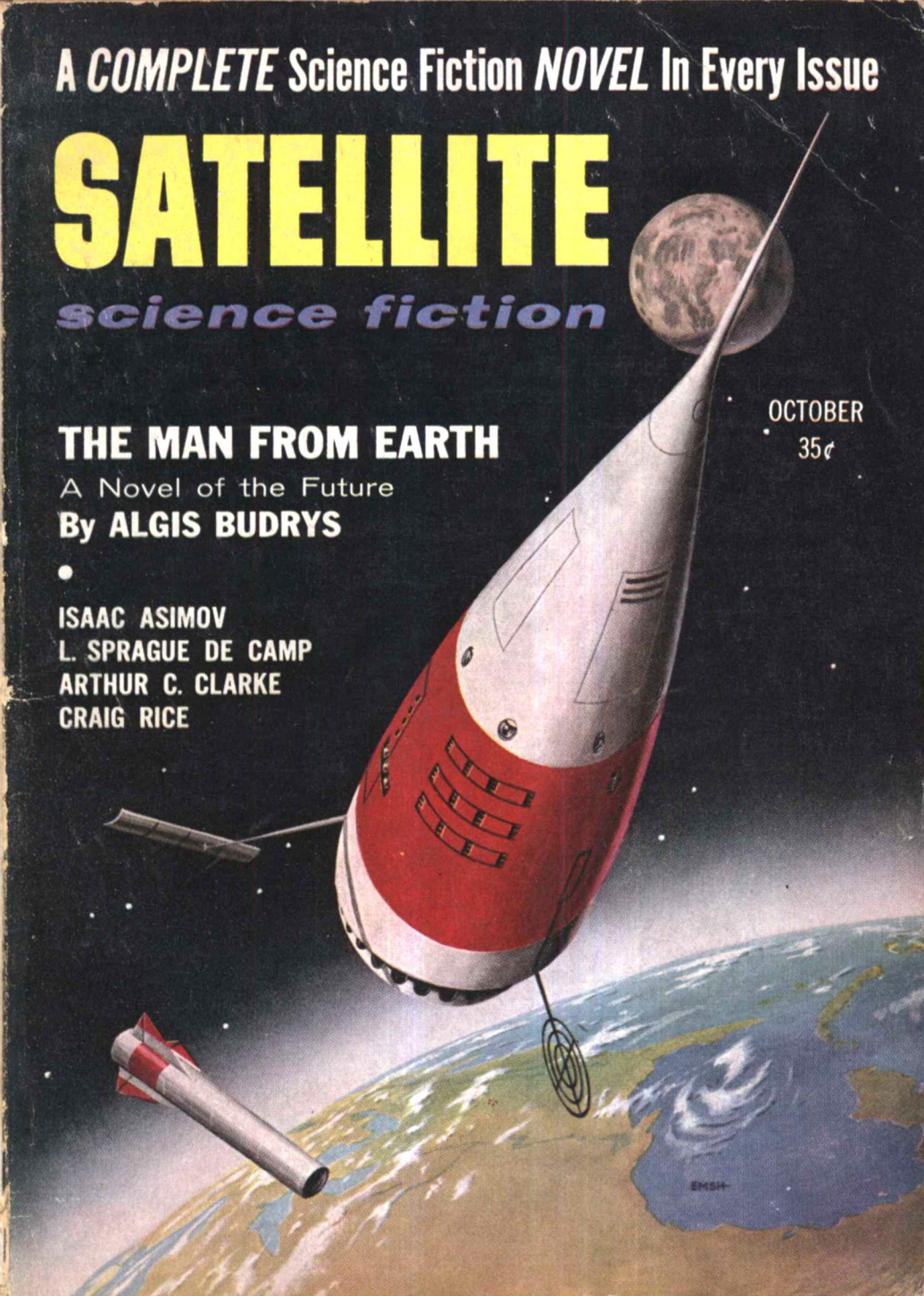

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LEO MARGULIES
Publisher

SATELLITE
science fiction

OCTOBER, 1956 **Vol. 1, No. 1**

A COMPLETE NOVEL

THE MAN FROM EARTH

It is the year 2197 A. D. The Solar System is menaced by the alien Vilk patrol that has effectively sealed man from the stars. Allen Sibley preferred primitive Pluto in a new body to prison on Earth in his old—but the last thing he wanted was to run afoul of the Vilks.

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SHORT STORIES

SATELLITE SCIENCE FICTION, Vol. 1, No. 1. Published bimonthly by Renown Publications, Inc., 501 Fifth Avenue, N. Y. 17. Subscriptions, 6 issues $2.00; 12 issues $4.00; single copies 35¢. Application for second-class entry pending post office, N. Y., N. Y. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious.

OCTOBER 1956, Printed in U. S. A.

THE MAN

A COMPLETE SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

People at home tried to forget the Vilk Patrol that held the Solar System in rigid quarantine. But on Pluto, the Aliens had the last word—or almost—until Sibley, the fugitive, cracked their secret.

by ALGIS BUDRYS

IT WAS AN ultra-high level conference. Beneath the soft radiant ceiling, the half-dozen men and women in whom lay the real power of the earth, as well as of the bastard and almost-forgotten settlements of Venus and Pluto, reclined on relaxichairs about an oval table that was without legs or other visible support, being held in place by a delicate balance of rhodomagnetic currents.

It was a moment of crisis, of crisis that had been building slowly over the years, defying makeshift and stopgap solutions

FROM EARTH

and returning with ever-increasing pressure, to whiten the hair of political leaders, to put premature lines in the faces of diplomats, to force industrial leaders onto starvation anti-ulcer diets.

Despite the long-established magic of atomic transmutation and all the other snowballing scientific advances of the twenty-second century, the Earth was suffering from its age-old problems of undersupply and overpopulation as never before in its tormented history.

"It's a vicious paradox," said the planetary Minister for Industrial Development. "We must have Sodium-334 if the entire complex of heavy industry is not to break down. We know there are ample supplies on Centauri Three—our astro-geologists have long since established the fact. Thanks to the MacDonnel drive, we have the means to go out there and get it. But the Vilk quarantine of the Solar System has us penned up in our little corner of the universe like rabbits in a cage."

The President, who had been drawing rectangles within rectangles on a sheet of neovellum with his no-point pen, lifted his deep-set, dark eyes, whose lids were filagreed with the lines of fatigue and frustration. "How long?" he asked simply.

The Minister for Industrial Development shrugged. "A year—two at the outside," he said.

The angular, sharp-featured, rather handsome woman who served the world as Minister for Health and Sanitation, said, "Among the first items that will fail, will be the poli-resistance shots, once Sodium-334 is lacking. With forty-three billion people crowded together on this planet,

the results will be ghastly beyond description. We have, as a race, lost immunity without the shots."

She paused to pass a strong, feminine hand across her eyes, added, "The Black Death of Medieval Europe will be merely a bad cold in comparison."

The portly Oriental who acted as Minister for Transportation and Defence exploded in non-Oriental anger. "It's not just the Vilks, who and whatever they are! It's the way the whole world seems to have lain down and played dead once they realized that Pluto was the outer limit. I still say, if we could send up ten thousand starships, we'd smash the Vilks like a paper hoop."

The President spoke again. "Without a basic transmutation-agent—in short, without Sodium-334—how are we going to build a hundred starships, much less ten thousand?" He paused and laid his blue-veined hands flat on the legless table in front of him. "The Vilk patrol, then, is our problem. They have had us buffaloed ever since they first appeared, in our fathers' time. They cut us off from space on the very eve of Man's flight to the stars.

"Now, thanks to their accursed quarantine, we are threatened with suffocation. Already, we have virtually abandoned our settlements on Venus and Pluto. After all, why leave the comforts of Earth for such crude and still-primitive worlds of mere survival? Especially when the planets are no longer way-stations to the stars but dead-end streets."

He paused to bow his head, then lifted it again and said, a spark of anger in his deep-set eyes, "Over the years, I have been unable to avoid acceptance of something for which I am totally without tangible proof. It is my opinion that the effectiveness of the Vilk patrol has been made possible only through cooperation from Earth."

There was a murmur of surprise which became focused in the contralto growl of the chunky, grey-faced woman who was Minister for Education and Information. "From Earth, Sir?" she countered. "Impossible! I have, of course, considered the possibility of the Vilks getting cooperation from Pluto or Venus—nor could I exactly blame the citizens of those all but abandoned planets. But here on Earth . . ."

The President permitted himself a faint smile. "Ten years ago," he said, "I might have agreed with you, Madam. But the very fact of the abandonment of the Interplanetary Settlement Program, their loss of contact with us, renders your supposition unlikely. I fully expect, once our critical condition becomes known, to receive an offer of help. I need not add that the price demanded will be ruinous. Therefore, though I know such admonition to be unneces-

sary, I must ask you to keep all mention of this meeting utterly secret."

"Have you anything on which to base this theory, Sir?" the Minister for Health and Sanitation asked quietly.

The President turned up his palms. "Nothing," he replied, "that my legal training will enable me to admit. I can only tell you that I have been approached—indirectly and most discreetly. And I have reason to believe the source of this approach is of a quasi-reputable nature. Needless to say, I do not know the name of this source. But I do not like its aroma."

"By God!" growled the Minister for Transportation and Defence. "*I'd* like to know its source. I'd send in a hundred demolition crews to wipe them out in an hour."

"And remove our one possible source of negotiation with the Vilks?" the President asked gently. "Furthermore, could you muster a hundred crews for a mission of violence? I think not. We are packed too tight for violence, I fear. Too many of the innocent would suffer, even if your men were willing to undertake it. I don't imply doubt of their courage—it's just that Earth, denied the right to the stars, has lost the impulse to fight."

"I wish we knew something about the Vilks," said the Minister for Health and Sanitation in her clipped accents. "How can we deal with an alien species that kills whoever approaches them?"

"We know a thing or two about the Vilks," said the Minister for Transportation, his face settling into graven lines of defeat. "We know they are aggressive and determined." He paused solemnly, then added, "When they first made themselves known to us by blasting our pioneer starships out of space, the then Secretary for Transportation and Defence, in collaboration with the Ministry for Interplanetary Relations—you may recall there was such a cabinet office at that time—sent up a strongly armed six-ship mission, more to impress and make contact with the Vilks than to protest against their action.

"Before they issued their warning against leaving the Solar System," he went on wryly, "we didn't even know they called themselves Vilks. Our six ships were the last word in their time—they had MacDonnel Drives, fusion disintegrators—yet only one of them was allowed to return. It was then we sent the fleet out after them." He bowed his head. "You all remember the disaster of seventy-three. One hundred and eighteen space-battleships destroyed in a matter of as many minutes!"

"Yes, I know—who doesn't?" the Minister for Education and Information said bitterly. "But it

still doesn't tell us what they *are*. For all we know, they may have long tails and six heads."

"I doubt that," the Minister for Transportation and Defence replied. "From their behavior, from their weapons, from what little we know of their ships—and it is pathetically little we *do* know—I fear they are very like ourselves."

"God dammit!" exploded the Minister for Industrial Development, pounding the table with a fist. "Why must we cling to Sodium-334? We can still crush enough Uranium out of the Antarctic to make a transmutation agent for the manufacture of the ships we'll need."

"That," said the Minister for Finance, speaking for the first time, "will take money—more money than the Planetary Treasury could borrow in ten years. And ten years will be too late."

"Then we can set it up as an independent agency—a dummy, if you will—and obtain outside, independent financing." Once roused, the Minister for Industrial Development was a hard man to check.

"I fear not," the Minister for Finance said dryly. "You may not have heard, but since the unfortunate heart attack of Carroll Hewes the money market is suffering from a state of shock. We are approaching a crash that will make borrowing, on any such scale, impossible for some time."

"When did it happen?" the Minister for Industrial Development asked incredulously.

"Only yesterday," replied the Minister for Finance, "but already the ripples are widening. Even Allen Sibley is involved, I hear."

"Not Sibley?" the Minister for Industrial Development was shocked. "I can't imagine him crossing the street against a pedestrian-light."

"Then," said the Minister for Finance, "I fear you fail to understand the intricacy of the current financial picture. Sibley has done nothing wrong—but what he has had to do to protect the business his father left him happens to be illegal—necessary, but outside the law. Now, with Hewes dead, the whole skein will unravel, I fear. And he is caught in the web, poor devil."

"I met him once," said the Minister for Education and Information. "Such a meek little man. He seemed—frightened. It is hard to imagine him breaking any law. Sibley epitomized, for me, the decadent male of today."

The other men at the table regarded her resentfully, until the President broke up the meeting, saying, "I very much fear that all we can do is pray . . ."

II

IT WAS December, 2197, in snowy New York City, and Allen

Sibley walked slowly up a dark hallway in an ancient Downtown building, looking hesitantly at cheaply lettered company names on dirty glass doors. He avoided the inquiring glances of the occasional receptionists who looked up from inside various offices whose doors were open.

He came to one such door labeled DONCASTER INDUSTRIAL LINENS. He looked inside and saw six or seven other people waiting their turns on a bench beside the receptionist's switchboard. They sat without regarding each other, an awkwardly assorted group. Some of them were very badly dressed, while others looked rather more well-off.

None of them approached Sibley's dandification, in his Moreley Frères surtout, none of them shared his overfed, over-massaged, over-manicured middle-aged look. They were thin, careworn people, most of them, who had never been Uptown in their lives. But this, Sibley thought, with hopeless resignation, was one of those rare times when that could make no difference to either section of the great city.

Each of them sat alone, though they were squeezed together on the bench, shoulders slumped, faces wooden. Each of them wore the bewildered, hurt and anxious look of a person in deep trouble. Each of them—and Sibley—each according to his need, was here for the same thing. Unlike the other offices in the old building, Doncaster's was busy.

Sibley cleared his throat.

"Yes?" The receptionist looked up impatiently.

Sibley reached into his breast pocket, took out the greying, dog-eared business card. "Excuse me. I have this card . . ."

"Um-*hmm?*"

He took a deep breath and put the card in her hand. "My name is Allen Sibley," he said in a low voice. "I need help."

The receptionist lifted an eyebrow. She turned the card over inspecting both sides. She scratched at it with a fingernail, and a faint green tinge appeared in the paper. Then she reached over and touched a button on her switchboard. Her lips moved silently behind a square of opacity that sprang up in the air in front of them.

Sibley's eyes studied her face, seeking a clue to what she was saying. He had never before heard of this type of communicator.

She felt his stare and glanced up at him frigidly. He rubbed a hand over the lower part of his face and dropped his eyes.

"Mr. Sibley." He could hear her again, and she was handing back his card.

"Yes?"

"Go right in. Mr. Small will see you. You'll find him through that door—the first office on your left."

"Thank you," he said." I . . ."

The receptionist was already back at her transcribing. Sibley moved uneasily through the gate beside her, conscious that the people on the bench had raised their heads and were looking at him indignantly. He went through the door into a corridor of frosted glass doors, each with a name lettered on it. He looked to his left and saw MR. SMALL. He opened it with a tentative push.

He saw a desk and a spare, aging man with thin hair, wearing a dark blue soutane. This man was looking at him cordially.

"Mr. Small?"

"Yes, Mr. Sibley. Come in, please."

Mr. Small rose and came smiling around the desk and extended a dry-skinned hand. Sibley shook it, and then Mr. Small motioned him toward a chair.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Sibley. Won't you sit down?" He went back around his desk and waited for Sibley before he took his own seat. He looked at Sibley with another smile. "Now, Mr. Sibley—what's happened to bring you to us?"

Sibley reached woodenly into his inside pocket and brought out the letter from the Securities Exchange Commission. "This was in my mail this morning." He handed it over.

Small took it. When he saw the superscript on the stationery, he said, *"Oh!"* His face changed subtly, then reassumed its good-natured look. But his eyes were very grave. He read the letter quickly, said, "I see. They wish to examine the books of Sibley and Sibley, Inc., Stockbrokers. I assume you're head of the corporation?"

Sibley nodded. "Sole officer—my father died some years ago."

Small pursed his lips. "Would your firm happen to have been associated with Mr. Carroll Hewes, the late Chairman of the S.E.C.?"

Sibley's throat was dry. "Yes."

"The—you'll pardon my bluntness—usual arrangement? Mr. Hewes lent the privileges of his position to your firm, in return for certain gratuities?"

"For kickbacks, yes."

Small nodded. "Ah! And then Mr. Hewes had the misfortune to suffer a heart attack, thereby exposing his records to the Inheritance Tax Commission, and now the S.E.C. is cleaning house. Yes—it's extremely unfortunate. There will assuredly be an attempt to prove that your firm and the many others associated with Mr. Hewes were responsible."

Sibley nodded, looking down at the floor.

"And it will not matter that your firm would have been blacklisted by Mr. Hewes had you refused to cooperate with him. Yes, Mr. Sibley, this could assuredly mean prison, to say nothing of pauperizing fines."

Sibley nodded again, feeling his shoulders slump.

Small picked up a self-powered desk clock and put it down on the blotter in front of him. Idly, his fingers pushed it back and forth. "Doncaster never turns down a client, Mr. Sibley. That's our policy, and we keep to it—invariably. We have a very high reputation to maintain." He pushed the clock away. "This means we are sometimes forced to present a client with a rather severe alternative. Mr. Sibley, I take it you still have a considerable sum in private assets which cannot be frozen?"

Sibley nodded.

"I rather thought you might have a tentative plan against even the present eventuality." Small nodded with satisfaction. "You have the reputation of being a thoroughgoing strategist." He smiled. "I recognized your name instantly, of course." Then his face again grew more serious. "But in this case, that reputation becomes merely an added disadvantage. The Federal government will press its case against you more energetically than it would against a lesser figure."

Sibley looked down at the floor again. He tried to think of something to say to that, but there was nothing.

He had been born weak. Despite all that his family had done to harden and discipline him in his youth, he remained irresolute and fearful. His great reputation in the world of finance was the direct result of his need to seal every possible chink against failure, to ensure every step of his life and his livelihood.

Now, he had fallen into utter defeat and was faced with immediate, total ruin from a factor he had not foreseen. For all his planning, and all his fearful caution. The worst of it was that his mind wouldn't even leave him happily unaware of his deficiencies. It poked and jabbed at him, as it had through every moment of his life, reminding him how inadequate he was.

"Mr. Sibley," said Small. "I mentioned an alternative. I must leave the choice entirely up to you. You can voluntarily withdraw your request for our help, or you can take the admittedly drastic and expensive step we offer. How would you like to stop being Allen Sibley?"

The question was put so casually that it was a long moment before Sibley realized Small had actually come to the point. Some chamber of his mind jumped into furious and wishful life even before he could actually begin to think rationally. His hands began to shake.

Then he looked up, hearing himself talk, almost as if a stranger were speaking. "Drop out of sight, you mean?" the stranger-Sibley said. "Change my name and move

to another part of the world? Something like that?" His voice was hoarse.

Small shook his head. "Much more than that. I'm afraid such an elementary move would never forestall the Federal Government's agents. No, I had in mind a method whereby it is possible completely, genuinely, to change the entire physical appearance and personality of any human being. I'm sure it can be adapted to your needs."

Sibley's glance roved through the window. The snow had stopped entirely. From where he sat, he could see Long Island emerging from the obscurity of grey, and the broad Atlantic, dark and restless, beyond it.

"The method is quite safe, quite fast, and foolproof," Small went on glibly. "So many things depend on a man's personality. His walk, the sound of his voice, his gestures, the expression of his face, his habits—all the little elements which—far more than the larger recognition factors, like eye color, length of nose or width of mouth —serve to identify an individual.

"What we perform is endocrinolectomy on a vast scale. With an altered basal metabolism, a different rate of glandular secretion, altered nervous reaction-timing, a man grows more sluggish or more energetic. His body changes as he exercises or ceases to, as he eats less or stuffs himself. And the change is accelerated by the action of his glands. It's a cycle, Mr. Sibley. Once a man's body has achieved its new balance, mere reasonable care on his part will maintain it.

"In addition, we provide new retinal patterns, finger and toe prints. In short, within a few weeks, the man is utterly unrecognizable. Yet, though his personality changes, he remains essentially himself. He loses nothing in personality or memory factors. He may gain a great deal. What do you think of that, Mr. Sibley?"

Sibley did not turn back toward Small. If he continued to look out the window, Small could not see his face.

"What—" His voice was too husky. He cleared his throat, tried again. "What sort of man . . . ?"

". . . can you become? Any kind, Mr. Sibley. Whatever you please. Our technicians are both ingenious and expert. They have revealed great talent at developing new systems and approaches no one else seems interested in anymore."

"What happens afterward?" Once again Sibley seemed to be standing behind his own eyes, seeing the man behind the desk in clear focus, surrounded by soft filters. He knew it was only the pumping of his heart, surging its rushes of blood through his veins, so that his eyes were being forced

forward and out of focus. He knew himself thoroughly. But it was beginning to look as though he might never again have to.

"Afterward? Oh—I see." Small made a gesture, half-understanding, half-deprecating. "Afterward, Mr. Sibley, there will be a short stay with us while you—adjust. Then you walk out of this building with complete new identity papers. We will insert duplicates wherever necessary in the various governmental records and, should the need ever arise, will provide witnesses who attended school with your new personality, worked with it, lived in the same building—whatever seems necessary, in the unlikely event your new personality also does something to attract investigation. That is one of our automatic contingency services. There is no additional charge."

Sibley asked, "How much?"

Small tented his hands. He looked at Sibley for a long, almost apologetic moment. "You're a high-risk client, Mr. Sibley," he said. "Every high-risk client brings danger with him. We must protect ourselves as best we can. I'm afraid that in your case, we must ask for everything you have." He looked down at a plate on his desk, touched a button, and read the figures that appeared on it.

"According to our figures, that comes to a little more than a million dollars. The odd few thousand are yours to keep against expenses until your new personality is sufficiently integrated to earn its own living. I'd like to point out that you'd be far less conspicuous without any unaccountable wealth."

He sat back and waited for Sibley's reaction.

The figure mentioned by Small had sucked the air out of Sibley's lungs. He had expected thievery from criminals, of course, but hardly on such a scale.

He raised his face, intending to protest and argue. But Small's eyes seemed to hold knowledge of exactly how much resolution Sibley could command. Sibley's scalp suddenly itched uncontrollably. He had to block his face briefly with his forearm as he scratched it, and the effect of determination was completely lost.

"Isn't there any other means?" he asked lamely.

Small looked at him patiently. He lifted his desk clock.

"This is a complex mechanism, Mr. Sibley," he said. "Like our society, it contains a multitude of cogs and wheels. It is crammed with parts, all turning on each other, each dependent on the other. And it fits into a case. It has form, dimensions, limits—exactly so many parts in so much rigidly limited space.

"Suppose a part breaks. The watchmaker must remove it, or the clock is jammed. He cannot leave the old part in. He cannot

simply solder it together, for it will break again. He cannot put it just anywhere.

"We, too, live inside a box, Mr. Sibley. For the past fifty years, our society has been rigidly limited and ruthlessly confined by the Vilk quarantine, just like the component parts of this clock. There is no room for extra parts. We turn on each other like so many cogs—our orbits are sharply restricted. One broken cog can be the destruction of so many others —as witness the case of Mr. Hewes and yourself—as witness the danger you present to us.

"No, Mr. Sibley, we cannot endanger ourselves or our other clients on our list. The watchmaker cannot resolder the broken cog. He can only melt it down and forge a new, whole part out of it —or throw it away. Remember—thanks to the Vilks, there is no hope of enlarging the case."

Sibley at last felt the slow stir of anger within himself, and the heedlessness to show it. "That's nonsense, Mr. Small! The Vilks have nothing to do with this. They've never come in closer than Pluto's orbit!"

"It wasn't really my intention to discuss social dynamics, Mr. Sibley. But—the clock case never quite touches the parts, does it?"

"Very adroit, Mr. Small. But your attempt to justify blackmail by waving a few alien space-ships under my nose is ludicrous!"

"And yet, Mr. Sibley—you are here." Small never lost patience. He simply regarded Sibley with calm, undisturbed eyes. "You have a choice," he repeated. "You can leave here a new and free man. Or, you can refuse the offer, keep your money and leave this building with the threat of imminent prosecution hanging over you. If you wish, Mr. Sibley, you can remain exactly as you are."

Sibley could not stare him down. He dropped his eyes, seeing clearly how Small had played with him—how surely he had touched every sensitive weakness in him —how much he must know of the frightened Allen Sibley.

His aching fingers unclenched. Sweat was trickling down the walls of his chest. "All right," he said.

Small nodded without surprise. He looked at Sibley much as an animal trainer looks with satisfaction at dog jumping through hoop.

Sibley felt his face burn. Once again, he had failed himself. There was no bitterness in what he felt. Bitterness can be burned out of a man by overuse. There was only a melancholy sadness at what he was.

But soon, he thought with sudden joy, it would never happen again. Soon he would be a man!

III

SIBLEY SAT IN his assigned room, somewhere in the building,

which was as full of Doncaster offices as a corncrib is of ratholes. The operation—he had no other word for it—would be taking place soon.

He sat on the edge of his chair, with Small sitting opposite him, his mind like a fist, clenched tightly around the thought of what he would soon be like.

Soon he would be powerful and muscular—Small had promised it, and Sibley believed him—he *had* to believe him. More important, he would no longer be himself.

"Perhaps we're being overhasty," said Small, breaking in on his thoughts. "The government might decide to hush the whole matter up. Or, perhaps, we might be able to attack the problem by more conventional means, after all."

"No," Sibley said quickly. "No, the government is in no position to hush it up. This is the only way."

"We can never be sure. So why don't we wait a little? There's always time if this does prove unavoidable."

Sibley looked at the grey wall across the room in something near panic. "This is my last chance to get away," he said.

"It would be idiotic to go through with the entire procedure, only to find it unnecessary."

"Small—" Sibley cut himself short as he realized that Small was deliberately prodding his panic, like a muleteer with a goad, making sure he wouldn't turn back.

Sibley looked down. There was no need for that. He was committed. This was still much better than prison and disgrace, even had they still been the most important considerations.

Enjoy it, Small, he thought sadly and triumphantly. *Enjoy it while you can.*

Small looked at his watch. "It's time, then."

"All right," Sibley replied curtly.

They walked to a doorway, and Small knocked. A man in a doctor's white uniform opened the door and stood aside, waiting.

Small turned to Sibley. "Good luck, Mr. Sibley," he said. "I won't be seeing you again. Unless, of course, you change your mind now and decide to stay in your present person . . ."

Sibley was peering past him into the room, where bulky medical apparatus gleamed, metallic, in the cold light. A padded table lay at the focus of two descending projectors with long, gleaming, needle-sharp tips.

"This way, Mr. Sibley," the doctor said.

Sibley followed him in. He scarcely heard Small's light footsteps fading as he looked around the room. A headset rested on the table, trailing thick wires that led to a bank of instrument panels.

It had to be worth it. Stubbornly, he set his teeth.

The doctor flicked a finger toward a form clipped beside an array of switches. "We've built up your personality profile very nicely, I think," he said.

Sibley nodded, because he imagined some such reaction was expected. He felt a brief tingle in his upper arm, rubbed it pettishly, then looked up and saw the doctor just putting down a hypodermic pistol.

"Mild sedative," the physician explained. Several assistants were moving about the room, setting up apparatus and running tests on the controls. One of them touched a switch, and crackling green haloes coalesced around the tips of the projectors over the operating table.

Sibley touched his lips with his tongue. He felt the sedative damping his nervous reactions, but his mind remained free. Surgery was correction, correction was pain, pain was fear, fear was weakness, weakness was inferiority. Inferiority required correction. And correction was—

He caught himself with a gasp.

"Will you undress, please?" the doctor said.

He hesitated. Underlying his fear was shame at his body's sloppiness. But it was too late to turn back now. He could never face Small.

Moving almost convulsively, he stripped off his clothes and lay on the table. He couldn't bring himself to keep his eyes open, to stare up at the dipping muzzles of the projectors. He couldn't restrain a shudder when the cold metal of the headset was slipped over his skull. He lay as still as he could, waiting for the pain, dreaming of those first moments when he could look in a mirror and see his new self looking steadily back . . .

There wasn't any pain. He felt cheated. He yawned. He stretched, looked up at the twin guns, and grinned. He sat up.

"*Well!* How long did it take?" he asked the doctor.

"A few hours."

Sibley twitched his shoulders. *Well,* he thought, *let's give the old boy a pat on the back.* "Good job, too. Feels fine. All done?"

The doctor nodded. "That's right. In the event you're wondering, the fingertips and eyes are organic, but artificial. Neither your prints nor your retinal patterns have ever been registered anywhere before. The same goes for the pore-pattern of your skin."

Skin? He looked down for a familiar birthmark, and discovered it missing. For a moment, cold panic touched his stomach.

"You have a new skin," the doctor went on. "We did not think it advisable to inform you in advance of that part of the process."

Well. Well, *well!* A new skin, eh? He grinned at the doctor.

"Be damned! But I guess you were right in not telling me. I don't think I'd have liked it."

The doctor cleared his throat. "If I may say so, there already seems to have been a considerable change in your personality."

Sibley laughed. His eyesight was crystal-sharp, and his body tingled with blood, racing through his veins instead of flowing sluggishly. "Did you give me everything the profile called for?"

The doctor nodded. "You're going to be completely unrecognizable as soon as the remainder of the physiological process completes itself."

Sibley laughed again. He slid off the edge of the table, grimacing at the bulge of his stomach. "Well, I guess that's that. Thanks, Doctor."

He padded across the room and opened the door.

"Ah . . ." The doctor was trying to catch his attention. Sibley half turned and cocked an eyebrow at him.

The doctor was holding up his discarded pants.

"What's the matter, Doc?" Sibley inquired. "Never see a naked man before?" He shut the door behind him and went up the hall to his room.

He found his new clothes in a closet, and a wallet on the desk beside a typewriter. Spread out in front of it were his new identification papers.

He took a long look at himself in the closet mirror.

He seemed taller, younger and a good deal more alive. His eyes were sparkling, and he had trouble recognizing himself. The new skin had taken the old, deep-cut lines out of his face, and his facial muscles weren't sagging any longer. He was still soft, and he was still close to fifty years old, but he didn't look it, even this soon. He stood naturally straight, with his shoulders squared. It was surprising how much difference this one factor made in the line of his stomach.

Looking himself up and down, he whistled softly, grinned at himself, then reached for the clothes on the closet hooks.

His grin deepened as he climbed into them. Small must have had a fair idea of the man who had emerged from the operation. The pantaloons were comfortably colorful, the blouse was salt white with ruffled edging, the vest was handsomely embroidered. All of them had adjustable seams.

He frowned a little over this, but the frown was just Allen Sibley's social conditioning, still lingering. Tailor-mades would have been ridiculous, considering the situation. Ready-to-wear was just the ticket for a man who wouldn't be quite the same shape on any two successive days for a while.

He studied himself in the mir-

ror again, and approved the look of the clothes on him. Allen Sibley, old style, would have used the word 'garish'. Allen Sibley, new style, whistled between his front teeth in appreciation as he sat down to look his papers over.

Birth certificate—driver's license —driver's physical examinations record book—Social Security card —Police Registry card—three rent receipts—two membership cards in a pair of Downtowner drinking clubs.

All of them were appropriately creased and worn. Where official signatures were required, they were signed. Where stamps were required, they were stamped.

Sibley paused for a moment, picking a name for himself. He fed the driver's license into the typewriter, thinking. Then he grinned and printed, in the space marked NAME: *John L. Sullivan.* He filled in AGE, WEIGHT, and HEIGHT, settling for 38, 200, and 6'—0". That was close enough to his present shape to sound more or less right, if a little optimistic. When he trained up a little, it wouldn't be too far out of the way. In any case, the only things that anybody ever checked were the print patterns already recorded on the license.

