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SCIENCE FANTASY

FIVE NEW LONG STORIES

Including

PINK PLASTIC GODS
By Brian W. Aldiss

THE CONTRAPTION
By Kenneth Bulmer

Volume 22
Number 65

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SCIENCE FANTASY

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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Editorial . . .
by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Of course I could just pretend that nothing had happened and that Science Fantasy hadn't changed hands, editors and format all in one inter-issue period. But if you are the kind of reader who looks at the Editorial at all you will know that all this *has* happened and will probably expect some sort of comment—perhaps some promise for the future or a manifesto of editorial policy and beliefs. So here is something of the sort.

There is every intention of keeping this magazine going and, indeed, increasing its frequency if this can be done. It largely rests with you: and with the economic cycle which starts with your silver, in your trouser pocket. Every time you miss buying an issue, every time you borrow a number or liberate it from a friend's bookshelf, you strike a half-crown blow at a living organ of s-f in this country. Make no mistake: it is here, in the pulp magazines, that s-f has its essential roots, here that young writers first get a decent crack of the whip. Enthusiasts' clubs and conventions are excellent in their way but what s-f in this country needs above all is circulation. I realise that England hasn't the population of the USA; I'm not thinking of a circulation rise in the tens of thousands. A rise of even three or four thousand an issue would enable us to offer rates comparable with those earned by writers in America: we could then compete at the top of the manuscript market and make it worthwhile for the rising young writer to look in the s-f direction.

There is far too much talk about s-f and far too little of it being written. Until I took on this magazine and started reading manuscripts I had thought, as no doubt many of you do, that there was a mass of first-class stuff pining away in drawers while the wrong-headed, perverse editors printed reader-losing rubbish. I was wrong. I have just read through a quarter of a million words of MS and half of it was so bad it made me blush. And I don't blush very easily. You loyal, stalwart readers who go on writing candid, well-reasoned, patient letters explaining exactly what you would like to be reading are wasting

your time. No-one over here is writing that stuff, or, if they are, they aren't selling it in England. Except, perhaps, in the form of full-length novels.

So, when next you have the urge to write "Dear Sir"—write "dear reader" instead and try your own hand at the thankless, unrewarding task of writing s-f. I undertake faithfully to give very special consideration to any first attempts by readers, and, if we print any, to pay the most encouraging rates the kitty will stand. (But write your letter to the editor as well: I shall rely very much on your comments and criticism for the next few issues.)

* * * *

I know this will make some enemies, but it had better be said. I don't believe that there is any such genre as science-fantasy. It is either, at its best, off-beat science-fiction with a touch of poetry or, at its worst, degraded science-fiction, in which the author wriggles out of his plot-difficulties by introducing "mystic" or "transcendental" elements (and there's a pair of suspect words!) just as an idle writer of straight s-f gets over the hurdles in his ill-made plot by dragging in another improbable machine. Mind, there's nothing wrong with the improbable machine so long as it is integral to the story: apart from the basic s-f allowance of a post-Einstein physics the writer is, I feel, allowed one basic stride forward in science or technology around which to construct his story (if it's that kind of story). Thus you can write about what happens when a space-missionary recklessly uses a cybernetic speech-translator to tell the aliens how sinful they are (Katherine MacLean's *Unhuman Sacrifice*) but, when you've got him into a tight corner, you must not let him hop into a handy matter-transmitter: unless the whole secondary point of the story is that he *can*.

What you really cannot do—if you are writing for adults—is have a Venusian princess materialise out of the air, offering to free your hero from the BEM's clutches if he will come to Krzk and kill the wicked High Priest of Zoz with the magic sword of Ugg. Ugh.

My editorial watchword, then, is "Science Fiction for Grown-Ups!" I hope I shall be able to make it hold good.

SCIENCE FANTASY

Dragon-lovers with sweet serious eyes
brood in a desert wood sick with bluebells:
the tough fire-belching curiosities
mate among ugly smoke and pungent smells.

Seal-women linger on the wild foreshore
where in the wrack and foot-prints of
green slime
doe-eyed enormous weed-eaters explore
pebbles and sand, and then begin to climb.

I belong to the Monster Society,
they are my only ramshackle heroes,
I really love them and whenever I see
monster films I cheer them from the
back rows.

I like steam tractors and big,
broken machines,
have two old coke bottles on my bookshelf,
I sit through Shakespeare mostly
for the scenes
where I am Caliban and love myself.

PETER LEVI.

You can try to improve the breed of monkeys or degrade the Ancient Gods, with various degrees of success and for various motives. The effect on yourself is another thing again, however.

PINK PLASTIC GODS

by Brian Aldiss

Every day that hot August of 2111 I was in Long Barrow Field, getting on with the potato harvesting. The six neosimians I employed worked hard in their monkey way, the heat shimmering above their bent backs. They worked two hours on and a half hour off, scamping if I let them.

"Keep up with us, Judy! Hey, Tess, that's Daisy's trench!"

Judy was the laziest of the bunch, yet Judy was the one I liked best.

Our first shift began as Sol rose, and the last shift finished after he'd gone and we were up to our knees in a mist as thick as rice pudding. Slowly we worked our way round the long pillow shape of Barrow Hill, day in, day out, from pearly light to purple. Neosimians have their drawbacks—they're slow for one thing—but they are vastly cheaper than machines; and unlike machines they never miss a potato—if you keep watching them.

I kept watching them. Every potato meant a penny off the load of debt I had shouldered since manhood. But

that still left me time to glance up to the top of Barrow Hill every so often, to regard the solitary figure up there surveying me.

His name was Aurel Derek Seyfert. This story is more about him than me; my life has none of the highlights that marked his career.

Seyfert was my nearest neighbour. His home was three miles over fields and barrens from mine—his a castle, mine a cottage. We knew nothing of each other; we had never exchanged a word. Our ways were totally different. From my bunk I could spit out through the window into the pigsty; Seyfert had been educated never to part with his saliva.

The only link between us was the intensity of his regard. He was mounted and his mount never moved. Only the equestrian statue's eyes moved as he stared out across the countryside.

Something in his attitude, something in his isolation, worked powerfully on my mind. A lonely human figure is always a symbol, and I'm a great one for symbols. My past—or rather my father's past—has isolated me; instinctively I felt the same was true of Seyfert. Maybe it was a curious idea for a fellow like me to nourish. In my way of life you can't afford too much fancy; probably the heat made me light-headed.

Seyfert sat up on the bare hill's brow on a hondlepegg, which is the Uffitsian version of a horse. Although herds of them were brought over from that planet to Earth, they could not be induced to breed here and you never see one now, outside zoos. Guess they just preferred Uffitsi. Some animals can choose to die rather than live in a way they don't wish to; humans are rarely granted such a faculty.

Seyfert sat on his hondlepegg wearing a black cloak and a wide hat. Against the sky he was a sinister figure. Or I suppose he was. For me he was all melancholy. He had a heavy, dark face, thick cheeks and lips, thick eyebrows, yet not coarse. From what I could see of his expression it haunted me; it seemed full of regret; or perhaps that was simply because I regarded him as a symbol of regret.

Sometimes he would look down at me and my gang

of monkey coolies, and I'd imagine what poor scum we must seem to someone who slept up in a palace. Other times, he'd scan a horizon we could not see, and then I'd observe the severe sadness in his eyes.

Though not a word passed between us, though we never got closer than fifty yards, I knew that Aurel Derek Seyfert was what I was: an embittered old man, for all that he slept in silk while I slept on sacks.

Often he'd sit up on his hill for hours at a stretch. Other times, we would see him for little of a day. He would appear only for a few minutes before spurring the hondlepegg and making off at a canter. No, I felt no idle curiosity about all the rest of his life, his past, his present, his future if he had any. I was more concerned with my spuds. He could remain a living symbol for ever, for all I cared.

Then came the evening he spoke to me.

The autovan had gone off ahead with my little labour force, Judy and the others riding tiredly back to sleep. I followed slowly on foot. It was late, night really, with sunset still rimming all round the sky like a dirty mark round a bath, and a fat moon low in the south. I was tired and thirsty and surly—as always I suppose; mine's not been the sort of life to encourage gaiety, though I'm not complaining, mind.

Anyhow, there Seyfert stood by the start of the track to my cottage, waiting for me, with the hondlepegg standing tranquil beside him.

"You're on my land, mister," I said.

"I wanted to speak to you, neighbour," he replied. He took off his wide hat to wipe his brow, revealing a crop of white hair. Until then I had not thought of him as aged; now I saw he had fifteen years' start on me. All I said was, "Talk some other time. I'm going home to rest. It's been a hard day's going, as you must have seen from up on your perch."

"I'll walk with you if I may."

"No you mayn't."

He stood with a hand holding the bridle of his mount and so I left him. I was not meaning to be harsh. It was just I was tired and thirsty.

Once I'd got back to the cottage and showered and drank a pint of water and walked round stark naked to give the neosimians their nuts and fruit, I began to wish I had passed the time with Seyfert for five minutes. After Judy and Daisy and the girls had had their evening play and been bedded down in their bunks, I flung on a pair of overalls and a shirt and went back up the track. He was still there, and that annoyed me. How can time mean so little to a man?

"No," he said.

Nobody would call me a subtle man, but the way he said that 'no' gave me a clear insight right into his life. He was not justifying nor defending a thing; just laying it down as it came, and you took your pick. That's my way too.

I stuck our my hand.

"Name's James Smith in case you didn't know."

"No, I didn't know. Mine's Aurel Seyfert."

"Yeh, I know. You live up in the palace. Glad to know you."

"Glad to know you. Come up to my place for some food."

"Why?"

"There's a party there tonight."

I laughed. The sound surprised me.

"You give *parties* and you want me to join in?" I asked. "What is all this?"

"All I said was there *is* a party there. Somehow I thought I wanted you to see it. It might interest you—make a change for you, anyhow."

"It would do that all right. But you mean you want me to look in at your party?" I scratched my head, somewhat hamming up my allotted simple rustic role in life.

"Man, you heard my words, Smith."

"All right, I'll come if you want me then—Seyfert."

We rode the three miles to his place, I behind him mounted on the hondlepegg. They are fragile creatures, like most creatures from Uffitsi, but it bore us true and steady.

The outline of this castle of Seyfert's fitted with how I thought of him. It was plain and straightforward and

severe: another symbol. It turned out that I was mistaken about the insides of both of them. We rode up the wide drive where several copters were parked, and directly we reached the entrance I had my first surprise.

We were greeted on the steps by a naked and armless woman. She was beautiful, with a deep navel and high breasts, and nothing but a drape low over her hips.

She bowed and welcomed us, and we passed in.

Several people were standing around in the hall—properly dressed, let me say—but Seyfert led through them and up an escalator to a second floor room packed with guests. They were dressed, too, although none had on anything so simple as my shirt and overall. None of them were my kind—or Seyfert's either; I knew that at a glance. Their conversation too meant nothing to me: dull stuff about art or something that they specialised in. Not that I listened very hard, because I was thinking "This must have been my father's sort of world." I recalled how in my childhood bedtime had excluded me from just this kind of function.

A naked man came across to us, very pink but superbly built, the perfect physique and a wise face. Most of the other males in the room looked shoddy beside him. He carried a tray full of glasses.

"You're too well-built to be a waiter," I told him.

"Waiting is my pleasure, sir," he told me.

Seyfert laughed.

"It's a robot, Smith, like the armless woman on the door. Don't look so surprised! You're out of touch. These things are my son's invention, my eldest son, Monday; his factories manufacture the damn things by the hundred. You must meet Monday. He should be somewhere in this infernal mob. First let's have a drink."

I looked in amazement at the heroic waiter. It made me sick to think that there were metal parts under that frame.

"Are you really a robot?" I asked. The question sounded indecent.

"I am a robot, sir. What would you care to drink?"

His tray of drinks was a heavy treble-decker, laden with a variety of liquors.

"Water's all I take," I said.

Seyfert picked a long glass containing an amber liquid from the tray.

"This is an Uffitsian drink, made from grain grown and distilled on Uffitsi. Please try it."

Ordinarily I'd have knocked it out of his hand; when a man says he wants water, why shouldn't he have water? Instead, I did take a sip, thank God, just to please the old man. It was nectar, lovely as the skies, better than spring water.

"One's enough," I said.

We hung around then. Seyfert looked on; it seemed like a major occupation with him. He was apparently neither bored nor interested, but I began to fidget. Finally Seyfert took the hint.

I was taken to meet Monday. Then I was taken to meet Tuesday, the second son. Wednesday was a daughter, pale and languid, totally unlike Seyfert. Thursday was a son, the youngest, but he was not at the party.

Monday and Tuesday were alike, although Monday was a bachelor and Tuesday was married and had his wife with him. These two sons were plump and ageing men with bald heads and genial moist eyes. Predatory they looked, perhaps because they smiled too often. Monday blinked a lot, Tuesday twitched his fingers. Tuesday's wife was bony; her face was lemon-coloured. All the time I looked at them, Seyfert looked at me. We laboured through some conversation before they broke free.

Then Seyfert led me away, taking another drink from a tray as he went. By now he had had several, though their effects were not noticeable. For myself, I wanted to get back to the neosimians; you can make sense out of them.

"You weren't a social success with my sons, James Smith," he said cheerfully. "Even their glib tongues were strained to get you in. They must be thinking what an odd fish you are."

"You're no better, Seyfert. Notice how everyone moves away or turns their backs when they see you coming?"

"Sure, sure. Great feeling of power it gives me . . ."

That party stuck in my gut. Only Aurel Seyfert and I were old, or rather not pretending to be young. Only we did not set out to impress. Only we were not soft. And the softies were tended always by the beautiful pink robots, each one—I counted a dozen—as fine as the last. They scurried round tirelessly with the drinks, beautiful robots, pink and perfect.

"Now you must meet my wife," said Seyfert. "If we can find her. That will make a grand climax to your visit."

"What did you ask me here for?"

"I must have needed a kindred spirit. You're standing there looking like the crack of doom. Have another drink."

The party was livening up. The nonentities were pairing off and dancing to some crappy music. Seyfert's white hair floated wildly round his head. Though I hated the whole occasion, I'll not say I did not enjoy hating it.

Mrs. Seyfert—Cristobel Bella Idris Seyfert—was surrounded by grey young men telling her blue jokes. Her laughter was punctuated by long 'oooooohs,' and she touched the young men's chests as she laughed. From her her sons had got their plumpness; yet she still had some to spare. As we went up to her, she raked us with a long wounding glare.

"Are you both having a lovely time?" she tinkled loudly. Then coming too close to me she said in a low voice, "I don't know who you are, dear, but your common sense must tell you that my husband was crazy to bring you up here. I'm sure you are feeling terribly out of place. Please leave at once before there is any unpleasantness."

Seyfert heard this and was grinning as he led me away again. He shook his head without speaking, in the way one savours success.

"I've had a belly-full of this idle charade—and besides I've got to get up early in the morning," I told him. "It's time I went home. I've seen how you live, if that was what you wanted, and you may as well know I don't like it. Everything here is—false."

"Come in here before you go," he said, not perturbed by my remark.

We entered what was evidently his study. It was the

simplest part of the castle I had seen. Jells of Uffitsian landscapes glowed on the walls, giving life to what was otherwise an austere room.

Another of the pink statues stood in a corner. It moved forward and offered us drinks. Against my better judgment I took one, selecting the kind that I had drunk before. This statue was of a beautiful woman, blunt of countenance but queenly in her poise, so that my loins ached unexpectedly as she moved. A sudden pain of desire spread through my limbs; I stepped forward and touched the creature. Her flesh had a slight yielding quality; for all that it was cold and *unalive*.

I turned to Seyfert. Catching him looking at me in that same enigmatic way, I said angrily. "Why do you keep all these statues around?"

"You mean our pink plastic gods!" he exclaimed. Suddenly he became animated. "They're at once our slaves and our rulers! How do you like them, eh? Aren't they foul, aren't they vulgar? Aren't they the epitome of our stinking, decadent, useless, putrid civilization? Come on, Smith, I value your opinion as the first honest man I've met in years. Aren't they just the goddammed end of everything?"

"They're beautiful," I said.

"Beautiful! They're cheap and nasty! They're fakes. Famous sculptures brought to life. That was the Venus de Milo to greet us at the door. Michelangelo's David gave us our first drinks. This little beauty is one of Canova's marbles. The castle crawls with walking statues. 'Any masterpiece copied for your delight' is Monday's motto. I told you he manufactures them? Pink plastic outside, wheels and levers inside. The new household gods . . . know how many he sold last year alone? Over two million, at four megabucks a time. Even exports them to Uffitsi . . . I tell you the end's upon us."

This talk made me impatient. Seyfert had changed, his talk even growing more complex than it had been. He was speaking of the effete part of the world I shunned, had no dealings with. I guessed he was a bit drunk. Perhaps I was too.

"I said they're beautiful. They are beautiful to me.

You think they're ugly, don't you? Well that's your opinion, but don't stuff it down my throat. There doesn't have to be just one opinion about everything all the time, does there? "

"Have another drink, man, and keep quiet."

"I'm asking you a question, Seyfert. If you don't like these what you call pink plastic gods, why not throw 'em out? This is your place, isn't it? "

Seyfert sat in a chair, resting his face in his hands, obviously pursuing a line of thought of his own. The Canova lady had retired to her corner, from which she stared out at us without sight. At last Seyfert sat up and spoke.

"You call a thing a god because it has a power of its own—like these household gods on which we depend. We've all got gods in our mind, that we built and that now rule us. And money—there's a god! It rules most of our lives, rules us even when we have a pile of it, the way Cristobel and I have. No, you don't throw a god out . . . to try to is just to confirm its rule."

For a time, I listened with a sort of interest in his performance, because I believed that I understood Seyfert now. His remark about money struck me as true. But when he began to ramble, I lost interest and thought it was time to be getting home. I made a move. He broke off his soliloquy to stare up sharply at me.

"What sort of a man d'you find me, Smith? "

"You're deaf to all but your own eccentric music."

"'Deaf to all but my own eccentric music!' That's not a countryman's phrase. Countrymen ought to stick to the country—Earthmen ought to stick to Earth. Rich people ought to stick to rich people. Uffitsian women ought to stick to Uffitsian men. And I ought to keep my own company! "

He sat up suddenly, looking at me and rubbing his face.

"I've been talking wildly, but there's excuse for it if you knew what my life's been," he said. "I had a blow in my young life from which I've never been able to recover."

"You spend too long brooding over your life, sitting

up there on Barrow Hill as you do. Do some work, forget yourself, that's my advice."

"That's why *you* slave so hard?"

I looked at him in surprise, not expecting such a shrewd remark from him. I nodded my head.

"Tell me the story of your life, Smith. Tell me why you aren't the simple countryman you look."

Normally I'd have said nothing. Perhaps the two drinks loosened my tongue, because suddenly I wanted to tell the brief and shaming story to him. I said, "That's easily done. Over half a century ago, before I was born, Uffitsi and Earth found each other. First meeting of interstellar civilizations, wasn't it? I was delivered while the first excitement was on and the flags were still waving in the back streets.

"You know man's natural talents—out of this so-called Greatest Event in History, all sorts of crooked deals were hatched. Everyone wanted to get rich out of it in any way they could, and with Uffitsi being undeveloped, a host of fraudulent real estate dealers prospered. Remember the Hardacre Earth Transpace Stock Company? No reason why you should remember it."

"I do remember it," Seyfert said.

"My father was involved in that. It sold parcels of land on Uffitsi it had no right to sell. This was in the days before we realised the Uffitsians were our equals in most things and our superiors in many. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their savings in the Hardacre Company. When it went bust, so did my father.

"He lost every penny he had one day and shot himself the next. The shock killed my mother. I was their only child, a talentless boy of twelve. I hired myself out as an agricultural labourer and I've worked on the land ever since. That's all my history, Seyfert, and a damned bleak one it is."

It was a long spech for me. When I had finished, I more than ever wanted to get home. Certainly I had no wish to hear his life story, which I could feel was brewing up in him.

"Funny things happen in a man's life," Seyfert remarked sombrely.

"I've heard that remark before. I'm going home to bed." To hell with his platitudes. It occurred to me he had probably not heard a word I had said.

"Don't leave me yet, Smith. This party will go on for hours still."

"Goodnight, ma'am," I said to the pink plastic goddess in passing.

Seyfert caught up with me as I descended the escalator, running after me with an empty glass clutched in one hand.

"I'll ride you home."

"Thanks. I can walk three miles. It's no hardship for me."

"I'll ride with you then—it'll be a pleasure to get away. Just let me get a coat . . ."

So I had his life story on the way home. It was a velvet sort of night, with the moon like a millstone rolling just above the hedges, and I could have enjoyed it better without words.

He started right from his childhood, how his father had made money investing in the Scullpepper FTL Drive, and who his mother was. With the gentle noises the hondlepegg made, the rattle of its bridle, the pad of its hooves, I failed to catch a lot of this. Maybe I was not listening too closely. I was watching some bats wheeling and dipping over our path.

"Then when I was just a very young shaver, I decided to follow in my father's footsteps and make money," Seyfert continued. "I invested a small legacy in the Hardacre Earth Transpace Stock Company."

I groaned. At once I believed I knew where his history was leading.

"When would this be, about?" I enquired.

"About the year twenty-sixty, I'd say. I know I bought that stock before I bought my first razor. I marched right into the Hardacre Company's main offices with the cash in notes in my hand. And the funny thing was, I even spoke to Joseph Hardacre himself. I can see him clearly to this day—rather your long shape of face, but sprouting a big moustache.

"He must have taken a liking to me. Perhaps a young

sucker's more fun than an old sucker. And I took to him, the old fraud. He invited me into his office and gave me a drink, and we sat jawing for quite a time after I parted up with my money."

There's a limit to all things. I could no longer bear that old voice creaking on the violet air. Grabbing the bridle of his mount, I stopped it dead.

"Listen here, Aurel Seyfert," I said, "since you've pressed me so far, time has come to set you straight on things I'd rather have left buried. I didn't tell you before but I'd better tell you now that this Joseph Hardacre you're talking about was my father. Smith's not my name any more than it's yours. I'm Joseph Hardacre's son, blast my luck. I've spent all my life getting clear away from people like you who want to tell me how my father ruined them when the stock bubble burst. As you've made another pile since, I can't see I need listen to your complaints on that score."

And with that I moved on fast. In fact I jog-trotted, eager to get back to those humble little neosimians who were like daughters to me. Never mind how bad I felt. My father's schemes had put a curse on me; his financial jugglings had upset my life right from childhood; and whenever I had peace of mind it seemed they would rise up again to destroy that peace.

"Hardacre!" Seyfert called urgently. Not for a long time had I answered to that name, and I wasn't going to start again now. I ran on.

Understand I was confused in my mind. Does it matter to anyone what I thought or felt in that moment, since it is all past now? But the truth was I was not only moved by the old disgust at my father's reckless dishonesty. I was also angry at Seyfert for destroying my previous image of him. His silent and brooding silhouette upon the bare hill had meant something to me. It had been—oh, maybe the words are too big to be true—a personification of all my personal regrets. He had been a symbol up there, probably a guilt symbol; I told you I lived by symbols. To find that the real thing was just an old man worrying about some money he had lost went down badly. I had hoped his woes were something much bigger, something

heroic. Tragedy should never have a cash value.

With my thoughts racing so fast, I never heard him ride up beside me.

"You've got the wrong end of the stick, James," he said.

James! I said nothing, just kept forging ahead. I'm not a man for argument.

"You didn't hear the rest of what I had to say," he called.

"Go back to your pink plastic gods, you old fool, and leave me be."

He spurred the hondlepegg, wheeling it round in front of me so that I had to stop. Slipping from his saddle, he seized me by the overalls.

"You're a stubborn man, James. Hold hard for once and listen to what I've got to say. Yours aren't the only troubles in the world."

I should have knocked him down had I been a few years younger. Instead I just stood there. Maybe it was the novelty of someone really wanting to talk to me.

"Your father may have cost me cash, but he made my life, James. I owe Joseph Hardacre more than I can tell. You see, when people found out that there was no land for sale on Uffitsi and his whole scheme went bust, I went out to Uffitsi on a Scullpepper ship to see if I could save anything out of the ruins. Ah, I'd be about eighteen. It was the adventure of my life, my real day of days, when we hit Uffitsi.

"My worthless scraps of contract named four square miles of territory near the Yovaquoy River in Southern Region. I went there just to have a look, and met Pampas. It was under one their big fruit trees—I forget their name—and Pampas was there picking fallen fruit with a basket on her hip.

"There's a sort of legend growing round Earth nowadays that Uffitsi is ugly and its women are unattractive. The rumour's been fostered, I guess, by the Spatial Anti-Miscegenation Laws of twenty-seventy, forbidding Terrestials and Uffitsians to marry in case they beget freaks. But I found the place beautiful, and Pampas even more beautiful. I fell in love with her right there under that fruit

tree, and she fell in love with me."

Now he could see he had no need to hold me, Seyfert walked along by my side, with the Uffitsian beast following on behind. The bats had gone now, and the wayside grass was loaded with dew. His white hair gleamed in the twilight. I kept thinking it was somehow childish for men like us to be talking about love.

