Science Fantasy

No. 13
VOLUME 5
2/-

In the next issue

He was one of the last Irishmen left alive—one of the few remaining men on earth, in fact—which might have accounted for his wildness. In a way he was lucky, for when the Martians landed there was much that Sheamus could teach them although it certainly wasn't his fault that the atmosphere upset Martian metabolism.

SHEAMUS

By Martin Jordon

Illustrated by QUINN

Sheamus squatted beside the heap of stones by the lough and gazed with satisfaction at the green hillside against whose ruffled cheek he had finished the word MAN. The activity had been enormously interesting; it was the first time he had formed a word since his body had grown the thews of adulthood; that is if you could call it writing—this tracing of twelve-foot-long letters with white stones. By noon he had finished another word. The message now read: MAN HERE.

an intriguing novelette

AND

- ★ **TUBB**
- ★ **NEAL**
- ★ **HYNAM**
- ★ **FRITCH**
- ★ **BULMER**

Science Fantasy

Vol. 5 No. 13

1955

CONTENTS

Novelette

IN A MISTY LIGHT ... ... Richard Varne 6

Short Stories

LATE ... ... A. Bertram Chandler 58

POOR HENRY ... ... E. C. Tubb 68

SMOOTHIES ARE WANTED ... ... E. R. James 76

MOSSENDEW'S MARTIAN ... ... John Kippax 97

THE ADJUSTERS ... ... Jonathan Burke 106

PASS THE SALT ... ... Helen M. Urban 122

GUEST EDITORIAL ... ... Jonathan Burke 2

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Cover by QUINN Illustrations by Quinn, Hunter and Bradshaw

TWO SHILLINGS

In the United States of America, 35 cents.

Subscription rates :

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 6 issues 13/- post free

United States of America, 5 issues $1.75 post free

Published Bi-monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., DERWENT HOUSE, 2 ARUNDEL STREET LONDON, W.C.2.

Telephone : COVent Garden 1811

Printed in England by Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby 4/55

GUEST EDITORIAL

This series of Editorials is proving a most popular feature—at long last authors have an uncensored platform where they can air their opinions, and as with Jonathan Burke herewith and William F. Temple recently their views are very forthright.

EVER BEEN TO URANUS ?

By JONATHAN BURKE

When I first became a regular reader of science fiction, in those dear dead days beyond recall, I did my reading for the sheer pleasure of it: I just happened to *like* stories about other planets, or telepaths, time travel or giant newts.

In due course it was explained by one of the leading s-f editors of the time (there weren't many of them in those days, so you should have little difficulty in establishing which one) that interest in science fiction meant an interest in science. The criterion of a good s-f story was that it must be scientifically accurate.

Later still, having drearily tried to persuade myself that I enjoyed ploughing through technical journals, I found—as did so many others—that I preferred good writing to equations, and imaginative situations to extracts from text-books. Who cared whether the hero wore a space suit on Mars or not? Myself and my colleagues no more demanded full mechanical details of a space ship than we demanded a potato-by-potato account of farm life in a Thomas Hardy novel. Liberation of the imagination was the essential.

Oddly enough, I still believe that. I like to believe that Edmund Crispin is right when, in his introduction to the recent *Best S-F* anthology, he praises science-fiction for dealing with serious human and philosophical problems—or, rather, that he *could* be right when he says: "Never before, in a popular entertainment literature, has anything at all resembling this serious and insistent overtone manifested itself." He is, I need hardly say, not referring to lectures on the methane content of the atmosphere of Venus . . . or Jupiter . . . or do I mean Saturn?

It was a shock to me when, after an absence of some years from the science fiction field, I returned to it to find that we were back in the "Science can prove" era. Once more the old jargon was in fashion. Scientific accuracy (a somewhat spurious accuracy, in my view) was once more the ideal.

A book of mine was unkindly reviewed the other day. I mention it with some trepidation, not wishing it to be thought that I am using this brief essay as an opportunity to indulge in personal lamentations. I refer to the said review only because it seems so symptomatic. In it, the critic made it clear that one major reason for not taking my novel seriously was the fact that the characters in it did not wear space helmets when they were on Mars.

But, the pedants will protest, science can prove that we shall need space helmets on Mars.

To which I can only reply that Dante does not refer to the inhabitants of Hell as wearing asbestos suits. And in Dante's day scientists had pronounced views on the literal existence of Hell, even down to the position of its entrance from the Earth's surface. It took a long time for their dogmatism to fade. The scientists to-day will continue to make lofty, dogmatic pronouncements . . . until they actually reach Mars and have to think again.

It also occurs to me that the Editor of the very magazine in which I am now writing—an Editor who, it must be admitted, exhibits a quite supernuman generosity in donating space to a cantankerous person like myself in order that I may use it to attack him—once wagged his head over a short story of mine and said reproachfully:

"You've got people living on Uranus. People can't live on Uranus. We *know* that."

I have not yet had the temerity to ask my Martian critic when he was last on Mars, nor to ask Mr. Carnell if he has ever been to Uranus.

The further development of this earnestness about the planets of our solar system is, to me, utterly ludicrous.

"If you want to have planets with a decent atmosphere and with humanoids able to live on them," say these solemn mentors, "you must place them outside our own solar system."

I was baffled by this when I first heard it. "But," I naively protested, "you don't know there are planets out there that have Earthly conditions on them."

"Don't use the word 'Earthly,' old chap." The rebuke was gentle, inexpressibly pained. "'Terran'—or 'Tellurian.'"

"All right," I said. "You don't know there are worlds elsewhere in the universe with Tellurian conditions."

"No. But we don't know there *aren't*."

So there you are. All the writer has to do is invent a ship with a faster-than-light drive, which is much easier than giving a factual account of a trip to the Moon, and the Editor will beam with delight when the manuscript is handed in. And the readers, too, will beam with delight.

Or will they?

There has been a marked falling-off in the sales of s-f books in recent months. Over-production, say some. The public isn't ready for it yet, say others.

Instead of making vague excuses, listen to the ordinary reader who was, for a while, tempted to try this piquant and, to him, new form of fiction. Ask him why he has gone back to reading detective stories or serious novels instead of science fiction stories.

"Oh, those things. They're all the same."

The devoted fan (let us use the awful word) will indignantly deny this. But it is true that in one very important respect they are indeed nearly all the same.

There are no human beings in science fiction.

The whole art of fiction has depended on the emotions, passions, problems and relationships of human beings; of men and women and children. The presentation of character has been its major glory.

But not in science fiction. What the characters do in science fiction is conditioned not by personality, environment, moral or spiritual questions, or by the author's artistic purpose and sense of artistic fitness: their behaviour is governed by gadgets and plot gimmicks. Edmund Crispin points out that, among other defects, "women are exceedingly rare among the dramatis personae, and plausable relations between them and the men almost unheard-of." He might well have gone on to say that plausible relations between men and men are equally rare in these stories. And that is the reason why the intelligent reader is not buying or borrowing s-f. He has tried it and found it wanting. What goes on in the hearts and minds beneath those space suits? He is not told. And who can maintain enthusiasm about the actions of depersonalised space suits walking about on alien worlds?

"They're all the same."

They are all the same because authors are letting themselves be bound hand and foot by materialistic misconceptions. They populate their stories with 'types' mouthing pseudo-technical

jargon or else talking with crude facetiousness in an attempt to establish character. The puppets exist in the framework of a plot: they do not live within the pattern of a story.

This simply will not do. Literary discipline is one thing. A strait-jacket is quite another. Plausibility means more than the slick presentation of the physicist's or astronomer's latest theory during the course of a story. It involves more than the . . . what is the fashionable word? . . . the extrapolation of modern techniques and gadgets to produce more and more amusing gadgets.

There are, of course, many good stories being written to-day. There are many writers who tackle difficult, provocative themes and make a splendid job of them. But can one imagine anything more absurdly wrong than the case of such a writer who, with a stimulating idea to write about, suddenly finds that he must stop and think out details of atmosphere, gravity, the use or non-use of space suits, the orbit of a planet . . .

Perhaps we had better forget about space travel for a while. Certainly if the intelligent reader is to be drawn back once more to science fiction instead of permanently rejecting it, he must be offered work that is mature *artistically* rather than ploddingly accurate according to the current scientific theories.

I foresee a day when the Editor of this magazine will be rejecting all stories of space travel because someone has discovered that, not only can men not live on Mars or the Moon without space suits, but they cannot even get to Mars or the Moon. Science has unearthed new data. Science has proved that the planets are inaccessible.

"Let's have something possible, old chap—a story about vampires, or spirit voices . . something realistic."

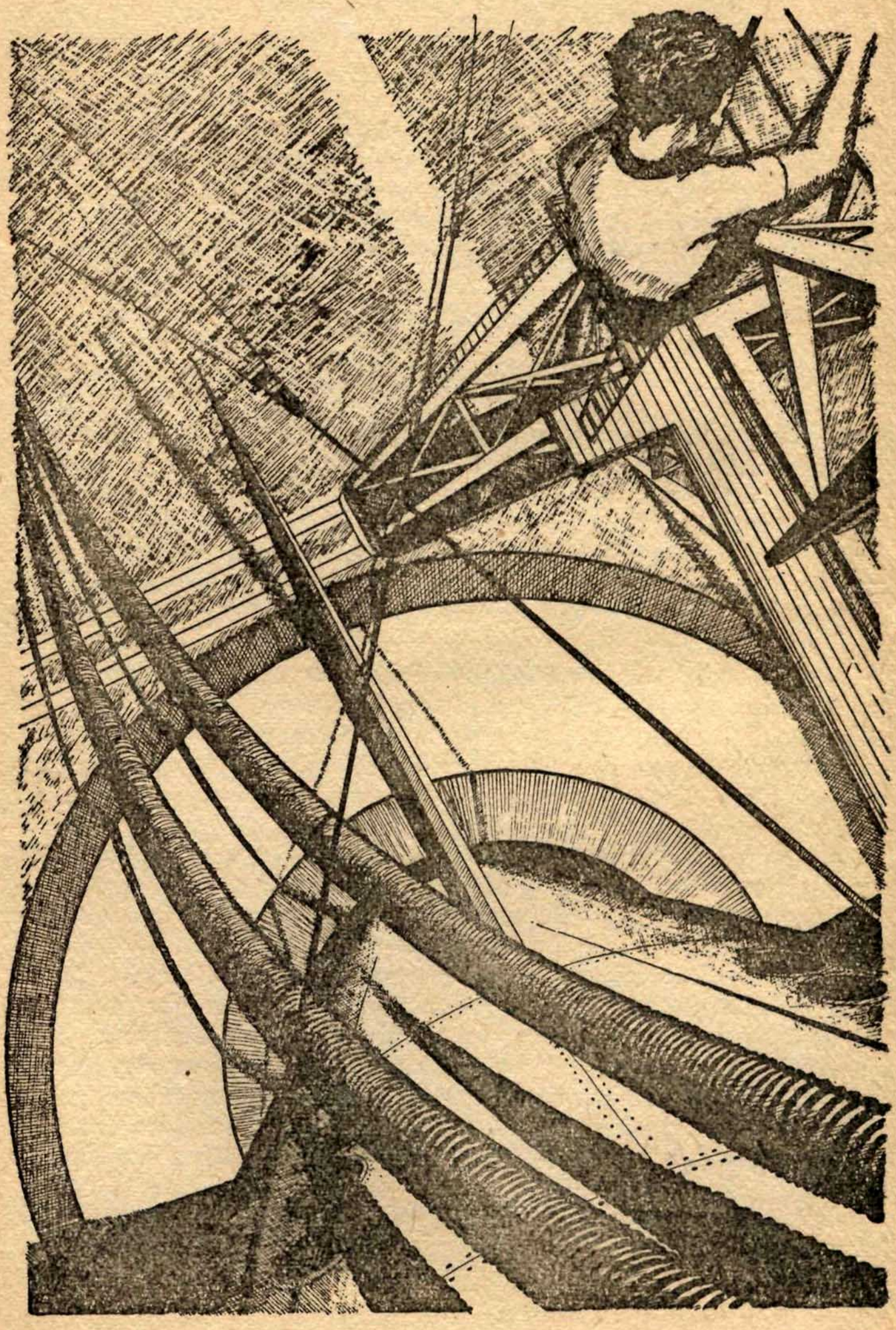
In the meantime I think I must make a gesture and give up space fiction. I shall write about telepathy—or, better still, time travel.

Ever spent a weekend in seventeenth century Rome? Or, in order to avoid the quibbles of historians who might insist on meticulous accuracy, what about thirtieth century Clacton? That should be safe enough to write about. Unless, of course, science has by now proved that the Earth will have no atmosphere by the thirtieth century, which would make my story quite incredible.

I really wouldn't know. I never read what the scientists have to say.

Which is more or less what I said at the beginning of this harangue.

—Jonathan Burke.



In the mist-shrouded darkness of an alien planet the espionage agent was given a vital secret to take back to Earth. That was the easy part of the assignment—the difficult part was to get off the planet.

IN A MISTY LIGHT

By RICHARD VARNE

Illustrated by BRADSHAW

All through the afternoon and evening, a humid wind had swept thick clouds in from the east, and now a heavy night heat enveloped Mek.

Sands walked a narrow side street leading towards the waterfront, keeping into the deeper shadows cast by the ramshackle buildings that made the alley a canyon of darkness. He looked around him warily, and once he shivered, although the night was oppressively warm. The moon shone momentarily through the veil of cloud that hid its lurid surface, and Sands moved quickly into the doorway of a shop until the protecting darkness returned. He cautiously stepped from the shop porch, looking behind him, searching the length of the dark alleyway before he moved on.

All around him, the city was silent, but it was not sleeping. In an atmosphere of tension and superstitious fear, families sat quietly in unlighted rooms, behind curtained windows, waiting out the night of the year when Copan spirits were abroad.

Sands began to look at the ideographs set beside the entrance until he found the one that he was looking for. It was the number of a shop that—Sands moved back a pace and strained his eyes to

read the ideographs along the shopfront—that sold antiques. Sands grinned a tightly mirthless grin, and his teeth shone whitely for a second, then he stepped towards the shopfront and looked in the tiny leaded window. Inside, he could only make out vague shapes, with some sparkling highlights from a yellow strip of light showing underneath a door at the other side of the shop. He went into the entrance porch. Cobwebs hung from the once white-washed walls, and the door in front of him was covered with peeling paint. Sands stood undecided for a moment, then put out a hand and pushed at the door. It opened with a creak of corroded hinges.

Sands stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

In the thick darkness of the shop, Sands could distinguish very little of the objects that he sensed surrounded him. He moved a step further into the shop, and knocked something over with a tinkling crash. He stood still and felt in front of him with his hands. He was moving another hesitant step when the strip of light at the other side of the shop grew a vertical which rapidly widened as the door opened. He could see the silhouette of a girl in the doorway, bending slightly forward with a hand against the lintel. There was a questioning attitude about her. Sands said softly, "Null-A." He waited.

Flexa looked at Sands in the light from the open door. Radiance striking on his high cheekbones gave him a vaguely Satanic appearance. He stood there confidently. *You were always too confident,* she thought.

She gave the signal of recognition. "Korzybski."

Sands let out a soft breath of relief. He began to walk forward, picking his way through a litter of china kylins and vases. He could see the warm sheens of their patinas reflecting the soft light from the doorway, and out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the brighter, metallic gleams of antique weapons and armour lining the walls. The girl stepped back into the inner room and waited there, out of direct sight from the street.

Sands walked through the doorway and turned quickly, scrutinising the room. There was nobody else there. He shut the door softly and studied the girl, saying nothing. She stood quite still, waiting patiently, knowing that he was examining her and realising that the whole success of her venture might depend on this first impression.

She was Copan, with the Copan cast of features and abnormally sloping shoulders. Her hair was black, with soft highlights in it

from the lime gas-mantle that illuminated the room. Her face was quite expressionless.

Sands transferred his gaze to the room again. It was almost bare of furniture, with only a desk, piled with dusty ornaments, and a chair in one corner. The rest of the space was taken up with a pile of canvas-shrouded pictures, more ceramic work, and some statues of ugly, half-reptilian animals. There were patches of damp on the plaster walls and ceiling, more evidence of the everlasting dampness and humidity of Copa, and one heavily curtained window. It was obviously a room that was hardly ever used, and definitely never lived in.

Sands stood very still, unrelaxing, with harsh lines creasing his face. He looked back to the girl, staring at her with dark, humourless eyes.

"What the hell is all this about?" He spoke angrily, the difficult vowels of the Copan language falling oddly from his lips.

The girl stirred from her position by the wall, turned to face him directly. "I am from Earth." She spoke in English. Sands grunted in disbelief.

"You don't look it," he said shortly.

"I don't expect immediate belief," she replied coldly, "but you must at least give me a few minutes to convince you."

Sands felt a slight stirring of annoyance, deep within himself at the moment, but ready to erupt as it had done so many times in the past. What he had taken for a lack of emotion in the girl had revealed itself to be a self-possession which matched his own, and his realisation destroyed the sense of superiority which had possessed him.

"Where were you born?" he asked.

"London," she said softly.

The word conjured up a sudden flow of memories, and with them, emotions which he had thought lost to him, lost somewhere on the path to maturity. London, with the fresh, earthy smell of the quiet, archaic city squares just after rain . . . the long sweep of the Embankment and the pastel shades of the buildings that lined it . . . the noise and colour of the street markets. He pulled himself back to the present, before the slow procession of remembrance inevitably brought Laura back to him, as it had done so many times before he had finally achieved his ultimate self possession.

"What's the name of the lake in Hyde Park?" he asked abruptly.

She answered immediately "The Serpentine."

Sands was not convinced. If she actually was from Earth, why did she look Copan, and what did she want with him, in any event? He knew himself to be a rover, a star-drifter who could not return to Earth because an obsession had grown slowly into a psychological block against it. The import deal that he was putting through on Copa was reasonably legal, as well. He could think of no reason for her interest. Suddenly he realised that these objections had been raised to substantiate an emotional belief that she was lying, caused by his first annoyance with her.

"What do you want with me?" he asked bluntly.

She moistened her lips slightly, unconsciously, and although her self-assurance did not falter, Sands could see that she had realised that he had already decided against her.

"I am an Earth agent," she began. "I was trained, surgically operated on for Copan appearance, and planted here when I was eighteen years old. The reason for my presence here isn't of much importance, normally, since I'm only the secretary to a somewhat minor economist and exporter, and my work is merely studying the flow and direction of Copan interstellar trade at its source." She paused.

"Six months ago, I began to see that there was something in the wind. Lewsen, my employer, is in partial control of one of the biggest trading corporations, Copan Interstellar Trade, an organisation dealing mainly with luxury imports, and he began to spend more and more time controlling this, and less with his economics work. Now, this isn't especially unusual, but what was unusual was that he didn't use me to help him. At first I thought that this was mere business caution, a big deal which he didn't want to leak out, but, well, he's trusted me before. Then I thought he suspected that I was an agent, but I realised that was obviously impossible, since I have never made him suspicious, I'm sure of that. Well, now I know what he was trying to conceal, and it's really big."

Anger rose in Sands like a seething tide.

"And may I ask what this so important secret is?" he asked with ponderous sarcasm.

Was that fear in her face?

"I can't tell you."

Sands lost his temporarily amused look; his heavy brows lowered.

"You lure me down here with a note semantically phrased to arouse my curiosity, and then you spin me this wild rigmarole." His voice was low and furious. "Do you know what this place is,

woman?" he continued. "It's certain death to Earthmen. Why, there isn't another Terran on the planet who would dare to come into this area of Mek, not even to-night, on the Night of the Spirits."

"I know that," said the girl. "And because I have access to a dossier on every Earthman on Copa, I can also see that you're the only man who can do what I want."

"And what's that?"

"I want you to take the information back to Earth for me."

Sands laughed openly.

"And why should I do that?"

She moved towards him.

"I know you, Sands. You're resourceful, cunning, clever, and you haven't stopped moving once since you left Earth fifteen years ago. You are the ideal man for the job. And you have a certain psychological instability which will force you to do this."

Sands said angrily, "If you know me so well, Flexa, or whatever you called yourself in your note, you'll know that I can't return to Earth, even though I want to." His eyes held a faraway bitterness. He moved towards the door.

She moved quickly in front of him, and leaned her back against the door. "Wait!"

Sands put out a hand and grasped her shoulder; he began to push her aside. Then he stopped.

"Well?"

She put a hand to the front of her dress and produced a small capsule. She held it out to him, and he took it. He weighed it reflectively on the palm of his hand, feeling its gentle warmth. Inside him, the old excitement began to rise, the thrill of new suns and new places and new situations stirred him again. All this, from one small message capsule.

Flexa watched him, interpreting his changing attitude with the case of training and practice. She had played on his instability, she knew, the instability which she herself had first stimulated, and she felt a faint self-disgust, and a wonder as she saw the change in the man.

"This is it," said Sands, stating rather than questioning.

The woman nodded.

Sands stood very still, thinking.

His decision made, Sands put aside the thoughts of the multifarious avenues that it opened up and concentrated singlemindedly on the present. He turned his head slowly and looked at Flexa.

"Why do you want me to take it back to Earth?" he asked. "I always thought that an espionage service had dozens of ways to get information back Home."

"Just about the time that I began to see that there was something big coming up, all the post office services that I know of were raided simultaneously. It seems that Earth Intelligence underrated the Copans slightly." She smiled a wry smile. "So there I was, cut off from Earth. I decided that I might as well stay here and carry on, because if the Copans know I'm an agent, they'll arrest me if I try to leave the planet, anyway."

"Of course, they might have left you alone to see if you'll contact any other lines of communication," said Sands.

Sands threw the capsule up in the air and caught it again.

"How did you get hold of it?" he asked cautiously.

The tight hold that the girl held on her emotions slipped for a moment, and a tiny flicker of revulsion crossed her face.

"I'm getting around to that," she said, "but I'll have to make it fast . . . I estimate that I'll be caught by morning."

Sands' jaw dropped slightly, but he said nothing.

"You know the set-up on this planet as well as I do," she went on. "As long as the Copans keep to their system of different corporations for each industry and utility and have little co-ordination between them, the Earth system of colonising and trade will be safe from the Copans, but you can see what would happen if something or someone formed a special circumstance where the corporation controllers would be obliged to amalgamate and satisfy the naturally warlike nature of the Copan race. The majority of the corporation heads are quite satisfied with the present status quo which leaves them undisputed hereditary rulers and they want war as little as we do, but some of them can see that the situation now is unstable as long as it remains static, and if, just by chance, they had the opportunity to alter it, I don't think that they would hesitate."

She stopped talking for a moment, and Sands digested what she had said. "And this secret that you have is that circumstance and their opportunity?"

"Yes." Then she went on, "About a week ago, a man came to see Lewsen at his home. He's a bachelor, by the way, and my position as his private secretary involves a little overtime work, if you see what I mean."

Sands saw.

"So I was in his house when this man arrived. I recognised him as the controller of the United Chemicals Corporation, and he was

the straw that showed me definitely the way the wind was blowing. He stayed locked in his room for the first three days, and during that time Lewsen brought his associates from Interstellar Trade to see him. After that, he emerged for a day, and I realised that whatever business had brought him to see Lewsen was satisfactorily completed.

"I had to find out what that was, so I began making a play for him. I could see that Lewsen was displeased, but I was gambling on the supposition that he wouldn't say or do anything that would offend Grigg, the United Chemicals man.

"This evening I went to his room. I had *Noviate* with me. You know what that is?"

Sands did indeed. It was a biological product extracted from an animal of the tropical Altair VI swamps and was injected into the subject at the height of an emotional disturbance. It was essentially a truth serum, and the effects on the subject were rather brutal.

"Grigg was foul." The woman wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Very fat and rather like something that you find under a rock. I injected him with the *Noviate* at the right moment." She spoke dispassionately, as if she was describing somebody else's experiences. Sands shuddered.

"He told me where he had hidden the information and he told me what it was about. I don't think that I could have even found it without doing what I did."

So that makes it all right for you, does it? thought Sands disguestedly. That gives your conscience a let-out.

Aloud, he said, "What happened to Grigg?"

"He was a hopeless idiot when I left him."

What makes you do things like this for Earth? thought Sands; I wonder what Earth could have done for you?

"Do you think that you'll be caught?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I'll be caught by morning. The Copan Security Police have a scent analysis of my body."

Sands said, "I'd better get going." He stood there awkwardly. Somehow, the woman's casualness had frozen the atmosphere in the room.

"Yes," she said.

There didn't seem much more to say, and Sands went towards the door.

"Not that way," said Flexa. "Out of the window."

Sands climbed onto the desk beneath the window, and pulled aside the curtain an inch.

"It leads to an alley,' said Flexa.

The Terran put his hand behind the curtain, and fumbled with the catch of the window. It swung open, and the curtain bellied inwards under the pressure of the wind.

He automatically pushed back a fold of his cloak and put a hand on his gun, somehow drawing strength from its presence as he had done so often before. He felt confused, as if he had been persuaded into a hasty action, as if someone had moved the strings that make the puppet dance, or pulled out the right emotional stops. Still, when he considered the situation rationally, he could see that his action was the correct one, for if the woman had done what she said, they would be connected up sooner or later, and the Copans would have little mercy with aliens who had murdered a Corporation Controller.

He turned.

"Well, this is it."

The girl said nothing at first. Then, "Good luck."

"And to you. Say, I don't even know your English Christian name. What is it?"

Flexa looked at him, at his strongly shadowed face. It's funny how love and the memories of love fade, she thought. Then she made an impatient gesture with one hand.

"Mary," she said, and knew another memory had been stamped *Cancelled.*

The door swung open and crashed against the wall.

They stood frozen in an insane tableau; the man on the desk, the girl half turning, the two uniformed Copan Security Police just inside the door.

The foremost mercenary moved his gun in a peremptory gesture. Sands stepped off the desk and stood beside it, one hand resting casually on a heavy lead coloured statuette, the other hanging slackly at his side. The certainty he had felt that his action was right disappeared and suspicion replaced it; suddenly he experienced a violent reversal of feeling and he realised with a strange neurotic certainty that Flexa was not an Earth agent and that she had betrayed him for some reason that he knew nothing about. Anger boiled.

"You lousy Copan bastards!" he shouted, oblivious of the fact that Copan marriage customs made the insult meaningless.

Flexa felt dismay. The intricate structure of decision and confidence in his own ability to do what she wanted that she had painstakingly built up in the Earthman's mind was disappearing.

She had to make a positive action that would convince him that she was actually what she had presented herself to be. It had to be a gesture that would impress him, and, although it seemed ridiculous as she thought it, something that would inspire him.

The two Copans moved forward from the door, and one covered the girl with a peculiar looking weapon as the other encircled the pair.

"Cut the play acting,' said Sands wearily, "I've fallen for your frame-up hook, line and sinker." He stood there quietly, resignedly.

Annoyance inundated Flexa. How could Sands be so stupid? Contriteness replaced her momentary anger . . . after all, she knew herself to be the basic cause of his instability.

"Would it convince you if I helped you to get away," she said flatly.

Sands ignored her for a moment, then he said, "You know something, Copan? You're just too emotionless to be true. I should have realised that at first."

The two Copan Security Police had stood where they were, listening to the interchange with slightly puzzled expressions on their darkly skinned faces. The one nearest the door still had his weapon aligned on the woman but the one who was moving towards Sands had his gun hanging down by his side.

"Get ready, Sands."

Sands automatically poised himself, planning out his moves with the greatest economy of motion possible.

Flexa threw herself at the Copan menacing her; he staggered, his arms flailing.

Sands picked up the heavy statuette and half smashed it, half threw it at the forehead of the Copan nearest him. The thud shuddered up his arm as he dropped down beside the desk. There was another thud as the body of the Copan followed him.

He heard sounds of struggling, then a peculiar whistling bang.

The sounds ceased and there was a graveyard silence in the grimy room. Sands' ears gradually grew accustomed to the lack of noise, and soon he began to hear the faint rustlings of clothes on thread-bare carpet. He lay there motionless . . . waiting.

Outside, the rain began to fall with a thunderously magnified roar.

Sands considered the situation.

He weighed the gun in his hand, somehow it had automatically jumped there during the brief action.

He put a hand on the heavy carven chair behind the desk, and

pushed it to the right as he simultaneously launched himself over the desk.

The Copan was crouching by the door, kneeling behind the body of the girl. The blur of chair and hurtling body confused him for a fraction of a second, and that fraction of a second was the difference between life and death. The Copan's weapon shifted towards the falling chair for a moment, and his spirit departed to his fathers with a shattered depression the size of a Terran revolver butt in his forehead.

Sands knelt beside the body of the girl for a moment; in death her features were relaxed, free of the constraining lines of character. Somehow the face looked vaguely familiar.

The Earthman stood up with an anger in him that was directed more against governments and worlds and interstellar civilisation than the Copans and the girl who had killed and been killed for money or idealism. Humanity is peculiar, he thought. The people of Earth were generally peace loving, he knew; they were like the lichens which grew on rocks, stagnant, perhaps, but with a quiet peace and beauty of their own. Men like himself who wandered around the galaxy with an itch to see more and more, with an insatiable desire for new places and the light of strangely coloured suns, were regarded as a throwback to the ages when Man was driven on to conquest and Empire, more by his unstable and stimulating environment than anything else. But still savage undercover war went on; civilisations were directed from their ordained paths by stellar fifth columns; war flamed from the far-away stars and returned to them leaving a drifting planetary cinder to mark its passage; Wealth and Death still ruled the Universe. Why? he thought, looking down at the girl who would be buried in alien soil with a service to another God to speed her soul into interstellar vastness.

