Science-Fantasy

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TWO SHILLINGS

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TWO SHILLINGS

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GUEST EDITORIAL

In this, our second Guest Editorial, we are pleased to present author J. M. Walsh, well-known science-fiction and mystery writer, and one of the Adjudicators on the International Fantasy Award. Long connected with the fantasy field, his pre-war Vanguard To Neptune *recently saw pocketbook publication in Britain.*

The Last Fifty Years and the Next

By J. M. WALSH

Perhaps it is one of the faults of advancing middle age, but I can never speculate on the future of science-fiction without thinking rather deeply of its past. My view is a particularly sectional one, but I believe there is a certain significance attached to some features of it.

I first became interested in it in those days when Jules Verne was on the wane, and H. G. Wells was writing those marvellous stories which in many respects have never been bettered. We didn't call them science-fiction then. I see in a volume I have just turned up, dated 1908, that they were classed as "romances." Yet they were great days. Apart from Wells, who brought a human touch to his yarns, and had a gift for characterisation that has seldom been equalled—it all tended to make his stuff read very realistically and plausibly—there was George Griffith and a host of others who have now more or less been forgotten.

One interesting feature of the period was that hardly a publisher's list of those days was without one or two books of the kind. Moreover, they went quite quickly into the cheap paper sixpenny editions of the time. They must have been read by an infinitely large number of people.

With the 1914-18 war interest seemed to wane. Thereafter it became virtually impossible to interest any publisher in bringing out any story of the kind in book-form. Perhaps people's interests had become more sectional. They were more concerned with their own immediate anxieties, and so unable to look beyond this world, say, into the prospect presented by the opening up of other planets. Whatever the reason the 1920's were the doldrums for science-fiction. It ceased even to be respectable. We writers who attempted it were looked on as even more eccentric creatures than writers usually are. Save for one or two magazines across the Atlantic we had no outlet for our rather dubious talents.

Then like a thief in the night came the great recrudescence. The war of 1939-1945, the coming of the atomic bomb, the vast strides made under the sheer pressure of necessity in almost all scientific achievements stimulated interest again. Science-fiction writers were no longer forgotten or derided. Some of us could even pose as prophets, and say "told you so," conveniently suppressing those instances where our predictions had gone wrong. Still the remarkable thing about it all is the number of times we were proved to be right.

The spate is coming back. Last year, I hear, seventy-five science-fiction books were published in USA alone. Their sales are quoted as something like 6,000 copies on the average, with an occasional one reaching as high as 10,000. Compare this with the average USA sale of whodunnits and Westerns of about 4,000 copies.

Science-fiction in book-form has come to stay, may even yet, if handled properly, become the most popular form of fiction. I say "handled properly" advisedly. The vogue of gadgets, the story woven round the machine, is one that can easily soon pass. It is noticeable that the most successful of present-day writers in the genre are those who put the human element first, who take pains to create characters.

In one respect I must own I am unorthodox. One critic I recently read stated that he much preferred piracy on the Spanish Main to piracy in the asteroid belt. I don't entirely agree. The pattern of developments is probably going to be pretty much the same when man takes to the void. The planets will undoubtedly go through much the same period of colonial development, the exploitation of "the lesser breeds without the law." The further man gets from the centres of civilization, the more he is going to be tempted to get hold of what he wants by any methods that present themselves. It won't be just a transference of a modern Captain Kidd from the Spanish Main to, say, the Magellan Cloud. There will be particular problems we haven't envisaged yet, new twists and turns supplied by new and possibly hitherto unsuspected scientific developments. There is a rich field in this line waiting to be exploited by the first writer who can keep his story and his characters, as well as his imagination within reasonable bounds, who can see the analogy without following it too slavishly.

Anyway, the next fifty years are going to be a pretty interesting time. Human beings should still remain human beings, no matter in what situation they are cast. So far I have viewed all this from the point of view of inter-planetary travel, but that is only one aspect of the situation, though probably one that seizes most on the imagination. There are other horizons opening up, nearer at hand. The great fact of science-fiction is that in competent hands it can seize on any new discovery that comes to light, and make it the germ of a story that shall be vivid, interesting, and lasting. There is scarcely a facet of human interest that it cannot touch and enlighten. The possibilities are boundless. Science-fiction is fast achieving the respectability it has always deserved since people are beginning to realise that the wildest fancies of today are often the coldest facts of tomorrow.

When I was a youngster the fastest mode of travel was that of a railway train. Man was tied to the earth. Today he has leapt into the stratosphere, and by air he can cover the distance between London and New York between one meal and other. Already he is able to travel faster than sound. What is he going to do in the next fifty years ? In other words how soon are practical developments in science going to catch up with the prophecies of science-fiction writers ? For that is the beauty of this kind of writing. It is invariably as logical as a proposition in Euclid and as fresh and novel as tomorrow morning.

J. M. WALSH

STITCH IN TIME

by J. T. M'INTOSH

Illustrated by QUINN

SCIENCE FANTASY

An intriguing thought about Time Travel is that it cannot have been invented at any time in our future, otherwise we should have had visitors from that future. Or would we have ? Maybe they are already with us !

I

Dell Davison sighed and went back to the TIS. It was all stops and starts, the stops guilty, the starts reluctant. But she had said she was going to be educated, and by heaven she would be educated.

She knew all about tiaras and tibiae and tickets and tides. There was little about the Tiber or Tiberius or Tibet that she couldn't quote. But the section on tides had made her think of water, and hence of a cool, refreshing swim, and it was all she could do to embark on a study of Johann Ludwig Tieck.

The reader showed her moving, coloured, three-dimensional pictures. It talked to her, whispered, sang Tibetan songs, made sounds of running water. It blew the smell of the sea in her face and brought to her fingertips the feel of the skin of goats, diamonds and healing bones. Everything she learned was relevant and accurate, and she filed it carefully and accessibly in a tidy, intelligent mind. There was plenty of room for it.

But suddenly Dell's resolve broke, or rather dissolved, and she snapped off the reader in the middle of its lecture on Tieck. She fled into the next room. A touch on a switch and the floor rolled up silently, revealing the clear green water of a swimming-pool.

There was always the chance that David would walk in. A small chance, perhaps. She hadn't seen David for three weeks. But because of that chance she put on a little black swimsuit which did a lot for her and dived in perfectly, spectacularly, as if David were actually watching.

After three strokes, however, conscience spoke and she got no more pleasure out of her swim. What had she said to David ? And here she was, wasting time.

Well, what *had* she said to David ?

She climbed out of the pool, shook herself like a dog, and went back into the lounge, dripping water.

Three weeks ago—23.37, May 18, 2132. In the garden behind Jim Keiller's too-good-to-be-true mansion. She set the dials of the olivet rapidly. She set them a good deal earlier than was necessary, if she merely wanted to hear what she had told David.

A Dell who was seven inches high came out of the shadows into the blaring light from distant french windows. The Dell who was five feet three and wore a wet black swimsuit looked with satisfaction, not to say delight, at the little Dell wearing the green, moulded evening gown. Is it really conceit, she wondered naively, to say that if I could shape myself exactly as I liked, I'd shape myself like that ?

It probably was conceit. She really didn't care.

The Dell in the olivet poised like a bird, and David joined her from the shadows. He was tall and thin and not very good-looking. It was Dell's fate to be interested in interesting men, not handsome men. So other girls would look and wonder and say: "She looks like that, and *that's* all she can do for herself ?" The *that* being David.

Dell watched the whole thing through raptly, but it was a long time before the scene reached its top point.

The eight-inch David said: "Since you ask a plain question I'll give you a plain answer. I won't marry you, Dell. In one word—no."

The Dell in the green evening dress looked as if she was hearing something she would never have believed she could hear. Which was the case. She was still too surprised to be angry.

"You mean after I go to the length of proposing to you," she said incredulously, "a thing I need hardly tell you I've never done before, you say no ?"

She looked down at herself, apparently wondering if she had suddenly become deformed. Her head came up with sudden decision. "Well, out with it," she said. "What's wrong ? Am I selfish ? Do I too obviously worship the ground I tread on ? Do I stink ?"

"None of those," said David, "though you don't hate yourself, Dell. It's just that you're not the girl for me. You've got brains, I grant, but you never use them. You've a good mind, but there's nothing in it. In one word, you're dumb. Ignorant. Uncultured. Uneducated. Illiterate. Useless."

"Those sound to me," said Dell, beginning to lose her temper, "like a hell of a lot of one words."

"Now if," said David, ignoring her vexation, "you were to go home and read a book . . . I'm not unreasonable. I don't want to marry an encyclopedia. All I say is, I can't marry a girl who doesn't know what a fact is."

"Doesn't know what a fact is . . ." Dell repeated, with venom.

"Well, do you ?" asked David reasonably. "You know that if you put on that oh-brother dress and walk about, all the men stare at you. But that isn't a fact. It's only ninety-nine per cent probability. Now it's a fact, say, that the material of your dress was made by squirting viscous hydrone from a nozzle into a tank containing antrone at a temperature of 96° Centigrade, but you wouldn't know that. Go on, tell me you don't care. See if I care that you don't care."

With great precision and masculine force, Dell slapped his face. "That shows what nonsense you're talking," she told him. "I've just slapped your face. That's a fact. Correct ?"

Feeling his stinging cheek, David nevertheless grinned. "I didn't say you were stupid. You're not. That makes it worse. Your mind is a vast, well-ordered library full of neatly-bound books without a word in any of them."

Dell was so taken with the picture that she forgot she was angry. "I think I'll put something in them, at that," she said. "How long do you think it will take me to get some culture ? Two weeks ?"

David choked. "At least," he gasped.

"I'm a bit doubtful about this," said Dell suspiciously. "I mean, suppose when I'm educated I decide I'd rather be dumb. What can I do about that ?"

"You needn't worry," David told her. "You don't pick up knowledge like a knife and fork. This idea of yours will last till you switch on the reader, no longer. Then you'll switch it off again, frightened you'll learn something."

"You don't think I can stick to one thing for five minutes," raged Dell with perfect justice. "Well, I'll show you. I'll show you ! I'm going right home to read an encyclopedia."

And she did.

Behind Dell, the full-sized Dell, a slow, amused voice said: "So that's what it's all about."

Dell whirled to face her brother Fred. "Eavesdropper !" she exclaimed furiously.

"I didn't get it all," said Fred regretfully, "but I can always turn the olivet back and get it when you're not around."

Dell launched herself at him like a young tornado. He was five inches taller and four stones heavier than she was, but he fought fair and she didn't. Her head butted him in the stomach and when he was folded untidily on the floor she ground a small hard knee in his solar plexus. He laughed weakly until he saw he had nothing to laugh at, and then it was too late. Her legs locked in his so that he couldn't throw her off, she had his arms out flat where his strength couldn't overcome her weight. With one pointed shoulder in his neck, she sought his ear with tiny, sharp teeth.

"I'm usually careful whose ear I bite," she panted, "but I'll make an exception this time. Either you promise to leave my love-life alone, or you become One-Ear Davison. Make up your mind."

Fred made up his mind. "Okay," he said. "I'll keep out of your hair, if you take it out of my mouth."

Dell got off him, strutting with self-satisfaction.

"David," said Fred cordially, "is welcome to you."

It was peace again, and Dell didn't really mind whether he knew what was going on or not. She had fought only because she felt like fighting.

"That's the trouble," she said, with one of her quick changes from complacency to wistfulness. "He won't have me."

"Well, I can't say I'm altogether surprised," Fred remarked, thereby showing he was Dell's brother. Any other male would have been surprised, not to say flabbergasted. "I told you before you ever met him that he didn't like dumb blondes."

"Et tu, Brute," she said fretfully.

He stared at her, his jaw dropped open. "Shakespeare !" he ejaculated. "This from you, Dell ?"

"He was in the ess-aitches," she explained. "Didn't you hear that bit ? I told David I was going to be educated, and I am. Going to be educated, I mean."

He went over and examined the reader, flicking open the container to see what she had been studying. "The encyclopedia !" he said. "You're not going right through that, are you ?"

Dell snorted derisively. "Think I'm dumb ? Oh yes, you do. Well, I knew I didn't have to know everything. Just a representative sample of everything. I'm not going to run the AS spool, for example, nor the VE nor CL. So I won't read about Astronomy or Venus or Cluster. But I have read the ST section, and the PL, so I know all about stars and planets and . . ."

"You know," said Fred, almost shocked, "that's very cunning."

Dell pirouetted happily. "Isn't it ?"

"But what's the result supposed to be ? Is David meant to take you in his arms and say 'Darling ! Wonder girl !' Or what ?"

"I haven't got that far yet," said Dell doubtfully. "I'll think about that

when I know some more."

Fred threw back his head and laughed. Dell looked at him suspiciously, not certain whether the joke was with her or against her.

"But I came to tell you something," said Fred, when he had stopped laughing. "Funny you should have that spool in. I'll wait till you finish it."

Dell frowned. "Why ?"

"Because then you'll know a little about it."

"All right," said Dell, and went back to the reader.

Fred nodded at her swimsuit. "That your school uniform ?"

"Silly," said Dell scornfully. "You don't have to be dressed to read." She prodded the reader into life.

Fred was still there, smoking patiently, as she reached the end of the entry on the tizzy (which, she was surprised to learn, was a machine designed for nothing but throwing out random selections of anything whatever).

"Anything strike you particularly in that spool ?" he asked tentatively.

She cocked her head on one side thoughtfully. "Strike me ?—how ?"

"Anything that surprised or interested you ?"

She told him about the tizzy. If she had only known it existed, she said, she would have borrowed one and got it to throw out random selections of two-letter combinations for her study.

"Anything else ?" Fred asked.

"Well—the section on Time."

"Yes ?" said Fred disinterestedly.

"Particularly the bit on time travel."

"You're getting warm."

"I never knew we *had* time travel. Isn't that strange ? Not that I didn't know—there's a lot I still don't know. But that nobody seems to care. Nobody's ever used it. At least, not when that spool was made."

"Nor since."

Dell had a quick, intelligent mind. "You mean you're thinking of trying it ?" she asked accusingly.

A little taken aback, though he should have been used to Dell by that time, Fred admitted it. "Funny thing is," he went on, "I can't find anyone else who shows much interest. Can you explain it ?"

"Explain what ?"

"Well, just think of it. A method of time travel is discovered. It's proved mathematically, so that everyone who has the brains and training to understand the proof knows that it's a proof. That is, the thing will work. You can send yourself back in time if you feel like it. And for a hundred and twenty-seven years, nobody does a thing about it."

"There's the olivet," Dell reminded him. "I always took it for granted, but it seems it actually uses time travel. You look back and actually see what happened."

Fred allowed himself to be sidetracked. "Sure. What did you think it was ? Magic ?"

"Well, you can record things you say, and then play them back. I thought it was like that. You know, with a library of recordings somewhere of everything that happened in the last hundred and thirty years. It doesn't go further back than that," she concluded naively.

"For a girl with a brain," said Fred, "you've got very little brain. But to go back to what we were saying. Doesn't it strike you as strange that at any time in the last hundred and twenty-seven years anyone could go back to last week or last year or last century, and no one ever did ?"

"When you put it that way," Dell admitted, "yes."

"There's no law against it. I checked on that. Nobody seems interested enough to pass a law against it. I was looking at a time travel machine only two hours ago, and there was nothing to stop me going back a hundred years, there and then. I nearly did."

"Why didn't you ?"

"Because," said Fred evenly, "I knew I couldn't get back."

Abruptly the conversation stopped being mildly interesting to Dell, a way of passing the time and an excuse not to start running the AC spool, the next on her list. It became instead something very important and rather frightening. With that almost uncanny faculty she sometimes evinced of going right to the root of the matter and ignoring everything else on the way, she suddenly wailed:

"And you mean to do it anyway, and only came back to tell me about it. Oh, Fred, don't do it !"

She had just learned all there was to know about time travel. It was possible only one way. One could go back in time—that much was taken as proved. But there was no way of going in the same direction as normal time except the usual way—sixty seconds to sixty seconds, twenty-four hours to a day.

Also, while anyone who wished could throw himself out of present time into the past, he couldn't go further than a hundred and twenty-seven years back, and he couldn't guarantee any point in that period. He might go back a day, or the whole century and a quarter.

So Fred didn't have to explain that if he went he was as likely as not to be gone for good as far as she was concerned. He was thirty, and she was twenty-one. If he went the whole way, he would have to live to be a hundred and thirty-six to be alive when she was born . . .!

She took a grip on herself. "It's all nonsense," she said firmly. "Why, it even contradicts itself. That means that when the machine was invented it was no use, for nobody could go back in time before it was invented, and . . . oh, it's all silly. Forget about it, Fred, and take up something else. Gardening, maybe. Do you know," she asked hopefully, "there's a grass with long rounded spikes called timothy ?"

"It won't do, Dell," said Fred soberly. "I'm going. Someone has to do it sooner or later. What puzzles me is why the records say no one ever has."

She seized on the implication behind his remark. "You mean you don't believe it ?"

"I find it hard to believe, anyway."

"We have the olivet. Maybe that's enough for most people. They can see the past without having to go back and live in it. Or the encyclopedia says it might be dangerous. Might upset the whole of the last hundred and twenty-seven years. Change everything. Maybe nobody wanted to take the risk."

Fred shook his head. "What you say is perfectly sound," he observed. "But it doesn't alter one fact. Nothing can be so stupid or dangerous that

some damn fool won't try it in a hundred years. Which is why I wonder."

"You think the book's lying ?"

"Not that exactly. It can't be. Maybe those who have gone have done it secretly. Or . . ."

"Or what ?"

"Think it out for yourself," he said, and rose.

Dell wailed again. "You're not going *now* ?"

He grinned. "No, I'll give you plenty of warning. But think it out."

II

Olive Ettingham sat silent as the will was read. But the black cloud on her brow gave some clue as to what she was thinking.

When the lawyer came to the end she said grimly: "I'll fight it."

Harvey Cornis shook his silver head. "Won't do the slightest good," he said. "Your father was no fool, Miss Ettingham. He knew you would fight it. Or at least that you would want to. So he sewed it up tight. Had himself certified sane—and you know as well as anyone that he *was* sane. Had me draft the terms and got other legal advisers to check on what I'd done. There isn't any line you can take that will break the will, Miss Ettingham. I'm sorry. I'm your lawyer now, and I suppose I could run with the hares and hounds by encouraging you to take this to court. I might even have left a flaw that I could exploit now. But the only honest thing I could do was make the will watertight. And the only honest thing I can do now is make sure you don't make a fool of yourself by trying to break it."

Olive Ettingham was forty-three, and she wasn't the type to lie about her age. She was a chemist, actually, but she was a member of a brilliant and versatile family. There were other things she could have been and done.

At forty-three she was still a beautiful woman. She had never been pretty—perhaps she had never even been attractive. But few people of her attainments would have had uninteresting faces, and to intelligence and strength of character was added, in her case, grace and a natural talent for making the best of things.

Therefore, although she had never sought the attentions of men because she was always too busy with other things, she was neat and well-groomed, and her grey suit and white blouse made the best of a figure which was still well formed and athletic. One glance at her was enough to show she was a successful woman.

She nodded. "I'll go back to calling you Harvey, if you don't mind," she said. "And even if I'm your client now, and not the daughter of your client, I think you'd better call me Olive."

The lawyer smiled, but said nothing.

"What you say may be true," she went on. "I know nothing about the law, but I'm a scientist. So was my father, and we only disagreed about one thing. This will illustrates it. I've spent the last few years working on . . . well, it doesn't matter, but I want to go on doing it and he wanted to stop me, because what I'm doing could be very deadly in the next war, if there is one. It could also help mankind on quite a bit if there's no war. So you see we each had tenable attitudes, just a different point of view.

"My father didn't want me to have his money. He had nothing against me, but he knew I've been hog-tied for want of funds, and that if he left

me anything I'd use it for something he didn't want."

Cornis nodded politely. He knew Olive Ettingham well enough to wait patiently for her point.

"Now this is just one of his wild schemes," Olive went on. "Leaving his money to time-travel research is just a way of keeping it out of my hands. Any use my trying to prove that ?"

"None," said Cornis. "For two reasons. One, it doesn't matter even if you succeed. Two, you wouldn't succeed, for you're wrong. He really believed in time travel. Said he'd done enough on it himself to be sure it was possible, but not to find the method."

Olive was unperturbed. "Then if that leads nowhere, how about trying to show that time travel is an impossibility ?" she asked.

"Your father allowed for that. I haven't read all the codicils to you yet. He points out how many things have been proved possible after being believed to be impossible for a long time—old stuff to you, Olive, but it would go down well in court. On the other hand, if he's wrong and time travel really is impossible, he doesn't want to found an institute of cranks which will tie up his money for ever and never allow it to be put to use. So if time travel can really be *proved* to be impossible—and you can guess what stress he lays on that word—you get the money, and the Time Travel Institute is dissolved."

"Then what I do now is obvious," said Olive calmly. "You have power to appoint the first director of this institute. The best way to disprove a thing is to work honestly at trying to prove it. It comes to the same thing. I have the necessary qualifications, I think. I apply for the job, Harvey."

Cornis was not surprised. "Your father," he remarked drily, "thought you would."

Olive laughed helplessly, as she had not done since she was a child. "He was an old devil, wasn't he ?" she said admiringly. "He's forced me to carry on his own job, as he always wanted me to do. And either way, he wins. I'll have to do a lot of hard, solid work on time travel before I can prove it's ridiculous."

"Your appointment," Cornis told her, "to be reviewed by me every five years. And I warn you, Olive, I'll do that as your father's employer, not yours."

Olive laughed again. She could see her father smiling to himself as he evolved the scheme that would take her from her work that he hated. There had been little love between her father and herself. But there had been a boundless respect. She was almost sorry that he wasn't there to gloat in his victory.

Olive drew up her car gently in front of the building that housed Harvey Cornis's office. She hadn't changed much in five years. She beckoned to the doorkeeper who stood under the ornate archway of the building.

"I want that taken up to Mr. Cornis's office," she said, indicating a large case on the back seat.

He went to get help. Olive sighed and wished she had carried the case herself. But it contained a rather remarkable machine, and she didn't want it damaged.

The doorkeeper returned with two porters. Each took an end of the case and heaved.

"Careful !" Olive exclaimed, shocked. The box banged hard against the swinging door of the car, and the porters hefted it more comfortably. "Careful with that box," she said patiently. "It's fragile. At least, what's in it is."

The porters marched to the swing door, squeezed themselves and the case into one compartment, and pushed the door. The frame crashed against the case as they came out into the hall, and they put it down to rest.

"Any use my talking ?" asked Olive pleasantly. "No, apparently not. "I'll take it myself, thanks."

She bent down to lift it, hoping her girdle wouldn't burst, and bore it from under the noses of the porters. At least, she told herself, as she got the case into the elevator, she had saved herself a tip. She was aware of the porters staring after her. It didn't bother her.

Cornis looked up, startled, as she staggered in with the case. "Couldn't you have found someone to carry that ?" he asked.

"Don't be dense, Harvey," Olive gasped. "Obviously I've already tried that. But I wanted it here in one piece." She laid it down carefully in the middle of his desk, and relaxed thankfully in the client's chair.

Cornis had changed little more than she had in five years. There was still no grey in Olive's thick brown hair, and Cornis's hair had been silver for much more than the last five years.

"I really must call you Miss Ettingham," Cornis said. "I don't like this, Miss Ettingham, but unless you can convince me that you are the best person for this job, I shall be forced to terminate your appointment and . . ."

"Relax, Harvey," said Olive easily, "and there's no reason why you shouldn't call me Olive. This isn't going to be unpleasant."

Cornis did relax, trusting her. "I'm glad to hear it," he said. "You've got somewhere, then. This case here is a time machine, no doubt ?"

"Yes," said Olive.

For the first time for forty years, Harvey Cornis was completely at sea. He collapsed like a jellyfish behind his massive desk, a semi-circular fort that might have been shaped to guard him from situations like this.

If he hadn't known Olive it would have been different. He would have been able to tell himself that the woman facing him was mad, or joking, or something just as reassuring.

But knowing Olive he knew that in a few minutes, time travel was going to be demonstrated. In his office. He would see it with his own eyes.

"Now, wait a minute, Olive," he said uneasily.

Olive smiled. "No, there's nothing to worry about, Harvey," she told him. "I'm not going to move anything in time. But I think I can show you, quite definitely, that time travel is possible. Which is more than even my father expected so soon, I suppose. That is, unless the bangs my poor machine has suffered have put it out of action."

She opened up the case. It was like a small, portable cinema. It was a black box with a recessed screen, so that pictures could be shown even in daylight. There were dials on one side, but the thing looked very simple.

"I'll send you the specifications," she said. "You'd better patent them.

I won't attempt to explain the thing. I'll merely tell you what it will do."

She plugged a wire into an ordinary power-plug beside his desk.

"Now," she said, "at the moment this is simply one of the new transmitterless television units. You've seen them ? Want to know what's going on anywhere ? What your wife's doing while you're working your fingers to the bone ?"

"My son's in Paris," said the lawyer. "Think you can find him ?"

"Certainly. What's his hotel ?"

She focused on Paris from the air. Cornis watched calmly. This was no miracle to him. It was twenty years before that a television camera high in New York had first sent out a national programme of life in the city, entering closed rooms, subways, ships in the harbour, and sending the pictures across the continent, though the camera had never moved. A new discovery of the nature of light had made that possible. The first pictures had been dull and blotchy, but there was no halting science. In the last twenty years people had had to get used to the idea that wherever they went, whatever they did, someone might be watching them. Any year now sound would be added, so that people could hear as well as see round the world.

It should have made the world different, but it didn't. The world adjusted to it, gradually, as more and more people had transmitterless television—TTV, as it was called. If a husband was so jealous that he used the machine to spy on his wife, he might have employed a detective to do it before the machine was invented, so it didn't make much difference. Criminals had to be more careful that no one had warning of their plans, otherwise someone might be watching them—but the machine didn't stop crime. Police couldn't watch all the things that might be stolen, all the people who might be murdered. People could get their entertainment without paying money to theatres and cinemas and night clubs; but the fact remained that it wasn't live entertainment if they weren't actually there, and live entertainment still had something that TTV couldn't provide. Also it had sound. It was a different problem altogether to pick up sound without a transmitter. Light waves lived a long time before they died. In fact, they never really died.

But the TTV technicians were not without hope. When TTV could see into closed rooms from which no light escaped, there must be a way to capture the sound too.

Nothing could be done about the new generation of peeping toms. People with sets could follow any girl they liked, famous or unknown, to her bedroom or her bath. But that, too, came to less than scandalised spinsters made of it at first. Things were getting so that most girls could be seen, somewhere or other, at some part of the year, wearing only a few square inches more than they wore in their baths. And as one judge remarked indifferently in a very early court case, TTV might show a man all that went on in a girl's virgin bedroom, but it didn't get him into it, so why the fuss ?

It was merely routine for Olive to show the lawyer his son in Paris. There were certain places on Earth that sets in certain other places couldn't reach. But for the most part, TTV could show people anything anywhere.

"This model," said Olive, "merely goes a little further than the others. Would you like to see your son yesterday ?"

"You mean . . ."

"Exactly that. We can not only focus on any spot we wish, but on any time in the recent past."

"Within what limits ?"

"Just under two years, at the moment. You can see anything that happened anywhere since March 21, 2002."

Cornis tested it for himself. He made Olive focus on times and places where things happened that only he could know about. He was satisfied. The thing was a time machine.

"Do you realise what this means ?" he asked.

Olive, brilliant as she was, had a blind spot. Almost everyone has. She didn't see all the implications of things she discovered, because she didn't look for them. She looked at him inquiringly.

"We thought TTV would change the world," she said. "It didn't."

"But this is different. This will finish crime, Olive. It will end all secrets. It will do away with spies. It will make war almost impossible. It will reshape psychiatry—all the sciences, for that matter. It will . . ."

"I've seen some of those," said Olive, "but not all. How ?"

