



Featuring

YESTERDAY'S MAN
by Algis Budrys

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Complete Novels by Top Writers

June

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CHALICE OF DEATH

by Calvin M. Knox

RUN FOR THE STARS

by Harlan Ellison



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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 1

No. 4

JUNE, 1957

3 Complete New Novels by Top Writers!

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There was only one man who could put Earth's blasted and broken civilization back together again, and that man had been dead for thirty years. Or—had he?

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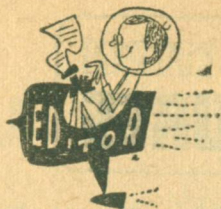
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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

STARTING a new magazine is always somewhat of a gamble. It takes natural talent or lots of experience—preferably both—to create a good magazine of any kind. And even a good magazine won't sell if the public doesn't want that particular *kind* of magazine. To spot what the readers will buy takes what amounts to a wide-beam telepathic receiver.

So, when I say that **SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES** has been gratifyingly successful, I'm not bragging. I'm thanking my lucky stars that Royal Publications has a top-notch wide-beam telepathic receiver; and I'm thanking you—the readers—for your wonderful support.

Naturally, I'm tremendously pleased with the way you've bought SFA, and the letters you've written in praise of it. The policy of running three short novels in each issue has met with almost universal acclaim; less

than five percent of the letters received have asked for a switch to just one or two novels per issue with short stories to pad out the book. There has been almost no disagreement at all with the choice of departments, writers, layout, etc. About the only thing on which there has been any serious criticism is some of the artwork—and I think you'll find that that has improved tremendously.

A lot of you have asked for more frequent publication. Effective immediately, you're getting it. SFA is now published six-weekly, which gives you three more issues a year. The next issue will go on sale May 16. (Subscriptions are still on the basis of 12 issues for \$3.50.)

If all continues to go well—and I sincerely believe it will—we'll switch to a monthly schedule very soon.

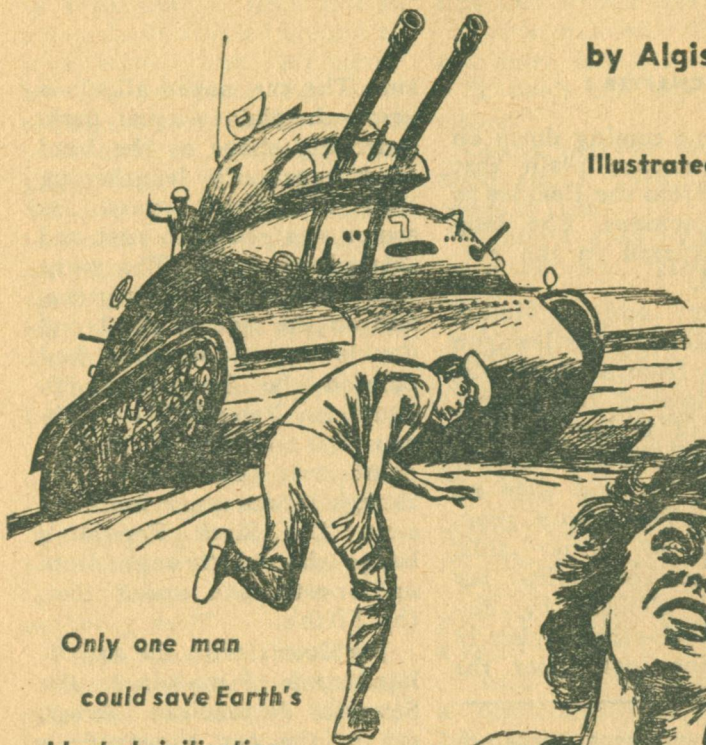
The gamble has paid off. I hope you're as happy about it as I am.

—LTS

YESTERDAY'S MAN

by Algis Budrys

Illustrated by Engle



Only one man
could save Earth's
blasted civilization
—and he was
thirty years dead!



Yesterday's Man

by Algis Budrys

CHAPTER I

NIGHT was coming down on the immense plain that stretched from the Rockies to the Appalachians. The long grass whispered in the evening wind.

Clanking and whining, a half-tracked battlewagon surged up from a low swale, snuffling toward the setting sun. Behind it lay the featureless grass horizon, almost completely flat and with no life in it. The empty grass fell away to either side. Ahead, the mountains lay black and blended by distance, a brush-stroke lying in a thick line just under the

sun. The car moved all alone across the plain; a squat, dark, scurrying shape at the head of a constantly lengthening trail of pulped grass. Its armor was red with rust and scarred by welds. The paint was a peeling flat dark green, and on the side of the broad double turret, someone had painted the Seventh North American Republic's escutcheon with a clumsy brush. The paint was bad here, too, though it was much more recent. The Sixth Republic's badge showed through from underneath, and under that, the Fifth's.

Joe Custis, with the assimilated rank of captain in the Seventh Republican Army, sat in the car commander's saddle, head and shoulders thrust up through the open hatch, his heavy hands braced on the coaming. His broad-billed cap was pulled down low over his scuffed polaroid goggles and crushed against his skull by a headphone harness. His thick jaw was burned teak-brown and the tight, deep lines around his

ALGIS BUDRYS is a paradoxical young man—as muscularly handsome as the hero of any science-fiction story, but so quietly self-effacing that his hair-raisingly powerful writing style comes as a distinct surprise to many readers. His first story for SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES is a typical Budrys shocker—with the punch of a runaway rocket!

mouth and nose were black with dust and sweat that had cemented themselves together. His head turned constantly from side to side, and at intervals he twisted around to look behind him. Whenever he saw a patch of ruins ahead, slicing their eroded walls straight up through the grass that drowned their foundations, he called down to his driver and altered the car's heading to circle around them. Except for the grass and the ruins, he never saw anything.

The AA machine gunner's hatch, back on the turtledeck, crashed open. He looked down. Major Henley, the political officer, pulled himself up, shouting above the dentist's-drill whine of the motors: "Custis! Have you seen anything yet?"

Custis shook his head.

Henley shouted something else, but the motors damped it out. Custis looked blankly at the man, and after a moment Henley kicked himself higher up in the hatch, squirmed over the coaming, and scrambled forward up the turtledeck. He braced a foot on the portside track cover and took hold of the grab iron welded to the side of the turret. He looked up at Custis, swaying and jouncing, and

Custis wondered how soon he was going to slip and smash his teeth out on the turret.

"I said: I thought you said this was outlaw territory?"

Custis nodded. "Don't see any more farms, do you?"

"I don't see any outlaws, either."

Custis pointed toward the mountains. "Watching us come at 'em."

Henley's eyes twitched toward the west. "How do you know?"

"It's where I'd be," Custis answered patiently. "Out here on the grass, I can run rings around 'em and they'd know it. Up there, I'm a sittin' duck. So that's where they are."

"That's pretty smart of them. I suppose a little bird told them we were coming?"

"Look, Henley, we been pointin' in this direction for a solid week."

"And they, of course, have a communications net that lets them know and gives them time to fall back on the mountains—I suppose someone runs the news along on foot?"

"That's right."

"Rubbish!"

"You go to your church 'n I'll go to mine." Custis spat over the side, to starboard. "I been out on these plains all my life, workin' hired-out to

one outfit or another. If you say you know this country better, I guess that's right on account of you're a Major."

"All right, Custis."

"I guess these people out here're stupid or somethin'—can't figure out how come they're still alive."

"I said all right."

Custis grinned nastily without any particular malice, giving the needle another jab under Henley's city-thin skin. "Hell, man, if *I* thought Wheelwright was still alive and around here someplace, I'd figure things were being run so smart out here that we ought to of never left Chicago at all."

Henley flushed angrily. "Custis, you furnish the vehicle and I'll handle the thinking. If the government thinks it's good enough a chance to be worth investigating, then that's it—we'll investigate it."

Custis looked at him in disgust. "Wheelwright's dead. They shot him in Detroit thirty years ago. They pumped him full of holes and dragged his body behind a jeep, right down the main street at twenty miles an hour. People threw cobblestones at it all the way. That's all there is left of Wheelwright — a thirty-year-old

streak of blood down Woodward Avenue."

"That's only what the stories you've heard say."

"Henley, a hell of a lot more people heard it that way than've heard he's still alive. Maybe you want us to look for Julius Caesar around these mountains, too, long's we're here?"

"All *right*, Custis; that'll be enough of your remarks!"

Custis looked down at him steadily, the expression on his face hovering on the thin edge between a grin and something else entirely, and after a moment Henley broke off the conversation:

"How soon before we reach the mountains?"

"Tonight. Couple more hours, you'll get a chance to see some bandits."

Henley chewed his lip. "Well, let me know when you come across something," he said, and gingerly crawled back to the AA hatch. He dropped out of sight inside the car. After a moment, he remembered, reached up, and pulled the hatch shut.

Custis went back to keeping an eye out.

THE BATTLEWAGON was a long way from Chicago. The only drinking water aboard

was a muddy mess scooped out of one of the shrinking creeks. The food was canned army rations—some of it, under the re-labelling, might be from before the Plague—and the inside of the car stank with clothes that hadn't been off their backs in three weeks. The summer sun pounded down on them all through the long day, and the complex power train that began with a pile and a steam turbine, and ended in the individual electric motors turning the drive bogeys, threw off more waste heat than most men could stand.

Henley was just barely getting along. For Custis and his crew, any other way of living was a possibility too remote to consider.

But it had been a long run. They'd stretched themselves to make it, and they still had the worst part of the job to do.

Custis had no faith in it. Wheelwright's name was used to frighten children—real children or politicians, it was all one—all over the Republic. It had been the same during the five Republics before it, for that matter. Somebody was always waving the blue and silver flag, or threatening to. A handful of fake Wheelwrights had been

turned up, here and there, in these past thirty years, trying to trade on a dead man's legend. Some of them had been such pitifully obvious fakes that they'd been laughed down before they got fairly started. Some hadn't—the Fourth Republic got itself going while the Third was busy fighting down the mob formed around a man who'd turned out to be one of Wheelwright's old garrison commanders. Through the years the whole thing had turned into a kind of grim running joke.

But the fact was that the politicians back in Chicago couldn't afford to have the ghost walking their frontiers. The fact was that Wheelwright had been the man who took over after the Plague scoured the world clean of ninety per cent of its people. The fact you had to live with was that Wheelwright had put together the First North American Republic—meaning the old American Midwest and a bit of old Canada—and made it stand up for ten years before he got his. And nobody else had ever been able to do as well. Between the times his name frightened them, people still thought of ten whole years with no fighting in the cities. It made

them growl with anger whenever the politicians did something they disliked. It made them restless, and it left no peace in the politicians' minds. You could say, and say it with a good part of justice, that Wheelwright was behind every mob that rolled down on Government House and dragged the men inside up to the rusty lamp posts.

Thirty years since Wheelwright'd died. Nobody was sure of exactly who'd been behind the shooting, the politicians or the people. But it was a sure thing it'd been the people who mutilated his body. And six months later the mobs'd killed the men they said killed Wheelwright. So there you were—try and make sense out of it. You couldn't. The man's name was magic, and that was that.

Custis, up in his turret, shook his head. If he didn't find this ghost for Henley, it was a cinch he'd never get paid—contract or no contract. But at least he'd gotten his car re-shopped for this job. Sourly, Custis weighed cutting the political officer's throat right here and reporting him lost to bandit action. Or cutting his throat and not reporting back at all.

But that meant turning bandit himself—at least until the

next Republic wanted to hire a battlewagon. That was something Custis wouldn't have minded, *if* oil and ammunition, replacement barrels for his guns, spare parts, pile fuels, and rations for his crew grew on this plain as thick as the grass.

"Bear 340, Lew," he said to his driver through the command microphone, and the car jinked slightly on its tracks, headed on a more direct course for the nearest of the dark foothills.

CHAPTER II

THE GROUND in the foothills was rocky, covered by loose gravel, and treacherous. The car heaved itself up over a sharp ridge with tortuous slowness and pancaked down the other side with a hard smash. The steering levers whipped back and forth just short of the driver's kneecaps, and the motors raced.

"No more seeing, Joe," the driver told Custis. "Lights?"

"No. Bed 'er down, Lew."

The driver locked his treads and cut the switches. The damper rods slammed home in the power pile, and the motors ground down to a stop. The car lay dead.

Custis slid down out of the turret. "All right, let's button

up. We sleep inside tonight." The driver dogged his slit shutters and Hutchinson, the machine gunner, began stuffing rags into the worn gasproof seal on his hatch. Robb, the turret gunner, dogged down the command hatch. "Load napalm," Custis told him, and Robb pulled the racks of fragmentation shells he'd carried in the guns all day. He fitted the new loads, locked the breeches, and pulled the charging handles. "Napalm loaded," he checked back in his colorless voice.

"Acoustics out," Custis said, and Hutchinson activated the car's listening gear.

Henley, standing where the twin 75's could pound his head to a pulp with their recoiling breeches, asked: "What're you going to do now, Custis?"

"Eat." He broke out five cans of rations, handed three to the crew and one to Henley. "Here." He squatted down on the deck and peeled back the lid on the can. Bending it between his fingers, he scooped food into his mouth.

"Do you mean to say we're going to simply wait for the outlaws to surround us and kill us? Is that your purpose in stopping here?"

Custis looked up, his eye sockets thick with black

shadow from the overhead light. His face was tanned to the cheekbones, and dead white from there to the nape of his recently shaved skull. The goggles had left a wide outline of rubber particles around his eyes. "Major, we been comin' at these hills in a straight line over open country. It figures, if you want to see bandits, they'll be here in the mornin'. They ain't gonna crack into us until they find out how come we're such damned fools. That's the fastest way I could think of to get this show goin'. We ain't that rich for time we can afford to waste any. O.K.?"

"You might have consulted me."

"What for? How many hours combat you got? Whose car is this, anyway?"

"Captain, this is *not* a combat mission. This is a diplomatic negotiation. You're not qualified—"

"You're gonna have dealin's with bandits. That's combat."

"Custis—"

"Lew."

The driver cocked his 45. Custis looked quietly at Henley, and the driver pointed his 45 quietly at Henley's belt buckle. Then Custis unscrewed the top of his canteen and handed it to the officer, still quietly. "One mouthful to a

man, Henley," he reminded him. Henley took his drink, handed the canteen back, and wiped his mouth.

THERE'S somebody," Custis said at daybreak. He stepped away from the periscope eyepiece and let Henley take his look at the soldiery squatted on the rocks outside.

There were men all around the battlewagon, in plain sight, looking at it stolidly. They were in all kinds of uniforms, standardized only by black and yellow shoulder badges. Some of the uniforms dated two or three Republics back, all of them were ragged, and some were unfamiliar. West Coast, maybe. Or maybe even East. Lord knew what they might not be doing out in those areas.

The men on the rocks were making no moves. They waited motionless under the battlewagon's guns. Some of them were smoking patiently. The only arms they seemed to have were rifles—Garand M-1's, mostly, that had to be practically smoothbores by now—and it had taken Custis a while to find out why these men, who looked like they'd know what they were doing, were trusting in muskets

against a battlewagon. But there were five two-man teams spread in a loose circle around the car. Each team had a Springfield '03 fitted with a grenade launcher. The men aiming them had them elevated just right to hit the car's turtledeck with their first shots.

"Black and yellow," Henley said angrily.

Custis shrugged. "No blue and silver, that's true," he answered, giving Henley the needle again. "But that was thirty years ago. It might still be Wheelwright."

He went back to the periscope eyepiece for another look at the grenadiers. Each of them had an open, lead-lined box beside him with more grenades in it.

Custis grunted. Napalm splashed pretty well, but it would take one full traverse of the turret to knock out all five teams. The turret took fifteen seconds to revolve 360 degrees. A man could pull a trigger and have a grenade lofting in, say, one second's reaction time. The grenade's muzzle velocity would be low, and it would be arcing sharply upward before it started falling—but it would be in the air, and the battlewagon couldn't possibly get moving. . . .

Custis unbuckled his web belt and took off his 45. He walked under the command hatch and undogged it.

"What're you doing?" Henley demanded.

"Starting." He threw the hatch back and pulled himself up, getting a foothold on the saddle and climbing out on top of the turret. He flipped the hatch shut behind him and stood up.

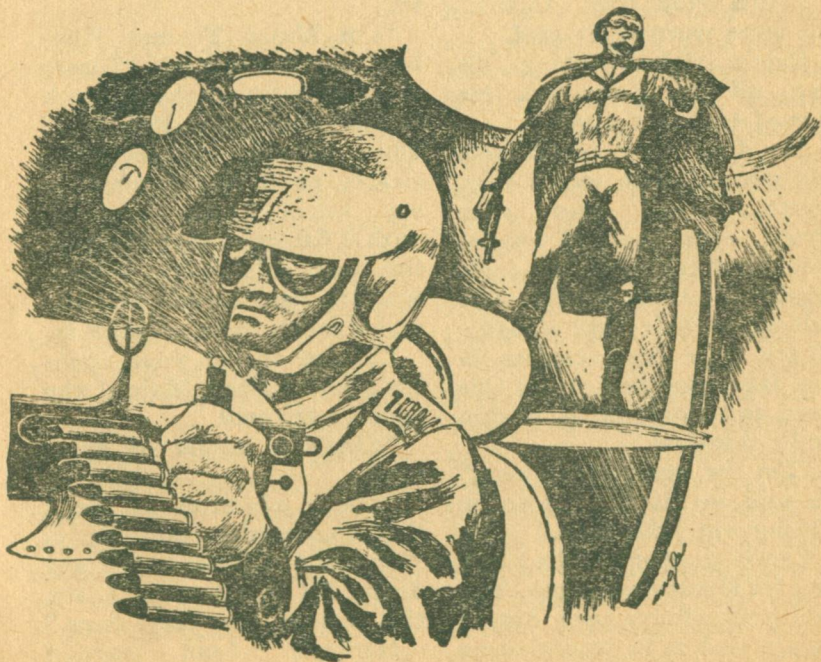
"My name's Custis," he said carefully as the men raised their rifles. "Hired out to the Seventh Republic. I've got a

man here who wants to talk to your boss."

There was no immediate answer. He stood and waited. He heard the hatch scrape beside him, and planted a boot on it before Henley could lift it.

"What about, Custis?" a voice asked from off to one side, out of range of his eyes. The voice was old and husky, kept in tight check. Custis wondered if it might not tremble if the man let it.

He weighed his answer. Things were at a poor stale-



mate. There was no sense in playing around. These men didn't give a damn whether the battlewagon had its guns loaded or not. Maybe he had an answer to that kind of confidence and maybe he was going to get himself killed right now.

"About Wheelwright," he said.

The name dropped into these men like a stone. He saw their faces go tight, and he saw heads jerk involuntarily. Well, the British had stood guard over Napoleon's grave for nineteen years.

"Turn this way, Custis," the same worn voice said.

Custis risked taking his eyes off the grenadiers. He turned toward the voice.

Standing a bit apart from his troops, there was a thin, weather-burned man with sharp eyes hooded under thick white eyebrows. He needed a shave badly. His salt-white hair was shaggy. There were deep creases in his face, pouches under his eyes, and a dry wattle of skin under his jaw.

"I'm the commander here," he said in his halting voice. "Bring out your man."

Custis stepped off the hatch and let Henley come out. The political officer gave him a savage look as he squirmed up

and got to his feet. Custis ignored it. "Over there—the white-haired one," he said without moving his lips. "He's the local boss." He stepped a little to one side and gave Henley room to stand on the sloping turret top, but he kept watching the old commander, who was wearing a faded pair of black coveralls with that black and yellow shoulder badge.

Henley squinted up toward the thin figure. The back of his neck was damp, even in the chill morning breeze, and he was nervous about his footing.

"I'm Major Thomas Henley," he finally said. "Direct representative of the Seventh North American Republic." Then he stopped, obviously unable to think of what to say next. Custis realized, with a flat grin, that his coming out cold with Wheelwright's name hadn't left the major much room to work in.

"You're out of your country's jurisdiction, Major," the commander said.

"That's a matter of opinion."

"That's a matter of fact," the commander said flatly. "You and Custis can come down. I'll talk to you. Leave the rest of your men here."

Henley's head turned

quickly. "Should we go with him?" he muttered to Custis.

"Lord, Major, don't ask *me*! But if you're plannin' to get anywhere, you better talk to *somebody*. Or do you expect Wheelwright to plop down in your lap?"

Henley looked back at the thin figure on the hillside. "Maybe he already has."

Custis looked at him steadily. "They shot Wheelwright in Detroit thirty years ago. They threw what was left of his body on a garbage heap, and twenty years ago they built a tomb over where they threw it."

"Maybe, Captain. Maybe. Were you there?"

"Were you?"

Custis felt annoyed at himself for getting so exercised about it. He glared at the major. Then his common sense came trickling back, and he turned away to give Lew his orders about keeping the car sealed and the guns ready until he and Henley got back.

Thirty years dead, Wheelwright was. Judged for treason, condemned, killed—and men still quarrelled at the mention of his name. Custis shook his head and took another look at the old, dried-out man on the hill, wearing those patched, threadbare coveralls.

CHAPTER III

MOST of the commander's men stayed behind, dispersed among the rocks around the silent battlewagon. Twenty of them formed up in a loose party around the commander and Henley, and Custis walked along a few yards behind the two men as they started off into the mountains.

It was turning into a bright but cool day, and looking up into the west Custis could see mountaintops plumbing as high altitude gales swept their snow caps out in banners. The track they were walking on wound among boulders higher than Custis's head, and he felt vaguely uncomfortable. He was used to the sweeping plains where his father had raised him, where, except for the spindly trees along the sparse creeks, nothing stood taller than a man.

But it wasn't a man's height that mattered, he thought as he worked his way up a sharp slope. Some men stood taller than the rest, and it wasn't a thing of inches.

Why? What was a man born with, that made people turn themselves over to him? A man like that could start with nothing—no money, no

rank, no important friends—and in a few years, there he was, blazing up like a comet, with people ready to die for him and the whole world at his feet. You couldn't stop that kind of man. No matter what you did to him he landed upright, and then he was on his way back up, and coming straight at you. The best you could do was kill him, and even then he haunted you forever. Your name was one fading line in a history book somewhere, and his burned on until it was something more than history—it was a legend, and two thousand years after he had come and gone, he was still remembered. Genghis Khan — Tamerlane — Friedrich Barbarossa—Alexander, whom every Indian peasant still remembered as the terrible Iskander—

Custis remembered his father rolling the names off his tongue like a man counting his gods.

There wasn't any explaining it. There was only living with it. You lived in Charlemagne's time, in Cromwell's time—in Wheelwright's time. And here you were, your feet slipping on loose rock, climbing up a mountain on a chilly morning with armed men looking at you coldly.

Custis growled and shook

himself, annoyed at getting into this kind of mood. He walked steadily behind Henley and the commander, ignoring the commander's men.

THE COMMANDER'S base was a group of low, one-room huts strung out along the foot of a cliff, with a cook-fire pit in front of each one. Their outlines were broken by rocks and boulders piled around them. There were prepared slit trenches spotted around the area, two machine gun pits covering the approach, and a few mortar batteries situated on reverse slopes. From the size of the place and the depth of organization, Custis judged the commander had about four hundred people in his outfit.

Custis wondered how he kept them all supplied and fed, and the answer he got from looking around was that he couldn't do it very well. The huts were dark and dingy, with what looked like dirt floors. A few wan-looking women were carrying water up from a tiny spring, balancing pails made out of cut-down oil cans. They were raggedly dressed, and the spindly-legged children that trotted beside them were hollow-eyed. Here and there,

among the rocks, there were a few pitiful patches of scraggly gardens. Up at one end of the valley, a small herd of gaunt cows was grazing on indifferent grass.

Custis nodded to himself. It confirmed something he'd been suspecting for a couple of years: the bandits were still crossing the plains to raid into Republic territory, but they'd never dared set up towns on the untenable prairie. With women and children, they'd needed a permanent settlement somewhere. So now they were pulled back into the mountains, trying to make a go of it, but with their weapons wearing out. They were dying on the vine, something left behind, and by the time the cities began spreading out their holdings again, they'd find little here to stop them.

Well, when you came down to it, there wasn't much that could be done about it.

"In here," the commander said, gesturing into a hut. Henley and Custis stepped inside, followed by two men with rifles and then the commander. The hut was almost bare except for a cot and a table with one chair, all made out of odd pieces of scrap lumber and weapons crates. The commander sat down fac-

ing them with his veined and brown-mottled hands resting on the stained wood.

Custis spread his feet and stood relaxed. Henley's hands were playing with the seams along his pant legs.

"What about Wheelwright, Major?" the commander asked.

"We've heard he's still alive."

The commander snorted. "Fairy tales!"

"Possibly. But if he's still alive, these mountains are the logical place for him to be." Henley looked at the commander meaningfully.

The commander's narrow lips twitched. "My name isn't Wheelwright, Major. I don't use his colors. And my men don't call themselves The Army of The Union."

"Things change," Henley answered. "I didn't say you were Wheelwright. But if Wheelwright got away from Detroit, he'd be a fool to use his own name. If he's in these mountains, he might not care to advertise the fact."

The commander grimaced. "This isn't getting us anywhere. What do you want from me?"

"Information, then, if you have it. We'll pay for it, in cash or supplies, whatever you say, within reason."

"In weapons?"

Henley paused for a moment. Then he nodded. "If that's what you want."

"And to blazes with what we do to your people in the outlying areas, once we're re-armed?"

"It's important that we have this information."

The commander smiled coldly. "There's no pretense of governing for anyone's benefit but your own, is there?"

"I'm loyal to the Seventh Republic. I follow my orders."

"No doubt. All right, what do you want to know?"

"Do you know of any groups in this area that Wheelwright might be leading?"

The commander shook his head. "No. There aren't any other groups. I've consolidated them all. You can have that news gratis."

"I see." Henley smiled for the first time Custis had ever seen. It was an odd, spinsteryish puckering of his lips. The corners of his eyes wrinkled upward, and gave him the look of a sly cat. "You could have made me pay to find that out."

"I'd rather not soil myself in dealings with your kind. A few rusty rifles pulled out

of the old armories aren't worth that much to me."

Henley's mouth twitched. He looked at the austere pride on the commander's face, gathered like a stronger and more youthful mask on the gray-stubbled cheeks, and then he said: "Well, if I ever do find him, I'm empowered to offer him the Presidency of the Eighth Republic." His eyes glittered and fastened like talons on the old commander's expression.

Custis grunted to himself. So that explained what Henley was really doing here.

And the old man was looking down at the table top, his old hands suddenly clenched. After a long time, he looked up slowly.

"So you're not really working for the Seventh Republic. You've been sent here to find a useful figurehead for a new combination of power."

Henley smiled again—easily, blandly—and looked like a man who has shot his animal and only has to wait for it to die. "I wouldn't put it that way. Though, naturally, we wouldn't stand for any one-man dictatorships."

"Naturally." One corner of the commander's lip lifted, and suddenly Henley wasn't so sure. Custis saw him tense, as though a dying lion had

suddenly lashed out a paw. The commander's eyes narrowed. "I'm through talking to you for the moment," he said crisply, and Custis wondered just how much of his weakness had been carefully laid on. "You'll wait outside. I want to talk to Custis." He motioned to the two waiting riflemen. "Take him out—put him in another hut and keep your eyes on him."

And Custis was left alone in the hut with the old commander.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMMANDER looked up at him. "That's your own car out there?" he asked quietly.

Custis nodded.

"So you're just under contract to the Seventh Republic—you've got no particular loyalty to the government?"

Custis shrugged. "Right now, there's no tellin' who I'm hired out to." He was willing to wait the commander out—see what he was driving at.

"You did a good job of handling things, this morning. What are you—about twenty-nine, thirty?"

"Twenty-six."

