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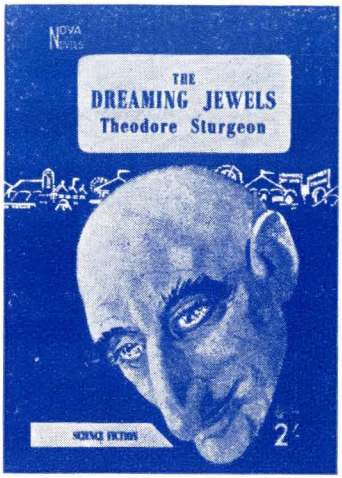

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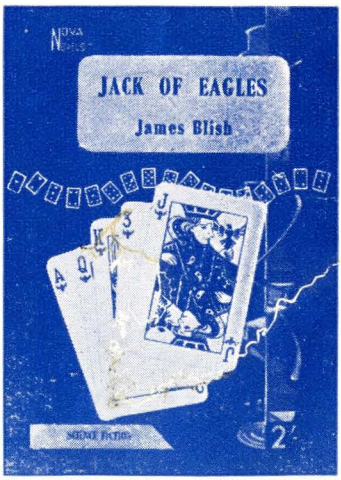

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CONTENTS

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With automation and the City-State looming more prominently in the news every week, this month's lead story is more than topical. In fact it extends today's possibilities a little way into the future and depicts some extremely interesting comparisons, both psychological and physiological.

IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

By RICHARD WILSON

I

They'd found a way to make it stop raining in the city and he didn't like that. Oren had one of the few outdoor gardens remaining in Greater New York and he'd had to hook up an irrigation system fed by hose from a tap in his basement. While he was at it, he ran another hose up to sprinklers above the windows of his ground-floor study and arranged them so they could send a shower of water against the panes from outside.

He turned the rain on hard so that water drummed against the glass with the realistic sound of a downpour. It was almost satisfying. The bright sunlight streaming through the drops spoiled it, somewhat.

Oren had known people who'd missed more than the rain. Some had bid goodbye to the city proper and moved to the suburbs, though they remained within the boundaries of the City-State. Others had fled Outside.

But there were those who had wanted, or needed, the benefits of the super-metropolis—and they compromised, as Oren and his wife had.

They'd diverted the rain away from the cities because it was mostly a waste to have it fall there. It was better to shunt it over to where it could fill a reservoir or unparch a desert or put out a forest fire—provided these places were on resources land belonging to one of the City-States. All very laudable, Oren supposed, but it was an interference with nature that he didn't care for. He was a conservative, an anti-progress crank.

Actually, euphemisms aside, he knew he was an anti-regimentarian. Had he been one outside his private thoughts, though, he would have been considered an undesirable member of society. It wasn't illegal, yet, to question the Suggestions of the City-State Council. Thus far, the Suggestions lacked the force of law. They served, however, to establish customs which most citizens found it wise to follow if they cared to avoid harassment by the green-tunicked members of the Council Guard.

It was no more illegal to be an anti-regimentarian in Greater New York in 2009 than it had been to be a Jew in the early days of Hitler-Germany, a Communist in the latter days of the United States, or a Conciliationist during the States' Rights Wars—in which the victors became the City-States and the losers were banished Outside.

But obviously it was healthier to keep quiet and follow Council-decreed custom than to seek justice in the letter of the law.

Oren was just sitting there in the study, smoking, not really thinking consciously about any of this, when his wife came in. His body was cradled to the optimum relaxation point in the restochair, but he was nervous.

" Oh, you've got the rain on," Edith said. " That's nice. But the sun kind of spoils it."

" Yes, it does," Oren said. " Pull the blinds, will you honey?"

She darkened the room and curled up into a resto next to his. " That is better," she said. " Makes it more cozy."

He lighted a cigarette for her and for a time they sat quietly while smoke rose to mingle with the shadows of the room.

" It is today, isn't it, Oren ?" she said finally. " I haven't been able to concentrate on a thing. I've got that orchestration sitting on the piano—the one the maestro wants by tomorrow—but I don't have the patience to finish it."

" It's just routine, isn't it ? Nothing you couldn't knock out in a couple of hours, I should think."

" Yes, but I seem to be so jumpy," his wife said. " I know I'm not supposed to be. It isn't Modern, and all that, but I am."

He laughed and reached out a hand to pat her flat waistline.

" Old skinny-tummy," he said. " It used to be that only the husbands went through waiting and smoking themselves into a frazzle. Now the female of the species knows what it's like, too. Relax." he said. He tried to give it the casual touch. " Our baby will be born at the proper moment, sanitary, strong and just as squally as the old-fashioned ones. The obby said he'd call immediately from the delivery lab and we'll probably see him tomorrow, when the little begger's adjusted to things."

" The obby !" Edith said. " What a terrible expression. Dr. Morales is the best obstetrician in Greater New York and you call him an obby, as if he were some kind of gadget."

" Well, isn't he ? I think I'm being very modern and enlightened about this whole impersonal business. Our first child is being born six miles away in an antiseptic laboratory while its mother and father sit smoking and discussing terminology. Nine months ago they got a droplet of goo from me and one from you and mixed them up in a high gear cocktail shaker and ever since it's been growing in a bowl of heat-controlled expandomush on a shelf where they look at it every so frequently and see that it's not going sour and agitate it a bit so it won't think its forgotten. If that doesn't entitle me to call Dr. Morales an obby I don't know what does."

" Really, Oren, you're terrible," she said. " You talk as if somebody put something over on you. After all, you're the one who wanted to do it this way. I was perfectly willing to go about it in the old-fashioned way. There's no law against it—not really. Just a Suggestion. And we could have moved Outside, if necessary. We'd have got along all right."

" We've been over this so many times, Edith," he said. He was being angry in his icy-calm way. " Let me enumerate the points for you. One—we're both Intellectuals, so called. You're a musician ; I publish talking books. It just so happens that the seats of our culture—the only places we could make a living—are the city-states. We're not farmers or workers and we'd be of no use on the Outside.

" Point two—if we left Greater New York where would we go ? Chicagoland ? The Bay ? Dixieton ? One's as bad as the other—and besides none of them has a decent publishing

house, even if you could write your music wherever you had a piano.

" Point three—although it would be socially unacceptable to have a natural baby here, it would be safe. You'd have the best facilities, even if you got lectured at while you used them. Who knows what would happen to you Outside ? "

" I'm sure people survive natural pregnancy on the Outside just as they used to," Edith said. " I think you've listened to the Council so long that you're beginning to believe everything you're told. Next they'll be telling you what kind of books to publish, if they haven't already."

She had become angry herself, now, as she did when he assumed his superior-logic tone of voice. Instantly he was contrite. He realised that he had been sharp with her only because she had verbalized the dilemma he wanted to avoid having to recognize.

" I'm sorry, Edie," he said. " I'm all tense. This waiting around for someone else to have our baby for us has me on edge. And you're right about the Council. They sent us a Suggestion last week. Very logical thing it was, too, on the surface. They'd noted that some of the titles on our back list haven't been moving well lately. That's true enough. They rarely do. They're standards, though, and the sales are steady, if small. But the Council Suggested that we let them go out of print. In the interests of conservation, of course. It was just a Suggestion, mind you ; we can take it or leave it."

" And if you leave it ?"

" I don't know. I think it's just a feeler the Council is putting out, to see how far it can go. I suppose if enough publishers took it, instead of leaving it, the next step would be a Resolution, to bring the rest of us into line."

" What kind of titles are they Suggesting you drop ?" Edie asked. " Simply to help save tape, of course."

" Oh, some works on politics and government, as you might expect, and some less likely—such as a whole list of titles by Haskell, the naturalist."

" You're resisting the Suggestion, I hope."

" I don't know," he said. " We're having a conference on it tomorrow. We did take one of their Suggestions, but that was strictly meritwise."

" Oh ? "

" It wasn't exactly a Suggestion. It was a letter of recommendation sent along with a manuscript by a Dr. Stern, the head of the Health Department. We're taping his book. It's about his pet theory, but it's sound. You know, the one about the creativity of women. I told you about it."

" I don't remember," she said. " But I don't think I'll like it."

" It applies to you, though. Stern's theory is that for so many hundreds of centuries women had been conditioned to motherhood that as a group they had a block against other channels of creativity. Even the unmarried and childless couldn't break the pattern because they themselves were the products of motherhood. Theoretically, that would be why you're having such difficulty with your music."

" But my mother was deconditioned," she protested. " She was born naturally, but I grew up in a bowl of mush, as you call it, and I intend to break the pattern."

" It's a three-generation process, Stern thinks," Oren said. " Not that I agree with him necessarily, but if we had a daughter, and if she were an obby baby, she might be the first to break the pattern in our family—if she had any talent, of course."

" You and your Dr. Stern can have his theory. I intend to break the pattern myself," Edith said. " Provided I don't fall back into it by having a baby myself in the normal way. I'll write that symphony yet, you'll see."

" Now you're being inconsistent."

She smiled as she recognised the truth of his remark.

" All right," she said. " But that's my prerogative. They haven't bred that out of us yet. I'm still a woman." She became serious again. " And I guess that's why I don't know whether I want to have another baby this way. It's so impersonal, so cold—like going shopping. This way is so easy ; it saves so much time and makes everything so simple. But do you appreciate the things you get the easy way, or do things only become precious to you when you've had to suffer to have them ?"

" Now don't give me any of that martyr talk," Oren said. " Were you any less precious to your mother because you were an obby baby ?" He grinned. " As I recall, you were about the most spoiled creature in existence until I snatched you from the bosom of your family."

His joke failed to return the smile to her face.

" I'm worried about something else," she said. " Aside from the psychological aspects of the thing. I mean, have I deterior-

ated . . . as a woman ? I don't want to be just a brain and a talent, if I am that. I want to be interesting in that other way, too—the way grandma was when she was a girl."

He turned in his chair to look directly at her. " Believe me, Edie, you're interesting. Oh, yes. Believe me."

Then he leaned over and kissed her soundly on the mouth.

" If you wish," he said, " I'll elaborate on that comment."

" Do that," she said.

But the elaboration had to wait. There was a musical tone and a voice said :

" Dr. Morales calling Mr. and Mrs. Oren Donn."

" There he is," said Edith. " There he is !"

" Now calm down," her husband said. " Are you ready ? Would you like a drink or anything before we talk to him ?"

" No. Go ahead, answer him."

Oren spoke the words that opened the communications circuits of their home to the doctor's call.

" Donn Fourteen. Hello, Doctor, this is Oren Donn. Edith's here, too."

" Hello," said Dr. Morales. " Your son has been born."

" A son !" Oren cried. " Do you hear that, Edie ? It's a boy !"

" That's wonderful," she said. " How does he look, Doctor?"

" Perfect," Dr. Morales said. " He's a lively little tike. Got good colour, too. Not all red like these natural children. He's had his first cry and his first meal and now he's sleeping. You can see him tomorrow at—say fourteen hundred. Will that be convenient for you ?"

" That'll be fine," Oren said. Edith nodded agreement. "I'd like to bring him a little present, if I may. A little gold wrist-band my father gave me when I was born. Sort of a family tradition, you know."

" I'm afraid that won't be possible, Mr. Donn," the doctor said. " You know the rules. No foreign matter must touch him except what the laboratory provides. That's why you were advised not to buy any clothing or bedding in advance. We have all the things the child needs right here. In six weeks, when you take him home, you can dress him in an Indian suit, if you wish, but until then you must abide by our rules."

" Of course, Doctor," Edith said. " We understand. Tomorrow at fourteen hundred then."

" Right. Goodbye."

" Goodbye."

The double goodbye switched off the communicator and a single musical tone signalled that the connection was closed.

" Well," said Oren, " there he is. Born and everything. How do you feel ?"

" A little weak. Honestly." she said. " I feel as if something had happened to me physically, just now. A lightening of pressure, sort of, and yet a kind of frustration. I can't explain it, really."

" It's strange," Oren said. " I don't know how a natural father used to feel, after he'd been sweating it out in a hospital corridor, but I'm pretty excited. But what bothers me is that I had the same sort of feeling when the dealer called up last year to say that our new gyro was ready to be delivered."

" Funny," she said. " He won't really be ours for six weeks. And until then I won't even be able to hold him in my arms except half an hour a day. What is that horrible name they have for it ?"

" Parent Acclimatization."

He took her hand and squeezed it. Then he got to his feet decisively.

" I'll get you a drink. A good stiff one. Then I want you to go in and finish that orchestration. We've got to snap out of this."

" All right," she said.

" And while you're working, I'll go out. I feel like taking a walk in the rain."

" But there isn't any rain," she said, " except just outside the window." She turned a switch and stopped the drumming of the water on the panes. " You are in a state, aren't you ?"

He laughed. " I certainly am. All right, then, I'll fix us both a drink."

Later, when Edith had finished the orchestration, Oren asked:

" Shall we see what's on the triveo ?"

" I don't care," she said. " If you like."

When the television first went three-dimensional it was called tri-video, to distinguish it. In time this was shortened to triveo, first with a long *i*, then with a short one. And there were many, like Edith, who changed the word once more—to *trivia*.

There was always a discussion about the triveo before they switched it on. Sometimes weeks went by during which it lay

silent and unseen. Probably it was the least-used piece of equipment in the house, a price it paid for its lack of intelligent programming.

Oren pushed a button on the panel attached to the arm of his restochair and a section of the living room wall became the front page of the daily gazette. He dialled for the triveo section.

" It says Jerry Hilarious is on," he said.

Edith squinted at the projected page. There was a flat shot of a man in evening clothes, with his eyes crossed and his tongue held grotesquely in a corner of his mouth.

"Looks more like a Jerry Gruesome," she said. "Who is he ?"

" A comic, it says. It's his triveo premiere. He's made a big hit in the pleasurants, it also says."

" I'm glad we eat at home, then," she said, " where we don't have to have belly laughs with our roast beef."

" Let's try him," Oren said. " We can always turn him off."

" All right," she said. " But you never do. You hang on to the grim end of everything."

" You've got to give them a chance. We wouldn't have any talent at all if everybody was condemned sight unseen."

" Off with their heads !" said Edith cheerfully ; and later, when Jerry Hilarious had made his debut, she asked : " You call this *talent* ?"

The comedian was a short, skinny man who gave the appearance of brash boyishness, though he must have been well into his thirties. He had a crop of scarlet hair whose vividness resulted either from dye or the affinity of the triveo cameras for the primary colours.

Jerry Hilarious also had an amazingly plastic face which he contorted at will and a repertory of startling gestures made still more fantastic by his apparent ability to throw each limb out of joint.

One the the gestures, delivered as if from a pitcher's mound, sent his forefinger streaking out by triveo magic so it seemed to be only an inch from the viewer's nose. Then the out-thrust arm and finger moved to the southwest and its owner's comic high-pitched voice would say to a stooge with the utmost scorn : " Aw, g'wan *outside* !"

The gesture and the gag line were used several times during the programme and it was obvious that these had helped to win him a spot on the City-State Network. It also was obvious that a new catch phrase had been born and that the Donns could expect to hear it often from amateur comedians among their acquaintances.

II

Mark Olafson had to be careful now. He had to use the utmost caution while appearing to be casual. Moving by night, it hadn't been too hard to cross open country undetected into the town on the outskirts of the City-State. From there, by stages, he had travelled nearly to the west bank of the Hudson River.

At the bus terminal, Mark went to the men's room and, waiting for a moment when he was alone, quickly but carefully redusted his face with talcum to hide the redness of the skin that marked him as a man from Outside. That done, he rubbed the excess off his hands and adjusted his borrowed clothing.

It was the best in the village and it had been pooled from among various owners for his mission. The village's best was only a seedy approximation of the everyday clothing of those he was among now. He pulled a telltale burr from the pants leg, wiped the shoes, adjusted the hat and, taking a deep breath, walked out into the terminal.

Mark ignored the moving pavement as being too open to scrutiny, and too slow. He bought a ticket to Timesquare and found the right bus. There were plenty of empty seats and he chose one in the back next to the window and tried to sink into it inconspicuously.

He saw the bus driver look back in his direction and he averted his eyes quickly. The driver seemed to be staring at him, but finally turned back. A few more people got on. No one sat beside him, luckily. The driver started the engine, closed the doors and the bus moved out onto the ramp leading to the tunnel under the river.

Oren Donn was sitting in his temperature-controlled, windowless office trying to decide whether to use good old reliable Smithson, with his fine familiar voice, to read the new pot-boiling historical romance into the tapes, or to experiment with a new voice, when the reception screen announced a visitor.

Oren pushed the papers to a corner of his desk and got up to greet the caller. The name, Mark Olafson, sounded familiar but he couldn't quite place it. But the man's face and the handclasp he gave him brought it all back.

"Mark!" said Oren. "You old scoundrel! I haven't seen you since school."

"That's right," the visitor said. He looked around the quiet, efficient office and dropped into a heavy lounge chair. "Hope

you don't mind, I'm about beat." He sighed. " Been travelling" He looked carefully at Oren.

" Make yourself at home," Oren said. " Brothers of the Oath don't stand on ceremony."

Mark Olafson laughed. " Remember that, do you ? It's been a long time since that schoolboy binge. You were pretty crocked"

Oren pretended to look hurt. " Held my liquor as well as a certain other eighteen-year-old I could name."

" Good old Donnie," said Mark. " Does the oath still hold?" He was serious suddenly.

" Of course." Oren looked at his visitor's clothing. Hé saw the rubbed places in the cloth and the worn shoe-soles. " I don't have a lot of cash with me, but you're welcome to what I've got—and I'll be here tomorrow."

Mark grinned. " That's more than I can say. Thanks, Donnie, but it's not money I need. Principally I need a friend —someone I can trust—a brother."

" Just a minute." Oren lifted a section of his desk and pressed a button.

Mark jumped to his feet.

Oren looked surprised. " Just wiping the tape. Don't be alarmed. I start it up in the morning and record all conversations. It's just a business gimmick."

" Does it go anywhere else ?" Mark asked.

" No. I have it for my convenience. Lots of people do. Helps you remember things, if you've got a memory like mine. Here, take the spool. There's nothing important on it today." He unhooked it and handed it to his visitor.

" I'm sorry," Mark said. He sank back into the chair. " I've got a case of nerves." He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. Some of the talcum came off. " You see, I'm from Outside."

" Oh." Oren looked grave and drummed on the desktop with his fingers. " That's where you've been. Pretty grim, I imagine"

" Yes and no. It depends on what you're used to—and what you want. For instance, I'm used to not having much—but I want a great deal. Does that sound paradoxical ?"

" Yes."

" It's not really," said Mark. " I don't have time to go into it right now, but one day we'll have a yarn about it. In the meantime, old brother, what I need are clothes that will get me by without suspicion, some kind of cosmetic to cover up my ruddy outdoor face that'll stay put for more than half an hour, and

your solemn promise not to say a word to anyone—not even your wife, if you've got one."

" I have. She's Edith Riordan Donn, the composer."

" So she's your wife ? Well congratulations. We hear her music out there, once in a while. ' The Storm that Wasn't,' for instance. Good subversive stuff."

Oren wasn't sure this was a joke. " Look, Mark," he said, " I'll help you all I can. I give you my word, which should be superfluous. I'll bring the clothes and the makeup and I won't say anything to anybody. But because I do have a family—there's my little boy, too—I don't want . . ."

" I understand," his visitor said. " Don't worry. I'm deeply grateful and I wish I didn't have to be so mysterious. But that in itself helps protect you. And I'd go a long way toward Death to avoid involving you and your family. I mean that."

Oren felt a thrill of vicarious adventure, but it was short lived. " I believe you," he said. " Shall I bring the clothes and things tomorrow. Here ?"

" If you will. It's a busy office building, with people coming and going all day. Better than my going to your house, or meeting you someplace else." Mark Olafson stood up. " Now I've got to run. I'm very grateful to you."

Oren waved away the gratitude. " Tell me," he said. " Do you think—? I mean if my family and I—"

Mark Olafson's glance was keen but impersonal as it swept up from Oren's good clothes to his pale, well-fed face and around the luxurious, gadgeted office.

" Somehow, Donnie," he said, " I don't think you'd like it out there."

Martin was a very good baby.

He never cried, never was any trouble. He was sent to them in an ambulance (" Delivery truck !" Oren called it) from the hospital. He arrived in a cage of glass called a Sleeprplay. It was to be his home till he outgrew it. The thing regulated the temperature to the baby's needs, kept out insects, bathed him with anti-germ beams and made him inaccessible to random pats, cuddles and chin-chucks.

There was also a switch they could have used to soundproof the cabinet if Martin had been too noisy. But even it he had been the worst wailer in the world they wouldn't have considered using it against him, they said, and wondered who would be so heartless.

But though they derided the glass box, they found it a useful improvement over the old-fashioned crib and play pen. And much more sanitary.

There was a Chango at one end of the gadget. Oren never quite lost his fear that it would swallow up his son whole one day. It was operated by plunging the baby into it up to his waist and holding him there. Then, behind the scenes, the old diaper was stripped off, the baby washed and oiled and a new, pinless diaper fastened to his loins. The whole operation took thirty-seven seconds and the manufacturers were looking for a safe short-cut which would reduce the time to half a minute flat. But they hadn't yet found anything to make the diaper itself obsolete.

Martin was so little trouble that they sometimes forgot he was in the house. He ate without fuss and slept well and the glass box discouraged much playing.

So Edith had plenty of time for her music. She worked hard and, sometimes when the baby was asleep and the piano was making a great racket, she would soundproof the Sleeprplay so he wouldn't be disturbed.

But she was often discouraged in the evenings when Oren returned from work and soon he found it was better not to question her about her progress. Tonight he had tickets to a theatre. It was a surprise for her—a dance act was going to use some of her old music.

She met him at the door and, before he could tell her about the tickets, she threw herself at him with a hug that almost tumbled him off his feet.

" What's up, Edie ?" he asked. " Martin been doing something precocious ?"

He sometimes was bitter about their son ; about the machine-like way in which he was progressing, without mishap, through infancy. And he always called the baby Martin, never Marty or any pet name.

" Now you stop that," Edith told him. " This isn't about the baby at all ; it's about me."

" All right, I'll be good," he said. He followed his wife into the studio.

She sat him down in a restochair, handed him a highball and went to the piano. " Now don't be too critical," she said. "This is just the theme, with a few embellishments."

She sat for a moment with her hands poised over the keyboard, and then began to play.

There were five majestic notes at the beginning. Edith wove them powerfully into a statement which spoke authoritatively of revelations to come. Her right hand was the harbinger of the calm future, her left the evoker of monumental discord, raging in the dying throes of the tortured present. There was strength in her playing and meaning in the music. It stirred him even on this first hearing.

There was a kinship here with Beethoven, he thought, in the feeling, and yet it would be unfair to make a comparison on any other basis. He had sense enough not to mention it.

She finished on a chord that echoed away in the big room, then picked up a pencil and made a change in the rough score propped on the stand beside her.

Oren's face was serious when Edith looked at him.

" Not so hot, was it ?" she said.

" Edie," he said, " you couldn't be more wrong. It's tremendous. I'm impressed more than I can say. I'm an old duffer about music—all I know is what I like—but you tell me I have good taste in good stuff. This is good stuff, Edie. It's the real thing."

She went to sit next to him.

" Do you really think so ? Don't give me any malarky, Oren —not about this. It's too important to me."

" Of course it is," he said. " And it's going to be important to a lot more people, I think. Did this all happen today ?"

" Sort of. It all went together today. I've had the theme—those first five notes—going through my mind for a week or more. I'd feel them pounding through me when I was doing something altogether irrelevant—like dipping Marty into the Chango, or hydrating his formula—but they didn't come out until I sat down at the piano today. Then there they were. They just came out of my fingers. I didn't even write them down, at first ; they were so much a part of me I knew I'd never lose them."

" That's wonderful," he said. Then he asked : " Where do you think it came from ?"

" What do you mean ? The music ? I wrote it, of course."

" Of course you did. I mean, do you think it has anything to do with the Stern theory ? The one about non-babying helping women create ? You're a generation ahead of his schedule, if there's anything to it."

" I think his theory is a lot of egotistical male nonsense," Edith said. " The only reason women haven't become great musicians or artists—or generals, for that matter—is that we never got a chance to show what we could do. Not till lately,

anyhow. Remember, it's been less than a century since women were permitted to emerge from the cocoons that the men had spun for them."

Oren smiled but said nothing.

" My theory is that Dr. Stern is just a crackpot," Edith said. " It's a matter of environment and opportunity, that's all. Otherwise why did it take man so long to write his first novel from the time he spoke his first intelligible grunt as a caveman ? I wrote that music myself, without any mystic help from a sublimated sex urge. And I'd have written it just as well if Marty had been born in me instead of in a laboratory."

" Good for you," he said. " Then we've got a reason for celebrating." He told her about the theatre tickets. She was pleased and ran to dress.

The dance act wasn't good and Edith's music seemed to her to be badly played by the orchestra. But it was an evening out and Edith squeezed Oren's hand to reassure him.

They hadn't expected to see a movie, too, but the curtains parted after intermission and there it was, in Ultra-Dimension, Authenticolour and Tactilivity, presented as a public service by the Department of Information, Greater New York.

A breath of cooled, somewhat rancid air swept across the audience and the sound apparatus played a stylized theme borrowed from a Tin Pan Alley relic that Edith recognised as " Baby, It's Cold Outside." The title of the film, formed by blocks of ice, was, simply, *Outside.*

The movie purported to be a travelog but they recognised it as propaganda. Nevertheless, after two reels of cineramic proximity to the gaunt, sullen-looking people who had chosen to live beyond the blessings of the City-States, they decided they were extremely fortunate to be living where they were.

Oren, in addition, had the recent memory of Mark Olafson. His caller, who had been so nervous, so suspicious in the office, might easily have been one of the people in the film.

" That's not for me," Oren said later. " That's going back two hundred years—going Outside. Those shacks they live in —what did the commentator call them, quaint ?—they're not quaint, they're primitive."

" I suppose that is the impression we're expected to go away with," Edith said. " But I don't see how we could have any other. The cameras don't lie. If that's freedom, they've changed the definition and they can have it."

Oren recalled Mark Olafson's words. No, he and Edith wouldn't like it out there.

III

The symphony went slowly for a time. But its progress was steady. Edith knew what she wanted to say through the music and she said it forcefully. Sometimes the statement came originally at her piano as she sat and coaxed the black and white keys to express a phrase that was throbbing through her body.

At other times whole passages suggested themselves to Edith with such clarity that the piano was superfluous.

The third movement was a revelation. The entire theme of it suggested itself to her in one brilliant mass as she was coming home from a department store sale. She was riding the moving pavement, clutching a few parcels she hadn't wanted to entrust to the delivery tubes and hemmed in by a crowd of other women shoppers. There, one flight underground, moving north at the speed of fifteen miles an hour and trying to ignore the advertising placards set into the tunnel ceiling at an angle just overhead, she felt the music hit her.

It came not as a phrase or snatch—not as a tender seedling thrusting hopefully through a crack it had made in the soil—but full-blown, like the bouquet of flowers a magician would produce from an empty fist.

The movement exploded in her mind, in a fraction of a second, fully-developed. It was a natural outgrowth of the first and second movements, over which she had worked so hard, and, although it was similar to them thematically, it was a totally original concept of their potentials. It was as if the first two had mated and produced the third, spontaneously and perfectly.

Edith was transfixed as the music throbbed through her. She was carried two exits beyond her own before she realised it and then in her excitement elbowed her way to the slow lane and off, where she took the escalator to the street.

She walked home from there, quickly. She was running when the front door cushioned closed behind her. She threw the parcels to a couch, dropped her coat to a floor, sailed her hat across the room and was at the paino.

She was still at the piano, the floor around her littered with paper and pencil stubs and the ashtrays piled with cigarette butts, when her husband came home.

" Hi, Edie," he said. " How's the baby ?"

She was irritated that his first thought should be of the child. But then she said :

" Oh my God ! The baby !"

" What's the matter ?" Oren asked. Alarmed, he headed for the nursery.

She followed him. " I plugged his sleeper into the sitter connection when I went shopping and when I came home—frankly I forgot all about him."

Martin was asleep, peacefully. If he was damp he didn't show it or object.