"A crime is committed—any kind of crime. The police now merely trace what happened, sitting in their offices. They see the crime being committed. Secrets, spies, war, I don't have to explain those. The sciences—I should have thought you'd see that."

"I've been too busy on something else—time travel proper."

"A man comes into a psychiatrist's clinic. Whatever method the psychologist uses, he can only return to that man's past through the patient himself. He can't check what he hears against reality, or get pointers from what really happened on the effect it might have had on the patient. Now he can. He can see what happened before the patient was born, he can watch the birth, follow him through life. He can——"

"Hold on," said Olive. "Eventually, yes. Not yet."

"Why not ?"

"I told you the machine only works over two years."

"But you'll improve it."

"I'll never get it past March 21, 2002."

"Again, why not ?"

"Because that was when it was invented."

The lawyer frowned. "I don't follow that."

"Don't you ? It's a very logical machine. I call it the olivet, by the way. Might as well leave my name on it for ever—the scientist's immortality. When you get the specifications you'll see, if you can understand them, that the olivet really works in time. It doesn't physically appear in the past, but neither does a TTV set physically appear in Paris when it's showing us what's going on in Paris. Though it doesn't actually move, the olivet brings the light waves from the past."

She smiled. "And, naturally, being a sensible machine, it won't go back in time before it existed."

Cornis tried to understand that, and failed.

"Time travel is against most of the laws," Olive told him. "That's why I told you five years ago it was ridiculous. I really thought it was, then. But it seems it has its own curious, but quite logical laws which we can only determine by experiment. Suppose I set the olivet to March 20, 2002.

What's it trying to do ? It's trying to show us what happened a day before it was possible to look into the past. Nothing doing. It will always be nothing doing."

She rose. "I'll leave this here," she said. "You can handle that end. My only job now is the discovery of actual time travel."

She glanced at him keenly. "It still is my job, isn't it ?" she asked. "I'm not fired ?"

Cornis was deep in thought. He had more practical vision than Olive. But he devoted enough attention to her to say absently: "No. You're not fired."

III

Dell did think about it. She soon saw what Fred meant.

Once when he came and taunted her good-humouredly, she was in spirits too low to bowl him over and scuffle on the ground.

"I should, though," she said darkly. "If I could break one of your legs you'd have to sit still for a few weeks and think. And then you might not do this."

"I've thought about it already," he told her. "How does it strike you ?"

At first Dell hadn't seen what he was getting at. No one seemed interested in time travel. Well, didn't that explain why no one had ever tried it ?

But then she wondered *why* no one was interested. Again, there was a simple answer, at first. There was the olivet. People might go into the past if it was the only way of knowing what went on in the past. Curiosity was a strong enough motive for nearly anything.

But if you could look into the past in the olivet, why bother ? Dell analysed her own feelings. She had no impulse to live a century ago.

Gradually, however, she began to ponder on what Fred had said. "Nothing can be so stupid or dangerous that some damn fool won't try it in a hundred years."

When she thought of it, he was right. Someone had just run a hundred miles non-stop. Someone else had played a trumpet for three days. A helicopter had picked up a man who was trying to cross the Atlantic in a rowing-boat. Two girl tennis players played a match on the North Pole. Demonstrating a new method of muscular tension, an athlete jumped from a fifteenth-floor window to show he could land safely, and didn't.

No, there weren't any more nuts than usual. But it gradually became clear to Dell that since a time travel machine had been lying about for a hundred and twenty-seven years, someone *must* have used it.

For a while she wondered if the truth was hidden. If the newspapers were not allowed to print the truth. If people were secretly prevented from travelling in time.

But that didn't stand for five minutes. Someone had once said that the invention of the olivet had been the beginning of truth. That was cynical, perhaps, but anyone could see why he said it.

You couldn't tamper with the olivet. If it worked at all, it showed what actually happened. People began to be more careful about telling lies. They could still lie about their feelings, of course, but there was no longer any percentage in lying about facts. Betty would say she had been with Madge all day, and Bill promptly turned on the olivet and saw that she had

been with Herbie. Then the fact that she had lied became more important than the fact that she had been with Herbie . . .

And when you read a far-fetched report in a newspaper, you checked on things as they had actually happened. Nine times out of ten you found that the report was accurate. Newspapermen meant to go on being newspapermen. It didn't do them any good for people to know they couldn't be trusted.

No, nobody was lying about time travel. Dell did some probing with the olivet and made sure.

"I don't know," she told him unhappily. "Except that there's something queer about the whole thing, and you'd much better not have anything to do with it."

"Why, Dell, I believe you like me," Fred grinned. "You're not yourself at all. You won't fight, and you look as if you've been putting in some hard work on research. At this rate you'll turn into a useful member of society."

That was too much for Dell. She dived at his legs, but he caught her round the waist, swung her to her feet, and kissed her forehead.

Dell burst into tears. "Why does it have to be you ?" she sobbed. "Why don't you let someone else try it ?"

"Because," said Fred, stroking her hair gently, "no one else will."

"Then I'll come too !" Dell exclaimed.

"What about David ?"

"Oh, damn David."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He looked thoughtfully at her. "David isn't right for you, Dell. He'd want to change you. Up to a point he's succeeded already. You've learned a lot, and that's made a difference. Quite a pleasant difference. But it wouldn't stop there. I can't tell you what it would be next that he'd want to change in you, but it would be something."

"He's your friend, isn't he ?"

Fred grinned wryly. "Have you ever noticed a curious fact, Dell ? Brothers often don't want their sisters to marry their best friends. I didn't dare say anything before, for you'd have taken a running jump into David's arms if I did."

"Oh, never mind David. About this thing . . ."

"Yes, about this thing. I can only see one explanation, Dell. People have gone into the past before. I'm sure of it. But it never got into the records. Because things changed—they must have done. There must be some strange logic about time travel, which is inherently illogical. People can't meet themselves at an earlier age, or play a composer's music to him before he composed it, or use an invention before it was invented—that's proved by the fact that we can't use the olivet or the time-travel machine before they existed."

Dell was dazed. "But what do you *mean* ?" she wailed.

"I mean, Dell, I might just disappear. When I'm gone you won't know you've lost me, because you'll know perfectly well you never had a brother. And——"

Dell burst into tears again. She did everything whole-heartedly. When she wept, she made it seem that there was nothing in the world but misery.

Fred nearly said he would forget the whole thing.

But it had taken too strong root in his mind for that. He had to know what happened.

There was quite a crowd round the Time Travel Institute building. It was a handsome erection; small but imposing, more impressive because it

didn't pretend to be anything but a laboratory. Someone had left a lot of money for time travel research, but though the old name stayed, the Institute was now mainly concerned with chemical research. One of the early directors had shown conclusively that only so much could be done on time travel, and it had all been done.

There were reporters, but no photographers. Photographers all took their pictures by olivet now. The olivet not merely provided them with any angle they wished, but any instant. A good picture was never lost because a camera wasn't ready.

Dell was there, tearful, on Fred's arm. David was there, too, but she hadn't much to say to him. She didn't even take any pleasure from correcting his information on two or three points. She found that Fred mattered much more than David.

There wasn't tremendous public interest in Fred's venture, but there was a good deal. Nobody was wildly enthusiastic; nevertheless, there is always some interest in something done for the first time. The newspapers would use the phrase "history was made yesterday when . . ." and Fred's name would go into the encyclopedia.

Besides, everyone was curious to see exactly what happened to him.

The last moment Fred could find alone with Dell he told her: "Dell, I know I'm leaving you alone, and I'm sorry about that. I've tried to think of anything I ever did that might matter to you, but there's nothing. I mean, I never saved your life or anything like that. But if you ever want me, you'll know what to do. Life a century ago wasn't so bad. A little rougher, but there was more left to do."

"Let me come with you now !" she begged.

"No, I want to see what happens first. I'll make some sort of mark in the past, I should think. After all, I know a lot more than they did a century ago. So you can see what happened to me——"

"I don't want to read in the records the date when you died !"

But it was too late to change his mind, and as she clung to him beside the Time Travel Institute she could almost feel the last seconds slipping away.

They wanted Fred to make a speech, but he shook his head. "I just want to get on with it," he said.

So at last he sat in the chair, nodded, and someone pressed the switch in the middle of a cry from Dell.

There was no one in the Time Travel Institute hall but Dell. She could have levered herself into the chair and pressed the switch, and no one would be any the wiser.

But she was as scared of the whole thing as ever. Any time she asked herself outright—why do you want to go back in time ? she found the same grim answer. Because things couldn't be any worse a hundred years ago. They might just possibly be better.

She wheeled her chair away. The attendant came in as she reached the door, and smiled. She didn't know he was supposed to be sour and grumpy, because he was always kind to her. She smiled brightly in return. The hardest thing for cripples, perhaps, was that not only had they to remain cheerful themselves, but also had to cheer up others who became miserable at the sight of them.

"Not to-day, George," she said, with a laugh. "But I will some day."

"It's a pity it won't work the other way, Miss," said the attendant. "I mean, in a hundred years' time surely they'd be able to do something for you. Maybe you could walk again."

"They did pretty well ten years ago to put me together again at all," Dell smiled. "I've no complaints."

She looked round the empty hall. "Am I still the only person who ever shows any interest in your machine ?" she asked.

"No one ever comes here but you, Miss."

"Doesn't that strike you as strange ?"

"No, Miss. Who wants to live a hundred years ago ? Way I look at it is, things are a long way from being perfect, but they're a lot better than they were a hundred years ago. It's always like that. It always looks to us that things were better about twenty-five years ago. Maybe less, if you're younger. But there's never any doubt that they're better than they were a hundred years ago."

"Why, George, I never knew you were a philosopher."

George grinned. "No more did I, Miss. But I think you're just making fun of me, with all you've read. The director here was saying just the other day . . ."

He bit it back and looked as if he hoped the floor would swallow him.

"What was it, George ?"

If he had been quick-witted he would have thought of something the director might have said and told her. But he could only look at her helplessly.

"Might as well tell me, George. I'll only find it in the olivet anyway, now you've roused my curiosity."

"He said," George told her, "you came an easy first in three things in this world of all people. You were the most beautiful, the most learned and the most pitiful."

Dell laughed without apparent strain. "He's wrong," she said. "About the last, anyway. Who am I to dispute the others ? You're only pitiful if you need pity. I don't." She smiled. "Among the many other things I know," she went on, "is the fact that it's time for you to lock up and go home. I won't keep you any longer."

She sent the chair spinning across the floor.

It was true enough that the surgeons had done a good job to patch her together at all. She had been looking for birds' eggs on a cliff. She had been alone. She had always been a lonely child. In some vague way she felt that she had always been looking over her shoulder for someone who wasn't there.

She fell two hundred feet on to the rocks below. Yes, the surgeons had done a good job to put her together again. It was more than all the king's horses and all the king's men had been able to do for Humpty Dumpty.

Dell had been eleven then. It wouldn't be true to say she had been unhappy in the last ten years. On the contrary, she had managed to be as happy as most people, and a lot happier than some.

It was just very recently that something had begun to break in her. It wasn't her courage—yet. What she was losing, perhaps, was the knowledge that life was, after all, worth living.

And there was the wild, impossible hope that she tried to fight, but was gradually beating her.

Ten years ago she had fallen down a cliff. Time travel was supposed to be possible, though no one had ever done it. Since no one had done it, one couldn't know exactly how it would work.

But there was that hope that if she could get back more than ten years—fifty, a hundred, it didn't matter—the cliff fall would never have happened. Of course, there was nothing in the time travel theories about that. The probability was that she would land up in the past somewhere (no one knew exactly where, except that it wouldn't be more than a hundred and twenty-seven years ago) still crippled, still unable to stand up.

She wheeled her chair into her flat. She was tired—too tired to face just yet the business of getting into bed. She could have had that made easy for herself, but she had always resolutely refused to let a machine do anything she could do herself. Almost to the waist she was beautiful and perfect, and if she didn't get some exercise she would become fat and flabby. That would be a surrender she never meant to make.

She turned on the olivet, her chair facing it. It was left at a familiar setting. For the thousandth time she watched herself fall down a cliff. The psychologists were all agreed that an experience like that would do less harm to people if they could take the sting out of it by experiencing it over and over again.

Once more, as she watched, she had that feeling that there was someone at her shoulder, someone who mattered to her life, someone who would make all the difference. Mother, father, brother, sister, husband, friend—she didn't know which. But she didn't turn. If she did, there would be no one there.

There never was.

IV

Harvey Cornis looked without enthusiasm at the pile of papers which had just been laid on his desk. He had been suspicious of anything Olive placed on his desk ever since she had put the first olivet there. He had been right: it had changed the world.

"What," he asked with foreboding, "is this ?"

"I suggest you hire someone to tell you, Harvey," said Olive, smiling. "A mathematician, preferably. I doubt if you'll make sense of it yourself."

Cornis looked up at the third person present. "How about you, Quentin?" he asked. "Can I persuade you to leave the Institute for a while and report to me on these papers, as an outsider ?"

Fred Quentin grinned. "I'll tell you what they mean now," he said. "They mean that time travel is a washout. Oh, not that it won't work. You want my private opinion ?"

The lawyer glanced from him to Olive, Quentin's chief, and back. "You mean it's different from Olive's ?" he asked.

"I mean it's a whole lot different. It's not down in writing, because it's guesswork, and you don't put guesswork in an official report."

"All right," said the lawyer. "Go ahead."

"I think time travel will always remain a theoretical probability—more than that, a proved, but untried, fact—but no one will ever try it, and in a few decades no one will be interested."

Cornis looked at Olive again. Quentin had worked with Olive for the last year, since the time travel machine had been perfected. To do him justice—ultimate justice—the wild idea had occurred to the lawyer that Quentin might actually be one of the time travellers the machine had made possible. The man was too good to be true. He never made mistakes, he was strong, healthy, well-balanced . . . the kind of man one would expect to find from a mythical better future.

But that was wild, and more than impossible. It just wasn't true. Quentin's record went back thirty-one years. He had existed long before there was such a thing as a time machine. Cornis had talked to people who had been with him at college. And Quentin had always been the same—a little solitary, but just as strong, healthy and well balanced.

"Why," Cornis asked, "is that ?"

"I believe in multiple probabilities, Mr. Cornis. Olive doesn't. That's all right by me—it's a free country. Besides, she's my boss. I think that all around us are not only the things that are happening, but the things that might have happened. Like people coming back from the future in a machine we know can bring them. Someone's bound to have done it. But we'll never know about it, for they can't fit into our time unless there's a place for them. And if there's a place for them we'll never know it once was empty."

"That sounds to me," said the lawyer, "vaguely like lifting oneself by one's bootlaces."

Quentin shrugged his shoulders. "It does, doesn't it ?" he admitted.

"Anyway, that's only a bit of it," said Cornis. "What's this about people in a few decades not being interested in time travel ?"

"Oh, Mr. Cornis," said Quentin, in mock disappointment. "And I thought you had brains. A hundred years from now, say, naturally no one who's around will be the slightest bit interested in going back in time. Because all those who were will have gone !"

Into the silence which followed this Olive inserted her quiet voice. "Perhaps you see, Harvey," she said, "why I haven't put that in my official report. No doubt Fred is a brilliant man. But we all know how close genius is to madness." Her amused tone robbed the words of offence.

"I think," said the lawyer carefully, "we'd be much better to forget the whole thing. What's the purpose of this report, anyway ? It isn't due for four years yet."

"Simply to show that we've done all we can do on time travel. If it's all right with you, I want to go back on chemical research."

"I wonder why I ever took this on," said the lawyer gloomily. "Oh, well. You'll have to wait till I get an independent report. But if what you say is true, there's no point in making you go on working on this."

"A curious, abortive little affair, time travel, isn't it ?" Quentin remarked.

Cornis stared at him long and steadily. He still had a strange feeling that Quentin should know.

Olive and Quentin left the building together and paused, like all people wondering whether to part at once or walk a little way together.

"What do you do in your spare time, Fred ?" Olive asked.

Quentin turned to her eagerly. "Is that a suggestion ?" he asked.

Olive smiled. "Stop play-acting," she said. "If you can, which I doubt. It's a pity you never had a sister."

Fred stopped play-acting. "I've often thought that too," he said, surprised. "Why do *you* think so ?"

"Because you're one of the world's wonders, Fred, and you know it. Nothing like a sister to knock that out of a man. She would be like you. And that being so you'd know you weren't unique. It would do you a lot of good."

Fred stopped in his stride to make her a little graceful bow.

"You know, ma'am," he said, "I never thought you had so much penetration."

Olive smiled. "For heaven's sake, come on," she said. "People are staring at us. And I'm twenty years too old for that sort of thing."

V

What finally decided Dell was meeting David Catterline. She liked him; he was the most interesting person she had met for a long time. But she was left with that familiar feeling, much stronger than usual, that life had passed her by.

George knew at once when he saw her in the Institute hall that she had made up her mind. He should have known it was bound to happen, but he was surprised, almost shocked.

"What's the matter, George ?" Dell smiled.

"Nothing, Miss. Just that I've been here so long and no one has ever used the machine. I never thought anyone would."

"You don't have to send for the director, or anything like that ?"

"No, Miss. If you want to go, no one can stop you."

Dell raised her eyebrows. It seemed too easy. Of course, that was it—it *was* too easy. If it had been difficult, if there had been problems to solve, opposition to overcome, she would have done it long ago.

"Isn't it even necessary to have witnesses ? I mean, to make sure I really went and wasn't murdered or anything. Oh—of course."

George didn't have to explain. Naturally, he would report what had happened to her, and the police would check by olivet.

George was hesitating, but having made up her mind she wanted no delay. She levered herself out of her chair, and George moved to help her.

He stood by the switch. "You really mean it, Miss Davison ?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes, George," said Dell patiently.

The attendant threw the switch.

The attendant, who was not George, dusted the machine indifferently and wondered why he wasted his time. No one would ever use the machine. Why should they ?

Olive and Quentin left the building together and paused, like all people wondering whether to part at once or walk a little way together.

Something shot between them and kissed Fred.

"Oh—Olive," said Fred. "My sister Dell. Olive Ettingham, my boss."

"Hallo, Olive," said Dell. "My, I hope I look like you when I'm forty."

Olive laughed involuntarily. "Forty-nine," she said. "What's the matter

—you two had a fight ? Was this the reconciliation ?"

"No, it's nearly two hours since she saw me," said Fred, as though that explained everything. He smiled at Olive's expression.

"You think she's just another dumb blonde," he said. "Damn it, Olive, she's my sister. She couldn't very well be dumb."

They strolled along the sidewalk. "In fact," Fred went on, "she said something yesterday that's been bothering me ever since. Let's have it, Dell !"

Dell was still looking curiously at Olive. She woke up with a start. "What was that ?" she asked. "I say so many clever things . . ."

"When you said you'd like to drop a bomb on the Time Travel Institute."

Dell blushed. "I didn't know you were going to repeat that in front of Olive."

"I wasn't. You are."

"Oh. Well, I don't wish you any harm, Olive," said Dell, "and I'd be careful not to do it with you or Fred in it, but I'd like to blow up the Institute and everything about time travel in it, and I wonder why nobody does."

"Why, Dell ?" asked Olive, amused.

"Well, you know Fred says people are really using the machine, time and again, and nobody ever knows ?"

"Yes. He was saying it again just a few minutes ago. But I don't necessarily believe it."

"Oh, but he's right, Olive," said Dell earnestly. "He's always right. Only he doesn't go far enough. Know what must be happening ? All through the future, everybody of intelligence and imagination and curiosity must be using the time-travel machine. To see what happens. Only we don't know about it. We only know the population's gone up and up——"

"Eh ?" exclaimed Olive, dazed.

"And sooner or later all the intelligent and imaginative and curious people will be here, and the future will have to get on without them. Which will be just too bad for the future."

Olive turned to stare at Fred. "She could be right," she murmured soberly.

"I know. That's what bothers me. Imagine a world a few hundred years hence with no courage or curiosity or imagination left in it . . ."

"Stagnation . . ." said Olive. "Of course, it's a wild theory, but——"

"You could cook the results," said Dell persuasively. "Say you were mistaken, and there's no such thing as time travel."

Olive shook her head. "It's too late," she said. "So we'd better reassure ourselves by saying it won't happen anyway."

Dell laughed, her momentary intensity dissolving. She couldn't be concerned over anything for long.

"If it's true," she said, "there must be a lot of interesting people around. I like interesting people. They interest me. I think I'll look around."

"You'll find what you're looking for, Dell," Olive told her. "Whatever you want, there will always be plenty of people ready to co-operate."

"Thank you," said Dell. "When you think of it, that's a very nice compliment, isn't it ?"

THE END

STITCH IN TIME

Modern theory states that Mankind has telepathic abilities—a latent talent yet to be developed. The first major contact between minds could come from almost anywhere—another planet, another Time world, another Galaxy.

WAS NOT SPOKEN . . .

by E. E. EVANS

Illustrated by QUINN

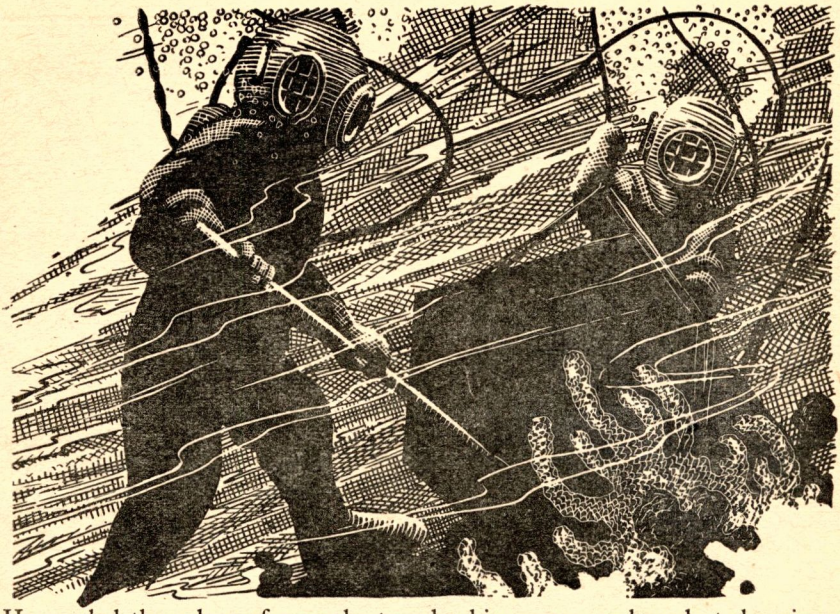
"*You must help me ! You must come to me !*"

Vern Jackson dropped his book into his lap, with a perturbed questioning. There it was again. That strange and compelling thought within his mind.

For the past several days it had been drumming into his thoughts—this despairing cry for help. Its coming had been progressively more frequent, until now the intervals were less than an hour apart. What did it mean ? Whence came such thoughts so completely foreign to whatever he was doing, thinking or reading at the time ?

"It is almost like I imagine telepathy would be," he said to himself. "I wonder if there is really any such thing, and if anyone really is trying to communicate with me ?"

His mind a jumble of conflicting emotions, he laid aside his book, arose and limped across the room to a little stand. That left leg, injured by flak in the closing weeks of World War II, still bothered him after twelve years.



He needed the solace of a smoke to calm his nerves, so he selected a cigar from the humidor. Lighting it, he returned to his easy chair, and threw himself into its comfortable depths. Seriously he set himself to ponder this strange business of the intruding thoughts.

Almost at once it came again. "*You must help me* ! *You must come to me* !"

Almost without volition he glanced at the clock on the radio. Only seventeen minutes this time.

Perhaps it was telepathy. If so, he might try a little experimentation, himself. Settling himself deeper into the chair, he tried to focus his mind on one thought of answer.

"Who is calling me ? What do you want of me ?"

Over and over he repeated the thought, striving to keep his mind concentrated on the one idea—trying to blank out everything else. Over and over. "Who is calling me ? What do you want of me ?"

Again, in spite of his efforts to concentrate on his own message, the alien thought came. "*You must help me* ! *You must come to me* !" Stronger than before, it intruded into his thoughts.

Harder and harder then the effort to focus his own thought-message. "Who is calling me ? What do you want of me ? Where are you, and who are you ? How can I help ?"

Suddenly—crystal clear and edged—came the answer. "At last ! I sense your thought asking who I am ! You must help me ! You must come to me !"

Concentrate. Concentrate. "I feel you calling me. Who are you ? What do you want of me ? Where do you want me to come ? How can I help you ?"

Stronger and clearer, then, the answer. The "thought-line" was rapidly becoming more intense, as both parties became more closely attuned to each

other's "wave-length."

"Where are you ?" the unknown asked.

"I am at my home at 5216 Hyde Park Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois," Jackson thought back.

"Chicago ? Illinois ? Where are they ? I never heard those names."

"They are on the southern shore of Lake Michigan, in the central portion of the North American continent."

"I never heard any of those names, either. They have a very strange sound."

"Then tell me where you are. Maybe I can locate you, instead."

"Perhaps. Do you know of Xanthus ?"

Xanthus . . . Xanthus, Jackson pondered deeply. No, he had no acquaintance with that name. It had a sort of Grecian sound, he thought.

"Where is it located ?"

"On the eastern end of the Great Island that lies near the centre of the Midland Sea."

"That does not help me any, although 'Midland Sea' sounds like you might mean the Mediterranean—and Greece is on part of the shore of that sea. Let me get an atlas and look for it."

He went to his book-case, and took down a big atlas. This he scanned carefully for some time, then returned to his chair.

"I cannot find any such place," he thought. Then, suddenly, "An idea has just come to me. What planet are you on ? Perhaps our thoughts are carrying across interplanetary space. Even that possibility seems no more fantastic than that I am actually conversing with another person by telepathy."

"Then you are not used to mind-communication ?"

"No, I never did it before. But to resume. I am on the third planet of a yellow sun. We call our sun 'Sol', which is merely a word in one of our languages which means 'Sun.' Our planet we call both 'Tellus' and 'Earth.' There are ten known planets in our system. Does all this mean anything to you ?"

"Some. I am also on the third planet of our system, which has a yellow-type star for a sun, but as far as I know there are but eight planets in our system."

"The outermost two of ours have been known only a relatively short time. Less than two hundred years or so, if my memory serves me. I am not an astronomer."

"That might make it the same. But what is your date ?"

"Nineteen Hundred and Fifty-seven, of the Year of Our Lord, as we reckon time. Does that mean anything to you ?"

"No, for the last I knew the date, it was Ten Thousand, One Hundred and Sixty-nine, of the Priestly Reign."

"That's no help, either. I suggest we may be on the same planet, with you either far in my past—or my future. Your date would make it seem the future; but your knowing of but eight planets would make it seem the past. Yet we know nothing of civilised men pre-dating ten or twelve thousand years ago, and nothing of any calendar reckoning by 'Priestly Reign' during that period."

"It is quite a problem, isn't it ? Almost as much as my own personal one."

"That's right, you called for help. I'm sorry to say I'd forgotten that for the moment, in my interest in these other things about which we've been talking. Why have you called for help—for me to come to you ?"

"To rescue me—I've been buried alive !"

Jackson gasped. "My God ! And I don't even know where or when you are !"

The thought-voice explained that it was not an immediate problem.

"I was working in my laboratory, and somehow created a gas that made me apparently dead, since I cannot move a muscle. I was unconscious for some time—how long, I have no way of telling. When my senses wakened, it was to find myself buried and my body still in a state of suspended animation, but my mind now free and clear."

"But that's terrible !"

"One gets used even to that. I've been calling for some of my friends to come and get me out, but yours is the first mind I have been able to contact. Now I seem to have bridged a time-gap, and cannot reach my immediate friends.

"I have been calling for what seems like centuries of time, although naturally it may have been a greatly shorter period. There is no way of computing the passage of time—not even the possible counting of heart-beats or breaths. It may have been only days—but it seems eternities."

"You poor man ! I do feel sorry for you, and wish there was some way of helping you. If we find one, I'll certainly do all I can."

