

# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

A  
Nova  
Science Fiction  
Magazine

No. 25

2/6

VOLUME 5



**JOHN BRUNNER**  
Spoil Of Yesterday

**PHILIP E. HIGH**  
Blind As A Bat

**MICHAEL  
MOORCOCK**

**ALAN BURNS**

**STEVE HALL**

# TIME CONTRACTS—CLUB EXPANDS

A new and fruitful discovery has been made by the bug-eyed extra-terrestrials who run S F B C: by reducing the intervals between books the enjoyment of members increases and the Club gets larger. This principle has now been applied once more and members will receive in future 12 books a year, one every month, each a top-flight, low-priced, durably bound volume by a star author.

February

## TROUBLE WITH LICHEN

by John Wyndham

The trouble with revolutionary discoveries is that their consequences are often more disruptive than beneficial. But can they be suppressed? 'If even a tenth of s f were as good, we should be in clover'—*Kingsley Amis*.

13s. 6d. for 5s. 6d.

March

## WOLFBALE

by Frederick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth

The earth is chill, lit by an artificial sun, and held captive by a strange planet in the deep reaches of outer space, but man is not yet finally defeated! 'It liberates one's thoughts from conventional categories'—*Guardian*.

12. 6d. for 5s. 6d.

April

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SKY

by Arthur Clarke

A really magnificent collection of twenty-four short stories from a brilliant author of whose work Kingsley Amis wrote—'Science fiction of the finest quality: original, imaginative, disturbing.'

15s. for 5s. 6d.

May

## NEW MAPS OF HELL

by Kingsley Amis

A critical guide to s f. 'A must to buy, read and keep, as it is by far the best thing done for us yet'—*New Worlds*.

16s. for 5s. 6d.

June

## THE STARS ARE TOO HIGH

by Agnew Bahnsen

Never previously published in U.K., this remarkable novel tells how a group of idealists perfect a space craft of unprecedented power and use it to end the cold war.

\$3.95 for 5s. 6d.

July

## BEST SF4

edited by Edmund Crispin

Stories by ten top-notchers, the latest in Edmund Crispin's famous Best SF series. 'Well up to the level of its predecessors, which is saying something.'—*Kingsley Amis*. 15s. for 5s. 6d.

## JOIN SFBC HERE • VACANCIES LIMITED

To: The Science Fiction Book Club, 10/13 Bedford Street, London W.C.2.

Please enrol me as a member of the Science Fiction Book Club. I will purchase six consecutive choices, commencing (if possible) with the ..... choice. After 6 books if I wish to discontinue my membership, I can give one month's notice. 735

☐ I will pay on receipt of each book 5s. 6d. (plus 1s. postage and packing).

☐ I enclose 33s. (plus 6s. postage and packing) for six books.

☐ I enclose 66s. (plus 12s. postage and packing) for a year's membership.

*Here and overseas members must send remittance for 6 or more books.*

Name ..... (Mr. Mrs. Miss)

Address .....



# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 4 No. 25

1962

## Original Science Fiction Stories

### *Novelettes :*

**SPOIL OF YESTERDAY** John Brunner 2

Only the Society of Time was allowed to visit  
past eras—the removal of an artifact could well  
change history.

**BLIND AS A BAT** Philip E. High 41

Manwood was promoted above his station and  
given a suicide squadron—but the Base psychiatrists  
knew what would happen.

### *Short Stories :*

**GOING HOME** Michael Moorcock 73

**DEVIANT** Alan Burns 88

**EINSTEIN'S UNIVERSE** Steve Hall 103

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by LEWIS illustrating "Spoil Of Yesterday"

Published bi-monthly by NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., Maclaren  
House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1 Tel. : HOP. 5712

Sole Agents for Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

Sole Agents for North America : Gordon & Gotch (Canada) Ltd.

Annual Subscription 17/- post free (6 issues)

North America \$3.00

The entire contents of this magazine are Copyright 1962 by Nova Publications Ltd.,  
and must not be reproduced or translated without the written consent of the publisher

The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed  
in this magazine are fiction, any similarity between the characters and actual persons  
is purely coincidental.

*Members of the Society of Time travelled into the Past on research work only, for nothing of historical importance dare be changed. But someone smuggled an Aztec mask back from the 15th Century . . .*

# SPOIL OF YESTERDAY

by JOHN BRUNNER

---

## Chapter One

Don Miguel Navarro, Licentiate in Ordinary of the Society of Time and loyal subject of His Most Catholic Majesty Philip IX, *Rey y Imperador*, regarded himself as a man of modern and enlightened views. Among other radical notions he held the opinion that women should not be barred by prejudice from science, philosophy and those other fields which were traditionally the preserve of men.

He had therefore been pleased to receive the invitation to tonight's function, the more so as it was in the Marquesa di Jorque's own handwriting—a rare honour!—with the great sprawling signature across the bottom: "Catalina di Jorque." He had turned down an invitation to the reception of the municipality taking place on the same evening, where they were promising clowns, jugglers and pyrotechnics—part of the quatro-centennial celebrations, of course—in order to come here.

And what had he got?

The Marquesa had been a famous beauty when she was in her twenties and thirties; having lost her looks at about the same time as she lost her husband—and enjoying the late

Marques's considerable wealth, because he also had been of advanced views—she had set up as a successful society hostess and was a well-known campaigner for female emancipation.

Yet and still, her reputation for erudition seemed to have been founded on nothing more than a habit of assembling leading lights in various fields and displaying them to each other. Tonight's function seemed to be typical. The invitation had said "a small gathering of intelligent people," and that was what had hooked Don Miguel; he preferred good conversation to the finest tumblers and fireworks in the Empire. Instead, he had found upwards of four hundred people—clerics, philosophers both pure and natural, musicians, artists, and a dozen other kinds of people.

That was well enough so far as it went. The trouble was that they all seemed to be slightly second-best. And after his arrival he had had to suffer the embarrassing experience of being shown around the hall by the Marquesa—as it were, a real live licentiate of the Society of Time, exclamation point, in the same tone of voice as one would say, "It's a real live tiger!"

At length he had managed to slip away into a quiet alcove; now he was wondering how he could get out of the building altogether. Rather the municipality's clowns than *these* clowns!

His glass was empty, and he looked around for a slave bearing a tray of full ones. He caught the attention of a slender Guinea-girl with knowing eyes and active hips, and as he watched her move away after changing his glass, he sighed. There were so many better ways of wasting time!

The sigh must have been too loud; there was a chuckle from near where he was standing, and a deep voice with a humorous edge to it said, "Your honour is perhaps not accustomed to the Marquesa's entertainments."

Don Miguel half-turned. He saw a man of middle height, in a maroon cloak and white velvet breeches, whose ginger hair was fastidiously high on his head. There was something rather engaging in his freckled face. Don Miguel gave the semi-bow that etiquette demanded, and said, "Miguel Navarro. No, it is the first time I've been to one of these affairs. I'm seldom in the country."

"Arcimbolito Ruiz," said the freckled man. "You're the time-traveller, aren't you?" It was permissible for him to

revert from the formal "Usted"—your honour—to the simple *you* now that Don Miguel had given him his name.

A little taken aback, Don Miguel nodded. Don Arcimboldo gave another chuckle. "Don't be so surprised that you've been identified. Once your acceptance of the invitation came through, Catalina couldn't keep from publicising the fact. She might at least have had the grace to inform you of the technique for getting through her receptions, though—or maybe she couldn't, because she probably doesn't know it herself."

"You *seem* to be enjoying yourself—" said Don Miguel doubtfully.

"Oh, I am ! Perhaps you were misled by Catalina's reputation as a centre of intelligent activity. As you've probably worked out for yourself by now, Catalina is actually—shall we put it kindly?—overconfident of her own talents. No, the trick is a simple one. She serves excellent food and truly miraculous wine ; therefore, come to her receptions for the refreshments, and take your chance on finding good company or not."

Don Miguel's face twisted into his crooked smile—always crooked, thanks to a certain Greek hoplite on the plains of Macedonia. "I had indeed arrived at that conclusion," he admitted. "Yet it seemed to me improbable, for how could so many people be deceived for so long?"

Don Arcimboldo shrugged, picking a luscious-looking cake off a tray borne by a passing slave. "Are we deceived? How much and how many of us are deceived? I think rather few. I think rather that we prefer to give Catalina her little meed of glory, and enjoy her food and her drink."

Another slave—the Marquesa di Jorque was wealthy, and had perhaps a hundred in her household—came searching through the crowd ; this time a tall Guinea-man who towered above the heads of those he passed by. Catching sight of Don Miguel, he broke off his wandering and came hurrying up.

"Her ladyship requests the honour of your honour's company," he said, bowing low. He straightened, and stood like an ebony statue awaiting an answer.

Don Miguel pulled a wry face at Don Arcimboldo. "There's no way of getting out of it, I suppose?" he said.

"None at all, unless you wish to incur Catalina's wrath—which can be spectacular and public."

Don Miguel heaved a sigh and tossed off the last of his wine. "Lead me to her," he told the slave, and as he turned to go, added formally to Don Arcimboldo, "The meeting has much honoured me. May we meet again."

"The honour is mine. May we meet again."

The Marquesa was standing under a bower of hot-house creepers, trained on silver branches, deep in conversation with two men. One of them Don Miguel recognised—Father Peabody, whose official post was clerk to the Archbishop of Jorque but who was commonly known as "her ladyship's chaplain"; men whispered unkind things about his function in her household. The other, Don Miguel did not know.

"Ah, Don Miguel!" said the Marquesa when he bowed before her, and flashed him a look that had probably laid suitors low in swathes when she was twenty years younger. "I trust that I have not dragged you away from an interesting discussion! But we are speaking of a difficult problem and would welcome your expert advice. Let Don Marco propose it to you."

She gestured at the man Don Miguel did not know, a foppish person in a moss-green cloak and yellow breeches, whose sword-handle was so heavily encrusted with jewels it was obvious he never intended to use the weapon. He uttered his name in a high goat-like bleat.

"Marco Villanova, your honour!"

"Miguel Navarro," said Don Miguel briefly. "What is your problem?"

"We were disputing regarding the private lives of the great, Don Miguel. It is my contention—indeed, reason demands it!—that the greatness of individuals must be manifest as much in their private as in their public lives."

"We spoke, in particular, of Julius Caesar," said Father Peabody, rubbing his hands on the front of his long black cassock. "There is a man whose greatness is not in dispute, I venture to say."

He spoke with a broad flat native accent, and bobbed his head humbly after every other word as though conscious of his inferior family status.

"Well, as you speak of Caesar," said Don Miguel, a little more snappishly than he had intended, "I can give you accurate information. As it happens, I've spoken to him. And he was a perfumed fop. In his youth, he was guilty of abomina-

tions with men, and in his maturity his promiscuous behaviour was such that the gossip of all Rome centred on it. If this is greatness in his private life, you may maintain so ; I would not."

Don Marco flushed and drew back half a pace, with a side-long glance at the Marquesa. "It does not seem to me to be fitting to speak of such matters in the hearing of a lady !" he said.

Don Miguel answered him frigidly. "Her ladyship asked my expert advice ; I gave it. I do not think dabblers, who turn aside from what displeases them—and history is full of unpleasant things—are qualified to pass opinions."

The jab went home; Don Marco's flush deepened still further. And the Marquesa added more coals when she gave a vigorous nod of confirmation.

"Indeed, Marco, that is what I want. For far too long, we women have been sheltered and pampered and secluded. This is not due to any weakness in ourselves, only to masculine prejudice."

She raised her sharp eyes to Don Miguel's face, and heaved a sigh. "But that we have in our midst a man who has spoken with Caesar himself ! Is it not a *miracle* ?"

"We of the Society of Time do not regard it as such," Don Miguel answered off-handedly. "It's an application of natural laws. A miracle, perhaps, would be to discover a means of flying to the moon. No one has suggested natural means whereby that might be accomplished."

"With—with respect," said Father Peabody, bobbing his round head in which his eyes were still rounder, "how was this feat accomplished ? I understood, if you will pardon me, that the rules of your Society forbade interference, and limited the actions of time-travellers to simple observation."

Already Don Miguel had regretted his ill-considered boast ; the cleric's sharp question made him regret it still further. He said stiffly, "True, father. I assure you that that rule is most strictly kept. All I can say is that the means employed are a secret of the Society, and used only with maximum safeguards."

"I may be only a poor stupid woman," said the Marquesa, and paused, as though waiting for automatic contradiction. Not getting it, she was forced to continue. "But to me it seems that interference with the past is out of the question. What, was, was, and how can it be changed, or interfered with ?"



Don Miguel sighed. For all her boasting about her intellectual accomplishments, the Marquesa had just put a question that no fifteen-year-old schoolboy of average intelligence would have uttered ; he would have been taught the answer in school, or pieced it together from the items in the news. Indeed, even Don Marco was a little surprised, and showed that surprise in his expression.

"The basic arguments, my lady, are rather a matter for the speculative philosophers than for a pragmatic person like myself. But I have some conception of them, and if you wish, I'll try and elucidate."

A shadow of discomfort as though caused by the realisation that she had let herself in for some heavy brainwork, crossed the Marquesa's face. But she composed herself and adopted an expression of polite interest.

"Do go on !" she murmured.

## Chapter Two

"First," said Don Miguel slowly, trying to cast his thought into words suitable for the Marquesa's intelligence, "there are in history certain crucial turning-points, are there not ? Of these, some are due to yet earlier causes, and some are comparatively random. It's rare that we can find down any event in history to a single essential causative element. The fall of Rome, for instance, was not only due to the invasion of a barbarian horde ; it was also due to decadence among the Romans, and as such is the sum of vast numbers of individual acts and attitudes. Do you see ?"

The Marquesa nodded, beginning to frown. Don Miguel assumed that she was not yet out of her depth.

"If we—I say *if*, for we have never dared !—if we were to tamper with the life of even a single Roman in the year 300, we might affect the entire course of events. We might rule ourselves out of existence ! Rome and the Roman Empire might yet be standing !"

"I'm *fascinated* by the great empires of the past !" said the Marquesa with enthusiasm. "Especially by—"

She noted the pained look on Don Miguel's face, and broke off. "I was carried away !" she said self-excusingly. "Do continue !"



"You've followed me so far?"

"Ye-es—except that if we were so to change history, then how would history have been changed? I mean, without us having gone back to change it?"

Don Miguel sighed. "We wouldn't exist, you see," he said. "This would be *history*—all the history there was. And if the outside interference was marked, then we presume that some other agency would have caused it."

Father Peabody shook his head, a look of resigned wonder on his face. "Truly the ways of the Lord are inscrutable!" he said.

The Marquesa gave a sudden nod and smile. "I see!" she said, and then added doubtfully, "I *think* . . ."

Don Marco spoke up. "You mentioned turning-points of a different nature, where interference is less dangerous, I think. What are those, then?"

Don Miguel shrugged. "The classic example, of course, is one which we all know—the storm that broke the English defences four hundred years ago, doused their fireships, and in effect made certain the conquest of Britain. We could hardly interfere with the brewing of a storm!"

"But—was that storm really so important?" the Marquesa put in. "I mean, the Armada was so huge and so well-armed . . ."

"We have studied this matter exhaustively, I can assure you," said Don Miguel. "The most eminent strategists and naval authorities agree that encumbered as they were with occupation troops and supplies, the galleons might well have been worsted—especially if the fireships had got among them with a steady following wind."

"Wonderful!" said the Marquesa, shaking her head in admiration. "Tell me, Don Miguel, is it true that in this year—this quatercentennial year—some specially honoured outsiders have been invited to witness the actual victory?"

"No, my lady!" Don Miguel looked at her sharply. "From whom did you hear such nonsense? The rule of the Society—that only Licentiates are permitted to travel back in time—is absolutely inflexible. The purpose of time travel is serious historical research; it is not a—*a* carnival, a spectacle for sensation-seekers!"

"Curious!" mused the Marquesa. "I had heard—but no matter. Yet I find it in my heart to wish that the rule was not

so rigid. I have such a tremendous desire to see these great past happenings !”

“We have brought back pictures of almost all the great events of the past—” began Don Miguel.

“Ah, pictures ! Pictures are dull, flat, lifeless ! What are pictures beside a view of reality ? But your heart is hard, Don Miguel. I see that.”

