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DEDICATED  
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# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 3

No. 15

1960

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#### THE FIRST RETURN

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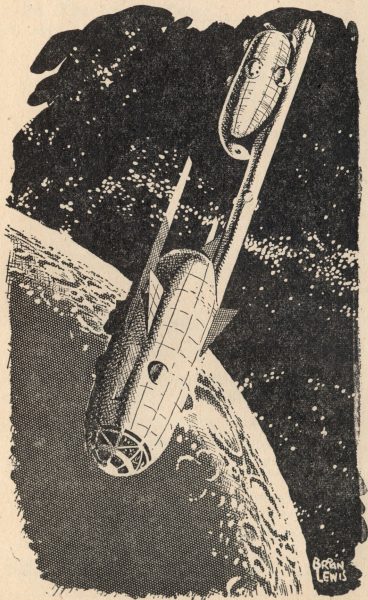
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*Lan Wright, author of a number of fine serials in New Worlds, is in his element with long stories and his first major contribution to SFA—"The First Return"—is centred round a fast moving plot set on Earth with a deep underlying thread of mystery.*

# THE FIRST RETURN

by LAN WRIGHT

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Illustrated by LEWIS

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## Chapter One

Kello paid off the aircab at the Imperial Hotel, and took the grav-shaft from the copter roof down to the forty second floor. He showed his pass to the uniformed Security man who guarded the shaft exit, and was directed along a wide, thickly carpeted corridor.

"Suite four-one-two, Doctor," the guard said. "Section Leader Garvey is in charge."

Kello smiled his thanks and headed along the corridor. He'd had dealings with Garvey before, which was perhaps as well when there was a possibility of a homicide to be dealt with. Garvey was a tall, loose limbed man, thin almost to emaciation, with a stoop-shouldered walk and a pair of sleepy grey eyes set in a narrow, hawk-like face. He wasn't everyone's idea of a top rank Security officer, but he was efficient and he had a dogged thoroughness that no spasmodic brilliance could match.

The door to suite four-one-two was opened by another Security man in answer to Kello's pressure on the bell push. A further check on his pass and he was shown through the luxurious entrance hall into the even more luxurious lounge. Garvey was there, together with several other uniformed men, and three who were in plain clothes. A quick glance showed Kello that the body was elsewhere.

Garvey crossed to him as he entered and held out a welcoming hand that seemed incongruous in the circumstances. "Hallo, Doctor Kello. I saw your name on the roster for this month and I thought you might be along this time."

Kello smiled thinly. "My turn comes round all too often on jobs like this. Where's the body?"

Garvey nodded to an inner room. "In bed. All nicely tucked up, and apparently dead from natural causes."

"Apparently?" queried Kello.

"You tell me," said Garvey cryptically. "Come on through."

The man in the large, silk-sheeted bed might have been sleeping. He lay on his back with his head slightly turned and one arm outside the bedclothes and across his chest. Kello put his bag on the table beside the bed and carried out a quick preliminary examination. He stripped the clothes from the body with rapid thoroughness and examined the cold, white flesh; the stiffness of death had not yet begun to filter through the joints and limbs, and there was nothing visible which could point to the cause of death. The body bore no marks of violence, and the preliminary examination didn't reveal any small marks or punctures which might have indicated an injection either by hypo or air needle.

Kello straightened and sighed glumly. This one would need a full autopsy.

"Well?" asked Garvey.

"It'll take a thorough postmortem to confirm your idea," said Kello, "and I can't do that here."

"Haven't you any ideas at all?" asked Garvey insistently.

Kello shrugged. "If he'd been a man of ninety I'd say it was natural causes—probably cardiac failure—and that would be the end of it—"

"He isn't ninety," Garvey snarled. "Don't be so damned cautious, Kello. Look, this man is thirty-four, a fine healthy specimen of humanity who shouldn't just die in bed."

"I know it." Kello studied the white, dead face and realised that there was something more than a little familiar about it. "Who is he, Garvey?"

Garvey shrugged. "I don't know. He's registered under the name of Joseph Adams. Look, all you need to do is perform an autopsy as soon as possible and let me have a report."

"Anxious to be rid of me?" Kello grinned.

"How long has he been dead?"

"Oh, I'd say six hours—give or take a little. You say you don't know who he is?"

Garvey shook his head, his grey eyes fixed morosely on the latest reason for his profession.

"Then how," asked Kello sweetly, "do you know he's thirty-four years old and a healthy specimen of humanity? He might be a young forty or an old twenty with a chronic heart condition." He cocked an eye at Garvey. "Well?"

"None of your damned business," snapped the Security officer. "I'll have him shipped out to the mortuary and you can do a postmortem right away. Suit you?"

Kello closed his bag and nodded resignedly. "All right, Garvey. I can take a hint. I'll get down to the mortuary in an hour if that's all right with you?"

Garvey nodded. "I guess so. Let's see, it's ten now. Can I have your report by—say—noon?"

"Make it thirteen hundred. I might need that extra hour."

Kello left the apartment and took the grav-shaft back to the copter roof. He'd learned, in five years of co-operating with the Security Squads, that it paid to keep an open mind and a closed mouth. Garvey was one of the top men in the Kenya Squads, and that alone indicated that there was something more to this business than just another man found dead in bed—even if he was only thirty-four.

Normally, Kello knew, the house physician at the hotel would have certified death due to unknown causes and shipped the body straight out for a more thorough examination by the proper authorities. Then if there was any suspicion of foul play, the Security Squad would be called in. But Garvey was already there with no apparent reason—and that fact alone pointed to an intriguing but slightly smelly rat.

Kello was quite aware of the fact that he had been officially warned off, and he didn't doubt for one moment that the name

of Joseph Adams meant absolutely nothing ; if it had then Garvey wouldn't have mentioned it. Still—he shrugged any further questions aside—all he had to do was perform an autopsy, make a report, and forget about the matter.

He gave his apartment address to the autocab and sat back in the cushioned seat while the electronic circuits clicked busily into action and swept him across the city to his destination. Below him the wide facade of boulevards and towering buildings was a too familiar picture for him to take any interest in it. His profession took him all over the vast reaches of Nairobi every hour of every day, and five years residence in the sun-drenched centre of Kenya had killed the last vestiges of excitement that his first sight of the city had brought. Nairobi was home to him now, just as London had been before.

It took him ten minutes to reach his apartment and he figured on having a good half hour in his office-cum-study to clear up a few routine matters before he needed to go to the fifth district mortuary. That was the only trouble with being on the Security Squad's call list—the money and prestige were often offset by untimely inroads into his ordinary practice.

He had been working for about fifteen minutes through a pile of official papers and returns when the visiphone buzzed. Kello sighed and pressed the receive switch. On the small screen the head and shoulders of a uniformed Security Squad man swam into view.

"Doctor Kello?"

Kello nodded.

"Section Leader Garvey's compliments, Doctor," the man went on. "He says that there is no need for you to conduct a postmortem on the subject of this morning's incident at the Imperial Hotel."

Kello frowned. "Indeed?"

"It appears that Doctor Morcatutur is already in attendance at the mortuary, and the Section Leader has prevailed upon him to conduct the autopsy, thus saving you the necessity of making the journey."

"Oh." Kello felt a trifle relieved. It was unusual, but it would certainly save him a lot of time and trouble, and Garvey was well aware how busy a doctor's practice could be. "All right. Thank the Section Leader for me, will you?"

With the connection broken Kello reached for his medical directory. The name of Morcatutur was familiar but he couldn't

place the man or put a face to the name. On page three-seven-one he read that Henry Morcatur was a newly graduated specialist in nervous diseases who had been in Nairobi barely three months. Well, that explained his eagerness to do the autopsy. The fifty credit fee would be more than useful to a newly arrived doctor who was probably having a struggle to build up a practice.

Kello returned to his work and forgot about the matter—until three days later.

He was due to speak at a local branch meeting of the Medical Association on his exploratory work in connection with neural disturbances, and by the time the appointment came round the matter of the unknown corpse in suite four-one-two had faded from his mind. He dined with the Association chairman and then gave his lecture to the assembled physicians and specialists. It was well received, and he had to answer only half a dozen questions on minor points—an indication that his talk had been clear and readily understood by the majority of the forty odd doctors present.

One question was asked by Doctor Henry Morcatur, and the name triggered Kello's memory of the affair of a few days before. When the questioning had ended he left the platform and mingled with the gathering, exchanging greetings and jokes with those to whom he was already acquainted.

Morcatur was a tubby young man with a round, red face and an eager expression that was made over-eager by a pair of wide bright blue eyes. The way in which he pushed himself into the group that Kello was currently chatting with, was hardly designed to endear him to the company. Kello ignored the intrusion until one of the group took it upon himself to introduce Morcatur.

"New boy, Kello. Just out from England with three new degrees tucked up his shirt."

Kello shook hands politely and said, "Ah, you're the chap who saved me the trouble of doing that p.m. at the mortuary last Tuesday."

Morcatur's face lost its beaming smile and took on an expression of almost moronic puzzlement. "P.M. Doctor?" he queried. "At the—?"

"Fifth District mortuary," said Kello, wondering why a faint prickle of surprise should be tingling the hair at the back of his neck. "Section Leader Garvey told me that you were



kind enough to do it as you were already on the spot. I must say you saved me a lot of time and trouble."

Morcatur's facial bewilderment was by now bordering on the idiotic. "There must be some mistake, I'm not even on the lists of the Security Squad yet—though I'd like to be." He beamed engagingly at Kello. "Perhaps you could fix it for me, eh? Nothing I'd like more—"

"But Garvey said you—"

Morcatur shook his head with brisk finality. "Sorry, Kello. He must have made a mistake. I've never even been inside the Fifth District mortuary."

The prickle became stronger, but Kello didn't press the point. If Morcatur wasn't even registered with the Security Squad then there was little chance that Garvey was even aware of his existence. He passed the matter off as lightly as he could, and spent the rest of the evening in a mood of introspective puzzlement which finally came up with the decision that Garvey must have made a mistake over the man's name.

Nevertheless, it still bothered him the next morning to such an extent that he found it hard to concentrate on his work. It was mid-morning when he gave up in disgust and put a visi-call in to the Section Leader at Squad headquarters.

Garvey's face was irritable as it swam grey upon the small screen, and his, "What do you want, Kello?" was hardly the friendliest of greetings.

"I wondered who the doctor was who did the autopsy on the subject from the Imperial Hotel," said Kello.

Garvey squinted at him, an angry frown creasing his high brow. "Is your memory that poor? It was Morcatur—Henry Morcatur."

"Oh." The answer stopped Kello in his tracks. He'd almost convinced himself that Garvey had made a mistake—but this was too definite. He asked, "How did he happen to be at the mortuary when he isn't even on your list of doctors available for autopsy?"

Garvey's lips compressed to a thin angry line, and his annoyance was all too plain as he replied. "Kello, I only did it as a favour to you. I could have got my fingers rapped by the Director if I hadn't had your recommendation that he could do the job."

"My—what?" Kello's brain whirled slightly, and he had a sudden impression that the conversation was proceeding on lines that were strongly reminiscent of Alice In Wonderland.

"Kello," snapped Garvey, "I don't want to appear rude, but I've got a lot of work to do. Now, if there's nothing else—?"

"What was the report of the autopsy?"

Garvey sighed. "Cardiac failure caused by extensive damage to the heart muscles which, in turn, was a result of recent severe over-strain. Now, if you've nothing more—?"

"No—no. Of course not. Sorry if I bothered you—"

The screen was already dead.

Kello sat back in his chair and wondered dizzily who was crazy? On an impulse he called Morcatur, but the result was as inconclusive as his call to Garvey. Morcatur still hadn't been anywhere near the Fifth District. No, he hadn't performed an autopsy since he'd been in Nairobi—but if Kello could do anything in that line for him he'd really be most awfully grateful.

Wearily, Kello cut the line and wondered what he should do now.

On an impulse he left his apartment and went up to the copter roof. He summoned a cab and directed it across the city to the Fifth District mortuary. The attendant at the main desk knew him from a score of previous visits, and in reply to Kello's request he produced the register which listed for posterity the work of the mortuary.

"Last Tuesday, Doctor?"

"That's right." Kello nodded. "A body from the Imperial Hotel—I don't know the name."

The man ran a finger across his record book. "Yes, that'll be file two-seven-baker-six-three." He punched a series of buttons on the autofile beside his desk and in seconds the slim brown folder slid out of the delivery slot on to the desk top before him.

"What did you want to know?"

"Everything. Who was the corpse? That'll do for a start."

"Not listed. Refer to Security Squad records."

Kello frowned. "What did he die of?"

"Cardiac failure caused by—"

"All right, all right. I know the rest. And Doctor Morcatur performed the autopsy?"

The attendant nodded. "That's right. New man to me, but Section Leader Garvey said it was all right."

The whole thing just didn't make sense, and Kello was at a complete loss. He supposed he could go to Garvey and tell him there was some mistake, but Garvey had been so obviously displeased when he had spoken to him that Kello doubted if any further approach on the subject would be welcome. So where did that leave him?

"Do you remember the Doctor Morcatur?" he asked.

"Yes, I do. Funny sort of guy, didn't speak very much. Did a good p.m. though."

"What did he look like? Was he a tubby man, about thirty—"

"Oh, no. He was older than that—around fifty I'd say. And thin, too. I remember—"

"Thanks, that's all I wanted." Kello left the small office in a sudden rush to be out and away. One thing was sure, whoever had performed the autopsy on the unknown man, it wasn't Henry Morcatur—and Kello wanted to know very badly just who and what was at the back of it all.

## Chapter Two

In the aircab which took him back to his apartment Kello realised two things that stuck out like large and unhealthy boils. One, the real cause of death had not been found. Someone who knew their business had done a very efficient job of covering—a job that had only been spoiled by a chance meeting between Kello and Morcatur. Second, Garvey had expected to find some other reason for the unknown man's death, and he'd been frustrated by some person or persons who had an unknown but apparently very good reason for wanting it kept quiet.

Kello knew too well that the prospect of carrying out another p.m. were almost non-existent. The body would have been consigned to the crematorium by now, and all physical evidence would be destroyed. Only one question could be answered by Garvey, and that was the one concerning the identity of the dead man. In his present frame of mind Garvey would be unlikely to be very informative.

The more he puzzled over the situation, the more Kello realised that he could be tangling with something more than just a desire by an unknown criminal organisation to cover up a killing. Every factor pointed to something much more sinister—unless his active mind was placing more significance

upon occurrences than was warranted. Clearly, Joseph Adams was an alias that the dead man had been using ; equally clearly, Section Leader Garvey had been badly worried by his death and had been shaken into saying rather more than he should have done. Kello himself had been put in Garvey's bad books as a result of the confusion over the autopsy. It was a spot he could easily get out of, but some stubborn streak made him hesitate as he visualised the unpleasant interviews he would have with Garvey until his point was cleared.

Two questions he would need to answer were of paramount importance. One concerned the true identity of the corpse ; the second he could not even begin to frame until he had the answer to the first.

When he reached his apartment he had still not decided what he should do, but any doubts he might have had were resolved very quickly by the official letter that awaited him. His name had been removed from the Security Squad's official list of medical advisers. The reason for Garvey's brusqueness was all too apparent.

Well, the financial loss wouldn't be too great, but there would be a certain amount of eyebrow raising in medical quarters, and possible damage to his professional reputation—that was a much more serious matter, and one which he couldn't possibly ignore. His mind had been made up for him.

Kello spent the rest of the day sitting quietly in his large, airy study considering all the facts and pondering what he could do. On the face of it there was little with which to begin, and he had long since realised that official sources of information would be closed to him. Several hours of thought made it clear that the prime necessity was to put a name to the picture he carried in his mind of the dead face in suite four-one-two at the Imperial Hotel. It was an even longer period of thought before he found how he might accomplish the end.

Peter Bord lived in one of the less reputable quarters of the city, which was not to say that he was anything but a highly respectable, if slightly bohemian, artist. He made his living by supplying highly coloured, photographically precise illustrations to several large commercial corporations for advertising purposes, but his true ideal was to paint in oils and live a slightly eccentric life with as much comfort as he could manage, and without appearing too much of an upright

pillar of society. He sported a neat chin beard and moustache, and his clothes were colourful as well as a trifle shabby.

Kello had met him some years previously at a party given by a mutual friend, and there acquaintanceship—seemingly odd to all who knew them—developed into a lasting, if spasmodic, friendship.

It was late evening, but Kello had little doubt that Bord would be at home, his daily, bread and butter chores placed on one side, and the oils and brushes of his hobby working busily. It was after nine when he dropped on to the roof of one of the larger public buildings in the Mwanzi district. He took the grav-shaft to street level and walked the few blocks to the four storied apartment house where Peter Bord had his penthouse flat-cum-studio. He climbed the stairs to the top floor, and spoke his name to the sound operated door of Bord's apartment. It opened in response to the electronically operated recognition cell, and Kello went in to the entrance hall.

From an inner room, Bord's deep voice called, "Come on in, Paul, damn your eyes. Where have you been hiding?"

Kello grinned and dropped his night cloak on a chair beside the front door. Bord didn't sound a bit different. He went into the large, high windowed studio and found Bord working busily on a large canvas while his model—a nude, buxom Masai girl—posed unselfconsciously beneath a bright arc lamp.

"Make yourself at home, Paul." Bord didn't move from his myopic study of a brush stroke on the canvas. "There's a bottle on that dresser. How are you?"

Kello and the girl exchanged smiles and nods as Kello replied, "Not bad, Peter. And you?"

"All right. Keep still dammit, Sadie," growled Bord. "There, that's it." He put down the palette and wiped his brushes on a filthy piece of rag that might once have been a handkerchief. "You cut along, Sadie," he ordered. "My friend and I have dark secrets to share which aren't fit for your shell-like ears. Come along tomorrow night. All right?"

The girl rose, her body gleaming black in the brilliant light, and pulled a robe around herself before stepping from the tiny stage. "Yes, Mister Bord. Tomorrow will be fine. Shall I find my own way out?"

"If you will. Goodnight, Sadie." Bord closed the door as she went into another room to dress, and turned his attention back to Kello "Long time, Paul. What brings you slumming?"

"A problem," Kello told him.

Bord grunted and crossed to the dresser that leaned precariously against one wall. "Well, we can have a drink while we talk about it. What'll it be?"

"Whatever you're having."

Kello sat back and raised the clear, brown glass of scotch that Bord poured for him. "Luck, Peter."

"The devil's own. And you. Now, what's the trouble?"

"How would you go about identifying a man you'd only seen once, and would never see again?"

Bord frowned. "By that I take it the man is dead."

Kello shrugged and put the glass on the floor beside his chair. "I seem to remember you saying once that you could build up a face from a description given to you verbally. Right?"

"It's an old technique, but, yes, I can do it," agreed Bord. "That is if you don't mind several hours trying."

"I'd be grateful."

"I've got a better suggestion, though. Why don't you try the Security Squad identification bureau? They could build up a face from their record blanks in a matter of minutes."

"I know they could, but I'm not exactly popular with Section Leader Garvey at the moment," smiled Kello. "I don't think they'd play. You're my next bet."

"And I thought I was disruptable," chuckled Bord. "At least I never fell foul of the law."

He rose and crossed to a large, untidy bookcase whose jumbled shelves dipped beneath the weight of books that were crammed on to them, and gave every impression of being about to deposit their contents in an untidy heap on the floor. Bord searched along the crammed shelves for a minute or two before he found what he wanted. He passed a tattered book to Kello, and said, "Look through that and pick out a few basic types. You know, hair style, face shape, colour of eyes, complexion and so forth. I'll take it from there."

Kello flicked through the pages for the best part of an hour while Bord sat watching and making notes. It was a long and difficult process because Kello found early on that he could not recall all the details of the dead man's features as well as he thought he could. He had to choose several chin lines and three hair styles which might have applied to the rumpled brown head that had lain on the smooth white pillow. More than once he had to change his entire concepts because of some

additional feature that was dredged from his memory by the sketches in the book.

At last he sat back and said, "That's about it, Peter. I'm not very sure about most of it, I'm afraid."

"It'll be a long job," Bord grunted. "Still we can make a start."

He took a large pad of smooth, white paper and began to make a charcoal sketch on the top sheet. He worked quickly and without a great deal of finesse, even to Kello's unpractised eyes, and he grinned as he saw Kello's dubious expression.

"Preliminary drawings, Paul, that's all. I'll do a proper job when I've got some idea what I'm drawing."

An hour later he had made six rough portraits of markedly similar men, and from them Kello began the difficult task of weeding out details and features that were right or wrong. A chin line here, an ear lobe there, thicker eyebrows, a straighter nose; the lips were a trifle more full, no, not quite as much as that; now, the eyes were deeper set and the cheekbones more prominent.

Slowly the picture emerged under the skilled hands of Peter Bord, and Kello felt a rising tide of excitement as each feature fell into place.

"It coming, Peter," he said at last, as a deft curve by the artist's chalk put solidity on the previously tentative chin.

Bord looked at him quickly and frowned slightly. "You sure, Paul?" he asked softly.

"Yes, positive." Kello glanced up in surprise. "You sound as if you know who it is."

"Maybe." Bord's lips were a thin, straight line as he pressed on adding details to the picture that Kello had not even mentioned. He worked swiftly, and with a certainty that his work had not possessed a few minutes earlier. Kello's sketched ideas were put aside and ignored, but the picture grew with a startling rapidity that sent a chill down Kello's spine as he watched and wondered. No, he realised, he didn't wonder at all—he knew.

Bord knew who he was depicting.

The artist made a couple of small changes around the eyes, and dropped the finished portrait on to Kello's lap. "There. How will that do?"

Kello examined the finished article. The picture was clearer than he would have believed possible, and he could see that there was a great deal more in it than the recollections of his own memory. It was too perfect a representation to be



possible from the detail he had been able to give, and there was no longer any shadow of doubt that Bord could, if he wished, put a name to the portrait he had created.

"What's his name, Peter?" he asked coldly.

Bord shrugged and dropped the black chalk he'd been using on his work table.

"Does the name Philo Martin mean anything to you?" he asked.

Kello felt as if someone had pressed a button within his brain—a button which activated the locked cells of memory and flooded his mind with a wealth of information that he had all but forgotten until the name of Philo Martin was added to the dead, remembered face of the body in suite four one two.

"Yes," he said softly. "Yes, I remember. The Centaurus Expedition."

And in truth he did. Now that the flood gates of memory were opened he recalled the names of other men who had been associated with Philo Martin in that first momentous voyage across the deeps of space to Alpha Centauri four long years ago. Martin had been the senior engineer—a brilliant practical scientist who had been in on the building of Earth's first starship right from the start. His great work in the development of the atomic drive had been rewarded with the post of senior engineer to the Expedition. There had been others—some were famous like Hendryk Vandyne, the expedition leader; Rabindranath Krishnan was the deputy leader, Carroll the astro-navigator.

Kello could have run through almost the forty-seven men and women who had formed the crew of the *First Discoverer*, but their faces had faded from memory—until this moment.

He cocked an eye suddenly at Bord. "But the ship is still in orbit on the far side of the Moon. Has been for the past eight months."

Bord shrugged. "Don't ask me, Paul. I just drew the picture—if that's the man you want."

"He's the one," Kello admitted, and he felt a cold hand reach its fingers around his heart as he said it. He wanted desperately to be alone to think about it quietly.

Since the *First Discoverer* had returned from its epoch making voyage the shouting and cheering had died slowly to an anticlimatic silence. After the first few weeks of rapturous applause and frantic enthusiasm, public acclaim had been dampened by cold, official reports and safety precautions. The

earthbound control centre of the Centaurus Expedition had blanketed the story by an almost impenetrable barrier of dull reports and frustrating safety precautions. The *First Discoverer* and her crew would remain in orbit around the Moon for a period of one year while all possible quarantine precautions were taken to ensure that there was no risk of admitting alien micro-organisms that might prove harmful.

Kello remembered how the flat, bald statement had puzzled him. As a doctor he knew exactly what the chances of such a thing happening could be. The *First Discoverer* had taken a year and two months to cross the four light-years to Alpha Centauri ; it had taken the same time to return. The crew had spent a year exploring the two habitable planets that had been found, and on their return all the expedition members had been reported safe and well. But the quarantine would stay for one year—just to be on the safe side.

