Science Fantasy

No. 7

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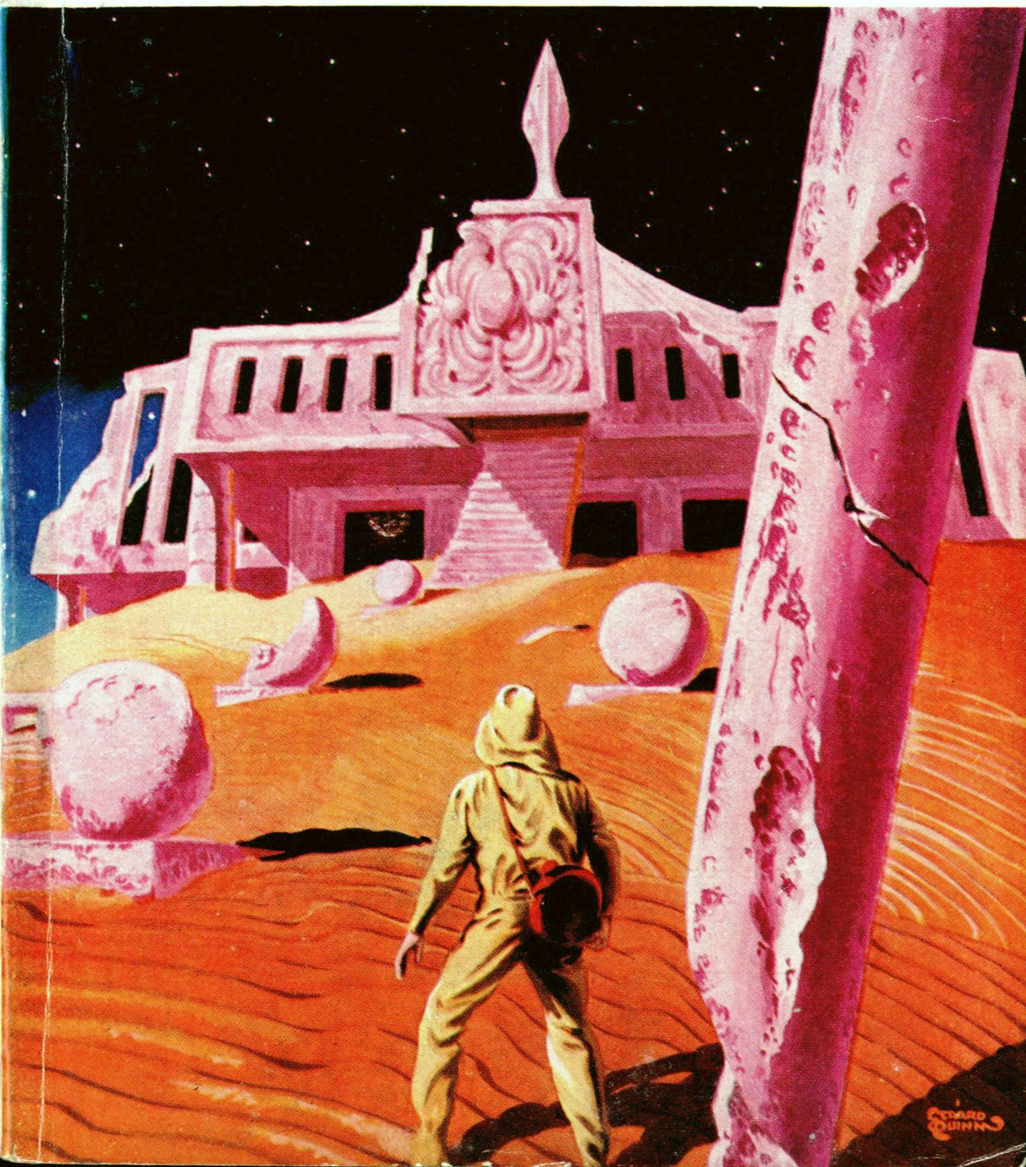

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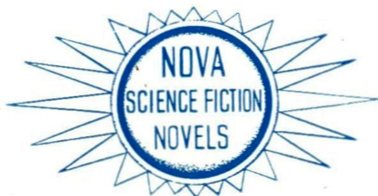

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GUEST EDITORIAL

*This issue's welcome visitor to the editorial chair is one of the most prominent in post-war British science fiction. Celebrated for his two recent outstanding novels—*The Day of the Triffids *and* The Kraken Wakes*—he is also a noted short story writer and yet another member of the International Fantasy Award panel.*

THE PATTERN OF SCIENCE FICTION

By JOHN WYNDHAM

If the rose were called the stinkwort a degree of prejudice would have to be overcome before one found it to smell as sweet. There is also this shocking term, "science-fiction." Unfortunately my case against it has been weakened by everyone's inability to find an acceptable substitute. Even Mr. Wells could not find one, and had to fall back on the unsatisfactory "scientific-romance." So we have lost (lost out—U.S.) and the term has gained currency. It is now not only general, but it is also commonly used with that same curl of the lip as was the phrase "penny dreadful" years ago; lacking even the status of "thriller." Which is, I think, a pity.

It is not alone in suffering debasement. The word "romance" has not been suitable for a well-written work for some years now, the once respectable word "novelette" has been a slur for some time—at any rate in this country—the word "detective" is a sort of twin: one of him is over the edge, the other isn't, yet. The near uniqueness of "science-

fiction" is that it almost started debased. It only came into use about the same time that the hack writers discovered the new "market" and started beating their six-shooters into ray-guns.

Since then it has widened its coverage rapidly until we have reached a stage when nobody can tell what sort of stuff he is going to find under the label—and probably the rarest constituent of all is science. Consider a few of the type-categories that could be made: *Western Science-Fiction, Gangster Science-Fiction, Weird Science-Fiction, Crime Science-Fiction, Super-Universe Science-Fiction, Bug-Eyed Science-Fiction, Screwy Science-Fiction, Incomprehensible Science-Fiction, Pornographic Science-Fiction,* and there are more, including the whole overtly juvenile range. Now, jumbling all this stuff together under the same label does what? Well, one of the things it does is this, it gives just the same old stories with a kind of surrealist approach—with both feet in space, instead of having to keep even part of one foot on the ground. What it also does is that it overlays and brings into contempt a type of imaginative story which once maintained quite conscientious standards of form and writing in a niche of its own.

Nevertheless, there is still a core of both readers and writers who feel that the better works in the form do have a right to some standing, and in the flood of hackwork and rubbish they keep on looking for books and stories that will justify their faith.

And what is it they look for in those stories? Well, primarily, perhaps, that they keep the rules. It may sometimes be difficult to define the rules for a class of literature, but they exist, and it is, outstandingly, their observance or non-observance that makes a book good or bad within its class. One of them is that a tale must proceed from its premise with adequate reason and logic. Thus, in the detective story false clues are permissible and part of the game, but deliberate misrepresentation is not, and if this is used the reader feels that he has been cheated, his sympathy is lost, and if he is an intelligent man he tends to say "tripe," and have done with it. Similarly, in the imaginative story there must be a wholeness and a logic which is not cut across either by silly assumptions used simply to make a situation more exciting, or by silly inventions called up on the spur of the moment just to get the characters out of a jam. The unities of likelihood must be preserved to the best of the writer's ability. Few writers do attain quite the crassness of the illustrators who under the guidance of the money-in-sex publishers have evolved the convention of the brassiéred and pantied cutie accompanying the space-suited hero, but some of them approach it pretty closely.

Then there is the science itself. It has to be there. It is the backbone. Backbones, however, are worn inside, not outside. When I switch on

my radio I do not tell myself that I am employing the wonders of modern science, nor do I bore my friends with a lecture on how it works. I simply use it because it is there. I happen to know that there are principles which make it work, so I take it for granted. That is one point. The reverse of it is this (always assuming the possibility of a reversed point): —that if I could not conceive of any principle by which such an instrument could be made to work, then I should not know whether I were contemplating a possibility or a piece of sheer hocus; nor would my readers. Therefore, since there must be error in all prediction, it is wise to err on the conservative side. In support of this I would suggest that had Verne, at the time he was writing, supposed wireless-telephony it would have seemed to both himself and his readers not scientific at all, but magical, for which reason he would have alienated most of the readers and vitiated his own stories.

Invention, then, cannot afford to lunge out wildly. If it goes far beyond the known, or at least the suspected principles of its age, the reader no longer has common ground with the writer; the result of that is, at best, that his interest lags, and, at worst, the story becomes sheer nonsense for him. In other words, the story has lost touch with science, both in its modern sense and in the older sense of " knowing." The reader no longer knows what depends on anything, and the whole fabric has fallen into the never-never.

There is plenty of this kind of thing where the author has got himself into such a state of utter confusion that he falls back on aggressively tough remarks of great stupidity leading to a series of pointless fights to keep things going, and, unfortunately, it is this kind of thing also that has now come to be commonly thought of as the pattern of science-fiction.

The object, then, of an annual Fantasy Award is to pick out the best exercises of controlled imagination—imagination working from data or theory within accepted limitations—work in which the writer has thought honestly, written carefully, and refused to abuse the logical implications of his theme. (It may sound dry, but it is the minimum requirement, just as it is the minimum requirement of a *good* detective story.) Sifting is even more necessary in this field than in crime, for in the latter there already exists an understanding of the distinction between an intelligent detective-story and a sheer thriller. If the Award can do anything to bring home to the public that the same kind of distinction exists in science-fiction, and make the best more widely known, then it will have justified itself. And if any member of its Committee, or, indeed, anyone at all, can produce an acceptable generic term which will distinguish the readable from the unspeakable let him announce it and do us all a valuable service.

Mars was ageless, deathless, its dwindling population only interested in the planet's past glories. Overall dwelt a sentient brooding something which found a way to break through to Earthly minds and shape them to its own ends.

SEEK EARTHMEN NO MORE

By FRANCIS G. RAYER

Illustrated by QUINN

The swing doors of *Solar Union* swished shut at Mike Barry's back. He walked hushed, cream and green corridors to a glazed door marked *Solar Union Commission*, opened it, and passed through. Tall, thirty-five, he looked more. *This was it*, he thought. *Those words on the door were fast becoming mere mockery.* But he would never agree to the proposals to be put forward. Never!

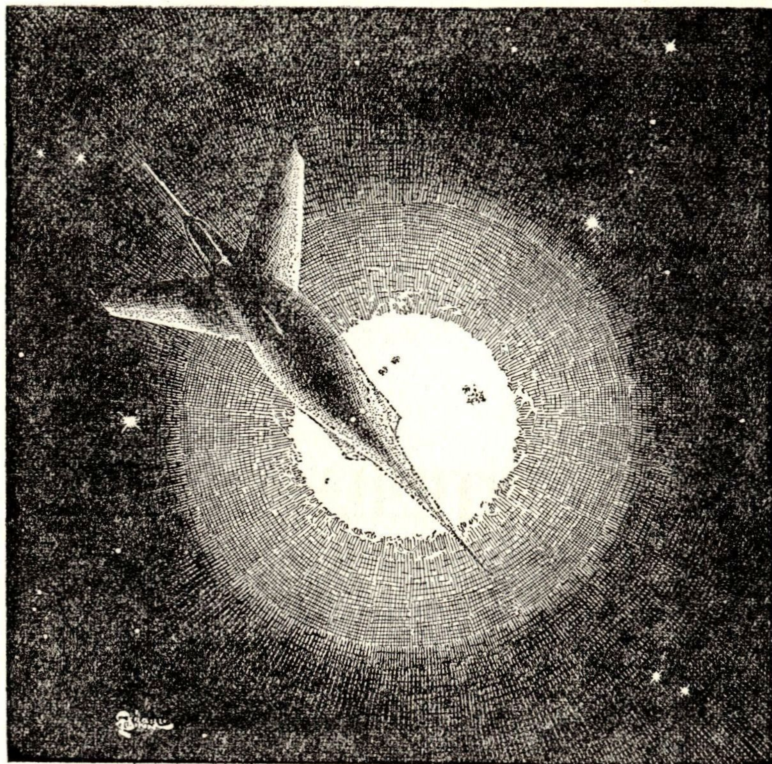
A man a few years his junior fell into step beside him. " Going to vote for the proposal, Mike? " he asked.

Mike shot him a glance. " You know I'm not! "

Charles Wylie drew in his boyish cheeks. " You're dead against it, aren't you."

" Was never more dead against anything in my life, Charlie."

" There'll be opposition."



" I've expected it."

They followed a balcony corridor glazed one side. Near its end Wylie's hand settled on Mike's arm. He pointed through the window.

" Your viewpoint isn't likely to be favoured by certain big business——"

Mike looked out upon the sun-lit building tops. The superior height of the *Solar Union* block permitted a view to the edge of the city. There, distant beyond the skyline, ten silent rocketships pointed like gleaming lances at the blue heavens. He turned away.

" Crofton and Williams would never have spent so much cash if they hadn't expected it to pay. It's up to me to see that it does." And to open up this first stepping-stone to the stars, he thought.

Inside, Mike's gaze flicked over the best-known faces in the committee room. Haggerty, jovial, who winked as if to say " I'm on your side."

Samuel Carlton, seventy, white-haired, who invariably came to opinions wholly personal. Crofton and Williams, who had put their own and other people's money into rocketships under Mike's direction.

" We've been waiting, Mr. Barry," Samuel Carlton said.

Williams nudged Crofton, whispering. Mike saw that a tussle lay ahead. *But he would never agree to the proposals*, Here, on Earth, it was easy to plan. Out there, on Mars, it was not easy to execute . . . But men—real men—did not give up because a task was hell. His father had been on the first ship, almost thirty years before. Mike, a boy, never forgot his father's homecoming. The eyes that had looked on Mars had burned. " Colonisation will be some job, son—but worth it——"

Across the table, the chairman spoke. " You object to our proposals?"

Mike looked back at him. " I want progress, expansion——"

Samuel Carlton's eyes glinted. " Is that reasonable, in this instance? We are proposing that any attempt at colonisation be abandoned for at least twenty years; that in the interim a detailed report on conditions be prepared——"

Mike sat down. " Mars needs people. We have the ships to take them. It'll be a man-sized job, but it's been left too long already."

" Sometimes there's wisdom in letting things lie," Carlton observed. " There may be unknown diseases—unknown hazards——"

" There may," Mike agreed. " Exploration always uncovers the unknown! "

Haggerty cleared his throat in the silence. " Progress at any price, Barry? "

The expected argument had begun, Mike thought. There was a lot to be said on both sides. He wanted men to go to Mars. His reasons were not mere selfish reasons, put forward because of the ten ships. They were deeper reasons. Men had the right to explore . . .

" We are also proposing that the vessels made ready be modified, and used to transport cargo to Luna," the chairman observed.

Mike swore silently. Freighters! Carrying machinery to the moon, instead of men to Mars!

" I shall never agree to such proposals," he said.

He let his gaze pass round the committee room. Pairs of eyes regarded him . . . out of dusty brown sand. Daylight globes shone overhead . . . through a weak blue sky, fading until there was only sky. The walls were gone. A rusty desert extended to the horizon, still except for tiny dust-devils that danced and swirled across the dunes.

Away to the right, sandstone rocks rose beyond a watercourse that had long since become a mere dusty valley. A thin curl of smoke rose from a tiny Martian fire where herbs stewed in a metal pot. Dry winds sighed

amid the rocks. Soon the sun would be high, burning down from a cloudless sky, so that the dunes seemed to dance in the shimmering haze.

For an infinitesimal yet timeless moment Mike felt that he was encompassed by—*was*—something immeasurably complex. He was seeking . . . seeking . . .

Then daylight globes burned through the hot sky; faces came, and voices emerged above the whispering wind.

"The final details should not present much difficulty, Mr. Barry," a voice said.

Mike met Samuel Carlton's eyes. Those eyes were tired, now. He looked at the others. Crofton was visibly flagged; Haggerty had perspired. The ashtray before Williams was filled with cigar butts . . . Mike momentarily closed his eyes.

Time had flowed. He opened his eyes, looking at the wall clock. Two and a half hours had passed since he had entered the committee room.

The chairman rose. "We're pleased that you agreed to our proposals, Mr. Barry," he said. "The motion would never have been passed without your support."

Chairs scraped back and men filed out. Williams was last to go. He paused behind Mike.

"It's our money you've lost—but your job!" he snapped. "Converted to freighters!" He snorted.

Wylie balanced himself on the balls of his feet, his hands deep in his pockets. "Never heard a man speak so convincingly, or with such strong conviction!" he said. "Nor ever had a bigger surprise in my life."

"You shouldn't have believed your ears, Charlie." Mike wondered for the thousandth time exactly *what* had happened. Almost twenty-four hours had elapsed since the committee meeting. He had since gathered that he had spoken long and well—that it was largely through his efforts that the very motion he had intended to condemn had been passed.

Wylie sighed. "You as good as stood up and asked Crofton and Williams to give you the sack! It would take twenty years freighting to Luna to cover what those ships cost."

"I know." At first, Mike had tried to explain. The attempt was futile.

"What shall you do?" a quiet voice asked from by the window.

Mike ceased fiddling with the oddments on his desk. He had been waiting to hear what Judy would say. She seemed to have reserved judgment. At twenty-eight, Judy Metton had a wisdom all her own. It showed in her dark eyes as he met them.

"What shall I do?" he murmured. "That's simple—*go to Mars.*"

She gave an exclamation. "But Michael, when you spoke against it! When you pointed out the dangers! When you said that it was unsafe there, and unwise to let people go——"

"Forget what I said!" He found it difficult to keep the snap from his voice.

"But you said it was quite impracticable to colonise Mars," she insisted. "I've the report here."

Mike drew in his cheeks. He had read that report. Every line amazed him. He had set out with great logic every reason why men should *not* go to Mars. He had even swayed Samuel Carlton into complete agreement. The resolutions had been adopted. Too late, now, to plead that they be reversed. Too late to claim that men *could* colonise Mars—*now*—if they tried . . .

"I'm going," he said.

When Wylie had left them Judy Metton crossed and stood by the desk. Mike looked at this blotter.

"I'm without a job, Judy. What's more, I've been a traitor to Crofton and Williams. The news spreads. Men who handle big money notice and remember such things, and don't take risks."

He trailed into silence. She touched his shoulder. "I'm—sorry, Mike." She sighed. "But why—*why*—did you say such things? *Solar Union* was undecided. You could have talked them into sending those ten ships of colonists. Your opinion carried weight. It still does. You could have started things rolling."

"Instead of bringing them to a dead halt." He did not look up. "And that's just the point. *I did not*. It was someone else—or something else—"

He raised his gaze and studied her face. She did not understand. That was written clear. He stood up.

"Listen, Judy," His voice was deadly calm, deadly serious. "I did not want colonisation stopped. I did not want those ten ships used as freighters to Luna."

Her eyes were puzzled. "But, Mike——"

"I know!" It seemed hopeless, he thought. "You don't believe me. You can't. I don't blame you. That's why I'm going to Mars."

It was a long time before she spoke. "Running away . . .?"

"No!" His eyes burned. "That's how it looks—but that's not the reason!"

There seemed nothing more to say. Judy let herself out and he watched until she had gone from sight along the enclosed balcony. Then he opened his blotter. It held one small clipping from a newspaper two days old. There was no big headline, no front-page display. Only a few

lines of small type. " *Local Counsellor pleads for his vote to be changed. 'I was asleep, and dreamed of Mars,' he said . . .*"

Mike gazed sombrely through the balcony window. Coincidence couldn't explain away a thing like that.

Mike stood with his back to the dusty wind. The particles crept beneath his clothing and adhered to his skin. The dry, earthy taste was in this mouth, and his goggles prickled where they lay upon his forehead and cheekbones.

" According to the map, it should be there—"

He pointed away across the dusty brown desert which extended to the horizon and beyond. His companion nodded, bleached blue eyes screwed up in his lined and wrinkled face.

" Should be. But what is an' what should be ain't always the same, on this planet."

Mike looked at him quickly. Gibson knew about as much of this part of Mars as any Earthman ever would. Among the first to come, he had stayed, growing old amid the loneliness.

" You know it well, don't you," Mike said.

" Well as any man. The deserts and the old cities; the deserted burial grounds and the unfinished canals; the sandstone caves where the last Martians linger, and the polar cradlelands from which they sprang—I've seen them all. Their race is older than the race of man, and they know things mysterious to us, for all our knowledge."

" So you think I may have tramped all these miles for nothing? " Mike asked.

" Did I say so? "

Gibson shaded his eyes with a hand. Mike wondered whether he was perhaps, a younger man than he looked, but wrinkled and dried by the parching winds of Mars. Mike thought that his journey might well be wasted. He had come to Mars partly because there was now no job for him on Earth; partly because of his experience, so vivid. Two weeks had passed since his landing; a week, since meeting Gibson in the single tiny Earthmen's outpost.

They went on, side by side in the loose dust. And this, Mike thought, was to have been a prosperous colony! Money, men, and machines could have made it so. There had been plans, and hopes—including his own. But no fulfilment. Ten ships should have come with five thousand men. Instead, he had come almost alone, on the single ship that maintained Earth's outpost.

But for himself, those ten ships would have come, he reasoned.

A week's thinking had consolidated his initial guess—*someone, or*

something, on Mars had not wanted those ten ships to come.

" I remember the ship-load of stuff being put down," Gibson said, walking with a stride unhindered by the sand. " Recognised the spot on the map, too, soon as you told me what you'd seen."

He glanced at Mike curiously, and Mike sensed that his story had not been believed.

" So you'd seen a picture of that dried-up valley, and cliffs, Mr. Barry? " There was total disbelief in the tone. " I'm wondering where such a picture would of come from, I am."

Mike let it pass, and pointed. " It should be beyond that ridge? "

" Yes. Ground dips just there."

They plodded on, ankle-deep in loose brown dust that had once been fertile earth. And could be fertile earth again, Mike thought, with proper irrigation and moisture conservation.

" Suppose Forsythe told you about it," Gibson observed.

Mike thought it wise not to admit he had never before heard the name. " Tell me about him," he suggested.

The bleached blue eyes turned upon him, then ahead. " It was him who had the stuff what I was talking about sent out here. I heard tell that he'd been drummed off Earth. A harmless looking cove, quiet as they make 'em." Gibson drew in his lips. " He'll have been dead this ten years, if I'm a judge."

" What kind of—*stuff*? "

" Electronic. A calculator, I've heard say."

Mike mopped his brow. " He wouldn't have to leave Earth because of that."

" Dunno." Gibson seemed to have reached the limit of his knowledge. " That's what I heard tell."

They began to climb the long, gentle rise. " This—calculator," Mike pressed. " Is it still there."

" What's left of it—a mound of junk."

They reached the point which had been visible across all the miles of dusty wilderness. A ridge a mile long, and perhaps a thousand feet high, Mike thought that its straightness testified to its artificial origin. Once, perhaps, it had been twice as high, clear-cut, possibly even verdant. Since those days it had been eroded by the winds of time, and was a flattened, elongated mound, backed by sandstone cliffs. He halted.

This was it. Only the viewpoint was different. If he went away down into the valley, and looked back, the scene would be the same. A rusty desert extended to the horizon. From down there, the sandstone would rise beyond the old watercourse, just as it had appeared for that fantastic moment—which had been two and a half hours—in the *Solar Union*

committee room.

He licked his lips, doubly dry. It was a shock to find it just like this. He had felt that Gibson could be wrong, and unable to pin-point the locality on a map from the description alone. Mike half wished that Gibson *had* been wrong. A dry wind moaned, and dust-devils curved upon the hazy desert, just as when he had first looked upon the scene. he shivered.

Gibson looked at him. " You got fever? "

Mike turned his back upon the valley. " I've found the spot. Thanks. But that's all, for now."

Gibson's face was disappointed. " Don't you want to go down? I can show the path. There's a few chums who'll be pleased to meet you."

" Chums? "

" Martians."

" Oh, another day." Mike wondered if the survivors of the planet's past masters numbered a thousand in all. " I want to radiograph Earth."

They turned their feet down the dusty, shifting slope.

The outpost that was to have been a centre for colonisation stood with its foundations in an outcrop of red sandstone. To have been a terminus for the coming of thousands, it sheltered a hundred men. Half were experts investigating with the infinite slowness of government officials; half were a flotsam drifted in for reasons other men would never know. Some were the born wanderers of the Earth; some had obviously been at variance with society, and the law.

As Mike paced outside the radio-building door, he thought of the ten big rocketships, and snorted. Freighters to Luna! They should have been pouring men and equipment into the outpost, rousing it to activity. . .

The door opened and a man looked out. " Reply has come, Mr. Barry."

" Thanks." Mike took the slip. The two hours waiting had been long, but might well have been exceeded.

He turned on a heel and walked slowly down the sandstone road between the half-empty buildings. It could have been difficult to find the Counsellor who had dreamed, he thought. And more difficult, still, to convince him that no one was trying to make a fool of him. But Judy would have done her best.

In the shade of the building that he had walked into, and used without objection since arriving, he opened the slip. Sent in Morse to over-ride static and distance, it was as brief as he had expected.

" *He dreamt of a desert, and valley backed by sandstone cliffs.—Judy.*"

Mike stood for a long time, slowly crumpling the slip in his hand. At last he turned in through the open door. *The same*, he thought. There was only one mistake: *dreamt* was the wrong word.

Dim, slanting moonlight illuminated the dusty valley. The evening winds had gone, and the dancing pillars of dust subsided. No twinkle of firelight showed in any of the sandstone caves, nor moved any living thing in the parched wilderness.

In the desert a purpose stirred, awakening again. The purpose strove to create action—to move—and was suddenly upon the top of the ridge. The dusty valley lay below; ahead stretched a long, glimmering slope.

The purposive awareness strove again, failed, and fell back in upon itself. But not for long did it remain quiescent. Its awareness uncoiled, and was again upon the ridge. There it remained a little while, feeling around it the sensations of night. It knew that it was still in the desert; but its awareness was upon the ridge. It had striven to move, and was there, though no space had been traversed and no time had elapsed.

After a time it directed its awareness to the end of the ridge. It was upon the end of the ridge, cognizant, now, of new areas of the wilderness. Time elapsed. It wished to withdraw, and was back. In the empty desert it sat under the twin moons. No minutest particle of dust had been disturbed by its going or return.

Beneath the awareness, the purpose increased, fundamental to it and always to be fulfilled. It strove, and was in green fields damp with spring dew. It saw tall trees and running water, and a little girl that walked behind a bunch of animals.

It followed the animals, slapping a stick upon the backs of those who were slow, and waving to a man who stood away across the field.

After moments its purpose failed. Again around it lay baked desert, silent and empty. It tried to be upon the ridge, but could not, and relapsed back in upon itself.

"So your—*pals* think the place haunted, so that they don't go there much any more," Mike said.

Gibson, sitting on the sand with his back to the wall, sucked in his weathered cheeks. "*Haunted* is scarcely the word, but the nearest *we* can get to it. They look upon things differently. Mars is *old*, and wasn't always dust. Beneath that dust lies uncounted generations of achievement, gone, now. *Meacre* is their word, and it doesn't mean haunted. They've no word for that. They're too old a race. All they say is, that anyone who goes along the ridge may suddenly find himself down on the desert, and as suddenly return. That's all. So they keep away."

Mike moved out from the shadow of the building. "You ever—felt that?"

There was a long pause.

"No."

"And this—this *meacre* has become much more frequent of late?"

Gibson stirred the dust with a heel. "They say so."

He looked down the road and Mike followed his glance. A Martian was coming—one of the few who ever bothered to enter the Earthmen's outpost. They did not keep away from fear, but indifference. The Earthmen had nothing they required. They were proud, too, Mike thought. The bearing of the one who approached showed it. Slight and short by Earth standards, he was aged. The appearance of age was deceptive, Mike knew. A Martian could come and go, aged but unchanging, while a man grew to maturity, relapsed into old age, and died.

The Martian's loose garment swayed with his unhurried motion; his feet whispered on the sandy road. Gibson got up. "He once lived on the ridge," he murmured.

The old man halted, smiling. "You are uneasy, Earthmen," he said.

Gibson nodded. "Perhaps, Resse. If so, it is because we are less wise."

Resse inclined. "If less wise, yet more strong."

Mike remembered the conventions. "You were undoubtedly strong in your youth, wise one."

The Martian inclined again. "Less so than you now are, Earthman."

They were silent. Mike cleared his throat. "I would ask you question."

"The answering will give me pleasure, Earthman."

"You once lived on the ridge by the sandstone cliffs?"

Aged eyes glinted. Resse folded his hands under his garment. "I did."

"Was there—*meacre* before Earthmen came?"

Resse looked out towards the desert. "No. Never."

Mike noticed the note of sadness in the voice. "Your—past has been glorious," he murmured.

The Martian's eyes lit. "Less glorious than can be your future, Earthmen. Yet—yes, *glorious*. In that past glory most of us now live." He smiled. "We wish to be there—and we are there. You understand."

"No."

Resse shrugged. The shrug seemed to say that perhaps it was as well . . . that Mars was old, and its knowledge infinite, while Earth was young, and Earthmen's knowledge small.

"This—this *meacre*," Mike pressed. "What is it? What happens?"

"You have no word . . . It is that a man who walks upon the ridge may find himself upon the desert, looking at the spot he walks. I have felt it. I was upon the ridge, one evening. Then I was in the valley, looking up. Then, yet again, upon the ridge. My footsteps in the dust were unbroken."

" You have no explanation? There is no hint of it in your lore? "

" None."

The silence grew. Gibson stirred. " We are pleased to have talked with one so wise," he said.

" True and greatest wisdom lies in the ear of the listener."

Robe swaying, he passed on along the sandy road, and from sight. Mike watched him go, consciously relaxing tension. Resse had a wisdom one with the age-old hills and eternal desert that stretched without end.

