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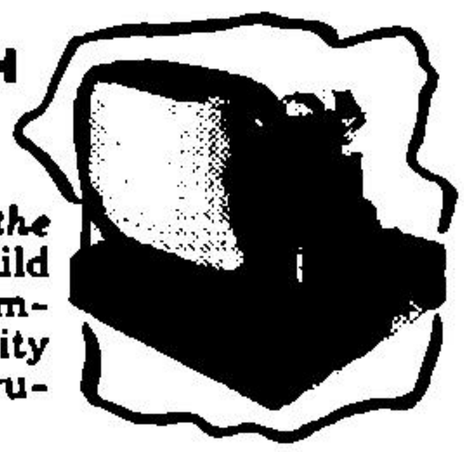
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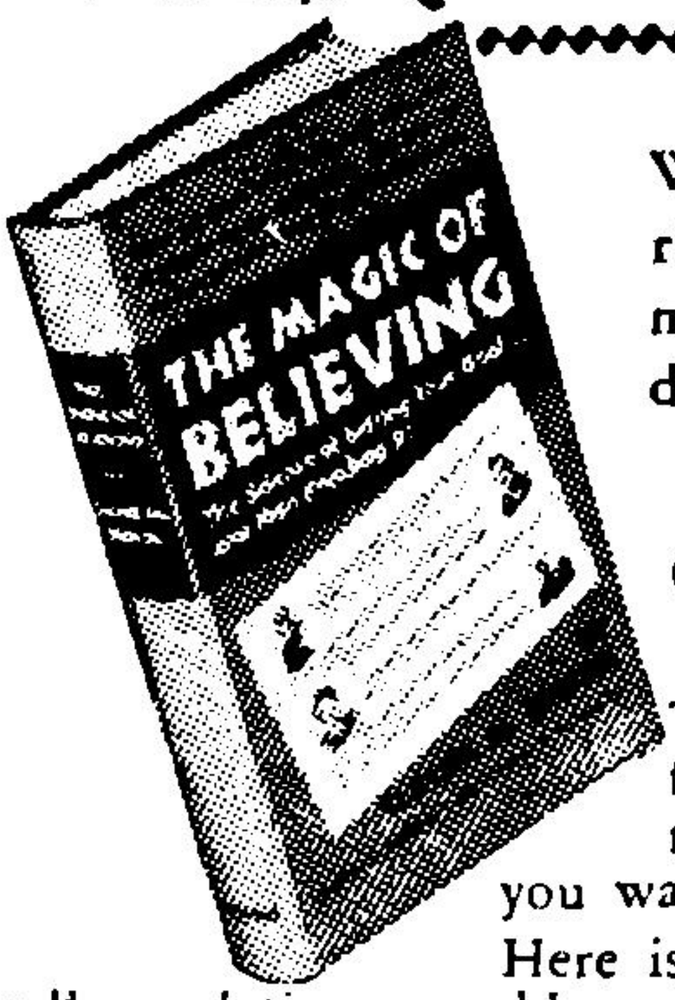
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AN EDITORIAL ON

TREASURE HUNT

Putting an issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES together is always something like a treasure hunt. Until we get down to our reading, we have no idea what will go into the next issue. It has to be something good—and it has to be up to the writers. But we never know what will come out of the manuscript pile.

Usually we wind up with a whole group of stories that may be good enough, but don't quite seem to arouse any sustained interest; a smaller pile holds the manuscripts that we've considered worth looking at again. And then there'll be one small pile that were so good that we just had to include them. So far, we've been lucky. Our trouble has been to weed out of that last pile the few that have to go because there simply isn't room enough to include them.

But no matter how sure we are that they're the best possible stories, somebody is going to ask why we picked them. So far, the readers have told us they were good stories—but there still seems to be considerable curiosity about why such-and-such a story was included. Okay—we'll try to answer that this time. The one real reason they were picked was because every single one of them left a feeling of satisfaction and genuine enjoyment in our minds when we read them; and that's hard to do, when we're reading critically. But there are other reasons.

Van Lhin's POLICE YOUR PLANET was chosen because it represents something we don't often see—a convincing picture of a planet in its early days of colonization, with a story behind it that isn't bogged down by the weight of that realism. We had a feeling all the way through that this was real—but we also wanted to keep reading because we were enjoying it.

Gallun's TEN TO THE STARS is another kind of story not too often seen nowadays. It's frankly sentimental in spots—and it should be, because the men who dream enough to go out to the planets first are going to be sentimental men. But it also is realistic, under it all. It gives us an *emotional* picture of what going out in those earliest days will be like, and it charts the development of the men who will blaze the way. There's nothing melodramatic about it—just a sustained story of what space will do to the men who open it up, with the honest drama that is inevitable. When we put the story down, we found ourselves lost

in a haze of the days to come—and that's recommendation enough for any story.

Oliver's JUDGMENT DAY is the kind of a story we can't stand—the story of a brat who feels that the only reality lies in his TV programs. But we bought it anyhow, because Oliver did a yarn that wasn't cute or silly, but had a genuine point to it, and which was honest science fiction. Also, because Oliver is enough of a craftsman to avoid making his kid behave as too many precocious brats have behaved in the slick stories we never finished. We also liked Captain Jet, we have to admit!

Budrys gave us an odd story in RECESSIONAL. All right, we might as well admit it isn't a slapdash, bang-bang plotted story; it's a story where the pilot lies down in the very structure of mankind's age-old battle against himself. But it's a story which handles the feeling and the mood so well that this subdued plot is more than strong enough to justify its treatment. We regretfully set that story aside twice because it "didn't quite have plot enough." Then we dashed back and grabbed it up, because we couldn't help liking it better every time we thought about it. Some stories are like that—they take a few days to digest. We can always use a few like that—since half of our favorite science fiction stories fall into just that category.

And finally, Dee's little story, EARTHMAN'S CHOICE, had to be included because of the idea Dee worked out. It's something new to us, even after years of reading science fiction avidly. And it's too darned logical to let go! Everything is built up neatly to support that idea, too. If anyone is planning to bring out an anthology of very short stories of science fiction, we'd recommend this one highly.

Now, what about balance, and all the other things an editor has to consider, and for reasons of which he does or does not buy stories? Well, the answer to that is simple! We just don't worry about such things. When we get an issue full of top-notch stories, we run those stories. If anyone wants to dispute our judgment on the basis that we've had too much of one kind, or not enough of another, that's his privilege. We just happen to think that in a fiction magazine the only thing that counts is the worth of the stories inside it.

So far, all your letters have agreed with us in this policy, so we feel highly encouraged. We look forward to getting more of those letters. We welcome kicks just as much as praises, incidentally; we don't think we're infallible, and if we pull a blooper, we want to know about it, so that we won't do it again. So keep the letters coming to us, and we'll try to make sure the best stories we can find continue coming to you—for whatever reason, just as long as they're good!

Philip St. John
Editor

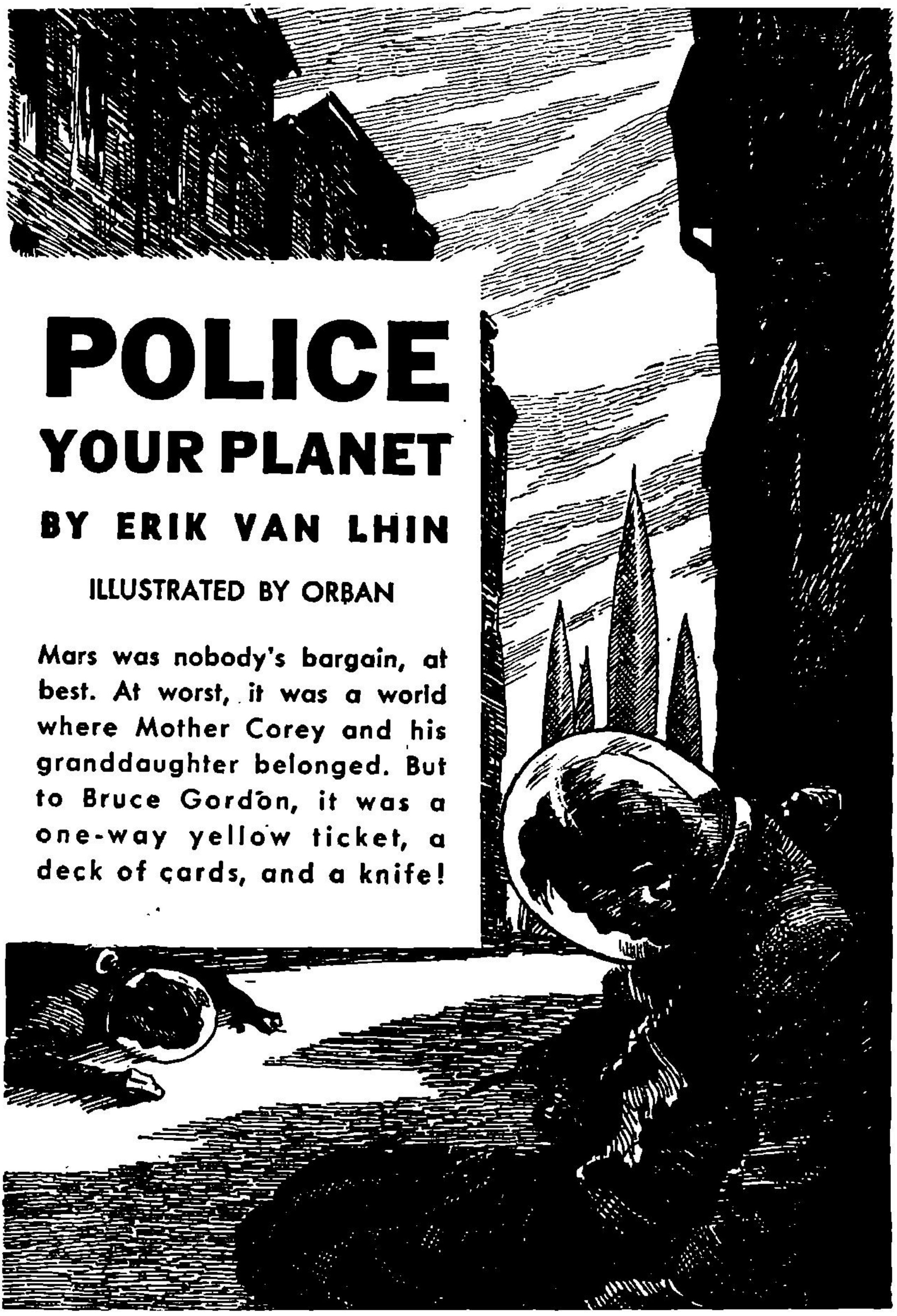


POLICE YOUR PLANET

BY ERIK VAN LHIN

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

Mars was nobody's bargain, at best. At worst, it was a world where Mother Corey and his granddaughter belonged. But to Bruce Gordon, it was a one-way yellow ticket, a deck of cards, and a knife!



There were ten passengers in the little pressurized cabin of the electric bus that shuttled between the rocket field and Marsport. Ten men, the driver—and Bruce Gordon!

He sat apart from the others, as he had kept to himself on the ten-day trip between Earth and Mars, with the yellow stub of his ticket still defiantly in the band of his hat, proclaiming that Earth had paid his passage without his permission being asked. His big, lean body was slumped slightly in the seat. Gray eyes stared out from under black brows without seeing the reddish-yellow sand dunes slipping by. There was no expression on his face. Even the hint of bitterness at the corners of his mouth was gone now.

He listened to the driver explaining to a couple of firsters that they were actually on what appeared to be one of the mysterious canals when viewed from Earth. Every book on Mars gave the fact that the canals were either an illusion or something which could not be detected on the surface of the planet. Gordon lost interest in the subject, almost at once.

He glanced back toward the rocket that still pointed skyward back on the field, and then forward toward the city of Marsport, sprawling out in a mass of slums beyond the edges of the dome that had been built to hold air over the central part. And at last he stirred and reached for the yellow stub.

He grimaced at the ONE WAY stamped on it, then tore it into bits and let the pieces scatter over the floor. He counted them as they fell; thirty pieces, one for each year of his life. Little ones for the two years he'd wasted as a cop. Shreds for the four years as a kid in the ring before that—he'd never made the top, though it had taken enough time getting rid of the scars from it. Bigger bits for two years also wasted in trying his hand at professional gambling; they hadn't made him a fortune, but they'd been fun at the time. And the six final pieces that spelled his rise from a special reporter helping out with a police shake-up coverage through a regular leg-man turning up rackets, and on up like a meteor until he was the paper's youngest top man, and a growing thorn in the side of the government. He'd made his big scoop, all right. He'd dug up enough about the Mercury scandals to double circulation.

And the government had explained what a fool he'd been for printing half of a story that was never supposed to be printed until it could all be revealed.

They'd given him his final assignment, escorted him to the rocket, and explained just how many grounds for treason they could use against him if he ever tried to come back without their invitation.

He shrugged. He'd bought a suit of airtight coveralls and a helmet at the field. He had enough to get by on for perhaps two weeks. And he had a set of reader cards in his pocket, in a pattern which the supply house Earthside had assured him had never been exported to Mars. With them and the knife he'd selected, he might get by.

The Solar Security office had given him the knife practice to make sure he could use it, just as they'd made sure he hadn't taken extra money with him beyond the regulation amount.

"You're a traitor, and we'd like nothing better than seeing your guts spilled," the Security man had told him. "That paper you swiped was marked top secret. When we're trying to build a Solar Federation from a world that isn't fully united, we have to be rough. But we don't get many men with your background—cop, tin-horn, fighter—who have brains enough for our work. So you're bound for Mars, rather than the Mercury mines. If . . ."

It was a big if, and a vague one. They needed men on Mars who could act as links in their information bureau, and be ready to work on their side when the trouble they expected came. They could see what went on, from the top. But they wanted men planted in all walks, where they could get information when they asked for it. Trouble was due—overdue, they felt—and they wanted men who could serve them loyally, even without orders. If he did them enough service, they might let him back to Earth. If he caused trouble enough to bother them, they could still ship him to Mercury.

"And suppose nothing happens?" he asked.

"Then who cares? You're just lucky enough to be alive," the agent told him flatly.

"And what makes you think I'm going to be a spy for Security?"

The other had shrugged. "Why not, Gordon? You've been a spy for six years now—against the crooked cops and tin-horns who were your friends, and against the men who've tried to make something out of man's conquest of space. You've been a spy for a yellow scandal sheet. Why not for us?"

It had been a nasty fight, while it lasted. And maybe he was here only because the other guy had proved a little faster

with the dirtiest punches. Or maybe because Gordon had been smart enough to realize that Security was right—his background might be useful on Mars. Useful to himself, at least.

They were in the slums around the city now. Marsport had been settled faster than it was ready to receive. Temporary buildings had been thrown up, and then had remained, decaying into death-traps, where the men whose dreams had gone, seethed and died in crowded filth. It wasn't a pretty view that visitors got as they first reached Mars. But nobody except the romantic fools had ever thought frontiers were pretty.

The drummer who had watched Gordon tear up his yellow stub moved forward now, desire to make an impression stronger than his dislike of the other. "First time?" he asked, settling his fat little carcass into the seat beside the larger man.

Gordon nodded, mentally cataloguing the drummer as to social, business, and personal life. The cockroach type, midway between the small-businessman slug and the petty-crook spider types that weren't worth bothering with. He could get along without the last-minute pomposity.

But the other took it as interest. "Been here dozens of times, myself. Risking your life just to go into Marsport. Why Congress doesn't clean it up, *I'll* never know! But business is business, I always say. It's better under the dome than out here, though. Why, last time I was here, they found a whole gang outside the dome selling human meat. Absolutely. And cheaper than real meat."

Gordon grunted. It was the usual untrained fool's garbled account. He'd heard about it on the paper. Some poor devil had taken home a corpse to a starving family out of sheer desperation. Something about the man having come out because one of his kids had been too weak for Earth gravity, to open a cobbling shop here. Then he'd fallen behind in his protection payments and had tried one of the cheap gambling halls to make good. The paper's account hadn't indicated what happened to the family after they hung him, but a couple of the girls had been almost pretty. Maybe they'd been able to live.

Gordon's mind switched from gambling to the readers in his bag. He had no intention of starving here—nor staying, for that matter. The cards were plastic, and should be good for a week or so of use before they showed wear. During that time, by playing it carefully, he should have his stake. Then, if the

gaming tables here were as crudely run as an old-timer he'd known on Earth had said, he could try a coup. If it worked, he'd have enough to open a cheap-john joint of his own, maybe. At least, that's what he'd indicated to the Security men.

But the price of bribing a ship to take him back to Earth without a card came to about the same figure, and there were plenty of ways of concealing himself, once he got back . . .

". . . be at Mother Corey's soon" the fat little drummer babbled on. "Notorious—worst place on Mars. Take it from me, brother, that's something! Even the cops are afraid to go in there. Seven hundred to a thousand of the worst sort—See it? There, to your left!"

The name was vaguely familiar as one of the sore spots of Marsport. Gordon looked, and spotted the ragged building, half a mile outside the dome. It had been a rocket maintenance hangar once, then had been turned into temporary dwelling for the first deportees when Earth began flooding Mars. Now, seeming to stand by habit alone, it radiated desolation and decay.

Sudden determination crystallized in Gordon's mind. He'd been vaguely curious as to whether the Security boys would have a spotter on his movements. Now he knew what to do about it—and as good a spot to start as any.

He stood up, grabbing for his bag, and spinning the fat thighs of the suddenly squealing drummer aside with a contemptuous shove. He jerked forward, and caught the driver's shoulder. "Getting off!" he announced.

The driver shrugged his hand away. "Don't be crazy, mister! They . . ." He turned and saw it was Gordon. His face turned blank, even though there was no yellow card for his eyes to study now. "It's your life, buster," he said, and reached for the brake. "I'll give you five minutes to get into coveralls and helmet and out through the airlock."

Gordon needed less than that. He'd practiced all the way from Earth, knowing there might be times when speed in getting into the airtight clothing would count. The transparent plastic of the coveralls went on easily enough, and his hands found the seals quickly. He slipped his few possessions into a bag at his belt, slid the knife into a spring holster above his wrist, and picked up the bowl-shaped helmet. It seated on a plastic seal, and the little air-compressor at his back began to hum, ready to turn the thin wisp of Mars' atmosphere into a barely breath-

able pressure. He tested the Mars-speaker—an amplifier and speaker in another pouch, designed to raise the volume of his voice to a level where it would carry through even the air of Mars.

The driver swore at the lash of sound, and grabbed for the airlock switch. Gordon barely had time to jerk through the form-hugging plastic orifice before it snapped shut behind him. Then the bus left him. He didn't look back, but headed for the wreck of a building that was Mother Corey's.

He moved down unpaved streets that zig-zagged along, thick with the filth of garbage and poverty—the part of Mars never seen in the newsreels, outside the shock movies. Thin kids with big eyes and sullen mouths crowded the streets in their airsuits, yelling profanity. Around a corner, he heard yelling, and swung over to see a man beating a coarsely fat woman who was obviously his wife. The street was filled with people watching with a numbed hunger for any kind of excitement.

It was late afternoon, obviously. Men were coming from the few bus routes, lugging tools and lunch baskets, slumped and beaten from labor in the atomic plants, the Martian conversion farms, and the industries that had come inevitably where inefficiency was better than high prices of imports. They were sick men, sick down inside themselves, going home to the whining of wives and the squabbling of their unwanted children; they were sicker because they knew themselves for failures, and could not deny the truth of the nagging accusations of their families.

The saloons were doing well enough, apparently, from the number that streamed in through their airlock entrances. But Gordon saw one of the barkeepers paying money to a thick-set rat with an arrogant sneer, and he knew that the few profits from the cheap beer were never going home with the man. Storekeepers in the cheap little shops had the same lines on their faces as they saw on those of their customers.

Poverty and misery were the keynotes here, rather than the vicious evil half-world the drummer had babbled about. But to Gordon's trained eyes, there was plenty of outright rottenness, too. There were the young punks on the corners, eyeing him as he passed, and the furtive glances of women coming out early to begin their emotionless rounds. Here and there, men with the ugly smirks of professional tough guys lounged in front of

taverns or barber-shops. Gordon passed a rickety old building where a group inside were shooting craps or working on their knives and bludgeons. If it was a gang hideout, there was no hiding involved. He saw two policemen, in what seemed like normal police clothes except for their bowl-helmets; the aspirators and speakers were somehow built in, and unnoticeable. But they passed the hideout without a look, and stalked down the street while sullen eyes followed them.

He grimaced, grateful that the supercharger on his airsuit filtered out some of the smell which the thin air carried. He'd thought he was familiar with human misery from his own Earth slum background. But there was no attempt to disguise it here —no vain flowers withering in windows, no bravado from anyone who was growing up to leave all this behind. This was dead end.

The crowded streets thinned out now, and the buildings were older—so battered and weathered that not even the most abject wage-earner could stand them. A few diseased beggars lounged about, and a scattering of too-purposeful men moved along. But it was a quiet section, where toughness was taken for granted, and no smirk was necessary to prove a man's rise to degradation.

Ahead, Mother Corey's reared up—a huge, ugly half cylinder of pitted metal and native bricks, showing the patchwork of decades, before repairs had been abandoned. There were no windows, though there had once been. And the front was covered with a big sign that spelled out *Condemned*, in mockery of the tattered shreds once an official notice. The airseal was filthy, and there was no bell.

Gordon kicked against the side, waited, and kicked again. A slit opened and closed. He waited, then drew his knife and began prying at the worn cement around the airseal, looking for the lock that had once been there.

The seal suddenly quivered, indicating the metal inside had been withdrawn. Gordon grinned tautly, stepped through, and pushed the blade against the inner plastic.

"All right, all right," a voice whined out of the darkness. "You don't have to puncture my seal. You're in."

"Then call them off!"

A wheezing chuckle answered him, and a phosphor bulb glowed weakly, shedding some light on a filthy hall that led to rickety steps, where four men stood ready to jump downward on the intruder. "Okay, boys," the voice

said. "Come on down. He's alone, anyhow. What's pushing, stranger?"

"A yellow ticket," Gordon told him. "A yellow ticket and a Government allotment that'll last me two weeks in the dome. I figure on making it last six here, until I can shake down and case the lay. And don't let my being a firster give you hot palms. My brother was Lanny Gordon!"

It happened to be true, though he hadn't seen his brother from the time the man had left the family as a young punk to the day they finally convicted him on his twenty-first murder and gave him the warming bench for a twenty-first birthday present. But here, if it was like places he'd known on Earth, even second-hand contact with "muscle" was useful.

It seemed to work. A fat hulk of a man oozed out of the shadows, his gray face contorting its doughy fat into a yellow-toothed grin, and a filthy hand waved back the other men. There were a few wisps of long, gray hair on the head and face, and they quivered as he moved forward.

"Looking for a room?" he whined.

"I'm looking for Mother Corey."

"Then you're looking at him, cobber," the grotesque lump of flesh answered. "Sleep on the floor, want a bunk, squat with four, or room and dutchess to yourself?"

There was a period of haggling, then, followed by a wait as Mother Corey kicked four grumbling men out of a four-by-seven hole on the second floor. Gordon's money had carried more weight than his brother's reputation, and for that Corey was willing to humor his insane wish to be completely by himself, even. He spread a hand out coarsely. "All yours, cobber, while your crackle's blue."

It was a filthy, dark place. In one corner was an unsheeted bed, with marks on the floor to show where another had been beside it, to house the four before. There was a rusty bucket for water, a hole kicked through the floor for waste water, and a disposal can that had apparently been used only as a chair, from the looks and smell of the place. Plumbing and such luxuries hadn't existed for years, except for the small cistern and worn water recovery planet in the basement, beside the tired-looking weeds in the hydroponic tanks that tried unsuccessfully to keep the air breathable.

"What about a lock on the door?" Gordon asked.

"What good would it do you?

Got a different way here, we have. One credit a week, and you get Mother Corey's word nobody busts in. And it sticks, cobber—one way or the other."

Gordon paid, and tossed his pouch on the filthy bed. With a little work, the place could be cleaned enough, and he had a strong stomach. Eating was another matter—there was a section in the back where thermocapsules could be used to heat food, but . . .

He pulled the cards out of his pouch, trying to be casual. Mother Corey stood staring at the pack while Gordon changed out of his airsuit, retching faintly as the full effluvium of the place hit him. "Where does a man eat around here?" he asked.

Mother Corey pried his eyes off the cards and ran a thick tongue over heavy lips. "Eh? Oh. Eat. There's a place about ten blocks back. Cobber, stop teasing me! With elections coming up and the boys loaded with vote money back in town—with a deck of cheaters like that—you want to *eat?*"

He picked the deck up and studied the box fondly, while a faraway look came into his clouded eyes. "Same ones—same identical ones I wore out nigh twenty years ago. Smuggled two decks up here. Set to clean up—and I did, for a while." He shook his head sadly, making the thin hairs wave wildly around his jellied jowls and head, and handed the deck back to Gordon. "Come on down. For the sight of these, I'll give you the lay for your pitch. And when your luck's made or broken, remember Mother Corey was your friend first, and your old Mother can get longer use from them than you can."

He waddled off, trailing a cloud of garbage odors, and telling of his plans to take Mars for a cleaning, once long ago. Gordon followed him, staring at the filth around him. Corey's plans had been about the same as his present ones, and this was the result. Landlord of a crumbling pile of decay, living beyond the law, and growing old among crooks and riff-raff.

He grimaced. Ten days! He wouldn't make the mistake of being too greedy. Ten days, and then he'd make his big pitch.

His thoughts were churning so busily that he didn't see the blonde girl until she had forced her way past them on the stairs. Then he turned back, but she had vanished into one of the rooms. Anyhow, this was Mars, and Gordon had no time for by-paths now. Mars! He spat into the moldy dust on the floor and hurried after Mother Corey.

II

A lot could be done in ten days, when a man knew what he was after and hated to go back to the place he called home. It was exactly ten days later when Gordon stood in the motley crowd inside the barnlike room where Fats ran a bar along one wall and filled the rest of the space with assorted tables, all worn. Gordon was sweating slightly as he stood at the roulette table where both zero and double-zero were reserved for the house.

The croupier was a little wizened man wanted on Earth for murder, but not important enough to track down to Mars. Now it seemed as if he'd soon be wanted here for more of the same, from the looks he was giving the big, dark man who faced him. His eyes darted down to the point of the knife that showed under Gordon's sleeve, and he licked his lips, showing snaggle teeth. The wheel hesitated and came to a halt, with the ball trembling in a pocket.

"Twenty-One wins again," he mouthed, and pushed chips across toward Gordon, as if every one of them came out of his own pay. "Place your bets." The words were automatic, now no more than a conditioned reflex.

Two others around the table watched narrowly as Gordon left his chips where they were; they reached for their own chips, then exchanged looks and shook their heads. In a Martian roulette game, numbers with that much riding just didn't turn up. Some of the others licked eager lips, but the croupier gave them no time. It was bad enough without more riding on it. Sweat stood out on his head, and he shifted his weight, then caught the wheel and spun it savagely.

Gordon's leg ached from his strained position, but he shifted his weight onto it more heavily, and new spots of sweat popped out on the croupier's face. His eyes darted down, to where the full weight of Gordon seemed to rest on the heel that was grinding into his instep. His eyes flicked to the knife point. But there was some degree of loyalty in him towards Fats Eller. He tried to pull his foot off the button that was concealed in the floor.

The heel ground harder, bringing a groan from him. And the ball hovered over Twenty-One and came to rest there once more.

Slowly, painfully, the little man counted stacks of chips and moved them across the table toward Gordon, his hands trembling. The sweat began to dry now, and his tongue darted

across his broken teeth in a frenzy.

Gordon straightened from his awkard position, drawing his foot back, and reached out for the pile of chips. For a second, he hesitated, watching the little man fidget, while he let the knife blade slide out another quarter inch from his sleeve. Then he scooped it up and nodded. "Okay," he decided. "I'm not greedy."

The strain of watching the games until he could spot the fix and then holding the croupier down had left him momentarily weak, but he still could feel the tensing of the crowd. Now he let his eyes run over them—the night citizens of Marsport, lower dome section. Spacemen who'd missed their ships, men who'd come here with dreams, and stayed without them—the shopkeepers who couldn't meet their graft and were here to try to win it on a last chance, street women and petty grifters—those who believed that a rude interior meant a more honest wheel and those who no longer cared, until their last cent was gone. The air was thick with their unwashed bodies—all Mars smelled, since water was still too rare for frequent bathing—and their cheap perfume, while the air was clouded with cheap Marsweed cigarettes. But thicker than that was a hunger over them—something demanding excitement, and now about to be fed.

Gordon swung where their eyes pointed, until he saw Fats Eller sidling through the groups. The sour-faced, pudgy man wasn't happy about the turn of events. His face showed that, together with determination to do something.

Gordon let the knife slip into the palm of his hand as the crowd seemed to hold its breath. Fats stared at it with a half-contemptuous sneer, but made no move to come closer. He plucked a sheaf of Martian banknotes from his pocket and tossed them to the croupier.

"Cash in his chips," he ordered harshly. Then his pouchy eyes turned to Gordon. "Get your money, punk, and get out! And stay out!"

For a moment, as he began pocketing the bills, Gordon thought he was going to get away that easily. Fats watched him dourly, then swung on his heel, just as a shrill, strangled cry went up from someone in the crowd.

The deportee let his glance jerk to it, then froze. His eyes caught the sight of a hand pointing behind him, and he knew it was too crude a trick to bother with. But he paused, shocked to see the girl he'd seen on Mother

Corey's staire, gazing at him in well-feigned warning. She looked like a blonde angel who'd been out in the rain just long enough to begin tarnishing. But on her, the brassiness of her hair and the too-experienced pout of her lips looked almost good. Or it could have been the contrast with the blowsy women around her. Her figure . . . In spite of his better judgment, it caught his eyes and drew them down over curves and swells that might be too ripe for Earth fashion, but would always be right for arousing a man's passion.

Then he ripped his eyes back to Fats, who had started to turn again. Gordon took a step backwards, preparing to duck. And again the girl's finger motioned behind him. He disregarded it —and realized suddenly it was a mistake.

It was the faintest swish in the air that caught his ear, and he brought his shoulders up and his head down, just as the sap struck. Fast as his reaction was, it was almost too late. The weapon crunched against his shoulder and slammed over the back of his neck, almost knocking him out. But he held his grip on himself.

His heel lashed back and caught the shin of the man behind him. His other leg spun him around, still crouching, and the knife in his hand started coming up, sharp edge leading, and aimed for the belly of the bruiser who confronted him. The pug-ugly saw the blade, and a thick animal sound gurgled from his mouth, while he tried to check his lunge.

Gordon felt the blade strike, but he was already pulling his swing, and it only sank half an inch, gashing a long streak that crimsoned behind it. The thug shrieked hoarsely and fell over. That left the way clear to the door, where the bouncer had been stationed. Gordon was through it and into the night in two soaring leaps. After only a few days on Mars, his legs were still hardened to Earth gravity, and he had more than a double advantage over the others.

Outside, it was the usual Martian night in the poorer section of the dome, which meant it was nearly dark. Most of the street lights had never been installed —graft had eaten up the appropriations, instead—and the nearest one was around the corner, leaving the side of *Fats' Place* in the shadow. Gordon checked his speed, threw himself flat, and rolled back against the building, just beyond the steps that led to the street.

Feet pounded out of the door above as Fats and the bouncer broke through. Gordon's hand

had already knotted a couple of coins into his kerchief. He waited until the two turned uncertainly up the street and tossed it. It struck the wall near the corner, sailed on, and struck again at the edge of the unpaved street with a muffled sound.

Fats and the other swung, just in time to see a bit of dust where it had hit. "Around the corner!" Fats yelled. "After him, and shoot!"

In the shadows, Gordon jerked sharply. It was rare enough to have a gun here. But to use one inside the dome was unthinkable. His eyes shot up, where the few dim lights were reflected off the great plastic sheet that was held up by air pressure and reinforced with heavy webbing. It was the biggest dome ever built, large enough to cover all of Marsport before the slums sprawled out beyond it; it still covered half the city, making breathing possible here without a helmet. But it wasn't designed to stand stray bullets, and having firearms inside it, except for a few chosen men, was a crime punishable by death.

Fats had swung back, and was now herding the crowd inside his place. He might have been only a small gambling house owner, but within his own circle his words carried weight. They stayed inside, and the door shut behind them, sealing tightly as doors always sealed, even under the dome.

Gordon got to his hands and knees and began crawling away from the corner. He came to a dark alley, smelling of decay where garbage had piled up without being carted away. He turned into it, stumbling over a woman busy rolling a drunk. She darted to the end of the alley, and he moved after her more slowly. Beyond lay a lighted street, and a sign that announced *Mooney's Amusement Palace—Drinks free to Patrons!* He snapped a look up and down the street, and walked briskly toward the somewhat plusher gambling hall there. Fats couldn't touch him in a competitor's place.

For a second, he thought he heard steps behind him, but a quick glance back showed nothing. Then he was inside Mooney's, and heading quickly for the dice table.

He lost steadily on small bets for half an hour, admiring the skilled palming of the "odds" cubes. The loss was only a tiny dent in his new pile, but he bemoaned it properly, as if he were broke, and moved over to the bar. This one had seats. The bartender had a consolation boilermaker waiting for him, and he gulped half of it down before he

realized the beer had been needled with ether. The tastes here were on the rugged side.

Beside him, a cop was drinking the same slowly, watching another policeman at a Canfield game. He was obviously winning, and now he got up and came over to cash in his chips.

"You'd think they'd lose count once in a while," he complained to his companion. "But nope—fifty even a night, no more . . . Well, come on, Pete, we'd better get back to Fats and tell him the swindler got away."

Gordon followed them out and turned south, down the street toward the edge of the dome and the entrance where he'd parked his airsuit and helmet. He kept glancing back whenever he was in the thicker shadows, but there seemed to be no one following him, in spite of the itching at the back of his neck.

At the gate of the dome, he glanced back again, then ducked into the locker building. The money in his pockets was heavier now — something that kept worrying him with every step. For a minute, he debated going back to register at one of the better hotels in Marsport Center. But too many stories came into his head. He wasn't clothed for it, and the odor of bathless living in Mother Corey's still clung to him. He'd be immediately suspected there, and it wasn't too hard to bribe one's way into a room. A bum with money had more chances in a place like Mother Corey's—where the grotesque hulk that ruled the roost apparently lived up rigidly to the one ethic of his given word.

He threaded through the maze of the lockers with his knife ready in his hand, trying not to attract suspicion. At this hour, though, most of the place was empty. The crowds of foremen and delivery men who'd be going in and out through the day were lacking, and there were only a few who crossed the line from the dome to the slums.

He found his suit and helmet and clamped them on quickly, transferring the knife to its spring sheathe outside the suit. He checked the tiny batteries that were recharged by tiny generators in the soles of the boots with every step. Then he paid his toll for the opening of the private slit and went through, into the darkness outside the dome.

Lights bobbed about—police in pairs patrolling in the better streets, walking as far from the houses as they could; a few groups, depending on numbers for safety; some of the very poor, stumbling about and hoping for a drink somehow, sure they had nothing to lose; and

probably hoods from the gangs that ruled the nights here.

Gordon left his torch unlighted, and moved along; there was a little light from the phosphorescent markers at some of the corners, and from the stars. He could just make his way without marking himself with a light. And he'd be better able to see any light following him.

Damn it, he should have hired a few of the younger bums from Mother Corey's — though that might have been inviting robbery instead of preventing it.

Here he couldn't hear footsteps, he realized. He located a pair of patrolling cops, and followed them down one street, until they swung off. Then he was on his own again.

"Gov'nor!" The word barely reached him, and he jerked around, the knife twitching into his hand. It was a thin kid of perhaps eighteen behind him, carrying a torch that was filtered to bare visibility. It swung up, and he saw a pock-marked face that was twisted in a smile meant to be ingratiating.

"You've got a pad on your tail," the kid said, again as low as his amplifier would permit. "Need a convoy?"

Gordon studied him briefly, and grinned. Then his grin wiped out as the kid's arm flashed to his shoulder and back, a series of quick jerks that seemed almost a blur. Four knives stood buried in the ground at Gordon's feet, forming a square—and a fifth was in the kid's hand.

"How much?" Gordon asked, as the kid scooped up the blades and shoved them expertly back into shoulder sheathes. The kid's hand shaped a C quickly, and he slipped his arm through a self-sealing slit in the airsuit and brought out two of them.

"Thanks, gov'nor," the kid said, stowing them away. "You won't regret it." He swung his dim light down, and Gordon started to turn. Then the kid's voice rose sharply to a yell.

"Okay, honey, he's the Joe!"

Out of the darkness, ten to a dozen figures loomed up. The kid had jumped aside with a lithe leap, and now stood between Gordon and the group moving in for the kill. Gordon swung to run, and found himself surrounded. His eyes flickered around, trying to spot something in the darkness that would give him shelter.

A bludgeon was suddenly hurtling toward him, and he ducked it, his blood thick in his throat and his ears ringing with the same pressure of fear he'd always known just before he was kayoed in the ring. But pacificism would do him no good. He selected what he hoped was the

thinnest section of the attackers and leaped forward. With luck, he might jump over them, using his Earth strength.

