

Science-Fantasy

SPRING 1952

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Science-Fantasy

VOL. 2, No. 4

SPRING 1952

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Assistant : G. KEN CHAPMAN

Cover by Bull

Illustrations by Bull, Quinn, Clothier and Hunter

TWO SHILLINGS

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Things Are On The Move . .

By H. J. Campbell

This department will regularly feature prominent personalities in the science fiction field, writing their opinions on fantasy in general. In this issue we have pleasure in presenting Mr. H. J. Campbell, editor of Authentic Science Fiction, a contemporary magazine devoted to long novels.

This is a great pleasure. As we write, *Science-Fantasy* is one of the only three true science-fiction magazines published in this country (one of the other two being Nova's first baby, *New Worlds*). It is a rare privilege for us to be host in one such magazine and guest in another. It is also a tribute to the camaraderie that exists among members of the science-fiction fraternity.

We say "as we write" back there because at the time you read this there may be other British magazines in the field. The first year of the second half of this century saw an enormous rise in the clamour for science-fiction among the public at large. And publishers, film studios, radio and TV were fast in trying to meet the demand. Every few weeks there was a new rumour about another magazine or a book or a film. Happily the upsurge of interest did good things to the circulations of Nova's publications, which have risen to all-time heights.

But it was rather ironic that while *New Worlds* was battling away for existence alone and scorned, the publishers who are now grabbing with both hands stood loftily aloof and tip-tilted their noses at science-fiction. Now, they are all trying to get in the act.

There is nothing wrong about this and nobody is sore. It is just, as we said, ironic.

We all of us hope that 1952 will produce an even greater demand, consolidating the position that science-fiction has gained and placing it on a firm, permanent basis in this country. We all of us know that *Science-Fantasy* and its brother publication will continue to play their full part in Nova's campaign for better and brighter science-fiction. And all of us will welcome into the fold the many new friends that we and science-fiction are bound to make in the coming year. Let us hope we do not lose any old friends.

For there are people who are worried about the changes that are taking place in *New Worlds* and *Science-Fantasy*. The magazines are not what they used to be, they say. This is true, and that is the way it should be. The best magazines are never static things—compare the 1841 *Punch* with what it is to-day; then compare to-day's with 1949's.

The higher a magazine's standard, the more alive it is and adaptable to trends; the more it is progressive. And progress is the basis of science-fiction. It is a mistake to think that all changes are good. Equally it is wrong to feel that all changes are bad. The intelligent mind knows that nothing is perfect, that everything can be better. Some, including ourselves, believe that the essence of intelligence lies in the desire and ability to make all things better.

And goodness knows, apart from Nova's efforts, British science-fiction could benefit from a few changes. For years the magazine racks have been loaded down with science-fiction that ranged from mediocrity to downright slush. Small wonder that sensible people, counting their pennies like the rest of us, spent their money on more worthwhile forms of reading matter. Small wonder, too, that science-fiction became synonymous with tripe—the technical journalistic name for material in papers devoted to sensational adventures.

We would be the last to condemn tripe. Large sections of the populace are unable to digest anything else, and they have a right to be catered for. But we are firm in demanding that science-fiction need not be *all* tripe—just as there are some very fine love stories available to show people that the expression of love can reach greater heights than an evening at the pictures and a quick kiss at the bus stop. For a long time Nova was the only firm that worked on this principle.

It did not castigate the tripe publishers. It simply went quietly to work and produced science-fiction of a standard that had never before been indigenous to this country. The present impetus that science-fiction has attained is largely due to that long, lonely stand.

Now the position is clearer. A standard has been set and accepted. And Nova is looking forward, not back. To our mind, as the years pass the subject matter of science-fiction comes ever closer to actual life. Space travel is very near. Many exciting developments lie close before us, not in the remote future. And so the stories put out by the better publications these days bear more resemblance to the here and now; to the moving, living present rolling inexorably into the future.

We think, too, that this tendency can be seen in the science-fiction films, newspaper strips, articles and books of to-day. There is a general awareness that things are on the move in a big way where science is concerned. It would be a pity if science-fiction media ignored this changing shape of things, staying in a rut carved many generations ago.

As a reader we personally applaud the painstaking analysis that results in the changes you have seen and will be seeing. As a writer we deplore it because we shall have to work harder to reach the required standard. As an editor we are dubious about our ability to keep our end up against the consummate technique of the man who edits *New Worlds* and *Science-Fantasy*.

But as a member of the science-fiction fraternity we know that nothing but good can come of it all. We are supremely optimistic about the future. We have no doubts whatever that science-fiction will very soon emerge as a fully-fledged literary form—with British science-fiction playing a prominent role. We have such a fine collection of leaders!

H. J. CAMPBELL

RESURRECTION

By JOHN CHRISTOPHER

It was a strange world Stanley Liggard awoke to after three hundred years of suspended animation. Humans were the subjects of mechanical dominance, or hunted down by the Meccanoes. With science lost to them there was very little they could do to alter their fate—Liggard, however, was the unknown factor.

Illustrated by BULL

As he awoke, George's words were echoing in his mind:

"You'll be a museum specimen, Stan. Probably in a glass showcase . . . attendants in white smocks . . . admission fifty cents—free on Saturdays and Sundays. And a doctor checking that two-an-hour pulse every few days. That's how it should be. But just in case—in case we're being too optimistic—there's the blast exit. I hope you won't need it."

He blinked his eyes clear of a film of dust. The underground chamber they had constructed was unchanged; the dust was on it, softening the outlines everywhere, but it was unchanged. George's chair still stood by his desk in one corner. He walked across to it on uncertain legs. The log lay open; the pencilled writing clear enough under the layer of grey:

"Thursday. January 17th. Everything normal. Pulse and blood suitably retarded. This marks six months from the beginning; I'll give him another few weeks before publishing. After that I don't suppose I'll be able to get near him for visiting celebrities."

That was all. A routine statement, no broken message trailing off into cryptic uncertainty. But he hadn't come back. A fatal accident? But there had been full details among his papers; the executors must have found them. He looked round the small cell again. Clearly they hadn't. So a lot depended on the blast exit.

The mechanism seemed in order. He primed it, flicked the control, and



RESURRECTION

retired to crouch behind the brick blast wall. He counted aloud, listening to his own voice echoing, so unlike the welcoming voices they had expected:

"One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . ."

The explosion cracked sharply through the air and fresh dust, swirling up, made him cough. He looked up. As he did his nostrils caught the scent of fresh air. There was the light of day, too, breaking in on the dim artificial illumination that his awaking had switched on. The blast exit had worked. The way was open; a small tunnel leading upwards. He squirmed his way through it and out on to a green hillside, on what seemed like a late summer afternoon.

The cottage had been chosen for its location; a mile and a half from the city limits, on an elevation sufficient to protect the cell from any ordinary flooding. The cottage still stood a few yards further up the hill, or rather its skeleton did. It had sagged in on itself, it seemed, through the ordinary dilapidations of time. He looked the other way, towards the city. At first sight it seemed not to have changed. He could see the glint of the river, and the Consular Bridge still spanned it. Or almost spanned it. His eyes caught a gap, just short of the east bank. And the Civic Building—when he examined it more carefully he saw that the top was crumpled, as though some giant had placed a hand on it and carelessly pushed it down. Other buildings, when he came to look at them, were also incomplete.

War? It seemed obvious enough. Misleadingly obvious. There was damage, but not the kind that could account for the world ignoring his hibernation as it had. But radiation sickness—bacteriological warfare? That might account for it. He watched the city. Yes, it was deserted.

He went down, anyway, to check. Before the sun set, he had confirmed his guess, but he was no nearer to finding the reason for the desertion. There were no skeletons. He camped for the night on the crumbling counter of what had been a chain store. He found some tinned provisions but not many, another surprising feature. From his couch he could see, through windows that still held glass, the brilliant night sky. If this city was deserted, was there any reason for him to expect any better fortune in other places? Obviously no, if he were looking for the kind of civilised life he had left behind a hundred years ago in the twentieth century. But he didn't allow his disappointment to blind him. Deserted cities didn't necessarily mean the end of man. He remembered the flies, the mosquitoes, the cockroaches that had been attacked with D.D.T. There was always the odd resistant strain in the breed. Somewhere there would be men; if only a handful, if only savages. And he would find them all right. It might take him a long time, but he would find them.

He rolled over, finding a more comfortable position on the pitted wood, and went peacefully to sleep.

He rose early the next morning. The weather still held fine. He packed a dozen tins in his haversack and set out, heading for the moment eastwards, away from the skeleton of the city. Provisionally he laid his course for New York, but not with any expectation of finding it inhabited. When he found men he knew it would be by chance, by stumbling on the isolated community that had escaped whatever pestilence had stalked across the planet. But there had to be a mark to aim at, and this was as good as any.

He thought of getting hold of some kind of vehicle since the roads seemed to be in tolerably good condition—a bicycle perhaps. But he realised the stupidity of that idea when he looked at the car in a garage on the road out from the city. It had been well sheltered, but it was no more than a pattern of rusts. He walked on as cheerfully as possible, thinking of the distance he might yet have to walk.

His surprise was all the greater when, no more than half an hour after he had left the city behind him, he reached the brow of a small hill, and looked down on to a neat pattern of well-tilled fields, dotted with small, roughly built houses. He stood for several minutes looking at the view, and trying to disbelieve it. There had been people who had wanted men to turn their backs on the cities and return to the land, he remembered, but the idea that anybody might have acted on their advice still seemed fantastic despite the evidence of the city behind him and the thriving agricultural land in front. He looked at the scene more closely. The houses were spaced roughly at the corners of squares he judged to measure about two miles across. Smallholdings. At the corner of one of the nearer squares, nine or ten houses huddled into a tiny village. With this as his new objective, he set off down the hill.

It was about three miles away, and he had covered approximately half the distance towards it when he heard the hooting. It was a sound not unlike a ship's whistle, and with the same staccato intervals. Automatically his ear registered the direction of sound, and he turned round to look for it. Something was following him, and rapidly narrowing the distance that separated them.

The key feature was the spherical cabin, carried at a height of about twenty feet from the ground on three metal legs that seemed to be jointed in at least half-a-dozen places. The cabin seemed to be windowless but was studded with various minor features, some of which might have been lookouts. Three metallic-looking fronds were curled up beneath it. The whole machine advanced rapidly on its jointed tripedal locomotory apparatus. He reckoned it to be travelling at little less than thirty miles an hour. Anxious in case it might miss him he stood in the middle of the crumbling roadway, waving his arms vigorously.

As the machine got within twenty yards of him one of the fronds beneath the cabin unrolled into a segmented metal tentacle, perhaps twenty-five feet long. It swung viciously towards him, and even as he ducked abruptly out of its way his mind only accepted the possibility of some clumsy mismanagement of the controls. He only began to suspect there might be some hostility about the machine's intentions when a second tentacle unrolled and flung its savage steel at him with a fury that made the air whirl about him. He threw himself towards the edge of the road, tumbled over a parapet, and felt himself falling helplessly.

When he recovered, he saw that he was lying at the bottom of a crevasse. There had been a landslip at some time and a fissure, perhaps ten or twelve feet deep, ran for several yards between the dilapidated road and the scrub country beside it.

He looked up. The machine was straddling his refuge. Far up against the blue arc of sky the spherical cabin swayed in motion as the machine settled its legs on either side of the crevasse. The tentacles lashed down at

him, but cut the air five feet over his head. They weren't long enough. For two or three minutes they whipped to and fro above him; then, as rapidly, they curled up again and with a convulsive jerk the machine passed across his field of vision, and out of sight. He heard its hooting resumed, and heard it grow fainter with distance. By the time he had climbed up the rocky slope to the road again, it was about a mile away.

He stood watching it. Its jerky but rapid motions were carrying it towards the group of houses he had himself been aiming for. It approached them without slackening pace. Tiny now, but distinct in the clear air, he saw it pass over the buildings, apparently brushing unconcernedly against them. He thought he saw one of the tentacles uncurl to wave briefly in some motion, but at the distance it was impossible to be sure.

The machine disappeared into the distance. He continued his own journey, his mind still more confused and wondering.

He saw men and women as he got near the cluster of houses. He saw the damage too. The side of one of the houses had been ploughed open, presumably by one of the machine's tripedal legs, and people were grouped about it. He noticed they were dressed in roughly woven, hand-made clothes. He walked towards them, conscious that his own momentous arrival from the twentieth century might be somewhat marred as far as these people were concerned by the pressing catastrophe of their own immediate affairs. He heard their raised voices as he drew near, and was relieved to realise, when so much was mystifying and apparently paradoxical, that George's guess that the English tongue was unlikely to alter much in the next hundred years had at least been borne out.

A small man with a shrill voice—he looked about forty—was saying:

"Yeah, it's the same one. He's a mean bastard, that one. It's the same one, all right. I couldn't mistake him."

There had been a slight vowel shift—"mistake" was more like "maystoik"—but the words were intelligible enough. He found himself on the edge of the group, but they weren't taking any notice of him.

He began to say something—anything to hear his own voice speaking to other men—but the others were too busily discussing the damage to the cottage to pay him any attention. Or most of them were. But a grey-haired man, tall, with a lean face, came round to stand beside him. He said quietly:

"Stranger in these parts?"

Stanley nodded. "It's a long story. And a difficult one. I don't suppose you'll believe me."

The other pursed his lips into a wry smile.

"I believe easily. Come on in and have a drink, anyway. It won't be back."

A girl joined them; she was slightly built, with a pleasant but rather strained face. Her hair was glossy brown, and curly. She wore a simple red dress.

Stanley asked: "It? That's something I want to know."

The stranger looked at him with real curiosity.

"You don't know what that was? You do interest me."

They went through a low doorway into a small square stone-walled room. It looked like the inside of the kind of farmhouse that twentieth-century America would have preserved as a relic. There was even a rack of churchwarden pipes on the wall behind the bar that stretched across the room

and barred the way to the rest of the house. A woman was cleaning glasses on the other side of it. The stranger went over and got three glasses of a liquid that looked like a dark ale. He paid, Stanley noticed, in heavy coins that rang on the wood.

He brought the drinks over to the table beneath the small square window, at which Stanley and the girl were already sitting.

"My name's Coolen. Luther Coolen. My daughter, Patience."

"Stanley Liggard." He looked at them speculatively. "I still think it's going to be difficult. I can't expect you to believe me."

Patience had a brittle-sounding voice, with a harshness that was in a way attractive.

"If you don't know what the Meccanoes are, you must have been hiding some place."

He drank from the glass. It was beer, and a brew with body in it.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose you could say I've been hiding."

He told them his story as simply as possible, glancing at their faces at intervals to watch disbelief creeping in. But it didn't. Luther Coolen continued to look at him with bland politeness, the girl with rather more interest but also without comment.

"Now," he finished. "You can tell me what kind of world I've come into."

The girl echoed bitterly: "What kind of a world!"

Luther Coolen said thoughtfully: "I wonder what happened to your friend George. He may have been killed in one of the first panics. Or perhaps entirely by accident—and the panics began before anybody could pay attention to his papers and come and find you."

Stanley said: "The panics?"

"In your time," Luther said, confirming something, "the world was divided between two blocs—it looked as though another world war was in preparation?"

"Very much."

"People on this side of the world didn't know much about what the others might be getting up to. They were believed to be chasing us for our atom bomb supremacy. And they were, of course. But they were on to other things too. Heard of cybernetics?"

Stanley said: "Servomechanisms—electronic brains?"

"Electronic brains. A lot of work had been done on them here. Some people talked of it as the second technological revolution. The first had largely dispensed with the need for human labour; the second would cut out the white collar workers in a hundred thousand different fields of organisation and accountancy."

Stanley remembered something. "More than that! Someone said there was no reason why machines shouldn't write poetry. A joke, I guess."

Luther smiled awkwardly. "It turned out to be a bad joke. The Russians were on it too. They had one man—a fellow called Kapitza. We don't know much about his career in Russia though he had had a brilliant one as a physicist in western Europe before he had the bad judgment to go back to his Russian homeland on a holiday. They kept him. There were reports after that. He was supposed to be working on atom bombs, on a super cosmic-ray bomb; half-a-dozen times he was reported dead. Actually they couldn't do anything with him. He wasn't to be intimidated, and the only

chance of his paying a dividend was for them to leave him strictly alone. Eventually they did.

"And on his own he turned to cybernetics. Whether out of real interest in a field quite unrelated to his early work or whether out of despair and cynicism about mankind we shan't know now. When he started getting results he was encouraged, of course. I don't know what the bosses thought he was giving them. Probably robot soldiers, giant remote-control tanks, all that kind of useful playthings. He asked for supplies of the precious plutonium—and they gave them to him.

"Then he built his Brain. We know it's plutonium-activated; and that's about all we do know about it. We know there's only one. These tripod arrangements that scavenge the countryside are in some kind of radio communication with the main centre. The country people credit them with individual personalities, but they're all part of the Brain. It was the Brain that swiped at you in the ditch and kicked half a house in here."

Stanley said: "And Kapitza? He couldn't control it?"

Patience Coolen said: "From what we've learned about it since, probably the first thing the Brain did was to pluck his arms and legs off. It's one of its favourite pastimes."

Stanley said: "I get the impression that the Brain is vindictive. Surely a machine can't be—emotional?"

"It's an interesting point," Luther agreed. "Purely as a guess, I should say that it's fascinated by *gesture*. That's something we take for granted; as an automatic part of all animal life, and especially of men. Smiles, frowns, waving arms—all the translations into the physical of mental processes are commonplace to us. But not to the Brain. It never tires of probing men for reactions, in a way that appears casual but may not be. It's one of the things we've got that it can never have: you can see the interest."

"And the deserted cities?" Stanley asked.

"Cities," Patience said, "are one of the things it can prevent us having."

"The first information the Western world had," Luther explained, "was when the Meccanoes plunged across the Iron Curtain as though it were butter muslin and started kicking Berlin to pieces. It was taken for Russian aggression, of course. One or two Russian cities were destroyed by atom bombs before the Meccanoes reached them. As a matter of fact, it was several months before it was realised that the whole business wasn't a Russian avalanche. And by that time, mankind was on the run. It had become very clear that the Brain regarded cities as a natural hunting ground. And in any case, once the Meccanoes had succeeded in breaking up the fabric of civilisation, of city-civilisation, the only hope lay in getting out into the country."

Stanley's imagination was caught. "The population of the world's cities pouring out into the surrounding country. That must have been . . ."

"Hell," Patience supplied for him. "In ten years the world population dropped from two billion to something probably nearer two million. And for the overwhelming majority of deaths the Brain was only indirectly responsible. It supplied the conditions for men to starve to death; to tear each other to pieces for a loaf of bread or the carcase of a rabbit."

Luther said: "It could have wiped us right out, of course. There's no way of really getting at whatever obscure thought processes go through it.

It seems as though the spectacle of man interests it. At least it leaves us reasonably well alone; as long as we don't form too large a group. And except for the hunts."

"The hunts?"

"The Meccanoes hunt every now and then," Patience said. "They hunt men as men once hunted foxes. And they treat them in much the same way when they catch them. They don't eat us; but men didn't eat foxes either, did they?"

Stanley said uncertainly: "It doesn't seem credible. Wasn't there any attempt to stop it at the beginning. Armies . . ."

"There were armies," Luther said grimly. "Tanks and aeroplanes and battleships. But their crews were human, and the Meccanoes aren't. If the Air Force had succeeded in dropping an atom bomb on the Brain itself, that would have finished things; but they didn't. And every human plane shot out of the sky represented a trained crew written off, while the Meccanoes, the arms and legs of the Brain, could be repaired almost as fast as they were hit, and replacements were always pouring out. There was only one end to that kind of war. And since the cities were abandoned . . ."

"There's no way of fighting it? No way at all?"

Luther said: "Look at them!"

The people had begun to come in from outside. They stood by the bar, talking and arguing in a desultory, hopeless fashion. The small man with the shrill voice said:

"Reckon they might leave us alone now. Reckon we might get the harvest in before there's any more trouble."

"They take things for granted," Luther said. He paused. "Yes, there is something. Not very much, but something. If you feel like coming in on it, we'd be glad of your help. Anyway, you might as well travel with us until you get your bearings. It's a feudal world now, and you're without a niche. They wouldn't let you stay here; the ground's all marked out."

"What do you do?" he asked.

Patience said: "We're pedlars. Hucksters!"

"We make a little," Luther said. "Three can live on it almost as well as two. There are few luxuries in this world, anyway. Well?"

"I'm very grateful." He felt the enormity of understatement in his words. He had a lot to be grateful for.

Luther drained his beer. "We'll have a meal here. Then we'll get on our way. We should reach the next village before night. That Meccano has done in our lodging here."

They had a donkey stabled behind the inn. It was a young, sturdy beast. They hitched the double pack of goods on it and set off, Luther leading the donkey and Stanley and Patience walking beside him.

Patience said: "You'll have to get used to walking."

He followed her glance to his own feet, shod in light, pointed shoes.

Luther said: "We'll get you something stronger at the next village."

They walked for some time in silence through the still hot afternoon. The donkey padded steadily on, stirring a small cloud of white dust in which the smaller clouds raised by their own feet merged and were lost. Stanley felt unaccustomed aches pulling at his muscles, but there was satisfaction also in the monotonous regularity of physical effort. He said once:

"You say there's some way of attacking the Brain—of getting at it?"

Luther said: "The Brain itself is a bit of a traveller. At present it's on this continent; in what used to be Philadelphia."

"And it has a weak spot?"

Luther glanced at him briefly. "I think so. That can wait, though. We'll have plenty of time to talk it over before we get within reach."

Stanley said nothing. He approved Luther's caution; it made it more probable that he really had something useful in mind.

The ground became more broken; the path they were following led over a hillside on which sheep were grazing—at this point there wasn't a single farmhouse in sight. But at the top of the hill, Patience pointed down into the valley before them. Shadows were falling more squarely with the approaching evening and the valley itself was in the shade, but Stanley could see the small huddle of houses in the distance. He was going to say something when Luther broke in:

"You hear that?"

Patience nodded slightly, her gaze preoccupied. Stanley listened. He heard it himself, a faint but quickening sound across the quiet air. The staccato hooting. He looked at Luther.

"The Meccanoes?"

The hooting was perceptibly louder, and he realised with a shock that it was on more than one note and that the intervals overlapped.

Luther said: "Yes, the Meccanoes. We're unlucky."

Patience had been looking about her. "A dip over there—about a hundred yards. It doesn't look very promising, but . . ."

Luther had already begun to urge the donkey in the direction she had indicated. The hooting behind them became louder. Suddenly the air was torn with a gale, blowing up over the brow of the hill. The wind shrieked at them; they had to fight their way across it. The temperature had dropped fantastically. Across the howling wind, Patience shrieked in his ear:

"They have weather control. They often exercise it on a hunt. God knows why, but it amuses them."

The whole sky had darkened and he became aware of the sting of hail plucking at his flesh. The three of them stumbled down into the hollow; he could see it wasn't going to be very much protection. Behind them the hooting rose into a pizzicato wailing. Luther pulled the donkey to its knees, and the three of them huddled beside it for shelter.

Luther said: "This was really bad luck. We haven't been caught in a hunt for two years. If they haven't found a quarry yet they may sweep right past us; they're more likely to flush someone down towards the village."

Stanley's mind still refused to accept the implications of the situation, or of a world in which such a situation could be commonplace. He said, almost angrily:

"But why? I don't get it. If the world were being bossed by super-intelligent cats I could understand it. But machines!"

He felt Patience's body tense beside him.

"Quiet now. They'll be close."

He could feel himself the vibrations in the ground underneath them; the thud of stamping metal feet ascending the other side of the hill. He craned his head over the side of the donkey, peering through what was now a

blizzard of snow and biting ice. There was light in the sky; a glow. He saw the first of the tripeds loom up over the brow of the hill. And the second, third, fourth. Powerful searchlights beamed down from the metal cabins, crossing and criss-crossing the uneven ground in front of them. He could understand the villagers having credited them with separate entities. It was very difficult to believe that each was no more than an organ of the single Brain.

He thought that the five hunters would miss them in their relentless progress downhill towards the village, and he was right. The nearest beam of light flicked the ground some twenty yards to their left; flicked and passed on. He heard Luther draw a breath of relief. And then, looking up the hill again, he saw another tripod heave across the horizon and knew that it must pass directly over their meagre hiding place.

Patience saw it at the same time. She clutched his arm involuntarily, her fingers gripping in harshly. The decision that he reached without hesitation or reflection was partly due to that, partly gratitude, partly a feeling that he was only exchanging one kind of certain death for another that would at least spare his friends.

He stood up quickly and lunged up out of the hollow, running across the wind-torn grass towards the swath of light approaching down the slope. He heard Patience cry something behind him, but the wind carried her voice away at once. He ran for the light as though it were warmth and shelter. It enveloped him suddenly, and he heard the hooting above him change its key and its intervals. He ran again, still heading away from the hollow. Almost at once the light lost him. Later he realised that this had probably been deliberate; the cat releasing the mouse to a temporary freedom. But at the time he was only concerned with the fact of the welcome darkness round him again. He knew one part of his purpose had been achieved—he could hear the others casting back up the hill towards him. Now he only had his own life to fight for.

He doubled back towards the crest of the hill. He had seen, before the storm came down, that there was no shelter on this side; and he remembered that as they had toiled up the other there had been a small wood of pines stretching round the side of the hill towards another valley. He didn't really think he could make it, but he might as well try for something.

The hooting behind him settled into a steady rhythm that was almost like the baying of hounds. But giant hardmetal hounds, standing twenty feet off the ground and equipped with twenty-five-foot-long coiled steel arms! You were all wrong, George, he thought, about the kind of reception the world of the future would give me. But George had been safely dead for a hundred years. He could feel the vibration of the heavy thudding behind him. His own pulses were thudding and he felt an added tightness of the lungs with every searing breath he drew. He wondered how much longer he could go before he dropped.

He didn't realise he was near the wood until he stumbled over a log. He picked himself up and ran a few yards in before he let himself fall alongside a fallen pine. He lay as close to its dark, rotting bark as he could and felt oxygen tearing back into his lungs like a choking, burning gas. He had turned towards the fallen tree so that he could see nothing. But he heard the hooting very loud behind, and felt the stamping hitting the ground.

Then the world was dazzling white all round him and he knew he was in the path of one of the tripeds' searchlights. He waited in resignation for the tentacle to sweep down and pluck him from his place, but as darkness flowed in again and a huge foot shook the earth a few feet from him he realised that he could not have been noticed.

He lay, still gasping for breath, while the noise of the hunt passed on into the wood. His peace didn't last long. After about five minutes it was clear that they had circled round and were coming back. Probably they had reached the limits of the wood and guessed then that they had passed him. It was unlikely that he would be missed twice in the same way. But if he broke back into open country there was no hope for him at all. He got up and began edging cautiously towards the approaching line of light from the Meccanoes. It was a small chance, but it was the only one. They were crashing across the wood in a line, some fifteen yards apart. Their searchlights crossed to each other and back again. There were a few seconds in every minute when there was darkness between each of the advancing giants.

It would require knife-edge timing. He snaked forward from tree to tree, hearing the hooting more and more terrifyingly close. He headed directly between two of the tall, careening searchlights. The jumping line of light was thirty, twenty-five, twenty yards from him. He saw that the Meccanoes had to move slower in the wood, though in part the slowness must also be due to their need to search for him.

Ten yards, five. The searchlights from the Meccanoes to the left and right swept together into a pool of brilliance that turned the needles of the pines into cascades of silver—and then parted, leaving blackness. Stanley plunged forward, trying to combine speed and quietness; the pine carpet beneath his feet helped.

