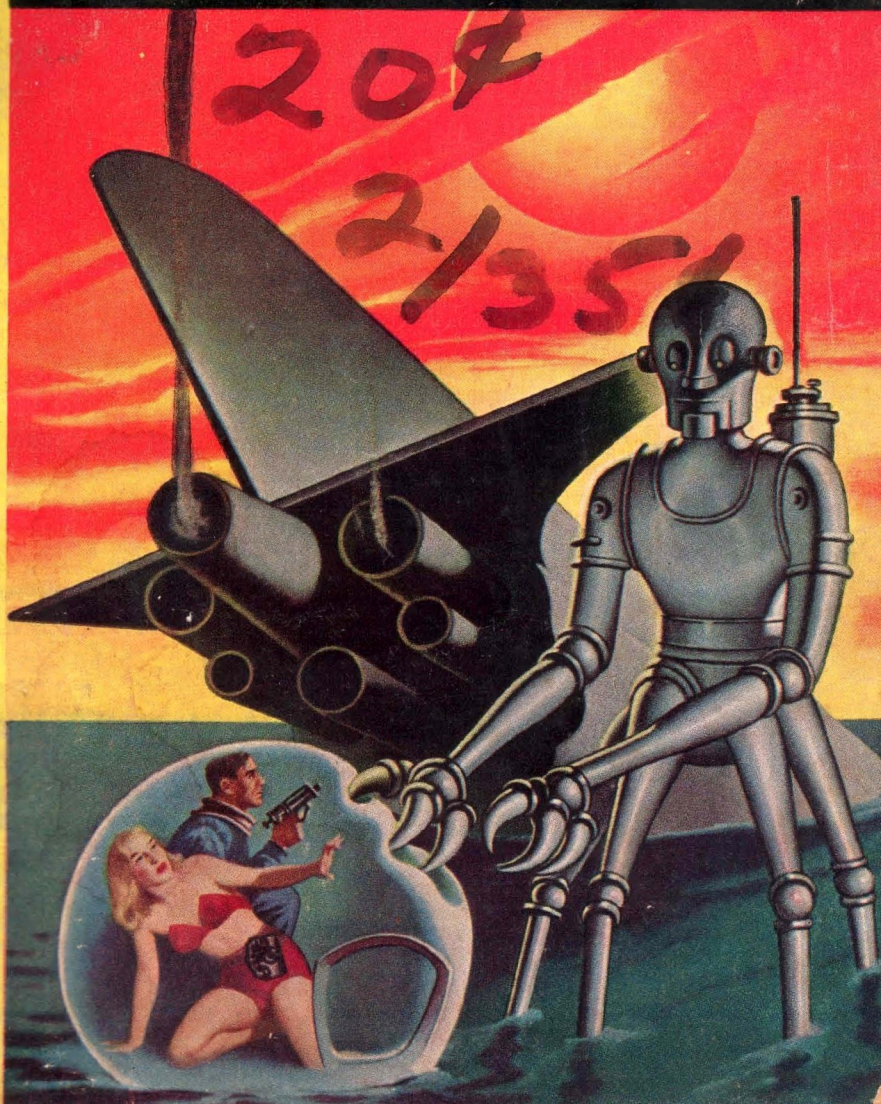


SCIENCE FICTION

adventures

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FEBRUARY 1953 35c



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AN EDITORIAL ON FORESIGHT

We've just about come to the conclusion that editing a science fiction magazine requires a good prophetic sense, and that we are sadly lacking in that. In fact, we might say that our foresight is foreshortened to the point where it only works on hindsight.

And don't let that seeming modesty fool you—naturally, what it really means is that we're happy and proud at the moment. A lot more so than if all of our private and public predictions had turned out 100% right.

We expected to begin this issue with an editorial on the lines of how this was still too early to know the response of the readers to SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, and to keep very quiet on our fond dream of going monthly some time in the vague future. Now we're going to have to change over at the last minute and boast a bit on how wrong we were.

You see, during the few days since our first issue went on sale, we've been flooded with mail from you. And our fondest hopes—which we wouldn't have put into words, being in the realm of pure wish-dreams—have turned out to be pure pessimism. Without exception, those letters have told us that you like the magazine! Oh, you've found some faults with us, and you've pointed out some of our mistakes to us—and we're grateful for that. But mostly, the enthusiasm of your letters and the number we have received have left us with a profound sense of gratitude to all of you. Those letters have helped far more than you could have believed, too. They've made it possible for us to announce at once that—

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES is now going monthly, starting with this issue! This isn't a prophecy, but an accomplished fact, so no foresight is needed in making that statement. We've just come back from a long talk with our distributor, and we're busily changing the date for our third issue from March to February.

So there'll be twelve issues a year of our magazine instead of six, and we're sending our rush calls for more of the kind of stories we want. We know now that all it takes to keep us on your approval listing is a supply of entertaining stories—and we're going to see that you get the best ones we can locate. You've amply confirmed our editorial policy of providing the most entertaining fiction possible, irrespective of name or type.

Along this line, we've got to admit that our record of having fore-

sight has suffered another blow, and one which also makes us happy, even while our faces are a bit red. In the first issue, we announced a story by Erik van Lhin, which you'll see confirmed on the cover this month. Well, it was a fine yarn, but it isn't in the magazine! Van Lhin wrote us shortly after we scheduled the story, telling us he'd had a brainstorm and that he wondered if we could let him have the story back. He outlined the changes he wanted to make, and they were terrific; instead of a fine yarn for us to brag about it, it should be a terrific one worth shouting about.

It was already scheduled, so what should we do? Well, naturally we sent it back to him. We'd rather have a blooper in our predictions and on our cover than fail to bring you the very best we can. And since we had another story we'd been aching to bring you more quickly, we knew it wouldn't leave any gaping hole in this issue.

In fact, we're pleased and happy about everything. You'll again find a line-up of stories by both new and old names; Chandler, Whitley and de Camp are probably known to all of you; Fritch was a name we'd never seen before, but we've already bought two stories by him, and are sure there'll be many more. Smith has been on a vast number of covers in the long period since he began writing; Morrison has sold everything from slicks to television—all in the field of science fiction; and Nourse is one of the most promising of the newer writers.

In one way, we're experimenting. You'll notice that all the stories depend on space flight or visitors from space, in some manner. This wasn't planned, incidentally. But we feel that it's more important to have first-rate stories than it is to balance a magazine with a wide variety. We'd like to have your opinion on that, incidentally. It's against tradition, of course, to let any single theme dominate an issue of a magazine which isn't one that has a particular slant at all times; but with your approval, we'd still rather restrict our policy to good stories, and let all other considerations go hang themselves.

Finally, since magazines seem to force their editors into the business of prophecy, we'll try to pin on our foresight-specs and indicate the changes coming up. There will definitely be a readers' column, since you've indicated you want one. And there'll be a regular feature in the future, reviewing one fan club at a time; we've seen the fanmags and books reviewed, and feel it's about time the organizations got a little attention. We're also planning to use longer stories in serial form when they're really good.

And we're planning to sit expectantly waiting for the mail from you, to find out by hindsight where our foresight has failed us again. So let's hear from you now.

PHILIP ST. JOHN
Editor



FAREWELL TO THE LOTOS

BY
A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

Hooper's Snoopers were the most hated men in the Federation. But they knew they had the highest mission of all — saving the race from the contagious poison of alien paradises and one-way Edens.

Altair VI was a rotten world to be stranded on. It was damp and dismal, and the park that surrounded the bench was filled with shrubs that looked more animal than vegetable, with



warty stems, fleshy black leaves, and blood red flowers. There was even a faint smell like that of carrion in the murky atmosphere that made the cigarette in Peter Quinn's mouth seem tainted.

He shifted his lanky six-foot body on the bench, and tried to close his pale blue eyes to the sights, while he sucked in on the smoke. He might as well enjoy it, he realized bitterly; there were only two other cigarettes in the case he'd just returned to the pocket of his wrinkled uniform. When they were gone. . .

Well, the Service would have nothing to do with him. From now on, all his past record would be blotted out, and he'd be listed as just another Second Pilot turned drunkard, who'd overstayed his shore leave and missed his ship. He hadn't been drunk, though he'd picked up a bit of a glow. And he'd kept his eye on the clock in the girl's apartment. But either it had been tinkered with or it stopped, as he found when he happened to look at his wristwatch. Then there'd been a wild ride to the spaceport, only to find that the *Lady May* had already blasted off, taking everything he owned with her. The girl, Annalyn, who'd thought so much of an officer of an interstellar cruiser, had indicated what she thought of him as a potential beachcomber, and had

denied knowing a thing about the money he didn't have. And here he was, stranded on Altair VI, good for nothing except perhaps enlisting in the local garrison forces!

"Peter Quinn?" It was a woman's voice, low and husky, that brought him to his feet out of habit, even before he saw her.

Venus sea-silk stockings covered fine ankles and shapely knees. Beneath the weatherproof, transparent cloak was a costume that must have come from London or New York, and it was filled in all the right places. Under the hood, the hair was black and lustrous, worn shoulder length. Her cheekbones were a little too high, her mouth more than a little too wide. Her eyes were ice-blue, and the line of her jaw was graceful—and strong. She was almost as tall as he was. He was not sure that he liked the hint of ironic humor under her seemingly grave expression—or that he would ever like her.

"Sit down," she suggested, before he could fumble for words. She dropped onto the bench beside him, holding out one of the rare, delicately carved boxes found among the crumbling ruins of the once mighty Martian civilization; its use as a cigarette box argued money with a capital M. So did the cigarettes.

He took one of the expensive Nine Planets brand, lighted one for her, and then inhaled gratefully. He started to question her again, but again she beat him to it.

"I knew you'd missed the *Lady May*, Peter Quinn. I came looking for you. You can pilot a Spurling, of course?"

He nodded. "I should hope so."

"Good. I need a skilled pilot. . ."

Disgust flamed up in him. It was obvious enough now—the money, the hardness in her, the ostentation, and her suggestion all told their own story. Someone who'd won one of the Federation Lotteries, throwing money away, travelling around in a haze of false glory, going from monocars to Spurlings, and now willing to play Lady Bountiful to a down-and-out spaceman—for a price, that is; for someone to push around, play servant, and gigolo while the glamor of the Bountiful act went on. . .

Quinn rubbed out the Nine Planets, and took one of his own remaining cigarettes; he slammed it viciously into his mouth, and swung on his heel toward the distant, mist-shrouded towers of Port Van Campen.

"Stop!" There was a whiplash quality in her voice that surprised him. "Come back, Quinn!"

"Why?" he asked curtly.

"Because I've already spent too much work getting my hands on you to let you go now. I needed someone who was trained to obey orders, and from outside this beastly world. But it isn't personal occupation. Here!"

She did something quick and complicated to a compact, then suddenly glanced around sharply, before completing the deft motions of her hands. Suddenly, the back of the case flew open, and she handed it to him. As a space officer, he couldn't mistake the badge inside. "Federal Agent Jane Haldane, Number ZX7355-668," he read. "Not too good a photograph."

"Skip it." She snatched the compact back, snapped it shut, and thrust it into her large bag. "And the name for my job is Jane Haley—about what you thought, too. From Centaurus VI, winner of the Far Centaurus Sweepstakes, blowing my winnings seeing all the Galaxy I can. I've bought a Spurling—looks like a crock, but she goes. And I know you; we used to be good friends when you were on the Centaurus run—remember? Now I'm lucky, you've had bad luck, and I'm giving you a hand. But you insist on doing something to earn your keep. . ."

"Quinn, of Hooper's Snoopers?" he asked, and laughed with an ugly sound. "No thanks! I'd

better enlist here—honestly.”

Shé grimaced. “All right, nobody likes us. But it’s time you learned the facts. We don’t care about morals. We don’t even care if some man-colonized world wants to kick over the traces and tell the Federation to go chase itself, though the Federation might take a dim view of that. Our job is simply to keep the human race ideologically pure—keep it human! And on some of these worlds already inhabited, with their own cultures, things could get out of hand. Some of those cultures are poisonous to human minds—poisonous but attractive, like a drug—and contagious. We’re trying to keep such deadly diseases from spreading!”

“Then why here?” Quinn pointed out. “This world was never inhabited by intelligent life.”

“Maybe not. But there’s—something! We never found artifacts, of course, but there was a biped here once, with a large brain case. . . .” She stopped, then swung to him. “But that’s enough, until I know whether you’re with me. Are you?”

He took a cigarette from her, trying to think. He knew she could get his blacklisting ended, return him to the Service and the ships with a simple recommendation. The Federation Se-

cret Service under Hooper had power enough. But spying, even for a good cause, was a dirty business. Sometimes the end justified the means, but he’d read enough history to have his doubts. . . .

“You’ll see the ships blasting off for the stars. . . .” the girl murmured. “Bound for Polaris, Alioth, Centaurus, Sol . . . But you won’t be on them, unless I say so. Think of the hills of Earth, Quinn—sunlight instead of this dank drabness, people around you, ships waiting. Think, Quinn, think of Earth. . . .”

She stopped suddenly, her face deadly pale except for the crimson mark on her left cheek left by his open hand. Her eyes were hard and cold, the eyes of a killer. Her handbag was open, and her hand was inside it. Then she laughed briefly, her eyes still cold and hostile, but with the tension broken. “All right, I hit below the belt. But it’s true. You’d be doing your race a good deed and you could win reinstatement. Otherwise, there’s no way back to the ships!”

“The price on the ticket!” He shrugged, and rubbed his hand against his trousers. “All right, you win. Spill the beans.”

She looked relieved, but got up and walked around in a circle beyond the bench, tense and listening. Finally she sat down

again. "They don't seem to be on to me, yet." She threw her cigarette away, and took out another. "It's a long story. But I need help, and it'll be too long before it can arrive. That's why you're it. And don't think it isn't important, Quinn. All I can give you now is a quick background."

The agents had stumbled on something first on Kalabon on Alioth III. The Kalabonians had been intelligent, but not humanoid; and they hadn't been behind it. They resented the alien ideas intruding on their antheap philosophy, and wanted to help. But while the investigation was going on, the local fort commandant set off a couple of rockets with atomic heads, and the focus of the trouble came to an end. The island where the cult, or whatever it was, had been was just a radioactive cinder.

But there'd been a survivor, bound for the island, but not close enough. Somehow, afterwards, she'd managed to fly her Spurling back, and the agents had snatched her when she landed. Before she died, she'd talked a little, though she was stubborn. Some kind of esoteric cult, with hints of paradise of some kind. Only humans were involved, and the natives had nothing to do with it—and then just top executives and their friends. The mayor, the commandant, and a lot

of others committed suicide before they could be questioned. That seemed to end all chances of finding anything more there, but routine investigation turned up a few bits.

There was the boss of Kalabon Ceramics, reported missing after the blow-up, who'd been on Kalabon only three years. The secret cult meetings had started about six months after his arrival—the secret comings and goings, the falling off of efficiency in all the Kalabonian human undertakings, and such. He'd been sent to Kalabon from Altair VI. And here, there were signs of the same slow corrosion, when they traced back.

Quinn helped himself to another smoke. "I've run across at least one alien cult," he said slowly. "I don't like them! After something like that—well, soap doesn't seem to clean very well for a while. Ugh. All right, I'm your man, I guess. But I still don't like Hooper's Snoopers!"

"Fair enough!" She grinned. "Then call a taxi to take us to the Aiglou—air taxi. We'll book you there, where I'm staying. Call me Jane—but don't forget the surname is Haley. And you might act a little embarrassed at accepting a woman's charity. Make it plain you're positively earning your keep." She looked at him quizzically. "As chauffeur, secre-

tary, travelling-companion, that is."

"The other might not be too hard," he suggested.

"Neither hard nor easy—it won't happen. But it won't hurt if people put two and two together to get six!" She pressed a thick wad of notes into his hand. "And you'd better take this. Call it salary."

Quinn took it, realizing he'd sold himself definitely to the Special Service of the Federation.

But somehow, being a well-fed, well-dressed spy in civilian evening wear, sitting beside Jane Haldane in the Aiglon lounge wasn't too bad, when he could forget he was a spy. She was dressed in something black and simple from Paris that made every other woman there look like a frump. He could almost forget the whispers and the amused suggestions that were going around. And even though he knew they were untrue, he could dream a little. . .

Jane stood up suddenly, looking at her watch. "Bring my car around to the main entrance, Peter—there's a lamb. . ." she said, and began moving off,

He finished his drink and got up, walking with deliberate slowness to the door. The envy in the looks was mixed with scorn

—and there was now something else that puzzled and worried him as he studied those about him—some undercurrent of hostility, just strong enough to ring little warning bells in his brain. Even the garage attendant was surly, though he did what was required.

Quinn waited until the gyroscope was spinning at the right rpm, withdrew the parking props, and eased the car along the covered driveway to the entrance porch. After a few seconds, Jane came down the steps, wearing a white cloak and carrying what he saw was a man's raincoat. She got in, and he started as he felt something digging into his side—something hard.

Jane grinned. "A shoulder-holster—and not empty. You can put it on when we find some place to park. Now, Peter, *Lotos-Land!*"

Quinn whistled. The most exclusive and expensive of the city's night spots—hardly the place where lethal ironmongery was considered *de rigueur*. But he threw the drive into low until the big glass doors slid open at the car's approach. Then he gunned the motor. He knew the way to the nightery—beyond city limits along the main road, about five miles beyond the park where she had picked him up.

There was little traffic on the road. It was raining heavily now, an almost vertical downpour, shining like polished steel rods in the glaring beam of the headlight. Even inside the car the air was unpleasantly damp and chill.

Something droned slowly overhead. Quinn looked up, through the transparent roof of the car, and saw a blurred triangle of red, green and white lights that denoted a police 'copter. The mournful beat of its vanes blended with the shrill whine of the car's gyroscope, the steady drumming of the rain, into a dismal, monotonous melody that held all the damp misery of the night. The trees bordering the road shone wanly luminous—an unsteady, flickering light that hinted at decay and corruption. Something small and sinuous, with too many legs, scuttled across the road in front of them, turned to glare at them with red-glowing eyes.

"Turn right," ordered the girl. "Here's the park. We'll be able to get our pocket artillery sorted without any risk of observation. . ."

Not taking his eyes from the glistening road Quinn said—"Observation? I've been wondering why you didn't give me my gun back there in the hotel. . ."

"I don't trust that place. I haven't found anything—but there's far too much ornamentation in which microphones and scanners could be concealed. You should have seen the contortions I went into so as to cover your holster from every possible angle when I got it out of my trunk. . ."

The park was deserted. The dim, pale glimmering of grass and trees and shrubs conveyed the impression of a photographic negative—and of a scene that would still be unpleasant even with the normal tone values of the print.

Acting on Jane's instructions Quinn left the road. He drove slowly over the short, soggy grass, pulled up under the overhanging foliage of a huge, dim-glowing, isolated tree. He stopped—but left the engine and the gyroscope running, did not put down the parking props. It was something of a relief to have lost, even if only for a short while, the steady, heavy drumming of the rain on the car roof. The relief, however, was not unqualified. In spite of closed doors and windows the rank, carrion stink seeped in, beat down the faint, elusive fragrance of the scent that Jane was using. Quinn wrinkled his nose in disgust, took out and lit a cigarette.

The girl said—"I'll have. . ."

Then — "Where's that police 'copter?"

Something more than the drumming of the rain was missing. Quinn thought, hard—racking his memory for the little, seemingly unimportant things noted by the subconscious rather than the conscious mind. He said—slowly, hesitantly, pointing uncertainly towards the road they had left—"It went drifting off that way, I *think*. . . Behind the trees. . ."

"Never mind. But put the headlight out. And the dashboard lights. And your cigarette. . ."

At first it seemed very dark—then the wanly phosphorescent vegetation supplied working light.

"Take off your jacket, Peter." She brought the holster and what it held from under her cloak. "Here—this is the way you put it on. . ."

She adjusted the straps to her satisfaction—and to the man's discomfort. Quinn, curious, pulled the gun. He was surprised by the ease with which it jumped into his hand. It was an ugly thing—although not so ugly as the regulation blaster. Projectile firearms were not as deadly as the blaster. But if a man were wearing a radiation screen, bullets would penetrate it. And if he were wearing bullet-proof armor there was sufficient kinetic en-

ergy with each round from a heavy automatic to knock him down.

Jane asked—"I suppose you have fired one before?"

"Of course. At a target."

"Anything—or anybody—you fire at is a target. . ."

Experiencing a small-boyish pleasure in the feel of the weapon, Quinn hefted its not inconsiderable weight in his right hand. He made sure that the safety catch was on—then, with the pistol pointing outboard, experimentally pulled the trigger. For a moment he thought—so far as he was capable of thinking anything—that the catch must be defective. There was a sudden, staccato hammering and the whole car was shaken violently. From the undergrowth across the road came vicious, stabbing goutts of orange flame. The girl gasped, said shakily—"I've been half expecting this. It cost a small fortune to have this car armored—but it was worth it. . ." She opened her handbag with a smooth, swift motion, pulled out a gun that was a twin to the one that Quinn was still holding stupidly in his hand. She lowered the window facing the attack a trifle, poked the muzzle of her weapon through the narrow aperture. The noise of her fire in the closed compartment was deafening. The acrid reek of

her powder smoke overpowered the charnel stench of the unwholesome night. And the machine gun stopped firing—but not for long.

Jane muttered something under her breath, pushed a fresh clip into the butt of her pistol, squeezed the trigger with slow deliberation. There was a high pitched scream—and again the machine gun was silent.

She said, her voice low and even, "Get started, you fool. I don't know how long the armor's going to hold out—and they may get the tire. They may have something heavier. . ." Then, viciously—"Don't put that headlight on!"

Quinn set the car spinning on its single wheel until it was headed the way they had come. He threw the drive into top gear. He did not feel happy running without lights—but the road, wetly gleaming in the phosphorescent glow from the trees, was clear enough when he reached it.

The gun started up again, and its bullets threw great splashes of water from the puddles ahead of them and on either side. But the aim was wild. Quinn concentrated on his driving, tried to ignore the shooting. Jane did ignore it—and peered forward with grim intensity, alert for a possible ambush.

A new note was added to the

whine of the gyroscope, the drumming of the rain, the fast fading rattle of machine gun fire. It was the helicopter. It circled aimlessly for a few seconds and then, following the road, came after them. A searchlight stabbed down, catching the speeding car squarely in its beam, flashing alternately red and white. It was the signal to stop.

"Carry on," ordered Jane, her voice a little shrill. "Weave a little. . ."

"I didn't come down in the last shower," retorted Quinn rudely. The frenzied howling of a siren beat down upon them in panic-inducing waves of sound. "I wish we carried an anti-aircraft gun. I've always hated those things."

He saw, ahead and to his left, a black break in the glowing shrubbery. He put the wheel hard over, raced down the side road. Wet, rubbery branches slashed along the side of the car. The helicopter, its pilot taken by surprise, carried on along its original course, faltered in its flight and came around slowly and clumsily. Quinn risked a brief flash of the headlight, saw that the road was petering out into a rough track over which speed would be impossible. He stopped with a jolting shock, spun the car on its wheel, headed back for the main highway. On

the opposite course the helicopter roared overhead.

"Back to town?" asked the man. "Or—still *Lotos-Land*?"

"*Lotos-Land*—if we can make it. But these buzzards are playing for keeps."

At the junction with the main road the car turned left. Quinn snatched a brief glance astern, failed to pick up the aircraft's lights. But he saw the salvo of rockets screaming down over the wet landscape—and the mathematician in his subconscious told him that the place and time of their impact with the ground would be already occupied by the car. He cut the drive and slammed on the brakes. The road ahead erupted in a flare of violet blinding light. When the sound wave struck them, before the first debris fell, the car was headed back for Port Van Campen. But not for long. Another side road offered a brief respite—and Quinn took it. As before, he stopped and turned the car. But, this time, he bundled the girl out into the wet night before she could protest. He stayed at the wheel, headed the vehicle along the straight stretch of the road back to town. He hoped that it would keep a straight course as he jumped through the still open door, aiming for a low, seemingly luxuriant shrub. He landed in a tangle

of thin, resilient branches, rolled over until he was brought up hard and painfully by something rough and solid.

He felt sick, and there was a sharp pain in his side, and he wondered if anything were broken. But he got to his feet, pulling himself erect by the branches that had broken his fall. He had to struggle to extricate himself from the bush. Before he was clear he heard the screaming roar of another salvo of rockets, saw the bright flare of their impact. The concussion wave almost knocked him back. He was out into the road in time to see the helicopter, its searchlight shining into a deep, smoking crater, drifting down to a landing. Shining in the brilliant beam were a few scattered shards of bright metal and polished plastic.

"It's a fool's game," he said to himself.

"What is?"

He turned, saw the white face and the white cloak of the girl glimmering pallidly in the pallid light of the roadside shrubbery.

He said, briefly, "Cops and robbers. And when you're both at once you get it from both sides, I suppose."

"Don't take it so hard, Peter. And come out of the road before you're spotted. Are you hurt?"

"I—don't know. . . My ribs, maybe. . ."

She slipped cool, efficient hands inside his shirt, ran them down his side. She said, with a confidence that he was far from feeling, "You're all right. But you'll get soaked. I don't suppose that you thought of your jacket or raincoat before you jumped. . ."

The man said stiffly, "I did well to think of as much as I did."

"Sorry. And here they are—and your pocket cannon. I managed to grab them when you threw me out."

"Thanks."

He took the pistol, slipped it into his shoulder holster. She helped him on with his outer garments. He winced a little as he pushed his arms through the sleeves. He thought that the girl was being needlessly rough—and thought, too, that she might have shown a little more gratitude.

She must have sensed his thoughts. She said, "You did well, really well. But I'm afraid that people like me are too apt to take this kind of thing as being all in the day's work. . ."

"And what now?" he asked.

She did not answer. She took her watch off her wrist, did something to it that he did not follow. She held it close to her mouth, said softly, "Calling

Lotty. Calling Lotty. This is Lettice. . ." She paused, repeated the words. There was the faintest of tinny whispers in reply. "The police have been gunning for us. They've rocketted my car. They didn't know, of course, that I was an agent. Well—I'm going to take the bull by the horns and flash my badge and demand the use of their 'copter. . . Yes—*Lotos-Land* . . . And if we don't come back. . . Yes, just that. . . Thanks—that's all. Out." To Quinn she said, "Have you any messages, Peter?"

"Any *last* messages, you mean. Give her my love and tell her Yes. I suppose it was a *her*. . ."

Jane grinned—and there was rather more meaning in the grin than was called for by the inane remark. She said—"You'd be surprised. Anyhow—that's got us covered."

"What with? A shroud? If all that chatter means merely that whoever bumps us off is going to pay dearly for the privilege—I'm still no happier."

"Don't be so morbid. Come on, now. Show these dumb cops that you aren't scared of 'em. Don't forget you're packing a gun—and don't be scared of that either. As long as you're working for us—you can do anything."

"Or anybody—as long as they don't do us first. Well—it's your party, Jane. You lead and I'll fol-

low suit. And I hope your hand has plenty of trumps in it."

"I've played the best one."

"And a fine, delayed action punch it packs, too. . ."

They took the police by surprise. The pilot of the helicopter, officially on watch, was too interested in watching his comrades searching the rocket crater to notice their approach. One of the men searching called up, "Not even enough left to make a hamburger!"

"A pity," the pilot shouted back, "she was a fine, tasty dish!"

"Excuse me," asked Jane. "Could I speak to whoever's in charge, please?"

The pilot started, turned quickly away from the crater to face the unexpected interruption. He pushed his head well out of the open window of the 'copter and stared rudely. He growled, "If you know what's good for you, lady, you an' your boy friend'll get to hell outa here—but fast!"

"But this concerns us, officer. Really, it does."

"What are you playing at up there?" bellowed somebody from the crater. A big man clambered slowly up—a big man, huge and formless in his glistening, hooded waterproof. "I told you, Clancy, to keep the public outa

this. An' now I find you enjoyin' a teetateet with some fancy broad you've found yourself."

"Are you in charge?" asked Jane.

"Yeah, sister, An' I'm tellin' you right now that this locality ain't healthy. We're out tryin' to run down the Callan Mob—an' we think we got some o' them in this car. But there may be others around—an' in the twinklin' of an eye this here peaceful roadway may become a bloody battlefield. . ."

"With the number of rocket craters it's got now it isn't a bad imitation," volunteered Quinn.

"An' who asked you to say your piece, sonny boy? Pipe down—an' let the grown-ups do the talkin'. . ."

The girl's left hand strayed up to the hood of her cloak, her right hand had slipped inside the big handbag. Quinn saw the gesture, let his own right hand creep up to the shoulder holster. The hood fell in soft folds about Jane's neck and shoulders. She stood there for a second or so, her face and head bare to the pouring rain. "Chief!" shouted the pilot suddenly, "it's them!" He almost atoned for his past slackness by the speed with which he acted. But the girl was faster. Her shot ruined an expen-

sive handbag—and the police pilot's face. The clatter of the policeman's weapon on the roadway, the slow dripping of some heavy fluid inside the cabin of the 'copter, were abnormally loud in the silence that followed the report of the heavy automatic.

"So," said the Chief slowly, a ham actor playing his part to the last, "Jenny Callan. And Rod Pendrick." He raised his big hands before the menace of Jane's levelled, rock-steady pistol.

Two of the men in the crater, fumbling in the folds of their waterproofs, pulled their guns. They were slow—slow enough for Quinn to pull his own weapon and fire twice, taking careful and deliberate aim. He had to struggle to prevent himself from picking off the last man who, arms lifted high above his head, was stumbling unsteadily over the rubble.

"Get back," Jane told the Chief. "Yes, there. To the edge of the crater. And you—" to the other survivor who had just succeeded in climbing out without the use of his hands—"stand beside him. Peter! Frisk 'em, will you? I'll keep 'em covered."

Both policemen seemed willing enough to give up their guns—each wore an automatic pistol and a blaster. Holding them

gingerly Quinn backed away from the crater lip.

"All right. Put 'em down somewhere. Get your own gun and keep these cops covered. I want to talk to them."

The policemen, standing in the glare of their helicopter's working lights, fidgetted uneasily. Quinn made a threatening gesture with his pistol and they froze into immobility. The girl put her weapon back into her ruined bag, pulled out her powder compact. She pressed and twisted it between her hands until the secret compartment opened, then walked towards the police chief. She was careful to keep out of Quinn's line of fire. She said, her voice low and honey sweet, "So I'm Jenny Callan. . . Who told you that one? Or did you make it up yourself?" The fat man said nothing. Quinn wondered how much of the moisture streaming down the broad face was rain, how much perspiration. Jane held the open compact in front of the Chief's staring eyes. "This is who I am. And you know what happens to people who tangle with the Special Service. Satisfied?" The man nodded. "All right. You haven't answered my question. Did some one tell you that I was an interstellar gangster—or did you dredge it up from the muddy

depths of your own feeble imagination? Answer, damn you!" The compact went back into the bag, the heavy pistol came out. The woman lifted it, struck the man across the face. The sharp fore-sight tore the skin over his right eye. She hit him again—and the bulbous nose flattened with an audible crunch. Quinn, watching, wanted to be sick. He hoped that somebody would make a hostile move—and give him the excuse to finish it all off cleanly and quickly.

"You'll pay for this, you witch!" The fat man cleared his throat and spat—aiming for the girl's shoes. His aim was good. She hit him again, viciously, still across the face. His knees sagged—then, suddenly, he collapsed into the mud.

"Get him up!" Jane Haldane ordered the policeman. "Jump to it, now! Keep him from falling. I haven't finished with him yet."

"All right," mumbled the Chief. "I made it up. So what?"

"So you knew, all the time, who I was?"

"I knew you were one of—Hooper's Snoopers. . ."

"There are the radium mines on Polaris III," murmured the girl, her voice low and deadly sweet. "There are the fisheries on Delagon. . . Or—" and her voice suddenly cracked like a whip—"there is the mere dis-

honorable discharge and exile you get if I care to stress the fact that you helped me in my report. What do you say?"

The man managed a feeble grin—broken teeth beneath a bloody, pulped nose—and said quickly, "I'll take your offer, Snooper. And I'll insist on the exile—I'll not last long on this world if I'm seen in *your* company."

"Right. And you?"

"Whatever you say, lady," gasped the policeman, pathetically eager to please.

"Good. First of all—get busy with the first aid kit in the 'cop-ter. You can't do much for your Chief right now—but cover the worst of it up with plaster. . ."

She turned abruptly, walked back to Quinn. He saw that her face was deathly pale—but there was a light in her eyes that he did not like. She said, "I hated having to do it."

"You're lying. Part of you may have hated it, but. . ."

"All right. Have it your own way. . . As soon as that big, fat slob has been patched up he and his men are going to take us to the *Lotos-Land*. They're going to come in with us—and introduce us. The way things are, my lad, we have only two alternatives. One is to get to hell out—the other, force a showdown. And

there's no chance of getting out till *Lady Pamela* berths in a month's time."

"Hadn't we better park our bottoms in the 'copter while we're waiting?"

"It'd be an idea. You! Patch your Chief up outside. The rain'll wash his face for him. We want to talk."

There were two dead men in the flying machine. One of them was the pilot—the other, judging by his stiffness, had been dead some little time. Quinn and the girl decided that he must have been the man behind the machine gun in the park—the one who had screamed suddenly when the gun stopped firing. The Chief had to wait still longer for his first aid while the bodies were dragged out by his subordinate and disposed neatly in the bottom of the rocket crater. And it was there, too, that the subordinate had to busy himself with antiseptics and plaster and bandages. The girl was making it hard for the policemen to make a sudden break for freedom.

She and Quinn lit cigarettes, inhaled gratefully. They relaxed—but not too much. Their pistols were ready to hand, the door of the 'copter giving an arc of fire into the crater, was open.

Quinn said, abruptly—"Put me in the picture. I'm reeling."

"All right. It seems a mess, doesn't it? More confusion than anything else. But—bear this in mind. We aren't dealing with professional criminals. We're dealing with people who are—or were—respectable citizens, who've merely had the misfortune to fall foul of the Special Service. They aren't fools—they soon tumbled to me. I don't know how. It may have been some carelessness on my part but I don't think so. It may be that they have organized some really efficient counter espionage system—but, again, I don't think so. It may have been one of those pieces of sheer bad luck that bring the best of us to grief. . . Anyhow—they know. But they couldn't have known until tonight. And they acted fast, playing by ear, making up the story as they went along. The first attempt was to get us more or less intact—alive or dead, it didn't matter. You'd be surprised what a really expert criminologist can deduce from a reasonably fresh corpse, not too badly mashed. But that failed. So they tried to get us anyhow, probably reasoning that it would be less embarrassing not to have a couple of corpses to dispose of. . ."

"There's one thing I don't like," suggested Quinn. "That Police Chief. He's a tough guy—"

and there's more to him than shows on the surface. Before you started on him he was talking like the dumbest of dumb cops—and then he dropped his screen and lapsed into more or less civilized English. And he's a tough guy, as I said. His sort don't give in so easily. Where's the catch?"

"There is a catch, Peter. I don't know what it is. But by playing a bold hand we stand a chance of throwing *their* game into confusion. It won't be a very skillful game—and I can improvise at least as well as they can."

"Could be. Another point—how do we sit on the way to *Lotos-Land*? Wouldn't it be better, perhaps, if I took the controls, with you holding a watch-brief from the stern?"

"No. We'll have 'em both in front, where we can see 'em."

"But didn't quite a few high officials on Kalabon bump themselves off when you had the trouble there?"

"True. But what were their motives? They might, I admit, have died to keep their secret inviolable—but it seems to me that after their secret had been destroyed they just didn't feel like going on living. Whatever the secret is—it hasn't been destroyed here. They still hope that it won't be, that they'll be able to

get rid of us somehow, to cover up. . ."

"Junior's finished patching his boss's face."

"Good." She raised her voice, called into the crater—"You can come up now. One of you take the controls—I don't care which one. The other sit beside him."

