

No. 8

# Science Fantasy

VOLUME 3

1/6



## *In the next issue*

*All the earthmen required was sufficient water for spaceship fuel to get them back to Earth—and water was the one precious commodity the Martians couldn't spare at any price.*

### **THIS PRECIOUS STONE**

**By H. J. Murdoch**

Illustrated by QUINN

Two planes, one red, one green, twisted and reared above the red desert of Mars. They never soared high. Mars would support life, human life, on the surface, but humans needed the whole light pressure of air that the small world could muster.

The planes were out of place on Mars. Clumsy, ugly, their very lines showed that they were inartistic adaptations of the machines of another world.

an intriguing novelette

**AND**

★ **TUBB**  
★ **CHANDLER**  
★ **HAWKINS**  
★ **COCKCROFT**  
★ **ALDISS**

# Science Fantasy

VOL. 3, No. 8

1954

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**GUEST EDITORIAL**

*The name of Wilson Tucker is one very well known in the fantasy field, both for his efforts as an amateur and a professional writer. In the latter category he has had five detective novels and four fantasy novels published during the past eight years and has one of each scheduled for 1954. It is a pleasure to welcome to these pages, therefore, one of America's noted humorists—in a more serious rôle.*

# SCIENCE INTO FANTASY

**By WILSON TUCKER**

(Author of "The City In The Sea," "The Long Loud Silence,"  
"The Time Masters," and "Wild Talent.")

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Yesterday's science has developed an embarrassing habit of becoming today's fantasy, with the unhappy result that many a science fiction writer suddenly finds himself perched far out on a limb that no longer exists. Science simply will not co-operate by standing still, will not permit a decent, hard-working chap to earn a living by writing "science" fiction. Indeed, one might suspect a plot, in which a corps of scientists pour over each issue of *New Worlds* and then proceed to change things, to demonstrate subtly the stories in question should have appeared in *Science Fantasy* or the out-and-out fantasy magazine.

Not to be included in the above category, of course, is the science fiction writer who deliberately puts himself out on a limb . . . his "science" become fantasy as soon as the first reader scans his lines. Many science fiction writers leave themselves open to embarrassment with no help at all from science.

And too, there is no quarrel . . . yet . . . with those who spin tales of time travel, alternate universes, psi-talents, and other highly imaginative "sciences." These writers are for the moment strictly

on their own, much as were those fictioners of two and three decades ago who caused their characters to saunter into a spaceship, seat themselves before a bank of piano keys, hit a few notes, and zoom off to the nearest star using a chemical rocket fuel. After take-off of course, the pilot arose from the chair and sauntered back to the galley to prepare a light snack. Parenthetically, it might be noted that most Hollywood studios are going through this stage right now.

It remains for time to prove the time travellers and their ilk wrong, or at least highly implausible. But for those others who today have looked beneath their feet to find the limbs suddenly vanished, we have the deepest sympathy. They have overnight become writers of fantasy.

A. E. van Vogt and his rain forests of Venus are a striking example, although many another writer has used the same background material in the past and doubtless some few writers will still attempt it in the future. Rain on Venus has unhappily left the realm of science and entered that of fantasy; it behoves the alert editor to channel such material into the proper magazine. The man who writes with his tongue tucked securely in his cheek just *might* get by with a thundering rainstorm or a hero hopping from tree to tree, the meanwhile dodging giant raindrops. He would leave it up to his readers to decide how a hero can do this on a planet lacking water vapour and oxygen.

Despite the sodden cloud layer, despite that all-encompassing blanket which shrouds the planet cutting it off from direct observation, it will be a very unhappy and short-lived man who lands on Venus equipped with umbrella and rubber boots. He won't live long enough to catch cold. Gilbert Gosseyn has to go.

Out with the teeming life forms, out with the Venusian swampmen clutching lovely girls to their scaly bosoms, out with the flashing blades and spitting ray guns, out with the tree-creatures hopping from limb to limb, out with rain, out with silly humans trotting about the planet clad only in the barest of garments. No more semi-naked heroines and brawny, bare-chested heroes delivering sterling performances on an arid, harsh planet constantly swept by devastating sandstorms. How long will that girl's inviting poitrine last on a world where rock outcroppings are ground smooth? How long will those dauntless earthlings last in an atmosphere heavy with carbon dioxide—more than one hundred times the amount found in the atmosphere of earth? Gilbert, your Gosseyn is cooked.

Unless Gilbert is playing in a fantasy, he will have the very devil of a time landing on Venus in the first place. He will need a motor and a fuel capable of lifting him off almost anything in the solar system; he will need radar to select a safe landing site, he will need an unlimited supply of fuel to "feel" his way down and perhaps make half a dozen false landings before finding a real and safe one. Too, if he is a cautious chap, he will make planetfall in the twilight zone. Venus rotates slowly, if at all, and he would be quite embarrassed to find himself plunked down in the middle of the sunward side; it could be several weeks until evening comes and the sturdy ship's air conditioning or refrigeration might not be up to the task.

In short, our hero will need a lot more of everything than just the routine ability to set her down, hop out and plant the flag, and take the ship up again. Once radar has picked for him a comparatively safe landing place, the elements he will be battling on the surface will be something else other than giant raindrops.

And as for hopping out and planting the flag, or exploring the place, or making friends with those non-existent natives and establishing a trading post for the empire—he is doomed to disappointment or a fate worse than death. Unless he wishes to end his glorious career right then and there, *if* he ventures outside at all it will be in an impenetrable spacesuit and at the end of a long rope. He might wish to find his way back to the ship after a few moments.

### Mars. More science into fantasy.

Gilbert Gosseyn's old friend on the neighbouring planet is something of a dodo, too. John Carter has been fantasy for a long time now, but in the light of newest evidence his adventures have become fantastic rather than mild fantasy.

Schiaparelli didn't say there were canals on Mars, although a host of large and small names imagine he did. He said he found evidence of *canali* and he meant channels. A form of seasonal vegetation appears to follow these channels as the ice caps melt, mosses or lichen that sometimes move toward the equator at speeds up to thirty miles a day. A science fiction writer might do better to make his characters heroic and villainous lichen rather than humans. If we are asked to suspend disbelief and watch a man perform deeds of derring-do in a howling sandstorm, surely we can go a step further and imagine a lovely lichen maiden dying for want of an ice crystal.

John Carter, if he persists in living, must gallop along on his trusty Throat just a hop, skip and jump ahead of a thundering dust

storm, racing for the bit of moisture that flows or blows down from the ice caps. Of course, he doesn't breathe very often. Can't, really, considering the locale his creator has placed him in. Again, as on Venus, there are large amounts of carbon dioxide in the surface gases, while the air is mostly nitrogen and very little oxygen. Hardly enough to keep his Throat in motion, I daresay.

There is one other peculiarity I have noticed in fiction set on Mars. People romping around in space suits or living in glass domes are one thing, but what of those unprotected wretches wandering around the hills picking up gold nuggets? For some odd reason these stalwart men and their lovely ladies never seem to dry up and blow away. And yet, the low density of the planet demands a pump capable of forcing oxygen into the body, while the extreme—almost violent—dryness of the air would wreck a lady's nails and skin in no time at all. In this one respect Mars is a vampire and offers a wonderful setting for a weird tale: she sucks body moisture like old Count Dracula sought hematose guests.

But all fantasy doesn't occur on these two planets and many fantasy writers never concern themselves with our deadly neighbours in the sky. Consider the space ship, that keystone of the glorious fiction of tomorrow. Fiction characters live oddly, almost gaily, in these thundering boobytraps.

Unless some conscience-smitten writer happens to include a bit of pertinent machinery as an afterthought, these space voyagers go on day after day, week after week breathing the same old air they and everyone has just exhaled, but miraculously no one gets a headache or drops dead. I tell you man, that's fantasy! They lie down during the "night" period to sleep and some strange agency beyond their and our ken keeps them breathing the life-giving stuff, while some other unknown magic whisks away the not-so-lively gases they have exhaled. This, mind you, in the absence of gravity, wind, or anything else. I am patiently awaiting the day when the first writer remembers to include an ordinary electric fan in his space ship.

The daily visit to the water closet is another ingenious boobytrap. Perhaps it is best not to dwell upon the subject here lest we be accused of low comedy, so we will dismiss the subject with but one thought: what will happen in free-flight if the writer neglects to include a suction pump?

I expect at least a hundred science fiction writers to put aside their typewriters when this exposé appears in print, realising at last their day is done.

—Wilson Tucker

*This is a grim story. It takes place in a raw and grim atmosphere—amidst the remnants of civilisation waging an unrelenting battle for survival in the aftermath of atomic war. Where the weak go under and only the strong survive. It points a grim moral, too.*

# TOMORROW

By E. C. TUBB

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Illustrated by QUINN

It was one of those days. I felt it when I jerked awake to the thrilling of the videophone, and when I saw Bransome's face I was certain of it. He glowered at me, his flickering image streaked and marred with the trails of radioactive particles blown from the mainland, and I twitched with unconscious reflex action to the mind-disturbing radiation from the wind-blown debris.

"Carter?"

"What do I look like?" I stared at him, at his flabby cheeks coated with stubble, his red eyes, and the long hair straggling over his dirty neck. A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth, and when he spoke I could almost smell his breath.

"Hell," he said, and spat out the butt. "Get down here as quick as you can."

"Why? A job?"

"Yeah. Tell you more later. Hurry now."

The flickering screen died and I leaned against the cool plastic trying to ease the throbbing of my head. I felt irritable, the same as I always did when the wind blew over the deadlands, and I hated the very thought of obeying orders. This was a free world, had been since the Blowup, and a man did what he wanted, when he wanted, and how he wanted. That was freedom, and I was free.

But I still had to eat.

Someone in the next apartment had a console radio going at full blast and the thudding of the downbeat vibrated through the thin walls. I tried to ignore it, shaving carefully around the edges of a half-healed knife slash down one cheek and watching the percolator at the same time. I failed in both efforts, the coffee bubbled over the stove, and a thin rill of blood ran from where I had caught the wound.

I cursed, hammered on the wall and refilled the percolator. While it was heating I staunched the flow of blood and finished my dressing, trying to figure out what Branscome had lined up for me.

I chose my best and cleanest slacks and blouse, black with yellow piping, tucking the tops of the slacks into knee-boots of black leather. A short jacket and a visored cap of stiffened nylon coloured to match, completed my attire. I slipped on heavy signet rings and checked the loading of the gun before slipping it into a concealed holster, and by that time was ready for breakfast.

The pounding of the radio seemed to be getting louder, making it hard to think straight, and when the coffee boiled over for the second time I'd just about had enough.

Ringin the doorbell didn't work, and knocking was a waste of time. It wasn't until I had almost kicked the door from its hinges that I got results and by that time the corridor was full of curious heads sticking out from opened doorways.

I ignored them, staring at the man who had opened the door.

He was a big, sweaty, beefy looking man with truculent eyes and a battered face. I had seen him once or twice around town, a promoter of mixed fights with a share in one or two happy-smoke joints. A man with friends, which made him a man to be careful of—unless, of course, his friends were of the usual kind.

He stood glaring at me, a cigarette smouldering between his lips and a half-full bottle in one hand. The room behind him was full of smoke and stank of stale liquor and the heady scent of marijuana.

"Wattya want?"

"The radio. Turn it down."

He didn't move, just stood staring at me through the smoke of his reefer. The thudding of the radio boomed along the corridor and I could feel the staring eyes belonging to the heads sticking out into the passage.

"Look," I said patiently. "I live next door and I can do without sound effects, so how about turning down your radio?"

"Go to hell," he said without emotion. He stepped back ready to slam shut the door, then stopped as he saw where I'd put my foot.

"Do you turn it down, or do I do it for you?"

He stared at me, his eyes hot and glittering and the knuckles of his hand whitening as he tightened his grip on the bottle.

I beat him to it.

The heel of my palm smacked his chin, sending him staggering back from the door. I took three long strides into the room, jerked the cable from the power socket, tore off the plug and threw it into the lap of a blonde sitting vacuously in a deep chair. Three more strides and I was back in the corridor ready to forget the whole thing.

He had other ideas.

A yell warned me. One of the staring heads had opened its mouth and called a warning, which one or why I neither knew or cared. I ducked, spinning on one heel, facing back down the passage and ready for action.

He came at me with his mouth open, his eyes glittering with hopped up rage, and a knife in his hand. I could have disarmed him. I could have jerked aside and smacked him down. I could have done a lot of things, but I was fed up and irritable.

I shot him three times in the body.

Branscombe waved me to a chair as I entered the office, and pushed a box of cigarettes towards me. I helped myself, wishing that I dared to fill my pocket, but knowing that if I did he'd cut the rate on whatever job he had to offer, and I needed money.

"What kept you?" he snapped irritably. "I told you to get here quick."

"I had trouble, shot a man and had to clear up the mess. What have you got for me?"

"Anyone I know?" He narrowed his eyes as he stared at me. I shrugged.

"Some jerk who used to own a big radio. Forget it. What's the job?"

"The usual." He ran dirty fingers through his lank hair and tossed a paper towards me. "Recovery job. Atomic Power Inc."

"Yes?"

"Someone broke into their laboratories last night, killed three guards and stole a new formula. They blame the Anti's."

"Why should they?" I picked up the paper and ran my eye over the usual list of suspects. "Couldn't it be a commercial theft? What would the Anti's want with a secret process?"

"How would I know," he snapped. "It's on general circuit, all the agencies will be on the lookout for the thief. You've got to get to him first."

"What terms?"

"The usual. Five hundred on delivery."

I shook my head, dropping the paper back onto the desk. "What are you giving me? Atomic Inc. would pay more than that for what they want. If they've called in all agencies it must be important otherwise their own people would handle it."

He sighed, staring at me without anger, picking at his grimed fingernails. "If you wasn't about the best operator in town I wouldn't argue with you," he said. "You know how things are with me, I can't even afford to hire regular personnel." He threw the paper back at me. "Alright, then, we split two ways. You pay your own expenses. Right?"

I nodded, it was the best I could hope for.

"Good. The thieves broke in about two in the morning. There must have been at least three of them, and they stole the guards' weapons so now they are armed. I think they were free-lancing, they may try to contact Fission Products, or one of the other companies, but the big agencies will have them covered so that narrows our field."

"That doesn't help much. It could be a free-lance job, but I doubt it. They would need inside help, someone must have given them the guard schedule and a plan of the laboratories. If there is big money in this I'm stuck."

He nodded, pulling at his cuticles. "Maybe there is something in this Anti scare," he said slowly. "Atomic Inc. seem to think so, and they should know." He glared at me with sudden heat. "Well? Get moving on the job or do I get another operator?"

I grinned and helped myself to his cigarettes. What he thought didn't matter now. I was on the job.

It was cold outside, mid-winter cold, and the wind brought a promise of heavy snow. I shivered a little, turning up the collar of my jacket and tried to think out the next move. First I had to

scan the issued report, then get on the trail of whoever it was had stolen whatever it was from some of the best guarded premises in the world.

Simple.

I sighed and entered a coffee house, stepping over the sprawled forms of beggars whining outside. A girl came up to take my order, a tall, well-made girl with make-up which did a good job of disguising her mottled skin. I ordered coffee and flapjacks, and while waiting for the food scanned the report.

I was lucky. Spy cameras had caught the thieves, and one of them had forgotten to shield his face. He wore rags and had a thick growth of stubble, but what caught my eye was the dark streak across his forehead. I knew that brand! Knew it too well! The debtors' mark, and that immediately narrowed the field of search.

I chewed the food, trying not to notice the taste of soy, and gulped the tepid coffee, staring at the paper spread before me on the table. The debtors' mark couldn't be removed. Couldn't! He had owed money, had been tracked and caught, forced to work off his debt, and then been branded as a warning to others. Such men weren't wanted, they were outcasts, pariahs, lower even than the beggars. I smiled as I looked at the tell-tale mark, then looked up with sudden suspicion.

The waitress stood at my shoulder staring down at the paper.

It was almost dark by the time I got back home. A thin drift of sleet fell from the lowering clouds, settling on the buildings and being churned into freezing slush in the streets. Few people were abroad, those that were either couldn't help it or were out on business and none of them seemed interested in me.

I stepped into the foyer, flashing my identification at the house-guard. He touched his cap and operated the electric lock permitting me to enter the building, and I crossed the foyer to his booth.

"Any messages?"

"No." He stared at me from beneath the visor of his cap. "Some people were asking after you, your ex-neighbour must have had a lot of friends."

"What of it?" I shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Did you take care of him for me?"

"Yes, the cremation and other fees will be on your bill." He hesitated and I looked sharply at him.

"What's the matter? Didn't you like the idea of my killing him?"

"It's nothing to me what you do, but we don't want trouble. Next time do your killing outside the building, it saves a lot of work."

I grinned and dropped a bill into his lap. He didn't move, and I shrugged and turned towards the elevator. Some people were peculiar, and I wondered what it must have been like in the old days. I stepped out at my floor, not bothering about the extra clean spot in the passage, and slipped a key into my lock.

I had entered the apartment before I knew that something was wrong, and when I did, it was too late.

A man sat in my easy chair, a gun in his hand and the tiny orifice pointed straight at my stomach. A second man stepped from behind the door, and relieved me of my own pistol, while a third stood just within the bathroom. I stared at them, then shrugged and leaned against the wall.

"What is all this for?"

"Don't you know?" The man in the easy chair twisted his lips in what he must have thought was a smile. I didn't like the look of his teeth. "The man you shot this morning was a friend of ours, now do you know?"

"You've come to thank me," I guessed. "I didn't like him either."

"Smart guy," said the man at my right, and smashed the edge of his hand across the bridge of my nose. "Shall I give it to him, boss?"

"Wait." He rose from the chair and stood in front of me. I tried not to look at his rotting teeth. "Listen you, maybe I didn't like that man much either, but unless we do something about it what's to stop some other smart operator drilling us?" He shook his head, and I almost felt sorry for him.

"It's a hell of a world," I said. "Now either give it to me or get the hell out of here. Your breath stinks."

He turned white, his skin glistening over his cheekbones and the pupils of his eyes dilating with sheer rage. He swallowed, licking his lips and half-raising his gun.

I kicked him in the groin.

Before he dropped I had turned and driven the fingers of my right hand into the eyes of the men who had broken my nose. He screamed, doubling forward, his hands flying to his face. I chopped down at the base of his neck, feeling the vertebrae snap beneath the blow, and dived for my gun as the man in the bathroom opened fire.

He was a lousy shot, or maybe he was worried about hitting



his boss, and he had loosed three times before I was ready for action. Something whined past my ear and something burned into my left arm leaving it limp and useless. The groaning figure of the man with the bad teeth jerked and was silent.

I rolled, ignoring the pain from my arm and concentrating on the man in the bathroom. He must have thought that he'd hit me, or perhaps he was just naturally careless. He stuck his head past the edge of the door for a better view, and I shot him neatly between the eyes.

For a moment I lay on the ruined carpet, feeling the pain of my broken arm, and wondering if my face was fit to be seen. Footsteps pounded along the passage, and someone hammered on the door.

"Come in," I yelled, "it isn't locked."

It swung open and I grinned at the startled face of the house-guard. I must have been a little lightheaded from the pain of my wounds, or perhaps it was just the reaction from a busy day, but suddenly everything seemed extremely funny.

I was still laughing when the lights went out.

The surgeon clucked like an old woman as he saw my arm. He washed the blood away with alcohol and tightened his lips as he felt around the wound, his eyes tired and strained looking.

"What's the matter, Doc?" I reached for a cigarette with my good arm and shivered a little in the chill of the hospital receiving ward. "Is it bad?"

"Could be worse." He frowned at the cigarette. "Pistol?"

"Yes. It would have blasted my arm off if I hadn't been wearing a metallic lined jacket, the gunner had a H.V. job."

"You were lucky." The surgeon reached for a pad of blanks. "What treatment can you afford?"

"The best I hope." I frowned at the fluorescents in the ceiling. "What would it cost?"

"Normal setting, splints, plaster cast and three X-rays will come to five hundred. Staders come to two thousand." He hesitated, his pencil poised over the pad. "If you can't pay you can have charity, or if you don't want that you can work it off over a period."

"Staders," I decided. "I've got to keep working."

He shrugged and put down the pad. "Can you pay?"

I dug money from my pocket. The three goons had each carried a fair roll, but it still fell short by two hundred. I looked at the surgeon.

"Will you take a cheque?"

He nodded, and wheeled a videophone over to the couch. I dialed the bank and he spoke to the cashier.

"Jim Carter, account number . . . ?" He looked at me and I told him.

"Account number one seven zero five three four. Is he good for two hundred?"

The cashier riffled some files beneath the range of the scanners, then nodded. "Yes. Do you want a transfer?"

"One moment," I said. I scribbled the cheque and stuck my thumb onto the prepared surface. I held the slip over the scanners, and in the vision screen I saw the cashier nod as he compared the print with the one he had on file.

"Satisfactory. Which account?"

"Medical. Two five nine seven." The surgeon waited for the acknowledgment and killed the screen. He nodded towards a nurse, and began to wash his hands.

"Prepare the patient for Staders, nurse. Local anaesthetic."

It was soon over.

The sleet had given away to snow and the thick white flakes swirled in a bitter wind as I stood on the steps of the hospital and thought out my next move. My arm was still numb from the anaesthetic, and would be sore for several days while the incisions healed, but I could use it and that was the important thing. I flexed my fingers and worked the muscles as I stood shivering in the night wind.

A kiosk stood at the corner, a barred metal pillbox, with a wire mesh grill and a solitary attendant. I strode up to it, fumbling in my pockets for money.

"Cigarettes. Five cartons."

"Tobacco or marijuana?"

"Tobacco." I slid money beneath the plastic front and received my change and five cartons. I tucked them beneath my left arm and bumped into a soft something as I turned away.

It was a man, boy rather, a loose-limbed, gangling idiot-faced hophead with a shock of wild hair and a deathly white face. He clutched at my arm, the bad one, and I winced beneath his grip.

"Help me, mister," he whined. "Gimme a shot, just the price of a single shot. Honest I ain't had any since I don't know when. Please mister. Please."

Any other time and I would have short-armed him away from me, but this time was different. I had a damaged arm, a job to do, and perhaps I may have even felt a little sorry for the guy. I nodded, and thrust a bill into his claw-like hand. He whined like a dog with eagerness as he hurried to the booth and received his bundle. He stood in the street, the snow whipping about his rags and settling on his shock of hair—and sniffed his paradise.

The cocaine took almost instant effect, it always does on an empty stomach, and I watched as he smiled in the grip of drug induced euphoria.

"Thanks, mister," he said with simple dignity—and stepped from the sidewalk straight into the path of a passing car.

It didn't stop, of course, and when I left, the beggars were already fighting over possession of the body.

I couldn't blame them. After all the man was dead, and the rags would probably fetch the price of a meal.

Someone had once said that the edge of town was a model of Hell, and sitting in the darkness, my back to a wall of shattered concrete, I could well believe it. Around me the ruins sprawled in a jumble of twisted metal and shattered stone. Weeds grew thickly in the crevices, dead now, their once sickly green leaves covered with snow, and the eternal blue of the deadlands threw a faint luminescence over the deserted sector.

I turned up the collar of my jacket, wishing that I'd had the sense to buy a cloak when I'd had the money, and settled even closer against the poor shelter of the ruined concrete.

I sat and smoked and thought. I sat and smoked, and sometimes just sat and thought, and in the end I just smoked. It grew colder, the wind-driven snow lashing at me with icy fingers, drifting down my neck and making my arm throb with a dull agony.

I began to get cramp and I would probably catch a cold, but still I sat and smoked and thought.

I couldn't do anything else.

He came at last. He came when I was almost paralysed and frozen. He came in a swirl of snow, a shadow among shadows, sitting beside me a shapeless lump in the blue-limned darkness squatting on his haunches and oblivious to the snow covering him with a film of white. Silently I handed him the cigarettes, silently he took them, tearing open a package and slipping one of the little white cylinders between his lips. Silently he struck a light.

I didn't scream. I had seen him before and even if I hadn't I still wouldn't have expressed either horror or disgust. He couldn't help it. No man could help a face that wasn't a face, eyes that weren't human eyes, a body that couldn't wear normal clothing. Life was bad enough for him without my making it worse.

But I was glad it was dark.

He smoked for a while in silence, the tiny red coal of his cigarette brightening and dimming as he inhaled the nicotine-loaded fumes. I smoked with him, chain-smoked, lighting one cigarette from the butt of another, trying to steady the quivering of my hands. Time crawled past and still we sat in silence.

"Trouble?" His voice was a whisper coming through the darkness like a flake of snow, gentle and light and unexpectedly warm and human.

"I am looking for a man who stole a paper from a guarded laboratory." I drew on my cigarette and stared at the glowing tip. "A branded man, or perhaps just a man who wore a brand. You know him?"

"No."

I wasn't disappointed, it had been a faint hope and a thin one, but I didn't move from where I sat. He sighed a little as he sucked at his cigarette, and now it was my turn.

"Trouble?"

"It will be a hard winter," he said. "I doubt if there will be many of us left to greet the spring."

"Is that bad?"

"No."

Again we sat in silence, smoking and thinking, the red coals of our cigarettes warm and human in the wind and snow and desolation.

"There are those who may have what you seek." His voice seemed utterly disinterested, a thin whisper against the rising wind.

"The Anti's?"

"Yes. They would want it, they seem to want many strange things."

"Do you know if they have it?"

He shrugged, the snow flaking from his hunched shoulders as he moved. I tried again.

"Has it left the city?"

"No."

We sat for a while in silence, then he touched the cartons of cigarettes.

"Take them." I rose stiffly to my numb feet, shaking the snow from my jacket, and trying to beat feeling into frozen fingers.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye—son," he whispered.

When I looked back he was gone.

I was so cold that it was hard to think straight, and the first need was coffee and food. By chance I entered the business and residential section of the city near the coffee house with the curious waitress, and didn't tread on more than a couple of beggars as I entered the place.

It was warm inside, and a little crowd had gathered around the television screen watching seven girls dance to the wail of pipes and the throb of drums. I sat at the same table and watched her as she crossed towards me.

"Coffee and a plate of ham and eggs."

She didn't make the obvious answer, just stood patiently waiting until I learned some sense. Her make-up had worn thin and her mottled skin didn't look too good at close quarters.

"Coffee and a bowl of energised soup." I smiled apologetically at her, turning on the charm. She frowned.

"Bread?"

"Please."

The dancing girls had left the screen and the crowd hunched closer as the main event of the evening flashed on. She returned with the food and I gestured towards the crowd.

"Do you go for the fights?"

She shrugged, setting the bowl of thick soup before me and putting the coarse bread beside it. I caught her arm.

"Listen, don't get me wrong, but I'd like to know you better than I do. What time do you finish?"

"In thirty minutes."