He forced his thoughts to the present. Should he take the Copan Security Mobile? He decided against it for the mobiles were too easily recognisable—even if speed was one of the primary considerations, secrecy was equally important, and although the Copans would realise that the information had been passed on, when they could not find it, Sands could see nothing that would connect him with the girl, and he obviously did not want to expose himself unnecessarily.

He climbed through the window into the rain. The avalanche of water soaked him almost immediately.

The square had two roads leading into it from opposite corners. During the day there was a market in the square, but now, there

were only one or two deserted stalls left behind, darker patches in the watery night. Rotting refuse, scattered over the wet cobbles that shone faintly in the greyish light from the thick clouds overhead, smelt sickly sweet to Sands as he crouched in the mouth of a dark opening in the blank facade of houses lining one side of the square.

Rain fell steadily out of the darkness, slicking his hair down to his scalp and soaking the heavy material of his cloak. He waited, listening to the rain-muffled footsteps of a solitary walker in the square. There was a sizzling sound, hovering just on the limits of audibility but gradually coming louder . . . Sands strained his eyes

into the darkness and the wetness. Over on the other side of the cobbled expanse, headlight beams appeared, faintly at first but rapidly springing into twin bars of brilliance that swung inexorably along the silent buildings as the mobile turned into the square. Sands flung himself full length on the cobbles, flattening himself into the angle between wall and ground, feeling water soaking into his clothes. The headlights shone directly into the opening, dazzling him and freezing the falling raindrops into momentary immobility.

The mobile went out of sight and Sands moved quickly back into the alley. The headlights reappeared across the narrow slot of the alley mouth, and then the dark ovoid of the mobile came into view. It stopped, blocking the opening of the alley into the square.

Sands swore, very softly. But here was a chance, he realised, to retrieve the adverse situation in which he found himself. For although the routes of the Copan Security Mobiles were almost certainly traced on a radar map of the city, the time that would be lost in catching one, even after the minutes which were bound to elapse before it was realised something was wrong, would more than compensate for the time Sands was gaining before the inevitable pursuit by keeping to the twisting alley mazes of Mek until he was able to get on the road leading to his objective. Which was . . . the Field. And he had made the mistake of not taking the Security Mobile which the two dead mercenaries had used. Sands smiled an unpleasant little smile and began to decide his course of action. He was in his element when a situation called for violent, senseless action.

The port of the mobile dilated and two men climbed out.

"This is the way they think he'll come," said one in a thick North Selthan accent.

"And they're dead right, too," said Sands softly, to himself.

The North Selthan turned up his uniform collar and looked up into the sky. All he could see were the long lances of the raindrops falling towards him; splashing off the pale oval of his face.

"By Selen," he said abruptly, "What a night to be out." He didn't mean the rain.

"Only a Terran would go out on the Night of the Spirits," replied his companion.

Sands began to move, a little at a time, towards the alley-mouth, his hands crooked slightly in front of him.

The Selthan began whistling in a shrill, unmusical manner

which cut piercingly through the muted patter of the rain and the gurgle of the little rivulets of rainwater that ran down the cracks between the cobblestones, joining and parting and joining again. His head was eternally moving on its flexible Copan neck, his eyes glistening nervously as they sought to pierce the thick, almost tangible darkness.

There was a faint scraping noise.

"What was that?" said the Selthan's companion. "Did you hear something?"

The Selthan shook his head and whistled louder than ever; unobtrusively he moved until his back rested against the cool side of the mobile. Selen protect me, he was sub-vocalising over and over again.

There was a louder clatter.

"Hand me a light."

The Selthan dilated the port of the mobile and went inside, searching for the torch as slowly as he dared.

Outside, there was a muffled struggle, and the Selthan looked slowly over his shoulder, shaking in fright.

From a black indeterminate mass on the cobblestones a dark shape detached itself and came slowly towards the mobile. The Selthan was literally paralysed with terror. The dark shape reached out for him.

Tyres sizzled on wet roads; rain slashed against the windows of the mobile; the shock absorbers took up the strain of violent cornering with a hissing of hydraulics; the motor grumbled softly.

On the seat beside Sands rode the body of the Selthan, rolling slightly on the smooth plastic seat covering; this was because Sands knew that the Security Mobiles invariably had two occupants. He was drivng along a main arterial road that led out of Mek and passed by the Field on its way westwards to Selth.

The buildings on either side suddenly became closer and the motor noise increased to an echoing roar; then the mobile with its macabre passenger was through the West Gate of Mek and on the open road.

A light began to blink intermittently on the instrument panel and a tinny voice spoke faintly from somewhere in the cabin. Sands glanced quickly round the cabin and saw a pair of headphones in front of the corpse beside him. He took one hand off the wheel and reached out for the phones. He settled them over his head and listened.

"Mobile Seventeen . . . Mobile Seventeen . . . Why are you outside the city limits?" a voice was repeating.

Should he answer? Sands was undecided; this was not an eventuality for which he was prepared. He decided not to, for he knew that his Copan was accented. He drove on, and after a few minutes the voice in the earphones stopped.

Sands drove slowly and carefully, for the road twisted and turned like a snake, and the headlights on the Copan mobile were a trifle inadequate to Terran eyes. The windscreen wipers moved backwards and forwards over the plastic, backwards and forwards . . . Momentarily there would be a clear arc of glass and Sands would catch a flash of white as a building slid past; then the spots of rain would cover the windscreen and he would be groping along blindly once more.

A long line of reflector eyes picked out a turn and as Sands followed the road round, the corpse beside him slipped against him; its arm flopped across his knees. Sands pushed it away.

The rain drummed monotonously on the roof of the mobile until Sands could hear nothing else; his eyes grew glazed and he drove like an automaton.

Some sixth sense prompted him to look in the rear-view mirror and he saw two pairs of eyes looking at him and growing larger. They stared fixedly.

He snapped out of his daze. How could he have forgotten pursuit?

He drove faster, recklessly, but the following mobiles gradually closed the distance between them. There was a spurt of flame and the bulletproof window on his left was suddenly covered with a network of fine lines. He heard a shrill whine as the high velocity bullet ricocheted away into the night.

A mobile drew level with him and Sands looked into it. In the light from the instrument panel of the other mobile, Sands could see two Copans staring at him. Some detached part of his mind thought how curious it was that he would try to kill these two men, strangers to him but suddenly enemies as well.

Headlights illuminated a ramshackle white fence; it curved to the right and Sands swung the wheel. The mobile slid into the corner in a long drift on the slippery surface and on his left Sands could sense the other mobile braking furiously. The corpse that rode beside him slid suddenly, leaned against him. The dead weight flopped forwards across his arms and the wheel was forced straight. The mobile bucked crazily and struck the pursuers a glancing blow. For a long moment the sides of the mobiles grated together. Sands straightened the mobile and behind him, the other vehicle ran off the road.

It hit a boulder with its offside wheel and bounced back on the road, broadside across the corner.

Sands saw another mobile hit it and then there was a flash as a power plant blew up.

Beside him, the corpse of the Selthan slipped to the floor.

Sands lay damply concealed in undergrowth at the edge of the Field. It had stopped raining an hour before as the strong false-dawn had lightened the sky above a low range of jagged hills in the west, but the tangle of bushes and heathery plants that he lay against were still dripping water, and the ground was marshy. He had driven past the Field and left the mobile roughly concealed in a little wood beside the Selth road.

He was waiting for the sky to lighten with the coming of dawn and as he waited, he was thinking. His thoughts were a patch-work; that he was too far into this morass of intrigue to withdraw now; that he would have at least another hour before the loosely liasoned Field Police were notified to search for him.

That was the trouble with the Copans, they were too un-co-ordinated. Sands thought that if they ever became co-ordinated, they could go a long way towards driving Earth out of space and back to the confines of Sol System. Not that he would care.

He realised that the Copans had worked with extraordinary speed to catch up with Mary and him so quickly. The information contained in the capsule must be important if it could bring the Copan Corporations to a concerted effort.

He thought of Earth, and Laura, and he knew that he had been thinking of her too much recently. Something must have stimulated his memory. Perhaps it had been meeting Mary. He wondered why Mary had done it, why she had given her life for Earth.

When it had grown light enough, he began to study the obstacles that lay between him and his objective.

Immediately around the outside of the Field there was a high wire fence, placed there primarily to keep animals out. Just inside the fence there was a deep drainage ditch, half filled with water. Then there was the wide expanse of the Field itself. It was small; Sands could count only eleven berths, each separated from the next by a hundred yards of open ground. He transferred his attention to the ships themselves.

There were five. One of them was a curiously shaped Copan ship; unloading crated machinery, Sands decided.

Two of the remaining ships were Sirian merchantmen, owned and operated by the Lezau Matriarchy. Those were definitely out

of the question. There was an interplanetary ferry, used on the runs between Copa and her radio-actives rich moon. She was surrounded by the bright red, universally used, Radio-actives sign.

The remaining ship was Terran. Sands studied her for a very long time. She was old, one of the Gunthar Class, and solid Swiss workmanship. A little rust-streaked, perhaps, but definitely the best possibility.

That was the one, then.

Sands began planning out his moves as he always did when he had the chance. First he discarded his cloak because it was too heavy and would encumber him. Then he felt in the inside pocket of his one-piece for the message capsule. He took it out and looked at it for a moment; he raised it to his face. There was an elusive perfume to it. He touched it to his lips, feeling the smoothness and the coolness of it; then he replaced it. He put a hand to his belt and adjusted the holster of his gun. He stood up and began to move down the slope towards the fence, feeling dampness between his toes; the spongy heather plants underfoot bubbling up moisture; the bottoms of his loose-fitting breeches catching in bushy grasses. What streak of insecurity made him do things like this, he wondered. He knew what the psychos had told him, all the rigmarole about him being the only one who could cure himself, but that struck him as being illogical. What the hell, anyway.

He found himself at the fence and he studied it for any signs of the insulation which would tell him that the fence was electrified. There were none, so he climbed it quickly and dropped from the top to the Field. Although the ground had been blasted clear of vegetation, little tendrils of growth were already spreading back to the sterile soil. Life is the most resilient thing there is, thought Sands. A man can come back to Earth and find his lover gone, and he can think that he'll be forever dead, but after a while, he'll be able to say "Laura" without wincing, and he'll be able to see women like her without going up to them and calling them by her name. He might blame his sorrow on someone else, like the Government who had refused to help him find her, why, he didn't know, because they kept records of every Terran, but basically, he'd be all right again; just a little dead inside, that's all.

Sands jumped the drainage ditch and set off across the Field at a steady run. He was nearly certain that he would be almost invisible in his by-now mud coloured one-piece, but the longer he hung about with the dawn coming, the easier he would be seen on the level landing field.

He was panting a little when he reached the base of the landing

gantry, and he leant against one of the corner girders of the structure as he surveyed the situation.

He tilted his head back and stared up the dizzying perpendicular height of the ship, towering up for two hundred feet, a product of the descendants of men who had built Gothic cathedrals. You could see the similarity. At the extreme tip of her pointed nose, the first rays of the greenish Copan sun were turning the silvery metal to a greenish tint; against the slowly moving clouds in the turquoise sky, she looked at if she was gradually, inexorably, toppling to crush him.

On one fin was red lettering. *S.S. Guntharben Zurich, Schweiz, Terra. 1994 Milliers.*

Sands tried to remember what little he knew of the Gunthar class, obsolete for about a century, now. The Control Bridge was right in the nose with the crew deck immediately below it. Then came the fuel tanks. The overdrive unit was in the centre of the *Guntharben* where it always was on all interstellar drive ships, and the cargo holds occupied the hull between the overdrive unit and the power-room.

The sky had been growing steadily lighter in the north and with rivulets of green fire running down the jagged hill crests and valleys, a livid greenish sliver of Ceta Aurigae II showed above the horizon. Sands realised that he would have to work fast—get aboard the ship first, he told himself, and make your excuses later, when you're aspace.

He transferred his attention to the loading gantry with its bare angular framework painted garishly in orange anti-rust. The lift was powered and the current was usually cut off for safety, so he couldn't use that. He slid open the door and stepped inside to try the control, anyway. Nothing happened.

He looked up the structure again and noticed that as the *Guntharben* was too tall for the Copan gantry, a makeshift crew platform of planks had been placed across the horizontal braces by the airlock. It made a dark patch against the sky with faint lines of light filtering through the gaps between the planks. He walked round the gantry and saw a ladder. The first thirty feet had been removed to make it useless to thieves.

With the assistance of the slightly smaller Copan gravity and the greater strength of the Earth human, Sands decided that he could perhaps reach the first horizontal brace between the corner girders. He gathered himself and jumped. He fell short by perhaps six inches. He stepped back a few paces and took a short run before

jumping again. His fingers hooked round the strut and he pulled himself up. A sharp edge cut one palm and blood ran down his wrist as he reached upwards to the next strut, but he disregarded it.

Soon he reached the foot of the ladder, and with a softly relieved outrush of breath, he transferred himself to it. As he climbed he noticed that the gantry was equipped with a suction loading system, which meant that the cargo of the *Guntharben* was almost certainly granular.

Gradually, his field ot view increased with height gained. At about sixty feet up, he stopped to rest, standing on a rung with one arm crooked around a vertical member to keep him steady against the wind that blew harder and harder as he climbed. He could see the warehouses now, a quarter of a mile away at the edge of the Field, with the railway lines looking like gossamer spiders' webs glistening in the early morning dew. Away in one corner was the white concrete tower of Control and at the foot of the gantry were the rusty ratchets of the gantry runners along which the loading gantry was moved when blastoff time came. Sands switched his gaze back to the Control tower where a movement had caught his attention. By straining his eyes and wiping them clear of wind-induced tears, he could see two mobiles drawing up at the entrance.

He looked up again and began to climb faster. Reach . . . pull. Reach . . . pull. Behind him, darker patches of crimson stained the orange painted metal of the gantry.

After another twenty-five feet, Sands reached the level of the cargo landing port. The colossal pipes of the suction loader, supported up here at their mouths by an intricate strutting system, snaked flexibly from the gantry and across a metre of space to the open hatch, where they led over the lip and disappeared into dense blackness.

Sands cursed, his words whipped away by the wind. There was no airlock. That meant that the cargo was stored in vacuum, good for the cargo, perhaps, but bad for Sands if he wasn't wearing a space-suit.

He straddled one of the flexible pipes and moved along it until he was at the lip of the cargo hatch; he looked down inside. He could see a glistening heap of some sort of grain about twenty feet below the hatch. He went back to the ladder and resumed climbing; once he looked down, and the ground was very far away. The crew lock was a hundred and eighty feet up the slim hull of the *Guntharben.*

After another ten minutes of climbing, Sands reached the crew

platform. He swung himself over the edge and crouched on the platform, feeling the roughly planed wood of the planks in strange contrast to the smooth cold metal of the gantry. The giant structure of the loading gantry trembled in the wind and Sands shivered in sympathy and nervous reaction. His muscles began to tighten, and with a grunt, he stood upright, his heart beating quickly and his eyes blurring and prickling.

He stood there quietly, his arms hanging loosely, relaxed, at his sides, feeling the wind wrenching at his clothes, the early morning coolness on his face. The outer door of the airlock was slightly ajar, and there was a thin tendril of tobacco smoke coiling out, only to be blown into nothingness. Of course. He should have realised that there would be a dogwatch.

He reached a quick decision and slid the airlock door open a few more inches. Inside, in cool green translucency, a man lay sleeping on a rough couch. A couple of empty bottles stood beside him and a forgotten cigarette drooped between limp fingers.

The spacesuits hung on a rack against one wall.

Sands moved towards them softly, loosening the clips that held one top and bottom. He pulled it away.

The rhythm of breathing from the couch altered, quickened. Sands stood very still. He looked over his shoulder at the little man on the couch. Slowly he turned and went out of the airlock.

Standing outside on the crew platform, he checked over the suit. Food, water, waste remover, oxygen. The material was fairly new, and only one joint showed signs of fraying.

Quickly he climbed down the ladder to the cargo loading port.

He looked at Control. Two tracks led away from the building. He followed them along their length. From behind a vertical girder which had concealed them, the two mobiles that Sands had seen driving up to Control were coming across the Field towards the berths holding the *Guntharben* and the two Lezaun ships.

Sands watched them.

Their tracks diverged like an adder's tongue; one came towards the Lezaun ships and the other towards the *Guntharben.* Sands let himself down over the edge of the loading port, one arm half encircling a flexible loading pipe. He hung there until the mobile went out of sight beneath him; then he let go.

For half a second he fell, then he landed with a soft thump on the silvery heap of grain. He tried to climb to his feet but the shifting of the grain prevented it. It slid away beneath him and his legs sank further and further into the heap. He sat down quickly to increase the area his weight was pressing down on, and so stop him sinking into the grain.

The end of the loading pipe was within his reach, and he grasped a collar at the end and pulled himself out of the grain. He hung on to the pipe and forced his legs into his spacesuit, then zipped it up, leaving the flexible transparent plastic hood lying on his shoulders.

He moved out of the light from the loading port and slid down the heap until he was at the hull of the spaceship. He leant against the metal plates and heaped grain over his legs and lower body to render him less visible.

He composed himself to wait.

A buzzer sounded in the ship, muffled by the inner door of the airlock. Baker woke up. He yawned widely and rubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands, then picked up a battered old cap from the floor and slapped it against his thigh to get rid of the dust. The buzzer rang insistently. Baker put the cap on at a rakish angle, then went to the outer door of the airlock in a leisurely manner and closed it to complete the safety circuits. Hidden fluoros came on automatically and the lock on the inner door released with an audible click.

The buzzer still rang.

Baker pushed the inner door open and went inside the Control Bridge. Although the Bridge occupied the entire nose of the *Guntharben,* Baker had to pick his way between computers and the twin pilot points banked with instruments and controls to reach the radio and radar units which covered one wall. It wasn't instantaneous, of course, no spaceship had the necessary mass to mount one, but it was powerful enough for interplanetary distances.

Baker actuated the receiver. The buzzing stopped.

"S.S. Guntharben from Control . . S.S. Guntharben from Control . . . " came in stilted Terran.

Baker tripped the transmission switch. "S.S. Guntharben here. Come in, Control." He switched to Receive.

"Security have ordered me to inform you that the *Guntharben* must be readied immediately for Customs Investigations. Will you repeat that message, please."

The little man switched to Transmit. He repeated the message, then switched off. He frowned. Blasted nerve, he muttered.

He went into the airlock again, and took one of the impressive looking signal guns from a locker; he opened the outer door of the airlock and looked down. With a whirring of ratchets the lift was rising slowly up to the crew platform. Baker stepped to the edge of the lock and gently moved two of the four planks of the

platform until an edge of each was resting on the horizontal brace with only a little overlap. The lift stopped and the door was slid open. There were four men inside it, the first two were in the uniforms of the Field Police with the regulation expressions of steadfast amiability. The other two were Security Police and they bothered with no such formality. They pushed their way forward.

"Get out of the way, Terran," said one.

"Watch your step," growled Baker, bringing the formidable signal gun into view. The two Field Police looked disgruntled. One said something in quick Copan to the Security Police which sounded unpleasant. The mercenary barked back, but subsided. There seemed to be little love lost between the two organisations.

One of the Field Police said politely, "I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but we have to make a routine Customs Investigation of the ship."

Baker said, "So—why the muscle men, then?"

The Field Police said nothing, but one of the Security Police frowned.

"Be careful," he said.

Baker laughed. "And where's your authorisation?"

"We don't need any." The two mercenaries stepped on to the crew platform.

"You do here," said Baker, and kicked the two planks off one brace. The planks tipped round the brace they had rested against on the other side and fell off.

Baker looked down the gantry and watched the planks falling. One was blown by the wind and hit a metal member with a clang. After about seven seconds they hit the Field. Baker laughed.

One of the Security Police made to jump the gap to the ship, looked at Baker standing in the airlock door. Baker laughed again.

"Come on," he said invitingly. The Copan said something under his breath, and moved his hand towards his side arm.

"Naughty," reprimanded Baker, and raised the signal gun suggestively.

There was a murmured conference, and then the Copans went back into the lift and shut the door. A moment later, the ratchets began to whirr, and the lift dropped away, down the gantry. Baker scornfully spat down the gantry framework and went back into the airlock victoriously. He sat down on the couch and upended a bottle which he produced from beneath the coverings. There was a thirst-quenching gurgle.

Down in the hold, Sands heard the noise of the lift go down past him and breathed a sigh of relief. He leant back against the hull

plates again and shut his eyes. He had had no sleep for nearly thirty hours. Presently he dozed.

Half an hour later, the sound of another mobile attracted Baker's attention. He looked out of the airlock and saw one going towards Control from the Lezaun ships. His curiosity lasted at least ten seconds.

After breakfast, the remainder of the crew of six, who had been in Mek doing the usual things that spacemen on planet leave did, began drifting back, for Mackenzie, the captain, had said that his crew had to be back in the ship a day before blastoff to get the liquor out of their systems. Baker recounted his minor victory to each of them as they arrived, becoming more and more proficient, in the telling, each time.

At ten o'clock the cargo loaders arrived below and started the suction loader; a quarter of an hour after that, Mackenzie arrived, dusty and hot because he had had to walk from Control to the ship. Baker related his small excitement of the morning, and Mackenzie was not pleased.

He told Baker so, and also described certain operations which he would perform on Baker without anaesthetic if the departure of the *Guntharben* was delayed.

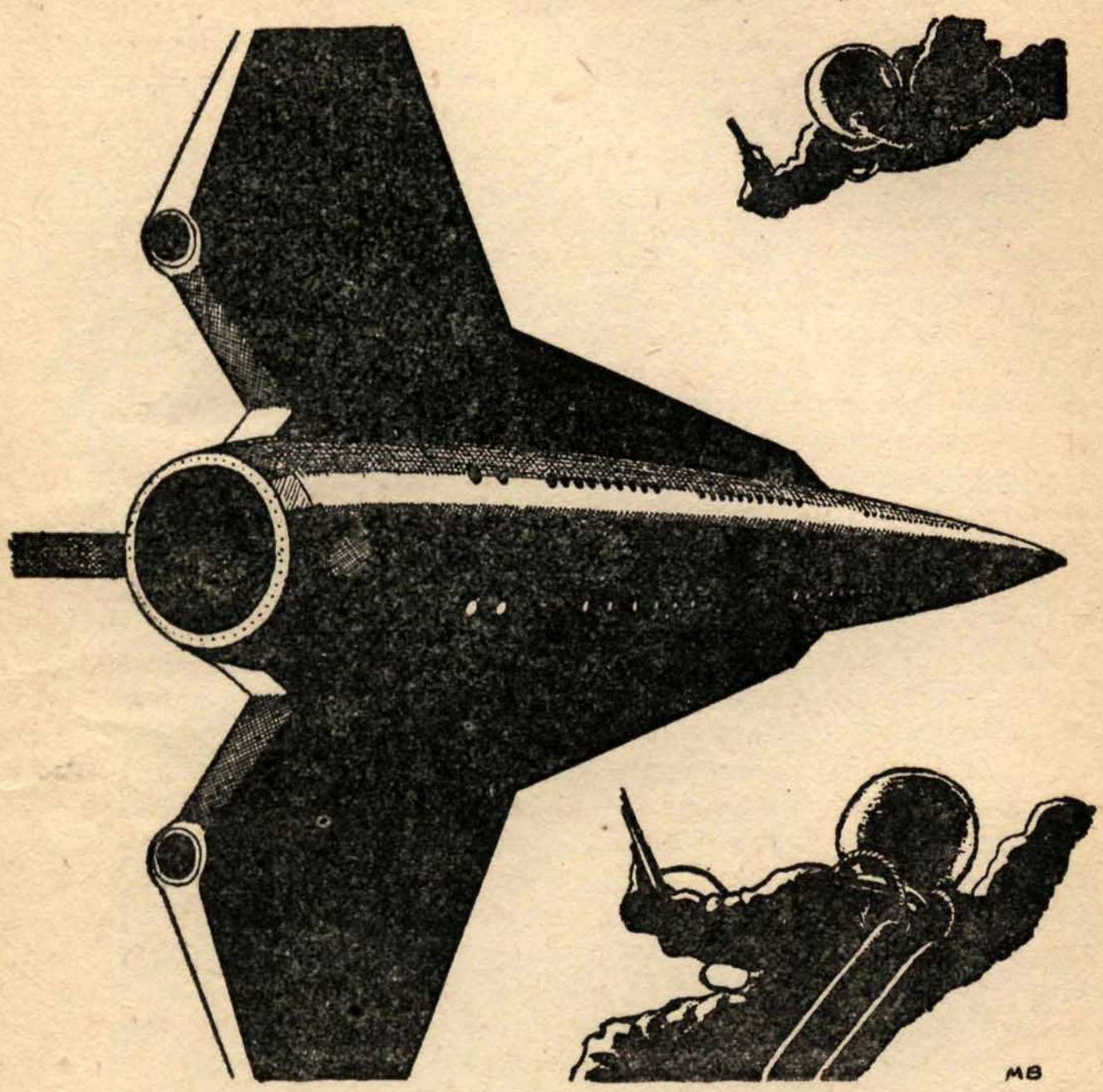
Outside, the green sun rose higher and higher in the turquoise sky, and the heat rose proportionately.

At eleven o'clock the first trainload of silver grain arrived from the warehouse at the edge of the Field and truck by truck the granular contents disappeared into the hungry maw of the suction loader. One of the crew, seeking some fresh air on the replaced crew platform, was the first to notice that there were several official mobiles spaced in a wide circle around the *Guntharben* and that there were two Field Police unobtrusively watching the loading. He told Mackenzie, who cursed Baker.

When the sun was immediately overhead, the loading was finally completed.

Just at this time, the four Copan Police reappeared at the airlock, equipped with all the necessary authorisation to search the *Guntharben.*

Down below, Sands had been dozing when the first avalanche of grain had come flooding in, running down the sides of the pyramid in the hold. It had quickly run up over his legs and thighs and hips. When Sands woke up, his legs were trapped. He realised what had happened and struggled frantically. He couldn't move. When the preliminary trickles of the next intake of grain began,



Sands saw his only course. He pulled the plastic hood over his head, zipped it up and turned on his oxygen. As the pressure rose in the suit, the wrinkles in the tough plastic material disappeared and the hood expanded into a bubble enclosing his head. Sands realised that his arms were pinned to his sides and tried to move them; he could not. Slowly, soundlessly, now, the flood of grain rose over his stomach and chest. It reached his neck. Now Sands could only move his head, and he knew the terror of being trapped.

He screamed.

The flow of grain stopped.

Through the slightly distorting plastic the surface of the grain seemed to curve up like the sides of a great bowl. Almost at eye level, Sands could see the millions of tiny seeds, each with a little

highlight shaped like a mocking grin on its shiny curved upper surface. He moved his shoulders with a monstrous effort and watched a few grains move. He laughed hysterically. It was like the ancient sand torture, he thought. At any moment he expected to see Arab horsemen galloping across the burning sands to batter his head to a pulp with the glistening black hooves of their rearing horses, or to see a long stream of soldier ants following a trail of honey which led to his unprotected, honey smeared head. He laughed again.

The grain began to rise once more. It rose past his mouth and he felt as if he was choking, even though there was a plastic air-filled bubble between him and suffocation. He could feel only the slightly roughened inside of his suit, and smell only the bitter plastic smell of the material, and hear only his own breathing and the noise of oxygen, and taste only the induced saliva of his own fear. The grain rose past his eyes and he was blinded.

The weight of the grain pressed the suit in all over his body and he could feel the smooth plastic touch his forehead, very softly, like a caress from a woman's hand. Laura, he thought, and lost consciousness. Soon the grain covered him completely and did not stop rising until the shining surface was three feet above his head. The pressure of it could not indent the glistening skin of plastic which stretched between the twin promontories of nose and chin, and so he breathed on steadily with only the hiss of oxygen and the gentle sussurations of his breath to disturb the splendid isolation of his suit.

Captain Mackenzie studied the sheets of ideographs which the Copan mercenary held out to him. He looked knowing.

He stood away from the airlock entrance and let the two Field Police and the two Security Police go by him. He shut the outer door and opened the inner, and the four Copans walked into the Control Bridge with the short hair on their shaven necks perceptibly bristling in suspicion. They looked at Baker who was lounging in one of the control points with an insolent expression on his face.

For all the equipment in the Bridge, there was little cover to hide a man. One of the mercenaries looked into the soundproof cubicle of the radio operator and withdrew his head quickly when he saw the man glare unpleasantly at him over the top of a lurid magazine.

They went down into the quarters below the Bridge and searched it thoroughly, looking under the sprung bunks and in the lockers with their webs of springs to hold the contents firmly during

accelration and free fall. The remainng three of the crew of the *Guntharben* lay on a bunk playing three-pack Kanaster and ignored the searchers completely. The Copans continued their search in the overdrive room.

They stepped gingerly along the narrow catwalks intersecting the overdrive unit and looked down into the mazes of wires and tubes and crystalline feelers with bewildered eyes; even when it was stationary, the overdrive was something far outside the confines of human understanding, for it was the product of cybernetic brains that were the products of cybernetic brains which in their turn were the offspring of yet other creatures of tubes and transistors and circuits, with the roots of this strange new evolutionary tree bedded in the fertile soil of half a milion years of humanity.