The subordinate police officer took the pilot's seat, his Chief lowered his clumsy bulk into the chair beside him. The vanes started to revolve, their steady swishing building up into a throbbing roar. The little craft lifted, rocking slightly.

"*Lotos-Land*, Chief, Captain, whatever you call yourself. And you're coming in with us."

"But why. . .?"

"I'm asking the questions. Do I have to get nasty again? But this *Lotos-Land* is the headquarters of whatever it is you people are hiding—and I'll find out what it is if I have to tear the dump apart with my bare hands!"

"All right. Do as the lady says, Moore."

The 'copter came around—and a distant light that had been shining almost right astern now showed ahead. It was a beacon of some kind, flashing alternately red and green. But its colors were soft, somehow, lacked the hard clarity to be expected from navi-

gational aids. The rain may have been in part responsible—but only in part. The colors of the alternate flashes merged gently, did not succeed each other with harsh abruptness. It was a pulsation rather than a flashing. It was the first beautiful thing that Quinn had seen on this drab world.

The light was right beneath them now—and the opalescent glow tinted the down-driving raindrops, making of them slim, straight pillars of shifting, changing light. And as the helicopter drifted slowly down its whirling vanes, above the transparent roof of the cabin, were an impossible rainbow hanging in the sky against all the laws of physics.

The 'copter groupded gently on a flat roof. Before them was a tower from the top of which the beacon glowed and faded, glowed and faded. A door opened and a flood of warm, amber light poured out, shimmering from the wet roof top like a golden river. The police pilot taxied his craft into the bare, unfurnished compartment thus revealed. The door shut behind them. There was a sighing of smoothly functioning machinery, a faint sensation of falling. The elevator stopped gently. Another door opened. As the two policemen stepped out, followed by Quinn and Jane

Haldane, attendants hurried forward to take their damp outer clothing.

One of them—a girl, clad in a simple white tunic—gave a little gasp of horror. "Sir! Captain Clane! Your face—I didn't recognize you. Let me take you. . ."

"Never mind that." Jane's voice was all authority. "See that we're taken to a table—a good one. And I want plenty of people around us."

"But, Madam—the Commissioner. . . And this other gentleman—his face is scratched and his clothes are muddy."

Clane sighed. "Do as the lady says, Louella. She's the boss around here."

The girl shrugged shapely shoulders. She made a little gesture with her hands that said as plainly as words, that if the customers were nuts it was no concern of hers. Two of the other girl attendants vanished somewhere with the discarded coats. The fourth, a man, went into the elevator with the helicopter. The doors slid shut and a soft sighing of machinery told that the flying machine had been removed to the garage.

Quinn glanced at his reflection in one of the tall mirrors that formed the walls of this vestibule. As the attendant had said, his face was scratched. He had the beginnings of a black eye.

His trousers were torn just above the right knee and his shoes were filthy. But in comparison with Clane he was a tailor's dummy. The Police Chief's face had been bandaged with more enthusiasm than discretion, and from beneath the stained bandages blood had trickled and dried. The ornate, glittering uniform was neat enough—but the man's linen was badly soiled by a brown crust of dried blood. His subordinate was unmarked—but in these surroundings he looked clumsy and ill at ease. Of them all only Jane Haldane was impeccably neat, assured, confident. She had refused to surrender her cloak, wore it with the hood falling about neck and shoulders, carried it with what was almost a swagger. Her face was pale and hard, colorless except for the vivid lips. Her eyes seemed a cold, steel gray rather than blue. She made no attempt, as she could easily have done, to conceal the ragged hole in her handbag through which she had shot the police pilot.

She said, allowing an undertone of impatience to creep into her voice—"Take us to a table. For four. And I want plenty of people around us."

"Certainly, Madam."

The girl led the way across the polished floor. At their approach doors opened upon a glowing

haze of amber light. There were the soft, sensuous strains of Hawaiian guitars, a wave of warm, space-laden air that carried all the drowsiness of the lights and the music.

"But this is all wrong!" said Quinn loudly.

Jane Haldane turned to look at him, a wry smile flickering at the corners of her full mouth. "What's all wrong?"

"Only the name. *Lotos-Land*. I expected something all incense and temple bells, green eyes of little yellow gods and all the rest of it. The phoney Oriental motif."

"Lotos, with two 'o's, Peter, not Lotus. Don't you remember the poetry they tried to stuff into you at school?"

*In the afternoon they came unto
a land
In which it seemèd always
afternoon . . .*

"But it's still wrong—I grant you that. The people who discovered the original Lotos-Land were on their way home from the Siege of Troy—and that was in the Mediterranean, not Earth's Pacific. But why worry? Whoever designed this place has captured the essential spirit of it all quite well . . ."

"Your table, Madam."

"Thank you. This will do."

They sat down. Quinn became

aware that those around them were staring at them. He flushed—but stared back. The majority of the customers were native born—soft, flabby, yet with a suggestion of viciousness. Their women wore a not unpleasant air of decadence. But there was a sprinkling of officers from the fort, both men and women, although of these the seniors seemed, in some indefinable way, to have gone native. The juniors—fresh-faced lads not long from Earth—had yet to lose the hardness, the toughness instilled by Terrestrial military academies. Quinn could see why Jane had insisted on a table well surrounded by others. In the event of a showdown she could call upon the officers for aid—and could expect it from the juniors at least . . .

But this was a puzzling thing. His own pay, as Second Pilot, had been far in excess of that of a mere Ensign—and yet he, even with the money accumulated during the voyage to draw upon, had not been able to afford *Lotos-Land*. He remembered then—something that the girl, Annalyn, had told him during the course of an unimportant conversation. There were special rates here for officers—for *military* officers. They were stationed here permanently. They, it would seem, must somehow be seduced

from their allegiance to the Federation, must be converted into loyal servants of whatever, or whoever it was that was running this world. So loyal that they would do as the Commandant did on Kalabon should the need arise . . .

A waiter, a man attired in effeminate, softly flowing, pastel colored robes, was standing by their table. He bowed. "Captain Clane, your order? We have a fresh shipment of Salerian wine . . ."

"We'll have some wine," said Jane. "We need it. Bring the bottle from that table—the one that's just been opened."

"Madam!"

"Do as the lady says, Roberto," grunted the Chief.

"You can tell him if you like, Clane—who and what I am. I told you—I'm forcing a showdown. Better still—go up to where the band is playing—there's a mike there. Stop the music. Make a public announcement."

"But . . ."

"Do as I say." The pistol—ugly, incongruous, blued steel gleaming greasily—came out of the handbag. "Get going," she ordered. "Peter, I'll be covering Clane. You stand by to shoot anybody who makes trouble."

The waiter gulped, his face turned a dirty yellow. He ex-

postulated feebly, "But, Madam . . ."

"That wine, Roberto," ordered Quinn. "The lady is thirsty. I'm thirsty." He gestured with his pistol. "So what about it?"

The music ceased in mid, sighing note. There was a subdued clamor from the patrons and, high and clear, the angry voice of the woman from whose table the wine had been taken. Her escort got to his feet, walked a little unsteadily after the unfortunate Roberto and his booty. He was a big man—but a bigness of fat rather than of muscle. His heavy jowls were quivering angrily. He said, to Quinn's dumb, embarrassed companion—"And you a policeman! To allow such doings! See that my property is returned!"

"I'm sorry," said Quinn, insincerely. "We took your wine because we were afraid that the management might have us poisoned . . ."

"Return it at once, you young hooligan! Don't you know who I am? I am Altairian Mines . . ."

"You'll be a lead mine yourself if you aren't careful," Quinn told him happily.

"Quinn! Stop being so damned childish!" Her voice was a slap in the face. "Don't argue with these people. Shoot quick if you have to—preferably in the belly."

The mining executive paled. He started to back away, back towards his own table. He brushed against another in his clumsy retreat, and a bottle fell, smashing noisily. But the occupants of this table paid no heed. They were staring steadily at Quinn—no, past Quinn, at Jane Haldane. The eyes of the man, dull glowing, held a bitter hatred. His hand toyed stealthily with the lapel of his coat—and Quinn had an uneasy feeling that it concealed a holster. He slipped back the safety catch on his own pistol. He heard the woman say, in a low yet carrying whisper. "No. No, I say. Aveling will handle her."

Jane called, her voice high and clear, "Well, what are you waiting for, Clane? Get it over with!"

The concealed speakers crackled slightly, then Clane's thick voice came booming out. "Attention, please, ladies and gentlemen. I have the pleasure to announce that we have distinguished guests with us tonight—Miss Jane Haldane, of the Federation's Special Service, and Mr. Peter Quinn, late Second Pilot of the interstellar liner *Lady May* . . ."

There was a sudden hush. The simulated thunder of the surf was low and ominous, the rustling of the artificial wind in the

palm fronds had become suddenly sinister. Quinn knew that the announcement of his name and past rank—and he must settle with Clane some time for that over-emphasis of the word "late"—could never have had that effect. Neither could Jane Haldane's name. As a person—to anybody not aware of her ruthlessness—she would be no more than a rather attractive brunette. As an Agent of the Special Service she ranked, in the absence of any superior officer, as Viceroy for the central government with the power of life and death.

He stole a quick glance behind him, looked briefly at Jane sitting at ease, her right hand playing with the heavy pistol, coolly insolent and hard, in this setting of sensuous warmth and softness. He saw, too, the tall man who walked slowly down an avenue between the palms, his feet sliding softly over the polished floor that had all the appearance, but not the texture, of wind-drifted sand. If Jane were Viceroy this man was king in his own world—and a king whose powers had yet to be discovered. He bore himself with an assurance in startling contrast to the uneasiness all around him. Like his staff he wore a long, flowing robe, glowing softly golden in the golden light—but there was

nothing effeminate about either him or his attire. He bowed—with just a touch of condescension.

He said, "My name is Aveling. I am manager of this establishment. Perhaps I can help you."

Guiltily, Quinn resumed his watch. He saw that he could expect no further trouble from the mining executive, that the man whose eyes betrayed his hate so starkly no longer played with his lapel and whatever it concealed. He heard Jane say, "If an Agent of the Special Service calls upon you for help, Aveling, you will help. You know what I'm here for."

"Yes. There have been rumors, haven't there? I can assure you, Miss Haldane, that I shall be able to convince you of the innocence of this world and all its people."

"Perhaps. Well—start convincing me."

"It must take time. But pardon me—isn't your friend permitted to join in this conversation?"

"He has his job. I have no wish to leave my back uncovered."

"But nobody will shoot you or stab you in the back. You have my word."

There was a short pause. "I'll take it. Peter—you can join the party. But don't put your pistol away. Keep our friend here cov-

ered. If anybody starts anything one of us should get him."

Aveling smiled. He was lounging easily in Clane's chair. The policeman had got to his feet, had surrendered his own seat to his superior, but the Police Chief remained standing. There was a hint of deference in his manner—he could have been some high military officer standing behind a throne.

Aveling said, "It's a long story. I can't tell it to you now. There's much that you must see for yourself before I can make things clear. But—this isn't the only *Lotos-Land*. There's another club, residential, about six hours' flying time from here. I'd like to take you there."

"Yes. You would."

"And I will give my word that no harm will come either to you or to your companion."

Jane smiled. She said, her voice soft and thoughtful, "I believe you. Funnily enough, I believe you. Yet—I *know* that there's something wrong, badly wrong, with this world and all its people. But you're sincere—and that's dangerous. Could it be, do you think, that our ideas as to what constitutes harm might not coincide?" She went on talking, half to herself. "But it's a chance, and I'm taking it. I'm strong—that's why I'm in this job. Strong enough to fight

any philosophy ever spawned by alien minds." She turned suddenly to Quinn, asked, her voice sharp, "But what about you?"

Quinn picked up the neglected bottle of stolen wine. He poured himself a generous goblet full. He sipped appreciatively—then said, "Pardon me. But I've been needing that." The alcohol brought memories to the surface of his mind: "I've attended a performance of the Martruskian Mysteries. Years ago, that was. The girl who took me was a convert—and a missionary. And all that I wanted to do afterwards was take a good, hot shower with plenty of soap—the disinfectant kind, not scented . . ."

"You see?" asked Aveling. "I know the type. The spaceman, pure and simple. All the poetry, all the philosophy of all the worlds held in one short phrase—Men against the stars. And anything not covered by that—just does not exist. Not for you, Peter Quinn."

Aveling smiled—but the charm of it was wasted on Jane. She snapped, "When you two have quite finished with the amateur psychiatry we'll get going. And give me that wine, somebody, before Quinn hogs it all . . ." Aveling beckoned to one of his waiters. "No, thanks. Just half a goblet is all I need. Now,



this other place of yours, six hours flying time from here. Is that by 'copter or Spurling?"

"Spurling, Miss Haldane."

"And you have a Spurling here?"

"Several. I . . ."

"Take us to your garage, then. And you're coming with us, Clane. And—is that the Fort Commandant there, Aveling? Tell him I want him. He's to come, too. I'm not going to risk any repetition of what happened on Kalabon—not when I shall be at the receiving end."

A waiter, at Aveling's orders, half ran to where the dapper little man in Brigadier's uniform was sitting, whispered a message. The soldier got slowly to his feet, walked with deliberate leisureliness to where Jane Haldane was waiting. He saluted—and although the gesture was impeccably correct it held a measure of that indefinable military crime known as "dumb insolence." Clane, anxious perhaps to assert himself, began, "Miss Haldane, this is Brigadier . . ."

"You needn't bother. I know his name. If I didn't—I shouldn't be interested . . ."

The soldier flushed angrily, said nothing. Quinn, watching him, saw that his anger had had to struggle to come to the surface of the dull, lack-lustre eyes. He realized that those eyes, or

their like, were a distinguishing feature of half the population of Altair VI.

"Quinn!" Jane Haldane had risen to her feet, was tapping impatiently on the floor with one, polished shoe. "Are you sober enough to pilot a Spurling?"

The spaceman swept her a reckless bow. "To Far Centaurus if it please your ladyship!"

Aveling interceded. "He'll be all right by the time we get to the garage. Good Salerian takes some people this way—but the effects soon wear off . . ."

"I hope you're right. All right, Aveling—you lead the way. You next, Clane—and you, Brigadier. *You*—" The policeman, who was shuffling his feet unhappily stiffened to attention. "You can stay here. Don't put your gun away yet, Quinn—you may be needing it. Let's go."

There were, as Aveling had told them, several Spurlings in the garage. Jane inspected them briefly, selected a big eight seater. Quinn checked the controls. He did not anticipate any difficulty in handling the job—she was a recent model, well-kept, with turret drive and no unconventional features. He took the pilot's seat, forward. Clane and the Brigadier sat immediately behind him, then, by himself, Aveling. In the rear,

covering them all with her pistol, was the girl.

The Spurling was already on the ramp leading up to the landing field—only the helicopters, of course, used the roof platform. The little auxiliary motor whined and the ship edged slowly up the incline. The big, double doors slid open before her. It was raining still outside—but the sky to the eastward was a dirty, pallid gray that told that sunrise was not far off. Above them, from the roof tower of *Lotos-Land*, pulsed the soft-glowing beacon, throwing a river of rainbow light over the wet, glistening tarmac. Quinn turned in his seat, called, "Where to, Aveling?"

"Get upstairs, Quinn, as soon as you like—then put her on a compass course of 270. Clane will give you directions after that. This isn't the first time he's made the trip."

The Spurling quivered and steam billowed around her as her down-pointing jets struck the wet ground. Slowly, carefully, he eased the turret drive from the vertical to the horizontal. There were no shocks, none of the crushing weight of sudden acceleration that is considered good airmanship by so many private pilots. And the glowing beacon of *Lotos-Land* flashed by under them in a split second that

told that the roaring jets must already be exerting their maximum drive. Quinn hardly noticed it. He watched his glowing, clicking compass card, his hands steady on the control column, until he was satisfied—then switched over to automatic.

He turned in his seat, asked, "Well?"

"She'll do on this course for the next hour or so," Clane told him.

"Will she?" demanded Jane. "Have you any charts there, Peter? Perhaps if Aveling were to tell us where his *residential club* really is we could cut a few corners. We're not potential customers, you know, to be taken by a circuitous, confusing route. One visit, so far as we're concerned, will be plenty."

Aveling smiled. "It was silly of us, Miss Haldane, to have tried to confuse you. Just, shall we say, force of habit . . . It will save time, I think, if you take her back to *Lotos-Land*, take your departure from there. You'll find a chart—it's in a secret compartment under the chart drawer—with the Great Circle Course laid off . . . Do you mind, Miss Haldane? I'll have to go forward to open the drawer for him. . . ."

"I suppose you have to. But let him swing her first."

It was almost full daylight

ahead now and below them the drab rectangles of cultivated fields were plainly visible, as was the long, low graceful structure of *Lotos-Land* as it lifted over the ragged line of the horizon. Little black specks hovered over the roof of the building—hovered and then fled in the direction of Port Van Campen, the last of the homing helicopters, their owners doubtless hastening to the destruction of papers and other evidence so soon as they should reach their homes. It was a little like an upset beehive—but these bees were intent upon flight, never upon attack.

Moving cautiously, careful that none of his movements could possibly be construed as hostile by the girl with the gun, Aveling fumbled with the little, sliding chart table under the chart drawer on Quinn's right. There was a sharp click and the top of the table lifted, revealing a small scale chart. There were the environs of Port Van Campen shown on it, and *Lotos-Land*, ringed with violet ink, and the arc of a Great Circle, its initial course 065, leading towards and over the twin, rounded peaks known as Simbala's Breasts. So much Quinn saw—but, good pilot that he was, he was giving Aveling only half of his attention. He was watching, too, a black speck against the gray sky

ahead—a black streak, rather. It was another Spurling—a small two seater—and it came up fast, climbing as it came, on the reciprocal of their course. Quinn was suddenly uneasy. He kicked his ship around viciously with the steering jet. The other Spurling came screaming down—and the tip of its starboard wing just missed slicing off Quinn's stabilizer.

He heard Clane curse, heard Aveling say gaspingly, but with surprising calm, "This . . . none of our doing . . . Miss Haldane . . . Please put . . . that gun . . . down . . . Another shock . . . and might go off . . ."

Quinn climbed—and the strange Spurling climbed faster. But he was able easily to avoid being rammed from beneath—there was not much difference in climbing speeds—although unable to keep his advantage of altitude. He looked into the cabin of the other ship as it roared past, saw the man from *Lotos-Land*—the man with bitter hate in his eyes and a shoulder holster under his coat. Clane must have seen him too, for he cursed. "Clementi-Smith! The fool!"

Behind him Jane gasped audibly. Her voice, for all its smooth, controlled calm, was excited. "An uncommon name, Clane. A brother, perhaps, on Kalabon

... Manager—Kalabon Ceramics ..."

"Brother — hell!. Clementi-Smith was Kalabon Ceramics ..."

Quinn cut the drive, put the ship into a steep fall. The shifting stresses sent a wave of pain flooding out from his bruised left arm and side and for a moment he blacked out. When the haze cleared from in front of his eyes he saw that Clementi-Smith had passed again, had barely missed again, and, not more than a hundred feet below, was already pulling out of his power dive. Quinn kicked the ship around with the steering jet, cut in the drive with an audible, bone shaking thud, put the big, clumsy Spurling into a dizzy climb. Astern, Clementi-Smith roared up on his flaming jets; regained with discouraging ease his suicidal advantage of altitude.

In the rear of the Spurling, Jane was determinedly ferreting out facts. Quinn wondered vaguely if it were genuine detachment or if it were a device to hide the fear that she would hardly be human not to feel.

"But ... Clementi-Smith posted as missing after blow-up ..."

"Yeah—he was missing, all right. He wasn't there. As soon as your people got too warm he took a powder."

Damn Clementi-Smith . . .

thought Quinn, taking violent evasive action once more. He didn't like the way that his ship was creaking with every sudden dive or turn—she had never been designed for this kind of thing. *Much more of this*, he thought, *and I shall be shedding wings all over the landscape*. He called plaintively over his shoulder, "Isn't there a radio in this crate? Can't somebody call the police or the military?"

Quinn pulled the control column aft until it was vertical, until the roaring jets were pointing straight downwards. The Spurling seemed to jump straight up, her passengers were forced down into their cushioned seats. The pain in Quinn's side was sickening and he blacked out again, barely aware that the other ship had skimmed by a bare foot or so beneath them. When he recovered the Spurling was still climbing slowly, with no headway. And above, not more than a thousand feet, Clementi-Smith was peeling off into another of his suicidal, murderous dives.

The Brigadier, who must have been busy with the radio, suddenly broke his silence. He said, "They're sending two fighters from the fort. Sorry I've been so long—had to be sure of getting pilots who'll be on our side—not his . . . About fifteen minutes

... Can you hold him off that long?"

"No. But I'll finish it now. I'm tired of this."

Quinn put the Spurling into a steep dive, pushed forward on the control column. The wet, gray earth rushed up to meet them, the grove of mis-shapen trees for which he was steering expanded in apparent size with terrifying rapidity. Somebody tried to reach around him to seize the controls—by the insignia on the sleeve he saw that it was Clane. And there was the sound of something hard connecting violently with something not so hard—a pistol barrel and the nape of a bull neck?—and the thick, hairy hand suddenly relaxed, hung limply. Aveling said, "Don't interfere. He knows what he's doing. I hope ..."

Quinn turned in his seat, almost fainting with the pain of it. He looked past the unconscious Clane, the pale, set faces of Aveling and the Brigadier and the girl, saw that Clementi-Smith, not so far astern, was following fast with all the power of his jets added to that of gravity. He grinned weakly and turned back to his controls. The clump of trees was very close now. He could see individual branches, twigs—leaves almost. He gasped. "Now!" He pulled

back on the column, saw the flame and smoke of his jets roaring out ahead of him, managed to push himself to one side just in time to escape being transfixed by the column as the sudden deceleration slammed him forward. In the rear of the Spurling something parted with a loud rending noise—he hoped vaguely that it was nothing important.

Just over them, barely ahead of them, Clementi-Smith came roaring in. Acceleration forced Quinn back in his seat and he did not see the tangled wreckage just beyond the trees. He saw the blinding flash reflected from his instrument panel, felt the blast that lifted the big Spurling all of five hundred feet. He started to speak—and the final thunder of Clementi-Smith's passing drowned his voice, forced the words back into his throat. Before the crashing echoes had died the Brigadier said hoarsely, "I can use pilots like you, Quinn. If you ever leave the Special Service ..."

Said Aveling, his voice calm, unhurried, "Might I suggest a return to *Lotos-Land* for minor repairs? I am sure that we all need them ..."

Jane's reply was contemptuous. "Perhaps Clane does—but we'll push on. What about you, Peter—and what about the ship?"

"I'll be all right—I can put her on automatic . . . But I heard something go. What was it?"

"Just a seat."

The Brigadier asked suddenly. "What about Clane?"

"H'm . . ." Aveling sounded mildly interested rather than regretful. "I'm afraid I hit him a little too hard . . ."

"Slow down, will you, Peter—there's too much slipstream to get this door open . . ."

"But . . . Miss Haldane!" Quinn heard the soldier expostulate.

"He's dead, isn't he?" asked Aveling reasonably.

The Spurling jumped slightly as the excess weight was jettisoned. Quinn did not look back—he didn't want to see what they were doing. He concentrated on getting the ship on to her Great Circle course, on making the necessary adjustments to the automatic pilot. He looked up from his work only when the two fighters from the fort screamed overhead, came around in a tight circle, fell into station one on either side of the Spurling.

"These pilots," Jane Haldane asked, "who can be trusted not to do a Clementi-Smith act on us . . .? They're fresh out from Earth, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Then tell them to follow us.

After what's happened a fighter escort won't come amiss."

Quinn slept most of the way to the twin peaks. It was an uneasy sleep, for his arm and side were paining him and he was dimly conscious, throughout, of the clicking of the automatic pilot, of every creak and groan of the overstrained structure of the Spurling.

Somebody was shaking him. It was Jane. She was saying, "Wake up, Peter. Wake up. We're almost there."

He opened gummy eyelids, tried to stretch himself—but the pain and stiffness in his left arm and side made him abandon the attempt. He yawned hugely. He looked ahead and down—saw barely through the rain-bleared forward transparency the twin, symmetrical masses of Simbala's Breasts. He heard Aveling explaining.

"Ordinarily, with strangers, we come in from the eastward. The peaks look altogether different from that angle, could pass for the Ass's Ears, hundreds of miles away. With the phoney courses we steer, it's easy to put the deception across. . ."

"I'm not interested in that—now." Jane's voice was crisp, decisive. "We're here, Aveling. What next?"

"Shall I bring her in?" asked

the Brigadier. "I know the marks."

"No," Quinn told him. "I may as well finish the job. Somebody tell me the courses and I'll manage."

The peaks were below them now, were sliding astern fast. There was no sign on their rounded slopes, covered with a lichenous growth, of any habitation, human or otherwise. The plains below and beyond them were bare of any life save the vegetable.

"Start bringing her around," ordered Aveling. "Bring her to 180." To the Brigadier, he said, "Tell your fighter pilots to drop astern and follow. . . You see that low, rounded hill? That's the Mole. Get it and the nipple of the South Breast in line. . . Yes, that's it. . . Cut your speed, prepare for a landing. . . See that ledge, that flat ledge? Do you think you can set her down there?"

"Of course."

The big Spurling turned again, her speed slackening. The roar of the jets died to a muted murmur, and the venturis were now pointing straight downwards rather than astern. The ship drifted down, slowly, slowly—and the dark gray mass of the South Breast filled all the sky to starboard. She grounded

with a barely perceptible jar and the billowing steam burst from wet ground and sodden vegetation at the flaming touch of the drive. And when the drive was cut and the quivering ship was still the steam clouds slowly condensed and thinned and formed an infinitesimal part of the light, drizzling rain—but the stench of burning carrion remained. Quinn looked astern. He saw the two fighters land, one after the other, saw each one shrouded in the evil-smelling mist of its own making.

"There's a cave there," said Aveling pointing. "Taxi her in."

"No," snapped Jane. "Leave her outside. You never know, Aveling—I might want to make a quick getaway."

"You won't Miss Haldane."

"And the promise you made?"

"I'm keeping it. That's one reason why you and Quinn won't need to leave in a hurry."

Jane shrugged. She opened the door of the Spurling, called to the two military pilots—two fresh, eager youths—who had climbed out of their ships, who had walked across to the big Spurling for further instructions. She said, "There's your general here—but I've superceded him. You know who I am, of course. You'll take your orders from me. Are you both armed? Good. Follow us to

wherever Aveling takes us—and if he or anybody or anything else, makes a hostile move, shoot. Understand?"

"Yes," said one of the pilots, a little sullenly.

"Are you ready?" asked Aveling.

"As soon as you are. What about you, Peter? You look all in. What about staying in the Spurling, keeping her ready for a quick blast off?"

"No. It's been an interesting party so far—and I don't want to miss the last of it."

"You're a liability, you know, Peter, in your condition. I could order you. . ."

"And I *would* refuse."

"Oh—all right. You—" She turned to the more sullen of the two army pilots—"Stay with my Spurling. Keep her warmed up and ready."

Aveling led the way across the short, pulpy grass. Quinn envied the man his air of ease and well-being. He, himself, was stiff and tired, was cold and wet and miserable. He almost wished that he had stayed with the ship.

Aveling, his manner easily conversational, flung out a possessive hand, began, "Of course, it wasn't altogether accidental my stumbling upon this place. I am, in such spare time as the Federation allows me, an archaeologist, and I was looking for

traces of whatever race was here before *we* came. You've seen, of course, the few, pitiful bones that they've left—or you've read about them and seen pictures of them. They must have been humanoid, these people—as near human as makes no difference—and, if that is indeed true, they must have left something more than their own bones. Hills were a promising line of approach—hills and mountains. Hills and mountains mean—caves. Warm, dry dens for the tribe to huddle in without having to turn builder—and, along every wall, a canvas waiting for the primitive artist with his crude but effective pigments, for the vivid depictions of the highlights in the life of a simple, unspoiled people.

"I must have nosed around every hill and every mountain of this blasted, wet world—and I must have burrowed and scrambled through every cave under every one of them. *This*—" He pointed ahead to the dark opening, close now—"was one of the last. The last. Because I found here what I was looking for."

Jane, ever practical, asked, "Shouldn't we have brought lights? But I thought. . . A residential club, you said."

"We shan't need lights. You answered your own question, Miss Haldane. One does not take

ropes and pickaxes and torches to explore a—*residential club*. . . But, perhaps, the Special Service. . .”

“That’s enough. Go on with your story.”

“I found this cave.” Aveling stooped a little, passed into the opening. The Brigadier followed him. Jane pulled her pistol from her bag, slipped back the safety catch with an audible ominous click, followed the two men. Quinn pulled his own weapon, followed. The army pilot muttered, “I don’t like this,” and his bulk blocked out the last of the light behind Quinn.

Ahead, Jane complained, “It’s dark. Why couldn’t we have come in by that larger tunnel?”

“It doesn’t lead anywhere, Miss Haldane. We use it just as a hangar for our flying machines. But there’s no hurry. We’ll wait a few minutes, let our eyes become accustomed to the dim light.”

“I don’t like this,” complained the army pilot again in a loud, carrying whisper.

“There’s some kind of light ahead,” said Quinn. He could see the forms of the others in vague silhouette against a faint, golden glow—a glow that grew stronger as he watched, as his eyes became used to it.

“Shall we push on?” asked Aveling. He did not wait for a

reply but, stooping slightly, made off towards the dim, amber radiance. Like a little terrier, the Brigadier trotted after. Jane called softly, “Come on, you two. But be careful.” Quinn, stepping cautiously, became suddenly aware that the fine sand underfoot was dry, that the air was dry and warm. There was an indefinable spicy scent, unfamiliar, that could have been either pleasant or unpleasant.

A little spark showed in the dimness ahead—a ruddy point of light that glowed and faded rhythmically. It lit Aveling’s thin, young-old face as he turned to say something to Jane. He was smoking. The tobacco smoke, drifting back to Quinn on the outdraft from the cave, was acrid, bitter. He wondered what it was that the Altairian was smoking, pulled out his own case and took a cigarette. After two puffs he threw it down disgustedly. It had the same flavor as the tobacco that Aveling was using.

“And now,” Aveling was saying, “we come to the cave itself.” He pushed aside a screen of fronds and creepers that hung like a living curtain. The light, soft though it was, was for a moment, dazzling. It flooded out into the tunnel in a warm, amber haze. And with the light came the strange, spicy scent—

almost overpowering now, warm, intoxicating—and what sounded like the rhythmic beating of countless tiny drums.

"I call this—*Lotos-Land*," whispered Aveling. "My other *Lotos-Land* is only a pale shadow of *this*, is only the shoddiest *ersatz*. Art can never do more than imitate Nature—and I never even tried to imitate. . ."

Quinn saw the Brigadier reach for his cigarette case with a trembling hand, saw him put a cigarette between his lips with obvious distaste. He wondered why the man should spoil the. . . the beauty of it all by the performance of a meaningless, repugnant rite. For it was beautiful. Not the kind of beauty to which Quinn was accustomed—the beauty of clean lines that limned raw power, the stark beauty of the stars and the black gulfs between the stars. This was soft, and warm, all gold and glowing orange-green and misty crimson, curves that held grace in every line but lacked symmetry. It was like . . . like . . . Quinn's bemused brain searched for a simile. It was like some paintings he had seen once, in an exhibition of Twentieth Century art, by a man called. . . Dali.

He relaxed then. The important point had been cleared up. Nothing mattered now. Aveling

offered him a cigarette, smiled softly when he refused, took one himself. Jane, beside him was saying, her voice deliberately harsh, "And is this your residential club, Aveling?"

"A part of it. It's lovely, isn't it? I don't know how many species of plant there are here—but they all seem to live in the happiest symbiosis. Some act as air-conditioning units, some supply light. And there are flowering plants, and others give fruit—and when once you've tasted the fruit of the lotos you'll want nothing else. But, when I found it, there was something missing. . . The flowers were beautiful, but not as beautiful as they are now. The moss underfoot was sparse, harsh to the skin. In many places the rocky ribs of the mountain showed through. There wasn't this softness, this luxuriance of curve and convolution, of pendant, glowing fruit clusters. It wasn't. . . strong then. That's how I was able to get away without becoming hopelessly enslaved from the very first. I got out to the wet, drab mountain slope, to my waiting Spurling. And I sat down in the soft-padded seat, that wasn't one quarter so soft as the moss in here even then, and I. . . No. I'll not tell you that now."

"You. . . will," said Jane with difficulty. She seemed dazed.

"Will I, my dear? You dropped that ugly gun of yours some twenty paces back. . ."

"I don't like this," muttered the army pilot—but his voice lacked conviction.

"There was one thing lacking," Aveling continued, leading them on down an avenue of what could have been tree-ferns—but tree-ferns of a lush fleshiness never to be seen anywhere but here. "The creatures for whom all this loveliness was intended as a . . . bait. They weren't too unlike us, the humanoids who were here, who lived and died here, before our ships dropped down from the stars. They played their part in the symbiosis. They supplied. . . something. No—nothing crudely physical, I'm convinced of that. . ."

Quinn half tripped over something, saw that it was Jane's cloak. He became aware of his feet, wondered why he should be walking shod over this moss with a pile like that of the finest rug from the Matrabanian looms. He kicked off his shoes. He dropped his jacket beside them.

"This," said Aveling softly, "was an interesting experiment. A gamble. Clane didn't want to take the chance, wanted to dispose of you both by his strong-arm methods. I told him that it wouldn't work, that if it did it

would bring the long arm of the Federation stretching out for us. But—you, my dear, and you, Quinn, are the first of your kind who've been here. You are both the servants of a dream. The others who came, who find here the only Heaven they will ever know, have no dream. They are tired, my dear. The race is tired. And yet your Federation, with its empty visions of Galactic Empire, still pushes out and on to the more distant stars, still colonizes drab worlds such as this with poor exiles who would have led moderately happy lives on the kindlier worlds from which they were dragged on the orders of some soulless authority."

Again Quinn stumbled. He fell against Jane. The touch of her bare flesh against his tingled sweetly. He kept his arm around her. He was dimly aware that she responded—dimly. There was no urgency in their desire. It could wait—and the waiting itself would be part of the drowsy euphoria through which he was moving, through which they were both moving, as in some golden, shimmering dream. From far away came Aveling's voice.

But Quinn was trying to think, vaguely aware that this was wrong. He saw Jane's bag ahead. Cigarettes! Something about

cigarettes and Aveling. Then the thought flickered away, and he kicked the bag aside into the thick moss. Jane laughed uncertainly and threw her watch after it. Aveling had turned aside, but Jane's laugh caught his attention. And Quinn stared with a last effort, trying to remember something. Aveling grinned at them.

"I will leave you now. There is food here, and drink—all in the lotos fruit. There is warmth and comfort that you will know nowhere else and, for music, the sweet drumming of falling water on the leaves and petals of the great, sweet scented flowers that flaunt themselves where the streams come tumbling down from the outside world. There are others here, many others, but they will not disturb you. Even if they knew who you were—they would not trouble you. For this is *Lotos-Land*.

"Sleep well. Sleep—and forget the grim, drab world that you have left behind you. . . Or, remembering, remember it only as a strange, unhappy dream.

"I will come back to you. When you have. . . rested there will, I fear, be work for you to do—for is not that the law of the Federation? There will be your report to make, Jane—a report that will clear this world and its people of all suspicion, that will

set the hounds of the Special Service baying off on some other scent. There will be, perhaps, the work that Clementi-Smith started, and bungled so disastrously, to carry on. Why should we be selfish, keep our dream—no, our reality—to ourselves?"

The golden haze closed in around Aveling, his voice blended with muffled pulse of the little drums that, in turn, marched in rhythm with the slow rhythm of the blood. Quinn saw dimly the young-old face, gently smiling, the incongruous spark of the cigarette that glowed and faded, glowed and faded, in time to the drums. Then Aveling raised his hand in farewell, was gone. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered any more. There was the moss beneath him, softly resilient, and the air, warm and spicy drowsily intoxicating; and there was her mouth on his, and her body, all languorous desire. . . .