"Will you come out with me?"

She hesitated, staring down at me, but I wasn't worried. I knew what the answer would be.

"Yes," she said. "I'll meet you outside."

I grinned over my soup.

The thirty minutes passed and I waited outside the coffee house, stamping my feet in the freezing snow. She came as I knew she would, and I hailed a fleet cab passing in the street. It pulled up with a spray of snow, and the cabbie stared at me through his wire mesh.

"Where to?"

"Marino's." I heard the click of the lock and ushered her into the cab just as the beggars began to gather around us. I ignored them, settling back in the warm darkness suddenly conscious of her nearness. It troubled me, women usually didn't affect me that way.

Marino's was a happy-smoke joint which also promoted select fights on the side. She obviously wasn't used to such places, and stood just within the foyer pulling her cloak tightly around her.

"Scared?"

She shook her head, her hand automatically lifting to her face.

"No, but where is the powder room?"

I pointed it out.

"Over there. Meet you at the bar, and don't take all night."

She smiled briefly and I stood watching her as she crossed the foyer. I shook my head irritably. I didn't like the emotions I was feeling, and so I headed towards the bar. Two drinks later and I

felt her nearness. Three drinks later and we began to talk.

Her name was Lorna, and she was an orphan, lived alone, was five years younger than me—and was an Anti.

She didn't tell me the last, but there are little tricks of conversation, verbal traps, subtle ways of finding out things, and I'd started with a healthy suspicion. I didn't tell her that I knew, I didn't tell her anything, that could come later, if at all, but now I was after a good time.

We had a few more drinks and some decent food. I lost a little cash at a dice game, and hesitated at the door of the happy-smoke lounge, looking at Lorna.

"Care for some sweet dreams?"

She shook her head, wrinkling her nose with disgust and looking through the arched doorway I had to agree with her dislike.

Couches lined the walls and soft lights threw a mysterious haze over the furnishings of the room. It gave the place an exotic air, a romantic air, and it was as phony as hell. Men and women sprawled on the couches, looking like a collection of rag dolls with their limp limbs and slack staring faces. Soft-footed attendants moved between them carrying long-stemmed pipes and the odour of poppy poison hung thickly on the air.

I shrugged and moved away.

We drank a little and danced a lot, cheek to cheek stuff, though I could sense that she wasn't used to it, and had her mind more on her make-up than on me. I sat in at a poker game for an hour winning enough for the evening, then smiled at her as I steered her to a back room.

A ring stood in the centre of the room, seats circled it, and bright lights glared down from above. We took ringside seats and while waiting for the bout to commence I took the chance to scan the crowd.

Nothing.

No enemies, at least no known enemies. No black looks or frowns or whispers. I could relax and feel safe here and I was glad of it. I didn't feel in the mood for action.

The bout was between a middle-aged man and a lithe young girl. They fought naked with knives and the man was outclassed from the start. He tried, any man would try when his life depended on it, but he was outmatched from the beginning and the girl slashed him to ribbons within five minutes.

The next bout was a three-way battle—all men. It was fun to watch, and I marked one of the combatants down as a good fighter.

He mixed brawn and brain, letting the other two engage and stepping in when he could strike without opposition. They fought bare handed, the anything-goes technique, and my man won without having to kill either of the other two.

Other bouts followed, all designed to appeal to raw emotions, and the audience seemed to approve of the promoter's choice. I glanced at Lorna from time to time, and when it seemed that she was about to vomit, I decided that it was time to go.

She clung to me in the cab. I had expected the reaction and was ready for it, but somehow it wasn't what it should have been. The house-guard didn't look at me when we arrived home. The girl couldn't have upset him, so it must have been the extra work I'd given him, that and getting reprimanded for having allowed assassins to enter the building.

A man had the right to expect some sort of protection when he paid the rent I did.

I grinned at the man, enjoying his discomfiture.

"Any goons waiting for me this time?"

"No." He seemed about to choke. "I couldn't help that, Mr. Carter. They must have sneaked past me, or entered as guests of some other tenant."

"Naturally," I said coldly. "That explains perfectly how they got into my apartment." I held out my hand. "Well, goodbye, I hope that you've another job lined up—you'll be needing it."

"Mr. Carter." Sweat glistened on his worried face and I could guess how he felt as he appealed to me. "I couldn't help what happened, and I promise you it won't occur again. Will you speak for me?"

"Why?"

"If I get kicked out of this job I'm finished." He grabbed at my arm, his eyes desperate. "You know how it is, once a guard falls down on the job he's blacklisted all over the city. I've a wife, Mr. Carter, I've got a couple of kids!"

"I've only got one life," I said coldly. It was in my mind to give it to him, but something stopped me. Irritably I shrugged off his hand.

"Forget it," I snapped. "But the next time will be the last."

The elevator doors cut off his grateful babble.

They had cleaned the apartment and aside from a lighter patch on the carpet there was nothing to show what had happened there. I locked the door and switched on the lights, turning on the radio as I went to the kitchen for ice and drinks.



Lorna was still standing in the centre of the room, her cloak drawn tightly about her slender figure and her eyes wide and frightened looking. I set down the drinks and smiled at her.

"Relax, I'm not going to eat you."

"I shouldn't have come here," she whispered. "I don't know what made me do it."

"Relax," I said again, and poured out a stiff drink. "Here, this will make you feel better."

She took it, more from politeness than anything else, but I could tell that she was all keyed up inside and it worried me. Girls didn't act like that nowadays, not girls of her age and position, and I'd known enough of them to be able to tell.

But—she was different.

I took her by the hands and led her to the big easy chair, forcing her into it and sitting on the wide arm.

"Lorna," I said gently. "You don't have to be afraid, you know. Don't you trust me?"

She stared at me with her wide eyes, and I could almost see my reflection in their pupils. A hard faced man with a knife-scarred cheek and a puffed broken nose. I'd lived hard in my time, eaten well when I could and starved when I couldn't. A life like that leaves its mark on a man, and I'd never been particularly handsome to start with.

"It isn't that," she whispered. "It isn't that at all, its . . . ." Automatically her hand went to her face, to her worn make-up and the mottled skin. I laughed.

"Is that what troubles you?" I took her hand between mine and stared directly into her eyes. "Forget it."

"I can't, Jim. I can't! You don't know, you can't know what it means to a girl."

"Forget it," I said harshly. "The world is what it is and we must take what we can get."

"Is that how you feel about it?" She rose to her feet, putting down her untouched drink. "I should have known better, but I was a fool. I thought . . ."

"What did you think?" I stepped before her, knowing that if she went now I would never see her again. It shouldn't have troubled me, but it did.

"Never mind." She blinked, her eyes filling with unshed tears, and almost I hated myself. Whatever else happened, whatever else I did one thing I had to do. I had to restore the trust between us. I had to!

It was easy, too easy. It was unfair, but I didn't care for fairness, not now, and soon I had her smiling again. I held her in my arms, not too tightly, and felt the stir of unfamiliar emotions as I looked into her eyes and at her lips. I bent, and she pulled away.

"Lorna!"

"Wait." She smiled at me, and I knew what the effort cost her. "There is something you must see."

"It doesn't matter. Believe me, Lorna it doesn't matter!"

"It does matter, Jim," she said quietly. "To me."

The bathroom door closed softly behind her.

I stood waiting, looking at the untouched drinks and striding about the apartment. The bathroom door clicked, and slowly she entered the room. I stepped towards her, then stopped, my eyes searching her face.

She had washed off every trace of make-up, dispensed with every artificial aid, and what I saw no woman should ever have been cursed with.

She wasn't deformed, she wasn't ugly, she wasn't inhuman, but her skin was—different.

It was mottled, discoloured in a regular pattern, a tortoiseshell pattern of angry reds and blues, yellows and sickening white. A grotesque mask stared at me, a mask from which two eyes glistened with tears and the gleam of white teeth shone between carmine lips.

I stared at it. I stared at it—and then past it. I moved, stepping towards her, folding her in my arms and her lips were warm and utterly human.

And I knew then what I hadn't known before.

Branscombe called me next morning. He snarled at me from the screen, then, as he saw my puffed and swollen features, grinned.

"Trouble?"

"No. What did you call for?"

"How's the job?"

I shrugged. "Moving, why?"

"Things have been happening. The guards of the laboratories are going to make a general sweep of the lower sector. A combination. If you've any ideas better get moving, we haven't much time."

"What do you expect?" I couldn't help sounding bitter. "Miracles? A paper gets stolen from a guarded building. It could be anywhere in the city and you expect me to get it back within hours."

"You've done it before."

"That was different. I can track stolen goods, but this isn't the same."

"Perhaps not, but if you hope to get paid for what you've done you'll find it." He leered at me. "How's the girl?"

I didn't answer, just stood staring at the flickering surface of the screen. Branscombe had probably learned about her from one of his touts, maybe from the beggars or even the house-guard, but I didn't like the idea of his spying on me.

He licked his lips, running a grimy finger against the side of his nose, and for some reason I began to hate his pasty face.

"You know about her?"

"I know," I said curtly, and cut the connection. I was annoyed to find that my hands were trembling, and angrily swallowed a drink. Damn Branscome! Damn the missing papers! Damn the whole unholy mess!

I tilted the bottle again.

It was still cold and though it had stopped snowing, big white drifts stood piled against the sides of the buildings. I stood on the edge of the sidewalk, my breath coming in thick plumes and felt the cold begin to bite into me. I wanted hot coffee. I wanted to rest at a table and watch Lorna as she moved with her long-legged easy grace. I wanted to do a lot of things, but I had to get on with the job.

I walked. Partly to keep warm but mostly because where I was going a cab would be as out of place as a diamond necklace around a beggar's neck. I strode along the ice-covered pavement ignoring the frozen bodies of those who had died during the night and trying not to see the pitiful gestures of the homeless. It was bad, but it couldn't be helped.

The residential section gave way to the business and shopping centres. I passed the markets, diving down little alleys and heading for the old waterfront. Traffic had almost vanished from the streets and pedestrians were few and far between. Half-a-mile more and I was where I had wanted to be.

A smell hung over the place. An odour, half-rot, half-musk. It coiled between the sagging bulks of warehouses and rose from the gutters. It reeked of dirt and unwashed bodies, of bad cooking and festering sores. It was a familiar smell, too familiar.

The smell of poverty.

I paused by a low doorway, knocking in a series of swift raps using the heavy signet ring on my right hand. A judas grill opened and little eyes stared at me from the darkness within. A pause, then chains rattled and the door swung open.

A man stood and grinned at me. A twisted caricature of what a man should be. A scar plucked at his lips and one shoulder rose higher than the other. He moved, and his trailing foot left a thin line in the dust.

"Jim! Anything wrong?"

"No." I ducked through the door and waited as the bolts and chains rattled back home. He jerked his head at me and moved towards the rear of the building, moving like a broken-backed spider as he trailed his useless limb. I followed him, one hand resting on the gun beneath my jacket. I should be safe here, but gratitude can be a funny thing.

A dim bulb shone a sickly light over a rough table and the remains of some noisome meal rested among the ruins of several bottles. The cripple swept them away, clearing a space at the end of the table, and I sat on an upturned box.

"Haven't seen you for a long time, Jim." The cripple fumbled beneath a heap of rags and lifted a dirty bottle. "How are things with you?"

"Not so good." I watched as he poured two cracked mugs full of a thick red wine. I sipped at the stuff, almost gagged, then forced myself to empty the mug. He grinned, and tilted the bottle, refilling my container.

"Just like old times, eh, Jim. Remember the old days? Before I fell off a roof and you had to drag me to the hospital for treatment." He sighed, staring at his wine. "Great days, Jim. Great days. We made a good team."

"We could again," I said, and tried to ignore the prickling between my shoulder blades. He shook his head.

"No, Jim. Those days are over. If it hadn't been for you I'd have died from that fall, and sometimes I wish that I had." He glared at me, little flecks of foam appearing at the corners of his mouth.

Suddenly I knew that someone had entered the room.

I didn't move. I didn't even breathe. I was a stranger here, a stranger wearing clothes worth the price of a month's food, a week's drug supply, a night at one of the happy-smoke joints. I sat as if made of stone, my brain whirling inside my head, and a thin film of sweat starting over my face.

The cripple laughed.

"Relax," he said, and gestured to someone standing behind me. "Beat it, Jim here is a friend of mine, and don't you forget it."

Air drifted about me, a thin stream of clean coldness, then the prickling between my shoulders died, and I could breathe again.

"What can I do for you, Jim?"

"I'm looking for a paper, Max," I said gently. "It was stolen from the laboratories of Atomic Power Inc., a bit of stiff blue paper covered with scribble. They want it back."

"Do they?" He smiled and reached for the bottle. "Worth much?"

"Five hundred."

He sat in thought, twirling the half-empty bottle between his hands. He looked at me, and I tried to read his dull black eyes. I failed.

"I haven't got it," he said. "None of my boys could have got it. Atomic Power you say?"

"Yes."

Silence. Silence as we each sat busy with our own secret thoughts. Carefully I picked up the thick mug.

"Any ideas?"

He shrugged, the gesture grotesque and somehow horrible, and then sat biting at his flabby lips.

"Tried the Anti's?"

"No. Should I?"

He laughed, a thick gurgling laughter without mirth and without any real feeling except that of hate. Abruptly the bottle shattered beneath his grip and he sat staring stupidly at the blood staining his hand.

"Why not?" he said thickly. "They go for that sort of stuff, don't they? Atomics! Bombs! Everything like that. They want to rule us, don't they? Tell us what to do, how to do it and God help us if we don't. Anti's! Swine!"

"Where can I contact them?"

"*You ask me that!*" He rose from the table and stood glaring down at me, rage twisting his features. "Get out! Get out before I forget that we once were friends! Get out now!"

I didn't argue. I never argue with maniacs, children—or old friends. I rose to my feet, not saying anything, not looking anything, not even thinking anything. All I wanted was to get out alive.

He unchained the door, jerking it open and letting in a gust of freezing wind. I stepped through it, then turned and stared at the distorted face of the cripple.

"Max," I said urgently. "Max!"

"Get away from me," he said, and his voice sounded almost like a sob. "Anti lover!"

I stared at the slammed door, wishing that we hadn't parted as we had, tasting the bad taste of defeat, and regretting the past. It did no good, the door remained shut and I turned away.

Half-a-mile down the street a beggar bumped into me. He hit my arm, the bad one, and I felt sick at the sudden wash of pain. A second rose up at my side, grabbing my arm, and a third swung something at my head.

I kicked, feeling bone snap and hearing a scream of agony. I smashed my hand into a dirty face, the heavy signet ring laying open his cheek to the bone. I twisted, jerking at the retaining arm, then something smashed down onto my head,

The stiffened nylon of my cap took the full force of the blow saving me from a splintered skull, but I went down on my knees. They hit me again, and the star-shot blackness of oblivion roared about me. Someone kicked me and someone else hissed a sharp word of warning.

Then the pavement opened beneath me and I was falling, falling, falling.

Falling into a black eternity.

It was cold. It was cold with the deathly chill of deep blue ice, of frozen air, of the vast distances between the stars. It was too cold for any living thing, too cold for ghosts, too cold for even the fierce heat of the atom. It was too cold to be stood any longer.

I groaned, rolling over on my side, and the dull ache of my injured arm jerked me to pain-shot awareness. I shivered, my teeth chattering as I felt the bite of the icy wind and the burning cold of the frozen snow beneath me.

Painfully I sat upright, nursing my swollen head between hands that felt like blocks of wood, trying to still the churning of my stomach.

I fumbled at my clothing searching for cigarettes, then glanced down when I couldn't find my pockets. My clothing was gone! I wore rags, thin and dirty, torn and tattered, they flapped in the bitter wind and I could see naked flesh through great rents in the rotten material. My rings were gone, my gun, my money. I staggered to my feet and felt snow against my bare soles. I felt sick and numb with desperation and the after-effects of the beating up.

The worse was yet to come.

I saw it by the weak light of an overhead fluorescent reflected from the steel shutters of a closed shop. A streak across my forehead, a red streak, oddly shaped and unmistakable.

The debtor's brand!

Even then I didn't worry too much. I had been robbed, beaten, branded, but I still had a home, a bank account and a few friends. Painfully I staggered along the sidewalk heading back into the heart of the city.

It was dark and I must have been unconscious for most of the day, but I couldn't have been lying in the frozen snow for that length of time. A sour taste in my mouth gave the answer. I had been dragged to some form of shelter, drugged, and then thrown out when it was time for me to recover. I frowned as I thought of it, beggars wouldn't have done that, they wouldn't have cared if I lived or died, but then beggars wouldn't have beaten me up in the first place.

Lights blazed above the entrance to my apartment house, and I leaned wearily against the bell. I needed a bath, fresh clothes, a slug of liquor and a good night's sleep.

I didn't get either.

A grill slammed open and a harsh voice echoed across the deserted street.

"What do you want?"

"What do you think?" I snapped tiredly. My head had begun to ache and what with that and the pain from my arm I was in no mood to bandy words. "Let me in, I live here."

"You what?"

"Hell, man, let me in!" I stared at him, and received another shock. I didn't know the house-guard, he was unfamiliar to me, and I could guess what he was thinking.

"Look," I said urgently. "I live here, room three sixty, Carter, Jim Carter. I've been robbed and beaten up. Let me in."

"Sure," he said sarcastically. "I'll let you in—as soon as you show me your house-identification."

"Don't be a fool! I told you that I've been robbed." I stared impatiently at him. "Where's the other guard?"

"Canned." He stepped back from the grill. "Sorry, but you don't get in, take it up with the office in the morning." The judas door slammed on my protests.

I couldn't blame him, he was paid to guard the building and residents, and with jobs as scarce as they were he wasn't taking and chances. I turned from the door, rubbing my hand over my forehead, then stared down at the traces of red on my fingers.

I should have known.

Tattooing would have left my forehead a throbbing sore, and the debtor's mark was always tattooed. Someone had smeared a red stain over my forehead, smeared it on after beating me up and stealing my clothes. They had done it for a reason. I began to wonder why.

Wind lashed at me, numbing my exposed flesh and jerking me to full awareness of my position. To-morrow I could enter the apartment, my thumbprint was on record and they would let me in. To-morrow I could draw money from the bank, get new clothes and weapons, wash off the red brand, but that was to-morrow.

Unless I found shelter soon I wouldn't be alive to-morrow, I would join the beggars frozen in the night or be shot down by some guard with a suspicious nature. I had to get shelter and that meant that I had to get money.

It wasn't easy.

I hung around outside a happy-smoke joint, thrusting my way forward, jerking the opposition from my path, and stuck my hand before each and every couple entering or leaving the joint. I chose a couple because there was less chance of getting my hand knocked off, and just when I had about given up hope I got what I was after.

A blonde, skillfully dressed, professionally bored, languidly beautiful, stumbled as I tripped her, then watched approvingly as I knocked down some poor devil at my side, blaming him for what he hadn't done.

I pulled my punch as much as I dared, and would even have shared my reward had it been larger. I felt that bad.

But I was fixed for the night.

The doss-house was a rambling warehouse deep in the poorer part of town. A great rambling structure with blind shuttered windows, sagging walls, and a single barred door. A man sat just within the entrance, a big man ugly with fat and wearing a holstered pistol strapped round his bulging paunch. He stared at me, swinging a club, and making little slobbering noises with his flabby lips.

"Whatcha want?"

"A flop in the warm." I showed him my money. "Any objections?"

He spat and held out his hand, examining the coin.

"Hungry?"

I nodded and he tucked the coin in his pocket. "Grab some chow inside, one bowl. Any noise and you're out." He jerked his head and I entered the interior of the warehouse.

It stank.

It reeked of dirt and stale food, of sweat and vermin, of too many bodies in too small an area. I felt saliva pour into my mouth as the smell hit me in the face, and hesitated, trying not to breathe. A blast of icy wind from the closing door helped make up my mind, and I went on in.

The chow was a single bowl of greasy slop. It reeked of sour yeast and bad soy, of reclaimed garbage and the scrapings of a thousand dirty plates, but it was warm, edible, and I forced myself to gulp it down.

Dim bulbs threw a vague light over the interior and I could see rows of silent shapes each muffled in their rags and pressing close to each other for warmth. A woman stared at me as I walked along looking for an empty place, a thin faced woman with lank dirty hair and wild dark eyes. She simpered at me, then as she

saw the brand on my forehead, cursed and covered her face.

I took no notice.

The floor was hard and cold, but not as cold as the pavement outside. I stretched, trying to ease the ache in my bones and feeling the alternate sweat and chill of incipient fever. Tomorrow I would have to get some prophylactic shots. Tomorrow I would have to get anti-flu and anti-pneumonia injections. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Always tomorrow.

Things began to take on an unreal appearance. The silent rows of muffled shapes looked like corpses, the warehouse a giant mortuary lit by the dying stars of vanishing hope. Or perhaps it was the anteroom to hell and we were lost souls waiting for the fires of purgatory.

Lost souls. Scum washed on the shores of a disintegrating civilisation. The damned!

Someone moaned softly from the other side of the room, and someone else cursed in a low savage monotone. The big man strode between the silent rows, his club swinging from his hand. A sharp crack and the moaning stopped. He was grinning as he returned.

I shifted a little, and the man next to me grunted, turning in his sleep, and uncovering his face. I stared at it, at the thick growth of stubble, the shape of the ears and neck—and at the vivid red streak across his forehead.

I had seen that face before.

I had seen it on a scrap of paper, a photograph caught by the spy camera and I tensed as he mumbled and opened his eyes.

We stared at each other, and I could sense his quick suspicion, his guarded distrust, then as he saw my own brand, quick relief. He licked his lips and nodded.

"Is it morning yet?"

"No."

He sighed, and rolled over on his side trying for sleep. I knew he couldn't and lay waiting for him to talk. He did, keeping his voice low and shooting suspicious looks around him as he whispered in the heavy reek.

"A hell of a night." He paused, rubbing automatically at his forehead. "I see you've got one too, how?"

"The usual," I forced bitterness into my tones, "a debt, a lousy fifty and they wouldn't give me time to pay."

He nodded sympathetically. "I know. I owed a little more than that, two hundred, but they clamped down on me without warning." He twisted his lips, hate distorting his grimed features.

"The dirty swine! With all that they've got they had to clamp down."

"Atomic Power Inc.?"

He looked at me with quick suspicion, his eyes guarded, and I could sense his regret at having said too much. I smiled.

"They got me too, they get everyone, and they always operate the same way. Pay up—or else!"

"Yeah." He stared past me into the dim distance and licked his lips as if at a pleasant thought. "It's time someone paid them off for what they've done."

"How?" I rolled on my back and pretended disinterest. "What can a man do against them? They've got too many guards, too many high walls, too much protection. What can one man do?"

"Plenty." He trembled on the brink of telling me what I wanted to know, and I smiled into the dimness. He had bottled it up too long, he had to tell, to boast, to spill his guts and bask in stolen glory. Wasn't I his friend? Didn't I also wear the brand of the damned? Wasn't I safe?

Iron footsteps rang on the stained concrete and the lights blazed to an eye-searing brilliance.

They came with stabbing handbeams, ready weapons and swinging clubs. They came with mechanical precision, deploying with the smooth efficiency of long training and their faces were hard and stern beneath the peaked visors of their uniform caps.

The guards of Atomic Products Inc.

I had forgotten them, forgotten all about the big combined operation to sweep the lower section of the town. I watched them as they jabbed sleeping men into wakefulness and stared stonily at the twisted faces of cursing women. They blocked the door, and with quick blows of their clubs they forced obedience from the muttering crowd.

Then they began to search every man and woman in the place.

I heard the man at my side curse with a desperate intensity. He half-lunged to his feet, then fell back with a sob as he realised that escape was impossible. I clutched at his arm.

"You got matches?"

"What?" His eyes were wild and I had to repeat my question before he understood.

"Sure. Why?"

"Give them to me. Quick!"

The floor wouldn't burn, but the walls were of rotten wood and should flare well. I slipped the matches in my pocket and



sauntered towards the guards. They stared at me and silently I began to undress, submitting quietly to their search, then stepping to one side as I dressed again.

A can of oil for the heater beneath the cook pot stood by the door. I jerked out the stopper, splashed it over the wall, and before they knew what I intended, had struck a match and thrown it at the fluid.

A sheet of flame raced up the woodwork.

It was beautiful, a red curtain of flame burning away all the dirt and rottenness of the lice-ridden doss-house, sending little sparks

flying in the breeze from the half-open door and starting a dozen other fires. A woman screamed, the shrill sound slashing across the crackle of flame and the startled cursing of the guards. One of them snarled at me, raising his pistol and squeezing the trigger. I ducked, the high-velocity bullet screaming over my head. The next moment all hell broke loose.

The place was a death trap with only one exit, the door! The guards didn't stand a chance, they went down cursing and shooting uselessly at the stampeding crowd. Blood rilled from where they had dropped, red blood staining the soiled concrete, staining bare feet and dirty rags. Blood from lives stamped out on hard cement. I slipped through the door and stood against the side of the building.

Waiting.

I didn't have to wait long.

He came, red-eyed and weeping from smoke and fear, coughing and beating at his smouldering rags, the brand on his forehead bright and clear in the light from the burning building. He stood trembling with reaction and the terror of near death, then walked unsteadily towards the edge of town.

I followed him.

I followed him past silent buildings, looming high and dim towards the dark sky. I followed him along narrow alleys and over heaped debris covered with snow. I followed him until my feet were numb and my arm throbbed with a shrieking agony, until the wind no longer seared my naked flesh with cold and my hand felt as if made of wood.

Then he stopped, and I sat beside him.

He wasn't too surprised. He stared at me, his stubbled face thin and drawn and his eyes dull with defeat.

"I knew that you were after me," he said. "What do you want?"

"The paper." I didn't waste words. "The paper you stole from the laboratories of Atomic Power Inc. Give."

"I haven't got it," he lied weakly, not really expecting to be believed. "I passed it on."

I swung at his jaw, using my right hand and putting the muscles of back and shoulder to work. He grunted once before keeling over and before he had fallen my hands were roving over his body.

I found it in a body belt, a thin wad of stiff blue paper nestling in a double fold of the nylon. I took it and rose wearily to my feet, staring down at the slumped figure before me.

There was nothing I could do for him. Nothing.

Painfully I stumbled through the snow.

Dawn found me half-dead with cold waiting outside the apartment building. They were suspicious, and I couldn't blame them, but they had changed the guard to a man I knew, and after some argument they checked my thumbprint and let me in.

The shower felt wonderful, the hot coffee even better, and it was good to have clean clothes on my back again. I'd scrubbed off the red stain and checked the loading of my spare gun. I swallowed some pills to clear up the incipient fever then called Branscome on the videophone.

He didn't answer.

I made three other calls and then managed to contact Lorna. I smiled at her, noting her wide-eyed look of surprise.