"Thank you. But we surely seem to be of vastly different time-ages, if not of location."

"Right. I do not see how it is possible for me to be of any assistance at the moment, at least."

"Nor do I at present, but you may be sure that it is comforting to hold mental intercourse with a fellow being again. I was beginning to fear that I would never reach anyone, and that my mind would break down."

"I am very glad I can be of that much help to you, at least—and greatly amazed that I am able to do so."

Vern explained that telepathy was not one of the things known to their science and civilisation, although there were some of the present generation studying the subject. Occasionally persons were found who claimed to have the power of reading minds, or of conversing with the minds of others. But so many of these have been proven to be outright fakes or charlatans, that nothing has yet been definitely proven.

"Many of our scientists are seriously seeking information on the matter," he continued, "but all thinking men can do at present is to say 'there may be such a thing.' That is why I have been several days delayed in answering you—I had not really believed that I was receiving an actual message."

"You see, now, though, that it is a possibility, don't you ?"

"It must be, unless I'm dreaming," he thought. "I have not been one of those who have studied the matter, and I could not, until this evening, even believe that it was real. I merely thought it was a vagrant and passing thought that was plaguing me with its increasing power and its progressive recurrence."

"I sensed that in your mind, as it became clearer to me, and therefore

did try harder to make contact with you."

It was not until Jackson had consciously concentrated on reaching out that the other was able to come clearly into his mind. Then the stranger was able to strengthen Vern's latent power of receiving and transmitting, until now they could do so clearly and easily.

"I do wish I could help you," Jackson telepathed. "Particularly, I wish that we could find some way of locating each other, and know our space and time relationships. Perhaps we are not even in the same planetary system, for I remember reading that those who have studied the matter believe that once telepathy was established, one would be able to bridge any distance, even interstellar."

"Not that far—at least, we have never found it possible," his mind friend said, "and we have had psych-communication for nearly a thousand years."

"Perhaps we are unknown thousands of years apart, either forwards or backwards from what I call the present."

"I cannot, at present, seem to feel that. I have a feeling that, although I may have been born thousands of years before you, we are now contemporaries. I am ashamed to admit that I am not too highly educated in general science."

"You are probably better than I at that. I am not a scientist of any kind, at all. I am merely a clerk in an office, but I have read lots, and have a general knowledge, even though it is not at all specific in any branch of study."

"Let's search for another clue. What means of power do you have ?"

He explained the present power system as best he could—the conversion of fuels to turn machinery to produce electricity, and its transmission over wires to the place of usage.

"We know our present system is very wasteful, because we cannot get much more than fifteen per cent of the possible energy that should thus be usable, for actual use. Our power-loss is too great."

"That is truly wasteful, as you say, but parallels our own early mechanical history. However, we passed that stage several thousand years ago. Now we use almost entirely atomic energy."

"Our physicists have that energy now. They have recently begun to get some real results in this releasing of the power of the atom. But they cannot control it for all uses. That fact would seem to put you far in our future."

"So it would seem. This seems to grow more puzzling with each fact we bring forth."

"That is true, and all this is most interesting. But I hope you will allow me to break this conversation for a time. I am not used to it, remember, and this intense concentrating has given me a terrific headache. Besides, it is past my time for retiring, and as I have worked hard to-day, I am almost dead for sleep. Can we arrange to call each other to-morrow evening, and resume ?"

"Of course, and forgive me. It has meant so much to me to make contact with another mind, that I did not stop to realise what it might mean to you. In my condition, there is no weariness of body, since my body is almost not functioning. Neither is my mind wearied, because our people have been telepathing for generations, and it is natural for us to converse thus, even when the body is in a state of sleep."

"Could I do that, too ?"

"Later, but we shall not try it at first. So you go to your rest, and I will abide as patiently as may be until you call me again at your leisure time. Perhaps in the meantime I can figure some way of mutually locating each other in the space-time continuum."

The thought-line was broken, and Jackson, rising wearily, sought his bed, first taking several aspirins for his headache, and a strong sleeping-draught so that his body and mind could rest against the coming day, and the following evening's communication with his new-found "mind-friend," as he phrased it.

All that next long day, as Vern tried to work at his job, his mind kept mulling over his dramatic experiences of the previous night. Was he possibly kidding himself ? Had he just dozed, and had a freakish, scientifictional dream ? No, he told himself, he hadn't dreamed it—he could remember smoking part of the time, and he still had the remnants of that awful headache.

The long day finally did come to an end, and he rushed to a restaurant for a quick dinner, and then home to his apartment, where he could either definitely convince himself that his experience was real, or know that it was a hallucination, which he still did not believe.

Seating himself once more in his big chair, a cigar drawing well, he began to consider. No method of contact had been mentioned, he recalled, so he would just try mentally calling him. Him ? Maybe it was a "her." Nothing had been said about that. He had not even told his name. *There I go again, calling him "he." Of course it's probably a man, as he spoke of working in a lab.—but we have lots of women working in labs. even now. Well, I'll just concentrate on saying "here I am." By golly, I'm glad I'm alone. No one to know just what a fool I may be making of myself, if this isn't real. Well, here goes* !

Putting all other thoughts from his mind—and he discovered with pleasure that he could concentrate more easily now than ever before—Vern began mentally signalling: "I am trying to call you ! Are you there ? Answer if you sense me !"

Almost before he had finished his thoughts became crystal clear, and the answer came rolling in, more powerfully than on the preceding evening. He was thrilled at the immediate success, and at the contact with his new mind-friend.

"Of course I'm here." The thought seemed to have a chuckle behind it. "I was in contact with your mind all the time, and have been laughing at your attempts to rationalise what seems so strange to you. Several times I almost broke into your thought-stream to reassure you, but felt I had better not distract you from your work any more than you were anyway."

Jackson felt himself blushing. "I imagine I was making an ass of myself, but this is all so new and fantastic to me."

"I realised that, although for a time your thoughts were so jumbled that I was afraid I might have damaged your brain by the contact. Then I saw that you were merely thinking without plan."

"I do that, mostly, anyway. I was afraid it was all a funny dream, and that you might not answer me to-night. Also, I didn't know your name, or exactly how to call you. You do have a name, haven't you ?"

"Of course. I didn't bother to tell you last night because our conversation was so short, considering the time I feel I have lain here. I am called Abalu. My father was head chemist, and I was working with him. Yes, that's right, Abalu is a feminine name."

Vern flushed again. "I couldn't help wondering."

"It was perfectly natural that you should, and I should have told you sooner. But to get on. Ever since we ceased communicating, I've been trying to remember anything that might help you to discover where and/or when I am. But I doubt if anything I've thought of will help."

"Well, as I told you last night, I'm not much of a student, but I have a close friend who is a real scholar, and he might help if you would allow me to bring him into our circle."

"By all means if you wish, and if you think he can help."

"Just a moment, then, while I telephone him."

" 'Telephone' . . . oh, I see in your mind that that is a transmission of the voice over a wire by an electric current. Our forefathers had such a thing thousands of years ago."

Jackson called up his friend and former school-mate, Perry Weeden, who was now Associate Professor of Archaeology at Western University. The latter was free for the evening, and promised to come right over when assured that there was something urgent and extremely interesting that he would not want to miss.

"While we're waiting," Vern thought to Abalu, "please tell me something of yourself, personally. I'm intensely curious to know of what race you are; if you are married or single, and things like that. Maybe it isn't polite, but I just can't help wondering."

"I am of the pink race, and am double-married."

"Wait, please. The 'pink' race, did you say? I wonder if you mean what we call the 'white' race, for our skin is rather pinkish-white, as contrasted with the black, brown, yellow and red races of the present."

"Yes that is correct. We have the same five coloured races here—so that might be a point in favour of our being on the same planet."

"I would think so. And now again, you said 'double-married.' Do you mean that you have been married twice in succession, or what? In our time, we marry only one wife, although if she dies, or we get a legal separation which we call 'divorce,' we can marry again."

Their marriage laws were rather more complicated than that, Abalu explained. Both men and women were allowed to have two mates—and all at the same time. Thus, she had two husbands, and both her first and second mates were married to the same two women, so that they made a household of four. But sometimes each one picked two different mates, and there were many cases where a household would number into the many tens, with all the various matings.

"Holy smoke! Imagine that!" Vern exclaimed in amazement. "Why, with all that, and with all the children from all the marriages, they must have a small town in one household."

"Oh, the children do not live with us. They are placed in state hospitals and schools, and cared for until they are old enough to get married, or begin their life work. Then they will either set up their own household, or join

that of the mates of their mates."

"That seems a little heartless to me. Our civilisation rather prides itself on the love of parents for children, and of the children for their parents."

"Oh, it's not as heartless as it may seem at first. We love our children, and they us. We remain the best of friends, with mutual love and respect. We visit them often while they are growing, and exchange many visits after they are matured. Sometimes we even find ourselves in the same households in cases where . . ."

"Excuse me, the door-bell is ringing. It may be my friend."

It proved, indeed, to be Weeden, a tall, breezy, ex-football star, whose twinkling blue eyes called on the whole world to be his friend. After he had entered and been seated, Jackson gave him a brief résumé of what had befallen. Perry looked more and more quizzical as Vern continued, and finally interrupted with a laugh.

"Whoa, pal. What kind of a yarn are you spinning ? Remember, Papa knows a few things."

"I know you do, Perry, and that's just why I called you. I don't wonder you think I'm pipe-dreaming. I wasn't sure of it myself this morning, or this evening, either, until I had again made contact with her. But I'm telling you the sober truth."

Perry continued to look and act sceptical, and Vern tried even more earnestly to convince him.

"Wait . . . Abalu suggests that I think towards you, and that she will try to follow my mind into yours, if you will concentrate on receiving our thoughts. It will probably seem to you at first that you are merely having vagrant thoughts, but as you continue to concentrate, we will be able to convince you, and you will be able to communicate with us."

"I'm game to try anything once," Weeden said, "but I still think you're pulling my leg." He tried to concentrate on receiving their thoughts, and soon Abalu made direct contact with his mind, which Jackson at the same time perceived. After some anxious moments more in which both thoughts and words were inter-changed, the deed was finally accomplished, and the three were in direct mental contact with each other.

"But this is marvellous," Perry finally said, as he became fully convinced. "Pleased to meet you, Abalu."

"I am as gratified to make your acquaintance, as well," she replied. "I hope you can assist us in solving this puzzle."

Weeden began to question her as to her knowledge of geology and archaeology, but her small knowledge of these subjects soon proved that there was little hope along these lines.

"You might tell us some of your history, then," Perry thought to her. "That may give us some common point as a clue."

"I'm not a student of history, either," she answered, "but I can sketch a few broad outlines for you."

Their recorded history went back about twenty thousand years, to the time when man first began to emerge from savagery, and the tribes began to be important units. First the strong men were the leaders, then the cunning men took over. Wars became fiercer and larger; the tribes grew to become nations.

"Sounds just like our own early history," Jackson interrupted.

"I imagine all worlds of cerebral entities would start in some similar way," Weeden contributed thoughtfully.

"You are undoubtedly right. Anyway, to continue.

"There was a first great ruler named Xanthus, after whom her great home-city was named. He was a conqueror and explorer, discovering many new lands. Under his rule, knowledge greatly increased, and for the second five hundred years of his reign, science began to be seriously studied."

"Wait, please. Did you say 'the second five hundred years'?" Vern interrupted. "That makes me wonder if you are on this planet after all. Our average life-span is seventy to eighty years, and very, very few people live to be one hundred years old. Or perhaps your idea of a year is different from ours."

"No, as I take it from your minds, it was the same—three hundred and sixty-six . . . oh, yours is three sixty-five!"

"Three sixty-five and about a quarter," Weeden explained. "However, it is believed that the year is getting shorter about one second per year, which might put you in our past about sixty-five thousand years or so."

"But that's impossible" Jackson broke in, while a gasp of dismay came from Abalu's mind, followed by a more calm thought, "Frightening, but not impossible. If a body can achieve a cataleptic stasis that would last even one hundred years, it could as well last several thousands of years. But I hope it is not true, and that I am closer to you than that."

"There is nothing conclusive about the idea," Weeden soothed. "It is a remote possibility, but I would rather think you are in our future, or on another sphere."

"Perhaps even another dimension," Abalu countered.

"Another possible angle," Weeden admitted. He was far more interested in her history, and asked her to continue, as he hoped this might give them a clue to her placement.

"Our next really great ruler came about two thousand years later. His name was Altan, and he . . ."

"Excuse again. Perry, do you suppose that could be where we got our word 'Atlantis,' and that they were the old race supposed to have lived on a continent now sunken in the Atlantic Ocean? I know most people think it is but a myth, but a lot of scientists and writers do believe in it."

"Could be, also, but nothing definite yet to point to it. As long as we have interrupted, another thought occurs to me, going back to the matter of Abalu's longevity. Our Bible, a religio-historical book, speaks of the people in the olden days living for hundreds of years, and of several men who were almost a thousand. It says that for their wickedness God reduced Man's age to three score and ten—seventy years, Abalu—which is now our average. Sorry for the interruption, Abalu. Please go on."

"If the interruptions will help us locate each other, so much the better, as that is our main problem."

She resumed, stating that Altan was a builder, and a patron of science. Exploration had discovered almost all of the land areas on the planet, except the Polar regions. Most of them had even been colonised to some extent. One great colony in the Eastern Sea soon began to grow in size and power until it declared its independence of the Motherland, and after about two

hundred years of intermittent warfare, became a separate nation.

Jackson had been doing some heavy thinking while entering into all this more or less casual conversation, interesting though it was. Now he interrupted again with a new idea.

"It is late at night here now, Abalu, and I suggest we postpone this while Perry and I sleep and rest ourselves. In the morning, I want to try an experiment."

He explained that they each had small private flying machines, and it was his idea for them to take off, while still in communication with her, and fly in opposite directions, to see if she might be able to tell whether or not one of them was coming closer to her, while the other was going farther away.

"In this way we might be able to locate your position, although I don't know whether such a thing is possible or not," he concluded. "Do you think that good ?"

"I think it is a fine plan to try," she replied. "We are able, to some extent, to tell whether or not a person with whom we are conversing mentally is close to us or far distant, but I have never tried using it to determine direction. But let us make the experiment, by all means, if you both are willing."

They talked it over, and Weeden made arrangements to stay the night with Jackson. Just as they were about to break the thought-line. Vern inquired, diffidently, "Er—ah—would you mind telling us how old you are ?"

They could feel the amusement in her thoughts, while Perry murmured something about "Girl-crazy people with no manners."

"To you I must seem an old, old woman," Abalu said frankly. "But please believe that I am just in my prime, and, indeed, am generally considered quite beautiful. I am only three hundred and twenty-six years old—or was, at the time of my entombment."

"In the 100 to 1,000 ratio, that would make you only about thirty-two and a half years old, as we reckon age," Weeden replied gallantly. "That would, indeed, be in your prime. Most of our women at that age are in the full flower of their mature beauty. Now, good night, we'll contact you in the morning."

After an early breakfast, the two men got out their fliers, and Perry flew east, while Vern flew west. All three remained in mental communication all the time. After an hour or so, Abalu said she was positive that Weeden was getting closer, while Jackson was getting much farther away.

The latter, therefore, turned south and east, while Perry flew north. A couple of hours later, Abalu announced that she was sure Vern was now coming towards her, while Perry was receding. The latter, therefore, turned back south and east, and both proceeded towards Key West, Florida, where they agreed to meet.

When they arrived at that city, and were resting in an hotel room, Abalu declared again that she was positive they were much, much closer to her than they had been at any previous time. Even the two men sensed this, as they found it easier to converse with her.

"Although that may be merely because we are becoming more proficient at telepathy," Weeden warned. "To-morrow, though, we'll try some more. I think we should go over to Bermuda, and see how it appears from there."

While flying the next day, they resumed the three-way mental conversation,

trying to learn more of Abalu's interesting story and history; still searching for any new clues that might lead to the solution of their problem.

"I've kept thinking," Jackson began, "that if hers is our own planet in the long and long ago, she might be in Atlantis, and this Eastern colony of which she spoke last night might be that other perhaps mythical continent variously called Mu or Lemuria."

"We call it 'Utharia'," Abalu stated.

"Could be again, but still nothing definite," Weeden remarked. "Besides, the supposed dates for the sinkings of Mu and Atlantis are approximately ten or twelve thousand years ago. Yet I keep feeling that the sixty-five thousand year time-age is about correct, and that you are definitely in our past."

"That would seem to make our problem of actually finding you quite a lot more difficult than ever," Jackson said. "Your calling your land 'The Great Island in the Midland Sea' more than ever makes me believe you are in Atlantis. But that would not agree with Perry's idea of your time."

"Hey, who's the archaeologist of this expedition ?" Weeden cracked.

"Phooey ! Don't try to push your exalted erudition on to us," Vern replied, laughing.

"Your humour is so delightful," Abalu said. "My people are rather serious-minded, but I love to hear you."

"How about books, Abalu ?" Weeden asked, more seriously.

"We do not have books in the sense that I read them from your minds. Our children are taught mainly by thought-impregnations. We do not have what you term either 'fiction' or 'poetry.' The only visual and permanent records we have are those made by our scientists and inventors, who inscribe on small ribbons of imperishable metal the more detailed and intricate portions of their discoveries. These are stored away against possible needs."

"That sounds more like the future than the past," Jackson said.

"Perhaps," Weeden replied. "But if it were the future, surely some remembrance of our own literature would remain."

"We have no knowledge of any pre-history literature at all," Abalu stated positively.

"Have you any legends of your past, which were of such great and universal importance that they may have remained through from your time to ours ?"

"None that I recollect at present . . . or, wait a moment. There is a curious prophecy that might have done so, if it ever came true. Your speaking of the 'sinking' of continents might be a result of it. It seems that somewhere to the east, some two or three hundred years ago, there was a soothsayer who believed, and proclaimed, that the entire globe was to be flooded. It is said that he and his family were building a great boat in which they hoped to survive."

"Noah, and the Flood," Perry and Vern both exclaimed aloud.

"Why," the former continued, "that legend is universal with all tribes and races throughout our present world. But it was supposed to have taken place only about five thousand years ago, as a part of our recorded history."

"It is hard to believe, though, that it could have been the same Deluge," Vern chimed in. "Unless, of course, we are away off in our guesses as to Abalu's time, or unless the soothsayer's prophecy didn't come true for

many thousands of years after he thought it would."

As they continued flying towards Bermuda, Abalu felt them coming closer to her. As their planes were equal to the flight, the men decided to continue on across to the Azores.

They kept up the psych-communication, and Abalu declared, after some further hours, that she could definitely sense that they were approaching very close to where she lay entombed.

This naturally gave them all great joy, and all three began to hope that perhaps there might be found some way of definitely locating her resting place, and perhaps, of rescuing her.

"Providing always," she thought, bravely, "that I am really in your own time-age, and that we are not conversing across time."

"It is much more probable that you have lived in your cataleptic state for thousands of years, than that we could thus bridge a time-gap mentally," Weeden declared quite positively.

The men had discovered by now that not only had it become much easier for them to converse mentally with Abalu, but that they could also psych-commune with each other, without undue mental strain. This proved to them that men had the power, latently, and that it only required direction and development.

Neither could feel that he had an ability above the great mass of humankind in this particular respect. It would be entirely too much of a coincidence that the two men thus gifted should chance to be already friends before they discovered this ability.

"We shall have some interesting research and teaching to do after this episode is concluded," Weeden stated thoughtfully. "By teaching others who will act as teachers in turn, we shall perhaps be able to begin a chain that will result in telepathy becoming an everyday usage in our time, as it is in Abalu's."

They reached their destination late in the afternoon, and retired for rest. Before going to sleep, they planned to begin further tests the next day, making shorter hops in various directions to see if it would be possible definitely to locate her.

Abalu thought they were very, very close. The two men, who were beginning to achieve some of this direction-finding ability, agreed with her, except that Vern felt they had already passed her.

For several days they continued their flight-search, narrowing down the area, until they had a spot roughly a mile or so each way which they were all three convinced was the right spot.

"It must be Atlantis !" Vern exulted.

"And that would definitely put me in your past," Abalu said.

"It will be impossible to live with Vern if he proves correct," Perry added wryly.

Thankfully, however, they noticed that they were in a place where the charts showed water less than a mile deep. It was quite near the coast of one of the little islands. This would be shallow enough for operations by one of the new and improved submarine-and-bell-diving combinations which had been developed since the war for salvaging operations.

"Now that we have the 'where' settled; comes the 'how'—with 'when'

still obscure," Perry stated. "We'll have to get one of the big salvaging companies interested in this, if possible."

"That will be mostly up to you," Vern answered. "I don't know much about such things, and I have no influence at all, and not too much money to put into it."

"I believe I know a wealthy man who might finance the project," Weeden said, slowly. "He is interested in science in a dilletante way, and often does 'angel' expeditions."

This man, when approached with the proposition, became quite interested after the boys had demonstrated their telepathic ability to him, and after they had promised to try to teach him as soon as they had time after the work was completed. With his financial backing, it took little longer to make arrangements with one of the best salvaging companies, and soon the expedition was on its way.

Perry and Vern had been in constant psych-communication with Abalu all this time, of course. One day, while the salvaging ship was on its way, she told them that she was undoubtedly buried in a special type of crypt on which her father and his staff had been working.

"They had been working with the ultra-carbonisation of iron," she explained. "At the last reports I had, they had already been able to combine between 19 per cent and 20 per cent of carbon with the treated iron . . I see in your minds that it must be what you call 'steel'. This gave an alloy whose molecular structure was far, far less . . . porous, than any hitherto known.

Abalu went on to explain that their interest in such a metal, and its peculiar use for coffins, was a result of their hope that it would make a superior last resting-place for their people, which would not only keep the body from decay longer, but would do away with the necessity for any sort of embalming.

"According to our religious beliefs," she explained, "unembalmed bodies will have a better chance of resurrection into the 'After Life' for which we all hope and pray."

When Weeden related this fact to the leader of the salvagers, he exclaimed with joy. "That should make our work of finding the tomb much easier," he stated. "We will be able to use one of the 'mine-detectors' like the Army used in finding land mines during the war."

Vern, meanwhile, had been talking with another member of the salvage crew, and this man explained their system of working. "We run the sub. to the spot where we want to work, and hover as deep as is convenient. Then, from a specially built air-lock in the bottom of the sub., we drop the diving-bell with the workmen inside, and then use that as a base for operations, working in self-contained diving suits."

Finally they reached the designated spot, and work commenced. It was slow and tedious, and kept on for several days.

"I only hope," the salvage master exclaimed, "that we don't run into a whole cemetery of those steel coffins. Then we would have a heck of a time trying to tell which was the right one—unless your girl-friend can help us out a lot."

Slowly, foot by foot, the divers covered the ground in the indicated territory, watching their detectors for any sign of excitation that would mean iron or steel buried beneath them.

WAS NOT SPOKEN

Abalu had not yet felt any other presences close to her, although she had been able dimly to sense many people fairly close—probably the members of the crew of the sub.

Day followed slow day, until finally one of the workmen electrified the crew with the announcement that he had detected iron. The others went to him as swiftly as possible, and digging tools were lowered to them by the diving-bell.

Even now, working under water at great pressure as they were, the work seemed unbelievably slow, but at last came the time when they announced that they had reached the coffin, and soon it was unearthed, and ready to be lifted into the sub.

This time Abalu was positive that it was her coffin. "I seem to sense movement," she explained, "and I can definitely get the close thoughts of many people."

She related some of the thoughts she had caught, and various of the workmen acknowledged that they were theirs.

Vern and Perry were dancing a jig to relieve themselves of the tension and to express their joy. Abalu was so excited at this eminent hope of the recovery of her body, that she was almost beside herself with joy. The boys had all they could do to calm her down.

"Take it easy," Weeden cautioned her. "You're not out of the woods yet, although you are on your way."

As soon as the casket was safely aboard, and following pre-arranged plans, the sub. surfaced and proceeded at full speed to New York.

"We have made arrangements at one of the country's greatest hospitals," Vern told Abalu, "so that the work of opening the casket can be done there under the close supervision of the best medical and technical minds we have. All the best doctors have volunteered to help."

Port reached at last, the precious burden was carefully transported by ambulance to the great hospital, and placed in the operating theatre.

Hundreds filled the galleries outside the glass partitions surrounding the operating pit. Microphones enabled them to hear all that the attending doctors said, and television instruments were set up to convey all the sights and sounds to the entire world, which was by now fully conversant with the great event.

The pit itself was almost crowded with a group of the country's greatest medical and surgical specialists who had volunteered their services, and with the technicians who were to open the casket.

Jackson and Weeden, in sterile gowns and masks, were in the forefront next to the coffin. They kept up their mental communication with Abalu, and relayed her comments and advice to the attending physicians, and were also heard by the peoples over the hook-ups.

"Our greatest fear," explained Dr. Smythe, leader of the medicos, "is in the first introduction of air into the casket, when we start unsealing it. We have no way of knowing just what the result may be, and it has been the cause of a lot of discussion among us."

"We'd better not tell Abalu about that," Jackson said, forgetting momentarily that she was *en rapport* with their every thought.

"Do not let the consequences frighten you, my friends," she told them calmly and courageously.

As a matter of fact, at this stage of the proceedings she was far more calm than they. Weeden felt himself go cold with nervous sweat, which he could feel trickling down his face and body. Jackson, for all his usually phlegmatic nature, was in little better state.

"Naturally I want so much to live," her thoughts continued, as the mechanics began examining the casket. "But I would rather perish in this attempt than to remain longer just an inanimate piece of flesh. You have no idea how fatiguing this condition is to one's mind. In spite of the fact that I am now in constant communication with you, dear friends, I would rather face eternal dissolution than that this state continue much longer."

"Don't worry about it too much, Abalu," Vern said. "These men will do everything possible to make it come out all right."

"I know that, and I am at peace. But in the event that they should not succeed, I would like my body to be interred again in this same casket, and without embalming. I would even like it if you could take it back where you found it."

"In such an unfortunate circumstance, we will do your every bidding," Weeden said softly. "But I refuse to believe there will be that ending now."

While this had been going on, the metallurgists had examined the casket to see how and where it was sealed, and how best they were to open it. They easily found the line of sealing, but were for some time at a loss as to just how they could safely break that seal.

"It is a welded metal of which we are totally unfamiliar," they reported. They did succeed in breaking off several small pieces, which they tested in their laboratories there at the hopsital. They found its properties very strange, indeed; far harder than any steel they knew, with a melting point so high they did not dare to try to use cutting torches, as these would definitely burn Abalu's body in the opening.

They did, however, find that it could be cut quite easily with high-speed cutting wheels faced with black-diamond dust, and so several of these were brought in and plugged into the wall sockets. Using these small portable cutters, several technicians could work at once, and thus make the task of unsealing much quicker.

"Are your people familiar with vacuum chambers ?" Abalu asked. When assured that they were, she suggested that the casket might be unsealed in such a chamber, and the inflow of air thereafter regulated as the doctors felt best.

While a big shielded case was being brought in, the experts decided that they could cut part way through the seal, leaving the final cutting to be done inside the vacuum. Two suits were brought in, and one of the technicians and Dr. Smythe donned them, as they would do the final work inside the chamber.

"Please convey all my sincerest thanks to these splendid scientists who are doing so much to assist me," Abalu told her two friends. "It goes without saying at present how very much I thank you two."

"We are all ready for the final task, Abalu," Jackson told her. "They have cut away all the metal of the seal except a thin rind, and are now placing your casket inside the vacuum chamber, from which the air will be exhausted. A worker and the doctor-in-chief are inside with you, and in a few moments they will have begun the final work."

WAS NOT SPOKEN

"It is well, friends. I am so anxious to see you, and this beautiful new world you have described to me. Also, I am just enough of a vain woman to enjoy in anticipation the sensation I will create when I emerge, living, from my ages-old tomb."