He rummaged through the desk, found a pen and some paper. He practiced his new signature a few times, then scribbled it loosely on the license.

Working quickly, changing typefaces as he went along, he filled in the other cards and papers to correspond. Small, he saw, had provided him with a journeyman's Social Security card, which was good. The idea appealed to him. He could always have it changed, if he wanted to. Meanwhile, he could work at almost anything, taking jobs and leaving them as he pleased.

He smiled to himself at the heady tang of freedom.

The treated fiber of the papers aged the new additions to match the other inscriptions. He rubbed them against the floor to finish the job. When he slipped them into the worn wallet, distributing them among the postage stamps, ticket stubs and other odds and ends already there, he was ready to stand forth as a man with at least the official framework of a history behind him.

He counted the money in the wallet. Fifty dollars—*and* a few thousand more to come.

Worth it? Damned right, it was worth it! He looked at himself in the mirror. He wouldn't have traded places with Allen Sibley for any amount.

The impact of being out from under the weight of Sibley's weaknesses and responsibilities was making his pulse jump in peculiar ways. He stood swaying a little, from what he guessed was reaction.

The first burst of euphoric intoxication was fading out. His grin became a smile, and he turned away from the mirror, which was reflecting him in soft focus. He walked over to the bed and sat down, almost losing his balance. He rubbed his eyes tiredly, his relief at finally having gotten away turning into a relaxed fatigue he had never experienced before.

The roof of his mouth felt numb, and he pressed his lips with the heel of a hand, trying to get some feeling into them. Then he slowly began to droop sideways, blinking blearily. He lost consciousness the moment his head touched the pillow.

IV

THE COMPARTMENT was small and bare. Sullivan turned on his side, waking up, and looked at four walls pressing close upon him. The wall beside his bunk was curved to meet the overhead, and the feeling in his stomach was that induced by the peculiar lightness of MacDonnel flight.

Something stiff was crackling in his blouse pocket, one corner digging into his ribs. He pulled out an envelope, opened it, read—

After some deliberation, we decided that our obligation to all our clients, rather than to any one individual, made this step necessary.

There remained a little too much of an element of risk. It was conceivable that you might, in an inebriated condition, for example, or through some other such circumstance, make a slip which would endanger both yourself and our organization.

One might say we were doing our utmost to fulfill our contract with you, by protecting you from your last remaining possible danger—yourself. You may not, at present, share this view, and we regret the injury to your feelings that we may be doing you.

From even only a cursory glance at your personality profile, however, it becomes immediately obvious that you will find yourself at home on Pluto, and that, once your first heat has passed, you will see the numerous possibilities open to a man of your nature on a world less constricted than our own. At least, we trust so.

Our last reports were that there was still enough of a social order remaining on the planet to enable a strong man to advance himself. If we are proved wrong, may I say we feel the deepest personal regret for your inconvenience?

In closing, allow me to remind you that silence is as advantageous to you as it is to our Firm. And may I offer you our sincerest good wishes for your success in your new life, and our as-

surance that Doncaster Industrial Linens does not frequently treat its clients so drastically? Should the opportunity ever somehow arise for us to be of further service to you, please do not hesitate to call on us.

For the Firm, then, and for myself personally, I beg to remain,
Your servant,
H. SMALL,
President.

The note was turning yellow in his hands. He dropped it and watched it turn brown, brittle, finally black, before it broke up into threads of flossy ash.

Well, he might have expected it. A million dollars was a lot of money. Doncaster wanted to be sure of keeping it.

He laughed harshly in the metal cabin. He should have expected something like it. All done within the social code, with its polite phraseology—and its backstabbing.

You stupid jerk, Sibley! he thought. *How did you think Doncaster got to be almost as big as New York's official government? Bigger, maybe.*

All right—now—let's figure a way out of this.

He heaved himself out of his bunk and opened his compartment door. He made his way up the corridor, with the peculiar cloud-walking stride of a man under acceleration in an anti-gravity field. He reached the door labeled Control Compartment—*Authorized Personnel Only.* He opened it and stood inside the doorframe, bracing himself against the sides. There was only one man in the compartment, sitting in a chair in front of the instrument panel.

"How far out are we?" Sullivan demanded.

The pilot turned his head and grinned at him lopsidedly. "I've been waiting for you to come out of it. *Boy,* what a head you must have!" He waved toward the other chair. "Come on in and sit down. You look like you need it. I'd offer you a hair of the dog, but I don't carry it aboard. Come on, buddy—we're far enough out so we're on automatic. If I turned around now, I'd have to refigure a thousand bucks worth of orbit tapes. Shut that door behind you!"

Sullivan grunted. That was that, then. He pulled the door shut and climbed into the other chair.

"Only place there is to sit on this clunker, except the edge of your bunk," the pilot said. He looked at Sullivan curiously. "My name's Ted Eagels. What's yours?"

All the drive had leaked out of Sullivan. He sat down in the chair. Now he'd have to figure out a way back from Pluto, and that was quite a large slice of distance.

"Sullivan," he answered. He looked at the field of stars in the forward screen. He had never so much as seen an astronomical photograph before in his life. He looked out at them with a numb sickness in his belly.

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Sullivan. It gets lonesome, making this run by yourself."

Sullivan looked at him, almost in disbelief.

Eagels nodded. "Just you and me. And let me tell you, you're the first in an awfully long time." He gestured around him. "Usually it's just me and old Bessie and a holdful of cargo. I've got a part stake in her, so I *gotta* go. But how come you're going? Not that I don't appreciate the money. Don't tell me the Settlers' Council's really putting out that much dough for technicians? What's the matter with a factory job Earthside?"

Sullivan shrugged. He took another wooden look at the stars and turned away from them for good.

Well, here he was, he thought —and nothing could be done about it. For now, anyways. He might as well make the best of it. What else could he do? He couldn't fly the ship back.

"What's Pluto like, anyhow?" he asked.

Eagels raised one shoulder and let it drop. "It's all right if you like living on dirt. The biggest work got done when they turned that moonlet into a sun, before the appropriation pooped out and the government never renewed it. A guy like you ought to make out all right—they're crying for anybody that knows which end of a screwdriver goes in the little notch."

"Up to now, though, they haven't had much luck. I stick pretty close to the field at Port MacDonnel, but even there I can see they're having a tough time. Just plain not enough people for the work, and they can't get anybody new. There isn't one guy in a million on Earth with guts enough to go out past the end of his nose." Eagels snorted his contempt.

He looked closely at Sullivan. "Say, you're being pretty quiet. You sure those friends of yours were giving my partner the straight dope? You really *want* to go out there?"

Sullivan grinned painfully. "I guess I thought it was a good idea at the time. Maybe it is. Looks like I'm going to have to try it."

"Well, I'll say this for you—getting the idea at all, even on a blind drunk, is more than most people back there'd do. Bunch of lily-livered fairies." He looked at Sullivan a little apologetically. "I guess maybe my partner should of asked a few more questions." He shrugged. "But five thousand bucks must have looked good to

him. It sure does to me. We're running this outfit on a patched shoestring."

"How come?" Sullivan asked. "Seems to me, if you don't like Earth, you ought to be able to get a pretty good job on Pluto or Venus, if they really need people that badly."

Eagels shook his head. "It beats me, too, sometimes. But, hell, who's going to run freight out to those places if I pull out? *They're* hanging on by a mighty thin string themselves. There's Tom Allenby on Venus, and there's me. Between the two of us, we just about manage to run in enough stuff to keep them afloat.

"They've got a raft of old equipment the government left behind when it pulled out, but it's wearing out, and no repair parts. They got a few little factories going, but there's some stuff they can't make for themselves. Some things, you've just got to have a drop-forge for, or micromechanics.

"I guess that's what they need you for—somebody to keep that old stuff patched and running. You ought to make out pretty good. And it's a nice-enough place, I guess, even if there's lots of storms and things. It's rugged country—but it's kind of a relief after Earth."

Hmm. Sullivan cupped his chin in his palm. Maybe Eagels was right. Once he learned a trade, he might be able to make a pretty comfortable living at it, plus doing work he liked.

He sat looking toward the instrument panel, with his eyes unfocussed, thinking about his prospects.

A job, a place to live—and the way Eagels was acting toward him wasn't lost on him, either. A job, a place to live, straightforward people for friends. He had a pretty good idea of what kind of community he'd find on Pluto. It would be close-knit, strong, the people proud and independent—the kind of world a man would be proud to fit into.

He grinned crookedly. Small *had* been right. Allen Sibley's hands had been full of money. John Sullivan's fists curled inward, as though gripping a tool.

"Well—thanks for giving me the word," he said. "I feel a little better. How's for some food?" His belly was rumbling—he was hungry as a horse.

"Sure," Eagels said. "Bessie'll fly herself okay. Galley's back aft. I could eat something myself."

He began to slide out of his chair. Then he stiffened.

"*Hey!* Look at that! Look at that son of a son!" He pointed to a moving dot of light on his screens. His expression was that of a man who would be delighted to kill.

"What is it?" Sullivan asked.

"It ain't no star!" Eagels snapped one screen to top mag-

nification. "There he is," he growled. "You don't see 'em very often, but they're still there, just a cat's jump outside Pluto."

Sullivan looked, and saw a silvery-grey ghost sliding across the face of the stars.

"That's one of the bastards," Eagels said. "That's a Vilk!"

Sullivan grunted, watching the shape slide across the screen like a spindle on a wire. He felt his hackles rise. But he was still hungry.

"What's the point of getting that excited?" he asked Eagels. "They never come in any closer."

Eagels gave him a look. "One of those things chased Tom Allenby's brother, Max, ten years ago when he thought he had the patrol schedule figured out. He had a Carlson-Westman speed yacht and the best MacDonnels ever bolted to a deck. He had a hold full of torps and a Du Pont Series-Four automatic rocket turret.

"He could of wiped New York off the map in one afternoon's work with that ship, if he'd wanted to. Hell, he could of wiped out the excuse we've got for a TSN! But he wasn't ten minutes over the line before they caught him and mashed him flat.

"That Vilk ship is one of the things that keeps me away from *this!*" and he threw his screen switches over so a clear field of stars suddenly burst into life on the forward screen.

Sullivan looked at him, understanding a little of what he must be feeling. But nobody could do anything about the Vilks. Maybe, if all of the people in the Solar System got together and worked at nothing else, they might be able to. But what was the use?

If the Vilks could afford to detach a squadron of ships merely to cruise endlessly around nine planets, then there had to be thousands more of their ships out there somewhere, and billions of Vilks, filling the Galaxy and leaving only this one pocket for Mankind.

That was something no few men like Eagels, or that other fellow, could fight. That was something you had to learn to live with. There was still plenty of room for a man doing his work and living his own life . . .

MacDonnels made a joke out of thirty-two hundred million miles. The trip out took a week. In that week, Sullivan worked religiously at getting his body into shape. He wrestled one hand against the other, one arm against one leg, every day in his compartment.

He tore voraciously through Eagels' galley, paying for the extra food out of the few bills still in his wallet. He came to know a fierce joy at what his body was capable of doing, and added that to the satisfying glow of being free at last, of leaving softness and weakness behind him. Allen Sib-

ley faded further back into one corner of his mind, not lost or forgotten, but glad to retire.

With every flex of his arms, with each time he pulled himself up by his hands against the tension of legs locked around a structural brace, he pulled himself farther away from Allen Sibley's world. He drew closer to the image in his mind of a hard-bodied, strong-minded man, ready to take his place in a society of men like himself . . .

Eagels lowered the ship toward Port MacDonnel. Sullivan was in the chair beside him, looking at the screens.

"Biggest city off Earth," Eagels said. "Twenty thousand people. Maybe another thirty thousand on the rest of the planet. Add about twenty-five thousand on Venus, and you've got it. Seventy-five thousand orphans."

Sullivan looked at the low, weatherbeaten buildings, with rows of newer, rectangular units lined up to one side in what looked like mass housing. There were larger buildings clustered near the spacefield, some with open-throated stacks boiling industrial smoke. There seemed to be some new construction around there, too.

He looked out at the surrounding country. A jagged range of mountains marched off under a wind that tore plumes of snow from their peaks. The craggy foothills tumbled toward a foaming sea, and young forests, the blue-green color of firs, spread toward the horizon, broken by tilled land here and there and broader stretches of open ground that looked as though it had been farmed for a few years and then left fallow. A roaring river burst through the mountains to the sea, and, overhead, the burning moon soared high in the dark blue sky. Sullivan caught a glimpse of blocky grey and newer white, up among the mountains.

"MacDonnel Dam. Never finished—be *damned!* They went and finished it!" Eagels said in surprise, jockeying the ship down.

Sullivan nodded, watching the hurried clouds scud overhead. It looked like a pretty good world for a man like him. He was still going back to Earth as soon as he could, but he might like his stay here.

He looked downward again. "What's that other ship?" he asked.

Eagels, watching his instruments, looked up again and grunted.

"Damned if it doesn't look like Tom's! Yeah, that's what it is, all right." He grinned. "By God, I haven't seen old Tom in three years. I guess we'll have a time for ourselves tonight."

"Isn't that the guy on the Venus run?" Sullivan asked. "What's he doing here?"

Eagels shrugged without taking his eyes off the controls. "It beats me. Seems to me I heard the Settlers' Council had cooked up some kind of a deal with Venus. Bringing in a lot of their people to live out here and maybe get more backs behind the wheel." He risked another look at his screens. Sullivan saw a line of people coming down a ramp from the ship's side.

"Yeah, guess that's it," Eagels said. "Good idea, I guess—if that's what it is. I don't pal around a lot with the Pluties. They're all right, but living out here has sort of soured them. They don't talk much. But, hell, I ain't happy anywhere."

Sullivan nodded and returned to his study of the world coming up to meet him. He had problems of his own. When the ship was down and Eagels snapped his switches shut, he stood up and got ready to go out. He picked up the duffelbag Doncaster had generously stowed aboard with him and shook Eagels' hand.

"Well, I'll be seeing you," he said.

The pilot nodded. "Say—if you're feeling lonely tonight, look in a couple of bars. Tom and me'll be in one of them somewhere. Maybe we can scare up something to do." He grinned and curved his hands through the air in the immemorial hour-glass gesture.

"Why—thanks!" Sullivan blurted, completely surprised. He knew by hearsay that this was the highest offer of friendship men like Eagels could give. Men like Eagels and—himself.

"I'll *be* there," he promised.

V

SULLIVAN CLIMBED down the ladder onto the field, carrying his duffelbag, and looked around. The long line of passengers from the Venus ship was filing into a large wooden building on his left. He stood watching them for a minute, breathing in the cold, sharp air. His leg muscles tingled to the feel of a gravity just a fraction on the light side from Earth's. He felt good. He felt alive, on top of the world.

"Hey, *bud!*"

He looked over toward the voice. A man in grey coveralls was motioning to him. "Get in line!"

Sullivan didn't move. "What?"

"Go on, get in line! You gotta go through Immigration."

Sullivan shrugged. "All right," he said agreeably, and began strolling toward the building.

"*Move*, buddy!" The Immigration clerk came closer and gestured emphatically.

Sullivan looked at him. "Take it easy," he said. Something made him want to grin joyously at the taste of anger, but he controlled it.

The clerk looked at Sullivan with exasperation. "You big birds always have to make trouble, don't you?"

Sullivan grinned to himself. So now he was one of those big birds who were always making trouble, was he? He began to whistle a chorus to some song he had heard in a cocktail lounge.

The song died as he stepped through the receiving door of the Immigration shed, and a clerk stamped his forehead with his basic number. He half-turned as he felt somebody fumbling with his duffelbag. He looked down. Half a claim-check dangled from the strap. Someone thrust the stub into his hand.

"Move up, *move* up," somebody mumbled with mechanical impatience. "We gotta get this nonsense over with and back to our jobs *today*." He was nudged forward, the bag taken out of his hand. Nobody stayed near him long enough for him to put up a protest. He was hemmed in between two pipe rails, and there were people being processed behind him.

"Polio, tuberculosis, VD, cancer," a voice intoned.

Four shots were blasted into his skin. Four numbers were added to his brow.

"Move up."

"Look, my name's John L. Sullivan. Who do I—"

"Pleased to meetcha. Mine's Leontovitch. Straight ahead, Sullivan. *Move!*" He was shunted forward to the next station.

"Where's your T-number?"

"T-number?"

"Your Tomson-index, bud. Oh, *Christ*, you missed it! Squeeze back there. Well, *go on!* Don't hold up the line."

He went back to the Tomson station.

"Stick out your arm," the technician mumbled as he had been mumbling every thirty seconds for the past twenty minutes.

Sullivan got back to his old place in line. The man who had stopped him the first time now let him go by. Apparently, he was a checker against slip-ups. Which meant that the last step in the processing was right about—here.

He swung toward the last clerk. "*You!* I want to talk to you!"

"So do I," said the clerk. "You're off the Earth-ship aren't you?" He looked down at Sullivan's red pants. "Let's see your Social Security card."

Sullivan took a deep breath. Then he held out his card.

"That's better," the clerk said. He grimaced at the number. "Unspecialized journeyman, huh? Well, what's your experience?"

Sullivan shook his head. "None in particular. I want to look around for a while—pick my spot."

"How much money you got?"

"Twenty, twenty-five dollars."

The clerk looked at him disgustedly. "Restaurant meal costs fifteen dollars without a work-team card. Hotel bed and shower's fifty, for one night. We don't go for drones. Now—what's your experience?"

Sullivan shook his head. He thought as fast as he could. "Like I said—nothing in particular. I've been taking it easy."

The clerk grunted. "Well, there's only *one* place for *you*." He flipped a blue card at Sullivan. "Put your right and left thumbs over those squares. Lean forward."

Red light exploded in Sullivan's eyes as his retinal photographs were taken. He heard his card clattering through the clerk's pocket typewriter. A stamp found room on his forehead. When his vision cleared, the clerk was pushing the card into his fingers.

"Here. Go through Gate E. Report to the sergeant outside."

"Sergeant?"

"Yeah, sergeant. Army's the only place for you. On your way, soldier."

Outside, Sullivan showed the blue card to the sergeant, who was a thin, brown-haired man leaning against the wall of the Immigrations shed. He looked at the card, looked at Sullivan, grunted, then returned the card.

"Sit," he said, "or stand—suit yourself. We're here until they finish processing this batch. I usually pick up two or three every time. My name's Hungerford. Any questions? They'll be answered later. Any experience? Don't make me laugh."

He leaned against the building again and withdrew into an inscrutible brooding, his brown eyes vaguely regarding the ground. At intervals, Sullivan heard him sucking at a cavity in a back tooth.

Sullivan squatted, his back against the shed wall, and thought things over.

Next time, he wouldn't let them catch him off balance. They had pressured him through that receiving routine like a dose of salts. With room to swing, next time might be a different story.

But no—they were right. He should have thought of it before, but a world that had to count every penny and every erg of energy had to have a tight organization, if only to make sure nothing was wasted.

Hungerford pushed himself away from the wall, turned his head to look through a window and grunted. "Guess they're all through for this trip. Means you're my only prize this time. Okay, Recruit Squad, fall in," he said. "Have a smoke?"

"Thanks." Sullivan took the sergeant's light, and they walked along together, passing between the buildings of the space-field area until they reached a parking

lot. Hungerford turned toward a small truck.

"I hear MacDonnel belts have become a big thing on Earth," he commented.

"That's right."

"Good idea. I can see why it caught on—privacy, convenience, all that. We don't use 'em here. Weather's still too unstable." He made a hawking noise, but he didn't spit. "There's a lot of things we don't have. Most of us follow the usual human pattern.

"We put in a lot of time praising what we have as 'manly'—the good, old fashioned way of doing things. Belts and weather control are decadent, effeminate—sissy stuff. Well, I suppose it makes us feel better, but we'd all damned well give our eye-teeth for one good shipload of old-fashioned luxuries. Especially me. No fluorides in the water, and we're short on dentists."

Sullivan looked at Hungerford in astonishment. The sergeant was still the same gangling character, his hair unkempt and his manner sloppy. But it appeared he was a lot deeper than he looked.

"It used to be worse," Hungerford went on. "One day, Pluto and Venus were going, booming concerns. Then next day, they were cut off, ignored. Nobody helped them, nobody cared if they lived or died. They've had two generations of sitting it out on a pair of dead-end streets, waiting for the Vilks to come in and smear them, while you people hid under the bed. They didn't like it, and they *don't* like it. Some of us have worked around to the point where we hate a Mole worse than a Vilk.

"So I'll give you some advice, Sullivan. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. Get out of that fancy dress and throw it away. Don't talk about Earth. The quicker you get to be a native-born Plutonian like the rest of us, the better things'll be for you."

Sullivan nodded. He climbed into the truck with Hungerford, strapped himself in, and, when the sergeant motioned, helped him close the stiff, manually-operated canopy.

Bad teeth and all, Hungerford seemed amiable enough. Before taking off for boot-camp, he rode Sullivan to a little counter-and-stool restaurant, on one of the lesser streets of the raw, straggling city. The sign outside, beneath a layer of dust, promised GOOD FOOD.

"It ain't no de luxe Earthside gourmet heaven," Hungerford told him, "but it's a step up from army chow. And you'll be swilling *that* for quite a spell, Sullivan. So fill up—it's on me.

"The condemned man," said Sullivan with an attempt at humor, "was offered a hearty breakfast—but he wasn't hungry."

The sergeant regarded him morosely after swinging up on a stool. "Eat, dammit!" he said. "That's an order."

"Still throwin' your weight around, Sarge?" The girl, who came up behind the counter was short, had blond hair and was pretty in a totally undistinguished way, though Sullivan found her face a trifle too long, her lower lip too thin. "Well, what'll it be?" she asked Hungerford.

He ordered goulash and coffee. Sullivan, his appetite returning with the smell of food around him, managed to order and put away a plate of chicken stew and dumplings, which he found tough but not unpleasant otherwise. While he ate, the girl and Hungerford chatted of affairs about which he knew nothing. It was not until the sergeant paid the check, that the girl's attention returned to Sullivan.

"Poor guy," she said, to Hungerford, not to him. "How long do you give this one, Sarge?"

Hungerford, making change, shrugged. "How the hell should I know?" he countered. "There's no way of telling. He's big enough."

"Poor guy!" the girl said a second time, and her obvious pity stung Sullivan. Worse, for his new ego, it frightened him a little. He wondered what he was getting into —or rather, what Doncaster had got him into.

When they were in the truck, Hungerford said, "How's Earth? Still scared of the Vilks' shadow?"

Sullivan shrugged, and let Hungerford draw his own conclusions, whatever they might be.

The Vilks again! Every time you turned around on Pluto, it seemed, somebody was mentioning the Vilks. If it rained, it was the Vilks. If a man had a scar on his hip, it was the Vilks. If a cow died, it was the Vilks. Sullivan wished to heaven the Plutonians and everybody else would tend to whatever they had to do and leave the Vilks alone.

VI

"THIS IS THE day-room," Hungerford said, leading him through it. He opened a door. "Barracks Chief's office. Sign in, sign out, request sick call, request passes or leaves here. No passes the first two months. I'm Barracks Chief."

He motioned Sullivan into the room, switched on the overhead light and went behind the wooden desk. Sullivan looked around. There was a print of Feurmann's *The Nature of Man* on the wall opposite the desk. The flare of the atomic rockets of Feurmann's time was the exact tint and shape, in miniature, as the alien sun at which the spaceship's prow was pointed.

Hungerford pulled a printed form out of the desk drawer, stabbed his finger at a line. "Sign

here," he commanded. He pushed a pen across the desk.

Sullivan looked at him and nodded slowly. He scribbled his name.

"Okay," Hungerford dropped the form in his drawer and spun the combination knob. "Come along."

He led Sullivan into the barracks proper. Rows of double-decker bunks were set down its length. A double locker stood between each pair of bunks and the next. Hungerford fumbled in his pocket and handed Sullivan a key.

"Down here," he said. He led him to a bunk. "This is yours." He tapped one of the two doors on the adjoining locker. "Your equipment's in there.

"When your bunkmate comes in, he'll tell you how to take care of it. He'll give you the word on the routine around here. My name is Sergeant Hungerford, and all statements addressed to me will have my rank appended as a form of respect for discipline."

He flung up his fist, caught Sullivan just above the point of his jaw and knocked him down.

Sullivan raised his aching head.

"I earn my respect. Don't kid yourself, Sullivan."

"Yes, sergeant."

Hungerford grinned. "I always clout the recruits—nothing personal. If I didn't look so much like a bag of bones, I wouldn't. I don't like doing it."

Hungerford turned and walked off, shutting the barracks door behind him.

Sullivan got to his feet, rubbing his jaw. He realized he should be angry at Hungerford. Instead, he found himself grinning again.

The barracks door slammed open, and a wave of men came pouring in, ripping off their helmets and tossing them on their bunks, dropping packs on the floor, banging lockers and streaming toward the latrine.

Sullivan got to his feet and waited for them to see him. His glance moved among them, trying to size up each man as an individual. Funny—he didn't seem to mind the idea of living in the same room with so many other people, but his experience didn't include anything like it. There'd be unwritten rules he'd be expected to know as a matter of course. He didn't know them. He'd have to watch the men and see how they acted.

"*Hey!* Here's a new one!"

He had been spotted by a little wiry man. All the faces turned in Sullivan's direction. He stayed where he was. The best thing to do was to stay put and let them look him over.

The little man came toward him with short, quick steps. He looked up at Sullivan. "You don't look like no Venusian," he said.

Sullivan stared down at him. "I ain't from Venus."

There was a slight noise among the other men. The little man grinned broadly. "Well, I'll be damned! When'd you get here, Mole?"

Sullivan narrowed his eyes. "This afternoon. My name's Sullivan—John L. Sullivan." He stuck his hand out slowly, deliberately. There was a faint singing in his ears.

The little man ignored the hand. He grinned nastily. "Maybe I'm jumpin' the gun," he said. "Maybe you're just from some other part of Pluto we don't know about. That it, Mac?"

Sullivan dropped his hand to his side and looked around. Nobody in the barracks was making a move or a sound. He felt something bubbling up through his bloodstream, and it felt vaguely good.

All right, he had tried to take Hungerford's advice. It wasn't going to do him any good, not with this bird.

"I'm from Earth," he said quietly.

The little man shook his head in perplexity. "That's funny," he said. "All the rest of us are Plutonians. You sure you're in the right barracks? Hey, Craddock—ain't that your locker he's foolin' with?"

Craddock was a beefy, flat-faced man with scarred lips and vague eyes. He blinked several times, then said, *"Huh?* Oh, sure. Hey, you Mole, quit foolin' with my locker. That's *my* locker."

Sullivan grinned, and the tips of his teeth touched each other lightly. His shoulders dropped, and his hands opened. "The hell it is, buster," he said cheerfully.

He didn't know exactly what was happening to him, inside. His arms and legs felt light. But this was John L. Sullivan's moment—this was what Sullivan lived for.

The little man caught the look in his eye. He jumped out of the way. *"Craddock!"* he cried.

Craddock got his slow feet untracked. He shuffled forward.

Sullivan was moving faster. He charged in, his right fist lashing out. His muscles felt as though they were crackling with electricity.

Craddock stepped inside his swing and slammed a left into his soft stomach. Then his heavy right fist caught Sullivan's neck below the ear. Craddock kneed him in the ribs as he fell away.

"Ya Goddam patsy!" Craddock grunted. "Where the hell'd ya learn to fight?"

Sullivan gasped for breath on the barracks floor. He coughed chokingly. He got his lower lip between his teeth and pushed himself up to his knees, shocked and so badly frightened that he began to shake violently. Craddock kicked him in the chest, and he fell backwards, his eyesight going dim. He tried to get up, but Crad-

dock slammed a boot down on the back of his neck.

Sullivan convulsed like a dying animal. He hadn't ever imagined this sort of brutality still existed. He saw, with a burst of intuition, that Craddock could kick him into a sodden bag of bones, and no one would intervene. The other men in the barracks hadn't made a move. That was the way it was. Nobody had any respect for a man who couldn't take care of himself, and they wouldn't help a man they didn't have any respect for.

Sullivan choked and rolled over. He was aware of Craddock, standing back a little, waiting for him to get up and make his next clumsy rush, so he could finish the job.

"Come on, Mole—I got more for ya," Craddock growled.

The little man, who, Sullivan now saw with insane perception, had Corporal's stripes on his sleeves, was standing to one side and bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Go on, Baby," the little man yelled to Craddock in a high voice. *"Go on—teach'm!"*

Sullivan felt a blinding explosion of red rage go through him as he looked up at the little man. His mouth opened, and he actually snarled. He wasn't going to let it end here, as though he hadn't ever changed. He wasn't going to let some little rat walk all over him.

He threw himself upward, his legs driving under him. He lurched sideways, clutching at the little man standing there. He got one hand on the little man's belt, another on his shirt-collar. Lifting him awkwardly, like a length of log, he swung on Craddock and smashed him in the face with the little man's skull. He lost his grip at the same time, and Craddock and the little man fell to the floor, tangled up in each other.

Sullivan kicked them indiscriminately. He grabbed one of Craddock's forearms and broke it over his knee. He got his hand in the little man's hair, held his head rigid and crushed his nose with the heel of his palm.

Then the rest of the men were swarming over him, pinning his shoulders, tripping him up. He tried to get his arms free, but there was too much weight on them. Then somebody was slapping his face.

"Easy! *Easy,* you!" the man was yelling. "Come on! Snap out of it! You wanna get hung for murder?"

He shook his head in a blur, feeling the pain Craddock had put in his neck. Some of his ribs were broken.

They slapped his face again. "Come on, killer! Come on, bud. It's all over. You licked 'em. Snap out of it. *Judas!*" the man who was slapping him mumbled, "Get a load of the look on his face!"

Slowly, he got it through his head. "Okay," he grunted. His eyes focused. "I'm through."

The man in front of him nodded. "He looks all right now. Let him go, boys."

Sullivan found his footing. He was swaying, but he was on his feet. He wiped his hand over his face, smearing the blood where his teeth had been knocked through his lip. He looked down at Craddock and the little man. Both of them were unconscious, though Craddock was moaning.

He had never in his life before looked down at a man he had felled. His bloodstream was pulsing with the news.

The little man who had been slapping him followed his glance. He shook his head and smiled, tight-lipped. "Craddock and Jones —that was some pair, as long as it lasted. My name's Liencer. I didn't catch yours."

"John L. Sullivan," he said. He bunched his arms, almost enjoying the pain in his chest as he felt the muscles tense across his back. John L. Sullivan—nobody's patsy. A man who had proved himself. A man who had passed the test.

He gave Liencer a long, hard look. He turned his head slowly and looked at the other men. They were standing in a huddle, with thin, cold grins on their faces, while Craddock pawed feebly at his broken arm and moaned.

"My name's John L. Sullivan," he repeated in a growl. "That's my locker, and that's my bunk."

The look on Liencer's face changed. The slightly awed smile dropped and became an ingratiating smirk. "Sure," he said. "Nobody's arguing."

A half hour later, in the sergeant's office, Hungerford wrapped a strip of adhesive around Sullivan's rib cage and grunted. Sullivan could smell the whiskey on his breath. The little office was full of it.

"Surprised me. I expected 'em to *drag* you in here." He tore another strip of tape off the roll with a savage sound. "You know, you came as near to killing those two as makes no difference? Jones is going to have to get his sinuses rebuilt, and Craddock's got a staved-in head. Don't you know when to stop?"

Sullivan looked at him. He couldn't understand what Hungerford was getting at. All he had done was protect himself. He felt a flash of anger at Hungerford's attitude.