"Hello, darling. When do I see you?"

"You want to?" She bit her lip and I noticed that she had taken trouble with her make-up.

"What do you think?" I became serious. "Of course I want to see you, can you come right over?"

She nodded, and I stood for a long while staring at the blank screen. Then I rang down to the house-guard telling him to admit her, and tried to get Branscome again.

Same result.

I took a drink, then another, and after a while a third. I felt restless and stood at the window staring down at the city. The wind was from the mainland and I could guess the hell brewing below. There would be fighting and short tempers, emotional disturbances and a craving for euphoria. The happy-smoke joints would be busy—and so would the dead-wagons.

A nice town.

The dark figures of beggars sprawled on the pavements, ruined debris of humanity lost in the canyons between locked and guarded havens of refuge. The weak, the handicapped, the lost souls cling to obsolete conventions and being trampled by the iron feet of progress.

I took another drink.

The doorbell chimed and Lorna entered the room. I stepped towards her, feeling her presence ease my restlessness and wishing that she need never go. We stared at each other for a moment, then I gestured with my glass, she nodded and I poured a generous measure.

"Here's to us." I smiled at her, then drank, feeling the bite of the alcohol as it went down my throat.

"Why did you send for me, Jim?"

"I wanted to talk with you, that's one reason."

"Is there another?" She sipped at her drink then set it down on the table. I took her shoulders in my hands and stared into her eyes.

"Yes," I said. "Do you want to hear it?"

"I don't know." She twisted from my grip, her hand going automatically to her face. "Jim, that night, you mustn't think . . ."

"I learned all I need to know that night, and you needn't worry."

"You know?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter, Lorna. It doesn't matter!"

"You said that once before, Jim. I want to believe you, but how can I? You've seen me, seen all of me, how can any man love a thing like that?"

"Stop it!" I shouted angrily. "Stop it I say!"

My hands were trembling and I slopped some of my drink on the table as I tilted the bottle. I couldn't look at her, I daren't, I couldn't trust myself. "I told you that it didn't matter, isn't that good enough?"

"You know what I am, Jim," she said quietly. "You know that, don't you?"

"What of it?" I forced myself to face her. "What difference does it make? I love you. I love you no matter what you are. Can't you leave it at that?"

"I wish I could, I wish to God I could!" She smiled at me through her tears, not worrying about her ruined make-up. "I love you too, Jim. Love you as I never thought that I'd ever be able to love a man, but it's no good, Jim. It's no good!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a mutant, Jim, that's why. A mutant! Now do you see?"

"No." I stepped close to her, staring into her face. "It doesn't matter, not one little bit." I nodded at the startled comprehension in her eyes.

"You see—I'm the same as you."

"You mean?"

I nodded, feeling unutterably relieved.

We sat on the edge of the couch our forgotten drinks on the table, holding hands as if we were kids just out of school. She had cried a little, whether they were tears of joy or sadness I didn't know, but one thing was certain.

We didn't intend to part.

She smiled up at me, dabbing at her ruined make-up and squeezed my hand.

"What else did you want to see me about, Jim?"

I sighed, wishing that life could stop just as it was, but it had to be said.

"What made you become an Anti, Lorna?"

I felt her stiffen. I sensed her startled reaction, her half-fear, half-shame that I knew, but she had courage and I didn't have to repeat the question.

"What else could I become, Jim? Life isn't easy for the weak, look at the beggars, look at the debtors, look at the drug-crazed children and the dead in the streets every morning. We want to stop all that, Jim. We want law and order, a decent life and protection for the weak. Is that wrong?"

I didn't answer, but drew her to the window and pointed to the edge of town.

"Look at those ruins," I said, and my voice didn't seem to be my own. "Look beyond them, at the deadlands and the radioactive hell around us. Law and order did that. Protecting the weak and defending the helpless. They had police in the old days, and armies and weapons to be used by armies. What danger is one man? He can shoot and kill—but he can be killed in turn."

I shook my head.

"I want freedom, Lorna. Freedom in the truest sense of the word. My gun, my arms against the guns and arms of those who want to "protect" me. I want freedom, the power to hit at those who hurt me. With your law and order I couldn't have that. I'd have to go whining to police or armies, and what could they do?"

"They could help us, Jim? They would stop crime."

"Crime?" I laughed contemptuously. "What is crime? There is none. Without law and law enforcement how can there be crime?"

I drew her to me and tasted the sweetness of her lips.

It was a funny world. I thought of Branscome and his allergy to water so that washing to him was a thing too painful to be borne. I thought of the crippled body and twisted mind of an old friend. I thought of my mother, now dead, and of my father still living. I thought of the difference between me and other men, of the knack I had of reading minds when their natural barriers were relaxed at moments of emotional stress.

I thought of a lot of things.

The click of the door jerked me back to sense, and I spun, my hand grabbing at the butt of my pistol. Branscome stood just within the room, his dirt-streaked face wearing a loose smile and his hands empty.

"Busy, Jim?"

"I might be." I looked at him. "I tried to contact you, but you wouldn't answer. Why not?"

He shrugged, slamming the door behind him, and helping himself to my liquor. I made a mental note to see that the house-guard got canned. He had no right letting anyone into the building without warning.

"I was visiting a friend," he said calmly, "then I decided to drop in." He held out his hand. "Give it to me."

I stared at him.

"Give you what?"

"The papers." He made a little rubbing motion with his thumb and forefinger. "Give."

"I haven't got them."

He sighed, tilting my bottle and looking at me from beneath untidy eyebrows. "Don't lie, Jim. Not to me. I know you have them, you got them last night after the fire. They're useless to you, but I want them."

I shook my head, smiling into his face and moving so as to keep Lorna out of the line of fire.

"Don't be a fool, Jim! What good are they to you?"

I shrugged. "Twenty thousand?"

"I'll give you ten, you'd never get more. Well?"

"No."

He tightened his lips, little sparks of anger flashing in his dull eyes. "Jim," he said carefully. "I'll give you one more chance. You should know by now what I can do. Either you give me those papers—or next time the brand won't wash off."

I stood looking down at him, at his struggling hair and dirt stained neck. I had known it. I knew him too well to be fooled and I could read him like an open book. I knew what he wanted.

Power.

He wasn't alone in that. There had always been men like him and there always would be. Potential dictators, greedy for what *they* wanted and not caring how they got it. Usually they didn't last long. Usually they trod on one set of toes too many and knife or gun settled the score. It was the best way.

He stared into my eyes and what he saw there made him tremble in sudden fear.

"Jim," he whispered. "Don't look at me like that. I wouldn't harm you, you know that. I'm your friend, your best friend. Jim!"

"You had the beggars in your pay," I said grimly. "You had an arrangement with Max and played along with the Anti's at the

same time. You knew too much about Lorna, and you had me beaten up. Why, Branscome? Why?"

I didn't need to ask the question, but I wanted him to damn himself from his own mouth. Killing him would come easier then.

"They crossed me," he whined. "I bought a plan of the laboratories, bribed the guards, hired the men. They got what I wanted, and then they crossed me. I knew you could find the papers and I sent you to where I knew they must be." He licked his flabby lips. "It was the only way, Jim. I was fighting against time and I had to find the papers. I had to!"

"Why?"

Lorna crossed the room and stood before me staring down at the fear-crazed man. I tried to push her to one side, afraid lest Branscome should pull a gun, but she smiled at me and shook her head.

"What are those papers? Why are they so important to you?"

"To us, Lorna," he whispered. "To us." He swallowed and glanced furtively at me. "They hold the secret of controlled atomic fission and with them we could remake the bomb. Once we have that then we can force law and order on this chaos, break the big cartels and give the Anti's a chance to take over. We could clean up the city, wipe out the mutants, force the farmers to send us food. It would mean a fresh start, Lorna. A strong man could gain full control and enforce his own peace."

"And you would be the strong man."

I pushed Lorna to one side and this time she didn't resist me. Branscome looked at me, then at her, then down at the clean spot on the carpet.

"Why not?"

I didn't answer him. I wanted to kill him, to blast him where he sat and end the danger of him getting his own way forever, but it would have done no good. He wasn't the only one, and it seemed hard to kill a man for his dreams.

And then there was Lorna.

I stared at my trembling hands, feeling the bite of wind-borne atoms from the radioactive deadlands as their radiation disturbed delicate neuron paths. At such times violence came too easily.

"Get out!"

He looked at me, not moving.

"Get out before I blast you. Get out and never let me see you again. Get out, now!"

He swallowed, not able to credit his luck, then as awareness came he scuttled towards the door. I stood fighting the hate within me as I heard him go.

"Thank you." Lorna stood before me and smiled into my face.

"You heard him," I said thickly. "You heard what he said. Wipe out the mutants, rule beneath the threat of the bomb. Kill you, me, my father, kill all the poor devils who couldn't help being born."

"You let him go."

"Yes, I let him go."

I stared at her, trying to find in her features the reason for my action. She put her arms around me.

"Thank you," she repeated, and kissed me full on the lips.

I clung to her, pressing her close to me and feeling my hate dissolving. I kissed her hair, her cheeks, her throat and the soft fullness of her lips.

I didn't even hear the click of the lock.

They stood just within the open door, three of them, armed, uniformed in solemn black, their eyes hard and watchful beneath the peaked visors of their helmets. They stared about the room, one of them searching the bathroom and one the kitchen, the other standing by the door.

Watching.

Satisfied, they took up their positions, standing against the walls their hands resting on the uncovered butts of their pistols. It wasn't until then that the fourth man entered the room.

He was old, white-haired and with skin wrinkled like the peel of an over-stored apple. He looked at me with shrewd little eyes, bobbed politely to Lorna, and sat carefully in the easy chair.

"Shall we get down to business?" His voice was a thin squeak, rasping from a too-tight throat, but I didn't laugh.

"You have it?"

He nodded, fumbling in his pocket and producing a printed slip of paper. "Twenty thousand, the sum agreed on. Will you accept a cheque?"

I nodded. There were few people or organisations that I'd trust for an unverified cheque, but Atomic Power Inc. was one of them. They were big.

"Very well, now the papers, please." He held out a hand thin and wasted and looking like the claw of some giant bird. I pulled the thin wad of papers from my pocket and dropped them into his palm. He sat jiggling them for a moment, looking at me with his shrewd eyes.

"Have you looked at these?"

"No."

"Could copies have been made, photostats?"

"No."

"You are sure of that? Quite sure?"

I laughed curtly and shrugged. "You should know. Haven't your guards covered every photographer in town, every place where copies could be made? Wouldn't your advertised reward have smoked them out if they had? They haven't been copied, you can take my word for it."

He nodded as if satisfied, then thrust the papers into his pocket.

"You know what they are?"

"Yes. A man told me, the man who arranged for them to be stolen." I shook my head at his unspoken question. "No, he didn't look at them, he never had them, his thief crossed him up."

"Are you sure?"

I sighed, and deliberately poured a drink. Lorna didn't say a word, just stood staring at the silent guards, her features tense and worried.

"Yes, I'm sure." I swallowed the liquor. "He made a mistake, a small one but it proved fatal. He gave me a photograph taken by a spy camera. A photograph taken at night and it showed a man's face."

He nodded with quiet understanding.

"I see. The wind was from the mainland that night, the radiations would have ruined the film."

"Not only that. If the photograph had been genuine there would have been no need to call in outside agencies. I checked, and no such aid had been asked. He was getting desperate and had to take a chance. He montaged the photograph to show the face of his thief and then set me on the trail. He never even saw what he had paid for."

He smiled and pushed the cheque towards me, then tapped at the pocket containing the papers.

"These are better with us. Unfortunately we can't have cheap plentiful power without also knowing how to make the bomb, but we have learned our lesson. There will be no second atomic war." He rose and held out his thin hand. "Thank you, Mr. Carter. If you ever need employment let me know, I could use a man like you among my guards."

I grinned and glanced at Lorna.

"Thank you, but I have other plans."

"I suspected it, but bear my offer in mind." He paused by the door while his guards searched the passage.

"Don't worry about your ex-employer. He will be taken care of, my guards will see to that. We can't have such a man threatening our freedom."

He smiled again, bobbed his head at Lorna, and passed from the room.

And passed from my life.

The wind has risen, wailing against the high buildings and rattling the windows. I moved restlessly about the room, drinking a little, smoking a lot, and turning over a dozen plans for our future life.

We would be married, of course. It wasn't necessary, but some of the old conventions still had an appeal and I wanted to make Lorna mine for as long as we both should live. I would take a larger apartment, buy new furniture, hire a permanent guard and move into higher circles. I could do it, I had done it before, rising from the gutters and climbing to relative wealth and a life of ease.

I could climb higher. A determined man could do anything, and I was a determined man.

I told her of my plans, snapping quick sentences at her as she sat in the easy chair, and trying not to feel the irritation plucking at my brain. She smiled at me, then rose and stretched.

"If I'm to move in with you, dear, I'd better get my things."

"I'll come with you," I decided. "We can be married on the way back and start as we intend to continue." I helped her on with her cloak, automatically checking the loading of my gun.

"We'll have children, lots of them, not all mutants are sterile and I like kids. We can buy a small house, a protected one, of course, and I'll make enough to keep us both in luxury. Branscome was wrong, but he had some good ideas and I can improve on them."

I babbled on like a kid with his first girl-friend, the words streaming from between my lips like bubbles from a foam-bath. She didn't say anything, just smiled at me with understanding eyes.

The house-guard saluted me as we came from the lift, he didn't say anything, but I knew that he was impressed by my visitors. They had probably tipped him well.

Outside it was still cold. The tingling wind was bitter and the sullen clouds were loaded with snow. I stood on the edge of the pavement looking for a fleet cab, ignoring the pitiful wailing of the beggars sheltering against the wall.

I was careless.

I heard the whine of tyres, the purr of a turbine and displaced

air lashed at me. A hand jerked me back, something warm and soft thrust at me and metal tore my sleeve.

I fell, slipping on the ice-covered sidewalk and cracking my elbow on the concrete. Something wet and sticky sprayed over me, something red and warm.

Blood.

I jerked to my feet, the gun leaping in my hand as I pumped shots after the speeding car. I was lucky. A rear tyre went out with a dull explosion and the car skidded helplessly, metal crunching as it slammed against a wall. A man staggered from the driving seat, a man with a dirt-streaked, pasty white face, long straggling hair and a loose screaming mouth.

Branscome.

I shot him. I smashed his arms, his legs, ripping his body with high-velocity bullets and spilling his guts in a red stream over the sidewalk. I cursed as I fired, snarling down at him without regret or remorse, hating myself for not doing before what I did now.

He was dead. With all his high dreams and greed for power, he was dead. He was just like any other dead man, like the frozen beggars, the knifed thieves, the stoned mutants. Dead. And like them he would wind up as fertiliser.

I wished him in hell.

I looked at Lorna then, staring down at her broken body, trying not to see where the blood had washed off her make-up. She was dead, of course. I had known that from the start. She had died to save me, thrusting her own body in front of the speeding car, and it was her blood that had splashed me.

I looked at her, feeling all my hopes and plans, all my dreams and happiness melt away at the touch of stern reality.

She was dead.

And looking down at her all my own words came like a thousand-footed army—and kicked me straight in the teeth.

My arms and gun against those of others who hurt me. Freedom to live as I wished, without restriction or restraint. Liberty to shoot and smash, to burn and destroy without regard for any other living soul.

Freedom!

I picked her up, holding her gently in my arms and not worrying about the blood ruining my clothes. I stared at her still, cold face, at the lips once so warm and the figure once so beautiful.

"Yeah," I said, and didn't recognise the sound of my own voice. "Freedom—it's wonderful!"

Softly I kissed the dead lips.

*Once again we welcome with pleasure the first story by a new feminine writer, and one who brings a delightful flavour of fantasy into a Venusian setting.*

# THE SHIMMERING TREE

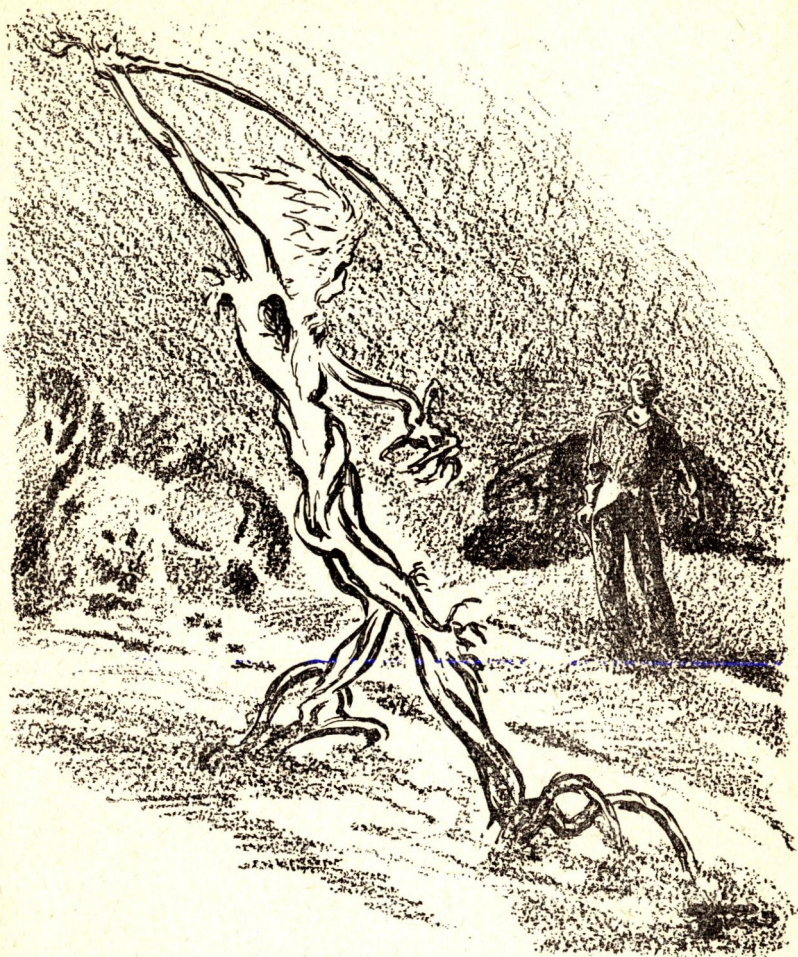
By MARGARET LOWE

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Illustrated by QUINN

The flora of Venus is more beautiful than the fauna. More beautiful and, with a few exceptions, more deadly. The green dragon of the Wastelands scares the pants off anyone meeting him for the first time, but he's harmless enough unless he happens to step on your foot. Whereas the blue veil that floats like an enchantment against the rose-coloured Venusian sky, and the crystalline lily gleaming palely through the starless nights—they're killers. And those yellow flowers flecking the grass over there. Cute, aren't they? But try making a daisy chain of them and see what happens to you. Everywhere is beauty and everywhere is death, and to venture outside the settlement without protective suit and mask is asking for trouble.

I spent a night in the Copper Forest without my suit and mask and that is why (they say), I'm suffering from an attack of Venusian



fever and see things which aren't there: trees that glow and shimmer and dead men doing the bidding of a non-human telepath. I'm sick and I'm to be shipped home to earth on the next spacer. Well, it can't be too soon for me. I don't want to share the fate of Fenton and MacGregor and the rest.

The trouble started about a month ago when one of our engineers, a member of a team making surveys in the Copper Forest, came stumbling back to camp, his hands to his head, babbling hysterically of a tree that "glowed and shimmered." His mates had seen nothing, and although a search was instigated nothing was found. So the poor devil was taken back to base and treated for Venusian fever—a name given by our medical corps to anything they don't understand.

A few days later, Fenton, a friend of mine, a steady unimaginative sort of fellow, failed to check in at nightfall and after that other men began in ones and two to drift into the forest and vanish without trace. That was the queer part of it. Usually we find a few grim remnants, odd bones and pieces of equipment, enough to mark the spot where a man has died and to enable us to take reprisals on the man-eater responsible.

But in the Copper Forest men disappeared without leaving so much as a footprint behind them for the searchers to follow. Working parties began to get the jitters and a rule was laid down that teams must keep close together and counts taken every half hour. Still the disappearances went on. A man would look up from his work and find his companion, to whom he'd been speaking a few minutes before, was no longer there. In the end all work in the Copper Forest was abandoned and the mystery pigeon-holed for investigation later on.

But Fenton had been my friend and I wanted to know what had happened to him. I got hold of a map of the area and ringed round the spots where the disappearances were known to have taken place. It wasn't accurate, of course, because in many cases we didn't know exactly where the men had been seized. But it was clear enough that the immediate vicinity of a lake, which we knew as the Coal Sack, was the most dangerous. All right then. I collected as many photographs of the lake and surroundings I could lay my hands on, and got a botonist pal to check with me all the plants visible in the photos. Just in case we'd missed anything.

The fellow was pleased to air his knowledge and discoursed at great length on the habit and appearance of the various plants. And then he suddenly broke off in the middle of a sentence. "That's queer," he said. "I don't remember ever having seen this chap before." I looked over his shoulder. He was pointing to a small tree standing by itself in a clearing. It was out of focus for the photographer had been concentrating on a close-up of a slasher fern, and slightly hazed as if light had fogged the film at that spot, but

even I could see that it didn't fall into any of the known categories of Venusian flora. Excited by his discovery, my botonist hastened off to discuss the matter with his colleagues. But I'd learnt all I wanted to. I knew where to look and what to look for.

I had some days leave due to me and I drew them at once on the grounds of having urgent business in the neighbouring settlement, a matter of thirty miles or so across open, "safe," country. If I'd let my true plans leak out, there would have been hell to pay. Solo exploration was a punishable offence—always provided that you lived to serve your sentence.

I applied for one of the sealed jeeps, loaded her with food to last a couple of days, a gun and a few rounds of ammo and, as an after-thought, when the quartermaster's back was turned, a flame thrower. My start was hindered by that fool Tiny, the camp dragon who, thinking I'd packed chocolate away somewhere, stuck his head in through the door and got his horn mixed up with the jeep's fittings. Only several pounds of chocolate and the combined efforts of a dozen sweating, swearing helpers, prevented the jeep from becoming a total wreck.

I ought perhaps to explain that Tiny was looked upon as my property and any incidental damage that he did was always debited to my account. I'd rescued him as a cub, or pup or whatever it is that dragons are when they're young, from a sticky end in the Black Seed Swamps, and to revive the bedraggled waif—then about the size of a St. Bernard—had given him the rest of my chocolate ration. From that moment he became my shadow and followed me everywhere, and if you've ever been followed everywhere by a two-ton dragon with a passion for chocolate—but I don't suppose you have.

When I was well clear of the settlement, I changed course and made for the lake in the Copper Forest, reaching it just on 1600 hours Venusian time. This meant I had a couple of hours daylight before the long fifteen-hour night began. There is little undergrowth in the forest and the trees are widely spaced, so I was able to bring the jeep right to the lake's edge. I parked it there and got out to have a look round. Although I was pretty silly playing at Sherlock Holmes all by myself, I wasn't that daft not to take the precaution of putting on my protective suit and mask, and of checking my gun, before leaving the security of the jeep. And I made sure that the jeep's doors were properly shut against wandering tendrils and floating spores.

I found the clearing easily enough and in the centre stood a great shining giant with legs wide spread and arms frozen in the act of hurling a javelin and a mass of flaming hair streaming in the wind. Well, that's what it looked like at first sight and I can tell you I didn't like it at all. Actually, apart from the divided trunk, its appearance wasn't so humanoid at close quarters. The outstretched arms were merely a couple of powerful tentacles that had come to rest in mid-air, and the yellow hair was part of the complicated flower head. The tree wasn't so very different from other Venusian plant life so far as its shape went, it was the way it glowed and, yes, shimmered, that was unique. Trunk, tentacles and flower head all bathed in this glittering light, like sunrise at sea. I'd never seen anything like it before, yet I couldn't see that it was dangerous, unless one got within reach of the tentacles. I walked all round, keeping at a safe distance, and took a number of photographs. All this time the thing didn't stir, not even when I chucked a stone at its head.

I sat down on a grass bank and tried to work things out. What I couldn't understand was why no one had ever spotted it when the search parties were out. I myself had never been to this particular spot, although I'd explored the other side of the Coal Sack, so I couldn't say whether the tree had always been in the clearing. But I'd seen the search party's report and no mention of this shining thing had been recorded. Perhaps it hadn't been there. Perhaps it was a tree we hadn't yet encountered on Venus, one that could pull up its roots and walk.

I was mulling these points over in my mind when there came into the clearing a herd of smarties. God knows who gave them their name because they're far less lovely than a warthog and even stupider than a green dragon which at least, if your chocolate ration holds out, can be coaxed into doing some useful haulage work. But a smartie is a dead loss and, although he looks something like a pig, not even edible (Venusian plants excepted, but then they'll eat anything).

The smarties paid no attention to me, but buried their ugly snouts in the grass and began to feed. They came quite close to the tree, they didn't seem to have any fear of it, and yet I noticed that they kept well away from the edge of the clearing where lurked other predatory plants, ready to snatch the careless straggler. I told myself that I'd been wasting my time. The tree was harmless, perhaps even that rarity on the planet, a respectable earth type tree drawing

its nourishment direct from the soil, and the queer glow nothing more than a device to attract insects.

I was about to return to the jeep when the tree came to life. Leisurely the two tentacles moved downwards, scooped a fat porker off his feet, and stuffed him whole into an orifice that opened in the trunk. His startled squeal was quickly muffled and the rest of the smarties went on feeding as if nothing had happened. Why didn't they beat it while the going was good? The answer—it couldn't be anything else—was that they had seen nothing, suspected nothing. They hadn't seen what happened to their pal any more than the humans in the forest had seen their working partner snatched from their side. And the reason they hadn't seen lay in that hellish glow, it must have a hypnotic effect, and—oh, I could see it all clearly now—the reason why I was standing there while other men had walked, unknowing, to their death, was because I was immune to hypnotic suggestion. And that's true, you know. A professional hypnotist once tried to put me under way back on Earth, and he couldn't do it. He was pretty offensive, I remember, implying that only a C3 intelligence was incapable of being hypnotised.

"You won't get me that way," I shouted, my voice echoing hollowly among the copper trees. The monster with a gesture crudely human brushed its tentacles down its sides and turned its flower face in my direction, as if aware of my presence for the first time. I felt the menace and glanced uneasily over my shoulder. The smarties had now disappeared out of sight, the shadows were deepening, and an ominous silence had fallen over the clearing. I was the only one to guess the tree's secret. I wondered what it could do to prevent me from getting away with it.

I made my way back to the jeep. It stood where I had left it by the lakeside. So far so good. Carefully I stripped off my suit and mask and put them in the decontamination bunker and set the air purifying plant working overtime. Then I pressed the self starter. Nothing happened. The engine was dead and none of my fiddling had the least effect. I was stranded in the forest for the night with that blasted Christmas tree, steadily brightening as the daylight died, for company. I tried the radio but there was too much static to get through to H.Q. I told myself I had nothing to worry about. A night in a Venusian forest is no picnic but the jeep, well armoured and air-conditioned, was safe enough so long as I didn't leave it during the hours of darkness, and in the morning, if it came to the worst, I could trek back to camp on foot.