Finally the searchers departed with no apparent success, yet with the negative knowledge that if the object of their search was not to be found in the *Guntharben* but must be there if the results of the synthesis of many stray pieces of information were correct, then Sands was in the one place that they had not been able to search in the spaceship. Ergo . . . the hold.

Darkness; metal walled cubicles with anti-detector networks embedded in them; doors which could only be opened by someone familiar with a coded form of an ancient Terran language.

Soft pearly light emanating from a square vision screen shines on a dark figure seated in front of the screen, long fingered hands resting lightly on a sloping shelf of button-inset plastic flutter like pale crabs.

Six similar cubicles, six dissimilar figures, links of traceless radiations between a tumbling chunk of orbiting cosmic slag with a chamber in its heart and a trading vessel plying between tiny islands in a tropical sea, known also as the proving ground for Armaments Incorporated, and four other locations which each nurse an alien cancer.

"We pulled a boner this time, didn't we?"

A pause. A solemn voice.

"We were following the right course in leaving Flexa where she was, our confidence in her ability was amply justified by her handling of the situation, even when she thought that she was cut off entirely from Earth Intelligence."

"And the only trouble was that we didn't happen to be around when she hit the jackpot and she had to get rid of the information using the best material to hand, which happened to be an

emotional unstable acquaintance, coincidentally on Copa at the moment."

A woman's voice.

"Well, we were right when we thought that United Chemicals Corporation would use a small outfit like Interstellar Trade to import the materials they would need for mass production of the treatment, and I think that it's almost certain that Sands is in the hold of the *Guntharben.*'

"The only difficulty is that the Copans seem to think so too, judging by the Security Police they've got at approximately two to the metre around the Field."

"They obviously think they've got something good in their discovery."

"Little do they know! "

Wry laughter.

"Look what we've got out of it! "

More wry laughter. Then the more serious voice again.

"Let's have less of the frivolity. Have we any suggestions which could possibly be of use in drawing off the attention of the Copan Security Police before they immobilise the *Guntharben* and find Sands."

"One thing's certain, my solemn friend. The best point to concentrate on is the way they scream blue murder when something goes 'bang in the dark.' In other words, their superstitious natures."

"Three cheers for the most brilliant brain of all Earth Intelligence! "

"Drop dead, will you, girl! "

When the Terran Consul received the complaint from Captain Mackenzie that his ship was being detained for insufficient reasons and that if he didn't do something about it quickly, certain gravitational conditions would delay the *Guntharben* far longer than the search would take, the Consul had already given his instructions and the necessary psychological training.

He went out to the *Guntharben* personally, an unprecedented happening, and after making a formal complaint to the Copan Field Police, he was driven out to the ship in his luxurious and unobtrusively armoured mobile, through the ring of Security Police surrounding the *Guntharben.*

He proceeded to play his part with distinction, angling Captain Mackenzie on his psychological line with unnoticed skill, but with tensed nerves, for convincing Mackenzie was the easier of his tasks;

the Copans were undoubtedly listening in through a pick-up planted in the Control Bridge by the Security Police the previous day, and they must not suspect anything.

"You realise, of course, Captain," he said, "that you have no legal right to object to the delay, for under reciprocal treaties, the Copans have every authority to do this."

Captain Mackenzie looked annoyed.

"Well, anyway, have you any idea what they're looking for?"

The Consul put on a carefully judged conspiritorial air. "Well," he said softly, deliberatcly starting to look stealthily around the Bridge and catching himself with a self-conscious smile, "We're not supposed to know this of course, but they think that there's an Earthman hiding in your hold who's on the run from the Security Police."

"What's he wanted for?" asked Baker, who had been a quiet spectator during the preliminary talking, but was interested now.

This was the moment. Gain their sympathy. Choose a Copan crime which would appear normal conduct to Earthmen; at least, the Consul qualified hastily, normal conduct to a certain type of Earthman.

"He accosted the mistress of one of the Controllers of Textiles Corporated in a drinking house, I think," he said in a deliberately off-hand manner.

He saw the indignant awakening of the partisan spirit of Earth which seems to follow the Law of Inverse Squares as the light years to Terra increase, and he smiled inwardly.

After a few more minutes, he left, leaving a germinating seed of rebellion behind him in the Guntharben.

Once more the Earthman watched the twenty hour Copan day wear on towards noon.

At the base of the *Guntharben,* the Copans scuttled like ants around the flaring jet orifices; in a typically Copan manner they had circumvented some difficult constructional problems by making the suction loader simply a loader, and now they couldn't unload the grain until they had dismantled the mechanism and altered it.

Captain Meckenzie relished the delay, for he had decided to blast off that night; he couldn't know that the final stimulus to a half-made decision had been supplied artificially by the remaining Earth Security system via the Earth Consul.

Darkness came and still the unloading hadn't started.

Delicate micro-millimetre controls were adjusted by steady

hands and electrical forces fluxed in the humid atmosphere above Mek. A remotely controlled two-feet long rocket opened tiny ports around its nose and ejected incredibly fine particles at carefully chosen points. Controlled refraction began.

One of the cargo loaders saw it first. He began to run.

Baker, who was standing on the crew platform far up in the gathering dusk, noticed the running figure and a concerted movement through the men clustered round the base of the gantry as they turned to stare after the fleeing cargo loader. Then one of the tiny figures pointed at the sky and a scared shout drifted distantly up to Baker.

He looked in the direction of the pointing arm.

Perceptibly against the purplish sky there was a patch of darkness pushing out amoebic pseudopods with slow menace. Baker felt a shiver up his back. What was it?

He went into the airlock and closed the outer door. He waited for the safety circuit to complete itself, then opened the inner door.

"Come and have a look at this . . ."

Mackenzie and Soames, one of the crewmen, came into the airlock and went outside to the crew platform. By this time, the cloud had coalesced and withdrawn into a sharply defined mass which was so dark that it looked like a hole in the sky.

The superstitious cargo loaders were tiny specks heading away from the *Guntharben* and after trying to stop them, a hopeless task, the Security Police who had been specially trained to subjugate their overriding superstitions watched the forming symbol for a few minutes; then they too began to move away, with a hint of haste in their rigid walks.

The Earthmen studied the symbol, something like the Crux Anstata of Terra, and the Sign of Foreboding in the principal Copan religion. Then Captain Mackenzie spun on his heel, a grim smile on his face.

"Come on, you two, here's our chance to blastoff without burning a few Copans to death in our rocket flame," he said over his shoulder, and Soames and Baker quickly followed him into the airlock. The outer door slammed to, and then there was only the featureless hull face of the *Guntharben* and five minutes after, a tiny glow of light showing redly around the rims of the jet orifices.

Sands opened his eyes and there was nothing but impenetrable darkness. He tried to move and realised with a sudden flood of terror that he was still trapped in the grain, that soon his oxygen

would be exhausted, that soon he would never breath untainted air again, that he would never feel wind on his face and smell the particular scent of the Oxfordshire countryside that was duplicated nowhere else in the Galaxy. He fought the tide of oblivion that came sweeping in again to protect him from the realities which faced him, and concentrated on the faint sensory stimuli reaching him from the so-near outside. There was a barely noticeable vibration and then he felt rather than heard a clang echoing through the ship.

That was a mooring grapple releasing! he thought excitedly.

There was another clang . . . and another . . .

The vibration increased, and Sands knew that outside the insulating grain there was the monstrous roar of an operating drive belittling other noises to nothing.

In the Control Bridge Captain Mackenzie sat with fingers poised above the firing studs, his eyes fixed on the red needle showing Pump Pressure, watching it move steadily around the colour graduated scale.

In the secondary Control Point, Baker studied similar dials and watched studs depressing themselves and levers moving backwards and forwards in response to impulses from the identical controls operated in the other Control Point.

He said suddenly, "Hey, cap! This bloke down in the hold. If he's buried under the grain, how the hell's he going to breath?"

Captain Mackenzie kept his eyes rigidly on the instruments.

"Didn't you notice that there was a spacesuit missing?" he said absently.

"Well, how's he going to get out from under the grain, then?" said Baker in the manner of a man presenting an unsolvable problem.

"Don't worry," said Mackenzie mysteriously, "he'll get out without any help from us . . ."

The moving pressure needle apparently disappeared as it reached the red part of the colour calibrations, and Mackenzie pushed down both hands in a mighty chord.

Sands tried to squirm to relieve the mighty drag of the economically high takeoff accelerations which Mackenzie was using, but he was still held in a straitjacket of grain. Without the sprung bunks and hydraulically cushioned, form-fitting chairs of the spaceship to help his body fight against the unnatural strains imposed upon it, his blood was dragged away from his head and his heart was unable to pump more up to replace it.

So Sands blacked out.

Captain Mackenzie released the firing studs and the thunder of the drive ceased; he floated gently away from the Control Point, twisting in the air to land on his feet on the bulkhead between the Control Bridge and the crew quarters, which had previously been the floor. Soames set the instruments which could check course to an incredible degree of accuracy in a mere quarter of an hour. Baker checked the instruments banked round the secondary Control Point, made a couple of minor adjustments, twisted his head to look at Mackenzie. "All correct, cap."

They relaxed, lying on soft cushions of air.

"What about our stowaway, cap?" said Baker.

"He'll be around soon," said Mackenzie. "Just flood the airlock with air to make sure we can hear him when he comes."

Baker pushed himself off, glided over to the airlock now in the floor or ceiling, depending on your viewpoint. He opened the inner door and there was a *whoosh* as the airlock filled up. Air was never left in the airlock because exposure to the single-thickness outer door of the lock conducted away its heat and so produced a temperature drop in the ship when the two air masses intermingled, on the opening of the inner door.

The radio operator came out of his cubicle and hovered in the exact centre of the Bridge, revolving very slowly on his longditudinal axis; presently the soft thumps of airtight doors closing showed that the other two crewmen were going down into the overdrive room. There was an air of expectancy in the Control Bridge, manifesting itself in the tense positions, and the irritatingly regular noise made as Soames thudded a fist into cupped palm, first the right hand into the left, then the left into the right to neutralise the slight spin which the navigator gave himself.

"Shut up, will you!" snapped Baker.

Soames stopped.

Sands floated amongst the millions of grains like a castaway in the Rings of Saturn. With the abrupt change from high acceleration to freefall, tightly compressed grains had sprung away from the lower portion of the hold and now occupied the entire cargo compartment. Sands switched on the torch on the right forearm of the suit and with the beam tightly focused, swung his arm in a wide arc.

All around him were the grains like miniature moons. He couldn't see the loading hatch; for that matter, neither could he see the hull, and he realised that he must have drifted away from it during his blackout. He moved his arm again and watched long

lines of grains stretching away from him until the separate seeds became indistinguishable, winking into existence, it seemed, for the brief moment that his light rested upon them and then disappearing into the absolute darkness once more. He hung his arm down by his side and tilted his head back. Still the grains were just visible, illuminated by a reflection of the torch beam pointing in the precisely opposite direction.

Sands roused himself to action and switched on the lights round the base of his plastic hood; he read the oxygen hours left to him on the wafer thin, flexible indicator inset in the transparent material of the hood, just below his eye level. He remembered that the calculations were based on the oxygen already used and the time it had taken to use them. The hour and a half indicated was, then, only about an hour of active movements, since his elapsed time spent in the suit had been mostly inactive. Enough, though, to get to the crew lock, he estimated.

He altered the torch beam to diffused, unfocussed light, gathered a handful of grain in each hand, threw them violently rearwards. He began to glide slowly forward, looking ahead of him, watching the grains swim slowly towards him and ricochette gently off the plastic skin around his head. Ridiculously, he found that it took a conscious effort of will to stop himself blinking involuntarily as they came towards his eyes.

The hull floated up towards him and he twisted slightly, thrust his arms out in front of him. Instead of hitting the plates directly he touched them at an angle and slowly bounced off. He hurled another handful of grain in a carefully judged direction and drifted in parallel to the hull this time, made contact without rebounding and moved along just touching it with his shoulder and his thigh.

After searching for five minutes, he found the cargo hatch, closed by automatic safety controls at the time of blastoff. He struggled with it, hooking the fingers of his left hand around one of the hinges while he pushed and strained at an obstinate catch.

Twice the flimsy hold his left hand was trying to maintain slipped and he sailed away from the hatch before he could regain it. Finally he pulled it open and eased himself through, holding firmly to the sides of the hatch. Outside, the stars were still points—the *Guntharben* was not yet in overdrive. He flattened himself against the hull and looked along it. First he picked out the black curve of the hull, then the direction of the nose.

He began to crawl along the metal, feeling through the insulation of his suit only a slight chill from the absolute-zero temperature of the hull plates. Occasionally he floated away from the hull and

waited patiently until he made contact again. He changed the focus of the light back to the concentrated beam and stood gingerly to his feet. He directed the torch up the hull and watched the long, pale oval of light. There! That's the crew lock, he thought.

He knelt down again on the hull and put his right forearm on the plates in front of him, pointing the path of light along the hull.

When he reached the airlock, he banged thunderously upon it; slowly it swung open, controlled from the inside. A gush of pale air came out, covering him with rime as the moisture condensed on his suit.

Baker stepped away from the airlock controls and looked through the small hatch in the now-closed inner door.

When Sands floated into the Bridge, Baker pushed a sly finger in his ribs. "About time you got here," he said with a grin. "What was it like in the hold?"

Sands looked at him in amazement. "But how did you know where I was?" he asked.

Baker leered at him. "We got our spies everywhere, mate. And that's how we know the Copans are after you for trying to pick up some woman, you nasty old man!"

Sands was puzzled, because he was certain that nobody had watched him hide in the hold, but he didn't pursue the subject.

"Thanks for not giving me up," he said.

"Great Ghu," exclaimed Captain Mackenzie. "You don't think that we'd have left an Earthman to the Copan idea of justice, do you? Arresting a man for talking to a woman . . . I ask you!"

The course computer buzzed and extruded a punched strip of paper. Soames fed it into a slot at the secondary Control Point, and Baker floated over and studied the results on the instruments. He pushed some studs, and the *Guntharben* heaved slightly. Baker checked the instruments, turned to Mackenzie.

"On course, cap."

"Right." Sands was forgotten as Mackenzie and his crew prepared for the jump into overdrive. Down below in the overdrive room, the other two crewmen began to gradually increase power through the unit and the crystalline feelers began to vibrate, creating an artificial condition in which multiple light speeds were possible.

The *Guntharben* slid smoothly into overdrive.

After steadily increasing velocity for thirteen hours, the apparent density of space reached a point at which it was unwise for the *Guntharben* to travel any faster. The hours and days wore on. After the inevitable questions had all been asked and Captain

Mackenzie had decided to hand Sands over to Earth Security when the *Guntharben* arrived with her cargo of grain, Sands carefully opened the capsule and loaded the film into the ship's microfilm projector. He switched it on and put his eyes to the eyepiece.

A densely packed sheet of ideographs, splattered with some intricately phrased equations, was projected on to the softly glowing screen. There were two lines of capitalised titling strip.

Sands began to laboriously translate it from his hypnotically impressed knowledge of the Copan language.

"A Method of . . . " Sands paused and tried to rid his mind of all unnecessary thoughts, attempting to achieve the ideal of a completely blank consciousness, allowing an easy path between the ideographs and the translations in his subconscious mind.

"per . . . pet . . . uating . . . " a pause . . . "Life in . . . " Sands gulped. "Anthropoid Lifeforms . . . "

A Method of perpetuating Life in Anthropoid Lifeforms!

Sands switched off the projector and took out the film with the automatic actions and detachment of deep thought.

Immortality . . . that was what it amounted to.

Eternal Life. If anything could unite the Copan Corporations and bring them to a concerted action, the bait of immortality was that thing. A reward or a bribe, either way it would be equally effective.

Sands let his thoughts run farther afield. Suddenly he realised that he could practically ask his own reward for the secret when he made contact with the Terran Government through Earth Security.

He replaced the film in the capsule with almost ludicrous care.

The voice of Captain Mackenzie, booming through the *Guntharben,* came curiously deadened to Sands as he lay on the bunk in his sleeping cubicle, half asleep, letting his mind play with the thoughts of the pleasures and luxuries which might be his, dreaming of going back to Earth.

"Sands!" He roused himself and floated to the companionway leading to the Control Bridge. "Yes?" he called.

"Come up here!"

Sands pushed himself off and coasted slowly up the companionway, into the Bridge.

Mackenzie greeted him, "Don't look now, but we're being followed."

He showed Sands the delicate instruments and the scope which indicated the presence of another operative overdrive within a quarter of a light year.

Sands eyed the scope with the blip almost motionless on the quarter of a light year concentric circle of the system centred on the *Guntharben.* "Who do you think it is?" he asked.

"The way I look at it,' said Mackenzie, "it can only be a Copan ship."

"Why?" asked Sands.

"The blip is practically motionless, so that ship must be on almost exactly the same course as us and travelling practically the same speed. And the odds against that happening by chance would require a new system of mathematical notation to express, unless that ship," Mackenzie nodded his head in the direction of the scope," started from the same place as us at just about the same time."

Sands pulled at an earlobe, thoughtfully.

"What can they do if they catch up with us?" he asked.

"Well, they can't touch us until their overdrive sphere merges with ours, which would require some pretty accurate movement if we didn't want it to . . "

"What's this about overdrive spheres?" asked Sands.

Mackenzie thought for a moment. "It's difficult to explain, but that's what the overdrive unit produces. It's a sphere of hyperspace; inside the sphere we can exceed the speed of light, outside it there is normal space. That is why the Copans wouldn't be able to touch us. The sphere's a mathematical impossibility really, but as long as it works, why should I worry?"

"What'll happen if they do merge spheres with us?"

"You're the proper original quiz kid, aren't you, mate?" said Baker.

Outside the *Guntharben,* the stars were varicoloured rings of light against purple space. The reflections on the polished metal of the hull looked like carelessly thrown hoopla rings. At a distance which could almost be measured sensibly in terrestial miles, the other ship paralleled their course, invisible but detectable.

Mackenzie sat at the Control Point, strapped in, immobile but for the flicker of fingers like blades of steel and the quick movement of eyes. He was sweating with strain, changing the course of the *Guntharben* as randomly as he could; his fingers would hover over a set of studs, then shift to another set, then to another, before they finally dropped to the roughened plastic of the studs.

He brushed the drops of sweat from his forehead. "It's no good," he said tensely, 'they've got some sort of psycho-computer in that blasted ship that predicts whatever I'm going to do." He turned to the Secondary Control Point. "Have a try, Baker."

For the first few erratic switches of course, the other ship was slow; the blip would shift fractionally from the centre of the bulls-eye of concentric circles on the scope and the men clinging to straps on the hull would breath audible sighs of relief.

Suddenly Captain Mackenzie looked at Sands. "They're chasing you for something more than you've told us," he said accusingly. Sands mutely shook his head.

For five hours the subtle manoeuvring continued. Inside the *Guntharben,* the controls were taken over by man after man, and each time the other ship would lose some ground at first, then quickly regain it, and more, as the psycho-computer detected an unconscious pattern in the moves which even the pilot himself was unaware existed.

The end was inevitable.

Outside, a segment of ship suddenly appeared, occulting the rings of the stars. It was the middle portion of the Copan ship, appearing through the circle of junction between the two overdrive spheres. The visible segment of Copan ship slowly grew, revealing the ugly streamlined bulges of weapon pods on her sides, with chill starlight shining on thick plastic ports and the phosphorescent, angular ideographs of her fleet designation glowing coldly.

The circle of junction suddenly dwindled as the distance between the ships increased, and the Copan ship disappeared in the time of a blink of an eye. Almost immediately it was back, entirely visible from the clustered tubes to the needle nose, visible because the ship was darker than the purple backdrop of space.

Inside the *Guntharben,* Sands stared into a viewplate, judging the approach of the other ship. He had on a spacesuit.

He turned to Mackenzie. "You're sure that there's nowhere for me to hide?" he asked.

"No . . . there's nowhere."

The *Guntharben* was slowly revolving on its axis; every ten seconds or so, the view of the Copan ship would shift to another screen, the image gradually becoming larger. There was a clang on the hull as a magnetic grapple touched, scraped around the turning ship, slowing its revolution. There was another clang, more scraping and rattling.

"Get a move on, Sands, they'll be coming aboard to look for you soon . . ."

Sands waited until the airlock of the *Guntharben* was beginning to move out of the view of the other ship, then opened the outer door of the lock a foot and squeezed out, the miniature rocket unit scraping against the lock rim. He hunched his shoulders as he

floated away from the closing lock, letting the unit settle itself more comfortably on his back. The important thing, the really important thing, a real matter of life or death, was that he must not go near the limits of the overdrive sphere. Don't go near it, he told himself. Stay right near the ship.

For consider, if he went out of the sphere, he would be in normal space, stranded. And without instantaneous radio and without a more specific knowledge of his position, even than within a million miles, he could drift for the rest of time without being found. And he couldn't wait that long.

How many ships had been lost through elapsed millenia? Once an alien ship had been found, drifting into Sirius System. An empty shell of metal, grained and carved out like a log canoe, with nothing inside it, no engines, no propulsion tubes, no air-locks. An enigma.

How many human ships, lost in normal space between the stars by the failure of their overdrive units, would be found ages in the future . . . to puzzle their finders?

So mused Sands as he watched magnetic grapples floating towards the *Guntharben,* slowing her revolution and drawing the two ships closer together. He grasped his automatic tightly, knowing that if he dropped it, the gun would not fall or drift away, yet not liking to risk relaxing his grip.

Incredibly, he realised that this was the first time he had floated in space with nothing in comfortable reach, nothing to touch and feel, nothing to keep him in touch with humanity. He began to fall. His brain told him that rationally he wasn't, yet insisted that he was. He felt nauseated and heartburn gurgled in his throat.

As suddenly as it had begun, the feeling of falling stopped, yet the nausea remained. Through a haze of sickness, he watched tiny tails of flame rush towards the *Guntharben,* swing round, slow down, blink out. A comforting, warm square of yellow light shone as the outer door of the airlock opened and one, two, three figures were silhouetted against it for a moment before they went inside. The square of light diminished to an oblong, a slit, a hair line.

Sands was alone, cut off from humanity except for a featureless, star-reflecting hull.

Immediately after Sands had gone outside to wait for the Copans to search the *Guntharben* for him and the secret he carried next to his skin, Mackenzie gathered together the crewmen in the Control Bridge.

"Look here," he said. "It's obvious that Sands has done something more than accost a girl if the Copans are going to these lengths to get hold of him. And if he isn't willing to confide in me, I don't think that I, or you, are under any obligation to protect him. Don't give him away, don't help the Copans, unnecessarily, but don't delay them."

"It looks to me, cap, that you're running out on him," said Baker.

Mackenzie looked obstinate, the strains of the last few hours were apparent in his demeanour.

"I don't want to start any interstellar complications," he said defensively.

"Don't give us that, cap," said Soames. "You're scared."

"Look here," repeated Mackenzie, his brows lowering, "this is my blasted ship, and I don't want it impounded or blown out of space for the sake of one Terran who seems a pretty shifty character, anyway."

He glared round at the crewmen.

There was a bang at the airlock.

"Open it, Baker," said Mackenzie.

"No."

The hostility was very apparent.

Mackenzie pushed himself off, floated to the airlock, opened it.

Three Copans floated into the *Guntharben,* fanned out just inside the airlock. Captain Mackenzie pushed a button, a light glowed red, the inner door swung closed. A voice crackled out from a speaker set in the helmet of a Copan with the Security Police emblem blazoned on his chest piece; his face was invisible behind a one-way vision filter.

"You will pliz push into centre of room." The inflections of his voice were subtly different, alien. The crewmen looked at each other, pushed off from the hull lining, judging the impetus to leave them floating within reach of a hand hold.

"You will pliz come nearer."

Finally the crewmen were skilfully manoeuvred until they were floating helplessly in the middle of the Control Bridge. One Copan turned to Mackenzie while the other two drew weapons and faced the crewmen with watchfulness evident in the positions of their bodies.

"Capzeen, you will pliz tell me where the man Sands is hidden." The Copan raised his metal gloved hand suggestively.

Mackenzie literally cowered. "I don't know," he spluttered, "Really I don't."

"I never thought he was yellow-bellied," said Baker to Soames.

Soames shrugged. "You can't tell, can you?"

The Copan smashed Mackenzie in the face. The sound of the metal glove striking against flesh was unpleasant. Mackenzie put his hands to his face and blood trickled between his fingers.

"We will not waste time."

Mackenzie whimpered. He took his hands briefly away from his face.

"I don't know where he is, I tell you!" he screamed. His mouth was a dark hole in a mask of blood.

After the fifth blow, one of the overdrive techs of the *Guntharben* took a spanner from his pocket and threw it. As it left his hand one of the Copans triggered his weapon. The granular bullet struck the tech on his chest and stomach and killed him instantly.

There was a murmer from the other three men. Then Baker cursed. Soames said quickly "Shut up. We'll wait until the iron's hot before we . . ." He left the last word of the old proverb unsaid. The other overdrive tech glanced at him quickly. Baker did not look at Soames or the body lying flacidly against the hull where the impact of the bullet had pushed it; instead he stared stolidly ahead, watching the rise and fall of the Copan Security man's arm.

Finally Mackenzie broke.

"He's Outside."

One Copan stayed in the *Guntharben* to keep Baker, Soames and the other crewman out of action, and the other two Security Police went out of the airlock.

Humanity is spread throughout the Galaxy in a million different but similar forms. Some have tentacular limbs, trinocular optical systems, furry bodies. Some live in symbiosis with a curious variety of life forms. All have adapted themselves to the conditions on their native worlds.

And despite the immense variety of physical variations on the basic anthropoid lifeform, all humanity have one thing in common.

The immense variety of humanity is not only confined to physical differences; it extends to mentality as well. Some have thoughts as vital as leaping fish, others have thoughts with the inexorability of falling rain. The humanity of Terra once were adventurous; once the spirit of Earth was like a patch of oil on still water, spreading in a whirl of scintillating colour. But now peace had thrown a veil over the planet, life went on in an uneventfully slow placing of one foot in front of the other. Ponderously? Spiritlessly? Time would tell.

No more did Earthman spread across the Galaxy in their swarming thousands; gradually the starmen were dying out. Occasionally a dissatisfied sect would pull up its roots and go from Earth to colonise a planet where a one-sided, unbalanced civilisation would gradually mature to a true democracy. There were still some free-lance traders plying between the stars, supplying a rapidly disappearing need for strangeness and novelty. There were still throwbacks like Sands . . . but very few. And there were still the members of Earth Intelligence, sacrificing their heritage of peace for the good of their Home.

But for all the difference between, for instance, the stolid, withdrawn civilisation of Earth, and the surging Lezaun Matriarchy, there is still a basic similarity.

Humanity, whatever its form, whatever its environment, whatever its background, humanity is not infallible. Man will always make mistakes.

Which was why the entire potentialities of Copa, spearheaded by the solitary Copan aboard the *Guntharben,* could not keep the crew of the *Guntharben* out of the struggle for possession of Sands and the secret he held.

Baker, Soames and the overdrive tech floated helplessly in the centre of the Control Bridge. The blank helmet of the Copan moved slowly, like the hood of a snake. It was disconcerting to be unable to read the expression on his face, to watch the direction of his eyes, to wait for the inevitable moment when his attention would wander, and the crewmen, by pushing against each other, would perhaps be able to close with him.

The crewmen had already forgotten that they were in the wrong, that they were actually aiding a lawbreaker. All the hostility against alien races which these neurotic starmen held inside them was finding an outlet in this battle between the underdog and Law, the law of another race.

"The Terran Space Navy will have sumthin' narsty to say about this," shouted Baker at the expressionless, unrevealing helmet.

The radio operator, who had been sleeping, forgotten by the remainder of the crew, in his cubicle, woke up. The unnatural stillness of the starship seemed curious to him, and he tried to remember what had awakened him. Wasn't it a voice?

He slid off his bunk and floated out to the companion way, looked up it. He could see a leg which he recognised as Baker's visible through the companion way, floating in the middle of the Bridge, motionless. The radio operator pushed off and slid through

the air, the steps floating past beneath him, unused, unwanted until the *Guntharben* made planetfall again. Some innate sense of caution restrained him at the entrance to the Bridge and he looked cautiously around the lintel. The situation was self-evident. The radioman withdrew his head, returned to his sleeping cubicle, began to hunt for a weapon.

He found it, a souvenir sacrificial knife of the pattern used by the priests of Tabor, fourth planet of Arcturus. A close examination would have revealed a microscopic "Made in Birmingham" on the hilt. But for all that, the weapon had a keen edge to sheer through the rubber and metal fabric of a spacesuit . . . and the flesh and bone beneath it.

He returned to the companion way, floated up it, resumed his watch at the entrance to the Control Bridge. The helmet which the Copan wore obscured his view and the man was obviously applying one of the basic tenets of humanity . . . What I cannot see, is not.

The mouth of the radio operator tightened, he pushed himself off from the head of the companion way and floated slowly across the Bridge towards the Copan mercenary, the knife glinting.

Baker saw him and frantically began to talk, saying anything, studying the Copan frantically, trying to gain from the expressionless helmet some assurance that he was attracting the man's attention.

"You don't think that you're goin' to get away with this, do you?" he said, his voice conveying the emotion which the banality of his speech would never express. "Why, that flea pit Copa 'll get blown out of space if you don't get that battlewagon of yours out of it."

The radio operator had ten feet to go.

The Copan spoke. "You broke our laws."

The radio operator glided on silently.