“I assure you, time-travel is no pleasure trip. The dirt, the squalor, the cruelty, the—the disgusting facts of life in earlier ages, in short, see to that.”

“Ah, but dirt and squalor are still with us. Why, yonder in the market outside the city wall of Jorque itself, there are people with *lice* on them, who do not know the meaning of the word soap ! I have no desire to view their ancestors—they were probably the same fifty generations ago. But I would greatly love to see the rich and beautiful things of the past. As I began to say”—she punctuated the sentence with an arch look of reproach, that belonged in the armoury of a far younger woman—“I am most fascinated by the empires of the past. The Empire of Mexico, for instance, with its wonderful gold-work and featherwork !”

“And its pleasant custom of sacrificing human victims by tearing out the living heart and displaying it to the victim,” said Don Miguel sourly.

“Have you no romance in you, Don Miguel ?” cried the Marquesa.

“It is not I that lack romance ; it is the empires of the past.”

“And yet—ah, but I called you to me to ask your expert advice, and I must accept what you say in that spirit.” The Marquesa gave a delicate, lady-like shrug. “And I would ask you one further favour of the same. I have a mask—a golden mask, of Aztec manufacture—which I wish to show off to you.”

Her choice of words betrayed satisfactory honesty. Don Miguel bowed by way of answer. “But I know little of gold and ornament,” he said doubtfully.

“Oh, no matter ! I am just proud of it, Don Miguel, and should like you to admire it also. You will excuse us,” she added to Don Marco and Father Peabody, who stepped back obediently. A slave answered an imperious gesture and cleared a way through the press of guests.

“You will not think it disgraceful of me, I am sure,” said the Marquesa briskly, “When I say that the mask hangs in my bedchamber. I feel that it is an insult to the dignity of women

to assume that they cannot protect their own virtue if they happen to be alone in masculine company."

The Marquesa had practically succeeded in making the enlightened and progressive Don Miguel into a bigoted reactionary by her behaviour so far this evening ; accordingly, he answered irritably, " And to men also, you must admit, my lady—by assuming that they are inevitably inclined to make improper advances whenever they have the opportunity."

The Marquesa looked blank ; then she smiled. " True, true ! I plead for the quality of the sexes, so I must confess you are right."

Through the head-turning, bowing throng they passed, down a corridor where their footsteps echoed on magnificent Moorish tiles, and into a room which their accompanying slave opened with a key from a chain at his waist. The room was large and luxurious, its great bed disguised as a bank of moss, its walls and ceilings festooned with the Marquesa's habitual creepers ; an adjacent bathroom was revealed through a half-open curtain in one wall.

But after the first glance, Don Miguel saw nothing of this. His attention was riveted by the magnificent golden mask that hung on the wall facing the foot of the bed. Hardly daring to breathe, he walked up to it and stood gazing at it.

It was more than just a mask. It was a representation in beaten gold of the head-dress, mask and shoulder-plates of an Aztec warrior. The square, snarling face of the mask was nine inches deep ; the head-dress was twice as high, and the shoulder-plates were fifteen inches square. It dominated the room with its rich yellow lustre.

" Is it not magnificent ?" said the Marquesa happily. " I am so proud of it !" And then, when Don Miguel did not reply, she added anxiously, " Or do you not think so ?"

Don Miguel reached up and touched it, half-hoping that it would prove to be a mere illusion. But the heavy metal was hard and cool to his fingers. He stepped back, his mind beginning to whirl as he noted the signs of genuine Aztec workmanship that identified it.

" Why do you not answer ?" said the Marquesa interrogatively.

Don Miguel found his voice at last. " I can only say, my lady, that I hope it's a forgery."

" A forgery ? What do you mean ?" she cried in alarm.

" A forgery ! For if it is not . . ." His mind quailed at the implications if it was not.

"But why?"

"Because this is perfect, my lady. As perfect as though the goldsmith had finished it today. Therefore it is not a buried relic dug up from the ground and restored. No restorer of the present time could so precisely adopt the Aztec style. A forger might—just—achieve a uniform pseudo-Aztec style over the whole of a work such as this, if he had long steeped himself in the period."

"But it isn't a forgery! It can't be!" The Marquesa was almost in tears. Don Miguel pressed on ruthlessly.

"In that case, my lady, I must take possession of it in the name of the Society of Time, as contraband mass illegally imported to the present!"

*How much does that thing weigh? Twelve pounds? Fifteen?*

When every single grain of dust gathered by a time-traveller in the past had to be re-deposited in its own age before return, what might that theft from the past not have meant in terms of changes in history?

"Where did you get it?" he pressed. The Marquesa looked at him with a stunned expression and ignored the question.

"You're joking!" she accused. "It's a cruel joke!"

"This is no joking matter," said Don Miguel harshly. "It's as well for you, my lady, that the first Licentiate of the Society to hear about this is under your roof as a guest, accepting your hospitality. Otherwise I can't guess the consequences. Why, anyone with the intelligence of a two-year-old ought to have jumped to the conclusion that something as perfect as that mask must be imported from the past! How did you get it—as a gift?"

"Y-yes!" The Marquesa was beginning to recover herself, and to understand what was being said. Don Miguel saw that he had been right in making crude threats to her in the name of the Society; the Society of Time had an almost magical reputation to most people.

"Then did you report the gift to the office of the Society in *Jorke*? Did you check that it had been licensed for import?"

"No, of course I didn't!"

"You probably thought it beneath your dignity to obey the law, I suppose. I won't insult you by saying that you didn't see the obvious—that you didn't know it was imported from the past. I'll try and make things easy for you—"

"Offer me no favours, traitor!" she said with a sudden blaze of spirit. Don Miguel let that pass.

"Who gave it to you?"

"Don—Don Arcimboldo Ruiz." She choked out the name. Don Miguel whirled, his cloak flying, and snapped at the slave who waited by the door.

"Get him ! Get Don Arcimboldo ! And quickly !"

He passed the time while he was waiting for the freckled man to arrive by inspecting the mask. Everything pointed to the same conclusion ; the gold was as fresh as though hammered yesterday. Oh, there was no doubt !

"You desired my presence?" said Don Arcimboldo, hurrying into the room. He bowed in passing to the Marquesa, who had sunk on the bed with her face in her hands, a pitiful figure.

"Yes !" Don Miguel wasted no time on formality. "You gave this to her ? Yes ? Where did you get it ?"

"Why, I bought it openly enough, in the market beyond the city wall !" said Don Arcimboldo, blinking. "Is something wrong ?"

"Did you report it to the local office of my Society ?"

"To check if it was licensed for import ? Why, no ! Why should I think of such a thing ? It was offered openly for sale by a merchant who vends his wares regularly in the market—why should I assume it was unlicensed ?" A look of awe spread across Don Arcimboldo's face. "Am I to take it that—that it's contraband ?"

"You are," said Don Miguel curtly. "You probably acted in good faith—but God ! That thing weighs more than twelve pounds ; it's so magnificent it must have been famous in its own period to begin with, and it would certainly have come to my notice if the Society had licensed it. Besides, we don't license things like that for sale in a public market ! We'd have given it to the University of Madrid, or the Mexicological Institute in New Castile." He sighed. "Well, at least you had sense enough to recognise it as an import. Who was this merchant ? Where's his pitch ? I must find out where he got it—and I'm afraid we're going to have to take possession of that mask and get it back where it came from just as fast as is humanly possible."

"But—who could have smuggled it in ?"

"Just possibly, a corrupt Licentiate ; we've had cases, but the Society doesn't publicise them. If not, my friend—then you can guess at the implications yourself. They frighten me out of my wits !"

## Chapter Three

With the passage of time, the fear had not diminished, but grown. It still held him in its clammy grip as he sat in the Chamber of Full Council of the Society a week later.

The atmosphere of the Chamber was rich with a sense of authority and ritual, like the interior of a great cathedral—which in many ways it resembled. It was panelled with fine dark woods inlaid with gold ; most of its floor was occupied by four tables arranged in the shape of two capital L's, with a gap at diagonally opposite corners. These tables were covered with red velvet ; the chairs were upholstered in the same material, except for one, which was still vacant. That was purple, the prince's colour, and it stood at the eastern end of the room, transfixed—like a butterfly on a pin—by a shaft of pure white light stabbing down from the ceiling. Another shaft of light, horizontally focussed, completed the cross.

Along the northern table, the General Officers of the Society sat waiting. Don Miguel could not tell one from another, for they sat in shadow, as did he. Behind them, their private secretaries stood dutifully at their masters' orders.

He himself was in the middle of the western side of the oblong formed by the tables ; while on the southern side, facing the General Officers, were the prisoners—the Marquesa, attended by two of her personal maids, Don Arcimboldo, who was alone, and the merchant from whom Don Arcimboldo had purchased the mask. The Marquesa had been weeping. But Don Arcimboldo had an air of puzzled boredom, as though he was certain that this stupid misunderstanding would shortly be regulated.

And on the velvet-covered table before the vacant chair, the mask itself rested like a great golden toad.

Suddenly there was a ring of trumpets, and the room seemed to tense. There was movement behind the vacant chair, at the eastern door of the Chamber. A herald in cloth-of-gold strode forward and spoke in a voice much resembling the trumpets that had just sounded.

"His Highness the Prince of New Castile !"

The Commander of the Society : Don Miguel rose to his feet and bowed.



When he was told in a grunting voice that he could sit down again, the Prince had already taken his place. He was a round man with stubby limbs and a short black beard ; a ring of baldness was spreading on his scalp. He wore the full dress uniform of a Knight of the Holy Roman Empire, and his chest glittered with the stars of all the orders which he as a Prince of the Blood had accumulated. The total effect was impressive ; it was meant to be.

His face was partly in shadow because the light was from above him, but it could be seen that he was studying Don Miguel intently. Don Miguel felt uncomfortable, as he might have done under the scrutiny of an inquisitor.

At last the grunting voice came again, like a saw rasping into fresh oak-planks. " You're Navarro ?"

" I am, sir," said Don Miguel, finding that his mouth was dry. He was certain that he had acted correctly in the matter and yet there was still the nagging doubt . . .

" And this bauble in front of me is the thing that all the fuss is about ?"

" It is, sir."

" Hah !" The Prince leaned forward in his chair ; behind him, an obsequious personal attendant moved slightly, ready for any emergency. The Prince caressed the golden thing with his thick fingers, that sprouted coarse black hair along their backs. Obviously, he liked it—or he liked the presence of so much fine gold.

At last he sat back and shot a keen glance down the line of the three prisoners before turning to the other side and saying, " Father Ramon, this is for you, I think."

Don Miguel watched to see which of the formless officers replied ; whichever moved and spoke, that one was Father Ramon, the Jesuit, the master-theoretician of the Society and the world's greatest expert on the nature of time and the philosophical implications of time travel.

" I have inspected the object," said a dry, precise voice from the officer who sat at the end of the table nearest to the Prince. " It is Aztec, of Mexican gold and workmanship—of that there is no doubt at all. And it has not been licensed by the Society for importation."

Don Miguel felt a surge of relief. At least he had been correct up to that point, then.



"The consequences of this temporal contraband cannot be assessed as yet," the Jesuit continued. "We are attempting to establish its provenance to within a few years; then we shall investigate the effects of its removal. If we find none, we are faced with a serious dilemma."

"How so?" said the Prince, leaning back and twisting a little sideways in his chair.

"*Imprimis*," said Father Ramon, and thrust forward a thin bony finger from the darkness to lay it on the table, "we shall have to determine whether we have in fact replaced it—and if we have replaced it, then we shall have to establish the time at which it was replaced, and the circumstances. And *secundo*, we shall have to determine whether—if it has *not* been replaced—whether we have in fact a case of history being changed."

Shorn of its emotional overtones by this cleanly logic, the problem seemed to Don Miguel nonetheless terrifying.

"You mean"—it startled him to find that he was speaking, but since heads were turning towards him, he ploughed on—"you mean, Father, that we may find its disappearance incorporated in our *new* history as an accomplished fact?"

The shapeless head turned towards him. "Your presumption," said the Jesuit coldly, and hesitated, so that Don Miguel had a while in which to wonder what "presumption" meant, "is—accurate."

Don Miguel breathed a sigh of relief.

The Prince shrugged. "It sounds as though the matter is safe in your hands, then, Father Ramon."

"I think so," said the Jesuit in a voice that implied a smile.

"I leave it to you, then. My business is with the associated troubles. For example—Navarro!"

The last word was uttered in so sharp a bark that Don Miguel jumped. He said, "Sir!"

"Navarro, what possessed you to arrest the Marquesa di Jorque, who was plainly an innocent party in this case?"

Don Miguel's heart sank so rapidly he could almost feel it arriving in his boots. He said stiffly, "I acted, sir, in strict accordance with the law." He was glad that his voice remained firm.

"Have you no sense, man?" said the Prince sharply. He gave the Marquesa a sidelong glance. "I have studied the informations you have laid, and there is no evidence at all that she acted otherwise than as an innocent party. I'm discharging

her from custody here and now, and I require you to apologise to her before she returns to her domains at Jorque."

*What ?*

For a moment, Don Miguel had the impression that he had actually uttered the word—in the presence of the Commander of the Society, an unforgivable breach of manners. But he had not. He licked his lips. To have to apologise for acting in accordance with the law ? But this was ridiculous !

He grew aware that the heads of the General Officers were all turned in his direction ; he saw that the Marquesa had suddenly recovered all her poise, and was giving him a triumphant glare, tapping her manicured fingers on the arm of her chair. What was he to do ?

To cover his loss of self-possession, he rose slowly to his feet. By the time he was standing, he had decided what to say.

"I will not apologise to the Marquesa," he said, "for acting in accordance with law. I *will* apologise for not realising that she is an innocent."

An innocent. A simpleton, in other words. He hoped the distinction would penetrate.

It did. The Marquesa stiffened with growing fury ; the countenance of the Prince began to purple. The air was thick with their reaction. But the tension broke suddenly—broke against a thin, rather high-pitched laugh. With amazement, Don Miguel realised that it came from Father Ramon.

"Commander, that is an apology exactly meet for the case," he said. "It is true, as our brother Navarro submitted, that anyone but an innocent would have questioned the presence of so magnificent a primitive artifact in the present day."

The Prince gave a tentative laugh. Then another, more convincing. Finally he threw back his head and roared. Other General Officers joined in, and to the accompaniment of their mirth the Marquesa hastened from the hall, her shoulders bowed and shaking—but not, for sure, with laughter. With humiliation.

Don Miguel felt he had gained an unexpected victory. He sat down again slowly.

"Good !" said the Prince finally. "Now to the main part of the business. What action have you taken, Navarro, to discover the source of this—this thing before me ?"

Don Miguel spoke rapidly. "The merchant is present from whom Don Arcimboldo bought it—a certain Higgins, native of Jorque and of family in that town and province. He maintains

and short of torture will doubtless continue to maintain that he in his turn acquired it from a stranger."

"Indeed!" The Prince turned thoughtful eyes on the merchant, who tried to sink in his chair; he was a middle-aged man without great personality. "And how was this, may I ask?"

The merchant turned from side to side, as though seeking a way of escape. Finding none, he babbled in the flat broad accent that Peabody exhibited also, and most of the people in the north of England. "Your highness, I swear! I swear it's true! I bought it from a stranger who offered it to me at the market—on the first day of November it was, as I recall."

"You often do business with strangers?" the Prince said.

"Never! Never in my life before! I cannot"—and his voice dropped to scarcely a whisper—"I cannot recall his name, or his face! I can say only that I must have been mad—must have had a brainstorm, your highness! For I'm a reputable man, and I've always traded in strict accordance with the law, and—"

"Enough!" said the Prince curtly. "Navarro, have you investigated the claim?"

"I have, sir. And it seems to be true as far as it goes. Hitherto, this man Higgins has been a law-abiding merchant, and I've spoken to several people who have sold him goods; he has been careful to ascertain that they have proper title to them, and to avoid handling anything imported without licence. He has had many extratemporal objects through his hands, and the office of the Society in Jorque has previously found him scrupulously careful."

"Yet this time he buys contraband from a total stranger, without investigation, and sells it to Don Arcimboldo who takes it in good faith, I'm sure"—this with a dip of the head in Don Arcimboldo's direction—"and gives it to the innocent Marquesa." The Prince chuckled again, reminiscently. "Surely he must indeed have had a brainstorm!"