Hungerford's eyes narrowed. He looked sharply at Sullivan. "Maybe you don't, at that." He grunted again. "Look—Sullivan, I don't think you know it, but you're in a spot to make a perfect damned fool of yourself."

"I can take care of myself, Sergeant."

"Sure—and you're going to get better at it. But don't get in any more fights."

"I didn't pick this one," Sullivan said angrily. He didn't have

any intention of starting anything. He didn't have to. The other men respected him, now, and in a few days he'd be firmly established as one of them. He resented Hungerford's telling him not to do something he didn't intend to. "What happens to me if I do get in any more?"

Hungerford's mouth twitched lopsidedly. "In *this* army? It's taken as a sign of the proper spirit. Nobody's going to stop you officially, short of murder. And you'll probably come out on top, physically. But—do yourself a favor. Cut it short right here. We've got enough boys like you in this army already."

Sullivan growled. "Suppose somebody else tries this Mole business on me? Which cheek am I supposed to turn?"

Hungerford silently pulled a bottle out of his hip pocket and set it down on the table beside him. His expression was unreadable, but his voice, after he put the last bit of tape on Sullivan's chest, was metallic.

"Nobody's going to call you a Mole again. You can quit worrying about that. You've established an independent reputation of your own." He sighed. "You can take the wrappings off tomorrow. The stuff I gave you to chew was Vitacalk. Heals bone-breaks in twelve hours. Remember the name." He turned to the bottle, unscrewed the top, and took a swallow. He looked at Sullivan for a long moment. "Welcome to Pluto, bully boy," he said.

VII

REVEILLE. The loudspeakers in the barracks came to roaring life, and the bellow of the bull-horn turned Sullivan over in his bunk.

Sullivan swung his legs over the side of the bunk and dropped to the floor, just missing Liencer, who had emerged from the bunk below. He grunted when he hit, feeling his muscles jump with stiff pain where Craddock had clubbed him. He felt his ribs and grimaced. Hungerford had said twelve hours. It was a good bit short of that time.

He noticed he was being given plenty of room, and smiled to himself. Last night had made them respect him, all right. Now, all he had to do was buckle down and turn into a good soldier as quickly as he could. Then he'd *really* be one of them.

He got his shave, went back to his locker and climbed into his fatigues as quickly as he could. Some of the other men were already moving out the door to the company street, dressed and with their bunks made up. But there was a fair handful of others still straggling out of the latrine.

Turning around to get his boots, he bumped into Liencer and muttered, "Sorry."

"That's all right," Liencer said quickly.

Sullivan gave him a curious look. "Hell, I'm not going to bite you, Liencer!" He was in a good mood. Seeing that he wasn't the only dub in the barracks had made him feel better.

Liencer, a thinnish, blond man with a nervous face, said, "Sure, Sullivan," uneasily. Then he smiled suddenly in response to Sullivan's grin. "Uh—look, you better get that bunk made up. Want me to help? It's a pleasure."

He went around to the opposite side. "These top-deckers look tough, but they're easy."

He grinned again when he had finished. "And there y'are!"

Sullivan looked at the perfectly made-up bunk and nodded appreciation. "That's pretty good. Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it." Liencer scooped up his fatigue hat and handed Sullivan his. "Gotta get out on the street and form up for roster."

Out on the company street, Sullivan asked Liencer "What now?"

Some of the men were standing in ranks. Others were leaning against the side of the barracks. Again, it was the harder looking men—the ones that had gotten out of the barracks first—who were in ranks. It was the awkward ones who looked bewildered.

Liencer winked when he saw Sullivan regarding the awkward ones. He jerked his thumb toward his chest. "Stick with me, Sullivan. These birds think, just because Jonesy's in hospital, the rules got changed this morning. You and me're gonna be in ranks when Hungerford and Kovacs come out. Now look, you gò stand next to Saddler, over there—the one with the ears. I gotta get down with the L's. Do what everybody else does when Kovacs comes out, and you'll be okay. I'll see you at chow. Right?"

"Okay." Sullivan nodded.

Sullivan walked over beside Saddler and took his place next to him. Saddler, who had a lined, windburned face and flat, china-blue eyes, turned his head, looked at him and said nothing. He shuffled a little to one side to give Sullivan room. Sullivan looked at him a moment, shrugged and turned his eyes front.

He wondered a little about Liencer. Liencer was an odd specimen. He had started out being scared, and now he was being chummy. Sullivan ran a hand over his upper arm and frowned. He had never known anybody that reacted exactly that way.

The gaps in the ranks were filling up quickly. Even the men standing around were now moving uncertainly into their places. One of them stepped up on Saddler's other side. Saddler looked at him, grunted and didn't move. The other man—a pale, gangling type

with eyes glassy from contact lenses—looked at Saddler and gave ground.

There were other barracks up and down the street. Sullivan saw men ranked up in front of each of them, each formation with its corporal standing in front. Sullivan caught the curious looks some of the men in the other formations were throwing at his platoon.

He saw the door open on the barracks opposite, saw a sergeant emerge with an officer behind him. Then he heard his own barracks door open and two sets of feet on the steps. Someone in the first rank yelled, "Ten-*hut!*" Sullivan noticed it was one of the more soldierly-looking men. He assumed an imitation of Saddler's stance, and waited.

Hungerford, holding a roster sheet in his hand, came around to stand facing the men. There was an officer with him, and Sullivan guessed this would be Kovacs. He was a lean whippet of a man, with thin, pale lips and hellfire eyes, and he raked the platoon with his glance before nodding to Hungerford.

Hungerford looked tired, but otherwise his drinking didn't seem to be bothering him this morning. He looked over the ranks. "*Saddler!* Front and center," he said in a flat voice.

Saddler stepped out of ranks, saluted Kovacs and turned to Hungerford.

"Saddler, you're Acting Corporal. Read the roster," said Hungerford.

"Yes, Sergeant." Saddler took the roster, saluted the lieutenant again, and began reading names. "*Adams—Andrews—Bickell . . .*"

There was a "*Here!*" in echo to each name. Saddler didn't call Craddock or Jones. When Saddler called "*Sullivan!*" Sullivan answered "*Here!*" with the same snap Saddler had given it, and a lot of the other men hadn't.

Saddler finished calling the roster. He handed it back to Hungerford. "All members present," he said, saluted Kovacs and went back into ranks.

Kovacs stepped forward. He bunched his shoulders as though he was going to hit each man personally.

"All right. Today, we are going to continue trying to turn you men into soldiers. We all know most of you are a bunch of crumbs and castoffs. We all know most of you are the absolute nadir in soldier material."

He flicked up a forefinger in a scolding gesture that took Sullivan by surprise.

"However, this is why you are here. You will note the absence from today's roster of two of your brightest adornments. You will remember that those two sorry birds are now in a labor battalion, their inability to be even the worst kind

of soldier having been demonstrated.

"This is a pragmatic army, my friends. We have no pity for you. *Nobody* has any pity for you. Those of you who cannot protect yourselves—from anything—will be ground underfoot—" he clenched his bared teeth and twisted his heel into the dirt—"like so much offal.

"Today, we're running through combat familiarization again. You will all draw rifles and sidearms after chow. You will be issued live grenades at the training field. Automatic-weapons men will draw four clips of .25's per rifle, two belts of 20 mm's per cannon. You will all wear fatigue uniforms with battle equipment. The first man caught with his battle armor on *under* his fatigues will be flogged. The second will be shot. It is now 0430. You will be back from chow and fall in for weapons and equipment inspection at 0500. *Dismissed!*"

The platoon broke up. Sullivan found Liencer waiting for him, and they trotted toward the chowhall together.

"Was he kidding?" Sullivan asked.

"Who—Kovacs? He never kids," Liencer answered.

VIII

SULLIVAN AND Liencer lay huddled close to the ground, their heads down, while the cannon shells streamed inches over them. They were fused to burst safely, behind the half of the company that was on the receiving end, but the gunners were no better at their trade than the men they were firing at. Once, Sullivan heard a scream from one of the men behind him.

A lateral burst of fire from one of the automatic rifles went shrieking over their backs, and Sullivan pulled himself closer to the ground.

"Keep your tails down," Hungerford kept saying.

"How long does this keep up?" Sullivan shouted, his mouth dry with fright.

"Not much longer. Pretty soon, we change sides. Then we'll be the ones that's pinning *them* down." Liencer's mouth jerked. "Pretty soon, Hungerford's gonna order us to start pluggin' grenades at their positions. We're supposed to try and make 'em fall short. It ain't so bad if we don't, though. They're pretty well sandbagged in and roofed over. Firing side never loses more'n one to pinned-down side's six. They'll tell you that in tactics class."

During the grenade throwing, a man somewhere farther down the line got his arm almost completely cut off by MG fire. Afterward, the pinned-down side changed positions with the firing side, and Sullivan and Liencer were assigned to a 20-millimeter cannon.

Hungerford paced back and forth in a slit-trench behind their platoon's firing pits, pouring out a stream of instructions. Kovacs, taking another officer's place behind a permanent machine-gun pit with its own specialist crew, kept up a steady chant.

"Traverse! *Damn it, traverse those guns!* Short bursts! *Short* bursts and traverse! Get lower with that fire! Come on, you miserable goons, get down as far as you can on those blocks! Come on, *push* those barrels down!"

The cannon-shells were exploding almost on top of the men. Sullivan, with his amateur's eye, could not understand why the rows of helpless recruits, lying down, weren't being combed into bloody shreds. Liencer had the gun barrel down as far as the safety blocks would let him.

"Hit 'em! *Hit* 'em!" Kovacs shouted. *"Hit* the dirty Moles!"

"Liencer!" Sullivan yelled, "What the hell *is* this?"

Liencer threw a sideward look out of a face that was set in a ghastly grin. "This is trainin', Sullivan. This is where they separate the men from the boys. Get used to it. Get to like it. It's better if you get to like it."

Down in the slight hollow where the other half of the company lay, Sullivan saw men twisting awkwardly to get their grenades out and primed. He stared in fascination as one man raised his shoulder too high and the fabric of his jacket exploded into red all along his upper arm.

"Liencer! You *hit* that guy!"

Liencer spat. "Yeah. I hope Kovacs saw who did it."

The firing slackened involuntarily, and Sullivan, in the middle of ducking away from a hail of gravel and earth, saw Kovacs jump beside the gunner on the specialist MG crew, and point.

The gunner fired one burst, and a man who had grown careless when the firing died down suddenly fell backwards like somebody falling into a pool. The live grenade fell out of his hand and exploded beside him.

"All *right!"* Kovacs shouted. *"Cease firing!"*

The storm of gunfire came to an end. Morning exercises were over.

They ate chow in the field, lying on their sides and spooning bad food out of their messkits, ignoring the truck that came out to pick up the casualties. Sullivan listened for comment about what they had just gone through, but didn't hear a word. The old soldiers ate stolidly. The young ones were white-lipped and silent. In a few knots of old soldiers, there were brief conversations about women, occasional remarks about the food.

"I don't get it," Sullivan said to Liencer. "What're they after? What's the sense of killing a man or two every day?"

Liencer shrugged. "All I know, this is the way it's been the last two months. When the Venusians started shippin' out here, that was when they started buildin' up the army. They get most of their new blood from the Venusians, but that's only because there's any number of 'em that's too scrawny or too beat-out to work. They had a real rough deal there, they tell me.

"Anyhow, it ain't just the Venusians—it's native-born citizens, too. If a guy's too weak, or too stupid, or too sick, to work on settin' up one of the factories, *boom*—he's in the army. There's new ones coming in every day."

Sullivan grunted. "Yeah—but, look, Liencer, what's it all for? Who's this army going to fight?"

Was this army really being worked up to attack Earth? That couldn't be. War with Earth—from Pluto? The mere thought was ridiculous. You don't attack a planet with rifles—not even with a handful of cannon. It would make as little sense if they really intended to attack the Vilks! With seventy thousand people . . . ?

Sullivan decided he must be wrong. Maybe it was just a generalized hate campaign—to get the men's spirit up—and Moles were the handiest target. But he'd better find out fast.

Liencer grinned crookedly. "Well—nobody's said anything official. There's a lot of people who figure they don't need any official word. There's a lot of what you might call guessin', if you follow me. But there ain't no sense worryin' about it until the time comes. Nobody else does. You just stick with me. I won't steer you wrong."

Sullivan frowned. It wasn't much of an answer. But then, Liencer was giving him credit for a practical experience he didn't have. At least, he had Liencer around to keep him from getting his head shot off until he learned to take care of himself and got himself oriented . . .

Sullivan came padding out of the latrine that night, wiping himself dry after a shower. He reached his bunk and saw that Liencer had put his dirty fatigues away for him and broken out the clean ones.

He grunted his thanks, and Liencer said, "Don't mention it. If we're gonna be buddies, that's what buddies are for."

"Yeah—well, thanks anyway," Sullivan said gruffly. He climbed into his clean uniform and began pulling his socks on.

"Tell you what," Liencer said, "Let's go over to the canteen. We can down a couple of brews."

A warm feeling touched Sullivan. Here was Liencer, one of the old, experienced soldiers, wanting to go out and drink with him, when he could just as easily have asked one of his old friends.

They pushed through the canteen doors. The small room was

crowded with tables, and the tables were crowded with men sitting around them. Liencer led him over to the bar. It was packed tight. But somehow, Liencer got a hand through to the bar and, moments later, pulled his way out, holding two beers by their necks.

He looked around, seeking an empty table to sit down at. There weren't any, but he spotted one with men he recognized from his platoon.

"You suppose they'd make room for us?" Sullivan asked Liencer.

Liencer looked at the men. They were all new recruits. His mouth twitched. "Looks to me like they're about to leave. That'll give us the whole table. I'll go over an ask 'em." He walked away quickly, and Sullivan saw him leaning over the table.

One of the recruits looked up sharply at Liencer, and Sullivan saw an incredulous expression on his face. The other men looked up, too, breaking off their conversation, and one of them said something to Liencer, but Sullivan couldn't hear it. They looked a little angry.

Liencer jerked his thumb over his shoulder, in Sullivan's direction, and the men's eyes shifted toward him. They looked at him expressionlessly, and Sullivan returned their look. If one of them had smiled, he would have smiled back. All of them looked at Liencer again. Then, wordlessly, they picked up their bottles and pushed their chairs back. They walked out the door, carrying their beer, and Liencer looked back at Sullivan with a grin. He waved for Sullivan to come over, and Sullivan carried his beer to the table.

"That was pretty nice of them," he said to Liencer, sitting down.

"Yeah," Liencer was looking down at his beer and smiling faintly to himself about something. "I figured they might just be ready to finish their brews outside. So I asked 'em if you and me could have this table. So they said sure." He raised his bottle. "Well, drink up!"

Sullivan smiled at him. "Right!" He tilted his bottle and took a swallow.

He felt loose and relaxed, and there was a steady, warm trickle of good feeling running through him. He could sit and drink with a man, look him in the eye and not be worried about anything. Pretty soon, he'd be a good soldier, and, after five years, he'd be out, with his own land and a place in the community. Sure, they were rough on you out here, but they had to be. And he was built to take it.

They finished a couple of more beers.

Liencer looked at his watch. "Whaddaya say, Sullivan? You wanna go back to barracks and play some cards?"

Sullivan shrugged. "Why not?" he said.

Liencer winked. "Okay—let's go."

They pushed their chairs back and left the canteen.

Back in barracks, Sullivan put some of his stuff away while Liencer got a deck of cards out of his own locker and took them to the table under the overhead bulb by the far wall. Sullivan locked up and crossed the barracks. He saw the bunch of men who had given up their table in the canteen, sitting around their bunks and talking. He flipped a hand and grinned at them, but they dropped their eyes and looked down. One of them muttered something under his breath that Sullivan couldn't quite hear.

He shrugged, a little hurt. He wondered what they had against him. He sat down thoughtfully, but Liencer soon kidded him out of his mood.

"Hey, there, Sullivan! Don't go getting down in the mouth even before Professor Liencer shuffles the cards. What'll it be?"

He grinned, feeling good again. This was the kind of man-to-man joshing back and forth he had only heard about before. He guessed Eagels and that fellow with the ship from Venus talked to each other like that. He wished he could have kept the date with Eagels last night. He wished he and Eagels and Liencer and Eagels' friend, Tom, could have gotten together tonight.

"Tell you the truth, Liencer, it won't make much difference," he admitted. "Card games are probably a lot different, back where I come from."

Liencer shrugged. "So what? So I'll teach you. And don't worry about the money, either." He winked. "I don't play for money with my friends. How about some Casino?"

Sullivan's eyes lit up. He *did* know how to play Casino. He and his father had played it quite frequently, at home, for recreation.

"That's one you won't have to show me," he said. "Deal!"

They played for a little while, and then Liencer said, "You're not kiddin', this is one I don't hafta show you! Hell, Sullivan, you're a shark! Tell you what—let's get some of these other guys in the game." He turned around in his chair and yelled down at the Venusian recruits. "Hey! *You* guys!"

The young recruits jerked their heads up and looked toward them. "What?" one of them asked. He was a scrawny looking, high-strung fellow.

Sullivan frowned at the bark in his voice. The character sounded sore at Liencer.

"Wanna play some cards with me and my buddy?" There was a peculiar edge in Liencer's voice,

and Sullivan looked at him quickly, again feeling bewildered.

The rest of the recruits in the group looked uneasily at each other. The scrawny fellow clenched his hands. *"No!"* he shouted.

Liencer looked at him, got up and walked toward him. "You mean," he said in that peculiar voice, "you won't oblige my buddy?"

Sullivan got up and followed him, wondering what was going on. He and Liencer stopped at the foot of the Venusian's bunk.

The man slid off the edge of his bunk and stood facing them. He looked more at Sullivan than he did at Liencer. His hands were held rigidly against his sides, and Sullivan noticed that the skin over his knuckles was white. He was pale, and the corners of his mouth were trembling.

"I wouldn't play with you, Liencer, even with my own cards," he said in a cracking voice. Then he gave way entirely. "I've had all I'm gonna take from you two!" he shouted.

The rest of the recruits were staring at him, then back to Sullivan, in panic. They slid backward on their bunks, pushing against each other, leaving the three of them isolated.

"I don't care!" the recruit shouted. "I don't care how goddamned big you are, Sullivan! I've had enough of it!"

"All right, punk," Liencer said in a flat voice. He stepped aside and pushed Sullivan forward. "Go on, Sullivan," he said. "Teach this wise guy."

Sullivan looked from Liencer to the Venusian, then back again. How had this happened? He wasn't sure what to do. He looked at Liencer uncertainly. He didn't want to make a mistake. It seemed to him, if the Venusian didn't want to play, that was his business.

Liencer pushed him again—a little impatiently. "Go on, Sullivan—take care of him."

Sullivan was confused. He wondered what had gotten the Venusian so worked up, when the recruit suddenly made a strangled noise and swung at him. He felt a dull crunch in his nose, and a streak of incredible pain shot across his eyes and blinded him for a moment. He put his hand up to his face and swung his other arm. He felt his knuckles smash into something, felt a sharp pain in his hand, too.

Then he heard the Venusian go down. He stepped back, his eyes slowly clearing, with blood running down his face, and looked at the Venusian lying sprawled half over the bunk. The recruit's hands were twitching.

Liencer looked at the rest of the Venusians. "Ya satisfied? Ya found out for good who's boss in this barrack?"

Sullivan looked down at the recruit, wondering if he had done the right thing.

IX

SULLIVAN CAME down the company street, released from hospital, his nose packed and taped, squinting down the darkness between the buildings. Both his eyes were swollen and black, and there was a steady ache in the front of his head that chewed through the shots of anesthetic. He saw somebody silhouetted against the light coming through the day room door, and peered at him.

It was Saddler, standing there watching him. Sullivan moved to go past him to the door and into the barracks.

"Not in there, Sullivan," Saddler said. "Hungerford wants to see you."

"Okay," Sullivan said, feeling his skull twinge to the vibration of the words. He looked at Saddler to see if there was anything more he wanted to say, but Saddler had turned and was walking toward the barracks door. Sullivan went up into the day room, through it to Hungerford's door and knocked.

"Come on in," Hungerford said, and Sullivan pushed the door open. Hungerford was sitting behind his desk, his feet on his wastebasket, the usual bottle in his hand.

"Shut the door," Hungerford said. Then he looked up and remarked, "Well, *you're* a pretty sight." He went back to staring across his desk with bloodshot eyes.

Sullivan stood beside the desk, waiting for whatever it was Hungerford wanted to say, watching him take a quick gulp out of the bottle. He followed his line of sight, and saw he was staring at the Feurmann print across the room.

"Quit gawking at that!" Hungerford's sharpness startled him, and he snapped his head back toward the sergeant. "It's mine," the sergeant added. "You keep your eyes where they belong." He took another drink. "You know something, Sullivan? It's about officers. They take a written examination at officers' school. An old lieutenant of mine named Corwin told me about it.

"They have all sorts of hypothetical questions thrown at them. Like—suppose the haliards on the flagpole are snarled, and it's impossible to lower the flag at sunset. You're in charge of a detail with a sergeant and some men. What order do you give? *Answer* —'Sergeant, get up that pole.'" Hungerford put his bottle down on the desk.

"So when Kovacs gets told to turn out a cadré of seasoned noncoms, fast, I get up that pole. Lean against the wall if you want

to, Sullivan. You may be here a while."

Sullivan stared at him. He wondered how long Hungerford had been sitting there alone, lowering the liquor table in his bottle.

"All right, Sullivan, forget that. I know all about what happened in the barracks tonight. You came close to doing me a favor. A little harder, and it would have been one more man in the hospital, and then down to the labor battalion. He swung first—you shouldn't have been able to down him after that. This is a pragmatic army. Well, don't do me those favors, Sullivan. I do my own favors, or Kovacs lends a hand." He looked up. "What happened in the canteen tonight?"

"I don't think I follow you, Sergeant."

"Who went over and chased those men away from their table?"

"Nobody chased them. They were ready to go."

"So Liencer was the one who went over, eh?" He studied Sullivan. "I wondered how your bunk got itself made up so well." He looked down at his desk and smiled crookedly. "I could have stood for another Craddock—Kovacs likes them. But not the team. I'll be damned if I'm going to have another Jones, too."

Sullivan was completely lost. He couldn't understand half of what Hungerford was saying. He just shook his head. He wished he knew more about living this kind of life. Maybe what Hungerford was saying would make sense then.

"You don't get it, do you? I told you last night—you fell into a perfect spot to make a damned fool of yourself. You didn't waste any time doing it, did you?"

Hungerford pushed himself up in his chair. "I'll spell it out." He jerked his head in the direction of the barracks. "Liencer's an operator. He knows how to soldier, but he won't soldier. He's a conniver. He doesn't gamble for relaxation, he gambles for money. He doesn't have friends, he has stooges. Liencer never does anything without calculating how much good it's going to do Liencer. Is that plain enough?"

It finally got through to Sullivan. He stood there dumbfounded. He asked, "Are the men in the platoon *scared* of me?"

Hungerford snorted. "Look, Sullivan—you're a big, hefty bruiser, and that's bad enough. It doesn't matter if you don't know how to fight—you can take punches until you get a chance to fall on your man. But the worst part of you is what you *don't* know. You don't know when you're beaten, and you don't know what to hit with, and you don't know when to stop. You're liable to kill anybody you get in a scuffle with. That's what frightens experts."

Sullivan took a deep breath, and his face twisted into a contorted smile. "All right, Hungerford. Thanks."

"Sergeant Hungerford, soldier," Hungerford said, smiling back. He raised his bottle and added, "Okay, Sullivan, now get the hell out of here and think of something to do to square yourself. And let me get back to my drinking."

Sullivan closed the door behind him. He found a chair in the day room and sat down. Liencer—this whole situation—was something out of a nightmare, and he didn't know what to do.

He winced at the thought of how Liencer had curried his friendship and shrewdly used his naivété to give him a completely distorted picture. When he remembered how anxious he had been not to make a mistake about the card-playing business, he twisted in the chair and beat his fist against his thigh. He thought about how the men in the barracks must feel about Liencer's ordering them around in his name, and he knew he had to do something.

He had thought he was becoming one of them. He had thought they respected him for handling Craddock and Jones. He had felt like one of them, and he had wanted to be part of the platoon. He hadn't understood the picture of him in their minds.

He had to show them it hadn't been his fault. He had to think of some way to prove, once and for all, that it hadn't been he, but Liencer, that had created this situation.

Finally, he thought of something. He got up and crossed the day room. He opened the door from the day room into the barracks and stepped inside.

He saw the men sitting on their bunks raise their faces toward him and then drop them. He saw Liencer lying on his bunk, his hands behind his head, with a too-familiar smirk on his face. He walked over to the foot of Liencer's bunk and said, "Stand up, Liencer."

"Huh? Hey, you teed off about something?" Liencer looked at him worriedly for a moment. Then the grin flashed. "What's the matter, pal? Hungerford chew you out?" His eyes were wary.

Sullivan felt himself move before he even thought about it. He pulled Liencer off his bunk and slammed him back against the lockers. He cracked his hand across Liencer's face.

"Stay away from me from now on," he growled. "Stay away from me, and keep your mouth shut. You say one word to me, and I'll make you wish you never heard of me." He threw him back on his bunk and faced the barracks, waiting for somebody to say something—anything—to show he'd done the right thing.

But nobody said a word. They

looked at him as he turned his head, bewildered, his eyes going from face to face. He saw the thin recruit lying on his bunk with a taped cast across his jaw, watching him, and walked over to him. He wanted to say, "Look, I'm sorry. It wasn't my fault."

The recruit looked up at him, white-faced. "Get away from me, you crazy ape," he said shrilly before Sullivan could open his mouth. "Go back and beat your buddy up some more."

Sullivan turned again, and the men's eyes were following him. He walked toward Saddler's bunk and saw Saddler watching him, his eyes careful, with a piece of one-by-two in his hand.

"Go to bed, Sullivan," Saddler told him. He didn't move from his bunk, but he held the piece of lumber ready.

Sullivan looked around at the other men. He saw by their faces that it was no use. Already, he had moved too far away from them.

He stood in the middle of the barracks, not stirring, with an overhead bulb glaring down on him and the men watching from their shadowy bunks. Liencer was lying face-down, his hands knotted in his blankets, motionless. A shower head was dripping on the latrine's concrete floor.

He was completely alone now. He didn't even have Liencer anymore . . .

Next morning, after *Reveillé,* he got out of his fatigues long enough to take a shower, ignoring the other men and being ignored in turn. He made up his bunk while a pale and frightened Liencer waited in the latrine until he was through, and then he went out to roster formation, taking his place beside Saddler.

Looking at the quiet soldier next to him, Sullivan couldn't fight off the impulse to try one more time. Saddler was a tough man, too. He was a man who might understand what it was to be big and hard-bodied and deep-voiced, and still just want to get along with people.

Sullivan had thought a great deal about this during the long night. He had decided that smaller men might expect a big man to ride roughshod over everybody, as they themselves would have liked to do if they only had the physical equipment.

"Saddler . . ." Sullivan began. He wanted to explain how he had gotten off on the wrong foot. He didn't expect Saddler to make him his buddy. He just wanted *one* man in the platoon who didn't hate his guts.

"Sullivan," Saddler said in a tight, husky whisper, his eyes as steady as gunbarrels, "You mess with me, and they'll find you behind barracks with a hole in your head."

Sullivan understood that, as

surely as though the last nail had just been hammered into the lid of his coffin, he was as much alone and sealed away as each individual corpse must be in even a crowded graveyard.

He shivered a little.

He marched out to the exercise field with the platoon, locked away inside himself, and there he took his bayonet practice. While Kovacs chanted in his overriding voice, Sullivan charged the dummies. Suddenly his throat opened, and he bellowed. He chocked his bayonet through the padding into the posts. He retracted with a jerk of his arms and a leg against the post, he roared and tore the padding with savage rips of his blade. He charged and yelled and splintered the posts. He tore the padding into shreds and roared some more.

X

SULLIVAN GRINNED tightly at his Unarmed Combat instructor and circled to the left. As usual, of late, there was a crowd watching —the men in the company who weren't paired off with their own instructors at the moment, Hungerford, most of the officers. Sullivan saw Lieutenant Kovacs standing in the front row of the circle.

Kovacs grinned savagely at him. "Go get him, Killer!" he barked.

Gandy, the instructor, scowled.

Sullivan mopped his face with a forearm and smiled coldly. " 'Matter, Gandy?" he asked.

Gandy was supposed to be the best fighter in the army. But, in the past few weeks of the two months he and Sullivan had been paired, they had been drawing more and more even. Today, Sullivan thought, things would go the other way. So far, they hadn't been able to catch each other decisively, but Sullivan was working on Gandy's temper.

Now Gandy, his eyes blazing, took an off-balance step.

Sullivan jumped forward. Gandy came to meet him, and Sullivan feinted with his left hand, reached with his right, turned with a kick of his right leg and caught the top of Gandy's shoulder in his left hand. He buried his thumb under the collarbone, brought his stabbing right hand into Gandy's armpit, kicked Gandy's driving leg aside and brought his right elbow up under the instructor's chin, just as Gandy tried to double away.

Gandy, his right arm helpless, twisted like a hooked fish. Sullivan's thumb worked under Gandy's collarbone, and he ground the stiff fingers of his right hand toward the curve of Gandy's fourth rib, lying just under the skin in his armpit. He hooked the first joints of his fingers over it, pushed Gandy forward with the

heel of his left hand, wrenched him around until he was behind Gandy's right shoulder, with Gandy's arm locked between his own upper arm and his chest.

He kicked Gandy's feet out from under him, held him for a second, then let him crumple to the ground. He looked across the small cleared space and saw Kovacs regarding him with approval.

Hungerford's whistle blew almost in his ear. "All right, next bunch!" the sergeant shouted, and the crowd moved toward the instructors.

Sullivan noticed that the other instructors were pointedly ignoring Gandy and were putting their attention on their own work. He smiled to himself and bent over to pick up his shirt, his back muscles stretching pleasurably.

"Get your kicks for today all right, Sullivan?" asked Hungerford.

Sullivan grunted and buttoned his shirt. He looked down at Gandy, who was sitting up, holding his right arm tight against his ribs, his eyes glazed with pain.

"Well, that just about mops everything up, doesn't it?" Hungerford persisted. "You've worked yourself into a spot where there's nobody left in this army with the guts to stand up to you."

Sullivan wished Hungerford would stop needling him. He scowled his annoyance and moved away.

Hungerford was the only man in the army who could get through to him. He didn't know why—he hadn't worked it out completely. But even when Hungerford was digging at him, like just now, there was a funny kind of twisted liking in the sergeant's voice. Sometimes Sullivan thought there was a trace of pity, too.

Perhaps it was because Hungerford's eyes didn't go cautious and shifty like everybody else's, perhaps it was because Hungerford was the one man who had really tried to do something for him—at any rate, he couldn't quite cut himself off from the sergeant.

Sullivan shook himself and walked over to his platoon. The men silently cleared a space around him . . .

Sullivan lay on his bunk after evening chow, looking off into space. He had finished stripping, cleaning and reassembling his equipment, but he was too good at it. It hadn't taken more than a half hour. The other men had a card-game going, but Sullivan didn't enjoy watching pinochle.

He rolled over on his back. He still had three hours till *Lights Out*. Finally, he dropped down to the floor, got his combat-knife out of his locker and went outside, where one of the lights on the fence around the base shone on the splintered board he had set up behind the barracks.

Methodically, first underhand

and then overhand, he practiced throwing at the board. The heavy knife thunked deep into the wood with each throw, and he trudged up to the board, yanked the knife out, trudged back to his mark, turned, and threw again. The dull sound of blade striking board beat against the barracks wall with clocklike regularity, and his boots gritted on the dirt between each throw.

