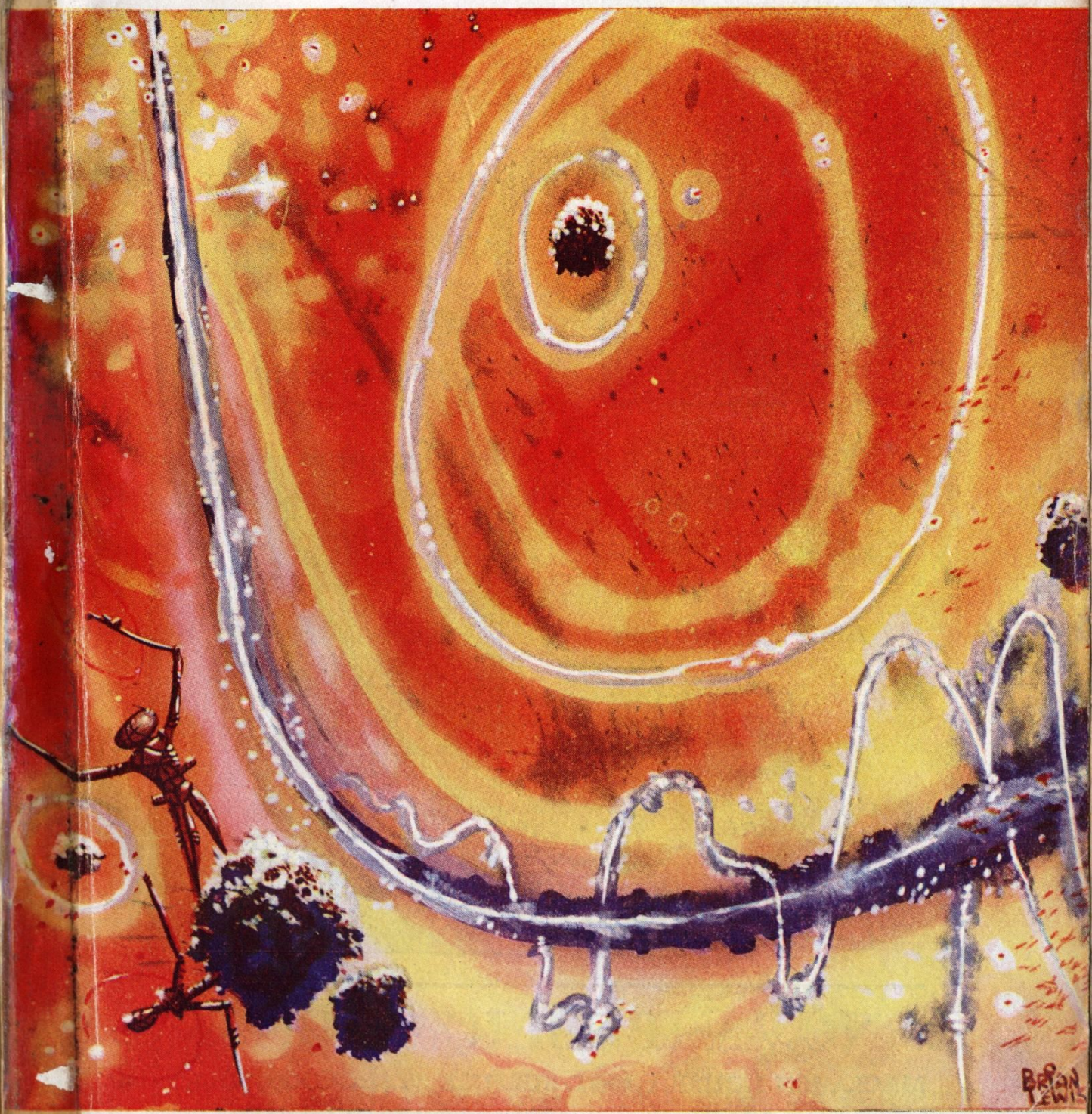
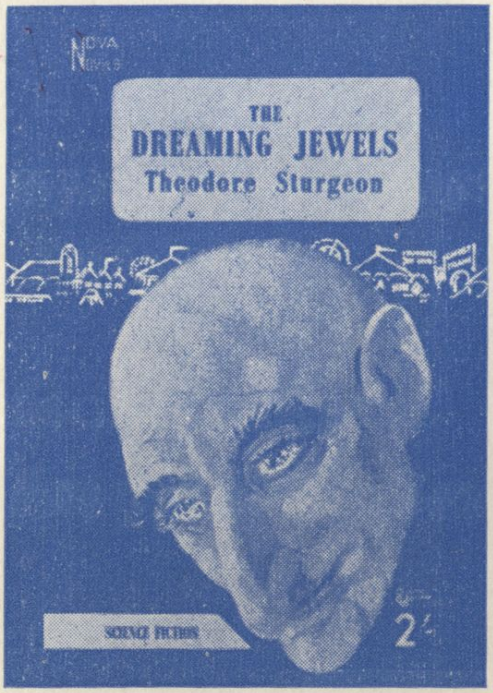
Science Fantasy

No. 26
VOLUME 9
2/-



★ BRUNNER ★ WILSON ★ TENN ★ BOLAND ★

ONLY A FEW LEFT!



The Second two NOVA NOVELS

★

The DREAMING JEWELS

by Theodore Sturgeon

JACK OF EAGLES

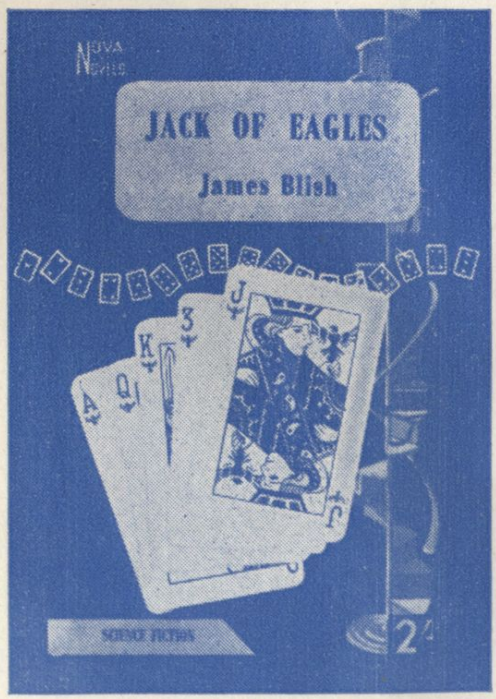
by James Blish

Two more outstanding novels by popular American Authors

2/-

EACH

Published for the first time in Britain



NOVA PUBLICATIONS

MACLAREN HOUSE, 131 GT. SUFFOLK ST., LONDON, S.E.1.

Science Fantasy

Vol. 9 No. 26

1957

CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL Cover : LEWIS

Symbolic cover painting from " Lungfish "

TWO SHILLINGS

In the United States of America 35 Cents.

Subscription Rates

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 6 issues 14/- post free.

United States of America, 6 issues $2.50 post free.

Published Bi-monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.,

MACLAREN HOUSE, 131 GREAT SUFFOLK STREET, LONDON, S.E.1.

Telephone : HOP 5712

Printed in England by Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby 12/57

The 'long voyage' theme is one that holds a constant fascination and many are the variations possible. For instance, E. C. Tubb's "Star Ship" in New Worlds *dealt with problems on the journey; Marion Zimmer Bradley's "The Climbing Wave" in* Science Fantasy *No.* 19 *postulated the problems upon arrival. In this issue John Brunner uses the same theme in a manner we have not seen before—from the viewpoint of the children born in a spaceship between star systems. It is a fine study in psychology.*

LUNGFISH

By JOHN BRUNNER

I

Once upon a time there was a sea. It was full of life. But tne sea grew smaller and the life-forms more numerous. There was the problem of overcrowding. Perhaps, if any of the inhabitants had been capable of wonder, they would have turned their flat eyes upwards and asked themselves what it was like above the sky, beyond the shining barrier of the surface. There was plenty of room there.

Eventually, some of them found out the hard way what it was like. Stranded by the tide, they gasped their lives away along tne shore; dying, they left their outline in the mud, which dried, and was compressed, and became rock.

A billion years later, and many more than a billion miles away—a man was studying the fossil shapes of some of those remote ancestors.

The reflection seemed suddenly to telescope time, and Franz Yerring gasped. He put out a shaking hand to turn off the projector which cast microfilm images on the wall before him.

For a long time after that he sat at the desk and listened to the sounds of the ship, identifying every one of those that seeped through the thick insulating walls of the office with an ease born of thirty-seven years of hearing them. He did not move except to breathe deep shuddering sighs, until the buzzer on the door sounded. Then he roused himself to say, " Come in."

Tessa Lubova, his senior aide, slid the panel aside and stepped through with her habitual lithe grace. She carried the daily productivity reports, which she put on the desk before him.

On the verge of going out again, she paused and stared at him curiously. " What's the matter ?" she demanded. " You look as white as paper !"

" It's nothing," said Yerring, getting stiffly to his feet. His voice had an irritable edge on it which he tried to disguise—it was not good to be sharp with the tripborn.

Tessa shrugged with one shoulder, hesitated a moment, and left the room. *Nice girl*, thought Yerring absently. Nicer than most of the tripborn, anyway—most of them would never have noticed, and if they had, they wouldn't have given a damn.

But then, she was one of the eldest.

He tripped the switch of the multipanel on the wall. It could be a picture, or an observation screen, or a mirror, according to the whim of the user. He selected the mirror setting and examined himself critically.

Yes, no wonder Tessa had been startled.

He forced himself consciously to relax, and went back to the desk, glad of the work which she had just brought him. He had been trying to throw away time by studying the text-film, and had been unable to lose himself in it. No one in the ship now could get away from the tension which hung in the air like smoke. It had not been publicly announced that Trip's End was near—if anyone did know the exact time, it would be Sivachandra and possibly one or two of his navigation aides—but there were rumours.

And how reliable is a rumour ? he asked himself wryly. He knew as well as any of the earthborn aboard that the trip was estimated to take not less than thirty-six and not more than

forty years, but he had been there when the estimate was made, and he knew how much of it depended on guesswork, as well.

He glanced through the summary on top of the sheaf of reports, and frowned. Taking up a red write-stick, he entered the day's returns on the master ecological chart which occupied one full wall of the office. On it, population was plotted against productivity: two curves, opposing and balancing each other, averaged out from dozens of daily entries relating to air supply, vegetation, water reclamation.

Sometimes he wondered how he kept track of it all.

His frown remained as he mentally extended the current downward sweep of the productivity line. Either Trip's End was close—

"Or we," he said to the air, "are going to be on short rations in less than a month."

That would be the sterile mutation in Culture B, he knew; it had been weighing the whole output down for days now. All the staff he had available was busy tracking down the mutated plasm, but it would take some time to eliminate it, and if one found more after that one could never tell if it was descended from a previously altered strain, or if it was a new series altogether.

"Hear this!" said the voice of George Hattus, the ship administration officer, from the public address speaker under the multipanel. "There will be a Captain's Conference at fourteen."

Yerring took the information in automatically, his eyes still fixed on the down-trending curve. It was bad—it really was. The cultures not only served to provide food for the crew; they were a main element in the oxygen recycling system. Perhaps he had recommended too optimistic an increase in population on the strength of having got away without a major incidence of sterility. He should have allowed for an increase in mutation with the rising radiation level as they homed on the sun of their goal . . .

Just as well Magda's called this conference, he thought.

The chronometer showed it lacked only eight minutes of fourteen hours. He gave a glance round the room by force of habit and went out, down the long green corridor towards the administration section.

Outside his main charge—the hydroponics section—he found a crew from maintenance taking up the plates to get at

a gravity coil which had been on the blink, and called to the man directing operations.

" Captain's conference, Hatcher ! Did you hear the announcement ?"

Quentin Hatcher turned burning eyes on him. He seemed on the brink of saying something acid, but contented himself with a weary nod. He gestured to the workers round him, and they stood back to let Yerring pass, which he did with a word of thanks. He could almost feel those eyes on the back of his neck as he walked on.

I wonder when it first began, he thought. Of course, like the rest of the earthborn, he wouldn't have noticed it. Only the education staff, probably, had the chance. His life was shared with his friends, whom he had known for over forty years—since they came together to work on a ship which was no more than drawings on a board, stress equations in a computer, and a dream burning in their minds.

But the slow antagonism had arisen all about them, until now they faced it as a fact.

What made it that way ? The tripborn's knowledge that it was with them that the future lay ? That the earthborn in the ship were condemned to spend their lives in space, perhaps living long enough to see Earth again before they died—and perhaps not—while they, the tripborn, would go on to plant the first human colony under an alien sun ?

Somehow, though that explanation was pleasing, he could not be satisfied with it.

Aside from the technicians checking the recording equipment, there was only one person ahead of him in the conference room, and that was Tsien, the senior psychologist. He sat in the chair on the right of the captain's place, bald head bent low over a stack of psychometric data sheets.

He glanced up as Yerring entered and nodded to him. On the point of looking down again, he checked himself. "What's with you, Franz ?" he inquired. " You look as if you've seen a ghost."

Hadn't he got over it yet ? Yerring restrained an impulse to reach up and feel for the betraying expression on his face. " In a way, I have," he said wryly, taking his place one chair away from Tsien. " Don't let me interrupt you."

" You aren't interrupting," said Tsien promptly. " I've read all these papers already, and going through them again won't alter the facts in them. What's the trouble ?"

Yerring shrugged. "I was thinking about the size and duration of the universe. It was as if—well, as if I'd had a vision of the full extent of it. It was disturbing."

"I can imagine it would be." Tsien settled back in his chair, big-shouldered, pot-bellied, reassuring of tone. "What did you find so particularly uncomfortable about it, though?"

"The sheer naked size of it!" Yerring was astonished at his own vehemence, and tried to continue in a lighter tone. "I mean, I was thinking in terms of millions of years, and we ourselves only live a hundred and twenty or so. That's the twinkle of an eye— "

"To whom?" Tsien shot back. "Not to us, Franz. To us it's a lifetime, and can't be otherwise."

"Yes, I suppose so. But we do quite cheerfully talk about millions of years, and yet we never stop and think just how long that is. We can speak of an age, an eon, but we can't appreciate them."

"Why should we?" Tsien spread his hands, palms upward; the movement made his chest and shoulders heave like a mountain in an earthquake. "No one ever experienced a million years, any more than anyone ever paced out the miles from here to M-39 in Andromeda. They just measured them. Think of yourself as one of Sivachandra's astronomy boys, trying to find the parallax of a star—only you're sighting on a fossil and using radio-carbon dating instead of a telescope."

"How did you know I was thinking of archaelogy?" Yerring was startled.

"A guess," said Tsien frankly. "Probably because I've been re-reading the basics of my job—Freud, and Hal Jenning's work on space neuroses. It's symbolic. We're here to make a new beginning, so we look at what we know of other, earlier beginnings which we know to have had successful results. We may recognise intellectually that each beginning is unique, but it comforts us to see resemblances and convince ourselves that we aren't walking into unknown darkness."

"And are we?"

Tsien grinned. "All the time! But on your argument, Franz—to go back to what you were saying—a man is unable to appreciate any period longer than his own lifetime. I disagree. This whole trip of ours has been a contradiction of that. Do you honestly think that Garmisch, who designed the ship, and Yoseida, who devoted his whole life to financing it and finding a crew for it, were incapable of appreciating a

longer period than a hundred-odd years? Would you yourself have volunteered to come if you hadn't been thinking in terms of millennia? Because it may be that long before the results are in, and neither you nor I will be around to see it."

Almost reluctantly, Yerring nodded. "I guess you're right," he said.

Towards the end of Tsien's speech, Tessa Lubova had come into the room and taken her place as usual low down on the left-hand side of the table, where the tripborn members of the conference always sat in a tight, exclusive knot.

This sort of thing is going to have to stop, thought Yerring. With the toughest part of the job still ahead, they couldn't have petty jealousies and discriminations.

He raised his voice. "Tessa, I'd like you up here next to me," he said, trying not to make the words sound like an order.

She turned her sullen face, very striking under its crown of dark hair, towards him. "What's the point?" she said sharply. "We"—the word conjured up a sudden vision of Quentin Hatcher, Vera Hassan and Fatima Shan, the other tripborn members of the conference in their places beside her—"never have anything to say, anyway."

The atmosphere seemed to become ten degrees chillier.

"So you've noticed it, have you?" said Tsien softly, as soon as Tessa turned away, and Yerring nodded.

"That's something we weren't bargaining for, isn't it?" he said.

II

The techs finished checking the recorders and went out, and one by one the remainder of the twenty members of Captain's Conference took their places about the table. Lola Kathodos of engineering sat opposite Yerring; Philippa Vautry of Medical came between him and Tsien; Sivachandra of navigation next to Lola—Yerring greeted each in turn.

There was a slight stir as George Hattus of ship admin took his place on the left of the captain's chair; he was the most—unknown?—man in the ship. *Like a policeman*, Yerring thought, and remembered back to the days when there had been such people in his daily life; whenever the familiar blue

uniform appeared round the corner, even the most law-abiding searched their consciences.

Last of all, precisely on time, Magda Gomez took her place at the top of the table, and they all fell silent, looking towards her.

" Captain's conference, Magda Gomez presiding, declared open at fourteen hundred hours, day ninety-one, year thirty-seven," she said for the benefit of the record. " All right. Now I suppose you want to know why I've called this conference so soon on top of the last one. It's because there have been too many sanitation rumours going round about the approach of Trip's End. People are started to get sloppy and careless. I want it to be borne in mind that when we reach Tau Ceti II, our job will be *beginning*—not over ! We came here for a purpose, and we're going to carry it through."

Her gimlet eyes fixed on Sivachandra, and he looked uncomfortable; it was plain she had her own ideas as to who let the rumours get started.

" All right," she said finally. " Let's kill the false reports once for all. Siv, tell 'em when we make Trip's End."

There was a rustle of excitement all round the table, and Yerring sat up in surprise. The first time that question had ever been asked in conference ! Whispered comment spread and was swiftly killed among the tripborn.

Sivachandra looked around impressively and waited for complete silence. " We will be in orbit around Tau Ceti II," he said, " in less than fifteen days."

This time the talk was loud and assured; only Tsien sat silent among the exchange of congratulations.

" Quiet !" said Magda at length, and there was quiet. To Lola Kathodos : " Yes ? "

" Is that for official circulation ?" the engineering officer asked. " My staff have been particularly full of ' inside information ' and I'd like to crush it."

" Yes ! Yes, by all means !" Magda looked down at a note in front of her. " All sections will have four hours' celebration time this evening, by the way, but I don't want anyone reporting tomorrow morning with a hangover. We're getting down to real work then. We can put some real meaning into boat drill and things like that from now on. Hatcher !"

Quentin Hatcher looked up.

" The flight simulator comes under you, doesn't it? I'd like you to pick your half-dozen best trainees and run them through final tests. Then Siv can decide who gets the chance at the first touchdown."

Hatcher nodded and made a note.

" I'll ask Siv to give us an idea of his first plans in a moment, but before that, has anyone anything they want to say? Engineering? Medical? Admin? Psychology?"

The representatives shook their heads.

" Ecology, what about you?"

Yerring spread his hands. " I was going to have to give some bad news, but the nearness of Trip's End solves the problem."

" Better tell us what it is, anyway."

" Well, we had a major attack of sterility in one of our important cultures; with the drop in productivity, consumption would have been due to exceed output in a month or so. But by that time we'll have raw materials from the planet to tide us over, so it's okay."

Magda glanced to her left. " George, what's the population right now?"

" Uh—two thousand, one hundred forty-nine," said Hattus. " It's one below schedule, but there's a late birth coming up in Franz's section somewhere—hydroponics, I think."

" That's right," confirmed Philippa Vautry. " Edna Barsavitza's having a long pregnancy—she's five days past due. I think I'd better stimulate labour artificially; we won't want advanced pregnancies to cope with when we actually hit orbit." She scribbled a memorandum, and Magda waited for her to finish before speaking again.

" Siv, give them a rundown of the immediate programme, will you?"

The navigation chief put up a pale brown hand and sleeked back his silver hair. " Fifteen days distant may not seem like a lot compared with thirty-seven years," he began. " But we're making for a small planet rather close to its primary, and it's been on the opposite side of its star for the past several weeks. So far, we haven't done much more than confirm that it's where it ought to be."

Someone down the table sniggered; Magda glared at the offender, but Sivachandra continued with unruffled dignity. " We've confirmed the composition of the air by checking the

absorption lines, and that's about all. Of course, this is duplication of effort, since the survey teams did a very thorough job when they were here a century ago, but a remote chance does remain, I suppose, that they overlooked something because they weren't thinking of staying.

" So tomorrow we'll be launching some TV-eye missiles. With them, we'll carry out a complete survey of the planet, during our approach run. As soon as they start sending in good pictures, by the way, I'll have them plugged into the multipanel circuit so everyone gets a chance to see them. By the time we go into orbit, we should know what site will suit us best—"

" Are you landing party?" said Vera Hassan loudly and rudely from the lower end of the table. There was dead silence for a minute.

" What was the point of that, Vera?" said Magda at length, in a voice like an arctic wind.

Vera leaned back in her chair, a defiant expression on her face. " He said which site will suit *us* best. I just want to know if he's one of the people it's going to *have* to suit whether they like it or not."

There were murmurs of agreement from the other tripborn present, and Yerring saw Tessa give a nod of encouragement. Magda slammed her open palm down on the table.

" Vera, we have a job to do, and it's the responsibility of all the crew—not just of part of it. You know as well as I do that Siv isn't landing party. Nor am I; nor is Franz, or any of the earthborn. But it isn't from choice, believe me—we'd change places with you straight off. We're just too old."

Too old: the words echoed in Yerring's mind. Too old at seventy-seven, even if that was scarcely two-thirds of his lifetime gone, because the remaining third was due to be spent in this same ship, with nothing but the knowledge of having achieved a historic aim as compensation . . .

He felt a sudden shiver go down his spine as he thought: what would it be like to have *nothing* to show for it? What if we fail?

Magda was still speaking in a persuasive tone. " We—all of us, Vera!—have given our lives to an ideal. We aren't going to relax our efforts simply because the period of waiting is over. The greatest task in history lies ahead of us." She touched a switch set in the table-top. " It lies there!"

No one heard her last words clearly. They had all turned to face the multipanel on the wall, which had just sprung to life. It showed the disc of the reddish sun called Tau Ceti, set against a background of stars which were familiar to them all. But there was a new star among the rest: small, tinged with the same red as its parent.

Trip's End !

Yerring heaved a slow sigh, and stole a covert glance around the group. The earthborn were staring dreamy-eyed at their goal, except for Tsien, who was more interested in the reactions of his companions, but that was natural. The tripborn, however, were sitting stony and impassive, wearing expressions of—contempt ? Nausea ? Disappointment ? He struggled to find a suitable word and rejected each of them in turn.

Finally Magda broke the spell. " That'll do for now. Remember what I said, won't you ? Now go and inform your sections about the celebration time tonight. Conference adjourned at fourteen nineteen."

She slumped back in her chair, turning off the multipanel, and with a scraping of chairs and shuffling of feet the members started to leave the room. Yerring was rising stiffly to his feet when he felt Hattus's hand on his arm. The admin officer looked grave.

" Magda wants to see heads of departments for a moment," he said. " Won't keep you long."

The pose of efficient domination which Magda had worn at the conference table dropped off her like a cloak when she stepped through the connecting door into her own office. She indicated with a gesture that the others present should sit down, and looked at Tsien. " Well ?" she said.

The psychologist nodded. " I'm afraid so."

" As you think best. What did everyone think of that little scene ? "

Yerring leaned forward. " The trick with the multipanel, you mean ?" he asked. " You hadn't by any chance primed Vera to explode like that and focus the tension, had you ?" He tried to sound hopeful, but he knew as he spoke it was wishful thinking, and Magda shook her head with a weary smile.

" No, Tsien warned me something like that might happen. It was an idea he had."

" How can they be so wooden ?" Philippa Bautry spoke with vehemence. " Damn it, Tsien, why didn't you foresee this ? "

" You're wrong, Phil," the psychologist answered. " We did. At least, Yoseida did. George, get out the orders, will you ? We have no choice but to use them now."

Hattus nodded and crossed to the safe set in the wall. Opening it, he took out a sheaf of envelopes with person-keyed destruction seals which would render the contents illegible if anyone but the addressee tried to open them, and handed the little bundle to Magda.

" I myself," the captain began, " don't know what's in these envelopes. I was told, though, during one of the final briefings George and I attended before we left Earth, that I might be called on to use certain emergency procedures at the request of the psychological section. Since Tsien first told me he was worried about the tripborns' attitude to landing, I've suspected one of the procedures might deal with that, and I was right.

" All of us here had the privilege of knowing Yoseida in person, and working under his guidance before the ship left. I think it's plain that only a man who was completely devoted to the high ideal of spreading mankind through the galaxy could have visualised so far in advance the need for plans to cover such an unlikely contingency."

She sounded a little self-conscious as she finished the speech; it was platitudinous to say such things to people who had also known and admired that fanatical old Asiatic, but Yerring knew it was only her respect and regard speaking for her, and nodded his approval. The others followed suit.

" We can't let him down now," said George Hattus, in his soft, agreeable voice. " A man like that deserves the memorial of success. I suspect what's in these orders may not be entirely pleasant to enforce, but we owe it to his memory to carry this thing through."

Taking the envelopes back from Magda, he distributed them; the recipients eyed them curiously but awaited permission to open them from the captain.

" Fifteen days isn't a long time to re-orient twenty-one hundred people," said Tsien thoughtfully. " It means this action will be pretty drastic."

" What do you mean ?" said Philippa indignantly. "There are nearly two hundred and fifty earthborn, remember !"

Tsien nodded vigorously, but Yerring had the impression that he was cursing himself for making a slip. Magda interrupted before he was able to speak.

"Take these orders and read them in your own offices," she said. "On no account let them get anywhere where the tripborn can see them. All right, on your way. Good luck."

All except Hattus rose and went out. In the corridor, Yerring caught Tsien's eye and drew him aside for a moment.

"*Were* you making a mistake when you said twenty-one hundred?" he inquired doubtfully. "It seems ridiculous—but I got the idea you meant it!"

The psychologist looked him soberly in the eye. "Franz, when did you last use the picture setting of the multipanel in your office?"

Yerring paused, dumbfounded. "Why—it must have been all of three years ago!" he exclaimed. "I hardly use it at all now except as a mirror."

"Exactly," said Tsien heavily, and walked on.

III

Yerring returned to his own section with his mind in turmoil. Tsien's sudden question had taken him by surprise; it brought back with discomforting vividness the terror he had experienced when he wondered what it would be like to know he had wasted his life in vain.

He passed the envelope from hand to hand, impatient to gain the security of his own office and find out what it was that constituted their last defence against failure.

But before that he would have to announce the news given at the conference to his own staff. Tessa would already be back, and could quite well have done it, but he knew it had not entered her head; like all the tripborn, she insisted with almost childish obstinacy that he exercise the full authority to which his status entitled him.

He tucked the envelope securely and inconspicuously into a pocket and stepped through the sliding door into the warm, slightly steamy air of the hydroponics section. Sometimes he thought, looking down the lines of transparent culture tubes towards the blindingly bright focus of the light area, that it was odd how an ecological cycle which had begun as a planet-sized unit could be fined down to essentials and tucked into the comparatively tiny hull of this ship.