A man came out of the radio building, smoking. Seeing Mike, he waved a slip.

" You get some odd messages! Suppose who pays thinks them worth it! "

Mike took it, opening the paper. " *I dreamt I was in a dusty desert ending in sandstone cliffs.—Judy Metton.*"

He drew in his breath and looked up. " When will the next transport be arriving? "

The man stopped at the door. " Want to go back to Earth? "

" Just that."

He jerked his head. " Come in. We'll look out the schedules for you."

Mike met Gibson's eyes. Gibson nodded to himself. " You'll be back," he said.

Mike stepped out upon the fire-scarred concrete which was to him part of the green fields of Earth. The scarred surface seemed friendly, even, after the aridity of Mars. Judy Metton stood a little apart from a group of officers outside the site buildings.

She waved as Mike alighted from the motorised runabout. " Didn't expect you back this soon."

" There are things I want to look into."

He examined her keenly. She was tired—but it might mean nothing. Unusually quiet, too. But perhaps that did not signify.

When they had passed out from the site, he pulled her arm through his. " This dream, Judy? "

Her eyes turned seriously towards him. " Just what I said in the spacegram. It seemed so real—frighteningly real."

Mike nodded. He had felt that way. There has been the committee room . . . then the dusty sands of Mars . . . then once again the committee room.

" It was a desert, with a dried-up valley," she said. " Behind were high sandstone cliffs—"

" I know."

She halted. " That's not all. There's been others. A little girl, and her father. They felt strongly enough about it to tell neighbours, and some newsman picked up the story." Fear was in her eyes. " What *is* it, Mike? What happens? Why? "

He pressed her arm, unable to answer.

An hour later, when they had eaten, he leaned back in his chair. His mind had been active and he had come to a new decision. He surveyed the other diners under thick brows, pensive. To most of them, *Solar Union* was only a name. Some would scarcely have heard of it. The initial enthusiasm of reaching Mars had waned when people saw there was to be no easy money, or large-scale colonisation. The decision to use the ten new ships to freight to Luna had stirred up no great interest. Life on Earth went on the same. Mike wondered whether that would always be so.

" I'm, going to see Crofton and Williams," he stated abruptly.

Judy's brows rose. " Them? The last pair I would think of! Why? "

" Just to see if we can get those ten ships on the way to Mars after all! "

They slipped away from the murmur of voices. The streets were busy, as always. Watching the flowing faces, Mike wondered in how few minds was a curiosity to match his own. They would not have noticed that at least three people had had the same odd experience . . . and that that experience had coincided with the decision to keep the ten ships from Mars.

Crofton and Williams owned a huge block on the borders of the city. From its windows the rocketship site could be seen, and the nine silver spears that should have cleft space to Mars. Judy had pointed to them as he left her below.

" One left last week to fetch Lunar ore."

Mike rode a lift to a level far above the noise and dust of the streets. Sun streamed through long windows and office personnel came and went, some glancing at him curiously.

The girl in the outer office recognised him but hesitated. " I—I'm not sure that Mr. Crofton or Mr. Williams will wish to see you, Mr. Barry."

" Try them," he said. " Tell them it matters."

He waited, wondering what he would do if they refused. After a long time she came back, her face red.

" They're willing to spare a few moments," she said.

" Thanks."

He passed through the frosted door, an inner office, and emerged into a room he knew well. The pair sat behind their great double desk. Crofton's arms were folded across his chest, and his eyes had a peculiar

expression behind his glasses. Williams sat with one leg crossed high over the other, his chin on his hand and his elbow on the arm of his chair.

" We've no work for you, Barry," Crofton said.

Mike stood in front of the desk with his hands in his coat pockets. He wondered whether they had called him in to insult him.

" I'm not looking for it, at present."

Crofton looked at Williams, and back, his glasses glinting at the motion.

" We're busy men, Barry."

" Not too busy to hear my proposition." Mike looked them both over. " You know as well as I do that I didn't want those ships turned into freighters for Luna! "

Williams unwound himself and sat up, eagle-eyed and long-faced. " We know nothing of the kind! It seems most unlikely, bearing in mind your conduct at the meeting! "

Mike knew that his task would be difficult. " I want to get that decision reversed. I'd like to see these ten ships on the way to Mars—"

Crofton grunted. " *Nine* ships."

" Nine, then. There's space on Mars for colonists—for men who will work, who don't want a soft job, but rather take pride in seeing a hard job done well."

Williams got up. " Who paid you to come here, Barry? "

Mike let his retort pass. " The three of us, together, might succeed."

Crofton leaned forward and tapped his blotter. " You remember what you said, Barry? Let me remind you! We'd be shipping people to almost certain death. Yes, your words! It was twenty years too early to think of colonising Mars. It would be folly to rush in until after proper scientific exploration." He snorted. " And a lot more—"

Mike bit a lip. " Those statements are not true! "

" True or false, the public has heard them. They were big news for weeks. Have you thought of *that*! Even given permission to take the ships to Mars, they'd go empty, unless we paid people to board them! Anyone who's read or heard your masterly speech now looks upon Mars as purgatory, and upon anyone fool enough to go there as listed among the damned! "

He subsided, fuming, and Mike was silent. *It was that bad*, he thought. He hadn't realised.

Williams tapped the desk. " We don't know what your plan is coming here, but wager it's one that would be no good to us! We've been betrayed once." He drew in his cheeks. " Yes, *betrayed*, Barry! By you. We expected your support. You had promised it. With that support, those ten ships would be loading for Mars. Even had you kept silent,

we might have succeeded. But you didn't—"

"I tell you it was a mistake!" Mike exploded. It was impossible to be silent. "I'd like to see those ships away to Mars!"

Williams sat down with an air of finality. "Go to hell," he said.

Mike put his palms on the edge of the desk. "You won't help me—?"

Crofton glared at him. "We want nothing to do with you! We've found it doesn't pay!"

"B—"

Williams swore terribly. "Go to the devil, Barry!" He smote the desk. "Get out or I'll ring for men who'll throw you out!"

"But—"

"*Get out*!"

"Very well, if that's the way you want it."

He turned and strode stiffly out, not looking back or to either side. The girl in the outer office did not speak as he passed.

Hell, he thought. Yet he knew that he could blame neither of the pair . . .

Resse stood in the dusty solitude with his back to the scorching sun. His shadow stretched, clear cut as if inked, away towards barren, distant hills. One with the eternal desert, he let his mind stretch back and away in the manner decreed in the ageless lore of his ancestors. The dry desert faded, and water was sparkling in the network of irrigation-ways that stretched from pole to equator. A city that had not yet collapsed into the dust upon which he had stood arose around him, and he walked amid stately buildings.

Robe flowing, he traversed corridors paved with coloured marble, and passed through an arched doorway into a chamber where an aged one sat. Eyes the same hue met; features cast from the same mould smiled.

Resse inclined. "I find you with pleasure, revered father."

Resse sat upon a delicately-carved chair. "I have come a long way, father—many years. I am afraid."

The aged one bent his head. "For what?"

"For strange things that are upon our planet in my own time in the years to come. Once this planet belonged to us. It was so in my earlier years. Now, it is not so."

"The past is always ours. We can always return to it, re-living our past glory." He gestured. Sunshine streamed through stained windows and somewhere music played. "Stay, then, with us."

Resse rose jerkily and crossed to an opened window. He shook his head. "Too many of us have already flown from the fears of our own times, seeking safety in the past. I have come to speak with you, not to stay."

He was silent, looking down into the street. A youthful crowd passed, singing. Two aircraft murmured overhead, arrowing into the eye of the sun. He set his back to the window.

"I am pleased you stay here, father. You are old. But I wish to live out my life in those years into which I was born."

They were silent while the singing faded from the sun-warmed air. The aged one sighed.

" Tell me of your fear, son."

Resse thought for a long time before replying. " Mars is no longer ours. We shall not fade as the moisture goes, until both race and planet are dead. Instead, we are to be dispossessed."

" You speak of the Earthmen—? "

" No." Resse's eyes sparkled. " They are strangers to this planet—but not to this galaxy. They would not dispossess us of our heritage. Instead, they would bring water to our deserts and green again to our arid hills. We know many things of which they do not dream; but they have many sciences of which we do not know. With them they would help us." He breathed deeply, shuddering. " It is not them. They are of our solar system. They are strangers, but not alien. They are as people who have come from an adjoining city. It is not them . . ."

The aged one's eyes were puzzled, afraid. " Then what, son? "

Resse listened for long moments to a single young voice singing. " It is—*something* not of Mars," he said. " Something not of Earth. Something, I think, not of this galaxy. With it has come a strange *meacre*, that grows more frequent every day."

His father drew his robe closely around himself. " It has come since the Earthmen? "

" Yes."

" It is of them—is something we do not understand, but brought by them . . ."

" No." Resse's voice rang with conviction. " It is not of Earth. It is—*alien*."

" Stay with us here, then."

Resse shook his head. " I shall not desert the years into which I was born, though the wisdom of our ancestors make that possible. I feel this alien thing that has come is one of immense power. Even here may not remain safe. I wished to warn you. That is all."

" Your coming has been to me both joy and glory."

" But to me tenfold so."

Resse let his mind drift in the way he had been taught. It accorded with the passing moments; with the passing years and millennia . . . He stood upon an arid desert with the sun at his back and the waterways were dry, and the buildings part of the dust upon which he stood.

He sighed, turning off across the dunes. Far away to his right, just visible as a smudge upon the horizon, was the ridge and the caves where he had lived. He turned his feet from it, shuddering. The terrifying *meacre* had been much, much more frequent of late . . .

Haggerty stood up with finality. " I'm sorry, Mr. Barry. I can't support you."

Mike kept the despair from his face until he had reached the street. Haggerty's refusal had been no less definite than that of Crofton and Williams. There had been suspicion on the jovial face; mistrust in the cheerful eyes.

"You've become rather an—*outcast* among us, Barry," he had said.

That summed it up well, Mike thought. No one trusted him, now.

He turned his steps towards his last address. Bright daylight globes strung high illuminated the city. Neons flashed, spelling eye-catching slogans, and evening crowds were thick upon the streets. He boarded a passenger subway vehicle side by side with a big man in a grey suit, and they sped below ground level. Mike sat with his face glum. Samuel Carlton was his last hope.

Stations whisked behind, and they shot up into the open air once more. Mike alighted, walked a block, and ascended in a lift that bore him into a quieter world of elegant luxury. A servant answered his ring, and finally took him in. Samuel Carlton, smoking and in a creamy-white suit, rose as the door closed.

"This is unexpected, Barry."

Mike realised that he must make his points as concisely as possible. He smiled slightly.

"So I'm finding. Old friends soon forget old faces—sometimes. But I can at least expect a civil hearing, here."

Carlton acknowledged the words. "What do you want?"

"To open full-scale contact with Mars. To get those nine ships that are left loaded with colonists. To open up the planet, as the first men who risked their lives to get there intended—"

"To make flower a wilderness—"

"Exactly!"

Mike wondered whether Samuel Carlton would support him. Together, they might eventually accomplish something.

Carlton sat on the arm of his chair. "A commendable aim but surely adopted too late."

"It need not be too late!"

Carlton exhaled smoke pensively. "People who have helped you in the past have found it—to their undoing."

Mike felt his hope ebb. No one would trust him. He met his host's eyes.

"I can explain."

"So Crofton and Williams informed me by phone scarcely an hour ago," Carlton observed flatly.

Mike knew that he had failed. "Crofton and Williams?"

"Yes. They explained at some length."

"I see."

Mike turned on a heel and left the suite, descended, and stood feeling utterly alone while the tide of people flowed round him. There was no help to be had on Earth.

He walked on, seeking less-frequented ways. The glowing heart of the city slipped away behind; the lights became less closely-spaced and brilliant. He walked for half an hour in black despair, then became conscious that other feet followed him. He halted at a corner and looked back. A big man in a grey suit, tall, with a round face, stood under a lamp. His one hand seemed oddly placed. A shock ran through Mike from head to toe. With it came realisation. He drew back, setting the corner of the building behind him. Something sang against the stone, whining on. Particles spattered his face and clothing.

He ran quickly and lightly for the next corner. It was farther than the distance his follower had to traverse. He flung himself round it with a noise like a wasp in his ear, and doubled into an open doorway. There, he stood in shadows. The man ran past, a needle-gun in one hand. His steps echoed, then halted. Came silence, then they began to return.

Mike moved soundlessly to a position behind the door. A shadow came in the dimly-lit doorway, hesitated, and came through. Mike lapped strong arms around him and forced the weapon from his hand. The man twisted round, his eyes glinting in the reflected light. Mike released him. He was a stranger. Mike thought of his near escape from death.

" You made a mistake? " he snapped.

The man withdrew from reach. " I'm not paid to make mistakes."

Paid, Mike thought. A hired assassin! But by whom? Not jovial Haggerty. Certainly not Samuel Carlton. By big-businessmen who felt themselves betrayed, and about to be betrayed again, in some way they did not understand . . .?

" Crofton and Williams? " Mike grated.

The big man withdrew through the door. " Guess if it gives you fun," he growled. His steps sounded to the corner, then were gone.

Speed counted, Mike thought. He slipped the other way, taking random corners. Once he thought he heard feet following, heavy and quick. At last he reached crowded streets and some of his tension relaxed. There was, after all, one more place to call. Judy Metton.

The dark, serious and wise eyes remained fixed upon his face. " They must feel badly to try to kill you, Michael."

" They've had reason." He looked from her window down into the lit street. " I'd heard rumours that Williams could be tough, though I'd never seen evidence of it before."

People passed. If the big man in the grey suit were among them, he was unseen. It was late and the city was drifting into the hush that would

last until dawn. Mike turned round.

" I've come to a dead end here, Judy. No one trusts me enough to help me get those ships to Mars. I'm an outcast—a traitor. I read that in Haggerty's eyes. They don't remember how much work I put into those ten ships, or how much I stood to lose. Instead, they think I'd schemed to get their capital tied up in a useless project. I can't blame them. It looks that way."

He moved away from the window. Judy Metton got up and stood near him.

" You haven't given up, Michael. You're not that sort. Nor the kind to be scared off." She smiled, quiet, serious, beautiful. " What shall you do? "

" There's only one thing."

" And that—? "

" Try from the other end—from the Mars end. The next provision ship will have me as passenger."

She nodded, understanding in her eyes. " I guessed. And I'm expecting that ship to have passenger space for two——"

Gibson screwed up his eyes against the sun and the hot brilliance of the desert, and pointed. " There's the ridge, Miss Metton."

Mike saw tension and eagerness—and perhaps fear—on her face. The note of the sand-truck rose and fell rhythmically as it mounted the billowing dunes that stood like the swell of some petrified brown sea. Dust half sand and half dry, pulverised earth drifted behind. The metal of the truck was hot to touch, and the engine roared and sang as the wheels sank half to axle level.

" Better make for one end of the ridge," Gibson said.

Mike turned the vehicle to the left, watching for a spot in the crumbled spine that must once have been a mountain range. Pillars of dust danced on the hazy, wavering horizon, sometimes twirling high into the cloudless heavens.

" How long has it been like this? " Judy murmured.

Gibson shrugged and scratched a wrinkled cheek. " Five thousand years? Ten? I'll wager no water's run down that valley for longer than that! When the water's gone, nothing remains. The plants die, and the people. The cities fall and everything grows flat, like a seashore the tide's covered." He grunted heavily. " It's like this most other places. I've been about anywhere on this planet that any Earthman has. It's all the same—dry, dusty, arid, except where there's rock. The rocks stick like dead things our of the sand . . ."

The truck began to murmur up the end slopes of the ridge and the

edge of the desert beyond came into view. Looking across it, Mike saw that it was flat as a tray of shaken sand—except for one point. There, a low dune broke the even brown sea. Diffused, almost lost, it was nevertheless visible. Gibson followed his gaze.

" That's where Forsythe's calculator stood."

Mike nodded. A building could have been there, soon to collapse and be covered by the wind-driven sands.

" We'll look around," he said.

Judy's eyes held curiosity. " What exactly was this calculator? "

" I checked up on that before leaving Earth. Forsythe was an old man when he came here, and has been dead these ten years. He'd been head of a manufacturing concern and had money. He tried to get permission to build this calculator on Earth, but failed. So he had the idea of shipping the whole thing out here, and no one stopped him. He spent a fortune, and it was a failure. If the building down there had been more durable, it would stand monument to his folly. As it is, the whole thing is as good as forgotten."

She thought for a long time. " You don't think it ties in with what's happened? "

" No. I don't see that it can."

They went into the dip that had once been a watercourse, and rolled up out of it to the desert plain. The sand-filled channel was almost a mile behind when Mike halted the vehicle The dune that marked Forsythe's folly was twenty yards to their right.

" *This is it*," July breathed.

She was looking at the sandstone ridge, her face startled. He nodded. This was the view he had seen.

" It's rather—terrifying," she said.

He turned his back on the sandstone ridge. It was. As accurately as the eye could judge, he had stood upon this spot before—or within a score or so of paces from it. Yet he had never before set foot upon the desert.

They walked round the dune, and over it. In a few places the broken metal fabric of the building was still visible, drunken girders projecting through the sand.

" It's all buried in dust," Gibson stated with conviction. " There's not a crack or a corner it wouldn't reach."

He scuffed in the dusty brown sand, grunted, stooped quickly and picked something up. His bleached blue eyes sparkled.

" Ever see anything like that? "

Mike took it. It had once been spherical, was heavy, and a foot in diameter. The surface was pitted and scarred as if by time or great heat,

and so dented one side as to leave a jagged crack.

" Something that belonged to a native," Judy suggested.

Mike turned it over. " Perhaps. I've never seen a yellowy metal like that before. I don't think it can be anything Forsythe brought."

Gibson stared at it. " I've never seen metal like that on Mars, either. Shows there are things here even I haven't met up with."

Mike shook the object and sand came from the crack. The cavity inside must have been small, and the walls thick, judging by the weight. The fissure was too irregular to give a view of the interior.

" We'll see if Resse can identify it," he suggested, and put it in the sand-truck.

Further exploration confirmed his first opinion. The rather fragile building that had housed Forsythe's machine was a flattened ruin and the mechanisms that had stood within it were silted remains worthless to uncover.

" Just a junk heap," Gibson said as he boarded the truck.

Resse made the Martian gesture of negation. " It is not an object made by my people. It is something the Earthman brought these many years ago."

" I don't think so," Mike objected. " The metal is a strange one."

Reese considered. " It is unknown to me, also. It is no Martian metal."

" Perhaps it *is* something from Forsythe's machine," Judy suggested.

They stood by the truck in the shade of the outpost buildings. Mike frowned. No one could identify the object. If Resse had never seen its like, it was not Martian. Yet he would swear that no similar, yellowy metal had ever been made on Earth. Unless, as Judy suggested, it was something specially fabricated by the man who had lost a fortune and died regretting it.

" I'm going to have it sent back to Earth, first chance, and classified," he said abruptly. " I'm no metallurgist, and may be wrong."

Resse sighed deeply. " May your wisdom bring you a glorious future." He turned quietly away.

" I'd give a lot to know the things he knows," Gibson said when they were alone. " We may be clever with machinery and the like, but some of these Martians know things we don't dream of. I've heard rumours. I lived for a year an' more with some of them, out by the ridge. They told me one night that they were going. Next morning, the lot had gone —never saw a trace of 'em again—"

" *Gone*? Where?" Mike frowned.

" Didn't say. Their planet was too dry, they said. Every year it was growing harder to live. They didn't want to stay. It hadn't always been like this, they said. Once was prosperity, with water, and many of their

fellows in happy cities. Next morning the lot had gone—the whole fifty odd of 'em, with never so much as a mark in the sand to show where."

He wrinkled his face in perplexity and they were silent.

"There were quite a number of Martians about when the first ships landed," Mike said.

Gibson pulled his stubbled chin. "Thousands. But they've gone. *Where*? They haven't died. They've just spirited themselves away! There have been others, too, an' I never seen a one of 'em since!" He spat in the dust and buried his hands in his coat pockets. "That there Resse knows things as no Earthman will ever know," he stated.

Mike watched him until he had entered the building he had appropriated.

"You think there's truth in what he says?" Judy asked.

Mike listened to the silence. "Probably. Many natives *have* gone, but we don't know where. It's an older world than Earth, and strange things have happened even back there."

He left it at that. Gibson had lived with the Martians and could have heard of things which had not reached other human ears. Mars was old with wisdom. Much had perished, but the important learning—the valued knowledge—would have been saved . . .

He thought again of the ten great ships that should have unloaded by the half-deserted outpost.

"This time is bigger than I thought, Judy," he said. "It's going to take time—"

He got into the truck, reversing. Vehicles left unprotected usually became choked with the gritty dust that rose whenever wind blew. It was going to take time.

The purposive intelligence in the desert grew hourly more active. Not requiring rest, day and night were alike to it, and with each rising and setting of the sun its experience had grown. It did not see the dancing pillars of dust which came soon after dawn, but had knowledge of their presence by a strange cognizance disassociated from that of vision or hearing. When darkness came, its awareness of every detail of the surrounding terrain was not diminished.

Soon it found that it could only be rarely upon the ridge. Spatial distance meant nothing, and it walked more often through green fields and rode through populous cities. Wholly and keenly aware, it could only endure to remain in one place for a short temporal span. Sometimes, when it looked out upon a scene of exceptional interest, it remained there, not wishing itself back into the desert. But often it flitted from viewpoint to viewpoint, remaining mere moments. Each viewpoint brought its own special and individual awareness, and the entity knew that it was

each time in the consciousness of some mobile organism. Sometimes the organisms were lowly, moving secretly in dark places, experiencing only the vibration and tenor of deep waters, or the smells of the earth, and it soon learned to avoid them. It sought more intelligent organisms, and in their mobility and knowledge found joy. Again and again it looked through their eyes and spoke with their voices, learning in the first instant of possession the whole content of their conscious and unconscious minds. Often it was purposive; somethings it contradicted their wishes in mere idle and sportive jest.

As the sun rose and fell, and rose and fell again, its purpose grew. The all-important desire to remain in existence asserted itself, and it longed to preserve its quiet haven in the desert. It had lodged in cruel minds that never knew rest or content, and flown at last from a torrid planet circling a hot binary sun. Now, it knew that its means of physical travel through the dangerous radiations of space was destroyed, and that for the remainder of its life, while stars waxed and waned, it must abide upon the spot where by chance it had arrived.

A man with round boyish cheeks, and eyes surrounded by the wrinkles left from smiling, walked out of the settling dust of the rocketship's landing. He looked about, waved, and plodded forward, ankle-deep in the fine sand. Mike went to meet him.

" Never been here before, Charlie? "

Wylie shook his head. " Been too busy all my life to go farther than Luna. But I'll admit this is a thrill."

" I was surprised by the message that you were coming."

Charles Wylie looked at him quickly. " Wait until you hear my news!"

They walked into the settlement. Wylie washed and changed his clothes. Mike wondered what had brought him. They got out drinks and Wylie sat down. He looked over the top of his glass.

" What are you up to, Mike? "

Mike felt shocked by the tone of reproach. " Up to? Nothing! Just trying to find what happens! "

Wylie looked relieved. " I'm glad to know it. A big scare has been developing on Earth these several weeks since you left. Folk think you're at the back of it, or somehow responsible. Or so rumours say. I've heard from authoritative quarters that you're likely to be shipped back and kept for official questioning. You look like being in trouble."

Mike started. " Why *me*? "

" Because this thing's associated with Mars, and what's associated with Mars is associated with you. Especially after that last lot of publicity." Wylie set down his glass. " For all I know, there may be people who have their own reasons for fostering the idea. When folk get scared they look for a scapegoat."

" I see." Mike wished he had asked Judy to be there to hear what his friend had to say. " And of what, exactly, are folk scared? "

" The 'possessions,' as the most popular Sunday papers call them. They're so frequent, so similar, that no one can ignore them. Cutting out the embellishments of the more imaginative accounts, each comes to about the same thing. It's not much—"

Mike nodded. " Don't tell me—I've experienced it."

" Then you'll know it's enough to scare folk. And folk are scared." Wylie grimaced. " More than scared—terrified! The thing's been made a national sensation." He took out a crumpled sheet, tapping it. " *Possessive Demon strikes again. 'I was just preparing supper,' woman says, interviewed late last night*—"

Mike took it, read it, and screwed it into a ball. " Sensational news sells copy," he said. " Especially when there's an element of truth."

Wylie sighed. " I agree." He produced a small clipping. " This is from a different class of paper—one to respect. *Is sacked rocket technician and expert on Mars behind these happenings . . .?* " He held out the cutting. " That means you."

Mike did not take it. " There's enough feeling to get me taken back and jailed? "

" More than enough. *Held for official questioning*, they would say—"

" The same thing! " Mike turned and gazed out into the sandy road. He had not thought the thing would grow like that, making him a wanted man. Nor had he imagined that people on Earth would be made afraid . . .

A man was coming along the dusty road from the radio building. He looked in curiously, halting. " A message for you. And long. Someone certainly has money to spend! "

Mike slit it and read. " *The spherical object sent by you has been fully investigated. It contained vestiges of mechanical and electrical devices of advanced design but unknown purposes. The atomic structure of the materials in it, and forming it, are unknown to Earth. No investigator has encountered them on Mars. They are assumed to be an isotope of alien nature. You are asked to forward the fullest possible details covering the discovery of the object.*"

Mike stood as if stone. *An alien metal.* He slowly folded the message, not speaking . . .

" You've gone white," Charles Wylie said.

" Maybe, Charlie. Maybe."

Mike stood on the edge of the desert, gazing into the wide, aged eyes.

" You are—*going* back? " he repeated.

Resse inclined his head. " Our years here are ended, Earthman. We are afraid and there is no peace. We who remain grow more lonely.

In the years of our past are peace, safety and companionship."

Mike remembered Gibson's words. On Mars were indeed things unknown to Earth.

" But this—*going back*? " he insisted.

" It is a thing known to us for many thousand years. We are an old race. It is a regression back into the civilised era of ourselves. The mind is accorded with the past. It is complex, yet explicable."

Mike felt his intense interest quicken yet more. " An Earthman could do it? "

Resse considered long, his gaze fixed upon the distant wilderness. He gestured assent. " Why do you ask? "

" It is something we have never known, on Earth."

Resse drew his robe close. " Even I am afraid to stay. I go to gather those few treasured possessions I would not leave. The mind accords them with the past, and they are there. You understand."

" No," Mike said flatly. He looked across the desert at the setting sun. Soon would come the deep, still night. " Will you show me? "

Breath held, he waited. He wondered whether Resse would wish to keep secret the ancient knowledge, handed down from times immemorial. Perhaps. Perhaps, again, no Earthman could understand . . .

Resse's gaze came searchingly upon his face. " Show you? " he murmured at last. " Yes, I will show you. I see no harm in it. Be warned, it will not be easy." He looked at the setting sun. " You could know, by dawn. It is an awareness, an identification of what is with what has been . . ." He hesitated.

" Yes? " Mike breathed.

He waited. The low sun gave long shadows to the dunes. The heat was going. Never had Mars seemed so old, so wise. Resse did not move until the last limb of the sun had gone.

" Come with me into the desert," he said.

A week passed and Mike saw that a crisis would come. An official radiograph from Earth requested that he hold himself ready to return by the next vessel. Resse and his companions were infrequently seen. Two days after he had taken Mike into the desert he entered the settlement and bid them a formal good-bye. " My companions await," he said. He did not reappear. Mike thought of the past glory into which Resse had taken him, and understood. There, Resse and his companions were safe from the strange and terrifying *meacre* . . .

Mike hunted through the empty settlement buildings and found explosives that some mining expert, long since gone, had never used. He loaded them into the sand-truck with Wylie's help.

" I'm going to blow the remains of Forsythe's calculator to dust, Charlie," he said. " This trouble seems to centre on that spot."

Judy Metton came along to the waiting truck. " You mentioned a man who tried to shoot you, Mike," she said.

" I did."

" I've seen him."

He experienced a shock. " *Here*? "

" Yes. He's been keeping out of our way. Watching us, most likely. A big man, tall, with a round face—"

" That fits," Mike agreed.

" Then you'd best take care."

" He could have shipped in with me," Wylie said. " There were half a dozen of us. One man kept to his berth. Space-sickness, they said."

Mike got into the truck and started its engine. " Thanks. I'll be watching for him."

He refused to let either come and set out across the undulating dunes. The buildings of the outpost faded from view behind, and at last the ridge appeared in the dancing haze. He drove to its low end, halting the truck.

The desert lay below, shimmering with heat. The far horizon shifted and wavered, barely distinguishable from a mirage of brown sandy wastes that gleamed above it. Central in the arid wilderness was the tump. Gazing at it, Mike's lips compressed. *Some damnable, inexplicable thing had there made its home* . . . He started the truck and turned it down towards the sandy plain.

The vehicle rose and fell over the hillocks. He shaded his eyes against the almost overwhelming heat and brilliance, driving with one hand. The explosives should be piled upon that infernal tump, he thought, and then detonated. The *thing* that rested there should be destroyed . . .

The sand-truck whirred on, wheels deep. This is what he should have done weeks before, he thought. The thing in the tump was an enemy—must always be an enemy, because of its alien nature.

He wiped perspiration from his eyes with the back of a hand, accelerating as the wheels slipped. He felt triumphant, confident.

Then the whine of the engine ceased; the feel of the wheel under his fingers was gone. He seemed to be standing in the middle of the dessert, his consciousness identified with that of something no longer in the truck. The truck was half a mile away across the hot sand . . . it turned in a quick curve, heading back towards the ridge. He felt powerless, as if time had ceased, taking with it conscious will. He seemed to watch the truck, fascinated, as it climbed the shimmering end of the ridge.

Then the engine thundered in his ears and the wheel kicked under his hands. " *Hell*," he said.