The knife flashed in a vicious arc, and the blade entered the Copan at the base of his neck and cut his jugular vein. He kicked for a moment, and when the radio man withdrew the knife, globules of blood emerged slowly from the slit and broke away like soap bubbles.

The radio operator saw Captain Mackenzie floating unconscious near the airlock door, his face covered with dried, blackened blood, his nose flattened, one eye closed. He began to go over to him. Baker caught his arm.

"Leave him alone," he said softly.

The mouth of the radio operator opened.

"What?" he said incredulously.

Baker's lips twisted angrily. "Leave the yellow-bellied swab alone!" he shouted, the metal of the starship ringing to his voice.

Mackenzie moaned, very softly, and little flecks of blood came from his lips. Painfully he moved an arm and caught hold of a strap on the inner wall of the hull.

Baker began to speak with a new authority and urgency in his tone. The atmosphere of flippancy and shallowness which had always surrounded the little man disappeared.

"Look," he said, "It don't matter why we're helpin' Sands. Perhaps he is in the wrong, perhaps he has done something more than what he's told us. It still don't make any difference to the fact that he's Terran, like us, and that these other swine are aliens."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"But what the hell can we do to rescue him?"

Soames creased his forehead in thought. "It seems to me," he said haltingly, "that if they just wanted him dead, the Copans could have blown this can out of space, made sure of killing him, and nobody would have been any the wiser. They'd have just said our overdrive must have failed."

"Which means, then," said the radioman," that if they haven't caught him yet, Sands is still out there," he nodded his head towards the airlock," and he'll be alive still."

"That's how I see it,' said Soames.

"Then there's only one thing to do," said Baker. "Let's get into our suits." He pushed off towards the airlock. "Wait," husked Mackenzie through cracked lips. He pushed off from the hull. "Listen to me. I've got a better plan."

"Why should we listen to you?" said Baker bitterly.

"I'm a coward," replied Mackenie. "I always have been, I suppose. And I've let Sands down. Can't you at least give me a chance to try and get him out of this mess."

The crewmen looked at each other, then back to the battered man, appealing silently with his eyes.

Sands was sweating inside his suit, the drops starting out on his forehead and trickling into his eyes as he moved his head. His armpits were wet, and the palms of his hands were clammy. He tried to rub them down his thighs and felt a sudden, petty outburst of anger, when he could not because he was wearing a suit.

The stars were like the pale faces which look up from the auditorium of a theatre, amused by the actor's antics but unaffected by them. Sands felt alone. Suddenly he could not wait any longer for the Copans to catch him, he had to do something positive. He

gave the impeller stud a little blip and drifted forward beside the dark metal of the fin he was hiding behind. On his left he knew, was the surface of the overdrive sphere, invisible but certain death to pentrate. On his right was the *Guntharben* and beyond that, the Copan ship, like monstrous whales in a goldfish bowl, with five deadly minnows hunting for him. The shining blue of the metal fin slid by him. It ended in a sharp edge and Sands cartwheeled in space with an incredible, airy ease which he could never hope to repeat in a gymnasium. For a brief moment he was back in primary school with the voice of his gym. teacher, not angry but patient. He could have understood anger, he knew, but not that patient voice saying, "Try it again, Christopher," when it was obvious that he would never be able to do it with the grace of his friends. What does it matter, anyway? he had asked, and now, he realised that he knew the answer; that his failure in as little a thing as cartwheels had laid the foundation to the feeling of inferiority that had driven him out into space, to the stars, and that his teacher had known it.

Christopher. Laura had been the last person to call him that. Never Chris, but always Christopher, in that soft, lovely voice of hers.

Back to the present; back to the here-and-now; keep away from that subject. No Trespassing, not in those memories.

He touched the impeller stud again and stopped himself, spinning slowly round and round. The stars revolved solemnly before his eyes. He saw a tiny red candle flame and knew what it was. The torch beam centred on him and the moment was here. Behind that light was a Copan, as isolated from his companions as Sands was. Sands was not afraid, the petty anger had left him, he felt detached from his body. His mind coldly calculated angles and vectors, hefted the weight of the automatic in his hand, ordered his body to move it in such-and-such a way, point it in such-and-such a direction. He squeezed the trigger, there was a splash of flame, the gun kicked in his hand.

The candle flame streaming from the back of the Copan was snuffed out, only a vague red glow was left, shining on the tiny figure of the Copan, illuminating the arms and legs; jerking like a puppet's.

The man sailed serenely on. Sands watched dispassionately as the Copan approached the limits of the overdrive sphere. Suddenly the kicking figure disappeared, was gone into normal space, to struggle until the air supply was exhausted. It would die; the spirit would leave the bodily husk to drift forever between the stars.

Sands drove himself back behind the protecting fin of the *Guntharben* and stopped there, waiting. That leaves four, he thought, melodramatically.

Captain Mackenzie and Baker climbed into spacesuits in the airlock. They switched out the airlock lights and stood in the darkness to let their eyes adjust to the difference between the brightly lighted Control Bridge and the blackness of space. Mackenzie had been roughly patched up with artificial skins and pain killers. In his hand he held the weapon which the knifed Copan had used; in a belt he had thrust an iron bar. Baker had a signal gun.

Baker rapped on the inner door and Soames operated the airlock controls. The outer door swung open and the two men slipped through the still opening gap and floated out of the lock to make the number of players in the macabre game of hide-and-seek up to seven. The outer door closed behind them.

Mackenzie studied the sinister shape of the Copan ship and kicked off from the hull of the *Guntharben* in a carefully judged course he hoped would bring him to his destination without using his rocket unit and so giving away his position. He sailed off into space and Baker watched him go with a curious, resigned expression on his face, as if he had tried to talk Mackenzie out of some action, and had failed.

The white spot of a torch beam appeared on the hull beside Baker and moved towards him. Baker avoided it.

He waited, listening to the ticking of his watch conducted by the air in his suit. After what he reckoned to be about three minutes had passed, there was a slit of light showing against the hull of the Copan ship. It was the first visible indication that Mackenzie had successfully reached the other starship and carried out the primary section of his plan. It was also the signal for Baker to begin to look for Sands. Where would a hunted man hide? he asked himself. Where *could* a hunted man hide in the overdrive sphere? He wasn't in the *Guntharben* and no man would push his head into the lion's mouth by going into the Copan ship. So he was still Outside.

Baker took a firmer grasp of the signal gun and kicked off towards the shelter of the fins of the *Guntharben*. He sailed towards one and hooked his arm round the leading edge of it, wrenching the muscles of his shoulder and biceps as the force of his momentum was suddenly transferred to them. He slid into the shelter of the fin and released the trigger of the signal gun, already set to a muzzle velocity of a metre per second. The fuse of the flare was

set to a minute. In sixty seconds, then, the flare would bathe every unprotected object in the overdrive spere with icy white light.

Captain Mackenzie floated down a long white corridor in the alien starship. It was quiet, absolutely quiet. Mackenzie was shaking with fright; a tiny hosepipe was gushing inside his mouth. He was fighting the fear which had always been with him, all his life. He was hating himself for the cowardice he had shown. Every few years, just when he thought he had the bane of his life conquered, his fear of physical violence would overcome him. In a few hours, if his plan worked, the fear would never bother him again. He held the weapon in his hand tighter, and touched the iron bar in his belt with the other hand. There was almost certainly another Copan in the ship and that was the first obstacle he would have to surmount, with his fear clinging to his back like the Old Man of the Sea.

He reached a bulkhead with an airtight door set in it. Mackenzie arrived against it with a soft thump and pressed his helmet against the smooth, cool metal, listening by conduction. There were the noises of machinery but none of humanity. There was a semicircular slot in the door with a knob projecting from one end of the slot. The Earthman took hold of it gingerly and pulled it. The knob slid easily and followed the slot round. When it reached the other end of the slot, there was a click and a whir. The door started to swing slowly open.

Mackenzie kicked off from the wall of the corridor and slid through the opening in the bulkhead. Inside the door there was confusion to the eyes of the Earthman for the first few moments, until the details began to sort themselves out. The strange, alien distributions of controls . . . and the Copan moving quickly to a desk and pulling open a drawer. Mackenzie pointed his weapon and pushed the stud in the butt. There was a whistling bang and the disintegrating granular bullet caught the Copan and hurled him back against a bank of winking lights. There was a popping of vacuum tubes.

The body twitched and Mackenzie hurled himself at it. He began to beat at it with his iron bar, wedging himself against a chair, smashing, smashing, smashing, until the body was a limp rag of flesh and splintered bone. The man was screaming hysterically.

Finally Mackenzie stopped, looked at his splattered clothes. He was violently sick, inside his helmet.

After a few minutes, he recovered control, set his mouth determinedly, went to another airtight door leading out of the control

room. He was searching for the overdrive room, and the overdrive unit which the Copan ship must have. All the time, he was looking around nervously; his hands were shaking and twitching as he fumbled at the door.

Mackenzie floated into a long, cylindrical chamber. The door, a six-inch slab of silvery alloy, swung closed behind him with a soft thump of airtight joints.

The chamber was illuminated with a soft yellow light emanating from the crystalline hammer-head crystals laying against the hull, vibrating on the unimaginable frequencies which produced the overdrive sphere and the frequencies which produced visible light.

Delicately spun wires and metallic tubes shivered with tiny voices and sung with power. Mackenzie drifted among the fairy-like machinery, gripping his iron bar with shaking, sweating hands, thoughts whirling inside his head like frighted squirrels running up their treadmill, getting nowhere but still running on.

Coward, the voices of the tiny tubes seemed to say. *You're afraid, afraid, afraid,* murmured and sung the finely drawn wires.

Mackenzie tentatively touched at a tube with his iron bar, thinking. "I'm not afraid!" he shouted, and listened to the mocking voices of the overdrive.

The flare burst, throwing out flaming fragments. It looked like Sol at the orbit of Mars, only it was white, a blazing white ball. Baker realised that he was illuminated in its glare and he reached frantically over his shoulder to use his rocket unit. His finger was on the impeller stud when there was a red flash about ten yards away.

The blinding light turned the hull of the *Guntharben* to silver, threw sharp shadows across the metal. Sands gasped inside his suit, wondering, waiting for the light to die away, trying to decide what was producing the sudden illumination.

He suddenly saw the figure hanging near him in space and levelled his automatic and fired in one continuous motion. A moment later, he realised that he had shot Baker.

The hole in Baker's suit sealed itself in a few seconds. Baker hung there, writhing, feeling a red-hot iron pushing itself slowly into his guts, angry pain forcing him to scream until his stomach seemed to rush up into his throat and choke him. He clasped his hands uselessly over his stomach for a moment, then took them away; he could feel his abdomen thrusting itself out against his suit.

He made himself move forward, his brain telling him coldly that he was going to die, his spirit making him go on and complete the plan which Mackenzie had worked out. He took Sands by the upper arm, turned round and jetted towards the airlock. He banged once on the outside metal, even as the flare of their rocket units turned the airlock door red with the braking energies. The airlock swung open and the two men were inside. The inside door was opened when the pressure of the lock was only half that of the ship and there was a great whoosh as the pressure was equalised. Sands pulled Baker inside and stripped his suit off. The little man lay on the air and the expression on his face was not nice to look upon. Soames went for the emergency medical pack although he already knew with a sickening certainty that it was too late.

There were unashamed tears on Sands' cheeks. He wiped them away, looked up at Soames and the overdrive technician. "Let's get on with it," he said harshly, trying to disguise his emotion but seeing it reflected in the faces of the other two men. He looked around the Control Bridge, saw the body of the other overdrive tech, the corpse of the Copan. "Where's Mackenzie?"

Soames looked soberly at Sands. "Mackenzie had an idea. He's gone over to the Copan ship to smash their overdrive, if he can; and Baker went out to bring you back aboard."

Sands said, "Why?"

"Don't you see, you fool. The Copans will either be left in normal space or out there," Soames gestured Outside, "and they'll just stay there till their oxygen's exhausted."

"When's Mackenzie coming back to the *Guntharben,* then?"

"He isn't. And, Sands, do you really think that you're worth all the lives that have been thrown away for you?"

Silence fell in the *Guntharben* as the three men watched the scope and the double blip on it which indicated the *Guntharben* and the alien starship. Sands mulled over the bitter, angry words which Soames had flung at him.

After a couple of minutes, the blip on the scope suddenly dwindled to a single blip and the three men knew that Mackenzie had smashed the overdrive mechanism of the other ship and plunged it, with himself aboard, into the unplotted grave of interstellar space.

An hour passed, and then the first bangs on the airlock begun, and the first pitiful scrabblings on the outside skin of the *Guntharben.* Soames and the tech thought of Baker, who had finally found himself and had been killed by the man he was trying to save, and Mackenzie, who had shown his cowardice but finally

overcome it, and LeFleuve, the dead overdrive tech, and they set their faces implacably and did not open the lock. Sands thought of the secret he had, and he did not open the lock, either.

For twenty more hours the noises continued at irregular moments, gradually becoming weaker; finally they stopped.

For three more days the *Guntharben* cut through hyperspace like a shining spear enclosed in a soap bubble. On the second day, Soames went out in a spacesuit, with the bodies of Baker and LeFleuve and gave them a push which gradually took them out of the sphere and into normal space. He did not look at the four bodies with protruding tongues which orbited the ship like miniature moons.

After the three days, the course computers automatically took the *Guntharben* into normal space, within primary drive distance of Earth. Soames set course for Home and a day out, he called aboard a pilot. The pilot arrived in the uniform of Earth Intelligence and aboard an Earth Intelligence cruiser. He came aboard the *Guntharben* with an escort and the interstellar trading ship was piloted directly to Earth Intelligence Satellite, rolling around in its orbit beyond the moon.

There, the *Guntharben* was taken apart and put together again with all the marks of the struggle with the Copan ship erased and some convincing damage, indicative of an accident, substituted. The minds of Soames and the overdrive tech were cleared of all memories of Sands and the battle in hyperspace and in the place of those memories were put convincing remembrences of an accident in space, which neatly explained the deaths of Mackenzie, Baker and LeFleuve. The *Guntharben* was sold to a breaker's yard, Soames and the tech were paid off from the money for the ship and cargo and the remainder of the proceeds went to an unsuspected wife of Mackenzie.

Sands was forgotten, completely.

Sands studied his image, narrowed and saturnine, in the mirror-surface of the sphere in which he found himself. He moved his head to look around him and the slight movement caused his body to float away from the concave, cool surface of the metal. He looked at his body and realised that he was nude. And he also realised that he had just regained consciousness. Only the hiatus that he sensed lay between his previous thoughts and his present ones gave him this information, because there was no interruption, no gap of troubled dreams, no sense of muzziness and that just-

woken-up feeling. His thoughts had gone smoothly on; one moment he was going into the airlock of the satellite disc with Soames and the other crewman, the next moment he had been looking down at a distorted image of himself.

The sphere was about fifteen feet across, a bubble of opaque metal inside which he was trapped. There was no gravity, the light flooding the globe was sourceless, no mark marred the polished surface of the metal, there were no pipes to supply air. There was nothing in there but Sands, and he was nude. He looked at himself and realised that he was clean, as well; incredibly clean. Not merely hot-bath-and-scrub, but sterilised cleanliness. His toe and finger nails looked like thin white paper, and his hair was fluffing round his head like a halo. He was not hungry, he was not thirsty, he did not feel sleepy, and somehow he knew that whilst he was in the sphere, no human needs would bother him.

There was a voice, echoless, sexless, clear as a bell.

"Sands."

"Yes?" he answered ridiculously, for the voice had not called, it had merely stated.

"We have taken the information for which seventeen men died."

Sands pretended a confidence he did not feel. Although it was as if all emotion had been sucked out of him, he still felt a deep dread. "I'm going to charge you five million pounds for it, and even counting the lives that it's cost, it's still cheap at the price!"

"Would you, Sands, buy a secret which you had already, and had owned for nine hundred years?"

It took a moment or two for the words to sink in.

Then, "You've got the secret of immortality?" asked Sands, incredulously. Reason quickly reasserted itself. "You can't have. You're lying. You want me to reduce the price." But that was ridiculous. He was at the mercy of Earth Security. They didn't have to pay him anything if they didn't want to. No, they couldn't have the secret . . . no! Why, if they did have it, there would be no money, and if there was no money, there would be no life of ease, no women surrounding him to make him forget Laura and his related hatred of the Earth Government, and to overcome his phobia against returning to his birthplace, to Earth. Sands struck furiously at the implacable metal with his open hand and floated away into the centre of the sphere, screaming, not even gaining the satisfaction of cauterising pain from the bruised and broken fingers of his hand. He thought cunning thoughts, he spoke softly to the enclosing walls, hoping to trick them.

"But if you have immortality, why don't you give it to the people of Earth?" Ah, you've got them there, Sands. They can't answer that.

The voice in the walls sounded again, reflectively. "I can answer that, Sands, if you really want to know.

"The reason is Evolution. That's why we haven't given everlasting life to the people of Earth. Evolution does not allow immortality. It drove Man from the comfort of his primitive fires; it drove him out into Space, to explore the planets of his own solar system, and, eventually, the planets of other stars, and then, in the fullness of time, it brought him back to his birthplace; Earth. When Man left the stars to the younger races, it wasn't because he had grown tired, or old and senile. It was because Evolution had channeled the spirit of the human race into introspection . . . looking inward to solve more important problems.

"The human race is growing up, Sands. We have finished playing marbles with the stars, and empire building in the Galaxy; we've come back Home to conquer ourselves.

"And this is why immortality is bad. If the human race became immortal, the expanding numbers of men would force us to take a step back down the ladder of evolution, our own prolific breeding would make us colonies out among the stars again until Evolution overcame the Immortality drug and made us mortal once more. We don't want to juggle with solar systems anymore, Sands, so we don't use the Immortality treatment.

"We could restrict our birthrate, I suppose, and stagnate in an unchanging civilisation, but that would hold up Evolution even more. Man is born to die, and that's all there is to it. So we don't let any knowledge of the possibility of eternal life get in to Earth. Once in every century or so, the secret is rediscovered, down there, but each time the discoverer has seen the dangers in his discovery, and handed it over to Earth Intelligence. That, in itself, shows that men are growing up."

"So you daren't let the discovery get out," jeered Sands. "You couldn't trust the so-human race with it."

"No," replied the voice, soberly. "We don't dare. In every race there are men who never grow up properly. And they are the men who would accept eternal life. They would live on for centuries, mating, perpetuating their ataviatic blood among the human race. That sort of man is necessary in his own time to balance civilisation, but he shouldn't live on past it."

Sands felt futile, there were questions rolling inside his head, struggling to get out, but he couldn't express them.

"Look at yourself, Sands," the implacable voice went on. "You're human. I've looked at your record to see what kind of man we had to deal with. And what do I find?

"When you were twenty years old, you fell in love. Her name was Laura Evans. There was a brief romance, presumably you were going to marry. But she disappeared. What do you do? You look for her frantically, can't find her. Finally you consider the matter rationally, ask the Government to help you trace her. They refuse, and you let your petty hatred of the Government develop into an obsession which drives you out into space. Then, instead of going to a psychologist and having treatment, you let your illness of the mind develop until you can't even set foot on Earth again. There's nothing that can be done for you now. Do you think that you're fit for immortality, fit to spread your instability throughout the race for the rest of time?" The clear voice held anger, now.

"Where did Laura go?" asked Sands. "You know. You must know."

"What she did involves one of the greatest sacrifices that a human can be called on to make. She became a member of Earth Intelligence, and accepted immortality."

"So you think that she was better than me?" said Sands dully.

"She was one of the finest women I have ever known."

"And is eternal life such a great sacrifice to make?" he said bitterly.

"It is for us. After we have passed the normal length of time that a human remains viable, we're sterilised to prevent any interference with the heredity and evolution of the human race."

"But why did she join Earth Intelligence. She loved me, I know she did."

"She could see that there are bigger things than personal love. Only a few people can do what she did. She became an extra-terrestrial agent, and to pass as a member of an alien race involves some of the most intensive treatment ever evolved. First the body is altered until it actually is that of an alien. Then the mind is altered until you think like an alien, too. Nothing less than this will pass. You're transferred to the planet you've been intended for and you may spend centuries there, getting up every morning and seeing your alien body in your mirror, thinking with inhuman thought processes, mixing with aliens who are exactly like you.

"Years ago, a man said something I've always thought exactly applicable to this case. He said, roughly . . . I can't remmeber his actual words . . . *If an object is exactly similar to another object, it is that object.*

"If you have a human being exactly like an alien, he or she will become that alien. It takes a very exceptional quality of mind to remain true to humanity under those conditions, and Laura Evans was one of those very exceptional people."

Sands just lay there in the middle of the sphere, letting the knowledge soak into him with a melancholy finality in his mind. He felt mentally cleansed, purified. The tangles of thought were cleared away at last. He knew what his destiny was . . . to ask for immortality, and sterility to keep his memory true, and to roam the galaxy looking for the woman he had loved, and still did, he knew. She was out there somewhere, immortal, waiting for him.

The glittering hypodermic reached out towards him on its long metal arm and he waited for it with an exultation in his mind. The needle pierced his skin and the sharp, bitter-sweet pain began, spreading over his body with an all pervading, excruciating tingling. Here was eternal life; here was destiny.

The clear voice sounded again, contemptuously, but Sands was safe behind his shield of self knowledge. He realised now, beyond all shadow of doubt, that he knew himself; the final meaning of his existence was clear. His shield of destiny was impregnable.

"Sands. There is something you should know. Laura Evans is dead. You were there when she died, on Copa, in the city of Mek. Her name there was Flexa."

The carefully poised pyramid of self-sufficiency which was the mind of Sands collapsed in tumbling ruin as if somebody had kicked away the base. He saw the endless vistas of his life, stretching out before him, a corridor of infinity, peopled with mortal men, friends who would rot and die whilst he lived on, strange suns and the planets of the universe, the marvellous future of man which he could witness . . . but without Laura; she would be his face in the misty light, inviting, floating before him always, but unobtainable.

Consciousness went.

—Richard Varne.

It was jokingly said that he would be late for his own funeral, but Jelks was the kind of technician who was methodical in everything he did. He was the logical operator, for instance, to send as observer on the space platform. Unfortunately, there was just one thing he missed . . .

LATE

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

—

He was a big man, this Jelks—big, with a ruddy complexion, china blue eyes and thinning blonde hair. He was a slow man—slow, but thorough and . . slow. In the days of his not too far distant youth he had been told, often, by parents and teachers driven to and beyond the point of exasperation, that he would be late for his own funeral. On these frequent occasions he had smiled his slow, amiable smile and, the rebuke seemingly having failed to register, had plodded stolidly ahead with whatever had been the work in hand. In spite of his slowness—and because of his thoroughness—he had won scholarship after scholarship after scholarship, had whilst still in his early thirties, become the sort of scientist and mathematician ignored by the popular press but still possessing a solid reputation among his academic peers.

"Jelks," old Professor Hartley had said, "will be the ideal man for the job. He's slow—I grant you that. He'll be late for his own funeral. But he's thorough. He'll be hanging up there for weeks—observing, monitoring, making out reports, cooped up in a tiny tin coffin. Some men it'd drive mad. It'd drive me mad. Not

Jelks. He'll monitor, and he'll observe, he'll make out and transmit his reports—and they'll be good, useful reports."

"I can take it, then, that you recommend him," said the Air Vice Marshal. "Of course, there's the security angle."

"That's up to you people," said the Professor.

The security angle was, of course, checked with far greater thoroughness than had been Jelks' scientific qualifications for the job. But no pink stain upon his political purity was found. He had never, so far as could be discovered, ever talked to a Communist. Politically, his mind resembled that hard vacuum into which he was soon to be transported. There was no risk whatsoever that the knowledge he would win would ever find its way to the wrong side of the Iron Curtain.

He was commissioned, then, after a series of somewhat unpleasant medical tests. He purchased a uniform with the two and a half rings of a Squadron Leader on the sleeves and with an Observer's half wing on the breast. In the mess of the Station to which he had been posted he was just that—an observer, watching, with quiet wonderment, the fast young men with their split second reaction times who, with the careless ease of the young man in the song, flung their sleek jets and rockets about the sky. He met the crew who were to put the satellite up in its orbit, the technicians who were to build and assemble his extra-terrestrial laboratory for him around the nucleus of the third stage of the big step rocket. He was given the opportunity to learn something about rocket piloting himself.

"He'll never make a pilot," said the Flight Lieutenant. "He's slow. He's so slow that he'll be late for his own funeral."

"Not to worry," said the Wing Commander. "He'll be taken out to the satellite, he'll be brought back. After all—boffins are wingless birds . . . "

With others of the team, Jelks was flown to Woomera. He stood with Air Marshals and Air Commodores and watched the big, three-stage rocket lift on its glaring column of fire, dwindle to a vapour trail in the cloudless sky. He watched the blips on the screens, saw that the first and second steps were falling as predicted, that the third step had established itself on its orbit. He watched the second rocket blast off—the one with equipment and technicians aboard, the one whose third step would bring back the crew of the first rocket. He did not, some weeks later, witness the blasting off of the third rocket (she was using the first and second stages of the first one) because he was in it.

He took the acceleration well, did Jelks, and was unaffected by free fall. When the time came, he put on his spacesuit as unconcernedly as if he had been dressing at his usual time in the morning in the bedroom of his Cambridge lodgings. He checked the various zippers and other fastenings with far less concern than a man heeding an admonitory notice in a public convenience. But even Jelks could not be unaffected by the spectacle visible outside the outer door of the airlock—the vast globe of Earth, green and brown and blue and silver, the space station, hanging seemingly motionless, with its spidery antennae and scanners, its solar mirrors, the big, inflated plastic sphere that had been the living and sleeping quarters for the assembly crew.

The speaker built into Jelks' helmet sputtered into life. "Doctor Jelks! Can you hear me? There's a lifeline rigged to the satellite."

"I've found it, thanks."

"Well, good luck, Doctor. See you in a week's time."

"Thanks, Brown. Don't forget to bring some newspapers."

Jelks pulled himself, hand over hand, to the airlock door of the space station. His clumsy, gloved hands manipulated the opening mechanism. He stood inside the tiny compartment waiting for the green light to glow. It came on, and he opened the inner door and drifted into his laboratory. Warren was there—another Squadron Leader—fully dressed except for his helmet. He helped Jelks to remove his, then said, "Here you are, Doctor. All ready for you. All tested and working."

"I'll take your word for it," said Jelks. He had come to know Warren, had recognised in him a thoroughness almost equal to his own.

"Exactly the same as the mock-up," said Warren.

"So I see."

"The transmitter's sealed, of course," Warren went on.

"Not to be used except in an emergency," said Jelks. "They told me. There's only one emergency I can think of. Did you ever work out the chances of being struck by a meteor?"

"No," said Warren. "But at times that plastic tent of ours out there seemed far too flimsy."

"Live in it for a hundred years," said Jelks, "and you *might* be hit by one large enough to do real damage. Well—all the best." His following words carried quotation marks fore and aft. "Happy landings."

"Be good," said Warren.

"And careful," said Jelks. He grinned. "Slow *and* careful. I know what they say about me. I just want to keep things that way."

He helped the other Squadron Leader on with his helmet, checked the fastenings of Warren's suit as meticulously as he had done those of his own. He drifted with him to the inner airlock door, watched the indicator lights until Warren was clear of the satellite and on his way to the waiting rocket. Jelks went, then, to one of the ports, watched the spaceship, now free of the lifeline, emit a brief, vivid jet of flame and slowly drop away from his field of vision. He took off the rest of his suit then, stowed it carefully in the locker designed for this purpose. For the next few hours he busied himself checking every smallest detail of the life-sustaining apparatus of his spatial laboratory. After he had done this he prepared for his first tests, his first experiments. He was a happy man—weeks of highly interesting work lay ahead of him and there was no urgency. Neither lack of gravity nor absence of company bothered him.

At the end of a week the rocket made its rendezvous with the space station. Brown—the Flight Lieutenant who was captain of the little spaceship—came across himself on the lifeline, brought with him the promised newspapers. He took with him recordings made by the instruments, also Jelks' first report. He said, "I don't think that the news has leaked out yet. When our friends on the other side of the Curtain *do* find out there's going to be a mass liquidation of astronomers."

"Anything in these?" asked Jelks, patting the bundle of newspapers.

"There's Jane of course—but she hasn't been the same girl since the purity drive set in . . . Overdressed in every instalment. Talking of purity drives—some crank reckons that the End of the World is at hand."

"Then it's high time that we pushed ahead with the Interplanetary Project," said Jelks.

"What do you think you're out here for?" asked the Flight Lieutenant.

After the spaceship had gone, Jelks settled down with his newspapers. There was even less haste than there had been before—it would be all of six weeks before the next rendezvous. He read the news items with an attitude of godlike detachment. He did the crossword puzzles. The listed radio programmes reminded him that not once had he used the receiver that was part of the station's equipment. He resolved that from now on he would, at least, keep up with the news. He read the accounts of the meetings at which the self-styled Prophet John had spoken, marvelled that

in this day and age, the age of atomic power and space travel, anybody should subscribe to this mystical claptrap. Then he went back to work.