He followed the direction of the culture flow until he found Tessa studying a sample drawn from the mixture. He called to her, and she looked up slowly.

"I suppose you want to address the hands?" she said, putting down the testing phial. "I'll go and round them up for you." There was a faint sneer on her face, as if she were implying that Yerring could not be sure they would come at his order.

And in a way, Yerring was forced to admit, she was right. He had begun the trip with a staff of twenty-one, all earthborn—naturally—but since biology and ecology were two subjects the colonists would need to know backwards, they had gradually been transferred off to ship administration. Now he had a staff of a hundred and three, but he was the only remaining earthborn member of it.

Must remember to have some of my old assistants re-posted while we're in orbit, he reminded himself. *We'll need them on the way home.*

He felt for his dark glasses and put them on before walking out across the big open space between the tubes where dead cultures were slued for drying, lysis and re-cycling as organic intake materials. One by one, the hands came in—not talking, not excited, just coming in.

He tried to remember how he had pictured the enthusiasm which would greet the news of Trip's End, thirty-seven years ago. Very different from this; the passive concentration in their faces reminded him of what Tessa had said in the conference room—"We never have anything to say, anyway."

And it was true.

What had happened to all the talking and shouting? *When I go into the conference room, I start a conversation with Tsien or someone; Tessa sits alone, not speaking even when one of her own generation joins her.*

What did these taciturn people do off duty? *Shock; I have scarcely an idea. They eat and watch the shows on the panels, sometimes we have dances they attend, some of them play music and some read books from the microfilm library; that's not the point. For example: could they fall in love?*

Are they really alive?

These had been children like any other children: noisy, inquisitive, foolhardy, disobedient. If they had been otherwise, Tsien as director of the education staff would have been alarmed.

And yet they had grown up into these frighteningly self-reliant people who could run the ship better than the earth-born any time they put their minds to it, and still refused to take the initiative.

" Everyone's here," said Tessa, just loudly enough to break through his musing, and he scrambled up on a breeding chest to make his announcement.

They took it as they took everything else, as if they were adding it to some store of information already prepared for use in some calculation Yerring could not guess at.

When he had delivered his message and got no response, his tension boiled over.

" If you knew how we envy you !" he exploded.

That startled them. He rushed on: " You have your whole lives to look forward to on a good world, a brand-new planet ! We gave up ours to see you achieve that aim, and I for one don't regret it—but I wish I could be your age again and take your place !"

He got down blindly to the floor and walked hurriedly into the protection of an aisle between the banks of tubes.

Someone was standing there, immobile; with his dark glasses still on, Yerring could not tell who it was until he stirred and spoke. It was Quentin Hatcher.

" What are you doing here ?" said Yerring gruffly, half-ashamed of his outburst.

" I came to see Tessa," said Hatcher placidly, and Yerring remembered that he had known in a vague way the two were having an affair; promiscuity had to be encouraged to ensure the mixing of all available genetic factors.

He wanted to pass on to his office and read the orders in his pocket, but Hatcher looked at him steadily, and he did not dare even feel to make certain they were still there. "Are you in a hurry ?" the other asked.

With an effort Yerring controlled himself; it would be a mistake to admit he was in fact in haste, when Tessa knew quite well there was no urgent work on hand in the section. Someone might draw the right conclusion. He shook his head. " Did you want something ?"

" Yes. You earthborn are very free with your description of this planet as a ' good ' world "—Yerring could hear the quotation marks. " But I know nothing about it beyond the fact that it's said to be habitable. Why ?"

"Tessa could tell you as well as I can."

"Tessa could not." The girl moved out of shadow, and he wondered how long she had stood there listening. "I do know more about the planet than Quentin does, but it's going to be my job, apparently."

Yerring gave ground reluctantly. "You've found the reason," he said, thinking fast. "You'd have to ask the psychological section for full details, but I know the rough idea. When we set up the colony—"

"We?" whispered Hatcher, with a glance at the girl; Yerring caught the word but pretended he hadn't, even to the extent of cancelling an impulse to frown at the echo of Vera Hassan's attack on Sivachandra.

He went on: "—we've got to have the best possible combination of experts to get the work done in minimum time. That's why, even though you know nothing about Cetian ecology, for example, you're three times as good a metallurgist and electronics engineer as someone your age on Earth. You're a specialist. So's Tessa. There's going to be so much to do at Trip's End that we can't afford to waste time teaching people knowledge they can't use. Of course, the data from the early survey is in the library for anyone to read who wants it—"

"I know," said Hatcher bitterly. "I've looked at it. But I haven't the time to teach myself the basics I need to follow it."

This time Yerring had to frown. He noticed that Tessa had stepped out of sight again.

"Give it to me in simple language," said Hatcher, managing to make it seem that Yerring would be in the wrong if he refused. "What kind of a planet *is* this?"

Yerring was tempted to snap that it was habitable and wasn't that good enough? Instead, he put it another way. "Promising enough for us to have begun and carried through a project lasting all these years to colonise it, and that means very good indeed."

"If it's so habitable, why isn't it inhabited?"

"Because it hasn't got a moon." Yerring was falling automatically into the teaching style he used when taking trainee classes in the ship's school. "There's a lot of life in the sea—some of it eatable, by the way, which is useful—but the oxygen in the air is replenished only by colonies of free-floating

algae which drift across the oceans. We'll probably supplement them with some of our own species.

" But on Earth, life was driven from the sea to the land largely by the effect of tides. Without a moon, the sea-level doesn't change significantly or frequently enough to produce land life."

Tessa had moved back into his range of vision during the last sentence. " That means," she put in sourly, " there's nothing to bind eroded rock into soil. It's all desert."

" So was Mars !" said Yerring sharply. " And it didn't even have good air. We took it over and re-made it until it was nearly as good as Earth. This world could well be made *better*." After a pause he added pleadingly, " Do you honestly think we'd have started on this trip if it wasn't worth it ?"

" You started on this trip," said Hatcher softly. " We hadn't much choice, had we ?"

Yerring was silent.

" Suppose it's changed since the survey teams were here ?" Hatcher pursued. " After all, it was nearly a hundred years ago that they discovered this system—"

" But a hundred years is "—Yerring remembered the way he had put it to Tsien—" a twinkle of an eye when you're thinking of biological processes. No, there won't be any important change."

" So you say," insisted Hatcher doggedly. " But what will we do if it isn't the paradise you've promised us ? Has anyone thought about that ?"

Yerring had been thinking of it—entirely too recently for the remark to be pleasant. He turned on his heel.

" It will be !" he threw over his shoulder. And as he drew out of earshot, he muttered, " It's *got* to be !"

Alone in the privacy of his office, he sat down at the desk and put his hand in his pocket to take out the orders. He experienced a momentary surge of panic as his hand closed on nothing.

Then he felt in the other pocket, and breathed a sigh when he found the familiar oblong shape. *Odd ; I could have sworn it was in the other—*

But when he examined the seal carefully, it showed no signs of tampering.

As he prepared to unfasten it, his eye fell on the multipanel, and he recalled Tsien's questions. Was it really three years since he had used it last as a picture?

He paused to think of the scenes he had liked most out of the enormous repertoire stored as electronic memory patterns in the master library. That flower garden, for instance—the play of colours was magnificent. But so was the sunset scene, and neither was as majestic as the view of Niagara, or as nostalgic as the riot of foliage under the dome of Copernicus Crater on the moon, where he had spent his first holiday off Earth as a small boy, stalking his younger brother through the 'jungle' . . .

He took out the index of settings, which he had once had almost by heart, from a drawer, and chose one which had always been a particular favourite of his: a panorama of wheat fields in North America. Suddenly, yellow corn seemed to stretch into the distance through the wall when he tripped the switch; on the horizon, it melted into blue sky. Mile upon square mile of earth-surface, and every last inch of it bearing for the benefit of man!

And yet, somehow, it didn't provide the shiver of awe which it had once induced.

He dismissed the reflection with annoyance, and broke the seal of the envelope. There was only one sheet of paper inside; closely typed, it ran:

Deliver at the captain's discretion to the senior ecologist.

It is considered possible by the psychologists who have studied the likely mental development of the crew after so long in space, that some measure of unconscious resistance to the prospect of landing may arise when the time of planetfall draws near. This is especially to be looked for in the case of those who, having been born on board, will not actually have set foot on terra firma.

As it has been explained to me, there is a close mental analogy between landing from a ship such as this, and the process of birth. A child objects to being born; it longs for the comfort and security of the womb to some extent for the rest of its life. The environment of the ship represents an extension of similar security into adulthood.

In the event of such a situation arising, action is to be taken as briefly outlined below WHEN THE SHIP IS CLOSE ENOUGH TO THE PLANET FOR CONDITIONS ON

BOARD TO REMAIN BEARABLE UNTIL IT IS REACHED. An absolute maximum of two weeks is suggested; within that limit, time of commencement is left wholly to the psychological section.

(a) *The medical officer is to prepare sufficient quantities of a suggestibility-heightening drug to render all affected members of the crew susceptible to influences designed for combating the subconscious compulsion against landing.*

(b) *The ecologist is to select a method of administering the drug. It will be essential to exclude those personnel who will be returning to Earth to report the success of the mission, and whose business on the planet is only temporary; aerosol administration is therefore inadvisable.*

(c) *The senior psychologist is to organise counter-compulsions, given in detail in an appendix to be delivered only to that officer, directed to instilling a distaste for shipside conditions in the crew.*

This expedient is analogous to shock treatment, and is to be resorted to in cases of emergency only. The chance of permanent mental effects, however, is estimated at less than one per cent. Man is a planetary animal; any other environment is unnatural to him, and re-adaptation will proceed much more smoothly than did the original adaptation to spatial conditions.

Yerring read the document through carefully, a frown deepening on his forehead, until he came to the signature. He looked at it closely. It was Yoseida's own.

Instantly, a curtain seemed to roll back in his mind, and he was once again a youth listening with adoration to the plans of a thin, fanatical Asiatic who was set on sending men out among the stars, and resolving that when the ship was built, he would be one of the crew. Yoseida was that sort of a man; in another age he would have conquered himself an empire at the head of an army prepared to die on his casual command, or formed a business concern and controlled the lives of millions, decreed whether they would starve or surfeit.

The old idealism was still smouldering in Yerring's mind, like a fire burning under a heap of ashes. He clenched his fists with determination. In that moment he was more certain of one thing than he had ever been : they were not going to fail !

He reached for the diet charts and studied them with care. The drug would have to reach everyone it was intended for, yet those who had to avoid it must be able to refuse the item containing it without exciting suspicion. It was an interesting problem.

He made his choice and sat back in his chair. This was a job he was going to have to do himself, obviously; he was the only earthborn left in the ecological section. None of the tripborn could be expected to understand just what this journey meant to the race of man, and to far-sighted geniuses like Yoseida, who had given his life to this ideal . . .

He would have to add it to the diet when the section was deserted, therefore, and during tonight's celebration was the obvious moment. The question was whether Philippa would have enough of the drug ready by then.

He reached for the phone, and then changed his mind; a tripborn technician might be monitoring the wires, looking for a fault. He would have to go down to medical section.

At the door, he gave his habitual glance around, and saw with momentary surprise that the multipanel was blank. He did not remember turning off the picture.

IV

Sounds of singing from the mess rang the length of the empty corridors as he walked slowly through semi-darkness towards the dietary room. At least the tripborn were still human enough to enjoy themselves. He kept his mind blank and receptive to every stir of noise, acutely aware of the jar of reddish liquid in his hand. He hoped it might pass for a drink if anyone saw him.

He kept reminding himself that the section would be deserted; nonetheless, he found himself rehearsing the phrases of excuse he would have to use if anyone found him there. But as he stepped into the dietary room, he realised that the singing from the mess adjacent would drown any slight sound he made himself; if there was anyone in the sleeping quarters opposite, where his own staff slept, he would notice nothing.

The synthesisers which turned the raw material of the cultures into flavoursome, substantial and nourishing food were quietly humming; the air was warm, and had a pleasant rich smell. He knew the layout too well to bother turning on the lights; he crossed the floor swiftly, opened the additive cap

on one of the synthesisers, and poured a careful half of the reddish liquid into the mixture. Then he moved to the next unit and repeated the process.

Closing the caps, he slipped the empty jar into a recycler for reduction to its elements and absorption into the resources of the ship. It was not until he was safely outside again in the corridor that he dared admit he had successfully completed his task.

In the humming warmth of the dietary room, Tessa Lubova came gracefully out of the cramped corner between two synthesisers where she had been hiding, and crossed to the door of the sleeping quarters. She made no attempt to discover what had been added to the food supply, nor did her face betray any hint of emotion whatsoever.

It was heartening to see the determination on the faces of his companions, thought Yerring, and knew that the same resolution inspired himself. Even when Magda passed a tired hand across her forehead, it was with impatience at her own inadequacy.

" Phil, how did the tests go ?" she asked. " Maybe you'd better say what you actually did."

The doctor nodded. " Well, we took blood samples from random members of the crew, ostensibly to be included in the equipment of the TV-eyes to detect bacteria which can breed in them. We shall be doing that anyway, of course—can't have anyone getting suspicious. But the samples we took show a hundred per cent incidence of the drug in the tripborn."

" That's Franz's doing," said Magda, with a glance at Yerring. " You picked an excellent medium to give it in. Right. Siv, the missiles were launched this morning—when do you expect the first pictures in ?"

" Assuming a minimum of solar activity, late this evening," said the navigation officer. " They won't be of good quality over this distance, but they'll be clear enough to give us a rough idea."

" Fine. Plug them into the panels as soon as you can. Tsien wants to see what their effect is before going ahead."

The psychologist grunted heavily. " I'm still hoping we may not have to do this," he admitted. " It'll be a foul job with only a few of my staff to help me out."

" How's that again ?" said Lola Kathodos.

" Well, naturally," Tsien shrugged, " I can't ask the tripborn to work on this, and as it turns out I can't even rely on all the earthborn."

" That's bad," said Lola complacently. " Well, I'm glad to say I'm every bit as determined to see this job through as I was when we left Earth."

" Of course you are," said Tsien with an effort at reassurance. " All of us in this room are. Not everyone is affected by the tripborn's apathy."

But I am, thought Yerring, and found Tsien's eyes on him. *After all this time, the men must practically be able to read my mind.*

" I think it might be a good idea to tell us what you'll have to do," put in Hattus quietly. " Franz, for example, has no one but tripborn under him now, and he's worried about production as things are. Will he suffer any more for what you're doing?"

" Possibly." Tsien was dubious. " We'll be using verbal suggestion, of course—if any of you want hints on how to weight your orders to your staff, I'll be glad to advise you. But we ourselves are going through the book—subsonics, trigger smells, tactile suggestion. There's latent claustrophobia for the asking, too, of course; we'll have to touch off as much of that as possible."

" And what if it doesn't work?" Sivachandra voiced the idea which Yerring had not dared utter.

" Of course it'll work," said Tsien bluntly. " Believe me, I've looked after the psychological state of the crew long enough to be certain of that. My only reservation is that we shouldn't have had to use it." He hunched forward.

" Every mass entertainment we've put out during the voyage, every programme of tuition in the school, every talk and every briefing—they've all been slanted towards the resumption of planetside life. That's why we've refused to permit the germination of any culture with a shipside background; we've taken special note of people with originality and qualities of leadership and diverted their aims, in case they made too great an impression on their fellows. The authority and the power is vested in the earthborn; we insisted on holding the prospect of independence up as a carrot for a donkey, and tried to make Trip's End the focal point of all the tripborns' ambition. The entire crew should have a load of subconscious commands twice as strong as their inherent womb-retreat factor."

" *Should* have !" echoed Philippa. " We even carried it so far as to develop easy birthing methods, to reduce birth trauma to a minimum. And yet look what we've wound up with !"

" There's something wrong," said Yerring. He watched Tsien's face as he spoke. " Isn't there ?"

" Yes," the psychologist admitted. " Somewhere along the line, this trip has altered our mental attitudes in a way no one could foresee. Why ? Because this ship is the first completely closed subplanetary ecological unit, Franz ?"

Yerring shook his head. " It's not that easy. The exploration ships of a century ago were completely closed, too ; what's more, the crews—except those which visited this system, naturally—found nowhere to land, so they spent the period of the round trip on board. Yet they were only mildly maladjusted when they returned to Earth."

" Yes, I've pored over their psychological records long enough to be sure of that. What's the difference, then ?"

" That we've bred in this environment ?" suggested Hattus shrewdly.

Tsien shrugged. " Could be. But what else could we do ? Load a cargo of babes-in-arms when we took off ? Of course not ! All the successful pioneering groups in history have included widely assorted age-ranges. By deciding to expand our population *en route*, we manage to arrive with not only a larger complement of capable workers than if we had kept to our original strength, but with about two hundred children who can be trained to take their places in the colony."

He looked around the room. " All of us here have grown children now; how many of us are grandparents besides myself ?" Four people nodded—Magda, Hattus, Sivachandra and Lola. " And the rest of you will be soon; when we land, we can expand our population without foreseeable limit. No, if this revulsion against landing is an inescapable result of breeding in the ship, we're sunk, and human expansion to the stars is going to have to await the coming of a faster-than-light drive."

" Which is still impossible to the best of our knowledge," said Sivachandra flatly. " But—well, I don't know quite why, but somehow I'm *certain* this revulsion against landing is just a phase. We'll get around it."

The others echoed his confidence in assured voices, and Tsien said emphatically, " Of course we shan't admit defeat !"

There was silence for a while. Finally Magda stirred. " Siv, how about the landing itself ?" she inquired.

" As soon as we hang up in orbit, we'll have a landing boat ready to go down. We're running the pilot tests all the time."

" Send your best man along to me before you tell him he's going," Tsien put in. " I'll need to make sure the conditioning has taken."

" Who is he—do you know yet ?" asked Philippa.

Sivachandra shook his head, the lie was beautifully camouflaged, but Yerring was sure he could see through it. " We're down to a short list of half a dozen or so," he said. " I can't say yet which of them will actually go."

" Okay," Magda frowned. " Anything else before we go back to our jobs ? Yes, Franz ?"

" Suppose one of the tripborn *has* missed the drug," Yerring suggested. " Suppose he spots Tsien's ' influences '—what do we tell him ?"

" A good point," the captain nodded. " George, any ideas?"

" Say we're slowing to turn into orbit," Hattus offered. " It's producing stress noises in the fabric of the hull. Does that sound convincing, Siv ?"

" Not to anyone in my section, or Lola's," Sivachandra answered. " But to anyone else it might. It'll do, anyway."

There were no further comments; they rose and went out. In the passage, Yerring drew Sivachandra aside.

" You've already picked the man to make the first touchdown, haven't you ?" he said flatly. " Why not admit it ?"

Sivachandra's pale brown face remained enigmatic. " I had reasons for not mentioning his name in there," he said.

" Who is it ? "

" Felipe Vautry. He's Philippa's son."

And then he realised, as Yerring's face went blank, he had made a slip after all. " And yours ?" he said in a questioning tone.

" Yes," agreed Yerring. " And mine."

V

Does he know, himself ? Yerring's mind wandered all round the question. There could be no such thing as a home in the ship ; it *was* home, in itself, and therefore the ties of parenthood were not strong. He had three children—Felipe and two daughters—but they had gone into the creche under

the efficient, understanding care of the nursing staff, and then through the ship's school; they were dropped, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, into places in the crew exactly the right shape to receive them.

After that, they were just—tripborn.

How old is Felipe now, anyway? Twenty-six? Twenty-eight?

"We have two courses of action to prepare for," he said doggedly to Tessa, who sat impassively on the far side of his desk. "Which we choose, depends on whether the TV-eyes find an ideal spot for the settlement soon, or not. We'll know in another day or two—you've heard that the first pictures are going to be relayed this evening on the panels?"

Silence.

"Tessa!"

The girl's sullen face turned towards him, and he demanded, "Were you listening?"

"Yes."

"Well, why not answer my question?"

"Oh, I wasn't listening to *you*," she said with a hint of contempt in her tone. "I was listening to the ship."

"What about it?" Yerring hoped that the sudden guarded alertness in his manner escaped her. "We're slowing down to fall into orbit, remember—it alters the stress noises of the hull. It was much the same while we were accelerating away from the solar system, I remember," he added glibly, thinking that if he was going to tell a lie it might as well be a good one. He had no way of knowing whether she accepted it or not, but ploughed on.

"Now pay attention, for goodness sake! Our position is getting damned near dangerous, and you're supposed to be director of ecology for the settlement, you know. As I was going to say: our margin for error is dropping like a stone. Our resources will take us barely two weeks past orbit as things stand. If we can land the advance party straight away, that'll lighten our burden enough to get us by; if not, we're going to have to import raw materials from the planet to tide us over."

He reached out and turned on the multipanel, choosing a view of some Martian plantations; it had just occurred to him that the surface of that world had been similar to that of Trip's End under its reddish sun, and the proof it had been made habitable was a useful semantic factor to work on the

minds of the tripborn. He was surprised it hadn't struck Tsien.

He ran quickly through the arrangements which needed to be made for either contingency, and finished, " Pass on what I've said to the rest of the staff as they need it. Sivachandra will be asking for opinions on the site for the colony, by the way; you ought to make the decision rather than me, since after all you'll be living there." He had to avoid saying ' have to live there ' by a conscious effort.

" Thank you for thinking of that," said Tessa, and he glanced at her sharply, wondering if she was being sarcastic. " Is that all ?"

" Yes, that's all."

She rose with her usual fluid grace and went out; Yerring waited till the door had closed and then brought in the observation circuit of the multipanel, anxious not to miss a moment of the pictures relayed from the planet. He had been staring at the blankly luminous surface of the screen for fully fifteen seconds before he realised it had previously been equally blank.

What happened to the picture of Mars ? This absent-minded turning off of the panel—

He pulled the index of panel settings out of the drawer again and hastily thumbed through it. When he had checked twice to make absolutely sure, he sat back and drew a deep breath.

No wonder Tsien hadn't thought of using that picture of Mars as a tool to work on the tripborn.

There wasn't one.

Badly frightened, he got blindly to his feet and walked down the corridor the short distance to the mess. Just as he reached it, Hattus's voice echoed from the public address speakers' warning that the relayed views from the missiles were about to be put on the panels.

Instantly, that drove his preoccupation away, and he ran into the mess-hall. It was already half-full of people arriving for the evening meal, but he ignored them and sat alone where he could get a good view of a panel.

The first pictures were blurred and indistinct, but as the operators got the feel of the circuit, and grew more practised at cutting in the one which was currently giving the best reception, they improved rapidly. Even the colour registration

was good; Yerring could tell that from so often studying the photographs taken by the survey teams.

Good, thought Yerring, catching sight of one of the gigantic free-floating drifts of algaes which kept the air oxygen-high; *if there are many more that size, we won't have to worry about force-breeding our own strains to help out.*

There was an ache in him at seeing the surface of their destination and knowing: *it's only a little way now* ! It was like—well, like coming home.

Tripborn came and went around him; the earthborn, their eyes glued to the panels, let their food grow cold untasted, or —if they had to go elsewhere and thus lose sight of the pictures for even an instant—reminded themselves that anything important they missed would be on film with the rest of the records. He scarcely noticed when Tsien dropped into the chair next to him, except to glance and see who it was. It was several minutes later that he turned to face the other and breathe, " Isn't it wonderful ?"

But the quizzical look on the psychologist's face cut through the warmth and excitement in him. Abruptly, he sobered.

" Is it bad ?" he asked.

" Pretty bad," acknowledged Tsien. " I'd hoped the visual stimulus would touch off the drive we've tried to instil. It hasn't."

" But—you mean you haven't started your programme ?"

" No !" Tsien stared. " Who told you we had ?"

Yerring explained about Tessa listening to the ship, and Tsien looked relieved. " That's all right," he said. " I was thinking about something which happened this afternoon. To one of my own earthborn staff. He was convinced he was susceptible to the command to leave the ship, and tried to do it through an airlock right now."

The expression on Tsien's face scared Yerring; it was no longer that of his habitual self-assurance and confidence— he looked gravely disturbed.

" I wanted to ask you about something," he said slowly, and told Tsien of the Martian picture episode. When he had finished, the psychologist nodded.

" A consequence of stress release, Franz. All through this trip, we earthborn have been getting wound up like a violin string, tighter and tighter. Now we're being let down, we can expect some pretty funny results. Nothing to worry about, in your case—it was autohypnosis from your seeing an identity

between the conquest of Mars and the work to be done at Trip's End. Go down to Philippa before you go to bed and ask her for a sedative, will you ?"

Yerring nodded; a comfortable amount of Tsien's assurance had returned during his last speech, and he felt relieved.

" Well, I've been here long enough—can't keep putting off the decision," said Tsien abruptly. " Excuse me. I've got to go kick us off the ship."

Yerring nodded and watched him go. Somehow, he was no longer so keen to watch the panels, and he finished his meal and left the mess without reluctance.

The usual evening pastime had been suspended tonight ; every panel in the ship seemed to be glowing with the TV-eye transmission. Restlessly, he wandered through his own section to see the night shift, passing through hydroponics, biolab, feedmix monitoring, air control, master water room, dietary room—all the space which formed the lungs, heart and digestive organs of the ship. The staff were going about their tasks as usual: adjusting controls, setting up new programming, testing the cultures.

He paused beside a young worker as he took a sample and studied it, seeming not to notice Yerring next to him. "What's the incidence of sterility now ?" he asked for want of anything else to say.

The boy turned calm eyes on him. " Going down," he said.

Irritated—by what, he could not tell—Yerring went on, " How do you think you're going to like working with soil when we land ?"

" I won't," said the boy, and replaced the sample in the culture tube; it mingled with the rest of the semi-liquid mass and joined the slow flow towards the light-irradiation area. Then he passed to the next tube and bent to repeat the process.

Baffled, Yerring did not try to stop him; there had been something so final about those two words. And they sounded not only final.

They sounded utterly honest.

Man had made the environment of the ship, and therefore it was as seemed good to him; the environment of a planet, on the other hand, had made man, and perhaps that was deflating to remember.

But we aren't going to fail !

They had planned for this time before the ship had even been half-built, and the procedure went into operation with oiled smoothness. That was one advantage of having everyone a part of a jigsaw, thought Yerring—of specialising. Ship admin : *who goes down when and with what cargo* ? Ecology : *what can we use when we get there, what do we take* ? Navigation : *at what height do we orbit exactly over the colony* ? Psychological : *are we going to—* ?

That was a question no one asked in full. There was always the subtle, nagging knowledge at the edge of consciousness : *we are having to force these people into something we gave up our lives for gladly.*

Somehow, it seemed—unworthy.

But the days passed in a flurry of work, until the ship was safely in its orbit, and they were ready to make the first landing.

Yerring walked slowly through the corridors towards a section of the ship he had almost forgotten existed. He had meant—somehow—to find time to get to know this pilot who was going to be remembered by the colonists all through their history. But the days had gone by, and there had been no time. Now, as he scanned the group around the boat lock, he had to think twice before he recognised this tall, black-haired young man with a set face and deep, unsmiling eyes.

Sivachandra and Lola Kathodos were directing final checks of the instruments and engines of the boat; a group of orderlies from Medical, and Tsien and some of his staff, surrounded the tall Felipe. He met Philippa's eye as he approached, and wondered if she was thinking the same thing: that perhaps they should have taken another few years to plan and found a way in which *father* and *mother* might remain more than biologically inevitable terms.