"It is unthinkable that, after all we have gone through thus far, we should not succeed," Vern said.

Weeden, watching the proceeding in the chamber, now exclaimed, "They are starting !"

"It is well !" Abalu exclaimed, enthusiastically. "I have made my prayers to my gods for their assistance, and have composed myself for wha . . ."

As Jackson and Weeden heard in their minds a great exultant cry of purest joy—instantly extinguished—they saw that the cutter had pierced the seal. The watchers could see, even through the glassite face-masks of the two men within the chamber, a sort of holy-flamed nimbus on their faces—a strange, luminescent glow similar to that seen occasionally on the face of a newly converted religious zealot.

Vern fainted dead away, while Perry staggered and was caught by a physician standing by his side, or he, too, would have fallen.

The two men inside the chamber seemed for a moment paralysed,then frantically completed the work, and prised the loosened lid from the casket. Dr. Smythe took one quick look inside; then raised a suddenly-chilled hand, signalling for air to be admitted.

When the chamber was opened, and his helmet doffed, he ran a shaking hand over his perspiration-soaked face, and slowly muttered a prolonged "Hmmmm !"

By the time Perry and Vern had regained their composure, the group of scientists had formed their theory, and were the more confirmed in it when told of that triumphant cry the men had heard.

"It must have been only because of that super-dense metal of which her coffin was composed," one of the doctors said to them—and to the listening world. "Although in the thousands of years during which her body lay there—and it was indubitably a dead body, and not one in a catalepsis or suspended animation, as she thought—the metal could not stop her body's decomposition. This dust is not that made by an instant crumbling of a body suddenly struck by air, for we are all agreed that it is unknowably old."

"Whether she was buried alive," Dr. Smythe took up the explanation, "and her body ceased living later, or whether she was dead when buried—personally, I believe that it was the former—that body has been dead and dust all the time you were communicating with her. It was . . . something else . . . (call it what you will) which remained, and which escaped when her casket was first breached."

"Poor, poor Abalu," Vern said softly in benediction. "Hers was a great soul, and I pray her gods and ours that she has found peace !"

Weeden quoted, reverently, and with new-found meaning:

"Dust thou art; to dust returneth,
Was not spoken of the Soul."

THE END

It's always a holiday when the circus comes to town. When the circus happens to be a collection of weird creatures from a score of planets—anything can happen.

CIRCUS

by PETER HAWKINS

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

Stalvey pushed aside a piece of paper, placing a slide-rule on it to do temporary duty as a paper-weight. He listened intently for a moment, head on one side, trying to pick up the roar of the descending ship. A glance at the clock confirmed he was anticipating; his hand moved tentatively towards the slide-rule and dropped to his side. He swung his chair round and walked out of the office into the early morning sunlight, expecting to hear the approaching roar of Arno's ship.

A small voice at his side took his attention from the expected ship.

"Mr. Stalvey !"

He turned round.

"Hello, Tommy. Going to see the *Ark* land ?"

"Yes. What's a circus like, Mr. Stalvey ? Have you ever seen one ?"

"Yes. I've seen Arno's, and Kleinert's . . ."

"What's in there ? I've seen all the vi pix Arno's transmitted but he says there's a lot more."

"There will be. Come on, Tommy."

Stalvey took the six-year-old's hand and led him off the last of the even paving stones to the hard, brown earth of the landing field. Most of Gornu had turned out for the arrival of the circus ship, and were scattered in sparse groups on the townward side of the field.

"Tommy." Stalvey pointed to a group of people a few yards away, "there's your uncle; run along and see him. I'll tell you some of the things there are aboard when I've seen Arno. Right ?"

"Oh, yes !" Tommy's face lit up with a delighted smile, the youngster overjoyed at possessing some information in advance of his friends. He darted off to his uncle, who waved an acknowledgment to Stalvey. Smiling, Stalvey returned the greeting, thoughts already busy with other things than little Tommy.

The last time Arno's *Ark* had landed on Gornu there had been trouble. Arno was far from soft, and his men liked to take their cue from their leader. Reflectively Stalvey scratched his ear, remembering the brawl which had occurred in the hotel bar, and afraid there might be a repetition during this landing. Now there was only Mulherd, one representative of the Guard,

on Gornu; the last time Arno had touched down there had been six.

A high shriek split the air, gradually dropping in pitch as the ship neared the ground. Suddenly the *Ark* became visible to Stalvey, an elongated silver teardrop coasting down over the Blue Hills west of Olegra towards the landing ground. The ship grew rapidly larger, setting the children chattering excitedly. They'd been told it would be the biggest ship they'd ever seen, but none of them, having seen very few ships other than the small inter-world trading ships which visited Gornu regularly, could conceive of a vessel as large as this. The *Ark*, highly polished silver with a broad crimson streak running along her centre, hung over the landing field, blocking out more of the sky than the largest of the Irrella fleet, members of the crew off duty staring down at the crowds below.

As the ship dropped earthwards Arno's voice, amplified many times, burst out of loudspeakers set in the ship's hull.

"Ladies and gentlemen," it boomed, "Arno's circus has landed at last ! You've all heard my broadcasts directed to you during the last few days, so you'll have some idea of the wonderful things we have aboard the *Ark*. There are animals from a hundred different worlds and performers and entertainers known from end to end of the Elch, from Pemuth to Alkernay; some of them have even performed at Star itself. You've heard me mention their names over your viscreen, ladies and gentlemen. At great expense I bring you these fine artists . . ."

Stalvey chuckled, noting from the steady descent of the ship that either Arno had engaged a new pilot since his last visit or had managed to knock some sense into his previous one. The ship lowered herself very neatly to earth, not the slightest suggestion of shock transmitting itself through the ground to Stalvey's feet as she touched down.

". . . and of all the marvellous animals in the universe," continued Arno's voice, "I have with me one of the few esley ever captured and brought away from Siwalt. This, with all the other . . ."

Stalvey clenched his teeth at mention of the esley, remembering it from Arno's previous visit. Esleys' intelligence, according to the Galactic rating, was less than that of the dog, despite their telepathic, as well as vocal communication with each other. They were beings of fairylike beauty, almost transparent and soft to the touch as fur, their delicate nervous system, a pattern of fine-spun gold threads, shining in their almost paper-thin bodies. The head was as human as possible, each esley's a carbon copy of the rest, glorious features belonging to goddesses of legend, and classical in beauty. From the scalp and from around two very human ears grew long tresses of golden hair, while inside the skull rested all the organs of the body. The head rested on a thin flexible backbone which extended to the slightly flattened tip of the triangular body, on which the creature stood.

Arno's voice was still booming as the gangplank slid from the *Ark's* side and Stalvey started to walk up it. Mulherd, clad in the black uniform of the Guard, pushed out of the crowd and joined him as he walked up the ramp.

"Nothing happened to make it illegal to hold esleys in captivity ?" asked Stalvey.

"Nothing," said Mulherd. "I wish there had."

In silence they walked to the first officer, standing at the head of the

ramp. Stalvey couldn't call him to mind from his previous acquaintance with Arno's *Ark*. The first officer shook hands with Mulherd, introducing himself as Raymer. In turn Mulherd introduced Stalvey to him, Stalvey feeling his extended hand taken in a firm grip. Raymer beckoned to a youth standing to one side.

"Take Mr. Stalvey to the Cap'n."

"Yes, sir." The boy saluted smartly and turned to Stalvey.

"Would you come this way, please sir." He turned off to the right, leading Stalvey along a corridor decorated with pictures of the worlds the ship had visited. Arno's cabin was situated at a point of the hull where maximum bulge would permit a large window to look out over the landing field.

"One moment, sir," requested the boy. He knocked on the door.

"Come in !" boomed Arno's voice. The boy opened the door for Stalvey, announcing him.

Arno sat at his desk, waiting until the boy had left before speaking. He was fingering an identity block.

"You're not Palliter. I know you." He paused reflectively. "You're Stalvey. Last time we met we weren't on the friendliest of terms . . ."

"You're quite right. Shortly after you asked Palliter to service your ship on landing he was taken ill and had to go to Pemuth for treatment. It seems his message hasn't caught up with you yet."

"It hasn't."

Stalvey hesitated before he spoke again.

"I know it's none of my business, but you've still got that esley aboard. It must be nearly crazy now . . ."

"As you said, it's none of your business. That esley brings in the money . . ."

"But captivity, and not being able to fly, is purgatory for it . . ."

"It's happy enough. I keep it half-drunk."

Stalvey felt his hands clench into fists; Arno saw the movement as well.

"I'm doing nothing illegal. Just because a thing has a human face, can speak our language and has rudimentary telepathy people want to sentimentalise it." He paused. "You're here to service my ship, Stalvey, and no more."

Stalvey felt his eyebrows rise.

"Your ship'll be very well serviced indeed."

"Good." Arno rose to his feet, six feet of tough, wiry humanity, lean, leathery face marked with a scar from a claw. "Raymer will give you all the information and assistance you want."

"I'll see him right away. When are you doing your shows ?"

"One to-night, one to-morrow and one the day after if there's the demand. If not we blast off the day after to-morrow at dawn. You'll be able to do everything in that time ?"

"Unless there's anything seriously wrong."

"There shouldn't be. Raymer's the best first officer I ever had." Arno sat down, hand reaching for a paper on his desk. Stalvey took it as a sign the interview was finished and left, walking slowly back to the ramp head. Raymer was waiting for him.

"You've seen the Cap'n ?"

"Yes, I . . ."

"Tell me," interrupted the first officer, "can you personally fix locks ? I find it amazing that among this crew," a tinge of bitterness crept into his voice, "there's not one who admits being a burglar. We've got some far from dull animals aboard and one of them has learnt to pick the lock on its cage."

Raymer led Stalvey down a spiral companionway into one of the holds. Despite the air-conditioning, and the fact that many of the animals were kept in their own surroundings in sealed tanks, there was a distinct smell of livestock in the place. From the far end of the long room came the sound of a voice crooning softly to itself, a voice of strange, fairy sweetness, blurred by alcohol.

Stalvey caught Raymer's half-glance towards him.

"I couldn't do it," said the first officer.

"Nor could I. It would be kinder to kill it." Stalvey paused. "Could I have a look at it ?"

"Certainly."

Raymer's pace quickened as he led Stalvey past the cages, glancing into each one as he passed. Behind bars, in a space larger than the other cages, the esley lay on the floor, head raised to inspect the visitors. The once transparent body was an opaque, grey mess, shot through with threads of tarnished gold. Two tiny three-fingered hands tapped out the rhythm on the floor of the tune it was singing to itself. The goddess's face looked vacantly at Stalvey and Raymer.

"Wha's happenin' ?" it asked, slurred voice still retaining a hint of elf-land bells. " 'S poor old Elsie done something wrong ?" A frown creased the forehead. "Don't tell Mr. Arno Elsie's done something wrong, cause he'll hurt Elsie and make her cold . . ." The esley flapped upright, balancing delicately on the tip of the triangular body. It quivered slightly, as if a faint, chill breeze were caressing it. "Don't tell Mr. Arno . . ." it pleaded.

"We shan't. Here." Raymer felt in his hip pocket and handed a flask through the bars to Elsie. "Quick . . ."

"Raymer !" snapped Arno's voice. "I've told you not to give that animal anything other than at regular feeding times. You'll kill it. Elsie, give that bottle back to Mr. Raymer."

The esley looked at Arno, pleading with its eyes for a drink from the flask. A sadistic smile disfigured the captain's face, lips pursing from a tight, sour grin to form a little circle. He started to whistle a tune. Immediately Elsie dropped Raymer's flask.

"Stop it ! Stop it !" it screamed. The whole fragile body shook as Arno's whistle scraped along Elsie's delicate nervous system. Maddeningly Arno increased the volume of sound and raised the pitch. Something like a sob tumbled from Elsie's throat.

"Stop !" it pleaded weakly. "Stop . . ."

"Arno, that's quite enough," snapped Stalvey. In reply Arno's eyes flickered with amusement as he pushed the pitch of the whistle still higher.

Stalvey felt his fists clenching, and tried to hold his temper in check. Abruptly Arno stopped whistling, half on guard against Stalvey's attack, as an iron fist landed on his jaw.

"Stand still, Stalvey," snapped Raymer. Stalvey glanced to one side, eyes catching a glimpse of the gun Raymer had produced from his pocket. Arno reeled against the cage door, hand wiping a little trickle of blood from his lips.

"I've got you now," he muttered. He breathed deeply, fingers of his right hand gently massaging his jaw where Stalvey's fist had landed, turned

away and walked along the line of cages to the companionway. Raymer tucked his gun back in his pocket.

"Sorry I had to use the persuader, but it was the only way to solve that without hurting either of you."

"It was the only way I could stop him . . ."

"Yes," agreed Raymer. He reached up to a long pole attached to the bulkhead and pulled it away from its bracket. Carefully he pushed the pole through the cage bars and drew the flask towards him. The esley watched him dully, making no move or request to retain the flask. Silently Raymer put it in his hip pocket and replaced the pole in its bracket.

"I'll show you the thing that's learnt to pick locks. It's a dreighoot from Karrennig VI; looks something like an overgrown mouse with extra long hands. It's got about the same elementary degree of tp as the esley—can tell the pips on a playing card when someone looks at them and thinks what's there. No real intelligence, just this particular talent."

Raymer led Stalvey back a few cages, stopping at one which had been divided into six hutches, and protected by many more, but finer, bars. He tapped on the bars with a peculiar rhythm, a frown wrinkling his forehead when nothing appeared from amongst the stones and vegetation in response to his command. He repeated the rhythmic tap, louder than previously.

"I don't like this," he muttered.

Cautiously he felt the combination lock, twisting the dial several times to left and right and stopping it in different positions each time. In response to a little tug the door opened.

"It's not got out, anyway. It takes a couple of days for it to shift the combination and I only altered it this morning." He removed another pole from a wall bracket and probed at the rocks, suddenly grunting in amazement as he pulled a small, still furry body towards him.

"Dead !" he muttered in astonishment. "More trouble. Arno's not had much luck since touching down here. I'll call him up on the viscreen and tell him. Have a look at the other animals while I do it."

Stalvey nodded, watching Raymer's figure retreating up the long hold to the viscreen at the far end. Idly he turned round, walking slowly back past the cages until he reached the esley. It lay full length on the floor of the cage, claw-like hands turned up and partly closed, eyes fast shut and golden hair tumbled in disarray over the neck and upper portion of its delicate body. Stalvey looked at the plaque wired to the bars of the cage.

"Elsie," he read. "Captured by Arno on Siwalt, day of the Lofford attack on Migard." Stalvey wrinkled his forehead, working out how many years the esley had been in captivity. He couldn't remember whether the attack had been in '76 or '79, but even if it were the latter it meant Elsie had been behind bars, stupefied with liquor, for twelve years.

The click of metal heels on the deck disturbed his train of thought. He glanced up, surprised to see Mulherd standing beside him.

"What have you been doing ?"

"Nothing. I . . . Ah ! You mean Arno ?"

"Yes. I've heard his story, and I've heard Raymer's. Now I'll hear yours."

Briefly Stalvey detailed the circumstances leading up to his encounter with

Arno, Mulherd listening with features moving uneasily while he was speaking.

The Guard nodded his head as Stalvey finished.

"I'm sorry. Attacking the master of a ship aboard his own vessel is a serious crime, and the least I can do is agree to Arno's request that you be placed in custody. In other words, I've got to take you along to the cells and lock you in until the facts have been vised to Talarth and a ruling obtained."

"But . . ." protested Stalvey.

"I know," snapped Mulherd. "Do you think I like having to arrest you ? I know you're a respectable citizen, and only under extreme provocation would you attack anyone. It just so happens you've had the provocation, and the man you've attacked is too big for me to do anything with. So you've got to spend a couple of nights behind bars until we get advice back from Talarth."

Stalvey breathed in deeply.

"All right. Do you trust me sufficiently to make a call at my office on the way ? There's a couple of things I want to fix."

"I'll come with you. Yes, I trust you," said Mulherd, seeing Stalvey's raised eyebrows, "but Arno remembers you from his last visit and doesn't like the memory a bit. That's why I was late at the field, by the way, looking up the records of the *Ark's* previous landings. Keep well within the law until this business is finished; Arno wants to get you psyched if possible on account of it."

"I see. Then we'll go straight to the cells," agreed Stalvey, "and I'll get you to ask one of my men to bring me along my bedding and some work I've got on hand. Will that be in order by the Guard ?"

"Yes."

Together Stalvey and the Guard walked along the hold, nodding goodbye to Raymer standing at the bottom of the companionway, and left the ship. While they walked through the crowds they talked of local affairs; when they reached the paving stones where the still deserted main street began they fell silent. As they passed his office Stalvey looked earnestly at the neat, white two-storey building, and craned his neck to glimpse the picture of his workshop which hung on the wall opposite his desk.

It was only another few yards up the street to Mulherd's station, outwardly very similar to Stalvey's office. Inside it was different; the two rooms at the back were steel-shelled and padded with felt; iron bars were let into the unglazed window spaces. In each of the cells was a bunk and a rubberoid set of unbreakable shelves.

Mulherd joined Stalvey in his cell for lunch, telling him he'd sent the details of the case to Talarth.

"Now I just have to wait until . . ."

"The answer will be here in a couple of days. Arno is very keen to know the result, so he paid for personal ultrawave and asked me to give the message top priority. I did that of course; I don't want my duly appointed deputy in here all that length of time. I'll drop your wants in at your office in a few minutes, then I'll have to attend to the rest of the landing formalities."

"I'd forgotten about those," laughed Stalvey.

"They won't be very hard; Arno seems confident of Raymer's abilities."

"I'm inclined to agree," said Stalvey.

As Mulherd left the cell Stalvey lay down on the bunk, looking at the blue sky out of the little barred window. He placed his hands behind his head, still studying the sections of unclouded sky. The sounds of people moving about the streets and an occasional laugh reached his ears; by straining his hearing he could just catch the thump of his own press at work in the sheds at the edge of the field.

The warmth of the afternoon, although no hotter than usual, combined with his position, made Stalvey feel sleepy. He yawned, deciding he could afford a few minutes sleep. Mulherd wouldn't be back until teatime, or perhaps even later, and his man wouldn't be along until he had finished for the day. Contentedly Stalvey settled down for a short sleep.

His awakening was far from normal. He came out of a deep sleep as twilight was descending and the first wandering dust meteorite from the Coalsack burnt itself out of existence, an orange streak of fire against a background of deepest blue, uncertain whether it was the shots or the scream which had awoken him. He jumped up to the barred window, listening to the shouts. Another burst of shots echoed across the darkening world, apparently from the direction of the field. He darted across to the cell door, shaking it vigorously. No one came to answer either the rattling or his shouts asking what was happening.

Instinct told him the animals aboard the ship had managed to escape and attempts were being made to round them up, but their escape . . . His mind flickered to the lock-picking dreighoot. That would have been a very satisfactory solution to the breakout except that the animal was dead. It could have worked out all the combinations on the locks on the other cages—as the idea formed Stalvey rejected it as unlikely. There must be some other cause.

He returned to the window, a flickering, darker patch in the sky attracting his attention. It looked like a bird, but one larger than any known on Gornu, and moved with a motion more like that of a flatfish through water than a bird through air.

The shape, dropping to earth like a monster falling leaf, fluttered and undulated nearer the ground, heading towards the Guard station. Tensely Stalvey watched it, recognising it as the esley, and feeling glad that it, of all the animals, had escaped. The beast seemed to be making for him; something hurtled past his ear and clanked to the cell floor. Instinctively Stalvey ducked, cautiously straightening up when no immediate reaction followed the sound of the metal hitting the floor. In the dim light of the cell he studied the object, recognising it as the key to the cell door. For a few seconds he puzzled how the esley had obtained it, and under what circumstances Mulherd parted with it.

Suddenly it occurred to him Mulherd might have been injured, either by one of the escaping beasts or by a stray shot. Hurriedly Stalvey pushed his wrist through the bars of the cell door, pushing the key in the lock. With an effort he turned it; the movement was strong and designed to be difficult to open except from the normal position.

The door pushed back on silent hinges, Stalvey dashing through the station, stopping only to grab a heat gun from the small rack near the door.

In the darkness outside there was no sign of movement; cautiously Stalvey walked down the street, eyes flickering suspiciously towards every shadow. Two more shots, separated by several seconds, echoed over the town followed by an unintelligible shout.

Stalvey broke into a run, chancing there would be a warning if any beast were coming his way. The noise still seemed to come from the field; it was possible the majority of the animals were now recaptured and back in their cages aboard the *Ark*.

The ship was a blaze of artificial light, arcs searing from each port and illuminating the landing field with light of intense brilliance. Momentarily dazzled by the glare Stalvey paused on the edge of the field for a moment before continuing his rush towards a group of people standing fifty yards away. He pushed his way through the crowd, dropping on one knee beside Mulherd. Doc Weythe was performing a primitive piece of electro-stitching on the Guard's bared arm, while Mulherd lay still, nerves numbed by a sedative.

"Trutke clawed him," said Weythe, not moving his eyes from the stitcher. "I'll have to have him under observation for a day or two before he can start work again. Asked me to tell you, before I started on him, that you were to be turned loose and to take over." A hint of curiosity crept into the doctor's voice. "It seems you've managed to do it for yourself."

Stalvey ignored the implied question in Weythe's voice.

"How'd the animals get loose ?"

"Arno says it was the esley. According to him, as the things are telepathic they learn a lot more than they should. The thing managed to learn the principle on which its cage door lock worked; it didn't manage to learn directly how to do the physical part of the job, so it picked the mind of a dreighoot, killing it into the bargain, and turning the other animals loose as soon as it could by opening the emergency airlocks." He paused. "We've killed one trutke, but there's still three more loose . . ."

"Where's Arno ?"

"After the esley's blood."

"He would be. It can't hurt anyone . . ."

Stalvey stopped as Arno appeared out of the crowd opposite him. Slowly he rose to his feet.

"I heard you say the esley couldn't hurt anything," stated Arno.

"Not only couldn't, but wouldn't if it were in its proper surroundings. If you hadn't kept it drunk and in captivity all this time you wouldn't have this affair on your hands. You know perfectly well an esley likes its freedom so much that it thinks everything else is as keen about it. So naturally, as soon as its gets loose, it frees all the other animals."

Arno stepped deliberately over Mulherd's legs, coming within two feet of Stalvey. Sensing a tension of the atmosphere the crowd drew back; out of the corner of his eye Stalvey saw Weythe ask two bystanders to help him take the unconscious Mulherd back to his house.

"Why didn't Mulherd lock you up ?" snapped Arno.

"He did."

"How did you get out ?" He paused. "He didn't lock you up. That's a charge I'll bring against . . ." Arno broke off, a light of understanding shining in his eyes.

"When the trutke attacked him the esley was flying nearby. It swooped down and distracted the trutke's attention for a moment. Mulherd gave it the key and it passed it on to you." The ruminative tone vanished from Arno's voice. A fist of iron clenched around Stalvey's forearm.

"Where's that esley ?"

"I don't know. If I did I wouldn't pass on the knowledge. It'll die before long, anyway . . ."

The grasp on Stalvey's arm became tighter. Suddenly he shook if off, free right hand rising in a vicious jab to Arno's diaphragm.

Arno coughed. He kicked out viciously, metal-tipped space boot landing with sickening force on Stalvey's shin. In return Stalvey's fist smashed a second time against Arno's jaw. Slowly he fell to the ground, panting, eyes glaring hatred at Stalvey.

"I'll bring the Guard deputy on you for that . . ."

Stalvey laughed.

"I'm Mulherd's deputy," he chuckled as he limped towards his office.

Once in his small room Stalvey started planning a search for the animals. It would be useless to commence operations before daybreak; even then, unless Arno would co-operate, it would be only a formality except if life or property were in danger. By nine o'clock he had finished his brief plans and called up Arno on the viscreen.

"I'd like to know how many animals you've still not accounted for," he said, feeling a small sense of satisfaction warm him at the bruise on Arno's chin. A little smile disturbed his lips as Arno's fingers wandered to the spot.

Stalvey waited several seconds for the circus owner's reply.

"Not many. I've lost one trutke, and a couple of chameleon fish from Naoïl died when their tank was shattered in the breakout. What is there still loose, you ask ?" He paused. "The only dangerous things are the two trutke and the esley. I don't know which I'd like to have back most of all." A note of pleading crept into his voice. "If you see the esley, kill it. It's started to do tricks, like the affair with the dreighoot, which aren't in the books." A few beads of sweat glistened on Arno's forehead as he turned to speak to someone who entered the room. He evidently turned off the mike, for Stalvey saw his lips move but heard no sound.

"Three trutke and the esley to be found, and the sooner the better," said Arno, switching on his mike and directing his attention to Stalvey.

"I've arranged for eight planes to take off at dawn; my own will be made ready immediately in case of trouble as soon as I've finished speaking to you. After that I'm leaving one of my men in charge and I shall be up at the Guard station. If you get any more information about the animals, let me know. I'll have to give orders to shoot to kill . . ."

"Not for the trutke. I've got some doped meat they'll go for . . ."

"Right. Get plenty prepared for to-morrow. Goodbye."

Arno's screen went dark before Stalvey's; for a few seconds he studied his search plan before calling up his chief mechanic.

"Jisslin, I'm going out to warm up my scout. I want you to sleep in the workshop to-night in case we need the ship at a moment's notice. I'll be sleeping at the Guard station."

When his mechanic had acknowledged his instructions Stalvey wandered out into the night air. The evening was cool, enlivened by the slightest of

breezes, and rich with the seductive scent of the fruit trees from the diamond-shaped cultivation patches between Gornu and the encircling Blue Hills.

Overhead orange streaks of fire cut an ever-changing cross-hatch pattern in the sky as tiny particles of dust from the Coalsack flamed to incandescent death in the upper reaches of Gornu's atmosphere. Over to the west, not concealed by the tiny meteor streaks, the random pattern of the stars was rent by the gaping Coalsack, the area of dust and electronic vortices from beyond which came the Lofford, harrying humanity along the fringes of its expanding sphere of influence, and attempting to annex portions of its territory.

Stalvey found himself outside his workshop door. Absently he felt in his pocket for his keys and waited for the whine of the servo motors opening the doors as he turned the key in the lock. The metal leaves slid back on noiseless rollers and the fluorescents in the ceiling began to flicker. Stalvey strode across to the other side of the workshop, past his low, sleek and mostly transparent scout plane, to open a further set of doors to the landing field. The arcs illuminating the neighbourhood of Arno's ship had been extinguished; only the regulation landing lights marked her presence in the quiet night.

Sliding open the door of his scout Stalvey walked to the pilot's cabin. Methodically he checked the instruments and fuel gauges, ensuring everything would be ready for the dawn flight. He waited for a few moments for Jisslin, deciding to return to the station before the mechanic arrived, in case any message had come in which needed attention.

There was nothing in the station Mulherd had left undone; the place was arranged with the fanatical method instilled into Guards from their early days of training, and none of the influence of being in an easy post had brought Mulherd out of his enforced habits. No strips of tape issued from the ultrawave; the indicator on the local set showed no call had been received. Stalvey unfolded a bunk from the wall and lay down, the day's incidents running through his mind in orderly sequence. He made a mental note to ask Mulherd, when he next saw him, how the esley got the key.

The alarm attached to the local receiver buzzed, red warning light flickering alive. Stalvey jumped off the bunk and hopped over to the set, fingers fidgeting with the local list of station operators.

"Hello, Mulherd," crackled the speaker. "Gesel calling and waiting."

"Hello, Gesel. Mulherd is ill. This is Stalvey speaking. What's happened ?"

"Sorry about Mulherd. I'm being attacked by a couple of trutke. I suppose they've escaped from the circus. I'll be able to hold out, but I'd like some stronger armament than hand guns to be brought along."

"I'll be over in about a quarter of an hour."

"Thanks and cheerio," answered the loudspeaker.