Oh, imagination's a fine thing in an artist or a poet, but it's not a good companion for a man forced to spend a fifteen hour night, alone, in a hostile forest. The breakdown of the jeep was—why should I doubt it?—pure coincidence, but I couldn't forget that here, in this clearing, reigned over by a shining Svengli, at least twelve men had disappeared. I should have liked to put the matter beyond all dispute and marched out flame thrower in hand and burnt the damn thing to a cinder, but I resisted the temptation because, after all, who would believe my story if all I could show was a stretch of blackened turf. This was the reason I gave myself and it seemed good enough at the time, and yet, looking back, I think that behind the logic lay the fear lest I should find that the flame thrower wouldn't work either. I'm damn sure it wouldn't have done.

I made myself a meal and had a cigarette or two and, making sure that the jeep doors were securely fastened, tried to settle down to sleep. I had fifteen hours of darkness in front of me and the more of them I could sleep away the better.

I awoke suddenly not knowing what had awakened me. The night was well advanced and all around were sudden kindling sparks and splashes of phosphorescence and streaks of luminous marsh gas winding through the trees. Over the lake lay a shining blanket of mist and from the encircling copper trees dripped chunks of liquid fire. It was a scene of fantastic beauty that never fails to catch an Earthman by the throat, but I knew it to be as deadly as a pit of rattlesnakes. Nothing, I told myself, was going to get me to leave my armoured foxhole. And then I saw him coming across the clearing towards me, and all my caution was thrown to the winds. My hand was on the door handle and I was out in a flash.

"Fenton!" I cried. "My God, man, we'd given you up for lost."

Something cracked down on my head and I pitched headlong to the ground. It was a glancing blow and didn't knock me out completely. I felt myself picked up and marched across the clearing. It wasn't until it was nearly too late that I realised what they meant to do with me. The tentacles brushed my face as I broke free. Before me stood four gaunt figures, dirty, bedraggled, the light of the Shimmering Tree on their faces, their eyes expressionless.

"Fenton! Mac!" I cried in horror, but they gave no sign of recognition. They began to close in on me and I backed away. Their movements were clumsy and unco-ordinated, like puppets badly manipulated, but they were dangerous and they were between me and the jeep. One put his hand to his belt and began to drag



out a gun. I turned and ran, but a tendril of adder-weed caught me by the ankle and I fell again.

Now I had lost my bearings, the phosphorescence and the swirling mist hid the jeep from me and I didn't know which way to go. I plunged on blindly and the next moment the earth fell away under my feet and I was in the lake. This probably saved my life for a couple of strokes took me out of sight of the bank. The mist closed down over my head just as a stream of bullets ripped past and ricocheted on the metallic lobes of the water plants. I knew nothing about Venusian water plants but supposed them to be as ferocious as their land counterparts, and every moment I expected to be

dragged under the surface. I swam and swam, not knowing where I was going or whether I'd made a circle and was even now heading back to the place I'd started from.

At last my knees touched bottom and I scrambled ashore, shivering with cold and more scared than I'd ever been in my life. I listened for sounds of pursuit but heard only the rasping of my own breath and the usual forest sounds—the whisper of tendrils, the sudden snapping of the crackerjacks, the blubbery suckings of the syphons, like old men swilling soup.

I leaned wearily against the polished column of a copper tree. A wisp of blue veil detached itself from a branch and drifted down towards me. It wasn't intelligent like most Venusian plants, its killing was blind, purposeless, and its tenuousness made its movements incalculable. A few yards away a cluster of crystalline lilies, bright with phosphorous, fanning themselves like sunning butterflies. An inquisitive tendril of adder-weed nosed my foot. All round were a dozen ways of dying and I wondered which would get me in the end, for I knew quite well that I was doomed. Without my suit and mask I stood no chance at all of living through the night.

Unless I could reach the jeep again. Reluctantly I started back, keeping the lake on my left as a guide. I had to make many a detour to avoid a lurking plant; sometimes a swirl of mist would rise up and engulf me and I'd have to wait until it thinned before continuing; sometimes a swarm of fireflies would speed past in a shower of sparks, making me flinch, for their sting could kill. It was a hellish journey, the whole night had taken on the quality of a nightmare and I had a feeling that I'd wake up at any moment and find myself in my bunk back at the camp. I hoped I'd wake before the tree got me.

I hadn't got very far when I heard the sounds I'd been expecting. I took up my position behind a copper tree and waited. Near me was a clump of lilies. They would give me a quick death if I needed it.

The sounds came nearer, a steady swishing in the long grass, a snapping of branches. Men would not make that noise. Oh God, I thought, the Shimmering Tree itself. A sudden vivid picture came into my mind of the tree striding through the forest, with tentacles lashing, and yellow, tufted flower face looking this way and that.

And then, suddenly breaking through the mist, appeared the ugly mask of my tame dragon. To this day I don't know how he found me, for although these dragons have abnormal tracking powers, yet I had driven fifty miles by jeep and swum a lake into the bargain.

However, here he was and Romeo wasn't more glad to see his Juliet than I this scaly leviathan. Chocolate I had none, but there was a half empty flask of whisky in my hip pocket and this we shared.

After that, tired and possibly a little tipsy, he lurched to a clear patch of grass and wound himself into a tight coil and went to sleep. Dragons give off an astringent smell, not unpleasant, but noxious to plants. I saw with satisfaction some lilies windward of him shut their petals with a snap. As soon as he'd settled, I climbed up on his coils and made myself comfortable. Comfortable! A fakir's bed of nails would have provided better sleeping quarters; but here was protection against the plants and if the tree sent its minions after me, Tiny might, I told myself doubtfully, come to my rescue.

The hours passed. I watched every flicked of light, every eddy of mist; listened to all the known and unidentifiable sounds of the forest. And I thought a good bit too. When we first landed on Venus we'd been prepared to encounter a dominant life form with which to parley or to fight as the case might be: a variation of *homo sapiens*. But all we found were dim-witted animals and beautiful but inimical plants. So we rubbed our hands and got on with the job of stripping the planet of as much loot as possible before the other boys developed space travel and came to queer our pitch. No one questioned our right to be here: no one asked whether the plants, given time, might not find a way of hitting back. And, by heaven, the Shimmering Tree had found a way all right. Its first experiment had been a failure and the specimen had run away screaming with a ruptured brain. Perhaps there were other failures which had had to be used as fodder or dumped into the Coal Sack. But the four men who were out there hunting for me, they weren't failures, they were very passable working models. And the next attempt might be perfect, so perfect that a man, outwardly sane, would one day walk into camp and, suddenly, without warning, pull out a gun and blaze away at everyone in sight. Or, it might be more subtle than that, the mental time-bomb in his head might not explode until he was spaceborne, so that the ship would be destroyed, or perhaps not until he reached earth . . . It all depended on the tree's range and on the number of these trees in existence. My thoughts began to chase each other like a dog after its own tail. I found myself nodding and in the end, just before dawn, I slept.

I awoke with a start as my bed suddenly upheaved itself and went off on some business of its own. I was tossed unceremoniously to the ground. "Come back here," I shouted. I might as well have tried to stop a runaway tank. Oh well, Tiny had done his part and now daylight was here, things didn't seem to bad. I was confident that I could reach the jeep or, if it were too closely guarded, make my way through the forest to the plain beyond, where I would be sure to be spotted by a patrol.

But as I turned towards the lake I felt ice slide down my back. Standing a little way off, staring at me silently, was Fenton and his gun was in his hand. I ignored it and went towards him, speaking to him urgently, trying to break through the hypnotic barrier. But his hand came up, the gun was cocked ready. I hesitated. There was a movement behind me and before I could swing round a noose was slipped over my head and drawn tight.

Now I was well and truly caught. Two other figures came out of the trees and began to drag me along. I shouted for Tiny but he was probably feeding. Dragons have one track minds, they can deal with only one emergency at a time. I tried to talk to my captors but they were deaf to human speech, and though once or twice I thought I saw a flicker of recognition in Fenton's eyes, it was quickly wiped out by a wince of pain. They didn't mind how they took me—head first, feet first, dragging along the ground. *Once we went right through a patch of adder weed in spite of my screamed warning.* I felt it rub along my ankles but it withheld its venom. Apparently word had been passed along that I was to be kept for the boss.

We reached the clearing. The Shimmering Tree stood there, bright against the encircling copper trees, its tentacles weaving to and fro, flower face turned expectantly towards us. They took me within a few yards of the tree and then gave me a quick push so that I fell within reach of the tentacles. I was whisked off my feet and raised high in the air. I saw the slit in the belly of the tree quiver in anticipation, and I found myself wondering, with academic interest, whether the thing had teeth or whether death would come by suffocation or slow disintegration by the digestive juices. The flower face loomed over me, the dark centre, criss-crossed with fine silvery wires, might have been an organ of sight, a sort of radar, I don't know.

One tentacle had wound itself tightly round my waist; the other, with painstaking thoroughness, began to explore my body, particularly my face and head. The stench of the tentacle pad nearly

choked me, but there was no avoiding it. At last, as if satisfied that it had found the right place, it clamped itself on my temple, and stayed there. There was a pricking, sharpening into pain. White hot needles of pain, pushing further and further inwards. The pressure built up. Something would have to go—and something did. There was a sort of “whoosh” in my head, it seemed as if a wall in my brain gave way, letting in a wave of agony. I screamed then, scream after scream. I could hear my screams and dispassionately wonder who was making that hellish noise.

A shudder shook the tree as if it had been hit with a battering ram. The tentacles loosed their hold and I was flung clear, the fall snapping the noose which had bound my arms. I got to my knees in time to see my dragon, scared and sheepish, back-peddalling for all he was worth, but a tentacle had got him round the horn. In the ordinary way, a two-ton dragon would be a match for any tree, but this was no ordinary tree. Shouting encouragement, I started to go to his help, but, like a whiplash, came the pain in my head again, and I blacked out.

When I opened my eyes it was to see the blunt features of our camp sergeant bending over me. “I wouldn’t be you for all the tea in China,” he was saying as he gave me water from his flask. “Going off on your own like that, you’ll be court martialled for sure. Lucky we happened to be passing, screaming blue murder, that you were.”

“It’s the Shimmering Tree,” I told him excitedly. “I’ve found it. It can hypnotise people. It’s got Fenton and MacGregor and at least two other men and it tried to get me, but I’m immune.”

I saw the sergeant’s face alter and heard someone behind me mutter, “Oh Lord, another of ’em!”

“But it’s true,” I shouted. “Look behind you and you’ll see it.” When no one moved I pushed them aside and staggered to my feet. I swayed and nearly fell. The clearing was empty. I could see the grass stretch unbroken all the way across. I could see right to the other side. Then I lost my head. I snatched the sergeant’s gun from his belt and emptied the chamber at the place where the Shimmering Tree had stood. Before anyone could stop me, I ran to my jeep—the jeep that had refused to start the night before—and drove it backwards and forwards over the clearing, until they dragged me from the wheel.

“All right, all right,” I cried as I saw them come up with ropes. “I’ll come quietly, only for God’s sake get me away from here.”

With exasperating slowness the sergeant gave orders. The jeeps

were set moving. I never thought the tree would let us go. Although I could no longer see it, I knew it was still there, watching us, laughing at us. I looked back and saw the marks of the jeep's tyres and knew that when they appeared to cross the place where the tree had stood, they lied like any simple optical illusion. I thought of Fenton standing there, invisible, watching us go, and I wondered what he was thinking. Was he despairing or did he now think in unison with the tree, hating our guts? Anyhow there was nothing I could do for him. My immunity had been taken from me; I was as vulnerable as any smartie.

We were moving quicker now, the trees thinned, and at last we were out on the plain. I breathed a little easier.

"You may believe me," I said, trying to speak calmly, "when you've developed the film I have in my camera." The sergeant only grunted, and I may as well tell you now, the film was blank. They said I'd forgotten to take off the lens cap. The hell I had.

I thought of my botonist friend, at least he would bear me out, but when I told the sergeant this, he gave me a queer look and said, "Funny you should mention him. He walked into a patch of blue veil last night, poor devil; caught him as he crossed the compound."

I gave it up and sat silent until we reached camp. Since then I've been examined by all the doctors, treated for Venusian fever, and worse, had to endure daily visits from the camp psychiatrist. I tell them what happened, and the more I insist, the madder they think me. So now I say nothing, only wait for the space ship to arrive and wonder if the tree will let me go. Or whether one night I shall hear the word "Come" and find myself walking into the forest to join Fenton and MacGregor—and Tiny too, for I reckon he's been "conditioned" along with the rest of us.

And how can I ever be sure, even if I do get away on the *Earth Queen* that this isn't what the Shimmering Tree wants and that I'm not one of the successful experiments, carrying in my head a time bomb which one day will suddenly start ticking? The devil of it is that I shall never be sure, until it actually happens, and then it will be too late.

—Margaret Lowe

*Readers have come to like these little vignettes about the eternal skirmishing between Jock Mactavish and the long-suffering Kennedy. As usual, justice prevails in the end.*

# SPACE PRIZE

By FRANCIS G. RAYER

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The abandoned ship was rotating slowly about her axis, ports drifting almost imperceptibly out of brilliant sunshine into the almost total darkness of the dim space-light. Jock Mactavish chuckled as he gazed through the port of his old trader.

"Me luck's in this day, laddie!" he said. "A gift from heaven it is."

I smiled. "You're worse than the old pirates—"

He turned hurt eyes on me, his wrinkled face screwed up. "Yon ship is worth a million. She'll be listed and there'll be a reward." He examined me seriously. "Always help folk, laddie, me mother said! An' won't I be helpin' to report this ship an' get her salvaged?"

The prow of the space liner was slowly coming into view, revealing high gold letters. Mactavish screwed up his eyes, striving to decipher them. Suddenly he grunted.

"Yon ship is the *Helopolis*, lost this twelve months!"

His excitement had increased. I could distinguish the ship's name, now. The *Helopolis* was a mighty vessel—such a prize as no buccaneer of old would have found upon the seas.

Jock Mactavish turned his ancient trader in a slow arc. His daughter Jill came from the radio cabin adjoining. She looked out of the port, then at Jock.

"There's another blip on the screen, dad," she said. "Distant, but approaching fast."

He patted her shoulder. "Never fear, lass. We've found the *Helopolis* an' by the saints I'll see 'tis us who collect the prize money! Radio Mars for details. If the *Helopolis* ain't listed, have a relay to Earth."

Jill raised her brows, disappearing, and I gazed at Jock in astonishment. A relay to Earth would cost a pretty packet. He seemed to guess my thoughts.

"The prize we'd get for a big ship like this warrants the vast expense," he said.

We prepared the trader's space tug—a leaky can that I felt would be sorely taxed even in chugging the short distance across to the *Helopolis*. We had it ready when a silver spear glinted high overhead, coming in a long curve towards us. Mactavish eyed it. His face grew red. He puffed out his cheeks.

"Trouble always follows the honest," he stated regretfully.

I studied the silvery ship drifting silently down. "You know her?"

Jock said a hard word. "Know her! It's Captain Kennedy's ship, laddie, none other. 'Tis that schemin', crooked, lyin' Kennedy mon, rascal that he is!"

He got out of the space tug, muttering. The silvery ship came to rest a mile above us. A sleek, new space tug drifted down from it. Grumbling to himself, Jock manipulated the air-lock controls. The space tug drifted in. The doors closed, and a tall man lowered himself to the deck. Jock swore under his breath, but beamed.

"Cap'n Kennedy! Me pleasure at seein' ye knows no bounds! 'Tis a happy mon I am, Kennedy!"

Captain Kennedy frowned. Many years Jock's junior, he knew that he had reason to suspect Jock's greeting.

"Just thought I'd look in to see if you wanted any help with the prize." He jerked a thumb towards the *Helopolis*. "She's a big ship."

Jock patted his shoulder. "Help, Cap'n! Nay, mon, I wouldn'a be troubling ye!"

Kennedy looked displeased. "I could at least radio verification for you, Mactavish."

Jock shook his head. "Nay, mon. My gal Jill can do that."

I saw a gleam enter Kennedy's eyes. "You haven't radioed yet?" he asked quickly.

The dismay on Jock's face showed he had realised his error. "Ye wouldn'a try to trick me, Cap'n?" he said soberly. "Ye wouldn'a hold a grudge against an honest old trader?" He scratched his chin. "In short, Cap'n, ye wouldn'a try to get the *Helopolis* for yourself?"

Kennedy's face shone with triumph. "Remember Pluto!" he said. His voice was nasty. "Remember Cephennid II? Remember the time you sold me all them dud radios?"

Jock was visibly hurt. "They wasn't dud," he stated. "Ye should have known they wouldn'a work on a planet where there was no transmitter!"\*

Kennedy stuck a finger in Jock's chest. "You won't trick me again, Mactavish!" he declared. "I win *this* time—and you don't get the *Helopolis*!"

He swore. Jock looked over his shoulder quickly. "Sssh, Cap'n! My gal Jill may be listenin'. Ye'd not want her to be learnin' bad words!"

Kennedy snorted and turned on a heel. Jock halted him just before he entered his space tug.

"Ye'll not be goin' across to the *Helopolis*, Cap'n? Ye'll not be tryin' to trick an old mon like meself?"

One leg through the hatch of his tug, Kennedy glared down. "You know you're beaten, Mactavish! My radio man heard your daughter asking for an Earth relay. I can work Earth *direct*." He let that sink in. "What's more, I can get across to the *Helopolis* while you're sticking gum on the leaks in your tin-can yonder!" He gestured at Mactavish's ancient and battered space tug.

Jock shook his head sadly. "Ye're rash, Cap'n. Ye wouldn'a find me crossin' to the *Helopolis* that quick for a fortune." He drew in his cheeks and made a gesture across his throat. "Driftin' ships is dangerous, Cap'n. Suppose the *Helopolis* is radioactive. Suppose—"

Kennedy laughed loudly. "We can test for that, Mactavish."

"Suppose there's 'orrible diseases," Jock continued doggedly. "Nay, Cap'n, I wouldn'a board her, if I was you."

Kennedy began to lower himself from sight. "You'll need to think up a better trick than that to keep me out, Mactavish," he called.

The hatch closed. Jock manipulated the air-lock controls. When

Kennedy's tug was in free space and gaining speed, Jock shook his grey head.

"That Kennedy mon bears me malice," he said sadly. "He only came to see if we'd reported. 'Tis a bad mon that he is, an' holdin' me innocent past against me."

He gazed dejectedly across at the *Helopolis*.

Jill pointed through the port. She had the same blue eyes as Jock, and when she smiled that was something worth seeing. I had a special kind of interest in Jill—and she had told me that she had that same kind of interest in me.

"Noticed that speck drifting round the *Helopolis*?" she asked.

I nodded. "Probably a lifeboat. It must have failed and been in orbit round the big ship ever since."

The silvery mote glinted high above the parent ship. We watched it for a few moments.

"Wonder why the *Helopolis* became derelict," I said at last.

Jill shook her head and her curls bobbed. "We've got no detailed report yet."

Mactavish came out of the control room. The grime and dust clinging to him showed that he had been in the holds. He carried a rusty cable.

"Let's go get that lifeboat in tow," he suggested. "Maybe there's duplicates of the *Helopolis*'s papers in it. 'Tis likely if the cap'n tried to get away."

His face was glum. I guessed why. Kennedy had us beaten. If the *Helopolis* was listed as an Earth ship, Kennedy could bang a report straight to her owners while Mactavish was trying to fix up a relay. Mactavish's ship transmitter was a junk heap. And if it came to reporting in person, Kennedy could leave Jock's old ship standing.

We donned spacesuits and took out the tug, Jill staying behind. The lifeboat bore the name *Helopolis* and was in a slow orbit round the parent ship. We got it in tow and gently drew it away towards Jock's vessel.

"Likely enough there may be a bit of a reward for the ship's papers," Jock said sadly over the intercom.

When we were near Mactavish's ship Jock looked back. He pointed and his face was red behind his helmet.

"That Kennedy mon is on the drifter, laddie!" was all he said.

I looked back. Captain Kennedy was in the entrance lock of the *Helopolis*. He waved mockingly, as if able to see our faces.

We moored the lifeboat outside and entered Jock's ship. I wondered whether Kennedy had already got the inner lock open and entered the *Helopolis*.

As we removed our spacesuits Jill came from the radio room. "Captain Kennedy wishes to speak to you," she said.

Jock sighed deeply. "'Tis abuse that he wishes to pour on me grey head, lass," he murmured.

We entered the radio room. He called, and Kennedy's voice came back strongly.

"That you, Mactavish?"

"None other, Cap'n Kennedy."

Kennedy laughed. "I'm on the *Helopolis*!"

"So we have observed, Cap'n."

"What's more, we'll soon have the inner airlock open!" The laugh came again, nastily. "That finishes you, Mactavish! You'll get nothing out of this!" Kennedy paused. "Think I didn't see you taking the lifeboat in, Mactavish? That will do you no good, either! If there are papers in the lifeboat, they'll only be the duplicate copies. The ship's papers will be in the *Helopolis*. I can get them to Earth while you're tying your ship together with new string!"

I saw Jock's face fall. "'Tis a hard man ye are, Cap'n," he declared. "Never bear malice, me mother said." Kennedy interjected a word that made Jock wag a finger at the loudspeaker. "Tut, tut, Cap'n," he said. "Remember my gal Jill is listenin'!"

Kennedy snorted audibly. "You won't talk yourself out of this, Mactavish!"

Mactavish sighed. "Did I ever wish ye anything but well, Kennedy mon?"

There was a long silence, and I wondered if Kennedy had turned off his suit radio, which I assumed was being relayed from his ship. Then his voice sounded again.

"There's a reward for these papers, Mactavish! The report has just come through. A big reward. There was a bit of a mystery about the *Helopolis*. The owners want her papers badly!"

A spark showed in Jock's eyes. "A big reward, Cap'n?"

"A hundred thousand credits!"

I looked at Jock. There were tears in his eyes. "*A hundred thousand credits!*" he murmured.

Kennedy laughed nastily and switched off.

I went to see if Jill had fixed up the radio relay. It would be a

roundabout working, but Jock's transmitter was too old to contact Earth direct.

She sighed. "Dad promised me a special wedding present, if this came off."

"Wedding presents have to be shared," I said.

She smiled. "It would be."

She returned to the transmitter. It was scarcely more powerful than the ship-to-ship equipment Jock used. Half an hour passed, and I saw that it was no use. Jill shook her head.

"Kennedy may even have got into the *Helopolis* by now," she said dispiritedly.

Finally I returned to Jack's cabin. He stood dejectedly watching a blue glimmer that played round the derelict's lock.

"The Cap'n is more than half way in, bad luck to him," he said.

I watched Kennedy and his men for a few minutes. Kennedy had all the equipment and help that Jock Mactavish lacked.

"He's a bad man, is that Kennedy," Jock stated at last. "But I ain't the kind to bear malice."

A new note was in his voice, and I glanced at him. A glint was in his eyes.

"I'll be gettin' Jill to contact Kennedy," he said.

I followed him back into the radio room. It was a long time before Kennedy's voice came.

"They tell me you want to parley, Mactavish." His tone was suspicious.

"I do, Cap'n, I do." Jock sat down heavily on the rickety stool by the panel. "'Tis in the kindness of me heart that is born pity for ye, Cap'n—"

Kennedy said a rude word. "Come to the point—if you've got one, Mactavish!"

Jock raised his eyes towards where heaven could be. "Ye're a hard mon, Kennedy, but I won't hold it against ye. Out o' the generosity of me heart I wants to make an offer to ye."

The loudspeaker rang with laughter. "That's choice!"

Jock sighed loudly. "'Tis a generous mon I am, like me mother always said. Stay out of the *Helopolis*, Cap'n, and radio Earth for me, an' I'll give ye one-quarter of the reward."

"You're daft!" Kennedy's patience seemed to be going. "I'm entering the *Helopolis*, taking the ship's papers, and going straight back to Earth! I shall have *all* the reward—and there won't be any split!"

Jock's eyes were cast down. "I'll give ye one-third of the reward, Cap'n. I'll forget them unkind words."

Kennedy swore, so roundly that Jock switched off hastily. "'Tis useless talking to the mon," he said sadly.

He left the radio room and drew in the *Helopolis's* lifeboat, making her secure. Then he turned his old tramp slowly, and set a course Earthwards. His acceleration was the gentlest thing in space, but rivets and plates twanged and squeaked.

"'Tis useless talking to such a mon as Kennedy," he declared again, when the course was set and the old ship in steady acceleration.

Almost an hour had passed when the ship-to-ship radio buzzed. Mactavish switched it on.

"This is Captain Kennedy." The voice was loud and clear. "I'm in the *Helopolis*. I can leave you a month behind, yet, Mactavish!"

"Have ye found the ship's papers?" Jock asked.

"I have!"

"There's copies in the lifeboat we salvaged. I observed 'em through the cockpit window. I'm off quietly to Earth to take 'em in."

I wondered whether Jock was growing weak-minded. Kennedy could overtake us without difficulty.

"When you get to Earth your papers will be valueless, Mactavish!" Kennedy declared. The triumph made his voice hard. "I'll already have delivered the duplicates!"

Jock looked sad. "Ye're a hasty mon, Cap'n. 'Tis a bad thing! Ye tricked me, and ye rushed straight out to the *Helopolis*. But I didn'a hold it against ye."

There was a moment's silence. Then Kennedy laughed. I noticed a slight hint of unease in the sound.

"You're crazy!" he said.

"Not that crazy as ye, Cap'n. Ain't ye never heard o' Venusian measles?"

"*Venusian measles!*" Kennedy's voice was astonished.

"Aye." Jock sighed. "'Tis a harmless complaint for a strong man like yeself, Cap'n. But easily fatal for people who bin aboard ship too long, on short rations. The *Helopolis* was on her way back from exploration. She called at Venus for water." Jock paused. "I pleaded with ye not to enter, Cap'n. If ye hadn't rushed that quick to the *Helopolis* ye'd have heard the report."

"So what?" Kennedy seemed to have collected himself. "I can still leave you a million miles behind!"

"Maybe, Cap'n, maybe. But haste will do ye no good. There's a rule, just as the radio said, as ye'd have heard if ye'd waited—"

"A rule?" Panic was in Kennedy's voice.

"Yes, Cap'n." Jock smiled. "Venusian measles be that catchin', Cap'n, that there's a six month quarantine."

A gasp came from the loudspeaker.

"Yes, Cap'n, six months," Jock repeated. "Not so much as a scrap o' paper will be let out o' the *Helopolis* during that time."

