

**A COMPLETE NEW BOOK... 35¢**  
**SCIENCE FICTION**  
**ADVENTURES** PDC

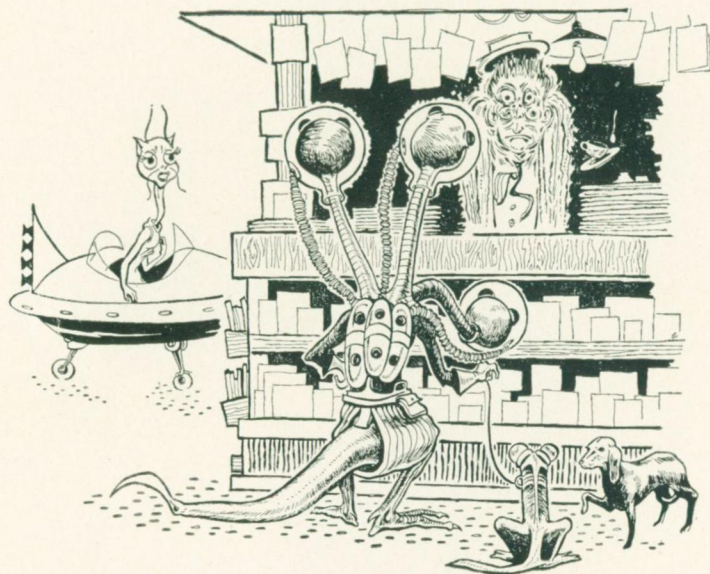
**SHADOW ON THE STARS**

by **ROBERT SILVERBERG**

April, 1958



# That's Right— I Said *Three* Copies!



Of course we love customers like this, who buy three copies of every issue of *Infinity* and *Science Fiction Adventures*—one for each head!

But then, we love all our customers, even those who only buy one copy of every issue. In fact, we'd be perfectly happy if everybody in the universe just bought one copy of every issue.

As it is, we're happy to please the customers we've got—because they're the people (and monsters) who know that *Infinity* and *SFA* consistently publish the best science fiction available. In short, they're the most intelligent people (and monsters) in the universe!

**Remember, monsters of distinction  
have subscriptions. See full  
details inside.**



# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2

No. 5

APRIL, 1958

## New Novels and Stories by Top Writers!

### Book-Length Novel:

#### **SHADOW ON THE STARS.....Robert Silverberg 6**

Two years of cold sleep on a lonely raft of space was a small price to pay for aid in the war against the merciless, powerful Klodni—and one Baird Ewing was more than willing to pay. But the aid he sought did not exist, and Ewing landed in a whirlpool of intrigue that made even reporting his failure seem an impossible task!

### Bonus Stories:

#### **BOX-GARDEN.....Allen K. Lang 116**

#### **FAREWELL MESSAGE.....David Mason 123**

### Departments:

#### **THE EDITOR'S SPACE..... 4**

#### **THE BOOK-SPACE.....Calvin M. Knox 113**

#### **THE FAN-SPACE.....Archibald Destiny 120**

#### **THE READERS' SPACE..... 127**

COVER, illustrating *Shadow on the Stars*, by Ed Emsh

ILLUSTRATIONS by Ed Emsh

**Publisher—IRWIN STEIN**

**Production Manager—HELEN SKALET**

**Art Director—RICHARD P. KLUGA**

**Editor—LARRY T. SHAW**

**Associate Editor—MONTY HOWARD**

**Assistant Editor—LEE HOFFMAN**

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, published monthly except February, July and November, by Royal Publications, Inc., 11 West 42nd Street, New York 36, N. Y. Single copy 35¢; subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, \$3.50; elsewhere, \$4.50. Copyright 1958 by Royal Publications, Inc. Second-class mail privileges authorized at New York, N. Y. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental.

Printed in U. S. A.



## THE EDITOR'S SPACE

Now that the first wave of surprise and excitement over the Russian Sputniks has died down, it's possible to make some evaluations of the by-products of the news.

When the news broke, a lot of people predicted that the sales of science fiction magazines and books would increase enormously. They were dead wrong. Circulation figures have remained just about where they were before. Science fiction is still a pretty specialized field, and does not lure many readers away from other forms of entertainment.

The moral for editors of sf magazines is obvious (and the squares should have known it before): since you can't attract huge segments of the general public anyway, forget the superfluous gimmicks designed to do so and stick to pleasing the loyal readers.

On the other hand, such a major breakthrough couldn't fail to have some effect on the

public. Confidence in science and scientists undoubtedly received a big boost, and there aren't as many people as there used to be who claim that rockets won't work because "there's nothing in space for them to push against." And the United States may even get around to spending more money on scientific research.

The word Sputnik itself has become so firmly entrenched in the language that news commentators frequently refer to our own proposed satellites as "the American Sputniks." And headlines casually tossing about such science fictional phrases as "space war" are becoming fairly common.

Science fiction fans will always be a fairly rare breed, apparently. But at least we aren't as likely to be sneered at for reading "that crazy stuff" any more. Funny . . . wonder if we won't grow to miss that old inferiority complex?—LTS



*These great minds were Rosicrucians . . .*

## WHAT SECRET POWER DID THEY POSSESS?



*Benjamin Franklin*



*Isaac Newton*



*Francis Bacon*

### *Why were these men great?*

How does anyone — man or woman — achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life!

Benjamin Franklin, statesman and inventor . . . Isaac Newton, discoverer of the Law of Gravitation . . . Francis Bacon, philosopher and scientist . . . like many other learned and great men and women . . . were Rosicrucians. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) have been in existence for centuries. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

## *The* ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose

(AMORC)

California, U.S.A.

### THIS BOOK FREE!



Write for your **FREE** copy of "The Mastery of Life" — **TODAY**. No obligation. A non-profit organization. Address: Scribe H. Q. J.

Scribe H. Q. J.  
The ROSICRUCIANS  
(AMORC)  
San Jose, California, U.S.A.

### SEND THIS COUPON

Please send me the *free* book, *The Mastery of Life*, which explains how I may learn to use my faculties and powers of mind.

Name

Address

City

State



*Two years of cold sleep on a lonely  
raft of space was a small price to pay  
for aid against the merciless, powerful  
Klodni. But that aid did not exist!*

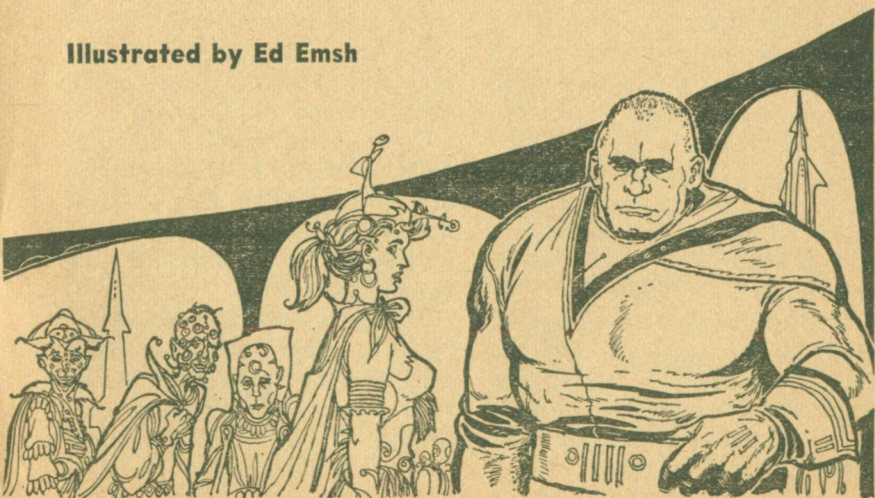


# SHADOW on the STARS

**A Complete Book-Length Novel**

**by ROBERT SILVERBERG**

**Illustrated by Ed Emsh**



# Shadow on the Stars

by Robert Silverberg

## CHAPTER I

EWING AWOKE slowly, sensing the coldness all about him. It was slowly withdrawing down the length of his body; his head and shoulders were out of the freeze now, the rest of his body gradually emerging. He stirred as well as he could, and the delicately-spun web of foam that had cradled him in the journey across space shivered as he moved.

He extended a hand and heaved downward on the lever six inches from his wrist. A burst of fluid shot forward from the spinnerettes above him, dissolving the web that bound him. The coldness drained from his legs. Stiffly he rose and stretched gingerly.

He had slept eleven months, fourteen days, and some six hours, according to the panel above his sleeping-area.

Ewing touched an enameled stud and a segment of the inner surface of the ship's wall swung away, revealing a softly glowing vision-plate. A planet hung centered in the green depths of the plate—a

planet green itself, with vast seas bordering its continents. Earth.

Ewing knew what his next task was. Circulation was returning to his thawed limbs. He strode to the subetheric generator on the opposite wall and spun the contact dial.

"Baird Ewing speaking," he said. "I've taken up a position in orbit around Earth after a successful flight. I'll be descending to Earth shortly. Further reports will follow."

He broke contact. This very moment, he knew, his words were leaping across the galaxy toward his home world, via subetheric carrier wave. Fifteen days would elapse before they arrived on Corwin.

Ewing had wanted to stay awake, all the long months of his solitary trip. The idea of spending nearly a year asleep was appalling to him: all that time wasted!

But they had been adamant. "You're crossing sixteen parsecs in a one-man ship," they told him. "Nobody can stay awake all that time and come out of it sane. And we need you sane."



He had tried to protest. It was no good. The people of Corwin were sending him to Earth at great expense to do a job of vital importance; unless they could be absolutely certain that he would arrive in good condition, they would do better sending someone else. Reluctantly, Ewing yielded. They lowered him into the nutrient bath and showed him how to trip the foot-levers that brought about suspension and the hand-levers that would release him when his time was up. They sealed off his ship and shot it into the dark, a lonely raft on the broad sea, a coffin-sized spaceship built for one.

**A**T LEAST ten minutes went by before he was fully restored to normal physiological functioning. He stared strangely at the whiteness of his fingernails, and peered in the mirror at the strange silken stubble that had sprouted on his face. He looked skeletal, his cheeks shrunken, his skin tight-drawn over the jutting bones of his face. His hair seemed to have faded too; it had been a rich auburn on that day in 3805 when he left Corwin on his emergency mission to Earth, but now it was a dark nondescript mud-brown.

Ewing was a big man, long-muscled rather than stocky, with a fierce expression contradicted by mild, questioning eyes.

His stomach felt hollow. His shanks were spindly. He felt drained of vigor.

But there was a job to do.

Adjoining the subetheric generator was an in-system communicator. He switched it on, staring at the pale ball that was Earth in the screen on the far wall. A crackle of static rewarded him.

It was nearly a thousand years since the colony had been planted, and almost five hundred since the people of Corwin had last had intercourse of any kind with Earth. Languages diverge, in five hundred years.

A voice said, "Earth station Double Prime. Who calls, please? Speak up. Speak up, please."

Ewing said, "One-man ship out of the Free World of Corwin calling. I'm in a stabilized orbit fifty thousand kilometers above Earth ground-level. Request permission to land."

"Free World of *which*, did you say?"

"Corwin. Epsilon Ursae Majoris XII. It's a former Terrestrial colony."

"Corwin, Corwin. Oh. I guess it's okay for you to

land. Coordinates for landing will follow."

Ewing carefully jotted the figures down as they came in, read them back for confirmation, thanked the Earthside man, and signed off. He integrated the figures and programmed them for the ship's calculators.

His throat felt dry. Something about the Earthman's tone of voice troubled him. The man had been too flip, too careless.

*Perhaps I was expecting too much*, Ewing thought. *He was just doing a dull job. I don't have any right to expect supermen doing routine radio work.*

It was a jarring beginning, none the less. Ewing realized he had a highly idealized mental image of an Earthman as a being compassionately wise, physically superb, a superman in all respects. It would be disappointing to learn that the fabled inhabitants of the legendary mother world were mere human beings themselves, like their remote descendants on the colony worlds.

Ewing strapped himself in for the downward jaunt through the atmospheric blanket of Earth and nudged the lever that controlled the autopilot. The ultimate leg of his

journey had begun. Within an hour, he would actually stand on the soil of Earth herself.

*I hope they'll be able to help us*, he thought. Bright in his mind was a vivid mental image: faceless hordes of barbaric Klodni sweeping down on the galaxy out of Andromeda, devouring world after world in their checkless drive inward toward civilization's heart.

Already four worlds had fallen to the Klodni since the aliens had begun their campaign of conquest. The timetable said they would reach Corwin within the next decade.

Cities destroyed, women and children carried into slavery, the glittering spire of the World Building a charred ruin, the University destroyed, the fertile fields blackened by the Klodni scorched-earth tactics—

Ewing shuddered as his tiny ship spiralled Earthward, bobbing in the thickening layers of atmosphere. *Earth will help us*, he told himself comfortingly. *Earth will save her colonies from conquest. She'll protect us.*

A gulf lay between Earth and her colony of Corwin, a gulf of five hundred years of silence. But now a shadow crossed the stars, a threaten-



ing fist was raised on high. Already four worlds had fallen. There would be more, unless Earth roused herself from her half-millennium of slumber and crushed the invaders.

Ewing felt capillaries bursting under the increasing drag of deceleration. He gripped the handrests and shouted to relieve the tension on his eardrums, but there was no way of relieving the tension within. The thunder of his jets boomed through the framework of the ship, and the green planet grew frighteningly huge in the clear plastic of the viewscreen.

**M**INUTES LATER, the ship came to rest on a broad ferro-concrete landing apron; it hung poised a moment on its own jetwash, then settled gently to earth. With gravity-heavy fingers Ewing unfastened himself. Through the vision screen he saw small beetle-like autotrucks come rumbling over the field toward his ship—the decontamination squad.

He waited until they had done their job, then sprung the hatch on his ship and climbed out. The air smelled good—strange, since his home world had a 23 percent oxygen content, two parts in a hun-

dred richer than Earth's. Ewing spied the vaulting sweep of a terminal building, and headed toward it.

A robot, blocky and faceless, scanned him with photobeams as he passed through the swinging doors. Within, the terminal was a maze of blinking lights, red-green, on-off, up-down. Momentarily Ewing was dazed.

Beings of all kinds thronged the building. Ewing saw four semi-humanoid forms with bulbous heads engaged in a busy discussion near where he stood. Further in the distance swarms of other Terrestrial beings moved about. Ewing was startled by their appearance.

Some were "normal"—muscular and rugged-looking, but not so much so that they would cause any surprised comment on Corwin. But the others—!

Dressed flamboyantly in shimmering robes of turquoise and black, gray and gold, they presented a weird sight. One had no ears; his skull was bare, decorated only by pendant-jewelled rings that seemed to be riveted to the flesh of his scalp. Another had one leg and supported himself by a luminous crutch. A third wore gleaming emeralds on a golden nose-ring.

No two of them seemed to

look alike. As a trained student of cultural patterns, Ewing was aware of the cause of the phenomenon; over-elaboration of decoration was a common evolution for highly advanced societies, such as Earth's.

"Pardon," Ewing said. "I've just arrived from the Free World of Corwin. Is there some place where I can register with the authorities?"

The conversation ceased as if cut off with an axe. The trio whirled, facing Ewing. "You be from a colony-world?" asked the uniped, in barely intelligible accents.

Ewing nodded. "Corwin. Sixteen parsecs away. We were settled by Earth a thousand years ago."

They exchanged words at a speed that made comprehension impossible; it seemed like a private language. Ewing watched the rouged faces, feeling distaste.

"Where can I register with the authorities?" he asked again, a little stiffly.

The earless one giggled shrilly. "What authorities? This is Earth, friend! We come and go as we please."

A sense of uneasiness grew in Ewing. He disliked these Terrestrials almost upon sight, after just a moment's contact. He hoped they were not typi-

cal of the majority. Five hundred years of cultural isolation might have done strange things to Earth.

A new voice, strange, harshly accented, said, "Did I hear you say you were from a colony?"

Ewing turned. One of the "normal" Terrestrials was speaking to him—a man about five feet eight in height, with a thick squarish face, beetling brows looming over dark smouldering eyes, and a cropped bullet-shaped head. His voice was dull and ugly-sounding.

"I'm from Corwin," Ewing said.

The other frowned, screwing up his massive brows. He said, "Where's that?"

"Sixteen parsecs. Epsilon Ursae Majoris XII."

"And what are you doing on Earth?"

The belligerent tone annoyed Ewing. The Corwinite said, in a bleak voice, "I'm an officially accredited ambassador from my world to the government of Earth. I'm looking for the customs authorities."

"There are none," the squat man said. "The Earthers did away with them about a century back. Couldn't be bothered with them, they said." He grinned in cheerful contempt at the three dandies, who had



moved farther away. "The Earthers can hardly be bothered with anything."

Ewing was puzzled. "Aren't you from Earth yourself?"

"Me?" The deep chest emitted a rumbling sardonic chuckle. "You folk really are isolated, aren't you? I'm a Sirian. Sirius IV—oldest Terrestrial colony there is. Suppose we get a drink. I want to talk to you."

## CHAPTER II

SOMEWHAT unwillingly Ewing followed the burly Sirian through the thronged terminal toward a refreshment room at the far side of the arcade. He saw now that his original confused glimpse around him had played him false; there were only a handful of the brutal-looking sorts he now knew were Sirian colonists in the terminal, and even less of the non-human aliens. The vast majority of the people there were Earthmen, clad in their fanciful robes.

Over a gleaming translucent table in the refreshment room, the Sirian stared levelly at Ewing and said, "First things come first. What's your name?"

"Baird Ewing. You?"

"Rollun Firnik. What brings

you to Earth, Ewing?"

Firnik's manner was offensively blunt. Ewing toyed with the golden-amber drink the Sirian had bought for him. "I told you," he said quietly. "I'm an ambassador to Earth. It's as simple as that."

"Is it? When did you people last have any contact with the rest of the galaxy?"

"Five hundred years ago. But—"

"Five hundred years," Firnik repeated speculatively. "And now you decide to reopen contact with Earth." He squinted at Ewing, chin resting on balled fist. "Just like that. Poof! Enter one ambassador. It isn't just out of sociability, is it, Ewing? What's the reason behind your visit?"

He said to the Sirian, "I'm not familiar with the latest news in this sector of the galaxy. Have you heard any mention of the Klodni?"

"Klodni?" the Sirian repeated. He shook his head. "No. The name doesn't mean a thing to me."

"The Klodni are a humanoid race that evolved somewhere in the Andromeda star cluster. I've seen solidographs of them. They're little greasy creatures, about five feet high, with a sort of ant-like civilization. A war-fleet of Klodni is on the move."

Firnik rolled an eyebrow upward. He said nothing.

"A couple thousand Klodni ships entered our galaxy about four years ago. They landed on Barnholt—that's a colony-world about a hundred fifty light-years deeper in space than we are—and wiped the place clean. After about a year they picked up and moved on. They've been to four planets so far, and no one's been able to stop them yet. They swarm over a planet and destroy everything they see, then go on to the next world."

"What of it?"

"We've plotted their probable course. They're going to attack Corwin in ten years or so. We know we can't fight back, either. We just aren't a militarized people. And we can't militarize in less than ten years and hope to win.

"As soon as the nature of the Klodni menace became known, we radioed a note to Earth explaining the situation and asking for help. We got no answer. We radioed again. Still no reply from Earth."

"So you decided to send an ambassador," Firnik said. "Figuring your messages must have gone astray, no doubt. You wanted to negotiate for help at first hand."

"Yes."

The Sirian chuckled. "You

know something? It's three hundred years since anybody on Earth last fired anything deadlier than a popgun."

"That can't be true!"

Suddenly the sardonic amiability left Firnik like air whistling through a meteor-puncture. His voice was almost toneless as he said, "I'll forgive you this time, because you're a stranger and don't know the customs. But the next time you call me a liar I'll kill you."

Ewing's jaw stiffened. "I didn't—"

"Enough! Don't make it any worse. Look, Ewing, I made a statement of fact. You don't have any evidence to contradict it. So shut up, unless you want to go on offending me."

*Barbarian*, Ewing thought. Out loud he said, "In other words, Earth's a totally pacifist planet?"

"That's right."

"And I've wasted my time by coming here, then?"

The Sirian shrugged unconcernedly. "Better fight your own battles. The Earthers can't help you."

"But they're in danger, too," Ewing protested. "Do you think the Klodni are going to stop before they've reached Earth?"

"How long do you think it'll take them to get as far as



Earth?" Firnik asked.

"A century, at least."

"A century. All right. They have to pass through Sirius IV on their way to Earth. We'll take care of them when the time comes."

Ewing scowled inwardly. He stood up. "It's been very interesting talking to you. And thanks for the drinks."

He made his way through the crowded room to the long shining-walled corridor of the spaceport arcade. A ship was blasting off outside on the ferro-concrete apron; Ewing watched it a moment as it thundered out of sight. He realized that if any truth lay in the Sirian's words, he might just as well return to Corwin now and report failure.

But it was hard to accept the concept of a decadent spineless Earth. True, they had had no contact with the mother world for five centuries; but the legend still gleamed on Corwin and the other worlds of its immediate galactic area of the mother planet where human life first began, hundreds of centuries before.

He remembered the stories of the pioneers of space, the brave colonists who had extended Earth's sway to half a thousand worlds. Contact with the homeland had withered in

the span of years; there was little reason for self-sufficient worlds a sky apart to maintain anything as fantastically expensive as interstellar communication systems simply for sentiment. A colony world has enough economic problems as it is.

There had always been the legend of Earth, though, to guide the Corwinites. When trouble arose, Earth would be there to help.

Now there was trouble on the horizon. And Earth, Ewing thought. Can we count on her help?

He watched the throngs of bejewelled dandies glumly, and wondered.

He paused by a railing that looked out over the wide sweep of the spacefield. A plaque, copper-hued, proclaimed the fact that this particular section of the arcade had been erected A.D. 2716. Ewing felt a tingle of awe. The building in which he stood had been constructed more than a century before the first ships from Earth blasted down on Corwin, which then had been only a nameless world on the star-charts. And the men who had built this building, eleven hundred years ago, were as remote in space-time from the present-day Terrans as were

the people of Corwin at this moment.

It was a bitter thought, that he had wasted his trip. There was his wife, and his son—for more than two years Laira would have no husband, Blade no father. And for what? All for a wasted trip to a planet whose glories lay far in its past?

Somewhere on Earth, he thought, there will be someone who can help. This planet produced us all. A shred of vitality must remain in it somewhere. I won't leave without trying to find it.

**S**OME painstaking questioning of one of the stationary robot guards finally got him the information he wanted: there was a place where incoming outworlders could register, if they chose. He made provisions for the care and storage of his ship until his departure, and signed himself in at the Hall of Records as *Baird Ewing, Ambassador from the Free World of Corwin*. There was a hotel affiliated with the spaceport terminal; Ewing requested and was assigned a room in it. He signed a slip granting the robot spaceport attendants permission to enter his ship and transfer his personal

belongings to his hotel room.

The room was attractive, if a little cramped. Ewing was accustomed to the spaciousness of his home on Corwin, a planet on which only eighteen million people lived in an area greater than the habitable land mass of Earth. He had helped to build the home himself, twelve years ago when he married Laira. It sprawled over nearly eleven acres of land.

The lighting was subdued and indirect. An air-purifier hummed gently; his window looked out on the bustling spaceport, and he could opaque it with a touch.

He missed some of the technological comforts Corwin had developed. There was no equivalent of a scent-organ, for one thing. He regretted it; he was emotionally depressed now, and the drift of sweet pine through the room would have aided in clearing his black mood. But he would have to make do with conditions as they were.

An outlet covered with a speaking-grid served as his connection with the office downstairs. He switched the communicator panel on. A robotic voice said immediately, "How may we serve you, Mr. Ewing?"

"Is there such a thing as a



library on the premises?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Would you have someone select a volume of Terran history covering the last thousand years, and have it sent up to me. Also any recent newspapers, magazines, or things like that."

It seemed that hardly five minutes passed before the chime on his room door bleeped discreetly.

"Come in," he said.

The robot bellhop had attuned the door to the sound of his voice. There was the whispering sound of relays closing, and the door whistled open. A carrying-robot stood just outside. His flat metal arms were stacked high with microreels.

When the robot had gone, Ewing lifted the most massive reel from the stack and scanned its title. *Earth and the Galaxy* was the title. In smaller letters it said, *A Study in Colonial Relationships*.

Ewing nodded approvingly. This was the way to begin: fill in the background lacunae before embarking on any specific course of action. The mocking Sirian had perhaps underestimated Earth's strength deliberately, for obscure reasons of his own.

He opened the reel and slid it into the viewer, twisting it

until he heard the familiar *click!* The viewer was of the same model in use on Corwin; he had no difficulties with it. He switched on the screen.

*Chapter One, he read. The earliest period of interstellar expansion.*

*The Age of Interstellar Colonization may rightly be said to have opened in the year 2560, when the development of the Haley Subwarp Drive made possible—*

The door chimed again. Irritated, Ewing looked up from his book. He was not expecting visitors, nor had he asked the hotel service staff for anything.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Ewing?" said a familiar voice. "Might I come in? I'd like to talk to you again. We met briefly at the terminal this afternoon—"

Ewing recognized the voice. It belonged to the earless Earther in turquoise robes who had been so little help to him earlier. What can he want that would make him seek me out? Ewing wondered.

"All right," he said. "Come in."

The door responded to the command. It slid back obediently. The slim Terrestrial smiled apologetically at Ewing, murmured a soft greeting, and entered.

### CHAPTER III

**H**E WAS SLIM, delicate, fragile-looking. It seemed to Ewing that a good gust of wind would smash him to splinters. He was no more than five feet tall, pale, waxy-skinned, with large serious olive eyes and thin indecisive lips. His domed skull was naked and faintly glossy. At regular intervals on its skin, jewelled rings had been surgically attached; they jiggled as he moved.

"I hope I'm not intruding on your privacy," he said in a hesitant half-whisper.

"No. Not at all. Won't you be seated?"

"I would prefer to stand," the Earther replied. "It's our custom."

The Earther smiled timidly. "I am called Scholar Myreck," he said finally. "And you are Baird Ewing—of the colony-world Corwin."

"That's right."

"It was my great fortune to meet you at the spaceport terminal building earlier today. Apparently I created a bad first impression—one of frivolity, perhaps, or even of oppressive irresponsibility. For this I wish to beg your pardon, Colonist Ewing. I would have had the opportunity then, but for that Sirian ape who seized your attention so hastily."

"On the contrary, Scholar Myreck, no apologies should be needed. I don't judge a man by my first impression of him—especially on a world where I'm a stranger to the customs and way of life."

"An excellent philosophy!" Sadness crossed Myreck's mild face for a moment. "But you look tense, Colonist Ewing. Might I have the privilege of relaxing you?"

"Relaxing me?"

"Minor neural adjustments; a technique we practice with some skill here. May I?"

Doubtfully Ewing said, "Just what does it involve?"

"A moment's physical contact, nothing more." Myreck smiled imploringly. "It pains me to see a man so tense. It causes me actual physical pain."

"You've aroused my curiosity," Ewing said. "Go ahead—relax me."

Myreck glided forward and put his hands gently round Ewing's neck.

His thin childlike fingers dug in, suddenly, pinching sharply at the base of Ewing's skull. Ewing felt a sudden fierce burst of light, a jarring disruption of sense-perception, for no more than a fifteenth of a second. Then he felt the tension drain away from him. His deltoids and trapezoids eased



so abruptly that he thought his back and shoulders had been removed. His neck, chronically stiff, loosened. The stress-patterns developed during a year in stasis-sleep were shaken off.

"That's quite a trick," he said finally.

"We manipulate the neural nexus at the point where the medulla and the spinal column become one. In the hands of an amateur it can be fatal." Myreck smiled.

Ewing said, "May I ask a personal question, Scholar?"

"Of course."

"The clothes you wear—the ornamentation — are these things widespread on Earth, or is it just some—fad—that you're following?"

Myreck knotted his waxy fingers together thoughtfully. "They are, shall we say, cultural manifestations? I find it hard to explain. People of my personality type and inclinations dress this way; others dress differently, as the mood strikes them. I am a Collegiate Fellow."

"Scholar is your title, then?"

"Yes. And also my given name. I am a member of the College of Abstract Science of the City of Valloin."

"I'll have to plead ignorance," Ewing said. "I don't know anything about your College."

"Understandable. We do not seek publicity." Myreck's eyes fastened doggedly on Ewing's for a moment. "That Sirian who took you away from us—may I ask his name?"

"Rollun Firnik," Ewing said.

"A particularly dangerous one; I know him by reputation. Well—to the point at last, Colonist Ewing. Would you care to address a convocation of the College of Abstract Science some time early next week?"

"I? I'm no academician. I wouldn't know what to say."

"Contrariwise; we feel you are particularly qualified to talk to us. The session will be informal. No preparation on your part will be necessary."

"And may I ask why you think I'd be a good speaker?"

"You come from a colony, one that none of us knows anything about. You offer an invaluable fund of experience and information. We would be greatly honored by your presence at our meeting."

"I'm a stranger in the city," Ewing objected. "I wouldn't know how to get to you."

"We will arrange for your transportation. The meeting is Fournight of next week. Will you come?"

Ewing considered it for a moment. It was as good an op-

portunity as any to begin studying the Terrestrial culture at close range. He would need as broad and as deep a fund of knowledge as possible in order to apply the leverage that would ultimately preserve his home world from destruction by the alien marauders.