"I suppose you know what Uffitsians look like," he continued. "They're much like us, only tall. Pampas was a good head taller than me, very thin and spindley, but graceful. So graceful. Her hair changed colour with the Uffitsian seasons. In the winter it was a wonderful greyish green, quite indescribable. You see I tell you all this, but you only get the words, not the atmosphere. She was just so wonderful and strange and sweet I couldn't take my eyes or lips off her . . .

"Anyhow . . . We went through a kind of Uffitsian marriage ceremony with the approval of her clan. I'd decided never to come back to Earth, and all father's dough was not going to tempt me back. Now you must understand James, Pampas and I were pioneers in what you might call interplanetary love-making. When she found that she had conceived and was due for a baby, neither of us knew what it'd be like. Yet such was the way we felt that we had no fears about it.

"She carried it in her slender body for near two years, the way Uffitsian women do, and often she was sick. But when the little thing was born it was a son as right as rain, and both of us were full of happiness.

"We called the boy Adam. As we worked in the valley, so he grew, spindley and gentle, shy and fey, and sweet as sunshine. He was different from both of us, odd and elusive, yet full of affection—and full of fun. Ah, James, my god, but those were happy, happy years, the very best that life could bring . . ."

He paused, a catch in his voice. Barrow Hill was rising ahead of us, dark now the moon was nearly set. Miles away, an FTL ship left its sparky blue trail in the heavens, and at the same moment an early cock crowed. The men who work the new space lanes have forgotten how the old life of Earth goes on. Some of these pansy

space pilots ought to come down and work the Earth a bit, the way I have to.

"Carry on with your story, Aurel," I said.

"We were the contentedest trio on Uffitsi or Earth; Pampas, Adam, and I. Even when at the age of three Adam still couldn't say one word, we didn't worry. We understood all the little things he ever wanted. Hell, Pampas and I didn't talk much either. We didn't need to, and I've never been the talking kind—except tonight with too much wine in my old veins. It's all such a long time ago. You forget, you know, even when you think you are remembering. I'm just an old bore nowadays, no good to anyone."

"I'm listening, aren't I? Get on with your story."

"Yes. Well, as I say, we were happy. But all bright dear things come to an end, and so we came to the year twenty-seventy. There had been ten years' communication between the two planets by then, and the politicians and scientists on either side were getting the reins between their hands. Funny thing, by my reckoning they always do more harm than all your swindlers and individualists put together. Maybe because they have more power.

"However that may be, in twenty-seventy the Anti-Miscegenation Laws were passed with cheers from all the do-gooders in the universe. The net result was the establishing of strict segregation from which it'll take Uffitsi ages to recover. If you can picture a cross between the colour bar in the United States and the apartheid that ruled what was the South African Republic last century, you have an idea of what happened on that beautiful planet almost overnight.

"So I found myself outside the law, with my marriage declared null and void, and Adam officially proclaimed a Sport. According to biologists it was amazing we'd had a living child at all. Yes, they caught up with us, the bastards. We could have gone on living peacefully in that valley for ever, Pampas and Adam and I, but the officials came with their cases full of forms and police support. Hardacre, I could have killed every mother's son of them—yet they were nice polite men, personally very sorry for interfering, but orders were orders and the law was

the law . . . You know the attitude. No law is so legal as a new law, and we couldn't escape it.

"We were all three hauled up for trial in a city a thousand miles away from our valley. We did the journey on the Uffitsian monorail, under government escort. On the way—it must have been just the sorrow of it all—poor little Adam died. He did it so easily, James, so easily, like falling into an after dinner doze, and never a word he spoke."

I did not know what to say. Dying has always seemed to me the hardest job a man can put his hand to. Of course, for all Seyfert said, his kid was a freak, no denying it. We walked in silence for some way while I mulled the matter over, until Seyfert wiped a hand across his eyes and spoke again.

"Anyhow, the long and the short of it was, Pampas and I were found guilty of miscegenation. My father—a powerful man by now—pulled strings and got me back to Earth. I've never seen Pampas since, don't know if she's alive or dead. Probably she's dead by now, and maybe better off that way."

"It's a hard story, Aurel," I said. Now I knew where his melancholy looks came from: my symbol of guilt had his own guilts to nurse. With difficulty I found something sympathetic to say. "I hope your marriage to Cristobel made up to you in some ways."

He laughed harshly.

"I was forced into that. My father wanted it. It was the debt I owed him and Mother for saving me from an Uffitsian prison sentence. Now I've got three sons and a daughter, all normal terrestrial offspring. I've watched them all grow up and away from me, growing strong and rich and far too clever. They mean nothing . . . Well, you saw them."

Now we were going down the track to my cottage, all the world hushed round us, the shapes of hedges black about our ears.

I knew how he felt now. While his family turned to what they thought of as the future, and worshipped their pretty moving statues, he huddled up inside himself regretting the good life he had once tasted.

"Little Adam's never grown away from me," Aurel said. "In my mind, his laughter and tears are as fresh as they ever were. I see him every day, safe from the fools that surround me."

He had arrived at my little place. The pigs snorted as they heard us coming. Suddenly I was eager to see young Judy and her five fellow-slaves, to see that they were sleeping safe before I got some sleep myself. Seyfert sniffed with self-pity beside me; turning, I saw a tear glint in the starlight.

"You live in the past too much, Seyfert," I said, picking up a lantern and preparing to see how the neosimians were doing. "It's late. You'd better get home or they'll be wondering where you are, Cristobel and the rest."

"You're a hard man," he said, his voice hardening as he spoke.

That I didn't answer. But what I thought inside was, Why should I comfort him? The bastard, he has something happy to remember.

Unlatching the wooden door, I stepped into the monkey-hut with its six small bunks.

"Goodnight, Hardacre," he called from outside; but I did not reply for fear of rousing the little sleepers.

BRIAN ALDISS

The poem on page 4 has been specially written for this number by Fr. Peter Levi, S.J. It is probably the first time that a new poem by a leading poet has been printed in an s-f magazine. We hope that you will enjoy it and ask for more. *Editor.*

Even when war between men was just something hateful in history-books, war still had to be waged—against the Brutes. And as always, the man who would cheerfully throw away his life was the man who could not be spared. Like Barrington, who backed his cunning against—

THE CONTRAPTION

by Kenneth Bulmer

They all saw him die without a sound. On the closed-circuit screen, the silent flare of the explosion, utterly sudden, utterly deadly, momentarily blinded the watching men in the bunker.

Bill Barrington was not the first man to gamble his life against the thing out there. He was, in fact, the fifth. Like all the others, he had lost. Luke Rawson fought down the sick, helpless anger in him, the useless nerve-corroding rage. Bill Barrington had been a friend. Now he was only a memory. They wouldn't find enough of him decently to bury in a matchbox.

Inside the bunker, cigarette smoke hung in thick coils in the air. Noises stung supersensitve ears. Sweat runnelled all their faces and chests—everyone was stripped down to singlets and shorts. But the over riding sensory impression was the stink of fear: the fœtid unacknowledged aroma of rank, soul-destroying fear.

Twenty men cramped into the observation bunker in a space designed for twelve—Admiral Simmons had insis-

ted on being present at this one. The designers had filled every wall, the ceiling and the floor with machinery and screens and control panels. Even the back of the door was densely covered with fuse boxes.

"Another brave man," Simmons said. "Another." The iron in his voice had been tempered by time and disillusion. "Waste. Utter waste."

He did not finish what he had been going to say but rose, picked up his black jacket, stiff with braid, from the back of his chair and shouldered out, big and tough and completely ruthless. Rawson knew that the admiral would mourn the passing of Bill Barrington for so long as it took him to walk out of the bunker and across to his command flier. The Martian desert all about them was not so pitiless or single-minded as Admiral Simmons.

The others rose deferentially as the Admiral left, followed by his aides. Of the visitors, only Rawson was left. He stopped for a moment to talk to Captain Brown, in charge of the abortive operation.

"A damn rotten show," said Captain Brown. He was thin with deeply cut grey lines parallelling his nose, his mouth thinned and bloodless. The disillusion in him had been absorbed from the atmosphere enveloping them all.

"Bill Barrington was a good man," Rawson said. "As good as they come."

"But not good enough," said Brown. "Not good enough for this job—as he so conclusively proved."

Distaste moved in Rawson. "He's the fifth. Is anyone good enough?"

Captain Brown gestured tiredly; but his voice was frosty. "Yes. Don't forget, captain, we are men. And no damn alien is going to beat an Earthman—"

Going out, leaving Brown still orating, Rawson felt a flicker of doubt. Man always had been good enough so far to meet and beat anyone or anything he'd encountered in space. Even the sick disillusion in Brown couldn't drown out the supporting knowledge that Earthmen always won through.

Going after the others to the admiral's command flier and the inevitable conference, Rawson wondered. Earth was fighting an unwanted interstellar war against aliens

from Bruzzi IX—Brutes, the men of Earth called the aliens. It wasn't clever or even very original—but it adequately summed up men's feelings about the grey-skinned, lowering, powerful brutes of aliens who refused every overture of friendship and fought like maniacs on sight. So far the struggle for survival had revolved around warship speeds and striking powers. There were gaping areas of space between the stars of the two rival combines that had to be kept free of enemy interference, no less for the Brutes than for the Terrans. So far no planets had been invaded. So far only a handful of planets on the rims had felt the hot breath of war. So far men and Brutes were not hurting each other in their own back-yards. So far . . .

Luke Rawson knew—along with every other thinking man—that the time was approaching when the people of the Terran grouping would reel back under shattering blows from space. Rawson only hoped that the Brutes would reel, too, from attacks from Earth.

And now—now the aliens from Bruzzi had turned clever. They had introduced something fresh and deadly into the chess-game of murder between the stars, and until that secret was deciphered then men must die.

As Bill Barrington had died.

Rawson broke into a tired lope over the last ten yards to catch the command flier's ladder and haul himself up into the passenger cabin. He flopped into a seat and sat, not seeing the other high experts about him, sunk in his own moody thoughts. On top of his own worries he was being badgered by this fellow Holtby. Lord knew what the man wanted. So far he'd been held at bay by LeRoy, Rawson's second. But LeRoy had said that Holtby was so insistent that they'd all get some rest if Rawson consented to see him.

Luke Rawson let his head flop back against the neck-support and he slept, fitfully and uneasily, on the short hop into Templetown, the local Headquarters. Templetown was uninspiring, a huddle of domes projecting from the sand, with launching-bays and fields to one side. Beneath the ages-old crust of Mars, Templetown extended in a hundred square miles of tunnel and cavern, a

mile deep, filled and humming with hectic activity. Rawson, half asleep, couldn't have cared less. He kept seeing Bill Barrington, vanishing in that soundless explosion, again and again, as though a film sequence had jammed in his mind.

If it hadn't been for what Rawson had brought back from space, Bill Barrington would still be alive.

The conference—the inevitable conference—got under way a scant hour after the command flier had scudded down to her berth. In that hour Rawson had had a shower and a meal and, one degree fresher, walked along to the top-secret conference room. This one, like the others, would be futile, too.

"Five," Captain Matsu was saying, thudding a fist into his palm. "Five. I'd like to blow the Brutes up with their own devilish tricks."

Rawson found a seat at the long mahogany table and let his tired body sink down. He reached for the carafe and glass. Commander Pulaski was doodling nothings on a jotter. He was blue-chinned and squat. He looked up at Matsu, trim and dapper, with pomade over his ears, and said: "We'd all like that, captain. The trick is how to swing it?"

Matsu nodded perfunctorily towards Rawson. "There's the genius. He's brought in three of these beauties. Do we send him out again for a sixth?"

Rawson drank water. His hand was perfectly steady. He did not bother to reply to the oblique question.

Pulaski glowered at his jotter, then ripped out the page, screwed it up and flung it savagely from him. The automatic dispenser caught it and tucked it away down the slot. "A full-size battle fleet out beyond Endymion might be more to the point," he growled.

"Sound tactics," nodded Matsu, smoothing his hair. "Apart from the awkward fact that we don't have a spare battle fleet hanging around doing nothing."

Rear Admiral Cyrus Q. Ombebe turned from his long scrutiny of the wall charts. His black face caught the reflected lights in sweat-beads so that, for that moment, he shone like a pagan idol. He looked as tired as the others around the table; yet the spring in his walk, the

fire in his voice were as volatile as they had been when this hopeless quest had begun.

"All over here," he said, tracing a quick finger circle on the charts. "All these stars are supposed to be Terran dominated. The trade-lanes should be safe. Yet—"

"Yet we lose merchant ships every week," Pulaski said angrily, rising and stamping across to the rear-admiral. Rank, here in this tension-filled conference room, was a minor matter. "And I say it's because of that damned gadget Rawson brought back."

Luke Rawson remained silent. He drank more water.

Captain Matsu was about to say something when the harsh tramp of feet beyond the door, the slap as the sentry came to attention, brought them all out of their chairs. They stood silently as Admiral Simmons and his aides entered.

Simmons waved a hand and the conference sat.

"Right, gentlemen. You know why you are here. The same reasons apply now as applied after the first—after all four." He gestured brusquely to an aide, who pressed buttons.

Rawson closed his eyes. "Oh, no!" he said to himself in bleak despair. "I can't stand it all over again."

But when the wall screen lit up and they ran through the film of Barrington's death, he watched with chilled attention, absorbed. Every movement made by the doomed man held a significance. They had to beat this hoodoo, break down the secret the Brutes had built into their ships, a secret that everyone knew—felt in their spacemen's bones—was responsible for the incredible number of losses out beyond Endymion.

The camera steadied on the object beneath Barrington's fingers. Complex, complicated, convoluted, it sprouted from the decking of the alien starship—the Brute cruiser that Rawson had detected, run up on, engaged, beaten and taken and brought back to Mars.—flowering in intricate curves and angles of metal, plastic and glass. The colours flowed over it in ever changing patterns. It vibrated slightly, a pulse of pseudo-life. Looking at it, remembering riding with the devilish contraption all the way back to Mars from Endymion, Rawson recalled too the cold

shudders the thing had sent shivering over him all that dismal journey. And then, at the end of all that, Bill Barrington had had to die.

Barrington had been the expert on booby-trapped bombs, delays, triggers, trips; all the multifarious gadgets used by the aliens to protect their secret weapons were, in theory, an open spool to Barrington. But he hadn't beaten this one. This one had sneered in his face and then blown up, taking him along with itself and this strange and pseudo-alive object.

Rawson had watched that alien artifact all the way home from Endymion, so he was able to observe coolly the subtle movements of Barrington's hands. The comentary came over this time, that previously had been fed only into the auditory group's 'phones.

"*. . . standard Mark Twenty-nine trigger here,*" came Barrington's steady, husky voice. No hint of panic in it. "*There. That's the trembler gone. Now to withdraw . . . yes, that's clear. Lay it down gently, Bill boy . . . Right. Now what's this little doohickey? Umm. Yes, rather an interesting variation on the Mark Fifty snatch-fuse. You slip your crevice-tool in to stop the contact and the beast snatches back the other way . . . Very clever. I'll take this slowly so the cameras have a full look in.*"

Looking at Barrington, knowing what he knew, Rawson still wanted to jump from his chair and scream a warning.

Around him in the conference-room the high experts were breathing irregularly, reliving those few pregnant minutes. Admiral Simmons sat hunched like a rock, immobile, his face scoured clean of expression. Rawson's eye crawled unwillingly round to the old man, needing the strength and calm that he was wrapped in. Then Barrington's recorded voice changed in timbre, snatching his eyes back to the screen, snapping every sense back to the alert.

"*This is as far as Jeffries got, I think.*" Jeffries had blown himself up on Number Four. "*So we just take it a leeetle eeasier from now on . . . The next stage looks like a modified Mark Twenty-Nine. Humm, Bill, boy,*

don't touch that yet. Think that one over. Why a Mark Twenty-Nine when we've just gone through one? These triggers and trips may not all be set to a single charge. As to where the charge is, that is yet to be established. The whole thing isn't a bomb. That we know. It's some sort of scientific gadget they want to protect. Right. So they smother it with booby traps. Right again."

On the screen the pictured face of Barrington swam with sweat. His nostrils pinched in. The hands above that evil, alien mechanism were quite steady, sure and deft, the hands of a master surgeon. "*I theenk,*" he said softly, "*I theenk we'll go in here, Bill, boy. This one is a new 'un. Yes. Hullo! What's that—oh—God!*"

The rest had been snipped off the film.

"So," said Admiral Simmons, turning to face the conference. "He knew that it was coming to him. He saw what he'd done wrong."

A disembodied voice lower down the table said: "He looked death in the face."

Simmons chose to ignore that. He switched his stony glare towards a young lieutenant, sitting sweating and with his youthful, fresh face pallored over with a sickly green.

"Explain what you think the modified Mark Twenty Nine was," he barked. "And also the new things that Barrington discovered."

The lieutenant swallowed twice and licked his lips.

"Take your time, Bikila," said Rear Admiral Cyrus Q. Ombebe softly.

Lieutenant Bikila flashed him a grateful glance. Then, in a surprisingly strong voice, he said: "We list the Brute booby traps by Mark numbers. Twenty Nine is a particularly nasty one, able to be fused in any of a dozen different ways. I'll have to see the cuts of the cameras angled down—that's routine, sir. As to the new one that Bill—uh—Barrington saw. From the photographs it's quite impossible to judge. I'd have to work direct on a model."

Admiral Simmons wasted no time. He swung that ferocious glare on Rawson. "Captain Rawson."

"Yes, sir," Rawson said, sitting up. "I understand."

"Can you do it again quickly?"

Rawson fought off the dull anger in him. Could he do it again quickly? Could he do it again at all was a question more to the point. The Brutes had some wonderful new instrument in their control cabins. With its aid they were knocking Terran ships out of space beyond Endymion like snipe at shooting time. To protect that instrument in case of capture they had so efficiently booby-trapped it that five of the best brains of Earth had blown themselves up. Open and shut. Go out and take another example—so that Lieutenant Bikila could have his chance to blow himself up.

Rear Admiral Ombebe coughed and then, quietly, said: "Might it not be quicker to have a ship in that area pick up a Brute—?"

Admiral Simmons did not bother to look at Ombebe. He said: "I'm afraid you have not had time to familiarise yourself with all phases of this operation, Admiral. Captain Rawson's ship has special equipment."

"I see." Ombebe didn't push it. He had only just joined the committee and he was fresh from Endymion. He had been seeing the results of the Brutes' handiwork face to face.

Into Rawson's mind rushed the host of detail that has ever plagued a ship captain's waking and sleeping hours. Oh, yes, he would go out again into the dark spaces beyond Endymion, the last friendly Terran base until your ship had made the long haul across to the Gobi cluster. Apt name, that, Gobi cluster, for those stars swam in a desert of space and drew their skirts away from the swarms of stars and planets comprising the rim of Terran influence. There were scattered stars lying along the wide sweeping trade routes; but none possessed planets of any use.

Out there—beyond Endymion, where the merchant ships fled in frightened clumps, like sheep herded by their watchful, tongue-lolling dogs. Those tireless dogs were the ships of the Terran Navy's escort fleets, and the Brutes were running them ragged. Out there in the vasty dark was no place for weaklings, no quiet contemplation of the stars, out there lay only horror and

destruction and final, merciless death.

He realised that he had not yet answered Simmons' question. But no answer was necessary. The granite admiral knew what the answer would—must—be.

Captain Brown, along with the others taking Rawson's assent in their stride, began the detail of the enquiry. Rawson intervened. "*Lynx* is in need of attention, sir. May I be excused? I shall have to work—"

"Very well, captain. Please. And"—that stony face did not relent a fraction; but some quality in the words touched Rawson deeply. "And, Rawson—thank you."

He made his formal farewells, picked up his black cap with its double row of braid, acknowledged the sentry's salute, and walked slowly out of the building onto the endless walkway of Templetown.

Coming out onto the underground space workshops, where the giant gantries lifted and the caverns of machinery hummed everlastingly, he stopped for a moment to look upwards. A quiet pride, a pride of humility, filled him as he looked on *Lynx*. Her lath-lean hull soared in strange contrast to the stubby, powerful hulls of battle-ships studding the shops, with the flares of working parties crawling on their hulls. *Lynx* was all speed, all fire-power and all gadgetry. A schoolboy with a rubber-powered catapult could put a marble through her "plating" at twenty paces. That made for disturbed dreams.

He took a pickup truck out to her. Lieutenant-Commander LeRoy met him at the lock.

"Good to see you back, skipper."

"We're off again, as soon as we can, Roy. Cheer up! This time we'll do it all in our sleep."

LeRoy looked uncomfortable. "Uh, skipper. That last one—?"

Slowly Rawson shook his head.

LeRoy said: "Did I know him?"

"Bill Barrington."

"Oh, hell." LeRoy turned away. "I'll push those grease-monkeys... Bill Barrington. Oh sweet stinking violcts." The phrase was cutting, powerful. Sweet violets was the final bed of so many good men.

Then, held by a thought that had been worrying him all day—Martian day, courtesy Greenwich Mean Time —LeRoy stopped and said: "Oh, skipper. That chap Holtby— "

"What about him? Good grief, Roy! We've a job to do."

"I know sir. But—well, he's insistent. And he has papers. He wouldn't show me. Insists on seeing you."

"Where is he? "

"I parked him in the wardroom with a big gin to cool off."

"All right. Send him to my space-cabin and tell him I can spare five minutes. No more. Check? "

"Check, sir."

In those five minutes Rawson intended to shave, eat a scratch meal Jekins, the pantryman would bring in, and decide just what priorities must over-ride all else.

He made a miscalculation there, for a start.

In his space cabin—a metal box, spartan, functional, he shaved with his right hand and stuffed egg-and-bacon sandwiches into his contorting mouth with his left. Jekins said: "Colonel Holtby, sir."

Rawson stopped shaving. Through bacon and egg he said: "Colonel! Colonel Holtby? "

"At last, captain, at last." Holtby was large and powerful, with the sort of face that could glare right back after a steamroller had passed over it. He was wearing civilian clothes and carried a brief case. Rawson did not miss the slight bulge under his left armpit.

"My second didn't tell me you were army, colonel. My apologies."

"Now I have at last seen you, that doesn't matter. I'm coming along with you on this trip, and so my rank— "

"You're coming along! I'm sorry. That's quite impos— "

"I assure you captain, that it is not. If you will just glance at these papers . . . "

In five seconds Rawson knew he would be taking Holtby along. "Terran Intelligence. Well, well. I never thought I'd actually meet a TI man in the flesh." He

almost added sarcastically: "No cloak and dagger, I see." But then he remembered the bulge under the armpit, and remained silent. Holtby would bear watching.

"I have this ship to make spaceworthy," Rawson pointed out quietly. "If you're coming with us, you can tell me what you need to tell me—and from what little I know of TI men that won't be much—when we're spaceborne."

"Good. Thank you, captain. I'll wait for you to call me."

And he was gone with the grace of a stalking panther.

Holtby was a first class man, Rawson decided. Then he forgot everything else in the concentrated labour of bringing *Lynx* back into fighting trim.

Taking that last Brute—the devil that had destroyed Bill Barrington in her cabin—had cost *Lynx* a few square feet of plating, a busted driver and a section of three turrets knocked out. The casualties had been buried in space. Those Brute gunners shot exceedingly straight.

Waiting out in orbit just past Deimos lay *Lynx's* armour. Layer after layer of steel plating, forming the petticoats of armour into which the ship would snuggle like a pip in an onion, her armour was frighteningly little, cut right down so that it could withstand a bare minimum of Brute shooting. Proof of that lay in the shattered hull of the ship's fabric itself. Rawson drove his crew hard, and the dockyard maties responded, so that in far less time than anyone would have thought possible, *Lynx* was ready to space out again. She lifted jets, picked up her armour and, cocooned in its deceptive protection, went onto her Stellengers for the long haul out to Endymion.

After that and with a twelve-hour stretch of sleep behind him, Rawson felt human again and able to listen to Holtby.

The colonel bent his craggy head over the table in Rawson's cabin. The flood of light from above gleamed from his cheekbones, cast a lurid light and shade over that domineering face. He turned out the briefcase and

opened a star chart. Rawson looked at it, waiting.

Holtby placed a large square finger on a star smack in the wastes between Endymion and Gobi.

"There, captain, is my target."

At first Rawson did not understand.

When Holtby had explained further, Rawson said: "You want me to take you to that star—if I understand aright—and drop you in a picket-boat onto a planet you claim is also there?"

"Precisely, captain. You have seen my papers. We're all in this war against the Brutes together; yet there are certain things that cannot be generally revealed."

"I know that," Rawson said frostily. "But it would be nice if sometimes the left hand knew what the right was up to."

Holtby chuckled. "I have full authorisation from the Navy Board—oh, yes, that is so. It was considered that a quiet little transaction between the prime parties—you and me, captain—would fit the equation better than a cloak-and-dagger arrival of a secret-service man and his equipment aboard a Terran Navy cruiser. You follow?"

A certain fear clutched Rawson then. He had been hearing rumours, strange stories that he did not want to believe. Slowly, he said: "Do you think the Brutes can infiltrate Earthmen, colonel? Can they pass as men and spy on us?"

Holtby's craggy face was stark in the lamplight. "I don't know. I don't believe anyone does. But my department considered it wise not to advertise my presence. Now we are in space we—"

"We consider any alien an enemy and fire if there are no recognition signals. Oh, yes. We can fight 'em in space."