And the rhythm of the drums.

Jane and Quinn were reclining by the pool that served them for their simple toilet. Quinn was at ease, stretched out lazily, watching the slowly drifting spray of the waterfall that fell in a tenuous smoke from the cavern roof. He felt as well as he had ever felt in his life. He felt—when he thought of them at all—a

vague pity for his comrades in the Service, for the slaves of control boards and plotting machines, the ill-rewarded servants of the ships. Yet he wondered, dimly, what was the cause of the strange, uncomfortable fidgetiness that came over him from time to time. He watched Jane roll over, edge herself towards the pool. She raised herself on her elbows, peered long and intently into the still, unruffled surface of the water.

She said, plaintively, "Peter—my hair. . . And my mouth. . ."

She got slowly and gracefully to her feet, looked down at him. Her black hair was tangled, was falling around her face—but it suited her. Her lips were well enough shaped not to need the aid of artificial coloring. Her body glowed softly golden in the golden light of Lotos-Land. She could have been a goddess from one of the kindlier myths of Earth's dim, long ago and far away youth.

"Your bag," he suggested. "Dropped it, somewhere. . . ." There was something about the bag. . . "And a lot of other things."

She considered his reply. "There's a comb," she said. "And a pair of scissors. . ."

Quinn rose reluctantly to his feet. With Jane's hand in his he walked away from the pool. And

it was pleasant enough to walk, not hurrying, over the soft, springy moss, to pause often to admire the shape and color and texture of a flower, to feel the warm, spicy air in gentle motion against the skin. It was a walk through Paradise—a sensualist's Paradise, but still—Paradise. They wandered on aimlessly, their original purpose almost forgotten, taking a drowsy delight in their surroundings and in each other. At times they rested, eating of the smooth textured golden fruit that hung always within easy reach. They talked but little—there was no need for words.

And they saw, for the first time, their fellow lotos-eaters. Some, like themselves, were wandering aimlessly, alone or in couples. Some greeted them briefly in low, musical voices—others stared past them with rapt, unseeing eyes, obviously inhabiting tiny private worlds of their own in which they were alone, in which they desired not even the most fleeting human contact. And all of them, all the golden skinned men and women moving slowly and gracefully, belonged. They were all a part of this strange, symbiotic union of plant and animal.

They came quite by chance upon the army pilot. He seemed pleased to see them, was glad to

greet somebody that he had known, even briefly, in his old life. He was sprawling under one of the fleshy ferns. There was a girl with him—slightly built, red haired, attractive in her fragile way, and they were eating one of the golden apples, sharing it. . . It was an idyllic scene, and old, old. It was like an illustration from some ancient Bible—of Eve tempting Adam with the fruit of the Forbidden Tree. But this fruit wasn't—deadly. *Where does knowledge get you, anyhow?* Quinn asked himself. But there was some knowledge he needed. Something about a bag, or a case. . .

"Why, hello," said the pilot, mildly surprised. "I didn't recognize you. . ."

"What does it matter?" asked the red haired girl.

"Oh, nothing, my dear. But I rather want to thank these people for bringing me here. I rather—care for this. . . And you. . ."

"We all—care for it. . ." the girl told him, lazily stretching supine on the soft moss. "I. . . I punch a comptometer—all day and every day—Outside. That's not. . . my life. This. . . is. . ." Her brow furrowed. "But there's one thing. . . wrong. . . with it all. . . Going. . . back. . ." Her eyes cleared, suddenly became alive, intelligent. "It's Hell. . .

going back. Why should we? Why should we work the. . . the best years of our lives away for the damned Federation when this. . . all this. . . is. . . *free?* The Lotos feeds us, and gives us warmth, and shelter. . . It doesn't clothe us. . ." She smiled, showing very white teeth. "And does that. . . matter?"

Jane sat down beside her. "I had. . . forgotten," she said. "But you. . . reminded me. Our clothes. . . Where do we. . . find them? I'm afraid that we just dropped them, any place, when we. . . came in. . ." She smiled apologetically. "You see, it was our first time. . . here. . ."

"Don't worry. When your. . . holiday is finished they will bring your clothes. . ."

"It was," said Quinn, "her bag, really."

"You could," the red haired girl told her, "borrow my comb. But my lipstick—it isn't your color, my dear. Next time—chain your bag to your wrist. . ." Quinn saw what it was that had looked so incongruous with her slim nakedness. "Leave the key—Outside. . . You'll want," she said, suddenly practical, "wide sleeves. . ."

"There was," said the pilot, his voice sleepy, a little bored, "a bag. Big. . . Brown leather. . . That way. . ." He waved a vague, languid arm to his left.

"The attendants," said Gillian. "I saw them. . . looking." She yawned. "Can't say. . . when. No Time. . . here."

"They might not," the pilot told her, "have found it." He said, hopefully, "You can. . . look. . ."

Jane thanked him, rose languidly and gracefully to her feet. She smiled. "I am. . . a nuisance, Peter. But. . ." She ran a hand over her tangled hair, "I want to be really happy, my darling, and I can't, until. . ."

They found the bag, where Quinn had kicked it aside into a tangle of thick ferns. They would never have found it had not Quinn's bare foot become entangled with the strap. But it was found—and Jane, exclaiming happily, sat down where they had found it, opened it, eagerly pulled out comb and cosmetics and mirror. In her haste she spilled the other contents of the bag on to the moss. Quinn, who had his tidy moments, sat down beside her, picked up the unwanted articles, started to put them back.

He picked up the cigarette case. And the old idea began to nag him again.

"Does this look better?" asked Jane.

"Damn you. Be quiet."

She knocked the case out of

his hand. She demanded—as near to anger as she would ever be in this drugged, drowsy parody of living—"Don't look at that silly thing. Look at me!"

"I must get back," whispered Quinn. "I must get back. . ."

But how? How?

Yet the way back must be easy. Aveling, by his own confession, had found it by accident. It must be something commonplace, absurdly simple. Aveling had stumbled out of his Lotos-Land—half drugged, yet sufficiently master of himself to be scared by something of unknown power and potentialities, shaken. He had sat down in the cabin of his plane and. . .

And. . .

The answer was obvious.

Blindly, roughly, he pushed the girl to one side, heard her whimper. He got to his feet, walked quickly to where the case had fallen, picked it up. He took out one of the two remaining cigarettes, put the end in his mouth, drew sharply. The tobacco ignited. He coughed violently, retched. The cigarette fell to the ground. He retrieved it, put it to his mouth again.

He fought down the urge to vomit. With each mouthful, he could feel his brain clearing. He looked around him with sudden distaste. It was all, he admitted, still beautiful—but it was a de-

cadent beauty, more than a little obscene. He felt a sharp longing for the cold, clean tides of interstellar space to wash from him the taint of the scented air, the soft, diffuse light, the contagion of this weakling's Paradise.

"Don't, Peter," Jane was saying. "That filthy smell. . ."

He looked at her dispassionately. He saw, for the first time, little skin blemishes, minor defects of her figure. Yet—she was still desirable. He muttered, "To hell with it. . ." But he did not throw away the cigarette.

He found her watch almost at once, among the ferns where he had seen her throw it when they had first come in. Subconsciously, he had noted the spot. And the watch was, he knew, more than a means of merely telling the time.

He took his cigarette from his mouth, looked at it. It was almost half finished. He would have to be fast—for he did not know how long the effects of the nicotine would last. Aveling, when he brought them here, had chain smoked. But one cannot chain smoke for long on two cigarettes.

But he took the other one from the case, got it going. He strode quickly to the girl, knelt beside her, grabbed her by the shoulders. She tried to fight back. He let go of her with his

right hand, clenched his fist, put all the strength he could into a short, sharp jab to the pit of her stomach. She collapsed, gasping. She looked up at him, the tears streaming down her face. "Peter! Darling! Why?"

"You'll find out. Smoke this."

"No. . . No!"

"Smoke this!"

He forced the end of the second cigarette into her mouth. Little crumbs of tobacco were smeared over her face. She gasped and spluttered, made unpleasant retching sounds. Then—

Her face was cold, hard. She spat out the words. "Aveling! That *rat*!"

"Never mind that. That fancy transmitter you had in your watch—can you reach the other agent from here?"

"I think so. And I'll make it the Prime Emergency call—whatever she's doing, wherever she is, she'll answer."

She did something to the watch, then held the little instrument to her ear, listening intently. A few seconds passed but Quinn heard no answering buzzing sound. Jane frowned brought her wrist down to mouth level. "Calling Lotty. . . Lettice here. . . Not much time. . . Quinn and I in Lotos-Land. Not the club, the real place. . . *Take over, Quinn, will you?*" She gave it to

him. He took it in his hand, raised it to his mouth. His articulation, when he talked, was a little indistinct—he did not dare to throw away his cigarette.

"Come," he said, "as soon as you can. The twin peaks, Simbala's Breasts. Get little hill called The Mole in line with nipple of South Breast, come in slowly on bearing. Ledge or terrace, landing for planes. Two caves—big one used as hangar, small one entrance to. . . here. Some kind gas—or maybe radiation. Drug. Antidote—nicotine. Bring plenty cigarettes. Watch Aveling. Watch Fort Commandant—and try to put rocket launching sites out of action. Don't forget. . . cigarettes. . ." His own, now, was burning his lips.

There was no answer. The watch, he saw now, was damp. That might have shorted the tiny batteries. Or the set might be working, but too weak to pick up the distant answer. There was no way to tell.

Jane went limp, her body slumped against his. He looked down, saw the short, crumpled butt of her cigarette on the moss. He spat out his own. The watch fell from his hands, unnoticed.

And it was sweet to drift once more into sleep beneath the low, green firmament of Lotos-Land, beneath the fleshly, luminous

blossoms that were dimly glowing, opalescent suns. The golden haze washed over them, the golden tides bore them far and far away from the workaday world with which they had made fleeting contact. And when they awoke they remembered this brief interlude of purposiveness—but it was of no importance, a mere doubtful dream of a dream. More—it was something deliberately to be forgotten.

"Wake up," said the voice. It was a harsh voice, mechanically distorted. "Wake up, Quinn." A hard, rough hand took his shoulder, shook it violently. Another hand forced a cigarette between his lips.

Quinn involuntarily inhaled, gasped and choked. He tried to spit out the little, poisonous, evil-tasting cylinder—but the rough hand was clamped over his face, bruising nose and mouth and chin. He looked up—and felt all the embarrassment of the naked man confronted by fully clothed, inimical strangers. And these strangers—there were two of them—were more than fully clothed by any normal standards. They wore full regulation space armor.

"Feel better?" asked one of them, the one who was bending over him, who had shaken him into wakefulness. The gloved

hand was removed from his face, but the cigarette remained.

"No," said Quinn.

"They aren't very grateful, are they?" remarked the second space-suited figure—and even the mechanical reproduction of the voice could not hide a faintly ironical overtone—no more than the clear glass of the helmet visor could hide a slightly amused glint in the eyes. "Jane, my dear," went on the speaker, "we've rescued you—saved you from a fate worse than death. Here—we found these. I think they're yours. . ."

Quinn saw the girl slowly putting on the clothes that she had worn when she had come into Lotos-Land. She dressed herself, it seemed to him, with a certain reluctance. Her eyes were sullen. The lighted cigarette hanging from her lower lip glowed and faded sullenly. She said, "You took long enough about it."

"I did not. And I've had luck, my dear, the most incredible luck! Wait till we get outside!"

Quinn dressed. He felt happier, much less defenseless, when he had clad himself—especially when he had his shoes on. He felt as the hermit grub must feel when, having outgrown his old, commandeered shell, he finds a new one of the right shape and size, edges his soft, temptingly edible body gently into it.

"It was lucky," remarked the most talkative suit of space armor, "that you didn't wander far from where you ditched your watch. It was lucky, too, that you left the general call switched on—otherwise we might have wandered for *days* through this sur-realist's dream of bliss without finding you. . . Funny sort of place, isn't it? Like something by Dali superimposed on something by the Douanier Rousseau—with trimmings. . . It makes me feel. . . *itchy*. . ."

"You talk too much," said Jane coldly. "Suppose you get us out of here."

"You're the boss, dearie. Give 'em a pack of gaspers each, Patrick—that should be enough to last 'em out to the fresh air. Come on!"

The smaller of the two in space armor led the way. Jane followed, then Quinn. He tried at first to walk beside her, but she edged away from him with distaste. He was not surprised. Seeing the shameless abandon of those that they passed on the way to the Outside, he was not surprised. He flushed hotly. He remembered something that he had read or heard once of a law passed in ancient Athens, a law making it illegal to walk through the streets naked—not because it was immoral, but be-

cause it was ugly. He felt a feeling very close to panic every time that he finished a cigarette, in the brief seconds that it took to light a fresh one.

It was a long way to the cavern entrance. Quinn was amazed at the extent of the place—wondered how much of it was natural how much, if any, the work of the race that had lived here—and died—before the coming of Man. He could see why and how it was that they had died. They must have drifted, slowly but inevitably, into racial extinction. The Lotos had been too kind. It had given everything—on a grossly physical plane. It had taken away everything that made for survival. It was dangerous. The generality of Mankind takes the short term view—and is wrongly convinced that it is, somehow, clever enough to cope with anything. It would see only that the Lotos would give, *now*, what the Federation promised to Posterity. It would delude itself that somehow—by voting for it perhaps—a new dawn would follow the long, steady decline into extinction. Or—it just wouldn't care. . .

The two space-suited figures halted, conferred briefly in low tones. "*This way,*" said one of them. Armored arms held to one side the screen of creeper and foliage. Jane, not looking back,

passed through into the tunnel. Quinn paused. He turned and stared for the last time at the lush, dim-glowing Lotos-Land. He sighed. He knew that a chapter of his life had closed—and there had been worse chapters.

"Hurry up. We don't want a pillar of salt on our hands," said the one that Jane Haldane had rebuked for talkativeness. Quinn did not hurry, but he turned, ducked under the upraised arms, walked into the tunnel. Instead of moss under his feet there was gritty sand. The living screen dropped and the golden light was abruptly cut off—and ahead there was the circle of wan grayness that was the tunnel mouth. And, as he walked forward, he became vividly conscious of the carrion stench of the vegetation of the outside world, of the chill dampness that struck through his clothes, that struck upwards through the soles of his shoes.

Outside, it was not long after dawn. It was raining. The misty drizzle seeped down the mountainside, dripped from the misshapen bushes, gathered in little, muddy pools in every footprint. The throbbing drone of the two big, hovering helicopters was a dismal monotony, the roaring scream of the circling squadron of fighters was unendurably harsh in Peter Quinn's ears.

There were two big Spurlings on the terrace, huge planes, ugly, of the kind that are used as landing craft. On their sides was the insignia of the Federation's naval forces. Quinn stared. He had the idea that all operations of the Special-Service were one man—or one woman—shows. He saw an officer, with junior Captain's braid on his shoulders, detach himself from a little group by one of the Spurlings, stride towards them over the sodden grass. The officer saluted. He half asked, half stated, "Miss Haldane?"

"Yes."

"They have placed me under your orders, Miss Haldane. What do you want done?"

"Give me time, if you please, to talk with my colleague."

The Captain flushed, saluted again, stalked away. The two in space-suits who had brought Quinn and the girl from Lotos-Land put clumsy, gloved hands up to their necks, lifted off their heavy helmets. One of them—the taller of the two—was a young man, a stranger, probably a naval officer. The other was Annalyn Claire. Her straw colored hair was ruffled and she looked very fresh and wholesome. When she smiled Quinn noticed, for the first time, her freckles. She said to her companion, "That's all, Patrick.

Thanks a lot. Run off back to your proper playmates now—there's a good boy. . ."

The young man grinned, gave her a salute that was more of a parting wave to a friend than an official gesture of courtesy, was gone.

"Annalyn," said Quinn.

"Who else? I'm sorry, Pete, for what I had to do. Believe me—I'm sorry. But—orders are orders. Especially when they come from my immediate superior."

"I think I see. You wanted me—an outsider with some training, with some idea of service and discipline—here to give you a hand. Tell me, Annalyn—it was nothing so crude as knock-out drops, was it? Wasn't it one of those comic drugs that play Old Harry with the time sense?"

"It was. But listen, Peter—I've made it up to you. As well as all these naval types there's another ship in port—*Pathfinder*, survey ship, calling in for fuel and stores. She's an officer short. Her Old Man—I told him as much as he needed to know—has agreed to take you. She's bound for the worlds of Capricorn—if there are any worlds revolving around those cockeyed suns. . . Suit you?"

"Suit me? Why, Annalyn—the Survey Service! This is. . ."

"I—we—owed it to you. There's a naval pinnacle laid on

for you—she's just behind that landing craft. I've told the pilot to get you to the port at least one and a half times the speed of light."

"Miss Claire!" Jane Haldane's voice was icy. "You have overstepped the mark. You had no right to. . ."

"But I had, dearie. I was in full charge during your vacation? And it was agreed, long ago, that Mr. Quinn was to be returned to his own service as soon as this job was over."

"And the job, of course, is of only minor importance. "What else have you been doing? What's happened to Aveling, to the Fort Commandant? What are these naval craft and personnel doing here?"

"One thing at a time. Aveling is dead. He had a fast poison concealed in a hollow, false tooth. . ."

"You should have thought of that."

"I did. But he thought of it first—and the tooth was in *his* mouth. And the Brigadier shot himself—and a few of his senior officers got themselves shot as they tried to get to their rocket launching controls. As for the fleet—it was on a training cruise in this vicinity. I got in touch with their Admiral as soon as I heard that they were around. I

called them in when I got your message. For all I knew—you were in deadly danger. . . Perhaps—" Quinn, watching, her, was surprised at the bitterness of her smile. "Perhaps I should not have hurried. . ."

"Never mind that. Have I your permission, Miss Claire, to retain Mr. Quinn's services for a few moments longer? The job, you know, isn't quite finished. . ."

Annalyn made no reply. She looked down at the helmet of her spacesuit, turned it round and round in her hands, studied it with absurd intensity. A dull flush suffused the fair skin of her face. She muttered something to herself—and one of the words sounded like *witch*. . .

Jane's voice was hard, businesslike. She said—"You're a Reserve Officer, Peter. You're versed in naval technicalities. These landing craft of theirs—they can be used as bombers, can't they? They carry a torpedo apiece—with an atomic bomb as a warhead. Right? Good. Now—these bombs, what fuses have they?"

"Impact," Quinn told her. "Proximity. Time. Delayed action. All at once if you want it that way. But if they're being used as bombs, to get blast without radio-activity, the warheads are taken out of the torpedoes and dropped, and either the

Time or the Proximity fuses are used. . ."

"I see. Now—suppose that there was one of those bombs here, with the time fuse set for—say—ten minutes time, could you do anything about it?"

"Yes. I'd jump into the fastest thing with wings I could lay my hands on and get the hell out. I don't think that any one could do any better. As far as I know any attempt to tinker with the fuse would only hasten the inevitable."

The girl lifted her hand, beckoned to the Captain. To Quinn she said, "You know what I have to do, don't you?"

Quinn swallowed. He felt a sickness that was not entirely due to the cigarette that he was smoking. He hated the idea of what was to come—but it had a bitter, unshakeable logic. It was as inevitable, perhaps, as the sequence of events that would come to pass when the time fuses were set going.

The Captain stood stiffly to attention on the wet grass, asked, "Yes, Miss Haldane?"

"Have your artificers," she said, "remove the atomic warheads from the two torpedoes carried by the landing craft. Have the bombs carried—inside. . ." She gestured briefly. "The officer who was with Miss Claire can go to show the men

the way. Have the fuses set for—say—half an hour. That will give your people just time to get out, will give us all time to get clear. . ."

"You haven't allowed much time," said Annalyn. "They'll have to hurry."

"That's all right. They'll have to hurry."

The Captain paled. His face set in stubborn lines. He said, "I don't like this. I will make a full report. . ."

"Make a full report. I shall make one too. And. . ."

"And. . .?"

"Do you want to be commander of a second class cruiser for the rest of your service life?"

Quinn felt sorry for the man. The power vested in his rank, the power of the men and the machines and the weapons of his ship, only a few miles away at Port Van Campen, were not enough. Neither was the power behind him—that of the Admiral and his squadron, serenely circling in their closed orbit far above the eternal overcast of this drab, Altairian planet.

The Captain swallowed, his rather prominent Adam's apple wobbling visibly. He saluted sullenly and strode stiffly to his waiting men, resentment in every line of his rigid back. He started barking orders.

Quinn watched the men lift-

ing projectiles from the Spur-lings, watched them detaching the warheads with almost exaggerated care. But his display of interest was only not very convincing acting. So it had come, he told himself. His mind picked up all kinds of fantastic possibilities, examined them one by one, rejected them. He said slowly, "We could marry, of course. It would mean your giving up your service. . ."

Jane, standing close to him, not looking at him, asked, "Why?"

"Because, my dear, the space-man home from the stars wants a wife, not a female bloodhound. He wants to know that he'll find companionship and a hot dinner waiting for him when he gets home—not a hurried scribble saying that the woman of his choice is very sorry, but she's had to go and handle a case on Deneb VII, but that she hopes that she'll be around when he's back from his next voyage. . ."

"And you, of course, couldn't. . ."

"I could, but. . ."

"All right. Fair is fair. We'll both ask for our cards. There are other worlds than this in the Galaxy—pleasant worlds, kindly, where life is easy. We could be happy. . ." Her voice faltered. "Or—could we? At first, perhaps. But there'd be times. . ."

He said, "Wherever you are—there is Lotos-Land. . ."

She flared: "You fool! If that were true—it would be even worse. Go, Peter, back to your ships and the cold loneliness between the stars. Go—before we both of us do something damned silly that we shall regret all our lives!"

She turned to watch the men, spacesuited, carrying the two dull-gleaming metal cylinders on stretchers to the tunnel mouth. She said softly, "So that's the end of Aveling's long, golden afternoon. And it wasn't so long, at that. . . That's the dawn—the dawn of reckoning, perhaps. The dawn too bright to be seen, coming up in thunder too loud to be heard. . ."

Quinn said softly, "They'll never know. . ." He added—"But we shall, my dear."

He took her roughly by the shoulders, turned her so that she faced him. He pushed back her hood. There was a harsh urgency in the embrace that had been entirely lacking from all their love making in the dim, softly glowing Lotos-Land. He tasted her sudden tears, bitter on his bruised lips.

She pushed him away, cried, "Go, damn you! Go."

He turned abruptly, walked rapidly to where Annalyn had told him that the pinnacle was

waiting. He hoped that there would be no delay, that the *Pathfinder* would blast off immediately after his reporting on board. Already he felt a sense of release—and knew that he would be denied this doubtful solace once the reaction should set in.

He passed a group of officers. "God!" one of them blurted, "has that woman no sense of

compassion? The few that we dragged out for questioning during the search are the lucky ones!"

Quinn stopped, faced the naval officers squarely. They stared at him curiously—and with a certain embarrassment.

He said, briefly and flatly: "You'd be surprised."

He climbed into the waiting pinnace.

COMING UP

Next month—rather than merely next issue, since SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES will now be appearing monthly—will begin our first serial. No, this doesn't mean that we are automatically going to run serials; we intend to use them only when they're good enough to make their use a must. And we think this one definitely fits as such a must.

It's Erik van Lhin's held-over POLICE YOUR PLANET. Van Lhin originally meant this as several novelettes, but when he heard we were going monthly, he asked us to let him handle it as a straight novel. It makes a better story that way, and we were glad to have him redo it. The results more than live up to our expectations.

It's as fine an example of realistic, honest space-opera as we've seen, where real people live real lives on Mars—and where a deadly grim and honestly urgent problem must be met by them. It's the story of a man who had no scruples or ethics, except the absolute devotion to his duty. It's the tale of a planet crushed between gangs on one hand and a civil war between two legal but warring police forces on the other—where anything can go, and everything does.

It's worth watching your newsstand for—or using the handy coupon on page 16 to be sure of! Don't miss it.

PEACEMAKER

BY ALAN E. NOURSE

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

All Flicker wanted was a chance to make the aliens understand. All the aliens wanted was a chance to kill him while they could. But there were things about Flicker that they hadn't counted on. . . .

Flicker's mind fought silently and desperately to maintain its fast-receding control, to master his frantic urge to writhe and scream in agony at the burning light. The fetid animal stench of the aliens filled his nostrils, gagging him; the heat of the place seared his skin like a thousand white-hot needles, and seeped into his throat to blister his lungs. It didn't matter that his arms and legs were bound tightly to the pallet, for he knew he dared not move them. The maddening off-and-on of the scorching light set his mind afire, twisted his stomach into a hard knot of fear and agony, but his body lay still as death, relaxed and motionless. He knew that the instant he betrayed his tortured alertness by so much as a single tremor, his chance for contact would be totally gone.

"The only sensible thing to do is to kill it!"

It was not repetition but a constant, powerful force, crashing into his mind, hateful, cold. He heard no sound but the muffled throb of spaceship engines far back in the ship, but the *thought* was there, adamant and uncompromising. It burst from the garbled thought-patterns of the others and struck his mind like an electric shock. One of the aliens wanted to kill him.

Thought contact. It was a paralyzing concept to Flicker. The aliens couldn't possibly realize it themselves; they were using sound communication with one another, on a sonic level beyond the sensitivity of Flicker's ears. He could hear no sound—but the thought patterns that guided the sound-talking of



the aliens came through to sledge-hammer his brain, coherent, crystal clear.

"But why kill it? We have it sedated almost to death-level now. It's completely unconscious, it's securely bound, and we can keep it that way until we reach home. Then it's no longer our worry."

The first thought broke out again with new overtones of anger and fear. "I say we've got to kill it! We had no right picking it up in the first place. What is it? How did it get there? Where was the ship that brought it?" The alien mind was venomous. "Kill it now, while we can!"

Flicker tried desperately to tear his mind from the agonizing rhythm of the light, to catch and hold the alien thoughts. Confusion rose in his mind, and for the first time he felt a chill of fear. His people knew that these aliens were avaricious and venal—a dozen drained and pillaged star-systems which they had overrun bore witness to that—but he had never even considered, before he started on this mission, that they might kill him without even attempting communication. Why must they kill him? All he wanted was a chance—one brief moment to convey his message to them. Five years of planning,

and his own life, had been risked just to get the message to them, to gain their confidence and make them understand, but all he found in these alien minds was fear and suspicion and hate, which had become a single ever-developing crescendo: "Kill it now, while we can!"

There were only three of them with him now, but he knew, from some corner of the alien minds, that five others were sleeping in a forward chamber of the ship. He saw himself clearly, alone on an unknown spacecraft with eight alien creatures, gliding through interstellar space at unthinkable speed, bound for that nebulous and threatening somewhere they called home. Their home. He caught a brief mind-picture from one of them of an enormous city, teeming with these alien creatures, watching him, picking at him, trying to question him, deciding how to kill him—

And through everything else came the intermittent burning glare of that terrible white light—

Then suddenly the three aliens were leaving the cabin. Flicker sensed their indecision, felt them balancing the question in their minds. Soundlessly, he lifted one eyelid a trifle. The

searing light burst in on his retina, blinding him for a moment; then he caught a distorted glimpse of them opening the hatch and withdrawing in their jerking, uneven gait. And still the alien thought came through with a parting jab to his tortured mind: "The only thing we can do is to kill it. The risk of tampering with it is too great. And we don't dare take it back home alive."

The light was gone now. Flicker took a deep breath of the heavy air, allowing his tensed muscles to relax as the sweet coolness and comfort crept through his body. First he stretched his legs, as far as they would go in the restrainers, then his arms, and coughed a time or two to clear his throat. Almost fearfully he opened his eyes to the cool, soothing darkness. His mind still ached with the afterglow of the furious lights, but gradually the details of the cabin appeared. Far in the background the throbbing drive of the great ship altered subtly, then increased slightly in volume. Bound where? Flicker sighed, trying to turn his mind away from the undermining awareness of failure, of something gone very wrong. Carefully he reviewed his rescue, his actions, the aliens' reactions. They had cut their drive almost

immediately when they had spotted him, and sent out a lifeboat for him without previous reconnaissance; surely he had been helpless enough when they dragged him from his crippled gig, half-frozen, to allay any suspicions of his immediate dangerousness. A crippled man is no menace, nor an exhausted man. The whole thing had been carefully planned and skillfully executed. The aliens couldn't have detected his own ship which had dropped him off hours before, in the proper place to intercept their ship. And yet they were suspicious and fearful, as well as curious, and their first thought was to kill him first, and examine him after he was dead.

Flicker's face twisted into a sour grin at the irony. To think that he had come, so quietly and naively, to these aliens as a peacemaker! If he were killed, the loss would be theirs far more than his. Because contact, living contact, and a mutual meeting of minds was desperately necessary. They had to be warned. For three decades they had been observed, without contact, in their slow, consuming march across the galaxy, conquering, enslaving, pillaging. The curiosity of their nature had started them on their way; greed and lust for power had carried them on until now, at

last, they were coming too close. They could not be allowed to come closer. They had to be warned away.

Flicker had been present at the meeting where that decision had been reached. There had been voices raised in favor of attacking the encroaching aliens, without warning, to deal them a crippling blow and send them reeling back home. But most of the leaders had opposed this, and Flicker could see their point. He knew that his people's struggle for peace and security and economic balance had been exhausting, the final settlement dearly won. Part of the utter distaste of his people for outside contact lay deep within Flicker's own mind: they asked no homage from anyone, they desired no power, they felt no need for expansion. The years of war had left them exhausted and peace-hungry, and they demanded but one thing from any culture approaching them: they wanted to be left alone. Cultural and economic contacts they would eagerly seek with this alien race, but they would tolerate no upset diplomatic relations, no attempts to infiltrate and conquer, no lies and forgeries and socio-economic upheavals. They were tired of all these. They had found their way as a people, and with character-

istic independence they wanted to follow it, without interference or advice.

And then the aliens had come. Closer and closer, to the very fringes of their confederation. Like a cancer the aliens came, stealthily, nibbling at the fringes, never quite contacting them, never really annoying them, but preparing little by little for the first small bite. And Flicker knew that they could not be allowed to take that bite, for his people would fight, if necessary, to total extinction for the right to be left alone.

Flicker shifted his weight, and sighed helplessly. The plan of his leaders had been simple. A few individual contacts, to warn the aliens. A few well-planned demonstrations of the horrors they could expect if they would not desist. There were other parts of the galaxy for these aliens to explore, other stars for them to ravage. If they could be made to realize the carnage they were inevitably approaching, the frightful battle they were precipitating, they might gladly settle for cultural and commercial contacts. But first they must be stopped and warned. They must not go any further.

Flicker's mind raced through the plan, the words, carefully imprinted in his mind, the evidence he could present to them.

If only he could have a chance! He felt the dull pain in his stomach—he hadn't been fed since he was brought aboard, and the drug they gave him had drained and exhausted him. At least he would have no more of *that* for another three hours. He sighed quietly, aching for sleep. From the moment the impact of the first dose of drug hit him, he had realized the terrible depths of strength his deception would require. He had been nearly unconscious from exposure in outer space when they had dragged him from his lifeboat into the blazing light of the ship, but the drug had stimulated him to the point of convulsions. An overwhelming dosage for *their* metabolism, no doubt, but it had fallen far short of his sedation threshold, driving his heart into a frenzy of activity as he tried to control his jerking muscles. Still, there would be no more for three hours or so, so he could lie in reasonable comfort, trying to find a solution to the question at hand.

One of them wanted to kill him immediately. That was the one who had poked and probed that first day, tapping his nerves and bones with a little hammer, taking samples of his blood and exhaled breath, opening his eyelid and using that horrid torch

that seared his brain like raw fire. The throbbing, intermittent light had begun to bother him as early as that. Either their visual pickup was of extremely low sensitivity, or his own neurovisio pickup had been stepped up to such a degree that what appeared as steady light to them registered on his mind as a rapid and maddening oscillation. But the brilliance and the heat—

His strength was returning slowly after the ordeal. His muscles ached from inactivity, and he began twisting back and forth, testing the limits of his restraints. Each leg could move about four inches back and forth; his right arm seemed tightly secured, but his left—he twisted his wrist back and forth slowly, and suddenly it was free! Unbelieving, Flicker groped for the restrainer. It hung loosely at the side of the pallet, its buckle broken. He moved the arm tentatively, testing the other restrainer, wiping perspiration from his forehead. Finally he lay back, his heart pounding. With one arm free he could free himself completely in a matter of moments. But the aliens mustn't know it, for anything that would startle them or make them suspicious might turn the tide of their indecision instantly, and bring sudden violent, purposeless, death—

The arm could be used to keep himself alive—if he had to. The thought of the one alien crept through his mind: the cold, unyielding hate, and the fear. The others were merely curious, and curiosity could be his weapon, to help him establish the link that was so necessary. Somehow, contact must be established—without frightening them, or threatening them in any way. Although their thoughts came to him so clearly, he had tried in vain to establish mental rapport with them. They showed no sign of awareness of anything but their own thoughts, and communicated only by sound, for their thinking processes were as sluggish as their motions. Sluggish thinking, but on a high level: they thought logically, using data in most cases to form logical, sound conclusions. They understood friendliness, and affection, and companionship, among themselves, but toward him—they seemed unable to conceive of him except in terms of alien, to be feared, investigated, attacked.

He sighed again and settled back, trying to ease his aching back and shoulders. His mind was almost giddy from lack of sleep, running off into wild, dreamlike ramblings, but he struggled for control, fighting to keep the fingers of sleep from his

mind. He knew that to sleep now would be to place himself at a terrible, possibly fatal, disadvantage. He couldn't afford to sleep now—not until contact had been established.

The light flashed on again, directly above him. Flicker cringed, his muscles twitching, tightening before the torturous heat. Anger and frustration crept through to his consciousness—why so soon? No more drug was due for a long while yet. He heard footsteps in the passageway outside, and the hatch squeaked open to admit one of the aliens, alone. And with him came a single paralyzing thought wave which tore into Flicker's brain, driving out the pain and frustration, leaving nothing but cold fear:

"If the others find it dead, they can't do much about it—"

This, then, was the one that had wanted him dead. They called him Klock, and he was the biggest alien on the crew. This one especially was afraid of him, wanted him dead immediately, and had come to see that he was dead! Alone, on his own initiative, against the will of the others. And in a cold wave of fear, Flicker knew that he would do it.

There was no curiosity in the assassin's mind, only fear and hate. Through one not-quite-

closed eye Flicker watched the alien approach. It held a syringe-like instrument in its claws, and the oily skin was oozing a foul-smelling fluid that stood in droplets all over its face. The fear in the alien's mind intensified, impinging on Flicker's brain with the drive and force of a trip-hammer, clear and cold. "If the others find it dead, there is nothing they can do—"

The alien was beside him, its head near Flicker's face, and he caught the bright glint of glass and steel, too near. Like lightning Flicker swung with his free arm, a sudden, crushing blow. The alien emitted one small, audible squeak, and dropped to the floor, its thin skull squashed like an eggshell right down to its neck.

Frantic with the maddening light and heat, Flicker ripped away the restraints on his other arm and legs. Ripping a magna-boot from the alien's foot, he heaved it with all his might at the source of the light. There was a loud pop, and the cabin sank into darkness again. Flicker wiped the moisture from his forehead, and stood numb and panting at the side of the table as the afterglow faded and the wonderful coolness crept through him again. And then he saw, almost with a start, the body on the metal floor before him.

Gagging from the stench of the thing, he knelt beside it and examined it with trembling fingers. With the light gone, the alien had changed color, its leathery skin now a pasty white, its shaggy mane brown. White stuff oozed from its macerated head, mingled with a red fluid which resembled blood. Flicker dabbed his finger in it, sniffed it. A red body fluid should mean an oxygen metabolism, like his own, but he had concluded from the heavy atmosphere that the aliens were nitrogen-metabolic. That would account, in part, for their sluggishness, their slow thinking.