Immediately it went dead the alarm buzzed a second time; the red light flickered into life and the adjacent viscreen demanded attention. Stalvey flicked it on, surprised to see Arno's face staring at him.

"My Sparks picked up that local call you've just received. I'd like to join you on the trip if it'll be in order. I've got some meat prepared for the trutke."

Stalvey hesitated before replying. He had no desire for Arno's company, but privately admitted a man used to handling trutke would be an asset.

"Yes. You'll see my scout when she comes out of the hangar. Be ready . . ."

"I'm ready now." The viscreen died, leaving Stalvey to collect a couple of heat-rifles and a projectile gun from Mulherd's arms rack. Hurriedly he walked towards the landing field, entering the workshop through the plane exit doors. A light in the cockpit showed Jisslin at work.

He waved to Stalvey and dropped down out of the doorway.

"All in order ?" asked Stalvey.

"Yes."

"Good. Get someone along to Mulherd's station to watch the radios. I'm going up to Gesel's. Two of the trutke are there."

Jisslin nodded acknowledgment and stepped away as Stalvey taxied the scout on to the field. Stalvey stood up in the cockpit, eyes searching the darkened field for Arno, suddenly catching sight of a running figure, heavy package strapped to its back, almost under the aircraft's wings.

"Climb aboard," he called, waiting for an answering shout and thud of the door closing.

"Aboard," shouted Arno.

"Sit down; I'm taking off as fast as possible."

Without waiting for Arno's reply Stalvey turned the scout's nose into the breeze and set the slim plane speeding over the hard earth. In half a minute the ship was airborne, heading towards Gesel's little hut.

Arno, package removed from his back, staggered into the cockpit.

"She's a fine little ship," he admired. "Good display to-night," he added.

For a second Stalvey glanced at the sky overhead, laced with orange patterns.

"Yes," he agreed. "I'm going to fly low at Gesel's. It'll give you a good chance to drop the meat in a place the trutke will find it."

"They'll be after it almost before we're there," said Arno confidently.

Stalvey sent the plane into a glide, calling up Gesel on the radio.

"Hello, Gesel. Stalvey speaking from a couple of miles off. Landing to the west of you and dropping doped meat for the trutke. Will taxi over and hand you the rifles. We hope to catch both trutke alive."

"Hello, Stalvey," replied Gesel's voice. "I'll be waiting for you with the door unlocked. Cheerio."

"What does Gesel do out here ?" asked Arno.

"Makes high-quality liqueurs for some firm of vintners. I don't know all the details . . ."

"That's why the trutke headed out this way. They could smell the fermentation."

"Several of your animals seem fond of alcohol," remarked Stalvey.

"It's a stimulant. Most animals have some plant or scent they make for."

"I hadn't looked at it that way," admitted Stalvey. "Get ready to throw out the meat; we're nearly down."

Stalvey felt the rumble of the door opening transmitted to him through the fabric of the plane and waited for Arno's instructions.

"Here come two of them," he shouted. "And the esley ! Where's a gun ?"

Arno evidently glanced quickly round the cabin and picked up a heat rifle. The sound of the breech being opened and closed followed quickly.

Stalvey brought the scout to a standstill by Gesel's little hut and dashed to the door. The two trutke, long sleek animals with vicious claws and feline heads, warily approached the meat. Suddenly one clawed a chunk from it, retiring a few feet away. The other, more cautious, waited a few moments as if listening for something, suddenly rearing up on its hind legs, claws snatching viciously towards the esley, undulating towards it. A beam of light slashed across the night, scaring the trutke and sending the esley out of sight.

"No good," swore Arno. "I'll have to kill the other one." He pointed to the trutke lying supine on the ground. "It'll never eat the meat while its mate is there." Deliberately he lifted the heat rifle to his shoulder and aimed at the trutke, standing, one paw off the ground, alongside its mate. It started to roar, the harsh sound dying away into a gurgle as a beam of light from Arno's gun seared away its life.

Slowly Arno lowered the rifle, eyes fixed on the dead beast.

"The hide'll fetch a few credits on Pemuth when I get there next and the guts will make a meal or two for some of the others."

He glanced up at the sky, studying the pattern of the falling dust.

"Have to go to Pemuth next," he muttered, "and then . . ."

The speed with which he brought the rifle to his shoulder again made Stalvey shiver. Instantaneously a bolt of orange light slashed across the darkness towards the heavens, barely missing the esley heading in the direction of Gornu. It faltered in flight, probably singed by the bolt and dropped, seemingly lifeless, towards the ground. Viciously Arno pumped another shot at it, missing a second time by mere inches. The esley disappeared out of sight beneath some of Gesel's low fruit trees.

"Come on," snapped Arno, heading towards the small clump of trees. Cautiously Stalvey followed, treading carefully in Arno's footsteps.

"What about the other trutke ?" he whispered.

"Uh. Forgotten it. I suppose I'd better wait for daylight," Arno admitted reluctantly.

With considerable relief Stalvey turned about and led the way back to his scout, unloading the two weapons and taking back the heat rifle Arno had been using. He knocked on Gesel's door, cutting short the offers of hospitality he received, pleading work to be done back at the station. In the scout he found Arno calling up his ship and ordering a number of men to come by tractor to Gesel's and pick up the two trutke.

"Are we going back ?" he asked.

"Immediately," answered Stalvey, slipping into the pilot's compartment. He revved up the scout, turned her into the wind and taxied her forward. She had hardly parted from the ground before Arno's excited shout reached Stalvey's ears.

"The esley ! Over to port !" Glancing out of the cabin Stalvey saw the creature, a dark, sentient leaf of flesh undulating on a course which would take it deep into a patch of country covered with charas bushes and dotted with huge boulders. There was grace in the esley's movement, the grace only seen in a fish swimming in untroubled waters. Loud noises from the cabin distracted his attention to Arno.

"Where's a gun ?" he shouted desperately.

"There's only a pistol. I've got it here," replied Stalvey calmly.

"Let's have it," Arno burst into the cockpit.

Eyes set grimly ahead Stalvey said, "You couldn't hit it from here with a pistol . . ."

"Turn round. We'll get it in no time."

"Let it go. It'll die in a few days. Give it a last fly round."

There was a pause before Arno answered.

"Yes. I'll do that. Let it have a last fly round."

Stalvey looked over his shoulder at Arno, certain he meant to chase after the esley as soon as he could get one of his own planes out of the *Ark*. What baffled him most of all was the sudden way in which Arno had accepted his suggestion; possibly, knowing the creature's habits, he had seen a way of recapturing it.

The stars were paling and the meteorites a dull yellow when Stalvey's scout touched down at Gornu and taxied up to the workshop. Jisslin waved to him as he backed the plane in. Stiffly, stifling a yawn, he climbed out of the scout, watching Arno closely inspecting the surface of the wings.

"A very nice job," he said, running a finger over the skin of the ship.

"I'll come along to-morrow and fix up any details which the maintenance plan needs," said Stalvey.

"Raymer's got everything noted; if your men come over that'll be good enough."

"I'd like to check," persisted Stalvey.

"Right. See you some time in the afternoon," said Arno. "Give me a call when you're coming."

He turned about and walked across the landing field to the *Ark*, steps showing no sign of weariness. Stalvey yawned again.

"Fill her up and keep her ready," Stalvey ordered Jisslin. "I'll get some sleep."

When Stalvey woke, past midday, there had been no further sign of either the esley or the remaining trutke. Quietly Stalvey attended to the routine of the little station, receiving some help from Mulherd when he called at Doc Weythe's to see how the Guard was recovering. His afternoon interview with Arno was routine; gladly he retired to the station early, taking some unfinished personal work to pass away the evening, retiring to bed before ten thirty.

Next afternoon, feeling much brisker, he walked out to the *Ark*, armed with routine clearance papers folded in a neat parcel carried in his left hand, Guard fashion. He strode up the gangplank, making for Arno's cabin. Cheerfully he knocked on the door and walked in. As he entered Arno switched off the viscreen.

"Good afternoon. I've just received some interesting news."

Stalvey laid the package on Arno's desk.

"What is it ?"

"My Sparks has just picked up another broadcast from Gesel. The esley and the trutke are still hanging round."

Suddenly Stalvey understood why Arno had agreed to allowing the esley to go free. Gesel's little distillery, with the alcohol which had been so much

a part of the esley's life, had been too much for it to remain away.

"We'll go out there straight away and take care of the trutke. The esley won't do any harm . . ."

"Remember it set loose all my animals . . ."

"It's free itself now; that's its desire . . ."

The moment Arno's hand moved Stalvey knew it would reappear holding a gun. The snout of the pistol pointed neatly at Stalvey's stomach.

"The esley is going to be aboard the *Ark* when she leaves, or else dead." Arno moved back a couple of paces, dialling a number on his desk viscreen. To the face which appeared on it he said,

"Rear blister, align your heatrod on Stalvey as he and I leave the ship. Keep it on him until we get inside the hangar. Got it ?"

The head nodded and disappeared in a swirl of dots and lines.

"You know the way out of the ship and you heard my instructions to the gunner, Stalvey. Walk across the field normally with me and we'll get in that plane, fly to Gesel's and settle the trutke and the esley." A little motion of the pistol indicated Stalvey should start walking. Somehow he managed to talk with Arno about maintenance matters while walking to the workshop, more conscious of the heatrod pointed at his back than of the words issuing from his mouth.

In the shadow of the workshop a swift glance showed none of his men around; resignedly he climbed into the scout and taxied her out on to the field, automatically turning her into the wind and setting course for Gesel's. The diamond-shaped fields flashed past with occasionally a glitter of sunshine reflecting from a partially concealed irrigation channel or from the metal skin of a cultivator busy harvesting.

"Keep lower," ordered Arno. "No higher than a hundred feet, and don't try to take me off course. I looked at the map to figure out the best way to bring the live trutke back."

Stalvey felt as if his mind had been read without his permission. His hands went limp on the controls, suddenly conscious Arno had been one jump ahead of him for a considerable time. Forcing strength into his fingers, Stalvey gripped the controls more firmly and started to look for Gesel's little hut. It appeared out of the vegetation like a spark of silver fire, sunlight flashing on the metal roof. A deep, satisfied exhalation of breath told him Arno had spotted their destination as well.

"Land where you did last time," he ordered.

Stalvey stole a cautious look over his shoulder at Arno as he dropped the scout into a shallow glide. Before the plan had reached a conclusion in his mind he rejected it as useless; Arno might be looking at the ground below but the slightest movement Stalvey made would be noticed. Obediently the plane's nose dipped earthwards as Stalvey adjusted the controls, wheels touching down on the edge of the little clearing.

"Where to now ?" he asked as the scout rumbled over the rough ground at walking pace. He started to turn his head, instinct telling him to duck as he moved.

Instinct was too late; as he bent forward Arno's gun descended, butt first, upon his unprotected head. Lights whirled amid a vortex of searing pain in his head for an interminable second as he fell down a chasm of infinite depth to unconsciousness.

With his return to consciousness came a wild fear he had been blinded. Stalvey knew his eyes were open; he could feel the lids traversing the outer eye as he blinked rapidly. Then he discovered he was unable to move; his arms were clamped tightly to his sides and his legs seemed as dead as only severe cramp could make them. Desperately he braked his thoughts, forcing his mind to draw logical conclusions from his sensations. He realised he was bent over double; with his finger-tips he could feel the toecaps of his shoes.

Obviously, when Arno had hit him with the gun, he had fallen over the instrument panel and Arno had tied him into the pilot's seat as he lay over the controls. An experimental twitch of his arms confirmed that; now his senses had returned fully he could feel the individual bands of pressure around his body where the rope cut through his clothing.

For long minutes he probed and pulled at a knot in the cord, tied with all Arno's lifetime of circus cunning. After repeated efforts it yielded to his finger-nails, easing some of the pressure round his legs. Immediately blood rushed back through his arteries in agonising streams as his aching fingers worked at the next knot. Finally he felt himself able to move his hands away from his body and straighten up, breathing in deeply and taking pleasure in the sight of the night sky, decorated with the dying dust-meteorites against the distant back-drop of the stars and Coalsack.

Deliberately he removed his pistol from the little locker by his knee and checked it was fully loaded. Cautiously, making no hurried movement in case Arno should be watching the plane, he inched out of the cockpit into the main cabin of the scout. The doorway was open to the night, allowing the cloying sweetness of Gesel's distillery to drift in with the delicate night breeze.

A shot from the far edge of the open space, an orange flash which left a dazzling splash of colour on the retina for several seconds, blinded him. Anxiously he waited for his eyes to readjust themselves to the night, afraid any second would bring the sound of the trutke's stealthy pad to his ears, or a shot from Arno. Relieved when neither came he started to walk towards the source of the shot, identifying it as the little clump of trees behind which the esley had disappeared the other day.

Suddenly he became aware of Arno's voice; it seemed as if he were talking to himself. Puzzled, Stalvey crept towards him, almost afraid at the vicious hatred embodied in the circus owner's voice. Arno stopped talking and started whistling.

"Stop it," screamed the esley. "It's cold and you're hurting Elsie, and she's dying . . ."

"It'll be a long time before you die," promised Arno. "You're going back aboard the *Ark* with me . . ."

"No ! Leave me here. I can't ever fly in the cage . . ."

Arno's laugh obliterated the esley's words. He started whistling again.

"Give old Elsie a drink," pleaded the esley. "She's hurt and cold and the whistle . . . Stop it !" The delicate voice rose to a high-pitched scream.

"Does Elsie want a drink ?" Arno laughed again. Stalvey inched forward, nauseated as Arno poured some liquid from a flask to the ground, just beyond the esley's reach. The delicate creature edged towards it, drawing its fragile body towards the little damp patch on the ground.

"Arno !" called Stalvey icily.

He swung round, gun searing an orange sword of fire across the space between them. Stalvey dropped flat as soon as he'd spoken, realising he had made a fatal mistake in revealing his presence. Little flames from the burst of the heatgun crept along the dry stems of Gesel's trees, their tinder-dry, resinous wood smouldering and crackling wherever fire caught the bark.

"Where are you, Stalvey ?" called Arno. "Come on out."

Stalvey shuddered as a hideous roar disturbed the night.

"Doesn't matter where I am," he gulped. "Get after that trutke !"

In reply a second blast of orange light crackled towards him, intensifying the fire on the trees. Thankfully Stalvey drew in a deep breath, more than glad he was full length on his stomach. Making as little noise as possible he pulled himself behind a tree, scorching his hand on smouldering bark as he hoisted himself upright. For a second time, frightened by the fire, the trutke roared.

The flames bit deeper into the wood, setting up a continuous popping and crackling. To Stalvey's right the foliage of a tree vanished in a mild explosion, scattering red sparks over the copse. Wherever they dropped fresh red eyes of burning crackled ominously.

Grimly Stalvey stepped from his place of concealment, pistol ready, finger on the trigger. Deliberately he walked to the esley, trusting Arno would be more worried about the trutke. The flames should drive it away from the locality and give him a chance to give aid to the esley.

When he reached it he knew there was little could be done for it. A patch of its flimsy body was no more than a raw, ragged burn, souvenir of the day when Arno's shot from the heat rifle had barely missed it. The eyes were closed, the mouth open, and from the throat issued soft hoarse breaths.

Stalvey removed his shirt, folded it into a little pad and placed it beneath the esley's head. He drew a flask from his pocket and knelt beside the creature.

"Elsie," he whispered.

"Don't whistle," gasped the esley. "Elsie'll go back in her cage. Elsie'll never be naughty again . . ."

"I'm not Arno," said Stalvey. "Drink this. It'll take away the cold and the pain."

The deep blue eyes opened momentarily, clouded with pain and suspicion. A little smile chased over the lips as the esley recognised Stalvey before closing its eyes.

"Drink," urged Stalvey, gently pressing the neck of the flask to the esley's lips. It took one or two sips of the liquid before pulling its head away from the flask.

" 'S better," it murmured. "Elsie'll go back now. Elsie's sorry she's been naughty and run away . . ." Maudlin tears trickled out of the closed eyes.

"You're not going back for a long while, Elsie. You'll stay here until you get better."

"Stalvey !" rapped Arno. "Don't move," he added as Stalvey started to rise. The flames had taken a firmer hold on the trees; little streamers of fire were running up the nearby stems.

"Don't whistle," pleaded the esley as it recognised Arno's voice. "Elsie'll come back and she'll be good from now on." The blue eyes opened, pleading with Arno, suddenly widening with terror.

"Trutke !" breathed Elsie.

Startled, Stalvey glanced in the direction the esley was looking. Two green eyes, with the suggestion of a black, sleek body outlined by the fire stared intensely at the little group. While Stalvey looked the mouth opened in a silent snarl, long threads of saliva dripping from the jaws. The animal padded forward.

"Elsie can hold the trutke still, Mr. Arno. Let Stalvey kill it. Elsie's mind can do funny things."

"Yes, it can. Elsie opened the cages and let all the animals out." He laughed. "The fire's frightened the trutke a mile away by now."

"I tell you it's not," said Stalvey.

Arno pursed his lips to whistle. The esley saw the movement.

"Don't whistle, Mr. Arno," it pleaded, "otherwise Elsie can't stop the trutke and we'll all die."

Starting very low in pitch, Arno gradually increased the volume as his whistle rose up the scale.

"Stop !" begged the esley. "Elsie's telling the truth about the trutke, and she can't bear the whistle . . . Stop it !"

The esley shivered, eyes closing as a choking sob issued from its throat. The trutke roared, green eyes blazing emerald hate at the group in front of it. Arno swung round as the animal sprang, firing into its muzzle as it landed upon him, claws ripping his face and chest to a bloody mess. He screamed once; a scream of utter terror which stopped abruptly in a gurgle. As his body and the trutke hit the ground Stalvey pumped a second shot into the beast's head. Sickened he walked towards Arno and the animal, a brief examination convincing him Arno was dead.

"Give Elsie a drink," muttered a voice, distant and sounding like fairy bells.

Stalvey hurried to the esley, knowing as soon as he touched the flesh the creature was dead. He coughed, suddenly realising flames had encircled him. Somewhere in the copse another bunch of foliage exploded.

"Stalvey !"

He stood still listening for the caller to repeat his name.

"Stalvey !" It was Gesel's voice, and it came from the left. Ignoring minor burns and scratches he dashed through the burning trees, thankful to be suddenly in the cool night air. Gesel, heat rifle in hand, came running towards him.

"What's happened ?" he demanded. "I heard the trutke . . ."

"It's dead. Take me inside, will you ? I want to call up the *Ark* and tell Raymer . . ."

"He's on his way. I got on to him as soon as I heard the trutke roaring."

Stalvey glanced towards Gornu. Against the pattern of the golden meteorites the shape of a plane became visible. As it slipped down to the field Stalvey walked thankfully towards it.

THE END

Other races in other galaxies would very naturally have evolved different ways of life; different living standards. Who is to say that Earth standards are correct?

NOT AS WE ARE

by E. R. JAMES

Illustrated by HUNTER

Colin was trying to concentrate.

A murmurous scurry of activity echoed up from below and to the rear as the old space ship was tightened into take off trim.

Upon the "Summary of Activity" panel, lights glimmered as crew members reported in their readiness. Colin checked the numbers of the lights against the dog-eared operating instructions, sometimes leafing through the "Repair and Replacements" log when lights failed to shine. The ex-owner captain had known too much about his ship to bother over entering up such modernisation as had been carried out. That made it all the worse for a stranger.

Radio room put through the expected, but overdue, call from the local port inspector. Ship passed for passenger conveyance, now that the required repairs and alterations had been completed. Necessary papers on the way over. Would Captain Colin Ruskin sign and return copies for file?

Colin sighed. He put down his pencil. Captain Colin Ruskin . . . He looked up at the strange night stars of the planet. Captain! His first command. He had passed the Board of Space Trade examination three Earth years before, but ships were scarce. He and Brocky had signed on as engineers in that lonely space station . . . as the next best thing.

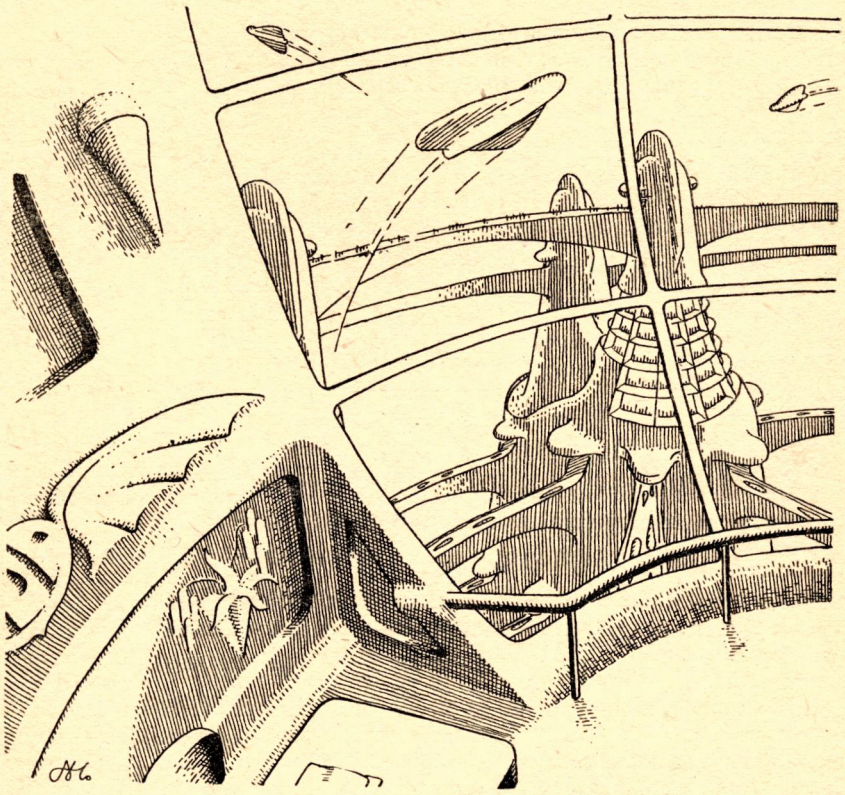
Fission it! But a lot of things had happened since then. Brocky's full name—Marmaduke Fleming Brockhurst—was even now being tossed back and forth between here and Earth with the possibility of a fat gratuity for services to humanity in the offing.

Brocky. Colin walked over to the observation window. Down there on the desert, Brocky stood talking to a knot of odd-appearing people. There was no mistaking the unruly black waves of that hair, the prominent ears and nose, those bushy eyebrows, and in particular the eloquent gestures of the hands and arms. Brocky. Colin grinned. He would miss the irrepressible twinkle of eye and mocking curl of lip of his mate.

Yes, even though there would be compensations back on Earth—even though there would be none of the contradictions and crazy uncertainties of the space frontier—even though there was Marylin waiting . . .

Distant, kindly Earth——

Well, this sort of mooning wouldn't speed the blast off. He turned with a sigh to the winking lights of the control panels. Soon now, his first officer



would have finished briefing the passengers and would be coming in to assist in the tricky business of taking this antique ship, *The Chesterfield*, on its home trip.

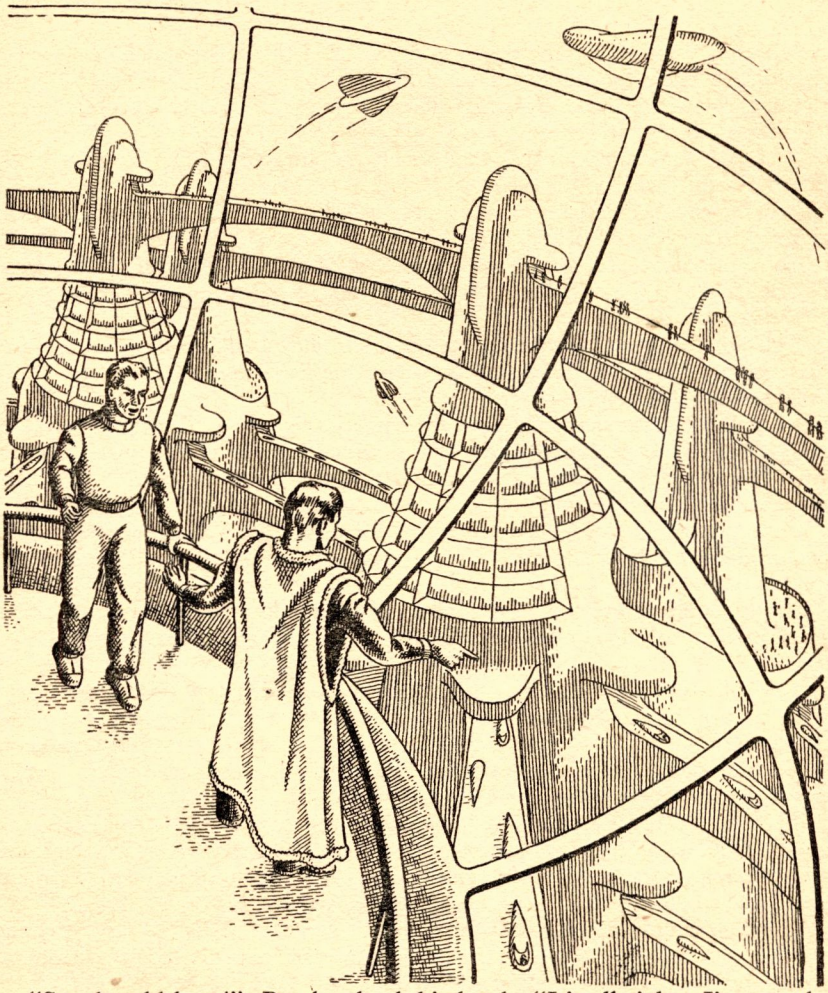
Ten minutes later the door crashed open. Colin turned expectantly, then stared.

"What-o !" said Brocky gaily.

Colin swallowed. Following Brocky into the Control came a most odd procession of apparently most ordinary humans. A man in black, carrying a ledger, came first. A woman with a brief case chained to her wrist, a girl in overalls—strikingly beautiful in spite of her severely cropped hair—a man with a black bag, a man with clean but stained overalls, a plump woman of uncertain age, a man and woman together in brown, and . . . But that was all.

The man with the ledger held up his hand, and they halted, still in the same order and looked about themselves like—a crocodile of schoolchildren taken into a museum, decided Colin.

He started nervously. "Brocky ! These are the people from—from that planet you told me about. You—you brought them on board after what I told you. Do you want me to be grounded ? I've one hundred and sixteen passengers and thirty-two crewmen, the maximum allowed me. I won't——"



"Steady, old boy !" Brocky shook his head. "It's all right. I've not the least desire to alter your decision."

"Eh ?" Colin stared at him blankly. He glanced into the eight pairs of eyes watching him in awe. He glared at Brocky suspiciously.

Brocky lighted a cigar with nonchalant care. He glanced at his watch. "You do not leave for thirty minutes. And these ladies and gentlemen from Gen IV have never seen a ship as big as this. I'm sure you cannot object to my—er—showing them around ?"

"What ? But Brocky——"

Colin was going to point out how unsuitable was the period before take off for sightseeing, but the radio buzzed insistently.

"Excuse me," he said irritably. As though he hadn't enough on his hands . . .

It was the port authorities. There was some snag over the clearance

certificate. Would he come over at once so that the papers could be signed for him to clear the planet as scheduled ?

Colin closed his eyes. The first officer strode in. Colin waved him over. "Finish checking, will you ?"

The man nodded, looked incuriously at the visitors, slid with easy familiarity into the control seat.

Brocky caught Colin's arm. Notes rustled into Colin's hand. "All right ?" murmured Brocky.

Colin hesitated. He was desperately short of money. Nothing in the way of credits was to be despised. "Oh, very well."

He ran for the door.

The port authorities were most helpful. They had heard a rumour he was conveying alien animal life amongst the passenger's baggage. They took his word that he wasn't.

As he left the atmosphere flier at the edge of the spacefield, Brocky hurried up. They shook hands. Brocky smiled broadly. "Be seeing you—just as soon as I get my hands on that gratuity they've promised me. We'll shake old Earth on its orbit, eh ?"