"Sullivan!"

He turned his head. Hungerford had thrown his office window open. "Have a heart, will you? Come on in here a minute."

Sullivan looked at him, went over and got his knife. He walked around the end of the barracks to get to Hungerford's office. He knocked and opened the door.

Hungerford was sitting alone with his bottle again. Sullivan scowled, and Hungerford said annoyedly, "Put that knife away before you look at me like that." He flipped a card-sized piece of paper toward Sullivan. "Here."

Sullivan dropped his knife into its sheath and picked up the paper.

"That's a ten-hour pass into town. You don't have to be back until *Reveillé*. Put your dress blacks on and get out of here."

Sullivan looked at the pass. He hadn't been off base since the day he'd landed. "Don't do me any favors," he growled.

"You're entitled to it. The other men get them. Beyond that, my motives are simple. I want a little quiet around here, so I can get my drinking done in peace. On both counts, that's no favor. Take the damned thing. Don't tell me you'd be homesick for this barracks."

Sullivan looked at the pass doubtfully. He was happy where he was. Hungerford studied him with that peculiar mixture of liking and pity, and Sullivan felt his face twitch in annoyance as he looked away.

"Take a walk down some streets," Hungerford said. "See some new faces. Look around at the kind of world you're living in. Get drunk. Go see a movie. Do you need any money?"

Sullivan scowled "No—I've got two months' pay."

"That's right. You don't even put in time at the canteen," Hungerford said flatly. "You don't gamble with the men."

Sullivan looked at him, and Hungerford looked steadily back.

"All right," Sullivan said. "Thanks." He walked out of the office, holding the pass gingerly, and into the barracks. He saw the men around the card game lift their heads, then drop them quickly. Suddenly, he couldn't wait to get out . . .

Even at night, Port MacDonnel's factories made more noise than its people did. Sullivan, walking down the street toward the

center of town, passed building after building, some of them only half-finished, where men were jockeying machinery into place, setting up production lines while constructors worked around them, finishing the factory structure.

He wondered about it. Eagels had told him these people were short on heavy machinery, and Eagels hadn't had any reason not to tell the truth. He just plain hadn't known. Which meant that all this was something brand new. They must have built their own machines, finally.

It wasn't his business, and there wasn't any sense in worrying over it, one way or the other, but he couldn't help thinking about it a little, with machines whining on either hand and the blue flare of welding torches stabbing at his eyes.

He had learned a few things in the army. He knew, for instance, that there were two ways to build a new machine—run raw materials through a machine for making machines, or shape the raw materials by hand. The first machine for making machines *had* to be made by hand.

They wouldn't be turning out just one kind of new machine. So any number of new master machines had had to be hand-built —out of the tough, macrocrystalline metals he had seen stop a 20mm shell fired point-blank, at the body armor demonstrations. He walked on, wondering what had driven the Plutonians to putting out such effort with their slim resources. He began to understand why everybody had to work. First, they must have built the master machines—then used them for making production-line machinery—and then, when the production lines were set up and automated—what . . . ?

He shrugged and turned onto Port MacDonnel's short main street, not knowing where he was going or what he was going to do. The street was only moderately crowded. There were a few small stores on it, a few bars. He passed these without looking in. He didn't have any interest in letting his body go to seed, and he didn't intend to let his mind get dull. The thought of not having perfect control over himself frightened him.

There was one movie house on the street, showing a picture with stars in it who were ten and twenty years dead, some of them. It had to be something brought out from Earth long ago, something run and rerun beyond a point of almost incredible boredom. He smiled at the thought of how the house's manager must have felt at having a brand-new audience shipped in from Venus.

But Sullivan certainly didn't want to see it.

He walked a little more slowly, looking around. If you didn't drink, and you didn't want to go to the

movies, and you weren't interested in shopping, if looking at new faces only proved that one group of people looked much like any other, there wasn't a thing to do in town.

He worked his shoulders under his jacket, feeling boredom make him restless. He kept walking only because he wasn't yet ready to lean against a wall with his hands in his pockets. Finally, almost at the end of a side street, he saw a small place with a sign that read *Good Food*.

He studied it for a minute. This was the restaurant Hungerford had taken him to when he first landed on Pluto—the place with the waitress who had pitied him. He thought about her now, and some impulse drove him to enter.

XI

SHE WALKED quickly the length of the counter, took a glass of water off a tray as she passed it, set it down in front of him.

"What'll it be, soldier?" she asked. She didn't remember him —but was that so surprising?

He looked at the menu again. "Are you kidding when you say steak?" he asked with a smile.

"It's tough, but a sharp knife goes with it. Rare, medium, or well?"

"Medium, please."

"Fried potatos and beets?"

"That would be fine, thank you."

"Well, you're not hard to please. It'll be a couple of minutes. Coffee meantime?" She shrugged meaningly. "You Venus boys wouldn't know—it's synthetic. How's about milk?"

He nodded. "That would be fine."

"Okay." She filled a glass and put it down. "I'll be back with that steak in a jiffy."

He watched her go through a door into the kitchen, and watched the door until she came out, carrying an armload of plates for the soldiers at the other end of the counter. He watched her talk to them while she was putting their orders down, glance toward him, and go back into the kitchen. He watched her come out and serve some other customers, then he watched her go back into the kitchen to pick up his order. He kept his eyes on the menu as she came toward him.

"So *you're* Killer Sullivan," she said as she put the plate down. He looked up sharply. She smiled at him. "You don't act like it—but you sure *look* like it, all right."

He felt a burst of anger explode through him. Those birds down at the other end of the counter had no business messing into his affairs. He felt his thigh muscles knot as he clamped his legs around the stool. He looked back at the waitress, who was still smiling, and found himself smiling back.

"That's who I am, I guess."

"Well, don't let it spoil your appetite. Dig in," she said.

"All right."

"And drink your milk."

He nodded, and reached toward it.

"This your first time in town?" she asked.

"That's right. Ten-hour pass."

"I heard you don't get off the post much."

He shot a look at the other end of the counter.

"Relax, Killer. They didn't give me your biography. They didn't have to. We get soldiers in here every night. You're a pretty hot subject of conversation. Topic B, if you know what I mean."

He grunted, thinking that over. It was the first time he had learned about *this*. He wondered just what she had heard.

"Go on—try the steak. It won't kill you," she said. She looked past him, saw new customers coming in, muttered something under her breath as she moved off to serve them. She turned her head back long enough to say, "My name's Maggie Banks, by the way." Then Sullivan was left alone with his steak.

He had no other place to go that he could think of, so he stayed in the lunchroom, occasionally drinking another glass of milk, talking to Maggie for a few minutes every once in a while.

"I hear you're from Earth," she said.

He bridled. "That's right. I'm a Mole."

"Relax. If there's Venusian Plutonians, I guess there's room for you, too. You signed a contract with the Settlers' Council. That's all the citizenship papers you need."

"Some people don't think so."

"There's a few of those in every crowd."

A little later, he asked her what living on Pluto was like.

"Pretty lousy," she told him. "My dad had a farm out near the dam. I hear they're finishing it up now, to get the power, but when I was out there, we had floods more often than not. Finally washed us out. Dad got a job in one of the Settlers' Council's first big projects —a cooperative farm, with a freezer plant so the surplus could be piled up for when they had to pull the labor off the farms and into the factories.

"He fell into a disker. Mom was in a factory, truing bedplates. I got this job a couple of years ago, when everybody moved into town. Mom died a year ago last month —T.B. I'm twenty-eight, healthy and unmarried. Now—what's *your* story?"

He had never had to tell one before, and he did a poor job of it. She stopped him in the middle of it.

"Killer, you're a clumsy man with a lie," she said, shaking her blond head. "Suppose we take a

rain check on it and you tell me some other time, when you've had a chance to polish it up."

He looked sheepish, and she laughed at him. Finally, she said, "Well, Killer, it's closing time. You look like a big, strong man. Care to see a helpless lady home?"

"All right."

He paid his check, and the two of them walked through the town to her dormitory. He didn't have much to say, and neither did she, except to ask, once, "Sullivan, what's your first name?"

He told her, and she let it go at that for the time being. When they reached the entrance to the dormitory, she shook his hand and said, "Thanks for taking me home, Jack. Be seeing you." Then she went in.

He walked slowly back to the post, reported in and lay down for an hour before *Reveillé,* looking up at the ceiling in the dark, turning, "Be seeing you," over in his mind.

He remained preoccupied throughout the day, feeling a new, peculiar restlessness, accompanied by a dull lack of interest in everything going on around him. He discovered he couldn't remember what Maggie looked like, and he frowned over the problem for hours, trying to build up an image in his mind. But his visual memory was completely overshadowed by long passages of remembered conversation—most of all, by the sound of her voice when she said, "Be seeing you."

He knew he'd recognize her the minute he saw her again—he had absolutely no doubt of that—but in the meanwhile, without a picture of her in his memory, he felt as though something was missing —something he ought to have, but didn't. He was vaguely irritated, and vaguely upset.

At one point, Kovacs asked him, "What's the matter today, Sullivan —off your feed?"

Sullivan looked at him quickly and closely, but decided finally that Kovacs had been using his usual sharp voice through habit, and had just happened to pull the expression out of thin air.

He shook his head and said "No, Sir."

Kovacs slapped his back, saying, "All right, Killer. Now, let's show the rest of these birds how to fight house-to-house." And that had been that.

Toward the end of the day, Hungerford regarded him with a slow grin and said, "Killer, you must have found something in town last night."

Sullivan looked at him in panic. Then he realized it probably didn't take much guessing and that, besides, Hungerford wasn't apt to give him away to anyone else. He felt oddly embarrassed, barely managed to grin back. Then another thought struck him, and he wondered how he had achieved

forgetfulness of the most important detail.

"I'd like another pass for tonight," he said. He was both surprised and angry when Hungerford shook his head.

"Sorry, but I can't do it," the sergeant told him. "You're supposed to sleep sometime, you know. The best I can do is promise you one for tomorrow."

Tomorrow was too far away. Sullivan opened his mouth to say something, but Hungerford cut him off. "No pass tonight, and no arguments. This is still an army. I can stretch the regulations some, but not that much."

So Sullivan spent the time between evening chow and *Lights Out* in various tortured ways, banging his knife into the barracks board until Hungerford came out and pulled the board down, then hanging around the fringes of a crap game, finally simply lying on his bunk and trying to shut his mind off so he could get some sleep. The following day was just as bad—if not worse, being tempered by impatience—and he took his shower after chow in a racking mixture of haste and painstaking care . . .

He started earlier today, so he got into Port MacDonnel while it was still light. He walked quickly through the town to the lunchroom. He went inside and stood just beyond the door, watching Maggie straightening out a place at the counter and putting dirty dishes in the washer. When she looked up, saw him and smiled, he smiled back in relief. She was exactly the way he remembered her. He walked awkwardly up to the counter, feeling painfully self-conscious, and sat down.

"Hi, Maggie."

"Hello, Jack. Got yourself another pass?"

"That's right," he said, and then realized it was at least six hours to closing time.

So, while Maggie waited on customers and talked to him for short times in between, he sat his way through it, feeling better merely to be back in the lunchroom, feeling impatient for some privacy.

"Tell me something, Jack," she said at one point, "I heard a lot of stuff about you. You're supposed to be a pretty rough customer—mean. Is that true?"

He shrugged. He didn't much want to talk about it.

"Damned if *I* can see it," she said.

"Maybe I don't act my usual self around you."

"Maybe you don't. You look big enough. Ever done any farmin'?"

He shook his head.

"Ever thought about it? What're you plannin' on doing with your land?"

He shrugged again, looking down at his hands on the counter. He'd stopped thinking about it at

all. But he had to say something. "I used to figure I'd farm it."

"You *used* to? What happened?"

"Well," he said uncomfortably, "things happen to make a man change his mind. To tell you the truth, I don't think about it much any more."

"Well, a man can think again, I guess," she said, moving away.

After a while, she had a chance to come back. She leaned on the counter. "I've been thinkin'," she said. "You're no more'n thirty-five, right? Time you get out, you'll only be forty. A man like you, healthy, knows how to take care of himself—a man like that's not anywheres near too old to start a place.

"Pretty soon, you'll make non-com—corporal for sure, maybe sergeant. All you boys that're in now'll make it pretty soon, so you can train the men turned loose when the factories start running on automation. So you can figure on maybe a hundred and seventy-five or two hundred acres comin' to you by the time you muster out. 'Course, that land isn't too hot, but you can sell it and, maybe, get ninety acres of prime land. That'll take good care of a family."

He looked at her uncertainly, feeling inexplicably short of breath, "You've been figurin', too?" he said. "Know all about what the army's going to do."

She looked back at him frankly. "Sure, I've been figurin'—no harm in it. And why shouldn't I know the way the army's set up? I've got eyes and ears, don't I? Heck, *you're* in it—don't *you* ever think about gettin' promotion?"

He shook his head. "Why should I? I got enough to worry about, just being a good soldier and learning how to take care of myself. Besides," he added lamely, "I don't talk to anybody much." Thinking back, he could dimly remember Hungerford saying something, once, but Hungerford had a habit, when he was hitting the bottle, of saying things that made only private sense.

So the men were moving from the factories into the army—and he was going to help train them. He shook his head and scowled. That would mean the army would go up to five, maybe six, times its size now. Where were they going to get their equipment and ammo? Just battle helmets and rifles for that many men would take up two factories running full time for weeks. Then you had to figure field-pieces and automatic weapons, tanks and armored cars for the cavalry, jets for the air corps . . .

Mentally, he slapped a dunce-cap on his head. But of course—that was what the factories were *for!*

He sighed at his own thick-headedness. But Sullivan had fall-

en out of the practice of paying attention to things that weren't his business. It kept life simpler all around.

Still—he thought, while Maggie had to leave him and get back to work again—from now on, things were a little different.

Buy a farm—it sounded good. Build your own house, live on your own land, eating food you grew yourself—raise kids.

He sat with hands folded under his chin, staring into space. Maggie had guessed him to be thirty-five. He, himself, would have said he looked a little younger. Maybe he didn't look as closely at himself as she did. Anyway, his fiftieth birthday was due in a few weeks—according to the calendar.

How old was he, really, though? He wondered. He wished he knew whether age was something purely physical, or whether there was more to it. He knew how old he looked, he knew how old he felt. He could think in terms of a future that stretched ahead for years to come. Perhaps he was wrong.

At the end of fivescore years and ten—or however much had been alloted him—he might simply wither away and die, leaving his wife and children without a man. He wondered whether he could even have children.

But it was better to be wrong, and take the chance, than to be wrong in the other direction and die, a lonely and extraordinarily old man, thinking of what he might have had. He saw Maggie coming back again, and it wasn't just the lonely soldier in him who felt the smile growing at the corners of his mouth. It was the whole uncertain, battered man—or men. Sibley, as much as Sullivan, lay behind the smile.

XII

SULLIVAN WALKED Maggie home again, more slowly this time.

"Jack, you're an oddball," she said. "There's more to you than I heard, and more'n you tell me. That's okay—there's plenty of men around you can find out the whole of in no more time'n it takes to mention the weather. What counts is, you can take care of yourself and some to spare for the people with you—if you want to.

"It's a rough life out in the back country, even nowadays. It takes a good man to keep his land under him when the storms hit. You done any more thinkin' about that farm?"

He nodded. "Sounds like a pretty good idea," he told her, "I think I'd like it—but, Maggie, you don't know anything much about me. You sure you want to talk like this to *me?*"

They walked along for a minute. Then she said, "You know, opinion's pretty divided about you. Some say you're crazy, some say you're stupid. Some say both. I

wanted to study you for myself. All right, so I did. And now I want to talk like this to you. Okay, Jack?"

He took a deep breath. He could feel buried things stirring inside him, and it upset him. He thought Sibley was gone and forgotten. He figured himself to be a man who minded his own business, who kept to himself, who walked alone. *Keep your head down and eyes front. Go along, and what comes to you, comes.*

This, he thought, might be the wisest thing he could do—just let the ball roll, and fall into a life with Maggie. But would that be fair to this almost frighteningly forthright young woman, who had so unexpectedly declared monopoly of his emotions.

"Maggie—maybe there are things about me you have a right to know. Anyway, there are a number of things we ought to think about."

They stopped, and Maggie looked up at him. "Maybe there are—and maybe they're not important. I just wanted to say, from what I've seen of you, you'll do for Maggie. I'd like to see more of you. You can please yourself about that, and about what you think of me. Now, I've said what I wanted to get on the books, and, if you want to add to it, that's up to you."

He nodded. "Okay," he said. They began walking again, and he was quiet while he tried to straighten himself out.

He had gotten out of the habit of making plans. In the end, plans never seemed to work out. A man got caught in the gears of big forces in motion, and got thrown out where the wheels wanted him thrown out.

He was all mixed up inside. He could feel himself being split open again, losing his armor, and that frightened him. The only way he could get along at all was by keeping his guard up all the time, by crowding the next man a little, by keeping him off balance. If he opened up, if he relaxed—even for an hour—it wouldn't take the pack long to drag him down.

But this girl was getting under his skin, and making him worry about things again. Now, of all times, when he had to be strong, she was making him weak.

He rubbed the back of his neck fighting anger. No, no she wasn't really making him weak—she was making him think. When a man starts being serious about a woman, he has to think of the future. That wouldn't be being weak, would it? It didn't have anything to do with his army life. Army life was made for not worrying—you went along, you followed orders, you lived by the rules. You didn't have to talk to anybody to get along, except to say, "Yes, Sir." It was apart from anything between Maggie and himself.

He found himself feeling a little better about it. He didn't have to go back to being Allen Sibley, worrying, planning, scheming all the time. He didn't have to plan anything beyond what touched him and Maggie together. He would only have to think a little bit.

"I guess I don't have to tell you what I think about you," he said finally. "But—well, listen—we've got to talk this out. Pluto's new to me. I haven't been here very long, and there are all kinds of things I don't understand. Back on Earth, nobody ever talks about Pluto. What's it going to be like for us, living here? What kinds of trouble are we going to run into? What's this world going to develop into? Suppose—well, suppose the Vilks come down and try to burn us out?"

He surprised himself, now that he had it in words. But if he was going to have something that belonged to him—a farm, a wife, kids, something to protect—all at once, there were dozens of things worrying him, things he had never given much thought to before.

Maggie shrugged. "If trouble comes, it comes." She looked at him in mild surprise. "I never figured you for a worrier, Jack. Good gosh, if somethin's big enough to *really* worry about, chances are it's too big to plan against anyhow. You wait 'til it hits, and, if you're solid enough, it won't kill you. Then you save what you can, you look around to see how to get along best, and in time it stops being so big and so dangerous. Then it's over, and you go on to the next thing. That's all."

"But Maggie, you've *got* to know where you're going!"

That surprised him again. Sibley was evidently still very much around. But it *was* true. This was different from army life. This was important. This was Maggie and he alone. You couldn't *not* worry about important things.

"I didn't say you should blindfold yourself," Maggie said. "I said you shouldn't stew your insides out, waiting for something that might never happen.

"When the first starships went out, and the whole Solar System was all excited about it, and then the Vilks came out of nowhere and blew them up, I guess everybody got scared—really scared," she said. "I remember my father talkin' about how it was, out here on the edge, those first months.

"I guess it was the worst thing that ever happened to the human race. One day, they were all bubbling over, all steamed up about getting out to the stars. The sky was wide open, and no limit. And then the next day—*bang!* Ships comin' out of nowhere, beings nobody had any idea were out there, blowin' up our ships like you'd swat a bug.

"And then everybody had to wait. The TSN went out and got

itself squashed, and that was the last hope. They never even got near the Vilks. Then the Vilks set up their patrol, all around the System, just circling. Never sayin' nothin', for all those weeks. Just circling, and knocking down everything that came at 'em. Then there was that one message in English. About how they were the Vilks, and nobody was to try and get past 'em, ever.

"On Earth, after that, they just gave up. They crawled into a hole. Out here, we sweated, waitin' for 'em to start landin'—except they never did.

"Then, after a while, we had to stop worryin'. We had other troubles. Earth was like a man with the wind knocked out of him. The people there forgot about us, but we had to go on living. You can't just lay down and die, can you?

"We had to get this place straightened out and on its feet all by ourselves. We were starvin' and livin' in a bunch of old Healy huts. We didn't have time to worry about the Vilks. We organized. We organized tight, and we worked up the Settlers' Council. Maybe we organized too tight, and maybe a lot of us don't like being numbered off and assigned around by the Council—but there's no other way to do it.

"We don't worry about the Vilks. We don't kid ourselves they're not still there, and we don't think they'll maybe go away if we pretend they ain't. But we got to live out every day. If they come, they come. Meanwhile, instead of being a colony, we're an independent planet. We got something good out of the Vilks bein' there, didn't we? Things work out that way with what looks like bad trouble, sometimes. Trouble pushes you."

They reached her dormitory. Sullivan shook his head. He'd have to think this over. He said, "You mean, the way you see it, sometimes what looks like trouble is really something that gives you a boost?"

"Sure," she replied. "The old way, Pluto'd be just a sort of a belongin' of Earth. Now it's different. Now we're our own boss. We're buildin' up to big things, now. One of these days, when the new army's set up, we're goin' to be able to prove it.

"Maybe we can't do anything about the Vilks. But there's other planets in the System to grow onto. There's Mars—there's Venus—there's even Earth."

Sullivan felt his face go out of control. Good God! he thought. They were really going to try it! They were charged up, they were bitter—all the planet drive had to find an outlet, now they were back on their feet. But—seventy-five thousand of them, and they planned to conquer the Solar System?

With what? With *infantry?* It was a joker. Yet he felt the strange disquiet growing within him.

"You mean it?" he asked. "Is that what the army's really for?"

She looked at him and shook her head, smiling ruefully. "My Jack—what goes on inside your head? What did you think you were training for?"

"I didn't know, I guess. I used to wonder about it, but I stopped. I still can't believe it. It's too crazy. Why would the Settler's Council be so smart all these years, and turn stupid now?"

"I have to go in, Jack," she said. "We open up pretty early in the morning."

He nodded distractedly. Now he was all mixed up again. She was looking at him, waiting.

"All right," he said. "I'll be seeing you pretty often, I guess."

They walked to her door, and they stood motionless under the small light, with the sprawled wooden building looming beside them. Sullivan looked at Maggie hesitantly. He felt all the tangled things knotting up in his stomach. He was suddenly terrified by the thought of how big the forces were that were rolling forward like so many invisible steamrollers all around him.

What could a man do? How could he fight something he couldn't take in his hands?

"I—Maggie—I guess I'll be around a lot."

She nodded soberly. "I guess I'll like that fine."

Then he broke through his paralysis with an abrupt step forward, and kissed a woman he cared about for the first time in his life.

XIII

"UP TO now," Kovacs said at Roster a few days later, "you men have been going through a training program designed to make good soldiers out of you in a hurry. Those of you still here are good soldiers. One or two of you are the best there ever was. We've toughened you up and knocked the lumps off you. We've been riding your backs all day, every day, weeding the weaklings out of this platoon, leaving nothing but the men. I suppose those of you who are still with us feel pretty good about it."

Sullivan shifted his feet restlessly. He was thinking of the pass waiting for him in Hungerford's office. This kind of talk was Kovacs's standard line, and it had begun to sound all the same. Charge-'em-up pep talks. Sullivan knew that whatever Kovacs put them through today, he could handle it automatically. There wasn't anything about soldiering that could throw him anymore.

He didn't want to listen. He wanted to think about his pass, about seeing Maggie tonight.

When he was with her, he could forget all about the army and the Settlers' Council. It was too much, thinking about Maggie and the army both. He was thinking, *thinking*, thinking all the time, not sleeping, wearing himself out. And for what? What could one man do about anything?

He wished he could shut himself off. He wished he was still as ignorant about where the army was going as he had been.

"So," Kovacs said in a casual voice, "you won't think anything of it when I tell you the next few weeks are going to cut this platoon by one third. We're moving the schedule up. If you soldiers thought you were getting it tough before, from now on you'll think we've wrapped barbed wire around it. You will all train harder, soldier better and do it faster.

"You men are not training to get yourselves killed or mess things up the first time you go into action. You're training to *lead*, and you *will* lead—*smart!*

"All right, now we've got that straight, you can take over, Hungerford."

Hungerford stepped forward. Sullivan noticed he was red-eyed this morning, and sickly pale. He guessed the liquor was beginning to catch up with the sergeant, and he growled a little, deep in his throat. Hungerford was too good a man for that kind of defeat.

He noticed, too, that the men in the platoon weren't reacting to Kovac's speech. None of them had even grunted. The word must have been around on the grapevine already. He realized sourly that it could have been on the grapevine for weeks without his hearing it.

"You heard the lieutenant," Hungerford said in a tired voice. "Today, we're hooked up with a Chemical Warfare combat team. You're going to be issued new equipment on the field, and you'll get instructions on it there. Then you're going out on the field and use it. You better learn quick, because the CW boys won't be pulling their punches. You'll get all this in detail later, from the specialists.

"After chow, you'll fall in here with your battle armor on. All right, you're dismissed. Go get something in your stomachs." He turned listlessly away, and Sullivan caught Kovacs giving the sergeant a sharp look. As he walked over to the messhall, he wondered what was wrong.

He growled uneasily at himself. He was changing. A few weeks ago, Hungerford's troubles would have been Hungerford's troubles, and Sullivan wouldn't have cared.

No—he might have cared some, in Hungerford's case. Even so, he wouldn't have wasted much time thinking about it.

Sullivan thought about Maggie

as he sat down in the messhall. She had really started something turning over inside of him, and his recent egoistic way of looking at things was going to pieces. He looked around him, conscious of the clear space the other men at the table kept around him, of the dead silence among them. Something in his throat began to ache. Then he told himself angrily: "Damn it, what do I care?" But he failed to make it sound convincing.

He went back to the barracks after chow and got into his armor, still moody. When the platoon formed up, he wondered what the other men would do if he suddenly started talking to them . . .

That evening he walked slowly into the lunchroom, his hands shaking a little, and dropped down on the farthest stool. He looked around to see if there were any other soldiers in the place, and when he saw there weren't, he let himself go and leaned on his elbows, covering his eyes. He kept his teeth clenched, and his breath hissed unevenly through them.

Maggie got down to his end of the counter. "What's the matter, Jack?"

Sullivan shook his head. "Fellow named Saddler in the platoon got killed today. We were issued a new-type filter that clips onto your battle helmet. Supposed to seal it up tight, and pass the air you breathe through some kind of complicated gizmo. Supposed to take out any germs or poisons. Well, we got checked out on the things, and then we got some stuff fired at us by the Chemical Warfare boys—antipersonnel gas of some kind.

"You're supposed to start your filter and keep going through it. Something went wrong with the gizmo in his filter. The stuff got through. Saddler went down and started screaming—with his radio on. We couldn't even hold him still long enough to switch it off. After a while—not very long—he was making sounds like nothing I ever heard. The CW boys said the stuff was eating out his lungs and throat. The whole business lasted about a minute. It seemed like hours."

Maggie's hand gripped his arm. After a moment she asked, "This Saddler fellow. He *couldn't* have been a friend of yours, could he?"

Sullivan shook his head. "I don't know," he replied slowly. "I'll never know now."

They made him Acting Corporal. It wasn't a promotion—it was just extra work. The cadre was set. He went doggedly through the next few days, while the platoon lost more men. There were no replacements. Sullivan wondered how much longer it was going to be before the cadre was broken up to staff the new training plant being built next to the

old area. The carpenters were at it day and night, and some of the new barracks were already finished.

Hungerford was still giving him passes into town every other day, signing them with a shaky hand. Sullivan was always tired, always either churned up or numb. The every-other-day passes had become a ritual, and the comfort of a ritual is that it can be performed without anyone's finding out what is going on in the next man's mind. Still, Sullivan did try, once, to get through the sergeant's fog.

"What's the trouble, Hungerford?" he asked, "What's eating you?"

Hungerford looked up with a crooked twist to his face, his hair falling down on his forehead, and swept his arm in a loose gesture that took in all of the post. "This," he'd said, and lapsed back into study of the print on the opposite wall.

Sullivan wasn't able to get any more out of him than that . . .

The whole thing was coming to a head, Sullivan knew, as he walked up Port MacDonnel's main street toward Maggie. The town was alive with it. There were many more people out tonight than usual, and they were stirring with excitement. He had felt it building, here in town, for the past two weeks, while the pace of the platoon's training steadily surged upward.

While they maneuvered through radioactive barrages, or fought to train their missile-launchers on tanks blasting out of clouds of fire, the new factories in Port MacDonnel had been going into production one by one. The glare of welding torches had disappeared from behind the windows, to be replaced by work lights.

The whine of power hoists moving automatic machinery into place had ended, and now he heard the steady rumble of work moving along the lines. There were still a few work-teams going through the old factories left over from the colony, bringing them up to the new standard. When they were through—perhaps they *were* through—Port MacDonnel's industries would begin delivering their product.

The whole tightly organized program was just about ready to roll, turning over and over, building up momentum, rumbling downward, an avalanche in the night.

He walked more quickly, aching to see Maggie again . . .

"It's coming soon, isn't it, Maggie?" he said as he walked her to her door.

She nodded. "You can feel it. It's like a pipe getting pressure, more all the time, until you know it's going to bust open any minute."

He caught her hands and almost crushed them before he re-

membered to relax his grip. He looked around him at the night on Port MacDonnel, with its naked stars overhead and the square patches of work-lights through the factory windows.

"I guess you won't be able to get off base so often," she said.

"I don't know. Maybe you're right." He looked around again, then shook his head and turned back to her. "Listen—we keep talking about the farm, and the kids, and how much land we're going to have when I get out. But I'm going to have to go. I'm going to have to fight this war, if they really try it.

"It's crazy, but what else can I do? I can't go over the hill—not on *this* world. It's like an ants' nest. All the ants are running, and I've got to run with them. If I try to get away, they'll catch me. We won't get any land, I won't have a work-card, I won't eat. We'll be through."

"I know."

"Do you want me to go? Do you think this'll be a good thing?"

"I . . ." For the first time, he saw her hesitate over an answer. "I don't know, Jack. I never used to think about it, one way or the other." She looked up at him. "It's too big for us, right now. I don't think what happens to us is up to us anymore. It's a bad time.

"I guess we just have to go along, and wait, and see what happens. While it's going on, we'll have to find what the best thing for us is. After it's over, we'll see what we can have. I guess that's it. I figure we're rooted good enough to come out the other side all right."

He walked back to the base, thinking over what she'd said. It sounded right.

It was no good planning anything. The only thing you could do with trouble was depend on yourself to be set solid, so you'd come through it. You hung on, watching for the best thing to do, and you tried to do it.

Absently, he said, "Hello, Browning," to the base gate guard as he went by. Then he was busy thinking again.

Except—except even though worrying didn't do any good—he couldn't stop his brain from turning over. He remembered how Sibley had been—always planning, always thinking of ways to protect himself. It hadn't done *him* any good. Sibley had tried to go up against something that was too big for him and had gotten caught in the gears without even knowing what was happening to him.

Sullivan shook his head in the darkness of the company street. What good was he doing himself? He couldn't even really think of anything he might do. He just kept going around in circles.

Did he really care? Was it important if Pluto lost the war, if Earth lost the war? He might get

killed in it—but there was a fair chance he might not. He was a trained man, with the best modern weapons and armor a soldier could have. In the end, it'd be over, one way or the other, and he'd be out of the army. And with Maggie . . .

No—he didn't care. That was it—that was what made it so easy to just drift along until the gears had finished their grinding. There wasn't really any reason in the world to fight it.