And now Philo Martin had turned up dead in the Imperial Hotel in the city of Nairobi, living there under an assumed name with the tacit—if unspoken—admission by the Security Squad that they were well aware of the position. Of course Garvey knew who the dead man was.

Kello rose from the chair, and crossed slowly to the door. He paused with his hand on the handle and smiled his thanks to Peter Bord.

"Guess I didn't remember too well. Thanks a lot, Peter."

"One thing before you go, Paul," said Bord. "You haven't said what's at the back of it all."

Kello pursed his lips and smiled wryly. "No. That's right, I didn't, did I?"

He thought of the cold, dead body lying under a false name in the white sheeted bed, and wondered what he should do. It might be as well if he kept his mouth shut about what he'd found out, after all, Garvey had as good as told him it was none of his business. And yet . . .

He knew that it was his business now, and he had an unquenchable desire to share his knowledge with someone just to relieve the burden a little.

"Philo Martin was found dead in bed in the Imperial Hotel last Tuesday," he said grimly. "I had to examine the body."

He noted the shocked pallor and the wide-eyed amazement on Bord's face.

"I'll be seeing you, Peter." He crossed to the door, and closed it behind him as he left the flat.

## Chapter Three

After he left Bord's flat, Kello walked for some way through the quiet, night streets. It was almost midnight and there were few people about. High in the dark sky the moving lights of the copters were fewer now than they had been earlier when he arrived at Bord's apartment, but the stars were still all but invisible behind the greater brilliance of the city lights.

Kello went to a small, all night restaurant and ordered a pot of strong coffee. He sat in a quiet, shadowed alcove smoking and drinking the coffee while he tried to orientate what he had found out with the facts that had so far been published about the Centaurus Expedition. Two things stood out a mile. One, officially, Philo Martin shouldn't have been on Earth. Two, and unofficially, officialdom knew he was—if Section Leader Garvey could be called officialdom. Kello had no doubt at all that Garvey was fully aware of the true identity of the corpse in suite four-one-two.

Now that he thought about it, Kello could see quite clearly that there had been a vast conspiracy of silence to play down the importance of the Centaurus Expedition's return. There was a need—undisclosed to breed apathy in the public mind. Common sense told Kello that there must be a hundred—a thousand—different facts that could be given about the trip and about the habitable planets that had been discovered. Instead, a nebulous veil had been drawn across the whole affair, and interest had been shadowed by the deadening effect of a year's quarantine. The cold, official news releases had been deadly dull and without a shred of glamour or excitement. People still talked about the *First Discoverer*, but reference to her in the news sheets and over the tridi-vision was almost non-existent. The public memory was short and had been made a great deal shorter by the dead hand of a subtle, unseen censorship.

But why should Martin return to Nairobi? The control centre of the Expedition was based far out in the Australian bush country several hundred miles west of Alice Springs. It was a vast, heavily guarded area surrounded by security fences and armed guards, and from it a fleet of ferry rockets had taken the prefabricated parts of the *First Discoverer* into orbit ready for assembly. The giant ship was a thing of space which would never rest her spidery frame upon the soil of any world. But Martin hadn't gone to the control centre—instead he had

turned up thousands of miles away under an assumed name—and dead.

Kello realised that Martin could have been in Australia before coming to Kenya, but a second thought made it seem unlikely. If he had shown up at the base Martin would have been instantly recognised by any one of the thousands of people employed there—and the more people who knew he was on Earth, the more people there would be to make a chink in the tight screen of secrecy.

Kello swallowed the last of his coffee—now almost cold—and looked at his watch. It was almost two, and the restaurant had but two other customers. He felt suddenly tired as the questions chased in endless circles through his mind. Slowly, he left the restaurant and strolled to the nearest copter port. There were plenty of grounded cabs at this hour, and he boarded the first one he saw to return to his apartment and spend what was left of the night in an uneasy, dream strewn sleep.

In the morning he awoke with a vile headache and the same question floating in his mind. Why should Martin be in Nairobi?

And in the cold light of dawn the answer was triggered in his brain as long forgotten memories of the Centaurus Expedition were stirred and recalled. Martin was married, and he lived with his wife in—Nairobi!

Still in his night clothes, and with a film of sleep dragging at his eyelids, Kello went into his study and turned to the pages of the city directory for help. He was pleased, but not greatly surprised, when he came across an entry for Mrs. Philo Martin with an address on Lubaka Avenue in District Seven.

He showered, dressed and ate a hasty breakfast before going to the copter roof to take a cab across the city. District Seven was a good class residential area to the north, and was made up of large, semi-luxury apartment blocks set in wide, tree-spread parks and gardens. Vivid beds of tropical flowers were interspersed with giant palm and jacaranda trees, and from the air as the copter circled for landing the whole area looked like an architectural dream come true. It was tasteful, well designed and pleasant—just the sort of place, in fact, where one might expect to find the home of an official of the Centaurus Expedition.

Except that Martin had stayed at an hotel.

Kello was beginning to get used to framing odd questions. The whole thing was a hotch potch of mystery and exasperation, and Kello wasn't at all sure what he'd done to get mixed up in it.

The apartment he wanted was on the ground floor of a small but exclusive block, and he announced his name to the auto door as he stood before it. Not surprisingly it didn't react either to his voice or to his name, and there was a break of a minute or so before it was opened by a uniformed coloured maid.

"May I ask your business, Doctor Kello?" she asked.

Kello deliberated for a second and decided that shock tactics might be the best line of approach.

"It concerns her husband, Philo Martin."

A shadow passed across the girl's dark face, and she hesitated for a perceptible moment before opening the door wider to admit him.

"You had better wait in the hall for a moment while I speak to Mrs. Martin."

The entrance hall was small but well furnished, and gave the impression that the Martin household liked to live in comfort rather than sybaritic luxury. Kello sat on the narrow, backless divan and waited. The maid returned and motioned him into the inner rooms of the flat.

"Mrs. Martin will see you, Doctor Kello."

Kello smiled his thanks and went through into a large, airy lounge. As he entered the brightly furnished room a tall, slim brunette rose from an easy chair to greet him, and it didn't take Kello's practised eye to see at once she had been under some considerable emotional strain. No doubt at all shaded the knowledge that she knew of her husband's death. Mrs. Martin was in her early thirties, an attractive woman with a strong face that showed her character rather than her physical beauty. Her cheeks were pale and there were deep shadows under her eyes unrelieved by any make-up. She was dressed in a vivid red house coat that swayed and turned to purple as she moved to greet him.

"What can I do for you, Doctor Kello?" Her voice was low, evenly modulated, but with a slight tremor to it that confirmed Kello's earlier opinion.

"I wanted to talk to you about your husband, Mrs. Martin."

"My husband is dead." She announced the fact coldly and without feeling, as if afraid to utter a trace of emotion in case the flood gates of her grief were opened.

"I know."

"Please. Sit down." She indicated a chair which faced the one from which she had risen. "You know, then, that Philo was on Earth?"

Kello nodded. "I examined his body at the Imperial Hotel."

"Then you know that he died of natural causes?"

"I don't know that, Mrs. Martin. I would have performed the autopsy but I was prevented by circumstances from doing so." He saw her lips move to frame the obvious question, and before she could do so he went on quickly to outline the facts, and all the time he kept his eyes closely upon her in case there should be any reaction. He needn't have worried. Mrs. Philo Martin was made of strong material, and she didn't flinch by so much as a hair during the time he was speaking.

When he had finished she said, "So you think Philo was—murdered?"

"I don't know," admitted Kello quietly. "All I know is that some person or persons, as yet unidentified, wanted the manner of his death kept quiet."

"And you think I can help?"

Kello smiled wryly. "I don't know that either, Mrs. Martin. I hope that you may be able to." He hesitated and asked, "Why didn't your husband stay here rather than at an hotel?"

She shrugged and smiled bitterly. "He said it was for security reasons."

"Then you have had contact with him."

"Oh, yes. I've had—contact with him." She laughed and there was a warning note of hysteria which she had to fight down with visible effort. "He called to see me—once—a week ago. I have not seen him apart from that. He wouldn't allow me to visit him at the hotel, and he wouldn't—wouldn't stay with me here for even a little time." The first break in her composure was indicated by a tear which squeezed its way from the corner of her left eye and ran, unnoticed, down her cheek.

"And that was—unusual?"

She rose quickly from the chair, and walked with rapid, jerky strides to the large sunlit window, standing before it with her back to Kello.

"Yes, of course it was unusual. After almost four years. After almost four years—" Her voice broke slightly and he could see the slight fluttering of her trim shoulders. "He stayed only five minutes."

Kello was silent. This was the last information he had expected to get, and he couldn't see for the life of him how it helped.

"But he must have wanted something, Mrs. Martin," he said at last. "I mean—just to walk in like that, and walk out again—it just doesn't make sense!"

"You think I don't know that?" she turned on him fiercely, her face flushed and her eyes bright with tears. "I've asked myself the same questions over and over, Doctor Kello, but I don't get any answers. I was resigned to waiting another year before I saw him. I knew he was safe and well and it didn't matter—but to have him walk in like that out of the blue and then walk off again without so much as a kiss of greeting or a word of love—after four years—" She dropped into the chair again, her voice breaking with emotion and her face buried in her hands.

Kello waited sadly and silently for the spasm to pass. Slowly she recovered her composure and sat up again, white faced and taut.

"I'm sorry, Doctor—"

"It helps to cry—I don't mind." Kello steeled himself and pressed on with his questions. "But he must have had some reason for calling to see you? There must have been something at the back of his visit otherwise there was no reason for it?"

"He wanted to know if I'd had any contact with any other members of the Expedition."

"What?"

"He asked if I'd seen Krishnan or Carrol or Chen-Su, had they been in touch with me either directly or indirectly."

Another door had opened to admit more information. Kello sat silent and surprised as he realised that this was proof that other members of the Expedition were on Earth. But if that was so why didn't Martin know where they were? Why should he think that they might contact his wife? Why? Kello gave up. He wasn't a professional investigator, and he was absolutely no good at reading intent into the actions of anything or anybody outside the sphere of medicine. He might be good at framing questions, but he was bad—very bad—at producing the right answers.



"Did you tell the Security Squads that? I assume they called on you?"

Mrs. Martin nodded. "Yes. They came the day that Philo was—was found dead."

"Section Leader Garvey." Kello said it almost to himself. "Was he surprised when you told him that?"

"No. No, he wasn't. In fact it almost seemed that he expected something of the sort."

There was little more that he could ask, and Kello realised that he had made a great deal more progress than he had any right to expect. There was no reason at all why Mrs. Martin should have allowed him to question her in the first place. As it was he had learned that there were other members of the Expedition on Earth, and that fact made nonsense of the official quarantine. It had clearly been imposed to give official quarters time to cover up something—time to sort out some dangerous factor that daren't be advertised.

Kello felt a slight twinge of fear as he wondered what he might be getting himself into. He rose from the chair and bowed slightly to the woman who sat opposite.

"You have been very kind, Mrs. Martin," he said. "I have imposed upon you quite enough." He reached for his wallet and took out a card which he laid on the table beside her chair. "That's my address. I should be most grateful if you would let me know if anything happens which seems important."

She picked up the card and looked at it, hesitating before she said, "That was what Section Leader Garvey wanted, Doctor Kello. I don't know if I should be doing right—"

"Please," said Kello earnestly. "It is most important to me. Believe me, I am as anxious as Garvey to know why and how your husband died. I admit my motives are personal, but I have more to lose than Garvey if I don't find the answers I'm looking for."

Still she hesitated, obviously torn between a desire for knowledge that she would be unlikely to get from the Security Squads, and a possible directive from Garvey that she must speak to no one but the Squads should anything further happen.

"I can't promise—"

"You don't have to," put in Kello quickly. "Do what your conscience tells you, Mrs. Martin, but remember, all I want is to help clear this whole thing to everyone's satisfaction."

The maid showed him from the flat and he returned to his flat in a far more sombre mood than when he had left it.

## Chapter Four

The trouble with being a doctor, Kello realised, was the fact that it produced an automatically inquiring mind. The deeper he got his teeth into a problem, the greater became the urge to follow it through to a satisfactory conclusion. He pondered what he should do for a long time. He could still call Garvey and let him know the truth about the autopsy. But if he did so would it help his own position? Kello decided that it wouldn't; he had waited too long and got himself in too deep to extricate himself as easily as that. If he went to Garvey now and told him what he knew there might be a lot of awkward questions as to his real motives. It wasn't difficult to imagine Garvey's first reaction. Why had he waited so long?

All he could do was keep quiet and hope that things worked out to his advantage one way or another. He was sufficient of a realist to recognise his own desire to play detective—but it didn't change his intentions.

What was it Mrs. Martin had said? Her husband had asked if Krishnan or any other crew member had called to see her. Now why should he ask that? Surely, if they left the *First Discoverer* together then each one would know the whereabouts of the others. But it was obvious from Martin's question that he didn't. It was equally clear that he wanted to know very badly if they showed up. And why should he expect that one or other of them might contact Mrs. Martin? There could be only one reason for that—they would do it if there was a way by which they could locate Martin. The mere fact that they hadn't done so would seem to indicate that they had found Martin without his wife's help. They had found him before he had found them, and—

Kello realised with a sudden shock that he now had a possible clue to the murderer. All he had to do now was to make it conclusive.

The copter had almost reached his apartment by this time, but he halted it in mid flight, cancelled his instructions, and redirected it to the offices of the largest of the city's news sheets. Excitement bubbled within him as he realised that he might well be on to a trail that the Security Squads didn't even know existed.

The main office of the *East African Times* was a gigantic metal and plastic building towering thirty stories into the clear

blue sky. It had a busy copter roof and Kello's cab had to wait for a minute or so before a lane was cleared and ready for landing. Then he took the grav-shaft down sixteen floors to the cuttings bureau and asked the petite blonde at the enquiry desk if he could look at the files containing the records and photographs of the Centaurus Expedition prior to the actual departure.

Five minutes later he was seated in a small cubicle with three thick dossiers before him. It was almost two hours work before he had extracted all that he wanted in the way of photos and odd pieces of information that might be useful to him at some future date, and he had to wait another half hour while the blonde arranged for the printing of the photos he had requested. There were forty-seven of them—one for each member of the crew of the *First Discoverer*.

It was late afternoon when he left the *Times* building and directed a cab back across the city to the mortuary of District Five. He went straight to the main desk with a prayer in his heart that the same attendant would be on duty as on his last visit ; he wasn't disappointed.

The man looked at him as he approached, and for a brief instant Kello hoped that the news of his removal from the official lists of doctors approved by the Security squads for autopsy, hadn't filtered this far. The frown on the man's face quickly disposed of that hope.

"Can I help you, Doctor?" he enquired in a voice which said quite plainly that he wouldn't if he could help it.

"I hope so," smiled Kello amiably. "You've probably heard of the trouble I'm in?"

The attendant sniffed disparagingly. "I heard you got taken off the list, if that's what you mean."

"Yes." Kello nodded. "Well, there's been something of a misunderstanding, and I'm hoping to be able to put it straight—with your help."

"So?" The man's suspicion was worn like a badge.

"You remember that autopsy I was enquiring about yesterday?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Would you be able to identify the doctor who performed it if you saw him again?"

"Of course I would. He was a new man around here. It was the first time I ever saw him."

"Fine." Kello took the envelope containing the forty-seven photos from his pocket, and passed them over the desk.

"Would you look at these and tell me if you can identify one of them, please."

The attendant looked dubious. "Well, I don't know—"

"Please. It can't do any harm, and it would sure help me in my enquiries."

"Well—"

Kello smiled winningly and pushed the photos into the man's reluctant hand. He had been careful to remove the names from the front of each picture, and there was no other way in which the attendant might have been diverted from his decision. Slowly, he ran through them one at a time dismissing some at once, frowning over some that held his attention.

"Some of these sure look familiar," he complained after the first couple of dozen had passed back to Kello.

"But not familiar enough, eh?" Kello prayed that the *First Discoverer* and her crew had not lingered too well in the man's recollection.

"No, I don't reckon—" He paused. "Hey, now. Wait a minute. Doctor, that's the man—that's him all right. I'd know him anywhere. Doctor Morcatur."

Kello felt as if a large weight had been lifted from his chest as he took the photo and looked at it. "Are you absolutely sure about it?" he asked.

"That's him all right. I told you I'd remember him."

Kello laughed in sheer relief and passed a ten credit note across the desk. "Friend, you don't know just how much help you've been to me."

"You mean you'll get back on the list?" The note was slid out of sight quickly and expertly.

"I might very well do just that."

"Well, I hope so. Yes, I sure hope so, Doctor."

Kello left the mortuary with the knowledge that the fake Doctor Morcatur was, in reality, Doctor Philip Naung Soon, head physician to the Centaurus Expedition. No wonder he had performed the autopsy so thoroughly.

And another crew member had turned up on Earth.

A picture was gradually being built up in Kello's mind but he realised that it was very far from being complete. As far as he could tell from the known facts there were at least six people from the *First Discoverer* on Earth who, officially, had no right to be there. They were, apparently, divided into two

separate groups. The first comprised Martin, Naung Soon and at least one other so far unidentified.

Unidentified?

As the copter whisked him across the city Kello flipped rapidly through the forty-seven photos he had in his pocket—and identified the Security Squad man who had viscoed him cancelling the postmortem, as Jerome Lynn, a junior technician aboard the *First Discoverer*.

Three faces were now in the picture.

The second group must be made of the names that Martin had mentioned to his wife—Krishnan, Carrol, Chen-Su, and an unspecified number of others. His only reason for splitting them thus, Kello realised, was the rather nebulous factor that Martin was trying to find the others headed by Krishnan.

The copter set him down on the roof of his apartment building, and Kello took the grav-shaft down to the restaurant floor. He'd not eaten since his hasty breakfast over seven hours earlier, and the strain was beginning to tell. He sat for an hour over a meal of rare steak and green salad topped off with a large brandy and several cups of black coffee. Then he went up to his flat.

Section Leader Garvey was waiting for him.

Kello eyed the loose-limbed figure leaning against the wall with as much aplomb as he could muster. "Well, well. Surprise."

The Security Officer scowled as Kello approached. "Where the hell have you been for the last hour, Kello?" he demanded wrathfully.

"In the restaurant," Kello retorted with a smile. "Eating—oddly enough. What can I do for you, Garvey? I presume it's me you want."

"Aren't you going to ask me in?"

Kello chuckled. "I thought you might be a little fussy who you mixed with."

"Don't get smart with me, Kello," Garvey snapped. "You got in a mess on your own, and you've caused me a packet of trouble as well. What do you expect—I should fall on your neck and kiss you maybe?"

"Hardly." Kello opened the flat door and motioned Garvey inside. As they stood in the entrance hall Kello remarked, "I think this is the first time I've met you socially—you know, without some of your henchmen to back you up."

Garvey glared at him angrily.

Kello led the way into his study and motioned the Section Leader to a chair. "Well, what can I do for you?"

Garvey sat down and took a cigarette from the box which Kello offered him.

"I want you to tell me more about that pantomime at the mortuary," he said bluntly.

Kello sat quiet, surprised and apprehensive. So the attendant had called the Security Squad as soon as he'd left. If it had been otherwise Garvey couldn't possibly have got to his flat as fast as he had done.

Kello spread his hands in a gesture of depreciation. "What about it? I wanted some information, that's all."

"About a man you recommended? Don't give me that." Garvey leaned forward and stabbed the cigarette sharply at Kello. "I know about those photos, and I know you were very satisfied when the attendant picked one of them out and identified it as being that of Doctor Morcatur."

"So?"

"So the picture of Morcatur I showed him from the records of the Medical Association isn't the same man he identified from those that you showed him."

Garvey was smart, Kello had to admit. Not that he expected the senior Security Squad officer for Nairobi to be anything else, he realised. Perhaps he had under-estimated the entire situation; perhaps Garvey knew a great deal more about this whole business than he had been given credit for.

"Well? I'm waiting."

Kello had to say something. He knew he could do his professional reputation a great deal of further harm if he tried to deny everything. He was in bad already, and he daren't get in any deeper.

Slowly he said, "I wanted to find out who performed the autopsy on Philo Martin."

"Philo—?" Garvey's lower jaw dropped in sudden surprise, and then snapped shut like a trap, compressing his lips into a thin, uncompromising line. "You're too smart, Kello. All right, so you know about Martin. Carry on from there."

Kello shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. I had a call from your office cancelling my appointment for the autopsy because Morcatur was already on the spot and was prepared to do it. A day or so later I met Morcatur for the first time, and found he knew nothing about it."

"What about Martin? How—?"

"Oh, I recognised him all along, but I figured you wanted it kept quiet for some reason," said Kello. "Then this business of the autopsy came up and I decided I ought to do something about clearing my reputation. Well, I couldn't do it without some proof so I played a hunch. Martin was in the crew of the *First Discoverer* and he was on Earth, so I wondered how many more of them were on Earth when they should have been floating in orbit on the far side of the Moon. I got hold of some photos from a cutting office and took them along to the mortuary in the hope that the attendant could identify the man who impersonated Morcatur."

"And?"

"He did," nodded Kello. He reached into his pocket and took out the photos. He passed the top one to Garvey. "That's him—Doctor Philip Naung Soon—chief physician to the Centaurus Expedition."

Garvey looked at the picture closely. "You sure?" he asked after a moment.

"Ask the attendant at the mortuary."

"I'll do better than that." Garvey stood up quickly. "I'll ask Naung Soon himself."

"You know where he is?"

Garvey nodded. "You've done your part, Kello, and I'll see that you're re-instated without prejudice—if Naung Soon confirms your story. There's just one other thing."

"And that is?"

"You'll keep absolutely quiet about this whole business. If you utter so much as one word about what you've learned in the past few days I'll have you tucked away so fast you won't know what hit you. Understand?"

"On one condition."

"You're in no position to make conditions."

"Still—"

"All right. What is it?"

"I'd like to be around when you question Naung Soon."

Garvey's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "What in hell for?"

"I'd like to know why he went to all this trouble when he obviously had the ear of officialdom."

"It's none of your damned business."

"Still, I'm curious to see his reaction."

Garvey hesitated, and Kello could see him weighing the need to keep him, Kello, happy against the obvious desire to keep as much of the Martin case secret as possible.



Grudgingly the Section Leader said, "Well, I suppose we owe you something. Be in my office at ten hundred tomorrow."

Kello relaxed and smiled his thanks. "I appreciate it, Garvey. Oh, before you go—" He took another photo from the sheaf he held and passed it to the Squad officer. "That's the man who viscoed me cancelling the appointment for the autopsy."

Garvey nodded and put the picture in his pocket. "See you tomorrow."

### Chapter Five

At a quarter to ten the following morning Kello went through the main entrance to the Security Squad headquarters, and presented his credentials to the duty officer. They were checked and re-checked, and Kello himself was identified positively by the searching cells of the retina scanner. His appointment with Garvey's office was confirmed and at five to ten he stepped out of the grav-shaft and walked the few steps along the bright corridor to Garvey's office. A uniformed Squad man in the vestibule checked him again, and he was passed through into Garvey's own personal office.

Garvey looked up from a pile of papers and grunted a welcome.

"Morning, Kello. Naung Soon's just arrived downstairs. He'll be up soon."

"Have you told him anything?"

"Nope. Just that I wanted to see him."

Which, thought Kello, was a good thing. At least he would be able to see the Doctor's reaction to the Section Leader's questions. They might be interesting. One other fact was certain—Garvey could get hold of certain members of the Centaurus Expedition as and when he wanted them. And that, as far as Kello could see, put the official seal on the presence of the Expedition members on Earth.

The intercom buzzed and announced, "Doctor Philip Naung Soon, sir."

"Send him in," ordered Garvey. His flicked towards Kello. "I hope his answers are good, Kello. There might be trouble else."

Kello recognised the comment as being born of a troubled attitude, and a sudden flash of understanding told him that

Garvey was anything but happy about Naung Soon's intervention at the autopsy.