They had been in love, he remembered—but each, to the other, had inescapably been one of many, and now there was hardly more than a flicker of memory to share.

He dropped his eyes and found Tsien approaching, mopping his forehead. The psychologist looked cautiously optimistic.

" Is everything all right ?" Yerring demanded.

" As far as we can tell. Medically, Phil says, he's as fit as possible, and we've done all in our power to make the landing easy for him."

There was a call from Sivachandra, who was studying his wrist chronometer. " Felipe !" he said. " Better go in now."

Yerring could stand back no longer; he pushed aside a couple of shipborn medical orderlies and grasped Felipe's hand. " Good luck !" he said with sudden fervency.

And then he turned slowly away, realising that there was no sense of history in this son of his; he had been told to do a job, and that was all.

Perhaps we should have harped on the wonder of it all, he thought; perhaps we could have brought home to them how marvellous it is that beings spawned of the hot seas of a ball of rock enveloped by gas could have spread across the gap between the stars . . .

It was too late to think of that now.

And yet—a fierce pride burned in him—we've done it ! Whether they realise it or not, we've done something without equal in the universe; we've planned and waited and carried it through until success is in our grasp.

" Let's go up to navigation section," said Tsien softly. " We can watch it all from there."

Yerring suffered himself to follow the psychologist, glancing back only once, to see the door of the little boat closing behind Felipe.

VI

It seemed like an age before the tell-tales on the hull of the boat reported the first whispers of atmosphere. In the navigation section, a tense, excited group faced the banks of screens and the instrument panels which kept them in contact with Felipe. At intervals he told them in a flat, monotonous voice that he was still all right.

Yerring heaved a sigh, and grew conscious that Philippa was standing next to him; in a gesture he was scarcely conscious of, so deep a need did it fulfill, he put an arm around her, and she gave him a quick, wan smile.

The red surface of Trip's End loomed up on the screens ; rough-featured mountains gashed by narrow, swift-flowing rivers passed under the boat as it rushed towards the broad flat expanse of ground near the sea which was to be their first settlement.

" I can see the landing-place now," Felipe called at last. There was no hint of strain in his tone, and Yerring gave Tsien an inquiring hopeful look. The psychologist nodded and wiped away a fresh stream of sweat.

The rocket motors cut in to check the boat's progress ; it tilted and settled on its tail, finding firm footing. " He's made it," reported Sivachandra from his post at the instrument panel—and his companions went wild. They shouted congratulations to Felipe and Tsien, shook hands and kissed each other—even taciturn, sober Hattus seized Magda by the arm and tried to make her dance.

They recovered their calmness slowly, and Tsien shouldered his way through them towards the microphone. " How is it where you are, Felipe ?"

" As I expected." The voice was still toneless, with a hint of enormous patience in it.

" How's the air ?" called Magda, glancing at the repeater dials.

" Good," said Sivachandra. " A full twenty per cent oxygen."

" Well, open the door and go out !" Magda exclaimed.

The screen showing the view inside the boat revealed Felipe silently undoing his harness and getting to his feet. He started towards the door, slowly, as if walking under water.

" High gravity ?" said Lola suddenly. " Look how he's moving !"

" Can't be," said Hattus flatly. " The gravity's barely a twentieth higher than aboard ship."

A chill of premonition seemed to go up Yerring's spine as he watched Felipe undoing the door. He wanted to shout, " Stop him ! Stop him ! "

But before he could utter the words, they could see over Felipe's shoulder the rolling landscape, dying into red hills on the skyline. The sky was not blue, but it was at least not black.

Still with the air of a man in a trance, Felipe stepped over the sill of the door and climbed down the ladder to the ground. A camera in an external housing tracked down with him until he was standing at the foot of the ladder, turning to look round. The tension was beyond bearing.

And then he screamed.

For an instant there was absolute stillness in the room, only the echoes of the cry dying into silence. Tsien was staring at the screen as if he did not believe his eyes.

" What's wrong ?" demanded Magda, rounding on him. " Look at him !" She gestured; the pilot had fallen to the

ground, knees drawn up to his chin, and his face was slack-jawed, staring-eyed.

The question was taken up, each person present trying to find refuge from despair in accusations against Tsien. The psychologist buried his head in his hands.

" What's happened is obvious," he muttered. " We didn't condition him properly."

" But you said you couldn't fail," Philippa insisted, starting forward. Her voice was angrily pleading.

" I thought we couldn't." Tsien dropped his hands. " No human being should have been able to resist our efforts. But somehow—"

Hattus stiffened, and they all turned and looked to see what had startled him.

The tripborn technicians in the room had quietly moved from their posts; now they stood about the officers—not speaking—their faces threatening, their attitude vigilant and alert.

Quentin Hatcher moved out from among them when the silence had stretched to breaking point; his face was peaceful, his manner assured and confident.

" I think now you should be convinced," he said. " You have seen for yourselves what we have known must happen for a long time. I assure you we regret the necessity to take over the ship from you, but you are no longer capable of facing facts."

" Mutiny . . ." breathed Magda as if she was blaspheming.

" Say rather that the real is supplanting the ideal." He paused as Sivachandra made a move towards him, only to be deterred by a minute adjustment of position from one of the tripborn near him. " We do not intend to harm you—in fact, you will be permitted to go about your sections freely when you have accepted one thing. *There must be no more talk of landing.*"

" You're mad !" said Hattus huskily. " You're insane !"

Hatcher laughed shortly. " Ask the psychologist," he suggested.

" You knew !" Tsien declared. " You must have known about the conditioning."

" Yes, we knew. Tessa Lubova watched Yerring putting the drug into the synthesisers."

" But you ate the food," Yerring broke in. " I know you did, because I saw you. How did you avoid the effects ? What did you do ?"

" Nothing," Hatcher answered, with a lift of one shoulder. " There was no need. You see, we knew it would not work."

They were breaking down now; Yerring felt Philippa collapse against his arm, and Sivachandra had begun to sob, dry-eyed; Magda was biting her nails, seeming not to dare take her gaze from Hatcher's face.

He spoke in a voice whose steadiness surprised him. "But we shall have to land, Hatcher. Or we will starve to death."

Hatcher lifted an eyebrow at him. He went on, " Our own resources will provide food, air and water enough for only two more weeks in orbit; our numbers are too great."

Hatcher shrugged. " Then we'll bring material up from the surface. Since you earthborn are so determined to found your colony, why should you not take our place ?"

" That would only postpone the end." Yerring felt a desperate fear growing in his mind; he had to convince this bland young man of the truth in his arguments, or they had no chance left at all. " The boats were designed for shipping cargo down, not up. Once we start using forty tons of fuel to bring one ton of material up from the planet, we're finished. Ask Tessa," he finished pleadingly. " She'll tell you I'm speaking the truth."

" I didn't know it was that bad." Magda stared at him.

" It wouldn't have been. With our population cut to what it was when we started out, we could have imported enough materials to last us the whole voyage back." Yerring tried not to let the implications in his statements come home to him; he knew he would break down if they did.

" I thought this was a closed system," Lola said, staring.

" It is. Landing on the planet would open it, though."

" Then what are you talking about ?" said Hatcher with exaggerated patience. " Didn't you hear what I said ? We are not landing !"

Yerring mastered his growing terror and thought of the sharpest way to bring it home. " Then you'll nominate one thousand people to be killed," he said.

There was a pause. Hatcher broke it in quite a different voice. " What did you say ?"

" That's better. Start listening with your mind instead of your muscles. This ship is a closed system, but it's overpopulated. You stand there and tie up water, calcium, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, about eighty or a hundred pounds of valuable organic compounds—*now* do you see what I'm

getting at? At half its present population, the ship could in theory continue indefinitely. Right now, we have too much of our resources bound up in our bodies."

He finished flatly, "We stay up here, and starve, or we stay up here and eat each other till the population drops, or we land. Which is it to be?"

We stay up here and go mad, he thought. *At least, I'll go mad if I stay here any longer.*

He paced restlessly up and down the office; there was nowhere else for him to go. All the earthborn had been confined to their quarters, efficiently, without fuss, but without mercy.

Three days' reserves wasted, he thought; he could almost taste the foulness starting to taint the air, feel the slow drain of their last resources—

The door opened, and he whirled to face it. Two stern-faced tripborn stood in the gap.

"Come with us," said the first, and he numbly obeyed.

They led him down the corridors, guessing about his destination. Not ship admin; not navigation—they passed the entrances to those. In the end there was only one possibility left.

They brought him into the psychological section, and a sunken-cheeked Tsien looked wearily up from his desk. The only other persons in the room were Hattus and Quentin Hatcher; the tripborn looked—frightened.

"So you're still sane, Franz," said Hattus with charnel humour, and Yerring stiffened.

"What's been going on?" he demanded. "I've been locked in my room these past three days—"

"George, and you, and I," said Tsien flatly, "are the only three sane earthborn left in the ship. Everyone else has gone into fugue—Magda, Siv, Lola, Phil, every last one."

"But—why?"

Tsien slammed his hand down on his desk. "Because they have been faced with an intolerable decision! They have to plant the colony, and they've been forbidden to, and there's nothing they can do about it!"

"Why can't they accept that it must be so?" Hatcher put in, and Tsien gave him a sour stare.

"That's what I want to find out. Franz, when you received the sealed orders detailing the compulsions we had to instil in the tripborn, how did you feel?"

Yerring remembered clearly. " I felt extra determination to see things through."

Tsien gestured to Hattus, and the admin officer thrust a piece of paper under Yerring's eyes; it was folded so that he could see only one line of it, but that line—

He had to see that the colony succeeded, but the tripborn refused to land. Consequence: failure. If they didn't land, they starved. Consequence: death—

It was suddenly overwhelming, terrifying. He cried out, feeling a weight of black despair loom up in his brain. The prick of the needle in his arm scarcely produced even a reflex withdrawal; his mind was running around a closed system. Closed system—starve—

Slowly, his eyes focused, and he was looking at Tsien's anxious face. " Are you all right ?" the psychologist asked. Weakly, Yerring nodded.

" What— ? "

" A shot of euphoric. It'll hold you for the time being, until we can cure you. This settles it, you know."

" Am I ill ?" Yerring was confused. " What of ?"

" A form of contagious madness." Hattus was grim, but seemed to gain melancholy pleasure from the words. " You caught it the same way I did. From Yoseida."

" You thought you volunteered for this trip, didn't you ?" said Tsien. " Well, you didn't. None of us did. You reacted when I showed you Yoseida's signature just now, because it was the trigger of an ordinary post-hypnotic compulsion. Every earthborn in the crew had that compulsion."

Watching his face, Yerring believed the incredible. So Yoseida, the visionary, the dreamer, turned out to be a megalomaniac who wanted nothing less than a planet as tribute to his mania . . .

" Why have we three got away so far ?" he demanded.

" You, I suspect, because you had a sane reason for demanding a landing," said Tsien. " The others hadn't. You were arguing from a viewpoint of simple self-preservation. George seems to have got away because his concern is shipside; the matter of the colony is incidental to him, and no major worry. And I "—he shrugged—" maybe I subconsciously diagnosed Yoseida's condition, and it led me to suspect the trouble could be put right."

So I gave my life for nothing, Yerring thought. He waited for despair, and oddly it did not come.

" We still "—Hattus broke the silence—" haven't solved anything."

The three earthborn turned slowly to look at Hatcher, who trembled under their gaze. " Yes," said Yerring, remembering. " Do we suffocate, or turn cannibal, or land ?"

Hatcher's face wrinkled, and he burst quite unexpectedly into tears.

They sat in amazement and watched him. " Is this the way the greatest feat in history must end ?" said Hattus in a hushed voice. " A shipload of catatonics to carry the race of man to the stars ?"

" If our inescapable compulsion is hypnotic," Yerring demanded of Tsien, " what's theirs ?"

Hatcher got blindly to his feet and ran from the room. " He'll recover without difficulty," Tsien said without sympathy. " They brought Felipe back, you know ? By remote control. He got over a shock which would have scarred you or me mentally for life in less than a day. Oh, their compulsion ?" He spread his hands. " Lifelong, Franz. Total."

" How long will it take to cure the rest of us ?" George asked.

" Days, at least, maybe months. We shall have to dredge through their minds and find out where and when the compulsion was instituted, and then erase it. It'll be a long, slow process."

" Wouldn't it be quicker to cancel it with a new one ?"

Tsien gazed at Yerring. " You have a reason for asking that, haven't you, Franz ? What is it ?"

" Would an earthborn be able to land on the planet ?"

" Damn ! Franz, you should have been the psychologist instead of me." Tsien's mind was a step ahead of his tongue —the words tumbled over one another. " Convince them the colony is founded ?"

" Better. Land them. Land us all—"

" You said that was no answer," objected Hattus.

" But it will be ! *If we build another ship.*"

Blank faces greeted his words, and he rushed on. " Look, the tripborn will never land. I've worked all this out in the past few days—how long they could last without the earthborn but the new ship just hit me. Cutting the population by two-fifty would give a margin of perhaps five years, supple-

mented by material shipped up to orbit. At the end of those five years, they have assembled, in orbit, a new ship—"

"Impossible," said Hattus. "It took ten years to build this one, with all the resources of Earth behind us."

"George, that was thirty-seven years ago," said Yerring soberly. "There has been progress. With the materials on hand—the tools we were going to use to build a modern town for ten thousand, remember !—we can build that ship."

The sincerity in his tone struck through Hattus's apathy, and the admin officer nodded, hope dawning on his face. "And we go back to Earth," he said softly.

Yes, that's one thing the tripborn have lost, Yerring thought. *The looking forward to going home. Because they are home already. Anywhere. Anywhere else.*

"It's a solution," frowned Tsien. "Yes, the earthborn can be cured if they're landed; the tripborn live in space and assemble the ship ; when it's over—where do they go ?"

"Anywhere."

"But why ?" Hattus turned pleading eyes to Yerring. "Why does it have to end like this—in this untidy, empty way ?"

"I don't know," said Yerring steadily. *Once there was a sea* . . . "But I can guess.

"Tsien said that any normal human being would have succumbed to his conditioning to planetside life. The tripborn didn't. And I think the answer is this: they aren't human.

"They didn't need to plan and plot to mutiny against us—they *did* it, by common decision. George, you had your finger on the pulse of the ship; conspiracy could never have escaped you. And you've noticed that they scarcely talk, except to us, but the ship has run smoothly nonetheless. They aren't human any more. They're—crew."

"So this is the end of humanity," said Hattus softly, and Yerring shook his head vigorously.

"Never ! George, long ago on Earth the sea was the only habitat of life—as it is today on that world down there. But the sea grew crowded; certain species were forced into the shallows, and sometimes the shallows dried up. So some of the creatures learned to take the sea with them, as we brought the air of Earth in this ship. The blood in your body now is precisely as salty as was that long-ago sea. Of course, for a

long time the animals had to come back to the water to breed.

" But—one day—an animal left the water and never came back.

" This isn't the end of man; there are still snakes and birds and dogs on Earth, still amphibians which have to return to the water. We're the amphibians, you and I. For a long time we've had to return to our rock pools, our planetary bases, at frequent intervals. But the ship we build here need never do so. We have found out how to breed now. And after that, there will be a snake, and a bird, and a dog—"

The certainty was growing; he could *feel* it.

" And in the end," said Yerring slowly, " there will be a man."

—John Brunner

Fantasy themes are always difficult to define, especially with the story which can fit either a science fiction magazine or one such as Science Fantasy. *Nevertheless, we seem to be managing to fill our quota of short stories each issue with occasional off-trail samples such as this one by George Whitley, who returns after a long absence.*

THE TIE THAT BINDS

By GEORGE WHITLEY

It all started with one of those absurd squabbles over what most people would consider inessentials. It was a Sunday evening and Lili and I, having finished our dinner, were sipping our coffee and discussing our simple plans for the week to come.

"Winter," she said, "is almost here, and you must get yourself a decent pair of grey flannels . . ."

I refrained—this time—from telling her that my corduroys were good for a few more years yet.

"And," she went on, "I'd rather like you in a blazer . . ."

"I've been meaning to get one for quite a while," I admitted. "I may as well blow the Income Tax refund cheque on that as on anything else. What shall it be—the Old School badge, or Merchant Navy? I knew a Doctor once who had a most ingenious system—he had one blazer and a collection of badges; all he had to do was to clip them over his breast pocket."

"Badges," she said, "are no longer worn."

" Not even," I pleaded, " a simple Tudor Crown ?"

" No."

" Anyhow," I said, " the trouble with getting a blazer is that I shall have to buy a new tie."

" Why ?" she asked.

" One cannot possibly," I told her, " wear a bow tie with a blazer. It *must* be an up-and-down job, with School, Service or Club colours. The M.N. tie is quite tasteful—dark blue with narrow green, white and red diagonals . . ."

" *No*," she said. . .

" Yes. It's the only possible tie. To get an Old School tie I should have to send to England. The Service tie I can buy here."

" You English," she flared, " are like *sheep* !"

" But why ? How ? This business of ties is so very convenient. You meet a bloke, and you know his background at once. He's wearing a horrid affair of red and brown stripes on a green ground, and you know that he was a tankman—through mud and blood to the green fields. You see that he has a tie with little red castles on a navy blue ground—and you know that he did his pre-sea training in H.M.S. Conway. Or he might be wearing R.A.F., or R.N., or R.N.V.R. colours."

" It's so childish," she maintained.

" It's not. It's convenient. For example—last night you met the Tauntons for the first time. Jeff was wearing a blazer and a tie with little gold tomcats carrying Salvation Army banners. If you'd known anything about ties you'd have known that he was exposed to his maritime education at Southampton University."

" And what good would that have done me ? He told me, later in the evening, anyhow."

" Yes. But look what a good impression you'd have made if you'd started talking about Southampton right away."

" I made a good impression anyhow. But what I have against all these fancy ties is this. We pride ourselves on being individualists . . ."

" Yes . . ."

" *You* pride yourself on being an individualist. And now, when it comes to buying a new tie, you want to get something that will turn you at once into a mere *type*. You meet somebody, and he looks at the tag round your neck and thinks—'Ah ! A sailor.' "

" And why not? It's nothing to be ashamed about."

" You were keen enough to leave the sea when I first met you."

" So what? I can still have a certain sentimental feeling for it—sort of like hankering after a bygone mistress."

" Don't change the subject. We were talking about ties."

" All right. I concede that in matters of taste, general taste, you know more than I do. But I maintain that no civilised Englishman would dream of wearing any other tie with a blazer than either a striped or a crested one. And if he is going to wear such a tie he might as well wear one which means something—and no civilised Englishman would dream of wearing a tie to which he was not entitled."

" Are Englishmen civilised?" she asked.

" At least," I replied, looking at her long, slim legs, " they wouldn't dream of wearing tartan slacks unless they had a dollop of Scottish blood to make it permissable. Could it be, darling, that you, in your ignorance of our complicated *mores*, thought that a tartan was merely a fancy check and that you, as a very fancy Czech, could rightfully use it to bedeck your lower limbs?"

" Oh, buy whatever bloody tie you like, then !" she snapped.

" I will. my sweet. Scrabble?"

" Why ask? We always play on Sunday night."

I got out the board. We drew for the privilege of starting, which was mine. I looked at the seven tiles on my rack, found that I could use four of them. I put them down.

" T . . . Y . . . E . . . S . . ." she read contemptuously. " Can't you spell, now?"

" Look it up," I said. passing her the dictionary. " They're ropes for hoisting and lowering sails—not things you wear round your neck."

When Lili left for work the following morning we had things worked out. I was to meet her at four twenty-five at our usual corner. We were then to proceed to Arrowsmith's, where I was to purchase the grey flannels. From Arrowsmith's—whose slogan was NOTHING BUT TROUSERS—we would go to Gardener's to buy the blazer, and a tie to go with it. The M.N. tie—to suit my low taste—I would get at one of the uniform tailors on John Street before meeting Lili.

Everything went according to plan. I bought the M.N. tie, I met Lili at the corner within thirty seconds of the arranged

time, we were able to buy a pair of flannels at Arrowsmith's that neither of us found revolting. The blazer, double-breasted, dark blue, was not hard to purchase, and I was pleased to be able to find one that required no alterations whatsoever. Then we went to the necktie counter. I was determined not to purchase anything that bore the remotest similarity to any existing Old School or Regimental tie, and was quite severe with Lili when she tried to persuade me to get one that would have conveyed the altogether false impression that I had been educated at Eton.

Then, pawing through one of the boxes, I found *the* tie. It was rich, without being guady. It had a black ground—and that black was, somehow, almost three dimensional. The diagonal stripes were silver—or were they an incandescent blue?—that merged into a bright scarlet. The thing had a luminous quality that made the other neckwear look like a bundle of soiled rags.

"This," I said, "I must have."

"Aren't you sorry that you wasted money on that Merchant Navy tie?" asked Lili. "I told you that you could get a tie to wear with a blazer without making a uniform of it—and I was right."

"You were," I admitted. I asked the young man behind the counter, "I suppose that this tie isn't the Old School Tie of some college we've never heard of?"

It was not, he assured me. He didn't know what the material was, although it seemed to be one of the synthetic fibres. He didn't know where the tie was made or who had made it—we both of us examined it and found no maker's name. Not that this worried me unduly—it was obviously worth a lot more than the other ties in the box but, in the absence of any identification marks, could not be charged for at a higher rate. It was a bargain—and we all like bargains.

After our shopping we spent a quiet evening at home.

The next day we arranged to meet again in town, as before. The forenoon I spent working, finishing the story that I had been writing for the past three days. I corrected the fair copy and the carbons, had lunch—bread and cheese and pickles and a glass of beer—then decided that an afternoon in town would do me no harm; there were several bookshops that I had not browsed around in for some time. The day was

fine, but not overly warm, so I decided on wearing my new flannels and my blazer and, of course, the new tie.

Yeoman's Bookshop was my first call. I wandered round the counters and shelves quite happily, picking up an occasional book and glancing at its contents, not looking for anything in particular but willing to consider buying something if it happened to be just what I wanted.

I was standing sneering at the display of the latest Flying Saucer books when I became aware that somebody was staring at me—never a very comfortable sensation. I turned away from the collection of Sauceriana, found myself looking at a fellow of about my own height and build, dressed in a conservative grey flannel suit. There was something about him that suggested a naval officer in civilian clothes—but this impression came later. The first thing that I noticed about him was not his face, nor his suit, nor his bearing—it was his tie.

Hell ! I thought. *This could be embarrassing. I should never have listened to Lili—I should have stuck to the old M.N. neck rag.*

" Prrizzat caltrre wrizzit ?" asked the stranger politely.

" I'm sorry," I said. " I don't speak Czech."

He grinned apologetically.

" You're right, of course. When in Rome—as these people say . . . Have *you* been to Rome yet ? I'm hoping for the chance before we leave."

" It's a long way from Sydney," I said rather foolishly.

He laughed. "*A long way*—that's good ! But I didn't know that any of the other ships had personnel operating here. Are you with old Tin Whiskers' mob ?"

" I'm sorry," I said. " You must be mistaken."

" Cautious beggar, aren't you ?" he complained. " But from what I've heard, old Tin Whiskers has always been inclined to give the aborigines credit for more intelligence than they have, and I suppose that he's got his whole crew thinking the same way. Anyhow—let's get out of here. I feel like getting outside some of the local brew—it's not as good as *mooza*, but it's far from poisonous . . ."

This impressed me as being a good suggestion. It was obvious that I was wearing a tie to which I had no right—and apologies and explanations are best made in an atmosphere of conviviality. I accompanied the stranger from the book-

shop, walked with him into the first hotel we came to. We went upstairs, to the Lounge which, at this early hour of the afternoon, was almost deserted. There were only two other customers there, a man and a woman. The woman's scarf was the same pattern as the men's ties. I felt that I was gate-crashing an Old School Reunion.

We—my new acquaintance and I—joined them. Nothing was said until the waiter had filled our orders for drinks. Then, when he had retired to a corner to study form in his newspaper, the woman asked, " Who *is* this ?"

I looked at her, decided that I didn't like her. She was handsome, beautiful almost, but hard. She was as metallic as the polished platinum of her hair, the grey steel of her eyes.

" I found him in Yeoman's Bookshop," said my companion. " He was having a quiet laugh at all that rubbish these people print about flying saucers. He's from Tin Whiskers' ship . . ."

" Then what's he doing here ?" asked the other man. "The main fleet is covering Europe and America . . ."

The main fleet . . . Foreigners, with more than a hint of naval officer in their manner and bearing . . . The main fleet . . . Submarines—wearing the Hammer and Sickle ensign . . .

" I must apologise," I said. " Quite inadvertently I bought this tie that I am wearing. I did not think that it was the tie of any school or club—but it seems that I was mistaken. I'll leave you now—but I promise you that I will go straight to the store where I bought the thing and lodge a complaint . . ."

I'll go straight to the police, I thought. *But will they believe me* ?

" Stop !" ordered the woman. Her handbag—a big one—was on the table, and her right hand was inside it. It was obvious that something in the bag—it was big enough to hold a .38 pistol—was pointing at me. " Remain seated."

" And if I refuse ?"

She smiled.

" You will be persuaded."

I saw the tendons of what little remained exposed of her right hand twitch slightly.

I thought, Here it comes ! But she'd never dare—or would she ? There are silencers . . .

My intention was to fling myself sideways from the chair. It was a good intention, and all in the best traditions of crime

fiction, but like most good intentions it never came to anything. Not that I didn't try. Oh, I tried, but I could have been suddenly turned to stone, but for one thing. Stone is cold—but I wasn't. The heat was coming from no definable source, but seemed to be spreading from inside rather than outside. Dimly I wondered how long it would be before my clothes started to smoulder, and if the waiter would look up from his paper when they did.

"You see?" asked the woman. "Just a little applied radiation, and you do as we say. Now, you'll answer a few questions."

"By what right . . . ?" I began.

"This," she replied, moving whatever was inside her handbag slightly. "First of all, your name."

"Whitley," I told her sulkily. "George Whitley."

"Occupation?"

"Writer, or sailor. Sometimes one, sometimes the other, mostly both."

One of the men—the one from the bookshop—started to laugh.

"This," he said, "is rich. You know that I've been making a study of what these people call science fiction magazines, just to see if anybody has stumbled on the truth yet, and this Whitley is one of the science fiction writers." He turned to me. "You wrote "Drift," didn't you?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Never mind all this," said the woman. "Marital status?"

"I don't see what . . . ?"

"Want some more?" she asked, her right hand twitching.

"No."

"Then tell me everything. I want to find out who's going to miss you, if anybody."

When I had finished—prompted by a couple of short sessions of burning—she said to the others: "This is lucky. Only his wife will miss him—and we can make sure of her at the same time."

"No," I said. "She's not in this."

They ignored me.

"What we still have to find out," said one of the men, "is where he got the tie—and how."

"I can guess," said the woman. "That fool Rroozal said he was going to make a collection of Terran neckwear. He must have been buying some in that shop, worn one away

with him that took his fancy—you remember that the Old Man did give him hell for being improperly dressed—and left his own on the counter. Anyhow, finish your drinks. Let's get out of here."

They managed it well. The waiter must have thought, as passers by must have thought, that here was a man who had celebrated rather too well at his old school reunion and was being assisted home by his old schoolmates. It was . . . nightmarish. It was wanting to run and not being able to stir a muscle. It was wanting to shout and not being able to emit the feeblest croak.