He turned his head instinctively as the brilliance flared up again—but this time behind him. The Meccanoes plodded solidly forward. For the moment he was safe. But they must soon reach the wood's edge, and it would not take them long in the bare open country beyond to guess that their quarry had cheated them again. It was up to him to press forward as quickly as possible while they were on the wrong track.

He made the best speed he could, and before the hooting began growing louder again he had actually got beyond the zone of freak weather into the ordinary clear twilight of a summer evening. The wood had attenuated several times almost to nothing, but each time it swelled out again beyond. The pines rolled down the valley and up the opposite slope. For over an hour the Meccanoes were obviously plunging around in a honeycombing search well to the rear; then, as though picking up some trail, their cry became more purposive behind him. The hunt was on again and with a vengeance.

The trees were thinner here; in some places the marks of the woodsman showed where areas of perhaps a hundred square yards had been cleared down to the stumps. And it was still quite light. He had no hope of doubling back again on the line relentlessly advancing up the slope behind him. He began to walk faster; to run. But all the time the hooting became louder. Although the air was quite cool now, the sweat was pouring torrentially down



his body. He was running fast, but without hope. He guessed they could not now be more than a hundred yards away.

He saw the hut as he staggered into the clearing. It was a log cabin, lying just below the hill crest. There was smoke coming from a chimney. Without thinking, without realising what he was doing he ran towards it, seeing it only as the hope of a refuge. The Meccanoes, hooting, as it seemed, triumphantly, broke through into the clearing as well. He dropped exhausted to the ground at the side of the cabin, and had enough of his faculties left to see the man burst from the cabin door and race for the further edge of trees. He even saw the metal tentacle uncoil towards the fleeing figure, before unconsciousness finally claimed him.

When he recovered he was not near the cabin at all, but laid before a small group of huts in another clearing. In the heavy dusk he could see the sullen, unfriendly faces watching him. But human faces—that was what counted. He said weakly:

"Is the hunt—over?"

A thickset, elderly man said: "Yeah. It's over."

Stanley closed his eyes again in relief. "Thank God!"

The thickset man said: "We aim always to do things legal. So I better tell you. This village you're in is Gafferty's. I'm Lew Neckers, the headman. I don't know your name, stranger, but you stand indicted. For murder."

He laughed weakly: "That's silly. I haven't killed anyone."

Neckers said stubbornly: "We do things legal. You deny you was in the hunt?"

Stanley said, more cautiously: "I was being hunted—yes."

Neckers spoke even more slowly. "It may be different in your parts, but here we reckon it that to throw the hunt on to a man is ordinary murder. It makes no difference if you're in hard straits."

Stanley said: "I don't understand."

"You came up the hill," Neckers went on. "You had the hunt after you; you made for Bill Skryski's cabin in the clearing; there was no call to do that unless you wanted to throw the hunt."

He had a sick feeling. "And—Skryski?"

"Bill Skryski," Neckers said, "had a wife and two kids in that cabin. Only one thing for him to do. He tried to take the hunt. They caught him before he'd gone fifty yards. His wife saw everything that happened from the cabin window. Everything. They were quite fast; they only took ten minutes."

His voice almost in a whisper, he said: "I had no idea . . . I didn't guess anything like that could happen." He looked up, at the narrow circle of condemning faces. "They'd been hunting me for two or three hours. I was just about all in. You can see how far gone I was. I never dreamed I was—throwing the hunt."

Necker said evenly: "I've known that defence put forward. I've known it taken. Only trouble is that it needs what we call testimony of character. You got anyone liable to vouch for you?"

The truth, he knew, could never be accepted, and if it were it would not help him in this situation. He shook his head reluctantly.

"I come from—a good way off. Two or three hundred miles. I don't know anyone."

God knows where Luther and Patience are, he thought. These valleys were like a maze. And they were strangers too. He looked at the surrounding faces, which were now sceptical as well as ominous. He realised what had probably caused that—they couldn't imagine anyone, in this world, travelling two or three hundred miles from his village. As for the true story . . . !

Necker said, with finality: "We do things right. You'll be put in a room under guard for the night. In the morning, we try you."

He submitted lifelessly as they led him away. The moon was lifting over the further hill.

The trial was soon over. He could do no more than repeat what he had

said the previous night: that he had been all in, that he hadn't imagined he was throwing the hunt on to anyone else. Necker, who presided as judge, formally requested him to supply testimony of character; he could only shake his head. They sentenced him, and then half a dozen of the men took him and led him off up the hill. He judged it to be about ten in the morning; the sun was already beating hotly between the pines.

He said to Necker: "Just how . . .?"

The trees had thinned out again. They were perhaps five hundred yards above the village; just ahead there was bare rock, gleaming in the sunlight, and the sky blue and stretching into haze beyond it.

Necker said: "We throw the hunt back." His voice was less sullen now; there was almost a note of friendliness in it. "The Meks use this route." He looked at Stanley obliquely. "Maybe twenty-four hours, maybe a little more. We leave you water."

As they reached the expanse of bare rock that crested the hill, Stanley saw why this would be a route for the Meccanoes. A strip free of trees stretched up obliquely from the next valley, and carried on over the top of the hill and down the other side. There were two iron rings sunk in a concrete block between the rocks. They chained him to one of them by a heavy steel bracelet round his left ankle. Then they left him, clomping off down the hill without a backward look. He watched until the trees swallowed them, and then sat down on a flat rock and considered his position.

The trouble was that he could see so well the justice of the villagers' action. To have the attentions of a hunt transferred to you must be one of the major hazards of life; it was reasonable enough to punish it as murder. After all, while he was lying in a faint beside the cabin, the Meccanoes had been torturing and killing an innocent man in his place. It was all very understandable and carried out, as Necker had boasted, with strict legality. That didn't make it any easier.

The sun rose steadily across the sky, and then as steadily declined. There were no clouds, and only the lightest breeze to sigh among the branches of the pines. He drank thirstily from the big leather water-pouch, and put it back in the shade of the rocks. Once or twice during the day he thought he could hear the distant hooting of a Meccano, and his skin shivered in apprehension, but there was no nearer approach.

He heard it more plainly during the night. Despite the chill of the rock on which he lay, he had dropped off into an uneasy doze, and he was awakened from this to hear the hooting stridently close and menacing. He got stiffly to his feet. The valley beneath was bright with moonlight but a circle of brighter light was advancing in a cumbrous dance along the valley floor. He watched it pass almost directly beneath him and carry on up the valley. The light disappeared and the hooting died away, but he got no more sleep that night. He was glad when dawn broke though, in view of what Necker had said it was overwhelmingly likely to be his last.

The morning dragged slowly, even more slowly than the previous day and night had done. Perhaps because he now regarded his time as borrowed—it was more than twenty-four hours since the villagers had left him. A hundred times he wondered what it would be like when the steel whip curled down to pluck him from his anchor.

It was a kind of relief when, a little after noon, he saw the Meccano crawling

like a great metal crab down the side of the facing hill. The bare stretch down which it was advancing led directly to the similar path on this hill, and so to him. He gave himself about ten minutes. He saw the Meccano pause to thresh idly at something in the undergrowth; and added thirty seconds on to his life.

When he heard voices he thought it could only be his own light-headedness, from lack of sleep, from hunger and fear. But the voices became clearer and unmistakably real. And among them, raised to call to him, its warm brittleness instantly familiar—Patience's. He looked down, and saw them coming towards him: Patience, Luther, a handful of the villagers.

He called, surprised to hear his own voice high-pitched and cracked:

"Keep off! There's one coming."

Then he felt Patience kneeling beside him, her arms round him, her mouth soft and warm on his cheek. Necker was stolidly bending. He turned a key in the leg-iron, and it clicked open. Necker looked down the hill.

"Plenty of time," he said. "But there's no sense in cutting things fine."

They scrambled down over the rocks and into the welcome seclusion of the pines. They were half-way down to the village when the hooting vibrated through the air as the Meccano made its way over the hill.

Stanley said: "I'm still not sure of anything."

Necker said: "We'd 'a been sorry if things had turned out bad, but you had yourself to blame in part. How come you didn't mention Luther Coolen? We'd 'a held you till his next visit. We don't rush things when there's a doubt."

He said: "I had no idea he was known here." He looked at Patience, demure again, walking down beside him. "You told them . . ."

Luther said: "We gave testimony of character all right. We're glad to see you again, Stanley. I never thought we would."

He grinned. "I'm glad to see you!"

That evening the three of them sat out in the glade below the village. The air was cool and with the setting of the sun clouds had begun to roll up over the hills, threatening storm; but real storm, ordinary natural storm.

"We know you can be trusted now," Luther said. "And more . . ."

Stanley said reflectively: "It's a violent and uncertain and treacherous world, but there are some good things in it. Necker and the others, for instance. Considering the situation, they were very fair. I doubt if I would have been treated so fairly in my own time under that kind of provocation."

Patience drew her breath in sharply. "Yes, there are some advantages in living under a reign of terror. There are no wars now. There's no social unrest. But there's the Brain. And the Meccanoes."

He caught the implied reproach.

"Anything I can do I'll do gladly. I only hope that—if we ever succeed in destroying the Brain—we hang on to something of the neighbourliness there is now."

"We must tackle problems as we come to them," Luther said calmly. "The Brain first." He lit his pipe, and drew on it. Stanley watched him. This was apparently a world without cigarettes. He would have to start pipe-smoking himself.

"Do you remember something I told you about the Brain?" Luther asked—"that it was plutonium-activated?"

Stanley nodded.

"We know from Kapitza's notes the amount of plutonium he used. He had to be wary with it. It was a very tricky business altogether. The amount is not very far below—the critical mass. So . . ."

The pieces fitted in smoothly and beautifully.

"So," Stanley said, "the Brain, by its nature, is permanently on fuse for an atomic explosion. The Brain is a bomb. It only wants a detonator."

"There you have it," Luther said. "The Brain is aware of it, too. Obviously that's one of the reasons for its deliberate destruction of man's city civilisation. That civilisation was already on the way to becoming an atomic one. The Brain might have used its Meccanoes to destroy a hundred, a thousand atom plants, but as long as man remained urban and industrial it could never rule out the possibility of the small secret plant and the sudden guided missile plunging down on it, beyond the possibility of defence. With a world of small farmers, of lumberjacks and cobblers and ironsmiths and pedlars, it could rest in something like security."

Stanley echoed: "Something like security! I should call it a hundred per cent!"

"Not quite," Luther said. "After the collapse there were, as you might expect, several attempts by small groups of scientists and technicians to build up small industrial units in secret. They were often in caves, or underground. They had one aim. The production of enough plutonium to detonate the Brain, if it could be once conveyed to it. The Brain, of course, hunted them down relentlessly, and successfully. These groups maintained radio communication with each other and one by one, over a period of fifty years, their transmitters went dead. I was born and reared in the last of them. We survived for fifteen years after the Delhi group went. Then, when I was a young man, the Brain finally found us, but not before my father and his friends had refined enough plutonium to do what was necessary, and developed a shielding powerful enough to make it genuinely portable. In fact they did it four times over. There were four canisters, each capable of turning the Brain into a mushrooming cloud of radio-active dust. When it was known that the Meccanoes had found the factory, two young men—myself and another—were each given two of the canisters and let out through a secret passage under the hill. The others stayed behind to destroy all trace of the passage, and to fight things out with the Meccanoes with the kind of desperation that was appropriate to man's last hope being quenched. I got clear."

"And the other?" Stanley asked.

"He left half an hour after me. I saw them get him."

"And you?"

Luther smiled. "For years I chased the Brain, without getting near enough even to make an attempt on it. I followed it from continent to continent, always to find that it had moved on to some new territory. So when I got back to America I decided to wait and let the Brain come to me. It's been a long time, but it's come at last. The Brain is in Philadelphia. So that's where we're heading."

"The canisters," Patience said, "rest on either side of the donkey, one in each pack."

Stanley said thoughtfully: "So the only problem is how to apply them. I don't see how that can be easy. How will you get near it?"

"There's one good chance," Luther said. "I've told you that in some ways the Brain is fascinated by man; by his actions, by that quality of *humanness* which makes him both strong and vulnerable. And gesture especially fascinates it. In part it satisfies the curiosity by having its Meccanoes chase and torture men, but it does it another way as well. The Brain holds court. Its most immediate personal servants—are men."

"But that lays it wide open!" Stanley protested. "Surely, eventually someone will be able, somehow, to throw a spanner in the works. You don't need plutonium."

"It's reported," Patience said evenly, "that one of the Brain's favourite minor amusements is to madden someone of its human slaves into attacking it. It even leaves iron bars lying round in the Main Room for them to pick up. But no iron bar, and certainly no human flesh, will crack the Brain's shell open. We've got the only thing that will do that."

Stanley said slowly: "So the idea is to get one of the Brain's human slaves to take the canister in—to bring the second half of the atomic bomb into contact with the first. Without knowing what he is doing?"

"If we could do it that way," Luther said, "we would. The kind of men and women who serve the Brain, for the sake of the luxuries they get from it and the freedom from ordinary labour, would be no loss, and I wouldn't hesitate to use them. But it's too risky; there are too many possibilities of something going wrong. No, I'm taking it in myself." He went on speaking, cutting across Stanley's attempt to interrupt. "I don't doubt that you're willing to volunteer for the job. But even ignoring the fact that I am getting to be an old man and that this is a suitable climax to my life, there is another thing. I am more experienced than you in the ways of the Brain. And this is so vital a project that no unnecessary chances must be taken." He looked at his daughter. "Patience knows this."

She nodded reluctantly. "Yes, I know it."

He said, with a feeling of frustration: "Then there's nothing at all I can do?"

Luther smiled at him. "On the contrary, a hundred things. You did one of them two days ago when you took the hunt from us. Three is so much better than two; there is one more expendable. And there will be a lot to do when the Brain is destroyed. You, with a mind fresh from the world before the Brain, will be invaluable."

"And now," he went on, "we should turn in. We must be off early in the morning."

Knowing Philadelphia to be no more than three hundred and fifty miles away, Stanley had not imagined the journey would present any great difficulties or take any considerable length of time. He soon realised that he had not fully appreciated the difficulties of travelling on foot with a donkey, and with the need for transacting the full and active business of a huckster on the way. Luther's stocks were nearly exhausted, and their first objective had to be well off their main course, for the replenishment of the packs. One of his main lines were small religious effigies, carved from pearwood. This particular village had a grove of trees, and the carving was their almost universal occupation. Luther paid in heavy gold coins and the small,

delicate figurines and high-reliefs were carefully wrapped in soft cloths and transferred to the packs.

The tempo remained leisurely. They tramped on from village to village, buying and selling and bartering, always with the main objective ahead of them. It was important not to rouse suspicion that they were anything other than a small group of pedlars, going about their ordinary business. Three or four times a week, on average, they would see one or more of the Meccanoes strutting across the landscape, and take cover until the danger had passed. Stanley became used to that eerie hooting, but it never lost its power to raise his hackles.

Once, from their hiding in a group of bushes, they were forced to watch the conclusion of a hunt. Seventy or eighty yards from them a hunted woman sank in final exhaustion and the three Meccanoes closed in on her. A tentacle picked her up, tossed her in the air, and she became a ball, flung between the three metal monsters for perhaps ten minutes.

Patience said, her voice dry and hard: "You must watch this. This steels our resolution. There is nothing we can do for her, but we can destroy the spring that sets those pretty little clockwork toys going."

The spasmodic hooting seemed to have a sardonic tone; at times it seemed almost like hysterical laughter. Stanley looked at Patience and saw the soft curve of her cheek set in sharp and bitter lines of concentration. He thought of the possibility of it being Patience up there, thrown between those curling metal arms, and knew that if it were nothing could have stopped him from plunging out to throw his own life away in a futile attack. But it was a human being whose life was being crushed out.

He said urgently to Luther: "In case this plan doesn't work—is there any other way of getting at it?"

Luther said: "I know only of one other. Patience knows it, too. But this way will succeed. Don't worry about that."

The Meccanoes had tired of their play. One of them took the small figure, held it close against one of the cabin's crystal "eyes," and carefully and slowly, almost tenderly, twisted the head from the body.

Stanley drew breath in deeply. "I hope so. I hope so."

Tragedy hit them when they were still eighty miles from their objective. The little donkey sickened, and in three days was dead. It took three weeks of scouring around the neighbouring villages before they could find anyone willing to sell them another.

At last they got off again. Autumn was well advanced by now, and the distance they could travel each day was shortened by the narrowing arc of the sun. It was late October when they stood at last on the limits of what had been Philadelphia. This city had obviously been roughly treated by the Meccanoes at some time in the past; entire sections had been reduced to patches of uneven rubble and those parts that were standing showed signs of heavy damage. Far off towards the centre a pylon gleamed in smooth aluminium. Luther pointed to it.

"The mark of the Brain's residence. When it comes to a new place the Meccanoes always erect a pylon. We don't know what the purpose is. They leave them behind when the Brain moves on."

Stanley said: "The city's suffered."

Luther nodded. "One of the earliest factory-redoubts was built here—somewhere under that rubble."

Stanley nodded. "And now—do we go straight in?"

"No. We look about for a village on the outskirts. There will be traffic between the villagers and the Brain's slaves. There always is."

They found a village easily enough—or the remains of one. There was one house untouched and a couple more that looked as though they were repairable. They found the survivors huddled among the ruins.

Luther asked them: "The Meks?"

One of the women said dully: "The big one itself."

Stanley said to Patience: "Does she mean the Brain? That the Brain itself destroyed the village?"

Patience whispered back to him: "It hunts in person sometimes. We don't know why."

Luther spoke to the woman again. "How did it come about?"

She said: "We had the drones up here. There was some trouble between them and our men. One of them threatened he would set the Brain on us." She gestured about her.

Luther pursued: "It did this—and went back down into the city?"

"The city?" The woman looked up. "No, it's left the city. It hit us during the move. We saw the Meks crowd out westwards, carrying all their boxes of junk. You bet we were glad to see 'em go. Then the big one came out last of all. It circled up this way and hit us. We saw the drone laughing at us. It was carrying him."

After all their efforts, it was a shocking disappointment. There, down in the city, where they had hoped to find their quarry, there was now only the routine Meccano service station; the Brain itself somewhere—anywhere—else. The cup was being dashed from their lips at the very moment of drinking.

Luther said: "Do you have any idea—where the Brain was heading?"

The woman said listlessly. "The drone talked about California. He talked a lot about lying on the beach, in the sun. That's what started the trouble, I guess. Someone told him what he was." She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe he was lying."

Luther stood quietly. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe."

The four survivors were about destitute, without even food. The three stayed with them and shared their provisions with them until help began to come in from other villages. In any case they could not summon any enthusiasm for the new trek that would have to be made. Stanley discussed it with Patience one day, lying out in a field and letting their bodies soak in the brief benediction of Indian summer.

She said: "I've got some clearer idea of the time now. We missed them by eight hours."

He said despairingly: "As little as that!"

She rolled over on to an elbow and looked at him.

"It's not as little as that. It would have taken at least a week to make the necessary preparations. We couldn't have just plunged in and laid the fuse."

"I suppose not. God, but it's infuriating, all the same."

"There are compensations. If we'd got here a fortnight earlier—if the

plan had worked—Daddy wouldn't be alive now."

She gestured with her hand, and he followed its direction. Below them the ruined village was quiet in the sunlight; at the back of one of the ruined houses Luther was tending the donkey. The smoke from his pipe curled up distinctly through the clear air.

"Oh, I know," she went on. "I haven't forgotten the things we've seen. I haven't forgotten that woman. I know it's got to be done, and I'm willing for him to do it. But a reprieve for the Brain is a reprieve for him, and I can't help being glad of it. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand." He paused, watching the breeze and the sun between them take a wisp of her hair and transmute it into gold. "And now?"

She said briskly: "To-morrow morning, off again."

"To California?"

She nodded.

"On a guess? On the chance word of a vicious and probably half-mad degenerate? What if we're heading in precisely the wrong direction?"

"We may be. But the alternative is waiting until news of the Brain's new place trickles through by the ordinary channels of gossip and information. Remember, we have no wireless, no telegraphy. If it's left the continent we're not likely to catch up with it before it moves again. If it hasn't—California's as likely a place as any." She paused, considering. "We should make it by the spring. We could do it sooner if we didn't have to wait for the snows to melt in the mountain passes.

"And if the Brain isn't there?"

"Then we've probably lost it. We'll have to wait for it to come back to America—maybe in ten years, maybe in twenty. Meanwhile peddling our way from village to village. Daddy would be too old for the job by then, even if he's alive."

She looked at him. Her eyes were very close to his.

He said: "It's not a bad life. Even with the Brain and the Meccanoes, it's not a bad life."

She said, too lightly: "You wouldn't rather be back in that snug twentieth century, with central heating and hot tubs and—beautiful women in silks and perfumes?"

He felt uncertainty in his own voice, but it was the uncertainty of emotion, not of any doubt as to where he wanted to be.

"I wouldn't change this for any place, any time."

He leaned towards her and her warmth came half-way to meet him, freely given, a miracle that sharpened all senses, the armed archangel lifting the cup.

The afternoon stretched, blue and golden, about them.

When the new trek was less than a fortnight old, trouble hit them again. Luther, leading the donkey along a difficult path, slipped and fell, and his ankle turned over beneath him. They were able to diagnose it as a sprain, not a fracture, but it was a sufficiently bad one to keep him immobilised for another three weeks. By the time they got going again there was the real feel of winter around them.

Another event took place during the three weeks' enforced idleness. The local priest, making the round of his scattered diocese, stopped at the village and married Stanley and Patience.

The little party struggled on into the colder winds blowing down from the

western mountains. Even on good days now they could make no more than twenty-five miles, and the increasingly frequent bad weather cut that down considerably. When December was half-gone, Luther told them the time had come to hive up for the worst of the winter. There was a village he knew, on the edge of a range of hills, overlooking a plain—they had wintered there before.

Patience nodded: she remembered.

"Scanlon's."

Most of the names of villages were in the possessive, having derived from a new patriarchy. In many cases the family who had given a name to the village still lived in it.

"Ten years ago?" Patience wondered. "I remember their grotto! The blue sky with stars in it, and the models of—what were they?"

Luther looked at her affectionately, remembering, Stanley thought, the years before he had come; their earlier wanderings. Those years, too, had been full and eventful ones.

"Camels," he told her.

She echoed, delighted: "Camels!"

They were remembered in the village and made welcome, and Stanley along with them. Previously, apart from the incidents of the donkey's death and Luther's sprained leg, their life had been nomadic, moving daily from village to village, putting down no roots. But this was the time when the huckster took his rest, sustained for a couple of months on the fat of the summer, and welcomed and prepared for idleness. The village was a fairly large one; more than thirty buildings clustered together just under the crest of the last hill before the plain. Just under, because it was not wise to build on a hilltop and invite more attention from the Meccanoes than normal chances gave. They got two rooms at the inn, and in the evenings in the bar there was the warmth of log fires and ale and good companionship.

The grotto that Patience had remembered was being built again, in the church beside the inn. Most of the village lent a hand in some way with its construction, and Stanley found a lost boyhood prowess returning as he whittled small pieces of wood into appropriate, satisfying shapes. A week before Christmas it was completed. The small niche in the stone of the church had become a window into a new landscape. The sky the brilliant blue of Syrian evening, with one great star; the shepherds with their flocks on the hill; the three travellers; the village huddled upon itself as though guarding a treasure; and in the foreground the cave with its kneeling animals, and among the straw the parents kneeling to their Child. The camels were there, too. Patience pointed them out to Stanley.

She said: "I was only thirteen. It was magic then."

"And now?"

"It's still magic. But more as well. The Brain hasn't got this. It isn't in the same universe even. That's a wonderful thing to remember."

They had cause to remember it.

During the week there was carol singing and a quickening tempo of preparation for the joyous feast of Christmas. On the Eve itself there was the midnight service which everyone attended; the little church was packed out with villagers and people who had walked or ridden or driven in from outlying farms. The warm glow of lantern and candle gleamed on the

bowed heads and flickered on the small landscape of the crib.

Above the music they heard the other noise echoing through the wintry air. They waited until the hooting was close upon them before they scattered. Stanley hurried Patience out through a side door, and into the narrow, winding street. Snow which had fallen earlier in the week had lain and the night, brilliant anyway with a clarity of moon and stars, was made more brilliant by it. Across this whiteness the little seemingly incandescent circles of light of the Meccanoes' searchbeams marched towards them up the hillside. The Meccanoes themselves loomed blackly and menacing against the snow. Stanley looked for Luther, but he had gone another way. He pulled Patience into the stream of people running from the village into any kind of refuge in the wilderness beyond.

They huddled in a snowdrift thirty yards from the village's edge and watched what took place. It was very cold; the stars themselves looked like suspensions of frozen snow.

There were three Meccanoes. They stalked upwards across the snow towards the village; fifty yards from its edge their hooting ceased abruptly and they covered the remainder of the distance in a silence more terrifying than the noise had been. Their metal feet were silent, too, on the soft bed of the snow.

But noise returned; first the splintering of brick against metal as the foremost Meccano ploughed its way through to the village's centre—and then the screaming of victims trapped or crushed. Moonlight spun soft webs of light from the harsh metal of the advancing tripeds as they moved in and stood, finally, grouped about their objective. The church. Then the tentacular arms came down, flailing, tearing at and smashing the vaulted roof. The noise of crumbling stone again. The screaming which had momentarily dropped started up once more. It rang shrilly through the frosty air.

The destruction of the church took about ten minutes. When it was over the Meccanoes moved on, treading their way out through the village and off over the ridge of the hill and out of sight. Stanley heard Patience beside him sigh; he could not tell whether in relief or anger.

He said: "I suppose we might as well get back."

Figures picked themselves up out of the snow, and began to move back into the village. They moved for the most part in silence—when someone did speak it was in a whisper that drifted sibilantly over the frozen snow. In the village groups detached themselves from the general stream to attend to the hurt and trapped. Looking for Luther, Patience and Stanley found themselves standing by the ruin of the church.

Most of the front and the whole of the roof had been pulled in. The fallen masonry lay in grotesque, jutting heaps inside the shell of the church, looking, in the subtle half-tones of moonlight, like some antique ruin. As they stood looking at it, Luther came up.

He said: "I lost you. I'm glad you're all right."

Patience said: "I don't think there are many casualties. And any there are might be called accidental. I didn't see them pick anyone up."

Luther said: "No." He nodded towards the church. "They had something else in view."

Stanley burst out: "I don't get it. I don't get it at all. What does the

Brain think it gains by this? In a way it's—an admission of its own limitations."

"Yes," Luther agreed softly. "But even in men, remember, that is where the reaction is most violent: where a limitation has to be admitted. Shall we go in?"

They went in through the open side of the church. Others had already begun to do the same. They sat awkwardly on blocks of stone. Someone started to sing a carol, and the rest joined in. Stanley felt Patience grip his arm.

"Look!"

In the niche in the wall the Nativity scene remained untouched by the violence that had raged above it. There was even a candle burning in front of it still.

Winter relaxed slowly. At the earliest opportunity that weather allowed they set off again. Almost straight away they had heartening news. An itinerant cobbler, travelling in the opposite direction, confirmed that the Brain had taken up his new residence in California, among the ruins that had once been called Los Angeles. There was every prospect that they would find it still there when they reached the city. They had started the last lap.

It was in reaction from this wave of cheerfulness that Stanley considered their chances of achieving anything even if they reached the Brain's home ground. What chance had two men—one of them past sixty—and a girl against the metal-clad power and cunning that had destroyed so easily the finest armies of a world at the peak of its technological prowess? Walking beside the donkey he tapped, as he had done before, the small bulge at the bottom of the pack that represented their forlorn and remote hope. It seemed quite hopeless. And yet . . . He was aware of an irrational feeling of confidence. Miracles commonly turned at the touch of one hand—and Luther's was a good hand.