The door opened and the thin, neat form of Naung Soon came in. He bowed to Garvey, and his dark eyes took in Kello's presence with an inscrutability that was alarming. He must know who I am, thought Kello, and that knowledge triggered the realisation that his presence would forewarn Naung Soon of the reason for Garvey's summons.

The element of surprise was missing, and Kello knew grimly that he would be unlikely to learn as much as he had hoped.

"Good morning, Doctor," said Garvey. "This is Doctor Kello."

Naung Soon bowed and smiled thinly. Kello smiled in return and said nothing.

"Please sit down." Garvey indicated a chair on the other side of the desk from Kello. "Doctor, I've called you here because I want to know something more about the death of Philo Martin."

"I thought that might be the reason." Naung Soon's voice was thin and dry, cold and emotionless. It was as near to being toneless as anything Kello had ever heard. "I fear my little effort was clumsy but unavoidable."

As he spoke Kello knew for sure that he could expect no surprise. The few seconds since he had entered Garvey's office had given Naung Soon enough time to prepare himself for the questions which he knew must come—and those seconds had been enough.

"Is Doctor Kello familiar with the overall situation?" Naung Soon asked.

Garvey shook his head.

"Then it might be difficult, might it not?"

"Difficult?" snapped Kello angrily. "Garvey had me taken off the Squad lists for that stunt of yours."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"Naung Soon," put in Garvey with a warning glance at Kello, "all we're interested in is the irregularity regarding the autopsy on Martin. Kello is naturally anxious about his official status. Now, what was at the back of it?"

Naung Soon considered the question for a minute then he said, "When I heard of Martin's death, I called your office and learned that you had already obtained the services of a doctor to perform the autopsy. Frankly, Garvey, having regard to the

general situation, I didn't think that was very wise of you. I thought that the best thing to do was take some action on my own to keep the matter as quiet as possible. Doctor Kello was another ear and another voice, so I acted to keep him out of it."

Garvey shifted uneasily. "Why didn't you do it officially? I could have headed Kello off."

"I tried to get you at your office," replied Naung Soon, "but you were not there. I—ah—became a little anxious and a little unorthodox."

"What were you afraid I might find, Doctor?" Kello asked.

"I found nothing. Martin's death was from natural causes."

"That wasn't what I asked," insisted Kello gently. "I asked what you expected to find that you were afraid I might get at first."

"That's none of your business, Kello," put in Garvey. "All you wanted was a reason for Naung Soon's actions—"

"I still haven't got one," snapped Kello.

"It's a good enough reason for me," replied Garvey. "I told you yesterday, Kello, that you were asking too many questions about something which is out of your class. Just forget about the whole thing. I'll see that your name is restored to the official records without prejudice, and as far as I'm concerned the matter is now closed."

Kello shrugged. In the face of such an attitude there was little he could do. Martin's body had long ago been cremated; Naung Soon was in the clear; and he had been warned off.

"If that is all, Garvey?" The Doctor rose from his seat. "I will leave you to your other—ah—duties."

"Yes, of course, Doctor," said Garvey. "Oh!" he glanced quickly at Kello. "I've no further news about the—um—general position."

"I see." Naung Soon nodded. "Then we must hope that better luck attends our future efforts. I will keep in touch with you."

As Naung Soon crossed to the door, Kello realised that he was no further forward than he had been yesterday. Naung Soon had answered the whole matter to Garvey's satisfaction and was about to walk out of Kello's ken forever.

On an impulse Kello called, "Oh, by the way, Doctor—"

Naung Soon turned back and cocked his head at an angle of polite attention. "Yes?"

"I had a long chat with Rabendrath Krishnan yesterday," said Kello quietly.

If he had thrown a bomb into the centre of the room he could have asked for no better reaction. Garvey swore and rose hurriedly from his seat, but it was on Naung Soon that Kello kept his whole attention. The man froze on the spot, his whole being taut with something very close to fear although his face remained clear of emotion. Kello was amazed at the degree of control that he retained. Only the eyes betrayed the surprise and the naked fear that he felt, and that died so rapidly as he mastered himself that Kello could almost have convinced himself that it never existed.

"What did you say, Doctor Kello?"

"I just wondered if you might be interested," said Kello.

"What in hell are you playing at, Kello?" rasped Garvey. "Just exactly how much do you know about all this?"

"Please." Naung Soon waved Garvey to silence. "I will handle this. Now, you made a statement, Kello, that you must know is of considerable interest. If you know as much as you hint then you must also be aware of the vital necessity of finding Krishnan and his associates as soon as possible."

"You mean Carrol and Chen-Su and the others?"

"Where are they?"

"If I knew I might not think it advisable to tell you."

"I'll have you held on a charge of wilfully suppressing vital information," snapped Garvey. "Don't play tag with me, Kello, this whole thing is a keg of dynamite and you're sitting right on top of it."

Kello chuckled drily. "If you put me away, Garvey, then you wouldn't have a cat's hope in hell of finding Krishnan. He wouldn't be able to get in touch with me if I was in prison, would he?" He rose from his chair, anxious to get away before the thinness of his bluff was exposed. He had learned one thing—Krishnan and Naung Soon were on opposite sides of some dangerous and quite unrecognisable fence—and he was sitting astride it.

"Krishnan had some very interesting things to say, Garvey," he went on calmly. "Things that should be—ah, well—perhaps I'd better not say any more at the moment. Krishnan warned me about saying too much in the wrong places." He let his eyes rest significantly on Naung Soon for a moment, then he nodded briefly to the two men and left the office.

Garvey made no move to stop him.

He went down to the ground floor and waited in a quiet alcove for almost a quarter of an hour before Naung Soon appeared. Clearly he and Garvey had found a lot to talk about as a result of Kello's shot-in-the-dark comment, and equally clearly Naung Soon was in a hurry to get away. Kello watched him cross to the public copter park and fly off in a cab. He did nothing to follow. The dice had been cast and all he could do was wait and see what happened.

There was no question in his own mind that Naung Soon had been very badly shaken, and Kello didn't think it would be long before someone got in touch with him and wanted to know what Krishnan had told him in the course of their mythical interview. His only regret was that Garvey had himself been so startled that it was unlikely that he would have seen Naung Soon's discomfiture.

Nevertheless, his visit to Mrs. Philo Martin was paying most unexpected dividends.

With Naung Soon safely out of the way Kello turned back into the Security Squad headquarters. He bypassed the main entrance hall and took a grav-shaft back to the floor on which Garvey had his office. The Squad man in the vestibule looked at him in surprise and Kello smiled lightly at the reaction.

"Please ask Section Leader Garvey if he can spare me a few more moments of his valuable time."

Garvey's reaction was prompt, and Kello was inside his office facing a wrathful Section Leader before he had time to get his breath.

"All right, Kello," Garvey snarled. "You asked for it. I told you to keep your nose clean but you couldn't do it. No, you had to be clever, and the only thing that keeps you out of gaol is the faint possibility that Krishnan or one of his pals might try to get in touch with you."

"You want Krishnan pretty badly, don't you?" Kello sat down in the chair he had occupied earlier.

"Just how bad you will never know." Garvey wagged an angry finger in Kello's direction. "I warned you yesterday to keep your mouth shut, and now I'm warning you again. You know too much to be healthy."

"Is that Naung Soon's opinion as well? Now that I've spoken to Krishnan?"

"It's everybody's opinion, Kello. And when this whole thing is cleared I'll make it my business to see that you never practice medicine in Nairobi again. That's how much trouble you've got yourself into."

Kello sat quiet and considered his position for a moment. He'd obviously frightened Naung Soon, and now he had antagonised Garvey beyond any but the slightest hope of a reconciliation. And where did that leave him? Right in the middle of a nebulous pile of trouble.

"Actually," he announced slowly, "I never saw Krishnan."

Garvey was speechless; his lower jaw dropped and his eyes popped in sheer disbelief. Slowly the surprise gave way to angry suspicion. "What are you trying to pull now?"

"Nothing. I was suspicious of Naung Soon and I wasn't happy with his cover story, so I figured I'd see what his reaction was to what I said about meeting Krishnan." Kello gazed bleakly at the Section Leader. "He was frightened, Garvey—very frightened indeed. Oh, he hid it well, but I was watching him more closely than you were, and there wasn't any doubt about it."

Garvey grunted. "I don't suppose there was, Kello. He had every reason to be frightened, and so would you if you knew what was going on."

"Look," Kello leaned forward in his chair. "I got dragged into this because of a little trouble over an autopsy that I didn't carry out. I didn't know what was going on so I started trying to salvage something of my professional reputation. And that's my only crime, Garvey. I know, things have gone a lot farther than I ever dreamed—but I'm still in the dark."

"You knew about Krishnan and Carrol."

"That was a sheer piece of luck. I went to see Mrs. Martin and she told me that her husband had asked questions about them." Kello shrugged. "Obviously, Martin and Naung Soon didn't know where they were, and it was equally clear that they were broken up into two mutually opposed groups. It doesn't need a very bright boy to figure that lot out. But I still don't know why. All I know for sure is that you and the Security Squad are on the side of Naung Soon, and that, for my money, puts Krishnan outside the law."

"How right you are," sighed Garvey. At this moment Kello was looking at an old man with grey lines marring the hang-dog expression of dumb despair that was so alien to the man. Garvey stood up, his shoulders even more stooped than usual.

"You threw a scare into us this morning, Kello. Now, take my advice and forget the whole matter. Go home and get into bed, then pull the sheets over your head and stay there until I

tell you its all right to come out. Believe me, you'll feel better."

"I've got an enquiring mind—"

"I said forget it."

"All right." Kello rose as well. He wasn't going to get any more out of Garvey, but there was still the naked fear of Naung Soon to be explained. "One thing, Garvey—"

"What?"

"Let me play one hunch. Don't tell Naung Soon that I was—ah—fibbing about seeing Krishnan."

"Why the devil shouldn't I?"

Kello shrugged. "It won't alter the situation if you do. Like I said—let me play one hunch."

Garvey eyed him darkly. "Every time you open your mouth you give me the feeling that you know a lot more about this than you are prepared to admit, Kello."

"Cross my heart." Kello grinned and held up his right hand, palm outwards.

"All right." Garvey shrugged in disgust. "Though I don't see why I should play games with you."

"Neither do I at the moment. Perhaps we'll all find out. I'll call you if I learn any more."

"I warned you," Garvey threatened.

Kello smiled, nodded farewell and left the office.

## Chapter Six

It was after eleven, and, for the moment, Kello realised he was stopped cold. There was nothing more he could do. He had set a slightly inconclusive trap which might not bring results—probably not, if Garvey was right. But he still could not get out of his mind the odd behaviour of Philo Martin when he had visited his wife. It was just not natural.

Kello headed for one of the smart restaurant bars in the centre of Nairobi, and spent an hour over two long drinks and three cigarettes. Then he ate a leisurely lunch and took a walk across the main city park towards his apartment.

It was after two when he stepped from the grav-shaft and spoke his name to the auto door. As he entered the flat he heard the light pinging of the visiphone in his study as it called his attention to an urgent message. He went straight through



and found a number neatly recorded on the message pad with the instruction 'please call at once—most urgent.'

It was quite unfamiliar to him, and he frowned slightly as he made the necessary call. Possibly it was to do with his practice, but in the light of recent events Kello felt an anticipatory tingle as the small screen swam greyly.

A woman's voice said, "Mrs. Martin's apartment. Who is this?"

"Paul Kello," he replied, a rising excitement flowing through his being. "I believe Mrs. Martin wanted to speak to me."

"Oh. Yes, Doctor. I'll call her."

Seconds later the familiar face of Mrs. Philo Martin flowed in miniature on the screen, and it didn't need his doctor's observation to tell him that she was on the verge of hysteria.

"Thank heaven you called, Doctor. I—I've been trying to get you for the past two hours. I—" Her voice broke a trifle with relief.

"Take it easy," Kello urged softly. "What's the trouble?"

She pursed her lips into a thin line, clearly trying to get a grip on herself. Then said, "I've got a visitor, Doctor. I—it's Rabindranath Krishnan."

Kello greeted the information with blank astonishment. Suddenly, out of the blue, Martin's original supposition had come true. Krishnan had got in touch with Mrs. Martin.

"Where is he now?"

"Here, with me. We were waiting for you to call."

"Have you called the Security Squad?"

Dumbly she shook her head.

"Why not?"

He could read the horror in her eyes as she replied, "I—I daren't, Doctor Kello, not yet. Will you come round as quickly as you can?"

Kello nodded. "All right. Wait for me, and don't talk to anyone else until I get there."

He broke the connection and made for the copter roof at a run. There were a few minutes of frustration while he waited for a vacant cab to answer his call, and in ten minutes he had landed at the copter park close to Mrs. Martin's flat.

He spoke his name to the door and was admitted at once. The maid showed him through into the lounge, and Mrs. Martin rose to welcome him as he entered.

"Has anything happened?" Kello asked.

She shook her head and turned to introduce a tall slim man who had risen from another chair on the far side of the room.

"Doctor Kello, this is—"

"Krishnan," finished Kello grimly. "Just about everyone I can think of is looking for you right now."

"Including you, Doctor." Krishnan smiled thinly, and Kello realised that the man was haggard and worn. His normal dark skin was pasty with an underlying pallor that served only to emphasise the deeply etched lines of worry and pain that had aged the man beyond his years. Kello realised that Krishnan had lost a great deal of weight since the Centaurus Expedition had left Earth. His hair was grey at the temples where photos showed it black before. He was thirty-eight and he looked ten years older.

"How did you get into this business, Doctor Kello?" he asked as they shook hands briefly.

Kello sat down in the chair which Mrs. Martin offered and then related the details as quickly as he could. The important story was Krishnan's—not his.

When he had finished Krishnan nodded. "At least I have found an unofficial person who might be able to appreciate my position—"

"Krishnan," Kello interrupted, "I don't know what this is all about, but Mrs. Martin told me on the visiphone that she dare not call the Security Squad. That seems rather an odd statement for her to make. Surely, if anyone is in trouble—you, for instance, the first people to get in touch with would be the Squads."

Krishnan smiled coldly and shook his head. "I am going to tell you a story, Kello," he said softly, "and I do not want you to interrupt until I have finished. Then—you can tell me what you would do in my place."

"All right." Kello nodded.

"First let me ask you a question. How much do you know about the Centaurus Expedition?"

"Not a lot," admitted Kello. "Probably more than the average man in the street—but I suspect a great deal more than I really know. One thing I am sure about, and that is the fact that the quarantine is a cover to give someone time to cover up a difficult and dangerous situation."

"It is intended," said Krishnan calmly, "to give them time to hunt down and kill myself and my companions—Carrol, Chen-Su, Morgan and Talgarth." He paused grimly. "They have already found and killed Viera and Cappini."

Kello sat stunned and quiet for a moment. Then he said, "And Martin?"

Krishnan smiled and shook his head. "No, not Martin. He was killed by Chen-Su."

Kello shot a glance at Mrs. Martin. She was sitting tense and straight, her face pale and drawn, and her eyes were the eyes of a woman who has heard such a tale of horror that she dare not believe—but which she cannot deny.

"On the fourth planet of Alpha Centaurus," said Krishnan in a dry, lecture room voice, "we found a world of plant life and animal life so rich and abundant that we christened it Eden. It had just about everything that Mankind could wish for in a new planet. There was no axial wobble so the seasons remained the same throughout the whole planetary year according to which latitude you were in. The gravity was point eight Earth normal, the temperature at the equator a mean eighty with only a five degree variation. At the poles it dropped to minus sixty with every possible temperature between those two figures remaining static within the five degree variation which I just mentioned. In short, Kello, the climate remained static in whatever region you might wish to settle. Ideal conditions for everyone I think you will agree."

Kello nodded. "Go on."

"I won't bore you with all the details, but you will be aware of the significance of the situation if I tell you that we found a fantastic degree of symbiosis operating between the animal and vegetable life. We have forms of symbiosis here, on Earth, but it bears absolutely no relation to the state of affairs which holds sway on Eden. We found that it extended to the nervous systems of the various species so that each species supported within their own bodies an additional and totally alien life form that lived and had its being within the body of its host." Krishnan shrugged.

"It was an admirable arrangement as far as our investigations could tell. It would never work on Earth, but it was most suited to the life forms of Eden. It opened up all sorts of exciting prospects, and we found that, in one dominant species, the symbiote was capable of defending its host against most forms of physical illness. In another species the host was given additional muscular strength by the symbiote when such a need arose. You will appreciate the advantages which either factor could give to our medical knowledge if such things could be adapted to our own particular form of life."

Kello nodded. He could indeed. The frontiers of medicine could be advanced a long way if such adaptations could be linked with the physical structure of the human body.

"We left Eden," continued Krishnan, "and on the trip home our scientific staff filled in most of their time in carrying out researches and experiments into symbiosis using data and specimens which we had brought from Eden." He chuckled grimly and without humour. "Eden! There was a serpent in the original Eden if my folk lore is correct—and there was a serpent here. We didn't find it until it was too late. You see, Kello, none of the life forms which we found had any semblance of intelligence such we know on Earth, and on that factor we made our one basic error. We assumed that none of the symbiotes possessed any intelligence either. How wrong we were. It was an error which we did not discover until we were within three weeks flight of Earth, and by that time thirty of the crew were already possessed by a symbiote which took over the body and mind and soul of the host."

There was dead silence as Krishnan stopped for a moment and rubbed his hands wearily down and across his face.

"I can't describe the days that followed. The crew was quite literally divided into two camps, each of whom was helpless to harm the other for the time being—and then, slowly, over a period of three days—the tide turned. By the time those of us who were—I suppose normal is the word—were normal realised what was happening it was too late. The number went up from thirty to thirty-seven and the balance was destroyed. Three of the unaffected crew members were killed when we took action to protest ourselves against symbiote infection, but we managed to take over a part of the ship and seal it off from the rest. We broke electrical connections, water supplies, air lines—everything—and then we waited." He leaned forward and buried his face in his hands for a second before his composure re-asserted itself. "One more became affected and we had to kill him. The other seven of us remained for a week, sealed off, with the air getting steadily worse, a few gallons of water and practically no food. We were still two days out from Earth when we realised that we could wait no longer.

"The—other had begun an assault on our position with flame cutters which burnt up the little air we had left. We had to cut our last lines of defence and take the plunge which we had planned when we sealed ourselves off from the rest of the

ship. We manned the emergency escape rocket and headed for Earth on our own. As we headed in we picked up a radio message from the ship telling the authorities that we were dangerous and had escaped from custody in a mass breakout."

Krishnan laughed, an edge of hysteria in the high note, and Kello knew that the man wasn't far from breaking point. He realised, too, that there wasn't a great deal more that he needed to be told.

"I can guess the rest," he said softly. "They branded you as being symbiote possessed, and claimed that they were normal. Being in the minority you wouldn't be believed. Right?"

Krishnan nodded. "We were attacked as we tried to land, and we had to crash the rocket high into the hills to the north of the Great Rift Valley. We dispersed and waited for something to happen. Fortunately, the authorities showed good sense in one respect by imposing a quarantine, though I suspect that Vandyne and his symbiote friends were actually responsible because it gave them time to hunt us down and destroy us before the truth was exposed. They were safeguarded from any accidental exposure themselves by being kept together in one place completely in control of their own small world. They were made to appear, in official eyes, as cautious, public spirited people who were taking every precaution to see that Earth was safeguarded from the terrible dangers of alien infection."

"But surely," Kello objected, "an inspection by a few medical specialists from Earth would show that all those people in the ship were, in fact, symbiote possessed?"

"It would," agreed Krishnan wearily. "In fact we know that three doctors spent two weeks aboard the vessel making just such an inspection." He pursed his lips to a thin, tight line, and went on, "By the time they emerged they, too, were hosts."

Kello sat silent. A chill of horror ran through him as the implications of Krishnan's story piled up. No wonder Mrs. Martin had been afraid to call the Security Squad. If Naung Soon and his associates had the ear of officialdom it would be easy for them to brand Krishnan and his friends as a potential threat to the civilised world. But Martin—?

"What about Martin?" he demanded abruptly.

"He was a host," replied Krishnan, "and he was on to our trail. He traced me to Nairobi and he was breathing down my neck with Garvey and his men close by. All he had to do was kill me and get Naung Soon to declare me symbiote infected and the hand of the whole group would be immeasurably strengthened. That was the technique they used to get rid of Viera and Cappini."

Light dawned on Kello. No wonder Naung Soon had been so anxious to stop him doing that autopsy. If he, Kello, had performed it then the cat would have been well and truly out of the bag. Not only would the true cause of death have been established but the fact would have been revealed that Martin was host to a symbiote. Could he believe Krishnan though? The man's story certainly fitted the facts as he knew them, and he had to admit that a superficial examination showed Krishnan to be far more normal than the cold, calculating Naung Soon. The odd behaviour of Philo Martin towards his wife was explained as well—perhaps too well. Kello looked at the thin, drawn face of Krishnan. The man smiled back at him wanly.

"Well, Doctor Kello?"

Well, indeed! Kello's brain was in a whirl. Up until this moment he had been engaged in the somewhat exciting role of an amateur detective unravelling something that was odd but not dangerous and making the Security Squads look a little foolish in the process. Now—!

"I don't know." He shook his head and looked at Krishnan enquiringly. "What do you want me to do?"

"I was rather hoping that you, as an interested party, might have some ideas. There is little I can accomplish in my position."

"Surely if you got in touch with the authorities—?"

"Viera tried that," Krishnan interrupted coldly. "You don't know just how frightened of this thing the—er—authorities are. The mere fact that Naung Soon and his pals claim to be experts on symbiote infection is enough for the politicians and the police to dump the whole matter in their laps with almost a free hand to do what they like."

"Then try to give some publicity to your story," said Kello desperately.

Krishnan laughed hollowly. "What do you suggest? A double column in the international press? Perhaps I should stop people in the street and try to make them listen? Haven't

you realised that there is a strict censorship on anything connected with the Centaurus Expedition?" He slumped in his chair. "How much of this would you have believed under other circumstances? How much of it do you believe now?"

Kello was silent. Just how much did he believe?

"You see?"

Kello glanced across at Mrs. Martin. She had relaxed in her chair, and sat, pale and wan, listening to the discussion.

"What do you believe, Mrs. Martin?" Kello asked.

She looked at him piteously, her great, dark eyes red rimmed and stark with despair.

"What can I believe? I keep remembering Philo as I last saw him. And I know it—it wasn't Philo I saw. Not the Philo I knew four years ago." She shook her head in desperation. "There was something about him—something cold and dead—"

And that, thought Kello, was the only reaction he was likely to get.

"Just what do you know about this symbiote?" he asked Krishnan.

"Simply that it submerges the human entity beneath its own, and uses the bodily functions of its host as if they belonged to it. Speech, thought, memory, movement—they all remain as they were before the human frame becomes a host, but after possession they become merely adjuncts of a new and alien personality. If you think of a human being as being paralysed and unconscious but moving and thinking and acting through some other external agency, that will give you some idea of the degree of possession."

Kello nodded. "Any physical manifestations?"

"Not outwardly," replied Krishnan. "A postmortem would reveal a soft, tumourous growth at the base of the skull connected to the brain. From that centre pseudo nerve fibre travels all over the body taking in the main nerve centres and all the physical and mental control necessary to operate the body as a normal, functional human—except, of course, that it isn't human."

"Can it be killed?"

"Not without killing the host. There is a traumatic shock involved because of the close linkage between host and symbiote. If one dies, so does the other. The one weak point



we know about is the one discovered by Chen-Su. A sharp blow at the base of the skull to the left of the spinal cord is enough to crush the symbiote and destroy it and its host."

"Is that how Martin died?"

Krishnan nodded.

Kello realised with a sudden shock that his own position was far more dangerous than he had believed possible. His suspicions regarding Naung Soon had been more than confirmed—if Krishnan was telling the truth—and, that being so, there was ample reason for Naung Soon's fear when he had announced his fictitious interview with Krishnan. There was little doubt that Naung Soon had believed him and would try to do something about it.

Now that he knew the full implications of the situation—irrespective of the truth of Krishnan's assertions—Kello could assess his own position with horrifying certainty. Panic touched him as he wondered if any sort of watch had been kept on his flat, and if so whether he had been followed to Mrs. Martin's address. It was more than just a possibility, and it meant that Krishnan could be in considerable danger.