"So you were born four years after Wheelwright was

killed. What do you know about him? What have you heard?"

"Usual stuff. After the Plague, everything was a mess. Nine out of ten people dead, not enough people alive to keep things goin', no transport, no communications. Everybody cut off from everybody else. Everybody havin' to scratch for himself. In the cities, with no food comin' in and the farmers shootin' everybody that came out, it meant people were gettin' killed over a can of peaches. That's when Wheelwright put an army together and tried to get the country back in one piece."

The commander nodded to himself—an old man's nod, passing judgment on the far past. "You left out a lot of people between the Plague and Wheelwright. And you'll never imagine how bad it was. But that'll do. Do you know why he did it?"

"Why's anybody set up a government? He wanted to be boss, I guess. Then somebody decided he was gettin' too big, and cut him down. Then the people cut the somebody down. But I figure Wheelwright's dead for sure."

"Do you?" The commander's eyes were steady on Custis. He was thinly smiling.

Custis tightened his jaw. "Yeah."

"Do I look like Wheelwright?" the commander asked softly.

"No."

"But hand-drawn portraits thirty years old don't really prove anything, do they?"

"Well—no." Custis felt himself getting edgy. "But you're not Wheelwright," he growled belligerently. "I'm sure Wheelwright's dead."

The old commander sighed. "Of course. Tell me about Chicago," he said, going off in a new direction. "Has it changed much? Have they cleaned it up? Or are they simply abandoning the buildings that're ready to fall down?"

"Sometimes. They try and fix 'em up sometimes."

"Only sometimes." The commander shook his head regretfully. "I had hoped that by this time, no matter what kind of men were in charge . . . But, never mind."

"When's the last time you were there?" Custis asked.

"I've never been there," the commander said, looking rigidly at Custis. "Tell me about this car of yours." Then his eyes dropped again, as though there was so little strength left in him that he dared not use it for long. "I—used to be

rather fond of mechanized equipment, once." Now he was an old man again, dreaming back into the past, only half-seeing Custis. "We took a whole city, once, with almost no infantry support at all. That's a hard thing to do, even with tanks, and all I had was armored cars. Just twenty of them, and the heaviest weapons they mounted were automatic light cannon in demi-turrets. No tracks—I remember they shot our tires flat almost at once, and we went bumping through the streets. Just armored scout cars, really, but we used them like tanks, and we took the city." He looked down at his hands. "It wasn't a very big place, but still, I don't believe that had ever been done before."

"Never did any street fighting," Custis said. "Don't know a thing about it."

"What do you know, then?"

"Open country work. Only thing a car's good for."

"One car, yes."

"Hell, mister, there ain't five good cars left runnin' in the Republic, and they ain't got any range. Only reason I'm still goin' is mine don't need no gasoline. I run across it in an old American government depot outside Kansas City. Provin' grounds, it

was. My dad, he'd taught me about running cars, and I had this fellow with me, Lew Gaines, and we got it going."

"How long ago was that?"

"Seven years."

"And nobody ever tried to take it away from you?"

"Mister, there's three fifty-caliber machine guns and two 75's on that car."

The commander looked at him from head to foot. "I see." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "And now you've practically handed it to me."

"Not by a long shot, I ain't. My crew's still inside, and it's kind of an open question just how much those baby bombs of yours'll do before your boys get turned into a barbecue."

The commander cocked an eyebrow at him. "Not as open as all that."

"Try me."

"You're here. Your car's down the mountain."

"My crew's just as good without me, mister."

The commander let it ride, switching his tack a little. "You'll admit you've come to a peculiar place for a man who only knows open country."

Custis shrugged. "Car needed shopwork. Chicago's the only place with the

equipment. If I use their shops, I do their work. That's the straight up and down of it. And it's one more reason why gettin' that car'd be more work than it was worth to you. Anything you busted on it'd stay busted for good. And you know it."

The commander smiled crookedly. "And you know I know it. It takes a good deal to budge you, doesn't it, Custis?"

"Depends on the spot I'm in. My dad taught me to pick my spots carefully."

The commander nodded. "I'd say so. All right, Custis, I'll want to talk to you again, later. One of my men'll stay close to you. Other than that, you're free to look around as much as you want to. I don't imagine you'll ever be leading any expeditions up here—not if Henley's plans work out. Or even if they don't."

He turned away and reached under the cot for a bottle, and Custis hadn't found out what the old commander was driving at.

CHAPTER V

OUTSIDE, they were cooking their noon meal. The camp women were huddled around the firepits, bent shapeless as they stirred their

pots with charred long wooden spoons, and the smell of food lay over the area near the huts in an invisible cloud that dilated Custis's nostrils and made his empty stomach tighten up. Whatever these people ate, it was hot and smelled different from the sludgy meat in the car's ration cans.

Then he shrugged and closed his mind to it. Walking upwind, he went over to a low rock and sat down on it. One of the commander's riflemen went with him and leaned against a boulder fifteen feet away, cradling his rifle in the crook of one thin arm and looking steadily at Custis through coldly sleepy eyes.

A bunch of kids clustered around the fires, filling oil cans that had crude handles made out of insulated wire. When they had loaded up they moved out of the little valley with a few riflemen for escort, carrying the food out to the men who were in position around the battlewagon. Custis watched them for a while, and then ignored them as well as he could.

So Henley was working for a group that wanted to set up the next government. It wasn't particularly surprising that the Seventh Republic

was financing its own death. Every government was at least half made up of men from the one before. They played musical chairs with the titles—one government's tax collector was the next government's chief of police—and whoever wasn't happy with the graft was bound to be figuring some way to improve it next time the positions moved around.

It looked a hell of a lot like, however the pie was going to be cut, Custis wasn't going to get paid. The Seventh wouldn't pay him if he didn't come back with Wheelwright; and if he did find him, the Eighth wouldn't hold to the last government's contract.

Custis twitched his mouth. Anyhow, the car was running as well as you could expect. If he got out of here, Kansas City might have a job for him. Or he might even head east, if the highways over the mountains there were still any good at all. That could be a pretty touchy business all around, with unfamiliar terrain and God knew what going on behind the Appalachians. Going there wouldn't be the smart thing to do. But at the moment, Custis was feeling a little sick of this whole part of the world.

He wondered how the boys in the car were making out. He hadn't heard any firing from over there, and he didn't expect to. But it was a lousy business, sitting cooped up in there, not doing anything, and looking out at the men on the rocks as time went by.

When you came right down to it, this was a lousy kind of life, waiting for the day you ran into a trap under the sod and the last thing you ever did was trying to climb out through the turret while the people who'd dug the hole waited outside with their knives. Or wondering, every time you went into one of the abandoned old towns, if somebody there hadn't found some gasoline in a sealed drum and was waiting to set you on fire.

But what the hell else could a man do? Live in the damned cities, breaking his back in somebody's jackleg factory, living in some hole somewhere that had twelve flights of stairs before you got up to it? Freezing in the winter and maybe getting your throat cut for your clothes in a back alley?

Custis shivered suddenly. To hell with this. He was thinking in circles. When a man did that, he licked himself before he got started.

Custis slid off his rock, stretched out on the ground, and went to sleep.

HE'D BEEN asleep for about a half hour when somebody touched his shoulder. He turned over in one easy motion and caught the hand around the wrist. With his next move he was on his feet, and the girl's arm was twisted back between her shoulder blades. "What's up, honey?" he said quietly, putting just enough strain on her shoulder to turn her head toward him.

The girl was about eighteen or twenty, with a pale, bony face and black hair hacked off around her shoulders. She was thin, and the top of her head came up to his collar bone. She was wearing a man's army shirt that bagged around her, and a skirt made by cutting off a pair of pants at the knees, opening the seams, and using the extra material to make gussets. The whole business was pretty crudely sewed, and came down to just above her dirty calves.

"I was bringing you something to eat, soldier," she said calmly.

"O.K." He let go of her wrist, and she turned all the way around, putting the pail

of stew down on the ground in front of him. There was a wooden spoon sticking up out of it, and Custis sat down, folded his legs under him and started to eat.

The girl sat down next to him. "Go easy," she said. "Half of that's mine."

Custis grunted. "The commander send you over here with this?" he asked, passing the spoon.

She shook her head. "He's busy. He always gets busy about this time of day, working on that bottle of his." She was eating as hungrily as Custis had, not looking up, and talking between mouthfuls.

Custis looked over toward the guard. The man was squatted down, with an empty dinner bucket beside him, scowling at Custis and the girl.

"That your man?" Custis asked her.

She looked up briefly. "You could say that. There's maybe six or seven of us that don't belong in anybody's hut. There's maybe fifty men without any families."

Custis nodded. He looked over toward the guard again, shrugged, and took the girl's spoon. "The commander here—what's his name?"

"Eichler, Eisner — some-

thing like that. Anyhow, that's what he says. I was with the last bunch he took over up here, a couple of years ago. Never did get it straight—who cares? Names come easy. He's the only commander we got."

So that didn't tell him anything. "What's your name?"

"Jody. You from Chicago, soldier?"

"Right now, yeah. Name's Joe Custis. You ever seen Chicago?"

She shook her head. "I was born up here. Never seen anything else. You going back to Chicago, Joe? Go ahead—finish that—I'm full."

Custis looked around at the cliffs and huts. "I figure I'll be getting out of here, anyway. Maybe Chicago's where I'll head for."

"Don't you know?"

"Don't much care. I live where my car is."

"Don't you like cities? I hear they've got all kinds of stores and things, and warehouses full of clothes and food."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Some of the fellows here came out from Chicago, and Denver, and places like that. They tell me. But Chicago sounds like it's the best of all."

Custis grunted. "Ain't

never been to Denver." He finished the stew. "Food's pretty good right here. You cook it?"

She nodded. "You got a big car? Room for extra people to take a ride in?" She leaned back until her shoulder was touching his.

Custis looked down at the stew pot. "You're a pretty good cook."

"I like it. I'm strong, too. I'm not afraid of work. And I shoot a rifle pretty good, when I have to."

Custis frowned. "You want me to take you to Chicago?"

The girl was quiet for a minute. "That's up to you." She was still leaning on his shoulder, looking straight out ahead of her.

"I'll think about it."

The guard had been getting uglier and uglier in the face. Now he stood up. "All right, Jody, he's fed. Now get away from him."

Custis got slowly to his feet, using two fingers of his right hand to quietly push the girl's shoulder down and keep her where she was. He looked over toward the guard with a casual glance, and jumped him.

He hit the man's rifle barrel with his left forearm, knocking it out of the way and getting a grip across the

guard's chest. He got his other hand on the man's neck, brought his thigh up, and pulled his back down across it. The rifle fell loose. Custis dropped him, scooped up the rifle, and pulled out the clip. He worked the bolt and caught the extracted chamber cartridge in mid-air. Then he handed the whole business back to the man.

"You tend to your job and I'll give you no trouble, son," he told him, and went back to where the girl was sitting. The guard was cursing, but by the time he had reloaded his rifle, he'd come to realize just how much Custis had done to him. If he didn't want the girl spreading this story all over the camp, his best move was to keep quiet from now on. He did it.

The girl looked sideward at Custis as he sat down again. "You always move that fast?"

"When it's gonna save me trouble, I do."

"You're a funny bird, you know? How come you've got that black smear around your eyes?"

"Rubber, off the goggles. Some of it's under the skin. Can't wash it off."

"You must of been wearing those goggles a long time."

"Ever since I was big

enough to go along with my dad. He had a car of his own—full-track job. That was the trouble with it—too damned slow on roads. We got caught that way in a town, once. This place was built around the only bridge standin' over this river, and we had to go through it. Dad goosed her up as fast's she'd go, but that wasn't much. There was a couple of birds with a bazooka — anti-tank rocket launcher, is what that is—down at the far end of town, behind some piled-up concrete. We opened up on them, but this car only had a 35-millimeter cannon. High velocity stuff, and that wears hell out of the rifling. It was pretty shot. We kept missin', and they kept tryin' to fire this bazooka. They must have had ten of the rockets that fit it, and one after another they was duds. One of 'em fired, all right, but when it hit us, it didn't go off. Punched through the armor, and got inside the car. The primer went off, but the charge was no good. The primer goin' off smoked up the inside of the car so bad we couldn't see. Dad was drivin', and I heard him tryin' to stay on the road. Then we hit somethin' with one track—maybe they got us with another rocket—so we

went around in a circle and flipped over sideways.

"Well, I crawled out and the car was between me and the birds with the bazooka. Then my dad crawled out. Both of us were busted up some, but our legs were okay. Meanwhile, these two birds were bangin' away with rifles. Dad and I, all we had was 45's. I figured the only thing to do was try and run for it, and I said so. Dad said the way to do it was to split up, or they'd get us both. And I couldn't see it, because if we got separated, there was no tellin' when we'd get back together again. Well, dad didn't argue. He just got this funny look on his face and gave me a shove away from him, and he started runnin'."

The girl looked at Custis. "Did he make it?"

"No."

"He must of been a funny kind of man."

Custis shrugged. He sat with the girl through the afternoon, making talk, until finally another rifleman came over to them from the line of huts.

He looked down at Custis and the girl, his eyes flicking back and forth once and letting it go at that. "This Henley fellow you brought wants to see you, soldier."

"What's his trouble?"

"I figured that's his business. He give me his wrist watch to come get you. That don't mean I work for either of you guys. You comin'?"

The man was a big, hairy type—bigger than Custis. This kind of life grew them either that way or undersized, skinny—and deadly treacherous.

But when Custis came smoothly to his feet, annoyance showing on his face, the rifleman took a step back. Custis looked at him curiously for a moment. The damndest people were always doing that with him, and he had a hard time understanding it. The man was glowering at him now, and Custis knew there wouldn't be any getting anything out of him. If the man got mad enough they might have a fight, but not now. Custis frowned. Some kinds of people just lost their drive and got surly around him, and that was that. No accounting for it.

"I'll see you later," he said to the girl, and walked off.

HENLEY was pacing back and forth in his hut when Custis stopped in the doorway. He twitched his lips nervously. "It's time you got

here. I watched you out there, lollygagging with that girl."

"Make your point, Henley. What'd you want to see me about?"

"What did I want to see you about!" Henley burst out. "Why didn't you come here as soon as the commander released you? We have to make plans—we have to think this through. We have to decide what to do if our situation grows any worse. Hasn't it occurred to you that this man might be planning to do almost anything to us?"

Custis shrugged. "I didn't see any sense in getting all worked up about it. When he makes up his mind, we'll find out. No use making any plans of our own until we know what his are."

Henley stared angrily at him. "Don't you care? Don't you care if you get killed?"

"Sure I do. But the time to decide about that was back down on the plains."

"Yes, and you decided quite easily, didn't you?" Henley answered waspishly. "It wasn't very hard for you to risk all our lives." His eyes narrowed. "Unless— You know something, Custis. No man in his right mind would have acted the way you have unless you knew you weren't in any danger."

"That's a lie."

"Is it? You drove up here like a man coming home. What do I know about you, after all? A freebooting car commander, off the same plains where the outlaws run. Yes, I know you've worked for Chicago before, but what does that mean?" Henley seemed to be almost hysterical. Custis could smell the fear soaking the officer's clothes. "You've sold us out, Custis! I can't understand how Chicago could ever have trusted you!"

"They must have, or they wouldn't have hired me for this job."

Henley gnawed his lip. "I don't know." He stopped and muttered down at the ground. "I have enemies there. People who want my place for themselves. They might have planned all this to get rid of me."

"You're a damned fool, Henley."

Custis was thinking that, a few years ago, he might have felt sorry for Henley. But since then he'd seen a lot of men go to pieces when they thought they might get killed. Most men seemed to lose their heads in a spot like that—and more of them died than would have if they'd kept thinking. It seemed to

be something built into them. Custis had never felt it, and he wondered if there might not be something wrong with him. But, anyhow, Custis had learned it wasn't anything to feel one way or another about. It was something people did, and you allowed for it.

Henley suddenly said: "Custis—if we get out of here, don't take me back to Chicago."

"What?"

"No—listen—they'll kill us if we go back. Let's go somewhere else. Or let's stay on the plains. We can live off the country. We can raid farms. Put me in your crew. I don't care—I'll learn to shoot a machine gun, or whatever you want me to do. But we can't go back to Chicago."

"I wouldn't have you in my crew if I had to drive and fire the guns by myself."

"Is that your final answer?" Henley's lips quivered.

"Damned right."

"You think you're so strong!" Henley cried. "You think you know all the answers."

"Good Lord, man," Custis growled, "get a hold on yourself."

And Henley did it. His face turned white, and he locked his muscles until his body shook. But he stopped his

pacing, and flicked one hand up to brush his perspired hair back into place.

"All right, Custis," he said in a voice that was hollow with tension but at least wasn't a whine. "I will. If you won't help me, I'll beat you yet." His lips curled. "I know your kind. You think strength is everything. You think all you have to do is get an angry look on your face and everyone'll be afraid of you. You think you're invulnerable. You think you can get out of any situation with brute force. You think women worship you—don't tell me, I've seen you!—and you spit on people like myself.

"But I'll get out of this. You watch me—I'll get out of this and see you executed."

"You poor son-of-a-bitch," Custis said slowly, shaking his head. "Look—I want to get out of here just as much as you do. I think maybe I can. If I do, I'll take you along because I got you into this. But if you can't stand the gaff, you had no business out here in the first place."

"Never mind the speeches, Custis. From now on, I'll look after myself. Don't expect any help from me."

"Hey, you two," the rifleman said from the doorway, "commander wants you."

CHAPTER VI

THE SUN was going down behind the mountains. It was still broad daylight farther up on the peaks, but the valley was filling with shadows from the west. Custis followed Henley along the line of huts, feeling a little edgy in the thick gloom down here at the base of the cliff, and wondering how all this was going to work out.

He watched Henley. The officer was walking in short, choppy strides, and Custis could see him working his self-control up to high pitch. His face lost its desperate set, and the look of confidence came back to him. It was only if you knew what to look for that you could still see the panic in him, driving him like fuel. They reached the commander's hut.

"Come in," the commander said from his table, and Custis couldn't decide whether he was drunk on his home brew or not. The inside of the hut was so dark that all he could see of the old man was a shadow without a face. It might have been almost anyone sitting there.

Custis felt his belly tightening up. Henley stopped in front of the table, and Custis

took a stand beside him.

"I'm glad to see you're still here, Custis," the old man said. "I was afraid you might be killed trying a break."

"I'm not crazy."

"I didn't think you were."

Henley broke in. "Have you decided what you're going to do?"

The commander sighed. "Just why would you want Wheelwright back, Major?"

"Then, he's available?"

"Just answer the question, please, Major, if you don't mind. We'll do this my way, or not at all."

Henley licked his lips. Custis could hear the sound plainly. "Well," the political officer finally said in a persuasive voice, "there's been no stability since he was deposed. Governments come and go overnight. A constitution isn't worth the paper it's printed on—hasn't been since the Plague, but Wheelwright's stood up better than most." Now that he'd gotten started, he was talking much more easily. "Paper money's so much mouse-stuffing, credit's non-existent, and half the time your life's at the mercy of the next man's good will. We don't have a society—we have a semi-organized rabble. The closest we've come to a decent life was under Wheel-

wright. And they killed him for his ambitions—or said they did, for what they said were his ambitions. They said it loudly and as often as they could before they were overthrown, and he didn't come forward to deny it. But if he's still alive, we need him. He's the only man anyone will follow with enthusiasm."

"Follow a corpse?"

"Follow a name—a legend. A memory of a time when there was civilization in the world."

The words sounded good. Henley's way of saying them didn't.

The commander twitched his head to one side and spat through the open doorway.

"Spare me your dramatics, Major."

"I was telling the truth."

"Certainly. But not your truth. You don't want a stable society. Your kind lives on connivance and battens on chaos. You're a breed of jackals, skulking around a sickened world. You're free to gorge because all the lions are dead." His voice, for a moment, had drifted away as though he remembered a man and could see him in front of his eyes. "If I could give you Wheelwright, I wouldn't—and if I were Wheelwright, I'd have you hung."

Henley gave it one more try. "Even with the presidency for a prize? Don't you think Wheelwright might see his opportunity to come back and finish what he'd begun?"

"Despite the controls you'd put over him, and the assassins dogging his steps? The people were turned against him once. It could be done again. No—that kind of thing's a young man's game, if it's anybody's game at all."

"Then you won't do it?"

"I'm not Wheelwright."

"Then, who is? Do you know where he is?"

"Wheelwright's been dead for thirty years," the old man said. "What in Heaven's name did you expect? If he was alive—and he's not—he'd be sixty years old now. A man that age, in this world—your whole scheme's fantastic, Major, and rational men would know it. But you can't let yourselves think about it rationally. You need your Wheelwrights too badly."

"Then that's your final word?"

"I want to ask Custis something, first. You stay and listen. It'll interest you."

Custis frowned.

"Custis."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think I'm Wheelwright?"

"You asked me that. No."

"You don't. Well, do you think Wheelwright's alive?"

"No."

"I see. You don't think I'm Wheelwright, and you don't think Wheelwright's alive—then, what're you doing up here in these mountains? What were you hoping to find?"

Custis felt himself getting angry. He felt like an egg the old man'd peeled, somehow. "Nothing, maybe. Maybe I'm just a guy doing a job, because he has to. Not looking for anything or anybody—just doing a job."

The commander laughed mirthlessly. The sound stabbed at Custis out of the dark. "It's time we stopped lying to each other. You put your car—your entire life—in a position where you might lose them instantly. You know it and I know it, and let's not argue the merits of grenades against cannon. Why did you take that kind of a gamble? Why were you dangling that bait? Who were you hoping might snap at it?"

"It was a quick way of finding out what Henley wanted to know."

"And how did you propose to get out, once you'd gotten

yourself in? You don't give two cents paper for Henley. You're an independent armored car commander on a simple contract job—then why all the extra effort? You must have known damned well this mission wasn't in the interests of the Seventh Republic. You're a child of the age. If you'd let yourself stop and think, you would have realized what was going on. But you don't care anything about the Eighth Republic, either. A man doesn't pledge allegiance to one of a meaningless string of numbers. No. What you wanted to do was pledge allegiance to a man who's thirty years dead. *Now* deny it."

Custis didn't have an answer. It was dark outside. He'd played out his string, with the commander and with himself.

"You want me to tell you I'm Wheelwright, don't you?"

"Maybe," Custis said grudgingly.

The commander laughed again—a harsh, bitter croak of sound that made the hackles stand on Custis's neck. Henley was breathing heavily in the darkness. "You and Henley—both damned fools. What would you do with your Wheelwright? Starve with him, up here in

these mountains with an old man? If you found him, did you expect him to go out and remake the world for you? But you're a different breed from this jackal. What did you think Wheelwright started with? What's the matter with you, Custis? You've got your crew and your car, and they'll go wherever you take them. What do you need Wheelwright for? What's the matter with yourself?"

Custis had no answer at all.

"Don't worry, Custis—Henley's getting an earful. I can hear the gears turning in his head. Right now, he's planning how to use you. He can see it already. The Chicago machine swinging in behind you. The carefully built-up legend they'll manufacture around you. All you'll have to do is stand on a platform and shout, and his gang will take care of the rest. That's the way he's thinking. But you don't have to worry about him. You can take care of him. It'll be a long time before anyone like you has to worry about anyone like Henley—years. And I can sit here and tell you this, and the likes of Henley'll still not worry, because they think they'll always run things. Of course, in order to safeguard the legend of Joe Custis, he has to

make sure, once and for all, about Wheelwright—”

Custis heard the sound of steel snaking out of Henley's boot top. He jumped for where the man had been, but Henley'd had minutes to get ready. Custis heard him bump into the desk, and the thin scream of his blade through the air.

The old man'll have moved, Custis thought. He's had time.

He heard the ripe sound of Henley's dagger, and then the dull *chunk!* as its hilt struck flesh. He heard the old commander sigh.

He stood still, breathing open-mouthed, until he heard Henley move. He went in low, under where the blade might be. As he hit him, Henley whispered: "Don't be a fool! Don't make any noise! We can walk out of here, with any luck!"

He broke Henley apart with his hands, making no noise. He let the officer slip to the floor and went silently around the table, to where he felt the old man folded over the desk. He touched his shoulder. "Commander—"

"It's all right," the old man sighed. "I've been waiting for it." He stirred. "I've left things in a terrible mess. He was quicker to make up his

mind than I expected." He hunched himself up, his cracked and dirty fingernails scraping at his shirt. "I don't know . . . You'll have to get out somehow. I can't help you. Why am I so old?"

"It's O.K., Commander. I've had somethin' figured out. I'll make it."

"You'll need a weapon." He raised his head and pulled his shoulders back. "Here." He tugged at his chest and fumbled the wet knife into Custis's hand.

CHAPTER VII

HE STEPPED OUT of the dead commander's hut into the flickering shadows from the cookfires. There was a rifleman posted about ten yards away, and Custis looked at him thoughtfully. Then he called, in a voice pitched to reach the man and no farther: "Hey—the boss wants some light in here."

The man grunted and went to one of the near fires for a sliver of burning wood. He carried it back, shielding it carefully with his hands. "First no lights, and now lights," he grumbled as he stepped through the doorway. He reached up to a shelf where an oil lamp was sitting, and stopped dead as he dimly

saw Henley on the floor and the commander lying across the table. "Now who the hell'd be dumb enough to kill the boss right in the camp . . ." he murmured, mouthing the words in an attempt to get them through his head.

Custis whipped the flat of his hand across the side of the man's neck. He caught the burning light and carefully crushed it out on the floor. And then he stepped outside again, gently closing the door behind him. He walked slowly away until he was fifty feet from the huts, in the shadows, and then he turned toward the fire where he saw Jody working. He had the knife in his belt under his shirt, and as he walked he rolled up his bloody sleeves. His skin gathered itself into gooseflesh under the night wind's chill.

When he was fairly close to the fire, he changed his pace until he was simply strolling. He walked up to the fire, listening for the first sounds from the hut on the other side of the camp. "Jody."

She looked up, wiping the wet hair off her forehead with the back of a hand. "Hi, soldier. Come for supper?"

He shook his head. "Still want to come to Chicago?"

She straightened up. "Just

a minute." She stirred the food in the pot, let the spoon slide back into it, and picked up her water pail. "Ready," she said.

"Let's go."

They walked toward the spring. Out of the firelight, she touched his forearm. "You're not kidding me?"

"No. You know how to get down to where the car is?"

"Yeah." She put the water pail down. "Come on."

As they walked up the rise to the valley entrance, she gripped his hand. "Anything go wrong, Joe? You get hurt, or something?"

"No."

"There's blood on your shirt."

"Henley's."

"You sure?"

"He spilled it. It belongs to him."

She took a deep breath. "There's gonna be hell to pay."

"Can't help it. It worked out that way." He was busy trying to remember the exact positions where the grenadiers had been.

They came to where the two machine gun pits covered the valley entrance, and one of the men there heard them walking. "Who's that?"

"Me. Jody."

The man chuckled. "Hey,



Jody. You bringin' me my supper?" The other men laughed out of the darkness.

"Not right now, Sam," Jody answered. "I got somebody with me."

There was more laughter in the shadows among the rocks, and then they were past. They made their way down the mountainside, walking as

quietly as they could on the loose rock, and then Custis heard a man's shoes scrape as he settled himself more comfortably in his position.

"We're there," Jody whispered.

"Okay." Custis oriented himself. After a minute, he was pretty sure where he was in relation to the car, and

where everyone else would be.

"What now, Joe?"

"You walk on down. Let 'em hear you. Talk to 'em."

"You sure, Joe?"

"Yeah. It's okay."

"You're not gonna leave me?"

"I told you I'd take you to Chicago, didn't I?"

"All right, Joe." Her fingers trailed over his forearm. "Be seeing you."