Colin, harassed, torn between desire for Earth and Marylin and regret over narrowing horizons and loss of Brocky's company, said something inadequate.

His first officer greeted him coolly. Colin made a rapid check of ship, requested and got final clearance, and the rockets thundered.

Take off went like a dream of smoothness. At ninety thousand miles, they were approaching maximum initial velocity. Colin felt washed out, but triumphant. The old ship was in better shape than he'd ever known her.

He had just given orders to relax crew and to set space routine going, when the door of Control opened unexpectedly.

The man with the ledger was followed by the woman with the brief case, and at regular intervals followed . . . the beautiful girl in overalls, the man with the black bag, the man in stained overalls, the plump woman, the man and the woman together, and . . . No, that was all.

The leader of the procession held up his hand. All halted. All looked around and then stared at Colin. The leader opened his ledger. From a pocket in the cover he took a folded note.

"From your partner," he said.

Colin took it dazedly. He could almost hear Brocky's cheery voice mocking him as he read. "Sorry, old pal. But I simply had to do it. Confoundedly short of credits. I gave you half, and tipped your First O. Everything went all right, just as I said, didn't it ? Everyone happy. See you soon. —Brocky."

"The devil !" Colin went cold. He went hot. He felt as though he would explode. He swung around on the First Officer. "You—you—What in Novas d'you mean by aiding that fool to break space regs ?"

"But——" The man stared in surprise. "But Captain, I heard you say it was all right . . ."

Colin smote his forehead. "Great Galaxies !" he murmured. The inimitable Brocky had even cinched it by paying him off in the presence of his second-in-command.

Just like the old swindler . . .

Colin concentrated. Renovations to the old ship had been so expensive that, if he used fuel to return, he would lack cash to build up the regulation safety margin, and would be grounded. He was stuck with these Genians. "Take them into the hospital ward," he ordered the First O. "Make arrangements for food to be sent in to them." He frowned. "Lock them in. We'll spring them on the rest after a sleep period and say we picked them up off a space wreck."

"No need for food," said the Gen leader. "We are self-contained. We have our own cook and supplies."

"Oh !" Colin boggled.

As the Genians marched off like a squad on parade, he started off by wondering if they were a fair sample of their race, but ended with sudden speculations—as the overalled girl looked back at him—of a nature that made him think guiltily of the far-away Marylin and of his present responsible position.

Routine of the long space voyage, non-stop to Earth, pushed all thoughts of the Genians to the back of his mind. When, at the beginning of the third rest period, the steward interrupted his disrobing to say that a passenger wished to see him, he had forgotten the uninvited guests.

"I'm Professor Vetch." The passenger introduced himself and began to bow but straightened and looked at the steward.

Colin nodded. "Thank you." He dismissed his crewman.

As the cabin door closed, Vetch caught Colin by the arm. His emaciated white face was lit with the intent glare of his eyes. His white hair, long and straggling, contrasted with his ill-fitting, but new clothes. "Captain, there's a Genian woman on board. One of the high-up engineers. I'm sure of it !"

"What ?" Colin started. "How d'you know ?"

"I saw her, going up on to the observation deck with one of your officers . . ."

"Oh, you did." Colin stiffened. So the First Officer was flouting his orders, was he ?

Vetch stepped back in sudden alarm. "You knew she was on board ?"

"Y-e-es," admitted Colin. "They stowed away, with the help——" He hesitated. "But how is it you know her ?"

"Er—I was captive on Gen for a long time after . . ."

"After ? After what ?"

"A—A— A wreck. Yes, a wreck." Vetch suddenly smiled. His entire body seemed to lose its tenseness, to smile. "You said . . ." He paused. "Er—did a Mr. Brockhurst help them on board ?"

"Why d'you say that ?" Colin frowned. "I think you know a lot more than you are telling me. What is all this ?"

"Nothing." Vetch waved a skinny hand. "Nothing at all, Captain. You—— I—— I'll make a bargain with you. You forget I came to see you; and I'll make no trouble about the presence of these people."

"What ! You'd blackmail me ?"

Colin took a deep breath. Vetch continued to smile. Colin remembered that this man had been one of the first to book passage. The fellow had been quite pathetic. Ships going straight through to Earth were rare this far out. Colin realised the man had not paid his fare. Now this !

"All right," he said heavily.

He put his jacket back on, and strode up through the darkened ship. Two dim figures, half-way along the observation deck, swivelled around as he flung open the hatch which had been closed for the sleeping period.

"Captain Ruskin !" gasped the voice of his First O.

Colin strode forward furiously. "Get to your quarters. I'll deal with you later !"

"Yes, sir."

As he left, Colin stood still and his eyes became more accustomed to the half-light. The wide eyes of the girl caught his attention wholly. The softness of her young shape, the straightness of her back and limbs, the shining texture of her hair infiltrated through his rage. He tried to think of what he had intended to say.

"You must go back to your quarters," he said slowly.

She smiled apologetically, yet with a curious mixture of nerves and indifference that seemed to have nothing to do with his arrival. "I meant no harm, Captain. Everyone was asleep."

"Not everyone."

"Not ev——" She caught her breath. "Oh, you mean yourself . . .?"

"Never mind what I mean !" he said with an attempt at self-assertion. "You——"

"Please . . ." Her eyes seemed to engulf him.

He swallowed hard, stiffened. "Er— We'll have you and your friends out of that ward to-morrow." He paused. He hadn't meant to say that. "Is— Will that be all right ?"

All right . . .? In the days that followed the Genians' release, his torment increased. She requested, in her devastatingly anxious, yet impersonal way, that her party be permitted to take their meals in the first class saloon. Struggling against her increasing power over him, he agreed against his better judgment but only after having a separate table fixed in.

He suffered a physical torment lest she cared nothing for him—and an increasing conflict with his conscience lest she did. Only under great stress did he continue running the ship. And, in that tiny, enclosed world surrounded by the immensity of the Galaxy, he knew that his every action was watched. Because he tightened discipline, nothing was said to him, but he knew too well of the joking speculations amongst his crew.

"Sir," said the steward nervously, one day weeks out in space, "that Professor Vetch is behaving most queer. He never leaves his cabin—and I get a smell like a hen-coop when I hand in his grub through the serving hatch."

"Oh ?" Colin shut his complaints book with an angry snap. Dismissing the mustered crew to their daily duties, he motioned to the steward to follow.

This was what came of being kind—of taking on board a dubious old fogey.

He rapped on the cabin door.

"Go away !" piped Vetch's querulous tones. "I wish only to be left alone."

"This is the Captain !"

"Eh ?" The service hatch opened. Old eyes glared out suspiciously. "Oh. What is it, Captain ?"

"I——" Colin wrinkled his nose. The smell was like a chicken coop. With a shock of dismay he recalled the hold-up just prior to departure.

Was there alien animal life on board ? "What the devil have you got in there, sir ?"

"Nothing, Captain——"

"Open this door. At once. Or I'll have it broken down and yourself clapped in irons !"

The bolt slid back. Colin pushed in past the protesting old man. He was aware that the steward held back, and he had his own hand upon the pistol at his belt.

He stopped in amazement. Half of the cabin had been fenced off with all kinds of furniture.

Three extraordinary birds turned their heavy bills to stare, unblinking, at him. Speechless, he glanced at Vetch, who shrugged. He heard the steward snicker. "Come in, and shut the door !" he snarled.

One of the birds waddled forward on its short legs, made a gobbling sound and wagged its stumpy tail. The other two seemed to come to a laboured decision, spread ridiculously small wings—covered with inadequately downy feathers—and made the best speed their misshapen bodies allowed to catch up with their fellow. All gobbled stupidly and wagged their tails.

The steward chuckled.

Colin glared at him. "Shut up !"

"You old scoundrel !" he growled at Vetch. "You come on board my ship on credit—and abuse my trust by bringing on board alien . . . birds !"

"Birds !" gasped the steward faintly.

Colin seized the man's collar. "You won't think it so funny if they've brought some unknown disease on board, you idiot !"

"Captain," protested Vetch, "but they're not alien . . ."

"No ? Then where did you get them ?"

"I stole them from the planet Gen——"

"From Gen IV ?" Colin hesitated in surprise. "Not alien ? Then, what are they, in the name of the Galaxy ?"

"Dodoes."

"Dodoes ? But—they're extinct Earth birds. You're crazy !"

"Not at all. Do you know anything at all about the founder of the human race on Gen IV ?"

"No," said Colin grimly. "But I'm listening."

"You've never heard of Harel Kinker ?" asked the old man incredulously.

Colin shook his head.

Vetch muttered in his white beard. "Hinker," he said slowly, "was the greatest of all the Geneticians. Besides much pioneer work of his own, he correlated all the discoveries made since Darwin and Mendel. He was . . . in advance of his times, you might say. He offered the knowledge he had gained to the authorities of Earth, free of all strings, save one. He wanted to be given control of all human births—so that he might make our descendants a race of gods by selective breeding."

Colin nodded. He remembered his history now. "That's right. When public opinion called him a charlatan, he took passage in an obscure ship full of other malcontents and disappeared somewhere beyond the space frontier."

"Blasted good job, too," said the steward fervently. "Nobody's going to tell me I can't snuggle up to any skirt I fancy !"

"But," said Colin thoughtfully, "what has all that got to do with these silly-looking birds ?"

"Everything," said Vetch very seriously. "You see, the expanding frontier has caught up with the planet on which Hinker's party settled. These birds are the proof."

"So what ?" asked Colin blankly. "Always supposing you are right . . ."

"Supposing ! Heavens, man, I am right. There is the possibility of any kind of life reverting back to any older species, or jumping over to any parallel species, or making any new species, but the chances of such perfection as these birds is so small as to be discounted. Only Hinker could have bred dodoes !"

"But—what of it ?"

"Oh !" Vetch spread his spidery hands and lifted them towards the ceiling. "You are like those stupid officials I've met. Only Mr. Brockhurst understood . . ."

"Brocky ! What's he to do with all this ?"

"Eh ? Oh. Well . . . He suggested I should go straight back to the Central Government. He——"

"I know. He said you could persuade me to take you and your chickens——"

"Dodoes, Captain. They're excellent to eat. Like turkeys——"

"All right !"

The steward snickered.

Colin swung on him. "As for you !" He suddenly glanced up at the emergency locker of the cabin and he smiled. "As for you," he murmured, "you are relieved of your duties from this moment. Open that locker."

"Yes, sir." The man jumped to obey.

Colin took the bunch of master keys from the man's hand. "You will remain here to look after Professor Vetch and his valuable birds. There is ample food in that locker for the remainder of the trip. Ample——" He glanced down at the steward's comfortable waistline. "——but frugal. And— heaven help you if a bird should die—or if anyone else on board should even guess at their presence."

Colin looked at the Professor. "Does that arrangement suit you ?"

"Admirably, Captain."

"But—— !" gasped the steward.

Colin held up his hand. He turned on his heel, and locked the door of the cabin from the outside.

It was a pity he could not dispose of the problem of the human Genians so easily.

On the way up to Control, he was met by the overalled girl. "Please, Captain, I must speak to you. Privately."

"Certainly." The word committed him to listen to her before he had time to be cautious. He followed her dazedly and found himself in his own cabin, alone with her, while he was still trying to erect mental defences against her attraction for him.

She smiled. He trembled.

Her hand took his arm. She sat him in his own chair. "There is something

I want you to do for us—er—for me." Her fingers, long and supple, brushed his hand. "I want you to order your First Engineer to come back with us to our Planet."

"Eh ?" Colin's thoughts swam into a focus on her words. "What ? But—I—I'm afraid that's not in my power."

"But, Colin, you are the Captain, aren't you ?"

Colin ! She'd not called him that before . . . "Eh ? Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't hear you too well . . . Er— I'm afraid I've no authority to make him do anything outside this ship."

"You haven't ?" she asked blankly. "Oh. But as long as we're on board, your word is law, isn't it ?"

"Yes . . ." he said cautiously.

She stood up gracefully. "Then . . ." She looked down at him as though arranging her thoughts. "Colin, why don't you call me by my name ?"

"Your . . . name ?"

"Yes. See ! It is here on the breast pocket of my overall." She indicated the pocket.

He stared. Stencilled on the pocket were the numbers 91. "Your name ?" he gasped. "You're called Ninety-one ?"

"Of course." She frowned in bewilderment. "Didn't you know ?"

"No—" He swallowed. "But haven't you any other name ?"

"Only Jeena, and you won't want to call me that."

"Jeena ?"

"Yes, short for Engineer, you know. Or didn't you ?"

"I didn't. Jeena . . ."

"How quaint ! All right. Call me Jeena, if you wish. It does sound less like a rank and more like a name when you say it."

Colin closed his eyes.

Her hand closed over his. "Colin," she murmured, her voice low but maddeningly dispassionate. "Colin, you could turn the ship around and go straight back to Gen IV, couldn't you ?"

"What !" His blood ran cold. "But Jeena— I've contracted to take all these passengers back to Earth . . . I— No ! You can't expect me to do that for you. No !"

"But Colin . . . Colin, I know that there is enough fuel. I am an engineer. With your reserve, you could manage it easily. You could refuel on Gen IV and——"

"No ! No ! I——"

A knock on the door brought Colin guiltily to his feet. "Come in !" he called. Never before had he been so glad to see his First Officer.

After that the voyage seemed uneventful. Although Jeena never mentioned her proposition again, and seemed to hold no malice against him for his refusal to agree to it, he was thankful to see Sol blazing her light into the old, much-travelled *Chesterfield.*

And yet—he was sorry in spite of himself. All his problems seemed to resolve themselves. The Genians approached him *en masse* as the ship swung into a landing orbit. "We understand," said the leader, "that you are short of money to pay off your crew."

He remembered having mentioned that much to Jeena. She was so easy

to talk to. "Yes," he admitted.

The leader motioned to those two of his followers who walked together. They sprang forward to place chairs around Colin's table. The leader spread out a document before Colin. The woman with the brief case took out bundles of credit notes. Jeena smiled with her baffling mixture of friendliness and reserve.

Colin picked up the document. Bill of Sale. Half as much again as he had hoped to realise for the *Chesterfield*. "You're serious ?"

"Of course." The leader motioned to the man with the black bag. This gentleman took out certain medical apparatus and, to Colin's amazement tested both the leader and Colin himself for sanity. "You wish to check legality of this document by having your ship's doctor confirm my findings?"

"Eh ?" gasped Colin.

The Genian doctor pointed to the card on which he had listed his findings. "There is no question, of course, of my colleague's fitness, but your own co-ordination and mental stability—although you have an astounding range of mental activity—is only that of the two Genian menials we have in our party."

"It is ?" Somewhat grimly, Colin signed his name.

Jeena left with the others without a backward glance. He saw her only at meals and, briefly, during the landing formalities. The Genian leader registered the sale in space—sale of Terrestrial ships less than three months out from Earth being forbidden to outsiders—of the *Chesterfield* and left without saying farewell.

Colin was called into the Customs building over Professor Vetch. "We wish," said an official, "for you to confirm that this passenger on your ship has come from beyond the limits of official colonisation."

"Yes, he has. I——"

"Thank you. Sign here, if this declaration is correct."

Colin signed. He walked out with Vetch. "What about the Dodoes—is that all the trouble you've had ?"

"Sssh !" Vetch looked around nervously. "They are registered as Hinker's turkeys. You weren't called in about them. I have—er—other items in my luggage which, although harmless in themselves, are by-products of scientific work not permitted by law, except under proper supervision."

"Stars !" breathed Colin. To think he had been carrying such stuff on the *Chesterfield* !

The business of the voyage was almost over now, however, and he rushed the few remaining matters to their end.

Escaping at last into the nearby City, he was so enthralled by the wonder of the buildings and myriad, teeming life, that he rode a moving pavement to the West End, letting the nostalgia of far travellers soak up the half-forgotten atmosphere of the hub of the Universe.

Earth ! He remembered Marylin with a guilty start. An aircab took him to the transworld airfield. From the evening rocket he looked back at the receding City. And it seemed that a chapter of his life had closed. Frontier planets, Brocky, mysterious girls of space, all were behind him, now.

The 6 p.m. landing on the other side of the world—the rocket beating the sun—was made on schedule. Colin hired a fly-yourself aircar.

His rancher father nearly fell off a cultivator as Colin swooped down and

waved. Colin put aside his intention of making Marylin's home his first stop, and landed.

Greetings over, they headed for the house.

"Son," said Ruskin Senior, "you were flying straight over . . ." Colin admitted as much, but his father interrupted. "She's married, son. I sent a radiogram to the Space Station. Didn't you get it ?"

Colin stared. Suddenly he smiled. Then he remembered himself, and tried to say something appropriate. But his father was not fooled. Most of the story was out by the time they reached the house.

It was a hilarious evening. The entire house went crazy. Neighbours came over. The intermixed nationalities of a united world made whoopee.

Early in the morning Colin was on his way back. Jeena first stop. Or so he thought. The Bureau of Aliens had lost track of the Genians. He had some difficulty in leaving the building. The matter had already been handed over to the Space Investigation Bureau.

Colin tried to track her himself from the Spaceport. The authorities there were trying to help when a clerk recalled a parcel left for a Captain Colin Ruskin.

It was a large box, left by a Professor Vetch. Marked upon the side were instructions for feeding three times a day.

As soon as Colin admitted it was his, he was arrested. The plain-clothes spacecop escorted him to the Bureau of Extra-Terrestrial Control. He was shown the stupid bird left for him—as payment, he gathered, for Vetch's passage. "You are charged with being in possession of fauna not of Earth."

He chafed in the air-conditioned cell all that night. Early the following morning, he received a visitor. The man, unknown to Colin, waited until they were alone, then narrowed his eyes.

"I come from the party of Nine-one. If you wish to see her again, I have money to stand your bail."

"You——" Colin's heart pounded. He stared at his visitor suspiciously. "You're an Earthman, aren't you ?"

"Yes. What of it ? Surely you aren't on the side of the law when you've been slammed summarily into jail ?"

"The law . . ." Colin debated the situation in his mind. If the Space Investigators were on the job, then there was something more in the wind than Dodoes and crackpot professors. Although there was no single item on which he could put his finger, the chain of events Brocky had touched off with his stowaways seemed to have some cosmic significance. Or did it ? He scratched his chin. "What is all this about, anyway ?"

"What do I care ?" said his visitor with a warning glance at the guard close to the cell door. "Make up your mind, pal. I begin to find the air in here oppressive."

"All right," agreed Colin dubiously.

His visitor beckoned the guard. Ten minutes later they were in the street. Twenty minutes later they were in a fast jet slicing up into the stratosphere. "We're being followed," said Colin's escort.

Hurtling up through the lower flying levels into the no-speed-limit heights, after them, was a grey rocket job. Coincidence, thought Colin an hour later as the rocket began to dive earthward. But his escort pointed with a grin to a black, dart-like jet away to the right. "But don't you worry,

pal. The Gens look after those that help them. I've got a grand little nest egg tucked away—and you'll be the same. It'll all be planned out." He lit a cigarette, puffing scented smoke. "Ask no questions. Do whatever you're told. Dead easy. Money for jam !"

"Oh ?" Colin stared moodily down through the cloud masses far below at the advancing tide of night upon the face of Earth.

The second pilot came back from the cockpit. You'll be going down by parachute. Fourteen minutes to go." He stared at Colin. "Been in an ejector seat before ?"

"I'm a spaceman."

"Spaceman—eh ? Kids stuff to you, then !"

The ejector seat kicked up, free of the aircraft. Cabin lights fell away below them and crept forward into the Earth's shadow as the thin air robbed the enclosed pressurised seat of velocity.

Colin took a deep breath as they went into free fall in the whistling darkness. Seconds passed slowly and then the pilot 'chute cracked open above them and nylon cords flapped out to support the triple, unseen mushrooms above them.

The long descent ended in soft sand. Colin's escort lit a flare. A helicopter picked them up. In the dark hollow between hills, they were set down. Colin was handed a pair of curious spectacles. Putting them on, he found he could see.

From the hills, lamps gave off light normally beyond the human vision range. All around the hollow, untidy piles of gauzy material seemed to have been dumped anyhow. Men, many of them in uniforms or overalls such as worn by the Genians he had already seen, moved in what seemed curiously mechanical haste, planned and purposeful. And, in the centre of the hollow, high and gleaming in the strange glow, a giant rocket, a stellar rocket, stood upon its guideway.

A hand touched Colin's arm, and he realised he had stopped in his astonishment. He followed his escort with slow feet but racing thoughts. The ropes he stepped over, the piles of gauze all around—these things were remnants of hastily dismantled camouflage. But—— Brocky had said the Genians had not seen a big rocket before boarding the *Chesterfield* . . .

In a bubble-building, luxuriously furnished, the familiar Genian leader turned on their entry. "Ah, Captain Ruskin."

Colin nodded to him, and turned as Jeena stepped gracefully towards him. She smiled. "I am so glad you have decided to become one of us.

"Eh ?"

"If you had only told us you were a first-rate engineer——"

"What ?"

"Now, Captain," said the Genian leader, "I present you to the High Organiser for Earth."

Colin gaped as a man, seemingly the centre of activity within the bubble-building, turned piercing eyes upon him. He took in the richness of the man's purple robe, its ermine trimmings and gold insignia, and licked his lips.

"Bow, Earthman. Bow to the representative of the Great Gen. Bow !"

"Bow ? Like hell I will !"

The leader made an impatient motion with one white hand. Colin choked

as powerful arms grasped him, bending his back. "Hey !"

"Silence, Earthman ! Remember your haphazard ancestors——"

"Haphazard . . ." Colin, straightening, rubbed the pain from his strained muscles.

Jeena caught his arm. He dragged it free. She took his hand gently. "Please . . ." she begged. Grimly, he allowed himself to be drawn away, backwards, from the Presence.

Two brawny men, naked to the waist, followed closely. Colin looked desperately for his escort, but the man had gone. He bottled up his fury. No use to protest against what was now to come.

Jeena led him towards the rocket. He stared around him and his alarm grew. There was something soulless about the activity here. His two, half-naked guards marched like robots. Even Jeena, walking beside him, seemed unreal. She had, he remembered, hardly ever spoken to him except to answer questions, or to a definite purpose, and she had refused to be drawn about her own life on Gen IV. What was life like on Gen IV ? On the *Chesterfield* it hadn't seemed to matter, but in this atmosphere—this alien atmosphere—even his feelings for her were blotted out with the one query.

As they entered the ship, as they walked along its companion-ways amongst machinery much of which was unfamiliar to him, as they entered the luxurious cabin in which servants—such as the pair with the party on the *Chesterfield* had been—backed respectfully away, he felt his spirits sinking.

It was no wonder, he thought, how alarmed Professor Vetch had been to find a Genian woman on the *Chesterfield*. This explained, too, why the Professor had kept to his cabin for the entire flight.

Jeena Nine-one smiled. "You are amazed at our rocket, Colin. But wait until we land on Gen IV." Her eyes lit up. "There you will see the wonders we have created upon what was once an unfriendly planet !"

"If we get there," growled Colin. "You forget the Space Patrol."

"No . . ." She chuckled like a peal of little silvery bells. "We forget nothing. We have devices which will baffle all your antiquated radarscopes. Even, if by any chance, we should be discovered and attacked, we have a weapon the like of which you have never seen. Do not fear. We will not be delayed."

Colin licked his lips. His hands clenched. He stared in baffled bewilderment into the beautiful face so close to his own.

Suddenly, impulsively, he caught her into a tight embrace, kissing her lips with desperate violence. For an instant she was like wax in his arms, then her arms crept around his neck.

"It is good," she murmured.

He let her go suddenly. "Why ?"

"Because now I can belong to you. I have been so uncertain. You are not like us. You are so strange. I have seen you do so many things. I did not think you relaxed as we do."

"Relax . . . as you do . . ." Colin took a pace back.

She watched him in bewilderment. "Now you are being strange again."

"I am ? You say I am being strange ! I'm not. I'm being myself."

"But you are not being rational !"

"Certainly I am !" He panted with the fury of his conflicting emotions. "I am being absolutely normal. My reactions are easily explained scientifically. I don't understand you. I am attracted to you. I frighten myself. I therefore leave you alone. And . . . I'm going to go on leaving you alone, d'you understand ?"

Her reproachful eyes seemed to follow him around during the long trip. His freedom was almost absolute. She answered his queries regarding the ship and its machines, and regarding what had happened without reserve, but volunteered nothing regarding their destination, and he did not permit his own curiosity to show.

He examined the anti-radar apparatus that could bend radio, light, sound or other vibration-like waves around the ship—as light waves are bent by the edge of a more solid surface. He explored the ship's marvellous drive machinery. He examined the mechanisms of the disruptor cannon. He exhausted all outlets for his burning energy.

She replied to his other questions in obvious sincerity. Earth scientists, though so comparatively unorganised and haphazard, had happened upon a principle which had baffled Genian specialists. The answer to the direct conversion of atomic power into electricity was, indeed, so unexpected that orthodox experiments might never have found it.

"So Earth did beat your—your friends in one respect at least," he growled.

She nodded. "Yes . . ." Her tone, however, expressed no admiration, only a rather mocking contempt. "And it is a useful contribution to science. We could, once the atomic magnetism principle was recognised, have developed the motors far more quickly than Earthmen did, but we chose rather to speed our advance by buying an example."

In order Earth should continue unaware of the Genian power, her party had been formed to make the purchase. It had been found impracticable to trust Earthmen representatives with huge sums of money, and besides Earth authorities did not care to deal with individuals of no standing.

It was necessary to reach Earth without using their own, so-advanced rockets. Hence the voyage in the *Chesterfield*. The purchase had been completed just in time, fortunately. A law had been tightened to enable Earth investigators to check on purchasers of new, or dangerous equipment.

The leader of her expedition had bought the *Chesterfield* as a clever stroke to throw off attention from the real method of return transport.

She smiled at the memory. "Only a specialist—a man trained to intrigue from birth—could have thought of such an action. Don't you see that ?"

"Trained from birth—not literally ?"

"Why not ? He was bred for his position in our perfect civilisation. Just as I was. Just as you would have been, if you'd been lucky enough to have been one of us. You——"

"Yes," he interrupted. "Me ?" He felt sick at having to listen to her tone of sympathy over his birth. His father had been wonderful. Most farmer parents wanted their sons to stick to the land. "Me," he repeated. "How do I come into all this ?"

"You will erect and demonstrate the convertor of atomic fission power to electrical power," she said flatly. It was, apparently, an honour. He was lucky that they had been able to find him so easily.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

Her eyes reproached him for his tone. "It was simple."

He listened in bewilderment as she said there had been a report in all the papers and over the telenews that he had been arrested on the morning of the *Chesterfield's* landing. On the morning of the landing . . . But, he reflected to himself, he had not been arrested until the following morning. Some newshound's error, he supposed.

Her voice went on softly. The reports had mentioned his excellent record

in the Science University, and his work upon the principle in which they were interested. "How fortunate it was," she ended. "We had not been able to persuade any other reputable engineer to come to Gen IV with us. And we did not wish to resort to force. Kidnapping of key men stimulates backward civilisations so much, as we have found on other occasions."

"Other occasions ?"

"Yes. Perhaps you remember the disappearance of a Professor Vetch ?"

"I've been in space for the last few years," he said thoughtfully.

She smiled with the candour of a child. "Then what's happened is doubly lucky. I'm so glad those reports were put in the newscasts."

"Huh," he said.

That "day," however, the smooth serving of their main meal was interrupted by a sudden clamour of bells. While the great ship woke to immediate activity, Jeena led him up to a blister observatory where several other Genians lounged at ease.

"What is it ?" he asked, faintly hopeful.

She shook her head. "Quiet. Only those of high rank are permitted here. See !" she breathed. "The Great Gen of this ship, himself, has come."

Colin glared at the newcomer. Similarly dressed to the Great Gen on Earth, the gaudy figure stared at him unemotionally.