Kennedy blasphemed. "You've been in the lifeboat—you'll have to wait six months too—!"

"Not I," Jock declared. "I ain't been in her! What's more, 'tis a small vessel she is. They'll have her disinfected an' open within the hour." He sighed. "They can't disinfect ships with folks in 'em, Cap'n."

As the full force of his words became clear to Kennedy, Kennedy began to swear. Jock Mactavish frowned, compressed his lips, and leaned towards the microphone.

"Tut, tut, mon," he said. "Me gal Jill is listenin'." He struck up the switch, and turned round in silence. "Can't understand it," he said. "'Tis strange, but that Kennedy mon always seems to think I done him some injustice. An' didn'a I offer him a quarter—nay, a third? 'Tis a bad mon he is, an' I wouldn'a be one of his men, cooped up in the *Helopolis* with 'im for six months, not for twice a hundred thousand credits . . ."

—Francis G. Rayer

*In a world of 100% commercialism the advent of two children from some "other space" was not conducive to the inhabitants' peace of mind. They had a queer power, too.*

# ONCE UPON A TIME

By JONATHAN F. BURKE

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Illustrated by HUNTER

The two children had been playing in the sun all afternoon. Now they lay on the grass outside the door of the small white house. Their mother propped herself up on one elbow and said:

"Time for a story."

"A true story?" asked the boy, Carl.

"It's supposed to be true."

"Like the others?" said the girl Tani, dubiously. "The ones you call history?"

The mother nodded. Then she began:

"Once upon a time, in the world our ancestors came from, there were two powerful groups of people. They were called the Unies and the Commies, and they were always quarrelling."

"Wrestling?" said Carl.

"No, not wrestling. When they wanted to argue with one another, they made things—machines, they called them—things that killed

and maimed and blew houses down. And as they got cleverer they found ways of drawing up powerful forces from the basic essence of their own world. All their cities crumbled in a great fight. The men and women had to live underground to keep away from the machines and the forces that had been let loose. When they came out they travelled about in machines—boxes on wheels—and they flew through the air in boxes with wings.”

“They flew?” both children echoed incredulously.

“So the stories say. Well, now . . .”

“And why did they fight one another like that, if it meant all their cities were going to be spoilt?”

The mother shrugged. She stretched her body luxuriously in the mellow afternoon sunlight and said: “Things were different then.”

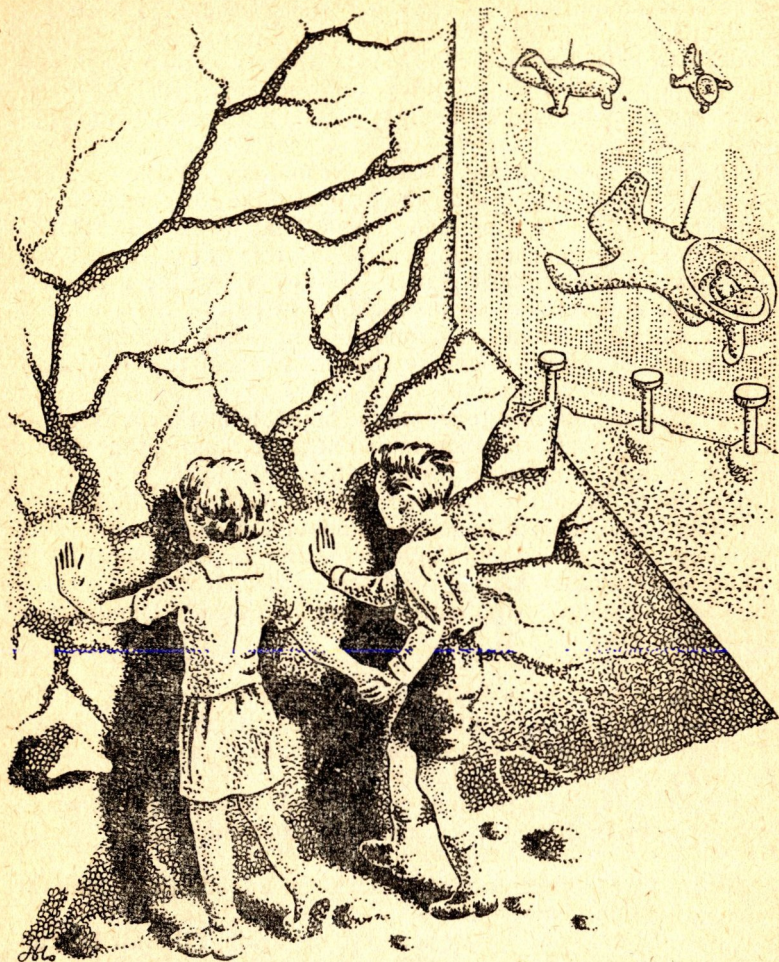
The children were silent for a moment. They wanted the story to go on, yet they didn’t want it to become too far-fetched. It was Carl who finally made an encouraging mumble in his throat, so that his mother went on. She told them about a small group of men and women who had grown weary of the strife and wickedness of what she called a materialistic civilisation (though she couldn’t explain to them exactly what she meant by this long word), and who had found a way of breaking through the barrier into a better world. She wasn’t very good at explaining what she meant by a barrier, either. She spoke vaguely of the division between two co-existent planes of being, and of men who had made some discoveries about atomic readjustment that would enable them to slip through. But she didn’t sound at all sure of herself.

Carl said slowly: “Do you really believe all these stories? Are they *really* supposed to be true?”

She gave him a faint, sceptical smile. But she was loyal to the agreed instruction curriculum of their community. “I’m not very good at explaining things,” she said. “History isn’t my strong subject. Father will give you all the real facts one day. It’s something to do with the intersection of different time paths, and the spacing of atoms within the same continuum so that different universes can exist in what is virtually the same space at the same time.” She sighed. “But I never really made head or tail of it, myself. And it doesn’t seem to matter much. Here we are, and that’s that.”

The boy wriggled in the grass. He thought this was just the way women—his mother, his aunts, and all their friends—would talk. All so vague. There was so much he wanted to know.

“Where’s father now?” he asked.



"He's away at the moment, concentrating."

"This concentrating: I wish I knew—"

"That's something else he'll explain to you soon. At present it's all in connection with forest clearance and food productivity. You'll learn all about it soon. Very soon now."

She reached out and touched her son's head, and then her daughter's.

Tani narrowed her eyes. She said: "It feels strange when you do that. A sort of—well, tightening up inside my head."

And the boy Carl said excitedly: "Yes, and it runs down to your fingers, doesn't it?"

"You are both growing up," said their mother. "We do not have machines as those people did—the people in the story," she added with that faint disbelieving smile again, "but we have developed other powers. You, Tani, are twelve, and it is at twelve that you will learn the use of those powers. Boys develop the awareness earlier, and Carl is ready for instruction now that he is eleven."

Once more she rested her hands on their heads, and they were conscious of a surge of energy that made them feel incredibly strong, and rather frightened.

After their mother had gone into the house, telling them to follow her in ten minutes, Carl sat and stared at the darkness of the woods nearby, as though impatient for his father to reappear.

"I wonder," he said to his sister, "if that world is really there—that other world we hear these stories about? And if it is, I wonder if we could ever go back through the barrier, or whatever it is? I wonder if it still goes on, and what sort of place it is now."

He sat and stared. What sort of place is it now? The question throbbed in his mind.

Jackson IV sat at the keyboard in his studio at the top of the Teletoren. He moved his long fingers in the air above the perslite pattern of green and grey keys, and a piercing discord quivered in the air.

Clive III said: "That's dunk commercial. Every big organestra on ether is using that in its cadences. It's become a cliché."

Jackson IV nodded. "Just fooling around."

"It's time we stopped fooling. They want a load of new stuff for this next session. New sound—"

"If anyone talks about new sound to me again, I'll draw his guts up through his windpipe," said Jackson IV morosely. "Even on one of these septaton jobs you can't hammer out something entirely original. Anyway, music isn't meant to be new. Tradition counts for more than cheap novelties."

"There's nothing cheap about the Heimann sponsored programs," said Clive III wryly. "Better lower your voice, or you'll be picked up on a lisner and fired for disloyalty."

The other man hunched his narrow shoulders over the keyboard once more, brooding over it like a lean sharp-beaked bird of prey. He waved a tentative finger above the third manual, and produced an echoing sigh.

"Corny," said Clive III.

"Damn it, if you think you can do any better . . ."

They always carried on like this. But in the end, as the plutocrat Heimann would have been the first to admit, they always turned in something dazzling, some fantastic composition that made the Jop-music lovers go wild with delight.

Once they had got over the preliminary wrangling, they would do it this time, too.

It was two hours later that they hit the chord that did all the damage.

Jackson IV had spread his fingers into a shape like a pouncing claw. His left index finger flicked the double swell into action, and suddenly came one strange vibrating chord.

Clive III went pale. "What was that?" he whispered.

They shuddered. There was an eeriness about the echoes that they could not account for. It wasn't only what you heard: it was a something else that you didn't hear, that jangled unnaturally.

Jackson IV said: "Sometimes I think those old stories about conjuring up devils and spirits missed out the most important details. It wasn't spells and incantations that did it: it was music. Look at the immediate effect music makes on you. It's not only emotional, but spiritual. And physical. Shattering tumblers, bringing down walls—and music too high to be heard, that gives you a splitting headache."

"I noticed the other day that some of the organestra stuff was causing trouble. The music on those Marriage Mart telecasts was quoted in the divorce courts twice last week."

The two men looked uneasily at the keyboard.

"Well?" said Jackson IV.

"Well?"

"It was a new sound all right. And it was logical enough. The progressions were logical. But we don't want to shatter all the teletubes receiving the Heimann programme. He wouldn't love us any longer."

"Try it again," said Clive III.

Tentatively, reluctantly, Jackson IV shaped his hand once more over the glittering keys.

The air trembled. They had a sensation of momentary deafness,

as though the vibrations of the notes making up the chord had somehow cancelled one another out and left only a soundless impact.

And suddenly—though Jackson IV and Clive III were not to know this—two naked children appeared on the sidewalk conveyor ten blocks away, sun-tanned brown against the bleak white snow that was gently falling.

The Chairman of the Juvenile Court was baffled.

There stood the wide-eyed boy with his fingers resting on the lie-detector as he told his story. And the story was wildly impossible. And the lie-detector confirmed that he was telling the truth.

The Chairman said: "All right, that's enough. Hold it for a minute. Is the psycho-analyst here?"

"Here, sir."

"You've examined this child?"

"I have, sir. He seems normal enough apart from these fantasies of his. He certainly believes in the fantasies, as you yourself will have observed. We had some difficulties at first over mere routine matters. He didn't grasp the point of our intelligence tests. But it was a matter of wording. Words seem to have different values for him—quite precise values, I might add, but different from our own. He speaks a dialect that we can't identify, but it is obviously our own language."

"I was aware of that," said the Chairman acidly. "I have already had a certain amount of conversation with the boy."

"Both he and the girl seem frank enough. No deep-seated complexes that we can trace. Queer thought patterns—but in no way abnormal. There's nothing wrong with them."

"Except that they're crazy?"

The boy and girl fidgeted.

"Can't you two keep still?" said the wardress sitting behind them.

The boy said in that precise yet oddly modulated voice of his: "Why must we wear these garments? They are uncomfortable."

"You can't wander about naked," said the Chairman irritably.

"Why not?"

The Chairman sighed. He said to the psycho-analyst: "Did any of the investigating panel find any possible connection between these children and the reactionary Dress Reform Association?"

"That had occurred to one of the panel, sir. We could trace nothing, though. They quite genuinely didn't understand what we

meant when we talked about the clothing regulations of 2235 A.D., though they admit that their parents consistently expose their bodies in public. They say that in their own world, this is normal. They can't understand what the fuss is about."

The wardress sniffed. "Shameless little brats," she said.

The Chairman turned to face the children once more.

"Quite apart from the moral issues and the rulings that have been so categorically laid down for more than a century now," he said, "how can you possibly walk about in cold weather like this without clothing? You've told us this story of having come here from a warm season in your—er—your own country. Don't you feel the cold?"

"No," said the girl.

"But what do you do when it changes from hot to cold?"

"We adjust," said the girl.

"What do you mean by that?"

Tani wriggled in exasperation. She was only a child. She didn't know anything about reasons and technicalities. She only knew that one did certain things automatically. She repeated: "We adjust."

"We'd better have a full report from the alienist," said the Chairman wearily. "And I can see we'll need a lot more advice before we've finished."

He longed to get on to the next case—on to something simple and understandable like some youngster stealing a helicar or imposing coarse jokes on telescreens by means of a home-made transmitter. That sort of thing was normal and healthy: you knew where you were with it.

A week later Carl said to Tani: "I wonder if we have told them too much? Some of them are beginning to take us seriously, and that would not be a good thing for our world."

"It's too late now."

They sat and thought for a little while.

"I wish we could get away," said Carl dismally. "How can we get out of here?"

They looked forlornly round the small room, sparsely furnished, in which they had lived since their arrival. It had heavy unbreakable windows, high up, which let in a great deal of light but no vision whatever of the outside world.

"And if we got out of here," said Tani, "how would we get back home?"

The door opened. Three elderly men came in. The leader had a broad, friendly face but a determined mouth. He was a man who would appreciate a show of spirit, but wouldn't stand too much nonsense: his friendliness went so far and no further.

He said, with bluff good humour: "Now then, you two . . . I wonder if we can have a little chat?"

They had a little chat. The three men were eminent scientists, and by no means as sceptical of the children's story as some of their earlier questioners had been. One of them became quite excited. He was sure that somewhere in the old records there was mention of the disappearance of a large number of intelligent men and women from high executive and social positions in several countries at the time of the great wars of the late twentieth century. He seemed to be a bit of a crank, but he certainly did produce some interesting statistics, worked out by his infallible robot secretary and interpreted by his rather more fallible self.

"If only you could tell us what you've been told about the barrier," he insisted: "if only we could get some idea of its real meaning . . ."

Carl said truthfully that he knew nothing about it, and that he didn't even know how the two of them had come to be wrenched through the barrier on to this side. Even if it had not been true, he would have said something on those lines. He was growing wary: he was contrasting this world into which he had been plunged with the world of his own, that tranquil place where there was none of this bustle and ceaseless questioning, where people did not wear ridiculous skins and plastics to cover themselves, and where there was peace and comfort in surroundings so different from this artificial civilisation. Even from the little he had seen of this world, he was prepared to decide that it was a bad one and that his ancestors had been right to escape from it.

He soon found that he was to have the opportunity of seeing more of this world.

The scientists argued over what little he told them, but there was no doubt that they took him seriously. He and Tani were released from the captivity in which they had been kept since their unexpected arrival on the sidewalk, and put in the keeping of one of the scientists—the broad, affable one, whose name was Professor Dandridge.

Professor Dandridge was a man with a reputation for thoroughness. He spared himself no pains—and he didn't spare other people either. When he wanted to root out a particular truth he would

plod jovially but remorselessly towards it, booming at it, persuading it to give itself up. He boomed all around when he needed help. He demanded assistance, and got it.

He wanted to discover the truth about Tani and Carl. What they said could not be true in itself, yet it might hold the germs of truth. Something queer had happened, and he intended to sort out the reality from the imaginery. However freakish it might be, he was going to have the truth all neatly packaged and labelled by the time he was finished.

His wife was a plump little woman with a warm smile—less effusive than the professor's, but far more spontaneously warm—and she did her best to make the children feel at home. "At home!" At first the phrase amused them, and then its tragedy struck them and they wept miserably, beyond all consoling.

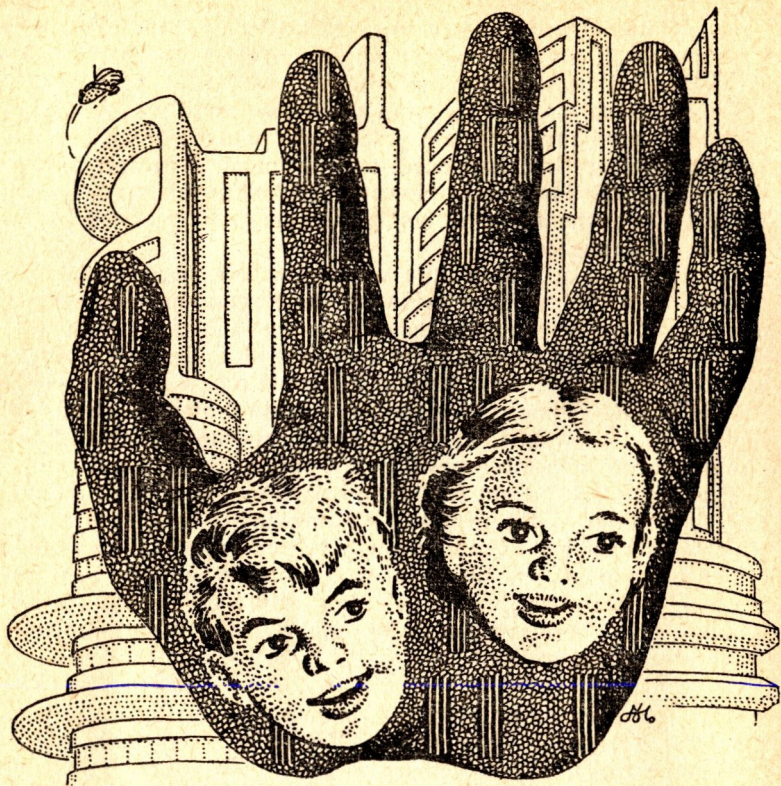
"We'll have some fun together," said Professor Dandridge boisterously. "I want to carry out some experiments, and I know you'll want to help me—they'll be the sort of thing you'll enjoy."

Tani and Carl did not feel optimistic. And in view of the fact that their room at the professor's home had a very heavy door, which was kept locked, and strongly barred windows, they could not accept him quite at his jovial face value. When they went out, it was in a special car, with a quiet but terribly official and efficient looking man beside them, who spoke only when Professor Dandridge spoke to him.

They appeared on programmes beamed all over the world from the great Teletoren. They appeared in an involved mathematical quiz game which had something to do with coloured lights and sine waves, but the audience only laughed at their uncomprehending answers and equally uncomprehending silences. "I was afraid it wouldn't work out," said Professor Dandridge afterwards, shaking his head, "but Professor Emary VI insisted."

They were encouraged to watch the regular teleject transmissions: the entire wall of their room, at the far end from the slung beds, quivered all day long with the multi-coloured, three-dimensional visions of men and women dancing, singing, telling jokes which meant nothing to Tani and Carl, and expressing their enthusiasm for some new artificiality which their civilisation had just created.

Professor Dandridge questioned them closely on their reactions to the programmes they saw. He made copious notes. And every now and then he slipped in a swift, unexpected question about their



own world, and about the barrier through which they had come. When he got no useful reply, his smile would lose its brilliance, and his flushed face would seem angry rather than jocular.

Once he snapped irascibly: "If you two are just trying to be smart . . ."

But he could not finish. There was something alien about the two children—something that had gradually impressed itself on everyone who met them. You couldn't believe the story they told, and you couldn't think of anything else that explained them; all you knew was that they were different: they were *other*. It was no good trying to convince yourself that they were just two mischievous kids who had dreamed up a complicated hoax and managed to remain consistent in their telling of details,

Professor Dandridge said one evening to Professor Emary VI: "The more I see of them, the more I believe their story is true. Why couldn't it have been an adult that came through the barrier? If only we'd got hold of someone who could tell us all about it."

"Maybe nobody—ah—over there knows the scientific explanation now. They went through from this side a couple of centuries ago: they may not have let their descendants have the details."

Dandridge nodded brusquely. "Quite possible. But we might have found out something—anything."

"I must say," Professor Emary VI remarked, "that from what the children tell us of their world, it doesn't seem to have a lot to offer us. Industrially it's quite undeveloped, and we don't know what mineral wealth it has to offer."

"No, but the very power of the barrier itself . . ." Dandridge was groping for words to express his vague concepts. "If we could move in and out of this co-existent world at will—if we could blend from one into the other, and perhaps draw power supplies of the nature of the Tchedi force-field . . . because, after all, the tensions that hold the balance between these related universes must be something quite incredible, something we've never even imagined—I mean, if it comes to war with the Eurasian Federation, and we've got something entirely new in our hands, not to mention the ability to disappear through a wall into another plane of existence whenever we need to, and perhaps come out of it at a different spot . . ."

He had become quite incoherent. He waved his arms like a windmill.

Professor Emary VI looked at him curiously, and said:

"Sometimes I think you're a trifle too eager, Dandridge. You want new knowledge just for the sake of it: you're sure that whatever is new must offer wonderful new possibilities for profit and destruction. I can't help feeling that it was from just such an irresponsible way of dealing with life that those people two centuries back were running away. I don't think they'd welcome us if we were to break through into their peaceful existence. But—" his scientific spirit reasserted itself—"I do wish I knew how those children came through. And for their sakes I wish they knew how to get back."

"If only we knew how to get back!" said Tani.

They had been taken round the War Record Museum and shown the vivid films of the last four great wars. They had been shown the mightiest building in the world—it was the Linguatoren, the

colossal home of all the leading advertising agencies in the country. Engaged in the world's most profitable and highly-paid business, men and women planned here, day in and day out, the best way of jarring the telejector watcher into wakefulness; of impressing a message on the eyes of a man travelling at five hundred miles an hour in a helicar; of making a woman step off the sidewalk conveyor into a shop—this shop here, rather than another one five doors further on. The children had admitted, when questioned, that in their own world there was nothing like this. And their questioners had nodded pityingly.

"If only we knew how to get home . . ."

Their minds reeled under the impact of screaming advertisements. They dreamed at night of the living, appalling films they had seen of death in atomic wars and the corruption of that last great disease war which might, according to the prophets, be repeated any time now if international relations did not improve.

They attended scientific conferences where they were asked questions. They were encouraged to play ball games which seemed utterly ridiculous to them, and every slip they made, every comment they gave voice to, was noted by Professor Dandridge or whoever happened to be studying them at the time. And always there was the feeling that they were being watched in the hope that they would give something away: that they would, perhaps, show that they had known all along how to get back through the barrier whenever they chose.

"If only we did!" lamented Carl.

They sat in their room with their backs to the endless shadow-play on the wall. Music dinned in their ears. They had no idea how to turn it off: although there were times when the sound and vision ceased—at night, when it was time for sleep—they themselves had no idea how to control the receiver.

Tani said: "Those other powers that we are supposed to have—those that mother mentioned to us—I wish I knew what they were. I wish they were something good, that would get us away from here."

Carl shook his head despondently.

Tani reached out and took his hand. They sat with shoulders hunched for a moment. Then Carl frowned. He said:

"Do you remember when mother touched our heads with her hands?"

"Yes," breathed Tani. "There was that feeling—"

"Like this, now."

They felt the same tingling sensation beginning to burn through their arms. There was an ache in their heads. They clenched their joined hands into a tight grip, and at once the power seemed to surge with renewed vigour.

"Concentrate!" said Carl suddenly.

He could not more have explained the meaning of the word than his sister had been able to explain the meaning of "adjust" to the Chairman of the Juvenile Court. But he knew now, instinctively, what concentration was.

And then they stood up and walked towards the door, and put their free hands on it. They pushed, and it gave way before them, shredding like torn paper. They walked downstairs and out of the house.

"It is a good thing that we are wearing these clothes, after all," said Tani. "Nobody will know us."

"We shall be recognised eventually," said Carl. "But in the meantime what shall we do?"

They stood beneath a large refractive hoarding which extolled the virtues of the Cumberland Helicar. With one accord they put their hands to its base, and concentrated. They concentrated so hard that it dissolved into dust. They went on their way, coughing.

"Is it something to do with this power that will help us to get through the barrier again, do you think?" asked Tani eagerly.

But although they stood in a quiet back street for several minutes, twisting themselves into meaningless contortions in the foolish hope that this might by some means enable them to stumble on the right way of regaining their home, they achieved nothing.

They felt petulant and excited at the same time. They had escaped from Professor Dandridge's house, but they could not escape from his world. They had a sense of freedom, and along with it a sense that this freedom was only another sort of imprisonment.

"This awful world!" cried Carl spitefully.

"Wicked place!" cried Tani.

And they joined hands, contemptuously struck a telecinema advertisement, and watched it disappear.

This time someone had seen them. There was an outcry. They ran down a street, dodged up a series of linked alleyways, and came out into a brilliantly illuminated main thoroughfare.

"There's that dreadful advertising building!"

They looked at one another apprehensively. Dared they do it?

"A wicked place!" said Tani firmly.

They joined hands, leaned against the wall of the world's largest building, and concentrated.

Fragments of concrete splintered about their heads. A cloud of dust swirled out from the wall and made them cough furiously.

"No, don't let's," Carl was shouting. "It'll all come down on top of us."

Someone else was shouting. They heard the wild hoot of what might in their own world have been a bird, but here was a swooping police helicar.

They ran.

The cars above the city converged on them. Like owls hovering above two cowering mice, the police vehicles came dropping purposefully into the canyons of the streets.

"In there!" said Carl.

They went in at the open side door of a tall building. A lift door stood open before them, but they did not know how to operate the lift. There were stairs as well—not often used. The two children began to run aimlessly up them.

They emerged, after a twisting and spiralling that left them dizzy, on a carpeted landing. They had seen something like it before. A man looked out of a door at them and said: "Hey, what do you two want?"

Carl and Tani broke into a run once more. They went up more stairs: this time they were ornamented and finely laid with thick carpet, as though used more often, though only for special occasions.

There were big double doors at the top. Someone was behind the children, so that they could not falter. They went straight on through the doors, and entered a world of uproar. They realised abruptly that they were in the concert hall of the Teletoren.

On the stage at the far end of the hall was a glitter of colour. The garish splendour of an organestra was laid out before an audience that crowded the hall. Four men sat at the complex keyboards, their hands pecking and waving and drawing out the tortuous counterpoint that had originated in the minds of Jackson IV and Clive III. Shifting sound hues played on the ears and through the skulls of the devotees in the audience. Some of them, shaken by a discord that struck some resonant frequency in their ecstatic minds, snapped their fingers to appeal for mercy; others beat a heavily accented beat on their knees, or moaned a short, gasped note at regular intervals.

Tani and Carl slid away behind the back row of seats and paused, out of breath and tired of this futile flight.

The composition built up to a jangling tumult of sound, and then there was a second's pause. Into the sudden silence dropped one agonised chord. The fingers of the Jop-fans tensed; their moans ceased; faces went white with an inexplicable fear, a terror of something completely unknown and unidentifiable . . .

And Carl, with a sob of incredulous delight, said to Tani: "Quickly. Through here. Turn round."

She turned. He took her hand and they leaned sidewise, and were twisted through on to a green grassy slope below a small white house.