They zigzagged up through the mountain villages and through the passes until the last pass was reached and they stood looking down the fall of ground to the great plain beyond. From there on the going was easier. They wandered through the prosperous villages of California into the lengthening days of spring.

The nearest village to the ruins of Los Angeles was called Mickman's. It lay on the coast to the north of the city—perhaps twenty-five ramshackle houses inhabited by fishermen. It was very crowded; there was no question of getting any accommodation. Fortunately the weather was set so clear that there was little hardship in sleeping out in the open, on the curving, fine-sanded beach. By day they bought and sold and bartered in the village.

It was easy enough to recognise the Brain's slaves: the drones. They shared a characteristic of an unhealthy flabbiness; even the thinner ones had layers of fat which marked them out from the lean featured workers. That was the physical distinction. They wore also gaily coloured clothes which hung clingingly on them in defiance of all utility. But more important than any of these was the question of temperament. They were marked by their flamboyant theatrical posturings, their condescending flattery, their sudden rages and overwhelming, emotional griefs.

The problem, as Luther had explained it, was for him to get into the Brain's entourage as a replacement or substitute for one of the drones. It had seemed easy when viewed abstractedly. Quite frequently, it was known, a drone would find the grotesque futility of his life too overpowering, and change places with some outsider eager for the superficial softness of life with the Brain. And there were also, of course, the occasional casualties among the drones; either by accident or through one of the Brain's whims of cruelty. Before seeing them at close quarters, Stanley had imagined that a quality of courage must exist along with the servility of these slaves: since they took the risk of living day by day under the Brain's continual surveillance and were always open to his fury. But he realised now that no question of courage was involved. These people had plumbed the worst depths of cowardice; to the stage where they could find psychological security only under the shadow of the oppressor.

And just at present, in the soft warmth of spring sunshine, the drones did not seem at all anxious to change their leisurely existence for any more strenuous one. During their long periods of non-duty they drifted, men and women alike, about the villages on the perimeter of the city's ruins, arguing, drinking, fighting, making love, all the time despising and hating the ordinary human beings whose lives they were disrupting. After a number of tentative approaches, Luther at last put the question directly to one of the drones, a squat, middle-aged male, dressed in gold and purple, as they sat drinking wine outside the small inn one hot afternoon.

"I'm getting on," Luther said. "Peddling . . . it's a hard life. I find it too much for me." He looked at the drone directly. "I could pay for an entry to an easier life."

The drone laughed. "Pay! What's money to me? I know where I'm well off. I don't want the capital to set up in business on my own."

Luther persisted: "But one of the others?"

The drone let his gaze run easily and contemptuously over Luther's face and stubbly white beard.

"There's just one other thing, grandad. The Brain doesn't take attendants over fifty. It's not interested. I've only got five years to go myself before I get my ticket. I'll come and join you outside then. But you won't get in to the Brain—don't fool yourself."

He drifted away from them in search of some more amusing means of passing the time. They found another unattached drone, and Luther repeated the approach, with the same result. The first had not been lying.

Luther took it badly.

He said: "To have been fooling myself for so long . . ."

Patience poured dark red wine from the flask into their glasses. The sun grilled in a blue heaven.

She said: "So it's my turn. I have next chance." She looked at Stanley with affectionate determination. "No arguments."

Stanley felt the wine, dry against his palate, cool against his throat.

"No. No arguments. No emotions either. We must look at everything in the light of cold reason." He caught her hand that lay on the table, and imprisoned it between his own. "Well?"

"Well . . ." she began dubiously.

Stanley looked at Luther. Luther nodded.

"Now," Stanley said. "No arguments about defending the sacred mothers of the race—or the fathers for that matter. And no claims as to who was here first. Not even about seniority, although with my birth-date I can outrank Luther by three-quarters of a century. We'll stick to reason—and the fact that the only really important thing is to find the best way of giving the Brain his plutonium twin. That being so"—he looked at Patience—"I challenge you. I'll challenge you on strength, endurance, reflexes and ability in straight bluffing." He grinned. "We can test that one by half a dozen hands of poker."

Luther said: "That convinces me. I guess it will have to do for you, too, Patience."

Her face whitened. "This isn't a joke," she said. "This is certain death for . . ."

"Yes," Luther said gently, "—for your husband."

Patience turned to her father quickly. "Daddy, I didn't mean that. I didn't . . ."

"It's very hard," Luther said. "It's very hard for me to be an old man, too old to be any use, when I had hoped to finish things off in a blaze of mushrooming glory. And it's very hard to sit back and let either of you take that death in my place. But this is the one great chance of smashing the Brain. We've got to take it. You go, Stanley, with our blessing. With both our blessings."

He looked at Patience.

"Yes," she said at last. "With both our blessings."

It still took time and a considerable amount of trouble to find the right opening for Stanley, but it was accomplished at last. One of the younger drones, about Stanley's own age, revolted suddenly against the futility of the life he was leading and offered the exchange without any financial consideration. Stanley arranged things himself, keeping Luther and Patience in the background.

The drone's name was Izaak Laperto, a tall, swarthy-skinned, dark-haired man. He looked at Stanley curiously:

"Yeah, it's an easy life, all right. No trouble about working. Food's available on tap, as and when and what you like. If supplies run short the Brain sends out a few Meks to round up another supply."

"And in return . . .?"

"In return all you have to do is use your head. Work—there's no real work. Dust the Control Room, tighten up a screw here and there, read a dial. No real work because the Brain doesn't trust people any place they might do any damage. No, all the Brain wants is that you should act up. Jump around, throw an attitude, fight, get emotional—anything that makes you look like a real live doll that says Mamma. If you want my advice, don't overdo it and don't underdo it. If you're just normally abnormal you're most likely to get by without trouble."

"How does the Brain communicate with you?"

"The Brain talks English. It uses some kind of automatic speech arrangement; sounds a bit tinny but you'll understand it all right. All the Meks are equipped with it for that matter, but they use that damned hooting instead. Don't ask me why. Don't ask me why the Brain does anything."

I don't know and I don't want to. From now on I'm dodging the whole damned lot of them."

"Good luck to you," Stanley said.

"And to you, brother. You're going to need it just as much. Not from the Brain so much as from the dimwits and schizos you'll be working with. Anyway, here's the rig. The Brain'll spot you as being new; he always does. You don't have to worry. There'll be an interview, but you've got nothing to worry about."

It was difficult parting with Patience and Luther, even though it was not in the nature of a final parting. Although working, and to a certain extent living at the Brain's headquarters, he could get back to the village often enough in his spare time, with the proviso, of course, that everything he did must be beyond suspicion.

Luther said anxiously: "Don't strain anything, Stanley. There's no need to rush things. Now that we know we can get in it would be stupid to try things too quickly."

The strain was telling on Patience. Her eyes were deeper sunk, her cheeks more taut with anxiety and fear.

"Give us as long as you can," she said. "As long of you as you can."

He kissed her lingeringly. "You don't have to tell me."

He picked up a party of drones going back to headquarters. They had a petrol-driven boat, carrying about twenty-five, which shuffled back and forwards along the coast at their convenience. He saw the shore drop back, and Luther and Patience with it, and then the village itself become a blur of brown against the sand. The ocean was very calm and blue. One of the other drones, a girl of about twenty, blonde and attractive but like the rest a little flabby, spoke to him:

"You the new guy?"

Stanley nodded.

The girl studied him critically. "You'll have to show more zip if you want to stay in with the Brain. It's the vitality that counts."

She illustrated her meaning by contorting her features into an expression that was very emotional—though it would have been difficult to put a precise label on the emotion—and contorting her shoulders voluptuously.

"I don't mind," she said, "giving you a little private tuition."

Stanley said: "Thanks. I'll bear that in mind."

Already he felt the strain of being surrounded by these unnatural aberrations from the decent human norm, and was depressed by the thought that he would have to copy them and to accept their standards. The sea was some help, stretching illimitably out to the far horizon: against that vast purity the antics of these creatures could be regarded with tolerance. And the thought of the vast distances of the ocean brought forcibly to his mind once more the unbelievably good fortune of having his quarry so nearly within his grasp. The Brain might have skipped to Europe, to India, to Australia. But it had gone no further than Los Angeles, and in less than half an hour he would be finally in its presence.

They disembarked at an old, crumbling quay and sauntered into town in an undisciplined, scattered group. It was strange to be walking casually through these empty and ruined streets. The city had not suffered greatly from the Meccanoes' depredations and only twice did they have to leave

street level to scramble over rubble. Ten minutes brought them to the Brain's citadel. They turned a corner and it was in front of them—the aluminium pylon reaching gracelessly into the bare sky, catching the sunlight and flicking it out again, and round it a dozen or more squat, dome-shaped metal buildings, one, directly under the pylon, a good deal larger than the others.

The domes were quite light inside, being illuminated from curving plate glass or transparent plastic windows set high up in the sides. Stanley was shown round them, except for the seven or eight which were workshops and store rooms used by the Meccanoes. He glanced into one of these as they went past the entrance, and saw inside it two of the Meccanoes swinging their great tentacles in some form of machining operation; there was the bright glare of a welding arc. There were ten domes devoted to the needs of the drones—they ranged from capacious living quarters to a large, luxurious swimming pool and restaurant. Stanley wondered what could be the reason for the drones going out to the surrounding ramshackle villages when here such ease and splendour surrounded them. But another glance at the physical presences of his new companions was sufficient explanation in itself. They wanted desperately to get away from themselves and from this debauched life they led. In the villages they could see real human beings living genuine, useful lives. They could even pretend to despise them.

He went into the Brain's dome on Izaak Laperto's shift. Izaak had explained what he would probably have to do, and one of the other drones confirmed it for him. The Brain ingested certain chemicals as part of its regimen. The system had to be checked on the inflow dials, marked in red for foolproof operation.

"Nothing's likely to go wrong," Izaak had said, "but don't go to sleep. If the wrong mixture does go in the Brain will know as soon as you do—and your life's not worth two cents. And it's quite capable of having its own supply doctored just for the hell of it. Watch those dials."

The other domes were perhaps eighty feet across and forty high. This one was half that size again. Round the sides and stretching in towards the centre were the great banks of instruments and switches by which the Brain was kept in being. But for thirty feet about the centre there was nothing, and in the centre was the Brain, with three of the Meccanoes, prone and inactive, like watchdogs about it.

Luther, from the various hearsay reports he had gathered during his life and from the notes on Kapitza's work that had been kept in the last redoubt of man's struggle against his usurper, had described it pretty well. The Brain was quite small. It rested on a low pedestal, and its highest point was no higher than a tall man's shoulder. It was perhaps three feet across; round and studded with audient and visual devices. The top bulged gently into transparent crystal, and behind the crystal could be seen the radio-active node that was the mainspring of the Brain's existence. When it was necessary for one of the drones to approach the Brain itself, shielded clothing was provided.

Stanley divided his attention between the Brain and the dial he had to watch. Patience, on one of his visits back to the village, would sew a suitable pocket on the inside of the scarlet and blue robe he wore. Then, he would have the small cylinder there. Whenever the occasion arose for him to go



right up to the Brain it would be an easy matter to unclasp the screening holder, to walk easily forwards, to reach the Brain and press against that crystal bulge, and . . . And nothing. Well-earned nothing in a mushrooming cloud of smoke.

The Brain called him on his second shift. The cold, clanking voice echoed through the great dome:

"Worker on Board X 37 D advance for audience. Worker on Board X 37 D advance for audience."

He had seen others do it already. On the first shift, in particular, he had seen a woman called forward and plagued by some jibes—in audible from where he stood—to the point of throwing herself forward in a fury against

that apparently fragile crystal. One tentacle of one of the recumbent Meccanoes stretched lazily up to pluck her in mid-air. She had been fortunate. After five minutes' shaking, as a dog shakes a rat, she had been released and permitted to stumble back to her duties.

Now Stanley advanced himself. This was the testing occasion; on this, the first time in which he would come under the Brain's direct attention, depended the entire success of his mission. Gesture, he told himself desperately, the Brain wants emotion and gesture. He remembered, from his schooldays, a device that had always worked with bullies, providing the bullies were big enough and self-confident enough. He came forward to the Brain, slouching, his face drawn into a malignant scowl of hate that needed little feigning.

He had donned the protective cloak that hung by his Board, but when he was still ten paces away a voice, lower-toned, emanating directly from one of the projections on the Brain itself, commanded him:

"Halt."

He stopped. Under the transparent shielding cloak he fixed his hands defiantly on his hips.

The Brain said: "Your name?"

"Stanley Liggard."

"It is registered. You are new. Where is Izaak Laperto?"

The Brain, Stanley realised, had a first-class filing system memory. Of course he had known it must have, but it was frightening being faced by the actuality. His own mind racing, he looked up sullenly towards the Brain.

"I bought him out. He was fed up with the job anyway."

"It is registered. You yourself are anxious to serve the Brain. Why?"

"I've worked around a bit. Stonemason, general labourer"—he paused—"huckster . . . Hard graft all the time. I want it easy. This will do me."

"If," the Brain said, "the Brain accepts you."

He wondered whether the Brain's habit of referring to itself in the third person signified anything. Aloud he said:

"You always got to take that choice." He glanced, summoning all the insolence of the animated against the unanimated, at the metal box and its bulging crystal. "Well? Does the Brain accept me?"

There was a slight pause.

The Brain said: "All the Brain's decisions are provisional. Provisionally you are accepted. Stanley Liggard: return to your Board."

He walked back across the polished, empty floor, hung up his shielding cloak, and resumed his attention to the barely flickering fingers on the dial. He saw that some of the workers on neighbouring Boards were watching him covertly; with envy and with respect. Ten minutes later the Brain called one of them forward and obliged him to squirm round the base of the pedestal on his belly.

His demeanour, and the fact that he had got away with it in his first interview with the Brain, seemed to have made quite a powerful impression on the other drones. In the subsequent leisure period they made that quite clear to him; and the fact that with them he maintained the attitude of off-handed surliness he had shown to the Brain only increased their uneasy admiration and respect. In particular, several of the women made it clear that any attentions he cared to pay them would be welcome. He rebuffed them cynically. The psychology of the situation was working out better

than he could have hoped; an attitude that was no more than an accentuation of his natural feelings would be easy enough to maintain.

Deliberately he did not go back to the village during the first few rest periods but concentrated on getting to know the layout of his new surroundings with the utmost possible accuracy. The Brain did not call him out again during duty periods. Everything was going well. On the fourth rest period—early afternoon of a day that had clouded over with towering cumulus clouds—he joined a party going down to the quay. Just over an hour later he had found Luther and Patience in the place that had been arranged: a small upper room in the inn.

Patience, when she had finally released him, said:

“What was it like? Have you seen the Brain?”

He nodded. Luther pressed him; there was a note of what seemed like wistfulness in his voice:

“You’ve really seen it?”

He told them of his interview and of the attitude he had adopted. Sitting here in this little room with alternate sunlight and shade drifting across the busy village street outside, the Los Angeles domes and the Brain itself seemed very far away.

Luther said: “Things couldn’t be going better.”

Patience looked at him bitterly: “They couldn’t, could they? How long . . .?”

Stanley had been calculating that himself.

“I’ve got to have time to develop things naturally. It would be stupid to ruin things by taking risks now. At least a month, I think. During that time I’ll come back here every fourth or fifth rest period; oftener would be unwise.” He hesitated. “Of course, anything might happen in that time; at any moment the Brain might decide to dispose of me, one way or another. It’s a risk either way.”

He looked at Luther, questioning.

Luther said: “Caution—you must go warily. It would be far worse to rouse the Brain’s suspicions in any way. If anything, err on the side of delay.”

He did not look at Patience. Stanley did; he saw her face taut and almost haggard under the agony of this discussion in which, academically, the date of his certain death was being determined.

He said: “So—for now anyway—let’s not worry. Let’s forget about it all.”

A counsel, he realised as he said it, of quite impossible perfection.

He had thought the time would speed past on lightning wings, but instead the days—the rest periods and the short duty periods—dragged out with paralysing deliberation. And the uneasy fear that he had felt at the beginning that something—most probably the Brain—would intervene and bring the carefully constructed plan crashing prematurely about his ears developed into a nagging obsession that rarely left him. He wasn’t blind to the fact that not a little of this was due to his own suppressed wish for something to prevent the *dénouement* taking place. It was difficult to be continually enthusiastic about death, when he had so much to live for. And yet the very things which made life precious were the driving forces in his determination to smash the Brain in the one way that was possible. Altogether

life was increasingly complicated and hag-ridden by various apprehensions.

On duty the Brain had left him alone since that first interview, now more than a fortnight in the past. It was on a night duty, in the soft gleam of concealed lighting in the great dome, that the Brain called him out again.

"Stanley Liggard on Board X 37 D advance for audience. Stanley Liggard on Board X 37 D advance for audience."

For a moment the full sway of fear and counter-fear crippled him; it seemed impossible to move in any direction. But, summoning his will, he did move, and found himself walking, stiff-legged, out into the polished emptiness, towards the Brain and his attendant, motionless Meccanoes.

The more personal, nearer voice, halted him, but not until he was nearer, much nearer, than he had been on the other occasion. He was no more than three yards from the seat of power. He halted, stifling a wish, foolish and irrational and futile, but well-nigh overwhelming, to rush forward and batter the fragile bubble before him.

It was a kind of relief when the Brain spoke again:

"Is service with the Brain to your liking, Stanley Liggard?"

He said, easily enough: "It'll do. Better than work, anyway. I got no complaints."

"The Brain expects entire service from its followers. In all things the Brain must be obeyed. A good servant seeks for ways in which it can serve the master."

Let it ride, he thought. He said nothing.

The impersonal, slightly mechanical voice waited for a moment before continuing:

"The Brain retains only its good followers. It has no use for the inadequate. Do you realise that, Stanley Liggard?"

"Yes," he said. "I get it."

"Good," the Brain said. "Now—dance!"

He stared ahead stubbornly.

"Dance!" the Brain repeated. "The Brain commands its servant to dance."

Terrifyingly, like a cancerous weakness, there was the impulse to submit—anything rather than antagonise this cold, omnipotent voice. It almost moved his limbs into motion. But behind it his brain raced in assessment of the situation. If he cracked now, anything might follow; at school the bullies had occasionally tested the show of strength in their smaller companions and if it cracked treated that unfortunate one worse than their ordinary victims. Whereas if he could get away with it . . . The way would be open for the real thing.

He said: "I'm not a dancer."

"Nevertheless," the voice continued, "the Brain commands you."

He stood his ground even when in front of him the nearest Meccano reared into sudden, horrifying life, and one of its tentacles curled through the air towards him. In this situation there was no hope in running. The prehensile metal gripped him round the waist and lifted him high into the air. He neither struggled nor kicked. The tentacle began shaking him, jerking him against his volition into a kind of aerial jig. Shaken and battered, he heard the Brain's voice:

"When the Brain commands its servant to dance, the servant dances."

Suddenly the motion was over. From about ten feet above the ground

the tentacle unclasped and dropped him. He hit the ground heavily and lay there, sprawling and out of breath.

The Brain said: "Get up."

Unsteadily he got to his feet.

"Return to your Board. And remember."

When he came off duty in the morning he went straight to the village. Luther and Patience were not expecting him, and he had to find them. He found them out on the beach, in the primitive tents they had rigged up for sleeping quarters. Luther looked at him keenly:

"Anything wrong?"

He told them of his second interview with the Brain. When he had finished he said:

"We can't waste any more time. The next occasion the Brain calls me out I must be armed. I'm pretty sure it will try to taunt me into some kind of action; it isn't going to let me get away with dumb insolence again. But it won't be expecting any sudden rush—I shall have time enough to reach it: it will want me to reach it. The set-up couldn't be more promising. And, on the other hand, if I'm not absolutely ready for it, the whole thing could be ruined."

Patience had been listening to what he said. She said herself, her voice twisted with pain:

"I dreamed last night . . . I dreamed we'd had to give the whole thing up—that we'd gone away, up North somewhere. The air was fresh and there were cold, blue lakes." She looked at Stanley. "I didn't want to wake up."

Luther said nothing. Stanley said, very gently:

"And were there any children? And were they growing into a manhood in which they would have to scurry like rabbits into holes in the ground at the sight of a Meccano coming over the horizon? No, that's one thing we're sure of. Life on those terms isn't worth living."

Patience nodded listlessly. She said:

"I can think of other terms like that."

They spent the day together. Towards evening Luther unpacked the donkey's right-hand pack and brought out the canister. He explained things again to Stanley.

"The shielding alloy was my father's work; it would have been enough to get him a Nobel Prize in pre-Brain days. The canister is designed for the job. At the moment you are called forward, release this catch and a spring device pushes the shield off—there's no complicated unscrewing or anything. And from that moment it's loaded. Bring it up against the Brain's crystal, and . . ."

"Yes," Stanley said. "I know the rest."

He patted the donkey's muzzle, and this small action of bidding farewell to the animal heightened for a moment his awareness of all the other things he was saying goodbye to. And, paradoxically, made it more and more certainly worth while. But it was very hard to kiss Patience, and harder still to have to release her clinging arms.

He said: "You're out of range here, of course. But don't turn to look at any sudden flashes in the sky."

He went then, and was glad to go.

Back on duty in the dome he was conscious all the time of the small heavy canister hanging inside the loose, gaudy robe he wore. It was a consciousness that made it difficult to keep his attention properly on the dials on his Board. At the sound of every announcement from the Brain he could not help starting. But no summons came for him. One of the more theatrical women was brought out and reduced to flooding tears; a man was shaken into storming rage and another dragged down to the extremities of cringing abasement, but there was no call for Stanley Liggard. He came off duty in a state of near nervous exhaustion.

There was no point in going back to the village. He could only lounge around the luxurious haunts of the drones and count the slow minutes of the rest period. One of the older men got into conversation with him:

"Bit of an exhibition this morning, wasn't it? I reckon he's building up for a Hunt."

"But—surely there are hunts going on all the time?"

"A *personal* hunt. You've not been here for one of those? The Brain has himself hoisted on to a giant Mek he keeps in store—it stands a good forty feet high—and goes off on a hunt of his own. Gets more of a kick out of it that way, I guess. When he lands anyone he lifts 'em up and does 'em slowly; right under his own nose, as you might say. Funny creature, the Brain."

This kind of casual acceptance of the Brain's tyranny was more shocking than the tyranny itself. Another hundred years and the Brain would be a god, an eccentric but a worshiped deity.

He said: "It never goes for—us, then?"

"No. It even warns us off the part it's going to hunt through. The Brain treats us all right if we act careful."

Duty time came round again at last—a short morning duty. Stanley stood in front of his Board for two hours before anything happened. He was paying only the most cursory attention to the dials in front of him. Suddenly he saw that the finger on the main dial had gone shooting beyond the scarlet safety mark and was pressing twenty or thirty degrees ahead. At the same time the loudspeaker roared:

"Board X 37 D—Supervisor take over. Board X 37 D—Supervisor take over. Stanley Liggard advance for audience. Stanley Liggard advance for audience."

The Supervisor came up and began adjusting the controls. Stanley slipped on the screening cloak and began to walk forward. Under the cloak his hand was on the canister, his finger caressing the release catch. He walked towards the Brain. Two or three yards from the pedestal, the near speaker came on:

"Halt!"

He stood, restraining his limbs from trembling.

The Brain said: "You are an inefficient as well as a disobedient worker. Have you any comment on this?"

"Yes," he said stiffly. "You fixed me. You fixed those dials."

He was watching for the faintest sign of movement on the part of the recumbent Meccano; he knew, from his previous experience, that he could cross the intervening distance before the Meccano could reach him, provided he acted at the first instant of its stirring. The knowledge that now, at last, the Brain was within his reach lifted his spirits to a crest of triumph, over-

riding any thought of his own fate. Under the cloak he released the catch, and felt the two halves of the canister click apart. He tensed his muscles for the plunge.

The Brain said: "Liggard is not a common name. From which part of this continent do you come?"

The remark threw him slightly off balance. And with that minor disequilibrium a part of his determination ebbed away. He had the Brain at his mercy, and one minute was as good as the next for the final blow. He could play the great fish on his line at his leisure. He thought he heard a faint, metallic sliding sound somewhere, but noises of that kind were commonplace in the domes.

He said: "You wouldn't believe me if I told you the truth about my origin."

The Brain said: "The Brain has heard many strange things. You are privileged to say what you wish."

Something was wrong. He knew that now. His ears caught a faint whirring noise in the air. There was no time left for delay. He gathered his strength and leapt forward . . . and as he leapt was caught in mid-air by a metal band that tightened round his waist, crushing the breath from his body and pulling him up and away from the Brain. Twenty feet up he was held while another tentacle probed beneath his cloak and pulled out the plutonium capsule. He could see now what had happened. A section of the roof had slid back and the giant Meccano which was the Brain's own vehicle had come through the gap to grasp him just as he was making his attack.

Having obtained the capsule, the Mecanno tossed him to the floor. He fell very heavily.

The Brain said: "In case the statistic interests you, you failed by one-fifth of a second."

Stanley said nothing. He lay, winded, conscious only of the black fog of failure about him. Death was still certain—slow death probably—but leaving the world still in the grip of this steel servitude. There was no hope of anything.

The Brain said: "It is repeated: you are privileged to say what you wish."

He said dully: "How did you know?"

"You have been under suspicion. The man who was seen twice fifteen hundred miles from here"—the Meccano that had attacked him that first morning and the others that had hunted him would, of course, have recorded impressions in the Brain's composite memory—"appears now as a candidate for service. That is cause for suspicion. For your audiences all safeguards were automatically put into operation. And then, during conversation, the incorporated Geiger counters"—Stanley cursed his own shortsightedness—"suddenly began recording heavily. It was then necessary to stall you until precautions of the right kind could be taken. This has been done."

"And now?"

"Very soon you will die. The precise method needs consideration since it is very long since a crime of this magnitude has been attempted against the Brain. It will have to be extremely public, as a warning to the others."

"You can do what you like to me. Someone will get you some day. I've shown the Brain to be vulnerable."

"The Brain has always been vulnerable in one way, and one way only. It is a matter to which the Brain has given much consideration. And it is now solved. The shielding alloy which enclosed the plutonium capsule before you released the catch is the answer. The Brain is now invulnerable."

There was truth in it. It would be easy enough for the Brain's Meccanoes to investigate and duplicate the alloy. Stanley said wretchedly:

"So the Brain has to depend on man for its safety, as it did for its creation."

"The Brain acknowledges that it is capable of creative thought only in a very limited field. This, too, has been given consideration. The Brain has now decided that it will make arrangements for men to carry out this work—*now that the Brain is invulnerable.*"

The emphasis came from an increase in volume. Stanley considered the implications of it. Men to be allowed laboratory tools again—under the Brain's supervision, for the Brain's profit. His anger rose like a lifting wave:

"You filth! You evil metal filth!"

"The Brain," said the Brain, "is beyond good and evil."

Stanley recovered himself. "No. You're wrong there, you know. In the realm of consciousness, nothing is beyond good and evil. Only the unconscious is neutral. You are evil, all right."

The hesitation was fractional. "You use terms that are outside the Brain's scope of reference."

"They are not outside the scope of reference of a creature that can torture other sentient beings simply for the sake of torture."

"Torture? The Brain's definition would be dispassionate curiosity. The Brain is without gesture and without emotion; a curiosity in the display of these things in creatures that possess them is natural."