"And we'll win."

"Have a noggin on that." Rawson filled the glasses. "Mist over your grave," he said, without thinking.

Holtby's face split into a mighty smile. His eyes puckered in folds of flesh. "University of Venus!"

"Right. You, too—?"

For the next hour they talked old schools and clubs

without a break. Rawson's parents, farmers in a middle-sized way on Venus, had sent their only son to U of V in the hope he would learn agriculture and return to run the farm in a super-scientific way. But young Luke Rawson had had his eyes fixed on the stars beyond the cloaking mists of Venus, and he had joined the Space Navy. His parents had accepted that, after a bitter struggle. Rawson was a man with a single-purpose mind; until a job was finished he allowed nothing to distract him. He'd left the farm and the girl and gone into space. He'd never regretted that decision.

Not until—perhaps—now. Now that he was engaged on a mission that, if he was successful, would bring death to a young bomb-happy lieutenant back on Mars.

"Of course," he said, "you understand I've no authority to put you down—where was it?" He checked the chart. "On Cudham I. If there is a Cudham I."

"There is. The star's a pretty fierce fellow and the planet should be far enough out for water to remain liquid."

"Yes," agreed Rawson. "That's the acid test of habitability."

"I shall be going in alone. My pinnace was shipped aboard along with my gear."

"Humph," said Rawson.

"As to the pick-up—"

"I've a mission of my own, you know—"

"Yes. I'm not aware of the details, of course. But I was told that you were the fastest ship going out past Endymion and returning as fast. Just what I wanted. No other ships suitable and those suitable not available. It's always the same in space."

"Rawson fingered his glass. "Science is a pretty wonderful force. It's abolished nearly all disease, given us ample food and power, enabled us to ride comfortably between the stars. We're even beginning to have a glimmering of understanding about the human brain. By using the powers of scientific thought and processes in a logical and reasonable way we've brought humanity along in pretty fine shape. But science is only a tool. Science can be used by others besides men—is being

used. We know that. When aliens meet up with us they're using scientific methods just as we are. So it boils down then— "

"To a contest between man and alien."

"Right, a straight fight. And the man with the better science will win. We trust."

"So? "

"So I put you down on Cudham I and go off on my lawful duties. I might not get back, colonel. Science cannot yet completely control the laws of chance. *Lynx* might be destroyed. You'd stay a mighty long time on that planet—if there is a planet."

"There is and I might. A risk." Holtby finished his drink. As he poured more Rawson knew that the colonel had thought through his own problems a long time ago. It made him appreciate the man more.

Lynx bored on through her peculiar space-time continuum that carried her in seven league boots through normal space. Rawson did not stop off at Endymion; he was fully fuelled, provisioned and armed. And he couldn't spare the time. The ship carried out exercises on the run. LeRoy, in particular, having charge of the tackybeam, was exercised almost off his feet. Three successes meant only that the odds against you had shortened.

From Endymion on out towards the distant glow of the wide-circling arm of the galaxy lay one of those strange blank areas, where dust had swirled millenia ago and, writhing clear, had left a stellar desert. On that route Earth was forced to punch men and supplies out to the Gobi cluster; for the Brutes lay beyond. Setting out, picking up, overhauling and leaving behind convoy after convoy, Rawson realised again how populous in terms of ships was all this area.

Finding an alien ship in space, with the help of modern radar, was not quite impossible; the Brutes managed it neatly enough, time after time.

It was now Rawson's turn again to find a Brute.

Holtby grew even more contained as Cudham came up. He waited by the lock on his pinnance, chatting to a subbie. Rawson clattered along steel ladders, wishing

to shake hands before Holtby left. Outside, filtered, swam the gross sun, Cudham. Their detectors had picked up the planet, and Holtby was on his way in.

"Best of luck."

"Thanks."

"We'll be back here in one week—Earth. Check?"

"Check." The lock sighed shut and the pinnace leaped from the flank of *Lynx,* and immediately her armoured flaps closed up like irises, tight against any possible attack.

"Hope he makes it, sir," ventured the subbie, McGarth.

"If anyone can, he will." Rawson smiled at the youngster.

Then he set about his own deadly hunting.

On the third day LeRoy straightened up from the ident machine. "A Brute, sir. Without question."

"Good," Rawson breathed. "May the Lord help him."

They vectored up on the alien, their radar baffles going at full blast, their Stellengers idling, matching velocities in this queer other-universe that extended in some impossibly distorted dimension. *Lynx* had once been armed with thirty Mark Two Wodens, each gun having six barrels and capable of punching out three hundred rounds a second. Each round was a cubic inch of fissile lead. To make room for LeRoy's tackybeam the dockyard had ripped out twenty of the Wodens, leaving *Lynx* with the punch of a kitten.

Rawson knew that. Knew, too, that his petticoats of armour had been drastically curtailed. He had to slide up in that wide grey blank of otherspace where sometimes the lurid glow of a supernova broke through from real space, slide up unobserved, pounce like the *Lynx* she was named for and take a Brute without being hurt too much.

Last time—well, that damage had been light.

As a battleship *Lynx* was past her prime; as a mobile fighting tug, she was deadly dangerous—if LeRoy could throw his tackybeam and make contact before *Lynx* was shot up. If . . .

"He must spot us by now!" McGrath was saying,

hands nervously clenching on the rail of the control panel. "He must!"

"Our dazzle equipment—" began Lieutenant French; but he subsided under the baleful glare of Rawson. Steadily, *Lynx* crept up. The Brute was showing clearly on the forward screen now, a slim, armoured shape that spelt Heavy Raiding Cruiser all over space. Any moment now that image would fade, flicker, disappear. That would mean the alien had spotted them and had turned her dazzlements on full blast.

At the optics the ratings sat watchful, keeping the Brute automatically balanced in the dead centre of their mirrors, watching him in this strange otherspace by the only rays that, so far, couldn't easily be baffled—light. For, of course, Rawson had weighed up his chances before this, everything went on in this otherspace at a steady, sedate speed relative to other objects—that they were hurdling the parsecs in moments in true space meant nothing. So he must wait for the precise, split second—

"Now!" His voice was perfectly controlled.

LeRoy swung the tackybeam into action. The Brute wiped herself off the forward screens, to be replaced immediately by an optical picture relayed from a telescope. She fired. For what it was worth, Rawson also gave the order to fire and the puny armanent of Wodens, mounted in their balls on outriggers, started to chatter, flinging out three thousand rounds a second.

Now was the moment of supreme danger. In any rational space-action the ships were in contact for a fleeting moment only, braking to hurl their thousands of tiny missiles at each other and then streaking away to avoid the return fire. Now Rawson had to hold on, jinking a little in hope of avoiding the Brute's salvo, bore in with LeRoy juggling his controls and the tackybeam waving about like a baton in the grip of a drunken conductor.

"Got her!" LeRoy shouted, sweat pouring off his face.

In the same moment *Lynx* ran into a fringe of the alien's fire. Lead pellets cracked into her armour, ripped

it apart, smashed their murderous way through to the hull. Lieutenant French span away, screaming, his lower body cut away. Lieutenant-Commander LeRoy glared stupidly at the place where his left hand had been. Then he said: "Got her!" And fell crumpled to the decking.

Death had struck at other places aboard *Lynx*. One of the Wodens was vapourised away from her outrigger; an atomic driver was splintered; a group of engineers clustered around a Stellenger had been crushed to pulp. But they had the Brute. They had her!

Feeling very tired, Rawson gave the necessary orders and waited as the lights dimmed, the song of the engines faltered and everyone's hair stood on end. Tremendous energy flamed along the tackybeam, speared into the alien, killed every living thing aboard in a single heartbeat.

"Head for Cudham," Rawson told the astrogator. With LeRoy out of action, he would have to see to cleaning up the ship himself—they were shorthanded now that French, too, was gone.

Old and outdated she might be, short on armour and short on Wodens, but *Lynx* was still a beauty. Rawson took a little time to return to his usual stern captaincy from the red ecstasy of fighting in space. No sane man could envisage a space-battle in a sane frame of mind; all the spacenavy fighting men were juvenile delinquents, all a little crazy—that was the only way to stay sane. He conned the ship back to Cudham, feeling like a man letting down after a hundred-metre dash.

Holtby was there. "I see we've company," were his first words as he stepped from the lock of his pinnace.

"Come and have a drink," said Rawson. Holtby looked done in. He had a week's growth of beard, his eyes were circled by red and black streaks, concentrically, and the look on his face was not good to see.

With a very large gin in his hand he said: "I'm glad you've succeeded in your mission, captain. I'm afraid I've failed in mine. His carved lips all at once softened, crumpled. "Failed rather badly, in fact." Suddenly he hurled his glass to the decking.

Rawson sympathetically remained silent as Holtby got over it. Failure to the big man was a new experience. Later Rawson said: "Care to tell me about it?"

They'd buried Lieutenant French and what they could find of the other casualties in space, and Rawson felt like hearing of someone else's woes, just as a sort of masochistic counterbalance. He felt as though he'd never been to sleep in his life.

"Well, can't do much damage now. Intelligence wanted a quiet little looksee at Cudham I. Feller called Withers had reported a planet; but there was some snag, he said. His full report never came through: only the fact that there was a planet there."

"And if we sent in a full scale Survey the Brutes might wonder why we were interested in a lone planet in the middle of nowhere—?"

"Right. It's of no use to anyone except as a base. TI asked me to land on the quiet and do a spot of surveying—army stuff. But I couldn't get down at all."

Rawson felt surprise. "But your pinnace—"

"Rocks, old boy. Rocks and stones and chunks of metal that'd rip out the guts of any ship fool enough to drop in among 'em."

"Like Saturn?"

"Like Saturn hell!"

Circling around Cudham I in an unbroken shell, said Holtby viciously, were literally billions of rocks. All sizes and shapes, he said, were there scraping and bumping, parting and closing up again as their horribly involved orbits clashed. Like a shell around a clam, that was Holtby's judgement. No going through—unless you had a secret passage.

When Holtby fell silent Rawson sat silent in turn. He screwed the glass around in his broad capable hands, thinking of Venus, his home planet. Finally he said: "But wouldn't the surface be in darkness, anyway?"

"No, I shouldn't think so. That sun is bright, and the shell of rocks is by no means a permanently light-tight barrier. As to what the surface may be like—well . . ."

"But it might serve the Brutes very nicely as

a base? "

Holtby looked up and the big savage face creased. "Yes. We don't know. We could just wipe the whole damn planet out—but we can't do that until we know what's below. We might wipe out a virgin planet—or one filled with friendly people. We just don't know."

"And until we get down— "

"We'll never know."

A fierce and completely irrational desire gripped Rawson to go back to Cudham I and to force a passage through that ship-wrecking shell. The sneaky thought hit him that Holtby was, after all, only army. It would take a Space-Navy man to let down through there—but he dismissed the thought with the contempt it deserved; Holtby's pinnace was equipped with first-rate astrogation equipment and Holtby was a first-class man. There had to be another answer.

Then Rawson stretched, still feeling the tiredness pulling down his back, and yawned. It wasn't his problem. He had to face the long run back with the Brute in tow, the tricky business of putting a prize crew aboard for the let-down onto Mars—tugs would swarm out ready to assist—and then the inevitable conference, the X-raying of the Brute device, the harrowing watching as a man attempted to uncover its booby-trapped secrets—and, very possibly, another soundless explosion and another friend shredded into thin pink flecks.

The sequence of events went off in his mind with a frightful deliberation that appalled him. He was back again in that devilish bunker, watching hypnotically that mocking screen as Lieutenant Bikila worked his way slowly through the alien booby traps. The same sweat of fear stank in the bunker. Admiral Simmons sat with his basalt face glowering at the screen. Everyone waited and watched and cringed at every move Bikila made.

If he blows up, Rawson thought deliberately, I'm not going back for another Brute. They can only shoot me.

Bikila did not blow up.

Rear-Admiral Cyrus Q. Ombebe had been working

hard since his appointment to the committee. Mockups reconstructed from photos and solidos had been made of the alien device. Bikila felt his way through with growing confidence.

Rawson's breath rasped in his throat, and his mouth was dry from too many cigarettes. Why did he have to watch this? It wasn't his department. But he knew he couldn't stay away.

Bikila's sweat-runnelled face swung towards the screen.

"The last trip," his voice came over the cut-in audios. "The last damn one. She's safe."

The booby-trap expert walked out of the alien ship like a very old man. He deserved the biggest medal Earth could give him; that Rawson knew. All he'd get, very probably, was another assignment. Ombebe hustled things then, his black face shining with enthusiasm, his eagerness transmitting itself to the experts who went aboard. Rawson heard the result of their findings when the inevitable conference opened.

Boiled down, what the experts had to say was—they could not understand the strange device, with its flushing colours and eerie pseudo-life. They had been able to take it to pieces when all the booby-traps had been removed. They had poked and pried and come up with an answer that floored the conference.

That answer was: "We do not believe this device has any practicable purpose."

"Rubbish," growled Admiral Simmons.

"The Brute cruiser is fully equipped for every department of warfare. Nothing is omitted that this device might exist to fulfill."

Rear Admiral Ombebe sat hunched forward, staring at a three-fifths scale model of the thing set up on the mahogany table. The very convolutions, the complexity, the exaggerated bizarreness of the thing worried them all—and it was left to Ombebe to make the obvious remark.

"We have been losing to many ships out there on that long run from Endymion. The aliens just slide up to our ships and knock them off and slide away again, untouched. They are fast and rangy and well-armoured.

Captain Rawson—I believe your salvoes had no effect on this one?"

"That is correct, admiral."

"If no one has the remotest idea of what this thing is *for*—what the hell it *does*—if all the best technical and scientific brains of the Space Navy cannot assign even a potential function to it—in short, if the thing does not do anything—then why is it aboard?"

Captain Matsu said carefully: "We believe the Brutes have no counterpart to our tackybeam. Oh, I know it's a suicide weapon. Captain Rawson had to go right close to get his beam into action at all. A Woden Mark Three would have knocked him out of space at three times the distance. But—but might not this thing be some sort of alien equivalent? Or might it not be a warning device?"

Ombebe considered. Then he shook his head. "It might be, captain. But I do not think so. The alien was *not* warned when Captain Rawson came in close. Only luck and superb spacemanship riding up the Brute's efflux did that for him. I say again that this device does nothing."

The fierce, choking, savage anger in Rawson blurred the room and he had to blink ferociously to see straight. He thought of the men who had been killed, right down to Bill Barrington and Frenchy, and of LeRoy's comments on his new prosthetic left hand—and all that had been wasted.

He stood up lurchingly. Every eye swung to him. He couldn't see the others clearly, all these high experts; but he was aware of the basalt face of Admiral Simmons like the beak of an oldtime ship thrusting through banks of fog.

"It's the oldest trick in the game," Rawson said hoarsely. "Do they think we're morons on Earth?"

They were on Mars; but it was a figure of speech. And everyone knew just what Rawson meant.

"Sure it's an old trick," Ombebe said. "But it's still a good one—"

"I cannot agree, admiral," Captain Matsu said in his thin, precise voice. "The Brutes cannot yet judge our

psychology well enough for this. I remain convinced that this device is installed aboard alien raiding cruisers for a specific purpose and function— "

"Yes," Ombebe said, punching the words home. "For a specific purpose and function. That of fooling us! Of making us spend time and money and men—men's lives!—on opening it up." His ebony face was passionate with his conviction.

"They must be laughing when they think of us being blown up trying to find out what a worthless piece of equipment does! I bet they had fun designing that thing!" Rawson sat down and reached for the carafe and glass. The laugh was on the men from Earth all right . . .

Pulaski was thumping the table and Bikila was swearing in a low monotone. Matsu, smoothing back his hair, was arguing violently with Ombebe. Rawson sat as the others wrangled—the pride of Earthmen had been stung. The conference had to face the unpalatable fact that they had been fooled—and they didn't like it.

"A decoy! A dummy!" Admiral Simmons' words froze the babble of sound. Everyone looked at the old admiral waiting.

Then—for the first time in the memory of anyone present—Admiral Simmons smiled.

Seeing that smile, Rawson suddenly felt very sorry for the man—or thing—who got in Simmons' way.

"The aliens from Bruzzi," said Admiral Simmons in his grating voice, "have been clever and almost successful. They have tied up this committee, they have wasted a considerable amount of effort on our part, they have misdirected other effort, and they have killed expensively-trained Earthmen. The installation of this device, which I am sure they can turn out in their spare time—as we would, a joke to be played on the enemy which we think up in off-duty hours—has cost them little. They have lost the cruisers we have captured; but we would have fought without our hands being tied by a tacky-beam otherwise— " He glanced at Rawson.

Rawson understood the use of 'we.' The navy were in this thing solidly. He nodded slightly.

"Captain Rawson could have destroyed the enemy more easily had he had his ship in fighting trim and had he not been under the compulsion of bringing the alien back."

Admiral Simmons sat back in his chair, pushing against the table edge. His knuckles looked like walnuts.

"We have only just in time seen through this. We could have gone on and on, worrying about the device and losing battles in space as a consequence. Think of the laboratory space we'd have consumed trying to find out what the thing did—!"

Captain Matsu said: "With respect, sir. I feel that there is something not quite explained yet."

"Yes, Matsu?"

"We have been losing ships out of proportion beyond Endymion. The aliens can throw fleets about like picket boats. I feel it my duty to put on record that in my considered opinion the continuous and unremitting attacks on the Gobi convoys are not based upon the ordinary use of spaceships. The aliens can concentrate and disperse so that our convoys cannot be adequately protected at all times. I think that the device has something to do with this."

Ombebe creased his forehead. "I will only add," he said shortly, "That what Matsu says is correct as far as the dispositions and speed of the aliens are concerned."

You had to admire Matsu, Rawson considered, not without a twinge of bitter amusement. With his pomaded hair and his precise manners and charm, Matsu looked the ladies' man, the fop, the brainless dandy. He would not have been seated on this committee had he not—along with the others—possessed the sharp brain and penetrating intellect of a first class navy officer—and that little something extra.

The conference was against Matsu. The tremendous wash of relief that swept over them when they realised that the alien device was a decoy, a dummy dreamed up to flummox them and make them waste effort on it, overbalanced and piddling thoughts of caution. Even Rawson, tired and fed up—perhaps because of that—

felt that at last they had beaten the Brute cleverness.

He voted along with the others that the device be considered a trick.

Matsu insisted on his right to submit a minority report.

Something that Matsu and Ombebe, between them, had said somewhere, buzzed around like an irritating gnat in Rawson's overworked brain. The conference broke up and he went back to *Lynx,* happy to be able to tell Commander Rawlins to look lively and unship the tackybeam projector and ship *Lynx's* full quota of Wodens. (Rawlins was standing duty temporarily whilst LeRoy got the feel of his artificial hand.) *Lynx* might be an old G & S battleship, outdated and due for the scrapheap; she was Captain Rawson's baby and he loved her with a fierce possessiveness never accorded any woman in his life.

Sub-Lieutenant McGrath—a man now after his experiences in space even though he was only nineteen—passed Rawson in Number three starboard passageway. Rawson stopped him.

"Seen Holtby around anywhere, subbie?"

"No, sir. He's left all his kit aboard, though."

"Right, thanks, McGrath."

"Oh, sir—" McGrath was diffident. "Will there be—uh, that is—" He slowed down and stopped in confusion.

Rawson smiled. It was a gentle smile. "Is it a girl, McGrath?"

"Oh, no, sir. My mother's on Mars on holiday, and—"

"I've no idea what our orders will be, son. We may have to space out tomorrow. But see Commander Rawlins. Tell him that if—no leave it. I'll see him myself."

"Oh, thank you, sir—"

"Commander Rawlins has been a Torpedo Officer, y'know, subbie. And you know what they say about those."

"Worse nut-cases than gunnery officers, sir, with respect."

"That's what they say." And Rawson, walking away, actually laughed. He laughed. Strange what your own

ship and its intimate, petty but infinitely important problems, could do to a skipper.

When he saw the Commander the progress-reports were good. Rawlins had worked the men hard. Their full thirty Wodens would be shipped in their outrigger balls, magazines filled and armour belaying-points bolted on in record time. The impatience in Rawson dictated speed and more speed; he had the spaceman's itch. He wanted to be out in space as soon as was humanly possibly. He sent the ship's company off on a trimmed twenty-four hour pass and secluded himself in his state-room—a more spacious and comfortable apartment than his spacecabin.

Colonel Holtby found him there.

Over drinks, Holtby said casually: "I can't help noticing that Brute you brought in is lying out there on the desert. Having fun?"

There was absolutely no chance of Rawson telling Holtby the truth. The TI man ventured to strange places. The less he knew the better Earthmen would sleep in their bunks.

"Oh, some. That job's out of the way now, though."

"Good for you. At the moment I'm in theoretical disgrace."

"Hard lines," Rawson sympathised. "But, y'know, Holtby, there must be a way down onto Cudham I."

"It's yet to be found."

"Oh, yes, quite so. But—"

"A planet completely englobed by debris, rocks, stones, metallic fragments, charging about like a herd of crazed cattle. It gave me the shivers, I don't mind telling you."

"It doesn't seem right, somehow, that worlds like that should roll through space. A man ought to be able to let down on any planet in the habitable sphere around a sun."

"And the same remark goes for the Brutes, too, I suppose."

"It went for the Nabos, you'll recall."

"Yes. Well, they're one bunch of aliens who are friends, now: their war didn't last long."

Rawson did not reply. Instead he rose and flipped open a star chart and gazed down on the pictured representation of that long empty haul between Endymion and the Gobi cluster. Then, as though speaking unwillingly, he said: "One of the gravest faults of a superscientific civilisation is the need for specialisation destroying free traffic of ideas and a spontaneous interest in the other man's work. You mentioned your mission to me only after it had failed and you were sick to your guts. Had you succeeded you wouldn't have told me a thing."

Holtby looked uncomfortable. "Right, Rawson. And for God's sake keep it to yourself. Professional honour is all I have to rely on—"

"I intend to pass on certain information to Admiral Simmons. Perhaps—" Rawson picked up his black cap. "Perhaps it would be best if you came along, colonel. This could be—I pray it is—the most important—"

"Is it necessary?" Holtby was stiffly formal.

"Yes. You'll see. Come on, man!"

They left *Lynx* and Rawson was almost running.

"Of course it's obvious," he said to Admiral Simmons, "and of course it's simple. But then, the best plans in warfare are just that. They fooled us with their device. They aren't going to fool us a second time."

Admiral Simmons swung his basalt face at Holtby. The two were well matched. "I'll request permission for you to come along with us, Colonel. And—"

"*You're* coming, Admiral?" Rawson was shocked.

"That is correct." A brief pause. "Captain."

"Sorry, sir."

"I was fighting in space with the Cougher-cannon —which was a step less efficient than the Woden Mark One. *And* we didn't have umpteen petticoats of armour, either." Simmons' chunky body stiffened at the recollection. "We'll take the whole committee. After all, it is our pigeon. This is what the committee was set up to do."

All Rawson could say was: "Aye, aye, sir." And feel a fool.

The feeling that he was a fool persisted as *Lynx* took space and flicked into that otherspace and ate up the

parsecs across to Endymion. Captain Matsu, standing very firmly on his rights, had insisted on having the Brute device fitted into a niche in *Lynx's* already overcrowded control room. It stood there on its pedestal, shorn of the booby traps, glowing with its pseudo-life that even the violence of energy from the tackybeam had not destroyed.

Simmons called up the C-in-C at Endymion and managed to chisel two destroyers out of him. The tiny fleet headed out into the grey wastes of otherspace, fleeting for Cudham I.

"My God!" said Pluaski, looking into the screens as *Lynx* came out into true space alongside Cudham I. "What a broth!"

"If you can find a way in—" Holtby said.

"With the admiral's permission," Rawson said softly. "I don't believe we need to. We ought to sit here and pick them off like sitting ducks."

"If they don't pick us off first."

There was, naturally, no answer to that.

In the next ship-day they watched a convoy glide past, punching ahead stoutly, the freighters bucking with their Raybrookes—slower than the Stellengers but terrible weight-lifters—with the lean armoured shapes of escorts trying to be in four different places at the same time. *Lynx* herself was lying stopped in otherspace close up against Cudham I. Every single one of her picket boats and pinnaces was out surveying the broil of rocks, along with those from the two destroyers. Finding a passage looked as remote now as ever.

Academic discussions started among the waiting officers, as men always found something to discuss in the expectant hours before battle, anything to relax tautened nerves, to take away the fear that clawed at all their minds. Heroics, of course, were out. A man did a job and sweated fear and perhaps failed and perhaps managed to hold on. Only one thing really held true—man was a stranger in space.

"And so are those damn Brutes," said Pulaski viciously.

"They're using very fast and very tough cruisers out

here." Matsu kept himself hovering about his alien device. He was like a broody hen with a strange egg. "*Lynx* should be good enough—"

Rawson let that by.

He wasn't, he had to admit to himself, one hundred percent confident of the old ship handling more than a couple of opponents. The destroyers would help, of course; but their fire power was slight, their armour negligible and their only defence a dazzling speed that—in theory—took them out of the smashing showers of alien shot. And the Brutes leaped on the convoys with dreadful speed.