Realization of the situation began to crowd into his brain. This creature was dead! He had killed it. He sat back on the floor, panting, trying to channel his wheeling thoughts into a coherent pattern. He'd killed one of the aliens; that meant that his last hope for peaceful contact was gone. The mission was lost, and his danger critical. Even if he could succeed in concealing himself, it was unthinkable to go with them to their home planet. Escape? Equally unthinkable. They were vengeful creatures, as well as curious. Their vengeance might be murderous—

Briefly his wife and family

flashed through his mind, waiting for him, so proud that he had been chosen for the mission, so eager for his success. And his leaders, watching, waiting daily for his return. There could be no success to report now, nothing but failure.

But he had to survive, he had to get back! There could be other missions, but somehow he had to get back—

The situation fell sharply into his mind, crystal clear. There was no alternative now. He would have to destroy every creature on the ship.

One against seven. He considered the odds swiftly, the sudden urgency of the situation slamming home. They had weapons, the ship was known to them, they could signal for help. There must be *something* to turn to his advantage— He kicked the alien's foot, thoughtfully—

The lights!

Flicker jumped to his feet, his heart pounding audibly in his throat. Why such brilliant light, why such a slow-cycle current that he could see the intermittent off-and-on? Obviously, what he saw as an oscillation was a steady light to them. With such low light-sensitivity the aliens *had* to have such brilliant lights. They couldn't see without them! The agonizing brilliance

that sent Flicker into convulsions was merely the light necessary for them to see at all—

And comfortable seeing-light for him was to them—total darkness!

Far forward in the ship a metal door clanged. Flicker was instantly alert, nerves alive, every muscle tense. Klock was dead, he would be missed by the others. He took a quick glance around him, and removed the weapon from Klock's side, an ordinary, clumsily designed heat pistol, almost unrecognizable, but similar enough to the type of weapon Flicker knew to be serviceable. He strapped it to his side, and moved silently toward the hatchway.

The lights had to go first. Flicker's body ached. His mind was reeling with fatigue, sliding momentarily into hazy attenuation, snapping back with a start. Unless he slept soon, he knew, his reactions would become dangerously slow, and hunger was now tormenting him also. Food and sleep would *have* to take priority over the lights, no matter how dangerous.

A thought flashed through his mind, and he glanced back at the alien body on the floor. Some of the blood had oozed out on the aluminum floor, forming a dark pool. The thought slid into fo-

cus, and the hunger reintensified, into a gnawing knot in his stomach; then he turned away in disgust. He just wasn't that hungry. Not yet.

Quickly he stepped out into the passageway, moving in the direction of the engine sounds. The ship was silent as a tomb except for the distant throbbing of the motors. Far below him he heard the clang of metal on metal, as if a hatch had been slammed. Then dead silence again. No sign that Klock had been missed, not yet. Flicker breathed the cool darkness of the corridor for a moment, and then moved quickly to the ladder at the end of the passageway. His muscles ached, and his neck was cramped, but he felt some degree of his normal agility returning as he peered into the dark hold below, and eased himself down the ladder.

The grainy odor he had smelled above was stronger down here. Halfway to the ceiling the coarsely woven bags were stacked, filling almost every available inch of the hold except for the walkways. A grain freighter! No wonder it had such a small crew for its size. Not many hands were needed to ferry staple food-grains to the aliens on distant planets. Flicker blinked and searched the walkways, finally finding what

he wanted—a cubbyhole, behind the stacks, and up against the outer bulkhead. He slid into the narrow space with a sigh, and curled himself up as comfortably as he could. Clearing his mind of every thought but alertness to sound, he sank into untroubled sleep.

He heard the steps on the deck above him, and sat up in the darkness, instantly alert. There were muffled sounds above, then steps on the metal ladder. Abruptly the hold was thrown into brilliant light. Flicker whimpered and twisted with pain as the light exploded into his eyes, and felt a flash of panic as he saw two of the aliens at the bottom of the ladder.

The waves of thought force struck Flicker, heavy with anger and fear. "It couldn't have come far forward in the ship. If Klock was right, that first day, it has a high-order intelligence. It would seek a good hiding place, and then venture out to explore a little at a time. It could be anywhere." The one called Sha-Lee looked back up the ladder anxiously.

The other's mind was a turmoil of jagged peaks and curves. Then his thought cleared abruptly. "But how could it happen? The creature was sedated, al-

most dead, as far as we could see. It had a shot just an hour before Klock went up there. How could it have awakened? And why did Klock go up there in the first place? I thought you left strict orders—"

The two cautiously moved down the walkway. "Whatever happened, it's loose. And there won't be any sedating when we find it again—"

Trembling with pain, Flicker forced his burning eyes to the source of the light in the overhead. He aimed the heat pistol he had taken from Klock, sending a burst of searing energy at the fixture. The hold fell dark as the light exploded into metallic steam.

"He's in here!"

There was a long pause, in dead silence. Flicker strained to catch the flow of thoughts that streamed from the alien minds.

"I can't see a thing!"

"Neither can I. It got the lights."

They were so near Flicker could almost feel their warmth. Swift and silent as lightning, he sprang up on the grain bags, leaned out just above them. A small bit of wood was near his foot; he grabbed it and threw it with all his might against the far bulkhead. A surge of fear swept from the alien minds at the crash, and they swung and

fired wildly. Like a flash Flicker sprang to the deck behind them, pausing the barest instant for breath and balance, then springing quickly forward and striking one of them a crushing blow across the neck. The alien dropped with a small squeak. The other fired wildly, but Flicker was too quick, zig-zagging back to a retreat behind the bags. After a moment he peered over the top of the pile.

Sha-Lee was standing poised, peering into the blackness toward the other alien who lay quite motionless on the floor, its head twisted at an unnatural angle from its body. Something in Flicker's mind screamed, "Get the other now, while you can!" But he took a deep breath of the sticky air, and then turned and ran silently to the hatch at the back of the hold, and out into the large corridor.

He had to get the lights first. With the lights gone, the others could be taken care of in good time. But he knew that he couldn't stand the torture of the lights much longer; already his eyes felt like sandpaper, and the paralysis which took him for several seconds when the lights first went on could give the aliens a fatal advantage. He came to a darkened hatchway, half open at the end of the cor-

ridor, took a brief inventory, and hurried through. Far below he could hear the generators buzzing, growing stronger and mingling with the sobbing of the motors as he descended ladder after ladder. He hurried down a dimly-lit corridor and tried a hatchway where the noise seemed most intense.

The light from within stabbed at his eyes, blinding him, but he forced himself through the hatch. To the right was the glittering control panel for the atomic pile; to the left were the gauges for the gas storage control. An alien was standing before the main control panel, a larger creature than his brothers, his mind swiftly pulsating, carrying overtones of great physical strength. Flicker slid silently behind one of the generators and studied it and the room, his mind growing progressively more frantic. His eyes burned furiously, and finally, with a groan, he unstrapped the heat gun and sent a burst toward the ceiling. The light blew with a loud pop, and the alien whirled.

"Who's there?"

Flicker sat tight. The generator he was using for concealment was not functioning—probably a standby. Three of them were running in series over to one side, with a fuse-box

above them. Flicker's heart pounded. It would have to be quick and sure—

The alien moved swiftly over to the side of the room, and a thin blade of light stabbed out at Flicker. A battle lamp. The suddenness of its appearance startled him, stalled his movement just an instant too long. He saw the burst of red from the alien's weapon, and he screamed out as the scorching energy caught him in the side and doubled him over. In agony he jumped aside and sprang suddenly up onto a catwalk. The alien swung the lamp around below, searching for him, tense, gun poised. In a burst of speed Flicker moved along the catwalk toward the alien, and crouched on the edge directly over him, panting, gagging at the smell of the creature mingled with the odor of his own burned flesh. He felt cold rage creep into his mind, recklessness, the age-old instinct of his people to claw and scratch and kill. Suddenly he sprang down past the alien, striking him a light tap on the shoulder as he went by, spinning the creature around like a dervish. The battle lamp went crashing to the deck; the heat gun flew off to one side, struck a bulkhead, and spluttered twice as it shorted out. Flicker spun

on the alien, catching him a crippling blow across the chest. Fear broke strong from the alien's mind as he toppled to the floor. Flicker was upon him in an instant, like an animal, ripping, tearing, crushing. The exhilaration roared through his mind like a narcotic, and he lifted the twitching body by the neck, half-dragging it over to the generators. Carefully he placed one of the alien's paws on one of the generator leads, the other on the other. The terrific voltage sputtered, and the alien gave two jerks and crackled into a steaming, reeking cinder, while the generator turned cherry red, melted, and fused. Flicker blasted the fuse-box with his pistol, fusing it into a glob of molten metal and plastic, then turned the pistol on the auxiliary generators. The smell of ozone rose strongly in the air, and the generators were beyond hope of repair.

Flicker rose and stretched easily, his heart pounding. His side throbbed painfully, but he felt an incongruent flush of satisfaction and well-being. Now there would be no more lights. No more painful, burning agony in his eyes. Now he could take his time—even enjoy himself. He sprang up onto the catwalk again, located a concealed corner, and sank down to sleep.

The five of them were gathered in the control room of the ship. Open paneling of plastiglass at the end of the room looked out at the infinity of black starlit space. Far below the engines throbbed, thrusting the ship onward and onward. The aliens moved restlessly, fear and desperation clinging about them like a cloak.

In the darkness of the rear of the control room, high above them on an acceleration cot, crouched Flicker, hunger gnawing at his stomach. He peered down at the flimsy little creatures, studying their features closely for the first time. Sha-Lee stood with his back to the instrument panel, facing the others, who sat or lounged on the short table-like seats before him. A pair of battle lamps sat on the instrument panel, trained on the two hatchways leading into the control room, and each of the aliens carried a heat pistol in his paw. They looked so weak, so frightened, so utterly helpless, standing there, that it seemed almost impossible for Flicker to believe that these were the creatures who were threatening his people—who were responsible for the draining and pillaging of planets that Flicker had seen. These were the ones, deadly for all their apparent helplessness. Flicker blink-

ed, leaning closer and closing his eyes, soaking in and separating each thought pattern that reached him from the group.

"So what are we going to do about it?" Sha-Lee's thought came through sharply.

"We might be able to manage without the lights, but he got the generators, so that took our radio out too. We got only one message home, and that was brief—not even enough for them to get a fix on us. They know approximately where we are, but they'd never find us in a million years. We can't hope for help from them. We're stuck."

Another one shifted uneasily. "He's out to get us all. And without light we can't find him. We don't even dare go looking for him—it looks as if he can see in the dark."

"Let's consider what we're really up against," said Sha-Lee. "As you say, he can see in the dark, and we've got darkness here. That's point number one. Number two, he's quiet as a mouse and fast as the wind. When he got To-may in the grain-storage vault, he came and went so fast I didn't even know what had happened before he was gone. Number three, he's acquainted with spaceships, and with the lights gone he's more at

home on this ship than we are. Wherever he came from, he's no primitive. He's got a mind that doesn't miss a trick."

"But what does he want?" Jock toyed with his heat pistol nervously. "What was he doing when we found him out there? He was nearly frozen to death—"

"—or seemed to be! Motive? It might be anything, or nothing at all. Maybe he's just hateful. The point is, there's one thing he can't do, unless he's *really* got some technology, and that may be our way out."

"Which is?"

"I doubt if he can be in two places at one time. Or three. There are five of us here, and some of us *have* to get home to tell about this. This could be death to our exploratories. Certainly we don't dare to take him home with us alive, but we'd have to find him to kill him, and he'd get us first. Now here's a plan we might be able to put across. Two of us should stay with the ship, myself and one other. The other three take lifeboats, and get out now. We approach within lifeboat range of Cagli in about an hour. The Caglians won't be happy to see you, but they won't hurt you, and you can bluff your way to a radio. Maybe the two of us here can keep him off until you get

help. At any rate, I hope we can."

Flicker lost track of their thoughts as the information integrated in his mind. A chill went through him, driving out even the gnawing hunger for a moment. If they got off in lifeboats, they'd get help, and the mission would really be lost, irreparable damage done. He had to prevent them from making *any* contact with their home. This ship was a freighter; freighters were slow. Any culture as advanced as theirs would have ships—fast ships—to overtake slow old freighters—

Quickly and silently Flicker slipped over toward the hatch. The lamp shown on it full, but the aliens weren't watching. Like a shadow he flashed through the hatch and down the corridor. There he paused, for a fraction of a second, and listened.

No thoughts, no alarm. Flicker felt a wave of contempt. They hadn't even seen him.

At the top of the ladder Flicker crouched and waited. The meeting below was breaking up; he heard a hatchway clang, followed by the muffled pounding of their heavy feet as two of the aliens started down the corridor below. The battle lamp swung back and forth before them, its flash pattern swinging weirdly

on the bulkheads and deck. Flicker waited. The aliens started up the ladder before him, their thoughts a muddle, fear oozing from them, but carrying with it a curious overtone of incaution. "We can check the lifeboat for supplies now," came a thought, "and be ready to blast in an hour." At the top of the ladder they passed so close to Flicker that he nearly gagged, yet in his desperate hunger there was something almost—tasty—about that smell. They moved on, toward the lifeboat locks, and Flicker followed, trying eagerly to separate their thoughts into a coherent pattern.

"*He's behind us!*" It came suddenly, like a knife through the air.

"Don't turn around." The first alien gripped his companion's sleeve. "Pretend you don't know it." They moved along, with no outward sign of their sudden terrible awareness. Their minds were racing, fearful, but they kept on. Flicker crouched along the bulkhead and followed.

The aliens came to the hatch. Flicker tensed, ready for them. He heard them undog the hatch, heard its squeak as it opened, and he tensed, his muscles quivering eagerly.

Three beams of light stabbed down the passageway at him,

brilliant, staggering him back against the bulkhead. He grasped frantically at the closing hatch, but it clanged shut, the heavy dogs scraping into place on the opposite side. And at the other end of the corridor—

He was trapped! Of course they had been incautious, nonchalant! Of course they had led him on. And now—

"There he is! GET HIM!"

A heat gun whined, its searing energy ricocheting in the closed end of the corridor. With a snarl Flicker sprang, high up on the bulkhead, dragging himself onto a shelf carrying emergency spacesuits. Blast after blast came from the alien guns, rebounding like furies, all missing. "I can't kill it!" a thought pounded through. "It's moving too fast!"

Frantically Flicker trained his own pistol on the hatchway, blasted a steady stream until the metal melted through. With an exultant snarl he dived through the opening, and without pausing sprang up onto the lifeboat locks. He paused, breathing heavily, his burned side throbbing painfully. The two aliens inside were swinging their battle lamp in wild arcs. One spotted him and blasted, but he was gone before the alien triggered. With careful aim he blasted the

battle lamp, resting easy for a moment in the ensuing darkness. Then he was across the lock, tearing, ripping, scratching, snarling into the two aliens, roaring in savage glee. One of them fell with a crushed skull, its body horribly mutilated. The other slipped from his grasp and started running through the blackness for the hatch. Flicker was there before it.

He picked up the alien bodily and threw him across the lock. In an instant he was upon him, ripping off an arm at the socket. The alien screamed in pain, and tried to wriggle away. Flicker let him wriggle about three feet. Then he gave him a cuff that sent him sprawling, and ripped off the other arm. The alien twisted and turned like a worm on a stick, but Flicker didn't kill him. Instead, he broke a leg, and twisted off an ear.

The three aliens in the corridor threw open the hatch and flooded the dark lock with the beams of the battle lamps. They saw blood on the deck, and nothing more.

"We know you're in here. Come out now, or we'll come get you." Flicker caught the thought clearly, and snickered comfortably. He was much more comfortable, now that he wasn't so hungry. He picked up a long white bone and threw it against

the opposite bulkhead. It clanged, and the three lamps swung instantly in the direction of the sound. "There he is! Blast him!"

Three heat guns spoke sharply, and dead stillness echoed the despairing thought, "That wasn't it—"

They moved across the room, and dragged the charred and mutilated body of their companion away from the bulkhead. "Let's get out of here! We can't fight this thing!" Sha-Lee started for the hatch, followed by the other two.

Only two of the three reached the control room. Flicker played with the third for quite a long while before he killed him.

"We aren't going to get out of this alive," said Sha-Lee. "You know that, as well as I do, I guess."

Jock nodded. "I've been sure of it since he got Klock in the first place. He moves too fast, he thinks too fast, he can see too well. And savage! He has a heat gun, do you realize that? But not one of us was killed with a heat gun. It's butchery, I tell you—no, we won't get out of here, alive."

"And this thing that's stalking us. What will it do? Take the ship back home? Run loose there the way he's run loose

here? Killing and maiming? We've got to stop it, Jock. We can't let it get home."

Jock stared at the instrument panel. "I know one way we can stop him," he said slowly. "It's suicide, but it would keep him from going home. And it would mean the end of him, too, finally."

Charlie looked up, tired lines on his face. The fear was gone to resignation now, replaced by another more terrible fear—the fear that they would be killed and leave this thing running loose—on the ship "What is it, Jacques?"

Jacques picked up a space chart, and slowly ripped it in two. "This," he said. "We can cripple the ship, foul up the controls, the gas storage, the charts—cripple it beyond repair. Then he can't do anything! Wreck the engines, destroy the food, smash this ship so no one could ever do anything with it. Completely wreck his chances to get home—"

They moved with sudden desperate swiftness. The heat gun sent up the space charts in wreaths of flame, fused the chart file into a molten heap of aluminum. The engines stopped throbbing, giving way to deathly silence broken only by the heat blasts and the heavy breath-

ing of the two men. The instrument panel melted and exploded, the gas control was smashed. The men worked in a frenzy of fearful destruction, their own last escape going up in searing heat blasts, destruction that no man could even hope to repair, ever—

And back in the corner, behind the acceleration cots, Flicker purred and purred. Easy, satisfied contentment filled him for the first time in days; he snickered as the alien creatures went on their path of self-destruction. Everything would be all right now, and his leaders would be pleased at how it turned out. He could bring back first-hand information about these creatures, vital, invaluable information. The contact could be made another time. And then he could go back to his family—they'd really enjoy hearing him tell about that alien, squirming and screeching with both arms ripped off—and have a long, comfortable rest.

The helpless, simple fools! They could kill him so easily, if they only knew. Just a breath of hydrogen, to combine with his high-oxygen metabolism, to explode him like a bomb. But they were destroying everything they could, in a mad, frenzied attempt to stall the spaceship, to

keep him out here in space to perish with them! Such a complete job they were doing, and it was so completely and utterly useless.

True, no human being could ever repair those controls to regulate the atomic engines of the ship. No human being could survive the weakening atmosphere long enough to repair the gas units. And even with these repaired and functioning, a human being would be forever stranded in the vast, cold, friendless reaches of space, without a perfect, detailed, visual memory of the space charts easily at his command. For no human being could ever direct a ship blind to a destination, without the charts of the space through which he flew. No human being would ever find his way out of the dead emptiness of such uncharted space.

Flicker curled up and placed his nose gently on his tail, disinterested; unconcerned. A human being would be hopelessly, irreparably doomed out here—

Flicker purred contentedly to himself as he considered the weaknesses of the human race which he had observed. From their view, he was completely stranded—

But a cat can always find its way home—

SPACEMAN'S LUCK

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

Holt wasn't interested in mere glory. He was on his way to the Moon, but only because that's where he'd find the road to all the money he could spend. Holt had it all planned. . . .

A flare of light arced upwards and moments later the shattering report dinned in the ears of the crowd, rolling across the field like thunder. The noise covered the sharply indrawn breath of ten thousand people. A sonorous voice amplified a millionfold announced: "X Minus Fifteen Minutes!"

There was a second or two of absolute silence and then the waiting crowd let out its breath all at once in an audible sigh. They wiped their glasses nervously, or poised their binoculars, or scratched their heads for the last nervous time, hoping that they would not sneeze at the improper second and so miss the takeoff; it would be over just about that quickly.

Out across the field, the focus of ten thousand pair of eyes,

stood the *Lady Luna*. She looked small from the crowd, but the three men who stood at one tail-fin were dwarfed by her size.

"This is about it, Gordon," said the oldest of the lot.

Gordon Holt nodded. "I've about five minutes yet," he said nervously.

The middle-aged man said, "Time for a last cigarette, Gordon."

Holt shook his head. "Not after training to do without for six months. Save it until I come back."

Doctor Walsch nodded. "That's good sense, Gordon. We'll be waiting for you. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Just a bit jumpy."

"You ought to feel as fit as a Guarnerius. You've been trained and you're trim and fit. I doubt



that you'll ever feel any better in your life than you do right now."

General Towne nodded. "Don't forget the honor, either," he said. "The excitement should give your high feelings another lift. Imagine being the first man to ever set foot on the soil of another world."

"It's a bit of a sterile world, I'm told. Not much more honor than the first man to put his sandal on the top of Pike's Peak. They sell postcards there, now."

"Too bad we've named all the visible Lunar Craters," said General Towne. "Seems to me that some signal honor—well, anyway, Gordon, we'll name a big one on the other side after you."

"It—"

A siren wailed and Holt jumped. "That's it," he said.

"Good luck, Gordon," said the general, wringing the space-man's hand. The doctor clapped Gordon on the back as he turned away.

Doctor and general got into the waiting jeep, and the driver turned and called, "Don't take any wooden moonbeams up there, Holt!"

Holt shrugged noncommittally and climbed the ramp into the spacelock. He sneered at the crowd beyond closing spacelock.

"Wooden moonbeams?" he said aloud. "Oh brother!"

He went to the control chamber of the *Lady Luna* and ran through his checklist almost mechanically. He waited almost breathlessly until the radio barked the word that told him to hit the ignition switch, and when it came he hit it with a vigor and enjoyed the crushing sensation that followed. The thunder from below was music in his ears; now he was on his way and they wouldn't call him back.

Holt was no mere glory machine. Not for him was the simple honor. He had it planned, had it planned from the moment he was selected.

For Holt, the honor of setting the first foot on another world was a flat and tasteless award. It would last only until someone else did something slightly better. What could he get out of driving a space rocket to Luna? Not a hell of a lot. He was not headed for an adventure and he knew it; with everything precalculated, including the risk, what adventure could he have? To land and collect a quart of pumice and a pound of rock and maybe a shiny stone. Look for lichen or moss. Listen to the Geiger.

This sort of dry action would sell no books, collect no royalties,

make no moving pictures, bring in no dough.

Gordon took a deep breath as soon as the motor cut off. He was on his way and he knew how to handle everything from here on in.

He had seen enough of human nature to foresee it all. A slight mishap and a call for help would start it. A landing just hard enough to bend the control vanes or to plug up the rocket exhaust. Maybe to dinge up the spacecraft enough to make it unspaceworthy. Then—

The cry for help and the whole world crying in return that a Human Being was marooned out there, helpless and alone.

They'd come.

They'd turn handsprings to get out there. Time and money would be tossed down the drain, and men would strive and women would cry, and the news would be filled with daily columns of how the rescue was progressing.

Drop a man in the ocean and the navies of every country go out and comb the sea to find him. Put a cat on the telephone pole and three hundred people struggle to get the animal down. Drop a child in a well and the countryside turns out en masse to help.

Well, maroon a man on the

moon and watch 'em struggle.

He had air for ninety days and food and water and just about anything a man would need. He could sit it out and he knew it. And he knew that there was a second rocket that could be put in space within a couple of months. Sixty days he'd sit it out and then—

It would be the story of his life, the tale of his rescue, the bright lights and the personal appearances. Radio and television and endorsing this junk and that googoo. Women and liquor and money.

He came down in the Crater Plato, tail first but far too fast. The tailfins crumpled and the sifting pumice drove up into the exhaust and packed like cement. A seam whistled far below to let out some air from a sealed compartment, cracked in the bump.

The crash staggered him a bit, but all he suffered was a nose-bleed and a set of sprained chest muscles. He sat up and looked around.

The radio. He snapped it on and called: "*Lady Luna* Gordon Holt reporting. Made a crash landing. May be dangerous. Will check and call at 0300."

He eyed the radio thoughtfully; it only took about three seconds for an answer, but in that time Gordon considered

smashing the radio in the middle of the next broadcast and then discarded the idea because it might lead people to think that he, too, had been smashed. Gordon wanted to be rescued, not given a hero's brief hail and farewell.

"Calling *Lady Luna*. Holt! Are you all right? Explain!"

"I am all right. I am not hurt. Crash landing rather rough but nothing broken. No air leakage, nothing completely ruined that I can tell. Landed as per program in the dead center of Plato, but a little too hard."

That ought to do it. Let 'em get excited slowly. They'll forget me less slowly.

"*Lady Luna* what happened?" They were worried.

"I don't know. I have a hunch that the pumice does not provide a true ground-plane for the radar. We landed as though the ground were about thirty feet below the surface."

That sounds logical. Such things are entirely possible, I'm told. Powdery, filmy stuff with no water shouldn't have a firm ground-plane.

"*Lady Luna* inspect your damage and report as planned at 0300."

Holt checked his air first. Plenty of it. Not a bit gone. Water next and food next. He

checked the hull as well as he could from the inside and then went out in his space suit to view the damage.

He had done an admirable job. The tail fins were bent messily and the hull was crumpled a bit, just above the place where the rocket motor ended. If this ship took off—

"*Lady Luna* calling home. Reporting as per plan. Hull bent, tail fins ruined. Crater filled with powdery pumice and I feel that the exhaust is packed. Shall I try a blast to clear it?"

While he waited for the answer Gordon found a bit of wire and shorted the battery for a second. He had to fade out slowly enough to fool them completely.

"*Lady Luna*, do not try a clearing blast. You'll explode. Wait for instructions."

"Will do. Will do."

He shorted the battery a couple more times and watched the voltmeter drop.

"*Lady Luna* can you dig down to the exhaust port?"

"Will try. Note battery dropping. Nothing else in danger. Food, water, air all okay. Hull sound but battery dropping."

Seconds went on and Holt could see the resources of the entire world collecting to prepare the First Spacewreck Res-

cue. Complete with video, reporters, clergymen, politicians, and humanity waiting.

"*Lady Luna* repeat. You are fading."

Holt repeated, insisting that he was all right. "I can stick it out. I can stick it out."

He watched the radio battery fade.

Let it fade. He could stand the silence for two months until rescue came.

A billion people listened to his voice die away. And when their radio networks went dead, they raced to their telephones and clogged the land wires demanding that something had to be done.

Congressmen gave speeches and clergymen spoke and doctors gave opinions and scientists differed. A government seldom known for its cooperation announced that its new atomic-powered rocket was about to effect the rescue single-handedly. But the atomic part blew up in front of the video cameras and took some of the landscape with it. The Council of the United Nations called a meeting. The newspapers and networks covered everything.

A man known for his brilliance came on the air.

"The batteries of the *Lady Luna* have run down," he said.

"We must get there in less than ten days."

They tried to do it.

A second rocket exploded in France.

A third blew up in Germany.

The fourth would not be ready for space for sixty days.

That was seventy long days after Holt's landing.

Without a miracle, Holt would be dead, even if the experts were wrong.

Protestants prayed, Catholics crossed themselves, and Mohammedans called it *kismet* and let it go at that. A scientist suggested that since there was no habitable planet in the solar system and that mankind could never reach the stars, there was small point in this effort to make space travel pay off. An economist computed the sum of money shelled out already and called it damned foolishness. A Senator Maculay suggested that taxes could be lowered if such expenditures were cut out.

And ten days after the accident there was a world-wide prayer said for Gordon Holt.

The other rocket at White Sands grew cobwebs in its empty fuel tanks.

And the *Lady Luna* slipped into the dark of the moon. It grew colder and colder as time went on . . .

IT OOL DEPENDZ

BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

When we published an article on spelling, we were looking for a fight. It seems that we got one. L. Sprague de Camp, our favorite authority on the subject, took one look and came up punching. All we need, it seems, is the right coefficient of annoyance!

Joe Fan had just happily buried himself in his file of science-fiction magazines spelled with the good old nauseating English orthography, whose permanence he had just assured by pushing the handle on the time-freezer all the way down (*How Phonetic Can You Get?* in SFA, Nov. '52, pp. 103-10) when the little green man, Ixl, appeared.

"I just came back for my machine," said Ixl. "I see you gave up trying to reform your orthography. So the Trans-Galactic Federation will have to wait until next century."

"How? What'll happen then?" said Joe.

"Oh, that idea of yours will be realized, but as a result of many other developments you couldn't possibly have foreseen."

"What are those, anyhow?"

"Well, one is the discovery in 1987 of the coefficient of annoyance by Professor Alexander MacHaggis of Edinburgh University," said Ixl.

"The which of what?"

"The coefficient of annoyance. You see, everybody knows that things such as your proposed spelling-reform get done either when a benevolent despot imposes them, or when enough people get annoyed enough to do something about it themselves.

"For example, by the end of this century the common mosquito will have practically disappeared from the United States, because enough people are enough annoyed with mosquitoes to bring pressure on their governments to do some-

thing about them. On the other hand ragweed will still flourish, because while every year in the eastern states over a million allergies are made semi-invalids by ragweed pollen from the middle of August to the end of September, there aren't enough of them. The non-allergic majority doesn't even know what ragweed looks like, so nothing gets done.

"Now in the case of English orthography, everybody finds it painful to learn, but this happens when they're kids and unable to do anything about it. By the time they're old enough to vote, the pain has subsided to a dull ache. A lot of them even take a perverse pride in having mastered this difficult accomplishment, under the erroneous impression that they are thereby proved to be cultured persons, and oppose any change for fear of losing their preëminence. You erred in imposing your reforms on them when they really didn't want them badly enough. The thing is to make them want the change so badly they'll bring it about under their own steam."

"That's fine," said Joe, "but how?"

"I'm telling you. First there will be this discovery of the co-efficient of annoyance, which gives a fairly accurate quantita-

tive measure of the social forces tending towards change. For instance the French Revolution—"

"Look," said Joe, "I suppose that's very interesting and important, but I wish you'd finish the account of the spelling reform."

"Very well. In the year 2016 there will be elected President of the United States, the eminent lawyer Fritz Lovecraft Derleth. Being the son of a noted science-fiction writer, editor, and publisher, he will have an open mind on such subjects. His attention will be drawn to the problem of English spelling by an unfortunate gaffe when he writes a personal letter to the Amir of Afghanistan and discovers, after it is too late, that his secretary spelled 'schism' without its 'h' and 'inevitable' as 'inevitible.'

"He will learn that a considerable degree of spelling-reform can be effected without causing people to stop reading. During the twentieth century the Dutch, French, and Russian languages will all have had changes in spelling without dire results. Russian, which is almost unique in having enough letters to go around, dropped five superfluous ones altogether. French underwent equally drastic changes that improved its orthography greatly though leaving it still

far from a phonetically spelled language.

"Derleth will then ask a committee of scholars to draw up a table on which the principal languages using a European-type alphabet are rated according to how practical—how regular and phonetic—their spelling is. The results will be somewhat as follows: 1. Excellent: Albanian, Czech, Finnish, Japanese (Rô-maji system), Turkish; 2. Good: Dutch, Hungarian, Spanish; 3. Fair: German, Italian, Russian; 4. Poor: Danish, French, Greek (Modern), Icelandic, Polish, Portuguese, Swedish; 5. *Horrible*: English. As chief executive of the world's mightiest nation, Derleth can't be expected to accept that cellar position.

"He will however learn that there are limits to the amount of spelling-reform that can be assimilated at one time. When in 1928 Mustafa Kamal decreed that the Turks should switch from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet, allowing them only eight months to make the change complete, he drove most of the publishers out of business. The literacy of Turkey had never been high, but Mustafa at one stroke reduced it to zero, and it took several years for the country's literary life to recover. After that the Turks were better off, as the consonantal Arabic alpha-

bet was never well adapted to such non-Semitic languages as Turkish.

"English orthography, however, has been allowed to get into such a state of irrationality that a proper phonetic system, as you saw, entails almost as violent a change as that which the Turks underwent. You see, pronunciation changes constantly, whereas spelling tends to become fixed and traditional. In Greek and Icelandic the spelling has changed but little since these languages acquired a stable written form, but the pronunciation has changed radically in that time. This archaic spelling is very convenient when a modern Greek wants to read Thucydides or a modern Iclander the *Völsunga Saga*, but it results in a spelling almost as unphonetic as that of English.

"In English this condition is aggravated by several historical accidents, such as the introduction of a lot of French and Latin spellings into the language, and the Great Vowel Shift of the sixteenth century which completely changed the values of all the long vowels and diphthongs, so that the *ow* sound became *aw*; the *aw*, *oh*; the *oh*, *oo*; and the *oo*, *ow*; and so on. That's why the vowel letters of English have values so radically differ-

ent from those of most European languages, in which the meaning of the letters has stayed closer to the original Latin.

"Thus the English-speaking peoples are like the owner of a jalopy that has gotten into such a state of disrepair that he can't afford the cost of maintaining it, and at the same time he can't afford to trade it in on a new one, especially as it has no trade-in value to speak of, and he has to have an automobile in his business.

"Derleth will see that the only way to handle such a situation is to make the change in several steps, say three or four steps five years apart.

"He will also conclude that the reason no efforts in that direction have gotten anywhere in English—neither Theodore Roosevelt's fostering of 'thru' nor Colonel McCormack's use of 'fotograf' in his newspaper—is not that people can't learn new habits, but that the English-speaking world has no official national language-academies to decide what is what and make the decision stick.

"Also, the French-speaking, Dutch-speaking, and other groups are nearly all under single national governments, whereas the English-speaking world is scattered over the globe under a dozen different repub-

lics, kingdoms, dominions, and the like. Of course those conditions have their advantages. English-speakers have never taken kindly to the idea of national academies telling them how to speak and write, though they submit without a murmur to the equally onerous tyranny of an obsolete tradition.

"Derleth, by his knowledge of MacHaggis's coefficient of annoyance, will know how to needle enough of the right people at the right time to get them all moving in the desired direction. He'll persuade all the states of the U. S. A. and all the other English-speaking nations to send delegates to a spelling-reform conference in Bermuda in 2019. Ireland will refuse to send a delegate on the ground that their national language is Irish Gaelic, not English, despite the fact that only one or two per cent of their people speak Irish. But eventually they'll accept the decisions of the conference.

"After the usual jokes about a bison's being something an Australian washes his hands in, the conference will get down to business. The phoneticians and linguists will call for the straight adoption of the International Phonetic Alphabet, new letters and all. The publishers will lobby for as little change as

possible. The teachers from Britain and the northeastern United States will be radical in the matter; those from elsewhere conservative. The members will agree on making the change in a series of steps, and will also agree pretty well on the first of the steps, as follows:

"Change *c* to *s* or *k* as appropriate; *qu* to *kw* or *k*; *x* to *ks*, *gz*, *z*, *gj*, etc.; *s* to *z* in *is*, *cousin*, etc.; *ch* to *k* in *school*, *chemist*, etc.; *gh* to *f* in *cough*, etc.; *y* to *i* in *system*, *pity*, *myrtle*, etc.; *ph* to *f*; *wh* to *hw*; and final *ed* in *asked*, etc., to *-t* or *-d*.

"Drop silent letters in such words as *debt*, *lamb*, *muscle*, *Connecticut*, *drachm*, *handkerchief*, *have*, *give*, *gnaw*, *caught*, *hour*, *rhino*, *John*, *Thomas*, *knee*, *half*, *could*, *mnemonic*, *hymn*, *psychic*, *corps*, *isle*, *castle*, *guard*, *build*, *wrong*, etc.

"Eliminate such anomalous and eccentric spellings as any, are, Arkansas, aunt, bade, beauty, blood, broad, bury, busy, Chicago, choir, colonel, dessert, do, does, England, flood, gaol, gauge, Gloucester, knowledge, laugh, leopard, MacLeod, many, memoir, Michigan, of, one, people, Phoebe, plaid, pretty, quay, queue, said, says, scallop, schism, sieve, Stephen, sugar, sure, tableau, Thames, thorough, through, two, victuals, water,

Wednesday, who, women, yeomen, etc.