"Sir." A flat word from one of the hitherto silent General Officers. The Prince glanced towards the speaker.

"Yes, Red Bear?"

The Director-in-Chief of Fieldwork, Don Miguel noted. They had really assembled the big guns for this case, then!

"I'm inclined to disbelieve that. I think Navarro was in a fit of pique against the Marquesa, and that this has coloured his investigation."

"How say you, Navarro?" the Prince demanded. Don Miguel felt his face grow warm.

"I admit," he said slowly, "that I was annoyed with her for showing off a Licentiate of the Society—myself!—like a performing animal for the benefit of her guests. But I deny that this was sufficient to colour my investigations."

There was a grunt from Red Bear. The Prince paused, as if seeking further remarks, heard none, and slapped his hand down on the table like a pistol-shot.

"Resolved, then! That the merchant Higgins be interrogated further! That Don Arcimboldo be discharged as an innocent party! That we meet now in private session to speak of what has passed! Clear the room," he added in a lower tone, off-handedly, to his personal aide.

Don Miguel sat back, feeling slightly weak, but conscious of an overpowering relief that—the attack from Red Bear excepted—he seemed to have justified his actions to the Full Council. And this, for a lowly member of the society, a Licentiate with only five years' experience and four field trips to his name, was no inconsiderable achievement.

## Chapter Four

As soon as the Chamber had been cleared, the doors had been locked with a great slamming of heavy bolts, and the lights had gone up, the assembled officers relaxed in their chairs. Don Miguel was surprised to find that with the lights full on the Chamber was just an ordinary room, large and palatial, but simply a room. And—more surprising still—when they threw back their cowls, the General Officers were just ordinary men.

He found himself relaxing with them.

The Prince fumbled out a large pipe and stuffed it with tobacco in coarse-cut hunks. Lighting it, he mumbled around the stem.

"Well, young Navarro, I don't mind telling you that you've created an almighty kind of chaos with this rash act of yours!"

A harsh laugh, as though to say "understatement!" came from Red Bear—who was a long-faced Mohawk with black braided hair showing oily-slick around his face.

Father Ramon—whose face was like a bird's, with the skin stretched tight around a beaky nose and little, very bright

eyes—passed a thin hand over his bald cranium in a way that suggested he had acquired in youth the habit of running his fingers through his hair and still expected to find hair on his head. He said quietly, "Sir, that is a harsh way to speak."

The Prince shrugged puffing his pipe like a bonfire. "I dispute that—though I should know better than to dispute with one of your Order, Father! What I mean is what I say. Navarro has caused us a good deal of unnecessary botheration."

The Jesuit looked worried. "Again, no. In my view he has acted well, aside from the element of innocence in connection with the Marquesa, where he has let himself be deceived by appearances. My son"—he turned to face Don Miguel directly—"I must say that you were as guilty as she of overlooking the obvious. The Marquesa di Jorque is not a woman of any great intellect. She has at most a certain low cunning, which enables her to gather about her people of superior intelligence, and to pass herself off as their equal. It is a harmless pastime enough, provided all the players understand the rules. I think you should have seen that she would never have thought, even for a moment, to report the mask to our local office."

"I accept your judgment, Father," said Don Miguel, and was glad that the strictures had been phrased so mildly.

"On the other hand, the question of the merchant puzzles me," continued Father Ramon. "Our brother Navarro has said that he objected to being displayed like a performing animal, simply because he was a real live Licentiate of the Society. There is here a far graver matter—that the work of the Society itself is being turned into a simple spectacle for sensation-seekers."

Like a spark and gunpowder, two facts came together in Don Miguel's mind and shot him forward in his chair. He said explosively, "Then it is true!"

The curious gaze of the General Officers turned on him. Of them all, only Father Ramon seemed to know what he was talking about. He said, "You have heard about this disgrace to us?"

"I—I know only what was said to me by the Marquesa herself: that it is rumoured that certain people have been taken in this quatercentennial year to witness the victory of the Armada."

"Hah!" said Father Ramon. "If it stopped there! If that was all!"

"Then it is true?" pressed Don Miguel. "How could such a thing be allowed to happen?"

The prince coughed. "Father Ramon, as usual I'll defer to your judgment—but is this wholly wise?"

"To give our brother the facts? Why, indeed it is. His action, heedless of possible consequences to himself, in this matter of the mask, indicates that he is uncorrupted and upright." Having thus justified himself, the Jesuit turned back to Don Miguel and resumed.

"As for how it is *allowed* to happen—it is of course forbidden. As for how it does happen—why, simply enough. Certain Licentiates whom I cannot yet name, but whose licences will not last long when they are caught, have stumbled on a trick. They act after this fashion: they take payment from those who wish to be treated to this spectacle, whatever it may be—the victory of the Armada, or the games in the Coliseum in the time of Nero, or the battle of the Guinea Coast, or the disgusting acts in the temples of Egypt—and they then plan an innocent field trip, which is approved as routine by our brother Red Bear. This field trip is always to a more recent time than their actual destination. They then establish a time and place when their customers were alone and unobserved; they go to that time and place, collect them, go to their official destination, go back further and deposit their customers, resume their fieldwork, collect their customers again, return them to the split-second of their departure, and then return to base. Put so elaborately, it seems difficult; in effect, it is not. Who can tell from which direction in time a traveller approaches?"

Don Miguel nodded. "And is this corruption widespread?" he said slowly.

"I regret that it is. We are at present investigating the finances of no less than thirty Licentiates whose income is—shall we say?—remarkably high."

"Thirty!" Don Miguel's dismay and shock appeared in his voice. The Prince, finding that his pipe had gone out, felt for means of relighting it, and spoke in a gruff tone.

"It wouldn't be so bad if it was simple—uh—unofficial observation," he said. "I mean, we've all done this at one time or another. I've taken my father on the odd trip myself."



"But that's different," said Don Miguel slowly. The Prince chuckled.

"Yes, kings get away with a good deal! So do—well, no matter." He coughed again to cover his momentary embarrassment. "But the habit of accepting bribes is hard to lose. And no one really accepts the possibility of altering the past, except the experts. It seems that certain of these unofficial travellers have acquired souvenirs of their trips."

Father Ramon nodded. "Of which this great golden mask is probably one."

A chill passed down Don Miguel's spine. "Is that, then, not the only thing which has been brought in as contraband? Why, the possibilities are inconceivable!"

"It's the biggest that we know of," said Father Ramon. "I presume you're aware of the principle on which we permit the importation of extratemporal objects—of course you are, for you've already made field trips, I gather. Then you know how we limit ourselves to objects which the historical record shows to have been lost, such as treasure buried in a secret place by one who is killed without divulging his knowledge, or something which we know to have disappeared without trace, because the fact is to be found in contemporary annals. This is not an altogether reliable rule, naturally, since we cannot be certain that some of these items lost by 'natural causes' were not in fact lost through our intervention." He gave a skeletal smile, and shrugged. "But we trust in the divine plan, and rule ourselves by this precept.

"What would happen if we deliberately stole away something which history records as being in existence at a date later than our interference, we do not know, and I pray God we may never find out. In such a case as this, though, we may justifiably fear disastrous consequences. Oh, it may turn out that this mask was melted down, and the loss of simple mass—even so much of it, and even gold—might pass unnoticed. But if not; if we find that its mysterious disappearance is on record, we face a still graver problem. Should we assume that history has in fact been changed? Should we replace the mask where it disappeared from, in an attempt to change it back? Shall we find paradoxes developing afterwards, because the events which led us to replace this object no longer form part of the universal chain of causality?"



The smile with which he accompanied his words was in fact a pleasant one, but to Don Miguel it seemed more like a skeleton's grin. He said slowly, "My mind boggles at such possibilities, Father. I'm glad I do not have to involve myself in such deep philosophical problems."

"Nonetheless, we are giving you charge of a problem which is just about as deep as this one," rumbled the Prince. He swept the others with an inquiring glance, and received confirmatory nods. "We're charging you with discovering, first, the origin in our time of this mask—of identifying, if you like the unknown man from whom it was bought. And then, second, of returning it unnoticed if such is the decision of Father Ramon."

Don Miguel's heart pounded. "I—I feel unworthy," he said after a pause. The Prince snorted.

"Worthy or unworthy, Navarro, you've opened up the problem. You close it again!"

In its way, the assignment was a signal honour; it was also a terrifying burden. The more Don Miguel thought about it, the more he felt qualms.

He was not yet thirty. He had held the licence of the Society for a bare five years. His experience of fieldwork had been confined to a few trips—one, the last, on which he had spoken with Julius Caesar and contrived to settle a long-standing argument among historians regarding Caesar's motives for refusing the crown of Rome; another, on which he had suffered the blow from a blunt sword which had permanently twisted his smile.

And perhaps he might have accepted the task with equanimity, nonetheless, had it not been for the news Father Ramon had announced to him at this meeting. Thirty Licentiates of the Society suspected of taking bribes—this was hardly believable!

To Don Miguel, work in the Society had something of the air of a sacred trust. That was the principle on which it was founded, after all. Since Borromeo's epoch-making discovery in 1892, the right to exploit time-travel had been strictly limited to those judged fit to be placed in charge of it; in the Empire, this was the Society of Time, and in the Confederacy, it was an analogous body.

Don Miguel had accepted this fact as gospel. Now, though, thinking over what had been said, he realised that what he had

taken for hard sense was founded basically on fear. Fear of what might happen if irresponsible people were allowed to make journeys into the past. It was that, and not a sense of responsibility, which had so rigidly restricted time licences.

And given this premise, then it followed almost automatically that after nearly a century of time-travel, people would grow blase and tolerant—that their upright posture would sag a little here and there.

Yet this too entailed paradoxes. One of the most familiar justifications for the rule confining the purpose of time-travel to observation without interference was the argument that if this rule were not made and kept, then time-travellers from the future, visiting the past, would be noticed in the here-and-now. Therefore the rule was a good one ; therefore it was to be kept.

And if it were not being kept . . .

Don Miguel had visions of whole areas of unrealised history being swept into some unimaginable vacuum, into the formlessness of absolute not-being. Worlds, perhaps, in which Jorque was York and an English monarch sat the throne of the Empire; in which possibly a Mohawk prince ruled New Castile and called his subjects braves and squaws. Worlds in which men travelled—to stretch the idea to its uttermost—into space instead of through time, by some undreamed-at miracle of propulsion.

Resolution hardened in him. The first line of attack on his problem, inevitably, would be to inquire further of the merchant, Higgins, from whom the mask had been bought.

## Chapter Five

The guards on the door of Higgin's cell inspected his commission ; it was under the Prince's own seal, so they gave way respectfully and permitted him to enter.

The cell was large and spacious. In the centre, Higgins sat lolling in a chair, his head sideways on one shoulder, his mouth half open. He was fastened down with leather straps. At a table facing him, the two inquisitors charged with interrogating him were conferring in low tones ; their faces were anxious and they frowned continually.

At Don Miguel's entrance, they glanced up, their faces pale in the shadow of their dark brown cowls.

"How goes it?" demanded Don Miguel, when he had explained his business and authority. The inquisitors exchanged glances.

"Badly," said one of them—the taller. "We greatly fear, Don Miguel, that has has been bewitched."

"How so?"

"We have used all the means that are lawful to unlock his tongue," the other inquisitor said. "We have employed liquors of divers kinds, and we have used mirrors and pendulums. We have established that he remembers purchasing the mask, but he cannot recall the face of the man who sold it, nor his name, nor any clue to his identity."

"But he recalls the date?" suggested Don Miguel. The inquisitor who had spoken first nodded.

"We have given orders that all travellers in or about Jorque who registered with the authorities at that time shall be followed up. But it seems hopeless; whoever brought the mask for sale would have been a wealthy man—perhaps a noble—and could too easily have avoided the demands of the law."

"The justification of the law lies in men's obedience thereof," said the other inquisitor in sententious tones. Don Miguel nodded.

"What kind of enchantment might this man have used?"

"There are many possibilities. A drug of some sort, one imagines. Or possibly he constrained Higgins to stare at some bright spot—a reflection on the mask itself, even—and then soothed him to oblivion with gentle words."

It sounded unlikely. But the inquisitors were experts in that kind of work themselves; he had to take their word for it. He sighed.

"Inform me of what passes," he said.

"We will. But we have small hope of reaching the truth."

If the interrogation of Higgins had reached a dead end, the only thing to do was to go back to Jorque and continue on-the-spot investigation. Accordingly, Don Miguel left Londres that same evening by fast coach, and next day presented himself at the local office of the Society—a great house set in spacious grounds not far from the Cathedral.

Here he was received by an old-young man with a pale face and a high, hesitant voice whose eyes fastened greedily on the Prince's seal at the foot of Don Miguel's commission. He was

probably a failed Licentiate, Don Miguel diagnosed both from that fact and from his further behaviour.

"We have discussed much the problem which you are come to look into," said the old-young man fawningly, having introduced himself as Don Pedro Diaz. "We greatly admire the way you saw straight to its heart."

"Did I?" said Don Miguel dryly, thinking of the clouds of mist that still shrouded its solution. "You are too kind. I am come to know what has been discovered concerning the origin of the mask since I left Jorque the other day."

The other looked disconcerted. "Why, we have not sought further," he admitted uncertainly. "Was it not enough to have arrested the merchant, Higgins, and his clerks?"

"It was not enough," said Don Miguel shortly. "Take me to these clerks; I would speak with them."

But the clerks were of no help either; their story was that their master Higgins had himself conducted the purchase and the sale, as he often did when the other party in a bargain was a person of noble family. Don Miguel well understood this—it was sometimes necessary for a nobleman to sell family heirlooms or other valuables in order to replenish a shrinking coffer, and when this was the case he usually preferred to treat in private with a discreet merchant.

It seemed that Higgins had a reputation for being exceptionally discreet; he had handled many such transactions.

The clerks stuck to their story—that they had known nothing of the mask until their master was arrested.

Don Miguel sighed and left the cell in which they were incarcerated. Walking back through the fine grounds of the Society's office, he spoke musingly to Don Pedro who accompanied him.

"This market, now—the one where Don Arcimboldo said he purchased the mask. It's outside the city wall, is it not?"

"It is. The municipality banned markets within the city, save for freemen of Jorque, in the last years of the last century; thus the custom arose of going beyond the walls to trade. And now, indeed, marketing within the city is rare—all the richest merchants trade yonder."

"Good. I wish to view this market. Call a coach, and let us begone."

"At once," said Don Pedro eagerly, seeming overjoyed to be of service.

While they were waiting for the coach, Don Miguel turned to another subject that interested him currently. He said, "And of Don Arcimboldo Ruiz, now—what manner of man is he?"

Don Pedro spread his finely manicured hands. "He is of noble and ancient family, I believe; he has estates in the north, but prefers to live in Jorque, occupying himself with the pursuits of the wealthy and with the collection of rare works of art."

"So he's a connoisseur, is he?"

"Men speak highly of his expert knowledge."

"Then he'd have known how strange and rare the mask was." Don Miguel bit his lip. He recalled that Don Arcimboldo had stated straightforwardly his assumption that Higgins would not try and sell him contraband; this was reasonable enough, if he had previously done business with Higgins and found him honest.

And yet he might have questioned . . .

Don Miguel firmly repressed that line of thought. Don Arcimboldo had struck him as a sensible, level-headed person; he had revealed a healthy cynicism in his assessment of the Marquesa di Jorque, and there was no doubt the he would have had the sense to make inquiries if he suspected he was receiving contraband. More to the point, perhaps, he would not have made a present of the mask to the Marquesa if he had suspected it was contraband; he would probably have kept it secretly for his own collection.

Why had he given such a remarkable object to the Marquesa, though? If he was himself a collector, then . . .

A crease of puzzlement deepened between Don Miguel's eyebrows, and remained there all the time he was in the coach *en route* for the great market of Jorque.

They called it a market; in fact, it was almost a town on its own now, spreading out beyond the walls in an easterly direction. Wide well-paved roads ran between the plots of ground occupied by the merchants' stalls; these consisted of booths erected before and around solid stone-built warehouses. During the day, goods were brought forth under awnings and in glass-sided huts, where brawny men guarded them with clubs. At night, they would be taken back into the warehouses and secured firmly against robbers.