"A curiosity," Stanley said, "that is never satisfied. Every day, all over the world, the instruments, the limbs of the Brain, destroy and torture. But still the Brain is interested in more. Is there going to be a personal hunt again soon?"

There was another, longer pause. Then:

"Your accents of speech have been analysed. They are unusual. The basic intonations have not been previously encountered."

He said: "I told you you wouldn't believe my story if I told you."

"You are instructed to speak."

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now; not even whether his own death was hastened or delayed. He told the Brain casually of his hibernation and his awakening. The last part he invented. In this world of the future he had met a dying old man, who had passed on to him the capsule of plutonium. He doubted if this or anything else could help Luther and Patience now, but at least it would not, like the true account, expose them to the possibility of the Brain's persecution and vindictiveness.

The Brain said: "Your story is improbable, but best fits certain facts. The means for this hibernation, even if they could be reproduced, are of no interest or advantage to the Brain. It is possible, however, that you yourself may be able to tell the Brain things of interest in connection with your life in the world before the Brain. You are reprieved until after later examination."

Stanley said: "Is there any reason why I should tell you anything when I know you will eventually torture me to death anyway?"

"The reasons," the Brain said, "will be applied by the Meccanoes. You will tell."

Suddenly the mechanical voice roared out on to the main speakers.

"Supervisor Lee Colroy. Boardmen Henry Natuski, Bray Stephens, Arturo Pelligrew, Michael Flaherty. Advance for audience."

They came forward and stood around Stanley. They were, he noticed, tougher than the run of drones in appearance.

The Brain said: "Boardman Stanley Liggard to be guarded for further audiences. The penalties for failure to keep adequate guard will be as usual. Take him away."

As he was led away, the loudspeakers roared out:

"The Brain will conduct a personal hunt in the neighbourhood of the village called Mickman's, beginning three hours from now. Servants of the Brain are warned to avoid this locality. Repeat to all servants of the Brain."

He wondered why he had been given human guards when it would have been simpler just to lock one of the Meccanoes' tentacles round him, and decided that it could only be part of the preparation for the very public execution the Brain was getting ready for him once the required information had been abstracted. At any rate, he was glad of it—it gave him the chance in a thousand that, he felt just now, was all he needed to enable him to get clear. He had no illusions that the drones would release him, especially in view of what was likely to happen to them afterwards, but they were drones and, for all their apparent toughness, would need the whole of their five-to-one majority against him in a struggle.

Meanwhile there was a more pressing requirement. The drones did not hold him incommunicado, having had no instructions from the Brain as to that, and he was able to persuade one of the others, who was himself going in to Mickman's to warn a girl friend, to take a message to Patience. Then he settled back, contented, to pull the strings for his thousand-to-one chance of escape and life. If he could escape . . . The Brain would hunt him, of course, but the world was wide.

The thing to play on was the fatal capacity of the drones for getting bored, and the excessive emotionalism that went with that capacity. He didn't have to wait long for the first quality to show itself. After less than an hour his guards were showing every sign of nervous irritability. Into this ripe atmosphere, he dropped his suggestion:

"A game of tarpack?"

Tarpack, a game played with cards, dice and counters, was one of the drones' most popular time-wasters and one that—even when played straight—led to brawling and fights fifty per cent. of the time. Moreover it was a game that divided into two equal sides of players—and he had no intention of playing it straight. A youthful prowess in sleight of hand was going to be very useful.

They were guarding him in a small compartment of one of the domiciliary domes. The door looked on both sides and had at first been locked inside and the key ostentatiously hung up on the other side of the room. But when one of them had gone outside for something in the first hour he had come back and, with the usual carelessness of the drones, left the key in the keyhole and the door itself unlocked. The prisoner, after all, was behaving very well.

The game of tarpack progressed with increasing excitement. The thought of the seriousness of their charge was clearly slipping away in all their minds against the insistent claims of the mounting stakes. It was at this point that Stanley began playing the game his own way. He palmed, he dealt crookedly, but in such a way as to give the advantages not to himself and the two drones who were his partners, but to the other three. The superiority became ridiculously lopsided. His two partners were cursing as the chips piled up on the other side of the table; and he joined in with them.

The moment was ripe.

The Tar Five counter had gone into the expended deck five minutes before. Now, carefully, he dealt it back into the Supervisor's hand. The hand was turned up, and at once his two partners rose in a fury of suspicion and accusation. He had been carefully seated on the opposite side of the table from the door, but this was now an advantage. He tipped the table, giving the impression that one of the others had done it. The table toppled forward on to the other three, and the whole scene became a *mêlée*. And at that point, without hesitation, he acted.

There was one drone directly between him and the door. He smashed an uppercut into his face, knocking him back on to the Supervisor. And then he was at the door, the key was wrenched out and in his hand, and he was through to the other side.

Fortunately the door opened outwards. He pressed all his weight against it, holding it against the fury of assault from the other side until he had clicked the key in the lock and it was secured. He raced along the corridor towards the outer air, hearing the loud outcry behind him, muffled by the intervening door. Luck was with him still. There was no one in the corridor and only one curious face, obviously non-comprehending, looked out from all the doors he dashed past.

He reached the outer air, and ran on, steadily now, towards the quay-side. If the door held the drones up only five minutes he felt he was all right. With that much start he was sure they could not catch him, and sure also that they would not dare to report the event to any of the Brain's Meccanoes. The only thing left for them to do would be to scatter themselves; anywhere to get out of the Brain's range before the loss of the prisoner was discovered.

One or two drones outside the domes looked at him with amazement as he ran into the city, but made no attempt to stop him. He wanted one more piece of luck. As he reached the quay he thought it had deserted him—the motor boat was not tied up in its usual place. It might have stayed at the village with the last party. But then he saw it—at the next landing stage. It was empty. The engineer, as usual, had gone off into the domes.

He leapt on board, and within a minute or two the engine was chugging and the boat heading out from Los Angeles: northwards towards Mickman's.

The village was deserted. He hunted through it for five or ten minutes, calling Patience's name, but except for the howling of a dog there was no reply. The whole village had scattered before the warning, which the drone's girl friend must have spread to the others. They must have headed north, out of the danger zone.

He set off north himself, feeling a kind of anticlimax after the furious excitement of the previous hours. The sun was still quite high in a sky

that was cloudless and infinite again. He trudged on, wondering what was going to happen.

If he found them—what then? The Brain was invulnerable. Would it always be? If he could prepare the conditions for another hibernation—for the three of them. Perhaps in a hundred years—two hundred years?

He faced the realities bleakly. A hundred years would only see the Brain more firmly entrenched as the cruel, whimsical god of a tormented world.

He was walking on, preoccupied with his gloom, and he could not at first believe it when he heard Patience' voice, itself strained with disbelief.

"Stanley! How . . .?"

But it was Patience. She was sitting a little way off the road. He ran towards her eagerly.

"I got away. Where's Luther?"

Her face clouded.

"We got the news about you. There was still the other canister."

He said: "I don't understand . . ."

"The Brain's making a personal hunt. Daddy's gone back—to be caught."

He looked at her dumbly.

"You know what happens on personal hunts? The Brain lifts people right up against itself and . . ." She broke off for a moment. "He has the other plutonium capsule."

Stanley said uncertainly: "It might work. The Brain could hardly be expecting any danger from that quarter—it's doubtful if it would take the precautions it took against me."

She said blankly: "In any case, he's dead. We must go on. I don't know if we are out of range yet—if anything happens . . ."

He nodded. They moved on, separate for the moment in their different kinds of grief, through the hot afternoon.

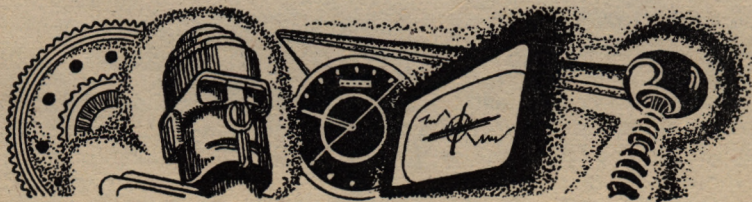
They had gone perhaps a mile when the sky opened up like a cruel, glowing flower behind them. Stanley pulled Patience down, preventing her from turning towards that quickly fading sheet of sunburst. The noise, rocking them on the ground like the hand of a giant, followed. They stood up at last.

He said: "I think . . ."

Ten minutes-later they knew. They passed a Meccano. It straddled the road drunkenly, still precariously upright on its three metal legs. The tentacles drooped from the cabin.

They walked beneath the steel corpse and on, together, towards the north.

THE END



RESURRECTION

NEXT IN LINE

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Nothing could be more ideal than being shipwrecked on a desert island with a beautiful girl. There was a little matter of two skeletons, however, and the furry things that whispered in the night . . .

Illustrated by QUINN

There was more room in the dinghy after we got rid of Hastings—or, to be more exact, after he got rid of himself. But we weren't really sorry to see him go. When he wasn't whining about the water shortage he was trying to make passes at Claire, and he was a powerful brute, and I knew that if he ever got hold of the single oar that was my only weapon it'd be me for a swim, and Claire . . . No, I don't like thinking about it even now.

The water looked more than usually inviting that morning—cool, and clean, a blue-green transparency in which we could see little fishes swimming deep, deep down—deep down and ignoring the pitifully inadequate fishing tackle that we had improvised from a strand of wool drawn from Claire's sweater and a safety pin. We had been fortunate enough to catch two flying fishes during the night and their raw flesh, chewed slowly, had taken the keenest edge off our thirst—but we were still thirsty. And Hastings had already started to demand that we open the two beer bottles full of water that had been all we'd been able to save before *Tarrentium* went down.

Very abusive he'd been about it. "Come orf it, Sparks. You ain't a *real* officer. 'O are you ter say I carn't 'ave a drink?"

"The officer in charge of this boat," I'd told him, taking a firmer grip of my oar.

"Ho!" he laughed insolently, "I likes that. A bleedin' ole workin' dinghy, red lead an' boot-topping from armhole ter breakfast time—an' little Sparks says as 'ow 'e's the ofricer in charge of 'er!" He leered at Claire. "Why don'cher come for'ard, dearie, an' sit wiv a *real* man?"

"I'd sooner stay aft, thank you," she said, the cutting edge to her voice just barely perceptible. I took a tighter grip on the oar.

"Ain't cher comin' for a swim, then?" demanded Hastings.

"No."

"Don't be a fool, Hastings," I said.

"An' 'o are you ter stop me?" he growled.

He stripped off his filthy singlet, his grease-stiff dungaree trousers. He stood erect for a second or so in the bows of the boat, said, "An' yer won't 'ave the guts ter scull away from me, will yer, Sparks?" Then he dived.

I want you to believe that I did try to get to him in time when we saw the dorsal fin cutting through the smooth water. But sculling is an art not easily learned in a hurry, and by the time that I, with the loom of my single oar through the grummet at the dinghy's stern, had her travelling in a reasonably straight line it was all over. I heard Hastings scream, and I



heard Claire scream, and I dropped the oar and looked forward, and there was nothing to be seen but a flurry of pink-tinged foam.

Claire started to cry then. Her face was hidden by her hands and the untidy straggle of straw-coloured hair that had fallen over it. "Oh, Ken, Ken," she whispered. "Where *are* the other boats? And where are the ships that you said were around?"

Yes, those other boats, the proper lifeboats, were a sore point with me, too. If I hadn't been playing at Casabianca, sticking to my key with the wireless room full of smoke and the flames all but licking my feet, I should have been sitting safe and snug in the motor lifeboat with my boat transmitter and receiver to play with. And if Claire hadn't gone back to her room for some sentimental souvenir in her handbag, she'd have been as happy as possible under the circumstances with the other eleven passengers.

NEXT IN LINE

And if Hastings hadn't seized the golden opportunity for a free go at the bonded stores he wouldn't have provided a free meal for the sharks. A meal, I thought hopefully, not just one course . . .

Meanwhile, *Port Leamington*, *Westralia Star* and *Ionic* had all answered our calls for assistance, were all steaming to the scene at full speed. But they would be looking for a burning ship and four lifeboats—not for a tiny dinghy. Once they found the four boats, once somebody got around to counting noses, they would assume that the Radio Officer—me—had perished in the best traditions of the service, and that one passenger and one greaser had got somehow mislaid in the hasty abandon-ship.

"And now *he's* gone," wept Claire.

"Are you really sorry?" I asked brutally.

"No-o," she admitted. "It's a dreadful thing to say—but I feel a lot safer now . . ." And I didn't feel flattered. "And yet," she went on, "somehow not so safe. After all, he was a man."

"Oh?"

"But suppose we're cast up on some desert island, with cannibals . . ."

"There aren't any cannibals, these days."

I grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her so that the hair fell away from her face. I looked at her, and in spite of the smudges, the absence of make-up, the untidy hair, she was rather more than pretty. I tried not to think of what she would be like in a few days' time when the sun, and the lack of food and water, had taken effect.

I said: "Let's get this straight. There were two dangers for you in this boat—rape and murder. They've gone. We still have hunger and thirst—and they're plenty—to contend with. But no cannibals."

She tried to smile. "I thought that people in our predicament drew lots for the privilege of eating instead of being eaten . . ."

"Not in this boat, they don't. We sink or swim together. O.K.?"

"O.K.," she said.

Deep below us the little fishes, returned from their scavenging, still ignored our strand of wool and futile safety pin. I didn't want to waste any more of the stale bread that we had with us as bait. I found myself regretting that the sharks hadn't left a few odd scraps of Hastings . . .

It was on the fourth day after the fire that we saw the island. I have learned since that it was Warren Island, but I didn't know at the time. To us it was no more than a line of tree tops glimpsed just above the horizon every time that the dinghy lifted to the swell. No more than that visually, yet in the mind's eye it was water and food and safety, all that had gone down with *Tarrentium* when the seams of her plates opened and the sea rushed in to quench the burning bales of wool and to send her to the bottom of the Pacific.

There was wind this day—not much, not enough to put any white tops on the swell, just enough to break the glassiness of the sea with little, scale-like ripples. And the land was to leeward of us. The oar, up-ended and lashed to a thwart, served as a mast of sorts. And for a sail there was my uniform shirt, and when that proved to be utterly inadequate, Claire's skirt. Lashings were improvised with my once-white uniform stockings. The whole effect was like something out of a slum back garden or a gypsy camp, but it caught some of the wind and Claire, trying to steer with a piece of

bottom board while I held the sail out, said that we were making way through the water.

It was the current that got us there, however. At noon, when I let the rags of sail fall and hang limply while I disposed of my ration of water—one mouthful—and my share of the solitary flying fish that had come aboard during the night, the island was much closer. We could see the tree tops almost all the time, now, and when lifted we could see a yellow line of beach.

"I'd like my skirt back," said Claire. "These knickers aren't very . . . adequate."

"You're not getting it back, yet. We want to get ashore before dark."

We did, too—more by luck than judgment. The current was setting us past the southern point of the island, so we had to take down our jury mast in a hurry and use the oar for sculling. It seemed at one time that we were going to be smashed to pieces on the outer reef of the island, but the swell lifted us over and we were in the relatively calm water between reef and beach. The sun was almost down when at last we grounded on the sand. We fell rather than jumped overside, pulled the boat as far up on to the beach as our limited strength would allow.

There were all kinds of things that we could have done in the short twilight. We could have made a fire. We could have looked for fresh water and food. We could have tried to find out if the island were inhabited. All that we did do, however, was to share the last of our water and the remaining half of the flying fish, and then sleep. The sand was hard, but, just then, it was the finest mattress in the world.

It was the sunrise that wakened me. For what must have been a few minutes I lay in a daze, thinking muzzily that I must have a truly monumental hangover, wishing that Giles, the officers' steward, would hurry up with my morning tea. I turned my head slightly, saw Claire's face only a few inches from mine. At first this served only to make the puzzle still more complicated—then the pieces of the jigsaw clicked into place.

I didn't creak audibly as I got to my feet, but I felt that I should have done. After I had yawned and stretched I felt a little better—but the only thing that could have begun to effect a real cure for my malaise would have been the nice hot cup of tea of which I'd been wishfully thinking. And then a hot shower, and a shave, and the refreshing taste of toothpaste, and a clean change of uniform . . .

Still wishfully thinking I walked to where a trickle of water from inland spread wet and glimmering over the smooth sand. I scooped up a double handful, let the sand settle, then raised it to my lips. It was fresh water, all right. I took another double handful, then saw the half of a cocunut shell almost at my feet. This I filled, being careful not to get too much sand in it. I took it to Claire. After I had said, "Your morning tea, madam," three times she woke up.

"That was *good*," she said, putting down the empty shell. Then, "I must look a sight."

"You do. But you don't have to shave."

"All right. You look a sight too. Look, Ken, will you try to rustle up something to eat while I get cleaned up?"

"The bathroom is there," I said, pointing to the fresh water stream.

"But I don't know where the larder is."

"You'll find it," she said. "I hope . . ."

"So do I."

I walked off along the beach—and while I walked I made a mental tally of our possessions. Item: One dinghy with one oar. Item: One penknife with efficient corkscrew, efficient bottle-opener and utterly inefficient half-inch blade. Item: One briar pipe. Item: One half-box of matches. Item: Two beer bottles, empty. In addition, of course, were such oddments as Claire might have about her person or in her handbag—the bag that she had gone back for, the salvage of which had led to her being here with me on the island. But there would be nothing, I was sure, of any value to a potential Swiss Family Robinson.

An outcropping of rock, like the half-buried bones of some monster, ran down the beach and into the sea. There were rock pools, and there was weed in some of them, which might or might not have been edible, and there was a sort of small oyster just below the water level. I didn't dare to use the little blade of my knife to prise them off the rock—after all, it was the only cutting edge we had—so used the bottle opener instead. With a convenient stone I smashed one of the oysters, then sampled the flesh. With lemon juice and cayenne pepper—to say nothing of stout and brown bread and butter—it might have been palatable. On the half-shell with no trimmings it was—edible. But it was food. I set to work on the oysters and after a while had four dozen or so out of the pool. Making a bag of my shirt I carried them back to our landing place.

Claire was waiting by the boat. In my absence she had contrived to make herself look, at the very least, presentable. She had her share of the oysters, saying that they were, anyhow, better than raw flying fish, then said: "And now we must strike inland and find the natives."

"Natives?" I asked.

"Yes. While you were away getting our breakfast I found—" she picked up something that had been concealed by her skirt as she sat, "—this."

This was a toy boat, a miniature dugout canoe, crudely fashioned—yet, I thought, regarded with as much pride and affection by its owner as is *Queen Mary* by that corporate entity the Cunard White Star Company Ltd.

"Don't be too hopeful," I said. "It may have been washed up from the sea. Things drift for thousands of miles in these waters."

"I don't think so. Look! The tool marks are far too recent. And, besides, I found it well inland. I had a proper wash in the stream where it's fairly deep. And that's where I found it."

So the island was inhabited. You know—I felt almost sorry. Oh, I wanted to be picked up and returned to civilisation eventually, but there was no hurry. We hadn't got the three best books and the ten best gramophone records with us, but there are more ways of passing the time than listening to music and reading. And where we were we hadn't got that nasty premonition—well down below the level of consciousness, but there—of the imminent descent of a large hunk of fissionable material from the stratosphere.

So the honeymoon was over before it had started. So the simple life would never be lived. So here were two children of Mother Nature who'd never get the chance to get back to her. So our little island paradise already

had its serpents in the shape of mission-spoiled Polynesians and gin-sodden white traders.

"We'd better follow the stream inland," said Claire.

"I suppose so," I said.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," said Claire. She opened her handbag, found her lipstick and, with the aid of the little mirror, started to make-up. She said, "I've been hoarding this."

"I don't suppose you've got a safety razor and tube of shaving cream . . . But we'd better go careful. For all we know, the natives mightn't be too friendly."

"Rubbish. You said yourself that there aren't any cannibals any more. Come on !"

It was fairly tough going following that stream to its source. If we'd had a pair of those dirty long knives—*machetes*, I think they call them—it would have been easier. But we hadn't any knives except for my barman's friend, and so we just had to shove through, regardless of scratches. Once we came upon a clump of bushes bearing a rather poisonous-looking purple berry, but as two birds, not unlike doves, were making a hearty meal from them until we disturbed them, we thought that there wouldn't be too much risk in following their example. The berries were almost flavourless, but they did do something towards filling the gaps left by our skimpy breakfast.

I said once that we should have been wiser to have stayed on the beach, gathering our strength, before going exploring, but Claire shouted me down. She said that she wanted a real meal of roast sucking pig, with yams and breadfruit, washed down with kava. I told her that we should probably get bully beef washed down with lukewarm gin, and she said that it'd be better, anyhow, than midget oysters and inferior elderberries—unless, of course, the ones we'd had were really a variety of Deadly Nightshade . . .

So we pushed on.

The sun was high in the sky, now, and the air was sultry. Our passage through the bushes disturbed a multitude of tiny flying things, some of which bit and all of which were inquisitive. And every time that we stopped for breath the silence hit us like a blow. Surely we could not be far from the native village now—and yet there was no smell of cooking fires, no chatter of children, none of the noises that betokened proximity to the homes of men. And then we came to the source of the stream.

"Where's your settlement ?" I asked.

"Ask the local policeman," she snapped. She slapped at some insect that was nibbling at the back of her neck. "But you'd think . . ."

"It doesn't matter," I told her. "We've plenty of time to explore this island. Suppose we keep straight on, keeping the sun at our back so we don't travel in a circle . . ."

"Could do . . ."

The going along the path of the stream had been tough; the going through the bush was tougher. But we pressed on, actuated by a rather foolish stubbornness. And before we had lost too much blood from our scratches we found another stream—we didn't think that it was the same one—and decided to follow it to the sea.

We didn't think at first that it was the same one, but when, at last, we

came out on to the beach we weren't so sure. In fact, we were quite convinced that we had, somehow, come round in a circle. The sun was in the wrong place, of course—but that only added to our feeling of utter confusion.

Then—"But it's not *our* boat," I said.

And it wasn't. This was no work boat, no glorified painting punt, but a canoe, full sized, drawn well above the water level.

"So," said Claire, "there *are* people."

We walked closer.

"There *were* people," I said.

The two skeletons were picked white and clean, no shred of flesh or string of ligament remaining. They were no more than untidy heaps of bones. Some of the smaller bones may have been missing—but even had I possessed the anatomical knowledge I could have thought of better ways of passing an odd half-hour than putting those grisly frameworks together again.

Claire clutched my arm, hard and painfully. "Crabs?" she whispered. "Land crabs?"

"Could be, must be. But I've seen none . . . And that's strange, too . . ."

"But do they attack . . . Do they attack living people?"

"I've never heard of it."

We looked at the two skeletons, looked at the canoe. There was no way of telling who these unfortunates had been. Not a rag of clothing—if they had ever worn any—remained with their bones. And whoever—or whatever—had picked the bodies bare had picked the canoe bare, too. There were no weapons, no tools, no gear of any kind. And even if the crew had been—as they probably had been—two unfortunate fishers blown, by some sudden storm, from their home island they would have brought *something* with them. A knife, perhaps, or a fishing line. And surely their canoe must have run to paddles and a sail . . .

Suddenly it was chilly—a chill that had little to do with the fast-setting sun, with the light breeze that was coming off the sea. It seemed, too, that there was something moving behind the wall of trees and bushes that rose, dark and sinister, at the landward edge of the beach. And I was frightened, and hungry, and still weak from our four days adrift. Whilst we had been buoyed up with the hope of finding some kind of settlement our scanty meals of oysters and berries had kept us going. Now—the only thing that kept me from flopping completely was fear.

"We can't go back to our own beach," I said. "Not in the dark. We must stay here the night."

"We must eat," said Claire.

"We must. Now, there's a bit of dried driftwood on the beach—will you gather it and make a fire while I try those rocks there for shellfish?"

I left her gathering the wood, walked to the outcropping of rock. And as I walked it suddenly came to me that I was the bloodiest of bloody fools. We didn't know what had killed the two in the canoe—and yet here was I dividing our forces in this utterly careless and lighthearted manner. I turned to retrace my footsteps—and as I turned I heard Claire scream. And she had vanished from the beach.

I ran, then, stopping only to pick up a ragged stick from the litter on the sand. "Claire!" I shouted. "Claire! Where are you?"

"Here," she replied.

She came walking out from the trees and bushes, limping a little, holding something in her left hand. In her right hand she held a stick.

"What was wrong?" I asked.

"This," she replied, showing me the thing that she was carrying. "It attacked me. It bit my leg . . ."

"But *what* . . .?" I took the small, furry body from her. "Is it a monkey? But that's impossible . . ."

And it was impossible, too, to tell what the animal was. Claire, searching the jungle rim for bigger sticks than those on the beach, had just picked one up when she was attacked. And she had lashed out—not once, but several times. The animal's head was so smashed that, to all intents and purposes, it might have been decapitated. Anyhow, as Claire remarked, it was supper.

"I'll see to your leg first," I told her. "We'll build the fire to give us some light, and then we might boil some water in one of these half-coconut shells."

We built the fire, and used two precious matches and some paper—a letter, it looked like—from Claire's bag to light it. By this time it was almost dark, but the fire pushed the shadows back—and shone, too, on the white bones of our predecessors, seemed, as it flickered, to give them an uneasy life of their own. But after a while we didn't worry about them. We knew what they were. They represented the *known*, in one of its more unpleasant aspects, perhaps, but, still, the known. It was the unknown that had us worried.

So had the wound on Claire's leg. It was a strange wound, more like a knife slash than anything done with teeth. A fraction of an inch deeper, and it would have severed the Achilles tendon. Sheer chance, perhaps, but it made the attack assume an aspect of real viciousness. Anyhow, I managed to boil some water in which I sterilised a relatively clean strip torn from my shirt. I cleaned the wound and bandaged it, then set about preparing our supper.

The animal was about the size of a rabbit and, except for its longer, hairless tail, not unlike one. Both fore and hind feet, however, were handlike rather than clawlike. I was sorry that the head had been so badly smashed. That would have given me a better idea. As it was, it could have been some sort of unholy rabbit-monkey cross. And that was just impossible, apart from the fact that neither rabbits nor monkeys are indigenous to the Pacific.

After we had cleaned and skinned the beast we spitted it on a stick, took spells in keeping it turning over the fire. Drops of gravy fell sizzling into the flames. It smelled good. And so, before it was even half-cooked, we burned our hands tearing it to pieces and stuffing it into our mouths. There was neither pepper nor salt, there was no sage and onion stuffing, but I've had many a roast rabbit that wasn't in the same class.

Claire inelegantly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, wiped the back of her hand on her skirt. "That," she said, "solves the food problem. We must think about setting traps for these things."

I pointed the bone that I was gnawing at those other bones.

"Who set traps for *them*?"

"Why, nobody. They were more than half-dead when they got here, staggered out of their boat only to die. And then the land crabs . . ." She

shuddered. "But that's how it must have been," she finished.

"Wish I could be so sure. And we haven't seen any crabs. Get some sleep, anyhow. I'll take first watch."

"First watch? But if there *are* any animals big enough to hurt us . . ."

"Your little friend had a damn' good try."

"I must have trodden on his tail, or something, so he flew at me. But let me finish, Ken. The fire'll keep 'em off."

"Maybe. But we have to keep the fire up."

"All right, all right. You win." She turned her back to me, curled up like a disgruntled kitten, refused to answer when next I spoke to her. Perhaps she was asleep, but I didn't think so. I got up and, being careful not to stray outside the wavering circle of firelight, collected some more wood. Once I thought I heard something stirring at the jungle edge, heaved a large stone in that direction. The noise—if it had been a noise—ceased. I wanted a smoke. I wanted a smoke badly. I took my empty pipe out of my pocket, stuffed the bowl with dried seaweed and picked up a stick with a glowing end, gave myself a light. The resultant fit of coughing woke Claire who, after abusing me roundly, fished in her handbag and produced a battered packet containing four cigarettes. One of them she halved, and we sat together, quietly smoking. When we had finished we carefully stubbed out and saved the butts.