"Give me twenty minutes," he said, and slipped off among the rocks.

HE MOVED as noiselessly as he knew how, the knife ready in his hand. Once he stumbled over a man. "'Scuse me, buddy," he mumbled.

"Okay, pal," the man answered. "Take one for me."

Farther down the mountainside, he heard somebody say loudly: "Hey! It's Jody! C'mere, Jody, gal." He could feel the ripple of attention run through the men among the rocks. Equipment rattled as men leaned forward, sick of this duty and glad of something to watch, and maybe join in on.

Now he was behind one of the grenade teams. He inched forward, found them, and after a minute he was moving on.

The men where Jody was were laughing and tossing remarks back and forth. He heard her giggle.

He found the next team, craning forward to look down into a cup behind some rocks where a small fire had been built on the side away from the car. When he was through, he looked over the edge and saw Jody standing in the middle of a bunch of men. Her head was thrown back and she was laughing.

When he'd left the third emplacement, and was working toward the fourth, he heard the sound of a slap. A man yelled: "Hey, gal, don't you treat me mean like that!" The rest of the men were laughing harshly.

The fourth team was easy to handle.

Working on the fifth, he missed the last man. It was a tricky business, getting the first with one sure swing and then going for the other before he could yell. This time, the man rolled sideways, and there was nothing for Custis to do but kick at him. He hit the man, but didn't even cripple him. The man slid off the rock, yelling, and Custis, scrambling as fast as he could, threw the box of grenades one way, the rifle the other, and jumped for the car.

"Lew! Open up! I'm coming in!" he bellowed as the night broke apart.

Rifle fire yammered toward him as he ran, ricochets screaming off the rocks. The car's motors began to wind up. It was still as dark as the bottom of a bucket, and then Hutchinson fired the car's flare gun. The world turned green.

Custis slammed into the starboard track cover, threw himself on top of it, and clawed his way over the turtledeck. He rapped his knuckles quickly on the turret hatch, and Robb flung it back. Custis teetered on the edge of the coaming. The car's machine guns opened up, hammering at the rocks. Custis heard a voice screaming like a lost soul: "Grenades! Where's the damned grenades?"

Then he heard the girl shouting: "Joe!"

He stopped. He looked over toward the sound of her voice. "Oh, dammit!" he muttered. Then he sighed, "What the hell." He shouted down the hatch: "Cover me!" and jumped down off the battlewagon, his boots resounding on the foreplates before he hit the ground. He pitched forward, smashing into the gravel, threw himself erect,

and ran toward the spot.

Rifle fire chunked into the ground around him. He weaved and jumped from side to side, floundering over the rocks, panting for breath. Hutchinson fired another flare, and now the world was red, laced by the bright gold of the car's tracers as the machine guns searched back and forth in their demi-turrets. He heard the tracks slide and bite on the gravel, and the whole car groaned as the bogeys lurched it suddenly forward.

The girl was running toward him, and there were men back in rocks who were sighting deliberately now, taking good aim.

"Joe!"

"All right, damn you!" he growled as he scooped her up. He flung her toward the car ahead of him, feeling a crack of fire lance across his back, and then the car was practically on top of them. Lew had his driver's hatch open, and Custis pushed the girl through. Then he was clambering up the side of the turret and into the command seat. "All right," he panted into the command microphone, "Let's go home."

The hatch dropped shut on top of him. He fell into the car, landing on his side and

hearing ribs break. Lew locked a track and spun them around. The inside of the car sounded like a wash boiler being pelted by stones.

Robb looked at him, patting his 75's. "Open fire, Joe?"

"No! No—leave the poor bastards alone."

He looked over toward the girl. "Hey, Jody," he grinned.

THE HALFTRACK rumbled down the last slope, spraying stones out from under its tracks as it took a bite of the

tough prairie grass. Custis jammed his hands against the sides of the hatch and scowled out at the plains ahead, where Chicago waited beyond the edge of the green horizon. He didn't turn his head back. He was through with the mountains.

He was going to Chicago. He was going to Chicago and see what kind of a man he was.

He thought about the ruts and jagged holes in State Street's asphalt. He shivered a little. But he was going.



ADVENTURES IN THE FUTURE

Ever since the first issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES appeared, readers have been asking us for a novel by Ivar Jorgenson. Most of the requests contained a note of pessimism, since Jorgenson stories have been few and far between lately. However, equal parts of constant persuasion and rare good luck have worked a virtual miracle for us, and we have Jorgenson's latest—and best—short novel scheduled for the next issue. *This World Must Die!* has everything: action, drama, ideas, and a deep insight into the problems human beings will face in extending their empire to the stars. We guarantee you won't soon forget it!

Backing it up will be two fast-paced stories so good you'll have a hard time choosing your favorite. *Forbidden Cargo* by Harlan Ellison and *Alien Night* by Thomas N. Scortia are not "second fiddle" stories; we're sure you'll agree that either one would easily be worth your 35¢. Together, they'll make the next issue a real bargain in science fiction pleasure.

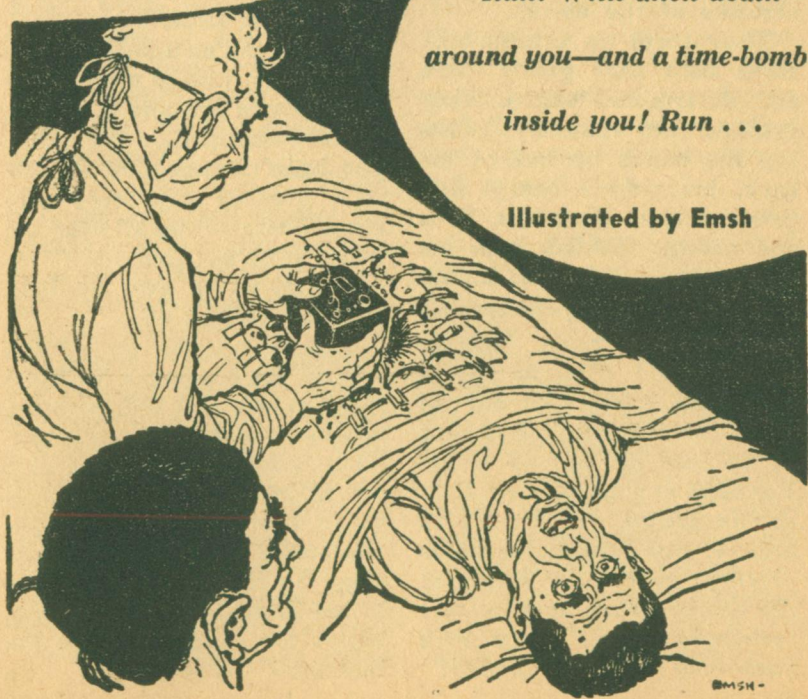
And remember the on-sale date: *May 16!*

run for the stars

by Harlan Ellison

*Run! With alien death
around you—and a time-bomb
inside you! Run . . .*

Illustrated by Emsh



Run for the Stars

by Harlan Ellison

CHAPTER I

THEY FOUND HIM looking at what was left of the body of a fat shopkeeper. He was hunkered down with his back to the blasted store-front, and didn't hear them come in. The scream of the Kyben ships scorching the city's streets mingled too loudly with the screams of the dying.

They crept up behind him, three men with grimy faces and determined stares. They grabbed him suddenly, twisting his hands up behind his back, bringing a sharp, surprised scream from him. Bills and change tinkled from his

SPEAKING at a recent science fiction conference, Harlan Ellison said that he wrote from his guts, and not so much for any tangible reward as because he had to write. For anyone who has seen Ellison in action, this is easy to believe. For others, the sheer driving power of Run for the Stars should be a perfect convincer. It's a story with guts—and no pun intended!

hands, scattered across the rubble-strewn floor.

Benno Tallant twisted his head painfully and looked up at the men holding him. "Lemme go! He was dead! I only wanted to get enough money to buy food with! Honest to God, lemme go!" Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes from the pains in his twisted arms.

One of the men holding him—a stocky, plump man of indeterminate age and a lisping speech—snapped, "In case you hadn't noticed, lootie, this is a grocery you were robbing. There's food all over the shop. Why not use that?"

He gave the arm he held another half-twist.

Tallant bit his lip. There was no use arguing with these men; he couldn't tell them the money was to get narcotics. They would kill him and that would be the end of it. This was a time of war. The city—the entire planet—was under siege by the Kyben, and they killed looters. Perhaps it was better that way; in death the insatiable craving for the

dream-dust would stop, and he would be free.

But the thought of death—as it usually did—sent chills coursing down through his legs, numbing his muscles. He sagged in their grip.

The pig-faced man grunted in disgust. "This the best we can do, for cripes sake? There's got to be someone better for this job. Look at the miserable little slob—he's practically jelly!"

The blond man shook his head. He was obviously the leader of the group. A patch of high forehead was miraculously clean among the filth and grime of his skin; he rubbed his hand over his face now, blotting away the clean area. "No, Shep, I think this is our man."

He turned to Tallant, stooped down and studied the quaking looter. He put his hand to Tallant's right eye, and spread the lids. "A dustie. Perfect." He stood up, added, "We've been looking for you all day, fellow."

"I never saw you before in my life, what do you want with me? Lemme go, willya!"

His voice was rising in pitch, almost hysterically. Sweat poured down over his face as though a stream had been opened at the hairline.

The tall, blond man spoke

hurriedly, glancing over his shoulder. "Come on, let's get him out of here. We'll let Doc Budder go to work on him." He motioned them to lift the quaking man, and as he rose, added, "There's a good five hours' work there."

The lisping man named Shep inserted, "And those yellow bastards up there may not give us that long."

The pig-faced man nodded agreement, and as though to punctuate their feelings, a high-pitched woman's scream struck through the fast-falling dusk of Deald's World. They stopped, and Tallant thought he might go mad, right there, right in their arms, because of the scream, and these men, and no dust, and the entire world shattering around him.

He tried to slump again, but the pig-faced man dragged him erect. They made their way through the shop, kicking up fine clouds of concrete dust. They paused at the shambles of the storefront, and peered into the gathering darkness. Outside, the explosion of a fuel reservoir superimposed itself over the constant blast and scream of Kyben attack.

Silence fell for an instant. Then, before a new breath could be drawn, a screaming

missile whined overhead and ripped through the face of an apartment building across the street. Metalwork and concrete flew in all directions, shattering on the blasted pavement, sending bits of stuff cascading over them.

They watched with tight faces for an instant. Then, hauling their human burden, slipped quietly and quickly into the evening.

Behind them, the fat shopkeeper lay amidst the debris of his store, dead, safe, and uncaring.

CHAPTER II

BENNO TALLANT awoke during the operation, his throat burning with dryness, his head swimming in fatigue. He saw his stomach open, the bare entrails staring up nakedly at him. A grizzled little man, with sharp spikes of white beard dotting his cheeks, was carefully settling a knobbed block of metal into the flesh. He promptly fainted again.

When he awoke the second time, he was in a cold room, lying naked to the groin on an operating table, his head slightly higher than his feet. The red, puckered scar that ran from the bottom of his rib cage to the inside of his

thigh stared up at him. The pin-head gleam of a metal wire-tip stuck up in the center of the scar. Abruptly, he remembered.

They stopped his screaming by forcing a wadded-up towel into his mouth.

The tall, blond man from the ruined shop stepped into Tallant's arc of vision. He had washed the filth from his face, and he wore a dun-colored military uniform, with the triple studs of a Commander on the lapel.

"I'm Parkhurst, fellow. Head of Resistance, now that the President and his staff are dead. We have use for you, mister, but there isn't much time left . . . so if you want to stay alive, calm down."

They pulled the towel from Benno Tallant's mouth and for a moment his tongue felt like a thick, prickly leaf. The picture of his stomach, split and wet, came back to him once more. "*What was that?* What have you done to me?" He was crying; the tears oozed out of the corners of his eyes, running ziggily down his cheeks into the corners of his mouth, and down his chin again.

"Take it easy," said a voice from Tallant's left. He turned his head painfully, and saw the grizzled man with the

spiky beard. It was a doctor; the doctor who had been inserting the metal cube in Tallant's stomach the first time he had awakened. Tallant assumed this was Doc Budder.

The nearly-bald man continued, "Why this snivelling garbage, Parkhurst? There are a dozen men left in the post who would've volunteered. We would have lost a good man, but at least we'd know the thing was being carried by someone who could do the job."

He caught his breath as he finished speaking, a thick, phlegmy cough making him steady himself on the edge of the operating table. "Too many cigarettes . . ." he managed to gasp out.

Parkhurst shook his head and pointed at Tallant. "The best possible job can be done by somebody who's afraid of the thing. By someone who will run. The running will take time, and that's all that will be left to insure our living till we get to Earth, or another outpost.

"Do you have any doubt this man will run?"

Doc Budder rubbed the bristling stubble on his chin. It rasped in the silence of the room. "Mmm. I guess you're right, Parkhurst—you usually

are—it's just that . . .

Parkhurst cut him off with friendly impatience. "Never mind, Doc. How soon can we have him up and around?"

Doc Budder coughed once more, deeply, said, "I had the epidermizer on him . . . he's knitting nicely. I'll put it back on him but, uh, say, Parkhurst, y'know, all those cigarettes, my nerves are a little jumpy . . . I wonder, uh, would you have a little, uh, something to sort of steady me?" A hopeful gleam appeared in the old man's eyes, and Tallant recognized it at once for what it really was. The old man was a dustie, too. Or a winehead.

PARKHURST turned away from staring at Tallant. "Look, Doc. This is a bad time for everybody. My wife got burned down in the street when the Kyben struck three days ago, and my kids were burned in the school. I know it's rough on you, Doc, but if you don't so help me God stop bugging for whiskey, I'm going to kill you, Doc. I'm going to kill you."

He had spoken softly, pacing his words, but the desperation in his voice was apparent. It was the tone of a man with a terrible anguish

in him, and a terrible burden on his shoulders.

"Now. How soon can we get him out of here, Doc?"

Doc Budder's eyes swept across the room hopelessly, and his tongue washed his lips. He spoke hurriedly, nervously.

"I'll—I'll put the epidermizer back on it. It should be set in another four hours. There's no weight on the organs; he shouldn't feel a thing."

Benno listened closely. The fear was gagging him, and he felt the nervous tics starting in his upper arm and his cheek. Doc Budder wheeled a slim, tentacled machine to the operating table, and lifted a telescoping arm from its clamp. On the end was a rectangular nickel-steel box with a small hole in it. Budder threw a switch, and a shaft of light struck out from the hole, washed the scar.

Even as Benno watched, the wound seemed to lose color, pucker more. He couldn't feel the thing they had put in his stomach, but he knew it was there.

A sudden cramp hit him.

He cried in pain.

Parkhurst's face turned white. "What's the matter with him?"

Doc Budder pushed aside

the telescoping arm of the epidermizer, leaned over Tallant, who lay there breathing with difficulty, his face wrenched into an expression of terrible pain. "What's the matter?"

"It hurts—it—*here*—" he indicated his stomach. "Pain, all over here, hurts like hell . . . *do something!*"

The fat little doctor stepped back with a sigh. He slapped the telescoping arm back into position with a careless motion. "It's all right. Self-induced cramp. I didn't think there'd be any deleterious after-effects.

"But," he added, with a malicious glance at Parkhurst, "I'm not as good a doctor, as sober and upstanding a doctor, as the Resistance could use, if it had its choice, so you never know."

Parkhurst waved a hand in annoyance. "Oh, shut up, Doc."

Doc Budder pulled the sheet up over Tallant's chest, and the dustie whined in pain. Budder snarled down at him, "Shut up that goddammed whining, you miserable slug. The machine's healing you through the sheet, you haven't got a thing to worry about—right now. There are women and kids out there," he waved toward the wall, "suffering a

lot worse than you."

He turned toward the door, Parkhurst following, lines of thought slicing across the blond man's forehead.

Parkhurst stopped with a hand on the knob. "We'll be back with food for you later. Don't try to get out. Aside from the fact that there's a guard on the door—and that's the only way out of here—you might open that incision and bleed to death before we could find you."

He clicked the light switch, stepped out, and closed the door. Tallant heard voices outside the door, softly, as though coming through a blanket of moss, and he knew the guard was standing ready outside.

Tallant's thoughts weren't deterred by the darkness. He remembered the dream-dust, and the pains shot up in him again; he remembered the past, and his mouth choked up; he remembered awakening during the operation, and he wanted to scream. The next six hours were a bright, thinking hell.

CHAPTER III

THE LISPING man, Shep, came for him. He had cleaned up, also, but there were fine tracings of dirt

around his nose, and under his nails, and in the lines of pocketing beneath his eyes. He had one thing in common with the other men Tallant had seen; he was weary to the core.

Shep shot the telescoping arm of the epidermizer into its clamp, and rolled the machine back against the wall. Tallant watched him carefully, and when Shep turned down the sheet, examining the now thin, white line that had been the incision, Benno raised himself on his elbows, and asked, "How's it going outside?"

Shep raised his gray eyes and did not answer.

He left the room, reappeared a few minutes later with a bundle of clothes. He threw them on the operating table next to Tallant, and helped the looter to sit up. "Get dressed," he said shortly.

Tallant sat up, and for a moment his belly-hunger for the dream-dust made him gag. He put a shaking hand through his brown hair. "L-listen," he began, speaking confidentially to the Resistance man, "do y-you know where I can lay my hands on some dream-dust? I—I can make it worth your while, I've got—"

Shep turned on him, and

the lisping man's hand slammed against Tallant's face, leaving a burning red mark. "No, mister, *you* listen to *me*. In case you don't know it, there's a Kyben battle armada on its way across space, headed directly for Deald's World. We've only been hit by an advance scout party, and they've nearly demolished the planet as it is.

"About two million people are dead out there, buddy. Do you know how many people that is? That's almost the entire population of this planet. And you sit there asking me to get you your snuff!

"If I had any say in the matter, I'd kick you to death right here, right now. Now you get in those goddammed clothes, and don't say another word to me, or so help me God I'm not responsible for what happens to you!"

He turned away, and Tallant stared after him. There was no fight in him, merely a desire to lie down and cry. Why was this happening to him? He'd try anything to get the dust now . . . it was getting bad inside him . . . real bad . . . "*Get dressed!*" Shep shouted, the cords in his neck tightening, his face screwing into an expression of rage.

Tallant hurriedly slipped into the jumper, hood, and

boots, and buckled the belt around himself.

"Come on," Shep prodded him off the table.

Tallant stood up, and nearly fell. He clung to Shep in terror, feeling the unsteadiness washing through him in sickening waves.

Shep shrugged his hands off, commanded, "Walk, you slimy, yellow bastard! *Walk!*"

He walked slightly behind Shep, knowing there was no place else to go; and the lisping man seemed to pay him no attention, knowing the dustie would follow.

Through the walls he could hear the reverberations of shock bombs hitting the planet. He knew only vaguely what was happening.

The Kyben-Earth War had been a long and costly battle. They had been fighting for sixteen years, but this was the first time a Kyben fleet had broken through, this far into the Terran dominion.

It had been a sudden, sneak attack, and Deald's World was the first planet to be hit. He had seen the devastation, and he knew that if these men were alive and working to defend Deald's World, they were the last pocket of the Resistance left.

But what had they done to him?

SHEP turned right down a corridor, and palmed a lock-tite open. He stepped aside and Tallant stepped into what appeared to be a communications room.

High banks of dials and switches, tubes and speaker rigs covered the walls. Parkhurst was there, holding a hand-mike carelessly, talking to a technician.

The blond man turned as Tallant stepped through. He nodded to Benno. "We thought you'd like to know what this is all about. We owe you that, at any rate."

Parkhurst pursed his lips for a moment, then said almost apologetically, "We don't hate you, fellow." Tallant realized that they had not even bothered to find out his name yet. "We have a job to do, and for the job we needed a certain type of man. You fit the bill beautifully. If it hadn't been you, it would have been someone *like* you." He shrugged with finality.

Tallant felt the shivers beginning. He stood quaking, wishing he had just a sniff of the dust, just a miserable sniff. All he wanted was to be let alone, let back out there, even if the Kyben were burning the planet. Perhaps he could find a cache of the

dust he needed so desperately.

Then the memory of the metal thing in his stomach jerked him instantly to reality. Tallant stood quaking.

"What—what are you going to do with me now?" He touched himself lightly, almost fearfully, on the stomach. "What is that thing you put in me?"

A high, keening whine broke from one of the many speakers on the wall, and the tight-lipped technician gestured wildly at Parkhurst. Parkhurst turned to the technician, and the man gave him a go-ahead signal. Parkhurst motioned Tallant to silence, motioned Shep to stand close by the shaking dustie.

Then he spoke into the hand-mike. A bit too clearly, a bit too loudly, as though he were speaking to someone a great distance away, as though he wanted every word precise and easily understood.

"This is the headquarters of Resistance on Deald's World speaking to the Kyben fleet.

"Are you listening? This call is being broadcast over all tight beams, so we are certain you receive us. We'll wait ten minutes for you to rig up a translator and to hook in with your superiors, so they can hear this announcement.

"This is of vital importance to you Kyben, so we suggest as soon as you've translated what I've just said, you make the proper arrangements, and contact your officers."

He signaled the technician to cut off.

Then Parkhurst once again turned to Tallant. "This is the advance guard of a gigantic Kyben fleet, mister. The fleet itself must be the largest assembled during the War. It's obvious they intend to crush right through all the Earth defenses, and perhaps strike at Earth itself.

"This is the big push of the War for the Kyben, and there is no way to get word to Earth. Our inverspace transmitters went when they burned down the transpoles at the meridian. There's no way to warn the home planet. They're defenseless if all the outer colonies go—as they surely will if this fleet gets through.

"We've got to warn Earth. And the only way we can do it, and with luck save the lives of the few thousands left alive on Deald's World, is to stall for time. That's why we needed a man like you. You."

He fell silent. The only sounds in the room were the click and whisper of the blank-faced machines, the

tight, sobbing breaths of Benno Tallant.

Finally the big wall-chronometer had ticked away ten minutes, and the technician signalled Parkhurst once more.

The blond man took up the hand-mike again, and began speaking quietly, earnestly, knowing he was no longer dealing with subordinates, but the men in power up there above the planet.

"We have placed a bomb on this planet. A sun-bomb. I'm sure you know what that means. The entire atmosphere will heat, right up to the top layers of the stratosphere, above the point where every living thing will perish, every bit of metal heat to incandescence, the ground scorch through till nothing can ever grow again. This world, all of us, all of *you*, will die.

"Most of your ships have landed. The few that remain in the sky cannot hope to escape the effects of this bomb, even if they leave now. And if they do—you are being tracked by radar—we will set the bomb off without a moment's hesitation. If you wait, there is another possibility open to you."

He tossed a glance at the technician, whose eyes were fixed on a bank of radar

screens. The technician shook his head, and Tallant realized they were waiting to see if their story was accepted. If one of those pips moved out away from the planet, it would mean the Kyben thought it was a bluff.

But the Kyben obviously could not chance it. The pips remained solidly fastened to the centers of the screens as if glued there.

Then Tallant's eyes suddenly widened. What Parkhurst had said was finally penetrating. He *knew* what the blond man meant! He *knew* where that bomb was hidden. He started to scream, but Shep's hand was over his mouth before the sound could escape, could go out over the transmitter to the Kyben.

Tallant knew he was on the verge of madness.

He had lived by his wits all his life, and it had always been the little inch someone would allow him, that had afforded the miles he had attained. But there was no inch this time. Bewildered, he realized he could not take advantage of the weakness or the politeness of these men, as he had taken advantage of so many others. These men were hard, and ruthless—and they had planted a sun-bomb in his stomach!

THROUGH a fog he heard Parkhurst continue: "We repeat, don't try to take off. If we see one of your ships begin to blast, we'll trigger the bomb. We give you one alternative to total destruction. One alternative."

Parkhurst licked his lips and went on carefully, "Let us go. Let the Earthmen on this planet blast away, and we promise not to set off the bomb. After we have left the atmosphere, we will set the bomb on automatic, and leave it for you to find yourselves. If you doubt we have actually done as I say, take a stabilization count with whatever instruments you have to detect neutrino emission.

"That should convince you instantly that *this is no bluff!*

"We will tell you this, however. There is one way the bomb may be de-activated. You can find it in time, but not till we have gotten away. It is a gamble you will *have* to take. The other way . . . there is no gamble at all. Only death.

"If you don't comply, we set off the bomb. If you do accede to our demands, we will leave at once, and the bomb will be set to automatic, and will go off at a designated time. It's set with a foolproof

time-device, and it can't be damped by any neutrino-dampers.

"We'll wait for your answer no more than an hour. At the end of that time, we trigger the bomb, even if we are to die!

"You can reach us over the band on which you are receiving this message."

He motioned to the technician, who threw a switch. A bank of lights went dark, and the transmitter was dead.

Parkhurst turned to Tallant. His eyes were very sad, and very tired. He had to say something, and it was obvious that what he said would be cruel, terrifying.

Don't let him say it, Benno Tallant kept repeating in the maddened confines of his mind. But the blond man spoke.

"Of course," he said quietly, "that end of it *may* be a bluff. There may *not* be any way to damp that bomb. Even after they find it."

CHAPTER IV

"**H**OW MUCH longer?" Shep asked from across the room, carefully keeping his eyes from Tallant. A while before, Parkhurst had taken pity on Tallant's miserable condition and ordered Doc

Budder to give him a small shot of dream-dust. The blond man had ignored Shep's protests, and now Shep was sore.

"Any minute now," the technician answered from behind his commask. And as though his words had been a signal, the squawk-boxes made a static sound, and the rasp of a translating machine broke the silence of the room.

It was in a cold, metallic voice, the product of changing Kyben to English.

"We accept. You have the bomb, as our instruments indicate, so we allow you seven hours to load and leave." That was the message.

But Tallant's heart dropped in his body. If the alien instrument's showed an increase in neutrino emission, it could only mean his last hope was gone. The Resistance *did* have the bomb, and he knew where it was.

He was a walking bomb. He was walking death!

"Let's get moving," Parkhurst said, and started toward the corridor.

"What about me?" Tallant's voice rose again and he grasped at Parkhurst's sleeve. "Now that they'll let us go, you don't need me any more, do you? You can take that—that *thing* out of me!"

Parkhurst looked at Tal-

lant wearily, an edge of sadness in his eyes. "Take care of him, Shep. We'll need him, seven hours from now." And he was gone.

Tallant remained with Shep, as the others left. He turned to the lisping man, and cried out, "What? Tell me! What?"

Then Shep explained it all to Tallant.

"You're going to be the last man on Deald's World. Those Kyben have tracing machines to circle down on centers of neutrino emission. They would find the bomb in a moment if it were in one place. But a moving human being isn't always in one place. And they'll never suspect it's in a human being.

"They'll think we're all gone. But you'll still be here, with the bomb. You're our insurance policy.

"Parkhurst controls the bomb as long as he's on the planet, and it won't go off unless the Kyben make a wrong move. But as soon as he leaves, he sets it on automatic, and it goes off in the time allotted to it.

"That way, if an alien ship tries to follow us, the bomb explodes. If they *don't* take off, and don't find it in time, it goes off anyhow."

He was so cool about it that

Benno Tallant, with the strength of his dream-dust rising in him, felt a savage fury at being used as a dupe.

"What if I just turn myself in to them and let them cut it out with surgery, the same way you put it in?" Tallant snapped, with momentary bravery.

"You won't," Shep answered smugly.

"Why not?"

"Because they won't bother being as gentle as we were. The first detachment of Kyben foot-soldiers that traces the bomb to you will pin you to the ground and let an *attache* slice you open."

He watched the horror that passed across Tallant's face. "You see, the longer you keep running, the longer it takes them to find you. And the longer it takes them to find you, the better chance we have of getting back to warn Earth. So we had to pick a man who was so stinking cowardly he would keep running—because his whole nature depended on it.