Sullivan strode toward his barracks, scowling.

When Kovacs, coming down the steps of the day room, called his name, he looked up sharply.

"Killer—I was just looking for you. Hungerford said you'd be back from town pretty soon."

"Yes, Sir." He was always respectful to Kovacs, because, in this army, you respected anybody who could send you to a labor bat. Whether you liked him or not.

"Well, I'm glad you're back so soon. I've got good news for you. I've had some myself." Kovacs's eyes were glittering. "I'm Major Kovacs now!"

"Congratulations, Sir."

"The orders just came down. Everybody's jumping grades. You're confirmed as corporal in Hungerford's new platoon." Kovacs touched his arm. "I've got a good reason for doing that. Don't worry—you'll make sergeant soon enough. And when the big push starts, I'll see to it there's a commission for you."

"Yes, Sir." Kovacs wanted a good man around Hungerford, just in case. Sullivan smiled in answer to Kovacs's expectant look, because the officer wouldn't have liked it if he hadn't. "Thank you, Sir."

"The first batch of recruits arrives at the new training facilities day after tomorrow. The expansion's on. Everybody in this company's a non-com now. We're on our way, Killer!"

"Yes, Sir."

Kovacs chuckled happily. "Yes, *Sir,* is right! A year from now, you'll be taking your platoon through New York! We're gonna teach those Moles, Killer! We're gonna *teach* 'em!"

Sullivan blinked at him. *"New York!* But, damn it, Sir, there aren't any dockyards on Pluto! And you can't land a force from just those two freighters. There's still a few TSN ships based on Luna. There's the old defenses they put up when the Vilks first came. They let 'em rust, but still . . . Major, this army *can't* go to Earth without an assault fleet!"

Kovacs chuckled again. "We'll have our fleet, Killer. The word's just been made official. The Settlers' Council has been in contact with the Vilks for years. They're dickering for ships right now—getting set to negotiate a treaty. When this army's ready, we'll *have*

our ships. And how do you think the Moles will like *those* apples?" He slapped Sullivan's back. "We're on our way, Killer! All aboard that's coming aboard!"

Sullivan just looked at him, his face wooden.

It was really going to happen. With the Vilks' help.

One hand became a knot against his thigh. The other twisted the hem of his battle-jacket. The Vilks! They hadn't touched foot on the Solar System, or done anything but cruise out there in the dark, circling, waiting. Yet they had taken him, and his life, and every human being's life, and twisted them, crushed them, stunted the sound in them.

Suddenly, Sullivan did care what happened. He found himself shaking with rage. All his life, the Vilks had haunted him, even now they couldn't leave him alone.

He had never in his life before been so ready to reach out and tear something to bits. Then his shoulders fell forward under an immense weight. Because there was nothing to get hold of except Kovacs, and Kovacs wasn't important.

The remorseless machine crushing the Solar System was bigger than he had ever imagined. The gears were greater, and their teeth were sharper. There was nothing —absolutely nothing—he could do.

"Well, what do you say, Sullivan?" Kovacs demanded. "How do you feel about it? You feel good?"

Sullivan took a deep breath. "Yes, Sir," he said, like the good soldier he was.

XIV

DECEMBER, 2198, and on the field at Port McDonnel where the army stood at Parade Rest, Corporal John L. Sullivan took a quick look along the line of his platoon. Howe hadn't put enough elbow-grease into polishing his visor. He gave the man a look, and Howe flushed guiltily.

Sullivan grinned behind the expressionless mask of his face. They were pretty far back in the ranks, and Howe's visor didn't really matter a damn bit. But Howe would be expecting to be straightened out about it, so Sullivan would do it.

It was funny, Sullivan thought —it wasn't at all like the old platoon. He wondered why? Probably because it was all new men. They acted differently.

He looked toward Hungerford, wincing. Hungerford was as drunk as a man could get and still stay on his feet. He was swaying a little, and his face was pale and sweaty. Sullivan could see some of the men indulging in speculative looks at the sergeant.

Sullivan's nostrils twitched. He wished Hungerford would let him

get through the blurred shell he had built up around himself.

"All men will come to attention." The command crackled in over their helmet radios.

The ranks snapped to. Sullivan looked up. He could just make out a descending speck. The Vilk envoy was coming in. Now he'd see, he thought. Now he'd get a look at them—see how they stacked up.

He laughed at himself without moving a muscle in his face. He still couldn't quite get rid of the idea that he might be able to do something. And all the while he was just a corporal in an army that was going to get help from them—a good, efficient non-com, who did his best to keep his platoon up to scratch while the sergeant drank himself silly.

Someday he might be an officer—and still he wouldn't be able to do anything. He'd lead his men through New York, do his job and someday he'd be back on a little Plutonian farm with Maggie. And he still wouldn't have done anything.

That was the way the cards were stacked, that was the way he'd have to play them. It was either that or nothing, and Maggie and the farm were a lot better than nothing. Even so, there were times he wished he could bring himself to follow Hungerford's example.

The Vilk ship was close enough so the growl of the nuclear jets was coming down like a thick sound-umbrella. Sullivan grimaced. Nuclear jets! They didn't have anything like a MacDonnel.

He wondered how they did it—how they caught and smashed the faster, cleaner ships from Earth. Yet, they did it. They did it by sheer weight, he supposed. Too many ships, too much territory in their hands, for anyone to escape them all—no matter how good he was.

He scowled at the Vilk ship hanging over the field on a pillar of fire. It looked ugly, compared to a MacDonnel ship. The racket it made was tremendous. Some of the men moved their feet uneasily, looking at it as though afraid it might explode. Sullivan grinned tightly.

The thing landed, finally, in a terrific burst of noise. An airlock door ground open, and a gangway rumbled down.

The helmet circuit crackled. *"Present arms!"* Hands slapped rifle stocks.

The first Vilk stepped out on the gangway and stared coldly down at the representatives from the Settlers' Council clustered below at the edge of the landing pit.

Sullivan looked steadily up at the Vilk, squinting to get a better look.

The Vilk was two-legged, round-headed, and had two hands and arms. He was about six feet six inches tall, and appeared much

like a man dressed up in odd clothes. He had two eyes separated by a nose. He had a short, thick jaw, he had ears. None of him was built exactly the same as a man, but the rough outline was there. Sullivan had seen humans who looked more alien than this fellow.

He felt the edge of a growl coming up in his throat. *So that's a Vilk,* Sullivan thought. *That's what the Council's going to sign a treaty with!*

The Vilk kept the reception committee spitted on the spearpoints of his eyes. Then he moved forward, followed by a two-man bodyguard, and walked slowly down the gangway.

Yes, Sullivan thought, looking at him. *Yes, you're worth hating. . . .*

"All that showin' off for a stinkin' monkey!" Howe cursed when they got back to the barracks.

Sullivan looked at him and said, "That reminds me, Howie—your helmet's dirty. Sleep with it."

"Ah, damn it, Corporal, it ain't *that* dirty!"

Sullivan grinned. Every once in a while, one of them tested him a little to see how much he'd give. "Tomorrow night, too," he said.

Howe grunted ruefully, "Yes, Corporal." Now he knew.

Sullivan lay back on his bunk and looked up at the bottom of the one above it. Howe was all right. They were all all right. Good men. Funny—he'd never had to push them to keep them in line. Probably his old reputation took care of that.

They caught on to things quickly. He only had to show them something a time or two, and most of them learned it, whether it was bayonet work, or knocking out a machine-gun position. Kovacs pretty much left things in the noncoms' hands, these days. He was too far up to get into the work personally, and the new officers were content to stand by and watch.

Yes, in a fight the platoon would follow him, and they'd be good. He had expected to have to knock them into shape, had braced himself for it, but they hadn't needed it. They didn't knuckle under, but they followed orders. The first day they lined up outside, he had stood up in front of them, looked them over with Hungerford standing fuzzily behind him, and they had seemed to straighten up by themselves.

He had heard two of his men arguing with a Joe from the same platoon Liencer was still a private in. They had been drinking beer behind the canteen, and Sullivan was sitting just inside, next to a window. They hadn't known he was there.

"Yeah, well I don't give a damn what the guy says," one of his men had said. "Sullivan's the best damn non-com in this army, and

that goes double out on the trainin' field."

"I'm tellin' you—he's crazy. You oughtta hear what this guy says Sullivan did to him."

"Ah, blow it! Sam's right. And the Corp never beat up nobody in our platoon, either. He don't have to. You take one look at him, and you know here's a Joe that's been where it's rough. And it didn't scare him one bit. There's one guy that always knows what he's doin'. For my money, they don't come better soldiers'n him, and it's gonna feel mighty good havin' him around when we push out."

Sullivan had puzzled over it then. From time to time, he still puzzled over it. He couldn't quite understand why the men should feel that way. The only conclusion he could come to was that soldiers had changed since he first came into the army.

He wondered what it would be like, going into New York with these men. He might get a chance to drop in on Doncaster. He imagined the look on Small's face, and grinned, though the thought of going to New York in a Vilk ship blackened his face for a moment.

"Hey, Corporal!"

He rolled over on his side "Yeah?"

"Sergeant Hungerford wants to see you."

Sullivan frowned. He didn't like watching Hungerford drink, or trying to make sense out of his blurred orders. Sullivan dropped his feet over the side and stood up. He walked across the barracks to the day room door, closed it tight behind him and stopped in Hungerford's office doorway.

"Yes, Sergeant?" he asked.

Hungerford looked up from behind his desk, nodded at a chair, motioned Sullivan inside. The sergeant's shirt was half out of the tops of his pants. His sleeves had been rolled up, but they had slipped back down his forearms, and the cuffs were slapping at his wrists. There was a half-empty bottle sitting on his desk. He lifted the bottle, took a pull on it, set it down. He looked at Sullivan out of the white, puffy, cynical mask his face had slowly become.

"That's none of your business," he said.

"All right," Sullivan said patiently. "Don't press the point. Are you deliberately out to get yourself broken? Some officer's bound to get fed up with it."

"Is there an easier way for you to make sergeant?"

Sullivan grunted. "I'm not interested in doing it over your dead body."

"Don't tell me you've mellowed?"

"Drop it, Hungerford! What am I here for?"

Hungerford grinned crookedly. He reached over toward a sheet

of yellow paper on his desk. "Who's the man the platoon can spare best? You're the guy that knows 'em all."

"Why?"

"Special orders in blank. One set to each platoon in Kovacs' company. We're detaching one man from each platoon and forming a detail for special liaison duty."

"What kind of liaison duty?"

Hungerford laughed. "Liaison duty aboard the glorious interstellar vessel of our gallant allies. Kovacs tells me their chief put in a request. He wants to study humans. I don't know what for, and neither does anyone else—maybe he wants to find out whether we taste better boiled or roasted.

"*His* story is they don't know any more about us than we do about them, and probably he's refused to sign the treaty until he gets his guinea pigs. The result is that the Council immediately passed it on to the army, and the General bucked it down to Kovacs."

He shook his head and chuckled. "Oh, what a wonderful thing politics is! I can just see the Council and the Vilk chief circling around each other like strange dogs. They trust each other about as far as they could throw that Vilk garbage-barge barehanded, I'll bet.

"But the Vilk's bargaining from strength, of course, and so the Council has to back down if it wants its precious ships. I wonder what they'll give in on next. Ah, the Council and its plans for the Solar System! We'll be lucky, in the end, if the Vilks agree to loosen our collars for an hour every other Thursday. So goes the revolution."

"Wait a minute, Hungerford. One man from our platoon's going aboard that ship, right?" That could be it, Sullivan thought. That could be the one place where he might get a chance to see something—even do something, perhaps.

Then he scowled at himself. When was he going to get rid of *that* notion?

Hungerford nodded while Sullivan was thinking. "That's right, Killer. The detail officer's going to be that pokey lieutenant in the Headquarters Company. So you can see how much Kovacs thinks of the whole idea." He paused, added mischievously, "Come to think of it, Sullivan, maybe now there's going to be room, Kovacs will make you an officer."

"Quit riding me!" Sullivan snapped, still busy with his idea, like a fly with one foot caught in glue.

Hungerford rolled back in his chair. "Big, rough-tough Killer Sullivan. Runs the barracks with an iron hand. Ought to make captain, anyway, during the war—or maybe master sergeant. That's even better. Officers don't

get much of the real kick of pushing guys around. They're too far away, and they never get a chance to use their hands on a man."

He grinned loosely and raised the bottle again. "Sullivan, I toast you. To the green youth who came out here from Earth and turned to stone. What happened to bring you out here, Sullivan, or whatever your name is?"

Sullivan looked at him.

"It takes one to call one, Killer. No history, no luggage, no calluses. That's not you—that's me, thirty years ago. I wonder if anybody's ever curious about what happened to me. Do you wonder about you?"

Sullivan looked at Hungerford closely. The man was drunk, yes. But there was a live, knowing gleam in his eyes.

Hungerford laughed. "We think the outside is the man. The clothes, the mannerisms, the new name. But it's inside yourself that you live." He tapped his skull. "Always in there—awake or asleep—you never stop. From one day to the next, no matter how good or how painful, no matter who befriends you or who becomes your enemy—no matter if your heart sings or breaks—you go on. Always you, until the day you die, and what you call yourself or what you wear makes not the slightest bit of difference.

"Somewhere in there—somewhere in here—there's a man called Angus MacDonnel, to whom Sergeant Hungerford is an outrage. He's a man who remembers the wonderful gimmick that was going to take us all out to the stars, before"—his face twisted, and for one moment his eyes were cold sober and staring—"before those *animals* fenced us in, and we all became pallbearers at our own funeral rite."

He looked directly into Sullivan's face. "How about you, Killer? Have you learned enough now? Do you see the road you're going? Or aren't you a Doncaster package too? Maybe they didn't have to frame you the way they framed me to get the drive, but they trapped you just the same!"

XV

MAGGIE ASKED, "Did Hungerford make out those orders himself, or did you ask to go?"

Sullivan grimaced. "I asked," he said finally. He looked down at the ground as they walked along. The worst of it was, he couldn't even quite explain the why of it to himself. Making it clear to Maggie was impossible.

"You know it's a crazy thing to do?"

He nodded. It had taken him a long time to face telling her. He knew what she'd think of it. He knew what he thought of it himself. He'd be aboard the Vilk ship —but what good would that do?

He was just going to be there. The Vilks wouldn't make a single slip in making sure the liaison detail stayed in bounds, and, in the end, if he came out of it at all alive, he'd leave the ship with nothing done. Nothing would be different from what it had been.

Except for one thing—if he came back at all, Maggie would still be gone as far as he was concerned. He couldn't blame her. He was throwing away his chance of staying in the army, of going along and coming out with their farm. He was bucking everything they had talked out.

He shook his head in bafflement. What Hungerford said had done something to him—or, perhaps, it had merely triggered a something that had already been growing in him. Hungerford—*MacDonnel*—he *still* couldn't get used to that! He was all twisted up, and somehow had let his emotions override his brain. Now he felt like a fool. He knew Maggie. Hadn't he added together everything she had ever said to him, with no missing factors. Hadn't he gotten a complete picture of how she'd feel about this? She'd never forgive him.

"Well, if you've got your mind made up, you've got it made up," she said. She smiled up at him. "It's funny—a few months ago, I would have kicked and screamed. But now—I don't know. You used to be tough. Now you're strong. You act like a man going toward something. It's funny, because I think I had something to do with it. So now I may never see you again, because of something I did." She shook her head. Her hand touched his forearm. "Take care of yourself, Jack."

He nodded silently. "Every time I think I'm capable of analyzing something perfectly," he told himself, "I'll think of you."

She was looking at his sleeve. "Jack—you got a promotion!"

He smiled—a wry smile. "Every non-com in the detail automatically gets upped one rank in grade. So I'm a sergeant, now. Just like Hungerford."

Or maybe not just like Hungerford—though Hungerford had good reason for feeling the way he did. He'd have to wait and find out . . .

The next morning, Howe shook him awake at *Reveillé*. "Come on, Corp."

Sullivan rolled over. In all, he guessed he must have gotten about two hours' sleep. He grunted up at Howe. "Thanks." Then he grinned. "I've got news for you. It's Sergeant Sullivan—and you're the new corporal. I've been transferred out."

He stood up, reached past the open-mouthed Howe into his locker, got his soap and towel and strode into the latrine. He slowly came awake under the cold spray of the shower.

He came out of the latrine, walked back into the barracks and began packing his uniforms into his field pack. Working rapidly, climbing into his battle armor, because his pack wouldn't have held it if he had worn anything else, he was ready in ten minutes. He strapped the pack on and heaved his shoulders to settle it. Then he noticed that the men of the platoon were standing around him.

"No kidding, Sergeant? You're transferring out?" one of them asked.

"Yep."

"Well—good luck."

If you knew where I was going, Sullivan thought, *you'd say that again.* But he was startled any-one should wish him luck at all.

"Yeah, Sarge—good luck. Hope it's good duty," another man said.

All of them, in one way or another, managed to join in while he was walking up the barracks and into the day room. He shook his head. It was the damnedest thing. He couldn't figure it out.

He hadn't been soft with these men, and he hadn't let them get away with anything. As a matter of fact, he had given them a rough time, making sure they learned all the things they'd have to know if they wanted a chance of coming out of the war alive.

As he was going out through the day room door, he thought to look in Hungerford's office.

He went back and opened Hungerford's door. The small room smelled like a distillery. The bottle was lying empty on the floor. For an instant, he thought Hungerford wasn't there. Then he saw the booted feet lying sprawled out on the floor behind the desk.

Sullivan winced. This was it for Hungerford. The lieutenant would be around any time now, for Roster.

He stood in the doorway, wondering whether it was worth it to try and get Hungerford on his feet. What good would it do? It wouldn't cure what was wrong with the sergeant. Who'd sober him up tomorrow?

He shut the door quietly and walked away, heading across the company street, cutting between barracks and out to the field where the Vilk ship was shivering in the light of the incandescent moon.

A temporary building had been put up next to the ship. He pulled out his orders and looked at them. This was the place, all right. He took off his battle helmet, held it in the crook of his arm and walked in.

He entered a room with men sitting on benches, and a tech corporal reading off names in alphabetical order. There was another clerk sitting behind a desk beside a door at the far end of the building, collecting their orders as the men went through. Kovacs' head-

quarters company lieutenant was standing by with a clipboard in his hand.

Sullivan looked around for a place to sit. The corporal reading the names was only down to the J's.

He was becoming the center of attention. Men were twisting around on benches and looking at him. He couldn't say he'd ever seen any of them before. More than likely, they didn't recognize him, either. It was a much bigger army these days.

He saw why they were staring at him. He was the only man in the detail wearing his battle dress, and he heard a chuckle or two. Most of the men had worn fatigues and packed their armor in laundry bags.

He swept his eyes over them, not particularly angry, but he saw their eyes turn away nevertheless. They must have looked like a group of old women going down to the riverbank on Monday morning. He looked at them calmly. They looked like perfectly good soldiers, every last one of them. Not the cream of the crop, but nothing really inferior. What he couldn't understand was why they had bothered to bring their armor at all, if they weren't going to wear it. It wouldn't do them any good in their laundry bags.

"Planning to fight a war, Sergeant?"

It was the lieutenant. Sullivan looked at him, and the officer's slight smile wavered. "If I have to, Sir."

The lieutenant's eyes dropped. "Um. Well, perhaps you could, at that." He fumbled with his clipboard. "Could I see your orders, please?" he mumbled, not looking up. "I have to put you on my roster."

Sullivan sighed to himself. If the lieutenant could be flustered merely by having a man look him in the eye, the Vilks would have a field day with him.

He handed his orders over. "Sergeant John L. Sullivan, Sir." The lieutenant's eyebrows shot up. *"Oh!"* Oddly enough, an expression of relief passed over his face. He glanced at Sullivan's orders, handed them back and scribbled his name on the roster. "I'm glad to see you here, Sergeant," he said. He looked nervously around the room. "It's good to know I'll have somebody to rely on. Have a seat. When your name is called report to the Multi-ling technician in the office down there."

"Yes, Sir." He sat down on the end of a bench as the men on it moved over. He realized, in bewilderment, that everyone in the room—was tense with nervousness.

He couldn't understand it. What good was that going to do them?

He settled back to wait until his name was called. He hadn't eaten yet, so he reached behind

his back, flipped up one corner of his pack-cover, pulled out a breakfast bar, and chewed it. . .

XVI

THE VILK SHIP hung over them like a cliff. Sullivan and the other men marched up to the foot of the gangway. The lieutenant had placed Sullivan last in line, and Sullivan wondered if the officer had maybe thought the men might break and run for it without a sheepdog.

Sullivan's head was aching a little. It was the first time he'd ever been run through a Multiling. He had heard it wasn't so bad after the first time—once your brain got used to having new languages rammed into it, it didn't fight back.

The Vilk guard at the top of the gangway looked at them and wrinkled his face. Sullivan couldn't read the expression, but he could imagine what the animal was thinking. He knew what he'd have thought, watching this straggling procession shuffle toward him.

The guard motioned them aboard as though he didn't care how many things of this kind wandered in. The lieutenant, at the head of the column, stepped uncertainly onto the gangway. Sullivan frowned in perplexity. The lieutenant looked like he was walking a last mile. How did he expect to keep his command from losing its nerve entirely?

They straggled aboard, filing inside the airlock and puddling up around the lieutenant, who was waiting for directions from the Vilk guard on where to go next. The Vilk didn't seem to be in any hurry. He was standing back, giving them plenty of room, just looking.

Sullivan saw the chief Vilk—the envoy—standing just inside the airlock, flanked by his two personal bodyguards and raking every man with his eyes as they filed past.

The lieutenant had come aboard uncertainly. The rest of the men had followed his lead and were keeping their heads down.

Sullivan stopped and, in the abscence of any kind of order, fell into at ease. He looked at the Vilk curiously. When their eyes met, Sullivan held his glance steady. He felt himself stiffening, looking at the alien's frigid eyes, and in a moment the muscles in his thighs and chest were knotted as he fought to keep his hate from showing.

The Vilk's face pulled into an expression Sullivan couldn't read. He raised his hand and motioned. Sullivan stepped forward exactly one half the distance between them, came to a stop and went back to at ease.

The look flickered across the Vilks' face again. He stepped for-

ward until they were close enough together for normal speaking voices.

"Are *these* your men?"

Sullivan didn't catch his point for a moment. Then he fought down a startled look and turned his head in the lieutenant's direction.

"I'm not the officer in charge. He is."

The Vilk looked quickly at the lieutenant. "*That* one?"

Sullivan nodded, wondering what had caused the Vilk's mistake.

The Vilk grunted. "You've got a damned peculiar army." He walked over to the lieutenant without saying anything more.

Sullivan watched him go.

The Vilk and the lieutenant had a short conversation. Sullivan saw that the Vilk was talking, the lieutenant listening. He frowned.

Then the lieutenant turned to the detail and said, in a strained voice, "All right, men: We've been assigned quarters. Follow me."

He began walking across the compartment toward a companionway, with one of the chief Vilk's bodyguards for a guide, while the chief and the other bodyguard stood watching them.

Sullivan could feel the chief's eyes on him as he followed the rest of the detail, and he wondered, again, about the peculiar expression on the Vilk's face, about the odd change he had seen flicker through the coldness in the alien's eyes . . .

The companionway was typical of the whole ship. It was spaced by heavy girders and sheathed with thick plates that had been enameled over in ochre red and deep blue. Ever so often, one panel was covered with hand-painted decorative patterns, but there was no consistency to the work. It seemed to have been done at random—one pattern might be nothing but curlicues while the next was all right angles.

Under the paint, the construction was massive and not quite so exact as human builders would have made it. Plates didn't abut exactly square against one another. Every once in a while, the dockyard had welded one frame and then riveted the same components in the next. The construction was as far from flimsy or slipshod as could be—these creatures simply didn't seem to care for symmetry.

They passed a gun-turret, and Sullivan's opinion changed. Where it counted, the Vilks could do as good a job of machining to close tolerances as anything he had seen on Earth or Pluto. The weapon worked by some method he didn't understand, but it was smoothly designed, in perfect condition, nakedly efficient-looking. The crewmen working around it, dressed in brightly dyed coveralls, looked purposeful. They raised

their heads as the detail filed by.

The lieutenant turned into a compartment, and Sullivan followed the rest of the men into what looked like a perfectly normal crew's quarters, except that the bunks were wider and more comfortable than those on a human ship would have been, to judge by the army barracks, and the bulkheads were enameled.

He saw the Vilk bodyguard give him a long look as he passed him going through the heavy door and wondered again what it was that made Vilks lose their usual icy expressions when they saw him.

A half hour before, one of the bodyguards had come into the compartment and called the lieutenant out. Now, Sullivan lay on his bunk, wondering what he'd do if the lieutenant didn't come back soon. He hadn't been ordered to this detail as platoon sergeant, or in any other administrative capacity. He had simply been attached as another member of a casual detail. He wasn't quite sure of just how much authority he had.

Lying stretched out on his bunk, with his hands behind his head, he thought to himself that he wasn't sure of anything at the moment. Once again, he considered how little good all this was doing. The Vilks were tough and hard, Their ships were ponderous, but that wasn't necessarily a drawback. And their weapons were deadly and ready.

Well, what kind of a chance had he expected? These people ruled an interstellar empire. They held the human race penned up in what must be a very minor corner of the galaxy. A lot of men had tried to crack them, and failed. Their greatest effect on the human race was the very fact that they were uncrackable.

That thought made him set his teeth for a moment. But he had to face it. More than likely, he might as well have stayed in the barracks and let someone else go to the slaughter.

He looked around the compartment at the other men. They were sitting together in little groups of two or three, talking in nervous voices, pale and nervous around the eyes. As he raised his head, they all looked at him expectantly, like puppets on spring-loaded strings. When he went back to staring up at the overhead, they seemed to grow even more nervous.

Well, what the devil *was* he doing here? he asked himself. How had he gotten here? "I'm an ordinary man," he told himself, "caught in something so much bigger than myself that I'm completely insignificant. I've drifted and been kicked from one thing to another, and never once was I really my own boss."

He thought to himself that, if he'd been able to see his future, that lifetime a year ago, he might

have settled for prison—and probably have been better off . . .

Someone entered the compartment, and Sullivan looked up. It was the bodyguard again, and he came to Sullivan's bunk.

"You're Sullivan."

"That's right."

"The Man wants you."

Sullivan grunted. That would be the chief Vilk. "The Man" was the closest possible translation of his name into English. "Better Than Any Other Man," perhaps.

Sullivan looked around at the other men in the detail. They were staring apprehensively at him and the Vilk.

"All right," he said to the bodyguard. "But you'll have to wait a minute." This settled it. He couldn't leave these men at a loose end like this. There was no telling when he or the lieutenant would be back.

The Vilk scowled. Then he looked at Sullivan, and the scowl faded. He jerked his head stiffly. "Very well. But hurry up," he added in a sullen growl.

Sullivan got up and strode to the middle of the compartment. The men's eyes clung to him.

"All right, settle down, men," he told them. "There isn't anything else to do in here. You can smoke if you find something for ashtrays. I don't know about chow. If nobody shows up with anything by noon, break out rations, but don't take more than one meal."

He walked across the compartment and opened a door he'd spotted. "Okay," he said after looking inside, "it's a latrine." He strode back.

"Now—you." He jerked his head toward a man who didn't look too badly upset, though he was only the best of a doubtful lot. "You're acting corporal of this detail." The man was a corporal in grade, but there were two other sergeants in detail. Nevertheless, everyone nodded. "Either the lieuenant or I'll be back sometime soon," he said confidently.

It was a risky thing to tell them, but he couldn't leave them with the thought that men were being taken out one by one and not returned. "Meanwhile, you men will take orders from the corporal. All right, I guess that's it." It was pitifully little, he knew.

Yet the men brightened up. He heard several sighs of relief, and one mutter of, "Goddamn, it's good to know which end is up again." They actually seemed to draw energy and resolution from having had somebody issue a few orders.

Sullivan turned it over in his mind as he nodded to the waiting Vilk. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

The Vilk grunted and stepped out of the compartment. He turned down the companionway, with Sullivan following. Sullivan studied his back. The Vilk seemed to be

walking uneasily, and, from time to time, he glanced back over his shoulder. It was probably just to see whether Sullivan was still with him, but his eyes had that inexplicable look in them.

XVII

SULLIVAN WAS STILL scowling over it when they got to the door of The Man's compartment. One of the two doorkeepers undogged it and pulled it open. The bodyguard stepped through and stopped.

"The Man, here's Sullivan," he said.

Sullivan stepped in and looked around.

The Man was sitting in a chair at the end of a rectangular compartment. There were some lesser Vilks sitting in lower seats against the bulkheads on either side. The lieutenant was standing next to The Man's chair. He looked a little like a thirsty boy in his pajamas, who had wandered into the midst of his parents' dinner party. Everyone in the compartment was staring at Sullivan.

The bodyguard stepped forward and approached The Man. He talked to him, in low voice, for a moment. The Man grunted loudly enough for Sullivan to hear him across the room. Then the Vilk said, "Come here, Sullivan."

Sullivan walked forward unhurriedly, no faster than he would have for an officer who used that tone of voice on him. He stepped in front of the raised chair, and his and The Man's eyes met on a level. He traded looks with the Vilk.

The Man wrinkled his face in that same expression. He said, "My right hand tells me you gave the orders to your men. If you're not in charge, why is that?"

Sullivan glanced at the lieutenant. He couldn't tell the Vilk his officer should have given the orders, but hadn't had the sense.

"Well, I'm a non-commissioned officer," he answered slowly.

"What's that mean?"

Sullivan glanced at the lieutenant again. The officer was looking at him miserably, his cheeks burning.

"There are two ways of becoming an officer in our army," Sullivan answered slowly. "One class goes through schools and is taught strategy in addition to tactics. Those are our superior officers. Then, there are men in the ranks who display a sound knowledge of practical tactics and ability to carry a limited amount of responsibility. They are advanced in non-commissioned grades, and are in immediate charge of the men, while remaining subordinate to commissioned grades. It is possible for a non-commissioned officer to be promoted to commissioned status, of course."

The Man looked from Sullivan

to the lieutenant. "So he's your superior."

Sullivan nodded.

"Damned if I ever heard of the pup leading its father around before today," the Vilk said drily. There was a sharp clatter of laughter from the other Vilks, and the lieutenant stared down at the floor, his mouth white at the corners.

Sullivan looked at him helplessly. Some other time, he might have thought it funny, too, but not now. If the Vilks lost all respect for humans, it might not be so pleasant aboard this ship.

The Man motioned to his bodyguard and turned to the lieutenant. "You may go. I'll talk to Sullivan."

The lieutenant started, and Sullivan's head jerked toward The Man. The Man's bodyguard stepped up to the lieutenant's back and urged him forward.

"Please—" the lieutenant blurted. "I've got to have a minute. I've—I've got to appoint Sullivan pro-tem representative of the Settlers' Council, in that case," he explained hurriedly. "There are some private instructions I have to give him, or anything you talk out between you won't have any status with the Council."

The Man regarded him coldly. "All right," he said impatiently. "Make it short." He jerked his head toward an empty corner of the compartment. "Go over there." He grinned dryly. "I won't listen."

Sullivan followed the lieutenant to the corner. He frowned over his inability to understand what The Man wanted with him.

"Sir, I wish this hadn't happened," he said, looking at the lieutenant's trembling hands.

"It's not your fault, Sullivan," the lieutenant said with surprising sadness. "It's mine. I don't look or act like that semi-barbarian's concept of a man."

"Well, sir. . . ?"