He braked, stopping amid drifting dust and looking back. He was upon the ridge and the desert looked remote and distant, away below.

" *Not that easy*! " he grated.

He turned the truck and took it bouncing down the slopes. Engine roaring, wheels churning sand, it sang to the edge of the desert . . .

From the centre of the desert he watched it turn, almost tipping over, and ascend the dusty hills. Deep in the centre of his mind something cried out as if imprisoned by a will stronger than his own. While that will and consciousness was identified with his own, something of its

terrible purpose seeped through to him. It wished to dominate: that was its nature. In its long past it had dealt with organisms more able to resist than he . . . and triumphed. It always triumphed. It always dominated. It was invulnerable . . .

The identification of mind with something akin to mind but not of flesh and blood ceased. He was bouncing in the truck down the other side of the ridge, his clothing adhering to his body. He slowed the vehicle, trembling.

It could not be done. A will stronger than his would always gain control and make him turn back.

Slowly, almost like a broken man, he drove the sand-truck back to the half-empty settlement.

Judy Metton and Wylie stood with their backs to the window of the shaded room.

" It was—that bad? " Wylie asked.

Mike nodded, shaken still. " I see, now, why Resse and the others have gone. I don't blame them. I'd go myself—if there was anywhere to go."

" To—Earth," Judy suggested.

" No. Mere interplanetary distances don't seem to count." He prepared a drink and saw that his hands still shook. He pushed the plastic tray round with one finger. " It turned me back—just like that," he said.

Wylie opened one of the shutters and looked into the street, and at the sky. He withdrew his head, returning the shutter to cut off the sun.

" It turned you back to protect itself," he said.

" Without doubt."

" Suppose there was a simultaneous attack by a number of us? "

" I don't think it would work. It could deal with a large number in quick succession—might even guide individuals to self-destruction." Mike considered. " No, I don't think it would work."

Wylie nodded slowly. " No, I don't think it would—"

Mike looked up, attention quickened by something odd in the tone. " What do you mean? "

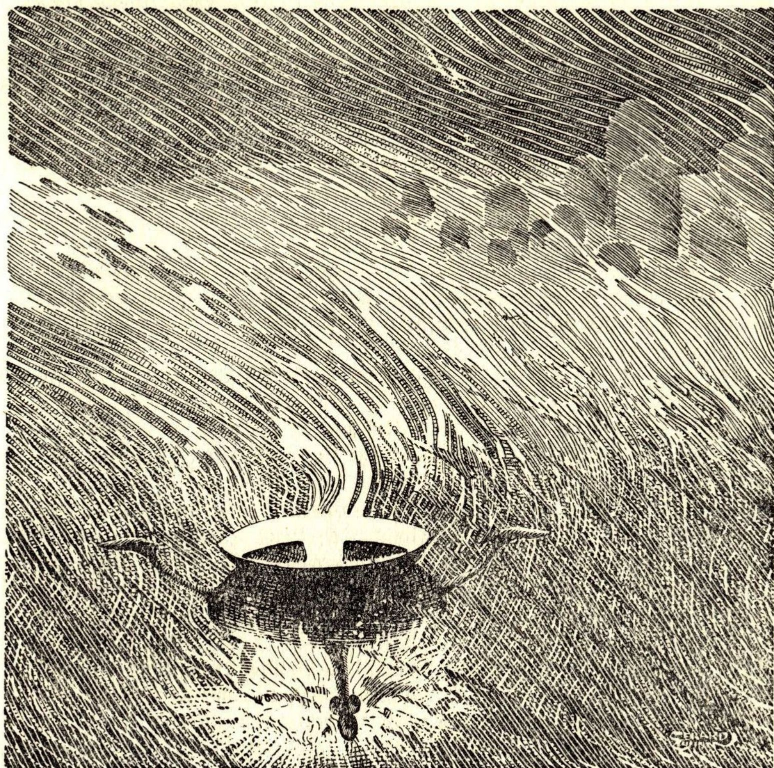
" That it seems to have turned aside something else, already."

Wylie came forward into the room, and Mike saw that his face had paled. He felt a shock.

" Turned aside something else, Charlie . . .? "

" Yes." Wylie drew in his cheeks and years seemed to settle upon him. " The spaceship is overdue."

In the frizzling darkness the crew swore, shouting wildly for the captain who had turned the rocketship sunwards and blasted at 5 Gs until it was too



late. They raved for the electrician who had fused the ship's circuits, accomplishing in five minutes of madness damage that would take a week to repair. There would be no week . . . nor yet seven hours of remaining life for them. Some screamed as the slow rotation of the ship brought sunlight through the ports, and staggered back as from an opened furnace door. Below, awesome in size, terrible in heat, and mighty in gravitational pull, loomed the sun. The walls sizzled where the rays touched . . . then as the slow rotation continued, sweating men wept in the searing dark, uselessly fighting each other.

Mike listened in the still, Martian night. Complete silence lay over dunes that were faintly silver with dim moonlight. If feet still moved in pursuit, they did so soundlessly.

He went on, thinking of the ten days that had passed since the rocketship became overdue. At first they had hoped that she would appear, or break her radio silence. Later, they had abandoned hope. The full

significance had only become apparent slowly—Mars was isolated. No more ships would call. No vessel would bring stores, or come to fetch men home. Ships might try, but each would be turned aside, probably to destruction. In ten days the truth had sunken deep into the heart of everyone in the outpost. Already some stores were short. Mike knew that subsistence could not be scratched out of the arid planet upon which they were marooned. Death was certain. To him it could come more violently and quickly.

He paused to listen, and heard footsteps scrape momentarily on out-cropping rock. A form came round boulders at his left. He bent double, and a whisper floated over to him.

" This is Judy."

He rose, facing her. " You should stay with the others. There's a chance—"

" You know there's no chance. No ship will ever get here."

" But at least you could avoid death the violent way," he urged. " If they find you with me . . ."

He did not need to end, and she nodded. " They're fools to panic."

" It's the loss of the ship," he said, " and the news from Earth. That, and the message saying I was to be imprisoned. They've pieced together enough to hate me, and feel they've reason for it."

" Aided by the man Crofton and Williams put on your trail."

" Perhaps."

In the distance three men appeared momentarily against the skyline. Nearer, away to the right, a voice called and another answered.

" I need ten minutes," Mike said. " Just ten minutes! "

From her eyes he knew that she did not understand. He gripped her arm and they went along a depression, silent as shadows on the sand. He stopped.

" Don't speak to me, don't interrupt me . . . when they come, say you haven't seen me."

" But—"

" Time is short," he said.

He turned his back upon her and put from his mind all thought of the following men. Ahead was a silvery wilderness, dune upon dune like a frozen sea. The agelessness of it—the *timelessness*—swept into his mind . . . he felt that each moment was accorded with the birth and death of universe, and that suns were created and cooled while a single timeless instant fled. Years came and went and were not, and had never been; the mind-created sequence of hours stood revealed as the illusion it was . . . a sequence created for convenience—a mere *habit* of thought.

His mind encompassed growing periods of time, his eyes looking back as if along a road his feet had trod. Beyond were longer ages, and all

were one. Tall towers rose out of the arid desert. Water sparkled in channels, and voices sang.

He walked down the mosaic-paved streets and into a building he had been shown only once, but would never forget.

Resse rose, inclining. " My pleasure is great, Earthman."

Mike hesitated. " I trespass? "

" Never trespasses welcomed guest."

They passed through into an inner room and Resse sat upon a marble bench.

" What purpose brings you? "

Mike fixed his gaze upon the sincere, aged face. " A few words you once said."

" They were? "

" That you and your companions would bring here a—few prized objects . . ."

Mike stood listening in the desert and started as a shadow came as from nowhere

" I've been waiting," Judy whispered.

He faced her. " How long? The men have gone? "

" Two hours or more. They're still searching."

The moon was high, making shadows small. He looked from it at the surrounding dunes, quiet now, but perhaps concealing searching men.

" I want you to know what Resse told me," he said. " Then we must go out to the desert beyond the ridge."

" Yes? " She stood motionless, waiting.

Side by side they went over the end of the ridge. The desert lay below and Mike's gaze turned instinctively upon the hillock in its centre. He shivered. Under that hillock were the remains of Forsythe's calculator. Forsythe had created something akin to brain—and in that pseudo-brain the alien intelligence had lodged.

Judy hesitated and looked back. " Thought I heard someone following . . ."

They listened. The stillness was unbroken. Mike feared that what he was to attempt would fail.

" We had thought of it, Earthman, but dared not try," Resse had said.

Judy took Mike's arm and they went down the slope into the long-abandoned watercourse. Ankle deep in sand, they ascended its farther side.

" I'll—*try* to help," Judy whispered.

Be that help ever so slight, it might be decisive, Mike thought. They did not know the potential of the opposition they would have to face.

Suddenly he felt her grip tighten. She halted, releasing his arm. Her eyes were glazed, fixed upon something unreal. She turned from him,

half stumbling, and began to hasten back towards the ridge. He took a quick pace after her.

" *Judy—*"

She did not pause or look back. Hand outstretched to call again, Mike was silent.

Thus it had been when he had brought the truck ladened with explosives, he thought. The thing in the tump was protecting itself.

He compressed his lips. *He would be next*! Just as soon as the alien thought came to bear upon him, the struggle would begin.

" It would be helpful to you to be close, Earthman," Resse had said.

Judy was almost gone from view. He turned and began to run out into the desert, feet slipping in the loose dust. He was half way between watercourse and hillock when the first dawnings of the strangeness that he had before experienced began to come into his mind.

He halted as if abruptly stone, striving for the peace and the timelessness of Resse's wisdom to enter his mind. The desert seemed ageless, silvery and silent. The same stars had looked down while uncounted aerons ran . . . a million years before, desert and ridge had been there, even if then grass-grown and clear cut.

Behind the dawning peace, striving to break his accord with the past, arose another intelligence. Alien, strange, wordless, it strove to destroy his increasing rapport, ravening to gain control of his mind. Behind the ferocity of its onslaught lay the overwhelming desire for self-preservation. He strove to accord it with the timeless past, bringing to bear all his consciousness so that his mind ached, recoiling as from physical agony.

For a fearful instant he felt as if split in two. He was man, yet an alien consciousness that experienced terror. With the last of his remaining will, he struggled to fling back into past ages the part that was not him. With a snap as of physical impact the conflict ceased. For an instant he felt himself kneeling upon the sands, then awareness fled, and with it all hope of success.

Mike awoke to find the warmth of morning sun on his face. Wylie was bending over him. He stirred, and saw that he had been carried back over the ridge.

" Thought you were finished," Wylie observed.

Mike looked from the kindly, critical eyes, and saw Judy. " I—*failed*? " he whispered.

She did not answer. Wylie stood up and looked about him. " We can't stay here for ever, Mike. Now daylight's come they'll begin searching again."

Mike struggled to his feet. " I must see over the ridge! "

Wylie swore. " I found you flat in the desert there, and you're not going back! "

" *I am going back*," Mike stated. " I must—*see*."

He began to walk shakily towards the ridge. Judy followed.

" Mike—"

He shook her off. " I must *see*! "

Wylie came after them, face resigned. " What was it you tried to do? I gathered some of it from Judy."

Mike did not look back. " Resse and his companions could take *their belongings* into the past. If that ruined, central core of Forsythe's calculator had never been there, this thing that came would have found no lodging. But lodging it had. I looked upon Forsythe's calculator—*and anything it might house*—as merely another object. That object could be thrown back millennia—so far, that it had mouldered to dust before the first Martian civilisation began . . ."

Breathless, he struggled on. The slope seemed long and steep. If he had succeeded, everything would be as it should, Mike thought. Colonists would come to Mars. The barren hills could be watered and verdant.

" There's a party of men coming up from the settlement," Wylie said.

Mike looked back and knew that the three of them had been seen. Some of the men were breaking into a run, following.

He reached the highest point of the ridge and looked down. The desert lay silent, a deep brown in the sunshine. Already dust-devils were beginning to dance across its wastes.

Mike felt an unspeakable thankfulness. Behind, men's voices were shouting.

" Tell them—*we're all safe*," he breathed.

He gazed down at the desert. The undulating irregularity of its surface was a motionless brown sea. *It was worth trying*, he thought. *There was no damnable tump*.

THE END

It was a simple enough case of murder. The problem was to find the most suitable punishment short of the death sentence. Exile, for instance.

DEATH SENTENCE

By JOHN CHRISTOPHER

While waiting to be rescued, he spent most of the time in the main lounge. There were more than a dozen bodies floating here but two of them in particular kept his attention as he walked around in the magnetic booted space-suit. He could not resist looking into their faces, swollen and distorted and ugly as they were. They both showed the usual signs of asphyxiation, but the woman's, it seemed to him, had something else in it as well. Almost an awareness of just what had happened to them. The man was floating face down, but she was on her back, with her arms stretched up in supplication to the curved ceiling.

After the crash he had smashed the globe that set off the automatic radio distress signal, and now when he heard the dull clang of the anchor smacking against the outer hull, he went up to the entry lock. He watched the lock swing open and the figures of the rescue party come through.

He waved to them feebly. A few minutes later he was in the patrolship *Pollaket*, and they were helping him off with his space-suit. He fainted, and they brought him brandy.

Captain Stewart, in charge of the *Pollaket*, was a slight, sandy haired man with thin ugly features. When Logan had recovered sufficiently, he sat with him in his cabin. The room was not very well appointed even for a second class patrol-ship. Stewart sat upright in his chair before an ugly but tidy desk. Logan had a battered sponge chair facing him. Stewart apologized for this.

"We don't often have visitors, and they never stay long. This must have been a very unpleasant business for you, Mr. Logan."

Logan nodded. "Yes, very."

"I don't want to make it any worse if I can help, but there are some questions I'm afraid I have to ask you. You know how it is—reports to make out."

"Yes, of course. I feel a little better now."

"We stock a good brandy," Stewart said. "Now first, Mr. Logan, were you travelling alone?"

Logan paused. "No. With my wife."

Stewart said: "I'm sorry. Would you mind telling me just what happened."

"You know the usual safety regulations?" Logan said. "First thing out from Earth, all passengers have to go through the emergency drill, which includes putting a space-suit on. I wasn't able to do it with the rest; I have a migraine—it came on with the take-off and knocked me out for a couple of days. So I had to do mine on my own. I collected a suit and went to my cabin to put it on. You know, one feels a fool wearing one of those things in public when no-one else is."

Stewart nodded. His hands were pressed together in front of his chest, and he was rubbing them slowly.

"Suddenly, the lights went. That didn't worry me. I've travelled in space before, and I guessed what it was—a power blow-out. I knew they would have the stand-by generators on in a minute or two. All the same, I felt shut in . . . in the dark, in my cabin. I felt my way out to the main corridor. I could hear people talking, laughing—one woman screaming somewhere but most of them seemed to understand what it was Then there was a kind of whoosh, and the voices just stopped. Just turned off from one second to the next. I went on into the lounge, where I had left my wife. There was full earthlight through the transpex windows, and I could see the people floating there. Everyone was dead.

"When I looked more closely, I saw that the transpex was smashed. I turned the alarm on straight away, and then I went hunting through the ship to see if anyone—one of the crew, maybe, was still alive. There

wasn't anyone. I went back to the lounge. I found the meteor. It had dug its way into one of the sponge sofas. There were fragments of transpex scattered all round.

" After that, I guess I just sat and waited. It seemed a long time. A very long time."

" Yes," Stewart said. " I can imagine that. So, as you see it, it's fairly clear what happened? Something blew the main generators. That, of course, put the meteor defence out of action. And by sheer bad luck, in the minute or two before the stand-by generators went on, meteor crashed through the transpex of the lounge windows. The air was sucked out into space in little more than a second. You were saved because you happened to have your space-suit on at the time. Have I go it right? "

" Yes," Logan said, " that's what happened."

" You smashed the alarm globe as soon as you realized what had occurred? "

" Naturally."

Behind Stewart the usual battered notice on the wall stated that smoking was strictly prohibited from take-off until planet-fall. Stewart pulled open a drawer, and brought out a battered box of cheroots. He offered them to Logan, who shook his head. " I don't smoke." Stewart lit one himself, and leaned back.

" What do you do, Mr. Logan? " he asked.

" My profession? I'm an engineer on one of the space stations. Equator 3."

" And this trip? Holiday? "

" Yes."

" On Mars? I thought you space station people never went anywhere but Earth for holidays."

" Generally true. But this time. . . . My wife wanted a change."

" Had you been married long? "

Logan looked at him. " I suppose you would describe yourself as hard-bitten, Captain Stewart. You haven't forgotten that my wife's body is still floating out there in the *Astarte*? I'm willing to help you as much as I can, but I would appreciate some consideration on your part."

" When we make Detroit." Stewart said, " you can put in an official complaint. Meanwhile I should like you to answer my questions. How long had you been married? "

Logan tightened his lips. " Five years."

" Leave from the space stations is one month in four. Am I right? "

" Yes."

" Women get lonely being left on their own three months out of four. Sometimes some of them get to doing something about it. Was that what

happened with Mrs. Logan?"

Logan said: "Commanders of patrolships have wide rights of interrogation in the course of their duties. But you're just being offensive, aren't you? I don't see why I should continue to put up with you." He eased himself out of the sponge chair and stood up. "If you'll excuse me."

Stewart blew smoke out through his teeth. "Stay where you are, Logan. I'm going to arrest you. Once I do, I can't ask you any more questions. And I want to find just what kind of justification you had for what you've done. You will have a trial, of course, when we get back to Earth, but that's five days' journey on a boat like this. For five days you are in my charge. They leave me plenty of discretion as to how I treat prisoners. That's why I'm asking unnecessary questions."

Logan's voice was cold and even. "You're going to arrest me? On what charge?"

"On a number of charges. To be precise, on seventy-eight charges of murder."

"You're crazy."

"It was a good scheme, Logan—at least, the planning was good. It's easy enough, on a space station, to get hold of a meteor of the right size. That went in your luggage, along with some carefully shattered transpex. You dodged out on the space drill with that faked migraine, so that you would have an excuse for taking a space-suit down to your cabin at the right time. You left your wife in the lounge and at the same time you planted an explosive by the transpex window. I don't know yet what you planted it in, but a number of things would do—the window ledges are always cluttered to hell on passenger boats.

"Then you went down to your cabin and got into your space-suit. You waited there till the blow-up came. Then you went along to the generator room and ditched the main generator, so that it would seem possible for a meteor to have got through the defence screens. You set off the automatic alarm, and after that you only had to scatter transpex about the lounge and plant your meteor in a sponge sofa. You must have done quite a lot of calculating for that alone. Trajectories and so on."

Logan said coldly: "Your job must be one that stimulates the imagination, Captain. And not in a very pleasant way, either."

Stewart said: "The trouble was, you took too much care, where your own skin was concerned. To be on the safe side, you climbed into your space-suit well before the blow-up was due—maybe ten minutes before. Then, before you could send the alarm out that would bring rescue, you had to fix the main generators. That lost you more time. The alarm went out at 0507. We picked you up at 1059—I had to note the time for the log.

I noted something else, too. Each oxygen charge on a space-suit lasts one hour precisely. If you had just put a suit on, by accident, at the time of the blow-up you should have been near the end of your sixth charge. But you weren't—you were on to your seventh."

Logan smiled. "If that's all . . . ! It's true I deceived you about the length of time I'd had the suit on when the meteor hit. I'd had it on for maybe quarter of an hour. I'm an oxygen addict. I picked it up on the station. One doesn't like admitting things like that, even at a time like this. But I should have done."

Stewart looked at him. "You think fast, don't you? But a bit late this time. That only gave me the suspicion; I acted on it and got the proof. Before we lifted the *Astarte* out of her orbit, I had the boys check space outside the shattered window. A lot of the fragments would have been blown clear away, of course, but they found a few." He opened the drawer of his desk, and held up a broken piece of transpex. "Enough to show that what had happened was an explosion, and not an implosion. It's in the bag, Logan—right in the bag."

Logan looked at the piece of transpex. "She was a bitch," he said. "She wanted the holiday on Mars because he was going there. She couldn't be without him even for that time. I found he had arranged to travel with us on the *Astarte*. She didn't know I knew. It was my chance to get them both at the same time." His glance went to Stewart. He was smiling. "I got them."

Stewart pressed the button in front of him.

"I arrest you, Hamil Logan," he said, "for wilful murder. Seventy-eight people. Ten of them were children. Captain Rydusk was an old friend of mine. It's only five days to Detroit, but I can tell you now you aren't going to enjoy them. I promise you that."

Logan shrugged. The door opened behind him, and a patrolman came in.

"Fourteen years I've been in this job," Stewart said. "And for the first time I'm sorry that we've given up executing criminals. All right, Benstein. Take him."

The jury had been human, but the judge was a robot. Immediately after the verdict, he had been taken back to his cell, and he sat there now, looking at the blank wall, listening to his sentence being pronounced in clipped mechanical words that issued from the small black box set in the middle of the ceiling.

The box said: "You have been found guilty, Hamil Logan, by an assembly of your peers, of wilful murder. A crime of this enormity has not been known amongst men for more than a hundred years. The harshest penalty that can be exacted must be too lenient. Out of jealousy

you determined to destroy your wife and her lover, and in pursuit of your end you did not scruple to kill seventy-six other human beings. You committed these additional murders simply in order to protect yourself from the consequences of the initial crime."

Whatever he said could make no difference to the voice implacably proceeding from above. The circuit was one-way only. His words would simply echo round the narrow cell.

" Capital punishment was abolished in the twentieth century, following the Atomic War and the barbarism that came after it. But there were still murderers, and they had to be committed for long periods to prisons, where they were a drain on the efforts of the rest of the community. It was an unsatisfactory state of affairs, and men sought ways of remedying it. A way was finally found with the discovery of a means of travelling through time."

The words dinned at his ears relentlessly. There was nothing new in it to him, but this part had been written into the robot a hundred and fifty years before, to be spoken automatically to every criminal who, since then, had been given the final sentence of temporal banishment. Nobody had bothered to have the record changed.

" The future cannot be traversed—only the past. And the journey is in one direction only; backwards, because to return to the present from the past would entail travel into the future. For this reason, time travel can be of no value to men, except in one way only. It provides a means of ridding society of those who have shown themselves unfit to remain members."

Logan tensed. The preamble must be over soon, and then the verdict would come. He would know something of what he must expect.

" Obviously this is a form of punishment which is not unvarying. There are some periods of history which are less bad than others for a man to be exiled in. Some, as, for instance, the Roman Empire under the Antonines, are peaceful, and provide an opportunity for a man of the present to prosper, once he has adjusted himself to the environment. To those periods are sent the misfits whose criminality is of a minor or to some extent justifiable nature."

Not for me, he thought. But what?

" The period fits the crime. It is reasonable and just that this should be so."

The voice paused. He was on edge now. What was it going to be?

" Hamil Logan," the voice continued, switched now from the routine tape to the direct attention of the robot judge, " your crime, as has been stated, is of an enormity that has few parallels in our records. As far as we can contrive, your punishment will fit it. In your case there will be no prior notification of the destination—in time and space—that has been

chosen for you."

Unable to contain himself, he cried out: " Why not? Why won't you tell me? " But there was no-one to hear him.

" From this moment," the robot went on, " this age casts you out. You will see no humans of your own time again. In a few moments you will be put to sleep when the cell is flooded with hypnane. You will be given the usual hypnosis-inhibition against mentioning your origin to those who live in the past. You will not be able to tell them anything you may know of their future.

" You will be clothed as befits the time, and will be given such minor accessories as are thought to be necessary. If the circumstances require it, a knowledge of the language which you will have to use will be hypnotically implanted. Then you will be put in the time machine and transported. When you awake, you will be in the past. You will still have your present memories. When you realize in what time and place you are you will know, from your knowledge of history, what you must expect."

He wanted to shout again, to protest that it was unfair that he should not know in advance, but the iron control that had enabled him to make and carry out his plans was in place again. He would know soon enough, anyway. He stared up at the small black box.

" Hamil Logan, the Twenty Second Century casts you out. You will sleep now."

Still staring up, he heard the faint hissing sound as hypnane flooded in through the inlet valves of the cell. He caught the distinctive acrid smell, and then he fell asleep.

People. They were all round him, thronging in a solid mass in which he, a single unit, was carried along with the rest. A tunnel. Stairs leading upwards. His nostrils twitched to the smell of hot and sweating humanity. He was wearing strange clothes, a rough cloth, and in place of his familiar contact lenses there were two lenses that rested on a frame fitting across his nose. He blinked his eyes, accustoming them to this strange vision.

The stairs debouched into a kind of hall that gave onto the open. A street, and unbelievably congested traffic. There was a stall on his left selling what he recognized as magazines and newspapers. He pushed towards it, through the crowd. He felt in his pocket, and found coins. He handed one across the counter, and took one of the papers. His fingers were trembling as he looked at it.

He saw the headlines of the newspaper first: PEACE TALKS BREAK DOWN. Then he saw the name and the date-line: NEW YORK TIMES, 1954.

People turned to watch him as he began to scream.

THE END

Many stories have been written round the theme of a space pilot separated from his home life, but none have been so poignant as this. Miss Lees, a Canadian, captures the feminine angle in a manner no masculine author can hope to emulate.

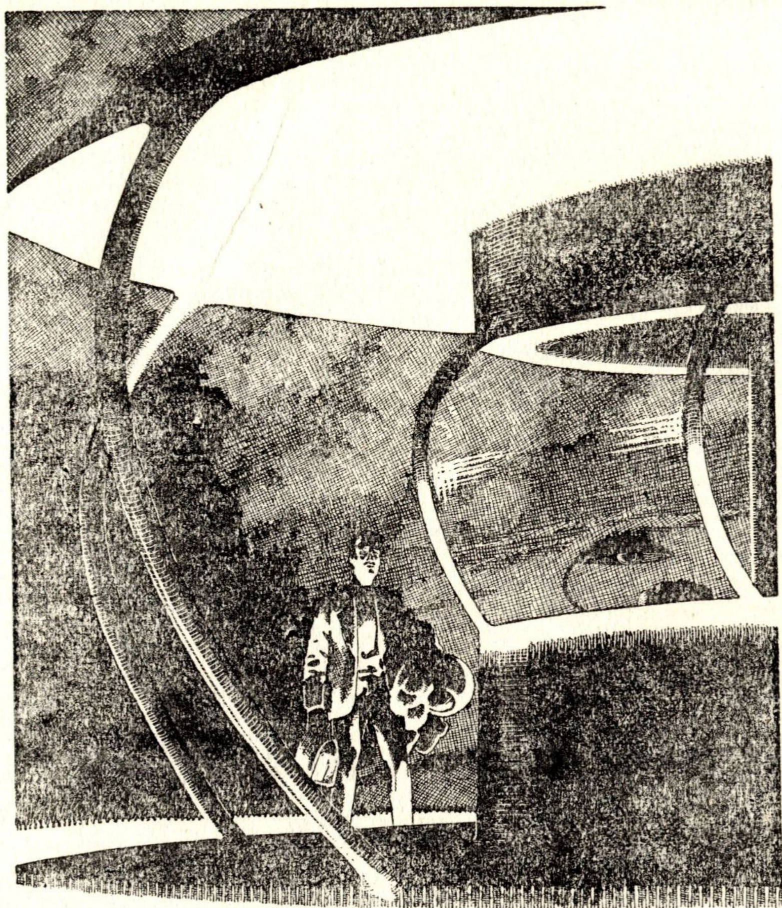
STRANGER FROM SPACE

By GENE LEES

Illustrated by QUINN

" Why can't we stay up and see him? Why, Mommy? "

" Because it will be nearly three in the morning when he gets here." All evening Ellen had struggled with their impatience, understanding too well their excitement at their father's return. For after all, that same excitement and much more was coursing through her, unsteadying her hands as she helped Bobby pull his pyjama top over his head. The pyjamas were light blue and soft, made of one of the traditional textiles: wool, as she recalled.



Bobby's strong, firm limbs were so like his father's. Everything about him was like Warren, from the almost black hair which she knew would some day go grey to the way he stood with his closed hands on his hips and his feet apart. He looked up at her with those bright, blue eyes and that so-familiar air of determination.

" I don't care," he insisted, a slight lament creeping into his voice. " I want to see him. I want to . . ."

" Bobby! "

" Oh, all right." Her first-born capitulated with great reluctance. And then his brow furrowed with ponderous eight-year-old dignity and he said: " You promise he'll be here in the morning? He'll really, honestly be here? "

" Yes, I promise. Cross my heart," Ellen said. Was it any great wonder that Bobby should be incredulous, that he found his father's homecoming hard to accept? He hadn't seen Warren since he had been seven.

" Southern Cross your heart? " Bobby asked. Ellen laughed. It was an amazing pun for an eight-year-old. " Yes, even Southern Cross my heart. If you'll go to sleep he will be. Linda doesn't want to stay up and wait. . . ."

It was a mistake. Linda, upon whose natural reserve she often depended to help her handle Bobby, suddenly said, " Yes I do. I want to stay up and see Daddy." Linda was seven. She had Ellen's red-blonde hair and, as a rule, her way of keeping her feelings and viewpoints to herself. For that reason, Ellen was surprised by her attitude.

" No," Ellen smiled, but with finality.

" Well, can we look at the pitchurs again before we go? " Bobby pleaded. " Just once more? "

" I suppose so," Ellen sighed. " But just once more."

She accompanied them to the library and again pulled the viewer from its place in the wall. Bobby and Linda sat down expectantly, almost as if they had never seen the ' pitchurs ' before. How long has it been since I've looked at them? Ellen asked herself and when she realized that it was at least a year, she decided suddenly that this time she, too, would see the ' pitchurs ' through with them. She made a place for herself between them on the couch and looked into one of the four binocular-like eyepieces which the sleek black viewer included. She pressed the switch and the first of the pictures began.