Two convoys went past, distant clusters of blips on the screens. The third, on the fourth ship-day, did not pass so easily.

Watching that slaughter, Admiral Simmons cracked his back straighter, and dug his fists into his pockets with a cloth-tearing savagery. "If only we had more ships!" he whispered.

Earth never did have enough ships to cover all her comings and goings in space. The convoy was struck by the Brute wolves, slashed and ripped and torn and left, bloodied, to limp on. A fast escort group swept in—some commodore had been using his brain—but the Brutes vanished from his screens, vanished from otherspace as they had so often done before, left the Terrans seeking wilding in emptiness for a foe that had gone.

Everyone in *Lynx's* control room snapped to quivering alertness. Admiral Simmons uncoiled his fists, and his fingers crooked as though he was choking the life personally from each enemy alien.

"We've got them!" he said. "By God, we've got them!"

For the Brutes disappeared from the ken of the escort group screening the sadly battered convoy, faded out of otherspace and swept in triumphant formation into real space, right on the doorstep of Cudham I.

At once *Lynx* was taken through to real space.

On the screen above the vast curve of the planet, the alien ships showed clear. Four of them. Filing down onto the hellish porridge of rocks and metallic fragments,

holding a course that took them, it seemed, to inevitable destruction.

All *Lynx's* dazzlement equipment was working at full gain and, shadowed by the bulge of the rocky sphere, she lay undetected. Undetected—for the moment.

The first Brute vanished beneath the layer of planetary débris. It was like seeing a diver vanish beneath the sea.

Then Rawson was in position. His thirty Wodens hammered their rattling bass, the two destroyers joining in with a shriller descant. Across space the sleeting leaden chunks spewed in a deadly shower that ripped into the armour of the alien cruisers, smashed in, tore down their defences, ploughed on to disintegrate with awful energy on the hulls.

Two Brutes died without firing a shot. The fourth and last got off a half-second burst and then she, too, was pulverised by the storm of shot from *Lynx* and her two destroyers.

"So they were using Cudham I as a base," said Holtby. And there was a vast satisfaction in his voice.

"Yes," Rawson said, angry and annoyed. "And one of 'em has slipped through your confounded barrier of rocks!"

"Greedy," said someone. Rawson, in a shocked moment of surprise, thought it was Admiral Simmons.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I am greedy. I want to knock every damn one out of space!"

Captain Matsu was stirring himself in his corner. No one bothered to spare him time; they were all watching the screens as *Lynx* stalked over the spot the aliens had occupied when attacked and destroyed.

"Can you see anything?" demanded Rawson of the ratings at the optics.

"No break, sir."

Not a single break in all that swirling confusion of débris below. Rawson conned the ship carefully, the pilot taking her in close to that roaring maelstrom.

Captain Matsu approached Admiral Simmons and saluted with curious punctilio. "Beg to report, sir, that I can con the ship down."

"What' Simmons swung towards Matsu. Then he, like all the others of the committee, turned to stare at the alien device Matsu had brought aboard.

It looked just the same.

"When we passed exactly over the co-ordinates where the alien ship vanished below," Matsu said precisely. "My instrument showed that. The colour flushing indicates quite clearly that an opening exists there."

No one bothered to question Matsu's judgment. They'd been calling the thing 'Matsu's baby' and no one had missed the careful 'my instrument.'

The proof lay in that the alien had found a way.

Rawson said softly. "Pilot, take her back over those co-ordinates. Then taken your orders from Captain Matsu."

"Yes, sir."

The hum of machinery, the flicker of energy rippling behind the panels and setting an electric tension in the air, the repressed breathing of two dozen men were the only sounds in the control room. Even the eternal whine of the air system—never normally noticed—began to obtrude itself. Rawson found a comfortable space alongside Matsu. He stared at the alien device that had been made amid laughter by the aliens—if they laughed over things like that—to trick and deceive the scientists of Earth, to make them waste precious effort in unravelling a chimera.

Earth had seen through the joke, had unmasked the trick. For that device was the most outrageous mass of nonsense and thumb-awkward engineering that any technician might dream about after a night on the tiles. It *couldn't* be used for any useful purpose. It was a bluff . . .

Lynx strode back over the co-ordinates and a rippling flush of crimson welled across one comical lobe, a clear signal. Matsu gave a crisp order and *Lynx* turned, slowed, began to let down towards those grim rocks clashing below.

There followed four hours of fear. Four hours in which Matsu, following that crimson flush like a terrier after a rat, guided the ship through a miraculously opening passage. That passage could never have been navigated,

let alone found, without the crimson wash of colour giving peremptory signals. Rawson, sweating in silent fear like all the others, watched the screens as rolling masses of planetary rubbish passed to either side, as the ship insinuated herself between orbiting clumps that appeared waiting for her arrival to close up and crush her like an orange in a mixer.

He had it figured now, of course; as they all had. Old Matsu would be cock-a-hoop over this—if he brought them through alive. Twice—and only twice—*Lynx* grazed a small planetoid, their mutual gravity about the same but their mass variant—and only the petticoats of armour saved the Terran ship. They could all now realise that the alien device had served a double bluff; in acting up its decoy complexity it had effectively cloaked its further —and entirely alien—character as a homing device. Rawson had a few words to say on that subject.

Matsu looked as though he had been placed lengthwise on a plank and the entire ship's company had jumped on him.

Coming back—if they ever did—Rawson would handle that alien pilot; that was a promise he made himself. The aliens had a beacon broadcasting somewhere below, probably. Maybe not. That was what Rawson wanted to talk about.

The alien device flushed a glorious orange all over and slumped back to its usual ripple of rainbow colour.

The screens showed the encircling rocks above—and a clear expanse below with the vasty curve of a blue and green planet sweeping away magnificently.

"Through!" said Captain Matsu. "I hand you back your ship, Captain Rawson."

Rawson had no time even to say thank you. "Guns!" he shouted urgently. "Alien bearing ninety-one degrees—red. Declination—nil!"

"Waiting for us," grunted Admiral Simmons.

Lynx sprang wildly as the pilot took her away on an evasive action course. The Wodens were chattering on their outriggers, shaking the ship. Crashes sounded aft. Everyone knew that this could be their deaths—*Lynx*, an old battleship was barely a match for the fast, powerful

Brute cruiser smashing at them.

With all space over the planet filled with the insane garble of radar-interference, no torpedoes dare be loosed. It depended on the guns. And *Lynx* shot divinely. Rawson saw the tell-tale flare as their leaden shot vapourised in horrible power on the alien armour, saw the ruddy flare as hits struck the hull. The Brute turned away.

In the moment of triumph, as the whole after section of the alien was crumpled up and she stopped firing, a storm of shot pierced *Lynx's* armour, smashed away her defences and a single leaden alien bullet smashed into her control room.

When the smoke and fire and the shambles had been cleared, Rawson and Admiral Simmons looked in stony-faced grief upon the wreckage. Captain Matsu, Commander Pulaski, Rear-Admiral Cyrus Q. Ombebe, a dozen more—gone, vapourised, vanished in that destructive eruption of released kinetic energy. McGrath was nursing a shattered wrist. Bits and pieces flew with lethal force when a strike was made. Here and there blood spotted the decks and bulkheads from those men not immediately vapourised.

"We got her," Simmons said. "We know the secret of Cudham I. We can send ships here again with the alien decoy device as a guide." He did not look at Rawson. "Take her home, captain."

"Yes, sir." All that Rawson had been going to say, about Earthmen tending to think of aliens too much in Earthly terms, of their forgetting that aliens were *alien*—and that although the Brutes fought in space with weapons very similar to those used by the Terran Navy, their instruments and techniques might very easily be so different as to escape immediate recognition. As this device. Who still knew how it operated? It flushed to crimson to guide them through the planetary débris, glowing to show them the way, as an old fashioned ground control sent out dots and dashes to bring a ship in along her landing lane. The men of Earth needed to learn a great deal more about alien ways of thought before they could be sure of their handling of other races in space.

"At least," he said softly. "We can now garrison

Cudham 1 and prevent the Brutes from tearing our Gobi convoys to pieces. That, at least, we can do."

Admiral Simmons turned has basalt face to the screens. Up there the road back lay barricaded by the rolling rocks and metallic fragments, through which only alien science would take them. He said: "*Lynx* is an old ship, Captain. We should have had better armour. It is too late now. One day, one day, pray God, we shall turn the Brutes into friends, as we have done with other alien races."

"I think we shall, Admiral." *Lynx* rose and began nosing into that hellish barrier. Rawson kept his eyes fixed on the crimson flushes of colour racing hotly across the pearly lobes of the alien jest which had been fatal for so many good men. "I think we shall. Somehow I feel certain that the Brutes did enjoy making this; did chuckle over their joke, just as we would. Yes, I think we can come to terms with people like that, one day."

After a long time he added "—when we have beaten them to a jelly, of course."

Kenneth Bulmer

BLAST OFF

Astronaut's thoughts *from the Finnish*

When I get around this bend I shall be able to see it. There is sure to be a crowd in the enclosure—will they shout or fall silent? Some of them smug, glad to be shot of me, some of them crying big selfish tears, sure that I shan't be coming back, hating the thought, loving the sensation, licking up the tears; most of them not even rubbernecks, just big shots who've fiddled a ticket for the take-off—the people who can fiddle a ticket for anything but they only come to show the other fiddlers that they can, they don't even really want to gawp. There will be a few people who understand what it's all about, just a very few who realise that this is the break-through, that it is going to work. That it has to work. That this is the machine that will make Man free of the universe. If it works. And it has to work, like I said. Johnny thinks it will and he's been in on this from the beginning.

Yes, well, there it stands, that's the thing you have to ride on, next stop the heavens ha ha and don't think you aren't scared don't let anyone think I'm scared I mean I'm don't anyone think I'm not scared oh you know. But anyway there it stands and I suppose like the man says it has a kind of stark beauty and all—long and slim and pointing up to the stars my destination and don't anyone think I'm oh hell. But it certainly does look kind of fine at that: good clean lines and the things like wings on the sides relieving the sweep of the line but not what you'd call a fancy design, more functional really, but then it does have a kind of special kind of mystery and appeal bound up with all that mankind's-hopes-and-fears stuff although this time it's only a one-man star-trip. One-way

too, most likely. (Let's not go into that again, do you mind? Thanks). They even have songs written about it already, like The Day He Comes Back What A Day It'll Be yeah that'll be a day but you know it's one man one way and the rest of the race can chase me.

Look I really do advise you not to pursue that train of thought, son. So alright of course I do get to come back, but I don't have to *bank* on it as though I was *stupid* or something, do I? So let's say I'm for sure coming back sure there's plenty of fool in the tank—there goes my unconscious or something making very cheap jokes—but there is plenty and I wish they'd just shut up about it, simply. In a moment I have to climb up there and ride that thing and they don't have to climb anything or ride anything except oh hell call this a take-off more of a kick-off I call it but the benefit to humanity is nevertheless blah blah blah.

Oh all right, so I *like* humanity, but I still wish they'd shut up. And stop assuming that I'm not scared.

All my short life I have wanted to be the first man to go to the stars and was trained up for it most of my life; not a mere man but a Project and all humanity cheers: oh his heroic sacrifice and he'll come back one day and what a welcome we'll give him and boy are we glad it's him and not us, no, what a glorious pioneer, saviour of humanity but why doesn't he hurry up and GO? What a sucker *he* turned out to be and we'll see he gets his name in all the history books is bunk unless he comes back which might be embarrassing and perhaps bad for trade.

Still it is a beautiful machine, no breadboard lash-up this, no prototype with all the bugs still in it but a masterpiece of simple design, clean, erect, ready for business (nearly there now) my old man would have admired the craftsmanship he was a very good artificer I should have stayed with him and learned the trade then I wouldn't be here all famous and terrified SHUT UP!

I can see mother in the crowd all gentle and proud and just quietly crying in a happy sort of way: I wonder whether she has any real idea what this is all about and what sort of a crazy son she had and do you suppose she

cares, as long as I don't get hurt and boy are you going to get HURT. There's Johnny with her without whom this project could never etc. and he's smiling too as though it was him and not me and the funny thing is.

Mother will know how I feel and all the mothers here will know because this is like the very end of pregnancy, the long wait is over and now there's nothing for it but HAVE it: too late for hot baths and jumping off the kitchen table and the little Indian doctor that you-know-who went to and you've had it now—now you have to have it and now it's going to come tearing out of you and they say the pain is worth it but CAN'T I CHANGE MY MIND but it's worth it child and they can shove that too anyway mother knows and she's only crying quite happily so perhaps. Look are you getting hysterical? Yes. Are you though? No, not really, but, do you know, I'd really rather, perhaps, on the whole, taking everything into consideration, by and large, not do this. (Anyway, I'm thirsty).

I can easily think of about five million things I'd rather be doing this fine afternoon than go riding to the stars on that thing, for instance I'd rather go fishing on the lake with the boys the sails so white they hurt your eyes and the water so cold it hurts your dabbling trailing fingers and you don't care if you don't catch any fish but if you do, oh lake trout fried in an iron pan on a fire of twigs and driftwood on the shore just a shake of salt and some bread and then roll over and look up at the stars and dream of joining their company, or maybe a trip into the mountains and the joy of your pistonning thighs climbing and the heat beating off the rock and all day all alone, you can really come to terms with what you want to do about you know helping the human race and all and going to the stars and first man there and the human race shall never want again. OK you've got it now it all came true and there's your human race—fair samples—in front of you waiting to watch you do it and look at them. The best are sad for all the wrong reasons, their faces all crumpled and slack and uncomprehending, even the ones you thought had grasped the idea. Most of the crowd, however, have bright eyes and parted lips like

young girls at a bull-fight or old gluttons before a bowl of tender baby crabs in boiling butter. All these I have loved.

(And now you are not so keen. Now the big talk turns into actions which hurt the flesh and deeds which the spirit cannot compass.)

SHUT UP.

And the women now are all around and crying and wailing and carrying-on and I didn't bargain for this, no-one told me about this in the briefing, no-one said anything about women shrieking . . .

"*Filiae Ierusalem, nolite flere super me, sed super vos ipsas flete, et super filios vestros. Quoniam ecce venient dies, in quibus dicent: Beatae steriles, et ventres, qui non genuerunt, et ubera quae non lactaverunt.*"

And now I'm at the top of the ramp and the technicians are closing in around me, peeling-off my earth-side outfit, checking the apparatus, there's the artificer with his hammer and eight-inch nails, the Public Relations man with a crazy signboard to pin up over my head and they're counting down now and the ground-crew are getting out the dice and the Met-men don't like the look of the cloud-ceiling and now you are not frightened any more for your mother is still just crying happily and she has always known the pain is worth it.

A sexta autem hora tenebrae factae sunt super universam terram usque ad horam nonam.

Et circa horam nonam clamavit voce magna, dicens: "*Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani?*" which, being interpreted, is "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

The end and start again.

For Professional Scientists Only

The detective story is highly respectable—throw a stone into any Senior Common Room in Oxford or Cambridge and you will hit a mystery-writer. Science-fiction is not respectable—throw a copy of this magazine into any Senior Common Room in Oxford or Cambridge and you will start a stampede out of the door.

Why is this?

(i) Lurid covers. Serious, well-planned, thoughtful writings by major writers in this field are still being published with coloured jackets displaying strumpets being stripped by ghouls; jackets which often have no relevance to the matter they contain and certainly no appeal to the people for whom they are written.

(ii) Sloppy science content. Far too few writers have the basic equipment to write plausible fiction around a defensible scientific possibility. More and more s-f writers sketch out a vague bob in the direction of a scientific advance then drag out their ray-guns and start blasting.

(iii) Ignorance of s-f's merits. Thousands of people who would relish s-f just don't know that it exists as a valid, if immature, literary genre.

I hope that some little progress may be made in some of these departments if, for example, some serious, reputable scientists could be persuaded at least to think about s-f a little. A prize of

FIFTY POUNDS

is accordingly offered for the best story written by a professional, qualified scientist during the Summer of this year. The prize will definitely be awarded however few the entries. Any size of story may be offered but those in the 5,000 - 12,000 words region will be favoured, other things being equal. The magazine reserves the right to buy the winning story and any other entries at current market rates. Anonymity is promised if desired. The editor's decision is final. S.a.e. should be sent with manuscript. And we guarantee that your work will not be published inside a sex-maniac's-dream paper-jacket.

Write to the Editor,
SF,
18, Norham Gardens,
OXFORD.

LAZARUS

by Jael Cracken

'I am Lazarus come from the dead.
Come back to tell you all,I shall tell you all.'

T. S. Eliot.

The children, in their grey and black habits, entered the Chapter Hall more soberly than usual. They were going to hear a story told, a frightening but splendid story which was so important that it was taking the place, this morning, of Dynamical Sociality and Sexual Deportment. They hurried to their seats, glancing shyly up at the Holy Mother and the grey stranger on the dais.

"Children," she said when they were silent, "You were told yesterday of Mr. Eastmore and the important part he played in shaping the world in which we all live. Here he is to give you his own account of those distant years before you were born: Mr. Eastmore."

The stranger beside her stood up, tiny beside the great desk. He had a long, thin, miserable countenance studded with sharp blue eyes: his glance was like a hatchet blow. With no preliminary clearing of his throat or greeting to the assembly, he began.

"To understand—to *appreciate* the age in which you live, you must know that our Peace follows a terrible age of positivism, the violent period of technology which culminated in the twentieth century. I was born in that century—oh yes, old as I look, I was once a little boy and used to get into as much trouble as I daresay you young people do."

He paused, expecting a general chuckle of appreciation, but it was not forthcoming. 'I never strike the right note with today's children,' he thought to himself; 'It's more

than just a difference of age; perhaps they're all too safe to have need of humour.' Irritatedly, he brushed away the irrelevance and changed his attack.

It was Wing Commander Sladden who set in motion what we may call the final phase. He burst unannounced into my home early one August evening and flung me a mock salute.

"Jack," he said, "I have the most staggering piece of news to tell you."

It was quite an effective entry-line, considering that I had not seen him for two years. That was always his way: dramatising. It had been a rewarding trait—ability alone could not have won him the fame he enjoyed.

"Do come in Skylark," I said (how Sladden got his nickname is too long a tale for now). "What's the great news? Don't tell me the war's over, or I'll be out of a job."

"It's more staggering than that: a signal has been received from the derelict space station."

Just three or four times in anyone's life come shocks like that. I could feel it strike my windpipe and slide down into my stomach. The space age—after the event that term was ironical only—had come and gone. Its roots had grown from the second world war, its sturdy trunk had been abruptly lopped by the third, which was in its fourth year when Sladden suddenly reappeared before me.

"Don't just sit looking like a streak of vinegar," he said. "Action, man, action!"

"Look," I gasped, "That station—the Dish—it's been deserted for three and a half years."

The icy fingers started over me. I was often going to have their pianissimo playing—but this first touch was the worst. I'd always had a secret terror of empty places ... could there be anywhere more horribly empty in or out of the world than that Dish we had left topside when the war clamped down?

"Three years, eight months it's been empty," Skylark confirmed. "Someone's up there sending signals now. Want to hear about it?"

I nodded my head and pressed a button for Barbara.

Sladden was a man with a preoccupation, but he took note when she came in; the pre-historic part of him almost wagged his ears at her. Barbara has that asinine effect on strangers. I'm immune. I don't bite at rotten apples, however good they look.

"Note down our entire conversation, Barbara," I told her.

"Top secret," Sladden cautioned.

"Miss Tedder is a grave of secrecy," I told him.

So he gave me the story. Almost despite ourselves, Sladden and I had been drawn into the space project. We had watched and cheered together as the first tall rockets laboured up from Woomera. Together we had sweated and struggled through all the physical gruelling that was a prelude to the Big Jump. Eventually, we had taken the Jump. Sladden and I were the two heroes who hurtled round the first man-made orbit in 1985.

What really got the two of us up there was what got Man up there: math, not muscle.

The Americans instigated E.1—Establishment One, the prosaic name for that space satellite which the press dubbed 'The Dish.' Dollars, sterling, francs, marks, even a few piastres, began to stream into the sky. Ah, they were the days to live in. Fulfilment!—Fulfilment with promise! Of course, I'm prejudiced; I must admit I liked seeing my face on the tele. But anyone who survived the war will tell you of the excitement that swelled round the earth.

The Dish was completed. It was like a miracle. No lives were lost in the entire process, except for one ferry which crashed into the Caribbean. It was finished on schedule. It functioned admirably. It even cost no more than estimated.

Then war threatened. The Eastern Bloc had waited till the coffers were drained before they showed their sword blades. By then, a one-man moon ship was on the stocks. It left the Dish two days before war was declared. Five days later it crashed in the Mare Imbrium.

For four months, on a curtailed scale, the U.N. Government let us keep the Dish manned. But we were a useful lot, and peaceful purposes were suddenly out

of fashion. We were brought down; grounded for Duration. We could all guess that Duration was going to be a long time.

Sladden and I were separated. I was given an unpleasant job, the details of which I won't bother you with. I'm an unpleasant fellow,—I did not dislike it. Sladden spent his time travelling a handful of miles above the earth at Mach 2. I suppose he did not dislike that, although it must have seemed small beer at first.

The war went on. Some little crooked intellect had discovered that one of the tensor muscles in the human cranium might, with due encouragement, bind down and disable the brain; my task was to discover the right encouragement, a vibration, the right decibel band ... It was absorbing. I forgot about the Dish.

Sladden did not.

"The idea of that beautiful thing we had constructed, swinging round out there dead, neglected, unmaintenanced, always preyed on my mind. I suppose I continually kept a mental frequency tuned to it ... Then Beddoes contacted me. Possibly you remember him, Jack. He was I/C communication at Woomera Base."

Sladden broke off—not, I gathered, for dramatic effect. "The war's broken us, Jack," he said; "Everywhere—secrecy ... censorship ... It took Beddoes two months to get the information discreetly to me; that was three weeks ago, and the knowledge has been burning me ever since. Fortunately I had this leave due, and knew where to find you."

I did not ask him why it had to be me. Already I guessed what was coming. I found myself pacing about unhappily behind Barbara; she has black, shining hair: she wears it long to conceal those sharp, cruel ears.

"What was the message?" I asked.

"Only standard procedure. 'E.1 calling. Are you receiving me?' No clue as to who ..."

"... or *what*."

"Or what," he agreed. And then there was a silence. As far as we knew, the only ways extant for climbing up to orbit were occult ones.

"Could it be some trick of the Bloc?" I asked.

"Why? How"

"No, silly question. Skylark—" and there I stopped. I was going to ask if, for some inscrutable reason, the U.N. might have reoccupied the Dish; but even as I framed the question, I formed the answer: if the U.N. had reoccupied it, that would have meant Skylark and me. Which of course led me straight to the next jump.

"You want us to go up there and find out," I said hollowly, and the blood drained so swiftly out of my head I could scarcely see him nod assent.

Nothing went well; the war went badly. The inconclusive, wasteful, spiteful business of technological warfare had seemed to turn in our favour. Beach-heads were desperately established along the enemy's Eastern seaboard. Then the Bloc took fright, and dropped the first hydrogen bombs. They struck out West and South: London and Sydney reeked and reeled simultaneously, and were swatted into the dust together.

In the ensuing turmoil, I was visited by General Crigensis. I rose to attention as he entered my Dublin office (Eire had been annexed bodily at the outbreak of hostilities).

Crigensis hated me, just as I hated him. Now he told me with a harsh relish that I was appointed to a new post. A high-sounding title went with the post, but in effect it meant I was in charge of captured enemy equipment in the North Far East zone. The transfer was to take place immediately.

"You won't be as comfortable there as you have been in Dublin," he said. As he left, he looked at Barbara Tedder the way they all used to. She returned the look, carefully and deliberately.

She and I took a trans-polar stratojet to Formosa: that was to be my new H.Q. Up aloft, I had time to think about E.1. No way of getting to the Dish existed any more. The orbital computers had been diverted and converted to military use; the precious fuel had been cached goodness-knows-where; the great, lumbering ferry rockets themselves had been broken up and used for scrap. But had everything been all to hand, the fact remained we should not have been allowd to go: two thousand miles

up, you're of no service to the state.

As Crigensis had predicted, Formosa was not comfortable. A typhoon struck almost as we landed, and Barbara and I were driven in pouring rain to an underground warren. We settled in somehow, into an atmosphere of suspicion and hate. Spy-scares, promotion rackets and rumours were in the air. I was under-staffed and overworked. Soon, I began to get queer ideas.

I began to believe that Sladden and I were being summoned by a supernatural being to go aloft, to escape the squalor, to live a free life miles above the earth. As the weeks drew by, the idea strengthened. There was nothing to be done: frustration stuck in my stomach like an ill-digested meal. I heard nothing more from Sladden, nor had I any means of making contact with him. The Dish must have ceased calling long ago.

Rumours accumulated that a V.I.P. was to visit the island unannounced. On top of the gruelling routine and the continual allegience-tests, this seemed like the last blow. Consequently, when my faithful Captain Kwong Si reported with an account of important enemy ordnances and equipment captured on the edge of the Gobi desert, I had half-decided to do the inspection myself before I glanced down the list.

One item set my heart booming in my ears: Five 19,000-ton fuelled orbital rockets.