There was a flicker of dawn-light in the sky, now, however; and he made out others behind, ready for just such a move. He changed his lunge in mid-stride, and brought his arm back with the knife. It met a small round shield on the arm of the man he had chosen, and was deflected at once.

"Give 'em hell, gov'nor," the kid's voice yelled, and the little figure was beside him, a shower of blades seeming to leap from his hand in the glare of his now bare torch. Shields caught them frantically, and then the kid was in with a heavy club he'd torn from someone's hand.

Gordon had no time to consider his sudden traitor-ally. He bent to the ground, seizing the first rocks he could find, and threw them. One of the hoods dropped his club in ducking and Gordon caught it up and swung in a single motion that stretched the other out.

Then it was a mêlée. The kid's open torch, stuck on his helmet gave them light enough, until Gordon could switch on his own. Then the kid dropped behind him, fighting back-to-back. Something hit his arm, and Gordon switched the club to his left, awkwardly. He caught a blow on the shoulder, and kicked out savagely as someone lunged for his feet. Here, in close quarters, the attackers were no longer using knives. One might be turned on its owner, and a slit suit meant death by asphyxiation.

Gordon saw the blonde girl on the outskirts, her face taut and glowing. He tried to reach her with a thrown club wrested from another man, but she leaped nimbly aside, shouting commands. Nobody paid any attention, and she began moving in cautiously, half-eager and half-afraid.

Two burly goons were suddenly working together. Gordon swung at one, ducked a blow from the other, and then saw the first swinging again. He tried to bring his club up—but he knew it was too late. A dull weight hit the side of his head, and he felt himself falling. This was it, he thought. They'd strip him or slash his suit—and he'd be dead without knowing he had died. He tried to claw his way to his feet, hearing a ghost-voice from his past counting seconds. Then he passed out.

It took only minutes for dawn to become day on Mars, and the sun was lighting up the messy section of back street when Gordon's eyes opened and the pain of sight struck his aching head. He

groaned, then looked frantically for the puff of escaping air. But his suit was still sealed. Ahead of him, the kid lay sprawled out, blood trickling from the broken section of an ugly bruise along his jaw.

Then Gordon felt something on his suit, and his eyes darted to hands just finishing an emergency patch. His eyes darted up and met those of the blonde vixen!

Amazement kept him motionless for a second. There were tears in the eyes of the girl, and a sniffling sound reached him through her Marspeaker. Apparently, she hadn't noticed that he had revived, though her eyes were on him. She finished the patch, and ran perma-sealer over it. Then she began putting her supplies away, tucking them into a bag that held notes that could only have been stolen from his pockets—her share of the loot, apparently.

He was still thinking clumsily as she rose to her feet and turned to leave. She cast a glance back, hesitated, and then began to move off.

He got his feet under him slowly, but he was reviving enough to stand the pain in his head. He came to his feet, and leaped after her. In the thin air, his lunge was silent, and he was grabbing her before she knew he was up.

She swung with a single gasp, and her hand darted down for her knife, sweeping it up and toward him. He barely caught the wrist sweeping toward him. Then he had her firmly, bringing her arm back and up until the knife fell from her fingers.

She screamed and began writhing, twisting her hard young body like a boa constrictor in his hands. But he was stronger. He bent her back over his knee, until a mangled moan was coming from her speaker. Then his foot kicked out, knocking her feet out from under her. He let her hit the ground, caught both her wrists in his, and brought his knee down on her throat, applying more pressure until she lay still. Then he reached for the pouch.

"Damn you!" Her cry was more in anguish than it had been when he was threatening to break her back. "You damned firster, I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do. And after I saved your miserable life . . ."

"Thanks for that," he grunted. "Next time don't be a fool. When you kill a man for his money, he doesn't feel very grateful for your reviving him."

He started to count the money. About a tenth of what he had won—not even enough to open a

cheap poker den, let alone bribe his way back to Earth.

The girl was out from under his knee at the first relaxation of pressure. Her hand scooped up the knife, and she came charging toward him, her mouth a taut slit across half-bared teeth. Gordon rolled out of her swing, and brought his foot up. It caught her squarely under the chin, and she went down and out.

He picked up the scattered money and her knife, then made sure she was still breathing. He ran his hands over her, looking for a hiding place for more money. It produced no sign of that, though he felt other results inside himself. The witch was exciting enough, even when out cold. For a moment, he debated reviving her, and then shrugged. She'd come to soon enough. If he bothered with her, it would only lead to more trouble. He'd had enough.

"Good work, gov'nor," the kid's thin voice approved, and he swung to see the other getting up painfully. The kid grinned, rubbing his bruise. "No hard feelings, gov'nor, now! They paid me to stall you, so I did. You bonussed me to protect you, and I bloody well tried. Honest Izzy, that's me. Gonna buy me a job as a cop now, why I needed the scratch. Okay, gov'nor?"

Gordon hauled back his hand to knock the other from his feet, and then dropped it. A grin writhed onto his face, and broke into sudden grudging laughter.

"Okay, Izzy," he admitted. "For this stinking planet, I guess you're something of a saint. Come on along, and we'll both apply for that job—after I get my stuff."

He might as well join the law. He'd tried gambling—and the cheaters were gone, while he'd be watched for at every gambling house crude enough to use such a fix on the wheel. He'd had his try at fighting, and found that one man wasn't an army. Reporting was closed to him permanently, on all the worlds. And that left only his experience as a cop.

Anyhow, it looked as if Security had him trapped on Mars. They wanted him to police their damned planet for them—and he might as well do it officially.

He tossed the girl's knife down beside her, motioned to Izzy, and began heading for Mother Corey's.

III

Izzy seemed surprised when he found Gordon was turning in to the quasi-secret entrance to Mother Corey's. "Coming here myself," he explained. "Mother got ahold of a load of snow, and



sent me out to contact a big pusher. Coming back, the goons picked me up and gave me the job on you. Hey, Mother!"

Gordon didn't ask how Mother Corey had acquired the dope. Probably someone had been foolish enough not to pay for the proprietor's guarantee of protection and had regretted it briefly. When the Government had deported all addicts two decades before, it had practically begged for dope smuggling—and had gotten it.

The gross hulk of Mother Corey appeared almost at once. "Izzy and Bruce. Didn't know you'd met, cobbers. Contact, Izzy?"

"Ninety percent for uncut," Izzy answered, and the putty-like head nodded, beaming and rubbing filthy hands together.

They went up to Gordon's hole-in-the-wall, with Mother Corey wheezing behind, while the rotten wood of the stairs groaned under his grotesque bulk. At his questions, Gordon told the story tersely.

Mother Corey nodded. "Same old angles, eh? Get enough to do the job, they mug you. Stop halfway, and the halls are closed to you. Pretty soon, they'll be trick-proof, anyhow. In my day, the wheels had hand brakes, and a croop had to be slick about it to stop right. Now they're changing over to electric eyes. Eh, you haven't forgotten me, cobber?"

Gordon hadn't. The old wreck had demanded five percent of his winnings for tipping him off. And even if it meant cutting his small stake to half now, he still had to pay it. Mother Corey had too many cheap hoods among his friends to be fooled with. He counted out the money reluctantly, while Izzy explained that they were going to be cops.

The old man shook his head, estimating what was left to Gordon. "Enough to buy a corporal's job, pay for your suit, and maybe get by," he decided, his eyes seeming to clutch the money and caress it. Then he tore them away. "Don't do it, cobber. You're the wrong kind. You take what you're doing serious. When you set out to tin-horn a living, you're a crook. Get you in a cops outfit, and you turn honest. No place here for an honest cop—not with elections coming up, cobber. Well, I guess you gotta find out for yourself. Want a good room?"

Gordon dropped his eyes to the hole he'd called home for over a week, and his lips twitched. "Thanks, Mother. But I'll be staying inside the dome, I guess."

"So'll I," the old man gloated. "Setting in a chair all day, being

an honest citizen. Cobber, I already own a joint there—a nice one, they tell me. Lights. Two water closets. Big rooms, six by ten—fifty of them, big enough for whole families. And strictly on the level, cobber. It's no hideout, like this. But the gee running it is knocking down till it won't more than pay its way. Now . . ."

He rolled the money in his greasy fingers. "Now, with what I get from the pusher, I can buy off that hot spot on the police blotter. I can go in the dome and walk around, just like you, cobber." His eyes watered slowly, and a tear went dripping down his nose, to hang pendulously. He rubbed it off with the back of his hand. "I'm getting old. They'll be calling me Grandmother pretty soon. And some day, some punk will come in and collect me. So I'm turning my Chicken House over to my granddaughter — damned wench will probably steal the lodgers blind, too—and I'm going honest. Want a room?"

Gordon grinned, and nodded. It was worth standing the smell of Mother Corey to have someone around who knew the ropes and who could be trusted within any limits. "Didn't know you had a granddaughter," he said.

Izzy snorted, and Mother Corey grinned wolfishly. "You met her, cobber," the old man said. "The blonde you shook down! Came up from Earth eight years ago, looking for me. Romance of the planets, long-lost grandfather, all that slush. I sold her to the head of the East Point gang. Since she killed him, she's been doing pretty well on her own. Mostly. Except when she makes a fool of herself, like she did with you. But she'll come around to where I'm proud of her yet . . . If you two want to carry in the snow, collect, and turn it over to Commissioner Arliss for me—I can't pass the dome till he gets it, and you two are the only ones fool enough not to steal me blind—I'll give you both rooms for six months free. Except for the lights and water, of course."

Izzy nodded, and Gordon shrugged. On Mars, it didn't seem half so crazy to begin applying for a police job by carrying in narcotics. He was only curious about how they'd go about contacting the commissioner.

But that turned out to be simple enough. After collecting, Izzy led the way into a section marked "Special Taxes" and whispered a few casual words. The man at the desk went into an office marked private, and came back a few minutes later.

"Your friend has no record with us," he said in a routine voice. "I've checked through his tax forms, and they're all in order. We'll confirm officially, of course."

He must have been one of the idealists once. His face was bitter as he delivered the lines, and he looked seedy, unlike most of the men around the police office.

In the Applications section of the big Municipal Building at the center of the dome, the uniformed men looked even better fed. Izzy and Gordon waited outside on a plastic bench for an hour, and then went in. There was a long form to fill out at the desk, but the captain there had already had answers typed in.

"Save time, boys," he said genially. "And time's valuable, ain't it? Ah, yes." He took the sums they had ready—there was a standard price, unless the examiner thought the applicant not suitable, in which case it went up—and stamped their forms. "And you'll want suits. Isaacs? Good, here's your receipt. And you, Corporal Gordon. Right. Get your suits one floor down, end of the hall. And report in eight tomorrow morning!"

It was as simple as that. Gordon was lucky enough to get a fair fit in his suit. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be in uniform, and was surprised to find he stood straighter.

Izzy was more businesslike. "Hope they don't give us too bad territory, gov'nor," he remarked. "Pickings are always a little lean on the first few beats, but you can work some fairly well."

Gordon's chest fell. He suddenly realized again that this was Mars!

The first week taught him that, though it wasn't too bad. The room at the new Mother Corey's—an unkempt old building near the edge of the dome—proved to be livable, though it was a shock to see Mother Corey himself in a decent suit, using perfume to cover his stench. He'd even washed his hands, though his face was still the same. And the routine of reporting for work was something that became familiar almost at once.

He should have known the pattern. He'd seen it when he was on the Force on Earth, though not quite the same. He'd turned up enough evidence when he was first a reporter. But it had always been at least one step removed from his own experience.

The beat was in a shabby section where clerks and skilled laborers worked, with the few small shops that catered to their needs. It wasn't poor enough to

offer the universal desperation that gave the gang hoodlums protective coloring, nor rich enough to have major rackets of its own. But it was going down-hill rapidly, and the teen-agers showed it. They loitered about, the boys near a pool-hall, the girls hanging around a be-draggled school-yard that took up half of one block.

Izzy was disgusted. "Cripes! You can't shake a school down. Hope they've got a few cheap pushers around it, that don't pay protection direct to the captain. You take that store, I'll go in this one!"

The proprietor was a drug-gist, who ran his own fountain where the synthetics that re-placed honest Earth foods were compounded into sweet and sticky messes for the neighbor-hood kids. He looked up as Gor-don went in, his worried face starting to brighten. Then it fell. "New cop, eh? No wonder Gable collected yesterday ahead of time. All right, you can look at my books. I've been paying fifty, but I haven't got it now. You'll have to wait until Fri-day."

Gordon nodded and swung on his heel, surprised to find that his stomach was turning. The man obviously couldn't afford fifty credits a week. But it was the same all along the street. Even Izzy admitted finally that they'd have to wait.

"That damned cop before us!" he groaned. "He really tapped them! And we can't take less, so I guess we gotta wait until Friday."

The next day, Gordon made his first arrest. It was near the end of his shift, just as dark-ness was falling and the few lights were going on. He turned a corner and came to a short, heavy hoodlum backing out of a small liquor store with a knife in throwing position. The crook grunted as he started to turn and stumbled onto Gordon. His knife flashed up.

Without the need to worry about the airsuit, Gordon moved in, his arm jerking forward. He clipped the crook on the inside of the elbow while grabbing the wrist with his other hand. A pained grunt went out of the man. Then he went sailing over Gordon's head, to crash into the side of the building. He let out a yell.

And across the street, two loafers looked up, and echoed his cry. Gordon riffled the hood's pockets, and located a roll of bills stuffed in. He dragged them out, before snapping cuffs on the man. Then he pulled the crook inside the store.

A woman stood there, moan-ing, over a pale man who was

lying on the floor with blood gushing from a welt on the back of his head. There was both gratitude and resentment as she looked up at Gordon.

"You'd better call the hospital," he told her sharply. "He may have a concussion. I've got the man who held you up."

"Hospital?" Her voice broke into another wail. "And who can afford hospitals? All week we work, all hours. He's old, he can't handle the cases. I do that. Me! And then you come, and you get your money. And he comes for his protection. Papa is sick. Sick, do you hear? He sees a doctor, he buys medicine. Then Gable comes. This man comes. We can't pay him! So what do we get—we get knives in the faces, saps on the head—a concussion, you tell me! And all the money—the money we had to pay to get stocks to sell to pay off from the profits we don't make—all of it, he wants! Hospitals! You think they give away at the hospitals free?"

She fell to her knees, crying over the injured man. "Papa, you hear? Papa! God, you hear me, please! Don't let Papa have concussions, don't let them take him to the hospital!"

Gordon tossed the roll of bills onto the floor beside her, and looked at the man's head. But the injury seemed only a scalp wound, and the old man was already beginning to groan. He opened his eyes and saw the bills in front of him, at which the woman was staring unbelievingly. His hand darted out, clutching it. "God!" he moaned softly, echoing the woman's prayer, and his eyes turned up slowly to Gordon, filled with something that should never have been seen outside of an archaic slave pen.

"In there!" It was a shout from outside. Gordon had just time to straighten up before the doorway was filled with two knife-men and a heavier man behind them.

His hands dropped to the handcuffed man on the floor, and he caught him up with a jerk, slapping his body back against the counter. He took a step forward, jerking his hands up and putting his Earth-adapted shoulders behind it. The hood sailed up like a sack of meal being thrown on a wagon and struck the two knife-men squarely.

There was a scream as their automatic attempts to save themselves buried both knives in the body of their friend. Then they went crashing down under the dying body, and Gordon was over the top of them, his fist crashing into the chin of the leader.

When the paddy wagon came,

the driver scowled and seemed surprised. But Gordon hustled his prisoners and the dead man inside. He wanted to get away from the soft crying gratitude of the woman and the look in the storekeeper's eyes.

The desk captain at the precinct house groaned as they came in, then shook his head. "Damn it," he said. "I suppose it can't be helped, though. You're new, Gordon. Hennessy, get the corpse to the morgue, and mark it down as a robbery attempt. I'm going to have to book you and your men, Mr. Jurgens!"

The heavy leader of the two angry knife-men nodded, and grinned, though his look toward Gordon was nasty. "Okay, Captain. But it's going to slow down the work I'm doing on the Mayor's campaign for re-election! Damn that Maxie—I told him to be discreet. Hey, you know what you've got, though—a real considerate man! He gave the old guy the money back!"

They took Gordon's testimony, and sent him home, since his time was up.

Jurgens set him straight the next day. The man was waiting for him when he came on the beat. From his look of having slept well, he must have been out almost as soon as he was booked. Two other men stood behind Gordon, while Jurgens explained that he didn't like being interrupted on business calls "about the Mayor's campaign or anything else", and that next time there'd be real hard feeling —real hard! Gordon was surprised when he wasn't beaten, but he wasn't surprised when the racketeer issued a final suggestion that any money found at a crime was evidence and should go to the police. The captain had told him the same.

By Friday, he had learned enough. He made his collections early, without taking excuses. Gable had sold him the list of what was expected, and he used it, though he cut down the figures in a few cases. There was no sense in killing the geese that laid the eggs, and business wasn't good enough to afford both kinds of protection at that rate.

The couple at the liquor store had their payment waiting for him, and they handed it over without a word, looking embarrassed. It wasn't until he was gone that he found a small bottle of fairly good whiskey tucked into his pouch. He started to throw it away, and then lifted it to his lips and drank it without taking the bottle away. Maybe they'd known how he felt, better than he had. Mother

Corey's words about his change of attitude came back. Damn it, he'd given up his ideals before he left the slums of his birth! He had a job to do—he had to dig up enough money to get back to Earth, somehow, unless he wanted to play patsy for the Security boys.

But he collected, down to the last account. It was a nice haul. At that rate, he'd have to stand it for only a few months. Then his lips twisted, as he realized it wasn't all gravy. There were angles, or the price of a corporalcy would have been higher. And he could guess what they were.

One of the older men answered his questions, a gray-haired, stout corporal with sadism showing all over his face. "Fifty per cent of the take to the Orphan and Widow's fund, of course. Better make it a little more than Gable turned in, if you want to get a better beat. You can squeeze 'em tighter than he did. He was a softie!"

The envelopes were lying on a table marked "Voluntary Donations," and Gordon filled his out, with a figure a trifle higher than half of Gable's take, and dropped it in the box. The captain, who had been watching him carefully, settled back and smiled.

"Widows and Orphans sure appreciate a good man," he said, ponderously humorous. "I was kind of worried about you, Gordon. But you got a nice touch. One of my new boys—Isaacs, you know him—was out checking up after you, and the dopes seem to like you."

Gordon had wondered why Izzy had been pulled off the beat. He was obviously making good. But he grinned, and nodded silently. As he turned to leave, the Captain held up a hand.

"Special meeting, tomorrow," he said. "We gotta see what we can do about getting out a good vote. Election only three weeks away."

Gordon went home, forgetting it until the next night. He'd learned by now that the Native Martians—the men who'd been here for at least thirty years, or had been born here—were backing a reform candidate and new ticket, hoping to get a businessman by the name of Murphy elected. But Mayor Wayne had all of the rest of the town in his hand. He'd been in twice, and had lifted the graft take by a truly remarkable figure. From where Gordon stood, it looked like a clear victory for the reformer, Murphy. But that should have worried the police, and there was no sign of it. He didn't give a darn, though. Even with the take-out that left him only

about thirty per cent of his collection, he should be able to get off Mars before the new administration came into power.

He went into the meeting willing to agree to anything. And he clapped dutifully at all the speeches about how much Mayor Wayne had done for them, and signed the pledge expressing his confidence, along with nodding at the implied duty he had to make his beat vote right. Wayne might get two votes from his beat, he thought wryly. Then he stopped, as the Captain stood up.

"We gotta be neutral, boys," he boomed. "But it don't mean we can't show how well we like the Mayor. Just remember, he got us our jobs! Now I figure we can all kick in a little to help his campaign. Nothing much—a little now and a pledge for the rest of the election. I'm going to start it off with five thousand credits, two thousand of them right now."

They fell in line, though there was no cheering. The price might have been fixed in advance. A thousand for a plain cop, fifteen hundred for a corporal, and so on, each contributing a third of it now. Gordon grimaced. He had six hundred left—and that would take nearly all of it, leaving him just enough to get by on, if he didn't eat too well, at Martian prices. And without the free room, he couldn't have done it at all. He wondered how often such donations were required.

A man named Fell shook his head. "Can't do a thing now," he said, and there was fear in his voice. "My wife had a baby and an operation, and . . ."

"Okay, Fell," the Captain said, without a sign of disapproval. "Freitag, what about you? Fine, fine!"

Gordon's name came, and he shook his head. "I'm new—I haven't any real idea of how much I can give, and I'm strapped now. I'd like . . ."

"Quite all right, Gordon," the Captain boomed. "Harwick!"

He finished the roll, and settled back, smiling. "I guess that's all, boys. Thanks from the Mayor. And go on home . . . Oh, Fell, Gordon, Lativsky—stick around. I've got some overtime for you, since you need extra money. Boys out in Ward Three are shorthanded. Afraid I'll have to order you out there!"

Ward Three was the hangout of the Scurvy Boys—a cheap gang of hoodlums, numbering some four hundred, who went in for small crimes mostly. They averaged too young to be used for goon squads or beating down strikes by infiltrating and re-

placing. But they had recently declared war on the cops, who'd come under local pressure severe enough to force closing their headquarters.

After eight hours of overtime, Gordon reported in with every bone sore from small missiles and his suit filthy from assorted muck. He had a beautiful shiner where a stone had clipped him. But he grinned a little, as he remembered the satisfying sound of two heads thunking together before a third member had joined and given the hoodlums a chance to get away.

The Captain smiled. "Rough, eh? But I hear robbery went down on your beat last night. Fine work, Gordon. We need men like you. Hate to do it, but I'm afraid you'll have to take the next shift at Main and Broad, directing traffic. The usual man is sick, and you're the only one I can trust with the job!"

"But . . ."

"Can't be helped. Oh, I know you've been on duty two shifts, but that's the way it goes. Better report to duty!"

He hadn't handled traffic before, and it was rough, even with the minor traffic snarls here in Marsport. In two hours of standing absolutely still, his feet were killing him. In four, his head was swimming.

He stuck it out, somehow. But it wasn't worth it. He reported back to the precinct with the five hundred in his hand and his pen itching for the donation agreement.

The Captain took it, and nodded. "I wasn't kidding about your being a good man, Gordon. Go home and get some sleep, take the next day off. After that, we've got a new job for you!"

His smile was still nasty, but Gordon had learned his lesson.

IV

The new assignment was to the roughest section in all Marsport—the slum area beyond the dome, out near the rocket field. Here all the riff-raff that had been unable to establish itself in better quarters had found some sort of a haven. At one time, there had been a small dome and a tiny city devoted to the rocket field. But Marsport had flourished enough to kill it off. The dome had failed from neglect, and the buildings inside had grown shabbier. Men had looted the worst of them and built crude shelters, some with only a single room that would hold air, many over a mile from the nearest source of water.

Gordon was trapped, though, and there was nothing he could do. He couldn't break his job with the police—if he did, he'd

be brought back as a criminal. Some of Mars' laws were rough, dating from the time when law enforcement had been hampered by lack of men, rather than by the type of men. He had to sweat it out, much as he hated being stuck out there.

The people there had been complaining for years about the Stonewall gang. It was made up of the lowest level of hoodlums, and numbered perhaps five hundred. They made their chief living by hiring out members to other gangs during the frequent wars between gangs. But between times, they picked up what they could by mugging and theft, with a reasonable amount of murder thrown in at a modest price.

Even derelicts and failures had to eat. And that meant that there were stores and shops throughout the district which eked out some kind of a marginal living. They were safe from protection racketeers there—none bothered to come so far out—except for the disorganized work of the Stonewall gang. And police had been taken off the beats there for years, after it grew unsafe for even men in pairs to patrol the area.

The shopkeepers and some of the less unfortunate people there had finally raised enough of a protest to reach clear back to Earth, and Marsport had hired a man from Earth to come in and act as captain of the section. No one from the city would take the job, and none of the regular captains could have coped with it. Captain Whaler was an unknown factor. He'd set tight for two months, and now was asking for more men. And the pressure from the petty merchants and the itinerant crop prospectors was enough to get them for him.

Gordon reported for work with a sense of the bottom falling out, mixed with a vague relief. There was little chance for graft here. And Whaler discouraged even what there was.

"You're going to be busy," he announced shortly in the dilapidated building that had been hastily converted to a precinct house. "Damn it, you're men, not sharks. I've got a free hand, and we're going to run this the way we would on Earth. Your job is to protect the citizens here—and that means everyone not breaking the laws—whether you feel like it or not. No graft. The first man making a shakedown will get the same treatment we're going to use on the Stonewall boys. You'll get double pay here, and you can live on it!"

He opened up a box on his desk and pulled out six heavy

wooden sticks, each thirty inches long and nearly two inches in diameter. There was a shaped grip on each, with a thong of leather to hold it over the wrist.

He picked out five of the men, including Gordon. "You five will come with me. I'm going to show how we'll operate. The rest of you can team up any way you want tonight, pick any route that's open. With six patrolling you should be safe, and I'll expect no great action until you're broken in. Okay, men, let's go."

Gordon grinned slowly as he swung the stick, and Whaler's eyes fell on him. "Earth cop!" he guessed.

"Two years," Gordon admitted.

"Then you should be ashamed to be in this mess," the Captain told him. "But whatever your reasons, you'll be useful. Take those two and give them some lessons, while I do the same with these."

For a second, Gordon cursed himself. He'd fixed it so he'd be a squad leader, even without his corporal's paid-for stripes. And that meant he'd be unable to step out of line, if he wanted to. At double standard pay, with normal Mars expenses, he might be able to pay for passage back to Earth in three years—if Security let him, which it wouldn't. Otherwise, it would take thirty.

He began wondering about Security, then. Nobody had tried to get in touch with him. He'd come here and vanished. The first ten days, while staying at the old Mother Corey's, that had been natural. But since joining the force, they'd have no trouble locating him. Nobody had mentioned it, and nobody had asked him questions that were suspicious.

If they were waiting for him to get up on a soap box, they were wrong. But it worried him, suddenly, all the same.

There was a crude lighting system here, put up by the citizens. At the front of each building, a dim phosphor bulb glowed. It was still light outside, but darkness would fall in another half hour, and they would have nothing else to see by.

Whaler bunched them together. "A good clubbing beats hanging," he told them. "But it has to be good. Go in for business, and don't stop just because the other guy quits. Give them hell!"

Moving in two groups of threes, at opposite sides of the street, they began their beat. They were covering an area of six blocks one way and two the other, which seemed ridiculous to Gordon. The gang would

simply hold off for a few days to see what happened.

But he was wrong about that. They had traveled the six blocks and were turning down a side street when they found their first case, out in broad daylight. Two of the Stonewall boys, by the gray of their sweaters under the airsuits, were working over a tall man in regular clothes and a newer airsuit. As the police swung around, one of the thugs casually ripped the airsuit open with his knife, and reached for a pocket.

A thin screech like a whistle came from Whaler's Marspeaker, and the Captain went forward, with Gordon at his heels. The hoodlums tossed the man aside easily, and let out a yell. From the buildings around, an assortment of toughs came at the double, swinging knives, picks, and bludgeons.

There was no chance to save the citizen who was dying from lack of air. Gordon felt the solid pleasure of the finely-turned club in his hands. It was light enough for speed, but heavy enough to break bones where it hit. A skilled man could knock a knife or even a heavy club out of another's hand with a single flick of the wrist. And he'd had practice.

He saw Whaler's club dart in and take out two of the gang, one on the forward swing, one on the recover. His eyes popped at that. The man was totally unlike a Martian captain. And a knot of homesickness for Earth ran through his stomach. They were tough by necessity here. But only old Earth could produce the solid toughness of a man who had a job to do, instead of answering desperation.

He swallowed the sentimental nonsense, knowing it was true for him because he'd seen only one side of Mars. His own club was moving now. Standing beside Whaler, they were moving forward. The other four cops had come in reluctantly, but were now thoroughly involved.

"Knock them out and kick them down!" Whaler yelled. "And don't let them get away!"

He was after a thug who was attempting to run, and brought him to the ground with a single blow across the kidneys.

It was soon over. They rounded up the men of the gang, and one of the cops started off. Whaler called him back. "Where are you going?"

"To find a phone and call the wagon," the man said, his voice surprised at the stupidity of the question.

"We're not using wagons on the Stonewall gang," Whaler told him. "Line them up."

It was sheer brutality. When

the men came to, they found themselves helpless, and facing police with clubs. If they tried to run, they were hit from behind, with little regard for how much danger the blow meant. If they stood still, they were clubbed carefully to bruise them all over. If they fought back, the pugnaciousness was knocked out of them at once.

Whaler indicated one who stood with his shoulders shaking and tears running down his cheeks. The Captain's face was as sick as Gordon felt, but he went on methodically, while he gave his orders. "Take him aside. Names."

Gordon found a section away from the others. It was just turning dark now, but he needed less light than there was to see the fear in the gangster's face. "I want the name of every man in the gang you can remember," he told the man.

Horror shot over the other's bruised features. "I ain't no rat! My God, Colonel, they'd kill me. They'd stick a knife in me! No! *No!* I don't know, Goddammit I *don't* know!"

His screams were almost worse than the beating. But Gordon kept his face straight, and moved in again. The other cracked, dropping to the ground and bawling. Between the other noises, names began to come. Gordon took them down, and then returned with the man to the others.

Whaler took his nod as evidence enough, and turned to the wretched toughs. "He squealed," he announced. "If he should turn up dead, I'll know you boys are responsible, and I'll go looking for you. Now get out of this district or get honest jobs! Because every time one of my men sees one of you, this happens all over again. And you can pass the word along that the Stonewall gang is dead!"

He turned his back and moved off down the street, with the other police at his side. Gordon nodded slowly. "I've heard the theory, but never saw it in practice. Suppose the whole gang jumps us at once?"

Whaler shrugged. "Then we're taken. The old book I got the idea from didn't mention that."

Trouble began brewing shortly after, though. Men stood outside, studying the cops on their beat. Whaler sent one of the men to pick up a second squad of six, and then a third. After that, the watchers began to melt away, as if uncertain of how many the police could summon.

"We'd better shift to another territory," Whaler decided, and Gordon realized that the gang had fooled itself. They'd figured

that concentrating the police here meant other territories would be safe, and they hadn't been able to resist the chance, even to bring it to a quick warfare in which they might win.

There were two more muggings spotted, and two more groups were given the same treatment. In the third one, Gordon spotted one of the men who'd been beaten before. He was a sick looking spectacle, and he'd been limping before they caught him.

Whaler nodded. "Object lesson!"

The one good thing about the Captain, Gordon decided, was that he believed in doing his own dirtiest work. When he was finished, he turned to two of the other captives, and motioned to the second offender.

"Get a stretcher, and take him wherever he belongs," he ordered. "I'm leaving you two able to walk for that. But if you get caught again, you'll get worse than he got."

They went in, tired and sore. There wasn't a man in the squad who hadn't taken a severe beating in the brawls. But the grumbling was less than Gordon had expected, and he saw grudging admiration in their eyes for Whaler, who had taken more of a beating then they had.

Gordon rode back in the official car with Whaler, and both were silent most of the way. But the Captain stirred finally, sighing. "Poor devils!"

Gordon jerked up in surprise. "The gang?"

"No, the cops they're giving me. We're covered, Gordon. But the Stonewall gang is backing Wayne for the election, of course. He's let me come in because he figures it will prove to Marsport that he's progressive, and get him more votes than he can win in the whole district out there. But afterwards, he'll have me out, and then the boys with me will be marks for the gang when it comes back. Besides, it'll show on the books that they didn't kick into his fund. I can always go back to Earth, and I'll try to take you along—I guess we can chisel your fare. But it's going to be tough on them."

Gordon grimaced. "I've got a yellow ticket, and it's from Security," he said flatly.

Whaler blinked. He dropped his eyes slowly. "So you're *that* Gordon? Sorry, I should have sent you back to your own precinct, I guess. But you're still a good cop."

They rode on further in silence, until Gordon broke the ice to ease the tension. He found himself liking the other.

"What makes you think Wayne will be re-elected?" he asked.

"Nobody wants him, except a gang of crooks and those in power."

Whaler grinned bitterly. "Ever see a Martian election? No, you're a firster. He can't lose! And then hell is going to pop, and this whole planet may be blown wide open!"

It fitted with the dire predictions of Security, and with the spying Gordon was going to do, according to them. It also left things in a fine mess. With Wayne out and an honest mayor in, there'd be small chance to get the fare he needed. With Wayne in, he'd be about as popular as a dead herring—and as defunct, probably. He'd been a fool not to take the Mercury Mines!

But curiously, he had no desire to back out and leave Whaler in the lurch, even if he'd had the power to do so. He discussed it with Mother Corey, who agreed that Wayne would be re-elected.

"Can't lose," the old man said. He was getting even fatter, now that he was eating better food from the fair restaurant around the corner. Gordon noticed that he'd apparently washed thoroughly, and had trimmed the wisps of hair. The widow in the small restaurant might have had something to do with that, though he couldn't imagine any woman showing interest in the monstrous hulk.

"He'll win," he repeated. "And you'll turn honest all over, now you're in uniform. Take me, copper. I figured on laying low for awhile, then opening up a few rooms for a good pusher or two, maybe a high-class duchess. Cost 'em more, but they'd be respectable. Only now I'm respectable myself, they don't look so good. Anyhow, I do all right. No protection from me—I know too much! But this honesty stuff, it's like dope. You start out on a little, and you have to go all the way."

"It didn't affect Honest Izzy," Gordon pointed out.

"Nope. Because Izzy was always honest, according to how he sees it. But you got Earth ideas of the stuff, like I had once. Too bad." He sighed ponderously, letting his chins move sorrowfully, and squeezed up from his huge chair to go inside. Gordon went to his own room and worried.

The week moved on. The groups grew more experienced, and Whaler was training a new squad every night. Gordon's own squad was equipped with shields now, since he'd remembered the ones on the blonde vixen's gang, and they were doing better. The number of muggings and hold-

ups in the section was going down. They seldom saw a man after he'd been treated.

One of the squads was jumped by a gang of about forty, and two of the men were killed before the nearest squad could pull a rear attack. That day the whole force worked overtime, hunting for the men who had escaped, and by evening the Stonewall boys had received proof that it didn't pay to go against the police in large numbers. Kidneys and other organs were harder to replace than bruised flesh or broken bones.

After that, they began to go hunting for the members of the gang. By then they had the names of nearly all of them, and some pretty good ideas of their hideouts.

It wasn't exactly legal, of course. But nothing was, here. Gordon's conscience was almost easy, on that—whenever he had time to think about it. If a doctor's job was to prevent illness instead of merely curing it, then why shouldn't it be a policeman's job to prevent crime? Here, that was best done by wiping out the Stonewall gang to the last member.

It could lead to abuses, in time, as he'd seen on Earth. But there probably wouldn't be time for it, if Mayor Wayne was reelected, as even the Native Martians seemed to feel he would be!

The gang had begun to break up and move, but the nucleus would be the last to go. The police had orders to beat a member of the gang up now, even if he was merely found walking down the dirty street for a pack of Marsweed. Citizens were appearing on the streets until it was fully dark for the first time in years. And here, in this one section of Marsport, there were smiles—hungry, beaten smiles, but still genuine ones—at the cops.

A storekeeper approached Gordon timidly at the end of the second week, offering a drink of cheap native whiskey to break the ice. He took it, forcing it down. The other man hemmed and hawed, pulling at his dirty gray mustache—a mannerism that seemed completely out of place when done through the thickness of an airsuit.

Then he got down to business. "Hear there's a new gang set to move in. Likely figure you won't spot 'em, being so busy with the Stonewallers. Hear as there's a gal running this one." The man was both scared and a bit ashamed to pass information to the police, but he was worried.

Gordon's mind swept back to the blonde granddaughter of

Mother Corey without prodding, and he straightened. If the vixen was deliberately needling him—as it seemed, if the man's story was true—she had a debt to collect, all right—but not the one she expected. "Where?"

"Cain's warehouse. Know where it is?"

Gordon nodded, and handed back the bottle. "Thanks, citizen," he said. He must have sounded as if he meant it, for reassurance and some measure of pride suddenly flashed onto the man's face. He shoved the bottle through the slit in his airsuit, drained it, and nodded.

Gordon considered getting a squad and going in for a mopping-up operation. By a little bit of manipulation, it could seem that he was stumbling on her while looking for Stonewall members. But then he remembered her crying over him as she patched his slit airsuit, and her apparently honest warning to him in Fats' Place.

Besides, while he knew she could be as dangerous as a man, he somehow couldn't get over the idea that she was only a girl. He started back to the precinct headquarters, then swung on his heel. It wouldn't do any harm to spy out the situation.

He made his way to the old warehouse building from the back, taking what cover he could. It was still two hours until sundown, and the gang would probably be holed up. But he could at least find out whether the building had been airproofed.

He found no evidence at first, until the sun glinted on a spot that seemed to glisten. It could be airproof cement, put on too heavily, and spilling through. He slid around nearer to the street, where the view was better, and began inching forward, using a heap of ruined foundation as cover.

He hugged it, moving around it, and started forward.

Something scraped against his suit.