In the viewer it was spring. Sometimes the incredible realism of the picture gave her an uncomfortable, eery feeling. Seeing oneself in the three-dimensional viewer could be disturbing. In the film she wore a light spring dress as she stood beside Warren just after his graduation. She barely came up to his shoulder. The film had been shot in front of the Astro-Physics Building at the Institute.

I've put on weight, she realized as she saw her small, trim figure as it had once been. But not much, she reassured herself and indeed, after ten years and two children, it was not much. Her hair was still the same bright reddish colour that she saw through the lenses. And her pert face, with its ever so slightly too small chin, was unchanged.

After a time the uneasiness of seeing another Ellen before her faded, as it always did, and she looked at Warren. He had been laughing at the

time and his white teeth sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. And she felt within her the excitement and almost unbearable love for him which she had known that day and from which she had suffered ever since. He was tall and clean and good-looking, in his own hard way, everything that was masculine and strong and unafraid. That's the trouble, she thought. Warren had too few fears. He was afraid of nothing, not even of his own death and her resultant endless loneliness. In the film Warren kissed her cheek. She knew she would cry in a moment because the sharp eyes of the tri-camera had picked up the unmistakable motion of his mouth as he had whispered the irony of, " I'll never leave you, Ellen, never."

" Oh, this is the mushy one," Bobby moaned, saving her. " We don't want to see this one, Mommy."

" Yes we do," Linda argued but Ellen had already concurred with the first opinion and changed the reel to the one that showed Warren's last blast-off. Ellen had taken this one herself. And by then of course, they had long since acquired an audio attachment for the tri-camera. The sound made this reel the more incredibly realistic.

In a close-up Warren smiled. But how peculiarly his smile had changed since his student days. This smile was tight, forced, embarrassed, as if he knew the torture that his possibly-forever departure was bringing her and couldn't bear to look upon it. She attempted to find some sign of great love in his face but could not, unless it was for the great gleaming metal thing in the background.

The rocket stood over a hundred and eighty feet high, sleek and streamlined for its passage through the atmospheres of many planets. She watched Warren walk toward it and mount the elevator that carried him up to the air-lock. The hatch closed behind him and for a long time the film could have been a still; she had stood for a long time just staring, the camera still recording what she saw.

The voice of an unseen man said, " You'd better leave now, Mrs. Coulter. It's almost time." She remembered how his voice had come, with the sympathetic touch of his hand on her shoulder, from behind.

The next scene showed the actual departure. She had hurried to the hill high above and to the west of the space-port. Only the sounds of the night things could be heard. The world was motionless, arrested in darkness, until suddenly a great orange flash errupted from the tail of the ship, spreading in a great blasted circle of flame on the ground below it. Even then it had been silent—until that delayed moment when the great and terrible roar had reached her and the camera. The ship continued its slow rise, accelerating, its flame diminishing as the rocket motors moved into more efficient fuel consumption, and soon there was only a bright speck of fire in the night sky, growing smaller and finally lost among myriad stars, as Warren was lost to her in most of her life.

She arose from her seat, saying, " You watch the rest by yourself." Her children did not even glance away from the viewer. " I'll be back in a few minutes." And she hurried to the garden leaving them to watch the films Warren had brought back from previous trips, in which they could see as if they were there the strange life-forms and vegetation and ancient mountains and spaceports of other planets in other, almost unheard-of solar systems and galaxies.

She sat down beneath the canopy and lit a cigarette. Soon now he will be here, she thought, and with her fear returning, reminded herself that until he set foot on the Earth, anything could still happen. Spaceships had been known to explode on grounding before. After all, that was the reasons no homes could be built within five-mile radii of the ports.

In the gathering evening she waited and felt the struggle within her and the slow dying of her eagerness. Through nine years of their marriage she had been experiencing this unhappy quarrel with herself: the wanting him back and the half-wishing he were really, truly dead. In the months and sometimes the year or more when he was gone she always considered him dead and she became a dry and dusty wasteland inside, never daring to hope that he would come back. Then she lived for her children.

Because some day, as surely as she awaited him now, she would get that message: " The Space Commission regrets to inform you. . . ."

After a while she got up and returned to the house. The house had been Warren's choice. With some of the later developments in architecture they had been advised against this traditional style of home. But Warren said it had a certain dignity and grace and the circular structure had gone up, suspended on its central pole and turning at the touch of a button so that any window might face any part of the horizon at wish. It had been built after his last trip out.

" Come on, you two," she said, and her youngsters turned off the viewer and started for their rooms.

Ellen turned on the gravity-field beds and watched them lie down. She stood for a long time until they fell asleep in the softness of the air in which they lay suspended.

Then she returned to the garden.

I suppose it's selfish of me to put them to bed, she thought. But there's always so little time and I must have him to myself for at least one small fragment of it. I must.

But she knew through unhappy experience that by the time he arrived she would have stifled all emotion. He would come striding in, with that peculiar leaned-over gait as he lugged his bulky space gear in one hand. And she would look at it and hate all it represented and hate him a little and herself for loving him and her heart would turn away and they would

have nothing to say to each other beyond the barest formalities.

It had happened so often before. Or could it be called " often "? During their marriage they had been together a total of fourteen months; Warren had been away the rest of the time on his eight trips. So there had been eight homecomings and each time it had been the same: the eager expectancy, the knowledge before he came that he would only go away again and the resolve not to let herself be carried away, not to let him become too important to her. Each time, when he had been home, their relationship had been cool, distant, and when he went away again she would tell herself he was dead because she did not dare even to hope. Sometimes, Ellen read of the wives of ship captains of old and felt a great kinship to them in their dilemma.

If only I could hate him, she thought, simply hate him, cancel him out of my life. O God. why doesn't he stay home. Or die.

The wind was freshening and it helped her to cool further her eagerness. Whenever he came within radio range and the Spaceport told her he would be home in a week or eight days, he became a man resurrected and the tidy rut of her life was plowed wide and she had to conceive of him once more as a living, breathing being who would generate for a time within her a warm, rich excitement until she was able to hide it even from herself.

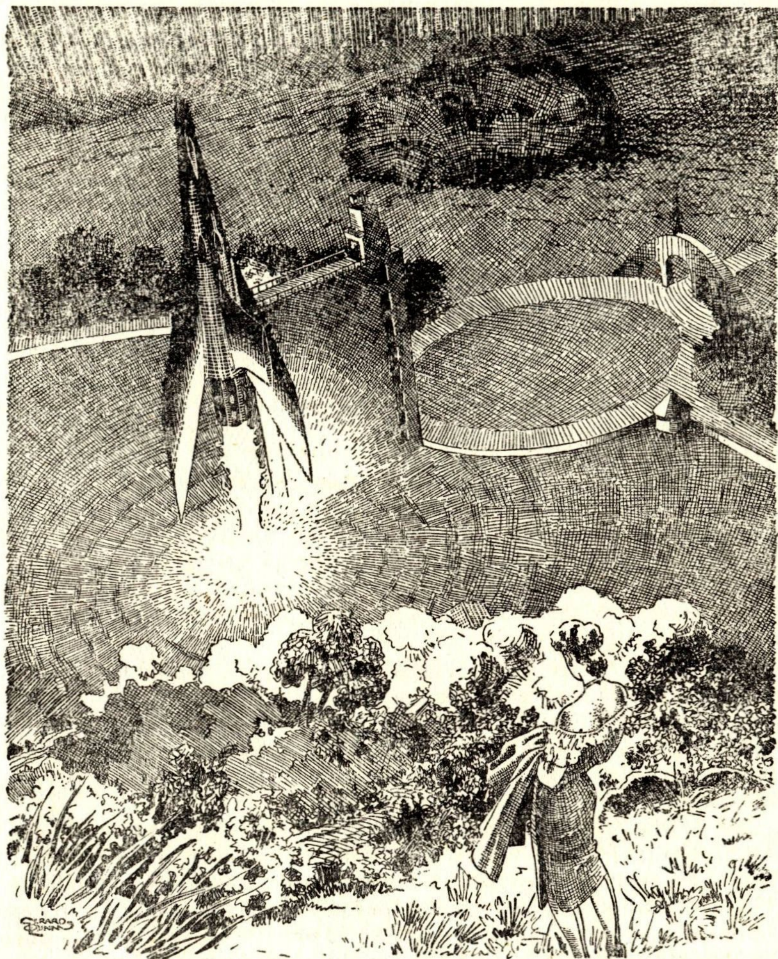
For the last six days her love for him had run riot, and as always she planned frantically the activities of their weeks or—too much to hope for, although it sometimes happened—months together. But when he came, she would have tightened, as she was tightening now, and while he was home she would follow her plans mechanically and without joy. It was foolish to plan but she couldn't help it.

The lights in the homes in the wide shallow valley below were sharp white specks in the darkness. An hour before, from the Spaceport five miles away, she had thought she detected a slight glow, perhaps his ship, the *Southern Cross*, grounding. Soon, anyway. He would be here soon.

She lit a cigarette, adding its red glow to the green flickering of fireflies in the garden. The wind moved again and she felt two cold lines extending themselves down her cheeks and realized she was crying. This would never do; the wife of a Star Man was supposed to be brave.

Suddenly there was the soft and unmistakeable sound of his rubberoid-soled boots on the plastic sidewalk. She pressed the button on the arm of her chair and the walk glowed with a soft whiteness. She saw him then, nearer than she'd thought, so that it startled her. He stood as if frozen in motion by the sudden light which swelled from beneath him, making him look even taller than his six feet, making his metalweave clothes shine strangely.

His gear—the great round transparent helmet and the magnetic boots



and all the rest of the hated stuff—hung from his tight-gripped right hand, lashed together in one untidy bundle. If only he'd leave it at the port; couldn't he stand to be away from it even for a few weeks?

He looked alien. And yet her heart quickened with her love. But then it stopped, calmed, went rigid in the memory of all her unhappy tomorrows.

" Ellen? "

" I'm over here, Warren, under the canopy." Her voice was quite cool. He sat down wearily, dropping his gear beside him.

" Did you have a good trip? " she asked dutifully.

" Good trip out, but a rough one coming in. Ran into a meteor swarm."

" Anyone hurt? "

" Collins. He's dead."

" Does his wife know? "

" She's been notified. I'm going over to see her to-morrow."

Somewhere inside she began to sob but her face remained icy. She sobbed for Collins' wife, and for herself.

" Would you like something to eat? " she asked with great control.

" Yes, I'd like that," he said stiffly. And yet she wondered if she detected a searching quality in his voice. But that couldn't be it. " I haven't eaten for nine hours," he said. " I just checked the ship in, made my report, and left. They hadn't even started to unload her."

" Let's go in, then."

She cooked him eggs and bacon. They could have been prepared automatically but she wanted something to do, something to keep her occupied. He ate quietly in the gleaming kitchen and she smoked. She got him a chilled beer and he talked softly, asking about the children, but she could see that he was uncomfortable. After all, they were virtual strangers, weren't they? She answered his questions briefly, sometimes with monosyllables.

She tried to remember the time when she had understood his love for space, but she couldn't understand it at all any more. She hated it: space was her rival, the other woman she couldn't fight. She could picture him behind the quartz screen in the bow of the *Southern Cross*, his eyes bright and happy and fixed on distant stars, large and still in the complete night of airless space. This was his love.

But to her space seemed cold and unfriendly and haunted with the future deaths of those who travelled it. Maybe a meteor would smash the ship to a meaningless twist of metal, or one small scrap of debris would rip like an old-fashioned bullet through the hull and kill him, as had happened to one of his crewmen on the previous trip out. Or the friction of a miscalculated landing would burn them to dry small cinders. There were so many things that could happen, out there, and yet her woman's wiles could do nothing against this calling of other worlds.

The night he had asked her to marry him he had warned her and she had promised she would never try to ground him, as the wives of rocket crewmen invariably did sooner or later. Well, at least she had kept her promise.

But why didn't he stay home? Why? She almost asked him aloud but she knew the answer, had known it from the day she had met him, when he had been a student. He loved it; that was all. He would be miserable at home, a groundling. She remembered too clearly what he'd told her that long-ago night.

"Can you understand it, Ellen, the feeling it would give a man? To be streaking through the untouched, unknown, unhindered, surrounded by absolutely nothing—except freedom? The strange life forms, the new colours of other worlds? That's living. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," she'd breathed fervently, because she loved him. "Yes, I can understand."

And she had understood. For a while. But as the realities of this kind of existence had become clear to her the understanding had faded and now their marriage was a vacuum, like the space he loved. And she had never even dared tell him she hated his going, because she had promised.

Well, I will tell him, she thought. It's time I did.

"Yes?" Another person might have seen the sudden longing in his voice or, missing that, in his face. But she was looking at the table and remembering her promise and neither saw nor heard it.

"Nothing," she said at last. "Are you ready for some sleep? I imagine you're pretty tired."

"As soon as I look in on the kids."

The day came bright and clear and summery. Warren was up before her, talking to Bobby and Linda. Every once in a while Bobby would ask an excited question and then Warren would answer and continue his tales of wonders of other galaxies and star systems and planets.

"Anyway," Warren was saying, having answered a question, "it's a very strange planet. The atmosphere is chlorine. Do you know what chlorine is?"

"Sure. I ain't stupid," Bobby said.

"You keep saying 'ain't' and you'll convince me," Warren said, and there seemed almost to be laughter in his voice. "To resume. These men—if you can call them that—who inhabit it are pretty intelligent in their way. So they mine this stuff and our crews go in once a year to trade with them. You have to keep the ship sealed and wear your helmet and suit all the time you're outside."

"Gee!" Bobby breathed.

Ellen stopped listening, although she could still hear the deep tone of Warren's voice, as she got up. She washed and dressed and stepped into the vacuulift. Warren sat in the kitchen with Bobby on his knee, Linda beside him and a halfeaten ham sandwich on the table in front of him. How they worshipped him. Ellen felt another moment of great resent-

ment as in her mind she heard Bobby bragging as usual to his playmates, " My Dad's a rocket captain." A questionable distinction, she thought.

Warren did not see her. He talked on about another planet, where the intelligent life was very close to the human, and of a little boy he had befriended there.

" I promised I'd bring him a puppy next time I came," he said.

" Imagine that," Bobby said scornfully. " Never even seen a dog! " Linda giggled.

The conversation ended instantly when Ellen entered the room. Her face was stern and filled with anger. She didn't want him filling Bobby's head with the yearning for space. As if it wasn't bad enough that he was sitting here dreaming of it himself, longing to be away again.

" I see you've had something to eat," she said.

" Yes."

" Do you want anything else? "

" No thank you," Warren said quietly. He seemed somehow whipped, not by her words, for she hadn't said anything significant, but by her almost tangible attitude of displeasure and disapproval. Bobby seemed to sense it and felt part of some indefinable guilt and he stood up, looking at her from beneath lowered brows. The resemblance to Warren was startling.

They love him, Ellen thought, and think I'm a tyrant. And yet how can they love him? Isn't he a stranger to them, too?

" I'm going out t'play," Bobby said. " Me too," added Linda. And they were gone and soon their laughter drifted in from the garden. Ellen sat down across from Warren.

He had a gaunt, handsome face, his great intelligence shining in his blue eyes. His dark and slightly greying hair was crewcut but it did not hide the sight aging that had taken place since he had last been home. After all, he was thirty-five and had never been one to worry over his appearance.

" Are you going to see Mrs. Collins today? " she asked.

" Yes."

She pressed a button on the wall and the house turned so that the kitchen faced east. The sun slanted through the windows. It was nearly nine o'clock.

When Warren returned late in the afternoon, Ellen asked: " How has she taken it? "

" Very calmly. I was surprised."

I'm not, she thought. You prepare for it.

There was a sort of slow summertime pace to things as the weeks moved by. As had happened before, the initial resentment Ellen felt at his return gave way to a great sadness and then to a quiet, almost pleasant melan-

choly in which she was glad to be with him, glad of the moments when he would softly press her hand and then, discovered, look self-consciously away—usually at the distant sky. Once he said, " Ellen, I love you." And he saw the only tears she permitted herself that summer and he said, " I'm sorry. Honestly, I'm sorry." And she told him, " No, Warren, it's not your fault. I should have known how it would be from the start." They never came even near to discussing it again.

Rustic picnics formed a large part of their agenda. They even prepared their own food. There were dances at which Warren's tall grace and look of dark, quiet determination, of unshakable purpose, seemed to attract and fascinate every woman they met. In the afternoons there were usually contingents of Bobby's friends to hear Warren's tales. And there were evenings with the children watching the broadcast movies. Once Warren threw a party for the crew of the *Southern Cross* and she was all that a hostess should be and Warren was for a time the old, personable self she remembered from before their marriage had grown cold. It always amazed her to see how at ease he could be with his men when he was all thumbs at home.

He wore his authority with an off-hand graciousness; the men seemed to worship him.

On the whole the party went smoothly but it had its difficult moments, the worst of them arising from the presence of a young man she had never seen before. He looked to be about twenty-two, shy and blond and soft-spoken. He was accompanied by a pretty and equally quiet girl of his own age.

" Come in, come in," Warren said when he saw the young man by the open door. " You must be Lamont."

" Yes sir. I'm pleased to know you, Captain Coulter."

" The pleasure's mine, Lamont. Glad to have you with us. And this . . .? "

Lamont turned with a touching air of pride to the girl. " This is Martha, I mean, Miss Marshall, my fiancée."

" How do you do, Miss Marshall," Warren said, accepting her hand. " Ellen, Miss Marshall. And this is David Lamont. He's Collins' replacement."

For a moment Ellen went rigid. Lamont's identification couldn't have hurt her more ; it was rather as if there had been a knife in her heart all summer and someone had given it a twist. For replacements always came about six weeks before a trip, so that the crew would have time to know the new men, and replacements could familiarize themselves with the ship. It meant, simply, that the end of Warren's visit was in clear sight.

" Are you sure it's okay for me to be here tonight, Captain? " Lamont

was asking. " It certainly is," Warren assured him, leading his guests to the bar. " And there's something you'd better learn right away, son. My name is Warren. At the port you may address me as ' Captain ' for the sake of propriety, but not in my own home and not in the *Southern Cross*. There's no room for formality in a space ship."

Ellen was watching the girl, who watched her David with adulation. Oh you fool, Ellen thought. You pretty, wonderful, tragic fool.

" Well, what would you like to drink? " Warren asked.

" Just something soft for me," the girl said.

" What can I have? " David Lamont asked hesitantly.

" Anything. But maybe you'd better start on some of the imported stuff. You'll have to get used to it, anyway. Now take this stuff here . . ." Warren held up a bottle of red liquid. " Nobody's even found a name for this yet. Comes from a system three hundred light years out. There's a plant form that seems to suckle its young like a mammal. This is the milk it gives. Only it's nothing like any milk you ever tasted. Violently intoxicating, so we use it only in dilution. The boys on the uranium run call it Satan's Cough Syrup."

" I guess I'd better stick to Scotch," David Lamont grinned.

" Scotch it is." And when Warren saw that David and his fiancée were cared for, he said, " Well, Lamont, I guess you and I should have a long talk. And now is as good a time as any. May I drag him away for a while, Miss Marshall? "

" Certainly, Captain Coul . . ."

" Warren is the name."

As they walked away, Ellen heard him advising his new crewman: " You should be absolutely sure you know what you're doing, Lamont. This is tough and dangerous work that calls for . . ." The ability to tolerate without flinching your wife's unhappiness, Ellen thought as the voice was lost in the party's laughter.

" You must be very proud of him, Mrs. Coulter," Martha Marshall said. Ellen opened her mouth to tell her the harsh facts of life but saw the look in the girl's eyes and remembered how beyond convincing she had been in the same circumstances and at the same age and knew that it would be wrong to deny her the slightest measure of happiness. The other would come soon enough. " Yes I am," Ellen said, smiling at the irony.

Warren spent part of his time catching up on the scientific journals he had missed during the trip and one day talked to her of a new cyclotron they were building in England. " Perhaps in time they'll be able to synthesize uranium cheaper than we can import it," he said. " Maybe they'll discontinue these interstellar freight runs." His voice was quiet and she

felt a fear and an uneasiness in it. Afraid he won't be able to make his precious trips, she thought.

Then, in August, her hopes for a solution to her life's problem rose suddenly with a visit from Dr. Arthur Williams, president of the University of Physical Sciences. He was one of Warren's old professors, a black—one of the few left now—and she always took great pleasure in the visits of the distinguished old scientist. The races of the earth had been blended into one for nearly a hundred years—since World War Four had consumed most of this world's uranium and population and forced mankind to see at long last the need for one government and the brotherhood of man. There were only a few men of distinct blood strains left. Dr. Williams was one of them. The last of his line, she thought sadly, because his son was lighter of colour than he and his grandsons were the soft copper hue that had come to be the colour of all Earthmen. A pity, she thought, for she regretted anything which meant loss of individuality. A gentle man with white hair, he was rather like Warren in the way in which he carried authority. He would sometimes smile whimsically at the obvious fascination of Bobby and Linda at the beautiful colour of his skin.

When dinner was over and the children had gone to bed—Linda insisting that she wanted black skin when she grew up—Dr. Williams came to the point. Her hopes pounding like her blood within her, Ellen listened from the darkened library, peering through the slit of the door, which was slid almost shut.

" Warren," Dr. Williams said, lighting a cigar, " we need you at the university."

" It's no use," Warren said flatly.

The older man smiled. " Still impatient, boy? I will continue without interruption, if you don't mind. You were always a fine physicist and your dealings with bulk uranium give you eminent qualification to work in our research department."

" I've never worked in research."

" You've been dealing with fission engines, with the transport of uranium and with allied fields for more than eight years. You've kept up on the latest developments and we want you to work with us. Look here, Warren, we're working in co-operation with this English group. You must have read about it. The colonies are now self-sufficient and if this project works out no man need ever go into space for materials again. Don't you see that? "

" Yes, Dr. Williams, I do. I've thought about it a great deal, in fact. But I don't want the job," Warren said, standing up. He paced back and forth for a time, running his fingers through his hair. I was foolish to hope, Ellen thought.

" But why, man, why? "

" I can't discuss it, Doctor. There are personal matters I must consider. I'm . . . I'm unable to stay here."

" Why? " Dr. Williams asked again and Ellen thought, Why indeed? Because he's got a head full of vacuum, space on the brain, because he wants to watch meteors streak by the ship, feel the exhilaration of danger, the great rushings of inconceivable distances, because he has the wanderlust, because he feels a lure. She thought again of how he'd talked of these things before their love had died.

Because he's a fool. She cherished no hope that Warren would later accept the offer and as his remaining time at home slipped quickly away he didn't mention it. Twice Dr. Williams called him on the visiphone and once Warren went to the university to see him. But he never spoke of it.

September came at last. But she was steeled to it now, with a resolution that bordered on a hatred for a man whom, after he had gone, she would admit for one terrible moment that she loved, and then forget him as best she could until he came home again—or died. He had been back four months, longer than he had ever stayed before, and they were more distant from each other than they had ever been.

And when the Day came, he went away in the afternoon, while the children were out, and gave her only a cool, correct kiss, looking uncomfortable and embarrassed and impatient and she knew suddenly that it was all over for them, that this four months had killed their marriage fully and finally.

" Good-bye, Warren," she said evenly.

" Good-bye, Ellen," he said and she thought she saw a flash of regret in his eyes. But it was gone in a moment and she could not really be sure it had been there at all.

She watched him from the window, saw him pause at the end of the walk, his gear in his hand, his great helmet shining in the sun, his boots hanging heavily in his grasp. He was looking back with a strange, longing smile. She tried to fathom his expression but couldn't. He was a stranger. A stranger whom she loved with every breath of her body, with a love which by its very power made her hate him.

He climbed into the tiny monorail car which they had sent out from the spaceport and was gone.

" Warren, Warren, Warren . . ." she screamed after him and ran from the house. But it was too late.

Wearily she went indoors and picked up a book. She read a few pages, then put it down, lit a cigarette and put it in an ashtray. She lit a second, realized what she had done and stabbed it out. She wandered in the garden for a while, then sat down achingly in the relaxing chair. She started suddenly at the faint whine of the monorail car. She just couldn't

bear a visitor. Not today.

But it was Warren who climbed from the car, Warren who walked to the house, Warren who stood in front of the visiphone talking to Dr. Williams. It was Warren's voice saying:

" All right, doctor, arrange my accommodation at the residence. I can't stay here. You won't forget to clear me with the Space Commission, will you? Yes . . . All right, I'll call you tomorrow."

And it was Warren who came to the garden, still carrying his gear absently in his hand.

He stood before her, bitterness in his face, even hatred. His one free fist was clenching and unclenching.

" I'm not going," he said through tight teeth.

She still had not grasped it. " What? " she said dully.

" I don't care how you feel any more, Ellen," he said. " I'm, not going. For eight years I've been wandering through space, feeling like men used to feel in the primitive submarine. Trapped, cooped up. Eight years of loneliness and emptiness. Eight years of loving you, remembering you, wishing it could be like it was when I first knew you. Eight years of watching men die." His eyes were flinty now as he went on:

" I can't take it any more. Every time I come home, I hope that somehow . . . Well, I bring this junk home,"—he shook the heavy gear as if it was a bundle of feathers and suddenly, viciously, threw it far into the garden and it crashed among the shrubs—" bring it home every time hoping I won't even have to go back to the spaceport to pick it up, hoping I'm home to stay.

" But every time, you're cold and you make it clear that you don't love me, don't want me and wish I'd stay out there."

He took a few steps toward her. " But I'm not running away from it any more." He moved closer; her two trembling hands pressed against her face. " We're strangers, Ellen. Strangers. All right, then, we'll remain strangers—in every sense of the word. I'll give you a divorce or anything you want. But I can't go out there again. And stop laughing!"

But she couldn't. Hysterical tears coursed down her face as Warren stared at her, then talked angrily on, telling her how he hated space and everything associated with it.

Warren's tirade faltered and he seemed for the first time to sense what was going on within her. " What is it, Ellen? " he demanded. " What is it? "

Dimly through her tears she could see how puzzled he was. But she couldn't help herself. She stood near him and laughed and laughed, and suddenly threw herself against him and his strong arms were holding her and still she was laughing, her face pressed against his broad, hard chest.

When she could stop laughing she would tell him.

THE END

When the scout ship poked its nose into a system-wide war, the best plan was to duck out and hide—but the warring planets didn't want Earth informed, so the scout had to be eliminated. Add a peculiar planetary environment, and it wasn't such an easy job.

BEGGARS ALL

By J. T. M'INTOSH

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS.

'Twas Brillig, and the *Slithy Toves* did gyre and gimble in the wabe. At least, that was what it looked like.

What she was actually doing was stopping. Since she had left Earth six months before, the little scout had never once *stopped.* She had gone this way and that, reconnoitred above a dozen worlds light years apart, exchanged messages with a dozen different cultures, and run hell-for-leather from the thirteenth. But each new motion had merely been superimposed on the last until, when she finally went free, it could truly have been said that she was trying to go in a hundred different directions at once.

She was still many light years from Earth. The run in, however, would be straight. It was safer and quicker to shed her surplus momentum in the emptiest of space than to wait until she was in a system packed with planets, satellites and asteroids.

As it was, she ran pretty close to a system which Cope, commander of the *Slithy Toves*, had said was too far away when the scout went free to need to be considered. No one was surprised or blamed Cope. One could only make blind guesses about what any ship was going to do when she went free, whirling through the uncharted spaces.

It had been an uneventful trip except for the last part. Scouts were a vital part of the communication system of a galaxy and presumably always would be. Ships could crack the speed of light and radio waves never would. Thus scouts went out for news and came back with bales of

tape recordings. They did not land on the worlds they visited. That would take too long. They orbited about one world after another, recording all that world had to report and broadcasting Earth's news in return.

But when the *Slithy Toves* entered Zone 43—the systems of Manta Commerline and Atacta—it was at once made clear that she was not welcome. There was some sort of war going on, apparently, and Zone 43 wanted to keep it to itself—to such an extent that it had been prepared to blast the scout out of space. The *Slithy Toves* hadn't waited. She had gone so far and so fast that even if there had been pursuit there was little chance of any Zone 43 ships being anywhere near when Cope decided to go free.

Cope snapped off the force field and leaned back. The field had been on not for reasons of defense, but to help to hold the little ship together while a hundred different strains were trying to tear her apart.

" I hesitate to interfere with your handling of your job," remarked Pretzel Fisher in her usual irritating drawl, " but someone has been trying to communicate with us for the last five minutes."

" Communicate! " exclaimed Cope. " Here? "

" So," said Pretzel, maddeningly indifferent, " it seems."

Cope heaved himself out of the pilot's chair into the seat before the radio equipment.

Scouts' crews were half men and half women for one main reason. Any other system was ridiculous. Cope was in command and Pretzel Fisher second, but that wasn't because Cope was a man and Pretzel a woman. Bob Best was junior to Ann Downing. That was the whole crew.

Cope was the radio officer and that was also coincidental. Each scout carried a radio officer, a technician, a recorder and an armaments officer. Any of the lieutenants could command. When Cope was promoted to a bigger ship, the *Slithy Toves* would be commanded by Pretzel Fisher, recorder, and a young radio officer would join the scout as the junior lieutenant.

" The signals are very weak," Cope commented, " from this system, which isn't explored." He sighed turgidly. " Once again we become missionary pioneers, reaching out the hand of friendship and progress to a race untouched by human civilisation. Once more a race in the dawn is brought to full day."

" Once more you talk too much," said Pretzel. " Let's just wait and see, huh? " She smiled arrogantly

" New set of tubes warming," said Cope. " It'll need all we've got to hear them from here. So what can we do but talk? "

" We could move in, I suppose? "

" We could but we won't. We'll hear what they have to say first."