"I don't fit *your* specifications either, do I, Sergeant?" The lieutenant's mouth twisted. "As a matter of fact," he murmured, "I don't fit my own. But that's beside the point." He looked up for a moment, meeting Sullivan's eyes with an obvious effort.

"There aren't any special instructions. This isn't a diplomatic mission," he said. "But The Man's driving at something. It may be vitally important to his talks with the Council. I got that much out of him before he stopped treating me as an equal at all." The lieutenant's mouth twitched, and his eyes clouded. "He seems to have some problem he wants to solve before he'll go ahead with the treaty.

"Now, he'll *talk* to you. I wasn't in here ten minutes before he started asking me about you—who you were, what your status was. You got through to him, Sullivan. You're the kind of man he respects. So do your best with him."

The lieutenant smiled ruefully,

made a vague gesture of helplessness and began walking out of the compartment. Sullivan watched him go, the two bodyguards closing up behind him, and wondered what the lieutenant had meant, exactly. He didn't understand why The Man should be particularly impressed with him.

But he turned and walked back to The Man's chair with a little more hope than before. Whatever it was, it might do him some good. It took away some of the feeling of helplessness.

"Now . . ." The Man motioned for a chair, and Sullivan sat down facing him. "Now that I've got somebody I can talk to, maybe we can get started."

"All right," Sullivan said.

The Man frowned. "I asked for a group of soldiers because I wanted to see what kind of fighting men you've got in your army. This is a pretty ticklish business, you know. I've got to be sure of where I stand. That Council of yours isn't any help. I thought I saw a lot of possibilities in their contacting me. Now I'm not so sure. Tell me something: Do you think your army could take Earth, using my ships?" He stared narrowly at Sullivan's face.

"Yes," Sullivan answered honestly. "Given transport and heavy weapons to knock out the planetary defenses, I think it'd be a runaway." He saw no point in lying and possibly being caught at it.

The Man nodded. "That's fine. Now, what about those planetary defenses? Do you know where all of them are, and what condition they're in?"

Sullivan shook his head. "*I* don't—or I can't be sure. That's the general staff's problem. But it's my private opinion that they're not in good condition, and that you'd have no trouble reducing them. The worst problems will be what's left of the Terrestrial Space Navy—but you've never had any trouble with them before."

The Man said, "That's just the point. I don't want the same thing happening to us."

Sullivan looked at him curiously. Was The Man actually worried?

"I'll take your word about the army, for the time being," The Man told him. "But are you *sure* about the defenses?"

Sullivan shrugged. "As sure as I can be. There was a time when Earth was armed to the teeth against you. But when you didn't come in, the people gradually lost their interest in maintaining the effort. You stretched their nerves past the breaking point."

"*All* of them?"

"I think so."

"Are you *sure?*" The Man's voice was urgent. He was leaning forward in his chair, scowling. Then, abruptly, he straightened up. "No—you're doing the best you can. There's no need to press you for what you can't tell me.

What it comes to in the end is that *nobody* can be sure." He beat his open palm against the arm of the chair. He faced the other Vilks. "Well, what do you think, Princes?"

One of them rubbed his chin. "I don't know," he said. "It's a big risk."

Most of the others nodded. Then one of them said, "But we can't let things go on the way they have been."

There was a general chorus of agreement. The Man nodded and turned back to face Sullivan. "I'm going to have to think this over. You can go now, but I'll want you back later."

"All right," Sullivan said. He got up and walked out of the compartment, without waiting for a bodyguard to lead him.

XVIII

HE WALKED with head down, his mind busy. Something was bothering the Vilks very much. He wished he knew what it was. There was an opening of some kind, there. Well, it might develop. Meanwhile, he had another problem.

As he stepped into the compartment where the detail was billeted, he saw the men look up eagerly.

"Hey, the sergeant's back!" somebody yelled. They seemed to straighten out of their slumps, and one or two of them grinned. Sullivan looked at them. None of these men knew him. What were they so happy about? He wondered.

The lieutenant came up to him, pale and nervous. "What happened?" he asked.

Sullivan shook his head. "I don't know yet, Sir. They've got some kind of problem, all right. They can't seem to make up their minds what they want to do. They'll want to talk to me again, later."

The lieutenant's face fell a little. "Oh! I was hoping they'd have told you more than that."

"They still might, Sir."

"Yes." The lieutenant smiled thinly. "They probably will—much more than they'd ever tell me." He ran his hand over his thinning hair. "Well, I'm glad you're back, anyway. The men were getting nervous again."

"Sir?" Now was his chance to ask.

"Yes, Sullivan?"

"Sir, you've made references to some special quality of mine all day." He was getting fed up with it. "I'm afraid that's a little over my head."

The lieutenant's eyes widened for a moment, then faded into mixed sadness and jealousy. "You don't know, do you?" He twisted his mouth into a ghastly smile. "I've always thought a man who really had it would have to be unaware of it. A man who knows he's a leader stops leading and turns into an egomaniac. And, of

course, a man who doesn't have it can never get it, no matter how hard he tries."

He swept his hand in a gesture that included all the other men in the detail. "They'll take orders from you. I don't really know what it is—a look in the eyes, perhaps a pattern of actions—an aura, perhaps. Whatever it is, it's instantly recognizable. Whatever it is, it has to be *in* a man from birth. And you have it, Sullivan. Whereas I—*don't.*"

Sullivan looked at him, frowned and walked across the compartment to the latrine. There was a mirror on one wall, and he stood looking into it closely for a few minutes.

He saw a broad-jawed, broken-nosed man, with leathery skin and weather-browned lips—a man like any other beat-out soldier.

He tried looking himself in the eye—but all he saw was a memory of old pain, a lack of faith in miracles. He saw caution, age, just a little hope. Leadership? The lieutenant had been wrong.

He turned away. He hoped every other so-called leader in the world wasn't as much of a fake as he was. But the men's eyes followed him as he crossed the compartment . . .

The Man was sitting alone in his compartment when the bodyguard brought Sullivan in again. Sullivan looked for the peculiar light in the Vilk's eye when they regarded each other. He found it, and it upset him a little. As he sat down, he thought to himself that it was a highly unlikely thing to have happened to Allen Sibley.

"Sullivan, I've been talking to my princes, and we're still no closer to an answer." The Man moved a hand impatiently. "We can't decide whether this treaty would be a good thing or not."

He growled at the floor, "It *sounds* like a good bargain. We supply you with ships, and you conquer the Earthmen for us. But there are all kinds of factors."

Sullivan listened silently.

"It's been fifty years," The Man muttered. "It seemed a very good bargain then. But times have changed. I'm not my father, and my princes aren't as easy going as his were. I've got to do *something*. It's an intolerable situation.

"Sullivan—you're *positive* in your own mind about those defenses? There's no possibility of anyone still having weapons that could hurt us?"

Sullivan shook his head. *I'm positive,* he thought, *and I wish I wasn't. And what was that about a bargain?*

The Man seemed to make up his mind. "Tell me—you're pretty well informed about Earth?"

"Yes."

"Well—damn it, I *will* ask you—I *have* to! Have you ever heard of an organization called Doncaster Industrial Linens?"

Sullivan didn't answer him for several seconds. The Man held him with an impatient stare, but anyone could have seen from Sullivan's face that he would eventually answer.

"What kind of bargain did you strike with them?" he finally asked.

"You've heard of them?" The Man demanded.

Sullivan nodded.

"Well, then—it wasn't I, it was my father. Fifty years ago, we were an important race, but not the most important, as we are now. A ship came out of the Solar System, and we captured it. It was the most fantastic space-ship we had ever seen—it skipped through space like a lightning-bolt. It was much faster and better than anything of ours.

"As it developed, it was looking for a race of conquerors to capture it. We could never have done it, otherwise. There were men on board who offered us superior weapons, tracking mechanisms that would enable us to fire at and destroy even a MacDonnel-drive ship, all sorts of other equipment that would give us supremacy in space.

"In return, we were to prevent any other ships from leaving the Solar System. We were not to enter the System itself—the man from Doncaster said that any attempt to invade a Solar planet would be interpreted as a move to destroy Doncaster. He said they had even better weapons than the ones they had given us, and that, if we came into the System, they'd wipe us out."

Sullivan clenched his fists. "And what did Doncaster get out of it?"

"We loot the galaxy. Doncaster gets one-half. If what we give them is less than they think it should be, they don't give us repair parts or new mechanisms we can't build ourselves. They don't give us the MacDonnel drive at all. We have to make do with our clumsy warp-generators, and our old ships. We never know when Doncaster is going to make some fresh demand. And we've grown damned tired of giving them all these things we have to fight for. We want more, we want ships as good as Doncaster's. But we don't dare invade the Solar System.

"This business with the Settlers' Council is our only hope. I don't like it—my princes don't like it. Unless Doncaster is forced to surrender, they'll come out hunting for us. We don't know how many ships or weapons they have. They have at least one ship that comes to take away their share. How many more, we don't know. If your army fails—and we rather think it might—Doncaster will never forgive us." He paused, added, "Sullivan—what are we going to do?"

Here it is, Sullivan thought quietly. *Here's the chance. This is what everything else was for.*

You grow, you learn, you change —you do the best you can to be what you think is best, and one day, if everything is right, it all turns out to have had a purpose.

"I think, The Man," he said quietly the whole plan falling into place as he began to speak, "that I can offer you a more profitable arrangement." The look on his face was John L. Sullivan's. The idea in his head was Allen Sibley's. But he was both of them . . .

XIX

JANUARY, 2199, New York City —John L. Sullivan pushed through Doncaster's glass doors and stood looking at the receptionist for a moment. The receptionist glanced up, met his eyes and looked again. He smiled and crossed to her. "My name is Allen Sibley," he said. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Small, please."

He waited while she worked her switchboard, suddenly pale of face. She spoke into her shadow microphone for a hurried moment, and when she looked up, Sullivan smiled down at her pleasantly—as pleasantly as an ugly, broken-nosed man can smile when his eyes are calmly dissecting everything they see.

"I'll go in," he said, and moved unhurriedly through the gate beside her, through the door into the hall full of offices, then through the door lettered MR. SMALL.

"How do you do?" he said quietly, smiling in the same way.

Mr. Small looked at him from behind his desk. He was half out of his chair, but now he sank back down.

"Mr. Sibley?" he asked.

"I prefer to use the name of John L. Sullivan." It was the only documented identity he had.

Small recovered quickly. His hands tugged at his lapels, and his tongue-tip ran over his lips. Then he was able to smile. "Well, Mr. Sullivan. What can I do for you?"

Sullivan crossed the room in a casual walk and sat down in the chair facing him. "I know about the Vilk monopoly," he said quietly. "I also know what you did to Angus MacDonnel."

"I see . . ." Small took it well. He tented his hands and looked down at them.

"I have documented proof, sealed by a high Vilk chief. I've taken the trite precaution of ensuring that copies will be delivered to a large number of Federal officials, not all of whom you can possibly control."

"I see . . ." Mr. Small apparently thought he did. "Very well, then let's get down to business." He smiled. "How much do you want?"

"I think I have a one-million dollar equity in the corporation already," said Sullivan. "And, of course, there are all the intangible assets I bring—such as silence.

Plus the fact that I'm a corporation executive of some ability. I want half, Mr. Small."

Small's teeth sank into his lower lip. Then he stood up suddenly. "*No! No,* damn you!"

Sullivan looked at him as long as Small was able to meet his eyes. Finally Small let his head fall forward.

"I'll make corporation policy, of course," Sullivan went on.

He wasn't enjoying this. He was afraid Small might become sick.

"Our first major change will be the revocation of the tariff on the Vilks. Everything else stands—they won't come into the System, and they'll have to make do on their own technological resources to an even greater extent than before. But they will no longer have instructions to quarantine the System, though I imagine they'll keep that up for some time. After all, they know that Earthmen don't make good neighbors. But they're happy at the thought of all that loot to keep." He paused, added, "And we're going to bring back a certain Sergeant Hungerford—née MacDonnel. Earth needs him."

"You're going to kill Doncaster with this scheme!" Small burst out.

Sullivan looked at him for a long moment, then shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "I'm going to kill what Doncaster was." He looked out the window at old Manhattan, trapped between its rivers, its towers squeezed far up into the sky. There had once been people who thought the city could never be important, because it had no room in which to spread out. "I think we'll find some new way to make money—and, perhaps, be a little more useful."

History was full of moments when human organizations had seen death staring at them. Where was Carthage? Where was Imperial Rome? The day the city burned must certainly have seemed like the end of the world to its people.

People, too, died often in their lives—the day the toys were put away, the day the child died. If, on a rainy afternoon, a man went back to the old trunk in the attic, he might very well be mourning an old teddy bear. He might also be getting it out for his son.

Even so strange a half-thing as a corporation changes many times. Probably because it lives much longer than a man. Where was Doncaster's parent cigar store? Where was the towel company that had lent its respectable name? At every midnight, tomorrow kills today and so the future grows. For the time being, perhaps for a while, now, the Vilks ruled the galaxy.

Sullivan nodded. Here, in this building, was where their borrowed power came from. He didn't yet know just how it could be manipulated—but the day would come when the Vilks, too, discovered the hour was midnight.

He walked to the desk and picked up the defeated Small's phone. There was going to be the devil of a lot to do before things were moving the way they should. Sibley, the veteran of business and finance, and Sullivan, the soldier, were merged into a single identity, an identity of far larger caliber than the sum of their individual personalities.

It was time to bring Doncaster, with all of its vast resources, out into the open, where its strengths and subtleties could be put to use for the world. He was going to have to call Washington and arrange an immediate appointment with the President—as agent for the Vilks and head man of Doncaster, he had no worry about obtaining an interview. Then there was the matter of Hungerford—a salvage job that had to be done, for MacDonnel, if not Hungerford, was going to be needed.

But first . . .

"I'd like to speak to Pluto, please," he told the switchboard girl. He gave the name and address of the restaurant, said, "No, I don't know the number. All I know is her name. It's Maggie—Maggie Banks."

NEXT ISSUE'S COMPLETE NOVEL

A GLASS OF DARKNESS

A Story of Cosmic Conflict

By PHILIP K. DICK

EVERY one of us believes he knows the community in which he was raised. Every one of us, exiled by life, dreams of visiting the scenes of his childhood. Some of us, like Ted Barton, find opportunity to revisit our own home towns. But few of us return to find our own home towns no longer have memory of us, except in an obituary column. For a while, Barton believed himself dead—then he believed the town itself was dead. He was wrong on both counts, faced with a truth whose origins lay in the depths of creation.

THE WATERY PLACE

They came from Venus to befriend Earth.
But they should not have landed April 14!

by ISAAC ASIMOV

WE'RE NEVER going to have space-travel. What's more, no extra-terrestrials will ever land on Earth—at least, not anymore.

I'm not just being a pessimist. As a matter of fact, space-travel *is* possible. Extra-terrestrials *have* landed—I *know* that. Space-ships are criss-crossing space among a million worlds, probably, but we'll never join them. I know that, too. All on account of a ridiculous error . . .

I'll explain.

It was actually Bart Cameron's error, and you'll have to understand about Bart Cameron. He's the Sheriff at Twin Gulch, Idaho, and I'm his deputy. Bart Cameron is an impatient man, and he gets most impatient when he has to work up his income tax. You see, besides being Sheriff, he also owns and runs the general store, he's got some shares in a sheep ranch, he does a bit of assay work, he's got a kind of pension for being a disabled veteran—bad knee—and a few other things like that. Naturally, this makes his tax figures complicated.

It wouldn't be so bad if he'd let a tax man work on the forms with him, but he insists on doing it himself, and the snags he hits make him a bitter man. By April 14th, he isn't approachable.

So it's too bad the flying saucer landed on April 14, 1956.

I saw it land. My chair was backed up against the wall in the sheriff's office. I was looking at the stars through the windows and feeling too lazy to go back to my magazine. I was wondering if I ought to knock off and hit the sack or keep on listening to Cameron curse real steady as he went over his columns of figures for the hundredth time.

It looked like a shooting star at first, but then the track of light looked like twin rocket exhausts and the thing came down sweet, steady, and without a sound. An old, dead leaf would have rustled more coming down and landed thumpier. Two men got out.

I couldn't say anything or do anything. I couldn't even gasp or point—I couldn't even bug my eyes. I just sat there.

Cameron? He never looked up.

There was a knock on the door, which wasn't locked. It opened, and the two men from the flying saucer stepped in. I would have thought they were city fellows if I hadn't seen the flying saucer land in the scrub. They wore charcoal-grey suits, with white shirts and maroon four-in-hands. They had on black cordovan shoes and black homburgs. They had dark complexions, black wavy hair and brown eyes. They had very serious expressions on their faces and were about five foot ten apiece. They looked very much alike.

Lord, I was scared!

But Cameron just looked up when the door opened and frowned. Ordinarily, I guess he'd have laughed the collar button off his shirt at seeing clothes like that in Twin Gulch, but he was so taken up by his income tax that he never cracked a smile.

He said, "What can I do for you, folks?" and he tapped his hand on the forms so it was obvious he hadn't much time.

One of the two stepped forward. He said, "We have had your people under observation a long time." He pronounced each word carefully and all by itself.

Cameron said, "My people? All I got's a wife. What's she been doing?"

The fellow in the suit said, "We have chosen this locality for our first contact, because it is isolated and peaceful. We know that you are the leader here."

"I'm the sheriff, if that's what you mean, so spit it out. What's your trouble?"

"We have been careful to adopt your mode of dress and even to assume your appearance."

"That's *my* mode of dress?" Cameron must have noticed the dude outfits for the first time.

"The mode of dress of your dominant social class, that is," explained the alien. "We have also learned your language."

You could see the light break in on Cameron. He said, "You guys foreigners?" Cameron didn't go much for foreigners, never having met many outside the army, but generally he tried to be fair.

The man from the saucer said, "Foreigners? Indeed we are. We come from the watery place your people call Venus."

I was just collecting up strength to blink my eyes, but that sent me right back to nothing. I had

seen the flying saucer. I had seen it land. I had to believe this! These men—or these somethings —came from Venus.

But Cameron never blinked an eye. He said, "All right. This is the U. S. A. We all got equal rights regardless of race, creed, color *or* nationality. I'm at your service. What can I do for you?"

"We would like to have you make immediate arrangements to have the important men of your U. S. A., as you call it, brought here for discussions leading to your people joining our great organization."

Slowly, Cameron got red. "Our people join *your* organization. We're already part of the U. N. and God knows what else. And I suppose I'm to get the President here, eh? Right now? In Twin Gulch? Send a hurry-up message?" He looked at me, as though he wanted to see a smile on my face, but I couldn't haven fallen down if someone had pushed the chair out from under me.

The saucer man said, "Speed is desirable."

"You want Congress, too? And maybe the Supreme Court?"

"If they will help, sheriff."

At this, Cameron really blew his stack. He banged his income-tax form to the table and yelled, "Well, you're not helping me, and I have no time for wise-guy jerks who come around, especially foreigners. If you don't get the hell out of here, pronto, I'll lock you up for disturbing the peace and I'll never let you out."

"You wish us to leave?" said the man from Venus.

"Right now!" Cameron roared. "Get the hell out of here and back to wherever you're from and don't ever come back. I don't want to see you and no one else around here does either."

The two men looked at each other, making little twitches with their faces. Then the one who had done all the talking said, "I can see in your mind that you really wish, with great intensity, to be left alone. It is not our way to force ourselves or our organization on people who do not wish us or it. We will respect your privacy and leave. We will not return. We will girdle your world in warning and none will enter and your people will never have to leave."

Cameron said, "Mister, I'm tired of this nonsense, so I'll count to three . . ."

They turned and left, and I knew that everything they said was so. I was listening to them, you see, which Cameron wasn't, because he was busy thinking of his income tax, and it was as though I could hear their minds, know what I mean? I knew that there would be a kind of fence around Earth, corralling us in, keeping us from leaving, keeping

others from coming in. I *knew* it.

And when they left, I got my voice back—too late. I screamed, "Cameron, for God's sake, they're from space. Why'd you send them away?"

"From *space!*" He stared at me. "You crazy, too?"

I yelled, "*Look!*" I don't know how I did it, he being twenty-five pounds heavier than I, but I yanked him to the window by his shirt-collar, busting just about every shirt-button off him.

He was too surprised to resist and, when he recovered his wits enough to make like he was going to knock me down, he caught sight of what was going on outside the window, and the breath went out of *him*.

They were getting into the flying saucer, those two men, and the saucer sat there, large, round, shiny and kind of powerful, you know. Then it took off. It went up easy as a feather and a red-orange glow showed up on one side and got brighter as the ship got smaller till it was a shooting-star again, slowly fading out.

I said, "Sheriff, why'd you send them away. They *had* to see the President. Now they'll never come back."

Cameron said, "I thought they were foreigners. They *said* they had to learn our language."

"Oh, fine. Foreigners!"

"They *said* they were foreigners, and they looked Italian. I thought they *were* Italian."

"How could they be Italian. They said they were from the planet, Venus. I heard them. They said so."

"The planet Venus." His eyes got real round.

"They said it. They called it the watery place or something. You know Venus has a lot of water on it."

You see, it was just an error, a stupid error, the kind anyone could make. Only now Earth is never going to have space-travel, and we'll never as much as land on the Moon or have another Venerian visit us. That dope, Cameron, and his income tax!

Because he whispered, "Venus! When they talked about the watery place, I thought they meant *Venice!*"

PAY FOR THE PRINTER

The Biltong saved civilization after the destruction of World War III—but the price was too high for a ravaged Earth.

by PHILIP K. DICK

ASH, BLACK and desolate stretched out on both sides of the road. Uneven heaps extended as far as the eye could see—the dim ruins of buildings, cities, a civilization—a corroded planet of debris, wind-whipped black particles of bone and steel and concrete mixed together in an aimless mortar.

Allen Fergesson yawned, lit a Lucky Strike, and settled back drowsily against the shiny leather seat of his '57 Buick. "Depressing damn sight," he commented. "The monotony—nothing but mutilated trash. It gets you down."

"Don't look at it," the girl beside him said indifferently.

The sleek, powerful car glided silently over the rubble that made up the road. His hand barely touching the power-driven wheel, Fergesson relaxed comfortably to the soothing music of a Brahms Piano Quintet filtering from the radio, a transmission of the Detroit settlement. Ash blew up against the windows—a thick coat of black had already formed, though he had gone no more than a few miles. But it didn't matter. In the basement of her apartment, Charlotte had a green-plastic garden hose, a zinc bucket and a DuPont sponge.

"And you have a refrigerator full of good Scotch," he added aloud. "As I recall—unless that fast crowd of yours has finished it off."

Charlotte stirred beside him. She had drifted into half-sleep, lulled by the purr of the motor and the heavy warmth of the air. "Scotch?" she murmured. "Well, I have a fifth of Lord Calvert." She sat up and shook back her cloud of blonde hair. "But it's a little puddinged."

In the back seat, their thin-faced passenger responded. They had picked him up along the way, a bony, gaunt man in coarse grey work-pants and shirt. "How puddinged?" he asked tautly.

"About as much as everything else," she said.

Charlotte wasn't listening. She was gazing vacantly through the ash-darkened window at the scene outside. To the right of the road, the jagged, yellowed remains of a town jutted up like broken teeth against the sooty mid-day sky. A bathtub here, a couple of upright telephone poles, bones and bleak fragments, lost amid miles of pocked debris. A forlorn, dismal sight. Somewhere in the moldy cave-like cellars a few mangy dogs huddled against the chill. The thick fog of ash kept real sunlight from reaching the surface.

"Look there," Fergesson said to the man in the back.

A mock-rabbit had bounded across the ribbon of road. He slowed the car to avoid it. Blind, deformed, the rabbit hurtled itself with sickening force against a broken concrete slab and bounced off, stunned. It crawled feebly a few paces, then one of the cellar dogs rose and crunched it.

"Ugh!" said Charlotte, revolted. She shuddered and reached to turn up the car heater. Slim legs tucked under her, she was an attractive little figure in her pink wool sweater and embroidered skirt. "I'll be glad when we get back to my settlement. It's not *nice* out here . . ."

Fergesson tapped the steel box on the seat between them. The firm metal felt good under his fingers. "They'll be glad to get hold of these," he said, "if things are as bad as you say."

"Oh, yes," Charlotte agreed. "Things are terrible. I don't know if this will help—he's just about useless." Her small smooth face wrinkled with concern. "I guess it's worth trying. But I can't see much hope."

"We'll fix up your settlement," Fergesson reassured her easily. The first item was to put the girl's mind at rest. Panic of this kind could get out of hand—*had* got out of hand, more than once. "But it'll take a while," he added, glancing at her. "You should have told us sooner."

"We thought it was just laziness. But he's really going, Allen." Fear flicked in her blue eyes. "We can't get anything good out of him, anymore. He just sits there like a big lump, as if he's sick or dead."

"He's old," Fergesson said gently. "As I recall, your Biltong dates back a hundred and fifty years."

"But they're supposed to go on for centuries!"

"It's a terrible drain on them," the man in the back seat pointed out. He licked his dry lips, leaned forward tensely, his dirt-cracked

hands clenched. "You're forgetting this isn't natural to them. On Proxima they worked together. Now they've broken up into separate units—and gravity is greater here."

Charlotte nodded, but she wasn't convinced. "Gosh!" she said plaintively. "It's just terrible—look at this!" She fumbled in her sweater pocket and brought out a small bright object the size of a dime. "Everything he prints is like this, now—or worse."

Fergesson took the watch and examined it, one eye on the road. The strap broke like a dried leaf between his fingers into small brittle fragments of dark fiber without tensile strength. The face of the watch looked all right—but the hands weren't moving.

"It doesn't run," Charlotte explained. She grabbed it back and opened it. "See?" She held it up in front of his face, her crimson lips tight with displeasure. "I stood in line half an hour for this, and it's just a blob!"

The works of the tiny Swiss watch were a fused, unformed mass of shiny steel. No separate wheels or jewels or springs, just a glitter of pudding.

"What did he have to go on?" the man in back asked. "An original?"

"A print—but a good print. One he did thirty-five years ago—my mother's, in fact. How do you think I felt when I saw it? I can't use it." Charlotte took the puddinged watch back and restored it to her sweater pocket. "I was so mad I—" She broke off and sat up straight. "Oh, we're here. See the red neon sign? That's the beginning of the settlement."

The sign read—STANDARD STATIONS INC. Its colors were blue, red, and white—a spotlessly clean structure at the edge of the road. Spotless? Fergesson slowed the car as he came abreast of the station. All three of them peered out intently, stiffening for the shock they knew was coming.

"You see?" said Charlotte in a thin, clipped voice.

The gas station was crumbling away. The small white building was *old*—old and worn, a corroded, uncertain thing that sagged and buckled like an ancient relic. The bright red neon sign sputtered fitfully. The pumps were rusted and bent. The gas station was beginning to settle back into the ash, back into black, drifting particles, back to the dust from which it had come.

As Fergesson gazed at the sinking station, the chill of death touched him. In his settlement, there was no decay—yet. As fast as prints wore out, they were replaced by the Pittsburgh Biltong. New prints were made from the original objects preserved from the War. But here, the prints that made up the settlement were not being replaced.

It was useless to blame anyone. The Biltong were limited, like any race. They had done the best they could—and they were working in an alien environment.

Probably, they were indigenous to the Centaurus system. They had appeared in the closing days of the War, attracted by the H-bomb flashes—and found the remnants of the human race creeping miserably through radioactive black ash, trying to salvage what they could of their destroyed culture.

After a period of analysis, the Biltong had separated into individual units, begun the process of duplicating surviving artifacts humans brought to them. That was their mode of survival—on their own planet, they had created an enclosing membrane of satisfactory environment in an otherwise hostile world.

At one of the gasoline pumps a man was trying to fill the tank of his '56 Ford. Cursing in futility, he tore the rotting hose away. Dull amber fluid poured on the ground and soaked into the grease-encrusted gravel. The pump itself spouted leaks in a dozen places. Abruptly, one of the pumps tottered and crashed in a heap.

Charlotte rolled down the car window. "The Shell station is in better shape, Ben!" she called. "At the other end of the settlement."

The heavy-set man clumped over, red-faced and perspiring. "*Damn!*" he muttered. "I can't get a damn thing out of it. Give me a lift across town, and I'll fill me a bucket there."

Fergesson shakily pushed open the car door. "It's all like this here?"

"Worse." Ben Untermeyer settled back gratefully with their other passenger as the Buick purred ahead. "Look over there."

A grocery store had collapsed in a twisted heap of concrete and steel supports. The windows had fallen in. Stacks of goods lay strewn everywhere. People were picking their way around, gathering up armloads, trying to clear some of the debris aside. Their faces were grim and angry.

The street itself was in bad repair, full of cracks, deep pits and eroded shoulders. A broken water main oozed slimy water in a growing pool. The stores and cars on both sides were dirty and rundown. Everything had a senile look. A shoe-shine parlor was boarded up, its broken windows stuffed with rags, its sign peeling and shabby. A filthy café next door had only a couple of patrons, miserable men in rumpled business suits, trying to read their newspapers and drink the mud-like coffee from cups that cracked and dribbled ugly brown fluid as they lifted them from the worm-eaten counter.

"It can't last much longer,"

Untermeyer muttered, as he mopped his forehead. "Not at this rate. People are even scared to go into the theater. Anyhow, the film breaks and half the time it's upside-down." He glanced curiously at the lean-jawed man sitting silently beside him. "My name's Untermeyer," he grunted.

They shook. "John Dawes," the grey-wrapped man answered. He volunteered no more information. Since Fergesson and Charlotte had picked him up along the road, he hadn't said fifty words.

Untermeyer got a rolled-up newspaper from his coat pocket and tossed it onto the front seat beside Fergesson. "This is what I found on the porch, this morning."

The newspaper was a jumble of meaningless words. A vague blur of broken type, watery ink that still hadn't dried, faint, streaked and uneven. Fergesson briefly scanned the text, but it was useless. Confused stories wandered off aimlessly, bold headlines proclaimed nonsense.

"Allen has some originals for us," Charlotte said. "In the box there."

"They won't help," Untermeyer answered gloomily. "He didn't stir all morning. I waited in line with a pop-up toaster I wanted a print of. No dice. I was driving back home when my car began to break down. I looked under the hood, but who knows anything about motors? That's not *our* business. I poked around and got it to run as far as the Standard station . . . the damn metal's so weak I put my thumb through it."

Fergesson pulled his Buick to a halt in front of the big white apartment building where Charlotte lived. It took him a moment to recognize it; there had been changes since he last saw it, a month before. A wooden scaffolding, clumsy and amateur, had been erected around it. A few workmen were poking uncertainly at the foundations; the whole building was sinking slowly to one side. Vast cracks yawned up and down the walls. Bits of plaster were strewn everywhere. The littered sidewalk in front of the building was roped off.

"There isn't anything we can do on our own," Untermeyer complained angrily. "All we can do is just sit and watch everything fall apart. If he doesn't come to life soon . . ."

"Everything he printed for us in the old days is beginning to wear out," Charlotte said, as she opened the car door and slid onto the pavement. "And everything he prints for us now is a pudding. So what are we going to do?" She shivered in the chill midday cold. "I guess we're going to wind up like the Chicago settlement."

The word froze all four of them. Chicago, the settlement that had collapsed! The Biltong print-

ing there had grown old and died. Exhausted, he had settled into a silent, unmoving mound of inert matter. The buildings and streets around him, all the things he had printed, had gradually worn out and returned to black ash.

"He didn't spawn," Charlotte whispered fearfully. "He used himself up printing, and then he just—*died*."

After a time, Fergesson said huskily, "But the others noticed. They sent a replacement as soon as they could."