Their mother appeared in the doorway. She called down to them:

"Wherever have you been? I told you ten minutes, and you've been away for at least twenty."

They raced up the slope towards her, and hugged her.

"Twenty minutes?" laughed Carl. "We've been away for weeks. Haven't you missed us?"

"Missed you?"

"Look at these silly clothes they made us wear."

But when the children looked down, they found that they were wearing no clothes.

Tani said: "There must have been something about them—something different—they wouldn't come through."

"What game is this you've been playing?" demanded their mother, her hands on their shoulders, leading them indoors.

It was Carl who started to tell the story, but Tani kept interrupting him, and they quarrelled over details.

And their mother wagged her head and smiled the sceptical, affectionate smile they loved so much, and said: "What an imagination you're getting! I never thought you'd be capable of making up such wonderful stories."

Jackson IV and Clive III were congratulated personally by the great magnate, Heimann himself. Their new work had caused a sensation. He wanted something bigger and better, for a double organestra, not later than the following Wednesday.

"It's not worth it," said Jackson IV decisively, when they were well out of earshot.

"Hush. We may be picked up on a lisner."

"I don't care what we're picked up on. I say it isn't worth it. Not for all the money in the universe. He can't have another one yet. We can't do it."

"We'll have to try."

"I'm not going to try. I'm not going to kill myself for the sake of a lot of Jop-addicts."

"We're doing it for our own sakes," said Clive III. "We're doing it because we like money and we like the way we live."

"I don't like the way I live," said Jackson IV. "I'd sooner live in a nice peaceful pastoral world like those two kids were talking about on the Science Half-hour the other night."

"The programmes you peer in on!" said Clive III with disgust. "Come on, sunshine. We're going to get down to work."

They got down to work. Four days later they produced a chord that shivered through their minds and the whole fabric of creation like the previous one had done. Only this time it admitted an unpleasant green creature with large fangs. This newcomer did not pause to look surprised at this new plane of existence on which it found itself. It had actually appeared in the studio where the two were working, and it killed them immediately, and playfully tore to shreds the dictascript rolls on which all their more recent compositions had been scored. It then went out to have a look round, and was eventually captured and put in the zoo.

The loss of Jackson IV and Clive III was mourned by all the Jop-music lovers in the world. Their earlier compositions would be played for as long as Jop lived. But, as the reviewers and fans sadly pointed out, the later compositions had been destroyed before many of them could be recorded in more enduring form. Those fantastic, inspired harmonies and discords would never be heard again.

Which was, perhaps, just as well.

—Jonathan F. Burke

*It was quite an ordinary correspondence—at first.  
Then some peculiar incidents began to arise, and  
the letters became curiouser and curiouser.*

# TAKE A LETTER

By P. W. CUTLER

---

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

*Horace P. Weems,  
42 Princess Gardens,  
S.E.  
7th August.*

The Bureau of E.T.I.,  
P.O. Box 41,  
W.1.

Dear Sirs,

I beg to acknowledge receipt of your communication of the 4th instant, together with Questionnaire 1/ETI/U.K., and in returning this latter duly completed to the best of my ability, must say that I have never heard of your organisation.

Ordinarily I would not raise this matter, but your letter seemed to suggest that your Department was Government controlled, and this fact is particularly surprising to me as I have been a Civil Servant for some fifteen years, and must confess that the existence of a Government Department of which I have no knowledge is somewhat disconcerting.

I should be interested—merely for my own satisfaction—to learn further of your activities, and in the meantime will be pleased to complete any further forms which may be forwarded to me.

Yours faithfully.

*The Bureau of E.T.I.,  
P.O. Box 41,  
W.1.  
9th August.*

Dear Mr. Weems,

Very many thanks for your letter of the 7th instant, and for the completed Questionnaire, the contents of which have been carefully noted.

We must say that it is not surprising that the existence of our department is unknown to you, for our activities have been officially classified as Top Secret for many years. However, restrictions have recently eased, and it is possible for us to enlarge our sphere of operations.

Briefly, the Bureau of Extra Terrestrial Investigation was set up several years ago, in order to investigate and report upon various phenomena, the existence of which could not be explained away by logical reasoning. The "Flying Saucer" reports for example were comprehensively covered by our organisation, as well as a number of mysterious disappearances, strange manifestations etc. It may surprise you to learn that a number of extremely well informed people, both in this Country and Abroad, are of the opinion that this Planet has been, and still is, under surveillance by beings of Extra Terrestrial origin.

We trust that the foregoing brief resumé will have given you some idea as to the nature of our work, and we would like now to explain the purpose of our approach to you in the first instance.

The position is that, as we have already mentioned, reclassification of our project has enabled us to enlarge our activities, and it has been decided to communicate direct with certain members of the Public, with a view to ascertaining whether they, perhaps, may be in possession of information that our own operatives—working in secret—have been unable to discover. You will note that we specifically mentioned "certain members" of the Public; the recipients of our Questionnaires have been carefully chosen, they are all—like yourself—men of integrity, above average in intelligence, and who, having given a large portion of their lives to



Government Service, can be relied upon to exercise discretion and their sound common sense in any undertaking which they are called upon to perform. You will, no doubt, appreciate that although we are less restricted than hitherto, it would not be expedient for full details of our work to become widely known, and we know we can be assured of your complete co-operation in this respect.

With regard to your completed Questionnaire, we have studied this very carefully, and have noted with interest your remarks concerning your neighbour. It is obvious from the manner in which you answered this particular question that you were somewhat dubious about giving the details asked for, and your reticence is appreciated. However we are accustomed to obtaining valuable information from seemingly innocuous details, and we feel that you could be of great assistance to us in carrying out a series of observations upon this gentleman, and reporting to us. Let us hasten to assure you that there will be no danger whatever to your good self, also that you are not required to act in the capacity of a Spy. Casual observation, using your own powers of deduction are all that is necessary. A report submitted at your own convenience from time to time will be greatly appreciated, and you may be assured that you will be assisting in a worth while Government project.

You may find the enclosed Booklet to be of some use in assisting you to evaluate your observations, and we look forward to your future reports.

Thanking you for your co-operation.

Yours faithfully.

*Horace P. Weems,  
42 Princess Gardens,  
S.E.  
14th August.*

The Bureau of E.T.I.

Dear Sirs,

I was extremely interested in your letter of the 9th August, and must thank you for your confidence in permitting me to participate in the activities of your organisation. You may be assured of my utmost discretion in this matter, and of my wholehearted co-operation at all times.

Since the receipt of your letter I have carried out an observation of the person in question, but regret that up to now have found no cause for believing he is anything other than what he appears to be.

I have, however, noticed several incongruities about this individual, and pass them on to you in the hope that you may be able to evaluate them better than I.

I have known of this person who calls himself Mr. Williamson for some fourteen months, since he first occupied the house adjacent to mine, and he has always appeared a quiet, self effacing type of

individual. He has no friends that I know of, and rarely speaks, unless perhaps to exchange a brief "Good Morning." He is, to all outward appearances a perfectly average individual, but since my attention has been drawn to him I have noticed several items of interest. Upon reflection I think these "oddities" have been noticed by me before, but accepted unconsciously as being nothing out of the ordinary. In the light of your remarks, however, they take on a new significance.

There is, for example, the matter of his clothing. He dresses conservatively in a normal suit of good cloth and cut, but I have noticed that he has never changed his attire for as long as I can remember. I would elaborate on that statement and say he has never altered one item of his wearing apparel. He has worn the same shirt, the same tie, the same shoes, the same waistcoat and suit. None of these articles ever show the slightest sign of wear, and appear to be clean and fresh every day.

Having written the above, I must say that it seems rather ridiculous to be placing so much score on so seemingly minor details—the man could conceivably launder and press his clothes every evening ready for the next day, but he does not strike me as being a person who would do such a thing. A further point is that he wears the same garments regardless of the weather. I can distinctly remember that in January last when there was several inches of snow upon the ground and the temperature was below freezing he disdained to wear an outer garment, and did not appear discomforted in any way. Similarly, during the present hot spell he never divests himself of a single item of clothing, and appears quite unperturbed at the excessive heat. You will, no doubt, be able to evaluate this apparent unconcern for extremes of temperature better than I, but I feel that it is a point worth making.

The second item of—I hope—interest is his utter loathing and terror of animals, particularly dogs. This point is more apparent to me because I am extremely fond of animals, particularly dogs, and his attitude toward them has been noticeable to me on more than one occasion. His dislike for these animals goes far beyond the usual "I don't like dogs" attitude. He will not continue along the street should there be a dog anywhere in sight, and on one occasion when a small puppy leaped up at him from a doorway, he was absolutely petrified with terror. I happened to be behind him when the incident took place, and I was amazed at his reaction to the harmless animal. His body was rigid, his features contorted, and choking sounds issued from between his clenched teeth. He made

as if to reach for the pup, and I felt that he was torn between the desire for killing the animal and the dread of touching it. I picked it up, and he seemed to notice me for the first time. With an effort he brought himself under control, turned, and almost ran up the street to his house. I did not connect it at the time, but now I think it worth reporting that some ten days after this event took place, no fewer than eight dogs in the neighbourhood died suddenly. There was quite an uproar about it, and a number of the animals were examined by a veterinary, but he could not establish any reason for their sudden demise.

I cannot think of anything further to add to this somewhat lengthy report, and trust you will be able to make use of the information it contains. I am due for a two-week leave of absence commencing on the 16th instant, and I will be pleased to utilise this time in carrying out a more detailed observation.

Yours faithfully,

*The Bureau of E.T.I.,  
P.O. Box 41,  
W.1.  
17th August.*

Dear Mr. Weems,

We are extremely obliged to you for your Report dated the 14th August, and must say that we found your remarks very interesting, and well worthy of our attention. We note your intention of devoting your vacational period to further investigation, and would say your co-operation to this extent is greatly appreciated.

We have considered assigning one of our own operatives to you with a view to assisting you in this matter, but upon reflection feel that his presence may retard the already excellent progress you have made, and we would be very pleased for you to act on our behalf, secure in the knowledge that you will continue to act with the utmost discretion.

Yours truly,

*Horace P. Weems,  
42 Princess Gardens,  
S.E.  
26th August.*

The Bureau of E.T.I.

Dear Sirs,

I must apologise for the lateness of this Report, but am pleased

to say that I feel I have discovered several items of considerable importance.

Since the receipt of your letter of the 17th giving me full authority to act on your behalf, I have kept our subject under the closest observation, and whilst I cannot be fully convinced that he is a person deserving of the full attention of your department, must admit that he has certain talents and peculiarities which place him above normal standards.

There is, for example, his seemingly incredible ability to assimilate knowledge from books merely by leafing rapidly through the pages. He has made four visits to one of the largest Libraries in the City, and each time has spent several hours intently poring over literally hundreds of volumes. I made cautious enquiries from the Librarian who told me that our subject has been a regular visitor for several months, and appears to be methodically reading every book in the establishment. He has already read, and presumably digested, every reference book in the Library, as well as every volume on Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Astronomy, and a host of other Sciences. He has now begun on books of a technical nature, and during one period of observation "read" eight volumes on the theory of Aerodynamics. Any suggestion of a photographic memory—as we know it—is ruled out by these prodigious feats, and I should be interested in your observations on this point.

A further puzzling feature of our subject is his apparent disregard for nourishment of any description. In the eight days that I have been observing him, he has not, as far as I am aware, eaten one morsel of food or taken a sip of liquid. So that I myself would not have to break off the observation in order to eat, I have been carrying sandwiches with me, and partaking of a heavy meal at night. Evidently our subject does not eat at all, for I have made enquiries from the local tradespeople, and none of them have ever delivered groceries or foodstuffs to his house, nor can they recall ever having served him with food. The exception to this is the local butcher, who recalls selling him a large quantity of dog meat at around the time of the sudden death of the eight dogs, which I mentioned in my letter of the 14th.

During the day, when not visiting the Library, our subject seems to merely wander aimlessly about the streets, with no particular purpose in view. He takes quite an interest in the people around him, and gives me the impression that he is "studying" them.

I feel that the time has come for your Department to take a more

active rôle in this case, and I should appreciate your sending a trained operative, who will, no doubt, be in a better position to evaluate the observations already made.

Assuring you of my continued co-operation,

Yours faithfully.

*Horace P. Weems,  
42 Princess Gardens,  
S.E.  
27th August.*

The Bureau of E.T.I.

Dear Sirs,

Further to my letter of yesterday's date, I must report with alarm that as a result of an incident which occurred this morning, this matter will have to pass out of my hands.

The fact is that our subject has committed murder; the act having been performed during the rush hour on the Underground. I had followed him on to the platform which was extremely crowded, and was standing close behind him. I was observing him very closely, and for once he did not appear so interested in the other people around him. As the sound of an approaching train was heard, I edged a little closer, so there would be no chance of my being separated, and it was then that I saw him deliberately push an elderly gentleman into the path of the oncoming train. I cannot describe to you how horror stricken I was to witness this cold blooded killing, particularly as I am certain I was the only person to observe the deliberate nudge that sent an unsuspecting man to his death. During the uproar that followed, our subject remained perfectly calm, and I again received the strong impression that the act had been carried out purposely, in order to study the reactions of the people around him.

It was most unsettling for me to have to stand by, unable to give the word that would have resulted in the apprehension of this criminal, but I trust that you will now take the necessary action, for whether or not this person is of Extra Terrestrial origin, it is quite obvious that he cannot be allowed to remain at liberty any longer.

Awaiting your further instructions,

Yours faithfully.

*Horace P. Weems,  
42 Princess Gardens,  
S.E.  
29th August.*

The Bureau of E.T.I.

Dear Sirs,

I am surprised that you have not replied to my letter of the 27th instant.

I have now discovered that our subject has left the premises in which he has been living, and I have been unable to trace his present whereabouts.

In the circumstances I must ask you to put one of your operatives in touch with me immediately, in order that our subject may be traced and arrested.

Yours faithfully.

*Horace P. Weems,  
42 Princess Gardens,  
S.E.  
31st August.*

The Bureau of E.T.I.

Dear Sirs,

I am at a loss to understand your failure to reply to my previous letters. You must surely appreciate the seriousness of this matter. I have done everything possible to assist you in your investigations, and am surprised that you no longer seem interested in this case.

Our subject, presumably an alien—and a proven murderer, has now been at large for two days, and I regret to inform you that unless I hear from you by return of post, I shall have no alternative but the place this whole matter in the hands of higher authority for complete investigation.

Yours faithfully.

*The Bureau of E.T.I.,  
P.O. Box 41,  
W.1.  
1st September.*

Dear Mr. Weems,

At the outset, let us apologise to you for not having replied to you earlier; at the same time we would like to say that the energetic and competent way in which you have devoted yourself to the task

set you, has resulted in enormous benefits to our Department, and we feel that we can now tell you more concerning our work.

We informed you in the first instance that we were investigating matters which could have a bearing on beings of Extra Terrestrial origin. This was true, but we were approaching the matter from a somewhat different viewpoint. Let us put to you a question.

Supposing that you were in charge of a group of Aliens, whose duty it was to study the inhabitants of this planet, with a view to paving the way for eventual conquest. Problem: How to study human beings, without being discerned as an Extra Terrestrial. Obvious answer: Disguise yourself as a Terran. But supposing you were not humanoid in form—then what? Answer, perhaps not so obvious, build an exact duplicate of a human being—what you may like to call an Android—and send him among humans, fully equipped with countless scientific devices photographic cells for eyes, recording equipment taking the place of sensory nerves, and many more delicate mechanisms of which you would have no knowledge. Build a large number of these “Androids,” and send them out to all parts of the world, where they will live as humans, move among them; study them; all the while receiving, storing, analysing, and transmitting data. Discovering the weaknesses, the defects in human personalities, studying their responses to various stimuli; for it must be remembered that although possessing a science in advance of human technology, an outright attack upon the planet would result in a bitter struggle, and this is to be avoided—the take-over must be insidious, unknowing, and gradual.

We are sure that you have followed our line of reasoning quite closely, and that you must agree the idea is sound. However, there is one flaw. Suppose they, the Androids are by some unfortunate means discovered for what they really are. It would not take the Earth Governments very long—even without a Bureau of E.T.I.—to realise what was taking place. Therefore a further problem: How to ensure a complete and foolproof disguise. Answer: Deliberately draw the attention of certain people to the fact that there *may* be Extra Terrestrial beings living amongst them. Deliberately site an Android close to a human, then *make* him investigate—without, of course, allowing the Android to know that he *is* being investigated. If the Android stands up to close inspection, all is well—if not he would be recalled, the various anomalies brought to light by reports from the human investigator would be corrected; and the Android sent out again, secure in the knowledge that he would pass even the closest examination. And remember

that in normal circumstances no close investigation would ever occur.

We had, of course, to be careful whom we approached to act as an investigator, the recipients of our original letter and Questionnaire were studiously selected, and our extensive knowledge of human psychology was used, with variations to suit individual cases, in order that our approach would be kept as secret as possible.

To return to the Androids, we prided ourselves upon these productions, and it was quite a surprise to us when your reports showed you were discerning certain flaws of what we imagined to be perfect disguises.

We must admit that the question of regular clothing changes had not occurred to us, and it certainly would not occur to our pseudo human to don warmer clothing in the colder months, he of course being impervious to changes of temperature. Needless to say this defect will now be remedied.

The other points raised in your reports are fairly obvious—photo scanning equipment enables our operatives to absorb knowledge from printed matter at phenomenal speed, and the need for earthly foods or liquids is, of course, entirely obviated. Henceforth more careful attention will be paid to these points, but our thanks are due to you for bringing these matters to our notice. The attitude of the dogs still constitutes a slight problem; research has shown that the Terrestrial dog—having spent about a million years in the company of its human masters—is extremely sensitive to Alien forms of existence. For this reason a subconscious dislike for the animal was deliberately implanted in our Androids, so that they would come in as little contact as possible with the animals. There will, however, have to be some re-adjustment in this connection, for it has been shown that humans tend to distrust people who have a fear or dislike of dogs, also that they look with suspicion upon individuals whose presence causes their pets to behave in an abnormal manner. The problem is not insoluble of course, and we hope to have the answer very shortly.

You are, no doubt, wondering why we have gone to such length to explain to you our real purposes; there is no valid reason actually, except that you have been of monumental service to us, and we feel that you deserve a full explanation. Besides, were you not to hear from us, you would certainly take this matter up with the authorities, and we feel sure you are, at this moment, considering ways and means of passing the above information to the proper

quarter. It will be obvious to you that we could not allow such a happening, and it is for this reason that we have impregnated the paper which you are holding—or have handled at some time since removing it from the envelope—with an extremely efficient toxic poison, which is absorbed through the pores of the fingers or hands, and which is timed to take effect at the precise moment at which you complete the reading of this letter—allowing perhaps an additional few seconds at this point, for the impressions of bewilderment, horror, and stunned realisation, to take effect.

Let us hasten to add also that any thoughts of placing this letter in a prominent position to be read following your death may be dismissed from your mind—the paper is combustible after being exposed to the air for a little longer time than would normally take to read it. You have, perhaps, discovered this also to be the case with our previous letters to you.

In conclusion let us again say how grateful we are to you for your valuable assistance, and in bidding you farewell, believe us to be,

Yours regretfully.

*The Department of  
National Security  
(Southern Section)*

*Date as postmark.*

The Bureau of E.T.I.

Dear Sirs,

Your letters of the 9th and 17th ultimo, and the 1st instant addressed to Mr. Weems are to hand, and we must thank you for the extremely valuable information which we have derived from them.

You are, no doubt, more than surprised to hear from us, particularly in view of your painstaking preparations to prevent such an occurrence, and are possibly wondering how such an event could come about. As you were overwhelmingly frank in your letters we propose to be the same, and will tell you that we have known of your existence since your first letter to Mr. Weems. You mentioned in one of your communications your extensive knowledge of human psychology—we regret to inform you that your knowledge in this case was insufficient. It would have been obvious to anyone but an Alien that the existence of a supposed Government Department of which a Civil Servant with fifteen years' service had no knowledge was more than "surprising"—it was unthinkable. Upon the

receipt of your first letter, Mr. Weems took the matter up with his superior—a gentleman with more than thirty-seven years' service with the Government—who felt so strongly about the existence of a "secret" Government Project, about which he too had no knowledge, that he, in turn, took the matter up with a leading Minister of the Country. Since that time our Department has been dealing with the matter, and we feel bound to say we have met with a large measure of success.

Your subsequent letters to Mr. Weems—in answer to those signed by him but written by us—were very carefully handled, their contents immediately photographed, and the data contained therein passed not only to our own Agents, but also to the Security Forces of other Nations.

As a result, we are pleased to inform you, and we trust that you will be suitably dismayed to learn, that no fewer than one hundred and forty of your Android operatives have now been apprehended, and at the time of writing reports are coming in from many other countries, stating that they too are meeting with considerable success.

You may be interested to know that in addition to the somewhat complex scientific devices used to locate your operatives, dogs are being used with great effect. Once they understand what is required of them, the animals are extremely efficient, and we must say that you made a grave error in implanting a Canine Fear Complex in the minds of your agents.

However, we feel there is little to be gained in prolonging this correspondence, let it suffice to say that at this moment your Country Headquarters are entirely surrounded by large numbers of very able men, armed with a large variety of the latest and most deadly weapons known to mankind, and we take this opportunity of calling upon you to surrender yourselves in the accustomed manner of this planet—that is by walking out of the house with your hands—or whatever you use for hands—held above your heads—or whatever, etc., etc.

Until then, believe *us* to be,

Yours gratefully.

—P. W. Cutler

*Quite by chance this story also has an unpleasant theme, yet it is one we feel well worth publishing because of its unique style and approach into the subject of the Mind.*

# DAWN OF PEACE ETERNAL

By JOHN ASHCROFT

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Illustrated by SMITH

Hope slowly vanishes beneath dark waves of despair, like a frail ship which strikes rocky fangs in a midnight sea. Hope fades like the dying screams of the mariners as they are dragged down into suffocating depths by the swirl of their sinking vessel, as they face the last and greatest darkness.

And hope is gone.

There is no hope for me. How many times in the past weeks

have I come to that conclusion? I do not know. I only know that there is no hope for me, none at all. Mankind is doomed.

Man is doomed because there is no hope for me, for I am the only one who can save him. And I am helpless.

I lurch to my feet and stare at the resilient plastic walls of my cell, at the resilient plastic bed, and then my gaze falls on the plate. The small, round, plastic plate gleams at me from the small, square plastic shelf which serves as a table. The white radiance from the tubes in the roof dances from the polished plate and flashes at me, taunting me, mocking me.

The remains of my food mar the surface of the twinkling disc. They seem to form into a face, a scornful face, a sneering visage that laughs at my helplessness.

Laughs? Everything in this tiny cell laughs at me, finding peculiar pleasure in the pitiful spectacle of a helpless, human prisoner.

They know, all of them. The plate, shelf, bed, walls and roof, all know what the Thrunas are planning. They also know that I cannot save my race from the savage Thruna onslaught as their spaceships hurtle from the velvet void on wings of white fire. Soon, very soon, the invasion will begin. I cannot delay it much longer. They all know this, those inanimate things that gleam their plastic smiles at me. And, knowingly, they laugh . . .

I stand before the shelf and my heart hammers against my ribs like the beating of a mighty drum, capturing my very thoughts and enslaving them to its endless, senseless rhythm.

"Run! Run! Run! Run!" roar my heart-beats, and dark shapes leap like savages in my mind, dancing in a frenzy as the drum booms and thunders.

The lone figure of Reason stands in the background crying, "You cannot escape: it is useless, futile, to think of running."

I do not listen to Reason. No one ever listens to him. Crimson clouds of rage drift past my eyes and settle over my brain, my thoughts roar and leap like lions fighting in a prison of bone.

Abruptly I lose all self-control. I snatch the plate with a shaking hand, see it through a red mist of hatred, and hurl it with all my force across the tiny cell.

It rebounds from the resilient plastic of the far wall, undamaged, and drops to the floor where it spins in a mad dance of triumph. A deep thrumming sound fills my ears, a sound produced by the spinning plastic plate on the shining plastic floor. The sound becomes words, repeated and repeated, faster and faster, as the plate nears the floor . . .



"Run! Run! Run, run, runrunrun. . ." sings the plate, and the light shivers from its racing edges like moonbeams bounding on the rippling surface of a lake. And with a last, dying murmur the plate lies still.

After the storm comes the calm. I sink onto the low bed, bury my sweating face in my trembling hands, and try to control the convulsive shudders that stagger along my nerves.

I look up as a low sound comes from the door. It opens, and a Thruna cautiously enters. Behind him are two others. *They dare not come alone.*

The one nearest me speaks in a normal tone, gestures with normal hands, and listens for my reply with normal ears. His skin is blue

and his large eyes are pools of red fire. Otherwise he is quite normal.

"Would you come this way, please?" asks the senior guard. The Thrunas always ask for a thing. Then they demand it. Then they take it. If I refuse to go I shall be ordered to do so. As a last resort I shall be carried. In a moment of grim, bitter humour I think that they will find it very amusing to drop me. I decide not to give them the chance.

Dully, I say, "Yes, I'll come with you." He holds my arm in his blue hand and we walk from the cell, his companions close by us.

The grip on my arm is not tight. I can easily tear myself loose, run, scream. And die . . . My death would not help them, but they would be doomed if I escaped. The energy pistols in the belt-holsters of their brown uniforms would fling blasts of destruction at my fleeing figure, and not very much of me would remain. Admittedly, they would have to think up a new scheme, but that would be easy for them.

Their existing plan is deceptively simple. They will persuade me to betray the secrets of my planet's defenses, then they will attack. There will be fighting, but the Thrunas will win. Mankind will either be enslaved or annihilated. If I tell them . . .

I will not betray my race: I will not give my secret information to the Thrunas. Man will never be destroyed by the blue-skinned, red-eyed invaders from space, Man will never—

I find myself standing before a door. I have no clear memory of walking to it. One of my guards opens it and the Thrunas enter. I go into the small room with them, of course. Naturally!

I have never been in here before, but I recognise the Thruna leader. He is sitting in a large chair behind a curving plastic desk. He is small and fat, inhuman and blue. He looks up as we stop before his desk, smiles at me and says "I hear that you are not happy here? We wish you to have every possible comfort, of course."

I try to control a sudden urge to tell him that this prison is like Paradise. He reaches across his desk and presses the switch of a recording machine. One guard walks out, the others remain by me, and the opportunity I have awaited for weeks presents itself.

The fat Thruna's sleeve dislodges a pile of small papers and they fall to the floor. I pick half of them up and carefully replace them on the desk. As the guard on my right stoops to retrieve the others I grab the compact recording machine and viciously bring it down onto the back of his head. As he falls I swing round and

fling the machine into the startled features of the second guard. He falls to the floor and I leap over the desk and lock my arm around the neck of the fat Thruna. He struggles furiously, unable to scream for help, and I press his head over the high back of his chair. His neck breaks with a sharp snap.