We kissed, then, and things might have gone further, but we had the damndest feeling that we were being watched. "It's no good, Ken," said Claire abruptly. "I'm sorry—but I just can't. Not to-night." She grinned. "And the worst part of it is—I want to."

"So do I. But I don't want some Peeping Tom shining a torch on us just at the crucial moment . . ."

"Just the way that I feel. Well, goodnight, my dear. Call me when you feel tired . . ."

"I'll call you all right," I said.

And so the night passed. We kept our watches—of about three hours' duration they must have been—and we kept the fire going and, apart from the uncanny, uncomfortable feeling of other, unfriendly eyes watching we had little of which to complain. But we were not sorry to see the sun come up.

Breakfast was oysters again—roast, this time—and a ripe coconut that had fallen from one of the palms. After the meal was finished we decided to make our way back to our own boat—it was more homey, somehow. I wanted to give the two skeletons decent burial, but Claire was against it. It would waste too much time, she said, and, after all, it wasn't as though we *knew* them. All the same, it didn't seem right to leave them there.

Our journey up the bed of the stream was made without incident. The flies were still bad, of course, but they were only a minor discomfort. When we came to the source of the stream I was rather surprised to discover what a clear path we had left in our yesterday's passage through the bush. I had always thought that in the tropics vegetation grows so fast as to completely obliterate any kind of path inside twenty-four hours. It seemed that I had a lot to learn.

I took the lead along the path of sorts, crashing quite happily through the undergrowth, when, suddenly, I fell. I hit bottom with what was almost a



bone-breaking crash, lay gasping for breath and swearing feebly. From somewhere above Claire called, "Ken, Ken! Are you all right?"

"Yes," I managed to answer, then scrambled to my feet.

It was a pit into which I had fallen, all of seven feet deep. There were pointed stakes in the bottom of the pit—points up. And the wood of which they were composed was newly cut. I found—afterwards, at the time all that I was concerned with was getting out—that whoever had dug the pit had managed, somehow, to leave a thin roof of earth, three inches or so, over it. But that, as I say, was afterwards. All that worried me then was the horribly makeshift rope that Claire was lowering to me. Her skirt I recognised, ripped beyond repair, and her sweater, and something else of pale, lilac silk. I got hold of the end of it, gave it an experimental tug. "It's all right," called Claire. "I've taken a turn round a tree!"

NEXT IN LINE

I dragged myself up hand over hand, getting as much purchase as I could in the soft soil at the side of the pit with my toes. I saw Claire's face, anxious, yet with relief dawning upon it. She bent down, one hand out to catch mine and to give me the final heave to safety. And then, beyond her shapely, bare legs, I saw something else—little, brown-grey animals slinking from bushes, moving almost like tiny kangaroos, getting into position for sudden, treacherous attack. I shouted then—a wordless bellow, compounded of fear and rage. Claire screamed, fell backwards. The animals scurried for cover.

I was out of that pit like a cork out of a champagne bottle. I jumped over Claire's body, ran crashing into the bushes. Something nicked my right ankle, it may have been a thorn or a sharp stone, but it brought me to my senses. Walking carefully, alert for any attack from the rear, I made my way back to the girl.

She was standing up when I got back to her, trying to arrange her torn skirt in some semblance of decency. She was far from pleased. She asked: "What's the big idea, roaring and bellowing like the Bull of Bashan?"

"Your little friends of last night," I told her. "They were creeping up behind you. I scared them off."

"I should say you did." She walked carefully to the rim of the pit. "Why! Somebody dug this!"

"And somebody put these stakes at the bottom."

She was very pale.

"Cannibals," she whispered.

"Looks like it."

"And those little rabbit things . . . Scavengers, perhaps, like jackals . . ."

"Let's get out of here," I told her. "There's a madman on this blasted island by the looks of it. The old cannibals used to kill their enemies in warfare—I've never read of their setting this kind of trap. Whoever did *this* must be somebody—a castaway like ourselves—who's read or heard about the African elephant traps. . ."

We were glad when we came to the stream leading to what we now thought of as *our* beach. As long as we kept to the bed we should be in no danger of any more pitfalls. And we had armed ourselves with stout sticks, and we kept telling ourselves that the two of us would be more than a match for our unknown, unseen enemy, otherwise he would, by this time, have made an open attack. The two Polynesians from the canoe? They, we said, must have slept, neglecting to keep a watch. Or, perhaps, the madman had come in the canoe with them.

Our beach was as we had left it. The dinghy was still there, her foul, paint-encrusted sides an affront to the clean sand. It was not until we examined the boat that we discovered that we had had visitors during our absence. The two empty bottles were missing. This was a serious loss. To people circumstanced as we were the most trivial, ordinary objects can be of great value. Already I had been debating with myself whether or not to put messages in both of them, setting them adrift, or to keep one, breaking it to furnish me with a knife of sorts and perhaps, thanks to the curvature of the glass, even a burning lens.

And now they were both gone.

"I hope," I said bitterly, "that the bastard falls and breaks them, and cuts an artery, and bleeds to death."

"And I. He probably killed that child as well . . ."

"What child?"

"The child whose toy canoe we found."

"Where is the toy canoe? That's gone, too . . ."

We stood and looked at each other, dreading the setting of the sun. Without a word, and keeping close together, we began to gather driftwood for the night's fire, enough to last us all through the hours of darkness without our having to move far afield for replenishments. A madman, a cannibalistic madman, might not fear fire as would a wild animal—but a fire would give us light by which to fight.

The sun went down and we had our unappetising evening meal of roasted oysters and seaweed, followed it with a shared cigarette smoked in uneasy silence. The stars came out one by one in the darkening sky. There was no moon. Claire got to her feet, walked to and fro, careful not to stray outside the circle of firelight.

She said: "I'll keep the first watch. I'm—edgy. I'll never sleep."

"We'd better both keep awake."

"No. That'd be silly."

"I don't think so. Whoever is behind it all is as liable to attack by day as by night."

And so we argued for a while, more for the sake of argument, for the sake of hearing our own voices, than anything else. Claire had her way eventually, and I was tired. I curled up as close to the fire as was possible with any degree of comfort, soon drifted into a pleasant state of half-sleep, half-wakefulness, in which I watched the girl pacing up and down, swinging the stout stick she carried in a rather vicious manner.

I went to sleep then, a heavy, dreamless sleep. For how long it lasted I cannot say. But for some clumsiness on the part of my assailants it could have lasted forever.

It is far from pleasant to be awakened by something sharp at your throat. I yelled and flailed out wildly, yelled again when my right hand fell into the embers of the fire. Dim forms, half-seen in the starlight, the phosphorescence along the beach, scuttled over the pale sand. I cursed the land crabs—for so I thought them—cursed Claire for letting the fire out.

But . . .

Claire was gone.

It would have been easy enough—and fatal enough—to have rushed into the jungle like a mad thing, to have run headlong into whatever traps our cunning assailant might have set. I took a tight grip on myself, drove my mind into what I hoped was a calm and rational evaluation of the factors involved. I sat beside the fire and stirred the embers into life, piled on some more sticks. As I picked them up something cut my hand. I picked it up and looked at it by the light of the flames. It was a dangerously sharp splinter of glass—of curved, brownish glass, the kind of glass that is used for making beer bottles. Its significance escaped me. I stared at it stupidly for a while, then got up to look for footprints.

They were hard to find by the unsteady, flickering light of the flames. But it seemed that the sand had been disturbed by—something. It seemed that—*something* had made a track from the vicinity of the fire to where the

stream spread over the sand of the beach. There were no footprints—or none that I could see. Something the size of a human body had been dragged to the stream.

I stared inland, stared into the darkness of the jungle. There seemed to be a light over the tops of the trees—an illumination too ruddy to be the Zodiacal Light, too ruddy, too unsteady. As I watched it pulsed and brightened, dimmed again, then shot up brighter than before.

It was a fire.

Something—some sense of being watched—made me turn round. The dim, dark little shapes of what I had taken for land crabs had slunk up behind me. I yelled and waved my stick and they retreated. I ran a few steps towards them—and they fled precipitantly into the sea, making luminescent splashes as they entered the water. Abruptly the calm surface was stirred into a flurry of brighter phosphorescence as two long, dark bodies plunged and threshed in the shallows. Something squealed, high and thin, scrambled out of the water, hopping like a tiny kangaroo. My stick came down, and there was a rather sickening *crunch*. I ignored the little body, looked once again to that fire inland.

So we had given the madman fire, I thought. From the embers of our fire on the other beach, or from the curved glass, the crude burning lens, of a broken bottle . . . But the means didn't matter. And I might be too late, too late to save Claire, but at least the fire would guide me to my revenge . . .

Some sort of Providence must have been watching over me. The bed of the stream wasn't exactly easy going even in broad daylight. And now, in pitch darkness, my haste invited a broken ankle at the very least. I had several nasty stumbles, but nothing serious, then at last reached a place where it became obvious that the fire was off to the right of the stream.

I kept telling myself to be cautious, to be silent, but even had I been trained in jungle warfare my anxious haste would have negated my skill. And I had no skill . . . But it was a noisy fire, crackling loudly, and some animals of some kind were keeping up a continual, high, hysterical chittering. There was a smell, too, that worried me. In part it was the smell of burning vegetation and in part . . . animal . . . Did you ever keep white mice or rats as a child, and did you ever incur parental displeasure by omitting to clean the little beasts out regularly? That's what the smell was like.

Abruptly I burst into the clearing. There was a huge fire there, and it had caught the surrounding jungle. I don't know what the trees and bushes were, but they burned. Some way from the flames was what looked like a conical metal hut, its base torn and twisted. Little grey figures were leaping hysterically in and out of a ragged hole in its side.

And there was Claire.

She was trussed up in a sort of net, and there was blood on her face and body, and in her hair. But her eyes were open, and she saw me, and tried to lift one of her arms. There was a gag in her mouth.

I ran across the clearing. The little—*things* got underfoot, squealing and biting, their fragile bones snapping as I trod them down. Then my knife was out, and its almost useless half-inch blade was sawing at the net. A half-dozen of the beasts jumped on to my back and I felt their sharp teeth. I dropped the knife, fell over backwards, felt something break that wasn't

me. When I got up two of them were still squirming. I picked them up and threw them into the fire.

At last she was free. She put up a hand to clear the wad of leaves from her mouth while I supported her in my arms.

"Where is he?" I demanded. "Where is the bastard who did this? I'll . . ."

She coughed and spat out the last of the leaves.

"It isn't—*him*," she gasped. "It's—*them* . . ."

"But where?"

"These . . ." she said, waving weakly around, pointing to the metal hut. "They've found fire, we gave them fire—and they've let it get out of control . . . They're hysterical with fear . . ."

There were letters and numbers on that hut of theirs—XR317. And somebody had scrawled untidily the word—or the name?—EXCELSIOR in white paint, in white paint that was oddly discoloured and blistered. I remembered these details later, but our main worry at the time was to get away from the fire, which was spreading fast.

In spite of Claire's weakness it was fairly easy to get downstream. The fire that gave us cause for haste also lit our way. We beat the flames to the beach, but not by much. As we staggered on to the sand something exploded in the jungle, sending a column of smoke and flame and sparks high into the sky, raining firebrands over the entire island. One fell into our boat, and only prompt action with sand saved her.

We got her into the water, pushed off, scrambled inboard. The island was now a mass of flame, a roaring, crackling inferno from which still flew terrified, squawking birds. Once we saw a dozen or so of the little grey beasts hop, kangaroo-like, down the sand to the water, saw the waiting sharks dispose of them in seconds. And once a tiny canoe pushed off from the shore—and as its paddlers brought it too close to our dinghy I brought my oar smashing down—and felt rather a swine for doing it.

The dawn came at last—and with the rising of the sun the fire died, and when it was light there was only a huge column of dirty smoke towering over the embers. To seawards there was more smoke, a thin, tenuous thread rising against the clear blue of the sky, hardly more than a faint discoloration beneath which, at last, we saw the masts and the upper works of the approaching ship.

And I wondered how much we could tell them when they picked us up. For I remembered reading of the experimental rocket—the one that had the rats aboard—sent up to try to determine the effects of hard radiation on flesh and blood . . . And I remember reading of how something had gone wrong, how the radar had lost track of the rocket, and how it had been assumed that the nose, with its strip parachute and instruments and animals, had fallen into the sea.

I forgot just how high those original rats were sent, but where they got to they weren't, like us, at the bottom of a deep, thick ocean of assorted gases. They had only a thin, metal skin between them and the hard radiations of outer space—the Cosmic Rays and all manner of high frequency stuff from the Sun and the stars. *They* weren't changed—but they breed fast, rats do, and they'd produced quite a few fine litters of mutants. A new

race, they were, with the intelligence to make weapons and tools from the broken glass and metal in the instrument compartment of the sounding rocket, with the intelligence to glimpse the possibilities of the fire that we had brought them.

A new race, they were, of fire-making, tool-using animals, like us. And like us they'd let the fire get out of control.

Be that as it may—nobody believed our story—and nobody believed our story of the death of Hastings either. The general idea seems to be that there were all kinds of fun and games on the island in which Mr. Hastings was involved and in which, when the games got a bit too rough, Mr. Hastings departed this life. The fire was a convenient way of disposing of the body . . . So, as far as I know, nobody has ever been back to see if there were any survivors of the rat people on the island.

At times, especially when I look at the morning paper, I almost hope that there are. If, or when, we finally get around to committing mass suicide—they'll be the next in line.

And they'll probably make as big a mess of things as we've done.

THE END

FORECASTS AND RATINGS

Leading off the next issue is a rather fine fantasy by J. T. M'Intosh entitled "Stitch in Time." As its name implies, it is a Time story, and may well have the answer to the problem of what would happen to travellers from the future if they visited our age. Peter Hawkins has another Lofford story, "Circus," and E. R. James contributes a long story entitled "Not As We Are." There are also a couple of excellent short stories, "Was not Spoken," by E. E. Evans, and "Enemy in their Midst," by Alan Barclay, who had his first story in *New Worlds* recently.

Readers had no doubts about the type of stories they preferred in *Science-Fantasy*, as the story ratings below for the Winter issue show. The three *fantasy* stories in the issue were well ahead of the rest of the field.

- | | | | | |
|----|----------------------|----|----|-------------------|
| 1. | Then there were Two | .. | .. | J. T. M'Intosh |
| 2. | { Pawley's Peepholes | .. | .. | John Wyndham |
| | { Grounded | .. | .. | E. C. Tubb |
| 3. | Double Trouble | .. | .. | William F. Temple |
| 4. | Undying Enemy | .. | .. | F. G. Rayer |
| 5. | Loser Take All... | .. | .. | N. K. Hemming |
| 6. | The Moving Hills | .. | .. | E. R. James |

THE TREASURE OF TAGOR

By SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

Ancient Mars had a few secrets from the prying eyes of Earthmen—including a gateway into other dimensions. Not even the swashbuckling Tiger came out of that affair the winner.

Illustrated by QUINN

"You wanted to see me."

The words were half-question, half-statement. The Tiger stood with arms folded, looking down at the Martian money-lender through a haze of smouldering spices.

"I sent for you."

Yagho's eyes were sly in his crinkled parchment face. His ancient, spidery form sprawled amid an opulence of silken cushions and his voice was a vulture's croak.

The Tiger stiffened. He liked neither the money-lender nor this opulent, stifling room with its heavy damasks and cloying incense. He bared his teeth.

"No one sends for the Tiger I!"

Yagho sniggered.

"But you came . . . you came out of curiosity, hoping for the chance of some easy money from old Yagho, the richest money-lender of all Mars. You can't deny it—curiosity and easy money."

The Tiger's right hand dropped to the hilt of his sword. His eyes moved beyond Yagho to an alcove where glittering gems fired rich velvet hangings with unforgettable splendour.

"Perhaps," he said, "I shall take my chance."

Yagho chuckled drily and the Tiger knew there were guards at his back. He let his sword arm fall slack, waiting for the Martian to speak his mind.

"You have heard of the treasure of Tagor?"

The Tiger nodded. Who hadn't heard of it? The legend went back to prehistory, the story of a jewel the size of a man's clenched fist. If it existed,

the jewel would be beyond ordinary price. He leant forward, towering above Yagho, lean and tanned with long, lank hair and a wild light in his eyes.

"You are an Earthman, an adventurer, a man hunted by the police of three planets," Yagho said. "A bold man, without fear—and such a one is needed to steal the Tagor treasure. I am offering you the chance of great wealth, a chance such as no man has had before. With my knowledge and your daring, the jewel of Tagor will be ours!"

"Yes?" The Tiger edged the word with doubt. "It's an old legend—and legends have a way of growing out of small things."

"Not on Mars, Earthman! The legend is true. So far back in history that records are meaningless, an alien race crossed space-time from another dimension, from a world they called Tagor. And the jewel was more than a jewel, a symbol of power, an image of the gods they worshipped. It is said that he who holds the treasure of Tagor holds the universe in the palm of his hand."

Yagho stirred amid the cushions, watching the Tiger's face, watching his expression change from doubt to avarice.

"It is said, Tiger, that our planetary system was in its infancy, that the aliens populated our worlds and a mighty civilisation sprang up. But that was long before any written memory and the legend has come down to us by word of mouth, passed from father to son for countless generations. And it is said they left a gateway to Tagor—a gateway through which a man may pass if he has the courage . . . and the cloak of power!"

Yagho paused dramatically.

"I have the cloak . . . have *you* the courage?"

"So long ago?" the Tiger whispered. "Can it still exist?"

Yagho shrugged.

"Who knows? But remember, the æons are not of this universe. Tagor lies in another dimension, across space-time. Tagor is alien; it lies outside our experience. Perhaps, there, the years are as nothing."

A ripple of coldness spread through the Tiger's body. He feared nothing on three planets, but this—this was the unknown. His mouth dried and his tongue cleaved to the roof.

"The cloak?" he said.

Yagho motioned with a thin arm.

"Open the casket behind the curtain."

The Tiger drew back a dark curtain and lifted the lid of the casket he found there. An opalescence shimmered deep in the interior of the casket, a dazzling, changing rainbow of light that wavered on the very edge of the spectrum. It had heart-aching beauty; and power coursed through it like blood through the arteries of a man.

"Lift out the cloak," Yagho commanded. "It will not hurt you."

The Tiger braced himself. His hands reached in, grasped the cloak and lifted it clear of the casket. His body tingled with a new sensation, as if the cloak lent him some of its power; he felt acutely *alive*. The cloak shimmered before his eyes, pulsing with strange colours, and he knew that Yagho spoke the truth.

"The gateway?" he whispered.

"At the foot of the North Canal, where the Polar Aqueduct crosses it,



you will find an opening in the canal wall. Put on the cloak and you may pass through unharmed. That is the gateway to Tagor—and the jewel which is beyond all wealth."

Yagho's eyes shone and his frail form quivered with excitement. His voice shook.

"We will rule the universe, Tiger, you and I. We shall command power

and riches greater than anyone before us. Go now, through the gateway to Tagor !”

The Tiger laughed, reading Yagho's mind. The Martian's greed would not permit him to share the jewel with any man—but the Tiger was prepared for treachery. Perhaps *he* would beat the money-lender at his own game.

He ripped down the dark curtain before the alcove and used it to cover the scintillating glory that was the cloak of power; and left Yagho's house. He moved through the back streets of Old Mars, the precious bundle under his left arm, his right hand on the hilt of his sword, the blade loose in its scabbard.

Dark alleys twisted tortuously under the faint light of twin moons. The air was sharp and thin and exhilarating and the scurry of rats magnified a thousand times in the still silence. Shadowy figures lurked in the gloom, but none bothered the Tiger; his reputation as a fighting man kept off all would-be assassins who waited for a careless tourist wandering from lighted streets.

He travelled along the edge of the North Canal, watching the lights of Marsport in the distance. There, Earthmen revelled in chromium luxury, safe and secure in their tight-walled colony. Here, in the streets of the Old City lining the banks of the canal, darkness and ruins and an atmosphere of decay spread like the legends of Mars' past glory.

Once, the canals had carried sailing vessels from city to city; commerce had built the Martian civilisation—and when the seas had dried up, the canals emptied, commerce died. And civilisation was no more. Now, only the ghosts of long ago flitted over the sand-crustbed beds of the canals.

The Tiger reached Polar Aqueduct and started down the worn steps. The canal wall rose sheer at his side, dark and eroded with age. A hundred steps to the bottom, then rust-red sand mingled with the dust of ages to form a thick carpet where once ships had sailed. There were no footprints; no one bothered to visit the canal bed for there was nothing but sand and a few rock plants struggling for bitter existence. The Tiger's prints were sharp and clear as he moved forward.

A rocket rose from Marsport, its jets redly illuminating the barren landscape. Dust shifted under a slight breeze, continually demolishing and rebuilding the long waves of dunes. The silence was solid, the darkness an opaque wall about him. This was Mars, the desert planet, old and dying, temporarily propped up by an imported colony from Earth.

The Tiger unwrapped the cloak of power and draped it about his lean form. The walls of the canal pulsed with a new light and the sand shimmered like petrol on water. He followed the wall till he came to the opening, half-blocked with debris and tunnelling into darkness. He passed through.

The ground seemed to leave him as he went through the gateway to Tagor. His feet walked in space and even the power of the cloak was lost in the black infinities of space-time. He had a sense of suspension, as if time stopped and lost its meaning; as if space contracted and all points were one. Light, sound, and all bodily sensations were alien here; the cloak was his ferry to another universe in another dimension. Then, abruptly, he was through the gateway—and Tagor stood before him.

Bright orange sunlight dazzled him, sparkled on the towers and minarets, terraces and galleries of a crystal city. A lambent light illumed the city and the Tiger was struck with awe by the beauty of Tagor. Not on Earth, nor Mars, nor Venus had he seen a city with such splendour; it was minutes before he remembered his mission and set out towards the wonderful city, leaving his cloak to mark the gateway to his own world.

Warm yellow grass caressed his feet as he walked. The air was heady as wine and clear as a mountain stream. Luxuriant plants sprayed a riot of colour about his path and long tendrils dropped from leafy boughs to ruffle his hair. The Tiger moved in a dream, motivated by a jewel that lured him on—a jewel that would bring him greater riches than man had ever known.

Before the city was an amphitheatre, a vast hollow between rising tiers of seats and, in the centre of the arena, a crystal pylon and a dark oblong block. The Tiger stopped, mesmerised. Atop the crystal structure, resting on the blackest cloth he had ever seen, lay the treasure of Tagor.

The Tiger's eyes were dazzled; he shielded them with his cupped hands from the jewel. It was, as legend said, the size of a man's fist. It glowed rose-pink from an internal light and was pure and ravishingly beautiful. No legend could contain its beauty, its wonder and sense of mystery; it sparked and flamed in a way that dulled all words. The Tiger's throat was dry parchment, his hands reached out in grasping claws and his whole being ached to possess the jewel.

The sounds of many people reached him. A crowd was moving out from the city gates, coming towards the amphitheatre. The Tiger dropped to cover, watching, waiting his chance to seize his prize.

The crowd came quickly, flooding the amphitheatre with life, filling the tiers of seats. They were restless, the people of Tagor, waiting . . . waiting for the procession that came almost immediately.

A tall, bearded man led the procession. Behind him, a girl in a white dress walked between two men. Behind them came a giant of a man dressed in black and carrying a scimitar which gleamed in the sun. And a dozen armed men completed the company.

The Tiger's eyes fell on the girl. She was young and smooth-skinned with golden tresses that fell across her white-draped shoulders. Her head was high, proud, and her expression calm with an infinite sadness. She had a beautiful face, oval and delicately proportioned—and the Tiger fell in love with her.

The meaning of the procession did not come to him at once. They grouped themselves about the dark block under the treasure of Tagor and the bearded man raised his hand for silence. His words had a solemnity that chilled the Tiger's spine and froze his sword-hand.

"People of Tagor, we are gathered once more to make propitiation for our sins. Every year, the Gods demand the sacrifice of a young maiden, the most beautiful in the land. Our offering this year is Luyka, Princess of Thayle—Luyka of the Golden Hair. May she please the Gods!"

"May she please the Gods!" chanted the crowd.

The bearded man bowed.

"Let the sacrifice be made . . ."

The Tiger threw off the numbness holding him. Anger surged through

him. Barbarians ! His grip tightened about his sword until the knuckles of his hand turned white. He rose, baring his teeth.

The girl's hands were tied, and she was forced towards the sacrificial block. Her face was white, but she made no murmur. Her head was high and the beauty of her ran through the Tiger's veins, heating his blood. His body shook with fury at such an outrage.

The guards tied Luyka to the block. The executioner stepped forward, whetting his blade. The girl closed her eyes, waiting . . .

Madness pounded through the Tiger's brain. He was one against a thousand—but he would not let Luyka die. Her loveliness cried out to him, threatened to engulf him. He loved her, desired her; the madness gripped him, stripped away his caution. He would take the jewel—and the girl.

Jerking his sword from its scabbard, he ran forward. The altar, with the bound figure of Luyka, loomed ahead. A cry went up from the crowd as they saw him, and the guards turned. The executioner paused, hesitating, looking to the bearded man for orders. This was sacrilege.

Luyka opened her eyes and saw the lean figure of the Tiger racing to her aid; the grim set of his jaw, the wild light in his eyes told his purpose, and she began to hope again. The Tiger laughed as he sprang at the foremost guard; his sword ripped into the man's chest, spilling blood, opening a way to the girl.

The kill warmed him and he threw himself into the breach. Guards surrounded him; blades clashed and sparked and another man died. The Tiger fought like a man possessed, giving no ground, forcing the pace. The hope in Luyka's eyes drove him on; his sword blade flashed in the sun, blood-red, lunging, parrying, thrusting home.

He reached the girl on the altar beneath the blazing light of the jewel, but more armed men appeared, crowding him. The Tiger was forced back, a dozen glittering blades seeking a path through his defence. His arm grew tired, wielding the sword. Blood and sweat ran down his face and he snarled defiance at his attackers.

He knew now that he could not escape. The crowds pressing about him grew thicker with every moment; more guards came to join the fight round the altar. It could only be a question of time before one of their blades penetrated his guard and plunged to his heart. The Tiger's laughter, remembering Yagho, was a bitter sound. He had come to steal the jewel—and would die for the love of a girl. Abruptly, the Tiger threw down his sword.

It clattered on the stones and the men of Tagor, taken by surprise and fearing a trick, drew back in alarm.

"Let the girl go free," the Tiger said calmly. "For love of her, I am ready to give my life. I will be your sacrifice—but let Luyka live."

There was a moment's silence; the Tiger's eyes met Luyka's, then the crowd roared:

"Kill ! Kill the infidel !"

The Tiger folded his arms across his chest and waited, smiling, while the guards closed in. The bearded man spoke:

"Wait ! There has been enough bloodshed."

He pushed through the ring of armed men to face the Tiger.

"Where are you from, stranger ? By what right do you seek to interfere



with a religious sacrifice? Speak, as you value your life!"

"I came through the gateway, from another world," the Tiger answered boldly, "and I claim the right to fight for the girl I love. No man can do less than that."

"You speak well," the patriarch said.

A reckless light danced in the Tiger's eyes.

"I will challenge the greatest fighting man of Tagor. If I win, the girl is mine."

The patriarch smiled faintly.