"Eliminate final doubled consonants like those in *add*, *off*, *egg*, *ill*, *pass*, *buzz*; also internal doubled consonants not sounded as doubles (as in *bookkeeper*) or needed to show a short stressed preceding vowel (as in *better*); as in *arrive*, *attempt*, etc.

"The rizult wil ov kours look somthing like this, hwich wil turn out to be kwite eazi for pepl to bekom akustomd to. After a few dayz ov praktis most pepl wil find litle diffikulti in reading and riting. The troubl with Joe waz that he kwit without giving himself eni time at al to get uset to the sistem.

"The trouble will arise when the conference tries to choose the subsequent steps. A basic difficulty is that while English has twenty-six letters, it has over forty phonemes (significant sound-units) if you count all the centering diphthongs (as in *ear*, *air*, *ore*, etc.). Of course it's easy to represent compound consonants like *ch* and the long vowels and diphthongs by digraphs (*ai* as in *aisle*, *au* as in *kraut*, *aa* as in *bazaar*, *dj* as in *adjutant*, etc.) but that still leaves us with a minimum of 29 phonemes, six short vowels with five letters to represent them (as in *it*, *let*, *add*, *odd*, *up*, *put*) and 23 consonant

phonemes with 21 letters for them.

"Three existing letters (*c*, *q*, and *x*) merely duplicate other letters and could be either eliminated altogether or put to other uses. The phoneticians at the conference, however, point out, against using the old letters with new meanings, that psychologically it has been found easier for people to assimilate a wholly new letter than an old letter with a new meaning, or an old letter with a diacritical mark. Everybody agrees that diacritics should be avoided, but they don't agree on what should be used instead.

"The phoneticians wish to use IPA letters, while the conservatives think the proposed first step is enough and they should stop there altogether. As the conference happens to be heavily loaded with phoneticians, the conservatives are defeated. It is generally agreed that the six sounds that cause trouble are the final consonants in *fish*, *rouge*, *bath*, *bathe*, and *sing*, and the vowel in *cut*.

"The conservatives want to use digraphs for these, as *sh* and *ng*. The radicals reject this on the ground that you have trouble with words like *gas-house* and *ingrown*, where you have to introduce a hyphen or similar device to show that the

letters represent separate sounds. The leading factions are split between using old characters with diacritics and using wholly new letters; Professor Rawson (New Zealand) smashes a portable blackboard over the head of Doctor Kowacz (Illinois) and it looks as though the conference would break up in a riot, when somebody suggests trying non-alphabetic types or numerals, which occur on typewriter and typesetting-machine keyboards.

"The new-character people, not giving in easily, argue that the introduction of the new characters will be the last step, and therefore the typewriter and typesetter people will have plenty of time to get ready, and also that present keyboards can be modified by dropping a few non-alphabetic characters such as #.

"They point out that using *c*, *q*, and *x* for existing English sounds causes trouble because these letters occur in many foreign names, words, and phrases, that are current in more or less their original form. Thus if you use *q* and *x* for *ng* and *dh* respectively, you'll have trouble with a name like *Quixote*."

Ixl stopped to draw breath. The attached table shows the main proposals and subjects of

contention at the conference. The *ch* and *j* sounds are included because, despite the fact that they are affricates (a kind of compound consonant) that would probably be spelled with digraphs in a reformed orthography, they are still often spelled with single letters and are often classed as single phonemes. The second row shows how they could be respelled using a current typewriter keyboard. The third shows how they could be respelled using a present-day typesetting machine, including foreign types.

Sound	Type- writer	Printing
SHe	c or /	ç
aZure	j	ȝ
CHeap	tc or t/	tç
Just	dj	ɟ
THin	8	8
THis	x	+
siNG	q or 9	n
cUt	w or y	ë or œ

It's a shame English lost the Anglo-Saxon *thorn*. Anglo-Saxon had three letters, *thorn*, *edh*, and *yogh* (3), the first two used for *th* sounds and the last at the beginning of words for a *y* and elsewhere for a sound like German *ch*. When William Caxton started the first printing-press in England in 1476, he refused to use these letters, having

learned printing in Flanders where they got along with the standard Latin alphabet. Instead he spelled the sounds represented by *edh* and *thorn* with *th*, and the yogh by *y* or *gh*. So, unfortunately, these letters went out of use, though *thorn* and *edh* survive in the Icelandic alphabet, which like Anglo-Saxon got them from the old German Runic alphabet or *futhark*.

Ixl, having recovered his breath, continued: "Well, the conferees will finally compromise between those who want to stick to the letters on the typewriter keyboard, and those who want to go clear to the bottom by adopting the symbols in the one-sound one-symbol alphabet. This system doesn't please anybody too well, but it's decided that this is the only system they'll all agree upon as even remotely acceptable.

"They also have to decide among various dialects of English—which shall be included in the new spelling and which not. For instance, they'll have to decide how far to go in preserving distinctions between pairs of words which some people pronounce alike and some differently, such as bomb-balm, sort-sought, horse-hoarse, witch-which, and do-dew. They will decide that whenever a majority or

even a large minority of the English-speaking world preserves a distinction, it shall be kept in the spelling.

"When it is voted to preserve the distinction between such pairs as father-farther and sort-sought and ova-over, the conference will be startled when Dr. Agnes Schwartzwaelder of New York City registers her protest by committing hara-kiri on the speakers' platform. Dr. Schwartzwaelder will be the last Tillyite in the New York public school system—that is, a disciple of the Australian speech-teacher William Tilly who, after acquiring authoritarian ideas on pronunciation in the course of teaching English in Germany during the early years of the twentieth century, moved to America with the avowed intention of imposing the Southern British upper-class dialect on the entire population of the United States on the ground that it was the only cultured, civilized form of the language, everything else being a mere gutter dialect. He left a little band of fanatical followers in the schools and colleges in and around New York City, dedicated to the extirpation of all final and preconsonantal r-sounds from American English, despite the fact that they are normally used by at least three-quarters

of the people of the country, and moreover fit the existing spelling better than the r-less dialects.

"So," said Ixl, "the great reform was launched at last. Would you like to see how it worked out?"

"You bet," said Joe Fan.

So Ixl whisked him forward to 2040 by means of the time-freezer.

Djou faund +e rifoormd speliñ a bit traiyiñ at feerst djěst az hi had on hiz priivios trips. Riidiñ woz nou plejer at ool for kwait a hwait. Bët after hi had bin +eir about a wiik, wi8 adveertizments liiriñ at him eerdjiñ him tu smouk tçester-fildz or lëkiz, driñk çenli'z or balantain'z, and draiv a foord or cevrolei or plimo8, hi faund +at hi had ënkonçosli bigën tu 8iñk in +e niu speliñ. At +e end ov a mën8 hi faund hi kud riid a niuzpeiper wi+aut pein; in tuu mën8s hi woz riidiñ fikçon for plejer agen. And at +e end ov a yiir, hwen hi keim akros an ob-skiur ould saiens-fikçon novel bai a forgotten raiter neimd di Kamp, hwiç had never bin rii-printid in +e niu oor8ografti bi-kooz it woz not konsiderd gud inëf, hi faund +at hi had sou faar forgotten hiz ould speliñ +at hi kud haardli meik sens ov it, and 8rëst it bak on tu +e çelf, liiviñ it Këmpliitli ënred.

The only catches to this prophecy are, of course, that Alexander MacHaggis has to discover the coefficient of annoyance and Fritz Lovecraft Derleth has to be elected president. If those things happen, I guarantee that the rest will follow; but if not, not.

However, I think Lester exaggerated the difficulty of mastering a reformed orthography. It is after all easier than learning the orthography of a foreign language, which is normally the first and easiest step in learning such a language, and people do that all the time without inordinate difficulty. And to cite one instance, when the Mayan Indians were conquered by the Spaniards, they had an imperfect and extremely difficult system of ideographic symbols, and as soon as they learned about the infinitely easier Spanish alphabet from the Spanish priests they dropped their own writing and took to writing Romanized Mayan—as they continue to do to this very day, publishing their own books and newspapers in Maya.

The number of proposals for reforming English spelling is astronomical. One or more magazine articles appear on the subject almost every year, and the British House of Commons de-

feated a spelling-reform proposal by a rather narrow margin a couple of years ago. Many of the reformers offer a graduated series of steps in making the change, as I visualize the Convention as doing. To give you an idea, here is a well-known text in several transcriptions by contemporary spelling-reform advocates:

Fred S. Wingfield (Systematized Spelling): 4 score and 7 years ago our fother's braut foerth on thiss continent a new nation, concevd in liburty, and dedicated tu the proposition that all men ar created eequal.

Fred S. Wingfield (Fonetik Speling): 4 skor n 7 yirz ago qur fqdhrz bret forth cn dhis kqntin'nt a niu neishn, knsjvd in librti, n dedikeitid to dh prpozishn dhaet cl men ar krjeitd jkwal.

Bernard C. Wrenick (New Spelling): foer skoer and seven yeerz agoe our faadherz braut foerth on dhis kontinent a nue naishon, konseevd in liberty, and dedikaitid to dhe propozishon dhat aul men aar kreaited eekwal.

William Russell (Fonemic Alphabet): Fuwr skuwr and seven yiyrz cguw qwr fqzerz browt fuwrhx on xis kontinent c nyuw neysyen, kensiyvd in liberti, and dedikeytid tcw xc pro-

peziſyɛn xat owl mɛn qɹ kriɛyɪd
iykwɛl.

George T. Wride (USAlingua):
fOr skOr and sevn yErz ugO owr
fothrɹ brot fOrTH on this kon-
tununt u nOO nAshn, kunsEvd
in librti, and dedukAted tOO the
propuzishun that ol mɛn or
krEAted Ekwul.

And there are innumerable others using special types or diacritical marks. Of the above, some have one advantage, some another. Mr. Wride's is defective in that he assumes the vowels in *calm*, *cod*, and *caught* to be all three identical, a condition that is not true of any English dialect that I know of, though many forms of English reduce these three vowels to two. The sample I gave earlier, my own version of the spelling of the future, is not necessarily the best or the most probable, but it is the best of which my typewriter is capable.

In addition, there is the complete International Phonetic Alphabet. This is the alphabet of the Association Phonétique Internationale, which was formed in 1886 out of an older association of speech-teachers. The alphabet was developed largely by the late Paul Passy, a French phonetician and for many years the editor of the association's publications. The alphabet has

been revised many times and is designed to handle any known language.

The API issues a small semi-annual magazine, *Le Maître Phonétique*, of which copies can be found in the larger libraries, and whose peculiarity is that the articles are entirely printed in IPA characters. Most of the contributions are in English, though there are some in German, French, and Italian. It is edited by A. C. Gimson, University College, London W. C. 1, England.

The IPA has become more or less standard for bilingual grammars and dictionaries. It is very flexible, adapted not only to different languages but also to different uses in one language. One may use a "narrow" form, with diacritical marks and many special characters outside the Latin alphabet, for indicating the peculiarities of the speech of an individual or a regional dialect. Or one may use a "broad" form, with non-Latin characters and diacritics reduced to a minimum, for a generalized transcription in a dictionary or a reformed orthography. Thus in broad transcription PIT would be spelled *pit* and PETE *pi:t*, *pijt*, or *piit*.

The French spelling-reform I mentioned earlier was, the last I heard, under governmental

consideration though not definitely passed. A couple of years ago the French government set up a commission to make such recommendations, headed by the director of primary education for France, a Monsieur M. A. Beslais. He proposes a fairly drastic reform that will change *photographe* to *fotographe*, *théâtre* to *téâtre*, *rhétorique* to *rétorique*, *doigt* to *doit*, *chevaux* to *chevaus*, *mystère* to *mis-tère*, *manger* to *manjer*, *homme* to *home*, *oignon* to *ognon*, *oeuf* to *euf*, and so on. He proposes, not to apply the reform all at once, but to begin by printing all the first-grade schoolbooks in the new system, and the next year the second-grade books, and so on until the new generation has grown up, by which time their elders will have had plenty of time to adapt themselves. The chances look good for the project, but I am keeping my fingers crossed. The Swedes had a similar reform proposed in their own wretched orthography some years ago, but never quite got to applying it.

I have tried to make the point that the main obstacle to spelling-reform is not, as Lester implied, the cursed conservatism of the human race, serious though that is. It is rather the lack of any official or governmental machinery in the Eng-

lish-speaking world to carry out such a change even if a lot of people were sold on it. The question is therefore primarily political, and if any of my readers are in politics they might give thought to the matter. The Hon. Mike Monroney of Oklahoma devoted a couple of pages of the *Congressional Record* to the subject in 1947, but he would need a good deal of help before anything came of such proposals. Bibliography:

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FORGOTTEN DANGER

BY WILLIAM MORRISON

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

Crusoe could remember only one thing—that somewhere near some deadly danger threatened him! He had no way of knowing what it was, or why he was in the swamp. Then he found he could work miracles!

He had a feeling that there was something he had to remember, something urgent, something that had to do with danger. But it was hard to think of it, it was hard to think at all. There was a dullness in his head as if he had been too long asleep. And now that he had awakened at last, he did not know for the moment where he was. He would realize, of course, once he shook himself and straightened out his mind. But so far he did not know. Nothing was familiar.

It was dark, and in the background he saw the silhouettes of bushes, a bridge, trees. Closer at hand there was a fire over

which a large pot was boiling. Around the fire were four men in ragged clothes. As the firelight flickered over their faces, casting weird lights upon the battered features, he studied them carefully. He knew none of them.

One was a big subtly misshapen bull of a man with a three days' beard. There was power in the set of his shoulders, in his easy slouch as, with narrowed eyes, he stirred the contents of the pot. Another was small, with a pointed beard and a shining bald head. The first one, he gathered from their con-



versation, was called Angel, the second, Professor. The other two were of more moderate size. He saw that their faces assumed strange colors in the light of the leaping flames. He could not, no matter how hard he tried, gather what their names were. But he knew that names didn't matter. The thing that mattered was the danger that somehow threatened and that he couldn't remember.

Angel lifted something out of the pot with a long spoon, said curtly, "Stuff's ready," and began to ladle out the steaming mixture. The men moved toward him with their large tin cups, and then moved back to eat. The largest portion of all Angel kept for himself. The next largest he brought to the sitting man, stumbling as he did so over a root that tangled his shoe. But he caught himself before he had spilled the contents of the cup and said, "Here y'are, Crusoe."

Crusoe. A strange name. Not his at all. But he said automatically, "Thank you."

Angel had lifted a spoonful of the stew to his own mouth. Now he gulped it down hastily and said, "Hey fellows, he sounds like he came out of it."

The other men gathered around him. Professor, staring with sharp eyes, asked, "Do you recall your real name now?"

He shook his head. "I don't remember a thing. How did I get here?" -

"You don't remember that?"

He said with irritation, "I have just told you so."

"Don't get huffy, eh,um," said Angel. "I been feedin' you and takin' care of you and your pal for two weeks. And you don't know a thing about it, huh?"

"I recall nothing. Except that there is danger."

"The railroad bulls who chased us," said one of the other men. "He remembers them."

"Bulls? No, it is something more than that."

"What about it, Professor?" asked Angel. "Think he'll snap out of it so he really remembers?"

"I certainly hope so," returned the little bald man. "When I first found him, wandering around near the swamp, he seemed to be in a complete coma. Then, after a few days of rest, he seemed to realize dimly what was going on around him. But from day to day he remembered nothing. Perhaps the events are not completely forgotten, perhaps they reside in his subconscious, ready to be called to mind again upon proper occasion. However, so far there is no evidence on this point."

"But he's gettin' better all the time," said Angel defensively.

"Yes, that is the thing that indicates there is hope. From now on I think that he will consciously remember all that happens. And perhaps, in time, he will recall who he really is. In the meantime, of course, he is like a shipwrecked mariner discovering an entirely strange land. That is why I have named him Crusoe." He smiled wistfully, "Perhaps he is more fortunate than he seems. I would give much for his ability to forget."

"Stop harpin' on it, Professor. It happened long ago."

"But I still remember it as keenly as if it had happened yesterday. Strange, all the whiskey and gin I have drunk have not dulled my memory in the least. I was very successful in my profession, gentlemen. I was already an Associate Professor of English Literature, a recognized authority on the novel. I had a great career ahead of me. And then, one day, coming home from a Christmas party with my wife, my car skidded on the ice—"

Angel's heavy hand fell across his shoulder. "It's okay, Professor, don't talk about it no more. I know where I can pick up some rotgut tomorrow night, and you'll celebrate and forget all about it."

Crusoe listened with interest.

He had a vague memory of having heard Professor's story about his wife's death before, as if the man had told it to others before they had met Angel and the latter's friends. But it was so vague that he could hardly be sure it was a memory at all. And meanwhile the feeling of danger persisted. He had to do something, do it rapidly. But what?

He felt the anger of frustration, an anger that made him tense and irritable. He ate his stew in silence, aware of its strong and slightly unpleasant taste. He had a feeling as if he were used to better food—and yet he must have been eating the stew all along for the past weeks.

The fire was dying down, and several of the other men talked in low voices to each other. He heard Angel: "And so this cop says to me, 'Move on, ya funny-lookin' bum—'" And then, the rough voice rose in amusement. "I give him a airplane whirl and toss him over the bridge. And then he comes up, coughin' up water, and says, 'Now I remember when I seen you before. You was the *Destroyin' Angel*. You used to wrestle with *The Masked McGinty!*'"

Angel had been a wrestler, Professor a student of literature. If he asked the other men what they had been, they would doubt-

less know. What had he himself been?

Again his mind seemed blank. He sat there sullenly, staring at his empty cup, and wondered if there were any torture greater than that of not being able to remember something that insistently demanded to be remembered.

Soon the conversations died down. The men settled themselves on the dry grass, pulled their old worn apologies for blankets over them, and began to snore. Around them, as the fire was reduced to embers, the night closed in. Crusoe could hear the chirping of crickets and the quiet flow of water under the bridge. A crackling shower of sparks spurted unexpectedly from the still glowing coals.

He couldn't sleep. He had slept enough during the past weeks. Now he had to awaken fully, to realize what he must do next. But first he must recall what had happened. Where had the Professor met him? He had been wandering around near a swamp. Now, what on earth had he been doing near a swamp?

The night passed slowly as he tried to track down the thoughts which kept eluding him. Even the chirping of the crickets died away, and at last there was only the ripple of the water. Then, after a time, he became aware of

new sounds. The crunching of twigs under foot, the creak of shoes on the ground. People were approaching.

He sat up suddenly, as if he had recognized that *this* was the danger he had feared. "Angel!" he called.

The ex-wrestler awoke, and the Professor with him. "Could be cops," whispered Angel hoarsely. "Some farmer loses a chicken, and they think of us. We better get goin'."

He rose quietly and led the way in the direction opposite the approaching sounds. Crusoe could hear the heavy breathing of the other men, almost as if they were continuing to snore even though they were now awake. They were on the alert, but not seriously alarmed. No, this wasn't the danger he had to fear. This was a mere trifle. The real danger was deep, hidden—

Some one stumbled loudly. A voice came out of the darkness. "Hey, you— stop!"

"Better start runnin'," muttered Angel, and lumbered forward. He tripped over something and cursed, but kept on going.

It was growing lighter now, and Crusoe found it easier to see. In front of him the ground rose gently toward the top of a low hill. And halfway up the slope stood two men, armed with rifles. They lifted the rifles and

one of them said harshly, "Hold it, you bums."

Their retreat was cut off. Angel came to a stop, the others near him, the slower and slighter Professor bringing up the rear. Without thinking, Crusoe raised his arm, and just as if his hand held a weapon, he pointed at the two men with their rifles.

The rifles exploded. They flew apart into countless fragments, and as if by magic, blood appeared on the faces of the two men. Angel grasped the situation instantly. He said, "Come on, fellows," and rushed forward again. But the two men collapsed before he reached them.

From behind them came angry yells as the first group realized that the trap had failed. Angel chuckled. "They thought they had us," he said. "When they see what happened to those two guys, they won't be in such a hurry to get close to us again."

"What did happen?" asked one of the men. He gestured with reluctance at Crusoe. "This guy just pointed his hand—"

Angel whirled around. "Him? I thought somebody in back of me threw a grenade. I wasn't askin' who done it—"

"Nobody threw no grenade. He just pointed at them."

"Just with his finger? And

them rifles exploded? It ain't possible!"

They surrounded Crusoe and stared at him with fear-filled eyes. "How did you do it, pal?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I just felt as if a weapon belonged in my hand, as if all I had to do was point it. So I did. And the rifles exploded."

"Point at a tree."

He pointed at a tree. Nothing happened.

Angel bounced his hand against his ear, as if trying to shake loose some water that hampered his hearing. He looked uneasy and bewildered. "Something's screwy, but we can't stop to figure it now. We gotta keep goin'."

The pursuers were being more cautious now, and after a time Crusoe realized that the acuteness of the danger had passed. They all stopped to rest. The other two men, however, paused only briefly. One of them said, "So long, chum. We better split up here. We're gonna catch a freight goin' north."

They seemed anxious to part from Angel and his friends. Crusoe watched them go without regret. They were odd-looking men, and he had not enjoyed their company. Moreover, he had a feeling that they had nothing to do with the danger the thought of which made him un-

easy. Professor, now—Professor had a little more to do with it.

Angel's ponderous mind had returned to the subject of their mysterious escape. He said, "Look, Crusoe, how'd ya do it? You can come clean with us. We won't spill it to nobody."

Crusoe said, "I haven't the slightest idea. As I told you, all I did was point."

"Any more tricks you know how to pull?"

"How do I know? I didn't even suspect that I could perform this one."

"I suppose," said the Professor, "that the reflexes, which existed long before there was a conscious mind, can continue to persist even after the mind has been seriously injured. You must have been in the habit of using some weapon—"

"A weapon? You mean that I was a soldier? Then what am I doing out of uniform?"

"I hardly know," said the Professor slowly. "When I first met you, near the swamp, you were wearing nothing. Your body was dirty and slightly burnt, as if from some explosion. There was not a shred of clothes to give a clue to what you had been. Those you are now wearing, including your overalls, I ah—borrowed from a clothesline."

"But there may be traces of

my own clothes back in that swamp."

"They will be hard to find. Swamps have a habit of swallowing what is left in them."

"But there must be *something* there. How did I get to the swamp in the first place? And what sort of explosion tore my clothes from me?"

"A plane," said Angel suddenly. "Maybe you were in a crash. I remember that a couple months ago some farmers had a story about a plane explodin' in the sky. Maybe that was the one."

"If I was in a plane, the wreckage must still be in the swamp." And there too must be where the danger lay. "I'm going back there," he said with sudden determination.

"I'll go with you, of course," said the Professor. "As the first one to come across you in your helpless condition, I feel a certain responsibility for you."

Angel grinned. "I feel the same way about you, Professor. I guess I been feelin' like that ever since I found you gettin' pushed around by Monk Cromo. Monk's about my size," he explained to Crusoe. "And he useta be a fighter. He thought he had only Professor to handle. He found he had *me*. And ya know, pal, that a good wrestler will take a fighter any old time."

"How long ago was that?" asked Professor. "It seems like ages."

"Five, six years. But you know somethin', pal, you ain't as helpless as you used to be. That's what comes of havin' a head on you. You learn how to get along, no matter where you are."

"I regard that as a compliment, Angel," smiled the little man. "Now, shall we start?"

Toward the danger that Crusoe felt awaited them in the swamp they could travel but slowly. They had to go by foot, on dusty narrow roads. There was no hope of getting a lift from passing cars. One look at the three of them, and the average driver stepped on the gas and raced away. Farmers set their dogs on them, and only the sight of Angel's grim face and the strength of Angel's powerful muscles kept them from being torn by the hounds and beaten by their masters.

Everything that happened now Crusoe remembered perfectly. His mind could go back a day, two days, with no trouble at all. It was only when it reached that moment when he had become aware of his surroundings at the fire that his memory stopped short, with terrifying abruptness. Beyond that

it couldn't go. What had he done before then?

As they made their way toward the swamp, he became aware of something else. The people here looked strange. Come to think of it, those two tramps who had been with them earlier had looked strange in the same way. And the farmers spoke in peculiar fashion, with an accent that grated slightly on his ear. Queer, he thought, that people who had lived here all their lives should seem so out of place and learn their own language so improperly.

Once, when Angel was foraging for food, a big dangerous-looking dog came barking at Crusoe and Professor. This was a barking dog that had never heard that it was not supposed to bite. Crusoe liked neither the vicious glint in its eyes nor the cruel look of its teeth. As the beast made a sudden lunge at them, he snapped his fingers sharply and said, "Scar!"

The animal came to a halt, as if puzzled. Professor laughed. "I don't think that's its name," he said, and stooped to pick up a heavy rock that might serve as a missile. The dog promptly scurried away as fast as its legs would take it.

"'Scar' isn't a name," said Crusoe thoughtfully. "I have the feeling that it's a command.

When accompanied by a snap of the fingers, it tells the animal to go back to its corner."

"That's interesting. So you're actually beginning to recall things."

"Not exactly. I'm still responding almost automatically, at little beyond the reflex level. Before I snapped my fingers I didn't know that I was going to snap them. Nor did I realize that I knew the word."

"But at least you've made a beginning," said Professor happily. "Soon you'll be recalling the past with full consciousness."

When Angel rejoined them, he was in proud possession of a tough but edible chicken. Crusoe and Professor congratulated him, and later they cooked the chicken and devoured it. It struck Crusoe that the taste of the chicken too was strange. Or was it rather that the chicken was quite ordinary, and that his own sense of taste was what was unusual? That must have been it, he thought. The feeling that food tasted good or bad also depended upon a kind of reflex memory, a memory that was making itself felt more and more.

The evening of that same day they camped in an open stubble-covered field. As it grew dark, Angel began to talk of his past career, of his triumphs as a

wrestler, of his one great adventure in Hollywood to make a picture. He had been the comic relief, a foil to the handsome hero. Crusoe had no reason to doubt what he said, but all the same he found Angel's adventures incredible. The life that the ex-wrestler described was mad, completely absurd. He couldn't imagine himself living it.

He stared up at the sky, and realized that this too didn't look "normal." It wasn't, it couldn't be, the sky under which he had lived for most of his life. And the idea of living under a different sky didn't surprise him. It was an idea to which he must long have been accustomed.

Two days later they reached the edge of the swamp. "I found you near here," said the Professor. He waved his arm vaguely. "You were wandering around, covered with mud."

It didn't look familiar. Nor did it look as dangerous as he had expected it to look. He asked, "Why did we leave this neighborhood? Why didn't we stay and look for the plane that had crashed?"

"For one reason," said the Professor gently. "Because at the time I didn't realize that there had been a plane. For another, because we were—shall I say, not popular?"

"Why? Why weren't we?"

A chuckle from Angel interrupted him. "People don't like to lose chickens."

"I see."

"Nor clothes," added the Professor. "Remember that I supplied you with garments that were hanging on a clothesline. Perhaps I should have mentioned that the farmer's wife who discovered her loss tried to extract payment from me by means of a shotgun."

Crusoe nodded slowly. "By now, you assume, the memory of the loss will have grown faint?"

"I hope so. We shall, of course, do our best not to attract attention."

They moved into the swamp. It was gloomy, but not, thought Crusoe, frightening. There must have been no more than light rains during the past weeks, for at first they found it possible to walk along dry paths, and here and there were pools of mud where ordinarily there must have been water. But as they penetrated further in, the mud became more liquid. The leaves of the trees overhead shut out most of the light, and they walked over soft carpets of moss and decaying leaves. The odor too became unpleasant, the odor of mud flats and stagnant water, of small dead animals and impure, stinking marsh gas.

"Where are we headed for?" said Angel uneasily. "This is kind of dark—"

"Not too dark to see," said Crusoe. "But I perceive no signs of there having been a crash."

"Nor do I," agreed the Professor. "However, the swamp covers an area of roughly twenty square miles. It will take us a considerable time to explore it all."

And in those twenty square miles was the danger which he had felt hanging over him. He suddenly began to wonder what he would find. A crashed plane? No, it would be more than that. A crashed plane wouldn't explain why the people acted and talked so queerly, why the food didn't taste right, nor the sky look right.

The following day Angel stumbled over a half-hidden log and almost stepped into a trap. As the steel jaws snapped on the log instead of on his foot, Crusoe thought of another trap, a trap not of steel, but more relentless, one that gripped more firmly than this ever would. Had it shut recently, or was it going to shut?

Angel's cursing distracted him from his thoughts. Professor said mildly, "Don't use such language, Angel. After all, you have escaped. And here's an-

other trap—with something in it."

Angel's eyes glittered. "It's a 'possum. They're good eatin'." He began to laugh. "Say, won't this guy be sore when he finds two traps sprung, and nothin' in them!"

But later that day, when they saw the trapper, it seemed less like a laughing matter. The man carried a rifle, and as Angel made an incautious noise, he swung around, rifle butt to his shoulder. Angel dropped just as the bullet cut through the leaves near where his head had been.

And then the trapper's rifle exploded, just as the other rifles had done.

The trapper stared at what was left of his weapon in his hand and then turned and ran. Angel said, "You pointed your finger again!"

"No," said Crusoe. "Not this time. I just *started* to point."

"Maybe it's just the thinkin' about it that does it. Maybe you can do things by thinkin'."

"That's absurd."

"I wonder," said the Professor. "The swamp ahead of us is particularly nasty. We'll have to wade through water and mud at least to our waists. And when I remember how muddy you were when I found you, I have a feeling that you must have wandered

through here. Now if we could only dry up the swamp—"

"They tried to do it once," said Angel. "It can't be done."

"But suppose Crusoe were to point his finger at it and think: 'Swamp, dry up.' I wonder what would happen."

They were both staring at Crusoe now, and he said, "Nothing would happen."

"You can't tell," said Angel. "Maybe Professor's right. Maybe it *would* dry up. Try it and see."

"I refuse to make a fool of myself."

"The foolish thing," remarked the Professor, "is not to try."

"Yeah, that trapper will be comin' back after awhile, with his pals. He'll keep us from goin' back the way we came. We'll have to go ahead. And I hate to get all muddy. Come on, pal, just point your finger and think the magic words."

He did feel like a fool, and if the other two had seemed at all skeptical, he would never have dared do it. Nevertheless, there did seem to be nothing to lose. He pointed his finger at the dark and muddy water, at the tangle of fallen trees and rotting water lilies, and concentrated.

"Think hard," urged the Professor.

He thought hard and forgot

that they were there. Suddenly, a sheet of blinding flame swept over the swamp. He heard Angel cry out, and covered his own eyes. When the flame had passed, the water was gone, and with it the tangle of fallen vegetation. Before them lay a bed of hard dry clay.

"You did it," said Angel in awe.

"I didn't," he replied angrily. "You just can't do things like that by thinking."

"I know I can't," said Angel. "But you can. It's magic."

The Professor smiled. "Let's not worry what it is. The main thing is that the swamp ahead of us is now dry, and we can go ahead."

They went ahead. And a quarter mile ahead of them they found the ship.

It had been easier to locate than he had thought it would be. And once he saw the ship, a feeling of recognition swept over him.

Angel had halted and was saying in awe, "This ain't no plane."

It wasn't. It had been constructed to do more than skim the surface of a planet. It had been built to bridge the gap from one planet to the next, from one star to the next. Only fifty feet long, it was a thing of strength and beauty, with a dull smooth finish that could slip

through an atmosphere with a minimum of friction. He was beginning to remember a great deal now. The entrance, he knew, was near the nose. The door closed tight after you went through it, leaving an apparently unbroken surface of metal, but if you came over to it and put your hand on a certain plate—

He came over to it and hesitated. The Professor asked eagerly, "Is this—is it a space-ship?"

"Yes. This is the door, over here. I must have crashed in the swamp and for some reason staggered out."

"But how—how does it work?"

"Like this."

He raised his hand to the plate, and suddenly the sense of danger swept over him again. And now he knew where it came from. Not from the ship itself. No, not from the ship. But from the Professor, the gentle little man who had been protecting him.

He swung around and saw that the little man's forehead was beady with sweat. The man had been tense, hoping that he would open the door without remembering too much. The hope had failed. His memory had been coming back gradually in the

past few days. Now the sight of the ship had brought back everything. Everything.

He caught sight of the glint of metal in the Professor's hand. "I thought so," he said. "I thought so."

Angel's lower jaw had dropped. He stammered, "What is this? Professor, that ain't a gun, is it?"

"Much more than a gun," said Crusoe softly. "That's the magic. When I pointed with my hand, without thinking, it was because I was accustomed to having a weapon like that. But it was the Professor who actually had it. It was he who made those rifles explode. And because he didn't want any one to suspect that he had such a thing on him, he let me have the credit."

"It will do you no good to remember," said the Professor. "In the long run it will do you no good."

"I wonder. You can cover a great surface with a sheet of flame by using that thing, you can kill with it, but you can't make me do what you want. Not now, not after I've remembered who you are."

"Look," said Angel, "I don't get this. I know the Professor for five, six years."

"Not this one," replied Crusoe. "Perhaps the original Professor did find me wandering

around alone. But then my friend here came searching for me, and after studying his characteristics for a time, killed him and took his place. He's a great mimic, is my friend. That, in fact, is why I was sent to get him, and was bringing him, a prisoner, back to his home planet. He's mimicked all sorts of people, even those who have only the slightest resemblance to humanoids. It was nothing at all for him to become a Professor. Physically, of course, he probably doesn't fit the part too well. Do you mean to say that you haven't noticed?"

The Professor laughed gently. "Angel wouldn't notice. Haven't you realized yet that he's half blind? He stumbles, blunders into things. He can't see well. He didn't notice the difference. Not when I acted so well."

Angel sought escape from confusion in a fact he could understand. He said pathetically, "You killed the real Professor? He was a guy who wouldn't have hurt anybody. You killed him?"

"Of course. I've killed much better and more important people than he would ever be."

"He's right, Angel, he's an experienced killer. But all his killing won't help him now. He needs me to open and operate

the ship. And I'm not cooperating."

Angel held fast to what he could understand. He muttered to himself, "The dirty killer. The rat."

The little man ignored him. He said, "You were very wise, Tlaxon—you remember your name now?—you were very wise, when you saw that a crash threatened, to lock the ship's machinery so that only your own personal characteristic motions would open it again. That was too much for even me to mimic. Your cleverness left me helpless to escape from the planet without you. After we finally crashed, and I recovered from the shock, I examined the ship's machinery. There seemed to be no serious damage. But I couldn't operate it. I needed your help. And you were unconscious. Sitting at the controls, you had received a much more severe shock than I had. You didn't recover for many hours. And after you did, you remembered nothing. You were still unable to be of use to me.

"I was enraged, but there was nothing I could do. I tried to keep you in the ship, but once, while I was asleep, you awoke and stumbled out. I had no choice then but to follow you in order to protect you. The ship locked automatically behind me, leaving me worse off than ever.

But I had to follow because my escape depended on your own. It was then that Professor discovered you and I discovered him. I had to kill him. I think you can see why."

"Yes, I see now."

"Once our return to the ship was blocked off, we had to hide. I had to discard our old clothes and steal clothes that would be less conspicuous. As it was, we ourselves were conspicuous enough. In the world of ordinary men, we would have been subject to immediate investigation. It was only among such outcasts as Angel and his friends that we could to some extent pass ourselves off as natives. When they met us, the others thought that Angel had at last found friends of his own kind. Angel, of course, thought he had found the Professor. He was overjoyed to see me, and his enthusiasm was our passport. Moreover, in their world, it was not customary to ask questions that a man was not inclined to answer. There were too many embarrassing secrets on all sides.