They got me into their car—nothing fancy about it, just an ordinary more or less streamlined box on four wheels with all the usual modern conveniences. One of the men drove, the other, with the woman, sat with me in the back seat. They went through my pockets, found an envelope with my address. They drove me home, supported me up the steps and the stairs to the flat, let us in with my key.

They didn't smoke, but they allowed me to do so. They allowed me to have a drink, and helped themselves to cold beer. They browsed through the bookcases—but all the time one of them was covering me with the glittering weapon from the handbag. It looked as pretty and harmless as the plastic rayguns sold with children's spaceman outfits, but I knew that it wasn't.

" He might as well get packed," said one of the men.

" Packed ?" I asked.

" Yes—packed. You and your wife won't feel quite so lonely when you're able to have a few of your own things in your new home."

There was a knock at the door. It was Lili. I made a move to get up to let her in, but was motioned back by the woman.

" We still don't trust you," she said. " Your wife has her own key, no doubt . . ."

Lili came in. She looked rather beautiful, as she always does when in a bad temper. She said, " I waited for you, you . . ." Then—" Sorry, George. I didn't know we had guests . . ."

" We are hardly that," said the woman. " Sit down. Let your husband tell you about what has happened, and what is going to happen."

So I told her. She took it very well—but then, she's always had itchy feet. She's rather looking forward to seeing that Earth-type planet revolving around Alpha Eridani. Already she's made plans for the dress shop, *Earth Models—Exclusive*, that she is going to open.

And Marrza—she isn't such a bad sort at all when you get to know her—has agreed to let me write this story and post it off to my Agent in New York; there will be no stamps on the envelope, so he's bound to get it. She says that nobody will believe it anyhow and it can't possibly do any harm.

And now it's time to lock up the flat and to lug our suitcases down to the car. We shall rendezvous, they tell us, with a small, shuttle spaceship in French's Forest—the real spaceship is hanging above the Earth in a twenty-four hour orbit.

I can keep the tie, they say—now that I have been recruited into their service I'm entitled to wear it. I've taken it off, though, and I'm wearing my neat and dignified M.N. necktie.

And if I find anybody on Alpha Eridani III wearing one like it, it will be my turn to raise hell.

—**George Whitley**

WEDNESDAY'S CHILD

William Tenn is a comparatively new American author to the field of science fiction and fantasy writing, but in the short time he has devoted some of his talent to the field he has risen to the front rank for imagination and ingenuity. As an example of his skill we have pleasure in presenting the 'creepy' episode below.

By WILLIAM TENN

When he first came to scrutinize Wednesday Gresham with his rimless spectacles and watery blue eyes, Fabian Balik knew nothing of the biological contradictions which were so incredibly a part of her essential body structure. He had not even noticed—as yet—that she was a remarkably pretty girl with eyes like rain-sparkling violets. His original preoccupation with her was solely and specifically as a problem in personnel administration.

All of which was not too surprising, because Fabian Balik was a thoroughly intent, thoroughly sincere young office manager, who had convinced his glands conclusively, in several bitter skirmishes, that their interests didn't have a chance against the interests of SLAUGHTER, STARK & SLINGSBY : Advertising & Public Relations.

Wednesday was one of the best stenographers in the secretarial pool that was under his immediate supervision. There were, however, small but highly unusual derelictions in her employment history. They consisted of pecularities which a less dedicated and ambitious personnel man might have put aside as mere trifles, but which Fabian, after a careful study

of her six-year record with the firm, felt he could not, in good conscience, ignore. On the other hand, they would obviously require an extended discussion and he had strong views about cutting into an employee's working time.

Thus, much to the astonishment of the office and the confusion of Wednesday herself, he came up to her one day at noon, and informed her quite calmly that they were going to have lunch together.

"This is a nice place," he announced, when they had been shown to a table. "It's not too expensive, but I've discovered it serves the best food in the city for the price. And it's a bit off the beaten track so that it never gets too crowded. Only people who know what they want manage to come here."

Wednesday glanced around, and nodded. "Yes," she said. "I like it too. I eat here a lot with the girls."

After a moment, Fabian picked up a menu. "I suppose you don't mind if I order for both of us?" he inquired. "The chef is used to my tastes. He'll treat us right."

The girl frowned. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Balik, but—"

"Yes?" he said encouragingly, though he was more than a little surprised. He hadn't expected anything but compliance. After all, she was probably palpitating at being out with him.

"I'd like to order for myself," she said. "I'm on a . . . a special diet."

He raised his eyebrows and was pleased at the way she blushed. He nodded slowly, with dignity, letting his displeasure come through in the way he pronounced his words. "Very well, as you please."

A few moments later, though, curiosity got too strong and broke through the ice. "What kind of diet is that? Fresh-fruit salad, a glass of tomato juice, raw cabbage, and a *baked potato*? You can't be trying to lose weight if you eat potatoes"

Wednesday smiled timidly. "I'm not trying to reduce, Mr. Balik. Those are all foods rich in Vitamin C. I need a lot of Vitamin C."

Fabian remembered her smile. There had been a few spots of more-than-natural whiteness in it. "Bad teeth?" he inquired.

"Bad teeth and—" Her tongue came out and paused for a thoughtful second between her lips. "Mostly bad teeth," she said. "This is a nice place. There's a restaurant almost like it near where I live. Of course it's a lot cheaper—"

" Do you live with your parents, Miss Gresham ?"

" No, I live alone. I'm an orphan."

He waited until the waiter had deposited the first course, then speared a bit of the shrimp and returned to the attack. " Since when ?"

She stared at him over her fresh-fruit salad. " I beg your pardon, Mr. Balik ?"

" Since when ? How long have you been an orphan ?"

" Since I was a little baby. Someone left me on the doorstep of a foundling home."

He noticed that while she was replying to his questions in an even tone of voice, she was staring at her food with a good deal of concentration and her blush had become more pronounced. Was she embarrassed at having to admit her probable lack of legitimacy ? he wondered. Surely she had grown accustomed to it in—how old was she ? twenty-four years. Nonsense, of course she had.

" But on your original application form, Miss Gresham, you gave Thomas and Mary Gresham as the names of your parents."

Wednesday had stopped eating and was playing with her water glass. " They were an old couple who adopted me," she said in a very low voice. " They died when I was fifteen. I have no living relatives."

" That you know of," he pointed out, raising a cautionary finger.

Much to Fabian's surprise she chuckled. It was a very odd chuckle and made him feel extremely uncomfortable. "That's right, Mr. Balik. I have no living relatives—*that I know of.*" She looked over his shoulder and chuckled again. " That I know of," she repeated softly to herself.

Fabian felt irritably that the interview was somehow getting away from him. He raised his voice slightly. " Then who is Dr. Morris Lorington ?"

She was attentive again. In fact wary was more like it. " Dr. Morris Lorington ?"

" Yes, the man you said should be notified in case of emergency. In case anything happened to you while you were working for us."

She looked very wary now. Her eyes were narrowed, she was watching him very closely; her breathing was a bit faster, too. " Dr. Lorington is an old friend. He—he was the doctor

at the orphanage. After the Greshams adopted me, I kept going to him whenever—" Her voice trailed off.

" Whenever you needed medical attention?" Fabian suggested.

" Ye-es," she said, brightening, as if he had come up with an entirely novel reason for consulting a physician. " I saw him whenever I needed medical attention."

Fabian grunted. There was something very wrong but tantalizingly elusive about this whole business. But she was answering his questions. He couldn't deny that: she was certainly answering.

" Do you expect to see him next October?" he inquired.

And now Wednesday was no longer wary. She was frightened. " Next October?" she quavered.

Fabian finished the last of his shrimp and wiped his lips. But he didn't take his eyes off her. " Yes, next October, Miss Gresham. You've applied for a month's leave of absence, beginning October fifteenth. Five years ago, after you had been working for Slaughter, Stark & Slingsby for thirteen months, you also applied for a leave of absence in October."

He was amazed at how scared she looked. He felt triumphantly that he had been right in looking into this. The feeling he had about her had not been merely curiosity; it had been an instinct of good personnel management.

" But I'm not getting paid for the time off. I'm not asking to be paid for it, Mr. Balik. And I didn't get paid the—the other time."

She was clutching her napkin up near her face, and she gave the impression of being ready to bolt through the back door of the restaurant. Her blushes had departed with such thoroughness as to leave her skin absolutely white.

" The fact that you're not going to be paid for the time off, Miss Gresham—" Fabian began, only to be interrupted by the waiter with the entree. By the time the man had gone, he was annoyed to observe that Wednesday had used the respite to recover some of her poise. While she was still pale, she had a spot of red in each cheek and she was leaning back in her chair now instead of using the edge of it.

" The fact that you're not going to be paid is of no consequence," he continued nonetheless. " It's merely logical. After all, you have two weeks of vacation with pay every year. Which brings me to the second point. You have every year

made *two* unusual requests. First, you've asked for an additional week's leave of absence without pay, making three weeks in all. And then you've asked—"

"To take it in the early Spring," she finished, her voice entirely under control. "Is there anything wrong with that, Mr. Balik? That way I don't have any conflict with the other girls and the firm is sure of a secretary being in the office all through the summer."

"There's nothing wrong with that *per se*. By that I mean," he explained carefully, "that there is nothing wrong with the arrangement *as such*. But it makes for loose ends, for organizational confusion. And loose ends, Miss Gresham, loose ends and organizational confusion have no place in a well-regulated office."

He was pleased to note that she was looking uncomfortable again.

"Does that mean—are you trying to tell me—that I might be laid off?"

"It could happen," Fabian agreed, neglecting to add that it was, however, very unlikely to happen in the case of a secretary who was as generally efficient on the one hand, and as innocuous on the other, as Wednesday Gresham. He carefully cut a fork-sized portion of roast beef free of its accompanying strip of orange fat before going on; "Look at it this way. How would it be if every girl in the office asked for an additional week's leave of absence every year—even if it was without pay, as it would have to be? And then, every few years, wanted an additional month's leave of absence on top of that? What kind of an office would we have, Miss Gresham? Not a well-regulated one, certainly."

As he chewed the roast beef with the requisite thoroughness he beamed at the thoughtful concern on her face and was mentally grateful that he hadn't had to present that line of argument to anyone as sharp as Arlette Stein, for example. He knew what the well-hipped thirtyish widow would have immediately replied: "But every girl in the office *doesn't* ask for it, Mr. Balik." A heavy sneer at such sophistry would mean little to Stein.

Wednesday, he appreciated, was not the person to go in for such counter-attacks. She was rolling her lips distressedly against each other and trying to think of a polite, good-

employee way out. There was only one, and she would have to come to it in a moment.

She did.

"Would it help any," she began, and stopped. She took a deep breath. "Would it help any, if I told you the reasons —for the leaves-of-absence?"

"It would," he said heartily. "It would indeed, Miss Gresham. That way I, as office manager, can operate from facts instead of mysteries. I can hear your reasons, weigh them for validity and measure their importance—*and* your usefulness as a secretary—against the disorganization your absence create in the day-to-day operation of Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby."

"M-m-m." She looked troubled, uncertain. "I'd like to think a bit, if you don't mind."

Fabian waved a cauliflower-filled fork magnanimously. "Take all the time in the world! Think it out carefully. Don't tell me anything you aren't perfectly willing to tell me. Of course anything you *do* tell me will be, I am sure I need hardly reassure you, completely confidential. I will treat it as official knowledge, Miss Gresham—not personal. And while you're thinking, you might start eating your raw cabbage. Before it gets cold," he added with a rich, executive-type chuckle.

She nodded him a half-smile that ended in a sigh and began working at her plate in an absent-minded, not-particularly-hungry fashion.

"You see," she began abruptly as if she'd found a good point of departure, "some things happen to me that don't happen to other people."

"That, I would say, is fairly obvious."

"They're not bad things. I mean what, oh, the newspapers would call bad. And they're not dangerous things, exactly. They're—they're more physical-like. They're things that could happen to my body."

Fabian finished his plate, sat back and crossed his arms. "Could you be just a little more specific? Unless—" and he was struck by a horrifying thought—"unless they're what is known as, er, as *female* difficulties. In that case, of course—"

This time she didn't even blush. "Oh, no. Not at all. At least there's very little of that. It's—other things. Like my appendix. Every year I have to have my appendix out."

" Your appendix ?" He turned that over in his mind. " Every year ? But a human being only has one appendix. And once it's removed, it doesn't grow back."

" Mine does. On the tenth of April, every single year, I get appendicitis and have to have an operation. That's why I take my vacation then. And my teeth. Every five years, I lose all my teeth. I start losing them about this time, and I have dental plates that were made when I was a little girl—I use them until my teeth grow back. Then, about the middle of October the last of them goes and new ones start coming up. I can't use my dental plates while they're growing, so I look kind of funny for a while. That's why I ask for a leave of absence. In the middle of November, the new teeth are almost full-grown, and I come back to work."

She took a deep breath and timidly lifted her eyes to his face. That was all she evidently had to say. Or wished to.

All through dessert, he thought about it. He was positive she was telling the truth. A girl like Wednesday Gresham didn't lie. Not to such a fantastic extent. Not to her boss.

" Well," he said at last. " It's certainly very unusual."

" Yes," she agreed. " Very unusual."

" Do you have anything else the matter with—I mean, are there any other peculiarities—Oh, darn ! Is there anything else ?"

Wednesday considered. " There are. But, if you don't mind, Mr. Balik, I'd rather not—"

Fabian decided not to take that. " Now see here, Miss Gresham," he said firmly. " Let us not play games. You didn't have to tell me anything, but you decided, for yourself, for your own good reasons, to do so. Now I must insist on the whole story, and nothing but the whole story. What other physical difficulties do you have ?"

It worked. She cringed a bit in her chair, straightened up again, but a little weakly, and began : " I'm sorry, Mr. Balik, I wouldn't dream of—of playing games with you. There are lots of other things, but none of them interfere with my work, really. Like I have some tiny hairs growing on my fingernails. See ?"

Fabian glanced at the hand held across the table. A few almost microscopic tendrils on each glittering hard surface of fingernail.

" What else ?"

" Well, my tongue. I have a few hairs on the underside of my tongue. They don't bother me, though, they don't bother me in any way. And there's my—my—"

" Yes ?" he prompted. *Who could believe that colourless little Wednesday Gresham . . .*

" My navel. I don't have any navel."

" You don't have any— But that's impossible !" he exploded. He felt his glasses sliding down his nose. " Everyone has a navel ! Everyone alive—everyone who's ever been born."

Wednesday nodded, her eyes unnaturally bright and large. " Maybe—" she began, and suddenly, unexpectedly, broke into tears. She brought her hands up to her face and sobbed through them, great, pounding, wracking sobs that pulled her shoulders up and down, up and down.

Fabian's consternation made him completely helpless. He'd never, never in his life, been in a crowded restaurant with a crying girl before.

" Now, Miss Gresham—Wednesday," he managed to get out, and he was annoyed to hear a high, skittery note in his own voice. " There's no call for this. Surely, there's no call for this ? Uh—Wednesday ?"

" Maybe," she gasped again, between sobs, " m-maybe that's the answer."

" What's the answer ?" Fabian asked loudly, desperately hoping to distract her into some kind of conversation.

" About—about being born. Maybe—maybe I wasn't born. M-maybe I was m-m-made !"

And then, as if she'd merely been warming up before this, she *really* went into hysterics. Fabian Balik at last realized what he had to do. He paid the check, put his arm around the girl's waist and half-carried her out of the restaurant.

It worked. She got quieter the moment they hit the open air. She leaned against a building, not crying now, and shook her shoulders in a steadily diminishing crescendo. Finally, she *ulped* once, twice, and turned groggily to him, her face looking as if it had been rubbed determinedly in an artist's turpentine rag.

" I'm s-sorry," she said. " I'm t-terribly s-sorry. I haven't done that for years. But—you see, Mr. Blaik—I haven't talked about myself for years."

" There's a nice bar at the corner," he pointed out, tremendously relieved. She'd looked for a while as if she'd intended to keep on crying all day ! " Let's pop in, and I'll have a drink. You can use the ladies' room to fix yourself up."

He took her arm and steered her into the place. Then he climbed onto a bar stool and had himself a double brandy.

What an experience ! And what a strange, strange girl !

Of course, he shouldn't have pushed her quite so hard on a subject about which she was evidently so sensitive. Was that his fault, though, that she *was* so sensitive ?

Fabian considered the matter carefully, judicially, and found in his favour. No, it definitely wasn't his fault.

But what a story ! The foundling business, the appendix business, the teeth, the hair on the fingernails and tongue . . . And that last killer about the navel !

He'd have to think it out. And maybe he'd get some other opinions. But one thing he was sure of, as sure as of his own managerial capacities : Wednesday Gresham hadn't been lying in any particular. Wednesday Gresham was just not the sort of a girl who made up tall stories about herself.

When she rejoined him, he urged her to have a drink. " Help you get a grip on yourself."

She demurred, she didn't drink very much, she said. But he insisted, and she gave in. " Just a liqueur. Anything. You order it, Mr. Balik."

Fabian was secretly very pleased at her docility. No reprimanding, no back-biting, like most other girls—Although what in the world could she reprimand him for ?

" You still look a little frayed," he told her. " When we get back, don't bother going to your desk. Go right in to Mr. Osborne and finish taking dictation. No point in giving the other girls something to talk about. I'll sign in for you."

She inclined her head submissively and continued to sip from the tiny glass.

" What was that last comment you made in the restaurant —I'm certain you don't mind discussing it, now—about not being born, but being made ? That was an odd thing to say."

Wednesday sighed. " It isn't my own idea. It's Dr. Lorington's. Years ago, when he was examining me, he said that I looked as if I'd been made—by an amateur. By someone who didn't have all the blueprints, or didn't understand them, or wasn't concentrating hard enough."

"H'm." He stared at her, absolutely intrigued. She looked normal enough. Better than normal, in fact. And yet—

Later that afternoon, he telephoned Jim Rudd and made an appointment for right after work. Jim Rudd had been his room-mate in college and was now a doctor: he would be able to tell him a little more about this.

But Jim Rudd wasn't able to help him very much. He listened patiently to Fabian's story about "a girl I've just met" and, at the end of it, leaned back in the new upholstered swivel chair and pursed his lips at his diploma, neatly framed and hung on the opposite wall.

"You sure do go in for weirdies, Fabe. For a superficially well-adjusted, well-organized guy with a real talent for the mundane things of life, you pick the damndest women I ever heard of. But that's your business. Maybe it's your way of adding a necessary pinch of the exotic to the grim daily round. Or maybe you're making up for the drabness of your father's grocery store."

"This girl is not a weirdie," Fabian insisted angrily. "She's a very simple little secretary, prettier than most, but that's about all."

"Have it your own way. To me, she's a weirdie. To me, there's not a hell of a lot of difference—from your description—between her and that crazy White Russian dame you were running around with back in our junior year. You know the one I mean—what was her name?"

"Sandra? Oh, Jim, what's the matter with you? Sandra was a messed-up box of dynamite who was always blowing up in my face. This kid turns pale and dies if I so much as raise my voice. Besides, I had a real puppy-love crush on Sandra; this other girl is somebody I just met, like I told you, and I don't feel anything for her, one way or the other."

The young doctor grinned. "So you come up to my office and have a consultation about her! Well, it's your funeral. What do you want to know?"

"What causes all these—these physical peculiarities?"

Dr. Rudd got up and sat on the edge of his desk. "First," he said, "whether you want to recognize it or not, she's a highly disturbed person. The hysterics in the restaurant point to it, and the fantastic nonsense she told you about her

body points to it. So right there, you have something. If only one per cent of what she told you is true—and even that I would say is pretty high—it makes sense in terms of psychosomatic imbalance. Medicine doesn't yet know quite how it works, but one thing seems certain : anyone badly mixed up mentally is going to be at least a little mixed up physically, too."

Fabian thought about that for a while. " Jim, you don't know what it means to those little secretaries in the pool to tell lies to the office manager ! A fib or two about why they were absent the day before, yes, but not stories like this, not to *me*."

A shrug. " I don't know what you look like to them : I don't work for you, Fabe. But none of what you say would hold true for a psycho. And a psycho is what I have to consider her. Look, some of that stuff she told you is impossible, some of it has occurred in medical literature. There have been well-authenticated cases of people, for example, who have grown several sets of teeth in their lifetime. These are biological sports, one-in-a-million individuals. But the rest of it ? And all the rest of it happening to one person ? *Please*."

" I saw some of it. I saw the hairs on her fingernails."

" You saw something on her fingernails. It could be any one of a dozen different possibilities. I'm sure of one thing; it wasn't hair. Right there she gave herself away as phony. Goddammit, man, hair and nails are the same organs essentially. One doesn't grow on the other !"

" And the navel ? The missing navel ?"

Jim Rudd dropped to his feet and strode rapidly about the office. " I wish I knew why I'm wasting so much time with you," he complained. " A human being without a navel, or *any* mammal without a navel, is as possible as an insect with a body temperature of ninety-eight degrees. It just can't be. It does not exist."

He seemed to get more and more upset as he considered it. He kept shaking his head negatively as he walked.

Fabian suggested : " Suppose I brought her to your office. And suppose you examined her and found no navel. Now just consider that for a moment. What would you say then?"

" I'd say plastic surgery," the doctor said instantly. "Mind you, I'm positive she'd never submit to such an examination, but if she did, and there was no navel, plastic surgery would be the only answer."

" Why would anyone want to do plastic surgery on a navel?"

" I don't know. I haven't the vaguest idea. Maybe an accident. Maybe a disfiguring birthmark in that place. But there will be scars, let me tell you. *She had to be born with a navel.*"

Rudd went back to his desk. He picked up a prescription pad. " Let me give you the name of a good psychiatrist, Fabe. I've thought ever since that Sandra business that you've had some personal problems that might get out of hand one day. This man is one of the finest—"

Fabian left.

She was obviously in a flutter when he called to pick her up that night, so much more of a flutter than a date-with-the-boss would account for, that Fabian was puzzled. But he waited and gave her an ostentatious and expensive good time. Afterward, after dinner and after the theatre, when they were sitting in the corner of a small night club over their drinks, he asked her about it.

" You don't date much, do you, Wednesday ?"

" No, I don't, Mr. Balik—I mean, Fabian," she said, smiling shyly as she remembered the first-name privilege she had been accorded for the evening. " I usually just go out with girl friends, not with men. I usually turn down dates."

" Why ? You're not going to find a husband that way. You want to get married, don't you ?"

Wednesday shook her head slowly. " I don't think so. I—I'm afraid to. Not of marriage. Of babies. I don't think a person like me ought to have a baby."

" Nonsense ! Is there any scientific reason why you shouldn't ? What are you afraid of—it'll be a monster ?"

" I'm afraid it might be . . . anything. I think with my body being as—as funny as it is, I shouldn't take chances with a child. Dr. Lorington thinks so too. Besides there's the poem."

Fabian put down his drink. " Poem ? What poem ?"

" You know, the one about the days of the week. I learned it when I was a little girl, and it frightened me even then. It goes :

Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child is loving and giving—

And so on. When I was a little girl in the orphanage, I used to say to myself, 'I'm Wednesday. I'm different from all other little girls in all kinds of strange ways. And my child—' "

"Who gave you that name?"

"I was left at the foundling home just after New Year's Eve—Wednesday morning. So they didn't know what else to call me, especially when they found I didn't have a navel. And then, like I told you, after the Greshams adopted me, I took their last name."

He reached for her hand and grasped it firmly with both of his. He noted with triumphant pleasure that her fingernails *were* hairy. "You're a very pretty girl, Wednesday Gresham."

When she saw that he meant it, she blushed and looked down at the tablecloth.

"And you really don't have a navel?"

"No, I don't. Really."

"What else about you is different?" Fabian asked. "I mean, besides the things you told me."

"Well," she considered. "There's that business about my blood pressure."

"Tell me about it," he urged.

She told him.

Two dates later, she informed Fabian that Dr. Lorington wanted to see him. Alone.

He went all the way uptown to the old-fashioned brownstone, chewing his knuckles in excitement. He had so many questions to ask!

Dr. Lorington was a tall, aged man with pale skin and absolutely white hair. He moved very slowly as he gestured his visitor to a chair, but his eyes rested intent and anxious on Fabian's face.

"Wednesday tells me you've been seeing a good deal of her, Mr. Balik. May I ask why?"

Fabian shrugged. "I like the girl. I'm interested in her."

"Interested, how? Interested clinically—as in a specimen?"

" What a way to put it, Doctor ! She's a pretty girl, she's a nice girl, why should I be interested in her as a specimen?"

The doctor stroked an invisible beard on his chin, still watching Fabian very closely. " She's a pretty girl," he agreed, " but there are many pretty girls. You're a young man obviously on his way up in the world, and you're also obviously far out of Wednesday's class. From what she's told me—and mind you, it's been all on the positive side—I've got a definite impression that you look on her as a specimen, but a specimen, let us say, about which you feel a substantial collector's itch. Why you should feel this way, I don't know enough about you to say. But no matter how she rhapsodizes about you, I continue to feel strongly that you have no conventional, expected emotional interest in her. And now that I've seen you, I'm positive that this is so."

" Glad to hear she rhapsodizes about me," Fabian tried to squeeze out a bashful-type grin. " You have nothing to worry about, Doctor."

" I think there's quite a bit to worry about, quite a bit. Frankly, Mr. Balik, your appearance has confirmed my previous impressions: I am quite certain I don't like you. Furthermore, I don't like you for Wednesday."

Fabian thought for a moment, then shrugged. " That's too bad. But I don't think she'll listen to you. She's gone without male companionship too long, and she's too flattered by my going after her."

" I'm terribly afraid you're right. Listen to me, Mr. Balik. I'm very fond of Wednesday and I know how unguarded she is. I ask you, almost as a father, to leave her alone. I've taken care of her since she arrived at the foundling home. I was responsible for keeping her case out of the medical journals so that she might have some chance for a normal life. At the moment, I'm retired from practice. Wednesday Gresham is my only regular patient. Couldn't you find it in your heart to be kind and have nothing more to do with her?"

" What's this about her being made, not born ?" Fabian countered. " She says it was your idea."

The old man sighed and shook his head over his desk-top for a long moment. " It's the only explanation that makes sense," he said at last, dispiritedly. " Considering the somatic inaccuracies and ambivalences."

Fabian clasped his hands and rubbed his elbows thoughtfully on the arms of his chair. " Did you ever think there might be another explanation ? She might be a mutant, a new kind of human evolution, or the offspring of creatures from another world, say, who happened to be stranded on planet."

" Highly unlikely," Dr. Lorington said. " None of these physical modifications is especially useful in any conceivable environment, with the possible exception of the constantly renewing teeth. Nor are the modifications fatal. They tend to be just—inconvenient. As a physician who has examined many human beings in my life, I would say that Wednesday is thoroughly, indisputably human. She is just a little—well, the word is *amateurish.*"

The doctor sat up straight. " There is something else, Mr. Balik. I think it extremely inadvisable for people like Wednesday to have children of their own."

Fabian's eyes lit up in fascination. " Why ? What would the children be like ?"

" They might be like anything imaginable—or unimaginable. With so much disarrangement of the normal physical system, the modification in the reproductive functions must be enormous too. That's why I ask you, Mr. Balik, not to go on seeing Wednesday, not to go on stimulating her to thoughts of marriage. Because this is one girl that I am certain should not have babies !"

" We'll see." Fabian rose and offered his hand. " Thank you very much for your time and trouble, Doctor."