"Luyka belongs to the Gods—your fight is with them. Do you dare challenge the Guardian of the Treasure?"

The Tiger bared his teeth in a wild laugh.

"I came to steal the treasure of Tagor. I will kill your Guardian, take the girl and jewel for my own. I defy your Gods!"

"Enter the amphitheatre, stranger. The Guardian will claim you. Prepare to meet your death!"

"First," replied the Tiger, "free the girl so that she may watch her champion."

The patriarch signalled to a guard and Luyka's bonds were cut. She rose to her feet, looking with wonder at the Tiger.

"Sir, I accept your love and will die the happier for knowledge of it—"

The Tiger stepped forward and took her in his arms.

"I shall fight for you, Luyka," he said, "and win. We will leave Tagor together."

"You cannot win," the girl whispered, trembling against him. "Escape while you have the chance. Leave me—"

Smiling, the Tiger pressed his lips on hers, tasting the promise of infinite ecstasy. He looked deep into her eyes and saw, mirrored there, the seed of his love growing in her heart; he knew then that she was his—if he killed the Guardian.

He turned away, strode into the circle of the amphitheatre with a bold swagger. A man threw him his sword, jeering:

"Take your blade, infidel. It will be of little use against the Guardian!"

The Tiger stood motionless, watching the crowd press back from the arena. His lips tightened and he balanced his sword in his hand, wondering what manner of beast the Guardian could be that even the men of Tagor cowered in fear. His eyes left the crowd, rested for a moment on the treasure of Tagor, glittering atop the crystal structure behind the altar. The jewel winked back at him.

The air was sparkling clear and sunlight glinted on the distant towers of the city as he awaited the coming of the Guardian. Luyka, white-faced, smiled at him; she was so slender, so beautiful, that the Tiger ached with longing.

A grating of moving metalwork jarred him from his dreams. A lattice grille slid up in its frame and an opening yawned before him; terrifying sounds came from the darkness beyond. The Tiger stiffened, bringing his sword across his body—the Guardian was coming.

A bulky shape pushed the shadows aside. The ground quaked and waves of thunder beat through the air. The Tiger held his breath, fighting back the fear which threatened to paralyse him. A scaly head took form; a cloud of black smoke, acrid and stinging, mushroomed out; a scarlet tongue of flame roared forth. The Tiger's short hairs prickled and ice froze his veins. A sickness spread through him and he forced himself to move forward, to face the Guardian as it left its lair and rumbled into the arena.

It towered above him, scaly and clawed, a serrated tail dragging the dust. Red eyes in a lizard head glared down at him; monstrous jaws gaped and a tongue of fire roared out. The Tiger staggered back as the Guardian's hot, stifling breath engulfed him; the monster lumbered towards him, shaking the earth as it moved. A fearsome claw swished through the air, brushing the Tiger, ripping his clothes.

Luyka shouted: "Run! Run for your life!"

Her words shattered the Tiger's paralysis; he snarled defiance and struck savagely with his sword. The blade clattered harmlessly on the Guardian's thick scales and he moved back, searching desperately for a weak spot in

its armour. He knew now what manner of thing he was fighting; he had seen pictures in ancient murals, read descriptions in the oldest written legends. On Mars, the thing had been called *Xytl*; on Earth, in the history of China, a fire-breathing dragon.

The Tiger knew now how those legends had started; he was face to face with the reality of the thing that had crossed space-time from Tagor—and he was no longer afraid. The fear of the unknown fell away from him. He had a material enemy to conquer—and the Tiger feared no mortal thing.

He slashed at a giant claw, dodged the fiery mouth bending to devour him, ran close in to the dragon's body, hacking wildly with his blade. But the thick scales were impenetrable and he wasted his strength trying to force an incision between them. The Guardian spewed a tongue of flame, roaring with anger at the impudent pigmy tickling it with a leaf of steel; it spread membranous wings and flapped furiously. The wind of its beating wings lifted it through the air, flinging the Tiger head over heels in a beast-made gale.

The dragon swooped for the kill. The Tiger rushed in with his bloody sword; a massive armour-scaled leg grazed him, knocked him sprawling. He rose to his feet, seething with impotent fury. There must be a way to kill the Guardian, a weak spot for his blade to penetrate. He lunged again . . . and the dragon turned, its serrated tail describing a wicked arc, flailing the air.

The Tiger dropped flat; the monster tail passed over his head with the force of a whirlwind. Baleful red eyes glared at him; that awful mouth lowered, yellowed teeth gleaming, black smoke pouring from huge nostrils. The Tiger rolled clear, darted away, turned again to face the Guardian of the Treasure.

Luyka watched with haggard face, hardly breathing. The crowd was tensed, silent, expectant. The dragon's wings beat again as it pounced; and the Tiger knew how he would kill the thing. Its eyes were unprotected; his sword could reach through to the brain behind those horrible red eyes. But the Guardian's head was high above him and he could not cut it down—so he must climb the scaled body, climb till he reached its eyes.

He circled the dragon, waiting his chance; rushed in, clawing wildly to obtain a hold on the serrated scales. The Guardian shook its huge body and the Tiger flew through the air, landing with such force that dust rose in a cloud and his teeth rattled in his head. Again he circled the monster.

He ducked under the wings and slashed wildly at the beating membranes, cutting a ragged hole in one. He sprang upward, gripping the protruding bone, forcing himself up through the tear in the Guardian's wing. He climbed through, perched on scaly shoulders, holding on with the grip of a drowning man. The dragon rose in the air, breathing fire, roaring with pain; it fell awkwardly, jarring the ground—and the Tiger inched his way towards the head, sword in hand.

The Guardian lumbered round the arena, furious that it could not shake loose the parasite on its back. The Tiger, hands and feet wedged into the cracks between the dragon's horny scales, grimly climbed towards a beady red eye. He clung to the neck, raised his sword—and plunged it home with all his force.

The steel blade slid into soft jelly, penetrated to the hilt, striking the tiny

brain of the Guardian; it reared in the air, claws flailing, the thunder of agony beating a maelstrom of sound through the air. Hot blood gushed out; the Tiger withdrew his blade, and was thrown from his perch. He rolled sideways as the huge body staggered and crashed to the ground, smothering him in dust.

He rose, breathing heavily, but triumphant. The dragon heaved in death motions, growing weaker with every moment. The Tiger approached warily, lunged again, forcing his blade deep into the other eye. The dragon quivered; and was still.

A shocked silence fell across the amphitheatre. For long minutes, the men of Tagor could not believe their eyes—the Guardian of the Treasure lay dead in the arena. And the stranger walked towards the altar, blood trailing from the sword in his hand. They parted to make way for him.

Luyka's face was wet with tears of joy. She flung herself upon the Tiger, wrapping her arms about him, offering her mouth for his kisses.

"You won!" she whispered in awe. "You have killed the Guardian!"

The Tiger laughed and kissed her, then held her away from him. He faced the patriarch again.

"Luyka is mine," he said. "And the jewel!"

"You have won the girl," replied the bearded man. "But nothing was said of the treasure of Tagor. The jewel remains—take Luyka and go."

"Old man," the Tiger jeered. "Can you stop me taking the jewel? Is there one man of Tagor willing to face my blade?"

He leapt up and took the shimmering jewel from its resting place atop the crystal structure. The treasure of Tagor vibrated in his hand, filling him with a sense of power; its rose-pink beauty glittered like dawn light, crystallised into one breath-taking gem. It was the Tiger's moment of triumph; never again would he know such power. He laughed, and men drew back in fear.

"Stranger," said the patriarch, "you cannot escape with the treasure of Tagor. It is for no man. Armed guards will follow wherever you go. You will not be able to sleep, for they will take the jewel from you. You will know no rest, no solitude, no peace. The treasure of Tagor must remain here."

But the Tiger laughed and walked away, holding the jewel with one hand and Luyka with the other. He moved across the amphitheatre, towards the open spaces, heading for the gateway and the cloak of power. Once through the gateway and the men of Tagor could do nothing; they could not follow without the cloak. He hurried on, Luyka at his side.

Guards followed after them, making no attempt to stop them, waiting for the Tiger to sleep. They could afford to wait. Beyond the amphitheatre, the Tiger told Luyka of his plan.

"We shall soon be safe, Luyka. Beyond the gateway, on my world, nothing can touch us. The jewel will make us wealthy beyond dreams—but that will be as nothing to our happiness. Our love is the real treasure I am taking from Tagor."

She did not speak until they reached the place where he had left the shimmering cloak. Then she said:

"Leave the jewel—and stay with me. You are a strange man with strange ways, but I love you. You saved me from death—to kill me in your own

way. How can I make you understand? To pass through the gateway is death for me. There are some things about it you do not understand."

The guards ringed them, unspeaking, waiting for the Tiger to decide. He picked up the cloak and girded it about him, drew Luyka under its protective cover. He held the jewel tight in his hand.

"Luyka," he said gently. "There is nothing to fear. Trust me. I came through the gateway—and we can pass back. You will not be harmed."

Her eyes were sad as she clung to him.

"Kiss me, then, and I will go. Give me one more token of your love . . . then I will pass through with you."

The Tiger's lips touched the girl's, and he knew their love was the greatest thing in his life. Almost, he consented to stay—but the treasure of Tagor nestled in his hand, throbbing with power. And he wanted to return, to outwit Yagho and keep the jewel for himself. He looked away, unable to face the appeal in Luyka's eyes. Holding the girl and the jewel under the cloak, he stepped forward, through the gateway.

Blackness and silence descended. He was suspended in space-time, alone in an alien place. Time stopped and space contracted. Then, abruptly, he was through—and saw again the red sand of Old Mars and the canal stretching before him under twin moons.

"Luyka—"

But he was alone. Terribly alone, and afraid. The girl was not there, nor the jewel known as the treasure of Tagor. Slowly, he unclenched his hands. From one, fell a fine spray of dust, the mortal remains of a girl who had lived and died millions of years ago. From the other, a second spray of dust—so many æons had passed that even the jewel had disintegrated.

For a moment, the Tiger's heart stopped beating. A slight breeze moved along the canal and the two tiny piles of dust were scattered amid the sand dunes, lost for ever.

A voice said: "The treasure?"

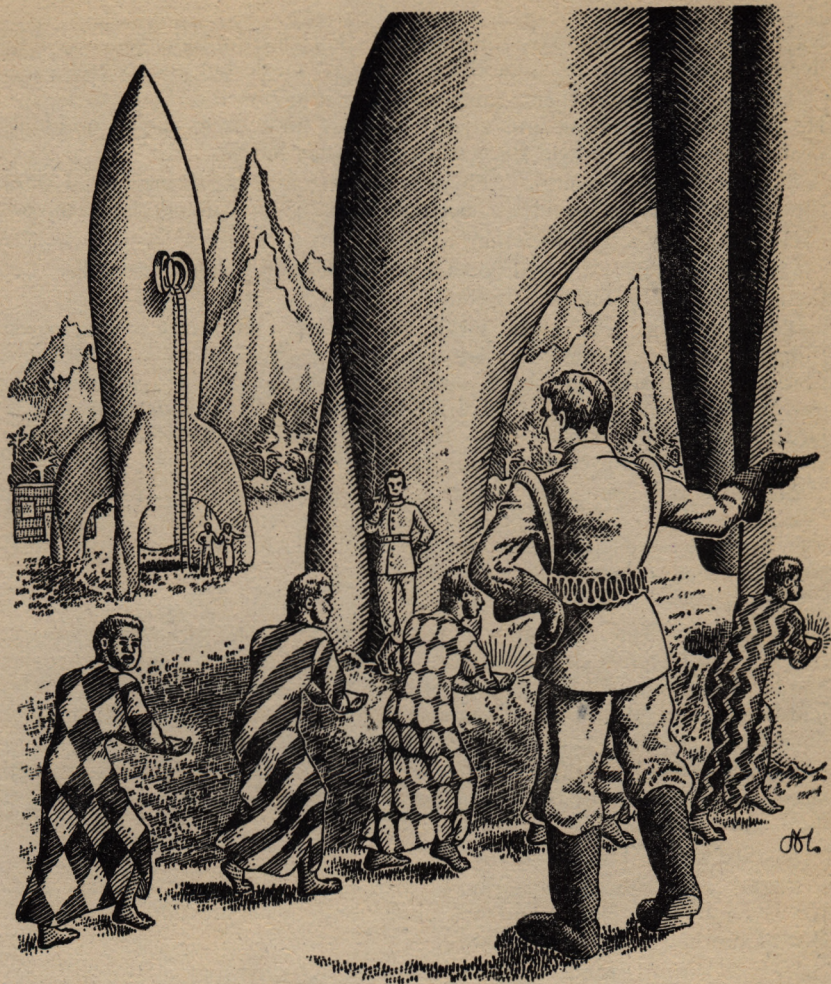
Yagho came from the shadows, his parchment face alight with eagerness. He saw the Tiger and could not understand the expression on his face. But he did not doubt his words:

"There is no treasure, Yagho. All is dust . . . dust . . ."

The money-lender watched him walk unsteadily through the sand of the North Canal, then drop to his knees, lips moving in silent prayer. Yagho drew back, afraid, for there were tears in the eyes of the Tiger.

THE END





PLIMSOLL LINE

By F. G. RAYER

The race doesn't always go to the fastest—the old skipper knew a trick or two when it came to picking up cargo.

Illustrated by HUNTER

Rain hammered on the ship's hull and on the oilskins of the girl and man coming across the steaming ground. Out there up near the galaxy's edge

SCIENCE-FANTASY

some of the planets seem to have tough weather, by Earth standards, and Cephenid II, wobbling its hundred-day year round a small, young sun, was living up to rumour. Captain Kennedy scowled as he admitted the two newcomers into the entrance lock.

"Didn't know there was another Earthman in this system," he said.

He swore. I knew it was the hope that he'd have the little planet all to himself for at least a few days that had brought him at top speed from Earth and I looked at the pair shaking their waterproofs. The girl was maybe twenty-five; small, neat and having a purposeful look. The man had to be her dad—there were the same blue eyes, mildly amused; the same kind, keen face, though older and wrinkled. A look of recognition came into the blue eyes.

"Kennedy, by the horned saint !" the man said. "What chance brings ye here ?"

"The same as you, Mactavish !" Kennedy snapped, and I saw he was more uneasy than he wanted to show. "Rumours of a rake-off for them who are quick !"

I knew Kennedy had expected to be first on the little Cephenid. A cruiser had put down there for repairs and a crewman taken back a piece of curious stuff he'd found. It had made him rich and he had talked. Kennedy was one of a pack of wolves anxious to cash in—had supposed himself first until we landed.

Mactavish stroked his long nose and grinned. "By Halley, rumours travel ! Is there no honour among thieves, mon ?"

He raised his eyes expressively towards where heaven might be and Kennedy snorted.

"You're as much a thief as any of us ! I warrant you nearly burned your old tramp up getting here first—"

Mactavish lifted a hand. "No swearing, Cap'n, we've ladies present. Meet my gal Jill." She smiled, nodding. "No bad feelings over the past," Mactavish continued. "No quarrelling. By the comet, but there's enough space in the cosmos for two millionaires ! We'll split."

Kennedy's eyes were angry; he was a head taller than the older man and lacked the latter's kindly looks. I had only shipped with Kennedy because Planetary Records expects an early report on any planet and I hadn't reached that level where they'd give me a ship of my own.

"Split nothing !" Kennedy said. "I haven't forgotten what happened on Pluto ! No, Jock Mactavish, I've got you where I want you this time, and you know it. I can leave that tub of yours six months behind."

Jock Mactavish looked hurt. "You wouldna do that, Mr. Kennedy. You wouldna spoil a poor old trader's chance, or spoil the market for him ? A single load of this stuff will fill Earth's needs for generations. Me mother wouldna believe you'd be that unkind . . ."

"I would—and will !"

Kennedy stamped off back to the control room to see to the delayed landing check-up.

With a heavy sigh Mactavish led his daughter away and they vanished in the teeming rain. I got a waterproof and went out. The rain was hot and heavy and thunder cannonaded in the distance, blue flickers sometimes showing through the murk. The Mactavishes had a rough shelter outside

their ship, which was a crate that would not knock up a quarter the speed of Kennedy's ship. Jill was standing under the shelter, her red hair freed from the waterproof's hood. I hoped she didn't think me one of Kennedy's special chums. Kennedy was hard—and mean.

"Is it always this wet?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Only these last few days."

"Anything interesting around? You've been here some days, I see."

"A week."

The tone was hostile. "Look," I said, "I'm not tied up with Kennedy; I'm merely collecting a rough first report for Planetary Records. They tag exploratory journeys and pushed me on to him. I've got two stars up. If I get another then they give me command of my own ship and more pay."

She smiled, and that was a reward. "I've heard of you boys. Dad had been hoping to retire after this trip. Can't you help negotiate an agreement. Dad was here first; it's mere rotten luck his ship's slow."

"I'll try." I thought that extra pay maybe enough to marry on.

"And tell Kennedy the stuff is *sacred*," she shouted after me as I set off back through the rain. "Sacred. Nobody can touch it except the natives."

That shook me for a moment, and it shook Kennedy too. But I saw he was determined to forestall Mactavish, feather his own nest, then overload the Earth market.

"If Mactavish can get it loaded, so can I!" he growled.

Early next morning he was out. Temporarily fine weather brought out the natives to see the new ship. The tallest was up to my shoulder; all wore many-coloured one-piece garments like shirts reaching to their ankles. By signs I learned that the stuff we sought was half a mile away over a rocky hill, and I set off that way. Kennedy soon caught me.

"One of these days he'll call himself Tavish to save ink," he stated, jerking a thumb towards Jock's ship. "The stuff is in lumps and he's giving the natives *one* packet of tobacco for every ten lumps they carry into his ship! I can't calculate how many billion per cent. profit that is!"

We went over the hill. Ahead, under a misty sun, was a vast pile of silvery-looking material. I gasped—it seemed to reach almost to the clouds. The little natives watched us approach. The stuff was in long, crystalline granules such as a man might encircle with finger and thumb, and I made a mental note to find out why it was valuable. Kennedy bent to pick up a sample but a howling began among the natives. He straightened.

"Forgot it's sacred! Funny customs in some places! But I'll show Mactavish yet!"

He emptied his pockets and made a pile of tobacco on the ground. I saw he wasn't one to lose time and the natives drew closer, eyes eagerly on the packets.

"Much, much tobacco in ship, savvy?" Kennedy pointed. "I give you one packet for every five lumps of this stuff you carry into my ship. Savvy?"

I left him gesticulating and counting on his fingers and went on a little way by myself. The pile was not so big as it first appeared, but huge. When I got back a stream of natives had already begun to carry the bars down to Kennedy's ship and Kennedy was grinning triumphantly. He spat on the earth.

"They chew the tobacco, though tenth-rate barter brand," he said. "The

flavour tickles their palates. Wait till Jock sees !”

All day the stream of natives up and down the hill continued. When I saw Kennedy again he was pleased with the progress made in loading his ship, yet irritated.

“Never saw such weaklings on any planet in my life !” he said. “It wastes time !”

I saw what he meant. Each native carried only one lump of the silvery stuff and nursed it gently between both hands.

“Perhaps they’re that gentle because it’s sacred,” I said.

I drifted over to Mactavish’s shelter and found Jock smoking placidly under the lee of his ship. His hat was off and his sandy hair stood out.

“I hear ye’re not on that Kennedy’s side, laddie,” he greeted me.

“No. I’d like to get a fair deal made.”

“Any deal with Kennedy would be fair as five aces.” He puffed, eyeing me critically, then his gaze strayed to the busy natives. “He’s outbid me on the ’bacca. But come inside—looks like another storm, anyway.”

We went into the ship and to his cabin. He poured out drinks, drowning mine in water.

“To Kennedy’s load !” he said.

We drank and I put the glass down. Mactavish grinned at my expression.

“I’m not the mon to hold his past against him, or wish him bad luck ! Me mother wouldna like that,” he said. “I even slipped word to the natives he might want help loading up his ship. I taught their chief a few words too.”

His face was like a wooden gargoyle. There was a lump of the silvery stuff on his desk and I reached for it. He put a gnarled old hand on my arm.

“Don’t touch it, laddie. Never know if them natives are watchin’.”

I played with my glass, curious. “What is it ? What’s its value ?”

Jock Mactavish puffed and leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know what it is—leave that to the scientific lads. But this crewman begins scratching glass with his bit and tells a pal. In short, it’s the hardest thing in the cosmos. It’ll scratch a diamond, they say, yet is easily worked as iron when hot. For drills and similar cuttin’ machinery it’ll fetch a fortune. It can be fused on to any ordinary metal. Even a thousandth of an inch layer is almost everlasting. I’ve heard the scientific lads have been successful in electroplating tools and bearings with it.”

I eyed the silvery piece with new respect and decided Mactavish was not such a simpleton as he sometimes tried to appear.

“Have you no more tobacco ?” I asked.

He understood. “Plenty. Also as much of this stuff as I plan to take.”

“Then why not blast off with it ?”

“Because Kennedy could still get to Earth months before me. By Galileo, I could have made a fortune !” He sighed and helped himself to a second drink. “By the time Kennedy has sold his, mine will about cover expenses.”

Jill came in ; we talked of other things and at last I went off to write my preliminary report. I found Kennedy’s stock of tobacco gone but the natives still carrying for the promise of more to come. Jill and Jock had agreed that the origin of the stuff was curious, but apparently shrouded in the dim past. The pile had been there as long as any native could remember—had always been there, the wise ones in the tribe said. It wasn’t the most peculiar

thing I'd seen on strange planets by a long way and I didn't care where it had come from.

The next day Mactavish wandered across and Kennedy invited him in triumphantly.

"I'd like you to see my cargo, Jock!"

He was being nasty but we went through the ship. Every space, including the main holds, was filled with neatly stacked silvery lumps. Mactavish's brows slowly went up and up; at last he sighed.

"By the saint, ye've enough here to buy up a planetary system, with careful selling!"

Kennedy patted the high piles. "Remember Pluto?" he asked.

Mactavish seemed to be taking his defeat well. "Me mother always told me never to hold malice," was all he said.

That night it rained so violently that the first storm seemed a spring shower. I awoke to find Mactavish and Kennedy holding parley outside with a dignified native.

"Wrong to move sacred silver," the native was saying. "Cause much bad weather."

I was amazed at the ease with which he had picked up these few phrases, but remembered Jock's teaching.

"No want more," Mactavish said.

"No more," Kennedy agreed.

The native bowed, obviously satisfied. "Good. Cause much bad weather. Sacred spirit angry." He left, dignified and erect.

"So what?" Kennedy said when he had gone. "I've got all of the stuff I want. I'm ready to blast off."

"And I," said Mactavish.

Kennedy scoffed at him and I went with Mactavish back to his old tramp. Somehow I'd had enough of Kennedy, who was ruining Jock's one real chance of ending up a rich man, and I knew no real spaceman would refuse a lift to anyone from Planetary Records, who do so much to clear up original doubt on a score of vital points.

"Look," I said. "Why not hurry?"

Mactavish shook his head. "No use, laddie. Kennedy could leave us months behind. His ship is *fast*."

He made leisurely preparations, economically taking down the old hut and storing it in the hold. Then he took out his remaining stock of tobacco and distributed it among the natives.

"Never let other men touch sacred silver," he said as he handed the packets out. "Cause much rain. Cause bad luck."

They all nodded vigorously. Mactavish closed the airlock and I went with him and Jill into the control room. He switched on the inter-ship radio and called Kennedy. He had one lump of the silvery stuff near the control panel and stroked it tenderly. Soon Kennedy's voice came back.

"Mactavish here," Jock said. "I'm still game for a fair split, because there's enough for both, an' because me mother said never to bear malice—"

"You're nuts!" Kennedy sounded angry.

"Nay, mon, just kind-hearted. Don't you want to play?"

Kennedy's reply was abusive. Mactavish shrugged.

"Me gal is listenin', mon," he said, and took off. All the time his expres-

sion, puzzled me. He seemed in no hurry to get the ship right away and the intercom was still on.

"I'll leave you months behind!" Kennedy's voice came.

Mactavish stroked the silver lump. "The natives will never help unload your ship, Cap'n," he said. "Bring much bad luck to move sacred silver lumps, eh! Besides, ye've got no more bacca"

"What makes you think I want unloading?" snapped Kennedy.

"Me common sense, mon. Ever handled one of them bars?"

"N-no. Wanted to avoid arousing the natives." Kennedy's voice held a new note of growing panic.

"An' quite right too," Mactavish said.

He motioned and I saw he wanted me to pick up the lump by his panel. I took it with one hand; gasped, and took it with two. I could just lift it an inch.

"Collapsed atomic structure," Mactavish said. "Them wee natives ain't weaklings. Ever seen under their nightshirts? All muscles and brawn! I hate to think how many thousand tons overload Kennedy's got on board an' no means of shifting it."

The reproducer began to stutter and roar, with a voice now filled with anger and panic. Mactavish switched it off.

"Tut tut, and with me gal listenin' too," he said softly. "Hope he doesn't blow his tubes out trying to take off with that lot. Never wished any mon bad luck . . ."

THE END

SECOND INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE-FICTION CONVENTION

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OUTWORLDER

By PETER HAWKINS

Out amongst the Elch stars, at the edge of the Coalsack, the Lofford were planning to invade the civilisations of Paganin. Unfortunately, nobody knew who or what a Lofford was . . .

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

Yeydel's attention wandered briefly from Stalvey's words, his eyes flickering towards the horizon, where the Blue Hills separated cultivated plain from mountain range by a thin band of purple. Stalvey's slight cough brought the aged archæologist's senses back amongst the subdued clinks of crockery and low buzz of conversation.

"I must apologise for my lack of attention," smiled the archæologist tiredly.

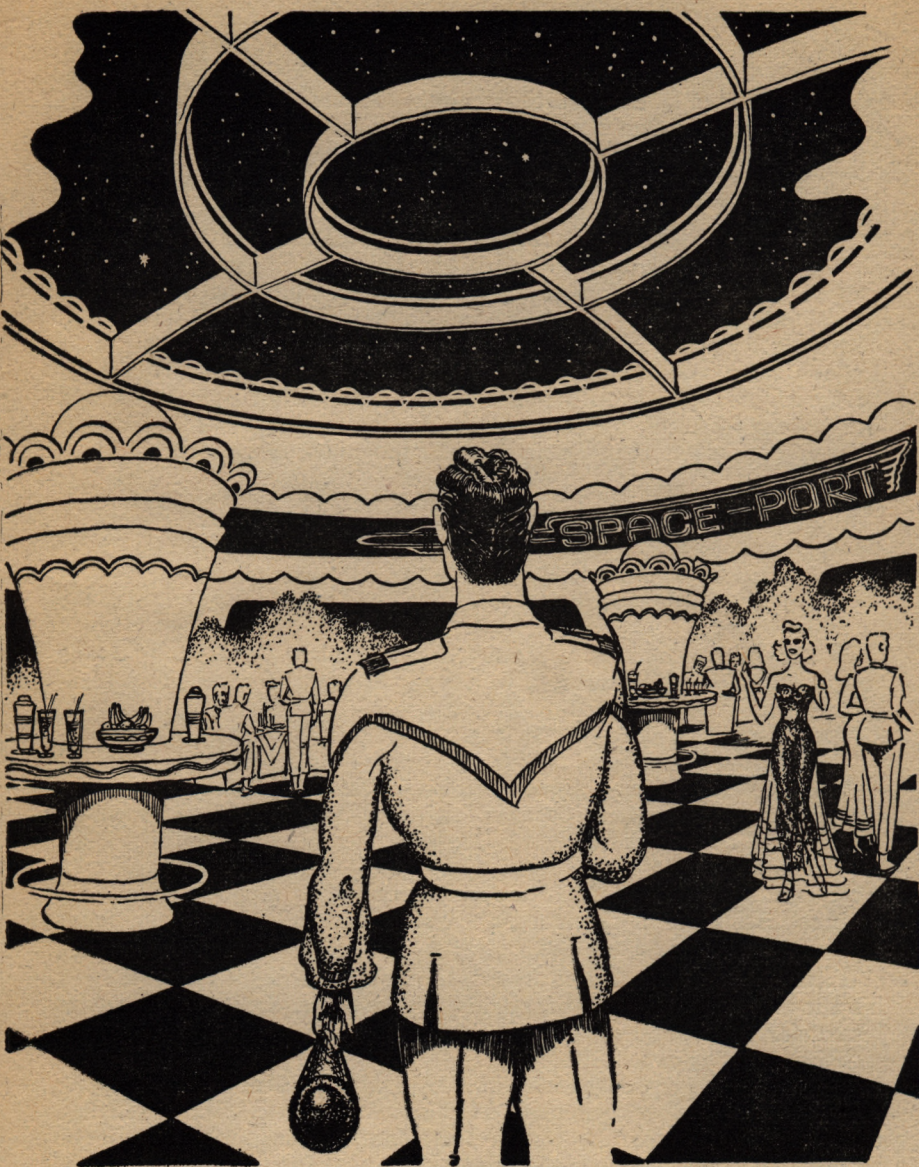
"For a moment I thought the Lofford had you in a trance," laughed Stalvey. "I suppose I must seem bitter to you," he continued. "I'm supposed to be your host for an evening, and fill in the time slandering the ships which will eventually drive the Lofford from our part of space . . ."