" What a terrible mother I am," Edith said. Anxiously she pressed a button and a voice said, almost instantly :

" Nursaway, Incorporated. Everything was just fine while you were gone. One moment, please."

That was just Tape A, but it did mean there had been no trouble ; no need to send a nurse in person from the central sitter office.

" Eloctronic nursemaids," Oren snorted. He was about to elaborate when a viewscreen which could be seen from the baby's Sleeprplay went alight. The image of a young woman in a crisp white uniform appeared. She said :

" Martin was wonderful while you were gone. He slept most of the time. Once he got a bit cranky, but we ran off a puppet film on the screen, which amused him, and then played a Soothe-tune. He went back to sleep. You have a very fine baby, Mrs. Donn."

" Yes, I know," Edith said. " Thank you."

" Will there be anything else ?"

" No. Thank you very much, Nurse."

" Thank you."

The screen darkened and Edith plugged out the connection.

" So everything's under control," Oren said. " I'll change him and feed him later, if you like." They went back to the studio. " You seem to be busy." He looked around at the mess.

She laughed and curled up on the couch, moving the parcels to the floor.

" You have no idea," she said. " I've been going like a mad one all afternoon. And the reason why ? This will kill you." She spoke self-consciously. " Your strictly no-talent wife thinks she has something good. She thinks she has it and she may not lose it, if only she keeps working at it like fury so as to keep it from getting away."

" Of course you've got something," he said. " We both know that."

" But this is different. It's the third movement. It's all there. Part of it's down on paper—there," she pointed her chin at a

mass of papers on the piano top, " and part of it's up here." She rapped her skull with her knuckles. " Or down here," she added. " I seem to feel it in my stomach, too. Is that the way great music is written—with the stomach ?"

" I don't know," Oren said. " But if that's the way you write, that's the way you write."

" Well, this is ulcer music. Maybe I'll give it a name. Symphony Number 1 by Edith Donn, subtitled ' The Brain and the Ulcer.' "

" Good," he said. " Now you're relaxing. I'll get us a drink and you knock off for the day so you can go at it fresh in the morning."

" Thanks," she said. " I'll take the drink, but I've got to get back to this. I can't risk losing it. If you don't mind getting your own supper, that is ? I don't think I want anything."

He came back from the portable bar and handed her a drink.

" In the old days I'd have blown my stack," he said, grinning. " Work hard all day and then have to stand over a hot stove while my wife makes merry in the music room. But even though I'm Apologist Number One for the old-fashioned way, I must admit this modern cooking has grandma's methods beat all to hell."

" You know how to do it, don't you ?" his wife asked. " The freezer's full of all kinds of meals. All you have to do . . ."

" I know," he said. " From the freezer into the Electronicook and onto the table in ten seconds flat. Then into me, and what's left into the Disposo. But just to be perverse, I think I'll have a couple of medieval sandwiches. If I fix you some and tiptoe in quietly with them, you'll eat them, won't you ?"

" You're a darling," Edith said. She gave him a quick kiss and went to the piano. " Yes, I will."

At twenty-three thirty Oren Donn came out of the shower and peeked into the studio. Edith was still hard at work.

He wrote a note, tiptoed in and put it on the piano top :

" Baby's all tucked away. Now I'm tucking myself away. Please come to bed soon."

She read the note at a quick glance, smiled, blew him a kiss and nodded vaguely.

When he awoke the next morning the first thing he was conscious of was the muted sounds of the piano.

He went in to her.

" Darling, for God's sake !"

Her face was pale and drawn but her eyes were bright. She would play a few bars, then write a line of notes in quick, expert strokes. There was a little box of tabodex on the piano top next to a glass.

" I'm fine," Edith said. " Don't worry about me. It's a bit tricky in spots, but it's really coming along."

" You've got to slow down—have some rest," he protested. " I won't let you do this to yourself."

" No," she said. " The music is more important. You run along. With luck, I'll be through with this movement by the time you're home."

He conceded defeat, respecting her judgement and sense of values as she had always respected his.

" All right, but don't overdo it. I'll make you some scrambled eggs and coffee. And I'm going to call Nursaway and get a sitter for Martin so you won't be disturbed. Except that she'll be instructed to feed you lunch—forcibly if necessary."

Edith put down her pencil, got to her feet, put her arms around him and rested her head on his chest.

" I just want to tell you," she said softly, " that you're the most wonderful, perfect, sensational, terrifically colossal person in the whole world and I love you love you love you love you." Her tears wet the skin of his chest in the V of his bathrobe. " Thank you for you," she whispered.

He kissed the top of her head and then on each wet cheek and gently on the mouth.

" Okay," he said, considerably effected. " Okay, fine, I'll go fix the eggs. And you write this thing good, Edie. Give it hell, Sweetheart. Give it hell."

Oren pushed open the door of the apartment that night and called : " Edith. Edie !"

He went into the studio, but it was empty—and clean. The piano lid was down. The ashtrays were empty and sparkling. The papers were gone from the floor.

" Edie !" he cried.

A nurse in starched white came from the bedroom. She had her finger to her lips.

" She's in bed, Mr. Donn. I tried to call you at the office, but they told me you'd just left."

" What is it ? What's the matter ?"

" It's all right. Strain and fatigue is about all. I've given her a sedative and she's sleeping now. Dr. Harrons is on his way, but just as a precaution."

He pushed past the nurse and into the bedroom. Edith lay quietly in the centre of the double bed, breathing just a bit heavily. He stood at the edge of the bed, looking at her.

The nurse followed him. She put her hand on Edith's forehead, in a gesture which she combined with the smoothing of the sleeping woman's hair, adjusted the covers and turned to smile at Oren.

" I'm sure there's nothing to worry about," she said.

" Poor kid," Oren said.

" I put her to bed," the nurse said. " And called you and the doctor. But as I said, it's just strain, I'm sure."

" Thank you, Miss Loring. I guess you didn't bargain for all this when you came to baby-sit."

" I'm glad I could help," she said. " Would you like me to fix you some coffee or anything while we wait for the doctor ?"

" No, thanks. I'll go visit with Martin, I think, till he gets here. Has the baby been good ?"

" Perfect," she said. " A real doll."

His son was asleep. Oren sat and looked at him and worried about Edith.

Doctor Harrons was packing his things away in his bag. He refused a drink but accepted one of Oren's cigarettes and sat down in a straight-backed chair. Oren stood and fidgeted in front of him.

" It's as Miss Loring said." The doctor took out a prescription kit. " Fatigue, mostly. Your wife was driving herself on borrowed energy—she'd taken a few of those Tabodex things, you know. Perfectly all right, of course, occasionally, but you do have to let yourself catch up afterwards. Mrs. Donn just went a bit too far before allowing herself to catch up. A good night's rest and a minimum of activity tomorrow and she'll be as good as new. Who is your regular doctor ?"

" We don't have one. We had Dr. Morales, but he was just the obby—the obstetrician for the baby. A laboratory baby, of course. "

" Good man, Morales, in his field. But I would suggest another in this case. I mean no criticism of Morales whatsoever, but he is a specialist. He'd be the first to tell you so himself. No, if I may make a recommendation, I'd say Dr. Leif."

" If you say so," Oren said. " I suppose you're too busy to take on another patient yourself ?"

The doctor carefully ground out his cigarette in an ashtray. He looked at Oren, began a smile, then stopped it in the middle.

"Mr. Donn," he said, "apparently I have news for you. Have a drink yourself, Mr. Donn. Your wife is pregnant."

Oren stiffened. His face went through a series of contortions as it adjusted itself to the emotions chasing around behind it. He ended his confusion by breaking out into a broad grin.

"Pregnant!" he cried. "You mean pregnant? You mean she's going to have a baby? The way people used to do? The old-fashioned way? Naturally?"

"Naturally," said Dr. Harrons, grinning back.

"Oh, boy!" Oren exploded. "Oh boy-oh-boy! That's wonderful!" He walked up and down the room in excitement. "Pregnant! Imagine that! The little devil! Doctor, I'm going to have a drink and you're going to have one with me."

"Well," the doctor said, "all right. Just a weak one."

Edith slept through the night.

Oren sent word to his office that he was taking the day off and he was anxiously hovering over his wife when she stirred into wakefulness.

"Hello, Maw," he said when her eyes opened.

"Hello, darling," she said. She stretched out a hand to him and he put it to his lips. It was warm and soft. "I feel so lazy and relaxed," she said.

"It's about time," he said. "And that's the way you're going to stay."

"Oh, but I can't. I have so much work to do. I've—" She frowned and looked around the sunlit room. "It's morning," she said. "I don't remember going to bed. What happened?"

"It's all right. Just relax."

"But it's not all right. I have work to do. I have to finish the symphony. I have a lot of work to do."

"You finished it," he said. "You finished it last night. Before I came home."

She frowned down at the covers. "I remember now. Yes, I did finish. But that was only the third movement. It was good. It came out all right, Oren. I remember. But I don't remember after that. Did I fall asleep in the studio?"

"Yes," he said. "And the baby-sitter put you to bed. You were knocked out."

"Well, I'm not knocked out any more. I've got to get right up and start the last movement. That's going to be a humdinger

to tackle. I've got no ideas whatsoever. The third took everything out of me."

"So I hear," he said. "Now you listen to me. You're going to stay in bed all day. That's an order. Doctor's order. Maybe tonight, if you're very good, you can get up for a little while. But not before. You've got to take care of yourself. You owe it to the baby."

"Poor Marty. I've certainly been neglecting him. All right, I'll be good. I'll stay in bed and behave. And maybe you'll bring him in and he can stay with me, the way he's never had a chance to, in that damned old scientific box of his all the time."

"Edith Riordan Donn," he said to her, grinning. "Mrs. Oren Donn, I want you to stop talking like an idiot. The doctor has been here, and he's told me everything, and there's no point in your trying to hide it any longer because I know. I, your husband Mr. Donn. I know."

"Know what, silly? What doctor? What are you talking about?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm— Don't you? You mean you don't know? Don't you really?"

She laughed. "No, I don't. And if you keep mumbling to yourself like a fool I never will. What are you talking about?"

He took both her hands in his and said:

"Edie, darling. The doctor was here. He examined you after you passed out. He said you'd been overworking yourself. He said you need a rest. But he also said— He said, and I think it's wonderful—he said we're going to have a baby."

She looked at him, her eyes wide.

"Oh, no!" she said.

She withdrew one of her hands and pulled it down the side of her face.

"Not no, yes. We're going to be real live parents. No bowl of mush stuff, with all due respect to Martin, but an honest-to-God old-fashioned baby."

Her staring eyes were focused on nothing. When she spoke again her voice was barely audible.

"Now I'll never finish the symphony," she said. "It's no good any more. I can't do it now."

"Silly girl," he said. "You sound like Dr. Stern. Surely you can't agree with him now. You can have your baby and your symphony both. You can have a dozen babies and write a dozen symphonies, if you want to."

" No," she said dully. " Not now. I was talking a lot of bravado then. Now I'm just an ordinary woman, like all the rest. We can't do two things at once. We're strictly one-track people. It's our fate."

" Fate hell !" Oren exploded. " What a lot of nonsense you're talking. You did three movements, didn't you ? You can do anything you want to do, if you'll only get out of this defeatist frame of mind."

" You're shouting at me." She looked at him, her eyes grown cold. " You did this thing to me and now you're shouting at me." Her voice rose and she had a wild look. " You're jealous of my work. I was doing something creative and you weren't and now you're jealous of my work and you're trying to destroy it. That's why I'm pregnant. You did it on purpose. You did it maliciously. Well, I won't let you destroy my music. I'll destroy your child first !"

She thrust the bedclothes aside and got unsteadily to her feet. He sprang up to help her. She shoved him aside, with more strength than he thought she possessed.

" Darling," he said.

" Hypocrite !" she yelled. She clawed a dress from a hanger in the closet, gathered together other clothing and ran to the bathroom, where she locked the door against him. He pounded on it.

" Edie," he said. " You're sick. Open the door. Come back to bed. I'll call the doctor."

" You needn't bother," she said. " I'm going to the doctor. I'm going to have an abortion."

Oren, pale and shaking, went to the communicator. He set it for private and whispered :

" Medical emergency."

A minute later the bathroom door opened and Edith came out, dressed for the street. Her face was ashen under its makeup. She carried her purse in her left hand and behind it she was shielding something she held in her right hand.

Oren stood at the front door, barring her way.

" You're not going out," he said softly. " Please, darling, be reasonable."

She walked toward him. She lifted the purse so he could see the large pair of scissors in her other hand, the point of one blade just touching her body.

"Open the door my dear husband," she said. "Let me go out."

He hesitated only a moment, watching her mad eyes, then opened the door for her.

IV

They brought her back on a stretcher ten minutes later. She was unconscious. At Oren's gesture the two men carrying the stretcher took it into the bedroom and the young medical officer with the gold badge on his white tunic helped them transfer her to the bed.

" Preventive paralysis," the officer said to Oren. " She's all right. We tracked her from the street door as soon as we got your call and made contact in person a minute or two later."

" But you had to use the para ray ?" Oren asked.

" She was carrying those shears and we couldn't take a chance. She seemed to be wandering aimlessly until she saw us. Then she began to run and we pre-parred her. No one saw and Dr. Soames caught her as she fell. There'll be no publicity, I think I can assure you."

" Thank God for that." Oren knelt by the bed and pushed a lock of hair away from his wife's face. She was breathing peacefully and the mad look had gone.

" There will be a few questions, though, if we can go into the next room. Dr. Soames will see that Mrs. Donn is made comfortable."

" Questions ? "

" Just routine," the medical officer said. " For the department records. Confidential, of course." He took Oren's elbow and guided him out of the bedroom.

The questions, if routine, were extensive. At one point Oren angrily crushed out a cigarette, and said :

" What is this, anyway ? You make it sound like a police matter. If we're charged with anything let me know and I'll get a lawyer. I don't like this inquisition."

" Well, now," soothed the medical officer, " you know that there's often a very fine line of demarcation between a medical case and a police matter. Our department must have the facts if the case is to be closed."

" Don't call it a ' case.' You make me sorry I ever called you."

" You might have been sorrier if you hadn't," the officer said coldly, his affability slipping for a moment. " Our job is to safeguard all the citizenry and it's people like you who make things difficult."

Oren jumped to his feet.

" Listen, you young squirt," he began. But Soames came from the bedroom then and after a grave look at Oren whispered into the officer's ear.

The medical officer frowned.

" What is it ?" asked Oren. " What's wrong ?"

" Mr. Donn," the officer said reproachfully, " you didn't tell us your wife was pregnant."

" You didn't give me a chance to, with your stupid questions. Well, what of it ?"

" We should have had that fact in our possession at the time we answered your emergency call," the officer said sententiously. " Then we would have proceeded differently. As it is, you must take responsibility."

" Responsibility for what ? What do you mean ?"

" I mean this. Preventive paralysis is harmless, generally speaking, but its effect on a foetus or embryo is not completely known and may even be harmful. Therefore we disclaim responsibility for any injury or mutation which may occur in the course of this natural birth. I have a form here which I must ask you to sign, to absolve the departm—"

That was when Oren socked him in the jaw.

It was thirty-six hours before the Donn household was back nearly to normal.

Oren had been under house arrest for twenty-four of those hours. During that time the house had been aswarm with Council Guards, medics, and medical officers, a lawyer, nurses, a baby-sitter and reporters from half a dozen news media. One reporter carrying a creepy-peepy sent the scene out for triveo.

Finally all of them had gone except Oren's lawyer, in whose custody he was parolled.

" Not only don't they have a case, Oren," the lawyer said, " but you might have a strong action against the Council. I say this in the strictly legal sense, of course, without consideration of such extra-legal little gimmicks such as Suggestions and Resolutions they could whip out at the spur of a moment, and assuming that they'd allow a suit. I imagine, though, that all you want is peace and privacy again."

" Exactly, Burt," Oren said. He kicked at a fax tabloid whose headline screamed :

" MUSIC HER BABY "—SCISSOR PSYCHO

" You could sue that sheet, at least," Burt said.

" Forget it."

The bedroom door opened. Oren pushed the tabloid under the couch with his toe as he got to his feet.

Edith came in, wearing a hostess gown and smiling uncertainly.

" Hello, darling," she said. " Hello, Burt. I've been a bad girl, haven't I ?"

Oren went to her and led her to the couch. She was a bit unsteady on her feet. She relaxed gratefully.

" We're not going to talk about anything unpleasant tonight," her husband said. " We'll pretend that Burt is here on one of his rare social evenings."

They pretended as best they could but it was not a success. Oren was worried about his wife's condition and was not talkative. Edith, who had not been told there was anything to worry about, was pale under her make-up and wore a fixed half-smile which soon choked off Burt's attempts at conversation.

So in desperation they switched on the triveo.

It was Jerry Hilarious night and the scarlet-haired comedian was in rare form.

His material usually was topical and tonight it was right up to the minute. They had turned him on in the middle of a routine which obviously was a parody of the Donn case. Since they had missed the beginning, it wasn't too clear what was going on, but in the act with Jerry Hilarious were a couple wearing heavy glasses—which he had made symbolic of the intellectuals the City-State so despised. Moreover, the girl was wearing as a costume a print dress polka-dotted with music notes and a hat that was a grand piano, while the man, obviously a snob, carried a heavy old-fashioned book under his arm.

" Oh, he's subtle," said Burt. "Subtle as a kick in the teeth. Shall I turn him off ?"

" No," said Oren. " We might as well see ourselves as The Common Man sees us—unless it upsets you, Edie ?"

" It's all right," she said. " It has a certain fascination."

The triveo couple, with Jerry Hilarious laughing it up in the foreground, were singing :

" We don't like the City-State
But we think *we* are just first rate."

The couple, with their faces fixed in expressions of the utmost gravity, were going through a series of insane antics as they sang the verses, and the studio audience was roaring with laughter as Jerry Hilarious mugged, cross-eyed, and danced around the pair with his arms and legs flailing fantastically.

The production ended with a crash of music and a sudden silence in which Jerry Hilarious wound up and let fly his gesture of banishment.

" Aw, g'wan *outside* !" he cried.

A wind machine went into action and, as it howled, snowflakes pelted the ridiculous, bespectacled couple. They cringed away from the gesture and crept towards an icy gate.

Edith, with a switch next to the couch, cut off the triveo. Her expression was angry and her lips were pressed into a firm line.

" You know," she said, " I'd like to do just that."

The Doctors—both the Health Department experts and the Donn's private physician—couldn't tell what the effect of the para ray would be on Edith's unborn child. It was alive, they agreed, but whether it would be normal after birth was something they could not yet say. They put her through a Diagnosticon, they thumped on her belly with fingers and X-steths, they examined smears and slides and dials and they said they'd be back to run some more tests when she was five months pregnant. It was thoroughly humiliating.

Oren was tried on the assault charge. The trial was held in chambers with the press barred. Nothing had appeared anywhere about the fact that Edith was pregnant when she was rayed down by preventive paralysis and the Council intended that nothing should. The case was handled as one of simple assault and the judge sentenced Oren to a year in Correction, then suspended the sentence. He was free then, but from that time on the Donns were under surveillance.

They planned one Restday to go on a gyro trip with a picnic lunch. They hadn't ever made such a trip as a family unit, and little Marty seemed to sense their anticipation. His heels kicked against the lunch pack as they wheeled him the few blocks to the gyropark. But the plane wasn't there. A hostile attendant, speaking from the back of his booth as if fearing contamination, told them the Council Guards had confiscated it.

Marty sensed their mood of frustration and bitterness as they wheeled him back home and he began to cry. He was still crying when they reached the house and Oren on an angry impulse put the infant in the Sleeprplay and cut off his yowls by turning the soundproof switch. Then Oren went into the study and turned on the artificial rain ; the streams of water slammed against the window. But suddenly the sound stopped. He looked up and saw a Council Guard looking at him from outside the panes. The booted, green-tunicked guard motioned to him to open the window.

He did, and asked belligerently, " Did you turn that off ?"

" I did," the guard said. " As you must be aware, there's a Suggestion against artificial rain. In addition to being wasteful, it's naturalistic."

The guard took out a pocket Listener and aimed it at Oren.

" I didn't know about any such Suggestion," Oren said. He was leaning out the window and talking loudly to the guard standing in the garden below. " And if there is such a Suggestion it's petty tyranny."

" Oren Donn, with two n's," the guard said into the Listener. ' And tyranny.' That was the word you used, wasn't it, Mr. Donn ?"

' Go to hell," exploded Oren. " And get the hell out of my garden. You have no right here at all."

" And use of profanity to a guard in the performance of his duty," the guard said. " People under surveillance are subject to loss of certain rights. I'm sure that was explained to you at the time of your trial."

Oren bit the inside of his cheek then, and was silent. The guard looked up at Oren, smiled faintly and put the Listener back in his pocket.

" Nothing else to say, Mr. Donn. Too bad. I was enjoying your lecture, as I am sure the Council will when it is transcribed for them. Nice garden you have here. Very natural."

The guard turned and on his way to the gate at the back of the garden his heavy boots tramped through a border of moss roses.

Oren bit off a little piece of the inside of his cheek.

A man had been standing in the street beyond the garden, watching the scene, and he walked on leisurely as the guard left. The guard gave him a passing glance and disappeared around a corner. Oren recognised the man. Mark Olafson, the man from Outside. Oren was about to speak when Mark shook his head almost imperceptibly. Then he, too, disappeared from view.

At his office the next day, Oren spent the entire morning failing to get anything accomplished. Half a dozen times he began to tackle the correspondence that had accumulated over the weekend and half a dozen times he yanked the page out of the voicewriter. He was still in his mood when the reception screen showed that he had a visitor. It was Mark Olafson, but the name he gave now was Ross Buckley and his appearance was that of a successful businessman.

Oren looked his surprise.

" Well," he said. " Made a go of it, have you ?"

" You might say so," Mark replied. " In a manner of speaking."

" I saw you go by our place yesterday, but I had no idea you'd had such a complete change of fortune. Why didn't you come in ? Or is that a stupid question ? I'm not much of a conspirator."

" You're not a conspirator at all, I'm afraid," Mark said. He lifted a flap in Oren's desk and pressed the button that wiped the conversation tape. " You'll pardon me. No, Donnie, you're just a victim of an evil, stupid government. I saw that little drama in the garden yesterday, and I know more about you and Edith than you might suppose—never mind how. I've been busy since you and I last talked. In several ways. And I know that things have changed with you."

" They have, Mar—Buckley. They certainly have."

" Good lad. Thanks for the ' Buckley.' We'll make a conspirator of you yet."

" They're driving me into it," Oren said. " Or out of the City-State, at any rate. Edith is already half-way thinking about that Jerry Hilarious thing as being a good idea—that ' g'wan outside ' business. I guess you've been here long enough now to know about Jerry Hilarious."

" Yes," said Mark. " I've become very well acclimated. You know, Donnie, once I told you I didn't think you'd like it out there. Now I'm not so sure. It hasn't changed any Outside, except insofar as it's always changing—for the better, we think—but . . ."

" I know," Oren said. " I've changed. I'm waking up."

Mark Olafson looked at the other man intently. " I shouldn't do this," he said. " It's not my primary job, directly. But if you like, I'll help you go."

" Oh ?" Oren chewed his lip for a while. " I'd like to think about it, and talk to Edith. Could we make a living ? We're not farmers or labourers, you know. And—could we take it ?"

" Yes, to both. I suppose you've been saturated with the propaganda films about Outside. I'll not tell you they're fakes, because they're not exactly. They're factual as far as they go. But they only go as far with their cameras and spies as we let them go."

" Oh ?" Oren said again. " You mean there's more than—"

" Lots more. I think I can safely say—to you—that you'd be pleasantly surprised. Some of our people are farmers, of course, and some work in factories. But we have a thing called a Constitution, pretty much the same as the one a bunch of the boys hammered out back in the seventeen hundreds. It says things, for instance, about freedom of the press, and that means books, and books means somebody has to publish them."

" Books ?" said Oren.

" Of course. Your business. Ours don't talk yet. You still have to turn the pages and know how to read. But it's something you could do if you don't mind going into the print shop once in a while and getting your hands inky."

" Printer's ink," said Oren. " How I used to love that smell ! But how about Edith's music ?"

" We're not barbarians, except maybe when the City-State turns its cameras on us. We have music, too."

" Well." Oren's eyes had a far-off look in them.

" Well ?" Mark echoed the word, smiling.

" I don't know what to say. I'm tempted, very much, to pack right up and move out there, but I don't know. This is my country, even if it's wrong in a lot of ways, and maybe I should stay and try to help make it right instead of deserting it."

" That's a noble thought. I don't mean that flippantly," Mark added quickly. " I respect you for it. But can the few people like you who are left still do anything—from Inside ?"

" I don't know," Oren said. " I'll have to think about it."

" I'll be around," Mark said. " Now that I'm respectable, or almost, I'll be keeping in touch with you."

" Good. What are you doing here—as Ross Buckley, I mean?"

" Officially—at least as far as the City-State is concerned—I'm in the talking book business. Just like you. That's why it'll be easy for me to see you often, after I've really got started. Unofficially—you might say I'm in the business of counter-propaganda, or recruiting."

Oren realised that he'd be of no use in the office the rest of the day, either, and decided to go home and talk to Edith.

" You'd better let me go ahead, by about five minutes," Mark said. " I don't think we should be seen together in public until things have firmed up just a bit more."

Oren never saw him again. When he reached the street he found a crowd of people watching the departure of a Council Guard van. He asked the doorman what had happened.

" They got an Outsider. He puts up a struggle but they beats him over the head and takes him off."

With his stomach squeezed tight Oren asked, "Where did he come from ?"

" Somewheres in the building. Just by luck the same elevator jockey brings him down as takes him up and remembers the floor he comes from. The guards are up there now. They got the whole thirty-sixth floor sealed off and every last soul up there is getting their heads grilled off."

Mark Olafson must have walked three flights before and after his visit. Oren's office was on the thirty-ninth floor.

V

Mark's arrest brought new tension into the Donn home. Oren knew Mark would never mention his name but he was frightened by the efficiency of the Council Guard in tracking down the Outsider despite his elaborate precautions. Apparently no one but the mechanical reception screen had seen Mark visit his office and fortunately it was not one that kept a permanent record. But presumably they knew where Mark Olafson lived and the clothes Oren had brought for him might be traced, if Mark had kept them.

Although Oren tried to keep his new worry from Edith, she finally forced it from him. But with it went the picture of Outside as Mark had described it for him and that, at least, was a consolation. The couple talked more and more seriously about making the break with their once-comfortable life and fleeing to the wilderness that now seemed more a promise of paradise.

But where once they could have made the emigration with no difficulty other than the scorn of their friends and the sneers of a government which would have confiscated their funds as it stamped their visas, they now were trapped in a land they had come to loathe. As a man under surveillance, Oren had only limited freedom. They'd already taken his gyro and he was sure that if he strayed far from the route between his home and office he'd soon be tapped on the shoulder by a Council Guard.

In this atmosphere Edith's music stagnated. It was an academic question now whether the fact that she was naturally pregnant meant that she could not write a great symphony. She knew she could not write a bar now if she was a sixteenth generation obby baby whose female ancestors for three hundred years had been born in bowls of laboratory mush.

Then, in the fifth month of her pregnancy, the Health Department specialists came back for the re-examination. All the exhaustive tests again were made but still there was none among them who could say with any certainty if Edith's child would be normal after birth. Preventive paralysis was a tricky thing. That was about all they could state positively, and there had been only a few cases of an expectant mother having been pre-parred.

The specialists went into a conference and emerged with a Recommendation which they sent to the City-State Council. The Council deliberated and issued a Suggestion to Mr. and Mrs. Oren Donn.

A Suggestion to a person under surveillance had the power of a Resolution and, of course, a Resolution was an Edict, backed by whatever force was needed to carry it out.

The Suggestion was that the mother should enter a Health Department hospital at the beginning of her ninth month and be subject to exhaustive tests under rigidly controlled conditions. Then, if it was indicated that the birth would be normal—if something so old-fashioned as a natural birth could be considered " normal "—a film record would be made of the birth and of the infant's progress.