"I just thought of something," he said gazing bleakly at Krishnan. Coldly he told of his interview with Naung Soon, and of the white lie he'd told to try and draw the man out. As he spoke he saw the man's face cloud with alarm as a worried frown added to the creases of his brow. "There's only one thing for it," Kello said finally, "and that's for me to get out of here fast and try to draw them off."

"You're sure of all this?" asked Krishnan.

"Too sure. Naung Soon would obviously have me watched if he thought I was in touch with you. Until this minute I was too stupid to realise it." He rose from his seat. "I'd suggest you stay here with Mrs. Martin for as long she will have you."

"And you?"

Kello shook his head. "At the moment I can only see one way out, and that's to get Naung Soon examined by a panel of medical experts under foolproof conditions. Is there any sure way of telling a host by such an examination while he's still alive?"

"Yes. A blood test will reveal a change in the haemoglobin. An X-ray will show the presence of the tumourous bulk of the symbiote, and I believe a neurectomy can be carried out in the upper part of an arm or a leg which will also be conclusive."

"Right. At least I know what to go for."

"You forget," said Krishnan quietly. "Naung Soon has the official ear, and he's clever enough to do a lot of covering."

"He won't be able to deny the evidence," replied Kello grimly.

"If you can get it."

"I'll get it." Kello crossed to the door. "I don't know how—but I'll get it. Just you look after yourself, Krishnan. I'll need to have you examined as well to clinch the matter."

## Chapter Seven

As he recrossed the city to his apartment, Kello had an urge to peer continually back along the copter route to see if there were any signs that he was being followed. The effort was as ridiculous as it was unproductive for it was now late afternoon and the brilliant skies over Nairobi were thronged with traffic. It was after four when he slumped again in the comforting peace of his study and tried to shake off the fear that stirred his stomach so that he could think clearly and logically.

The previous, almost light hearted approach, had disappeared, and Kello realised the truth of the old adage that to know is to fear—he knew, and he was afraid.

Night darkened the skies as he sat and wrestled with the problem and got no nearer to a solution. He was in much the same position that Krishnan had been for over eight months, and he thought wearily if Krishnan hadn't found the answer then he was hardly likely to do so.

The only advantage he had was a freedom of movement which had been denied to the deputy leader of the Centaurus Expedition. Krishnan moved in fear, unable to take the slightest risk because he knew that one slip would mean more than just his own death. It would increase by a small amount the possibility of ultimate victory for Naung Soon and his associates.

Time passed, and he moved from his seat only once to bring light to the darkened room and to move the whisky decanter from its usual position to the desk before him. For all the good those hours of thought did him Kello realised his mind might as well have been blank the whole time.

It was after eight when the buzz of the visiphone stirred him from a stupor of concentration, and he sighed, stretching his stiffened shoulders, as he reached across to press the receive

button. The screen swam with the grey depths of reception, but no picture appeared. Whoever was calling him wasn't using vision.

He said, "Who's calling?" tentatively, and noted with mild surprise the fading blankness of the screen as it died before his eyes. The caller had rung off.

The instant of query was replaced by a flash of panic as the implication hit him—someone wanted to make sure he was still in his apartment. He reached the study door in two giant strides, threw himself across the lounge in frantic haste and out through the entrance hall. The apartment door yielded under his pull and he threw himself along the corridor towards the grav-shaft. He hadn't gone two yards before the howling roar of an explosion rocked the walls and floor, flinging him flat on his face. From the open door of his flat there gushed forth a vicious mass of flame which was replaced seconds later by a bubbling, gaseous cloud of acrid smoke.

Naung Soon had made his try.

Kello picked himself up shakily from the floor and winced as various portions of his body reacted to the bruising he had received. He staggered the few steps to the grav shaft, aware that voices were already audible, and sure in the fact that he didn't want to be around to answer questions. He didn't doubt that someone would be along to make sure that the incident had accomplished its intended end. He stepped into the grav-shaft and slid easily towards the ground floor. He left the shaft at the first floor and took the stairs down, pausing at the bottom to scan the wide entrance hall. It was all but deserted. The few people in sight were clustered around the base of the up grav-shaft, and it was clear that they were the tail end of the crowd that usually thronged the vestibule. The others had gone up to investigate the cause of the explosion.

Kello crossed the hall unnoticed and slipped out of a side door into the brightly lit street. He turned away into an alley that led down the side of the block, heading away from the main entrance and towards a line of visiboosts in the next street.

He called Security Squad headquarters and found to his dismay that Garvey wasn't there. His obviously troubled air induced the operator who answered to switch the call to Garvey's home number, and a minute later the call was answered by a coloured servant who agreed that Mr. Garvey

was at home but would be going out in a few minutes because of an urgent call which he had received a minute or so earlier. Kello knew what the call was about.

"Tell him that Paul Kello is calling," he ordered grimly.

Moments later Garvey's harassed face appeared on the screen.

"What in hell, Kello. I just had a call—"

"I know," snapped Kello. "I just got out in time. Garvey, someone is after me, and they almost succeeded."

"I warned you."

"I know you did, but I've got more answers to this business than you have. Now—"

"Shut up, Kello," Garvey interrupted. "I've got to look into this explosion—"

"Fat lot of good it'll do you. Get one of your messenger boys to handle it and meet me in your office as soon as you can make it."

Garvey snorted. "I can't do that. I've got a murder to look into."

"I'm not dead," Kello pointed out acidly, "but I will be if you don't co-operate. Do as I ask, Garvey, for heavens sake. And one other thing—can you get in touch with Naung Soon?"

"Sure I can."

"Then call him and tell him what's happened, and tell him that I'm dead—"

"What?" Garvey's eyes popped in amazement. "Are you mad?"

"I'll be in your office in ten minutes. I'll see you there." Kello broke the connection before Garvey had time to argue, and left the booth.

In the distance he could hear the noise of gathering crowds as the explosion brought people from the surrounding buildings to the scene, and he hoped fervently that the damage would be sufficient to cover the fact that there had been no one in the apartment—at least for the time being.

He took a ground cab to the Security Squad building, and arrived to find that Garvey had beaten him to it. The officer on the main desk passed him straight through, and there was no one on duty at the vestibule to Garvey's office. As he entered Garvey was on the phone, and the Section Leader's eyes flicked towards him.

"That's right, Naung Soon," he heard Garvey say, and he took the hint offered to stay silent.

Garvey ended his call and sat back in his chair, his dark eyes looking Kello over with something akin to despair.

"I warned you," he said.

Kello sat down and smiled thinly. "I know, but it was already too late when you did that." He lit the cigarette that Garvey offered him. "I don't suppose you can guess who did this?"

Garvey sneered. "Don't be stupid. I warned you to keep clear of Krishnan and his friends."

"Oh? You think it was Krishnan?"

"After your smart cracks this morning—yes. And Naung Soon agrees with me. He told me earlier today that Krishnan was in Nairobi, said he had definite information that confirmed your visit to see him—you know, the one that didn't happen."

Kello nodded. "I know. I saw Krishnan this afternoon."

"Oh, no. Don't start that again," pleaded Garvey. "I've had enough for one day."

"It's true, I can prove it," Kello retorted.

"Go ahead. No one's stopping you."

"Call Mrs. Martin's apartment. Tell her I'm with you—"

"That won't do any good." Garvey's voice was sombre as he shook his head slowly.

Kello felt panic slide through him as he asked, "Why not?"

"Mrs. Martin's flat was destroyed by an explosion at the same time as yours. I got the call when I arrived here a few minutes ago."

Kello sat stunned and unable to take in what Garvey had said. It wasn't possible! But why not? If they'd trailed him there from his flat as he had anticipated this afternoon—

"How many bodies did you find?" he demanded.

"I don't know. It'll take hours to sort out the mess."

So Krishnan had met his end with the situation unresolved. At least, thought Kello, he'd be dead before he knew it—dead before he realised that he'd failed. The net was closing rapidly and Kello wondered hysterically what he could do.

"What about Naung Soon?" he asked. "Did you do as I said?"

Garvey nodded.

"Can you get him along to this office? Now? Tonight?"

"I suppose so. But why should I? Kello, why don't you give up? You've caused more trouble than enough so far, and I've more than a suspicion that we can blame you for Mrs. Martin's death—if she is dead."

In desperation Kello pleaded, "Let me do this one thing, Garvey. Let me play a hunch about this. I know more about what's going on than you do, believe me, and I know just how dangerous this whole thing is. But I know the answer, and I can prove it one way or another if you'll help me."

"Give me one good reason why I should?"

"Because Rabindranath Krishnan was in Mrs. Martin's apartment when it was blown up."

Garvey's lower jaw dropped in stunned amazement, and it was seconds before he could frame the obvious question.

"How do you know?"

"Because it was there that I met him this afternoon after Mrs. Martin had called me. Whoever caused those explosions followed me to her flat and realised what I'd gone there for. They also knew that Krishnan had told the true story to me and that I had to be put out of the way before I could pass it on—they failed by inches in my case, but they got Krishnan."

"And Mrs. Martin," added Garvey distantly.

Yes, thought Kello, death to two—perhaps three—people because of my stupidity. And he realised with a shock that he cared more than he should have done about the death of Mrs. Philo Martin. And he'd only met her twice.

"All right, Kello," said Garvey breaking the flood of his thoughts. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get Naung Soon over here. Tell him it's to do with my death. He'll believe that all right. Then I want you to lay on two doctors who are above reproach—"

"What?"

Kello waved him to silence. "Just listen. I don't care who you get as long as they're known to you personally and have no connection whatever with the Centaurus Expedition. Time their arrival for ten minutes after Naung Soon gets here—and make sure they stick to it." Kello snapped his fingers. "Make one of them the local chairman of the Medical Association—Doctor Keever—he'll be acceptable."

Garvey had regained his grim air of intolerance. "What are you trying to do, Kello? Run my office?"

"I believe that Naung Soon is sybiote possessed."

Garvey's jaw dropped for the second time in as many minutes, and his very attitude suggested that he wouldn't be

surprised if Kello turned out to be an oriental magician at any second. He stuttered wordlessly for a minute before gasping, "You're crazy!"

"I don't think so." Kello leaned forward in his seat. "It can't do any harm, Garvey. If Naung Soon is in the clear then he can't possibly object, and the only thing to happen will be that my career is in the ash can for good. If I'm right, though—"

Garvey said nothing.

"It's the 'if' that could sink you," said Kello softly.

"You know something," Garvey began, and then hesitated again for several long seconds, then he said, "All right, I'll play."

## Chapter Eight

Kello felt relief wash through him. Perhaps, after all, the death of Krishnan would not have been in vain. The whole facade of Naung Soon could be broken by a few minutes quiet, methodical examination. The myth would be exploded and officialdom could do whatever was necessary to kill the menace of the symbiotes.

Garvey arranged for him to be accommodated in the next office with an open visiphone connection so that he could hear all that went on. The one thing that Kello kept impressing on Garvey was that Naung Soon must not know he was still alive. Garvey went through the motions with grim-faced dubiousity, as if he'd call the whole thing off at any moment.

He called Naung Soon and arranged for him to come to the Squad H.Q. at twenty-one thirty. He called Doctors Keever and Maude and impressed on them that they must be there at twenty-one forty. The officer at the front desk was instructed to hold the doctors should Naung Soon arrive later than the half hour, so that there was a clear ten minutes break in which to put the trap in motion.

By twenty-one fifteen everything was set, and at the half hour the desk officer announced Naung Soon's arrival. Garvey grimaced as he cut the connection.

"One thing about Naung Soon," he said, "he's always on time. You'd better head for your cubbyhole, Kello, and if you've made a monkey out of me—" He left the threat unfinished.



Kello sat in the office for two long minutes chewing his nails before he heard Garvey's voice echo from the sound only visi connection.

"Good of you to come at this late hour, Naung Soon."

"Only too pleased if I can help." Even over the phone the doctor's voice was cold and lifeless, and Kello felt a shiver of anticipation run through him. "What can I do to assist you?"

"It's in connection with the death of Paul Kello," said Garvey deliberately. "Before he died he wrote a statement which was delivered here about an hour ago." The crackle of a sheet of paper echoed softly on the phone.

"Indeed."

"To the effect that you were symbiote infected, Doctor Naung Soon."

Kello could feel the atmosphere building up even though it was by remote contact.

"That is a remarkable statement for such a person to make, Garvey. It is ridiculous of course."

"He claimed to have spoken with Krishnan," went on Garvey inexorably. "and his personal opinion was that Krishnan was a perfectly normal human being who had been subjected to a great physical and mental strain for a long time, and was now at breaking point."

Kello smiled to himself as Garvey went through the rehearsed routine, but he had to pull himself up sharply as the smile began to degenerate into a slightly hysterical giggle. The strain was beginning to tell.

"The solution is simple," said Naung Soon. "Find Krishnan."

"We did." Garvey replied. "Four hours ago."

The long silence that followed was broken by a single word from Naung Soon.

"And?"

"Perhaps," said Garvey carefully, "you are wondering why I didn't send for you as we arranged?"

"Indeed I am. You have acted most incorrectly."

"I'll tell you. Kello sowed the seed of suspicion in my mind this morning, and I decided I should follow it up—just in case, you understand. I had Krishnan examined by two of our most notable local physicians. Do I need to tell you, Naung Soon, that there was absolutely no evidence of symbiote possession?"

Kello realised that he was sweating from head to foot. His whole body was tense with expectation, taut with a strain that

was all but intolerable as he waited for the conversation to continue.

"I'm quite at a loss to understand it," said Naung Soon carefully. "There must obviously have been some carelessness in their examination. I think I explained some time ago that it is very difficult to detect evidence of symbiote possession, Garvey. I should be glad of the opportunity of confirming those findings."

"I've got a better idea," said Garvey coldly. "We'll examine you first."

The silence was tomb like in Kello's office. It seemed to radiate over the wires connecting the visiphone, and he could imagine Naung Soon's alien mind weighing the situation, studying the fact of Garvey's obduracy.

"Are you mad?"

"Surely you can have no objection? It can do no harm, Doctor. As a matter of fact, I have arranged for two doctors to be in attendance in just a few minutes. They should be on their way up at the moment."

"I can see that you have come into the possession of some information that you are keeping secret from me," said Naung Soon. "That being the case—"

"Don't be a fool, Naung Soon," Garvey said sharply.

"On the contrary, I'm being a little smarter than you think."

The scrape on a chair was followed by Garvey's voice tense and apprehensive. "What the devil. Put down that hypo—"

"I may not be able to kill you in safety, but I can make you one of us. Oh, don't be alarmed—a few hours unconsciousness will be followed by a high fever, but you will recover in a week, and you will be quite your old self in ten days or so—"

Kello didn't wait to hear any more. He left the room at a run and dashed down the few yards of corridor that separated the two offices. As he ran, Krishnan's words flashed through his mind, "A sharp blow on the base of the skull to the left of the spinal cord—"

He threw open the door and took one split second to catch the scene as Naung Soon, a gun in one hand and air hypo in the other, stood before a grim faced Garvey.

Kello launched himself across the few yards towards Naung Soon just as the man turned towards him. He felt the flame and heard the noise as the gun fired—but there was no pain. His right hand raised high and then clubbed down, seeking out

the vital point at the back of Naung Soon's left ear. He felt his fist strike home, he heard the death scream which bubbled forth to be cut off in mid cry, and then he was aware of Naung Soon crumbling to the floor in an untidy, lifeless heap.

He was suddenly conscious of a light stinging on the back of his left hand, and he raised it to examine a round, red weal that had sprung from nowhere. In sudden horror his eyes sought out the air hypo as it lay on the floor clenched in the lifeless hand of Naung Soon.

It was fully discharged.

"Oh, God—" He gazed frantically at Garvey who still stood frozen in the same position, and he lifted the shaking hand, clawlike, towards the Section Leader. "Garvey, I—" He saw his own horror mirrored in Garvey's eyes for a brief second, before he crumpled unconscious to the floor.

Even in waking he knew the horror was still with him. There was no blessed oblivion to deaden his mind against the knowledge that the involuntary discharge of the hypo had met his own flesh. Even in dying Naung Soon had struck a fatal blow. As he opened his eyes Garvey's familiar face swam into view, smiled, and was replaced by another that he recognised as belonging to Kever, the local head of the Medical Association.

"Hallo, Kever. What's the verdict?"

Kever grinned. "A bit of a shock, but you'll be all right."

"Who are you kidding? That blasted hypo—"

Kever sighed. "For a doctor you're remarkably thick headed, Kello," he chided. "You should know that it takes time for anything like that to take effect. We got it in time. You'll be kept under observation for a week or two, but I don't think you have much to worry about."

Kello never knew that relief felt like that. He could appreciate the feelings of those patients from whom he had lifted a virtual death sentence by his skill. This was some small payment for all he had gone through.

Garvey's face came into view as he turned his head.

"What about Naung Soon, Garvey?"

"You were right. It didn't need much of an examination to prove it."

"And the others?"

"They'll be rounded up quietly—they don't know what the score is yet, so there shouldn't be any trouble." His face clouded. "One thing, Kello. The Centaurus Expedition is

dead. The government issued orders ten minutes ago for the immediate destruction of the *First Discoverer* by long range missiles. It's the only sure way out of this mess. There'll be the very devil of a row, but—" he shrugged and said no more.

The elation that Kello had felt slid away. Man's first faltering step into Galactic space had faded and died—and he was responsible—no that was stupid. Yet he felt something of the failure that so many people must be feeling at this moment and would be feeling in the months ahead. The knowledge that he'd helped destroy the symbiotes didn't really help.

"By the way, there's someone to see you," said Garvey, interrupting his train of thought.

"Me?" Kello roused himself slightly from his depression. "For heavens sake, who?"

Garvey moved aside, and his place was taken by the pale, smiling face of Mrs. Philo Martin.

Kello gazed at her in sheer, unadulterated surprise. "But—" He was lost for words. "But you—you were—"

"No she wasn't," said Garvey. "She'd left the flat two minutes before."

"And Krishnan?" asked Kello.

The smile faded from Mrs. Martin's face as she shook her head sadly.

Pleasure and pain were strangely mixed in Kello's mind. More pleasure than he should have felt over the fact that a woman he had met only twice should be safe and well. But Krishnan—!

There was final thought that brought him some slight consolation. Krishnan had won—in the end.

—Lan Wright



*Nelson Sherwood has had several stories in our pages—"Galactic Galapagos" in No. 6 and "The Sun Creator" in No. 7—and this month produces yet another different alien-world type of plot, based on Man's will to do good rather than the evil of aggression. Unfortunately, the dividing line is extremely narrow.*

# THE DEDICATED ONES

by NELSON SHERWOOD

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## Chapter One

They were the best that Earth could offer.

They swung confidently down the landing ramp, leaving behind them without a backward glance the miniature, self-enclosed world of the spaceship that had brought them fifty light years from home. For this moment they had been screened, trained, tested, indoctrinated, selected.

His four hooves square on the ground, Colonel Bill Ramsden watched them disembark upon his continent of this new world. "They have a tough job in front of them," he said to Major Wishart. "Even if you can't convince me." Everything for which they lived and breathed lay before them on the strange, new and challenging world of Lancia III and there could be no room in their minds for weakening thoughts of anything or anyone they had left on Earth.

Scrubbed, polished, eager, mentally and physically perfect specimens of young manhood and womanhood, they strode from the landing area. They were dedicated—yet they were not fanatics. Humour bubbled in them. A zest for the good things of life possessed them in nearly as strong measure as their desire to spread their glad tidings. They had a job to do and to them that job was the single most important task in the whole Galaxy. Failure was a word that they had cut from their dictionaries.

They were the best that Earth could offer—in the opinion of those who sent them.

Watching them striding purposefully over the blackened landing area where already thin green shoots were probing upward again in the heavy soil, Colonel Ramsden smiled. For only a moment he allowed envy to cloud his mind. For only a fleeting millisecond did he wish that he was like that again, that the four-legged, whipcord lean body and scarred and lined face that was his could be exchanged for one of those supreme examples of *Homo sapiens*.

Then he remembered how he had become as he was—and he knew he could not forfeit one of those personal memories. Save, perhaps, the sore that persisted when he thought of Hal Lindsay . . .

The leading figure, older and more experienced than the rest, dumped a heavy duffel bag and walked with that bouncing tread up to Colonel Ramsden.

“How are you, Colonel? I’m Ferguson, team captain.”

“Hi, Mister Ferguson. Glad to meet you.”

“We’re a strong team, colonel, a strong team. All of us volunteers, and all specially selected for Lancia III.”

“I suppose that was on the strength of the report?”

“Why, yes.” Ferguson was never a man to appear at a loss. He laughed, showing strong white teeth that would not have shamed Nutcracker Man. “We’re all most anxious to get to grips with the problems here.”

All about them now the men and women were setting down their gear, relaxed, joking, not smoking, awaiting assignments to quarters. Ramsden knew the breed. If there were no quarters assigned, then they’d turn to and run up bivouacs in the time it would take an Army sergeant to detail his fatigue parties.

"The inhabitants of Lancia III have been apprised of your arrival, Mister Ferguson. If your people care to carry on through the forest that way for a mile or so they will find huted accommodation."

"Why, that is very good of them." Ferguson swung round. "The quicker Earth begins to show tangible evidence, here on this primitive planet, of her right to be the leader of our Solar Federation, the better. We are here to do a job, and we mean to carry it out. These people are in need of our help and advice, of our medicines and surgery and all the civilising influences we can bring. Lindsay's report was very precise on those points. Malnutrition, sickness, overcrowding—why, colonel, this planet is in one devil of a mess."

"I daresay you're right, Mister Ferguson. Personally I've seen no evidence of it. Quite the contrary, I assure you."

Ferguson was astonished. He turned back to face Ramsden after his initial movement to issue orders. "You mean you've never penetrated the slum areas? You didn't see what Lindsay reported?"

"No."

"That seems incredible. However—"

"Perhaps you could see your people settled and then we could discuss this over a meal. If you're not hungry, I am. I've been waiting for the ship all morning. And I have to see the captain—Pitroffski, isn't it?—about stores we need here."

"Yes, colonel. Yes, perhaps that would be best."

Ferguson, however hard and keen and near-perfect he might be, had not been able to refrain from a questioning glance at Ramsden's body. Ramsden himself had long ago recovered from the accident landing on Lancia III that had turned Charlie Hulot into a beachcomber and himself into—well, there was only one word for it.

"Major Wishart, perhaps you'd care to escort Mister Ferguson . . . ?"

"Certainly, colonel." As they walked off Ramsden caught the one word 'Centaur' quite clearly. He smiled. He could smile, now, because it was no longer important. Old Charlie Hulot had been skipper of the ship that had brought Ramsden to Lancia III. After the crash the native people—the Laridu—had found the bits and pieces. In the smash-up an animal had also been injured, a four-hoofed animal not unlike a



terrestrial horse. The Laridu had done the only thing open to them under the circumstances, with Ramsden dying with his lower body gone and the animal dying—they'd grafted them together with their own brand of medical wizardry and a forced compatibility of blood and tissue. So, now, when he went for a morning stroll it was a morning canter.

He owed the Laridu a great deal. His life and an understanding that that life was worth having, even with a body that galloped on four hooves. And now Ferguson expected him to give a full report on the evil side of the Laridu.

And that, reasoned Ramsden without rancour, is the first problem efficient Fergy has run up against. He was expecting the colonel to hand out information on a platter, had probably been briefed that way, and now that information was not only not forthcoming, it was stated not to exist.

If only Hal Lindsay hadn't been such a good fellow . . .

Ramsden watched the team move off, making every movement easy and natural. As Ferguson had said, a strong team. Hal Lindsay had a lot to answer for. Ramsden glanced up at the sun—at the alien sun of Lancion—figured it was about twelve-thirty local time, and sauntered off to see Pitroffski about stores—and a long, cool Earth type drink.

Pitroffski was running to fat, running to baldness, and running from four alimony-chasing wives. Every second sentence contained a throaty, whisky laugh. A good sort among men. He welcomed Ramsden with a drink.