"I can understand your bitterness against the Paganin ships," replied Yeydel sympathetically. "You spend a fair portion of your life building a little empire of your own to repair and refuel ships, and find it vanishes, virtually overnight, with the advent of the Paganin drive. And to rub in your defeat further, you find the only ship which can take you to your well-earned retirement on Talarth is a Paganin ship . . . I can understand it." He leaned forward across the table.

"But you're luckier than I am. This is my last assignment. After this, when I have returned to Star, my body will just be able to stand the last trip I shall make in space. It will be to Deferiansa in Colyt, and there I stay, world-bound until I die." He paused. "You will be able to return to Gornu . . ."

"Yes, I shall," grunted Stalvey, "but . . ."

He broke off, eyes searching the enhaloed images of the stars above the transparent dome of the restaurant. Twilight had turned to darkness; errant particles of dust from the Coalsack, orange feathers of fire against the purple sky, flamed briefly into oblivion as they encountered the upper reaches of Gornu's atmosphere. Somewhere out there hung the *Pocohontas*, a long sleek needle-like ship, ready to thread her way to Talarth, capital



of the Elch stars and beyond, to Pemuth, where the dust of the Coalsack began to encroach heavily on empty space.

"You love your little world, Stalvey?"

Yeydel's soft voice jerked Stalvey back beneath the dome of the restaurant.

"I suppose I do," he agreed reflectively. "It's at its best in springtime. The fruit trees are beginning to blossom and the lilies on the lakes in the

Blue Hills near Olegra are flowering; the fireflies will be swarming in the chalas bushes . . . look." Stalvey leaned eagerly across the table towards his guest, "I'll . . ."

His enthusiasm faded as the expression on Yeydel's face hardened.

"You know Rhissman?" he interrupted. "Vrees' wireless operator aboard the *Pocohontas*?"

"Yes. He's a good lad. I taught him a lot when he was a youngster here. I was sorry when he went to Paganin . . ."

"He's a good man, yes." Yeydel paused. "He's making for this table. He's got the thing I don't like with him now. It's a transparent plastic sphere, which looks as though it contains water. He picked it up in the Sharramith battle area—we came through there, you know. I wanted it destroyed, because it is obviously nothing made by man. I'm certain it's a Lofford device of some kind, but I do have to agree with Commander Vrees," he smiled. "It is also totally unlike anything the Lofford ever constructed and appears perfectly harmless. There's none of the Lofford's favourite mechanical tricks in it; in fact there seems to be no mechanism at all."

Stalvey rose as Rhissman approached the table, curiously eyeing the transparent sphere, about eight inches in diameter, which dangled from Rhissman's right hand in a net bag. Carefully the wireless operator placed the bag and its contents in the centre of the table, enjoying the stares of the nearby diners.

Pleased to see you, Stalvey," greeted Rhissman. "I've been looking forward to . . ." He broke off, a frown creasing his forehead as a high-pitched burbling interrupted his sentence.

"Excuse me," he glanced at Stalvey.

"Is it talking?"

"Yes. Just a minute." Rhissman bent his head close to the sphere, a lock of black hair dropping over his forehead. Impatiently he brushed the strands back on to his head.

"But Stella, I . . ."

"You call it Stella?" asked Stalvey incredulously.

"Yes. Stella—from the stars," grinned Rhissman. The smile faded suddenly. "I . . . I . . ."

Rhissman's hands stretched towards the globe, clasping it firmly. Slowly his arms raised above his head, pointing to the dome, Stella held tightly in his hands.

"Rhissman!" shouted Stalvey.

The wireless operator ignored him. His body stiffened, swaying slightly from side to side like a metronome. His feet left the ground, body steadying. Slowly he rose towards the centre of the dome, halting suspended in the air when his downward-pointed toes were eight feet from the floor. A hush, comparable only with the silence of a deserted city, hung over the crowded room.

The watching crowd drew in an audible breath as Rhissman shivered slightly, tense body swaying like a sapling in the breeze. His rigid form shivered again, darting towards the dome.

"Lofford!" screamed a woman, her terror-shrill voice breaking the tense silence. Rhissman slashed through the transparent plastic, a shower of

feathery white particles floating gently down on the diners beneath.

For a moment there was silence. The woman who had screamed began to sob. Shakily Stalvey emptied the decanter into his glass, downing its contents at one gulp. Exhaling deeply he sat down again.

Yeydel's aged face managed to twitch into a smile.

"I'd like to know what all that means," he murmured.

"So would I," agreed Stalvey. "But what was that thing?"

"I don't know. I told you Rhissman picked it up in the Sharramith battle area and Vrees wouldn't agree to my suggestion it be destroyed. Rhissman claims he can understand some of the burbling sounds it makes." Yeydel's yellow hand stretched out towards his glass. Idly he twisted it between his long, barely-fleshed skeletal fingers.

"I've not told you why I was sent to Gornu, other than I'm expected to look at the world." He paused.

"There is a legend that at one time a race of beings occupied Gornu, and that before Man spread out this way amongst the stars these people defeated a huge Lofford invasion. We have found artifacts indicating third period Lofford occupation on many Elch worlds, but never has there been a single trace of Lofford discovered on Gornu. Therefore, we think here, especially as Gornu is ideally suited for Lofford habitation, this race existed . . ."

"Except there are no signs of civilisation on Gornu . . ." began Stalvey.

"Only a pair of monoliths of osseous material in a dried-up lake somewhere in the Blue Hills. They are obviously not of natural formation . . ."

"There have been thousands of different civilisations all over the known universe," laughed Stalvey, "and there's probably twenty times as many we've not yet discovered . . ."

"Possibly." Yeydel glanced at his watch. "I must go to bed shortly. I'm going to look at the Olegra monoliths to-morrow morning. Would you care to come?"

"No, thanks. I've arranged to leave at dawn and the tender will be at the field for me then. I've got my case packed; if I went up into the Hills I might change my mind and stay." He hesitated. "I can't allow myself to cancel my retirement now it's all arranged."

"Quite," agreed Yeydel, rising. "Rhissman's disappearance doesn't seem to have caused much alarm," he observed curiously.

"It won't have done. Jafferer—the restaurant proprietor—always has a movie camera filming events. He's probably going over it frame by frame now with Mulherd—he's the one Guard on Gornu."

After he had left Yeydel at his rooms in the one remaining hotel on Gornu, Stalvey wandered aimlessly along the one street of the town, eyes surveying the smooth white concrete pavement. Impatiently he turned about as he reached the border of the landing field, walking briskly back to his room. For a while he was unable to sleep, ideas chasing each other around themselves in his mind. Eventually he quietened down, a shallow, disturbed sleep enveloping his over-active brain.

White and cold, the first light of false dawn awoke him, insinuating itself through his uneasy senses. Last night the break had seemed easy. The Paganin ship had arrived; his workshop had been sealed against possible intruders and the contents would still be good a thousand years from now, even though he himself would have no need of them.

A wave of bitterness swept through him as he thought of Paganin. They had forced him out of business; their light-drive ships had cut long distance radiation ships from the ether in a few years. Faster transportation, more economical freightage rates and maintenance performed aboard by a small crew of specially trained men were all hard blows to a world-bound maintenance man. Even so, Paganin had lost ships in the Elch because of their refusal to instal a simple protective device in the motors to counteract the fluctuations of light pressure caused by the movement of the dust. It had injured Stalvey's prominent pride when his suggestions had received a polite letter of thanks and a statement Paganin's research department considered his idea unworkable, but it hurt more, although he hated Paganin, to hear of their wonderful ships bursting into incandescence for want of thought at headquarters.

Impatiently he threw back the sheets and sprang out of bed, washing and dressing himself carefully. This, he told himself, was the day for which he had been waiting all his life. From now on there'd be no more midnight calls, no dangerous work amongst poorly shielded radiation motors, nor possible danger from the long-expected Lofford mass attack on the Elch. He'd be on well-protected Talarth, amongst the bright lights and the idlers, laughing, dining and drinking with them, doing nothing. It was going to be great.

Unhurriedly he packed the last few items into his case, locking it and refusing himself a final look round the room in which he had slept for most of his life. Out in the main street, sun shining brightly in the fresh clear sky of early morning blue, Stalvey felt it was certainly good to be alive. Whistling tunelessly, he strode off towards the landing field.

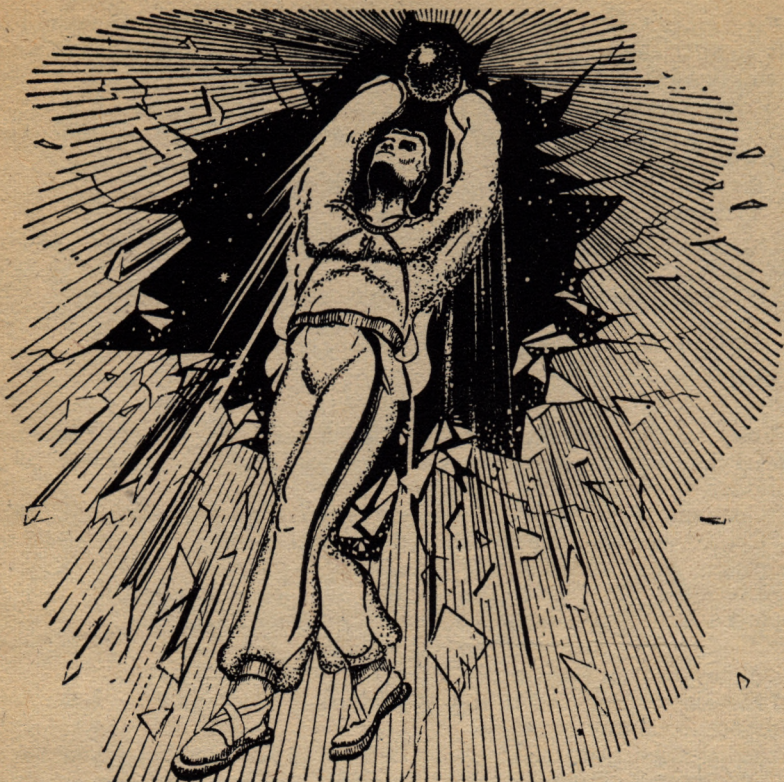
Outside Bormin's boarded-up office building his steps faltered. The doubts he had been experiencing attacked him afresh. Perhaps the people he had left behind would think he was running away from the threatened Lofford invasion. His mind rejected the idea almost immediately; he'd been talking about retiring for the last ten years.

His walk became less brisk as he approached the end of the regular pathway. On the opposite side of the road, shining white in the strengthening sunlight, stood his two-storey office building, windows boarded up like Bormin's, but only since yesterday.

He glanced across the landing field. Ahead of him the pavement turned from a strip of smooth white concrete into a series of irregular stepping stones across dark brown earth. In the far corner of the field rested the Paganin tender; beyond her began the diamond pattern cultivation, alternate patches of trees and crops, characteristic of Gornu.

A vagrant feather of breeze from the Blue Hills, fresh with the clean scent of the blossom on the trees, tickled Stalvey's nostrils. Carefully he placed his case on the ground, turning his head to survey the horse-shoe shape of the Hills protecting the little town.

A bundle of ideas flashed through his mind. A Lofford attack threatened Gornu; Yeydel could use his help in his inspection of the Olegra monoliths; Rhissman and the peculiar contraption which controlled him had to be found—and there'd be a lot of small inter-world radiation stuff to repair yet, not to mention tractors and personals.



He looked back up the little street, the fresh breeze from the Hills disarranging his hair slightly at the back of his neck. He bent down, grasping the handle of his case. Turning towards the Paganin tender, his eyes impressed on his mind a picture of the main massif of the Blue Hills, coated in the finest silver-grey grass, looking as they always did just after dawn; remote, ethereal and a million fairy miles away.

"No," muttered Stalvey, fingers clenching the handle of his case. He sighed, visions of the bright lights of Talarth flickering through his mind. They could never replace this.

"No," he repeated more firmly, aloud. "I'll stay."

Briskly he walked back up the street, dumping his case at his room. For a few moments he stood pondering what to make his next move, finally deciding to visit Yeydel. He was surprised to find the archæologist in the Neo-Chaffren decorated hotel sitting-room reading a copy of the *Guard telenews*, and looking old enough to have been on Gornu since the hotel was furnished in the boom period of four centuries ago.

"You're up early," observed Stalvey. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you," smiled Yeydel. "The old like early nights and early mornings, you know."

"So I believe," agreed Stalvey, "but I should have thought in view of the shock . . ."

"Rhissman's disappearance was startling at the time but it seems to have left no after effects." Yeydel paused. "You know the big problem, which is still unsolved, of maintaining Paganin ships in the Elch?"

Stalvey stiffened.

"It's no problem. I offered Paganin a solution several years ago. They refused to use it . . ."

"Perhaps there was a flaw in your reasoning . . ."

"There wasn't."

"Commander Vrees will be here very shortly. The *Pocohontas* has developed a sufficiently high potential of magnetism to be dangerous in operation. In other words, the next time she attempts to land she'll burn up . . ."

A brisk knock on the door interrupted Yeydel.

"Come in," he called.

Vrees, slim and over six feet tall, strode into the room, dressed in Paganin's official close-fitting green uniform, trimmed with grey braid and silver badges of rank.

"Good morning, Yeydel," he greeted briskly.

"Good morning, Commander. I'd like you to meet Stalvey. He's the man Bormin and Rhissman told you about."

Stalvey felt Vrees' cold eyes studying him for a second. In return he studied Vrees. The commander's face split into a smile.

"How are you, Stalvey?"

"Quite well. And yourself?"

"The same," replied Vrees. "How much," he continued, "has Yeydel told you about my ship?"

"Excess magnetism. Next time you attempt to land, the ship will burn up."

"That's correct," rapped Vrees. "Bormin and Rhissman, members of my crew whom I believe you know, tell me at one time you sent a method of disposing of excess magnetism to our research station and they refused to look further into the matter. I'd like your assistance to fit the *Pocohontas* for space again, otherwise I shall have to wait two weeks before our repair ship comes from beyond Talarth. Naturally I have no wish to do that . . ."

"You seem very confident in me, where your research department was sceptical," observed Stalvey.

Vrees tensed. In his reply Stalvey felt he was evading the point at issue.

"I have heard, as I said earlier, from Bormin and Rhissman, that you are an extremely capable man . . ."

"I'm sorry, Commander. I can't do it. The Elch Federation of Maintenance Engineers, in view of Paganin's policy of performing their own repairs, issued instructions to its members—I am one—not to repair any Paganin ship, however bad the trouble aboard may be."

"Are you standing by that ruling?"

"I am."

"Stalvey, there's a Lofford fleet chewing up the worlds around Sharramith; another is forming with the apparent intention of attacking this section of the Elch . . ."

"That Lofford fleet has been manœuvring in that area for over a year. It's no more than a training ground . . ."

"I think differently." Vrees paused. "Besides, in the event of a Lofford attack the *Pocohontas* could evacuate all Gornu's inhabitants if she were spaceworthy."

Stalvey made no reply.

"I have a man named Bormin as part of my crew," continued Vrees after a few seconds of silence. "He's a born trouble maker and he knows the facts. He invented a similar safety device for Paganin ships in the Elch which is in his workshops. He can't enter them now, since the Guard sealed them for some offence. He knows," Vrees' voice hardened, "you have such a safety device. We both know Bormin sufficiently well to realise he'll try to get hold of your gear by any possible means . . ."

"That's not ethical !" protested Yeydel.

"I've given no instructions to Bormin; he just knows the facts," smiled Vrees. "Stalvey, if you should be prepared to help me I'll be aboard the tender at the edge of the field. I've ordered a search to be made for Rhissman; there are three ships of mine out looking for him now. I hope I shall have your co-operation in that matter if it should be needed."

"Most certainly," agreed Stalvey.

"Good." Vrees smiled again. "I . . ."

A brilliant purple flash, eye-searing, more powerful than lightning, split the heavens. Automatically the three occupants of the room pressed their hands to their eyes, drawing in sharp breaths. Yeydel sobbed. Cautiously Stalvey slipped his hands away from his eyes, seeing Vrees' hands gliding down his face.

"What was that, Stalvey ?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before."

"It came from over there." Vrees' long arm extended towards the Blue Hills, clearer, more sharply defined now the sun was higher in the sky.

"Olegra way," muttered Stalvey. "Yeydel was . . ."

He glanced at the archæologist, astonished to see him crumpled up in the chair, chest resting on the chair's arm, the knuckles of his long, yellow hand pressed against the floor. Gently Stalvey pulled him upright, feeling his pulse. It fluttered irregularly beneath his fingers in the archæologist's old arteries.

"Call the doctor, would you Commander ? Twenty-seven is the number; I'll take him up to his room."

Stalvey gathered Yeydel's light body into his arms, carried him to his room upstairs and laid him on the bed. He felt the fluttering pulse again, lips tightening at the irregular beat. Carefully he loosened the belt on Yeydel's suit and unclipped the magnetic fastenings at the neck and on the cuffs. With a last glance at the unconscious man he left the room.

Vrees was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

"The doctor will be over immediately," he said, without waiting for Stalvey to ask. "And my search parties have found Rhissman."

"Found him—good ! How is he ?"

"Well enough. A bit battered—that machine dropped him from a height of twenty feet or so, but he fell into a bush of some sort . . ."

"A chalas bush; they're pretty springy," interposed Stalvey.

"Possibly. He hit the side and bounced on to the ground. The doctor

is bringing him along so we'll be able to hear all about it."

There was silence for a few seconds.

"I shan't be coming to Talarth," said Stalvey.

"Oh—that's rather a pity. I thought perhaps you would like to press your idea of having discovered a method . . ."

"When I retired I intended to leave maintenance to the remaining men in the business . . ."

"You would have a better chance with an address in Talarth. The authorities are more sympathetic, in many cases wrongly," conceded Vrees, "to people from well-populated areas rather than to Outworlders."

In reply Stalvey walked over to the window and looked up the street.

"They're coming," he said.

Vrees nodded, turning about and making for the door, sparkles of light glittering on his silver badges of rank. Stalvey followed him quietly.

" . . . not too many questions, Commander."

The doctor's smooth voice reached Stalvey as he entered the vestibule.

"There won't be," promised Vrees.

"Yeydel's in room twelve, Doc."

"I'll go up right away. Remember, let Rhissman take it easy for a bit. There's no real damage, but—go steady."

"Well, Rhissman, come in and tell us all about it."

Rhissman laughed, the lock of hair falling down over his forehead. He pushed it back into place, hand showing an expanse of plaster.

"I can't tell you much . . ."

"Where did Stella take you?" asked Stalvey.

"Towards Olegra . . ."

"Begin in the restaurant," suggested Vrees.

Rhissman nodded.

"I was talking to Stalvey when Stella began to burble. I tried to get what it was saying, but couldn't manage to understand it. Then I felt dizzy. The next thing I knew we were flying towards the Blue Hills about twenty feet above the ground.

"Stella kept on talking to me, saying everything was all right at present, and that I'd come to no harm, but it just had to get out of the restaurant in a hurry.

"I asked why it hadn't used the power it possessed previously and was told it was exhausted when I picked it up near Sharramith. It was storing up power and keeping it for emergencies. Apparently this was an emergency . . ."

"It seems so," agreed Vrees. "You still think Stella is nothing to do with the Lofford?"

Rhissman nodded.

"Then what was the emergency?"

"Stella didn't say . . ."

"Carry on with the story."

"There's nothing much more to it. Stella took me almost as far as Olegra. You know you can see the monoliths along the fault, where it widens . . .?" appealed Rhissman to Stalvey.

He nodded.

"Stella saw them; forgot all about me and flew off like a streak of lightning. It was lucky I dropped in a chalas bush, otherwise . . ."

"That's all, is it?" interrupted Vrees.

"Yes . . ."

"It's not very much," he commented bitterly. "It's peculiar," he continued. "Yeydel comes here to investigate the Olegra monoliths; a tremendous purple flash comes from that direction in the Hills and a plastic globe filled with water, which apparently knows what it's doing, kidnaps Rhissman and makes for Olegra, loosing interest in him completely when it sees Olegra. It's unlikely to be Lofford because, according to Yeydel the Lofford never occupied this world and have avoided it consistently in the past. What do you make of it, Stalvey?"

"There's . . ." he began.

The purple flash, less intense now the sun was higher, slashed across the sky. Stalvey blinked away tears from his smarting eyes, turning towards Olegra.

"No smoke—nothing," he murmured.

The doctor walked quietly into the room, his normally expressionless face twisted into a grimace of professional regret.

"I'm sorry, Commander. Yeydel is dead. The only reasons I can give are shock and senile decay. I'll arrange for his body to be removed and buried."

"Thank you. Let me have a full report for his department at Star, will you?"

Stalvey followed the doctor out of the room, turning out of the front door as the doctor returned upstairs for a final examination of Yeydel's body.

A few steps past the hotel was Bormin's office building; some of the plastic window covers were torn and flapped idly in the slightest of breezes. One of the windows was cracked; a broken glass eye staring with injured gaze on the sunny, almost deserted street.

Quickly Stalvey walked on, tension in his throat, glad he had decided to remain. He just couldn't picture his little building falling apart under the slight stresses of Gornu's equable climate. Most likely some of the lads of the town had been skylarking outside the building; there should never have been sufficient breeze to rip off the cover.

He walked across the street to his own office building, searching his pockets for the keys. The door opened smoothly, a shaft of sunlight spreading a golden path over the interior. Glancing round quickly Stalvey removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. A search in a little drawer produced the keys to his workshops. Swinging the key ring jauntily on the first finger of his right hand he walked, whistling tunelessly, out of the door towards his three workshops.

The heavy sliding doors slipped easily backwards ten feet as the key turned over the servo motors. Stalvey stepped into the cool interior, the lighting tubes in the roof flickering as they warmed up. Neat rows of equipment, enveloped in transparent containers of preserver gas and separated by aisles of clean white concrete stretched away to the end of the shed. Experimentally Stalvey prodded the nearest envelope. It gave slightly beneath his finger, showing no sign of deterioration in the three days since he had bottled up the gear.

He turned round making for the other side of the workshop, glancing over his shoulder at the door. A figure clad in the green uniform of Paganin, slick and trim and neat as the needle-like ship of which he was a crew member, obscured Stalvey's view of the landing field.

"Hello, Bormin," said Stalvey steadily.

"Hello," replied Bormin, uncoiling himself from the support of the door. "I've come for your assistance . . ."

"You won't get it . . ."

Bormin's hand moved slightly; with the speed of a striking snake Stalvey threw himself full length behind the nearest pile of equipment. A beam of orange light slashed past him, puncturing the protecting envelope. The gas soughed into the air, a grey mist dispersing after a few seconds.

Bormin had followed up his shot as soon as he had fired; Stalvey was pushing himself from his knees when he saw Bormin again, gun pointed towards him.

"Stand up, Stalvey. Get what I want—the apparatus for demagnetising Paganin ships. I know what it looks like . . ."

Reluctantly Stalvey turned his back on Bormin, walking slowly to the far end of the workshop, hearing Bormin's heavy footsteps following him. He started to turn his head.

"Keep looking straight ahead," snapped Bormin.

For another ten steps Stalvey continued his steady pace, halting before a small pile of metal boxes, each about the size of a small case.

"I'll have two, Stalvey," said Bormin.

"You'll have to let me have something to open the envelope . . ."

"Easy !" laughed Bormin.

His gun spat another orange beam at the envelope. While the grey mist dispersed Stalvey, eyes on Bormin, waited for his attacker's attention to wander. In return Bormin's eyes fixed Stalvey.

"Two, please," repeated Bormin, pointing to the boxes with his free hand.

Stalvey heard Bormin move back a couple of paces as he picked up one of the cases, realising as he bent forward to grasp the handle of the next he could easily have swung one of them at Bormin. It was too late for that now. He glanced enquiringly at the Paganin man.

"Walk towards the door."

"You'll have to answer some peculiar questions when we're seen walking across the landing field like this," remarked Stalvey.

As Bormin made no reply Stalvey turned his head.

"Keep looking ahead !" snapped Bormin.

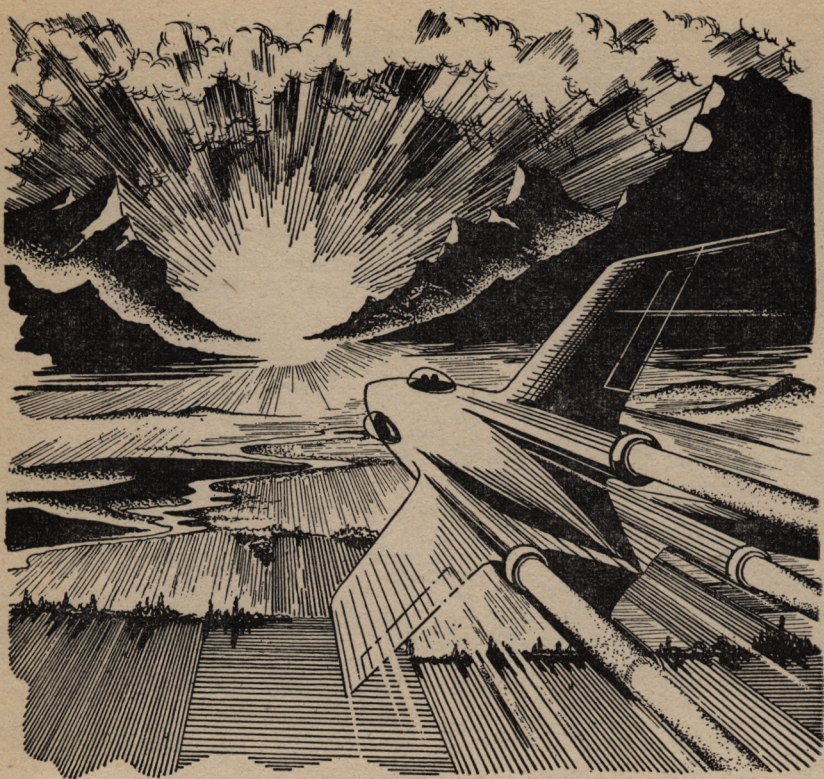
"I suppose you'll get promotion from Vrees for this ?" asked Stalvey.