They had bickered for so long now that they could do it automatically, their minds on other things. Once when Cope had looked into Pretzel's

cabin she muttered without really waking up: " God, now he's in my dreams, I'll have to give up sleep."

They waited and wondered. Unless the radio messages were from the crew of some wrecked ship, or an early colony which had lost touch with Earth, it was unlikely they would understand them anyway. Any race which used radio, however, must communicate by sound or sight, and a lot could be learned from either.

Cope was young for a scout commander, still under 30. His features were ill-assorted. There was a blue and a brown eye, a large, aggressive nose, and faint, apologetic eyebrows. His mouth was the mouth of an artist, in constant conflict with his fierce, cleft chin, always somewhat blue.

Ann Downing was twenty, slim, eternally resentful, and no beauty. Her face and ears and nose and chin were too small for her mouth, which was immense. On state occasions she would paint some of it out and keep it shut. Then she looked quite pretty. She was the one among them who was most bound up in her job. She only really came to life when she was working. She was the technician.

Bob Best was very eager to please, with the inevitable result that he seldom did. He was tall and awkward. Cope and the others knew that when enough of his attention was occupied by the present time situation, he forgot to try to please, and did his job.

Pretzel *was* a beauty and 100 per cent aware of it. She was tiny and exquisite, and in constant tribute to her own perfection she kept herself immaculate twenty-four hours of the artificial day. At the moment, while the others were dressed in soiled, shapeless overalls, she wore a spotless white pleated skirt and an orange silk blouse, drawn tight to her wide black belt and open to the waist. Why she was there at all was a problem which she could no more attempt to answer than the others.

The speaker came to life. With the first sounds, though they could not understand a word, it was obvious that they had to deal with humanoids, therefore humans, and therefore the descendants of people who had left Earth within the last 500 years.

Other intelligent races had been discovered, not very many and not very prolific, but some. Nothing even remotely humanoid, however. Anyone who talked as the speaker in the control room of the *Slithy Toves* talked, using ordinary Terran vowels and consonants, was so clearly human that it wasn't worth while seriously considering any other possibility.

" Wonder what language it is," murmured Cope. " Anyone make anything of it? "

" English, fool," said Pretzel. Discipline in the four-man scouts was notorious throughout the Navy. " Shut up and let me hear what he's saying."

Cope listened, but the words made no more sence than before. Certainly a word here and there seemed familiar, but that was all. He could guess a little more from the tone. It was pleading, entreating, begging. Though he could make out no words, Cope knew the whine of the beggar when he heard it.

The voice stopped. Pretzel spoke at once, taking it for granted that she had to interpret, and not in the least surprised that she could do what the

others could not. It was principally at such times that Cope wanted to take her by the throat.

" They want help," she said. " All sorts of help. They haven't had any communication with Earth since they left it. At least, they've occasionally picked up fragments of messages from ships, but never been able to reply. They don't know their history, but they know they came from Earth."

" How did you understand them when we didn't? " asked Cope.

She shrugged. " Intelligence," she said.

" Meaning we haven't any? " asked Ann Downing, a slight edge in her voice.

" Didn't you even get the name of the place? Omaruco. That explains everything. Key word. Don't get it yet? Heavens, some people are dumb. America—Omaruco. That was obvious. The consonants are the same, but the vowels have moved round. Some Baccar was talking to us—Sam Becker. I'll tell you the rest of what he said in a minute. Meanwhile, what am I to tell them? "

Cope looked back through the ports thoughtfully and futilely. It wasn't much use looking back the way they had come for a ship that might be pursuing at more than the speed of light. Pretzel interpreted his gaze correctly.

" You don't think the Zone 43 ships are going to chase us back to Earth, surely? " she asked mockingly.

" No," mused Cope. " There's not much use chasing a ship you know can do twice your speed. We'll give them credit for working that out. Yes, I think we should have a look at this Omaruco."

Pretzel visibly dropped her mockery. They had something to decide as commander and second now, and for a moment other relations were put aside, as she directed herself to the problem.

" You don't think we should get right back and report on Zone 43? "

" Whatever's going on there is less important than contacting these people. Besides, you know what'll happen if I've nothing more to report than we have now." His voice took on the peremptory bark of reprimanding top brass. " Why not? Didn't you realize the importance of this? Haven't you learned yet that the purpose of scouts is to bring back information? What's a tinpot local squabble beside the rediscovery of an early colony? "

She nodded and took the microphone. " Kimung un tee loned," she said confidently. " Senning ife nu. Thus untarastung Unglush ive years wul boo dufucilt oonif whan woo soo yee wuthut fullung tha oothar wuth ut. Bit keep year kile sen gawung fire deraschine."

She grinned at their expressions. " After all," she said, " I'm a recorder. Cracking weird dialects is part of my job." Inevitably the mocking tone came back. She couldn't keep it out for long. " You don't need to feel

bad just because I'm terrific at my job—and most other things."

Cope refused to make any sign of having heard this. Pretzel had been such a challenge to him from the moment she joined the *Slithy Toves* that he felt, somehow, he had to be better than she at everything. As usual, he carefully avoided looking for possible reasons.

The scout dropped under the low clouds and the four lieutenants had their first view of an Omarucon city. Sam Becker had called it a city, Pretzel said, but apparently he had been misled by natural pride and not knowing any better. Liddin, a major Omarucon city was a hundred or so farms stretched from horizon to horizon.

However, there was quite a respectable crowd waiting at the field where the *Slithy Toves* seemed to be expected to land. Ann was at the controls. Cope as commander, Pretzel as recorder, and Bob as armaments officer were naturally at the ports learning all they could about Omaruco. Pretzel was taking photographs and Bob, already rather disdainfully, was checking on possible defenses in case they should have to take overt action at any time against Liddin.

It was an Earth-type planet to ten places, which told a story in itself. The early settlers had gone on and on from system to system, planet to planet, looking for just such a world. That was when settlers still had a sentimental attachment to their own physical specification. They wanted to have nothing to do with worlds where they would adapt themselves to new conditions and cease to be human as they understood the term. They ignored Venus, Mars and the satellites of the outer solar planets for this reason. And thus, before Earth's own system was fully colonized, the search for other Earths had started. Fortunately, among millions of planets there were hundreds of Earths.

Ann brought the ship down neatly, and Cope moved to the airlock. He was germicided, and he was breathing through a thin, almost invisible membrane which would keep germs of one world on one side and of the other on the other. Experience had shown the precautions which were necessary and those which were safeguards against million-to-one shots.

A party of about a dozen people moved to meet Cope and Bob as they dropped the four feet from the airlock. They turned and waited. As they didn't know the male-female setup on Omaruco, it seemed wiser that the first contact should be made by Cope and Bob. So Pretzel had trained them in the Omarucon version of English. It wasn't difficult to speak it and understand it after a little practice. Pretzel warned them, however, that the vowel changes wouldn't be uniform. They would almost certainly find that some words hadn't followed the general rule.

The people were like Liddin—rough, untidy, backward. Once again Cope saw that hard work and healthy conditions didn't necessarily produce the perfect physical specimen. Some of the Omarucons were the

idyllic primitive—tall, strong, magnificent—but like most peoples living in backward conditions they were largely scrawny, fat, ugly, hairy, pot-bellied, gap-toothed, awkward and slow.

The lieutenants of the *Slithy Toves*, in the routine way, had made no special effort to create a good impression. They were still in the clothes they had been wearing. But at that, they obviously came from a culture on a higher level than that of the Omarucons.

The Omarucons' spokesman was one of the least attractive of them. He was small and fat and pig-eyed, and he puffed and wheezed unpleasantly as he came up to Cope.

" Greetings," he said. His manner was half defiant, half apologetic. " I'm Sam Becker. You will help us, won't you? We have had no help from Earth since we came here. All you see we built ourselves, or grew. There was no life here when we came, except a little vegetation. We knew Terran civilization was spreading over the galaxy all around us, for we picked up fragments of messages and knew ships were—"

" Hold on," said Cope. He found he could understand the man easily enough if he disregarded the actual sounds he heard and concentrated on the meaning. But the combination of unfamiliarity of language and the unexpected whining appeal for assistance before he had even said a word dazed him a little.

" I'm Randolph Cope," he said, using the Omarucon dialect as far as he could. " I take it you are the descendants of early colonists who—"

" Possibly," interrupted Becker. " No one had any time to write our history. What matters now is—"

" Excuse me. If you want help from us, you must allow us to be the judge of what matters now. Are your problems so immediate and desperate that they must be attended to now—this instant? "

The Omarucons seemed puzzled by this attitude. They stared at each other and murmured among themselves. Cope didn't call them to order. He was reminding himself of two things which were always pertinent whenever the advancing tide of Terran culture caught up with one of these early settlements. The first was that he was dealing with human beings, people who shared his own history, not unknown, inexplicable, unpredictable strangers. The second was that however that might be, it was an established fact that when a group was split off from the rest of humanity, isolated and left to work out its own salvation, it frequently happened that the explanation for strange, inhuman, unconventional behaviour that one found in it was so hidden in their past or present way of life that it took months or years to discover it.

There was a colony where the filthiest, most obscene word in the language was *sleep*. People did sleep, of course, but the whole culture was constructed to deny the fact. Husbands and wives had private resting-

rooms where they would *rest* (even that word, though not actually obscene, was avoided where possible), but the suggestion that they *slept* in them was full and sufficient grounds for divorce. To the crew of the exploring ship which made the first re-contact with this colony, all this was very puzzling. The explanation which was now accepted was undoubtedly the correct one, but the shortest statement of it was contained in a volume of 372 pages, with many charts and diagrams.

"No," said Becker at last. "But of course—you will, eventually, help us? When I realized I was at last in touch with a Terran ship, and that after all this time we were to join our fellows again, I. . . ."

Cope didn't stop him this time. The begging, entreating tone died to an indeterminate murmur and Cope turned his head to see what all the Omarucons were staring at—though he had a pretty good idea of what it was.

He was right. Pretzel was standing in the airlock. Cope searched among the Omarucons until he found a girl of about twenty, looked from her to Pretzel and back, and understood all.

The Omarucon counterpart of Pretzel was at least 70 per cent as pretty as she was. But the Omarucon girl was none too clean, had a colourless, weatherbeaten face, tangled hair, imperfect teeth, and generally didn't seem to be ready and able to put much into life, or expect to get much out of it. She wore a rough, nondescript jacket over something else that looked even less interesting, and though more of her legs was bare than Pretzel's, who cared?

Pretzel—well. It was sacking placed beside the purest silk. She had clearly been watching and listening, and had replaced her perfunctory blouse with a white shirt which was not too garrulous about its contents. By Omarucon standards she was probably decent. There was no indication that the Liddins saw anything not quite respectable about her. She was merely dumbfounding.

Sam Becker recovered himself, and though his eyes occasionally strayed back to Pretzel, who had jumped down with a somewhat sensational ballooning of skirt, he went back to his point. He talked about things of which they were in desperate need but didn't say what they were.

"Just what is your most important problem?" asked Cope patiently. Pretzel moved over and stood beside him.

Sam thought hard. "Etus," he said at last. "An illness. Many of us are falling to it. More every year. Have you a doctor?"

Cope nodded at Pretzel. "Your baby," he said. Sam's eyes widened, but he said nothing. Cope turned back to Sam. "We'd like," he went on, "to have a look round, if you don't mind."

Sam didn't mind. He led the way contentedly. These Earth people, apparently, were going to help. That was all that mattered.

There were no real surprises in what they found in Liddin. Such surprises as there were arose because whenever they began to decide the Omarucons were very backward they found evidence that they were not and vice versa. For example, electric power was everywhere, plenty of it, and yet there was next to no mechanization save lumbering electric trucks. The electricity was used mainly for lighting and heating. Conditions were surprisingly clean and the Omarucons surprisingly dirty.

There was no sign of luxury and even less of real hardship. It wasn't hardship to the Omarucons that there was no meat, for there had never been any animals on Omarucon but men. There had apparently been a certain amount of vegetation, which had largely succumbed to the more virile plants of Earth. The idea of eating the flesh of living creatures was slightly repugnant to the Liddinars but not really very interesting.

As the recorder, Pretzel had to find out things and report on them. Her responsibility was more to Terran Navy HQ than to Cope. He could, of course, ask her to report to him if he thought she had information which would be valuable to him as commander. But the strain and rivalry between them being what it was, Cope tended to ask her, and she to report, as little as possible.

Certain things about Omaruco and the Omarucons were clear. They used no money, which at once suggested a barter system. But there was hardly any barter either. There was no government. Certain local councils would meet to decide what to do about things. They had no authority, however, except what they decided to take. All in all, the system, whatever it amounted to, seemed to work.

The *Slithy Toves* had landed at a busy time. The Omarucon climate was like Earth's except that seasonal changes were very abrupt, and the summer, which would come almost overnight, was due. Almost all the Liddinars were farmers. They had to be. The soil of Omaruco would grow crops but reluctantly. Each farmer could produce enough for himself and only a little over. The scout arrived in the middle of the inevitable last minute rush to complete the sowing.

Some arrangement had been made whereby Sam Becker, who had no official position in the community except that he happened to be the man who operated Liddin's only radio, could be left more or less free to look after the four Terrans. They stayed at his farm, put their questions to him, and had little to do with other Liddinars as individuals. That didn't matter. Sam seemed to be typical.

It became more obvious every minute that the Omarucons were a race of beggars. They begged without apparent loss of pride. Cope discovered something he had not known before—pride was dependent entirely on the individual's own idea of himself. If he didn't think he was lowering himself by begging for something, he wasn't.

The limitations of Ann and Bob Best were soon apparent. They were good at their job, of course. That went without saying. But both proved entirely incapable of extrapolation. For all practical purposes Cope and Pretzel were alone on Omaruco in their dealings with the Liddinars. (The fact that they called themselves Liddinars suggested that Liddin was a corruption of London. The idea of London being the most important city in America amused Pretzel and therefore slightly irritated Cope.)

No, Ann and Bob could be told to do things, but that was all. Left on their own they didn't even interest the Omarucons much. The Liddinars wanted Cope and Pretzel, with an instinctive realization of the people who counted in the small Terran group.

Cope had left the problem of the Omarucon disease entirely to Pretzel. She wasn't a doctor, but she was the nearest they had. She had commandeered a large farmhouse as a hospital. The idea was new to the Omarucons, but they gave no trouble.

Cope wandered among the beds on the third morning, with Sam as guide, and found Pretzel giving injections. " How goes it? " he asked.

She straightened up. She didn't speak until they were in her office.

" Nothing in this," she said with confidence which might be assumed for Sam's benefit, but which Cope had to admit was impressive. " It's finished, in fact. Cures in every case and I can guarantee them in future."

Cope waited and Sam's pot-belly shook eagerly.

" Etus," she said, " is merely the ending -itis, meaning the Omarucons didn't know what it was. But it was easy enough to crack. Like most early colonists, they hated and have continued to hate the idea of changing physically. It's been built into a psychological block. They *won't* change physically. But after all, there are bound to be differences eventually in a race that settles on a new planet, with slightly altered conditions, traces of different chemical structure, and so on. And, of course, the Omarucons are all vegetarians.

" These things have been working to modify the Omarucons slightly, and their determination not to change has been working against them. So in some extreme cases they became ill. Naturally there would be more and more cases as time went by. But all that's necessary is to draw up a list of the chemical influences of Omarucon conditions and how to counteract them, and that's what I've been doing."

Sam didn't understand all this, obviously, but he did understand that the problem was solved. He lost interest.

" Now," he said, " there's the problem of . . ."

" Just a minute," said Cope curiously. " Is that all you have to say? "

Clearly Sam didn't know what else there could be to say. Then, after profound and visible cogitation, he came up with something.

" Sorry," he said. " Thank you. Now there is the problem. . . ."

" Let's get to the bottom of this," said Cope. " Didn't you care about this thing, after all? "

Sam didn't understand. " Care? Naturally we cared. But it is over, isn't it? Didn't Lieutenant Fisher say . . ."

" Isn't there such a thing," asked Cope ironically, " as gratitude? "

Sam considered that carefully. He obviously didn't understand them, but that was a common occurrence and caused him no surprise. He wasn't unwilling to co-operate—he merely found it difficult.

" I don't know the word," he said at last.

" Groetfeel," said Pretzel, becoming interested. " Don't you have that word? Or anything like it? "

They tried him with all the synonyms they could think of. Some of them he knew. But then it was other meanings which were familiar. The idea of gratitude was wholly missing from the Omarucon language.

The conversation irked Sam a little. Though some of his work was being done for him, he still had a lot to do. He wanted to do it. They let him go.

" Any ideas on this? " Cope asked, perhaps a little unguardedly.

" Any I have," said Pretzel, " would be mere theories." She gave him a look of impossible innocence. " After all, my only responsibility is to record facts."

" Since when were you afraid of responsibility? "

" Since when," she asked mildly, " did you want to give it away? " Perforce, Cope left it at that.

The Omarucons were good at one thing—finding work for idle hands. They worked hard themselves and they didn't see that any other way of life was possible. Sam begged Cope to instruct him in radio. To send Ann to have a look at the generating station, which was underground; nearly all Omarucon power was hydro-electric, and nearly all the water was underground. To have Bob tell them a little about defense, of which they had none. To help them with their crops, their health, their communications, their obstetrics, their social problems, their storage, their few machines—everything in sight and a few things from further away than that. This, apparently, was the help they needed.

And Cope did almost everything that was asked. He needed facts. He was getting them, but they only crystallized the questions.

What made the Omarucons tick? Why had they never had wars? How did they get on without government? Who had taught them to beg? Why had they no history?

At last he knew he must have most of the facts at his fingertips and still no real understanding.

Then, five days after they landed, the summer came. One day it was

merely not very cold. The next, it was hot. The Liddinars worked as hard as ever. Now their task was to operate and supervise the simple pumps which brought water from underground, regulate the flow and direct it where it would do most good. Cope was kept busy solving problems for the Omarucons, telling Ann and Bob what to do, improving Sam's radio, explaining things, showing the Liddinars new, better and quicker methods of doing the same things. In fact, he found himself busier than ever.

But not Pretzel. She had been left free most of the time so that she could prepare and complete her various reports. For a time she had been busy, even apart from her work as the scout's medical officer. Now she had things moving smoothly, relaxed, left everything possible to Liddinars she had given some training, and spent most of her time sun bathing on the hill behind Sam's farm. Her whole attitude said she was giving herself a well-earned rest.

Cope, still working hard, was naturally irritated. Maybe she had done a good job. Maybe she regarded it as concluded. Maybe he had no right to interfere. But . . .

If Pretzel felt she knew all there was to know about the Omarucons, couldn't she let him in on it? All right, so he was dumb. So he didn't see what was so obvious to her. So he would appreciate a little information.

He swallowed his pride and hammered down the lid on his resentment.

He still hesitated before joining Pretzel. After all, she was entitled to a little privacy if she wanted it. She was sun bathing, as ever, on the little hill behind the farm, and from her outfit, or lack of it, there was a distinct possibility that she was taking it for granted she would be left alone. After all, Pretzel was never cheap. Very likely her state of undress was meant to be a sign, " Please do not disturb."

It was. When Cope barged up the hill, Pretzel sat up and unhurriedly but pointedly put on her blouse and fastened her shorts in a silence full of meaning.

" Sorry," Cope sighed. " I'll go in just a minute. But look here. Isn't there anything you'd like to tell me? " He made an effort and forced himself to say: " You seem to see things that I don't. How about sharing some of them with me? "

Pretzel lay back again, and Cope was amazed and shocked by a sudden almost irresistible impulse to drop beside her and find out how she felt in his arms.

" It all revolves around one little thing," she said absently. " Remember when we found Sam didn't know what gratitude was? That surprised

me—didn't it surprise you?"

"Sure," said Cope. "A race of beggars with no gratitude. You go down on your knees for a thing, though you expect to get it, and if you don't you ask for something else. You humble yourself asking for things, take them for granted when you get them, and don't feel any gratitude. I don't understand it. Do you?"

" I thought about it then," said Pretzel lazily, her eyes closed, " and then began to see things. A ship, 500 years ago. A long, long time in space. A landing—probably the hundredth or so. A world that had to do, because only a few more trips and landings could be made, and this world was a better bet than anything likely to be found if they went on. A good world, but a hard world. A world where it wasn't easy to get a livelihood, and where it didn't get any easier. A settlement where people knew less and less as they forgot and died and had to break up their ship to make things they needed *now*, and . . ."

She stopped and opened one eye to look at Cope. " I may be wrong about all this," she said, with a return of her old mockery. " Wouldn't it be better for you to reach your own conclusions and check them against mine? "

She was still annoyed at being disturbed, Cope thought.

" Look," he said, his voice carefully controlled. " This is the seventh day we've been here. There's still the matter of Zone 43 to report. That means we can't stay. We should go now, if we're satisfied we have something to tell HQ about Omaruco. Have we? "

" Naturally," she said. " Haven't you? "

He made up his mind. " We're going," he said coldly. " In a few hours."

" That's all right," she said and closed her eyes again.

An insidious thought crept into his mind in the middle of his anger. It would be nice to be loved by a girl like Pretzel. His anger evaporated and for once he was honest with himself about her. She wasn't really hard. At first, suspicious of her beauty, he had been brusque and a little unfair towards her. When he knew better, it was too late. She had set up the powerful defenses that so many intelligent, beautiful women learned to use—irony, so that he never really touched her; carelessness, so that it didn't seem to matter if he did; efficiency, so that he was always at a disadvantage.

She had won the encounter hands down. They had had a tacit contest to see who could care less about the other, and he had always been a bad second.

He wasn't aware she had opened her eyes until she had had plenty of time to see the brooding, self-accusatory look in his eyes.

" Is it as bad as that? " she asked softly.

He jumped to his feet violently. He knew that perhaps she had dropped some of her defenses. But he also knew with what effect she could strike if he gave himself away further, and if she wanted to.

He was glad to see Sam come up the hill from his ramshackle radio installation in an outhouse. The radio was a little less ramshackle and much more effective now, and Sam had even shown signs of understanding what Cope had done to it. The Omarucons weren't stupid.

Pretzel sat up abruptly when they saw that Sam was trying to run. " There were two others with him, two farmers whom they knew only as Wallace and Charlie.

It was the first time they had seen Sam agitated. He looked more human, somehow. They were seeing him really concerned about something now, which he had never been when he was merely begging for something he said his people desperately needed.

" The Zone 43 ships followed you," he gasped. " They are over Porus now. We're in trouble."

" What the hell," said Cope distinctly, " do you know about Zone 43? " There had been no mention of it from them.

" They told the station at Porus who they were and why they were there. They took a while to understand our dialect, but in the end they worked it out. They want you. They say they have no quarrel with us, but you must be turned over to them. If not, for a start, they will destroy Porus."

" So," said Cope grimly. " We've done a few things for you in the last week. Helped you on about a hundred years, I suppose. So it's just as well, in the circumstances, that you told us you didn't know the meaning of gratitude."

Sam danced in his impatience. " What does that matter now? You talk about words I don't understand when Omaruco may be blasted to fragments. They can do what they threaten, these Zone 43 ships. They have destroyed a mountain."

" Oh, they could do that," Cope agreed. " Also blow Porus, wherever or whatever that is, to its constituent atoms."

" What are we to do? "

Cope sighed. The responsibility was his. He should have known somehow, using second sight if necessary, that the Zone 43 conflict was so important to Zone 43 that they would have to follow the scout and destroy it if possible so that no news would reach Earth until they were ready. Now he was caught with his pants down. It was failure and it was all his. When the facts were known, if they ever were, he would get no medals. Events found him guilty.

" Oh, it's obvious enough," he said. " We go out and fight them. Or make a run for it."

" What are the chances? " asked Charlie.

" Nil," said Cope briefly. " A good big 'un will always beat a good little 'un. We can handle anything our own size. But there will be at least three

big Zone 43 ships. . . ."

" Five," said Sam.

" Then I can tell the future even more clearly. We go out and that's the end of us. But they may leave you alone."

He doubted that. If Zone 43 was ready to destroy a Terran Navy ship to keep its secrets, it wouldn't be likely to balk at razing a newly discovered colony afterwards, to make sure. But he could see no useful purpose in telling Sam that. As for running for it, the Zone 43 ships, if they knew their business at all, were bound to be able to detect them and win the battle of acceleration. The *Slithy Toves* would start with the handicap of Omaruco's gravity, and the Zone 43 ships would be free. Five of them, too—one could hardly guard a fast, agile scout, but five . . .

" Then we must fight," said Sam. He was more composed now. He looked at Wallace and Charlie and they nodded.

Pretzel also nodded calmly, as if to show that she had expected this. Cope couldn't help his mouth dropping open. Fight? How could they fight? They were almost weaponless. . . .

" Your weapons, I suppose, can be stepped up by our power," observed Sam thoughtfully. " We must make our preparations and then induce the ships to come here and let us bring them down." Wallace and Charlie nodded again, in full agreement with this simple statement of the position.

Cope worked it out. Yes, with Omarucon power, they might do something, at that. The main limitation of a ship like the *Slithy Toves* was not the armament she could carry, but the power there was to operate it. With unlimited power—why, with unlimited power there was more than a chance. The Zone 43 ships, after all, were only units, unable to draw on the power of a world. The armament of the scout, overloaded with all they could pour into it, was greater, in theory, than anything any half dozen ships could carry.

" Right," he said briefly. " Let's get busy."

As the Zone 43 cruisers came over the hill four hours later, Cope was conscious that all that could have been done in the time had been done. Liddin had been evacuated. The scout ship was still in plain sight, and the Zone 43 ships might destroy it. That would be a disaster in its way—Omaruco had been isolated for centuries and Cope didn't want to spend the rest of his life there. But on the other hand, with the technical knowledge of his crew something might be done—and anyway, that wasn't the problem of the moment.

It was a great battle. When the first ship was destroyed, Sam and Wallace and Charlie thought it was easy. They saw a Bob Best they had not known existed, cold and competent, every atom of attention on his job. They saw him do things to the equipment mounted in Sam's farm-

house yard and there was a faint crackle in the air as if it was being torn asunder. As a matter of fact it was. They saw the first ship's screens flare dull red, then orange, then white, and then suddenly its bare hull was black and helpless, falling to smash with an ear-splitting crash and sudden blinding brilliance.

Cope had hoped that one would be enough. There was always the possibility that the Zone 43 cruisers were looking for an easy prey, and might be driven off far enough to enable the scout to escape—without her weapons, but that was a detail. He had left a recorded message for Sam to broadcast, promising dire retribution if Omaruco was harmed. This threat would really mean something if the scout escaped.

But apparently no such thoughts were present in the Zone 43 commander's mind. Ship number two dove in, direct for the scout. The plan was obvious. It was the ship that mattered. If it could be destroyed, Zone 43 would have time, even if Cope and his crew were left unharmed on Omaruco. But so long as the *Slithy Toves* existed, so did the danger to Zone 43. It was becoming obvious that Manta, Commerline and Atacta must have dreams of galactic conquest. Their own battle, presumably, was against their own moderates.

But that was another thing Cope couldn't allow himself to think about at the moment. He was not actually engaged in the attack, which was Bob's affair, but he had to be ready in case he was needed.

He didn't have to give any orders about the second ship. Destroying it was not enough. It was a battering ram which was quite capable of wrecking the scout even though it died in the effort. Bob had to blast it out of space. He did it, with some help from Ann, who was on the other beam. But only just. They saw fragments of the ship spatter the scout. That wouldn't do any damage. Some of its screens had been left, though all its armament had been removed to Sam's farm.

If there had been more time, Cope would have had the ship removed under cover and a dummy set up. But they had no time for small refinements like that. If they had tried, they might have left themselves open to such an attack that the Zone 43 ships could have razed the whole of the planet to make sure that they had destroyed the scout.

The remaining three cruisers withdrew out of range, and an exploratory beam came down from the nearest. It wasn't much of a beam. The ship was so far away that even the overloaded Terran equipment couldn't do much against it. But nevertheless it was very effective against the defenseless farms of Liddin. The buildings shrunk to skeletons, and the fields blackened. Bob moved at his beam, but a word from Cope stopped him.

" No use doing anything about that," he said. " They're only trying to find out where we are by a process of elimination. They want to find out what isn't defended. They know we'll be able to handle a beam like that.

Sam, this farm has to go too."

Sam nodded. If it disturbed him at all, he gave no sign of it.

In a few minutes everything about them was blackened ruin. Bob had done nothing but defend his own equipment and the people standing about it. The farm itself was allowed to collapse. There would be nothing to show the Zone 43 ships that they had found the attacking base and moved on.

They realized this when they had destroyed every farm in the valley. Then they moved in. They were asking for destruction, and they knew it, but there was nothing else they could do.

" Pretzel, take over," said Cope. He opened his mouth again to add further instructions, but changed his mind. If Pretzel was going to take charge, she might as well be free. " I'm going to talk to them," he said instead. There was no need to explain further. The radio, which wasn't a weapon, had been left in the scout. If he wanted to communicate, he had to do it from there.

Pretzel merely nodded. Very likely he would die in the scout. The chances were that the Zone 43 ships would get it in the end. But if they did, it didn't matter much whether Cope was inside it or not.

He ran for the scout, keeping under cover as far as possible. But that was another thing that didn't really matter. The attackers wouldn't want to destroy the ship any more, or any less, with him inside it than they did now.

He reached it safely, and wasted no time in getting to the radio. " Zone 43. Zone 43," he called.

The reply came in at once. " Well? "

" You can do nothing against us here," he said flatly.

" Then why tell us? "

" Because I wish as little harm to this world as possible. You know it will do you no good to go and destroy the rest of the world, and it won't affect our actions. But we don't want it to happen. You may as well let us go to Earth."

" In fact, you have nothing to say."

" I've said it."