"Well, Colonel. You've a fine team on this godforsaken planet." Pitroffski was used to Ramsden's Centaur body.

"Ferguson struck me as a keen type. The sort to stand no nonsense with the natives."

"And with colonels who call the potential citizens of the Solar Federation natives. Inhabitants, yes. Citizens, at a pinch. But natives—watch your dossier at HQ, colonel, is all I say."

"Like that, is he?"

"Don't get me wrong, colonel. A fine type. Dedicated. Like Hal Lindsay was. No news of him, I suppose?"

"No."

Pitroffski sipped his drink and changed the subject.

"Earth is just the same, colonel. You may have been off planet for six years; you wouldn't know you'd left if you

returned to Earth with me." He glanced up. "Have you put in for a transfer yet? You said—"

"I changed my mind." Ramsden's words were harsh.

"Well, from all I hear you've a man-size job on your hands here. Those slums—fantastic! The ruling class here seem to have less heart than the vilest landlord and vilest baron we ever knew. Can't understand why the locals don't have a nice quick bloody revolution. It's in the pattern."

"Perhaps they like it the way it is. We say that slums and disease and a monstrous child death rate and all the other symptoms of a backward culture riddled by class distinctions are bad. Perhaps these folk don't think so."

"If they didn't, it would have shown up in the analysis. HQ go through the field reports with a bank of cybers that'd sink the Moon. They decided that a team should be sent here to clean the place up, get rid of disease and ignorance and malnutrition—and superstition, too, I shouldn't wonder."

"That would be classified."

"Quite right. Religion is a function of any normal man, or humanoid. So unless you know exactly what you're doing, don't monkey with it." Pitroffski drank again, laid a forefinger along his nose, and winked. "But there is a high percentage of missionaries among the team I brought over. All denominations, apparently. At least, not all. A sizable slice of beliefs, though. That they work so well together is—"

"Is a testimony to the sanity of mankind faced with a world government and an expanding galactic federation."

"Quite so. Quite so. Anyway, Lacion III is regarded as a high priority job for cleaning up. The team here is going to do the job in nothing flat. They told me."

Ramsden laughed, infected by Pitroffski's cheerful irresponsibility. Now, if only Hal Lindsay had had the saving grace of knowing how to climb down, Ramsden might not be standing in the captain's cabin of a spaceship that had brought a strong team of dedicated culture spreaders all the way from Earth. But, even so, no man could condemn Hal . . .

The intercom chimed and Pitroffski answered. "Captain, an outside call for Colonel Ramsden, from Lieutenant Komich. Sounds urgent."

"Put her through," Pitroffski said at once, and, with a wave of his hand to the speaker and mike, rose to leave his own cabin, taking his glass.

"Thank you, Captain," Ramsden said. "Please stay. I don't anticipate anything restricted."

As Pitroffski resumed his seat, Ramsden answered the call. Lieutenant Komich's chiming tenor voice—she was a big girl and filled her uniform admirably—spoke in the cabin.

"Colonel? Sergeant Steuben reports that old Charlie is causing trouble. He went raving into the team's new hut area on his elephant. Knocked a few huts flat. No one hurt, thank goodness. But I thought you'd—"

"Quite right, Lieutenant. I'll be right across."

When Komich had rung off, Pitroffski started chuckling.

"That Charlie! I'm stood more drinks on the strength of his story—y'know, I'd almost be sorry if he changed his mind and decided to ship out."

"I sometimes wish he would; and then, again I know it wouldn't make any difference. Since his ship cracked up here he's gone so hog-wild native—and I mean native—that civilisation is a dirty word to him."

"You think he's set his elephant onto the team in a pathetic effort to stop them?"

"Something like that." Ramsden picked up his cap. "I'd better get along. Thanks for the drink."

"Remember me to Charlie," were Pitroffski's last words.

## Chapter Two

On the way to the huts, hurrying along a narrow trail through the forest, Ramsden ran straight into another instance of the un-human thought processes and standards of ethics of the inhabitants of this continent on Lancion III. What the other continents might be like and what problems they might hold was not his province. The situation was ticklish enough on this continent and in this small area of it; a great deal of quick-thinking and double-dealing lay before him if he wasn't to land up quite probably being shipped back to Earth to face a bookful of charges.

The track of old Charlie's elephant cut across the trail, a swathe of splintered trees and trampled vegetation where the animal—not a terrestrial elephant, of course, but near enough in morphology to tag the name—had blundered past. One bushy-topped tree had fallen, jack-knifing another next to it and the top of this tree had sunk almost straight downwards.

It was prevented from tipping over by the first trunk, and the top, perhaps as wide round as a dinner table, sat on the ground firm and level. Pinned beneath one branch was a Laridu.

Ramsden hurried forward. The Laridu was still alive and his quick, soft intelligent eyes regarded the terrestrial with that general warmth of feeling that Ramsden had come to expect from these people. Even when they were not pinned beneath a tree trunk. He reached rough hands towards the branch.

"Colonel!" The alien's voice was shocked, and yet gently understanding. "No—please do not dislodge the tree."

Looking again at the alien, Ramsden recognised by the tip-tilted and off-centre nose, that he was Lairkyn, some magistrate of the Laridu of importance although of an unspecified function.

"Why not, for pete's sake!" Ramsden again grasped the tree. "Are you in pain, Lairkyn?" Hold on, and I'll soon—"

"I am pleased and honoured that you recognise me, colonel. But again, I beg you, do not dislodge the nest—"

"Nest?"

"If I were to make the slightest movement, the nest would be tilted, the eggs would roll out—and death would have scored another victory over life."

Ramsden looked with clearer eyes into the bushy tree. He saw the nest. An octagonal structure of leaves and twigs and fur, it contained seven round eggs, mottled white and purple, and a small and cherubic animal without wings but possessing formidable claws, who chattered gaily to itself on the edge of the nest.

Lairkyn said: "I could quite easily remove the tree and free myself. If I did, the eggs would spill."

"But—" Ramsden wanted to laugh and swear. "You can't stay here until the eggs hatch—"

"Oh, yes. In about four hours, I judge."

Ramsden felt exasperated. "I'll hold the nest steady while you crawl out. You can't lie there for four hours!"

"Why not?"

"Why not? Well, well—" Ramsden shrank from saying that to him the act was out of proportion. Take every precaution against disturbing the eggs, yes; but to lie patiently for four hours beneath a tree—that was taking love of animals a little higher than he cared to go.

"You think they'll hatch in four hours. Why can't I simply hold the nest—"

"The mother will be frightened off by you. She will not return. The infants will then die. That we cannot allow."

Ramsden's command of Laridu was quite adequate in normal conversation but at this juncture he began to wonder if he had wildly missed the point. Lairkyn just lay there, not moving. Ramsden sighed and stood up. "All right, Lairkyn. I'll be back along here in four hours if I can. Your attitude not only intrigues me, it makes me feel kind of lacking—"

"Please, colonel! Do not disparage yourself. It is not good for you Earthpeople to fall in your own estimation."

Ramsden cantered off along the trail, trying to decide if he could ever lie quietly under a tree, with a knotty branch digging into his stomach, so as not to disturb seven eggs in a nest. Somehow, it didn't jell with the idea of a space-conquering Earthman. The machine and nuclear age and the preservation of an unimportant little animal's eggs somehow did not go hand in hand.

A thought filtered through that perhaps they ought.

At the clearing where the huts had been put up by Lairkyn's people for the newly arrived team, Ramsden found order had been restored. Three huts had been squashed, no one hurt, and the culture-spreaders from Earth were cheerfully rebuilding. Ferguson walked up, smiling.

"Ah, colonel. Perhaps we can talk over that meal—?"

"Surely, Ferguson. I'm sorry about this. Captain of a spaceship which crashed here decided to turn native"—Ramsden used the word deliberately—"found himself a pet elephant and now beachcombs so thoroughly that he'll never return to Earth. I'll try to arrange a meeting. He's been into the slums—"

"This would be Captain Charles Dampier Hulot, would it not? The last man to see Lindsay."

"That's right."

"I'd appreciate an interview if you could arrange it."

Out of some obscure feeling of guilt, Ramsden took Ferguson back to his residency by a route that avoided Lairkyn lying patiently under a tree. Even the anticipation of figuring how Ferguson would react could not overcome his reluctance. Lieutenant Komich, her bosom only just contained by a service tunic, was waiting with the day's status reports.

He went through them fast ; the Terran Solar Army had little need of its weapons and military organisation on Lancia III. The Laridu just accepted them and went about their own business. A colonel, two lieutenants, three sergeants and fifty men were an overpowering military establishment for this section of the continent. They went into lunch.

Major Wishart, of course, was not under his jurisdiction.

Ramsden was sharp set. The meal was good. Over a cigar, the first of his rationed three a day, he tried to put Ferguson into the relaxed frame of mind that was natural to the man and yet which had, for some damnably odd reason, not been apparent since the landing. The culture-spreaders, missionaries, the dedicated ones, call them what you will, were famous throughout the Earthly-dominated portion of the galaxy for their humanity, their tolerance their efficiency and their complete dedication to the task of helping other more lowly cultures along the rungs of the cultural ladder.

"We know that there are signs of other alien cultures spreading from different loci, doing exactly what we are doing. We try to spread the good tidings of Earth ; they spread their own news of their own civilisation. It's a race, colonel, and Lancia III is just one area of conflict."

"I know." Ramsden fingered his scarred face. "I've met these other aliens. At least the Laridu look vaguely humanoid—two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two arms and legs. But those others—God created some weirdies out in the Galaxy."

He could talk like that ; he, the man with a horse's body. There were many advantages being a Centaur, of course, many advantages.

Ferguson had evidently had the story from Wishart and that little man had not put in an appearance for lunch ; he had more work doing his routine seal-checking. Ramsden decided that if he was going to be strung up by the government, he ought to try to break his fall a trifle.

"Ah, Mister Ferguson," he began, clicking his hooves as he rose from the Laridu-designed couch that supported him at meals. "I feel I ought to put in a report to counter your report that I was unco-operative—"

"Colonel !" Ferguson protested at once. "I understand from Major Wishart, who was Lindsay's successor, that he slapped seals on the Laridu city. I was surprised you had seen no evidence—"

"I saw no evidence because I chose not to go into the city. I could have countermanded the Major's orders had I wished."

At that precise instant Major Wishart entered. He was a tight, dapper, nervous little man with a perpetually sweat-shining forehead. "That would not, however, have been a wise move, colonel, would it?" he said, walking forward.

"Well, now." Ramsden was feeling reckless. "If Hal Lindsay had listened to me, instead of pushing out that report so fast we might have saved Ferguson and his team a long journey—for nothing!"

"For nothing!" Ferguson sat up straight. "Are you aware what you are saying?"

"Of course. I think you're wasting your time here."

"Or could it be," put in Wishart waspishly, "that you are enamoured of the Laridu because they patched you up?"

Ramsden forgot himself. He always tried to prevent this but he just couldn't. He swished his tail angrily. And, of course, his specially cut uniform pants burst asunder.

"Of course not!" he roared at Wishart and, by implication taking in Ferguson. "The Laridu are a fine people." He click-clacked about. "Now I'll go and change—"

"Just a moment." Ferguson's face had hardened and the set of his jaw—probably a self-conscious mannerism—told anyone who cared to watch that what he was going to say was important.

"We have a holy trust," he said. "We must spread the knowledge that Earth has gained through her bloody history of the values of tolerance and methods of understanding we have developed over the centuries. If a team of our calibre—I speak, you understand, of my comrades, not of myself—had landed on Earth when civilisation was beginning along the Tigris and Euphrates and in Egypt and China, perhaps we'd have developed into decent-thinking people much earlier than we did. It is our job to help other races to avoid our mistakes. And Lancion III is a prime example of what we are out to rectify." There was absolute conviction and certainty in Ferguson; he glowed with purpose. Major Wishart was nodding his head in agreement like a puppet.

Komich was intent on Ferguson. "Yet Earth first went out to the stars with a sword in hand." Her rounded chin was propped on a hand that was the most feminine part of her. Ramsden had always admired her hands. The thought of a sword in that delicate fist was incongruous—until you under-



stood that the most childish of hands could press the red button to release a lithium bomb.

"We have profited by all our errors." Ferguson sat back, not looking at Ramsden. "We are now in a state of grace. We have this trust imposed on us to aid and help those other races less fortunate, or behind us in the evolutionary ladder."

Major Wishart said oilily: "If Komich will call the flier, we can go across to the city. I'll release the seals." He cocked an eye at Ferguson. "That is, as my superior officer, I assume you authorise that?"

"Of course—we have to go in, don't we?"

Ramsden deliberately stamped a rear hoof. It was a mark of contempt; but they wouldn't know that. This idea of split leadership had always annoyed him; Wishart should have been subject to his own orders. That way, perhaps, with Hal Lindsay also obeying orders, the present fouled-up mess could have been avoided. It was absolutely useless to talk to Ferguson and try to persuade him to call this off; it was unthinkable. Ramsden as the day wore on felt more and more uneasy and uncomfortable. He could see only an ignominious cashiering for himself. If he was right, that was . . .

He could be wrong.

"The Laridu call their city Xenos. Quite a place. If you'll give me five minutes to change I'll take you along."

"Right." Ferguson nodded. "I'll call my deputy, young Koslov, if I may?"

"Sure. The flier seats eight, plus my own special harness."

A distant trumpeting roar resounded in the hot air. Everyone looked up. The floor trembled slightly.

Komich, her face alight with quick sympathy, said: "That's old Charlie!"

They all ran out onto the verandah. Ramsden's hooves clattered on the porch. Across the clearing where the fresh shoots struggled with the burned earth, the sound of crashing trees and shrill, angry trumpeting, drew their attention.

Charlie rode out on his elephant. He was not mad. He had simply taken the easiest way out when his ship cracked up and he had seen what the Laridu had had to do to Ramsden to save his life. He'd found himself his elephant, lived off the forest and the friendly offerings of the Laridu, and gone native, with a distinctive Earthly tang to it. He normally never ventured here and left the residency strictly alone.

He was the classical case of the man who, injured by the modern miracles of science, had completely rejected science.

Ramsden knew that old Charlie would do anything in his power, feeble though that might be, to retain the present conditions on Lancion III. He didn't want Ferguson and his team.

The elephant was a big, ugly brute, with four tusks that swung low and wide, now, as it raced across the clearing.

Men in the spaceship were clambering out for a look and other men were fleeing, climbing the ladder. In the confusion someone operated the ladder and ramp retractor and they began to close inwards. The elephant charged past. Charlie wasn't after them.

Major Wishart, who was trembling and sweating more than ever now, said sharply: "He's after us! He's never liked me." He turned to run into the residency.

Ramsden said: "Get the flier, Komich! Fast!"

She went with quick efficiency.

"If that elephant put a pad on you, or speared you with a tusk . . ." Ferguson was detachedly composed about it all.

Wishart had vanished. Komich brought the flier in from the hangar at the side of the residency and the men jumped aboard. Komich ran out the ramp for Ramsden, and he clattered up it and into his harness in the cabin. At times, four feet were more of a handicap than two.

Flat-keeled and egg-streamlined above, the flier was lifted by a miniature anti-grav unit and powered by two turbo and two ram jets. Three tail fins rose between the four tubes. Up front the bubble-canopied cabin was spacious enough to seat eight in comfort, plus Ramsden's special centaur-harness. On full ram power the flier could break Mach four.

"Hurry it up, there!" shouted Komich. Ramsden looked down towards the ground. A young, crew-cut, fresh-faced youngster was sprinting for the flier. On his heels the sweep of elephant tusks spurred him on.

"Koslov!" Ferguson was rapidly losing his air of impartial judgment and impeccable poise. "Run, man, run!"

Ramsden looked quickly up towards the elephant's back. There, perched like a wizened and gnomish mahout, Old Charlie was laughing openly, waving his thin arms and generally having a high old time. Ramsden relaxed. "There's no danger," he told Ferguson. "Old Charlie won't hurt your man."

"Won't hurt him!" Ferguson's indignant remark was lost in the crash as Koslov hit the ramp and bundled himself into the cabin. He was shouting about taking off, at once.

## Chapter Three

Komich hit the cabin seal studs and the takeoff buttons. The flier curved up and Komich toolled it along at a modest five hundred miles an hour, looping up over the clearing and forest, leaving the spaceship to the rear, taking it in a long parabolic curve to come arching down to idle along ten feet above the ground. Ferguson and his deputy, Koslov, had recovered from their fright as Ramsden again explained that old Charlie meant no harm.

He finished, meaningfully: "He feels more strongly than do I that you are not wanted on this planet. Maybe he has better reasons for trying to evict you in his own futile way—"

"May I remind you that you are an Earthman, colonel, despite your appearance? These Laridu are decadent, repulsive in their habits, desperately in need of our help . . ."

"There's the city gate, Ferguson, directly ahead of you. You'll find Major Wishart's seals still intact. Only the Laridu themselves go in and out. To Terrestrials, it is taboo."

"Not taboo, colonel," Koslov cut in. "Merely out of bounds. Until we arrived to clean the place up."

The Laridu could build. Their city was entirely surrounded by trees and more vegetation grew in and among the houses. "They use trees *as* houses!" Koslov exclaimed.

"Yes. Their architecture consists in taking established forms and by a little judicious tailoring and pressuring, bending those forms to their own purpose. That giant central sequoia-like tree is still alive, still thriving and growing—yet the entire trunk is honeycombed with rooms and passages. They even have lifts running on hydrodynamic power. They never cut timber if they can use it in its living form."

"I understand they are experts with ceramics."

"One of their largest industries. They have really extensive factories manufacturing all kinds of artifacts from base materials, hardly ever from organic—"

"Yes. The factories." Ferguson spoke heavily.

"If you wish to see them you need only walk through—"

"Are you coming, colonel?" Koslov, polished and trim, one of the fabulous dedicated ones, had resumed his poise after the race from Charlie's elephant and was now in the grip of intense excitement. What he had travelled fifty light years to see lay just ahead.

"No."

Ferguson was not a man to indulge in argument or acrimony unnecessarily. Yet he could not forbear to say: "Why do you shut your eyes to the shortcomings of these people, colonel? All you say is in their favour. You never tire of praising them. Yet we know they oppress countless numbers of unfortunates, they sweat labour, they permit diseases and hunger."

Komich was holding herself in with an effort. Koslov, who after one look at her had lost interest, now said: "I expect that the colonel, through obvious reasons, has developed a natural affinity with these people. I don't know how that applies to the rest of the Army here. But I can understand that a man cannot believe that he is living amongst a race of monsters and sleep easily. He isn't conditioned against those sort of pressures. We, on the other hand, are—"

Komich said with suppressed fury: "Thank you for your analysis of us, Koslov. However, we believe that the Laridu are a fine people because we have seen only good in them. The slums and factories and mills—"

Ferguson interrupted. The best that Earth could offer seldom argued or wrangled. He said: "I feel we are at cross purposes here. The colonel does not wish his beliefs about the Laridu shattered by facts. We shall go in alone, Koslov."

Komich brought the flier delicately to earth and Ferguson and his deputy alighted. They strode purposefully towards the city. Watching them go, Ramsden sighed.

"Patsy," he said to Komich. "Suppose we did go in and see all the muck Hal said was there? Just suppose . . ."

"The Laridu are a fine people, colonel. We know that. If they do have this foul cultural set-up in their cities, I, for one, don't understand it."

"Ostriches. That's all we are, ostriches. Take the flier back along the trail, Patsy, until you see where Charlie's elephant crossed it. Lairkyn is lying there with a tree trunk crushing him, refusing to move because he might disturb a nest of eggs. Oh, hell—what a conundrum."

Lairkyn was still lying where Ramsden had left him. He opened his eyes at the sound of footsteps. His alien face was bloodless, and lines that could only denote pain grooved his flat and chubby face. All the jollity that normally resided in the face of a Laridu had gone.

Komich said sharply : " My God, colonel ! You left him like that !" She knelt sharply and snapped the seal from her water bottle. Lairkyn drank gratefully. He tried to speak.

" Hold it, Lairkyn." Komich laid hold of the branch and was about to tear it away from Lairkyn's trapped body.

" No, Patsy !" Ramsden caught her arm. " No, Lairkyn insisted that he should lie there till the eggs had hatched."

" You can't leave a man to suffer, colonel. It's not human. Let's get this damn trunk off him and care for him—"

Lairkyn shook his head weakly. " In just a minute, Patsy," Ramsden said, wondering why he bothered. " In just a minute." He looked into the nest, cautiously.

The spritely little animal was busily tapping the eggs with one claw. The sound was brittle. Then a shell cracked. From the star-shaped opened hole a round, brown, bright-eyed little face peered. Komich, looking over Ramsden's shoulder, cooed in sudden delight.

" Why—he's cute."

The baby struggled. The mother chipped away at the shell. Presently the baby emerged, wagging its tail and claws. The mother went around the other six eggs, starting the hatching process. In almost no time at all seven little cherubic animals lay, squalling, in the nest.

Lairkyn said, weakly : " If you would release me now, colonel. I'm afraid I'm a little stiff in the joints."

Ramsden lifted the tree branch, carefully, and Komich helped the alien out. He lay for a moment, blinking his eyes and licking his lips. Then, with a puff of effort, he stood up.

" I shall be quite recovered by the time I've walked back home. Your concern for me makes me grateful to you. I am sorry I was forced to refuse your first offer of help ; but," —Lairkyn gestured helplessly. " You do understand that even though I had to cause you and the lieutenant here pain in denying to you your right to help me, it was necessary."

" That's all right, Lairkyn." Komich was looking hard at the Laridu. " I now understand about the little animals."

" Well," Ramsden said, slapping his uniform trouserleg—nearside foreleg—with his cane. " I've always said that a guy ought to do what he likes. Even if it is crazy by our standards. I guess no harm's done. Lairkyn—we'll run you home in the flier."

" That is very kind of you." The Laridu was looking very thoughtful—that is, in his alien way he was wrinkling his



eyelids down, which corresponded to a ponderous frown on an Earthman. "Very kind. And I have much to think about."

The three walked across to the flier and Komich took it up cleanly through the trees. On the way back Ramsden suddenly understood what he had promised the alien. He had offered to take him home and that meant entering the city and seeing at first hand the slums and noisesomeness and all the other barbaric horrors that Lindsay had reported. He had never really thought that Lindsay could have been right; but he'd never had the courage to check for himself.

No, that wasn't quite right, either. He hadn't wanted to make a liar out of Lindsay, just as much as he hadn't wanted to make monsters out of the Laridu. He had had only friendship from both Lindsay and Laridu. Both had at all times been good to him, in the sense that Ferguson and his best from Earth would understand the term 'good.'

If he now entered the city, and saw the aliens on their home ground—he would either know Lindsay had been lying or he would have his illusions about the Laridu irreparably shattered.

Either way he'd lose.

And on the quiet backwater of Lancion III he wanted no emotional stresses. He had had enough of those roving the starlanes and fighting the odd other aliens, the real aliens. He just wanted to retire and vegetate here, not to become mixed up in great crusading drives for the betterment of the people—as far as he had seen they were all right. You only had to look at Lairkyn to see that.

The way out of responsibility taken by old Charlie was not the way for him. Beachcombing around the forests on an alien elephant was a withdrawal from life that held no attractions for Ramsden.

Thinking about that reminded him that before he arranged Charlie's meeting with Ferguson he would have to discipline the old reprobate. He couldn't just send his elephant charging into other people's property because he didn't want them around his neck of the woods.

Komich slanted the flier down towards the city gate and made a neat landing. The three alighted. Ramsden said: "Well, Lairkyn. Here we are—"

Lairkyn was leaning against the flier's body. The blood had still not fully resumed normal circulation in his face ; his arms and legs were trembling. He was in no state to walk into the city and climb into whichever one of the monstrous trees was his home. Ramsden looked at Komich. He could always take the easy, Army, way out and give his subordinate her instructions . . .

Then he came face to face with the idea that if he was any sort of man at all, he ought to have sorted out this problem on the day that Lindsay, the dedicated-one reporting on this planet, had walked in and told him about the slums. He hadn't believed Lindsay then. He'd flatly refused to go along with the idea that the Laridu could be such monsters in their treatment of their own less fortunate brethren.