He turned, but with the slowness of caution this time. It was a good thing. The blonde stood there, a grin stretching her mouth into a thin line, and pure murder in her eyes. A knife was in her left hand, almost touching the plastic of his uniform's airproofing. In her right hand was one of the forbidden guns—probably legal out here, but so rare on Mars that he hadn't actually seen one until now. But she looked as if she could use it.

"Drop the stick!" she ordered him. Her voice was low with some obscure passion. He had no way of knowing it wasn't fear—but it was more probably sheer desire to kill him.

The stick hit the ground. Her knife flashed, and he stepped back. "Looking for something—or someone?" she asked.

He shook his head, trying to estimate his chances. They didn't look good. "For you," he told her, forcing his voice to hold steady. "I couldn't get you off my mind. When you wouldn't come to visit your poor old grandfather, I had to hunt you down. And now . . ."

Fury lifted her voice an octave. "Damn you, Gordon. Get down on your knees and crawl like a dog! Crawl, damn you! When I save the life of a piece of scum, I want to see gratitude."

"You've seen it, beautiful," he told her. "Your own kind. Or don't you remember the love tap, and the little present we exchanged?"

For a second, he thought she was going to pull the trigger. Then she shook her head. "When they let the air out of your suit, you should have died. I fixed that. But I can unfix it. Take off your helmet—and don't think I'm kidding this time. Take it off, you yellow firster, or I'll puncture your belly—and then seal up your suit again, so you'll die slowly! Well?"

"Is that the way you killed your—ah—husband?" he asked her. He could feel the first trickle of sweat on his forehead, and there was a cold lump in his stomach, but he held his grin. "I heard you settled that out of court."

She had gone white at the first words, and the gun in her hand jerked and trembled tautly. She tried to speak, choked, and then bit out a single sentence, her eyes pin-points of hate.

"Take—it—*off!*"

He could feel the false amusement slip from his face, and a chill of fear wash over him. This time, she meant it.

A man could live for a couple of minutes without a helmet . . . In that time . . .

He reached for it, loosing the seal, and beginning to lift it off. The air went out of it, spurting in little clouds of frost as the expansion cooled it off, and froze the water vapor in it.

. . . In that time, the precious two minutes, he could do nothing. He'd been a fool. The effort of holding his breath was too great, and his vision was already growing unfocussed.

"So long, baby," he said, and hurled the helmet at her. The air exploded from his lungs with the words, and for a minute everything began to turn black.

(*To be continued*)

RECESSIONAL

BY ALGIS BUDRYS

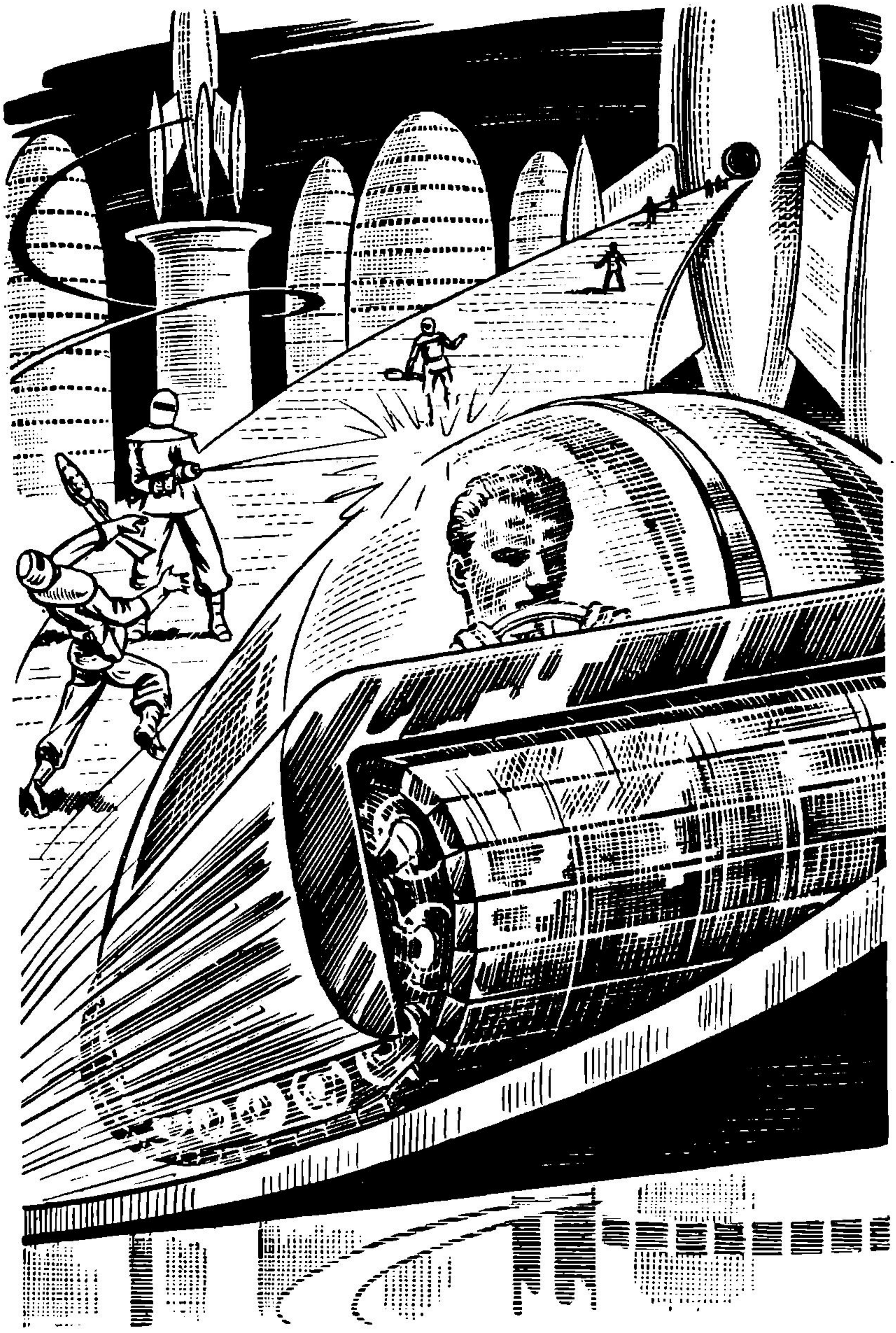
ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

It was a lousy spot for them to be caught in the First Interstellar war. Against the implaccable Kiti, they didn't have a chance, and they knew it—and fought all the harder. But their real enemy was an abstraction known as History!

The incredible sun of McMillen's Planet rose over the jagged ridge in front of us and struck our faces. Along the scattered line we pulled our visors over our eyes and peered at the broken foothills through slitted eyelids. Below us, the wounded pack animal that had screamed all night kicked a stone loose with one of its good legs and set it to clattering down the side of the hillock where we lay. Little clumps of dust rose and settled again as a hot wind dodged briefly through the valley.

On my left I heard the unmistakable sound of a Blevens bolt being opened to allow the anxious Automatic Weapons platoon to check the badly designed ejector arm. On my right the Company Commander argued with his radio tech in a low, vicious voice as they tried to raise Griffon Base. Behind me someone jabbed a bayonet into the lid of a ration can. A heavy body swept crunching pebbles away as someone inched toward me.

"Captain!" I turned my head. Behind a scuffed, sweat-beaded visor, I made out a completely unfamiliar face. The corporal was a thin-jawed, smooth-faced boy with a startling scar from what must have been a mushroom bullet that had struck his left cheekbone, flattening it before traveling up, just missing



his ear, and scything away the hair at his temple. The scar was still pink, which meant he must have gotten it at Darkarte. His lip was slightly turned up at the left corner, either from nervousness or bad surgery on the wound.

"Yes, Corporal?"

"Major Law would like to see you, Sir." I looked over toward the Company Commander's position. Law was looking at me through the polaroid of his visor, one hand raised. I took a quick look up at the ridge. God knows why, because it was still in shadow and I couldn't see anything, but I noticed that the corporal threw it a glance himself before we bellied over the sharp stones into the small foxhole, half expecting to be cut to ribbons by concentrated small arms fire from the ridge.

I think both of us were mildly surprised when we slid head first into the foxhole without any sign from the ridge, but the bad side of the corporal's face was toward me, so I couldn't judge his expression.

"Hello, Mike," I said as I scrambled up and sat down with my back to a boulder. The corporal stayed on his belly, since the hole was too small to give him adequate cover in any other position. He tried all angles.

Mike Law nodded to me. He was a stocky man of about forty-five, with damn little hair left under his helmet, two deep furrows from behind his nostrils to the sides of his chin, a nose that started out as a ski-slide but became a small potato at its tip, and a thinness of lip that could only have come from years of compression. His eyes weren't ice-blue, but only because ice never looked as cold. The brain behind them was tremendous. He was a Reserve officer—if he'd been a regular all the chuckleheads this side of hell couldn't have kept him from being ComStaff. He didn't belong on McMillen any more than any other Political Geographer, but he was doing a better job than any West Pointer they'd ever sent out to this heat-struck rock.

"Harbin!" he said over his shoulder, and the radio tech winced, as though that carborundum-on-glass voice had been plaguing him from early childhood.

"Yes sir!"

"Quit fiddling with that thing. If we can't raise Griffon, maybe we can get somebody else. Start sending a CQD on allwave broadcast. Get cracking!"

"But, Sir, if we do that the Kiti'll know we're in bad trouble." The radio tech didn't seem to like that idea very much.

Law kept his eyes on the ridge. "I'm pretty sure they know all about it, Harbin," he said softly. "Get with it!"

"Yes sir!"

The corporal laughed harshly from the bottom of the foxhole at the tech's jump back to the radio, and Law looked down at him curiously.

"Oh, you still here?" he said gently. "See if you can dig up Lieutenant Grannery, will you please?" The corporal nodded and slipped over the edge of the hole. I could hear gravel being displaced by his progress, but I didn't stick my head out from behind my rock to watch him.

"I'm going to get that boy killed pretty soon, Ben," Law told me with the assurance of a man reading over the Recording Angel's shoulder, "but what else can I do? These damn helmets muffle sound until you can't shout for a man, and walkie-talkie's no good with this static. Even the big set's a laugh when this rockpile's orbit brings us as close to the sun as we are now." He shoved his insulated plastic hat back from his forehead, shutting his eyelids tight to keep out the savage glare of sunlight, scratched angrily at the few hairs that remained anchored on the top of his scalp, and jammed the helmet back on quickly. He pulled a folded map out of his hip pocket, snapped it into contour, and pointed to a low hill surrounded by higher ground. The dotted red line of a trail ran beside the hill and kinked its way toward Griffon Base through the jagged terrain.

"That's where we are," he said. He traced a circle with his finger over the surrounding bluffs and ridges. "That's where they are."

It was a lousy spot for us to be in. Periodically, fire from the high ground smashed down on our position, probed at the scattered foxholes, ricocheted off the boulders and outcrops, kicked up bursts of gravel, and thunked into flesh. Lousy or not, though, it was much better than it might have been.

I'd been riding a crawler at the tail end of the column, and hoping we'd make it to Griffon Base by morning. McMillen is all rocks, and the base was almost the only flat spot on it. Aside from the attractiveness of the idea of walking around without having to climb up and down, there was also a BOQ that boasted an air conditioning system. I'd been looking forward to sacking out and not waking up in a puddle of sweat.

Until three days earlier, there'd been exactly two samples of civilization on McMil-

len's ugly surface. Now that we'd wrecked the smelting and reducing plant to keep the Kiti from making any use of it, Griffon was all that was left.

This was in the early stages of the First Interstellar War, when there wasn't any hope of holding the isolated systems against the Kiti. The civilian personnel had gone home in their own ships, but the Constab detachment had been ordered to reinforce the base garrison until a government transport could pick us all up.

The front end of the column was atop a rise in the trail when the Kiti hit it. I heard the crash and whine of fragmentation shells going off among them, the shocked pause and silence, and then the smallarms fire, overborne by the Blevens, which jammed almost immediately, cleared, then jammed again.

"Get up there!" I yelled to my driver, and riflemen in my platoon jumped aboard the crawler as we picked up speed. I began firing at ridges beside the trail with the crawler's gun, and some of the Kiti fire shifted. It mowed into the pack animals tethered to the crawler by lead ropes, and my men began to curse as they cut them loose. Then the Kiti got their range right, and slugs began pounding around the driver's position. The crawler slewed off the trail, mounted a sixty degree bank, and turned over while my men and I jumped clear. We scattered into shelter behind rocks at the edge of the trail and began firing back.

My men were scattered for a hundred yards along the trail. Some distance further up, Law's men were being cut up despite their heavier firepower, which was less effective than it might have been if infra-red scopes had been of any use on this heat soaked ball of rock. I realized that if the two halves of the column remained apart, we'd be butchered separately. We began fighting our way up the trail, running for a few seconds, then diving back among the rocks and firing up into the ridges. I hadn't seen any Kiti yet, nor, with their ambushing tactics, did I expect to. We simply fired at gun flashes in the darkness.

We were still fifty yards away from Law and his men when I heard him shouting orders above the lashing uproar. He was standing on the trail, firing his sidearm.

"That hill! Get up that hill! If we stay down here, we haven't got a chance," he shouted. I joined my men with his, and we began working our way up the hillock where we now were. We'd been helped by the fact

that downhill fire is always inaccurate, and, after a nightmare fifteen minutes, we'd cleared the Kiti off the hilltop, taken up some kind of positions, and, after rolling a liberal supply of frag grenades down on the enemy troops trying to come up the hill after us, had settled down to a night of sporadic fire fights and nerve-wrenching attempts at infiltration.

Law looked up from his map. "Where's that crawler of yours, Ben?" he asked. I pointed out the spot where the machine lay, and his forehead moved under his visor. "Not so good. I was hoping it was closer than that." He put a cigarette between his lips, lit it, and let the smoke drift out of his nostrils until he dispersed it with an angry snort.

"God damn it, I told them an overland march wasn't the brightest idea in the world!" he said savagely. I remembered he'd suggested ferrying the men to Griffon in the civilian ships, but Colonel Dentick at Griffon had refused to authorize it. Since all Griffon had were some light survey and scout craft, that had been that.

The corporal and Lieutenant Grannery crawled into the foxhole. There wasn't room enough for five men to take cover, but the corporal began widening the hole with an entrenching tool, piling up rocks into a barrier as he did so. Law looked at him for a moment, then shook his head wonderingly. The Kiti fire had picked up a little, but the boy seemed to have come through it without injury.

Grannery had been wounded the night before. There was a lump in his sleeve where it stretched over a bandage, and his helmet must have been taken from a corpse to replace his own, because the stylized lightning bolt of an electrical technician had been daubed over with a medic's crayon and replaced by a crude single bar. The suit couldn't have been his own either, since there was no patch over the wound in his arm. He sank to the foxhole's floor and pulled up his knees, the breath grunting out of his throat. "Christ!" he said, getting the word out rapidly.

"How's it, Phil?" Law asked him. Grannery just nodded an "all right." He drew a hand over a mouth that had wide lips which were badly chapped. Law handed him a cigarette, and he lit it with short puffs.

"I've seen it better," he said finally.

"Hows that gun of yours holding up?" Law said gently.

" 'Bout as well as a Blevens can be expected to, I guess," Grannery answered. "Who the

devil sandbagged Procurement into accepting that machinist's nightmare, anyway?"

"I suppose you both know that if we don't let Griffon know what kind of a mess we're in, we're cooked," Law said. He turned his head back to the radio. "Harbin!" The tech threw an apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

"Yes sir!"

"Getting anywhere?"

"No, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Um. Well, stay with it." Law turned back to us. "Not much hope there," he said shortly. "We're not due at the base for almost a day yet, and they won't get too worried about us for awhile after that. What's more, their garrison's so small they can't take a chance and come looking for us until they're absolutely sure something's gone wrong."

He flicked his cigarette over the edge of the foxhole.

"We've got to get a message through," he said. "Unless Harbin works an improbable miracle with the radio, it's going to have to be by courier. There's no possibility of fighting our way out of here, but the crawler just might make it, if we can get a few men down to it."

"Kiti'll line each side of the trail and keep shooting until they hit the driver," Grannery said listlessly.

"I don't think so. It'll be rough at the start, but we'll be able to cover the getaway. Once it gets rolling, the crawler can outdistance a man on foot. This is a small bunch of scouts that saw a chance to get into a strategically superior position and has us pinned down. You'll notice they've either run out of ammunition for their rocket launchers or else they're so low they're conserving it," Law said. "It'd be different if they controlled the trail from here to Griffon, and could eventually snipe the messengers down, but I doubt if there's more than a company of them, at best. They must have snuck in on one ship to look the situation over."

For a minute I thought that Law hadn't seen that the Kiti must have called for a larger force by now. Then I realized that he'd thought of it long before I did, but didn't want to depress the already apathetic lieutenant any further. If we moved fast, we might just get away with this scheme, which, in the light of Law's estimate of the situation, wasn't as hare brained as it would ordinarily have been.

"The hardest part of this whole deal will be getting to the crawler and getting it back on

the trail. It'll mean working under fire in an exposed area. That's where you come in, Phil. We'll cover you with rifle fire while you get the Blevens set up so you can sweep both ridges above the crawler. You, in turn, will cover the men working on the machine, and then you and the riflemen'll cover the crawler's passage through the Kiti. It's a damn shame, but we can't wait for darkness."

"I want you to get back to your crew and get that Blevens in the best shape it's ever been in. We can't afford to have it jam. The minute you're ready, let me know, and we'll get going. Okay?"

Grannery nodded. He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, and began to crawl down the slope to his position. He bellied his way from boulder to boulder, exposing himself as little as possible. Even so, I saw something pluck at the leg of his suit before he disappeared into his own hole.

The Kiti must have realized something was up, for their fire intensified. Law, the corporal, and I dropped to the bottom of the foxhole. Harbin hunched down behind the armored radio.

"You two are going," Law said without preamble. "The corporal'll drive, and you'll be free to handle the gun, Ben." I was about to say an officer wasn't needed when he cut me off. "What say we get some breakfast, Corporal?" he said. The boy began rummaging through a ration pack, and Law pulled me aside. "Both of you are going for a reason, Ben. The corporal because I owe him this chance, and a medal for valor besides, and you because I'm afraid it'll take an officer to convince Dentick to get us out of here."

"Huh?" was all I could say. Law smiled grimly.

"Ever read any Kipling, Ben? A poem called *Recessional*, specifically."

"Something about 'Lest we forget', or something like that, wasn't it?"

" 'Far-called, our navies melt away; on dune and headland sinks the fire: Lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with Ninevah and Tyre!' " he quoted softly.

God knows, I've heard a lot of poetry, but I never expected to hear Kipling from Mike Law at the bottom of a foxhole on Mc-Millen.

"When Kipling wrote that," Law said, "he saw what was coming for the empire of which he was a citizen. It's bound to happen to any system that goes ahead blindly, putting its trust in "reeking tube and iron shard," and devil take the hindmost. It's

happening to us, because we plowed right into Kiti territory without thinking of the consequences. It's not that we're any more wrong than they are, no more than the Twentieth Century British were wrong when their empire began to break up on them. It's simply a system that requires constant effort for its maintenance, and if that effort ever has to be diverted, even for a short time, everything collapses.

"Ben, when we win this war, and we will, the whole philosophy of interstellar expansion will have to change. If we don't get rid of the imperial system and substitute a federation of equal and sovereign solar systems, we'll be in a continuous series of wars. Space is too big to be held by force or prestige. Somebody'll always be revolting.

"But there are a lot of people who are born imperialists, Ben. Dentick's one of them, and so is most of the top brass. They have to be, or they wouldn't be where they are in the hierarchy. While the empire's running smoothly, they're all right, but when a thing like this happens, they panic. They're liable to gloss over the loss of a planet here and another there, and talk about the 'Overall Picture' and, in final desperation, about 'Living to fight another day.' To them, the individual solar systems lose their importance. As long as the form of the empire is preserved, they care more about that than the fact that the empire encompasses less territory every day.

"That's the kind of thinking that produced Czarist movements fifty years after the Russian revolution. They just can't see that the old system is obsolete. Right or wrong, bad or good, it just won't work any more."

"I still don't see why Dentick would need convincing to get you out of here, though," I said.

"Well, it's a bit hard to explain without going into the background, like I have," Law said, "but in a spot like this, with the Kiti swarming all over the frontier, and with a strong force due to arrive here any time, Dentick'll be in a stew. He's never been too bright, or too brave. Ordinarily, it would look like hell on his record if he left the remains of a company to sure death. He'd be forced to come after us, no matter how little he liked it. But the way things stand now, with all the empire builders running around and wringing their hands, and nobody very sure of just what's going on, he's in a perfect spot to shake his head regretfully, get very indignant about the 'massacring aliens', spout some gabble about how our heroic stand

will be avenged, and how our martyrdom will furnish a shining example, and then sit on his hindquarters and do nothing. Believe me, Ben, I know Dentick. He never moves until he's got a regiment for every enemy company." He spat over the foxhole's edge.

"Supposing that's true," I said, "how'm I going to convince him to risk his precious tail?"

Law grimaced. "That's up to you, I'm afraid. If you can put enough pressure on him, and make him worry if you'll raise a big stink about it, he might take the chance."

Grannery signaled from his position. I took Law's hand and squeezed it in mine. "I'll do my damnedest," I said.

The crawler bounced and spun its tracks down the trail. The corporal hung on the steering levers grimly, while I almost cut myself in half against the gunner's seat belt. Law's plan had worked, and he'd been right about the strength of the Kiti force. We'd had a bad time getting the crawler righted and under way, but once we'd broken through the Kiti line and revved up to top speed, the trip had settled down to a grueling dash down the kinking trail.

I wondered how Law was making out. The fire from the ridges had been murderous, and once, looking over my shoulder as the corporal flung the crawler out of the trap, I thought I saw the major's stocky figure fall, but he'd gotten to his feet immediately, and I'd wiped the sweat off my jaw in relief.

We clattered over a ridge, and I saw Griffon's radio tower for a few seconds before we dipped down into a valley again.

For some reason, though, for once, I didn't agree with his logic, I couldn't get Law's statements out of my mind. I couldn't conceive of Colonel Dentick's actually leaving the company to be overrun, but the more I thought about it, and combined that with what I knew of Dentick's thought processess, the more I worried.

We broke out of the rocks and began to roll across the flat plain toward the base. I slapped the corporal on the back. "By God, we made it!" I shouted, and he grinned in answer. I began thinking of ways to pressure Dentick.

Then I saw the transport squatting on the field. It bulked over the buildings and threw a long shadow across the Administration building.

"Must have come in ahead of schedule," the corporal said. There was a faint frown on his face. "They'll hold it until they

get the major out, won't they?" he asked.

"Of course they will," I said.

We rolled past the gates and headed for the transport. There'd been no guard at the gate, and I couldn't see anybody moving around on the base. We came around the corner of a barracks, and I saw why. A long file of men and equipment was going up the transport's ramp. The base was being abandoned.

"Get up that ramp!" I yelled to the corporal, and we caterpillared past the line of men, up the metal ramp, and into the ship.

I jumped out of the crawler and ran toward a knot of officers. Dentick saw me and turned in my direction.

"Knowles!" he said. "Then the column did get here in time." He turned his head and spoke to an officer from the transport. "Commander Williams, this is Captain Knowles of the column from the smelting plant. Can you make arrangements to take his company aboard after all?"

I stood staring at him. They'd been ready to take off without us. Even our scheduled arrival time would have been too late.

"Colonel Dentick," I said rapidly, "the column isn't here."

"Isn't here?" He turned around back to me and looked at me in surprise. "Then what are you doing here?"

"The column's been cut off and trapped by a force of Kiti," I said. "Major Law tried to raise you on the radio, but the static was too bad."

Dentick blanched. "Kiti! Here on McMillen? Commander, did you hear that?" He and the transport officer ran to the head of the ramp. "Get aboard!" Dentick yelled down to the men still coming up the ramp. "Hurry it up. Come on, get moving!" I ran after them.

"Aren't you going to go after Major Law and his men, Sir?" I shouted.

"Go after Law? Are you crazy, man? There's a whole force of Kiti on its way here. If we don't get off in a half hour, we'll be trapped ourselves. You can't expect me to risk the base personnel and the transport for the sake of the remains of a company. I've got to think of the relative strategic importance of an interstellar vessel and the skilled men under my command in a case like this." He began waving a truck up the ramp with impatient hand motions. "I'm sorry, Captain, but Law will just have to stay where he is."

I stared at him incredulously. Then I realized that Law had been right after all. I turned away from him and walked back

to the crawler. The corporal looked at my face.

"They're going to leave the Major behind, aren't they?" he said. There was nothing I could do but nod. I watched the men come marching up the ramp, followed by the cursing men who drove the various mobile equipment.

"Knowles!" Dentick shouted from across the ramp, "Come here and supervise this, will you? The commander and I have to see to the stowage of all this equipment."

I walked to the head of the ramp and began directing the traffic. I looked at the faces of the men as they filed past me. Their faces were pale, and their hands on their rifle slings were sweaty.

I heard the clattering of the crawler's treads behind me. The corporal sat behind the steering levers, his visor over his face. He pointed the crawler down the ramp and began sliding it toward the ground. Men and equipment got hastily out of his way.

"Got to let the major know," he yelled back in answer to my shout, and pushed his speed up the limit. The crawler hit the ground and whipped away across the field and back toward the mountains.

I stood watching him until he disappeared behind a row of buildings. The men kept filing past me into the transport, and the sun was hot on my face.

And that's the story of the famous Lost Company. The history schoolbooks are full of it, and all the members got the Congressional Medal of Honor, posthumously. I had to settle for a Presidential pardon after I broke Dentick's jaw for him, and once in awhile, whenever I hear about the glories of war in space, about the huge fleets englobing whole planetary systems, of great fleet actions in the deeps of interstellar distances, I go out and get drunk.

We're beginning our reader column, THE CHART ROOM, in this issue. This is one case where it's up to you. If you want a good column, *you'll* have to write it! So how about letting us hear from you—all of you?

EARTHMAN'S CHOICE

BY ROGER DEE

ILLUSTRATED BY BRYAN

Cameron and his wife were left stranded on Venus when the old madness of the human race struck across all the millions of miles of space at them. The Droon Mind offered them shelter—of a kind!

For seconds after the roar of the blast rolled up the mountainside to them Cameron and his wife stood frozen beside their caterpillar ore sled and stared palely at each other, neither daring to voice their inevitable first thought.

"That was the *Astra's* fuel pile letting go," Cameron said finally. "We found what we came to Venus for, Helen, but we'll never take it away."

She answered him indirectly, displaying for the thousandth time the characteristic commonsense that made her a perfect balance-wheel to his driving impatience.

"Miilak!" she called.

The Droon worker came out of the ore pit toward them, his silvery eye-discs glowing like bland, cryptic windows against the violet oval of his face. The flood of white light from the mist ceiling overhead sank into his flesh without highlight or reflection, causing Cameron to think irrelevantly of a purple California grape, translucent but with an odd quality of absorbing and drowning light.

Unerringly Miilak read the



question in their minds and droned his answer in the English which he and the millions of his kind swarming the planet had learned in a single day.

"The star-ship is destroyed," he said. "The men are all dead but Jansen."

Cameron stared, feeling again the instinctive prickle of unease that had been his first reaction to a creature so human in form yet so alien of nature. He knew the infallibility of the Droon's communal telepathic sense, but for the moment it seemed to him that more than simple awareness lay behind the enigmatic eye-discs. Anticipation, triumph?

Impatiently he discarded the thought, knowing that in spite of his improbable abilities the Droon worker was utterly amenable to an Earthman's will—a four-foot puppet with a faculty of telepathic rapport, and nothing more.

"What happened?" Cameron demanded. "How did Jansen escape?"

The mellow drone was placid, disinterested. "A message came from your own world and made the crew like madmen. Afterward, Jansen destroyed the ship and the men in it."

"*A message,*" Helen breathed. Hope sprang up in her eyes. "Vic, maybe it isn't all—"

He knew her thought: World Council might have finished a second ship ahead of schedule to assist the *Astra* in her last-ditch attempt to augment Earth's dwindling stockpile of radioactives. Perhaps another expedition was on its way already, and they were not marooned after all. Jansen, taut with the eternal strain that rode the crew, might have gone mad from simple relief of tension and . . .

"There is no second star-ship," Miilak said, answering Cameron's unspoken query. "There is war on Earth. Jansen destroyed the ship because his country ordered it."

Helen came into Cameron's arms and began to cry quietly, her face hidden against his chest. He held her with detached tenderness, thinking bitterly that the agony of waiting was over at last. The *Astra's* precious cargo would never reach Earth to swing the balance from unrest to peace; the *Astra* was gone, and with her had gone Earth's chance.

Their foolhardy argosy into space was done, and for nothing. Earth by now would be broken into a hundred warring factions, locked in a vicious struggle that might tear down all that the ages had built.

"We could have prevented this war, except for Jansen and his

kind," Cameron said thickly. Futility sickened him—and was displaced, characteristically, by an instant and overpowering need for revenge. "The filthy spy!"

Miilak read his thought and climbed obediently to the ore-sled's seat to start the motor. Helen raised a startled, tear-streaked face when Cameron vaulted up beside the native.

"Vic! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find Jansen," he said grimly, "and kill him."

Knowing him, she did not argue. Instead she mounted the sled and sat beside him in silent misery, her soft mouth quivering.

The sled took them swiftly downward through masses of mica-flecked boulders, past yawning burrows of the Droon workers' tunnels, past groves of yellow-leaved trees that rose taller and thicker as the green plain below came up to meet them. Across the valley floor wound a clear, shallow river, its placid surface gleaming like silver. In the distance another mountain range rose, lofty peaks hidden in the mist ceiling.

At the valley's upper end loomed the deserted city, rising tier upon massive tier, conical towers reaching for the mists.

Helen's hand found Cameron's, and from its trembling he sensed that she shared the feeling of pygmy inconsequence that fell upon him with each fresh sight of the empty city. And with reason, he thought, for it was more than a city. It was a monument, a towering testimonial to the greatness of the race that had built and then abandoned it.

Pervading light drenched it and made it a place without shadow, a featureless pile of polished planes that gleamed like glass, unbroken by any aperture. For the thousandth time Cameron pondered that illogical blankness, wondering why a creation so perfect should turn upon its world a face so blind.

"But they *had* to see," he muttered. "A race must visualize before it can build beauty like that . . ."

He felt the puzzled weight of Helen's regard and broke off, recalling the purpose that drove him. There was no time now to consider a dead city's riddle. He had to find Jansen.

In a bend of the river below they saw the crater where the *Astra* had lain, a great raw pit gouged out of the green meadow, dust still swirling lazily at its bottom. There was no trace of the ship. Even the second, and

larger, ore-sled was now gone.

They stared in dreary silence at the crater until a flash of movement farther up the valley caught Cameron's eye. A man-made dot crawled across the plain, sunlight winking on angular, metallic surfaces—the second sled, making straight for the dead city.

"The fool!" Cameron said. "Does he think he can hide from me here, with a million Droons broadcasting every move he makes?"

The bright dot grew rapidly larger when they gave chase.

Cameron's sled was faster, so much faster that by the time Jansen reached the city they could distinguish the pale blur of the saboteur's backward-turned face. Once Jansen shook a clenched fist, and Cameron grunted with satisfaction.

"He's unarmed, or he'd have opened on us by now," he said. "All our weapons were locked away to prevent trouble, remember?"

Helen touched his arm, pleading with him. "Don't follow into the city, Vic, please. If anything should happen—"

He squeezed her fingers absently, knowing that she was not afraid for herself but for him. A moment later they were at the city gates.

The city stretched before them in vast ordered divisions like the segments of a gigantic disc, silent avenues converging like spokes toward a central hub; a place heavy with the silence of millenia, deserted beyond the meaning of time. The only sound was the jangling of the sleds, echoing through canyoned, empty streets.

The *Astra's* crew had never penetrated here, bending every energy toward gathering a full hold of ore before Earth should recede beyond reach. Cameron had no eye for detail now, his whole attention centered upon the vehicle ahead.

The city-segments narrowed, the empty streets drew more sharply toward their common center. Jansen's sled was no more than a hundred feet ahead when it clanked into the final confluence and halted.

It was a place of utter desertion, a vast circular arena lying naked and empty except for a towering block of native stone that gleamed like pale, polished marble. The stone was the city's hub, and in each of its four vertical surfaces black tunnel-mouths gaped, angling downward.

Into the planet itself? Cameron felt his scalp prickle at the thought. Was that where the city builders had gone—inside?

Jansen did not hesitate. He

chose the danger he did not know, and plunged directly into the first black opening.

Miilak halted the sled beside Jansen's and waited passively. Helen clung to Cameron, hampering him. "Please, Vic—we don't know what may be down there!"

He shook her off. "Jansen went in. I'm going after him."

He strode into the orifice, Helen and Miilak at his heels.

The tunnel sloped gently downward, and it was not dark. A faint glow lighted the way, growing sharply brighter at the farther end where Jansen had vanished, swallowed up by whatever lay beyond.

At the glow, Cameron paused. "What's ahead there, Miilak?"

Something like ecstasy warmed the native's mellow drone. "The Hive is there, and the Droon Soul guiding Its people through the eternal Cycle."

Cameron swore, startled by the inference. "So *that's* why you're all in rapport! I should have known—you're like a termite colony or an ant-hive, a composite intelligence!"

Helen pressed against him, her eyes on the Droon worker's placid face. "Miilak, what will happen if we follow Jansen?"

For the first time the answer was oblique. "That lies between the Earthpeople and the Droon. I may not say."

"Rot," Cameron said shortly.

He moved into the light, down a short incline that dropped away to a circular chamber whose polished walls gaped with the mouths of a dozen other corridors leading deeper into the planet's heart. Light flooded from a low-arched ceiling, falling without shadow upon a circle of kneeling Droon people.

They ignored his entrance, their silver eye-discs fixed raptly upon a globe of milky radiance that rested upon a pedestal in the center of the room. The globe pulsed and changed, mottled with strange shadows and seethed with alien motion.

Cameron ignored it, centering his attention upon the tense figure of Jansen crouching against the farther wall.

"The burrows are open," Cameron said. "Why don't you run, Jansen? Have you lost your nerve?"

The saboteur raised a thin, frantic face. His eyes rolled, pale with terror.

"I won't go!" he said shrilly. "You can't drive me out, Cameron—I know what is down there now!"

"I see you've found out about the hive-brain," Cameron said. His lip curled. "Facing a thing

like that *is* harder than murdering a crew of unsuspecting men, isn't it?"

Jansen's eyes begged, mute as a dog's. "I'm sorry about the *Astra*, Cameron . . . Can't you forgive me now when we're alone here with this thing, when we'll never get off the planet alive?"

Cameron moved in, circling the ring of kneeling Droon people. The globe on its pedestal spun a flickering web of light and shadow, sucking at his attention like an insistent, hypnotic vortex.

"No," he said. "You're going to pay for the *Astra*, Jansen."

A shadow welled out of the globe, assumed a shape defying definition. It caught Cameron and froze him in midstride, his consciousness recoiling in stark panic from the overwhelming intelligence that threatened to swallow his.

Fading vision told him that Jansen had surrendered control already; the placidity that lay across the saboteur's face was as alien as the round-eyed serenity of the Droon people.

Darkness swept Cameron into a void stippled with icy pinpoints of light. He heard Helen's stifled scream and fought to reach her, and could not. The grip on his mind closed tighter . . .

He drifted like a disembodied soul, powerless to shut out the scene unfolding below him.

A jungle world that steamed with primeval mists, acrawl with alien life monstrous beyond his conception. Under his eyes the jungles thinned, the mists lifted, the monsters gave way before smaller and less feral fauna. A new race, violet-skinned and silver-eyed, rose to swarm across the planet.

The Droon people.

Parallel to their evolution grew a formless shadow, shot through with a myriad tiny sparklings like moonlight on snow crystals. It waxed and swelled and became the pulsing thing Cameron had seen emerge from the globe of light in the Droon-circle.

In the depths of his consciousness a soundless voice implanted a conviction; this was the hive-mind, the racial soul. The light-points were Droon people, cells of its being.

The concept revolted him, and he rejected angrily the postulation of a race without liberty.

His own people fought to the death against restraint—the suicidal war raging on Earth at the moment was, paradoxically, an end result of that principle. No man who had ever known freedom could ever belong body and soul to a tyrannical race-master, drowning his personal

ego in termitic regimentation . . .

But this was perfection, his conviction told him. All other ways must lead to insanity and to death.

Violently he denied it. The individual is more important than the whole, personal liberty a greater thing than the culture that bears it. He, Victor Cameron, was a discrete entity, and he would rather die than be a part of such a corporate monster.

Yet you must join us or perish, the voice said. *Your own race is dying, the end of your world is at hand. Take your place in the circle before it is too late. Your companions understand — look and see.*

Sight and speech returned, and he saw Helen and Jansen kneeling side by side in the Droon-circle. Their unnatural stillness startled him; the alien calm that lay like a veil across Helen's face sent him taut with horror.

"*Helen!*" His voice was a hoarse half-shout. "You didn't—"

She stood erect at the sound of his voice, her slim hands raised against his fury.