Leaving Barbara to worry over the paper work, I took the next stratojet out.

High over China, guided missiles tracked us. We fused two and eluded the others. Finally the Great Wall showed below us. We sped down as night was falling and landed in the recently captured township of Lokohrgashun. Five hours before we had enjoyed the mild Formosan autumn: here the Inner Mongolian winter was upon us.

Rest was far from me. I squeezed a staff car and a reluctant lieutenant and we headed for the enemy dump. The rockets were there alright. They stood three hundred yards apart from each other, lonely and splendid in their launching bases.

Like a crazy man, I walked round them and climbed

up them and pried into them. They were exact replicas of our own rockets; it looked as if a few plans had quietly changed hands at some time. The lieutenant sat sulking in his vehicle and probably thought me insane. Temporarily at least, he was right. I had had what amounted to an impromptu launching ground delivered into my hands. The one vital thing missing was the complicated mathematical equipment necessary to plot courses and timings. With that—we could be off.

I stood up on the scaffolding of one of the giants in a dry, cutting wind. The sound of gunfire was carried from the low hills to the north. Everything was dead about me, the metal shapes, the poor earth. It was an ideal situation in which to contemplate my hopes—and my fears.

Oh yes, I was frightened again. Now that there was a possibility of attaining blast-off, the idea of a benevolent something calling to me vanished. I knew that whatever was up in the Dish had to be something inhuman. We'd left it empty; eerily, thunderously empty ... Whatever inhabited it now, I didn't want to meet it.

Yet I was horribly curious.

Yet if by a miracle I—we—could get someone to compute a course that would take us up to the Dish, would I dare go? It meant facing a court-martial on our return, if we did return.

I had no aptitude or stomach for raising potatoes in the Amazon basin, or labouring in the undersea hatcheries of the Tasman Sea, or whatever the current fashion in so-called 'corrective training' was.

"Are you coming down, sir?"

With a wave I acknowledged the existence of my sulky subordinate, and climbed back to ground level.

Next day was spent securing a fuel-sample from nearby subterranean tanks and trying to find out more about the enemy rockets. I had little success. The technical personnel had obviously been evacuated when the sector was threatened. It seemed most likely they were going to appropriate the Dish—possibly under the old delusion that it would make a useful bombing platform—but this

I could not confirm. If that had been their intention, it raised another question. Had they too picked up the strange signal?

Back at base, things had been happening. I could tell that at once by Kwong Si's face as he approached. It made me feel tired: I wished Formosa had sunk with all hands, I felt drunk with over-work and over-worry.

"Whatever it is," I said, "It'll have to wait till I've slept my eyes out."

"Sorry sir, this can't wait," he told me. "The V.I.P. has arrived in your absence."

Like a fool, without waiting to hear more, I burst into a rage. I even threatened him with demotion for not having radioed me at Lokohr-gashun. I shook my fist in his face and gobbled like a turkey.

"You were quite right," he said coldly; "You did need to sleep your eyes out," and with that he turned on his heel and left.

Alone, I rode the mile long escalator into the underground fortress. Alone, I strode into my offices. Ignoring half-a-dozen frightened filing clerks, I pushed through the private door into my own apartments. A smell of fresh cigar smoke haunted the air. The liquor cabinet was open. Two empty glasses stood together on a table.

My study was empty. I opened the bedroom door and flicked on the light. Barbara Tedder and General Crigensis sat guiltily up in bed.

"So you were the V.I.P.!" I exclaimed. It must have been the surprise: I lost my self-control. I began to weep with my fists in my eyes. Crigensis never said a word; he buckled on his uniform and left, Barbara behind him. I still cried. It may have been due to the strain I had already undergone; or perhaps under the hate Barbara engendered in me, like a mirror lying on a mirror, lay the opposite of that emotion. I don't know. I was all entangled with myself.

The fame that had been mine... The love I had never known... The dread of being alone anywhere... They seemed to be the only strains in my life's tune. I fumbled blindly at my hip, tugged the webbing holster

open, pulled out my service revolver. My hand would not behave properly, but I got the weapon up to my head.

Someone knocked on the door.

I fired.

The door burst open. Perhaps—I forget—I missed on purpose. I was still alive, lying stupidly on the floor. Above me stood Sladden.

"Hullo, Vinegar," he exclaimed. "Hunting the big game in your lousy hair?"

He put me to bed and drugged me up with stuff from my own medicine chest. When I woke, I was sane again—sane enough, anyhow, for the world I was in.

An aerial bombardment was in progress upstairs. I 'phoned my A.D.C. and Kwong Si and took a cold shower. The A.D.C. put me in the picture while I was drying: General Crigensis was carrying out his inspection as if nothing untoward had happened. When he had dismissed, I apologised to Kwong Si for losing my temper and inquired where Sladden was. The little captain asked: "You mean the fair man who piloted the General here?"

"He's fair alright, the rest I wouldn't know."

He went to get him, leaving me thinking hard. It appeared my hours were numbered: I could not believe Crigensis would want me where I was after what I had seen. I seemed further than ever from the thing in the Dish and didn't know whether I was glad or sorry. About every other aspect of the affair I was quite certain I was nothing but sorry.

A tap at the door.

"Come in, Skylark," I said.

Barbara entered.

"Wasn't your bed aired?" I asked.

She flinched and replied, "I've come from the General. Don't make this any more difficult than necessary."

Now, I was feeling better, a sensation that makes me cruel. "The spectacle of young love is seldom, if ever, anything but revolting," I told her.

It was the word 'young' that stung her, that and the memory of Crigensis' cropped grey hair. Before she could answer, Sladden was looking round the open door. As I mentioned, his entries are always timed to

perfection.

I made Barbara Tedder wait while he and I huddled in a corner. He told me that Beddoes had received a repetition of the message from E.1 only three weeks ago and had managed to transmit an answer which had not been acknowledged; after which, Beddoes had been hauled off to a nameless underground tribunal. It looked as if a goodly portion of the world was becoming aware of E.1. I use goodly to denote quantity, not quality.

Sladden received my news of the five captured rockets with jubilation, and seemed little disturbed when he learned why I was now feeling uncertain of my position.

"You've nothing to worry about, Jack," he said. "You know who Crigensis' wife is, don't you?"

"Didn't even know he was married."

"Still reading the highbrow papers! Take my advice —buy one with pictures in it. Crigensis married a niece of the Prime Minister. He'll make no trouble for you in case your little story leaks home. He's got too much sense to jeopardise his future career. Believe me, you're now in a position to ask him favours!"

Our eyes met. "The computer!" I breathed.

I turned back to Barbara.

When the familiar sick ache in the entrails had passed, the horizon had already drawn itself into a curve. At the extreme limit of that curve appeared a curve of light; there, someone was watching the sun set. We sped soundlessly upwards, the curdled blackness of earth's night yielding to the sweet dark of space, and sun flashed along our metal flank.

"Good to be back here," Sladden sighed.

"Four long years," I said. Earth looked so silent from up there: war, man himself, might never have existed. Whether that would have been any loss is not, perhaps, for Man to say.

The Dish itself was still hidden from us by earth's bulk. Indeed, at this early stage of our journey, it lay almost directly behind us; ahead lay the point where its orbit and ours would intersect. Before that time, the Dish

would make one and a half revolutions, carrying its unknown inhabitant with it.

"'. . . . . *What may this mean*
That thou, dead corse, again, in complete steel,
Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous.'"

"What did you say, Jack?" Sladden asked.

"Shakespeare," I said. "You want to stop reading those lowbrow papers with pictures in 'em!"

"Glimpses of the moon," he echoed. "It's a pity while we're up here we can't pop over and put a few flowers on Teddy Auden's grave."

Ted had piloted the moon-ship which never came back; Sladden and I had known him well.

"He might have been able to tell us what goes on in the Dish," I said.

"Oh, alien invaders, undoubtedly . . . Moon men take over Earth's first space station'!" he scoffed.

"Even that wouldn't surprise me."

We said no more; the silence became steely, unbreakable. Even in the shallows of space, close to a planet, an impression of immensity stamps itself firmly on the senses. A word is too trivial a thing to impinge on the parsecs of silence.

Also, there was the ordeal of entering the Dish. That had soon to be undergone. The thought did not make for light conversation.

Slowly we closed with our target. The blackmailing of Crigensis had given us access to Manila's SLKC-HK, the big cybernetic brain known familiarly as 'Slick Chick.' It had provided us with all necessary course-data. Before leaving Formosa, ostensibly on leave, I had told Barbara in a fit of misplaced enthusiasm which I was to regret later, "Even the enemy's fuel formula was identical with ours. Someone on our side has made a fortune out of a murky deal. We'll worry about that when we get back."

She had just looked at me.

SLKC-HK had done its job impeccably. We slid alongside the Dish with a matching velocity. Sladden shot out a pair of magnetic grapples which locked against the great

bowl-shaped hull and we felt them tighten and pull us firmly into the orbit of the Dish.

Possibly you have seen photos of the Dish. It is what was known as a Maccleston's modified Ross-Smith design. The living and working quarters form a circle behind an immense, dish-like, solar reflector, which turns perpetually to the sun and provides the power. Drawing up to the main hatch, we of course turned into the dark side; only earth light gleamed along the great convex bulk above us.

Sladden snapped his fingers in triumph and pretended to feel for his latch-key. He was almost gay. Then he turned and gazed enquiringly at me: I did not meet his eyes.

"One of us ought to stay here," I said huskily. "You go over."

Sladden spoke no more to me. I might have ceased to exist. He looked sharply away and unbuckled the securing straps about his legs and body. We already had our external suits on; now he donned his helmet too, sealed it and tested the join with the manual vacuum. He shucked over to one side and crawled back into the air lock. Several times I made to speak—but nothing came out.

Through the scanner I watched him swim the intervening nothingness, the yellow rear light of his helmet growing smaller. He opened the hatch of E.1—slowly it opened to reveal a black oblong—and vanished inside it. The hatch closed again. I was alone: just I and the cold fingers.

What transpired in there I discovered later.

Sladden found the light in the air lock was not working. He switched on the headlight in his helmet and operated the air-flow. It functioned, which was not surprising, despite the light failure; the Dish had been laboriously constructed with as many independent circuits and cells as possible, for reasons of safety.

The atmosphere in the lock had built up to the standard five pounds per square inch before Sladden glanced at the dial that indicated air pressure into the corridor beyond: it registered zero: there was vacuum both sides

of the lock! Shrugging, he pumped the air out again and stepped through into the corridor.

The short, straight stretch to the next door was featureless. The lights did not work here. He walked to the door and pushed it open; it offered some resistance and closed of its own accord. There was air in this compartment at a pressure of one and half pounds. Still no illumination apart from his headlight.

He was now in the circular walk that, regularly segmented by safety doors, led right round the Dish. As he moved slowly forward, blurred reflections of his headlight rippled along with him, one on either white-painted wall close beside him. Until now, he had been stirred with excitement at finding himself back in the deserted station. Now, the muffled sound of his own boots and the similar cadence of his heart worked together to shake his confidence.

When he reached the first side door, he paused. This, as he knew, without reading the stencilled notice on it, was a Fitters' Shop. Pressure inside: zero. He thrust open the door. Ironically, lights burned. Sladden looked over the deserted equipment, almost expecting to see something move. The air from the walk was whistling gently past him, and after a few seconds he closed the door again.

No sign of what had caused the air loss. A meteor perhaps . . . Perhaps a stress had developed, tearing two plates apart . . . The Dish had always been a horrifyingly rickety structure. Then belatedly the realisation struck him—

"Who's here?" he called.

Someone or something had put that light on.

Goodness knows, we had left the Dish hurriedly enough, left it all intact, but we had at least switched off the lights.

Sladden leaned against the wall, waiting for an answer. He pulled the vac-gun from its side holster and clutched it in his steel hand ready for use. But there was nothing to shoot at, and in a minute, pulling himself together, he moved on again. He determined to make for the radio room without further delay; it was fruitless—and a little

too exciting—to examine every compartment as he came to it.

"I'm looking for a green carrot with five pseudopods and a taste for drinking liquid oxygen through a straw," he called. His morale did not bother to laugh in answer.

The radio room door was in a lighted segment of walk. Vacuum lay the other side of the door. Sladden stopped, all too aware of his isolation. He had to enter, better sooner than later; nevertheless, he hesitated. Here, after all, was where the original signal had originated.

"Come in," a voice said.

Sladden stood with one hand on the white door and his mouth open wide. Tepid little tracks of sweat ran off his shoulders and down his back, and a stupid numbness worked round his veins.. Whatever else was in his mind then, he must have realised he was close to something human destiny had never faced before. One moment he almost stampeded back down the walk, the next he thrust open the door.

In the airless room the lights burned bright. There was a window here looking out on the starfield, which seemed to turn as the Dish performed its endless gyrations. Apparatus ranged the walls, a confusing assortment of communicating devices. In the centre of the floor, a table stood. On the table lay Teddy Auden. He was watching Sladden through eyes as readable as jelly.

"Is it you, Ted?" Sladden asked at last.

"Yes, Skylark." He spoke as if he had a rope tight round his neck.

"You crashed on the moon four years ago."

"I—got back here."

"You crashed on the moon four years ago!" said Sladden, his voice rising. "You're dead, man—you're dead! You died long ago!"

The prone figure raised itself, clumsily and heavily with the weight of its space suit.

"I told you I got back here, Skylark."

"You're dead," Sladden whispered. His limbs shook with a sudden palsy and he pressed back against the wall. "You're dead," he repeated, but the ashen face regarding him through the glass helmet was unquestionably Auden's.

"*How* did you get back here?" he demanded. "Where's your ship?" The shock strangled his voice, and even clouded his gaze, so that a dichromic effect rendered this terrifying reality even more terrible.

"I did not crash on the moon. I was—incapacitated. When I got back here, the station was deserted." The words came slowly. "I could not get down to earth in a non-atmosphere ship. I had to stay here."

"Then where's your ship?"

"I failed to secure her properly. I was—not myself. She drifted off."

Sladden was standing upright again now. He had regained some composure, while drawing comfort from the vac-gun in his hand.

"You've lived here close on four years, alone?"

"Has it been as long as that, Skylark?"

"Every bit as long . . . How did you live?"

Auden was sitting upright on the table now. His dull eyes fixed Sladden's unblinkingly.

"Food . . . Air . . . Water . . . They were here."

Silence. Inside Sladden's head, racing thought.

"Auden," he said, "We picked up the signal you sent from here. How come you never answered ours?"

"Uh . . . receiver wrecked. Meteorite . . ."

"The equipment all looks alright to me."

"Look, Skylark—I'm not well. Take me down to earth will you. That's what you came for, eh?"

The stars wheeled outside like sparks going up an everlasting chimney. Cold stars, cold steel, cold men . . . nothing with any heat or juice in.

"I can't take you back, man!" Sladden burst out. "There's something wrong here! You—you—I *know* something's wrong. You couldn't have survived—Wait! Answer me this: we only picked up a signal from you six months ago: how was it we didn't hear two or three years ago?"

Auden said slowly: "I called. Nobody could have been listening. Look, I want to get taken down to earth . . ."

It was just possible he was speaking the truth. And in time of war, if anyone had received the signal they might so easily have discounted or perforce ignored it. Each

item of Auden's tale was just possible *by itself*.

"You have to understand, Skylark—"

"I can't take you down, Auden! I daren't risk it. I don't believe you're Auden any more. You'll have to stay here, even if I have to stay with you."

"You're being foolish now."

"Maybe. But there is something all wrong about this! I have just one crazy idea in my head and I'll tell it to you. Suppose Auden landed safely on the moon. That, I grant, is possible—even likely; Auden was an individualist, and his last message was, "I'm just going to put down. From now on I'm too busy to chatter, so I'm switching you lot off until I'm ready for you." When we never heard again, we had to assume he had crashed, although through our telescopes the ship appeared unharmed.

"Alright. He landed, and decided to go outside before bothering us. Suppose he walked round the surface, and while doing so he picked something up—a seed, a spore, pollen, anything of that kind with a germ of life in it that was able to survive intense cold. This seed may have lain there a long span of years, it may have blown from the far corners of the galaxy, it may have borne a type of life unguessable to us . . . And in the warmth and air of the moonship it might have lived like a leech on Auden's spirit's blood, until in the end it could crawl into and command his husk of body. How do you answer that, Monster?"

The head shook inside the motionless helmet. The words came slowly, "You're mistaken. Your imagination is too riotous. You—"

"I'm going to leave you here, whatever you are. I'm going now. Can you stop me?"

"You're wrong, Skylark, you're wrong. You have not understood—you're mistaken. *Please* take me down—"

"What? To feed like vampires, to multiply like a virus?—"

He broke off. Auden had raised his arms and slithered off the table, stomping towards him. The table fell over backwards, the stars jerked slightly then resumed their circular march.

Sladden fired once wildly out of panic and jumped for the door. He miscalculated in the low gravity, cannoned into the side and sprawled over the raised lip of the doorway. As he fell, the vac-gun exploded again, the shot screeching down the walk, and he crashed against the floor. The frontal glass of his helmet took the blow squarely. It shattered into several pieces.

Helplessly, Auden stood and watched the painful fight for oxygen which was no longer there. It was soon over. The man from the moon bent down and took hold of the body. He commenced to drag it towards the air lock

As he worked along, the great gash in the calf of his suit opened and shut like a dumb mouth."

Jack Eastmore paused briefly. He stared over the heads of the Children of the Universal Church, out through the tall windows and across the flatness which stretched from Westminster to Marylebone. For a moment he seemed to regard past, present and future simultaneously; the vision faded and he resumed his tale, the sardonic note back in his voice.

"While, for what felt like an age, I waited in the ferry rocket" (he said) "I resumed my favourite occupation and began to consider myself. I had acted all along with amazing foolishness. The absurd compulsion which had lifted me and Sladden to the Dish had ruined my future. I saw, above all, that free from my surveillance Barbara Tedder could easily work my ruin—even without Grigensis' help.

I could comfortably be accused of conspiring with the enemy, revealing astronautical secrets, dereliction of duty, abuse of power . . . and be whipped quietly away as I landed again.

This idea had had much time to circulate when I saw two figures emerge from the Dish and slowly approach my ship. I presumed the active figure to be Sladden: who the other was, I could not guess. It was only when they had huddled and crushed through the lock and were cramped into that little compartment with me that I saw the dead was alive and the alive dead.

When I was fit to understand, Auden told me what had happened in the Dish.

"Now take me down to earth," he begged.

I just sat at the controls shaking my head.

"You *must* go down," he said. "Believe this, Skylark's not really dead—I am not really dead. But by the time you have landed we shall both be beyond trouble. I have written an explanation: here."

He thrust a paper at me. His hand was bare, a purple mummified paw. Somehow, seeing that, I believed him. I pulled myself together, retracted the grapples, fired a one-second burst of power.

During the long supersonic glide down, I had plenty of time to make up my mind. So I landed outside the enemy capital.

The Bloc forces took only twenty-five minutes to reach me; in half an hour I was in the hands of Marshall Subjaerof and the two bodies were in a laboratory. They were dead alright. Less attention was paid to me than to Auden's brief message. It said:

"Biology is a truncated worm whose ends are unknown. Nobody can say what the beginning of life is, or what the end of life is. Guesses only.

"When I left the moonship, I tore open my suit on a ridge of stone. I suffocated. For something like a year I lay in limbo on the moon. Then I became aware of myself and returned slowly to the ship. Both my mind and my body had become—like dank, unfamiliar houses; the essential 'I' of myself, on the other hand, had become the dominant part. With practice I could control some of myself. I returned to the Dish. Here I shall wait, for ever if need be.

"I am beyond medicine. But I am not dead, for up here I cannot die. No life can come into being except on earth. No death can come into being except on earth. This is all my message."

After the story, old Jack Eastmore walked with the Holy Mother across the flatness. The children had dispersed for the day and would not return till evening worship.

"It was fortunate for you that Marshall Subjaerof belonged to a dissatisfied religious faction waiting to rebel

against the Bloc leaders," the Mother said.

"Yes, it was," Eastmore assented. "I was the spark that touched off the powder. They were successful, and three months later were suing the U.N. for peace."

"God moves in a mysterious way," she said.

Eastmore chuckled.

"Why the note of amusement?" she asked.

"It was all a question of biology," he said. "Yet the world took it for a religious sign. I was quite a prophet, you know. Me!—Bringing the Word!"

"We still take you as a prophet," she said firmly, "Although it was all thirty years ago—thirty years of abiding peace. The Lord works through worldy men you know, Mr. Eastmore."

This time he laughed with more of his old confidence. "It's always nice to know you've brought perpetual peace to the world," he agreed "—Even by accident!"

A wave of fighters of the Squadrons of Perfect Freedon, roaring low overhead, drowned his last sentence with the shriek of their engines.

THE END

Never stir up a Jack-in-Office: he is probably less dangerous there than he would be at large. Pepkinson's affair with the dormant Empire, for instance, was just a matter of time....

UNAUTHORISED PERSONS

by John Runciman

Chief Controller Pepkinson interrupted himself with a polite yawn, then continued to dictate: " . . . 'and while rejecting the charge of incompetence levelled against this Office, we reaffirm and must herewith emphasise that we cannot be held responsible for any accidents to our operatives attributable to chance or Act of Space.' Thankyou, Miss Sedley. Sign off with the full title—you know, 'Chief Controller, Office of the Control of Uninhabitable Worlds, Hampden Poyle, Deneb VI.' Hampden Poyle, Deneb VI . . . a very fine address, Miss Sedley. We are indeed fortunate to be situated so near to the centre of things."

She adjusted the big, saccharine smile reserved especially for him, aware, as always, that only his old-fashioned prejudice against robot office-staff kept her in her lucrative job.

" You gathered what the letter was all about, I daresay? " he enquired, airily flicking a speck of dandruff from the sleeve of his crisp pink jacket.

" Well, . . . I got it all, Chief Controller."

" Good. You understand, it is always necessary to employ the loftiest possible phraseology when in a position

of this importance. No joke, my dear young lady, having two hundred useless—ahem—*uninhabitable* I should say, worlds on one's hands and a stubborn, highbrow, self-opinionated gaggle of archaeologists digging away on them and producing nothing worthwhile to show for it from one year's end to another. Especially now that the Supreme Board are pestering me to increase our productivity—"justify our budgetary estimates" forsooth—in short, simply putting me in a damned awkward spot. Which is why I leave for the planet Aturnin tomorrow; I shall contact this Professor Bullock and personally investigate his ruins. He has been instigating quite a little fuss recently."

"I do hope you enjoy yourself, Chief Controller, Aturnin sounds awfully romantic."

"Ha, it hardly resolves itself into a case of enjoying oneself, my dear young lady. It's a case of necessity leading where the devil drives . . . You had better send in Copperfeldt with the Aturnin file."

"Certainly Chief Controller." Miss Sedley rose gracefully, well aware of the eyes dropping to her knees as she uncrossed her legs and stood up.

"Oh, and Miss Sedley . . ."

Was the stuffed shirt going to make a move at last? He could hardly be forty, yet he behaved like an old man. She had worked for him for three weeks and nothing had happened. She rolled her large grey eyes and said, "Yes, Chief Controller?"

"Tell Copperfeldt to come in quietly. I am unable to accustom myself to these Denebians' surplus pair of feet."

"Very good, Chief Controller."

"Oh, and Miss Sedley . . ."

"Yes, Chief Controller?"

"How about having dinner with me this evening, before my little spatial perambulation?"

Professor Bullock was the ideal type for excavating one of the Controller's unwanted worlds. He was a long-limbed, long-lived man from one of the border suns with about two hundred years of his life-span still to run (accidents barred), and a definite taste for solitude. A CUW ship had landed him with his paraphernalia on

Aturnin twelve years before and he had burrowed quietly down into the ice rind of the dead world with no company but an assortment of servo-mechanisms. He was, in fact, one of culture's cheapest and most patient long-term investments.

He awoke this morning feeling disgruntled. He would have to deal with another human being, and although he had not seen one for close on seven years, the prospect did not excite him, despite his having voluntarily signalled for inspection. Those asses at CUW would certainly send a prize mutton-head, if he knew them. As yet he did not know how prize.

After a brief meal, the professor walked into one of the garages in his compact little two-acre H.Q., climbed into an enclosed truck and drove out through the airlock onto the surface of Aturnin. It was the first time he had been out here since the location of the H.Q. had been settled. There was nothing to tempt him out. Thick overcast hid the planet's two suns in a perpetual blanket of gloom, while the ground was bogged knee-deep in a gooey blue treacle of liquid oxygen. It would be cold to a degree, the degree being about minus one hundred and ninety. In twenty minutes, all being well, the important visitor would land here; the professor sat relaxed—why should he be worried? There was something far more important than an executive two hundred and fifty feet below the frigid syrup he stood on.

He would have been less confident and comfortable, perhaps, if he could have seen down into those deep, deserted halls beneath him. Among the shadows that had lain in silence for over eight thousand years, among the debris and dirt of a vanished world, a light moved. It was a flickering beacon, glowing as if afraid of the very darkness it dispelled. Carrying it was a crazed man who staggered as he walked. His eyes gleamed crimson in the smoky light. In his other hand, he carried a heavy chopping knife.