"You'll keep running, fellow. That's why Parkhurst picked you. You'll run, mister, and never stop!"

Tallant drew himself up, and *screamed*, "My name is Tallant. Benno Tallant. Do you understand—I have a

name! I'm Tallant, Benno, Benno, Benno Tallant!"

Shep grinned nastily and slumped down on the console bench. "I don't give a flying damn *what* your name is, fellow. Why do you think we never asked you to tell us your name?"

"Without a name, you'll be all the easier to forget. This isn't an easy thing to do for Parkhurst and the others, they have feelings and scruples about you, fellow.

"But I don't. A dream-dustier just like you assaulted my wife, before—" he stopped, and his eyes raised to the ceiling. Aboveground the Kyben sat, waiting. "So I sort of figure it all evens out. I don't mind seeing a dustie like you die, at all. Not at all."

Tallant made a break for the door, then, but Shep had his rifle up, and slammed its stock into the small of Benno Tallant's back. The dustie slumped to the floor, writhing in pain.

Shep slipped back to his seat.

"Now we'll just wait about seven hours," he said quietly. "Then you become real valuable, fellow. Real valuable. Y'know, you've got the life of the Kyben fleet in your belly."

THE ROCKET field was silent at last. The noise of loading the few remaining thousands of Dealders had crashed back and forth for seven hours, and the ships had gone up in great clouds of fumes. Now the last ship was almost ready, and Benno Tallant watched as Parkhurst lifted the little girl. She was a tiny girl with yellow braids, and she clutched a plastic toy. Parkhurst held her an instant longer than necessary, staring at her face, and Tallant saw compassion and sorrow for his own dead children coursing across the blond man's face. But he felt no sympathy for Parkhurst.

They were leaving him here to die in the most frightening way possible.

Parkhurst hoisted the little girl, set her inside the ship's plug-port, where other hands received her. He began to swing up himself.

He paused with one hand on the rail. He turned and looked at Tallant, standing with shaking hands at his sides, like a lost dog, pleading not to be left behind.

"Look, mister, it's like this. You're the only assurance we have that we'll make it to an Earth outpost to warn the mother world. I—I can't say

anything to you that will make you think any better of us; don't you think I've burned over and over in my mind for what I'm doing? Get that look off your face, and say something!"

Tallant stared silently ahead, the fear draining down and around in him like acid rotting his legs.

Parkhurst began to swing up into the ship again, when Tallant made his last try. He had pleaded all through these last hours, and even now he knew no other way.

"At least, tell me, is there a way to damp the bomb? Can it be done? You told *them* that it could!" The childish eagerness of his expression caused Parkhurst's face to wrinkle with disgust.

"There isn't a bone in your body, is there?"

"Answer me! *Tell me!*" Tallant shouted.

"I can't tell you, mister. If there were, and you knew it for certain, you'd be off to the Kyben lines right now. But if you think it'll go off when they touch it, you'll wait a long time."

He pulled himself up into the ship. The port began to slide home, but Parkhurst stopped it for a second, his voice softening as he said: "Good-bye, Benno Tallant. I

wish I could say God bless you."

The port slid shut. Tallant could hear it being dogged, and the whine of the reactors starting up. He ran away from the blast area in wild blindness, seeking the protection of the bunker set back from the blast pit, the bunker beneath which the Resistance had made its headquarters.

He stood at the filtered window, watching the thin line of exhaust trailings disappearing into the night sky.

He was alone.

The last man on Deald's World.

Alone with a planet of attacking Kyben, and a total-destruction bomb in his stomach.

CHAPTER V

AFTER they were gone, after the last drop of exhaust trail had been lost in the starry night sky, Tallant stood by the open door of the bunker, staring across the emptiness of the field. They had left him; all his begging, all his appeals to their humanity, all his struggling had been for nothing. He was lost with the emptiness of the field and the emptiness of his heart.

A chill wind came rippling across the field, caught him in its wake, and smoothed over him. He felt the hunger rising once more.

But this time, if nothing else, he could drown himself in dream-dust. That was it! He would send himself into a dust stupor, and lay there in heaven till the bomb went off, killing him.

He found the trapdoor, lifted it, and went down into the Resistance headquarters.

A half hour of throwing supplies around, smashing into lockers, breaking open cabinets, and he had found Doc Budder's supply of medicinal dream-dust. Nurmoheroinyte concentrate. The dream-dust that had found him, made him a slave after one small sampling when he was twenty-three years old. That had been a long time before, and he knew this was his only rest now.

He sniffed away a packet, and felt himself getting stronger, healthier, more fierce. Kyben? Yes, bring them on! He could fight the entire armada single-handed.

He stuffed his jumper pockets full of white packets, strutted back up the stairs, slammed back the trapdoor.

Tallant saw his first Kyben then.

They were swarming across the rocket field, hundreds of them. They were average-sized, more than five feet tall, less than six, all of them. They looked almost human—only golden-skinned, and their fingers ended in silky tentacles, six of them to a hand.

Abruptly, the resemblance to normal humans terrified Tallant. Had they been grotesque, it would be something else; he could despise and hate them as monsters. But these Kyben were, if anything, handsomer than humans.

He had never seen them before, but he had heard the screams that had echoed through the city's canyons. He had heard a girl getting the flesh flayed off her back, and in his own way he had felt sorry for her. He remembered he had wished she might die from loss of blood.

Yet they looked very much like human. But golden.

Suddenly Tallant realized he was trapped. He was caught in one of the bunkers, with no protection, no weapon, no way out. They would find him, and kill him, not realizing he had the bomb in him. They would not ask whether or not he carried a bomb . . . that was too ridicu-

lous to consider seriously.

That was why Parkhurst had done it. It was too ridiculous to consider.

They were looking for a sun-bomb, and that bomb—according to the logic of a searcher—would be in some obscure hiding place. In the ocean, under a thousand tons of dirt, in a sub-cellar. But not in a human being.

He looked around the bunker wildly. There was only the one exit. And the field was crawling with Kyben—furious enough at having been outfoxed to gut the first Earthie they found.

He watched them getting larger and larger in the filtered window. They all wore suits of insulating mail, and carried triple-thread blasticks. They were armed to kill, not to capture prisoners. He was trapped!

Tallant felt the fury of desperation welling up in him again. As it had when he had first learned he carried the sun-bomb. Not only to be boxed-in this way—to be a human bomb—but to have to keep running. He knew the Kyben were ruthless. They would already have started scouting for the bomb with ship-based emission detectors, spiralling over the planet in ever-decreasing circles, nar-

rowing in on the bomb.

When they found it was not stationary, they would know it had a living carrier. They would close in relentlessly, then. He was trapped!

But if these common foot-soldiers on the field got to him, he wouldn't even get *that* far. They would scorch him and laugh over his charred carcass.

He had to get away.

Shep was right. The only escape was in flight.

If he could stay alive long enough, he might be able to figure a way of dampening the bomb himself.

Or he had to get to the Kyben commanding officers. It was the only chance. If he kept running, and avoided them entirely—the bomb would detonate eventually. But the men in charge might be able to remove the bomb without triggering it.

He would outsmart Parkhurst and his filthy bunch of survivors. He would not *let* himself get caught, unless it was by the right persons, in high places. Then he would offer his services to the Kyben, and help them hunt down the Earthmen, and kill them.

After all, what did he owe Earth?

Nothing. Nothing at all. They had tried to kill him,

and he would make them pay. He would *not* die! He would live with his beloved dream-dust forever. Forever!

BUT NOW one Kyben foot-soldier was dodging, broken-field running, and now he was at the door of the bunker, and now he was inside, his triple-thread blastick roaring, spraying flame and death around the bunker.

Tallant had been beside the window, behind the door. Now he slammed the door, so the others on the field could not see what was happening, and he found a new strength, a strength he had not known he possessed.

He dove low from behind the Kyben soldier, tackling him. The soldier fell, the blastick jarred from his hands, and Benno Tallant was up, stamping the man's face in. One, two, three, four and the man was dead, his head a pulped mass.

Then Tallant knew what to do.

He dragged the soldier by his feet to the edge of the trapdoor, lifted it, and shoved the man through. The body went clattering down the stairs, and landed with a thump.

Tallant grabbed up the

blastick and slipped in before any more soldiers could appear. He let the trapdoor slam shut, knowing it would not be seen unless there was a thorough search; and there was no reason to expect that, as they believed all Earthmen had left the planet.

He crouched down, beneath the trapdoor, the blastick ready in his hands, ready to sear off the face of anyone who lifted the door.

Overhead he heard the sound of shouts, and the door of the bunker crashed open against the wall. He heard the rasp and roar of more blasticks being fired, and then the sound of voices in the sibilant hiss of the Kyben tongue. He heard boots stomping around above him. Once a foot stepped directly on the trapdoor, and little bits of dust and dirt filtered through around the edges, and he thought he was caught.

But a shout from outside brought grudging answer from the men, and they trooped out, leaving the bunker deserted.

Tallant lifted the door to make certain, and when he saw it was clear, lifted it higher to look through the filtered window. The Kyben were moving off away from the field.

He ducked back to wait till they had gone. Night was upon the land, and he would be able to get away.

While he waited, he sniffed a packet of dust.

He was God again!

HE MADE it as far as the Blue Marshes before another patrol found him.

He had been moving in the best escape pattern he could think of, circling outward, so that any Kyben ships tracking overhead with emission detectors could not pinpoint him. Eventually, of course, they would see that the target was not in the same place, and then they would recognize what the Earthmen had done.

He kept moving.

It was a totally cloudless night. The smell of it was clean and sweet, till he stepped off the land and entered the marshes. Then all the rot of the eternities swam up to offend his nostrils.

Tallant's stomach heaved, and for a moment he wondered if vomiting would set the bomb off. Then he laughed at his fear, knowing action of that sort could not possibly trigger the weapon.

He stepped into the swirling, sucking blue-black mud,

and instantly felt it dragging down, down at his boots. He lifted the blastick above his head, and stepped high, pulling up each foot with a muted, sucking *thwup!* as he slowly moved.

The marshes were filled with animal life, and whether vicious or harmless, they all made their voices heard. The noises swelled as he moved deeper into the dankness, as though some unimaginable insect telegraphy was warning the inhabitants that outside life was approaching. Ahead of him, and slightly to the left, he heard the deep-throated roar of a beast, and he knew it was big.

The fear began to ring his belly once more, and he found himself muttering, "Why me?" over and over again, in a dull monotone that somehow helped him keep going. As he moved, the subtle phosphorescence of the blue-black muck swirled, coating his lower legs and boots.

It was as he was scrambling over a rotted tree fallen across his path, having tossed his blastick to a hard patch of ground on the other side, that the beast broke out of the clinging matted vines, and trumpeted its warning at him.

Tallant froze, one foot in

the air, the other shoved into a niche in the tree, his hands holding his full weight. His eyes opened wide, and he saw the dark gray bulk of the animal all at once.

It was almost triangular. A smooth neck rose up to an almost idiotically tiny head, set at the apex of the triangle. The back was a long slope that tapered down to the

ground. Its eight legs were set under it, almost as a kick-plate might be set under a bookcase. Two tiny red eyes gleamed through the mist of the Blue Marshes, set above a square snout and a fanged mouth.

Tallant stared at the animal, unable to move himself from its path, a cold wash of complete terror gluing him



to the stump as if it were the one solid form in the universe.

The beast trumpeted again, and lumbered forward.

The blast of fire that ripped at its gray hide came from nowhere. The beast rose up on its back sets of legs, pawing at the sky. Another screech of power and the flames bit at the thing's head.

For an instant the thing was wrapped in flame and smoke, then it exploded outward. Blood spilled through the leaves and vines, covering Tallant with warm stickiness. Bits of flesh cascaded down, and he felt one slippery bit go sliding down his cheek.

His stomach twisted painfully in him, but the explosion unstuck him. He was not



alone in the marshes.

Since he was the last *man* on Deald's World, there was only one other answer.

Kyben!

THEN he heard their voices above the trembling sounds of the marshes. They were around a bank of bushy trees, about to burst into the clearing where the scattered hulk of the beast lay, quivering even in death.

Tallant felt a strange quivering in himself. He found a sudden inexplicable identification with the beast, lying out there in the open. That beast had been more man than he. It had died, in its brutishness, but it had not turned and run away. He knew the animal had no mind, and yet there was something—*something*—in the beast's death that made him feel altered, changed, matured. He could never tell what it had been, but when the animal had died, he knew he would never give up to the Kyben. He was still terribly frightened—the habits of a lifetime could not change in a moment—but there was a difference now. If he was going to die, he was going to make sure he died on his feet.

The Kyben came into view.

They moved out from his left, almost close enough for him to touch them. They moved across the clearing, and he knew they had not seen him. But they had mechanisms that could trace the bomb's emissions, and in a few moments they would get his track. He had to do something—and quickly.

The five Kyben moved to the dead animal, obviously too engrossed in examining their kill to study their detectors. Tallant reached for the blast-tick.

He slipped on the damp bark, and his hand collided with the metal of the weapon. It clattered across the ground, and fell with a splash into the mud.

One of the Kyben whirled, saw Tallant, and screamed something to his companions, bringing his own weapon up. A blast of blue power streaked through the space between them, and Tallant dove for cover. The blast-beam seared across his back, ripping wide his jumper's covering, scorching his flesh.

He screamed in agony, and dove headfirst into the muck, trying to extinguish the fires of hell that arced on his back and trying to find the weapon that had disappeared into the mire.

He felt the stuff closing over his head. It was deeper than he had thought. The stuff clogged his throat, and he struck out blindly.

He tried to reach bottom, found it with his flailing feet, and dragged himself across the pool. He felt the land rising under him, and stuck his head out momentarily.

The Kyben were still in front of him, but they were turned away slightly, thinking he was still in the same position, that perhaps he had drowned.

He knew immediately that he had to kill them all, and do it before they could call in to their superiors, or the game was up. The moment the Kyben officers knew there was a human left on the planet, they would realize where the bomb was hidden. Then any chance he had of surviving was gone.

He saw one of the Kyben—a tallish one with golden hair clipped into an exaggerated flat-top—turning toward him, his blastick at the ready. Then the adrenalin pumped through Tallant's veins, and for the first time in his life—knowing the dream-dust had worn off, but not really caring—he moved with aggression.

Lifting his feet high, he

pounded around the rim of the pool, spraying blue mud and slime in every direction. The suddenness of the movement surprised the Kyben, and he failed to bring the blastick into play.

In a moment, Tallant was on him, the drive of his rushing advance bowling the Kyben over. Tallant's foot came down with a snap, and he felt the alien's neck snap under the pressure of his boot.

Then he had the blastick in his arms, fumbling for the fire stud, and raw power was bluing out, in a wide arc, catching the remaining four members of the patrol.

Their screams were short, and their bodies splattered the marshes for fifty feet. Tallant stared down at the raw, pulsing husks that had been alive a minute before, and leaned against a tree.

He thought of the dust for a moment, but felt no need for it now. Somehow, the fire was up in him. The killer instinct was rising in the coward.

Tallant struck out again, a fresh weapon in his hands.

By now the Earthmen were far away in their ships, and the Kyben still feared the bomb would trigger if they tried to take off. Tallant *knew* they had not tried to leave

Deald's World by one clue only:

The bomb in his middle had not exploded yet.

But time was dripping away.

CHAPTER VI

THAT NIGHT, Tallant killed his thirtieth Kyben.

The second set of five went as he left the Blue Marshes, ambushed from behind a huge, snout-like rock.

Single reconnaissance men died by knife and by club at Tallant's hands as he made his way through the fields of swaying, unharvested Summerset wheat that lay on the outskirts of Xville. They walked slowly through the fields, just their shoulders and heads showing above the tall burnished stalks of grain. Occasionally Tallant, from where he crouched below sight-level in the field, saw the snout of a blastick poke up from the Summerset. It was hardly difficult at all to drag each man down in his turn as the alien passed nearby.

The first one's skull shattered like a plastic carton, as Benno Tallant swung the end of the blastick viciously. The ex-looter felt a rugged thrill course down his veins; there

was a pleasure he had never known in this sort of guerilla warfare.

From the corpse he took a long, scythe-shaped knife with an inlaid tile handle. It worked wondrously well on four more.

Kyben blood was yellow. He wasn't surprised.

By the time dawn slid glowingly up on the horizon, Tallant knew the Kyben must be aware of his presence. Thirty men had by that time died before the blue power of his blastick or the curve of his knife. Some of them would have been found where they lay or reported missing.

And the Kyben Command must know they were not alone on the planet.

It seemed about the time for them to realize the bomb was in a moving carrier. What that carrier was, and the reason thirty troops were dead, would soon show themselves to be the same: a man alive on the planet.

The robot patrol scouts circled and buzzed overhead, and for a moment Tallant wondered how *they* had gotten aloft when a ship could not. Then he answered his question with the logical reason. The robots were just that—robots. The ships were inverspace ships, operating

from warp-mechanisms. And it was obviously the warp pattern that would set the bomb off.

So he could be easily tracked, but the Kyben could not leave, to chase and destroy the Earthies.

Tallant's fist balled and his dirt-streaked face twisted in a new kind of hatred as he thought of the men who had left him here to die. Parkhurst and Shep and Doc Budder and the rest.

He was fooling them. He was staying alive!

But wasn't that what they had wanted? Hadn't they chosen properly? Wasn't he running to stay alive, allowing them to escape to warn Earth?

He swore then, in a voiceless certainty deeper than mere frustration and anger, that he would do more than survive. He would come out of this ahead. He wasn't sure *how*—but he would.

As the light of morning reached him, he rose to his feet, and looked out through the blasted plasteel face of the building. The capital city of Deald's World stretched before him. In the center, towering higher than any building, was the command ship of the Kyben fleet.

Somehow, in the darkness,

with the newly-acquired stealth of a marsh animal, he had passed the outgoing Kyben troop lines, and was behind their front. Now he had to take advantage of that.

He sat down for a moment to think.

Before the looting Kyben soldier stepped into the room, he had arrived at the solution. He had to get to that Kyben ship, and get inside. He had to find a Kyben surgeon. It might be death, but it was a *might*; any other way it was a certainty.

He was standing up to go when the double-chinned, muscled Kyben came up the partially-ruined stairs, and stopped cold in the entrance to the room, amazement mirrored on his putted features. An Earthie—here on conquered ground!

He dragged his blastick from its sheath, aimed it, and fired dead-range at Tallant's stomach.

THE SHAFT of blue light caught Tallant as he rocketed sideways. It seared at his flesh, and he felt an all-consuming wave of pain rip down through him. He had side-stepped partially, and the blast had taken him high on the right arm. He was hor-

ribly convulsed by agony for an instant, then . . .

Tallant was moving through a fog of pain, and in a moment, before the Kyben could fire again, had grabbed the blastick with his left hand. The little man felt a strange power coursing through him, and he dimly recognized it as the power of hatred: the hatred of all other men, all other beings, that had displaced his cowardice.

He ripped at the blastick violently, and the alien was yanked toward him, thrown off-balance.

As the bewildered Kyben stumbled past, losing his hold on his own weapon, Tallant brought up a foot, and sent it slamming into his back.

The yellow outworlder staggered forward, arms thrown out wildly, tripped over the rubble clogging the floor, and pitched headfirst through the jagged rift in the wall.

Tallant limped to the hole and watched him fall, screaming.

That scream, held and piercing, was more than a death knell. It was a signal. The area was a great sounding-board, and every foot of that screaming descent had been repeated by the walls and stones of the city.

The Kyben would be here shortly. Their comrade could not have directed them to their goal more effectively had he planned it.

Then Tallant realized something:

He had only one arm.

He could feel no pain now; the blastick had cauterized the stump immediately. There would be no infection, there would be no more pain, but he was neatly amputated at the bicep.

With one arm, what could he accomplish? How could he stay alive?

Then he heard the raised voices of the Kyben coming through the building. He moved with wooden legs, feeling the fight draining out of him, but moving all the same.

His legs carried him out of the room, down a back flight of stairs, endlessly, endlessly down. As the numbers decreased, as 10 melted to 5 to 3, he realized he had come thirty flights—entirely in shock.

When he reached the first floor, the front of the building was surrounded by Kyben, staring and motioning at the body of their comrade. Tallant looked away; he had thought himself injured to death, but this Kyben had

died in a particularly unpleasant manner.

He shifted the blastick in the crook of his arm—the one arm left—and huddled back against the wall. There were three tortuous miles of ruined city and piled rubble between him and the flagship. Not to mention the entire land-army of the Kyben fleet, a horde of robot patrol scouts that must surely have realized the bomb was being carried by a man, and his own wounds.

At that moment he heard the public address system in the scout ship that circled over the building. It boomed down, flooding the streets with sound.

“EARTHMAN! WE KNOW YOU ARE HERE! GIVE YOURSELF UP BEFORE YOU DIE! EVEN IF YOU CONTROL THE BOMB, WE WILL FIND YOU AND KILL YOU . . . FIND YOU AND KILL YOU . . . FIND YOU AND KILL YOU . . .”

The robot scout ship moved off across the city, broadcasting the same message over and over, till Tallant felt each word burning into his brain. *Find you and kill you, find you and kill you . . .*

TIME was growing short, and Tallant could feel it in his gut.

He had no way of knowing whether the bomb was nearing triggering-time, but there was a vague, prickling sensation throughout his body that he interpreted as danger. The bomb might go off at any second, and that would be the end of it.

He hefted the blastick and turned to go. Even as he did so, a Kyben officer, resplendent in sand-white uniform and gold braid, came through the door in front of him.

The man was unarmed, but in an instant he had whipped out the dress knife. That same feeling of urgency, of strength from some unknown pool within him, boiled up in Tallant. The officer was too close to use the long blastick, but he still had the arc-shaped knife from the night before. He dropped the blastick softly into a pile of ash and slag-dust, ducked as the Kyben blade whistled past his ear, and leaped for the officer, before the other's hand could whip back around.

With one hand fingers-out, Tallant reached the Kyben, drove the thin fingers deep into the man's eyes. The officer let out a piercing shriek as his eyeballs watered into pulp, and the prongs of Tallant's hand went into his head. Then, before the Ky-

ben could open his mouth to shriek again, before he could do anything but wave his hands emptily in the air, feeling his eyes running down his cheeks, Benno Tallant drew his own scythe-shaped blade from his belt, and slashed the man's neck with one sidearm swipe.

The officer fell in a golden-blooded heap, and Tallant grabbed up his blastick, charged through the hall of the building, reached the door that led to the basement, slammed it behind him, and plunged into the darkness of the building's depths.

Overhead he could hear the yells of Kyben foot soldiers discovering their officer. Keeping careful track of which direction he faced, he felt around the floor of the basement till he contacted the sealplug that led to the sewers. He had come up through that polluted dankness the night before, seeking momentary rest, and fresh air. Now he was back to the sewers, and the sewers would carry him to the one lone chance for life he could imagine.

He ran his suddenly strong fingers around the edge of the sealing strip, and pried up the heavy lid with one hand.

He grimaced in the dark-

ness. He *had* to pry it up with one hand—that was all they had left him.

Another moment and the port sighed up, counter-balanced, and Tallant slid himself over the lip, the blastick stuck through his belt. He kept himself wedged against the side of the hole, a few feet above the darkly swirling water of the sewer, and grabbed for the lid. The sealplug sighed down, and Tallant let himself drop.

The knife slid from his belt, fell into the water and was gone in an instant. He hit the tunnel wall as he fell, and came down heavily on one leg, sending a pain shooting up through his left side.

He regained his footing by clawing at the slimy walls of the tunnel, and braced himself, legs wide apart against the dragging tide of the sewer water.

He kept pulling himself along the wall till he found a side-tunnel that headed in the proper direction. Just as he turned the corner, he saw the sealplug open, far back down the tunnel's length, and a searchbeam flooded the water with a round disc of light. They had guessed his means of escape already.

"*Ssssissss sss sss kliss-iss!*" he heard the sibilance of the

Kyben speech being dragged down the hollowness of the tunnel to him. They were coming down into the sewers after him.

He had to hurry. The net was tightening. He knew he had one chance of getting away, even though they had light and he had none. They would have to try *all* the tunnels, but he would not; he would keep going in one direction, inexorably.

The direction that led to the gigantic Kyben flagship.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS a short run from the sewer plug near the service entrance of what had been a department store. A short run, and he was hidden by the shadow of the monstrous spaceship fin.

He found a loading ramp, with a guard slumped against the shining skin of the deep-space ship. Tallant took a step toward the man, realized he'd never make it in time.

The same strange urge to strike rose up in Benno Tallant, showing him a way he would not have considered the day before. The blastick was too noisy; he had lost the scythe-knife; he was too far away to throw a boot and hope it would stun the guard.

So he walked out, facing the guard, coughing nonchalantly, as though he had every right to be there. The guard heard the coughing, looked up, and amazingly watched Tallant stalking toward him. Benno Tallant waved a greeting, and began to whistle.

The guard watched for a second. It was long enough.

Tallant had his hand around the man's neck before the guard could raise an alarm. One leg behind the Kyben's, and he was atop the guard. The butt of the blastick shattered the alien's flat-featured face, and the way was clear.

Tallant crouched as he walked up the ramp. Late morning light filtered across his back, and he held the cumbersome blastick with his hand on the trigger-stock, the weapon shoved under his armpit.

The inside of the ship was cool and moist and dark. Kyba was a cooler, moister, and darker planet.

He saw what must have been a freight shaft, and stepped into it. There was no drag, and he pressed a button on the inner wall of the hollow tube. Suction was immediately generated, drawing him up through the ship.

He let himself slow by scraping his heels against the inner wall, at each layer of the ship, seeking the one escape factor he hoped was on board.

He saw no one. The ship's complement had been cut to the bone, obviously. Every able-bodied man had been sent planetside to search for the bomb. And here was the bomb, walking through the mother ship.

Tallant began to sweat as he rose in the shaft; if he had figured incorrectly, he was doomed. And then he saw what he wanted!

The Kyben was walking down a hall, directly in Tallant's line of sight as he peered from the freight tube. He wore a long white smock, and though Tallant had no way of knowing for certain, he was sure the apparatus hanging about the man's neck was the equivalent of an electrostethoscope.

The Kyben was a doctor.

Tallant propelled himself from the shaft, landed on the plasteel floor of the ship with legs spread, the blastick wedged between body and armpit, his hand tight to the trigger-stock.

The Kyben doctor stopped dead, staring at this man who had come from nowhere. The

alien's eyes roved up and down Tallant's body, stopping for a long moment at the stump of the right arm.

Tallant moved toward the doctor, and the Kyben backed up warily. "English," Tallant asked roughly. "You speak English?"

The doctor stared silently at Tallant, and the Earthman squeezed a bit harder on the trigger-stock, till his knuckles went white.

The Kyben doctor nodded simply. "There's got to be an operating room around here," Tallant went on, commanding. "Take me there. Now!"

The doctor watched the man silently, till Tallant began to advance. Then he must have realized that the Earthie needed him for something, and would not—under *any* circumstances—shoot. Tallant saw the realization on the alien's flat-featured face, and a wild desperation struck up in him.

He backed the alien to the wall, and gripped the blastick farther down its length. Then he swung it, hard!

The muzzle cracked across the Kyben's shoulder, and he let out a muted moan. Tallant hit him again, in the stomach; a third time across the face, opening a gash that ran to the temple.

The alien sank back against the wall, began to slide down. Tallant kicked him just below the double-jointed knee, straightening the doctor up.

"You'll stay alive, Doc—but don't try anything. I'm getting pretty edgy. So you just walk ahead of me, and we'll see that operating room of yours."