Dr. Lorington cocked his head and stared up at him. Then, without shaking the hand, he said in a quiet, even voice, " You are welcome. Goodbye, Mr. Balik."

Wednesday was naturally miserable over the antagonism between the two men. But there was very little doubt where her loyalties would lie in a crisis. All those years of determined emotional starvation had resulted in a frantic voracity. Once she allowed herself to think of Fabian romantically, she was done for. She told him that she did her work at the office —from which their developing affair had so far been successfully screened—in a daze at the thought that *he* liked her.

Fabian found her homage delicious. Most women he had known began to treat him with a gradually sharpening edge

of contempt as time went on. Wednesday became daily more admiring, more agreeable, more compliant.

True, she was by no means brilliant, but she was, he told himself, extremely pretty, and therefore quite presentable. Just to be on the safe side, he found an opportunity to confer with Mr. Slaughter, the senior partner of the firm, ostensibly on personnel matters. He mentioned in passing that he was slightly interested in one of the girls in the secretarial pool. Would there be any high echolon objection to that?

"Interested to the extent of perhaps marrying the girl?" Mr. Slaughter asked, studying him from under a pair of enormously thick eyebrows.

"Possibly. It might very well come to that, sir. If you have no ob—"

"No objection at all, my boy, no objection at all! I don't like executives flim-flamming around with their file-clerks as a general rule, but if it's handled quietly and ends in matrimony, it could be an excellent thing for the office. I'd like to see you married, and steadied down. It might give the other single people in the place some sensible ideas for a change. But mind you, Balik, no flim-flam. No hanky-panky, especially on office time!"

Satisfied, Fabian now devoted himself to separating Wednesday from Dr. Lorington. He pointed out to her that the old man couldn't live much longer and she needed a regular doctor who was young enough to be able to help her with the physical complexities she faced for the rest of her life. A young doctor like Jim Rudd, for example.

Wednesday wept, but was completely incapable of fighting him for long. In the end, she made only one condition—that Dr. Rudd preserve the secrecy that Lorington had initiated. She didn't want to become a medical journal freak or a newspaper sob story.

The reasons why Fabian agreed had only a little to do with magnanimity. He wanted to have her oddities for himself alone. Sandra he had worn on his breast, like a flashing jewel hung from a pendant. Wednesday he would keep in a tiny chamois bag, examining her from time to time in a self-satisfied, miserly fashion.

And, after a while, he might have another, smaller jewel . . .

Jim Rudd accepted his conditions. And was astounded.

"There is no navel at all!" he ejaculated when he had rejoined Fabian in his study, after the first examination.

"I've palpated the skin for scar tissue, but there's not the slightest hint of it. And that's not the half of it! She has no discernible systole and diastole. Man, do you know what that means?"

"I'm not interested right now," Fabian told him. "Later maybe. Do you think you can help her with these physical problems when they come up?"

"Oh, sure. At least as well as that old fellow."

"What about children? Can she have them?"

Rudd spread his hands. "I don't see why not. For all her peculiarities, she's a remarkably healthy young woman. And we have no reason to believe that this condition—whatever you want to call it—is hereditary. Of course, some part of it might be, in some strange way or other, but on the evidence . . ."

They were married, just before the start of Fabian's vacation, at City Hall. They came back to the office after lunch and told everyone about it. Fabian had already hired a new secretary to replace his wife.

Two months later, Fabian had managed to get her pregnant.

He was amazed at how upset she became, considering the meekness he had induced in her from the beginning of their marriage. He tried to be stern and to tell her he would have none of this nonsense, Dr. Rudd had said there was every reason to expect that she would have a normal baby, and that was that. But it didn't work. He tried gentle humour, cajolery. He even took her in his arms and told her he loved her too much not to want to have a little girl like her. But that didn't work either.

"Fabian, darling," she moaned, "don't you understand? I'm not supposed to have a child. I'm not like other women."

He finally used something he had been saving as a last resort for this emergency. He took a book from the shelf and flipped it open. "I understand," he said. "It's half Dr. Lorington and his nineteenth-century superstitious twaddle and half a silly little folk poem you read when you were a girl and that made a terrifying impression on you. Well, I can't do anything about Dr. Lorington at this point in your life, but I can do something about that poem. Here. Read this."

She read :

Birthdays
by B. L. Farjeon.

Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is loving and giving,
Thursday's child works hard for a living,
Friday's child is full of woe,
Saturday's child has far to go,
But the child that is born on the Sabbath-day
Is brave and bonny, and good and gay.

Wednesday looked up and shook the tears from her eyes. " But I don't understand," she muttered in confusion. "That's not like the one I read."

He squatted beside her and explained patiently. " The one you read had two lines transposed, right ? Wednesday's and Thursday's child had the lines that Friday's and Saturday's child have in this version and vice versa. Well, it's an old Devonshire poem originally, and no one knows for sure which version is right. I looked it up, especially for you. I just wanted to show you how silly you were, basing your entire attitude toward life on a couple of verses which could be read either way, not to mention the fact that they were written several centuries before anyone thought of naming you Wednesday."

She threw her arms around him and held on tightly. " Oh, Fabian, darling ! Don't be angry with me. It's just that I'm so—*frightened* !"

Jim Rudd was a little concerned, too. " Oh, I'm pretty sure it will be all right, but I wish you'd waited until I had time to familiarize myself a bit more with the patient. The only thing, Fabe, I'll have to call in a first-rate obstetrician. I'd never dream of handling this myself. I can make him keep it quiet, about Wednesday and all that. But the moment she enters the delivery room, all bets are off. Too many odd things about her—they're bound to be noticed by some nurse, at least."

" Do the best you can," Fabian told him. " I don't want my wife involved in garish publicity, if it can be helped. But if it can't be—well, it's about time Wednesday learned to live in the real world."

The gestation period went along pretty well, with not much more than fairly usual complications. The obstetrical specialist Jim Rudd had suggested was as intrigued as anyone else by Wednesday's oddities, but he told them that the pregnancy was following a monotonously normal course and that the foetus seemed to be developing satisfactorily and completely on schedule.

Wednesday became fairly cheerful again. Outside of her minor fears, Fabian reflected, she was an eminently satisfactory and useful wife. She didn't exactly shine at parties where they mingled with other married couples from Slaughter, Stark and Slingsby, but she never committed a major faux pas either. She was, in fact, rather well liked, and, as she obeyed him faithfully in every particular, he had no cause at all for complaint.

He spent his days at the office handling the dry, minuscule details of paper work and personnel administration more efficiently than ever before, and his nights and weekends with a person he had every reason to believe was the most *different* woman on the face of the Earth. He was very well satisfied.

Near the end of her term, Wednesday did beg for permission to visit Dr. Lorington just once. Fabian had to refuse, regretfully but firmly.

" It's not that I mind him not sending us a congratulatory telegram or wedding gift, Wednesday. I really don't mind that at all. I'm not the kind of man to hold a grudge. But you're in good shape now. You're over most of your silly fears. Lorington would just make them come alive again."

And she continued to do what he said. Without argument, without complaint. She was really quite a good wife. Fabian looked forward to the baby eagerly.

One day, he received a telephone call at the office from the hospital. Wednesday had gone into labour while visiting the obstetrician. She'd been rushed to the hospital and given birth shortly after arrival to a baby girl. Both mother and child were doing well.

Fabian broke out the box of cigars he'd been saving for this occasion. He passed them around the office and received the felicitations of everybody up to and including Mr. Slaughter, Mr. Stark and both Mr. Slingsbys. Then he took off for the hospital.

From the moment he arrived in the Maternity Pavilion, he knew that something was wrong. It was the way people looked

at him, then looked quickly away. He heard a nurse saying behind him : " That must be the father." His lips went tight and dry.

They took him in to see his wife. Wednesday lay on her side, her knees drawn up against her abdomen. She was breathing hard, but seemed to be unconscious. Something about her position made him feel acutely uncomfortable, but he couldn't decide exactly what it was.

" I thought this was going to be the natural childbirth method," he said. " She told me she didn't think you'd have to use anesthesia."

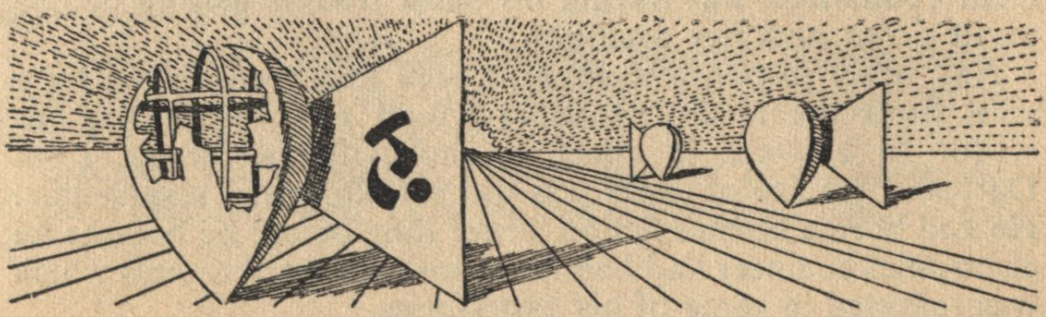
" We didn't use anesthesia," the obstetrician told him. " Now let's go to your child, Mr. Balik."

He let them fit a mask across his face and lead him to the glass-enclosed room where the new-born infants lay in their tiny beds. He moved slowly, unwillingly, a shrieking song of incomprehensible disaster building up slowly in his head.

A nurse picked a baby out of a bed that was off in a corner away from the others. As Fabian stumbled closer, he observed with a mad surge of relief that the child looked normal. There was no visible blemish or deformity. Wednesday's daughter would not be a freak.

But the infant stretched its arms out to him. " Oh, Fabian, darling," it lisped through toothless gums in a voice that was all too terrifyingly familiar. " Oh, Fabian, darling, the strangest, most unbelievable thing has happened !"

—**William Tenn**



TIME OUT

Gatherings of science fiction writers, artists and publishers are usually called 'Conventions'—at which many strange and humorous events take place. Here is a story centred round one such meeting—Mr. Wilson evidently being inspired by one of the many conclaves he has attended in the past.

FOR TOMORROW

By RICHARD WILSON

Darius Dale banged on the speaker's table with his empty highball glass in an attempt to bring the Omega Club to order. He didn't have instant success because many of the members and guests had some holiday cheer in their glasses and others were at the bar getting refills. It was the Omega's Club annual Christmas party and Darius, the chairman of the entertainment committee, was having his usual trouble getting people to sit down and pay attention.

Any other responsible scientist who had been visited by a man from the future probably would not have asked his visitor to become, in effect, a vaudeville performer. But Darius at the age of thirty was not yet altogether responsible. He had been a science fiction writer long before he became an electronics engineer and had never lost the prankishness which was reflected in some of his best stories.

And the Omega Club—that amorphous collection of science fiction writers, editors, illustrators, agents and just plain readers—was Darius' first love.

Besides, it was the Christmas season, which meant a skit for the Christmas party. Darius Dale, perennial chairman in charge of the skit, had been procrastinating this year and had prepared nothing. His big worry had been a rush rewrite of the last two chapters of his new magazine serial—the first instalment of which had already been published. It just happened to be a time travel yarn. So, when the time traveller made his appearance in Darius' writing room one evening in late November, the nimble Dale mind quickly worked out several ways in which the visitor might be helpful.

The hubbub of the Christmas party showed no signs of abating.

Darius shrugged and put his glass down. He buttoned his double-breasted coat around his generous middle and killed time by telling his story about the old maid and the Martian. Groans and cries of protest came from those already seated but Darius only leered at them and went on with the story, varying it here and there from last year's version and dragging in the names of prominent club members as incidental characters.

Darius finally reached the punch line—" ' By Deimos and Phobos,' the Martian said, rubbing his eyes in the morning light, ' two more !' "—and was rewarded with boos and jeers, as was customary.

By now the last straggler had seated himself. The straggler was James Overholt Edison, the science fiction editor who signed his editorials "—joe," but who instead had come to be known to his readers as Old Overholt. He was pushing thirty-five, at most, and generally was sober.

" I missed your story, Darius," Edison said pleasantly, stirring his fresh drink with a forefinger. " Would you mind repeating it ?"

" Gladly, Joe," said Darius, baring his teeth in a simulated smile. " I'll have it on your desk next week, at my usual three and a half cents a word."

" Frankly," said Edison, " I'd be happier to see the re-do of the time-travel yarn. The printer's having an ulcer. Just like mine."

" I didn't think this was a business meeting," said Walter Crown, the agent, " but if it is I want my ten per cent, Darius."

" My right arm up to the elbow you've already got, Walter," said Darius. " How much more ?"

" As much more as it takes to make the next payment on his Cadillac," said Edison. " That's how much."

" It's only a Buick," Walter Crown protested good-naturedly, " and I'm its sole support."

" Buick-schmuick," cried Darius Dale banging on the table again. " The meeting will come to order and be entertained. The feature of the evening, ladies and gentlemen, an act guaranteed to thrill and astound—not to mention astonish and amaze—has been obtained for your delectation at great trouble and expense."

" How much expense ?" demanded Jennie Rhine, the glamour-girl secretary-treasurer of the Omega Club.

" At ease !" cried Darius. " Hardly as much as you get for one of your illustrations, Jennie. Fifty dollars. I say it at the risk of embarrassing our guest, whose name . . ."

" Fifty dollars !" Jennie shrieked theatrically. She shook her dark head in dismay. " And just when I thought the books might balance."

" A little dignity, please !" bellowed Darius. " Let's not drag the good name of the Omega Club through these sordid financial gutters. Our many distinguished guests," he said, looking around the large room through his thick horn-rims, " include, I have been told, a *Life* photographer and, for better or worse, one of the brighter young men from *The New Yorker*."

" Gosh-wow-boyoboy !" quoted a thirsty member who was on his way to the bar.

" That was *Time*, George," Darius said. " And why don't you come back and sit down quietly before they reprint that precious little slander. George ! If you insist on going out there, bring me one, too—Scotch and water."

George Granger, the novelist, nodded and kept going barwards.

" Let's get the show on the road, Darius," Edison said and began to stamp his feet. Others joined in, beating out the slow rhythm of an impatient audience.

A portly figure stood up and went " Ahem " and " If you please " until the stomping ceased.

" Not now, Zorry," said Darius hopefully.

" I insist," said Zoroaster Ramm, the critic and anthologist. " I feel I must, under the circumstances, acquaint our new friends here tonight with the true aim of the Omega Club, lest they wrongly conclude that it is merely the gathering of juvenile science fictionists and—and—"

" Drunken crackpots." George Granger supplied the description as he ambled back from the bar and handed Darius his drink. " Or maybe cracken drunkpots, Zorry. You admonish 'em, keed."

Zoroaster Ramm smiled with what he imagined to be indulgence and waited for the laughter to die down. " It was not my intention to admonish anyone. I'll leave that to the distinguished editor of Admonishing Stories." He waited for a laugh of his own, but the only response was a polite smile from Edison, the editor of *Astonishing Science Fiction.* " However, at the risk of boring you—"

" Hear ! Hear !" cried a voice from behind him.

"—at the risk of restating something already known to many here," Zoroaster Ramm plowed on, " science fiction is not an adolescent hobby, but a finger pointing the way to the future, the harbinger of the stars, so to speak; the first faltering step—"

" Thank you very much, Zorry," Darius said quickly, looking at his watch. " I'm sure we all agree. And now for the feature presentation of the evening, which happens to be not the finger to the future, as Mr. Ramm so putly apt it—aptly put it—what's in this drink, George ?—but the finger *from* the future, together with all the rest of him . . . Mr. Future himself !"

Darius Dale gestured with a flourish to the emptiness beside him on the speaker's platform.

Nothing happened, except that Zoroaster Ramm sat down regretfully, looking hurt.

Darius looked at his watch again, held it up to his ear, shrugged and asked : " Who's got the right time ?"

He got a dozen different answers, mingled with catcalls.

" Well, anyhow," he said, " at ten-thirty, whenever that is, Mr. Future will make his appearance from the year 2017."

Even as he spoke there was a shimmering in the air next to him and a whining hum. The shimmering became the outline of a man—a tall man wearing silvery shorts and some sort of

metallic harness over his bronzed skin, with a heavy cloak thrown back from his shoulders.

Then everything coalesced in an instant and the man stood there, solid, but blinking and looking a bit pale in the forehead. Handsome, too, Jennie Rhine observed, and not *too* young.

Mr. Future's cloak was the last thing to stop shimmering and even after it did the whining hum continued in an undertone as it gradually faded away.

The applause was thunderous—certainly more than Darius had hoped for. Of course they thought it was a trick, but it was gratifying to know they considered it a good one.

The man with the cloak blinked around in the direction of Darius Dale and said, " Hello, Papa."

" I'm not your father, Dare," Darius said. " I'm your great-grandfather."

" I know," the other said. " Too long. Call you Papa."

" Okay," said Darius. " Let's make the introductions. Ladies and gentlemen—and George—I want you to meet Darius Dale IV, born March third, 1993, and therefore now twenty-four years old.

" He's travelled backwards through time from the year 2017, where he's attending Havard business school prior to retiring. I'll explain that in a moment. His cloak—I guess you heard it hum—is the secret of it all. I'll explain that, too, as far as I can. But in the meantime there might be a question or two among you. Yes, Joe ?"

James Overholt Edison stood up and straightened his grin into a serious expression.

" *Astonishing Science Fiction*, in the spirit of the evening," he said, " will gladly pay one thousand dollars for an exclusive five thousand word ASF fact article by Mr. Future, with options."

" Noted," said Darius. " You'll have a chance to back down later, but you'd be getting a bargain if Dare were interested. Walter ?"

" He'll need an agent," said Walter Crown. " And seeing how he's a relative of yours I'll take him on without reading fees."

" Very generous," said Darius. " George ?"

" I'll buy him a drink, if he drinks."

" Thanks," said Darius Dale IV before his great-grandfather could speak for him. " I'll take it."

" Time travelling must be dry work," George Granger said. " Come on to the bar, son. Let's get away from the shop talk."

" Can't now. Papa."

" Papa be damned," said George. " Where you come from, Papa Darius is a moldering corpse."

" Corpse my time machine !" protested Darius. " In the year 2017 I'm only ninety-four. Dare told me. Stout as an oak, too, I might add."

" This presupposes that Darius the Fourth has visited you before," said Jennie Rhine. " As long as we're pretending to be gullibilized you might as well give us the story from the beginning."

While Darius launched into an account of how Darius IV had discovered the time warp and learned to take advantage of it, the young man from the future sidled off and joined George Granger at the bar. After a while, as Darius the elder began to get cute and repetitious, Jennie went to join them.

" Hi, Jen," George welcomed her. " Old Darius still spellbinding 'em ?"

" Well, he does have a way with him," she said. " Ergo, it's obvious that they think he's the show and young Dare here is just a prop."

Dare, his cloak slung over his arm, smiled shyly and signalled the bartender to make a drink for Jennie. The bartender was taking Dare and his futuristic costume in stride. As an old-timer at Omega Club parties, he'd also seen Men from Mars, head-bandaged and goggled Invisible Men and Bug-Eyed Monsters.

George said: " The way you talk, Jen, a person would think you had some doubts about it all being a hoax."

" I keep an open mind," Jennie Rhine said. " What's yours like ?"

" I'm on Dare's side," George said. " A man ought to know where he's from. Besides, he talks different and has a different viewpoint on things. Alien, sort of; the same way I imagine I'd be if I barged in on my great-grandfather's time. Forgive me for talking about you as if you were the lamp-post, Dare."

" Nyun," said Dare.

" That's one of the things, Jen, that ' nyun.' Obviously it means ' Don't mention it,' or ' That's okay,' but it's a word we don't have—just the way great-grandpa didn't have ' take off ' for ' leave.' That's a characteristic of his conversation, generally. All of his phrases are clipped. Laconic is the word for Darius the Fourth."

The bartender handed Jennie her drink and she flashed a smile at him and let it continue to glow as she turned to Dare.

" That's pretty slim proof," she said, "—meaning no disrespect to 2017."

" Oh, there's lots more," George said. " For instance, I know who's going to win the Kentucky Derby next year, and the Rose Bowl game, and how the heavyweight championship is going to go, and how long it'll be before the other party gets the Presidency again—things like that. Very useful stuff, moneywise."

" Hmm," Jennie mused. " But nothing you can check up right away. And even then it could be no more than good guesswork."

" That's true," George said. " But somehow it's not *what* Dare says, it's the odd ways he says it that has me more than half convinced he's one of Darius' science-fiction yarns come true. Now you take his accent—"

" Love to," she said. " Except that at the rate you're using yours, his never gets a chance. Maybe Dare and I should go sit at one of the tables and talk while you go in and heckle Darius. Come on, Mr. Future, and tell me what my great-granddaughter has been doing with herself lately."

George took the hint and exited, first warning the young man: " Beware this glamourpuss. Face-of-an-angel but heart-of-ice type."

" Nyun," said Dare, smiling.

" Meaning," Jennie Rhine called after George, " I don't believe a word of it."

Darius Dale was still going strong. George took a seat in the back row and listened.

". . . and since I can see you still think it's an elaborate gag I may as well tell you exactly what my great-grandson plans to do with his fifty-dollar fee. By a few judicious bets on long shots at the race track and by spreading smart money around at the ringside he'll soon have a tidy little sum to invest legitimately in a family trust. I guess you're all aware

what a few thousand invested in General Motors about the time of World War I would be worth today. Well, Darius IV has made notes from the *New York Times* over the next half century and his money doesn't come any smarter.

" Needless to say, I'll be investing money of my own right along with him. I'll be living quite comfortably for the rest of my life—but when Dare gets back to his own time he'll be a millionaire in the flick of an eye."

Darius had a lot more to say but he had become serious and his audience was getting restless.

He eased back into a lighter vein, told his story about the robot and the girls' finishing school, then stepped down from the platform. The audience applauded and began to drift out to the bar.

George Granger managed to corner Darius alone after a while and said :

" You're serious about this thing, aren't you, Darius ?"

Darius squinted through his glasses and said :

" What makes you think so, George ?"

" This and that. But if you are, you'd better go round up your boy. Our girl Jen has her hooks in him. I don't know why exactly, aside from the obvious fact that he's lady bait, but I have a feeling something's up."

" Where are they ?"

" Out in the bar, at a table."

Darius, looking concerned, headed that way with George at his heels.

" At what table, where ?"

" That's where they *were*," George said, pointing. But Zoroaster Ramm was sitting there now, talking earnestly to a squirming young writer.

The bartender remembered seeing Jennie and the entertainer go down the broad staircase, toward the coat room, he said. It had been a little while ago. The check room attendant said the girl and the entertainer gentleman had picked up her coat, and the doorman remembered putting them into a cab. The trail ended there.

Darius' cab waited while he pounded at the door of Jennie Rhine's apartment. There was no answer and the door was locked. Darius got back into the cab and gave the driver the address of Jennie's studio.

The studio was in a loft building in a section of the city that once had been bohemian. As Darius climbed the stairs he saw that there was a light under the door, and when he found the door unlocked he burst in.

The two of them were sitting on pillows on the floor in the glow of a Sears Roebuck space heater. Dare's cloak was folded neatly beside him. A bottle of wine and two glasses were sitting precariously on the shag rug between them. An easel was holding a bare canvas and there was a palette with fresh gobs of paint on it lying on top of an up-ended crate. Darius regarded the set-up with suspicious—Jennie rarely used oils.

Darius IV had the look of a conspirator on his face, but Jennie's expression blazed anger.

" Just what are you doing here ?" she demanded. " And have you forgotten there's a custom called knocking at the door ?"

Darius ignored her. " Dare," he said. " You'd better come with me."

Before the young man could speak, Jennie scrambled to her feet. She began to shove Darius in the direction of the door, whispering to him fiercely.

" Why don't you leave the kid alone ? He's done his job, making a spectacle of himself for you and your Omegans. Now let him relax a little. It's Christmastime, you know."

Darius stood his ground. Darius IV continued to sit crosslegged on the rug. He took a sip of wine and looked fixedly at the big toe sticking out of the end of his sandal.

" I don't like this little tete-a-tete," the older Darius said. " Why don't you pick on someone a little less innocent to relax with, Jen ?"

" Dare happens to be fond of me," she whispered back. " And I'll thank you to keep your long nose out of my affairs. After all, he's of age."

" Not in this century, he isn't," said Darius. " Now be a good girl and shoo him out."

" I'm not a good girl, as you well know, and I won't shoo him out. It just so happens that he's—well, he thinks he's in love with me and he's going to take me back with him. His cloak is big enough to take the two of us."

" So that's the game ?" Darius raised his voice. " I guess his fortune will be big enough, too ! I always knew you didn't have many morals, but I didn't think you were a gold digger."

Jennie's flashing palm put a ruby glow on Darius' cheek.

Dare got to his feet, alarmed now.

" Metter, Papa ?" he asked. " Matter, Jen ?"

Darius whirled on his great-grandson. " Did you promise to take this—this woman back to your time ?" he demanded.

" I—yes." Dare seemed to be holding a discussion with himself and then verbalizing its conclusion : " It's love."

" Love ! You must be crazy, son. Why, she's a good ten years older than you are. And you don't fall in love just like that !" He snapped his fingers.

Dare snapped his own fingers. He grinned. " Old fashioned," he said.

Darius waited, but that seemed to be Dare's complete argument.

Jennie smiled a maddening, victorious smile.

" I'm glad that's settled," she said. " Now, Papa, will you leave us love-birds alone ?"

Darius thought hard, his fictioneering mind seeking a denouement to this plot that was not of his own making.

" All right," he said finally. " But first I'd like to have a word with my great-grandson alone. Come, Dare."

He led the young man to the back of the studio and there, among a welter of old canvases, stacks of magazines and a plaster reproduction of Michelangelo's *David* he talked intensely and at some length.

Dare listened, politely at first, then seriously, and in the end he was shooting unhappy glances at Jennie Rhine.

She was nervously kicking the leg of the space heater when the two finished their conversation. Darius was looking unpleasantly smug.

" Well ?" she said tentatively.

Young Dare was coming toward her with his arms outstretched. She shot a puzzled look at Darius, but then smiled at Dare and went to him, her face turned up to his.

But Dare didn't gather her in his arms. He took both her hands, squeezed them gently and kissed her respectfully on the cheek. Then he picked up his cloak and went to the door. He opened it, paused, sighed heavily and said :

" Bye, Mama."

Then he was gone.

" The taxi's right in front of the door," Darius called after him. " I'll be with you in a minute."

Jennie Rhine remained thunderstruck for about ten ticks of a grandfather clock. The slamming of the street door below brought her out of it.

" Mama !" she screamed. " Mama ? What did you tell him ?"

" Merely," said Darius smoothly, " that you and I, Jennie dear, had once had a little affair, of which there was issue. I also said that because you showed no interest in the child, I had taken it and was bringing it up in my name, as Darius Dale, Junior."

Jennie Rhine was having trouble with her larynx.

" I think I might have added," Darius said complacently, " that therefore if he ran away with you he'd be eloping with his own great-grandmother."

Jennie got her voice back with a rush.

" You filthy liar !" she yelled. " You deliberately told him a thing like that ! Why, it's unthinkable ! And he believed that I— With *you* ? You fat . . ."

" Of course he believed it," Darius said. " I've had a long career of making the improbable sound convincing. At any rate it quite dampened his ardour."

No one ever saw Dare again.

Darius Dale vanished a few days later—but not before he had placed a large number of parlays on long shots, put all his winnings into a bet on the Rose Bowl game and then took a suitcase full of cash to an investment broker in Wall Street.