This shadow among the shadows emerged from a crumbling house and made its furtive way along a littered thoroughfare. On either side yawned black doorways that filled with menacing, sliding silhouettes as he passed.

Suddenly, from one, a figure leapt, a stick upraised in its hand. Even as it struck, the man with the torch screamed and screamed—the terror of finding life lurking where only death should be. His torch fell to the floor with him and lay guttering there as its owner was dragged into a side chamber and propped against a wall. Suddenly alarmed by the enfolding echoes, the attacker picked up the still-burning torch and raced back along the way his victim had come. A great door closed behind him and darkness resumed its reign. Dust settled again over everything.

* * * *

Guided by Bullock's radio station, which circled Aturnin perpetually in close orbit, the Chief Controller made a good landing at the appointed time and place. He climbed out towards the waiting truck, resolved, inside his new space-suit, to be very much on his dignity and tolerate no nonsense from this archaeologist fellow, and that for a very good reason. On his journey out here, the Chief Controller had used his leisure by popping the substantial CUW file on Aturnin into the 'viso and scanning it through. It had not taken him very long to see that here was something sensational. The monthly beam-reports from Bullock had poured steadily into Deneb VI and there they had one by one been glanced through and stuck on the telefile. Each in itself, dryly worded, carried little to attract attention, but when read consecutively even the C.C. could gather their import. And he should have read them consecutively long months ago. They told the story, no less, of the gradual discovery of the capital city of the almost mythical First Galactic Empire. And Pepkinson had let them moulder on his files! He broke into a sweat of profuse self-concern to think what would happen to him if this neglect became generally known; but fortunately he had possession of the file and control over the professor. The latter should not be hard to deal with, for the C.C. knew his scholarly types—hence the extra pomposity in his greeting to Bullock.

The professor was hardened to governmental condescension and indifferent to patronising airs; moreover, he did

not give a hoot about the other two hundred and six worlds under the C.C.'s control. He drove his visitor slowly back into his H.Q., which hung to the icy tableland like a soap bubble to a man's fist. Once under the dome, he jumped down and helped the distinguished visitor to the floor.

"Well, professor," Pepkinson said expansively, "Here I am, the most suitable and—if I may venture to say so—the most influential person to lend ear to your trouble. Spill the proverbial beans."

"You'd better get the general picture clear first," Bullock said coldly. "I suppose you know this is a binary system?"

"Naturally I do. I believe I can even tell you the names of the stars, if I have a moment's reflection . . ."

"Aturnin and its satellites revolve round Bah beta, a white dwarf which is the minor component of the Bah alpha and beta system, Bah alpha being a red giant. They make quite an incongruous couple. I shall not bore or baffle you with all the figures, but you must know that this planet circles round Bah beta in just over thirty years at a distance equivalent to Saturn's distance from Sol. Beta takes eight thousand years to make one complete ellipse round the common alpha/beta axis, its course varying inversely with its mass ratio to alpha, the giant—but I will not load you with facts you will have learned at school."

He glanced enigmatically at the C.C., who said "Quite, quite."

"Conditions on Aturnin vary considerably over the eight thousand year cycle. For most of the time, when beta is distant from alpha, it is roughly as you see it now, with half its atmosphere frozen onto the surface. Alpha is only a bright star, and not visible through the cloud. But as beta nears its companion and gathers speed, changes take place. Alpha grows apparently brighter and finally the stars pass so near that Aturnin is heated considerably. Near the perihelion of the two stars, over a period perhaps of two hundred years, the planet's atmosphere is liberated and we would then no doubt find it inhabitable. Aturnin is approaching such a period of heat

now, as the two suns draw together after their long separation. Each day alpha grows brighter."

"I read all this on the files, professor. Show me something interesting. Where are these wash basins you dug up?"

"We'll come to those shortly. One other factor varies conditions here. The eight-thousand year cycles are not all alike; they are part of a larger pattern, for alpha too, naturally, is swinging about the common axis. Sometimes the suns pass a comparatively long way from each other, when alpha is at the furthest point of its orbit. At other times, they pass comparatively close. Their last perihelion was very near, and this coming one will be even nearer."

"Does this really have much bearing on your digging?"

"It has every bearing on my researches. These are no idle astronomical figurings I give you, Chief Controller. They are the vital background against which the peoples of the First Empire lived and moved. For lack of data, my calculations cannot be precise, but I fancy that Bah alpha and beta may pass closely enough in a hundred and fifty years for Aturnin to be wrenched off its present orbit."

"Indeed?" The C.C. was a little red in the face. He preferred something tangible—like wash-basins—to speculation. "I can't see that these theories do anything but detract from your appointed task of excavation, professor."

Bullock snorted and flung open a store door. "Your lavatory bowls are in here," he said.

With a sound like a sigh, the little cage carried the two men down through the ice pack, below and away from the well-lighted confines of the H.Q. It felt like a fall into the interior of the planet. After his recent inspection, the C.C.'s attitude had undergone a slight change. Under his boredom and superiority, excitement grew. The formidable mass of stuff the professor had accumulated left no doubt he had made a genuine discovery, and Pepkinson found himself promising Bullock trained assistants, historiographers and all the facilities of modern research for the Aturnin site. Now in the lift, cooler-headed, he was promising himself something; that this

cantankerous streak of erudition should be got rid of. The ruins seemed as likely a place as any.

They stopped. "Planet face," Bullock announced.

A pair of steel doors greeted them. Bullock took a key from his belt and unlocked.

"What are these doors for?"

For the first time, the archaeologist showed embarrassment. "You must understand," he said, "that some large rodent-like creatures live down here. This city, in its heyday, was enclosed from the air and heated partially from the interior of the earth crust, so that breathable conditions still obtain here, irrespective of conditions on what is now the surface. Also, owing to blockages, I have explored only a very small area and it is possible that larger beings may have survived and mutated in the dark. And again, I am alone here, and occasionally my mind plays tricks on me . . ."

His cautious words gained something sinister from the gloom in which they now stood. The lights—fed from the miniature all-purpose plant in H.Q.—were dim and the atmosphere was dusty. Near them stood the factotum robot that performed such duties as digging, boring, bull-dozing or structural jobs. They were in some kind of old roadway, broad and flanked by solid but ruined buildings.

"The roof has collapsed here," the professor commented, "but the buildings have taken most of the strain and now support it. At one time they must have been forty-storey skyscrapers. There was a mass of rubble to clear away—you can't get into these buildings or behind them because they are packed tight with compressed debris. An area of solid wreckage extends some considerable distance to left and right here."

He moved over to a light platform truck. "If you will mount this truck with me, we will travel to the scene of my most recent finds."

The C.C. climbed up and they moved slowly off. A small headlight lit their path.

"Not very cheerful," Pepkinson commented. "I suppose all this dirt was caused by the roof collapse, but it makes it hard to form any sort of general picture."

"Not at all," contradicted Bullock quietly. "With a

little imagination, it is easy to recreate the lives lived here. I should have died of boredom long ago if it was all as uninteresting as you seem to think. Now this building on our right—buckled and smashed as it is, you can still see the flawless mastery of detail that went into its decoration. They loved elaboration, these dead masters of the First Empire. Their factories were as rich in design as a Gothic cathedral. That particular building was a printing house."

"How on Deneb do you know that?"

Bullock paused. "A thorough acquaintance with my monthly reports would have made that question unnecessary, Chief Controller. I have been operating here, apart from one spell of leave, for twelve years. One of the earliest tasks I set myself was that of resolving the dead Aturnin language for myself. I reported having done so two years ago."

"Yes, of course, of course. The point had momentarily slipped my memory. In the Control of Uninhabitable Worlds, you realise you are but an insignificant unit among many." 'And soon you won't even be that,' he added to himself.

"Ah, we'll stop here for a minute!" the archaeologist said with excitement, seeing something that interested him even more than making a counter-snub. He stopped the truck and jumped down, switching on a powerful torch. The mighty roof sagging above them was higher here, and a fine building stood with six floors intact. Beside it a gigantic pile of girders and masonry reached up to the roof. Beside it stood dead and shattered trees, eerie and silent, with monstrous webs stretching from them silted up with age-old dirt.

"What's this place?" Pepkinson asked, glancing back nervously into the darkness from which they had come. They were less than a hundred yards from the cage-shaft, and he did not feel like venturing further.

"We are nearing the centre of this beautiful city," Bullock replied. "This was where I made one of my most valuable discoveries. The building is—was—a recording tape factory, where all that was valuable, or interesting was recorded for the general public to buy. We have the same industry flourishing on our worlds today. It was by

selecting and listening to records taken from here that I learned to speak the Aturnin tongue."

"Oh, you speak as well as read it!" exclaimed the C.C., and realising that was naive, he added, "I think it would be fitting if I investigated the structure. Is it safe to do so?"

"It stood at least eight thousand years, the probabilities are it will bear up a half hour longer."

"You'd better go first, just in case."

The lavishly carved wooden doors stood partially open, just as the professor had left them long before. A fresh pile of debris lay in the hallway and over this they climbed, and then through another door, chased in patterned brass. Bullock flashed his torch about. Pepkinson also produced a light and scuffled round interestedly.

"This was the shop where the records were sold," he announced, his voice hollow in the vast room. Like a small boy exploring, he ran excitedly behind counters and past racks still packed full of spools. "It's wonderful!" he cried, "Wonderful! The First Galactic Empire—here!"

The other man walked reverently over to an audition booth and sat down on a chair by the powerless amplifying apparatus. Who had last sat here? What had he or she looked like? He relaxed into a dream. In another hundred and fifty years, the oxygen ice would evaporate and this city would see the light of day again. He should still be alive and hale them, and would be content if only he might see the sun streaming into these wonderful ruins, bringing light and colour. And then the eternal, unsolved question overtook him: how did the city get under the ice? What catastrophe must have happened to bury it so deep?

He glanced up, and gave a cry. A face was peering in at him. Then he realised it was his own face, reflected in the dusty glass of the booth. Bullock shook himself. So often he had imagined that the Aturnins had not all died . . .

Leaving the booth, he looked about the hall. No sign of the Top Brass. Bullock tutted in annoyance. Then two shots rang out. Another. They were followed by a heavy rumble that sounded like a minor earthquake. The glass in a door

at the far end of the hall shattered and fell noisily onto the mosaic floor. Through the gap billowed a dense cloud of dust. Bullock ran to the door and opened it. Out of the murk, an obscure figure staggered, choking and wheezing, and covered in powdery dirt. Bullock took him roughly by the arm.

"What the deuce are you playing at, you—you novice? You'll collapse the whole place over our heads. And what are you doing with a gun down here anyway?"

"I—I—," the C.C. spluttered. "I was going down a passage out there, and there was a hole in the paving ahead—and suddenly an animal jumped out on me. I had to shoot in self-defence, and all the floor caved in."

"It would only have been a rodent."

"It was the size of a St. Bernard."

"I'd better go and have a look. I've never been through there."

"I'll come with you."

The dust was settling. There was no sign of any animal life. A little stream of mortar and plaster trickled gently into an underground cellar that was now almost entirely filled with rubble. Pepkinson pointed speechlessly ahead. Where before had been a seemingly impenetrable mountain of brick, a tunnel had appeared, its low ceiling shored up by the accidental collapse of beams.

"That wasn't there before," the C.C. gasped. "The mouth of that tunnel was blocked by all the rubbish that plunged into the cellars. Let's see where it leads to."

"Most unwise. The cellar may collapse into a lower cellar, or that dangerous looking ceiling may fall in. If we are killed—finish. If we are trapped—finish. There's nobody to rescue us here."

But the fever of exploration was in the Chief Controller's blood. After all, it was his tunnel. He plunged in clumsily, bent double to get past the low beams. Observing, not without surprise, that the fool appeared to have courage, Bullock followed resignedly. Shortly, he was glad he did so. The tunnel, an ancient cloister of some kind, curved right through the unscaleable pile of wreckage and when they had crawled and crept through it, they came into open space again. Both men pulled up and

stared about in awe.

This looked like the heart of the city. The streets were narrow, as if intended only for pedestrians, and the windows and doors were high and elegantly proportioned. Here the roof was still in place, almost invisible above them. By mutual consent, they started down one of the thoroughfares. In the torchlight, these graceful facades had a funereal elegance. Overhead ran light and graceful bridges and ramps. Away ahead, the buildings stopped for an open space fringed with dead trees, and beyond that again rose an immense round structure, colonnaded and decorated, and rising into the dark like a chord of music. At the extreme range of their light beams, it looked like a splendid white dream.

They walked towards it down the littered thoroughfare. On either side of them yawned black doorways, filling with uneasy, sliding silhouettes as they passed. "It's all uncanny," the C.C. muttered, and even the hardened archaeologist agreed. Crossing the empty square, they climbed broad, shallow steps and so came into the great building.

"Look at those murals!" Bullock exclaimed. Reaching from shoulder level up to the ceiling, in unbroken succession round the walls of the great hall in which they found themselves, were paintings hardly de-flowered by time and executed by a great and eloquent hand. A sweeping staircase and eight doors led from here into other parts of the building—and there was a ninth door, tall and wide and closed by a massive, ornamental handle. Propped by one of its portals was a battered notice board, and towards this they went.

There was writing on the board. It was in English. It read:

UNAUTHORISED PERSONS ARE WARNED THAT TO PROCEED PAST THIS POINT IN SPACE OR TIME MAY RENDER THEM EXCEEDINGLY LIABLE TO PAINFUL HUMILIATION EVEN.

"Who do you think put that there?" the C.C. demanded, blankly.

"English . . . English here? I can't understand . . ."

"Heavens, yes! I never thought of that! Your calculations must be wrong Bullock. This place must be far more recent than the First Galactic Empire. You've made a boob! We must go in and see what it is all about."

In a whirl of mixed emotions, Bullock could only gasp, "But it says—"

"Look here, my dear Bullock, if the Chief Controller of the two hundred and seven Uninhabitable Worlds is not an Authorised Person, I'd like to know who in the Galaxy is? Besides, it may well be two hundred and eight or nine by now. Come along."

The door slid sideways into the wall and they walked in, Bullock nervously, Pepkinson with a swagger. The door slid quietly shut behind them. Both men jumped. Pepkinson went over, pulled it open a fraction and peered out with his torch. Darkness. Silence. When he let the door go, it slid shut. His teeth chattered. "Pull yourself together, Bullock," he said.

"The power supply must still be functioning in this sector," the archaeologist whispered, flashing his torch about.

The room was not large, only about twenty feet square, and ten feet high. Close by the door, encased in glass, was a heavy machine. Spreading from it were many rods which ran about two feet apart, across the floor, up the walls and met on the ceiling, so that the chamber was encircled by them. They were protected from touch by plate glass that entirely lined the room. On the near wall were a number of imposing dials and a red lever. There was also a notice on the wall in the tall, graceful letters of the Aturnian tongue.

"Shall I read you what that says?" Bullock asked impressively, indicating the notice. "It says, 'The penalty for tampering with this time device is confinement to the present.' A time device, Controller, a time device. The men of First Empire knew secrets we can only dream of."

"Let's get back home," was the response.

Scientific detachment won the day over shame-faced nerves, and investigation of the device soon proved fruitful.

"It is obviously devised for a special purpose," Bullock

remarked. "The whole room seems to be intended for a shuttle between two times, for this major red lever here slides over an uncalibrated scale that merely has 'Now' stamped at the right end and the Aturnian 'plus' sign at the left, evidently a time in their future. If the thing works, and as the power functions I see no reason why it shouldn't, we might well switch on and try the 'Now' end of the scale."

"Kindly do no such thing, Bullock. We should perhaps find ourselves thrown back into the days of the First Empire."

"Perhaps? If this functions at all—definitely. The 'Now' could refer to no other time. And that would fulfill my dearest dreams beyond their wildest expectations. Don't you see I've worked among the remains of these gentle people so long that I almost belong to them."

"Gentle? You could hardly expect them to be gentle if we barged in on them unexpectedly."

"Well, I"ll move the lever over to the right and see what happens. It's safe enough, there's a foot pedal control down here marked 'Starter,' and I won't touch that."

The lever could traverse an angle of ninety degrees betwen the 'Now' and 'Plus' terminals. It rested no more than about a degree and a third from the 'Plus' end. Bullock seized it; it was vibrating, gently. He pulled it over and back to the other end of the scale. As the lever moved, so the rods behind the plate glass swung and regrouped themselves, settling round the room in a different pattern.

The two men looked askance at each other. Both were pale.

"You'd better press the pedal, now we've started fooling around," Pepkinson said.

Bullock did so. His foot pressed it level with the floor and at once dials flickered before him and lights came on overhead.

"We asked for it!" Pepkinson yelled, his frightened voice scarcely audible above the whine of engines. Under its glass casing, the motor was alive; little was to be seen except one glowing tube, but from under the casing tore a crescendo of noise. Rising up the audibility scale, the

noise built into a thin scream and cut out. There was a sound like a thunder clap. Visibility during that ear-wracking interval had also been affected. The chamber seemed to crumple about them like a battered carton, to blot out completely—and then normality returned. Bullock recalled shakily the similar effects that occurred when space ships hurtled successively through sound and light barriers. Had they now broken through the time barrier?

"You've wrecked the works, Bullock," the C.C. told him in evident relief. "Come on, let's get back out of this ruin."

He turned away and found himself in the hands of two uniformed guards. Two more closed in and pinioned the professor's arms.

"We've made it!" Bullock shouted. "We've made it! Oh, Pepkinson, how wonderlful!"

"Are you mad? Wonderful indeed! These boys don't seem to share your enthusiasm. Let me go, you hooligans. I'm the Chief Controller."

But they were propelled irresistably to the door.

Recalling the Aturnian language through his wonder and bewilderment, Bullock said to the guards, "No need to hold me tightly. I have no intention of escaping. I have come a long way to meet you. Kindly take us to someone in authority."

"That's where you are going right now," one of the men replied. By twisting his head, Bullock could see the four were uniformly dressed in elaborate and soft clothes. They seemed to be unarmed. They looked remarkably unsurprised at the arrival of their two captives. Casually, one of them began to open the tall door.

"They're going to take us into the ruins and shoot us!" Pepkinson said. His voice was flat. He had forced himself into a bitter self-control. Chief Controllers don't cry.

The door swung back. Outside, the hall of murals was brightly lit, fresh and clean. From the door where they stood, right across the mosaic floor and into the open, wound a long queue of people, quiet and alert. They watched with interest and obvious amusement as Bullock and Pepkinson were marched out and down the shallow

steps. Fear and embarrassment tortured the C.C., but Bullock rapturously drank in every detail. He was back in the flourishing days of the First Galactic Empire. His beloved ruins had sprung into life. Behind them now spread the imposing facade of the building they had left. About them was an open space with trees growing and people promenading; music sounded. Ahead, were the very streets he and the C.C. had lately come by, torches lighting their littered way; they were still recognisable, but much altered. Signs glittered, wares were on display, men and women walked and lingered and talked. Back to life.

There was little time for observation. Bullock glanced up and saw the roof high above them covering all of this part of the city, and then he was ushered with Pepkinson into a vehicle and they were driven away. Instead of going through the shopping centre, they branched right and over a bridge, making their way among spacious gardens and tall buildings. Slender ramps bore walkers high above roads and flowerbeds. Slowly they circled left down a wide way. Even Pepkinson had dropped into silence in his absorption at the scenes about them, and then suddenly he pointed and cried, "Look Bullock, that building over there—"

Bullock recognised it at the same moment. "Yes," he said, "It's the recording-tape factory. This is the very road I have excavated—somewhere in the future."

It was a strange sensation. Where rubble and decay had piled high were lawns, trees and a fresh breeze blowing. In a minute they passed the spot where the archaeologist's cage-shaft would be—at some problematical point in the future. Then they emerged from under the high roof, although many smaller buildings still fringed their route. A blue sky appeared and in it hung, midway to zenith, a great red orb. Bullock recognised it almost instinctively. It was not Bah beta. It was, must be, alpha, the giant.

They turned abruptly up a drive and stopped before a fine sprawling house.

"Get out and follow me, please," one of the guards said, opening a door for them. Leaving the other three, Bullock and Pepkinson allowed themselves to be led

indoors, through a richly appointed hall and into a room. Over against a wide, empty fireplace stood a tall, white haired man dressed grandly in black and yellow.

"Here are the two time-travellers, Jat Ehrlick," the guard announced.

"Thank you. You may withdraw."

The white haired man approached the two of them and said, in Aturnian, "Greetings. You I think," addressing the professor—"are Professor Bullock?"

"I certainly am," replied Bullock, amazed more by this greeting than anything that had happened so far, "Were you expecting us?"

The white haired man smiled and said, "I was. But before the explanations, introductions."

As he spoke, two ladies entered, smiling, one a matron and the other a dark haired girl of about thirty.

"This is my wife Galen, and Dorin, my unmarried daughter. My name is Ehrlick and I am one of the Jats, or noble ruling families of this city of Aturnin."

Introductions all round. After an interested look at Dorin, Pepkinson said, "Tell this fellow I am of some importance. Ask him if we are prisoners."

Bullock made a rough translation.

"You are not prisoners, certainly. But you must allow yourselves to stay with me, it it does not inconvenience you too greatly. We hope you will be able to help us here, for you come upon us at a time when our existence and the existence of our world is threatened. Were this not a time of emergency, I hope we should treat you more ceremoniously, visitors as you are from other time, other space."

"You have been more than kind, Jat. But there are so many questions we have to ask you—"

"Bullock, ask his daughter if she feels like teaching me some Aturnian out on the verandah."

After more discussion, a plan was decided upon. Ehrlick decided his explanations would be aided by practical demonstrations, but Pepkinson refused to budge. He was too tired, he said. It was agreed that he would stay here with Dorin, who should try and teach him the rudiments of her language, while Bullock made a short flight over

the city with Ehrlick and his wife. Secretly, the professor was delighted with this arrangement, as every moment spent with the C.C. was distasteful to him.

As he walked with Ehrlick onto a paved walk at the back of the house, he said apologetically, "I hope you will not find my associate ill-mannered. He is overbearing because of the responsibility he bears in his own world." He explained the nature of Pepkinson's post. Ehrlick and his wife were staggered.

"Two hundred and seven uninhabitable worlds! He has every right to be overbearing! Yours must be a most mighty empire!"

"I am afraid it does not—from me at least—command the reverence yours does, Jat. Your empire is known to us as the First Galactic Empire. Please tell me, how many planets lie in its federacy?"

Ehrlick pulled a wry face and said reluctantly, "I am afraid you will be disappointed when I tell you—only twelve."

He was right. Bullock was disappointed. The title First Galactic had been dreamed up by a myth-mongering journalist of his own age, and the truth hardly came up to expectations. Little wonder none of its worlds had been found—so many uncharted planets lay beyond the narrow limits of the Sixty Systems. As they made their way over to a crimson helicopter that stood in the grounds, a space ship rose about two miles away, climbed on a pillar of smoke, turned into a twinkling point and vanished into the upper air. Ehrlick's wife laid a hand on Bullock's arm and said gently, "You see that ship, professor? It is the last foreign ship leaving Port Aturnin. The others have gone, back to their home planets. We are alone, as a race, for the first time in many centuries."

"I don't understand, madam. Why are they leaving?"

"Because this city is doomed. In a few days its glory will be over."

* * * *

As the 'copter climbed, Bullock told his story. Ehrlick and his wife Galen listened with interest but almost without comment, their faces sad. Then the archaeologist

begged to hear what was happening now.

Galen began the story. "You find three things here which are recent innovations. The first two are this great dome which is planned soon to cover our city, and the time device by which you came here. The two have been forced upon us by the third—that terrible monster up there!"

She pointed to the red globe of Bah alpha, climbing across the sky. "Normally, this would be night in our peaceful realm, but for centuries, growing steadily in the heavens, one bright star has blossomed and now it rules us, as you see, a giant threatening our very existence. It is from that we now flee and defend ourselves."

Bullock listened to this in some dismay. His confidence once shaken, he began to wonder if these people understood the nature of the binary system they inhabited. "Your own sun must be approaching perihelion with the monster," he said diffidently. "Every eight thousand years they swing close and then part company again. Possibly they have already passed their closest point and the crisis is over."

A harsh laugh came from Ehrlick. "You underestimate us. Knowledge does not depend on size. Our astronomical sciences were past that stage some twenty-six thousand years ago."

Bullock was duly abashed, and apologised.

"I also must apologise," Ehrlick said. "We are upset at present, or our civility would not so desert us. At each recent successive perihelion, Bah alpha and beta have drawn nearer, due to alpha's own fast orbital revolution. This of course is the usual order of things in a binary system. The orbits of the stars intersect at two points, one either side of perihelion. We have already passed the first of these and are due at the second in ten days. We shall then be in closest conjunction with alpha—a matter only of a few hundred million miles."

"There cannot be a collision?"

"Naturally not. Nor do we fear one. But at that time of closest conjunction, a matter of hours, Aturnin will be in a position between beta and aplha. Of course, it will be many times nearer beta, its own sun, but that will be

counteracted by the infinitely greater mass of alpha. A gravitational tug of war will take place over our little world."

Bullock let silence cover his confusion. The process sounded likely to be undergone in searing heat and that he could not adjust with his foreknowledge of Aturnin as a world of snow and ice. Equally, the planet could not be destroyed by the titanic forces, nor could it be wrenched into an orbit about the other sun, for in his own time it still circled beta.