" It couldn't be the case, could it, that if we were to destroy the rest of this world your power would stop and you would be helpless? "

" No," said Cope indifferently. " There is no link-up of power here. Destroy other places and it would make no difference, for we have been unable to draw on their power anyway. We have all we need here."

That was almost true. The ships could not cut off the power Cope had at his disposal without overcoming the Terran resistance, and that could only be done by exhausting the power. But it wasn't true that Cope had all he needed. The Omarucons had a lot of electricity, but it couldn't

stand much more of the terrific drain on it.

" You cannot stop us getting back to Earth," Cope insisted. " I'm not talking about that. I'm concerned merely about this world."

" Which doesn't interest us at all. If that is all you have to say . . ."

Communication was cut.

Cope watched the next act, helpless. Two cruisers swung back into space, built up velocity, and came at the scout from opposite directions. One couldn't but admire the devotion to duty of the Zone 43 ships. Each of them contained at least 50 men. They were being sacrificed without the slightest hesitation because their job was nothing more or less than the destruction of the *Slithy Toves*.

There could be no finesse in what Pretzel did about it. There were only two beams. If the attackers had known that they would certainly have thrown in all three to batter the scout to ruin, and would almost certainly have succeeded. But they probably thought there was only one. And this manoeuver left one ship. It wasn't the last effort.

Realizing that he had done all he could at the radio, when the attackers' attitude was as single-minded as it was, Cope started back for Sam's farm. The attackers had all their armament directed at the scout, of course, but power such as the Zone 43 ships couldn't match was being poured into the scout's remaining screens by remote control from the farm.

On the way he stopped, chilled by what he could see. Pretzel and Bob and Ann weren't quite going to destroy the two ships before they destroyed the scout. But Pretzel apparently realized that too. Both beams concentrated on one ship, and whenever it veered, clawed from its course by boiling air, the beams at once switched to the other ship. Until they crashed neither was entirely disabled. But both missed the scout.

Cope completed the dash to the farm. A glance at Sam told the story, though his crew was unperturbed.

" We're just about through," said Pretzel. " In simple language, if that last ship tries the same thing, we can't stop it."

" More power? " Cope snapped at Sam.

" Impossible. Can we move your equipment? We could use the Ketrin lines only nine miles from here."

Cope had been told that already and it was no answer. The remaining ship would be watching. The Liddinars had only slow electric trucks. They would never be allowed to do those nine miles.

He could have stalled for longer before letting the Zone 43 ships know where they were. He could have had the *Slithy Toves* under cover, and a power line to Ketrin.

But he had given away the scout's position when they could no longer prevent the attackers destroying Porus as a gesture. Cope was no field

marshal, balancing so many lives against such a loss or such a gain. Besides, he didn't regard Omarucon lives as his to buy and sell.

Ann interrupted his thoughts. " I did quite a job on those generators," she said eagerly. For once the chip on her shoulder didn't show. " They're fully automatic now, and there's a terrific charge when power is low, down to a trickle when it's high. Give them an hour or two and there'll be enough power again to handle this last ship."

" How long? " demanded Cope.

Ann frowned. " Trouble with these beams is that they can't scrape up the last dregs of power—they need a good kick. Three hours, I'd say."

" Let me take a truck and go over towards Ketrin." said Sam. " That will occupy this ship for a while. Then . . ."

Cope and Pretzel looked at Sam, and at each other. The funny thing was that he couldn't help begging even when he was asking him to let him throw away his life. They had decided independently, days ago, that Sam

was all right. But this was the first time they could look at him and really like what they saw.

" The idea's good," said Pretzel, " but let's refine on it a bit, shall we? First, it's my job, Sam, not yours. The way we work, the second in command gets all this sort of dirty work. In the second place, I'll take one of the small screens on the truck so that I won't exactly be a pushover."

She caught Cope's eye. " Any comments? "

" Yes," he retorted. " God knows I don't want to be a hero like you noble characters. But you're the recorder, Pretzel, and if anyone gets back to Earth it has to be you. Looks as if I'll have to drive that truck."

They naturally left it as long as possible. If the Zone 43 ship was prepared to wait, nothing suited them better. But the purpose of the plan was to save power, and it would fail if the beams and screens had to be used again before the power built itself up.

They loaded all the batteries they could find on one of the electric trucks. It was blackened and twisted by the beam which had licked the whole of Liddin, but still usable. Cope, who had no intention of dying if he could help it, seriously considered the possibility of setting it going without a driver. That, however, was impracticable until the road to Ketrin, a mile away, was reached. The truck had to be driven through gates and along lanes to reach it. But once he had the truck pointed along the long straight road, he was perfectly prepared to leave it if he got the chance.

When they saw the ship drop low, far across the plain, they hoped for a moment that a land attack was going to be tried. Fifty men would only be committing suicide by advancing into range of the scout's beams. But then they saw the ship was creeping slowly towards them in the apparent hope that the beams could not be turned low.

They could, of course, but Cope didn't want the beams to be used at all. He jumped on the truck.

" So long, hero," said Pretzel. He said nothing. She might have found a few more tender last words to say to him, he thought.

The Zone 43 ship soon saw the moving truck and rose again, still keeping well away. Now they knew where the Terran base probably was. Cope began to see advantages in the scheme he hadn't quite expected. For quite a while the ship seemed to think this new move was a trap, and watched without doing anything.

Cope found himself glancing at his watch every two or three minutes. Three hours, Ann had said. Half an hour had passed when the truck started. Another half hour, the incredibly slow trolley had almost reached the road, and the ship was still well clear, waiting.

But just as Cope saw that 67 of the 180 minutes had passed, the ship

began to move closer. Anything that happened now would be tentative, until either side saw the possibility of victory in a last all-out attack. The single cruiser from Zone 43 had to be wary. The commander might guess that Cope's resources were dwindling, but still couldn't afford to take chances.

The first probing beam touched the truck. Cope's screen was on; there was a crackle, no more. But the screen, powered only by the Omarucon batteries, could take pitifully little of this.

Cope swung out on the road. It wasn't a good road, but at least it was straight. The beam sought the truck again, and Cope considered his chances. Luck had been with him up to now, in that the Zone 43 commander didn't dare do much. But now the commander would see that there was no answering attack, and his confidence would build up. Soon he would come nearer and turn full power on the truck.

There were hedges at the roadside—no protection, but good cover. Cope looked at his watch again. Seventy-three minutes.

The Zone 43 commander swept away to come at the truck along the road. He knew where the defending base was, and he wanted to keep well out of its way. Cope seized his chance. He turned the truck in as close to the hedge as possible, set it straight, and then when the chance occurred he dropped over the side of the truck and rolled under the bush. The truck rumbled on, slower than a man could walk.

Thereafter he could watch what was going on with more satisfaction. He could smile as the ship gingerly approached the truck and again tried a cautious beam. The road ten yards from Cope glowed faintly, but the next time he would be quite safe. The truck rolled on indifferently. Eighty-one minutes. He began to work his way along the hedge back to Sam's farm.

At 113 minutes the truck fell in tangled ruin, after having limped on gallantly long after Cope would have been dead if he had stayed in it. He had timed his return well. He got back to the yard just as the four men and two women there saw the truck, far away along the Ketrin road, collapse into black wreckage. He saw tears in Sam's eyes, which was interesting, but none in Pretzel's. In fact, she looked indecently jubilant.

" How about it, Ann? " he said, and everyone wheeled to stare at him. He didn't quite know how to take the fact that only Pretzel wasn't surprised or pleased to see him. Apparently she had seen or guessed what had happened. " Nearly two hours," he went on cooly. " What are the chances now? "

They all rapidly adjusted themselves to the idea that he wasn't dead after all, except Pretzel, who didn't have to.

Ann looked almost happy. " Pretty good," she said. " Of course, I

can't test the power. But we may be able to bring that ship down like the others, if we get the chance.

" We'll get the chance," Cope assured her.

" Why? " asked Bob. " If I were the Zone 43 commander, I'd orbit about the planet, getting up some velocity so that I could catch the scout whenever she tried to leave."

Cope didn't have to answer that. " Then you'd lose her," said Pretzel. " That was all right when he had five ships. Now there's only one, and however and wherever he orbits, we can calculate the precise split second and exactly the right direction to take off so that we get hours of acceleration before he can follow. No, he muddled the whole thing. He should have kept us where we are with his five ships."

Cope grinned. " I wouldn't have liked to try it," he said. " I think he was right enough—only he failed, that's all. At least, I hope he failed." . .

He had. Knowing that the scout could slip away from one ship almost whenever she wished, the Zone 43 cruiser came in for one last flaming, all-out attack on the scout—just three hours and 27 minutes too late.

Ann had done a good job on the generators. The last ship flared through the bright colours of disintegration as rapidly as the first had done, and all that the five cruisers from Zone 43 had accomplished was the destruction of Liddin's farmhouses.

" You are really going? " asked Sam. " Nothing will make you change your minds? "

Cope shook his head. " But we'll be back," he said, " or others like us. Probably us. Zone 43 isn't our job, after we've reported." For a moment he thought dazedly of the joy of reporting that the *Slithy Toves* had destroyed five enemy cruisers.

Sam put his hand in his pocket. " Take these with you," he said. " As a personal gift. I don't know the laws of your Navy, but if we have to sign something to make it legal for us to give you things personally draw it up and we'll sign. No? We'd be obliged if you make it clear to your Navy and the rest of your world that these are as valuable and as difficult to get on Omaruco as on Earth, so there's no use starting a diamond rush. Also, that we're not going to give them away to anyone who comes and asks for them."

He left Pretzel and Cope staring at four magnificent stones. " We could have cut them," said Sam over his shoulder, " but you will certainly be able to get it done better." Deliberately, standing no nonsense, he walked back to a corner of the field.

" No gratitude, huh," said Cope.

Pretzel got her breath back. " No," she insisted. " It isn't gratitude. It isn't payment. They asked us to help, and we did. When the Zone 43

cruisers came, you did all you could to keep Omaruco safe. They knew what you could have done, and what you did. They heard on their radios what you said to the cruisers, and worked out what it meant. But this still isn't gratitude."

"Then how the hell do their minds work?"

"Let's get off the ground and I'll tell you."

The *Slithy Toves* was a straight run to Earth. There was nothing to do for weeks now except eat, talk, sleep or read.

"What you need," said Pretzel, "to understand the Omarucons is imagination."

"Which we haven't got?" demanded Ann.

"We'll see. If you have, use it." She rose abruptly and switched out the lights. The cabin was illuminated only very faintly by the starlight from the ports.

"The four of us," came her voice in the darkness, "are landing on a new world. With a lot of other people. Our ship is useless—not damaged, just worn out. We'll never be able to make it really serviceable again—at least, not for centuries and then only if the civilization we build takes a technological turn. We have tools, but this job needs the help of a score of specialist factories.

"So we're here to stay. But things aren't easy. We have to live for a long time on our stores while we try to get things to grow.

"And another thing. We always thought there would be a government. We thought governments just grew. Now we find they don't when everyone's busy nearly all the time. Some people think they'd like to govern, and maybe even try, but they soon find they fall behind with producing things for their own use, and others have none to spare. So they decide they'd rather live than govern."

"Could it be as simple as that?" Cope wondered.

"Perhaps not. Look at it from another angle. Who is our natural leader? You—you commanded the ship. But you commanded it for a long time, and you don't want to give orders any more. You want to settle like everyone else and own things and make things grow. That's not the only way *you* can exist, but it's the only way you can leave anything for your kids, when you have any."

Cope grunted. Pretzel's teeth flashed faintly in the darkness and they heard the laugh in her voice.

"I'm coming to that in a minute. Now, what happens when the only food on a world is what you can grow yourself, and each individual can only produce enough for about one point two people? The tendency is for farmers to be independent, not to trust anyone else too much, never taking in a weak partner who's a liability. So each family has a farm of

its own. And it needs help—often. So how do we manage? We get two or three neighbours in to help, and then go and help them in return."

"That's it," said Cope. "Quid pro quo. Gratitude. You helped me, now I'll help you. Just what we'd expect. How does it come about that nobody feels any gratitude, and no one understands the idea of quid pro quo?"

"I keep telling you to use your imagination," said Pretzel plaintively. "You've got a farm. The harvest is completely beyond you. You need help, or you'll never get it in. And there's no money, so you can't pay anyone to help. You won't have enough over to pay in produce. No one has any time for government yet, they're too busy just trying to live, so there's no government, no currency, and no system of barter—because everyone, just at first, wants the same things.

"So what can you do but beg help? At first you do it with promises. You tell me if I help you you'll do the same for me.

"But then, when the time comes, maybe you can't. You're too busy, but Bob's free. So he helps me. Next year you come to me for help again, and I say, 'Oh, no, you didn't pay me back last year. Nothing doing.' You've got to have help, so you go down on your knees for it. But you're not so keen on making promises you may not be able to keep. Promises are two-edged things. Gradually we reach an understanding without many definite promises.

"It becomes formal. When you need help, which is often, you go around begging for it. You don't make any promises. When people do help, you don't feel grateful. People don't really feel grateful for something they've got to have, and expect to get. Gratitude belongs in a leisured, many-faceted civilization where all men are not equal—where some have more, or *are* more, than others."

"Wait till I get that straight," Cope interrupted. "You've got something there. Do you ever feel grateful to someone who's on the same level as yourself? No, you don't. You're glad they did whatever it was, and you like them for doing it. If you feel gratitude, you're admitting inferiority. Admitting you've got to do something to be level with them again. Whether you ever actually do it or not."

"That's it," agreed Pretzel. "On Omaruco, when someone comes to ask your help, you don't feel inferior or superior to him, but remember you're dependent on him and others like him. You can't afford to say too often, 'No, try Pretzel Fisher over the hill. Or Bob Best down in the valley. I haven't the time.'

"A system works itself out. One or two people try to fit new things into it. You, Ann, don't want to run a farm. You think you can do better by offering assistance in return for so much grain. And that's all right until there's a bad year when the work still has to be done and everyone needs

everything he's got. That year you're told politely that we're sorry, but we have to use help we don't have to pay for except in kind. Then, of course, you're stuck.

" This is necessary for so long that by the time it isn't necessary it's established. There comes a time when people are free to think about things like government and currency and specialization and so on. But by this time they've got on for so long as they were that they aren't very interested.'

It was all clear enough now, and Cope said so. " What made it difficult to understand," he observed, " was the fact that the Omarucons, who can't say ten words without going down on their knees to beg for something, are actually the most independent race that we have so far discovered in the galaxy."

" It's just the way they do things," said Pretzel. " For example, you finally decide it's time you got married. You've taken a long time to make up your mind about this. But when you do, it's obvious that Pretzel Fisher is the best-looking, most competent, most intelligent, in every way the most attractive female for miles around. So you go to her and beg. You don't know any other way to handle the situation. You want her, but it doesn't occur to you simply to ask if she feels the same way. You tell her how marvellous she is, and how much you need her, and how you can't do without her—"

Cope jerked to his feet to switch on the lights, but didn't. He didn't want Pretzel to see his face.

" You've been pretty hard and cruel once or twice before, Pretzel," he said furiously, " but never quite like this. You've won your battle, damn it. What do you want me to do now—apologize for breathing the same air as you? Okay, so you can make a fool of me any time you like. That doesn't mean you can—"

" It's not me," said Pretzel gently, " making a fool of you this time. What was it I said? You want her—that's right, isn't it, or am I making a fool of myself this time—but it doesn't occur to you simply to ask if she feels the same way. . . ."

Some time later Cope suddenly asked, " Ann and Bob, are you two still here? "

" In this light," came Ann's resentful voice, " it doesn't really matter, does it? "

THE END

Let's extend the Welfare State to a point where human beings are almost functioning robots, and then throw in a few hereditary patterns which almost certainly would creep in. Something would have to give way somewhere.

THE TROJAN WAY

By FRANCIS RICHARDSON

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

When Anne Gordon was fifteen and was allocated to Child Welfare, her friends envied her. Not that they coveted her job; just that her aptitude tests and personal choice coincided.

Her naive trust in the omniscient benevolence of the Welfare State soothed and submerged her sympathy for her friends. The State ensured their happiness. The State knew best.

A few thinking people questioned the State's success, but not in public. Malcontents quietly disappeared. Nor was there machinery to investigate complaints or consider appeals against the State's judgment.

Three other girls of Anne's age helped each other to settle down to the nursery routine. Anne's extra keenness marked her early for advancement.

The nursery held approximately one hundred and fifty children be-

tween the ages of six months and three years old. That the intake and output maintained a fair balance was no coincidence. The State enforced strict population control. A necessary evil of the times.

Six-months-old children were parted from their mothers for State rearing and educating. From that moment mothers lost all trace of their children, and children never knew their parents. All records were State secrets.

Sharp eyes noted and remarked upon strong resemblances among top ranking State officials. But their remarks were ever discreet.

The State named the children, but not after the parents. For convenience the State numbered them. Later, with maturity, letters were added to the number, indicating station or vocation.

Anne Gordon worked diligently, and at eighteen became a qualified nurse. A week later she found an excited crowd around the notice board. The excitement was caused by the notification of the quarterly assembly of the Eugenics Board.

Eventually she wormed her way to the front. The severity and thoroughness of the outlined tests damped her enthusiasm. Passes were few, and the failures around her—bigger, healthier girls—convinced her of her own shortcomings. An attempt at sympathy with those that passed only to lose their children, was unconvincing.

" No good, Anne," smiled another newly qualified nurse. " You're kept too thin ducking Dr. Korbett's advances! "

" She'd be a skeleton if she ducked every time," quipped another, cynical voice. Anne smiled sweetly.

" Is that why you're round shouldered? "

Anne was twenty-three when she finally found the courage to add her name to the applicants to the Eugenics Board. It was considered a huge joke.

Anne was a slightly-built brunette barely five feet high. Despite her vivacity and high spirits, she looked too pretty, too delicate, to pass such stringent tests. Her naturally pale complexion tended to confirm her fragility; but her one hundred per cent attendance record was overlooked.

" What's the idea, Anne? " asked Jane Brett, her closest friend. " You surely don't think you have a chance? You're just making a fool of yourself."

In her heart Anne agreed, but; " You never can tell. Anyway, I'm tired of Dr. Korbett. This is my only chance to get rid of him. If it fails I've lost nothing."

" Why don't you just tell him to jump in the lake? "

" Wish it was as easy as that. I don't want to hurt him, he's been good to me. I can't help liking him, but he palls."

" Too much of a good thing, eh? "

A shocked silence lasting several seconds followed the posting of the results by the Eugenics Board. Anne, at the rear of the crowd as usual, suddenly found herself the target of all eyes. Incredulous eyes. Envious eyes. Eyes that looked somewhat dazed.

A tall luscious blonde protested. " I don't believe it. There's a mistake somewhere," She had strongly fancied her chance.

A dry voice from the back said: " Tell that to the Eugenics Board."

The blonde departed in quest of the voice's owner.

Amid congratulations from friends and half-ribald comments that once would have made her blush, Anne made her way to the notice board. There were only two names, her own and a man's.

" George Harvey 129537 S.P.I." She turned to her friends. " That's Space Pilot, First Class, isn't it? "

" That's a lot of man," agreed a redhead. " Think you can handle him?"

" He hasn't a chance! "

George Harvey was a big man. Over six feet tall and strongly built. Not good looking, Anne decided, but pleasantly ugly. She liked the effect of the space-tanned face beneath the shock of blonde hair. In fact, she liked all she saw of him.

George caught his breath. What a beautiful girl! A piece of Dresden china come to life. Yet, despite her slight build, something about her belied her apparent fragility. Perhaps the rhythmic way she walked, or maybe the glint in her eyes, or the challenging tilt of her jaw.

Her voice jarred him from his reverie. " Pull your eyes back in, Mister-Man. You'll see plenty of me for the next six months. Maybe too much! "

George answered her ready smile with a slow grin. " I'll take that chance! "

" Have a good time, Anne? "

" Ask stupid questions and . . ."

" Come and tell me all about it."

" What do you need to learn? I've heard certain rumours! "

Jane Bret laughed gaily. " Rumour is a lying jade. But not, I admit, this time. However could you tire of such a man? "

Anne avoided the question. " How is the dear doctor? Perhaps we had better have a conference and confessional."

Two pairs of ears should have burned.

Anne gave her friend a real surprise when she produced a marriage certificate.

" But my dear," gasped Jane, " that's out of date. Archaic. No need to tie yourself down like that. Why did you do it? "

" To be perfectly honest, because George asked me,"

" You must have got it bad! "

" Maybe, but it's still legal and binding, you know. There are certain advantages."

" Think it will keep the wolf from the door? The wolf named Korbett? Don't make me laugh, Anne! "

Somehow, Anne lost much of her confidence. And, as the months passed, even more. Returned to the old routine, she found Dr. Korbett going out of his way to smooth her path. His solicitude over her health caused a slight coolness between the two girls.

" How long before George returns? " Jane asked.

" About two years. He's taking supplies to the Altair system."

" That's a year too long. I can see me looking for another man. Korbett's all eyes when you are around."

For once, Anne could think of no reply.

Anne was duly delivered, in the maternity hospital, of an eight pound boy. Dr. Korbett was a frequent visitor. Which somehow did not detract from her happiness.

The pain of parting from her son slowly subsided into a dull ache, and Anne consoled herself in work. She gave her small charges the same care and affection she had lavished on her own child.

Three months after, she was promoted to a supervisory role. She welcomed the extra responsibility. Where before she had been mainly confined to one small ward, she was now free of the whole nursery.

Towards the end of her initial round of the wards, the old heart-pain returned. Fortunately, the ward nurse was absent at the time.

He was the fifth of ten in a small ward. The dark curly-headed boy held himself erect on sturdy legs, grasping the bars of his cot. He had an engaging smile. A smile that slowly faded into a peculiarly intent expression, then suddenly returned, broader, happier, less impersonal. He shouted unintelligibly, and held out his arms.

For seconds Anne stood frozen. Then gasped, and gathered him into her arms. He snuggled confidingly close. Her heart beat wildly, senselessly, for it could not be her son. Her son! The thought echoed madly within her mind.

" He's been no trouble, has he? " asked the returned ward nurse, anxiously. " Such a good little chap, as a rule."

Anne was slightly dazed. " No, no trouble. He's—he's so like my own son, that's all. Only of course, my boy was fair," she amended, seeing the startled expression on the other's face.

The nurse smiled understandingly. " I had a boy, too. Three years ago."

There was no room in Anne's mind that night for sleep. She alternately dared to hope, then berated herself for her foolishness. He could

not be her son. It was impossible. And yet, one mistake or omission—even in the highly efficient State machinery mistakes were possible—and he was as likely to be sent to this nursery as any other.

If he were her son, and the fact was discovered, they would again be parted. Anne determined that that would not happen. How could they even suspect, unless she spoke? A small strawberry birthmark on his shoulder would settle the question of identity.

Three frustrating days passed before her chance came. Very soon her heart beat joyously. He was indeed her son!

His tag read: Donald Martin No. 735692.

Reiteration of her professed reason for special interest in the boy prevented suspicion. The ward nurse was sympathetic; and anyway, one humoured one's superiors. Life was more pleasant that way. Yet Anne avoided spending too much time on him, unless she was alone. Her duties embraced the whole nursery, and an adverse report of neglect elsewhere would be difficult to explain away. It would mean disaster, and she treasured the few moments she spent with him too much to senselessly jeopardise them.

Gradually now, Doctor Korbett began to claim more and more of her free time. He hinted at a return to the old relationship. Anne resisted, strongly at first, panic in her heart. She knew she could not hold out indefinitely. Or even for very long. The mind-picture of George, despite her efforts, insisted in changing into Dr. Korbett's.

One evening Jane Brett entered Anne's room. She waved a white handkerchief ostentatiously.

" I surrender. Your forces are superior. He's all yours."

" What are you talking about, idiot? "

" Who else but your darling doctor? And you didn't even try! "

" You're out of your mind, Jane."

" No. Just out of a delightful liaison. But I have a consolation prize. That new young doctor—Corcoran's his name—who arrived here a couple of days ago. We're like that." She held up two fingers, close together.

" Jane, you're incorrigible! "

The other girl merely laughed. " Oh! " she exclaimed, halfway through the doorway, " I almost forgot. He wants to see you immediately in his office. And don't say ' who '! "

Anne knew beyond any doubt her marriage was not the source of strength she had believed.

In his age group young Donald forged ahead. At first, Anne credited her extra attention, until the gap between him and the rest of his group widened noticeably.

He walked a few days after Anne refound him, long before the next child. Which could have been a coincidence. But in talking the difference was marked. At a year old, most children could say—some only repeat—a few simple words and phrases. Yet at this age, Donald could converse intelligibly. He seemed to know the meanings of words without being told. Which was fantastic.

She noticed him staring intently at her whilst repeating even difficult words unhesitatingly. Somehow she had an uncomfortable feeling he was reading her mind. He started repeating words before she finished voicing them. The impression of mind-reading grew.

Suspicion changed to certainty. In quick succession she quoted a string of difficult words. He repeated them faithfully and accurately, with a barely noticeable time lag. She slumped into a chair, mind awhirl. For she had spoken the last word in her mind only. The boy had unhesitatingly " repeated " it.

He regarded her gravely. Reproachfully, she thought. And she barely repelled the threatened wave of hysteria.

Further investigation only confirmed the fact. Donald Martin, her son, was a telepath. Anne felt alone and frightened. For the boy. Abnormal children—including over-brights like Donald—were sent to " Special Schools," the location of which were a State secret. Chance remarks by visiting officials and doctors over a period of years had killed all belief among nursery establishments in the existence of such schools.

Anne was certain that discovery of the boy's gift would mean his death. In the present set-up nothing was easier than the elimination of such abnormals, rated as either likely burdens on the State, or possible dangers. That suppression of information could mean equal danger to herself, had little importance.

Somehow, Donald's supernormal powers remained undiscovered. The ward nurse, perhaps, had little interest in her job. She was evidently not too intelligent, or she would not be subordinate to Anne. Whatever the reason, Anne was thankful. For despite her repeated explanations, the boy could not comprehend his danger. Only after weeks of surreptitious warnings would he accept her instructions, and even then as if to humour an eccentric.

Only Fortune preserved him, and Fortune was fickle. He must soon attract attention. Fatal attention.

Donald was eighteen months old when George returned. For a week he was unable to leave the Spaceport, due to routine matters involving the re-stocking of the ship in readiness for the next flight. Space ship maintenance was too expensive to permit lengthy leave at terminals. George, as Captain and Chief Pilot of the spaceship *Ariadne*, was the worst

sufferer. Three days was all he got. Anne applied for, and was granted, three days leave. She hated leaving Donald, but she needed advice and support.

A quieter, subdued George picked her up in the morning. A man with something on his mind. He smiled at Anne's raised eyebrows as she regarded his luxurious limousine.

" The Commandant at the Spaceport is a friend of mine. Wish this bus was mine. It's a beauty! "

They stopped at a small bungalow in the country, half a mile from the nearest neighbour.

" We're really alone here, darling," said George, finally setting her on her feet. " We can talk in safety."

" Then I'm going to start talking now. Listen." Anne told her story.

George pensively scratched his head. " This complicates matters. Simplifies them too, in another way. You see, I applied for permits for both of us as colonists, when I first returned. We were refused, as I expected. Most of my crew have applied at various times.

" We made our plans on the way home. Will you come with us? We intend to do without permits."

" What about the boy? "

" Complicates matters somewhat. It means adjusting for his weight. I shall have to go back to the ship tomorrow to straighten things up. I'll leave you to organise your end. Get your things together tomorrow. No one will notice if you leave what you have here with me. Have yourself and the boy ready by six o'clock the next evening. If we are to get away, we shall have to cut it that fine. I'll drop in to see you about six tomorrow evening to see that things are going right, but I'll have to go back again. My second pilot returns from leave then, and he may upset the new calculations if I'm not there. Agreed? "

" I hate the idea of leaving you, even for a short time."

" Never mind, tonight is ours."

A relief nurse was on duty in Donald's ward when Anne arrived there. One of Anne's intimate circle. " Anne! Something gone wrong? " she gasped. Anne explained that George was recalled to the Space Port.

" A nuisance, but what could we do? I couldn't sit around twiddling my fingers, could I? "

" A nuisance, you call it! For sheer understatement that takes the biscuit. If it had been me, now . . .! " She lifted her eyes to the ceiling. " Wish I was as keen as you."

She started to leave, but turned at the door. " By the way, one of these boys will be taken away tomorrow afternoon. An overbright. Wonder you haven't noticed him. I told Dr. Korbett and he tested him. The boy

at the end there." She pointed to Donald and left. Fortunately.

Anne's pallor deepened to a ghastly hue, and her legs went like jelly. For minutes her brain refused to function; then raced at double speed, which was no improvement. The rest of the day was a haze.

George guessed the cause of her mental turmoil. " They've found out about the boy! "

Anne could only nod.

" Come for a drive. I can spare an hour."

Anne brightened. Together they evolved a plan, which involved her voluntarily assuming ward duties next day. That, she knew, would not be difficult.

" That's my end settled. What then? "

" Five years ago, we used some of our surplus fuel—easy enough to accumulate a surplus—to explore a promising system a few light-years beyond Altair. Strictly illegal, of course, so we never reported it. Altair is by far the most distant colonised system. The nearer stars in other sectors will be surveyed before scouts get around there. The second planet is ideal. Almost identical to Earth. An improvement if anything. Should be safe for decades.

" I suppose it proved the turning point. The whole crew were ready to stop there, then. But I pointed out that it was a barren way to live, and suggested that we return to Earth. There the younger and unattached would get firm girl friends—marry them, preferably. Then we could settle the details next trip. We were lucky, we were transferred for a break on the Mars run, I was especially lucky. I passed the Eugenics rating. My —our—six months leave fitted in nicely.