The Missing Persons Bureau later established that the last person to see Darius had been the cab driver who took him from Wall Street to his apartment in East 61st Street.

Astonishing Science Fiction failed to receive the rewrite of the last two chapters of Darius' time-travel serial. Nor was the magazine able to find the original ending among Darius' effects.

The editor, after communing with his ulcer, printed the serial unfinished and at the end of it ran a factual note in which all the circumstances of the author's disappearance were set forth. The note was attested to by Darius' fellow author, George Granger, Walter Crown, the agent, and the editor,—joe himself. A notary public witnessed their signatures.

A few readers of *Astonishing Science Fiction*, when the issue appeared, wrote to say they thought it was a pretty clever way to end a time-travel yarn and that they were looking forward to seeing more of Darius Dale's work. The majority of those who wrote, however, were outraged at what they considered a cheap editorial trick and demanded that a proper ending be printed in the next issue.

Life and *The New Yorker* decided it was a publicity stunt unworthy of their attention and the newspapers ignored Darius' disappearance on the same grounds.

But a surprising number of members of the blase Omega Club were almost entirely convinced that Darius Dale had left wrapped in his great-grandson's cloak for the year 2017 so he could be a millionaire at the age of thirty instead of ninety-seven.

—**Richard Wilson**

Fantasy fiction lends itself admirably to the light humorous touch of any writer who is not bound by the more stringent requirements of science fiction, yet it is seldom that we have an opportunity of including such a story in our pages. Author Edward Mackin, new to our pages, can apparently fill such a requirement admirably.

CRIFFLE-SHAPED

By EDWARD MACKIN

" Belov," said Emilio, removing his chef's hat, and wiping the sweat from his fat brow, " for once I am glad to see you. My oven is what you call on the blink. You fix it, and I fix you a meal. Okay ?"

The nerve of the man. Asking me, a qualified cyberneticist, and the best in the business, to fix a lousy oven ! Give me a computer, and I'm your man. You can kick it to pieces, my friends, and old Belov will re-wire it blindfold; but one must draw the line somewhere. There is the dignity of the profession to consider.

I took three seconds out for consideration.

" Okay," I said.

What did you expect ? I was starving.

It was the thermostat, of course. I didn't need to look at it to know that; but, in these hard times, one must make the most of one's opportunities.

" Emilio, old friend," I said, after a quick glance round, " the whole place needs re-wiring. It's dangerous. The way it is someone is likely to get electrocuted. I'll do the whole

job for twenty-five pounds plus the cost of material. That's just because you are an old and valued friend, and I shouldn't like anything to happen to you."

" Okay," said Emilio, agreeably. " You re-wire it. That is twenty-five pounds off what you owe me. It is nearly a month now since I see the colour of your money. All the time you eat off the slate."

It wasn't that urgent, the dog !

" I'll just fix your oven," I said.

Half-an-hour later I was sitting down to a three-course lunch, and taking both arms to a huge porterhouse steak, cooked as only Emilio can cook it. He is the finest cook in the world, and probably the heaviest. When he walks across the floor the customers have to hold on to their soup.

I missed my mouth twice with a forkful of meat as it shook to his elephantine tread. Finally, I replaced it on the plate, and looked up, warily. Emilio was bending over me with a skillet knife in his hairy fist.

" Don't blame me," I said, quickly. " If you'd get yourself a decent oven instead of that archaic incinerator . . ."

" The oven is all right," he told me, " and it should better stay that way, Hek Belov." He pointed to the kitchen with his knife, and hissed at me : " What you think this is ? Your private office ? Someone wants you on the video-phone."

" A lady ? "

" Not a lady."

" Then it must be the police. Tell them I have a complete answer to the charge, whatever it is, and anyway I just left."

They are awfully hard on people these days. All I did was employ some ingenuity in the course of obtaining a little credit. One must live.

" No, no, no !" said Emilio, excitedly. " It is not the police. They phone this morning. It is a job, I think."

It turned out to be the manager of an automated plant. A single-handed job, which produced watch-style, wrist radios at the rate of 1,000 an hour.

" I'm in trouble," he said.

" I'm not surprised," I told him. " That's an awful lot of wrist radios. Perhaps you'd like to try something else ? What do you say to a wrist video ? I could fix you a new control tape, and re-locate the assembling units. I would

have to invent the stinking thing first, of course, and that would come rather expensive. Shall we say three thousand pounds?"

" Our market is an expanding one," he said, icily. He stroked his bristling grey moustache, and thought a bit, his bent, bald head like a glistening egg. " Look here," he said, at last, " you had better come over. I can't explain properly over the vid. Take an air-taxi to Grudge Hill Trading Estate. The firm is *Gribble Electronics*. I'll expect you in fifteen minutes."

The manager paid the taxi off and introduced himself.

" My name is Bellis," he said. " John Bellis."

He extended a sinewy hand.

I shook it, perfunctorily.

" What's your trouble ?" I asked him.

" Come and look at the line," he said. " You'll be able to see for yourself."

He had a clear line, and had to switch on production. Some of the things that came off that line were incredible, monstrous ! The outraged inspection unit took one look at them and stopped production.

I removed a dome-like affair made up of a network of wrist-radio parts, and handed it to Bellis.

" Give that to the Board of Directors with my compliments," I told him. " I just want them to see what I am up against."

I started in to check every feed line for freak variations; but I couldn't find any. Just the same they were there in the output. We ran the thing without the tape. That should have meant a clean line. The manager nearly wept when he saw what the transfer belts bore along. It was disgusting.

" It's gone mad !" he said. " It's a kind of magnetic delirium tremens !"

He looked hollow-eyed.

" My friend," I said, gently. " In moments like these it is as well to remember old Occam's dictum : ' Never magnify entities beyond necessity.' It is a sheet-anchor for the mind. It prevents you drifting up the wall."

" Maybe you're right," he said. " I'll leave you to it."

He walked slowly away, still clutching the thing I had fished off the production line.

I checked the tape for accuracy, and for marginal drift. It was okay. I ran a blank tape through, after clearing the

line, and examined it for magnetic impregnation. It was there all right; but very slight. This meant that the pick-up unit was receiving its impulses from some other source. But when I checked around the reader it became abundantly clear that the source of the interference was in the unit itself.

After four hours of trying to crack the problem I gave up temporarily, and went in search of a video-phone. Food was what I required, and there was only one way to get it. I found a vid in the programming and tape-information room, and I put a piece of paper over the scanner before switching on. Then I rang Emilio's restaurant.

" 'Ullo," he said. " What is wrong with your scanner. I can't see you."

" It must be your screen," I told him, speaking with a nasal intonation that made me sound like an American. It was the nearest I could get to the manager's adenoidal tones. " But never mind. I'd like a three-course luncheon sent over to Gribble Electronics. You know where it is, don't you? Grudge Hill Estate. Send it air-taxi, and make the bill out to Mr. Bellis. I'll be over later to settle with you."

" You sound as though you have a cold," said Emilio, suspiciously. " What name did you say? Trellis?"

" Bellis," I told him, forgetting the intonation. " I want your special three-course with all the trimmings, and also a large cherry pie." I could hardly keep my mouth from watering. " Don't forget the cherry pie," I adjured him.

" Belov !" he shouted. " I might have known."

I removed the paper from the scanner, and forced a smile.

" It was a joke," I explained. " You know me, Emilio, old friend."

" Yes, I know you !" he bellowed, so that the screen danced. " You are a rogue. and a snake-in-the-grass, biting the hand what feeds it. You want I should go bankrupt? I will not allow you even a slice of bread until you pay me what you owe me."

" Old friend," I pleaded. " This is very exhausting work. Supposing I drop dead through undernourishment. It will be your fault."

" Then I pay for your cremation," he said. " At least I will be able to see my money go up in smoke."

" You fat food-spoiler !" I told him, vehemently. (May Heaven forgive me !) " I hope your oven explodes, and all your customers die of food poisoning. You've ruined *my*

digestion. I get the belly-ache whenever I think of your lousy restaurant !"

He laughed.

" You great, fat pig !" I said, and switched off.

It was the only thing for a gentleman to do.

But the food arrived just the same. A great man, Emilio. Generous to a fault. And what cherry pie he makes ! He is assured of his place in Heaven on that score alone. I only wish I could pay him for it.

I'd finished my meal, and I was sitting by the computer, smoking a cigarette, and trying to puzzle out just what could be wrong with the pick-up unit in the process controller when the manager walked in.

" What goes ?" he asked, without much enthusiasm.

" You want a replacement for the pick-up unit," I told him.

He shook his head.

" The firm that made that computer and its ancillary controller went bankrupt twelve months ago. We might get a replacement if we advertised; but how long would we have to wait ? No, that's no use. If there's anything wrong with that unit you'll have to repair it. You do know what's wrong with it, don't you ?"

I snapped my teeth at him.

" Of course I know what's wrong with it," I said. " My friend, you've got yourself a practical man—not a smart-alec figure fiend. I have this problem taped. Don't worry about that. I want fifty pounds down, and ten-shillings an hour. I know precisely what's wrong. It will take me three days to rectify it."

" You'll be lucky to get a tenner out of Gribble," he said. " Three days, eh ? Gribble won't like that. Do you really know what's wrong with it ?"

I put my hat on. I hate people who doubt my word.

" I'll see you tomorrow," I said. " I've had enough for one day."

" Gribble will be over tomorrow," he told me. " He's busy at the moment with some new project, calculating the possible market and so on. We may have to switch from wrist radios to this, whatever it is."

" Good. Whatever it is you can rely on me absolutely. All he has to do is pay me in advance. My brain works smoother that way—I'm not oppressed by fears of starvation.',

" Gribble," said the manager, carefully, " is a scrawny, yellowed misanthrope. A stinkwort. He hasn't bought a new suit since he stopped growing, and he stopped growing over forty years ago. He's so mean that he practically lives on free samples. I wish you luck, that's all."

My stomach sagged.

I get the damndest jobs, somehow, and the mangiest employers.

Climbing the stairs to my room I was still giving the problem of the unwanted impulses some considerable thought; so much so that I came face to face with Mrs. Stacks, my exacting landlady, before I had realised she was waiting for me. Her hatchet features had an edge on them. She was frowning.

I knew why.

" To-morrow, for certain, dear lady," I said. " I hope your corns are better. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get to my room."

I pushed past her, slipped into my apartment, and shut and locked the door almost in one movement. I'd had lots of practice. She yelled at me through the keyhole; like one possessed. She has a mercenary soul, that woman. A miserable three weeks rent is all I owe, and I am threatened with eviction, and ultimate damnation if one is to heed the old harridan.

It is enough to make one almost despair of humanity. All some people think about is money. Doesn't she know, I ask her, that it is possible to have too much money? There is no answer, only a stiffled scream, and the sound of heavy breathing. I leave her to her near-apoplexy, and throw myself on the bed to think again about the errant nature of electronic impulses; but all I can think about is money!

I was no nearer a solution the next morning. In fact, I hadn't a clue. I washed, dressed, and went over to the service hatch. Dialling *kitchen* I asked for bacon and mushrooms. It wasn't long before a plate slid out of the food lift. It had a note on it; but no breakfast. The note said: " *For Mr. Belov's attention. This is not an institution. Pay up or get out. I am having the lock changed on your door today, just in case. Yours respectfully, Mrs. E. Stacks.*"

Respectfully!

" *Dear Emma,*" I scribbled on the back of it, " *I find your note very hurtful after all we have been to each other. Your*

ever-loving Hek." I put it back on the plate, and sent it down with the food lift. It would give the kitchen staff something to talk about. I went out of the window and down the fire escape. I didn't want to meet Mrs. Stacks just then.

Passing *Schmid's While-U-Wait Tailoring—60-Seconds Service*, I thought of Wolfgang Schmid, one of the early automationists. His 'thinking lathe' had shaken the twentieth century industrialists. Their steam-driven brains rattled in their rusty skulls, and they turned him down one after the other.

What can you make of a machine that works to music? The inventor takes a flute, and plays it. The machine works in rhythm to the melody. The raw metal is turned and fashioned to the tone scales of the tune. Then the inventor explains that endless, and precise, duplication of any required piece is possible once the Impression Regulator has made its tactile scansion through the machine tool, and recorded the rhythm on a steel strip.

Some of them were sick men after that, of course. Frightened men. They went home and belted their wives, and one of them cut his throat. So the tale has been passed down to us—slightly exaggerated, I suppose—but Schmid finally made it with the aid of a far-sighted French industrialist.

He was one of the pioneers of automation. One of the two men most revered to-day. Sargrove is the other. You can tell they're revered. They have three police officers always on duty to keep people from writing rude things on their statues in the Hall of Achievement.

I was thinking about these things when the answer came to me in a blinding flash. I lost no time, of course. I took an air-taxi to Gribble's Electronics, and hared into the manager's office followed by the pilot, who seemed to be under the impression that I was trying to bilk him.

"Here, Bellis," I said, without stopping, "pay this fellow, will you? I've got the answer, I think."

I went through the office and into the factory, leaving the manager slightly bewildered, and the pilot demanding payment.

Five minutes later I had a pair of crystal earphones on the output end of the Electronic Master Brain. By this time Bellis was trying to break in. I'd locked him out. I felt I couldn't be bothered with him at this stage.

I had to reduce the volume quickly, because what I was

listening to was the ultimate in musical noise. It was *criffle*, or co-riffle as it is sometimes called. Yes, it was that combination of old-time skiffle, and 'concrete' music that has the youngsters by the ears just now. It may be "Fission, man, fission!" and "Real jangle-juke!" to the Cavs and Doxies; but it is just a pain in the neck to me.

I let Bellis in.

"Come and listen to the pretty music," I said.

"Now look, Belov . . ." he began; but I jammed the crystal plugs in his ears, and he stopped in mid-sentence.

"What the hell's that?" he asked, and pulled the earphones out.

"Music," I told him. "Get beamed in, will you, Cav. Don't you recognise criffle when you hear it?"

"I don't care what you call it," he said. "It's not music."

"Let me put you straight on this, my friend," I said. "Basically, music is a series of sounds, melodious or otherwise, which occupy a pre-determined period on a length of hi-fi tape. This sells at an average retail price of one penny per foot. Consequently, there is hardly anything that *isn't* music. I know. I've been into it. You are listening to big business."

"Never mind that, Belov. Just tell me what goes on. Why the music—if you can call it music."

"Because music happens to be your trouble. To the machine mind electrical impulses are just electrical impulses, no matter how they originate. Ever heard of Wolfgang Schmid and his musical lathe? Well, you've got something similar here—a musical workline. That pick-up head has an oxidised surface somewhere, acting as a rectifier, or detector. Somehow the coils are picking up broadcast sound—a harmonic, perhaps. It's as simple as that.

"All we do now is strip the head, clean the oxidised surface, and screen the whole caboodle. No more criffle, and no more monstrosities. Gribble will be that delighted he'll make you a partner. Let's get to work."

Three hours later the line was in normal operation, and Bellis invited me out to lunch. Lunch included a half-bottle of champagne. We felt we had reason to celebrate. We were happy men.

"I'll vid Gribble when we get back, and give him the glad tidings," said the manager. "It should make the old grab-all happy. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't pay you."

I thought it likely at that.

When we got back Bellis went down on his hands and knees, and proceeded to look under the machinery, and in all sorts of odd corners. Finally, he gave it up and said he thought it would do.

"I gave it a good going over last week with the electrostatic cleaner," he said. "I have to watch it with Gribble. It isn't the dust he worries about, it's spiders, or spiders' webs. He's got a thing about them."

"We've all got our phobias," I said, agreeably. "Me—I'm just afraid of starvation. Some night I wake up chewing the sheets."

Gribble was a tall, thin, shabbily-dressed lamp-post of a man in his late sixties. He had a quick glance round the place, and then peered at me from under his heavy brows.

"Now, Mr. Belov," he began, "I must settle with you. I'm very pleased, of course, that you succeeded in locating the fault; but we are re-tooling in a couple of days—going over to video recorders—and that is, you will appreciate, a very very expensive business. Consequently, I will have to cut down on the incidentals. My manager has just accepted a five-per-cent salary cut." He paused and looked at Bellis, who nearly choked. "In the circumstances I think five guineas a reasonable return for your efforts. We don't want to break the firm, eh, Mr. Belov, eh, eh?"

He smiled, ingratiatingly.

I picked up a hammer, and went over to the computer. Bellis grabbed my arm just in time, and I saw little beads of sweat appearing on Gribble's forehead. He passed a trembling hand over his face.

"Oh," he mumured, "you damned vandal!"

He dragged his cheque book out, and scribbled in it.

"Here, you bandit," he said, brokenly. "Take this, and get the hell out of my sight!"

I took the cheque, and examined it carefully. It was for fifty pounds.

"Thank you," I said, with quiet dignity, "you miserable, cheese-paring, grasping old ruffian!"

I was taking no chances with a character like Gribble. I went round to the bank right away, and asked for cash. The clerk examined the cheque in stony silence, and then handed it back.

" This a joke ?" he asked, frowning. " There's nothing on this cheque."

He was right. The writing had vanished. Clever, clever Gribble ! I got him on the vid without any trouble. He grinned at me, and his long features looked almost human.

" Did you forget something, Mr. Belov ?" he asked.

" Yes," I said. " I forgot your sub-human antecedents. When this universe was fabricated, Gribble, and all the strange and diverse creatures were put down on all the little worlds throughout it, Heaven was left with a heap of dung to dispose of; but suddenly it got up and walked away. Your ancestory dates from then. I should like you to know," I added, warming up, " that if I don't get my money I shall take great pleasure in punching you right on the whiskers, you scummy shylock!"

" Your five guineas is in the post," he said, evenly. " You should receive it to-morrow."

Five guineas ! I could hardly believe my ears. The vid went dead, and I staggered away, and sat down on a nearby step, which promptly took me up three flights to a tonsorial artist's establishment. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I succeeded in convincing the pink-bearded, and purple-headed barber that I wasn't interested in having my hair permed, fuzzed up, or dyed in any one of half-a-hundred shades. I didn't even want it cut. Competition is fantastic these days, and there are traps everywhere for the unwary.

Something the manager had mentioned kept running through my mind : ". . . spiders and spiders' webs. He's got a thing about them."

His Achilles heel ! He was wide open to fear, and the way I saw it Belov could cash in after all. Oh, yes. A dirty trick, maybe; but one has to live.

Gribble's private address was in the vid directory, and I despatched a small packet via postal tube straight into his apartment. I made no mention of the contents, because I had no wish to be charged with obtaining money by menaces. I merely asked after his health, and suggested that a cheque for fifty pounds, written in non-vanishing ink, would be greatly appreciated by his humble servant, Hek Belov.

I succeeded in pacifying my landlady Mrs. Stacks, with promise of riches to come, and three out of the five guineas already received. The following day there was a slim packet

in the post for me from Gribble. I opened it, and something jumped out.

The accompanying note said: "*Fleas. These are not infected with anything very serious; but the next consignment will be if I get ten years for it. The hand of Thetis is on every-one's heel when you play that high.—Aloysius Gribble. P.S.—You will no doubt be pleased to hear that your little friends got away—damn you* !"

What could I do ? One must forgive a man with a classical education. There are so few of us left these days—the unspeakable swine !

But I hadn't finished with him yet. One thing still puzzled me. The wrist radio circuit—and something else. An unnecessary steel disc backed the tuning mechanism, and a pair of wires that seemed to be resting on a tiny coil beneath this were actually attached.

An hour later I vidded Gribble again.

" What the hell do you want," he demanded. (I think he was worn out looking for spiders). " You won't get another damned penny out of me, and I'm sacking my manager for employing you. If he knew his job properly he wouldn't have had to call in anyone."

" That's as may be," I said; " but it doesn't alter the fact that sub-threshold advertising is forbidden by law. The government has the monopoly—or didn't you know? That whisper, just below conscious hearing has a cumulative effect on the mind. It's a stinking way of hypnotising people into doing something they perhaps wouldn't do normally, such as buying your inferior products. I fed that whisper back through the audio amplifier in the wrist radio and at the moment it is shouting " Gribble's products can't be beaten " over and over again. There's a little disc that revolves when the radio is switched off . . ."

" You're unlucky," interrupted Gribble. He was grinning. " The Government issues licences for these things, or didn't *you* know ? I happen to have one; but it was a good try, and there'll be something in the post for you to-morrow."

There was. It was a summons to appear before a magistrate at three o'clock that afternoon. I was accused of stealing a wrist radio, the property of Gribble's Electronics.

There is no justice, my friends. Positively, there is no justice.

—Edward Mackin

John Kippax is beginning to line up a long list of successful short stories in Science Fantasy, *written in varying moods and concerning many off-trail themes. This time it is a parallel world idea—with interesting and unexpected results.*

SEND HIM VICTORIOUS

By JOHN KIPPAX

Herbert Cole was not paying any great attention to the B picture. He was worried, worried that he would never be able to break free from the ties of the university and fly with Edith Burrage to fresh fields and pastures new. Her husband was much older than she, and might die, but there seemed to be no great chance of it. Burrage *was* dead, but he still breathed, and seemed to resent the fact that Herbert Cole, only thirty-five, was a bright and up and coming man. True Herbert's hair was a little thin and his chin might have been stronger, but he had charm, hadn't he?

Herbert gazed at the screen. Quite a clinch they were in now. Edith didn't respond quite like that. What was the time? Twenty-past ten. He would be back at the university by a quarter to eleven. Funny, he had always imagined that the clocks in this place were round, but now he noticed that these were octagonal. He wished that Edith had come with him, but she was afraid of what people might say. He saw the couple in front, making use of every bit of the dark, and he sighed.

Now the picture was ending, and the hero and heroine had reached Shangri-La, or achieved Nirvana or something.

Crashing chords of brass and high screech of amplified violins brought the picture to its end.

There was a scramble to get out before the National anthem was played, but Herbert did not take part. That would never do. The roll of drums swelled from the speakers, and the accompanying picture flashed on the screen. Something new? Instead of the picture of the sovereign, there was the waving red banner with the golden lion on it. Herbert's knowledge of heraldry was negligible, and his knowledge of music not much better, so he stood with the audience while the National Anthem was being played. At least, he stood for the first four bars, approximately, then suddenly he was not quite so vertical as before.

He could not believe his ears. He shook his head and listened with the greatest possible. What tune were they playing? *He had never heard it before in his life* ! He rubbed his ears, shook his head, and shot covert glances round the cinema. People, ordinary people, were standing respectfully, not noticing that there was anything wrong. But there was ! Here was he, Herbert Cole, Ph.D., M.Sc., standing in a perfectly ordinary cinema in Jerningham in the heart of the English Midlands in the year of grace 1960. He had seen the usual sort of cinema show, and now he was . . . he was . . . Herbert felt his mind reeling. He wanted to shout out *LISTEN LISTEN* ! *CAN'T YOU HEAR IT*? *IT'S NOT WHAT IT SHOULD BE. SOMEONE'S PLAYING A SILLY JOKE* ! *FIRE THE PROJECTIONIST* ! *WHY DON'T YOU LAUGH*? . . . But nobody did laugh. It was the normal national anthem. Herbert was the only man in step, and all the others were wrong.

Ridiculous ! With a strange muscular quaking in his stomach, he heard the closing strains of the still totally unfamiliar tune and when the people began to leave he joined them, came down the steps with them chattering cheerfully around him, into the familiar bustling high street with its cars and buses. He stopped to look. Yes, familiar; it looked exactly the same, with its old buildings converted to new uses and its neon lights overlaying the ancient browns and greys.

For a few moments he stood and watched people passing, staring at their faces. Was it not possible therefore, that he had deceived himself? After all, he was a man with responsibilities; what with his teaching, and the watching brief over the little research department, and his own work with the new

Quadro-Cyclotron, *and* his twisted love life, it might well be that he had been overdoing it, and this was nature's way of telling him so. Of course they played the national anthem at the end of the performance ! How could he have been right and everybody else wrong ?

" Aberration," muttered Herbert, " Aberration, just temporary, that's all."

He decided to walk back to the university, and deep in complex thought, he went along the broad pavement. With Edith, there was no knowing what would happen; he realised that she wasn't the greatest catch in the world, either for him or her husband, (and he hadn't caught her yet, not by a long chalk), but she was pleasant enough, and for a man such as Herbert was, there would certainly be a better use for her private income than old Burrage could find. Browsing over the fate of that most important person, Herbert Cole, he hardly noticed how uncrowded the pavements had become as he neared the university buildings.

The entrance was one of white stone, with impressive ironwork gates, and a wide drive led up, poplar lined, to the impressive portico of the main building which housed the main administrative offices, the assembly hall, and so on, while behind lay the labs and lecture rooms and the comfortable apartments of the faculty. Further away still, in their own park, were the hostels for the students, a few of whom were strolling in the evening. Over all was the serene calm that all such institutions should possess.

Jerningham University could afford to possess it though; it had been built as a gift by its most famous son, Sir Joshua Shoe, the millionaire manufacturing chemist, and there had been no stint. His statue stood surrounded by ornamental gardens at the end of the walk, about fifty yards from the portico of the main admin building. As Herbert passed the statue, the moon came out from behind a cloud and added its cold lustre to the sodium lamps of the driveway, so that when Herbert looked up, casually, Sir Josh was limned in pale light against the uncertain clouds. Just for a moment, but that was enough.

It was as though a firebell had rung in the brain of Professor Cole, and he stood rooted to the spot, mouthing slightly and incoherently, the while he lifted his unprepossessing face to the changing sky. Yes, Josh was there all right, immortal in

white stone, with his top hat in his hand. That was the point; on every other occasion that Herbert had seen it, the statue was *wearing* a top hat.

This time there was not merely the muscular quaking of his stomach; added to that first undesirable sensation was now the impression that a colony of small eels were using his spine as a funfair slide. People passed him as he stood there in the gloom, waiting for the moon to come out again, waiting to assure himself that he had *not* seen this thing which, he was forced to admit, was almost dreadfully discernible without the help of the moon. But the moon obliged, and quite certainly, Sir Josh had his top hat in his hand.

An idea was beginning to dawn in the astute mind of Herbert Cole. He summoned his courage, and walked to the foot of the statue. There, in dignified Roman caps, was the inscription: THE FOUNDER OF JERNINGHAM UNIVERSITY, SIR JOSHUA XENOPHON SHOE. 1885-1950. Herbert read the dates; his stomach gave a lurch. The last time he had noticed them, they had read 1860-1935.

He clapped a hand to his head, and walked round the statue several times. He was going mad, quite definitely he was going mad. The momentary idea that had come to him was now gone, flung away in the concern he felt for himself. Herbert straightened, looked squarely at the university building in front of him and made up his mind. Then he walked forward to the portico. He was alert for any discrepancy, but here found none whatsoever. The steps up to the colonnade were eight—the right number. The tiled floor of the entrance hall was exactly the same, the pillars, the oak panelling, the broad stairway, all were as he had known them. He could hear voices here and there, and somewhere a radio was playing dance music.

Someone was coming down the stairs. He stopped and held his breath, and then gave a sigh of relief; it was Miss Pargeter, the principal's secretary, a broad-beamed, bespectacled and highly efficient person. She saw him as she passed into an office door and called, " Good evening Professor Cole."