It was two days before the rocket was due that Jelks was making a series of observations of Earth from the station. He was over the night hemisphere, sliding swiftly in his South-North orbit while the great, shadowed globe turned slowly beneath him. The sky was clear above South America and Jelks could see the city lights—Buenos Aires, Rio, Santiago. He was surprised when the darkness swept suddenly over the tiny, glimmering sparks that were the homes of men, thought at first that the fault lay in his instruments. It was over North America that he saw the golden glow and the thousand mile long lightnings. His vehicle carried him over the Pole and south over the sunlit hemisphere. But neither land nor sea could be distinguished—all Earth was obscured by an impenetrable layer of dense black cloud.

It must be, thought Jelks, some meteorological phenomenon. He was a physicist, and a good one, and he knew of no weapon that could have produced such an effect. On the other hand—and he felt the beginnings of cold, sickening fear—he was also a meteorologist of sorts, and he knew of no meteorological explanation for what he was seeing. Slowly, unhurriedly (he refused to hurry) he switched on the receiver. Slowly, unhurriedly, he tried waveband after waveband. The set was dead. Slowly, unhurriedly, Jelks took photographs of the black ball over which he swung in his orbit, jotted down in his log what he had seen—the obstruction of the city lights, the golden glow and the dreadful lightnings. Again he returned to the radio and this time, but all too briefly, caught what seemed to be a broadcast of some great choir, somewhere. It was the merest echo, and in spite of all his care and skill he was unable to bring the controls of the set back to the right setting.

He was tired then—a tiredness that came, he knew, more from strain than from overwork. *I can do nothing,* he thought. He put his cameras on automatic control, then strapped himself into his bunk. He slept—a deep sleep untroubled by dream or nightmare.

When he awoke he went straight to the most convenient port, looked down to the world. He was over the sunlit hemisphere again and Europe was below him. The black overcast was gone. Over Russia there was smoke—it was, he thought, a forest fire, covering thousands of square miles. He turned his telescope first on London. London still stood—there were no craters, no fires. Paris, Berlin, Rome, Moscow—all were, seemingly, untouched.

After a while he was able to see the cities of the Southern Hemisphere, and he saw nothing to arouse his apprehension. But there was a bush fire in Australia and, within in his field of view some time later, another forest fire in Canada.

The radio was still dead.

His chronometers told him that it lacked minutes of his rendezvous with the rocket from Woomera. His chronometers told him that the rocket from Woomera should now be alongside the space station—but space was empty. His chronometers told him that the rocket from Woomera was all of two hours overdue.

"I was hoping that Brown would be able to tell me something," he muttered to himself as he broke the seals on the transmitter. He hesitated before switching on. Was this an emergency? He decided to give Brown another hour, and filled in the time by hunting vainly up and down the wavebands of his transmitter.

He switched on the set, waited for it to warm up. His fingers reached out for the key. "James calling Rosie Bell," he sent in the pre-arranged code, on the agreed wavelength. "James calling Rosie Bell. I am worried." He sent again, "James calling Rosie Bell. James calling Rosie Bell. Again he sent, "James calling Rosie Bell. James calling . . . James calling . . . "

He broke out the emergency brandy bottle. Moving slowly and methodically, never forgetting to allow for the conditions of free fall, he managed to take a drink without wasting a drop of the fluid. Suddenly he felt lost and lonely, and Earth very dear and very far away. Somehow, for no reason, he remembered the thing that had always been said about him—that he would be late for his own funeral. *Unless I get back to Earth,* he thought, *I shan't have one.*

He put on his spacesuit, went outside. He studied the exterior of the station. The wings were still there—it had been worth nobody's while to remove them. The solar mirrors, the various antennae and the telescope tubes were removable. The rocket motor was, he knew, still workable, and there was fuel. It would not be an impossible task to convert the station into what it had originally been—a replica of the rocket whose rendezvous was now hours overdue.

Jelks worked slowly and carefully. He stripped the rocket of all aerodynamically undesirable excrescences. He then reduced weight by the jettison of equipment and fittings from the interior. The records he kept, also the Geiger Counter. Then, strapped to his desk in the strangely bare and spacious cabin of the station, he worked out his flight plan. Then, satisfied that nothing had been

left unnecessarily to chance, he secured himself in the pilot's seat and fired the braking blast. The huddle of dumped instruments and machinery dropped away from the station. Jelks allowed himself briefly to wonder whether it would ever be picked up and used again.

Then the station had to be turned—a simple enough task using the built-in, manually operated flywheel. Jelks sat at the controls —waiting. He allowed himself one experimental wiggle of the control surfaces, but no more. He did not allow his eyes to stray from the Air Speed Indicator, ever alert for the first warning quiver of the needle.

His reaction times were slow—but then, even at his initial supersonic speed, he had to come down a long way. Through the first high cirrus he swept, and the temperature inside the ship rose to an uncomfortable level. He hoped that the refrigerating unit would prove equal to the strain. Out of sunlight into darkness he swept—and saw the lights of cities and of vast fires beneath him. Out of darkness into sunlight he screamed—and there was the sea, and ships, and the European coastline. Down, he spiralled, down, down. He felt the wrenching shock as his first ribbon parachute took hold and then was wrenched from the fuselage.

A less slow man would have fought the controls, would have striven grimly for mastery of the machine in which he rode. Not Jelks. He knew his limitations; he knew, too, the excellence of the design of the ship. He knew that she would, almost, land herself without damage. His main anxiety was that the landing should take place on a site of his own selection.

Gently, carefully, he eased the ship down, determined not to repeat the mistake that had lost him one of his parachutes. Gently, carefully, he brought her round in a wide arc, round again in a smaller one. England was beneath him—cities and towns and green fields. London was beneath him, then the seaside towns of the South Coast and the blue-green waters of the Channel. Ships he saw in the narrow sea, but there were no aircraft in the air. He thought it strange that no investigatory jets or rockets had been sent up to intercept and challenge.

Lower he spiralled, lower. He could see traffic on the roads now. He could not be sure—the speed at which he was still travelling made accurate observation impossible—but the cars, the coaches and the trucks seemed to be stationary. At one crossroads he glimpsed an untidy huddle of machines, saw the black scar of fire on grass verge and hedgerows.

At last he was over the Station to which he had first been posted.

The long runway was clear. Remembering his radio, he called the tower. There was no reply. He looked down to the windsock and saw that his line of approach could not be bettered. He lowered his undercarriage, released the last of his braking parachutes. The concrete was sweeping beneath him with terrifying speed. One wheel of the undercarriage touched, bounced, touched again. The ship heeled over, the tip of his port delta wing dug into the concrete. Landing strip and administration buildings wheeled before him, around him. Something struck the back of his head and he took no further interest in the details of the landing.

His first waking thought was to wonder who would have to pay for all the damage that he had done. "One Space Station, complete," he muttered. "That'll make a nasty hole in a month's pay . . . " He realised, slowly, that he was hanging upside down in his securing straps. Before releasing himself he worked things out in his methodical manner, snapped open the catches so that he was able to ease himself gently down on to his shoulders. A clumsy, slow-motion somersault brought him to a sitting posture.

The airlock doors were hopelessly jammed, but it didn't matter. The cabin was so wrenched and battered that it was easy for him to force his way out at the minor cost of a slightly lacerated hand and a badly torn trouser knee. The unaccustomed gravity made him feel heavy and tired, for all of five minutes he stood beside the wreckage of the rocket waiting for somebody to come out to him. Somewhere a dog—one of the Station's Alsatians—was barking hysterically.

Slowly, he walked towards the Mess. *If there were anybody in Administration,* he thought, *they'd have seen me come in. They couldn't have missed it.* He noticed that the Alsatian he had heard barking was trailing him, keeping well back. He wished that he had a weapon of some kind—there was something mad about the appearance of the brute.

All doors in the Station were open. Jelks went first to the bar—hungry, uncharacteristically, for company. The bar was deserted. There were four pint tankards standing on the counter, each perhaps two-thirds full. The beer was stale and flat, and had dead flies in it. In another glass—a Martini?—a wasp was drowned. Jelks went behind the bar, found a glass, poured himself a stiff whisky. After it he felt better. He picked up a newspaper on one of the tables, looked at the side. It was a Sunday paper. It was the day that he had seen the golden glow and the supernal lightnings, the day of the impenetrable black overcast.

Jelks stood there and shouted. "Anybody at home? Is anybody at home?" Only the barking of the half-mad Alsatian outside answered him. "Is anybody here?" bellowed Jelks.

Jelks went into the pantry adjoining the dining room, found a stale loaf of bread and some butter that wasn't quite rancid. He opened a tin of sardines, made a filling yet unsatisfying meal. He watched the flies that came to feast on the crumbs on his plate almost with affection. *Dogs,* he thought, *and flies. And I heard a bird singing . . . It can't be radio-active dust . . . There shouldn't be any need to get the Geiger counter from the ship. It's probably smashed, anyhow.*

He stiffened abruptly as he heard a new sound—then relaxed. It was the sound of bells, it was the church clock in the village, two miles distant, striking the hour. In the still air the sound carried well; yet, somehow, was tenuous, could have been some ghostly carillon pealing in the almost airless depths of a lunar crater.

"I will go to the village," said Jelks—to the flies, to the barking dog outside, to nobody in particular. He picked up the remains of the loaf, took it with him. "Here!" he said to the dog. The Alsatian stopped barking, looked at Jelks suspiciously. The man threw the bread down gently, watched the dog as it sniffed the food and then began to eat ravenously. He waited until it had finished eating, then said, "Come on, boy." The dog followed him, close to heel, but only as far as the gates.

So Jelks had to walk alone to the village. After the first half mile he regretted that he had never learned to drive—he could have had his pick of the Station cars, of the abandoned vehicles along the road. The sun was high in the cloudless sky and he was perspiring inside his overalls. His feet were tender in the thin, canvas shoes that had been his footwear in the space station. Yet, in spite of his discomfort, he was able to watch, to observe, to see the animals in the fields, the birds in the sky and in the hedgerows. He was able to *feel*—able to sense the impalpable something that Chesterton has called so aptly "the smell of Sunday morning." But it was not a Sunday.

He was footsore and weary when he reached the village. On the window ledge of the first cottage a fat, tortoiseshell cat regarded him gravely. Jelks put out his hand to touch the animal, to stroke it. It responded to his advances with feline courtesy but without much enthusiasm. Jelks left the cat to its own devices, knocked on the cottage door. There was no reply. He opened the door, went inside. A smell of burning still lingered in the kitchen—the

fire was out, but the Sunday joint was a mass of charred, acrid stinking meat. On the oven the saucepans in which the vegetables had been boilng were dry and their contents ruined. On the kitchen table was a half finished cup of tea—in which floated the inevitable drowned, bedraggled flies.

It must have been a disaster of some kind, thought Jelks. *I shall find them in the church . . .* He left the cottage, walked slowly along the street to the tall, grey spire. His mind conjured up images of what he would find there—huddled corpses, victims of some fearful weapon produced by the bio-chemists. He walked more slowly than was justified by his sore feet.

The church was empty. The sunlight struck through the stained glass of the windows, a patina of rainbow colouring on altar and altar cloth, reflected by dull gleaming metal. But there was damage. In places the stone flooring of the aisle had been ripped up, the underlying earth scattered untidily and carelessly. The man (the last man, the only man) stared uncomprehendingly at this—he thought—vandalism, then walked slowly out through the side door to the graveyard.

There in the warm sunlight, he gazed at the overset headstones, the heaped and scattered earth, the odd, terrifying craters. He began to laugh—quietly at first, then with mounting hysteria. Abruptly he stopped and stood there, scarcely breathing, straining his ears to try to catch some faint echo of the trumpet that once (and once only) had sounded, the trumpet that he would never hear.

—Bertram Chandler.

One of the annoying things about Mars was that no intelligent life lived there—except a few Earth colonists intent upon nigh pay. Henry was one of the fortunate few who managed to have an ambitious wife with him—not that it did him much good.

POOR HENRY

By E. C. TUBB

The sand car stopped, the motor whining down into silence, and Henry swore a little as he operated the unresponsive controls.

"Damn it! What's wrong now?"

"Please!" Lucy wasn't a prude but she didn't want Henry to forget his manners either. "I'm sure that swearing at it won't do any good."

"Sorry, darling." Henry did blush, a crimson tide suffusing his face and accentuating his fine, blonde hair. "I'm not used to having a woman around, especially such a beautiful woman as you."

"Silly." Lucy smiled at him, secretly pleased with his boyish adoration. "Is that why you married me?"

The answer to that took some time and many gestures and it wasn't until much later that Henry returned to the problem of the breakdown. Irritably he swung the rheostats and kicked at the pedals. Nothing. The sand car remained a lifeless heap of metal and plastic.

"That mechanic! He told me that this vehicle had been thoroughly checked. Just wait until we get back."

Lucy nodded. Henry was right, of course, it would serve the man right to be discharged and perhaps fined by the tourist bureau. Personally she had no time for bad servants and she was pleased to see that, in that respect at least, Henry would prove no trouble. But future actions wouldn't get them back to the Dome. She stared at her husband.

"Can't you mend it?'

"I don't know." He kicked at the pedals. "I've driven these things nearly all over the planet but I've never bothered to take a mechanic's course. After all, why should I? I'm a business man, not a grease monkey."

"That's right, dear. But couldn't you twiddle a wire or something?" Lucy looked at the rolling dunes beyond the plastic windows. "We can't stay here all night."

Henry nodded, somehow feeling that he was being put to a test and that, unless he repaired the vehicle, he would suffer for it in many ways later on. Lucy was beautiful—at least he thought so—but there was a certain hardness about her mouth and her eyes that would have warned a more experienced man at first sight. Henry hadn't bothered with first sight or second. He was young, on a planet where women were scarce, and Lucy had been redolent of all the good things of Earth.

He hadn't even stopped to think why, if she was such a bargain, she had found it necessary to travel to Mars in order to find a husband.

Henry was very young.

Slowly he unbolted the engine cover and stared helplessly at the twisting wires and mysterious connections. Cautiously he touched them, jerking back as current stabbed at his fingers.

"Damn! At least the batteries are charged, that's something."

"Is it," she said distantly. A smear of dirt had marred the smooth perfection of her dress. "Really, Henry! Can't you be more careful?"

"I'm sorry, darling, but there isn't much room in here." He blushed as he spread more dirt on her stocking. "Sorry."

"If you're going to make the cabin filthy perhaps I'd better wait outside." Lucy stared at the scene beyond the window. "Is it safe?"

"Of course, and if you wait outside it will give me more room in which to work."

"Well then?" Lucy didn't move, but her expression was unmistakable. Henry swallowed, unlatched the door, and stepped out onto the barren plain. Lucy followed him and, for a moment, the two stood motionless as they stared over the eternal sands of Mars.

"I feel funny." Lucy sat down and pressed her hands to her chest. "Giddy and a little sick."

"It's due to the thin air," explained Henry quickly. "You can breath it—just, and then only because of your conditioning. The air inside the Dome and the cars is always kept much higher than outside." He fussed around her as she slowly recovered. "Just sit quietly and don't move. That way you'll use less oxygen and won't feel uncomfortable."

"I've never been outside before." Lucy forced herself to smile. "Why can't I breathe properly?"

"The air here is too thin to support human life. That is, it would be unless you have been conditioned to it. You have, everyone who arrives on Mars has to take the treatment." He gestured vaguely. "Something to do with increased corpuscles in the blood or something, I don't know much about these things, but it works."

"I feel better now." Lucy relaxed on the harsh, gritty sand. "You get back to work, dear. Don't forget that we have an appointment for dinner to-night. It wouldn't do to miss it."

"No, dear."

"Our social calendar is just as important as your business. It isn't just what you can do, you know Henry. It's knowing the right people. The Addams's can help us a lot."

"Yes, dear."

"Well, then?" Lucy looked towards the motionless vehicle. "Hurry and fix it, Henry."

"Yes, dear." He moved away from her side and entered the sand car.

Lucy smiled. Henry was a good boy, rather young but all the more easily controlled. Automatically her hand went to her face, the fingers caressing the skin as she tried to discover whether the scars of the plastic surgery were noticeable. They weren't, but

then she paid more than enough for a perfect job and the beauticians were very efficient.

She sighed as she settled back, staring up at the cloudless sky, so dark as to be almost black. Stars shone up there, tiny points of light still bright despite the shrunken ball of the sun, and, as she looked at them, she tried to decide which was Earth.

Not that it mattered. It was good to be free of care, with a young and handsome husband only too willing to be managed, and with the prospect of an enviable life ahead of her. Mars was still rough, still very much the frontier planet, but already there was a skimming of culture, a small and exclusive circle of the important and wealthy. To Lucy the terms were synonymous.

Something traced a rapid path over one shin, hesitated a moment, then she jerked to a sudden pain. Her scream coincided with the vanishing of a glistening black body, then Henry was at her side, his arms around her, his hands caressing her hair.

"Darling! What's wrong?"

"Something bit me! Something horrible and black. I saw it!"

"Where?" He stared down at the unbroken skin. "Where is it, dear?"

"I don't know. Don't ask such stupid questions." Anger and fear made her voice harsh and brittle. "I tell you that I saw it."

"Yes, dear."

"Did I tell you, Henry. Black and insect-like. It bit my leg."

"Yes, dear."

"Don't keep saying 'yes dear' like a fool! Hurry up and mend the car."

"Yes, dear." He turned away, hesitated at the door of the vehicle, then looked back. "You know, dear, there isn't anything on Mars that could hurt you. Are you sure . . ."

"Yes." She stepped back as something glistened on the sand. "Look! There's another of them?"

"Where?" Henry lunged forward his eyes searching the desert. "That?"

"Yes."

"Why, Lucy, that can't harm you. It's just a sand-ant, just like the ants back home. Look." He spread his fingers on the sand and let the little insect run across them "See? Harmless."

"It bit me," she insisted stubbornly. "I felt it."

"Perhaps it was a sharp grain of sand?" he suggested. "Or nerves? A sensitive girl like you would be bound to feel a little

out of place here." He stepped forward, his intention obvious, but she turned just in time to avoid his hungry arms.

"Have you mended the car yet?"

"Not yet." He sighed as his arms fell to his sides. "I don't know what's the matter with it. The fuses seem intact and I can't see anything wrong with the wiring. Must be a short somewhere."

"Does that mean we're going to be stuck out here all night?"

"I don't think so. I've tripped the emergency radio-call and someone will be coming after us." He scowled towards the setting sun. "Just wait until I get back! That mechanic!"

"It's too uncomfortable in the car," said Lucy. "Can we wait out here?"

"Of course. There are covers in the vehicle and we can build a barrier of sand to shelter us from what wind there is." Henry smiled. "You know, darling, this is awfully romantic. Just you and me alone together out on the desert . . . I'm so lucky to have such a beautiful wife."

"Yes, dear." She remembered not to wince as he kissed her. Youthful husbands had their advantages but they had their disadvantages too. A more mature man would never dream of trying to make love in the centre of a wilderness. But then a mature man would never have married her.

Later, when Henry had fetched the covers and piled sand into a rough heap against which they rested, she questioned him about hope of rescue.

"They'll pick up our radio-call back at the Dome and send out for us," he explained for the tenth time. "We're quite safe, nothing can harm us, it's just a matter of time."

"They should have been here by now," she said crossly. "Really! The inefficiency is terrible! What the Addams's will say I simply can't think. How could you do such a thing?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You should have checked the car before we started. It was a ridiculous thing to do in the first place, all this sand . . ." She dug her fingers viciously into the reddish grit. "Mars! Why did I ever come here?"

"It was fate," said Henry simply. "We were fated to meet and fall in love. I do love you, darling. I can't tell you how much. I . . ."

"Look," she said hastily. "There's some more of those horrible ants."

Henry grunted, hesitated a moment, then reluctantly stopped to examine where she pointed. The sand, where she had disturbed it, was swarming with little black bodies. Henry laughed.

"They can't hurt you. Probably they've been attracted by the warmth of our bodies. Forget them."

"I hate insects." Lucy shuddered and frowned towards the half-hidden ball of the sun. "It's getting dark. Will they be able to find us at night?"

"Yes, dear," said Henry wearily. "I keep telling you that they will follow our signal. Now will you please stop worrying."

"I can't understand why you couldn't mend the car. Surely a man should know about such things? It isn't right that a woman should have to trust herself to a man who is so helpless when it comes to an emergency. I must say, Henry, that I'm a little disappointed in you."

"Please, Lucy. It wasn't my fault."

"That's what you men always say. Whose fault was it then if not yours? Mine? Am I to blame that we're stuck out here in this horrible desert?" She sniffed. "I should think that a man would have more consideration for his wife than to blame her when anything went wrong."

"I'm not blaming you, darling. I . . ." Henry clutched air as she moved away. "Please, dearest. Don't let's quarrel."

"I'm not quarrelling."

"Then . . ."

"No." Again she moved just in time. "Look! There are some more of those ant things. Bigger ones this time."

"So there are." Henry squinted down in the dying light. "That's odd! I've never heard of these before."

"I thought that Mars was devoid of life." She sounded accusing as if it was his fault that the books had been proved wrong. "Now it seems that the desert is teeming with insects."

"Not exactly teeming, dear." Henry grasped at something and held it before his eyes. "You know, we could have made an important discovery. Look at this fellow! Almost three inches long!"

"Insects can't grow that big," Lucy said primly. "I've read about them. Something to do with their weight or something."

"There mass increases with the cube but their strength only by the square." Henry nodded. "On Earth the largest ant is just under an inch long. If you double its size it will weigh eight times as much but only have four times the strength. Increase its size three times and it would weigh twenty-seven times as much and have nine times its original strength. That's why this fellow is so important. Even allowing for reduced gravity it still seems big."

"Throw it down, Henry. It's horrible!"

"No, I . . ." Henry swore and threw the wriggling body away from him. "Damn it! The thing bit me!"

"There! I told you that they bit and you wouldn't believe me. It serves you right, Henry, for being so stubborn."

"Yes." Henry slapped at his leg. "It must have been a big one that bit you." He brushed at his arm. "Damn them! The things seem to be everywhere."

"Please!" Lucy moved away from her husband. "Do you have to swear?"

"I . . ." Henry jumped to his feet and tore something from his neck. "Lucy! Help me! The ants are all over me!"

"I can't, Henry, and it's wrong of you to ask me." Lucy stepped further away from the prancing figure of her husband. "You know that I hate insects. Why don't you just knock them off?"

"You stupid bitch!" Henry yelled as he threshed in pain and terror. "Can't you see that the damn things are attacking me?"

"Henry! How dare you talk to me like that?"

"Lucy! For God's sake do something! I'm being eaten alive!"

He was too. Attracted by the blood from his bitten finger, drawn no doubt by its moisture content, the big, three-inch insects seemed to pour out of the sand as they swarmed towards him. They crawled up his legs, along his arms, scurried up his back and, wherever they could, they bit through his skin and into his flesh.

The new supplies of blood only served to attract them the more.

He went insane then. He shrieked and rolled, swore and cursed, begged and pleaded and, when that didn't work, piled invective and insult onto his wife's head. No self-respecting woman could stand such language. No-one, with the slightest claim to breeding and decency, could ever even admit that she knew what the words meant. Lucy had always considered herself to be a lady.

The sand car was a mess with the dust covers removed from the engine and the seats disarranged, but, with the door shut, it did serve to protect her delicate ears from the gutter-language outside. Primly she settled down to wait until Henry should have recovered his senses. She wouldn't forgive him at once, oh no, she would make him suffer first until he fully realised what he had done. Then, after he had been duly humbled, she would permit some of those minor liberties common between married couples.

She smiled as she visualised the future.

It was better this way. Henry was young and the youthful are always impetuous. His love making for example . . . Lucy forced herself not to think of that. He was healthy and able to work

hard. Twenty years perhaps would see him bald with a paunch and ulcers, but they would be a good twenty years and she, with care, might just be able to retain her appearance.

It would take money, of course, lots of money, but Henry would supply that.

She opened the door a crack and listened. The screaming had stopped and so had the insults. Good. Soon he would be coming over to apologise for his performance. It was really disgusting that a grown man would make such a fuss over a few insect bites. Why, one time at a picnic she had literally been eaten alive by mosquitoes, and she was certain that nothing could be worse than that.

And so she settled down to wait, and wait, and wait. Waiting until the dawn broke and the rescue car came churning over the sand.

But there was no sign at all of Henry, not even a clean-picked bone.

Poor Henry.

—E. C. Tubb.

While Trade Unions will undoubtedly play a large part in the welfare of the technicians and mechanics inhabiting colonised planets, it may well be that by that time a new form of arbitration between Capital and Labour will have been evolved.

SMOOTHIES ARE WANTED

By E. R. JAMES

Illustrated by QUINN

Machinery ground to a halt and vibration from the day's work subsided.

Workers flooded noisily up into the living quarters of the mine, but, in the observatory on top of the Dome, only the air whispered as it circulated through the gratings.

Away on the desolate horizon, the sun, small and brilliant, sank from sight.

For an instant, by contrast, darkness was complete. Then a single, blue-green star, low over where the sun had set, shone out of the gloom. Earth . . . Approaching inferior conjunction, the birthplace of man was the brightest star of the Martian evening.

Bill Ruxton started as footfalls echoed in the darkness below him. Light shone in through the door which he had left unlocked. Two dark shapes, holding hands, hesitated, casting grotesque shadows towards the base of the big telescope.

" Come on !" urged a male voice.

There was a quick release of breath and a girl's voice pleaded: " No . . . You know he comes to places like this to be alone—"

" Oh, heck ! Don't be so soft. If the smoothie were here, he'd turn us out. Come on ! Might be weeks before we get another chance to be alone. There's no privacy . . . on the Earth rocket. Somebody's just left the door open—forgotten to lock it. That's all."

Bill felt the unformed thought that was the girl's feeling of indecision. Such "espings"—extra-sensory-perceptionings—came unbidden over his telepathic sense, just as variations in light or sound were automatically reported to his brain by the more normal sense-receptors of eyes and ears.

Some of her agitation communicated itself to his own mind, making him remember his own loneliness, homesickness, and the vague fears common to all humans out of their own element. But he did not shut her out of his mind. Receiving such espings, in fact, was his job here in the mine. As Telepathic labour relations officer, he was a kind of mental policeman, responsible for discovering and " smoothing out " trouble-makers, no matter whether they were officials or workers.

He deliberately refrained from listening in on her actual thoughts, being content to be aware of them in the same way as he might have heard the tone of a speech without being aware of the words, or seen something on the edge of his vision without focussing on it. These were no troublemakers and the same exercises which had developed his potential telepathy held him back from violating the privacy of their thoughts until it became really necessary.

He waited for her to make up her mind.

" Well . . ." she murmured, " if you really think so . . ."

" That's the style !" One figure drew the other towards the skeleton barrel of the 100 inch reflector. " It'll be real cosy up in the observer's seat. Romantic, too, when Phobos comes up."

Bill, sitting in that observer's seat, stiffened with alarm. It was very important to him to have the period of peace to which he had been looking forward, here, as far from other humans as he could get within the confines of the mine.

He insinuated himself into her mind and at once her uneasiness communicated itself to him : *we should not be here* ! she was thinking over and over again. He let his own feelings and alarm at her presence add fuel to her smouldering conscience.

She halted. " I don't like it." She drew nearer her companion. " Perhaps he's here—in a trance or something."

Bill felt her mind search its memory for evidence to support her vague fears. Obligingly he suggested one.

She gasped. " I sort of half remember seeing him come up this way. Yes ! I'm almost sure he was with a bunch of miners coming off the evening shift."

" Oh, heck."

Bill seized on the youth's masculine disgust at these fears, puffed it up and then inserted the impression of eyes watching from the darkness.

The youth spun round. His neck hairs would be rising.

The girl said nervously: " You've left the door open. Oughtn't we to— Darling, just to please me, let's go somewhere else, eh ?"

" Oh—" The youth managed a rather shaky snort. " Oh, all right, then."

They hastened away, leaving behind them a rippling backwash of their feelings.

Both were excited in more than one way. On the surface of their minds had been the delights of courtship. Beneath the surface there had been a steadily mounting anticipation. They were going back to Earth together, for more years in college, to meet old friends, to be married, perhaps.

Bill looked up at the bright star. He had no place in the rockets that were coming. Not for him was the companionship of those of his kind, such as he had known only at the " smoothie " college on Earth.

He became aware of conflicting feelings esping up from somewhere not too far below him in the big dome that was the Mine for which he was responsible. But, he could not help thinking of the two lovers who seemed to have all the things that he lacked, and he blocked the trouble warnings. There was always friction between men ! He slammed a door in his mind, resentfully. And concentrated. His mind schooled itself into the calm of mirror-smooth water held in the hush of evening.

Half way through his mind control exercises, however, came a call sharp enough to pierce his barrier.

" Hello, Bill," said a voice in his mind. It was Joss Hart, Manager of the Martian E.S.P. Services Bureau at New Ottawa. " Sorry to interrupt your exercises. But I'm always rushed when rockets are expected from Earth. I did what I could to get you that transfer home. But, no luck. Sorry. Hope you understand ?"

" Yes. Not your fault."

" Goodbye, then."

" Goodbye."

Bill felt Joss withdraw his telepathic presence.

The void it left was immediately filled with a clamour of trouble esping up from within the mine dome.

Bill scowled. Just when he felt he had to be alone !

He climbed down from his lofty seat, the espings buffetting up, like blows upon the delicate but powerful structure of his trained mind.

He stepped out into the empty passage and headed in the direction of the trouble.

A wall speaker blared. " William Ruxton wanted in the Manager's Office right away. Hurry, please."