Don Miguel instructed Don Pedro to dismiss the coach for an hour, and set forth on foot through the market. He paused,

apparently at random, to test the quality of nutmegs at a grocer's ; to feel some splendid Eastern brocades in a draper's ; to inspect a set of candlesticks in a silversmith's. As he did these things, he asked questions casually of the merchants who attended him. Don Pedro, blinking and uncertain, listened to what was said, and at last began to catch hold of an important fact. Somehow in each conversation, Don Miguel was contriving to introduce the names of Higgins and of Don Arcimboldo.

The hour passed. Their last call was at a bookbinders, where gold-leaf glittered on fine calf bindings and the air within the booths was rich with the scent of leather and size.

Brooding, Don Miguel emerged and indicated to Don Pedro that they should walk together back to the place where their coach waited. Their course took them through the heart of the market ; many persons of great wealth and standing were now entering it, since it was past noon, to visit their favourite merchants.

"Higgins seems to have been a very upright and much respected trader," said Don Miguel at length, while they stepped to the side of the road to allow the passage of a gilded coach.

"So it has been said," agreed Don Pedro, with a sage nod.

"Therefore he must indeed have been bewitched." Don Miguel cast a lingering glance after the gilded coach—for its passenger had been a rather beautiful young woman—and resumed walking. "And witchcraft is tricky. Don Pedro, I require a word of advice from you."

"You do me too much honour," said Don Pedro nervously.

Don Miguel did not comment. He said merely, "Don Pedro, if you were in Don Arcimboldo's place, why would you give a very rare and costly mask of solid gold to a lady who is—to be blunt—past the age of courting?"

Don Pedro's eyes widened. He said nothing for a moment. When he did reply, his voice was hesitant.

"Ah—I would not say such things of Don Arcimboldo—"

"Speak your mind !" rapped Don Miguel impatiently.

"Why, then, one would assume he stood to gain some small advantage or other. If he did not do it purely from motives of friendship."

After Don Arcimboldo's scathing denunciations of the Marquesa, Don Miguel felt that the latter possibility could be ruled out. He shrugged.



"So too would I say. Don Pedro, instruct your coachman to pass by Higgins's town house on the way back to the Society's office."

At Higgins's town house, Don Miguel descended alone from the coach and went indoors. He came back after twenty minutes, his face very thoughtful. During the rest of the trip to the office, he said nothing, responding only with grunts to Don Pedro's tentative essays at conversation.

There was a message waiting at the office, which had come by semaphore telegraph from Londres a few minutes before their return. It was a report from Red Bear's department, informing Don Miguel that the golden mask was almost certainly the work of a certain celebrated Aztec goldsmith called Nezahualcoyotl—Hungry Dog. And that placed its origin somewhere in the middle fifteenth century, most likely in the great town of Texcoco.

Another puzzling factor ! If the mask was the work of so famous a smith that Red Bear's fieldworkers could trace and identify its origins in so short a time, then it was all the more unlikely that Don Arcimboldo would readily have given it away.

And especially since . . .

A great light suddenly broke in on Don Miguel. Facts came together and formed a pattern. A pattern that made sound sense. He slammed fist into palm and muttered an oath.

"What ails you ?" demanded Don Pedro in alarm.

"Nothing !" snapped Don Miguel. "Nothing ! But I see it, and yet I do not see it ! If—Don Pedro ! Send speedily to the office of the Inquisition in Jorque ; demand for me a skilled inquisitor, to visit me and answer certain questions. Then a coach, to await my orders—for tonight I purpose to call on Don Arcimboldo."

"It shall be done," said Don Pedro, a trifle nervously, and hurried away.

Don Miguel conversed lengthily with the inquisitor who came in answer to his request, in private and alone. When he had finished it was near dark, and yet he refused Don Pedro's request to stay and take a bite to eat before his departure. Instead, he buckled on his sword, threw his cloak about him, and went into the night as though fiends were hot on his heels.



## Chapter Six

Don Arcimboldo's house was a fine one, of recent building, in extensive and well-cared-for grounds. Inside, everything bespoke luxury and elegance ; the same stamp that marked the Marquesa's house was to be seen here, in the many creeping plants and hothouse flowers that turned the rooms and halls into gardens, in the exquisite panelling and the many cases holding rare trophies—Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Etruscan, Aztec, Inca . . .

The majordomo who admitted Don Miguel presented his master's apologies, saying that he was at dinner but would shortly be finished and would wait on his distinguished guest ; meantime, would Don Miguel have the grace to occupy himself in the library ?

Don Miguel would, with pleasure. Wine was brought for him by a slender Guinea-girl—she must have been very expensive—who poured him a glassful and then retired to sit in the darkest corner among the bookcases, her white eyes and white teeth glimmering in the shadow.

Glass in hand, Don Miguel walked absently about the room. It was not merely a library ; it was almost a museum, with many shelves of fine objects—gold, silver, jade, turquoise. Don Miguel passed his fingers caressingly along a pair of Moorish silver knives that caught the light on one shelf, before turning away abruptly and interesting himself in the books.

Don Arcimboldo displayed a truly catholic—but definitely not Catholic—taste. There was one case which would probably have sent Father Peabody into hysterics. Don Miguel caught the thought, re-considered it, and decided that it was probably incorrect. Father Peabody's association with the Marquesa had probably cured him of any such tendency. Nonetheless, there were very many books here that were on the Index, for heresy as well as for other reasons.

He selected a finely illustrated edition of the *Satyricon* of Petronius Arbiter and settled himself in a superb leather chair, its back tooled all over with gilt, to pass the time until Don Arcimboldo should enter.

When he at length did arrive, he was full of apologies for having made Don Miguel wait. But Don Miguel waved the protestations aside.

"Of course not !" he said. "I should have sent word that I was coming. But I wished to speak with you, and I have not long to spend in Jorque before I must return to Londres—so it is rather I who should apologise. And I have not been bored. I have been admiring your excellent taste."

Don Arcimboldo dropped into a chair that was the twin of Don Miguel's, snapped his fingers for the Guinea-girl to bring him wine, and gave a deprecating chuckle. "I'm flattered," he said dryly. "But it is hardly a question of taste ; rather, I am selfish enough to like to surround myself with beautiful things."

"You have certainly succeeded in that," agreed Don Miguel. "Tell me, did you acquire all these in Jorque ?"

"Many of them. Our great market—have you seen it ?—is a fine hunting-ground for rarities. Indeed, I bought many of the items here—the gold and silver, at least—from Higgins. By the way, what news is there in that matter ?"

"You hold no grudge against me, I trust, for having acted a little—rashly," suggested Don Miguel.

"No grudge at all, of course. I see perfectly that you had to act as you did. The smuggling of temporal contraband is a very serious matter, I know ; I've been looking into the question since I returned last night, and though my mind spins with some of the tenuous arguments of the philosophers, I am fully aware of the risks attached to it."

Don Miguel repressed a desire to frown. That choice of words seemed inapposite. Or apposite. He was very glad he had had that illuminating discussion with the inquisitor before he set out this evening.

The strong wine was affecting him a little, on an empty stomach. He waved aside the Guinea-girl when she came to offer him more.

"No, so far we have made little progress," he said. "It appears that Higgins was bewitched into forgetting the name and looks of the man who sold the mask to him. The best efforts of our inquisitors have not broken down the barrier in his memory."

He watched closely to see if there was any change of expression on Don Arcimboldo's face at the news ; none was visible.

"But it puzzles me," said Don Arcimboldo reflectively, his hand caressing the cut-glass goblet in which his wine was served, "how anyone could have acquired the mask in the first

place. As far as I can see, it would have had to be a Licentiate, would it not?"

"Possibly not," said Don Miguel, giving a shrug. "It is known that certain outsiders, not of the Society, have been taken into the past lately—having oiled sufficient palms, of course."

Don Arcimboldo raised his eyebrows. "Indeed! I believed that your Licentiates were incorruptible."

"It would seem not. Thirty at least are known to have accepted bribes." There! That was a direct jab. But in vain Don Miguel sought a sign that it had struck home.

"Almost, I find it in my heart to envy these outsiders," said Don Arcimboldo, and gave a grin which conveyed engaging frankness. "For I must admit I have yearned to walk among the people to whom the rare and beautiful things I so much admire were almost commonplace—modern! But I fear that even if I were to overcome my natural revulsion against infringement of such a basic law, I would find it an expensive business to indulge that yearning."

Don Miguel found himself oddly at a loss. There was a ring of great sincerity in Don Arcimboldo's words. He said uncertainly, "I am glad that you say so. It seems to me in the last degree wrong that the marvel of time-travel should be degraded to a mere spectacle."

Don Arcimboldo shifted comfortably in his chair. "On the other hand," he said reflectively, "I suppose there is some reason to say that—provided, always provided, that the rule regarding non-interference is strictly kept—others than Licentiates might be accorded the privilege of visiting the past."

Don Miguel shook his head. "But who, except Licentiates, could one trust to—?" he began. Seeing the flaw in his argument, he broke off. Don Arcimboldo chuckled.

"Yes! Yes! On your own admission, Don Miguel, it has now turned out that even your Licentiates are not to be altogether trusted. Although, I have no doubt, they charge a very stiff price, and do their best to see that their—uh—clients keep the rules."

Don Miguel felt that somehow he had been bested in a subtle dispute. He rose nervously to his feet and began to walk back and forth on the soft, expensive carpets.

"Possibly," he said after a few moments of silence, "possibly in the end we shall be compelled to extend the scope of time

licences. Possibly we shall find a means of bringing objects out of the past which does not entail changing history."

"As far as I can find out," said Don Arcimboldo, "changing history is highly theoretical—up to now. How can one tell whether history was in fact changed by the contraband importation of that mask, for example? One can't. Our idea of 'changing history' actually consists in changing the written record of history, does it not?"

"Partly. Not entirely."

Don Arcimboldo paused to see if the other was going to add anything. When he did not, he rose to his feet also. "Well, as I said, this is all too deep for non-experts like myself. Tell me, was there any special business about which you came to see me?"

Don Miguel debated for a moment with himself. His original resolution was fading; he was no longer so sure that he was right. He covered his hesitation by staring thoughtfully at a fine Saxon buckle of hammered gold, set with garnets, that occupied a shelf among the books on the wall.

Well, it was risky—but if he did not stake his hopes on this deduction, he might go on hesitating for ever. He said, "Yes, Don Arcimboldo. There was. I wished to ask you why you gave such an expensive present to the Marquesa."

Don Arcimboldo looked taken aback. He spread his hands. "Don Miguel!" he said reproachfully. "I think you have no right to pose me so personal a question."

"You leave me no alternative but to command you, then," said Don Miguel, and drew his documents from a pouch at his belt. "My commission is under the seal of the Prince of New Castile."

Don Arcimboldo scowled. "I suppose I have to answer, then. I think it is ungracious and unmannerly. Why do you wish to know this?"

Don Miguel drew a deep breath and turned to face the other. He said, "You must have had a reason for doing this. Because you were heavily in debt to Higgins, and you would not lightly have paid him for that mask, nor would he lightly have sold it to you."

Don Arcimboldo half-turned his head away, so that his face was shadowed. His voice was cold and distant. He said, "So you have been prying into my personal affairs."

"I was commanded to," said Don Miguel, and waited.

Don Arcimboldo picked up a delicately wrought silver chain from a shelf near him, and let it swing between his fingers as though absent-mindedly. He said, "Very well, then. Yes, it is true that I owed Higgins a good deal of money. But it is not true that he would not have extended me further credit. After all, Don Miguel, I am far from being a poor man."

"Are you?" said Don Miguel glacially.

"What do you mean?" Don Arcimboldo flushed and spoke in a harsh tone. The swinging chain did not vary its pendulum-like motion. "Think you that this around you is the home of a poor man?"

"Yes."

Don Arcimboldo sighed. "I yield, I yield. That also is a sort of truth. I will tell you, then, why I gave the mask to the Marquesa. I hoped that she would loan me a sum to rescue me from my temporary—temporary!—difficulties."

The chain went on swinging. There was silence. Don Miguel allowed the silence to stretch. And after a little while, Don Arcimboldo's self-possession began to crack. He looked first puzzled, then alarmed. When his alarm was acute enough, Don Miguel spoke out.

"No use, Don Arcimboldo! Before I came here, I spent an hour in talk with an inquisitor, who is expert in this work. I have taken an antidote which countered the drug you gave me in that very good wine. So you cannot lull my mind with your swinging chain and hypnotise me into forgetfulness—as you served Higgins!"

The last phrase came out like the lash of a whip. Don Arcimboldo let fall his hands; white-faced, he whispered, "I—I do not understand!"

"Don't you? I do. This is how it happened. You decided to join those fortunate outsiders who have bribed Licentiates to take them into the past. It was, as you yourself said, an expensive business. Yet you persisted. You ran into debt with Higgins—an undignified situation! He may have become eager for his money. Doubtless your original plan was to smuggle a valuable item of contraband back from one of your illicit trips and offer it to Higgins in settlement of your debt. Then you reconsidered. Higgins was an upright man—too upright to accept contraband. So you chose a subtler way out of your corner.

"You deluded him into believing that he had bought the mask from someone else. No wonder he cannot remember

who it was ! One cannot remember a non-existent person, after all. But you did not get to his clerks, Don Arcimboldo. I have spoken to those clerks. Even the clerk who keeps the stock-list for his master does not know of the mask. And you gave it, then, to the Marquesa, knowing that she would show it off to all the world, and that sooner or later someone would deduce it was contraband. Then you could play the innocent dupe, and Higgins would suffer the penalty for trading in contraband—thus preventing him from dunning you further, of course.

"I was almost deceived. A few moments ago, indeed, I was ready to believe that I had made a mistake—until you made a worse one, and started to try and bewitch me with that silver chain. The inquisitor with whom I passed time this afternoon warned me about such tricks. Then I was certain, and am now."

Don Arcimboldo cast the silver chain violently to the floor. "It's a pack of lies !" he said harshly. "What's more, you'll never convince anyone else except yourself."

"That is a risk I'm prepared to take," said Don Miguel stonily. He jerked his sword from its scabbard. "I arrest you, by the authority vested in me, and desire you to go with me to face trial. You may have met one corrupt Licentiate, Don Arcimboldo—but learn from this that some of us take our rules seriously. After all, we are meddling with the very fabric of the universe."

## Chapter Seven

The vacant space between the crystal pillars hummed faintly; those present in the hall shifted in their chairs, wiping their faces occasionally. It was always warm in the neighbourhood of the crystal pillars when a traveller was about to return.

The Prince of New Castile seemed worse affected than anyone by the heat, and grunted and muttered to himself. Abruptly he could not stand it any longer, and snapped his thick fingers at the attentive aide standing nearby.

"Wine !" he said thickly. "The heat is awful."

"Yes, your highness," said the aide alertly. "And for the company as well ?"

"Father Ramon ? Red Bear ? You want wine ?" the Prince barked.



Red Bear moved his long Indian face once in a gesture of acceptance, but Father Ramon did not move. After a pause, the Prince waved to the aide to hurry.

"Think you it is well done, Father Ramon?" he snapped.

Father Ramon seemed to come back to the present from a very long time away. He sketched a brief smile, turning to look at the Prince.

"Well done?" he parried. "As well done as we may do, I suppose. At least we know that the golden mask has been restored; whether the restoration itself was wise and necessary or not, we can but guess."

Red Bear snorted. "If you had doubts of the wisdom of the act, why give me so much trouble over it?"

"We must always doubt our own wisdom," said Father Ramon peaceably. He raised a hand towards the crystal pillars. "I think the moment is at hand."

The technicians on duty around the hall had tensed to their positions. Now, suddenly, there was a clap like thunder and a smell of raw heat, and in the space between the pillars a shape appeared. A curious shape of iron and silver bars, that seemed to glow for a moment as energy washed out of their substance in the process of their turning back to right angles with normal dimensionality.

In the middle of the frame, a figure was seen to collapse.

Father Ramon jerked to his feet. "Be swift!" he ordered the technicians. "He has been long about his task!"