The golden-skinned outworlder hesitated a fraction of a second, and Tallant brought his knee up with a snap. The medic screamed, then, high and piercing. Tallant knew the sound would carry through the ship, so he kicked out at the alien, driving him before the balstick.

"Now you get this straight, fellow," Tallant snarled, "you're going to walk ahead of me, right straight to that operating room, and you're going to do a little surgery on me—and one move, so help me God, *one move* that seems wrong, and I take off the top of your yellow skull. Now *move* it!"

He jabbed the blastick hard into the Kyben's back, and the medic tottered off down the hall.

TALLANT refused to take even a local anaesthetic. He sat propped up on the operat-

ing table, a sliver-shaft revolver he had taken from an arms cabinet pointed directly at the medic. The Kyben stared at the cylinder of the gun, saw the little capsules in their chambers, thought of how they were fired through the altering mechanism to come out as raw energy, and he wielded the electroscalepel with care.

Tallant's face became beaded with sweat as the incisions were made. As the layers of flesh that had been the scar peeled back, and he again saw his innards, wet and pulsing, he remembered the first time.

He had changed since Doc Budder had put the bomb in his belly. Now he was nearing the end of a path and starting a new one.

In twenty minutes it was over.

Tallant had guessed correctly. The bomb could *not* be set off under cautious operating conditions. Shep had stressed how the bomb would detonate of its own accord when the time came. But when it had come to mention of the Kyben removing it, he had threatened Tallant only with being cut to ribbons. Perhaps it had been Parkhurst's subconscious way of offering Tallant a chance; perhaps it had just been an

oversight. In either case, the operation had been completed successfully.

Tallant watched carefully as the Kyben put an alien version of an epidermizer on the wound. As the scar built up, he studied the bomb's mechanism. When the scar looked firm enough for him to move, he said in level tones:

"Graft the bomb to my stump."

The medic's dark eyes opened wider; he blinked rapidly, and Tallant repeated what he had said. The medic backed away, knowing what purpose Tallant had in mind—or *thinking* he knew, which was the same thing as far as Tallant was concerned.

It took ten minutes of pistol-whipping for Tallant to realize the medic would go only so far, and no further. The physician would *not* graft that total destruction sun-bomb to the stump of Tallant's right arm.

At least, not under his own will.

The idea dawned slowly, but when formed was clear and whole and practicable. Tallant reached into his jumper pocket, extracted one of the packets of dream dust. He bent down, and under pressure, made the half-conscious Kyben sniff it. He got

the entire packet, the full, demolishing dose into the alien's nostrils. Then he settled back to wait, remembering the first time he had used the dream-dust.

The memory flooded back, and he recalled that the first, imprudent whiffing had made him a confirmed addict. When the medic awoke, he would be an addict. He would do anything for another of the packets nestling in Tallant's jumper pocket.

Tallant wanted only one thing: The sun-bomb grafted to his arm, where he could detonate it in an instant.

THERE had been no pain. The force that had ripped Tallant's arm to atoms had deadened the nerve ends. The bomb was set into the flesh slightly, a block at the end of the stump, with a simple wire hookup that would detonate under several circumstances:

If Tallant consciously triggered the bomb.

If anyone tried to remove the bomb against his will.

If he died, and his heart stopped.

The Kyben doctor had done his work well. Now he huddled, shaking under the effects of total dust addiction,

moaningly begging Tallant for another packet.

"Sure, mister, you can have the snuff." He held the clear plastic packet between two fingers, so the Kyben could see both the revolver and the dust at once. "But first, you take me updecks to meet your Commandant."

The Kyben hardly realized he had led the Earthman to the bridge, but when he looked again, they were there, and the Commandant was staring wide-eyed at them, demanding an explanation.

Then, as the doctor watched, Tallant raised the revolver and fired. The shot took away half the Commandant's face, and he spun sidewise, spraying himself across the port. The body tumbled to the floor and rolled a few inches, to the edge of the dropshaft. Tallant walked past the doctor, and calmly nudged the body over with his boot. The body hung there a split instant, then dropped out of sight as a stone down a well.

There was only one more step to take.

Benno Tallant took stock of himself. The bad in him—and he was the first to admit it was there, festering deeper than any superficial nastiness—had not changed one bit. It

had not become good, it had not tempered him into mel-low thoughts through his trials, it had left him only harder. It had matured itself.

For years, as he skulked and begged, as he weaseled and cheated, his strength of evil had been going through an adolescence. Now it was mature. Now he had direction, and he had purpose. Now he was no longer a coward, for he had faced all the death the world could throw at him, and had bested it. He was another man entirely. A man whose life had taken the one possible turn it could.

Benno Tallant shoved the doctor ahead of him, to the banks of controls.

He paused, turning the shaking addict to him. He stared into the golden slits, and the golden face, and realized with consummate pleasure that he did not hate these men who had tried to find him and cut out his belly; he admired them, for they were engaged in taking what they wanted.

No, he didn't hate *them*.

"What is your name, my friend?" he asked cheerily.

The doctor's hand, tentacle-ended, came up quivering, to beg for the packet. Tallant slapped the hand away; he did not hate the aliens, but he

had no room for sympathy.

"Your name!"

The doctor's tongue quivered over the word: "Norghese."

"Well, Doctor Norghese, you and I are going to be ever such good friends, you know that? You and I are going to do big things together, aren't we?"

In the quivering, chill-racked body of the little doctor, Tallant knew he had a slave from this time on. He clapped the alien about the shoulders.

"Find me the communications rig in this mess, Doc."

The alien pointed it out, and on command, threw the switch that connected Tallant to the men in the field, to the ships that were settled all across Deald's World, to the skeleton crew of the ship in which he stood.

He lifted the speak-stick, and stared at it for a moment. He had considered blowing up the fleet, ordering it to return home, a number of things. But that had been the day before. This was today, and he was a new Benno Tallant.

HE SPOKE sharply and shortly.

"This is the last man on

Deald's World, my Kyben friends. I'm the man your superiors have finally realized carried the sun-bomb.

"Hear me now!

"I *still* carry it. But now I control it. I can set it off at any moment, and kill us all—even in space. For the power of this bomb is incalculable. If you doubt me, I will let you speak to Doctor Norghese of the mother ship, in a few moments, and he will verify what I've said.

"But you have no reason to fear, for I'm going to offer you a deal far superior to anything you had as mere Kyben soldiers on conquest missions for your home world.

"I offer you the chance to become conquerors in your own right. I offer you the chance, not to go home as tin heroes, but to go anywhere you wish as warriors with money and worlds at your command.

"Does it matter to you who leads this fleet? As long as you conquer the galaxies? I don't think it does!"

He paused, knowing they would see it his way. They would have to see it that way. Planetary allegiance only went so far, and he could turn these home-hungry foot-soldiers into the greatest conquering force ever born.

"Our first destination..." He paused, knowing he was hewing a destiny he could never escape. "... Earth!"

He handed the speak-stick to the doctor, shoved him once to indicate he wanted verification of what he had said, listened for a moment to make sure the doctor's sibilant monotone in English was appropriate.

Then he walked to the viewport, and stared out as the dusk fell again across the city

of Xville, and the fields of slowly-ripening Summerset, and beyond them the marshes and the mountains.

He didn't hate anyone now. He was above that; he was Benno Tallant.

He turned away from the port and looked about at the ship that would mold his destiny, knowing he was free of Deald's World, free of the dust. He needed neither now.

Now he was God on his own.

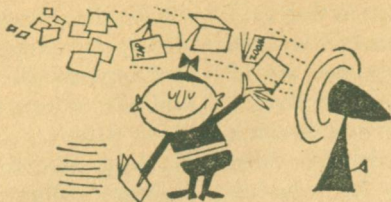


THE BAND PLAYED ON!

The *Heroes' March* was an appropriate theme indeed for the men who piloted the space rockets. Nobody disputed that. But there was one exception: the garbage man of space! No hero he—or so they said, until the chips were down, and no one else could save the entire crew of the crucial space station. It's a unique situation, and Lester del Rey turns it into a uniquely thrilling novelet: *The Band Played On*, in the current issue of INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION. We honestly think this is one of the best, most human stories any science-fiction writer has ever produced. Read it and see if you agree.

In the same issue, you'll find *Pilgrims' Project*, a superb novelet of a grim but chillingly possible future by Robert F. Young, plus short stories by H. B. Fyfe, Robert Silverberg, Isaac Asimov, Randall Garrett and Harlan Ellison.

If you like SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, you'll like INFINITY. The current issue is one of the best yet; get it at your newsstand today!



THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

I WAS completely flabbergasted recently by the arrival on my desk of a new fanzine called *Star Stuff*. Now, new fanzines arrive on my desk all the time. Some of them are impressive because of their all-around excellence, and some are depressing because of their illegible worthlessness. But I have gotten pretty well accustomed to them, and am hardly ever startled as I was by this one.

What made *Star Stuff* different is that it came from Sweden, and was written entirely in Swedish.

The magazine was beautifully mimeographed, with a photo-offset cover. Unfortunately, I don't read Swedish, so the contents were pretty much lost on me. I could make out a word here and there—science fiction, doctor, fans, Sally, Rita, and furschlugginer, for instance—but I still have no idea of

what most of the writers were talking about. Thoughtfully, though, the editors—named Leif Helgesson and Karl-Evert Wetterlund, I gather—provided subscription information in English: you can get six issues of *Star Stuff* by sending a dollar bill to Wetterlund at Box 895, Stockholm 1, Sweden.

One Swedish fanzine would have been surprising enough. But the last page of *SS*—also in English—carried a list of no less than seven others! There was also a list of back issues of the first and only Swedish prozine, *Jules Verne-Magasinet/Veckans Aventyr*, which the editors have for sale.

From another source I have discovered that Sweden, with a total population of seven million, now claims to have the second largest science-fiction fan population of any country in the world. This

little European country contains a smaller number of people than New York City, but has 15 fan clubs and two science-fiction "unions" (I'm not quite sure what they are, but they sound impressive). The movement was given press and radio coverage when it held its first local convention, the Luncon, late last year. And Swedish fandom, as such, didn't even exist three years ago!

If this rate of growth continues, Sweden may become the only country on Earth inhabited entirely by science-fiction fans. Living there would be like attending a permanent convention. It's a staggering thought indeed!

●

I'VE RECEIVED a number of other worthwhile fanzines recently, and will list as many as possible here. I'm not going to write detailed reviews; I don't have the space, and see little reason for doing so. But if you've never seen a fanzine of any kind before, practically any of these would be a safe bet to start with.

A few general comments may help you to know what to expect. Most fanzines are mimeographed, usually in black and white, though some

have very fine color work. A few are hectographed, and an occasional one multigraphed. Almost all have a page size of 8½ by 11 inches (the size of a sheet of typewriter paper); number of pages varies from around 20 to 100, but 40 or 50 is typical. They are bound together (unimaginatively, it is sometimes held by critics) with staples.

The bulk of the material consists of reviews: reviews of books, the professional magazines, other fanzines, movies, etc. There is a good deal of amateur fiction, sometimes quite professional in quality, and sometimes so full of fannish allusions as to be unintelligible to the inexperienced reader. There is a great deal of satire and humor of various sorts, but there are also serious articles and news items. And there is always considerable gossip and chit-chat about the fans themselves—who are, on the whole, a pretty lively and interesting bunch.

In the following list, any magazine that specializes in a particular kind of material will be noted—though such a notation does not mean that this is the *only* kind of material the magazine in question prints.

Outré — George Spencer,

8302 Donnybrook Lane, Chevy Chase 15, Maryland; 15¢ a copy.

Triode—Eric Bentcliffe and Terry Jeeves, Sheffield, England; reports on fannish activities; Americans may send \$1.00 for seven issues to Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Avenue, Minneapolis 22, Minn.

Void—Jim and Greg Benford, c/o Lt. Col. J. A. Benford, G-4 Sect, Hq V Corps, APO 79, New York, N. Y.; 15¢ a copy.

Sata Illustrated—Dan Adkins, Box 5, 3636th CCRTA-RON (SUPP), Stead AF Base, Reno, Nevada; lots of artwork; 20¢ a copy.

Retribution—John Berry and Arthur Thomson, 31 Campbell Park Ave., Belfast, Northern Ireland; the hilarious doings of the fabulous "Goon Defective Agency"; free.

Science-Fiction Five-Yearly—Lee H. Shaw, 545 Manor Rd., Staten Island 14, N. Y.; satire and humor; free.

Science Fiction Parade—Len J. Moffatt, 5969 Lanto Street, Bell Gardens, Cal.; news and reviews; free.

Concept—Larry Ivie, 230 E. 26th Street, New York, N. Y.; 15¢ a copy.

Twig—Guy E. Terwilleger, 1412 Albright Street, Boise, Idaho; reviews and a very

useful list of book and magazine dealers; 10¢ a copy.

FAN-attic—John Champion, Route #2, Box 75B, Pendleton, Ore.; 10¢ a copy.

Sigma Octanis—John Musells, 4 Curve Street, Wakefield, Mass.; free.

Meuh—Jean Linard, 24 Rue Petit, Vesoul, H. S., France; extra large and lively; free.

The Burroughs Bulletin—Vernell Coriell, Box 652, Peekin, Ill.; large, handsomely photo-offset, and extremely well-edited, this is strictly for fans and collectors of Edgar Rice Burroughs, but is absolutely essential to them; free.

I recommend all of these, and urge you to take the plunge if you haven't done so already. Send for several so that you won't be disappointed—some of them are published at rather infrequent issues, and a particular editor might not have any samples on hand when your request arrives. Don't be dismayed if you don't understand everything in the zines you get at first—you'll have fun learning! And remember that these things cost money to produce; when asking for copies, it's nice to enclose a stamp or two for postage, even if the zine itself is free.

Of course, if the list just

confuses you hopelessly, drop me a line and tell me a little about yourself. I'll arrange to get you some sample copies of the most suitable fanzines.

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Tribute to Ray Cummings, a small but extremely significant publication, has been sent out by Leslie Gerber, 201 Linden Blvd., Brooklyn 26, N. Y. All it contains is the news story of Ray Cummings' death plus a few well-chosen words about what an important writer and wonderful person Cummings was.

Cummings died in January, at the age of 69. His work had not appeared in any of the science-fiction magazines for some time preceding his death, but it is remembered with awe and pleasure by every old-time fan and reader. Noted particularly for the "Golden Atom" stories, he was in actual fact one of the first real masters of the modern school of sf. His death came as a shock, and he will be missed by all who knew and loved him.

•

A BRAND-NEW fanzine named *Equation* has announced an amateur authors' contest,

scheduled to begin with the appearance of its first issue (which hasn't yet reached me). Contest entries may be fiction of from 1,000 to 5,000 words, or articles and features from 1,000 to 3,000 words. Any non-pro in fandom is eligible to enter; it is *not* necessary to have a subscription to *Equation*. And readers of the magazine will be the final judges, so there's no possible chance of unfairness.

There will be three prizes, consisting of subscriptions to prozines and fanzines plus copies of older magazines. Entries must be submitted by March 1, 1958, and everyone who submits a story that is accepted will receive a free copy of the issue in which it appears.

Equation will be published monthly and run 40-60 pages; 25¢ a copy or five for \$1.00. The editor is Richard Brown; publisher is Paul Stanbery, 127 Roberts St., Pasadena 3, Cal.

•

A. J. OFFUTT, 133 Clay Ave., Lexington, Ky., has a rather extensive collection of magazines and a few paper-bound novels for sale or swap. The magazines include *Startling* and *Thrilling Wonder*, from

1940, as well as several first issues of magazines which died after two or three appearances, and a few British magazines and novels. There are also three 1929 *Amazings*. Mr. Offutt is interested in swapping only for pre-'48 *Astoundings* and the Dec. 1954, *If*. He will send a list to anyone interested. . . . Richard Young, 910 Grand Concourse, New York 56, N. Y., has comics and *Mad* magazines, plus pocket sport books, for sale. Write him for information.

THE LARGEST "outer space" set ever built in Hollywood, measuring more than 18,000 square feet, is being used in the filming of Warner Brothers' *The Story of Mankind*. The set contains various constellations, nebulae and planets, which will be made to appear to move through the sky by the use of revolving lights. All this is for a scene showing the "trial of mankind," a special sequence starring Ronald Colman as the Spirit of Man, Sir Cedric

Hardwicke as the High Judge, and Vincent Price as the Devil. The picture, needless to say, will be a Technicolor, wide-screen spectacular, and is based on the best seller by Hendrik van Loon.

PVT. WILLIAM N. BEARD, US 55583420, B Co., 60th Inf. Regt. Fort Carson, Colorado, would like to contact fans around Colorado Springs and Denver. . . . LEON NOVICH, 1897 Carter Highway, Apartment 5E, Newark 4, N. J., has for sale 800 science-fiction magazines and 500 pocket books. The magazines include 46 different titles, some as old as 1947. Write him for information.

THAT'S the bottom of the barrel for now. If you have a fanzine for listing here, or any news or personal items you'd like published (strictly free, of course), just send them to Archibald Destiny, Royal Publications, 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y.



• The next SFA goes on sale May 16! •

Was it only a myth

—or did it exist,

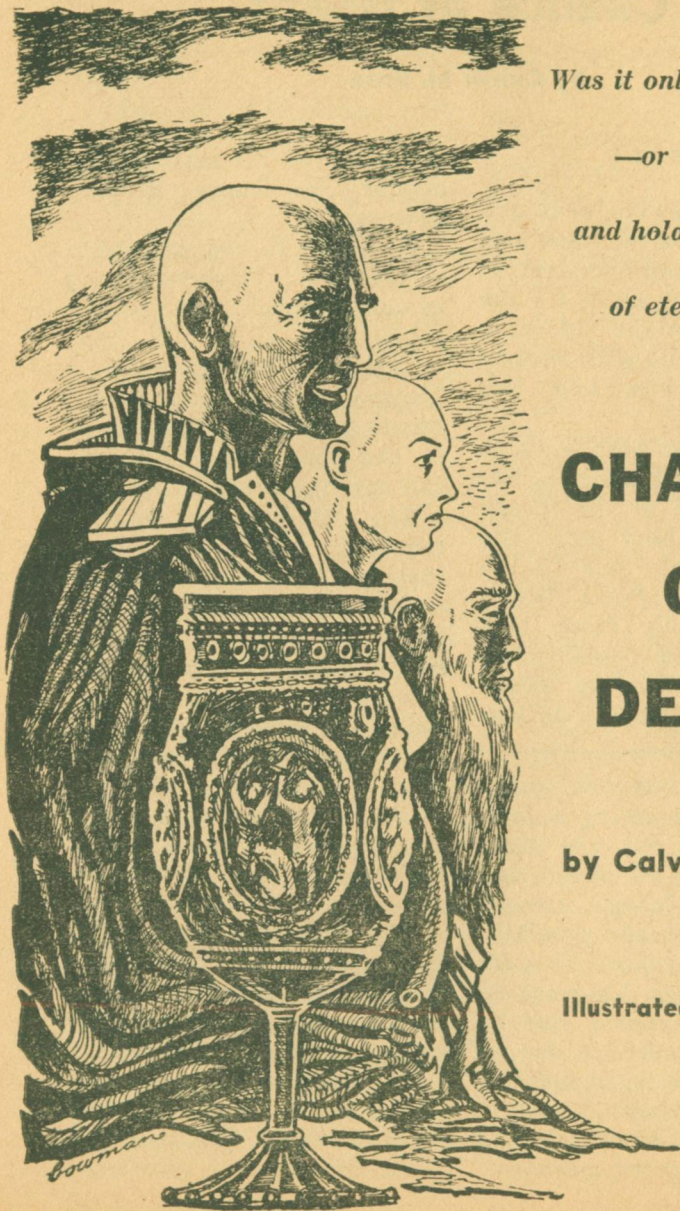
and hold the secret

of eternal life?

CHALICE OF DEATH

by Calvin M. Knox

Illustrated by Bowman



Chalice of Death

by Calvin M. Knox

CHAPTER I

IT WAS mid-day on Jorus, and Hallam Navarre, Earthman to the Court, had overslept. It had been a long night for the courtier, the night before: a night much filled with strange out-system wines and less strange women.

But duty was duty. And, as the Overlord's Earthman, Navarre was due at the throne room by the hour when the blue rays of the sun lit the dial in Central Plaza. Wearily, he sprang from bed, washed, dabbed depilator on his gleaming head to assure it the hairlessness that was

CALVIN M. KNOX held many jobs before becoming a freelance writer, but the most interesting by far was a top secret post doing research connected with the possibilities of real-life spaceships. He can't talk about his work in that line, of course, but he obviously gathered a lot of convincing background for his stories while doing it. Read *Chalice of Death* and you'll see what we mean!

the mark of his station, and caught the ramp heading downstairs.

A jetcab lurked hopefully in the street. Navarre sprang in and snapped, "To the Palace!"

"Yessir." The driver was a Dergonian, his coarse skin a gentle green. He jabbed down on the control stud and the cab sprang forward.

The Dergonian took a twisting, winding route through Jorus City—past the multitudinous stinks of the Street of the Fishmongers, where the warm blue sunlight filtered in everywhere, where racks of drying finfish lay spreadwinged in the sun, then down past the Temple, through swarms of mid-day worshippers, then a sharp right that brought the cab careening into Central Plaza.

The micronite dial in the heart of the plaza was blazing gold. Navarre cursed softly. He belonged at the Overlord's side, and he was late.

Earthmen were never late. Earthmen had a special reputation to uphold in the universe. Navarre's fertile mind

set to work concocting a story to place before the Overlord when the inevitable query came.

"You seek an audience with the Overlord?" the cabbie asked.

"Not quite," Navarre said wryly. He slipped back his hood, revealing his bald dome. "Look."

The driver squinted at the rear-view mirror and nodded at the sight of Navarre's shaven scalp. "Oh. The Earthman. Sorry I didn't recognize you, sir."

"Quite all right. But get this crate moving; I'm due at court."

"I'll do my best."

The Dergonian's best wasn't quite good enough. He rounded the Plaza, turned down into the Street of the Lords, charged full throttle ahead—

Smack into a parade.

The Legions of Jorus were marching. The jetcab came to a screeching halt no more than ten paces from a regiment of tusked Daborians marching stiffly along, carrying their blue-and-red flag mounted just beneath the bright purple of Jorus, tootling on their thin, whining electronic bagpipes. There were thousands of them.

"Guess it's tough luck, Sir Earthman," the cabbie said

philosophically. "The parade's going around the Palace. It may take hours."

NAVARRÉ sat perfectly still, meditating on the precarious position of an Earthman in a court of the Cluster. Here he was, remnant of a wise race shrouded in antiquity, relict of the warrior-kings of old—and he sat sweating in a taxi while a legion of tusked barbarians delayed his passage. Once again he cursed the rule that forced him to live at such a distance from the Palace, knowing as he did so that the arrangement was deliberately designed to serve as a constant reminder of the precariousness of his position.

The cabbie opaqued his windows.

"What's that for?"

"We might as well be cool while we wait. This can take hours. I'll be patient if you will."

"The hell you will," Navarre snapped, gesturing at the still-running meter. "At two demi-units per minute I could be renting a fine seat on the reviewing stand. Let me out of here."

"But—"

"Out." Navarre leaned forward, slammed down the meter, cutting it short at

thirty-six demi-units. He handed the driver a newly-minted semi-unit piece.

"Keep the change. And thanks for the service."

"A pleasure." The driver made the formal farewell salute. "May I serve you again, Sir Earthman, and—"

"Sure," Navarre said, and slipped out of the cab. A moment later he had to jump to one side as the driver activated his side blowers, clearing debris from the turbojets and incidentally spraying the Earthman with a cloud of fine particles of filth.

Navarre turned, clapping a hand to his blaster, but the grinning cabbie was already scooting away in reverse. Navarre scowled. Behind the usual mask of respect for Earthmen, there was always a lack of civility that irked him. It was another reminder of his ambiguous position in the galaxy, as an emissary from nowhere, a native of a world long forgotten and which he himself had never seen.

Earth. It was not a planet any longer, but a frame of mind, a way of thinking. He was an Earthman, and thus valuable to the Overlord. But he could be replaced; there were other advisers nearly as shrewd.

Navarre fingered his bald scalp ruefully and flicked off his hood again. He started across the wide street.

The regiment of Daborians still stalked on—the seven-foot humanoids with their jutting tusks polished brightly, their fierce beards combed, marching in an unbreakable phalanx round and round the Palace.

Damn parades anyway, he thought. Foolish display, calculated to impress barbarians.

He reached the Daborian ranks. "Excuse me, please."

He started to force his way between two towering artillery men. Without breaking step, a Daborian grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and threw him back toward the street. An appreciative ripple of laughter went up from the onlookers as Navarre landed unsteadily on one leg, started to topple, and had to skip three or four times to stay upright.

"Let me through," he snapped again, as a corps of tusked musicians came by. The Daborians merely ignored him. Navarre waited until a bagpiper came by, one long valved chaunter thrust between his tusks and hands flying over the electronic keyboard. Navarre grabbed the base of the instrument with

both hands and rammed upward.

The Daborian let out a howl of pain and took a step backward as the mouthpiece cracked against his palate. Navarre grinned and slipped through the gap in formation, and kept on running. Behind him, the bagpiping rose to an angry wail, but none of the Daborians dared break formation to pursue the insolent Earthman.

He reached the steps of the Palace. Fifty-two of them, each a little wider and higher than the next. He was better than an hour late at court. The Overlord would be close to a tantrum—and in all probability Kausirn, the sly Vegan adviser, had taken ample opportunity to work mischief.

Navarre only hoped the order for his execution had not yet been signed. There was no telling what the Overlord would do under Kausirn's influence.

HE REACHED the long black-walled corridor leading to the throne room somewhat out of breath. The pair of unemotional Trizian monoptics guarding access to the corridor recognized him and nodded disapprovingly as he went

toward the throne room.

Arriving at the penultimate turn in the hall, he ducked into a convenience at the left and slammed the door. He was so late that a few moments more wouldn't aggravate the offense, and he wanted to look his best.

A couple of seconds later, the brisk molecular flow of the vibron had him refreshed and back in breath; he splashed water on his face, dried it, straightened his tunic, tied back his hood. Then, stiffly, walking with a dignity he had not displayed a moment before, he stalked out and headed for the throne room.

The annunciator said: "Hallam Navarre, Earthman to the Overlord."

Joroiran VII was on his throne, looking, as always, like a rather nervous butcher's apprentice elevated quite suddenly to galactic rank. He muttered a few words, and the micro-amplifier surgically implanted in his throat picked them up and tossed them at the kneeling Navarre.

"Enter, Earthman. You're late."

The throne room was filled. For this was Threeday—audience-day—and all sizes and shapes of commoners thronged before the Overlord, each

hoping that the finger of fate would light on him and bring him forward to plead his cause. It was Navarre's customary job to select those who were to address the Overlord, but he saw coldly that Kausirn, the Vegan, had taken over the task in his absence.

He advanced toward the throne and abased himself before the purple carpet. A sudden sensation of heat told him that Lagard, the slave who operated the spotlight from the balcony, was having a field day with the Earthman's glitteringly bald head.

"You may rise," Joroiran said casually. "The audience began more than an hour ago. You have been missed, Navarre."

"I have been employed in your Majesty's service all the while," Navarre said. "I was pursuing that which may be of great value to your Majesty and to all of Jorus."

Joroiran looked amused. "And what may that be?"

Navarre paused, drawing in breath, and prepared himself for the plunge. "I have discovered information that may lead to the Chalice of Life, my Overlord."

To his surprise Joroiran did not react at all; his mousy face showed not the slightest

sign of animation. Navarre blinked; the whopper was not going over.

But it was the Vegan who saved him, in a way. Leaning over, Kausirn whispered harshly, "He means the Chalice of *Death*, Majesty."

"Death . . . ?"