"Jansen and I joined the Cycle because we understand what the Droon offers," she said. The voice was Helen's, but rounded to an impersonal evenness totally foreign to the girl he had known. "We have entered the Hive, Vic, but it's not the bondage you think. It's release, the ultimate peace. Join us quickly, before it is too late."

He fought with all his strength to break the stasis that held him, and his futility only fanned the rage higher in him.

"Join you?" he shouted. "Come into that slave-chain willingly? I'll see you damned first—even you, Helen!"

"Hurry, Vic," Helen said, as if he had not spoken. "Earth is dying. Unless you join us you will die with her."

He hesitated, finding behind her words a stark mental picture of Earth shriveling and cracking, spewing out atomic fires in a blazing, cosmic holocaust.

Helen came toward him, her wide eyes glowing like the sight-discs of the Droon people. "You have glimpsed the truth, Vic. Join us now, while there is still time."

He made his voice savage, pushing back the fearful concept growing at the back of his mind.

"I can't knuckle under to this hive-brute—if I'm going to die I'll die free, as an Earthman should!"

"Please, Vic," she begged. "The Droon is right. It knows—everything."

"Then it knows how we climbed up out of the slime," he

said. "It knows that men came up the hard way, alone, and built a culture that might have reached the stars. Our ancestors went out with their heads up and their bare hands for weapons, and fought their way through a world that would have swallowed the Droons overnight!"

She shook her head, and the familiar toss of her dark hair wrung him sharply with the ache of remembered intimacy.

"We were a proud people," she said, "but a dull and savage one. The Droons built and abandoned the city above us, because they had outgrown it, ages before our recorded history began."

You were great once, the soundless voice said, *but what you have known is only a clumsy, apish mockery of the older culture that was yours before some cosmic accident to Earth destroyed it. What you have now is a patchwork of degeneracy, bound from the first to fail.*

"Degeneracy?" Cameron raged. "Do you know what you're saying, Helen? Does the Droon Soul that speaks through your mouth know?"

"Men were always like the Droon people, Vic, though they never knew it. There are no free individuals anywhere, except in dissolution. We are units too in an all-encompassing Man-soul."

Stunningly the concept flared in his mind, beating down the feeble protests his stubborn hope raised against it. His eyes went from Helen to Jansen, who knelt in rapt serenity with the rest of the circle and communed with the vast, throbbing intelligence that was the complete Droon.

"But if Earth has a Man-soul," Cameron whispered, "then how can we be at each other's throats now? How could we ever have blundered into the atomic trap that is destroying us?"

The truth came of itself, numbing him with its crushing simplicity, and he saw with final clarity the gibbering unreason behind man's tortured idealism and blind ferocity. Earth's Man-soul, maimed by that ancient, cosmic catastrophe, was helpless to control Its own ragings . . . *mad.*

"You're right," Cameron said. "I should have seen it long ago."

Then he knelt, between Helen and Jansen, in the circle.

BOOK REVIEWS:

THE DISSECTING TABLE

by

LESTER DEL REY

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Due to the change to a monthly schedule, there wasn't time to notify Damon Knight and get back his reviews before going to press. Therefore, this time we asked Lester del Rey to fill in. Damon Knight will be back with us next month, of course.)

Damon may disagree violently with everything I have to say, so let me state at once that the opinions below are just that—my opinion, and nothing more. The editor tells me that if Damon sends in reviews of the same books, they'll be run, so I can go ahead and speak my piece without hurting his chance to be heard from, incidentally.

First, like everyone else, I've been somewhat appalled by the volume of anthologies appearing. Let's admit at once that there are too many of them, and that too many are simply rehashing the same old stories, ad infinitum and ad nauseam. Yet, when a good anthology does appear, it performs a genuine service to the field. And I'm happy to say that one very good one has just appeared.

BEYOND HUMAN KEN, edited by Judith Merril (Random House, 334 pp., $2.95) • belongs in anyone's collection. To begin with, it's an attractive job, with good typography and make-up that's a real pleasure to see, after so many routine jobs of book-making. There's no false bulking of the paper to make it seem like a big book for the price, either; it's a good-sized book, sold as such.

Miss Merril's preface is clear and to the point, and it fits the book. She states that she has attempted to collect as many different concepts of "other life" as could be found, and to do so without using stories previously anthologized. Fletcher Pratt, in an introduction, gives us some

excellent comments and reasons for choosing these stories—but the stories can speak for themselves. On the whole, they stand up, as one might expect from an editor with the skill previously shown in Bantom Books' *Shot in the Dark.*

The names listed after the 21 stories read like a science fiction and fantasy hall of fame. And many of the stories should be included under that rather uncertain listing as classics. Katherine MacLean contributes what I consider her best story, *The Fittest.* This has an odd, pleasant mixture of lightness and pathos, and it should have been anthologized long before. William Tenn has *The House Dutiful*—perhaps not his best story, but still excellent reading with a biting point in the end. *Pride,* by Malcolm Jameson, gives us one of our finest robot characters. *A Gnome There Was* is superb Lewis Padgett, which is praise enough. *Our Fair City* is a rare thing—a genuine Heinlein *fantasy*—and a neat little masterpiece. Anthony Boucher's *Compleat Werewolf* is easily among the ten best fantasy novelettes I've read. Mark Clifton's *What Have I Done?* has the freshest approach to an alien invasion for a long time. No comment need be made on Stephen Vincent Benet's *The Angel Was a Yankee*—it lives up to his usual standard of genius. And finally, while I shouldn't list my own story, *Helen O'Loy* has always been my particular favorite among the stories I've written, so I'll include it and forget about being modest. That makes nine stories that strike me as top-grade material.

Many of the other stories would be considered excellent in almost any magazine; they're not quite the outstanding examples that those above are, but they're good, well-done, interesting stories I'm glad to see in hard covers. Roger Dee, Eric Frank Russell, James Blish, H. B. Fyfe, John Christopher, and Laurence Manning all contribute worthwhile yarns. In fact, on second thought, I find Manning's *Good-bye, Ilha!* should be listed as a topflight story; it's a new story, which never appeared in any other book, or in the magazines, and so smoothly done that it isn't until later the reader gets the extra-added-feature of the beautiful psychological development of the alien. It grows on you.

Kris Neville's *Underground Movement* was almost a fine story, but it starts out as science fiction and then abruptly becomes fantasy with-

out proper preparation; the illogical striving for a ghoulish effect in the end ruined it for me. And Fritz Leiber might have had a fine story in *The Foxholes of Mars,* except that the coldness and muddiness of the method of telling made it hard work for me to follow it at all. Arthur Porges came up with another ultra-tiny invader job in *The Fly,* but there was nothing new to recommend it, and the mimicry of the fly plus the added coincidence of the spider-web was just a bit too thick. Read more like a treatise than a story, anyhow.

Finally, there are a few stories which I feel were badly selected. Idris Seabright tried, apparently, to imitate the yarns of Dunsany—with singular lack of ability to get the same feeling and consistency. Her quaint and unexciting style, mixed with a studied dispassionateness didn't make it any higher in literary value, to me—merely "arty." Personally, I don't want to return to the eighteenth century. I feel the author's job is to tell a good story, and the best style is one which doesn't keep poking itself into the reader's face and yelling to be seen. Anyhow, the story value here was feeble enough to make wasting any kind of style on its preciousness rather pointless.

The Wabbler, by Murray Leinster, is actually a good yarn; but while the undersea bomb is vaguely personified, I can't feel that it has any place in this book. Anyhow, now that the last war is over, why not forget this story along with others too strongly slanted for a few years ago? Leinster has written so much outstanding stuff that I feel this choice was unfortunate, since another story by him could have replaced it.

And finally, one of the best writers of fantasy is represented by a story which I am forced to list as one of the worst pieces of fantasy I've seen anywhere. *The Perfect Host,* by Theodore Sturgeon, simply isn't a fair example of the wonderful material he has written. It's pretentious, confused, arty, filled with purple prose, and not even original in idea, particularly; in fact, part of the trouble seems to be that Sturgeon had no real story idea, and tried to make up for it with an over-tricky handling. It starts out well, but eventually the author has to step in as himself and admit that he doesn't know what to do with it. He finally resolves

the story in a flood of purple phrases that only proves his statement. A darned shame.

However, no anthology can completely satisfy anyone, and the work done by Judith Merril here is still head and shoulders above the usual run of anthologies. It seems to me that some of the publishers who are supposed to be searching for editors for their new magazines are crazy for not approaching her with large contracts and signed checks.

Definitely a good job.

And while mentioning anthologies, I'd like to point out that Random House is still advertising one of the first of the anthologies on the back of the dust-jacket for *Beyond Human Ken*. It still remains the best buy ever offered among anthologies, and if it isn't in your library, it should be put there at once.

ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE, edited by Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas (Random House, 997 pp., $2.95) • is practically a definitive example of all that good science fiction should be. The 35 stories—many of them longer than a lot of stories listed as novels—represent the cream of the crop in every way. If you do have a copy of it, you automatically have an excellent library of science fiction. There isn't a story in it which I haven't re-read at least three times—and not one which I don't expect to re-read again!

If you have a friend whom you want to convert to science fiction, you can't go wrong by lending him a copy of this book. The only trouble is that he may get too exalted an idea of our favorite type of reading!

I'm deliberately reviewing books I think everyone should buy, since I feel it's more important that no one should miss a good book than it is that bad ones shouldn't be bought. And there remains one other book which should be included on every bookshelf. In this case, even the non-science-fiction reader should have it.

THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE, by Arthur C. Clarke (Harper & Brothers, 199 pp., $3.50) • This was chosen as an alternate selection by *The Book of the Month Club*, incidentally. When you read it, it's easy to see

why it cracked the wall of prejudice most book clubs have against anything futuristic.

Clarke has done an outstanding job. This is one of those very rare books about which I have absolutely nothing adverse to say. The purpose of the book is to show clearly and simply how and why men will go out into space, what they will find there, and what they will do once they get there. It does that job to a T, and it leaves nothing to be said, at least until we actually do get out there. Clarke, of course, is well known as a writer of science fiction, and as Chairman of the *British Interplanetary Society*. But I suspect a lot of people will consider him simply the author of *The Exploration of Space* from now on.

He begins with an account of early work and thoughts on space-flight, covers the basic facts of astronomy, and then goes into some detail of how a rocket works. All this may seem a bit elementary to science fiction readers, but it's entertainingly written, and brief enough to be enjoyable as a review of what we know, before going on.

From there, he goes on step by step to a lucid account of what will be done. He covers space-stations, the moon, and the planets. He lists what men will find, the problems to be met, and the probable solutions. But unlike many books, he does this with the real feeling that *men* will be there, that there will have to be reasons, human failures, fumblings, dreams, and all the things that go to make up normal human progress. He never simply sits down to tell us that a rocket of such-and-such a size, powered by this fuel, making this acceleration, will achieve an orbit of such a nature. He adds the feeling that rocket flight will be a real thing, not a mathematical equation.

It is, actually, a book of history—history that hasn't yet been written, but which must be written someday, and almost as given here. The conclusion is that man not only can—but that he must go out into space.

Some of the work on space-suits and air-pressure within the ships shows a clear, pleasant logic that should have been applied to these subjects before. His summation of what the moon will be like in human terms, how men will find ways of living there, and why they should go

there is about the best to be found anywhere. He does the same for most of the planets. It isn't a book of astronomy—Clarke isn't interested in the mere statistical facts about the planets; he covers a fair amount of such material, but he does so in terms of what it will mean to men.

The final chapter of the book adds a touch that keeps it from being too optimistic. Here, in discussing the problem of ways and means, he faces the financial and economic facts squarely and intelligently. Without this, the book might have been only a work of wish-dreams to the average reader; but this facing-up to the problems proves that everything has been thought of and covered.

The subject here was naturally one with which I considered myself pretty familiar—as any writer of science fiction should be. Yet I found the book as engrossing as the best novels, and came away with a clearer picture of the future of space flight than I'd had before, as well as a lot of items to be mulled over and used in future stories. I'm still somewhat amazed by what an excellent book it is.

The illustrations are the only feature of the book which doesn't completely please me. They're not bad—in fact, they're much more than adequate, and the color plates are superbly done. But they aren't Bonestell illustrations, after all. And after the work Bonestell has done in this field, it's a little hard to appreciate even very good work by others. Probably the average reader will find the illustrations here a little on the garish side.

Incidentally, this doesn't mean that you should buy the book instead of *The Conquest of Space* by Willy Ley and Chesley Bonestell. The two books are completely different, and not at all interchangeable. If you have either one, be sure to get the other, anyhow.

And that winds this up. Damon Knight will be back next issue, to cover the field again, of course.

Judgment day

BY CHAD OLIVER

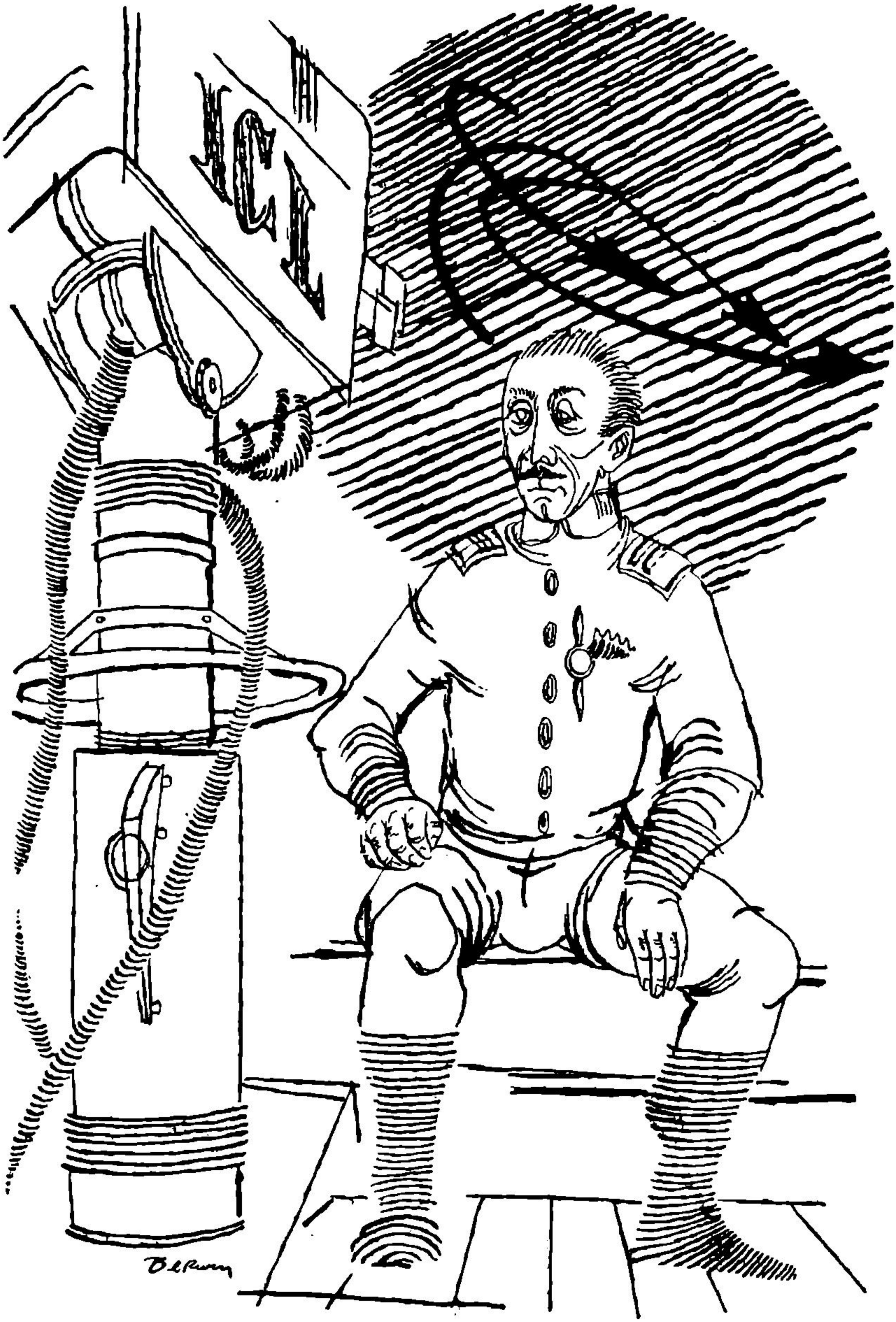
ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

Bobby's father thought he had found the flaw in his son's dreams of TV spaceships. After all, in space, what could the rocket push *against*? But Bobby still knew that Captain Jet had a real ship out there!

A quarter to five, Earth time. The black spider's legs of night squat behind the hills near Centerton, ready to march.

D-Day minus three. The silver spear of the *Titan* swims through velvet in the Sol system, between Mars and the Earth. A picked crew prepares to go into action, and a man in an oddly melodramatic uniform checks a code message for the last time.

Six units, Galactic Standard Time. The great, lumbering behemoths of the Occupation Fleet roll lazily through space, far beyond Pluto. Tight beam contacts flash through nothingness. Culture area experts pore over charts in silent planning rooms.



Two spacemen laugh softly at some secret jest and wonder about home.

Night on Nrando, Galactic Communications Center. A club, bathed in semi-darkness. Music. The tinkle of glasses. A faint, curious air of impatience, of annoyance, of waiting. . .

"Fantastic that it went on so long."

"Good that they caught it in time."

"Confounded nuisance, that's what I say."

"How can people be so stupid?"

"Danger Potential One—too close for comfort!"

"Oh, I do hope this doesn't drag on like that Procyon affair. . ."

"Psychotic. . ."

"Training. . ."

"Oh, listen! That's our song. . ."

"Earth! Of all the crazy foolishness! Robbing the taxpayer's money, that's what it is. Who ever heard of Earth, that's what I want to know. Where in the hell IS it?"

A quarter to five, Earth time.

Bobby Carter glanced at the clock and swung off the bed with a thump, knocking his decoder button to the floor. He picked it up and put it in his shirt pocket. A quarter to five—he'd better hurry or he'd miss it. He hid his special assignments and operational charts away behind the magazines in his closet—not that they weren't in the secret code, of course, but it wouldn't do to have them found by just *anybody*.

The Old Space Ranger said so.

"Bob-*by!*"

Mom. Why couldn't she leave a guy alone? Probably wanted him to do some fool thing just when the Old Space Ranger was coming on. Parents never understood anything—fortunately.

"Coming," he muttered, charging down the stairs. Mrs. Carter was waiting in the kitchen—a bad place—and she was tapping her foot. Bobby braced himself for the attack.

"You look here," she launched herself. "You march right back up those stairs and get your room cleaned up this minute. It's a disgrace, that room is, and I'm hot and tired and I will *not* clean it up again. We can't afford a cleaning robot like the Bensons have, not on the wages your father makes, but let me tell you—"

"Not now, Mom," Bobby pleaded. "The Old Space Ranger is on."

"I don't care whether your space ranger is on or off, and I'm sure he can struggle along without your help just this once. And

must you wear that infernal cap pistol around the house?"

"It's not a cap pistol," Bobby said levelly. "It's a paralysis gun."

"I don't care what it is, take it off. Now you get upstairs, you hear me?"

"No," said Bobby Carter

His mother glared at him.

"You don't understand," he tried to explain. "I'd lose my commission and space rating and miss out on the code message."

"My heart bleeds for you," his mother said without conviction.

"*Listen* to your Old Space Ranger, then. But when it's over you're going to clean that lovely room of yours!"

Bobby was already out of the kitchen, hardly giving the electric eye time to open the door before him. "It's a *crummy* room," he shouted to no one in particular. "All fixed up like a sailor's cabin and everything. A *sea* sailor, suffering jets!"

He raced across the living room. Just in time! Breathlessly, he switched on the TV set.

The big white screen flickered briefly and there he was. Not the Old Space Ranger yet, of course. Just Captain Jet, his assistant, in that swell silver and black uniform.

"Howdy, pardners," drawled Captain Jet, smiling lazily with his famous crooked grin. "I know all of you cadets are anxious to get on with the Old Space Ranger's story of how he brought law and order to the galaxy, and to get your orders for today—super secret orders this time, so be ready with your decoders!—so old Captain Jet won't take much of your time. Nossir, it's just like it was down there in Texas, where I hail from. You don't have to *tell* folks down thataway how good those two jet-propelled breakfast foods are, not by a long beam! You just set a heaping bowlful of Puffed Atoms or Martian Mush down on that old table, and *they'll* do the talking for us. The Old Space Ranger and I know that you cadets wouldn't eat any other kind."

"Of course not," Bobby agreed indignantly, hitching up his paralysis pistol.

"And that's just the scientific thing to do, friends," Captain Jet said easily. "The Old Space Ranger and I have *proved*—you saw the tests yourselves, and you watched little Johnny rip into those space pirates after a heaping bowlful—that after a long, hard space flight there's just nothing like Puffed Atoms or Martian Mush to pick a fellow up. Remember, Martian Mush is grown right on the planet Mars, and Puffed Atoms are a product

of good old Earth. You make sure Mom's got a good supply on hand." Captain Jet winked broadly. "*You* know what to do."

"You bet," Bobby Carter said, fingering his paralysis pistol.

"And now—stand by!" Captain Jet was suddenly grim-faced and stern again, the way he had been when he had tangled with the Spider-Men of Neptune. "Cadets, attention! Here are your orders for today."

Bobby Carter held his breath, pencil poised above his order book.

"Key 7-F," Captain Jet said clearly. "Ready? Here we go. Four, sixteen, eighty-one, eleven. . ."

The numbers came steadily out of the TV set and into the living room. They were loud and plain and undisguised. Bobby got them all down, and then replaced the order book in his pocket. Business being over, he sat forward as though glued to the TV set for twenty thrill-packed minutes while the Old Space Ranger raced over the system in his special ship, the *Titan*. Boy, what a ship! It had atomic engines and light drives and obliterator rays and *everything*. It was the real McCoy, all right. You couldn't fool a kid on anything like that. It made the studio ships on the other programs look silly and childish—but then, of course, that couldn't be helped. They didn't have *real* ones.

You must always try to be fair —that's what the Old Space Ranger said.

After the adventure, the Old Space Ranger himself came forward to talk to him. Not just to him, not really—but it always seemed that way. He was tall and lean with iron gray hair and eyes the color of deep space. He talked softly, with conviction. There was no posing, no ham. He talked straight, and what he said was right. You *knew* it was right.

Bobby smiled happily, his heart thousands of miles away. Just think—he'd get to meet him someday, someday *soon*, get to shake his hand and ride in the control room and learn all about outlawing war. He could hardly wait. But he must be patient, of course.

That was one of the rules.

"Well, cadets," the Old Space Ranger said, looking Bobby straight in the eye, "the big day isn't far off. You decipher your orders and report to headquarters and your chance will come. We're counting on you, and we know you won't let us down —won't let *yourselves* down. Now, more than ever, we must stand together. So let's all repeat the pledge. Cadets, *attention!*"

Bobby Carter got to his feet and stood at attention. Mrs. Carter peered in from the kitchen and shook her head sadly.

Slowly and with feeling, Bobby Carter repeated the Old Space Ranger's words: "As a loyal cadet, I pledge myself to guard the secrets of the Space Ranger Club from all outsiders. I will be honest and brave and work to make a better world. I will study my lessons and do my best to understand, without prejudice and without fear. In so doing, I dedicate myself to the stars."

"That's all for today, friends," said the Old Space Ranger, smiling at him. "Clear jets!"

Bobby Carter switched off the set.

"Bob-*by!*"

But Bobby Carter was already in his room, busily decoding his orders for the day.

One day passed, and night came again.

"Harold."

Harold Carter looked up from the sports page of the *Evening Sentinel,* his frown seeming to extend in folds all the way across the top of his shiny bald head.

"Harold, I was reading."

"Good," said Harold Carter, reburying himself in his paper.

"I was reading where television and funny books and that new tri-di thing are taking the modern child away from his parents," Mrs. Carter went on doggedly. "I've been thinking, Harold. Bobby's seemed so strange lately—so different. He's so *sure* of himself, and we never see him or play with him or anything. Harold."

"Ummm."

"I'm worried about Bobby. What's he like, what's he think about? I'm sure *I* don't know. He gets all his ideas from that Old Space Stranger or whatever he is. All he does is study those silly charts and codes and plans and goodness only knows what else. And he never goes anywhere without that cap gun of his— he even sleeps with it under the pillow. Harold."

"Oh, it isn't anything, Ida."

"I just don't know, Harold. Bobby seems to *know* so much, and all that funny talk of his about a better world and peace and equality—he takes it all so seriously, Harold, he *believes* it. It's all right to talk about those things in Church, or make speeches about them, of course, but after all. . ."

Harold Carter, sensing defeat, reluctantly put down his paper. "Look Ida," he explained patiently, "It used to be Hopalong Cassidy, and before that I guess it was Buffalo Bill or King Arthur or Adam. Kids are just

kids, that's all. I used to have a decoder button myself, and I used to lug around a Buck Rogers disintegrator pistol that was almost as big as I was. It's nothing to worry about."

"I just don't know, Harold. The boy knows so many facts. . ."

"Facts!" snorted Mr. Carter, pausing to fire up his pipe. "Why, he even thinks he can fly to another planet in a rocket ship! Let me tell you, this is 1995 and not the year 3000. All that stuff may come someday, but it won't be in *our* lifetimes." He blew a cloud of smoke at Mrs. Carter, probably accidentally. "Now, I'm all for this peace and equality stuff just the same as anybody, but there's a time and a place for everything. There have always been wars, and there always will be, whether we like it or not. I'm just as broad-minded as the next man, but I think that the sooner Bobby learns some of the practical facts of life, instead of all that hooey about the stars, the better off he's going to be."

"I just have a feeling," began Mrs. Carter.

"We all have feelings," Mr. Carter told her. "They come from the nervous system." He picked up his paper again.

"Please, Harold—put the paper down for just a minute."

"Why?" he asked her.

Mrs. Carter, unable to think of a good reason, retreated into the ancient wisdom of the race. She began to cry, softly at first, but working up to a first-class moan.

"Damn it," Harold Carter said without passion. He tossed his paper down on the floor and folded his hands. "Stop it, Ida. Please."

Mrs. Carter sensed a momentary advantage, and long experience had taught her to make good use of it. "The least you could do," she sniffed, "if you still loved me, would be to go upstairs and see if Bobby cleaned out his room like he was supposed to. He was out last night to a Space Stranger meeting, and he's out again tonight. I'm so tired from tubing groceries all day. . ."

"Never mind the routine," Harold Carter said, with all the resignation of a martyr taking a swan dive into the lion pit. "I'm going."

Mrs. Carter sighed.

Outside, the winds whispered softly in the trees, and the stars twinkled silently in the night.

His son's room was trim and shipshape, with the brown bunk bed neatly made and the floor swept clean. The mariner's desk was tidy for once, and the photograph of the Old Space Ranger hung straight on the nautical

wallpaper. Even the clothes were hanging properly in the closet.

"Well," said Harold Carter.

Curiously, he pawed through the stacks of magazines on the closet shelves—they were all science fiction, naturally—and exhumed a rash of space ranger materials. Kids always thought they were being very clever in hiding things like that, but then they weren't the first kids ever to come into the world. Harold Carter smiled and carried a pile of the papers over to the desk. He switched on the small ship lantern so he could see more clearly, and sat down on the undersized, frankly dubious chair.

He couldn't make head nor tail of the complicated diagrams and operational charts, and all the messages were in code. But he did find a duplicate decoder button and an important looking leather-bound booklet with the code key still visible where it had been inexpertly erased on the flyleaf.

"Son, son," murmured Mr. Carter sadly, "a fine secret agent *you* are."

What the devil, he thought. It was better than going back downstairs to the Inquisition; Ida would have to have her cry. He hesitantly began to decode the first page, which was in elaborate script and seemed to be a directive of some kind. It took time, but it wasn't overly difficult.

He opened the window by his side, letting the wind whisper into the room. Half unconsciously, he listened to the city around him. He heard the hum of helicopter blades, the rustling of leaves in the big trees that lined the street outside, the buzz of a robo-prowl car. There was soft summer laughter from a porch two houses down, the far-off whistle of a mail rocket, the clatter and bang of the kids riding their jet cycles over on Edmonds Avenue. How many years, he wondered, how long a time, between man and boy? Almost, it seemed that he were young again, in his own room. . .

But the mood wouldn't stick. The years were there, and he couldn't erase them. He finished decoding the page and read the translation, smiling to himself.

Of all the nonsensical stuff—

But he kept on decoding.

Nine o'clock, Earth time. A silver moon shines down on the hanging lights of Centerton.

D-Day minus two. The *Titan* floats between Mars and the Earth, a beehive of activity, getting ready.

Eight units, Galactic Standard Time. The black fish of the Occupation Fleet slither through

the deeps off Uranus. Signals flash and hum.

Midnight on Nrando. A brightly-lit, official looking room. Two men sit alone at a long table, talking. They seem tired and both smoke too much.

"Well, the children are only a small part of the operation."

"I hate to use them at all; they're such a bother to work with."

"It's necessary, I'm afraid. We've got to begin with the children, because the older people are too set in their ways to adjust to the problems of non-Earthly civilization. The children must be trained, must be made to understand, must be educated to realize that our way is the only civilized way, must be taught that Earth is a barbaric planet—that must reform. They are the ones that must take over the Earth eventually, when our work is done. This way, perhaps we can accomplish it in a single generation."

"Sometimes I almost think it would be better to let them alone, let them work things out in their own way. . ."

"Their own way! What way is that, may I ask? Our tests show that they've got nuclear fission and are on the verge of space travel—and at the same time are still on the brink of warring with each other! No one muddles through with that kind of a situation, my friend, and they have no plans. It just takes one mistake."

"But we know so little about them, really. And when I look at what we've done to Procyon —with the best intentions in the world, of course—I can't help wondering. . ."

"Don't question the Plan, my friend. You know that it is the best, the only scientific way. We are right and they are wrong, and that's all there is to it. It simply won't do to let a backward planet like Earth get into space with nuclear fission and primitive war patterns. They are incapable of controlling themselves, and this is only self defense on our part—preventive war, if you will."

"That isn't all, of course."

"No. They'd blow themselves up eventually if let alone. But we are not savages, my friend. We are civilized, and therefore it is our duty to save them from themselves."

"And confer upon them the ultimate blessing of being just like we are. It seems sort of egotistical."

"Nonsense. This is all planned with the utmost care for their benefit. You seem to be questioning the Plan again, my friend."

"Sorry. No offense. Come on, my friends, it's getting late."

"Yes. It's getting quite late."

Nine o'clock, Earth time.

There was a sudden electric swish as the door flew open.

"What are you doing at my desk?"

Harold Carter turned around, the leather-bound booklet still in his hand. Bobby stood in the doorway, very pale, his blond hair touseled, grease marks on his clothes. He was breathing too fast.

"It won't work, you know," Harold Carter told him quietly. "It won't work at all."

Bobby tensed in the shadow of the doorway. As though suffering from shock, he backed a little into the hall. One hand uncertainly brushed the butt of the paralysis gun at his hip. His forehead glistened with sweat.

"What are you talking about?"

"This," said Harold Carter, indicating the pile of papers on the desk. "It's hopeless."

The black shadows choked the hall behind Bobby, waiting to grab and tear at him. His heart pounded in his throat.

"What do you mean?"

"Look, son," said Harold Carter, getting slowly to his feet and moving toward him, "I think you'd better forget it."

Bobby tensed, not sure of how to proceed. His father came closer, his hand extended. He touched Bobby's shoulder. Bobby could feel the ice sliding through his veins.

"Forget? Forget *what?*"

"Come now, son, be reasonable. Don't play dumb. *Spaceships,* of course. What else *would* I be talking about after reading all that stuff?"

"Spaceships?"

"Of course. Now look here, son. I'm not trying to be cruel or anything—you understand that, don't you?—but it's time you faced up to some of the practical realities of this world you're living in. I've got just one question to ask you, and you can't answer it. It's the key to the whole thing."

"Question?"

"That's right, question. Now, spaceships are propelled by rockets, just like the mail rockets, right?"

"Well—"

"But they're supposed to go through empty space, right?"

"I suppose you could—"

"Very well, then. *What do they push against out there?* There isn't any air in space—let me tell you, you're not the only one around here who knows something about science."

Bobby Carter stumbled over and collapsed on the bed, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

"There now, son," said Harold Carter, patting him on the head.

"Don't take it so hard. You get a good night's rest, and you'll forget all about it in the morning. Good night, Bobby."

"Good night, Dad."

Harold Carter left the room. He could hear Bobby coughing and gasping on the bed—crying his eyes out, the poor kid. He hated to do that to Bobby—but he had to learn sometime.

Another day passed, and night returned.

Bobby Carter took off his space ranger uniform cap and wiped his forehead, pushing the damp hair out of his eyes. It was hot in the club house they had built from plastic Martian Mush boxes in the big empty lot next to Fitzgerald's. The little hanging light in the center of the room was off-center and shifted uncertainly up and down and around and sideways, throwing grotesque shadows on the uneven walls.

"I guess that about does it," Bobby said, pushing back the last of the reports they had been working on.

"We're all ready now," said Dave Toney.

"Ready for the *real* contest tomorrow!" beamed Jim Walls, downing a bottle of Luna Cola at one gulp.

"Boy," exclaimed Dave Toney, wiping the grease off his hands on a grimy shirt-tail, "just think—"

A little red light flashed over the door.

"Someone's coming," whispered Bobby Carter.

They listened. Big, heavy, adult footsteps crunched down the path. A pause. Mr. Fitzgerald, big and burly in his trim business cloak, stuck his head in the door.

"What's going on in here?" he boomed. "You kids been working like beavers all night. Not up to anything, are you?"

"Gosh, no," Bobby told him. "We're just carrying out our secret orders and everything."

"I see. What's that thing in the corner? It looks expensive. I wouldn't want you boys stealing anything, you know."

The little group was pale and tense under the hanging light.

"That's a communicator to send in our reports with," Bobby Carter said steadily. The Old Space Ranger said that you must never lie. "We got it by sending in our box-tops."

"I *see!*" chuckled Mr. Fitzgerald tolerantly.

"We're just getting ready for the invasion," David Toney could not resist adding.

"Well, well, that's fine," boomed Mr. Fitzgerald. "Fine. Good night!"

"Good night, Mr. Fitzgerald."

Mr. Fitzgerald left and his footsteps crunched away up the path. The red light went out.

Everybody laughed.

"They just don't know *anything*," said Jim Walls.

"They can't help it," Dave Toney said seriously.

"That's it then, until tomorrow," Bobby Carter said. "You all know what to do when it happens?"

A chorus of excited yesses.

"Let's go home, then."

They filed out into the darkness, climbed on their jet cycles, and clattered away through the night. They banged down tree-arched streets under the hanging lights and lurched across dim short-cuts invisible to the untrained eye. They waved to the live policeman on the corner of Edmondson Avenue and vanished down the busy street, laughing and shouting in the summer night.

One week passed. The battle, such as it was, was over. The outcome, of course, was a foregone conclusion. Nothing in their training, history, or experience had prepared the vanquished for the forces arrayed against them. And, the victors assured themselves, it was all for the good of Earth itself.

Nothing had changed, outwardly. That was part of the plan. The people of Earth, most of them, were not even aware that anything had happened. But a few knew, and waited for the inevitable.

Bobby Carter knew.

It was ten o'clock, past his bed-time, when the knock came at the door.

"Who's that?" asked Harold Carter, peering over his paper.

"Callers—at this hour?" questioned Mrs. Carter, half rising.

"They've come for me," Bobby Carter whispered, his eyes glowing. "They've come for *me*."

The knock at the door came again.

"What the devil," said Mr. Carter, standing up.

Bobby pressed the release, and the door swished open. A man walked into the Carters' living room, but he was no ordinary man. He was not of the earth.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Harold Carter, dropping his paper.

The man smiled. He was a tall man, tall and lean, with iron gray hair and eyes the color of deep space. He was dressed in an oddly melodramatic uniform of black and silver. He should have been absurd, standing there. He should have been like Santa Caus walking in on Christmas Day, just a gag.

But the Carters looked at his eyes and were unable to laugh.

"I've come for Bobby," the man said softly, "if he wants to go."

"If I *want* to go!" gasped Bobby, trembling visibly. "If I *want*—"

Harold Carter opened his mouth and nothing came out. He stopped, swallowed, and tried again. "Just a minute," he said, and his voice was a little too loud. "Just a *minute*."

The man smiled at him, his gray hair almost white under the light.

Confronted with an utterly, fantastically unprecedented situation, Harold Carter was at a loss for words. What *did* you say when Buck Rogers, or whoever he was, walked into your living room and announced that he had come for your son? He thought of several things, and finally settled for, "Who in the hell do you think you are, Mac?"

"Dad!" Bobby looked shocked.

The man in the uniform raised an eyebrow. "My name is Leighton," he said patiently, as though he had been through this many times before and was enacting a role that was somewhat tiresome. "May I sit down?"

"No," said Harold Carter firmly, rapidly losing what remained of his temper.

"Of course the man can sit down, if he's a friend of Bobby's," Mrs. Carter corrected him. "Where are your manners?"

"*Manners?*"

The tall man sat down.

Harold Carter choked up again, stamped his foot, and forced his voice down to an audible frequency. "If I may be so crude, may I ask just what in the name of the seven blue blazes is going on in here?" he asked in a low, husky voice. "Of course, I just *live* here, that's all, and if I'm inconveniencing this gentleman from Mars . . ."