"Bow !" whispered Jeena frantically.

A member of the Great Gen's retinue made a motion with one hand. Colin glimpsed two half-naked men running towards him. He bowed his head.

The Great Gen smiled faintly, and looked up into the starry wilderness above them.

Colin followed the man's gaze. Pin-prick lights—navigation lights—were moving swiftly against the brilliance of remote stars. A ship. A big ship. With a cluster of smaller craft out to screen its advance. A warship. Not less than a cruiser. Colin caught his breath.

But could it be a craft of the Space Patrol ? He looked at the Gens, wondering at their idle attention. Surely it must be one of their own kind. They were so indifferent.

Soon the narrowing space between cruiser and the Gen ship must be such that they must surely see one another. The Great Gen tensed. A murmur of comment fled around the assembly. Silence—so complete as to be oppressive—blanketed the entire ship.

Colin felt sweat run down his face. All at once he noticed small television screens picturing rapid, machine-like activity of Genians around ominous sections of their apparatus. He wanted, suddenly, to call out—to warn the cruiser. But that was crazy !

A sharp crackle of space static spat from a tiny speaker. A voice filled the blister with its urgency. "PQ 5 to Base. Unidentified ship sighted. Am closing in to investigate——"

Upon the lighted screens, all motion had ceased. Men stood like statues, save for one, who crouched beside telesights while blue fire danced within the heart of the weapon before him.

Then the blackness of space was rent like a torn curtain. The Gen ship quivered with the recoil. Colin, blinded momentarily, moaned with physical revulsion.

As Jeena led him away, he suddenly caught her arm. "They did not see us. We could have easily changed our course a degree or two . . . and passed them !"

"Colin ! You're hurting me !"

"What ?" He glared at her contorted features. "Oh, your arm——"

"Colin !" She ran after him. "But to change our course would have meant wasting time . . ."

"Wasting time !"

He brooded on what he had seen until Gen IV was swelling before them, as they came in like a thief out of the night. In spite of everything, however, he could not but envy the inhumanly smooth handling of the great rocket. It might not be natural for men to be so content with their particular stations in life, but breeding and training had made them perfect, he had to admit. Anyone who had been in charge of men must have dreamed, some time or other, of such unfaltering precision, such pride in what were often apparently dull routines.

Gen IV grew like a vast, green balloon, flecked with white, half-lit, until it filled the sky and they no longer seemed to approach it, but instead to descend upon its increasingly detailed surface.

A City—a giant place of uniformly conical shape—appeared below and grew.

The ship floated down to its berth beside it. Not even the most advanced mechanisms of Earth could have performed the operation so smoothly, reflected Colin. After all, the human brain was still supreme—and the Genian techniques seemed to have eliminated human fallibility.

He entered the City expecting marvels, but was still capable of being surprised. Earth cities, even the most modern, the most carefully planned, were not like this. On Earth, human beings fought for the right to personal choice, to individuality; here the dominating influence was the—the hive ! Bees— This was like a great hive. All the discoveries of the atomic age were here, subordinated to the hive. All the varieties of men were here, too, working on level after level, in factories deep within the walls, or in hydroponic gardens or pleasure houses in the walls themselves or deep underground. Here everyone knew where he was going, what he wanted to do, because he had been bred to the life, as well as trained to it.

He had been led to believe that such a state of affairs—such perfect socialism—would be unhappy, full of malcontents. But it was not so. His acceptance of the situation was taken for granted apparently, for he was given a squad of men and permitted to supervise the unloading of the rocket's cargo.

The work took far less time than any comparable task on Earth or Earth colonies. His part was reduced to a minimum of commands. The men at his disposal sang to the rhythm of the machines.

He half-envied them. Here was heaven on earth—perfect contentment.

Because there was nothing else possible, he worked as directed. He began to hate the brightly clad minor engineers and mechanics about him. Jeena, in her element, listened to him, sometimes corrected him even, and seemed to have forgotten the personal element in their relationship. He began to hate her. And he knew he was working against his own kind, against the

system of life which had created him. He hated himself for that.

Hate filled him, dominated him. Most of all, he hated the guards who shadowed him. As his work of assembly and instruction drew to a close, he spent rest periods sitting on a balcony beside a luxuriant, tropical garden just within the City wall.

The teeming life of the City, and in particular that single courtyard garden, began to form a pattern in his mind. Before long he could tell the time by the comings and goings below him there. With increasing interest, spurred on by desperation because his time was running out, he began to use his freedom. Exploration dissipated some of his hatred, as life in that courtyard began to be pieced together. By the time he was finished with the task given him, he knew where most of the individuals had come from into that meticulously ordered garden, whither they were bound, their business and even something of their origins.

They lived in quarters on levels according to their ranks. One day in seven they performed no work, but passed their time relaxing—more often than not in the arms of some member of the opposite sex—within the pleasure gardens. No children came of these brief unions.

Children were born only in special areas. Files of genetic and biological information provided the basis of birth, and statistics the need of it. Apparently the human need of children had been bred out, or the urge diverted as most other Genian-unnecessary or undesirable traits appeared to have been.

At length his part was done. He went, under escort to see the Grand Gen. It was second nature to bow before such a Presence now.

He looked up into piercing eyes of a young man sitting behind an ebony desk.

"Well, Captain Colin Ruskin," murmured the man with a gentle smile, "we are grateful for what you have done."

"Oh !" Colin stared. Such a young man . . .

A smile curled the aristocratic mouth. "You expected, perhaps, to see someone venerable ?"

"Yes," murmured Colin. "Yes, I did," he repeated more loudly.

The Grand Gen nodded. "A year ago, you would have met my great-grandfather, Professor Karel Hinker. He died, however, at the age of 131 years. You may be surprised to learn that I am 41 years old myself, but you must understand that I have led a very protected life . . . as his successor. I was, I may tell you, very carefully chosen. It was thought—and indeed, it has turned out—that I would be the one to face our greatest testing time."

"Oh ?" Colin could think of nothing else to say.

The Grand Gen crossed the room to look down through slanting windows down through the thousand levels of the conical City below them. "Come here, Captain. You are of the old civilisation. Look down, as I do."

Colin obeyed, and the Grand Gen sighed with contentment. It might, thought Colin, have been the sigh of any one of the thousands below them.

"You," said the Grand Gen, "may not wholly like what you have seen here. It may seem unnatural to you. But you cannot, if you are honest, help admitting that my great-grandfather's theories have borne golden fruit."

"I don't know . . ." began Colin. He hesitated. The Grand Gen's tone seemed so friendly, so willing to listen—yet his autocratic rule was so

absolute that to flout his opinion openly at this first meeting might mean disaster.

The Grand Gen smiled. "You are frightened. You forget I have been bred to my position. If you are sincere, I will listen with equal sincerity to anything you say. I may even value your opinion."

"Really ?" Colin bit his lip and looked down. "If I might show you the courtyard below my rooms . . ."

"I will show it you . . ." The Grand Gen turned to a blank wall. At his touch a screen slid into the floor. He adjusted knobs. The image of the teeming courtyard showed upon the screen that filled the wall.

"That man—" Colin pointed to a worker, "he has never left the City. Should he ever have to do so, he would be lost. He does not know how food is produced. He would probably not even recognise an animal as the provider of meat, or wheat as the basis of a loaf."

"That is true. But you are surely not comparing your own civilisation with ours on that level. How many of your own mechanics in your own straggling City on Earth could exchange places with your own father ?"

"Yes—that's right, but— Oh, I don't know. Suppose the City failed ?"

"There are three thousand, six hundred and two Cities, three of which are only just completed and at present empty." The Grand Gen frowned. "We are wasting our time talking in this way. I admire your candour and lack of awe of myself to some extent, but you think in a muddled way, as is, I suppose, to be expected. You assume that I know nothing of your own life. That is completely wrong. And you forget that all civilisation is man-made and artificial. You are avoiding the main issue. Are the people in your Cities as happy as these people you have been living amongst."

The Grand Gen's tone was so flat that Colin was not altogether sure he had been asked a question. He pondered his words. "No, they are not," he said. "But they are—closer to nature. They experience extremes. They . . . live !"

"Live ?" The Grand Gen shrugged. "A word to conjure with. A word, indeed, that has caused much unhappiness and strife and bloodshed throughout man's long history. A word which, when used in the sense you mean it to have, is a torch."

"Do—" Colin hesitated. "Do you say your people live full lives ?"

"Do the people of your civilisation ? I mean, of course, the average man. Or— Perhaps even one who is a little above average, such as yourself ? You are an excellent engineer, but you know nothing of women. You are baffled by my own Jeena Nine-one, as she complained to me—and goes on complaining to me each time I see her."

Colin bit his lip. "You said something about your greatest testing time," he suggested.

The Grand Gen smiled. "I see I have won our little argument. You change the subject . . . That is good. Now you admit that, as no man is a truly whole man, an entity such as this City which forms a perfect whole, is not so distasteful as you thought. Good. But—Your change of subject. Yes . . ."

He returned to his desk. "Our greatest testing time is almost at hand." He looked up. "I tell you this because it is possible you may be a part of it. The men of Earth have always been intolerant of things they do not know.

Their immediate reaction is to hold off and consider, then to flee or fight; only seldom do they accept new facts." The Grand Gen nodded solemnly. "You will shortly witness contact between the old and the new. Ships of the Space Patrol, carrying very important observers will deliver an ultimatum to us. They will not challenge our right to self-government, but they will, I fear, cause much bloodshed before they discover that alien presences here, except as single individuals such as yourself, cannot be tolerated."

Colin left the Presence, after bowing with a new respect. His mind full of chaotic thoughts, of unfinished arguments, he walked out on to the balcony as was his habit.

He looked down.

An unfamiliar man crossed the courtyard. Colin watched him idly, aware of a subtle difference. The man disappeared into the labyrinth of passages beyond. A few seconds later he returned, retracing his steps. Colin lifted an eyebrow. Something new had been added. The man reappeared and again crossed the straight garden paths. Colin stared. The man walked, not as the others, but with a jaunty swing of the shoulders, a strange out-of-place cheekiness.

Colin leant forward. There was . . . no mistaking those unruly waves in that black hair, the prominent ears and nose, those bushy eyebrows and the nervous movements of the arms. Brocky !

Colin took a grip on himself. He felt an insane urge to wave as Brocky at last looked up. Then his friend was gone into a passageway. He did not return.

Night crept across the face of Gen IV, darkening the conical City, stilling its movement, hushing its murmurs.

Colin waited. An hour after dark, the door opened. A shape crossed the room confidently.

"What-o, old sport !"

"Brocky !"

"Are you dressed ?"

"Yes."

"Right. Follow me."

"But how in the Galaxy did you get here ?"

"Shush ! All right. That is the only question I allow you. I came down in an ejector seat. I guessed they'd not expect anyone to do that. They're waiting for an invasion fleet; not an individual. O.K. ?"

"O.K."

"Right." Brocky led the way to the door. "Mind the bodies," he whispered. "These babies play rough."

"Eh ?" gasped Colin. He almost fell over still shapes in the darkened passage.

Their exit from the City was a nightmare of false alarms. Or it was to Colin. Brocky walked on, as though on as important a mission as the others they met. He swung his hips as jauntily as though he walked a familiar street on Earth. They passed the watchful eyes of guards at an exit.

Once out of sight of the City, Brocky turned. "We've got six hours until dawn. No slip-ups, now. They'll not find those bodies until the engineer ants come to life for the day shift. Right ?"

They ran across country, past empty farm buildings, past dark houses. "Not all the citizens are perfect enough to live all their lives in heaps," said Brocky in reply to Colin's breathless question. "Shut up. You'll want your breath. They don't believe in more mechanisation than strictly necessary Ants must be kept happily occupied, damn them ! Oh, for a car or a 'copter !"

They reached a stretch of moorland at last. A mile further on, Brocky stopped, as he had done from time to time, to take bearings.

The tiny spaceboat, half-hidden under its green-grey parachute, shocked Colin.

He said nothing as they entered. The boat had been stripped of everything. There was just room for themselves in front of the concrete shield which cut them off from the atomic drive.

"This," said Brocky, "is where you come in. You can navigate this pea-pod if anyone can." His teeth gleamed as he grinned.

Colin gasped. "How about instruments ?"

"None," chuckled Brocky. "Anything bigger than this would show on their radar, and our number would be up. We have exactly sufficient fuel to get our total mass to where I last saw you. So you'd better not take a wrong turning."

Colin looked up at the stars. Into his mind came a maze of detailed knowledge, the thousand and one things a man of space must know. It was . . . just possible, perhaps.

The take-off nearly tore them apart. Their blood flowed from the delicate blood vessels of their nostrils. Increasing acceleration was agony, and yet . . .

They staggered eventually, some aeons later, from the tiny craft to meet the Grand Admiral of Space, and Stars knew how many other notables. Colin, however, was far too famished, too unutterably weary to notice. Even the vast fleet through which they had descended seemed like the mirage of a crazed mind.

But there were no questions that day. And before they were again shown into the presence of the Great Men, they had time to talk.

"Those Gens," Brocky paused in his shaving. "I hope you made more of them than I did."

"Perhaps," murmured Colin.

Brocky cut himself and swore. "Is that all you can say, after all I did to get you in good with them ?"

"What ?" Colin's mouth opened in blank astonishment.

Brocky grinned. "It was lucky, all right, that I got old Vetch talking. He wouldn't have spoken to a bloke like me if he hadn't been desperate. You might bless the inertia of officialdom for that. And then . . . Gosh ! along comes a squad of Gens badly up against it. I knew you'd be able to handle them. I gave a nice little story to the powers-that-be as soon as I heard over the telecasts what had happened on your arrival. They did as I said—rather to my surprise. Perhaps they thought they'd get a line on the vanished Gens . . . Hum. Hadn't thought of that. Anyway I knew better.

"It rather shook me for a while, though, when this blinking armada showed up. That was Vetch's doing though. Never occurred to me they'd

take so much notice of the old so-and-so.

"It took me a while to get to see the big-wig, too. But I managed. Leave it to your old pal ! I got him to give me the few months' grace I needed to get you out. And so . . ."

"And so what ?" Colin swallowed hard. If he hadn't known Brocky so well, he'd never have believed such a string of events to be possible.

Brocky put down his razor. "Look here," he said. "I get you into the camp of the enemy, and you have a darn good time with that pretty girl, I suppose, and thoroughly enjoy yourself in other ways probably not repeatable—but didn't you have a good look round on my behalf ? Didn't you ?"

Colin stared at him speechlessly.

Brocky turned back to his shaving. "I'd have gone myself, but I haven't a captain's certificate and my engineering is mostly a wangle——"

Colin grabbed his mate by the shoulders. "You're serious about all this ?"

"Of course." Brocky's bushy eyebrows lifted in hurt amazement.

Colin concentrated with an effort. "These Genians are clever all right. How many ships d'you think they have ?"

"Don't you know ? Stars !" Brocky looked at the ceiling. "Oh, Vetch said something about a thousand or so. Some new weapons and gadgets, haven't they ?"

"Yes."

"Well ? What is it to be. War ? Or d'you get the peace prize of the century ?"

"If——" Colin hesitated as he marshalled his memories. "If I say it right, it should be peace . . ."

"That's more like the talk I want to hear." Brocky put down his razor and began to wipe his face with a frown. "I just can't understand people. That admiral-bloke said I was the craziest gink he'd ever met, but that if my plan came off he'd decorate me himself. What's crazy about it, Colin ?"

"Nothing," Colin assured him. "Nothing at all, Brocky old sport. It's just that he's not like us. It was a wonder he understood at all——"

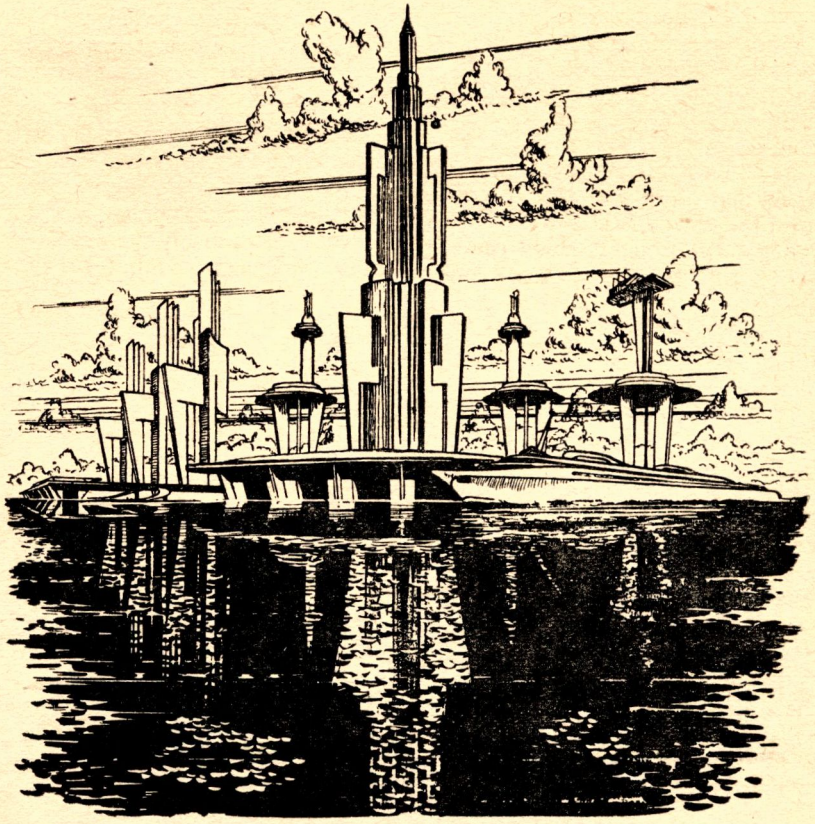
Colin broke off so suddenly that Brocky stared at him. "Now what's biting you ?"

"That's it !" gasped Colin. "The Genians. They're not like us. They're a different sort of human being. They wouldn't be happy living as we do; not any more than we'd be happy if we were suddenly filling their shoes. But— Stars, but there's room for them, surely, in the Galaxy. Yes, even if——" his breath was momentarily taken from his throat as Brocky seized his arm and began to steer him out. "Even if they are——"

"Go on," urged Brocky, "finish it while the idea's hot. I always do. Even if they are . . ."

"Not as we are," murmured Colin.

THE END



The City sat in the middle of an ocean, impregnable, unconquerable. The Martians sent an Ambassador with a mission—surrender or annihilation. It turned out to be a clever battle of wits.

ENEMY IN THEIR MIDST

by ALAN BARCLAY

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

"Let's have a look at Jonah," Ray Martin asked the scanner-operator.

"Sure, Inspector, sure !" the man agreed, and began to spin the dials. "It's only a few miles away now."

The whale had been picked up by the scanners about a week before, while

it was still nearly three hundred miles to southward of the City. It had been very carefully studied. There was no doubt at all that it was a whale, complete with tail and flippers, and from time to time a most powerful spout. No other whale had been seen in the neighbourhood of the City for the past ten years—naturalists said they were nearly extinct now—so this appearance interested the men on watch quite a good deal. Someone had named it Jonah. Objections had been made to this name on the grounds of historical inaccuracy, but among the men on watch it stuck.

From the time he was first observed Jonah moved in a general northerly direction towards the City, basking at times, feeding at others, and once for a whole day keeping pace with a ship with every appearance of intelligent curiosity.

Ray Martin peered at the image looming large in the scanner, watched the great tail rise and flick down and strike the water with a smack that he almost imagined he could hear, then saw it roll over with slow sleek movements, and submerge.

"How'd you like to be a whale, Joe ?" he asked the man.

"I'd like it fine if there was a decent-looking lady whale to go swimming with, but so far's I understand this is the last of them; there isn't a lady friend for him—he's fixed to be a lone bachelor for the rest of his life."

Ray picked up his peaked cap from the desk and began buttoning his tunic.

"See how far out that tender is, Joe," he said.

"The one that went off to meet the *Martian Lady* ?" Joe spun his dials again with expert ease and brought the white ship into view.

"It's forty miles out and skimming along at sixty," he reported, reading the scales. "It's due to dock in half an hour."

"I must get along down then—we look for secret agents, and drugs and weapons and fissionable materials, and all we pick up is an occasional reel of questionable film."

"I hear these Martians turn out some really wonderful three-dimensional stuff of that sort ?" Joe asked interestedly.

"You're a nasty old man," Ray flung at him over his shoulder. He took his familiar way along the shining corridors of the City, down the Elevator from Police H.Q., and along the main avenue to the dock . . .

But let me tell you what the City was like in those days. At one time a lot of people used to prophesy that cities would go out of fashion in an atomic age, since in the first place no one would wish to live and work in the middle of a target area, and since in the second place with cheap and swift transport available they wouldn't have to. This proved to be the case in general, and it was for these two reasons that the great cities of the twentieth century—New York, London, Moscow, Tokio and others—shrunk in course of time to the size of university towns.

But after man had decided that warfare had become so dangerous and unprofitable and unpredictable that it had to be stopped definitely and finally, and after he had reluctantly and painfully adapted himself to the idea of a continuing peace on earth (but not necessarily out in space), it was seen that at least one Capital City was a necessity. After all, a world government needs a senate house, and libraries, and printing presses, and radio

and television studios, and accommodation for senators and their wives and daughters and friends, and records and card indexes, and computators—oh yes, and, of course, secretaries, for there is no indication that science will ever succeed in developing a really satisfactory substitute for those. And in addition all these several and various items required to be guarded, protected and supervised, and this could best be done by collecting them all in one spot, under one roof, so to speak.

So there had to be a city.

Every nation on earth had the firmest and most definite ideas about where this City should *not* be sited. The English thought it should be somewhere about South America. The U.S. nation was united in the opinion that the best place for it was in the middle of Asia, and the Russians, with the appearance of the greatest possible magnanimity, affirmed that no more suitable place could be chosen than in the very heart of the great North American nation.

This may surprise you a little unless you have taken note of the remark I made a little way back about peace on earth, but not in the sky above, and unless you agree that the essential nature of the human animal could not change very much in such a short period as two thousand years or so. As a matter of fact, at the time of which I write, relations between Earth and Mars were more than a little strained, which is rather odd when you recall that the Martians (unlike the Venus people) are of human origin. Or perhaps it isn't surprising after all, since it takes two to make a quarrel.

In the end it was decided to construct a new city in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, not many hundred miles from the take-off area for interplanetary ships. It was a new city in every sense of the word, a great shining towering structure of glass-crete standing on monstrous feet astride four little islands. The ocean flowed about its base and underneath its galleries, and its topmost pinnacles reached into the clouds. Engineers, architects, planners of every sort, Government servants, poets and security officers all had a word to say in the design, and it was therefore confidently foretold during the years of its construction that it would emerge at last as the most unholy gosh-awful architectural abomination the world had ever seen. This gloomy prophecy proved in the end to be entirely mistaken. The City came in time to be regarded as one of the finest achievements of mankind.

Ray Martin walked along one of the lower-level avenues towards the dock. Simultaneously the tender from the *Martian Lady* skimmed inwards on its two knife-like hulls. Jonah the whale, catching sight of the white ship out of the corner of one little eye, gave a whisk of his huge tail and came along inwards also.

The passengers on the tender's deck, especially the Martian visitors, who had little knowledge of oceans and less of the great beasts that lived in them, crowded to the rail to inspect Jonah. One of the Martians was a tall and elegant personage who stood a little aloof from the rest; a youngish man with the coppery complexion of all Martians, he wore folded closely around him a long cloak of a colour that anyone used to the greens and blues and pastel shades of Earth could not fail to describe as the most abominable and disastrous shade of glaring yellow. If Jonah's eye picked out anyone at all on that deck, it must have been that hideous blotch of colour.

The launch swung in towards the cliff-like face of the City, heading into the cavern that led to the dock. Jonah showed no inclination to follow further, but turned along the base of the cliff in the direction of the bathing beach. Joe, up aloft in his look-out tower, tried to follow him with the scanner, and was having difficulty in depressing the beam enough to keep him in view.

The tender slid gently up the great tunnel over smooth water curiously illuminated by the glow of the lights in the roof. The engines which had been inaudible in the open water, now made a deep and powerful note which re-echoed from the walls. The ship scraped against the quayside. The passengers began to bustle and jostle and to stream ashore. Ray Martin hung up his hat and spread out his charts.

Martin's job was a very special one. No one—here on Earth at any rate—was very sure about telepathy—yet. Most people, even scientists, admitted that it had possibilities. Funny stories were told about the Martians; certain of our visiting personages had suffered curious and embarrassing experiences which appeared to indicate that sometimes their unspoken thoughts were listened to. It was agreed that occasionally people were found to have a sort of talent, and successful techniques had recently been discovered for developing it. But the time had not yet come when a man could be appointed as Government Telepath (Junior), Grade II, so Ray Martin was listed as a police inspector, security branch. He could—very often but not always—tell when people were lying, and a very considerable part of his duties consisted of attempting to do just that, although as yet his Department was not prepared to take action on his statement alone, unsupported by additional evidence. Some of his colleagues thought him a nice fellow; others regarded him as a human monstrosity who spent his spare time listening-in to private thoughts, while a third and not unimportant section considered him to be a howling fraud.

He sat at his desk between two colleagues, and looked down the corridor towards the quay.

"Here they come," he muttered. "Extra special attention to our Martian friends these days."

The corridor was wide, well-lit and for the most part unencumbered with any sort of obstacle, but there was just one point near the seaward end, where passengers could only proceed one at a time. It was an unimportant matter, and very few people even troubled to complain that the City authorities might perhaps some day get round to improving that bottle-neck. Only the police knew that behind the wall and under the floor at that point there lurked a vast and complex machine—known to them as the Digger—which photographed, X-rayed, weighed, charted, blood-counted, and did numbers of other curious things to each passer-by and his luggage, charted the result and shot it along to Ray and his two colleagues before the subject of the examination had time to walk into their office.

"Senator Wheeler," the memory man of the trio said, as the first arrival was seen approaching the office.

Senator Wheeler's chart rustled out on to the desk in front of them.

"The old so-and-so's lost five pounds since he went off—that's what space does for a man . . . What's that metal up near his shoulder, Tim ?"

"Pistol in shoulder holster. He always carries that . . . discovered his great grandfather was an Indian fighter and has never quite got over it . . . Anything in his bag ?"

"Same weight as when he went out, near enough."

" 'Afternoon, Senator. Had a good trip ?"

"Uneventful," the great man grunted. "You boys not goin' to waste time giving me a going-over, eh ? Know me well enough by now."

"Of course not, Senator . . . Staying at the Oceanic, as usual, I suppose ? Enjoy your visit, sir ?"

"I wasn't on any pleasure trip, young man," the Senator grunted. "Yes, at the Oceanic."

"Well, Ray ?" Tim asked.

"He's O.K." Ray told them, "but he's scared paralytic about something—I bet he thinks we'll be fighting the Martians soon."

"Wouldn't surprise me a lot," Tim commented.

The passengers passed through the room one at a time. Once Ray spoke through the microphone to the next room.

"The fellow on his way to you—now. Search his valise. He's got something in there that doesn't show on the chart, but it's on his mind; he's worrying about it. Contraband, like enough." And again: "The girl. The blonde; says her name's Taylor and she's a hotel receptionist. It isn't, an' she isn't. Put a man on her tail and see where she goes."

A glare of colour at the door. "Well, bless my aching eyes ! Did you ever see such a yallery yaller ?—— What does the chart tell us ?"

"Martian—average weight for that sort—nothing on him nor inside him—something metallic in his grip . . . Good-day, sir. Your name ? Identification card, please ?"

"Jon Lannia," the man said, pushing his papers across.

"What's your business here, sir ?"

"To study your administrative methods," the man explained. He spoke without very much accent.

"How long will you be with us ?—Where are you staying ?" The routine questions followed each other smoothly. Ray Martin said nothing. He sat. His eyes were almost closed. He tried to burrow his way into the other man's mind.

At length they passed him on.

"Well, Ray ?" Tim asked.