"Eternal life for Joroiran VII," Navarre said ringingly. As long as he was going to make excuses for having overslept, he might as well make them good ones. "The Chalice holds death for some—life for thee."

"Indeed," the Overlord said. "You must talk to me of this in my chambers. But now, the audience."

NAVARRE mounted the steps and took his customary position at the monarch's right; Kausirn had at least not appropriated *that*. But the Earthman saw that the Vegan's nest of tapering fingers played idly over the short-beam generator which controlled the way the hand of fate fell upon commoners. That meant Kausirn, not Navarre, would be selecting those whose cases were to be plead this day.

Looking into the crowd, Navarre picked out the bleak, heavily-bearded face of Dom-

rik Carso. Carso was staring reproachfully at him, and Navarre felt a sudden burst of guilt. He had promised Carso a hearing today; the halfbreed lay under a sentence of banishment, but Navarre had lightly assured him that revokement would be a simple matter.

But not now. Not with Kausirn wielding the blue beam. Kausirn had no desire to have an Earthman's kith and kin plaguing him on Jorus; Carso would rot in the crowd before the Vegan chose *his* case to be pled.

Navarre met Carso's eyes. *Sorry*, he tried to say. But Carso stared stiffly through him. Navarre had failed him.

"Proceed with your tale," Joroiran said.

Navarre looked down and saw a pale Joran in the pleader's square below, bathed in the blue light of chance. The man looked up at the command and said, "Shall I continue or begin over, Highness?"

"Begin over. The Earthman may be interested."

"May it please the Overlord and his advisers, my name is Drusu of the Loaves; I am a baker from Dombril Street who was taken with overmuch wine on yesternight, and did find myself in another man's

wife's arms by the hour of midnight, all unconscious of what I was doing. The girl had given me to understand she was a woman of the streets; not only was I befuddled by the wine but by the woman's lies. The man himself arrived at his home late, and did fly into a mighty rage from which he could hardly be dissuaded."

The story went on and on—a rambling account of the negotiations between the outraged husband and the besotted baker. Navarre's attention wandered; he glanced around the court, spying here and there a person whom he had pledged to assist this day. Of all days to oversleep! Kausirn held the reins, now.

". . . and finally we came before your Nobility for adjudgement, Sire. The man desires a night with my wife as fee simple for the insult, plus payment of one hundred units; my wife refuses to grant this, while his will have naught to do with either of us."

On his throne, Joroiran scowled and twisted fretfully. Such petty matters embarrassed and annoyed him, but he kept up the pretense of the public audience at Navarre's advice. Even in a galactic society, a monarch

must keep touch with his subjects.

The Overlord turned to Navarre. "What say you in this matter, Earthman?"

Navarre thought for a moment. "All four must be punished—Drusu for straying from his wife, his wife for not being loving enough to keep her husband's undivided affections, the other woman for seducing Drusu, her husband for taking so little care of his wife as to allow a stranger to enter his home of a night. Therefore—Drusu is sentenced to supply the offended husband with bread, free of charge, for the period of a fortnight; the erring wife is condemned to cut short her hair. But all four are sentenced to unbreaking rectitude of behavior for one year, and should any of you be taken with a person not your spouse the sentence will be death *for all four*."

"Excellent, excellent," Joroiran murmured. Drusu nodded and backed away from the royal presence. Navarre grinned; he enjoyed delivering such decisions on the moment's spur.

Joroiran intoned, "Fate will decide who is next to be heard."

Fate—surreptitiously controlled by the generator hid-

den in the Vegan's twenty fingers—materialized as a ball of blue light high in the vaulted throne room. The ball lowered. For a moment it flickered above the head of Domrik Carso, and Navarre wondered if the Vegan would choose the half-breed's case unknowingly.

But Kausirn was too sly for that. The beam swung tantalizingly over Carso's head and settled on a pudgy grocer at his side. The man did a little dance of delight, and stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, I am Lugfor of Zaigla Street, grocer and purveyor of food. I have been accused falsely of thinning my measure, but—"

Navarre sat back while the man droned on. The time of audience was coming to its end; Carso would go unheard, and at twenty-fourth hour the halfbreed would be banished. Well, there was no helping it, Navarre thought glumly. He knotted his hands together and tried to follow Lugfor's plea of innocence.

AT THE END of the session, Navarre turned to the Overlord—but Kausirn was already speaking. "Majesty, may I talk to you alone."

"And I?" Navarre said.

"I'll hear Kausirn first," Joroiran decided. "To my chambers; Navarre, attend me there later."

"Certainly, Sire." He slipped from the dais and headed down into the dispersing throng. Carso was shuffling morosely toward the exit when Navarre reached him.

"Domrik! Wait!"

The halfbreed turned. "It looks like you'll be the only Earthman on Jorus by nightfall, Hallam."

"I'm sorry. Believe me, I'm sorry. I just couldn't get here in time—and that damned Vegan got control of the selections."

Carso shrugged moodily. "I understand." He tugged at his thick beard. "I am only half of Earth, anyway. You'll not miss me."

"Nonsense!" Navarre whispered harshly. "I—oh, forget it, Domrik. Will you forgive me?"

The halfbreed nodded gravely. "My writ commands me to leave the cluster. I'll be heading for Kariad tonight, and then outward. You'll be able to reach me there if you can—I mean—I'll be there a week."

"Kariad? All right. I'll get in touch with you there if I can influence Joroiran to revoke the sentence. Damn it,

Carso, you shouldn't have hit that innkeeper so hard."

"He made remarks," Carso said. "I had to." The halfbreed bowed and turned away to leave.

The throne room was nearly empty; only a few stragglers were left, staring at the grandeur of the room and probably comparing it with their own squalid huts. Joroiran enjoyed living on a large scale, certainly.

Navarre sprawled down broodingly on the edge of the royal purple carpet and stared at his jewelled fingers. Things were looking bad. His sway as Joroiran's adviser was definitely weakening, and the Vegan's star seemed in the ascendant. Navarre's one foothold was the claim of tradition: all seven of the Joroiran Overlords had had an Earthman as adviser. The Overlord, weak man that he was, would scarcely care to break with tradition.

Yet Kausirn had wormed himself securely into the monarch's graces. The situation was definitely not promising.

Gloomily, Navarre wondered if there were any other local monarchs in the market for advisers. His stay on Jorus did not look to be long continuing.

CHAPTER II

AFTER A WHILE a solemn Atrizian glided toward him, stared down out of its one eye, and said, "The Overlord will see you now."

"Thanks." He allowed the monoptic to guide him through the swinging panel that led to Joroiran's private chambers, and entered.

The Overlord was alone, but the scent of the waxy-fleshed Vegan still lingered. Navarre took the indicated seat.

"Sire?"

"That was a fine decision you rendered in the case of the baker today, Navarre. I often wonder how I should endure the throne without two such ministers as you and Kausirn."

"Thank you, Sire."

Perspiration beaded Joroiran's upper lip; the monarch seemed dwarfed by the stiff strutwork that held his uniform out from his scrawny body. He glanced nervously at the Earthman, then said, "You spoke of a Chalice today, as your reason for being late to the audience. The Chalice of Death, is it? Or of Life?"

"It is known under both names, Sire."

"Of course. Its details slipped my mind for the instant. It is said to hold the secret of eternal life, not so? Its possessor need never die?"

Navarre nodded.

"And," Joroiran continued, "you tell me you have some knowledge of its whereabouts, eh?"

"I think I do," said Navarre hoarsely. "My informant claimed to know someone whose father had led an earlier expedition in search of it, and who had nearly located it." The statement was strictly from whole cloth, but Navarre reeled it off smoothly.

"Indeed? Who is this man?"

Sudden inspiration struck Navarre. "His name is Domrik Carso. His mother was an Earthman—and you know of course that the Chalice is connected in some legend-shrouded way with Earth."

"Of course. Produce this Carso."

"He was here today, Sire. He searched for pardon from an unfair sentence of banishment over some silly bar-room squabble. Alas, the finger of fate did not fall on him, and he leaves for Kariad tonight. But perhaps if the sentence were revoked I

could get further information from him concerning the Chalice, which I would most dearly love to win for your Majesty—"

Joroiran's fingers drummed the desktop. "Ah, yes—revokement. It would be possible, perhaps. Can you reach the man?"

"I think so."

"Good. Tell him not to pay for his passage tickets, that the Public Treasury will cover the cost of his travels from now on."

"But—"

"The same applies to you, of course."

Taken aback, Navarre lost a little of his composure. "Sire?"

"I have spoken to Kausirn. Navarre, I don't know if I can spare you, and Kausirn is uncertain as to whether he can bear the double load in your absence. But he will try it, noble fellow that he is."

"I don't understand," Navarre stammered.

"You say you have a lead on the Chalice, no? Kausirn has refreshed my overburdened memory with some information on this Chalice, and I find myself longing for its promise of eternal life, Navarre. You say you have a lead; very well. I have arranged for an indefinite leave of

absence for you. Find this man Carso; together, you can search the galaxies at my expense. I don't care how long it takes, nor what it costs. *But bring me the Chalice, Navarre!*"

The Earthman nearly fell backward in astonishment. The Chalice? Why, it was just a myth, an old wives' tale he had resorted to as an excuse for oversleeping—

Greed shone in the Overlord's eyes: greed for eternal life. Dizzily Navarre realized that this was the work of the clever Kausirn: he would send the annoying Earthman all over space on a fool's mission while consolidating his own position at the side of the Overlord.

Navarre forced himself to meet Joroiran's eyes. "I will not fail you, my lord," he said in a strangled voice.

HE HAD BEEN weaving twisted strands, and now he had spun himself a noose. Talk of tradition! Nothing could melt it faster than a king's desire to keep his throne.

For seven generations there had been an Earthman at the Overlord's side. Now, in a flash, the patient work of years was undone. Dejectedly

Navarre reviewed his mistakes.

One: he had allowed Kausirn to worm his way into a position of eminence on the Council. Allow a Vegan an inch, he'll grab a parsec. Navarre now saw he should have had the many-fingered one quietly put away while he had the chance.

Two: he had caroused the night before an audience-day. Inexcusable. By hereditary right and by his own wits he had always chosen the cases to be heard, and in the space of a single hour the Vegan had done him out of *that*.

Three: he had lied too well. This was something he should have foreseen. He had aroused weak Joroiran's desire to such a pitch that Kausirn was easily able to plant the suggestion that the Overlord send the faithful Earthman out to find the Chalice.

Three mistakes. Now, he was on the outside and Kausirn in control. Navarre tipped his glass and drained it. "You're a disgrace to your genes," he told the oddly distorted reflection on the wall of the glass. "A hundred thousand years of Earthmen labor to produce—what? *You?* Fumblewit!"

Still, there was nothing to be done for it now. Joroiran

had given the word, and here he was, assigned to chase a phantom, to pursue a will-o'-the-wisp that was half fancy, half lie. The Chalice! Chalice, indeed! There was no such thing.

And even if there were, the sky was full of stars. Navarre could search the heavens for a billion decades and not touch each world twice. And he dared not return to Joroiran empty-handed. That was what Kausirn was counting on. Navarre was a prisoner of his own reputation, of the reputation of Earthmen's ability to achieve anything they set out to do.

Navarre chuckled hollowly and wondered what would happen if they knew the truth—if they knew just how futile the much-feared Earthmen really were.

Here we are, he thought. A couple of million of us, scattered one or two to a world throughout the galaxies. We dictate policies, we are sought as advisers—and yet we were unable to hold our own empire. We don't even remember where our home world is.

He tossed his empty glass aside and reached for the communicator. He punched the stud, quickly fed in four numbers and a letter.

A blank radiance filled the

screen, and an impersonal voice said, "Citizen Carso is not at home. Citizen Carso is not at home. Citizen Car—"

Navarre cut the contact and dialed again. This time the screen lit, glowed, and showed a tired-looking man in a white smock. "Jublain Street Bar," the man said. "Do you want to see the manager?"

"No. Is there a man named Domrik Carso there—a heavy-set fellow, with a thick beard?"

"I'll look around," the bar-keep grunted. A moment later, Carso came to the screen. His thick-nostrilled face looked puffy and bloated; as Navarre had suspected, he was having a few last swills of Joran beer before taking off for the out-worlds.

"Navarre? What do you want?"

"Have you bought your ticket for Kariad yet?"

Carso blinked. "Not yet. What's it to you?"

"If you haven't bought it yet, *don't*. How soon can you get over here?"

"Couple of centuries, maybe. What's going on?"

"You've been pardoned."

"*What?* I'm not banished?"

"Not exactly," Navarre said. "Look, I don't want to talk about it at long range. How soon can you get over here?"

"I'm due at the spaceport at twenty-one to pick up my tick—"

"*Damn* your ticket," Navarre snapped. "You don't have to leave yet. Come on over, will you?"

NAVARRÉ peered across the table at the heavy-shouldered figure of Domrik Carso. "That's the whole story," the Earthman said. "Joroiran wants the Chalice—and he wants it real hard."

Carso shook his head and exhaled a beery breath. "Your oversleeping has ruined us both, Hallam. With but half an Earthman's mind I could have done better."

"It's done, and Kausirn has me in a cleft stick. If nothing else, I've saved you a banishment."

"Only under condition that I help you find this damnable Chalice," Carso grunted. "Some improvement that is. Well, at least Joroiran will foot the bill. We can both see the universe at his expense, and when we come back—"

"We come back when we've found the Chalice," said Navarre. "This isn't going to be a pleasure-jault."

Carso glared at him sourly. "Hallam, are you mad? There is no Chalice!"

"How do you know? Joroiran says there is. The least we can do is look for it."

"We'll wander space forever," Carso said, sighing. "As no doubt the Vegan intends for you to do. Well, there's nothing but to accept. I'm no poorer for it than if I were banished. Chalice! *Pah!*"

"Have another drink," Navarre suggested. "It may make it easier for you to swallow the idea."

"I doubt it," the halfbreed said, but accepted the drink anyway. He drained it, then said, "You told the Overlord you had a lead. What was it?"

"You were my lead," Navarre said. "I had to invent something."

"Fine, fine. This leaves us less than nowhere. Well, tell me of this Chalice. What is known of it?"

Navarre frowned. "The legend is connected with ancient Earth. They say the Chalice holds the key to eternal life, if the proper people find it—and instant death for the wrong ones. Hence the ambiguous name, Chalice of Life and Chalice of Death."

"A chalice is a drinking-cup," Carso observed. "Does this mean a potion of immortality, or something of the like?"

"Your guess is equal to

mine. I've given you all I know on the subject."

"Excellent. Where is this Chalice supposedly located, now?"

Navarre shrugged. "Legend is incomplete. The thing might be anywhere. Our job is to find a particular drinking-cup on a particular world in a nearly infinite universe. Unfortunately we have only a finite length of time to do the job."

"The typical shortsightedness of kings," Carso muttered. "A sensible monarch would have sent a couple of immortals out in search of the Chalice."

"A sensible monarch would know when he'd had enough, and not ask to rule his system forever. But Joroiran's not sensible."

They were silent for a moment, while the candle between them flickered. Then Carso grinned.

"What's so funny?"

"Listen, Hallam. We don't know where the Chalice is, right? It might be anywhere at all. And so we can begin our search at random."

"So?"

"Why don't we assume a location for the Chalice? At least it'll give us a first goal to crack at. And it ought to be easier to find a planet than

a drinking-cup, shouldn't it?"

Navarre's eyes narrowed. "Just where are you assuming the Chalice is? Where are we going to look for it?"

There was a mischievous twinkle in the halfbreed's eyes. He gulped another drink, grinned broadly, and belched.

"Where? Why—Earth, of course."

CHAPTER III

ON MORE-OR-LESS sober reflection the next morning, it seemed to Navarre that Carso's idea was right: finding Earth promised to be easier than finding the Chalice (if it were proper to talk about degrees of ease in locating myths). It seemed a good deal more probable that there had been an Earth than that there had been a Chalice, and, if they directed their aims Earthward, their quest would have a more solid footing.

Earth. Navarre knew the stories that each Earthman told to his children, that few non-Earthmen knew. As a halfbreed Carso would be aware of them too.

Years ago—a hundred thousand, the legend said—man had sprung from Earth, an inconsequential world revolv-

ing around a small sun in an obscure galaxy. He had leaped forward to the stars, and carved out a mighty empire. The glory of Earth was carried to the far galaxies, to the wide-flung nebulae of deepest space.

But no race, no matter how strong, could hold sway over an empire that spanned a billion parsecs. The centuries passed; Earth's grasp grew weaker. And, finally, the stars rebelled.

Navarre remembered his father's vivid description. Earth had been outnumbered a billion to one, yet they had kept the defensive screens up, and kept the home world untouched, had beaten back the invaders. But still the invaders came, sweeping down on the small planet like angry beetles.

Earth drew back from the stars; its military forces came to the aid of the mother world, and the empire crumbled.

It was to no avail. The hordes from the stars won the war of attrition, sacrificing men ten thousand to one and still not showing signs of defeat. The mother world yielded; the proud name of Earth was humbled.

What became of the armies of Earth no one knew. Those

who survived were scattered through the galaxies. But fiercely the Earthmen clung to their name. They shaved their heads to distinguish themselves from humanoids of a million star-systems—and death it was to the alien who tried to counterfeit himself as an Earthman!

The centuries rolled by in their never-ending sweep, and Earth itself was forgotten. Yet the Earthmen remained, a thin band scattered through the heavens, proud of their heritage, jealous of their genetic traits. Carso was rare; it was but infrequently that an Earthwoman could be persuaded to mate with an alien. Yet Carso regarded himself as an Earther, and never spoke of his father.

Where was Earth? No one could name the sector of space—but Earth was in the hearts of the men who lived among the stars. Earthmen were sought out by kings; the baldheads could not rule themselves, but they could advise those less fitted than they to command.

Then would come a fool like Joroiran, who held his throne because his father seven times removed had hewed an empire for him—and Joroiran would succumb to a Vegan's wiles and order

his Earthman off on a madman's quest.

Navarre's fists stiffened. *Send me for the Chalice, eh? I'll find something for him!*

The Chalice was an idiot's dream; immortal life was a filmy bubble. But Earth was real, Earth merely awaited finding. Somewhere it bobbed in the heavens, forgotten symbol of an empire that had been.

Smiling, Navarre thought, *I'll find Earth for him.*

Unlimited funds were at his disposal. He would bring Joroiran a potion too powerful to swallow at a gulp.

LATER that day he and Carso were aboard a liner of the Royal fleet, bearing tickets paid for by Royal frank, and feeling against their thighs the thick bulge of Imperial scrip received with glee from the Royal treasury.

A stewardess moved up and down the aisle of the liner, making sure everyone was prepared for blastoff. Navarre studied her impartially. She was a Joran native, pink-skinned, high-breasted, with only the flickering nictitating lid filming her eyes to indicate that she did not come from the direct line of Earth.

"A fine wench," Carso mur-

mured as she passed.

"For you, perhaps. Give me an Earthwoman of the full blood."

Carso chuckled. "As a mate, perhaps; you fullbloods are ever anxious to keep your lines pure. But as for that one—if I judge you on past practice, you would not toss her from your couch if she sought a night's sport."

"Possibly not," Navarre admitted wryly. "But sport and bloodlines are separate affairs to me. Obviously this is not the rule in your family."

Carso stiffened in his seat. "My mother was forced by a drunken Joran, else I would be full-blooded like the rest."

"Oh," Navarre said softly. Carso had never spoken of this before. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"You didn't think she'd seek a Joran bed willingly, did you?"

"Of course not. I—wasn't thinking."

"Ready for blasting," came the stewardess's voice. "We depart for Kariad in fifteen seconds. Relax and prepare to enjoy your trip."

Navarre slumped back in the acceleration cradle and closed his eyes. His heart ticked the seconds off impatiently. *Twelve. Eleven. Nine. Six.*

Two. One. Acceleration took him, thrust him downward as the liner left ground. Within seconds, they were above the afternoon sky, thrusting outward into the brightly - dotted blackness speckled with the sharp points of a billion suns.

One of those suns was Sol, Navarre thought. And one of the planets of Sol was Earth.

Chalice of Life, he thought scornfully. As Jorus dwindled behind him, Navarre wondered how long it would be before he would see the simpering face of Joroiran VII again.

KARIAD, the planet nearest the Joran Empire's cluster, was the lone world of a double sun. This arrangement, uneconomical as it was, provided some spectacular views and made the planet a much-visited pleasure place.

As Navarre and Carso alighted from the liner, *Primus*, the massive red giant that was the heart of the system, hung high overhead, intersecting a huge arc of the sky, while *Secundus*, the smaller main-sequence yellow sun, flickered palely near the horizon. Kariad was moving between the two stars on its complex and eccentric orbit,

and, in the light of the two suns, all objects in sight had acquired a purple shimmer.

Those who had disembarked from the liner were standing in a tight knot on the field while Kariadi customs officials moved among them. Navarre folded his arms and waited for his turn to come.

The official wore a gilt-encrusted surplice and a bright red sash that seemed almost brown in the strange light. He yanked forth a notebook and started to scribble.

"Name and planet of origin?"

"Hallam Navarre. Planet of origin is Earth."

The customs man glared impatiently at Navarre's shaven scalp and said, "You know what I mean. Where are you from?"

"Jorus," Navarre said.

"Purpose of visiting Kariadi?"

"Special emissary from Overlord Joroiran VII; intent peaceful, mission confidential."

"Are you the Earthman to the Court?"

Navarre nodded.

"And this man?"

"Domrik Carso," the halfbreed growled. "Planet of origin Jorus."

The official indicated Carso's stubbly scalp. "I wish you

Earthmen would be consistent. Or are you merely prematurely bald?"

"I'm of Earth descent," Carso said stolidly. "But I'm from Jorus, and you can put it down. I'm Navarre's traveling companion."

"Very well; you may both pass."

Navarre and Carso moved off the field and into the spaceport itself. "I could use a beer," Carso said.

"I guess you've never been on Kariadi, then. They must brew their beer from sewer-flushings."

"I'll drink sewer-flushings when I must," Carso said. He pointed to a glowing sign. "There's a bar. Shall we go in?"

As Navarre had expected, the beer was vile. He stared unhappily at the big mug of green, brackish liquid, stirring it with a quiver of his wrist and watching the oily patterns forming and re-forming on its surface.

Across the table, Carso was showing no such qualms. The halfbreed tilted the bottle into his mug, raised the mug to his lips, drank. Navarre shuddered.

Grinning, Carso crashed the mug down and wiped his beard clean. "It's not the best I've ever had," he comment-

ed finally. "But it'll do, in a pinch." He filled his mug again cheerfully.

Very quietly Navarre said, "Do you see those men sitting at the far table?"

Carso squinted without seeming to do so. "Aye. They were on board the ship with us."

"Exactly."

"But so were five others in this bar! Surely you don't think—"

"I don't intend to take any chances," Navarre said. "Finish your drink and let's make a tour of the spaceport."

"Well enough, if so you say." Carso drained the drink and left one of Overlord Joroiran's bills on the table to pay for it. Casually, the pair left the bar.

Their first stop was a tape-shop, where Navarre made a great business over ordering a symphony.

The effusive, apologetic proprietor did his best. "*The Anvils of Juno*? I don't think I have that number in stock. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever heard of it. Could it be *The Hammer of Drolon* you seek?"

"I'm fairly sure it was the *Juno*," said Navarre, who had invented the work a moment before. "But perhaps I'm wrong. Is there any place I can listen to *Drolon*?"

"Surely; we have a booth back here where you'll experience full audiovisual effect. If you'd step this way—"

They spent fifteen minutes sampling the tape, Carso with an expression of utter boredom, Navarre with a scowl for the work's total insipidity. At the end of that time he snapped off the playback and rose.

The proprietor came bustling up. "Well?"

"Sorry," Navarre said. "It's not the one."

Gathering his cloak around him, he swept out of the shop, followed by Carso. As they re-entered the arcade, Navarre saw two figures glide swiftly into the shadows—but not swiftly enough.

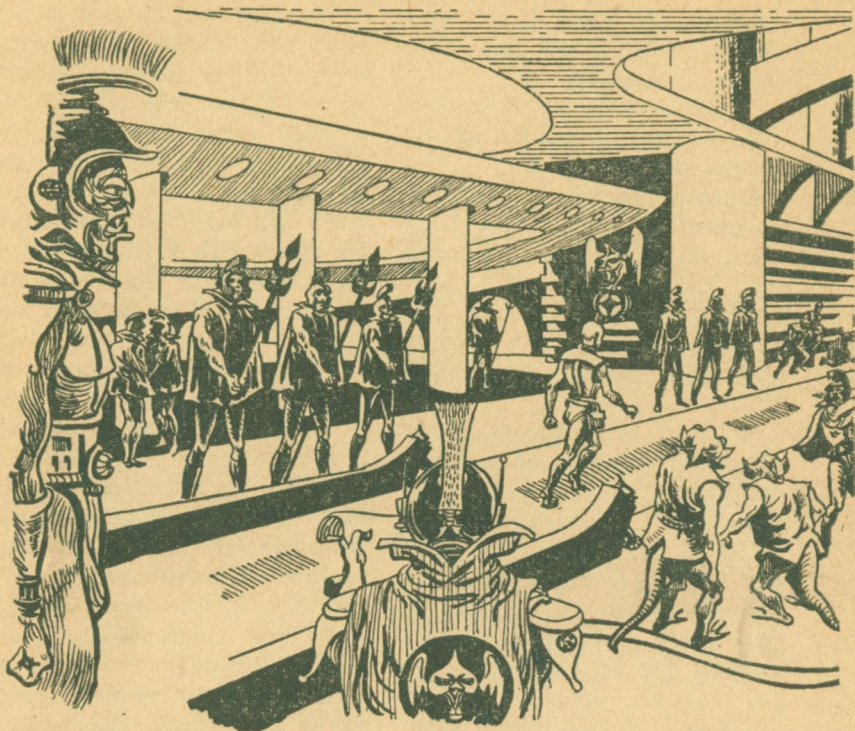
"I do believe you're right," Carso muttered. "We're being followed."

"Kausirn's men, no doubt. The Vegan's curious to see where we're heading. Possibly he's ordered me assassinated now that I'm away from the Court. But let's give it one more test before we take steps."

"No more music!" Carso said hastily.

"No. The next stop will be more practical."

He led the way down the arcade until they reached a shop whose front display said



simply, WEAPONS. They went in.

The proprietor here was of a different stamp from the man in the music shop; he was a rangy Kariadi, his light blue skin glowing in harmony with the electroluminescents in the shop's walls. "Can I help you?"

"Possibly you can," Navarre said. He swept back his hood, revealing his Earthman's scalp. "We're from Jorus. There are assassins on our trail, and we want to

shake them. Have you a back exit?"

"Over there," the armorer said. "Are you armed?"

"Yes, but we could do with some spare charges. Say, five apiece." Navarre placed a bill on the counter and slid the wrapped-up packages into his tunic pocket.

"Are those the men?" the proprietor said.

Two shadowy figures were visible through the one-way glass of the window. They peered toward it uneasily.



"I think they're coming in here," Navarre said.

"All right. You two go out the back way; I'll chat with them for a while."

Navarre flashed the man an appreciative smile and then he and Carso slipped through the indicated door, just as their pursuers entered the weapons shop.

"Double around the arcade and wait at the end of the corridor, eh?" Carso said.

"Right. We'll catch 'em as they come out."

Some very fast running brought them to a strategic position. "Keep your eyes open," Navarre said. "That shopkeeper may have told them where we are."

"I doubt it. He looked honest."

"You never can tell," Navarre said. "Hush, now!"

The door of the gunshop was opening.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOLLOWERS edged out into the corridor again, squeezing themselves against the wall and peering in all directions. They looked acutely uncomfortable, having lost sight of their quarry.