Herbert stammered " Good evening," and could have swooned for joy. For a moment he thought that he would like to look up some of his colleagues, but he imagined that they would not welcome his presence at this hour, and so, heartened by meeting Miss Pargeter, and feeling that after

all, he was the person he thought he was, he passed out of the rear entrance and walked along the well-lighted pathway towards the apartment block. He let himself in, and took the lift to the fourth floor, got out and stood in the hall, doubt and veering irresolution once more in control of him.

Well; there was his apartment door. Now he would soon see. *Here there could be no doubt whatsoever* ! Feeling like a burglar he thrust his latchkey into the lock, and opened the door with extreme care. His mind was a maelstrom of possibilities.

And yet . . . just inside the door, with his hand in the act of withdrawing the key, another doubt struck him. What he had seen so far, inside the university building was exactly as he had known it, but the overall impression was different, somehow. There was an air of—not luxury—of *spaciousness* which he didn't seem to remember noticing before. It was as though instead of there having been two and a half million of old Sir Josh's money spent here, there had been, say, three and a half. Curious, very curious.

He passed through into his own study, not switching on any light until he got there. Silently, he flooded the cream and brown room with light, and stood looking at it. The curve of the bay window, the green and grey of the carpet, the book case, his desk and typewriter, the Da Vinci sketchbook reproductions on the walls, all seemed the same. Yes, it looked all right. He sat at his desk, gingerly, as though it might bite him. He remembered the letter that he had received from the publishers about his book *A Degree Course in Physics*. It should be here, saying that they hoped to put it out in September next.

He found it.

Dear Professor Cole,

We are happy to inform you that the work on your book, A University Course in Physics *has now begun, and that publication date will probably be next November.*

Yours faithfully,

Whirl squiggle loop

for Doram and Padgett Ltd. ! !

That was not the title of his book, neither was it the name of his publisher ! Feverishly, he began to scrabble in drawers, tumbling things about. He found a neat bundle of his past salary chits. He looked at the top one; he gasped. According

to this, Professor Cole's monthly salary, less tax, came to *five hundred and ten pounds* !

Hardly shuddering at all when another look at the publisher's letter told him that the year was nineteen eighty five, and not nineteen sixty, he was overwhelmed by a sudden desire to get away somewhere where he could think—where he *must* think—somewhere where he might feel a little more at peace than here. The lab, of course, especially one department of the lab he must see.

He left the apartment and took the lift down to the ground floor. He knew that the way to do this thing properly would be to investigate each one of the tutorial staff whom he knew well and see how soon the illusion would break down—one way or the other. And there was, of course, the more pressing point; being a physicist, he was not unaware of the various time theories; he knew Dunne, he knew Einstein, and the possibility of a parallel world was something that his scientist's training could by no means discount.

Outside the apartment block, moving slowly toward the administrative buildings to where another walk branched off in the direction of the labs, he considered carefully. Suppose, then he was in a parallel world. Some things were different, others were not. The time stream was at a slightly different point—a mere twenty-five years, but the *sequence and nature* of events within that stream seemed to be such that he could easily understand them. Indeed, it seemed that in this world at least, professors of physics were paid something approaching the salary they deserved ! But the key to the thing was not yet clear to him. At what point had he moved from the world he knew to this particular world ? And what was the cause ?

Now he stood stock still, and lit a cigarette. Most of the lights in the university buildings were out, and the wind blew little chill gusts and made the cigarette light his face with a faint daemonic glow; *at what point* ? His afternoon lecture to the fourth year group had finished at three o'clock. He had had a cup of tea, and had gone straight from the lecture room to the lab, where he had supervised a group on some practical work. Then he had gone to the cyclotron hangar, and had consulted with Borlass and Green, his assistants. He had worked on some calculations with them, and then he had gone up to the control point of the Quadro Cyclotron, the 'bridge' high above it, near the roof of the hangar, where, looking down on the great circular mass of the thing,

and with one's hand over the controls and the eye searching the battery of oscilloscopes and vision screens, one felt like—like God.

The cigarette burned his fingers and he stamped on it impatiently as he reconstructed the afternoon. He had switched on; Borlass and Green had reported to him regularly as the power mounted. He remembered thinking that it was time he classified and prepared a paper on certain side effects—possible side effects—of the machine, together with other tentative calculations that he had dithered with and even now carried a copy of in his notebook. They had taken the machine up to the safety limit, and then, feeling slightly dizzy for some reason, he had waited, and then closed it down. It had been as though the effect had come from the cyclotron itself. Now, wait a minute ! Perhaps this tied up with a few notes he had made . . .

Five minutes later, Herbert Cole, trembling slightly, had convinced himself that he had made the transition from the world he had been brought up in into a parallel world where things were, if anything, better from his point of view. Five hundreds and ten pounds a month ! There was something ! Of course, the standard of living might be different, the value of money might not be anything like the one he had known, but he could not help feeling that he would be better off here. He thought for a few seconds about Edith. She did love him so—not that he didn't deserve it, of course. He was quite worthy of the discreet affection which was all she dared show. Not the best female to pick, of course, but then . . .

The *click click* of high heels along the path which led by the apartment block aroused him from his meditations. It was a woman, swinging along with an easy grace. Even in the distant light of the lamps he could see that her walk was that of a self-confident creature who was of the sort to which Herbert Cole could not normally aspire. She passed by; or, rather, she was about to when she stopped. Startled, he saw her approach. He saw a beautiful oval face framed with dark hair, felt a whiff of heady perfume.

" Herbert, darling !" she whispered. " You waited for me !"

He found himself propelled backwards into the dark of the shrubbery, and before he could collect his wits he found him-

self in a warm embrace. No schoolgirl kiss, this, no please-do-you-think-we-should peck, but the healthy open-lipped welcome of a woman who had decided that Herbert Cole was her man and he'd better demonstrate his manhood. After one-and-a-half seconds of indecision, Herbert came up to scratch. Half-a-minute later, he came up for air; little lights danced round him, and his head was reeling. He held her close; she was ideal for it.

" Oh," she whispered. " Oh, darling !" After a moment he whispered, " Sweetheart," and wondered what her name was. Fool ! He *knew* ! " Edith," he murmured.

She asked, " Did you enjoy the picture ?"

He played up. " Yes," he said. " But I wished that you could have been there."

" I know," she replied, " but with the extra psycho people to take, I couldn't. Then of course, I had to accept coffee and sandwiches."

" Oh, quite," he said warily.

She sighed. " Being psycho lecturer isn't all honey for me, darling." She snuggled close.

" Er, no," he said. His mind was working rapidly; so this Edith, on this world, was a fine looking woman of thirty who was the psycho lecturer here. It made it even worse for him. This world seemed so much better than his own !

He said diffidently, " Won't your husband wonder where you are ?"

She jerked in his arms, and looked at him in wonderment. She laughed. " My *what* ? Oh—you mean Miss Tiffy. She'll be out of my rooms at the end of the week, when they've finished her redecoration." She hugged him. " Kiss me again Herbert !"

He did so, and very enjoyable it was. But as he osculated, his heart was bounding wildly, madly. He, Herbert Cole, could have this glorious woman, and his post at five hundred and ten pounds a month, if he chose to stay on this world ! He could have them ! They were his, *his*, HIS ! He had got here by the cyclotron, and he could stay, he could. What was there to stop him ?

The answer sent a shiver down his spine. Of course there was something to stop him; somewhere in this town of Jerningham, on this world, was a Professor Herbert Cole, the Herbert who, solid enough in this dimension, occupied the

rooms he had seen and was carrying on something lovely with the lady psychology lecturer of the university. Good for him; he was a lucky fellow. But that put Herbert-Cole-the-first right out in the cold.

" I shall have to go in now, dearest," she said. " I think I'd better walk ahead. If there's anyone in the lobby as I go through we mustn't be seen together."

" You go on then," said Herbert boldly, " when we get near the place. I'll see you outside again and we'll walk together."

She asked, with glowing eyes, " Do you think you should ?"

He put a front on it. " What do I care ?" he said.

" Darling," she whispered.

She walked ahead of him. Herbert was feeling reckless; if this was what she thought of him—well ! Why not just follow on, and see what happened ? The memory of Edith-in-that-other-world came to him, and mentally, he snarled at it and told it to go away.

Now she had momentarily disappeared from his sight, as she went into the rear entrance of the admin block. As he entered a moment later he heard excited voices, that of this new Edith, and of men.

" Impossible !" she was saying. " You will see for yourself !"

As Herbert entered, two men ran to him; he recognised them as the almost exact counterparts of Wall and Somers, two of his colleagues. They stood before him, darkly dressed, Wall short and tubby and Somers big and broad, like a policeman.

" Remarkable," chattered Wall.

" Incredible, but true," said Somers.

Herbert was baffled.

" We thought you were dead !" chirrupped Wall, " and we identified you as being dead !"

" There was an accident, in the boulevard at the corner," said Somers, " and we saw part of it, and the man who was killed looked exactly like you ! We told the police that it was you ! But here you are, safe and sound !"

" Remarkable !" beeped Wall, in his tiny voice.

Just how remarkable, they would never know, thought Herbert. It was like an answer to a prayer; here he was in this bright well-paid parallel world, free to take up the job suddenly vacated, free to look after (to be euphemistic) this

free and very attractive young lady, Edith—would her name be ?—Burrage. He *would* stay, why shouldn't he ? The hell with Edith, and that other world. This was the one for him, this, *this* was the life . . .

" Perhaps you would care to 'phone the hospital ?" said Wall.

" Oh, er, yes. I will." Herbert came back with a start. " Yes, of course, and thank you very much, gentlemen."

" We're very glad," said Somers.

They said goodnight; Herbert at once speeded after Edith whose form was outlined against the lights of the boulevard. He caught up with her, linked up their arms.

" You *bold* man," she said. " No," she added, as he tried to slow up, " I am not going to let you smooch me as though we were a couple of students. You will have to wait until—"

" Yes ?" he said eagerly.

" Until Miss Tiffy is out of my room, then you can—I mean, things may be a little different. And Herbert, isn't it a bit late for you ?"

He did not understand the question.

" Certainly not, I'll see you right home." Oh how bold and dashing he could be, he would be, NOW !

" Well, almost home, darling. We mustn't shock Miss Tiffy."

He walked home with her to a small block of flats. He took a long time to say goodnight; she was an enthusiastic sayer of goodnight. Then, thinking of the joys to come, Herbert, his mind made up about life at last, went back through the admin block and along the broad path to his apartment on the fourth floor. He let himself in, and went to his study. He wanted to satisfy himself that the mathematics of his transference from that other world to this one were things that he understood. He might even want to pay that other world a visit. His mouth twisted sardonically at the thought that such a thing would be very unlikely, and he muttered a few descriptive words about his previous Edith as compared to the magnificent woman who loved him here.

It took him twenty minutes to do most of the mathematics; he was just beginning to check when he was astonished to hear noises in another part of the apartment. He had half risen to his feet when the noises—footsteps—suddenly grew louder, and when the inner door of his study opened, he

almost let out a yell of fear. But the yell froze on his lips, and he stood transfixed at the figure that appeared in the doorway. She was about fifty, with a thin, sharp face, her hair in curlers, and a pink nightgown of old fashioned design over her shoulders; and she looked just like a caricature of Edith number one !

" Herbert !" she rasped. " how much longer are you going to be, keeping me waiting up until this hour ? What do you mean by it ? Come to bed at once !" She stood glaring at him, and as he stood there goggling, she added, " And if you're not there in five minutes, I shall lock the bedroom door !"

Herbert gulped and said, " All right."

She slammed the door, barking, " Five minutes !" as she did so.

Quivering, Herbert felt the cup of happiness dashed from his lips; this he had never bargained for. In this world Edith was single but he, Herbert, *he was married* ! In less time than a man takes to say ' I will ' Herbert had decided. This world, and its promises, and its Edith, must all go, must be left behind; he, Herbert Cole, did not intend to suffer; if anyone was going to be in the lifeboat, he could name the man most likely to succeed. He grabbed the paper on which he had done the calculations back, back, back to world number one !

Out, and into the elevator, and down and outside, and a brisk run along the broad path, and a turn right to the lab and the cyclotron hangar. A terrible fear hit him ; perhaps the key he had would not fit ? He worried about this until at last he arrived at the small door in the huge black side. The key slid in, the lock turned, and he was inside, with a hand on the light switch. Would the cyclotron be the same pattern as— ? He switched on the light, and gaped with relief as he saw that it was essentially (from the outside at least) the same as the one he knew. He hurried round to the bottom panel, threw the main switch, heard the current hum up. It would be a little difficult without Borlass and Green to help him—did they exist here too ?—but he would manage. Hand over hand, he climbed feverishly up to the bridge, where the screens and oscilloscopes told their story to him. Yes—now he was beginning to feel that preliminary tingling—the ' Cole effect ' he would call it. Heavens ! Was he certain to arrive back in his world at a suitable time ? The tingling increased . . .

The cinema was very dark, and on the small black and white screen a soundless drama was being played to the accompaniment of a piano. Herbert breathed a sigh of relief; this must be the series of old films that were being put on, though he was a little surprised to see that, judging by the clock, these old bits and pieces were on at the end of the programme. Still, he was back. No wife for him, in this world ! The picture ended with a silent, jerky embrace between hero and heroine. Then the lights went up, and Herbert saw that there was actually a pianist playing down there by the screen. Everybody was standing still. What was he playing now? Herbert glanced round at the people. They stood as though a national anthem was being played. But the tune was not ' God Save the Queen.' *Neither was it the tune he had heard being played in that other cinema* !

With something between a gulp and a yelp, Herbert Cole shot out of the place and into the uncommonly ill-lit street outside. Not pausing in his headlong flight to notice the dress or anything else appertaining to people around him, he puffed and panted until he came to the university park. Then he slowed, and finally he stopped, shivering in his shoes. For the place was dark, without a single lamp or pathway—and the fitful light of the cloud-scudded moon showed him that in this *second* parallel world they had not yet begun to build Jerningham University.

—John Kippax

THE WIRE TAPPERS

One of the most indispensible items of scientific equipment used by modern Man is the telephone and without it life and industry as we know it would be virtually impossible. If something should go wrong with it universally even greater complications could ensue. Take the case of Harry Brown, for instance . . .

By JOHN BOLAND

George Hinton was the only one who saw it happen, and as he was a reporter, nobody believed him. " Anything for a story, eh, George ?" his companions at the Midshire Country Club ribbed him.

The reporter brooded darkly into his pint tankard. " You can all laugh," he said stubbornly, " but I know what I saw ! I wasn't drunk. I tell you it was a long, curling streak of light coming down from the night sky, like a lightning flash without jagged edges, and moving very slowly."

" I suppose there weren't any pink elephants riding on it ?"

" Bah ! "

" What happened then, Mr. Hinton ?" The club barman was young, and susceptible. Two months before he had seen

a flying saucer hovering over London, and he knew what it was to be faced by a crowd of sceptics.

Harry Brown, one of the members, gave an explosive laugh. "Why, nothing happened, Bobbie!" Harry was a large man with a nose for gossip, a successful business, a beautiful wife, and little taste. "Absolutely nothing happened, Bobbie! This long streak of light circled round the sky for a bit, then came down on to a telegraph pole and poured itself into the phone wires." His laugh boomed out again. "Isn't that right, George?"

"That's what I saw," George maintained. "And the telegraph pole was the one right outside your place, Harry." He emptied his tankard. "Laugh as much as you like, but I saw it."

The joke was good enough to last the evening, but by midnight, when Harry left the club to drive home he had forgotten it. Not until he started out for the office on the following morning did he recall George's alleged encounter with a purple streak of light, and what brought it to mind was a casual glance at the pole in passing.

The top half of it was stained a bright purple.

The following weekend, Harry Brown was in the clubhouse again, waiting for George Hinton, and when the reporter appeared, Harry began in a loud voice to tell everyone in the bar all about George's encounter with the strange purple light.

George looked along the crowded bar. "For the Lord's sake, man! Can't you drop it? I've had more than enough about the whole blasted business."

Harry regarded him innocently. "But my dear fellow! I'm only trying to help you." He grinned round at his cronies. "What George really saw was some new stuff the Post Office are using to paint the telegraph poles—purple stuff." He took a long drink. "And poor old George was in such a state that he couldn't tell the difference between a dab of paint and a streak of slow lightning!"

None of the others seemed to find it so funny as did George. "Purple painted telegraph poles!" he snorted. "Now who's seeing things!"

"That pole outside my drive is painted purple—at least, the top of it is. Probably some stuff they're trying out against

the woodpeckers." During the past two years woodpeckers had caused considerable damage to telegraph poles all along the Thames valley, and the authorities had tried several experiments to control the damage, even going so far as to replace some of the poles with metal ones.

But the joke seemed to have gone sour and the subject was dropped. By the time Brown got home he had forgotten it, not even sparing a glance for the coloured telegraph pole as he steered his car into the drive of his home. His wife, Beulah, was waiting for him with a message.

" Someone called Erich Muller phoned. Said he wanted to see you about some contract or other."

He glanced at her sharply. Beulah's tone was even sharper than usual. " The Steinback contract ?" Harry felt his finger-tips begin to tingle, as they always did when there was the prospect of a huge business deal.

" He didn't say." Beulah's mouth was a straight thin line.

" Good lord, old girl ! Didn't you even ask him ?" How many times had he impressed on her the importance of such calls ! Any prospective customer who went to the trouble of calling outside business hours was already seventy-five per cent hooked.

" Harry ! Don't you dare ask that man to this house !" There was a spot of hectic colour high up on Beulah's cheeks. " If—if you do . . . ! I've put up with some off-colour people, for the sake of your business, but this man . . . !"

In all the years they had been married he had never seen her so excited. " What did he do ? Did—did he say something rude ?" He smiled. That was the explanation ! " But he probably didn't mean anything, dear. He's a foreigner, remember. Maybe his English isn't too good . . . ?"

" His—his English, as you call it, was quite good enough to understand, thank you ! He—he was simply disgusting."

Harry frowned. He'd never met the German, so there was no knowing what sort of man he was. " What did he say ?"

Waves of blood painted colour over the whole of her face. " I—I can't repeat it," she said. " But—but he had some woman—a woman off the streets—with him, and he was speaking to her and I overheard."

" Now look here—" Harry swallowed. " How do you know what sort of woman she was ?" Even to his own ears it sounded a bit feeble, but he was having difficulty in keeping his face solemn. Old Beulah always had been a bit of a cold fish. Maybe it was his fault ? Maybe if he'd . . . ?

At eleven o'clock on Monday morning, Herr Erich Muller was shown into Brown's office. Harry stood up to greet the man. Muller was short and stocky, his hair cropped short above a round, podgy face that glistened with sweat which he mopped away with a large, heavily-scented handkerchief.

They chatted for ten minutes, sounding each other out before they settled down to begin to talk of business, but Muller gave no hint of being anything out of the ordinary, even though Harry gave him several openings to talk of women. Harry's weakness was making money, and in order to indulge this trait he had often found it valuable to know the weaknesses of the men with whom he dealt in business.

" Is Frau Muller with you ?"

" No. I am alone for this trip." Muller's accent was only light; his English very good.

" Oh, I see. I thought you might . . . Mrs. Brown heard you speaking to someone else while you were on the phone to her . . . a woman, she thought."

Muller's almost non-existent eyebrows rose. " Speaking to someone else ? But that is not possible. I was alone. Only just a few minutes before had I arrived at the hotel and I telephoned immediately to arrange the appointment with you.'

Harry nodded. It was unimportant. Obviously Muller wasn't going to brag about his tastes. " Mrs. Brown must have made a mistake, I guess." He waved a hand in dismissal of the subject. " But I'm sure you didn't come here to gossip, Herr Muller. So shall we get down to business ?"

A brief smile appeared on the German's face. " That is good. Time wasted, it is criminal, is it not ? Nowhere can one regain a moment that has been lost. So let us make use of the time we have at our disposal." He opened his briefcase. " Herr Brown, I am in England because I am in the market for certain items of electrical equipment."

Three hours later the German left and Harry got down to work on producing a price. The German was a keen bargain-driver, and Harry knew that the price would need to be reasonable. He depressed the switch of his intercom. " I want to speak to Walter Renner, of Quicklite, Ltd." The connection was quickly made, but Renner was away. "When's he coming back ?"

"To-night, sir. Mr. Renner was expecting to arrive home about eleven this evening."

"Thank you." Harry put down the phone. He'd ring Renner tonight.

It was eleven-fifteen p.m. when Harry called Renner from his home. "Ah! Walter, old man. I want a word with you." Harry took the receiver from his ear as a quick, bell-like tapping sound came over the wires, temporarily drowning what the other man was saying. "Wait a moment . . . I didn't catch what you said!" He banged the earpiece against his cupped palm, and when he listened again the tapping sound was still there, but so faint that it was only just discernible.

"That's better . . . Now, Walter, I wanted to know if you've still got those solenoids you bought—you know, the surplus materials you got from the Ministry of Supply."

"Yes. But what the devil do you want to know about those for at this time of night? Couldn't it have waited until tomorrow morning? I've only just got back from Paris."

"I want to buy them."

"You must want 'em badly, ringing me up like this." Renner laughed harshly. "Aren't you afraid I'll stick the price up?"

Brown's voice was smooth. "I was just trying to do us both a good turn, old man. I want 'em, but if I can't have them at a fair price, then I'll buy somewhere else. I—I was hoping to save time, that's all. I wanted to give my customer a price and delivery date first thing in the morning." Time had nothing to do with it. He knew that Renner was desperate for cash and he could screw the fool down to the lowest penny. He started at Renner's next words. It was almost as though the man had read his thoughts.

"Thinking you'll get 'em cheap, eh?" Renner laughed again. "Well, I wouldn't let 'em go cheap to you, you swollen-headed pig, not if I was going bankrupt for the sake of a bit of ready money."

Harry swallowed, and when he spoke his voice was even more level and pleasant than before. "Now, Walter, there's no good'll come out of slanging me. What's your price?"

There was a brief silence. "Seven thousand pounds for the lot. You know what they are and how many they are. They cost me two thousand, and I'm going to soak you. You can argue till you're black in the face, but I won't come down a

penny. If I have to endure the unpleasantness of dealing with you, then I want heavy compensation, you rotten swine !"

Harry slammed down the receiver, his face aflame. The insolent swine ! Why, Renner was no better than a gutter-snipe; pretending to be a businessman, indeed ! One thing was certain . . . if it was the last thing Harry did, he'd see Renner smashed. No man said things like that to Harry Brown and got away with it.

In the bedroom, Beulah was going through the nightly ritual that had so far kept the years from marring her coldly beautiful face, her eyes peering expressionlessly out of a mask of grease. If she listened to her husband's tirade against Renner, she gave no sign.

On the following evening when Harry arrived home from business, she greeted him with the news that the telephone was out of order. He picked up the receiver and listened. Clearly, but as though coming from a great distance, he could hear a bell-like tapping, very rapid, very distinct. The noise seemed to transfer itself from the instrument and into his head. It was as though the tapping was now going on inside his very brain. and he dropped the receiver hastily. The noise stopped immediately, but he stood for a moment, hand pressed against the side of his head, the palm covering his ear.

" Is it that tapping noise ?" Beulah asked.

" Yes. Damned funny—seemed to fill my head—" He broke off. " Why can't the confounded Post Office people keep the lines in good order ! This is the second time the line's been out of order within the past week or so !"

The next morning the tapping noise on the line was even worse, and as he drove up to London he was surprised to see how many of the telegraph poles at the side of the road were stained bright purple from the top to half-way down. He must have noted dozens, scores, before he had to devote all his attention to the thickening traffic.

He had promised to give lunch to a man he'd just met—a Member of Parliament, an up-and-coming man who might well be extremely useful in the future. The lunch was pleasant and the man seemed as though he might be amenable. It was over brandy and cigars that Harry appeared to have an idea.

" Say, why not come down and spend the weekend with us? Beulah would love to have you with us."

William Trent, M.P., nodded happily. He had never refused an invitation in his life—unless he'd had a better offer. " Love to come, my dear fellow."

Back at the office, Harry remembered the out-of-order telephone at home, and put through a call to see if it was working yet. There seemed to be none of the tapping sounds, and after he had heard it ring once or twice, Beulah answered. " Just checking on the phone," he explained. " Oh, and by the way, we shall have a guest for the weekend."

" Not that horrible German ?" Her voice was shrill.

" No, of course not. It's Trent—that M.P. I was telling you about."

" You and your fancy guests can go to hell !"

" What's that !" he shouted. But the phone had gone dead. He was still in a temper when he reached home. " What the devil did you mean," he demanded of Beulah, " speaking to me in that fashion !"

" I don't know what you're talking about." It was all he could get from her and so he slammed out of the house and drove to the club.

The M.P., Trent, who knew he was going to be made use of, in his turn made use of his host and spent a lot of his time on the telephone, making trunk calls. Three days after Trent had departed, two suave, big men called at Harry's home and introduced themselves as Special Branch Officers. Trent had been arrested for subversive activities. Although nothing definite was stated, Harry got the impression that Trent had betrayed himself over a tapped phone.

The industrialist took himself off for a drink, to restore his shocked nerves. Trent's defection was difficult to believe, but what upset Harry more than anything was the fact that he might be—and probably was—a suspect, because he had associated with the man. That sort of thing wasn't good for business.

At the next table, two men he knew slightly were drinking, one of them holding forth. " I tell you, it was just as though the man was reading my thoughts !" he declared. " I'll swear it was that damned tapping noise ! The noise of it seemed to increase, suddenly, until it filled my head. And after that I couldn't think straight—old Jenkins seemed as though he knew what I was thinking. I tell you, it was uncanny."

Harry was sudednly very still. Now he came to think of it, several times recently he'd been speaking over the phone and it had seemed as though the other person could read his mind. *And it had happened after that ringing noise got into his head.* He could remember the incident with painful clarity.

But the very idea was ridiculous, preposterous ! It could never happen . . . But the more he thought about it, the more uncertain he became. He went in search of the reporter, George Hinton. George had seen something funny happening to some telephone wires . . . But George was nowhere to be found.

Harry brooded over the problem. It could easily be put to the test, but he shied from doing so. For if he proved his suspicions to be right . . . Eventually he could stand the suspense no longer. Going into the phone booth he slowly and deliberately dialled the number of his home. When Beulah answered he clamped a damp palm over the mouthpiece and stood there, silent, concentrating.

" It's probably just a cold, dear," he heard her say. " But if you don't feel well I should come home straight away."

Dumbly, Harry replaced the receiver and stumbled out of the booth, his face ashen. Beulah had known what he was thinking: it was just as though he had spoken his thoughts aloud. Back at the bar he downed three double whiskies in quick succession, but they did nothing except increase his depression.

" What's going to become of my business ?" he muttered to himself for the fiftieth time. If he couldn't use the telephone he'd be crippled.

After an almost sleepless night he managed to doze off for a few minutes, then woke happy. He wasn't going to put up with it. An Englishman still had *some* rights ! Fortified by righteous anger, Harry hurried off to see someone in the Post Office Engineering office. Obviously the trouble was being caused by tapping the lines. It was all very well to tap a phone when the safety of the country was involved . . . But tapping the phone of a good, solid citizen, such as Harry Brown was . . . that was a different matter.

Some of these trick gadgets that were used by people these days ! It wasn't safe. It should be stopped.

He was ushered with gratifying promptness into the office of a grave-faced man who listened to Harry's complaint in silence.

"I'm very sorry, sir," he said when Harry had finished, "but I am afraid that we are not responsible. We can't stop this—er—business. We are trying our best, of course, to locate the seat of the trouble, but so far without success."