It would of course be necessary to have a complete record until such time as the child was found to be either normal or abnormal and therefore it was Suggested that the child would become a ward of the City-State while doubt remained. The mother would be free to return home after the birth.

That was when Oren and Edith decided they'd had it. They read the copy of the Suggestion which had been brought to them for their signatures. They signed it, received the thanks of the medical officer for their intelligent co-operation, and then made their plans.

There was to be, on the Restday after next, the annual Rededication Jubilee in State Square, a vast public amphitheatre. It was the one day in the year when the Members of the Council made a public appearance and of course everyone went to pay his respects and add to the din of applause and cheers when the Members made their brief speeches. It was also the day awards were made in the form of medals and scrolls to citizens who had done most for the City-State during the preceding year. Mostly the recipients were officials of the government, but they never were the Council Members themselves, who year after year modestly refused their nomination by the awards committee.

This alone should have been enough to guarantee attendance, but there was always entertainment besides. The greatest names in the movies and triveo appeared, each with a special new act never before seen anywhere. The star of stars this year was to be Jerry Hilarious, that sensational new triveo comic.

There was no triveo of the Jubilee, however. It was thoroughly understood that it would be unpatriotic not to be one of the crowd personally taking part in the Oath of Rededication that climaxed the occasion. Therefore there would be no one at home to see a triveo cast of it. Films were made, though, for showing at a later date to those who had to work on the holiday and those in institutions.

Jubilee Day dawned hot and sunny. Oren and Edith knew that their best chance would come when the ceremonies ended and the mobs of people swarmed in all directions for home. They and little Marty in his baby buggy would be part of that anonymous crowd and they would let that part of it which swarmed west take them with it—toward the setting sun, and Outside. Just exactly how they would escape notice when they reached the outskirts of the City-State, or how they would cross the boundary, they did not know. But if there was a way they would find it.

It was a long day. They'd taken nothing with them except some changes of clothing for the baby, and only as much money as they would normally be expected to carry with them, and Edith's music—the manuscript of the first three movements of her symphony. But though they were travelling light they had the weight of fear with them until they had worked themselves well into the centre of the crowd in the great square. They found seats.

Under the broiling sun—the heat only slightly mitigated by the frigeration towers—the programme began. The vast audience was restless despite the brevity of the official speeches but when each ended the applause was deafening. Oren and Edith applauded, too, looking cautiously around to see if any guards were watching. None was in sight anywhere near them.

Jerry Hilarious romped onto the stage and was welcomed with a roar of laughter. At first the Donns forced themselves to laugh at his antics, not to seem out of place, and as they watched they realised that the short, wiry redhead was genuinely an artist and not just a buffoon.

He was giving a masterful performance and through his special material could be seen the man, warm-hearted, inventive,

instantly responsive to the mood of the crowd. Oren and Edith relaxed and felt their tension ease off. They gained strength through the respite for the journey ahead. Only when Jerry Hilarious wound himself up and threw his familiar catch line at the crowd did Edith fail to laugh.

" Aw," boomed the words, " g'wan *outside* !"

" Amen," said Edith under her breath.

Finally, after repeated encores, Jerry Hilarious left the stage. Act after act followed and at last, in late afternoon, the programme ended with the solemn Oath of Rededication. The Donns mouthed the promissory, meaningless words, stood up from the folding chairs for the recessional music and then joined a throng that was heading west.

The crush was so great that Oren took Marty up and carried him while Edith collapsed the baby buggy to briefcase size and carried it. They found a kiosk and, surrounded by humanity, made their way down to the westbound moving pavement. Clinging together so as not to lose each other, they were propelled along at a steady fifteen miles an hour.

The pavement and the throng took them under the Hudson River and into what had once been New Jersey but which now was just another part of Greater New York. The crowd had begun to thin as the pavement branched north and south but there were still many thousands of people heading west. Marty was asleep with his head on his father's shoulder and Oren's arms were beginning to ache. Edith had a pain in the back of the neck, as if someone were staring at her there and any moment would tap her on the shoulder and say " Go back."

Miles later the moving pavement ended, at the top of a rise. Nearby was a loading platform for buses. Neither of them knew where they were or in which direction to go next.

A dilapidated old gasoline bus that still carried the lettering *Pennsylvania Greyhound* was marked *Borderville* and they boarded that one.

They were exhausted when the bus reached its terminal. It had been crowded when it started off. The Donns had found seats but many others stood. At the end of the line, however, less than two dozen persons still were aboard.

Wearily the Donns got up. When they left the bus it drove off. Their fellow riders melted away into the dusk and the Donns walked at random down a street of ancient houses and old-fashioned stores with full plate-glass windows. They tried to look as if they had a destination.

Several blocks later they saw a sign in red neon tubing which once had spelled HOTEL. They would have to go in. They could do nothing more tonight.

In the dimly lit lobby, an old man sat in a heavy armchair behind the counter, dozing. There was no one else.

Oren cleared his throat and the man opened his eyes.

" Hi, there," he said. " Customers, eh ? Always get a customer or two on Jubilee Day. How was the show ?"

" Great," said Oren without enthusiasm. " Could we have a double room, please, with an extra cot for the baby ? I don't suppose you have a crib."

" Sure do," the old man said. " We ain't so antiquated as you might think, though we are a mite far off from the centre of things. Like a room with a bath, or would down the hall do you ? Five credits cheaper for down the hall."

" With bath, please," Oren smiled. He couldn't remember that he'd ever had to make the choice before.

" Right you are, sir. Sir," he repeated. " Sometimes forget to say that." He cackled. " You from Outside ? Or maybe goin' there ? I know you ain't from around here."

Edith looked at Oren with weary frightened eyes and Marty whimpered sleepily as Oren shifted him to the other shoulder.

The old man cackled again. " That's all right," he said. " You don't have to say nothin'. Lots of Outsiders sneak across on Jubilee Day. And vicey versa. Nobody pays much mind. I certainly ain't goin' to make a fuss about it. All I care about's you pay me twenty credits in advance, seein' as you got no luggage."

Oren fished out his wallet and handed it to Edith, who counted out twenty credits to the old man, who put them in his pocket and took a key out of a cubbyhole.

" Second floor," he said. " Elevator got cranky couple years ago and it ain't worked since. Hope you don't mind the stairs."

The stairs creaked loudly as they climbed them. Their room was just off the stair well and there was a film of dust on the battered chest of drawers. When Edith took the spread off the big double bed, though, she found fresh linen underneath. Oren put the baby down with a grunt of relief.

" I'll bring the crib up in a little while," the old man said. " Anything else you'd like ?" He was dubious when Oren asked about the possibility of having a meal sent up to the room but finally agreed to see what he could do. Maybe the place down the street, if they weren't too busy. He went out.

The food came sooner than they had dared hope. It was hot and good, although they had to eat off a rickety card table the old man brought up with the crib.

They ate the meal, fed the baby and put him to bed and then, while Edith ran herself a hot bath. Oren went down to the lobby to buy cigarettes.

The stairs creaked under his feet but the sound was drowned out by a crash as the street door was thrown open and a crowd of people entered in a babble of loud talk. There were about a dozen of them. Two of them were women and all of them seemed to be drunk. All were well dressed.

Oren froze on the landing, half in the shadow. He dared not go back up for fear of attracting attention to himself, so he stood and watched.

One man, apparently the leader of the noisy group, went to the counter and pounded on it.

" Innkeeper !" he commanded. He took off his hat and sailed it neatly onto the branch of a coat-tree across the room. The gesture revealed a flaming shock of red hair. There was no doubt of his identity.

Jerry Hilarious.

Oren drew himself farther back into the corner of the landing.

The old man came around a corner of the lobby.

" There you are," said Jerry Hilarious. " Throw open the bar for these good people, Innkeeper. They're beginning to run down."

" Ain't got no bar, strictly speaking," the old man said.

" I have hung up my hat and I intend to stay," the red-haired man said. " You have tables in the lobby. These will do. Put liquor on them. Or would you rather "—he wound up and let fly his gesture of banishment at the old man—" g'wan *outside* !"

One of the other men in the group slapped a third on the back and howled :

" That Jerry Hilarious—he kills me !"

The old man spat calmly into a flaked enamel cuspidor. " Don't kill me," he said. " If you got money I guess I can rustle up some bar whisky from someplace. We get all kinds here. You come from the Jubilee, I take it ?"

A florid-faced man in a checkered tunic pushed importantly forward and slapped some credits on the counter. " Take it !" he cried, laughing drunkenly. " We brought the Jubilee with us—hah, Jerry ?"

" I have brought this roistering company," Jerry Hilarious said, " to see the outside of the Outside. But if you don't hurry

they'll start to unroister, which is a disheartening sight. So hasten with the liquor, Innkeeper."

The comedian ended his little speech with a crazy dance that evoked more laughter. The old man brought bottles and glasses from under the counter and set them out on the tables. One of the women hiccupped in a moment of silence and leaned against her escort for support.

"Music!" cried Jerry Hilarious. "Turn on the triveo!"

"Trivia!" shouted the man in the checkered tunic. "Turn on the trivia!"

"Sir," said Jerry Hilarious pirouetting and jabbing a finger into one of the checks, "you slander my profession. G'wan outside!"

"G'wan outside! G'wan outside!" the others echoed, laughing, and the company was roistering again.

"Ain't got no triveo," the old man said without apology. "Got an old video, though." He switched it on.

"I don't think this is a very good party," said the woman who had hiccupped. "I'm depressed."

"Can't expect all the conveniences, dear, when you get so far from civilization," her escort said. "Can you, Jerry?"

"Extemporaneous reply," Jerry Hilarious said. He sang:

You'd feel worse in a hearse—
You'd be drab on a slab.
That is the curse
Of being inside the Outside.

He went into one of his fantastic dances as music blasted out of the video.

Oren took advantage of the diversion to slip back upstairs and into their room.

Edith came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her.

"What's all that noise, Oren?" she asked. "It worried me."

"It's Jerry Hilarious, of all people. He's got a crowd with him on the tail end of some private Jubilee."

"Jerry Hilarious!" she said. "Did they see you?"

"I don't think so."

"Why did they come all the way out here?" she asked.

"Educational tour, apparently. Slumming to see how it is in borderland so they can congratulate themselves on living where they do. We can't leave. About all we can do is try to get some sleep and see what happens in the morning. I don't

think they'll make a night of it. A couple of them are pretty bored already."

But an hour later, as they were dozing off, they heard the stairs creak.

It wasn't the tired tread of the old man. Someone was taking the steps two at a time. They listened in alarm to the footsteps, then in dread as they stopped just outside their door. There was a knock, a brisk tattoo.

They dressed quickly. Oren opened the door.

Jerry Hilarious stood there.

Oren's heart sank. Edith came to his side.

"Oh," she said. She took Oren's hand.

"Hello," Jerry Hilarious said. He was smiling. "May I come in? I could only get away for a minute."

"So you found us," Oren said in despair. He opened the door wider, then closed it behind the comedian.

"And we were laughing at you—with you, really—just this afternoon," Edith said. "I know you have to work for them that way, but I didn't think you were their bloodhound, too."

"No, no," said Jerry Hilarious. "I've never hunted anything, except laughs. I'm sorry if I frightened you. I'm on your side, the way Mark Olafson was."

"You know Mark?" Oren asked.

"I knew him. He's dead. They beat him to death. They'd beat me to death, too, if they found out about me."

"Then you're an Outsider, too?" Oren asked. Relief swept through him.

Edith grasped the comedian's hand. "Mr. Hilarious," she said. "Oh, I could cry."

"Call me Jerry. That's my real name. The Hilarious is strictly for laughs."

"Poor Mark," Oren said. "It was my fault. They killed him because he tried to help us."

"No," said Jerry. "It had nothing to do with you. He told us about you, but they never knew of any connection, either way. Mark slipped up somewhere along the line, or they were too clever for him. It's a chance we all take.

"We volunteer to go in. To infiltrate the system and help point up its evils and contradictions to intelligent people—people like you."

"You had me fooled," Oren said. "But in the end it was that crazy gag line of yours that we remembered—and we went."

"You certainly did," Jerry said. "You went a lot sooner than we expected you to and we had the devil's own time finding

you. I come here every Jubilee Day—guiding a tour of drunks from Inside makes fine camouflage. It's a sort of wide-open town anyway and I can report and get new instructions from Outside. The old man told me you were here. He's one of us."

" I liked him, too," Oren said. " How many of you are there, Inside ? "

" Plenty of us. There have to be, because there are a lot of you—people we need Outside."

" You *need* us ?" Edith asked. " Honestly ? We're not just—refugees ? "

" You're a *cause celebre*," Jerry said. " And in that connection I think I can reassure you about your baby, Mrs. Donn." Edith looked toward the crib where Marty was sleeping. " The new one," Jerry said. " We've had experience with the para-ray and your baby will be all right."

" Thank God," said Edith.

" And of course we need you," Jerry went on. " We're rebuilding from nothing. We've got willing hands and stout hearts but we need a brain or two besides. And a little music to lighten the burden, Mrs. Donn.

" We want to live in peace with the City-States, even though we're the remnants of their defeated enemies. But if we can't live side by side in dignity and if it comes to a struggle, one day there'll be a lightning coup from within and without simultaneously. As I said, there are many of us, and some of us are pretty high up."

" Do you mean in the government itself ?" Oren asked.

Jerry smiled. " I've talked too much already. And I have to get back to the roisterers. Now go to sleep. Talk to the old man in the morning and he'll send you to a man who'll show you the way."

As he left them, Jerry Hilarious said softly, smiling and without the gesture :

" G'wan outside ! "

As they walked the next morning, towards sanity and dignity, the sun came out. It was warm and friendly.

Edith felt a slight movement of life inside her.

Maybe she'd never write the fourth movement of her symphony now, but she didn't care. She was beginning to live it.

—**Richard Wilson**

THE BELLS OF

This short story is one of those by which author Tubb has built a very fine reputation in recent years. It's fantasy—but with a deftness of writing which makes for realism.

ACHERON

By E. C. TUBB

Every planet has an atmosphere, not the one you breathe but the one you feel. Kalturia with its soaring mountains lashed by tumultuous seas, the towering escarpments naked and bare, reflecting the ruby light of a sullen sun in a sky so heavy and brooding that, standing there, you feel like a fly on the face of creation. Lokrush, soft and gentle with its woods and rolling hills, its flowers nodding in scented breezes, the red and green light of its twin suns merging and blending in an eternal kaleidoscope of shimmering wonder. Ragnarok with its snow and ice and incessant electrical storms and, at night, the flaming beauty of the aureoles filling the sky with sheets and curtains of coloured fire. Acheron with its Singing Bells.

We covered them all on the Grand Tour, dropping down to spend a day or two days while the passengers stared and marvelled, then up again, the grav-drive humming as it lifted us into space, the twisting wrench as the warp jumped us from

star to star, then planetfall again and more natural wonders to dazzle the eye and numb the mind. It could have become routine but it was never that. The universe is too big, the worlds too many to ever allow of boredom. So that the crew rivalled the passengers in their eagerness to make planetfall, their reluctance to leave once landed and, having left, their impatience to land again somewhere new and strange.

Most of us had our favourite worlds. The Captain, I knew, loved Almuri with its living crystals ; the Chief Engineer had always to be watched when we reached Homeline with its fantastic seas and equally fantastic fish and for me nothing could equal Acheron with its Singing Bells.

Holman was talking about them when I entered the lounge. It was his habit to discuss the next world we were to visit, to explain the natural phenomena in scientific terms and to prepare the passengers, in a way, for the wonders to come. It wasn't his job but he had made it so. Accidents were few, sickness rare and the warp-jump often took as long as several days. Time, for the doctor as for all of us, tended to drag between the stars.

I moved softly about the lounge, collecting empty glasses, cleaning ashtrays, arranging the scattered books and magazines, acting, as always, the perfect steward. I didn't dislike the job, menial though it was, the pay was sufficient, the tips sometimes generous and the work was not arduous. It served to pass the time and, as long as we visited Acheron, I was content.

" A strange world," Holman was saying. " For some reason animal life never evolved on Acheron and the flora is ascendant. There aren't even any insects."

" No insects ?" Klienman frowned. He was a small, balding man who had read much but knew little. " Then how about pollination ?"

" The plants are bi-sexual," explained the doctor. " They are self-pollinating. The winds, of course, scatter the seeds."

" The Bells," said Klienman. " What of those ?"

" The famous Bells." Holman paused and looked at his audience. They were all in the lounge, the thirty passengers we carried this trip. Old, mostly, for the Grand Tour is not cheap. A couple of young lovers on their honeymoon held hands and whispered to each other. A fat matron, her bulging throat ringed with diamonds, glared at her son, a gangling, vacuous youngster who stared with puppy-eyes at an attractive ash-blonde. I knew her, Laura Amhurst, a silent, self-contained woman who spoke little and smiled less.

" The Singing Bells of Acheron," continued Holman, and I edged a little closer. " They aren't bells at all, not really. Just a freak of evolution. The dominant plant form is a bush about twice the height of a man when fully grown. It has a continuous seed-cycle and is usually covered with seed pods in various stages of ripeness. The pods are spherical, about an inch in diameter, and each contains a half-dozen seeds."

" How disappointing !" A faded socialite pouted in a manner which had been fashionable when I was born. " I had imagined them to be real bells."

" Seed pods." Klienman snorted his disgust. " Is that all ?"

" That's all." Holman glanced towards me. " Just a freak of nature." He smiled at the others. " But they are rather special at that. You see, there is a high silicon content in the soil of Acheron. So high in fact that no Terrestrial plant could survive there."

" Nothing wonderful about that." Klienman seemed determined to make himself unpleasant. " Lots of worlds can't support earth-type vegetation."

" True." Holman paused again and I knew that he was trying to hide his annoyance. Men who knew little and thought they knew all were anathema to him. " The point," he continued gently, " is that the seed pods, because of the absorbed silicon, are in effect fragile spheres of glass. The seeds within them are loose and, when ruffled by the winds, they strike against their containers."

" Like a Japanese lantern," said Laura Amhurst suddenly. " Is that it ?"

" Yes," said Holman, and again he glanced towards me. " Exactly like a Japanese lantern. There is absolutely nothing supernatural about the Singing Bells at all."

There was more, much more, a running cross-fire of question and answer with Klienman trying to show off his book-learning and belittle the doctor. Holman was patient. He was, after all, a member of the crew and he refrained from revealing Klienman as the fool he was. Only Laura Amhurst remained silent, her ash-blonde beauty accentuating her pallor. Later, when the passengers had retired and the ship had settled down for the night, Holman sent for me.

" Sit down, John," he gestured to a chair in his crowded dispensary. " What do you think of the passengers ?"

" As usual."

" Meaning not much, is that it ?" He didn't really expect a reply and he was not disappointed. " What do you think of the blonde ?"

" Laura Amhurst ?"

" That's the one." He scowled at a cabinet of instruments. " She's a widow, John, recent too. I don't like it."

I knew what he meant but made no comment. Some arguments remain evergreen while others pall after the first discussion. To me Acheron was something not to be discussed. I made a point of glancing at my watch and Holman took the hint.

" So you won't talk about it," he said, and his voice held defeat. " Well, I've done what I could and now must hope for the best. But she's a widow, and I've been watching her." He shook his head. " Those damn rumours ! Why can't people accept the real explanation ?"

" Maybe she will." I rose and stepped towards the door. " You sounded very convincing."

" But not convincing enough, eh, John ?" He looked at me from beneath his eyebrows. " I thought not." He sighed. " Well, tomorrow will tell. Good night, John."

" Good night, doctor." I left him still scowling at the cabinet.

Acheron loomed before us the next morning and the shrill hum of the grav-drive made a singing accompaniment to breakfast. The meal ended as we dropped into the atmosphere, the tables were all cleared before we grounded, the passengers ready to leave as the air-locks opened. Holman, acting for the captain, gave his usual warning.

" There is nothing harmful on this planet," he said. " But there is one great danger. We land at the same spot each trip and you will find well-beaten trails. Do not leave them."

" Why not ?" Klienman, as usual, was being awkward. " If there's nothing to hurt us then where's the harm ?"

" You may get lost," said Holman patiently. " The bushes are high and it is easy to lose your way. Remain on the beaten paths and you will avoid that danger." He smiled. " I promise you that you will miss nothing by doing as you are asked."

There was more but he could have saved his breath. They took the warning as they always did, carelessly, indifferently, intent on having their own way. Holman watched them file through the air-lock, the escorting crewmen following after a discrete interval. He must have seen my expression for he came towards me, his eyes serious.

" Why don't you give it a miss this trip ?"

" I can't."

" You could if you wanted to," he snapped, then became gentle. " What's the point, John ? What good does it do ?"

" Please." I stepped away, not wanting to argue. " I have work to do."

The work didn't take long, I saw to that. I hurried through it as I always did when on Acheron, my thoughts elsewhere. Holman was busy when I had finished ; three men, Klienman among them, had returned to the ship with badly cut hands. I heard the doctor's voice as he dressed their wounds.

" I warned you," he said. " Silicon is glass and glass is both hard and brittle. What happened ?"

" I wanted some of the pods," said Klienman. " I tried to tear off a bunch." He swore, probably from the pain of the antiseptic. " It was like grabbing a handful of knives."

Holman's answer faded to a murmur as I headed towards the air-lock. A crewman turned, recognised me, then faced the acres of bushes surrounding the ship. A faint wind was blowing, scarcely more than a breath, but even across the clearing I could hear the Bells.

The sound increased as I ran towards the valley.

It was off the beaten trails but I knew the way. I slipped carefully between the tall bushes and halted only when I had reached the old, familiar spot. Before me the ground fell away into a deep valley every inch of which was covered with bushes heavy and glistening with their pods. I waited, breathless with anticipation then, as the wind freshened, it came.

There are no words to describe the music of the Bells. Others have tried and failed and I am no poet. It is something which has to be experienced to be understood and, once experienced, is never forgotten. The valley, with its thousands of bushes each bearing their hundreds of pods acted like a sounding board. From it sound rose like a cloud, a multitude of notes ranging all over the aural spectrum, singly and in combination, blending and weaving into an infinity of patterns. Music which held all the sounds there ever were or ever could be.

A hand fell on my shoulder and I opened my eyes. Holman stared at me.

" John ! "

" Leave me." I struggled against his hand. " Why do you interfere ? "

" It's late," he said. " I grew worried." He glanced down into the valley and I knew what he meant. " Let's return to the ship."

" No." I stepped away from him. " Leave me alone."

" You fool !" Anger roughened his voice. " How often must I tell you that it's all an illusion ? "

" Does it matter ?" I looked over the valley. " To me it is real enough. He lives down there, somewhere. I can hear his voice."

" Illusion," Holman repeated. " A dream."

" So you say, but it's all I have." I looked at him. " Don't worry, I believe you."

" For how long ?" He swore, savagely, bitterly. " Damn it, John, stop hurting yourself. Your son has been dead for five years now, your ex-wife has remarried. Isn't it time that you stopped wasting yourself and got back to work ?"

" Yes." I stepped towards the ship. " Work. I'll be missed."

" Not that work, your real work. Not acting as nursemaid to a bunch of tourists but doing what you were trained to do." He gripped my shoulders and stared into my eyes. " One day you're going to forget that all this is an illusion. You're going to think it real. Do I have to tell you what happens then ?"

" No." I stared down into the valley. " You don't have to tell me."

" Then get some sense, John," he said tiredly. " Go back where you belong. What good are you doing here ?"

It was an old argument and one which I'd heard so often, but how could I go back to research ? If I did I would lose the opportunity to visit Acheron and the Valley of the Singing Bells and listen to the voice which waited, so patiently, for my return.

The Grand Tour was scheduled for a two-day stop at Acheron and with good reason. The Bells were at their best only at sunset and dawn when the morning and evening winds stirred them to vibrant life. A change came over the passengers as the hours slipped past. They became quieter, more thoughtful, less inclined to argue. After the first landing no one tried to collect souvenirs. It wasn't the fear of cuts from the glass-like fronds which stopped them, that could be overcome, rather it was a reluctance to despoil the planet of even a little of that which gave rise to such wonderous music.

The second night came and passed all too quickly. Dawn flooded the horizon with flaring streamers of red and gold and,

as usual, the morning wind stirred the Bells and filled the air with their incredible beauty. Everyone listened to them. Every member of the crew and every passenger stood in the light of the rising sun and filled their hearts and minds with the beauty of Acheron.

Afterwards, when the ship was readying for take-off, Laura Amhurst was missing. Holman brought me the news, his eyes wide with fear.

" A widow," he said. " The Bells. Damn it, John, you should have been more careful."

" I'm not responsible for passengers once they are outside the ship," I reminded. " But I think I know where she is."

" The valley ?" He had anticipated me. " Are you sure ?"

" No, but I met her once heading in that direction." I headed towards the door. " I'll get her."

I raced from the ship and between the bushes, careless of the fronds which slashed my clothing, heedless of the music rising about me, the music created by the wind of my own passage. I left the regular paths and slipped towards the valley. Haste was essential, I had to race the wind and by the time I arrived my body was lacerated and my clothing in rags. My guess had been correct. Laura Amhurst, her eyes closed, her arms extended, was walking directly towards the rim of the valley.

" Laura !" I chased after her, caught her, slapped her face. Her eyes opened and shock twisted her mouth. I talked fast and loud, trying to drown the rising music, fighting the desire to concentrate and listen.

" It isn't real. It's illusion, all of it." I held her close to me, tightly so as to prevent any sudden movement. " Your husband?'

" You know ?" Her eyes searched my face. " You do know. The rumours were true. The dead do live here, I know they do."

" No." I searched for words to destroy her dream. I had heard them all, a dozen times and more from Holman and others, but still they came hard. " It's a trick of the mind," I said. " You come here and you listen to all the sounds that ever were and from them you pick the ones you want most to hear. The prattle of a dead child, a husband's voice, the laughter and tears of those who are gone. The mind is a peculiar thing, Laura. It can take sounds and fit them with words and make them seem different to what they really are."

" I spoke to him," she said. " And he answered me. He is here, I know it."

" He is not here." I gripped her tighter as she tried to move, knowing that one false step and we would both topple into the valley. " You close your eyes and concentrate and you hear the voice you want to hear. You speak and it answers but all the time you are talking to yourself. You speak and your brain answers, picking words and tones from the sound of the Bells. It is an illusion, less real than a photograph or a recording. The words you hear are from your own memory."

" It was my husband," she insisted. " He was calling to me. I must go to him."

" You can't !" I sweated at the thought of what would happen if she broke away. " Listen to me. You heard his voice or thought that you did and, with your eyes closed, you began to walk towards the sound. But the sound came from the bushes." I shook her. " Do you understand ? The bushes !"

She didn't understand.

" Silicon," I said. " Leaves like razors. The valley is covered with them and the ground falls sharply away. Two more steps and you would have thrown yourself among them." I gripped her shoulders and turned her so as to face the valley. " There is a good reason why this place is out of bounds. Too many people act as you acted, believe as you believed." I pointed to where something white gleamed among the pale green vegetation. " We call this place the Valley of the Singing Bells," I said heavily. " A better name would be the Valley of Death."

For a long moment she stared at the bleached bones. The wind had died and only a faint chiming rose from the valley and, when she spoke, her voice seemed very loud.

" You come here," she said. " Why ?"

" For the sake of a dream." I told her my reasons. " But now I know that I have wasted five years. Don't do the same, Laura, don't live in the past. Live for the present and the future. Don't try to keep memory awake and hurting. Let the dead rest in peace."

" And you ? "

" I'll follow my own advice." I stared for one last time over the glistening expanse of the valley and, for perhaps the first time, saw it as it really was. Not, as rumour had it, the resting place of the departed, the one spot in the universe where they would return and speak in the old, remembered voices to those that had known them, but as Holman had emphasized again and again. The Bells were a natural wonder, no more. They were

a freak of evolution utterly devoid of the supernatural, as obvious and as normal as a Japanese lantern.

Laura was smiling as we walked back to the ship. I learned the reason for that smile before we reached Earth.

I had forgotten that Holman was a psychologist. I had underestimated my own importance. I had discounted the fact that my acquired skill was not to be lightly cast aside. Not by the government who, apparently, still needed me. But wanted me sane.