"I see you are baffled," Ehrlick said, "And understandably. So should we be, and our approaching fate unknown, but for our development of time travel over the last two years. We have thus learnt of the end of the catastrophe, and you shall hear it. When those fatal hours, minutes, near, our largest satellite, Lagg, chances by fortune to move into opposition. It lies on the ecliptic. It will be drawn away from us and take up a course round alpha, but in those few minutes when alpha is eclipsed, its hold on us will inevitably weaken and we shall swing safely away after beta, on its predestined course."

As Ehrlick talked, he had swung their craft away from the city; now they were climbing and returning. The massive shield over the city gleamed redly below, the uncompleted section looking from the air like a large chip out of an inverted saucer.

"Unfortunately, we shall be wrenched away into a new orbit about Bah beta. At present we are at a mean seventy million miles distant, but after the coming perihelion—in a fortnight's time—we shall be something approaching eight hundred and eighty million miles away." His voice lapsed into silence. His wife made the next comment.

"So you see our tragedy now, Professor Bullock. Aturnin will survive, but will become completely unliveable. It will be so cold that the atmosphere will be partially frozen down onto the face—as you have seen it in your day. It is all too terrible to contemplate."

Bullock saw. From capital of the First Galactic Empire to—one of two hundred and seven Uninhabitable Worlds. He felt crushed.

Under Ehrlick's control, the machine sank lower and they touched down on the mighty roof. As they climbed out, Ehrlick remarked, "The privilege of coming up here merely sight-seeing is one compensation for the responsibility of being a Jat."

He walked slowly away from them, sunk in thought, and Galen said quietly, "Our world has built up a great tradition of civility, professor. Our laws are lenient—we have no malcontents, no death sentence. I doubt if you'd find half-a-dozen hand weapons in all Aturnin. We have—graduated. But my husband has many responsibilities. You see, he has chosen to stay here after perihelion."

"You mean—after the orbit change?"

"Someone in authority must stay. There must be no disorder. Under this great roof, many will survive . . ."

"And you, Galen?"

"I stay with my husband." She looked away, and then pointed to the horizon, where light gathered behind a wooded hill. "There is our sun, see. This should be dawn, with the cool mists clearing—would be, but for that usurper up there."

Beta came up, insignificant in the glare from alpha. Bullock turned away, silent as the first beams slid over the wide roof. His years in the ruins had been happy; he had been reconstructing their glories in his mind. Now he was wretched; here were the glories, and he saw them merely as preludes to ruin. Abstractedly, he looked over to where Ehrlick was talking to one of the roof construction crew. He saw the titanic nature of the job in hand. It looked like a last fling. They had some marvellous machines at work—there were two flying cranes that appeared as airworthy as elephants. A great seventy foot truck lumbered girders up from a small foundry constructed up here, and the foundry was a match box two miles in the flat, steel distance.

Ehrlick rejoined them. "Impressive, isn't it?" he smiled at Bullock's face. "But we had better be leaving. It'll get really hot up here soon. A pity that all this construction will be partly vain . . ."

"Vain?"

"We have time travel. We know as well as you the

way this shield will be almost everywhere ground down onto the city by—" he waved his hand, "—this very air we breathe now."

"I'm sorry I don't understand. You build this shield, knowing it will be a partial failure, to save the city. Yet you—at least, most of you—are going to leave the city. The two facts don't match."

They were climbing back in the crimson 'copter. As the blades began to whirr, Ehrlick replied in a raised voice, "Hardly anyone is leaving the city. Over the rest of the planet, ships are taking off as many people as possible to the other worlds of the Empire. But here, here we are staying." He laughed. "And yet we are leaving . . . We are going forward in time."

The machine lifted, and they floated over the edge of the shield. The land was a bright green below them. They sank, and circled low over the high buildings, landing neatly before the round white building, which Galen referred to as the Civic Palace.

"Are you tired of sight-seeing?" she enquired.

He shook his head.

Once more Bullock stood in the great, decorated hall. A queue of people still waited there. The doors of the time chamber opened, and part of the crowd filed in. The doors closed. A seven minutes' pause, filled with the muffled noise of the time device. The doors opened. The chamber was empty. Another group of people moved in and the doors closed again.

"It is so simple," Ehrlick said. "Our whole population drains off into the future."

"I see now," Bullock said quickly. "They go eight thousand years ahead, don't they? In eight thousand years, beta and alpha are in conjunction again. And at the first intersection of orbits—"

"Yes, at first conjunction, the suns swing even closer than this time. But Aturnin will be out of the way, round the other side of Bah beta. The gravities of both suns will be piled against it, and once more it will be wrenched out of orbit. It will be drawn back into something very near its present—its old orbit. Our world will come back to life."

The archaeologist nodded, mutely. At last he said, "I am one of the long-lived men from the border suns. There's a time effect out there on the edge of the galaxy that gives us life-spans of three or even four centuries of life. I have a long while to go yet. All I have ever lived for is your world, Ehrlick. All the while I was digging in your ruins, I knew I would survive to see that conjunction. I'm not an astronomer, but we have mechanical computers, and I had worked that out for myself—I knew Aturnin would live again, and that was my desire. To see the sun shine over the green ground once more."

"Our people will also be there to see it."

"Now I know how far Pepkinson and I came back in time—eight thousand years, less the hundred and fifty."

"That must be correct. You see our time chamber is just a shuttle operating on a narrow band with an eight thousand year limit. It goes back and forward all day. Already in the future our people are building up again, reconstructing."

"But it's a great task, professor," Galen added. "And your help is needed."

"If I can do anything at all . . ."

"You can, but before we talk of that, let us go home. You must be tired, and Dorin and the Chief Controller will wonder what we have been doing."

But when they returned, Dorin and the C.C. had gone.

* * * *

The evening had been a cheerful one. Ehrlick's son, Ehrmal, had returned home with friends and they had talked with Bullock for a long while. Now both suns had set and everyone retired to bed. Bullock had been given a comfortable room and stood by it saying good-night to his host.

"I will return to my own time tomorrow, Ehrlick," he promised. "I shall begin to organise help for you immediately, without waiting for Pepkinson to turn up. He would have been more influential than I—but I fear he would be disinclined to exert himself on behalf of others."

"We shall regret your going, while remaining eternally grateful for your eagerness, professor. As for your friend, do not worry too much about him."

As Bullock paused enquiringly in the threshold, Ehrlick added, " As Jat, I am privy to certain secrets which must not be communicated to others, but as you are not of our time it would hardly be a breach to tell you some of them, notably some paradoxes concerned with time travel. ' Foreknowledge of the future saps initiative.' That is the first maxim we have formulated in the last two years, the period over which the time device has been perfected. Another maxim, dependant on the other, is, ' All futures are possible until they are past; and then they merely remain probabilities.' I will give you an example. The time device may be likened to a rubber band slipped over a nail, the nail representing—in our case—a point eight thousand years ahead. The continuum is stretched back like rubber, back to now. Obviously, each day that passes stretches the rubber less, as 'now' moves closer to 'then'—but the point at the other end remains constant. If you from your time had gone forward instead of back to us, you would have stretched the continuum very little—a mere hundred and fifty years. You would have come out where all our people come out, into a ruined civic palace —*where help from your world is already arriving.* Medical aid, provisions, materials, they are flowing in already! "

" Then my help is not needed! " protested Bullock.

" Yes. There you illustrate my point about foreknowledge. The assistance is supplied because you or Pepkinson, we have not found out which, returned to prepare your worlds for our appearance from the ice. But if neither of you go, another future will eventually emerge. You cannot do nothing, or the future of Prior Possibility will be cancelled—and there are futures of infinite possibility."

He let his point sink in, then continued, " That was how we expected you, and had guards stationed in the chamber waiting for you. Because on one of the lifts into the future, Pepkinson and my daughter were seen there, in the reviving Aturnin."

" What? "

" He was noticed as an alien, Dorin was questioned, and they were sent back."

"When was this?"

"'When' was two times. They were first eight thousand years in our future, and they were returned to this evening."

"Where are they now? I am afraid of Pepkinson."

A frown crossed Ehrlick's brow. "And I am afraid of Dorin. She was always irresponsible and selfish. Nobody knows where they are now. We have few guards here, but they have been on a search, without result."

Bullock shook his head slowly. Forebodings overtook him.

"I must go back to my own time first thing tomorrow. I shall make a full report on Pepkinson so as to nullify any actions he may take."

"Don't worry now, professor. Go to bed and sleep well. Good-night."

Bullock turned into his room, pressing the door slowly shut, his brain puzzled. A revolver was dug into his stomach, and a grim voice said, "You're coming with me, Bullock." It took him a frightened moment to recognise the steely tones for Pepkinson's.

"What do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"I've been standing here listening to a very interesting little conversation, all about goody-goody Bullock. If you shout, I'll shoot you at once, and then Ehrlick will never get any aid."

"Don't be a fool, what's suddenly made you so dangerous?"

"For one thing, I haven't swallowed the line of tackle that you seem to have done from these Aturnians. They're a powerful race, and you're helping them to power again. For another thing, Dorin and I get on very well together; we're both interested in matters like self-improvement, I find. But two things I can't do. I can't understand enough of her language, and I can't manage their confounded time device, being constitutionally unmechanical. You can help in both cases, Bullock. Come on out the window. Dorin's waiting in a car outside. She's longing to see you again. Come on, move man."

Bullock was helpless. He was not a hero, his bravery lay in facing intangibles, and the idea of jumping a gun

never occurred to him—he had two hundred years of life to lose. He climbed dumbly out onto the dim lawn and was pushed through a small plantation onto a side road, where Dorin awaited them at the wheel of a powerful car. The archaeologist was thrust into the back seat. Pepkinson jumped in beside him and they moved off.

"You're just an amateur kidnapper," Bullock snapped.

"Maybe. But the ransom is—a city. Now listen to me. During the siesta hour this afternoon, the Civic Palace was deserted and Dorin and I got into the time device. I tried to get her back into my world with me, but when I swung the lever over, we just materialised into the point where Aturnin was coming to life again."

"What was it like?"

"Exceedingly busy and messy, but I'm not here to give you a travelogue. The point is, we got sent back and have been hiding ever since. Now the time device is again deserted and we are going to try again, with your help."

"I'm going back in the morning. Isn't that soon enough?"

"Sorry to spoil your night's sleep, but no. If these people can see into the future they may already have spotted that I have—am going to do a little sabotage. They wouldn't tell you if they had."

Dorin called something to him, Pepkinson gave a brief word of agreement and the car stopped.

"You are mad Pepkinson. Whatever can you gain by all this?"

"Gain? Everything . . . I'm going back to the C.U.W. on Deneb VI to get hold of the biggest excavation detail ever. Then I'm coming back with it to Aturnin, to plunder it in the name of science. When these people crawl out of their burrows again, they'll find the place picked clean!"

"You greedy fool! You dirty, grasping cur! How on earth did you get Dorin to comply with a rogue's dream like that."

"Ha, you don't imagine I've given her all the details, do you? She thinks she's in for a nice, safe life on Deneb VI and so she is, too!"

"Dorin, this devil—Aaah!" His plea to the girl was

stopped by a swift blow to the solar plexus. Pepkinson grabbed him by the throat.

"Don't be stupid, Bullock. You can't stop me. If you think I'm going to tolerate for ever the stuffy boredom of an obsolete and powerless post just to oblige your pal Ehrlick, you're wrong. I'm desperate. Now, tell me, tell me quickly, how do I work that time device to get back to the time we came from?"

"I can't tell you."

"Tell me, or I swear I'll shoot you dead."

"Well . . . You move the lever over to the left, all but about a minute and a half of the total arc."

"It's no use talking to me about arcs. I'm a Controller not a mathematician. How far over in inches?"

"Just over six inches."

"All right. I hate to break it to you, but that's all you are needed for. Dorin, come and help me tie him up."

Bullock was hauled unceremoniously out of the car. He saw in the dimness that they were parked by one of the ornamental pools before the Civic Palace. Nobody was about, taking advantage of the brief dark, and he regretted that the Aturnians were so peaceable that they did not bother with guards. He was securely trussed in two minutes. Dorin came towards him, sprinkling liquid from a bottle onto a cloth. "Now you sleep," she said in English.

"Wouldn't it be better if we pushed him into this water?" Pepkinson asked her, with appropriate gestures to the pool. "It would save any further trouble."

She said in a shocked voice, "No. No kill!"

"As you please. As soon as my squads get digging, we'll have the time device dismantled; that will stop any bother. You're going out now, professor. Here's a thought to take with you in your dreams—this gun wasn't loaded. I fired off all my rounds at that creature in the ruins. Look!"

He threw his weapon out into the dark. As it splashed into the pool, the cloth was clamped firmly over Bullock's face. Helpless, the archaeologist gasped in bitter fumes.

Blackout.

The Chief Controller was in a fury. For the third time, he moved the major lever over. For the third time, he kicked the activator pedal. For the third time, they were drowned in a crescendo of noise and for the third time he opened the door and they stepped out into a dark and ruined city. He was up against a problem of size. The lever's swing was almost six feet over the uncalibrated scale, representing the maximum journey of eight thousand years. Had he been less thick and hot headed, he might have calculated for himself that one and a third inches roughly represented his required century and a half. Instead, he worked on the trial and error scheme, moving the lever slowly on for each journey. Besides, Bullock had said six inches and it never occurred to him the professor might have lied under duress.

"Let's hope we are there this time!" he exclaimed. He shone his torch out into the silence. The city looked forbidding and chill.

"Come on!" he said to Dorin.

They hurried out into the ghostly square and made for the shops. The route was the same always, the litter the same always. Up the narrow shopping street, a furtive movement in the buildings on their right. Of course the place was haunted; its inhabitants lived on. Pepkinson shivered. The torch was waning and his nerve sank with it. This was their third foray . . . They had to go each time to see if his tunnel was there, the tunnel he had accidentally blown in the pile of rubble. If it was, they could crawl through into the record factory and along to Bullock's shaft. If not, they came back.

Not. Wrong again. An unscalable pile of rubble stood in their path. He kicked a stone in frustration. There was nothing for it but to go back and move the lever along again. If he had but known it, they were still about a century before the day Bullock was landed on Aturnin. Wearily, they retraced their steps.

At the end of the street, something attracted Dorin's downcast eyes. "Look!" she screamed.

Across the square, the Civic Palace loomed. In the hall, a fire glowed, and a figure stood over it, dimly seen against the door of the time device. As Dorin's scream

rang out, it vanished and they saw it no longer. For a long time, Pepkinson and the girl stood petrified, waiting. Nothing happened. The fire burned steadily ahead.

"We must pass it," Pepkinson said. "It's the only way back."

Half dragging the girl, he went forward and eventually climbed the steps of the palace. There was not a sign of anyone. Seizing up a board as a weapon, he stepped boldly past the fire—they both regarded it as something supernatural—and up to the tall door. Nothing moved. Giving a sigh of relief, Pepkinson put down the board and tried to kiss Dorin. She flinched away, and in a burst of fear pushed into the time device. With a similar surge of panic, he followed and swung over the lever, shooting them into safety.

This was a mistake on Pepkinson's part. He had been working the lever carefully along the scale about a half inch at a time. Now he lost his place, and had to put the lever back by guesswork. Again they grated through the time barrier. He opened the door. Again a dark, fearful Aturnin greeted them.

"Come on," he said to Dorin.

"I not come on."

"You must. I take you home."

"You go on. See if this time right. Then come get me."

Her face was pale and pleading. She was tired. She was also, it dawned through his thick head, growing sick at the sight of her dead city. He too, was losing heart.

"All right Dorin, You stay here. I won't be long."

"No. Please. Leave me torch!"

"Not on your life! Wait. I'll build you a beacon."

He hunted across the desolate square, grumbling at his loss of time and pulling pieces of wood out of the ruins of a tall building. Carrying them back in his arms, he dumped them in the middle of the entrance hall and lit them, fanning up the flames with his hand.

"I won't be long," he said curtly, and made off into the dark with his torch. Dorin began to seem like a helpless child, and Pepkinson was not fond of children at the best of times.

He picked his way gloomily along the now-familiar

street, and suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. Something was approaching. Hurriedly, he switched off his torch and cowered in a doorway. A light moved ahead, towards him. He made an effort to run, but a spasm of supernatural fear held him motionless. Two figures neared, silent and worried of aspect. Then Pepkinson nearly dropped—he recognised them, himself and Dorin!

The discovery only increased his fear. He crouched and watched, his hands shaking. The explanation occurred to him readily enough; he had returned after their hasty retreat, to almost exactly the same place in time as their last investigation, but about five minutes later. No comfort came to him from this knowledge, as he watched himself out there, gliding by with the torchlight shining glassily in his eyes. That thing was not him. It had been once, perhaps but now it was only—a ghost from the past. The two stalked by his hiding place, and he gathered his wits together.

A scream rang among the dead buildings. It made Pepkinson's flesh crawl even as he realised he should have anticipated it. Dorin was screaming at the sight of her own fire. Coming out into the street again, he watched two frightened figures stare across the square, and began to laugh soundlessly and mirthlessly. Let them worry! They'd get over it. Meanwhile, no sense in going to look for the vital tunnel—the ghosts told him it was not there. He returned slowly, emerging into the open in time to see his earlier self disappear into the time device.

Dorin was crouching under the grand staircase, trembling.

"We are the haunters of this city," she said. "I could not face myself. Now I shall always be afraid of myself."

He laughed, suddenly light-hearted. "If we have only ourselves to fear, we should win through! Look here, I'll make a notice out, just to keep ourselves off in case we are any more bother to us." He spoke as one humouring a child, and seized a board lying nearby. For an instant, his hand hovered about it blankly—he so seldom wrote—and then the world of Hampden Poyle and the CUW came flooding back, and he recalled his official phraseology.

He wrote on the board:

UNAUTHORISED PERSONS ARE WARNED THAT TO PROCEED PAST THIS POINT IN SPACE OR TIME MAY RENDER THEM EXCEEDINGLY LIABLE TO PAINFUL HUMILIATION EVEN DEATH.

P. P. Pepkinson.
Chief Controller, U.W.

Somehow, the sight of such a prosaic notice soothed their nerves.

"We must hurry if we are to get to your world before it is morning in mine," Dorin said. So once more they went into the device, moved the lever along a space, activated it . . . and stepped again into the unchanging gloom of the wrecked city. The fire that had blazed—it seemed a minute ago—was ashes under their feet, ashes collapsed under dust. The notice still stood where they had left it; how old was the lettering now? It must already have stood a hundred years.

"Are you coming?" Pepkinson asked the girl.

She shook her head. "I stay by the door here" she said.

"It makes so much delay getting a fire," he grumbled "Come with me."

"A fire doesn't matter. You go. I stay by the door."

"As you please, Dorin. I won't be long."

He set off again, down the wide steps and across the open towards the street of shops. His torch was growing dim, and shadows crept nearer about him. Then, behind him, he heard the roar of the time device. With a cry, he turned and ran back, hurling himself into the great hall. Dorin was gone. The door of the time chamber was locked. All his frenzied, terrified hammering could not move it.

For over an hour he stood and paced by the great door, using his torch only at brief intervals to husband its light. His numbed mind refused to believe the truth: he was shut out. At length, from sheer weariness, he sat down with his back against the door, and fell asleep. His waking was sudden and filled with a desperate comprehension of the situation. Unless it was now the time of

his and Bullock's first penetration of this part of Aturnin, he was trapped in the city.

A long while passed before he had the courage to make the test. At last he got up and dragged once more up the hated street. The mountainous pile of rubble once more met his shrinking gaze. He was due to stay. With a cry, he flung himself down and commenced to scrape away the bricks. As a few were dislodged, more trickled down the slope which reached up to the low roof, and his efforts remained useless. Pepkinson was still grovelling when the torch failed.

Life is determination; where there is the possibility of survival, it survives. The great city lay silent under its ice layers, waiting pillage or resurrection. Its cellars and larders were well stocked with tinned and boxed provisions. Its shops were filled with provisions. But as the hungry man prowled from place to place, the mirage of food crumbled before him, dropping into rust or wet pulp. Life is determination; it preys on life to live. Pepkinson was not the only creature there in the dark mazes of the city. Giant white animals with wet lips hunted and bred in a thousand forsaken rooms and cellars, rodent-like animals as large as spaniels and savage as sharks. But they feared light and could be trapped. They could also be cooked and eaten. Life is determination; hence—it survives.

Bullock shook his head. It seemed unaccountably loose. He muttered, and tried to fan away the mists that fogged his brain. Someone was making him walk, or rather stagger. He opened his heavy eyes. A woman was propelling him up some steps. It was Dorin. Then his memory returned.

"Please hurry," she said. "It grows light already and shortly guards will be here and the citizens will start queueing. We cannot seem to strike your time. I am sure the Chief Controller is working the wrong way. If you will get us quickly back there, we will let you go free. He is so stubborn and I am sure that all that is required is a simple arithmetical calculation—you understand."

"Where is Pepkinson?"

"I suddenly had the notion of fetching you, and I left him—ahead in time. Look, I marked the place on the scale with the end of a burnt stick, so that we could go straight back and pick him up."

She smiled at her bright idea, paced about anxiously behind him as he moved the lever over from the 'Now' end to the black mark at the other, left, end. Bullock was himself again, more than himself, filled with an iron decision. Pepkinson had to be eliminated. It was unlucky—although not for Bullock—that he placed the lever so that Dorin's mark was on its right, rather than on its left as it should have been. A small matter, but it made a difference of nine years to Pepkinson.

The time barrier rumbled noisily about them, and Dorin hurriedly pushed open the great door. Blackness. Bullock cast round for something to light. Pepkinson's notice stood near; it was backed with a pitchy substance that should burn well. He broke off a long strip, taking care that the hated signature came off with it. Everywhere, that name should be obliterated. He had also snapped off the last word of the text: DEATH. Very suitable, Bullock thought, as the flames bit into it. He lifted it above his head and motioned to Dorin to follow him.

As they emerged again into the great tomb, Bullock cast a brief look about. He saw now the largeness, the valiance of Aturnin's plan for the survival of its chief city. When the roof was being constructed, it was already known it would collapse, yet still work had gone ahead, and wisely, for although it had been weighed almost to the ground in many places, here at the city centre it still stood firm above them. Rebuilding would not be too formidable a work—if the Aturnians were given their chance. And Pepkinson was all that stood in their way.

They halted on the steps and began shouting. That should be safe enough. There were no weapons in the ruins for Pepkinson to pick up, and if Bullock started a search down the streets he might meet an ambush. No answer greeted them, only echoes. The rough torch guttered dimly.

"You'd better—" Bullock began, and in that instant two great white creatures launched themselves at him,

and Dorin. He went down with an angry, stinking face glaring into his own. Dorin cried with pain. Struggling, Bullock brought up his feeble torch and rammed it into the furry muzzle that sought his throat. The creature yelped, pawed wildly, and bounded off into the dark. Pulling himself up, Bullock brought the wood down savagely on the other brute's skull. It leapt up, striking at him, and dragged itself off after its mate.

Bending tenderly over Ehrlick's daughter, Bullock lifted her head. In the dim glow, he saw what he had feared—Dorin's windpipe had been chewed through. She was dead.

He stood up and squared his shoulders. With angry, lashing movements, he fanned flame back to his torch. Then he began towards the dim buildings. At the first one he came to, he paused, and broke in the door with a few kicks. He entered, peering through the musty, ill-smelling atmosphere. He wanted a weapon. In the back room, a table lay collapsed on the floor; termites had long ago eaten through its legs. The man kicked at the drawer and it fell away, spilling rot and termites over the floor. A miscellaneous collection of cutlery was revealed. Among it lay a heavy chopping knife. Bullock picked it up and pushed his way back into the street, his knuckles white round the handle.

Among the shadows his light moved, a flickering beacon glowing as if afraid of the darkness it dispelled. Bullock staggered as he walked, his eyes gleaming crimson in the smoky illumination. He called every now and again the one word "Pepkinson." On either side of him yawned black doorways that filled with menacing silhouettes as he passed. He was tense, prepared—yet even so he was taken by surprise. Suddenly from a narrow doorway a figure leaped, a shaggy, rag-clad figure who had lurked for nine years here, eventually forgetting the purpose for which it had come. It was filled only with the feral will to survive.

Even as it struck, the man with the torch screamed and screamed unnerved by the terror of finding life where only dead centuries should be. His torch fell to the floor with him and lay guttering there as its owner was dragged

into a side chamber and propped against a wall. Suddenly alarmed by the enfolding echoes, the ragged attacker grabbed up the still-burning torch and raced back along the way his victim had come. Across the square he ran, springing over the body, into the civic hall, into the time device. The great door closed behind him. Darkness resumed its reign. The dust settled again.

A distant rumble like thunder. Bullock stirred. He had lain for a long while in a semi-stupor, imagining himself in his grave. Visions floated before him, glimpses of his home planet, glimpses of Ehrlick's world, which appeared sometimes as a fine and glittering domain, sometimes as a broken shell. Now he gathered his wits. He was alive, but entombed. He had sprawled here—how long? He imagined it to be days.

Now there were sounds outside this unknown place where he lay, and numbly he imagined the white creatures gathering to attack. Probably as the years had seeped by, their food had grown scarcer and they more bold. He sat up. Footsteps approached.