Bill hesitated in mid-stride, then continued. He could go this way Suddenly he felt confused. Espings blustered out at him from the air men's rest room. The entire day and evening shifts of the men responsible for keeping the mine full of breathable air must be playing

merry hell in there. And the wall speaker, behind him now, yelled after him. And there was a subtle, definitely feminine scent exciting him.

"Hello, Bill. I've been looking for you. Thought you might be perched up in the observatory."

He turned to look at Audrey Scott. People did take him by surprise like this sometimes. His sixth sense was apt to block signals from even the strongest of the human senses, that of sight.

Looking at her absorbed him. She was smiling at him. The lights flecked her fair hair with gold. He could imagine no more cuddlesome girl than she. He carefully kept away from her mind; she wasn't a smoothie.

The espings were only like incoherent, distant voices.

Her blue eyes were very soft. "You were up there on the telescope, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"All alone, again. You poor boy."

He was older than she was, but—

She studied his face. "You had a message from your Joseph Hart, didn't you?" Her guesses were very shrewd. "What did he say?"

"No chance."

"What a shame."

She was going Earthwards. One of the lucky twenty who were being replaced for one reason or another. The Mine Unit would be just that much more lonely for him afterwards.

"You'd better go." She pressed his arm. He felt half-frightened by her nearness. He remembered his being conditioned against fraternising. It wasn't as though she were an executive, or even a technical—Why did storekeepers of non-mining supplies have to be female—and so attractively feminine, at that?

"Yes, I'd better go," he said stupidly.

He was past the door of the air men's rest room when he felt the espings coming back into his mind. He blocked them off and went on. First things first.

A depressing antagonism of deadlock esped out to meet him. The Mine Manager's secretary smiled at him as she waved him on to enter the inner office, but her mind hissed at him—like a cat confronted by a dog. He sampled her mind. She was relieved that he had come at last; she reflected her boss's attitude towards him of uneasy tolerance.

She was rather fond of her boss. Bill withdrew his contact hastily.

Kenneth Gall, even more florid-faced than usual, motioned him towards a chair. The Mine Manager straightened the loud check

waistcoat over his soft stomach: his mind was grinding over the thought that Bill had kept them waiting; he was curiously tolerant of the problem before him — perhaps because it was more Bill's problem than his ; he was very anxious about the outcome of the problem, though.

Bill sat down and looked at the other man, sitting at the other end of the desk. Defiance of the underdog standing up for his rights ! Herbert Whipp's dark, hook-nosed face seemed to project the feelings that actually emanated from his mind. He was leaning back in his chair with his deep chest thrust out and his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

Bill sat down, and looked inquiringly from Whipp to Manager Gall, and back again to the official representative of the mine's branch of the Union of Martian Miners.

" Mr. Whipp is here in his official capacity," said Gall.

Bill nodded. It was an unnecessary remark, but required some kind of acknowledgement. Gall shifted impatiently. He expected Bill to know what was wrong.

" It's the air men," said Whipp defiantly. " They've been here two and a half Earth years. The mine's going well now. But they're getting less for producing air than the lowest grade miner. And their rate's 5 per cent. below Moon air men. They want a bonus back, upping their rate, or they'll strike and go back Earthside on the rocket that's coming."

" I see," said Bill. Whipp, even while talking, was remembering being involved in a strike while working as a deep miner. He was reflecting that smoothie influence had kept him his job; with human contrariness, that was prejudicing him against his present labour relations officer. This seemed to Bill to be helping to counteract the basic fact that Whipp was acting as Union Representative in this instance only out of duty. The air men's rate was not really unfair, since mining ores on Mars meant such a huge capital outlay.

Gall stood up. " Well, Mr. Ruxton, I'll leave this matter in your hands—"

" That," said Bill, " is your official reaction, Mr. Gall ?"

" It is. I am sympathetic towards the air men; but I am only executive management and my orders are that there can be no pay increases until after the first loads of ore are sold on Earth."

" Very well." Bill could not suppress a sigh as he thought of those rockets approaching Mars at that very moment. Gall was going to be no help: was going to drop this right into the lap of his telepathic labour relations officer—who was certain to know of his innocent but difficult-to-explain affair with his secretary.

Bill withdrew his contact. He blinked. Human motives were—human. Somehow he took Whipp's thick, muscular arm and injected a little soothing oil over the troubled water of the union man's mind.

Whipp grinned like a reproving father. "We'll work something out."

"Sure we will," nodded Bill.

Gall's mind, if not his eyes, followed them out, suddenly disliking them both. They were doing the job that was really proper to Managers and not to freaks and puffed-up labourers.

Some of the sourness that accompanied these thoughts tended to colour Bill's own impressions, reminding him of his loneliness, of the rockets that came but not for him, of Audrey's offer of feminine companionship that he dared not accept, and of the thorny problem before them.

Walking back along the passage, Whipp snapped: "Gall's an old fool! If he paid less attention to his blonde secretary and more to his work, the job'd go on that much better. You can see he doesn't give a damn!"

"Eh?" Bill gasped as he realised that the sourness he had received from Gall had been transmitted on top of the pattern of Whipp's thoughts. This outburst was the result. "Oh, I think you're being a bit hard," he said, allowing tolerance to flow between them, and then withdrawing what had become a disturbing contact. "Manager Gall is very fair. This threat of strike action is just not inside his list of duties. It's up to us—as the authorised representatives of labour and management to work it out."

"Yes, I see his point of view." Stray esps of bad feeling still reached Bill, as Whipp went on: "But . . . you could tell from what he said that his air wasn't in danger of being cut off—his job's safe—he meant us to know we'll get the blame if there is a strike. He—"

"Steady now!" urged Bill. "Don't underestimate yourself."

"Eh?"

"Don't forget you've been dealing with men all your union career. What makes you think you'll fail to get an agreement this time? It's all the better for us if the Manager reports a strike threat—and we avert it. The credit for that would do us both good."

"Um," said Whipp. He halted in surprise as Bill turned down the short side passage to the Dome rim. "Where are you going? I left the ringleaders in their living quarters and . . ." He stared resentfully after Bill. "Are you sure they've come out of the inner hemisphere?"

"Yes." Bill stood awkwardly. He could feel Stumpy Borland's bull-like aggression epsing like a trip-hammer from the main air mixing

room. It was a bad start, this reminding of his companion that their powers were so unequal. Men did not like to be made to feel small.

Bill clenched his jaw. To attempt to influence the union man at this moment would be to antagonise him hopelessly. Bill imagined another two and a half years of waiting until the next close approach of Earth brought another flight of rockets. Another two and a half years—even Earth years—of lonely dilemmas seemed unbearable.

" O.K." Whipp caught him up and they went on together in unfriendly silence.

Stumpy Borland turned to look down at them as they entered. He was on the platform before the master air mixing and circulating panel. One hand was raised to emphasize a point. His mouth was wide open and the last sound to come from it was like a blast of explosive.

He waved his raised arm towards them and the twenty-three other members of the air staff turned to stare hostility at Bill and Whipp.

" *Here they are* !" roared Stumpy. " The smoothie to smooth us and the Whip to lash us !"

There was a murmur of warning from the air men. Whipp halted and, catching Bill's arm, whispered in his ear.

" D'you know Stumpy Borland used to be Unit Secretary of the Interplanetary Air workers' Union before it was amalgamated with us? He didn't like losing his job to me."

" LOOK at them !" bellowed Stumpy. " CONSPIRING together. Thick as thieves. I told you the miners looked out for themselves—DIDN'T care hang about us air men. SLING 'EM OUT, I say. Before they can work on us !"

He ducked under the platform railing, jumped down. Stepping forward, his wide body rolled from side to side on his short legs. Behind him, the other air men pressed forward.

Bill felt for Stumpy's mind, and it was like trying to run a wooden lance into an armoured car. Stumpy's life had been hard. His mind had developed its armour in order to exist. It hampered his vision so that he could not see all the sides of a problem, but he might easily browbeat or even batter his opponents over on to his side.

Such strength and determination was something to divert rather than challenge. Even a smoothie fresh from school would have known that. Bill sampled several of the follower's minds. Scraps of thought, left behind from the speech Stumpy had been shouting, slipped through his thoughts: *Everyone looked down on air men; yet men could live for ever without the metals they mined, could live for weeks without food, days without water, but only MINUTES without air . . . Because Mars was further from Earth than the Moon, ought to mean that workers*

here should get more money instead of less . . . Cornelius Van Zee, South West Divisional Manager of Martian Mines—the sort who had everything he wanted here on Mars—had issued the order that only five year staff were to be considered for a passage back to Earth.

Bill felt that thought hit home in the depths of his own mind. It was a dirty trick, that. He knew just how the air men felt, there.

While his mental probing, however, had taken place with the speed of thought, the air men's physical presence, though much slower, was now uncomfortably near.

Whipp stood at his side, fists clenched, chest thrust out, like an out-of-condition giant with his paunch.

" It's no use," said Bill. He pulled at Whipp's thick arm. " Cracking a few jaws will get you nowhere. These men are determined. For us to be slung out will only lower our prestige."

" Uh."

Whipp spat on his fists, made a threatening gesture that momentarily halted the air men except for the inexorable Stumpy. Then they both turned and went back.

On their heels the door slammed and was clamped up.

" It's almost," said Bill, " as though there was a telepath stirring them up. Men aren't often so single-minded and determined."

" Obstinate devil, that Stumpy," said Whipp and drove a big fist into the palm of his other hand. " You ought to have let me knock sense into his head."

" That," said Bill, " would have ended both our careers."

" All right !" growled Whipp. He stared at Bill with narrowed eyes. " What d'you intend doing ?" He half-grinned as Bill hesitated, then went on: " You've had a real cushy time since you came here, haven't you ? I've seen plenty of labour troubles off Earth. Space is no friendly place and easy-going humans 'd rather stay on Earth than take a chance of getting rich quick out here." He paused, looking over Bill's shoulder along the passage. " Who're those men down there ?"

" Emergency Guard Force," murmured Bill, who had almost subconsciously noted the emanations of men pressed into an irksome service to the community. " I think . . . yes, I'm pretty sure that they are covering all the passages leading into the Air Control Room."

" Got them hemmed in. Stumpy'll keep them in. He'll know that his men'll be arrested, if he let's 'em out . . ." Whipp scowled. "A bad business, that. Gets the men's backs up. I know. Well, what're you going to do ?"

" Go back to Gall. At least he'll talk to us."

" Eh ?" Whipp glared suspiciously. " D'you get that out of my mind ?"

" No," said Bill. At least he had not done so consciously. But, when one became used to people, it was not always easy to know when telepathic contact was being made. Being a smoothie was a responsible job and he felt guilty even over the possibility of his reply being a small lie. Small lies led to larger ones. " What else is there we could do ? ' he ended lamely.

Whipp shrugged. They retraced their steps to the office of the Unit Manager.

Gall's secretary smirked at them. " He's on the 'phone."

" Who to ?" asked Whipp suspiciously.

She sniffed. " You know I can't tell you that !"

Whipp turned to Bill. " I suppose we'd best wait. Unless you can think of another approach ?"

" Well . . ." Her unwary mind had told Bill that she had put her boss through to Van Zee at New Ottawa. She was expecting them both to be discredited; she was glad that they were in trouble; she felt guilty because she felt glad; she felt ashamed because she had enough conscience to feel guilty; she was being nasty to them to cover her confusion.

He blinked. People were complicated ! Hardly anyone seemed to understand even themselves—

Whipp was still waiting for his answer. " Well . . ." he said again. " I think we'll make a 'phone call of our own."

" All right," said Whipp.

Bill led the way out and the secretary's thoughts followed them even after her eyes lost sight of them. She was wondering whom they could 'phone, and she was worrying lest it should be someone higher up the bureaucratic scale, to whom they might tell a different tale than Gall would be telling to Van Zee, and with whom they might have some kind of influence—a family pull perhaps.

They had not taken many steps down the passage towards the radio-telephone kiosk in the Workers' Canteen, when Gall put his head out of the doorway behind them.

" Whipp ! Ruxton ! Just a moment."

As they went back, Bill felt for the Manager's thoughts— and he ran into a shield of some kind. It was so unexpected that he felt physically dizzy for an instant.

Whipp caught his arm. " You all right, smoothie ?"

" Yes. Thanks. It was nothing." But it was. It meant that another mind with extra-sensory powers was standing guard over Gall's mature but ordinary brain.

Bill drew protective screens around his own thoughts. Somebody else with smoothie powers was taking a hand— He caught his breath. Perhaps—no, perhaps was too weak an expression—almost certainly he had been up against smoothie opposition all along and had only just realised it.

Somewhere amongst the people who were concerned with the mine, there was a man, or a woman, with smoothie powers who was using them secretly to cause trouble.

Bill watched the manager seat himself and smooth down his gaudy waistcoat. The man's florid face seemed shockingly enigmatic. Bill, used to ignoring outward appearances, now found their interpretation impossible.

" I have been handed," said Gall, " an ultimatum from Foreman Air Man Borland that there will be an unofficial strike of air men, unless their demands are agreed to by 21.00 hours—sixty minutes from now. I have, therefore, called Divisional Manager Van Zee, and he, in turn has reported the trouble to the Mars Area Director. Perhaps you would like to wait for his official reply before taking further action on your own."

" Yes," said Whipp.

" Yes, I would," said Bill. He was aware of someone feeling pleased over this crystalization of the trouble. For a moment he thought that Gall's mind had opened to him, and then he realised that the secretary had followed them into the room and was standing behind them. He turned. She had an expression of concern upon her face, not in keeping with her thoughts. Bill turned back to Gall. The girl would be taking her cue from her boss, and she would understand her boss's expression and mannerisms.

Gall, then, was wearing a front to cover whatever went on in his mind, just as the girl did in imitation of him. Bill wondered if it was possible for Gall to have smoothie powers . . . of his own ?

" Sit down, gentlemen," suggested Gall, indicating the chairs in front of his desk.

They sat in silence with the whisper of the ventilators seeming unnaturally loud.

Bill had never seen the Mars Area Director. But the man's surname, Hauptman, and his christian name, Biltmore, suggested a background of money and power. Concessions to strikers did not seem likely from a man with the name of Biltmore Hauptman.

When the 'phone rang, Gall listened with an occasional " Yessir." He replaced the receiver, sat back in the chair and straightened his waistcoat. " Mr. Hauptman expects the strike to be averted. He refers you both to Section IV, Rule 57, Paragraph 3 of the General Agreement between Workers and Management, which all staff will have signed before being brought out here."

" Is that all ?" asked Whipp.

" That is all."

" Then you've been wasting our time," said Bill. " From what we saw, it won't do any good to read the riot act to Stumpy Borland."

In a quiet passage on the way to the Workers' Canteen, Whipp stopped. " I don't know what you're going to do now. But I've been thinking. This is an unofficial strike. I've got to call a union committee meeting. There isn't much time. Most likely we'll threaten the air men with expulsion."

" And do you think that will do much good ?"

Whipp shrugged. Bill had felt the union man's spirits rise a little at the prospect of some kind of action; only to sink again as a result of this query.

" It's the right thing for me to do, anyway," he muttered.

Bill could feel the whisper of panic at the back of Whipp's mind. You couldn't live long without air.

They separated in the canteen, and Bill shut himself in the radio-telephone booth. In it he was well in the public eye; yet would be left alone. For him to have disappeared even for a short time might have started ugly rumours, and there weren't many places in full view where he would be left alone to go glassy-eyed with concentration.

He dialled a non-existent number and held the receiver, still burring, at his ear. He wiped the sound from his mind and along with it all other outside sensations so that to all purposes he was deaf and blind.

Securely in his trance he reached out and felt for his own boss. Never before, during his tour of duty at the mine, had he needed assistance—

Emptiness was all that came to meet him. The shock brought him back to awareness of his surroundings. Many eyes were staring in through the glass sides of the booth, at him. None looked friendly. Everyone would know of the air men's ultimatum, for in a closed community of this kind nothing stayed secret for long unless extraordinary precautions were taken.

And air was a very precious commodity, here.

Even as he looked out, a man glanced up, jumpily, at a ventilator grating.

Without any invitation, some of the uneasiness was creeping from outside into his own mind. He found himself dialling the number of New Ottawa, and using the mechanism of ordinary men to ask for Joss Hart.

" I'm sorry, sir. He went out. This is his busy time, just before the Earth rockets come in. Can I take a message ?"

" Yes. Ask him to get in touch with the T.L.R.O. at Number 1."

" Very well, sir. I'll make a note."

" Thank you. And—could I speak to Manager Van Zee ?"

" I'm sorry, sir. The Divisional Manager is not available. Is there any message for him ?"

" No, thanks."

Bill closed his eyes and felt around the minds of the men and women about him in the canteen. A few sympathised with the air men, on principle, as one working man will stick up for another. Some went to the other extreme, privately condemning the air men for what

amounted to blackmail, in their opinion. But not one person there had any friendly feeling towards the smoothie, who was responsible for keeping their thoughts from becoming unhealthy.

They did not know that somewhere amongst them there was a telepath, who seemed to be trying to destroy the mine, and them with it, by playing on natural grievances. They did not realise that Bill might be their only hope of survival from the approaching mad strike.

Gloom settled over Bill. Time was so short. Forty minutes until the ultimatum expired, and the air ceased to circulate. After that . . . not long in this closed world.

He had to have help. The two and a half Earth years of peace which he had spent here had been no preparation for a search and conflict of minds.

He dialled Mars City and insisted on speaking to the Mars Area Director.

At last a curt voice said: " Biltmore Hauptman. Who's that ?"

" Ruxton, Sir. William Ruxton. T.L.R.O. at—"

" What ?"

" Telepathic Labour Relations Officer at No. 1 Mine."

" Well ?"

" There's a troublemaker here. I think it must be a natural telepath——"

" God ! Handle him, then. Your job ! Why the hell call me ?" The receiver went dead.

Bill closed his mouth and slammed down the receiver. He had done everything that he could to insure against a disaster following his own failure.

Outside the booth everyone sat as though frozen. Their attitudes of listening suddenly changed to voluble action. Bill dragged open the door as men and women began to leave. One or two near to him shocked him with the disgust in their thoughts. He had fallen down in his job. None took notice of him.

He picked a very young miner, dropping thoughts into the impressionable mind.

Perhaps the smoothie doesn't know what's going on.

The young man halted. He seemed familiar to Bill.

Perhaps I ought to tell the smoothie.

The young man turned an unfamiliar face, looked hesitantly at Bill and stroked his chin. Bill placed where they had last encountered each other. This was the man who had brought his girl into the observatory.

Perhaps he can tell me where my girl is, if I help him.

" Mr. Ruxton !" blurted the young man. " You've got to tell me where she is. The air men 've gone crazy. They've told the boss they're not waiting. They've stopped the air."

" Stopped it ?" Bill listened for the background murmurs of the ventilators, but the commotion drowned them—if they were still going.

He remembered his suggestion to his informant. Locating the girl was easy. " She's coming here. You'll miss her if you run off," he said. Some of her woman's panic transferred itself into his mind and from thence to the young man.

" Is she all right, smoothie ?"

" Yes. Frightened. You'll be able to comfort her here, when they've all gone. And a big room like this will hold air enough for many hours."

Bill ran for the passage leading towards the main air-mixing room, where Stumpy and his men had apparently gone beyond all bounds.

" Blamed smoothie !" shouted a man on the tail of the angry mob, turning. " I'll wake you up—"

His big fist swung.

Bill speared him with a thought: *The ground is open at my feet and I'm going to fall into a bottomless pit.*

The man howled, tried to turn in mid stride, fought to drag himself back, and plunged to the ground. He stayed there, and was only just opening his eyes as Bill raced past him.

Bill cleared an avenue by implanting the impression that it was a very high official coming in great haste.

The crowd behind him, his long legs had taken him well on his way before they began to follow. He was glad for their noise to cover the silence of the ventilators.

He turned a corner and saw the guards at the end of the turning leading to the air-mixing room. Even above the discontent and defiance esping out of the air men's minds, he could sense a curious sort of partial dilemma in the minds of those guards.

Chosen for their steadiness, they had not been affected at all by the strike announcement. Even allowing for the leakage into the thin Martian atmosphere outside, the air within the mine would last a full twelve hours. A lot could happen in that time. It might not be long enough for help to reach them from any other settlement, or for one of the Earth rockets to land, but they had faith in their leaders.

But that was only a part of their dilemma. There was a girl begging them to let her pass them. She turned at the sound of his footfalls.

Audrey Scott ! What was she doing here ? His mind began to reach for hers, but his conditioning deflected it. He could not help but know that she liked him too well, and he must not commit the crime of encouraging her.

His pace slackened as she ran to meet him.

" Oh, Bill ! I'm so glad. I was sure Stumpy had got you."

" Eh ?" Bill stopped as she flung her arms around him. He had no weapon against this kind of attack and went cold and hot by turns.

Suddenly she had caught his hand and was dragging him after her. " You didn't say there was a mob after you !" she gasped at him.

The sentries blocked their path. " No entrance for you, Miss Scott. Administration only beyond this point."

" But I'm on the union committee representing non-mining staff !"

" Not good enough. Orders."

Bill ducked under their arms, leaving her protesting behind him.

Half-way to the mixing room door, the whole mine seemed to rock around him. Blows seemed to rain in on him from empty air. His mind seemed to be breaking in two and his determination wavered, groggily.

He covered up desperately and stood for a few moments pulling himself together. A mind, at least as powerfully developed as his own, had attempted to stop him.

It had failed. But it would try again.

He waited. Until he knew his opponent, it was impossible to strike back. He was fighting in the dark. He could not guess at the direction from which the next blow would come. Nor could he do more than wait for that blow.

And yet . . . Audrey Scott had been waiting for him, here. He probed back through his own defence, through his own implanted inhibition, grimly into her mind.

She was angry with him for having left her behind. She did not want to risk offending him, because he would be such a wonderful marriage catch. She could put up with his smoothie ways, because he was so handsome, even if he was skinny, and because, as a smoothie, he would be able to support her in luxury. With his smoothie talent and her innocent face and cunning, they would clean up.

Horrified, he withdrew, shuddering. She wasn't his telepathic opponent . . .

Espings from the door in front of him drew his attention. In themselves they seemed to beat over his mind like leaping flames. He must do something about them.

He took a pace forward, and staggered. For a moment he was in combat so violent that the mental effort left him physically weak.

And then he was alone again within the citadel of his thoughts. He marshalled his thoughts.

Union representative, Herbert Whipp, was coming towards him with exaggerated caution, no doubt fresh from a council meeting in the union office. Bill opened the older man's mind.

The smoothie looks queer—can he have gone nuts ?

Whipp halted, hesitating.

After all, it's an unofficial strike. What happens is on the head of Stumpy Borland and . . . the smoothie. I need not get mixed up in it. Yet, Stumpy's a good fellow, if he is pig-headed, and I did take his job off him; and the smoothie is a good T.L.R.O., and we've got to put up with T.L.R.O.'s these days. So—

" Anything I can do ?" asked Whipp. " I want to help, if I can."

" Just stand there," said Bill. In the two and a half years of living and working with Whipp, they had respected each other, almost liked each other. No, Whipp surely could not be the troublemaker.

Bill looked to his mental defences, and took another pace towards the door of the air-mixing room. And almost staggered back, as a fresh attack broke his calm, tearing his thoughts to chaos. For an instant he seemed to be standing chest to chest with an invisible opponent, and then again he was alone, chilled with sudden sweat.

He flung himself forward, a pace, two paces, three— With each movement the power of the opposing force seemed to double. He paused, gasping for breath, nerves taut, mind rocking with a nausea so strong that vomit rose in his throat.

Doggedly, he stayed where he was, fighting for calm, pulling himself together for a renewed attack.

Behind him there was some minor commotion. Unit Manager Gall's arrival was breaking the nervous tension in the minds of the watching miners. Bill slashed back at the Manager's mind, felt the shock of striking the shield. Could Gall, then, be his opponent, after all ?

Bill passed through the minds of three miners in front of Gall. *The smoothie is trying to help us* ! he prompted. Gall must be stopped, and hang the consequences.

He felt the jumpy men swing into almost instinctive action. Consternation came shuddering towards him. Hell's bells—

They've knocked out the boss !

The feeling of Gall's shield faded . . .

Bill's confidence climbed. With strength renewed, he leaned forward into another step.

The door was so close.

Shock after shock smashed into his reeling mind. The attacker was right within his mind, playing havoc with his nerves so that muscles ached and twitched. But he stepped doggedly on, pace after shaking pace.

A single step from the closed door, he stopped, of his own accord, rigid while he grappled with the devil rending and suggesting within him. For a dreadful instant he thought that he must go under. And then he was alone within himself, his clothes sticking to him with his own sweat, fear crawling in his stomach.

It would be so easy to go back !

Retreat would be such a relief !

Nobody would ever know . . .

Temptation.

He flung out the thoughts that crept and invited. Somebody would know if he failed in his duty. He would, himself. He felt he would never have any self respect again—

All his ordinary senses faded from his awareness as he channeled all his vitality into a counter attack. There was only Stumpy Borland left. Stumpy, unlikely as it had seemed, had to be the trouble-maker.

As before, his probe into the central character of the striking air men came up against a mind armoured by the school of hard experience. But armour lacks mobility. Bill by-passed it, disturbing the softer elements of his enemy, demoralising with swift thoughts superimposed on whatever pattern of mind he came across.:

Wife and my son. They will suffer hardship, and stand to gain very little. Why don't I make Stumpy get the Smoothie to report on all sides?

Promotion. This has gone farther than I thought. Stumpy's only causing trouble now. Pig-headed he is. They'll think I am the same, when they want foremen air men for new mines. I'm a fool to stand for this.

Comfort. There's going to be no beer, if we stay in here. It's dull enough, here, anyway.

Common Sense. In the old days, the workers used to have to meet fire with fire—to threaten their employers when the employers threatened them. But—nowadays, we've got smoothies to see both sides of troubles like this . . .

Bill's confidence grew as he felt consciences awake and tongues begin to wag with questions that Stumpy must be finding it very awkward to answer.

The harrassing tactic complete, he gathered his entire strength. And suddenly he knew that he stood on the brink of a precipice. To fall over would be to go mad. And yet there was no option to fighting Either himself or his enemy must be destroyed.

He advanced and closed around the solid, single-minded purpose of the mind of Stumpy Borland. And he squeezed the defences, and hammered on them, and went on squeezing and hammering.

On and on to crescendo. Barrage and shock. Barrage and shock. *Come out and face me. Stumpy Borland, come out and face me. Come out* !

He was getting home, at last on the man's mind, feeling parts of his attack penetrating the heavy defences.

But, at that instant of triumph, the attack upon himself renewed. He met it, and took punishment, like a man who leaves one fist to protect himself whilst attacking continually with the other.

It was as though half of him battled for right; and half for wrong. Like a Nation at civil war and trying to keep at bay an outside invader.

And no nation can do that for long. No man can take and deal punishment indefinitely. There has to be a unity. A climax must come.

He tottered on the brink, now winning his unseen battle, now losing it to the unseen enemy. He was alone. Nobody could help in this little world of humans . . .

He felt himself seeming to rise from a great depth, somehow stronger than ever before, like a man renewed, a spirit tried and proved.

The door in front of him was opening. Stumpy Borland was coming out because he was forced to do so. Awareness crept back piecemeal into Bill's mind. There was a murmuring sound behind him. Footsteps at his side. He was shaking as though with ague, physically weakened, but mentally strengthened.

Silence fell as the door swung wide open. It had been dragged open at a violent rate, but Bill's thoughts moved so swiftly that the motion seemed slowed.

Stumpy, like a miniature bull, stamped on the floor and bellowed : " I'LL DO FOR YOU !" And charged, head down, massive arms swinging.

Bill felt himself swung to one side. A bigger, heavier figure met the smaller stubbier one. Fists thudded and voices gasped incoherently.

Bill laughed triumphantly. Physical attack was mental capitulation. He saw that his saviour was Whipp, and he could feel that the general feeling of both the watching miners and the agitated air men was of relief at this brawl as an end to a situation that had become no good to anyone.

Murmurs from both directions along the passage died away. The air men within the mixing room stilled with listening. The combatants paused in mutual truce to listen with the others.

A faint, gigantic roar slowly gained volume. Bill, expecting to hear the air again circulating, was puzzled.

Then a voice shouted. " The ships. The rockets are coming !"

The rockets from Earth were coming down for the first big commercial cargo from Mars. And they would be taking back a few human beings from the mine . . .

The crowd melted away, miners and air men rushing like schoolboys to see the night landing of the great rockets.

One man, the side of his face bruised, slowly approached Bill.

Unit Manager Gall rubbed his jaw tenderly. "I suppose you set them on to me," he said. "Now let me tell you. You cut your own throat doing it. I had to tell you that your boss was trying to contact you."

"Joss Hart—trying to contact me?"

"Uh-huh. He said he couldn't get through your concentration, or something. Well . . . I'd better go and see about an official welcome. S'long, smoothie. Thanks for getting things settled."

"So long," murmured Bill.

He marvelled. Never before had Joss Hart failed to be able to break through whatever concentration he, William Ruxton, had been able to achieve.

He opened his mind, and Joss came in, impatiently.

"I've been trying to call you for long enough. What's been going on?"

Bill told him.

"And you still don't know what's actually been happening to you?" asked Joss.

Bill started. "Stumpy—"

"Stumpy was just a tool," said Moss. "You started the whole thing. You kept it going and made it worse. You and you alone are to blame. Thank heavens you came to your senses in the end. For a while, you had me worried sick. It could have driven you mad."

"But—" began Bill.