I hurtle to the door and try to open it. It is locked. The guard who went out . . . I frantically search the drawers of the desk. I find a bunch of keys and leap once again to the door. Fumbling and swearing, I find the right key and open the door. Slamming it behind me I turn and run down the plastic tunnel.

Alarm bells rattle and clang as I run. A Thruna steps from a side-corridor and I send him crashing to the plastic floor and continue my wild flight.

I am Earth's only hope: I must escape! I alone can warn my race of the alien menace: I must escape! *Escape!* The word does not mock me now, it beats triumphantly with the frenzied pounding of my heart as I race with flying feet along endless corridors.

Thrunas come after me. I do not turn to see them, but I hear their voices booming harshly behind me. They are ordering me to stop!

To stop! I will destroy them all if I can escape! My lungs heave desperately, my mind reels as I run, and I know that I must find an exit door. And escape!

Voices sound louder behind me. Thrunas roar, "Stop!" I will not stop! I turn a corner, swerve to avoid a startled Thruna, and bound recklessly down a flight of stairs.

A door bars my way. I fling myself at it and it crashes aside. I am in a vast hall, an entrance hall. Before me is a great door, windows in it flashing at me, urging me to hurry, hurry!

Thrunas appear beside me, snatching at me. I stagger, slip from their grasping hands, and reach the door. It will not open! Through the transparent panes I can see trees and grass, pleasant countryside, a brilliant blue sky. It is beautiful out there, and peaceful—

Blue hands clutch my shoulders. I batter my fists against the door, screaming at it to open. My shrieks tear burning lungs and my heart hammers and heaves. My fists spurt blood as they split on the unbreakable glass, there is a raging inferno of agony and frustration blazing within me, there is a mad flailing of arms and legs around me. And then comes the soft veil of darkness, falling silently over mind and body.

My thoughts diffuse like vapour and drift silently above dark

lands. My thoughts are clouds and the clouds are soft rains, falling and falling . . . The rains are streams, the streams merge into a dark lake, and the lake is my brain.

I lie with my eyes closed, dreaming. I open my eyes, wince as light pours into them, and stare upwards. Above me is a plastic roof. I slowly turn my head, shuddering as waves of pain flow through my brain. After a while I begin to take notice of my surroundings.

I stare at a door. Near it are two white-coated Thrunas and an armed guard. My eyes fall on a small plastic plate on a small plastic shelf. My mind dulls as I realise that I am in my cell once more. I alone can warn my race that aliens are preparing to attack it and seize its world. I alone can save my race. And I am a helpless prisoner.

Tears spring into my eyes, and hope once more sinks with fading screams into a whirlpool of darkness. And hope dies.

One of the white-coated Thrunas walks across the cell and sits down on a low chair by my bed. He stares at me, crimson eyes contrasting vividly with blue skin. Sleek black hair gives him an appearance of supreme efficiency. He says "Do you feel better now?"

"Yes," I reply, for the throbbing agony that had been beating in my brain has died away, just as hope has died away.

He feels my pulse. I offer no resistance: it would be worse than useless. There is an armed guard . . .

The biologist lowers a blue hand onto my forehead, takes a thermometer from his pocket and slips it into my mouth. The glass rod feels hot and sickly. I consider snapping it with my teeth. Mercury is poisonous . . . Then I decide that my death will serve no purpose, for the Thrunas will find another way to successfully invade Earth and massacre innocent millions. To my numbed brain nothing seems to matter now. Nothing at all.

The two biologists leave, and only the guard remains. I try to sit upright, but waves of pain flood my mind once more. I lie back on the low bed and begin to think.

I think about the Thrunas and wonder how they might be destroyed. There must be a way to prevent the success of their hideous plan. How? *How?* The word leaps around in my skull, my thoughts race.

I explore my mind, and scurrying thoughts run along nerve corridors, open doors of amnesia, and peer into dark rooms of memory. And bitter anguish comes as I find that every room is empty.

There must be a way! How? *How?*

I know why the Thrunas are trying to fling my race into doom and slavery. Their own sun exploded, and only several thousand aliens managed to escape into space as their planet vanished into the gushing flames of a far distant star. They came to our planetary system with dreams of conquest. They came in what became popularly known to my race as "flying saucers."

They watched us for years then established this outpost. I do not know where it is: I was captured and they brought me here to torture my secrets from me. I have heard muttered references to such things as brain-surgery, and I am afraid. I can delay them no longer by vague promises. They will resort to physical and mental torture. And Earth will be lost . . .

Why must they come to Earth?

A mocking voice within me calls, "They must come here. This is the only planet in the galaxy which will support Thruna life."

I banish this horrible thought, and my mind roars, "Why? Why? Man does not deserve this fate, this destruction!" And the grim ghost of things that are better forgotten, moans "Has not Man stamped out animals that opposed him? Are we not animals to these Thrunas?"

This is a terrible, horrible truth, but Man never destroys life that is intelligent. He lives in peace. He never makes war on himself, he never has. And now that peace on Earth is threatened by invaders from the heart of the galaxy, strife is inevitable.

How can the Thrunas be defeated? How? How?

My mind is suddenly brought back to the external world by a harsh noise.

The external world! What mockery!

A throbbing and a roaring, a bellowing vibration booms in my ears and becomes an almost unbearable scream before fading with distance.

Joy surges through me, joy that increases and grows into mad pleasure as I recognise the sound. It is the thunder-song of a rocket-bomber! I smile grimly, and exultation rises within me as the guard instinctively looks upwards, apprehension on his blue face.

And then comes the sound of a distant explosion.

A deafening blast rips the air and shakes the ground as the triumphantly screaming machine releases metal globes of death and destruction, globes that fling countless tons of soil into the tortured heavens as they explode.

More explosions follow, louder, nearer, and the guard's face

pales and he starts nervously as I shout, "You'll die, do you hear me? You'll die! Bombs, hundreds of atomic bombs, all dropping on you! And hydrogen bombs! You're all going to die!"

I laugh as the humour of the situation comes to me. I, the helpless captive: he, the omnipotent captor. And I know that he will die! Tears run down my face and my mirth fills the cell as the guard jumps to his feet, crimson eyes wildly staring, blue hands clenching and unclenching. He glowers at me and tells me to be *quiet*.

"Bombs! All the destruction!" I scream at him, "the death and blast! You'll be damned in a radio-active Hell! Ha! Ha! Ha!" I shriek with insane laughter as the air above my prison and the ground around it are rent asunder by the battle-roar of rocket-bombers and the infernal blast of searing energy.

My race has found the Thruna outpost. The entire Thruna settlement is being obliterated. The aliens will be destroyed by the most awful weapons available!

And I will die.

But I will pass gladly into the whirlpool of Beyond, for I know that my race is saved. Saved forever! Death to the Thrunas!

I look round as the cell door opens. The biologists enter, pushing a long trolley before them. A coldness lurches within me. What are they going to do? One of them speaks in a strained voice to the guard: "The war's started. Bombs are falling all around this area. We may escape, we may not—but we'll have to go on with the operation."

A dreadful chill shudders through me. Operation! They are going to drag my secrets from my brain by surgery! But why? They have no chance now! Spite. Vengeance . . .

My brain screams against the thought as the biologists come to me. One grips my arm and tries to calm me with soothing words. Even as I shriek in rage and fear his companion sinks a gleaming needle into my arm.

A deadness spreads from the tiny puncture. I rave and shout, my voice weakens, and my limbs are suddenly too heavy to move. I lie weakly in the blue arms of the biologists as they lift me onto the trolley.

As my sight fades I see the plastic roof moving above me. I am being wheeled rapidly to the operating theatre. Then all is dark. As my hearing fades I catch once more the strangely muffled sounds of rockets and bombs, dying, vanishing. Then all is silent. My thoughts cease tossing and turning and they lie motionless on the cold bed of my brain. And all is lost . . .

I move my fingers, stiffly, painfully. Where am I? Who am I? Echoes murmur gently in my brain, echoes of bombs, echoes of a voice that I was not meant to hear, a voice that spoke of war, bombs and an operation . . .

And slowly, infinitely slowly, darkness of amnesia fades before the dawn of memory. I remember that I am a captive, a specimen.

I open my eyes and they gradually become adapted to the light. I see a scarred and cracked ceiling. I turn my head and stare at walls that are virtually no more than heaps of rubble.

I sit up, fighting back the dizziness that clouds my brain, and realize where I am. Around me is the wreckage of an operating theatre, and I am on an operating table. No straps bind me to it. The operation never had a chance to begin.

I am wrapped in a white sheet. Otherwise, I am naked.

Shards of glass lie on the smooth floor. They are probably remnants of large mirrors. There are no windows in the walls of a place like this. It would not do for anyone to peep in and see white-coated blue men with red eyes hacking at the skull of a—

Then the thought strikes me. The Thrunas! Where are they?

My muscles and skin send agony along my nerves as I lower my feet to the ground. I then realize that the cloth around me is charred in parts, and that all my skin is covered with blisters, sores that begin to torture my brain as the deadening effect of the drug wears off.

I hobble across the floor, wrapping the cloth tightly around my aching body, carefully avoiding the heaps of shattered glass. I stumble through a door into what had been a kind of waiting room and I find death.

On the floor are the charred and scorched remains of four Thrunas. I turn my eyes from the ghastly sight and try to reconstruct in my mind what must have happened. An atomic bomb sent its radiations into the building. One wall was insufficient to protect the Thrunas as they prepared their tools. I was shielded by the double walls of the operating theatre.

A slithering sound, hoarse breathing, and shuffling steps come from behind me. The sickness of terror crawls through me. I turn, I stare in horror at the thing which advances upon me. My screams tear the silence of the room, and I move backwards as it comes nearer. Fear and panic flood my mind, the blood drains from my face. And it comes nearer, staggering on blistered legs, ever nearer, reaching for me, groping with blackened hands, nearer . . .

It might have been a human, it might have been a Thruna. It has walked through a door at the far side of the room. As it comes within two yards of me its shapeless mouth gapes open and words pour out, almost indistinguishable words . . .

"And the sea gave up the dead which were in it: and death and hell gave up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works."

I recoil as it moves ever nearer to me, wailing: "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

"And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

It lunges at me, shrieking, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea."

Strength returns to my quivering legs, and I turn, and blunder through the operating theatre. Glass cuts into my right foot, and then I stumble out through a gap in the crumbling wall. I run shakily over dusty ground, then turn and stare behind me.

The remains of the operating theatre loom behind me, and a voice bellows from the shattered building: "Alas, alas, that great city, wherein were made rich all that had ships in the sea by reason of her costliness! For in one hour is she made desolate. Babylon is fallen!"

And the walls laugh and shudder with horrifying, creaking humour, and the great building sways, topples, and subsides with the thunder of a mighty avalanche, burying beneath a great heap of rubble and concrete whatever is inside it.

The other sprawling buildings of what had been an alien settlement lie behind me in tumbled ruins and smoke, a funeral pyre of Thruna hopes and plans.

I wander aimlessly away from them, wondering why lunatics always resort to Biblical verses at times like this. Then I realise, with a feeling of shocked disbelief, that the "new heaven and a new earth" of that insane creature's voice are all around me. He must have seen them, and perhaps it was this awful sight that deprived him of his senses, and not, as I had thought, atomic radiations.

The ground is like warm grey ash beneath my bare, bleeding feet, and the horizon is tinted with crimson flames. The sky above is a flaring canopy of orange and yellow fire, and the very air I breathe is hot and choking, carrying to my burning lungs an indefinable odour.

I look down and find that I have stumbled upon a smooth path or drive which leads away from the wreckage of the Thruna base.

I walk along it towards the flames beyond the horizon, and I dimly realise that I am dying.

I also realise that the Thrunas have been destroyed completely. They are gone. Gone forever! And Earth may remain in peace at last!

I alone survived the mighty holocaust, I, the pitiful prisoner!

Choking laughter rumbles through me, and I almost fall onto the scorched ground as I blunder into a tiny hump of dust-covered rubble that might, at one time, have been a pair of gateposts at the end of the drive. And there, poking from a swirl of grey dust, lies a newspaper!

Preserved by a miracle, only slightly charred, it is a strange sight amidst the chaos and desolation all around it. I carefully lift it from the ground and read the still visible date in disbelief.

"26th AUGUST, 1967." The letters flicker before my eyes, for I know that it is now near the end of October, 1983! What does this mean?

And the headlines! Heavy black print, two inches high, seems to shout its insane message at me: "DECLARATION OF WAR."

War? There has never been a war on Earth!

I read the parts of the brown crackling newspaper which are still visible, and the paragraphs describe places and events which have no part in reality. What is England? Russia? And America? The paper calls them "countries." But there is only one land on Earth, one vast continent surrounded by seas. This is insanity!

And there are references to two "World Wars." Even the dates are given. But men have lived in peace since history began!

I throw away the useless, senseless newspaper, and then my eyes fall on a name-plate which had been fixed on the gate-post. Part of its inscription is visible. I brush the dust from the rest of it, and stare in bewilderment at the neatly painted letters. What was their purpose?

I do not know, I cannot imagine, so I continue my aimless wandering across parched land. And then, before me, I see the ruins of a great city—an Earth city! Gutted buildings rear their ugly heads into the orange fire of the heavens, and I realise that this city must have been destroyed in the recent cataclysm of atomic doom.

Why? Why should Earthmen send flaming annihilation onto one of their own cities? Why? Men never damage other men's cities!

I do not understand this tragedy, but one riddle is answered by the sight of this murdered metropolis. The full ingenuity of the Thruna plan brings thoughts of admiration to my dying brain.

Their stronghold lay within three miles of a great city! Their stronghold was disguised by the notice on its gates, the notice that would keep unwanted people away!

I laugh, air rasps from tortured lungs, and a weirdly-glowing pit opens before me on the ground. I make no attempt to avoid it, and I laugh again as I fall into this cavern of dying atoms. Everything is dying.

I try to scream as I hit the bottom of the depression, as the angry blisters all over my pain-seared legs and arms scrape over rough sand and stone. No sound comes to my throat this time, only agony and blood. I lie on my back, watching the heavens flare in fiery torment. And I think once more of the name-plate on the smashed gates . . .

“LAREWOOD MENTAL HOSPITAL.”

—John Ashcroft

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## 1954 Convention

If you have not yet decided what to do over the forthcoming Whitsun holiday this is your last opportunity to make up your mind and book two **exciting days and nights at the Grosvenor Hotel, Manchester**, where this year's main science fiction Convention is being held under the auspices of the Manchester Science Fiction Group.

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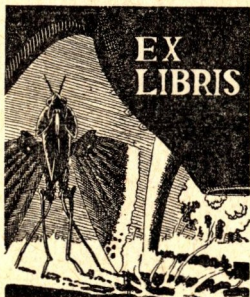
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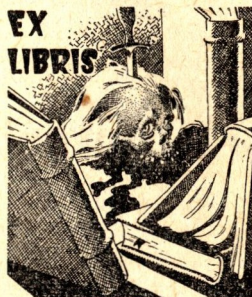
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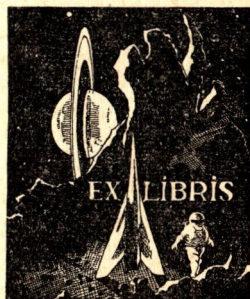
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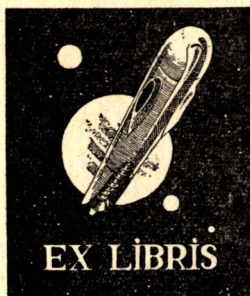
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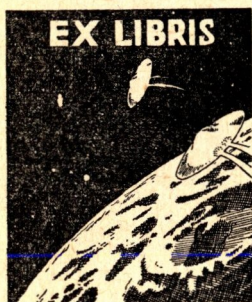
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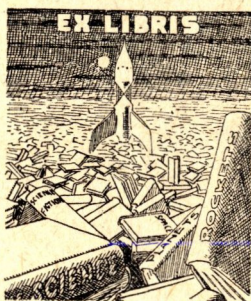
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*Given faster than light travel and Man's first visit to a neighbouring planetary system, it would be interesting to see which race would profit most from the contact.*

# THE CONQUERORS

By LAN WRIGHT

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Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

"That does it." Burl laughed exultantly and slapped the metal of the control board with one beefy hand. His round, red face beamed its pleasure at Wade who sat beside him. "Six months out and only three hours behind schedule. Sirius Three, we greet you."

"Bit different to Alpha Centauri," Wade replied, looking out of the plastiglass dome at the rolling, pastoral scene before them, and recalling as he did so the dead lifeless worlds that rolled uninvitingly around Sol's nearest neighbour. That first voyage to another star had yielded nothing; this promised to be very different.

The woodlands and downs, green and alive beneath the light of



Sirius, were almost Terran in appearance. There were trees and flowers, and a myriad growing things spread in wild abundance over the two continents of the third planet. Nowhere, on their preliminary circuit, had there been signs of large communities, towns or cities; the planet appeared uninhabited.

"Terra Nova," agreed Burl. "Well, almost."

He reached for a small microphone, pulling it from its magnetic rest against the bulkhead to one side of him.

"Hey, Eddie," he called. "Have you finished that atmosphere test yet?"

"Yes, it's good, skipper," said the loudspeaker above his head. "Bit more oxygen, fraction too much argon, plus a couple of other gases that I can't identify. Breathable, though."

"How do you know that, if there are some unindentifiable gases?"

"I tried it," was the laconic reply.

"You idiot," growled Burl angrily. "We might be down to a crew of three by now. Okay, join us at the lock in a couple of minutes, you too, Sanders. It doesn't look too dangerous outside." Burl replaced the mike and heaved his bulky frame out of the seat.

"Spacesuits?" queried Wade, his thick black brows raised questioningly.

"No." Burl shook his head. "Guns though. It may not be as quiet as it looks." He opened a locker underneath the main control panel and took out four heavy pellet guns of the latest type. Two of them he passed to Wade, and a third he buckled round his waist. "You take Sanders', I'll give Willis his."

Wade followed him out of the control room and along the metal corridor to the main airlock. Eddie Willis, blonde and stocky, and Sanders, lean and dark, were already waiting for them. Willis grinned as he took the gun that Burl offered him and asked, "Scared of the natives, skipper?"

"Could be," agreed Burl amiably. "Or maybe I'm just the cautious type."

"Do we head for the road?" asked Sanders casually.

"Road?" Burl eyed him blankly; the others simply stared.

"Road?" he repeated. "What road?"

Sanders shrugged, fiddling with the adjustment catch of his gun-belt. "Figured you'd seen it," he said. "Off to the right as we landed. About a mile I'd say."

"Anyone else see it?" asked Burl. Willis and Wade shook their heads in unison. "Me neither. Why didn't you report it?"

"No call to before we were ready to go outside. Like I said, I thought you'd seen it."

Burl eyed him evilly. "Why in hell they had to pick an awkward cuss like you for this trip I'll never know." He lifted his shoulders helplessly. "Okay, I guess we head for the road."

He turned to the panel which controlled the main airlock doors, and closed the master switch activating both the inner and outer doors. Hidden machinery whined softly and the double doors slid

back into the walls of the ship. There was a soft hiss of air as the pressure became equalised, and the four men felt the first clean, sweet breath of air from the strange planet. It was strong and invigorating after six months of tinned atmosphere which had been cleaned and purified a hundred times, so that it seemed as dead and lifeless as the chemicals which sifted it.

Burl drew a long, deep breath and stepped forward across the threshold of the lock. He turned and backed slowly out of sight over the edge, his hands and feet fumbling for the built-in holds in the body of the ship. It was about twenty feet to the ground, and the other three waited in silence, as if afraid to move, until his booming voice called, "I'm down. First man to step on a planet outside the Solar system." He laughed. "Can't say I feel any different, only damned silly shouting about it. Come on, Wade, you next."

Wade smiled a trifle foolishly at the others and followed Burl down. In a minute they were all standing beside him, savouring the clean soft winds around them and feeling the springy turf beneath their feet.

Wade stooped and pulled a handful of green, grasslike growth from the ground. "Just like it is back home," he said quietly. "Might almost have come out of my garden."

"Yes, but it didn't," replied Burl sourly. "Come on, let's move. We don't want to be away from the ship more than six hours, and that's about all the daylight we've got left, I reckon. Which way was that road, Sanders?"

Sanders nodded his dark head in the direction of a low line of hills away to the right of the ship. "Over there, just below the hills," he said.

"Okay, let's march."

Burl led the way over the rough, uneven ground. He sank up to his ankles in the long grass, and after six months of the smooth metal floors of the ship he felt peculiarly unbalanced, as if every step he took would see him trip and fall sprawling on his face. He slowed his stride, aware that the others were following him closely.

Twenty minutes hard walking brought them to a long, straight strip carved in the countryside, which was the road that Sanders had seen from the ship. It was not wide, not more than eight or ten feet, and it was smooth and new in appearance, apparently made of some substance like concrete. Burl stooped to examine the hard, flat surface, running his hand over it in an effort to discern what

is was made of. "Funny no one else spotted it," he remarked. "Must have all been asleep." He grunted and rose. "Nothing like anything I've ever seen on Earth."

And then he saw the girl.

She was sitting on the grass on the other side of the road regarding them gravely. Her knees were drawn up to her chest and her arms wound round them, clasping them to her. Her hair was fair and windswept, her eyes large and blue, and there was no fear in them as she looked at the four men.

Burl stood quite still, shocked, amazed, and utterly at a loss. He had not seen her come, and he wondered vaguely how he had missed seeing her earlier. Wade laughed idiotically and Willis swore vividly under his breath. Only Sanders was silent.

"Where in hell did she come from?" asked Willis, his voice plaintive with disbelief.

"Native," replied Burl indistinctly. He felt foolish as he said it, but the sound of his own voice broke the spell. "Well, at least there are some people around here. Good looking people, too." He chuckled as his thoughts relieved the tension which had mounted within him.

He walked across the road towards her, moving slowly, expecting at any moment that she would take fright and run. But she didn't. She stayed quietly where she was, watching the four men cross slowly towards her. Burl stopped barely three feet from her and knelt down on one knee so that he could look her straight in the eye and on the same level.

She was about eighteen he figured, if you could go by Terran standards, and very attractive, again by Terran standards. Her clothes were simple, quite plain, but worn with an air that gave them a distinction and a beauty which the material alone would never have displayed. They were not entirely alien as he would have expected, and there was a similarity to Terran styles about them which he could not define.

"What do we do about talking to her?" queried Wade.

"Draw pictures," suggested Willis.

"Our orders told us to avoid contact with the natives if at all possible," Burl remarked, half to himself. "Still, we'd best make some use of the opportunity now it's been thrust at us."

Still on one knee, he pointed a finger at himself. "Burl," he said distinctly, tapping his chest. "Burl."

The girl opened her mouth and said, "Burl," clearly and with no trace of an accent.

He turned and grinned at the others. "She catches on fast, doesn't she?" He turned back to the girl, pointed to himself once

more, repeated his name, and then pointed to her, his face contorted into an expression of polite curiosity.

"My name," she told him, "is Lynn. Lynn Baria."

Burl swayed as if she had struck him physically, and behind him he heard the startled gasps of his companions. Willis giggled hysterically.

"You—" he choked uncontrollably. "You—spoke English," his tone was quite unbelieving.

She smiled at him, showing two rows of white, even teeth. "Of course," she replied.

"I don't like it," came Wade's worried voice. "Burl, I don't like it. Let's get back to the ship."

"Shut up," said Burl dispassionately. "So she speaks English." His surprise was passing now, drowned in the flood of curiosity which the situation aroused within him. "So what? We just didn't expect it, that's all. No need to blow your top, Wade."

"My father will be glad to welcome you," Lynn said, still smiling. She stood up, stretching her tall, lithe form.

"How is it that you speak our language?" asked Burl gently.

"I learned it from—from my father."

Burl smiled. "Then perhaps we'd better ask your father where he learned it."

She returned his smile brilliantly and nodded. "I will tell him you are coming."

Abruptly, she vanished.

The long instant of horrified silence and frozen movement was broken by a muffled, hysterical shriek from Willis. Burl, amazed and more frightened than he had been in his life before, turned and cuffed him viciously round the head. If it did nothing else the action released him from the terrified paralysis which had gripped him.

"Shut up, Willis," he snarled. "We've got enough on our hands without you going haywire."

Willis collapsed, moaning, on the ground, his face buried in his hands and his shoulders heaving convulsively. No one took any notice of him.

"Burl, let's go back," pleaded Wade. "There's something here that we ought to get away from. I don't know what it is, but—" his voice broke and wavered on the edge of panic.

"No more do I," replied Burl. "But I'm damned well going to find out. That's what we're here for, a preliminary exploration."

"They didn't tell us to kill ourselves."

Burl's lips curled with sarcasm. "Who's going to do it? That

girl? Don't go soft on me, Wade, just because of a couple of things we can't explain."

"Is your friend ill?" Lynn was there, where she had stood before, looking with compassion on Willis's hunched form.

Burl paled slightly, and his stomach turned over sickeningly as it had done at the instant when she vanished. For a moment fear tugged at him, drying his throat and churning his vitals. However she did her tricks it was having a bad effect on his nerves.

"Yes, he's sick," he replied briefly.

"Father will be glad to welcome you," the girl told him. "Our home is just over the rise, beyond the woods."

"Okay, lead on," said Burl, resignedly.

"Skipper—," began Wade plaintively.

Burl turned a baleful eye on him. "I said we'll follow the lady. Pick Willis up, we can't leave him lying there."

Together Wade and Sanders lifted the limp form to its feet and began to pull it after Burl.

The house was a single storied building of wood, picturesque and rustically beautiful. Its roof was thatched with woven grasses and it stood in a small grove of trees which gave it some shelter from the winds and some shade from the brilliant sun.

They approached it over a wide, uncultivated expanse of grass-land, the girl walking ahead of them with long, lithe steps, her fair hair blowing in the slight breeze. The others blundered rather than walked after her; their muscles unaccustomed to the hard going across the rough, uneven country.

As they reached the house a man came out of the door and stood waiting for them. He was tall and brown, with thick grey hair, and the same deep blue eyes that graced the girl. He smiled in friendly fashion and offered Burl his hand.

"I am glad to welcome you. My name is Baria, Gorlan Baria."

Burl shook hands. The other's grip was hard and firm, and gave the impression of perfect physical condition.

"Mine's Burl," he replied. "This is Wade—Sanders—and Willis. Willis isn't feeling good."

Willis, in fact, looked terrible. The exertions of the walk had done something to shake him from his stupor, but his hair was disarranged and his eyes, in a white and frightened face, were like those of a startled deer, as they flickered nervously here, there and everywhere, never settling on one object for more than a second at a time. Sanders and Wade still supported him on either side.