This is what we plan. The crew, there are twenty of us, will bring their wives and girl friends aboard for a farewell party. Nothing unusual there. Only there will be no party. As soon as we're all there, we blast off! Provisionally at eight o'clock, but I've set the calculator to give or take an hour."

" Talking of time, yours is nearly up! "

On her way to her room, Anne was intercepted.

" Why didn't you report that boy to me, Anne? " asked Dr. Korbett. " Surely you noticed him? " Anne understood. A cat-and-mouse game.

She shrugged unconcernedly. " He was very clever, but I didn't think he warranted a special report."

" Be more careful another time. Overlooking such cases can prove serious. I have to report on it tomorrow night. You needn't worry, though." He was smiling. She understood.

They walked away together.

The day nurse jumped at the chance of an extra day off, and Anne

assumed her duties.

The children were taught to return to their own cots at the end of training sessions, and at bedtime. Anne devoted most of her time to Donald and another dark-haired boy of similar build and appearance. First, she changed them over and trained them to return to their new cots. Not a difficult matter. At four o'clock she changed their identity discs.

The danger hour approached, and her heart beat faster. All depended now on who collected the boy, and when. The later it was, the less chance of premature discovery.

At five o'clock Anne began to breathe more freely. At five-thirty a probationer entered the ward and introduced a stranger in nurse's uniform. A hard-faced woman of fifty or so.

" Nurse Andrews for the boy, Nurse Gordon. Shall I get him ready for you? "

" No thanks! Very little to do."

Anne ordered the children to their cots. The two boys returned to their new positions. Nurse Andrews, evidently well primed, went straight to Donald's old cot.

There was little comment as Anne leisurely dressed the boy in outdoor clothes. She gave him his bag of toilet necessaries, and kissed him goodbye.

" All yours, Nurse Andrews. He's a good boy."

" Too good, apparently."

Immediately they left, Anne took a prepared syringe to Donald. Within seconds he was asleep.

Simultaneously at six George arrived and Anne's relief, a young probationer, entered the ward.

Anne ran outside. " I'll have him out in a couple of minutes. Keep the motor running! "

George grinned and kissed her. " Good girl. But be careful."

Returning to the ward, she changed into street clothes. The probationer looked up as Anne left the changing room.

" That youngster there is sound asleep."

Anne smiled. " Not surprising. He hasn't been still all day. Wish I could sleep as well. Anyway I'm off. My husband is waiting." She picked up a large suitcase, then dropped it. She wailed. " Now I've forgotten it! Be a dear, will you, and run along to my room for me. It's a small leather case, on my bed. You can't miss it."

The girl was only too eager to please.

Anne moved fast. Putting a screen around Donald's cot, she opened the suitcase and laid him inside. Rolling a bundle of blankets to simulate the sleeping boy's form, she rearranged the bed, closed the suitcase and

removed the screen.

The suitcase was surprisingly heavy. Fortunately, she met nobody on the way to the car.

George put the case on the back seat and opened the lid. Anne returned to meet the probationer.

" You're an angel. Saved me a real skinning," she smiled. " You're new to this ward, aren't you? I'll show you where the case-notes are, and push off. The children won't hurt while you read them. Make it a point, wherever you go, to acquaint yourself with your charges." Flattered by the attention, the girl settled herself in the desk.

" She should be kept busy for half an hour," said Anne as she slid in beside George, " but don't rely on it. Only on speed, now."

" Don't worry on that score, darling! "

They drove at high speed for about two miles, then turned into a secondary road. Leaving the city outskirts they slowed and drove along a narrow lane barely wide enough to accommodate the car. Around a bend, hidden from the road they had left, they stopped.

" The worst is over now, darling, but hurry," said George, picking up young Donald and Anne's small suitcase.

" Hurry? Where? "

George pointed. Half hidden by trees, was a small helicopter. He smiled at her astonishment. " Many things happen outside the knowledge of the State. Quite a few people are beginning to think for themselves. That is only one of several similar private jobs. They are never challenged."

They touched down close to the towering star-ship, and lost no time getting aboard. Anne and Donald were left with the other women, while George went straight to the Control Room.

" You cut it awfully fine," said Joe Ryder, the second pilot, a red headed gaunt giant. " As you came in a police message came over the air. They seem keen to get you two. I presume you have the boy safe? Good! But here come the Spaceport Police! "

George glanced out of the port. " We're sealed down? "

" Sure. Directly you arrived. All present and correct, and ready for the off."

George consulted the chronometer. " Start the motors. There's a seven minute wait, and that'll keep them away! " Joe pulled a lever and pressed a button. The ship vibrated gently.

Slowly the minutes passed. Word was given through the inter-com. and the passengers prepared for the take-off.

" This is it! " said George, finally, and commenced punching buttons,

The great ship lifted slowly from the ground, then swiftly accelerating, was gone.

Fifteen months later the ship landed in grassland bordering a forest. To guard against chance discovery, it was quickly camouflaged.

Farm machinery was off-loaded, and while one team ploughed the ground for the experimental sowings, and prepared the ground for orchards, another commenced erecting living quarters. Log cabins would have to suffice until the colony was settled and prospering. Brick and stone would come later.

In the autumn they took stock. Wheat, rye and maize were failures among the grains. Oats did well, yielding a heavy crop, as did barley, the latter producing inch-long grains.

Potatoes degenerated, but other root crops fared better.

Apples thrived, while pears and plums died. Raspberries and currants produced abundant fruit, while strawberries grew to the size of pineapples, to the detriment of their old flavour.

All animals except pigs thrived. Chickens revelled in the new life, and eggs were plentiful. Ducks and guinea-fowl had mostly absconded, but were evidently flourishing.

A vegetarian life, even for a few years, was not attractive, and hunting parties scoured the surrounding woods. The main bag was a rabbit-sized rodent resembling a kangaroo, with an occasional bird-reptile and small armoured but unarmed animals that curled into a ball when danger threatened. The latter, with a flavour reminiscent of pork, was soon professed a delicacy. The only predatory creatures seen were ferocious, stoat-like creatures, too small to be dangerous to humans.

Occasional reports of larger animals were unsubstantiated for many years, for within two years the food situation was stable, and hunting was mostly confined to the " armadillos."

The colony expanded fast. Within three years the population doubled. Within ten years they were over a hundred and sixty strong, and the cultivated areas increased accordingly.

Almost a quarter of the children developed telepathic powers. Until they learned to veil their thoughts, a disconcerting situation for the adults.

Anne believed that Donald had amplified and developed latent talents that would otherwise have remained hidden. Hers was the majority view, but a substantial minority gave credit to the new environment.

As George was the natural leader of the colonists, so Donald was among the boys. He was a born leader.

He was fourteen when, taking a few of the older lads exploring in the forest, he caught his first fleeting glimpse of a large animal. Subsequently,

he and others of the boys made other sightings, but not sufficiently for identification.

One day, Donald, with two companions practising woodcraft, suddenly emerged into a small clearing. Silently he signed a halt. In the centre of the clearing directly ahead was a strangely man-like animal picking berries from a low bush.

Except for humanly proportioned arms and a covering of golden fur it was not unlike a chimpanzee, but its legs were less bowed, and its stance was almost upright. It was about five feet high, and was markedly less prognathous than its Earth counterpart.

The animal looked up and saw the boys. It turned and darted toward the opposite side of the clearing. Then, strangely, it stopped and retraced its steps. As Donald turned to speak to his companions it ran away again. Donald realised that he had willed the animal to return half unconsciously, to satisfy his curiosity. He made a conscious effort. It returned again, evidently frightened.

It had proved amenable to telepathic control. The boys were elated. With Donald retaining control, they escorted their capture to the village.

Within a few days, Donald and the ape-thing were firm friends. It proved easy enough to train, and intelligent enough to perform relatively simple jobs in the fields and orchards. When Donald released it from control as an experiment, it made no attempt to return to the forest.

To the relief of the womenfolk, it proved a strict vegetarian.

Inevitably, more of the animals were captured and introduced into the village life, until there were twenty of them. One to each household. Here, George Harvey called a halt, vetoing any further import of the animals.

Some months later, in the autumn, the serenity of the colony was shattered. Practically everyone, including the now thoroughly domesticated animals, were stripping the fruit trees. Something was disturbing the telepaths. They were unable to concentrate on their work. Every now and then they would pause, as if listening.

" What's the trouble? " George asked his son.

Donald looked down from the ladder against an apple tree.

" New thoughts, Dad. New people. Strangers. Too far away to be clear. Who could they be? "

His father looked grave, but left the question unanswered.

Halfway through the afternoon a faint hum came from deep in the forest. The hum crescendoed to a roar as a silvery shape flashed high overhead and vanished from sight.

" A space-ship! " gasped George. " A survey scout! "

He ordered work to stop. " As a precaution, we shall have to camp out

in the woods until the scout leaves. Fortunately they were flying high and probably didn't spot us."

The exodus proved unnecessary. Before the arrangements were complete, Donald, after conferring with his fellow telepaths, announced that the scout had left.

" They didn't see us. Then we're safe! " exclamed Anne.

George shook his head. " Hardly. When their microfilms are developed on Earth, the village will show. The ship, too, probably. The camouflage has worn thin. In any case they will report the planet suitable for colonisation. That means a fully-fledged expedition inside three years. Somehow we have to persuade them that this is not such a desirable residence after all. A formidable undertaking, but not impossible. Time is on our side."

The Commodore exhibited annoyance as the Lieutenant bustled into his office with an excited air and a large photograph.

" Can't you see I'm busy? "

" Sorry sir, but this is something unusual. From Intelligence."

The Commodore muttered under his breath and examined the photograph with a magnifying glass. The Lieutenant indicated an irregular ovoid smudge.

" A space-ship. Badly camouflaged."

" Hm! A lost ship and a settlement of the survivors, apparently. Why should that require my attention? "

" Just that it's in a previously unexplored sector, sir, and we have no report of a missing ship anywhere near there."

The Commodore dubiously returned to his magnifying glass. He grunted. " Look. See those shadows? Twenty-eight people there, in plain sight. Look at the different sizes. Some of them small children."

" Exactly, sir. But no colonists have been settled there. None nearer than Altair."

" Altair, huh? That rings a bell! Get me the missing ships file. The answer will be there."

During the subsequent investigation, Dr. Korbett was interviewed by intelligence agents and found to be extremely co-operative. His own questions were answered. His curiosity aroused, he began to pull certain strings. He was appointed to the Commission to investigate the case.

His interest was in the abducted child, or so he said. To himself he admitted a stronger interest in Anne.

Their ship landed beside the inadequately concealed hulk, immediately identified as the *Ariadne*. The six members of the Investigating Commission advanced towards the village, two hundred yards away. The workers in the surrounding fields were remarkably disinterested.

The Commission approached the nearest individual. " He doesn't look human," said Dr. Korbett. " Something queer here."

" Or else they don't have a barber," drawled Commander Walker, the Commission leader. " Rather quaintly tinted hair, too."

They were very close before the worker acknowledged them. The figure straightened its back and leaned on its hoe. The eyes in its apish face were mildly curious.

The Commission stared. " Whatever it is, I don't believe it! " gasped the woman member.

Commander Walker stepped forward. " Who are you? What are you? Can you understand me? "

The creature cocked its head sideways in a listening attitude. Then it dropped its hoe and ambled off towards the village. After a momentary indecision, the Commission followed. They were led to a house at the village centre. The workers they passed en route merely glanced at them incuriously and continued working. None were human.

Inside the house, the creature commenced industriously dusting the furniture. A heavy coating of dust covered the floor. The Commission scattered. It was Dr. Korbett who found the diary, a thick heavy tome, weighing several pounds. The others gathered round.

Walker was pleased. " That should help us." Nothing else of importance was discovered.

Korbett read the name inscribed on the cover. " George Harvey. That's the man! "

" Anything personal? " asked Walker. Korbet grunted unintelligibly. They commenced reading the diary together.

The story of the flight and the subsequent adventures of the fugitives slowly unravelled. A similar story to that of many other, legitimate colonies. There was a short account of the visitation of three years ago. Harvey apparently believed he was safe.

Commander Walker made it two years later that the disease was first mentioned. At first it had not been considered serious. Merely a blotchy type of rash with moderate fever. But instead of disappearing in a few days the rash spread and the fever mounted. Treatment proved useless. The rash broke down and ulcerated. The contagion spread.

The first victim went mad and ran into the forest. His dead body was recovered and cremated. Others followed. None recovered. Soon the whole settlement was affected.

Harvey's last words were shaky almost illegible.

" I am the last, and I have little time left. Anne and the two others died this morning. I burnt the men, but could not steel myself to do the same with Anne's body. I shall take her body into the forest tonight and die.

" I think the disease originated from our domesticated humanoid animals. They may be innocent carriers, but lately I am not so sure. They appear so smug. Who knows, it could be their way of ensuring their security. If so, we captured twenty Trojan horses. The least I can do is to leave this as a warning to future would-be colonists. This planet is a plague-spot." The writing ended with a scrawled signature.

Outside the Commission gazed silently at the flattened pile of charred wood. Amid the ashes were numerous gleaming white objects. The atmosphere suddenly chilled.

" Let's get out of here! " said Walker with a shudder, and led the way.

Radar warning markers were set in free orbits around the planet. On the homeward journey the ship's complement watched each other anxiously for signs of the disease.

Keen eyes from the forest marked the space-ship's departure with relief. George delayed three days, then, finally convinced of their departure, he sanctioned the return to their homes.

The ravages of the six months' desertion of the village had to be repaired. For a week the place was a hive of industry, then gradually settled down to normal routine.

The memory of the visit from Earth began to fade.

Three months had passed when the first disease victim was notified. The first symptom was a blotchy kind of rash. . . .

THE END

The real detective story of the future may not be possible to write at all, as Mr. Burke shows herewith, not because science will solve every problem, but because of the complexity of the participants.

DETECTIVE STORY

By J. F. BURKE

Illustrated by HUNTER

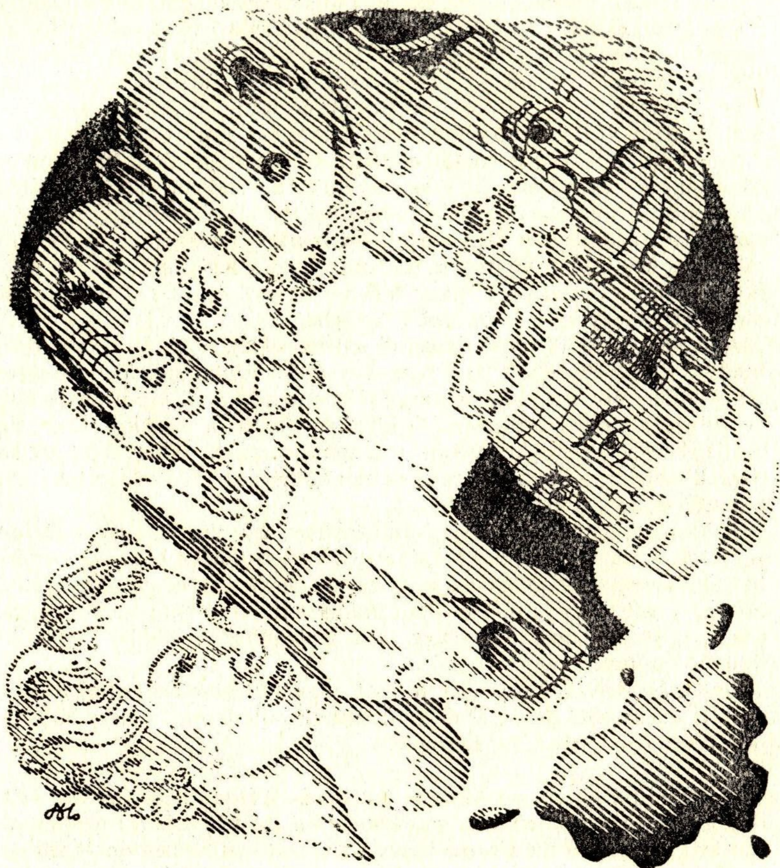
There's nothing I like better than to settle down for an evening with one of those old-fashioned books printed on paper, with the words in black type. Musty and out of date such things may be—the scansion revue and solar ballet enthusiasts turn up their noses at them—but for me they have a real charm. And there are times when charm is very much lacking in my sort of life. It does you good, every now and then, to dream about the past. Everything was so stately in those days: things were so formal and uncomplicated.

Particularly murders.

What a period charm there is in those old detective stories! Someone dies in a locked room; there are seven or eight suspects, all of whom behave oddly and leave interesting clues about the place; the detective busies himself with fingerprints and simple enquiries. . . . It is all worked out mathematically. You can sit back in your slung chair and pass a happy hour or two watching the calculated minuet of these delightful puppets. And perhaps, you think, a detective's work really was as quiet and dignified as that in the old days, with nothing more than a few crude revolvers and perhaps an even cruder blonde to distract him from his neat little problem in deduction. Whereas today . . .

Today. Shades of—what was his name?—Sherlock Blake, or something; what a business it is today!

If you've spent more than a month in the service of the Interplanetary Criminal Investigation Bureau you know that nothing is ever neat. There are no pleasant abstractions with which to entertain yourself.



And the classical formality of crime in the old days is lost in our present chaos. Mix a few Martians and Venusians and Tellurians together, and put them, just to make things more awkward, in an outpost on Jupiter, and the permutations are innumerable. Crimes multiply. And they get more and more complex in themselves, so that you finish up by believing anything is possible. And that's not good. " When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth," said one of those old-timers. Very nice, too. But if you know that there's precious little that *is* impossible, how do you start eliminating?

Take those old locked room stories I was mentioning just now. Today it's no unusual thing to find a man murdered in a locked room. Sometimes there's no sign of foul play. A man who dies in a room locked on the inside could be killed from a distance by a supersonic pulse, or, if he happened to suffer from heart trouble or jittery nerves, by a phantasmal projection from some ill-wisher. The pulse aim would need to be damned accurate, but it could be done. Or the man could be killed at close quarters by a Carey gun, leaving no trace: and the murderer could walk out and lock the door behind him, on the inside, with any one of a dozen magnetic devices that are on the market nowadays. It's easy to kill someone today—and hard to find out who did the killing. It's not only not safe to go out of doors after dark in some of our big cities: it's not even safe to stay indoors in broad daylight.

And you couldn't write detective stories today, even if people read books—which they don't, as a rule. No reader would ever feel you were playing fair. He would be waiting for you to pull a trick out of the bag at the end: a pulse projector, an invisible welder, a thinking robot, an artificial twin, a thought realisor or a space scanner. When there are so darned many unexpected things that can happen, the fun of working out a detective story ceases to be fun.

For someone like me it never is fun anyway. For me that sort of fiction is everyday reality. Most of the time it's not a matter of brains or deductive skill: you need toughness and staying power; sheer cussedness and obstinacy will get you further than brains will. Once you start to think too hard, you're liable to go crazy. You find yourself ready for any weird thing to happen.

And even that readiness can, in itself, be a disadvantage sometimes.

Take the murder of the Martian delegate to the Interplanetary Federation Peace Conference, for example.

Jackson and I were on Mars at the time. We had been dealing with that grisly little business that was known on the telecasts for a week or two as The Case of the Corpse in the Canal. It was all tied up—the case itself, I mean: the corpse was too widely distributed ever to be thoroughly tied up, though we had done our wretched best. Jackson had been drowning his nausea in drink, and I had been enquiring about the possibilities of spending an entertaining evening in the small town. As a result, Jackson was morose because of drink, and I was morose because entertainment on this side of Mars was something that nobody seemed to care for. I don't know whether the town had been established by a gang of Puritans fleeing from the bright lights of Marsport, or whether there was a very private and personal night life to which strangers were not welcome; whatever the truth might be, it was clear that we hadn't much hope of

fun and games that evening.

"Though of course, sir," said the hotel manager, a Martian with a nasty lisp, as though his double tongue kept getting hitched up with itself, "there is the visiscreen in the lounge."

"Goody goody," I said. But it would have to do. I said: "Any good Saturnian swing bands on tonight?"

He shook his head unctuously. "All programmes tonight carry the universal hook-up of the Peace Conference."

Jackson groaned and reached for another bottle. The barman whipped it smartly away and poured out a small dose which Jackson downed with bitter resignation.

"Come on," I said, grabbing him by the shoulder. "Let's go and watch the Peace Conference."

"Dancing girls," said Jackson thickly. "If they got any dancing girls and a good comedian from Saturn—"

"They've got comedians from all over the universe," I assured him "Come on, before that Martian hooch makes you phosphorescent."

We went dismally into the lounge. The visiscreen flashed and sputtered and murmured to itself in the corner.

We sat down. Then Jackson got up and went out to collect something that would save him from dying of thirst while the programme was on.

During his absence I sat and watched a plump Uranian twiddle his antennae. What he said was at once translated, so that a cultured Tellurian voice accompanied the singing and rustling squeaks that were faintly transmitted in the background. The Uranian, one gathered, believed in peace and brotherhood. There was room in the universe for all of us, and our civilisations were all of a high enough order to set us above the crudities of interplanetary strife. He hoped that all of those who were present at this conference . . . And so on and so on.

Not, of course, that anyone was actually *present* at the conference. No delegate wanted to spend several weeks travelling in to some conference building from the farther planets. Things weren't done that way any more. The representatives of the various planetary governments sat comfortably at home or in a private room at their club, before a transmitting screen that also relayed back to them a picture of the other delegates. They were all sharp focussing transmitters: the upper part of the body was removed from its background and projected on to a facsimile of a conference chamber, so that to all intents and purposes some ten or fifteen men (and other creatures), were sitting together in a large hall, below the glowing emblem of the Interplanetary Federation. All over the universe they could be seen: and on the screens before them they could see those who were taking part with them in the conference—could

talk to them, denounce them, argue with them, interrupt them. But they couldn't come to blows, and often enough that turned out to be a darned good thing.

When some particular delegate was speaking, it was not usual to bring him into close-up: his image on the screen was sharpened, while the others were faded back.

As Jackson came back into the room, the features of the Martian delegate sprang into relief, and his mellow voice resounded through the room.

"That's not a translation tone," said Jackson, standing behind my chair.

"He's speaking English," I said. "And if that's not a courageous way of doing things right at this moment, I'd like to know what is."

"Take my hat off to him," said Jackson muzzily. "If there were a few more like him. . . ." He yawned, reached for a slung chair, and tweaked it into range. Then he slumped down and rocked gently to and fro.

Kar Dilhre repeated many of the things that the Uranian delegate had already said. But there was a difference. What had been platitudes from the Uranian became sincere, intense exhortations from this great apostle of peace and friendship. He spoke of the troubles there had been between Earth and Mars. He was frank about the clash of interests over the mines of Jupiter, and the problems that must be faced by the diplomats of both planets. But by speaking in our own language he was making a direct appeal. There were people who would like to see Earth and Mars at war—he made no direct accusation, but perhaps somewhere in the dimmed background the Uranian smiled sardonically to itself—and it was up to men of goodwill on the two worlds concerned to ensure that such a thing did not happen.

No one could have given a finer impression of burning sincerity. The narrow features, alien as they were, radiated a genuine call for understanding and fellowship.

"They do say," said Jackson abruptly, "that even a few months ago, when you'd have sworn war was going to break out at any minute, he continued to go about in public with that girl from Earth that he adopted when her father died on Mars—"

"He never stopped his famous 'evenings,'" I added: "visitors from every planet were always welcome in his salon—and he never ceased work for the interests of peace."

We both nodded, a bit maudlin maybe.

Kar Dilhre retired into the background, and the Tellurian delegate rose to speak.

He praised the moderation and integrity of his Martian colleague. He said that, no matter how jittery the public might get under the influence of mischief-making newscasts and the propaganda of certain other powers who wished to precipitate a conflagration, the presence of such a representative would hearten peace-loving peoples everywhere. Kar Dilhre had worked untiringly to further friendship between Mars and Earth, and it was doubtful whether any evil force could overcome what he had achieved.

And as he spoke, a strange cry came from the background and was transmitted to the universe. In the corner of the screen, for one fleeting second, it seemed that there was a blurred face behind Kar Dilhre's shoulder—the dark, vague suggestion of an Earthman's features, that disappeared at once.

Then the screen glowed brightly, illuminating the startled faces of the delegates, all seeming to stare right at the viewer as they peered into their own screens . . . peered at the slumped figure of Kar Dilhre, who had been assassinated.

It took Jackson and I less than ten Martian minutes to reach the local booster station. The local police were there already, and they looked more than somewhat hostile when we showed up: a couple of Earthmen couldn't expect to be very popular on this territory at the best of times. The badges of the Interplanetary C.I.B. still carried some weight—and we hoped they'd go on doing so.

I said: " You've got a recording of the transmission? "

" It is not yet proofed," said the resident engineer slyly.

" You can't get away with that one," I said. " You've got new plant here, and it doesn't need that processing at all. I want to get that scene in front of me right now, and I want it blown up big."

I got it. The magnifying screen was put into operation, and when the eerie cry echoed through the room I said: " Right. Hold it."

There was silence. We stared up at the frozen picture, with the Tellurian at the front, his mouth foolishly open where he had been trapped in mid-sentence. Behind him, in the corner, Kar Dilhre's head lolled forward. And behind Kar Dilhre was that other ghostly face—the face that had come within range of the transmitter.

It was an Earthman all right. The features were far from distinct, but it was no good trying to pretend it might have been a Martian or even a mutant Venusian.

" Kar Dilhre did all he could to persuade us that friendship between Earth and Mars was possible," mouthed the Martian engineer bitterly; " and you see what his reward was." He glared venomously at us.

Jackson said: " That picture's too blurred to prove anything."

" It is the face of a Tellurian—an Earthman."

" But what man would be fool enough to murder him in full view of the whole universe? " I demanded. " It's absurd."

And so it was. But that wouldn't stop the Martians getting het up about it. There would be trouble—demonstrations, notes of ambassadorial protest, and no doubt in due course a nasty incident on, say, Jupiter, which would lead eventually to all-out war. These things were like a snowball.

And who had given this snowball the first push?

I said: " Someone who doesn't want Earth and Mars to be friendly is behind all this."

Jackson said: " We'd better get busy, quick."

We were in Marsport within the hour. We got another consignment of dirty looks from the Martian attendants at Kar Dilhre's small private helicar ground: but in this business you get used to dirty looks, and we slung a couple of the same sort back at the donors.

In the house we found that a young Earthman, Clive Wheatley by name, had already been arrested.

I trailed through the beautiful, spacious rooms until I found the Martian cop who was in charge. And I said:

" What have you got on this Wheatley? "

He wasn't one of the awkward type. His narrow features, gashed by the looping mouth that gave so many Martian faces the appearance of a perpetual sneer, were wry and weary with the weariness of the criminal investigator who's too busy with individual creatures to get hysterical about wars between races and planets. He said:

" His face is like the face that appeared on the screen when Kar Dilhre was murdered. It is very like. I would say it is the same face."

The sibilants jarred. Martians talk like grasshoppers.

" Would you consider telling us the full story? " I asked politely.

He bowed, also polite. " You have every right to ask."

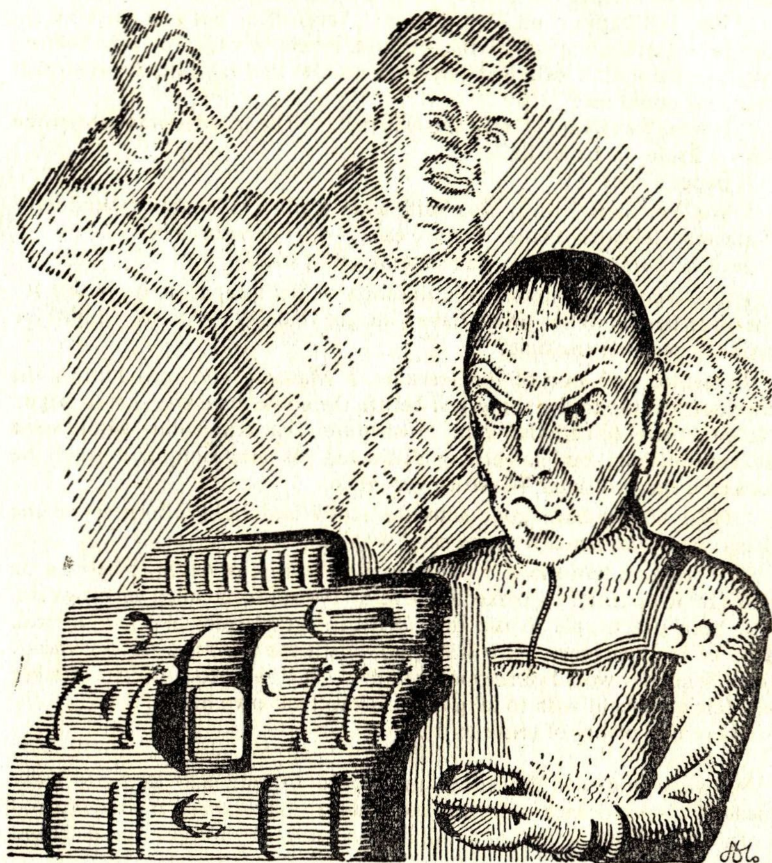
Jackson said: " You bet we have."

I said: " Shut up."

We made ourselves comfortable in a room that was designed for people who wanted to make themselves comfortable.

The Martian told us the story. It wasn't a heartening one.

It appeared that Clive Wheatley was a young man with designs on Kar Dilhre's ward, the Tellurian girl he had adopted. Wheatley wanted to marry her. Kar Dilhre didn't fancy the idea, but he wasn't inhospitable: young Wheatley had been staying in the house for some weeks now, and by all accounts he and his host had had some strenuous arguments. The



girl herself, Sandra by name, was in love with the fellow. Between them, no doubt, they hoped to wear down her guardian's resistance.