Joss interrupted: "Being a telepath is not easy, Bill. What you think is reflected to some degree on all those around you. You wanted to do a useful job when you came here to Mars and you did your part in keeping the mine happy and contented, until the ships came. No doubt there were other stresses on you, like homesickness, maybe a woman . . . As soon as you became discontented, your feeling of duty made you suppress that discontent. And your mind split within itself. You certainly caused some trouble, didn't you?"

"You're sure of this, Joss?"

"Absolutely. You've been a schizoid—two people in one. I wanted you to fight it out within yourself, but I meant to make sure that neither you nor the mine came to any harm. But you beat me. I let Manager Gall into my confidence, and just now sent him after you to tell you

that you would be going to Earth, after all. But you settled him. You did it all yourself. And you have come through twice as powerful mentally as you were before."

"I am? You— Did you mean that about my going back to Earth?"

"You are. And I certainly did. More than ever, now. Samuel Smith, Managing Director of Interplanetary Mines, Incorporated, has asked me several times for a well-tried T.L.R.O. for a very special job. I've been looking for a man for a long time. You are definitely the one. I'm sending you back to Earth for a holiday, a spot of extra work at the college, and then—you're off."

"Then you aren't mad at me, for all this trouble?"

"I'm not mad at you. Nobody else is. As I said, it's no joke being a smoothie. Sitting on the fence, you're Billy-All-Alone. But— I will say one thing. You can't expect to be popular through being a smoothie and you aren't always happy because you are one. But you've got one consolation.

"Smoothies are wanted."

—E. R. James.

One of the biggest difficulties being experienced in the making of science fiction films is necessity for 'accurate' extra-terrestrial scenery. Until the first on-the-spot photographs from the Moon or Mars reach us, the artists' imagination must serve instead.

MOSSENDEW'S MARTIAN

By JOHN KIPPAX

Illustrated by QUINN

In many ways, George Mossendew was a clever fellow. At school he was nimble fingered and near brilliant at maths, but his restless spirit and his unprepossessing appearance were against the full realisation of his potentialities. During the war he had worked in an R.E. camouflage school, where his camera and his model work had been of a very high standard. He never got higher than lieutenant however, because his shy and diffident outlook caused him to be passed over in favour of the 'good-evening-sir-you're-looking-well-do-have-a-drink-sir' type. When he left the army he first set up as a general photographer, but while he took the odd photo of a bare-skinned infant on a bear skin rug, he had his mind on higher and potentially more profitable things: the trouble was that in his particular line, things were a bit sticky.

I don't know how he would have got on if he had had a wife. Come to think of it, if he had been married he would not be in the interesting spot he's in at this moment—but I'm certain that no woman would

have stood for the way in which he expressed his single-minded passion for model making. The whole place was littered with dioramas, models and cut outs of all descriptions; visitors gazed at the jumble in horror. Mrs. Gage his daily help gave him notice regularly once a week over it, and only Hodge, his cat, remained contentedly uncritical. I remember that I was very busy myself at this time, but the one occasion when I did see him at home remains in my memory as an all time high of confusion.

For a very long time he was pretty well on the bread line, but he was proud, and he kept to himself, and he asked charity of no one. He photographed his models and went plugging round the agents ; they told him goodbye, but he stuck at it. Then he made an absurdly small start by doing a dioramic effort for the display of shirts and ties in a tailor's shop. Not long after that things *did* begin to happen. A fellow named Tallin offered George the job of doing the space-opera backgrounds of a series of puppet advertising films. George set himself a twenty hour a day schedule, used every penny he had on materials and went to work. He was in business—paint, glue, paper, cameras and all.

It was soon after he collected the first cheque that he began to come into our pub. I never met him there, because we were fiendishly busy at our place too. He liked to have a beer or two and sit and listen to the conversation, but mostly he read or did a pool coupon. He was far too shy to break in and introduce himself to anybody, although it seems that there *was* one night when he got very near to it.

" Flying saucers !" said someone. " What would the popular press do without them ?" A paper was tossed down. " Here, just *look* at that cartoon."

Mossendew looked at it in his own copy of the paper. It showed some alleged Martians clambering from what purported to be a space ship: they had four eyes and six legs and they carried ray guns. The caption was funny too.

" What bosh !" said a man with a beard. " Why haven't they got the sense to see that if ET life was clever enough to get here, and wanted to invade as that joke says, the aliens wouldn't advertise the fact."

" Here John—come and keep him in his place !"

" But *doooo* tell us !"

" Careful—there might be a writer listening !"

" I see what he means," said another. " If they were going to organise a successful invasion, they would look just like ourselves. They'd spend a long time getting acclimatised, and used to our ways—'

"Shhhh!" cut in a fat bloke with Gilbert Harding spectacles, "there's a guy in the corner who might be one!"

George grinned as he looked over and saw another stranger to the place sitting on his own, reading. The man was of George's own small stature, indeterminately middle aged, wearing an old hat and a very ordinary raincoat. George smiled over at the man, but his smile was really for no one but himself—and once again he drew the note from his pocket, to read it for the twentieth time.

"*Have given your name to Spyros Gavradis. Ring him BELsize* 41258 *tomorrow a.m. between* 9.30 *and* 10.30.

Good luck.

Tallin."

Gavradis ! He was an American producer over here to spend some of his company's frozen assets in motion pictures using British and American stars and British studios and equipment. George folded the note, smiled again, and when he had finished his beer he made for the door. Quite thoughtlessly, he smiled at the stranger as he passed. The latter gave him a blank look, and then formed his features into an answering smile. Another shy bloke, no doubt.

George was in the pub again next evening. He gazed moodily into his beer, and hunched himself like a dyspeptic heron that has just seen the fish slip away. And *what* a fish ! For the hundredth time, he went over that phone conversation again . . .

Gavradis had been effusive.

" Yeah, yeah ! Good-morning to *you*, Mr. Mossendew. Yeah—Mr. Tallin—nice man." The gusty voice seemed to bring an impression of rimless glasses, a meaty face, a cigar and a pretty shrewd brain.

" Mr. Mossendew, I'm in a spot, and from what I'm told, you're the man to help me out. We're making *Conquest of the Moon* here at Elmwood Stoodios, and a combination of illness and other commitments has put our model men and background specialists out of the running. I've been on transatlantic for Bonestell, but he's not available—"

Bonestell ! Thought George. In *that* class ! Something told him that this would be no push-over.

" If you'll look at it at once, I'll send an art department skedule over to you by messenger right away."

George's head was spinning.

" I'd like your firm to do the lot, and I want your O.K. within twenty-four hours—"

Firm ! Him and Hodge !

And then the punch line which sent George reeling.

" If your work's what we want and you can handle it, the whole thing is worth ten thousand pounds. 'Bye Mr. Mossendew."

The phone crashed down. Hodge rubbed against his legs as he slowly replaced his own receiver. He decided that they both needed something to pull them together, so he made himself a pot of coffee and poured Hodge a stiff milk.

The messenger arrived, and George's fingers were ripping at the cover of the wad of typescript almost before the door had closed. The coffee grew cold and the untidy room about him ceased to exist as he read on, and soon his eager anticipation began to fade, and instead gloom and frustration and anger chased through his mind. *Ten thousand pounds* !—and he would have to turn it down, because even

if it were possible to borrow the gear necessary, one man, working twenty-four hours a day could not hope to get the work done in the time. ' Conquest of the Moon ' called for the lot, and it was only within George's power to supply part of that lot. If only he could farm out the making of the lunar backgrounds . . .

The conversation in the pub around him seemed to grate on his ears. He scowled into his eighteenth half pint and wondered if something stronger than beer would help in providing a clue as to possible action. The beginning of real success . . . Mossendew's Models Inc. . . . *' we defy you to spot where the model ends and the real thing begins '*— or should it be the other way about ? . . . Mossendew Model Enterprises . . . " Mossendew and Bonestell have been contracted to make the finest—" —"so I said to him ' Ches,' I said—" . . . He must get that other beer . . .

Even as he thought of rising to make his unsteady way to the bar, a glass containing something which closely resembled a treble whisky was put in front of him. He looked up to see the little man whom he had previously noticed in the pub, the chap who sat as lonely looking as himself.

" Mr. Mossendew ?"

The voice was soft, the eyes large, cold, compelling.

" Yes," said George thickly.

" You need two things—a drink and some help. You have the first here—the second is on its way." The stranger sat down. With his eyes still on his new-found friend, George took the first half of the whisky at a gulp. And the man in front of him seemed to cease to be strange, and the leathery smile now appeared warm and hopeful. George was lost to everything but the voice of the man opposite, who began to explain to George that he had connections whereby a large proportion of the background work of the ' Conquest of the Moon ' could be supplied by him : payment ? Couldn't they talk about that later ? They might even be able to catch two meteors with one grab. Curious expression. He meant two mouses with one piece of cheese of course. George gave the man all his attention.

The last ' rush ' was through.

" Mossendew !" boomed Gavradis, larger, meatier and sharper than even George had imagined him, " Mossendew, this work is tops !"

In addition to the producer and George, the Elmwood Studios projection room contained Borrow, the director, and Mirak the technical supervisor.

They blinked as the light went on, and the voice of the projectionist enquired through the speaker " O.K., Mr. Gavradis ?"

" Yep !" Gavradis slapped George on the back.. " Once there was only George Pal—now there's another George in there pitching !"

" It wouldn't be anything," disclaimed George modestly, " if it weren't for the wonderful direction and lighting."

Mirak was regarding George curiously. His dark eyes were narrowed.

" Can't figure out that *quality* you get in some of the backgrounds. There's often a stereoscopic effect, and even at the original size you get on the stuff I would have expected the emulsion grain to show up, but there doesn't seem to be any. Such clarity . . ."

" Quite a technician," said Borrow.

" I'll say !" said Mr. Gavradis enthusiastically.

" It has me beat," said Mirak, " why—if you could prove your *imagined* lunar detail really did exist, you'd have the astronomers eating out of your hand."

" You must pull their legs sometime," said Borrow. " Now, before you go, there's a point about the model of the second space ship . . ."

The work went on.

When the stuff was delivered to George, he got no more than a glimpse of his benefactor's little car as it sped away round the corner after leaving his part of the contract in the porch.

George was ninety-nine per cent happy—which is a sight more than most of us have any right to be.

The pub was busy again.

" All right then," said a long fellow called Ted. " So the invaders would need to establish confidence and get some money. How would they do it ?"

" Easy. If they look and talk like the earthman does, then they already have his confidence—trust. And if they need money they steal it. Or maybe they could come prepared to sell something we wanted to buy."

" Set up shop ?"

George was listening with the greatest possible attention.

" No, *no* ! If you've anything vital to sell, you can sell it all right. And they would come with some really precious goods—something we couldn't afford to be without—perhaps something tailored to our individual needs."

George Mossendew found that he was gripping his glass tightly, his eyes downcast. He did not want to admit *why* to himself.

The man called Ted said " It occurs to me that if they traded with us like that, when they had got the money they wanted, they might

consider it advisable to cover up their tracks by killing off all those with whom they had done business."

"You'll soon be in the horror comic trade!" laughed someone. There was more laughter, in which George wished he could have joined. He felt worried now, and with his work for the studio so near completion . . . He was on the point of leaving when a glass containing a treble whisky was put into his hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Mossendew."

The soft spoken little man with the wizened face and the muscular smile was beside him. The sharp eyes glittered from the pallid face.

"G—good evening," returned George. Why the hell should he feel nervous?

"Everything all right at the studio?"

The little man sat down and searched Mossendew's face.

"Perfect." George could not have sounded less enthusiastic.

"It's a happy thought, isn't it, that the last batch of our work will be delivered to you tomorrow morning?"

"Y—yes," stammered George, "very happy. Er—what about the payment?"

This was another worry. The fellow had always been most reluctant to talk about the business side of it.

"I think that five hundred pounds would be in order."

George choked into his glass. *Five hundred pounds*! He had expected them to want a thousand at least. He recovered, and reflected that he could raise it from Gavradis the next day.

His companion was rising.

"Cash, please, Mr. Mossendew. I will call at seven tomorrow evening—the twenty-third."

Then he was gone. George downed the whisky and ordered himself another. He drank that one more reflectively, and told himself several times and firmly not to be a blithering fool. At two a.m. the next morning he was still giving himself the same advice.

The photographic work which George delivered to the Elmwood studios that morning was indeed the last of its kind required. All that remained now was some model work which he could handle himself. He was relieved, and got furious with himself for not admitting what he was feeling relieved about. As usual, he had got just a parting glimpse of the little car which delivered the huge prints to him.

He gave the stuff in at Mirak's office, and as the tech supervisor was not available at the time, he wandered in to see them preparing some trick shot work. He could talk to these people fairly easily; Mirak was all right, but definitely the boss man. George was listening to a des-

cription of the astonishing variations possible with the matt shot, when his attention was drawn to a youth standing by with a large cardboard folder.

" Yes ?"

" Mr. Mossendew, Mr. Mirak says he must return this one to you."

One of his photographs—one of the photographs of those model backgrounds which were being supplied to him by his secretive friend.

" Did he say what was wrong ?"

" He said for you to go and check the model you did it from with a lunar map, and the schedule of work which you have."

George dismissed the boy and said goodbye to his acquaintances. This was no time for making admissions of error—his reputation stood high and Gavradis was talking winningly about work in the States.

Check the thing, Mirak had said. He propped the beautiful photograph in front of him as he ate the dinner which Mrs. Gage had left for him in the oven, and he was struck again by the amazing close grained quality, the superfine detail. Mirak must be in a pretty peculiar mood to find fault with *that*.

He washed up, and at about two o'clock he began to go through his files and his references. At two-thirty he was puzzled, at three he was definitely nervous, and at four o'clock he rang me. He was shaking. I listened to the recital of his fears.

" Great Palomar !" I said, " but is that *all* ?"

" *All* ?" He was nearly weeping. " Isn't that enough ?"

" You're overworked," I said soothingly: " why not take the rest of the day off? Then quite likely you'll find it tomorrow."

" Every time I went into the pub—"

" I wish I could have got in and introduced you to them," I said, " but even so, if you were in such a jam you could have asked—"

" Oh, stop lecturing !" barked George. Then his voice changed to an almost whimpering note. " I'm begging you, John, come over and see this rejected photograph—and—and stay a bit !"

So I came over. *I* didn't need any reference books. I took one long look at that wonderful photograph and I said yes . . . I'd wait with him until seven that night, when payment was to be collected.

So—here we are waiting. There's no wonder that Mossendew feels upset. Perhaps we *should* have told the police . . . no. That's ridiculous. There must be a logical explanation for the whole thing. It certainly would have been wiser for him to have shown me these photographs as he got them. Work or not, for these I would have found time from somewhere. And why *couldn't* he have made friends with the fellows in the pub ? Anyone in there, on Thursday nights

at least, could have helped him. The 'Globe' has a very highly specialised clientele. But, speaking as an astronomer of twenty-five years experience, I can honestly say that I *don't* think those lunar background photos were fakes, or built up from models at all. I think they were the real thing, done with greater artistry than has ever before been achieved. That's all right—except for the rejected one. It fits into no known map of the Moon that *I've* ever seen, and I'm forced to the conclusion that it was *taken with a flash bomb from the side of the moon we never see—the dark side.* It's five minutes to seven now. I could be mistaken about the whole thing of course, but it *might* have been a good idea to risk ridicule and call the police. There would still be time. That noise I can hear is Mossendew's teeth chattering.

—John Kippax.

This is a Time-travelling story with a delightful difference—in it Mr. Burke assumes that it would be possible to alter the past. Such alterations eventually become a Government department and the ensuing chaos makes quite amusing fantasy.

THE ADJUSTERS

By JONATHAN BURKE

Illustrated by HUNTER

The two of them were strolling under the softly glowing artificial trees of the Embankment Gardens. Above them the traffic hummed and flickered in a turmoil as the evening rush into the city intensified. The great sports stadium in the Strand sent out its summons in jabbing fingers of light that beckoned helicars and buses in from the heavens.

Alun said: " Want to go anywhere special ?"

She shook her head. They sat down in the localised warmth of an arbour, away from the frosty clarity of the cold evening. He put his arm around her shoulders.

" It's much nicer," she said dreamily, " just sitting here."

Then she was gone. He was left sitting there alone, with his arm curved out at an awkward absurd angle.

He swore. This was the second time it had happened this month. He pushed himself up from the seat and stamped off towards the Ministry of Adjustment. The building was four minutes' walk from here, but he was so angry that he made it in three minutes flat.

At the moment of the girl's disappearance, a jet car which had just begun to fall to the ground out of control over Lisbon was snatched back on to its course as though by a giant hand. There had been a fault in the atomic power pack, but now there was no fault.

An elderly widow in Bayswater whose son had been executed for murder two years earlier went downstairs to answer an aggressive ring at the door, and found him standing on the step. He was the same as ever—his lower jaw thrust out, his thick lips greedy and sensual, his eyes as hard and selfish as ever. She let him in—she could hardly have kept him out—but within ten minutes she was ringing the Ministry with a bitter complaint. It took her quite a time to get through. People were always ringing up with complaints, and the visiscreens were clogged with protesting faces and voluble mouths.

The young couple spending their honeymoon at the Trafalgar Palace Hotel had gone to bed early that night. The husband finished cleaning his teeth and came in to smile at his wife as she lay back with her eyes half-closed. She turned her head lazily and luxuriously on the pillow.

" Marianne, darling," he said gently.

And then he disappeared.

Her eyes opened wide. She sat up abruptly and reached for the communicon.

" Get me the Ministry of Adjustment—Complaints Department," she snapped furiously. Then, glancing down at her filmy night-dress, she added: " Screen blank. Sound only."

A little girl who had, one moment before, been killed by a maniac as she stepped from a taxi on her way home from a party, suddenly went on crossing the courtyard into her home. There was no maniac. He had, now, never existed.

It was a busy evening for the late shift at the Ministry. The small staff had to cope with a surge of incoming calls, and to make things worse there had been several personal visits. It was easier to deal soothingly with a face in a visiscreen than with an indignant man pounding the desk in the Complaint's Office.

Alun leaned threateningly towards the weary middle-aged man behind the desk. He said :

" This is the second time in a month. Last time we had tickets for the Undersea Tournament, and by the time the trouble was unravelled it was too late for us to get there. I'm telling you, you'd better get busy right now."

" I'll investigate your case, sir."

" Well, get a move on. There's twenty minutes before the Palladium show starts, and I want her back so that we can get there."

It was not true: he had just wanted to sit beneath the trees with her; but the only way to get any action out of these people was to set a time limit and make a fuss about it.

He stood away from the desk and fidgeted while the clerk thumbed buttons on the correlater and registered a complaint with Central Records at Somerset House.

One of the screens behind another desk sparked into life. The young woman at the desk sighed and accepted the call. An elderly woman's face shaped itself on the screen. She began talking before the focus was clear.

"What do you mean by sending my son back? He was a no-good all his life, and now he's come back to torment me. He'll kill me, I tell you. You've got to do something about it. He was a criminal once, and he's still a criminal."

"Your name and address, madam?"

The young woman jotted down the details, and her fingers ran over buttons. Disembodied voices crackled from the desk receivers. She nodded over the results, then smiled brightly up at the indignant face in the screen.

"I'm sorry you've had this trouble—"

"So I should think."

"It was a side-effect which had not been taken into account. We had to go back to a period six months before the murder which your son committed: there was a Martian transport whose passenger list had to be altered so that certain people did not travel on it. Those who did travel on it were killed in a blow-up out in space."

"That doesn't mean a thing to me. All I want is—"

"The readjustment," went on the young woman smoothly, "involved the man your son was to murder. He travelled on that ship and was killed, and so of course your son could not murder him. But there is a strong case for that adjustment to be annulled."

"So I should hope."

"The victim was himself a criminal, so that the Ministry does not theoretically disapprove of the murder, though this does not of course affect the legal penalty to your son. As our potentiality factor shows that your son will very probably attempt to kill you for your savings, and will in any case resume a life of crime if he is allowed to continue in this time sector, we agree to go back and make a further readjustment. The other man will be restored to his old ship, the murder will take place, and your son will be executed. If you will wait for fifteen minutes while our operator goes back, your son will disappear."

"Fifteen minutes? There's no telling what—"

"It can't be done in less than that. You have to allow for the equivalent time factor, you know. But I can promise you that the matter will be adjusted."

Grumbling, the woman in the screen faded.

Alun's impatience boiled over. He came back to the clerk at the desk and growled :

" Well, what about some results ? If it takes fifteen minutes to straighten things out, we'll—er—we'll miss the show."

The harassed clerk looked up at him warily. " There seems to be some snag. Records are making some checks."

" Well, tell them to get a move on. All this messing about with Time has meant nothing but trouble since it started."

The clerk looked offended. He evidently resented this slight on the work of the Ministry.

" It's done more to stabilise our civilisation and prevent wars than anything else the human race has ever developed," he said proudly. " We can go back and rub out mistakes—make sure that things which ought not to have happened don't happen—straighten out the kinks—"

" All right, all right," snapped Alun. " Get this kink straightened out and let me get away from here."

Another screen glowed, but no picture formed on it. A call that had been waiting for some few minutes came through on the sound channel alone. Alun glared at it as angrily as any of the clerks were doing: he didn't want other folk's problems to be dealt with until his own was cleared up.

" I'm speaking from the Trafalgar Palace Hotel," said a voice that might, under normal circumstances, be an attractive one; at the moment it was extremely bitter. " My husband has been removed—presumably by one of your foolish past-adjustment schemes. I want something done about it . . . and done quickly."

" Your name, madam ?"

" Mrs. Marianne Westing."

The call went through as usual, and somewhere the relays began to click, the facts were collated, and the Duty Inspector made his decision.

Still no word came for Alun.

Marianne listened in horrified disbelief to the sympathetic, carefully reasonable voice that came out of the receiver. It made everything sound so right and just and inevitable—and so appalling.

" We are sorry to have kept you waiting, but I am afraid your case is a somewhat complicated one. The Ministry regrets that nothing can be done to restore your husband."

" Nothing ? But you must. You can't just—"

" Yours is one of those fortunately rare cases where definite personal hardship is unavoidable. We do all we can to frame our plans so that there is a minimum of personal inconvenience. But on this occasion the complexity of the problem has made a certain—ah—severity

essential. Two children who *must* grow up safely and marry were in danger of death. One was the son of the President of the World Federation, the other the daughter of the Governor General of Mars, at present on holiday there. The power pack of the jet car in which the boy was travelling had been tampered with by unscrupulous opponents of the present regime. A man with a distorted sense of the value of old-fashioned terrestrial imperialism was set upon the girl. You will agree that something had to be done to wipe out those errors."

"Certainly. But surely it could have been done without—"

"We were taken aback when we studied the various factors. The decision was made in less than five seconds, but our electronic computers did work which would have taken a human mathematician almost three years. It was revealed that the only possible resolution of the equation was by ensuring that three people thirty years ago did not meet. I am afraid that to make an adjustment at such a distance involves a large number of side issues. At least four families have, as a direct or indirect result, ceased to exist. Your husband belonged to one of those. It was not one of the major factors, but in a way that I cannot explain to you it proved to be essential nevertheless. If your husband were to be born, one of the terrorists would be born. There is no family connection, of course: it is entirely a matter of chance meetings, the friendship between certain people at the time, and a particular social circle. I am sorry, but your husband had to be eliminated; and our computers lay it down quite firmly that he must not be restored. The equation was a tricky one, and to replace your husband would be to throw out the entire reckoning and endanger the peace of the Solar System."

"I won't stand for this," cried Marianne through her tears. "I'll visit my M.P. tomorrow. You can't get away with this bungling."

"It is very regrettable, madam." The voice was still sympathetic but still firm. "If you wish to file a claim for suitable compensation, it will be dealt with promptly. But the decision is inalterable."

Marianne snapped the switch off and lay back, sobbing.

She could not sleep. The evening was still young, and without her husband it would be endless. This evening, this night, the next day and all the days and weeks to follow . . . how was she to face them?

She went to the window and blinked out, the colours of the sky signs blurring fantastically through her tears. She would have to go out. She could not stay here. She would throw herself under a descending helicar, or dive into the cold river. Life could not go on.

How long she stood there, she could not tell. At last she turned back and looked wretchedly around the room.

It was useless to sink into a trance like this. If she did not pull herself together and get out, she would scream.

She had just finished dressing when the communicon chimed its resonant notes.

" What is it ?" She tried to keep the misery out of her voice.

" A gentleman downstairs to see you, Mrs. Westing. A Mr. Alun Crawley."

" I don't know any Mr. Crawley. I'm afraid he must have made—"

" He says he has come here direct from the Ministry of Adjustment."

Marianne did not wait to reply. She was out into the corridor in a flash, thumbing the lift button, clenching her fists as the lift swooped down. In the foyer she half ran towards the young man who was waiting by the desk.

He said: " Mrs. Westing ?"

" It's all right, isn't it ?" she gasped. " You've found some way of fixing it up after all ?"

He shook his head slowly. She saw then that the sombre expression in his eyes was not the professional sympathy of a Ministry clerk. Here was someone who had suffered—someone, she sensed, who had been through an experience similar to her own.

Her shoulders sagged. She felt dizzy. Then his hand was under her arm, guiding her towards a seat in one of the alcoves.

" I caught your name and address when I was in the Complaints Office myself," he explained gently but urgently. " I don't work there. I was there to get something straightened out—and they told me pretty well the same sort of story as they told you."

Marianne sat up erect, staring straight ahead and winning control of her voice. At last she was able to say :

" But why did you come to see me ?"

" I thought that we ought to do something." He was, she realised, as hopelessly dazed and upset as she was. " I felt I couldn't go home, couldn't just . . . just walk out of that place and give up. I wanted to do *something*. I thought that as we were both involved in this business we ought to talk it over. We've got to take action."

She nodded vaguely. " What sort of action ?"

There was a long silence.

Then Alun said: " You don't know anyone in the Ministry ? Or—well, anyone influential ?"

" No."

" If we could bribe someone—"

" You can't bribe them," she said. " I had a friend who tried to do it. It was over something trivial—they'd done an adjustment a week back, so that she found herself living in a different town and all her

collection of twentieth century glass had ceased to exist—but they were very severe when she was caught. It's a serious offence to try bribing any of the staff to make private readjustments for you."

He stared glumly at his feet. " If I could get a job there, I might find out how they travel back in time—might get on one of the duty squads myself—and then go back and fix things up . . ." There was no conviction in his tone.

Hope drained out of both of them. They looked blankly into the future.

" It's terrible," said Marianne. " Terrible. This tampering with the natural order won't do any good in the long run."

" We won't be beaten by some damned incompetent Ministry," Alun growled. " We'll work out something. Look, let me meet you tomorrow and see if we can think up something. We may see things more clearly tomorrow. We'll decide what approach to make. I'll get an official protest drafted, and maybe we can make some influential contact. We'll find some way of doing something."

What they actually did, after a comparatively short time, was to marry.

This was not an official suggestion. It was not, so far as they could tell, an idea which had been cunningly implanted in their minds by harassed Ministry officials. It was just that a day came when they admitted, sheepishly at first and then with a growing, exuberant warmth, that they were fed up with pursuing enquiries and making angry representations to various authorities; they found that they were not at all anxious to restore the past. Their original impetus had carried them quite a distance, but now its force had weakened. There came that time when they frankly said that they were managing very well without their previous partners, that the whole business might as well be written off, and that in any case they *did* seem to get on so well together that, after all, when you came to look at it sensibly—and emotionally and passionately as well as sensibly, of course . . .

They married.

Marianne's previous husband and Alun's girl friend were not often mentioned. They asked one another a few questions, and answered more honestly than they had done during the course of their original investigations. Alun admitted that his girl had been only one of many (at which Marianne frowned dubiously) and that she had been by no means the best of the bunch; while Marianne said that even on her honeymoon she had begun to feel a bit apprehensive about life with Patrick, who talked at great length about spaceships and his theories

about Venus and what it would be like when the atmospheric conditions were conquered and man could settle there.

"Atmospheric conditions !" said Marianne. "He could quote figures about the darned place until you'd have thought he'd spent his life there. It was his one real ambition—to travel to Venus."

" People get these kinks," said Alun tolerantly. He could afford to be tolerant towards a non-existent Patrick.

" He'd have left me like a shot if someone had said there was an expedition setting off for Venus tomorrow. I'm sure he would."

" Well, anyway, I'll never leave you," said Alun.

That seemed to be a good way of looking at it, and it made them both happy, and they didn't worry about the past.

In due course a son was born to Alun and Marianne, and they both thought how lucky they were, and hoped that young Martin was aware of his own good fortune. Alun prospered. When Martin was a year old they found themselves abruptly transported to a new house. Somewhere the Adjusters must have found it necessary to make a revision of past events, and as an indirect result Alun had a better job and a better home. It was one of the paradoxes of the time-shift that they did not forget their earlier surroundings, although they were able to accept the new ones with complete assurance, just as Alun was able to cope with the vastly extended ramifications of his job.

" One day I'm going to read a book about this Time business," said Alun.

He bought several books and microtapes, but he always seemed to be too busy to read them. Still, they would come in useful for Martin one day. Martin was going to be clever.

" You can see it in his expression," said Marianne bending over him as he blew strange noises at her through pursed lips. " He's going to be a genius, is our boy."

Alun nodded. Everything was going to be wonderful.

And then, when Martin was almost two, they had a visitor. It was a warm summer evening, and they had been sitting on the balcony. Somebody came up the drive, and Alun cursed.