"I'm sorry," commiserated Baria. "But come in and sit down."

The room was light and pleasant, the furnishings plain yet comfortable, and Burl reflected that the whole house was much like a hunter's cabin that he had stayed at once in the bush north of Nairobi. The thought seemed to emphasise the nine light years of space between him and his home planet, and he pushed it from him irritably.

They sat down in wickerwork chairs, the seats of which were so soft and pliant as to make them feel as soft as the foam rubber creations of Earth. The girl sat on the floor beside Baria with her long, tanned legs tucked beneath her.

"And how is London?" asked Baria casually.

"London?" Burl's amazed repetition echoed the surprise of the whole party.

"Yes, I have not been there for some time."

Burl felt the fear rising within him again, but he fought it down with a vicious determination born of almost hysterical necessity.

"Look, Mister Baria—"

"Please. Call me Gorlan."

"Gorlan, then," Burl gestured angrily. "We've got a lot of questions to ask you before we start any polite conversation, and we want some pretty good answers."

Baria smiled and nodded.

"We've come nine light years across space to reach this planet, and the trip took six months. We are the first human beings to set foot on a planet outside the Solar system. Yet, when we get here, we are welcomed by a girl who speaks our own language, and who does the finest vanishing trick since Houdini was on the halls. On top of that her father wants to know how London is looking because he hasn't been there for some time." He sat back in his chair and eyed Baria grimly. "You see our point?" His tone was ironic. "Now then—how come?"

Baria's face was serious and thoughtful, and he regarded his daughter's fair head abstractly, running his fingers through the gossamer strands of her hair.

Burl watched him like a cat, perfectly relaxed, his hands laid peacefully in his lap, yet every muscle was tensed for something—anything, he didn't just know what. He pushed the fear that surprise that had been forced on him during the last hour from him, and concentrated every fibre of his being on a wary preparedness for the slightest move that threatened danger. He felt his gun pressing comfortably into the flesh of his thigh and his confidence mounted.

Baria raised his head after a long minute and looked at them,

his eyes moving from one to another as they sat around him. Burl felt a roaring paralysis in his brain, and his eyes went suddenly blind. He felt as if the nerves controlling every sense, save that of existing, had been slashed by a surgeon's knife, and an hysterical panic rose up and was still with him when deep unconsciousness overwhelmed him.

Baria watched dispassionately as three bodies slumped limply in their chairs.

Sanders looked silently across at him for a moment, then he rose and said, "Rather precipitous, wasn't it, Baria?"

Baria shrugged and smiled. "You must blame Lynn. She thought it would be amusing to play tricks on them instead of leaving it to you to guide them here." He pulled playfully at the girl's hair and she smiled up at him.

"It is amusing to confuse these aliens," she replied.

"Did you have a good trip?" Baria asked Sanders.

"Not too bad. A trifle cramped. But it's good to be back among my own people." He nodded to the three inert bodies. "What about them?"

"They will be like that for as long as I wish. Their minds did not give any resistance. We will give them a day, that should give the rust plenty of time to get to work. After that, well, we shall see."

"You can wake up now, Burl."

He heard the voice dimly through the black haze that enveloped him, and he resented being dragged from the comfortable depths of sleep. He moved slightly, savouring the comfort of perfectly relaxed mind and body, and then remembrance flooded over him like a douche of icy water. He opened his eyes wide with the sudden fear of it, moving to sit up so sharply that his stomach reeled with the vertigo of his movement.

Baria stood smiling down at him.

"You have slept well?"

Burl rubbed a hand round the back of his head. It ached slightly and his tongue moved uncertainly in a nauseous fur which coated his mouth.

"Too well," he replied with feeling. He looked around the large room and saw, on two other beds, the bodies of Wade and Willis.

"Where is Sanders—the other one?"

"He is eating. Perhaps you and the others will join him, and afterwards we can talk."

Baria crossed the room and called Wade softly. He awoke as had Burl, but relaxed instantly when he saw his skipper sitting

watching him. Willis was different. He awoke and lay quietly and limply, gazing silently at the timbered ceiling above his head for several seconds. Then he moved weakly and whimpered. The whimpering grew with the violence of his movements, until he was threshing wildly, and screaming insanely and monotonously. Baria watched him compassionately for a minute, then he reached down and touched him lightly on the back of his neck at the base of his skull. He relaxed instantly into unconsciousness.

Baria sighed regretfully. "I am afraid he is temporarily unbalanced. I am sorry. We will treat him later, but for the moment—your meal."

Sanders greeted them cheerfully as they joined him in the outer room; too cheerfully, thought Burl as he sat down opposite him and began to pick without relish at the meal of fresh fruits and vegetables. To his disgust there was no meat, but at least the food was fresh and, as such, welcome after nearly six months of tinned and synthetic food aboard the ship.

They ate in silence. Wade, wary and obviously ill at ease; Sanders, hungry and unconcerned; Burl, brooding massively and turning over in his mind the strangeness and danger in their position. He had no clear idea of what had happened to them to render them unconscious, though his mind played idly with gas, drugs, hypnosis and a dozen other possibilities. That Baria and his daughter were human he could not doubt without evidence to the contrary, but how they came to be on a planet nine light years from Earth he could not imagine. He thought briefly about the theories of parallel evolution, but dismissed them; for, scientifically at any rate, the odds against such a thing happening twice in the entire Galaxy were millions to one. The odds against it happening simultaneously on two neighbouring planets were utterly fantastic.

To the other, and more obvious peculiarities, such as the girl's vanishing tricks, he gave only a passing thought. The major questions to be answered were based upon the silent Baria, sitting at one end of the table and waiting politely for them to finish their meal.

At last Burl laid the wooden spoon and fork carefully on the earthen platter, and pushed it from him. He looked at Baria with sombre, questioning eyes.

"Well?" he asked. "How about some talk?"

"By all means," nodded Baria agreeably.



"How about getting out of here?" Wade's voice was small and tinged with fear.

Burl thought of Willis, unconscious in the next room, and the fear rose in him strongly for a second, until he stifled it angrily. He ignored Wade as he went on, "You know what I want, Baria."

"Yes, I know. You cannot understand how we can speak your tongue and know of your planet. You think of us as human, and yet can imagine no set of circumstances which would explain how that may be."

"That'll do for a start."

Baria laughed and stood up, pushing his chair back from the table so that he stood clear of both. As he did so the lines of his form blurred and became indistinct. Burl blinked, thinking his eyes were out of focus, but the stomach-wrenching fear rose again within him, and a wave of horror rocked his mind as the human being shimmered, faded and changed, emerging as a nebulous opaque ovoid which pulsed and shivered with an evil, silver aura.

Wade screamed horribly, and collapsed sobbing across the table. Burl froze in his seat, his face grey with shock and his eyes deep pools of incredulity and disbelief. Only Sanders sat unmoved.

The ovoid vanished as suddenly as it had come, and Baria was in its place, smiling ironically.

"You see, we are not human."

"Hypnosis." Burl's voice was thick and indistinct as he voiced the only possibility which allowed him to retain his sanity, yet even as he said it he knew, deep within him, that it was too simple an answer.

Baria shook his head. "Once, long ago, we had physical bodies similar to yours. I say similar but I do not mean like. There were reasons why we dispensed with them." He paused and looked at the floor beneath his feet. "Have you noticed anything peculiar about this planet?"

Burl was rapidly regaining his control, so rapidly that he wondered if what he had seen had not been an hallucination.

"A lot of things," he replied wryly.

"No, I do not mean that sort of peculiarity. Compare it with your own world. What is missing?"

Burl considered for a moment.

"It appears entirely rural," he replied at last.

"It is entirely rural. In fact it is completely pastoral and entirely undisturbed. It is not mechanised or industrially developed in any way."

Burl shifted uneasily in his seat. "But—the road—?"

"Does not exist. It was merely a bait to draw you right to this house. After all, it would have looked suspicious if you had landed right next door to us. Sanders could have done that, but he preferred instead to create a pretext for leading you here, so he created the road."

"Sanders?" Burl stiffened in his chair and switched his eyes in stark understanding to his crewmate.

Sanders smiled gently at him, and for an instant the lines of

his form wavered and swam indistinctly so that the ovoid figure was visible.

Burl relaxed, shaken and numbed by the knowledge that he had been in company with some form of fifth column for so long.

"Had you followed the road, it would have led you straight here. Unfortunately Lynn took it into her mind to have some amusement at your expense without consulting us." He shrugged. "It was a pity that it should have had such a bad result on Willis."

"Let's get back to this planet," rasped Burl.

"Can you guess why this world is not industrialised to any extent whatsoever? Can you imagine any one circumstance which would force the major life form of this world to develop in the way which it has?"

Burl shook his head dumbly.

Baria smiled. "There is no metal. So far as we know there never has been any metal in the entire planet. Perhaps you can visualise the ultimate effects of such a factor. It meant that any physical form of progression, beyond the most elementary, was closed to us, and yet any race must progress or perish. In every race there is the will to survive, and if one avenue is closed then there are others to which it must turn. We moved along the one which led to mental evolution."

The sudden picture of the girl, vanishing and reappearing, crossed Burl's mind.

"Teleportation?" he asked.

"Among other things."

There was an implication behind what Baria had told him which bred in Burl an overwhelming sense of apprehension and terror he could not pin down. It was as if he were a child again in a darkened room, with all the fears of the world around him, yet not one of them in any way tangible. Baria seemed to sense it for he paused and made no attempt to go on with his talk.

Burl swallowed a hard, dry lump in his throat. "How long," he began. "How long have you been visiting Earth?"

"About two hundred years—your years, that is."

The terror of realisation rose up in Burl. "It fits," he whispered almost inaudibly, and then, more loudly, "Yes, it fits."

He was sitting taut and upright in his chair, and his eyes held an agonised apprehension as he asked, "How many of you are there on Earth?"

Baria smiled. "Your mental processes are quite extraordinary for one of your race, Burl."

"How many?" shouted Burl, and he beat the table madly with his clenched fist.

"At the moment about fifteen million. We do not breed very fast compared with your race."

"Oh, God." Burl buried his face in hands as the impact of Baria's figure was borne in on him. Once, not so long ago, it had been a million, and then two million, and then five. In the not far distant future it would become fifty million, and then a hundred, five hundred million. The picture he had carried in his mind since boyhood of Earth's growing empire in the stars crumbled and was replaced by a nightmare vision of a Galaxy swarming with nebulous ovoids who flitted, with supernatural ease, from planet to planet and from star system to star system. In such a picture there was no place for man.

It was several minutes before he managed to compose himself sufficiently, but when at last he raised his head, there was only anger in his eyes, still wet with tears of shock.

"Why couldn't you leave us alone?" His voice shook with his emotion.

"Would you have left us alone here, once you had found a way of conquering us?" Baria retaliated gently.

Burl did not answer. He knew the charge was justified.

"Well, now we know, and we can do something about it."

Baria shook his head. "I don't think so."

"When I get back to Earth—"

"We won't let you."

"Try and stop me." Burl rose gigantically and backed away from the table. "For all your power I do not think you will be able to stand the blast of an exploding pellet, Baria. There is still an element of mortality about you which I think is worth testing."

He grabbed for the gun in his holster, but even as he drew it he knew with sickening horror that there was something wrong. The metal was soft and pitted in his hand, and as he looked down at it with wide, startled eyes, flakes of reddened, rusty metal fell to the floor and crumbled where they lay. As a weapon it was useless.

"You did not ask me why there was no metal on the planet," Baria reminded him gently.

Burl regarded the crumbled ruin of the pistol as if it hypnotised him. The hand which held it opened spasmodically and allowed it to fall unchecked to the floor. It struck with a dull, doomed thud.

"There are elements in the physical make-up of this world which make it impossible for metal to exist." Baria's voice reached him

through a roaring haze of horror as a thought was born and grew within his mind. A thought which paralysed him with its grim significance, and he heard again the voice of Willis, "Bit more oxygen, fraction too much argon, and a couple of other gases which I can't identify."

"The ship," he croaked, and turning rushed from the house, stumbling blindly and wildly across the threshold and out over the rough, uneven country.

Baria and Sanders walked to the door and stood watching him.

"Shall I stop him?" asked Sanders.

"No." Baria sounded almost sad. "No, it would do no good."

Burl blundered through the long grass and up the gentle slope to the top of the rise. Before him on the plain he could see the ship where they had left her. In the light of brilliant Sirius she did not shine or gleam as she had done on her native Earth, and there was no beauty about her as she lay on the too green grass of the plain. She was dull and reddened, her surface pitted and scarred as if she had laid there for uncounted centuries while the harness of her skin was worn by the seasons and the weather.

"Got to get her off." The thought pounded in his brain and surged through his body, forcing his muscles to respond to the frantic effort of his mind. He ran stumbling, often falling, towards her.

She towered above him, silent and still, a ghostly desertedness emanating from the crumbling redness of the rust which was flaking the incredibly tough metal of her hull. Above him the airlock gaped open like a hungry mouth—just as they had left it.

Even inside—

He grabbed frantically for the crumbling handholds and began to pull himself madly upwards, panting and perspiring under the fury of his efforts. The jagged metal, which had been so smooth and even, cut and tore his hands now, but he was oblivious to the pain. His clothes tore and ripped on jagged edges which had not been there bare hours before, and all around him the flakes of rust crumbled, broke, and floated down to the green earth below.

As he reached the top a whole section creaked suddenly under the weight of his climbing form and folded outward. He clutched wildly at the receding edge of the lock and missed it; he cried out once and fell back twenty feet to the earth beneath. The fall dazed him, and he lay stunned, his eyes blinking hazily in the brilliant rays of Sirius, while above him the airlock was an unattainable goal in a broken and crumbling ship.

Burl lay for a long time in the sunlight, stunned and unbelieving. It was all a dream, he thought, a nightmare that would pass in time; he closed his eyes praying that when he opened them again he would be lying in his own back garden on the lawn that he knew so well, with the grey stone of his house looming against the blue Terran sky.

He heard a movement beside him, a slight rustle in the grass, and he opened his eyes to find Baria standing beside him, outlined against the red, rusted ruin of the ship. The dream was shattered.

"I am sorry," said Baria simply, and there was pity in his eyes as he looked down at Burl.

Burl sat up slowly, a deep pit of despair making an aching void in his stomach.

"Yes." His voice was husky. "Yes, I bet you are."

Baria gestured briefly towards the ship.

"There is nothing you can do here. Soon the vessel will collapse."

Burl realised dully that he was right. The stresses and strains caused within the structure by the disintegration of the metal would make the immediate vicinity of the vessel a danger area.

"Let us go back to the house," suggested Baria.

Slowly Burl rose and together they made their way back.

Sanders was waiting for them as they entered, and Wade was still hunched over the table, his face buried in his hands. It was apparent that he was going the same way as had Willis. Burl dropped wearily into the chair he had occupied formerly, aware that the frantic race to the ship had exhausted him utterly. He sat for a long time striving to regain his equilibrium, and he was thankful that neither Baria nor Sanders tried to disturb him. He attempted to study his position objectively, but from whatever angle he looked at it there was only hopelessness and defeat.

At last he said, "I don't see why you want to take over a world which is so totally different to your own."

"For the same reason that your race wanted to take over this planet," replied Baria simply.

"Conquest for you will be rather different. You are attempting to achieve your results by infiltration, while we should have done it by open and direct methods. There is quite a difference."

"In what way?" asked Baria.

Burl shrugged. "We would have defeated any hostile opposition by power and physical superiority. That way there could be no

argument about who was the master, but you are trying to do it by becoming as much a part of the world which is your objective as the people who are native to it." Burl looked at the floor. "I don't think it will work."

"Why?"

"Do you know what war is?"

"We have learned about it from you." Baria was obviously puzzled.

"But you have never experienced it?"

"No. We have always been above such barbarities."

Burl smiled, but there was no humour in his eyes. "Some day my people will learn how you are trying to conquer them. It is not a secret that can be kept for ever. When they do they will fight you with everything they have left to them, and when Mankind fights for his own survival there is nothing in this Universe that can stand against him."

"By that time," returned Baria without rancour, "we shall have learned enough of your science to be able to counter any such threat." He pointed to Sanders. "Already we have made great strides. Sanders became sufficiently proficient in the theories of space navigation to be regarded as one of your greatest experts."

Burl stood up and shook his head. "Don't be fooled, Baria. You are trying to take over a culture which you do not understand, because you have not the physical background which makes understanding possible. As you go ahead with your conquest of Earth you will be called upon to take over the scientific and industrial structure of our civilisation together with the planet itself, and I do not think you will be able to do it. You will have to rely upon the race you have conquered to run a world that you cannot understand, and on the day that happens your conquest of Earth will be finished."

Baria was frowning slightly now. "You are too optimistic, Burl. I do not think that such will prove the case."

Burl's shoulders drooped and he felt very tired. The reaction of the past few hours was catching up with him and dulling his senses. He did not feel like forcing home theories about which he himself had to admit doubts.

"I'm a bit tired, if you'll forgive me—?"

Baria nodded.

He went into the room wherein he had awakened and found Willis still lying inert on one of the beds. He sat down on another

and loosened his boots and the other fastenings of his clothes, then he lay back, relaxing on the soft mattress.

The light of Sirius was still strong outside the glassless window, but the star was already sinking to the horizon, and he knew that night could not be far away. He closed his eyes and as he did so a deep rumble, like a distant, heavy explosion, caused him to open them again and sit up on the bed in sharp alarm. A great wave of despondency swept over him and he relaxed again realising that Baria's words had come true. The ship had collapsed and broken up as the metal of her structure became too weak to bear the huge weight of her body.

Burl closed his eyes again and tried to stifle the hopeless frustration within his being.

He was not aware that he had slept, yet when he awoke many hours later the position of Sirius told him that it was now early morning. He rose and dressed himself, taking a quick, cursory look at Willis, before passing into the outer room. It was empty and there was no sign of Baria or Sanders—or Wade.

For a moment he stood undecided what to do, then the returning memory of the crash he had heard before going to sleep decided his course of action. He left the house and made his way across the open country towards the plain on which the wreckage lay. There might be something non-metallic amongst the ruins that would be of use to him.

Prepared as he was for the scene which met his eyes, he was, nevertheless, deeply shocked as he topped the rise and looked down on the reddened tangle which had once been a mighty ship. It lay like a giant open wound in the middle of the plain, its revolting colour marring the greenness of the countryside.

Burl walked slowly down towards it, until he was only a few yards away, and stood for a moment looking at the horrifying destruction which had been wrought. Then he moved forward to examine it more closely.

The metal had all the appearance of having been subjected to years of weathering, centuries of rain and wind and weather. It was pitted and scarred beyond belief, and he knew that before very long there would be no trace at all that the great vessel had ever existed.

Burl walked round to what had been the observation cabin, but was now a jumble of twisted metal, red and rusted, and broken, transparent plastic. He kicked moodily at a large metal plate and

frowned as it broke into a dozen smaller pieces while the dry red dust rose in a cloud over it as it fell apart.

It was clear that the wreck would collapse in on itself again as the structure deteriorated further, and Burl realised that any searching he might try to do could, conceivably, be dangerous. He walked on around the ship, his eyes sweeping sombrely over the devastated scene, and his heart was sick and heavy within him.

On the far side, that on which the main airlock had been situated, he paused again, and as he looked into the heart of the wreckage he could see one great curved side of the drive chamber that was the heart and lungs of the vessel. It was red and scarred but it appeared to be intact, for the thick shielding had withstood the effects of the corrosion and the strain of the collapsing ship.

It was still intact—

The shock hit Burl with a force that drained the blood from his face and made him draw a sudden sharp breath of horror.

The shielding of the drive chamber had to be intact or else the atmospheric corrosion would by now have upset the precise balance of the giant atomic pile and caused an explosion that would have ripped the crust of the planet like the skin of an orange.

Two feet thick was the shielding which contained the most potentially destructive power known to human science, and when that shielding collapsed . . .

An overpowering elation swept over Burl as he looked, fascinated, at the reddening curve of the chamber. It was an emotion which grew as each fantastic piece of a monster jigsaw puzzle clicked into place within his mind. He turned and fled from the scene heading for the rise behind which lay Baria's house. With each stride he took, another factor fell into its appointed place, mingling grim humour with rising optimism.

Burl was panting heavily as he reached the house, and he clattered over the wooden threshold into the room where they had eaten their food the previous day. It was empty.

"Baria!" His voice echoed mightily through the building with its triumphant challenge. "Baria! Come out, wherever you are, damn you."

He stood in the centre of the room facing the outer door, his eyes glinting and his chest heaving under the strain of his exertions.

"Baria," he called again. "Baria! Come and see what uncle's got for you."

The shadow on the porch preceded Baria's entrance.

"You want me, Burl?" he asked mildly.

Burl laughed, but there was no humour in his eyes. "What is the limit of your powers of teleportation?"

"Why?"

"Just because! Come on, I can't use the knowledge myself."

"True," Baria nodded agreement, but he was obviously puzzled. "Very well. In distance about twenty light years at present, in bulk around five hundred pounds by your measurements. These limits are being expanded as we progress. Why do you ask?"

Burl sat down, his smile icy now and his manner menacingly composed. "What do you know about atomic theory, critical mass and so on?" he countered.

Baria's bewilderment was quite open now, and Burl reflected briefly that his emotions were astonishingly human. "A little," he replied. "What we have picked up from your race."

"I thought so—a little but not enough. Remember what I told you last night, Baria? You are trying to conquer something you will never fully understand. Remember?"

"I remember. What are you getting at?"

Burl contemplated, not without pleasure, that Baria was getting more and more troubled.

"You forgot something, Baria," he said softly. "And it's going to cost you the Earth—or your own planet. Want to hear about it?"

Baria nodded dumbly.

"The drive unit of that ship out there is the greatest single feat of scientific engineering that the human race has ever carried out," Burl told him. "And the most powerful. It has to be, because in that unit has to be concentrated enough power to take the vessel and all it contains across light years of space at many times the speed of light. You see, we don't have teleportation, and that is our substitute. I won't go into the technical details, you probably wouldn't understand them, but the ship's drive is powered atomically and that power is contained in the drive chamber and shielded by two feet of metal which protects the rest of the ship and its crew from the radiation. I said that the shielding is two feet thick," he paused significantly. "And at the moment it is intact."

Burl paused again, and the silence that followed was broken only by the creak of the chair as he leaned forward.

"At the moment, Baria," he repeated, "it is intact. I don't know how long it will hold out, but judging from the way the hull plates corroded I'd say you've got a week before the effects of your

atmosphere reach the pile itself, and when that happens—well, I don't want to be on this planet."

Baria stood as if carved out of stone, his face showing not one flicker of emotion, but as he finished speaking Burl saw, just for an instant, the shadowy ovoid form of the alien that he really was.

"You—know what the—the consequences will be?"

"I can guess."

"Well?"

"At the best, one half of your planet will be completely decimated; at the worst—well, it could affect the orbit of the planet sufficiently to cause its ultimate destruction." Mentally Burl crossed his fingers and hoped that the last part sounded convincing.

"You mean—?"

"I mean it could be whirled off into outer space, or thrown into Sirius."

"I don't believe you." Baria was anything but certain if one could judge from his voice.

"All right, go and ask Sanders about atomic power, go and ask one of your so-called experts who have learned it all from us." Burl grinned. "I'll just sit back and watch it happen." He rose and walked to the door, praying that his psychology was correct.

"Wait." Baria stopped him at the entrance. "Assuming you are correct—"

Burl smiled amiably and encouragingly.

"—What is the answer?"

"Now we're talking." Burl turned to face the other. "There's only one place in the Universe with the technical resources and knowledge to deal with that pile and render it harmless."

Baria was silent for a long moment while Burl paused and forced him to admit the knowledge himself. He nodded at last, and said, "Earth," very softly.

"Right, and the only way you'll get them to help you is by revealing yourselves and giving up any thoughts you have of Terran conquest."

Baria's face went taut and expressionless. "But—that might mean the end of—of us?"

"We're not that crazy," Burl told him. "There's too much that you can teach us, and a lot more that we can teach you. No man yet ever blew up a gold mine that was paying off."

"Even if we agreed, how could it be done in the time? There is a week, you said."

"Use your head—if you have one of your own," snarled Burl. "Your race could teleport enough scientists and equipment in small doses to clear this thing up in no time at all. The main trouble you'll have will be in convincing the authorities. Whatever happens you'll have to decide quickly, every minute may be vital."

Baria bowed his head, and the tension in Burl mounted as the silence grew longer.

"Which is it to be?" he urged gently. "Earth? Or your own world, your home?" And as he said it he prayed that his judgment was right and that Baria's race were as fond of their own planet as mankind was of theirs.

Baria stirred. "But even if we agreed—how would you be able to use tools and equipment which are made of metal?"

Burl gestured impatiently. "That's a detail. Each tool used and each piece of apparatus necessary would retain its usefulness for a considerable period, and as soon as it showed signs of corrosion it could be replaced with another direct from Earth."

Baria nodded. "I must—there are others—please wait."

He vanished.

Burl stood quietly where he was, not daring to relax his guard for an instant, for he was aware that he might be under observation, and any slip at this stage might endanger any advantage he had won. The scheme depended on the panic he could arouse among Baria's compatriots, for, while there would certainly be considerable damage if the pile was not rendered harmless there had been more than a touch of exaggeration in his description of the probable effects. The fact that Baria's race had a very sketchy knowledge of material science was the hinge on which success or failure turned.

He had not long to wait. Bare minutes had passed before Baria reappeared as disconcertingly as he had gone.

"We are agreed that—that this disaster must be prevented," he said haltingly.

"Wise," Burl told him, stifling grimly the feeling of elation that rose inside him. "Very wise."

"You will come back to Earth with me," Baria continued stonily, "and together we will convince your rulers about what has happened." He looked earnestly at Burl. "You will do all you can to convince them?" His tone was almost pleading.

"Sure, everything," agreed Burl ironically.

"Where do you suggest we arrive?"

Burl considered for a moment. "Better make it the office of the Scientific Director to the Sirius Project, it is—"

"I know where it is," Baria interrupted him. "We will go now." He stepped forward and placed one hand on Burl's right shoulder.

"I hope this is painless," Burl said with a wry grin, and then his mind and body twisted and wrenched in upon themselves as if his whole being were turned inside out. There was a long, torturing moment of roaring blackness that raised panic in his brain, and then, sick and weak with reaction, he was standing on a thick carpet in front of a large, ornately carved wooden desk in a neat, white painted office. The yellow light of Sol shone through a large glass window and outlined the tall, white haired giant of a man who rose from the desk and eyed them with utter and astounded incredulity.

Burl wanted to laugh, and he had to fight down the hysteria which rose within him. His stomach turned over sickeningly and his head reeled dizzily.

He staggered slightly, and managed a weak, "Hello, chief," before he crumpled, unconscious, to the floor.

—Lan Wright

***Memo from***

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