"It was too late!" Untermeyer grunted. "The settlement had already gone back. All that was left were, maybe, a couple of survivors wandering around with nothing on, freezing and starving, and the dogs devouring them. The damn dogs, flocking from everywhere, having a regular feast!"

They stood together on the corroded sidewalk, frightened and apprehensive. Even John Dawes' lean face had a look of bleak horror on it, a fear that cut to the bone. Fergesson thought yearningly of his own settlement, a dozen miles to the East. Thriving and virile—the Pittsburgh Biltong was in his prime, still young and rich with the creative powers of his race. Nothing like this!

The buildings in the Pittsburgh settlement were strong and spotless. The sidewalks were clean and firm underfoot. In the store windows, the television sets and mixers and toasters and autos and pianos and clothing and whiskey and frozen peaches were perfect prints of the originals—authentic, detailed reproductions that couldn't be told from the actual articles preserved in the vacuum-sealed subsurface shelters.

"If this settlement goes out," Fergesson said awkwardly, "maybe a few of you can come over with us."

"Can your Biltong print for more than a hundred people?" John Dawes asked softly.

"Right now he can," Fergesson answered. He proudly indicated his Buick. "You rode in it—you know how good it is. Almost as good as the original it was printed from. You'd have to have them side by side to tell the difference." He grinned and made an old joke. "Maybe I got away with the original."

"We don't have to decide now." Charlotte said curtly. "We still have *some* time, at least." She picked up the steel box from the seat of the Buick and moved toward the steps of the apartment building. "Come on up with us, Ben." She nodded toward Dawes. "You, too. Have a shot of whiskey. It's not too bad—tastes a little like anti-freeze, and the label isn't legible, but other than that it's not too puddinged."

A workman caught her as she put a foot on the bottom step. "You can't go up, miss."

Charlotte pulled away angrily, her face pale with dismay. "My apartment's up there! All my things—this is where I *live!*"

"The building isn't safe," the workman repeated. He wasn't a real workman. He was one of the citizens of the settlement, who had volunteered to guard the buildings that were deteriorating. "Look at the cracks, miss."

"They've been there for weeks." Impatiently, Charlotte waved Fergesson after her. "Come on." She stepped nimbly up onto the porch and reached to open the big glass-and-chrome front door.

The door fell from its hinges and burst. Glass shattered everywhere, a cloud of lethal shards flying in all directions. Charlotte screamed and stumbled back. The concrete crumbled under her heels; with a groan the whole porch settled down in a heap of white powder, a shapeless mound of billowing particles.

Fergesson and the workman caught hold of the struggling girl. In the swirling clouds of concrete dust, Untermeyer searched frantically for the steel box; his fingers closed over it and he dragged it to the sidewalk.

Fergesson and the workman fought back through the ruins of the porch, Charlotte gripped between them. She was trying to speak, but her face jerked hysterically.

"My things!" she managed to whisper.

Fergesson brushed her off unsteadily. "Where are you hurt? Are you all right?"

"I'm not hurt." Charlotte wiped a trickle of blood and white powder from her face. Her cheek was cut, and her blonde hair was a sodden mass. Her pink wool sweater was torn and ragged. Her clothes were totally ruined. "The box—have you got it?"

"It's fine," John Dawes said impassively. He hadn't moved an inch from his position by the car.

Charlotte hung on tight to Fergesson—against him, her body shuddered with fear and despair. *"Look!"* she whispered. "Look at my hands." She held up her white-stained hands. "It's beginning to turn black."

The thick powder streaking her hands and arms had begun to darken. Even as they watched, the powder became grey, then black as soot. The girl's shredded clothing withered and shriveled up. Like a shrunken husk, her clothing cracked and fell away from her body.

"Get her in the car," Fergesson ordered. "There's a blanket in there—from my settlement."

Together, he and Untermeyer wrapped the trembling girl in the heavy wool blanket. Charlotte crouched against the seat, her eyes wide with terror, drops of bright blood sliding down her

cheek onto the blue and yellow stripes of the blanket. Fergesson lit a cigarette and put it between her quivering lips.

"Thanks." She managed a grateful half-whimper. She took hold of the cigarette shakily. "Allen, what the hell are we going to do?"

Fergesson softly brushed the darkening powder from the girl's blonde hair. "We'll drive over and show him the originals I brought. Maybe he can do something. They're always stimulated by the sight of new things to print from. Maybe this'll arouse some life in him."

"He's not just asleep," Charlotte said in a stricken voice. "He's dead, Allen. I *know* it!"

"Not yet," Untermeyer protested thickly. But the realization was in the minds of all of them.

"Has he spawned?" Dawes asked.

The look on Charlotte's face told them the answer. "He tried to. There were a few that hatched, but none of them lived. I've seen eggs back there, but . . ."

She was silent. They all knew. The Biltong had become sterile in their struggle to keep the human race alive. Dead eggs, progeny hatched without life . . .

Fergesson slid in behind the wheel and harshly slammed the door. The door didn't close properly. The metal was sprung—or perhaps it was misshapen. His hackles rose. Here, too, was an imperfect print—a trifle, a microscopic element botched in the printing. Even his sleek, luxurious Buick was puddinged. The Biltong at his settlement was wearing out, too.

Sooner or later, what had happened to the Chicago settlement would happen to them all . . .

Around the park, rows of automobiles were lined up, silent and unmoving. The park was full of people. Most of the settlement was there. Everybody had something that desperately needed printing. Fergesson snapped off the motor and pocketed the keys.

"Can you make it?" he asked Charlotte. "Maybe you'd better stay here."

"I'll be all right," Charlotte said, and tried to smile.

She had put on a sports shirt and slacks that Fergesson had picked up for her in the ruins of a decaying clothing store. He felt no qualms—a number of men and women were picking listlessly through the scattered stock that littered the sidewalk. The clothing would be good for perhaps a few days.

Fergesson had taken his time picking Charlotte's wardrobe. He had found a heap of sturdy-fibered shirts and slacks in the back store-room, material still a long way from the dread black pulverization. Recent prints? Or,

perhaps—incredible but possible—originals the store owners had used for printing. At a shoe store still in business, he found her a pair of low-heeled slippers. It was his own belt she wore—the one he had picked up in the clothing store rotted away in his hands while he was buckling it around her.

Untermeyer gripped the steel box with both hands as the four of them approached the center of the park. The people around them were silent and grim-faced. No one spoke. They all carried some article, originals carefully preserved through the centuries or good prints with only minor imperfections. On their faces were desperate hope and fear fused, in a taut mask.

"Here they are," said Dawes, lagging behind. "The dead eggs."

In a grove of trees at the edge of the park was a circle of grey-brown pellets, the size of basketballs. They were hard, calcified. Some were broken. Fragments of shell were littered everywhere.

Untermeyer kicked at one egg; it fell apart, brittle and empty. "Sucked dry by some animal," he stated. "We're seeing the end, Fergesson. I think dogs sneak in here at night, now, and get at them. He's too weak to protect them."

A dull undercurrent of outrage throbbed through the waiting men and women. Their eyes were red-rimmed with anger as they stood clutching their objects, jammed in together in a solid mass, a circle of impatient, indignant humanity ringing the center of the park. They had been waiting a long time. They were getting tired of waiting.

"What the hell is this?" Untermeyer squatted down in front of a vague shape discarded under a tree. He ran his fingers over the indistinct blur of metal. The object seemed melted together like wax—nothing was distinguishable. "I can't identify it."

"That's a power lawn-mower," a man nearby said sullenly.

"How long ago did he print it?" Fergesson asked.

"Four days ago." The man knocked at it in hostility. "You can't even tell what it is—it could be anything. My old one's worn out. I wheeled the settlement's original up from the vault and stood in line all day—and look what I got." He spat contemptuously. "It isn't worth a damn. I left it sitting here—no point taking it home."

His wife spoke up in a shrill, harsh wail. "What are we going to do? We can't use the old one. It's crumbling away like everything else around here. If the new prints aren't any good, then what—"

"Shut up," her husband snapped. His face was ugly and strained. His long-fingered hands

gripped a length of pipe. "We'll wait a little longer. Maybe he'll snap out of it."

A murmur of hope rippled around them. Charlotte shivered and pushed on. "I don't blame him," she said to Fergesson. "But . . ." She shook her head wearily. "What good would it do? If he won't print copies for us that are any good . . ."

"He can't," John Dawes said. "Look at him!" He halted and held the rest of them back. "Look at him and tell me how he could do better."

The Biltong was dying. Huge and old, it squatted in the center of the settlement park, a lump of ancient yellow protoplasm, thick, gummy, opaque. Its pseudopodia were dried up, shriveled to blackened snakes that lay inert on the brown grass. The center of the mass looked oddly sunken. The Biltong was gradually settling, as the moisture was burned from its veins by the weak overhead sun.

"Oh, dear!" Charlotte whispered. "How *awful* he looks!"

The Biltong's central lump undulated faintly. Sickly, restless heavings were noticeable as it struggled to hold onto its dwindling life. Flies clustered around it in dense swarms of black and shiny blue. A thick odor hung over the Biltong, a fetid stench of decaying organic matter. A pool of brackish waste liquid had oozed from it.

Within the yellow protoplasm of the creature, its solid core of nervous tissue pulsed in agony, with quick, jerky movements that sent widening waves across the sluggish flesh. Filaments were almost visibly degenerating into calcified granules. Age and decay—and suffering.

On the concrete platform, in front of the dying Biltong, lay a heap of originals to be duplicated. Beside them, a few prints had been commenced, unformed balls of black ash mixed with the moisture of the Biltong's body, the juice from which it laboriously constructed its prints. It had halted the work, pulled its still-functioning pseudopodia painfully back into itself. It was resting—and trying not to die.

"The poor damn thing!" Fergesson heard himself say. "It can't keep on."

"He's been sitting like that for six solid hours," a woman snapped sharply in Fergesson's ear. "Just sitting there! What does he expect us to do, get down on our hands and knees and *beg* him?"

Dawes turned furiously on her. "Can't you see it's dying? For God's sake, *leave it alone!*"

An ominous rumble stirred through the ring of people. Faces turned toward Dawes—he icily ignored them. Beside him, Charlotte had stiffened to a frightened ramrod. Her eyes were pale with fear.

"Be careful," Untermeyer warned Dawes softly. "Some of these boys need things pretty bad. Some of them are waiting here for food."

Time was running out. Fergesson grabbed the steel box from Untermeyer and tore it open. Bending down, he removed the originals and laid them on the grass in front of him.

At the sight, a murmur went up around him, a murmur blended of awe and amazement. Grim satisfaction knifed through Fergesson. These were originals lacking in this settlement. Only imperfect prints existed here. Printing had been done from defective duplicates. One by one, he gathered up the precious originals and moved toward the concrete platform in front of the Biltong. Men angrily blocked his way—until they saw the originals he carried.

He laid down a silver Ronson cigarette lighter. Then a Bausch and Lomb binocular microscope, still black and pebbled in its original leather. A high-fidelity Pickering phonograph cartridge. And a shimmering Steuben crystal cup.

"Those are fine-looking originals," a man nearby said enviously. "Where'd you get them?"

Fergesson didn't reply. He was watching the dying Biltong.

The Biltong hadn't moved. But it had seen the new originals added to the others. Inside the yellow mass, the hard fibers raced and blurred together. The front orifice shuddered and then split open. A violent wave lashed the whole lump of protoplasm. Then, from the opening, rancid bubbles oozed. A pseudopodium twitched briefly, struggled forward across the slimy grass, hesitated, touched the Steuben glass.

It pushed together a heap of black ash, wadded it with fluid from the front orifice. A dull globe formed, a grotesque parody of the Steuben cup. The Biltong wavered and drew back to gather more strength. Presently it tried once more to form the blob. Abruptly, without warning, the whole mass shuddered violently, and the pseudopodium dropped, exhausted. It twitched, hesitated pathetically, and then withdrew, back into the central bulk.

"No use," Untermeyer said hoarsely. "He can't do it. It's too late."

With stiff, awkward fingers Fergesson gathered the originals together and shakily stuffed them back in the steel box. "I guess I was wrong," he muttered, climbing to his feet. "I thought this might do it. I didn't realize how far it had gone."

Charlotte, stricken and mute, moved blindly away from the platform. Untermeyer followed her through the coagulation of angry men and women, clustered around the concrete platform.

"Wait a minute," Dawes said.

"I have something for him to try."

Fergesson waited wearily, as Dawes groped inside his coarse grey shirt. He fumbled and brought out something wrapped in old newspaper. It was a cup, a wooden drinking cup, crude and ill-shaped. There was a strange, wry smile on his face as he squatted down and placed the cup in front of the Biltong.

Charlotte watched, vaguely puzzled. "What's the use? Suppose he does make a print of it." She poked listlessly at the rough wooden object with the toe of her slipper. "It's so simple you could duplicate it yourself."

Fergesson started. Dawes caught his eye—for an instant the two men gazed at each other, Dawes smiling faintly, Fergesson rigid with burgeoning understanding.

"That's right," Dawes said. "I made it."

Fergesson grabbed the cup. Trembling, he turned it over and over. "You made it with *what?* I don't see how! What did you make it *out* of?"

"We knocked down some trees." From his belt, Dawes slid something that gleamed metallically, dully, in the weak sunlight. "Here—be careful you don't cut yourself."

The knife was as crude as the cup—hammered, bent, tied together with wire. "You made this knife?" Fergesson asked, dazed. "I can't believe it. *Where do you start?* You have to have tools to make this. It's a paradox!" His voice rose with hysteria. "It isn't *possible!*"

Charlotte turned despondently away. "It's no good—you couldn't cut anything with that." Wistfully, pathetically, she added, "In my kitchen I had that whole set of stainless steel carving knives—the best Swedish steel. And now they're nothing but black ash."

There were a million questions bursting in Fergesson's mind. "This cup, this knife—there's a group of you? And that material you're wearing—you wove that?"

"Come on," Dawes said brusquely. He retrieved the knife and cup, moved urgently away. "We'd better get out of here. I think the end has about come."

People were beginning to drift out of the park. They were giving up, shambling wretchedly off to forage in the decaying stores for food remnants. A few cars muttered into life and rolled hesitantly away.

Untermeyer licked his flabby lips nervously. His doughy flesh was mottled and grainy with fear. "They're getting wild," he muttered to Fergesson. "This whole settlement's collapsing—in a few hours there won't be anything. No food, no place to stay!" His eyes darted toward the car, then faded to opaqueness.

He wasn't the only one who had noticed the car.

A group of men were slowly forming around the massive, dusty Buick, their faces dark. Like hostile, greedy children, they poked at it intently, examining its fenders, hood, touching its headlights, its firm tires. The men had clumsy weapons—pipes, rocks, sections of twisted steel ripped from collapsing buildings.

"They know it isn't from this settlement," Dawes said. "They know it's going back."

"I can take you to the Pittsburgh settlement," Fergesson said to Charlotte. He headed toward the car. "I'll register you as my wife. You can decide later on whether you want to go through with the legalities."

"What about Ben?" Charlotte asked faintly.

"I can't marry him, too." Fergesson increased his pace. "I can take him there, but they won't let him stay. They have their quota system. Later on, when they realize the emergency . . ."

"Get out of the way," Untermeyer said to the cordon of men. He lumbered toward them vengefully. After a moment, the men uncertainly retreated and finally gave way. Untermeyer stood by the door, his huge body drawn up and alert.

"Bring her through—and watch it!" he told Fergesson.

Fergesson and Dawes, with Charlotte between them, made their way through the line of men to Untermeyer. Fergesson gave the fat man the keys, and Untermeyer yanked the front door open. He pushed Charlotte in, then motioned Fergesson to hurry around to the other side.

The group of men came alive.

With his great fist, Untermeyer smashed the leader into those behind him. He struggled past Charlotte and got his bulk wedged behind the wheel of the car. The motor came on with a whirr. Untermeyer threw it into low gear and jammed savagely down on the accelerator. The car edged forward. Men clawed at it crazily, groping at the open door for the man and woman inside.

Untermeyer slammed the doors and locked them. As the car gained speed, Fergesson caught a final glimpse of the fat man's sweating, fear-distorted face.

Men grabbed vainly for the slippery sides of the car. As it gathered momentum, they slid away one by one. One huge red-haired man clung maniacally to the hood, pawing at the shattered windshield for the driver's face beyond. Untermeyer sent the car spinning into a sharp curve; the red-haired man hung on for a moment, then lost his grip and tumbled silently, face-forward, onto the pavement.

The car wove, careened, at last disappeared from view be-

yond a row of sagging buildings. The sound of its screaming tires faded. Untermeyer and Charlotte were on their way to safety at the Pittsburgh settlement.

Fergesson stared after the car until the pressure of Dawes' thin hand on his shoulder aroused him. "Well," he muttered, "there goes the car. Anyhow, Charlotte got away."

"Come on," Dawes said tightly in his ear. "I hope you have good shoes—we've got a long way to walk."

Fergesson blinked. "Walk? Where . . . ?"

"The nearest of our camps is thirty miles from here. We can make it, I think." He moved away, and after a moment Fergesson followed him. "I've done it before. I can do it again."

Behind them, the crowd was collecting again, centering its interest upon the inert mass that was the dying Biltong. The hum of wrath sounded—frustration and impotence at the loss of the car pitched the ugly cacophony to a gathering peak of violence. Gradually, like water seeking its level, the ominous, boiling mass surged toward the concrete platform.

On the platform, the ancient, dying Biltong waited helplessly. It was aware of them. Its pseudopodia were twisted in one last decrepit action, a final shudder of effort.

Then Fergesson saw a terrible thing—a thing that made shame rise inside him until his humiliated fingers released the metal box he carried, let it fall, splintering, to the ground. He retrieved it numbly, stood gripping it helplessly. He wanted to run off blindly, aimlessly, anywhere but here. Out into the silence and darkness and driving shadows beyond the settlement. Out in the dead acres of ash.

The Biltong was trying to print himself a defensive shield, a protective wall of ash, as the mob descended on him . . .

When they had walked a couple of hours, Dawes came to a halt and threw himself down in the black ash that extended everywhere. "We'll rest awhile," he grunted to Fergesson. "I've got some food we can cook. We'll use that Ronson lighter you have there, if it's got any fluid in it."

Fergesson opened the metal box and passed him the lighter. A cold, fetid wind blew around them, whipping ash into dismal clouds across the barren surface of the planet. Off in the distance, a few jagged walls of buildings jutted upward like splinters of bones. Here and there dark, ominous stalks of weeds grew.

"It's not as dead as it looks," Dawes commented, as he gathered bits of dried wood and paper from the ash around them. "You know about the dogs and the rab-

bits. And there're lots of plant seeds—all you have to do is water the ash, and up they spring."

"Water? But it doesn't—rain. Whatever the word used to be."

"We have to dig ditches. There's still water, but you have to dig for it." Dawes got a feeble fire going—there was fluid in the lighter. He tossed it back and turned his attention to feeding the fire.

Fergesson sat examining the lighter. "How can you build a thing like this?" he demanded bluntly.

"We can't." Dawes reached into his coat and brought out a flat packet of food—dried, salted meat and parched corn. "You can't start out building complex stuff. You have to work your way up slowly."

"A healthy Biltong could print from this. The one in Pittsburgh could make a perfect print of this lighter."

"I know," Dawes said. "That's what's held us back. We have to wait until they give up. They will, you know. They'll have to go back to their own star-system—it's genocide for them to stay here."

Fergesson clutched convulsively at the lighter. "Then our civilization goes with them."

"That lighter?" Dawes grinned. "Yes, that's going—for a long time, at least. But I don't think you've got the right slant. We're going to have to re-educate ourselves, every damn one of us. It's hard for me, too."

"Where did you come from?"

Dawes said quietly, "I'm one of the survivors from Chicago. After it collapsed, I wandered around—killed with a stone, slept in cellars, fought off the dogs with my hands and feet. Finally, I found my way to one of the camps. There were a few before me—you don't know it, my friend, but Chicago wasn't the first to fall."

"And you're printing tools? Like that knife?"

Dawes laughed long and loud. "The word isn't print—the word is *build*. We're building tools, making things." He pulled out the crude wooden cup and laid it down on the ash. "Printing means merely copying. I can't explain to you what building is; you'll have to try it yourself to find out. Building and printing are two totally different things."

Dawes arranged three objects on the ash. The exquisite Steuben glassware, his own crude wooden drinking cup and the blob, the botched print the dying Biltong had attempted.

"This is the way it was," he said, indicating the Steuben cup. "Someday it'll be that way again . . . but we're going up the right way—the hard way—step by step, until we get back up there." He carefully replaced the glassware back in its metal box. "We'll keep it—not to copy, but as a model,

as a goal. You can't grasp the difference now, but you will."

He indicated the crude wooden cup. "That's where we are right now. Don't laugh at it. Don't say it's not civilization. It is—it's simple and crude, but it's the real thing. We'll go up from here."

He picked up the blob, the print the Biltong had left behind. After a moment's reflection, he drew back and hurled it away from him. The blob struck, bounced once, then broke into fragments.

"That's nothing," Dawes said fiercely. "Better this cup. This wooden cup is closer to that Steuben glass than any print."

"You're certainly proud of your little wooden cup," Fergesson observed.

"I sure as hell am," Dawes agreed, as he placed the cup in the metal box beside the Steuben glassware. "You'll understand that, too, one of these days. It'll take awhile, but you'll get it." He began closing the box, then halted a moment and touched the Ronson lighter.

He shook his head regretfully. "Not in our time," he said, and closed the box. "Too many steps in between." His lean face glowed suddenly, a flicker of joyful anticipation. "But by God, we're moving that way!"

THE ICONOCLASTIC KOALA

When an Australian honey-bear ponders the nature of things, a great change occurs.

by DAL STIVENS

A YOUNG KOALA in the Zoo became bored and irritable. He was particularly irascible when he heard human visitors uttering, in his opinion, sentimental and gushing things about him and his fellows.

Whenever visitors exclaimed that he was cute, was the sweetest thing, had a bland, kind, wise face, the young koala declaimed to the other bears, "These assertions about our natures are made without the slightest investigation. Speaking personally, I'm not at all sure that we *are* kind. In fact, I have a rather different opinion about some of you.

"As for our wisdom, well, I doubt that we, as a race, show much signs of it when we accept ready-made opinions of ourselves. What's more—and this is the crux of the matter—I refuse to be sweet to order!"

One day, when he was chattering in this vein, he captivated an impressionable old lady, who asserted that she found him utterly charming. The young koala, who was called Teddy, a name he loathed, retired in disgust to the top of a tree made of concrete. He morosely chewed some gum leaves, which had been plucked many miles away in the bush, and brooded on what he could do.

Ten minutes later, he precipitately descended the tree. When a man put out a hand to stroke him, Teddy nipped his fingers hard.

"You nasty little beast!" cried the man.

Teddy beamed.

"The cute little thing!" said the man's wife. "He was just looking for sugar."

"Sugar nothing!" said the man. "He's mean-minded. You've only

to look at his face to notice that."

"Nonsense!" said his wife. "He looks like a wise little old gentleman and he has ears just like Clark Gable. He's just beaming love at us!"

"Vindictive! That's what he is!" said the man.

Teddy was delighted at this refreshing appraisal of his character and decided to accompany this remarkable and penetrating man. At a suitable opportunity, he sneaked into a large carry-all the man had.

"That finger's still hurting," complained the man, some minutes later, "and if it's not impertinent of me, I should like to ask why you need to pack so much for a simple day at the Zoo. This bag is extraordinarily heavy."

"Cute little thing!" said his wife. "All this fuss over a little caress from that dear little bear." Teddy managed by an effort of will to stop himself from squirming. The wife went on, "That bag contains food for your stomach."

Ten minutes later, the couple decided to have lunch, and the woman began unpacking the carry-all. When Teddy saw her fingers considerately near his mouth, he bit them.

"Ow!" she cried. "Something horrible has bitten me!"

The husband looked in the bag and found Teddy.

"You spiteful little thing!" said the wife.

"What did I tell you?" asked the husband.

The woman's conversion made Teddy more and more certain that here were two people who appraised him accurately, his distress was acute when they returned him to his keeper, who restored him to the synthetic gum-tree and a bundle of limp gum leaves.

"I can't eat these wretched things," said the bear to himself and pushed them away.

"Our bears want for nothing, madam," said the keeper. "It is most unusual for them to bite anyone. They are such happy little creatures."

Teddy was so infuriated he came down from the tree and bit the keeper.

In the course of the next few days, he systematically bit all the keepers. They went in a deputation to the superintendent.

"I find your story difficult to believe, gentlemen," said he. "Our koalas, dear little things, want for nothing. You might say, indeed, that our sweet little bears belong to the perfect Welfare State. They are the most tractable little creatures."

The keepers repeated their complaints and the superintendent said impatiently, "Very well, show me this bear, though I don't believe a word of your allegations."

Teddy bit the superintendent.

"Take him back to the forest!"

cried the superintendent. "Ungrateful wretch! I simply cannot understand it!"

Released in the forest, Teddy gave a whoop of joy. "Hurray for freedom. Now at last I can be myself." He skipped round the clearing.

He had scarcely finished speaking before a fox made a rush at him. Teddy scampered up a gum tree, twelve and then only six inches ahead of the fox's sharp teeth. He reached a safe limb, trembling. The fox called Teddy some rude names and went off. When the young koala recovered from his fright, he began to contemplate the advantages of being called a "mangy koala" instead of "Teddy". He had scarcely begun when an eagle dived at him and almost seized him.

In the course of the next few days, the young koala had other alarming experiences, evading dingoes, pythons, foxes and eagles. Moreover, it was difficult to get enough to eat. The gum trees with suitable forage leaves were few, and the other bears bit the young koala when he attempted to climb them. Hunger finally made him just as fierce as the other bears, and he was able to get his share.

One day, when the young koala had been gone a month, the Zoo superintendent removed the bandage from his finger and remarked, "I'll bet that ungrateful young bear wishes he was back here."

The superintendent was wrong. The young koala, at that very moment, was perched on a limb, safe from eagles, dingoes, foxes and pythons. He had a full stomach of tender gum leaves and was murmuring to himself, "There was something I wanted to think about, but I'm kept so busy I forget what it was . . ." Yawning, he went off happily to sleep.

ATTENTION—*ATTEND!!!*

This year, it's New York! The *Fourteenth Annual World Science Fiction Convention* will be held in the Hotel Biltmore on East Forty-third St., next door to Grand Central Station, from August 31st through September 3rd. These 96-odd hours of discussion, entertainment, auctions, feasting and just plain stfun will feature a costume party, a banquet, a special movie preview, exhibits, displays and panel sessions. Famous British author Arthur C. Clarke will be the guest of honor. If you have attended previous W.S.F. Conventions, you won't want to miss this one—if you haven't, here's your chance to begin. Write World Science Fiction Society, Inc., P.O. 272, Radio City Station, New York 19, N. Y.

PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN

The stf-film publicity was designed to win profits. The Galactic emmissaries hoped to win friends. A pity they ever had to meet!

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

THE CONCUSSION of the last atom bomb still seemed to linger as the lights came on again. For a long time, no one moved. Then the assistant producer said innocently, "Well, R. B., what do you think of it?"

R. B. heaved himself out of his seat while his acolytes waited to see which way the cat would jump. It was then they noticed that R. B.'s cigar had gone out —something that hadn't happened even at the preview of G.W.T.W.!

"Boys," he said ecstatically, "we've got something here! How much did you say it cost, Mike?"

"Six-and-a-half million R. B."

"It was cheap at the price. Let me tell you, I'll eat every foot of it if the gross doesn't beat *Quo Vadis*." He wheeled, as swiftly as could be expected for one of his bulk, upon a small man still crouched in his seat at the back of the projection room. "Snap out of it, Joe! The Earth's saved! You've seen all these space-films. How does this line up with the earlier ones?"

Joe came to with an obvious effort.

"There's no comparison," he said. "It's got all the suspense of *The Thing*, without that awful letdown at the end when you saw the monster was human. The only picture that comes within miles of it is *Forbidden Planet*. Some of the effects in that were nearly as good as ours, but, of course, they didn't have Todd-AO. And that sure makes a difference! When the Golden Gate bridge went down, I thought that pier was going to hit me!"

"The bit I liked best," put in Tony Auerbach from Publicity, "was when the Empire State

split right up the middle. You don't suppose the owners might sue us, though?"

"Of course not. No one expects *any* building to stand up to—what did the script call them?—city busters. Besides, we wiped out the rest of New York as well. *Ugh*—that scene in the Holland Tunnel when the roof gave way! Next time, I'll take the ferry!"

"Yes, that was very well done—almost *too* well done. But what really got me were those creatures from space. The animation was perfect. How did you do it, Mike?"

"Trade secret," said the proud producer. "Still, I'll let you in on it. A lot of that stuff is genuine."

"What!"

"Oh, don't get me wrong! We haven't been on location to Sirius B. But they've developed a microcamera over at Cal Tech, and we used that to film spiders in action. We cut in the best shots, and I think you'd have a job telling which was micro and which the full-sized studio stuff. Now you understand why I wanted the Aliens to be insects, and not octopuses, like the script said first."

"There's a good publicity angle here," said Tony. "One thing worries me, though—that scene where the monsters kidnap Gloria. Do you suppose the Breen Office . . . ? I mean, the way we've done it, it looks . . ."

"Aw, quit worrying! That's what people are *supposed* to think! Anyway, we make it clear in the next reel that they really want her for dissection, so that's all right."

"It'll be a riot!" gloated R. B., a faraway gleam in his eye as if he was arleady hearing the avalanche of dollars pouring into the box-office. "Look—we'll put another million into publicity! I can just see the posters—get all this down, Tony. *Watch the sky! The Sirians are coming!*

"We'll make thousands of clockwork models—can't you imagine them scuttling around on their hairy legs! People love to be scared, and we'll scare them. By the time we've finished, no one will be able to look at the sky without getting the creeps! I leave it to you, boys—this picture is going to make *history!*"

He was right, *Monsters from Space* hit the public two months later. Within a week of the simultaneous London-New York premieres, there was almost no one in the Western World who had not seen the posters screaming *Earth Beware!*, or had not shuddered at the photographs of the hairy horrors stalking along deserted Fifth Avenue on their thin, many-jointed legs.

Blimps, cleverly disguised as spaceships, cruised across the skies—to the vast confusion of the first pilots who encountered them

—and clockwork models of the alien invaders were everywhere, scaring old ladies out of their wits.

The publicity campaign was brilliant, and the picture would undoubtedly have run for months, had it not been for a coincidence as disastrous as it was unforeseeable. While the number of people fainting at each performance was still news, the skies of Earth filled suddenly with long, lean shadows, sliding swiftly through the clouds . . .

PRINCE ZERVASHNI was good natured but inclined to be impetuous—a well-known failing of his race. There was no reason to suppose that his present mission—one devoted to making peaceful contact with the planet Earth—would present any particular problems.

The correct technique of approach had been thoroughly worked out over many thousands of years, as the Third Galactic Empire slowly expanded its frontiers, absorbing planet after planet, sun upon sun. There was seldom any trouble—really intelligent races would always cooperate, once they got over the initial shock of learning that they were not alone in the universe.

It was true that humanity had emerged from its primitive, warlike stage only within the last generation. This, however, did not worry Prince Zervashni's chief adviser, Sigisnin II, Professor of Astropolitics.

"It's a perfectly typical Class-E culture," pronounced the Professor. "Technically advanced, morally rather backward. However, they are already used to the conception of space-flight, and will soon take us for granted. The normal precautions should prove sufficient until we have won their confidence."

"Very well," said the Prince. "Tell the envoys to leave at once."