He looked up. "All right. Fournight of next week it is, then."

"We will be very grateful, Colonist Ewing."

Myreck bowed. The jewelled ornaments fastened to his skull dangled loose, flapping against his bare scalp when he straightened up. He backed toward the door, smiling and nodding, and paused just before pushing the opener-stud. "Stay well," he said. "You have our extreme gratitude. We will see you on Fournight."

The door slid closed behind him.

**E**WING SHRUGGED; then, remembering the reels he had requested from the hotel library, he returned his attention to the viewer.

The image of the Earther Myreck overshadowed everything in his mind for some minutes; he found himself unable to concentrate properly. The Scholar was far from the

sort of Earthman Ewing had expected to find.

After a while Ewing forgot about his bizarre little visitor, and focussed his attention on the book of history. He read for nearly an hour, skimming. His mind efficiently organized the material as fast as his eyes scanned it, marshaling the facts into neat well-drilled columns. He related cause to effect, linear motivation to horizontal historical stress, integrated reaction with random response. By the end of the hour, he had more than a fair idea of the shape of Terrestrial history in the thirteen hundred years since the first successful interstellar flight.

There had been an immediate explosive outward push to the stars. Sirius had been the first to be colonized, in 2573: sixty-two brave men and women. The other colonies had followed fast, frantically. The overcrowded Earth was shipping her sons and daughters to the stars in wholesale batches.

All through the second half of the Third Millennium the prevailing historical tone was one of frenzied excitement. The annals listed colony after colony.

The sky was full of worlds. The seventeen-planet system of Aldebaran yielded eight



Earth-type planets suitable for colonization. The double system of Albireo had four. Ewing passed hastily over the name-weighted pages, seeing with a quiver of recognition the name of Blade Corwin, who seeded a colony on Epsilon Ursae Majoris XII in 2856.

Outward. *By the opening of the thirtieth century, said the book, human life had been planted on more than a thousand worlds of the universe.*

The great outward push was over. On Earth, the long-overdue establishment of population controls had ended forever the threat of over-expansion, and with it some of the impetus for colonization died. Earth's population stabilized itself at an unvarying five and a half billion; three centuries before, nearly eleven billion had jostled for room on the crowded little planet.

With population stabilization came cultural stabilization, the end of the flamboyant pioneer personality (all those had long since departed for the outworlds), the development of a new kind of Earthman who lacked the drive and intense ambition of his ancestors. The colonies had skimmed off the men with outward drive; the ones who remained on Earth gave rise to a culture of esthetes, of debaters and

musicians and mathematicians.

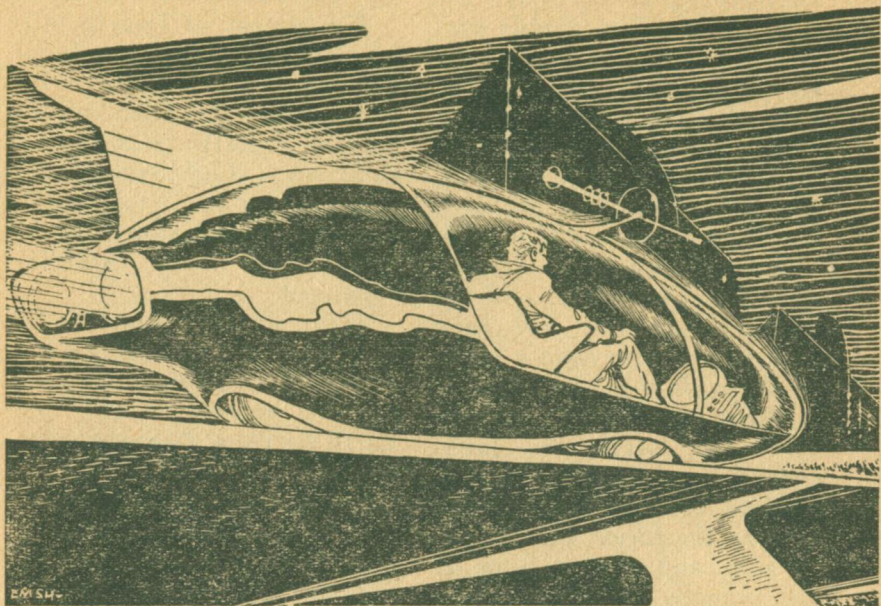
The history of Fourth Millennium Earth was a predictable one. There had been retrenchment. The robot-served culture of Earth became self-sufficient, a closed system, neither lending itself to emigration nor immigration. Births and deaths were carefully equalized.

With stability came isolation. The wild men on the colony-worlds no longer had need for the mother world, nor Earth for them. Contacts withered.

*In the year 3800, said the text, only Sirius IV of all Earth's colonies still retained regular communication with the parent planet. Representatives of the thousand other colonies were so rare on Earth as to be virtually non-existent there.*

Only Sirius IV. It was odd, thought Ewing, that of all the colonies the harsh people of Sirius IV should alone be solicitous of the mother world. There was little in common between Rollun Firnik and the Scholar.

The more Ewing read, the less confident he became that he would find any aid for Corwin here. Earth had become a planet of gentle scholiasts, it seemed; was there anything here that could serve against



the advancing Klodni?

He read on, well into the afternoon, until he felt hunger. Rising, he disconnected the viewer and rewound the reels, slipping them back into their containers. His eyes were tired. Some of the physical fatigue Myreck had taken from him had begun to steal back into his body.

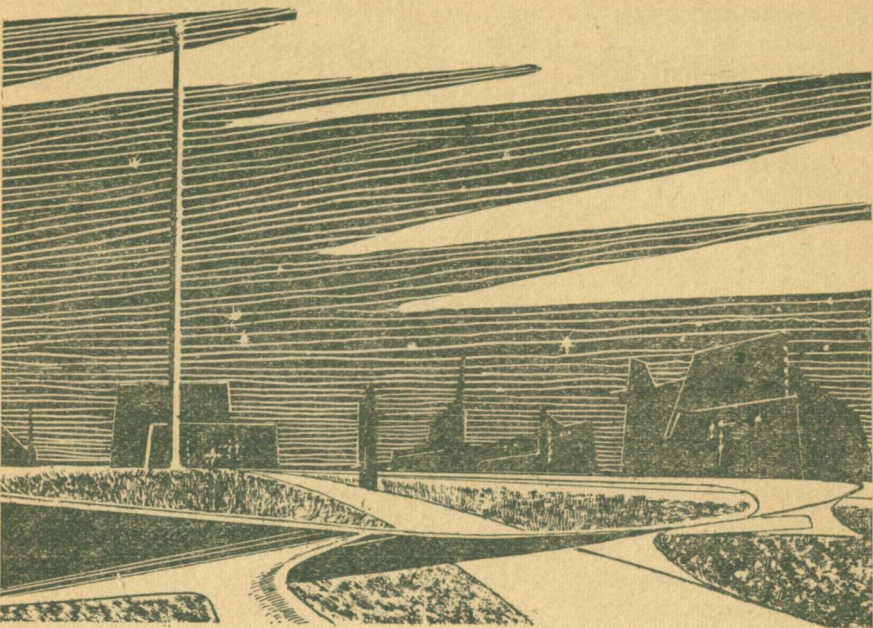
There was a restaurant on the sixty-third level of the hotel, according to the printed information sheet enameled on the inside of his door. He slipped out of his clothes, stepped into the bath, and switched on

the shower. The stream of ionized particles descended from the tiled ceiling as a gentle velvety violet haze.

The ion-flow was soothing. Ewing waited while it peeled away the layer of grime from his skin, leaving him pink and clean. He surveyed himself briefly in the full-length mirror, nodded, and returned to the bedroom.

There he dressed formally, in his second-best doublet and lace. He checked the chambers of his ceremonial blaster, found them all functioning, and strapped the weapon to his





hip. Satisfied at last, he reached for the housephone, and when the robooperator answered said, "I'm going to eat dinner now. Will you notify the hotel dining room to reserve a table for one for me?"

"Of course, Mr. Ewing."

He broke the contact and glanced in the mirror to make sure his lace was in order. He felt in his pocket for his wallet. Yes, that was there too. He had brought with him from Corwin a considerable supply of platinum bullion, since at last report platinum had been a precious metal on Earth.

Terrestrial economics had evidently not altered much in five hundred years; he had been able to dispose of his platinum easily and at a good price at the hotel desk. Now his wallet bulged with Terrestrial paper money, enough to last him the length of his stay.

He opened the door. Just outside the door was an opaque plastic receptacle which was used for depositing messages. The red light atop it was glowing, indicating the presence of a message within.

Pressing his thumb to the indentiplate, he lifted the top of

the box and drew out the note. It was neatly typed in blue capital letters. It said:

COLONIST EWING—

IF YOU WANT TO STAY IN  
GOOD HEALTH KEEP AWAY  
FROM MYRECK AND HIS  
FRIENDS.

It was unsigned. Ewing smiled coldly; the intrigue was beginning already, the jockeying back and forth. He had expected it. The arrival of a strange colonial on Earth was a novel enough event; it was sure to have its consequences and repercussions as his presence became more widely known.

"Open," he said shortly to his door.

The door slid back. He re-entered his room and snatched up the housephone.

The desk robot said, "How may we serve you, Mr. Ewing?"

"There seems to be a spy-vent in my room someplace," Ewing said. "Send someone up to check the room over."

"I assure you, sir, that no such thing could be possible in this hotel."

"I tell you there's a concealed camera or microphone someplace in my room. Either find it or I'll check into some other hotel."

"Yes, Mr. Ewing. We'll send an investigator up immediately."

"Good. I'm going to the dining room, now. If anything turns up, contact me there."

## CHAPTER IV

THE HOTEL dining-room was gaudily, even garishly decorated. Glowing spheres of imprisoned radiant energy drifted at random near the vaulted ceiling, occasionally bobbing down to eye-level. The tables themselves were banked steeply toward the outside edge, and in the very center of the room, where the floor-level was lowest, a panchromaticon swivelled slowly, throwing many-colored light over the diners. Soft music issued from speaker-grids along the mural-ed walls.

A burnished bullet-headed robot waited at the door.

"I have a reservation," Ewing said. "Ewing. Room 4113."

Ewing followed the robot into the main concourse of the dining-room, up a ramp that led to the outermost rim of the great hall. The robot came to a halt in front of a table at which someone was already sitting: a Sirian girl, Ewing guessed, from her brawny appearance.



The robot pulled out the chair facing her. Ewing shook his head. "There's been some mistake made. I don't know this lady at all. I requested a table for one."

"We ask indulgence, sir. There are no tables for one available at this hour. We consulted with the person occupying this table and were told that there was no objection to your sharing it, if you were willing to do so."

Ewing frowned and glanced at the girl. She met his glance evenly, and smiled. She seemed to be inviting him to sit down.

He shrugged. "All right. I'll sit here."

Ewing slipped into the seat and let the robot nudge it toward the table for him. He looked at the girl. She had bright red hair, trimmed in what on Corwin would have been considered an extremely mannish style. She wore a tailored suit of some clinging purple material; it flared sharply at the shoulders and neck. Her eyes were dark black. Her face was broad and muscular-looking, with upjutting cheekbones that gave her features an oddly slant-eyed cast.

"I'm sorry if I caused you any inconvenience," Ewing said. "I had no idea they'd

place me at your table—or at any occupied table—"

"I requested it," she said. Her voice was dark of timbre and resonant. "You're the Corwinite Ewing, I understand. I'm Byra Clork. We have something in common. We were both born on colonies of Earth."

Ewing found himself liking her blunt forthright approach, even though in her countryman Firnik it had been offensive. He said, "So I understand. You're a Sirian, aren't you?"

"That's right. How did you know?"

"I guessed," Ewing said evasively. He directed his attention to the liquor panel set against the wall. "Drink?" he asked her.

"I've had one. But I don't mind if you do."

Ewing inserted a coin and punched out a cocktail. The drink emerged from a revolving slot in the wall. The Corwinite picked it up and nestled it in his hand. He had ordered at random, having no idea of what Terrestrial cocktails might be like. This one was cold, a steely blue in color, with some sort of yellow fruit at its bottom.

"You said you requested my presence at your table," Ewing remarked. "And you knew me

by name. How come?"

"It isn't every day that a stranger comes to Earth," she said, in that impossibly deep, husky, almost-masculine voice. "I was curious."

"Many people seem to be curious about me," Ewing said.

A robowaiter hovered at his shoulder. Ewing frowned; he said, "I don't have any idea what the speciality of the house is. Miss Clork, would you care to recommend something for my dinner?"

She said to the robot, "Give him the same thing I ordered. Venison, creamed potatoes, green beans."

"Certainly," murmured the robot. As it scuttled away Ewing said, "Is that the tastiest dish they have?"

"Probably. I know it's the most expensive."

Ewing grinned. "You don't spare my pocketbook, do you?"

"You gave me free reign. Besides, you must have some money in your pocket. I saw you flashing platinum bullion at the desk this morning."

"You saw me, then?" An idea struck him. "You didn't send me a note this afternoon, did you?"

"Note?" Her broad face showed genuine-looking confusion. "No, I didn't send you any notes. Why?"

"Someone did," Ewing said. "I just wondered who it might have been."

He sipped his drink thoughtfully. A few moments later a robot arrived with their diners. The meat smelled pungent and good. Obviously it was no synthetic; that explained its high cost.

"This is the meat of a Terrestrial animal called the deer," Byra Clork explained. "There's a pretty large preserve of them ten miles outside of Valloin. Go ahead; taste it."

Ewing tasted it. It was tougher than he expected, but good. He ate in silence a while. When he had made substantial inroads on his plate he paused, looked up, and said, "What do you do on Earth, Miss Clork?"

"I'm with the Sirian consulate. I look out for the interests of any of my people who happen to visit Earth. It's a very dull job."

"There seem to be quite a few Sirians on Earth," Ewing remarked casually. "It must be very popular among your people as a tourist attraction."

She seemed momentarily disconcerted by Ewing's remark. Her voice hesitated slightly as she said, "Y—yes, it's very popular. Many Sirians like to vacation on Earth."

"How many Sirians would



you say there were on Earth right now?"

This time she stiffened visibly; Ewing realized he had accidentally asked a question which touched on very delicate grounds. "Just why are you so interested, Colonist Ewing?"

He smiled disarmingly. "A matter of curiosity, that's all. No ulterior motives."

She pretended the question had never been asked. Music welled up about them, blending with the vague general hum of conversation. She finished her dinner quietly, and while starting on the dessert said, "I suppose you didn't think much of Firnik."

"Of who?"

"You met him this morning," she said. "The Sirian. He tends to be rather clumsy at times. He's my boss, actually. Sirian Vice-Consul in Valloin."

"Did he tell you to wangle dinner with me?" Ewing asked suddenly.

A blaze flamed in the Sirian girl's eyes, but it died down quickly enough, though with reluctance. "You put things crudely."

"But accurately?"

"Yes."

Ewing smiled and reached into his doublet pocket; he drew forth the anonymous

note he had received earlier and shoved it across the table toward her. She read it without displaying any apparent reaction.

"Is this the note you suspected me of having sent you?"

Ewing nodded. "I had a visit from Scholar Myreck this afternoon. Several hours later I found this note outside my door. Perhaps Vice-Consul Firnik sent it, eh?"

She stared at him as if trying to read his mind. Ewing sensed that a chess-game of sorts was going on, that he was rapidly becoming the center of a web of complications. While they stared silently at each other a robot glided up to them and said, "Mr. Ewing?"

"That's right."

"I bear a message from the manager of the hotel."

"Let's have it," Ewing said.

"The message is: a spy-ray outlet has been discovered in your room at the intersection of the wall and the ceiling. The outlet has been removed and a protective device planted in the room to prevent any future re-insertion of spying equipment. The manager extends his deep regrets and requests you to accept a week's rent as partial compensation for any inconvenience this may have caused you."

Ewing grinned. "Tell him I accept the offer, and that he'd better be more careful about his rooms the next time."

When the robot was gone, Ewing stared sharply at Byra Clark and said, "Somebody was listening and watching today when I had my visitor. Was it Firnik?"

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Then so be it," the girl said lightly. She rose from the table and said, "Do you mind putting my meal on your account? I'm a little short of cash just now."

She started to leave. Ewing caught a robot's eye and quickly instructed, "Bill me for both dinners."

**H**E SLID past the metal creature and caught up with the Sirian girl as she approached the exit to the dining room. The sphincter-door widened; she stepped through, and he followed her. They emerged in a luxurious salon hung with abstract paintings of startling texture and hue.

She was ignoring him, pointedly. She moved at a rapid pace down the main corridor of the salon, and stopped just before an inlaid blue-and-gold door. As she started to enter, Ewing grasped her by the arm.

She wriggled loose and said, "Surely you don't intend to follow me in *here*, Mr. Ewing!"

He glanced at the inscription on the door. "I'm a rude, untutored, primitive colonial," he said grimly. "If it serves my purpose to go in there after you, I'll go in there after you. You might just as well stay here and answer my questions as try to run away."

"Is there any reason why I should?"

"Yes," he said. "Because I ask you to. Did you or Firnik spy on me this afternoon?"

"How should I know what Firnik does in his free time?"

Ewing applied pressure to her arm.

"You're hurting me," she said in a harsh whisper.

"I want to know who planted that spy-ray in my room, and why I should be warned against dealing with Myreck."

She twisted suddenly and broke loose from his grasp. Her face was flushed, and her breathing was rapid and irregular. In a low voice she said, "Let me give you some free advice, Mr. Corwinite Ewing. Pack up and go back to Corwin. There's only trouble for you on Earth."

"What sort of trouble?" he demanded relentlessly.

"I'm not saying anything



else. Listen to me, and get as far from Earth as you can. Tomorrow. Today, if you can." She looked wildly around, then turned and ran lithely down the corridor. Ewing debated following her, but decided against it. She had seemed genuinely frightened, as if trouble loomed for her.

He stood for a moment before a mounted light-sculpture, pretending to be staring at the intertwining spirals of black and pearl-gray, but actually merely using the statuary as pretext for a moment's thought. His mind was racing; rigidly, he forced his adrenalin count down. When he was calm again, he tried to evaluate the situation.

Someone had gimmicked his room. He had been visited by an Earther, and a Sirian girl had maneuvered him into eating dinner with her. The incidents were beginning to mount up, and they grew more puzzling as he attempted to fit them into some coherent pattern. He had been on Earth less than fifteen hours. Events moved rapidly here.

He had been trained in theories of synthesis; he was a gifted extrapolator. Sweat beaded his forehead as he labored to extract connectivity from the isolated and confusing incidents of the day.

Minutes passed. Earthers in dazzling costumes drifted past him in twos and sometimes threes, commenting in subdued tones on the displays in the salon. Painstakingly Ewing manipulated the facts. Finally a picture took shape; a picture formed on guesswork, none the less a useful guide to future action.

The Sirians were up to no good on Earth. Quite possibly they intended to make the mother world a Sirian dominion. Assuming that, then the unexpected arrival of a colonist from deep space might represent a potential threat to their plans.

New shadows darkened the horizon, Ewing saw. Perhaps Firnik suspected him of intending to conspire with the Scholars against the Sirians. Doubtless that had been Myreck's intention in proffering the invitation.

In that case—

He turned. A robot stood there, man-high, armless, its face a sleek sheet of viewing plastic.

"That's right, I'm Ewing. What is it?"

"I speak for Governor-General Mellis, director of Earth's governing body. Governor-General Mellis requests your presence at the Capital City as soon as convenient."

"How do I get there?"

"If you wish I will convey you there," the robot purred.

"I so wish," Ewing said. "Take me there at once."

## CHAPTER V

A JETCAR waited outside the hotel for them. The robot opened the rear door and Ewing climbed in.

To his surprise the robot did not join him inside the car; he simply closed the door and glided away into the gathering dusk. Ewing frowned and peered through the door window at the retreating robot. He rattled the doorknob experimentally and discovered that he was locked in.

A bland robotic voice said, "Your destination, please?"

Ewing hesitated. "Ah—take me to Governor-General Mellis."

A rumble of turbogenerators was the only response; the car quivered gently and slid forward, moving as if it ran on a track of oil. Ewing felt no perceptible motion, but the spaceport and the towering bulk of the hotel grew small behind him, and soon they emerged on a broad twelve-level superhighway a hundred feet above the ground.

Ewing stared nervously out the window. "Exactly where *is*

the Governor-General located?" he asked, turning to peer at the dashboard. The robocar did not even have room for a driver, he noted, nor a set of manual controls.

"Governor-General Mellis' residence is in Capital City," came the precise, measured reply. "It is located one hundred ninety-three miles to the north of the City of Valloin. We will be there in forty-one minutes."

Ewing settled back in the comfortable cushions that ringed the back of the car and enjoyed the view. The northbound superhighway swung around in a wide westerly curve, giving him a view of the City of Valloin which he had just left. Floodlights poured forth intense radiation, brightening the night sky and making a view of the stars impossible. Shining city towers thrust upward in the hazy distance. The million million pinpoints of light that sparkled from the city were streetlamps and windows, Ewing realized. Ten million people lived in Valloin, Earth's largest city. He had read about it that afternoon; it had been built in the latter part of the 29th century, when the push toward the stars was almost over but while the urge to do mighty things still remained among Earthmen.



The effortless glide of the car lulled him into a state of relaxation. The road curved northward again, and the sky grew dark despite the stream of lamps illuminating the roadway. Once he looked to his left and saw the glittering surface of a river running parallel to the road.

The robocar was strict in its schedule. Exactly forty-one minutes after it had pulled away from the plaza facing the Grand Valloin Hotel, it shot off the highway and onto a smaller trunk road that plunged downward at a steep angle. Ewing saw a city before him—a city of spacious buildings far apart, radiating spirally out from one towering silver-hued palace.

A few minutes later they had finished their plunge down the broad boulevard that led to the grand palace. The car came to a halt, suddenly, giving Ewing a mild jolt.

The robot voice said, "This is the palace of the Governor-General. The door at your left is open. Please leave the car now and you will be taken to the Governor-General."

Ewing nudged the door-panel and it swung open. He stepped out. The night air was fresh and cool, and the streets about him gave off a soft gentle glow. Accumulator bat-

teries beneath the pavement were discharging the illumination the sun had shed on them during the day. A massive white marble pillar rose heavenward in the square opposite the palace, and ringed around it Ewing saw inscribed the names of Terrestrial colonies, spiralling upward on the stone toward the top.

"You will come this way, please," a new robot said.

**H**E WAS USHERED through the swinging door of the palace, into a lift, and upward. The lift opened out onto a velvet-hung corridor that extended through a series of accordion-like pleats into a large and austere furnished room.

A small man stood alone in the center of the room. He was gray-haired but unwrinkled, and his body bore no visible sign of the surgical distortions that were so common among the Earthers. He smiled courteously.

"I am Governor-General Mellis," he said. His voice was light and flexible, a good vehicle for public speaking. "Will you come in?"

"Thanks," Ewing said. He stepped inside. The doors immediately closed behind him.

Mellis came forward—he stood no higher than the mid-

dle of Ewing's chest—and proffered a drink. Ewing took it. It was a sparkling purplish liquid, with a mildly carbonated texture. He settled himself comfortably in the chair Mellis drew for him, and looked up at the Governor-General, who remained standing.

"You wasted no time in sending for me," Ewing remarked.

The Governor-General then shrugged gracefully. "I learned of your arrival this morning. It is not often that an ambassador from an outworld colony arrives on Earth. In truth,"—he seemed to sigh—"you are the first in more than three hundred years. You have aroused considerable curiosity, you know."

"I'm aware of that." Casually he sipped at his drink, letting the warmth trickle down his throat. "I intended to contact you tomorrow, or perhaps the next day. But you've saved me that trouble."

"My curiosity got the better of me," Mellis admitted with a smile. "There is so little for me to do, you see, in the way of official duties—"

"I'll make my visit brief by starting at the beginning," Ewing said. "I'm here to ask for Earth's help, in behalf of my planet, the Free World of Corwin."

"Help?" The Governor-General looked alarmed.

"We face invasion by extragalactic foes," Ewing said. Quickly he sketched out an account of the Klodni depredations, adding, "And we sent several messages to Earth to let you know what the situation was. We assume those messages must have gone astray en route. And so I've come in person."

"The messages did not go astray, Mr. Ewing."

"No?"

"They were duly received and forwarded to my office. I read them. They are filed somewhere in the bowels of Capital City, their contents duly recorded along the ten-mile length of the computer my remote predecessors found so necessary in the execution of their office."

"You didn't answer," Ewing said accusingly. "You deliberately ignored them. Why?"

"Because there is no possible way we can help you or anyone else, Mr. Ewing. Will you believe that?"

"I don't understand."

"We have no weapons, no military forces, no ability or desire to fight. *We have no spaceships.*"

Ewing's eyes widened. He had found it impossible to believe it when the Sirian Firnik



had told him Earth was defenseless; but to hear it from the lips of the Governor-General himself—

"There must be some assistance Earth can give. There are only eighteen million of us on Corwin," Ewing said. "We have a defense corps, of course, but it's hardly adequate. Our stockpile of nuclear weapons is low—"

"Ours is non-existent," Mellis interrupted. "Such fissionable material as we have is allocated to operation of the municipal atompiles."

Ewing stared at the tips of his fingers. Chill crept over him, reminding him of the year spent locked in the grip of frost as he slept through a crossing of fifty light-years. For nothing.

Mellis smiled sadly. "There is one additional aspect to your request for help. You say the Klodni will not attack your world for a decade, nor ours for a century."

Ewing nodded.

"In that case," Mellis said, "the situation becomes academic from our viewpoint. Before a decade's time has gone by, Earth will be a Sirian protectorate anyway. We will be in no position to help anybody."

The Corwinite looked up at the melancholy face of Earth's

Governor-General. There were depths to Mellis' eyes that told Ewing much; Mellis was deeply conscious of his position as ruler in the declining days of Terrestrial power.

Ewing said, "How sure can you be of that?"

"Certain as I am of my name," Mellis replied. "The Sirians are infiltrating Earth steadily. There are more than a million of them here now. Any day I expect to be notified that I am no longer even to be Earth's figurehead."

"Can't you prevent them coming to Earth?"

Mellis turned and stared reproachfully at the Corwinite.

"How?"

"Restrictions on their entry—spaceport regulations—legislation—"

Mellis shook his head. "We're powerless. The events to come are inevitable. And so your Klodni worry us very little, friend Corwinite. I'll be long since dead before they arrive,—and with me Earth's glories."

"And you don't care about the colony-worlds?" Ewing snapped angrily. "You'll just sit back and let us be gobbled up by the aliens? Earth's name still means something among the colony-worlds; if you issued a general declaration of war, all the colonies would

send forces to defend us. As it is, the scattered worlds can't think of the common good; they only worry about themselves. They don't see that if they band together against the Klodni they can destroy them, while singly they will be overwhelmed. A declaration from Earth—"

"—would be meaningless, invalid, null, void, and empty," Mellis said. "Believe that, Mr. Ewing. Officially I weep for you. But as an old man soon to be pushed from his throne, I can't help you."

Ewing felt the muscles of his jaw tighten. He said nothing. He realized there was nothing at all to say.

The cloud of Sirian domination hung over an Earth without spirit. He had come to a world even more helpless than his own.

He stood up. "I guess we've reached the end of our interview, then. I'm sorry to have taken up your time, Governor-General Mellis."

"I had hoped—" Mellis began. He broke off, then shook his head. "No. It was foolish."

"Sir?"

The older man smiled palely. "There had been a silly thought in my mind today, ever since I learned that a man styling himself Ambassador from Corwin had landed in

Valloin. I see clearly now how wild a thought it was."

"Might I ask—"

Mellis shrugged. "Well, the thought I had was that perhaps you had come in the name of Terrestrial independence—to offer us a pledge of your world's aid against the encroachments of the Sirians—but you need aid yourself. It was foolish of me to expect to find a defender in the stars."

"I'm—I'm sorry," Ewing said haltingly.