The technicians moved—some to dismantle the frame of metal bars, others to help Don Miguel to his feet and stumble with him to a couch that stood waiting. Slaves hastened to fetch restoratives and basins of clean water to rinse his face and hands.

Only a few minutes had passed in the hall since the moment when Don Miguel had shifted into the past. But it was plain that for him much time had gone by; his skin was burnt with sun to the colour of leather, and his eyes were red and inflamed with dust. The General Officers gathered anxiously about his couch, wondering how gravely he had suffered.

Not very, it transpired. For having accepted a sip of stimulating liquor, he waved aside further attentions and struggled to sit up. He passed his tongue over sun-chapped lips and spoke thickly.

"It is done," he said, and looked about him in wonder. His mind was still whirling with the memory of the great city of Texcoco burning in tropic daylight, as his body was still clad only in the breech-clout of an Indian of that time. The slaves had started to wash away the painted symbols from his face, but had not completed their task.

The General Officers breathed a sigh of relief. Red Bear said harshly, "You are certain?"

"Indeed I am. I found the workshop of Hungry Dog without trouble, at a time when he was working on the very mask I had brought back. When it was complete, it waited in his shop for the great festival at which it was to be dedicated with sacrifices to the great god Tezcatlipoca. I waited until the time of that festival. And the day before it, a man came to the shop and went away with the mask."

"Was it Don Arcimboldo?" demanded the Prince.

"Perhaps."

"Aren't you sure?" The Prince leaned forward angrily, with reproaches boiling on his tongue-tip; Father Ramon laid a hand restrainingly on his arm.

"Don Miguel has done well," he said.

"How do you mean?" the Prince said, blinking.

"Why, if he had given himself away to Don Arcimboldo, then Don Arcimboldo would have recognised him on meeting him again. This did not happen. Therefore it was correct to hide from him."

"So I reasoned," said Don Miguel, laying his head tiredly in his hands. "Therefore, when I saw that the mask was gone, I replaced it. I stayed long enough to make sure that it was dedicated at the festival as planned. And—here I am."

The Prince breathed a sigh of gusty relief. "Is it now in order, Father Ramon?" he demanded.

"As far as we can tell."

"Good! Then I must back to New Castile; had it not been for this affair, I had planned to leave Londres days gone. All else will be attended to, I take it."

He gave Don Miguel a curt nod, spun on his heel, and was gone from the hall with cloak flying and aides trotting at his heels. After a thoughtful pause, Red Bear also took his leave, and Father Ramon was alone in the hall with Don Miguel and the silent, scurrying technicians.

"How do you feel now?" said the Jesuit eventually.

"I begin to recover," said Don Miguel, and reached for another sip of the restorative. "My hurt is rather in my mind than my body. I was witness to the sacrifice to Tezcatlipoca less than a day ago, and I am still nauseated."

The Jesuit nodded.

"It sometimes makes me wonder," said Don Miguel in a hesitant tone, "what blindness we also may be guilty of."

Father Ramon gave him an odd sideways glance. "Go on, my son," he invited.

"Well—what I mean is this. For all their fine work in gold, their masonry, their social discipline, those Aztecs I have been among were savages, habituated to sacrificing men by the score in the most cruel manner. For all that they understood the motion of the stars and planets, they never used the wheel save to move children's toy animals. We are superior in some ways—in many ways, perhaps. And yet we may have our blindnesses. Although Borromeo showed us how we might rotate the dimensions of substances so that the worlds became flat and we could voyage back into time, although we live in a peaceful world free of much of the horror of war—nonetheless, what things may we not be using for children's toys, that later ages may marvel at and put to use?"

"Yes," said Father Ramon, looking unseeing at the frame of iron and silver which the technicians were now dismantling. And then he repeated more slowly, "Ye-es . . ."

"What is perhaps worse still," Don Miguel continued, "is that we—unworthy as we are—have the power to re-shape the history of Earth! So far, we have managed to confine that power to a few fairly reliable individuals. But thirty corrupt Licentiates—if this figure was accurate—could in their overweening confidence wreck history back to the moment of Creation!"

He spread his hands. "How see you this, Father? It's a question for you, not for a layman."

Father Ramon seemed to draw himself together inside his habit. "We have free will, my son. Therefore it is up to us to do as we will with what we have been given. Only—"

Don Miguel broke in, suddenly incredulous. "But Father! Here is—oh, how have I never seen this before? With time-travel, would it not be possible for agents of evil to go back in time and undo the good consequences of the acts of others? Would it not even be possible for such persons to corrupt the great men of the past, deliberately?"

"You are astute," said Father Ramon soberly. "It has been debated whether indeed the influence of evil that we see in history may not be the working out of just such interference as you suggest—whether in fact the fall of the angels hurled out of heaven may have been a fall into the past, rather than a fall through space. But this is the deepest of all theological questions today."

"I'm glad you say so," said Don Miguel with a trace of irony, and wondered at his own audacity in being ironical with a General Officer of the Society. Yet for all his reputation as a philosopher living in the rarefied regions of metaphysics, Father Ramon seemed singularly approachable. He added, "I myself do not see how such a question could be answered at all."

"You mean—whether or not the good results of men's acts could be wiped out by temporal interference? Good, of course, cannot be destroyed, and it is heretical to think it can."

The edge of sharp reproof on the Jesuit's voice cut Don Miguel's self-confidence to ribbons. He said humbly, "But then, Father, that makes nonsense of the idea of deliberate interference for evil ends."

"Not altogether." The Jesuit rose to his feet, seeming to come to a decision. "When you are rested, visit me in my private office. I think you deserve some information you have not been given."

Father Ramon's bare office had two chairs in it—one hard, one soft. He was himself sitting in the hard one when Don Miguel entered, and indicated that the other was for visitors. Don Miguel sat down uncertainly, wondering what the knowledge might be that was to be imparted to him.

Father Ramon offered him tobacco and a pipe, which he refused with a shake of the head, and then leaned back, putting his finger-tips together.

"Consider what makes an act of free will free," he said.

The suddenness of the question took Don Miguel aback. He stammered a confused answer which Father Ramon ignored.

"No, it lies in this. That all the possible alternatives be fulfilled."

"What?"

"Precisely that. If there is free will—and we hold that there is—all our acts of decision must in fact be fulfilled in just

so many ways as there are alternatives. Thus to kill and not to kill and merely to wound more or less seriously—all these must follow upon a choice between them."

"But I do not see that! There—there is no *room* for that to be true!"

"No?" The other sketched his habitual faint smile. "Then think on this. You go into the past. You abstract a crucial object—shall we say, a bullet from a gun aimed by an assassin at a king? You return to the present with that object. A king may change history by living or dying. Would you return to the same present as that which you left?"

"I begin to understand," said Don Miguel slowly, his voice shaking.

"Then suppose you return and restore that bullet to its place. The king dies—*again*, so to speak. And the present to which you come after doing thus, is the original present."

"But this must have been done!"

"It has," said the Jesuit calmly. "We have been doing it for more than forty years."

"How about the rule of non-interference, then?" cried Don Miguel, feeling his universe reel about him. "Are the corrupt Licentiates not the only ones who are corrupt?"

"There is no corruption in this matter. Those Licentiates who have taken bribes and carried outsiders into the past were confident that they could undo any stupid act by their clients. Indeed, most of them have scrupulously undone them. He who was Don Arcimboldo's accomplice did not know about the golden mask, or doubtless he would have forbidden Don Arcimboldo to take it away. From fear, of course. We all fear the consequences of interfering with history."

"But if all this is true," said Don Miguel in a choking voice, "then what does it matter if we interfere or not? We ourselves may be only a fluid cohesion of possibilities, subject to change at the whim of someone who chooses not to keep the non-interference rule."

"True," said Father Ramon stonily. "That is a logical consequence of there being free will."

There was silence. Eventually Don Miguel said, "I suppose this might be foreseen by anyone who worked out carefully what kind of a universe Borromeo's discovery opened to us."

"We may give thanks that up to now, few people have thought the matter through." Father Ramon smiled again.

"Well, Don Miguel Navarro ! How do you like the universe we live in ?"

"I do not," said Don Miguel, and was at a loss for words to describe the sense of impermanence, volatility and changeableness that the other's words had instilled in him.

"Nonetheless," said Father Ramon dryly, "this is how things stand. Go you now to Red Bear and report on your trip for him. And do not speak lightly of what I have told you. For if this truth were to become known to those who are not ready for it—why, the sky would fall !"

When Don Miguel turned and walked to the door, he was surprised to find the floor still firm beneath his feet.

—John Brunner

**Your Favourite Film** is probably on 16mm ! Fifty or more new films are released on 16mm every month. Unless you know what they are about and who they are available from, you may be missing something of great interest. With **FILM USER** to keep you in touch with the latest informational, training and general interest films this risk will never arise. **FILM USER**'s monthly reviews of new releases—unique in its comprehensiveness—is but one of several reasons for taking out a subscription (20s. for twelve issues) today. Free specimen on request from Dept. F.U.E.,  
**FILM USER, 319 High Holborn,  
London, W.C.1.**



*An invincible and implacable enemy must have a weak spot somewhere. To find it the Terran Command had to adopt seemingly unorthodox methods.*

# BLIND AS A BAT

by PHILIP E. HIGH

---

## Chapter One

"There is only one thing to do." Lacrosse studied the base list, frowning. "Leap-frog Manwood."

"Leap-frog!" Tiny veins in Forrester's heavy cheeks darkened slightly. "You mean promote him above men with longer service and greater experience?"

"Precisely." Lacrosse's sandy coloured face was neutral but firm. "This is a new assessment, Commodore, a survival measure. We need the best man at the top and Manwood is the best man." He flipped open a file. "Check the I.Q. Check the latent but positive initiative rating. He's the only man with enough drive to *do* anything when the trouble starts—as it will."

Forrester resolutely refused to look. "It's monstrous. You're creating resentments in a combat squadron which, at a time like this, should be unified down to the lowest rank." He banged his fist suddenly on his desk. "Damn it, man, you're tearing the Service to pieces."

Lacrosse looked at him and made no attempt to conceal a sigh. "Commodore, the War Department called us in, incidentally with your authority, to select the most competent officers for a given task. We've made that selection on a

psychiatric basis as instructed. If you don't like that selection, I suggest you take the matter up with the War Committee."

Forrestor was still flushed and angry. "But, good God, no one expected you people to promote a junior lieutenant, administrative, above a Captain. True he's handled squadrons as part of his training but that doesn't turn him into a tactical genius."

Lacrosse smiled faintly. "True, but on our assessment, Manwood has the potentials of a tactical genius."

Forrestor rubbed his forehead angrily. These blasted psychiatric head-shrinkers would be running the whole Service soon. He drew a deep breath and managed to control his voice. "This latent talent will, of course, place us on equal footing with a parapsychic enemy."

"Oh, no." Lacrosse's voice was reasonable and infuriating. "On the other hand we may get slightly better results than normal promotion on a length-of-service basis."

Forrestor said: "Balderdash!" explosively.

"You think so?" Lacrosse was wearing a nasty little smile now. "The Second Fleet was traditionally officered, I believe."

Forrestor half opened his mouth then closed it. The statement was, he felt, unjust but irritatingly unarguable. Desperate measures, new ideas and applications were undoubtedly needed but he had never dreamed that the War Office would bow so slavishly to the dictates of the psychiatrists. It was a phase, of course, a panic move, a series of defeats would soon prove it. Unfortunately a series of defeats would finish them for good.

"I could rush a replacement out there," he suggested, controlling his temper. "A selected replacement, of course, but suitable in rank."

Lacrosse sighed inwardly. "There's no time for that, Commodore, you said so yourself." He leaned forward. "Surely we are both working for the same cause? All we are trying to do is get the right men in the right position at the right time and, on base Ninety-Two, Manwood is the best man."

Forrestor looked at him and suddenly realised the futility of further argument. "Very well, you win. I'll appoint Manwood but I shall append the reasons for my decision in detail. The other officers have the right to know why they have been passed over."

"Excellent." Lacrosse bent down and extracted a printed sheet from his brief case. "This is exactly what you need—it explains the purpose and promotion basis of the Psychiatric Selection Board."

Forrestor took it, a little dazedly. "You *are* running the Space Force, aren't you?" A thought struck him. "My God, on your recommendation I could be thrown out of Supreme Command."

Lacrosse laughed softly. "You could but you won't. You have already been assessed as eminently suitable, we began at the top you see—"

Forrestor sat staring in front of him long after Lacrosse had gone. Finally he sighed. He supposed they'd had to do *something* but what one could do against a parapsychic race however competently you handled your defences was another matter.

One could, of course, console oneself with the thought that the enemy were not invulnerable despite their obvious advantages. The Voyans had lost seventeen discs and three moderate size vessels before what remained of the defenders had turned and—let's face it—run like scalded cats.

The propagandists called the battle indecisive but the loss of eighty-nine ships—three quarters of the Second Fleet—was in truth a rout.

There had been nothing left to do but concentrate one's forces for the defence of the home system, leaving a few battered remnants for possible delaying actions.

Fortunately the Voyans had not followed up their success and Humanity had had time to draw breath and, where possible, reorganise.

It was known, however, that the Voyans were concentrating in the Markheim area for what was, obviously, a major thrust. Worse, they seemed indifferent, or more probably contemptuous, of the constant watch kept on their movements. To them, no doubt, the lone observers on dead meteoric rocks, the circling spy-cameras and the occasional suicide scout were less than nuisance value. Why bother with the Intelligence Service of a race which, irrespective of concise information, was a dead duck anyway.

No doubt, the rearguard bases, stretched thinly across the perimeter of Human expansion were equally contemptible. Although they gave the appearance of defence in depth the

enemy no doubt knew they were but minor defence points which would take days to supplement in the event of a major attack. In any case they could be brushed aside with indifference, they were nothing more than tiny groups of obsolete or patched-up casualties sited on any world which would support life and serve as an operational base. The only justification for their existence was that they *were* perimeter defences of a kind and they just *might* prove useful as a delaying factor.

Forrestor frowned at the map on the opposite wall. Judging by the enemy concentrations their first objective would be the New Commonwealth Worlds in Sector 6. Such an attack would take them into Twenty-Second Squadrons area which, of course, had been the basis of the recent argument.

The Twenty-Second Squadron had previously been commanded by Tinsley, an elderly man dragged forcibly from retirement in a race extremity. Tinsley, despite his age had been a first class man but base life had finished him. At sixty-five a plus gravity and the boiling humidity of a mud ball planet had proved too much for his heart and lungs. One morning Tinsley had been found dead in bed and the Psychiatric Board had decided who should take his place. An unknown administrative Lieutenant named Manwood.

Forrestor felt his temper rising again and forced himself to think. Did it matter? The squadron wouldn't be there if it wasn't expendable and in any case was only a paper squadron. At least half the units based there were unserviceable. As for the Commander—what could any Commander do against an enemy *who could read minds* . . .

On base 92 Manwood scowled at the long confidential report fully aware that his interest was purely escapist. A month ago in the comfortable security of an administrative post it would have pleased him to play armchair strategist and re-fight the battle, safely, in his imagination. In the last month, however, things had changed, he had been pitchforked into a promotion which, to say the least of it, was an appalling error on the part of H.Q.

Irrespective of the Psychiatrists, Manwood knew he was not cut out for Command. At this very moment his only reason for reading the report was an excuse, a means of evading less pleasant and more urgent duties. He had to appoint Captains

for the serviceable ships and, from the officers on the base, his own Second.

Manwood, mentally, side-stepped the issue, there was no hurry, was there? He felt a sudden annoyance, shilly-shallying, side-stepping, it all went to prove that H.Q. had blundered badly.

The promotion itself had understandably been far from popular on the base, not that there had been any overt rudeness or insubordination, it was just something one could feel.

The officers were too polite, the saluting over-punctilious, everyone was too correct. Worse, he shared their feeling and it made him uncomfortable and embarrassed.

Oh hell, he might as well read a bit more of the report, give him time to settle down. He turned the page.