"Unlikely," replied Bormin. "Vrees would very much like to get rid of me but at present he's nothing to pin on me apart from a fight during our last stop at Pemuth. That's not sufficient . . ."

"Vrees is a very neat worker, Bormin. He knew you'd try and get the demagnetiser from me. He'll let you repair the ship and then turn you over to the Guard when I charge you with robbery . . ."

"I don't think so. Vrees assesses a situation and uses anybody and everybody to make the conclusion successful for himself. He'll come to a nasty end one day . . ."

Stalvey flung the box from his right hand towards Bormin, throwing himself to the ground and rolling towards a concealing pile of equipment.



A heavy weight descended on him as he rolled over, thumping his head against the concrete floor.

"Bad luck, Stalvey," rasped Bormin's voice hoarsely in his ear. Bormin's hand in his shirt pocket as he jabbed futilely at his attacker's midriff gave Stalvey's whirling, dizzy brain the clue to Bormin's next action. Nobody knew he was in the workshop and without a key there was no way of opening the door. The whirling in Stalvey's head increased, dissolving into utter blackness with a jagged knife-edge of pain as Bormin knocked his head against the concrete a second time.

Stalvey's consciousness returned with a force that seemed almost physical, blood pounding through his head seemingly under the control of fiend-manned pumps. A groan escaped his lips as he blinked his eyes in darkness shot with grey streaks of retinal light. Dizzily he clambered to his feet, fingers scrabbling on one of the tough, rubbery preserving envelopes. It gave slightly, reluctantly, beneath his touch. For a second he paused, endeavouring to orient himself. In the darkness he was uncertain which way he had rolled when Bormin had jumped on him, and Bormin could have dragged him anywhere having rendered him unconscious.

Stalvey stiffened, thundering head momentarily forgotten. He cocked his head to one side, nauseated by the pain the slight movement sent through

his brain. The sound was repeated; eagerly Stalvey pushed one heavy foot beyond the other towards the source of the noise, the distance he covered without obstacles giving him a clue to his location.

The knocking appeared to be coming from the main door. Of course it could be Bormin, endeavouring to discover how effective his blow had been. Quickly Stalvey dismissed the idea; Bormin, he decided, would have made off towards the *Pocohontas* as soon as possible.

Exploratory fingers wandering swiftly over the smooth wall confirmed he was in the main aisle; a few steps to one side brought his fingers to the switchboard. Eyes closed, Stalvey pressed down the switches, opening them slowly to accustom them to the glare, breathing heavily for a second or two as pain lanced through his head.

The knock, repeated again, attracted his attention. He glanced around, searching for a bar of metal, knowing there was nothing left unsealed he could use as a weapon. A satisfied grin split his features suddenly; quickly he trotted to the pile of demagnetisers. He hefted one, feeling the weight, assessing its potentialities as a cosh. He decided it would do. Lightly he moved back to the door, teeth set.

"Hello, who's there?" he called.

"You're all right, then?"

Gratefully Stalvey lowered the case to the floor as he recognised Rhissman's voice.

"Rhissman, get me out of here. There's a spare set of keys in the drawer on the left-hand side of my desk. Be quick; I've got a little personal business with Bormin."

"Quick as possible," acknowledged Rhissman.

In less than five minutes Stalvey heard Rhissman's footsteps hurrying up to the workshop; a second later the sound of the servo motors rolling back the doors gladdened Stalvey's heart. Eagerly he squeezed through the opening, blinking his eyes in the strong sunlight.

"How did you come to be round here?" he asked Rhissman.

"I saw Bormin come in after you and leave without you. When he shut the doors and put the key in his pocket I reckoned there was something out of order . . ."

"Good job you did see him, otherwise I'd have been a long time attracting anyone's attention." He paused. "Now it's too late I'll switch the viscreens back into circuit again. I'm staying, you know."

"So the Commander said. I . . ."

Rhissman broke off abruptly as they turned out of the shadow of one of the few side streets into the main thoroughfare, his mouth remaining open, amazed as Stalvey to see Vrees carrying a body on his broad shoulders towards them.

Stalvey grabbed Rhissman's arm.

"Come on," he snapped. Breaking into a trot, each thump of his foot against the ground jarring his head, Stalvey caught up with Vrees as he bent low to enter his office.

"Glad to see you," said Vrees as he laid his burden on the table. "It's the doctor. He's in a Lofford trance . . ."

"Then there's one of them on Gornu!" breathed Stalvey. Anxiously he switched on the lights, studying the doctor's pale, slack countenance.

"He might have been under its influence for weeks," he muttered.

"He might," agreed Vrees icily.

A flicker of colour ran through the doctor's yellow cheeks. He moved slightly, his lips writhing as if he were trying to speak. He spluttered, then sobbed.

"Stella!" he mumbled. "It's . . . it's Lofford . . . Stella's Lofford . . ."

Calmly Vrees bent over the doctor, thumb pulling down an eyelid.

"Nothing we can do," he said. "He may come out of it, or he may not. Hope you don't mind me bringing him in here . . ."

"Not at all. I'll have him taken along to his house."

"Thanks. Rhissman, where's . . ."

A rapid, high-pitched burble halted his words. Without apparent thought Vrees' hand separated a small pistol from his belt, aiming and firing it in one movement. Rhissman threw himself to the floor as the orange beam lanced towards Stella, charring the wall only an inch from its plastic hide. The globe jerked upwards, darting out of the open door as Vrees' second blast burnt a piece of concrete out of the wall an inch or two from the jamb.

Stalvey and Vrees darted for the door, eyes eagerly searching the skies for Stella. Stalvey saw it before Vrees, a tiny dot high in the heavens, hardly moving, but growing fainter. He blinked, realising the sphere was rising from the ground, heading in no particular direction until it was certain it was out of sight of watchers. The glare of the sun made Stalvey's eyes smart; he blinked a second time, squinting in an effort to hold his vision steady. It occurred to him his sight had been playing tricks since the first time he blinked.

"Gone?" asked Vrees, as Stalvey lowered his head.

"Yes. I don't know where, apart from upwards," grunted Stalvey. "Let's go back inside."

In the shady office they found Rhissman curled up in a chair, back towards the table on which the doctor lay.

"What's the matter?" asked Vrees.

"Nothing much, Commander. I twisted my ankle slightly when I dodged your shots. It'll be all right in a moment."

Vrees nodded.

"Stalvey, why hasn't the Guard put in an appearance? We've done enough startling things this morning to shake all Gornu, yet nobody's come near, nor asked any questions . . ."

Stalvey felt a little glow of pride run through him. He chuckled softly.

"The town regards me as a sort of unofficial mayor. If I'm around things are more or less in order. If anyone else had been involved in the shooting, or Yeydel's death, Mulherd would have been nosing around before long. He'll be expecting me to tell him all about it . . ."

"And you will tell him all that's happened?"

"Certainly." Stalvey stiffened. "There's no reason for . . ."

"Quite, quite," soothed Vrees. "Rhissman, Stella was boiling away like a hot spring for a few seconds. Did it say anything interesting?"

Rhissman shook his head, the black curl slipping down over his forehead.

"I couldn't understand it. It was speaking too quickly. Commander, why did you shoot?"

"You agree with me events point to Stella being some sort of Lofford contrivance?"

"Events do, but what Stella's told me, and you yourself said . . ."

"It seemed unlike anything else the Lofford had ever used," quoted Vrees. "Yes, I did."

Stalvey glanced at his watch, annoyed with the turn the conversation had taken. If it developed, as seemed likely, into a private battle between Vrees and Rhissman the commander would win hands down, and a potential quarrel with a foregone conclusion held no interest for Stalvey.

He switched on the radio, tuning to the news relay from Star. The reader's voice, rendered slightly hollow by the ultrawave, bounced out of the loudspeaker at him.

" . . . Lofford fleet manœuvring on the edge of the Coalsack near the Elch stars has formed into battle order. Outworlders on the fringe of the Elch between Gornu and Sharramith are advised to leave for Talgarth in case a major thrust should develop. Paganin ships are being despatched from convenient points between Star and Talarth to pick up refugees . . ."

Disgustedly Stalvey snapped off the radio.

"It seems you were right about the battle training area the Lofford were using," he snapped bitterly at Vrees.

The Paganin man nodded.

Stalvey strode into the sunshine, eyes searching the blue skies for signs of Lofford ships. There'd be none for a few hours; most likely the main body would come during darkness about four days hence. Before them would come scouts, darting about the world, prying and testing the defences—and there wasn't a single anti-aircraft gun on Gornu.

The term "Outworlder" twisted back into Stalvey's mind. The manner in which the announcer had used it had made it seem almost a word of contempt. He had obviously never visited one of the Outworlds, least of all Gornu. How could the system of concrete, steel and plastic in which he lived and from which he had probably never moved, compare with this piece of cosmic dust on which Stalvey lived. Leave it, and leave it above all to the Lofford . . . that was impossible.

"Stalvey!"

The sound of Vrees' voice made him jump. The commander stared at him, a smile on his lips.

"Miles away?" he queried.

"No," disagreed Stalvey. "Just thinking."

"I've been thinking, too," said Vrees. "There's a Paganin ship up there somewhere," his arm pointed to the sky, sunlight flashing on his silver badges of rank, "that could evacuate the entire population of Gornu and quite a few sister worlds if she were spaceworthy."

Mental pictures of the Olegra lakes, the fireflies and the waterlilies flashed through Stalvey's mind. Others besides himself would remember them even if the Lofford devastated Gornu as they had Sharramith.

"I'll repair your ship," agreed Stalvey slowly.

"Good, I'm glad," smiled Vrees. He paused. "Who rejected your suggestions for demagnetising our ships?"

"Someone called Kersaliv. Know him?"

Vrees nodded.

"What makes you confident I can fix your ship?" probed Stalvey curiously.

"I saw your suggestions," replied Vrees.

"How?"

"We checked up on personnel in the company, including Kersaliv. Would it make your mind easier if you knew three other people including Bormin had suggested methods similar to, and almost as efficient as, yours and Kersaliv had squashed them all?"

"But why?" interjected Stalvey.

"You'll feel less bitter against Paganin when I tell you. Although Kersaliv had been in our employ for over thirty years, it was only then we discovered he was a Lofford."

"But . . ." began Stalvey.

A distant musical hum distracted his attention momentarily.

"But . . ." he recommenced, wondering at the tense, puzzled expression on Vrees' face.

"Stalvey, do you hear that?" snapped Vrees.

"Yes, I do . . ."

The pitch of the hum rose a couple of octaves, breaking at irregular intervals into a staccato crackle before dying down into a steady roar.

"One of the tenders," muttered Vrees. "It almost reached takeoff turnover . . ."

The crackle blasted across the field, drowning Vrees' words before cutting out entirely into a soft swish of air as the tender hurtled overhead. Instinctively Stalvey and Vrees ducked, eyes following the rapidly disappearing

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ship out of sight. In half a minute it was high in the sky, as remote a speck as Stella had become earlier on.

Vrees glanced at Stalvey.

"Yes," he said, divining the unspoken question on Vrees' lips. "It's gone Olegra way, as far as I can tell."

"Just what is there at Olegra?"

"Very little. A dried-up lake—how it dried up we don't know—in the bed of which are two monoliths composed of osseous material; something like compressed bones of sea animals, according to geologists. Opinions as to formation differ fantastically, of course. I've no knowledge of the geology at all; Yeydel could have helped us . . ."

"Unfortunately Yeydel's dead. Let's go and see why that tender took off."

In silence the two men walked across the bare landing field, eyes fixed on the remaining tender and the busy group of men running like ants up and down the gangplank. They saw a member of the crew being carried into the ship, and all except one of them, disappearing into the interior. The man, dressed in grey overalls, saluted Vrees as he approached. As smartly, Vrees returned the salute.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"We're not certain, Commander. Bormin went into the second tender to finish work on a lighting circuit. The remainder of the men were working on this tender." He indicated the ship with a wave of his hand. "The motors started up, and Bormin staggered out of the ship. He's in a Lofford trance . . ."

"Badly?" snapped Vrees anxiously.

"Yes. He won't last very long . . ."

Vrees anticipated Stalvey's own words; hearing them uttered sent an icy chill down his back.

"Then I think whoever piloted that ship is a Lofford," said Vrees grimly.

"But who was it?" pressed Stalvey.

"Rhissman?" queried Vrees, glancing over his shoulder towards Olegra. Stalvey laughed.

"That's impossible. I've know Rhissman since birth . . ."

"I'd known Kersaliv ever since I'd been with Paganin," countered Vrees. "At some time the Lofford had substituted one of their own kind for him. You know the difference between the races are so slight; they have super-sensitive eyes and large hands. It's the mental outlook which prevents . . ."

"I know," interrupted Stalvey. "Let's go and see Bormin."

Vrees led the way into the tender, Stalvey following closely at his heels. The tall commander bent his head walking along the shallow corridor; Stalvey walked upright comfortably, studying the interior fittings. Soft lights, giving off the colour of Star itself, illuminated the passageway; occasional pictures of the distant worlds visited by Paganin ships decorated the green walls.

Vrees slid back a door marked with a red cross, poking his head inside.

"Here we are," he said, sliding the door wide open.

The group of men round a couch parted as Vrees advanced towards them, Stalvey at his heels.

"It's no good, Commander," said a voice.

"Dead?" queried Vrees.

Several men murmured "Yes," together.

Vrees looked at the still figure for a few moments before picking up the limp hand at the wrist. His face remained expressionless for a minute until he allowed the hand to drop back to the bed. He bent over the still body, fingers unzipping the fastener on Bormin's overalls. He placed his hand over the heart, feeling for indications of life. He shook his head slowly, withdrawing his hand.

"Any relatives left here, Stalvey?"

"None."

"Two bodies to explain when I get back to Star," snapped Vrees. He paused. "Stalvey, have you got a ship we could load with general recording gear and high explosives? I want to take a complete record of Olegra and then blow the place sky high."

"Yes, but . . ."

"I shan't blow up the area until we've examined it thoroughly."

"I'll get it all ready for you," agreed Stalvey. He glanced at the clock. "Nearly midday!" he exclaimed. "I'll be over at my office if you want me."

Stalvey ate some sandwiches he had picked up at Jafferer's while he made notes of the items he would need on the trip to Olegra. Carefully he split the work into three sections, making out a set of brief instructions for three of his old workmen. Within half an hour they called at the office to collect their orders, making for Stalvey's number three workshop, where he kept his runabout.

They could have been no more than halfway to the workshop before Rhissman slipped into the office, closing the door behind him. He glanced anxiously round the room.

"Have you seen Vrees?" he asked.

"I left him half an hour ago . . ."

"He's after me, isn't he? He thinks I'm a Lofford . . ."

"He wants to see you, certainly," soothed Stalvey, "but he's not after you . . ."

"I know Vrees' way with Loffords. If there were a dozen people and one was known to be a Lofford, he'd kill all twelve to make sure . . ."

"He won't kill you. He's got more important things on his mind at present. We're loading my runabout for a trip to Olegra; going to blow the place sky high after we've made a thorough examination of it . . ."

"No!" shouted Rhissman. "Stalvey," he crossed from the door, leant across Stalvey's desk, hand clutching frantically at his arm. "Stella just told me . . ."

"You've seen Stella? Where?"

"Vrees wants Stella as well, doesn't he? He'll be lucky if he manages . . ."

A thin strip of golden sunlight appeared on the far wall, widening slowly as the door opened. Stalvey watched it grow in size until it flashed across Rhissman's eyes. His face, frightened in expression already, froze into a mask of utter terror.

"Keep still," snapped Vrees' hard voice.

Rhissman tensed, head moving in the direction of the opening door.

"Do as Vrees says, Rhissman. You don't stand a chance."

"Thanks, Stalvey," said Vrees. "Rhissman, stay exactly as you are. I'm

getting one of the crew to put a bag over your head. That'll stop any hypnotic tricks if you're a Lofford. If you're not you'll be quite safe . . ."

"If I was a Lofford I wouldn't let my eyes be covered . . ." panted Rhissman.

"You might, if you thought it would be to your advantage later on," replied Vrees.

He beckoned one of his crew into Stalvey's sight, indicating he should put the black bag he carried over Rhissman's head. The man carefully approached from the side, well out of Vrees' line of fire. Rhissman shivered as the bag obscured his vision.

"Put your hands behind your back. We're putting some clamps on you," said Vrees.

Rhissman's hands crept slowly out of Stalvey's sight; a moment later a click confined his wrists within metal bands.

"The ship will be ready shortly," said Stalvey.

"Good. The sooner we get to Olegra . . ."

A clatter of feet outside stopped Vrees in mid-sentence.

"Commander, three Lofford ships are landing on Gornu. According to navigation they will touch down somewhere near Olegra if they follow their present spiral."

"Thanks. Return to the tender. Tell them to prepare for takeoff immediately and return to the *Pocohontas* as soon as you've radioed for our three scoutships to make for Olegra. I'm going there now. Got the message?"

"Yes . . ."

"Right. Get back with it."

"We're off, then?" queried Stalvey.

"Yes, and there's a small Lofford raiding party which needs breaking up." A hard smile crossed Vrees' face.

"We've only hand weapons," protested Stalvey.

"Until my scouts arrive," agreed Vrees. "The Lofford haven't landed yet, don't forget, and I want to be there when they arrive. Are you ready?"

In reply Stalvey rose to his feet.

"What about Rhissman and . . .?" he indicated the man who had placed the bag and clamps on Rhissman.

"They're coming too. Your ship will take four, I hope?"

"She'll manage it."

"Guide Rhissman and follow us," Vrees ordered the green-clothed crew member.

"You've plenty of explosives, Stalvey?" asked Vrees.

"Enough to tear Olegra apart . . ."

A muffled protest from Rhissman interrupted Stalvey.

"Rhissman, I'll listen to you when we get aboard; save it until then," snapped Vrees.

Stalvey glanced sympathetically over his shoulder at Rhissman; the bag would be both uncomfortable and hot. Rhissman tossed his head, evidently trying to work the lock of hair out of his eyes.

Stalvey's silver dart of a runabout squatted on the bare brown earth of the landing field, nose pointed towards the inward curve of the Blue Hills. Stalvey climbed aboard the plane, a quick glance at the dials on the control

panel confirming his men had worked efficiently. He glanced over his shoulder into the cabin.

"Ready?" he called.

"Ready," acknowledged Vrees.

Settling himself comfortably in the pilot's seat, Stalvey ran the motor for several seconds in a brief test run; a few moments later he steered the plane across the field, nose pointed dead towards Olegra.

Below him the diamond-shaped agricultural pattern shrunk until it was visible only as patches of different colours. Occasionally the sun shot a brilliant beam of light from the metal hide of a cultivator moving amongst the plants. As the plane reached the fringe of the Blue Hills the air became bumpy; unconcernedly Stalvey sought height, beginning a gradual climb which would bring him on a level with Olegra.

Reducing speed slightly Stalvey dropped the plane into the fault leading to Olegra. He pulled down between mighty walls, rock strata only barely visible as he neared the ground. Daylight was almost cut out; only by looking straight up could he see clear sky. Carefully he followed the jagged line of the fault, heaving a sigh of relief as one of the twin monoliths of Olegra appeared.

A second later his nerves tensed; excitedly he inhaled.

"Vrees, come here will you?"

He felt the commander's hands grip the back of his seat a few seconds later.

"This is Olegra," he said. "You can see one of the monoliths easily . . ."

"And I can see my missing tender. I'd still like to know who piloted it here . . ."

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"Yes, who?" agreed Stalvey.

"I don't know. All members of the crew were accounted for when I checked over before coming back to pick you up."

"We could have used Yeydel's help now," observed Stalvey.

"We certainly could," agreed Vrees. "However, we've got plenty of film and there's a probe for each scanner, so we should manage to find something—if there's anything to find."

"I'm going to land as near as possible to the tender," said Stalvey. "Be ready for a Lofford attack."

Vrees laughed.

"I'm ready enough for that."

Stalvey throttled down the speed of the plane, bringing it gradually nearer the ground. He swung low, flying twice round the monolith, searching for signs of the ship's occupants before touching down fifty yards away from it. He glanced up through the transparent roof of the runabout at the closer monolith, nearly three hundred feet high, with the tip fifty feet above the rim of the cup-like depression in which it reared skyward.

"Look!" snapped Vrees, pointing to the further monolith.

"Stella!"

"Yes," he agreed. "I'm just waiting . . ."

Stella floated nearer the ground, seeming to progress cautiously, so steady and determined was its motion. Lower and lower it dropped until it was a bare ten feet from the ground. Suddenly it darted forward, making for an unmarked spot in the middle of the line between the monoliths. As it touched the ground a blinding flash of violet light throbbed across the cup-like depression, blinding Stalvey and Vrees. For what seemed an age patches of retinal light swam across Stalvey's vision before he found sufficient courage to force open his eyelids. Tentatively he dabbed at his smarting eyes with his fingers, seeing a tear-distorted vision of Vrees performing a similar action.

"So that causes the purple flash," muttered Vrees.

"Did you see how it was caused," asked Stalvey.

"It seemed as though bolts of purple lightning flashed from Stella and the tips of the monoliths, and when they met—the almighty flash."

Stalvey looked towards the spot where Stella had rested. The sphere had moved a few feet away, edging cautiously towards the further monolith. A beam of fire, intensely orange in the twilight of the lake-bed, snapped at Stella from the cover of the monolith. The sphere dodged easily, advancing towards the source of the beam. It lashed out again, passing wickedly near Stella.

For a moment Stalvey took his attention from the duel, searching beneath the control board for a pair of binoculars. Aware Vrees was waiting for his report rather than rely on his own eyes in the dim light Stalvey focused his glasses carefully. Icy shivers trickled along his spine as he identified the man firing at Stella. He looked again, disbelieving his eyes, thinking the purple flash had caused them to play tricks on his brain.

"Who's firing?" snapped Vrees, tensed by Stalvey's obvious surprise. Stalvey placed the binoculars in Vrees' eager hands. He put the glasses to his eyes, adjusting the focus slightly.

"Yeydel!" he snapped. "But Yeydel's dead . . ."

"He's out there, firing at Stella," replied Stalvey.

"He's hit Stella, badly too."

Stalvey's eyes followed Stella, pulled back to the plastic sphere by Vrees' last words, as it darted in jagged little rushes away from the further monolith like a ship attempting to dodge a homing torpedo. Yard by yard it jerked back towards the spot on which it had rested previously.

"Cover your eyes, Stalvey!" snapped Vrees, dropping the glasses as he shouted.

The force of the violet flash penetrated the cracks between Stalvey's fingers and throbbed through his closed lids with almost physical force. Once the first shock of pain had passed Stalvey opened his eyes. Vrees had picked up the binoculars, sighting them on Stella. The sphere lay on the sand, seemingly inert.

"What's happened to Yeydel?" asked Stalvey.

"The same as Stella. Looks dead but probably isn't." He paused. "Let's go and look."

Stalvey nodded agreement. Cautiously he revved up the motor, taxi-ing the plane carefully across the bumpy ground. Vrees opened the hatch in the roof, leaning out with his gun ready for use. As the plane approached Stella he ducked back into the cabin, ordering his crewman to take his place in the hatchway. He jumped down from the plane, Stalvey watching anxiously as he walked towards Stella, gun pointed at it. Two feet away he cocked his head to one side, as if listening. Stalvey throttled down the motor as low as he dared without danger of stalling it.

Suddenly Vrees shoved his gun in his pocket and bent down, carefully scooping up Stella in his hands.

"Pick up Yeydel's body when I get aboard," he called.

A few seconds later Stalvey felt the fabric of the plane vibrate slightly as Vrees slammed the door in the fuselage.

"Is he aboard?" he asked the crewman.

"He's aboard."

Stalvey coasted the plane slowly towards Yeydel's body. Darkness was closing in rapidly; the first wandering fragment of dust from the Coalsack had burnt itself out of existence high in the thin fringes of Gornu's outer atmosphere as Stalvey pulled up beside Yeydel's thin body. Vrees' tall figure slipped out of the runabout into the gloom, hoisted the archæologist over his massive shoulders and re-entered the plane.

"Do you know Carlissla Lake, Stalvey?" called Vrees.

"Yes."

"Far away?"

"A quarter of an hour's flight."

"Good. Set course for there on the auto pilot and come and have a chat with us."

"Right." Stalvey revved the engine, tearing the plane into the sky, wingtips almost touching the steep walls of the dried-up lake. In a few moments he had set the pilot for Carlissla and eased himself out of his seat.

Rhissman no longer wore the bag over his head; he sat at the radio and turned his head to grin at Stalvey as he entered the cabin. The crewman was helping him with the radio. Yeydel lay in a corner, a cushion covering his face. Stella was propped between two books on a small table.

"Sit down, Stalvey. You've missed a lot in piloting the plane; we've been seeing everything. It's a long story too. Stella told Rhissman most of it before I put the bag over his head." Vrees paused. "It seems," he continued, "Stella is something quite different from what we imagined. It's intelligent, very intelligent, and more than just one.

"In that plastic sphere," Vrees pointed to Stella, "are the several million survivors of a Lofford attack on Gornu about eight thousand years ago. That's why we could find no trace of civilisation on Gornu. The intelligent inhabitants lived in Olegra Lake, and they're a kind of virus. Their only works of construction are the two monoliths, made out of the bodies of inimical lake mammals who had formed an alliance with the Lofford and who also lived in Olegra Lake. They'd won a long uphill fight against these creatures when the Lofford appeared on the scene. The Olegrans defeated the Lofford with the purple flash. You know the effect it has on our eyes; on Lofford eyes, which are more sensitive, it scorches the eyes out of the head, destroys the optic nerves and burns out the surrounding areas of the brain. Any Lofford who sees that flash several times, dies unless his eyes are protected against light of that frequency.

"The purple flash had one uncalculated effect. It dried up the Olegra Lake in practically no time and left the Olegrans nowhere to live. They built three of those plastic spheres and left Gornu. Stella is the only survivor; it started heading back this way when it learned of a fresh Lofford attack imminent in the area. Lucky the human race was around this time instead of doing whatever it was doing eight thousand years ago. My history is very low on that period.

"We're taking Stella to Carlissla Lake; the virus can live there although conditions aren't ideal. I said we would help them if possible."

"How did Stella speak to Rhissman?"

"The burbles carry thought impulses; Rhissman was receptive to them."

"And what about Yeydel?"

"Yes, Yeydel. He spent a lifetime in Federation service and was shortly due to retire."

Vrees rose from his chair, walking over to the still figure, face covered by the cushion. Stalvey followed him closely.

"Lift the cushion," suggested Vrees.

Stalvey bent down, fingers pulling it away gently.

Two charred holes where eyes should have been in a yellow face stared blindly at him. Hastily he dropped the cushion into place.

"So Yeydel was a Lofford," he murmured.

"Commander!" interrupted Rhissman. "I've made contact with our scouts. They report three Lofford ships crashed near Olegra five minutes ago; all the crews are dead. The shock of the crash killed most of them, but a few had their eyes burnt out."

"Excellent!" snapped Vrees. "With the Olegran weapon we'll have the Lofford right back beyond the Coalsack in a hundred years."

A ringing bell partly obscured Vrees' last words.

"Carlissla Lake, Stalvey. We're going to drop the Olegrans in there; they say they'll survive. Come down as low as you can when we drop Stella."

"I will," said Stalvey, glancing at the plastic sphere which had wandered the stars for eight thousand years.

THE END

SCIENCE-FANTASY

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