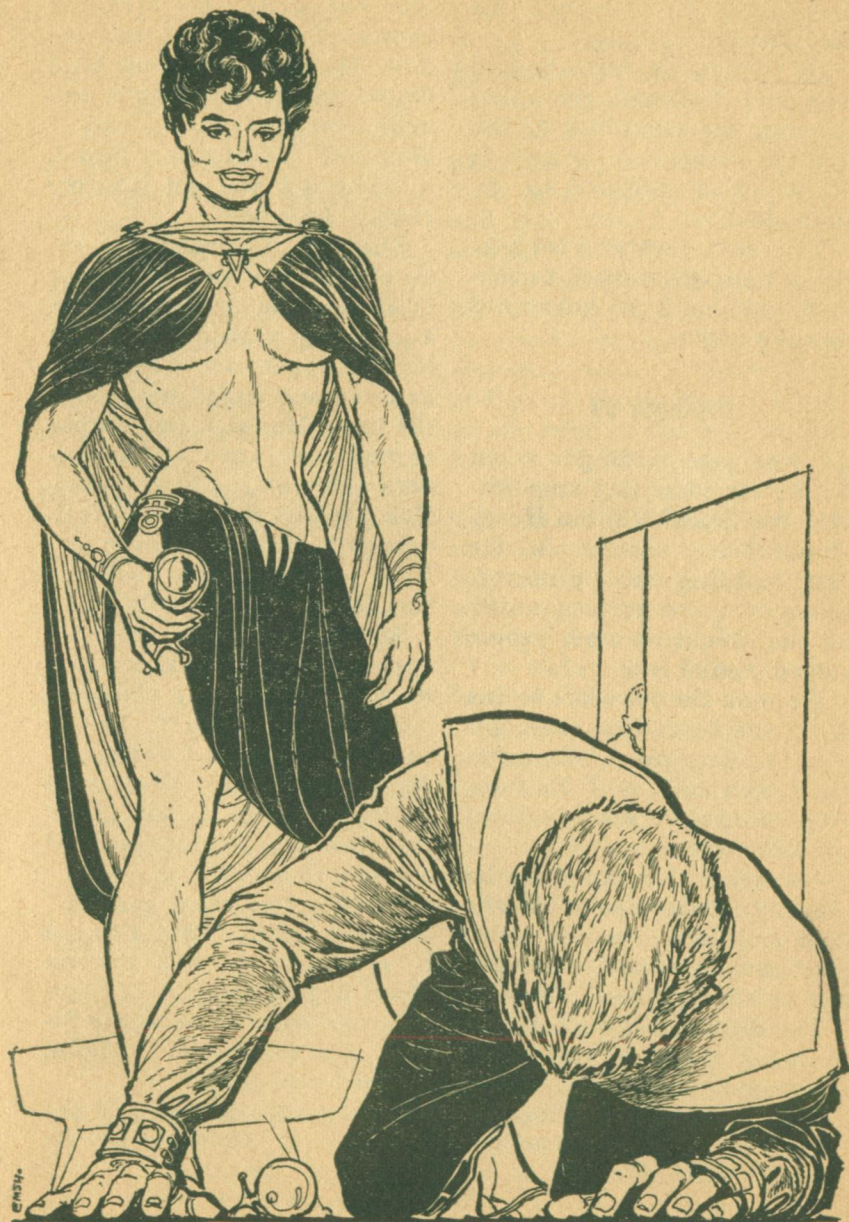
"For what? For being unable to help? We owe each other apologies, in that case." Mellis shook his head. "We have known brightness too long. Now the shadows start to lengthen. Aliens steal forth out of Andromeda to destroy, and children of Earth turn on their mother."

He peered through the increasing gloom of the room at Ewing. "But I must be boring you with my ramblings, Mr. Ewing. You had better leave, now. Leave Earth, I mean. Go defend your homeworld. We are beyond help."

He pulled a wall-switch and a robot servitor appeared, gliding noiselessly through the opening doors.

Ewing felt a flood of pity for the old man whose misfortune it was to hold the supreme office of Earth at this





dark time. He clenched his fists; he said nothing.

In silence he left the old man and followed the robot through the corridors to the lift. He descended on a shaft of magnetic radiance to the street-level.

The car was waiting for him. He got in; the turbos thrummed briefly and the homeward journey began.

## CHAPTER VI

IT WAS past midnight when the car came to a stop outside the Grand Valloin Hotel. Hundreds of rooms in the vast building still glittered, though; it was the beginning of the weekend, and people stayed awake late.

He took the liftshaft to his floor, the forty-first, and got out. The deep pile of the crimson carpet cushioned his footsteps as he made his way down the hall toward his room.

He pressed his thumb to the identity-attuned plate of the door and said in a low voice, pitched so it would not awake any of his neighbors, "Open."

The door rolled back. Unexpectedly, the light was on in his room.

"Hello," said Byra Clork.

Ewing froze in the doorway and stared bewilderedly at the broad-shouldered Sirian girl.

She was sitting quite calmly in the relaxochair by the window. A bottle of some kind rested on the night-table, and next to it two glasses, one of them half full of amber liquid.

"How did you get into my room?" he asked.

She had discarded her severely-tailored suit of earlier in the evening, and now wore a clinging plastic wrap that left the upper part of her body exposed and ended just above the knee. Her skin was deeply tanned; her arms and shoulders were extremely well-muscled. Despite the rounded fullness of her breasts, Ewing saw little feminine about her; she was too steely, too cold.

She said, "I asked the management to give me a pass-key to your room. They obliged."

"Just like that?" Ewing snapped. "I guess I didn't understand the way Terrestrial hotels operated. I was under the innocent impression that a man's room was his own."

"That's the usual custom," she said lightly. "But I found it necessary to talk to you about urgent matters. Matters of great importance to the Sirian Consulate in Valloin, whom I represent."

Ewing became aware of the fact that he was holding the door open. He released it, and it closed automatically. "It's



a little late in the evening for conducting Consulate business, isn't it?" he asked.

She smiled. "It's never too late for some things. Would you like a drink?"

He ignored the glass she held out to him. He repressed any emotions that began to rise within him, even anger. He felt no desire for this girl. He merely wanted her to leave his room.

"How did you get in my room?" he repeated.

She pointed behind him, to the enameled sheet of regulations behind the door. "It's up there plainly enough on your door. *'The management of this Hotel reserves the right to enter and inspect any of the rooms at any time.'* I'm carrying out an inspection."

"You're not the management!"

"I'm employed by the management," she said sweetly. She produced a glossy yellow card which she handed over to the puzzled Ewing.

He read it.

ROLLUN FIRNIK  
Manager,  
Grand Valloin Hotel

"What does this mean?"

"It means that the robots at the desk are directly responsible to Firnik. He runs this

hotel. Sirian investors bought it eight years ago, and delegated him to act as their on-the-spot representative. And in turn he delegated me to visit you in your room tonight. Now that everything's nice and legal, Ewing, sit down and and let's talk. Relax."

Uncertainly Ewing slipped off his coat and opened the clothes-closet; the robot arms emerged, took it from him, and hung it up. He sat down on the edge of the bed, facing her.

"We've had one conversation already today, haven't we? A highly inconclusive and fragmentary one, which ended when you ran away from me." Ewing moistened his lips. "Just before you left me you warned me that—"

"Forget about that!"

The sudden whiteness of her face told him one thing he had been anxious to know: they were being watched. He had nearly revealed something she had not wanted the watchers to find out.

"I—have different instructions now," she said hesitantly. "Won't you have a drink?"

He shook his head. "I've already had more than my share today, thanks. And I'm tired. Now that you've gotten in here, suppose you tell me what you want."

"You visited Governor-General Mellis tonight, didn't you?" she asked abruptly.

"Did I?"

"You don't have to be mysterious about it," she said sharply. "You were seen leaving and returning in an official car. Don't waste your breath by denying you had an interview with the Governor-General."

Ewing shrugged. "How would it concern you, assuming that I did?"

With elaborate care she drew a cigarette from her bag, flicked the autolighter, and took a deep puff. A cloud of greenish-yellow smoke rose immediately from her lips.

"Your presence on Earth worries us," she said. "By *us* I mean the interests of the Sirian government, whom I represent. We have a definite financial interest in Earth. We don't want to see that investment jeopardized."

Ewing frowned in curiosity. "You haven't made things much clearer."

"Briefly, we wonder whether or not you—representing Corwin or possibly a league of the outworld colonies—have territorial designs on Earth," she said slowly. "I've been utterly blunt, now. Too blunt, perhaps. We Sirians are poor at diplomacy; we have a racial

characteristic of always coming directly to the point."

"I'll answer you with equal bluntness: there's no outworld colony league, and I'm not on Earth with the remotest intention of establishing a dominion here."

"Then why are you here?"

He scowled impatiently. "I explained all that to our friend Firnik this morning, only a few minutes after I had entered the spaceport terminal. I told him that Corwin's in danger of an alien invasion, and that I had come to Earth seeking help."

"Yes, you told him that. And you expected him to *believe* that story?"

Exasperated, Ewing howled, "Dammit, why not? It's the *truth*!"

"That any intelligent person would cross fifty light-years simply to ask military aid from the weakest and most helpless planet in the universe? You can think up better lies than that one," she said mockingly.

He stared at her. Under the evenly distributed glow-lighting of the room her tanned face had taken on a bronze sheen; flecks of perspiration beaded her bare upper body, and she seemed to glisten. She held the glass cupped in her hand without drinking.



"We're an isolated planet," he said in a quiet but intense voice. "We didn't know anything at all about the current state of Earth's culture. We *thought* Earth could help us. I came on a fool's errand, and I'm going home again tomorrow, a sadder and wiser man. Right now I'm tired and I want to get some sleep. Will you leave?"

**S**HE ROSE without warning and took a seat next to him on the bed. The nearness of her body did nothing to arouse him. He realized dreadingly that the Sirians evidently suspected him of being the key nexus of a vast secret organization centering in the outworld colonies, whose main purpose was to achieve dominion over battered old Earth and whose effect would be to thwart the intentions and designs of Sirius IV.

The Sirians were fanatics; once convinced of his high position in this mythical conspiracy, no mere words of his could serve to convince them of his innocence.

"All right," she said in a husky but surprisingly soft voice. "I'll tell Firnik you're here for the reasons you say you are."

Her words might have star-

tled him, but he was expecting them. It was a gambit designed to keep him off guard. The Sirian methods were crude ones.

"Thanks," he said sarcastically. "Your faith in me is heartwarming."

She moved closer to him. "Why don't you have a drink with me? I'm not *all* Sirian Consulate, you know. I do have an after-hours personality, too, much as you may find it hard to believe."

He sensed her warmth against his body. She reached out, poured him a drink, and forced the glass into his reluctant hand. He wondered whether Firnik were watching this at the other end of the spy-beam.

Her hands caressed his shoulders, massaging gently. Ewing looked down at her pityingly. Her eyes were closed, her lips moist, slightly parted. *Maybe she isn't faking*, he thought. But even so, he wasn't interested.

He moved suddenly away from her, and she nearly lost her balance. Her eyes opened wide; for an instant naked hatred blazed in them, but she recovered quickly and assumed a pose of hurt innocence.

"Why did you do that? Don't you like me?"

Ewing smiled coldly. "I find

you amusing. But I don't like to make love in front of a spy-beam."

"How do you know—"

"Furthermore," he went on, "you probably aren't aware of this, but the planet I come from is passing through a hopelessly puritanical cultural phase just now. I tend to view my friends' attitudes with some reservations, but I'm pretty thoroughly conditioned by my upbringing none the less. And I have a wife on Corwin to whom I prefer to be faithful."

Her eyes narrowed; her lips curled downward in a momentary scowl, and then she laughed—derisive silver laughter. "You think that was an *act*? That I was doing all that for the greater glory of the Fatherland?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She slapped him. It was utterly predictable; he had been waiting for it from the moment the affirmative word left his lips. The blow had astonishing force behind it; Byra Clark packed quite a wallop.

"Will you leave now?" he asked.

"I might as well," she muttered bitterly. She glowered at him. "If you're a sample of Corwinite manhood, I'm glad they don't come here more often than once every five hun-

dred years. Machine! Robot!"

She picked up a light wrap that had been on the back of the chair, and arranged it around her shoulders and bosom. Ewing made no move to help her. He waited impassively, arms folded.

"You're incredible," she said—half scornfully, half otherwise. She paused; then a light entered her eyes. "So you insist on treating me as a lady. I might kill you for it, but I won't. Will you have a drink with me, at least, before I go?"

She was being crafty, he thought, but clumsily so. She had offered him the drink so many times in the past half hour that he would be a fool not to suspect it of being drugged. He could be crafty too.

"All right," he said. "I'll have a drink."

He picked up the glass she had poured for him, and handed her the half-full glass that she had held—untasted—throughout the time. He looked expectantly at her.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

"Waiting for you to take a drink first."

"Still full of strange suspicions, eh?" She lifted her glass and plainly took a deep draft. Then she handed her glass



to Ewing, took his, and sipped it also.

"There," she said, exhaling briefly. "I'm still alive. No deadly poison lurks in either glass. Believe me?"

He smiled. "This time, if no other."

Still smiling, he lifted the glass. The liquor was warm and potent; he felt it course down his throat. A moment later, his legs wobbled.

He struggled to stay up. The room swirled around him; he saw her triumphant, grinning face above him, circling madly as if in orbit. He dropped to his knees and clung to the carpeting for support.

"It was drugged," he said.

"Of course. It was a drug that doesn't happen to react on Sirian metabolisms. We weren't sure whether it worked on Corwinites; now we know."

He gripped the carpet. The room rocked wildly. He felt sick-stomached and bitterly angry at himself for having let her taunt him into taking the drink. He fought for consciousness. He was unable to rise.

Still conscious, he heard the door of the room open. He did not look up. He heard Byra say, "Did you watch it the whole time?"

"We did." The voice was

Firnik's. "You still think he's holding back?"

"I'm sure of it," Byra said. Her tone was vindictive. "He'll need some interrogation before he starts talking."

"We'll take care of that," Firnik said.

The Corwinite tried to cry for help, but all that escaped his quivering lips was a thin, whining moan.

"He's still fighting the drug," he heard Byra say. "It ought to knock him out any minute."

Shimmering waves of pain beat at him. He lost his grip in the carpet and went toppling over to one side. He felt strong hands gripping him under the arms and lifting him to his feet, but his eyes would not focus any longer. He writhed feebly and was still. Darkness closed in about him.

## CHAPTER VII

COLDNESS clung to him. He lay perfectly still, feeling the sharp cold all about him. His hands were held to his sides by a spun-foam web. His legs were likewise pionioned. And all about him the cold, chilling his skin, numbing his brain, freezing his body.

He made no attempt to move and scarcely any even to think. He was content to lie back

here in the comforting darkness and wait. He believed he was on the ship heading homeward to Corwin.

He was wrong. The sound of voices far above him penetrated his consciousness, and he stirred uncertainly, knowing there could be no voices aboard the ship. It was a one-man ship. There was no room for someone else.

But the voices continued.

Ewing moved about restlessly, groping upward toward consciousness. Who could be making these blurred, muzzy sounds?

For an instant he lapsed back into peaceful mindlessness. *I'm almost home. Maybe I'm in orbit around Corwin right now*, he thought.

But the insistent conversational murmur continued to intrude itself upon his numbed consciousness. He shook again, aware that he should awaken and investigate the mystery.

"—better not say anything else. He seems to be coming out of it."

"It'll take him a few minutes more," said another voice. "He's really under."

*Really under what?* Ewing wondered. He felt the coldness begin to drain away from him now. He was waking up. He knew what his next task was:

to reach out and grasp the lever near his wrist that would free him from the cradling entanglements of the web.

Eyes still closed, body held rigid, he extended his hand and groped for the lever. His clutching hand closed on air. He moved his hand in as wide a radius as his wrist would permit.

There was no lever. Not anywhere within reach.

Something was very wrong. His subliminal training had been intense, and one of the sharpest of the commands was, *Upon awakening, use right hand to find lever that controls the web-dissolving system.*

Had they changed the design of the ship?

His hand moved in a wider circle. Still no lever. To his astonishment he discovered that his hand was not bound by anything; he could move it several feet in any direction, up, down, right, left.

He lifted the hand and touched his chest with it, then his thigh. He felt cloth—not spun-foam.

No web bound him.

"Get ready," the voice said far above him. "He's almost awake now."

Ewing's free hand explored frantically, but there was no web at all. No levers. And



voices in the ship. A cloud of haze obscured his vision. He sat up, feeling stiff muscles protesting as he pushed his way up. His eyes opened, closed again immediately as a glare of light exploded in them, and gradually opened again. His head cleared.

His mouth tasted sour; his tongue seemed to be covered with thick fuzz. His eyes stung. His head hurt, and there was a leaden emptiness in his stomach.

"We've been waiting more than two days for you to wake up, Ewing," said a familiar voice. "That stuff Byra gave you must have really been potent."

He broke through the fog that hazed his mind and looked around. He was in a large room with triangular windows. The walls were made of some milk-white irradiated plastic; pearly-rose fibers glinted in its depths. Around him were four figures: Rollun Firnik, Byra Clork, and two swarthy Sirians whom he did not know.

He was not in the ship. That had been an illusion of his drug-clouded mind.

"Where am I?" he demanded.

Firnik said, "You're in the lowest level of the Consulate building. We brought you here

early Sixday morning. This is Oneday. You've been asleep."

"Drugged's a better word," Ewing said bleakly. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the cot. Immediately one of the unknown Sirians stepped forward, put one hand on his chest, grabbed his ankles in his other hand, and heaved him back on the cot. Ewing started to rise again; this time he drew a stinging backhand slap that split his lower lip and sent a dribble of blood down his chin.

"Do I have permission to wipe my chin?" he asked bitterly of Firnik. The Sirian made no response; Ewing rubbed the moist spot tenderly.

"What right do you have to keep me here? I'm a citizen of Corwin. I have my rights."

Firnik chuckled. "Corwin's fifty light-years away. Right now you're on Earth. The only rights you have are the ones I say you have."

Angrily Ewing attempted to spring to his feet. "I demand that you release me! I—"

"Hit him," Firnik said tonelessly.

**A**GAIN the barrel-bodied Sirian moved forward silently and slapped him—in the same place. Ewing felt the cut on his lip widen.

"Now, then," Firnik said in a conversational voice. "If you are quite sure you'll refrain from causing any more trouble, we can begin. You know Miss Clork, I think."

Ewing nodded.

"And these gentlemen here"—Firnik indicated the two silent Sirians—"are Sergeant Drayl and Lieutenant Thirsk of the City of Valloin Police. I want you to realize that there'll be no need for you to try to call the police, since we have two of their finest men with us today."

"Those? Police? Aren't they from Sirius IV?"

"Naturally." Firnik's eyes narrowed. "Sirians make the best policemen. More than half the local police are natives of my planet."

Ewing considered that silently. The hotels, the police; what else? The Sirians would not need a bloody coup to establish their power officially; they had already taken control of Earth by default, with the full consent if not approval of the Terrestrials. When the time came, all the Sirians needed to do was to give Governor-General Melis formal notice that he was relieved of his duties, and Earth would pass officially into Sirian possession.

The Corwinite let his gaze

roam uneasily around the room. Unfamiliar-looking machines stood in the corners of the room. Torture devices. He looked at Firnik.

"What do you want with me?"

The Sirian folded his thick arms and said, "Information. You've been very stubborn, Ewing."

"I've been telling the truth. What do you want me to do—make something up to please you?"

"You're aware that the government of Sirius IV is soon to extend a protectorate to Earth," Firnik said. "You fail to realize that this step is being done for the mother world's own good, to protect it in its declining days against possible depredations from hostile worlds in this system. I'm not talking about hypothetical invaders from other galaxies."

"Hypothetical? But—"

"Quiet. Let me finish. You, representing Corwin and possibly some of the other distant colonies, have come to Earth to verify the rumor that such a protectorate is about to be created. The worlds you represent have arrived at the totally false conclusion that there is something malevolent about our attitude toward Earth—that we have so-called



imperialistic 'designs' on Earth. You fail to understand the altruistic motives behind our decision to relieve the Terrestrials of the tiresome burden of governing themselves. And so your planet has sent you here as a spy, to determine the relationship between Sirius IV and Earth, and to make necessary arrangements with the Terrestrials for a 'defense' of Earth against us. To this end you've conferred with Governor-General Mellis, and have an appointment to visit one Myreck, a dangerous radical and potential revolutionary. Why do you insist on denying this?"

"Because it's a concoction of nonsense," Ewing said stonily. "You're having a paranoid nightmare about spies, growing out of your own guilt-feelings, and you've decided to pick me as your scapegoat."

This time Firnik did not have to give the order. Lieutenant Thirsk did; Sergeant Drayl moved forward a third time and slapped Ewing. The Corwinite's neck clicked sharply at the blow; he felt a blinding surge of pain.

Firnik shook his head sadly. "We're not anxious to hurt you, Ewing. Why can't you cooperate?"

"Because you're talking idiotic gibberish! I'm—"

The side of Drayl's stiffened hand descended on Ewing at the point where his neck joined his shoulder. He gagged but retained control over himself. "You've told both Miss Clork and myself," Firnik said, "that your purpose in coming to Earth was to seek Terrestrial aid against an alleged invasion of non-human beings from beyond the borders of this galaxy. It's a transparently false story. It makes you and your planet look utterly pitiful."

"It happens to be true," Ewing said doggedly.

Firnik snorted. "True? There is no such invasion!"

"I've seen the photos of Barnholt—"

Firnik nodded and the hand descended again. "There is no such invasion," the Sirian repeated implacably. "It's a hoax which you're using to cover your true activities on Earth. How can we believe that any world would be foolish enough to send a man to Earth for aid? To *Earth!*"

"I've told you," Ewing said leadenly. "We've been out of contact with the stream of events. We thought Earth was the dominant planet in this part of the galaxy. We had no way of knowing—"

Drayl's fist rammed into his stomach. Relentlessly Firnik

said, "Your story is ridiculous. I don't want to hear any more of it."

"But can't you believe we were out of touch? *You* are! There's an invasion going on a few hundred light-years from here and you keep telling me—"

The barrage of punches that resulted nearly collapsed him. He compelled himself to cling to consciousness, but he was dizzy with pain.

"You pose a grave threat to joint Sirian-Terrestrial security," Firnik said sonorously. "We must have the truth from you, so we can guide our actions accordingly."

*You've had the truth*, Ewing said silently.

"We have means of interrogation," Firnik went on. "Most of them, unfortunately, involve serious demolition of the personality. We are not anxious to damage you; you would be more useful to us with your mind intact."

Ewing stared blankly at him—and at Byra, standing wordlessly at his side. There was no sign of pity on her face. She might have been carved from a block of ice. He knew there would be no help forthcoming from her.

"I've told you all I can tell you," Ewing said wearily. "Anything else will be lies."

Firnik shrugged. "We have time. The present mode of interrogation will continue until either some response is forthcoming or we see that your defenses are too strong. After that"—he indicated the hooded machines in the corners of the room—"other means will be necessary."

Ewing smiled faintly despite the pain and the growing stiffness of his lip. He thought for a flickering moment of his wife, Laira, his son, Blade, and all the others on Corwin, waiting hopefully for him to return with good news. And instead of a triumphant return bearing tidings of aid, he faced torture, maiming, possible death at the hands of Sirians who refused to believe the truth.

Well, they would find out the truth soon enough, he thought blackly. After the normal means of interrogation were shown to be useless, they would put into use the mind-pick and the brainburner and the other cheerful devices waiting in the shadowy corners for him. They would turn his mind inside out and reveal its inmost depths, and then they would find he had been telling the truth.

Perhaps then they would begin to worry about the Klodni. Ewing did not care. Cor-



win was lost to the aliens whether he returned or not, and possibly it was better to die now than to live to see his planet's doom.

He looked up at the Sirian's cold, heavy features with something like pity. "Go ahead," he said gently. "Start interrogating. You're in for a surprise."

## CHAPTER VIII

A TIMELESS STRETCH of blurred minutes, hours, perhaps even days slipped by. They had taken away Ewing's watch, along with his wallet, and so he had no way of perceiving the passage of time. After the first few hours, he hardly cared.

They never let him sleep. One of them was always with him, prodding him at odd moments, keeping him awake. Ewing grew to tell, even with his eyes shut, the difference in the prods of Firnik, Drayl, and Thirsk. Firnik's was always a sharp jab between two of his upper ribs; Drayl poked roughly and clumsily at his stomach, while Thirsk favored short quick thrusts at the base of his throat. Byra invariably dug her nails into his flesh.

The questioning went on around the clock. Usually it was Firnik who stood above

him and urged him to confess, while Drayl or Thirsk hovered at one side, punching him from time to time. Sometimes it was Byra who interrogated him.

He felt his resources weakening. His answers became mere hazy mumbles, and when they became too incoherent they dashed cold water in his face to revive him. After some time not even the cold water had any effect; he was asleep with his eyes open, staring glazedly ahead, seeing nothing.

Thirsk forced an anti-sleep tablet down his throat. The comforting haze vanished.

They were showing signs of weakening too. Firnik looked red-eyed from the round-the-clock strain; occasionally his voice took on a ragged rasping quality. He pleaded with Ewing, cajoled him to end his stubbornness.

Once when Ewing had muttered for the millionth time, "I told you the truth the first time," Byra looked sharply at Firnik and said, "Maybe he's sincere. Maybe we're making a mistake. How long can we keep this up?"

"Shut up!" Firnik blazed. He wheeled on the girl and sent her spinning to the floor with a solid slap. A moment later, ignoring Ewing, he

picked her up and muttered an apology. "We'll try the truth drugs," he said. "We're getting nowhere this way."

They tried the truth-drugs. Ewing submitted to the injection passively, and sat hunched over waiting for the interrogation to resume.

"What did you talk about with Mellis?" Firnik barked.

Ewing felt deep inner peace; there was not even the compulsion to conceal anything. "I told him about the Klodni invasion, and that I was here asking for help. He explained that Earth had no help to give us, that we had come to the worst possible source of aid. Then—"

"You see?" Byra asked. "Not even the truth drug has any effect. He *must* be telling the truth."

Coldly Firnik said, "He comes from another world. Perhaps his metabolism absorbs the drug. Perhaps it takes effect more slowly on Corwinites than on other people. Or maybe he's been hypnotically conditioned not to react to its influence."

The interrogation continued. Ewing was barely conscious; his answers to the questions put to him were muffled, ghostly. He realized only dimly what was taking place.

"It's no use," Byra said some time later. "You can't tell me that he's pretending."

Firnik shook his head. "I don't know what he's doing. But I want to find out. Drayl, the mindpick."

Vaguely Ewing heard something being rolled over the stone floor toward his cot. He did not look up. He heard Byra saying, "There'll be nothing left of him when the pick's through digging through his mind."

"I can't help that, Byra. Drayl, lower the helmet and attach the electrodes. Byra, start the recorder. Thirsk, get down there and keep an eye on the encephalograph. The moment life-intensity gets below Plus Two, yell out."

Ewing opened his eyes and saw a complex instrument by the side of his cot; its myriad dials and meters looked like fierce eyes to him. A gleaming copper helmet hung from a jointed neck. Drayl was moving the helmet toward him, lowering it over his head. Clamps within the helmet gripped his skull gently.

He felt metal things being attached to his wrists. He remained perfectly still. He felt no fear, only relief that the interrogation was at last approaching its conclusion. He knew a little about mind-



picks; it would thrust downward into the very memory chambers of his mind, probing, recording, leaving behind it a trail of irremediable destruction. When it was over, there would be no such personality as Baird Ewing, merely a sightless hulk on a cot in the Sirian Consulate's basement. There would be an end to pain and suffering.

"It's ready to function, sir," came Drayl's voice.

"Very well." Firnik sounded a little tense. "Thirsk, how are the preliminary readings?"

"Plus six, sir."

"Watch them. Keep an eye on the fluctuations. Ewing, can you hear me?"

"Yes," he said after some moments of silence.

"Good. You have your last chance. Why did the Free World of Corwin decide to send you to Earth?"

"Because of the Klodni," Ewing began wearily. "They came out of Andromeda and—"

Firnik cut him off. "That's enough! Byra, get ready to record. I'm turning on the pick."

**U**NDER THE HELMET, Ewing relaxed, waiting for the numbing thrust. A second passed, and another.

He heard Firnik's voice, in

sudden alarm: "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"Never mind that." It was a strange voice, firm and commanding. "Get away from that machine, Firnik. I've got a stunner here, and I'm itching to use it on you. Over there, against the wall. You too, Byra. Drayl, unclamp his wrists and get that helmet off him."

Ewing felt the machinery lifting away from him. He blinked, looked around the room without comprehending. A tall figure stood near the door, holding a glittering little gun firmly fixed on the Sirians. He wore a face-mask, a golden sheath that effectively concealed his features.

The newcomer crossed the room, coming to the side of Ewing's cot, and lifted him with one hand while keeping the stunner trained on the baffled Sirians. Ewing was too weak to stand on his own power; he wobbled uncertainly, but the stranger held him up.

"Get on the phone, Firnik, and make sure you keep the vision off. Call the Consulate guard and tell him that the prisoner is being remanded to custody and will leave the building. The stunner's on full intensity now. One phony word and I'll freeze you."

Ewing felt like a figure in a dream. Cradled against his rescuer's side, he watched uncomprehendingly as a bitterly angry Firnik phoned upstairs and relayed the stranger's message.

"All right, now," the stranger said. "I'm leaving the building and I'm taking Ewing with me. But first"—he made an adjustment on the gun he was carrying—"I think it's wise to take precautions. This ought to keep you out of circulation for a couple of hours, at least."

Firnik made a strangled sound deep in his throat and leaped forward, arms clawing for the masked stranger. The other fired once; a blue stream of radiance came noiselessly from the muzzle of the gun and Firnik froze in his tracks. The stranger directed his fire around the room until Byra, Drayl, and Thirsk were just three more statues.

Half-dragged, half-stumbling, Ewing let himself be carried from the room and into a lift. He sensed upward motion. The lift stopped; he was moving forward. Gray waves of pain shuddered through him. He longed to stop where he was and go to sleep, but the inexorable pressure of the stranger's arm carried him along.

Fresh air reached his nostrils. He coughed. He had become accustomed to the foul staleness of the room that had been his prison.

Through half-open eyes he watched his companion hail a cab; he was pushed inside, and heard the voice say, "Take us to the Grand Valloin Hotel, please."

"Looks like your friend's really been on a binge," the driver said. "Don't remember the last time I saw a man looking so used up."

The gentle motion of the cab was soothing; after a few moments Ewing dropped off to sleep. He awoke later, once again being supported by the stranger. Upward. Into a corridor. Standing in front of a door.