"I was continually on tenterhooks with regard to you. I was hoping that you would remember enough to help operate the ship and escape from the planet, but not enough to recall who I was. Meanwhile, I watched with interest how even in your amnes-

iac state you absorbed the English language. With our people, Tlaxon, language learning is much more of a reflex process than it is with these Earthlanders. You learned without knowing that you were doing so. All the same, your racial peculiarities prevented you from speaking exactly as the natives do."

"That's why I thought that *they* were the ones who spoke strangely. All but Angel."

"Yes, he has the same difficulties with dentate sounds like *t*'s and *d*'s that we do. Strange how much he resembles us physically too. It helped people to think of us as three freaks of a kind. Mentally, of course, there's all the difference in the world."

"Is there? I wonder if he isn't basically sound. I wonder how well he'd do if he weren't made to feel like a freak, if he were given a chance in our own System."

The smaller man's lips curled in a sneer. "Perhaps an inferior creature like him would fit in. I'm afraid I never will. I'll tell you what I'll do, Tlaxon. Once we take off from this planet I'll let you put me down in one of three places where I have friends. I'll give you your choice and promise you that no harm will come to you."

"The rat," muttered Angel

hoarsely. "Look, Crusoe, I don't understand everything you fellows said. But I remember the Professor, the real Professor. He had a big head, just like me. He used to say, a wrestler could be a highbrow too."

"A high forehead, such as our own. Yes," agreed the little man. "He had."

"And he didn't make fun of me because my face was kinda blue. Other people used to look at me like I was a freak. They didn't realize that after I stopped wrestlin' I had to go to work in some factory where the silver chemicals turned my skin blue. They just thought I was born that way."

"We *were* born that way," said Crusoe gently. "Can't you tell? Or are your eyes so very bad? That's one reason we would have been so conspicuous without you. That's why the people looked so strange to me. Not merely because most of them had low foreheads. But because none of them were blue. Pink and brown and white, and red and yellow and black, but no blue. I began to think of them all as freaks."

"You are as big a freak as any," interrupted the Professor. "I am giving you a chance for your life. And you prefer to discuss irrelevancies."

Crusoe shook his head. "Your-

offer is rejected. Whatever happens to me, I do not intend to help you escape."

"No? You have no choice, friend Tlaxon. I am tired of caring for you like a baby. Either you accept my offer now or I withdraw it for a worse one. And I think I know of ways to make you do as I wish."

It was Crusoe's turn to perspire. He was quite aware that the other man knew of many painful ways. But he knew too that if he accepted the original offer, the murderous little man would break his promise and murder him the moment the ship's controls were freed of their responsiveness to the characteristics of one man.

While Crusoe hesitated, the sharp crack of a rifle broke the silence. Angel winced and pressed his hand to his right shoulder. A red stain spread under his fingers.

Half a dozen men with rifles were advancing across the burned out area of the swamp. "Attracted by the flame," muttered the Professor. "The fools." He swung around to cover them with his weapon, keeping one eye on Crusoe.

He had written off Angel because of the latter's wound. He should have remembered the man's tremendous vitality. Just

as the weapon went off, Angel's left hand swung out and caught him under the jaw. A sheet of flame appeared at treetop level and then died out. The weapon fell to the ground and Crusoe picked it up.

The rifles exploded. The next moment the door in the ship's surface had swung silently open. Crusoe leaped in.

"So long, pal," said Angel huskily. "This rat killed Professor. I'm goin' to make sure that he gets his."

Crusoe shook his head, remembering all the times the big man had befriended him before.

"Those men will punish him. You come in here."

"Huh?" said Angel foolishly.

"Your one real friend is dead.

Do you want to be regarded by the others as a freak all the rest of your life? Come with me. I'm expected back with a prisoner. They'll be glad to get you instead. You'll be made over, given a new life. You'll still be blue, of course—but so will everyone else. As for *him*, he's past making over. He doesn't deserve to be treated as we treat most of our prisoners. I'll leave him to your race and he'll probably be punished for killing the real Professor. Even if the only thing that happens to him is to remain on Earth and have no way of getting back to his own planet,

that will be punishment enough. You needn't worry about his getting his."

Angel moved slowly through the doorway. The metal clanged shut behind him. The motor purred and the ship began to vibrate so smoothly that Crusoe could hardly feel it. All was well,

he realized; the motor was unharmed by the crash. For which they were thankful.

The ship roared into the air. As the forgotten little man, who had been the danger, screamed unheard, they headed for the nearest star and home—for both of them.

One of the favorite themes of fiction has always been amnesia, since men first recognized its existence. That's only natural. What could be more dramatic than the sudden realization of a complete loss of identity?

Most of such stories, of course, have been filled with a good deal of nonsense, such as the too-trite solution by another bump on the head. But some have used perfectly honest psychology, and have lost none of their mystery or suspense by doing so. There is so little understood about amnesia, after all, that it's almost impossible for a writer not to have a good, sound mystery by using it.

Here's a case of a machine—the brain—breaking down. But it's only a partial break-down, usually. Most of the functions go right on, undisturbed. The body functions continue. Even most of the habits seem to remain. There seems to be a loss of memory to an amazing degree—but actually, the amazement should be at the amount which remains. Think for a moment of what a complicated habit-pattern speaking a language is; yet the amnesiac may retain complete memory of his language, of all social customs, etc.

Just how does the mind separate the identity—the part of a man which he considers almost his whole self—from all the things which went into making him that self? How can he forget that he is an aviator—and yet remember the slang of his trade? Or, as sometimes happens, how can he forget that purely trade slang—and yet remember all the rest of the language?

Memory and personality seem to be a lot more complicated than most of us think.

COME INTO MY PARLOR

BY CHARLES E. FRITCH

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

Sober or drunk, Johnny was seeing things. Like spider webs in the night sky. But as a newspaper reporter, Bennet had the job of keeping facts and fancies separate. He was good at that—too good!

I found Johnny a few blocks from our hotel in a little bar that was nearly deserted. He was sitting alone at a table in a dark corner, staring morosely at nothing in particular, his hand limp around an almost-empty glass. He seemed perfectly sober, though his eyes stared glassily ahead.

I sat down beside him. "What do you say we go back to the hotel, Johnny? Tomorrow's another slave day."

His eyes shifted to me and then back to nothing. I wondered if he had actually seen me.

"We can talk about it over

some coffee and a bit to eat."

I suggested, placing my hand on his arm.

"Go to hell," he said quietly and shook me loose. He lifted his glass, drained the last few drops. He held the empty glass to the light, then set it down, regretfully. "But first buy me a drink."

"You'd better go home," I said. "You've had enough."

He laughed harshly. "Look who's giving me orders. I know things about this cock-eyed old world you never had nightmares about, and you're ordering me around! Bossy newspapermen!



ORBAN

Go to hell, then; I'll get my own drink."

He rose unsteadily and managed his way to the bar. He came back with the glass full.

"You still here. I thought I told you—"

"You'd better lay off that stuff," I said quietly. "You're not used to it."

"Boy, oh boy, you're just full of orders today, aren't you? Charlie Bennet, boy crusader! Well, I've got something you can crusade about. Anything else you'd like?"

"That's enough for now."

"You're damn right it is. Now get the hell out of here and leave me alone. Can't you see I'm brooding over the fate of the world?"

"What are you so mad about?"

He looked annoyed, and a little startled. "Brother, if you only knew—" He raised his glass, and then stopped and set it on the table. "Wait a minute. Maybe I ought to tell you. Maybe I ought to let the two of us worry about it, instead of just me. Maybe you should print it in that newspaper of yours."

"I'm willing to listen, anyway."

"Sure! Why not? I'm just beginning to experience that rosy sensation, that warm feeling of camaraderie they keep stoppered up in bottles. It's the only place

on this planet you can find it."

"Don't be cynical."

"Maybe I should bust out laughing. The whole thing's really funny; it's the funniest thing I've ever heard."

"We'd better go."

"Sure, let's go. But first—you want to see something really funny? Here."

He took a pair of glasses from his pocket and handed them to me. They seemed like ordinary shell-rimmed glasses, though the lenses were tinted a slight blue.

"Put them on," he prompted. "Go ahead."

"Where'd you get these?"

"Made 'em," he said. "My job is optical research, remember. I was fooling around in the lab with some invisible light experiments. The right combination of lenses and coatings—and whammo! This." He took a drink. "I should have been a lawyer or a plumber or something." He grunted. "Or even a newspaperman!"

"What are they supposed to do—see in the dark?"

He laughed humorlessly. "That'd be a boon for a reporter, wouldn't it? No, my friend, much worse than that. Try them on. Go ahead."

I did. "Well?"

"Notice anything peculiar?"

"The coating makes everything here seem bluish—maybe even unearthly, if that's what you want—but—"

"C'mon outside, then," he said. This time he took my arm and steered me from the bar. I was glad of the opportunity to get him into the night air.

"Look at the sky," he directed. "See anything unusual?" He stood waiting, expectant.

"I see stars," I said. "Nothing unusual about that, is there?"

"Stars! Only stars?" His voice had lost its tinge of sarcasm. His fingers were tight on my arm. "Look, across the sky, see those luminous bands? All across the sky. Like a giant spider web."

I looked again. After awhile, I said, "Sorry, Johnny, but there aren't any luminous bands, spider webs or otherwise. I think we'd better get to the room. A good night's rest—"

"Wait a minute," he cried suddenly, his face pale. "You think I'm drunk—or worse. I tell you there is something up there. Shining streamers crisscrossing the sky, like—like—"

"There's nothing, Johnny. Only stars."

I took the glasses off. He made a quick grab for them and somehow they fell to the pavement and shattered.

For a moment, Johnny stared

at the glittering fragments, his jaws working. "You've broken them," he accused finally, his eyes filled more with sudden despair than hatred. "It took weeks to build them."

"It was an accident," I told him. "But it's just as well they are broken. I tell you, Johnny, there's nothing unusual in the sky. Nothing at all. Spider webs! Next you'll be seeing pink elephants."

Johnny stood in the cool night and stared at the sky. "They're up there, I tell you. They're up there, and I want to know why. And there's one thing I want to know more than anything else; suppose they're really spider webs—" His face was deathly white. "Are there spiders?"

He stared at me insanely in the darkness. "Do you realize what that would mean, Charlie? Giant spiders, invisible, roaming across the Earth!" His fingers were digging into my arm again.

"Johnny, come out of it," I snapped, shaking him. "There is no web in the sky, you hear me? And there aren't any spiders, either. It's just some crazy figment of your imagination. That's all."

"But just suppose there are," he persisted, a little wildly. "Maybe—maybe it's not just the glasses. Maybe it's partly me, too; maybe I'm the only one who

can see them; maybe that's why you didn't see the web. Maybe—"

"Johnny, be sensible! If there were such monsters roaming around, don't you think they'd have been discovered by now?"

"I don't know," he said, helplessly. "I don't know, and it's driving me crazy. You've probably wondered why I haven't slept very well for the past couple of weeks; well, that's the reason. I didn't want to say anything. I hardly dared put the glasses on, I was so afraid. Not of being thought crazy, but—but afraid of what *they* might do if they knew they were discovered."

"Look, Johnny. Even supposing you might be right, why wouldn't they show themselves? Why just stay up in the sky in a large web?"

"Maybe they're sizing us up," Johnny said, trembling but not with cold. "After all, we've got a few weapons, too. Maybe a machine gun or an atomic bomb can hurt them, as well as humans."

"Unless they're here for some good?" I suggested.

Johnny laughed. "Spiders? Maybe they're hungry—and they think we're a bunch of flies down here. That's more likely."

"Isn't this—rather fantastic?"

"Of course it is. Why do you suppose I've been keeping quiet

about it for the past two weeks? Why do you suppose I'm out trying to get drunk?" He added disgustedly: "I can't even do that."

"C'mon," I said, "let's go to the room and we'll have some coffee. We can talk about it there."

"Sure," he said, and his voice was suddenly subdued. "Sure, why not?"

We went to the hotel room and I made some coffee, being careful to slip enough sleeping tablets in Johnny's cup. In a few minutes he was sprawled across the bed.

I went to the window and looked at the glowing beads of traffic below. I looked at the sky—at the stars. Spiders in the sky; what a story that would make. The editor'd slap me in the booby hatch if I ever handed in a who-what-when-where like that.

When I left for work the next morning, Johnny was still snoozing. Let him sleep it off. Do him good. He'd been working too hard at the lab, anyhow.

I couldn't get back to the hotel room that morning, though I wanted to see if Johnny was okay. I was pretty busy writing a human interest yarn kidding the pants off some astronomer's notion that light waves coming from certain portions of the sky were being deflected or refracted

slightly for no discernible reason.

The amount of difference was microscopic, and I wrote it up to emphasize its ridiculous splitting of hairs and the fact that you can't take some of these crackpots seriously. Here the world is on the verge of coming apart at the seams, and they worry about wayward light rays.

During the afternoon, I managed to drop into the hotel to see if Johnny had slept off the liquor and the sleeping tablets. He had, and he was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking grim—and a little perplexed.

"How ya feeling, Johnny?" I said.

"Great," he said, though he didn't sound it. "Things seem a lot clearer this morning."

"Good. I thought they would. You know, you really had me going last night. I thought you meant all that stuff, but I guess imagination and a few beers can do a lot."

"Cut the kidding," he said grimly.

"What?"

"I said, cut it. I'm not in the mood."

"Now what's the matter?"

"This," he said. He held up a pair of glasses, twins to those destroyed.

"But—how could you have

made another set? You haven't been near the lab today."

"When I first discovered this web business, I made two pair of glasses. I figured two people could do something about it a whole lot easier than just one. But I was afraid to let anyone in on it. I thought maybe I *was* batty."

"So?"

"I made this pair for you. For you, Charlie, so you could write the stuff up in your paper to let people know. That's a laugh, isn't it?"

"Say—that's swell. But—"

"Stand back!" Johnny cried suddenly, as I started to move toward him. He snatched a gun from beneath a pillow and waved it threateningly. "Know what I was doing this afternoon before you came in?"

"Johnny, this is crazy! Put down that gun and listen to reason."

"I had the glasses on," he continued, "and I was looking out the window here. I'm getting real brave—even in broad daylight—but there comes a time when you just don't care. I saw *spiders* in the streets. Huge spiders walking along the streets, mingling with human beings. And get this, Charlie—when I took the glasses off, they were like human beings. Like humans, you understand. You know what that

means? They're in disguise all around us!"

"That's not true, Johnny," I insisted. "There are no webs in the sky. There are no spiders. It's your imagination. The strain. Working in the lab—"

"No," he cried, and the gun never wavered. "You know what else I saw? A few minutes ago. I was looking down into the street, and a spider got out of a car just in front of the hotel here and started coming in. I took off the glasses to see if it might be someone I knew."

He began to laugh hysterically. "You know who it was, Charlie—"

I leaped forward, trying to knock the gun down. But Johnny's hand came up, and the gun jumped, spurting noise and flame. The bullet slammed into my body.

Desperately, I drove forward.

My arms went around him. The gun went off again, before I could prevent it. A furrow of pain shot across my stomach, and I shied out in sudden anguish.

"Johnny, Johnny. Stop it. Stop!"

I struck his hand. The gun clattered to the floor. He was struggling frantically, striking out against me with doubled fists. His shirt was splattered with my blood. He gasped, clearing his lungs for a scream.

There was nothing else I could do. The life was draining from me.

I held his arms and legs together and tried not to look into the terrified expression crossing his face. I held him tightly while he squirmed in helpless frustration.

And with my two remaining arms I strangled him!

A LOT OF STORIES involve aliens who masquerade as Earth people, or men who pass as aliens. Since we've never knowingly met aliens, we can't deny the possibility. But how it could be done is a bit difficult to explain.

Can you imagine yourself going on a trip to the interior of China and passing as a native? Or could you join a pack of timber-wolves and pass as one of them? It seems pretty unlikely. Yet surely the problem of an alien masquerading as a human must be even tougher.

We've yet to see a really good account of just how all this can be done, and we'd like some ideas on it. If any authors feel like showing us an alien honestly trying this—no instant telepathy and ultimate adaptiveness, please—we'd love to see such a story. Or maybe the readers have some ideas on this?

BOOK REVIEWS:

THE DISSECTING TABLE

by

DAMON KNIGHT

TAKEOFF, by Cyril M. Kornbluth. Doubleday, 218 pages, \$2.75 • Readers who have followed Cyril Kornbluth's work since the early 40's, when (as Cecil Corwin, S. D. Gottesman, Kenneth Falconer, et al.) he was a heavy contributor to *Stirring Science* and *Cosmic*, do not have to be told that for more than a decade he has been one of the most promising young writers in this field.

Here, finally, is the promise amply fulfilled.

Kornbluth must have been born with a lexicon in his mouth. Legend has it that once, when a motherly stranger bent over him in his perambulator and made the sounds that are usually made to babies, Kornbluth remarked, "Madam, I am not the child you think me." At any rate, he was about sixteen, and looked a prematurely aging twenty-six, when he wrote *The Words of Guru*, a short fantasy which, for my money, deserves the place in the literature generally assigned to something by Dunsany.

Today, heavier than ever (and looking about as much like his jacket photo as an owl like an owlet) he is not only writing first-rate science fiction but getting paid accordingly—a factor which, like it or not, makes all the difference between promise and fulfilment. His first novel was *Mars Child*, written in collaboration with Judith Merrill; his second, *Gunner Cade*, also with Miss Merrill; his third, *Gravy Planet*, with Frederik Pohl. All three, judging by style and manner, were at least three-quarters Kornbluth; each was better than the last; but none of them has one-half the stature of *Takeoff*.

Takeoff is a science-fiction novel about the building of the first Moon ship. It is also a contemporary novel of science and bureaucracy, and a tough, realistic murder mystery. It functions brilliantly on all three levels; Kornbluth's Midas touch makes the engineering of the spaceship as fascinating as the mystery behind it, and the devious workings of governmental intrigue as engrossing as either. The incidental love story is less effective, but this is a hindsight criticism.

Other hindsight: I regret the plot necessity that killed off the book's most engaging and believable character less than halfway through, and altered another, barely believably, to a villainess. In the pro-

tagonist himself, there are traces of pulp characterization not evident elsewhere.

These are all minor cavils. If there is any major complaint to be made to Kornbluth at this point, it must be based, paradoxically, on the very prodigality of his talent. Kornbluth's career is like that of a very bright schoolboy in a class of dull ones: he discovered early that he could do the things the others struggled to accomplish a great deal better and with much less effort; he has been doing it ever since, with his tongue in his cheek.

Takeoff, I think is a strong candidate for the best science-fiction novel of the year—a year that produced *The Puppet Masters* and *The Demolished Man*. But brilliant as it is, there is not an idea or an attitude in it that is original with its author. It is simply the standard material of modern popular fiction, compounded with more skill than most of us can muster.

Or:

This is a very good book.

Kornbluth can write a better one.

CITY, by Clifford D. Simak. Gnome Press, 224 pages, \$2.75 • Here in eight connected short stories—seven from *Astounding*—is a justly famous history of the future that begins with the withering-away of cities. In Simak's leisurely, nostalgic, frankly sentimental prose, the stories follow the fate of mankind and of one family in particular—the Websters—from about the end of this century to A. D. 14,000. Inevitably, sharp images are replaced by hazier ones as the narrative progresses; the best of the stories, I think, are *City*, *Huddling Place*, *Census* and *Desertion*—the first four.

For this volume, an "Editor's Preface" and a Note on each tale—all supposedly written by the intelligent dogs who have replaced Man on earth—have been added to justify its being called "A New Science Fiction Novel of the future," which it isn't. The idea does help to unify the series, and the Preface is amusing in itself; the Notes are tedious.

Burn the jacket.

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE, by Taylor Caldwell. Crown, 375 pages, \$3.50 • "This eloquent novel," says its jacket, making two errors in three words, "is a dramatic presentation of life in America in the not-so-distant future. It is chiefly the story of Andrew Durant and how in the year 1970 he and the incredibly brave Minute Men worked secretly and ingeniously to overcome the awful tyranny of the dictatorship that ruled the country.

"The dictators were native Americans of the group that had been in power for over 30 years. . . ."

To be precise, for 38 years: ever since the Presidential election of 1932. Other villains, besides Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party:

farmers	psychiatrists	agnostics, atheists
workers	New Yorkers	scientists ("smirking")
executives	cattlemen	women in men's jobs
technicians	doctors	communists in the
teachers	liberals	Cabinet
rich people	materialists	journalists
	college students	

Most of these groups are fingered one at a time by Miss Caldwell in a sentence which begins: "They, more than any other single group, had been responsible . . ." When the reader has encountered this formula for the eighth or ninth time, he begins to wonder whether anyone is going to be left out. But not everybody is guiltier than anybody else; Miss Caldwell likes:

the clergy
the middle class
the Republican Party

The ingenuity exercised by the Minute Men in the 1970 revolution is of a class familiar to science-fiction readers: they infiltrate the dictatorship until, in effect, they own it. Then avoiding the prosaic coup d'etat, which would not make much of a novel they slyly intensify the government's oppression until the public, which has stood with its finger in its mouth for going on forty years, Rises in Its Wrath.

Miss Caldwell's style is of a piece with her plot. Her dialogue at times reaches the dramatic intensity of clambake oratory; in narrative passages, among many other curiosities, she displays a tendency to choose the word which does not merely understate a dramatic point but mashes it completely flat: ". . . assassination of public officials proceeding by night and day" . . . "hordes . . . applying fire to public buildings" . . . "a-blow in the mouth which had removed three of his teeth." Italics mine.

Totalitarianism is not intrinsically a funny subject, and I am not poking fun at this writer for dealing with it, nor for her opinions: Miss Caldwell to the contrary, it is not against the law in this country to be a Republican. Or a fathead, either. But it seems to me that anyone writing after Koestler on Koestler's subject must either parrot him, as Orwell did in 1984, or attempt to refute him; Miss Caldwell writes as if he had

never existed—as if, indeed, no fiction but her own had been written since 1910.

I don't say it is easy to interpret this century in prose, but Miss Caldwell has not made the first step essential to the interpretation of anything. She sees as in a Dewey button, darkly.

NEW TALES OF SPACE AND TIME, edited by Raymond J. Healy. Henry Holt, 294 pages, \$3.50 • This book impresses me as more valuable for what it promises than for what it actually does. The notion of an anthology of new stories, as Anthony Boucher points out in his introduction, has several points in its favor—it relieves the anthologist of the necessity of choosing from much-picked-over magazines, it gives him the opportunity of truly creative selection, it cancels out magazine taboos. (This last point, since the magazine publication of Mickey Spillane's emetic *The Veiled Woman*, is less convincing than it was when Boucher made it.)

The idea also has its inevitable drawbacks: the anthologist limits himself to the production of a few writers over a period of a few months; barring miracles, he can't hope to improve much on the quality of a good single issue of a top-flight magazine; and, as every editor learns, some writers respond brilliantly to story assignments; others, the majority, do not.

Anthony Boucher's *The Quest For Saint Aquin* is a minor miracle—not only "one of the three or four best robot stories ever published," as Healy calls it, but unquestionably one of the dozen best science-fiction short stories of the past ten years. Kris Neville's *Bettyann*, overlong for what it has to say, is still a memorable piece of work.

A. E. van Vogt's *Fulfillment*, Cleve Cartmill's *You Can't Say That*, Isaac Asimov's "In a Good Cause—," P. Schuyler Miller's *Status Quondam*, Ray Bradbury's *Here There Be Tygers*, R. Bretnor's *Little Anton* and Gerald Heard's *B + M—Planet 4* are dead-level samples of each writer's work; there is not a fresh idea in the lot, it is as if everyone had been told to write as much like himself as possible; the results vary between pastiche and parody. Frank Fenton's and Joseph Petracca's *Tolliver's Travels* is massively and painstakingly trite.

FIVE SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS, compiled by Martin Greenberg; Gnome Press, 383 pages, \$3.50 • **YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELS: 1952**, edited by Everett F. Bleiler and T. E. Dikty; Frederick Fell, 351 pages, \$3.50 • Here we have two collections of five science-fiction "novels" each—"novels" in quotes because the longest of the ten is 40,000 words long; the shortest is 14,000.

The temptation to compare the two volumes is irresistible, even

though their aims are very different. *Five Science Fiction Novels*, unlike the previous Martin Greenberg collections, has no especial theme or other binding idea; it's simply a grab-bag of five stories, all originally published either in *Astounding* or in *Unknown* between 1939 and 1945. In bulk, it's the better buy; set in smaller type than the Bleiler-Diky volume, it contains almost half again as much wordage.

All five of the stories are well remembered: A. E. van Vogt's confused and three-quarters mystical *The Chronicler*, probably this writer's longest jump away from reality in a notably unfettered career; Fritz Leiber's craftsmanlike but—for him—rather pedestrian *Destiny Times Three*; Jack Williamson's solemn, creaky, celluloid-collared *The Crucible of Power*, (which, if I remember rightly, re-introduced the step-rocket to science fiction after about ten years' neglect); Norvell W. Page's imaginative treatment of the superman theme, *But without Horns*, with its memorable two-word ending; and Norman L. Knight's slow but beautifully visualized story of tailored human mutations and incorrigible human nature *Crisis In Utopia*.

The *Year's Best* volume is a different case, and intrinsically a little more interesting: as we might have expected, someone has finally opened a pipeline to the long novelettes, or, if you prefer, short novels, which till now had constituted the only almost-untapped reservoir for anthologists. The idea is a good one—many writers have done their best work in these lengths.

Making the usual discount, the "Best" in the title is reasonably accurate; oddly enough, it's the word "Year's" that's really misleading. We are accustomed by now to the fact that "1952" on a book jacket means "1951" . . . but two of the five stories in this collection date from 1950. Previous commitments probably account for the absence of half a dozen 1951 stories which come automatically to mind; present, at any rate, are Walter M. Miller, Jr's forceful, compact, brilliantly imaginative story of the world-around-the-corner, *Izzard and the Membrane*, memorable in spite of a thoroughly fuzzy ending, and Eric Frank Russell's wonderfully relaxed . . . *And Then There Were None*—a treatment of Gandhi's non-violent politics as praiseworthy for its unstrained humor as for its convincing framework.

The third '51 selection, Frank M. Robinson's *The Hunting Season*, is a poor story by a good writer—an unconvincing and tasteless remastication of the future-tyranny theme. All three of these are from *Astounding*.

From 1950's crop the editors have taken Poul Anderson's *Flight to Forever*, a pleasant but conventional time-travel story (*Super Science*) and Arthur C. Clarke's *Seeker of the Sphinx* (*Two Complete Science-Adventure Books*), a leisurely, evocative story of the far future which you will probably like either very much or not at all.



FINAL VOYAGE

BY GEORGE WHITLEY

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

They were sending the *Thunderchild* on her last voyage, loaded with livestock for Pluto. Now she was heading out to the stars for the last time—but not exactly the way they'd planned for her.



"The last voyage," said Petrie. "The last voyage for the *Thunderchild*. It isn't that which I mind so much. It's . . ."

"But times change, Captain Petrie," said Ludlow, the Port captain. "She's a fine old ship, but—she's old, man, obsolete. Good enough for the Lunar Ferry, maybe, or to use the drive units for the new power station on Pluto . . ."

"*Lunar Ferry*," growled Petrie, with all the contempt of the Deep Space man for the short hoppers. "*Power stations*—so that Mrs. Jones, whose old man is vice deputy assistant fifteenth gardener at the hydroponics factory has an iron hot enough to press her panties . . . So that little, spotty-faced Billy Smith can tune his video to *Clancy of the Space Patrol*. So that . . ."

Petrie laughed bitterly, looking up at the Jovian Mail liner *Thunderchild* whose great, gray bulk towered above them as they spoke.

"Yes," he admitted. "You're right, Ludlow. The ships exist for the colonists—not the colonists for the ships. But—I made my first Deep Space voyage in her . . . It was *her* maiden voyage, too. Then I was Third Pilot of her. And Engineer. I missed Second Pilot, but I came back to her as Chief, then as

Commander. And when, at last, I was made Master of her she was mine . . ." His big hands clenched tightly shut as he spoke. He laughed again. "If only she *were* mine!"

"Captain Petrie. May I quote you on that?"

"You may not." Petrie looked at Hales, of Solar Press, with undisguised distaste.

The pressman shrugged his narrow shoulders, put away his pad. With his slight build, his pallor, his dark hair, he looked like a black and white ferret—but a ferret with a sense of humor, with the capacity for feeling sympathy with the rabbit. And, just now, he was feeling sympathy for Petrie. It was a sympathy he dared not show, a sympathy that would have awakened nothing but contempt and hostility in the shipmaster had he shown it. Hales had covered the spaceports for long enough to know that spacemen regarded the press with, at best, amused condescension—at worst, with open hostility.

Petrie took Ludlow's arm, walked with him to one of the conveyor belts up which *Thunderchild's* last cargo was steadily streaming. Hales followed them.

"Quite a Noah's Ark," commented Ludlow, grimacing.

Petrie grunted, looked without enthusiasm at the crated poultry, the pens containing pigs and sheep, the larger stalls with their mournfully protesting cattle. "Ay," he said at last. "Noah's Ark. And we're spacemen, not farmers. But the cargo liners are too slow, and the first class passenger liners don't want to offend the ears and noses of the mugs who're paying the big fares . . . We're just tourist class now. And so . . ."

A Southdown ewe, at the receiving end of his baleful glare, bleated hysterically.

"All these animals, Captain," said Hales, "must make the voyage more difficult for you."

"No," Petrie told him. "They aren't really difficult. You see, they can't ask silly questions."

"But just think," said Ludlow, "of the four minute egg for Mrs. Jones' breakfast, of the pork chop for little Billy Smith's dinner . . ."

"I'd sooner not," replied Petrie.

"I know nothing about these things," said Hales, "but it always seems to me to be a criminal waste of space to ship out the living animals. Surely fertilized ova would be just as good?"

"They've tried shipping out fertilized ova," said Ludlow. "The results never received any publicity—had they done so

they would have caused quite a panic among passengers—especially female ones. It would have been useless telling them that fertilized ova carried in the container designed by Nature for that very purpose were quite safe. But there's something about space travel that does funny things to fertilized ova carried in any kind of artificial container. It may be hard radiation—although lead vessels were used. It may have been acceleration. Anyhow — two-headed calves and six-legged lambs weren't too popular . . ."

It was dusk now, and the last of the light was fading fast. The floodlights were on, and *Thunderchild* loomed above them, a tower of luminous silver, an enchanted tower out of some old legend, an enchanted tower that was the gateway to other, alien worlds. The bleating of the sheep, the lowing of the cattle, seemed distant, somehow, unearthly, could have been, Hales found himself thinking, the horns of Elfland, faintly blowing, and the lighted rectangle in the ship's side a magic casement fronting perilous seas . . . A keen wind, that had risen with the setting of the sun, blew off the desert, bringing a chill that could almost have been that of the gulfs between the stars.

And overhead the first stars were already shining in the darkling sky—Mars and Jupiter, the sprawling giant Orion, the beckoning, beacon glamour of the Centaur and the Cross.

Petrie, the hard man, the master astronaut, was not immune to the strange, inhumanly cold magic of the night. He said softly, speaking to the Port Captain, "There are times, Ludlow, when I wish that Port Kingsford had never been opened, when I wish that all the spaceports were in the Northern Hemisphere . . ."

"Why?" asked Ludlow. "Don't you like Australia?"

Hales, with an odd feeling that he was about to hear something of the utmost importance, listened.

"Look," said Petrie, pointing to the southern sky. "Look. That's the best of this hemisphere—and the worst of it. Every time that you blast off for Mars, or Venus, or the moons of Jupiter you see it there, hanging in the sky. Far Centaurus—or Near Centaurus, as stellar distances go. The astronomers have found planets, now, they tell us—and some of those worlds must be better than the inhospitable hunks of rock that we go to. You know, when I was a kid, just a brand new cadet in this old lady, I used to

dream. I used to dream of being Captain of the first expedition, the first ship, to the stars . . . And now *Thunderchild's* on her way to the breakers, and I reach retiring age in a couple of years . . ."

The passengers embarked the next morning.

They were young people mostly, colonists for the artificial, man-made world that was springing into being beneath the eternally frozen crust of Pluto. Engineers were there, and miners, and hydroponics experts, and even farmers. There was a sprinkling of older people, both men and women, holders, perhaps, of executive positions—of minor executive positions, otherwise they would have traveled in one of the fine, new ships. He would have ample time to get their stories, thought Hales, as he took his place on the escalator to the main port, ample time. It would be a long lift to Pluto.

He saw Petrie, standing a little to one side of the head of the escalator. It was only natural, thought the pressman, that the Captain should take an interest in the last passengers who would ever travel in his ship. When the moving stairway brought him to the entrance port he broke away from the stream of passengers, walked to

where the man was standing.

He said, "Reporting on board, Captain."

The big man looked at Hales, looked at the portable typewriter and suitcase that he was carrying.

He asked, "Is this necessary? You could have written your pretty piece just as well from the landing field."

"Didn't they tell you I was coming? This is a famous old ship, you know. They've sent me to cover the last voyage."

"You can spend your time hunting for ghosts," said Petrie. "Or I can find you a job mucking out the cattle. *That* should be in your line."

Hales colored. He had never regarded himself as a muckraking journalist. And he resented the air of ownership worn by the Captain like a garment. *Master you may be*, he thought, *but not owner. She belongs to all of us . . .*

He said, "I know that she's your ship, Captain Petrie. I know that you resent me, and all that I stand for. But can't you, won't you, understand? These ships mean something to us, too. You've never stood on a landing field in the chilly hour before the dawn, waiting for the first sign of the shooting star that isn't a shooting star at all, but *Thunderchild*, or *Thunder-*

bird, or *Thunderqueen*, or *Martian Maid*, perhaps, or *Martian Queen*, or *Empress of Venus* . . .

You never see the things that *we* see—the strange, ruddy tinge that you always get from the *Empress's* jets for example. You don't know—unless somebody has told you—that we can tell your ship by the queer, high-pitched whistle that's always audible above the thunder of her drive. If it's overcast and raining we can always tell that it's the *Child* coming in by that sound, no matter what other ships are due.

"When the big ships go, Captain Petrie, you Masters must lose your sweethearts. Believe me when I say that *we* lose our friends."

And now, he thought, *have me thrown down the gangway.*

Petrie took Hales by the arm. It was a friendly pressure.

"Come," said the Captain, "away from the crowd."

He led the pressman to the elevator. The attendant in the cage needed no orders, pressed the button marked *Captain's Flat*. In a very short time Petrie and his guest were seated in the plainly, but comfortably, furnished sitting room, were sipping the light, dry, but very potent wine which is the main item of export from the colony.

at Syrtis City on Mars.

"Is it true," asked Petrie, "about that whistle? I like to feel that the old lady has something that the others haven't."

"It's true," said Hales.

"But I always thought that you people stayed in the control tower, warm and snug, watching the ships come down on the radar screens, drinking whiskey."

"Some of us do, Captain. But some of us feel that it's not, somehow, right. There's no . . . magic."

"So you feel it, too. There are some, even among those wearing this uniform, who never feel it, to whom this is just a job. And there are some, like myself, who feel that we were born either too late or too early."

"Too late, or too early?"

"Yes. Too late for the first rockets to the Moon, to the planets. Too early for the first interstellar ships."

"But it's only a matter of a few years now," said Hales.

"A few years—or a few centuries. Why, man, it might well be millenia before the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle falls into place. And, meanwhile, we're tied to this one sun, to this scant handfull of planets, our ships mere ferry boats, coasters . . . Deep Space . . . I tell you, Hales, that the words are meaningless,

meaningless, until the day that the first interstellar ship pushes off for the worlds of the nearer stars."

"But you've had a full life, Captain Petrie."

"Perhaps. All but the realization of the dream . . . Everything that doesn't really matter I've had—and the one thing I do want I shall never see. Think of it, man—the strange sun with its planetary family looming closer and still closer on the screens, to the naked eye. The encounters, perhaps, with alien ships, with their non-human crews. The weird cities and the queer machines, the odd ways of doing things, the logics that are not Earthly logics, yet are still logical . . ."