Ray spoke into the microphone: "The Martian who's coming to you now. He's got something in his bag. See what it is and handle it gently—— Besides that, give him the full treatment. Take him apart stitch by stitch and bone by bone . . ." He looked up at the other two. "That man has something on his mind—something big. He's not here just to study our legal systems. He's big trouble. I'm going next door to see what the boys dig out of his bag. Tim. Ring the Chief and say I don't like the fellow. If you can find anything at all on his record that warrants us chucking him out, let's give him the push, but quick . . ." He slid out of the door.

The searchers were carefully and gingerly pulling a curious metal object out of the Martian's bag. It was about eight inches long, made partly of gold, with a silver mesh at one end. It looked like nothing on earth. Not

only did it look like nothing on Earth, but it seemed to be entirely purposeless and looked like nothing on Mars either.

"What is it ?" one of the searchers asked.

"An ornament," the Martian told them, indifferently. "It's just a sort of toy—— I intended perhaps to make a present of it to one of your senators."

"For sure it isn't a weapon," the man admitted. "It's too fragile to beat a fellow over the head with."

Rather doubtfully he placed it back in the bag in its nest of gaudy garments.

"It isn't a weapon," Ray agreed. "I can see his thought clear enough. But it's something clever and amusing . . ."

"And I'm a pink elephant with heliotrope spots," the man told him. He happened to think Ray a fraud, and wondered how he got away with it.

"Not you," Ray replied, "you're a blue-nosed baboon, with—— but you know what else."

"Look at Jonah now !" Joe cried. "He's got sight of these dames on the south beach, and he's going in after them."

Joe's relief, who was waiting to take over, looked in the scanner. It was getting dark by now but the whale could be seen plainly enough.

"He can't get right inshore, though."

True enough, the whale was swimming straight for the beach. Joe could see the bathers making inshore, out of its way.

"What does the book say about this ?" Joe asked. "Is this an attack on the City ? Or an attempted clandestine entry ? Is a whale a vessel, or a being, or an object ? I feel I've got to make a report about this any minute now."

"He can't get much further in," the relief consoled him. "There's a sandbank . . . Well, what d'you know ? He's grounded himself."

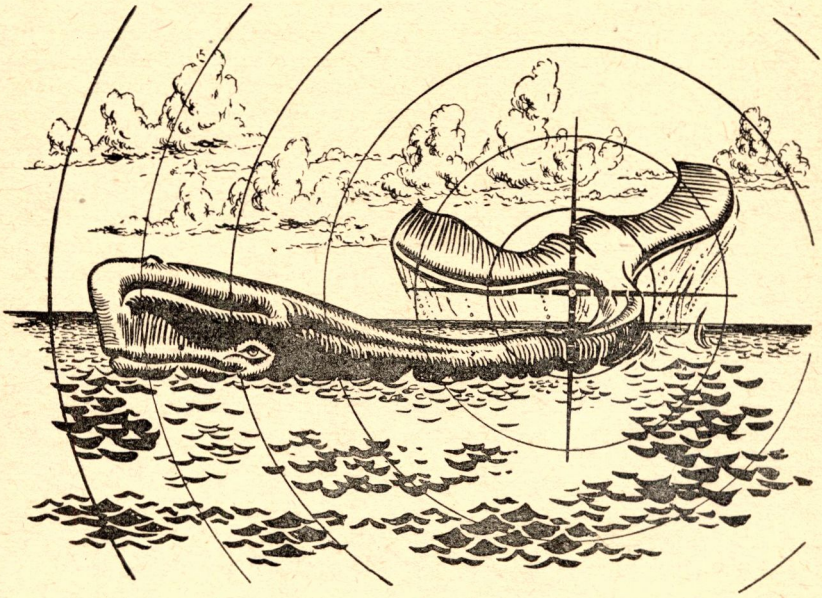
Sure enough the great bulk of the whale seemed to have wedged itself on an underwater reef a hundred yards or so off the bathing beach. It lashed about wildly for a while, then lay still. It had now grown so dark that the people on the beach could hardly discern its great dark bulk, but of course it was still clearly seen in the scanner.

"I believe they smell something horrid after a bit," Joe worried.

Jon Lannia walked in a leisurely and elegant manner along the main avenue from the dock, and then five levels up, to the Oceania, where he had a room booked.

He washed in the peculiar Martian manner, changed into garments less colourful than those in which he had arrived, descended once again to First Level, and sauntered among the evening crowds up one corridor and along another until he emerged on to the bathing beach.

Ray Martin had returned to his flat by this time. He was sitting in an armchair playing Beethoven on his magnetic phonograph, and worrying. He was worrying because of Jon Lannia. He did not know quite why, and he didn't particularly enjoy it, but it was some consolation to reflect that worrying was the thing he was paid to do, and that usually in due course, something useful resulted from the process. This evening he wished that something useful would emerge as soon as possible so that he could give his whole mind to Beethoven's Fifth.



Just about the end of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth, Jonah the whale gave a tremendous whisk of his tail and slithered off the reef.

"Thank heaven for that," Joe sighed, and put on his cap and went home.

Jon Lannia was hiring himself a little boat.

"You won't go out far, sir ?" the boatman asked, thinking it rather strange that a Martian should want to go rowing, especially in the dark.

Jon Lannia smiled, and got into the boat and paddled rather aimlessly about along the shore. He finally reached the reef where the whale had been grounded. He was busy there for a little while. No one could see him from the beach, and though he was picked up momentarily by the roving eye of the scanner, the watcher merely thought he was fishing.

After lingering no longer than five minutes at the reef, he rowed inshore, got out, dumped two objects on the beach and covered them with sand. Then he returned the boat to its owner.

"Had a pleasant evening, sir ?" the boatman asked.

"Very pleasant," Lannia agreed. If it had not been dark the boatman might have observed that he was sweating profusely though the night was cool.

Lannia sauntered back along the beach, scooped up the two objects from the sand, and walked on. He carried one in each hand, under his long and billowing Martian cloak. They were very heavy and it required every ounce of his very considerable strength and self-control to continue his saunter, and to avoid disclosing the existence of the two boxes beneath his cloak. He passed through the hotel lounge all right, still sauntering, and smiling in a vague and amiable way. A man who accompanied him in the elevator

observed that he was sweating, and thought he must be finding the Earth atmosphere and gravity trying.

He made his hotel room, locked the door, deposited the two cases gently on the floor and collapsed in a trembling shivering heap.

Jonah the whale, now some distance out from the City, no longer frisked and gambolled but slid through the water at a surprising speed and on a remarkably steady course, southwards towards the Antarctic.

Next morning there reigned in Police Headquarters a state of organised chaos. Information had reached the Government that the *Martian Lady* had taken off during the hours of darkness, without taking aboard passengers or cargo, and without clearance papers. Her sister ship had not left its home port on Mars. Two Martian cargo vessels could not be located in space position, and were presumed to have turned back. There were other signs. The Chief of Police (whose name was Frobisher and who was an Englishman), thought this meant the war was going to happen at last. He was organising a watch on all Martians in the City. He had just commented on the fewness of them—another ominous sign—when a uniformed messenger handed him a sealed envelope.

"From the Secretary, sir," the man explained.

"Which secretary ?" Frobisher growled. "Secretary of what ? Of the Police Swimming Club ?"

"No, sir. Secretary to the World Council, sir."

Frobisher swore. Nothing like this had ever happened before. He tore the envelope open. He read the brief note from the Secretary; then he read the longer letter with which it was enclosed. He read it a second time, scowling.

"Get Martin," he ordered suddenly, "and anything we have on the records about a Martian called Jon Lannia. He might be a colonel in their army, so call up our military people and find out what they know about the man.

Ray Martin appeared.

"Ah, Martin !" Frobisher exclaimed, "did you see a man called Jon Lannia come in last night ?"

"Yes, sir," Martin replied, and to himself he added: "I knew that man meant trouble—— Here it comes."

"Get anything on him ?"

"Not a thing, sir. The instruments showed nothing. A physical search disclosed only a small metal ornament or toy, in his suitcase."

"Why did you have him searched if the instruments showed up nothing ?"

"I got a strong impression that he was keyed up, tense, anxious, as if he were concealing something. Why, sir ? What's he been up to ?"

"Nothing much," Frobisher answered. "Nothing at all, nothing at all . . . He's written to tell the Secretary he has a bomb beside him in his hotel bedroom; he says it's adequate to blow the entire City to atoms; to volatilise it completely. He adds that is exactly what he means to do with it unless the Government surrenders to him unconditionally within three days."

Martin sat down; he said nothing for a moment.

"He had no bomb with him; he had no bomb even inside him last night. Just another lunatic."

"Very likely," Frobisher agreed, "very likely—but let's not dismiss him

so lightly just at first. Read the letter."

Martin took the letter and read:

"I am Colonel Jon Lannia, of the Army of the Republic of the Federated Nations of Mars. I am in the first place instructed to announce that my government now considers a state of war to exist between the peoples of Mars and Earth. Secondly, it is my duty to inform you that I have brought with me into the City a bomb consisting of approximately forty pounds of fissionable material. Details of its construction are appended, from which your scientists should be able to conclude that it is sufficiently powerful to obliterate this city completely. My instructions are to detonate the bomb three days from now, that is to say, on Tuesday next, at 2.25 a.m. precisely, unless I receive the surrender of your government, and unless before that time certain steps are taken by you to make that surrender effective.

"I am instructed further to inform you as follows: My government considers that its objectives will be just as effectively achieved by the surrender of the City as by its complete obliteration, and therefore earnestly desires your government to believe that our plan for the planting of a bomb within your city has been long and carefully perfected, and that there is no hope of circumventing it. For example, a consideration of the nature of this ultimatum for a few minutes will certainly cause you to decide that even although I am sitting astride the box with a hand ready on the switch to fire it, a bullet through my brain would be an effective deterrent. In this you would be mistaken; this contingency has been foreseen—and so has every other. Indeed, in order to persuade you of the genuineness of this threat, of the perfection of the plan, and of the hopelessness of circumventing it, I am prepared to receive not more than two persons into my room, and to answer any questions that they may put to me on the subject. However, if in the course of their visit an attempt is made to overpower me, or if I am shot, the mechanism will be operated and the bomb actuated."

Martin looked up when he had finished reading this.

"Not the writing of a madman," he commented.

"That's what I feel. It seems sane enough taking it sentence by sentence. Only when one thinks of the message as a whole does it seem like a nightmare dream."

"What do you want me to do ?" Martin asked.

"Get your hat, and come along with me. We'll visit Mr. Jon Lannia, and if we find that he's sane and speaking the truth, then, if ever, will be the time for you to do a bit of mind reading."

"But if he's sane, and if his plan is watertight, what is there to be gained by any mind reading ?"

"No plan is perfect, despite what Lannia says. We must find the flaw—— Come along."

"Come," a voice cried from within the room.

Frobisher pushed open the door, and went in. Martin followed.

Lannia was seated at the far end of the room, near the window. He had cleared all furniture away from that end except for a couch, and the chair on which he sat. There were two black boxes by his side.

"Will you be good enough to sit just there, gentlemen ?" He waved and

indicated two chairs. "And sit down and tell me who you are ?"

"We are from the Police," Frobisher replied. "You sent a letter."

"Ah, yes !" Lannia smiled. "As I expected—and you have come to discover whether or not I am a madman ?"

"Exactly."

"Then tell me in what respect you are unconvinced . . . I shall be happy to explain. You must see that I am personally interested to convince you of the truth of what I have written, for if I should fail, my duty is to blow us all up." He smiled. "I do not wish to blow myself up if it can be avoided."

"In the first place, you must convince us that you have smuggled a bomb into the City."

It was Frobisher who spoke. Martin sat silently, listening, probing. He got nothing from the Martian except an impression of intense, eager, excited alertness.

"Ah, yes !" Lannia told them. "The whale, you know—your scanning system must have recorded the visit of a whale. Such an excellent whale. It took a great deal of money to make, and to transport from Mars, and to train its crew so that the whale could act in a natural and whale-like manner. It left the bomb on the beach last night, and I collected it after dark. You will be able to check that . . . And here is the bomb." He tapped one of the black boxes with his long finger.

There was a silence then. The silence lengthened, and grew tense. Lannia watched them out of narrowed eyes. He was absolutely still, rigid. He held a cigarette in one hand, and it was so still that the blue smoke rose in a thin straight line. Ray became aware of a tensing of Frobisher's muscles, and a slight shifting of his feet. He transferred his thoughts to his Chief, and felt that the other was preparing to hurl himself across the room at the Martian.

"Gentlemen," the Martian said quietly, "I feel that you believe me now—or at least that you are very near to believing me. In a moment you will begin to think how you can leap on me unexpectedly, or perhaps shoot me. Let me assure you most seriously that we have things so arranged that the moment you or your bullet touches me, the bomb will be actuated."

Ray felt Frobisher's muscles relax.

"Let me tell you more about this plan—it has been prepared and studied and matured for more than five years. Even the whale part of it, which must seem just a little boyish to you, is psychologically sound. A whale is an extinct animal, very nearly; it is almost a fabulous beast, and as such answers the very question which its appearance raises. When it first appears in the scanner your watchers are elert. "What is this ?" they ask. "Look out !" they say, "here is something odd." Then as it comes nearer their questions are resolved. "It is a whale," they say. "How interesting ! How amusing ! but, of course, not in the least suspicious." You cannot believe how long we debated the feasibility of smuggling the bomb in, and leaving it hidden, and actuating it from outside the City. But no sure way could be devised of preventing it from being discovered during the period of our ultimatum. Nor could we produce a reliable means of actuating it from outside; so finally it was agreed the bomb should have a keeper." He paused and smiled at them again. "I am its keeper."

"Now one of the most interesting things about this bomb," he continued,

"is its fuse. The fuse is most curious—almost fantastic. I feel that you may have difficulty in believing this part of my story—— You see, we realised that intelligent people such as yourselves might very quickly see a flaw in our plan as indicated to you so far. You may at this moment be considering how to shoot me through the head before I can touch the switch, or how I can be rendered unconscious by passing gas into the room by one of the ventilators, or perhaps you might think I could be hypnotised. We have arranged that if you did any of those things, the bomb would detonate —because this fuse of which I have spoken needs no plunger to actuate it, no turning of a knob, no pushing down on a button. It needs nothing more from me than a thought—a sudden thrust of my mind, an abrupt change of mental pressure—either a voluntary change, or the change that would result from my being killed or rendered unconscious."

He looked at them steadily. Frobisher frowned back under his thick bushy eyebrows. Ray listened with his mind, trying to catch the thoughts in the mind of the other; he received no clear-cut idea, just an impression of the most intense vivid alertness, even a hint of amusement, though how could even a Martian be amused at the thought of destroying a city and himself along with it ?

"You don't believe me ?" the Martian queried.

"I have never heard of such a thing," Frobisher replied bluntly. "A good deal of work has been done on telepathy recently—some very successful techniques have been developed, but the direct impact of thought on physical objects—no. I find it unacceptable."

"We feared you would not believe me," Lannia sighed. "We were so certain you would not, that I have brought with me a means of making a demonstration."

He rose, lazily and elegantly, and stepped away from the chair and the bomb.

"I do hope you won't decide to rush me, or to shoot me," he begged. "I still have the bomb under my control."

He opened his valise and lifted out the small golden object that Ray had examined the evening before. He placed it delicately on the table and stood away from it.

"This is a mere toy," he explained. "It is used at home to show what is called the Chesdiner effect—you see that it consists merely of a metal rod, eight inches long. The rod is surrounded by a mesh of silvery wires, apparently arranged haphazard, but in reality, or so I understand, for I am not an expert in the mathematics of the subject, in a definite series of three-dimensional curves. Mounted on the rod you observe a metal ball. The ball is free to slide up and down the rod within the mesh of wires. Look !" He stepped forward towards the table, and with one finger jiggled the ball upwards and downwards on the rod.

"Now watch !" He stepped back. Ray saw his eyes narrow—he felt the man's mind concentrate.

The ball rose slowly up the rod to the top, then dropped back. It rose again quickly, and fell slowly.

"If you still doubt me," Lannia offered, "call out, and when you call I shall make the ball rise."

"Do it now," Frobisher barked.

Instantly the little ball clicked up to the top of the rod and after a moment slid down again.

"Of course," Lannia said apologetically, "the ball weighs very little, scarcely an ounce, but I think you will agree that it could be made to actuate a fuse ? A convincing experiment, I think ? Take the device and see whether you can make it function."

He lifted it from the table and tossed it to them. Ray caught it, examined it for a moment, and placed it back on the table.

"I feel you must be convinced now," Lannia said. "Here is the bomb, with its fuse, and here am I, its keeper, in the heart of your wonderful city—and I am unassailable. I am surrounded as if by an invisible armour. You cannot touch me. The more you think of what I have told you, the more you will be certain that you can do nothing. Go and tell this to your Council."

"We will," Frobisher growled, rising to his feet.

The President smiled patiently, a little wearily; other members of the Council drew diagrams on bits of paper, or whispered to each other from behind hands. For once in a way, no one was asleep; the occasion was much too serious.

Serious though it was however, everyone realised that it would be impossible to proceed to constructive discussion until Senator Wheeler had said his say—until he had talked himself hoarse, in fact.

"I demand," Senator Wheeler was shouting, pounding the table with a ham-like fist, "that the culprits be brought to book, that this inefficiency—this abominable criminal inefficiency—be punished. I demand that not only the guilty men themselves be punished, but that those persons who were responsible for their appointment in the first instance, be dealt with likewise."

"Mr. President," a French senator interrupted, "Mr. President . . ."

"Be quiet, sir," Senator Wheeler thundered. "I assert my right, my inalienable right, to state my case fully and without interruption . . ."

"Mr. President . . ." the Frenchman continued, his voice making the tenor part of a duet, the bass of which was Senator Wheeler's rumble. "In view of the fact that time is short, that indeed we are all likely to be extinguished in less than three days, I propose that the present speaker be now asked to terminate his remarks."

"Seconded ?" the President asked, as Wheeler howled out imprecations.

"Seconded," a voice agreed.

"Shut him up, someone !" the President asked.

A man at the Senator's elbow stood up, and brought his mouth close to that gentleman's ear. "Shut up and sit down," he bawled.

Senator Wheeler did as he was told, suddenly and bewilderdly. He was not in actual fact an ass; he merely enjoyed the sound of his own voice, and had not yet grasped the full deadly significance of the present situation.

"Mr. President," the Frenchman, whose name was Masson, began again, "while I would not go so far as to say that Senator Wheeler is fiddling while Rome is burning, he appears to me to be discussing the type of match used to start the conflagration at a time when he should be considering how best to put it out. For myself, I feel that when, or if, we survive this crisis, the question of the efficiency of the Security Service might be made the subject

of an investigation . . . Let us for the moment, however, waste no time in vain recriminations; let us consider how we shall deal with the danger itself."

"An excellent idea," the President agreed, "and, for the purpose of opening the discussion, let me ask whether anyone agrees that this is a real threat, not the imaginings of a madman ?"

He looked round the table. Most of the Council nodded.

"I think we must proceed on the assumption that it is a real threat," one man observed, "but I suggest that we do not at present discuss whether we shall or shall not surrender—leave that to be considered three days from now, at the last moment—for the present let us see what chances there are to circumvent this one-man army."

"What have you to say on that score, Frobisher ?"

"Just this: Lannia has a bomb which he tells us will blow the City to dust. I cannot believe that this is not true; the Martians would not expend so much effort on planting a dummy bomb. He says he can detonate it by a mere thought, or by the cessation of thought, should he be killed or rendered unconscious. This second statement he has demonstrated to be possible, by means of the model which I have described to you. He says that he sits in the middle of our city untouchable, unassailable, invincible, and I must confess that I cannot see where he is wrong."

"He must sleep, sooner or later," someone said.

"I believe, sir, that he intends to stay awake for the next three days—it isn't difficult, if one is merely sitting."

"Let us evacuate the City, and leave him alone with his bomb."

"He has stated that if any attempt is made to do so, he will fire the bomb."

"He is one man, alone," Masson proposed, softly. "He has human weaknesses, even if he is a Martian. Let us offer him a fortune—several fortunes . . ."

"What has our tame telepath to advise us ?" a senator asked sarcastically. "Surely he must have read the Martian's mind, and learned the code-word that will render the fuse harmless ?"

"I read nothing in his mind," Ray admitted. "Lannia is a very intelligent and complex and controlled character . . ."

"And besides," the previous questioner interrupted, "you forgot to take your crystal ball."

Ray flushed angrily. "The possibilities and limitations of my profession are well known," he protested.

"But at this time, when any help from you would be invaluable, beyond price, you tell us that you know nothing ?"

"I have not said that I can tell you nothing—I failed to learn anything precise, but I did learn something."

"What ?"

"I know that some part of the set-up is a trick—Lannia is amused by it all the time. I could feel his amusement."

"Amused ? When he is about to blow himself and a half-million people to perdition ?"

"Yes, he is amused. Lannia is a very complex and alien character. It is clear that such a man, chosen to be a one-man invading army, with a duty to destroy himself in certain circumstances, must be an extraordinary

character. . ."

"So that all the Inspector has to contribute to the discussion," a senator sneered, "is his observation that the enemy is amused ?"

"I said more than that— He is amused at some aspect of this scheme. I suggest therefore that some part of the scheme is a trick."

"Inspector," Masson asked, "that gentleman who has just spoken," he pointed with his pencil. "Can you tell me what he's thinking at this moment ?"

"Yes, sir," Martin replied. "He intends as soon as this conference is over, to put his wife and daughter aboard his sailing boat and get them away from the City . . ."

Everyone turned to regard the senator in question. It was clear from his expression that this shot had gone near the mark.

"I confess that some such plan has been in my mind, but I'm sure many of us must be thinking along the same lines. Perhaps the Inspector has done nothing more than guess intelligently."

"May I put my own little poser ?" the President broke in. "You saw into this gentleman's mind with ease and accuracy, Inspector—why can you not do likewise with Lannia ?"

"The Martians know as much as we do about telepathy, perhaps more. Obviously they would select a man for this job whose mind is inaccessible to probing."

"But . . ." another objected.

The discussion continued.

At the end of an hour the President summed up:

"It appears to me that the fruits of this discussion are as follows: In the first place we postpone consideration of whether we surrender or permit ourselves and the City to be wiped out, to a later time. Secondly, we consider that Lannia might be bribed, and this should be attempted. Thirdly, the Inspector here tells us, and most of us here are disposed to believe him, that there is an indication in Lannia's mind of some trick in the plot, some flaw, perhaps some ingenious piece of bluff."

"It is agreed therefore that two senators be deputed to call on Mr. Lannia, ostensibly to have preliminary talks on the procedure for surrender, but chiefly to see whether he can be bribed. Inspector Martin is to accompany them, in hopes that he may learn something more. Agreed ?"

"Agreed." The heads round the table nodded.

There remained twenty-four hours to go. Frobisher and Ray Martin sat by the fire in the latter's apartment. Beside the two men on a long table stood a small movie projector, whirring softly, and projecting its picture on to the little screen against the wall.

"It's very complete," Frobisher remarked. "Where did you have it concealed ?"

"In my uniform cap, with the lens in the badge. I kept fiddling with the cap, turning it a little from time to time."

"Run it again," Frobisher asked.

Ray rewound the film and set it going again. The two men watched with

agonised intentness as the little picture glowed clear and gem-like on the screen. The image of Lannia lounged in his chair, smiled, talked in a small clear voice, rose and sat down once more. They saw him demonstrating again the working of the model. One of the senators appeared briefly in the picture as he came forward to examine it, and then retreated out of sight.

"There it is," Ray said, "every word, every gesture, every movement, and nothing at all that gives us any clue."

"You still insist that there is some trick ?"

"Chief," Ray told him earnestly, "you know me. You at least know I am no fraud. There are limits to what I can do. There are times when I fail, but always when I have said a thing is certain, I have been proved right. This time I am completely certain that some part of Lannia's set-up is a trick. He's laughing at it to himself."

"But there is no room for any trick," Frobisher protested. "Suppose there is no bomb; suppose it is an empty case—and then ask yourself why it should be empty. Why construct a life-like whale, bring it here, and go to all that trouble to smuggle in an empty box ?"

"We'll have the film again," Ray said.

He rewound the tiny spool and set the machine whirring once more.

"Same words, same motions," Ray muttered. "I know them by heart now—in a moment he lounges back and crosses his legs—now he rises to demonstrate the fuse, walks to same spot on floor—same spot on floor !—SAME SPOT ON FLOOR !" Ray yelled the words as he leapt to his feet in excitement.

"Chief," he said, "I've got it—I've got the clue—let's have the film again . . ."

"Come," Lannia's voice called.

They went in. Lannia was lounging in his chair as before. He was smoking. There was a pile of stubs in the ash-tray beside him.

"My two friends from the police," he greeted them. His voice was calm and amiable as before, but Ray could detect flickers of anxiety passing across his mind.

"What can I do to oblige you this time ?"

"The Council cannot agree on the matter of the surrender," Frobisher said bluntly. "One councillor in particular refuses to believe what he has been told. He demands to speak to you himself— He is in a state of some excitement, and we have been ordered to see that he . . ."

"That he doesn't precipitate matters, eh ? Very well, ask him in—as you know, I have a keen personal interest in persuading each of you that your situation is hopeless."

The man—he was in reality a member of the police force—came in. The conversation proceeded on lines suggested by Ray. It came round eventually to the matter of the fuse. Lannia rose from the chair, produced the model from his valise, and gave his demonstration.

"I don't believe it," the man said stubbornly, stupidly. "I always considered this thought-wave business to be nonsense."

"But, my dear fellow," Lannia laughed, "there it is, working." He pointed his finger at the model, and the ball rose up and down on the metal stalk.

"That's not difficult," the other objected. "Give me a few gadgets—an electro-magnet screwed under the table, a battery, two thin wires embedded in the plastic of the floor, and a contact just where your foot is—I could work that trick too . . ."

Lannia's face did not change—he still smiled.

"I believe something of the sort could be rigged up," he admitted. "But, as you see, there is no contact on the floor."

Behind the elegant smile Ray could detect waves of black panic racing round the Martian's mind. But the man still smiled.

"Look !" He moved to another part of the room, looked towards the ball and once again it slid up its stalk, stayed there a moment, and then clicked back.

The pseudo-senator glanced quickly towards Ray and Frobisher for guidance.

"There could be another pair of wires leading to that point on the floor also," Ray suggested softly. He began to slide his long-barrelled needle gun gently from its holster.

Lannia still smiled. The smile was now a little strained.

"A little complex and over-ingenious, don't you think ?" he observed.

"Tell me, Mr. Lannia," Ray asked. "You say a thrust of your mind, a sort of mental punch, will operate the fuse ?"

"That's true," Lannia agreed.

"Up to what range ?"

"Not any very great range," he confessed. Some of the strain left him. Ray felt the turmoil of panic in the man's mind begin to subside.

"When you emit the mental punch which operates that model, why has it not caused the bomb fuse to function ?"

"I—I do not know," Lannia said hesitatingly. "It's an obscure matter, requiring a knowledge of a specialised branch of mathematics."

Ray slid his gun forward into view.

"Your model is operated by an electro-magnet screwed under the table," he stated. "There are pairs of wires running to several points about the room. You fixed these so that you need not always stand in the one point to close the circuit—the closing switch is a strip of metal screwed to the sole of your shoe—isn't that correct, Mr. Lannia ?"

Lannia hesitated. He was pale now beneath his tan, and beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

"Yes," he said.

"You are a very brave man, Mr. Lannia," Ray said. "No man could have performed such a mission more expertly than you have done—it will be no disgrace to surrender to us now."

"You are very generous," Lannia said.

Like lightning he turned and hurled himself towards the bomb. Ray shot him through the head.

He fell with outstretched hand within a foot of the switch on the side of the black box. He was dead.

There was silence, a silence so complete that the noises of the City could be heard through the closed window.

THE END