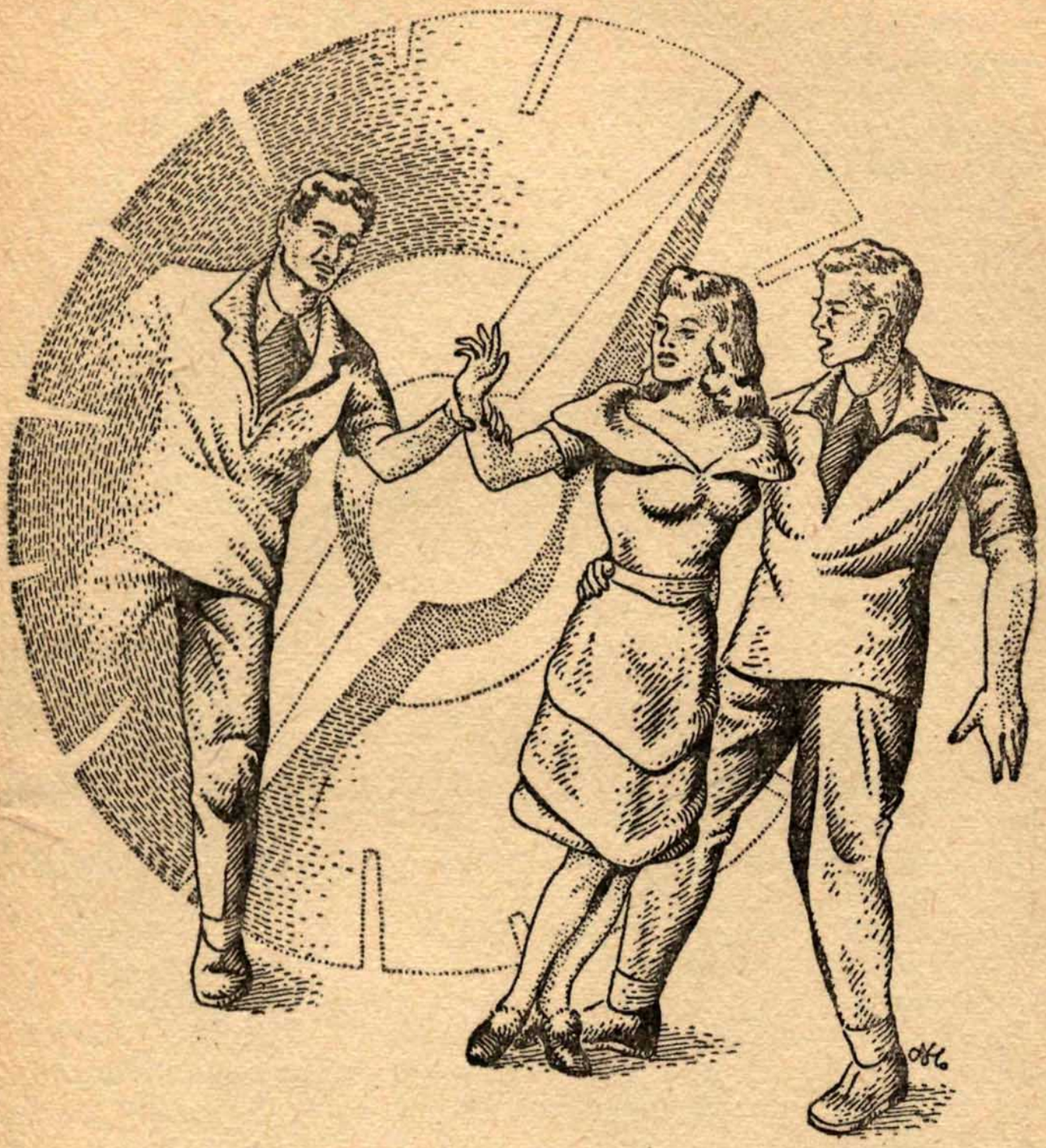
" Thought we were going to have a quiet evening. Who the blazes is it ?"

Marianne stared and went pale. When she had found her voice she said:

" It couldn't be."

But it was. Patrick Westing had been restored to existence.

Marianne installed the child in the regulo sleeper, and then the three of them—her two husbands and herself—went in person to get things cleared up at the Ministry of Adjustment.



The clerk had some difficulty in sorting out the facts, as all three of the complainants spoke at once. In the end it was Marianne who indignantly prevailed.

" You told us," she said with virtuous fury, " that my husband—my first husband, that is—couldn't come back. When I *wanted* him back, you were quite definite that it couldn't be arranged."

" By which you mean," growled Patrick, " that you don't want me now. Is that it ?"

" Really, Patrick, it's so awkward. You ought to realise that I've got used to you not being . . . well, not *being* . . ."

The clerk sighed, punched a couple of buttons, and said: " This is a complicated case."

" That's what you said before," Marianne snapped. " And now it's more complicated than ever, and it's all your fault. You've got to get rid of this man."

Patrick's face became puffed and crimson. " Now just a minute. If you imagine—"

" We were opposed to this readjustment from the start," said the clerk. " If it hadn't been for the insistence of the Ministry of Geopolicy who claimed that the rational development of the new national devisions could not be carried out without a re-assessment of the emigration scheme three years ago, we would never have considered it. But the Minister is a man of great influence. He meant to get his own way, and he got it."

Alun frowned. " What's this—er—Mr. Westing got to do with emigration ?"

Patrick himself looked baffled.

The clerk gave a terse explanation. He had given it many times before, but one got the impression that for once he was glad to fall back on it: he was not at all anxious to get down to the serious business of unravelling this problem before him.

Patrick, he explained, was only one digit in a colossal equation. Thousands of possibilities, reduced to mathematical symbols, had to be taken into consideration when the Time travel squad was preparing a readjustment. Patrick himself was insignificant; so were hundreds of other people caught up in the calculation. But the loss of one of them could throw the whole thing out. " What is the meaning of a colossal numeral ?" demanded the clerk with rhetorical splendour. "A million is not an entity in itself: it has no meaning other than a million times one. And each one of those ones is equally important in the million. The subtraction of any one of the ones ruins the conception of the million."

They nodded vaguely, and he went on to explain that to go back in Time and alter it so that the present was thereby modified meant the bringing together of an incalculable number of small events. A man who crossed a road in May of a certain year might hesitate on the far side and then make up his mind to turn to the right. This began a chain of circumstances which ensured that he would meet with an accident to his leg and be confined to hospital for three months. If, on the other hand, he turned to the left, he would meet a woman who would later become his wife, and their son would discover a new mineral and alter the whole course of economic and scientific history.

" That, of course," said the clerk with airy satisfaction, " is only an example."

Alun licked his lips. " Of course," he muttered.

" And I'm only a cipher," said Patrick.

" One which cannot be ignored or struck out."

At this point they all three began to talk again. This time the clerk's patience cracked. He hammered on the desk and shouted :

" It's no good yelling at me. Listen."

They stopped. Marianne took advantage of the lull, and said swiftly: " I suppose we can arrange a divorce. It will be purely a formality. I can divorce Patrick for—well, desertion."

The clerk shook his head. " Divorce is no mere formality nowadays," he pointed out. " I have been checking on the situation while you've all been—er—talking. The ruling is that Mr. Westing is your rightful husband. No trumped-up divorce suit will be even considered by the authorities. If Mr. Westing wishes you to return to him—"

" I do," said Patrick with unexpected fervour. " When I got back, it took me a month to find her. I went round everywhere. I just had to get to her. And now I've found her, and I want her."

Alun groaned. Marianne said: " This is fantastic. Alun and I have a son, we can't just strike out everything that's happened—"

" We can make you forget," said the clerk quietly, smoothly. "That is the recommended course. We can, with no great difficulty, arrange an adjustment which will blot out all your memories of one another."

" No," said Alun and Marianne together.

" We will make arrangements for the child—"

" No."

The clerk sighed. " You will have to make up your minds to cope sensibly with this problem."

Now it was Alun's turn to hammer the desk.

" We'll go away," he snapped. " We'll move off where you can't get at us. Why not ? We're not harming anyone—"

" The regulations cannot be flouted," said the clerk primly. " As for going away, it makes no difference where you go. If it is considered that you have flouted authority and that for the safety of the pattern of the future you should be checked, all we have to do is go back and arrange for your parents never to meet. You will thereby be painlessly eliminated."

" You smug little rat," said Alun. " If I get my hands on you—"

" Even if you were to kill me, our emergency squad would go back—only a few hours or so—and arrange things so that you did no such

thing. And "—it was as though he had caught an echo of what was passing through Alun's mind—" if you kill Patrick Westing, he too can be restored in the same way." He glanced meaningly at the clock and then at a group of people waiting. " I'm afraid there's nothing more to be said. I would advise you to go off and talk this over intelligently. It is no further concern of ours. The Bureau of Marital Welfare will of course expect a report from you, and no doubt an inspector will be sent round if you have any real trouble in sorting things out."

The three of them turned and left the building, and went home. Martin slept soundly, with a blissful smile. The three adults did not smile. They sat down and glared at one another. Then Alun got up and opened a bottle of *pola*. They drank; and continued to glare.

It was Patrick who resolutely opened the argument. He had been staring hungrily at Marianne ever since he returned. Alun realised, with a shock, that in Patrick's mind very little time had passed since his last meeting with Marianne—which had been on their honeymoon. Since then there had been a timeless blank, and then he had found himself back in existence . . . and had set out to look for his wife.

His wife . . .

Patrick said: " Let's face it, I've got my rights. The law is on my side—and so it darned well ought to be—"

" Why divorce can't be as easy as it was in the twentieth century, I don't know," Marianne wailed. " We could get this all straightened out then."

" Oh no we couldn't," said Patrick grimly. " I'm not going to give you up now I've found you again. You mean too much to me. Wait and see, darling—when we've been together a little while, everything will work out all right, and—"

" Don't talk to my wife like that !" shouted Alun.

Patrick said: " I saw her first. You've been lucky to have her for this time, and now it's only fair to give her back. I'll take on your boy as my own, and do the best I can for him."

Marianne stared wretchedly at Alun. He put his glass down and wagged his head in despair. At last Marianne said: " What else can we do ?"

" You won't be sorry," said Patrick persuasively. " Let's look at it sensibly. We're all intelligent, reasonable adults, and we don't want to feel bitter about what's happened . . ."

There were suddenly four people in the room instead of three. The fourth, dressed in clothes such as none of them could recall having seen before, had appeared in the corner by the table bearing the bottle

of *pola* and the siphon. The appearance was such a shock that Alun would have grabbed for the bottle and poured himself a stiff drink if only that had not meant passing the apparition.

" I trust I did not alarm you," said the newcomer.

Alun was glad to have the opportunity of venting his wrath on someone. He burst out:

" What the blazes d'you mean by bobbing up like that ? This is a private dwelling—"

" The intrusion is regretted but unavoidable," said the stranger with unruffled courtesy. " I am from the Ministry of Adjustment—"

" Get out," said Marianne.

" I think it would be as well for you to hear what I have to say."

" You heard my wife," said Alun.

" *My* wife," said Patrick.

The stranger smiled. " It is that very question which I have come to settle. I have come from a considerable distance in the future in order to put things right."

Marianne stared. " Now, wait a minute. You mean we're going to be . . . to be adjusted, to fit some cockeyed scheme in the future?"

The answer was a grave, friendly nod.

" As if it's not bad enough having to cope with the present and the past !" cried Marianne. " Now we've got the future to reckon with as well."

" What I have come to say," their visitor went on with some determination, " is that our predecessors in the Ministry made an unfortunate error. They could not realise, of course, what repercussions their decision would have. They acted according to their lights in restoring Mr. Westing to life and in insisting that his wife should rejoin him. Mr. Westing undoubtedly did his best for the boy Martin . . . but it was not—will not be, that is, according to your time view —good enough."

" I knew," Alun said to Patrick, " that you'd make a mess of things with my son."

" Martin," said the stranger, " will be one of our great men. It is his knowledge that will enable us to conquer the problem of the Venusian atmosphere. The poison that holds men back from exploiting that planet will be defeated by Martin. But only if—" a warning note came into his voice, "—he remains with his actual parents. You, Mr. Westing, mean well; but in one or two unfortunate incidents you will implant certain psychological fixations in the boy's mind. He will be brilliant, but maladjusted. At the crucial moment he will, because of those psychological disturbances, relax his grip . . . and die in an accident, before his work is completed. Whereas all our potentiality

charts confirm that if left with his mother and his rightful father he will succeed—will go right on to the end."

Marianne was radiant with joy. She did not hesitate. She waved one imperious hand at Patrick and said: "Take him away. Get rid of him."

"Just a minute, now," said Alun uneasily. "You can't just . . . well, I mean, you can't rub the man out just like that."

"I've been murdered once," said Patrick with justifiable anger. "If you try that again—"

"We would deplore any such course," came the firm assurance. "What we are offering is something rather unusual. It has rarely been the practice to remove people from their usual surroundings and transport them to the future, but in this case we are prepared to do it."

Patrick gasped. He licked his lips. "The future? You mean you're going to shanghai me into—"

"I believe you have always had a dream of going to Venus. In our time, if Martin is brought up by his parents, such a visit will be possible. You can be one of the pioneers in the development of Venus."

"You . . . say, you can really do that for me?"

"In the unusual circumstances, we feel such a step would be justified."

Patrick's spreading grin was the answer to the question in Marianne's eyes. She heaved a great sigh, and took Alun's hand.

Patrick turned to them both. "I'll be off, then. I won't see you again. But you can give the boy a message from me. Tell him I'll be seeing him one day—on Venus."

The suspicion of a pout rested on Marianne's lips. The stranger repressed a smile, and said:

"You will agree that we knew what we were doing in offering this to Mr. Westing?"

"All right, all right," said Marianne. "I do think you might have looked a little more reluctant to go, Patrick, after all you were saying, but . . . Well, good luck."

"A report on this incident will be filed with the Ministry before we go," said the stranger. "Just to make sure they do not query Mr. Westing's disappearance." He beckoned to Patrick, and together they went out.

It was over. As quickly and efficiently as that.

"Well," said Marianne. "Well."

Alun eyed her uneasily. He had been taken aback by her ruthless manner. While he himself had certainly considered murdering Patrick, it had been no more than a thought—a vague longing which he had known he could not fulfil. But Marianne would have had Patrick

wiped out without any hesitation whatsoever. He could only hope there would never come a time when she wanted *him* out of the way.

Then he relaxed. Of course there was no danger of that. It had been ordained that Martin was to be brought up by the two of them. If there was any trouble, someone from the Ministry of Adjustment would come scuttling back from the future to put things right.

Everything was going to be fine.

Marianne kissed him and said: "We always knew our son was going to be a genius. It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"Wonderful," he said. "A guaranteed genius."

"We've got to concentrate on him," she said passionately. "Nothing is going to be too good for him. It gives us a real purpose in life, doesn't it? Isn't it . . . well . . . wonderful?"

"Wonderful," repeated Alun.

He hoped Patrick would like it on Venus. And for a moment—one fleeting, disturbing moment only—he rather envied Patrick.

—Jonathan Burke.

Not many men get the opportunity of marrying a witch. Irving was one of the few and he found that he desperately needed some kind of a spell to counteract his wife's colourful experiments. Any spell, in fact.

PASS THE SALT

By HELEN M. URBAN

When Irving finally got his eyes opened to the place where he could fairly judge, he could see that it was a typical autumn day, promising too much in the way of smoggy nasal irritation from the 25 degree temperature differential inversion layer that the weather report decreed.

Irving hated people who were cheerful at dawn and who chose dawn as a time to ring up on the phone.

This time it had been Walter, to say: "I've just read the most inspiring book and I've just got to tell you all about it."

" Look, dear friend," Irving pulled the covers over his head and the telephone and his muffled voice said, " I do not wish to be inspired yet."

"But, my friend, the reviews are ecstatic. Listen to this: ' He irons the frown-wrinkles out of our regimented lives with the hot irony of satirical derision. A philosophical masterpiece.' He,' "

" He, hell !" Irving groaned. " I am filled to the neck with useless philosophies. Useless, for all philosophies crumble under the onslaught of a head cold."

" You're ill," Irving's friend commiserated.

Irving hung up gently. Not even to Walter would he slam the receiver. " Which only proves what a sweet guy I am," he mumbled as he tried to go back to sleep. A clear impossibility. The rack was waiting. The boss expected an appearance. He was that sort of boss who considered illness on the part of an employee to be a personal affront.

From the depths of his bed Irving exploded, " Sin take her ! The devil take all females named Doris who show up on a date with ' just a little cold.' "

There never was such a thing as a little cold. A cold in the head was a national catastrophe; worthy of frontpage; worthy of stoppress; worthy of network newsflash treatment. Press conference ! Cabinet meeting ! The President states: ' I proclaim Irving's head cold to be a disaster area.'

Irving dressed and drank coffee. He turned on the radio. " Radio; " he defined, " An electrical device dedicated to the perversion of music in the extolling of the virtues of Crispy, Crunchy, deeelicious Doudle-flavoured Minced Porcupine Quills, or Sam Sauerkraut's Snappy, Reliable Used Smogmobiles." Irving turned off the radio and went to work and came home and repeated the performance daily until the cold was a memory and the inversion layer had received a sane temperature balance defeat, and the telephone bill, remaining unpaid from an oversight, quieted the morning jangle.

" God ! Doesn't anyone ever sound that black bell ? Mr. Bell's reddamned private bellhell. Dead phone. Oh, the bill."

He paid the bill and reinstated the service and talked to his fiend-friend who had another inspiring book to tout and kissed his girl who had since lost her cold too. He dressed and worked and ate and went to the cinema. Gambled a little. Drank some. Got engaged and mercifully disengaged and met a witch.

He didn't know she was a witch. There was no sign on the back. No mark on the forehead or witchlike actions to shout a warning. A

nice sort of girl who was fire and some refrigeration and a lot of looks. Not too expensive. Not inexpensive either, but just tolerable to the paycheck.

" Darling," he said. " Mmmm, sweetheart, pass the salt, please."

A witch should watch it. Unconsciously musing over some nonsensicality, she teleported the salt into Irving's hand, and Irving was astonished.

He left the table abruptly. She paid the bill and left in bewilderment. No memory of having passed the salt cleared his unexpected departure for her.

" Irving !" she expostulated over Mr. Bell's bellhell.

" Look, Yvonne," Irving was upset, but still able to speak, for wordlessness was not one of Irving's virtues. " I was watching you. Explain the flying salt bit, dear, sweet, I'll make meat out of you, Yvonne."

" But I don't understand, Irving. What about the salt? You asked for the salt ?" she questioned in perplexity.

" I got the salt." He was emphatic. " You sent the salt by parcel post, or don't you remember."

" Oh, no ! Oh, dear ! Oh, my Heaven ! Oh, no !"

" Now you are being repetitious, Yvonne."

" Come over and I'll explain," she urged.

Irving hesitated. He was curious, but curiosity wasn't always a good thing, he concluded, so he required considerable urging to prod him to action. He went.

Yvonne explained. She told him that it was merely an old family custom, not to be confused with that occult stuff. Just a little matter of family pride; keeping the old family traditions alive and that sort of thing, to hear her tell it.

She told it well, he reviewed to himself later, and then later than that he married her, starting himself on an unusual career.

" Promise me one thing, Yvonne ?" Irving asked after the ceremony.

" Anything, duck."

" Please don't call me things like that," he protested. " I'm liable to wake up and find a duck in bed with you."

" Silly. I can't change you into a duck."

" Promise me one thing, Yvonne ?" Irving went back to the request.

" Anything, dear."

" Keep the salt under control ? Hmmm ? Will you Yvonne ? Our friends might be fascinated and delighted, but I'm sure they'd be more delighted with normalcy."

" But, sweetheart, for me the flying salt and things like that *are* normal."

" A man doesn't often have a witch for a wife," he said.

" Now you're being sententious," she pouted.

" A man really doesn't, though," he reminded her.

" But *you* do," she reminded him, which seemed to settle things for a while, as he had no rebuttal to refute that statement.

People can get engaged and disengaged, and sometimes the original attraction sours completely, and then again the original attraction breaks loose again, particularly when a girl happens to remember an attractive man she'd met and thought to marry, and being temporarily out of husbands to be she calls the old flame.

Yvonne was irked when old-cold-in-the-head-Doris called one evening. Irving was just too damned coy over the phone. No woman likes to hear her husband be coy over the phone. And Yvonne was a woman, undoubtedly. A witchwoman, of course, but reacting to coy husbands on the phone in the usual manner. She felt that his saying too little on the phone was a lot more damaging than saying too much.

Insinuendo is transparant. Avoid it, men !

Irving turned from the phone to say, " Old friend of mine."

" Yes, obviously," Yvonne said sarcastically. " How old ?"

" Oh, ages ago. Before I met you."

" I mean her age," Yvonne said patiently. " I know you have had no girl friends *Since You Met Me.* I'm a checker-upper, remember ?"

" I only answered the phone," Irving protested, days later, after he had had enough witching. " I'm an innocent victim of a telephone-obsessed woman."

" You answered it; that's enough for me," Yvonne replied witch-logically, womanlogically.

With resignation Irving explained again. " It might have been, God help us, one of those execrations who call to ask, ' Which station are you listening to ?' ' This is Mr. Putrid, representing the Gougem Finance Corpulation—do you wanna tenth unpayable mortgage on the little barn door ?' It might have been the President. It might even have been important !"

" It was important. It revealed my sweetums sugar pie as a nasty philandering old goat."

" Yvonne ! I am disenchanted with lilac hair. I am utterly bored with this long white unshavable beard. I get no kick from this goat's foot. One sour apple for a nose is enough—you have given me three. Out of the house I am such a colourful monstrosity since you started practising spells that few people will have anything to do with me."

" The better to keep you in, my dear."

" Moneyless," Irving replied not casually.

" Non sequitur," Yvonne replied part-truthfully. *She* pulled money out of the air. *She* paid the bills by mail. *She* ordered the food by phone. Never left his side, his successful side, the one that was orange striped. Yvonne didn't care much for the other side. It was admittedly a failure, for the pink polkadots on a background of cerulean blue she considered to be out of key with his basic character, but all of Yvonne's spells were irreversible, so she had to be contented.

" I'll lose my job," he wailed pitifully.

" You've said repeatedly that you despised the miserable bore and he could do the routine placement act with his foul job."

" I'm a prisoner," Irving stated accurately. " Why in noname don't you wish your visitations upon the guilty party. *She* should suffer for calling *me* ! Look at me now; an innocent victim of a witch's wrath. All I did was to answer the phone."

" You were available. Now you are not."

" Oh, so right, my darling witchwife. Another point, though you'll probably punish me for mentioning it; the hex you've put on the phone. It works for you, but it won't work for me. How many calls have I had in this last month of incarceration ? 20 ? 30 ? 30 times 30 ? I pick up the phone. Who is it, I innocently ask ? All I get is a raucous noise in my ear. *Brack* ! It works for you. Food we get by phone. People call and ask you to buy things; contribute to Senator Sindin's campaign fun; take your Patsy Pants-on-the-nose-for-two-bucks bets; give you the word for bridge; ask you what station you are listening, please ? What do I get ? *Brack* ! Who's your friend with this brack ?"

" Just a little gimmick, dear. Nothing to get upset over. Just a little bug in the box. Nothing of consequence. Totally irrelevant."

" I'm unravelling, Yvonne. Witchwife ! I implore you ! Remove the burning eyeballs, at least. I singe myself whenever I raise my hand to my face."

" No."

" You won't ?" Irving's hurt was heavily coloured with incredulousness.

Yvonne could be brief when necessary. " I can't," she stated truthfully.

Now that Irving fully understood the irrevocableness of his situation it led to things. Irving was not a man of great wrath; he stirred slowly. He could take it, really, but he felt that he had already taken too much. That the beard might be permanent shocked him thoroughly and he felt that the lilac hair went poorly with the apartment's colour

scheme. He had little taste for lilac and chartreuse; felt that it was just too cute. A little feminine, perhaps. His manhood was suffering.

Irving did some research. Not the book kind, but personal private research to steal an irrevocable spell for his own use. He had noticed that Yvonne had the habit of mumbling in her sleep. Irving was a sound sleeper, so it bothered him very little, but he began to be desperate and in his desperation he listened, telling himself that Yvonne might be mistaken about the permanence of her spells. Staying awake to listen to Yvonne's mutterings-while-asleep took some practice. He often fell asleep in the centre of a syllable, but he gradually managed to overpower his sleepiness and made sentence-sense after a while.

Three months, and he had it, with patient piecing from a word here and a mutter there. One sentence one night and another on the next. It was a matter of now or never, he felt. It must either break the spell and free him, or fail. A simple either/or situation. Nothing to it, really.

He carefully drew a nicely accurate circle around the bed where the luscious Yvonne slept mutteringly. He drew it with talcum powder. There wasn't a bit of chalk in the house and the way he looked he'd be damned if he'd run down to the drug store. Couldn't, at that, for he was unable to open the doors for himself; and anyway, Yvonne's pulled-out-of-the-air-money ran through his fingers.

With talcum powder he drew the seventeen arcs on the perimeter of the large circle. Then came the north star oriented line that extended out between the first and last arcs and ran directly to the pot of incense by the window. The incense had been tricky, but a little bay rum and gin smelled good to him, so he used them. He sat crosslegged by the rumpot and chanted softly.

"Oh, Twothistlwitnaochseo," over and over. He'd had a hard time sorting it out from the mumbles, but he felt that said it, even if he was taking a mighty long chance on what this spell would produce.

Irving was surprised and pleased with the results. The results hadn't been according to his either/or proposition, but then few things ever fall that well into line.

The Irving Schuylers are an odd couple. He has the darlingest hair; a sort of pale lilac. Definitely enchanting. His left, or orange striped, side I find a little bizarre for everyday wear, but the pink polkadots on the background of cerulean blue is just too sweet for words. The little tufts of deep purple hair on the tips of his ears give him a pixie air. It really is an arch expression he gains from the two sour apple noses placed over each eyebrow. The third is routinely

placed where a sour apple nose ought to be. His leather oxfords have proved to be unsuitable for goat's feet, so he has taken to wearing soft felt slippers. Yvonne sewed some sequins on the toes for decoration, and some bells on the heels so that she could keep close track of him around the house. She is an extraordinarily suspicious young woman; has even quit mumbling in her sleep for fear of giving away any more of her absolutely irreversible spells.

Yes, an unusual couple. You should see them, though naturally that is a figure of speech, for she's invisible now.

—Helen M. Urban.

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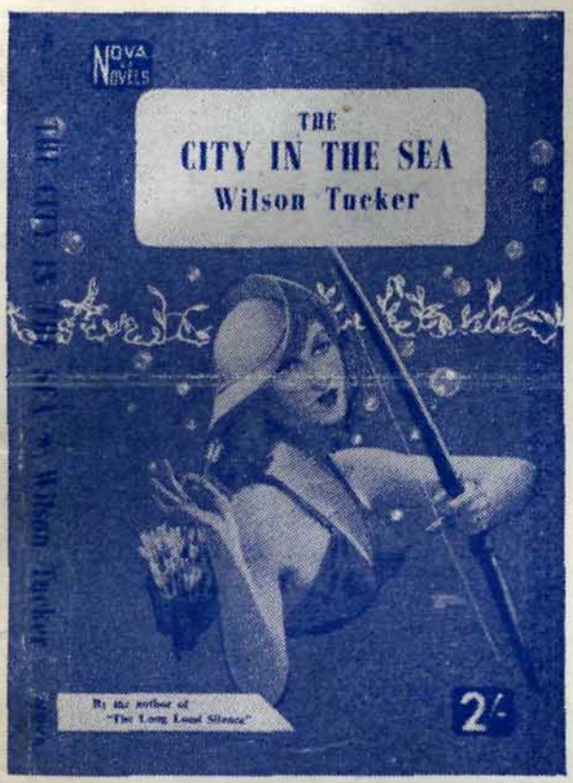

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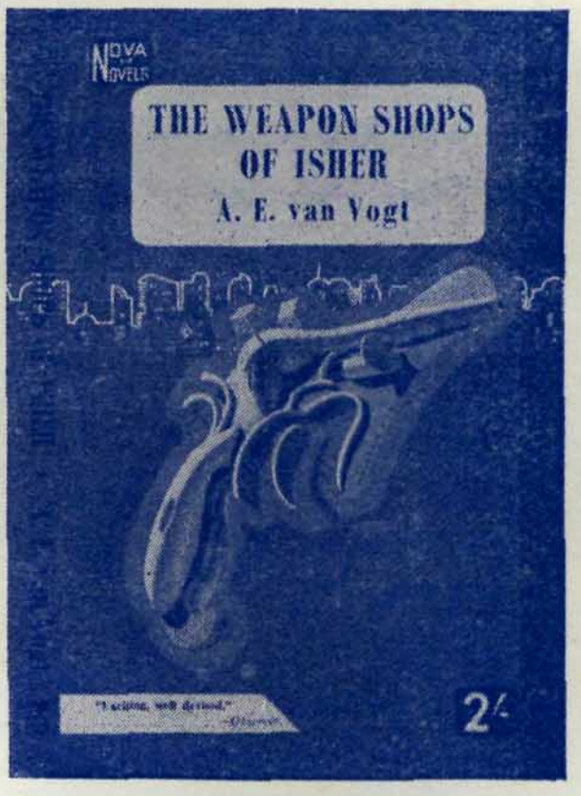

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