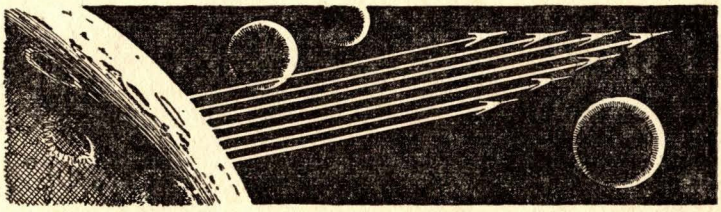
" It was a trick," said Holman on our last night in space. " I make no excuses, a practitioner does not have to justify his cures. Laura isn't a widow. She is a natural-born actress." He looked sharply at me. " Are you surprised ?"

" No," I said truthfully. " I'm not surprised." An intelligent man does not lose all his intelligence because one facet of it is dulled. I had had time to think and little things, seen in a new light, had become obvious. Holman's hints, the coincidence of her being missing, even the doctor's hint as to where she could have gone. She had heard me coming, of course, and had timed things well. She had never been in any danger but I hadn't known that. In my anxiety for her I had destroyed my own illusion, faced it and recognised it for what it was. But had found in return something of infinitely greater value.

I smiled down at Holman and left him staring, his eyes perplexed. I could have enlightened him, but that could come later.

Laura was waiting.

—E. C. Tubb



John Wyndham's fantasies need no introduction being in a peerless class entirely on their own. The great pity is that he no longer produces so many delightful little cameos as "The Chronoclasm," "No Place Like Earth" and the story which follows below, with such regularity as he did.

BARGAIN FROM BRUNSWICK

By JOHN WYNDHAM

The Partland home is the big house on the left, about a hundred yards, maybe, beyond that sign that says :

Welcome to
PLEASANTGROVE
Pop: 3,226

and the board beneath it which adds :

The Livest Little City
In This Or Any State
WATCH IT GROW

In the big Partland living room Mrs. Claybert was explaining: "My dears, I *must* apologise. Only this morning I said to myself: 'Ethel, this time you're going to be on schedule.' That's just what I said. And now I've kept all you girls waiting again.

Am I mortified ! Something always happens. I'm interruption-prone, I guess. It was the mailman came, right as I was starting. He had a package from my boy, Jem. You know my Jem's over in Europe, occupying those Nazis. Of course I couldn't leave it that way. I just *had* to take a peek. And I was so thrilled when I saw what it was, I just had to bring it right along with me. There, now, look, isn't that a cute present ?"

Mrs. Claybert, with a conjuror's air, stripped the paper from the object she carried and held it up. The ladies of the Pleasant-grove Cultural Club Musical Society, Recorder Section, gathered round, impressed. Among the modest instruments they were holding—and which they would have been playing by this time had Mrs. Claybert kept her schedule—it was a king. The whole length of its dark body was carved with an intricacy of vines and leaves in low relief. The sharpness of the pattern was softened as though by much handling. The polished wood, of darkest chestnut shade, gleamed like satin.

" Why, Ethel, that's real antique. Maybe a hundred years old—maybe even more," said Mrs. Muller. " Aren't you the lucky girl ! I didn't know you'd a millionaire son. Must've set him back plenty."

" Oh, my Jem's a good boy. He'd never be a tightwad where his Mom was concerned," said Mrs. Claybert, a trifle smugly.

Mrs. Partland was somehow in the middle of the group when she was thought to be on the outside. It was a way Mrs. Partland had. She took the instrument from Mrs. Claybert's hands, and examined it.

" The workmanship's just elegant," she pronounced, though with an air of impugning any other quality it might possess. She slid her fingers over the smooth polished undulations. " Yes, it certainly was made by one of those old-time craftsmen. But," she added severely, " is the pitch right ?"

" I wouldn't know," admitted Mrs. Claybert. " I didn't have time to try it. I simply said to myself : ' Ethel, the girls'll just *love* to see that,' and I brought it right along with me."

Mrs. Partland handed it back.

" We'd better find out before we begin. Barbara, will you give Mrs. Claybert the ' D ' ?" she directed.

Mrs. Cooper lifted her recorder, and obliged. It was a plaintive note.

Mrs. Claybert found the finger-holes, and raised the ivory mouthpiece of her resplendent instrument to her lips. She blew gently.

A silence fell on the room, and hung there a moment.

" Well, I guess it *is* ' D,' " acknowledged Mrs. Muller. "But it's a very unusual tone, isn't it ? It's more like—well, I don't know quite what it is like. But it certainly is a *very* remarkable tone indeed."

Mrs. Partland satisfied on the technical side, moved over to the footstool which served her as a rostrum. Mrs. Claybert was still looking at her instrument with astonishment and admiration.

" You wouldn't expect it to sound like a modern one," she said. " I mean, we have machinery and things now. That must make a difference. I guess this is the way they all sounded in those olden times."

Mrs. Partland rapped with her baton.

" Girls !" she said, decisively, but for the moment she went unheard.

" You know," Mrs. Claybert was saying, in a visionary fashion, " you know, somehow I can just see one of those old strolling players using maybe this very instrument in one of those big mediaeval halls. There'd be great oak beams, and rushes on the floor, and—"

" Ladies !" commanded Mrs. Partland. Her arresting tone cut short Mrs. Claybert, and brought them all round facing her. She went on : " There's that little thing by Purcell that we played last time. If we start with that, it'll get our fingers limbered up nicely. Have you all got your sheets ?"

The ladies disposed themselves, arranged their fingers on their recorders, and frowned at their parts. Mrs. Partland stood on her footstool, baton poised.

" Now, is everybody ready ? Well, I'm afraid you'll just have to look over Mrs. Schultz's sheet, Mrs. Lubbock. Now. One— Two— Three . . ."

From the first breath it was clear that something was not well. One by one the others faltered and stopped, leaving Mrs. Claybert with a long, sweet note proceeding from her instrument, and an astonished look about her eyes. Mrs. Partland drew an admonitory breath, but before she could speak Mrs. Claybert's white fingers began to skip delicately on the dark wood. A tune, light, lilting, and lovely as a May morning danced through the room. Mrs. Claybert's comfortable body began to sway lissomely as she played. She posed one foot forward. The air was enchanting, irresistible. She began to dance. Lightly as a ballerina

she crossed the room, and whisked beyond the door. After her swept and swayed the ladies of the Pleasantgrove Cultural Club, like nymphs upon a sward . . .

At the crossroads the lights were against them. They stopped, and stood there, looking dazed. The policeman was a man of notable self-control. All the same, his eyes were still bulging slightly as he came across. He approached Mrs. Claybert with a look somewhere between compassion and suspicion. The glance he gave her instrument was wholly suspicious, as if it might be some ornamental kind of nightstick.

" What would it be, lady ? What goes on here ?" he inquired.

Mrs. Claybert did not answer. Her eyes dwelt on him with the wondering look of one only half untranced. For a moment nobody else spoke, either. Mrs. Partland felt that it in some way devolved on her to clear things up.

" It's all right, Officer. We were just—well. Well, it was just a—a kind of —of—er—Corybantic fancy," she finished desperately.

The man looked them over. His eyelids lowered in a slow blink, lifted again.

" I wouldn't know much about that," he admitted. " But, lady, if I was you, I'd go fancy it some place else."

" Yes," said Mrs. Partland, with unusual meekness. " Girls —" she began. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw Mrs. Claybert's hands raising her instrument once more. She made a quick snatch.

" Oh, no, you don't," she said. " Not again !"

Mr. Claybert examined the recorder. He peered at it this way and that under the light. He might have attempted to blow it had the mouthpiece not been removed to rest safely in Mrs. Claybert's handbag.

" Yes," he said, judiciously. " It certainly is old. But is it old enough—"

" How old would it have to be ?" Mrs. Claybert asked.

" I can't say for sure—'bout seven or eight hundred years, I guess."

" Well—maybe it is that."

" Uh-huh. Maybe. I wouldn't know what seven hundred years looks like anyway."

" If it *is*—" Mrs. Claybert began. But she cut off the remark, and lapsed into thought.

" You *can* find out," observed her husband, pointedly.

She made no response. Mr. Claybert laid the recorder down carefully on the table. The silence that ensued was broken only by the rhythm of his fingernails on the arm of his chair. His wife moved irritably.

" Harold, dear. Will you please to stop that drumming !"

Mr. Claybert obediently stopped, but though he controlled his fingers the rhythm went on in his mind. *Tum* ! *Tum* ! *Te-tutta, te-tutta, te-Tum* ! He found that his foot was beginning to tap it. *Tum* ! *Tum* ! *Te-tutta, te-tutta, te-Tum* ! He checked that, too, but it still went on inside him. Soon his head was nodding to it and his lips were framing the words, though silently : *Rats* ! *Rats* ! *We gotta get ridda the Rats* !

" Maybe there'd be enough rats even in Pleasantgrove for a test, my dear," he suggested, at length.

Mrs. Claybert shuddered.

" If you think I'm going to fool around with a lot of rats, Harold—"

" But it'd prove it, dear."

" Maybe it would. But no rats. Not me."

Mr. Claybert sighed. " The trouble with women is they got imagination, but they don't *apply* it. I'm right out ahead of you, Honey. Look at it this way. If it works on rats, and it works on your friends, we've got something. Something big. Maybe we could get it really selective. Maybe we could get, say, all the smokers of Camels, or all the members of the After-Shave Club dancing in the streets. And would that be an ad ! Oh, boy ! And there'd be some nice political angles, too, I guess. Now, suppose you were to play it over a nation-wide hook-up—"

" Harold ! If you want any peace in this home you'll put that imagination of yours right back in its cage, and let me think," Mrs. Claybert declared.

" But, Ethel, this thing can be big. We could figure out a movie angle, too. Kinda band-wagon for—"

" Harold ! *Please* !—*And* will you stop that drumming !"

Breakfast the following morning was an even quieter meal than usual. Both the Clayberts appeared introspective. By a costly effort Harold Claybert had restrained himself from making further reference to the recorder. As a result it seemed

to dominate the room in some way. He found his eyes wandering toward it continually. But only as he was about to leave did his resolution break down. At the door he hesitated.

" Honey, I've not even heard you play it," he said. " Couldn't you—? Well, just a note or two, maybe ?"

His wife shook her head.

" I'm sorry, Harold, but the very last thing I said to myself before I went to sleep was : ' Ethel, don't you dare blow that thing again till you get it some place where it can't do any harm.' And I guess I'd better stick to that."

After he had gone, Mrs. Claybert did her cleaning speedily, if absentmindedly. When she had set the house to rights she picked up the recorder, and polished it gently with a duster. She contemplated it in a thoughtful fashion for a moment, then she took the ivory mouthpiece from her bag and pushed it into place. She half lifted it to her mouth, and paused. Then she lowered it, and laid it on the table again. She went upstairs to fetch a coat. As she came down she picked up the recorder, and, with a slightly furtive air, hid it beneath the coat before she opened the front door.

Instead of getting out the car in her usual way she kept on down the path to the road. There she turned to her left, and began walking away from the town and the houses. After less than a mile a track led off to the right across a field. She followed it over that field and the next, and into the woods beyond. It was quiet there, and peaceful. Among the trees she felt removed from the world as well as hidden, and her own inner self stretched the creases out of its wings a little. A faint footpath slanted away from the track, and, following that for a short distance, she came to a small natural clearing. There, in the sun, she spread out her coat, laid the recorder carefully on it, and sat down.

In spite of the sunshine there was a tinge of gentle, eighteenth-century melancholy. In her present mood Mrs. Claybert found that not unpleasant.

For a while she sat, pensive ; dreaming a little, with a touch of nostalgia. Not that she was unhappy. There was Jem—and Harold too, of course, and Harold was a good husband, as husbands come. But she missed Jem. Germany seemed a terrible long way away. There's a kind of wistful mood that can come on you when you stop to think that the only child God let you bear has somehow turned into a man who's halfway round the world—and you're over forty now . . . You can't help wondering about it sometimes. Not kicking : just wondering

what it might all have been like if, maybe, it had been some other way . . .

After a bit Ethel Claybert picked up the recorder. She stroked the smooth wood with her fingertips because it was Jem who had sent it. She looked beyond it, beyond the trees, smiling a little. Then, still smiling, she put the ivory mouthpiece to her lips, and began to play . . .

A meeting, on the front porch of Mayor Duncan's house by the cross-roads, included several of Pleasantgrove's more influential citizens. Though it was informal, it was clearly aware of obligations ; it had, perhaps, authority, too ; but what it excelled in was bewilderment. The only face to wear an expression of decision was Mrs. Partland's, but that was habitual, and this time nothing was coming of it. The look of reliability which Jim Duncan's conception of office caused him to wear was a kind of drop-scene, deceiving nobody. Mrs. Muller was offering comment and suggestion at her usual high velocity, but they had an expendable, radio-background quality. Everybody present stood looking out on Main Street in perplexity. Everybody, that is, except Mrs. Claybert who sat in the rocker, weeping quietly.

The sight of the junction of Main Street and Lincoln Avenue at that moment was one that nobody was going to forget. Not only the crossing itself, but the entrances to the four streets were jammed with children. The girls for the most part wore flaxen plaits hanging in pairs from beneath white caps embroidered with coloured flowers. Short sleeves puffed out at their shoulders above tight bodices, and their full, striped skirts were covered in front with bright aprons. The boys were in tunics of green or brown, and long tight pants. Their hats were coloured with the brims shaped to narrow peaks in front, and the high crowns each set with a feather. All the roadway looked as if it had been spread with a brilliant but restless carpet from which rose a hubbub of young voices mingled with the tocketty clatter of hundreds of small clogs.

Astonishment was not one-sidedly restricted to the citizens of Pleasantgrove. The children's faces reflected it. Most of them were still looking around them in bewilderment, and regarding the amenities of the town with cautious suspicion. Others were already discovering compensations. There was a group near the movie house stricken with delighted awe by the

posters. Another had its noses flattened against the plate glass windows of Louise Pallister's Candy Store. Over their heads Louise herself could be observed bobbing about stressfully behind her barricaded door, her hands clasped, and her mouth opening for alternate " Oh, dear !"—" Oh, my !" Across on the other corner there was a press where some juvenile instinct had already led to the discovery of the soda fountain in Tony's Drug Store. But these high spots of adventure were only local, on the fringes of the crowd. Within, it consisted of children who stared about them in puzzlement while little girls and boys clung, big-eyed and fearful, to their elder sisters' skirts.

Not one of the Pleasantgrove citizens showed the least joy in the situation.

" I don't get it," complained Al Deakin from the filling station. " Where the heck did they all come from ?" he demanded. He turned aggressively on Mrs. Claybert. " How did they get here? Where *did* they come from ?" he repeated.

Mrs. Claybert sniffed the unsympathetic atmosphere. Before she could answer Mrs. Partland said, decisively :

" We can leave that till later. What I want to know is now they *are* here, who is going to do something about it ?" She looked pointedly at Mayor Duncan. " Somthing *has* to be done," she added, emphatically.

Jim Duncan maintained the air of a man detached, and thinking deeply. He was still keeping it up when Elmer Drew shuffled forward and plucked urgently at his sleeve. Elmer was a house-painter who doubled in the less spacious art of sign-writing, but both are professions which made a conscientious man finicky about details.

" How many do you reckon there'd be, Jim ?" he asked.

Here was something a Mayor could try to answer. Jim relaxed slightly.

" H'm," he judged. " I'd say three thousand, Elmer. Not less. Maybe more."

" Uh-huh." Elmer nodded, and edged his way out of the group to get his brushes. The way he saw it, it'd be near enough to change the preliminary 3 of the population figure to a 6, just till someone made up the full count.

" Three thousand kids !" repeated Al Deakin. " Three *thousand* ! Well that fixes it, I guess. No community the size of ours can stand that."

" And how does that fix it ?" asked Mrs. Partland coolly.

" Why, makes it a State job. It's too big for us to handle."

" No !" said Mrs. Claybert, distinctly.

They looked at her.

" What do you mean, ' no '?" Al demanded. " What else ? What can we do with three thousand kids ? Comes to that, why should we ? Seems to me you've got a mighty lot of explaining to do, Ethel Claybert."

Mrs. Claybert cast a forlorn glance round the semi-circle that enclosed her.

" Well, it's difficult to explain . . ." she said.

Mrs. Muller came generously to her rescue.

" I guess three thousand children are sometimes not much more difficult to explain than one," she said, sharply.

This reference to an obscure incident in Al Deakin's past had the effect of deflating him for the moment.

" Well, we can't just go on standing here and doing nothing," Mrs. Partland said. " Those children are going to have to be fed soon, and—er—looked after."

It was quite true. Wonder was giving way to fractiousness. Some of the larger girls had taken little ones up in their arms and were lulling them to and fro, golden plaits swinging. Mrs. Claybert ran down the steps and came back holding one pretty small thing close to her.

" That's right. We have to do *something*," agreed Mrs. Muller.

" There's that old army camp out by Rails Hill," said Mrs. Partland. " If we could feed them and take them out there—"

" And who's going to feed them ?" demanded Al Deakin. " I hold that Ethel Claybert just ain't got the right to dump three thousand kids down here and expect . . ."

" I reckon Pleasantgrove folks will be able to find a meal or two for them," the Mayor put in. " But outside that—Oh, there's Larry !" He broke off. Like a shipwrecked mariner hailing a lifeboat he called across the street : " Hey, Larry !"

The cop looked up, and waved his big hand. He started to come over, wading carefully through children, and looking not unlike a man picking his way across a flower-bed.

"Who did it, anyway? Who brought 'em here?" he demanded as he climbed the steps.

Everybody looked at Mrs. Claybert. So did the cop.

" Are you responsible—for all this lot ?" he enquired.

" Well, yes—I suppose I am . . ." admitted Mrs. Claybert.

" Three doggone thousand of 'em," put in Al Deakin. "Fifteen hundred little Gretchens, and fifteen hundred little Hanses—and not one word of American between the lot."

The cop tilted his cap back, and scratched.

" From Europe ?" he asked.

" Well, yes . . ." said Mrs. Claybert again.

" You got their immigration papers ?" inquired the cop.

" Well, no . . ." Mrs. Claybert told him.

The cop turned and surveyed the vista of children. He turned back.

" Lady," he said, " some place there's several freight cars of trouble marked ' Rush,' and they're all headed your way." He paused. " What are they ? D.P. children ?" he added.

Mrs. Claybert detached her gaze from his, and looked out over the street.

" Why—why, yes," she said. " Yes—I guess that's just what they are."

" They don't look a bit like the D.P. children in *Life*," Mrs. Partland said. " Too clean. And tidy. Besides, they all looked happy before they began to get hungry."

" Wouldn't you be happy, coming to a town like Pleasantgrove after all those ruins over in Europe ?" Mrs. Muller asked.

" They've got a right to look happy," said Mrs. Claybert, with a sudden firmness. " And Pleasantgrove has a duty to see that they are happy."

" Hey— !" began Al Deakin.

Mrs. Claybert clutched the little doll of a girl that she was holding more firmly to her breast.

" Aren't they lovely children ? Did you ever see lovelier children ?" she demanded.

" Sure they are, but—"

" And is there anything more valuable to a community than its children—and its children's happiness ?" she went on, fiercely.

" Well, no, but—"

" Then I guess that makes Pleasantgrove the richest community in this state," concluded Mrs. Claybert, triumphantly.

There was a difficult silence.

" Er—sure. That's mighty true," agreed Mayor Duncan. " But right now we got to be practical." He turned an appealing eye on the cop.

The fascination of novelty was fast wearing thinner with the children. More of the little ones had begun to cry, few of the older ones still smiled. A girl in a brightly striped skirt with an embroidered blouse frothing out of her laced velvet bodice climbed up on to a box near the front of the dry goods store. Her mouth opened, and she began to sway with her arms. At first nothing was audible from the porch. Then voices round her took up the song. It spread outwards across the crowd until it drowned the crying. The children began to sway together as they sang, rippling like a field of barley in the wind. Mrs. Claybert swung the one she held in time with the rest. She listened to the unfamiliar words with a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes.

" What we gotta do," said the cop, cutting through the lilt of massed trebles, " what we gotta do is to get on to the State Orphanage and tell 'em to start in sending trucks right away. Then we got to see about feedin' the kids till the trucks pull in."

Mrs. Claybert stiffened.

" Orphanage !" she exclaimed, in a thrusting voice.

She put down the little girl, and advanced.

" We gotta be practical—" began the cop, but she stopped him with a gesture.

" For the first time in my life I'm ashamed to be a citizen of Pleasantgrove," she proclaimed bitterly. " You could send all these lovely children off to be orphans ?"

" But, Mrs. Claybert, they *are* orphans—"

Mrs. Claybert swept that aside.

" They come away from that dreadful Europe; they come here to the land of liberty and opportunity; they ask you for love—and you give them orphanages. Just what do you think they're going to say about the American way of life when they grow up ?"

Mayor Duncan looked at her helplessly.

" But, Mrs. Claybert, you got to be reasonable—"

" Is this, or is this not, a Christian community ?" demanded Mrs. Claybert. " I've lived in Pleasantgrove all my life. I thought Pleasantgrove folks were great-hearted folks. Now the test comes I find they haven't got hearts or Christian charity."

" Listen lady," said the cop, in a placatory tone. " We got hearts *and* we got Christian charity—but the little thing we can't fix is Christian miracles."

Mrs. Claybert glared at him, and then at the rest. Without comment she picked up the recorder from the floor beside the

rocker. Looking out across the singing children, she settled her fingers on the holes.

" You just don't *deserve* to have lovely children," she said.

She lifted the pipe. Then she paused.

" I guess—" she said, wistfully—" I guess the only thing that's wrong with children is that they grow up to be people like you."

And she put the pipe to her lips.

As the long mellow note floated out across Main Street the children began to turn and look at Mayor Duncan's porch. The singing faded away. The little ones ceased to cry, and smiled as their sisters put them on their feet. There was no sound but the single note, trembling a little . . . Mrs. Claybert put one foot forward. Her fingers flittered up and down the pipe stem. The air came, light and gay, tripping brightly as sunbeams on broken water. Hundreds of small clogs began to patter with a click-clocketty noise to its rhythm.

Down the steps danced Mrs. Claybert, and off across Main Street, through a lane that opened among the children. They closed in behind her as she went, golden plaits and bright skirts swirling, red stockings flashing, feet tat-tattering.

There was a scuffle inside the Mayor's house and his two children bounded out across the porch to join the dancing crowd beyond.

" Hey ! Stop them !" Jim Duncan called, but somehow neither he nor anyone else could move to do it.

Mrs. Claybert turned down Lincoln Avenue with the children streaming like a bouncing, bubbling, coloured flood behind her. Down the front yards the American children came tumbling to join the rest. Out of the school poured another stream skipping and dancing to flow into the passing crowd and whirl away with them up the street.

" Hey ! Mrs. Claybert ! Come back !" bawled Mayor Duncan, but his hail was lost in the children's voices.

The only sound that could top the laughing and the singing and the clatter of clogs was the tune of Mrs. Claybert's pipe as she danced along ahead, across the fields, and way away to the woods beyond . . .

By the time that conscientious citizen Elmer Drew had finished turning the 3 into a 6 hotter news had reached him. So when the first carloads of reporters, detectives and F.B.I. passed him as they came tearing into Pleasantgrove he was already painting

out the population figure altogether, pending a revised estimate. After he had done that, he considered the lower board for a moment. Then he came to a decision, unscrewed it, and tucked it under his arm.

On his way back into town he met Mrs. Partland. Her children were walking sedately, one on either side of her. Elmer stopped and stared. Mrs. Partland beamed.

" The American children chose to come back to their own folks," she told him proudly.

" Yeh," agreed Mortimer Partland, Junior, with a nod. "They didn't have any ice cream, or movies, or gum—nothing but *dancing* ! Was it corny !"

" And Mrs. Claybert ?" asked Elmer.

" Oh, well, I guess she just *likes* dancing," said the young Mortimer Partland.

Elmer turned and walked back up the road. On the board he rewrote " Pop: 3,226," and then thoughtfully changed the last figure to a 5. Underneath, with a deep feeling of civic satisfaction, he refixed the board which said :

WATCH IT GROW

—John Wyndham

John Mantley's latest short story is one that could well fit either science fiction or fantasy but because of its action and philosophical content we prefer to think that it righty belongs in Science Fantasy. *Whichever type of fiction you prefer, the story below will admirably satisfy.*

THE BLACK CRUCIBLE

By JOHN MANTLEY

I

He stood on the wooden platform, resplendent in the new spaceman's uniform, and gazed out over the undulating sea of humanity. By turning his head through an arc of one hundred and sixty degrees, he could view all that was left of the race of Man. Eight hundred and ninety-six thousand, seven hundred and forty-four human souls crammed into the great natural amphitheatre under the blue bowl of sky. Not all of them were survivors. At least a fifth of the total number were children born right here in Freeland. Children who had known no other home.

It was a miracle that so many had survived ; an even greater miracle that they had found their way to this remote section of northwestern Canada. Some had come by their own resources; others had been brought. In response to radio entreaties during the weeks following the blast, lead-lined trucks had gone out to rescue isolated families as far away as Labrador and Louisiana, and from hastily constructed landing strips on the edge of Great Slave Lake, aircraft, dangerously overloaded with radiation shielding, had flown out over the oceans and across the poles

to almost every corner of the globe. Most of those who found a way to make their presence known had been rescued. How many tens of thousands died because they lacked the means of communications, no one would ever know.

Clayton's father had been one of the many who had lost his life on these rescue missions. A distress signal had come from the heart of China. Oliver Steele and his co-pilot had made the contact and found a remote village practically undamaged. A dying missionary was patiently tapping out pleas for help on an amateur transmitter. One look at the minister and Oliver knew there was very little hope. The village had escaped blast, but like so many others, it was dying of radiation. Still he checked everyone. He found three children and a young woman who might yet be saved. He bundled them aboard the aircraft and tried to explain to the others. They tore his body to pieces twenty yards from the plane. The co-pilot had to use his machine guns to get off the ground.

The history of those weeks was a bloody chronicle of such incidents, but there were also many examples of quiet heroism. At the main gate to the sanctuary of Freeland, men with children who had somehow escaped contamination, were told that they themselves had no hope. They handed their children to the guards and with grave eyes asked for the quick mercy of a bullet. Husbands and wives listened to the inexorable ticking of the geigers, turned their backs on sanctuary and life, and hand in hand walked quietly away. A man with blood bubbling from his lungs staggered to the gate and thrust a leaden sheath into the arms of one of the guards. It contained the body of a child about a year old. The child had been dead for two days. Once, one hundred and fifty fear-crazed men stormed the gates and were mown down by machine gun fire. Other desperate men, denied admission, scaled the hastily erected fences in remote spots. They died horribly, hours or days later. The patrols, discovering the bodies, buried them deep.

After two months, no more people had come and no more radio signals rewarded the vigilance of the monitors. The world was dead. Except for the community around Great Slave, it was a blackened ruin—a radioactive wilderness where no human thing could live. And today the survivors and their children stood in massed silence, listening to the voice of their elected leader. In the distance, the snowy peaks of the Rockies, beautiful and indestructible as they had been since Man had

first walked the Earth, watched in silent splendour. They seemed remote, indifferent. And yet their presence coupled with the arctic wastes of the North, had kept this small area of Northwest Manitoba free of contamination. Only one bomb had landed to the west between the mountains and the sea. It had been enough to level Victoria and Vancouver, but only a small fraction of the lethal radiation had breasted the protective barrier of the mountains. The great, cold air masses and fierce winds which howled off the polar glaciers to the north had kept at bay the deadly sickness which hovered over the ruins of the great American cities.

But even the sanctuary was, at best, a place of temporary safety. As the air masses circled the earth, they picked up more and more radioactivity. The winds which swept over Freeland from the Northwest territory contained each year a higher radioactive count. Radioactive particles began falling out of the upper air. They descended with the air and snow, contaminating the water, the crops, the homes of what remained of the race of men. Year by year, too, invisible death crawled over the land, pushing inward the fences that marked the boundary of man's dwindling island of safety.