The door opened. They went in.

It was his room at the hotel.

He staggered forward and fell face-first on the bed. He was aware of the stranger's motions as he undressed him, washed his face, applied depilator, freshened him.

He was carried into the adjoining room and held under the shower until the ion-beam had peeled away the grime. Then, at last, he was allowed to sleep. The bedsheets were warm and womblike; he nestled in them gratefully, let-



ting his tortured body relax.

Vaguely he heard the door close behind him. He slept.

He woke sometime later, his body stiff and sore in a hundred places. He rolled over in the bed, clamping a hand to his forehead to make the throbbing back of his eyes stop.

Memory came flooding back. He recalled finding Byra in his room, taking the drugged liquor, being carried off to the Sirian Consulate. Blurred days of endless torment, interrogation, a mindpick machine lowered over his head—

Sudden rescue from an unknown source. Sleep. His memories ended there.

Achingly he crawled from the bed. He switched on the room telestat and dialed the news channel. The autotyper rattled, and a ribbon of news report began to unwind.

*Fourday, 13th Fifth-month, 3806. The office of Governor-General Mellis announced today that plans are continuing for construction of the Gerd River Dam, despite Sirian objections that the proposed power-plant project would interfere with power rights granted them under the Treaty of 3804. The Governor-General declared—*

Ewing did not care what the Governor-General had declared. His sole purpose in turning on the telestat had been to find out the date.

Fourday, the thirteenth of Fifthmonth. He calculated backward. He had had his interview with Mellis the previous Fiveday evening; that had been the seventh of Fifthmonth. On Fiveday night—Sixday morning, actually—he had been kidnapped by Firnik.

Two days later, on Oneday the tenth, he had awakened and the torture began. Oneday, Twoday, Threeday—and this was Fourday. The torture had lasted no more than two days, then. The stranger had rescued him either on Twoday or Threeday, and he had slept through until today.

He remembered something else: he had made his appointment with Myreck for Fournight. Tonight.

The housephone chimed.

Ewing debated answering it for a moment; it chimed again more insistently, and he switched it on. The robotic voice said, "There is a call for you, Mr. Ewing."

Moments later the room-screen brightened and Ewing saw the hairless image of Scholar Myreck staring solicitously at him. "Have I

disturbed you?" Myreck asked.

"Not at all," Ewing said. "I was just thinking about you. We had an appointment for tonight, didn't we?"

"Ah—yes. But I've just received an anonymous call telling me you had had—ah—a rather unfortunate experience. I was wondering if I could be of any service to you in alleviating your pain."

Ewing recollected the miraculous massage Myreck had given him earlier. He also considered the fact that the hotel he was in belonged to Firnik, and no doubt the Sirian would be fully recuperated from his stunning soon and out looking for him. It was unwise to remain in the hotel any longer.

He smiled. "I'd be very grateful if you would be. You said you'd arrange to pick me up, didn't you?"

"Yes. We will be there in a few minutes."

## CHAPTER IX

It took only eleven minutes from the time Ewing broke contact to the moment when Myreck rang up from the hotel lobby to announce that he had arrived. Ewing took the rear liftshaft down, and moved cautiously through the vast

lobby toward the energitron concession, which was where the Scholar had arranged to meet him.

A group of Earthers waited there for him. He recognized Myreck, and also the uniped he had seen the first morning at the terminal. The other two were equally grotesque in appearance. In a pitiful quest for individuality, they had given themselves up to the surgeon's knife. One had a row of emerald-cut diamonds mounted crest-fashion in a bare swath cut down the center of his scalp; the inset jewels extended past his forehead, ending with one small gem at the bridge of his nose. The fourth had no lips, and a series of blue cicatrices incised in parallel on his jaws.

Myreck said, "The car is outside."

Myreck drove; or rather, he put the car in motion, and then guided it by deft occasional wrist-flicks on the direction control. They turned south, away from the spaceport, and glided along a broad highway for nearly eight miles, turning eastward sharply into what seemed like a suburban district. Ewing slumped tiredly in his corner of the car, now and then peering out at the neat, even rows of houses, each one surmount-



ed by its own glittering privacy shield.

At last they pulled up at the side of the road. Ewing was startled to see nothing before them but an empty lot.

Puzzled, he got out. Myreck stared cautiously in all directions, then took a key made of some luminous yellow metal from his pocket and advanced toward the empty lot, saying, "Welcome to the College of Abstract Science."

"Where?"

Myreck pointed at the lot. "Here, of course."

Ewing squinted; something was wrong about the air above the lot. It had a curious pinkish tinge to it; it seemed to be shimmering, as if heat-waves were rising from the neatly tended grass.

Myreck held his key in front of him, stepped into the lot, and groped briefly in mid-air as if searching for an invisible keyhole. The key vanished for three-quarters of its length.

A building appeared.

It was a glistening pink dome, much like the other houses in the neighborhood, but it had a curious impermanence about it. It seemed to be fashioned of dream-stuff. The lipless Earther grasped him firmly by the arm and pushed him forward, into

the house. The street outside disappeared.

"That's a real neat trick," Ewing said. "How do you work it?"

Myreck smiled. "The house is three microseconds out of phase with the rest of the street. It always exists just a fraction of an instant in absolute past, not enough to cause serious temporal disturbance but enough to conceal it from our many enemies."

Goggling, Ewing asked, "You have temporal control?"

The Earther nodded. "The least abstract of our sciences. A necessary defense."

**E**WING felt stunned. Gazing at the diminutive Earther with newly-born respect, he thought, *This is incredible!* Temporal control had long been deemed theoretically possible, since Blackmuir's equations more than a thousand years before. But Corwin had had little opportunity for temporal research, and what had been done had seemed to imply that the Blackmuir figures were either incorrect or else technologically unimplementable. And for these over-decorated Earthers to have developed them! Unbelievable!

He stared through a window

at the quiet street outside. In absolute time, he knew, the scene he was observing was three microseconds in the future, but the interval was so minute that for all practical purposes it made no difference to the occupants of the house. It made a great difference to anyone outside who wanted to enter illegally, though; there was no way to enter a house that did not exist in present time.

"This must involve an enormous power-drain," Ewing said.

"On the contrary. The entire operation needs no more than a thousand watts to sustain itself. Our generator supplies fifteen-amp current. But there's time to talk of all this later. You must be exhausted. Come."

Ewing was led into a comfortably-furnished salon lined with bookreels and music-disks. Plans were pinwheeling in his head. *If these Earthers have temporal control*, he thought, *and if I can induce them to part with their device or its plans—*

*It's pretty farfetched. But we need something farfetched to save us now. It might work.*

Myreck said, "Will you sit here?"

Ewing climbed into a relax-

ing lounge. The Earther dialed him a drink and slipped a music-disk into the player. Vigorous music filled the room. He liked the sort of sound it made—a direct emotional appeal.

"What music is that?"

"Beethoven," Myreck said. "One of our ancients. Would you like me to relax you?"

"Please."

Ewing felt Myreck's hands at the base of his skull once again; he tensed, waiting for the impact of the Earther's fingers, but this time no impact came. Myreck merely stroked the nape of Ewing's neck a few moments, causing no particular release from pain. Ewing waited. Myreck's hands probed the sides of his neck, lifted, jabbed down sharply. For one brief moment Ewing felt all sensation leave his body; then physical awareness returned, but without pain.

He leaned back, exulting in the sensation. The music was fascinating, and the drink he held warmed him. It was comforting to know that somewhere in the city of Valloin was a sanctuary where he was free from Firnik.

The Earthers were filing in now—eleven or twelve of them, shy little men with curious artificial deformities



of diverse sorts. Myreck said, "These are the members of the College currently in residence. I don't know what sort of colleges you have on Corwin, but ours is one only in the most ancient sense of the word. We draw no distinctions between master and pupil here. We all learn equally from one another."

"I see. And which of you developed the temporal control system?"

"Oh—none of us did that. Powlis was responsible, a hundred years ago. We've simply maintained the apparatus and modified it."

"A hundred years?" Ewing was appalled. "It's a hundred years since the art was discovered and you're still lurking in holes and corners, letting the Sirians push you out of control of your own planet?"

Ewing realized he had spoken too strongly. The Earthers looked abashed; some of them were at the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry," he said.

A slim Earther with surgically-augmented shoulders said, "Is it true that your world is under attack by alien beings from a far galaxy?"

"Yes. We expect attack in ten years."

"And will you be able to defeat them?"

Ewing shrugged. "We'll try. They've conquered the first four worlds they've attacked, including two that were considerably stronger than we are. We don't have much hope of winning. But we'll try."

Sadly Myreck said, "We had been wondering if it would be possible for us to leave Earth and emigrate to your world soon. But if you face destruction—"

"Emigrate to Corwin? Why would you do that?"

"The Sirians soon will rule here. They will put us to work for them, or else kill us. We're safe so long as we remain in this building—but we must go out from time to time."

"You have temporal control. You could duck back into yesterday to avoid pursuit."

Myreck shook his head. "Paradoxes are caused. Multiplication of personality. We fear these things, and we would hesitate to bring them about."

Shrugging, Ewing said, "You have to take chances. Caution is healthy only when not carried to excess."

"We had hoped," said a dreamy-eyed Earther sitting in the corner, "that we could arrange with you for a passage to Corwin. On the ship you

came on, possibly."

"It was a one-man ship."

Disappointment was evident. "In that case, perhaps you could send a larger ship for us. We have none, you see. Earth stopped building ships two centuries ago, and gradually most of the ones we had were either sold or fell into disuse. The Sirians now control such industries on Earth, and refuse to let us have ships. So the galaxy we once roamed is closed to us."

Ewing wished there were some way he could help these futile, likable little dreamers. But no solutions presented themselves. "Corwin has very few ships itself," he said. "Less than a dozen capable of making an interstellar journey with any reasonable number of passengers. And any ships we might have would certainly be requisitioned by the military for use in the coming war against the Klodni. I don't see any way we could manage it. Besides," he added, "even if I left Earth tomorrow, I wouldn't be back on Corwin for nearly a year. And it would take another year for me to return to Earth with a ship for you. Do you think you could hold out against the Sirians that long?"

"Possibly," Myreck said, but he sounded doubtful.

There was silence for a moment. Then the Scholar said, "Please understand that we would be prepared to pay for our passage. Not in money, perhaps—but in service. Possibly we are in command of certain scientific techniques not yet developed on your world. In that case you might find us valuable."

Ewing considered that. Certainly the Earthers had plenty to offer—the temporal-control device foremost. But he could easily picture the scene upon his return to Corwin, as he tried to get the Council to approve use of a major interstellar freighter to bring refugee scientists from Earth. It would never work. If they only had some super-weapon, he thought—

But, of course, if they had a super-weapon they would have no need of fleeing the Sirians.

He moistened his lips. "Perhaps I can think of something," he said. "The cause isn't quite hopeless yet. But meanwhile—"

"Yes?"

"I'm quite curious about your temporal-displacement equipment. Would it be possible for me to examine it?"

Myreck rose. "Come this way. The laboratory is downstairs."



They proceeded down a winding staircase into a room below, brightly lit with radiance streaming from every molecule of the walls and floor. In the center of the room stood a massive block of machinery, vaguely helical in structure, with an enormous pendulum held in suspension in its center.

"This is not the main machine," Myreck said. "In the deepest level of the building we keep the big generator that holds us out of time-phase with relation to the outside world. I could show it to you, but this machine is considerably more interesting."

"What does this one do?"

"It effects direct temporal transfer on a small-scale level. The theory behind it is complex, but the basic notion is extraordinarily simple. You see—"

"Just a moment," Ewing said, interrupting. An idea had struck him which was almost physically staggering in its impact. "Tell me: this machine could send a person into the immediate absolute past, couldn't it?"

Myreck frowned. "Why, yes. Yes. But we would never run the risk of—"

Again Ewing did not let the Earther finish his statement. "This I find very interest-

ing," he broke in. "Would you say it was theoretically possible to send—say, me—back in time to—oh, about Twoday evening of this week?"

"It could be done, yes," Myreck admitted.

A pulse pounded thunderously in Ewing's skull. His limbs felt cold and his fingers seemed to be quivering. But he fought down fear. Obviously the journey had been taken once, and successfully. He would take it again.

"Very well, then. I request a demonstration of the machine. Send me back to Twoday evening."

"But—"

"I insist," Ewing said determinedly. He knew now who his strange masked rescuer had been.

## CHAPTER X

A LOOK of blank horror appeared on the pale face of the Earthman. Myreck's thin lips moved a moment without producing sound. Finally he managed to say, in a hoarse rasp, "You can't be serious. There'd be a continuum doubling if you did that. Two Baird Ewings existing co-terminously, you see. And—"

"Is there any danger in it?" Ewing asked.

Myreck looked baffled. "We

—don't know. It's never been done. We've never dared to attempt it. The consequences might be uncontrollable."

"I'll risk it," Ewing said. He knew there had been no danger—that *first* time. He was certain now that his rescuer had been an earlier Ewing, one who had preceded him through the time-track, reached this point in time, and doubled back to become his own rescuer, precisely as he was about to do.

"I don't see how we could permit such a dangerous thing to take place," Myreck said mildly. "You place us in a most unpleasant position. The risks are great. We don't dare."

A spanner lay within Ewing's reach. He snatched it up, hefting it ominously, and said, "I'm sorry to have to do this. Either put me back to Twonight or I'll begin smashing things."

Myreck moved in a little dance of fear. "I'm sure you wouldn't consider such a violent act. We know you're a reasonable man. Surely you wouldn't—"

"Surely I would." His hands gripped the shaft tightly; sweat rolled down his forehead. He knew that his bluff would not be called, that ultimately they would yield,

for they *had* yielded, once—when? When this scene had been played out for the first time.

Limply Myreck shook his head up and down. "Very well," the little man said. "We will do as you ask. We have no choice." His face expressed an emotion as close to contempt as was possible for him—a sort of mild apologetic disdain. "If you would mount this platform, please—"

Ewing put the spanner down and suspiciously stepped forward onto the platform. Myreck made adjustments on a control panel beyond his range of vision, while the other Earthers gathered in a frightened knot to watch the proceedings.

"How do I make the return trip to Fourday?" Ewing asked suddenly.

Myreck shrugged. "By progressing through forward time at a rate of one second per second. We have no way of returning you to this time or place at any accelerated rate." He looked imploringly at Ewing. "I beg you not to force me to do this. We have not worked out fully the logic of time travel yet; we don't understand—"

"Don't worry. I'll be back. Somehow. Sometime."

He smiled with a confidence



he did not feel. He was setting foot into the darkest of realms—*yesterday*. He was armed with one comforting thought: that by venturing all, he might possibly save Corwin. By risking nothing, he would lose all.

The Earther's hand reached out for the switch. "There'll probably be a certain amount of spacial dislocation," Myreck was saying. "I hope for all our sakes that you emerge in the open, and not—"

The sentence was never finished. The laboratory and the tense group of Earthers vanished and he found himself hovering a foot in the air in the midst of a broad greensward, on a warm bright afternoon.

The hovering lasted only an instant; he tumbled heavily to the ground, sprawling forward on his hands and knees. He rose hurriedly to his feet.

**H**E WAS in a park; that much was obvious. In the distance he saw a children's playground, and something that might have been a zoological garden. Concessions sold refreshments nearby. He walked toward the closest of these booths, where a bright-haired young man was purchasing a balloon for a boy at his side

from a robot vender.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm a stranger in Valloin, and I'm afraid I've got myself lost."

"Can I help you?"

"I was out for a walk, and I'm afraid I lost my way. I'd like to get back to the Sirian Consulate. That's where I'm staying."

The Earther gaped at him a moment before recovering control. "*You walked* all the way from the Sirian Consulate to Valloin Municipal Park?"

Ewing realized he had made a major blunder. He reddened and tried to cover up for himself: "No—no, not exactly. I know I took a cab part of the way. But I don't remember which way I came, and—well—"

"You could take a cab back, couldn't you?" the young man suggested. "Of course, it's pretty expensive from here. If you want, take the Number 68 bus as far as Grand Circle, and transfer there for the downtown undertube line. The Oval Line tube will get you to the Consulate if you change at 378th Street Station."

Ewing waited patiently for the flow of directions to cease. Finally he said, "I guess I'll take the bus. Would it be troubling you to show me where I could get it?"

"At the other side of the park, near the big square entrance."

Ewing squinted. "I'm afraid I don't see it. Could we walk over there a little way—I wouldn't want to inconvenience you in any way—"

"Perfectly all right."

They left the vendor's booth and started to cross the park. Halfway toward the big entrance, the Earther stopped. Pointing, he said, "It's right over there. See? You can't miss it."

Ewing nodded. "There's one final thing—"

"Of course."

"I seem to have lost all my money in an unfortunate accident this morning. I lost my wallet, you see. Could you lend me about a hundred credits?"

"A hundred cred—! Now, see here, fellow. I don't mind giving travel directions, but a hundred credits is a little out of line! Why, it won't cost you more than one credit eighty to get to the Consulate from here."

"I know," Ewing said tightly. "But I need the hundred." He pointed a finger through the fabric of his trousers-pocket and said, "There's a stungun in this pocket, and my finger's on the stud. Suppose you very quietly hand me

a hundred credits in small notes, or I'll be compelled to use the stunner on you. I wouldn't want to do that."

The Earther glanced quickly at the boy with the balloon, playing unconcernedly fifteen feet away, and then jerked his head back to face Ewing. Without speaking, he drew out his billfold and counted out the bills. Ewing took them in equal silence and stored them in his pocket.

"I'm really sorry about having to do this," he told the young Earther. "But I can't stop to explain, and I need the money. Now I'd like you to take the child by the hand and walk slowly toward that big lake over there, without looking back and without calling for help. The stunner is effective at distances of almost five hundred feet."

"Help a stranger and this is what you get!" the Earther muttered. "Robbery in broad daylight, in Municipal Park!"

"Go on—move."

The Earther moved. Ewing watched him long enough to make sure he would keep good faith, then turned and trotted rapidly toward the park entrance. He reached it just as the Number 68 bus drew up at the corner. Grinning, Ewing leaped aboard. An immobile robot at the entrance said,



"Destination, please?"

"Grand Circle."

"Nothing and sixty, please."

Ewing drew a one-credit note from his pocket, placed it in the receiving slot, and waited. A bell rang; a ticket popped forth, and four copper coins jounced into the change-slot. He scooped them up and entered the bus. From the window he glanced at the park and caught sight of the little boy's red balloon; the flame-haired man was next to him, back to the street, staring at the lake. Probably scared stiff, Ewing thought. He felt only momentary regret for what he had done. He needed the money. Firnik had taken all of *his* money, and his rescuer had unaccountably neglected to furnish him any.

Grand Circle turned out to be just that—a vast circular wheel of a street, with more than fifteen street-spokes radiating outward from it.

Ewing dismounted from the bus; spying a robot directing traffic, he said, "Where can I get the downtown undertube line?"

The robot directed him to the undertube station. The ride cost him one credit ten; he transferred at the 378th Street Station and found himself in the midst of a busy shopping district.

He stood thoughtfully in the middle of the arcade for a moment. He needed a privacy mask and a stungun.

A weapon shop sign beckoned to him from the distance. He hurried to it, found it open, and stepped through the curtain of energy that served as its door. The proprietor was a wizened little Earther who smiled humbly at him as he entered. "May I serve you, sir?"

"You may. I'm interested in buying a stungun."

The shopkeeper frowned. "I don't know if we have any stunguns in stock—ah—yes!" He reached below the counter and drew forth a dark-blue plastite box. He touched the seal; the box flew open. "Here you are, sir. A lovely model. Only eight credits."

Ewing took the gun from the little man and examined it. It felt curiously light; he split it open and was surprised to find it was empty within. He looked up angrily. "Is this a joke? Where's the force chamber?"

"You mean you want a *real* gun, sir? I thought you simply were looking for an ornament to complement that fine suit you wear. But—"

"Never mind that. Do you have one of these that works?"

The shopkeeper appeared

pale, almost sick. But he vanished into the back room and reappeared with a small gun-case in his hand. "I happen to have one, sir. A Sirian customer of mine ordered it last month and then unfortunately died. I was about to return it, but if you're interested it's yours for ninety credits."

"Too much. I'll give you sixty."

"Sir! I—"

"Take sixty," Ewing said. "I'm a personal friend of Vice-Consul Firnik's. See him and he'll make up the difference."

The Earther eyed him meekly and sighed. "Sixty it is," he said. "Shall I wrap it?"

"Never mind about that," Ewing said, pocketing the tiny weapon, case and all, and counting out sixty credits from his slim roll. One item remained. "Do you have privacy masks?"

"Yes, sir. A large assortment."

"Good. Give me a golden one."

With trembling hands the shopkeeper produced one. It fit the memory he had of the other reasonably well. "How much?"

"T-ten credits, sir. For you, eight."

"Take the ten," Ewing said. He folded the mask, smiled

grimly at the terrified shopkeeper, and left. Once he was out on the street, he looked up at a big building-clock and saw the time: 1552.

Suddenly he clapped his hand to his forehead in annoyance: he had forgotten to check the most important fact of all! Hastily he darted back into the weapons shop. The proprietor came to attention, lips quivering. "Y-yes?"

"What day is today?"

"What day? Why—why, Twoday, of course. Twoday, the eleventh."

Ewing crowed triumphantly. Twoday on the nose! He burst from the store a second time. Catching the arm of a passerby, he said, "Pardon. Can you direct me to the Sirian Consulate?"

"Two blocks north, turn left. Big building."

Two blocks north, turn left. A current of excitement bubbled in his heart.

He began to walk briskly toward the Sirian Consulate, hands in his pockets. One clasped the coolness of the stungun, the other rested against the privacy mask.

## CHAPTER XI

Ewing passed through the enormous Consulate lobby and turned off left to a down-



ramp. He made his way down. A guard stationed at the foot of the last landing said, "Where are you going?"

"To the lowest level. I have to see Vice-Consul Firnik on urgent business."

"Firnik's in conference. Left orders that he wasn't to be disturbed."

"Quite all right. I have special permission. I happen to know he's interrogating a prisoner down below. I have vital information for him, and I'll see to it you roast unless I get in there to talk to him."

The guard looked doubtful. "Well—"

Ewing said, "Look—why don't you go down the hall and check with your immediate superior, if you don't want to take the responsibility yourself? I'll wait here."

The guard grinned, pleased to have the burden of decision-making lifted from his thick shoulders. "Don't go away," he said. "I'll be right back."

The man turned and trudged away. After he had gone three paces, Ewing drew the stunner from his pocket and set it to low intensity. The weapon was palm-size, fashioned from a bit of translucent blue plastic. Ewing aimed and fired. The guard froze.

Quickly Ewing ran after

him, dragged him back to his original position, and swung him around so he seemed to be guarding the approach. Then he ducked around him and headed down toward the lower level.

Another guard, this one in a lieutenant's uniform, waited there. Ewing said quickly, "The sergeant sent me down this way. Said I could find the Vice-Consul down here. I have an urgent message for him."

"Straight down the passageway, second door on your left."

Ewing thanked him and moved on. He paused for a moment outside the indicated door, while donning the privacy mask, and heard sounds from within:

"Good. You have your last chance. Why did the Free World of Corwin decide to send you to Earth?"

"Because of the Klodni," said a weary voice. The accent was a familiar one, a Corwinite one. It was his own voice. A blur of shock swept through him at the sound. "They came out of Andromeda and—"

"Enough!" came the harsh chop of Firnik's voice. "Byra, get ready to record. I'm turning on the pick."

Ewing felt a second ripple

of confusion, outside the door. Turning on the pick? Why, then this was the very moment when *he* had been rescued, two days earlier in own time-track! In that case, he was now his own predecessor along the time-line, and—he shook his head. Consideration of paradoxes was irrelevant now. Action was called for, not philosophizing.

He put his hand to the door and thrust it open. He stepped inside, stungun gripped tightly in his hand.

The scene was a weird tableau. Firnik, Byra, Drayl, and Thirsk were clustered around a fifth figure who sat limp and unresisting beneath a metal cone.

Firnik looked up in surprise. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"Never mind that," Ewing snapped. The scene was unrolling with dreamlike clarity. *I have been here before*, he thought, looking at the limp, tortured body of his earlier self slumped under the mind-pick helmet. "Get away from that machine, Firnik," he snapped. "I've got a stunner here, and I'm itching to use it on you. Over there, against the wall. You, too, Byra. Drayl, unclamp his wrists and get that helmet off him."

The machinery was pulled

back, revealing the unshaven, bleary-eyed face of the other Ewing. The man stared with utter lack of comprehension. The masked Ewing felt a tingle of awe at the sight of himself of Twoday, but he forced himself to remain calm. He crossed the room, keeping the gun trained on the Sirians, and lifted the other Ewing to his feet.

Crisply he ordered Firnik to call the Consulate guard upstairs and arrange for his escape. He listened while the Sirian spoke; then, saying, "This ought to keep you out of circulation for a couple of hours, at least," he stunned the four Sirians and dragged his other self from the room, out into the corridor, and into a lift.

**I**T WAS NOT until Ewing had reached the street-level that he allowed any emotional reaction to manifest itself. Sudden trembling swept over him for an instant as he stepped out of the crowded Sirian Consulate lobby, still wearing the privacy mask, and dragged the semi-conscious other Ewing into the street. But he had succeeded. He had rescued himself from the interrogators, and the script had followed in every detail that



one which seemed "earlier" to him but which was in reality not earlier at all.

The script was due to diverge from its "earlier" pattern soon, Ewing realized grimly. But he preferred not to think of the dark necessity that awaited him.

He spied a cab. Pushing his companion inside he said, "Take us to the Grand Valloin Hotel, please."

"Looks like your friend's really been on a binge," the driver said. "Don't remember the last time I saw a man looking so used up."

"He's had a rough time of it," Ewing said.

It cost five of his remaining eighteen credits to make the trip from the Consulate to the hotel. Quickly Ewing got his man through the hotel lobby and upstairs into Room 4113. The other—Ewing-sub-two, Ewing was calling him now—immediately toppled face-first on the bed. Ewing stared curiously at Ewing-sub-two, studying the battered, puffy-eyed face of the man who was himself of two days earlier. He set about the job of undressing him, depilating him, cleaning him up. He dragged him into the shower and thrust him under the ion-beam; then, satisfied, he put the exhausted man to sleep.

Within seconds, he had lost consciousness.

Ewing took a deep breath. So far the script had been followed; but here, it had to change.

He realized he had several choices. He could walk out of the hotel-room and leave Ewing-sub-two to his own devices, in which case, in the normal flow of events, Ewing-sub-two would awaken, be taken to Myreck's, request to see the time machine, and in due course travel back to this day to become Ewing-sub-one, rescuing a new Ewing-sub-two. But that path left too many unanswered questions.

But there was a way paradox could be avoided, Ewing thought. A way of breaking the chain of cycles that threatened to keep infinite Ewings moving on a treadmill forever. But it took a brave man to make that change.

He stared in the mirror. *Do I dare?* he wondered.

He thought of his wife and child, and of all he had struggled for since coming to Earth. *I'm superfluous*, he thought. The man on the bed was the man in whose hands destiny lay. Ewing-sub-one, the rescuer, was merely a supernumerary, an extra man, a displaced spoke in the wheel of time.

*I have no right to remain alive*, Ewing-sub-one admitted to himself. His face, in the mirror, was unquivering, unafraid. He nodded; then he smiled.

His way was clear. He would have to step aside. But he would merely be stepping aside for himself, and perhaps there would be no sense of discontinuity after all. He nodded in firm decision.

There was a voicewrite at the room desk. Ewing switched it on and began to dictate:

"Twoday afternoon. To my self of an earlier time—to the man I call Ewing-sub-two, from Ewing-sub-one. Read this with great care, indeed memorize it, and then destroy it utterly.

"You have just been snatched from the hands of the interrogators by what seemed to you miraculous intervention. You must believe that your rescuer was none other than yourself, doubling back along his time-track from two days hence. Since I have already lived through the time that will now unfold for you, let me tell you what is scheduled to take place for you, and let me implore you to save our mutual existence by following my instructions exactly.

"It is now Twoday. Your tired body will sleep around

the clock, and you will awaken on Fourday. Shortly after awakening, you will be contacted by Scholar Myreck, who will remind you of your appointment with him and will make arrangements with you to take you to his College in the suburbs. You will go. While you are there, they will reveal to you the fact that they are capable of shifting objects in time—indeed, their building itself is displaced by three microseconds to avoid investigation.

"At this point in my own time-track, I compelled them to send me back in time from Fourday to Twoday, and upon arriving here proceeded to carry out your rescue. My purpose in making this trip was to provide you with this information, which my rescuer neglected to give me. *Under no conditions are you to make a backward trip in time!* The cycle must end with you.

"When Myreck shows you the machine, you are to express interest but not to request a demonstration. This will automatically create a new past time in which a Ewing-sub-three actually did die under Firnik's interrogation, while you, Ewing-sub-two, remain in existence, a free agent ready to continue





your current operations.

"As for me, I am no longer needed in the plan of events, and so intend to remove myself from the time-stream upon finishing this note. I intend to do this by short-circuiting the energitron booth in the lobby while I am inside it, a fact which you can verify upon awakening by checking the telestat records for Two-day, the eleventh. This action, coupled with your refusal to use Myreck's machine, will put an end to the multiplicity of existing Ewings and leave you as the sole occupant of the stage. Make the most of your opportunities. I know you are capable of handling the task well, obviously.