*In the light of subsequent information, there is no doubt whatever that the Voyans were 'aware' of the Second Fleet long before the battle began.*

*When, on D plus 7, contact was established with enemy formations, the Voyans immediately seized the initiative by launching a long range missile on Command Squadron.*

*This squadron, it must be born in mind, was four thousand miles to the rear of our advanced formations yet it was singled out and destroyed before our forward assault units could begin to deploy for the enveloping plan prepared some days before.*

*There is no doubt, therefore, that the enemy with the aid of his peculiar faculties, was able to identify this vital Squadron far to the rear but also, without undue strain on the imagination, gain vital information from the minds of its personnel.*

Manwood frowned at the words, his difficulties temporarily forgotten. Somehow, somewhere some pertinent date seemed to be missing. What? He couldn't even explain it to himself why he suspected the omission. No, no, that wasn't the word. The weakness of the report was not its omissions but its assumptions. Because an alien life form had peculiar faculties there was no reason to assume . . . On the other hand, how had the Voyans pin-pointed Command Squadron? The vessels had carried no special insignia, no identifying signal unit, in short it hadn't shouted it's presence so that—shouted?—*shouted*! Good God!

Manwood laid the report carefully face down on the desk, conscious that he was sweating slightly. He was not certain it was the answer but it *might* be.

He was suddenly glad the squadron was in a remote part of the galaxy far away from enemy concentrations. Nothing was ever likely to happen out here but if it did . . .

Manwood knew himself well enough to realise that he'd have to try out his theory.

He jerked his mind hastily away from the thought and found himself confronted with his old problems. Fate, he decided was definitely working against him and it was about time he stopped dithering and hit back.

Manwood had yet to learn that if fate was responsible it carried an almost lethal punch.

The message arrived four hours later.

To : Garrison Commander (Manwood, J. 66/c4/112. Acting Temp')  
Twenty-Second Squadron  
Base 92

Sir,

Two Voyan capital ships (suspected M class) area 9. Proceeding area 8 at 11.02 H.D. and 62 minutes 30 seconds N at 4.03 per second.

Enemy vessels should enter your operational area at sixteen hundred hours plus four, standard.

The squadron under your command is hereby ordered to space for interception.

Enemy vessels must be destroyed or delayed irrespective of odds.

Signed

S. G. Forrester

Supreme Commander  
Imperial Fleet.

Manwood laid the message carefully in front of him and wondered why his hands were not shaking. He felt there should be some outward sign of the twitching in his stomach and the icy feeling at the back of his neck.

His previous worries and doubts seemed suddenly meaningless and a rush of panic filled his mind. What was he going to do? God, he was an administrative officer.

He fought down an almost overwhelming urge to jump to his feet and run from the room.

Carefully, keeping both feet firmly on the floor, he extracted a cigarette from his case and watched it light as he broke the



plastic tip with his thumb nail. Got to keep a grip on himself, if he dithered now he was lost. He inhaled deeply, forcing his body to relax and slowly his mind returned to normality.

They'd thrown the book at him, hadn't they ?

The enormity of the order struck him with renewed force. What sort of squadron did they think he had here—heavy cruisers ? Couple of sharks your area, get up your minnows and stop them.

He laughed hysterically, forced himself to stop and suddenly his mind was calm again.

Action, that was the answer, got to face things now. He reached forward and touched a switch. "Get me the maintenance officer." His hands were shaking now and his forehead felt strangely damp.

## Chapter Two

Detling's head and shoulders appeared abruptly in the screen, looking as always, with his small moustache and slightly protruding teeth, like an ill-tempered camel. This was one of the interviews Manwood had been dreading but as Detling saluted it seemed to fall abruptly into perspective.

"Sir ?" Detling's very correctness made it sound like an insult.

"How many vessels operational, Captain ?"

"Two, sir."

"Only two ?" The harshness in his voice surprised even Manwood himself. "Why ?"

Detling looked slightly taken aback. "Three were those beat-up jobs transferred to us from sixty-three squadron, sir. Number one is undergoing the usual routine overhaul. In view of the facilities here, sir—"

Manwood leaned forward slightly. "Captain Detling, I am not interested in *your* problems, only my own. I want at least *three* ships ready to grav off at twelve hundred hours. That is an order."

"But damn it, sir, that's only—"

"Twelve hundred hours." Manwood's face was grim. "Enemy vessels are presumed passing through this area at sixteen hundred. You will command the *Mayflower* and Austin-Dobson the third vessel—understood ?"

Detling's mouth fell open then he snapped to attention.  
"Yes, sir."

Manwood cut the picture before he could salute. Dully and with brief satisfaction he realised he had handled Detling correctly. He was a good officer and the realisation of impending action would more than outweigh his natural resentment. Further he respected a firm hand, those ships would be ready.

He touched the switch again. "Kindly instruct Lieutenant Harper to report to my office immediately."

He picked up the message again and frowned at it. The Voyan ships were crossing space in a series of prodigious leaps, 11.02 seconds in Hyper-drive and sixty-two minutes eighteen seconds on normal thrust. The squadron should intercept as they came back to normal thrust which might provide an element of surprise.

There was a knock at the door and automatically Manwood said: "Come in."

"Lieutenant Harper reporting as ordered, sir."

Manwood looked at him coldly. "I'm appointing you my Second in Command, Harper."

"I, Sir?" Harper, a tall, too handsome man with almost exquisitely waved fair hair looked taken aback.

"You will, therefore," continued Manwood, ignoring the ejaculation, "appoint yourself to the lead ship, *Harrier*, in readiness for immediate action."

"But, sir—"

"That is all, Harper." Manwood turned his attention to the papers on his desk and waited until he heard the door close. Then he touched the switch again. "Get me the Medical Officer."

Dixon's face appeared in the screen. He was a human man and his "Sir" inferred friendly understanding.

Manwood smiled faintly. "Lieutenant Harper will probably be reporting sick within the next half hour. Unless you can confirm his symptoms beyond doubt, you will find him fit for action—understood?"

"Yes, sir, understood perfectly."

As Manwood cut the screen he had the strong impression that the M.O. had been fighting a losing battle with a confiding wink. He half grinned to himself then frowned. Where the hell were all these decisions coming from? He had the uneasy feeling that he was slowly surrendering himself to another

personality. Damn it, he was Manwood, a junior administrative officer, an easy-going, let's be frank, lazy nonentity.

He was not to know that Psychiatry, now an exact science, had from the normal induction tests, correctly assessed his reactions under pressure.

Manwood, conscious of the almost impossible task ahead of him, thought bitterly that psychiatry had combed the base for a bloody fool and had found one. Now that he was committed beyond redemption, he might as well try out his theory and have a smack at the Voyans, yes they'd found a fool, no doubt about that.

There was a clicking sound and the communicator ejected a flimsy at him.

*Six squadrons, heavy cruisers, due your operational area at twenty-one hundred hours.*

He screwed the flimsy up in his hand and shrugged indifferently. Support would arrive five hours too late. If it were true, it could be a morale boost.

'God, I'm getting cynical already,' he thought, 'and I haven't even seen action yet.' Perhaps it was a pointer to strike a balance, they were getting no morale boost on this base, only the facts.

He leaned forward and touched a switch. "Now hear this, Commander speaking, attention all ranks—"

They were ready. Manwood reached absently towards his pocket for a cigarette and checked the movement just in time. God, his first spoken command and he was behaving like a boy entrant. He swallowed. "Seal all ports and stand by." He counted mentally up to ten. "On grav' motors."

Through the two-way com' he heard the order repeated back.

"On grav' motors, sir."

"Minus one."

"Minus one, sir."

There was a faint humming sound and the familiar pressure beneath the soles of his feet.

*The time was twelve hundred hours.*

He turned watching the four navigators, eyes intent on their circular data screens.

"Minus three—number one thrust, stand by."

Harper, a few feet away, checking the diagram screen, heard the voice through a haze of angry resentment.

Manwood had always seemed pleasant, easy going and eminently reasonable. Now, bolstered by a dubious and obviously haphazard promotion he developed overnight into one of those pathetically 'keen types' with which the Space Force seemed to abound.

He had, Harper suspected, warned the M.O. who had been altogether too abrupt when he had reported sick.

Harper smiled to himself with faint bitterness. They thought obviously, and, perhaps understandably, that he was afraid.

It was true he had tried to avoid action but not from the motives of abject fear they suspected.

He, Harper, had sought to avoid action not because he was afraid but because he was a realist. If, as the propagandists claimed, this was a war of survival then the sensible procedure was to ensure one's own survival.

The enormous influence of his Father had not helped in evading military service but it had, until now, provided a posting in a reasonably safe area. It was sheer bad luck that the Voyans had chosen to make a combat run through this particular sector of space.

Harper had a sudden queasy feeling in his stomach. M ships! What the hell could Manwood do against M ships? It was equivalent to tackling a combined fleet. Did he know what an M ship was and, if so, had he any idea of the Voyans capabilities?

Harper doubted it. In the early days of the war he had been one of the few privileged civilians to see a captured disc.

The visit had been an eye-opener and had confirmed his opinion that only a fool threw away his life unnecessarily.

The disc had been partially wrecked, its occupant a few burnt smears long since scraped away by the scientists for analysis but the structure of the vessel had been intact.

In it had been a diminutive recoil chair and beyond that, a terrifying blank. There was no vision screen, no firing buttons and no instruments or controls.

One knew, of course, that the vessel was armed, that the incredible speed and manoeuvrability it had shown in action must be dependent on its now dead pilot. But how?

Scientists had checked the peculiarly resilient plastic of the recoil chair suspecting that control might be dependent on the movements of the operator's body but had drawn a complete blank.

Micro-mechanisms of unbelievable complexity had been found between the double walls of the vessel but no one knew how the pilot operated them.

It took seven months of ceaseless experiment to find out and the answer was an unpleasant shock—the mechanisms were *telepathically sensitive*.

The Voyan operator, changed course, controlled the motor and fired the weapons by the simple process of sitting in the recoil chair and *thinking at them*.

Harper shivered slightly. He had the uncomfortable feeling that Manwood was going to be deliberately unorthodox and mix the action in an excess of zeal. It was the sort of reaction one expected from these emotional types.

Did Manwood know, for example, that the Voyans had no communication system? Telepathy, after all, needed no mechanical assistance.

“Number two—boost!”

*The time was twelve hundred and thirty hours.*

Manwood touched the Com' switch. “Calling *Mayflower* and *Kingfisher*, maintain course and speed, scramble inter-vessel contact. Acknowledge and out.”

Manwood was glad of the scrambler. It was a simple device which condensed sound to an inaudible crackle of static in transit. On reception the sound was slowed again to audible speech but detection or pin-pointing was almost impossible.

He realised that he was following a plan still hazy in his mind and that, already, he was facing the agonising decision which, sooner or later, must be faced by all commanders.

To prove his theory and enable him to launch a successful attack, someone had to play guinea-pig and the guinea-pig would undoubtedly be killed. On the other hand his theory might be wrong in which case a man would have died in vain. If it was right, however, and he did not send a man, everyone might die.

Manwood leaned forward and touched a switch. “Now hear this—Commander speaking.” He paused drawing a deep breath to steady his voice. “A volunteer is required for a dangerous mission.” He paused again. “The chances of survival are slight.” He clicked the switch and leaned back sweating. That had been blunt enough, surely? Perhaps, he thought without conviction, no one will volunteer, perhaps it will not be necessary.

Four minutes after the announcement, a volunteer named Perkins presented himself to Manwood and saluted. His reasons were so simple they were almost elemental.

"I'm from Adelaide, sir. They got my girl, my parents and all my friends."

Manwood nodded slowly without speaking. In the early days of the war four discs had somehow slipped through the defences. There was the crater which had been Adelaide, the hole which had been Berlin, the pit which had been Manchester.

"You realise, Perkins, the chance of return is unlikely in the extreme?"

"Yes, sir, I understand that from the first."

When he had gone Manwood called the technical officer for specialist work on one of the ship's life-craft.

"Approximate interception point, sir."

*The time was fifteen hundred and thirty hours.*

Manwood touched a switch. "Reduce velocity to one hundred plus, course thirty degrees green." He paused and cleared his throat carefully. "Volunteer rating will report to number three escape tube in full survival kit."

Perkins was a thin, dark-skinned man with abnormally thick eyebrows and wiry short cropped hair.

At twenty his face was gaunt and his mouth bitter but there was no outward sign of his real feelings. As he walked sown the companion-way there was an uneasy fluttering in his stomach but, apart from that, he was quite calm.

The numbing shock of having his personal world destroyed was still, after two years, a leaden feeling inside his chest. A feeling which, after the first three months, began to manifest in the idea that he ought to *do* something to get rid of it.

He was not given to introspection and he found it difficult to translate these inward feelings into thought. It was something which lately had made him want to wreck things, get drunk for days on end, strike a superior officer, anything to relieve the inward tension. Doing something, however dangerous seemed to him to be the answer. He only hoped he'd see those mind-reading bastards get hell before he died.

"Now you quite understand your instructions?" The technical officer was fussing over the life-craft as Perkins crawled into it. "You will proceed directly towards the enemy vessel until they open up on you. All known Voyan weapons,



apart from the interceptors, are visual and build up on the projector facets before discharge so you will be able to *see* when they begin. You will then turn parallel to the enemy ship for thirty seconds at thrust ninety. At the conclusion of the run you will turn, heading back for base. On the home run you may take evasive action but not before. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite clear, sir."

"Bear in mind, please, the purpose of your run is *vital information*. Don't develop heroic ideas about ramming the enemy. In the first place you'd never make it and, in the second, the lives of all your shipmates may depend on the information you send back."

"Yes, sir." Perkins climbed into the prone control position and eyed the simplified instruments feeling a momentary anger that the ship was unarmed. He would have liked to have had a smack at the swine.

"Secure activator leads." The officer's voice reached him tinnily through the earphones of his helmet. Above and beyond he could hear combat instructions booming through the ship's speakers.

"All ranks, survival suits—"

"Close up fire parties—"

"Missile crews, load all tubes—"

"Radar crews, cut projection and close circuits."

Dully Perkins realised that his face was suddenly dripping with sweat.

*The time was fifteen hundred hours and fifty five minutes.*

### Chapter Three

At sixteen hundred hours and nine minutes—a discrepancy of only five minutes—the familiar aura-effect of a hyper transfer began to play against the stars.

"One!" Detling in the *Mayflower* ejaculated the word angrily at his Second Officer as if he were personally responsible

"Two!" Detling's prominent teeth seemed to protrude even further. If he had been in command things would have been very different. He would have strewn the area with target-seeking mines and let go with every missile he had.

It was true, of course, that Voyan interceptor methods were well-nigh impregnable but a surprise attack might have caught them on one leg.

As it was the three ships were simply cruising in an aimless circle across the presumed path of the enemy and, as such, were sitting ducks. Not only sitting ducks at that, with the radar shut down they were blind as well. What the hell was Manwood playing at? With the radar shut down every measurement would have to be done with clumsy and often inaccurate magnification instruments.

"Estimated enemy position, four thousand, one hundred and twenty-three miles," said a voice through the speaker as if to refute his thoughts.

Detling switched off the bridge lights and scowled into space. He could see nothing against the dusting of stars but, of course, *they* would see—or should it be 'read'—him.

His thoughts turned to Manwood. He had, he assured himself, nothing against the man *personally*. It was just that he lacked the background and experience for command.

Damn it all, he Detling, had six years more service than Manwood who had not learned to follow procedure. If he had, what the devil was he doing now except placing them in a position where they could be blown to bits at any moment. God, Command Squadron had bought it at a far greater range than this.

In the lead ship Manwood leaned forward and said: "Release the life-craft." His voice was so devoid of emotion that he wondered briefly if it was his own. He didn't *feel* devoid of emotion, he felt as if someone had ripped out his stomach.

Perkins heard the order tinnily and strangely far away in his helmet then there was a kick, a brief feeling of nausea and he was alone in the darkness.

There was no sense of motion, even when he pressed the firing button and the surge of power seemed to pass through his own body, it still felt as if he were drifting helplessly at the mercy of unseen currents.

He couldn't see the enemy vessels and he had the sudden illogical fear that he had been released in the wrong direction or had gone off course.

He realised suddenly that they hadn't told him quite what to expect save a lot of dimensions which he secretly suspected were gross exaggerations. What sensible man could believe in a ship which was two miles long? No, that was something they'd cooked up to keep him on his toes. They probably thought it would help his morale or something.

He peered through the transparent nose of the vessel and suddenly realised they were there almost dead ahead.