Man fought, but the outcome could never be in doubt. In forty terrible minutes with one hundred twenty thousand atomic bombs, he had sealed his own doom. He had destroyed most of the world and made certain that within a quarter of a century, even the few isolated areas which had escaped immediate contamination, would be incapable of supporting life.

The ultimate tragedy was that the man-made satellites still circled the planet. A few rockets still existed, capable of carrying man to their orbit, but there was nowhere to go ! Man had landed on the moon and Mars. Both were barren, desolate, impossible worlds. The outer planets had yet to be explored, but they held not the slightest hope of sustaining human life and to bridge the awful gap between the stars was beyond the grasp of human ingenuity. Man was the victim of a cosmic irony. All of the marvels he had created—the great mechanical brains, the planes, the ships, the factories—some of them untouched by blasts—were there for Man to decontaminate, and to use. But to what purpose ? Materials there were in unlimited quantities. There was even the knowledge to guide in their use; for many of the world's greatest intellects had been closeted in lead-insulated, bomb-proof laboratories when the rain of atoms had descended. But of what use was their knowledge, when in

a few years, mankind must assuredly die ? There was no way out. Just a painful lingering—a few more desolate years, and then the end. The once green and beautiful Earth consigned to mutants and monsters. Mankind had given up hope.

And then, four years after Armageddon, an astronomer in a moment of madness, fed into a mechanical brain all the known astronomical data concerning the planet Venus and asked the machine whether the cloudy world was capable of supporting human life. The answer blasted Man from a certainty of doom into an hysteria of hope. By every available test, the surface conditions on Venus had gradually been altering through the millenia until they were capable of supporting human life.

It was a faint hope, to be sure. A hope so fraught with dangers and difficulties that it was almost impossible to contemplate. For Man, before Armageddon, had only taken two faltering steps into space—to the Moon and Mars. To realise the dream he was now forced to contemplate, he would have to hurl an untried ship and an untried crew across millions of miles and bring it back. But it was this or nothing.

He began to build. He poured into the ship his hope, his desperation, his sweat, and his life's blood. From the moment its construction was agreed upon, every citizen of Freeland lived for the moment when it would be completed. And still it took ten years. Someone calculated that by pre-atom standards it would have cost one hundred and seventeen billion dollars. As each section was completed, it was rocketed out to the satellite to be assembled. And while the adult population laboured eighteen hours out of every twenty-four, every child between the ages of eight and fourteen was enrolled in the most comprehensive course of competitive study that science and educators could devise. For when the ship was finished, the crew must be waiting. Every hour was precious.

Ten years later, on the day the *Pilgrim* was christened, a mechanical brain dropped five names into a slot. The names of five, clear-eyed, determined youngsters between the ages of twenty and twenty-six ; each physically perfect, mentally sound, morally dedicated. The very best that Mankind could produce.

They waited now, all five of them, at rigid attention on the wooden platform in the shadow of the ferry ship, surrounded by the people to whom they represented the last hope of survival. For this morning—this bright April morning—the curtain was

to be drawn on the final act of the drama of earthly man. This morning the *Pilgrim* would leave.

The presentation of wings was a mere formality, intended to give the people a last chance to see those in whom their dreams were vested. The crew themselves had known for six months that they were the chosen. They had known, too, that their journey would take over two years—six months out, a year there before Venus and Earth were again in a suitable position for an economical orbit, and six months back ; and that during those two years, man hoped to build the ships to carry him to the planet which he now called " Grail " in his prayers instead of Venus. If the *Pilgrim* returned with the news that Grail was habitable, the ships would be launched immediately. If the return spelled the destruction of their hopes, or the ship did not return at all, Mankind preferred to die where it had been born—among the winds and sounds and tastes of Earth.

A corner of Clayton's mind made him aware that the President was bringing his speech to a close. The measured, intelligent words brought him out of his reverie a second before the leonine head turned in his direction and a deep voice said into the microphone : " Clayton Steele."

The thunderous roar from almost a million voices ripped the fabric of the morning, burying the platform in an avalanche of sound. It made Clayton feel small and humble and somehow unworthy. He stepped forward and looked into the tired, grey eyes of the great man as the astro-pilot's wings were pinned to his tunic. He shook the proferred hand and stepped back to his place. One by one the four others came forward to receive at once, the greatest tribute and the greatest responsibility that Mankind could offer. As each name was mentioned, the ovation went up ; the reverberations rolling among the ancient hills like Jupiter's thunder.

And finally it was over. The voice of a clergyman invoked a blessing and the five stepped aboard the ferry ship. The blast area was cleared and the atmosphere rocket slammed out toward the satellite where the *Pilgrim* waited. A few hours later, they closed behind them the massive locks of the *Pilgrim's* entry port, each knowing in his heart a mixture of relief and awe. Relief, because the gruelling ten years of study were over and the moment for action had arrived. Awe, because with the closing of the locks, they were sealing themselves off from Man's first and, perhaps, final home. The next time those doors were

opened, if ever, it would be on an alien planet millions of miles away, across reaches of space where no man had gone before. They did not speak. Silently and efficiently they proceeded to their stations.

In the control room, Clayton flipped open the intercom switch ; " Pilgrims, this is Captain. Check your stations." One by one, the terse, controlled checks came back. Clayton strapped himself into his acceleration couch. He said into the intercom, " Prepare for acceleration." In four separate portions of the ship the crew did as ordered, their voices coming through the intercom as each settled himself. Clayton pressed the earth-space communication button. " Earth, this is *Pilgrim.* We are secured and preparing for acceleration." The voice of the President came back slightly distorted by static. " God go with you, Pilgrims. We will be waiting." Clayton released the button and took one final glance around. He took a long, deep breath. He sighted out of the space port. His lips moved silently. He hit the acceleration switch. The warning lights went on. The blast bell clanged. He counted : one-two-three-four—the vicious acceleration hit them like a mighty fist, freezing the blood, driving them into a grey, unreal world on the edge of darkness. When it was over, Clayton checked the instruments and pressed the assembly button. They got out of their harnesses and proceeded to the tiny wardroom. They stood at attention until he motioned them to sit, and then took a chair himself. In the ensuing silence, he examined the people with whom he was to live and work for more than two years. Although he was captain and pilot of the *Pilgrim* and thus in command, his name had actually been the third of those dropped in order of merit into the slot of the brain machine.

First had been the tall, lanky, coloured boy who sat on Clayton's left; Washington Carver Jones, six feet three inches tall, weight, one hundred and eighty-seven pounds. At this moment, the sweat was gleaming like quicksilver on his black skin and, as always, the broad, open face was a strange contrast to the burning intelligence in the eyes. ' Wash,' as he was affectionately known to the Pilgrims, was the only true genius among them. He had an I.Q. of one hundred eighty-five. He also had an enormous smile, a quiet voice, and the ungainly, awkwardly deceptive gait of a friendly giraffe. The son of a coloured lumberjack, he was the only one of the five who had actually been in the Great Slave area during the forty most terrible minutes in human history.

Clayton smiled at him and a slow, enormous grin came back from the black giant, revealing an incredible number of gleaming white teeth.

" How goes it, Wash ? "

Washington linked his fingers and looked down at them, still smiling amiably. " Fine, Clayt—that cheering shook me up a bit."

Clayton nodded. " It did me too." He transferred his attention to the girl sitting next to Washington ; clear green eyes, dark auburn hair, an exquisite figure. Not tall, not short, not even beautiful, but with something a great deal more important. From the first moment he had seen her, she had stirred him strangely. Carla Stanton was the daughter of an Archeology professor who had taught at the University of Winnipeg. She was the only one aboard whose parents were still alive. The whole family had been on a kind of busman's holiday in the Yukon when Winnipeg was levelled. Her eyes met his and he felt his heart turn over once, quickly. He said, " Carla ? "

She gave him a warm glance. " Hi." She held up a pack of cigarettes. " May I ? "

" Sure. Anytime. All of you. Use your own judgment." He shook his head as she extended the package, then spun around. His eyes met those of Jacques Doucette and he felt, as always, something that was like an electric shock. Those eyes were impossible to describe. They had in them a tremendous appreciation of the simple act of living, coupled with the glint of the devil. There was a small boy trapped way down deep in their depths ; a boy who would never really grow up. And perhaps in this lay the surprise. For the Jacques that surrounded the eyes was a great bull of a man, built like a steel wedge. He was only five feet, nine inches tall, but a special outsized uniform had had to be constructed merely to accommodate his shoulders. He often amused children by bending railroad spikes in his hands. Jacques, at twenty-six, was the oldest of the crew, and his short curly black hair was already beginning to recede at the temples. His face was so ugly, he was irresistible. Women adored him.

He was the son of a French Canadian fur trapper. He had buried his father near Hudson's Bay and driven his birch bark canoe eleven hundred miles across unmapped wilderness to Great Slave. He had arrived at the end of the last portage weighing fifty-three pounds. He had been eleven years old at the time and had not spoken a word of English. He rubbed a

muscular hand across the blue-black chin and when he spoke, the cabin shook. His voice was like everything else about him —big. It sounded like it was coming through several layers of gravel. He said happily, " I like it here."

Clayton nodded and shifted once more to face the small, quiet man to his right. Soft, onyx eyes gazed back at him with serene confidence. Lee Wan was a Chinese orphan ; one of the three children that Oliver Steele, fourteen years earlier, had given his life to save. It seemed somehow a good sign that the sacrifice had paid such a precious dividend. The little Chinese did not speak, but his quiet imperturbability had the stability of a rock. None of the others had said anything really, either, but their brief words and their smiles had held an undercurrent of confidence and an unspoken but assured acknowledgement of Clayton's position. He felt relieved. After all, he was younger than most, and less intelligent than two. Sometimes he wished they had not let him know that last part. Some of the tension dropped away from him as he stood up. " Well, we're off. Barring accidents, in six months, four days, seven hours, and . . ." He turned to Jones. " How many minutes, Wash ?"

Washington didn't even look at his watch. " Twenty six."

" And twenty six minutes, we should be in orbit around Grail. Any questions ? "

Jacques grinned. " I've got one."

" Yes ? "

" When do we eat ? "

Carla snorted. " I suppose we are going to hear this refrain for a couple of years ! "

Jacques spread his big hands expressively. " But, cherie, you do such wonderful things with those concentrates ! "

Clayton floated back to the control room and a few minutes later, Carla came in with plastic bottles of soup concentrate and coffee. She stood next to him, her arm touching his shoulder. The contact affected him so much that, after a moment, he leaned away from her as if to check one of the instruments. She didn't seem to notice. For a while, she stood silently gazing out of the space port at the blue-black sky with its myriad pinpoints of stars. Then she said, " Do you feel different ?"

He frowned. " How ? "

She lifted one shoulder in what would have been a shrug. It didn't quite come off because the shoulder came down slowly. " I don't know. But I was convinced that once we were on our way, all my reactions would be different. Bigger, I suppose.

But they're not. We spent so much time in trial runs and in the astro-trainer with a sky that looked exactly like this, I can't quite believe we're on our way."

Clayton nodded. " I guess we all feel like that. After ten years, it's almost like an anti-climax." His shoulder touched her arm again and he automatically pulled away. She stared at him for a second, and then put a hand on his shoulder.

She said, " I wouldn't be afraid of anything, Clayt. We're going to be together for a long time." She went out.

II

For two months, nothing happened. They saw one another at one main meal a day and for a half hour afterwards. At other times, they worked, ate, and slept alone as they had for seven of the ten years of their training. They slept two hours in every eight with six hours on the job. They worked around the clock. There was never a time when three were not awake and only six hours out of twenty-four, when two slept at once. The routine functioned perfectly. The ship's course checked to twelve decimals and one job ceased to be necessary when radio contact was lost, as the gap between Earth and ship widened. Nobody decided the captain was incompetent. No one turned out to be a latent paranoic, and there were no fights as to who should share the woman's couch and affections.

Monotony was not new to them and in its true sense, did not even exist. They had been bred to enjoy the job they were doing and to accept the limitations of their lives as normal. They did their work because they wanted to and because their efforts could mean a future for themselves and for what was left of the race of men. The sheen of dedication did not tarnish with the lengthening miles. They had confidence in each other and in their ship. They were prepared for any eventuality ; for meteor holes, for rocket failure, for human error—for every conceivable thing that the human mind could anticipate. When disaster struck, they were not even aware that anything had happened.

It was the regulation daily ship check. Carla and Washington had already made their reports and Jacques and Lee were in the process of completing theirs. When it was over, Jacques sat back and rubbed his chest absently. " That's it, skipper, all secure."

Clayton sighed. " Good." A little frown made a crease between his eyes. He stood up and took the few small steps that the tiny wardroom permitted him. " Maybe too good. You all know what I mean. In two months, *something* should have happened. It just isn't logical for a ship as complicated as this one to function at 100 per cent efficiency for two solid months. Do you agree ? "

Washington shifted his long frame restlessly in the chair. " I think we all agree, Clayt, but the plain fact of the matter is, there is nothing wrong. We are on course, on schedule, up to speed, and there are no mechanical problems."

Clayton bit his lip. " But in every test we ran back on Earth, something happened ; sometimes minor, sometimes major, but something. Of course, some of the trouble was planned to test us, but not all of it. Now that the chips are down, suddenly there's no such thing as trouble. It's uncanny."

Jacques grinned. " We tested her so often, maybe there isn't anything left to bust loose."

" I wish I could believe it."

Washington put out a hand inside his tunic and stroked his breastbone. " Maybe there's an explanation."

" Let's hear it."

" In almost every test we ran back on Earth, we dropped into atmosphere once or twice. You know how she bucks when that happens. The strain could have been the cause of most of our troubles during rehearsals. After all, this ship was built for deep space and we all know it's impossible to combine perfectly the features of a spaceship and an atmosphere craft. But there will be no ferry rockets at Grail, so she has to be able to stand atmospheres—to land and take off. This is really the first time we've ever run her consistently in free space where there's no resistance. Also, we're moving around a lot less than we did in training and as you pointed out, there are no carefully planned trick emergencies. Hence, less banging on hull plates and less strain on instruments and overall structure. Maybe we'll get all the way there without any trouble."

Jacques rubbed his chest. " But when we hit the atmosphere —wow !"

They laughed. And then Lee said, " There may be a corollary to Wash's reasoning. We were fortunate not to have any trouble on initial acceleration. And since then, we've all been making intensive examinations of our equipment."

Clayton hid a smile. It always amused him to hear the taciturn Lee speak. It sounded so strange to hear perfect polysyllabic English coming out of that imperturbable Oriental face.

" Jacques and I have found many potential danger points ; crossed wires where some friction existed, thin welds on electrical synapses, partially defective switches. In each instance we have strengthened the weakness. It seems logical to assume that the longer we go without trouble, the safer we become."

Clayton nodded. " Okay. I hope you're both right."

Washington's black face split into a wide grin and he stuck a pipe between his teeth. " So do I."

Clayton went back to the control room, somewhat relieved. After all, the ship was everything and if it continued to function effortlessly, there could be no real cause for concern. Furthermore, no one else seemed particularly worried. He tried to put the thought aside, but at the back of his mind, an uneasy presentiment continued to gnaw away. It was all too damned easy !

Carla ran the blood sample out of the centrifuge and checked the count. She picked the clip-board out of the air beside her, wrote October 17th on the top of the sheet and set the word NORMAL on Washington's dossier. There was a knock at the door. " Come in."

Jacques stuck his head into the room. His eyes twinkled. " Excuse me, Doctor, but I wonder if I could have my appointment a little earlier this morning."

She raised an eyebrow. " Why ? "

His face acquired a hurt expression. " Doctor, how could you forget ? "

She knew she was being baited, but she went along. " Forget what ? "

" This is my afternoon for golf."

" Come in, you idiot." He lumbered into the room. " Take off your shirt."

"Oui, cherie." He unzipped the acetate garment and stood waiting. Mentally she shook her head. She checked each of the crew every week, but never ceased to be amazed and a little appalled at Jacques arms and torso. His biceps were as big around as her own thighs and the pectoral muscles were like square, stone slabs thrust under the skin.

" Sit here." He sat while she took a sample of his blood. He watched the red fluid rise in the needle with grave absorption, as if it were a constant miracle that his body actually contained blood. Jacques fascinated her. The intense satisfaction he derived from the simple phenomenon of his own blood being drawn into a needle, might lead one to believe that he was a little weak-minded. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He had an I.Q. of one hundred and forty six, nerves of iron, and reflexes that were like spring steel. While she put his blood in the centrifuge and wound his arm for a blood pressure check, he absently began massaging his chest with his other hand. It surprised her mildly because she had checked him for the eleven consecutive weeks of the voyage and she had never noticed the gesture before. She let the air out of the tourniquet and put the stethoscope to his chest. He jumped as if he'd been sting.

" What's the matter ? "

He made a wry face. " It's cold."

She laughed. One could stick a half dozen needles in him and he wouldn't even wince. But he wriggled like a schoolboy at the touch of a cold stethoscope. " Don't be such a baby," she said. She put the stethoscope aside. The heart was perfect.

As he watched her mark the chart, he began massaging his chest again. She looked up. " Something wrong with your chest, Jacques ?"

He seemed surprised. " No. Why ? "

" You were rubbing it."

" I didn't know. Does it mean something ? "

" Should it ? "

He grinned. " With you psychiatrists, everything has a meaning." He tapped his forehead with one finger. " Subconscious," he said darkly.

She laughed in spite of herself. " I've had doubts about your subconscious for some time."

He laid a finger along his nose and stared at her lewdly. " Doctor," he said, " I want you to know that you are correct."

" Put your shirt on and get out of here."

He reached for his shirt. " Ah, oui, always the same. Always they are afraid to be alone with me."

She pointed to the door. " Out ! "

He floated away, still smiling. After he had left, Carla sat down and began filling in his report. A few minutes later, as she transferred the figures to the medical log, she became aware

that she was absently stroking her breasts with her free hand. She looked down at the hand, frowning, and then abruptly began to smile. ' The power of suggestion,' she thought, ' and you a psychiatrist, too.' She went back to work, holding the pencil in one hand and the chart in the other.

On November 11th, they went through a small, cosmic dust storm. The storm came at the ship on almost a collision course. The closing speed was so astronomic that the particles which struck them vaporized on contact. None penetrated the ship's hull, but the instantaneous conversion of such vast energy created enormous heat. Neither the absolute zero of space nor the cooling plant of the ship could bleed off the energy fast enough. In a few seconds, the temperature inside the ship went up to one hundred and eighty-six degrees. In the control room, Clayton opened his tunic and swabbed at his dripping face and body with a handkerchief. As they emerged from the storm and the temperature, he discovered that he was absently rubbing the sodden handkerchief around and around on his bare chest. He paid no particular attention.

On November 21st, Washington Jones was taking his daily shower. During the process, he began mentally checking the value of carrying their estimated speed to another ten decimal places in his calculations. He was totally unaware that he had rubbed the cake of soap over his rib cage several hundred times.

Clayton said as usual, " Okay. Everything seems in order. Any comments ? "

Washington scratched his woolly pate and made a wry face. Familiar as they were with one another's habits, it was enough to get all of their attention.

Clayton said, " Alright, Wash, what is it ? "

Washington shifted restlessly and then said, " I don't know, but I've got a hunch that there's something crazy going on around here."

Clayton felt a tiny nudge of apprehension. They were all familiar with the uncanny accuracy of Washington's hunches, except that their training had taught them that they were not really hunches at all. Washington was a genius and the scope of his intellect made it possible for him to draw conclusions from the correlation of vague indices that the average mind would never bring into association. These conclusions, for lack of a better term, he labelled ' hunches.' Clayton hoped this one wouldn't be too serious. He said, " What do you mean, Wash ?"

Washington twisted again. " Well, maybe it's ridiculous, but when Jacques here is preoccupied, he has a tell-tale gesture. Most of us do. He rubs his chin with the back of his hand." Jacques raised his eyebrows and turned his hand over quizzically. " He uses that gesture," Wash continued, " on an average of six or seven times during every meeting. Damn, I wish Carla were here. This is more in her line than mine."

" Never mind, Carla. What about this gesture ?" Clayton said. " Is there anything abnormal in it ?"

Washington shook his head. " Not in the least. It's just that I've been waiting for this gesture for the past three nights and it hasn't come. I didn't really realise I'd been waiting for it until a few minutes ago."

Clayton looked at Jacques and back to Washington. " So?"

Washington looked a little embarrassed, but he went on doggedly. " So, why does a man who always scratches his chin when he's preoccupied, suddenly stop scratching his chin and start rubbing his chest ?"

Clayton began to get a little irritated. " I don't know. Maybe he's itchy. Are you, Jacques ? "

Jacques grinned. " Nope."

Clayton turned back to Washington. " I'm sorry, Wash. Forgive me if I'm missing something, but I don't see that this proves anything's wrong. Jacques has changed an unconscious behaviour pattern. We all do this."

Washington refused to be derailed. He chose his words carefully. " I didn't mean to give the impression that it proves anything. It might not even be significant except that this transfer of behaviour pattern doesn't seem to be confined to Jacques. A few minutes ago, I found myself doing it, and if you'll look at your own right hand, you'll find you've got it inside your tunic. Whether you know it or not, you'll find you've been massaging your breastbone for the past fifteen or twenty seconds."

Clayton looked down and froze. It was true and he hadn't even been aware of it.

" Either we've all developed the seven year itch," Washington continued, " or this is truly an unholy coincidence."

Clayton let the impact of this sink in and then spun around to Lee Wan. " What about Lee Wan—is he a member ?"

Lee shook his head. " I don't think so. Am I, Wash ?"

" I don't know. But then I didn't notice anything until fifteen or twenty minutes ago."

Carla came into the wardroom, took in the sombre faces, and said, " What's wrong ?"

" We don't quite know," Clayton said, " Wash has noticed that everyone of us except Lee Wan, has taken to rubbing our chests, in place of our customary gestures. He thinks it might be significant."

Carla looked at him for a long second and her face drained of colour.

" What is it ?" Clayton said.

She pulled herself down into a chair and looked at him anxiously. " I'm sorry, skipper. I'm the medic and psychiatrist here. I should have caught it, not Wash."

" Then you think he's right ? "

She swallowed. " I'm sure of it. I saw the indications some time ago and like a fool I ignored them."

" What do you mean ? "

" Several weeks ago, Jacques began rubbing his chest after a physical. Since he'd never done it before, I asked him if there was anything wrong and he said no. I checked his heart just for safety and it was normal."

" Oui," Jacques said, " she's right. I had forgotten."

" I dismissed it," Carla continued, " as not being significant. Later on, I found myself massaging my breasts with my hand." She blushed. " I'm sorry, but it's relevant. I was a little amused. Since there was no pain and no itchiness and no symptoms of any kind of trouble, I decided I was the victim of the power of suggestion and let it go at that. Twice since then, I've found myself doing it again, and I began to get annoyed. Each time, it happened when my mind was occupied and my hands were free. During the last few meetings, I've made it a point to keep my arms folded so that I wouldn't embarrass everyone by doing it again." She stopped. There was a long pause.

Then Clayton said, almost angrily. " But what the hell is it ? I don't feel any pain. I don't itch. Why should I rub my chest? Why should any of us ?" He looked at Carla. " Have you any idea ?"

She shook her head. " At the moment, not the slightest."

He hesitated, then dubiously said, " Could it possibly be a habit we've picked up from one another ? "

" Coop five people up for three months in an environment as small as this, and anything is *possible*. It's just that it's not probable."

" You think we've contracted something, then ? "

" I can't say, but I'll try to find out. Starting right after this meeting, I'll do X-rays and exhaustive tests on everybody. Maybe we'll find out something. However, in the absence of any physical symptoms, I can't believe it's dangerous, at least not now."

Washington grinned. " What you mean is that there is no cause for immediate anxiety."

She smiled back. " Yes, that's it. It may also be taken as a good sign that Lee appears to be immune. If it were biologically contagious, he certainly should have been affected. We've all had the same vaccines and we all display maximum resistance to any known virus." She hesitated and then turned to Clayton. " I'm sorry, skipper. I dropped the ball."

" Don't worry. There doesn't seem to be any harm done."

" Thanks." She stood up. " Any volunteers for the inquisition ? "

Jacques said, " Me. That is, if you promise to warm up that stethoscope ! "

" You've got a deal," Carla said. " Come on."

III

Back in the control room, Clayton mulled the whole thing over in his mind. Obviously, it was not something you could dismiss with a shrug as unimportant. On the other hand, there was no necessity to develop an anxiety neuroses over it, either. Whatever it was, it wasn't painful or even unpleasant. It didn't appear to interfere with the performance of duty or normal bodily function. If it didn't develop into something worse, it could probably be ignored as one of the thousand strange things to be expected in space. Carla seemed confident and she was the best doctor that Mankind had produced since the war. Also, it was still possible that it was just a crazy behaviour pattern they had picked up from one another. He chewed on it for over an hour, trying to remember if the hand on the chest was a foetal position—if he had ever used it before ; if anyone on the ship had had it before take-off. He got nowhere. He was relieved when Washington came in to tell him it was his turn for the X-ray.

When he arrived at the sick bay, Jacques was sitting on the edge of the table looking very pleased. " She broke two needles," he explained proudly.

Carla stared at him balefully. " He has a skin like rhinoceros hide."

Jacques beamed. " Not skin, cherie, muscles. Look." He crooked a mammoth arm and biceps rippled like steel hawsers.

She laughed in spite of herself. " A living example of the Neanderthal man. Go look at your old power plant before something happens."

Jacques skipped off the table and started out. He stopped at the door, his black eyes twinkling. " Today, mon capitain, she has examined my chest most carefully. And tomorrow, if she is good, I have promised to examine hers with equal attention"

Carla threw a test tube at him. He caught it expertly in mid-flight and set it gently down on a table. " When you are angry, cherie, you are exquisite !" He went out, whistling.

Carla said over her shoulder. " You're the captain of this ship. Why don't you do something about him ?"

Clayton put on a serious mien. " You really want me to ? "

" Oh, stop it. You know I adore him."

" How about me ? "

She studied him critically. " About you," she said, " I haven't made up my mind."

Clayton began taking off his shirt. She placed him against the X-ray machine and her finger touched his naked back as she adjusted his position. His mouth suddenly got dry and his throat tightened. " I can manage," he said sharply.

There was a pause, then she said quietly. " Good for you, Captain." He felt like someone had doused him with a bucket of ice water.

In the control room when she brought him his food, he tried to apologize, but he couldn't get it out. To apologize would be to admit he'd been angry. And to admit he'd been angry because she'd touched him, would be a far greater admission than he cared to make. The green eyes studied him gravely, but there was a hint of amusement in their depths. ' Damn it,' he thought, ' why do I have to keep remembering she's smarter than I am ? Only eighteen percentage points, but smarter, nevertheless.' He let her go out without saying a word, and felt thoroughly miserable.

Carla announced the results of the tests at dinner the following night. They were negative. There was absolutely no sign of anything malignant, no change in blood count or pressure. The X-rays were clean and there was no perceptible damage to

nervous system or motor centres. By every available test, they were all in perfect physical condition. When she finished her report, they all felt vastly relieved. Whatever it was, it was obviously not dangerous.

November passed and December. Every one except Lee continued to indulge in the strange and somewhat ridiculous practice of chest rubbing, but since no further symptoms developed, what had seemed abnormal in the beginning, gradually came to be accepted as normal. Carla ran two more extensive tests on the crew with results as negative as the first. In the press of duty, everyone gave up speculating on its significance, and Clayton almost forgot his concern because of his preoccupation with another problem which was daily becoming more worrisome. He had never been able to dismiss the fact that he had been unreasonably rude to Carla, and almost daily, determined to make his apologies. But somehow or other, the proper opportunity never presented itself, and the longer he waited, the more difficult it became. She treated him exactly as she always had ; warmly and pleasantly and with precisely the proper measure of respect, but he found his behaviour towards her alternating between stiff formality and embarrassing effervescence.

On more than one occasion, he found himself staring at her during the daily ship checks when he should have been attending to what was said and several times he was conscious of her grave, green eyes studying him speculatively. When he tried to examine the situation, it evaporated. The solution was eminently clear. Call Carla in and say to her, " Look, Carla, I'm sorry about snapping at you in the laboratory . . . I was just preoccupied. I hope you'll forgive me." But somehow when it came to doing it, he never could quite get it out. He couldn't understand why. If it had happened with any of the men, there would have been no difficulty at all. Because it was Carla it somehow had an additional significance and this too, was confusing. Clayton began to hope that something would happen to jar them out of the mechanical rhythm of their days. But with the exception of one burst of excitement during the dust storm, ' burning excitement ' as Jacques put it, there had been nothing for four months to interrupt the smooth flow of days.