"I wish you luck. You'll need it.

"Yours in—believe me—deepest friendship,

"Ewing-sub-one."

When he had finished the note, Ewing drew it from the machine and read it through three times, slowly. He folded it, drew from his pocket ten credits—something else his predecessor along the time-track had neglected—and sealed the message and the money in an envelope which he placed on the chair next to the sleeping man's bed.

Satisfied, he tiptoed from the room, locking the door be-

hind him, and rode down to the hotel lobby. There was no longer any need for the mask, so he discarded it; he had left the stungun upstairs, in case Ewing-sub-two might have need for it.

He picked up a phone in the lobby, dialed Central Communications, and said, "I'd like to send a message to Scholar Myreck, care of College of Abstract Science, General Delivery, City of Valloin Branch Office 86." It was the dummy address Myreck had given him. "The message is, quote: Baird Ewing has been interrogated and severely beaten by your enemies. At present he is asleep in his hotel room. Call him this afternoon and arrange to help him. Unquote. Now, that message is not to be delivered before Fourday, no later than noon. Is that clear?"

He crossed the lobby to a loitering Earther and said, "Excuse me—could I trouble you for change of a one-credit bill? I'd like to use the energitron booth and I don't have any coins."

The Earther changed the bill for him; they exchanged a few pleasant words, and then Ewing headed for the booth, satisfied that he had planted his identity. When the explosion came, there



would be a witness to say that a tall man had just entered the booth.

He slipped a half-credit coin into the booth's admission slot; the energy curtain that was its entrance went light pink long enough for Ewing to step through, and immediately returned to its glossy black opacity afterward. He found himself facing a beam of warm red light.

The energitron booth was simply a commercial adaptation of the ordinary ion-beam shower; it was a molecular spray that invigorated the body and refreshed the soul, according to the sign outside. Ewing knew it was also a particularly efficient suicide device. A bright enamel strip said:

### CAUTION!

THE OPERATOR IS WARNED NOT TO APPROACH THE LIMIT-LINES INSCRIBED IN THE BOOTH OR TO TAMPER WITH THE MECHANISM OF THE ENERGITRON. IT IS HIGHLY DELICATE AND MAY BE DANGEROUS IN UNSKILLED HANDS.

Ewing smiled coldly. With steady hands he reached for the sealed control-box; he smashed it open and twisted the rheostat within sharply

upward. The quality of the molecular beam changed; it became fuzzier and crackled.

At the limit-lines of the booth, he knew, an area existed where planes of force existed in delicate imbalance; interposing an arm or a leg in such a place could result in a violent explosion. He moved toward the limit-lines and probed with his hands for the danger area.

A sudden thought struck him: *What about my rescuer?* He had left him out of the calculations completely. But yet another Ewing-one had existed, one who had not left any notes nor stunguns nor money, and who perhaps had not suicided either. Ewing wondered briefly about him; but then he had no further time for wondering, because a blinding light flashed, and a thunderous wave of force rose from the booth and crushed him in its mighty grip.

### CHAPTER XII

E WING WOKE.

He felt groggy, stiff and sore in a hundred places, his forehead throbbing. He rolled over in the bed, clamped a hand to his forehead, and hung on.

*What happened to me?*

Memories drifted back to

him a thread at a time. He remembered discovering Byra in his room, drinking the drugged liquor she gave him, being hustled away to the Sirian Consulate. Blurred days of endless torment, interrogation, a mindpick machine lowered over his unresisting head—

Sudden rescue from an unknown source. Sleep. His memories ended there.

Achingly he crawled from the bed and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked frighteningly haggard. Dark circles ringed his eyes like crayon-marks, and the skin of his face hung loose under his chin, stretched tight elsewhere. He looked worse than he had at the moment of awakening, some days before, aboard the ship.

An envelope lay on a chair by the side of the bed. He frowned, picked it up, fingered it. It was sealed and addressed to him. He opened it. Five two-credit notes came fluttering out, and along with them a note. He stacked the banknotes neatly on the bed, unfolded the note, and sat down to read.

*"Twoday afternoon. To my self of an earlier time—to the man I call Ewing-sub-two, from Ewing-sub-one . . ."*

Bleary-eyed as he was, he

came awake while reading the note. His first reaction was one of anger and incredulity; then he nibbled his nails as he considered certain turns of phrase, certain mannerisms of punctuation. He had a fairly distinctive style of voicewrite dictation. And this was a pretty good copy, or else the real thing.

In which case—

He switched on the house-phone and said, "What's today's date, please?"

"Fourday, the thirteenth of Fifthmonth."

"Thanks. How can I get access to the telestat reports for Twoday the eleventh?"

"We could connect you with Records," the robot suggested.

"Do that," Ewing said.

He heard the *click-click-clack!* of shifting relays, and a new robotic voice said, "Records. How may we serve you?"

"I'm interested in the text of a news item that covers an event which took place Twoday afternoon. The short-circuiting of an energitron machine in the lobby of the Grand Valloin Hotel."

Almost instantly the robot said, "We have your item for you. Shall we read it?"

"Go ahead," he said in a rasping voice. "Read it."



"Twoday, 11th Fifthmonth, 3806. Explosion of an energitron booth in the lobby of the Grand Valloin Hotel this afternoon took one life, caused an estimated two hundred thousand credits' worth of damage, injured three, and disrupted normal hotel service for nearly two hours. The cause of the explosion is believed to have been a successful suicide attempt.

"No body was recovered from the demolished booth, but witnesses recalled having seen a tall man in street clothes entering the booth moments before the explosion. A check of the hotel registry revealed that no residents were missing. Valloin police indicate they will investigate."

The robot paused and said, "That's all there is. Do you wish a permanent copy? Should we search the files for subsequent information pertinent to the matter?"

"No," Ewing said. "No, no thanks." He severed the contact and sat down heavily on the edge of the bed.

It could still be a prank, of course. He had been asleep several days, long enough for the prankster to learn of the explosion and incorporate the incident retroactively in the note. But Occam's Razor

made hash of the hoax theory; there were too many inexplicable circumstances and unmotivated actions involved. Assuming that a prior Ewing had doubled in time to carry out the rescue and leave the note was vastly simpler a hypothesis, granting the one major improbability of time-travel.

There would be one fairly definite proof, though. Ewing found a small blue stungun lying on his dresser, and studied it thoughtfully.

According to the note, Scholar Myreck would call him soon after he had awakened.

*Very well, Ewing thought. I'll wait for Myreck to call.*

AN HOUR LATER he was sitting in a relaxing lounge in a salon in the College of Abstract Science, feeling the pain of Firnik's torture leaving him under the ministrations of Myreck's expert fingers. Music welled around him, fascinating ancient music—Beethoven, Myreck had said. He sipped at his drink.

It was all quite incredible to him: the call from Myreck, the trip across Valloin in the domed car, the miraculous building three microseconds out of phase with the rest of

the city, and above all the fact that the note in his room was indubitably true. These Earthers had the secret of time travel, and, though none of them was aware of the fact, they had "already" sent Baird Ewing back through time at least once from a point along the time-stream that still lay ahead, this afternoon of Four-day.

He realized his responsibility, tremendous already, was even greater now. A man had given up his life for him, and though no actual life had ended, it seemed to Ewing that a part of him he had never known had died.

The conversation moved smoothly along. The Earthers, alert, curious little men, wanted to know about the Klodni menace, and whether the people of Corwin would be able to defeat them when the attack came. Ewing told them the truth: that they would try, but there was not much hope of success.

And then Myreck introduced a new theme: the possibility of arranging transportation for the members of the College to Corwin, where at least they would be safer than on an Earth dominated by Sirius IV.

It seemed a doubtful proposition to Ewing. He explain-

ed to the visibly disappointed Earthers what a vast enterprise it would be to transport them, and how few ships Corwin had available for the purpose. He touched on the necessary delays the negotiations would involve.

He saw the hurt looks on their faces; there was no help for it, he thought. Earth had her enemies, and Corwin her own. Corwin faced destruction, Earth mere occupation. Corwin needed help more urgently.

He felt a depressing cloud of futility settle around him. He had accomplished nothing on Earth, found no possible solution for Corwin's problem, not even succeeded in helping these Earthers.

He had failed. Whatever bold plan had been in the mind of the dead Ewing who had left him the note did not hold a corresponding position in his own mind. That Ewing, clearly, had seen some solution for Corwin, some way in which the planet could be defended against the Klodni. But he had said nothing about it in his note.

Some experience he had had, perhaps, while traveling back in time; something that had happened to him in those two extra days he had lived, that might have given him a



clue to the resolution of the dilemma—

Ewing felt a tempting thought: *perhaps I should make the trip back in time yet again, rescue the Ewing I find there, dictate the note to him once again, and add to it whatever information was missing—*

No. He squelched the idea firmly and totally. Another trip through time was out of the question. He had a chance to end the cycle now, and cut himself loose from Earth. It was the sensible thing to do. Return to Corwin, prepare for the attack, defend his home and country when the time came to do so—that was the only intelligent thing to do now. It was futile to continue to search Earth for a non-existent super-weapon.

The conversation straggled to a dull stop. He and the Earthers had little left to say to each other.

Myreck said, "Let us change the subject, shall we? This talk of fleeing and destruction depresses me."

"I agree," Ewing said.

The music-disk ended. Myreck rose, removed it from the player, and popped it back into the file. He said, "We have a fine collection of other Earth ancients. Mozart, Bach, Vurris—"

Myreck played Bach—a piece called the Goldberg Variations, for a twangy, not unpleasant-sounding instrument called the harpsichord.

Several of the Scholars were particularly interested in music old and new, and insisted on expounding their special theories. Ewing, at another time, might have been an eager participant in the discussion; now, he listened out of politeness only, paying little attention to what was said. He was trying to recall the text of the note he had read and destroyed earlier in the day. They would show him their time machine. He was to refuse the demonstration. That would cause the necessary alterations in time past, to fit the design intended by Ewing-sub-one.

Whatever *that* had been, Ewing thought.

The afternoon slipped by. At length Myreck said, "We also have done much work in temporal theory, you know. Our machines are in the lower levels of the building. If you are interested—"

"No!" Ewing said, so suddenly and so harshly it was almost a shout. In a more modulated tone he went on, "I mean—no, thanks. I'll have to beg off on that. It's getting quite late, and I'm sure I'd

find the time machines so fascinating I'd overstay my visit."

"But we are anxious to have you spend as much time with us as you can," Myreck protested. "If you want to see the machines—"

"No," Ewing reiterated forcefully. "I'm afraid I must leave."

"In that case, we will drive you to your hotel."

*This must be the point of divergence, Ewing thought, as the Earthers showed him to the door and performed the operations that made it possible to pass back into phase with the world of Fournight the Thirteenth outside. My predecessor never got back out of this building. He doubled into Twonight instead. The cycle is broken.*

He entered the car, and it pulled away from the street. He looked back, at the empty lot that was not empty.

"Some day you must examine our machines," Myreck said.

"Yes—yes, of course," Ewing replied vaguely.

*But tomorrow I'll be on my way back to Corwin, he thought. I guess I'll never see your machines.*

He realized that by his actions this afternoon he had brought a new chain of events

into existence; he had reached back into Twoday and, by *not* rescuing Firnik's prisoner, had created a Ewing-sub-three who had been mind-picked by the Sirian and who presumably had died two days before. Thus Firnik believed Ewing was dead, no doubt. He would be surprised tomorrow when a ghost requisitioned the ship in storage at Valloin Spaceport and blasted off for Corwin.

Ewing frowned, trying to work out the intricacies of the problem. Well, it didn't matter, he thought. The step had been taken.

For better or for worse, the time-track had been altered.

### CHAPTER XIII

Ewing checked out of the Grand Valloin Hotel the next afternoon. It was a lucky thing, he thought, that the management had awarded him that week's free rent; otherwise, thanks to the kidnapping, he would never have been able to settle up. He had only ten credits, and those were gifts from his phantom rescuer, now dead. The bill came to more than a hundred.

He strolled through the sumptuous lobby, past the light-fountain, past the relaxing-chairs, past the somewhat



battered area of the energitron booth, where robots were busily replastering and repainting the damage. It was nearly as good as new. By the end of the day, there would scarcely be an indication that a man had died violently there only three days before.

He passed several Sirians on his way through the lobby to the front street, but he felt oddly calm all the same. So far as Rollun Firnik and the others were concerned, the Corwhite Baird Ewing had died under torture last Twoday. Anyone resembling him did so strictly by coincidence. He walked boldly through the cluster of Sirians and out onto the street level.

Ewing boarded the limousine that the hotel used for transporting its patrons to and from the nearby spaceport, and looked around for his final glance at the Grand Valloin Hotel. He felt tired and a little sad at leaving Earth; there were so many reminders of past glories here, so many signs of present decay.

He pondered the time-travel question for a moment. Obviously the Earther machine—among all its other paradoxical qualities—was able to create matter where none had existed before. It had drawn from *somewhere*

the various Ewing bodies, of which at least two and possibly more had existed simultaneously. And it seemed that once a new body was drawn from the fabric of time, it remained in existence, coterminous with its fellows. Otherwise, Ewing thought, my refusal to go back and carry out the rescue would have snuffed me out. It didn't. It merely ended the life of that "Ewing" in the torture-chamber on Twoday.

"Spaceport," a robot voice announced.

Ewing followed the line into the Departures shed. He noticed there were few Earthers in Departures; only some Sirians and a few of the non-humanoid aliens were leaving Earth. He joined a line that inched up slowly to a robot clerk.

When it was Ewing's turn, he presented his papers. The robot scanned them quickly.

"Your papers are in order. Your ship has been stored in Hangar 107-B. Sign this, please."

It was a permission-grant allowing the spaceport attendants to get his ship from drydock, service it for departure, store his belongings on board, and place the vessel on the blasting-field. Ewing read the form through quickly,

signed it, and handed it back.

"Please go to Waiting Room Y and remain there until your name is called. Your ship should be ready for you in less than an hour."

Ewing moistened his lips. "Does that mean you'll page me over the PA system?"

"Yes."

The idea of having his name called out, with so many Sirians in the spaceport, did not appeal to him. He said, "I'd—prefer not to be paged by name. Can some sort of code word be used?"

The robot hesitated. "Is there some reason—"

"Yes." Ewing's tone was flat. "Look: suppose you have me paged under the name of—ah—Blade. That's it. Mr. Blade. All right?"

Doubtfully the robot said, "It is irregular."

"Is there anything in the regulations specifically prohibiting such a pseudonym?"

"No, but—"

"If regulations say nothing about it, how can it be irregular? Blade it is, then."

It was easy to baffle robots. The sleek metal face would probably be contorted in bewilderment, if that were possible. At length the robot assented; Ewing grinned cheerfully at it and made his way to Waiting Room Y.

WAITING ROOM Y was a majestic vault of a room, with a glittering spangled ceiling a hundred feet above his head, veined with glowing rafters of structural beryllium. Freeform blobs of light, hovering suspended at about the eighty-foot level, provided most of the illumination. At one end of the room a vast loudspeaker-grid was erected; at the other, a screen thirty feet square provided changing kaleidoscopic patterns of light for bored waiters.

Ewing stared without interest at the whirling light-patterns for a while. He had found a seat in the corner of the waiting-room, where he was not likely to be noticed. There was hardly an Earther in the place. Earthers stayed put, on Earth. And this great spaceport, this monument to an era a thousand years dead, was in use solely for the benefit of tourists from Sirius IV and the alien worlds.

For a moment despair overwhelmed him, as he realized once again that both Earth and Corwin were doomed, and there seemed no way of holding back the inexorable jaws of the pincers. His head drooped forward; he cradled it tiredly with his fingertips.

*"Mr. Blade to the departure*



*desk, please, Mr. Blade, please report to the departure desk. Mr. Blade—*"

Dimly Ewing remembered that they were paging *him*. He elbowed himself from the seat.

He followed a stream of bright violet lights down the center of the waiting-room, turned left, and headed for the departure desk.

"I'm Blade," he said. He presented his identity-card. The robot scanned it.

"According to this your name is Baird Ewing," the robot announced after some study.

Ewing sighed in exasperation. "Check your memory banks! Sure, my name is Ewing—but I arranged to have you page me under the name of Blade. Remember?"

The robot's optic lenses swiveled agitatedly as the mechanical filtered back through its memory bank. After what seemed to be a fifteen-minute wait the robot brightened again and declared, "The statement is correct. You are Baird Ewing, pseudonym Blade. Your ship is waiting in Blast Area 11."

Gratefully and in relief Ewing accepted the glowing oval identity-planchet and made his way through the areaway into the departure

track. There he surrendered the planchet to a waiting robot attendant who ferried him across the broad field to his ship.

The ship smelled faintly musty after its week in storage. Ewing looked around. Everything seemed in order. He was ready to leave.

But first, a message.

He set up the contacts on the subetheric generator, preparatory to beaming a message via subspace toward Corwin. He knew that his earlier message, announcing arrival, had not yet arrived; it would ride the subetheric carrier wave for another week, yet, before reaching the receptors on his home world.

And, he thought unhappily, the announcement of journey's end would follow it by only a few days. He twisted the contact dial. The *go-ahead* light came on.

He faced the pickup grid. "Baird Ewing speaking, and I'll be brief. This is my second and final message. I'm returning to Corwin. The mission was an absolute failure—repeat, absolute failure. Earth is unable to help us. It faces immediate domination by Terrestrial-descended inhabitants of Sirius IV, and culturally they're in worse shape than we are. Sorry to be delivering

bad news. I hope you're all still there when I get back. No reports will follow. I'm signing off right now."

He stared reflectively at the dying lights of the generator a moment, then shook his head and rose. Activating the in-system communicator, he requested and got the central coordination tower of the spaceport.

"This is Baird Ewing, in the one-man ship on Blasting Area 11. I plan to depart under automatic control in fifteen minutes. Can I have a time-check?"

The inevitable robotic voice replied, "The time now is 1658 and 13 seconds."

"Good. Can I have clearance for departure at 1713 and 13?"

"Clearance granted," the robot said.

Grunting acknowledgment, Ewing fed the data to his autopilot and threw the master switch. In fourteen-plus minutes, the ship would blast off from Earth, whether or not he happened to be in the protective tank at the time.

He stripped off his clothes, stored them away, and activated the tap that drew the nutrient bath. The autopilot ticked away. Eleven minutes to departure.

He climbed into the tank. Now his subliminal instruc-

tions took over; he knew the procedure thoroughly. All he had to do was nudge those levers with his feet to enter into the state of suspension; needles would jab upward into him and the thermostat would begin to function. At the end of the journey, with the ship in orbit around Corwin, he would be automatically awakened to make the landing manually.

The communicator chimed just as he was about to trip the foot-levers. Irritated, Ewing glanced up.

"Calling Baird Ewing—calling Baird Ewing—"

It was central control. Ewing glanced at the clock. Eight minutes to blast-off. And there'd be nothing left of him but a pool of jelly if blasting time caught him still wandering around the ship.

Sourly he climbed from the tank and acknowledged the call. "Ewing here. What is it?"

"An urgent call from the terminal, Mr. Ewing. The party says he must reach you before you blast off."

Ewing considered that. Firnik, pursuing him? Or Byra Clork? No. They had seen "him" die on Twoday. Myreck? Maybe. Who else could it be? He said, "Very well. Switch over the call."



A new voice said, "Is that Ewing?"

"That's right. Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter just now. Listen—can you come to the spaceport terminal right away?"

The voice sounded tantalizingly familiar. Ewing scowled angrily. "No, I can't! My autopilot's on and I'm due to blast in seven minutes. If you can't tell me who you are, I'm afraid I can't bother to alter flight plans."

Ewing heard a sigh. "I *could* tell you who I am. You wouldn't believe me, that's all. But you mustn't depart yet. Come to the terminal."

"No."

"I warn you," the voice said. "I can take steps to prevent you from blasting off—but it'll be damaging to both of us if I do so. Can't you trust me?"

"I'm not leaving this ship on account of any anonymous warnings," Ewing said hotly. "Tell me who you are. Otherwise I'm going to break contact and enter suspension for the trip."

Six minutes to blast.

"All right," came the reluctant reply. "I'll tell you. My name is Baird Ewing, of Corwin. I'm *you*. Now will you get out of that ship?"

## CHAPTER XIV

WITH TENSE FINGERS Ewing disconnected the autopilot and reversed the suspension unit. He called the control tower and in an unsteady voice told them he was temporarily canceling his blasting plans and was returning to the terminal. He dressed again, and was ready when the robocar came shuttling out across the field to pick him up.

He had arranged to meet the other Ewing in the refreshment room where he had had his first meeting with Rollun Firnik after landing on Earth. A soft conversational hum was droning as Ewing entered. His eyes, as if magnetically drawn, fastened on the tall, conservatively-dressed figure at the table near the rear.

He walked over. He sat down, without being asked. The man at the table favored him with a smile—cold, precise, the very sort of smile Ewing himself would have used in this situation. Ewing moistened his lips. He felt dizzy.

He said, "I don't know quite where to begin. Who—are you?"

"I told you. Yourself. I'm Baird Ewing."

The accent, the tone, the sardonic smile—they all fitted. Ewing felt the room swirl crazily around him. He stared levelly at the mirror image on the other side of the table.

"I thought you were dead," Ewing said. "The note you left me—"

"I didn't leave any notes," the other interrupted.

"Hold on, there." It was a conversation taking place in a world of nightmare. Ewing felt as if he were stifling. "You rescued me from Firnik, didn't you?"

The other nodded.

"And you took me to the hotel and put me to bed and wrote me a note explaining things, and finished off by saying you were going downstairs to blow yourself up in an energitron booth—"

Eyes wide in surprise, the other said, "No, not at all! I took you to the hotel—and left. I didn't write any notes or threaten to commit suicide."

"You didn't leave me any money? Or a blaster?"

The man across the table shook his head vehemently. Ewing closed his eyes for a moment. "If you didn't leave me that note—who did?"

"Tell me about this note," the other said.

Briefly Ewing summarized the contents of the note as well as he could from memory. The other listened, tapping his finger against the table as each point was made. When Ewing was through, the other remained deep in thought, brow furrowed. Finally he said:

"I see it. There were four of us."

"What?"

"I'll put it slowly: I'm the first one of us to go through all this. It begins with a closed-circle paradox, the way any time distortion would have to: me, in the torture chamber, and a future me coming back to rescue me. There were four separate splits in the continuum—creating a Ewing who died in Firnik's torture-chamber, a Ewing who rescued the tortured Ewing and left a note and committed suicide, a Ewing who rescued the tortured Ewing and did *not* commit suicide, and a Ewing who was rescued and did not himself go back to become the rescuer, thereby breaking the chain. Two of these are still alive—the third and the fourth. You and me."

Very quietly Ewing said, "I guess that makes sense, in an impossible sort of way. But that leaves an extra Baird



Ewing, doesn't it? After you carried out the rescue, why did you decide to stay alive?"

The other shrugged. "I couldn't risk killing myself. I didn't know what would happen."

"You did," Ewing said accusingly. "You knew that the next man in the sequence would stay alive. You could have left him a note, but you didn't. So he went through the chain, left *me* a note, and removed himself."

The other scowled unhappily. "Perhaps he represented a braver facet of us than I do."

"How could that be? We're all the same!"

"True." The other smiled sadly. "But a human being is made of complex stuff. Life isn't a procession of clear-cut events; it's a progression from one tough decision to the next. The seeds of my decision were in the proto-Ewing; so were the bases for the suicide. I picked things one way; *he* picked them the other. And I'm here."

Ewing realized it was impossible to be angry. The man he faced was himself, and he knew only too well the bundle of inner contradictions, of strengths and weaknesses, that was Baird Ewing—or any human being. This was no

time to condemn. But he foresaw grave problems arising.

He said, "What do we do now—*both* of us?"

"There was a reason why I called you off the ship. And it wasn't simply that I didn't want to be left behind on Earth."

"What was it, then?"

"The time machine Myreck has can save Corwin from the Klodni," the other Ewing said flatly.

Ewing sat back and let that soak in. "How?"

"I went to see Myreck this morning—I've been staying in a hotel not far from the Grand Valloin—and he greeted me with open arms. Said he was so glad I had come back for a look at the time machine. That was when I realized you'd been there yesterday and hadn't gone back on the merry-go-round." He shook his head. "I was counting on that, you see—on being the only Ewing that actually went forward on the time-track, while all the others went round and round between Fourday and Twoday, chasing themselves. But you broke the sequence and fouled things up."

"You fouled things up," Ewing snapped. "You aren't supposed to be alive."

"And you aren't supposed

to be existing in Fiveday."

"This isn't helping things," Ewing said more calmly. "You say the Earther time machine can save Corwin. How?"

"I was getting to that. Myreck showed me all the applications of the machine, this morning. It can be converted into an exterior-operating scanner—a beam that can be used to hurl objects of any size backward into time—"

"The Klodni fleet," Ewing said instantly.

"Exactly! If we set up the projector on Corwin and wait for the Klodni to arrive—and shoot them back five billion years or so, with no return trip ticket! What then?"

How eerie it was, Ewing thought, to sit across a table from a man who knew every thought of his, every secret deed, from childhood up to a point three days ago in absolute time. After then, of course, their lives diverged as if they were different people.

"What do you suggest we do now?" Ewing asked.

"Go back to Myreck. Team up to get the plans for the device away from him. Then high-tail it back here, get aboard, and—"

His voice trailed off. Ewing stared blankly at his alter ego and said, "Yes? What then? I'm waiting."

"It's—it's a one-man ship, isn't it?" the other asked in a thin voice.

"Yes," Ewing said. "Damned right it is. After we've taken the plans, how do we decide who goes back to Corwin and who stays here?"

"We'll—worry about that later," said the other Ewing uncertainly. "First let's get the plans from Myreck. Time to settle the other problems later."

**T**HEY TOOK a robot-operated cab to the suburban district where the College of Abstract Science was located. On the way, Ewing turned to the other and said, "How did you know I was on my way off Earth?"

"I didn't. As soon as I found out from Myreck both that you existed and that his machine could help Corwin, I got back to the Grand Valloin. I wanted to see you. But the doorplate didn't work—and, of course, that door was geared to my identity just as much as yours. So I went downstairs, phoned the desk from the lobby, and asked for you. They told me you had checked out and were on your way to the spaceport. So I followed—and got there just in time."



The cab pulled up near the empty lot that was the College of Abstract Science. Ewing let his alternate pay the bill. They got out.

"You wait here," the other said. "I'll put myself within their receptor field and wait for them to let me in. You wait ten minutes and follow me through."

"I don't have a watch," Ewing said. "Firnrik took it."

"Here—take mine," said the other impatiently. He unstrapped it and handed it over. It looked costly.

"Where'd you get this?" Ewing said.

"I—borrowed it from some Earther, along with about five hundred credits. You—no, not you, but the Ewing who became your rescuer later—was asleep in our hotel room, so I had to find another place to stay. And all I had was about ten credits left over after buying the mask and the gun."

He donned the watch—the time was 1850, Fivenight—and watched his companion stroll down the street toward the empty lot, wander with seeming aimlessness over the vacant area, and suddenly—with a shimmering of pink light—vanish. The College of Abstract Science had swallowed him up.

Ewing waited for the min-

utes to pass. They crept by. Five, six, seven.

At eight, he began to stroll toward the empty lot. He ticked off the seconds inwardly: *thousand-and-one, thousand-and-two . . .*

At *thousand-and-sixty* he was only a few yards from the borders of the lot. He forced himself to remain quite still. The stungun was at his hip. He had noticed that the other Ewing also wore a stungun—the twin of his own.

At nine minutes and forty-five seconds he resumed his stroll toward the lot, reaching it exactly at the ten-minute mark. He looked around the way the other Ewing had—

—and felt the transition from *now* to *now-minus-three-microseconds* sweep over him once again. He was inside the College of Abstract Science.

He was facing an odd tableau. The other Ewing stood with his back to one wall, the stungun drawn and in activated position. Facing him were seven or eight members of the College, their faces pale, their eyes reflecting fright.

Ewing found himself looking down at the accusing eyes of Scholar Myreck, who had admitted him.

"Thank you for letting my—ah—brother in," the other

Ewing said. For a moment the two Ewings stared at each other. Ewing saw in his alter-ego's eyes deep guilt, and knew that the other man was more of a twin to him than any brother could have been. The kinship was soul-deep.

"We're—sorry for this," he said to Myreck. "Believe us, it pains us to do this to you."

"I've already explained what we came for," the other Ewing said. "There's a scale model and a full set of schematics downstairs, plus a few notebooks of theoretical work. It's more than one man can carry."

"The notebooks are irreplaceable," Myreck said in a softly bitter voice.

"We'll take good care of them," Ewing promised. "But we need them more than you do. Believe us."

The other Ewing said, "You stay here, and keep your gun on them. I'm going below with Myreck to fetch the things we're taking."

Ewing nodded. Drawing his gun, he replaced the other against the wall, holding the unfortunate Fellows at bay. It was nearly five minutes before Ewing's alternate and Myreck returned, carrying papers, notebooks, and a model that looked to weigh about fifty pounds.

"It's all here," the other said. "Myreck, you're going to let me through your time-phase field and out of the building. My — companion — here will keep his gun on you all the time. Please don't try to trick us."