"You—you mean there's a lot of it?"

"Your's is the fifty-first complaint I have personally received, sir." He cleared his throat. "Rest assured, Mr. Brown, that we are doing our best to overcome this—this interference, but it will take time. So I beg that you be patient, sir. And I would also beg that you keep this to yourself for the time being, sir. It—it might hinder us in our work if the story leaked out to the Press."

Harry, somewhat bemused, took his leave. Something mighty odd was going on. But what?

The news broke the following day. One of the First Secretaries at the Russian Embassy was speaking over the telephone to his opposite number at the American Embassy, and the conversation sparked off an international incident. In the ensuing excitement, further tension was added by the unguarded statements that were apparently made over telephones all over the country.

Ever a prudent man, Harry had kept away from the office and refused to answer the telephone at home, He was trying to decide whether to sell his business while he could still get a fair price, or if he should hang on in the hope of the trouble being cured.

Oddly enough, now that he was not in his usual state of health and strength, Beulah seemed more considerate of his welfare. She fussed around him in a manner that he had never before known, and he found himself enjoying it.

But if there was peace in the Brown menage, it was at variance with the state of affairs outside. Daily, almost hourly, the tension grew, as former friends and allies indulged in inadvertent slanging matches as a result of telephonic mind-reading. Cases of assault and battery mounted to astronomical proportions, and many husbands showed a sudden disinclination to speak to their wives over the telephone. An even greater number of wives avoided having speech with their husbands over the telephone.

The tone of the newspapers became almost hysterical. With every edition a new theory as to the main cause of the trouble was put forth, and the following issue destroyed the arguments set out an hour earlier.

Commerce slowed down. Instead of orders being passed by telephone there was a delay caused by the time taken to deliver written instructions, and the Post Office was swamped by the number of orders received for the removal and disconnection of subscribers' telephones.

At last the government acted. All use of the telephone was banned, an example that was quickly followed by other governments. The result was gratifying, for the number of civil disturbances fell dramatically, and an uneasy peace reigned.

The cause of the trouble was known, for now there was not a single telegraph pole in the kingdom that was not stained a bright purple over its upper half. Many watchers had seen, during the night hours, long slow-moving streaks of purple light moving across the dark skies and disappearing into nothingness after touching a telegraph pole. It was as though the light poured itself into the wires, leaving only the stain as evidence that anything had happened.

Everyone who had used the telephone had heard the tapping noise, hearing it apparently transfer itself into their heads, momentarily deafening them with its clamour, and leaving them weak and frightened. But no physical harm seemed to result, which was at least something to be thankful for.

During the days of crisis, when the newspapers had tended towards ever-larger headlines, only the BBC had remained calm, passing on the news with its customary dignity and lack of exaggeration. Harry, cut off from business, was still at home, and in the evenings he and Beulah were finding entertainment and enjoyment from sitting side by side and watching TV.

"There's a good programme this evening," Harry said to her, as he looked at the TV offerings for the day. "Raymond Swiller is doing an investigation into the mind-reading crisis."

Raymond Swiller was a large gentleman with a little pointed beard and a vast sense of his own importance. He stared blandly into the camera lens, licking his thick, flabby lips while he waited for the announcer to introduce him. When the introduction was completed, Swiller sat silent for a few seconds, staring straight at the camera.

Lookers-in in three million homes heard a string of sanguinary, guttersnipe words apparently issue from the writhing lips. For fully fifteen seconds the words tumbled over themselves, each one filthier than its predecessor, until a frantic producer cut the transmission and collapsed in hysterics.

Radio and TV broadcasts went off the air until tests had proved that it was safe to transmit pre-recorded material after which a diminished service was offered to the public.

Harry Brown, strangely rested by his unplanned break from business, resumed work, finding the routine of the days much less trying. Now he was no longer thrust into crisis by a frantic summons over the telephone. Instead, if anything needed his attention, it got it after a leisurely perusal of the note or letter. Business life now provided a relaxed pleasure; there was no longer the fierce, nerve-stretching joy of battle; instead, there was satisfaction of a more peaceful nature.

Life at home assumed a different pattern. Previously they had had many acquaintances, some of whom rang up frequently to exchange gossip and casual invitations. But now the number of people they were in contact with was slightly smaller, but the understanding was deeper. At week-ends, Harry drove Beulah to the shops and enjoyed meeting all the other people who were now calling personally for their goods instead of ordering them over the phone.

Freed from the instant demanding tyranny of the telephone, Harry began to put on weight. Now he could afford to give leisured contemplation to every decision, and very often would take the problem home with him, to talk it over with Beulah. There was a warmth about his wife these days that Harry had never before known. When he got home she seemed glad to see him, hurrying to welcome him with a kiss.

It was a pattern of peace that was spreading over the whole world, for the days of crisis had faded. Instead of the news of a petty quarrel between minor nations being spread over the surface of the earth within minutes, with the larger nations hurrying to be the first to add their snarls to the upset, incidents passed unnoticed, too stale to be of any interest by the time they had reached outside the country of their origin.

There was not even any unemployment caused by the stoppage in telephone usage, for the increase in postal staff more than absorbed the redundant telephone workers, and

it will be many years before sufficient new cables are laid to deal with the tremendous increase in telegrams.

At the cosy little dinner parties which the Browns give once a month, George Hinton, the reporter, is a regular guest. Harry takes pleasure in wining and dining the reporter, and telling the assembled company how at first he scoffed at George's tale of the purple lights that poured themselves into the telephone wires.

These dinners are the high-lights of Harry's existence. No longer tied by the voice of the ever-present telephone, Harry has discovered the words of the past. He has a fine library and is adding to it every week.

What with his happy marriage, his pleasant business life, his dinners, his books, and his leisure, Harry is a happy man, his life falling short of perfection only because of the occasional nightmares he suffers.

Nightmares in which scientists have restored a normal telephone system.

—John Boland

GHOST

This is not the type of ghost story one usually finds in a fantasy magazine—no shades of dead people walking through walls or the clanking of chains as Sir Lancelot returns to haunt the scene of his murder. Yet the "haunting" has a parallel in all the accepted branches of a modern ghost story—only more so.

By BERTRAM CHANDLER

Our landing on Weldon, third world of the planetary system of Alpha Gruis, was unscheduled. No ships ever called at Weldon any more, it had dropped from its importance—never a great one—in the scheme of interstellar commerce with the exhaustion of its mineral resources. Man had come. Man had gutted the planet of its wealth. Man had left.

We hoped that the spaceport was still in a fit state for a landing. We hoped that the supplies of spare parts, of repair equipment, had not deteriorated too badly with the passage of the years. We hoped that the Pilot Book, according to which large quantities of such material had been left behind, as a cheaper alternative to its being shipped to a "live" planet, was not lying.

We could, of course, have hoped that our Drive would hold out until we reached the busy, prosperous worlds of the Centaurian system. to which we were bound. We could have done so—and, in all probability, made one of the swelling number of ships listed as *Overdue. Believed Lost.* Nobody is quite sure what happens when the Mannschen Drive gets out of control—according to some authorities one is slung into the remote past, according to others one finishes up in the remote future. They agree on one point—there's no returning.

I'm no technician, but I had been uneasily aware for some time that all was not well with the intricacy of spinning, precessing wheels that is the Drive. The note—which should be high, steady, almost supersonic—wavered, at times deepening to a low hum, at times rising painfully above normal aural range. And, with almost every action, there was the haunting sense of familiarity, the feeling of I've-done-this-before.

I was trying to check freight lists, and not making much of a job of it, when the buzzer of my telephone sounded. I picked up the instrument.

It was the Old Man on the other end.

" Mr. Rayner," he said, " come up to Control, will you ?"

I wasn't sorry to leave my papers. I unbuckled myself from my chair, pulled myself out from my office to the axial shaft, caught the guide-line and pulled myself towards the nose—and the brains—of the ship. On the way I passed a few of the passengers and I could see that they, like me, were aware that something was wrong. I didn't stop to answer their questions which, even though I didn't know the answers, was rather foolish of me.

When I reached the Control Room it was obvious that some sort of conference was in progress. The Old Man was there, looking even more worried than the Master of an interstellar ship usually looks; I swear that the lines on his face had deepened, that his hair had become appreciably greyer in the few hours since I had last seen him. Caulfield, the Navigator, was there; the wrinkles on his brow seemed to be spreading up and over his glistening bald scalp. Welles, the Drive Engineer, was there, looking as miserable as only a fat man can look.

"All right, Mr. Welles," the Old Man was saying. "So you can't make repairs in Space. You *think* that you can keep the Drive running for two more days, ship's time, but no longer."

"That's the strength of it, Captain," said Welles sullenly.

"Weldon's our best chance, sir," said Caulfield. "A ghost planet, but, according to the book, it has a breathable atmosphere, no lethal extremes of temperature and, even better, a stock of spares. The planet was evacuated when the mines closed down but, as there are no inquisitive natives, we have every reason to hope that we shall find the stocks intact."

"Weldon it has to be," said the Old Man. "You, Mr. Welles, will have to keep the Drive running for three more days." He turned and saw me. "You, Mr Rayner, will inform the passengers. Whatever you do, don't frighten them."

"On the intercom, sir?" I asked, reaching for the microphone.

"*No.* Of all the instruments devised by man for spreading panic the loudspeaker's the worst. The customers know that there's something wrong. An authorative, reassuring statement over the intercom will be anything but reassuring. We want the personal touch—and that's the Purser's job. Circulate, Mr. Rayner. Tell them that everything's under control. Tell them how lucky they are to get a look at a ghost planet—and all for free. Blind them with science . . ."

"But I don't know anything about the Drive, sir."

"Neither do they. Off you go, now. We're going to be very busy here until we arrive. *If* we arrive.

It's hard to be reassuring if you're feeling very badly in need of reassurance yourself. I was remembering all the horrid stories I'd heard of ships—and people—being turned inside out with a malfunctioning of the Drive. I was wondering which would be preferable—being marooned in the remote past or the remote future—and was not wildly enthusiastic about either prospect. I was wondering what would be the best line of approach to take with the passengers.

They were gathered in the Lounge—all twenty-four of them. They knew that there was something wrong; the behaviour of the Mannschen Drive had worsened since I had left my office. They looked at me with mingled distrust and distaste; my

uniform made me one of *Them*, one of the rulers of this little world who had failed, lamentably, in their duties.

"I hope you aren't worried," I said brightly.

My answer was a growl such as one would expect from the jungle, not from a gathering of allegedly civilised human beings.

"When do we take to the boats?" asked one of the men, a burly individual called Petheridge.

"We do not take to the boats," I told him. "The boats cannot be used in interstellar space, only in the vicinity of planetary systems. But I did not come here to tell you that. I came here with good news."

"So they've fixed the Drive," said Miss Hall, a tall, angular spinster. "It doesn't sound like it, young man."

"I'm afraid that the Drive has not been fixed," I admitted. "Not yet. But there is no danger. Anyhow—here is the *good* news. You'll have all heard of the ghost planets—worlds that have been exploited and then abandoned. We're headed towards such a world now—Weldon, otherwise Alpha Gruis III. The mines were worked out all of fifty Earth years ago . . ."

"*Why* are we going there?" asked Petheridge.

I tried to smile brightly. "I *could* say that we're going there to give all you people the opportunity, which very few travellers ever get, to look at a ghost planet. I *could* say that, but I won't. Even so, you'll be very foolish not to make the most of the opportunity. The reason, however, is this. There are large stocks of spares and repair equipment at the spaceport. We shall make use of them."

"Suits me," said Susan Willoughby.

"I am pleased that *somebody* can afford the delay," remarked Miss Hall acidly.

"The delay, I hope, will be to my financial advantage," replied the girl sweetly.

"Why, Miss Willoughby?" I asked—although I had guessed the reason. Her profession, as listed on her passport, was that of writer.

"Local colour," she said. "My next novel's going to be about one of the mining planets—the first discovery, the prospecting, the exploitation and, finally, the decay."

"So long as *someone's* happy," snapped Miss Hall.

"I don't see why we shouldn't all be happy," said Petheridge suddenly. "As the Purser has told us, this is a chance that

comes to very few people. We shall be fools not to make the most of it—fools not to make the most of it . . ." He paused, then said, " I seem to be repeating myself."

" You will," said Miss Hall, " until somebody repairs the Drive."

I returned her glare.

" I'm sorry," I told her, " but I'm the Purser, not a Drive Engineer."

" Have we got one aboard ?" she asked.

" I'm sorry," I told her, " but I'm the Purser not a Drive Engineer."

" Have we got one aboard ?" she asked.

" I'm sorry," I began.

" Must we have all that again ?" she demanded.

" Not if I can help it," I said. " All I can do, ladies and gentlemen, is to assure you that there is no danger and that everything is well in hand. You will all—we shall all—suffer slight inconvenience until repairs have been effected. I trust that you will be able to endure this inconvenience for another three days. It will be no longer.

" Should any of you require any further information, I shall be in my office. Thank you."

Susan Willoughby came into my office while I was trying to check the freight lists.

She said, " Men amuse me."

I looked up from my papers. She was better worth looking at than they were—that is, if you like redheaded women. Some people don't; I do.

She said, " Men amuse me."

I said, " I heard you the first time, Miss Willoughby. Of course, things being as they are, you may have actually said it only once."

" I said it twice."

" Then, why do men amuse you ?"

" Their passion for routine work in the face of catastrophe."

" If there's any castastrophe in here, you must have brought it in yourself," I said, joking feebly.

" I can see it all," she said half to herself. " The Captain daren't come to see us himself, or send one of his executive officers. They—and he—all know too much. They wouldn't have been able to lie convincingly. You, knowing nothing, could lie. I heard Mary Hall talking to Bill Etheridge. ' It

can't be really serious,' she was saying. 'Mr. Rayner was a little worried, but he wasn't frightened—and he's the kind that scares easily . . .' "

"Thank you," I said.

She said, "I hope we do come through. This'll be first class material—and so will be the ghost planet. If we get there."

"We shall," I said.

She ignored this.

"I've done quite a lot of research into the various losses of interstellar ships. Most of them seem to have been due to Drive failure. Did you hear about Mitsubishi's discovery on Antares VII?"

"Who's Mitsubishi?" I asked.

"The archaeologist. He discovered what must have been the remains of a spaceship, all of fifty thousand years old. There was a mass of corroded machinery that could have been, that must have been . . ."

"What?" I asked.

"A Mannschen Drive Unit."

"Some race, fifty thousand years ago, had interstellar travel."

"That's possible," she admitted. "But the other solution is possible, too. Correct me if I'm wrong. Remember that I'm a writer, not a physicist. The principle of the Drive is precession—precession in Time as well as in Space. Thanks to those fancy gyroscopes that aren't, at the moment, behaving too well, the ship goes astern, as it were, in Time while going ahead in Space . . ."

"You know as much as I do," I said. "I'm only the Purser."

"What a pity that the temporal precession can't be used to drive a Time Machine," she murmured. "As you know, historical novels are my speciality. If one could be on the Moon to watch Corderey's landing—the first man to set foot on a world other than his own! If one could witness the early struggles of the Martian colony!"

"Once you have Time Travel," I said, "you have paradox."

"And what's wrong with paradox?" she demanded.

"Nothing—except that you just can't have it. You just can't have people going back in Time and murdering their grandfathers."

"I admit," she said sweetly, "that it's not done."

We both laughed.

The Drive held out until we made planetfall.

Weldon lay below us—a grey-green globe, with wide white belts of cloud—when we flickered into normal Space-Time. Landing, we knew, would be a protracted business; the last Survey ship that had been in the vicinity of the planet had reported that the automatic beacon was no longer functioning. We should, therefore, have to circle Weldon until our telescopes picked up the city—also called Weldon. Whether or not this task would be easy would depend upon how much the buildings were overgrown by the native plant life.

Things went surprisingly smoothly.

On our third circuit of the planet we picked up the city. All that remained then was the stern-first dropping through the atmosphere, our speed adjusted to match the speed of rotation of the planet so that, in effect, we achieved a vertical descent. All, I say—but it wasn't as simple as that. What had been the daylight hemisphere at the beginning of landing operations became, inevitably, the night side. There were no lights to guide us.

We seemed, too, to be bringing the bad weather with us. We commenced our long fall from a cloudless sky; the latter part of it was through driving rain and, if the drift indicators were to be believed, gale force winds. When, at last, we touched the wet concrete we were enveloped in clouds of steam of our own making as our rocket exhausts vaporised the deep pools and puddles that had collected on the apron.

When the steam had cleared there was not much more to see. Dimly, through the driving rain, loomed a low huddle of buildings. There were no lights, no signs of life. We hadn't been expecting any, but this did not make the overall effect any the less depressing.

"Landing has been accomplished," I said into the microphone through which I had been delivering a running commentary to the passengers and crew. "Landing has been accomplished. Repairs will be put in hand at once."

"Mr. Rayner," said the Old Man coldly, "by whose authority did you make that last rash promise? Even you must realise that Mr. Caulfield, Mr. Welles and myself have been three days and nights without sleep, and the other officers are in little better case. Repairs will be put in hand as soon as *I* see fit."

"Even so, sir," put in Caulfield, "there's no reason why we shouldn't investigate the stores around the spaceport, get some idea of what materials we shall have to work with."

" In the morning," said the Captain. " Or the afternoon. Or whenever we wake up. We're far too tired to do any work on the Mannschen Drive Unit—the state we're in now we couldn't reassemble a cheap alarm clock without having at least six parts left over. Mr. Rayner—amend your message."

" Attention, please," I said. " Here is an amendment. Repairs will be put in hand as soon as possible."

There was nothing further for me to do in the Control Room ; the necessary entries in the Official Log I would make in my own office. I slid down the guide-line in the axial shaft, disdaining the ladder rungs. I stopped for a brief word with those passengers who were still in the Lounge. Most of them had turned in, finding the gravity tiring after the weeks of Free Fall.

Susan Willoughby followed me into the office.

" Men," she said, " amuse me. This passion for routine."

" I always," I said, " make it a practice to get this sort of thing clewed up as soon as possible after arrival."

" Interstellar vessel *Delta Cygni*," she read aloud, peering over my shoulder. " Arrival at Port Weldon, on Weldon, Alpha Gruis III. Time, G.M.T. Subjective: 05.45 hrs. Time, Local . . . " She laughed. " What *is* the local time, James ?"

" Search me, Susan," I admitted.

" But you must put in something, mustn't you ? You must do it now. The ghostly Port Doctor, accompanied by the spectral Immigration Officer and the phantom Customs Officials will be boarding at any time now . . ."

I listened to the wind whose howling, even through our insulated plating, I could hear. I decided that I did not envy the cadets, who would be standing airlock watch throughout what remained of the night.

" You know," she said, " I'd like to be the first, James. Well, not *the* first—but the first after fifty years. Do you think . . . ?"

" No," I said.

" Why not ?"

" The Old Man hadn't granted shore leave."

" But he hasn't *not* granted shore leave."

" Anyhow—the ship's not cleared inwards."

" By whom, James ? By whom ? It seems to me—of course, I'm no authority on interstellar law—that you've done all the clearing possible with your Log Book entries."

I remembered, then, Caulfield's suggestion that an immediate investigation be made of what facilities for repair and replacement the spaceport offered. If I were able to greet my superiors, when they at last awakened, with a neat list of the contents of storerooms and workshops they would have to admit that I had made a material contribution towards getting the ship under way once more for the Centaurian system.

" Do you want a job ?" I asked Susan. " Acting Temporary Purser's Pup, Unpaid ?"

" Doing what ? Helping you make silly entries in the Log Book ?"

" No," I told her my scheme.

" I'm with you," she said, " on one condition—that you let me be first out of the ship."

Susan went to her cabin and I climbed the shaft up to the officer's flat. Nobody—excepting, of course, myself—was awake in the accommodation. I collected a heavy raincoat and a powerful torch. Pen and notebook I stuck into my pockets almost as an afterthought.

Susan was waiting for me in the Lounge when I got down. She, too, had dressed against the weather. She, too, was carrying a torch. She was talking with Miss Hall and Etheridge

" I think you're crazy, Miss Willoughby," the spinster was saying. " And that Purser boyfriend of yours is crazier."

" I rather wish that I were going with them," said Etheridge.

" Then you're crazy too."

" All right—we're all crazy." He noticed me. " Just one thing I'd like to ask, Rayner. Are there any dangerous animals on this planet ?"

" None—according to the Pilot Book."

" Even so," he said, " fifty years is a long time. There were probably a few domestic animals left, inadvertently, at the time of the evacuation. Cats, perhaps, and dogs. You'd better take this—I don't suppose that the ship carries any firearms."

" No," I said, " we don't. But I can use a pistol. Thanks a lot."

I took the heavy automatic from him, checked the magazine, then slid it into my pocket.

"The odds are that you won't need it," said Etheridge.

"I should think not!" snapped Mary Hall.

We said goodnight to them, descended the companionway to the airlock. The cadet on duty was reluctant to let us out, but finally did so when I made him admit that no orders had been issued about restriction of shore leave.

As I had promised, I let Susan first down the ramp. She staggered as the wind caught her, and the beam of her torch waved wildly. A second or so later I was by her side and, heads down, we were pushing through the wind and the freezing rain towards the nearer of the low buildings. As we approached it we found ourselves in a lee, for which we were grateful. The beams of our torches were reflected from rows of windows, all of which seemed to be intact. Almost directly ahead of us was a door.

It wasn't locked—but fifty years is a long time. We got it open at last, the protesting shriek of the long idle hinges audible even above the howling wind. I cried out as I saw two glowing green eyes in the darkness—then laughed. The owner of the eyes was only a cat, a Terran cat—lean and wild, a reversion to its savage ancestors, but nothing to be afraid of.

"Puss!" I said. "Puss! Pretty Pussy!"

The animal swore at me and made off.

We were in a passageway, and we advanced along it with caution. We opened, without much trouble, the first door that we came to on our right. The room behind it must have been an office of some kind—there were stools and their were desks and filing cabinets. On one of the desks was an open book—a ledger of some kind.

"We'll see what the last entry was," said Susan, shining her torch on to the yellowed pages.

Already this is a ghost planet. There is still life, the city still lives, the spaceport is busy as the ships come in to take off personnel and such equipment as is worth the expense of shipping out and away. But today I saw a ghost—two ghosts. I saw them in broad daylight. Ghosts of the pioneers, they must have have been—some long dead prospector and his wife, returned to see the ending of the dream that once was theirs, of which they were once a part. A man and a woman they were, dressed in heavy outdoor clothing. Each of them carried a torch—or so it seemed. The man carried a pistol as well, in his right hand.

I was in the main equipment storeroom, checking the Mannschen Drive units. The orders are that they are to be left here, so that any ship in truoble on the Centaurian run can put into Port Weldon for spares and repairs. I was applying the coat of oil that should last, if necessary, a hundred years or more.

Suddenly, I heard a man's voice say, "That's the one."

I looked up. They—the ghosts—were standing there. I don't know for how long they had been there, but I am certain that they had not come through the door, which I was facing as I worked. There was this man—an ordinary looking sort of fellow with brown hair—and the rather striking redhaired woman. The man pointed his pistol at me.

"You," he said, "you left the safety clamps off the main rotor."

"What if I did?" I asked.

"Make sure that they're on," he ordered. "Tight."

"It's no business of yours," I told him.

"It is," he said. "Take the pistol," he said to the woman. "If he tries to interfere, shoot."

"I didn't know that they were ghosts. I stood still, and watched the man tighten the clamps on the main rotor. And then—they were gone. Both of them. Vanished.

I'm leaving this here in the office. Sooner or later a ship will be coming in for repairs. This is just to let you—whoever you are—know that the main equipment storeroom is haunted.

"Some people," said Susan, "have—or had—a weird sense of humour."

"Shall we find the main equipment storeroom?" I asked. "Are you afraid of the ghosts?"

"Of course not," she said. "And if there *are* ghosts, it's all material."

So we found the main equipment storeroom. It was easy enough—on the wall of the office in which we had found the ledger with its odd entry there was a plan of the spaceport buildings. We didn't find any ghosts in the storeroom—but we found the dogs.

Six of them there were—huge brutes, with something in them of Alsatian and something of mastiff, and they were fierce and they were hungry. Luckily—I had half believed the ghost story—I had shifted my torch to my left hand and held the pistol—cocked, and with the safety catch off—in my

right. I fired when they rushed us, killing one of the brutes. The others—all save one—turned tail and bolted.

I emptied my magazine at the one who did not run. My last shot must have wounded him—even so, he was on me, and bore me down, his jaws at my throat. I tried to fight him off, but it was a losing struggle. He was strong. Then, suddenly, he collapsed on me—dead. By the light from my torch, which was still burning, I saw Susan standing over us. Her own torch was out. It had never been designed for use as a club.

"Thanks," I said inadequately.

She pulled the stinking carcass off me, helped me to my feet.

I shone the beam of my torch around the storeroom, fearing further attack from the surviving dogs. They might well, I thought, be lurking behind the machines, gathering their courage for a fresh attack.

Then, somehow, I became interested in the machines themselves. The only ones that I was able to identify were the Mannschen Drive units—there was no mistaking that complexity of gleaming wheels that, even in rest, seemed to draw the eye down unimaginable vistas, Several of my bullets, I saw, had hit the nearer of the Drive units. One bullet—there was no mistaking that bright, silvery splash of metal—had struck the rim of the main rotor a glancing blow.

Suppose the wheel had turned, I thought. Suppose the wheel had turned . . . Suppose that, somehow, a temporal field had been set up . . . What would have happened? Nothing—according to widely publicised laboratory experiments. Or—to judge from the rumours one heard of other experiments that were given no publicity—quite a lot.

The thought of what might have happened scared me. I blessed the technician who had set up the safety clamps tightly enough to hold the rotor immobile, even under the impact of a bullet.

But . . .

I remembered the absurd entry in the ledger in that deserted office.

Who had tightened those clamps?

I've been writing this to pass the time for the remainder of the voyage. I have to pass the time somehow. Rayner the Leper—that's me. I'm in bad with the Old Man and the senior officers, and once *that* happens aboard any ship you

might as well pack your bags. The Captain has not forgiven me—I don't think he ever will—for disturbing his sleep that night; the duty cadet sounded the General Alarm when he heard the shooting inside the spaceport buildings. All in all, I shan't be sorry to arrive at Port Austral. I've asked for a transfer and I pay off there.

What really does hurt is the lack of any sympathy from Susan Willoughby. I think I'm entitled to it, but I'm not getting it. She had a long session with Welles and Caulfield, apparently, and thinks that she knows *all* about the Mannschen Drive now. She thinks that if those clamps had not been tightened, if the main rotor had turned, she and I would have gone back in Time, would have found ourselves in Port Weldon at the time of the evacuation of the planet—and that, she says, would have been material of a kind that comes once in a lifetime, if then.

I raised the point of the impossibility of our returning to our own Time—except by the slow way—and she said that it

Continued on page 128

didn't matter, that good writing sells no matter when it's written. I pointed out that she had held the pistol on the technician while I tightened the clamps.

" But," she said, " *I* can't remember it."

" No," I said, " you can't—because it never happened. But it *would* have happened if I hadn't tightened those clamps."

" So you admit it," she flared. " I'll never forgive you for it !"

And that was that.

When I first got to know her I had allowed myself to dream, to hope that a casual, shipboard acquaintanceship might develop into something more permanent.

That's all over now—and all because I'm haunted by my own ghost.!

—Bertram Chandler