"But think," Hales reminded him, "of the people of the mid-Twentieth Century—or those of them whose feet were almost on the first rung of the ladder to the stars. It must have been even more galling for them—the certain knowledge that for the price of one battleship the first rocket could climb to the Moon."

There was a sharp rapping at the Captain's door.

"Come in," shouted Petrie.

A youth entered, a cadet. The insignia of the Jovian Mail Service was bright, new and untarnished, on his uniform. He

held his cap under his left arm, standing stiffly to attention. His face, thought Hales, was hauntingly familiar.

"Cadet Warwick, sir, reporting for duty," said the lad.

I don't know anybody by that name, Hales thought, and yet... He snatched a glance at Petrie. *The Old Man looks as though he's seeing another of his ghosts...*

"Warwick," murmured Petrie. "The usual training, I suppose?"

"Yes sir. The Academy, then a year in *Diana* on the Lunar Ferry."

"And this will be your first voyage Deep Space, eh? Your maiden voyage—and the lady's last..."

"I'm sorry she's going, sir. She seems a fine ship."

"She will—after your excursion rockets. That will do, lad. You can find your own way down to the cadets' flat?"

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

Warwick turned smartly on his heel, strode out of the room.

"A likely lad," said Hales.

"Yes. And now I must ask you to leave me, Mr. Hales. I have a deal of paper work to get through, and I have to entertain a few of our brass hats before we blast off."

Hales did not use the lift on his return to the lower regions

of the ship. He preferred the companionway—the spiral staircase that led down and around and around the central well. He tried to soak up the atmosphere of the various flats as he passed through them—the Commander's Flat, the Officers' Flat, the Cadets' Flat. But the strong personality of Petrie dominated them all. He had lived in all of them—first as a smart, ambitious lad like young Warwick, then as a junior officer, then as one not so junior, next as second in command, finally as Master. Hales rather resented the strong imprint that the man's personality had made on his surroundings. *If they weren't breaking her up, he thought, the Old Man's ghost would become a proper nuisance to whoever might follow him...* But she's our ship, too... He grinned, seeing a sudden, absurd vision of his own ghost haunting the Port Kingsford landing field, waiting, in all weathers, for the incoming of the phantom ship from Jupiter and beyond.

He snapped out of his reverie as he entered the main lounge. Once again he was the news-hound, alert for the small touches of human interest, little, human items that had made his reputation. He saw Crombie, also of Solar Press, fussing around a portable scanner, send-

ing and recording interviews and such until the time came for him to dismantle his apparatus and get ashore.

"Hello, Hales," called Crombie. "Coming to say a few words for me?" As his colleague approached he murmured in a low voice, "You're the nearest thing we have to a celebrity in *this* crowd, damn it!"

"You just love your stuffed shirts, don't you?" muttered Hales. "Your stuffed shirts and your cheesecake . . . These people are of far greater importance than all your politicians and leggy video stars."

"Just try telling the public that," said Crombie.

"But I do, I do. That's why I'm going in the ship."

"You're welcome. The Moon's as far as Mrs. Crombie's little boy ever wants to go. But say a pretty piece for us, Hales."

Hales took his place before the scanner and microphone.

"This is Christopher Hales," he said, "speaking from the main lounge of the liner *Thunderchild*. As you all know, this grand old lady of the space lanes is making her final voyage. Upon her arrival at the Port St. John landing field on Pluto she will be broken up. I hope, during the voyage, to make broadcasts from the ship—although, such is *Thunderchild's* reputation for

smooth running, it is extremely improbable that anything newsworthy will occur during the passage. But this, the pre-sailing broadcast, is the concern of my colleague, Mr. Crombie. Good-bye to you all for now, and—over to you, Dan!"

"Dan Crombie here, people. You have just seen and heard Christopher Hales who will be covering, as he has told you, *Thunderchild's* final voyage. But Solar Press hasn't a monopoly of interesting personalities—ha, ha—and so I will endeavor to persuade some of the passengers to come to the scanner. Now you, madam. Would you care to say just a few words to the people of your old home?"

The woman—youngish, blondish, utterly undistinguished—came to the scanner.

"Your name, Madam?" asked Crombie.

"Er—Edith. Edith Jones, that is. Mrs. Edith Jones."

"And you are going to Pluto?"

"Er—yes."

"If it's not an impertinent question, Mrs. Jones, what will you be doing there?"

"Oh—er—just keeping house for my hubby, I guess . . ."

"And he?"

"Fifth assistant gardener at the hydroponics factory."

Hales, half remembering an

overheard scrap of conversation, had a crazy, I-have-been-here-before sensation. He edged himself to within range of the scanner and the microphone.

"And don't forget, folks, that *Thunderchild's* main drive is being ripped out for service in the power station, so that Mrs. Jones will always have plenty of current for ironing her pretties!"

"If that's one of your famous human touches, Hales," flared Crombie, "I don't think much of it!"

"Neither do I!" flared the blonde, and Hales retreated barely in time to avoid what would have been one of the most resounding slaps in the history of video. He retreated as far as the bar, found congenial company in a tall man who, after two whiskey-sours, admitted to being a veterinary surgeon.

They were halfway through their third drink when Crombie found them.

"Hales," he said. "You'll have to help me out. This broadcast is—sticky. I've just had a personal call from the Big White Chief to tell me that *your* item was the only piece of color and human interest in it so far."

"Oh, all right. Now, Crombie, here's a man who could tell us something interesting. This ship has umpteen head of cattle and livestock in her cargo spaces,

and I don't suppose you've mentioned 'em yet. Not you. They haven't got big names, or legs and busts . . ."

"Would you mind handling the interview, Hales?" pleaded Crombie.

"Oh, all right. But I'm not supposed to start doing anything about anything until the ship blasts off. At present I'm supposed to be browsing around hunting for atmosphere."

Crombie's assistant was having a hard struggle with a pimply-faced male child, whose only contribution to the entertainment of the video audience was the oft reiterated request for the autograph of Clancy of the Space Patrol. Hales got rid of him by assuring him that the last Clancy broadcast had been a recording, and that Clancy himself was at least half way to Alpha Centauri, hot on the trail of a gang of *slith* smugglers. Clancy, he assured the brat, might well call in at Port Saint John for stores and bunkers on the homeward passage. Luckily nobody thought to ask him what *slith* was—after the whiskey-sours he would have come up with some utterly outrageous answer . . .

"Now," he said, "this is Hales again, people. Christopher Hales, dragged from the . . ." Crombie

hacked his shin. "Dragged from the Control Room to talk to you all. And with me is Doctor Hilton, a practitioner of veterinary medicine—a man who knocks the 'Ell out of elephants, who puts, with his pretty pink pills, the dash back into superannuated dachshunds . . .

"We have, in the lower decks of this grand old lady of the space lanes, as fine a selection of assorted fauna as has ever graced any vessel in the long, long history of Man—with the possible exception, of course, of Noah's Ark. We have bulls, and we have cows. We have boars, we have sows. We have . . ." He made two syllables of it . . . "ewes. We have kiwis." He paused. "*Have* we got any kiwis? No? Then I shall complain to the management.

"However, I am not a zoologist, and I regret that, in a fit of mad inadvertence, I omitted to pack my well thumbled copy of *Who's Zoo*. Had we any members of the canine species with us, and were they, perchance, in the arms of Morpheus I should perforce, let them lie. Far be it from me to force the feet of Man's Best Friend on to the stony path of veracity.

"But tell me, Dr. Hilton, why, in these decadent days of synthetics and super-yeasts, is it necessary for the Plutonians to

import their protein on the hoof?"

"Have *you* ever eaten synthetics?" asked Hilton.

"Why, no. But now we're on the subject—has anybody here ever eaten synthetics?"

There was a pause. "Yes," said a short, thickset man. "Yes. I have."

"Come up to the front then, and tell us about it."

"It was on the Other Side, see, and a gang of us was making test drillings in Harrison's Crater. We had our insulated balloon tents, and enough water—and enough food to last us the two weeks it was going to take us—but it was all synthetics. And that, let me tell you, was the last time that the Lunar Commission ever pulled that one on the boys."

"But I always understood that the actual food value . . ."

"Food value! Pah!" The miner made as though to spit, then thought better of it.

"There are more things in food than food value," said Hilton.

"Flavor," said somebody.

"The synthetics *have* flavor," said the miner. "But it's stale, somehow. As stale as the jokes they put over the video."

"So flavor isn't all . . . What about texture?" asked the vet-

erinarian. "And appearance? A hunk of something with the food value and the flavor of steak, medium rare, but with the texture and the appearance of putty . . ."

"You've got something there," agreed Hales. "But both the texture and the appearance of oysters are rather revolting."

"There I must differ. A dozen oysters on the half shell, with slices of lemon, and brown bread and butter, and a glass of stout—could you, sir, conceive anything more aesthetically satisfying?"

"Yes," asserted the miner. "Two dozen."

Hales pretended not to hear the man's attempt at levity, and nodded.

"So when we finally get around to sending a ship on the Long Passage," said Hales, "it will be advisable to stock her well with animals, instead of yeasts and such, if only to relieve the monopoly of the food."

"Indubitably. Too, the care of the beasts will make life more interesting for all concerned. And think of the experiments in genetics!"

"And tell me, Doctor Hilton, is there much scope for one of your profession on Pluto?"

"Not yet—but there will be. The first, experimental dairy herd is doing quite well, they tell

me. And there's no reason to suppose that the sheep and the pigs and the rabbits won't thrive once they become acclimatized. After all—climatic conditions in the caves are rather superior to those on Earth."

One of the ship's cadets had approached Crombie, was talking to him in a low voice. Crombie nodded his head. "Break it up now, old man," he said to Hales. "Blasting off in a few minutes. And I have to get this load of junk ashore."

"This is Christopher Hales signing off. Our next broadcast, on the Solar Press network, will come to you from somewhere en route to Pluto. The boys outside will show you the pretty picture of the old girl clambering up to the Outer Planets. . . And this," he said, with a little catch in his voice, "will be the first time since I've been on this job that I haven't seen her blasting off myself. I should have liked to have seen it this last time. . ." He grinned. "But I'm greedy. I couldn't watch her go—and make the trip. Goodbye now. Take her away, Dan!"

He thought, *I'll see her go on the ship's screen. But it won't be the same. I shan't get the smell of the blast hitting the desert. I shan't hear that funny, high whistle I was telling the Old Man*

about—that never comes through the mikes.

Crombie and his assistant deftly dismantled their apparatus carried it to the main port. Captain Petrie walked slowly through the lounge. With him were Captain Hadlow. Captain Brent, the Line's Senior Superintendent, Oulenovsky of the Math Department (the Orbit King, they called him), Harrison of Freight, Clemens of Passengers. Hales, cursing himself for an ill-mannered lout, edged closer to where they were standing, hoped to overhear something in the shore officials' last good-byes that would help him to catch something of the essential *feel* of the liner's farewell voyage.

"I envy you, Petrie," said Brent. "After all, I made the maiden voyage in her too. And yet. . . I think I'd sooner say goodbye to her here, watch her lose herself in the sky, than see the breaking up started."

"I will miss her," said Oulenovsky. "And my computing machines will continue to plot her orbit from force of habit."

"She always turned out a good cargo," said Harrison.

"And there was hardly ever a complaint," said Clemens.

"I wish that every ship came in with as little fuss," said Hadlow.

"Don't forget," Brent re-

minded Petrie, "I want her crest for my office."

Hales glanced at the ship's crest, bright above the big, ornamental mirror—a flaxen haired, laughing girl, very young, holding carelessly in her right hand a stylized lightning bolt. He heard Petrie say, "Yes, you'll get all your souvenirs. As soon as she's finished with them, you'll get them."

Sonorous, almost gong-like, the warning notes of the First Bell reverberated through the big ship. From the concealed speakers came the order. "All visitors ashore, please. All visitors ashore. All passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches. All passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches. Blast off in fifteen minutes. Blast off in fifteen minutes."

There was music then—the familiar Interplanetary March, with drawing room words:

*"Stand there in the moonlight,
look up to the sky,
Watch our jets a-fading, but,
darling, do not cry—*

*For I will still remember you,
Your hair of gold, your eyes of
blue—*

*On Mars or Far Centaurus, I'll
still remember you!"*

"All visitors ashore, please,"

said the speakers. "All passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches. . ."

Hales walked to his cabin, singing.

*"There was a girl on Venus, and
she was very sweet,
I left her there with triplets,
a-clustered round her feet,
I had to pay the doctor's fee
Who ever said that love was
free?"*

*On Mars or Far Centaurus, they
blame it all on me!"*

"All visitors ashore, please. All visitors ashore. . ."

But I'm really a visitor,
thought Hales. *I haven't any
right here . . .*

He strapped himself into his couch.

"This is Christopher Hales speaking, from the good ship *Thunderchild*. We are three days out, now, and Earth's just the kind of thing that you'll have seen often enough in the old schoolroom—just a big globe, with the seas and continents, slowly turning. But that schoolroom globe never had clouds drifting over it, and it had as its background a plain, bare wall, not the black sky and the bright—too bright—unwinking stars.

"But you've seen all that, time and time again, on your screens. And on this trip, more than on

any other trip, perhaps, the ship is more important than the stars—is more important even than her passengers, her crew.

"She knows it, I think. And she knows that this is her last voyage, that her name will soon be inscribed on the roll of. . . of. . . No, not the roll of lost ships, honorable though that may be. No—on the roll of ships that have served their makers long and faithfully, that have died, in the end, not in mystery or drama or glory, but under the hammer of the breakers.

"Voices are hushed, this trip. Nobody laughs much. The officers—although they will be scornful should they overhear this—are like men and women sitting by a deathbed. And, inevitably, this mood of theirs has been transferred to the passengers. Even the animals—the pigs, and sheep, and cattle—are subdued. 'Imagination!' I hear you say. But I don't think that it is.

"I'm sorry, people. But I try to report honestly, and as well as my ability allows. Frankly, had I known that it was going to be like this I would never have accepted the assignment. They say that it's a poor funeral that hasn't at least one good laugh—but there aren't going to be any laughs at this funeral.

"So this is Christopher Hales

signing off, folks. I hope that my next broadcast is a little more cheerful.

"Goodbye for now."

He switched off, then looked at his watch.

"Two minutes to run," he said, "but they can give the customers a spot of cheesecake."

He nodded his thanks to the senior cadet who was in charge of communications, left the ship's radio office. Outside he hesitated. Should it be up to the Control Room, or down to the officers' quarters and the public rooms? He decided to make it down.

Outside the officers' smoking room he heard singing—evidently a party was in progress.

*"Out beside the spaceport, beneath the rockets' glare,
There I used to meet her; I left her standing there—
There with her children at her knee,
I owned to one, but not to three—
On Mars or Far Centaurus, they blame it all on me!"*

He tapped at the door. "Come in!" called somebody.

The air inside was thick with smoke. Sprawled in the biggest of the overstuffed chairs was Commander Welch, the Navigator, a pint tankard in his hand. The Chief and Second Pilots

were there, the Surgeon and the Nursing Sister. Kenton, the Engineer, got to his feet, poured out a mug of beer.

"Take this, Hales," he said. "We're having an Irish Wake."

"So I gathered. Thanks."

"Getting your atmosphere, Hales?" asked the Navigator.

"Yes. Too damned much. I almost sang *Goodbye Old Ship of Mine* into the mike just now."

"It wouldn't have mattered. You'd have been no worse than the current crop of moaners."

"Pardon my talking shop, Welch—but do we see anything of the Belt this trip?"

Welch hesitated a long second before replying. "No," he said. "The Orbit King has given us a track well South of the Ecliptic this time. I think he's scared that one of us might go all suicidal and pile the old lady up on some hunk of rock. . ."

"It'd be better than the breakers," said Hales.

"So you really think so? Well, I don't—and none of the other officers do. We aren't in the habit of throwing away our certificates to make a pressman's holiday!"

"Keep your hair on," admonished Hales.

He finished his beer, put down his mug with more than a suggestion of clatter. He said, "Thanks for the party," and

walked out, wondering why the Asteroid Belt should be such a sore point with the Navigator. Professional pride, perhaps. The spacegoing staff always reckoned that they could do at least as well as Oulenoysky, sitting snug in his office with his batteries of computers.

He continued his downward progress, ran into young Warwick just outside the cadets' quarters. "Ah," he said. "Warwick, isn't it?"

"Yes sir. And you're Mr. Hales."

"Got it in one, sonny. Where are you off to now?"

"To my room, Mr. Hales."

"Mind if I come in with you? I want somebody to talk to."

"I should be very pleased, sir."

"Good."

The cadet's room, a single berth cabin, was small, but comfortable. Hales motioned to the lad to sit in the single armchair, then parked himself on the bunk. His gaze strayed to the single photograph on top of the chest-of-drawers, that of a woman—a dignified, but far from unattractive woman. Her relationship to the youth was obvious. Hales wondered why there was no photograph of his father in evidence. He had a vague feeling that, at some time, he must have known the youngster's father.

"My mother," said Warwick. "She's. . ." He hesitated. . . "Dead."

"I'm sorry. She must have been a very gracious and charming lady. And your father?"

You nosey swine, he thought.

"Oh, *he's* all right. And he prefers me out of the way."

"It's none of my business, lad—but that isn't a nice way to talk of your parent."

"But he's never liked me."

Hales felt as much embarrassment as was possible in one of his profession. He was sorry that the interview had taken this turn. It was all atmosphere, perhaps—but it wasn't the kind of atmosphere he wanted, was certainly not the kind that he could use. The boy's voice broke into his thoughts.

"*She* loved ships and the stars. All he ever dreams of is making money."

"Don't we all?"

"No. *You* should never say that. I've heard you broadcast many times—and under the ham there's a streak of poetry."

"I get paid for it, sonny."

"I heard father say, once, that you'd make more in advertising. He offered you a job."

"Ye-es. I remember now. Warwick, head of the Plutonian Trust. Wanted me to turn out a scad of lying copy when emigration to that dismal icebox was

showing signs of falling off."

"And you refused."

"So I refused. So what?"

"So what?"

"So I like to write and say my own kind of stuff when I feel like it."

He thought, *Damn the boy. But he's a nice lad—not like his fat toad of a father.*

"Must you go, sir?" asked Warwick.

Hales, already on his feet, was looking at his watch with a simulated slight anxiety.

"Yes. I promised to meet a bloke in the bar at twenty one hundred—and it's that already. We must talk again some time."

Any time you like, he thought, *any time you like—as long as you soft-pedal the starry-eyed idealism. My stuff has been quite slushy enough of late without any outside help.*

He paused briefly in the main lounge, found nobody of interest there, walked morosely to the bar.

"A shot of embalming fluid, please, Lew," he asked.

"Embalming fluid? Oh, yeah, yeah. The joint is like a high class funeral parlor, aint it?"

"You're telling me. Thanks."

He downed his whiskey-sour in one gulp. "That vet—what was his name? Wilson? Milton? Oh, Hilton! Seen him around?"

"Didn't you know? He's working his passage. The two regular cattlemen went sick, and the Old Man asked for volunteers for the job. It means a refund of the passage money when we get to Port St. John."

"Suppose he's putting the cows to bed now."

"Guess so."

"Thanks, Lew. I'll go and see how he's making out."

From the lounge he continued down, through the decks of passenger accommodation then, through doors marked CREW ONLY, down bare steel ladders into the cargo decks. The air was warm and steamy here, and even the conditioners could not remove the not unpleasant smell of straw and hay and manure. Hales sniffed appreciatively. It was better than the ever-present odors of tobacco smoke and cooking in the higher levels.

He found Hilton—clad in overalls and knee high boots—mucking out the three Jersey cows. Another overall-clad figure was giving the Herefords their fresh bedding for the arbitrary night. Hales watched them in silence, then started to sing softly:

*"Down in the sewer, shovelling
up manewer,
That's where the spaceman does
his bit;
You can hear those shovels ring,*

*Ting-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling,
When you're down in the
sewer. . .*

He said, flushing, "I'm sorry."

The girl playing nursemaid to the Herefords, who had turned around on hearing his voice, laughed.

"Don't mind me," she said.

"Oh, it's you, Hales," said Hilton. "Vera, this is Mr. Hales, of Solar Press. Hales, Miss Vera Kent—like myself a Doctor of Veterinary Science."

She transferred the pitchfork to her left hand to shake hands with the pressman. Her grip was firm and warm, capable. She was as tall as he, and what few strands of hair had escaped from under the tight fitting cap were a tawny gold. Her eyes were gray rather than blue. Her teeth—white against the deep tan of her face when she smiled—were slightly irregular.

"Coming to see how the poor live?" she asked.

"The poor? But you're rich. You seem happy enough."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I'm supposed to be gathering atmosphere—and these are tonight's results. Item: The star commentator of Solar Press sobbing into the microphone. Item: Irish wakes in the officers' flat, and all hands as touchy as a

hunk of plutonium one milligram below critical mass. Item: The main lounge like a first class morgue on an off night. . . You know, the atmosphere down here was so refreshing after all that I just had to start singing."

"I thought it was a bit thick, myself," laughed the girl. "But it's not a bad smell. . ."

"It's all atmosphere," said Hilton.

"We'll get around to broadcasting odors some time," said Hales.

"Then you'd better not get me in front of your scanner—they'll say I *stink!*"

"Never, Miss—or should it be Doctor?—Kent. But tell me, how are you and Dr. Hilton finding the trip?"

"Quite enjoyable, so far. But we're thankful that the two cattlemen went sick. Without these. . ." her hand ran affectionately over the head of one of the bulls. . . "It'd be—*grim*. I've never really liked ships—and this one'd give me the screaming meemies!"

"Yes," said Hilton. "There's that feeling, all the time, of dumb resentment. It's like riding some large and dangerous animal that senses, dimly, that you're driving him to the slaughterhouse. You'll think this is silly."

"No. And I know this ship well—as well as anybody could know

her who's never, until now, made a trip in her. But I'm holding up the good work. Can I help?"

"Why, yes, Give us a hand to get this muck down the chute."

"Seems a waste, doesn't it?" asked the girl. "You'd think they'd save it for the hydroponics tanks."

"Maybe. But I suppose the pampered plants they have there would turn up their noses at a piece of honest muck. It has to be nice clean chemicals out of nice, clean bottles."

"Yes. But suppose the supply of chemicals ran out?"

"Hardly. They tell me that these ships are stored for a trip of twice the normal duration—just in case."

"We're the farmers, not the gardeners," said Hilton. "Down the chute with this lot!"

Day succeeded day—days that were no more than the movement of pointers over numbered dials. Time had significance only to the watchkeepers and to those with definite, routine duties. To all others it was meaningless. Even the regular service of meals meant little. When there is not the feel of early morning in the air one might as well break one's fast on roast beef and Yorkshire pudding as on fruit juices, cereals and eggs.

Time had some, slight signifi-

cance to Hales—he had his regular broadcasts to make, once every two days. He succeeded in arousing some interest among the passengers, managed to bring some to the scanner whose personal stories would justify the telling. With the ship's people he was not so fortunate. From the Old Man down, they refused to play. And from the Old Man down, they treated him with what he could define only as a suspicious hostility. They had been instructed to place no obstacles in his way, he knew. May be so—but they weren't falling over each other in a mad scramble to present him with usable material.

And I thought I had the old buzzard eating out of my hand, said Hales to himself, after an attempt to persuade Captain Petrie to say a few words to the great listening and viewing public. His refusal had been unnecessarily rude.

So had Welch been unnecessarily rude. Hales had wandered up to Control, hoping, not very hopefully, that he might pick up some unconsidered crumb of news interest in the Holy of Holies. The Third Pilot, sitting stiffly in the Watch Officer's chair, had ignored him. So had the Navigator, whose lean, angular body was bent over his work table like a pair of his own

dividers. Knowing nothing of navigation—but always willing to learn—Hales had walked over to the work table, peered uncomprehendingly at the instruments and the closely-spaced calculations in the Commander's work book.

Welch flared up.

"What the hell do you want, you damned spy?"

"Really, Commander. . ."

"I'd like to order you out of here—but I suppose that, as you're the Board's blue-eyed boy for this trip, I can't. But I'll ask you to leave."

"Very well, I'll leave. But what are you doing? Thinking of seizing the ship and embarking on a career of piracy?"

"Get out!" shouted Welch.

Hales got out.

He went down to the bar, found Hilton and Vera Kent there.

"The usual, Lew," he said. "And what are you two drinking?"

"Beer," said the girl. "For both of us. You look put out, Chris."

"I am. But literally. The Commander threw me out of Control with his own fair hands."

"Not really?"

"No, not really. But as near as dammit. Anyone would think that it was *my* fault that this

blasted ship was being broken up at the end of this trip."

"I can see their viewpoint. She's home to them—and wife, or mistress, to quite a few of them. They must resent having a stranger exploiting the very real sense of loss that they must be feeling. . ."

"I know all that. But why pick on me? Tell me, Lew, you've been in this wagon since she was knee high to a Fourth of July rocket—do *you* resent the pretty things I've been saying about her?"

"No, Mr. Hales. At least—not often. Only when you *will* keep on calling her a grand old lady of the space lanes."

"Sorry, Lew. I'll not do it again." He took a gulp of his drink. "Do you think that's why the officers are so hostile?"

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Hales," said Lew, then moved to the other end of the bar to serve some fresh customers. And his manner thereafter was such as to discourage any further attempts at conversation.

"Even his best friends wouldn't tell him," mourned Hales. "Tell me. Do I?"

"Do you what?"

"Stink."

"Not yet. But put on some old clothes, and come down and help us with the animals."

"I will. To give 'em their due,

they've never tried to bite me yet."

Yes, thought Hales, I'm happier down here. The Old Man's crack about muck-raking had some truth about it. . .

He was happy working beside the girl. There was something about her—a wholesome earthiness that contrasted favorably with the artificiality of the ship, with the artificiality of the life that Hales led ashore. He even began to think of buying a farm—and to think of Vera Kent in the farm kitchen. Not that she'd be content to stay in the kitchen, he told himself. Not with her degrees—and the knowledge behind the degrees.

He noticed, too, that Hilton was beginning to leave the pair of them to themselves. Which was silly. He knew that he had nothing to offer a girl like Vera Kent, that even if he did realize the crazy dream about the farm such a life would not be bearable for more than two weeks at the most. His life was news, and the collection of news, and the dissemination of news. The slow cycle of crop and season was not for him.

Still—it was good working with the girl. Only a beautiful, ship-born friendship, perhaps, a friendship that might lead to something deeper—but never to anything really permanent.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden clangor of warning bells. And the speakers came to sudden life. "All hands, all hands! Stand by for turnover! Stand by for turnover! Passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches!"

"Turnover?" said Hales. "I'm no astronaut—but it shouldn't be for a week yet, or longer!"

"What does it mean?"

"It means that they cut the drive, and that everything in the ship is weightless."

"For the rest of the trip?"

"Good Lord, no. Only until they've got her swung on her gyroscopes, and then we start deceleration."

The girl's face was suddenly white. "Hell!" she said.

"It's nothing serious."

"Isn't it? My dear man, do you realize that all these poor beasts are going to drift out of their pens, hang in the air like toy balloons—and then crash to the deck as soon as the drive comes on again?"

"I never thought of that. What's biting me is all the damned secrecy. Never a word from Control until now."

"There's no time to worry about that." She went to the hatchway leading down to the next deck. "Dr. Hilton!" she called. "Better get the sheep and

pigs all tightly secured!"

She herself ran to the nearest stall, with hasty fingers started to buckle the specially designed harness around the alarmed animal. Hales followed suit, found that the big bull, frightened by the bells, was in a fractious mood. But he got it trussed up somehow, untidily, not very securely, and moved to the next beast. By this time, the girl had dealt with three of the cattle. Round the deck they moved, Hales working anti-clockwise, the girl clockwise. They met at the last animal, faced each other across the Hereford's broad back as they worked. Vera Kent had lost her cap and her tousled hair was falling into her eyes. Her face was flushed with exertion.

"You're beautiful," said Hales suddenly, raising his voice above the bell, the lowing of the beasts. "You're beautiful."

"Don't be a fool," she said. But she smiled.

Abruptly, the bell ceased.

Weightlessness came, and nausea. The big bull bellowed mournfully, kicked out viciously. One hoof caught the girl a glancing blow—but it was sufficient to break her loosened grip, to send her drifting to the deck-head. Hales relinquished his own hold to catch her, and followed her up—in a ship where neither

"up" nor "down" had any longer any meaning—drifting with nightmare slowness. Something nuzzled at his legs. In a moment of panic he thought it was one of the animals, but it was only a bale of hay.

Then he was spreadeagled against the overhead plating—or what was the overhead plating during acceleration—with the girl beside him. She clutched his hand, gulped, then said. "What now?"

"We. . ."

"Never mind. Have you a handkerchief? Ugh!"

"Here. As I remember from the Lunar Ferry trips I've made, the bells start again five minutes before the drive comes on. But they're still swinging her. Listen! You can hear the gyros."

"And we fall?"

"We fall. But these are only ten foot decks."

"Ten feet's quite far enough."

"It is. Here—let's grab some of these bales, get them under us. And we'll push ourselves over a clear deck space so we don't fall on the cattle."

"There're the bells."

"Turnover almost completed," said the speakers. "Turnover almost completed. Stand by for deceleration. Stand by for deceleration."

"Where's another bale? *Here.*

The damned things are trying to escape."

"Oh, oh! Have you another handkerchief?"

"No. Use a handful of straw. Got you!"

"Turnover completed. Turnover completed. Stand by for deceleration."

The bells stopped.

It was only a ten foot fall—but it was sufficient to break the bands of the bales. And Hales, sprawling in the hay with a pretty girl in his arms, did the natural thing, kissed her, hard. She responded. It all seemed so—right.

"Break it up," said Hilton. "Break it up. Clairmont Princess of Jersey has lost her cud and. . ."

"Oh, all right," said Vera Kent. "I think I've lost mine, too—but to work!"

"Can I help?" asked Hales.

"No, my dear. You can watch."

"I—ulp—I think I'll go up and see what they're doing in Control!"

Hales trailed his dirtiness and smelliness through the decks of the liner with a certain perverted pride. When some of the passengers, emerging from their cabins after the turnover, wrinkled their nostrils at his approach, he burst into the ribald song:

*"Down in the sewer, shovelling
up manewer,
That's where the spaceman does
his bit;
You should hear those shovels
ring,
Ting-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling,
When you're down in the
sewer. . ."*

He bawled the last lines in their unprintable entirety.

"Mr. Hales!" said Lew, shocked, when he called at the bar on his way. "What have you been doing?"

"I've been down in the sewer, shovelling . . . No, not the usual. Rum. A double rum."

"But. . ."

"But me no buts. Rum, Lew, rum. The drink for mutineers. I'm on my way to Control to tell old Frozen-Face Petrie and the other gormless louts just what I think of them!"

"But, sir, you can't. . ."
Can't I?"

He tossed off his drink, strode to the elevator.

"Control!" he snapped to the boy.

"But, sir. . ."

"But what? But I'm not respectable? Neither are quite a few more things in this space scow. Take 'er up."

The boy took her up.

Hales' entry into the Control Room—affecting, as it did, more

senses than one—did not pass unnoticed. Before he was properly inside the door he bawled, "What the qualified hell are you qualified fools playing at?"

Welch—impersonating as usual a pair of dividers—straightened himself, moved between Hales and the transparent sphere that was the tri-di chart.

"I will thank you, Mr. Hales," he said, "not to bring either the language or the aroma of the farmyard to the Control Room of a First Class passenger liner."

"Tourist Class," sneered Hales.

The Chief Pilot swung in his deep-padded chair to glare at the intruder. Petrie walked to join the Commander in front of the chart.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" demanded Petrie.

"Only this, sir. Thanks to the secrecy about the time of turnover you endangered the lives of all the cattle and stock—to say nothing of those of the attendants."

"And are you one of the attendants, Mr. Hales? I may have been misinformed, but I understood that you were travelling here as correspondent for Solar Press."

"I should have thought about the cattle," muttered Welch.

"You should have thought about the attendants. It's no

thanks to you that I didn't break my neck."

"Didn't you?"

"No."

"A pity."

And what goes on? thought Hales. *No cadets here, no junior officers. . . And there's a funny feel in the air. . . The die has been cast, the Rubicon crossed, the boats burned. . . Wish I could see that chart. I'm no astronaut, but. . .*

He began a sidling, outflanking movement, with Petrie and Welch watching suspiciously. He moved in—and Welch made to grab him. He kicked Welch in the groin and Petrie, rushing to the aid of his executive officer, tripped over the prostrate Commander and fell heavily. The Chief Pilot jumped up from his chair but made no move to attack, ran instead to a switchboard.

Hales grabbed the pedestal supporting the tri-di chart, stared into the ball. He saw the spots of light that were worlds, the fainter ellipses that were their orbits. He saw the red spark that represented *Thunderchild*, the red curve that was her path through pathless infinity. He saw . . .

The chart went dead.

Petrie climbed heavily to his feet.

"Good man, Willis. Were you

able to stop him in time?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the Chief Pilot.

Welch sat up, his face still contorted with pain.

"What did you see, damn you? What did you see?"

"Commander Welch, did you tell me that we weren't passing within sight of the Asteroids?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a bloody liar."

Petrie's hand came up holding a pistol. There was a puff of sweet-smelling gas—and for Hales the episode was over.

He woke up in a strange, but comfortable bed, in a cabin furnished with an eye to hygiene rather than appearance. He refused to ask the obvious question, waited until his still muzzy brain had had time to deal with the evidence of his eyes. He said, then, "What am I doing in the Sick Bay?"

The nurse—tall, angular, severely handsome—looked up from the book she was reading, said, "Concussion, dearie. You were kicked by a cow."

"How's Commander Welch? He was kicked, too."

"Now, Mr. Hales! You're letting that imagination of yours run away with you. You've been raving about mutiny and piracy and barratry no end. Tell me, I've often wondered, is it you

who does the script for Clancy of the Space Patrol?"

"No. When do I get out of here?"

"When Doctor says so, dearie."

"I'm getting up *now*."

"You are *not*."

She was strong, the nurse. She was strong, but the pressman was determined—and in no mood for chivalry. He kneed her viciously in the belly, then, while she was still gasping, scrambled out of the cot and threw her on to it. His left hand he kept over her mouth to stifle her screams—and she bit it, hard and painfully, drawing blood. He cursed, managed to get his right knee over her left arm, pinning it. Luckily her right arm was beneath her.

He got her nurse's cap off, hastily withdrew his left hand and stuffed the cap in its place. With two hands to work with he found some slight improvement in the situation, managed, after another struggle, to get her turned over on to her face. He thought of tying her—but with what? Then he saw, on a table not far from the bed, a hypodermic syringe, ready for use. He had no means of telling what it contained—but assumed, hopefully, that it was there, ready to hand, so that the nurse could put him out again should the need arise. It would do nicely.

Sitting astride the heaving body of the woman, his right hand imprisoning her wrists behind her back, he stretched his left arm cautiously. The tips of his fingers just touched the barrel of the syringe, and no more. Delicately, with all the care of which he was capable, he tried to roll the instrument towards himself. The nurse squirmed and tried to turn over—and the needle was pushed away from the cot by the violent motion.

It rolled away—but it turned on its short axis. Hales found that he could grasp the plunger, not very tightly, between his first and second fingers. After that it was easy. A vicious jab into the fleshy part of the nurse's arm, the plunger pushed home—and the struggle was over.

Hales was scared by the suddenness of it. Anxiously, he turned her over, pulled the square of white fabric from her mouth. She was out—for how long he could not guess. But she was breathing normally. Her face was pale, but it was not the sort of pallor that one associates with death or the nearness of death. She could have been merely asleep.

But he was in no mood to worry over much or over long. The nurse was an officer of the ship—therefore she was one of

the gang. And as one of the gang she was deserving of little, if any, sympathy. Let her boy-friends do something about her when they came to see how their prisoner was and how much he knew.