Ten minutes later, both Ewings stood outside the College of Abstract Science, with a nearly man-high stack of plunder between them.

"I hated to do that," Ewing said.

The other nodded. "It hurt me too. They're so gentle—and it's a miserable way to repay hospitality. But Corwin needs that generator. If we want to save everything we hold dear."

"Yes," Ewing said in a strained voice. "Everything we hold dear." He shook his head. Trouble was approaching. "Come on," he said, looking back at the vacant lot. "Let's get out of here. We have to load all this stuff."

## CHAPTER XV

THEY MADE the trip back to the spaceport in tight silence. Each man kept a hand atop the teetering stack on the floor of the cab; occasionally, Ewing's eyes met those of his double, and glanced guiltily away.



*Which one of us goes back?* he wondered.

*Which one is really Baird Ewing? And what becomes of the other?*

At the spaceport, Ewing requisitioned a porterobot and turned the stolen schematics, notes, and model over to it, to be placed aboard the ship. That done, the two men looked strangely at each other. The time had come for departure. Who left?

Ewing scratched his chin uneasily and said, "One of us has to go up to the departure desk and reconfirm his blast-off plans. The other—"

"Yes. I know."

"How do we decide? Do we flip a coin?" Ewing asked.

"One of us goes back to Laira and Blade. And it looks as if the other—"

There was no need to say it. The dilemma was insoluble. Each Ewing had firmly believed he was the only one still in the time-track, and each still partially believed that it was the other's duty to yield. But—

The spaceport lights flickered dizzily. Ewing felt dryness grow in his throat. The time for decision was now. But how to decide?

"Let's go get a drink," he suggested.

The entrance to the refresh-

ment-booth was congested with a mob of evening travelers. Ewing ordered drinks for both of them and they toasted grimly: "To Baird Ewing—whichever he may be."

Ewing drank, but the drink did not soothe him. It seemed at that moment that the impasse might last forever, that they would remain on Earth eternally while determining which one of them was to return with Corwin's salvation and which to remain behind. But an instant later, all that was changed.

The public address system blared: "Attention, please! Your attention! Will everyone kindly remain precisely where he is right at this moment!"

Ewing exchanged a troubled glance with his counterpart. The loudspeaker voice continued, "There is no cause for alarm. It is believed that a dangerous criminal is at large somewhere in the spaceport area. He may be armed. He is six feet two inches in height, with reddish-brown hair, dark eyes, and out-of-fashion clothing. Please remain precisely where you are at this moment while peace officers circulate among you. Have your identification papers ready to be examined on request. That is all."

A burst of conversation greeted the announcement. The two Ewings huddled into the corner of the room and stared in anguish at each other.

"Someone turned us in," Ewing said. "Myreck, perhaps. Or the man you burgled. Probably Myreck."

"It doesn't matter who turned us in," the other snapped. "All that matters is the fact that they'll be coming around to investigate soon. And when they find two men answering to the description—"

"Myreck must have warned them there were two of us."

"No. He'd never do that. He doesn't want to give away the method that brought both of us into existence, does he?"

Ewing nodded. "I guess you're right. But if they find two of us—with the same identity papers, with the same identity—they'll pull us both in. And neither of us will ever get back to Corwin."

"Suppose they found only one of us?" the other asked.

"How? We can't circulate around the spaceport. And there's no place to hide in here."

"I don't mean that. Suppose one of us voluntarily gave himself up—destroyed his identity papers first, of

course, and then made an attempt to escape—in the confusion, the other of us could safely blast off for Corwin."

Ewing's eyes narrowed. He had been formulating just such a plan too. "But—which one of us gives himself up? We're back to the old problem."

"No, we're not," the other said. "I'll volunteer."

"No," Ewing said instantly. "You can't just volunteer! How could I agree? It's suicide." He shook his head. "We don't have time to argue about it now. There's only one way to decide."

He fumbled in his pocket and pulled forth a shining half-credit piece. He studied it. On one side, a representation of Earth's sun with the ten planets orbiting it was engraved. On the other, an ornamental 50.

"I'm going to flip it," he said. "If it comes down Solar System, you go. If it comes down Denomination, I go. Agreed?"

Ewing mounted the coin on his thumbnail and flicked it upward. He snapped it out of the air with a rapid gesture and slapped it down against the back of his left hand.

It was Denomination. The stylized 50 stared up at him. He went.



He smiled humorlessly. "I guess it's me," he said. He pulled his identity papers from his pocket and ripped them into shreds. Then he stared across the table at the white, drawn face of the man who was to become Baird Ewing. "So long. Good luck. And kiss Laira for me when you get back."

Four Sirian policemen entered the bar. One remained stationed near the door; the other three circulated. Ewing rose from his seat; he heard a whispered "*So long*" from behind him. He felt calm, now. It was not as if he were really going to die. *Which is the real me, anyway? The man who died in the torture chamber, or the one who blew himself up in the energitron booth, or the man sitting back there in the corner of the bar? They're all Baird Ewing. There's a continuity of personality. Baird Ewing won't die—just one of his superfluous doppelgangers. And it has to be this way.*

Icily Ewing made his way through the startled group sitting at the tables. He was the only figure moving in the bar except for the three circulating police officers, who did not appear to have noticed him yet. He did not look back.

The stungun at his hip was

only inches from his hand. He jerked it up suddenly and fired at the policeman mounted by the door; the man froze and toppled. The other three policemen whirled.

"I'm the man you're looking for," Ewing shouted. "If you want me, come get me!"

He turned and sprinted out of the refreshment room into the long arcade.

**H**HE HEARD the sound of pursuers almost immediately. He clutched the stungun tightly, but did not fire. An energy flare splashed above his head, crumbling a section of the wall. He heard a yell from behind him: "Stop him! There's the man! Stop him!"

Five policemen appeared at the upper end of the corridor. Ewing thumbed his stunner and froze two of them; then he cut briskly to the left, passing through an automatic door and entering onto the restricted area of the spacefield itself.

A robot came gliding up to him. "May I see your pass, sir? Humans are not allowed on this portion of the field without a pass."

In answer, Ewing tilted the stungun up and calcified the robot's neural channels. It crashed heavily as its gyro-

control destabilized. He turned. The police were converging on him; there were dozens of them.

"You, there! Give yourself up! You can't hope to escape!"

*I know that, Ewing said silently. But I don't want to be taken alive either.*

He wedged himself flat against a parked fueler and peppered the advancing police with stungun beams. They fired cautiously; there was expensive equipment on the field, and they preferred to take their man alive in any event. Ewing waited until the nearest of them was within fifty yards. He pumped deep breaths in and out of his lungs; the oxygen made his heart race. He poised, waiting.

"Come get me," he called. Turning, he began to run across the broad spacefield.

The landing apron extended for two or three miles; he ran easily, lightly, sweeping in broad circles and pausing to fire at his pursuers. He wanted to keep them at a reasonable distance until—

Yes. Now.

Darkness covered the field. Ewing glanced up to see the cause of this sudden eclipse.

A vast ship hung high overhead, descending as if operat-

ed by a pulley and string. Its jets were thundering, pouring forth flaming gas as it came down for a landing. Ewing smiled at the sight.

*It'll be quick, he thought.*

He heard the yells of astonishment from the police. They were backing off as the great ship dropped toward the landing area. Ewing ran in a wide circle, trying to compute the orbit of the descending liner.

*Like falling into the sun. Hot. Quick.*

He saw the place where the ship would land. He felt the sudden warmth; he was in the danger zone now. He ran inward, where the air was frying. *For Corwin, he thought. For Laira. And Blade.*

"The idiot! He'll get killed!" someone screamed as if from a great distance. Eddies of flaming gas seemed to wash down over him; he heard the booming roar of the ship. Then brightness exploded all about him, and consciousness and pain departed in a micro-second.

The ship touched down.

**I**N THE TERMINAL, the public address system said, "Attention, please. The criminal has been discovered and is no longer menacing society. You



may resume normal activity. We thank you again for your cooperation during this investigation, and hope you have undergone no inconvenience."

In the terminal refreshment room, Ewing stared bleakly at the two half-finished drinks on the table—his, and the dead man's. With a sudden brusque gesture he poured the other drink into his glass, stirred the two together, and drank the glassful down in four eager gulps. He let the stinging liquor jolt into his stomach.

*What are you supposed to say and think and do, he wondered, when a man gives up his life so you can get away? Nothing. You can't even say "Thanks." It wouldn't be in good taste, would it?*

He had watched the whole thing from the observation window of the bar. The desperate pursuit, the fox-and-hounds chase, the exchange of shots. He had become sickly aware that a liner was overhead, fixed in its landing orbit.

Even through the window's protective glass, the sudden glare had stung his retinas. And there was an image he would carry with him through life of a tiny man-shaped dot standing unafraid in the bright path of the liner, van-

ishing suddenly in a torrent of flame.

He rose. He felt very tired, very weary, not at all like a man free at last to return to his home, his wife, his child. His mission was approaching a successful conclusion, but he felt no sense of satisfaction. Too many had given up life or dreams to make his success possible.

He found the departure desk somehow, and pulled forth the papers that the dead man who was himself had filled out earlier in the day. "My ship's on Blasting Area 11," he told the robot. "I was originally scheduled to leave about 1700 this evening, but I requested cancellation and re-scheduling."

He waited numbly while the robot went through the proper procedures, gave him new papers to fill out, and finally sent him on through the areaway to the departure track. Another robot met him there and conducted him to the ship.

He entered the ship and glanced around. Everything was ready for a departure. He frowned; the other Ewing had said something about having sent a message back to Corwin presumably telling them he was on his way back empty-handed. He activated

the subetheric communicator and beamed a new message, advising them to disregard the one immediately preceding it, saying that a new development had come up and he was on his way back to Corwin with possible salvation.

He called the central control tower and requested blast-off permission twelve minutes hence. That gave him ample time. He switched on the autopilot, stripped, and lowered himself into the nutrient bath.

With quick foot-motions he set in motion the suspension mechanism. Needles jabbed his flesh; the temperature began its downward climb. A thin stream of web came from the spinnerettes above him, wrapping him in unbreakable foam that would protect him from the hazards of blast-off.

The drugs dulled his mind. He felt a faint chill as the temperature about him dropped below sixty. It would drop much lower than that, later, when he was asleep. He waited drowsily for sleep to overtake him.

He was only fractionally conscious when blast-off came. He barely realized that the ship had left Earth. Before acceleration ended, he was totally asleep.

## CHAPTER XVI

HOURS TICKED BY, and Ewing slept. Hours lengthened into days, into weeks, into months. Eleven months, twelve days, seven and one-half hours, and Ewing slept while the tiny ship speared on through the nothingness of not-space on its return journey.

The time came. The ship pirouetted out of warp when the pre-set detectors indicated the journey had ended. Automatic computer units hurled the ship into fixed orbit round the planet below. The suspension unit deactivated itself; temperature gradually returned to normal, and a needle plunged into Ewing's side, awakening him.

He was home.

After the immediate effects of the long sleep had worn off, Ewing made contact with the authorities below. He waited, hunched over the in-system communicator, staring through the vision-plate at the blue loveliness of his home planet.

After a moment response came:

"World Building, Corwin. We have your call. Please identify."

Ewing replied with the series of code symbols that had



been selected as identification. He repeated them three times, reading them off from memory.

The acknowledging symbols came back instantly, after which the same voice said, "Ewing? At last!"

"It's only been a couple of years, hasn't it?" Ewing said. "Nothing has changed too much."

"No. Not too much."

He did not prolong the conversation. He jotted down the landing coordinates supplied by groundside, integrated and fed them to his computer, and proceeded to carry out the landing.

He came down at Broughton Spacefield, fifteen miles outside Corwin's capital city. The air was bright and fresh, with the extra twang that he had missed during his stay on Earth. After descending from his ship he waited for the pickup truck. He stared at the blue arch of the sky, dotted with clouds, and at the magnificent row of 800-foot-high Imperator trees that bordered the spacefield. Earth had no trees to compare with those, he thought.

A hastily-assembled delegation was on hand at the terminal building when the truck arrived. Ewing recognized Premier Davidson, three or

four members of the Council, a few people from the University. He looked around, wondering just why it was that Laira and his son had not come to welcome him home from his long journey.

Then he saw them—standing with some of his friends in the back of the group. They came forward, Laira with an odd little smile on her face, young Blade with a blank stare for a man he had probably almost forgotten.

"Hello, Baird," Laira said. Her voice was higher than he had remembered it as being, and she looked older than the mental image he carried. Her eyes had deepened, her face grown thin. "It's so good to have you back. Blade, say hello to your father."

Ewing looked at the boy. He had grown tall and gangling; the chubby eight-year-old he had left behind had turned into a coltish boy of nearly eleven. He eyed his father uncertainly. "Hello—Dad."

"Hello there, Blade!"

He scooped the boy off the ground, tossed him easily into the air, caught him, set him down. He turned to Laira then and kissed her. But there was no warmth in his greeting. A strange thought interposed:

*Am I really Baird Ewing?*

*Am I the man who was born*

*on Corwin, married this woman, built my home, fathered this child? Or did he die back on Earth, and am I just a replica indistinguishable from the original?*

It was a soul-numbing thought. He realized it was foolish of him to worry over the point; he wore Baird Ewing's body, he carried Baird Ewing's memory and his personality. What else was there to a man, besides his physical existence and the tenuous gestalt of memories and thoughts that might be called his soul?

*I am Baird Ewing*, he insisted inwardly, trying to quell the doubt-raising thing within him.

They were all looking earnestly at him. He hoped none of his inward distress was visible. Turning to Premier Davidson, he said, "Did you get my messages?"

"All three of them—there were only three, weren't there?"

"Yes," Ewing said. *Including one that someone else with my name sent you, one that I have no memory of.* "I'm sorry about those last two—"

"It really stirred us up, when we got that message saying you were coming home without anything gained. We

were really counting on you, Baird. And then, about four hours later, came the second message—"

Ewing chuckled with a warmth he did not feel. "Something came up at the very last minute. Something that can save us from the Klodni." He glanced around uncertainly. "What's the news there? How about the Klodni?"

"They've conquered Borgman," Davidson said. "We're next. Within a year, they say. They changed their direction after Lundquist—"

"They got Lundquist too?" Ewing interrupted.

"Lundquist and Borgman both. Six planets, now. And we're next on the list."

Ewing shook his head slowly. "No, we're not. They're on *our* list. I've brought something back from Earth with me, and the Klodni won't like it."

**H**E WENT before the Council that evening, after having been allowed to spend the afternoon at his home, renewing his acquaintance with his family, repairing the breach two years of absence had created.

He took with him the plans and drawings and model he



had wrung from Myreck and the College. He explained precisely how he planned to defeat the Klodni. The storm burst the moment he had finished.

Jospers, the delegate from Northwest Corwin, immediately broke out with: "Time-travel? Impossible!"

Four of the other delegates echoed the thought. Premier Davidson pounded for order. Ewing shouted them down and said, "Gentlemen, I'm not asking you to believe what I tell you. You sent me to Earth to bring back help, and I've brought it."

"But it's fantastic to tell us—"

"Please, Mr. Jospers. This thing *works*."

"How do you know?"

Ewing took a deep breath. He had not wanted to reveal this. "I've tried it," he said. "I've gone back in time. I've talked face-to-face with myself. You don't have to believe that, either. You can squat here like a bunch of sitting ducks and let the Klodni blast us the way they've blasted Barnholt and Borgman and Lundquist and all the other colony-worlds in this segment of space. But I tell you I have a workable defense here."

Quietly Davidson said, "Tell us this, Baird: how

much will it cost us to build this—ah—weapon of yours, and how long will it take?"

Ewing considered the questions a moment. He said, "I would estimate at least six to eight months of full-time work by a skilled group of engineers to make the thing work in the scale I intend. As for the cost,"—he paused—"I don't see how it could be done for less than three million stellors."

Jospers was on his feet in an instant. "Three million stellors! I ask you, gentlemen—"

His question never was asked. In a voice that tolerated no interruptions Ewing said, "I ask *you*, gentlemen—how much is life worth to you? I have a weapon here. It sounds like nonsense to you, and expensive nonsense as well. But what of the cost? In a year the Klodni will be here, and your economies won't matter a damn. Unless you plan to beat them your own way, of course."

"Three million stellors represents twenty percent of our annual budget," Davidson remarked. "Should your device prove to be of no help—"

"Don't you see?" Ewing shouted. "It doesn't *matter*! If my device doesn't work there won't be any more

budgets for you to worry about!"

It was an unanswerable point. Grudgingly, Jospers conceded, and with his concession the opposition collapsed. It was agreed that the weapon brought back from Earth by Ewing would be built.

There was no choice. The shadow of the advancing Klodni grew longer and longer on the stars, and no other weapon existed. Nothing known to man could stop the advancing hordes.

But possibly something unknown could.

**E**WING SPENT most of his time at the laboratory that had been given him in North Broughton, supervising the development of the time projector.

The weeks passed. At home, Ewing found family life strained and tense. Laira was almost a stranger to him; he told her what he could of his brief stay on Earth, but he had earlier determined to keep the account of his time-shift to himself forever, and his story was sketchy and inconsistent-sounding.

As for Blade, he grew used to his father again. But Ewing did not feel comfortable with either of them.

They were — perhaps — not really his, and, preposterous though the thought was, he could not fully accept the reality of his existence.

There had been other Ewings. He was firmly convinced he had been the first of the four, that the others had merely been duplicates of him, but there was no certainty in that. And two of those duplicates had given up their lives so that he might be home on Corwin.

He brooded over that, and also about Myreck and about Earth. Earth, which by now was merely a Sirian protectorate. Earth which had sent her boldest sons forth to the stars, and had withered her own substance at home.

He saw pictures of the devastation on Lundquist and Borgman. Lundquist had been a pleasure-world, attracting visitors from a dozen worlds to its games parlors and lovely gardens. The pictures showed the lacy towers of Lundquist's dreamlike cities crumbling under the merciless Klodni guns. Senselessly, brutally, the Klodni were moving forward.

Scouts checked their approach. The fleet was massed on Borgman, now. If they held to their regular pattern, it would be nearly a year be-



fore they rumbled out of the Borgman system to make their attack on nearby Corwin.

Ewing counted the passing days. The conical structure of the time-projector took shape slowly, as the technicians, working from the Myreck model, carried out their painstaking tasks. No one asked exactly how the weapon would be put in use. Ewing had specified that it be installed in a spaceship, and it had been designed accordingly.

At night he was haunted by the recurring image of the Ewing who had willingly thrown himself under the jets of a descending spaceliner. *It could have been me*, he thought. *I volunteered. But he wanted to toss for it.*

And there had been another Ewing, equally brave, whom he had never known. The man who had taken the steps that would render him superfluous, and then had calmly and simply removed himself from existence.

*I didn't do that. I figured the others would be caught in the wheel forever, and that I'd be the only one who would get loose. But it didn't happen that way.*

He was haunted too by the accusing stare in Myreck's eyes as the twin Corwinites

plundered the College of its secrets and abandoned Earth to its fate. Here, too, Ewing had his rationalizations; there was nothing he could have done, he told himself, to help.

Laira told him finally that he had changed, that he had become bitter, almost irascible, since making the journey to Earth.

"I don't understand it, Baird. You used to be so warm, so—so *human*. And you're different now. Cold, turned inward, brooding all the time." She touched his arm lightly. "Can't you talk things out with me? Something's troubling you. Something that happened on Earth, maybe—?"

He whirled away. "*No! Nothing.*" He realized his tone was harsh; he saw the pain on her face. In a softer voice he said, "I can't help myself, Laira. There's nothing I can say. I've been under a strain, that's all."

*The strain of seeing myself die, and of seeing a culture die. Or journeying through time and across space. I've been through a lot. Too much, maybe.*

He felt very tired. He looked up at the night sky as it glittered over the viewing-porch of their home. The

stars were gems mounted on black velvet. There were the familiar constellations, the Turtle and the Dove, the Great Wheel, the Spear. He had missed those configurations of stars while on Earth.

But there was nothing friendly about the cold stars tonight. Ewing held his wife close and stared up at them, and it seemed to him as if they held a savage menace. As if the Klodni hordes hovered there like moisture particles in a rain-cloud, waiting for their moment to descend.

## CHAPTER XVII

THE ALARM came early on a spring morning, a year after Ewing had returned to Corwin.

The phone rang. He stirred, turned over, buried his face in the pillow. He was dreaming of a figure limned briefly in the white flare of jet exhaust on Valloin Spacefield. The phone continued to ring.

Groggily Ewing felt a hand shaking him. A voice—Laira's voice—was saying, "Wake up, Baird! There's a call for you! Wake up!"

Reluctant, he came awake. The wall clock said 0430. He jabbed thumbs into his eyes, crawled out of the bed, groped his way across the room to

the phone extension.

"Ewing here. What is it?"

The sharp, high-pitched tones of Prime Minister Davidson cut into his sleep-drugged mind. "Baird, the Klodni are on their way!"

He was awake fully now. "What?"

"We just got word from the scout network," Davidson said. "The main Klodni attacking fleet left Borgman about four hours ago, and they're heading for Corwin. The reports say there are at least five hundred ships in the first wave."

"When are they expected to reach this area?"

"We have conflicting estimates on that. It isn't easy to compute super-light velocities. But on the basis of what we know, they'll be within range of Corwin in not less than ten nor more than eighteen hours."

Ewing nodded. "All right. Have the special ship serviced for immediate blast-off. I'll drive right out to the spaceport and pick it up there."

While Laira fixed a meal he stood by a window, looking outward at the gray, swirling pre-dawn mists, and listening to the thumping patter of the rain. He had lived so long in the shadow of the Klodni ad-



vance that he found it hard to believe the day had actually come.

He ate moodily, scarcely tasting the food as he swallowed it, saying nothing.

Laira said, "I'm frightened, Baird."

"Frightened?" He chuckled. "Of what?"

She did not seem amused. "Of the Klodni. Of this crazy thing you're going to do." After a moment she added, "But you don't seem afraid, Baird."

"I'm not," he said truthfully. "There's nothing to be afraid of. The Klodni won't even be able to see me. There isn't a mass-detector in the universe sensitive enough to spot a one-man ship a couple of light-years away. The mass is insignificant; and there'll be too much background noise coming out of the fleet itself."

When he had eaten, he stopped off briefly in Blade's bedroom to take a last look at the sleeping boy. He did not wake him. He merely looked in, smiled, and closed the door.

"Maybe you should wake him up and say goodbye," Laira suggested hesitantly.

Ewing shook his head. "It's only five in the morning. He needs his sleep at his age. Anyway, when I get back I

guess I'll be a hero. He'll like that."

**D**AWN streaked the sky by the time he reached Broughton Spacefield. He left his car with an attendant and went to the main administration building, where a grim-faced group of Corwin officials waited for him.

*This is it, Ewing thought. If I don't make it, Corwin's finished.*

A world's destiny rode on the wild scheme of one man. It was a burden he did not relish carrying.

He greeted Davidson and the others a little stiffly; the tension was beginning to grip him now. Davidson handed him a portfolio.

"This is the flight-chart of the Klodni armada," the Prime Minister explained. "We had the big computer extrapolate it. They'll be overhead in nine hours fifty minutes."

Ewing shook his head. "You're wrong. They won't be overhead at all. I'm going to meet them at least a light-year from here, maybe farther out if I can manage it. They won't get any closer."

He scanned the charts. Graphs of the Klodni force had been inked in.

"The computer says there are seven hundred seventy-five ships in the fleet," Davidson said.

Ewing pointed to the formation. "It's a pure wedge, isn't it? A single flapship, followed by two ships, followed by a file of four, followed by eight. And right on out to here. That's very interesting."

"It's a standard Klodni fighting formation," said gravel-voiced Dr. Harmess of the Department of Military Science. "The flagship always leads and none of the others dares to break formation without order. Complete totalitarian discipline."

Ewing smiled. "I'm glad to hear it."

He checked his watch. Approximately ten hours from now, Klodni guns would be thundering down on virtually defenseless Corwin. A fleet of seven hundred seventy-five dreadnaughts was an unstoppable armada. Corwin had perhaps a dozen ships, and not all of them in fighting trim despite vigorous last-minute work. No planet in the civilized galaxy could stand the burden of supporting a military force of nearly eight hundred first-line ships.

"All right," he said after a moment's silence. "I'm ready to leave."

They led him across the damp, rain-soaked field to the well-guarded special hangar in the rear where Project X had been installed. Security guards smiled obligingly and stood to one side when they recognized Ewing and the Prime Minister. Field attendants swung open the doors of the hangar, revealing the ship.

It was a thin black spear, hardly bigger than the vessel that had taken him to Earth and back. Inside, though, there was no complex equipment for suspending animation. Where that apparatus had been now rested a tubular helical coil whose tip projected micromillimeters from the skin of the ship, and at whose base was a complex control panel.

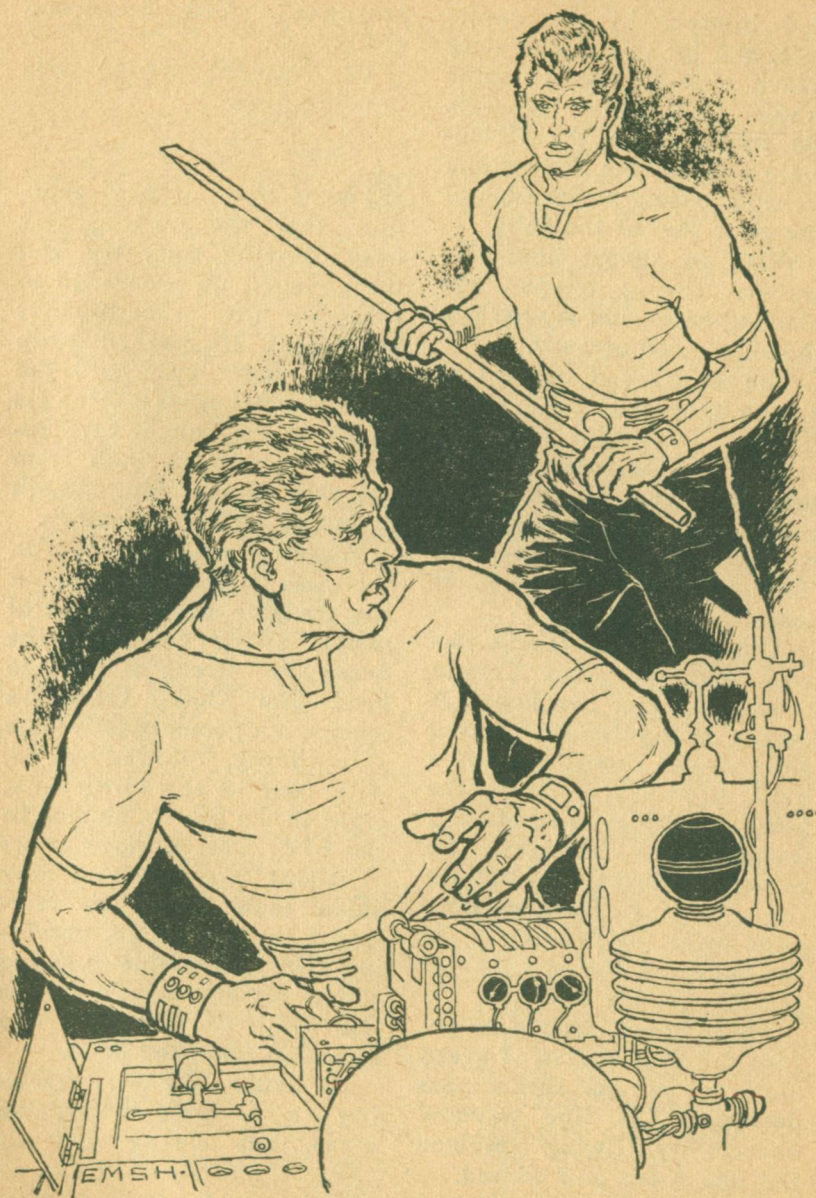
Ewing nodded in approval. The field attendants wheeled the ship out; gantry cranes tilted it to blasting angle and carried it to the blast-field.

A black ship against the blackness of space. The Klodni would never notice it, Ewing thought. He sensed the joy of battle springing up in him.

"I'll leave immediately," he said.

The actual blastoff was to be handled automatically. Ewing clambered aboard, set-





tled himself in the cradle area, and let the spinnerettes weave him an unshatterable cradle of spidery foamweb. He switched on the vision-plate and saw the little group waiting tensely at the edge of the clear part of the field.

With an almost impulsive gesture Ewing tripped the blasting-lever, and lay back as the ship raced upward.

The ship arced upward in a wide hyperbolic orbit, while Ewing shuddered in his cradle and waited. Seconds later, the jets cut out. The rest of the journey would be carried out on warp-drive. That was less strenuous, at least.

The pre-plotted course carried him far from Corwin during the first two hours. A quick triangulation showed that he was almost one and a half light-years from the home world—a safe enough distance, he thought. He ceased forward thrust and put the ship in a closed million-mile orbit perpendicular to the expected line of attack of the Klodni. He waited.

Three hours slipped by before the first quiver of green appeared on his ship's mass detector. The line wavered uncertainly. Ewing resolved the fine focus and waited.

The line broadened. And

broadened. And broadened again.

The Klodni wedge was drawing near.