"Please," said the man softly, raising his hand. "I assure you that I'm not from the planet Mars, and—"

"I don't care *where* you're from," Harold Carter interrupted him bluntly, "but I hope they catch you and take you back."

Surprisingly, the man laughed. It was a good laugh, and everyone relaxed a little—everyone, that is, except Bobby, whose eyes were bigger than he was. "Evidently there's been some misunderstanding," the man said. "My apologies, sir, for an overly dramatic entrance. I assure you that it was not done intentionally." He glanced at Bobby reproachfully. "You see, I was under the impression that you had already been prepared for my coming."

Harold Carter shook his head. "Only in nightmares," he said,

and then lit his pipe for want of something better to do.

"I couldn't tell them," Bobby spoke up. "I just *couldn't*. They would have laughed."

The man shook his head. "Sometimes a man has to be laughed at, Bobby, if what he believes is worth believing."

"Yes, sir," said Bobby, ashamed.

"Look," said Harold Carter, a vein throbbing visibly in his forehead. "I like plays and all that, but I like to know when I'm *in* one. What are *my* lines?"

The man named Leighton sat back in his chair and lit his own pipe, which was somehow reassuring. At least he didn't just squirt flame out of his mouth, Harold Carter thought. Not yet, anyway.

"I think perhaps that I'd better begin at the beginning," the tall man said.

"By all means," Harold Carter approved. "Start with Adam, make yourself at home for a year or two, and bring us all up to date."

The man's eyes narrowed.

"Dad, Dad," Bobby whispered, a terrible fear in his voice. "You don't *understand*."

"No," the man said softly, "your father doesn't understand." He eyed Harold Carter evenly, and Mr. Carter looked away. "You see, Mr. Carter, I have the advantage here. You know nothing about me, evidently, but I know everything about you. I know what you're thinking, what you will think, what you are going to say when I'm through, and what reasons you will have for never speaking of this visit to a living soul."

There was a long silence.

"I'm listening," Harold Carter said. "Give me the Word."

But for the first time, he began to doubt.

"You must first understand," the man began, "that six days ago an event took place that will have far-reaching consequences for this planet you live on. The event was long in the planning, and was executed with precision and dispatch.

"You see, the planet Earth was invaded from Outer Space."

Mr. and Mrs. Carter just stared at the man.

"I know that this is impossible for you to accept at the moment," the man called Leighton continued, "but positive proof will be forthcoming shortly, if it is needed. This is real, I am not a lunatic, and the sooner you face the facts the easier this will be for all concerned."

Harold Carter was suddenly conscious of the night wind outside, and he remembered with a cold shock the papers he had de-

coded in his son's room. *Could it possibly be . . .*

"It's quite true," the man said, reading his thoughts. "I see that you are more disposed to listen now. Very well. I will give you some facts, and you will do well to follow them carefully."

Bobby Carter listened intently, although he had heard all this many times before. It was the old story that the man from space told, the one they all knew by heart . . .

The planet Earth had achieved deadly potentialities too early, long before the bulk of the population was ready for them. It was one thing to fight little wars with each other, however senseless. It was something else again to blow up a planet or to carry your destruction away from the Earth to other worlds that lived in peace.

These were new problems that the Earth had to face, and new problems called for new solutions. It was not enough to merely pass laws and mutter pious proclamations. An entire new generation had to be trained to cope with a new world, a world living in an inhabited universe.

Secrecy and care were essential, of course. One mistake could be the last one, the only one. The new powers must not get into the old hands. A new people, a young people, must be educated to guide the Earth out of chaos. There was only one new people on Earth.

The children.

The children had to be trained to face the future. They had to learn at last to avoid the old mistakes, the mistakes that could no longer be tolerated. Everyone agreed to that, but no one was willing to *really* do it.

But it had to be done. And it had to be done in a way that the children would understand and accept. It had to be presented to them in their own terms, and it had to be done fast. When the time came, the juvenile focus could be replaced with formal training, but the children had to *want* the training.

The older people, born and raised and moulded into the old patterns, didn't understand that their world was different, totally different. They *couldn't* understand. Their whole mental set was wrong, and could not be revamped overnight. Blunt, open action would have brought rebellions. Reformers, impractical idealists, were not the answer.

The techniques of science, of subtlety, had to be tried. It was necessary to discard what had proved to be impossible. It was necessary to try the possible, however fantastic it seemed to the mind of the layman.

The alternative was destruction.

When a boy had shown, by the reports he had turned in, that he was ready, that he really *understood*, it was time to give him a chance for formal training, so that he could take the lead in the world of tomorrow.

That was why the man had come for Bobby.

Bobby Carter could see his father and mother sitting entranced in the spell of the tall man's words. The man had been trained for his task, and he knew his business. His words, soft and even as they were, flowed together and became more than words. They became a picture, a living picture. They were alive, and they carried the Carters back.

Back to what had happened six days ago, far out in space. Back to the Occupation Fleet and what had brought it across the light years to Earth.

Bobby could *see* it, *feel* it, *hear* it. And he knew that the others could too . . .

Midnight, Earth time. Centerton sleeps under a starry sky.

D-Day minus one. D-Day when an Earth clock ticks once more. The *Titan* hovers far above the Earth, waiting.

Ten and one half units, Galactic Standard Time. The Slim cruisers of the Occupation Fleet bore past Mars, in normal space, bearing in for the kill. Men joke tensely or sleep fitfully in their bunks. The first few weeks are always hard . . .

Early morning on Nrando. An orange sun floats just below the horizon, turning the dawn clouds to flame. Men sit expectantly around a communicator, waiting.

"It's rather curious, you know. Barbaric as they are, they have one concept that exactly parallels what is going to happen to them."

"Oh?"

"Yes. An idea of infallible justice, that every man must one day face."

"And we are infallible justice, eh? What do they call it?"

"My friend, they call it Judgment Day."

D-Day.

The *Titan* swings into action, and she is not alone. From behind the silent moon, shadow shapes fall into position on white tongues of flame.

The confident cruisers of the Occupation Fleet decelerate in sudden uncertainty, just beyond the orbit of Mars. Ship commanders stare into their viewplates and do not believe what they see.

This is not part of the Plan.

The heavy equipment of the

Titan comes to life. A message electrifies the space between the two fleets.

The Occupation Fleet listen, incredulously:

"To the men of Nrando the men of Earth send greeting.

"We have long been expecting you.

"We desire no conflict, but tell you frankly that the scout ships of Nrando have been observed by this planet for fifty of our years. We tell you that we know why you have come.

"We tell you also that you must leave, on pain of death.

"The men of Earth have had spaceships for forty of our years, and the light drive for ten. Most people on our planet know nothing of this, nor do they know now what happens in the sky above their heads.

"What you have thought about us is true in part. We are young, and many of us are foolish. But the men of Earth have always solved their own problems, and will continue to do so. We will tolerate no invasion, whatever your intentions. Nor will it be possible for you to land on this planet at this time.

"We extend our pledge to you that man will never spread war to the stars from the planet Earth. That is our duty and not yours. We tell you further that we will speak of joining the Federation when we are ready for it —and when you are ready for it.

"We suggest to the men of Nrando that a civilization that is positive that its ways are right and all other ways wrong is not a civilization. You are not qualified to pass judgment, any more than we are.

"We tell you now to leave in peace.

"We will meet again.

"The alternative is death."

For a long, long moment there is nothing. The two fleets face each other in space, waiting. An invisible beam licks out from the *Titan* and a neat circle of blue energy flares into life before the invading cruisers.

The Occupation Fleet wavers. They are unprepared for what has happened. The Plan is no longer valid.

Slowly, carefully, the dark fish of the Occupation Fleet turn in a tight circle. Jets flare, and then the gray nothingness of the overdrives.

The Occupation Fleet is gone.

Morning on Nrando. The men by the communicator stare at each other blankly.

"It can't be, it can't be, it can't be."

"I'm afraid it is."

"It's impossible."

"It happened."

"But we made a mistake, a

mistake! Nrando does not make mistakes. We were doing it for them!"

"Not much of a mistake, my friend. Only a small mistake. It was as you said—Judgment Day. But it was not for Earth. It was for us."

On Earth, it is early morning.

"You have heard the story from the beginning," said the man from space. "I think you will understand now."

Mr. and Mrs. Carter jerked back to the present again with a visible effort. They were stunned, and their voices were gone. Doubt was forgotten now. There were some things in life that you *knew* were true.

The tall man smiled at them and got to his feet. "I see that you need no further proof," he said quietly, his strange dark eyes holding them like magnets. "And yet you will have your proof." He paused. "The decision, of course, is up to you. If you think what we have to offer is the life for your son, we will train him with us to be a leader in this new world we're living in. You yourselves will be taken care of, of course, and you will be able to see Bobby every summer. If your answer is stil no, we will not trouble you further. And we would advise you not to speak of this to your friends, unless you too wish to be thought insane."

The Carters couldn't answer that one, but the man's smile took the sting out of his words.

"You need not give me your answer now," the tall man said. "I will be back. And now, if you would be so kind as to accompany me—"

They followed him to the door and out into the night. Bobby stayed as close to the man as he could, hoping against hope that he would not be left behind.

"I'll be back, Bobby," the man said again.

A taut hum filled the air, very low, almost inaudible unless you were listening for it. A black shadow detached itself from the other shadows of the night and hovered down almost to the ground. There was a hiss and a portal opened. Yellow light splashed out into the darkness. The tall man stepped inside, waved once, and the portal hissed shut again. The shadow hummed and was gone.

There was silence.

Bobby held his breath for what seemed to be an infinity, waiting for the shuttle to join the mother ship. Perhaps, if he were lucky, he would be able to hear it when it happened. His parents stood behind him, waiting for they knew not what.

Would they let him go?

There! Suddenly, wonderfully,

he saw it. A tiny flash of flame, far, far above him. He didn't breathe, waiting. There—the sound and the feel. A faint roar lost in the night, and a wrench at his heart as the ship lifted upward into the starlit night.

Would they let him go?

Bobby knew that he had to go. One battle might send the Occupation Fleet back, but it could never hold them, unless there were other men trained to take up the job of protecting Earth. There were real ships up there and trained men in them who had been boys once. But more and more were needed.

Other mothers and fathers had decided, of course. They had been told the facts, and at least some of them had been willing to let their sons go out where Bobby wanted so desperately to join them.

But he remembered his father's amusement, and the way his mother had treated his need to watch the television regularly. Would they believe it all, even now? And if they did, would they give their permission? The cadets were told that most parents did, but his mother and father . . .

He turned and read the proud answer in their eyes.

Next month, Erik van Lhin's POLICE YOUR PLANET begins to branch out into the real mess that a colonial planet can get into. And when Earth decides it is time to do something about the tangled mess, the tangling becomes rather spectacular! In addition, there's an unusually fine line-up of stories. THE OTHER CHEEK, by Theodore Coggswell, begins with a raw rooky who suddenly finds himself in the middle of a galactic war —with nobody willing to believe he's in trouble. It goes on nicely from there. We have a nice job by Robert Sheckley concerning a world where all the predictions are 100% correct. Irving E. Cox, Jr., whose novelette in our first issue was so warmly praised, is back with another novelette. And there are two stories by writers who are new to us—but who've handled their ideas in a way that should make many of the old-timers sit up and whistle with envy. Finally, we're beginning a feature which has long been needed—a regular review of the fan clubs. If you know of a fan club near you, or if you belong to one and think it should receive some publicity, by all means let us know. If you don't already know about them, keep your eyes on this feature—maybe you'll find just the group you've been looking for. And meantime—keep looking for our fourth issue. Or better still, there's a coupon on page 159 which will help you be sure of getting your copies regularly!

TEN TO

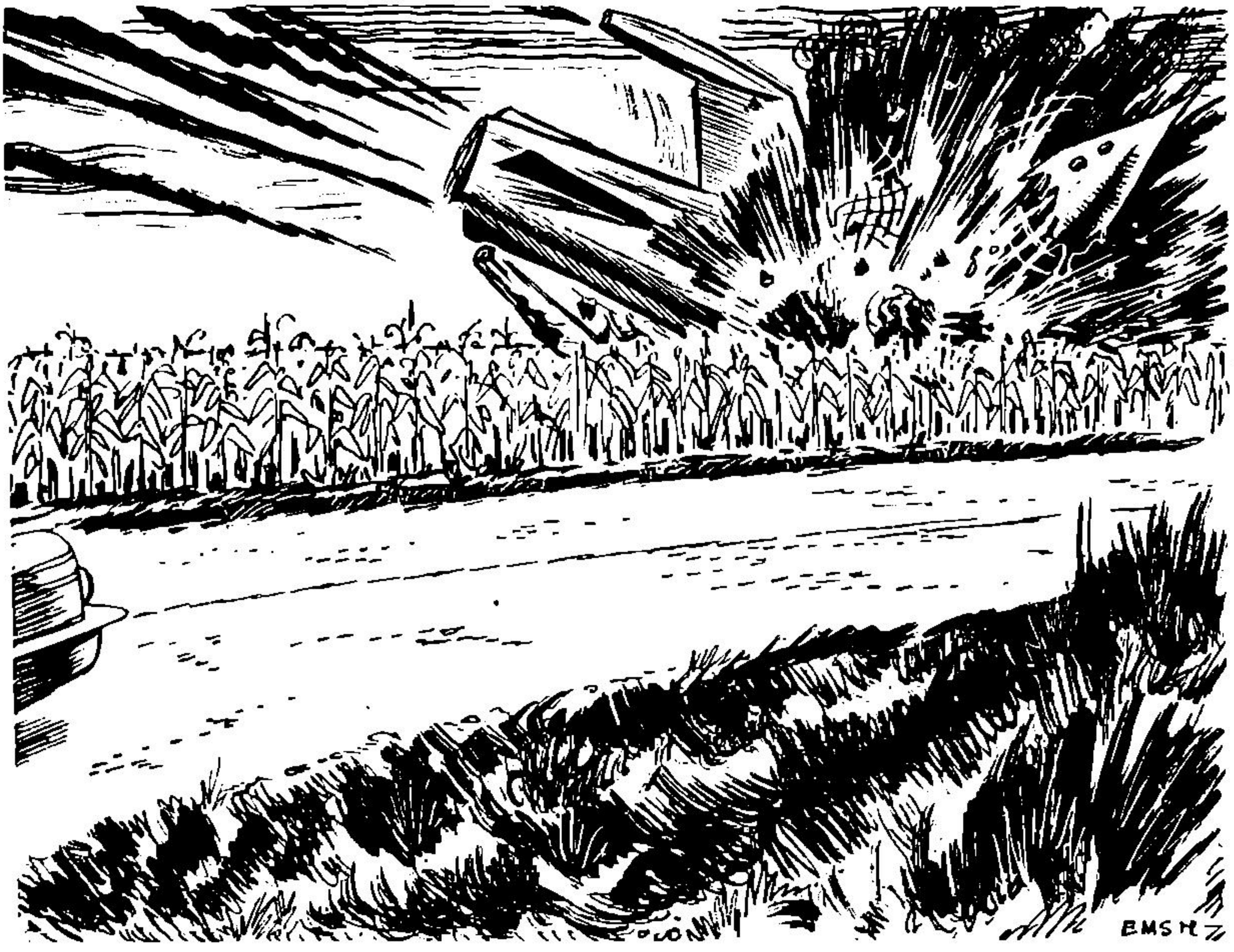


BY RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

ILLUSTRATED BY EMSH

They promised to meet again in ten years, after they'd explored all of space. It was sentimentality, of course, such as kids have always gone in for. Only, out in space, kids turn into men....

THE STARS



The official name of man's pathway to the planets was the Harmon Jet Engine Number Three, but that lasted only long enough for someone to name it the Pusher. It was appropriate —it pushed men right up from the Earth, and out into space in droves. It opened the planets to every young fool who had stars in his eyes and the ability to dig up the small sum needed to put the Pusher into a hunk of tin that could be called a ship. Like the ten who stood in the rain outside the science museum at Hume Hall, waiting to get a sneak preview of the gadget.

There was Lenz, shabby as usual. Beside him was Gannet, always laughing, with the white marks in his hair and the radiation burns he'd got in the recent war. There was Glodosky, the accident-prone medical student, flexing the fingers of a wonderful mechanical hand which had replaced the one he lost to a freak prewar infection. Beside him, Dopy Devlin, who always got high marks in science, was talking to himself as usual. Tobias was trying to sound as brash as usual, but the look in his eyes said that his motorcycle didn't mean much anymore. Roscoe, the University's star end, simply looked embarrassed, but he was the big, silent type, and that was normal.

Harwin, the ex-soldier, had come up from the rows of olive drab barracks—quiet, experienced, a little swashbuckling. Flashy Phelps had left his sleek fission-driven car parked nearby, and money had made him sure of himself, unless you looked too close. Major Benrus, the glamor soldier, might have been a garage mechanic, except for the war. But now the calm force of him couldn't stop pushing him on to victory.

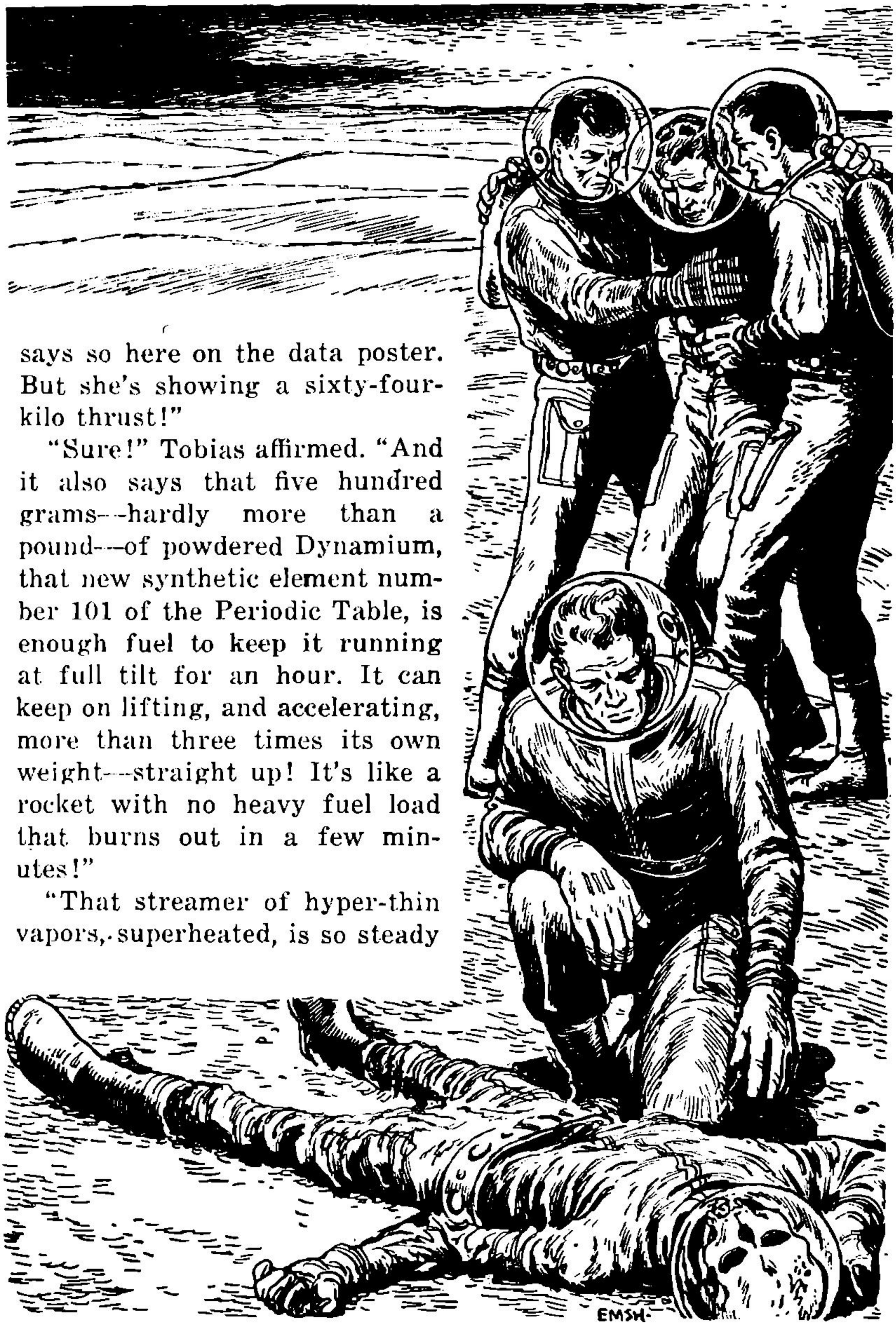
And finally, there was Little Thomas, the last—and maybe the least—of the ten. Precise, silent, excellent in mathematics, and about as noticeable as a snowflake in a blizzard.

Like a good-natured impresario, Flashy Phelps now took command. "The caretaker is opening up!" he said. "Let's roll . . ."

A minute later they stood before the invention that promised to unlock the barriers of the solar system to almost anyone who had the nerve for such adventuring. It was a shiny tube, clamped vertically in a thrust-measuring harness, inside a glass case. Around it, setting it apart by contrast, was the dusty room, dating back to the eighteen-nineties. The other displays had been set up much more recently, of course. But could one ever look at dinosaur bones, apparatus for demonstrating physical facts, or cut-and-dried star-charts, now?

The old caretaker touched a button gingerly, and a tenuous blue flame, a meter and a half long, shot down from the bottom end of the cylinder, causing it to jerk sharply upward in its thrust-harness. The protecting baffle below whitened with heat. The thick heat-and-radiation resistent glass of the case, took on a blue fluorescence. Gauge needles jumped and swung, registering.

"This model Pusher weighs only twenty kilograms," Roscoe, the football man, pointed out. "It



says so here on the data poster. But she's showing a sixty-four-kilo thrust!"

"Sure!" Tobias affirmed. "And it also says that five hundred grams---hardly more than a pound---of powdered Dynamium, that new synthetic element number 101 of the Periodic Table, is enough fuel to keep it running at full tilt for an hour. It can keep on lifting, and accelerating, more than three times its own weight---straight up! It's like a rocket with no heavy fuel load that burns out in a few minutes!"

"That streamer of hyper-thin vapors, superheated, is so steady

that it seems almost rigid," Devlin muttered. "It's hard to believe that it's really moving at seventy percent of the speed of light. It's that velocity that gives the force. Acceleration, going on for hours, could build up almost any speed . . ."

Gannet kept staring at the engraved plate on the side of the jet engine. *"Patented November 11th, 1992,"* it said. More than ever he felt as if he were inside some kind of temple to coming history which both trapped and glorified him. The others couldn't feel much different.

"This is just a model," Harwin, the ex-soldier, said hoarsely. "But we've all heard. A full-size Pusher is so simple and easy to make, that, with government subsidy because they want other worlds colonized, it costs only a thousand bucks."

To these students, some of them shabby for more reasons than the still-existing shortages, this remained a lot of money. As they were reminded of a price, their faces fell a little.

"Oh, well," Gannet said.

Regret was tempered some by relief. Perhaps the thought was shameful; but if finance kept you from doing a thrilling but fearsome thing, then you were excused with honor.

But restless young minds have always been gifted with a special talent for getting the most for the least.

Devlin's eyes were a bit wild. "Do we have to be stymied that way," he said, "when we know that if we can get the Pushers, we could build our ships with cheap war-surplus supplies?"

Everybody looked at Devlin strangely. He was a book-theorist. A soft, pedantic kid. A high-strung, sheltered screwball.

"Think your money will let you go?" Lenz taunted.

Devlin's cheeks paled. "Shut up, wiseacre," he drawled.

Then Phelps spoke with his usual flourish, saying what he had planned all along, and what was half expected of him by the others:

"I can stake you all to a reasonable amount, without strings, fellas. It's only fair. I can do that much for my buddies."

There was a tense pause, during which each man must have tried to weigh his own courage and dreams against the scare in him. Lenz was the first to answer.

"Thanks, Phelps," he said earnestly. "Count me in."

"Me, too," Tobias seconded brashly.

After that it was like ragged rifle fire.

"I'll finance myself. Pride," Harwin, the veteran, stated.

"Same here," Roscoe, the football man announced.

"I'll be another independent," Gannet declared.

"I can't swing it alone, Phelps. Thanks," little Thomas piped up. His companions stared.

But they stared more when Dopy Devlin growled: "Do you really think I'd stay out of this? Just give me a hand, Phelps!"

He was the defiant Mamma's Boy. The young pedant, the rose petal. How would he survive out there? You heard the stories of what happened even to some stolid people. If he went through with his boast, you felt that it was suicide.

Then there was Glodosky. Not exactly a stumble-bum, but with the same effect. The guy whom the paint bucket always fell on, and whom stray baseballs always hit. One of those called accident prone by statistics. A bird with a mysterious affinity for ill-luck. What would happen to him under the naked stars of space, away from the mellow scene of a campus?

Ruefully he shrugged a pair of massive shoulders, and grinned.

"You know me, fellas," he said. "But should I stay in bed all my life? Thanks, Phelps."

Phelps and Benrus didn't have to declare themselves in, for it was a foregone conclusion. Now everybody looked to Benrus for guidance. He was the oldest—twenty-five. He knew speed and power. As civilian kids they'd all seen the war. But they envied his deeper knowledge of living. It was a thing that they had to get caught up on.

Benrus' glance was sober and a bit quizzical. The others could hear sleet tapping on the windows.

"Just to be sure," he said, "we'd better each check on what we want from life."

"Philosophers are dopes to wonder what life means," Lenz answered promptly. "Food, love, sex. Getting rich, maybe. And helping to find the materials to make living better, everywhere. After the war. But sidestep the myth of perfection. The fun of life is in the struggle and the gamble, the seeing what comes out of the years. Being able to look back, feeling that you haven't missed too much—that your memory-mixture is rich, and quite a bit wild. Maybe most of all, life is to make yourself a man . . ."

"For guys like us, he's absolutely right," Gannet joined in.

He felt the truth of this boiling in his blood. And there were prompt secondings of his statement.

"Ten years from now, to the

hour," Tobias said loudly, "let's all meet in this same Hume Hall, and compare notes and adventures!"

This bit of young whimsy echoed, thin and naive, in the big room.

Benrus, the ex-flier, laughed. "Okay—let's," he said.

From that moment, in their minds, they were really on chilly, fabulous Mars with its ruins and deserts, on hot, smothered Venus, or among the crazy, wonderful Asteroids, where an inhabited planet had been blown apart, perhaps by a colossal atomic torpedo that bored to its center, to leave the artifacts of its civilization drifting, preserved by the vacuum and the cold through millions of years, in a huge orbit around the sun.

And what went on in the old garage that Phelps rented out of town, was no isolated phenomenon. All over America, and in scattered parts of the recently ripped-up world, the same strange phoenix was hatching, as youth with new technology—some of it war-born—behind it, reached for colonization of the solar system.

Here were the ghosts of all the motorcycle, plane-model and aero clubs of the past, concentrating now on bigger objectives.

Long before the ordered Pushers arrived, blueprints from supply houses became the guides for the welding of skeletons of Titanium-alloy tubing, meant originally for the frameworks of supra-atmospheric bombers. In that old garage, ten such skeletons, all about fifty feet in length, but of varying types, began to take form in a row. Fingers, some of them not as deft as others, blundered, but there was always help at hand. Within the frames, anti-radiation bulkheads, gyroscope rotors, chlorophane air-rejuvenators, and delicate electronic instruments, all meant for the bombers, and now purchased for almost nothing—were fastened into place according to precise directions in the instruction pamphlets.

Then, over the skeletons, went the thick skin of insulated metal-sheathed plastic. Its seams were sealed and rubbed smooth, and tested for leaks. After that, the cabins—usually cylindrical, where a man could only lie prone and strapped to the padding before his observation window—could be arranged some according to personal taste: Supply lockers here, water tanks there, pin-up girls here, and so on.

Maybe it was no surprise after all that in the late spring, shy, precise little Thomas completed his ship and bolted his Harmon Pusher into its tail two

days ahead of his companions. Moreover, the government safety inspectors said that his craft was the best, and showed the finest workmanship of the lot.

Perhaps Thomas got a bit scared, then. Or maybe hero worship cropped out in him. Anyway he said:

"You test-fly it, Benrus. Show us how."

So, on the next Saturday morning, from a nearby vacant field, the war flier took it straight up for a thousand miles, on its thin streamer of fire. And most of the way Benrus' roúgh laugh came back to the listeners by radio:

"Beautiful ship, Thomas! . . ."

But it came down in a vertical power dive. Benrus' mistake was to fly it manually, instead of switching in the delicate robot controls that space-craft are meant to use. Perhaps Benrus wasn't as fit as he used to be, blacking out under acceleration at the wrong instant.

Anyway when Phelps drove with the gang for ten wild miles, the farmer told them that his potato field had splashed like water. The hole in the ground still glowed and smoked with the heat of impact. Of Benrus there wasn't much left to bury or cremate.

Just the same, here was Phelps' chance to decide that it was his duty to run the food company he owned, himself, instead of delegating the job to others. Or for Glodosky to remember his jinx and unfinished medical studies. Or for others to consider the worries of their families. Gannet, himself, almost wished he weren't an orphan. Anyway, the key-man and main prop of the crowd's project was gone. But for Thomas, it might have withered like a rotten apple.

He had built the death ship. He turned ghastly pale; then green. Then he lost his dinner—which is not a romantic or delicate way to show grief. Two big tears made the mess worse. But he said without phony dramatics:

"I guess Benrus used up all his luck in the war. So I take his ship, *Gremlin's Roost*. And not to Mars, like I wanted. But to Venus, where he meant to go."

What he could do, the others felt compelled to equal.

"Stick to Mars," Tobias urged him later, with a touch of hysteria. "You know that Venus is no lovers' dream. Days and nights weeks long. Crazy seasons because of the extreme tilt of the planet's axis to the plane of its orbit. Smothering heat, then smothering blizzards. An atmosphere mostly of carbon-dioxide. No place for anybody but a fa-

natical scientist. Like living in a dark hole—breathing canned air. Be smart, kid! . . ."

Tobias looked tough and Thomas looked weak. With his nerve Thomas propped the sagging project. And in another way Tobias did the same.

His case headed up several days later, when he brought a dark, fiery, and very pretty little girl to the workshop. Or maybe she insisted on coming.

"I'm here to tell you fellows," she said evenly, "that Toby is through with all this."

Gannet felt the meaning of this scene just as the others must have. An ancient situation. The sweetheart with all of a woman's capacity for gentleness and fury. The guy protected and possessed for his good or his detriment. Because she loved him, and had her own ideas. Because, partly, those ideas were his, too. Kids and a home. Tender, secret moments. Yeah, there was substance to such thinking, too.

Tobias looked sour, shamed, and pleading. Yet he defied his companions and the half of himself that sought to prove his strength and to satisfy a burning romantic curiosity to see the strangest of the strange.

His lips jutted. "I can't help it, gang!" he growled. "I'm not twins! I can't cut myself in halves and go two ways! Kitty's right! I'm staying with her! But it's not because I'm yellow! Damn you all—you understand that, don't you! . . ."

"Sure, Tobias," Phelps tried to soothe honestly. "We understand. We'll have wedding presents sent, and we wish you both the best of luck and happiness . . ."

But the gang's inner contempt had to harden its remaining members. For they had to be above the thing they despised . . . Gannet wished mightily to escape the stigma of the white feather. And could it be any different with the others?

"Scratch two," Gannet said later. "Benrus and Tobias."

Eight ships hissed up from the rented field the next day. You don't reasonably fly space craft manually. Speeds are too great; controlling is too finely timed. Nobody monkeyed with the pilot instruments. So the test flights were all successful. There were no more ruined potato patches to be paid for.

Dopy Devlin came back, pale, but lost in a rapturous daze. "I saw the stars at noon!" he muttered. "And the black sky with the air ripped off and the stars white hot! . . ."

They were all cocky, triumphant, and relieved of brass-flavored scare. Even Glodosky.

Though a humble wonder showed in him.

"I got back down, Gannet!" he enthused. "Here I am without a scratch on me! Maybe my jinx is busted. Maybe I'll make it to the moon with you and Devlin . . ."

Gannet shook Glodosky's cold mechanical hand, just then realizing that these two would be companions. Phelps and little Thomas were plotting their courses to Venus, as their first venture. Not so good, some thought. Lenz, Roscoe, and Harwin meant to shoot straight out to the Asteroid Belt.

Some minutes later, Harwin took Gannet aside, and gave him the gently insolent, suit-yourself advice of an older man who has faced danger many times, and has drawn shrewdness from experience.

"The moon, eh, Gannet?" he said with a slow grin. "Getting into things by slow stages—like some people going into ice water?"

Gannet chuckled. "That's about it," he said. "The moon's the nearest."

"Umhm-m—that's one way of approaching an unknown that could finish you sometime," Harwin told him. "With caution. Me—I like the long, deep dives better. I already talked Lenz into switching from Venus to the Asteroids. The farthest place, the newest, the best. It ain't the culture of the Old Planet that blew up that's so important. It's that the whole metal insides of a world are laid open for easy mining. You know that the Earth has a heart that is largely gold, too. But who can get at it? And who wants gold, anyway? It'll be almost worthless, now. Think of almost pure uranium instead. The power source of the future is out there. And no end of industrial metals . . . Come on, be smart, Gannet. I like Glodosky. Too bad a good guy has to be a Jonah. But some of his luck might rub off on you. As for Devlin, when he mumbles to himself I wonder how the doctors can call him emotionally fit."

Gannet felt a sharper twinge of worry. But a stubborn and adventurous perversity hit him.

"I like to do things my way, Harwin," he laughed. "Step by step, not skipping anything. And I haven't seen the moon. Maybe we'll meet out there in your Asteroid Belt sometime before long . . ."

It was mellow June, and the bunch graduated. Then some went home to visit their folks, and to say so long for a while. Thomas, Devlin, and Glodosky were all under twenty-one, but nobody kept any of these at the

last minute, from space. Their intentions were an accepted thing everywhere, nowadays. Gannet was nineteen, but he was an orphan.

Some of the crowd brought relatives back to see the takeoff. Devlin's mother came. And his sister. Devlin's mother was a prim little woman, different from what Gannet had suspected. Hard. But maybe naive, too. She seemed to think her boy was just going on a picnic, when she said to Gannet:

"He's a strange kind of son . . ."

Kath Devlin was just budding out of the awkward age—with great promise. Her pale brat's eyes dug at the ships with such interest that Gannet said jauntily for her to hear:

"Before we get started, we'd better check for stowaways, fellas!"

Kath met this compliment with a pout and a blush and a look of murder. Too bad for her that she wasn't a boy.

Phelps' smooth Bett was there, and Lenz' Mary. Mary showed the hurt of long neglect. Bett masked her injury with a light and cheerful indifference.

"We used to know each other —for laughs," she said. "Good luck."

Phelps bowed, and patted her cheek. "Thanks, Bett," he said earnestly. But his former sartorial elegance still showed in the neat coverall he was wearing.

The ships started out almost together. With the power of the Harmon Pushers to depend on, waiting for special favorable moments for a takeoff to any given destination was no longer necessary. You plotted your trajectory to fit the time that was convenient.

Two ships flashed sunward. Three arced around the Earth to head in the opposite direction. Three more climbed more cautiously moonward. None dared to use full power. And all joined the general restless flow outward, to colonize the solar system.

Not many hours later, Gannet watched his ship slide down backwards on its jets, to a velvet landing by instrument. Then, in a space armor that was really a high-altitude suit for bomber crewmen, he was stumbling through the dust of thermal erosion, and through the daze in his mind. The feeble lunar gravity confused his feet.

There was the mountain ringwall of Copernicus all around him, one half of it shoving the black fangs of undiffused shadows toward the blazing sunlight on the crack-lined lava around his boots. There were the brittle stars and the inky, airless sky.

The Earth was high, and fuzzy blue-green, but he had the frightening impression that it was really far beneath him, and that he would never be able to climb down again.

There were the clusters of glinting metal igloos that showed man's presence, even where there was no natural air to breathe. And he was moving toward them. His ears rang with the silence. But in his brain was the thought that he hadn't gone hysterical in space as some guys still did. Even the weightlessness, which felt exactly like falling, had brought him no panic. That much was proven. There was that much growth. He was that much of a man. And to the extent of what was around him, so much of burning curiosity was satisfied. He was on the moon! This was his personal conquest!

Devlin and Glodosky he had hardly troubled to notice, but now their voices came to him by helmet radio:

"We made it—we got here!" Glodosky was saying thickly. And the words were more pointing out of triumph.

Devlin's tone quavered, either in terror or ecstasy. The sourness in him was gone. "Luna," he was saying, as if in apostrophe. "What was it like when it was brand new—back two billion years? Great meteors falling. Smoking craters. Hot lava. The vapors that might have formed an atmosphere, leaking away into space, because the gravity was too weak to hold them . . ."

"Yeah—we know," Gannet growled. "Here come the security police."

Martial law compelled you to work, here. That was to be expected, and Gannet and his companions accepted the fact as natural. Even the air you breathed had to be labored for—removed chemically from the oxides in the rocks.