Grail could now be seen without the aid of a telescope and yet so vast was the distance still to be covered, that, as the days

passed, the planet did not appear to get any larger. It was as if the ship itself was motionless—suspended in a vast and velvet darkness against whose arch some mythical giant had hurled handfuls of splintered ice. It was impossible to accept the knowledge that against this mighty proscenium, the *Pilgrim* was actually hurtling through space at close to sixty thousand miles per hour. A sliver of light moving so fast that the human eye could not have seen her passage.

The only sensation of movement was the muffled vibration of the power units. Clayton was staring out into the death-black sky which curled around the ship and striving fruitlessly to recall the lines of a long forgotten poem about a ' painted ship upon a painted sea,' when there was a knock on the door. He said, " Come in," but as he began to turn, Carla's voice said, " Don't look."

There was a moment's pause, then suddenly he smelled the scent of earth and flowers. He spun around and caught his breath. She stood just inside the door. The unflattering coveralls she had worn since the trip began, were gone. Instead, she was wearing a simple, but beautiful frock with a deep V-neck and a wide collar. In the lack of gravity, the collar floated out away from the shoulders and bodice and the skirt which she had been pushing down to a decorous position when he turned, stood flared away from her legs. She had touched her lips and cheeks with rouge and she looked at that moment like something straight out of Heaven. Her feet, clad in patent leather slippers instead of the ungainly magnetic boots, were inches off the floor. Even her hair, grown longer with the months of voyaging, had been combed out and floated in an auburn halo around her face. Clayton thought he had never seen anything more beautiful. He felt a familiar constriction in his chest and his voice was husky in his throat.

" Carla ! "

She pushed a hand against the bulkhead and spun slowly in mid-air, toes pointed out like a ballerina. " Don't you like it ?"

He didn't trust himself to speak again. He moistened his lips, the scent of her perfume making him almost giddy. When he didn't reply, she pushed herself away from the wall to drift down beside him. She alit like a butterfly. His eyes ached with the agony of looking at her. Perhaps she misread his look because she put a hand on his arm and said, " Clayt, I'm sorry. I thought you'd like it."

He swallowed. " I do, but I . . . I . . ."

Her brows furrowed. " But surely you know *why* ?" He shook his head. " Then no wonder you looked so strange. You must have thought I'd gone crazy."

She put her hand to her bosom. She drew out a small package wrapped in tissue paper. She handed it to him. The package was warm from contact with her flesh. He felt his fingers trembling. He undid it slowly. A tiny card floated out. He caught the card. It read, ' *Merry Christmas, Clayton.*'

He looked up at her, aghast. " But it can't be !"

She smiled. " It's Christmas Eve. You're the only one aboard who doesn't know."

He undid the package. It was an exquisite gold cigarette lighter in the shape of a spaceship. On its bow was written, ' *The Pilgrim.*' He realized she must have bought this for him before she left Earth. He got a considerable lump in his throat. He looked out of the space port. The sky seemed a little blurry. After a while he said, " Carla, I'm sorry I don't have anything for you. I . . ." He turned to her beseechingly and their eyes locked. He felt a singing inside his head and he knew suddenly that this woman was his. He reached for her. She came into his arms gently, nestled to him like a feather. He kissed her, his head swimming and a crazy, wild excitement exploded in him. He suddenly felt as if he could do anything, and a weight he'd been carrying for a long time, dropped from his shoulders. When he released her, she looked at him gravely. The green eyes were soft.

" Now," she said, " hear this. You've been fighting this for a long time and it wasn't good for you or for me, either, because I love you." He started to speak and she put two fingers over his lips caressingly. " Let me finish. I said I love you and I meant it, and I thought it was about time you stopped peering at sealed instruments or becoming embarrassed everytime I touched you."

" I wasn't really—"

" You were too, so don't try to pretend you weren't. Now we can both stop pretending. But this ship is no place for the act of love and there is no time or room for doting. We've both got jobs to do and we can't let this or anything else interfere. You follow ?"

His face was a study in surprise and wonder and delight but he said, " I follow."

" Now give me my Christmas present."

He touched her cheek with his fingers. " I've loved you from the first moment I saw you."

She kissed him softly. " Thank you." She smiled, then a little wryly she said, " It isn't going to be easy for either of us. You know that."

" Yes."

" It will have to be enough just to know. Do you agree ? "

He swallowed. " I agree."

She pushed herself off his lap. She said formally, " At 20.30 hours, there will be a Christmas party in the wardroom." She spun slowly in mid-air again and then drifted out.

Clayton stared at the open bulkhead where she had disappeared. Then he caught again the lingering scent of her perfume. He unbuckled his harness and kicked himself out of the chair. He was twenty-two years old and he knew a lot about spaceships, but very little about love. He began doing barrel rolls and somersaults in mid-air. He felt a little silly when Washington's drawling baritone said from the doorway, " Are you alright, Captain ? "

Carla did not wear the dress nor the perfume to the party. First, because she felt that since she could not give herself to Clayton as she might have wished, she could, at least, leave with him something that was his alone. She also felt that there was no point in emphasizing to the rest of the crew the basic differences between them. Such differences had more than once destroyed enterprises of great pith and moment.

Even without the dress, however, the party was an outstanding success. Lee and Jacques had actually grown a tiny Christmas tree in a hidden corner of the hydroponic tanks and had decorated it with tinsel and a few fresh fruits from the same source. Only Carla had thought of presents. For each of them she had a small gift and for each, too, she had a can of preciously rationed beer. They toasted the *Pilgrim*, Earth, each other, and success. For with over half of the outward journey behind them, they could not repress a glowing feeling of triumph. With only a minimum of luck now, they could not fail to reach their landfall. They had space and life and time in the palms of their hands ; they felt invincible. Clayton particularly felt there was nothing he could not do and Carla, watching, felt relieved. She had judged him well. It had been a risk telling him how she felt, but it was going to be alright. He was strong enough to enjoy the knowledge of his new found emotions and at the same time

to accept the limitations of their positions. But loving him, womanly, she was a little disappointed. He might, at least, have made it look a little more difficult. The party broke up and they went back to work.

In the first release of tension in four months, no one noticed that the chest rubbing had become considerably more pronounced.

IV

New Year's morning, at one minute after midnight, Greenwich Mean Time, they launched the first of six, tiny message rockets. When it reached the gravitational field of Earth, it would ' home ' on the Great Slave Beacon. In addition to the regulation microfilm reports, they sent a letter to Freeland. They said that they were all in the best of health and that absolutely nothing serious had happened. They did not bother to mention that they had all developed a strange, new behaviour pattern. They were confident that they would reach Grail without trouble.

The idyll ended on January 10th. Lee's soft voice said, " May I speak to you, Captain ?"

Clayton released his chair and spun around. " Sure, Lee." He pointed to the co-pilot's seat. " Sit down."

Lee pulled himself into the chair and folded his small, perfectly articulated hands in his lap. For the first time in Clayton's memory, the bland, yellow face wore a look of concern.

Clayton steeled himself. " What is it, Lee ? "

The Chinese hesitated, seemed about to say something, and then appeared to change his mind. Finally he said, " I was checking the transistors this morning. I found myself rubbing my chest."

Clayton released the long breath he had been holding. He had been expecting something more serious, was mildly surprised that Lee had appeared so concerned. He nodded. There didn't seem to be anything to say. All five of them had it, then. No one was immune. They could thank the stars it wasn't dangerous. Then he realized that the Chinese made no move to leave. " There was something else, Lee ? "

Again Lee hesitated. Whatever it was, it wasn't easy for him to get it out. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. " I had hoped not to have to tell you this. It should not have come from me."

Clayton kept his voice calm. There was no point in borrowing trouble. " Yes."

" For two days, Jacques has been finding it hard to breathe."

An ice cold finger pressed against the back of Clayton's neck and ran slowly down his spine. Involuntarily his hand went to his chest. He flung it down angrily when he realized what he had done. After a moment he said, " You're sure ? "

" I am sure. I dared not wait any longer to tell you."

" But why hasn't Jacques come to me himself or to Carla ? "

Lee raised his shoulders expressively. " He is so much stronger than the rest of us, he will not admit that there is anything wrong. But twice I have seen him gasping for breath, and he rubs his chest constantly."

Clayton unbuckled his harness. " Take over here, Lee. I want to talk to Carla."

When he arrived at the lab, the door was ajar. She did not hear him till his magnetic soles made contact with the floor. She spun around. " Oh, you startled me !" She saw his face. "' Clayt, what's happened ? "

" Jacques is having trouble breathing."

He saw her blanch and watched the involuntary gesture towards her breast. Then she got control of herself. "When did it start ? "

" Yesterday. Lee just told me. Jacques has been rubbing constantly, but he hasn't reported it because he's ashamed to be sick. He probably hasn't even let himself admit there's anything wrong."

She looked at him, her face lined with strain. " Clayt, I know you must think I'm not holding up my end—that I should have foreseen this, but believe me, I've done everything I can. I've given all of us every test known to medicine and a few I've dreamed up on my own. Whatever this thing is, it's beyond the range of medical knowledge."

He put a hand on her shoulder. " Easy. No one is blaming you."

She bit her lip. " How bad is Jacques ? "

" I don't know. I haven't seen him."

" Well, I'd better get him up here." She reached for the intercom switch and he caught her hand.

" Just a minute. When is Jacques' next sleep period ? "

She glanced at her watch. " In about twenty minutes."

" Good ! Look, check him over, but unless he's in serious condition, don't let him know you suspect anything. Keep him here for twenty minutes, then send him to bed. When he's asleep, the rest of us will meet in the wardroom. This thing concerns us all, but I think, for the moment, it's better discussed without Jacques."

She nodded. " Alright." She pressed the intercom and spoke into the microphone. " Jacques ? Come up to the lab a moment, will you ? "

His voice came back. " Oui, Doctor, I am practically there." She released the switch and straightened up. She looked so desperately tired that Clayton wanted to take her in his arms.

He clamped his jaws together, tight, and tried to look confident. " Don't worry," he said, " it may be nothing."

She smiled, somewhat unsuccessfully. " Alright, Clayt."

Jacques came in a few minutes later. Outwardly he looked much the same, but he was a trifle paler and there were tiny tension lines at the corner of his mouth and eyes. She wondered what physical tortures, what mental agonies he was concealing beneath the slightly strained smile.

" I think," he said amiably, " that I will kill that yellow-skinned little monkey."

She pretended innocence. " What do you mean ? "

He pursed his lips and looked at her in mock accusation. " Doctor, Lee and I are close. We work together. It does not take much imagination to guess what has happened when he disappears during his regular watch, and a few minutes later, the good doctor asks me if I can come to see her."

She decided that there was no purpose in evasion. " He did what he had to do, Jacques."

" Oh, of course he did. It was my fault for not coming myself. I hoped it would pass."

" Is it bad ? "

" It comes and goes. Just now it is alright."

" What is it ? "

" I don't know. There is no pain. But how shall I say it . . . it is unpleasant. One cannot breathe . . . one gasps, but the muscles do not work. It is like what I think it must be to drown. It seems to help if you massage the ribs."

" That's all you can tell me ? "

" That's all."

" How many attacks have you had ? "

" Six. Two yesterday, four today. Lee saw only a part of two."

" It is getting worse, then ? "

He shrugged still smiling. " A little." Abruptly his body stiffened, and for a split second, the barrier dropped. She saw behind the smile and her whole being went out to him in pity. He was afraid ! The man who cared for nothing, for pain nor danger ; who, she was convinced, could face hell itself without a qualm, was afraid of this dreadful thing which he could not fight.

The spasm passed. He saw her look of anguish and the smile came back. " One feels so helpless," he said apologetically.

She bit her lip to hold back the tears and busied herself with the cardiograph. She found nothing wrong. She gave him another X-ray. It was as clean as before. She tested his blood count and pressure, knowing even before the results, that it was useless. When it was over, she flung down the instruments and looked at him.

He met her eyes and the devil in them might be frightened, but he was unconquered. " I tell you now the truth, cherie. I am a big fake. I have made it all up, so you would call me here and look at me with those grave, green eyes full of sympathy and make my heart melt."

Suddenly she had her arms around him and her head against the great chest and she was sobbing. " Oh, Jacques . . ."

He patted her shoulders clumsily. " Cherie, cherie, it is nothing. This is no way for a doctor."

She threw back her head and wiped her eyes. " You're right. Let me give you something to make you sleep." It was the measure of his anxiety that he made no objection.

Washington's troubled eyes met Carla's. " Haven't you any drugs that could help him ? "

She shook her head hopelessly. " How can I tell ? I've got curare, adrenalin, cocaine, a hundred others, but when I don't know what's wrong, I don't dare use anything. If we leave him alone, he might come out of it himself, whereas an attempt to cure him with the wrong kind of drugs, could quite easily be fatal."

Clayton put his fists together and looked at them. " Those final tests you gave him . . . they still show nothing ? "

She spread her hands helplessly. " By every conceivable medical standard, *there's nothing wrong with him* !" She picked

up a book from a table beside her. She held it out to them savagely. " You see this ? It's the medical log. In it I've written down everything we know about this damnable thing . . . and that's almost nothing. I've annotated the results of every test I've made and checked those indices against our pre-flight medical records. According to them, there's no difference. There's nothing wrong with any of us, Jacques included. I've even checked my own findings with the medical mecho-brain. It says we're fine. When I feed it the rubbing symptoms, it throws back, ' insufficient evidence for diagnosis.' How can you fight something you can't see ? Something you can't hear, taste, or smell, or understand or isolate ? "

Washington started to rub his chest, caught himself and thrust his hands into his pockets. " There are some diseases in medicine whose causes are unknown, aren't there ? "

" Yes, some. The common cold is the best example. After some 2,000 years of medicine, we still don't know what causes it. But you can't compare it with this. This thing does not reveal any signs of virus germ or malignant presence. At least with the cold you have visual evidence in nasal discharge, raw throat, and so forth. Here we have nothing but a ridiculous involuntary impulse to stroke an apparently healthy chest and then strangulation *without pain* ! "

" But there are illnesses," Wash persisted, " which don't announce their initial presence, aren't there ?"

" Yes. Cancer is one. It often isn't felt until it's too late to cure, but the malignancy is visible under examination right from the beginning."

" Is there any evidence of the body itself taking precautions against invasion where the nervous system is not consciously aware of danger ? "

" I'm not sure I know what you mean. All healing is primarily a physical process and pain is the warning of danger."

" Yes, but supposing the body didn't have its normal means of communication such as pain, fever, and so forth. Could it conceivably devise another means of acquainting the consciousness with the presence of danger ? "

" I don't know . . . possibly. Why ? "

" Well, we know that right now we are in danger. How serious it is we can't tell yet. But conceivably the body has been trying for months to tell us about the danger by making us rub our chests every time we relax motor control. Maybe

it's even trying to tell us that the way to relieve that danger is to massage the rib cage."

Carla shook her head. " I won't dispute that, but it doesn't really fit medical theory. Theoretically, the body cannot be in danger unless cells are being injured or destroyed or deprived of nourishment. If any part of the body were in danger, there *should* be *pain*, or other distress symptoms, as long as our nervous system remains intact."

Clayton said, " What are you driving at, Wash ? "

Wash ran a gigantic hand over his black face. " Well, certain things seem to be conclusive. This has never happened before in medical history. Carla says the medical mecho-brain attests to that. Therefore, it must be indigenous to space. It cannot be caused by anything inside the ship because air composition, pressure, and so forth are identical with what we have known all our lives. The ship is sealed and we've had no meteor holes or other damage, so no unknown viruses could have entered from space, if there are any which can live at absolute zero without atmosphere. Therefore, whatever is attacking us must be able to penetrate the ship itself. Only one thing could do that—cosmic rays, or something like them. Undoubtedly, the earth's atmosphere is deep enough to damp them out, but the minute depth of the atmosphere in this ship is no barrier. We've never run up against it before because we've never been in space more than a few weeks. Apparently it takes time before the effect of the rays begins to be felt."

They looked at one another as the import of the words went home. If Wash was correct, there was no escape. The longer they stayed in space, the worse it would get, and even as they sat thinking, the rays sliced unceasingly through metal and bone and flesh and sinew, and still they felt nothing. Carla opened her mouth to say something, and there was a crash from outside. For a second they were frozen. And then, as one, they bolted for the door. They found Jacques in the corridor, his eyes popping from his head, his face, purple ; his tongue distended, and horrible rasping sounds came from his throat. The massive chest was quivering, pitifully like the skin of a chameleon. He had torn his collar and shirt open and ripped great gashes into his neck and chest with his clawing fingernails.

They got him into the laboratory and strapped him to the table. Lee got the oxygen mask on him and Clayton applied artificial respiration while Carla tried to staunch the blood

flowing from the deep scratches. Gradually, the ugly, purple hue fell away from his face and he began to breathe more freely. They sat him up and he bobbed his head forward horribly, with the mouth half open like a bird picking at food. As if he were trying to reach the air and the air was running away from him. His eyes were glassy. He began gasping and they put the oxygen mask back and resumed the respiration. No one said anything, but the acrid taste of fear was harsh in their mouths and they were conscious of every beat of their own hearts, of every rise and fall of their chests. No one knew who might be next. In the brief seconds of his seizure, they had seen a man drowning in air and it was not a pleasant sight. The tears were running down Carla's cheeks as she worked at taping his wounds. Clayton motioned to Lee to take over the respiration and turned to Washington. " Do you think it would help to turn back ? "

Washington shook his head. " No. We couldn't anyway."

" Why not ? "

" You know why. The orbits of Earth and Grail—Venus—are such that the trip out and back is only possible once every few years. If we turn back now, we can never overtake the Earth, which is already moving away from us behind the Sun."

Clayton set his jaw. " Then we'll just have to keep giving him artificial respiration for the rest of the trip."

Washington said quietly, " What happens when the rest of us can't breathe, either ? "

Clayton swallowed. " I don't know. We'll just have to do the best we can."

" Captain, quick !" It was Lee. He flung a frantic look over his shoulder without stopping the respiration. There were beads of sweat on his forehead and his face was paling beneath the colour.

" What is it ? "

" His muscles are stiffening. They're like iron. I can't force the rib cage."

Washington hurled them both aside and bent over Jacques. The enormous black arms quivered with strain and sweat burst out in great beads on his forehead. A shallow breath rattled in Jacques' throat. Washington released the pressure and rocked backwards but when he came forward again, the Frenchman's chest was like cement beneath his fingers. He pressed until the

veins stood out in big bumps on his arms, but it was useless. He looked at them in frantic entreaty. Carla grabbed a hypodermic, filled it with desperate haste, and came to the couch. She looked at Clayton. " It's adrenalin. I don't now. It may kill him."

Clayton hesitated for only a second. " Give it to him !"

Carla plunged the needle into the bared arm, pushed the plunger home. There was an endless thirty seconds, broken only by the strained breathing of Washington and the ghastly husking of Jacques into the mask. Then suddenly the torso shuddered, then slowly the chest rose and fell once, twice, three times—then it picked up a rhythm. It became easier, stronger, until it was moving normally. For the second time, the ghastly purple colour ebbed out of the cheeks, but now it was replaced in a few minutes, by a natural colour. They looked at each other in furious astonishment. Jacques himself reached up and took the mask from his face. He felt his chest. He took an enormous breath and blew it out. He looked at their faces. He said, " Cherie, I love you." They were still in an hysteria of relief when Jacques died.

" . . . into the keeping of Almighty God, we commend this body of our brother. Amen." Clayton nodded towards Lee. The little Chinese looked once at the flag-covered body resting in the airlock, then lowered his eyes and shook his head. Clayton turned toward Carla and Washington. They too, refused his eyes ; stood motionless, their heads bowed. He hesitated, then set his jaw and stepped forward. He swung the massive door into place and secured it. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and pressed the stud which released the outer door. There was a muffled sound, like a miniature explosion ; the sound of the contents of the airlock being sucked out in the vacuum of space. He suddenly felt like he wanted to sob, but he knew if he began, he would never be able to stop. He clamped his teeth together tightly and realized he was trembling. None of the others had moved. He pressed the button which would close the outer door of the empty lock where the body of Jacques had rested a few moments before.

After a while, he turned and went back to the wardroom. One by one, they followed him, entering the room in silence. Their faces were numb, stricken. Clayton did not see them. Before his eyes, a flag-draped body was falling, falling endlessly

through the infinite reaches of space ; through unimaginable cold and unrelieved darkness through all of eternity ; oblivious now to whether Man lived or died. The great heart stopped, the booming voice, still ; the smile, the love, the laughter . . . lost. Locked like the mighty thews in an unbreakable grip of ice. Destined to drift forever through all eternity without rest, without peace—past alien worlds and dying suns. Never to know again the blessing of the warm clays of Earth, except perhaps, in a billion, billion years to pass far out and in shrouded silence, the tiny desolate planet which had once been home. A nameless dread took possession of Clayton's soul. He was hypnotized by it. Never before had he feared death. Often, in fact, he had imagined his body being interred in the soil of Earth or his ashes scattered across her skies. But he had always thought of death as the ultimate finality. A kind of returning—*dust unto dus* —so that what he was, became, in death, a part of what he had been before his beginning . . . the natural ending . . . a final rest. But there was something here which left a man bereft of even faith.

A vision of his own corpse tumbling ceaselessly, falling endlessly, falling through cosmic darkness and ultimate cold, dropping forever through the vast, empty limbo of nothingness. No stone, no urn, no mark, no earth, no blade of grass, no familiar thing to cradle his flesh and comfort it until it returned to the dust it had been. He felt himself trembling. Somewhere, someone was sobbing hysterically. He looked up in time to see Carla disappearing through the door, her shoulders heaving. Nothing seemed quite real. The walls of the wardroom swam crazily. His eyes fell on Lee. The eyes were fixed, unseeing, staring into space. And Washington was having trouble breathing. The eyes were straining from their sockets and the tongue protruding. He knew there was something he should do to help, but he could not move. The gasping sounds reminded him of Jacques sliding off the table, clawing at his throat, writhing, twisting—the great corrugated muscles of the belly and chest frozen with idiotic pretzel shape of horror—dead. He should help Jacques or Washington—he should help Carla—she was crying. He did nothing. He sat there, rubbing his chest, mesmerized by the vision of a frozen corpse tumbling crazily through the cold, black bowels of endless night.

V

How much later it was ; how many hours or days later he did not know. He helped Washington down to the lab. Carla tried all the drugs she knew and nothing worked. After the third day, she collapsed. He put her to bed and came back to Washington. He worked over the prostrate body, pushing, counting, releasing, until his own body reeled with fatigue and his mind became so numb, it no longer remembered that the mark of death was upon him too, and upon Carla and that the thousands back on Earth would wait in vain now for the *Pilgrim's* return. Lee found him sprawled across the body of the navigator. Washington had been dead for more than eleven hours.

And so there were three. And some time later, in the power room, Lee discovered he could not breathe. He opened the door in the shielding surrounding the atomic pile and closed it behind him. They couldn't even get his body out when they found him, but it was this that saved them from insanity. For when Clayton saw what had happened to the body, it made him think of almost a million bodies back on Earth—women and children who were to die like this, only more slowly now, more horribly, unless the *Pilgrim* came back.

He washed and shaved and discovered that his hair was white and his eyes were old. He took food to Carla and they gave strength to one another, for now they were alone and must do the work of five. It wasn't possible, but it was done.

It was days or weeks later—Clayton did not know how long, when she came into the control room pushing ahead of her a huge object like the top half of an ancient suit of armour. It was made of sheet lead, almost ten inches thick. On Earth it would have weighed at least a thousand pounds. She floated it down over Clayton's head, pulled his arms through the spaces left for them, and while he stared at her wordlessly, she buckled it on. Her eyes were feverish. She said, " Darling, listen. I think Wash was right. I think the rays he spoke about attack the great nerve next to the heart and paralyse the respiratory system. Back on Earth, they'll find out how and why. I haven't the facilities here, but this jacket should protect you against them. I've sent off message rockets to warn them, so that they'll be prepared when you come back. Don't take it off, whatever happens."

He turned to her ; his eyes glassy with fatigue. " What about you ? "

She shook her head. " There was only enough shielding for one."

The words cut through Clayton's weariness like a knife. " What did you say ?"

" Darling, please. Just hold me." But he pushed her away and began to tear at the fastenings to get it off. She seized his hands. " Clayton, don't ! Darling, please. *It's no use* ! It's too late for me."

There was no more room in him for horror, but as the impact of her words hit him, the tears fell inside from the walls of his being into a bottomless pit of anguish. He buried his face in her hair. He tried to hold her close, but the monstrous jacket held them apart. " Why do you say this to me. Why ? "

" Because I must. Because I want you to understand. What happened to Jacques at the beginning, has already happened to me, but I had the adrenalin ready. A small dose. It will give me a little time."

" Don't . . . don't ! Oh my God, my God ! Carla, how I love you. You mustn't leave . . . you mustn't—"

She silenced him by putting her fingers against his lips as she had done that first time. " I'm not afraid. The jacket will protect you. You must go on . . . you must promise me."

He shook his head. " No, no I can't . . ."

" You must, for my sake . . . for Jacques, for Lee, for Washington. For all of the people who depended on us. Promise me."

" Alright, I promise." He sobbed brokenly. Oh, Carla, Carla . . ."

" Kiss me, Clayton, and remember I love you always. And if you love me, you must not break faith." She took his face in her hands.

He crushed his mouth to hers and then screamed aloud as she stiffened in his grasp. He shook her wildly, insanely, shouting incoherent endearments into her deaf ears. Then he lost consciousness. When he came to, her body was floating near him. But strangely, unlike Jacques, the face was serene. The mask of love still etched there in the turn of the lips. The eyes closed as they had been at his kiss. And his mind had stood all that it could stand. It was incapable of knowing any more horror, any more desolation. There was nowhere to go now but forward into insanity, back into the light of purpose.

The echo of her voice rang into his ears—' remember, I love you always, and if you love me, you must not break faith.'

He went back, slowly at first, and then more surely. But he could not bring himself to thrust her out into space. She was a part of him now. He could not bear to think of that loveliness lost, as Jacques and Washington were lost. Nor could he keep her there with him.

And then he saw what he could do. And he set about it ; the insane, wild, incredible thing that would have set the final seal on his madness for any human jury. And it was the one thing that kept him sane ; the one thing that sustained him through a waking nightmare of endless exhaustion and an ultimate loneliness unknown to the souls of men.

He took off the leaden armour and dressed himself in a plastic pressure suit. Then he caught her up gently and he carried her out of the airlock and up to the very top of the giant ship. And there astride the gleaming metal with the endless blackness of night about him and the eternal stars to watch, he held her tightly in his arms and shouted his defiance at that vast emptiness. And when he had told it what he would do, he folded her arms across her breast, straightened the fragile hands, and lashed her to the ship. She was his and she would go with him. And never while he lived would space have her. Never. He would use the hated cold and the vast emptiness against itself . . . to keep her with him to the end.

He laughed in the truth of creation and went back inside to don the armour she had made for him and to service the ship and tend her as the high priest tends his altar—to listen to the voice which whispered in his solitude . . . "I love you always, and if you love me, you will not break faith.'

And he had not broken faith ! Below him lay Grail. Holy Grail, Man had called it that deliberately, for it represented the end of the great search ; the final sanctuary ; the hope of a new beginning. And the body of the woman who had given him the courage to find it, lay in the wardroom behind him. He had brought her inside jealously lest the atmosphere of the planet he had sought so long should tear her from him in the moment of victory.

Now he had only to land and he had won. To go back was nothing. The terrors were gone and in their place, a terrible, monstrous hatred of that cold void which had torn from him everything he loved. But he was proof against it now. Clothed

in the leaden armour she had made for him, he was invincible. It rested beside him on the other seat, for in the gravity it would have crushed him. But out there it weighed nothing. A feather of impenetrable metal—proof against the worst that space could hurl against him.