Hal Lindsay had been ablaze with his discoveries.

"You think these people are God-given, colonel? You believe they are fine, upstanding, full of a clean life that makes our old ideas of goodness outdated?" Hal's laugh had been unpleasant for a dedicated one. "I've seen such devilry in that city, in those factories, as makes me sick to my stomach. These people need to be told how to live, they need all the help we can give them, help that we know how to give out of our own unhappy past."

"But look at what we've seen—" Ramsden had known then, that his arguments were groundless. You show your best face to strangers ; your friends see your worst side.

"I'm reporting this planet as a priority job for a general clean up—at least, this continent. I was assured that the conditions I witnessed applied all over. Children, harnessed to heavy carts, dragging them along mine shafts cut under the city—Man ! Old men and women, working round the clock for a crust of bread. Clerks losing their eyesight adding up figures, and starving if they didn't work—what sort of conditions are those for potential Solar Federation Citizens?"

"It just doesn't add up." Ramsden remembered how he'd been afraid, even then, even that early, to probe too deeply. "I've never seen a sign of this—and I've been close to them, closer than you, up to now."

"Don't blame yourself, colonel. They fooled you. It's as simple as that."

Lindsay had sent off his report. Ramsden had no jurisdiction over him, and the report had been followed up by quick action from Earth. There had been no need for Ramsden

to go into the city to check on Lindsay's report, and after that first sick despair that these aliens of Lancia III might not be the people he had thought them, Ramsden had been able to meet them and talk to them quite openly—outside the city. He half-believed Lindsay. He half-believed what his own instincts told him of these aliens.

He had drifted very naturally into his present position where he neither wished to have his suspicions of Lindsay verified nor his assumptions about the aliens disproved. His command here had drifted with him. They were soldiers, not dedicated-ones. Wishart's seals kept them out effectively.

Lairkyn moved—and groaned involuntarily with the effort. Komich slid a strong arm around his shoulders. "We'd better help him in, colonel."

"Yes." Ramsden put his own arm around the alien. "Yes. We'll have to take him into the city and find someone who knows where he lives to take him home."

Even now, he couldn't accept that he would have to go right into the city and find—whatever he would find.

## Chapter Four

Following Lairkyn's directions they went through the gate, along the main street that wound naturally between tall trees. Komich helped Lairkyn to mount and sit astride Ramsden's back. Ramsden felt the light weight of the Laridu. The sunlight was diffused, golden, soothing. The ground was softly carpeted with an alien grass that was starred with myriads of flowers that gave off a heady, sweet perfume. Little clawed animals ran up and down the corrugated bark of the trees, singing high and melodiously.

Other aliens walked about, dressed in bright clothes that showed up the drab uniforms of the Terrans. There was a peace, a contentment, here that could drug a man and yet, with all that calmness there was no hint of decay, no sign of decadence or sloth.

"This is very good of you," Lairkyn said. He was slumped forward, his arms around Ramsden's human torso. "The central tree. A lift will take us up."

The lift sighed and surged under hydrodynamic power. As they rose higher and higher in the tree trunk, music drifted down to them, music which burst in glorious yet muted

melody as the lift doors swung open and they walked out onto a moss carpeted landing. A door across the hall opened and a female Laridu hurried out, flashed the Terrans a smile, took Lairkyn. They all went through the door into an apartment that might have been the dream desires of a great painter and a great architect and a great musician back on Earth. Komich caught her breath in admiration. A person could *live* in this room.

"How marvellous!" she said, standing stock still, enwrapped. Ramsden felt the same way too; but he had the presence of mind to assist Lairkyn onto a wide, low couch that gave exactly to the alien's weight and figure.

The female alien—Lairkyn's wife—was told what had happened and she showed no surprise at Lairkyn's decision. She produced a soothing and refreshing drink and passed the pottery goblets around. Everything the Terrans saw filled them with fresh admiration. The standard of life here was high, very high.

Presently another alien popped his head around the door, said: "There are two aliens requesting permission to enter, Lairkyn."

Lairkyn's wife looked at her husband, then turned and nodded. The head withdrew. A few moments later the door opened again and Ferguson and Koslov came in. Both were full of an indignation that all their training was having a full job controlling. Ferguson came straight to the point.

"Colonel—this place is so foul, I—well, you would say the place stinks. I am sure whatever reservations you may have had before must now be entirely swept away." He looked at Lairkyn. "Is this alien called Lairkyn?"

"That's right," Ramsden said in English. "But I'd take it a little easy if I were you, Ferguson. If you wish to denigrate these people in their own home, speak English."

"You are right, of course, colonel. I apologise."

"This room doesn't make you think maybe you're being a little hasty?" enquired Komich, heavily.

"Quite the contrary. I remember the wonderful Grecian and Roman civilisations. The supreme culture of the Moslems. All founded on a slave population. This is the top of the scale. The bottom is—less pleasant."

"You have seen—"

"Everything exactly as described by Lindsay."

"So he was speaking the truth."

Ferguson darted Ramsden a quick look. "Had you any doubts?"

"Doubts? Well—no. No, of course not. Lindsay was a dedicated-one. He would not make mistakes."

Unexpectedly, Lairkyn spoke. His voice flowed into the conversation quite naturally. "What do you intend to do, now, then, Mister Ferguson?"

Not until Ramsden was waiting for Ferguson's reply did the realisation strike home that Lairkyn had spoken in English.

Some time after that, when Ferguson, taking Lairkyn's knowledge of English in his stride, had completed his outline of the scheme the dedicated-ones from Earth intended to operate on the planet, Ramsden felt that he wanted to get away by himself and think things out. He had the strangest conviction that the world—or at least, this alien planet—had been turned upside down. His reaction to that feeling was to sit tight in the comfortable chair adapted to his anatomy, and to accept, with a smile the alien could comprehend, another goblet of the refreshing drink from Lairkyn's wife. He intended to let Ferguson and his aide Koslov leave and then to talk to Lairkyn.

"Patsy," he said to Komich. "Would you mind running Ferguson and Koslov back to their camp area? I'm sure they'd appreciate that."

"Thank you, colonel, we would. You are not coming?"

"Nope. I have things to discuss with Lairkyn."

He made it final.

When the three Terrans had left, Lairkyn settled back on his couch and said: "Your Mister Ferguson has big ideas. I had thought—well, I had not anticipated quite so thorough a going over of our economy. I anticipated changes. I knew your missionaries would wish to alter much that they had found. But I did not realise that they would intend to dig so deeply."

"That worries you?"

"A little." Lairkyn was talking now man to man, or alien to alien. He had rallied to the tone of resolution in Ramsden's words.

"You have found, perhaps, that when Earth sets about a task she does not do it by half measures?"



Lairkyn smiled. "I am very worried," he said. He smiled again. "But I think that, perhaps, you can help me."

"If I can. I like your people, Lairkyn. I've studied you as you and your friends have met me, around the residency, out in the forest. Your city appeared always to me to be a fairy place. Then Lindsay came back with his report—"

Lairkyn said flatly: "It is now I realise that it was a great tragedy that you did not first visit our city, colonel."

Ramsden was slowly grappling with an idea that he had known existed in his mind for a long time. He was frightened by it. He'd be smashed, utterly and completely—as he had suspected he would earlier this day. But, now, he had to go on.

"Why do you grind down your people, Lairkyn? You are obviously a person of great importance here. In charge. One of those who give orders. Why are you so gentle a person as I see you, and yet countenance these atrocities my comrades speak of?"

Lairkyn closed his eyes. When he opened them he had made up his mind. He said: "When my people met Hal Lindsay we recognised the type at once. He was the personification of the missionary. He felt it was a divine duty laid upon him to go out into the galaxy and to help all those he found in trouble. The same is true of Ferguson—and of all those men and women who landed today. So many. So very many."

"Your civilisation exists with all these beauties and evidences of a high culture about it. I don't believe you have need of those mining children, those cataract-ridden clerks, those ground-down masses of workers I've heard of. Oh, sure, I know well enough that our history teaches that a small minority may live in luxury on the sweated labour of a majority; but that doesn't apply here. Your wants are too few; I've seen them, here, today, in this city. Why, you even grow your houses—you don't need mass-production and factories. Your ceramics were hand-produced, each one a work of art. Need I go on?"

"No, colonel. You are not the missionary type. We are very sensitive, I suppose, in comparison with most Earth people. We cannot bear to make a person unhappy—"

"Some of our Eastern races were like that. They'd tell lies to give you the answer you wanted."

"So you understand why we invented and faked all those slums and factories and sweated labour conditions?"

"My God!" Ramsden said. "You felt sorry for we Earthmen! You thought: 'Here they come, striding in their strength. They have need of helping other people, so let us pretend that we need help. Let them practise their missionary antics on us.'"

Lairkyn held up a hand. "Not quite. The need for helping others which features so largely in you Earthpeople is, I am almost ashamed to tell you, merely a symptom left over from your own past of the disease you suffer from."

"Disease?"

Lairkyn stood up, walked to the window that had not been cut in the wood but which was a pane of glass around which the tree had grown, and looked out and down. Ramsden joined him. Broad green leaves made a magic twilight. Animals chirruped and sang in the branches. Sunlight shafted down. It was very pleasant and restful.

"Yes, colonel. Disease. All the history of Earth, as I understand it, from you and Lindsay and the books you gave me, has been one of struggle, of the strong oppressing the weak. Now, and I am truly happy that it is so, you have reached a balance. No longer do you tolerate conditions—well, conditions such as those we put together down below to humour Lindsay. You are at last mature, responsible people in the galaxy. And you spread out from your own planet with the praiseworthy ideal of helping other cultures. You intend to make sure that the benefits—the very real benefits—of your enlightened culture are spread as far as you can spread them." Lairkyn sighed. It was not an unhappy sigh. "A very great and praiseworthy ideal. You are a great people, you Earthfolk."

"Disease," Ramsden said. "You mentioned a disease."

Lairkyn went on without noticing the question. "We are different in that we have never felt the need of oppression. Maybe we are Lotus-eaters—I think that was the term? But we have accomplished much. So that when we realised what was wrong with Lindsay, we naturally felt we had to gratify his desires. Any actual cure was, at least then, outside our scope."

"You humoured his wish to be a missionary, and you set up conditions so bad that he could have fun putting them

right. Well, that seems plain enough." Despite himself, there was bitterness in Ramsden's words. "But, Lairkyn—disease?"

"The disease afflicting Lindsay and Ferguson and his assistant, and, very powerfully, Major Wishart, and, to a lesser extent, yourself, colonel, is simply, guilt."

"Guilt?"

"You are ashamed of your bloody past. So you go out into the Galaxy as missionaries. Then, Lindsay, a typical dedicated missionary, meets us, a culture that has no need of him. So, what would be—"

"I don't know if you're right, Lairkyn. But I can see what you mean. They'd feel—unnecessary."

"A terrible feeling, colonel. The feeling that you are not wanted can destroy."

At that moment Ramsden realised himself. He said: "Hal Lindsay was a fine man. I suppose that he disappeared when he found out. Maybe he killed himself. He was a fine man—but what he found out, that you'd taken pity on his ambitions and provided him with a nicely nasty civilisation for him to roll up his sleeves and set about putting it right, well, that was too drastic a mental understanding for him. He couldn't take that final rejection of his whole life and being and race."

"Colonel, please try to understand me. At first we thought that the crusading drive in Lindsay was a personal incubus in him. In fabricating a hell for him to put right we thought merely that we were gratifying his own personal desires. Then Major Wishart appeared." Lairkyn sipped a drink, reflecting. Ramsden remained quiet, sitting with his four hooves tucked away comfortably.

"Major Wishart is an unusual specimen of *Homo sapiens*."

"You can say that again. Sorry, Lairkyn, please go on."

"This Major Wishart is driven by a personal demon stemming from your own bloody past history of Earth—your own psychologists have described the mass unconscious that animates all people of one race—and he is therefore supremely conscious that now Earthpeople are right, fully developed, able to help others. He, I think, could not listen to what I have been telling you and remain calm, colonel, as you have done."

"An old expression would have covered Wishart, Lairkyn. If people weren't so educated and mentally balanced these days, he'd be what was known as a nut case."

"I understand." Lairkyn's alien smile was strangely comforting to Ramsden—strangely comforting for there was little in the facial expression to reassure an Earthman.

"As for that old man, Charlie, he found out—"

"Just a minute, before we leave Wishart. I shall have to arrange for him to leave Lencion III before he finds out. I've never liked his attitude since Hal Lindsay returned from your faked up horrors."

"Quite so. As for Charlie, when he'd found out, his reaction was to go native, to live among us yet not of us, and fight to keep us as we were. There is every chance that his brain was injured during the accident. We were, at the time, fully occupied—ah—elsewhere . . ."

"You saved my life. I care for that. I find many compensations in being the reincarnation of a centaur." He reached a hand down and scratched his nearside front hoof. "Still, it was a pity about Charlie—and about Hal, too—"

"Lindsay's intelligence was of a different order. He understood what he had done. He saw that he had cost your Earth a tremendous effort to send missionaries to us when we had no need of them; that it was all a waste."

"You saw him die?"

"He did not die, colonel. He was very ill. He is not yet fully recovered. But he is living quietly here in the city waiting to return. He is now more mature, more cognisant, more understanding than ever before."

"Hal—alive!"

The interruption, when it came, was all the more shocking for its very timing. The door opened and Ferguson walked in. He was very pale and his hands were clenching and unclenching.

"Ferguson—!"

"Hullo, colonel. Lairkyn—thank you for your explanations." Ferguson bent and removed a small microphone from the base of the table. "I have never listened with more interest."

Lairkyn was, for the first time in Ramsden's knowledge of him, speechless. He stood, staring blankly at Ferguson.

Ferguson was pocketing his microphone. He was acting quite normally, apart from that faint touch of strain that showed itself only in the stiffness with which he held himself.

## Chapter Five

Koslov appeared at the doorway. He was holding a hand to his head. Blood seeped between his fingers. Behind him a crowd of Laridu peered and talked in excited whispers.

For the first time this day a touch of real fear stroked Ramsden's brain. At once, he knew that something was seriously wrong.

"What is it, Koslov?" Ferguson asked. His voice was a brittle snap in the room.

"Major Wishart—"

"Well?"

"Major Wishart went to see the slums and the factories and all the other filth. It must have—it must have affected his mind."

"Go on, man, go on!" Ramsden said viciously.

Everyone in the room was standing now, tense, waiting, watching Koslov as he tried to speak with the blood running down from his head over his face.

"He said he was going to blow the whole city off the face of the planet . . ."

"Good God!"

"He forced Lieutenant Komich to go with him to take the flier. I refused and he struck me—he struck me . . ."

"How long ago?"

"A few minutes. He's taking the flier to the spaceship and will order Captain Pitroffski to fly over the city and bomb it out of existence. He can. He can do it—easily!"

"Of course he can," Ferguson said, his face pinched. "That ship is a veritable battleship."

"And he will," Ramsden added, feeling leaden and useless and nearly dead. "Pitroffski must obey Wishart. He won't question an order from a superior of the Dedicated Ones. Discipline will see to that."

"Wishart is not a fully qualified Dedicated One," Ferguson snapped out. He had to say it, Ramsden realised dully, even in this moment of stress. They were all standing about like waxed dummies, stricken, unable to think coherently.

His previous conversation with Lairkyn rose up to mock him. What did all those high flown sentiments matter now that an Earthman was about to wipe out of existence this fair city?



"He doesn't know that all the horror-civilisation we arranged was a sham?" asked Lairkyn.

"No." Ferguson put out a hand to stop Koslov, who stood with open mouth, staring stupidly at his superior.

"A sham?" said Koslov.

"That doesn't matter now. I really thought we had a priority clean-up job on this planet. Seems I was wrong."

"Seems—you—were—wrong!" choked Koslov.

"What matters now is how can we stop Wishart?"

"If he's taken the flier there's no way. You can't reach the ship to countermand his order. There is no time."

"I once thought you Earthpeople were a curious lot. One of you rides an elephant to escape from the realities of life. Another is ridden by the devil of self-punishment and servitude. Another hates everyone, more specifically himself, and now intends to blow us all up and thus rid this planet—and his own conscience—of what he thinks of as a blot."

"And me?" asked Ramsden, acknowledging the truthful summing up the Laridu had just completed.

"You, colonel? It is not for me, now, to judge you as a terrestrial." Lairkyn smiled at his wife, a smile that told Ramsden that they were both prepared to die if they must, provided they could go together. "However, colonel, you have at least realised that modern life and responsibility are not mere extensions of machine science. Rocketships can never give a man a soul or conscience—"

"No," put in Koslov bitterly. "But they could get us to the spaceship and forestall Wishart before he blows us all to kingdom come."

"Ah." Ferguson suddenly looked hopeful. "Our camp is out in the trees a short way off. Surely, Wishart wouldn't bomb the city with the chance that our camp would suffer—?"

"Sorry, Ferguson." Ramsden shook his head. "Pitroffski can drop a nuclear-bomb tailored for size right on this place and not disturb a hair on the heads of your boys and girls in the camp."

"But, surely," Lairkyn protested. "He would not do such a thing whilst his friends are under the bomb in the city?"

"He has no friends now. He'd sacrifice everyone to clear his conscience of the blot the slums and the rest of it have made. It's a sort of reaction-type trauma. They were quite common about the end of the twenty-seventh century after the Lydian-Stymphalian wars. A nasty prognosis."

"What can we *do*?" demanded Koslov, helplessly.

Something he had just said roused a spark in Ramsden. Lairkyn spoke swiftly to the Laridu in the room, then faced Ramsden.

"My people are evacuating the city. If, as you say, the bomb will not effect the camp outside the city, there is a chance—"

His wife said in a melodious, infinitely sad voice: "It is not good to raise hopes that are groundless, Lairkyn. We know that no one can reach safety before the bomb falls. The camp radius is too far away."

And that crystallised Ramsden's errant thought.

There was no means of transport in this city, either to take to safety the inhabitants or to let an Earthman reach the spaceship in time to warn Pitroffski and countermand Wishart's insane order. Pitroffski would have to obey. He would drop the bomb under the orders of Major Wishart and only then, if he felt uneasy about the decision, would he query it. That was the way discipline worked.

No, there was no form of transport—except Ramsden himself.

He couldn't reach the spaceship in a race against the Mach four flier driven by Komich—but . . .

Without an explanation he galloped through the doorway, bundled into the lift and waited impatiently as the hydrodynamics lowered him to ground level. There was a fine, very faint tremor running all over his body.

Every second was precious, now. The talk in Lairkyn's room had occupied only a few moments, so rapidly had events moved. Probably Komich, if he knew her at all, would stall for all she was worth. She might even overpower Wishart, although even Komich might be overawed by discipline and military rank. Damn Wishart, anyway! What right had they to take an Army man and jump him up through the Dedicated Ones so that he could be contemptuous of a colonel?

Certainly, Komich should try to stop Wishart telling Pitroffski—and then, galloping wildly through the graceful city of the Laridu—Ramsden knew that idea was no good. Wishart would simply deal with Komich before he reached the spaceship.

Ramsden felt a new fear strike him ; an incongruous one when set against the imminent nuclear bombardment of a city full of intelligent beings ; but one, nevertheless, that caused him acute pain. If, he vowed, if Wishart has hurt a hair of Komich's head, he'd—he'd . . . Well, what would he do if he was a pile of blown cinders charred by a nuclear blast ?

He galloped with clattering hooves through the gate. One or two Laridu stared at him as he flew past, but the majority merely stepped out through the gate, heading for the forest. He struck straight along the trail, the furious clatter of his hooves warning that he wanted no obstacles. Laridu scattered.

No doubt, he thought sourly, they imagined him to be fleeing from the threatened holocaust.

So be it.

The Laridu had a poor enough opinion of Earthmen as it was for that to bother him now. Later, if he was successful, he could explain. If he failed, explanation would be impossible.

The ground was soft beneath his hooves. They formed a steady drumming that found an echo in the pounding thoughts in his head. He was breathing long and steadily, quite conscious of the remnant of Earthly lungs in his human body and only vaguely aware of the equine lungs in the strong barrel body that had once been an alien equivalent to a horse. His human heart battered at his rib cage. The horse's heart below beat no less strongly, and he imagined that he could feel it more clearly as he galloped on. He had never felt before so much at one with his new body. Four hooves and flying tail and balancing arms and hands all merged into a charging body that was, truly, one body.

He felt fine.

That he might feel nothing at all after the bomb dropped could not be allowed to distract him. He leaped a brook, taking it cleanly and then cleared a fence to take him straight into the forest trails. How far away was that damn camp ?

He felt he recognised the trails. Branches leaned to pluck at him. He warded them off with flailing arms. His head bent low, he plunged through the forest. Steam began to snort from his mouth and nostrils at each spent breath.

If only Wishart had been spotted before this . . . But then, even today, Earthly psychoanalysis was not one hundred per cent. Men still were not adapted to travel light years from their own world without strains and stresses being set up that

could not be envisaged. Now, all the science in the universe wasn't going to save a friendly people's city from being blown to atoms because they had tried to humour the crusading drive in humanity.

Tiredness was creeping over him. His legs and hooves felt leaden. He would have to stop for a breather soon. But he could not stop. He daren't let up. The camp must be just around the next bend in the trail. It *must*!

He galloped around the turn, head high, tail flying, to see just another long stretch. Had he missed it? Was Wishart even now ordering Pitroffski? Was Pitroffski refusing? Would Wishart pull a gun? Of course he would. He was a man who believed that a gun or a bomb solved questions.

Ramsden felt that he could not go on. He forced himself. He had the crazy idea of pulling a switch and lashing himself, as though he were a mere human riding a horse. But he *was* a horse. He was a Centaur. He was one of those mythical creatures dreamed up by ancient Greeks to explain, in a non horse-riding society, the supernatural horsemanship of the riders from the vast central plains of Asia. When Attila and his Huns rode down from the wastelands, they were, in very truth, Centaurs returning to their olden hunting fields.

He rampaged around the next bend, feeling a low branch claw his face, and was almost through the camp before he realised he had reached it.

Men and women boiled out of huts. Shouts reached him.

A tremendous barrage of sound rolled down out of the sky.

Everyone looked up.

The spaceship was taking off. It rose, quite slowly, poised above the trees, the fire from its jets blinding in the sunshine. A desperate sense of crushing defeat shook him.

Then he was galloping with the last reserves of strength up to the radio hut. The operator listened in awestruck silence and then, without a waste word, operated his equipment and began calling out.

Would Wishart have cut off the radio? Would he force Pitroffski to ignore the order to return?

"This is Captain Pitroffski." The words from the speaker were in the usual whisky-cheerful voice.

He would have to be very careful. He took a deep breath, trying to steady the voice that was all off-key and shaky after the gallop. He gripped the mike with clawing fingers.

"Captain Pitroffski. *Do not drop the bomb.* This is an order from—"

But the operator glanced up, shaking his head. "They've cut off."

Well, that was that, then.

There was only one thing for him to do. He would have to return to the city. He dare not run out on his friends when they were about to be vapourised.

The noise from the sky belted down around them again, coiling like a serpent into their ears and minds. The sound diminished, then grew. It crescendoed. Ramsden looked up.

The spaceship was returning.

She turned majestically above the tree tops, her anti-gravs holding her steady, began to settle for a landing on jets that now shone like Christmas candles.

"Pitroffski did it !" Ramsden was shouting. "He did it !"

Such a profound gush of thankfulness rose up in him that he turned away from the radio, cantered off to be alone. He saw old Charlie on his elephant, thrusting through the trees ahead, and felt a new wonder that even that poor old man and his pathetic attempts to cling to the only life that made sense to him, were not to be destroyed with everything else.

Later on Pitroffski told him what had happened. "And when I heard your voice, colonel, Wishart pulled a gun. I knew then that something was wrong, so I took the gun away from him and he, I'm afraid, became unconscious during that, and returned to base."

"Thank God you obeyed your natural instincts, captain. I was afraid Wishart had cut the radio before you'd understood."

"Your voice gave me the order. That was all I needed to know."

They were all standing in the shadow of the great central sequoia. The Laridu had returned to their city and were going about their tasks in their usual happy way. Already, Lairkyn told them, the fake factories and sweat shops were being dismantled.