It was unfortunate that the "normal precautions" did not allow for Tony Auerbach's publicity campaign, which had now reached new heights of interplanetary zenophobia. The ambassadors landed in Central Park on the very day when a prominent astronomer, unusually hard-up and therefore amenable to influence, had announced in a widely reported interview that any visitors from space probably would be unfriendly.

The luckless ambassadors, heading for the United Nations Building, got as far south as 60th Street when they met the mob. The encounter was very one-sided, and the scientists at the Museum of Natural History were most annoyed that there was so little left for them to examine.

Prince Zervashni tried once more, on the other side of the

planet, but the news had got there first. This time, the ambassadors were armed, and gave a good account of themselves before they were overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Even so, it was not until the rocket bombs started climbing up towards his fleet that the Prince finally lost his temper and decided to take drastic action.

It was all over in twenty minutes, and was really quite painless. Then the Prince turned to his advisor and said, with considerable understatement, "That appears to be that. Now—will you tell me exactly what went wrong?"

Sigisnin II, knitted his dozen flexible fingers together in acute anguish. It was not only the spectacle of the neatly disinfected Earth that distressed him, though, to a scientist, the destruction of such a beautiful specimen is always a major tragedy. At least equally upsetting was the demolition of his theories and, with them, his reputation.

"I just don't understand it!" he lamented. "Of course, races at this level of culture are often suspicious and nervous when contact is first made. But they'd never had visitors before, so there was no reason for them to be hostile."

"*Hostile!* They were demons! I think they were all insane." The Prince turned to his captain, a tripedal creature who looked rather like a ball of wool balanced on three knitting needles. "Is the fleet reassembled?" he asked.

"Yes, Sire."

"Then we shall return to Base at optimum speed. This planet depressed me."

On the dead and silent Earth, the posters still screamed their warnings from a thousand hoardings. The malevolent insectoid shapes shown pouring from the skies bore no resemblance at all to Prince Zervashni, who, apart from his four eyes, might have been mistaken for a panda with purple fur—and who, moreover, had come from Rigel, not Sirius.

But, of course, it was much too late to point this out.

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THE EGG

Advice to baby-sitters—check the calendar before you take on a Yerethian assignment. You won't want to be there when they hatch!

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

GNOTH, the Yerethian consul, looked at his watch and said, "Damn it! If she does not get here soon, we shall miss the start of the feature."

Triw kept on painting her horns. "What difference does it make? We can always stay around to where we came in."

"You know I hate seeing a movie cut up that way," snorted Gnoth, scratching his scales. "It is like a statue with the head broken off and put under the feet. It is still all there, but the effect is not the same." The Yerethian glanced at the incubator. "You do not suppose we could—ah—go out and leave the door unlocked?"

"Before the Earthgirl gets here?" cried Triw. "Gnoth, are you out of your mind? You know what Terran thieves are like. To leave our egg untended so close to hatching-time . . ."

"Speaking of hatching, are you sure of the date?"

"Of course."

"It would never do to have it hatch when the Earthgirl was alone with it."

"No, I figured it all out," said Triw, buffing the diamond set in her left lower tusk. "Allowing for this silly decimal system and everything, today is September twelfth, and it will hatch on the sixteenth. There is the Earthgirl now."

Gnoth threw open the big front door of the modified barn that served as his consular residence. Patrice Ober stood on the threshold with a book in her hand.

"Come in!" said Gnoth, switching to English and holding down his bellow so as not to frighten the girl. Patrice stepped onto the polished floor.

If you had asked Gnoth to describe Patrice, he would have said

she looked like other Terrans, a little, skinny, waist-high creature with a pale, soft skin, rudimentary jaws, no tail and no scales, plates, knobs, spikes, horns, tusks, or other splendid ornaments.

Moreover, Terrans had five digits per limb, so they based their number-system on ten instead of the more logical eight. If you had pressed him further, he would have said that while, to him, all Terrans looked much alike, Patrice was deemed attractive by her fellow-beings and that her eyes were green and the filaments on top of her head were dark.

"So nice to see you, my dear!" said Triw in excellent imitation of a Terran hostess. "Let me show you around." She put out a four-clawed hand. Patrice, after a slight pause, took it.

"First—here is our pride and joy," said Triw, raising the lid of the incubator. Patrice looked at the egg.

"It will hatch in four days," said Triw.

"A baby Yerethian must be pretty big," said Patrice doubtfully.

"Bigger than you, my dear."

"Would it be dangerous?"

"What? My baby dangerous?"

"I mean, to one of us."

Gnoth broke in. "It could be."

"What's it like?" Patrice asked with noticeable lack of eagerness.

"It is a carnivore, with complete instincts but no intelligence," said Gnoth. "That is why we keep them in cages. After three years, they begin to lose their instincts and become teachable. But do not worry. It will not hatch."

"What if he—it—should be premature?" asked Patrice.

"There is no chance. But, if it *should* happen, you must call the theater to have us sent home."

"What theater are you going to?"

"The Forest Drive-In. We always go to drive-ins, because they are the only ones that have space for us."

"What are you seeing?"

Gnoth said, *"Sands of Yereth.* This is business, as well as pleasure."

"How do you mean?" Pat was puzzled.

"Our government likes us to see all movies having to do with Yerethians, to make sure your movie-makers are not making hostile propaganda against us."

"Why would they do that?"

"Oh, they must have villains, and, unless we watch them, Hollywood will show all people from other planets to be scoundrels."

"A villain has to belong to *some* race." The girl frowned.

"We do not mind an occasional Yerethian villain, if they show some good Yerethians too."

"Oh," said Patrice.

"This is the powder-room," said Triw. "It is for our Terran guests, so everything is the right size for you. Do stop fidgeting, Gnoth!"

Looking around, Patrice said, "I should think it would be a bother, having everything in two sizes." There was a Yerethian-sized sofa in front of the entertainer and, a few yards away, a sofa of half its size for human beings.

"Our government pays for everything," said Triw. "Here is the kitchen. This small fridge has Terran food, so you can get yourself a snack."

"How will you get to the theater?"

"William, the gardener, will drive our limousine," said Triw. "It is really a big truck, fixed up."

"Does anybody else work for you?"

"Last week Xap, our maid, got sick and went back to Yereth. We have applied to the Embassy for another servant of our own kind, but it may take years. So now we must hire egg-sitters. I see you brought a book."

Patrice held up a library copy of *Jane Eyre*. "It's our first homework assignment for senior English."

"Come *on!*" rumbled Gnoth in his own tongue. "We can just make the first feature."

The Yerethians went. Patrice strolled about. There was a bookcase full of Terran books and another, with twice the space between the shelves, for Yerethian books. She laid down *Jane Eyre* and pulled out one of the big Yerethian volumes. The writing consisted of wiggly lines that ran from top to bottom of each page, about twenty lines to a page.

She put back the book and resumed her exploring. At the incubator, she gingerly raised the lid for another peek at the egg. It was as big as a trunk. A faint noise came from within the egg. She thought she saw it tremble, as if something were moving about inside. She put out a hand, then jerked it back as a loud thump came from within the egg.

The egg quieted down. Patrice shrugged. She was not a worrying type. The Yerethians would surely know when their own egg was due to hatch. She crossed to the smaller sofa, sat down and dug into *Jane Eyre* . . .

The telephone rang in Patrice Ober's home. Mrs. Ober answered.

"Mrs. Ober? This is Terry. Pat there?"

"No. She's baby-sitting."

"Where?"

"She—she went to the Yerethians' barn."

"Oh . . . Well, thanks. G'bye."

"Good-bye, Terry."

As Mrs. Ober hung up, her husband said, *"Hey!* Was that Terry Blaine?"

"It was."

"Then why the devil did you tell him where Pat was?"

"Why not? He asked me."

Mr. Ober threw down his newspaper. "You know why not! He'll

jump on his buzzer and fly over. They'll be alone in that house for hours, and he'll have his mind on just one thing."

"Don't you trust your own daughter?"

"As far as I trust any girl when a handsome no-good like Terry Blaine puts the pressure on her."

"Terry Blaine is *not* a no-good."

"He *is!* You just can't see it because his looks and his line have turned your head."

"Well, if you must know, I was worried about her being alone in a house full of dinosaurs. She ought to have another human being to keep an eye on her. Terry won't eat her."

"Gnoth wouldn't eat her, and furthermore he wouldn't do what Terence Blaine *will* do if he gets a chance. You know that wild crowd he goes around with . . ."

In Gnoth's house, Patrice Ober found *Jane Eyre* absorbing in spite of its leisurely pace and the archaism of its language. After an hour's reading, however, her attention flagged. Her mind wandered to her personal life, which consisted almost wholly of boys. She was not, at the moment, going steady. Several boys were striving for that relationship and Pat had not made up her mind which to accept.

Terry Blaine was in the lead, being the biggest and most aggressive, and a football hero besides. The trouble with Terry was that he made no bones about wanting what she supposed most boys wanted from a girl. She supposed also, that if she did go steady with him, she would sooner or later give in, even though a girl could get in trouble that way if she wasn't careful.

The masterful Terry seemed to expect it, and Patrice was an obliging girl who hated to refuse anyone anything. She had held out so far, out of affection for her parents, but you couldn't expect old people in their forties to know how young people felt.

As for Andy Dupas, the runner-up—Andy was an oddball who kept his thoughts to himself. He wasn't as big and good-looking as Terry, but in some ways he was nicer. He was punctual and responsible, and he kept his word. He did not proposition her on every date—in fact he never had. Patrice hoped that didn't mean Andy was somehow abnormal.

Where Terry got his way by muscle and push, Andy got his by looking something up in a book or working out a formula in his head. When he had first dated her, for instance, he hadn't known how to dance. A month later, he had evolved into one of the best dancers in the school.

"Just figured it out," was all he would say.

Some of Pat's friends thought Andy a bore, but she did not share their prejudice against brains. However, Andy had already grad-

uated from High and was going away next week to M.I.T. on a scholarship. So he would be out of the running for some time to come.

As for Henry and Leroy, they were far back in the ruck, though she thought it wise to keep in touch with them, in case she and Terry ever broke up . . .

The bell rang. Patrice went to the door.

"Who is it?" She wasn't going to let just anybody in.

"It's me," said Terence Blaine's voice.

Patrice opened the door, which had a trick latch that required the use of both hands at once. There he stood, six feet of blond male animal. Behind him, on the Yerethians' lawn, stood his flying platform. In one hand, he held a stack of phonograph records.

"Hi," he said. "How's my little cabbage?"

This was the year that American youths shaved their scalps and wore false beards. Terry's was green. He folded Patrice in his arms, bent her back towards the floor in an Apache embrace, kissed her, then set her on her feet again. Patrice gasped.

"How'd you get *here?*" she asked.

"I called your house. Thought you might be lonesome." He sat down on the man-sized sofa, pulled her down, kissed and pawed her a bit, then squirmed in discomfort. He pulled *Jane Eyre* out from under him.

"What's this?" he asked, staring at the cover.

"Homework."

"You actually *do* homework?" He seemed surprised.

"Sure. I want to go to college."

"*Hah!* Setting a bad example, my wench. First thing you know, they'll expect us all to study and pass exams, and then where'll we be? I've never cracked a book outside of school hours yet, and I'm not gonna start now. What's this?"

"English assignment. Nineteenth-century stuff."

"You mean, old Rollins makes you read the slop some blob of gup wrote back in the Middle Ages? Some fossil who wore iron pajamas and wrote on clay tablets or something?"

"No, and anyway it was a *she* who wrote it."

"Aw, ta hell with it!" Terry tossed the book to the floor. "Let's dance."

While he took his records out of their envelopes and spiked them on the phonograph-spindle of the entertainer, Patrice straightened her hair. She wished Terry wouldn't wrestle around quite so much. Presently, the machine was giving out *Marijuana for Two.*

Terry hauled Patrice to her feet and swung into the Guatemalan *brinco*. This called for both to leap into the air and come down on all four heels with every eighth beat.

"Are—are you sure we're not making too much noise?" said Patrice between floor-shattering hops.

"Who'll know?" said Terry, landing with a particularly loud crash. "Come on, limber up, cabbage. Got arthritis already?"

Patrice exerted herself to follow him. Making one twirl, he banged her into the side of the incubator, so that it rocked a little.

"Ow!" said Patrice, stopping.

"Hurt?" said Terry.

"You bet! I'll have a bruise the size of your hand."

"Oh! Too bad my hands aren't smaller." Then, with concern, "Can't you dance any more?"

"Not tonight, Terry." She limped to the sofa, exhausted.

"Well, *I'm* hungry," said Terry, belching loudly and rubbing his stomach. "These reptiles got any human food in their dump?"

Patrice indicated the smaller icebox and sat down. While Terry was in the kitchen, further thumps sounded from the incubator. Were they louder? She stirred as a prelude to getting up for a look, but the pain in her battered thigh made her sink back on the sofa.

Terry strode out of the kitchen with a tray holding two sandwiches and two glasses of milk. Patrice almost told him about the egg. She hesitated for a peculiar reason. One of Terry's favorite subjects was how they ought to get married as soon as the law and their parents allowed, and at once beget a horde of offspring. Such a program did not suit Patrice's collegiate ambitions and, besides, she found his excessive interest in the reproduction of the species embarrassing. Now she feared the sight of the egg would send his mind jetting off in biological direction.

Before she could decide, he cut her off with a loud stream of talk, "C'mon, cabbage, wrap yourself around this! Make you feel better. Say, I just heard the funniest story . . ."

Patrice forgot the egg. They ate, talking with full mouths—the endless, garrulous chatter of adolescents, so full of words and so empty of meaning to outsiders, from eggs to adults.

At last, Terry put the tray away, wiped his mouth, and slid large hands around Patrice. "Now, my trull, let's face it. If you can't dance, there's only one other thing you're good for." The music ground on . . .

The Obers' telephone rang again. This time Mr. Ober answered.

"Mr. Ober? This is Andrew Dupas. Is Pat there, please?"

"No. She went over to the Yerethians' place to baby-sit."

"Hmm—thanks."

Mr. Ober turned to his wife with a smirk. "That was Andy. If one human being to watch Pat is okay, two ought to be better."

"If he and Terry get there together, they're liable to fight."

"Maybe, but Andy's pretty smart. He'll see that everything comes out all right . . ."

Terence Blaine was well into his campaign. He had shed his beard, and his hands were busy.

"Take it easy, cabbage," he panted. "I won't hurt you."

"No, Terry darling—"

"Aw, come on! Be a sport!"

"But I don't *want* to."

"All the girls do it."

"No, Terry. Let me up!"

"And you'll feel good afterwards . . ."

"Leave my clothes alone."

"But we *love* each other, don't we? That makes it all right."

They were so busy, with determined attack on one side and wavering defense on the other, that they did not hear the commotion from the incubator, over the loud choruses of *I Hate Your Guts* from the entertainer. There was a sudden crackling sound. The lid rose. Out came the head of the baby Yerethian.

The neck followed, then the forelegs. The rest of the creature poured itself over the edge of the floor. The lid fell back with a thump. The wrestling couple looked up. Patrice screamed.

A new-hatched Yerethian is about ten feet long, counting its tail. It does not much resemble an adult, aside from the reptilian aspect of both. The baby lacks the spines, horns, and other ornaments of the adult, nor does its skull bulge with brain. It looks a little like a long-legged, long-necked alligator, with jaws big enough to bite a man's head off. It walks on all fours instead of upright like an adult.

The baby swiveled its big slit-pupiled eyes towards the petrified pair on the sofa. It hissed and trotted briskly towards them, its jaws chomping hungrily, its sixteen claws clicking.

Terry and Patrice bounced off the sofa and fled for the door. Terry got there first. He tried to open it, not knowing the trick of the latch. The door refused to budge.

Patrice tried to push him out of the way and open it herself. He shouldered her aside, mastered the latch-combination and began to pull it inward. Then the Yerethian was upon him.

It opened its jaws and swung its massive head sideways, like the business end of an excavating-machine. The head struck Terry in the side and knocked him flat. The jaws clomped on a mouthful of his satin whizz-jacket, which came apart with a ripping sound. In falling, Terry knocked Patrice down, too.

They sat up and, for half a second, looked at the Yerethian, which was standing in front of the door and digging shredded satin out of its teeth with its foreclaws.

They got up and ran again. Both headed for the powder-room. Be-

ing bigger and faster, Terry again was first. He lunged inside, slammed the door and locked it.

Patrice pulled on the knob, shrieked *"Let me in!"* She beat on the door, then looked over her shoulder and saw the Yerethian charging down upon her.

She fled along the wall of the huge room, while the Yerethian crashed into the powder-room door, picked itself up and started after her. It was less agile on sharp turns than she, but faster on the straightaway. She saw that it was gaining and would catch her long before she could reach the outer door again.

She ran past a bookcase—the one with the smaller shelves, for human books. As she came to the end, she whipped around into the angle between the end of the bookcase and the wall. The Yerethian shot past her and skidded to a stop thirty feet away.

Patrice darted back around the end of the bookcase and climbed up the front of the shelves as if they were ladder-rungs. She was halfway up before the Yerethian began its next charge, and all the way up by the time it arrived. It slithered to a halt beneath her and looked up.

"Go *away!*" she told it. *"Help! Help!* Go *away! Help!"*

The Yerethian reared up against the front of the bookcase and stretched its neck.

"HELP!" shrieked Patrice.

She reached under the top of the bookcase, pulled a book from the top shelf, and threw it at the Yerethian. The book bounced off its nose. It shook its head and grunted. Another book followed. This time the Yerethian blinked and dodged. It felt around with its claws, took a firm grip on the front edges of the shelves, and began to climb.

"HELP!" About two shelves up, and it would be able to reach her.

The bookcase swayed outward and fell with a frightful crash. Patrice jumped clear but turned an ankle as she came down.

She sat up, gasping with pain, and looked at the ruinous heap. The Yerethian's head rose out of the pile of books and broken bookcase. It blinked, hissed and resumed the chase.

Patrice hobbled toward the door. Claws scrabbled on the floor behind her.

The door, which had been open a crack since their first attempt to flee, now opened wide. In it, stood Andrew Dupas, wearing a purple false beard. The lights inside were reflected on his owlish glasses.

"Hey!" cried Andy.

He ran forward and snatched up a light chair, one of those meant for men, not Yerethians. He danced between the Yerethian and Patrice, holding the chair with its legs extended as lion-tamers do. The Yerethian paused, made a couple of lunges, seized the chair

in its jaws and sent it whirling away. Then it closed in on Andy.

Andy glanced round and ran toward the smaller sofa. He threw himself flat, dived under the sofa and came out the other side, scrambling between the struts like mad. As he was of medium size and rather spare, he made it.

The Yerethian, following him, got stuck. Its head and neck stuck out from under the rear of the sofa, while its forelegs were out of sight under the piece.

Andy turned on his pursuer. "What are you going to do now?"

The Yerethian emitted a hoarse cry and snapped at him. He stood just out of reach and slapped its muzzle. It heaved and lunged and pushed the sofa along the floor.

"Can't we catch it?" cried Patrice. "If it upsets the sofa, it'll get loose again."

"Let me think."

Andy ran around to the front of the sofa, pulling off his belt. He climbed upon it. As the Yerethian twisted its neck back to try to reach him, he whirled the belt so that the buckle whipped around it. He caught the buckle in his other hand, slipped the free end through the buckle, and pulled the free end so that the noose tightened. Then he braced his feet and pulled with both hands.

The baby Yerethian was wheezing for breath a minute later, when the door opened, and in came Gnoth and Triw.

"My *baby!*" bellowed Triw, lumbering forward.

She gave Andy a push that spun him away like an autumn leaf. His unsupported pants fell down and tripped him so he skidded, sprawling.

Triw broke the sofa apart to extricate her young and gathered the creature to her bosom. It bit her arm, at which she dealt it a slap that would have crushed a man to jelly.

"Keep calm! *Keep calm!*" roared Gnoth. "What is the matter? Quick, is anybody hurt? Do not all talk at once. Great Knash, that this should happen to us! *Keep calm,* everyone!"

'Calm down yourself," said Triw. "My dear little baby is safe and sound."

"How about you two?" said Gnoth.

Patrice said, "I turned my ankle, but it's better now."

"Nothing but a few bruises," said Andy, his glasses dangling from one ear. He replaced them. "May I have my belt back, please?"

Gnoth handed the belt to Andy, who secured his falling trews. At that instant Terry's record of *Heaving and Panting* ended. As this was the last record in the stack, the entertainer gave a click and fell silent. Gnoth turned it off. He looked at the machine, at the floor, then at the incubator.

"Have you two been dancing?"

he inquired in an ominous tone.

Patrice said, "I was but Andy wasn't."

You mean you were doing a—what do you say—a solo?"

"No, I mean I was dancing with Terry. Andy only got here just now."

"Who is Terry?"

Patrice nodded towards the powder-room, whose door Terry had opened. Patrice, trying to put her looks in order, presented both boys to the Yerethians. Her voice quavered with nervousness. You can't help feeling a little scared, she thought, when a creature that could make two bites of you is mad at you, no matter how civilized it seems.

"And you lurched against the incubator and moved it, is that not true?" rumbled Gnoth. "I see scratch-marks on the floor."

"Well—uh . . ." said Terry gallantly.

"So, if our child suffers from premature hatching, it will have been *your doing!*" thundered Gnoth.

"Wait a minute!" said Andy. "When was this egg supposed to hatch?"

"In four days," said Gnoth. He looked at his wife. "Is that not what you said, Triw?"

"It is. I asked Niag at the Embassy to make sure. He said it would be the fourteenth day, our system, of your month of September. So I added two days to change from our number-system to yours, which gives the sixteenth—"

"You *added?*" said Andy, interrupting her.

"Of course. Our fourteen is your sixteen, or—dear me . . . ! Is it that *your* fourteen is *our* sixteen?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Andy. Then to Gnoth, "You see how it is, sir. The egg didn't hatch ahead of time after all."

Gnoth waved an apologetic paw. "I see now. I am terribly sorry. Mr. Blaine, you must let me buy you a new coat."

"He doesn't deserve it," said Patrice. "He ran into the john and locked me out with that—with your baby."

"Isn't this yours?" said Andy to Terry, handing him the green beard.

Terry snatched the beard and put it on. "Want a lift home?" he asked Patrice.

"Thank you, *Mister* Blaine, but I'll go home with Andy."

"Big hero, eh?" said Terry to Andy. "Don't go shooting off your mouth about what happened here if you want to stay healthy."

He started for the door. Gnoth, counting out Patrice's fee, rumbled, "Just a minute, Mr. Blaine. *And* the rest of you."

"Whaddya want?" said Terry.

"Your personal relations are no concern of mine, but I think it would be just as well if we *all* kept silent about what happened."

"How so?" said Andy.

"If your story got out, Miss Ober would have trouble with her parents. Mr. Blaine would suffer embarrassment because of the pusillanimous part he played, and Triw and I would have trouble getting Terrans to work for us. You, Mr. Dupas, are the only one who would gain from the broadcasting of this news, and I hope you can be persuaded to—ah—make common cause with us."

Andy looked for Terry, but the latter had already stalked out. He hesitated, then said, "Okay. Let's go, Pat."

Terry's flying platform whirred off into the night as Andy started his old but well-kept automobile. On the way home, Patrice asked, "Why didn't you hit that big blob of gup? He deserved it."

"Sure he did! The trouble is, he can lick me. He did once, in fact. He knows what we think of him, so why should I ask for another beating-up, just to underline it?"

They parked and smirped in front of the Ober house. After a while, Andy said, "You know I'm going in two days. You're too young for me, Pat. It'll take me at least six years to get my Ph. D."

"Six years," mused Pat, undeterred by the thought. "That will give me plenty of time to catch up with you."

Patrice had made up her mind.

THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY

She was magic, meant for love—and like so much of beauty, strangely marked by fate.

by CRAIG RICE

OF COURSE IT happened a very long time ago. Today, there is barely a charred, overgrown trace left of the buildings that burned, the curious, helter-skelter collection of gaily painted little two and three apartment houses that huddled together, down a steep valley scarp from the broad avenue above. The whole affair, indeed, is almost forgotten—almost.

He is a mature man now, the head of a family, successful in his business, liked and respected, a solid citizen in all things. But *he* still remembers. As long as he lives, he will never forget.

And the little children—all grown up now, of course—surely *they* must remember, too.

It began on a night that was windless and clear, neither warm nor cold—a night that was very quiet. He was young, and he was lonely, a stranger in the town in those days. All by himself, he had gone into one of the small, shadowy bars that dotted the broad avenue that crowned the hillside. He sat there alone, scarcely touching his glass, not seeking companions, all but oblivious of the men and women who moved and got acquainted with each other all around him.

He had no idea how long she had been sitting beside him when first he noticed her. Even then, it was the drink that he noticed first, rather than the girl.

The glass that held it was conventional enough—thin and gracefully stemmed—but the drink itself glowed with a color he could not remember ever having seen before. A gold color it was, yet with more light, more luminescence than gold. It was marvelously clear, yet there was an occasional hint of swirling mist in its

depths that appeared and vanished and appeared again. He watched it for a while caught by its almost hypnotic effect, and then he looked at the girl.

She was golden, from the hair wound and braided so smoothly about her head, to the gold kid slippers on her small and fragile feet. Her dress, of some soft, glistening, silky stuff, was a deeper shade of the same gold, her soft, delicate skin seemed almost to be touched with a faint, powdery, golden dust. He failed to register, and never could recall, the color of her eyes. Perhaps, they were golden, too.

All at once, he realized she was aware that he was staring at her, that she seemed faintly amused. He looked away and stammered something inadequate about the curious color of the drink in her glass.

She smiled, a sweet radiant smile, and pushed the glass toward him.

Neither then, nor in memory, could he be sure she said, "Would you like to try it?" in a faint whisper, or that his own mind formed the words from some projected thought. For that matter, did she ever speak at all? Of this, too, he never was quite sure. But of course, he would remind himself in afterdays, she must have spoken when she told the children stories. Or did she? Did they understand the words as, perhaps, he had, without ever hearing them? He never knew.

He did know that he tried the drink. It was cool but not cold, pungent yet sweet—almost too sweet with a curious, new flavor he could not quite identify, a flavor of half-remembered fruits and flowers. Cool and sweet and strangely heady—he took a sip of it and felt a faint, delightful tingling in his fingers and toes.

They sat together silently, while strangers moved and chattered all around them and paid as little attention as if neither of them was there. Then it was late, and the lights were being turned out, and the chairs stacked on the tables.

He said, almost without thinking, "Will you come home with me?" It was as easy as asking for a match.

She said, "Of course," in that soft whisper that might not have been a whisper at all. Then she rose and linked his arm with hers, and they went out of the small, shadowy bar. It was as simple as that.

They walked down the broad avenue together and paused at the top of the stairs that led down between the little buildings. They were steep stairs, narrow and winding and dimly lighted, and he turned to her and said, "You must let me carry you down."

He lifted her and she seemed to weigh nothing at all—exactly nothing. It wasn't that she was re-

markably small, it was simply that she didn't weigh anything. Yet he thought hardly anything about it at the time.

Down the long, steep stairs, past the paths and little flights of stairs that led off in all directions, down to the wide, gardened space half-way to the valley floor, where the children played in the daytime, from which his own little flight of wooden stairs led. Up to his door, and into the two tiny rooms that were his home in those days.

He never was quite sure how long she stayed. It might have been weeks or months. It was days, certainly. He was on vacation, and there was no routine coming and going to and from his insignificant job to wind the clock of his mind.

He was certain of but one thing —then and always afterwards. This was the happiest time of his entire life.

It seemed never the least strange to him that she seemed to have no other home, neither friends nor mere people to inquire about her. Nor had she possessions of her own.

Save for the carrying of her down the long flight of stairs, he scarcely dared touch her again but with the rarest and lightest caress of a hand. He had a feeling that, somehow, she was too fragile, too delicate, too perishable for coarse human contact, that a normal caress would shatter her into glistening golden fragments, that she might, perhaps, disappear altogether. Sometimes, she would smile at him, the sweet radiant smile, and brush light fingers fondly over his face. Yet, while he knew her fingers touched him, he could scarcely feel them.

It did seem curious to him now and then, during the time they were together, that she never slept or, at least, never seemed to sleep. She did come to rest from time to time, perched on the arm of a chair, perhaps poised gracefully on the couch, her exquisite face in repose, motionless save for an occasional fluttering of her small hands. Watching her, he would fall asleep himself, confident that, when he wakened, she would still be there in the two tiny rooms.

It was down in the garden that the very young children who lived in the other buildings on the hillside would come to her. She would rest on the lowest step of his little flight of wooden stairs, and tell them stories—fabulous, wonderful, marvelous stories. It mattered not to the children whether she told her stories in words or in dream-like thought projections. The children heard them and understood them, and watched her with eyes sometimes gay, sometimes grave, sometimes aglow with sheer enchantment.

She made little cakes for them, too, the sugary, crumbly little cakes that, with the sweet, golden drink, seemed to be her only food.

She loved them all, and they loved her.

It was a very lovely time, a dreamy time, and he was happy.

Then, awakening in the midst of a night that was windless and clear and very quiet, he heard the rustle and crackle of flames. He rushed outside to the little apartment landing and saw that the lower buildings were ablaze, that the flames were creeping up towards his own little garden.

He ran back into the house to sweep her up to safety. She shook her head, radiating a strange blend of sadness and expectation.

It didn't matter to him whether she spoke aloud or not. "The children," was what she said. He understood. He raced down into the garden and began to knock on all the doors.

How he managed it all, he was never quite sure. From doorway to doorway, from window to window he ran, waking everyone, collecting the children, shepherding them up the hill to the broad avenue and safety. There were fire engines coming now.

The flames were flickering hungrily, close to his own little home when he reached it and ran lightly up the stairs, to where she stood poised on the tiny landing.

She had taken a scarf of the same glistening, golden silky stuff as her dress, and bound it around her eyes like a blindfold. She stretched out her hands to him, and he prepared to lift her and carry her away to safety.

Perhaps, in his fear and in the urgency of the moment, he moved too quickly, too roughly—for, suddenly, the scarf came unbound and floated into his hands.

She gave him one long look, of anguish, of incomprehensible despair, of final farewell. Then she turned and, before he could move to stop her, she had gone. She seemed, in his horrified eyes, to dart, to fly, into the very heart of the flames. It was as if, having seen them, she was drawn to them as by a magnet. It was as if a moth . . .

Afterward, of course, they called him a hero. They made a great fuss and pother over him. There were pictures of him in the newspapers, and pictures of the children. But whenever he spoke of *her*, everyone looked at him kindly, even pityingly. *"Shock,"* they said. "Shock and the horror of the fire."

But he could never quite accept this theory—for how did they explain the scarf he still had, the golden, glistening, gossamer scarf, that he still has to this day. The children never spoke to him of her, but, for a long time afterward, they looked at him with sad, remembering, pitying eyes. Did *they* know? He was never to find out. By the time he acquired the wisdom to ask them, it was too late. They were no longer children —they were merely boys and girls.

—continued from Back Cover

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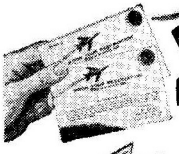

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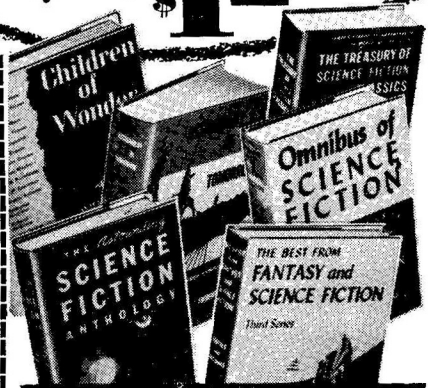

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