He watched his instruments carefully, the sunken eyes flicking from needle to gauge with unceasing vigilance. Then, at the precise moment, the split second when his jets could most economically compensate for his dwindling speed, he thrust home the throttles. Fear squashed his entrails in a great, icy fist. Nothing happened ! The ship hurtled through the upper atmosphere under the power of inertia alone, but he was falling now too, feeling every second the increasing pull of gravity, screaming through the atmosphere like a thing in pain—plunging remorselessly towards the great, barren desert which lay below. Clayton pulled back the throttles and jammed them into their sockets again. Nothing. He couldn't fail now. He couldn't. Not now, after he had already won. ' Remember, I love you always, and if you love me, you will not break faith.' In desperation, he slammed his hand against the braking jets. They thundered into life. That left him one chance. No hope now to land where he had hoped, beside the great sea and the lush jungle he had seen on his approach. If he were to land at all, it had to be here, now, in the middle of a parched and lifeless wilderness. The *Pilgrim* was dropping like a stone. He set his teeth and jammed her nose upwards, giving the brakes full power.

The warning needles leapt into the red danger area and quivered as if alive. There was no time for jockeying no time to look for a suitable landing place. Only the hope that the brake jets alone would stop her before she smashed herself to pieces and robbed him of his victory. He forced himself not to look at the altitude indicators, concentrated on the fact that his lunge toward the planet below was being slowed. But was there enough time ? His ears told him that some of the jets had burned out. They were never intended for this kind of punishment. And then suddenly he realised it was over. The *Pilgrim* had stopped falling. She was poised now, motionless, suspended between Heaven and Earth on a thundering lance of flame. He glanced at the radar altimeter—97 feet ! With shaking hands, he eased the power back and the ship slid down the flaming pillar of her exhaust as a cylinder glides down a greased pole. She grounded with a slight tremor and Clayton cut the jets. He had done it !

He allowed himself a second or two to still the frantic pounding of his heart, then struggled out of his harness. He was awkward and uncertain. After six months in free fall, he now had to relearn how to move in a gravitational field. It's weight bore him down like a millstone about his neck. In his impatience, he fell twice before he got himself over to the instruments, but when he saw them, his triumph was complete. The scientists had been right. Temperature, 93 degrees ; gravity, 85.9 percent ; oxygen content slightly higher, 25.7 percent. No indication of harmful virus or noxious gases ; only dust and water vapour, hydrogen, nitrogen, argon, carbon dioxide with the infinitesimal amounts of helium, neon, krypton, xenon, hydrocarbons, peroxide and sulphur. Almost an exact duplicate of terran atmosphere. Total content—99.9978771. No possible danger from identified particles at the fifth decimal place. He unlocked the port and threw it wide, expelled the reconditioned air he had breathed for so many months, and inhaled. The clean, fresh air rushed into his starving lungs. The heat of it stabbed him with pain, but the pain was drowned in a wave of ecstacy. In one breath he was drunk with it. Rich and pure, it saturated his parched senses with a trace of lingering perfume. He imagined it sweeping over the lush jungles and the coral pink seas of Grail until after fifteen hundred miles still laden with the scent of flowers and salt spray, it reached the desert and was inhaled for the first time in history by a human being. He closed his eyes and the tears forced themselves out through the tightly shut lids.

When he opened them, the planet still lay before him ; beautiful, strange, and in this desert area, almost terrifying. Great orange and black mountains limned against the saffron sky ; jet-black shadows at their bases and blood-red sand. Dead, silent sand ; no water, no vegetation, and except for the towering castles of rock as unrelieved as the Earth's Sahara, and if his judgment was correct, there was almost a thousand miles of it between him and the jungles and seas. He felt only a minor irritation. He was alive and his ship was safe. He was the most highly trained and survival-conditioned individual that the planet, Earth had ever known. He would cross the wilderness, fish her seas, take samples of her soil and pictures of her flora and conquer the desert as he had conquered the skies.

But first there was something he must do. He went back to the ship and stripped the tattered trousers from his body. He bathed and shaved and put on a clean, tailored uniform. He

cut his hair as well as he could and set the captain's hat on his white head. Then he went to the wardroom and picked her up. He carried her out of the ship and made a grave in the middle of the warm, golden sand. And when he set her gently down, she was smiling. Perhaps even a tiny bit more now because she knew he had brought her home. Over the grave he placed the flag of the World Federation, and then he prayed. For the first time in eight months, there was a look of peace about him.

He went back to the ship and when he came out, he was carrying a survival kit. He looked stronger, somehow, assured and confident. He stopped and looked at the *Pilgrim*. He stood for a long moment over the tiny mound of sand. Then he raised his head and squared his shoulders, and turning away, he marched out across the sand.

After a few minutes, his tiny figure disappeared beyond the base of a great orange and black crag. But behind remained his footsteps in the sand and the banner of the World Federation fluttering in the sun.

—John Mantley

THE PRINCIPLE

Mr. Chandler's latest stories are all proving fascinating fantasy—being based around puzzle and word problems, as in " The Maze " last issue and " The Unharmonious World " in Science Fantasy *No.* 19. *This month he presents yet another new background idea for his plot—the sequence of numbers.*

By BERTRAM CHANDLER

Randall, whom beer always made philosophical, said that it was a great pity that Einstein was dead. Hibbert, whose favourite tipple, whisky, made him argumentative, asked why.

" In any case," said Hibbert, not waiting for an answer, " he did quite enough damage for one man in his lifetime with that equation of his. You know the one I mean . . ."

" I do," said Randall.

" You know the one I mean," repeated Hibbert, glaring at the other. " E over MC^2. That's what gave them the idea for the atomic bomb. That's why we had no summer last year, and why we're not going to get any this. It's a great pity, in my opinion, that Einstein ever lived."

Randall sipped his beer slowly. He was only a little man, and it seemed at first that he was almost afraid of Hibbert's bulk. But we knew that this was not the case. Philosophical he might be—but he was the sort of philosopher who would go on peddling his brand of philosophy in the face of any and all adverse criticism. He finished what was in his glass, then rapped it gently on the counter to attract the attention of the barmaid. When it was refilled he took a careful swallow, then drew himself up to his insignificant full height.

" The trouble with you, Hibbert," he said slowly and distinctly, " is that you just don't think. You take all your opinions ready-made from the newspapers—and from the cheapest and nastiest newspapers at that. To *you*, atomic power means nothing but bombs—fission bombs, fusion bombs, cobalt bombs and anything else that may have been cooked up since yesterday morning." He raised a hand. " Now, Hibbert, let me finish. We heard *you* out. My point is this—atomic power *had* to come. We are nearing the time when we shall have exhausted the oil and coal reserves—and, bear this in mind, ours is essentially a power-wasting civilisation. For example—just compare the consumption of power by the average household *now* with the same household's consumption twenty years ago. So—we just had to have this new power source, and the sooner the better . . ."

" So Einstein gave it to us," laughed Hibbert. " According to you he's played his part."

" No, Hibbert. There was plenty of work yet to be done. Einstein never had a chance to finish his Unified Field Theory."

" And what was that ? " I asked.

" Mathematics—a formula—to account for every physical phenomenon. With those equations we could, perhaps, have drawn enough power from a grain of sand to light a city. We could have flown to the stars. We could . . ."

". . . have blown the world up," finished Hibbert. " But cheer up, Randall boy, we'll do it yet. We'll do it, that is, unless we really *want* to do it. And then Hibbert's Law will take over and stop us from doing it . . ."

Randall sneered.

" Hibbert's Law ? Never heard of it. Come to that—I've never heard of a scientist or a philospoher with your name."

" But you've heard of *me*," said Hibbert softly. " And you said just now that I couldn't think. Well, Randall—I can think. I can think for myself, too, and don't have to rely upon writers in the highbrow weeklies to supply my thoughts for me. Furthermore, Randall, Hibbert's Law is just as valid as Einstein's famous equation. And, furthermore, I can prove it."

Randall was on the point of saying something cutting. I knew what this might quite well mean. Hibbert—especially after a few whiskies—had a very nasty temper and I didn't want him to get us thrown out of the pub. It lacked at least twenty minutes to closing time. Accidently-on-purpose I shifted my

weight from one foot to the other, jostling Randall as I did so, spilling his beer.

Randall, as he wiped down the front of his suit with his handkerchief, was not pleased.

"You are a clumsy oaf, Whitley," he said.

"But Whitley's not a clumsy oaf," almost shouted Hibbert. "He's just like all of us, a victim of the inexorable workings of Hibbert's Law . . ."

"Randall's the victim," I said.

"Shut up. Let me finish. One of the axioms of my Law is this : If any involuntary motion can possibly cause discomfort or inconvenience, it will do so."

"What *is* this drivel ? " demanded Randall.

"It's not drivel. It's a law of nature, just as valid as any ever formulated by Einstein, Newton, Archimedes or anybody else you care to mention. It's really amazing that nobody else has ever stumbled upon it—but then, the scientists and philosophers aren't as a rule, very practical people." He laid money on the wet counter, motioned to the barmaid to refill our three glasses. He raised his own. "Gentlemen, let us drink to Hibbert's Law, the Principle of General Cussedness ! "

Randall was beginning to get interested.

"All right," he said. "You said you could prove it. Go on —prove it ! "

"No trouble at all," laughed Hibbert. "Here's another axiom for you : When there are two or more similar keys on a key ring, you will always use the right one last ! "

"It just *seems* that way," I started to say, but Randall got in first.

"*You* might, Hibbert, but *I* don't. I have to unlock when I get to work in the morning, and I have nine keys on the ring, all of them Yale type. The door that I usually open first has one little hole punched in the woodwork over the lock, and there's one little notch filed on the key. And so on."

"The sort of thing *you* would do," said Hibbert disgustedly. "All right, here's another axiom. If you have an important appointment (or a train to catch) and your watch or clock is wrong, it is invariably slow."

"Any clocksmith could explain *that*," said Randall.

Randall snorted ; it was obvious that his stock of axioms was running low.

"All right," he said. "Here's another one. If you *insist* on doing a thing in the face of opposition, after two failures, the result of the third attempt is quite disastrous."

" Not a good one, Hibbert," I said. " Not a good one at all. What about Robert Bruce and the spider ? If at first you don't succeed, try, try again . . ."

" And what about Robert Clive ?" asked Randall. " When he was a mere clerk in the employ of the East India Company and tried to commit suicide, and the pistol kept on misfiring . . ."

" How many times did he try, anyhow ?" demanded Hibbert. " If he *had* tried three times the third attempt would have blown his head off."

" Not necessarily," said Randall. " Maybe he *did* try three times—and it was the failure of the third attempt that convinced him that he was destined for great things . . ."

" So he went right out and conquered India," I said. " But was that a *good* thing, or a *disastrous* thing ? A lot depends upon the viewpoint, you know. An ardent Indian Nationalist in the years before the war would have said that it was quite disastrous."

" And *that*," almost shouted Hibbert, " justifies my Principle."

" Not necessarily," quibbled Randall, looking over the tops of his spectacles in a most judicious manner. " As Whitley has pointed out, the disastrous results of Clive's third attempt at suicide—if he *did* try three times—are disastrous only when viewed in a certain, biassed manner. Any unbiassed observer would agree that Clive's conquest of India was a good thing. Meanwhile, we've heard a lot of nonsense about keys and clocks, and nonsense is all that is. I'm afraid, Hibbert, that you still have to convince us that the ruling spirit of the Universe is a mere, antic malice."

" *There's your proof* !" roared Hibbert, pointing. " ' Ye that have eyes, but see not ! ' "

We looked to the corner where a game of darts was in progress. Both players were trying to double out. Both players were trying for the double one. Judging by their expressions they had been in the madhouse—that is, I believe, the expression used by darts players on such occasions—for some time.

" Look at them," said Hibbert. " Until they started to double out they were putting the darts more or less—more rather than less—where they wanted them. Once they started to double out they just *had* to get down to the double one. And can they get it ? Of course not. They're throwing double twenties that they would have been glad of when the game started . . ."

" Psychology," Randall stated flatly. " Just psychology. They aren't really good players—in the early stages of the game they

weren't quite able to put the darts where they wanted them. Quite often, when they were trying for the twenty, they must have got number one . . ."

"But that bears out Hibbert's Law," I said.

He ignored me. "It is only at this stage of the game that *real* urgency exists. Each knows that the other can end the game with one dart. Each knows, too, that it's almost closing time, and that unless the game is finished soon the loser won't be able to buy the winner his drink—and one for himself, of course. It's a double urgency. And mixed up with it all is the Death Wish of the psychologists—after all, defeat is a little death, and so is failure to get a last drink before throwing out time . . ."

Just in time I paid for the last round.

Raising his voice against the barmaid's "Time, gentlemen, *please*!" Hibbert said, "There's still one more proof. It's a mathematical one. And you can't argue with mathematics."

"Can't I?" demanded Randall. "Well, all right, what is it?"

"We'll all walk together to Everdale Station," said Hibbert. "It's not putting anybody to any inconvenience. Whitley and I can both get trains from there, and you get your bus from there. We'll take a note of the registration numbers of every car we see . . ."

"*Why*?" asked Randall.

"Did you ever play that game of Patience?" asked Hibbert. "It is a sort of Patience, although it's not played with cards. It's played with cars. You watch the number plates, and you see a number with 1 in it. All right. That's your 1. Sooner or later you see one with 2 in it. And 3. And so on. You get to the tens, and the twenties, and the thirties. But here's the point. You'll have been waiting a long time for, say, 13. And while you're waiting there'll be car after car with 12 and 14. Once you get your 13, however, there's no shortage of the number—it's the 14s that are in short supply . . ."

"Time, gentlemen, *please*," said the barmaid.

The lights started to go out.

It was cold outside, and a thin drizzle was falling. The abrupt transition from the heated room to the chilliness outside made me realise that I was not quite sober—certainly not sober enough for the playing of mathematical games. I said as much, rather hoping that Randall would decide to save himself time and a walk by catching his bus at the stop right outside the pub.

Randall, however, was just as determined to establish the fatuity of Hibbert's Law, the so-called Principle of Cussedness, as Hibbert was to prove its validity.

For a few minutes the three of us walked along the wet footpath, watching the passing cars. We had not long to wait for our first number—the second car we saw had 501 on its plate. 234 followed it.

Randall laughed. "What price your theory, Hibbert? Three numbers that we want, all at once."

"Wait till we get to the tens," said Hibbert.

Five cars passed, all of which displayed either 1, 2, 3 or 4, before we got our 5. By this time I was beginning to get interested and wondering how all this fitted in with the laws of random. But we got 6, 7, 8 and 9 without waiting too long and then, almost at once, 10.

11 was a long time coming—and while we were waiting for it we got 123, 512, 712, 012 and 129. I could hear Randall muttering, and knew that he was doing calculations in his head. When 11 came at last it was an out-of-State car, with four numerals on its number plate—1112—giving us 11 and 12 simultaneously. This, of course, pleased Randall no end.

"The Principle of Natural Cussedness," he scoffed. "In any case, Hibbert, you'd never prove anything by observations during a single evening . . ."

"I've been doing this for a week, now," said Hibbert. "I got the idea from a magazine story—nothing to do with my Law, though—and I tried it out for my own amusement."

"A *week*," scoffed Randall. "A week? My good man, don't you realise that you'd have to make your observations over at least a century before they had any value? For example—one night we might have a sequence of 1's, the numeral 1 at least once on every number plate. It'd be quite possible to have the same thing happening over an entire week. But, in the end, the number of 1's would even out to the right percentage."

"Not if you *wanted* them to," said Hibbert. "Meanwhile—I hope you've realised that we're all wanting number 13 to turn up. And it's not turning up." He gestured towards a passing Renault. "Look—143—14!" He pointed at an approaching Morris. "120—12!"

"But this doesn't *prove* anything," protested Randall.

"Yes, it does. We want number 13. According to the laws of Random we should have got it long before now. According to Hibbert's Law we should be getting the numbers we *did*

want and the numbers we *will* want. And that's just what we *are* getting."

"And there's my bus," said Randall.

The bus stop and the station were on the other side of the road. The traffic lights were against us, but there was a lull in traffic and Randall, the bus service to whose suburb was not of the best, was determined to catch this one.

Still arguing, we struck off across the road, against the lights. Randall, I remember, was asking Hibbert if the alleged unluckiness of 13 had any bearing on his theory, or if his theory had any bearing upon the alleged unluckiness. Hibbert was indignant, and disassociated both himself and his precious Principle from superstition.

They didn't hear the horn of the approaching car. I did—I was walking to the right of the other two—and caught Randall's sleeve. Hibbert—still talking, still gesticulating, walked on. The driver of the car slammed on his brakes, hard—but it was too late. The road surface was greasy under the thin drizzle, and his tyres were not new.

Hibbert screamed just once as the bonnet of the car caught him. We ran to where he had been thrown—and when we reached him it was obvious, even to laymen like ourselves, that he was dead.

Yet, in a way, he lives on.

Randall has become a convert to Hibbert's doctrines and plans, if he can find a publisher, to bring out a book expounding the Principle of Natural Cussedness. He claims that Hibbert's death—the number of the car that hit him was 014—was the one piece of proof that he, Randall, needed.

Perhaps I'm old fashioned—but I still think that the license plate of that car should have had a 13 on it.

—Bertram Chandler

Venus always has been a conveniently mysterious planet upon which to base a science fiction story, but most authors prefer not to use it as a locale owing to the controversy over its suitability or otherwise for human existence. Ignoring the scientific possibilities makes the planet an admirable place for fantasy, as our newest author proves.

THE HYBRID QUEEN

By E. D. CAMPBELL

It was fortunate that he had gone prepared. But he was unprepared for the suddenness of the attack.

They had been very cunning, allowing him to come among the hives and consider which of the races he would inspect first. But the instant he made a move towards the French bees they opened the attack.

First came the guard bees, then a horde of furious workers.

Ben stood quite still, for even with their increased length of sting he was confident that they could penetrate neither clothing nor veil.

At first they merely buzzed round his head, an angry and threatening crowd. Then he walked forward—and the full attack began.

From the Dutch hive a swarm came zooming. A battalion of the Golden Caucasians followed. The English bees came next ; then the Grey Mountain Caucasians. Lastly, there came a horde of Ligurians.

The pearly sky vanished.

The humming was a drumming of unbelievable sound, so loud it seemed as if the ground began to shake. Nor in all his life had he met with such fury.

The bees were out to kill.

So dense was the mass that Ben knew that very soon he would be overwhelmed; it would be impossible to stand against the weight. He turned and began to run.

They flew with him, pressing very close and hampering his speed. It was impossible to see anything except a cloud of bees, but quite soon he felt the rougher ground of the meadow under his feet.

Then he became terrified of falling.

Even if they were still unable to sting him they would " ball " him to death. He had sometimes watched them do that to their queens. They would surround her, and in another instant a huge, suffocating mass would spread over her, pressing out breath and life.

A great weight of bees was pushing now against his veil. If it was moved closer great stings would penetrate to his face.

Terror gave him a sudden added strength and he managed to increase his speed. But only for a few paces.

The bees crowded thicker on to his body, hung from his limbs in swarms, pressed in an even denser cloud about his head. It became all but impossible to walk.

To his horror he began to feel faint.

The weight, the heat, the buzzing that was now an incessant roar, fear, and the fact that he was unable to see, combined to form a single nightmare impression that became unbearable.

Yet he knew that if he fell, even stumbled, death would be inevitable. All he could hang on to now was the thought of reaching the shed.

He was certain that he was going in the right direction ; if he could manage a few yards more he must reach it.

With an enormous effort he managed to raise his arms a little, and sooner than he had dared hope his outstretched hands came into contact with the shed.

He groped for the door. It opened at a push and he stumbled inside. Being methodical by nature he knew exactly where everything was kept.

His gloved hands found the right shelf, reached for the three smokers. A few moments later he had dropped lighted matches into the fireboxes.

Smoke came weaving through the bent nozzles.

Ben grabbed a smoker in each hand, thrusting them into the swarms of bees that were filling the shed.

The effect was instantaneous.

Angry but frightened bees retreated swiftly ; another moment and the air about his head was clear. He applied the smokers then to his limbs and body. The bees either flew off or dropped to the ground.

A moment later, and carrying all three smokers, he had left the shed and was streaking for the house.

In spite of the smoke a cloud of bees followed but kept their distance.

Inside the house Ben hurried into every room, shutting and fastening the windows, turning the smoker on bees that had entered and killing them as they fell stupified to the floor. At last he was satisfied that every possible entry was closed or securely blocked and that no single bee lurked anywhere. Only then was he able to relax.

He downed a couple of stiff whiskies, then stripped and took a shower. Afterwards he went into the lounge and sat down with another drink and a cigarette.

He looked up at the windows, curtained outside with hanging masses of bees. Though there were some hours till nightfall he had been obliged to switch on the light.

He wondered how long they would keep him prisoner.

Normally, it would be only till darkness ; but with these bees . . .

The situation would take some thinking out.

It had been Ben Cartwright's own idea that he should try bee-keeping on Venus.

Perhaps he would never have thought of it if—he smiled rather ruefully as he remembered all the circumstances that had led to his coming to Venus.

If Eileen hadn't turned him down and then almost immediately married another man.

If his mother hadn't died and left him some money.

If he had had friends who had wanted him to stay ; but those he had were married and full of their own concerns, and the two friends he most cared for had settled in other countries. And he had no brothers or sisters or other close relatives.

If he hadn't read the advertisements about life on Venus, or seen the photographs of the alpine meadows which as an experienced bee-keeper and trained botanist, had aroused his curiosity.

Above all, if a strong sense of adventure and a longing to try something new hadn't possessed him to the exclusion of everything else.

So he had left Earth quite cheerfully, and up to now had found no cause for regret.

On the contrary. Life on Venus was better even than the glowing advertisements issued by Venusian Projects Incorporate had led him to believe. For one thing, he had always liked mountains. And on Venus one can live nowhere else.

As the first explorers had discovered, up to about a thousand feet above sea-level there was no vegetation ; the air was unbreathable and the temperature too hot for anyone from Earth.

Only insects, known and unknown, of all sizes and kinds and everyone of them inimical to man, survived in the arid wastes.

But in both the northern and southern hemispheres there were great mountain ranges, higher than those of the Himalayas. In places the slopes formed great shelves, some of them wide enough to hold cities ; or a steep part would end in a huge valley or defile between cliffs.

These enormous alpine meadows and valleys had rich soil and were well watered.

Also, as Venusian Projects Incorporated in their attempts to attract settlers were never tired of reiterating : between eight thousand and fifteen thousand feet no better air could be breathed anywhere on Earth, and the temperature and climate was like that of the Mediterranean.

It was the flowers that had first caught Ben's attention. They covered the mountains in great profusion, their colours causing the mountains to glow.

Ben had no sooner studied the coloured photographs than he knew without doubt that he must see the flowers for himself. He went at once to the offices of V.P.I. and asked for samples to be sent over to him. At the same time he learned that there were no bees on Venus.

In fact, above the thousand feet level no insects of any kind existed.

The flowers arrived in due course and Ben tested them himself. He found that most of them produced nectar of good quality. This was a little strange, as all the flowers were—as he had expected—self-pollinating. He wondered what the purpose of the honey-sacs might be until it occured to him that the honey might provide nourishment for the seeds when they

first formed, and subsequent observations proved his theory to be right.

The next thing was to arrange with V.P.I. to buy a small meadow on one of the alps and to have a house erected.

His passage was then booked on the space-freighter which transported the bees in a special hold.

Ben sold his apiary, keeping only a colony of English bees, and one each of Grey Mountain and Golden Caucasians. He then bought a colony each of Dutch, French and Ligurian bees.

As a bee-keeper he knew that there was some risk in having six different races all in the same apiary ; but he had experimented in this way before, and the risk he was taking now was counter-balanced by the fact that he had no idea which race, if any at all, might be best suited to the new world.

At all events, he would be the first apiarist on Venus, and his venture attracted some attention. Even if it didn't succeed he had no need to worry, for as a trained botanist he could easily make a good living.

He said goodbye to his friends and set off for Venus.

The journey proved easy enough. The bees travelled in specially-prepared hives in a darkened hold. At intervals during the journey he arranged for light to enter so that they could take cleansing flights. Gravity pressure at take-off and landing seemed to have no effect on them and he brought them safely to their new quarters.

For the first week Ben watched them closely but they appeared to settle down very well. The first day they went ranging, the worker-bees delving into this flower and that sampling the qualities of honey and pollen.

The next day it became apparent that the bees of every race had settled unanimously in favour of the Venusian Queens.

They were queer looking plants.

When Ben first saw them he thought them some kind of gigantic fungus, for they looked something like a monstrous toadstool—the kind with conical heads. These were outlined with triangular projections, in colour a dark mottled blue in contrast to the drab, grey-white texture of the caps. The whole gave a rather macabre effect of some crowned death's-head.

They had one colourful feature. In a close circle at the foot of each, small flowers, red, blue, and yellow, grew in brilliant concentric rings.

This surrounding court of flowers had a circumference of six or eight feet, the central toadstool plant standing about three feet high.

Ben had no idea who had first thought of calling them Venusian Queens ; but when one saw the whole effect the name seemed apt enough.

At all events, they seemed highly popular with the bees.

About a dozen of these plants were ranged over the meadow. As there were hundreds if not thousands of little, bell-shaped flowers growing in each circle, and as it was these in which the bees were interested, it would be a long time before they had exhausted them of pollen and nectar. Ben decided to leave well alone.

In any case, he was busy enough settling himself in his quarters on the new world.

On the other side of the alp there was the thriving town, Projecta, run by V.P.I. Here Ben bought furniture for his house and arranged for supplies of food to be sent round each week.

He had no worries about water or electricity, as a waterfall not far from his house supplied water for the pipes and power for the generator. Very soon Ben found himself enjoying life to the full.

His own meadow was situated at a height of about fourteen thousand feet. He explored the mountain, climbing up another five thousand feet—and then he was almost twenty thousand feet short of the summit—and downwards to about eight thousand feet, discovering for himself that the air became uncomfortably thick and difficult to breathe below that height.

He called on his immediate neighbours and liked them enough to become friends.

Jed Rankin was an American from the Middle West. He owned a cattle-ranch on several vast alpine meadows a couple of thousand feet below Ben's small meadow.

He was a pleasant man of early middle-age, very keen on making a success of his venture. He had done well with cattle in the U.S.A., and was confident of doing even better on Venus.

He was unmarried and seemed to like Ben's company, and they often visited one another.

Tom Jamieson was a sheep farmer from New Zealand. His sheep farm was another thousand feet below that of Jed Rankin and also comprised a couple of huge meadows, one lying slightly below the other.

He and his wife, Alice, were about the same age as Ben, and all three liked one another well enough to strike up a firm

friendship. They were very interested in the apiary and would often come up for a visit, bringing with them their small son, David.

Before he knew what had happened Ben found that he had fallen in love with the wonderful Venusian scenery ; and what with the new friends and the many interests he was far happier than he had ever been back on Earth.

So the days passed and became weeks. Ben visited the hives from time to time but noticed nothing unusual. The bees had everything they could need. He had no intentions of disturbing the combs until they had raised several broods when the swarm would start in search of new quarters, and led, possibly, by new queens.

There would be time enough then to put plans into operation.

And still time, he thought, as he went one morning towards the hives. Then he saw a cloud of bees in the air. This was no swarm but a mating-flight, and even as he watched, one bee dropped plumb to the ground.

A new queen returned to the Ligurian hive. The courtiers followed.

Ben picked up the dead drone—and received his first shock. The body in the palm of his hand was twice the size of a normal bee.

He walked rapidly towards the hive and immediately was driven off by guard-bees.

He went to the shed where he kept tools, apparatus, and spare hives, put on protective clothing, gloves and veil and returned to the apiary.

The combs in the Ligurian hive had unusually large cells. Some already held outsize eggs. Soon not only giant queens and drones would hatch—there would be monster workers as well. It was the same in all the hives.

Ben watched other mating-flights that day, and in the course of it picked up five other dead drones. All were immense.