For Gannet it was all wonderful, at first. You slept in a dorm dug deep under the lava, sealed, white-walled, spotless. Your life was as coordinated as the parts of a watch. You ate vegetables grown in vaults, under sunlamps.

Devlin was put to work in those gardens. Glodosky refused a hospital job for ruggeder work digging more tunnels and vaults —extending Earth's hold on its nearest colony. So Gannet and he were doing the same things. Other young men were around them, with histories paralleling their own. And it was good to be building something human and proud.

Gannet kept his high spirits while Glodosky's cheeks hollowed with homesickness, and while Devlin, mumbling, withdrew deeper into himself, causing

other men to look at him askance.

Gannet didn't know quite what to do about Devlin; but to Glodosky he said encouragingly:

"Feeling low can happen to anybody, pal. You'll straighten out."

"Sure I will," Glodosky affirmed.

But the nostalgia was his undoing. Befogged by it, he wandered right into danger, when somebody forgot to put up a safety rail, during blasting. Glodosky's jinx was still around.

Advanced medical science could keep him alive, and patch him up, but it couldn't give him back his own legs. He was fixed up right there in the lunar hospital; and when it was over—well—you couldn't tell the difference.

His legs, now, were like his right hand. They looked like flesh on the outside, even to the dark hairiness. But inside each there was a motor, and many steel cables, and a small atomic battery. Platinum wires finer than spiderweb were connected to nerve-ends in the stumps of Glodosky's real limbs, to pick up the minute neurotic currents. These were amplified, and used to direct the movements of Glodosky's new underpinnings just as if they were the ones he had originally been born with.

But it took three lunar months. Time for the novelty of being on the moon to wear thin in Gannet. Time for his mind to get into mischief, thinking of the discipline exercised by officials whose natures were perhaps harshened by the harsh lunar scene. There were the "forbidden" notices. Ah, yes—it was good to dig more sublunarian chambers, but you never got close to anything important.

The great fortress, that could range all of Earth with its guided missiles, was closed to you—the place that was meant to check future wars which didn't seem likely to come anymore, but somehow might anyway—Man had grown wary of himself, and of his old hopes of being finally civilized.

You never got close to the great astronomical observatory, either, or to the vast research labs, where more wonderful newness was being figured out, far from the Earth, and where extensive populations would not be wiped out, were there an accident. Such places were for the elite. Or that was the bitter, inaccurate thought. Thus you never became an aware part of the moon's greatest meaning in the invasion of space. That was for the experts—those who were investigated and put under contract on Earth. You were of the

bums, the drifters who came on their own, and were always suspect.

Gannet fought such bitter thinking—with scant success. Being off the Earth changed everybody. Or was it life that did that? As soon as you broke its placid surface, and struck out to do something big and dangerous, your view of yourself and everything began to shift. A thing once yearned for could turn to venom inside you. A friend could seem an enemy. Or vice versa.

In his restlessness he began to hate the moon. He felt responsible for Glodosky—tied to him. He thought about little Thomas. Deep in Venus he should be. If something hadn't gone wrong. And how about Harwin, Roscoe and Lenz? Out in the Belt! While he was only on the moon, stuck, left behind, outpaced! He was almost as bad as Tobias and his Kitty and his cowardice.

Glodosky was back, working in the tunnels, for less than an hour when Gannet said to him:

"I'm going, fella. Out after Harwin and the others. Maybe you and Devlin better go home."

Glodosky's eyes lighted. "Unh-unh," he grunted. "I have my own ship. I go where I please."

A half hour after Gannet got into space with the ship that had been stored at the port, two other well-known craft were tailing him. He cursed under his breath. What was he supposed to be, a nursemaid? He could cheerfully have killed Glodosky and Devlin just then.

But being in motion once more, and on some kind of obscure quest, had lightened his inner nature. So, after a moment he smirked wryly into his radio and said:

"Okay. I guess you guys didn't find yourselves on the moon anymore than I did."

The acceleration produced by just one Earth-gravity of force, operating for an hour, builds a velocity of something over twenty miles per second. And the Harmon Pushers could do better than that. But maybe it's not so good to go much faster than fifty miles per second, because, for one thing, you have to slow down for a landing. Even so, distance is eaten up fast. A million miles in a bit more than five hours.

But Gannet and his friends didn't get to the Asteroid Belt, then. Yeah—the reason was Glodosky. A brace in his ship snapped under the strain of acceleration, tore a big hole in the hull skin, and let his air out. All he could do was lie in his cabin in space armor, and sweat, and sound scared.

No, you couldn't desert him,

even if he begged you to—which he didn't. Sixty hours later, with Glodosky almost gone from thirst, since he had had no emergency flask of water inside his space suit, they soughed down through a tenuous atmosphere of nitrogen, mixed with small quantities of carbon-dioxide, water vapor, and oxygen. They were down on the wide sweep of the space port of a place called Cross Valley, soon afterward.

"I'm kind of glad we could come," Devlin said through his helmet radio. "Thanks, Glodosky, for being a clunk—this time."

His eyes were bright and interested. He kicked at the dry ground, and with a quizzical intensity watched the thin wind—air pressure was only one-point-two pounds per square inch, compared to fourteen-point-five, Earth norm—blow a little cloud of dust toward a lazily turning anemometer atop a gleaming laboratory structure of Earthly design.

Gannet was glad that he was here, too. Cross Valley was one-third several years old, its hemicylindrical corrugated-metal buildings caked with dust; and it was two-thirds yesterday-new and shining. All buildings were hermetically sealed, to confine breatheable air, of course. The new part was to meet the needs of the flood of wanderers who had come to Mars by virtue of the Harmon Pusher.

Gannet looked at the town, that sprawled in mid-afternoon sunshine from a weak sun not much more than half the diameter, in the greater distance, than it used to have, seen from Earth. Yet its brilliance was undiminished in the frostiness that must be creeping into the air from a high of fifty degrees, F., at noon.

And he looked beyond the town to the umber hills, toward which the trails led in all directions. Young men followed those trails, now, to hunt for—well—whatever they found. Wealth, the solution of some mystery, a mood that was yearned for, or death. Nobody yet knew fully what Mars might be good for in the new scheme of things.

The fabulous Martians had been wiped out long ago. But in return they had smashed even the planet of their enemies. Something ached in Gannet, and it was as cold as the thought of empty pockets far from home—even though he was now flush from recent pay. It was cold and lonely, but there was freedom in it, far from the crowded Earth. The scene fitted the feeling, too. The soft tones of dusty color, and the hard blue of the sky. The

peace was that of a small, cold planet, sinking toward death.

Gannet's gaze pulled itself nearer, to explore the vast, flat bottoms of the two valleys that crossed, here—through telescopes they would once have been called "canals," and they may have been artificial.

No water was in them now, of course. There was just a great, rusty mound a mile away—the ruin of some machine. Monoliths loomed, wind and dust scarred, until their bas-reliefs were all but obliterated. There were sparse growths that he had read about. They had scientific and common names.

The low shag-trees had paper-dry whorls, the color of an old hornets' nest, faintly patinaed with moss. The grubbers looked like huge gobs of hard tar, left to flatten irregularly in hot sunshine. But they were covered with little crinkles, like lichen. They were hoarders. They stored not only moisture inside their massy forms, but the oxygen that they produced from carbon-dioxide—as all green plants do—as well. They didn't liberate it to the atmosphere but compressed it into hollow spaces in their horny shells. Such economy on Mars was necessary. There was so little oxygen in the air. And during the bitterly cold nights the stored supply served to maintain an animal-like tissue heat in them by slow oxidation.

Gannet thought of this, and of many other things. In the town, through the thin plastic of his helmet, he heard muffled hammering. Absently he decided that a home-made space ship, powered with a Harmon Pusher, was exactly like a covered wagon. This was exaggeration.

"Hey, Devlin!" Gannet croaked. "Can I go into your unpunctured ship cabin and take off my helmet, so I can have a drink of water? Before I shrivel?"

This plaintive request aroused Gannet from his thoughts.

"Come on," he said. "Let's try the town. Beer, maybe. Five bucks a bottle. Unless the Harmon Pusher has already cut the cost of transportation. But what the hell. . ."

They entered a nearby hut by its airlock. There was a restaurant. And because of an inevitable need in a place like Cross Valley, there was also an inevitable friendly man who grinned and said, "Do you birds want to work?"

No—that doesn't have to be a crooked proposition, even on a frontier. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it must be okay...

Before sunset, Gannet, Glodo-

sky, and Devlin had signed up. Their ships went into storage again. And in the blackness of the night, with the stars blazing, and with Phobos, the nearer moon—not round, but a small jagged chunk crawling eastward among them, they were aboard a crawler—inside its heated air-tight cabin—while its caterpillar treads ground at the valley floor and then at the desert, where the temperature must have dropped to eighty below zero, at least.

They rode all night, cross country, and thin winds covered their tracks by blowing dust, and fine salt from oceans that had died a hundred millions of years ago. They didn't know where they were going, except from what Bart Lasher, the driver who had hired them, had said. "A couple of hundred miles west. Wait and see—you'll like it. . ."

"Yeah—I like it already," Devlin said. "I used to dream of Mars when I was a kid. And here it is. Deserts, valleys, strange life, ruins. Fifty million years ago its people died. In a big scrap across space. . . And now civilization is coming. Of people. Not—*beings*. Corruption and cheating are here already. The rest comes later. . . The dome cities. The harmony. The governments and politics . . ."

Devlin talked on and on. But you never could quite tell whether he was being fervent or sarcastic. . . Sometimes they all dozed—like hoboes riding a freight long ago. But mostly they didn't.

In the night they passed huge broken dams and rusted pumping stations rimed with frost, squeezed out of the dryness by cold. And strange towers loomed against the stars. And in the dawn there was a white haze of tiny frostcrystals, lying low in the valleys.

At 10 a.m., by watches that had been retarded 37 minutes and 23 seconds from the daily Earth norm, they arrived at a small camp of nisson huts at the foot of a bluff which was the mound of a city. The huts, dust plastered, were marvelously camouflaged by nature.

They liked being here at first. They couldn't help it. It was so new to them. The bunks were not as clean as on the moon. But good enough. And the food came from Earth, in dehydrated forms. Water was flown in from the snows hard hoarfrost of the south polar cap a thousand miles away. Things were better than they had expected, and that was a surprise that lifted them from the dumps. And you expected guys who had stayed here a long time to look tough,

didn't you. Tough and full of grouches? It was natural.

So they went to work, digging into the strata of that bluff Sometimes you used shovels, sometimes fine knives, and sometimes even brushes as fine as a painter of portraits uses. For care was the nature of the work. It was like archeology with a heavily commercial angle. For what you found were exquisitely colored tiles. Bowls of stone or porcelain. Most were broken, of course. But there were ways to patch them together so that the breaks couldn't be seen. But it was important to find all the pieces that you could. For it was hard to make restorations. And then the price dropped, on Earth, in the art salons where stuff like this brought minor fortunes. It was a new fad. . .

Throckson, the boss, explained some of this, but he didn't explain all of it. Yet it didn't take many days to get the general drift. Throckson was long and lean, and near fifty. And he could handle himself pretty well. And he matched an old mold. The man who had come to a frontier to win wealth and power by whatever means came to hand. Sometimes he still looked the professor of literature that he claimed to have been. But he had a system, now. Also pretty cut and dried, in a way. It had no aspects of violence, except for the young roughnecks he kept around in case somebody got aggressively difficult. Otherwise, you did your work, you got paid and fed. And you could quit if you wanted to. Only, no means of transportation was provided back to Cross Valley, the nearest settlement. Moreover, ostensibly for greater freedom and comfort while working, your regular space suits were taken from you, and you were issued a lightweight coverall with an oxygen helmet, suitable for Mars. It really was more comfortable. But it carried only lightweight oxygen tanks, instead of regular air purifiers. And in the cold of the Martian night it would never be any good.

"They'll give your space suits back, too—if you ask for them," a big youth who looked as though he'd soaked up all the ruggedness of the solar system, told Gannet bitterly. His name was Hellers. . . "Only, there's always something wrong with those suits. A tear you can't fix. Or a missing part. . . Oh, sure—lots of men have quit and started out, crazy mad. Do you think they ever got to Cross Valley? You guess. There's no life for men in Martian air."

Gannet never cursed or any-

thing. Not audibly. Nor did Glodosky. Both looked scared. And sober. And wise after being dumb. But what good did it do? Think, maybe? Figure out an angle?

As for Devlin—well, any time now. He worked all right. He kept the color in his cheeks. But he'd lost four-fifths of his contact with reality. He looked at things with a kind of half smile —but he seemed to look more beyond them, or through them. The hills around. The gorge or "canal" extending away. And he muttered—not even looking embarrassed any more. You could catch what he said, sometimes.

"Sea roar. Surf on beaches. Here. Once. Like Earthly geology. Similar. Not the same. Coal formed in the same way, though. In swamps. Before intelligence developed. Pulpy things without bones that corresponded to the dinosaurs. Blue sky. Rain. The air was never dense, though. Low gravity. High atmospheric expansion. . . And never a very warm climate. Then the Martians. Things that stood up on legs without bones, and made the first spears. . . Can you see them in the darkness? Half visible. . . Gone. . . It's figured out a little, isn't it? But there's lots more. Fossils. Pieces of machinery. Pumps can be understood. Engines. But much can't be understood. I wonder what a Martian would think a table fork was for, or a lady's powder puff? . . ."

Poor Devlin—made of softer stuff. And what good would he be when trouble came? Well, he'd die fast, anyhow.

And a couple of times Glodosky said: "I wish I was like Tobias. Home with a woman. He's no fool."

Gannet didn't even agree, audibly. It went without saying, now. Aspects had changed, utterly.

No plan of action was made. Events just blossomed out by themselves in mid afternoon, two weeks after Gannet and his companions had arrived. A tough old man took issue with Throckson. It didn't matter what the argument was about. There were too many possible subjects. Throckson knocked the man down, pulled him erect, and repeated the process. The man's light helmet was torn from him, and he gasped in the thinness. But Throckson, with a smirk on his face kept pounding, even after the man's bloodied lips began to turn blue with the cyanosis of asphyxia. . .

Maybe it was a cold, dispassionate thing on Throckson's part. Part of a plan of periodic intimidation for everybody. To

maintain order, later. Of course he started a riot. Someone took a swing at him, too, and he went down. Gannet got the second poke in, and it also had good results. Then the pug-uglies went to work, and everybody had to quiet down, or run. Some did run for a ways. But most of them came back to surrender, because they didn't want to die.

Five didn't come back. They were too full of rage to surrender. To knuckle down. There was Gannet. And Hellers. And another big guy with a soft drawl. And there was Glodosky, who might have gone back, if Gannet had gone with him. Maybe Devlin's motives were the same as Glodosky's—if his mind had any rational motives left.

They straggled down the valley among the boulders and the corkers and the grubbers—those queer Martian growth. Enraged, Gannet, Hellers, and the other big man forged away from camp for almost an hour without thought of consequences. But the sun was sinking, and that meant ninety below zero. Also, their oxygen tanks were low. There was no food or water. Cross Valley was two hundred miles of this kind of wilderness, away. A pale haze of frost was gathering high in the air, already. . .

Gannet growled to his companions. "Throckson got free of law out here. It was easy. Why —in a hundred years, when Mars ought to have many people on it, and cities, there probably will be hundreds of thousands of square miles of desert that nobody has put a foot onto. There can't be any law in such country except nature. . ."

His wits began to come back out of the blur of blind rage. But enough fury remained to stimulate ingenuity. And there was fear of the lengthening shadows, and of frosty cold creeping through the coverall, to add to that. The blue shadows. The quiet scene took on the taint of death. But the question of how to breathe was more pressing. Oxygen. Oxygen. . .

The grubbers had it. If there was any way to make use of it. Martian plants were like Earth plants. They liberated oxygen from carbon-dioxide under the action of sunlight. They made starch molecules by hooking the carbon to water molecules drawn from the dry air, too. Photosynthesis. A function of chlorophyll. But Martian plants couldn't be wasteful. Especially the grubbers. They kept moisture sealed in their hard bulbous forms. And the free oxygen, too. They couldn't let it go. It was too precious. To maintain a faint body warmth by slow combustion at night. That was the way

they had learned to survive the nocturnal cold, and the harshened climate.

All right—what good was having read about all that? It was like saying that there is iron in most any kind of soil, when you needed to make yourself a knife. . .

He kept right on going, away from camp, though. He wouldn't go back. Dying was bad, but not a bad enough alternative. He didn't tell Devlin or Glodosky or the others to go back. He was through with that. They were supposed to be grown men. If they weren't entirely that, was it his responsibility? He felt worn out.

But the sun sank out of sight. It gilded the castle-like crags of the gorge walls far ahead, for awhile after that. But the stars came out brilliantly, and the speck of the Earth, attended by the lesser speck of the moon, and it seemed a dream that he had ever been to either place. The cold deepened, and gnawed at his fingers and his lips. And after that—well—desperation took him, and he seemed just to follow his nose, doing all he could.

He found a soft spot of dust underfoot, and began to dig a hole into it, barehanded, and dog-fashion. "Dust insulates against cold," he said to anybody who would listen. If you listened hard enough, you could hear, on Mars, even through a thin helmet, without the intervention of radiophones.

Then he tore at the grubbers, and threw the pieces into the deep hole. Hundreds of pounds of the stuff—even on Mars. Then he packed the whole business over with dust, mounding it high, stamping it down for a kind of seal.

At long last he really burrowed—like a worm going into the ground. He pushed dust backward, plugging his point of entrance behind him. He got down a yard or more to the grubber fragments, and with his gloved fingers, he tore them apart. They half exploded with little pops, from the pressure of the almost pure oxygen sealed up in spongelike cavities within. Maybe it would work. Maybe it was a new invention, sort of. Maybe his companions would catch on to what he was trying to do, and follow suit. He hardly cared, one way or another.

He got his helmet off, and tried to breathe. There was a thin atmosphere sealed up around him. But it was mostly oxygen. He found out that, for the moment, he could get along. There were little dewdrops of water inside the cavities in the grubbers. He

lapped at them. And though he wasn't hungry yet, he chewed some of the fibrous pulp, and sucked it dry. There had to be some slight food value at least, in most any plant. The stuff tasted faintly sweet, and there was an oiliness on his tongue. Maybe there was nothing in it to kill him. So this was an experiment. Maybe it could keep him going.

He tore up more chunks of grubber, to free more oxygen. Then he tried to sleep. It didn't work, then. And in an hour, by the luminous dial of his watch, he had to rip up still more grubber parts. Once he succeeded in sleeping—only to awaken from a nightmare of suffocation. That was near dawn, when the awful cold was beginning to dig down to him. By then he didn't have many unused grubber fragments left. His head ached terribly. Well, maybe he'd figured out a way of sorts to keep alive. But as much or more depended on endurance. Two hundred miles! Well—no. Say a hundred and ninety-three, now. They'd already come part way. But he bet that other guys had thought of his technique before. And had any come through alive? Not that he knew of.

He put his helmet back on, and let the dregs of the contents of his oxygen flask flow into it, and dug up to daylight. He saw then that the others had paralleled his scheme exactly. Digging deep holes, mounding up dust over the pulp of the grubbers. And the others had already emerged. They'd even added a new wrinkle, that Gannet figured would have come to him too.

Stuff your oxygen helmet, except for the absolute minimum needed for your head and vision, with fragments of those same plants. Put the helmet on. Start ripping the fragments apart with your teeth. The key point of course was, that on Mars, with lungs full of concentrated but expanded oxygen, you could go without your helmet, and without breathing, for most of a minute. But you had to work fast.

Gannet worked the trick himself, and then said: "Come on—let's go!" One thing was in their favor. There were plenty of the queer plants they needed growing in the flat canal bottom ahead. If that hadn't been so they would have had to try to carry a supply. Which wouldn't last long. Well—that time might come. If they had that much good luck.

His mood was waspish. His nerves tore at his mind, and the awful desolation around him tore at his nerves. Mars' charm

was gone for him, now. And this valley was what you'd call a fertile region—comparatively! What a place to kick off in! He ached mightily to tear Throckson apart. Maybe the fury of revenge in him was the one force that sustained his efforts to keep alive. Sometime. Some way.

Hellers and the other guy were in worse shape than he was. "Three greenhorns we got on our hands, too—Mic," he growled to his companion. "Like having babies to take care of. Especially Mumblehead, here! He was nuts at the start. . . He'll go loopy at the next turn. Well—you don't catch me trying to hold him down! . ."

Gannet growled under his breath, as he saw Hellers' twisted thinking. Baby, huh? He'd given Hellers and Mic the tip about the grubbers, that enabled them to still be alive, hadn't he? He fought for self control to keep from leaping at Hellers. But he hated Devlin too, just as he worried about him. Devlin with the kiddish pink cheeks, the eyes with the cherubic look that had lost all grasp of reality, now. And his mumbles that you couldn't hear the words of, in that thin muffling air. But he spoke up loud enough a few times, so that the sounds came through his helmet, and across the small distance to the other men.

"Swell picnic, fellas. Nice to be along. . ."

Every fifteen minutes or so the grubber pieces in the helmets had to be changed for fresh stock. But the march went on. Lying behind some rocks they found a corpse in a Mars suit. He'd managed to steal an extra oxygen flask, it seemed, from Throckson's camp, on some previous occasion. But both his flasks were empty, now. And all that Glodosky, who went through his clothes with shaking fingers, found on him was a crumpled letter from a little place in Illinois. It was signed, Mom. His name was Fetterly. Burt Fetterly. Yeah—take it along for identification. Maybe. . .

After that the daze began to close in on Gannet. When the sun got higher, aches began to afflict his body. Something like the bends in that thin air, maybe. But you had to keep going. Thirst was on his tongue from the dryness. And the drops he kept licking from inside the spongy cavities, didn't seem to help as much as they must have. Without them he would have been in a lot worse shape.

Sometimes they had to carry huge bundles of grubbers across desolate stretches. Bundles fastened to their backs with fibers torn from the corkers—those strange treelike growths. In the

fifty degree heat of noon, Gannet felt hot and feverish. But maybe the fever was a good thing. He didn't lose so much moisture from his body, sweating.

They bedded down that evening, as they had the evening before. They were near a vast pavement of rusted iron, to which areas of white glaze still clung. Lord only knew what it was for. The millions of years and the thoughts and purposes of rough skinned creatures who hadn't been men, and who were long extinct, hid that. And who cared, now, anyway? . . Maybe they'd covered twenty-five miles that day.

Two days later, around noon, Hellers blew up. Gannet watched it happen as he might have watched a dream that he didn't believe in. Hellers just ran off toward the low hills of the widened valley. His screams turned swiftly fainter. The other man, Mic, took off after him. And what were you supposed to do about it? Try a rescue? Where did you find the energy for that, or the concentration of mind, even if there was any good or any reality in all that? Gannet half wanted to run, himself. Sure, it was an impulse to try to escape. From aching feet and body, and strain that went on and on and on. . . Why he didn't, then, was maybe that he kind of lost interest. He just kept plodding, with the mumbled conversation of Glodosky and Devlin droning, without words or meaning in his ears. . .

Every time he replenished the Martian plant-life in his helmet he did so more clumsily, and with less interest, as if he were going to sleep. Near sundown, all he did was give up—flopping over in a faint.

He woke up with his helmet stuffed again, and with Devlin with all the old sourness out of his nature, talking to him very gently: "Easy, pal. We've gone almost half way. We can make it. We can bed down here for the night."

Devlin's voice was scratchy as with great thirst, but his words were perfectly rational. And Gannet found himself almost hating the thought. Devlin the kid, the Mamma's Boy, the crackpot from the start, the softheaded dreamer, still on his feet, and still—or again—able to talk straight, when this day two guys of large and ugly proportions and long experience with Mars, had gone to their certain deaths, raving nuts. . . While he himself, who had always looked down on Devlin, had worried about him, was also near to coming all in pieces. He met the

truth of it now with a poisonous resentment, which said that all the natural laws of human nature were off beam, when it came to places beyond the Earth.

But as Devlin continued speaking, Gannet knew that a conviction of Devlin's advantage had been growing in him all the time.

"Listen, Gannet," Devlin said. "I found out that I've got something most people haven't got. All Hellers and that other mug could see here was the terrible desolation. I've been seeing a lot more. Mars as it was way back—just after the planets were thrown off from the sun. Mars with its first life—perhaps in its small salty oceans of those times. Mars in a stone age. Then, grown old, but at the peak of its civilization. Exploring space, even. Establishing a few colonies. Then, Mars at war with its nameless neighbor. To the complete smashing of one, while the people of the other were wiped out. And maybe Mars of the future, too. See what I mean. Reverie and dreams, under control, can be a good thing, Gannet. Velvet padding between you and the harshness. Sure I mumble. It doesn't mean anything. It's part of the reverie. . . Try it yourself. Now let's get you bedded down. . ."

Devlin sounded very earnest.

The next day Gannet did try the reverie. He knew what it was, some, of course. He'd felt the charm. . . But he wasn't quite like Devlin. . . He couldn't romanticize Mars, right now. But he thought about girls he used to know. And his dead folks, and the country place they'd had. And a certain island in a lake. . . It helped. And it might go on helping. If he didn't get in too deep. For that stuff was utterly out of reach, now. . .

But energy still kept dropping lower and lower, under wear and tear. In another twenty-four hours and thirty-seven minutes, both Gannet and Devlin were just about done. So Glodosky croaked through cracked lips: "Come on. I'll carry you both. . ."

"Carry us?" Gannet echoed. "How are you so strong?"

"You know," Glodosky answered. "My legs."

Gannet had all but forgotten. His legs. Not of flesh but of machinery. Atom powered. Never tiring.

And so they were able to go on. With Gannet thinking a curious thought. That if Glodosky hadn't lost his real legs, they'd be about dead by now. Misfortune adding up to—maybe—good fortune. Life. Cockeyed. Unpredictable. Who could blame anybody for anything?

Sometimes Gannet and Devlin

still staggered along on their own feet. More often they were lashed to Glodosky's back by means of a rude sling of vegetable fibres. They still had to stop to collect pieces of the grubbers for oxygen and moisture and a little food value at frequent intervals. And for more nights they had to burrow into the ground to escape the cold. Their consciousness seemed to fade away from them. But here necessary actions became a kind of automatism.

And so, late one morning, the people on the streets of Cross Valley were treated to a strange spectacle. A pair of strong legs bearing three nearly dead men, their clothing grimed with the red, salty dust of Mars. It was not easy to guess that only months before, they had been students in a quiet university town on Earth. But some who saw them did guess. For many had had a similar background. They too had joined the vast outward surging and had become part of the colonial impulse that the Harmon Fission Jet Engine had made possible. They rushed forward, eager to help as much for curiosity as for kindness. The weight of three men on Mars was about equal to one on Earth.

Gannet awoke at last to the dim hammering and clang of building. He was in a hospital. It was natural, wasn't it, that in this harshness the nurses would be male? Sunlight was on the windows, heavily glazed to resist internal airpressure of an Earthly level. A studious looking middle-aged man came after awhile, and after profuse good wishes and congratulations for his still being alive, announced his name . . . Dan Simpson. . .

"Survival on Mars, Mr. Gannet," he said. "Under native conditions, I mean. You and your friends have found a way. From what was in your helmets, I can guess part of your method. It will be useful knowledge for all colonists, here. A safeguard in case of emergencies. Something that should be standard, published advice, for everyone here, or on the way. I am prepared to pay fifteen thousand dollars to you three men. And the others said, come to you. There will be royalties as well, of course. So, would you explain your method fully to me, and allow my firm to prepare pamphlets?"

Somehow the thought of commercial things, so soon after his and his pals escape from death, irritated Gannet. So did this man's gentle, rather insipid face —Gannet had already forgotten his name, and did not try to re-

member it. And with some brash carelessness, as of a haughty person tossing a coin to a beggar, he said:

"Sure, friend. Listen carefully. . ."

But he found a satisfaction, too. At having done a little. Adding something to knowledge. Doing something that counted. It was one thing that people aimed at, wasn't it? He talked on with better consideration, now.

Yet his mind was on Throckson and revenge. He'd go back out there now—with whatever forces he'd collect. Police, or whatever else there was. Break the empire of a frontier baron. . .

But later, after they'd let him up and out, he found it wasn't that simple. Throckson had taken care of things like that, it seemed. The sheriff wasn't interested in anything but positive proof, and they had nothing to show him. Mr. Throckson was a highly respected man here, and they couldn't just take anyone's word against him. Besides, the police were needed here—they were short-handed, and . . .

Gannet left him, feeling contempt and something strangely like relief. He couldn't understand it, but somehow the trip to take revenge on Throckson didn't seem as important now as it had before. He told the others, and they nodded. They stood there in the Mars suits from Throckson's camp, but they were all busy with thoughts that had nothing to do with getting even. Finally Glodosky shrugged, and turned to Devlin.

Devlin mused aloud: "So? I wouldn't mind staying on Mars for awhile. What's it got? Well —not much in available resources. It's half dead. And cold. But it has color. Romance. That's an easy thing to sell. And the Earth feels so small. And it's getting so that people can make any place comfortable. They like the challenge of doing that. I could stay—help see what we can do about Throckson. Work. And maybe try historical research, here. But the Asteroids are better. And plenty of folks have more right to get Throckson than I have. He's a damn fool who'll wind up very soon, smashed and dead. So why should I lose more time and risk my neck further, trying to do something that plenty of others are itching to do, anyway?"

"We've been telling about Throckson, Gannet," Glodosky added. "While you were still out cold. And they could see where we came from. So more than that bird we just talked to, knows. Come on. Down there's the post

office. Maybe mail was forwarded from the moon. From the gang. Especially from Roscoe, Harwin, and Lenz, out there where we ought to be going."

Gannet felt a difference in his friends, now. Something everybody fought to get. Growth. Devlin, especially, seemed now to have his feet on solid stuff. Out of danger and strangeness, he'd won pride and confidence. He seemed to have found out what he wanted.

Both Devlin and Glodosky collected bunches of letters. But Gannet, the orphan, got nothing at all. In spite of himself, he felt lonely and left out of things.

Both of his companions thumbed through their sheaves of envelopes. Devlin glanced at Gannet. "Nothing from the crowd, here," he said. "Just family stuff. My mother. My sister."

"Same with me. Only my dad," Glodosky stated.

What they shared with him was the disappointment at no news from their friends. The family part they tried to depreciate. And that, he sensed, was consideration for him. In his new confidence, Devlin had lost his defensive sourness, too. That was another thing that space had done for him.

"We'll head for the asteroids anyway," Glodosky said. "We know that Roscoe and Lenz and Harwin headed for the asteroid, Ceres."

Gannet shrugged. He had wanted to go out there. He still did. It is what he would do. Still, there was a dull regret at leaving revenge behind.

"Okay," he said. "So now we see if we can buy regular space suits."

They found a shop. Gannet and Glodosky took new armor, still crated after shipment from Earth. High altitude suits, they were, really, like the ones they had had before. War surplus. But even at the low prices for such surplus, those two armor used up the better part of ten thousand dollars out here.

Devlin did a little better. The smaller armor he bought was second hand, third hand, fourth hand—who could tell? Each dent and scratch on it might have had a history. He put it on right away. Then a puzzled smile came to his lips, and extended up to his eyes. His nose twitched.

"Who hocked this thing, Mister?" he asked. "I mean who owned it before?"

The graying shopkeeper grinned. "Somebody that needed a ticket, on a regular space liner," he said. "Back to Earth, or else farther out. I don't re-

call which. But a talkative person."

"I see," Devlin answered with some awe. "I could stand a larger size. But I'll take this one. . ."

When the transaction was completed, but while they were still all inside the pressurized shop, Devlin beckoned his companions close. The face plate of his helmet was open. "Make like dogs, you guys!" he chuckled.

They sniffed dutifully. Gannet caught just a trace of a delicate aroma emanating from the armor's interior, and it didn't come from the unwashed Devlin. It was a whispered hint, plying on them through memories of soft lights and music, far, far away.

Perfume!

And on the outside of the suit, over the heart, a red rose was carefully painted.

Gannet and Glodosky donned their own new armor as fast as they could. Out in the street again, they all tried out their helmet radiophones. But that wasn't their interesting motive, just then.

"It could be the effeminate type," Gannet teased Devlin. "Male."

"Could be. Sure," Devlin agreed mildly.

"Or else some blowsy adventuress who'd cut your throat for a buck," Glodosky hinted.

"Or a sweet and tender violet —who knows?" Devlin himself chuckled.

"Not too likely—off the Earth, or even on it," Gannet stated.

"Hey—what are you lugs tryin' to do—discourage me?" Devlin protested mournfully.

"Of course not—we're your friends, and we just want you to be very realistic so you will never be disappointed," Glodosky said. "Of course, probably, the former owner of your suit hocked it for the purpose of getting home to Earth, rather than to go farther. That's a more regular procedure for folks who go broke."

"It is," Devlin agreed airily. "But who was it who once said, 'You never can tell. . .?'" So what are we doing, anyway? Chasing skirts as our primary motive? We should have stood home. . ."

"We didn't have the sense to do that, and now it's too late," Gannet laughed, meaning of course that if they had known about the events that they had just been through, in advance, they would never have had the nerve to start out at all. Now he was glad that they hadn't known. . .

"We've got to collect our ships, from storage, and I've got

to patch up the hole in mine. Then we can get some more fuel. And start out," Devlin said.

They did all of that, clearing Mars at midnight for Ceres. Leaving with other Pusher vagabonds and their homemade craft, for the same destination. Mostly they were young, but a few were old.

The stars were very bright and hard and unfeminine. But somehow they looked a little different now, to Gannet. There were women around in space, too. Adding another mystery to mystery. Being alive,—that was a supreme success in itself—made him feel good. And lightly, for the sake of old-time joshing, which was back for now, he laughed over the radio, and said:

"Just because you got her tin overalls doesn't make her your girl, Devlin." Then, strapped prone in his cabin, against the weightlessness, he slept. The slightly curved course outward was well plotted. The millions of miles reeled by.

Later, much later, he saw the speck of Ceres growing before him. There was a fuzzy haze of light around it—boulders, meteors, dust, wreckage, following lunar paths and encircling it continuously, chained by its slight gravity. There was a glow from its great smelters—metal being the great new industry of the asteroids. But these countless thousands of bodies, most of them too small to be seen from Earth in a telescope, ranging singly and in clusters in an orbit almost half a billion miles across, could not be thought of as a single place, like Mars. Distances were too vast. To say that you went to the Asteroid Belt, this was not a very definite explanation.

Gannet watched eagerly, wondering how much more eagerly Devlin must be watching. This region was legendary. Here a thing that people had worried as a possibility for Earth, too, had actually happened. An unnamed, inhabited planet had been blown to pieces, the latter following now many scattered orbits, around the sun. And Gannet's reveries about the region must have been then of the same quality as Devlin's. How quickly it must have happened. How cities, and whole sections of country must have been hurled skyward, the flames from the atomic explosion, and from the hot guts of the planet, being chilled and quenched quickly in the cold of space, so that destruction of that ancient culture had not been sudden and complete. In fact many of its artifacts had been perfectly preserved in the cold vacuum of space, and had made the millions of years that had

passed since, mean nothing to them. The handiwork of Mars. Some gigantic torpedo, perhaps. But Mars' people had died too, in that great conflict. Perhaps both sides had fought for empire.

Gannet and the others had to cut their speed to a crawl as they approached Ceres, to avoid collision with the yet uncleared lesser wreckage of the ancient planet. But they got through to what someone had called Boom Town, safely. At the spaceport the rotating beacon lights were reflected from a square mile plain of almost flawless and polished nickel steel—not imported, and not smelted in furnaces here, either. It had been smoothed as, on Earth, a native granite outcropping might be smoothed and cut. Nickel steel, the stuff of many meteors, unrusted in the absence of oxygen. And Ceres was like a gigantic meteor—a fragment that had come from deep inside the bulk of the original planet.

After their landing, Gannet, Devlin, and Glodosky, stood in a group by the administration building of the port. Devlin didn't mutter, now. He spoke aloud.

"The theory of planets' inner structure," he said. "Materials settling out in layers, according to density, down to the center. Light rocks on top, heavier ones below, then lots of this nickel steel. And at the center the really heavy stuff, in quantities undreamed of on the surface. Gold, lead, osmium. And a whole string of radioactive elements. But on Earth, and on other regular planets, all that stuff is buried too deep—maybe forever out of reach. Not here, though. . ."

"Sure—we heard about all that before, Devlin," Glodosky laughed. "Look at the town. Boom Town. A corny name. But honest."

It certainly was honest. It had the air of having been built overnight—but according to a precise plan. And it was still being built, swiftly—and for a swift, efficient life. Scores of huge airdromes, of thin clear plastic, flexible, but sustained by the atmosphere inside, looked toward the airless stars. And there were hundreds of long, low buildings. Factories, hospitals, laboratories, barracks. From the mines of Ceres, on what had been its deeper side in the original planet, came the radioactive metals that powered the post-war reconstruction on Earth, and the advance of industry, there, and the colonial surge into space. From the uranium of Ceres could be made more of the dynamium that was fuel for the Harmon Pushers.

"Even the moon was nothing

like this place," Glodosky remarked.

"Let's not just stand gawping," Gannet advised.