**E**WING felt utterly calm, now that the waiting was over. Moving smoothly and unhurriedly, he proceeded to activate the time-transfer equipment. He yanked down on the main lever, and the control panel came to life; the snout of the helical core advanced nearly an inch from the skin of the ship, enough to insure a clear trajectory.

Working with one eye on the mass detector and one on the transfer device's control panel, Ewing computed the necessary strength of the field. The Klodni formation opened out geometrically: one ship leading, followed by two, with four in the third rank, eight in the fourth, sixteen in the fifth. Two massive ranks of about two hundred fifty ships each served as rear-guard for the wedge, providing a furious double finishing thrust for any attack. It was the width of these last two files that mattered most.

No doubt they were traveling in a three-dimensional array, but Ewing took no chances, and assumed that all two hundred and fifty were



moving in a single parallel bar. He computed the maximum width of such a formation. He added twenty percent at each side, for safety. If only a dozen Klodni ships slipped through, Corwin still would face a siege of havoc.

Programming his data, he fed it to the transfer machine and established the necessary coordinates. He punched out the activator signals. He studied the mass-detector; the Klodni fleet was less than an hour away now.

He nodded in satisfaction as the last of his computations checked and cancelled out. *Here goes*, he thought.

He tripped the actuator.

There was no apparent effect, no response except for a phase-shift on one of the meters aboard the ship. But Ewing knew there had been an effect. A gulf had opened in the heavens, an invisible gulf that radiated outward from his ship and sprawled across space.

A gulf he could control as a fisherman might a net—a net wide enough to hold seven hundred seventy-five alien vessels of war.

Ewing waited.

His tiny ship swung in its rigid orbit, round and round, carrying the deadly nothingness round with it. The Klod-

ni fleet drew near. Ewing scratched out further computations. At no time, he thought, would he be closer to a Klodni ship than forty light-minutes. They would never pick him up at such a distance.

A minnow huddled in the dark, waiting to trap the whales.

The green line on the mass-detector broadened and became intense. Ewing shifted out of his locked orbit, placing the vessel on manual response. He readied his trap as the Klodni flagship moved serenely on through the void.

*Now!* he thought.

He cast his net.

The Klodni flagship moved on—and vanished! From Ewing's vantage-point it seemed as if the great vessel had simply been blotted out; the green wedge on the scope of his mass-detector was blunt-snouted now that the flagship was gone.

But to the ships behind it, nothing seemed amiss. Without breaking formation they followed on, and Ewing waited. The second rank vanished through the gulf, and the third, and the fourth.

Eighteen ships gone. Thirty-two. Sixty-four.

He held his breath as the one - hundred - twenty - eight -

ship rank entered the cul-de-sac. Now for the test. He stared at the mass-detector intently as the two biggest Klodni formations moved toward him. Two hundred fifty ships each, the hammers of the Klodni forces—

Gone.

Gone, all of them. The mass-detector was utterly blank. There was not a Klodni ship anywhere within detectable range. Ewing felt limp with relief. He disconnected the transfer mechanism, clamping down knife-switches with frenzied zeal. The gulf was sealed, now. There was no possible way back for the trapped Klodni ships.

He could break radio silence now. He sent a brief, laconic message: "*Klodni fleet destroyed. Am returning to home base.*"

One man had wiped out an armada. He chuckled in relief of the crushing tension.

He wondered briefly what the puzzled Klodni would think and say and do when they found themselves in the midst of a trackless void, without stars, without planets. No doubt they would proceed on across space in search of some place to land, while their provisions became exhausted, their fuel disappeared, while old age and death

claimed them. Eventually even their ships would crumble, and would be gone.

According to the best scientific theory, the stars of the galaxy were between five and six billion years old. The range of the Earther time-projector was nearly infinite.

Ewing had hurled the Klodni fleet nine billion years into the past. He shuddered at the thought, and turned his tiny ship homeward, to Corwin.

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE RETURN VOYAGE seemed to take days. Ewing lay awake in the protecting cradle, staring through the open vision-plate at the blurred splendor of the heavens as the ship shot through not-space at super-light velocities. At these speeds, the stars appeared as blotchy pastel things; the constellations did not exist.

Curiously, he felt no sense of triumph. He had saved Corwin, true—and in that sense, he had achieved the goal in whose name he had set out on his journey across space to Earth. But he felt as if his work were incomplete.

He thought, not of Corwin now, but of Earth. Two years had gone by on the mother



world since his departure; certainly, time enough for the Sirians to make their move.

And Myreck and the others—well, perhaps they had survived, hidden three microseconds out of phase. But more likely they had been caught and put to death, like the potential dangers they were.

Guiltily Ewing told himself, as he lay pinioned in the foam cradle, that there was nothing he could have done. Earth's doom was fore-ordained, self-inflicted. He had saved his own world; there was no helping Earth.

*There was a way, something in his mind said reproachfully. There still is a way.*

Leave Corwin. Cross space once again, return to Earth, lead the hapless little Earthers in a struggle for freedom. All they needed was a man with the bold vigor of the out-world colonies. Leadership was what they lacked. They outnumbered the Sirians a thousand to one. In any kind of determined rising, they could win free easily. But they needed a focal point; they needed a leader.

*You could be that leader, something within him insisted. Go back to Earth.*

Savagely he forced the idea to die. His place was on Corwin, where he was a hero,

where his wife and child and home awaited him. Earth had to work out its own pitiful destinies.

He tried to relax. The ship plummeted onward through not-space, toward Corwin.

**I**T SEEMED that the whole populace turned out to welcome him. He could see them from above, as he maneuvered the ship through the last of its series of inward spirals and let it come gently to rest on the ferroconcrete landing surface of Broughton Spacefield.

He let the decontaminating squad do its work, while he watched the massed crowd assembled beyond the barriers. Finally, when the ship and the area around it were both safely cool, he stepped out.

The roar was deafening.

There were thousands of them there. In the front he saw Laira and Blade, and the Prime Minister, and the Council. University people. Newsmen. People, people, people. Ewing's first impulse was to shrink back into the lonely comfort of his ship. Instead, he compelled himself to walk forward toward the crowd.

Somehow he reached Laira and got his arms around her.

He smiled; she said something, but her voice was crushed by the uproar. He read her lips instead. She was saying, "I was counting the seconds till you got back, darling."

He kissed her. He hugged Blade to him. He smiled to Davidson and to all of them, and wondered quietly why he had been born with the particular conglomeration of personality traits that had brought him to this destiny, on this world, on this day.

He was a hero. He had ended a threat that had destroyed six worlds.

Corwin was safe.

He was swept inside, carried off to the World Building, smuggled into Prime Minister Davidson's private chambers. There, while officers of the peace kept the curiosity-seekers away, Ewing dictated for the airwaves a full account of what he had done, while smiling friends looked on.

There were parades outside. He could hear the noise from where he sat, seventy-one floors above the street level. A world that had lived under sentence of death for six years found itself miraculously reprieved. It was small wonder the emotional top was blowing off.

Sometime toward evening, they let him go home. He had not slept for more than thirty hours.

A cavalcade of official cars convoyed him out of the capital city and toward the suburban area where he lived. They told him a guard would be placed round his house, to assure him continued privacy. He thanked them all, wished them good night, and entered his house. The door shut behind him, shutting out the noise, the celebration, the acclaim. He was just Baird Ewing of Corwin again, in his own home. He felt very tired. He felt hollow within, as if he were not a hero but a villain despite himself. And it showed.

Laira said, "That trip didn't change you, did it?"

He blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

"I thought that the cloud of whatever-it-is would lift from you. That you were worried about the invasion and everything. But I guess I was wrong. We're safe, now—and something's still eating you."

He tried to laugh it off. "Laira, you're just overtired. You've been worrying too much yourself. Why don't you get some sleep?"

She shook her head. "No, Baird. I'm serious. I know you



too well; I see something in your eyes. Trouble, of some kind." She put her hands round his wrists and stared up into his eyes. "Baird, something happened to you on Earth that you haven't told me about. I'm your wife. I ought to know about it, if there's anything—"

"There's *nothing!* Nothing." He looked away. "Let's go to sleep, Laira. I'm exhausted."

But he lay in bed turning restlessly, and despite his exhaustion sleep did not come.

*How can I go back to Earth?* he asked himself bitterly. *My loyalties lie here. Earth will have to take care of itself—and if it can't more's the pity.*

It was a hollow rationalization, and he knew it. He lay awake half the night, brooding, twisting, drowning in his own agonized perspiration.

He thought:

*Three men died so I could return to Corwin safely. Two of them were deliberate, voluntary suicides. I owe them a debt. I owe Earth a debt, for making possible Corwin's salvation.*

*Three men died for me. Do I have any right to be selfish?*

Then he thought:

*When Laira married me, she thought she was getting*

*Citizen Baird Ewing, period. She wasn't marrying any heroes, any world-savers. She didn't ask the Council to pick me for its trip to Earth. But she went through two years of widowhood because they did pick me.*

*How could I tell her I was leaving, going to Earth for good? Leaving her without a husband, and Blade without a father? It simply isn't fair to them. I can't do it.*

And then he thought:

*There must be a compromise. A way I can serve the memory of the dead Baird Ewings and be fair to my family as well. There has to be some kind of compromise.*

There was. The answer came to him shortly before morning, crystal-sharp, bearing with it no doubts, no further anxiety. He saw what his path must be. With the answer came a welling tide of peace, and he drifted into sound sleep, confident he had found the right way at last.

**P**RIME MINISTER Davidson, on behalf of the grateful people of the world of Corwin, called on him the next morning. Davidson told him he might pick anything, anything at all as his reward.

Ewing chuckled. "I've got

everything I want already," he said. "Fame, fortune, family—what else is there in life?"

Shrugging, the rotund little Prime Minister said, "But surely there must be some fitting—"

"There is," Ewing said. "Suppose—suppose you grant me the freedom of poking around with those notebooks I brought back with me from Earth. All right?"

"Certainly, if that's what you want. But can that be all that—"

"There's just one other thing I want. No, two. The first one may be tough. I want to be left alone. I want to get out of the limelight. No medals, no public receptions, no more parades. I did the job the Council sent me to do, and now I want to return to private life.

"As for the second thing—well, I won't mention it yet. Let's just put it this way: when the time comes, I'm going to want a favor from the Government. It'll be an expensive favor, but not terribly so. I'll let you know what it is I want, when and if I want it."

Slowly the notoriety ebbed away, and he returned to private life as he had wished. His life would never be the same

again, but there was no help for that.

A month passed. The tenseness seemed to have left him. He discovered that his son was turning into a miniature replica of his father—tall, taciturn, with the same inner traits of courage, dependability, conscience. It was a startling thing to watch the boy unfold as if leaving the chrysalis of childhood, becoming a personality.

It was too bad, Ewing thought, as he wrestled with his son or touched his wife's arm, that he would have to be leaving them soon. He would regret parting with them. But at least they would be spared any grief.

A second month passed. The apparatus he was building in his basement, in the sacrosanct den that neither Blade nor Laira ever dared to enter, was nearing completion. The time was drawing near.

He ran the final tests on a warm midsummer day. The machine responded perfectly. The time had come.

He called upstairs via the intercom housephone. Laira was reading in the study; Blade was watching the video. "Blade? Laira?"

"We're here, Baird. What do you want?" Laira asked.



Ewing said, "I'll be running some very delicate experiments during the next twenty minutes or so. Any shift in the room balance might foul things up. Would you both be kind enough to stay put, in whatever room you're in now, until I give the signal from downstairs?"

"Of course, darling."

Ewing smiled and hung up. Quite carefully he took a massive crowbar from his tool-chest and propped it up at the side of the wall, near the outer door of the den. He glanced at his watch. The time was 1403:30.

He recrossed the room and made some final adjustments on the apparatus. He stared at his watch, letting the minutes go by. Six, seven, eight . . .

At 1411:30 he reached up and snapped a switch. The machinery hummed briefly and threw him back ten minutes in time.

## CHAPTER XIX

HE WAS HOVERING inches in the air above his own front lawn. He dropped, landing gently, and looked at his watch. The dial said 1401:30.

At this very moment, he knew, his earlier self was on the housephone, calling upstairs to Laira. Ewing mois-

tened his lips. This would take careful coordination.

On tiptoe he ran round the house, entering at the side door that led to his basement workshop. He moved stealthily down the inner corridor until he was only a few feet from the workshop door.

There was an intercom outlet mounted in the hall. Gently he lifted the receiver from the hook and put it to his ear.

He heard himself say, "Any shift in the room balance might foul things up. Would you both be kind enough to stay put, in whatever room you're in now, until I give the signal from downstairs?"

"Of course, darling," Laira's voice responded.

Outside, in the hall, Ewing looked at his watch. It read 1403:10. He waited a moment. At 1403:30 he heard the faint *clink* as the crowbar was propped up against the wall near the door.

So far, everything was right on schedule.

He edged forward and peered through the partly open door into the workshop. A familiar-looking figure sat with his back to the door, hunched over the time-projector on the table, making fine adjustments preparatory to jumping back in time ten minutes.

His watch said 1405:15.

He stepped quickly into the room and snatched up the crowbar he had so carefully provided for himself. He crossed the room in four quick bounds; his double, absorbed in his work, did not notice until Ewing put his hand on the shoulder of the other and lifted him away from the workbench. In the same motion he swung the crowbar; it smashed into the main section of the time-projector, sending it tumbling to the floor in a tingling crash of breaking tubes and crumbling circuits.

"I hated to do that," he remarked casually. "It represented a lot of work. But you know why I did it."

"Y-yes," the other said uncertainly. The two men faced each other over the wreckage of the projector, Baird Ewing facing Baird Ewing, the only difference between them being that one held a crowbar ready for further use. Ewing prayed Laira had not heard the crash. Everything would be ruined if she chose this moment to violate the sanctity of his workroom.

He said, slowly, to his double: "You know who I am and why I'm here, don't you? And where I came from?"

The other ruefully stared down at the wreckage. "I

guess so. You got there ahead of me, didn't you? You're one notch up on me in the absolute time-track."

Ewing nodded. "Exactly. And keep your voice down. I don't want any trouble from you."

"You're determined to do it?"

Ewing nodded again. "Listen to me very carefully, now. I'm going to take my—our—car and drive into Broughton. I'm going to make a call to Prime Minister Davidson. Then I'm going to drive out to the spaceport, get into a ship, and leave. That's the last you'll ever hear from me.

"In the meantime—you're to stay down here until at least 1420 or so. Then call upstairs to Laira and tell her you've finished the experiment. Sweep up the wreckage, and if you're a wise man you won't build any more of these gadgets in the future. From now on, no extra Baird Ewings. You'll be the only one. And take good care of Laira and Blade. I love them too."

"Wait a minute," the other Ewing said. "You're not being fair."

"To whom?"

"To yourself. Look, I'm as much Baird Ewing as you are. And it's as much my re-



sponsibility to—to leave Corwin as it is yours. You don't have any right to take it upon yourself to give up everything you love. Let's flip a coin to see who goes, at least."

Ewing shook his head. In a quiet, flat voice he said, "No. *I* go. I've watched too many alter egos of mine sacrifice themselves to keep me safe and sound."

"So have I, remember?"

Ewing shrugged. "That's tough for you, then. But this is my ride through the time-track, and *I'm* going. You stay here and nurse your guilty conscience, if you like. But you shouldn't moan too much. You'll have Laira and Blade. And Baird Ewing will be doing what he ought to be doing, as well."

"But—"

Ewing lifted the crowbar menacingly. "I don't want to skull you, brother. Accept defeat gracefully."

He looked at his watch. It was 1410. He walked to the door and said, "The car will be parked at the spaceport. You figure out some explanation for how it got there."

He turned and walked out.

The car was waiting in its garage; he touched his finger to the burglar-proof identiplate that controlled the garage door, and the car came

out. He got in, switched on the directional guide, and left via the back route, so no one in the house could see him.

As soon as he was comfortably distant from the house, he snapped on the phone circuit and gave the operator Prime Minister Davidson's number, in the World Building.

After a short pause, Davidson acknowledged.

"Hello, Baird. What's on your mind?"

"A favor. You owe me one, remember? I asked for *carte blanche* the day after the Klodni thing."

Davidson chuckled. "I haven't forgotten about it, Baird. Well?"

"I want to borrow a spaceship," Ewing said quietly. "A one-man ship. The same sort of ship I used to get to Earth in, a couple of years ago."

"A *spaceship*?" The Prime Minister sounded incredulous. "What would you be wanting a spaceship for?"

"That doesn't matter. An experiment of mine, let's say. I asked for a favor, and you said you'd grant it. Are you backing down, now?"

"No, no, of course not. But—"

"Yes. I want a spaceship. I'm on my way to Broughton Spacefield now. Will you

phone ahead of me and tell them to release a military-owned one-man job for me, or won't you?"

IT WAS nearly 1500 when he reached the spacefield. He left his car in the special parking lot and made it on foot across to the trim little building used by the military wing of Corwin's government.

He asked for and was taken to the commanding officer on duty. The officer turned out to be a wry-faced colonel who looked up questioningly as Ewing entered his office.

"You're Ewing, of course."

"That's right. Did Prime Minister Davidson phone?"

The colonel nodded. "He authorized me to give you one of our one-man ships. I guess I don't have to ask if you can operate it, do I?"

Ewing grinned and said, "I guess not."

"The ship's on Field B right now, being serviced for you. It'll be fully fueled, of course. How long are you planning to stay aloft?"

Shrugging, Ewing said, "I really haven't decided that yet, Colonel. But I'll advise for clearance before I come down."

"Good."

"Oh—one more thing. Is

the ship I'm getting equipped for suspension?"

The colonel frowned. "All our ships are. Why do you ask? Not planning *that* long a trip, are you?"

"Hardly," Ewing lied. "I just wanted to examine the suspension equipment once again. Sentimental reasons, you know."

The colonel signaled and one of the cadets led him across the field to the waiting ship. It was a twin to the one that had borne him across to Earth; for all he knew, it might have been the very same one. He clambered aboard, switched on the controls, and advised he would be leaving Corwin in eleven minutes.

From memory, he punched out the coordinates for his journey on the autopilot. He activated the unit, stripped, and lowered himself once again into the suspension tank.

He thought:

*Firnik thinks I'm dead. He'll be surprised when a ghost turns up on Earth, leading the underground revolt against the Sirians. And I'll have to explain everything very carefully to Myreck as soon as I get back—if I can find Myreck.*

And he thought:



*My double back home is going to have some fancy explaining to do too. About what happened to the ship he took up with him, and how his car got to the spaceport while he was in his workshop. He'll have plenty of fast talking to do. But he'll manage. He's a pretty shrewd sort. He'll get along.*

He paused for a moment to wish a silent goodbye to the wife and son who would never know he had left them. Then he stretched out his feet and switched on the suspension unit. The temperature began to drop.

Darkness swirled up around him.

## CHAPTER XX

THE TIME was 1421, of a warm midsummer afternoon on Corwin. Baird Ewing finished sweeping the shattered fragments of his painstakingly constructed projector into the disposal unit, looked around, put the crowbar back in the tool shelf.

Then he snapped on the housephone and said, "Okay, Laira. The experiment's over. Thanks for helping out."

He hung up and trotted up the stairs to the study. Laira was bent over her book; Blade stared entranced at the video

screen. He crept up behind the boy, caught him suddenly with one big hand at the back of his neck, and squeezed affectionately. Then, leaving him, he lifted Laira's head from her viewing screen, smiled warmly at her, and turned away without speaking.

Later in the afternoon he was on his way to Broughton Spacefield via public transport to reclaim his car. He was still some miles distant when the sudden overhead roar of a departing spaceship sounded.

"One of those little military jobs taking off," someone in the bus said.

Ewing looked up through the translucent roof of the bus at the clear sky. No ship was visible, of course. It was well on its way Earthward now.

*Good luck, he thought. And Godspeed.*

The car was in the special parking field. He smiled to the attendant, unlocked it, climbed in.

He drove home.

Home—to Laira and Blade.

## CHAPTER XX

BAIRD EWING woke slowly, sensing the coldness all about him. It was slowly withdrawing down the length of

his body; his head and shoulders had come out of the freeze, and the rest of him was gradually emerging.

He looked at the time-panel. Eleven months, fourteen days, six hours had elapsed since he had left Corwin. He hoped they hadn't held their breaths while waiting for him to return their ship.

He performed the de-suspending routine and emerged from the tank. He touched the stud and the vision-plate lit up. A planet hung centered in the green depths of the plate—a planet green itself, with vast seas bordering its continents.

Earth.

Ewing smiled. They would

be surprised to see him, all right. But he could help them, and so he had come back. He could serve as coordinator for the resistance movement. He could spearhead the drive that would end the domination of the Sirians and bring new life to Earth.

*Here I come*, he thought.

His fingers moved rapidly over the manual-control bank of the ship's instrument panel. He began setting up the orbit for landing. Already, plans and counterplans were forming in his active mind.

The ship descended to Earth in a wide-sweeping arc. Ewing waited, impatient for the landing, as his ship swung closer and ever closer to the lovely green world below.



## ADVENTURES IN THE FUTURE

Editing SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES is an exciting job these days—not just because the stories are so exciting, but also because there are so many good ones on hand to choose from.

Next issue will have one of the best line-ups yet. There will be two big novels this time: one by John Brunner, a strong contender for the title of England's best and most prolific sf writer, and one by Harry Harrison, world-roving editor, writer, and artist. The two yarns are alike in only one thing; each is a fast-paced, thrill-a-page yarn dealing with one strong man fighting tremendous odds in an utterly alien environment. And they're both terrific!

Short stories will be by Alexander Blade (an author you've asked for), Ralph Burke, and others if space permits. The issue goes on sale March 8th—you'll want it!



# THE BOOK-SPACE

Reviews by Calvin M. Knox

**C**ITY UNDER THE SEA by Kenneth Bulmer and **STAR WAYS** by Poul Anderson. Ace Double Books, 35¢.

This latest in the Ace two-for-the-price-of-one series comprises a pair of uneven but generally entertaining novels, one an original, one a reprint.

The original is the Bulmer—the first American-published novel of this well-known British science fiction writer. Its previous appearance was in the British magazine *New Worlds*, where it was serialized under the title "Green Destiny."

*City Under the Sea* has as its theme the highly interesting speculation, also considered recently in an Arthur C. Clarke novel, that the area deserving of man's exploration in the immediate future is not space but the seas of Earth. Bulmer's protagonist, like Clarke's, is a former spaceman who ventures beneath the sea—but the resemblance between the novels ends there. While

the Clarke book is rambling and episodic, developing character well but ignoring plot, Bulmer's novel is a well-plotted, fast-paced novel of under-sea adventure against the fascinating background of an ocean undergoing intensive cultivation ("aquiculture" is Bulmer's term).

His protagonist is ex-spaceman Jeremy Dodge, who is lured beneath the sea to investigate the legacy of his uncle, sea-farmer Arthur Dodge. But spaceman Dodge is captured by unscrupulous hirelings of a sea-farming corporation and is surgically converted into a "manfish," capable of surviving under the sea and unable to breathe air.

The story as it unfolds is an exciting one, and the well-researched details of under-sea life make for vivid reading. It is an uneven novel, however: some of the under-sea scenes have an easy-going realistic quality reminiscent of Heinlein at his best—but when depicting his above-ocean villains, Bulmer occa-

sionally allows his style to go flat and unconvincing and his plot to become mechanical. Occasionally characters come on stage without proper introduction, and this, too, becomes confusing. But despite these faults the book is a capable job well worth investigating.

On the other side is Anderson's *Star Ways*, a reprint of the 1956 Avalon hardback edition. This is a short and sometimes almost sketchy novel, not up to the usually high standard of its author's shorter work. It concerns the adventures of a band of space-rovers, interstellar nomads of Terran descent who face the problem of a series of ship disappearances.

The book is colorful and fast-moving, but the lack of a really strong central figure weakens the plot and thins the story-line. Many of the individual scenes are expertly handled and make stirring reading in themselves; readers may find that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. But—as is true of all the Ace Doubles — there's plenty of good reading in both halves of this volume, and you can't possibly go wrong at the price.

**PILGRIMAGE TO EARTH**, by Robert Sheckley. Bantam, 35¢.

This is Sheckley's third short story collection—fifteen yarns, some from the days when this talented writer was first making his sensational debut in science fiction, some more recent. Most of the stories are from *Galaxy*, but others hail from such sources as *Bluebook*, *Today's Woman*, *If*, and *Astounding*.

This reviewer's favorite is the wryly irreverent "Earth, Air, Fire and Water" from *ASF*. But all the stories bear the distinctive Sheckley stamp: bright, neat, satirically sparkling, as they examine tongue-in-cheek some of sf's most ancient notions and find new surprises in them. You're likely to enjoy the book all the more, by the way, if you take it in small doses.

●

**THE TIME DISSOLVER**, by Jerry Sohl. Avon, 35¢.

A new, never-before-published story by the author of the recent SFA yarn "One Against Herculum" and of half a dozen previous science fiction novels. This is certainly the best Sohl novel to date,



suspenseful, convincing, and, above all, *human*. The characters—even the villain—come to life in a way not seen before in Sohl's novels, and seen all too rarely in science fiction in general.

The time is the present; the protagonist is Walter Evan Sherwood, who awakens on a July morning in 1957 to discover that he has no memory of any event later than 1946. He awakens in bed with a strange woman—a tantalizing opening hook that is perfectly justified by the subsequent actions, since she turns out to be Sherwood's wife, whom he married during the years that had been blotted from his mind. And she is a victim of amnesia too.

The core of the story is Sherwood's methodical quest for the missing eleven years, built up with rising suspense as he moves forward, learning about himself and about a

world that has taken a strangely nightmarish turn since the hopeful days of 1946. Eventually he finds the answer—but not before Sohl has exploded a series of skillful and intriguing narrative surprises.

The writing is crisp and clear and only in one or two places does the author's hand show through the scenery; generally the characters move and live and breathe seemingly of their own accord. One peculiar value of the novel is the startlingly clear and objective view Walter Sherwood has of the world events of the last eleven years; bringing Rip van Winkle up to date, Sohl is able to take a sharp look at recent happenings. And the mysterious device that has brought about all the trouble is developed in a highly satisfactory manner.

This is a good book. It rings true. Highly recommended.



## DOWN WITH TROUBLE!

We're opposed to trouble—it's unpleasant. So we've gone to great lengths to eliminate *your* troubles! Not all of them, exactly, but the trouble of finding *SFA* on the newsstands, at least. All it takes is a little cooperation on your part. Send \$3.50 to Royal Publications, Inc., 11 West 42nd Street, New York 36, New York. Next thing you know, you'll have a 12-issue subscription. (Of course, we'll have your money—but money only leads to further trouble, anyway.)

# Box-Garden

by Allen K. Lang

*He had big ears, hated TV commercials,  
and talked about bansai (with an s)....*

THE EARS of the man to my left at the bar were blocking off my view of the TV set. This annoyed me. The commercial was on, and I didn't want to miss any of it. Leaning forward, trying to get the man's head and ears out of my line of sight, I bumped against his shoulder. He turned, taking my accidental nudge to be an invitation to converse.

"I'm getting pretty tired," the big-eared man said to me, "of being treated like an adult pituitary-deficiency case." He nodded his head and ears at the screen. "Look at that thing that's on now," he said. "It's an insult and an outrage."

I watched the TV commercial closely, trying to discover what had triggered this out-

burst from my neighbor. An elf in a scarlet hat was pouring emerald golf balls onto a plate, to the tune of Bryant & May's "Garden-Fresh" song. That commercial, I thought myself, was as much a triumph of Yankee ingenuity as was color television itself. No child, no housewife in America, could fail to identify that elf and his song with Bryant & May's Garden-Fresh Peas.

My big-eared friend was still glaring at the screen as though that commercial had been designed to insult him. "You don't like commercials?" I demanded. I wasn't really the least bit angry. You meet all kinds in the advertising business.

"Advertising may be necessary," he hedged, pulling at



the lobe of one of those magnificent ears of his. "Still, it doesn't take a choir of TV elves or a cantata sung by squeaky-voiced animals to remind me to launder my sox, or to point out that a beer would go good when I'm thirsty. Hell, I outgrew the advice of teddy-bears years ago." He sipped his beer, staring at my reflection in the bar mirror as though trying to decide whether I was worthy of his further confidence. He must have decided I had a sincere face, because he scooted up closer. "What's more," he said, "some of these commercials, like the one we just saw, frighten me terribly." Big-ears whispered this last like a murderer in Shakespeare.

I laughed in spite of myself. "The Bryant & May elf? Afraid of him? Man, that's like being scared of Santa Claus."

"It's not that simple," he rapped back. "It's not only fear those commercials inspire, but pity." I stared at him now, thinking maybe he was a recruiter for a nudist colony or a ward-worker for the Vegetarian Party, or some other sort of fanatic peddling his exotic ritual. "Let me explain," he asked quickly, seeing my hesitation. "Want another beer?" I reflexively

named the beer my agency handles, smoooooth Billygoat Beer.

When the bartender had set our refills before us and moved out of earshot, my big-eared confidant explained. "Do you know what *bansai* means?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "That's when the little men come screaming out of the palm-trees, waving their swords."

He smiled briefly. "You've got the right string, friend, but the wrong yo-yo. It's Japanese, all right; but spelled with an "s," not a "z." A *bansai* is a dwarf tree raised for a Japanese box-garden, or *hako-niwa*. They've been growing *bansais* on those islands for fifteen hundred years: full-grown pines you can put in a flowerpot, oaks two hundred years old and a foot tall, all with perfect tiny limbs and leaves."