"But the kid wouldn't be such a fool as to murder Kar Dilhre," I said.

"He is erratic," said my confrere, stretching out his three legs and winding them abstractedly together like a plaited rope. "Not a very

stable type. He goes about wrapped up in his own thoughts, according to the servants, and has a nasty temper when he gets worked up."

"Yes, but damn it all," I protested, "even if he got sore with all the delays and wrangling and all the rest of it, would he walk into Kar Dilhre's room in the middle of a universe-wide visicast and ray him down so that everyone could see?"

"It wasn't a ray-gun," said the Martian. "The murder was committed with a knife—a paper-knife."

"A paper-knife?"

"We Martians"—this was said with a faint, squeamish shudder—"are very delicately made. We are easily—er—punctured."

Jackson turned a snort of merriment into a sneeze.

I said hastily: "Anyway, the question of the weapon is irrelevant for the time being. What proof have you got that Wheatley was anywhere near the room at the time?"

It seemed that one of the servants, a Martian, had seen him in the corridor leading to the study just before the conference was due to begin. He had meant to call after him, to warn him that Kar Dilhre would soon be transmitting, but something distracted his attention, and when he looked a moment later Wheatley was gone.

"He'd hardly have gone into the study and hung about while the programme was actually going out," I said.

The Martian had thought of this point. But, reasonable as he was, he had felt it essential to make the arrest. No more detailed investigation had been practicable in the time between the murder and our arrival. Two of his henchmen were still questioning the servants. In the meantime, Wheatley would remain in custody. "It is safer so. A great number of Martians might wish to take the law into their own hands."

There was plenty of sense in that.

We went and saw Wheatley, and talked to him, and he hysterically pleaded his innocence. He was certainly an unbalanced character, and I can't say I liked him. Nor could I understand why his girl friend should be fond of him.

We saw Sandra. She was pretty. She was more than pretty: she was terrific. And she was crazy about young Wheatley. She was so crazy that she told us three or four times that he couldn't have committed the murder because she was with him all the time; and when I asked if he hadn't left her even for a minute or two she said he hadn't, and when I asked what they were doing all that time she told me, and Jackson looked shocked. But then Jackson has a queer sense of humour, and is something of a hypocrite.

Afterwards, I said: " It could be true. She may be lying for his sake, but it may be true."

" Then who was it that the servant saw in the corridor? " asked the Martian.

" Let's talk to these servants."

We talked to them.

They were a motley assortment. Kar Dilhre had evidently carried his cosmopolitan principles genuinely into his private life—a thing which outspoken idealists don't invariably do. There were two Martians, a Saturnian, two Uranians, and a Venusian biped with a head like a horse.

I tackled the Martian who claimed to have seen Wheatley in the corridor on the way to Kar Dilhre's room. His evidence seemed pretty sound. He was not to be shaken, and he did not give the impression of being in any way personally spiteful.

" Do you think we're leaning over backwards? " muttered Jackson to me. " It could have been Wheatley. We don't want to be awkward for the sake of being awkward. I mean, it's all very well being loyal to our own people—"

" Loyal be damned," I said. " In this job we're loyal to truth, and nothing else. And this all seems too silly to be true."

We tried the other Martian, who was less friendly but still appeared to be—somewhat grudgingly—honest.

" I was not very near the corridor you speak of at the time," he rasped.

" You didn't see Wheatley? "

" No."

" Did you see anybody else? "

He hesitated.

I said: " Come on, out with it."

" In the corridor that joins the one outside Kar Dilhre's room "—he jerked his head in reverence at the name—" I saw Calendo."

" Calendo? "

The Martian nodded reluctantly at the Venusian, who tossed his absurdly equine head.

" What did he do? "

" He went towards the corner, and went round it. That is all."

I said to the other Martian: " You didn't see Calendo? "

" No. It was probably at a different time. We were all busy about the house."

Jackson said: " The Venusian could hardly turn into a facsimile of Wheatley just as he turned the corner. Chief, you're on the wrong track."

" I am not so sure." The voice was that of our Martian colleague. His

features seemed to grow even narrower. He pursed his curved lips, and bent forward. Then he spoke.

What he said was quite unintelligible. It was a blur of rustling, squeaking sounds—a Uranian dialect, I would have guessed.

And it made the Venusian jump.

He looked warily around, and then tried to look blank. But he had given himself away. And the two Uranians stared at him.

" Look! " cried Jackson abruptly. " Is it that liquor I stowed away, or . . ."

It was not the liquor. I saw it as well. I saw the equine head waver, and a different sort of face peer out. It was hazed for a moment, then the Venusian head became suddenly firm and clear once more.

" Hold it! " snapped the Martian inspector, and his two countrymen grapped the Venusian.

They had quite a job holding it. Because it changed. The outlines dissolved, and it was a small animal on four legs, scuttling for the door. It might have got away, but one of the Martian police outside came in at the double and hit it hard behind its furry ear. As it slumped to the floor it changed into a long sleek being with the face of a weasel.

Jackson said: " Oh Gawd . . . this is too much."

It was the Martian inspector who explained. The Venusian, he said, was not a Venusian at all: it was one of the Uranian unstables.

I admitted that this was a new one on me.

" I acted on impulse when I spoke to it in lower idiomatic Uranian," he modestly said. " It was your friend's remark that gave me the idea."

Jackson preened himself.

I said: " You mean I was right, and in some way this is a put-up job by the enemies of Mars and Earth? "

" I would say that it was. I believe that on Uranus there are still some life forms which, though mentally well advanced, are physically unstable. They can assume various forms at will. A scientist once tried to explain their metabolism to me, but, he shook his head sadly, " I did not go very far with him. All that I know is that they possess a physical fluidity which is not known on any other planet in our universe."

" And when he got a job here as a Venusian, he was pulling the wool over Kar Dilhre's eyes? "

The Martian looked blank, then said: " If you mean that he intended to deceive his employer, I would say that such is the case."

" He was a Venusian when he went along one corridor, knowing that he was in sight of a fellow-servant; when he turned the corner, he was another, and having his plan mapped out in advance he was providing evidence—he changed into an imitation Wheatley so that Wheatley would

have been seen in the corridor approaching Kar Dilhre's door a short time before Kar Dilhre was murdered. And it was Wheatley's face on the screen."

"I think that that is so. We must find out. We must be certain."

I do not wish to dwell on the methods by which he set to work to find out. The Martians have some nasty little tricks. According to the Interplanetary Code, most of them are not strictly ethical. But we wanted the truth, and we wanted it quick.

And after all, the Uranian had a sporting chance. He certainly gave them quite a time. When they tried to pull out his toenails, he changed into a Saturnian sloth, which hasn't got any toenails. . . . Believe me, they had quite a job to hold him.

He confessed to quite a lot, but they couldn't get him round to admitting that he had murdered Kar Dilhre. He blabbed that he had been placed in the house by the Uranians, who wanted to foment trouble between Earth and Mars. Plugged with a truth injection, he fed into a recorder his confession that the intention had been to kill Kar Dilhre—but before they could get any full confession out of him he suddenly seemed to dissolve into a Venusian king-bird, streaking across the room as though tearing himself by sheer will-power out of his drugged trance . . . and one of the Martian police, startled into instinctive activity, whipped up a blaster and atomized him.

That was that.

It was a pity the confession had not been rounded off. But what we had got on the record was good enough. It went out on universal hookup within thirty minutes, and was thundered out again several times during the next couple of days. It made the Uranians unpopular. It nearly precipitated a war with them—a war which we're bound to have sooner or later, anyway—but it certainly averted any nasty incident between Earth and Mars.

Now, I ask you: how could a hick space cop like me be expected to know about obscure Uranian inhabitants that could turn themselves into Venusians or Tellurians just by thinking about it? What sort of deduction is a detective supposed to do when there are so many impossibilities waiting round the corner for him, waiting to turn into actual facts? No man can know enough to be able to deal with crime in this sort of universe.

But like I said at the beginning, that very readiness to find something screwy can, in itself, be a disadvantage sometimes.

There's a sequel to this story. If I weren't so honest, I'd keep quiet about it.

About a year after Kar Dilhre's death, I saw Sandra at a big reception on Venus. I was hanging about doing what was supposed to be an important hush-hush job, but what was really no more than keeping an eye on the family jewels. Sandra caught my eye and looked away, and then looked back and smiled, rather unpleasantly.

I said: " Good evening, ma'am."

" Good evening, officer," she said.

I said: " Not so loud, if you don't mind. I'm incognito."

" I thought you were looking wonderfully sinister," she said.

I still thought she was terrific; but I also thought she was a nasty bit of work.

I asked her politely how she was getting on. And, naturally, I asked how young Wheatley was making out these days.

She said she didn't know. She said she hoped he was having a rough time. She said he had married a Venusian heiress, and that she hoped his wife was giving him hell.

" I'm sorry to hear that things didn't work out," I said.

She glared at me spitefully, as though it was all my fault. And then she told me, in a voice that was far too loud—though fortunately no louder than all the other screeching voices in the room—that Wheatley had killed Kar Dilhre. He had got himself hepped up on Martian *lubla* and gone down to Kar Dilhre's room, and walked in and murdered him.

It was true what they had said about Wheatley. He had lived in a completely selfish, egocentric world of his own. He hadn't even known that Kar Dilhre was attending a peace conference. He had simply walked in, in a blind rage, seen him hunched up over the set apparently looking at some programme that was going on, and had stabbed him.

Afterwards he had nearly died of fright, but managed to keep his head—until I came along and, with the aid of the Martian police, got him out of the mess.

So there you are. Everything worked out for the best in the long run. After all, the Uranian had been planning to kill Kar Dilhre eventually, so his fate wasn't too unjust. And a war between Mars and Earth had been averted.

That's the truth. That's all there is to it. And if you think the truth is even more far-fetched than the business about Uranian unstables and political plotting, I can only say that I agree with you. But that's the way things go. Ordinary human beings are just as much of a nuisance, and just as crazy and irresponsible and unpredictable as any mutant that crawled out of a Venusian swamp. You never know what's going to happen next.

I tell you, this is a hell of a profession.

THE END

The trouble with playing at make-believe is that the adult mind can seldom keep up the pretence for long, whereas with a child the make-believe is often real.

UNFORTUNATE PURCHASE

By E. C. TUBB

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

George Weston walked through the door of his lounge, grabbed at a non-existent weapon in a non-existent holster, snapped up his stiffened forefinger and said:

"*Shissssssssssss!*"

Willie rolled on the floor, levelled an object of brightly coloured plastic, and squeezed the trigger.

"*Hissssss,*" he said. "*Hissssss hissssss.*" He looked triumphantly at his father. "You're dead."

"I got you first," objected George.

"You missed," corrected Willie with all the irrefutable logic of the ten year old. "Your blast just singed the side of my head, but I got you dead centre. Twice."

"I wasn't using a heat gun." George threw his brief case into a corner of the room and grabbed his son. "You know that I always use a disintegrator, one with a fan beam and wide coverage. I fired first and so

you're dead. You know what that means? "

" Yes. It's my turn to make the tea." Willie frowned then changed the frown into a grin. " Well, I suppose that I can't win every time."

" No," agreed George soberly. " Not every time."

He settled himself into an armchair, a plump middle-aged man with tired eyes and thinning hair. Age had softened the firmness of his mouth, but it hadn't touched the natural lines of good humour running from nose to lips. He sighed, and tried not to listen to the sounds of Willie making the tea. It reminded him of too many memories, and he felt the old ache for his wife who had died too young. Irritably he reached for the evening paper.

" Dad? " Willie stuck his head round the kitchen door. " Can I have some money? "

George lowered the paper and looked sternly at his son.

" How much and why? "

" Not much." Willie entered the lounge carefully carrying a laden tray. " Ginger Willis bought a space suit from a new shop in town, and I want one like it."

" Ginger Willis has a father who works for the Civil Service," reminded George. " I work in an office." He smiled affectionately at the eager expression on Willie's freckled features. " I thought that you were saving up for a telescope? "

" I am, but I can always use Ginger's." He carefully poured the tea. " Can I, Dad? "

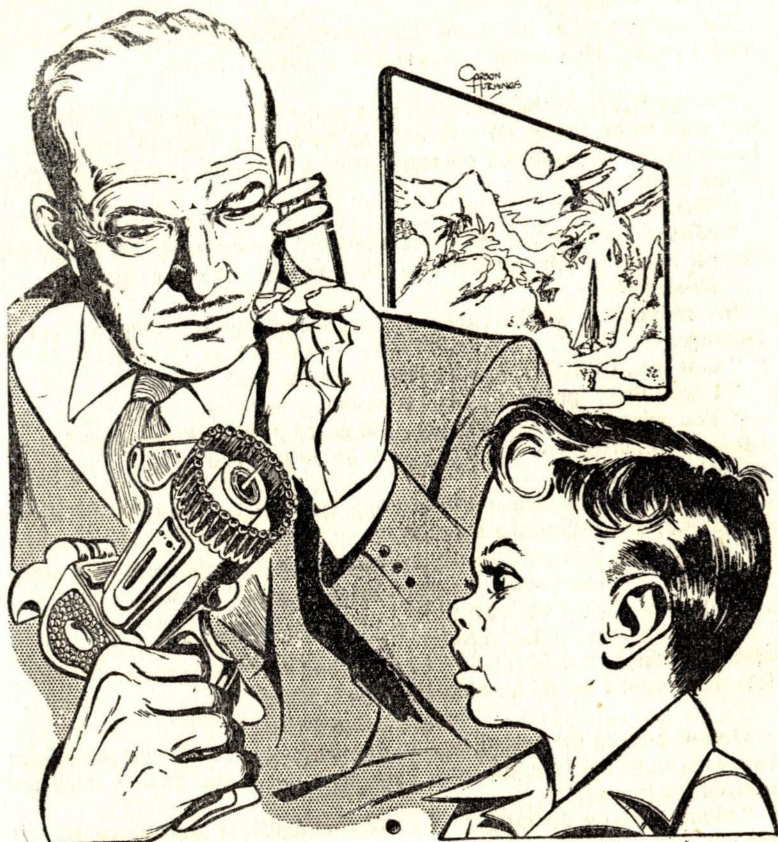
" Maybe." George reached for his cup, and tried to harden his heart against the appeal in his son's eyes. Guiltily he avoided looking at the magazine-stuffed bookcases, and at the futuristic paintings on the walls. If there was anything at all in heredity he was directly responsible for Willie's craving for things as yet belonging strictly to a possible future. Firmly he sipped at his tea.

" You mean that I can have it, Dad? "

" I didn't say that," protested George. He tried not to sound too abrupt. " What is this space suit of Ginger's? "

" It's a super one, honest it is." Willie climbed onto the arm of the chair. " It's got a fishbowl helmet, and zippers all over, and a built-in radio. There's even a control panel, and they look just as if they could work. They don't of course, but it's easy to pretend they do."

George sighed and rustled his newspaper. Sometimes he wondered if he would ever understand the modern generation. Science fiction was all very well—to read, but actually trying to live in the future was something else again.



" I only got you that water pistol last week," he protested. " If you want something else you'll have to use your own money."

" The heat ray," corrected Willie. " It only looks like a water pistol, actually it's a heat ray." He swung his leg thoughtfully. " Can I spend my money on anything I like, Dad? "

" If you want to."

" Then I can buy a space suit? "

" Yes."

" Good! Dad, you're firing on all jets and heading for space! " Willie

raced for the door. "I'm going to tell, Ginger, and get the address." The door banged behind him.

George winced at the weird slang, then philosophically resumed reading his paper. He'd never been like that in his own youth.

George felt tired the next day, he'd had a hard time at the office and was glad to be home. It was only as he entered the tiny hall of their house that he remembered the usual drill. Cautiously he opened the door of the lounge.

"*Shisssssss.*"

"Missed me!" yelled Willie. He levelled something in his hand, and George flinched at the menace of a flared muzzle. It looked too real.

"*Hissssss.*"

Involuntarily he ducked, then climbed sheepishly to his feet at Willie's laughter.

"Got you, Dad. It's your turn to make the tea."

"I fired first," protested George weakly.

"You missed," insisted his son. He gazed proudly at the object in his hand. "I charred you to a crisp with my heat ray, and so it's your turn to make the tea."

George admitted defeat by entering the kitchen, and expressed his indignation by rattling the tea cups.

"What have you got there?" he called over the singing of the kettle.

"This?" Willie casually held out his new toy. "It's a heat ray."

"Another one? I thought that you wanted a space suit?"

"I did, but they didn't have any, the man said that they had sold out, and so I bought a heat ray." He gazed fondly at the weapon. "I like it lots more than I would an old space suit."

George poured the hot water into the tea-pot, put milk and sugar with two cups onto the tray, added a plate of biscuits, and picking it all up, entered the lounge.

"What did you do today?" he asked casually. Carefully he poured the tea.

"Played with Ginger. Then I went down to the new shop and bought my heat ray." Willie reached for his cup and crammed biscuits into his wide mouth. "Ginger said that he's going to buy one like it tomorrow, but I bet he doesn't get one as good as mine."

"I bet that he doesn't," agreed George. He stirred his tea. "When does school start?"

"Day after tomorrow." Willie swallowed and reached for more biscuits. "Do I have to go, Dad?"

"Don't you like boarding school, son?"

" I like being at home with you the best. Ginger stays at home all the time, why can't I stay home too? "

" Ginger has a mother, Willie. She looks after him while his Dad is at work." He ruffled the tow-coloured mop affectionately. " Why don't you like school? "

" School's not bad, but none of the kids know how to play. Cowboys and Indians! " Willie snorted disgustedly. " Kids stuff. I like to play at Space Rangers like I do with Ginger and you." He looked hopefully at George. " If I had a Mummy, could I stay at home like, Ginger, Dad? "

" Drink your tea, son, it's getting cold."

George tried not to sound too brusque, but somehow he couldn't forget that it was Willie who had lived, and Mary who had died. He couldn't blame the boy, he didn't blame him, but some things are beyond cold logic and mature reasoning. He knew his failing, and deliberately tried to make up for it by generosity unusual in a parent, but it was a poor substitute.

Idly he picked up Willie's new toy. It was an unusual thing, a swollen chambered, flare muzzled pistol, surprisingly heavy, and remarkably well finished. Toy it must be for it was far too small to fit any adult hand. The orifice of the flared muzzle was pitted a little, and the plastic butt showed faint traces of wear. The blue sheen of the metal seemed to have been rubbed in places, and a number was stamped along the barrel.

" It's a heat ray," said Willie.

" So you told me." George turned the pistol in his hand. " Where do you put the water? "

" It doesn't use water."

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" Caps then. How do you load it? "

Willie squirmed uncomfortably on the arm of the chair. " It's broken, the man said that it wouldn't work, but I wanted it anyway. Ginger's space suit doesn't work either."

" You don't expect it to work," protested George. " It's just a toy, a make-believe space suit, but this pistol should make a noise or something."

" It would if it worked, but the man told me that it was broken, and I like it anyway."

" If it's broken then why did you buy it? " George tried to control his impatience.

" Because it's a heat ray, that's why, and it's better than a silly old water pistol even though it doesn't work." Willie sounded dangerously close to tears. George examined the gun again.

" It must be a heat ray because you can see where the heat has melted the barrel." Willie pointed with a grimy finger. " See? "

" It's well made," admitted George pacifically. He grinned at his son. " I bet that it's a disintegrator."

" No it's a heat ray."

" It can't be a heat ray because heat rays don't work."

" How do you know they don't work? " Willie was indignant at this slur of his favourite weapon. " They could work, just because no-one's made one yet doesn't mean that they couldn't work."

" Look," explained George patiently, glad to show off his scientific knowledge. " For a heat ray to work it must produce more heat at the gun than at the target. That means that the gun would be so hot that it would burn anyone trying to use it." He grinned at the perplexed expression on Willie's youthful features.

" Take a disintegrator now, that could work. All you need to do is to find a way to destroy the molecular cohesion of a thing, and then it will fall apart. Easy."

Willie frowned. " Why must it be hotter at the gun than at the target, Dad? "

" It's something to do with the law of inverse squares," George said vaguely. He glanced at his watch. " If you're going out to play, you'd better go now. It'll be bedtime soon."

Willie slipped from the arm of the chair, and grabbed his new toy. " It is a heat ray, Dad, I know it is." He grinned as he raced for the door. " And a heat ray's better that a silly old disintegrator anyway."

George winced at the bang of the door, then reached thoughtfully for an encyclopaedia. He really should find out more about the law of inverse squares. Willie was bound to ask.

It was late when Willie returned, too late for any ten-year-old to be out of bed, and he had a sheepish expression when George pointedly looked at his watch.

" I'm sorry, Dad, but Ginger's going away tomorrow and we had to finish his space ship."

" What? "

" Ginger's building a model space ship," explained Willie impatiently. " He needed me to help him finish it."

" Ginger is older than you are, Willie, and you should be in bed now." George smiled at his son in forgiveness.

" Hungry? "

" Mmmm."

" There's cocoa and cake in the kitchen, help yourself."

Willie darted out and returned with a huge mug in one hand and a slab of fruit cake in the other. Carefully he wriggled onto his usual position on the arm of the chair, and filled his wide mouth with cake.

" Dad? "

" Don't speak with your mouth full."

Willie swallowed, almost choked, and hastily took a sip of cocoa. " Can you mend my gun for me, Dad? "

" I don't know. Why? "

" I get tired of hissing all the time, and Ginger said that if it was any good at all it should make a noise. Is he right, Dad? "

" Not necessarily, but it would be more realistic if it did something, wouldn't it? "

" Yes. Can you mend it for me? "

George sighed and reached for the weapon. Sometimes he wondered at the touching faith of all children in an adult's ability to mend things. Usually it was easy, most toys being what they were, but this one promised to be difficult.

" Where did you get this, Willie? "

" The new shop in town."

" Yes, but where? "

Willie frowned. " You know where the waste ground is just past the station? "

" Yes."

" Well, it's there."

" But there aren't any shops there at all, Willie. I pass it almost every day, and I've never seen any signs of building."

" It's not a building, Dad. It's like a caravan."

" A mobile shop." George nodded and looked down at the gun in his hand. " Have they many of these? "

" I don't think so, Dad." Willie sighed happily as he finished his cake. " The man said that stocks were limited." He chuckled. " He's a funny man, Dad. Not much bigger than me, and he talks funny."

" A foreign midget." George grinned at Willie's unknowing expression. " How much did it cost? "

" Three tins of pressed meat."

" What? "

" He didn't want money, he said that he'd swap the gun for tinned food, and I only had enough money for three tins. Can you mend it, Dad? "

" I'll try," George promised absently. He glanced at his watch again, and picked his son off the arm of the chair. " Bed, now, we'll talk some more tomorrow."

" But will you mend it for me please, Dad? " Please? "

" I'll try, but only if you're in bed and asleep by the time I count to a hundred."

" Goodnight, Dad." Willie darted from the room, and George quivered to the sound of banging doors. Reluctantly he reached for the gun.

Despite himself he grew interested in the problem it represented. The thing was well made, exceptionally well made, and he smiled reminiscently as he remembered the shoddy toys produced when he was young. Now realism was the keynote, and the gun certainly looked real.

He slipped a pencil down the barrel, and heard the faint click as it met an obstruction. Squinting down the flared muzzle he caught the gleam of a lens, and grinned as understanding came.

" Well I'll be . . ." he muttered. " A flashlight. It's a dolled-up flashlight just like the one I had as a kid. It must need new batteries or perhaps the bulb's gone."

He looked carefully at the butt, and frowned at the slight scratches marring the smooth plastic. Cautiously he slid the blade of his penknife beneath the butt-plate and levered upwards. With a faint click the plastic sprang free, and he chuckled in mild triumph.

It had fitted like the back of a watch, the plastic springing over and around a raised rim on the metal of the gun itself. Beneath it lay a tangle of silvery wires, and he squinted as he tried to follow their complexity. One of the wires had broken, the ends fused and discoloured as if by great heat.

" Fused! " George grunted as he searched for some fuse wire and a pair of tweezers. " I'll twist a new wire onto the ends of the burnt piece and see if that will do it."

It did.

He grinned as he pressed the trigger and watched a lambent beam of blue light stream from the flared muzzle. The gun hissed as the light cut through the air, and George smiled as he thought of how Willie would get extra pleasure from his new toy now that it was mended. Their personal argument still hadn't been resolved, however. The gun could either be a heat ray or a disintegrator, whatever the user wished. Somehow that was one of the best things of being a child. Things were what you wanted them to be, not as they really were.

George sighed as he snapped the butt-plate back into position. Growing up had many disadvantages, and the necessity of earning a living was only one of them.

From the garden came the sound of something in terrible agony.

George jumped, his heart hammering at the sheer horror of the sound. It came again, and he cursed in sudden relief.

" That cat! "

Angrily he stormed out of the house, the light streaming from the open door throwing the tiny garden with its few tired plants into sharp relief. At the foot of the garden, perched proudly on the front wall, a great ginger coloured beast threw back its scarred head and yelled defiance.

" *Yeooowwww.*"

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"Shoo," snapped George. "Scat. Shoo."

"*Yeooowwww.*"

It was instinct which promoted George's next move, instinct and the pistol shape of the toy he still held in his hand. Automatically he swung the gun level with the yelling cat and pressed the trigger. It hissed and bucked slightly in his hand, the stream of blue light strangely brilliant against the darkness of the night.

Abruptly the caterwauling ceased, and when George had blinked the retinal after-images from his eyes, the wall was deserted. He laughed and entered the house.

"First time that I've known a tom cat run from a flashlight, it worked better than a bucket of water."

He yawned, feeling suddenly tired, and throwing the toy onto the table, went up to bed.

He was late next day. Hastily he ate a scanty breakfast, and yelled upstairs to Willie, still tired after his late night.

"Get yourself something to eat, son. I'll see you this evening."

The door banged behind him as with his brief case in one hand, and still adjusting his top coat with the other, he ran down the garden. As usual the gate was stiff, and he muttered angrily as he tugged it open. Half out of the gateway his foot slipped and he fell heavily against the gatepost. Irritably he looked down.

Almost he vomited.

George didn't like cats, but he didn't hate them either, and what had been done to the cat at his feet was the work of a madman. The tail was still recognisable, the tail and one back leg both held together by a scrap of singed ginger fur. The rest was a charred mess. It was as if someone had used a giant blow-torch, or had retrieved the tail from a raging fire. Weakly George leaned against the concrete of the gatepost.

He must have been staring at it for a long time before he finally saw it. A patch of cracked and crumbling cement, in form like a broken circle at the top of the gatepost. Memory clicked, and sweat glistened like glass beads on his forehead.

The gun!

He had fired the gun at a ginger cat sitting on top of the gatepost, and now he had found a seared and charred mess of burnt flesh and fur. The concrete was cracked as if it had been subjected to intense heat, and the mark was circular, just the sort of mark one would expect from a ray.

Little things began to click in his mind, relays each triggered by the one before, each helping to build to an unbelievable pattern. A mobile shop, a funny little man with a strange accent who had no use for money, but

who wanted imperishable foodstuffs. Toys that weren't toys, but weren't like anything else either.

Time?

To Willie time was something which separated holidays, something which prevented him from growing up overnight. To George, time was getting to be merely the gap between paydays. To others . . .? To others time might be something to travel in. Such a traveller might well need goods, supplies, a hundred things. What more natural than to stop and sell off all the broken junk, the useless gimcracks, the trade goods, useless to them, but attractive to savages—and children?

Memory clicked again and he sagged in sudden relief. It couldn't have been the gun, he had used it within the house and it had been merely a flashlight. He remembered it vividly, the broken wire mended with a scrap of normal fuse wire. Testing the gun, and smiling at the harmless beam of blue light. Then he had replaced the butt-plate and had gone out into the garden.

The butt-plate!

A safety-catch?

Willie!

Desperately he ran into the house.

" Willie! " he called. " Willie, the gun, don't . . ."

" Got you!" yelled his son. He rolled from behind the armchair, still in his pyjamas, the gun heavy in his hand. With the speed of long practice he levelled the weapon, aiming expertly at his father's rotund middle.

" I can't miss! " he called cheerfully, and pressed the trigger.

He didn't have to hiss, the gun did it for him, bucking slightly in his hand.

It *was* a heat ray.

THE END

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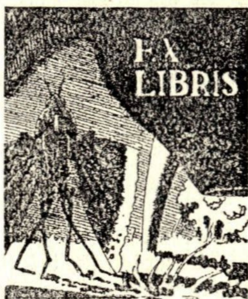

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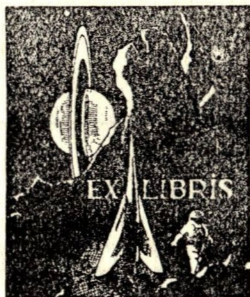

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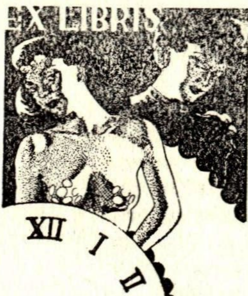

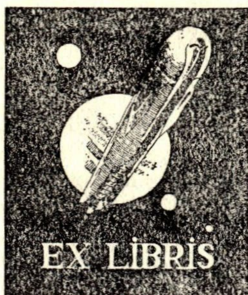

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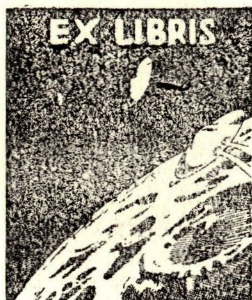

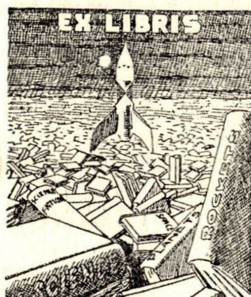

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