Their ships were wheeled into hangars, and they rode into town on a moving belt with their packs, and they found their way to a name registry office, where they were required to put down their own names, and could search for others. The calendar was different here, and arbitrary. There were numbered months of approximate Terrestrial length, divided into thirty watches, measured by the twenty-six-hour Cerean day.

Thus they found the names, and the time of arrival of their three friends. "Fifth hour, third watch, twenty-second month." Long ago, of course, that turned out to be. But the address of the hostelry was also given. "Merret House, Fourth Lane, Second Cross."

In the ridiculously low gravity, they almost floated to their destination. Harwin was in the lobby. The ex-infantryman. He searched their faces, which must have changed some. His own features had thinned down some, but his pale eyes still had that light challenge. He wasn't surprised to see them. Just pleased.

"Good thing I came back from prospecting," he said. "Figured you'd be around soon. But Lenz and Roscoe have gone out again. . . Lenz thinks he wants to set up some kind of business. He's got that kind of a head. Roscoe's just a big lug. . ."

"Funny we could find even you in a place as big as the Asteroid Belt," Gannet offered, grinning. "I mean it strikes me funny. Of course it's easy enough, as long as you are on Ceres. . . Why didn't you write to us . .?"

"Why didn't you write to me?" Harwin laughed back at him. "Don't worry. Same old story of separated pals, wandering. Too much happening. Too much that's new. New people, new things. No spare time. And the past getting a little dim."

"Tell him what happened to us, Glodosky," Devlin said.

"Glad to," Glodosky began.

But Harwin's interest turned out to be only mild. When Glodosky was finished talking, he had his inning.

"What I'll tell you will be mostly a build-up for the Asteroid Belt," he said. "You can find anything around here from a quick finish to fame and fortune —maybe in a way that you could never imagine beforehand. You've heard this before from the explorers books. Gold? Hell —don't worry about gold! Think of wreckage floating in space—

never changed through all the ages, since the Great Blowup. As if a freighter, loaded with household supplies, and everything that makes for civilization, came apart in space. Only it's not *our* civilization. It was one that was bigger than ours, some ways. Do you know that, on a little piece of the surface of the old original planet, I once slept in what was left of the house of an ancient inhabitant? That house was stout enough not to fall completely to pieces by that shock. And I made what I suppose you'd call the stove in the place work. Self-contained power unit. But I didn't even bring it back with me. The old owner was there, too—dried up and on his pallet, black—with bones sticking out of him, and not human at all. Kind of a leathery sack, with dried out tendrils, and eyestalks sticking out of him. . . But these are just hints, of course. There are a lot of things and devices that you can find, that you'd have a tough time figuring out. Just floating in the emptiness. Maybe they're whole devices, or just fragments of the whole, torn apart in the blowup. There are ideas in that stuff. Here, Devlin. You ought to be good at this sort of thing. Catch!"

The thing that lashed through the air to Devlin's palms was a maze of wheels and grids and sliding parts in a round crystal case. Devlin looked at it in awe that was like love. Of course he might never know what it was. . ."

And Harwin's voice ground on. "Things you find could blow up in your face. That has happened. Or it could be worth something. Of course there are the metal deposits, too—the mainstay of economics out here. You might as well say it's all like Aladdin's cave. But like that, it has a curse on it. You think you're a good guy, But wander around here for a while and you'll run into a situation where you know you're a wolf and a murderer. That is when death is on your tail, and morals don't mean anything. . ."

You could see Devlin's eyes light up. This was for him. Even if Harwin was just gassing, some —as probably he was . . .

They jabbered on through most of the night. But in the morning Glodosky, the med student, headed for the general hospital. "I'll play it safe," he said as he left. "I've been riding my luck heavy lately. And you know what its like. So I'll play it slow, now. . ."

Gannet found that Devlin had already left the hotel. He shrugged, and went to see Harwin's prospector's gear, put up in a


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warehouse. When they both returned to the hotel, Devlin was there in the lobby again. He looked fuddled. But he was all smiles.

"Here she is, guys," he said. "Miss Jeanne Pauls."

"Pardon? Who?" Gannet demanded, puzzled.

"Miss Jeanne Pauls. Entertainer," Devlin said with a pained frown. "You know—former owner, and owner again, of what used to be my space suit. I gave it back to her. Jeanne, here are Gannet and Harwin—fellow voyagers, and former classmates of mine."

They greeted her formally while they looked her over. She was wearing the suit, all but the helmet. There was the painted rose. She was cute and blonde and fuzzy—cute as anything you could name. Cuddly, too. But hardly smaller than Devlin. And what was the thought of her now? The roving, reckless eye. The flow of young feminine shrewdness. Maybe she wasn't as old even, as Devlin. Chronologically, that is. But Devlin was still a baby beside her.

Now she giggled. "Hello, boys!" she said. "Devlin, you call him. But he's Arnold to me, already. Arnie told me that you thought I'd be headed back for Earth from Mars. Now why would I be doing that if I came so far? And Arnie found me. . . He checked back all of the women's names for months in the Registry. There weren't so many. And there were only a few hotels listed where they went. I'm at the Woman's Y. Arnie came there, wearing this armor. Of course I saw the rose. . ."

She stopped, and a petulant look of anger and hurt came into her heart shaped face. Gannet knew that it was Harwin's and his own expressions that did it. Of humor, judgment, and worry for their buddy. And vexation. Gannet thought for a second that this Jeanne Pauls, this pretty little devil, was going to launch into a tirade against him. So he nudged Harwin, chuckled genially, and said: "That sounds like an interesting start, Jeannie. Romance among the asteroids. . ."

Later, though, he cornered Devlin. "Where did you get the money to buy yourself another space suit?" he demanded, "to replace the one you needed, and gave away?"

"Sold my ship," Devlin answered airily.

"Umhm-m," Gannet commented. "All in a couple of hours time. Boy—you work fast! Or somebody does! Crazy, ain't it—dim wit? A guy wins a little of being man-size from space.

And along comes a certain kind of sharp female operator and cuts him to zero. Haven't you got sense enough to see through this Jeanne?"

For a second a terrible fight loomed. But Devlin held himself in, maybe because Gannet could surely lick him.

"Sure I see through Jeanne," he said at last. "I don't say I thought she was an angel—not the regular kind, anyhow. I also see that you're trying to be a pal and put me straight. Thanks. But maybe I see more of Jeanne than you do. She was on Mars. Now she's among the asteroids. Alone. That means one thing to me. She's got guts. Courage. More in a minute than a lot of your 'good' stay-at-home girls have in a year."

There was a pause. Gannet wasn't really taken aback. Because he knew. He chuckled. "You're right," he said. "But does that make you any less a sucker? Don't you want to go along with Harwin and me? I thought you did."

"I'd like to," Devlin answered guardedly. "But not now. Sorry. I've got things figured out. The way I want them to be. The kind of mood that fits me and the asteroids. Maybe you'll see what I mean, sometime."

Just then Harwin came into the room. "Oh," he laughed. "Rare jewels that women are out here, you want to hang onto one, eh, Sonny? Better learn judo, bud! Better hire a dozen body-guards. Better go for your blaster, whenever you hear a wolf's whistle!"

After a good sleep, Gannet and Harwin said so-long to Glodosky, who had gotten the hospital job he wanted, and to the worried and rather puzzled Devlin. It was the parting of the ways, for a while.

Then they were off Ceres, plunging deeper into the Belt. Gannet was a little like Devlin in his quest for the charm of newness. Here was vigor and manhood. And what was better than to be part of the leading edge of progress and colonization, than to be a searcher for resources?

During his first hours, now, he realized the vast distance in the Belt. Deserts of nothing. Not all tiny worlds at fairly close quarters. But at long intervals. And sometimes in clusters. The glamor wore off quickly; yet for him and Harwin some of it always remained; or a different kind was built somewhere inside them.

There were already fifty-thousand men in the Asteroid Belt. But how often did you see even one besides yourselves? Nor was

the ancient wreckage of the culture of another people as thick in space as Gannet had pictured it.

And you lived in a space suit. Lots of guys didn't even use ships out here. A small Harmon Pusher attached to your shoulder-plate was enough to hurl you millions of miles. For where was there an asteroid large enough and with a gravity strong enough even to pose the obstacle of velocity of escape? You could jump off of the smaller ones, and never fall back, by virtue of your own leg power. There was this much of the mood of fairyland, travelled by means of seven-league boots. But the dark shadows were real. The shrunken white hot sun was real. So was the rancid smell of your own sweat inside your armor.

Food concentrates were all around you, inside. And you pulled an arm out of an armor sleeve and fed yourself—if you didn't have the cabin of a ship to relax in. But it was a lot the same both ways. You worked so much outside your ship. Water you drank through a tube, attached to a belt tank. Your armor became like your house.

You investigated all wreckage, and all meteors around you. Relative to yourself there was no terrific speed to either. For, in general, in the Belt, you became part of your surroundings. You moved in the same direction, and at the same velocity.

Certain heavy metallic meteors were what you wanted. Some were black. Some dull gray. Visually you could be confused. But a Geiger Counter fairly shouted at you if you were right--naming fragments from near the center of that broken planet. Anything less than sixty-percent pure, you ignored.

Gold was no more worth the transportation than iron. And sometimes it was almost as plentiful. Earth had a heart of gold, too.

Gannet and Harwin loaded up the freight nets, which then trailed behind their ships. . . A full load on Earth would have been around fifty tons. Out here it was like a great bubble with a considerable inertial drag.

And there were the souvenirs to pick up, or discard. Rails of steel. Or of some kind of titanium alloy. Maybe they were girders. They'd been snapped off by some terriffic force. Once they found what might have been the tip of a tower. Inside they found a small square of woven glass-wool tapestry. Its bizarre design in red, blue, and white, would have turned a bum like Throckson green with avarice. And there were little hooks of silver. And there was something which

might have been a microscope. And a flat object with one string. It was of vegetable substance, probably. Call it wood. Maybe the whole thing was some kind of musical instrument.

There was a lot more in that curious round tower-top or chamber, which must have been hurled into space like a projectile, when the planet it had graced exploded. It was all mashed together against the floor. Metal, wood blackened and dehydrated by the complete dryness of space, crystal. Substances and shapes that couldn't be named.

Harwin and Gannet took what they thought might be worth something, as they always did. Gannet felt there were ghosts around him. But he felt the thrill of discovery. This was living. This was a high point. And he thrilled to it.

Of course he always knew that if the steady murmur of his air purifiers stopped, he might mingle with this wreckage too. And that was just one thing that could happen. But it was good to know that you were equal to your surroundings. Yes—good.

Their first load went, not back to Ceres, but on to another group of much smaller asteroids. For from Lenz and Roscoe a radio message called them: "Unload at Refuge. . . Unload at Refuge. . . Get fair prices at Refuge. Stock up at Refuge. Refuge, the way station. Follow the radio beacon in. . ."

"It's the business," Harwin laughed. "That was Roscoe's voice. From football to space, and then back to advertising. Seems as though those birds are even trying to start a town of their own. . ."

So they saw Lenz again, and Roscoe, browned and casual, but a little scared underneath. Gannet's and Harwin's loaded nets bounced lightly down beside the half-dozen nisson warehouses they had managed to build, and one worried some if this embryo outfit would ever be able to pay at all. But they'd run in supplies. And of course Lenz said, or maybe bragged, sounding like his old self:

"We made out well enough doing what you guys are still doing, to start something better. Now we've got two supply ships started — plying directly to Earth. Pretty soon we'll be bringing in prefabricated houses, and wall paper for living rooms. You'll see. . . Join up when you want to. . ."

"Not before, not now, not ever, not me," Harwin pronounced. "Maybe you can interest Gannet. But I don't think so. . ."

The next time they went out, Gannet and Harwin almost had

bad luck. Four men just in space suits fitted with Pushers tried to be friendly. . . But Harwin was smart, and wouldn't bite. And Gannet used a rifle that fired explosive bullets to keep them off. Stealing ships and net loads was a common thing.

And when they got back to Refuge, Roscoe said. "Yeah, I know. I killed a bloke with a blaster. Had to. You know what he was on Earth? Yeah—a grocer. His credentials were in his pocket. And a family picture. Nice wife and kids. And he was okay himself, in the picture. Funny things the Belt does to people. Living the way they do. Not out of armor for weeks at a time. No luxury. Being scared of smothering something. So the weasel crops out. Watch yourselves, you guys. . ."

Time went on. There were more and more men in the Belt. You almost expected to meet a few, now and then. Refuge showed signs of growing. Lenz, the poor boy, was building his town. And all the business in it belonged to him and Roscoe. But of course this was a common phenomenon, everywhere.

"They're forcing us farther into the wilderness, Gannet," Harwin began to kid.

Not always were they lucky. Once Gannet was far afield in just an armor. And his Pusher went wrong and almost quit. His radio was too weak for an SOS back a million miles. Lucky his air purifier cartridge was okay. Food and water was the problem. So what did he do. Well, you know what they say in the belt. "You can find anything." He knew what to look for. He'd seen them before. Flat containers of thin sheet metal. There's a little airlock under the arm of each space suit, for the entrance or exit of any object. The pasty stuff in some of those containers, made him sick, and the sour liquid in others made him dizzy. But taking his time, he limped back to Refuge all right, and laughed with his friends. . .

He had a funny feeling, though. Something which kept telling him—only just so long. Sooner or later. . .

Lots of things happened. Harwin and he might have stolen supplies themselves, once, when they were far afield, and low, and when some men passed near them, and glared at them. They didn't, but the old cutthroat impulse was there. . .

They'd been out from Boom Town on Ceres a year then. And then Glodosky finally wrote:

"Dear Gannet:

"I haven't heard from you. Maybe you're in or around Refuge, which we hear about. Lenz'

project, eh? Could be. I'll just take a chance. I'm sending him and old Harwin letters, too. Hope this finds you, and finds you prosperous enough to snoot an old friend. But I know how you are about letters, Pal. So I'm kidding.

"I'm in the same place—same hospital. And in spare time in research branch. Electro-neuronics—artificial body parts section. You know how I got into that, don't you? My legs and my hand. All news is good, so far. And there's more good news. But first there's some bad.

"I had a letter from Little Thomas. He's doing research work for an outfit on Mercury, now. What he tells me is that old Flash Phelps was killed on Mercury, shortly after their arrival, there. The accident was a simple one. He just slipped on a high ridge in the fog, and tumbled into a deep gorge. I don't know what to say to all that, except that he financed us all, and looked as though his chances of taking care of himself were better than with most.

"Thomas sent photographs. Of himself. He's not so thin anymore. He can grin. The kid in him is dead. There are photographs of Venus. Think of a cellar full of steam. But sometimes its snow. Boiling hot. Then cold. That's the climate. The vegetation is low and crusty. It cakes the continents and scums the oceans. The mountains are hidden, in the fog. And there are the test stations, to find out what Venus is, was, and will be like. You know how the stations look. It's like everywhere. Low domes. Barometers and wind guages on top. Cosmic ray testing equipment. And everything inside to study air, soil, rock, water, fauna, flora—what not.

"So what is Venus? Twin of the Earth in size. Just a trifle smaller. Should be another, warmer Earth. Only it's not. Instead its a problem world. What can you use it for? The crazy exaggerated seasons, because of the great tilt to the plane of its orbit. The long days. The heavy atmosphere. The place might be more useful if it had no atmosphere at all. And there aren't even any specially valuable mineral deposits.

"I'll show you the pictures of Venus when I see you. There are also those of Mercury. Dead as the moon, but maybe promising someways. At the center of its forever sunward side, they're building a great solar observatory, for instance. Shielded against the heat, of course. 'Like putting up a lot of gauges to keep tabs on the functioning of the central power plant of the

solar system,' is the way Thomas expresses it.

"I guess he found himself. Maybe he's no great scientist. But he fits in planetary research. Strange tough conditions don't bother him. They seem to give him a lift, instead. He'll be okay.

"Devlin married Jeanne Pauls, right after you left. I guess you thought it was bad. Maybe it is. And now they've got an heir. I'd say that he's one of the first kids born off of the Earth. All right—somebody says that space is too rugged for young love, much less babies. So it happens anyway. And Jeanne, remembering you, says, 'Ask that Gannet what he thinks I thought I wanted from life, anyway, just a new hat?' She's okay.

"You know Devlin, the dreamer—the scientific visionary. There's something of the South Seas beachcomber in that guy—and he's brought it out here—in his head. He has done some of the work you are doing. He's brought back a lot of ancient instruments. He's worked in the metals labs of the big refiners. Now he's on his own, again. Maybe he'll make out—someway. He thinks of things like vacation centers in the Belt —featuring new sports like races in Pusher equipped space armor, from asteroid to asteroid. I guess maybe stuff like that will happen. Sometime.

"Well—enough for now. I hope I'll see you. Norman Glodosky."

So Gannet felt himself stirred up. And it was the same with Harwin.

"I guess the wind blows the other way for us just now, don't it?" Harwin said, and grinned.

"Yep, it does," Gannet agreed. "For now, anyway." He felt the urge in him. Go back to Ceres. Just for a look. For old times. But more for facts unravelling themselves strangely from the unknown. The future becoming the present, and turning itself into the visible and indelible past. Not hidden anymore, but still mysterious.

Harwin still grinned—and it was right that he should. It was no lack of warmth for the memory of Phelps. Flash Phelps. Cocky. Sure. Brave. Opulent.

"You'd say, 'scratch three.'" Harwin commented.

Gannet felt not grief so much as a frosty tingling. Surprise. As if he thought that there should be no end to Phelps, ever.

"And Devlin, the kid we thought was Earthbound, has a son in the Belt," Harwin said further.

"This all needs looking into," Gannet laughed.

They said so long to Roscoe

and Lenz. There were even a couple of girls in Refuge to kiss goodbye—for a hundred hours, or for good. Then they picked up and left with the casual ease of tramps, the same as if they were going out for another net load. The meaning, here, might be less or more than this. They went out across the mlllions of miles. To Ceres.

Boom Town had grown. Weight, under Cerean gravity, put scant limits on its potential for spidery height. For the beacons and guard towers.

But Glodosky wasn't much changed. Steadier and cooler, that was all. Another guy with a niche, now. The three went to a small cluttered apartment in a new building, and looked on the Devlin heir with appropriate and flattering comments, mostly for Jeanne's sake, while they saw nothing new. A red, healthy kid. A young couple struggling. How old a picture was that? And did it's being on an asteroid make any difference?

Devlin searched their faces, and they searched his. Catching up on time that was. Then it was more or less as it used to be.

"Do you still mumble?" Harwin asked brashly.

Devlin blushed.

"Sure he does," Jeanne laughed.

Devlin made a mock sour face and said, "Want to see what about?"

He showed them a lot of pieces of apparatus from the ancients. "I'm supposed to take them apart and to try to see what they're for. Or what they're parts of. Sometimes you can assemble pieces into something more complete. I've got a knack for it. Sometimes it's very hard going. The archeological research division, coordinating with the physical research section pays me for data on devices delivered to me. And the same to a lot of other guys. Sometimes it gets a little screwy. For instance this little brush. Does it sound sensible to you that the ancients used such things to oil their leathery hides? It was me that found it out. From a color photograph fifty million years old, half burnt away. Maybe I'll find out sometime if they had advertising. For cosmetic products."

Devlin laughed and went on: "But that brings up another point—their color photography. Fragments of film emulsions have been put under test. That's a job mostly for a big lab. But I did find out one thing about their cameras on my own. They used not lenses of quartz or glass, but of clear gelatin. Focus then is controlled by flattening or thickening the lens—tensile

shaping, as in the human eye. I found a little sac of thin plastic in a broken piece of a camera, and dried residue of the gelatin, and figured it out. . . In other fields—surgery, medicine, manufacturing processes, the same hunt goes on. Almost in any subject you can name. Superimposing what they knew on what we know. . ."

"Some would call that bad, Devlin," Harwin chuckled. "A weakening force. Men should invent their own gadgets, not pirate them."

"And who lives to invent gadgets?" Devlin shot back at him. "I live for fun. And the pay-dirt of exploration is richer when you've got more hints to explore. It's more exciting—particularly when the hints come from a world that blew up, leaving enough behind, preserved, perfectly. Nothing like that is true, on Mars. Too much weathering in an atmosphere. Nope—there's no place outside the Earth and in the solor system, as wonderful as the Belt."

Just then Devlin sounded sure—convinced. A guy who had jiggled into his own particular place.

"How did the Martians blow up this world?" Gannet asked "Has that been figured out yet?"

For a second Devlin looked scared—as if the question posed a hidden answer that still might be a danger out here. "You can guess that it was atomic, of course," he said. "Otherwise there's not much data—yet. . . But forget it. What else have I got to show you? Books on thin sheets of metal, that nobody has read much of yet, you no doubt know. No—let's get back to photography. Lots of guys bring lots of half burned junk in. And I get the restored prints. I've got quite a collection. Here. . ."

Gannet hadn't really seen the like, before. Those photos in color, might have been taken yesterday. High thin clouds, no doubt ice crystals. Deep blue sky, almost like that of Mars. But the hills and plains were green. Often the vegetation was planted in rows, too. Gannet had walked across such rows, dried out and blackened, on chips of the outer crust of that world. The surface asteroids, they were called.

And in the various pictures, shapes reared up—quasi-human at a distance, leathery, decorated with bright bits of color. They were the many mummies he had seen, filled out, animated again. In some pictures, they bent over strange machines. In others—well there were a great deal of others.

Gannet laughed. "You want to put old machinery together,

Devlin," he said. "Why not put the whole planet together again? The pieces are all floating in space. Including all the smallest ones, which can't be seen from Earth, they'd make a world as big as Mars. It would be a real restoration."

"You think you're joshing," Devlin told him with a grin. "I thought of that. It could be done. With a lot of Pushers, the pieces could be collected. Still—what for? The asteroids are better as they are. They make a very special region. Which brings me to something else. . ."

Devlin spread some plans on a table. "A house," he continued. "A covering of thin, transparent plastic, with an inner layer of gum as a sealer against meteors. A sort of huge tent, covering house and gardens. The life of Riley. It could be nice. Beautiful. It's happening already, Gannet. Permanent colonists, loaded with their junk, are moving in. To farm. To feed the miners. To make things like they were at home. Me—I'm a family man, now. There's got to be a place for kids. . ."

Gannet felt elation creeping over him. Something like a meaning was, or seemed, clear. One civilization creeping over the wreckage of another. Order coming out of chaos. From the murder of colonial beginnings. And the harshness of space. He really felt part of something big. He felt that his life was well spent. But maybe the groundwork was laid, and it was time for a shift. He'd had enough of the lonely thrills of vast distance, and of the danger in it.

He even looked at another kind of photograph—atop a cabinet of books. A girl just emerging from the gangling stage. A brat beginning to bud with great promise.

"I saw her before, Devlin," he said. "Just before we left Earth."

"Yeah, Gannet," Devlin said. "The brat. My sister. Kath. . . She's crazy. She wants to come here, too." His eyes teased.

Gannet thought of the thousand times that he'd envied Tobias. The guy who had stayed home with his wife. The guy whose choice had been along the path of good sense.

"It happens here, too," he said suddenly. "I'm gonna write to Tobias and his Kitty. I'm gonna put them straight. I wonder how they are. Life in a cottage. With roses. Well—that's a lot, too. I'll write right now. . ."

Jeanne's expression sobered suddenly. "Don't do it, Gannet," she said.

"Why?"

"Tobias is sick." She touched a finger to her forehead.

Gannet felt the prickles of

surprise and strangeness again. "Am I guessing the reason for his sickness?" he asked.

"Probably," Jeanne answered. Her eyes were soft.

Gannet looked back in time to see Tobias pleading that he was not yellow. While he didn't live up to his own standard. All he had had to do was get rid of those ideas. Relax on Earth. Accept his Kitty's pattern. But he hadn't been able to. He was in an emotional trap. Maybe all people were, partly. You could die in space. But you could die on Earth, too.

"Has his Kitty stuck with him?" Gannet demanded.

"Yes," Jeanne answered.

"If he'd come along with us, he'd probably be both alive and sane," Gannet said.

Devlin's grin was elfin. "Probably," he said.

Gannet and Harwin spent several days on Ceres, loosening up and doing the town. Gannet still meant to stay. But at last Harwin grew bored.

"It's fun for a while," he said. "But I like open space, better. I'd rather be on the pioneering end. Staying in Boom Town—well—what more is it than just another version of what poor Tobias did? No—don't let me influence you, Gannet. Do what you have to or want to. . ."

Harwin was all in one direction. He belonged in his work. Gannet was not so sure. Most of the bunch belonged where they were. After over a year, he was still at loose ends, unsettled. He wanted to team up with Devlin. Maybe it was the idea of not taking too many chances with his neck—and of seeking security. But what had happened to Tobias on the safe Earth, sort of disturbed that notion. It was a prop knocked out from under him. And he liked the open regions of the Belt. The strange discoveries. The fun of relaxing in Refuge, after bringing in a profitable net load. It was a way of life that could get into your blood. The adventurer's vanity was in it.

"Got to go wind up things with Roscoe and Lenz," he told Devlin. "But I'll be back—I guess. . ."

They were an hour out of Ceres. They stopped to investigate a large meteor mass, which probably had been examined many times before. It was more or less just whim. The way the sun glinted on flakes of gold. Gannet got out of his ship. He stood on the chunk of gold fleeced wreckage, watching a string of colonists ships, trailing away toward the farther regions.

Then, all of a sudden, he was very ill. The first thing he

thought of was a heart attack. But he knew that that was unlikely. Out of nowhere, and out of a peaceful moment, disaster had come to him. He coughed inside his helmet, and tasted blood in his mouth. Blackness began to creep into his mind. He thought of rumors of the viruses of diseases kept in cold storage like other things, from the time of the ancients, and active again among the colonists. But there had never been any real substantiation of such talk.

Then he heard the racing whir of his air-purifier that settled quickly back to an even hum. He thought of the fluid gum between the double walls of his space armor, that could quickly seal any small puncture, and of course now he knew what had happened.

He thought of the distance, represented by an hour's swift flight back to Ceres. Across cold vacuum. He wondered if he'd ever see the place again. "Harwin!" he called hoarsely, and saw his friend veer his ship toward him as he blacked out. . .

It was a long fuzzy pull back toward thready awareness. He smelled hospital smells, and saw the faces of his friends worried around him. But maybe he only dreamed it. It seemed that he was climbing a high hill, and couldn't quite make it. For a while he sank into darkness again.

Then there was Devlin's indulgent voice chuckling:

"You were hit by a meteor, Gannet. It sounds spectacular, doesn't it? A fast stray, from outer space, from outside the Belt. The usual kind—the size of a large grain of sand, and travelling up to twenty-five miles per second. Of course the Medics didn't find it. It went right straight through you from right shoulder to left thigh, and on out into space again. Like a long needle driven in the same course, and producing the same kind of wound—with hardly any time for the heat of friction to burn tissues. You know, don't you?"

Of course he knew! His mind was almost defiant about it. He knew space, didn't he? What did Devlin think? . . . There were always those tiny meteors. On Earth the gravity drew millions of them into the atmosphere in a day. But the atmosphere, there, was a shield—they burned up quickly, and hurt no one. Here, there was none of that. Still, there distribution was thin. If there were fifty to a square mile in a day, rarely would they hit a man. But there were not nearly fifty. The chance of a man being in a particular few cubic feet of space at a given time, to keep a

tryst with a meteor from interstellar space, was slim. Yet it had happened before.

"The danger to those hit is seldom large," Devlin went on. "And you know you'll be all right. . ."

Yet if you wanted to, you could say that there was the intervention of Fate in it. Devlin didn't say anything to Gannet about a definite focusing now of the latter's plans. But he must know it was there. It was in his voice. Being ill or injured always swung a person away from rugged living. It was like having your mind made up for you. And Gannet relaxed in this at last. It was time for a shift, anyway. While he was still weak, he began drawing plans. He'd studied achitecture at the U. hadn't he? Let Harwin, with the pioneer in him, chuckle and go away out into the wilderness.

So Gannet went along with Devlin's idea. They had the funds to start. Gannet had piled up a lot in his year with Harwin. And Devlin, with his job, and with the proceeds of some new processes, and alloys figured out from the relics of the ancients—to which he acquired patent rights on his own—was almost as well heeled, himself. Without getting rich being the main thought, as with Lenz.

"I want a certain mood to what we do," Devlin said. "Otherwise, its the same as with lots of colonists. Bringing the fruits and flowers of Earth out here and growing them. . ."

Gannet agreed. The rest was rugged work and defiance of space again. They chose an asteroid almost an Earth day out from Ceres. It was a surface chip asteroid, from the old planet. One side held thirty square miles of ancient soil, in which water had been locked through the ages, in the form of ice. Most of the latter had not sublimated away even in the dryness of space, after the quick freeze that had followed that vast explosion.

Here, in the negligible gravity they blew up their first great plastic air-bubbles with atmosphere brought out in cylinders from Earth. Each covered acres of the plain, where the rows and stalks of old agriculture showed. The ground thawed, for the plastic roof cut off only the dangerous rays of the distant sun, whose heat was not diminished by great depths of atmosphere, and the greenhouse effect of confined air did its work. . .

Oh, you kept your weapons close to you. You couldn't tell what might happen, as far out as this. But you kept working. Drilling into the deep subsoil,

and introducing heat units to thaw the ice. Then attaching pumps, pumping it into old storage cisterns. A score of such wells they drilled outside of their airdromes. But the cisterns were under the latter. Water was of first importance. For itself. And for the oxygen you could free from it.

It was tough work for just two men and their machines. But it was best that there were just two, whose ideas matched, and who could trust each other.

In the warm, thawed ground, strange vegetation, shaggy and dark green, began to sprout, proving the fact of suspended animation in the frozen cold, and through the ages, at least in the case of some seeds. But they added Earthly grass. They planted young trees. They planted vegetables. Vegetation around them would keep the air fresh, charged with oxygen for them to breathe.

Then, using the rectangular blocks of stone from the ruins, they began to build Devlin's house. Though the more interesting ruins, the more complete ones, they did not disturb. Those with the strange cells and passages that humans could not use.

It was Devlin's house which they built first, for Devlin had a wife and son waiting on Ceres.

Gannet had not bitten off that much to chew. He was aware of being smarter than that. It was in his grin.

To Devlin's joshing he had quick answers. "Right now I'm in this to help you, and for the profit of business, and for fun," he said. By fun he probably meant seeing something blossom out under his fingers. Something that meant that space was really being colonized. And not in a half-scientific and a half haphazard way. Like rough and lusty Refuge, with its banks, foundries, and trading places.

But it wasn't to be said that he didn't think of the future. All in proper order. It wasn't to be said that he didn't think of Kath Devlin's picture. Kath who was still in high school, on Earth. Or of the girls of Refuge, even.

Devlin's wife and infant son, David, came out as soon as Devlin's house was finished. Then, long before Gannet's first house was finished, he had a dozen prospective buyers—men who had made good among the asteroids, and could pay the fantastic prices prevalent there.

Too bad that no one knew what lay in the ground of this asteroid. A thing made on Mars. A dangerous thing.

Devlin and Gannet expanded their housebuilding operations. They also admitted people to

build for themselves—to set up shops, and residences, and metal refineries, as in other places. But they retained strings of control. Their plan must be followed. There must be beauty, and not disorder. The commerce must be hidden. The mellow feeling of a countryside in summer must be preserved.

So that was their life for six years. By that time their asteroid was populous, and shaggy green, under its many connected domes. There had been a dozen times when Gannet and Devlin, and those who had joined them, had to drive off bands of space hopping marauders. But the result was being achieved.

They had a central lake, a great park, rich farmlands, and a thousand houses, perched sometimes, at fantastic angles on weird crags, for gravitational force—what there was of it—was always toward the asteroid's center of gravity, while it was not round. Going straight out toward either end of it, was always up hill.

Glodosky came out with the clinic. He was a physician, now, having completed his studies in a university branch attached to the hospital on Ceres. . . To this record, he had already added important research work. . .

And Kath Devlin came out from Earth. One of the first things Gannet said to her, was: "Miss Devlin—you'll be disappointed here, now. The setup is too easy. You'd like to build from scratch. It's in your eyes. . ."

She was bronzed and beautiful. Let's see. She'd be about twenty, now. She liked blue. And he had meant what he said. She had all of Jeanne's courage. But she was a finer drawn type. She was here to work in the clinic.

Her eyes smiled as they went over him with that kind of searching which told him that she had heard a lot about him from her brother.

"Maybe you're right, Gannet," she said. "But the building goes on for a long time, doesn't it?"

She called him Gannet without explanation or apology, as if it were what she was used to. And what he said to himself was that here in her was his future. . .

When the asteroid tumbled over, turning like a pivoted chip in its regular twenty-two hour period, and it was night, he held her hand. He told her how long he had thought about her—since the day he'd left Earth. And she said, "This seems to be the way it's supposed to be—Norb. Yes—I know your name is Norbert. . . I thought about you, too. . ."

It was pretty well settled, then. Though he didn't want to hurry

her. She might not want that. Meantime Glodosky developed a crush. He worked with her all day, on local people, and on people moving among the asteroids. Mostly it was that kind of hangdog crush. Common out here. Women still were not plentiful.

Maybe Kath was just flattered. "He talks about the farther planets. The giants. And little Pluto —little by comparison, way out in the cold and the gloom. The satellites of Jupiter have already been reached, haven't they? I guess that was natural, wasn't it? But the others are so much farther. I hear that an expedition to Saturn didn't come back. Considering that the Rings are composed of meteors, I guess dangerous strays must be plentiful there, too. . . But what will anyone do with Saturn's satellites? Or the farther Planets? They're all so big and cold? Of course I know my brother has found something. Still—well—nobody's tried yet for farther than Saturn, though the Harmon Jet is perfectly good for the greater distances. He talks about going, Norb. . ."

Kath's eyes were warm. Right then Gannet would have liked to poke Glodosky in the nose. Glodosky's crush was perfectly evident to anyone who saw him within half a mile of Kath. . .

But there came a moment when all this seemed unimportant. It was while some underground storehouses were being dug. Part of a rusted steel cylinder began to be uncovered. Gannet didn't even know it had happened.

Yet he did remember those last minutes very clearly, later. Walking in the late afternoon with Kath. Walking, or rather gliding. You could swim up through the air, if you wanted to. A couple of small boys were doing just that, nearby. Tussling and yelling.

Then the explosion came. An eye-searching blop of light. A delayed but terrific concussion that knocked them prone. Out toward the farther end of the asteroid. The ground opened and turned to dazzling fire, right in the middle of a bunch of air bubbles.

Gannet could guess what it was. "An old bomb," he yelled. He knew of course that it couldn't be anything like the giant that had destroyed the planet, perhaps after drilling to its core. But a bomb from the same conflict. A dud, before. . .

There was no time to speculate on such matters, now. There was just the rush to help. With Kath. Ten hours later, they and the other people were still laboring

like demons, sweating, burned by radiation. Five hundred people were dead. A third of the populated area was wiped out. It was not news to Gannet or Kath to see charred bodies. Of adults and infants. That had been part of the war. But experience did not diminish horror. Two hundred people were injured. Most of them not badly. For that was the nature of the bomb. It either incinerated its victims completely, or left them all but untouched outside of its zone of action.

There was one exception. Glodosky. He whom circumstance seemed always to have conspired against. He was not at the clinic. Which was left untouched. He was off duty, and on a minor errand. He would have been crisped by the blast, except for those mechanical legs of his. They kept walking after he had all but lost consciousness. They walked him out of the zone of intense heat, before the latter, combined with the airlessness after a dome collapsed, could have full effect. And so space-suited men picked him up. He was black from head to foot. His clothing was burned off, and his skin. His lungs were seared inside. His body was ripped open. His lips, ears, and eyes were burned away.

Kath Devlin was in on what was done to him afterwards. There were tears in her eyes when she told Gannet, later.

"His legs and one hand were artificial already, Norb," she told Gannet at the clinic. "The rest was really just the same. It was a thing he'd worked on, himself. Make the whole body artificial. Except the brain—which was all that could be salvaged. Put the latter in a case of nourishing fluid, kept warm. Blood is purified, reoxygenated, supplied with food. An apparatus to do all that can be self-contained, compact, atom powered—operating for months without attention. Then all you do is hook the neuronic contacts to the outlet nerves of the brain—motor and sensory. Then the brain can control and live by a robot form. That is what will be done, Norb. It will take time to set everything up, and hook it together. Wonderful eh? And scientific and horrible!"

She began to cry. Gannet patted her shoulder. He didn't feel that he should take her in his arms. Not remembering how Glodosky had felt about her.

He got busy with the salvage and reconstruction work, making sure that there were no more dangerous unknowns in the bulk of the asteroid, by means of delicate radar It was an oversight on the parts of many besides himself that among the asteroids such precautions had hitherto

been neglected. He got busy with the salvage and reconstruction because it had to be done, and he had to be doing something while he waited.

It was weeks before the doctors began the hookup work on Glodosky's doped brain. His mind was perhaps the first to submit to a complete substitution of mechanical form, after an accident. That was what this system of replacement of limbs and organs by mechanical equivalents was for. And here was its acme.