"You heard all I said, about your racial sense of guilt, Mister Ferguson?" Lairkyn was still off balance.

"That's all right, Lairkyn. I'd like to see Hal Lindsay as soon as possible and set his mind at rest. You see, Lairkyn,



you are quite right. We of Earth are ashamed of our bloody past, and there does exist a sense of guilt. But that does not blind us to the fact that other races may not have had the same evolutionary dog-fight we've had. You had it easy. We had to learn to fight like devils in order to stay alive and to adapt and to expand." He smiled. "Hal Lindsay was a good man, as you've said. But he was not a team member. He was not a fully fledged Dedicated One. As for Wishart—no one can be perfect all the time. Not even a race. Wishart was just an unfortunate example that the old ways still linger."

Ramsden was suddenly, unexpectedly, smiling. He felt fine. His fears that Terrans were somehow second rate had gone. The guilt idea couldn't affect him directly; he was just a calloused, hardened broken down old soldier with the body of a Centaur. It was the brainy boys who were highly strung, who would break down. And yet, Ferguson and his team—which did not include Lindsay or Wishart—had retained a perfect poise throughout. They'd acted well.

Then, he heard Ferguson talking to Lairkyn.

"You see, Lairkyn, we are the best that Earth can offer."

—Nelson Sherwood

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Most of the soldiers were only trying to be men. It took a man to defy authority and prove his point.

# ORIGINAL SINNER

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

---

This was the order in which the A.S. *Intractible's* hatches opened, after landing at Army Base, South City, Roinse, Mars. Firstly, the Second Aft Hatch, to emit a Leading Hand who ran in his suit across to the Control Bunker to collect Contact Assurances. Secondly (fifteen minutes later), Aft Hatch 'Q,' to emit three engineers who made a cursory survey of the jets before retiring to chat with the uniformed ground crew now appearing. Thirdly and fourthly, simultaneously, the Lower Midships Hatch (Personnel) to emit the Catering Officer who wanted to secure a supply of fresh bacon before the A.S. *Intractible* left again, and the Upper Midship Hatch (Cargo) to emit a heavy duty gangplank, from which Neptunian sulphosphates were trundled in covered trucks.

Fifthly, the Fore Control Hatch, to emit the pilot, who had brought the Army ship in from Orbit Epsilon, and the Captain, who was going to have a drink with the pilot. Sixthly, Warrant Officers' Hatch, from which a group of three officers emerged in civilian dress. Seventhly, the Personnel Duty Hatch (Personnel) to emit a platoon of Outer Planets Commando, who marched off the Army Base field in threes. Eighthly, the Personnel Duty Hatch (Stores), to emit a small vehicle carrying the equipment of the Commando platoon. Ninthly, the captain's Hatch, to emit the Trooping Officer

and his A.D.C., heading in the direction of Roinse, the old city. Tenthly, the Heavy Cargo Hatch, amidships, from which various duty technicians in fatigue kit straggled, to climb over the ship and check its hull for faults.

Lastly, General Hatch (Ratings) swung open. By this time, two and a half hours had elapsed since landing.

"Isn't it just typical of the bleeding Army!" Wagner Hayes exclaimed, clattering down the gangplank. "We've only got twenty-four hours here before we bat off for Earth again, and then they keep us mucking about with an FFI when we arrive. What did they think we could have picked up on that lousy hole Ganymede?"

"Don't forget we had a pay parade, too, Wag," Dusty Miller said, chinking the credits in his pocket.

"They could have had that when we were space-born if the ruddy RSM had been half sharp," Wagner growled.

Leaving the ship with him were, besides Dusty, two slightly older men, Max Fleet and their bald unsmiling corporal, George Walters. The four came down onto the landing pad with a knot of other servicemen, all looking forward to a few hours' leave and a change from the rigorous confinement of the *Intractible*.

"You're always grumbling, young Wag," George said. "What are you going to do with yourself now you're out?"

"I'm certainly not going to get drunk, like you and Max!" Wagner exclaimed promptly. "I've got more sense. Catch me wasting my money on booze!"

Backing up his friend, Dusty pointed across to one of the Base buildings in the direction of which they were walking.

"See that place, George?" he said. "Wag and me are staying there, mate. Other Ranks' Hostel. We found it on the trip out. It's got everything; showers, ultra-violet, juke-boxes, local and Earth telly terrific canteen . . ."

"And a library," Wagner said. "A library bursting full of comics! I've never seen so many comics in my natural."

"You did nothing but read comics on Ganymede," Max Fleet said. "Don't you ever want a change?"

"These are up-to-date comics, stupid," Wagner said genially. "Go and get sloshed with old George and keep your trap shut!"

They trudged companionably across the monotonous expanse of tarmac. It was good to be out of the confines of the

ship ; the air, as Max remarked to George, breathed well considering that it had once been artificially 'planted.'

"It's better in the hostel," Wag explained. "They maintain it there at full Earth pressure. I tell you, that place is a dream. It is ; it's better than home ! If you two drunken old repro-bates had any sense—"

"Hallo ! Here comes the bleeding padre !" Dusty said. "You've had it, lads. From the right, pray !"

The four of them groaned in unison.

No doubt Padre Column heard them, but his smile was not affected. He included them all in the smile, the beefy Wagner with his open, boyish face, weedy Dusty with his peak haircut, dark and reserved Max, dough-faced corporal Walters with his parody of a monk's tonsure.

"Enjoy your leave, my friends," the padre said. "Try and regard this brief break in our journey home as an opportunity for spiritual refreshment. Remember that war is raging on Earth, and that as soon as we return there we shall be called upon to give of our very best."

"Yes, sir, of course, sir," Wagner and Dusty chorused together. George Walters looked sullen.

"You speak as if that was something to look forward to, sir," he said.

"If we are to be tested, Walters, we must come to it with what fortitude we can muster," Padre Column said. "We must regard mortification as our common lot, I fear."

"Come on, George, let's shove off !" Dusty said in an undertone, tugging at the corporal's sleeve ; but George stood his ground.

"My wife was killed in the East Anglia Massacre last year," he said distinctly. "I doubt if I shall get back aboard the *Intractible* until two M.P.'s carry me aboard drunk."

"Then you are a fool, Walters, and I only hope your younger companions will not follow your example."

"Don't worry, sir," Wagner said cheerfully ; "we wouldn't follow this old soak into the nearest cookhouse."

So saying, he grabbed George's arm and moved him forcibly away. Dusty and Max Fleet, who had said nothing during this exchange, followed hurriedly. The padre stood watching them, lips pursed. A heated argument sprang up between Dusty, George and Wagner, lasting all the way to the Base gate. As usual, Max kept out of the controversy.

"You young fellows don't know what's good for you nowadays!" George said. "When I was your age, I wasn't content to bash my bunk reading bloody comics—I was seeing a bit of life, knocking round the taverns with a few likely women."

"No wonder you lost all your hair," Dusty retorted. "You'd better watch out, Max, or the corp will lead you down the primrose path into the dog house."

"I'll watch it, Dusty," Max said, as they reached the gate. He stood there with his hands in his pockets, suddenly aware that although he had spent almost all his tour of duty with these three men, they were not really his friends, nor ever could be. A momentary silence spread from him to the others, as if they too, at this moment of parting, had become aware for the first time of their own, separate identities.

"Well, we'll meet up again tomorrow evening, and see who looks in best shape then," Wag said. "Gentlemen of the ruddy ranks, Di-i-i-iss—wait for it!—di-i-i-iss—miss!"

But his tone was not as light as usual. Wag sounded slightly defensive. George, Max thought, had caught him on a sensitive spot with his remark about the rival attractions of comics and women.

Forgetting it at once, he turned away with George. As the two youngsters entered the air-conditioned hostel, he and George showed their passes and walked through the main gate into one day's liberty.

Roinse was partly a military town. When the terrific task of oxygenating the Martian atmosphere had been undertaken two generations back, the Army, in liaison with the Space Corps, had been in charge of the project. When the inter-racial wars had broken out on Earth, the military had tightened their grip here.

Yet mingled with the barracks and camps was a sizeable business city, also growing. As it grew its suburbs grew, bright and cheap and uniform, pathetic replicas of the square miles of suburb now being blown to bits all over Earth. There was another section of Roinse: the ancient Martian city, rock-hewn and ruinous, standing on the edge of the new built-up area. In the heart of the old alien city stood the village Roinse where the descendants of the original colonists lived, a proud and dwindling clique resenting all the more recent intruders.

Roinse, in short, was a muddled city—and an interesting one, heterogeneous as Rome, mysterious as Singapore.



George Walters and Max Fleet headed for the oldest part of town. The number of people in uniform thinned as they went, but George was still peevish and muttered about the folly of youth.

"I don't understand these kids," he said. "They're all the same today—rather watch a telegame over a bottle of squash than come out and have a real drink like a man."

"Forget it, George," Max said.

"Yes, let's forget it," George agreed, taking the other's arm. "Let the world go to pot eh? We'll show 'em! I feel like getting real soused tonight, Maxie, and forget the bloody war and everything."

They passed into the shadow of a Martian building like a small hill. It might have been, in its prime, a cathedral or a railway station. The race that had built it was long gone; now their monument bore warning notices BEWARE OF FALLING ROCK. Many of its ancient cloisters had been adapted into stalls or shops by terrestrials. In one of the darkest corners stood the Flingabout Tavern. The two Earthmen went in, into an atmosphere of neon and noise.

Few customers were about. A juke-box blazed away in a corner; two couples danced in front of it. Girls in aprons bustled round, serving drinks and marsbergers. George eyed them appreciatively.

"This is living!" he exclaimed, rubbing his red hands. "Maybe we pick up a couple of these tarts at closing time, eh, Max?"

"Maybe," Max said.

They ordered Roinse Green wine in tankards.

"Here's to all those stinking, fruitless, useless months of our lives we wasted on Ganymede station!" Max said, raising his tankard.

Together they drank deep. George sighed with gratification, leaning back in his chair relaxedly, his fingers tapping on the table in time with the juke-box beat.

"This is living," he repeated.

"Think of those poor kids with their faces buried in comics," he said.

"I'll bet this place gets pretty wild after dark," he said. He looked slightly bored.

"We can go somewhere else after another drink or two, if you want," he said.

"Really paint the town," he said.

"Show 'em old soldiers never die," he said. Pause.

"You're quiet, Max," he said.

Max drained off his tankard and stood up. His usually expressionless face puckered into a look of embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, George," he said. "There's someone I've got to go and see. I can't just sit here and get stewed on our one night free."

"Now wait a minute !" George said, plonking down his tankard and getting up belligerently. "Are you trying to walk out on me ? Were we not going to make a day of it ? Did we or didn't we not plan this bloody binge ever since we left Neptune ?"

"I'm sorry," Max repeated. "I hate to let you down, George. There's someone I've got to see ; I thought I could stay away but I can't."

"It's Maggie, is it ?"

Max sighed.

"Yes," he said.

George sat down again, rubbing his bald head. "Then you won't be wanting me with you."

"Directly I leave this place, the women'll see you're alone and defenceless, and come swarming round you."

"You're a swine," George said. As Max went through the door, he was calling savagely for more drink.

Hands in pockets, shoulders hunched, Max walked through the old part of Roinse. The sun and the false satellite sun together cast double shadows everywhere. It was mid-summer. Only the white dust underfoot looked like winter.

*I sometimes think that never blows so red*

*The rose as where some buried Caesar bled.*

By the same token, the dust was white with the hopes and bodies of extinct Martians. An obvious thought, thought Max ; but this was no age for subtlety. He walked rapidly until he came to an exchange store huddled against a mouldering pile of masonry. Over the door was one word only: DEACON. He entered without hesitation.

Maggie Deacon sat behind the counter, thumbing through a catalogue. She was lean and hard and green-gold, a typical Martian colonist woman. Her eyes were grey : she was not beautiful, except to Max.

As she stood up, he hardly recognised her. Her hair was red.

"Max!" she said. She pronounced it as if it was the sweetest word she ever spoke.

At the sound of her voice they were back where they had been before, two years ago when Max was on leave on his way to Ganymede in the troopship. He had forgotten she was a mutant of a type becoming not uncommon on Mars. Her hair colour changed with the seasons. Last visit, he had seen it in winter, when it was black; in the spring, it acquired a green tinge. Now, through the summer, it was a golden red. A few white hairs streaked it, adding to its brilliance.

The mutation was ugly, people said. Max felt otherwise. For him, it was a sign of the way she was different from all other women.

"Your husband?" Max asked, casting an eye towards the back of the shop. He was prompted to ask that first.

"He died only a week after you left," she replied. "Don't say anything about it. Just don't mention it."

Max had met Maggie Deacon by chance. He had brought a ring into the shop to sell for drink money. They had looked at each other and recognised themselves for two of a kind: wary, hard, lonely, uncompromising, desperate. Deacon had lain in a back room issuing irate orders through the door, cursed with a spinal disease of long standing. Deacon had not mattered as Maggie and Max banished all that was barren in each other's lives.

Now Maggie came round the counter, wrapped her arms round Max's ribs and kissed him deeply. Finally taking her lips from his, she regarded him with satisfaction.

"The way you walk in so casually," she said.

"You still remember me, Maggie," he said.

Inside him, the luck and the love boiled up. Reaching out, he seized her roughly and drew her back into his arms, pressing his face into hers, devouring her.

"I'll close up the shop," she said, when he released her. Their eyes were alight; they both looked ten years younger.

"There'll be a bed free now," Max said.

She bolted and locked the flimsy door.

"We're not staying here now we can chose," she said decisively. "We need proper surroundings—besides, I don't get out enough."

He followed her into the rear room. It was poor, tidy, dusty. The idea of criticising it, even mentally, never occurred to him; it was her place and he accepted it.

"How long?" she asked, brushing her hair, stooping to look in a tiny mirror.

"Till tomorrow, five in the afternoon."

Silently, they faced up to the appalling briefness of it. She said not a word more on the subject, and he thanked God for her sense.

She bundled drink, food and a blanket into a basket. She straightened her skirt and was ready to go.

"We can climb to the top of the Cropolade," she said. "It'll be quiet there, and we'll be alone. I've got something to lie on."

"Wherever you say, my love," he said.

Flashing, she smiled at him. Light-heartedness took them; they squeezed each other, excited as kids as she steered him to the back door.

"I wish you'd come tomorrow instead of today," she said, as they emerged into a back alley, "I meant to have a bath tonight."

The Cropolade was another massive, meaningless, chunk of Martian architecture. The outskirts of the city ended round its feet; it was like a galleon aground on a reef. A large sand dune had worked against one side of it, forming a sweeping slope up which a track ran right onto the rocky shoulders of the Cropolade itself.

Max and Maggie lay close together on the top, beside a length of ruinous wall. Lights spattered the darkness below, but they disregarded them. Lights flecked the dark sky above, but they ignored them. Night had come, bringing the image of peace to them both.

She sat up and poured more wine.

"I'm feeling half tight," he said, drinking avidly.

"Tell me about the half-tight thought you're thinking," she murmured.

"Oh, there are too many of them. I'm thinking how I was a kid raised in a slum, no breeding, no education . . . yet right now I'm the happiest, luckiest man alive. And I'm thinking of all the things I've done and experienced in the universe—and of all those I haven't. And I know they're all valuable and should not be denied. And I know that through you I can find the best of everything."

"I never would have guessed you had such a soft centre," she teased.

He was annoyed. "You're wrong there, mighty wrong ! I may *think*, but I'm like rock inside . . . All hard, Maggie, all hard."

She stroked his hair, asking him what else he was thinking.

"I'm thinking that we'll never find anybody better suited to each other than we are. That a day with you is better than a year anywhere else . . . That I ought to desert, skip the ship, and stay right here with you forever."

Maggie sat up.

"You can't do that, Max. Mars is a small place. You'd never get away. Besides, it's wartime on Earth—they'd hunt you down and shoot you !"

"I was only thinking, love, only thinking. Lie down again. After being with you, the thought of the other fellows drives me crazy. If you knew how damned gormlessly *innocent* they are. Adult innocence makes me want to be sick."

She had brought a small lamp. It hung above them on a stick, swaying slightly in a light breeze. The evening was chilly, and they snuggled closer.

"We'll stay here until it's time for you to—get back," she said. "We'll stay here till the very last moment."

Neither of them spoke about the future. When they parted, it would be for good. Army other ranks never do the Outer journey twice. Besides, there was a war on on Earth ; wars killed people.

They had both fallen asleep when the bright light played on them. Max sat up, feeling for a gun he did not have, knowing something was wrong. A pallid dawn glow sickened in the sky. Someone was calling him by name.

A vehicle had climbed the slope onto the top of the Cropolade. Its headlights seemed to souse them in blinding dry liquid.

"Max ! Max Fleet !"

"Who is it ?" Maggie asked. In the cruel illumination, her face was white, drawn, old. Glancing at her, Max was suddenly angry, frightened, full of hate. He jumped to his feet and advanced pugnaciously, clenching his fists.

"Who the ruddy hell are you ?" he called.

"Max ! It's me !"

He moved out of the beam and began to see again. A small duty truck stood there, its television antennae shimmering above it with reflected light. Young Wagner Hayes had jumped from the driver's seat and was coming towards Max.



Max told him to go away, using the strongest language he could muster.

"Don't muck about, Max," Wagner said sharply. "Get in the van, and we'll drive you back to the ship."

"I'll get back to the ship when I'm ready."

"You'll breeding well get back now, Maxy Boy! An urgent call's come through from Earth. There's an enemy offensive along the Greenland-Iceland axis or somewhere, and we're the joes who've got to go back and help squash it as soon as possible. Crisis on! Leave's cancelled."

"Of all the dirty—"

Max broke off. Padre Column was approaching from the other side of the truck.

"What seems to be the trouble, Hayes?" he asked.

"It's Max here, padre—"

"My leave doesn't expire till five this afternoon!" Max exclaimed furiously. He wondered what Maggie was doing.

"On the contrary, it expired at midnight," the padre said.

"Sorry Fleet. The ship's siren sounded the Recall signal. I wonder you did not hear it up here. You're technically under arrest for overstaying leave."

"How the hell did you find I was up here?"

The padre moved impatiently.

"Several trucks are out searching for you. All the troops are back aboard ship bar you and Corporal George Walters. We picked Walters up from a gutter. He was completely intoxicated; he is fast asleep in the back of the truck now. Before he passed out, he gave us the name of the woman you are with. We got her address and found someone who saw you both come up here. Now please get into the truck without any further trouble or foul language."

He could see the weather-worn top-knot of the Cropolade all round and, further, the scattered lights of Roinse and, further still, the neutral and obnubilated blackness of Mars. He could see—yet it was as if he was blind. His senses rocked. He hardly felt the hand on his shoulder.

"You'll have to go, my dear; arguing will only make it worse," she said. "I know how it is. I understand."

Choking he turned to Maggie.

"Maggie, we'll never—"

"Leave that woman alone, Fleet, and come with us!" the padre said. He spoke quietly, but his words were loaded with contempt. Max turned on him.

"If you say one word against my Maggie, padre or no padre, you're going to get the biggest—"

"Haynes, get this man into the truck," Padre Column said, sharply. "If he is not intoxicated, his senses are besotted with something equally dangerous."

"Come on, Maxy!" Wag said, advancing. He looked big. His baby face was screwed into the grimace of a man executing a painful duty. He put out a hand. Max hit him right on the mouth.

Wag stopped in surprise.

"Oh, well done!" Maggie exclaimed.

The padre and Wag charged together. Max put out a shower of blows. They seemed not to land. In a whirl of excitement—hardly any pain then—he realised he was being beaten. Wag was too big. He was being borne down, picked up . . . he was still struggling, but he was being dumped into the truck. Confusion . . .

Handcuffs clicked on his wrists and at once his mind cleared again.

"Maggie!" he bellowed. The sound was lost in the angry revving of the truck. Max half climbed to his feet and then fell over the unconscious George; when he had picked himself up again, the vehicle was already bumping downhill. Max did not call out any more. He sat on the floor of the truck, breathing hard.

When they reached the bottom of the long slope, Wag leant back and said, "Sorry I had to hit you like that, Max."

"It would be better to attend to your driving," the padre said gently.

This was enough to rouse Max again. He knelt up on the bumping floor.

"You're a fine one to say what's best!" he exclaimed bitterly. "You and Wag and everyone—you're all the same! You say my senses are besotted; well, that's the way I like it. To suffer, to feel . . . What's it matter, whether it feels good or it hurts, if you're alive? You preach your bloody sermons against the snares of the senses. You must be mad! Everyone's senses are being starved, not surfeited. A race of fools, dullards, bores, is being raised—by you and your damned creed of the starvation of any natural urge. Why do you think George is lying here drunk? It's because he's reacting against your sort of living death!"

"I'll remind you," Padre Column said, turning in his seat, "That from midnight last you are on active service, Private Fleet. For this insubordination there can be a very serious penalty."

The patchwork city was round them now. The night shadows were stuffed with the dust of dawn. Max relapsed in silence. Talk was useless ; he had never believed in it. Nor had she. My God, to think he'd never even had a last look at her. Supposing he jumped out now, now they were slowing to turn a corner . . .

"Buck up, Max," Wag said, forgivingly. "Dusty and I have got a great stack of new comics to show you when we get back on the old ship."

No, he'd never jump. Perhaps if he had been a different fellow . . . Comics, did they say ? They didn't know what the blood was in their veins for, the whole bloody lot of them ; they didn't know how to live . . . except him . . . and her . . .

What other woman in the whole lousy, lovely universe, instead of crying in protest, would have said, "Oh, well done!" like that, when he hit young Waggy ?

Handcuffed in the dark, Max laughed aloud, exultingly.

—Brian W. Aldiss



Naturally an alien wouldn't understand the psychology of a human—so passive resistance would be incomprehensible to him.

# MESSENGER BOY

by JIM HARMON

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Larkim San Druvan stood on the conquered soil of the Earth colony and looked about himself in tired satisfaction. The sneak attack by the Sankrusan fleet had been entirely successful. Sankrusa had made its first thrust at the swollen giant that was the Terrestrial Federation.

Drawing off his mailed gauntlet Larkim pressed some of the perspiration-fog from his azure forehead. The land before him was uncivilized in appearance. The horizon revealed only a line of scrubby Earth-type trees, the oaks and elms he knew from his college days on Earth. These trees had their voice, the whisper of their oxygen-crowded winds and the disturbing insect parasites that ate their decaying wood. They were typical of Earth in its senility and decay, he knew.

Larkim had to look closer to hand to find the rough wooden frames that represented the capital village of the rustic world, Marlowe. A primitive colony such as this could offer no resistance to Sankrusan seizure; the starships had warped silently down to the surface of the planet and in minutes his men had occupied the village where the Earthmen huddled together on this world.

As a member of a warrior race Larkim was not completely happy with such a bloodless victory, but he knew it was only a

specimen of the conquest Sankrusans would bring home to the imperial state of Earth.

In a way, he was sorry Earth didn't know about the Sankrusan victory even though it was from this lack of knowledge they would wring their final triumph.

Earth had expanded the human race to the stars, occupying more worlds than any other intelligent race in the Galaxy, breeding with a fantastic energy. Now the human race occupied more worlds than it could count. Literally, no one knew how large the Terrestrial Empire was.

Colonies had reached out and founded other colonies, sometimes forgetting to report them all. Even the reported ones had not all been verified and filled. Colonies increased with geometric progression; the home world of Earth couldn't keep up with the number of colonies growing through the universe since the development of warping, faster-than-light starships.

Larkim could remember sitting in the luxurious class-room on Earth as a young man, inhaling the decadent artificially cooled and scented air, hearing the brutish, human professor admitting that communication between the human race scattered among many planets of many stars had broken down. He remembered seeing the old newspapers, so well preserved that they might just have come from the facsimile unit, but gigantic in thickness—hundreds upon hundreds of pages of concise, clipped news reports from thousands of worlds. The technical journals were unbelievable. Finally, even the most thoughtful of Earth publications retreated to their own neighbourhoods, their own specialities.

He had come back from Earth and talked to his superiors, doing what he could to convince them that *now* was the time to strike against Earth, a palsied giant. Now . . .