My clothes, thought Hales.

Here was a fresh problem. They had taken his clothes, all of them. Nowhere in the hospital could he find them. His only apparel was a long, white hospital nightshirt that, although decent, was hardly the thing in which to go prancing around the decks of a passenger liner at any hour of the artificial day or night. He considered achieving a more dignified, toga-like effect with a sheet from the cot—but realized that the only gain would be in dignity. Meanwhile, the Doctor or the Commander or old Flinty-Face himself would be calling in at any time to bring the patient grapes, magazines and invalid port.

The speaker on the bulkhead muttered inaudibly to itself for a second or so, then announced: "Before we start the dance here is a request. You are all asked to retain your masks until after the fancy dresses have been judged. Please do not unmask until after the judging. That is all. On with the dance!"

Hales swore delightedly. He hadn't known another dance was

scheduled yet. He started to strip the sheets from the bed, from under the recumbent nurse, then thought better of it. That would be as big a give-away as his appearance in a nightshirt. And there were clean sheets in one of the lockers in which he had looked. He got one out, then stripped off his shirt. He tried hard to remember the historical films he had seen as he draped the sheet about himself. He found some safety pins to hold it securely in place. He said, to the softly snoring nurse, "This was the noblest Roman of them all . . ."

Sandals were the next problem. He looked at the nurse's feet. She was a tall woman, and her shoes did not have high heels. He unbuckled them, pulled them off, tried them on. They were not a perfect fit—but they could have been worse, much worse. He took them off again, pulled the scissors from the nurse's breast pocket, hacked the footwear ruthlessly until he had a reasonably accurate approximation to sandals. The snippings he disposed of in the toilet.

The mask was easy. The nurse's dark blue uniform cape, hanging on a peg, provided that. Hales was sorry to have to ruin such a good piece of cloth with his hasty scissors, but it had to be done. Then, in toga, mask

and sandals, he went through to the hospital bathroom to look at himself in the mirror. "What?" he said to his reflection, "no laurel wreath?" But he was not displeased with the result.

He picked up the nightshirt, stuffed it under his toga. With *that* gone there would be a hue and cry for somebody wearing a nightshirt. In all probability, the loss of the sheet would never be discovered.

The pressman went to the door, opened it cautiously. Hell! He should have known that Petrie would never leave the hospital unguarded. One of the cadets was there, a tall, beefy lad, but not, luckily, as alert as he should have been. He was talking to a girl, one of the pass-engers, and both of them had their backs to the hospital door.

"Slip down to the lounge, just for one dance," she was saying. "Nobody will miss you."

"Won't they just, honey! If old Vinegar Nell slips out and finds nobody here she'll go running straight to old Flinty-Face and then all hell'll be let loose."

"I believe you're frightened of them."

"I'm not, but. . ."

"Come on, then."

"No."

"Then you don't love me."

"I could not love you, dear, so

much. . ." suggested Hales.

"Loved I not honor more," finished the cadet. "*What the hell?*"

Hales slammed the door shut, whipped out the nightshirt and pulled it on over his toga. The door flew open again and the cadet barged in, fists ready. Hales hit him, hard, skinning his knuckles. He jumped over the body, out into the alleyway. The girl, confronted by the sudden, masked, nightshirted apparition screamed, ran along the alleyway. Hales ran, too, stripping off his nightshirt as he ran. At a cross alleyway he paused, then, seeing nobody, ducked through the door of a two berth cabin. It was unoccupied. Hales lifted the pillow of the lower bunk, pushed the unwanted garment under it.

He opened the door of the cabin, walked out as though he had not a care in the world. Along another alleyway he walked, down a short companionway—and then he was in the lounge.

The furniture had been removed, strings of colored lights and gay streamers seemed to be reflected in the gaily clad dancers moving rhythmically over the polished deck.

*"Out where the stars are gleaming,
Out where the Cross rides high,*

*On the trail for Far Centaurus—
Sending you my last goodbye;
Stand there in the moonlight,
look up to the sky,*

*Watch our jets a-fading, but,
darling, don't you cry—
For I will still remember you,
Your hair of gold, your eyes of
blue,*

*On Far Away Centaurus—I'll
still remember you!"*

Hales, by this time, was one of the throng of people around the dance floor. Standing next to him were two men, masked, one, tall and thin, dressed as an old-time sea-pirate, the other, short and fat, as a monk.

"What goon let them play that?" demanded the pirate irritably.

"We always do play it," said the monk.

"Yeah. But not with those words."

"They are new, aren't they, Welch? But this corny old thing must have had millions of words to it, in all languages, since it first came out. A soldiers' march, wasn't it? In one of those wars way back in the Twentieth Century? Anyhow, why don't you go to the mike and let 'em have one of your versions?"

"I'd like to. Say, Willis, do you think that Hales had anything to do with the new words?"

He's a writing man, you know."

"Hardly. He's not a poet. Just a lousy newscaster who comes up with a purple passage every second broadcast and thinks that his middle name is Shakespeare."

"He's safe enough now."

"Yes. Vinegar Nell can cope."

"I'll thank you not to call Nurse Murray that."

"I beg your pardon, *sir*. I forgot that. . ."

"Don't forget any more, that's all. Miss Murray is a very capable and charming woman."

"Talking of charming women—I could go for that blonde. But what's she dressed as? Three tufts of cotton wool could be *anything*."

"Snow on the mountains? Just look at those two clots in night-shirts!"

"They do at least cover hairy and knobbly knees."

"Are you insinuating, Willis, that. . . Anyhow, a monk's habit covers a fat belly."

Hales despaired of learning anything to his advantage, or to the disadvantage of *Thunderchild's* staff, and unobtrusively edged away from the Commander and the Chief Pilot. He had yet to map out a course of action, but he knew that the best place to hide a tree is in the forest. Until the unmasking he, an eccentrically attired man among

fellow eccentrics, would be safe. He knew that it would not be long before the cadet or his girlfriend raised the alarm—but he was reasonably secure in the crowd. He would have time to think of something. Meanwhile—why not dance?

But he couldn't dance without a partner. He sat down at one of the lounges at the rim of the floor, surveyed the scene with the bored hauteur befitting one of the later Roman Emperors. He wished that he had Nero's emerald to use as a monocle. He wished that he had a few lions to throw the Christians to—then told himself that lions brought up on such a diet would certainly refuse to even as much as nibble any of the ship's company.

A couple gyrated past, almost brushing his feet—a slave girl, tinkling chains and little else, in the arms of a bem. The girl looked at him rather intently, then was carried off in the passing stream of dancers. Hales was getting to his feet to see if he could find an unattached woman anywhere when he saw the girl, alone, coming towards him. He waited.

"Chris! It is you. They told me that you had a concussion, that you couldn't have any visitors yet."

"Not so loud, Vera. I didn't recognize you, in the outfit."

"Not very flattering, are you?"

"We're supposed to be disguised, aren't we? Anyhow, every time I've seen you you've been in overalls."

"It's the first time I've seen you in a toga—but I spotted you almost at once. But what about your concussion?"

"Never mind my concussion! Got a cigarette on you?"

Surprisingly, she had—in a jewelled metal pouch hanging from her girdle. Hales puffed appreciatively. "Listen, my dear. I'm in a jam. I don't know what those louts up top are playing at—but when I was up to Control I sneaked a look at the chart. As far as I can see we're coming in to a planetfall somewhere in the Belt. Then the Old Man pulled an anaesthetic pistol on me and they removed the corpse to the Sick Bay. I suppose I've been out for quite a few hours."

"Quite a few *hours*? Quite a few *days*."

"*Days*?"

Hales looked at his bare right arm, saw the puncture marks. He said, "You're right. I suppose that every time I showed signs of life that blasted woman jabbed her needle into me, kept me under. I suppose I must have developed some kind of immunity to the stuff they were using after I soaked up enough."

"But—the Asteroids? Chris, what . . .?"

"I don't know. I don't *know*. But I want to find out. Let's dance, anyhow. I'll feel safer on the floor."

They got to their feet, circled slowly to the music of The Grand Canal Waltz. Hales would have enjoyed it but for the fact that he was anxiously scanning the dance floor and the surrounding deck space for any signs of a disturbance. He had not long to wait. He saw a uniformed cadet thread his way among the dancers, catch by the elbow the tall, thin pirate. With unsailorly ungallantry the pirate at once let his arms fall from around his partner—the lady with the cotton wool—and listened intently to what the lad had to say. They were joined by the brown-habited monk.

"We'd better get out of here," said Vera.

"No. Not yet. We'll see what happens next."

Monk and Pirate retired to the perimeter of the dance floor, the cadet keeping a respectful two paces behind, the blonde—obviously nobody had told her that this wasn't *her* party any longer—dragging after. Four more cadets escorted their partners to seats, then made their way unobtrusively to where their

superiors were standing. Three men in fancy dress—Harlequin, Armored Knight and Mandarin—did likewise. Hales thought the Harlequin was the Second Pilot, but wasn't sure about the others.

The band brought the waltz to its saccharine conclusion, smirked appreciatively in recognition of the applause. Before they had time to start their next number the Pirate beckoned their leader to the edge of the dais, talked with him for a few moments. The leader went to the microphone, said, "Ladies and gentlemen—by popular request we are making the next number a Paul Jones. Ladies on the outside please, gentlemen on the inside."

"I don't like this," said Vera suddenly. "Who's the Pirate?"

"Commander Welch. But we'd better do as the man says."

He grasped her hand tightly, smiled at the returned pressure, then took his place with the other men in the inner, outward facing ring. He was surprised to see that the ship's people, both those in uniform and those in fancy dress, took no part.

The band started to play.

*"Out beside the spaceport,
'neath the rockets' glare,
There you used to meet her, you
left her waiting there;*

*Wait till the next big ship is
due,
Then what she'll do won't
worry you—
You're pulling out for Pluto,
it shouldn't worry you."*

"There're better words," panted the Rabbit on Hales' left.

"Yeah. I know."

*"Out where the comets wander,
Out where the rockets ply,
Riding out on wings of
thunder—
I'm sending her my last
good-bye!"*

"Manners for you," said the Rabbit. "These ship's people—do as they damn please."

"Yeah," said Hales, watching Pirate and Monk, Mandarin, Knight and Harlequin, a half dozen of uniformed cadets, inserting themselves into the women's ring. He whirled past the arc they formed—but the Pirate looked past him uninterestedly.

*"Wait there in the starlight,
wait there in the dark,
Watch the skies, my darling,
for . . ."*

The music stopped.

Hales made straight for Vera, pushing the Rabbit to one side. He grasped her hands—then they both turned to watch a commotion on the other side of the

floor. The focus of it was a night-shirted man who appeared to be having a violent difference of opinion with a Pirate. The man in the nightshirt lifted the candlestick that was part of his costume, cracked the Pirate smartly across the head. The Pirate swore and drew his cutlass. It looked unpleasantly real, reflected the light from a crimson lamp overhead in a disturbingly sinister manner. A woman screamed. The nightshirted one picked up his skirts and bolted, hotly pursued by the Pirate, the Harlequin and three cadets.

The other nightshirted dancer, perturbed by what was happening to his friend, started to sidle unobtrusively towards an exit. Seeing the Monk and the Mandarin making towards him, he started to run, too. There was a horrid clatter of tinware as the Knight, making a reckless flying tackle, caught his ankles and brought him down.

"My God!" ejaculated the Rabbit. "A pogrom of sleep-walkers!"

"I don't understand..." whispered Vera.

"Come away from the crush... That's better. They think that I got away in my hospital nightshirt."

Twice around the dance floor, the first nightshirt was still going well. The Pirate, waving his

cutlass, was gaining ground, however. As he passed Hales, Hales put out his foot and tripped him. "Sorry!" he muttered, trying to disguise his voice. Then, grasping the girl's arm, he said, "Let's get out of here."

"But where?"

"Anywhere. The cattle decks?"

"They'll look there."

"They'll look everywhere. But you'd better stay here."

He pressed her hand, walked calmly to the nearest exit. It was guarded, of course—but the cadet on duty seemed to have been designed for brawn rather than brains. Hales, putting on his best Roman Emperor manner, told him that Commander Welch wanted a hand to secure the prisoner, then, as soon as the young man had hurried to the upheaval that marked the scene of the first nightshirt's eventual capture, strolled calmly out.

"It is to be regretted," the speakers were saying, "that the judging of the fancy dresses has been cancelled. Everybody is requested to unmask at once. Everybody is... *ordered* to unmask at once."

Then the alarm bells started to ring.

"They're having their fun in Control," said Vera, sitting on a bale of hay and watching Hales

gulp the sandwiches she had smuggled down to him. "An uncharted meteor swarm, I heard somebody say. They're too busy with their navigation to make a proper search."

"It was near enough to the real thing for me. Some goon grazed my ribs with his pitchfork when they made sure that I wasn't under this straw . . ."

"The two laddies in night-shirts are talking of suing the Line. They're saying that Commander Welch and his juniors were all drunk and disorderly at the dance."

"I wish you'd put some mustard in these."

"Think yourself lucky to get 'em. There's an order against taking food out of the saloon. The hostesses are watching us like cats watching mice. A good job I went in to breakfast in my overalls."

"Indeed, yes," agreed Hales, remembering the slave girl outfit.

"But what are you—*we*—going to do?"

"Now you're asking! Honey, I've got a hunch, more than a hunch, that something big is going to break . . ."

"After what's been happening—it *is* more than a hunch."

"Yeah. Well—something big is going to break, and it's got past the stage of hunches. I've a feel-

ing, somehow, that Welch's pirate get-up was more than half in earnest."

"*Piracy?* In these days? Absurd, my dear. It *must* be you who does the scripts for Clancy of the Space Patrol."

"It is *not*. And if anybody else makes that crack there's going to be murder. But the idea of piracy isn't too fantastic. A base in the Asteroid Belt, say. Perhaps a few assorted weapons among the cargo, shipped under false bills of lading. And the know-how regarding orbits, velocities and all the rest of it . . ."

"No. I still don't see it. How are they going to return to Earth or any of the colonies to spend their ill-gotten gains? And how are they going to dispose of the passengers and any of their own people who don't feel like playing?"

"*That* never worried the old-time pirates."

"No. No. I'll not believe that. I'll not believe that Captain Petrie—or, for that matter, Commander Welch—would ever do such a thing. Men don't break with long years of service tradition as easily as that."

"Don't they? I don't claim to be a historian, but I've always been fascinated by naval history. The British Royal Navy had more long years of tradition behind it than all the interplane-

tary services combined—but it had its share of bad hats, men holding the King's Commission who were not averse to the occasional odd spot of piracy or mutiny."

"Even so—I won't believe it."

"All right, then. What's *your* idea?" Hales took another sandwich, munched it moodily.

"I . . . Under the straw, quick! There's somebody coming."

Hales swore, took cover. Feet scraped on the rungs of the steel ladder from the deck above, a pair of shoes appeared, stockings, shorts, a uniform shirt . . . Hales watched closely through his peephole, saw that it was one of the cadets, young Warwick.

Vera Kent leaned on her pitchfork, looked at the young man with a coldly hostile eye.

"Well?" she demanded. "Are you all coming down here to disturb the beasts again?"

"No, Miss Kent. There's only me. And I've a message for you."

"Yes?"

"Captain Petrie's compliments, and will you and Dr. Hilton get the stock secured before we go to landing stations?"

"When is landing stations?"

"They didn't say."

"Thank you. And you'll probably find Dr. Hilton at the bar on your way back to Control.

You might ask him to come down."

"Yes. Oh—*sandwiches*, Miss Kent? But I thought I saw you at breakfast."

"You did. But I brought these out with me. Dreaming Boy of Bentham Manor . . ." She nodded towards one of the Herefords. ". . . simply adores marmalade."

"Does he?" Warwick picked up the half eaten sandwich that Hales had left. "Then I suppose that's why he spat out this egg and bacon one . . ."

"I got them mixed. That should have been for one of the pigs."

"Encouraging cannibalism? Really . . ." He reached out, took the pitchfork from the girl's hand. "You know, I've often wanted to use one of these things. To plow and sow, and all the rest of it. To reap and mow, and be a farmer's boy."

"Give that back."

"If you insist. But I'd love just to try it out first—on that heap of straw, perhaps."

"Give it *back*. Really, Mr. Warwick, I shall have to tell Captain Petrie that you're interfering with the work on the cattle decks."

"You can tell him, too, that I interrupted the animals' breakfast of saloon delicacies . . ." He picked up the sandwich and

sniffed it. "Why—they're getting a better egg than I did!"

"Will you *please* get out of here?"

"Not yet. You see, I'm in a bit of a jam. And I want advice. Badly."

"There's the Captain. And Commander Welch."

"No. Not from them. It has to be from an outsider. And from somebody whom I respect . . ."

"Thank you, sir," she said."

"No, not you. Oh, I'm sorry. I do respect you, a lot. And you could advise me about part of it—but you haven't the . . . the way of feeling about things that . . . You're not a shippy sort of person, that is . . ."

"What *are* you driving at?"

"Well, this is part of it. Suppose you found out that your father wasn't your father at all . . ."

"A lot depends on your feelings towards your father."

"But I've never liked him—old Warwick, I mean. And my real father—well, he's our sort of people. I had a long talk with him last night. He was traveling in this ship—oh, years ago, and mother was a passenger. I can't blame them, I don't know enough about life to blame them. And I'm glad that I found out. But he called me into his room to . . . just to tell me good-bye."

"Do you think that you should be telling me all this?"

"I suppose I shouldn't. But I don't want to say good-bye to the Old Man now that I've found him. But I . . . haven't the words to argue with him, to say what I want to say . . . If Mr. Hales were with us, now, if he'd come out from under that straw, I could talk it over with him."

Hales got to his feet—a be-draggled Roman Emperor with wisps of straw hanging over his brow like a threadbare wreath. "And now," he said, "I suppose that all the other goons will come pouring down the ladder to haul me back to Vinegar Nell. I thought I'd save you the trouble of doing a proper Judas on me."

Warwick flushed. "That, sir, was never my intention. Get back under your lousy straw, and we'll all consider that this conversation never took place."

"I believe it *is* lousy," said Hales, scratching. "But I'm sorry, lad. Tell me about it."

"But I can't. I promised father . . ."

"Then why did you tell us as much as you did? How much more *can* you tell me? How much did old Flinty-Fa . . . Sorry, Captain Petrie . . . tell you?"

"So you know about it?"

"So I guessed. How much did he tell you?"

"Everything."

"Then . . . Is it illegal?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Then is it—er—unethical?"

"I don't think so."

"Not good enough."

"Very well, then—it's as ethical or unethical as the first Moon Rocket was."

"That's better. I was afraid that it was something with lots of blood in it—spilt blood, I mean. Now here's another question—is it something that *you* want to do? And will your doing it cause any hurt to any other person?"

"I do—and it won't."

"Then here's the answer for you—built up from remarkably scanty data. Stick with your old man—and to hell with the rest of 'em."

"Christopher! How can you?" asked the girl. "You said yourself that it was scanty data—and here you are giving the lad advice that might well mar his life for all time."

"He'll be doing what he wanted to do. My old man was a Master Astronaut, Captain on the Martian Mail run. He was lost, and his ship with him, and my mother swore that I should stay on Earth. But I've always loved the ships, and I've always—and I always shall do so—regretted

not having entered this service when I was a youngster. If I'd done what I wanted I might have been better off now—or worse off. But I'd have had *something*."

"*Landing stations!*" bellowed the speaker. "*Landing stations! Secure all for landing stations!*"

"I must go," said Warwick.

"Where are we landing?"

"Seven Three Four. I must go."

"Well," said the girl. "Help me with these cattle, will you?"

Feet clattered on the ladder as Hilton came down.

"That was sudden," he gasped. "So *you're* here. I thought as much." He said nothing further, busied himself securing the stock.

There was a sudden surge of power that threw them off their feet. Somewhere a bell was ringing—its faint, far away notes soon drowned by the bellowing of the cattle and the bleating of the sheep. Another surge of power came, and then the drive was cut suddenly.

"I hope they're enjoying themselves up there!" growled Hilton, hanging desperately on to the straps that he was adjusting.

Power on, power off—except for the sudden changes from weight to weightlessness the effect was not unlike that of a

heavy sea on a surface ship. But they got the job finished, somehow, relaxed for a much needed breathing space.

"Seven three four," said the girl as soon as she had got her breath back. "What do *you* know about it?"

"Nothing much—except that it's mostly ice."

"Ice? But what can you get from ice?"

"Water's the only thing that I know of."

"Hello," said Hilton, "we're down."

There was a slight shock, the drive was cut for the last time. The ship shuddered slightly as her members took her weight. Shuddered slightly, but that was all—for here, on this tiny planetoid, she weighed only a fraction of her tonnage on Earth.

"Careful, now," warned Hales. "If we don't watch ourselves we shall be flying up to the deck-head."

Somebody shouted down the hatch. "Is all secure there?"

"All secure!" replied Hilton.

"Then come up to the Main Lounge."

The speakers started up again. "Working party to Number Seven Compartment! Working party to Number Seven Compartment! Lively, now!"

"What's there?" asked the girl.

"As far as I can remember, equipment for the colony on Pluto . . . Surface shelters, I think . . ."

"Are you coming up?" asked Hilton.

"No," replied Hales and the girl simultaneously.

"I'd better go." He paused at the foot of the ladder. "I suppose I haven't seen you?"

"No. Thanks."

"None of my business, anyhow."

"Nice guy," said Hales. "Hadn't *you* better go?"

"I suppose I should, but . . ." She turned on him suddenly, took his face between her two hands. "I've the darnedest kind of feeling that if I do—this is good-bye. For keeps. And I . . . Oh; drat! You must think that this is dreadfully sudden."

"But I wish you *would* go . . . You could find out what is happening and let me know."

"No. We stick together from now on. Can do?"

"Can do," he said, and kissed her.

She pulled away. "Is there *no* privacy in this blasted ship? Who's coming now?"

They scrambled under the straw just as two people came down the ladder. One was the

cadet, Warwick, the other was a small, dark girl whom Hales had noticed, once or twice, around the ship.

"Under the straw?" asked the girl.

"Yes—for the time being. We'll find a better place later."

Hales got to his feet, the effort sending him drifting several feet into the air.

"What is all this?" he demanded.

"Keeping out of the way. They've landed the surface shelters and they're marching all the passengers out to them—and all of us, the cadets, as well. We're supposed to be in charge of the encampment until help arrives. But I'm sticking with the ship."

"And I'm sticking with—him," said the girl.

"What else?"

"They've cleaned out the emergency fuel dump, and they're taking ice on board, filling up every possible tank. I heard father say that even though the ship is a closed economy for air and water it's as well to have plenty in hand."

"Cadet Warwick," bellowed the speakers, "Cadet Warwick, report to Control *at once!* Miss Kent, Miss Wellesley and Mr. Hales, report to the disembarkation airlock *at once!*"

"Do we?" asked Hales. "Do

you know a *real* hiding place?"

"No. You see, this is my first trip here . . ."

Somebody scrambled hastily down the ladder. It was Hilton. "Come on!" he shouted. "There's not much time. Those buzzards up there are playing for keeps! They said it was an emergency landing—and now they're letting fly with gas pistols!"

"Father was afraid of that," said Warwick. "He hoped to do it without using force, but . . ."

"Stay, then!" said Hilton. "I'm getting out of this ship!"

"They'll find us here," said Hales.

He led the way to the hatch, dropped to the deck below, in which the sheep, pigs and poultry were penned. The hatch to the deck below that was tight shut, securely dogged, but the four of them, using the heels of their shoes, got it open. He felt a brief surprise that the airtight door, operated from the Control Room, was open—then realized that all such doors would have been opened to facilitate the discharge of such cargo and stores as were being left for those marooned on the asteroid.

They got the manually operated door shut after them as well as they could, waited until Warwick switched on the torch that he had at his belt. At first there did not seem to be any room for

concealment among the well stowed crates, bales and cases, then Warwick spotted a loose board on the top of one of the big boxes. They got it up, that and the board beside it, found that there was barely room for four people at the sides of the piece of equipment it contained. And when they were inside they were able to pull the loose boards down over themselves. There were two convenient knot holes in the thin planking.

Somebody was hammering at the dogged door.

Somebody was scrambling down the ladder into the hold.

Through the knot holes they saw the reflected beam of a torch.

"But where *are* they?" somebody asked.

"Never mind," said somebody else. *Petrie?* wondered Hales. "We shall need a historian—and he'll want his woman along. Come to that—we shall need somebody for the stock, too."

"But what about young Warwick, sir? His parents?"

"His mother's—dead. His father? You know—I think he'd rather approve . . . After all—when I'm gone, and you, Welch, and the others, he'll be Captain . . ."

"But the girl?"

"We want women. The right

sort of women are necessary."

"It's not too late, darling," whispered Warwick.

"I stay," whispered his girl.

Petrie raised his voice.

"We can't waste any more time searching for them. The survey ship is due any time now to check the fuel dump—and won't those boys be surprised when they find what we've left 'em! No, Welch, we've cut things fine enough as it is. If the four of 'em want to come, they come. That's all."

"But, sir, they *must* be here."

"I've no intention of having every case and crate of cargo shifted. Clear away for blasting off."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"You've still got time, sir," whispered Warwick to Hales.

"Yes, but . . . Tell me, is it a story? A good story?"

"*The* story."

"I stay."

They heard the door being dogged tight shut above them, they heard the other sound—a faint swishing, a muffled clang—that told them that the electrically operated door had shut. They heard the muffled roar of the big ship's drive, felt their weight build up with the acceleration to above Earth normal.

Said Warwick, "This is where we come out, I suppose."

They clambered out of the packing case, made their way to the foot of the ladder leading to the decks above. Warwick found and pressed the button that would ring a bell in Control, that would tell the watch officer that there was somebody in the airtight compartment. Then they sat down and waited.

"Now you can tell me," said Hales.

"No, I'd sooner not. It's the Old Man's—father's—story. He'll tell you everything."

"All right."

"There's somebody coming," said the little dark girl.

Hammer blows fell on the dogs, the hatch lid clattered open and back. The remotely controlled door slid to one side. Welch peered down at them.

"Ah," he said, "stowaways. Up you come." He looked at Hales, still in his toga. "So *that's* the way you managed it. Oh, well—whatever reports our nightshirted friends send in won't hurt me now."

"No. Barratry, or piracy, or whatever it is, comes more expensive, when you're caught, than merely chasing passengers with swords."

"Cutlasses," corrected Welch. "Strive ever for the *mot juste*, my little scrivener."

"Cadet Warwick, sir, reporting for duty," said the lad.

"Oh, yes—our Mr. Warwick. Our new acting temporary Third Pilot, unpaid. Get up to Control, Mr. Warwick."

"But Miss Wellesley . . ."

"Go to your cabin, Miss Wellesley. You'll have plenty of time to see your sweetheart later—plenty of time."

"The stock . . ." started Vera Kent.

"Yes, the stock. They're all right. We, in our crude, bungling fashion, have coped. They're fed and watered and reasonably happy. So I'd like you to come with Mr. Hales and myself to see the Captain."

"Happy, isn't he?" said Hales to Vera.

"Yes, I am happy. And why not? But come on, you two."

Through deck after deck they climbed—past the cattle, up into the accommodation, through silent, deserted alleyways. In these, Hales noticed, most of the lighting fixtures had been removed, the few, remaining strips gave barely enough illumination for safety.

They came into the Main Lounge. Here there was more light and life. Here there were a few people—passengers, of both sexes, the ship's hostesses. Nurse Murray walked briskly through the big compartment, saw Hales, gave him a friendly

grin. Behind the bar, Lew seemed to be taking stock of his display bottles, aided in this by the stout, middle-aged woman who was the ship's Purser. The pressman found it hard to define the atmosphere. It was, he thought, matey. "Let's call at the bar," he said to Welch.

"As you please."

"I don't know that I can spare you the usual, Mr. Hales," said Lew. "Can we, Helen?"

"Just one," said the Purser. "After all, this is a special occasion."

"As you say, my sweet," said the Barman.

They finished their drinks, but no chits were produced for anybody's signature. That, however, was not surprising—but the relationship between Purser and Bartender was.

"What goes on?" demanded Hales as they walked to the lift.

"Oh, *that*. The Old Man married 'em. He won't tolerate any unattached women around."

"Won't tolerate? Who does he think he is?"

"King, I suppose," said Welch soberly. "Perhaps, after he's been dead a few centuries, even God . . ."

There was no youthful attendant; Welch operated the lift himself. He led the way to the door of the Captain's quarters, rapped sharply. "Come in," called

the voice of Captain Petrie.

He was seated at his table, at ease, relaxed. He looked younger. There was something in his face of the small boy embarked upon his first big adventure, something of the lover hastening to meet his mistress.

He smiled. "That will do, Welch," he said. "I mustn't keep you from Miss Murray—sorry, Mrs. Welch. Now, Hales. And Miss Kent. Will you sit down?"

"Thank you, Captain. I believe you have a story for me. Your son said that it was *the* story—but he wouldn't tell me what it was."

"Ay. He's a good lad. I've done wrong, perhaps, bringing him—but he has no people, and Jennifer's husband won't worry about what happens to him. And he's got his—let me see—Jane, isn't it? But it doesn't matter what her name is."

"The *story*!" almost screamed Hales.

"Oh, yes—the story. I was forgetting. Well, as you know, most of us here, especially those of us with long service in her, wanted to see the old lady come to a rather better end than the breaker's yard. And most of us, too, had got to the stage of regarding life aboard the ship as the only *real* life . . . And so . . ."

"And so?" Hales prompted.

"And so this is the maiden voyage to the worlds of Alpha Centauri."

"What?" But somehow, he'd known the answer, though he still couldn't believe it. "But it's impossible. You haven't the fuel—and even if you had, it'd take *generations*. You haven't the food . . ."

"It *will* take generations. As for the fuel—we accelerate until we're well clear, then fall free. As for food—we have livestock, we have our hydroponics tanks, we have a consignment of seed grain, and other seeds, in our cargo. We shall be a little world, Hales, a little world, self contained, falling forever—or forever as far as *we're* concerned—through the gulf between the stars. I forget which generation it is that will make the landing—Welch has worked it out. But it may well be that some bright boy among our descendants will come up with an interstellar drive and get her there while you and I, Hales, are still living memories . . ."

"Thanks for the story," said Hales. "But how do you know that I want to be part of it?"

"I don't know. There's time yet—I can cut the drive and give you a boat, and if you don't fancy your chances of landing it you can start screaming for help on

your radio as soon as you get within range."

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Frankly, yes. As historian. Why not?"

Hales looked at the girl. "And you, my dear?"

Her hand sought and found his, grasped it tightly.

"Somebody has to look after the cattle," she said.

"Then I'm pleased to have you both with us. You'll have to get married, of course—I'll see to that. Anything else?"

"I'd like, before it's too late, to make one last broadcast. After all, that's what I'm here for—or what I came here for. Can I do it, sir?"

"No. Given a definite bearing, they might even go to the trouble of sending somebody after us. After all—we *are* decamping with a very sizeable hunk of property . . ."

"But I've thought of a way, sir. A transmitter packed into one of those message rockets you use sometimes, a recorded message, some kind of device for starting the record when the rocket approaches Earth . . ."

"H'm. I must get Welch on it . . ."

"One other thing," said the girl. "It's a rude question, but until you answer it I shan't feel I've the right to be happy myself . . . You've been marrying

people off all through the ship—what about *you*?”

Petrie looked as though he were seeing his ghosts again. But they were kindly ghosts, and

he smiled. He picked up the little, shining model of *Thunderchild* that stood on his table as a paperweight, and fondled it.

“I’ve got *her*,” he said.

It seems only logical that when men have conquered the planets—perhaps within the lifetime of many of us—they will turn out toward the stars. The distance is much greater, but that’s seemingly only a matter of degree.

It isn’t any such thing, though. It’s a matter of kind—of such a radical change that planetary travel and stellar travel have no relationship. At speeds well within the limits of rocket flight, even Pluto could be explored within part of a man’s life. But the stars are going to require whole centuries of time. And there’s a fair chance that nobody will ever come back to tell of their exploration.

It’s not just a matter of whether the speed of light can be exceeded. It’s a question of how much energy can be expended. Rockets may be built which can reach the stars. They could build up to a velocity which would permit their escaping the pull of the solar system without doing the impossible. But that speed is fairly low, compared to light. It would mean taking literally generations to reach another star. But about the only way to build up to speeds even close to that of light would require more energy than we can even theorize about developing—something on the order of the 100% conversion to energy of most of the mass of the ship, done first to accelerate, then to slow down! The wild ultra-speed cruises among the stars so often seen are sheer fantasy, after all.

But commerce involving centuries is implausible, to say the least. We may send out colonies, and man might someday people half the universe—in the very dim future. Long before the colonies develop ship-building facilities, however, Earth will be only a legend.

Earth may never know whether any colony survived—simply because no ship ever returned to report!

THE MAIN EVENT FOR '53

As nearly everyone knows, science fictioners hold a World Convention every year. After the success of the recent one in Chicago, it would be hard not to know it—and foolish not to make plans to attend the next one.

It will be in Philadelphia in 1953—and it promises to be the best one of all. For one thing, there's already a large and active amount of cooperation among groups from all nearby cities, which gives it a solid basis for building upwards that no single group could hope for. For another, it's in a city which has already had the experience of holding a highly successful convention. From the plans already drawn up, it can't help being an affair which no fan or reader of science fiction should miss.

You'll be hearing more of it (and more of the fine group sponsoring it in our next issue). But there's one way in which you can be sure of getting all the news and developments while they're still hot. At the same time, you can help the people who are putting this one on. It takes time and effort to organize such a convention. That is being donated gladly by all concerned. It also takes money, however.

And there, you can do your share. For a single dollar, you become a member of the Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention. For this you receive a card entitling you to all the privileges of a member; you get copies of all the bulletins put out, reporting on the convention progress (well worth the buck, by themselves); and you know you've done your share.

The Convention will take place Labor Day weekend—as usual—so you'll have plenty of time to get ready for it. But the best way to be sure of getting there and of being comfortable and satisfied when you do arrive is to make full use of the information you'll find in the bulletins, which members receive. Maps, hotel rates, how-to-get-there, etc., are things which no member has to worry about.

While you're still thinking about it, why not write to the Convention Committee, or simply send your dollar to Bob Madle, Treasurer—Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention—Box 2019, Middle City Station—Philadelphia 3, Pennsylvania.

We'll see you there Labor Day weekend, of course.

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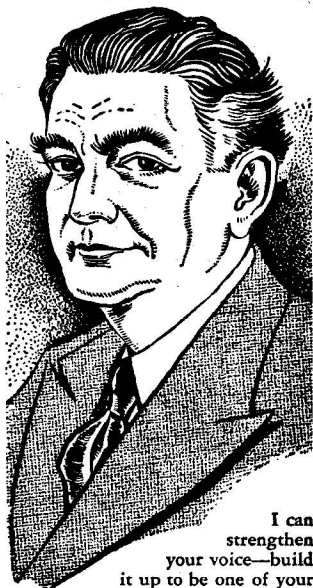
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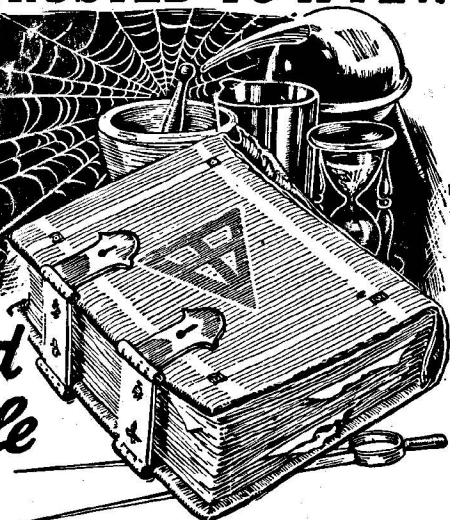
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