He could not actually see them as yet, but there was a blackness against the canopy of stars which gave an outline, and, now and again, a star seemed to vanish and re-appear.

Hastily he reached for the binoculars, jerking them from the magnetic clamp beneath the control panel.

The binoculars were specially made for use in space, the eye-pieces widened and precisely curved for use in conjunction with a survival suit but Perkins thought the lenses must be at fault. They couldn't be that big, could they?

They didn't even look like spaceships, they looked like nothing more than twin cylinders flattened at each end. There was nothing about them even to suggest they contained life or even that they might be dangerous. Worse, they were strangely *clean*, they did not, like his own ships extrude the familiar external equipment. There were no radar cones, transmission lattices, tube bulges or weapon blisters but, strangely, they were not smooth.

Adjusting the highly efficient binoculars, Perkins could see that the surfaces of the alien vessels were faceted as if painstakingly machined or even prefabricated in geometrical and precise sections.

Back on the ship a voice was saying monotonously: "Boost seventy-five, target area seventeen hundred miles, still no enemy reaction. Check."

Perkins knew he was drawing rapidly near the end of his run. The enemy vessels were now clearly visible to the naked eye and, due to the deceptive appearance of space, almost close enough to touch. Through the binoculars they were literally immense. He realised suddenly there had been no exaggeration, the dimensions they had given him were true. Although he was seeing the truth with his own eyes he still wondered dully if there was a catch somewhere. How could a thing two miles long and half a mile thick be a spaceship?"

Perkins realised suddenly with a vague feeling of surprise that he was shaking all over. He was getting so damn near, were they just playing with him—waiting?"

He thought they would probably throw everything at him but, of course, there would be nothing he would be able to do about it. They had told him about Voyan weapons but only what they looked like, not what they *did*.

At that precise moment the leading alien cylinder seemed suddenly to awake.

To Perkins, prone in the life-craft, it seemed that a hundred brightly lighted ports had been abruptly opened and shut in the enemy vessels sides. She flickered at him angrily as if to warn him of approaching danger.

He sensed rather than saw that things were rushing from the vessel towards him and he reached quickly for the twin steering rods.

*Make a tight turn and run parallel at—*

He watched the simplified instruments carefully as he pressed on the steering rods. Ten—twenty—thirty.

At forty-three degrees the controls went suddenly limp in his hands and the finger of the dial rushed past forty five and up to sixty.

For a few seconds he wrestled grimly with the controls and then went limp. A tight turn! They'd cheated him. The life-craft was 'rigged,' the indicator needle had steadied and 'thrust' had jumped from ninety to one hundred and twenty.

He was heading back for the *Harrier* at maximum boost.

One minute and twenty-eight seconds later a thing which looked like an eight foot bluish rod revolving slowly on its axis struck the life-craft astern and chopped it into glowing fragments.

The humans called the weapons 'spinners' and, mercifully, Perkins never knew what hit him but he died feeling somehow that he had been betrayed.

In the control room of the *Harrier* Manwood turned away and wrote the figures 885 miles rather shakily on the blank page of the bridge note-pad.

"B tube—release one missile."

Somewhere within the vessel there was a thud and a voice said: "Missile away, sir."

Other voices began almost immediately, droning and monotonous.

"Thrust five—twenty-five point o six miles—speed two four nine o one per minute. On target."

They reminded Manwood strangely and rather sombrely of voices in a church.

He realised dully that the palms of his hands were damp. Somehow the rest of him, particularly the skin over his cheekbones and temples, felt tight and flaky as if he had contracted some unpleasant skin disease.

He was conscious that deep down inside him was a raw sense of guilt but it felt sealed off. It was like a knife wound which had been anaesthetised with the weapon still embedded in the flesh.

"Point o two three miles per second—on target."

Seven hundred and sixty-three miles from the enemy vessels, the single eight foot missile was hit by a thumb-size Boyan interceptor and disintegrated in a soundless circle of white flame.

Manwood wrote the figures on the note pad and rubbed a shaky hand across the face plate of his survival suit. So far it had worked, now for the rest.

"Now hear this—attention all ranks and support vessels. Commander speaking. Procedure five, stations sixteen." He paused and began again, hoping his voice had the friendly but impersonal tone expected of Commanders in times of tension. "This is the position at the moment," despite his resolution he paused and cleared his throat nervously. "Two Voyan M ships are now proceeding in normal drive approximately four thousand miles distant and on a course which suggests an attack on the New Commonwealth System. There is no need to tell you what will happen to these worlds if these ships get through. Heavy cruisers are speeding to our support but, at the moment, we are the only vessels in a position to intercept the enemy. I intend therefore to close the range to nine hundred miles and open fire with projectors. This is an extremely hazardous manoeuvre and may result in our immediate destruction but it is our only hope of inflicting damage and possibly delaying these formidable vessels." He paused, wishing he could wipe the sweat from his face. "Thank you—and good luck."

In the *Mayflower* Detling snorted audibly. "Extremely hazardous! That must be the most unique understatement of all time." He glared at his Second. "Nine hundred miles, my God, it's a wonder he didn't ask for grappling irons." He sighed and shook his head. "I suppose Austin-Dobson in the *Kingfisher* is calm enough, one of those solid types, but personally I find it damned hard to commit suicide for the fun of it." He made an angry gesture. "I know condemned criminals are lead blindfold to their execution but not by a madman."

He looked at the slightly shocked face of his Second. "All right, Brunner, we'll obey orders but I detest marching off the edge of a precipice."

Brunner nodded and said, cautiously. "Don't you find it rather odd they haven't had a go at us, sir? I mean, sir, we've begun to close and they still haven't reacted."

Detling glared at him. "Cat and mouse, Brunner, cat and mouse. They know we're here."

In the *Harrier*, Harper said almost casually, "Commander I have no right to say this but I think you threw away a man's life for nothing."

Manwood looked at him without expression. He had been expecting something of the sort and somehow the words failed to touch him. "Kindly close the door."

Harper slid shut the transparent bridge door angrily. "Further, I think you're a louse."

Manwood looked at him almost indifferently. "You realise your position, Lieutenant?"

"Of course, but since you intend to kill us all there is not much you can do about it, is there?"

"On that assumption, no. Have you quite finished Lieutenant?"

"Not quite, why did you choose me—spite?"

"On the contrary, I consider, despite your egotism, that you have the makings of a first class officer." He slid back the door. "I advise you to resume your duties."

"Oh, I intend to, I prefer to die occupied." He saluted contemptuously. "I leave you to stew in your intolerable conceit, Commander."

Manwood frowned then forgot him almost at once. There was too much to do and think about. He had to direct the battle yet send out a minute by minute report of his progress for the benefit of H.Q. If his theory was correct, the information would be vital.

"Enemy vessels three thousand, three hundred and eighty-six miles.

He realised with a vague sense of shock that the voice was slowly assuming the tense awareness of a count down.

"Enemy vessels, three thousand, one hundred miles."

The three vessels were rapidly drawing into combat range. Their position, in relation to the enemy, was roughly triangular, with the *Harrier* leading. The *Mayflower*, two miles higher and a mile astern, formed the apex with the *Kingfisher* bringing up the rear and forming the base.

All vessels were now at full alert, with tubes loaded and all blisters manned and ready.



## Chapter Four

Despite enormous progress in spatial sciences, the mastery of hyper-dimensional travel and highly efficient gravity motors, humanity possessed no wonder weapons. There were no searing 'rays,' no titanic disrupters, in fact there were no new wonder weapons whatever. Five hundred years of peace had produced only highly efficient developments of weapons which had been in use for centuries.

In point of fact Humanity possessed only two major weapons the target-seeking missiles and the projectors. The latter but a rather pompous title for what was, in effect, a glorified machine gun.

Primitive as the projectors were in basic sciences, they were still a highly formidable form of attack by any standards. Special recoil mechanisms and the incredible cold of space permitting a rate of fire exceeding thirty rounds a second.

The projectiles themselves were also worthy of note. Products of nuclear laboratories they were of incredible density yet slightly smaller than a garden pea but somehow packed into each one was an explosive power roughly equivalent to that of the ancient hand grenade.

There being no air resistance in space, the projectiles would travel several thousands of miles without loss of muzzle velocity. Their very smallness made them difficult to detect and at seven thousand miles they could successfully penetrate a three inch armour plate and explode on the far side.

"Enemy vessels, one thousand three hundred—"

"One thousand, two hundred—"

Manwood leaned forward. "Fire control—fix."

"On target, sir."

"Enemy vessels, nine hundred miles—combat line." The voice cracked slightly on the last two words.

"All projectors, one three second burst, on the word three." Muscles seemed to be jumping strangely in Manwood's legs. "One—"

In Number Three Blister, McKay heard the voice as if from the end of a long tunnel. McKay was only nineteen and this was his first time in action. He was, at that moment, so terrified he was almost calm.

He had set the sighting controls according to instructions and now crouched staring at the incredible black cylinders which, they had assured him, were the enemy ships.

"Two."

McKay saw that two gauntleted hands were gripping the projector butts, index fingers resting lightly on the round black firing studs. He supposed they were his own hands but he couldn't bring himself to believe it, he couldn't *feel* them.

"Three!"

The projectors were flashless but not entirely recoilless. McKay's arms and shoulders shook until the voice said: "Cut."

Nothing happened, he hadn't expected anything to happen, not at once, nine hundred miles was a long way.

There were four blisters facing the enemy, each blister mounting three projectors. Forward and amidships were two turrets mounting six projectors of slightly heavier calibre but similar rate of fire.

The combined fire of three vessels resulted in something equivalent to a meteor shower. The enemy vessels were mechanically reflexed to handle mass attack but over a thousand and almost undetectable missiles strained their resources to the utmost.

Inside the enemy lead ship relays clicked and automatic mechanisms took over the almost insuperable task of evasion and defence.

To McKay, rigid in the blister, it seemed as if the enemy vessel woke suddenly from sleep. The faceted surface glowed and flickered as defence and counter weapons were thrown abruptly into action. Coloured lights rushed outwards and away and an enormous feather of incandescence gushed suddenly from a forward turning-tube as the great vessel went into evasive action.

The manoeuvre was only partially successful.

Hundreds of projectiles passed harmlessly onwards into space, hundreds more struck the vessel obliquely detonating ineffectually on the heavy armour.

Forty-seven missiles, however, travelling at muzzle velocity, successfully penetrated eighteen inches of armour and detonated in the vessels outward compartments.

Twenty Voyans died instantly, forty-nine were so seriously wounded that further action on their part was an impossibility.

The damage however was even more serious, an atmosphere motor, two transit ramps and a gravity unit were wrecked beyond repair, but, most important of all, one missile completely destroyed an ejector circuit and a second wrecked the emergency generators.

The aliens, with the individual pilots ready in their recoil chairs, found themselves unable to eject their squadrons of defending discs.

The attack although encouraging was limited and to a vessel of that size almost negligible. Robotic repair squads sealed off eighteen penetrations within forty seconds, six compartments had their atmospheric pressure restored within eighty-five, re-wiring began almost at once.

By no stretch of the imagination could the aliens be called human but intellectually and emotionally they were little different from their human enemies.

Naturally they were alarmed but they were also rigidly disciplined. They were human enough to acknowledge the courage and audacity of the attack and already psychological departments within the vessel were re-assessing the fighting power of an enemy who, until now, had confined himself to long range missile attack.

The Voyans were also a little disconcerted. Their own weapons, although of greater range and treble the destructive power, had developed along entirely different lines. The conception of rapid firing weapons projecting literally thousands of unguided projectiles was completely new to them but as a race which had conquered three quarters of a galaxy they were swift to react.

In the blister McKay was still rigid with terror. As yet there was no outward sign that the attack had even touched the enemy.

"Two."

McKay realised suddenly that they had drawn level with the second vessel.

"Three !"

Again the weapons vibrated but this time the enemy vessel was prepared, the cylinder began to turn before the three second burst was finished.

It was a mistake.

A singularly alert fire control officer had anticipated the move and re-sighted his weapons accordingly.

Two hundred and eighty missiles penetrated the enemy vessel wrecking sixteen compartments and killing over a hundred aliens. An automatic control monitor was hit and one fifth of the vessel's surface defence mechanisms went abruptly out of action but like her sister ship she reacted.

"My God, they're throwing out some muck." Detling frowned in a puzzled way. "It's all over the place, they don't seem to know where we *are*."

At that precise moment the enemy lead ship let go with one of her multiple weapons.

To McKay it seemed that the enemy vessel exhaled a blue-white mist which rushed outwards expanding as it came.

The Commander's voice rang suddenly loud in his helmet.

"Break formation, stand by for crash-jump, all tubes—fire!"

An enormous pressure seemed to press suddenly down on the top of McKay's skull, his vision blurred and he was flung heavily against the side of the blister.

For a few terrifying seconds he had the impression that he and the blister were going to be torn loose and hurled into space then the pressure slowly lessened and he was able to catch his breath.

The mist was still rushing outwards but they were clearing it, although, it seemed, the fringes might still catch them.

He had no idea what the weapon was but there was something ominous about it as if, in some strange way it possessed life of its own. It contained flickerings as if minute life forms moved within it.

Planet-based fortifications which had suffered attack from the weapon called the flickerings 'crawlies' but McKay had not time to think of this. The outer fringes of the cloud seemed to reach out for the *Harrier* with darting luminous fingers. Colour flared suddenly in front of his eyes and fragments of the blister splattered about him.

He felt the thud as his survival suit expanded and stiffened against the loss of pressure. He sensed, rather than saw, the exit door slam shut behind him, sealing him off from the ship. He found himself staring at a ragged hole, eight inches wide in the transparent plastic.

In the control room, lights came on in the 'ship diagram' screen.

"A hit forward." There was sweat on Harper's face. "Twin punctures amidships—looks like one has gone through to the drive room. A blister is pierced, number three I think, one gravity motor is out and the communication link between here and the drive room has gone dead."

"Pressure?" Manwood's face was wooden and expressionless.

"Holding, sir. The Liquiseal seems to have held the punctures, but the crawlies seemed to have made a mess inside."

Manwood glanced quickly at the diagram and touched a switch. "Report in number three blister." He turned. "I want a full damage report, Harper, better make the drive room your first stop, do anything you can to help—" He pressed the switch again. "Number three blister, report in."

After an appreciable interval there was a faint click. "McKay, number three blister, sir." The voice sounded shaky and thin.

"Are you all right, boy?"

"Sir?—er—yes, sir, thank you, only a hole in the plastic." McKay found himself unaccountably moved by the concern in the Commander's voice.

"Good lad, don't forget the drill."

McKay stared unseeingly at the stars. Drill? What drill?

Harper made his way angrily to the drive room. The Commander was obviously retaliating for past insults by sending him to a danger spot. It wasn't a Second's job to—he scowled. Nothing he could do about it, was there? It was an order. It was the sort of thing which always happened when you got out of line and allowed events to control you.

In the blister McKay was just beginning to remember. You had to make repairs—there should be some seals under the projectors somewhere. When you'd made your repairs, you had to let air out of your reserve cylinders to restore pressure inside the blister. If your repairs were efficient, the safety door would swing open behind you, if not you'd thrown away thirty minutes of precious air for nothing and a survival suit would keep you alive for only six hours.

As he worked he saw that the Voyan ships were exhaling the equivalent of a firework display. Balls and cubes of light built up on the facets and rushed outwards. Fantastic looking constructions—he believed they were called 'bird cages'—drifted like bubbles from the lead ship while the second was ejecting discs like pennies from a child's money box.

"Support vessels, one five second burst followed by a single missile at the discretion of the Commanding officer."

Manwood tried to wipe sweat from his face and found himself baulked by his helmet. God, he just wasn't cut out for Command.

## Chapter Five

Harper reached the drive room and saw the pressure gauge above the door was normal, the G light, however, was burning a sullen red. Despite the warning the lack of gravity caught him completely by surprise. His feet came suddenly off the floor and he was compelled to grab at a wall stanchion to prevent himself turning completely over. The error made him angry with himself. God, what a way to die, upside down in the drive room of a suicide ship!

He touched the magna-switch at his belt, pressed his feet firmly to the floor and looked about him. His anger evaporated as quickly as it had come.

At first glance the drive room was a complete write-off. It looked, he thought, like the inside of a submarine he had once seen in an historical film—this one had stopped a six-inch shell.