“Sergeant-major Folkum reporting as ordered, sir.”

Larkim glanced around almost guiltily at the slender young noncom. How many years had it been since he himself only a wore a mailed shirt like Folkum's instead of full ceremonial armour?

“I see you, sergeant-major, quite clearly,” he said “but unless my vision is failing me I don't see the leader of this colony of humans. I believe I suggested that you bring the headman of that town to me.”



"Yes, sir," the young officer blushed purple "but I was unable to find any human in authority in the village."

"Aren't there any official buildings? Courts, jails, churches?" Larkim demanded.

"There may be, sir, but we couldn't find them. All the buildings look alike. Well, they aren't all *alike*, sir, but the ways in which they aren't alike aren't different, sir."

"Stop babbling, sergeant-major!"

"Yes, sir!"

Larkim ran his palm across his jaw. "Couldn't you get any of the inhabitants to tell you the name of their headman? Have you forgotten the principles of torture, sergeant-major?"

"No, sir. But they all claim that they have no leader, sir."

Larkim glared down at his uncomfortable noncom. "Sergeant-major, I lived among Earthmen for some years as a young man. They are a predatory race and someone here is sure to have seized power for himself. These humans are lying to you. But I would like to see them try lying to *me*."

"Yes, sir!" Folkum said feverently.

The village had the smell of freshly cut wood about it. The insignificant buildings presented rough-hewn faces to Larkim as he marched down the main and only street.

He passed the sentries without giving any identification. If they tried bouncing a beam off his armour it would be the last thing they ever did in the Sankrusan army.

A gaunt figure approached him, rattling around inside his armour, his four elbows and four knees looking like *krensham* nuts growing on sickly vines. It was his lieutenant, Henrov San Rogrand, he admitted reluctantly to himself.

"Commander," Rogrand said eagerly "have you heard how our troops are making out?"

"Yes, lieutenant," he replied "and no excuses."

"Not here, commander, but on the rest of the planet."

"Aren't your radios working, man?" Larkim demanded.

"No, commander. Don't you know? There's some kind of counter-frequency that's knocking out our communications."

Larkim grumbled deep inside his thick neck. He had stood on the slope watching the assault. He hadn't returned to the starship for news. A commander's place was with his men! At least, he amended, within sight of them.

"Obviously," he said with forced calm "these humans have set up some kind of jamming transmitters. We must locate and destroy them."

"Begging the commander's pardon," Rogrand mumbled, "but the interference seems completely random. It might be some kind of natural electromagnetic source. These natives themselves use a kind of single signal code transmission over wires. They call it a telegraph."

"Telegraph!" Larkim snapped. "Lieutenant, let this show you an example of how decadent Earthmen lose their grasp of civilization and slide back towards the dawn. The telegraph predates the release of atomic energy on Earth."

"Really, commander? You seem to know everything about the human race."

"I believe in knowing my enemy, lieutenant. Now tell me, have you found the leader of this village yet. It's the largest settlement on the planet. The head human for this world must be here."

Rogrand shifted uneasily, like a bundle of sticks in a turbulent wind. "They all claim they have no leader."

Larkim snorted impatiently. "I've heard *that* before. Bring me one of the prisoners. I'll see how long he can hold on to that line."

The Earthman was a square-built blonde human, about fifty years old. He seemed completely disinterested in what was happening. Gripping a pipe between his teeth, he regarded Larkim and the Sankrusans behind him with something less than the casual observation he would give to leaves rustling in the breeze.

"You should be aware by now," the commander told him levelly "that you are not dealing with an alien race completely ignorant of the customs of Earth humans. I have lived on your planet and know all your weaknesses, your every decadent softness. I know it is impossible for a group of Earthmen to exist where one of you has not beaten the rest down by outsmarting them, or buying them, or beating them to a pulp with his fists. You *have* to have a leader and I have to know who he is."

"Why?" the Earthman asked, momentarily removing his pipe.

"Because, you fool, I can't take possession of this planet unless an official surrenders it to me," Larkim shouted.

"I don't mean to be hard to get along with," the Earthman explained, "but I don't guess anybody here can surrender this planet to you. Marlowe belongs to Earth. I guess you'll just

have to go to Earth and ask the boys there to surrender it to you."

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Larkim stormed. "To go to Earth and ask them to surrender to us openly? No, Sankrusa has a small but valiant population; we can't compete openly with a colossus like the Terrestrial Federation. But one by one we can conquer her worlds without her even knowing about it. Marlowe is the first. Now I suggest you tell me who your leader is. I warn you—torture on Sankrusa is an ancient warrior art."

"Great sakes alive, mister, hold on," the Earthman complained. "I don't want to be tortured any. Just wait a minute. I'm trying to think who our leader would be. Give me a second and I'll think of it. Say, what would you say a leader done?"

Larkim pounded one mailed fist into the other impatiently. "What does a leader do? He's the man who tells the rest of you what to do."

"You mean," the Earthman said anxiously "that if I wanted something done and I couldn't do it myself I could go to our leader and ask him to tell some other people to come and help me?"

The commander mentally reviewed his knowledge of terrestrial history. "Hmm. Royal audience. Lobbyists. Yes, that sounds right."

The other nodded. "And he would send me messages telling me I should go somewhere or do something?"

"Of course! Now stop pretending to be below even the standard of Earth intelligence. Who is this man you are talking about?"

"The messenger boy," the Earthman said triumphantly.

Larkim turned aside in disgust. "Kill this one and bring me another one. I never could stand human attempts at humour."

Lieutenant Rogrand coughed respectfully. "Of course I lack the commander's knowledge of Earth customs, but it has occurred to me that the man in charge of the only communications system on the planet might hold some authority."

He narrowed his flat eyes. "What are you getting at?" he asked his lieutenant.

"I heard the colonists say that the messenger boy ran the telegraph station here," Rogrand answered softly.

Larkim waved a hand. "Let him go," he ordered the men holding the Earthman. They dropped him, literally. It was

few moments before he recovered enough to crawl away. Sankrusans like to do things with their hands.

"Lieutenant, by any chance, would you happen to know where the telegraph station is?" Larkim inquired.

"The commander is joking," Rogrand said brightly. "Of course I seized enemy communication at once. Unfortunately, there wasn't anybody there at the time."

"I suppose you would prefer that he was there alerting every village on the face of the world that we had attacked them?" Larkim asked politely.

"No, sir! But in that case we would have had someone to bring to the commander."

"I suppose," Larkim said "that you would have been able to effortlessly follow the distorted logic of Earthmen and would have instantly recognized that the messenger boy was the most important man in the village."

"Well, sir, as the Earthman said, he would have been telling people what to do, wouldn't he?"

Larkim looked at his junior officer for a long moment, but did not reply. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Rogrand slump wearily as he looked away from him.

"Where is the telegraph, lieutenant?"

"The house at the end of the street, commander."

He marched down the road with a small personal guard trailing him.

Suddenly an Earthman loomed up in front of them.

The Sankrusans behind him dropped to their knees, weapons ready to defend Larkim, but he waved them off. It was the same middle-aged human he had questioned, now somewhat battered.

"Excuse me, mister," the Earthman said, approaching with pipe in hand, "I don't mean to pry, but you said something about taking over the Terrestrial Federation."

"Yes."

"About conquering all the worlds, the ones Earth had so many of she couldn't even count. Are you going to take over every Earth colony?"

"Yes," Larkim said. "It may take generations but eventually we will own every colony of the bloated giant, even Earth itself. In its swollen senility it is unfit to rule."

The Earthmen nodded thoughtfully. "There's just one thing. How the devil are *you* going to keep track of all those colonies?"

Larkim marched on, his guard brushing aside the Earthman like a *kryll* bug.

He couldn't lower himself to disposing of an Earthmen for asking a question, for admitting his ignorance of Sankrusan superiority. There would be stronger resistance than that and a decimated colony was of no use to Sankrusa. She needed workers and servants. Sankrusans weren't a prolific race; they needed wealth, not territory.

The house at the end of the street was different from the others but Larkim couldn't reason out the difference. He abruptly realized he had a splitting headache.

Larkim waited inside the primitive cabin for four hours before anyone finally showed up.

He peered between the homespun curtains and saw a youngish Earthman with unruly hair walking up the path carrying a string of fish and whistling some sentimental Terrestrial love chant.

Nodding to the guards, he flattened himself against the wall by the window as the other Sankrusans positioned themselves on either side of the door.

The human youth lifted the latch and stepped inside. Instantly the two guards knocked him to his knees with blows at the base of his spine and jerked away the line of fish, pawing and shredding his clothes in a fruitless search for weapons.

The Earthman got to his feet, rubbing the small of his back. "Say, what's going on here?" he inquired.

"This planet has been seized by the Sankrusan Expeditionary Force. You are all now subjects of the Sankrusan Crown," Larkim explained curtly.

The human whistled softly. "That *is* news. I better key-up the other towns. They probably don't even know about this yet."

Larkim allowed himself the Sankrusan equivalent of a smile, which looked more like a sneer. "They know about it, I can assure you. I can also warn you that trying to alert the planet to our coming is an unhealthy business for you to attempt."

The telegraph operator shrugged. "If they already know about it, there isn't much use of my telling them. But what would you care if I did?"

Larkim held his temper. It wasn't good form for a warrior but that was an officer's burden. The truth was, with all his



radio communications inoperative he had no way of knowing whether the rest of the invasion had been a success or not.

Naturally, he wasn't going to tell an alien prisoner the truth.

"It's a matter of principle," the commander said. "Resistance to your Sankrusan liberators means death. And resistance includes passing messages to help the enemy, undermining Sankrusan morale or bolstering Terrestrial morale. Remember that ! I'm leaving a man here who can easily learn your code and listen to everything you send and receive on your primitive instrument."

"Why, I wouldn't want to send anything that would cause any trouble," the messenger boy said.

"Don't take me for a fool, Terrestrial," Larkim told him. "I've lived on your Earth. I know Earthmen. You will resist us bloodily. You think you don't dare risk fighting us openly, but you will form underground armies and no doubt murder many of my men. But let me warn you : for every Sankrusan that dies, *ten* Earthmen will be executed.

"I dislike giving the impression that I think ten Earthmen equal the life of one Sankrusan soldier, but unfortunately this is a small colony. If we executed a hundred or a thousand of you we would rapidly run out of servants to provide for us and the Crown.

"Now I suggest you pass this warning along to the other villages on your communications line," Larkim concluded.

"No, sir !" the messenger boy snapped. "I'm not going to send anything like that and get executed for it."

"You *kryll*," he said impatiently "I won't execute you for following my instructions."

"Look here, General—"

"*Commander* Larkim San Drusan."

"—Commander, we Marlowes are a simple people maybe not much like other Earthmen. All we want is a chance to enjoy our life peacefully—to farm, and fish, and try to reach an understanding of Truth through contemplation. That's our whole way of life since the Founder brought us here. I can tell you that no Marlowe would ever get an idea into his head to murder *anybody*, much less someone who was going to save him the trouble of running his own affairs. But if I go tapping out a warning to everybody not to do it, somebody may think it is a good idea after all. No, sir, I just can't do it. You're asking me to pass along anti-Sankrusan propaganda, and moreover, to be responsible for the deaths of my own people for every Sankrusan I may give somebody the idea of killing."

"Perhaps you're right," Larkim admitted grudgingly. "What do they call you, boy?"

"My name is Will Adams but they don't always call me that."

"I know. They also call you 'messenger boy.' There is something else: I want you to contact the largest village on the other side of the continent. Do your lines reach that far?"

"Yes, sir. We had the Planetary Engineers lay us inter-continental lines under the seas. I can reach about any place on the planet."

"Good. I want you to get me my Lieutenant Fragnam in Marloweburg. I hope—I know he had sense enough to seize the telegraph post there himself."

"Aren't your radios working?" Adams asked.

"He's been spying on us," one of the guards yelled. "Shall I kill him, sir?"

Larkim raised a palm in interference with the guard's violent idea. "What makes you ask that question, Adams?"

The telegraph operator shrugged. "Our radios don't work. I didn't know whether you had solved the problem or not."

"You can rest assured that Sankrusan science is far ahead of Earth's," the commander replied. "Purely as a test of the effectiveness of your primitive system, I want you to ask Fragnam if he is in control of Marloweburg."

"I think you had better use your radio for that, commander," Adams said apologetically. "Suppose he isn't in control of the town? I'll be warning the people against your invasion then and you would have to have me executed for that."

Larkim grunted to himself. He didn't mind the Earthman having to die for a mistake of a Suskrusan's, but he didn't want to tip off the natives if for some reason Fragnam hadn't made his move. And if he hadn't done as ordered, the Great God help him. He would send out a scout for the purpose of communication, Larkim decided.

"Very well. You will send out *nothing*. One of my men will remain here and listen in on all incoming messages."

"If that's the way you want it, commander," the messenger said readily. "There's one thing—I know I'm in no position to ask favours, but might I call something to the commander's attention in his own best interests?"

Larkim had learned never to trust an Earthman but he was ready to listen to one begging him for leniency. "Say it, Terrestrial."

"I know my people, commander. Marlowes aren't an imaginative people, but they are suggestible. It might be a good thing to advise your men not to mention that ten of us will be killed for every one of them we kill to any Marlowe. There's no use in giving the people any dangerous ideas. They might not stop to think what retaliation would cost us. If you don't say anything, probably most of us will never even *think* of retaliation."

Larkim studied Adam's youthful face for a moment. "I'm not entirely sure how clever you are, Terrestrial. Perhaps you want me to keep back information about reprisals so that your people will strike, not knowing the consequences. But I'm willing to wager the life of one Sankrusan soldier before I make public our reprisal schedule."

He turned on his heel and stalked towards the door.

Uncomfortably, he noticed that the Earthman behind him had begun to whistle once again.

As it happened, Larkim didn't send out a scout boat immediately.

He was confident that the bovine Earthmen on Marlowe would give Sankrusan soldiers no trouble. And at the same time, he was oddly afraid to reduce the number of his own forces in the enemy stronghold. The capital was a small town, but nevertheless the Terrestrials far outnumbered the troops that could be carried on one starship.

It was the day following the landing that sergeant-major Folkum rapped on the hatch of Larkim's HQ hut.

The commander looked up from his work sourly. He was in the middle of the sixteenth stanza of the battle hymn he was to read at Court on their return. It was hard-going; he had almost flunked Epic Poetry II at the Military School.

"Well, sergeant-major?"

The invitation-dismissal hung unaccepted for a moment.

Folkum cleared his throat reluctantly. "Sir, I thought it was my duty to report that the ranks are restless."

"Restless? Of course they are restless. They can't rape mammals. It's unfortunate but it's just one of the things a good soldier has to learn to put up with."

"It's more than that, sir. The men think he deserves the ceremony of a proper military funeral."

"Who?" Larkim demanded in exasperation. "We took this miserable little hole without a single casualty." He sighed.

"These people don't even know the meaning of fighting."

"I don't know the soldier's name, sir. Scattered the way we are I suppose only the men in his platoon know which of us it was."

Larkim became interested. "A body finally turned up, eh? Couldn't you identify him? I suppose he was too mutilated. Feelings build up."

"No body, sir," Folkum said uncomfortably.

"Somebody saw the Terrestrials drag off a soldier?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Then how the bloody hell do you know anybody's dead, man?"

"Well, sir, we keep a close count of the townspeople. We double-checked at noon, but it was true; there were ten of them missing. So we knew that you had—"

"I did nothing, sergeant-major. Nothing! So far as I know there are still no casualties in our ranks. But you, sergeant-major, you have stood around and let ten of our prisoners escape to head off across the countryside and warn the rest of the continent. I swear if I wasn't shorthanded, sergeant-major . . ."

"But you do need every man, don't you, sir," Folkum said sharply.

"Yes, sergeant-major, I need everyone. To hang for insubordination if nothing better."

Folkum's complexion faded to a vapourish blue. "Yes, sir," he said quietly.

"Get out."

The noncom left, stumbling over his own feet.

Larkim rubbed his chin briskly for a moment, then picked up his writing instrument. Ten escapees couldn't cause much trouble.

Why, he wondered, did he always have such trouble rhyming the Sankrusan word, blood?

A few days later, Larkim decided he could venture through the village safely with only two fully armed guards.

He noticed the polite nodding of heads from the colonists without a feeling of accomplishment; the Marlowes were a particularly sheeplike herd of Earthmen.

Lieutenant Rogrand approached, alone, and saluted smartly.

"May I speak to the commander a moment?" he inquired.

Larkim grunted assent. They moved over into the shadow of one of the buildings. "Well?" the commander demanded. "What's it about, lieutenant?"

"The escapees, sir."

"More of these Terrestrials have slipped through your paws, have they!"

"Yes, commander, they have," Rogrand admitted. "But the chief problem now is our own deserters."

"Three deserters isn't too bad a record. You have to expect some cowards among real warriors. There is nothing that brings out cowardice, Lieutenant, like the presence of bravery."

"It isn't three any longer, commander," Rogrand said softly, glancing around at the townsfolk. "It's nearer thirty. Twenty-eight at last count."

Larkim blinked rapidly, trying to think just as fast. "I don't get it. Twenty-eight. What's wrong with them?"

"They are afraid, sir."

"Of course they are afraid, but what is there about sheep like this to frighten them."

Rogrand coughed. "You'll admit the underground resistance is stiff, sir. After all, we've had to execute half the town in reprisal."

The tendons stood out beside Larkim's nose. "Have you executed any Earthmen, lieutenant?"

"No, commander. I supposed you had given that detail to some other man," the lieutenant offered.

"Because of your carelessness certain prisoners have escaped from this community but they have offered *no* resistance to Sankrusan authority whatsoever."

Rogrand pressed his four sets of knuckles against his brow. The skin around his hand drained into the colour of ice-blue snow. "I think I see, commander. And you *can't* tell the men that the aliens really aren't resisting us."

"Why not? It's the truth!" Larkim bellowed.

"Commander, of course it's true, but you know if you tell the men that they will think you are lying to them, trying to make them think conditions here are less dangerous than they are. They are *convinced* these Earthmen are slaughtering them in their sleep. There are too many of us for any soldier to keep track of the rest. If they think you are lying to them, they will lose respect for you."

Larkim tried to cough up something he had sucked down his throat. He absolutely did not want his men to lose

respect for him. The Sankrusans were a race of warriors. Mutiny was not at all unusual in the Sankrusan army. Above all, Larkim did not want his men to think he was a liar.

"Lieutenant," he said earnestly, grabbing the younger officer between his right elbows, "you've got to stop these colonists from escaping the village. I don't want my men to think more of us will get slaughtered every night."

Rogrand glanced around covertly. "Commander, I don't think these people *are* escaping. We have all the exits covered. I think they are hiding somewhere here in town. I've sent men to locate their hiding place but with no luck so far."

"Hiding? Why the Devine Devil should they be hiding?"

Rogrand studied his commander's face warily. "I couldn't say, commander," he answered finally in a tired voice.

Suddenly, Rogrand stepped in closer beside Larkim. "Sir, there's only one thing we can do. If we kill off all these Terrestrials the men will know they have nothing more to fear."

"Lieutenant, you know it would cost me my commission if not my head if the Crown ever discovered I had genocided a herd of willing slaves out of sheer *cowardice*."

"But this isn't cowardice! These Earthmen are the greatest danger we've ever faced!"

"What are you babbling about, Mr. Rogrand? These colonists haven't harmed a scale on our head? It's the cowardice of our men we have to worry about."

"Yes, sir," Rogrand admitted slowly. "Of course you're right, commander."

"The thing for you to do is locate the hiding place of the townspeople," Larkim said. "Then the men will have to believe that there have been no Sankrusan casualties."

"Of course, commander. Unless they think you have imported colonists from other villages. I can't tell one of these Earthmen from another, can you, sir?"

Larkim didn't answer.

He had lost track of the days. Their passage no longer seemed real to him.

Sergeant-major Folkum's body was beginning to get ripe where it laid in the doorway of the pre-fabricated hut.

Larkim looked down at the gun he had done it with. He let it lay in his palm a moment, then silently reholstered it. Gone.



They were all gone. First every member of the Earth colony had disappeared. And soon afterwards all of his men were gone.

It seemed impossible that lieutenant Rogrand would desert him, steal the starship and carry off his best men in terror from a world where the inhabitants wouldn't fight. But he had.

Folkum's mutiny was not unexpected and he had dealt neatly with that by beaming him between the nostrils. The ragged little clump of Sankrusans with the sergeant-major had turned tail at the sight of blood and fled into the forest.

The commander of the Sankrusan Expeditionary Force was completely alone, unable to contact his men in control of the other Marlowe villages. Or were they in control? He hadn't dared go to the Terrestrial, Adams, and ask him to telegraph for more reinforcements. He couldn't admit he was helpless, deserted.

Then he heard the footsteps outside, rustling through leaves on the dusty soil.

He sneered half-heartedly. More of his men returning to finish him off. They would have to come through the door one at a time. A single-fire weapon would be entirely sufficient for them.

His trigger finger became paralysed when the first figure appeared on the threshold.

It was a young Earthman, a Marlowe colonist, but different from any he had ever seen. He was dressed in light plastic body armour, and rigged with body straps supporting several lethal-looking weapons. Larkim was unfamiliar with the type of rifle that was being aimed at him but he was confident it could kill him efficiently.

The thing that disturbed him most was the fact that this Terrestrial soldier was the messenger boy, Will Adams.

He stared down foolishly at his own hand weapon.

Adams took a running step into the room and knocked Larkim's gun skithering through the air with his rifle butt.

Larkim blinked uncertainly, and Adams' hand chopped down on the point where his neck met his body and he collapsed back into his chair.

"Make up your mind whether you're going to use that faster next time, Larkim," Adams told him.

A number of other Earthmen outfitted like Adams filtered into the hut. Perhaps Rogrand's idea that all Earthmen looked alike had only been prejudice because Larkim was suddenly sure he had never seen these particular humans before.

"It seems," the Sankrusan commander said "that you can't learn *everything* about a race by living among its members for a few years."

Adams nodded. "There's a lot you don't know about human beings."

Larkim waved a hand tiredly. "Where did these Terrestrials come from?"

"Other villages where you didn't land. They got my message, just as your own men did."

"My men got your message!" Larkim blurted. "So that's it. Propaganda! They believed your story; that's why they all left. But how did you manage to pass out your lies? I had you constantly watched."

"Larkim, you don't know very much about how a telegraph works," the telegrapher said. "A telegraph sends a message only when the current is interrupted. *It functions only where its signal is missing*. A steady transmission means nothing. It only counts when its output is broken."

Larkim shielded his eyes. "I don't see—"

"You don't want to see, but I'll help you understand," Adams answered. "If you had stopped to take us seriously as a potential danger you would have realized that when the messages I ordinarily sent out were missing the other villages would know something was wrong. In the same way when your men saw that the villagers were missing and knowing that ten of us would die for each of them they knew we were resisting them. They got our message by our absence."

"You were hiding somewhere," Larkim said urgently, "but we could never find you."

"Commander, on a materialisticly backward world the people may have found unconventional means of accomplishing their needs. You are probably unfamiliar with where we went and what we used to get there."

Larkim lifted his eyes towards Adams. "Very well. Sankrusa failed here. But I know Earthmen. They aren't all as devious as your people. We will win on some worlds without Earth knowing or caring who is clipping its toenails. Until finally we will have the power to crush you."

"Don't you see even yet?" Adams asked patiently. "Earth will know your plans. If you conquer the colonies the flow of new colonies will be interrupted. You haven't enough men to continue faking it. The supply of new data feeding back to Earth is incomprehensible now, but if you interrupt that transmission Earth will understand instantly."

"Commander Adams," Larkim said finally, "would you leave me here with my weapon?"

"No," Adams said. "You can help your people more by going back and trying to convince them they can't beat Earth. There's no reason for contest besides your philosophy of combat. You don't need room for growing—the human race does. We produce more than we need and you can trade your services for it. Offhand, I would say you could help us in policing ourselves."

Larkim stared dully at the fallen gun on the floor of the hut.

"Terrestrial," he said finally, "do you have any books by Earth's epic poets on this world?"

—Jim Harmon

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