Navarre drew his blaster and hefted it thoughtfully. Then he shouted, "Stand and raise your hands," and squirted a bolt of energy almost at their feet.

One of the two yelled in fear, but the other, responding instantly, drew and fired. His bolt, deliberately aimed high, brought a section of the arcade roofing down; the drifting dust and plaster obscured sight.

"They're getting away!" Carso snapped. "Let's go after them!"

They leaped from hiding and raced through the rubble;

dimly they could see the retreating pair heading for the main waiting-room. Navarre cursed; if they got in there, there'd be no chance of bringing them down.

As he ran, he levelled his blaster and emitted a short burst. One of the two toppled and fell; the other continued running, and vanished abruptly into the crowded waiting-room.

"I'll go in after him," Navarre said. "You look at the dead one and see if there's any identification on him."

Navarre pushed through the photon-beam and into the spaceport's crowded waiting-room. He saw his man up ahead, jostling desperately toward the cabstand. Navarre holstered his blaster; he would never be able to use it in here.

"Stop that man!" he roared. "Stop him!"

Perhaps it was the authority in his tone, perhaps it was his baldness, but to his surprise a foot stretched out and sent the fleeing spy sprawling. Navarre caught him in an instant, and knocked the useless blaster from his hand. He tugged the quivering man to his feet.

"All right, who are you?"

He concluded the question with a slap. The man sput-

tered and turned his face away without replying, and Navarre hit him again.

This time the man cursed and tried to break away. "Did Kausirn send you?" Navarre demanded.

"I don't know anything. Leave me alone."

"You'd better start knowing," Navarre said. He drew his blaster. "I'll give you five to tell me why you were following us, and then I'll burn you right here. One. Two."

On the count of three Navarre suddenly felt hands go round his waist. Other hands grabbed at his wrist and immobilized the blaster. He was pulled away from his prisoner and the blaster wrenched from his hand.

"Let go of him, Earthman," a rough voice said. "What's going on here, anyway?"

"This man's an assassin," Navarre said. "He and a companion were sent here to kill me. Luckily my friend and I detected the plot, and—"

"That's enough," the burly Kariadi said. "You'd all better come with me."

Navarre turned and saw several other officers approaching. One bore the body of the dead assassin; the other two pinioned the furiously-struggling figure of Domrik Carso.

"Come along, now," the Kariadi said.

"A GOOD beginning to our quest," Carso said wryly. "A noble start!"

"Quiet," Navarre told him. "I think someone's coming."

They were in a dungeon somewhere in the heart of Kariad City, having been taken there from the spaceport. They sat in unbroken darkness. The surviving assassin had been taken to another cell.

But someone was coming. The door of the cell was opening, and a yellow beam of light was crawling diagonally across the concrete floor.

A slim figure entered the cell. Light glinted off a bald skull; it was an Earthman, then.

"Hello. Which of you is Navarre?"

"I am."

"I'm Helna Winstin, Earthman to the Court of Lord Marhaill, Oligocrat of Kariad. Sorry our men had to throw you in this dank cell, but they couldn't take any chances."

"We understand," Navarre said. He was still staring without believing. "No one told me that on Kariad the

Earthman to the Court was a woman."

Helna Winstin smiled. "The appointment was recent. My father held the post till last month."

"And you succeeded him?"

"After a brief struggle. Milord was much taken by a Vegan who had served as Astronomer Royal, but I am happy to say he did not choose to break the tradition."

Navarre stared at the slim female Earthman with sharp respect. Evidently there had been a fierce battle for power—a battle in which she had bested a Vegan. *That was more than I managed to do*, he thought.

"Come," she said. "The order for your release has been signed, and I find cells unpleasant. Shall we go to my rooms?"

"I don't see why not," Navarre replied. He glanced at Carso, who looked utterly thunderstruck. "Come along, Domrik."

They were led through the corridor to a liftshaft and upward; it was evident now that the dungeon had been in the depths of the royal palace itself. Helna Winstin's rooms were warm and inviting-looking; the decor was brighter than Navarre was accustomed to, but beneath its obvious

femininity lay a core of surprising toughness that seemed repeated in the girl herself. Considering the fact that her rooms, unlike his own on Jorus, were in the Palace itself, he reflected that there must be both advantages and disadvantages to being a woman.

"Now, then," she said, making herself comfortable and motioning for the men to do the same. "What have you two done to bring you to Kariad with a pair of assassins on your trail?"

"Has the man confessed?"

"He — ah — revealed all," Helna Winstin said. "He said he was sent here by one Kausirn, a Vegan attached to the Joran court, with orders to make away with you, specifically, and your companion if possible."

Navarre nodded. "I thought as much. Can I see the man?"

"Unfortunately, he died during interrogation. The job was clumsily handled."

She's tough, all right, Navarre thought in appreciation. She wore her head shaven, though it was not strictly required of female Earthmen; she wore a man's costume and did a man's job. In other ways, she was obviously feminine.

She leaned forward. "Now — may I ask what brings the

Earthman of Joroiran's court here to Kariad?"

"We travel on a mission from Joroiran," Navarre said. "For him, we seek the Chalice of Death."

A tapering eyebrow rose. "How interesting. I have heard of this Chalice. If it really exists, its value is fabulous. I wonder . . ."

She paused, and seemed to come to a decision. "With such a prize at stake, you may still be in danger," she said. "It was on *my* authority that you were released; Lord Marhaill knows nothing of this affair as yet—as far as I know. But even now, he is closeted with another man who disembarked from the liner from Jorus. Could he, perhaps, seek to beat you to your goal?"

The news was shocking, but Navarre forced himself to consider it calmly. The wily Kausirn would in all likelihood have more than one string to his bow. The situation looked critical—but would Helna Winstin continue to help them if she knew the truth?

Casting caution aside, he told her the whole story of their search for Earth in terse, clipped sentences. A strange look crossed her face when he had finished.

"Lord Marhaill is all too likely to side in with your friend Kausirn in this matter," she said. "If I help you, it may mean the loss of my post here—if not all our lives. But we Earthmen must stick together! What is our course?"

CHAPTER V

THE MAIN LIBRARY of Katriad City was a building fifty stories high and as many more deep below the ground—and even so, it could not begin to store the accumulated outpourings of a hundred thousand years of civilization on uncountable worlds.

"The open files go back only about five hundred years," Helna said, as she and Navarre entered the vast doorway, followed by Carso. "Everything else is stored away somewhere, and hardly anyone but antiquarians ever bothers with it. I imagine they ship twenty tons a month to various outworld libraries that can handle the early material."

Navarre frowned. "We may have some trouble, then."

An efficient-looking Dergonian met them at the door. "Good day, Sir Earthman," he said to Helna. Catching sight of Navarre and Carso, he

added, "And to you as well."

"We seek the main index," Helna said.

"Through that archway," said the librarian. "May I help you find what you seek?"

"We can manage by ourselves," Navarre said.

The main index occupied one enormous room from floor to ceiling. Navarre blinked dizzily at the immensity of it.

Coolly, Helna walked to a screen mounted on a table in the center of the index-room and punched out the letters E-A-R-T-H. She twisted a dial and the screen lit.

A card appeared in the screen. Navarre squinted to read its fine print:

EARTH, *legendary planet of Sol system (?) considered in myth as home of mankind*

SEE: D80009.1643, Smednal, *Creation Myths of the Galaxy*

D80009.1644 Snodgras, *Legends of the First Empire.*

Helna looked up doubtfully. "Shall I try the next card? Should I order these books?"

"I don't think there's any sense in it," said Navarre. "These works look fairly recent; they won't tell us any-

thing we don't know. We'll have to dig a little deeper. How do we get to the closed files?"

"I'll have to pull rank, I guess."

"Let's go, then. The real location of Earth is somewhere in these libraries, I'm sure; you just can't *lose* a world completely. If we go back far enough we're sure to find out where Earth was."

"Unless such information was carefully deleted when Earth fell," Carso pointed out.

Navarre shook his head. "Impossible. The library system is too vast, too decentralized. There's bound to have been a slip-up somewhere—and we can find it!"

"I hope so," the halfbreed said moodily.

TRACK 57 of the closed shelves was as cold and as desolate as a sunless planet, Navarre thought bleakly, as he and his companions stepped out of the dropshaft.

A Genobonian serpent-man came slithering toward them, and the chittering echo of his body sliding across the dark floor went shivering down the long dust-laden aisles. At the sight of the reptile Carso went for his blaster; Geno-

bonians entered this system but little, and they were fearsome sights to anyone not prepared for them.

"What's this worm coming from the books?" Carso asked. His voice rang loudly through the corridors.

"Peace, friends. I am but an old and dessicated librarian left to moulder in these forgotten stacks." The Genobonian chuckled. "A book-worm in truth, Earthman. But you are the first to visit here in a year or more; what do you seek?"

"Books on Earth," Navarre said. "Is there a catalog down here?"

"There is. But it shan't be needed; I'll show you what we have, if you'll take care with it."

The serpent slithered away, leaving a foot-wide track in the dust on the floor. Hesitantly the three followed. He led them down to the end of a corridor, through a passageway dank-smelling with the odor of dying books, and into an even mustier alcove.

"Here we are," the dry voice croaked. The Genobonian extended a skinny arm and yanked a book from a shelf. It was a book indeed, not a mere tape.

"Handle it with care, friends. The budget does not

allow for taping it, so we must preserve the original—until the day must come to clean this track. The library peels away its oldest layer like an onion shedding its skin; when the weight of new words is too great—*whisht!* and track 57 vanishes into the outworlds.”

“And with it you?”

“No,” said the serpent sadly. “I stay here, and endeavor to learn my way around the new volumes that descend from above. The time of changing is always sad.”

“Enough talk,” Navarre said. “Let’s look at this book.”

It was a history of the galaxy, arranged alphabetically. Navarre stared at the title page and felt a strange chill upon learning the book was more than thirty thousand years old.

Thirty thousand years. And yet Earth had fallen seventy millenia before this book was printed.

Navarre frowned. “This is but the volume from *Fenelon* to *Fenris*,” he said. “Where is Earth?”

“Earth is in an earlier volume,” the Genobonian said. “A volume which we no longer have in this library. But look, look at this book; perhaps it may give you some information.”

Navarre stared at the librarian for a long moment, then said, “Have you read all these books?”

“Many of them. There is little for me to do down here.”

“Very well, then. This is a question no Earthman has ever asked of an alien before—and if I suspect you’re lying to me, I’ll kill you here among your books.”

“Go ahead, Earthman,” the serpent said. He sounded unafraid.

Navarre moistened his lips. “Before we pursue our search further, tell me this: *did Earth ever exist?*”

There was silence, broken only by the echoes of Navarre’s voice whispering the harsh question over and over down the aisles. The serpent’s bright eyes glittered. “You do not know yourselves?”

“No, damn you,” Carso growled. “Else why do we come to you?”

“Strange,” the serpent mused. “But yes—yes, Earth existed. You may read of Earth, in this book I have given you. Soon they will send the book far away, and the truth of Earth will vanish from Kariad. But till then—yes, there was an Earth.”

“Where?”

"I knew once, but I have forgotten. It is in that volume, that earlier volume that was sent away. But look, look, Earthmen. Read there, under *Fendobar*."

Navarre opened the ancient History with trembling fingers and found his way through the graying pages to *Fendobar*. He read the faded text aloud:

FENDOBAR, The larger of a double-star system in Galaxy RGC18347, giving its name to the entire system. It is ringed by eight planets, only one inhabited and likewise known as Fendobar.

Because of its strategic location just eleven light-years from the Earth system, Fendobar was of extreme importance in the attack on Earth (which see). Starships were customarily refueled on Fendobar before . . .

Coordinates . . .

The inhabitants of . . .

"Most of it's illegible," Navarre said, looking up. "But there's enough here to prove that there was an Earth—and it was just eleven light-years from Fendobar."

"Wherever Fendobar was," Helna said.

THERE was silence in the vault for a moment. Navarre said, "There's no way you can recall the volume dealing with Earth, is there? This book gives coordinates and everything else. We could get there if—"

He stopped. The Genobonian looked at him slyly. "Do you plan to visit your homeland, Earthman?"

"Possibly. It is none of your business."

"As you wish. But the answer is no; the volume cannot be recalled. It was shipped out with others of its era last year, some time before the great eclipse, I believe—or was it the year before? Well, no matter; I remember not where the book was sent. We scatter our excess over every eager library within a thousand light-years."

"And there's no way you could remember?" Carso demanded. "Not even if we refreshed your memory?" The halfbreed's thick hands shot around the Genobonian's scaly neck, but Navarre slapped him away.

"He's probably telling the truth, Domrik. And even if he isn't, there's no way we can force him to find the volume for us."

Helna brightened suddenly.

"Navarre, if we could find this Fendobar, do you think it would help us in the quest for Earth?"

"It would bring us within eleven light-years—a mighty stride toward success. But how? The coordinates are illegible."

"The Oligocrat's scientists are shrewd about restoring faded books. They may help us, if they have not yet been warned not to," the girl said. She turned to the Genobonian. "Librarian, may we borrow this book a while?"

"Impossible! No book may be withdrawn from a closed track at any time!"

Helna scowled prettily. "But if they only rot here and eventually are shipped off at random, why make such to-do about them? Come; let us have this book."

"It is against all rules."

Helna shrugged and nodded to Navarre, who said, "Step on him, Carso. Here's a case where violence is justified."

The halfbreed advanced menacingly toward the Genobonian, who scuttled away. "Should I kill him?" Carso asked.

"Yes," said Helna instantly. "He's dangerous. He can report us to Marhaill."

"No," Navarre said. "The

serpent is a gentle old creature who lives by his rules and loves his books. Merely pull his fangs, Carso: tie him up and hide him behind a pile of books. He won't be found till tonight—or next year, perhaps. By which time, we'll be safely on our way."

He handed the book to Helna. "Let's go. We'll see what the Oligocrat's scientists can do with these faded pages."

THE LITTLE ship spiralled to a graceful landing on the large world.

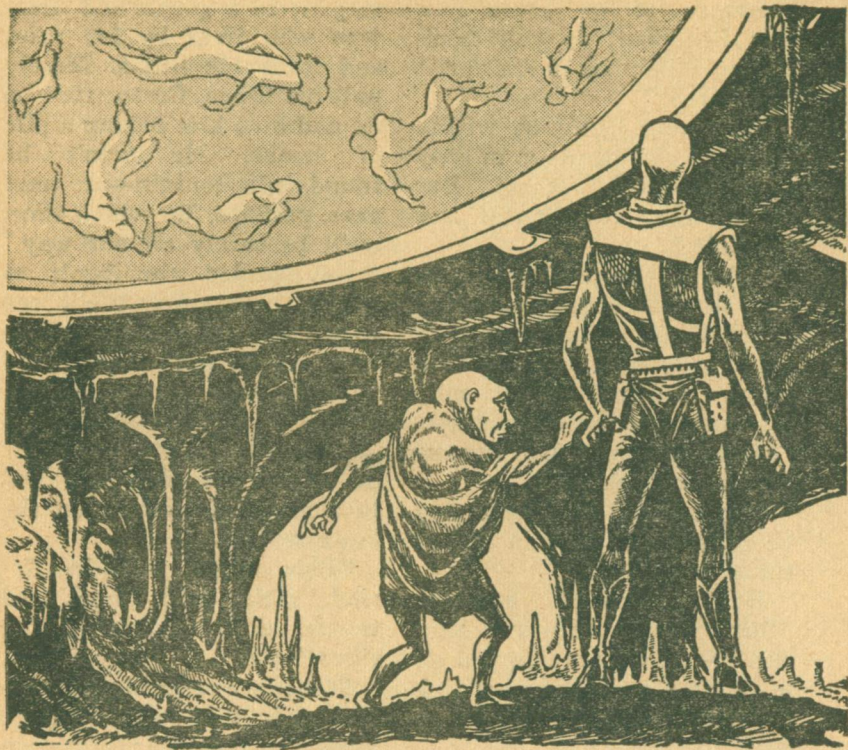
"This might well be Kariad," Helna said. "I am used to the double stars in the skies."

Directly overhead, the massive orb that was Fenobar burned brightly; farther away, a dim dab of light indicated the huge star's companion.

"Even this far away," Navarre said, "the universe remains constant."

"And somewhere eleven light-years ahead of us lies Earth," grunted Carso.

They had traveled more than a billion light-years, an immensity so vast that even Helna's personal cruiser, a warp-ship which was virtually instantaneous on stellar



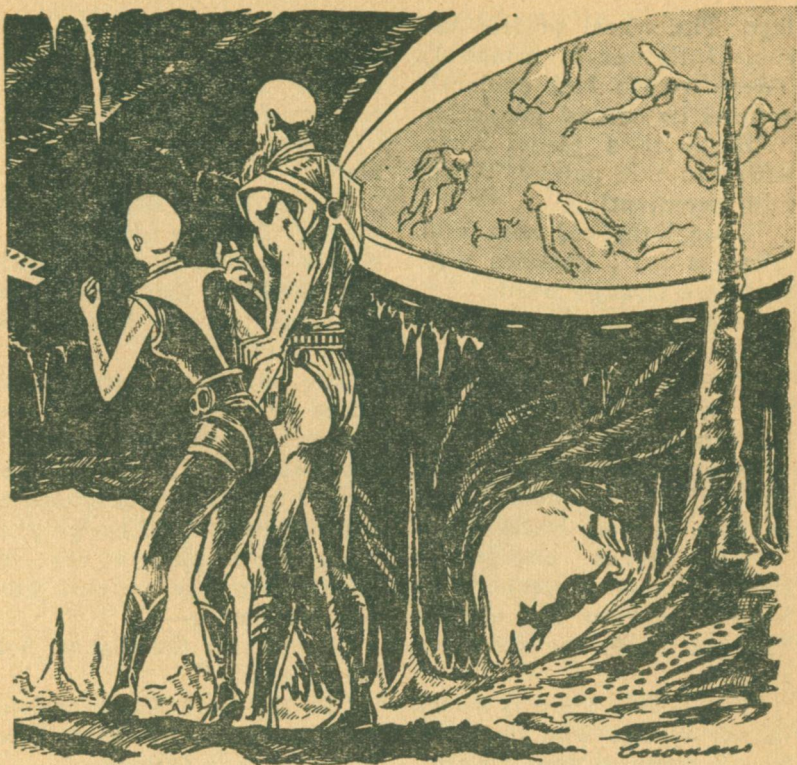
distances of a few thousand light-years, had required a solid week to make the journey.

And now, where were they? Fenobar—a world left far behind by the universe, a world orbiting a bright star in a galaxy known only as RGC-18347. A world eleven light-years from Earth.

The Oligocrat's scientists had restored the missing co-

ordinates as Helna had anticipated. Helna had packed a few things, and the three had said an abrupt good-bye to Kariad. They were none too soon; Marhall's police had been stopping all strangers on Kariad and questioning them. Luck had been with them and they had gotten to the cruiser safely.

And they had swept out into space, into the subwarp



and across the tideless sea of a billion light-years. They were driving back, back into humanity's past, into Galaxy RGC18347—the obscure galaxy from which mankind had sprung.

They had narrowed the field. Navarre had never thought they would get this far. Pursuit was inevitable, and he was expecting signs of it at any moment.

"We seek Earth, friend," Navarre told the aged chieftain who came out supported by two young children to greet the arriving ship.

"Earth? Earth? What be this?"

The old man's accents were strange and barely understandable. Navarre looked around; he saw primitive huts, a smoking fire, naked babes uneasily testing their

legs. The wheel of life had come full; one of mankind's oldest worlds had evidently entered its second youth.

"Earth is a planet somewhere in this galaxy," Carso said impatiently.

"I see," the old man said. "Planets . . . galaxies . . . these are strange words."

Navarre fumed. "This is Fenobar, isn't it?"

"Fenobar? The name of this world is Mundahl. I know no Fenobar."

Carso looked worried. "You don't think we made some mistake, do you, Hallam?"

"No. Names change in thirty thousand years." He leaned close to the oldster. "Do you study the stars, old man?"

"Not I. But there is a man in our village who does. He knows many strange things."

"Take us to him," Navarre said.

The astronomer was a withered old man who might have been the twin of the chieftain. The Earthmen entered his hut, and were surprised to see shelves of books, tapes, and an efficient-looking telescope.

"Yes?"

"Bremoir, these people search for Earth. Know you the place?"

The astronomer frowned.

"The name sounds familiar, but—let me search my charts." He unrolled a thin, terribly fragile-looking sheet of paper covered with tiny marks.

"Earth is the name of the planet," Navarre said. "It revolves around a sun called Sol. We know that the system is some eleven light-years from here."

The wrinkled astronomer pored over his charts, frowning and scratching his leathery neck. After a while he looked up. "There is indeed a sun-system at the distance you give. Nine planets revolve about a small yellow sun. But—those names—?"

"Earth was the planet. Sol was the sun."

"Earth? Sol? There are no such names on my charts. The star's name is Dubihsar."

"And the third planet?"

"Velidoon."

Dubihsar. Velidoon. In thirty thousand years, names change.

But could Earth forget its own name—so soon?

CHAPTER VI

THERE WAS a yellow sun ahead. Navarre stared at it hungrily through the fore viewplate, letting its brightness burn into his eyes.

"There it is," he said. "Dubihsar. Sol."

"And the planets?" Carso asked.

"There are nine." He peered at the crumbling book the astronomer had given him, after long hours of search and thought. The book with the old names. "Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Venus, Mercury. And *Earth*."

"Earth," Helna said. "Soon we'll be on Earth."

Navarre frowned broodingly. "I'm not sure I actually want to land, now that we've found it. I know what Earth's going to be like: Fendobar. It's awful when a world forgets its name."

"Fendobar is called Procyon on these charts," Carso commented.

"It was the Earth name for it. But now all are forgotten—Procyon, Fendobar, Earth. These planets have new names; they have forgotten their past. And we'll be coming down out of that past. I don't like it."

"Nonsense, Hallam." Carso was jovial. "Earth is Earth, whether its people know it or not. We've come this far; let's land, at least, before turning back. Who knows—we may even find the Chalice!"

"The Chalice," Navarre re-

peated quietly. "I had almost forgotten the Chalice. Yes. Perhaps we'll find the Chalice." Chuckling, he said, "Poor Joroiran will never forgive me if I return without it."

NINE planets. One spun in an eccentric orbit billions of miles from the small yellow star; three others were giant worlds, unlivable; a fifth, ringed with cosmic debris, was not yet solidified. A sixth was virtually lost in the blazing heat of the sun.

There were three other worlds—according to the book, Mars, Earth, Venus. The small craft fixed its sights on the green world.

Navarre was first from the ship; he sprang down the catwalk and stood in the bright, warm sunlight, feet planted firmly in sprouting green shoots nudging up from brown soil. Carso and Helna followed a moment later.

"Earth," Navarre said. "We're probably the first from the galactic worlds to set foot here in thousands of years." He squinted off into the thicket of trees that ringed them. Creatures were appearing.

They looked like men—

dwarfed, shrunken, twisted little men. They stood about four and a half feet tall, their feet bare, their middles swathed in hides. Yet in their faces could be seen the unmistakable light of intelligence.

"Behold our cousins," Navarre murmured. "While we in the stars scrupulously kept our genes intact, they have become *this*."

The little men filed toward them unafraid, and grouped themselves around the trio and their ship. "Where be you from, strangers?" asked a flaxen-haired dwarf, evidently the leader.

"We are from the stars," Carso said. "From the world of Jorus, he and I, and the girl from Kariad. But this is our homeland. Our remote ancestors were born here on Earth."

"Earth? You mistake, strangers. This world be Velidoon, and we be its people. You look naught like us, unless ye be in enchantment."

"No enchantment," Navarre said. "Our fathers lived on—Velidoon—when it was called Earth, many thousands of years past."

How can I tell them that we once ruled the universe? Navarre wondered. *How can it be that these dwarfs are the sons of Earth?*

The flaxen-haired little man grinned and said, "What would you do on Velidoon, then?"

"We came merely to visit. We wished to see the world of our long-gone ancestors."

"Strange, to cross the sky merely to see a world. But come; let us take you to the village."

"IN A MERE hundred thousand years," Helna murmured, as they walked through the forest's dark glades. "From rulers of the universe to scrubby little dwarfs living in thatched huts."

"And they don't even remember their planet's name," Carso added.

"Not surprising," said Navarre. "Don't forget that most of Earth's best men were killed defending the planet, and the rest—our ancestors—were scattered all over the universe. Evidently the conquerors left just the dregs on Earth itself, and this is what they've become."

They turned past a clear brook and emerged into an open dell, in which a group of huts not unlike those on Fendobar could be seen.

The yellow sun shone brightly and warmly; overhead, colorful birds sang, and

the forest looked fertile and young.

"This is a pleasant world," Helna said.

"Yes. It has none of the strain and stress of our system. Possibly it's best to live on a forgotten planet."

"Look," Carso said. "Someone important is coming."

A procession advanced toward them, led by the little group who had found them in the forest. A wrinkled gray-beard, more twisted and bent than the rest, strode gravely toward them.

"You be the men from the stars?"

"I am Hallam Navarre, and these are Helna Winstin and Domrik Carso. We trace our ancestry from this world, many thousands of years ago."

"Hmm. Could be. I'm Gluihn, in charge of this tribe." Gluihn stepped back and scrutinized the trio. "It might well be," he said, studying them. "Yes, could indeed. You say your remote fathers lived here?"

"When the planet was called Earth, and ruled all the worlds of the skies."

"I know nothing of that. But you look much like the Sleepers, and perhaps you be of that breed. They have lain here many a year themselves."

"What sleepers?" Navarre asked.

The old man shrugged. "They look to be of your size, though they lie down and are not easy to see behind their cloudy fluid. But they have slept for ages untold, and perhaps—"

Gluihn's voice trailed off. Navarre exchanged a sharp glance with his companions. "Tell us about these Sleepers," Carso growled threateningly.

Now the old man seemed frightened. "I know nothing more. Boys, playing, stumbled over them not long ago, buried in their place of rest. We think they be alive."

"Can you take us there?"

"I suppose so," Gluihn sighed. He gestured to the flaxen-haired one. "Llean, take these three to look at the Sleepers."

"**H**ERE we are," the dwarf said.

A stubby hill jutted up from the green-carpeted plain before them, and Navarre saw that a great rock had been rolled to one side, baring a cave-mouth.

"Will we need lights?"

"No," said Llean. "It is lit inside. Go ahead in—I'll wait here. I care little to see what

lies in there a second time."

Helna touched Navarre's arm. "Should we trust him?"

"Not completely. Domrik, stay here with this Llean, and watch over him. Should you hear us cry out—come to us, and bring him with you."

Carso grinned. "Right."

Navarre took Helna's hand and hesitantly they stepped within the cave mouth. It was like entering the gateway to some other world.

The cave walls were bright with some form of electroluminescence, glowing lam-bently without any visible light-source. The path of the light continued straight for some twenty yards, then snaked away at a sharp angle beyond which nothing was visible.

There were small footprints in the soft sand covering the floor of the cave; evidently they had been made by the boys of the tribe who had discovered this place.

Navarre and Helna proceeded to the bend in the corridor, and turned. A metal plaque of some sort was the first object their eyes met.

"Can you read it?" she asked.

"It's in ancient language—no, it isn't at all. It's Galactic—but an archaic form." He blew away the dust and let

his eyes skim the inscription. He whistled.

"What does it say?"

"Listen: *Within this crypt lie ten thousand men and women, placed here to sleep in the year 11423, the two thousandth year of Earth's galactic supremacy and the last year of that supremacy. Each of the ten thousand is a volunteer. Each has been chosen from the group of more than ten million volunteers for this project on a basis of physical condition, genetic background, intelligence, and adaptability to a varying environment.*

"Earth's empire has fallen, and within weeks Earth herself will go under. But, regardless of what fate befalls us, the ten thousand sealed in this crypt will slumber on into the years to come, until such time as it will be possible for them to be awakened.