Voices were talking in English. He heard his own name. A light grew. Two men passed along the thoroughfare within feet of him, and their light washed for an instant over one of his shoes. Blood rushed to his face as he realised—he knew those voices, he knew those men. One was himself. One was Chief Controller Pepkinson. They were making their first visit to the Civic Palace.

With a groan, he tried to get up. If he could stop them . . . His left leg was dead where he had been lying on it. Painfully he rose, and dragged himself into the street. The two figures were several yards away, crossing the desolate square. No, he would not deal with them. What must be, must be—and now there was another way.

He turned back, making for his own quarters, climbing wearily through the tunnel Pepkinson had just uncovered, riding back to the cage, locking those steel doors, sailing up towards the surface . . . towards the splendour that still lay a hundred and fifty years ahead, the splendour and the reckoning.

—JOHN RUNCIMAN

There might even have been a news story in Einstein's discovery of Relativity—just a small one. Not front-page stuff.

MATCHBOX

by Peter Bradley

Now look, son. You will notice I'm keeping my temper. When you've been in journalism a few weeks you will realise that News Editors never keep their tempers. I'm doing you a favour, trying to *help* you. I know you've come a long way to take this job and your head is full of School of Journalism stuff and you think cub reporters spend their time making dazzling scoops. Well they don't. They spend their time covering weddings and police courts and amateur dramatics if they're lucky and local council meetings if they're not. That is what the readers want. That is what we print. And believe me, if the Great Venusian Lizard materialised at a society wedding in this place, the readers would still want to know what the bride was wearing. That's what matters. That's what sells papers. Scoops—phooey. Listen, I'll tell you a story.

I wasn't much older than you, I suppose, and just as innocent. Well, perhaps not quite as innocent . . . anyway, there was this Women's Institute meeting and me sitting balancing a cup of lovely strong tea and a piece of pink iced cake and not bored any more, suddenly. I remember wishing the tea was something even stronger, wishing the Vice-chairman or whatever would leave off yakking, wondering how soon I could decently drift over to Mrs. O'Neill and start pumping her. For there had to be a story in this—maybe I even used the word "scoop" to myself. Meanwhile I just watched the expressions on

the faces of the women, which I must say were a treat. They ranged through mild surprise, jaw-dropped incredulity and frank suspicion to open, naked hatred.

For a while I really thought there might be an ugly scene and if you think a lot of middle-aged women can't be dangerous you should wait outside a court-room when they're bringing in a sex-maniac who's done something horrible to a child. Anyway, there wasn't a scene; W.I. members aren't quite the level of the *tricoteuses* round the guillotine in ancient France. Maybe my presence kept them in line a bit—the power of the Press, my boy, it works in odd ways sometimes.

For a while the women went on making sinister sort of buzzings and murmurings then the Vice-chairman (Mrs. J. G. de V. Bracegirdle, acting for the Chairman, who, we regret to say, is indisposed etc.) got up on her feet, gave a funny sort of uncertain smile as though she wasn't quite sure whether anyone was going to listen, and spoke.

"Well, I don't think there is any doubt that Mrs. O'Neill is the winner of our little competition with—how many was it my dear?—five hundred and sixty something?—objects in a matchbox."

The undoubted winner, not very far from tears, started to say softly: "There are still one or two more things in my box, Mrs. Bracegirdle, if you'd like to—"

She was firmly silenced by the vice-chairman, who continued: "Mrs. Mettrick comes second, with seventy six, and Mrs. Ridley and Mrs. German tie for third place with seventy one objects each." There was lukewarm applause, and the secretary jotted something down in her little book. So, more unobtrusively, did I.

I had come along to give the members of East and West Hambling Women's Institute a very interesting talk about weekly newspapers. Last month they had heard a very interesting talk about Victorian jewellery, and at next month's meeting they would no doubt be having a very interesting talk by a policewoman or a representative of a cosmetics firm. But this month they had wanted to know about newspapers, and I had told them what they wanted to hear.

Not the inside story of the weekly miracle by which the miscellaneous events of a county's history are assembled into a threepenny broadsheet. It is better that life should retain some of its mysteries, and anyway, it's a dreary process to have to describe.

So instead I gave them a series of anecdotes drawn from my own not very chequered career in provincial journalism. You know the sort of thing: "In our last issue we described Col. Smythe-Smythe as a battle-scared hero. This should of course have read bottle-scarred." And—weighing up my audience carefully—a couple of slightly risqué ones about a junior with a taste for long words who began a wedding report by saying that the marriage was quietly consummated at the Parish Church of so-and-so, and a village correspondent who reported a whist drive in aid of the National Society for the Prevention of Children . . . These stories went down very well, but I reflected that I had better leave them out of my talk to the Mothers' Union in a fortnight's time. The Mothers, no doubt fed up to the teeth with marriage and motherhood, have adopted this attitude of treating these matters as sacred: a typical British compromise for dealing with unpleasant necessities.

The meeting drew towards its close. The competitions secretary was handing out bulbs for the forthcoming daffodil competition. 'Ah, the pleasures of the rustic life,' I thought to myself as I worked my way round towards Mrs. O'Neill. It wasn't difficult. Nobody else seemed to want to talk to her.

She was a pleasant-looking little woman of about thirty-five, with tweeds, sandy hair and spectacles. She looked as though she ought to be talkative, so I started chatting about the village, the weather, the meeting, the matchbox competition. Especially the matchbox competition.

"I couldn't see very well from where I was sitting. But it seemed a pretty impressive performance to get all those things into a matchbox. What were the objects? Mustard seeds?"

She gave a little, half-unhappy, sort of smile, wondering whether I too was going to be nasty to her. "Oh no.

There's a rule that you can't have more than one of any kind of object. I think all these ladies thought I was cheating, anyway. But I wasn't—really I wasn't. I did get all those things in my matchbox.

"It was very hard to think of new objects, too, after the first two hundred or so."

I believed her, and sympathised. But now we were getting to the point.

"Well, I can't see what all the fuss was about. You stood there, in full view of everybody, and took your five hundred and odd objects out of your matchbox. Where is it, by the way? I'd certainly like to see it."

Mrs. O'Neill rummaged in her rather bulky handbag. It had to be bulky to accommodate all the paraphernalia that emerged from it—pins, buttons, tiny coins, tinier nuts and bolts and odds and ends that might have come from smashed watches and transistor radios. Finally she produced it, this pocket Caligari's cabinet. Just an ordinary matchbox. Not even one of the smoker's-size matchboxes.

I suppose at that stage I still thought it was all a clever bit of legerdemain, but tricks fascinate me and I had to see this one done.

"Now put them all back in the box," I demanded.

She looked at me like a small boy whose favourite uncle has just snatched away his lollipop.

". . . please," I added, with what has always served me as a disarming smile. "I do believe you. It's just that —oh well, let me help you."

Together we started sorting and grading her collection of objects, dropping larger ones in the corners of the cardboard tray and packing them round with smaller ones. After four or five minutes it became obvious that we were not doing too well, and Mrs. O'Neill's fellow members—those who had not already left—were beginning to give us some rather curious looks.

Mrs. O'Neill herself was begining to flash distress signals, so I dropped the already full box into her bag, swept in the remaining heap of objects with my cuff, and pushed the bag into her hands.

"Let me give you a lift home," I offered. This whole

affair had set my curiosity seething. It was a silly, nagging business, but trivial as it was I knew I would not sleep properly until I knew how the trick had been done.

More distress signals. Accept a ride from a strange man? Lurid pictures of white-slave traffic, or stocking-strangled bodies in ditches.

But good sense won the day, and ignoring the now even more curious glances of her colleagues Mrs. O'Neill and I walked out to the car. It wasn't far to her house, only a mile or so, which didn't give me much time to invent an excuse for getting myself asked inside to see the rest of the matchbox trick.

My passenger, however, was made of more reckless stuff than I had given her credit for, and as we drew up outside her gate she asked me in for coffee.

"Goodness knows what the neighbours will think," she said with an uneasy little giggle. "Anyway, after that episode tonight I'm not sure that I value their opinion as much as I used to."

I wondered what she was worrying about. There had to be a Mr. O'Neill in the house, after all; a little pink chubby man with spectacles, who tinkered about with clocks or fussed over prize dahlias. (It wasn't until later that I discovered that all that was left of Mr. O'Neill in the house was an old trunk of belongings that he hadn't been able to take with him when he'd fled to South America with his company's funds. It was unlikely he'd come back for it now, because the discreet little plane he'd chartered had disappeared somewhere over the Gulf of Mexico. There was no end to the surprises of the evening.)

Over coffee we reopened, by mutual consent, the subject of the matchbox.

"Just take your time, and think carefully," I told her. "How did you do it the first time? I mean I suppose you used up all the familiar objects you could lay your hands on first of all, and then hunted out all these other things later."

The "other things" turned out to have been salvaged from her late husband's old tin trunk. I had been right about the clocks, if nothing else. Never trust a man

with a hobby.

Three hours and several pots of coffee later it became clear that, give or take a dozen articles or so, Mrs. O'Neill was going to repeat her performance. We almost danced in the little drawing room. Triumphantly she slid the tray into its receptacle, and tossed the matchbox in the air in sheer exuberance. I caught it, almost as gleefully.

There was something wrong.

For a minute or so I stood holding the box with its neatly packed contents, trying to discover what was worrying me. Then I remembered picking up Mrs. O'Neill's handbag in the Institute hall and handing it, weighty with jingling junk, back to her.

The box I held in my hand wasn't anything like as heavy as it should have been.

The same thought evidently occurred to Mrs. O'Neill at the same time. Without a word she took the box from my hand and disappeared into the kitchen, to emerge a few seconds later with a pair of scales. She put the matchbox in the pan, and the pointer flickered over to the two-ounce mark.

Still silent, she opened the matchbox, replaced it on the scales, and brought a pair of tweezers. Delicately, one at a time, she lifted the objects out of the tray and put them on the scales beside the matchbox. My flesh fairly crawled as I watched the needle slowly creeping up to nine ounces.

For a long minute neither of us spoke. We just stood there, white-faced, wondering what on earth we could have done.

"Perhaps" Mrs. O'Neill's voice squeaked as she spoke, and she tried again. "Perhaps what we have is some sort of four dimensional matchbox."

The world needs its Mrs. O'Neills, I thought, people who are not ashamed to stand right up and state th obvious, however squeakily.

"Let's see now, I fancy I've heard something about such an object." A newspaperman's memory is a glory-hole of useless information, odd disconnected scraps of of knowledge whittled like bacon rind from the good meat of a lifetime's news stories. I had acquired this

particular item from a mathematician who wanted to ride his hobby horse—topology—when I had gone to consult him about statistics for a feature I was writing on insurance.

"A four-dimensional cube, or hypercube, or"—I groped in my mental lumber room—"tesseract (I think) is not strictly speaking a cube at all, any more than a line is a plane."

She looked perplexed.

"Think of it like this. You start with a point—think back to your schooldays and geometry lessons, and remember that a point has neither length, breadth nor thickness. It has only position.

"Next think of a one-dimensional object: a line, which has only length, no breadth or thickness. Now a line connects two points.

"Move up to two dimensions, and you come to a plane, which is circumscribed by four lines, and incidentally has four points—one at each corner.

"From a two-dimensional plane we move to a three-dimensional object, in its simplest form a cube."

"I should have thought a sphere was the simplest," said Mrs. O'Neill. She had me there, so I pretended not to have heard. All I know about circles and spherical geometry and such things is a mnemonic for remembering the first fourteen decimal places of *pi*.

"Now our three-dimensional cube has six two-dimensional faces or planes," I continued. "You can see a sort of pattern emerging. A line has two points, a plane has four lines, a cube has six planes, and our hypercube has eight ordinary cubes arranged around it."

I didn't know whether this reasoning was at all sound, but this was the early hours of the morning, the time for evolving brave new theories. I sounded so convincing that I would have addressed the Royal Society on the subject with not a moment's hesitation.

"If it makes it any easier to conceive, the eight cubes would be so arranged as to show" (a moment's thought) "sixteen points."

More theorising, but it convinced both of us. In any case, it hardly affected our immediate concern, the

enigmatic matchbox that still lay, with its nine ounces of erstwhile contents, on the scale pan.

Another few moments' silence, and Mrs. O'Neill came to the rescue once again by asking the necessary question.

"Where do we go from here?"

She then provided an answer of sorts by going into the kitchen and making more coffee, thus giving me time to think up a more lasting solution. The first step, I thought, would be to discover just what we had, and how we could use it. I wondered about patenting the box, for there had to be some money to be made out of it somehow. But then I recalled something about the scope of patents, and I had a distant recollection of having heard that you can't patent a fundamental principle of science: letters patent (a distant voice in my memory seemed to be saying) are only granted in respect of artifacts which could be constructed or processes which could be carried out by someone skilled in the appropriate field when given appropriate instructions.

And anyway, who could possibly be interested in buying a matchbox, or any other container for that matter, which would hold eight times as much as it appeared to hold? Only conjurers or smugglers, I thought. No money to be made there, unless we took up smuggling on our own account.

Perhaps the manufacturers of matches would be interested, I thought wryly, if only to avoid accidentally making four-d matchboxes and putting themselves out of business by selling four hundred matches for the price of fifty.

This was the point at which I began to realise something that should have been obvious from the start.

The matchbox did not have remarkable properties of its own. If it had, then it must have had far too many matches in when Mrs. O'Neill bought it, and she would have noticed, if only because the sandpaper would have worn out while the box still appeared to be full. I congratulated myself on this piece of deduction, and then realised that it was unnecessary anyway. If the box had been a hyperbox from the beginning, then Mrs. O'Neill

would not have had any trouble earlier in the evening putting the objects back.

Ergo, she must have opened up a fourth dimension, so to speak, because of the particular combination of objects she had chosen. Or more probably the combination of a certain set of the objects.

Clearly, it was time for more experiments, and I said so to Mrs. O'Neill as she brought in the coffee. I hoped she would be able to remember again the order in which she had packed her matchbox. On reflection, I realised that the critical objects had to be in the first seventy or eighty objects, this being the number you would ordinarily expect to be able to cram into the bax. This narrowed down our field of search substantially.

It was beginning to come light a few hours later, but by that time we had eliminated all but thirty tiny, random-looking articles. They included a pin, a hairgrip, a needle, several watch components including a small luminous dial (the figures painted with a radioactive compound?), a ball-bearing, a match and grain of rice. Once these were in the tray of the matchbox, we found we were able to stuff a large pocket handkerchief in and still be able to slide the tray back into its cover.

It still left a lot of questions unanswered. Why, when the handkerchief was withdrawn, was it possible to see the original objects, lying-apparently in a perfectly commonplace manner—on the bottom of the tray? Why did they not stay in one of the fourth-dimensional projections of the box, into which they had presumably been pushed by the entry of the handkerchief? Particularly puzzling was the matter of weight, for if the objects were drawn back into the visible matchbox by the action of gravity, it seemed reasonable to suppose that this was because they were susceptible to gravity—and ought therefore to register their weight when the packed box was put on the scales.

But day was growing brighter, and intellectual brilliance seemed to recede with the darkness, for no answers to these questions seemed forthcoming. We had come at last to the end of our resources in the matter. Clearly what was needed now was the expert approach.

I left, having persuaded Mrs. O'Neill to let me have the matchbox and its vital contents, and exchanged a not very subtle pleasantry with the milkman as I let myself into my lodgings. I awoke a couple of hours later feeling as fresh as if I'd just had a couple of hours sleep, and made my way to the office.

Harvey, my news editor, glanced up at me as I entered. His glance evidently took in my all-night eyes and unshaven (no, if I must be scrupulously honest, even unwashed) features for after looking at the Diary for the previous day, he started to warn me against the perils of being drawn into Women's Institute orgies.

"You mark my words, Sock," he said (Sock is short for Socrates. How I got this nickname is a long and not very interesting story.)

"I've seen it happen too often. These harpies out in the county drag you into their midst, load you up with rhubarb wine, and before you know where you are you're passing round mystery parcels and taking part in other obscene rituals, and . . ."

It went on for several minutes more. Our Mr. Harvey was noted for his ingenious improvisations on original themes, and this morning he was in good voice. He concluded by asking me what I had got out of my night's work.

"The news story of the decade," I answered. I should probably have said something of the sort whatever the circumstances. But just to emphasise the point I solemnly drew the matchbox out of my pocket, and whispered conspiratorially: "It's all in here."

"Have it on my desk first thing this afternoon, then, and if you can keep it down to half a column or so, so much the better. Remember we have the education estimates this week."

His bellows of laughter drifted down the corridor after me as I set off on my first Diary job of the day, which would take me to the local magistrates' court.

I had about forty minutes to spare before the beaks started dishing out the fines for being-in-charge-of-a-bicycle-without-proper-rear-lights so I utilised it by dropping in on my mathematical friend, who lived close

by.

"Hello, Mr. Meinetz, I hope I don't disturb you?"

"Oh. Hello. Simpson, isn't it? From the Gazette? You're on the job early this morning, I'm still breakfasting. But come in. Help yourself to some coffee."

I winced, feeling that I had been living on the stuff for decades, but I had some nonetheless. Three hours of magistrates court stretched before me and the battle with sleep was likely to be intense.

"Well, what can I do for you this time? More statistics?"

"Well no, as a matter of fact it's something which might be much more up your street, Mr. Meinetz. A rather odd thing I came across last night and it reminded me of our talk last time—about Klein's bottle and the strip of paper with only one side—what d'you call it again? That's it, the Mobius-strip. Well, this is the Mrs. O'Neill-box."

Playing it for effect, I produced the matchbox and, with a fine conjuror's flourish, drew out the large handkerchief. He put a polite look on his face. I pulled out some more things. The look got a little strained. I pulled out more, and more. The look was chased off his face by one of suspicion, followed by one of what I can only describe as boggling, then one of greed. Finally he arranged an elaborately blank expression on the hard-worked features and stood up.

"Gimme" he said.

Well, from then on the matter was out of my hands, of course. They grudgingly let me print a quarter-column on what they all thought was some sort of spoof; then, when the full implications were realised, it was no longer a matter of local interest and we simply ran a syndicated front-page. Scoops—phooey.

But all that was thirty-five years ago, son. Now, out here on Deneb IV you'll find we've got quite a reasonable news-net, what with the thorium mines only two domes away and the star-port practically on our doorstep. You can usually get a story of sorts from one or the other, once you've built up a set of reliable contacts. By the way, for your first job you might just look through this

Space Board hand-out on the latest model Meinetz-O'Neill space-warp drive. There might be a quarter-column in it.

PETER BRADLEY

THE GREAT CHAN

by Archie Potts

I suppose you might describe me as a bit of a recluse, if you take my meaning. Not that I don't like people or anything like that, but not many people I meet have my interests. I mean, most other cigarette-card collectors tend to be a bit on the young side and the same is true of match-box tops and bus-tickets. Mine are serious collections, mind, not schoolboys' higgledy-piggledy accumulations. I have a genuine love of the old and beautiful and fading—which is why I feel so badly about the old Empire Theatre. It still stands, of course, in all the lovely complicated majesty of its Victorian Gothic, but somehow, now that it's used for Bungo or whatever they call it and that coarse wrestling, I can't enjoy the sight of it any more.

Beautiful, it used to look, in the brave days of music-hall's heyday, with all the coloured electrics outside—not like these eerie neons—and the purple of the commissionaire's nose clashing with the scarlet of his uniform and the striped porte-cochère and all. All gone now. Nasty vulgar wrestling-matches.

I've seen some of the greatest music-hall acts that ever graced the boards in the old Empire, bless it. My collection of old vaudeville programmes is probably one of the finest in the East Midlands but the finest series in it is from the Empire. I could always afford a programme because I mostly had a free ticket, see?—because I did the write-up in the *Bugle*, over the pen-name *Thespian* (classic touch that, I think).

Well, the night I keep trying to tell you about (well, that's very nice of you, perhaps I could fancy a small port, since you press me) was the very last night of the Empire before these Bongo people and wrestling nuisances took it over and tarted it up in their own flashy way. I wouldn't have missed that night for a great deal, you may be sure: a genuine sentimental occasion for me, as you can imagine. A true *cause célèbre* I described it as in the *Bugle* (a pretty turn of phrase, though I say it as shouldn't). But my sad-

ness at the melancholy occasion was mollified, shall I say, by the turns listed on the bill. My word, but they had done us proud. Going out with a bang, see?

Above all, I was delighted to see the name of the Great Chan, for I had last seen his act when I was a small boy. My father had taken the whole family for a Christmas treat and the memory still lingered with me. Chan had topped the bill in those days but now it grieved me to see him half-way down, below an obscure comic, a rowdy rock-and-roll group and a coarse strip-tease artiste (though I wouldn't call her any better than a common you-know-what). Never mind though, Chan and the others in small type were well worth enduring the vulgarians for.

My word, you *should* have seen Chan that night. As soon as the band started to play some of the music from *Chu Chin Chow* I knew, without a glance at my programme, that the Great Chan was next.

The curtains opened on an empty stage. The music died and then, in one of the smartest trap-door appearances I have ever seen, the Great Chan materialised before us in a Djinn-like cloud of smoke.

Chan was dressed in the silken robes of a Chinese mandarin, and his almond-shaped eyes sparkled in the glare of the footlights as he bowed to acknowledge our applause.

Chan pushed his sleeves back and began his act with some sleight-of-hand tricks. Streams of coloured handkerchiefs were pulled out of the air, ruby wine was made to flow from empty bottles, and packs of playing cards appeared and disappeared before our eyes.

It was a routine opening, but it was extremely well done and drew a mild round of applause.

Chan then snapped his fingers and two assistants dressed as coolies carried an execution block on to the stage. They were followed by a girl, dressed in a flimsy Eastern costume, who laid her head on the block. A third assistant handed Chan a large axe.

The band had stopped playing and the audience went very quiet as Chan raised the axe above his head and brought it flashing down across the nape of the girl's neck. As the axe thudded into the block the girl's head disappeared . . . there was a moment of shocked silence before

the audience—completely fooled—burst into applause.

Chan bowed gravely; "You will not wish" he said in his strongly accented English, "that our charming young friend should remain like this."

To approving shouts from the audience he snapped his fingers, brought on more assistants with a silver cannon; applied a torch to the breech and—Presto!—the girl was on her feet, laughing. We applauded wildly.

The whole act was of this quality. Sensational. Illusion piled on illusion. Chan's assistant was sawn up, levitated, vanished in and out of cabinets and deprived, temporarily, of most of her limbs. As stage magic it was supreme—I had never seen anything to compare.

While the music was "corking it up" and Chan was vanishing in another cloud of smoke, I sidled out of my seat, found an attendant and asked if Mr. Chan would interview the Press after the show. He came back and said that after the next act would be fine, so I sat back and watched what was a mere anti-climax after Chan's superb performance. After the finale, while the new owner was making a speech about Bango and wrestling (fat fraud) I made my way to the dressing-room and knocked on Chan's door.

He was seated in front of the mirror getting his grease-paint off, and waved me to a seat without stopping his work.

"You won't mind, I hope, if I carry on with this as we talk?"

To my surprise, his yellow complexion and almond eyes were disappearing under the cream as I watched, revealing unmistakably European features beneath the make-up. Seeing me stare, he laughed.

"No, the Chinese guise is just part of the act. People don't like an ordinary-looking man performing apparent miracles so in Europe I always make-up Chinese-style. When I tour the Far East, of course, I have to wear a top-hat and tails."

I complimented him awkwardly on his act and mumbled something about it being a pity the audience was so small. He sighed whimsically.

"The age of magic is almost dead, I fear," he said

sadly. "The magician's task of creating wonder has been almost taken over by science. The merest child, weaned on television, can nowadays sneer at my poor skill."

"I don't," I said stoutly.

"You, sir, are a special case," he civilly rejoined. For a moment I wondered whether he was being ironic, but a moment later was being enthralled with tales of Goldini, Foo Song, Maskelle and Devine, all of whom he seemed to have known. (Though looking back on it, I don't really see how he could have . . .) I wondered how the closing-down of Hall after Hall would leave a chap in his line fixed. He must have been getting really well on in years, though you would never have known it from his smooth, waxy face, which didn't look a day older than when I'd seen him first. What could he do? The thought of a great old trouper reduced to entertaining at kiddies' parties gave me a horrible turn.

Outside, old Charlie the stage-door keeper was jangling his keys impatiently out of pure habit, but I could see he was very much affected by the sadness of the occasion: tears were running down his great old bottle-nose. He very nearly refused the fiver Mr. Chan palmed out of the air from behind his ear.

"Goodnight Mr. Chan," he croaked, "and Gord bless yer."

"I say," I said, greatly daring, as he stepped into his taxi, "you can't really be called Chan. Don't think me rude, but might I ask what your real name is? I mean, I feel we've sort of made friends—I mean, I would count it a great privilege if you —"

He wound down the taxi window and smiled, for the first time that evening, with a flash of big, white, square teeth.

"Of course I will tell you," he said. "It's Alessandro Cagliostro." And his taxi ground off into the dark and the rain.

I shall always remember him, not only as a first-rate showman and superb magician, but also as a man whose sense of humour would never desert him. Cagliostro indeed.

ARCHIE POTTS

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