"A trick?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Big-ears said. "Here's how they do it in Japan. You take an ordinary acorn from an oak four stories tall. Plant it. Give the little tree time to get its shell cracked and its leaves unfolded in the sunlight. From that minute on, treat it like a wicked stepmother. Keep it in a plate too shallow for its roots. When the taproot starts

twisting around, all frustrated, lop it off. Bend the trunk out of shape with wires, so's it'll look as though it has been bent to the storms off the North Pacific since granddad was a suckling. Takes a long time, like the man said in the poem."

**I** MADE the V-sign for another pair of Billygoat Beers. "Interesting and all," I admitted. "But what does this exposé of Jap silviculture have to do with American television?"

"That's where my story gets ugly," said my friend with the ears. His voice dropped low again, confidential. "The Japanese didn't have hormones for their *bansais*. They made their midget oaks and pines and ginko-trees without the help of negative catalysts or anti-vitamins. They didn't even know B-12 from the far side of Fujiyama, when they started their box-gardens.

"The people running TV know those things. You never see an announcer on a tooth-paste show who doesn't talk like a biochemistry Ph.D. explaining paper chromatography in a kindergarten. You know what I mean. The guys who point their index fingers at you from the screen, all tricked out in doctor-coats

with stethoscopes on their necks and reflectors on their foreheads to prove that Science stands behind every tube of their particular gunk. They talk a line that would take the Nobel Prize in Medicine if it meant anything, then rub it in with shots of dancing bears and gnomes and chorus girls six inches tall."

Big-ears shuddered. "The people who put the calories in our breakfast woodchips know all about biology, now," he said, getting louder. "They've got laboratories, and even brag about having them. What's more," he said, his voice shrill now, "they use those laboratories of theirs to do their commercials."

"Still can't see where you've got anything to be afraid of," I said, tamping a cigarette tight on the bar.

Big-ears glanced up at the screen and shushed me. "Just watch this," he said, pointing. I watched. A tiny clown carried an opener at right-shoulder-arms toward a palisade of beer cans. He did port-arms with his opener, shoved one of the cans to the center of the screen, and punched two holes in the top of the can. He grounded the opener, still according to the Manual of Arms, bear-hugged the beer can to tip it into a glass, then



picked up the glass, which was tall as he was, and chugalugged the lot.

While I don't like to commend the competition, that was a good, workmanlike script. I'd be proud to have done that myself. We turned from the screen as the show came on. "Did you see that?" Big-ears demanded.

I paused before I answered, straining to be real objective. "Some people might think it was a bit childish," I said.

"It's obscene!" he hissed. "Can't you see how the advertisers get that horrible realism? Haven't you watched those tiny ballerinas with king-sized cigarettes for partners? Didn't I tell you about the *bansai*-trees and how they grow?"

People down the bar were staring at Big-ears now, impatient of his shouts, his noise that didn't fit the show on the screen. The bartender, glaring at my neighbor, twisted the TV's sound-knob so that the laughter from the set became a niagara. Big-ears raised his voice above his electronic competition. "Do you suppose those little bears, and monkeys, and clowns and chorus girls are puppets, maybe? Was that a doll that opened the beer, a toy that poured the

peas for Bryant & May? No! They're changing real people, that's what they're doing."

The bartender walked like a tank around the bar and came down our side toward Big-ears. He folded the man's lapels in one hand and explained softly, "These people want to hear our show. You'll have to go on down the street if you want any more beer tonight, friend."

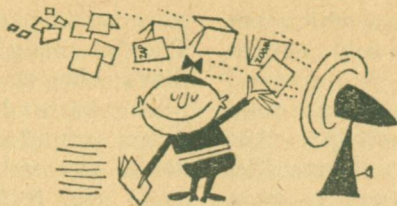
Big-ears didn't argue, but he called over his shoulder as the bartender escorted him to the door. "Remember what I told you, please remember!" I turned away, embarrassed. The poor little fellow had got so deep in his story that he was actually crying as he left the bar.

I had another of those smoooooth Billygoat Beers before I left, feeling pretty sorry for my little friend with the big ears.

This was about a year ago—Washington's Birthday, I think.

Last night, watching TV at home, I saw a sad-eyed dwarf in an orange cape and green shoes show how Pullo penetrates those sluggish kitchen drains. He did a poor job. Those big, familiar ears just weren't made for drainpipe work.





# THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

**I**T is a proud and lonely thing to be a fan!

I'm not necessarily stating an opinion; I'm just repeating one of the all-time classics among fannish catch-phrases, ranking with ringing slogans like "Yngvi is a louse!", "Who sawed Courtney's boat?" and "Pickle Bloch for posterity!"

It started life as a perfectly serious sentence in a science fiction story, only then it was "It is a proud and lonely thing to be a man." Naturally, fans took it over and made it their own; I don't know who used the fannish version first, but it was inevitable. It has appeared untold dozens of times as an interlineation in fan-zines; it has been used as a rallying cry at conventions; and it has been punned upon in strange and hideous ways.

It is probably immortal, if anything in fandom is. It is

no longer particularly true, though.

As Shaw points out (in the editorial he managed to sneak into this issue when I wasn't looking), it used to be considered a sign of insanity to read science fiction. Riding a hobby based on the reading of science fiction was, it follows, more than a *sign* of insanity—it was madness itself. But times have changed. Sf is comparatively respected (even though rarely read) by the man in the street these days. Fandom hasn't become any easier to explain to the same man, but if you say "science" at him loud enough he'll listen politely, at least.

In any event, fandom is visibly larger than it used to be. Before 1952, the annual conventions seldom attracted more than 200 attendees; since Chicago in '52, they



usually net close to 1,000. Cities that used to be one-fan towns now have clubs.

The trouble is, as fandom has grown larger, it has also gotten more diffuse. With science fiction no longer a lost cause to fight for, fans have taken up other interests in addition to or even in place of sf (sports cars and jazz are prominent). And with the increase in personal contact as more fans form clubs and travel around visiting each other, the need for fanzines has decreased.

Admittedly, this is a theory. It may not be the correct one—but something must account for the current dearth of fanzines. Aside from a few old reliables like *Cry of the Nameless*, *Yandro* and *Science Fiction Times*, the mailbox has been almost empty of late.

Looking back, it sometimes seems that the best fanzines of the past have been published by proud and lonely fans. And when I say best, in this case, I include frequently-published as one of the values. There have been lots of fine one-shots, and fanzines that were impressive in all sorts of ways but never got past their third issues. But to provide a unifying force in fandom, a zine has to appear regularly and often.

Harry Warner, Jr., called himself the Hermit of Hagerstown—and meant it—when he was publishing his famous *Spaceways*, which is remembered by many as the best subscription fanzine of all time, not because it was ever spectacular, but because it was always consistent and consistently good. *Le Zombie* lives in memory as probably the best of the humorzines; Bob (Wilson) Tucker was a lone wolf throughout its heyday. There are dozens of other examples, but you get the idea.

Yes, there have been good clubzines, too—but not many. (The already mentioned *Cry of the Nameless* is a notable exception.) As a general rule, I think it's safe to say that a fan does his best editing and publishing when he feels most deeply the need to communicate with other fans through his fanzine. In fact, stated that way, it sounds almost too obvious.

Since it also seems likely that personal contact will continue to increase, we may never see another real "boom" in fanzine publishing. But there will always be a few good ones, and in future installments of this column I'll describe a few of the better ones in fairly complete de-

tail. Meanwhile, if you receive and enjoy a fanzine, remember that communication works both ways. The editor wants to feel that he has established contact with you, so write and tell him how you like his work, enter the discussions, or just generally sound off. It will make the editor less lonely—and more proud!



AND NOW to the personals. Stuart Wheeler, 728 Stout Avenue, Wyoming, Ohio, is entering the field with a new zine, and as of this writing plans to get the first issue out in February. The title is *Ree*, it will be ditto'd (printed by P. F. Skeberdis in Michigan), about 20 or 40 pages and 15¢ each/2 for 25¢. . . . For sale or trade: back issues of many sf mags, including *SS*, *TWS*, *AS*, *OW*, *Madge* and many others. Wanted: back issues of *Astounding*, *Galaxy* and *F&SF*. Clay Kimball, 106 West Delaware Avenue, Draper, North Carolina.

Ted Pauls, 1448 Meridene Drive, Baltimore 12, Maryland, wants all issues of *Unknown*, volume one of *F&SF*, *Astounding* before 1947, all issues of *Astonishing*, and many other sf mags, also photos of UFOs. He will buy them or trade a number of other

items; there are too many to list here but included are several issues of *Mad* and *Trump* and books of interest to other hobbyists. . . . Betty S. Rack would like to sell her collection of science fiction, many paperbacks and some magazines. Anyone who is interested can write for a book list; the address is Box B49, RFD 3, Heathsville, Virginia.

A new club, "The Atom-Cadets," is desperately in need of more members. The club is more or less a technical club, but does send copies of *SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES* to members on request through its library. If you wish to join, send your picture with the following information: your full name, your address, and your age to President Douglas Keaner, 1119 North Herbert Street, Niles, Michigan. The Vice-President is Marvin Sorenson.

Subscriptions to *Vampire*, the neofanzine, are now being taken at 25¢ for 3 issues, 10¢ for one. Color illustrations by Prosser, Horrocks and others. Its editors are also interested in such mags as *Weird Tales*, *Planet*, older *Amazing* and *Fantastic Adventures*. Address correspondence to: Mike Klose and Stony Barnes, Route 1, Box 1102, Grants Pass, Oregon.



# FAREWELL MESSAGE

by DAVID MASON

*V'gu found Earth primitive and crude.*

*Its hydrogen bombs, for instance....*

THERE was the alien spaceship. It squatted in the middle of the airfield's main runway, in the way of every plane landing and taking off, to the complete confusion of traffic control.

The airport people had asked V'gu, politely, to move it. He had looked at them with blank indifference, and gone on making notes on Terran marriage rites.

Nobody had suggested *forcing* V'gu to move his ship. The ship looked as heavy as a battle cruiser—it probably was armed—and it did not look as if it could be moved by anything short of a hydrogen bomb. V'gu, when told about hydrogen bombs, had smiled and implied that such weapons

were about on par with stone axes.

The governments of the world treated V'gu with respect, and informed their peoples that he was merely a visiting student, with no intention of harming them, and should be given every courtesy, according to the best traditions of hospitality to strangers. So far, he had not become angry at anyone.

It was not too difficult to be courteous to V'gu. He looked reasonably pleasant: the standard number of arms and legs, one head, and only a slight tint of green to the skin. The green tint had caused one restaurant in the southern United States some debate before they would permit him a table, but

V'gu had not been angered; he had merely smiled and noted it down in his notes about taboos.

In fact, the only thing that made it slightly difficult to be courteous to V'gu was his air of superiority. He paid for services and sample objects and information by trading strange gadgets which could do fabulous things, and which were immediately patentable by the lucky owners, but he passed out the priceless gadgets with the air of a civilized man handing out glass beads and useless gimcracks to savages.

It was a question how long before someone felt enough insulted by this air of superiority to lose his temper and kill the alien being. The governments of the world were nervously protective of V'gu, trying to postpone and prevent any such murder. They were afraid of a space fleet or police force that might come to inquire what had happened to him, if he came to harm.

At last, to the relief of governments, and to the joy of the traffic control department of the airport where his ship still obstructed traffic, V'gu was about to go home. His ship was filled with photographs, notes and souvenirs. He announced that he had spent

enough years in a tour of strange planets to complete his course of study. He announced a farewell speech.

Photographers brought cameras to focus on him standing on the lowered gangplank of his ship, and color TV projected his image to the screens of the world—a tallish person, only a little strange and ugly, with a smooth greenish tint to his skin. The photographers finished flashing stills, and the TV sound booms moved in to pick up his voice.

**T**HE OLDEST REPORTER there was named McCann, and experience had made him leathery and cynical. He already knew what V'gu would say—the alien's superior attitude had made it only too clear.

Someone reminded V'gu respectfully that he had promised a speech.

"Yes indeed," he replied sonorously. His English was perfect. He had spent all of three hours in learning to speak it.

"You may write in your history books that I think Earth is a pleasant little planet," he went on, "but sadly backward and primitive in many respects. I believe that this is caused by the numerous wars, and the generally quarrelsome



behavior of your species." He said this without anger, and looked at the crowd and the cameras with a kind of superior pity and compassion in his gaze. "If you could only stop this bickering among yourselves, with a planet as green and pleasant as this you could attain a harmony and pleasure of life equal to any of the truly civilized worlds of the galaxy. My home world, for example, abolished wars generations ago. We learned a philosophy of cooperation."

He paused, and gestured up dramatically at the starry night sky, and again looked at the crowd with contempt. "Yes there are many worlds out there which are peaceful, productive and cooperative. But there are also worlds which are dead and shrunken cinders where there had been green planets and thriving races of people who could not give up war. For your sake I hope that you will be able to change your path, but I think that you do not have the ability, and that at last you will reach the end of the path you are on, and destroy each other and perhaps your world also. Each nova that you see in the sky marks the suicide of a race. Our knowledge of these matters is certain: there is never a nova caused simply by acci-

dent; power sources cannot fail this way. Each nova tells us of a war, of the death of a culture which probably thought of itself as civilized, and yet could not subdue its innate savagery."

The reporters scribbled and the cameras whirled. McCann closed his notepad, bored, and gazed at the sky, prepared to suffer through the rest of the speech. His paper could get the words of the speech from the TV. McCann had no comment to add; he had heard such ideas before. To the east in the sky was the distant glare of the landing lights of an oncoming aircraft. . . . No. Not a plane, a star. A star almost fantastically brilliant, brighter than the others, brighter than Mars.

"Mr. V'gu!" a young reporter said excitedly. "Isn't that a nova, there?" He pointed and everyone looked.

V'gu turned, his hand on the gangway rail. They waited and fidgeted as he stood without moving, looking up. After a time long enough for him to have memorized the entire star region, his eyes came down again, and he looked at them blankly, as if he had forgotten why they were there.

McCann felt a sudden electric thrill of recognition. He had seen a similar paralyzed

lack of expression on the faces of men who had just learned that they had made some terrible mistake. He turned abruptly and pushed through the crowd, heading for a phone.

**T**HE OTHER REPORTERS didn't understand. Not yet.

"This nova," one of them said. "What was it from?"

V'gu looked up at it. "A sun blew up," he muttered. "Five years ago. The light took five years to get here." The microphones barely picked up his voice.

"Do you know anything about the people who lived there, Mr. V'gu?"

V'gu opened his mouth as if to answer. Then he closed it again. He looked over his shoulder into his spaceship's entrance.

A reporter asked, "What about the nova, Mr. V'gu?"

"I was—I was very well acquainted with the people who caused it," V'gu said slowly. "Very well acquainted. I—can't imagine why it happened."

"It was a war, wasn't it, Mr. V'gu?"

"A war?" V'gu looked up again and hesitated. "Yes, I suppose it was."

A moment later he added,

apparently without reason, "I've been away from home a long time."

"How long will it take you to get back home, Mr. V'gu?"

"Get back?" V'gu looked around vaguely, his shoulders slumped. He looked less alien, somehow, and more like the men around him, and more likeable. He looked back to his questioner. "Oh. Oh yes, I'm . . . I've changed my mind. You may tell your papers that I've—ah—decided to extend my stay with you. For—for some time, I think."

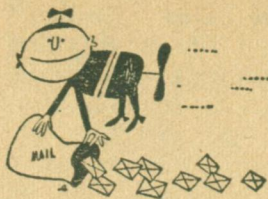
The youngest reporter asked suddenly, "Did the nova have anything to do with you changing your mind? With this decision, I mean."

The tall greenish man in the odd clothes came down the gangplank and entered the crowd, peering about as if he had forgotten the microphones and the cameras he was supposed to be speaking to. Then he saw his object and went through the crowd to him. It was an airfield official.

"Sir," said V'gu to the official, humbly—and suddenly everyone watching knew how well V'gu had known the people of the nova world. "Sir, I believe this spaceship is in your way. Where would you like me to park it?"







## THE READERS' SPACE

AFTER perusing the lettercol of the December issue of SFA, it would seem that some sort of a letter of defense would be in order after such a lengthy blast from Mr. Harlan Ellison on the subject of his "Run for the Stars" in the June SFA. I was completely floored by the fact that I, Bill Meyers, Expert Pessimist, would be accused of being a fellow who is (oh, ghod) "hammered into shape by Hollywood happy endings."

To back-track: Here I quote a few phrases from "Run for the Stars."

"I offer you the chance to become conquerors . . . to go anywhere you wish as warriors with money and worlds at your command."

". . . he could turn these home-hungry foot-soldiers into the greatest conquering force ever born."

After those quotes, it's apparent that Brother Benno

Tallant is a power-hungry dictator whose goal is the conquest of the galaxy. The fact that he was wronged by Earthmen just beforehand is entirely immaterial. He's a dictator, nevertheless, and is thus to be disliked and fought against, as is the common thought of any democratic citizen.

The yarn winds up thusly: "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 Dealds World, free of the dust. He needed neither now.

"Now he was God on his own."

Now I ask you, do those last three quotes naturally coincide with what you would expect to read about a dictator? Of course not. They're simply a few flowery little phrases

which would normally be associated with the end of a story in which the hero walks off into the sunset, so to speak. Whether you're for or against happy endings, it's plainly obvious that the three quotes are hero-cliches.

In other words, it's as if you were applauding the fact that he was going to conquer the universe. It has the same effect as if you look up to and admire a high-quality rat.

No, no one was particularly joyous over the fact that Ghengis Khan, Tamerlane, or Hitler almost succeeded in conquering the world with the exception of the men who shared their opinions of world dominance. Are you an advocate of universal dominance by a person like Tallant?

Sure, the Earthies weren't so heroic, either. But, personally, I prefer a coward to a maniac who takes pleasure in killing and conquering everything in sight. Your last three phrases most probably show that you prefer the latter. If that's the case, it's merely a difference of opinion.

And there is such a thing, you know.—Bill Meyers, 4301 Shawnee Circle, Chattanooga 11, Tennessee.

Harry Harrison in "Captain

Bedlam" produced as an inthralling a piece of science fiction literature as I've ever read, no better than, but equal to Van Gogt's (spelling?) works.

I'd enjoy a longer effort from Harry. That boy is brilliant, and unravels an ingeniously superb yarn.—Bill Poling, 1113½ D Street, Marysville, California.

*(Stick around. Harry unravels a short novel next issue.—LTS)*

●

SEQUEL! SEQUEL! Your readers (me for instance) demand a sequel for "Hunt the Space-Witch" by Ivar Jorgenson. I'll be expecting to see this sequel in a SFA soon!

By the way the other stories in the Jan. ish SFA were all good. Keep this up and you'll drive all of the other SF zines out of business.—Peter Francis Skeberdis, 606 Crapo Street, Flint 3, Michigan.

*(Stick around. "Hunt the Son of the Space-Witch" coming next week—er, eventually, that is.—LTS)*

●

Have just managed to wade through "Earth Shall Live Again" by Calvin M. Knox.

In my opinion this story represents one of the worst ele-



ments in SF. A previous story in this series, "Challis of Death," got favorable comment from your Readers. I didn't know we had readers who are Nazi or Ku Klux. Who else would identify with a "Hero" who endeavors to conquer and enslave all Races not his own (Terra) thru-out the Gallexy? When I read phrases like "He was a Half-breed—he didn't have the Pure Blood"—it makes MY blood, pure or impure, boil.

I am White, Scotch-Irish-English by way of Mayflower.

Hoping Youze is a good Arian.—Michael Duncan, Mulkeytown, Illinois.

The January cover was really good. I like SFA very much, and I think you have the best authors, but why don't you have something by Asimov? (*Try INFINITY, just across the street.—LTS*) I like the BEMs on the inside cover, and I have a suggestion. Why not an "earthling" asking for SFA at a Martian newsstand. Do you have any SFA No. 1? It is the only one I need for my collection.—Ted Pauls, 1448 Meridene Drive, Baltimore 12, Maryland.

(*The Back Issue Depart-*

*ment has all SFA's at 40¢ each or three for a dollar.—LTS*)

Why don't you answer my letters? To think that they end up in the wastebasket; or (horrors) unread, is murder. (*I read all letters carefully, but—sob!—rarely have time for personal replies.—LTS*)

However, down to Brass Tacks. (Gaa! What I said!) I can't say that I haven't enjoyed reading your mag, cause I have. While I don't care for Jerry Sohl *at all*, I did sorta like his effort in the latest issue. Jorgenson was in top form and very readable. The shorts were cute.

Now for requests. If you must have Smith's stories, have them in SFA. The thud-and-blunder wouldn't seem right in INFINITY. Have you any way of finding out what happened to Nelson Bond? He was my favorite author. (*He was at the New York Convention in '56, looking healthy and happy. Next time he turns up I'll twist his arm instead of just shaking hands.—LTS*) A short novel by Eando Binder would be welcomed here, I'm sure. Try R. M. Williams for one, he writes some of the best. (*Stick around; we'll get him.—LTS*) Raymond Z. Gallun, of "Seeds of the Dusk,"

would be appreciated. As would something by Manly Wade Wellman, Edmond Hamilton, and Wm. P. McGivern (try and lure him back to the s-f field). As for the art department, Finlay and Paul would be appreciated.

I hope that some of these requests are filled. I see that Calvin Knox is winding up his "Chalice" series, next ish. Will be waiting with bated breath.—Don Kent, 3800 Wellington, Chicago, Illinois.

●

I was actually amazed at last issue's front cover. I did not expect more of this from SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES but somehow it gave me at once the real impression of gazing into a universal puddle instead of just on one little sheet, where there swam and swam many things. (*I have dreams like that sometimes too.*—LTS) I don't really and truthfully know what to say about the first story, except that it was as good as they usually are. A few of the

others were really better than I thought, too, but one or two fell far lower than my expectations.

I used to like Ed Emsh.

My ears are still ringing from the many swords in "Clansmen of Fear."—James W. Ayers, 609 First Street, Attalla, Alabama.

(*Lotsa swords in "Man from the Big Dark" by John Brunner next ish. Also we confidently predict the return of W. C. Brandt. Like I always say, stick around.*—LTS)

●

The January issue of SFA was really great. I think that there should be more stories by Jerry Sohl in SFA. "Hunt the Space-Witch" was also very good.

I say give poor Archibald more space for "The Fan-Space." It is really great. (*Oh, I don't know . . .*—LTS)

I have gotten real pleasure from SFA since I bought my first issue. Keep up the good work.—Vincent Jacoboni, 19 Cottage Street, Leominster, Massachusetts.



• The next SFA goes on sale April 1! •



# Take Any 3 of These Great SCIENCE-FICTION Classics

values up to \$10.95

*Yours for Only* \$ **1.00** With membership

Continued from BACK COVER

YES, TAKE ANY THREE of these exciting books—worth up to \$10.95 in publishers' editions—yours for only \$1 simply by joining this new kind of book club NOW. They're all masterworks of science-fiction (or factual science books of special interest to science-fiction fans), by top-flight authors. And they're loaded with rocket-fast reading that takes you soaring through time and space. All in handsomely bound library editions you'll be proud to own! Choose ANY 3 and mail coupon below—without money—TODAY!

## SEND NO MONEY—Just Mail Coupon

Indicate on coupon your choice of any 3 of the new science-fiction masterpieces described here. One will be considered your first selection, for which you'll be billed only \$1 plus a few cents postage. The other TWO are yours FREE as a membership GIFT. Every month you will be offered the cream of the new \$2.50 to \$3.75 science-fiction books — for only \$1 each. (Occasionally an *extra-value* selection is offered which, because of its large size and importance will be priced slightly higher.) But you take *only* those books you really want—as few as 4 a year. This offer may be withdrawn at any time. So mail the coupon RIGHT NOW to:

**SCIENCE-FICTION  
BOOK CLUB**  
Dept. SFA-4,  
Garden City, N. Y.

**THE NAKED SUN** by Isaac Asimov. For description, please see other side. (Pub. ed. \$2.95).

**THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE-FICTION.** (New Edition) 17 thrilling stories selected from *Fantasy and Science-Fiction Magazine*. Adventure in other worlds... mystery, intrigue, suspense! (Pub. ed. \$3.50).

**OMNIBUS OF SCIENCE-FICTION.** 43 classic stories by top authors. Wonders of Earth and Man. Amazing Inventions. Space Travel and Visitors from Outer Space. Adventures in Dimension. Worlds of Tomorrow. (Pub. ed. \$3.50).

**TREASURY OF SCIENCE-FICTION CLASSICS.** 4 famous novels; a

complete play; scores of all-time great S-F stories, including H. G. Wells', "Invasion from Mars," made famous by Orson Welles' hoax newscast. (Pub. ed. \$2.95).

**THE ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION ANTHOLOGY.** A story about the first A-bomb... written BEFORE it was invented! Plus a score of other best tales from a dozen years of *Astounding Science-Fiction Magazine* (Pub. ed. \$3.50).

**SATELLITE!** by Erik Bergaust & William Beller. Top experts reveal full FACTS on the first man-made Satellite — information not even available in technical journals! (Pub. ed. \$3.95).

## SCIENCE-FICTION BOOK CLUB, Dept. SFA-4 Garden City, N. Y.

Rush the 3 books checked below and enroll me as a member. One is my first selection, for which you may bill me \$1 plus a few cents postage. The other 2 are FREE as a membership GIFT. Every month send the club's free bulletin, describing coming selections. For each book I accept, I will pay only \$1 plus shipping. (Occasional extra-value selection at a slightly higher price.) But I need take only 4 books during the year and may resign at any time after that.

**GUARANTEE:** If not delighted, I may return books in 7 days, pay nothing; membership will be cancelled.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Astounding S-F Anthology              | <input type="checkbox"/> The Naked Sun              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Best from Fantasy and Science-Fiction | <input type="checkbox"/> Omnibus of Science-Fiction |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Satellite!                 |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Treasury of S-F Classics   |

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ S54

City \_\_\_\_\_ Zone \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Same offer in CANADA. Address 105 Bond Street, Toronto 2. (Offer good only in U. S. A. and Canada.)



To This Earthman on the Planet "Solaria" An  
Unclad Girl Was Far More Dangerous Than

# THE NAKED SUN

by  
Isaac Asimov

ON THE PLANET "SOL-  
ARIA" Earthman Elijah  
Baley should NOT have blushed  
to the ears when beautiful Glad-  
ia Delmarre casually stepped  
out of her shower to talk with  
him! For all Solarians CON-  
SIDERED THAT ENTIRELY  
PROPER . . . because their so-  
cial contacts were carried on by  
VIEWING through two-way  
television.

And just as Elijah (an Earth-  
man brought up in under-  
ground cities) was terrified by  
Solaria's naked sun, the Solar-  
ians dreaded mingling with  
other HUMANS. Physical con-  
tact was out of the question.  
Even DISCUSSING such things  
was obscene!

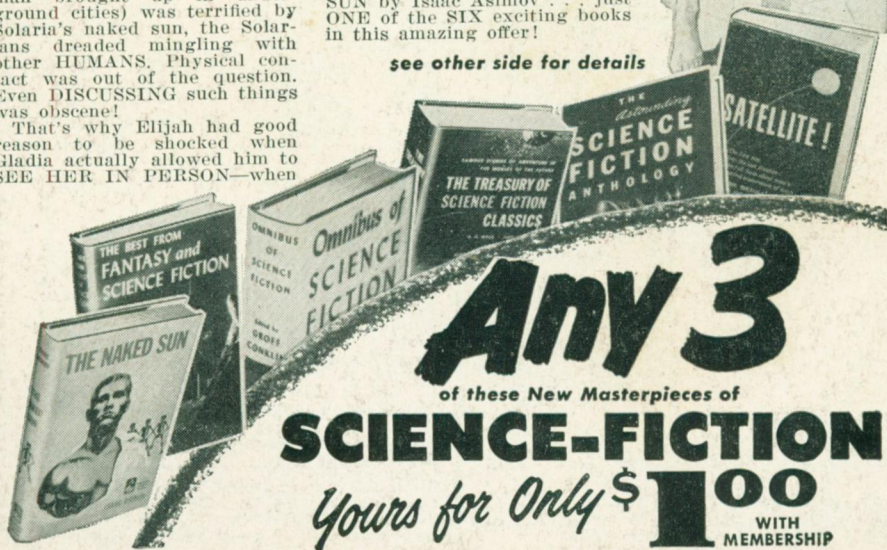
That's why Elijah had good  
reason to be shocked when  
Gladia actually allowed him to  
SEE HER IN PERSON—when

she brazenly reached out her  
naked fingers to TOUCH HIM!

There was no doubt left in his  
mind that there was something  
unspeakably strange about this  
exotic temptress. But it was be-  
coming more and more difficult  
for Elijah to admit—even to  
himself—that she was his prime  
suspect in a fantastically sordid  
murder!

You'll thrill to THE NAKED  
SUN by Isaac Asimov . . . just  
ONE of the SIX exciting books  
in this amazing offer!

see other side for details



# Any 3

of these New Masterpieces of

## SCIENCE-FICTION

Yours for Only \$ **1.00**  
WITH  
MEMBERSHIP