Those doctors were more than doctors—they were artists. Glodosky, lying in a bed, at last looked almost as he had been—a squat young man with broad, irregular features, and sandy hair—of glass-fibre, now. There would be no shock of horror, or of immediate and obvious loss at awakening. He would not know at first that he had changed at all. That would come on him slowly, when he discovered things about himself—that he did not breathe or eat, for instance. Or that his voice was made by a tympanic buzzer in his throat. He could modulate these tones with his lips and tongue of soft plastic. He could smile if he felt like it. But his plastic eyes could not weep.

Once he muttered in his sleep. "Did the Devlins get out of danger? And Gannet? And Kath? Kath! . . . Kath honey. . ."

Gannet and Kath were among those who heard and winced.

Glodosky was awake a moment later. He felt of his body, looked unbelieving. "Why," he stammered. "I'm like I was. . . How can it be?" Then his expression turned sheepish—almost embarrassed at his optimism. "No—of course not," he went on. "It's just that good. . . I ought to know, shouldn't I? Anyway I couldn't have gotten through what I remember, all in one piece. Hell, though—it's a fine job. . . Hi, folks! Hello, Kath! . ." He even smiled a little, before the reaction came. His face contorted, and a scratchy sob came out of him.

A physician pressed a bulb. A sedative went into the blood that fed Glodosky's brain. "He has a grasp of things as they are," the doctor said. "With that kind of reaction, he'll adjust. . . Let him sleep some more. . ."

Glodosky sold himself a purpose the next day. That is, he did so for Gannet to hear. "I had a funny idea that something like this might happen to me," he said. "And there are big advantages. I don't need to breathe air. My body will never suffer from cold. I don't need food or outside water. I'm not nearly as

subject to injury as you are. I don't need a space suit even. I could last as long as my brain does. So I'm getting a ship, and see if I can reach the farthest planets. Go down into the ammonia and methane blizzards of Uranus, maybe. Where a man of flesh and blood would have a tough time. Maybe the jinx is busted this time, Gannet. That nameless thing that statistical science recognizes. . . That some people are prone to accidents."

Glodosky looked actually eager. He had lost most of being a man. Physical love was out of his reach. Yet he had become a little like a minor deity. But you couldn't probe into his mind. Gannet was among those who saw him wave jauntily, several days later, as he fitted with improved Harmon jets. He flashed away on a streamer of blue fire a minute later. So here was another weird windup.

Kath had tears in her eyes again. Gannet burned to take her in his arms, comfort her. But doing that didn't fit, now. He growled and went away—he didn't know entirely why.

He couldn't talk.

Later Kath talked to him. "It always was just you—with me, Norb. Oh, I know how you feel. He's your pal, and he had terrible luck, and you think he loved me, and though you know there's no sense in it, you can't help but feel its unfair to him. . ."

"That's part of it, Kath," Gannet admitted. "But its only a detail. The final twist. . ."

Devlin, working to piece together an ancient sunray tower, talked to him, too. "So we had a big accident out here," he said. "A few hundred people were killed. But more than two-thirds of our project is still intact. In history, there have been lots of accidents. How many times, at home, has Vesuvius erupted, and how many times were new cities built up again, afterwards? Maybe that case is even stupid. Vesuvius is a known danger spot. Here it's not like that. We just have to be careful, that's all. So why be down at the mouth?"

Gannet grinned naturally enough. "I'm not down at the mouth, exactly, Devlin," he said. "It's quite a bit different from that. . ."

He went to the small house he occupied by himself, and tried to think things out. A little, he was bitter. Not much. But the drives were out of him. He felt flat and confused. His trouble didn't seem to lie in philosophy, either. Life, to him, was simple and elemental in meaning. To take what came, to go after things, to taste everything, bitter and sweet, to feel

that no part of time was an empty plateau.

So far he had accomplished all of that, and expected to accomplish more. Plot, as in a story, he did not especially look for—though perhaps it was there. His race he did not glorify especially as a space conquering people. He knew that here it had been antedated, and among the stars there must be millions of other races, as knowing and aggressive, or more so. They spread from world to world. Like a growth of mold. And yet maybe it was magnificent. The thrill was in the doing.

None of these thoughts had changed in him, basically. Yet he was mixed up. Over the wreckage of the far past—the failure of two great races—from Mars and the Old Planet—races who must have lived more or less by his own code, his own people were spreading, perhaps toward success. He thought of that. And again, of Benrus, the war flier who should have lived, Tobias who had gone mad for denying himself space, and of Phelps, the rich boy, who had achieved the ultimate poverty of death. Then there was Lenz, not especially industrious or clever, who was rich, now, with metal refineries and space ship factories, and what not—rich beyond Croesus' wildest dreams. Then there was Devlin, the sheltered kid who had found another kind of success in a place where it seemed that he could never belong. But he had impressed his inner self on space instead. Making a mood that had a little of the raggedness and charm of the south seas. Harwin, the soldier, the roustabout, the casual nerveless adventurer, was the only one who was not a surprise. Still asteroid-hopping. And Glodosky was the greatest surprise of all. The schlemiel who turned demigod with a sad touch, and hurtled farther out toward the stars than anyone. Who, then, was left out? Thomas. Little Thomas, reported now to be lecturing about Venus and Mercury on Earth. And Roscoe. And, of course, himself.

Gannet saw Roscoe, who came out to see if his friends were all right after the accident, the next day. Roscoe, it seemed was in on the space ship factory deal with Lenz, and was the mainspring of it. According to report. But he didn't say much about it. . .

"I figure on entering politics, Gannet," he said, grinning. "To bring better law and order out here. . . And I got a new hobby. Making violins. From wood from the Old Planet. Properly treated, that space cured wood can give wonderful tone. I've made three fiddles. Wish I'd brought one

along. Used to hate music lessons when I was a kid."

This was Roscoe, the football man.

"Ever been back to Earth?" Gannet asked.

"Sure. Twice. Had to buy machinery. Why?"

"Just thinking about it," Gannet answered.

That seemed to be his guiding impulse, now. To go home. To chuck everything. It wasn't that he was bitter or hurt or anything—very much. Just flat and mixed up and fuzzy in his head. He was just twenty-six, now. Good night—was he old and burned out already? No—not exactly. He figured that he could take any kind of luck that came his way. Anything.

He told Kath, rather formally. "I won't promise I'll be back," he said.

She nodded. "I know, Norb," she said to him quietly. "I'll wait and see."

Devlin didn't protest his decision, either. "Lots of folks are drifting back, Gannet," he said. "That'll always happen. I'm glad one way that you're making this trip. Davy'll have a traveling companion. To Earth. . ."

Gannet turned a startled gaze toward Jeanne. She looked worried.

"Davy is six, now," she said. "We want him to go to school—back home."

It seemed kind of odd to him for a moment—sending a kid away from his mother, so young.

"Oh—break 'em in tough—from the start," he laughed. "Well—I guess it's best."

"Davy won't be much trouble—on the liner, or anywhere," Jeanne said.

Gannet worked two months more on the restoration of his asteroid. He didn't see Kath so often. And whenever he did—well—they weren't exactly cool to each other. Just withdrawn. But they clung to each other tight, at the last moment. Kath didn't go along with her brother and Jeanne, to see him and Davy off from Ceres.

Gannet didn't really begin to get acquainted with the kid until after the big ship was in space. He was a wiry, sun-browned little guy, with sullen lips. Gannet had never had the time to try to know Davy. Now he felt embarrassed by the effort to be friendly. But the kid helped him.

"Are you scared, too, Gannet?" he asked.

"Maybe," Gannet answered. "Of what are you scared?"

"Of the Earth," Davy told him. "Some of the men at home say awful things about it. That its gravity almost breaks your

legs. That its air almost smothers you. That you can drown in the oceans. I'm scared of Mars, too—but not so much. . ."

The kid's fright of Earth added a new touch to Gannet's inner confusion. For to him it was hard to see how the home planet could scare anyone. Of course the answer was simple; still, it did not help him very much to realize that the asteroids were home to Davy, while Earth was a Great Unknown. Still it remained emotionally, a strange reversal of forces. An elusive thing of viewpoint, beyond reason.

"Some men like to pull the legs of young fellas like you, Davy," Gannet laughed. "Don't listen. Me—I was just the opposite from you. Scared, not of Earth, but of Mars and the asteroids. Maybe I still am—deep down."

The liner passed Mars without landing. It came down at the Chicago space port. Davy was delivered into the care of a young man from his school. Then Gannet was free.

He didn't bother to look the city over much, though it had soared higher and sprawled wider in seven years. Only seven. Not ten, as someone had said long ago, setting a date for a comparing of notes among ten men. But it seemed a naive idea, now. . . Chicago was fast becoming one of the capitals of a spreading space empire.

Gannet headed north by train. Far north. To an island in a lake. The island had belonged to his father. It was his, now. The place had a cut-off feeling. There were no paths left on it, except the tiny ones of small animals, under the brush. All the trees had too many small tangled branches. The shack was half fallen in. Here was the same world, of centuries ago. The marsh at one edge of the island couldn't have changed much since the time when only Indians had hunted in it. Mosquitoes swarmed from its summer lushness. Frogs croaked. And an occasional heron swooped up from it with a primordial cry, and a silhouette against the sky that suggested the pterodactyls. All time seemed to linger here, like a static check-point.

Gannet puttered with hammer and saw, repairing the shack. He fished. And the weeks went by. And he pondered. Yes, maybe it was time that he was trying to get hold of. Restless, moving time, making its changes. And the summers he'd spent here, long ago, before the war, seemed like a kind of norm or starting point to him. Space travel had just begun. It hadn't affected average living very much. Other

planets still were remote. . .

Now he would look up into the August sky soon after sunset, and it was much the same as it had been long ago. Mars was red in the southeast. Just a speck. How could you think of that as a world? A place he had been to? Almost died? A desert planet.

Out there, much farther, and not visible at all, was the Asteroid Belt. Much more significant to him, but lost in the distance beyond the deepening blue of the sky, as if it didn't exist. Yet the Devlins were out there. Roscoe. Lenz, Harwin. And Kath, whom he loved. . . Infinitely farther, if he still existed at all, was a machine with the brain and form of a man. Glodosky it still was called.

Gannet began to see his trouble. Not exhaustion. Not the griefs and trouble that came with success, and were part of living. No. Time had been changing things too fast. So there was an emotional indigestion, after too much newness, too many surprises. He was gorged on living. Maybe that was good. He hadn't missed much. But instinct drove you toward a time and place of relaxation, where you could think things out, shake them into their proper order, and grasp the rushing march outward.

He began to see. . . . Still he stayed on the island far into the autumn, going into the nearest town every day for his mail. And finally a message came, printed from signals that crossed space at the speed of light from Ceres:

"Dear Gannet: I made it; I'm back. I skimmed along beside Saturn's rings. I was deep in a blizzard of Uranus. And I was clear out to Pluto. Some meteors from a broken comet riddled my ship. One even went through my chest. But I fixed myself up. Pluto is smaller than the Earth —some. I stood on its frozen snow of air and left my tracks on its mountaintops. It's bleak and dark, Gannet. But there could be the sun-towers that Devlin figured out. There is oxygen, and carbon dioxide—congealed, of course. And some of the mountain tops are ice mixed with rock. Thaw Pluto out, and it would be almost a second Earth. . ."

In the message Gannet read Glodosky's elation and triumph, that could compensate for what he had lost. But he read a lot more in the coming years.

He returned to the island, and began to pack. He was a little like Devlin then, mumbling to himself, anticipating in reverie coming moments; small and personal, yet part of a bigness.

"You know I'd be back, Kath. No matter what. . ."

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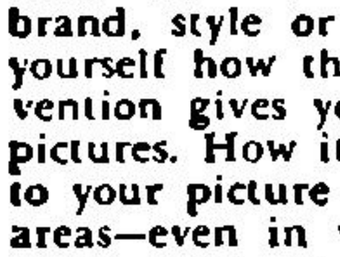
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THE CHART ROOM

Where Readers Helps Us Plot Our Orbits

The only absolute requirement we have for letters to be used here is that they be interesting. We don't mind blasts against ourselves, or any other subject. (This time, there are no blasts. But there will be, we can promise you!) We'll usually cut out listings of story preferences, of course—but we hope you'll include them, anyhow. However, you can help us if you'll try to double-space your letters, so we can avoid giving our typesetters eyestrain. And whenever possible, a typewritten letter helps. But even if you have to write with a paint-brush on the side of a barn door, let's hear from you!

Dear Editor:

I have read your first issue with great interest and was particularly interested in F. M. Turner's THE ROBOTS ARE COMING. I am notoriously ignorant on the subject and so it is quite ironic that I seem to have invented the term "robotics." I wasn't aware that I was inventing the term when I first used it. It seemed the logical term (compare physics, mechanics, statics, dynamics, atmospherics, etc.) and I had a notion in back of my mind that lots of people used it as a matter of course. It seems not. I'll have to write to Messrs. Funk, Wagnalls, Webster, Merriam, and Oxford English (what a strange first name) and make certain they apportion credit correctly.

In another portion of the article, Mr. Turner wonders why six apples times seven cents should equal forty-two *cents* (see page 89). I take it he thinks that the algebraic treatment of units should give the result forty-two *cent-apples*.

But he has stated the proposition incorrectly. Apples don't cost seven cents. If you pointed to a pile of apples and said "How much?" and the storekeeper said "Seven cents." You would demand indignantly, "Seven cents apiece or seven cents a dozen?" In other words, the proposition is:

Six apples times seven cents *per apple*.

Six times seven is forty-two. Apples times cents/apple is cents (the apples cancelling as the numeral three would in the equation three times two-thirds.)

Got it?

In your introduction to the

mag, Mr. St. John, you ask us to whisper to you what we want. You know what I want, Mr. St. John? I want you should spell my name right.

I S A A C A S I M O V
Waltham, Mass.

We got it. Six apples times seven cents per apple equal forty-two cents per apple. So that's what happened to prices, eh? No —you say the apples cancel. Now wait a minute, Mr. Issaac Asenion, if we can't cancel, that's our business; but you're not going to tell us that apples can do something we can't! But we'll do our best to spell your name right. You can count on us. Seems sorta odd though, all those names—eleven of 'em—with each one a single letter. But if you want to be known as that, okay, okay. Mr. Eye Ess Ay Ay See, Ay Ess Eye Em Oh Vee. Mind if we call you Mr. V, for short? Anyhow, we're a little confused. What makes you think if the storekeeper said "Seven cents," we'd want to know whether he meant seven cents apiece or seven cents a dozen? Think we're stupid, already? They should sell apples at seven cents a dozen?

Dear Editor:

Came across the first issue of your magazine and I've accepted SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES as a likely magazine to add to my regular list. "Likely," because I anticipate improvements as you go along, not because your first issue was first-class competition to the top titles, such as *Astounding, Startling, Future, Space,* or *Planet.* When I say "top," I mean my own personal preferences, of course.

To get down to details now: I'm not much impressed by the general appearance of the first issue. The cover, for instance. The title has a comic-book appearance about it, the way it is designed; and it's awfully squeezed together up there, with that strip so close to the word "Adventures." Who is "DE-CAMP?" Inside, I can see you have a story by L. Sprague de Camp, which is another matter. And I really can't believe that "November 1952" is as important a matter as the type-size makes it. As for the cover itself —the basic idea isn't too bad, but it wasn't well done at all; it's confused and difficult to make out; the fuzzy color scheme makes the whole thing uninteresting. (I have the same complaint about a lot of *Astounding's* covers, too, so you aren't alone.)

On the inside, most of the art work struck me as ranging from uninteresting to poor, with the opening double curiously split in between. The picture is interest-

ing, but the figures were ridiculously drawn. Van Dongen seems to have that trouble nearly all the time. As for the rest, only Orban struck me as being really good—although the Gari job for deCamp wasn't bad, and was better than the remainder. I definitely dislike the idea of setting articles, editorials, and fillers in bold type, set straight across the page. Layouts were simple, and not too bad for the most part—although putting the artist's credit lines in light caps can spoil the effect when it crowds the works, as on page 5; for the rest, however, it didn't look bad—there was plenty of air-space. The best use of your type for layouts is on page 122, where the word "by" is rightly put in lower case, and there is sufficient, but not too much space between it and the author's name. In other places, letters were spaced out too much (page 85), or jammed together too much (page 111), or where spacing was about right (page 58), the effect is spoiled by putting "BY" in caps.

I like the type-face you use for the stories, and the pages are broken up just right for neatness and easy reading.

Now for the reading itself:

Best: (1) "The 21st Generation"—not a new idea, but Cox gives it a fresh feeling, and handles it effectively. (2) "Recognition"—Pace does likewise.

Very good: (3) "The Ordeal of Professor Klein"—deCamp manages to make it seem much better than it is, since this sort of thing has been done quite often before, although not in this manner. Suspect that author was tonguing his cheek at the Lovecraft school en route. This ties, for my money, with "The Dissecting Table"—Knight's discourses were very fine in *Worlds Beyond*, and I'm happy to see him back. Department too short, though—and I *don't* like that bold type set straight across the page. Maybe you can get in as many, or more, words than in your body type, double-columned, but it looks as though you aren't getting as much wordage—in addition to looking like hell anyway. (4) "How Phonetic Can You Get?"—del Rey's thesis was quite enjoyable, marred only by his technique of setting up a straw man to demolish with one hand tied behind his back. Joe, our hero in the article, shows woeful lack of imagination; with the opportunity he had, it apparently never occurred to him to try a series of gradual changes, when he found the sorry results of trying to change everything in one swell foop. And what about merely regularizing the language, gradually? He could have tried a series, involving one

basic change per generation, perhaps starting merely with the regularization of English verbs. Example: I do; I dood. For the participles: doing; dood. I, he, she, it, be; beed. (Boucher has this in "The Barrier.") The idea, of course, being that you have no irregular verbs, no exceptions; once you learn the verb form you don't have to memorize a list of off-verbs and forms. Then phonetic changes could come later. After all, grammar, spelling, and word-usages, pronunciations, etc., change continually—but not overnight. When I went to school, one heard that "ain't ain't in the dictionary"; now, it is there, listed as a legitimate contraction for "is not" or "are not," although not good usage for "have not." I suppose that it will be accepted for "have not" in time, since usage in that manner persists, and the art of dictionary-making improves a bit—dictionary-makers seem a little more inclined now to note what meanings and spellings, etc., are actually in general use, rather than what they, themselves, were taught was "correct" English.

Good: (5) "Make Mine Mars" —Kornbluth has a good story here, with a delightful opening, but what puts it this far down, for me, is that I found it quite difficult to read when he got into the long sections of cablese. (There should have been translations—in footnotes—for lazy readers like me. You see, I'll readily acknowledge that it's my own laziness at fault, and not contend that he shouldn't have done it at all—a lot of readers, I'm sure, will be stimulated to puzzle them out. The only trouble is that, without translation, it slows up the story; unless you're as quick-minded as the author, you just have to stop cold every few pages.) (6) "The Persuasive Man"—Dee has an enjoyable little trifle here.

Not so good: "A Day's Work" —Shiras has done some excellent stories, and I expected something top-grade. This wasn't a story, although mildly interesting as an article. Put this one (7). And "Interplanetary Tin Can" had an interesting idea, but I disliked the way it was done. Make that one 8th.

Poor: "The Fires of Forever" —Oliver manages to be completely uninteresting, for my money, at great length. I have the feeling that this tale probably had a point—but I cannot say I give a damn. Only inertia, and very mild curiosity, led me to read beyond the first chapter.

The little squibs were more or less interesting, but I hope this was an emergency matter—space

that had to be filled up at the last moment—and not a matter of policy. Extend the editorial section, if you want to talk about a number of different subjects, but please don't scatter it all through the book.

Soo—the overall impression, as I said at the beginning, is that I want to give SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES a chance; your first issue interested me. But the next will have to be considerably better, if you want to retain this reader. Of course, perhaps you might think it wasn't worth it; after all, I like to write letters to the editors of magazines I follow, and I can readily understand why you might be willing to go to some lengths to avoid.

Glen Monroe
Bronx, N. Y.

We appreciate the detailed criticism sincerely, Mr. Monroe. Of course, we feel that the story content should come before make-up, and spend most of our worry on that. But it's always good to have our faults in any line pointed out. We'll try to do better as time goes on. As to the del Rey article, Lester was deliberately setting up a straw-hero, not a straw-man problem; he was pointing out that spelling reform isn't quite as simple as most of those who jump into it feet foremost without knowing the pitfalls think. And when it comes to language reform—brrrr! No thanks. It might be a good thing, but until they regularize spelling, we'd hate to suggest trying to do anything about the irregular verbs. As to the fillers—well, some readers want long fillers like those we used, and some are opposed. We'd welcome opinions. In this issue, we've avoided fillers as much as possible. Finally, it's interesting to notice that Cox and Oliver fought it out for first place in the issue all the way, and wound up in a tie; but those who put Cox first usually didn't like Oliver, and vice versa. Why, we don't know. It seems to prove that tastes differ, at least.

Dear Editor:

I read your first issue from cover to cover and found it very enjoyable and I am eagerly awaiting the second issue. However, now to business. I am the secretary of an organization called the International Flying Saucer Bureau and this letter is being written to try to increase the amount of members which we have. The Bureau was formed by Albert Bender in Bridgeport, Conn., in the summer of 1952 and it has a dual purpose: First to collect data on the Saucers; and second to get Saucer-minded

people acquainted with each other. We also want to be considered friends of the Flying Saucer occupants.

We will publish a fanzine four times a year with all current data available about the Saucers and any other news which we consider interesting to the members.

Alan C. Rievman, Sec.
P.O. Box 241
Bridgeport 2, Conn.

Okay, you friends of the flying saucers. We're sure the "occupants" of the saucers will be very happy to know you're friendly. And if there are such things, we'll be willing to be friendly, too—after we find out (a) that they're not from some enemy nation, (b) that they have no inimical purpose, and (c) that they're more intelligent than they seem to be about contacting us and looking for our friendship. Don't mind our cynicism, though. We wish you the best of luck with your fanzine!

Dear Editor:

I've been interested in science fiction since I discovered it indirectly through the interest which I have in interplanetary flight. I feel I could receive a better knowledge of both interplanetary travel and science fiction if I were a member of a group or groups which have an interest in such things. I believe that the two are intermixed as much as any two things can be because they are so closely connected. Therefore, I wonder if you could give me a direct lead to an interplanetary flight organization in the New York Area.

Georg Buhler
30-81 32nd St.
Astoria, L. I., N. Y.

How about it? We have no record of such a group—again proving the need for more information on the fan groups—but there must be someone among the readers who can help Mr. Buhler. And while at it, won't you drop us a line with the same information?

Dear Editor:

I guess I represent that group of borderline readers little heard from and less esteemed by regular fans and publishers. That is, I read a science fiction publication whenever I happen to get hold of one by the cheap method of borrowing. Yesterday at a newsstand I plunged; made my first actual purchase of a s-f magazine. The first glance at SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES made me look closer: cover somewhat girly but not garish; neat, quality-sized for-

mat. Second glance found the line which read "First Issue, DeCamp, Kornbluth, Oliver, Shiras." Today finds me busy with another first, this attempt at a s-f fan letter in answer to your introductory request for comment.

Just two of the stories failed to please me very much. Roger Dee's "The Persuasive Man" was perfectly good, it just didn't click with me personally. Nice length, anyway, for a neatly fashioned minor story. The one real disappointment was "The Ordeal of Professor Klein." As satire, it's trite; as horror, it's nowhere. You did say, "dealing with science, but based upon some kind of horror"? I guess I like my horror less subtle and my satire more so. Probably I would have liked the whole thing better under some other author's name. The DeCamp imagination and learning can do so much with a story—love those *wild* novellas!—but left this one pale and flat.

I'll balance these with the two that really delighted me. There are plenty of stories around in which Man turns out to be nothing in comparison to some nobler form of life. But "Recognition" brings the reader to this conclusion as a real shock, over a fresh road of approach. Mr. Pace is a smooth writer. "The 21st Generation," by Irving B. Cox, Jr., was a thoroughly good adventure story. Above the frank space-opera level, most science fiction tends—in my eyes—to be technical or psychological in content at the expense of real things that happen. Without action, dullness is hard to avoid, however clever the brainwork or profound the message. Cox's well-told story is able to carry the smart ideas without a break in the ordinary reader's interest.

Also good: "The Fires of Forever," "Make Mine Mars" (I have a predilection for s-f stories which begin with the hero drunk or hungover; it has carried me through worse and better than the above), "Interplanetary Tin Can" (beamed at the Space Ranger set, maybe, but no harm in that), and "A Day's Work." As an ex-English. major I was much interested and pleased by "How Phonetic Can You Get?" Del Rey is *always* good. "The Robots Are Coming" was also a good job; or if not I'll never know better. I am one who reads science fiction (I'll join Heinlein via Knight for "speculative fiction") because I like it, without being willing to work to understand it. About atomics, electronics, cybernetics, plain old engineering, I don't know a genuine thing. Still, I like to feel intelligent while reading. When *I*

say at the end of F. M. Turner's article, "I've learned some things," that man has accomplished a formidable task and I'm grateful to him. Oh yes—and I like the art work in the magazine.

Minor complaints on matters for which the editor is not liable: Don't we wish you could afford better proofreading? S-f readers and authors just have to endure those hundred little spelling and punctuating errors in the finished product. Also, my copy does not have a page 162 carrying a feature, "Meet Thomas C. Pace." I wish it did. My copy has a page 160, followed by "New Medical Evidence Shows Hair Can Be Saved."

You've come close, in your first issue, to my version of "the ideal magazine most of us are searching for." *Galaxy* might have had a better lead novel, but wouldn't have followed it with *so many* good shorter stories. Neither would *Astounding Science Fiction*. (That reminds me, couldn't your cover possibly be mistaken, at first casual glance, for an *Astounding* cover? *Galaxy* continues to hold the advantage of a title that is different from other leading names. No remedy suggested.) You have aimed high and in my estimation succeeded in making third with the publications just named. Old saying proved again: Always room at the top.

On re-reading, this all looks pretty officious—a trait I've always disliked in published fan letters. You did ask for opinions. Here's a final one. The letter departments in some magazines seem to be taken over by a few characters: loud and colorful, humorous or would-be humorous, very cute with the editor, eager to jump down somebody's neck. Bright but not thought-provoking. In others, it's just listings of stories according to the reader's preference, with requests for more or less of the same; not very piquant for another reader. Then there's the dead serious type of letter department in which every one published is a learned treatise on semantics . . . archaeology . . . rocket travel. They impress profoundly; they are deeper and more complicated than a feature article by Willy Ley—and far less lucid, in addition.

As a brand new magazine in the field, SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES will have a choice to make among existing types of fan department—perhaps establishing a unique pattern of its own. In the letter section of my ideal magazine, all groups would be represented—because, of course, they'd all read it! And why shouldn't they?

Louisa K. McDonald
c/o Lt. Larry McDonald
HQ, T.I.&E. Section
1st Arm'd Div.
Fort Hood, Texas

Thanks for that first fan letter, Mrs. McDonald. It's a typical example of the kind of letter we've received and are happiest to get. Like most s-f magazines, we love the fans, but most of our sales are to readers like yourself; and your opinion counts. We don't intend to put out a technical magazine—even in our articles; we don't see why the readers of a fiction magazine should have to work to understand things. And we're happy to know that most of you enjoyed the articles. We also agree that a letter column should be representative of all groups, and we'll try to keep this one open.

Dear Editor:

You've whipped up a darn fine Vol. 1, No. 1 in November SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES. Not only do you have an impressive array of authors, but you seem to have secured these authors at their very best—which is darn hard to do!

I think Chad Oliver shows promise of becoming one of the top ten science fiction writers of all time—he is certainly the top of the more recently arrived authors. I do hope that you will continue to solicit his work. All Chad needs is an editor who will give a bit of a shove and he will go far!

Damon Knight's book reviews are very interesting and certainly do not "soft soap" a publisher in order to get free books. More power to him.

Your statement of policy in your editorial struck me as being a little unusual. "But our pages will always be open to a story by an unknown writer, and we will never buy material for the sole purpose of getting a good 'cover name.'" Most editors make some sort of a similar statement, but with tongue-in-cheek. Usually, there is a silent parenthetical expression—"unless we can get a cover name cheap enough." It has always been my contention that a great many excellent manuscripts are lying unread in their authors' desk drawers simply because of the "closed door" policy of most magazines to unsolicited manuscripts, unless they came from "names" or agents. As one pulp editor frankly stated, he never seriously considered the manuscripts in his "slush pile" unless he had a "hole" to fill and the slush had a story with just the proper wordage to fill it. For over 20 years I have read pulp fiction of all kinds and I have

never yet refused to read a story because I didn't recognize the author's name; nor, have I ever bought a magazine because of a certain name on the cover.

Again, I think you have a fine magazine and I wish you every success with it.

Wilkie Conner
1514 Boston Cricle
Gastonia, N. C.

The only proof of whether we meant our statement of policy, of course, lies in what we publish. You might be interested to know, however, that two of the stories in the next issue came from our "slush pile," by authors whose names we'd never seen before. And it wasn't to fill any hole of a special length, either. We can always take care of such holes—but we can't pass up what we consider good stories. After all, most of the big names of today were submitting to that same "slush pile" a few years ago—and obviously, some editors were glad to welcome their first efforts! We'd hate to turn down a man who would later become one of tomorrow's big names—and we'd hate to think a good story escaped us because we couldn't see beyond the by-line!

EXPLANATIONS

Most of the letters from our readers told us we had a fine first issue, but wanted to know what happened to "Meet Thomas C. Pace, page 162." We'd like to answer that and give a bit of explanation here, rather than reply to any single such query.

It was, frankly, an error on our part, for which we apologize. Magazine publishing is a complicated business. First, the manuscripts have to be chosen—enough to fill one issue almost exactly. Then art layouts are made and illustrations obtained. After that, all errors have to be made—and, with luck, unmade.

Galleys of type are set and come back for proof-reading. Some of the errors, at least, are corrected. Then the galleys are broken down into pages, and again checked. At this stage, a dummy is made up, supposedly to show exactly how the final job will look, and what goes on which page. Included in that is a table of contents. Then the dummy

goes back, the magazine is locked up, and a final proof made. Theoretically, by now, all errors have been caught, but again the issue is proof-read.

What happened in Issue No. 1 was that we planned to run a picture and biography of Thomas C. Pace on our back cover—or, page 162, since the last regular page was 160. Then we found at the last moment that we had to put an advertisement there, instead.

All right, so you want to know why we didn't remove the line from our table of contents. That's a good question—with not so good an explanation.

The plain truth is that we were stupid! After going over that issue umpteen times, we never even stopped to think that the familiar line was no longer valid. So it went through lock-up, making stereotypes, printing, and out into the cold, critical world, where it earned us red faces for a month afterwards.

Another group of comments dealt with the Lester del Rey's article on phonetics. This drew high praise and hot condemnation. We're holding most of the kicks, however, to use in our next issue, where Mr. del Rey has volunteered to answer or admit he was wrong, as the case may be. And it should make for interesting reading, since those who didn't like the article were usually barely below the boiling point of lead.

Incidentally, we don't plan to run more articles on this subject. Phonetic printing is enough to drive printers mad; we're deeply indebted to the men who set and copy-read two such nightmares and gave us copy actually more accurate than the manuscripts themselves! A few errors were caught by those overburdened printers, proving how tough it is to be consistent, since authors and editor had already checked and rechecked that copy.

PHILIP ST. JOHN

TCH! TCH!

Did you have trouble getting this issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES? Or will you have trouble getting future copies? If so, about all we can say is what we've said in the heading above. We're sorry, of course, because we like to do business with you, and because we know how much it hurts to chance missing even one issue. But all we can do is to remind you again that the best way of being sure is to subscribe. Then the postman will bring every copy to you, and you won't even have to go outside your own door, let alone hunt from newsstand to newsstand, to be told they're all sold out. You'll even save a little, too. In fact, you'll get the added convenience plus twelve issues for the price of ten. We don't want to try any high pressure salesmanship on you. But we would like to remind you of the times you told yourself you were going to do something and then just forgot as the days went by—and were sorry later! The best way to be sure is to make out that check now, while you think of it.

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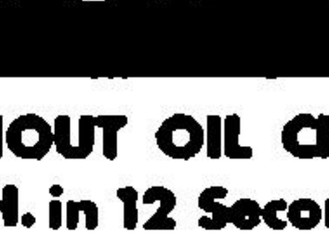
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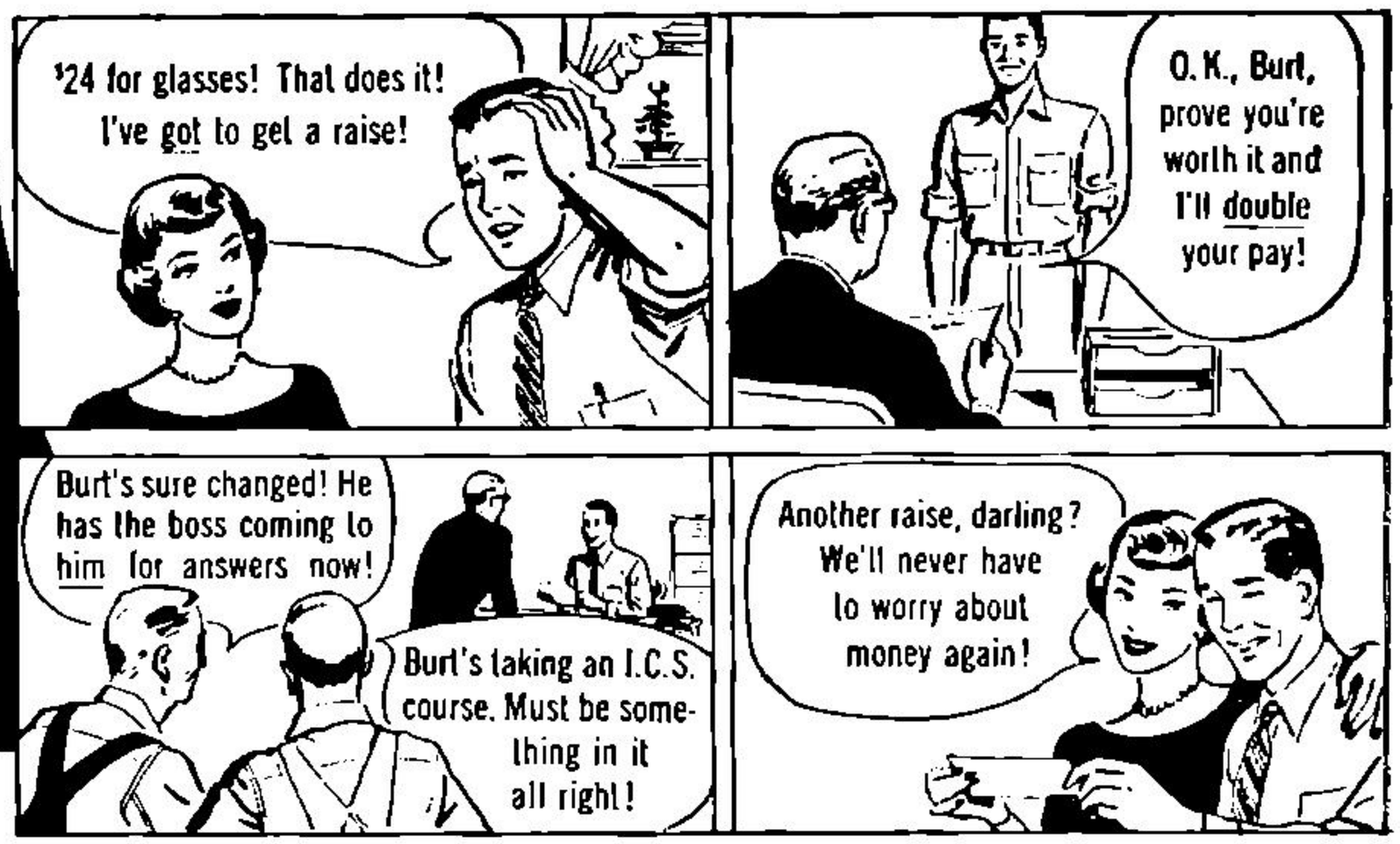
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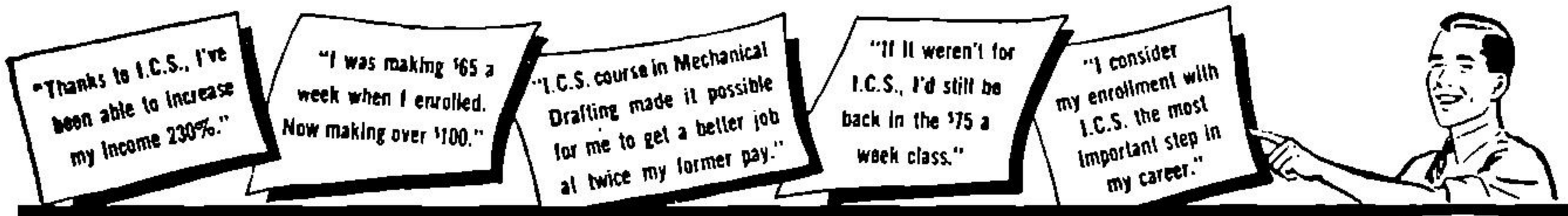
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