Inside the hives, enormous queens deposited huge eggs into great cells. Before long he would have to provide new hives nearly three times the size of those normally used. He was extremely disturbed. Something must account for the change in size of the bees. Something had caused an alteration in the genes and chromosomes. But what ? And by what process ? And what would be the end result of the change ?

The next day he went out in the meadow. The Venusian Queens stood drab and grey among their bright rings and from each he picked a few flowers of the various colours.

On reaching home and testing these he could find only that they seemed fuller than usual of nectar.

Ben felt more puzzled than anything, for he could think of nothing to account for the change in size ; nor did it seem to make any apparent difference to the behaviour of the bees, apart from the various races becoming angry whenever he went to inspect the hives. But bees are notoriously touchy creatures, and it was possible that they were disturbed by what had happened to them.

After some thought it seemed best to leave them alone for the time being. Meanwhile he set to work to make and prepare larger hives.

The first of the giant worker bees hatched and were followed by others. When the time came for the swarming of the new bees everything was prepared. The large hives had been constructed and placed in positions near the present site of the apiary. That very morning Ben had been busy setting them up. It was that same morning that he had found the space surrounding each hive thick with dead bees.

The giants had killed all those of smaller size.

The new guard-bees had attacked him then, but he had retreated very quickly and none had followed.

While he was placing the new hives he had seen flights of bees winging up into the air and returning to the hive from which they had flown.

It was obvious that they were trying to persuade the new queens to leave the old quarters and he was sure that by the afternoon they would begin to swarm.

After lunch he had put on specially-prepared clothing, boots, gloves, and wire-mesh veil, and gone down to the apiary. It was then that the bees attacked in force.

And now they hung in clouds about the windows, blotting out the clear Venusian sky.

There are not many hours of darkness, twelve thousand feet up in the Venusberg Alps ; even if the bees returned to the hives when night fell he would have only a little time if he wished to escape. If he lost this opportunity they might keep him prisoner for days.

But supposing that during that time anyone came visiting ?

They would certainly be stung to death : Jed—Tom—Alice —little David, perhaps.

Suddenly he realised that he had no wish to escape.

He rose then and went to bed.

It was daylight when Ben woke. He got up and walked through all the rooms. There were no bees at any of the windows.

He dressed and had breakfast, then put on the protective clothing, primed the smokers with fuel, lit them, and left the house.

Arrived at the apiary he received another shock. The bees were at war.

At first he could distinguish nothing, for the turmoil of sound and fury was unbelievable. But as he stood and watched, he saw that the fighting was discriminate : it was race against race.

The French bees were attacking the Grey Mountain Caucasians in their hive. A force of workers would fly in, thousands strong, and were met by the Caucasian guard-bees. Instead of merely defending, a spearhead of these flew into the mass of French bees, while two flanking parties attacked on either side. A furious battle ensued and dead bees fell in great numbers.

Sometimes the attackers were routed ; sometimes a party succeeded in entering the hives. But none of these came out alive. Time and again the French bees attacked and were savagely repelled. In size and courage the two races were evenly matched and neither made great headway against the other—only great slaughter.

Looking at the mounting heaps of dead bees he became certain that neither could be victorious. Ben turned away.

Not very far away the air was a maelstrom of winged bodies—a boiling, roaring, seething mass, a live cloud of whirling, tearing, stinging fury as bees massed against bees, zoomed upwards, plunged down and round, zig-zagged and dived, mounted and fell—fell in battalions and heaped the ground.

Looking at the bodies, stingless, and some with the wings and heads and limbs torn off, he saw that most of them were Dutch bees. Victory was going rapidly to the Ligurians.

He walked over to the English hive. Here there had been a complete massacre.

Ben stood looking down at the ruin of what had been at one time both his work and his pride.

The breeding of these English bees had been his secret, for there are now no pure English bees, and he had worked on what had been an almost extinct original to produce what was virtually a new race. Now he saw that every English bee had been killed.

The hive now was being systematically robbed of honey and pollen by Golden Caucasian workers.

For a little while he watched their ruthless busyness, then he followed some laden bees. They led him to one of the new hives that he had recently erected. He looked through the observation partitions into the hive. In their attack on the English bees the Golden Caucasians had been greatly depleted in numbers. Those that were left were now building comb, while foragers transported honey from the ruined English hive. Their huge queen was already crawling over the newly-made comb, transferring eggs into cells.

Suddenly he could no longer bear to watch either the fighting hordes, or the victorious Caucasians. He left the apiary and returned to the shed.

There he stripped off the protective clothing, but he left it with the smokers, ready to hand. Then he walked out on to the meadow.

The peace here was the peace enveloping the whole range of mountains. They towered into the opaque Venusian sky, range on range, loftier than the Himalayas of Earth.

Most of these alps were uninhabited as yet, and there was only a peaceful growth of plants.

Up here there was not even birdlife. The trees in which they nested, among which they flitted, mated and sang, stopped growing at ten thousand feet. Up here, and higher yet, only the settlers from Earth lived.

Ben walked on, half-wondering if he would go down and see Jed. Suddenly he became aware of a pricking sensation. He glanced up. Before him was one of the Venusian Queens. It was incredibly changed.

He stepped closer and the same instant received a violent shock. This time it was as if he had been stung by innumerable bees.

The moment he moved back the sensation stopped.

He stood looking at the Venusian Queen.

Something strange had happened to the whole plant. The stem had shot upwards at least another two feet, and the conical head was twice the size it had been. But there was more than this.

Something had changed the whole effect from the macabre to the magnificent ; as though an inwardly burning light had altered grey-whiteness to deep silver, streaked this with vertical lines of copper, and crowned the conical head with points of sapphire, deeper and richer in colour than any jewel.

But at its feet there no longer glowed the wonderful rings of bright flowers. Instead was a dead waste of blackened earth.

The glow now—a glow that was luminous—was emanating from the Venusian Queen.

Again he took a step forward so that his foot was on the blackened ground.

And again, as though he was being deliberately repulsed, he experienced the needle-sharp pricking, the burn of invisible stings.

Burning—invisibility—the strange luminosity—and the change —Ben caught his breath.

The bees had sucked nectar and gathered pollen from flowers that no longer existed—flowers that had lately graced the roots of a drab fungus. And now this fungus was unbelievably changed.

And the bees themselves ?

Suddenly something made terrible sense. He walked quickly here and there about the meadow. Every Venusian Queen was changed.

Each plant was taller, bigger, glowed now with colour, shone with the strange inward light. Each was ringed with blackened earth.

And whenever he came close enough to touch this burnt ground he felt the stinging sensation of needle-sharp burns. He was certain then of what had happened. And in that moment he knew a terrible sense of panic.

Ben's first instinct was to dash off to someone—Jed, Tom, Alice, anyone—anyone who would give him help. But he was uncertain if he could be helped. Nor was this a time to consider himself.

He began hurrying so as to give himself little time for thought. Reaching the shed, he looked round its neat interior. Everything was in its place. Other emergencies with bees had taught him the wisdom of keeping things to hand. He picked up what he had come for and returned to the meadow.

When he came within range of the first Venusian Queen he stood back and took aim. A stream of fire jetted from the flame-thrower in his hand. In a matter of seconds the deadly yet beautiful plant had become a heap of ash.

Ben destroyed all twelve. Only when he was satisfied that every Venusian Queen had burned utterly and that no trace of stalk or head remained ; when he was certain that there was only ash already shifting and scattering in a faint play of wind, only

then he was able to leave the meadowland and return to the house. He drank the best part of a bottle of whisky.

The drunkenness that resulted was of the clear-thinking kind: an odd state of exaltation in which the worst might be faced and now had no power to dismay. He knew then that he would have to remain on his own.

It might be that later on others would be able to help him, but in the meantime . . .

He went outside again and saw to the recharging of the flame-thrower. He put on all the protective clothing and returned to the apiary. He was met there with the calm of death. The war of the bees had ceased. The ground was thick with dead creatures, the hives silent.

Ben walked over to where he had placed the new hives.

By this time the Golden Caucasians should have—He reached the hive and stopped short. There had been holocaust here. No single bee of the Golden Caucasian race remained alive.

Yet there was life and movement : humming and murmuring and beating of wings. The Ligurians had taken over the hive.

Ben had no wish to look inside. These bees, triumphant over all rivals, would follow the age-old pattern, building more comb, gathering stocks of honey.

Except that now there were no more Venusian Queens. Would they then, he wondered, gather honey from other flowers?

It was not likely once they had tasted—what had they tasted ?

Some self, half-frightened, half-jeering, came pat with the misquotation.

Radio-active honey-dew from some insect Paradise. So now what ? He had destroyed the Venusian Queens.

But the source of honey, the small, bright flowers had been destroyed before he had burned the strange plant beneath which they had grown. The bees had gone to war because to survive one race must destroy the others in order to gain the honey and pollen stocks stored in the rival hives. Now it was a case of winner take all.

Instinct might prompt them to as much ; then he remembered what he had seen of the fight.

He had watched a planned campaign, something beyond the ordinary powers of instinct.

If they had changed—as they had—radically, behind any manifestation now must lie intelligence.

Then there would come a time when their stocks of honey were exhausted and they would fly further afield. Whenever

they found a Venusian Queen it, and the ground about it, would become radio-active. And whoever came in contact with these plants, or the bees—or the honey ?

The first jet of flame struck the hive. And as suddenly he turned it off.

Supposing ? The thought flashed and made sense. Need these bees—the last he had—either die or escape ? If he could prevent their roaming ? Perhaps glass-in the apiary ?

But they had escaped already.

The hive was burning ; but out of the uplicking flames there came a dark tide of wings. They beat upwards as the bees rose and fanned out in several columns.

He followed each with a snaking of flame, ceasing to shoot the fire only when he was reasonably certain that none had escaped.

Then he completely destroyed the hive.

In the apiary he picked up some of the bodies of bees that had been killed in the fight. Later it would be interesting to examine them. Meantime he made a great bonfire. It burned merrily enough.

Before long all was as burnt and blackened and ashy as the Venusian Queens that had bloomed in the meadow.

Ben returned to the shed and left there clothing, flame-thrower, and the few dead bees he wanted for experiments. He then went back to the house.

But he found it impossible either to eat, drink, or rest. Suddenly he found himself fighting an impulse to go down and see Jed.

It became overwhelming and he left the house and started walking down the path that led to the lower levels.

He began rehearsing what he would say and very soon was half-choking in a morass of self-pity. Then he stumbled over a stone. The sudden jolt brought him to his senses.

Ben noticed then that his brain felt singularly clear, and it occurred to him that though there were no more Venusian Queens remaining in the meadow there might be some further on.

The flying range of the average bee is not above three miles ; but the new race with their huge bodies and wing-span could fly twice, if not three times, as far. It was possible that to get honey and pollen from the flowers at the base they might have found out where other Venusian Queens were growing. He returned to fetch the flame-thrower.

Beyond his own meadow the going became steep and Ben climbed steadily for some way. After a time he became aware

that his body was very tired and he sat down to rest. But his mind was still very much alert, and his thoughts went ranging, uneasily exploring unknown paths.

What had within it radio-active elements : soil or plants ?

He could rule out the bees as he was absolutely certain that neither on Earth nor during the voyage had they been subjected to atomic radiation.

The soil was the likeliest possibility, since he knew of no plant that contained radio-active elements without first being subjected to atomic radiation.

In his meadow then, or perhaps wherever the Venusian Queens grew, there were uranium or thorium deposits. There might even be a strata of Monazite sands. And where might one go from here ? Or how deep ? How deep crept the roots of the Venusian Queens ?

Yet however deep they might go, whatever contact they might make with pitchblende, or rare earths, how did they set about freeing or separating the elements of uranium, or thorium, or any other radio-active atoms ?

And how was it that the Venusian Queens had remained unchanged until the arrival of the bees ? How would insects in turn affect the plants ?

Come to that, what was the true explanation for the absence of insects above a certain height ? And why were plants not to be found at sea-level, or even below a thousand feet ?

One might postulate that some strange symbiosis took place between plants and insects that somehow caused both to become radio-active. The genes and chromosomes of both had been strangely affected.

With the bees, apart from their extraordinary increase in size, there seemed to be a sudden rise in levels. Instinct had graduated to intelligence.

For the Venusian Queens, not only had they altered in size, but their whole aspect had changed from ugliness to unbelievable if sinister, beauty.

Whether the transformation resulted also in intelligence, and if they shared this with the insects once both had become radio-active, were questions to which he would have liked the answer.

And now he had destroyed both bees and plants.

Unless there was still the possibility that the bees had visited the Venusian Queens growing further on. In that case he still had an opportunity to investigate. But even so, everything might be too late.

How badly was the immediate district affected by radio-activity ? It was possible, even probable now that the soil of his meadow was " alive " with radiation.

Soil—air—water ? Just how dangerous was the immedaite situation ?

More terrible, because personal, just how dangerous was Ben himself ?

He had come into contact with the bees and with the soil round the plants. It was certain that he must carry the effects of radiation with him now. At the thought his skin already began to burn and crawl.

The point was then : what was to be done ? Should he get immediate help for himself ? If he went to the authorities he would probably lose both his freedom and his land.

Suddenly it became imperative that he should know why and how the Venusian Queens had become radio-active and what was their relationship with the bees. Or the bees with them.

It was the bees that had gone first to the flowers at the base and ignored all the others in the meadow.

At the same time—though the realisation came with a struggle —he had no right to retain his freedom at the expense of others.

He thought of his new friends and what it would mean to them if they became affected by radio-activity through contact with himself. Their faces rose clear in his mind and he smiled a little. Of course it was impossible to imagine hurting them.

He would go the very next day to the authorities.

It might even be that he was not too badly affected to respond to treatment ; then he could come back, find other Venusian Queens and make what experiments he pleased.

As for his land, it would almost certainly be worked for the uranium deposits it must contain ; and that would mean some monetary compensation. At all events, it was useless to worry. Ben got up and walked on.

At the summit of the steep rise he found himself looking down into a deep hollow. It was about fifty yards long with steep sides, their rocks concealed mostly by ferns and flowers. The ground was covered with thick grass among which grew a multitude of flowers. Among these grew also two Venusian Queens.

One was already changed, the earth about it a blackened ring. The other was still small, a drab queen surrounded by a brilliant court. He climbed down and went over to the unchanged Venusian Queen.

Suddenly he became aware of movement among the bright rings of flowers. As he watched, there emerged from a red cup the dark body of a queen bee.

Nor could he be mistaken, even though he stood on the far side of the flowers.

Ben remained perfectly still. The queen rose, laden with honey, and flew off towards an outcropping of rock where he watched her disappear beneath the hanging fronds of a large fern. While she was hidden he moved further down the dell.

When she reappeared and flew again to one of the flowers Ben went quietly to where the large fern grew, lifted the fronds and peered into a deep cleft of rock. Two combs had been built.

He saw that they contained both eggs and larvae. There were worker cells, and the large cells of queens and drones. Already there was an ample store of honey.

It was obvious that the little hive had not been started either today, or yesterday ; for according to the state of the comb, eggs, and larvae, and the amount of honey, at least three weeks, perhaps a month, must have elapsed.

But there were no worker bees to be seen ; no guards, nurses, or drones. Only the single queen.

By her markings he was certain that she was a Ligurian. And he had destroyed the Ligurians.

Nevertheless, a Ligurian queen must have left the hive after hatching some weeks before.

But then she would have been followed by a swarm. A mating-swarm, at least, for this was a fertilised queen. Yet there were no signs of any bees other than herself.

The inference then was that she had come to this place alone, selected the cleft in the rock, built comb, gathered honey and laid her eggs. But queens don't normally fly off unescorted. Nor do they build comb or gather pollen and honey.

If she had done so—and she must have, for not only were there no signs of other bees but also the fact that she was to be seen gathering nectar—then her whole nature, her very being was fundamentally changed.

The genes that held or contained those hereditary characteristics that made her capable of only laying eggs had under-

gone some radical alteration. She was capable now of fulfilling the functions of worker bee as well as queen.

Soon she would be queen of a thriving colony of bees.

Looking at the natural hive, admiring the industry that had gone to its planning and order, Ben was again assailed by temptation.

As a beekeeper it would go against everything he had ever felt, ever learned, ever experienced, to destroy either this queen or her colony-to-be.

Besides, Ben reasoned, he had in this dell everything he needed now for investigation and experiment. Such a chance might never again come his way.

Suddenly he heard a loud buzzing. His back was towards the flowers and he whipped round. The Ligurian queen was flying straight at his face.

Suddenly she zoomed upwards and flew over his head. The next instant he felt her settle on his neck. There was a timeless pause while he stood paralysed. To receive a sting from the huge, radio-active insect . . .

A split second later he had dropped the flame-thrower and almost simultaneously dashed her from his neck. As she fell towards the ground he was ready to stamp on her, but before she reached it she zoomed up again.

A moment later she had settled on his left wrist. Again he knocked her groundwards.

This time, in rising, she made a feint. She appeared to make for his right hand, then suddenly hurled herself at his face. Ben flailed out with his hands and she darted this way and that, then turned and soared along the dell.

He snatched off his hat and went in pursuit. Just as she reached the entrance she turned back, whizzed over his head and again settled on his neck.

After Ben had knocked her off again she went through all the tactics of trying to sting his face, neck, and hands. He thanked his lucky stars that he was wearing boots into which the trouser-ends fitted and that his shirt offered her no chance of crawling either up the sleeves or down the neck.

Again she darted off and Ben went in pursuit, and again she turned to attack. Before long he was breathless and giddy. Then he tripped over a tuft of grass.

As he went down Ben was able to keep his wits and hit out as she hovered ready to strike. The tip of his cap hit her and

she fell to the ground. But he had fallen awkwardly and it took a few moments to struggle into a position from which he could rise. By that time she had recovered from the blow.

To his astonishment she didn't attempt to renew the attack but flew straight off to the Venusian Queen that had become radio-active.

She settled on the silver surface and began rapidly fanning with her wings. Above and below her were the curious markings like streaks of copper and deep gold. As he watched, the luminosity of the whole plant appeared to deepen, the glowing of silver and copper and the sapphire of the triangular shapes that formed the crown became extraordinarily intense, became blinding, began to burn.

Ben tried to run but his body seemed rooted to the ground. Or transfixed—caught and speared through by rays of burning light.

Suddenly it became impossible to bear the awful intensity. He caught his breath on a cry—the kind of strangled scream one gives in a nightmare. Then, for a second, he was released.

It was enough. He dashed down the dell.

The little valley ended in a steep cliff. There seemed no holds within reach and he doubted if he could scramble up. He realised then that he would have to retrace his steps and get out the way he had entered. In any case, he would need to get the flame-thrower which was still lying on the ground.

Ben ran towards the place and again met the force emanating from the Venusian Queen. He realised then that it would be impossible to pass the plant. Somehow he would have to climb up.

The rocks forming the walls on either side offered easy enough climbing until one was within six or seven feet from the top ; then either they appeared quite smooth or ended in an overhang. Nevertheless he would have to try.

Ben went as far as he could from the deadly plant and hastily removed his shirt. With this and his belt he managed to strap the flame-thrower round him ; then he began to climb.

He climbed the faster for the realisation that if the Ligurian queen chose to attack him now he was a fair target, for in hauling himself up he needed both hands. Nor could he glance back to see if she was still settled on the plant.

He kept thinking that he heard her buzz at his ear and his hands grew slippery with sweat. But the instinct of self-

preservation was stronger than fear and sooner than he expected he reached the smooth part of the rock just below the summit.

He made sure of his footholds and began feeling about for handholds. Just as he was beginning to despair Ben found a couple and after a great struggle hauled himself to the top of the cliff. He stopped only to regain breath and to put on his shirt, then he headed for home.

Inside the house he made certain that all doors and windows were shut. He had a bath and a meal, then slept for some hours. He woke when it was quite dark. The rest had given him new strength, though he was still very tired. By the clock Ben saw that he had well over an hour of darkness.

Had he been able to walk quickly he would have reached the dell very soon; but he found it impossible to hurry and so it took him almost the hour.

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The meadow was a dark space which the light of his torch threaded like a meteor-spark. Nothing stirred.

Above and below and all about was the great mass of the mountain ; and beyond and all around darker mountains with deeper and greater and blacker heights. And nothing seemed alive except himself.

At last he came to the small valley. It glowed and pulsated with phospherescent light.

From the active Venusian Queen streamed prisms of colour ; for the great crown flashed blue fire, and the silver cap was a whiteness of light banded with molten copper and gold, the intermingling of hues forming a marvellous aurora, insignia of a universe whose atom-suns were changing the patterns and orders of worlds.

And even as he watched the stem and crown of the smaller Venusian Queen began in turn to glow, to rise and to expand. In the unnatural light the natural beauty of the flowers ringed at the base began to shrivel and to burn.

In her hive the Ligurian queen bee slept, unaware that in the cosmos of cells composing her body, and within the eggs she carried, and in the larvae laid in the hive-cells, the pattern and order of genes and chromosomes was changing and changed. She knew nothing except her natural instinct to propagate her race.

And Ben knew nothing of what that race might mean to this planet, or its creatures, or the alien people that lived now under the wide Venusian sky. Nothing, except that he might be an unwitting instrument of death.

He climbed down to within range, lifted the flame-thrower and took aim.

The liquid spray of brightness drenched and drowned the luminous wonders of the dell.

Beauty and death and humming life were consumed in fire.

To Ben came the thought that if life in him was changing, or rotting, its order deranged, he could wish his end as swift.

Dawn began to gather as the refracted light from the pearling sky tipped the further peaks. Ben looked down into a blasted pit that in time would green.

He stood for a while—then turned and went back home.

—E. D. Campbell

A brief cameo, by another new author to our pages, of the perils of forthcoming spaceflight.

INCIDENT

By K. E. SMITH

The man was tall, stooped and thin. His face was mottled and streaked with " spacevein " marks. He wore a hearing aid of the Bone Conduction type, and when he talked his voice wheezed.

I realised, with a shock, that he couldn't have been more than about twenty-five, but it was obvious what had happened to him. There where many such as he hanging about the bars of space ports, from Mercury to outermost Pluto and on a thousand other planets of Solar Systems sprinkled throughout the Galaxy.

Space bums. Victims of vacuum and atmospheric organic damage.

A man could spend years in space without mishap and then, one day, an accident might occur. His suit spring a leak whilst on one of the atmosphereless moons or planets. Or, contrary-wise, on a planet with a massive atmosphere. It didn't matter much either way, the result was almost always similar. Implosion; explosion. Although completely opposite, the havoc wrought by either is much the same.

When a suit springs a leak in a vacuum the air enclosed within rushes out into space with abrupt suddenness. The air also rushes (or attempts to rush) from the chambers of the Middle ears and the respiratory system. If a man is ice-cold, calm and

without panic when this happens he can, in rare cases, expel the air from his lungs by opening his mouth and exhaling. By gulping rapidly he can, sometimes, empty the air contained in the Middle ear chambers, via the Eustacian tubes.

But he can do nothing with regards the third effect of vacuum, the internal pressure building up in facial and body veinous systems as the blood begins to heat up. And if he's lucky and the leak is plugged quickly he saves his life but at the expense of his health.

A spacesuit that suddenly leaks without warning is not conducive to icy calmness and lack of panic. Almost always, the first blind reaction in a man is to gulp air into his lungs before it has all rushed away into space and to close one's mouth to keep it there. Such a reaction is instantaneous, overriding all functions of sane, rationalised thought. This is when the survival mechanism comes into action and adrenalin pumps through the system. A man does not have to consciously think these things. In an emergency the " Telephone exchange system " of the cortex is cut off as the automatic transmissions of survival nerve impulses swamp all others and demand immediate action.

This action, which is almost quicker than thought, directly causes the wreckage in a man such as was evident in he who now stood before me.

He was deaf. The drums of his ears, fragile, tissue-thin membranes, no longer existent ; destroyed by the miniature explosions that had taken place within the chambers of his middle ears as air pressure within blasted its way out through the drums with the sudden withdrawal of equal pressure in the outer ear.

The damage to the respiratory system was always more serious, often fatal. It left a man gasping for air and wheezing for the rest of his life, his lung capacity halved and in some cases, necessitating a wheelchair for the rest of one's usually short life —quartered. The blood, of course, was never the same either. A massive atmosphere caused much the same trouble except for the veinous damage.

These thoughts passed through my mind in seconds as I regarded the pitiful wreck before me.

" Just arrived Lieutenant ? " he croaked.

I smiled, unconsciously striving to hide the pity I knew was evident in my gaze. I needn't have bothered though.

" Got in yesterday from Pluto," I hesitated.

" Care for a drink ? "

His eyes lighted.

" I sure would Lieutenant—and thanks." He seemed embarrassed at having accepted. I guessed it hadn't been long since his accident.

I said : " Don't mention it. How long has it been since it happened ? "

He didn't need to ask what I meant.

" Three month's," he croaked in reply.

" Too bad." There wasn't anything else I could say.

I ordered two beers and slid his across the crowded bar. He thanked me and drank deeply. He grinned. It would have looked good but for the " spaceveins." He was probably quite handsome at one time. A thought flickered through my mind, irrelevant I guess. Women would shudder whenever they saw his face from now until the end of his life.

" First today," he said, finishing his beer. I could see he had enjoyed it, too.

I bought him another, disregarding his feigned protest. Suddenly, as if divining my thoughts, he said wryly.

" I feel the same way when I look in a mirror. Even I am not yet used to it, Lieutenant. Not yet. But I guess I will be eventually. Life goes on and Man is an adaptable species. When this first happened I thought the end of the world had come so far as I was concerned. Even contemplated suicide." He fumbled in a pocket, produced a wallet and from that a photograph. The girl was more than averagely pretty. Raven black hair, turned up nose, pert mouth, vivid blue eyes and a whistlable figure that showed itself to full advantage on the Threedee snap.

" I had a girl once Lieutenant. That's her. Nice, huh ? "

I nodded, said : " What happened ? "

" What do you think ? " he croaked. For the first time I detected bitterness in his tone.

" When I saw her at the hospital after the bandages had been removed from my face, she screamed. Yes, actually screamed. She didn't look at me with pity, God knows that would have been bad enough ; no, she looked upon me with loathing as though I were a Martian, or a Venusian Thog. Wouldn't even say goodbye. She wrote me."

I didn't need to ask what she had written.

Abruptly he changed the subject.

" Still the same out there, Lieutenant ? "

" Just the same," I answered. " It never changes. I know now, how you must feel. It's tough to think you will never be able to venture into deep space again. It kind of gets a hold on you, doesn't it ? "

" It sure does, Lieutenant. It sure does," he breathed.

" Even when I was a kid I wanted to get out into space. I dreamed about it and when I was eighteen I finally passed my Phys and Men. exams. Jean, that's the girl I mentioned, didn't want me to go, wanted to get married . . ." His voice became wistful, his eyes roamed back through time's memories and held, for a moment, the far away recollections of things that might have been. He sighed.

" I would do it again ! It was worth it. I wouldn't want it any other way !"

I understood him completely, as only a spaceman can understand. It's impossible to describe the feeling a man gets when he ventures out into space. I guess it's the Supreme adventure.

Planets and suns without number. All different. Moonlit worlds, alien and beautiful. The feeling you get when you look through a viewscreen in deep space and see myriads of stars pulsing and beating in all their colourful splendour. The pulse-quickening thrill you get when you think that out there anything is possible. Other races to be discovered, other worlds to explore. And the rare comradeship that is peculiar to spacemen. These and a thousand other reasons why being a spaceman is the greatest life a man can have.

" Yes," I said, " you're quite right. It's worth it. I wouldn't have it any other way either."

He looked at me steadily. " That's right, Lieutenant. Like I said before, Man is an adaptable creature. And things are not always as bad as you think. And one consolation—Officers get a comfortable pension."

I held out my hand.

" It's been a real pleasure meeting you," I said, " and I'm grateful for our little chat."

" Don't mention it, Lieutenant, and thanks for the beers." He waved casually and shuffled painfully out of the bar.

I sighed and raised my beer to finish it, catching sight of my reflection in the bar mirror as I did so.

" Just like an Egyptian Mummy," I thought wryly.

Still, I felt a lot better now. Tomorrow they would remove the bandages and I would know the worst.

I lowered the volume of my hearing aid as I shuffled painfully from the bar.

—K. E. Smith