"To the finder of this crypt: the chambers may be opened simply by pulling the lever at the left of each sleeper. None of the crypts will open before ten thousand years have elapsed. The sleepers will lie here in this tunnel until the time for their release, and then will come spilling out as wine from a chalice, to restore the ways

of doomed Earth and bring glory to the sons of tomorrow."

NAVARRÉ and Helna remained frozen for an instant or two after he had read the final words. In a hushed whisper he said, "Do you know what this is?"

She nodded. "'As wine from a chalice—'"

"Beneath all the legends, beneath the shroud of myth—there was a Chalice," Navarre said fiercely. "A Chalice holding immortal life—sleepers who would sleep for all eternity if no one woke them. And when they were awakened—eternal life for doomed Earth, death for her enemies!"

"Shall we wake them now?" Helna asked.

"Let's get Carso. Let him be with us."

The halfbreed responded to Navarre's call and appeared, dragging the protesting Llean with him.

"Let the dwarf go," Navarre said. "Then read this plaque."

Carso released the squealing Llean, who promptly dashed for freedom. The halfbreed read the plaque, then turned gravely to Navarre.

"It seems we've found the Chalice after all!"

"It seems that way." Navarre led the way and they penetrated deeper into the crypt. After about a hundred yards he stopped.

"Look."

A wall had been cut in the side of the cave and a sheet of some massively thick plastic inserted as a window. And behind the window, floating easily in a cloudy solution of some gray-blue liquid, was a sleeping woman. Her eyes were closed, but her breasts rose and fell in a slow, even rhythm. Her hair was long and flowing; otherwise, she was similar to any of the three.

A lever of some gleaming metal projected about half a foot from the wall near her head. Carso reached for it, fingering the smooth metal. "Should we wake her up?"

"Not yet. There are more down this way."

The next chamber was that of a man, strong and powerful, his muscles swelling along his relaxed arms and his heavy thighs. Beyond him, another woman; then another man, stiff and determined-looking even in sleep.

"It goes on for miles," Helna murmured. "Ten thousand of them."

"What an army!" Navarre said. He stared down the long bright corridor as if peering ahead into the years to come. "A legacy from our ancestors: the Chalice holds life indeed. Ten thousand Earthmen ready to spring to life." His eyes brightened. "They could be the nucleus of the Second Galactic Empire."

"A bold idea," Carso said. "But a good one."

"We could begin with Earth itself," Helna said. "Leave a few hundred couples here to repopulate the planet with warriors. We could conquer Kariad, Jorus—and that would be just the beginning!"

"We would have the experience of old to draw upon," said Navarre. "The Empire

would be built painfully, slowly, instead of in a riotous mushroom of expansion." He grinned broadly. "Domrik, Joroiran would be proud of us! He sent us to find the Chalice—and we've succeeded."

"He'll be surprised when he finds out what was in the Chalice, though!"

Navarre shut his eyes for a moment, let his imagination dwell on a galaxy once more bright with an Empire of Earth, of cities again thronging with his people after millenia of obscurity.

Never again, he promised, would Earth be forgotten.

Smiling, he reached for the lever that would free the first of Earth's sleeping legion.



DON'T FORGET: MAY 16!

That's the date the next issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES goes on sale—and with short novels by Jorgenson, Ellison, and Scortia, it will be an issue you literally can't afford to miss. But on second thought, why strain your memory? There's a much better way—buy a subscription! Just send your check or money order (made out to Royal Publications, Inc.) for \$3.50—or \$4.50 if you live outside the United States, its territories and possessions, or Canada—to Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y. You'll get the next 12 issues, and they'll all arrive well in advance of the newsstand date. Deal?

*The plants flew
and had a thirst that
made them deadly!*

moths

by Charles L. Fontenay

ONLY the broad wing surfaces of the ground-to-space rocket prevented its sinking from sight in the steaming mud of Venus. It lay half buried, like a crippled bird, in the eerie red glow that filled the entire atmosphere without casting any real light on the flat mud plain.

From the roiling, red-lit clouds that hung low over the whole sky, thousands of dark blots dropped like falling leaves. Those that came close to the wrecked rocket veered to converge on it. They struck its metal sides flat, with a dry flapping sound, and clung tenaciously.

Inside the rocket's thick hull, Jonner and Rikk hauled Meegl, the astrogator, by his heels from the wreckage of the radio equipment, where the crash had plunged him.

He blinked up at them dazedly as Jonner, captain of the spaceship *Adonis*, dabbed iodine at the cuts on his swarthy face.

"By Saturn, Meegl, did you have to dive into the radio?" asked Jonner indignantly after he assured himself the broken safety belt had saved Meegl from serious injury. "How do we call Venusberg now?"

"We don't," said Rikk, the ground-space rocket's pilot. He was standing over the smashed equipment. "It looks like Humpty Dumpty after the fall."

"You mean we're not at Venusberg? Where are we?" demanded Loid Wils. He was a pudgy, red-faced businessman, one of two passengers the *Adonis* had brought from Earth to Venus.

A SPECIAL BONUS SHORT STORY

"I think I know where we are," said Rikk, turning back to them. "I'm sure of the direction, because we were on course. We're somewhere between ten and twenty miles away from the city."

"Confound it, what sort of piloting is that?" exclaimed Wils.

Meegl was getting to his feet, helped by Jonner and Nella Gregry, the fifth person in the rocket's cramped confines. Nella was the other passenger, serving as the *Adonis'* doctor-psychologist—an innovation of which the veteran Jonner did not particularly approve, but now required by the Space Control Commission for all ships carrying passengers. The presence of Loid Wils—and Nella herself, for that matter—on this Earth-Venus run had made blonde, lovely Nella a temporary crew member.

"What happened, Rikk?" asked Jonner, turning to the pilot. En route from the now orbiting *Adonis* to the surface of Venus, the ground-to-space rocket had plunged suddenly to grief, and there had been no time for questions.

"Ailerons went haywire," Rikk explained. "She just dived. We're lucky we didn't hit directly nose-first and end up *under* this mud."

"Well, what do we do now? Can you take her up again?"

Rikk went to the control seat and peered out the thick windshield of the craft. He fiddled with the controls, swearing under his breath. After a moment, the windshield wipers began working, slowly and jerkily, pushing aside part of the leathery, greenish thing that covered most of the glass.

The searchlights were under the wings, buried in the mud, but Rikk held a flashlight against the heavy plastiglass, moving its beam up and down outside. The thing that clung to them shifted at once, flopping over the windshield and smothering the wipers this time. But Rikk had found out what he needed to know.

"Can't risk it," he said, switching off the flashlight and swinging around in the control chair to face the others. "She's headed down at an angle and the leading edges of the wings are under the mud. The rockets would just drive us deeper."

"How about the searchlights?" suggested Jonner. "If we could dig them out, could we signal with them?"

"They could be seen at that distance," answered Rikk slowly. "The city blacks out

at night because of the moths. But, in this misty air, I think they'd be too dim to attract attention unless the people there knew we were down. About the only thing we'd attract with them at twenty miles would be every moth in the country—which is just what we don't want."

"I guess we do one of two things, then," said Meegl, rubbing his lacerated face gingerly. "We walk to Venusberg, or we wait for them to find us."

"Looks that way," agreed Jonner. "Which is it, Rikk?"

Rikk stared thoughtfully at the windshield. Thick veins could be seen faintly in the green thing beyond the glass.

"I don't like either one," he said. "But waiting for rescue is out, anyhow, I'm afraid. We never did get a radio message through all the static in those clouds, and Venusberg won't know we've left the *Adonis* until they clear and Qoqol can radio in."

"Qoqol doesn't know how lucky he is," said Jonner, thinking enviously of the Martian engineer relaxing in the comparatively spacious sphere of the spaceship. "Looks like we walk, then."

"The problem there," said Rikk slowly, "is those things."

He gestured toward the windshield.

"What are they?" asked Nella in an awed voice.

"Venus moths," he said. "If it were daytime, we wouldn't have to worry about them, because they stay above the clouds. But at night they come below for water."

"Water?" repeated Nella.

Rikk grinned wryly.

"I shouldn't have to remind you, Doctor, that the human body is more than eighty per cent water," he said. "That's a bigger percentage than you'll find in that mud out there, and those things work on a percentage basis."

"I don't see why everyone here is so stupid," exclaimed Wils, thrusting himself forward. "The whole thing's very simple. We just wait here until daylight. Then we walk to Venusberg."

Rikk shook his head.

"We can't wait," he said. "This bus doesn't carry emergency food supplies, and the water supply won't last more than twenty-four hours for all five of us. You don't drink untreated water on Venus unless you want to die real quick."

"I should think that would be ample," said Wils impatiently.

Rikk looked at the pudgy

man with a puzzled expression for a moment. Then he understood.

"You're not on Earth or Mars now, friend," he said. "The night here is twenty Earth-days long, and it's just started. Let's just all pray for rain."

Jonner's eyebrows lifted.

"When it rains," explained Rikk, "those moths fly, because they can get all the water they want in the air. The usual early evening rain is over now, but we can hope—and pray—for a good, all-night rain, because we've got a long walk ahead of us."

MEEGL stepped down from the control chair and moved back toward the rear of the rocket. The other four were asleep in the cushioned chairs.

Meegl passed Jonner, his graying head bowed forward, and Wils, snoring loudly. He bent over Nella and kissed her softly on the lips. She murmured and moved, then opened her eyes.

"Hello, darling," she whispered.

"Fine honeymoon I'm giving you, *bonita*," he grumbled.

"Honeymoons come after marriage, darling. There'll be

both when we get to Venusberg."

"If we get there. Help me wake the others, Nella. It's raining."

Sleepily, the five stirred around, getting awkwardly into their venusuits—tough, transparent plastic coveralls with broad flat pads like oversized snowshoes attached to the feet. Their fishbowl helmets were fitted with airtight diaphragms so their wearers could speak to each other.

Rikk looked at the control board.

"A hundred and fifty degrees outside," he said. "It's a cool night. Set the thermostats on your venusuits to seventy degrees, everybody."

He broke open a rack, handed each of them a flashlight and took out two heat-guns.

"I wish we had more of these," he said, his helmet amplifier booming out in the close confines of the cabin. "Who's going to bring up the rear?"

"You're the boss here," said Jonner. "You say it."

"Right. Meegl, then." Rikk handed one of the weapons to the astrogator, and strapped the other to his own venusuit. "We'll lead, Jonner."

They filed out through the airlock, one by one, and huddled in the mud. It was rain-

ing hard. There was no sign now of the flapping things.

With his flashlight, Rikk indicated the direction of Venusberg, a few degrees off the wrecked rocket's starboard bow, and they struck out. Rikk and Jonner took the lead, with Loid Wils close behind. Nella and Meegl brought up the rear.

The rain poured down around them, beating on their helmets with a muted mutter. Despite the heavy cloud cover, the night was not pitch dark. A faint glow spread over the sky from distant volcanoes—Venus was covered with them—and from diffusion of the vanished sun's light. The glow was not bright enough, however, to reveal the terrain.

As far as Jonner could see, there was no difference in this land and the desert highlands, except that this was mud instead of sand. There were no trees, no plants, no animals, just a bare sea of mud.

"How do these moths live?" asked Jonner of Rikk. "The last time I was on Venus, they had decided no life was possible here because there isn't any free oxygen."

He could hear Rikk's chuckle through the amplifiers.

"They decided no water

was possible, before the first expedition landed, too," Rikk answered. "Then they found it was in the lower fifteen per cent of the atmosphere, just like it is on Earth, below the oxide smoke clouds. You'll realize there's life here, too, if you step into one of the giant yeast colonies in this mud."

"I've seen the moths. They're alive. But how, without oxygen?"

"They're plants, Jonner. They're plants that have developed free flight so they can go above the clouds and get sunlight in the daytime. At night they come down for water and food from the mud. They're dangerous as hell, too."

"Even with venusuits?"

"It looks like you'll find out," said Rikk, his voice suddenly harsh. "The rain's stopping!"

The patter on their plastic suits was, indeed, slowing down. Rikk stopped and turned to those behind him.

"Everybody spread out, quick!" he shouted. "Try to find a pool of free water—anything bigger than a puddle. Hurry!"

Five flashlights scattered, like fireflies, slowly, in five different directions.

"You're the boss here,

Rikk," called Jonner across the fifty feet of mud that separated them, "but if we're in danger, shouldn't we head back to the rocket?"

"Couldn't make it," Rikk shouted back. "We're half a mile away by now, and these moths drop like hawks. We've got to find water."

The rain stopped. The atmosphere seemed to clear at once, but it was not the open sky above them, only the red-lit clouds.

"Flashlights out!" bawled Rikk. "I'll keep yelling and everybody come in to me. If you run across water, holler."

The lights winked out. In the darkness, Jonner made his way toward Rikk, who was shouting, "Here! Over here!" over and over again. After a few moments the pilot, tiring of the repeated words, broke into a bawdy space song that brought a grin to Jonner's lips.

Jonner reached Rikk first.

"I think we're gone ducks," rumbled Rikk, pausing between verses. "But if we'll get together we can make a show with the heat-guns."

He resumed his singing:

*"Martian Mabel was a grand
old gal,*

*Had a robot husband and
a spaceman pal . . ."*

Meegl came up to them.

"Nella? Is Nella here yet?" he asked anxiously.

"She'll be here," said Jonner. "Both of the others should be close by now."

"Nella!" shouted Meegl.

The sky suddenly darkened above them. A tremendous flat thing landed with a flop right in front of them. Rikk burned it with the heat-gun, never pausing in his singing.

Other moths were hitting the ground near them now, and they could see the hordes of them descending against the glowing clouds.

"Nella!" cried Meegl frantically. He turned to right and left, peering into the darkness.

"She'll be here, Meegl!" shouted Jonner, grasping him by the shoulder. "You can't find her!"

A scream like the cry of an agonized animal over-rode Rikk's song, and stopped it. The shrill voice could not have been more than thirty feet from the three men. It rose, wailing, and was suddenly choked off.

Jonner couldn't tell if the screaming voice was that of a man or a woman.

"One down," said Rikk regretfully, and burst into song again.

"Nella!" cried Meegl in

anguish. He struggled to break free of Jonner's restraining hold.

Jonner heard the splash, near them, as Rikk ended a verse. Rikk evidently heard it too. There was a moment of dead silence.

"Water! Over here!" came an excited cry from the darkness.

Nella or Wils? Jonner still couldn't tell.

THE THREE stumbled to the pool, guided by shouts. It was about twenty feet from the spot where they had been standing. Climbing out of it when they got there was a muddy, suited figure.

As they approached, Jonner at last recognized the voice. Meegl recognized it simultaneously.

"Nella!" cried Meegl, running to her. "*Gracias a Dios! Chiquita*, I was afraid . . ."

"Then it was Wils the moth got," said Rikk. "It's too bad the little guy had to die that way."

"Shouldn't we try to find him?" suggested Jonner. "He may not be dead."

"He's dead, all right," said Rikk. "You wouldn't like to look at him, either. He'll be all shriveled up—not a drop of water left in him. No,

they'll just have to look for his body from Venusberg, when daylight comes."

"Now what?" asked Meegl. He was sitting in the mud, his arm around Nella's shoulders.

"We stay here and pray for more rain," said Rikk. "As long as we're beside a good-sized pool, the moths will hit the pool instead of us. It's a hundred percent water. It's like standing close to a tree, but not under it, to keep from being struck by lightning—the tree draws the lightning."

As if to emphasize his words, one of the moths struck the water's surface near them with a muffled splash. Rikk killed it with a burst from his gun.

"We'll have to shoot them as they come down," he said. "If we don't, the first couple of dozen will have that pond dried up."

"Do you mean we're pinned here by this mudhole until it rains again?" demanded Nella.

"I'm afraid so," said Rikk, "if we don't want to end up like Wils did."

"What do you do to get rid of moths that are really plants?" demanded Jonner morosely. "Spray them with weed killer?"

"What would you do if they

were insects?" countered Rikk. "Spray them with insecticide? They're just too big and too many to handle, that's all."

The four of them sat on the bank of the pool, waiting. Every few minutes a moth splashed into the water from above them. Meegl and Rikk took turns shooting the creatures as they fell.

Once Rikk shone his flashlight beam briefly across the pond. It was choked with the bodies of the green flying creatures, some of them with a fifteen-foot wingspread.

Nella went to sleep, her head on Meegl's shoulder. Jonner felt himself dozing.

"*Por Dios!*" exclaimed Meegl softly. "We have no luck. The sky is clearing."

Jonner looked up. It was true. Stars shone faintly through the mist above them. The surface of Venus was getting one of its rare looks at the heavens.

"That kills the rain for a while," said Rikk phlegmatically. "Might as well get some sleep if you can, folks. I'll keep watch."

"The thing that blasts me," said Jonner, "is that that bright star up there is probably the *Adonis* swinging over us in orbit."

"That's Sirius," retorted

Meegl gruffly. "The ship's on the other side of Venus right now."

The ground trembled beneath them. It shook again, harder. Nella awoke with a start. A distant, rumbling roar sounded in their ears. A smoky pall drifted across the newly-revealed heavens, replacing the clouds.

Brilliant light flared all around them as a new volcano exploded into being not more than three miles away. The ear-splitting thunder of the blast, arriving late, almost deafened them. The whole sky was lit with the flames.

"Now's our chance!" shouted Rikk, getting to his feet. "The moths will head for that. Let's get back to the rocket!"

"Why not go on to Venusberg?" objected Jonner. "If the volcano attracts the moths, it'll draw them for miles."

"These new eruptions never last more than an hour," said Rikk. "Sometimes they're gone in a few minutes. I hate to go back, but that's our only chance."

The flashlights were no longer necessary. In the fiery light from the eruption, ashes beginning to fall all around them, the four headed back toward the wrecked rocket as fast as they could waddle on the flat pads of their venusuits.

THE FOUR of them stood together at the windshield of the ground-to-space rocket and looked out. They watched the flames of the volcano flicker and die, leaving the mud-plains of Venus once more lit only by the reflection from the cloud cover.

"We have a fine kettle of guppies, *compadres*," said Meegl gloomily. "If we stay here, we die of thirst. If we leave, we get sucked dry by these animated plantain leaves."

The moths flew fast. Already they were beginning to flop against the sides of the rocket.

"That's Venus for you," said Rikk. "You live hard, you die easy."

"I don't suppose," said Jonner thoughtfully, "that we could hold them off long enough to do some work outside?"

"How long did you plan to be out?" asked Rikk.

"I don't know. It's just an idea I want to try."

"You might live twenty minutes out there. You might die as you stepped out the airlock. I wouldn't risk it, Jonner."

"We'll have to wait for another rain, then." Without realizing it, Jonner was as-

suming command. "How tall a radio aerial do you have on this bucket, Rikk?"

"She could be run up to seventy-five feet. Cities are far apart on Venus and we have to fly low to get under the clouds sometimes. But the radio's busted, Jonner."

"Is it a pretty sturdy affair?"

"The aerial?" Rikk smiled. "It'll almost hold you up. These things fly fast. It has to be sturdy."

"Good. We'll set up two-hour watches and get some sleep. The general directive to everybody on watch is, as soon as it starts to rain, sound the alarm."

Jonner himself took the first watch. Rikk followed him, then Nella.

Gradually the rift in the clouds closed. The clouds lowered over the rocket, the skies darkened.

At last, a gentle rain began to fall. Nella woke the others.

"A shower," said Rikk, looking out the windshield as he struggled into his venusuit. "Good for thirty minutes, I'd say."

"I hope that's long enough," said Jonner. "Get pliers and screwdrivers, Rikk. I hope you have spades in this thing."

"One. We don't normally

figure on getting stuck in the mud."

"One will have to do, then. I hope one man can work fast enough to hold this mud back."

Leaving Nella inside, the three men went out again in their suits. Jonner led them to the leading edge of the right wing and, growling orders, seized the spade and began to dig. In ten minutes, he had uncovered one of the rocket's huge searchlights. Working quickly while Jonner shoveled mud away from them, Meegl and Rikk removed it from its brackets, clipping its connecting wires. Then they moved over to the left wing.

It was still raining, but not as hard, when the trio climbed on top of the rocket and attached the searchlights to the aerial, pointing upward. They connected them. Then they went back in through the airlock.

"Get your suit on, Nella," Jonner ordered. "Rikk, run up the aerial to full extension."

They complied. Jonner passed out the flashlights and handed one heat-gun to Rikk, retaining the other.

"All right," he said. "We're off to Venusberg."

"Jonner, are you crazy?" demanded Rikk. "That rain

won't last more than ten minutes longer."

"Long enough to get us away from the rocket," Jonner said calmly. "This is where every moth in the countryside is going to be as long as the searchlights burn. Phototropism in either plants or insects is not a matter of will, but a physiological compulsion. For these Venus moths, light must be a stronger attraction than that of food and water, to make them go upstairs in the daytime and be attracted to volcanic fire."

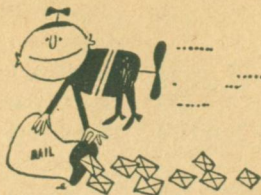
"Bonita, it looks like we'll get a honeymoon instead of a funeral after all!" exclaimed Meegl, hugging Nella joyfully.

They went out through the airlock. They were about a hundred feet away from the rocket when the light rain slackened.

Jonner gestured behind them. The beams of the twin searchlights shot up into the sky like beacons, joining to make a circle on the low-hanging clouds.

As the rain stopped, the black blots were dropping again from the skies. But from all directions they were converging on the wrecked rocket, drawn by the glare of the searchlights—like moths.





THE READERS' SPACE

WHAT makes a science-fiction addict? That's only one of the questions up for discussion here. In these pages, you can criticize SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, suggest new ideas, or sound off on any science-fictional topic that interests you. Send your letters to the Editor, Royal Publications, 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y.

•

I am in a pickle. I wrote a letter to Bill Gassaway, but got it back marked unknown. So perhaps you can help me out by printing this letter to him.

Calling Bill Gassaway!
Calling Bill Gassaway!

I wrote a letter to you hoping that I might be instrumental in helping you find an answer to the question that is bothering you. But, seeing that I got the letter back marked unknown, I guess the

magazine will have to be my means of reaching you if they are kind enough to print this for me.

You asked, "What makes a science-fiction addict?" Well, here is my answer to your question.

I think if you could make a survey of all the "addicts" I think you would find that 99 and nine-tenths of them would like to go out into space.

They look at the stars at night and wish that they could go out there and see the other worlds out there. They want to see if there are other races out there and if so, what they look like, how they live, what their technology is like, etc.

They would like to go out into space and keep going on and on until they die, visiting new worlds, seeing new races.

They want to know what the future is like. In fact most of them would like to live for

a long time and see that future for themselves.

Most of them would give their right arms just to see the stars from beyond Earth's atmosphere.

None of these things are possible at the present time so what's the next best thing? Why the stories between the covers of the science-fiction magazines, of course!

I wonder how many readers disagree with this?

Anyway, this is the way I feel and I get every issue of every magazine on the market. Yep, you guessed it. I'm one of your "addicts."

Thanks, Mr. Shaw, for printing this. And if you don't print it—well, thanks anyway for a swell magazine.—Mrs. Richard Leek, Oak Ridge, N. J.

I've been an s-f fan for only a year. However, I consider myself a pretty good expert on judging mags. I read almost every one of them and I think SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES and INFINITY are the best.

Because of some unknown reason, I missed the first issue of S-F ADVENTURES. I obtained your second issue today. After I started reading it, I couldn't stop! It was

great! The stories were extremely well written, the illustrations were good, and the departments were very interesting.

The stories in the February '57 issue were hard to rate. However, "Assassin" is best because of the ending. "Two Worlds in Peril" and "Slaves of the Star Giants" were both very good.

I consider your two mags, SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES and INFINITY, the best in the field.—Daniel Pittinsky, 527 Hinsdale St., Brooklyn 7, N. Y.

My!

"Two Worlds in Peril" was utterly splendid—believe me.

I enjoy James Blish for his challenging new ideas and the detailed accuracy of his scientific concepts, as you said. Phil Barnhart is almost the same—if not his superior.

"Slaves of the Star Giants" was the best novel for February. "Assassin" was almost as good.

How about getting a really, sure enough, long novel from Charles V. De Vet? (*Darned good idea; we'll work on it.*—Ed.) Then I can sit back and relax. Most of my worries in science fiction are

nearly over now.—James W. Ayers, 609 First Street, Attalla, Ala.

●

Yes, I'm another of those science-fiction addicts—to use reader Bill Gassaway's word for it. Definitely prefer the word “fan,” myself—it's acquired a kind of tradition behind it that makes it mean a great deal to me.

I have definite and strong opinions on what makes a fan. I'm probably going to get laughed at for them, but I've got to express them anyway. In fact, according to my theory, expressing my opinions is what makes me a fan!

I think fans are the citizens of the future! No, I don't mean they're supermen or “Slans” or anything like that. They may or may not be superior to the average man. You can't prove it either way—not by me, at least.

But look at the activities fans indulge in. Writing to each other, forming clubs, publishing fanzines, putting on conventions, etc. All these things prove the fan's basic desire to help bring about a better world by *taking an active part* in actually improving world conditions.

Let's say two people read a

science-fiction story. They are both of equal intelligence, and they get similar ideas from the story. But one tries to do something to make those ideas become reality, and the other doesn't. That's the difference between the active fan and the passive reader!

Incidentally, it applies to magazines too. Some of them seem to passively print whatever comes along. Others actively try to improve things for their readers, their writers, and themselves. So far, SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES impresses me as belonging to the latter category. Congratulations, and keep it up!—Pete Ramsdale, Route #3, Cabool, Mo.

●

I liked everything about the February S F ADVENTURES. “Two Worlds in Peril” was the best novel. But what really started me to thinking was your editorial.

It was very well thought out and interestingly written, but it strikes me as somewhat on the pessimistic side.

Science-fiction writers go on inventing wonderful gadgets. Then when the same gadgets come on the market and are available to everybody, people complain and

say they're no good. And the surprising thing is that many science-fiction writers, editors, etc., are among those who complain!

What goes on, anyway? Do we really believe in science fiction or don't we? If we don't, why publish it? —J. T. Anspach, 323 Elm Street, Hagerstown, Md.

(We believe in science fiction. And it's not the gadgets themselves we don't like, it's the uses to which they are so often put. Take television, for instance . . . —Ed.)

•

You asked for criticisms and suggestions.

Unfortunately at this time I have only had the privilege of reading one copy of your mag. That happened to be the December issue, the reason being my brief (I hope) stay in Uncle Sam's Army. I do not have the opportunity to buy them myself, so my very generous father (who is also a SF fiend) risks his whole future to send me the copies that he feels are worthwhile to read. That unfortunately calls for much delay.

As for criticisms, I am proud to say that I have none! From what I have seen and

read in this mag, it is the best example of good old imaginative space opera that I have been fortunate enough to get my hands on in a long time. Whereas most mags in the field are going way off of the line that has made the field practically indestructible as far as its many fans are concerned, you have stuck to it. (The foregoing statement can be proved by the many fans that have regular collections that they prize with their very lives, and quite often despite their wives, dating way back there. My father being one whose collection goes back to 1935 that I know of for sure.) Of course you may just be the only ones that are fortunate enough to latch on to authors like Edmond Hamilton, Robert Randall and Calvin Knox.

The order in which I put the stories according to quality is as follows:

1. Battle for the Thousand Suns.
2. The Starcombers.
3. Secret of the Green Invaders.
4. Hadj.

You can have my 35¢ a copy for stories like that any time. —PFC Dan W. Wilhite, APO 731, Seattle, Wash.

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