The crawlie, accumulating energy as it came, had finally become unstable. The violent, although limited release of energy, had ripped a six foot hole in the drive room wall.

Bluish smoke swirled round the still-functioning air units but, as far as Harper could see, the black oblong bulk of the drive-housing was undamaged.

The rest was a shambles. Copper-coloured coolant pipes severed by the explosion jutted outwards jaggedly and at odd angles. Several power cables had been cut and now swayed loosely away from their brace supports like the roots of enormous black vines. Two of them were arcing vividly giving the curious impression of a thunderstorm in miniature.

'Hell,' thought Harper, 'sheer hell.' Vaguely he was aware of a curious change of perspective as if the universe had suddenly grown larger about him and he had the thought that his own place in it was singularly unimportant.

If he died now, no one would miss him, everything would go on exactly as before.

He rounded the drive-housing and almost stumbled over a man sprawled but drifting slowly a foot or so above the floor.

There was a ragged tear in the shoulder of the man's survival suit and, in the non-gravity conditions, blood drifted away from the tear in the fabric like crimson smoke.

Harper found himself galvanised into action. Despite lack of gravity, placing the injured man in a medical capsule was enormously difficult. He was sweating profusely by the time he pulled down the shutter and pressed the emergency stud.



The capsule might save the man's life. Pressure on the stud released not only increased oxygen but an inert gas combining anaesthetics and wound-seal compounds.

Someone pulled at Harper's arm. "For God's sake give me a hand here."

The Lieutenant found himself pulling on a heavy wrench clamped to the top of what looked like a fire hydrant.

"The blast knocked out the control circuit and warped this release valve—again, she's moving a little. If we don't get the emergency coolants running we'll blow in ten minutes—again—ah !—just one more."

Harper found that, despite the limitations imposed by his face plate, his vision was singularly acute. He could see the pores in the man's skin, the tiny beads of sweat in the wrinkles round the eyes. He could . . .

"Ah, that's it, got her." The man seemed suddenly to notice the insignia on the shoulders of Harper's survival suit. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't realise—"

Harper to his surprise found himself patting the man's shoulder. "Nice work, much damage?"

"It's bad sir, but nothing vital, nothing we can't patch up."

Harper became aware that other figures were moving through the smoke and that two men were already joining the arcing cables.

He stepped aside quickly for two men bearing a stretcher. The prone figure had both hands pressed futilely to the sides of his helmet as if striving to relieve an unbearable pain. The inside of the face plate was spattered and misted with crimson mercifully concealing the shattered face within.

Harper made a brief report to the Commander and then made his way forward.

Just short of the forward missile compartment a small group of figures conferred near an emergency shute.

"What's the trouble here?" Harper noted but did not dwell upon the clipped assurance in his voice.

Explanations reached him in disjointed fragments. "It's Collin, sir—he's stuck up there—a crawlie hit the shute—we can't get at him—we think he's bleeding to death."

Harper bent down and looked upwards. The emergency shute was simply a metal tube connecting Forward Fire Control with the Missile compartments and life-craft exits. In

an emergency and under conditions of normal gravity a man could slide down it even in a survival suit.

Harper could see booted feet, he could see that the walls of the chute were bulging inwards.

"Can we get at him from the top?"

"No, sir, we've tried that. There isn't room in a survival suit."

Harper scowled at him. "Then there's only one answer—help me out of this damn thing."

"But, sir, the regulations—"

Harper told him briefly and obscenely what to do with the regulations.

In the *Mayflower*, Detling had his face pressed against the thick supra-glass of the bridge. He was conscious of a curious mixture of fear and elation. They'd hurt the swine, there was no doubt about that. One of the cylinders was not dropping discs and both of them were firing all over the place.

Detling experienced a sudden sense of guilt which was somehow mixed up with resentment and grudging admiration. Manwood might be overbearing and crazily unorthodox but he'd certainly stumbled on some sort of gimmick.

Idly he watched a 'bird cage,' noted unconsciously that it would miss them by at least eight miles and suddenly stiffened.

"Blast away!" He made futile jerking motions with his arms. "Blast away!"

There was no sound, only a flash that momentarily blinded him and filled the control room with a sudden whiteness.

Brunner, studying the instruments, spun round startled. "What the hell was that, sir?"

Detling didn't look at him. "A bird cage hit one of our ships—the *Kingfisher*, I think." His voice was unintentionally harsh. He leaned forward and pressed a switch. "One five second burst, followed by a single missile—target nearest M ship."

Inside he was numb. Three hundred and fifty men, gone, finished, phut, just like that.

In number three blister, McKay heard the safety door swing open with an hysterical sense of elation. He'd *done* it, he'd made his repairs successfully and he hadn't lost his nerve.

"Attention projector crews, independent control, stand by to repel discs."

McKay's elation vanished to be replaced by the now familiar sense of constriction and the words of one of his instructors came back to him vividly : "*They come in edgeways, you can't see the damn things until it's too late.*"

McKay was shivering, what could he *do* ? All he could think of were brief bursts of fire in the hope of keeping them at a distance.

It was at that moment he saw the 'bird cage.' He had already noticed that enemy fire was becoming concentrated and more accurate and the glowing thing seemed to be coming straight at them.

The 'bird cage' was a dark sphere surrounded by glowing intertwining circles of bluish light and almost unthinkingly McKay sighted his guns and fired straight at it.

The enemy weapon, although awe-inspiring was far simpler than it appeared. It was, in truth, no more than a projected mechanism, the bird cage effect being produced by the 'lines of force' surrounding it. The weapon was a 'distorter'—its purpose being to disarrange or distort the atomic structure of its target to such effect that it destroyed itself. Metals weakened and, for fractional periods became other substances, chemical changes occurred in fuels and, most important of all, reactives became critical and exploded instantly.

The bird cage took the first projectile, distorted it and, in so doing, detonated it instantly. Automatically it distorted the released power of the explosion. The same with the second and the third but there were limits to its power, the mechanism began to overheat.

Unbelievably McKay saw the bird cage lose shape exude white sparks and trail into nothing.

"I got one !" McKay realised the importance of reporting the matter immediately but was too excited to be coherent. "Number three blister, I got a bird cage—"

In the *Mayflower* Detling was still thinking numbly of the *Kingfisher*. They were all chaps he had known intimately, Austin-Dobson, Cranbrooke, Mason, HeilBrandt. He had forgotten the missile.

The target-seeker, however, was still on its way. Following the barrage of projectiles it registered the direct impact of a director beam and changed course slightly to avoid it. An interference unit built into the nose cap began to relay false radar echoes as to its real position.

Under normal circumstances Voyan instruments would have broken down the fogging effects and stabilised the position of the approaching missile within fractions of seconds but conditions were no longer normal. One fifth of the vessel's surface defences were still out of action, the rest were fully occupied with a meteor shower of projectiles and among these the target seeker was not detected until too late.

The missile, its speed now well in excess of a mile a second, penetrated eighteen inches of armour and a protective bulkhead before exploding.

It is difficult to convey the size of vessel two miles long but the Voyan ship was incredibly complicated. There were eighteen decks each housing thirty independent functioning compartments, each linked by elevator shafts, transit ramps and companionways. Four moving belts, each capable of transporting heavy machine parts, ran from one end of the ship to the other. Some of the lower deck compartments were large enough to house a Terran cruiser. The vessel was, in effect, a powered planet, carrying within itself enough piloted discs to challenge a fleet. It had, however, no facilities for dealing with the penetration of a target-seeking missile.

The detonating of the hydro-nuclear warhead, although of limited power, could hardly be described by the single word 'explosion,' even 'eruption' would have been an understatement.

Two thousand cubic feet of metal and alien life vapourised in a single blinding flash. Beyond that, metal crumpled or ran like tallow, tiers of decks and compartments fell and crumpled one upon another in indescribable ruin.

Beyond even this bulkheads blew in, safety doors, inches thick, crumpled like paper or were wrenched loose and flung like a missile through several compartments.

A mid-deck support girder weighing several tons was hurled through three decks and eighteen compartments before coming to rest in the shambles of the main computer room.

Gravity units failed, escaping atmosphere, rapidly crystallising, shrieked down corridors, carrying masses of debris and dead aliens.

In less than one second, three quarters of the great vessel ceased to exist as a functioning unit.

To Manwood, watching from nine hundred miles away, there was only a brief flash and a sullen after-glow of red which clung for some seconds to the enormous hole in the vessel's side.

Whiteness rose from the hole like smoke, whiteness and dark, drifting fragments.

"All missile tubes—fire !" Manwood's voice was an exultant croak.

"We got her !" Detling turned dazedly to his Second. "That was our missile—my God, we got the bastard."

"Discs coming in, sir."

Detling punched a switch. "Projectors, rapid independent, pick your targets, try and keep them out of range." He turned back to his Second. "I wonder how good those discs are without Mummy to run home to?"

There was a brief flash in space.

"Not that good," said Brunner with a certain grim satisfaction. "Minus one."

The wreck of the Voyan ship had no defence now and the five missiles struck her almost simultaneously. They not only tore her to pieces, they flung the glowing fragments far into space. When the eruption had died down there was a vast mass of drifting wreckage. There were girders, gobbets of metal, sections of compartments, and strangely, in a section of broken corridor, a single minded robotic was still struggling to re-wire a blown out circuit. Among it all a handful of survivors drifted stunned and uncomprehending in their survival suits.

Manwood watching was dimly conscious of a detached satisfaction. Whatever happened now the attack on New Commonwealth was out of the question, but there was no cause for prolonged elation. True the enemy had been cut down to size but he still towered above his human adversaries in size and technology. Now if H.Q. were sensible.

Manwood did not know it but a powerful force with a vigorous psychiatrically assessed command was already speeding towards the enemy concentrations in the Markheim area. As a force it was not overwhelming but it had one decisive advantage—the information and conclusions Manwood had passed back during the battle.

"Hyper-aura, sir, bearing green eight."

Manwood leaned forward and stared. What the—good God, surely that was a cruiser ? It was a cruiser. It was true, they'd actually sent support.

A light glowed on the scrambler and he touched a switch. The voice reached him rather tinnily through his helmet

phones. "Well done, Twenty-Three squadron. Suggest you take a rest now, we'll handle the other Mother."

Manwood exhaled a sigh of relief which temporarily fogged his face plate. "Thanks, it *was* becoming tiring." He touched a switch. "Twenty-Three squadron—return to base."

In the blister, McKay said: "Blast!" He had discovered how to detect a disc, even an edgeways one, by noting the sudden disappearance of stars and had already accounted for four.

Strangely his feelings were mixed, whatever the aliens were they had guts. Without their Mother ship they were doomed anyway but they still came in.

Manwood, relieved of pressure, found the nearest support and leaned on it. He was shaking all over and was glad of the concealing sections of his helmet. He had the strong feeling that he looked a nervous wreck. Never again, once was all right, but there were limits. No doubt the psychiatrists had noticed their error by now and would soon restore him to the comfortable security of administration.

He realised suddenly that Harper had rejoined him and was looking at him strangely. "Well?"

Harper saluted. "I don't expect to get away with it sir, I deserve what's coming but I would like to apologise. I hope you'll accept my apology, sir, irrespective of future disciplinary action."

Manwood looked him up and down and smiled faintly. "I said you had the makings of a good officer, if you're idiot enough to prove my words we'll call that action enough." He frowned. "Incidentally, the next time you remove your survival suit without my permission I'll have you broken down to a Spaceman 3rd class, understood?"

"Yes, sir." Harper looked subdued and relieved at the same time. "Is it in order to ask how you did it, sir? Just how did you manage to creep up on things which can read minds?"

Unexpectedly Manwood laughed and suddenly both men were aware of a curious sense of comradeship. "The answer to that question is simple—they couldn't."

"Couldn't!" Harper looked at him disbelievingly. "What about Command Squadron, sir? What about—"

"Easy." Manwood made a brief motion with his hand. "One question at a time. If you remember we sent a volunteer



out in a life-craft, that volunteer had precise instructions to run parallel with the enemy vessels for thirty seconds.

"But he didn't do it sir." Harper looked pained. "He just ran in and out."

"I know, we rigged the life-craft to do that but Perkin's didn't know it. If the Voyans had been able to read his mind they would have fired along his proposed line of flight and got him almost at once. As it was they only just got him on the return flight." Manwood sighed. "I was praying he might get back. As it stood, I learned, that although Voyan faculties could detect life at eight hundred and eighty-three miles, they were quite incapable of reading the human mind."

"But Command Squadron, sir—"

"We'll come to that in due course." Manwood sat down a little wearily, glanced at the computed distance to base and thankfully opened his face plate. "Voyan detectors were even more rudimentary, it was seven hundred and sixty miles away before the enemy picked up our test missile. I therefore knew that I could operate safely against the enemy at a range of nine hundred miles without being detected either by his faculties or his instruments." Manwood paused and shook his head slowly. "Now, we have to go back a bit. When the Voyans started moving in on our outposts and it developed into a fight, everyone was frightened when it became known that the enemy had 'faculties.' Some fool called the aliens parapsychic and that was the mental *coup de grace*. I, and all humanity, presented the Voyan race with amazing supernatural powers they never possessed and the destruction of Command Squadron proved these assumptions beyond doubt. It occurred to no one there might be another explanation. It was pure chance that while examining the report of the battle I stumbled upon another explanation. I was thinking that Command Squadron were not shouting their presence but of course they were . . ."

"They were!" Harper looked bemused.

"Yes." Manwood smiled faintly. "Voyan *detector* instruments may have been rudimentary but his receptor facilities were singularly acute." He paused and smiled at Harper's puzzled face. "Now, think, radar simplified is nothing more than an electronic shout, the returning echo of which is measured to determine the position of the target. Now, out of our fleet, which would need the most powerful radar to maintain a full picture of the battle? Obviously, Command

Squadron and, equally obvious, which Squadron would the acutely sensitive Voyan receptors pick up first?"

Harper said: "My God, Command Squadron's," in a choked voice.

"Exactly, they attacked the source of radiation they picked up first."

Harper made an abrupt gesture. "We went in *shut down*, without *our* radar to give them a lead, they had no idea where we were—did you know this at the time?"

Manwood shook his head soberly. "No, it was only a theory which our volunteer partly proved, all I could do was try and keep praying I was right. Take it from me, I'll never do it again." He began to remove his survival suit slowly. "Funny thing when you come to think of it, all the song and dance we made about the Voyan faculties. No doubt it was a wonderful thing for inter-Voyan communication but taken as it stands it didn't compare with human sight."

"I agree." Harper nodded and thought suddenly of the captured disc. There had been *no vision screen*. Manwood was quite right, super faculties in the long run counted for very little especially if you were *as blind as a bat*.

—Philip E. High

### ***Missed Any Issues ?***

The first issues of this magazine  
are still available, each one packed  
with exciting action adventure  
science fiction stories

**Nos. 4 to 7; 9 to 18, 2/- each (35 cents)**

**Nos. 19 to 24, 2/6 (40 cents)**

**post free**

**NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD**  
**Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1**

*An overwhelming desire possessed the colonists' descendants to return Home to Earth.*

# GOING HOME

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

---

They were like eagles of silver flashing towards the smoky blue sun.

They were like the hopes of men, those slim ships, as they headed through the afternoon towards outer space. They were beautiful and it was still a little difficult for many of the watchers to believe in them. They were gone in the time it takes a man to dream a dream—swiftly, yet they seemed to take a long, long while before they were lost from sight. Then the watchers dispersed, not quite sure if it had happened. And if it had—then what did it mean? What would the five ships find?

Men and women went slowly back to the cities. There were only two cities on the planet. They were enough. That night, they celebrated.

They celebrated and they forgot what they were celebrating, if they had ever known. The drinking houses were open until morning, and when they had finished drinking, the men returned, dazed, to their wives, or went to talk with friends. But they didn't sleep.

They didn't sleep because they were trying to remember something. People asked one another half-formed questions, but no one had an answer to give in return.

And the five ships, like eagles of silver, were now silently ploughing through space, towards a planet which the men

on board called 'Home'—but they were self-conscious about using the word. For home was three centuries ago and hundreds of light years away, and they were not at all sure whether they had a right, any more, to use the word.

The speed of the five ships increased.

They became dark silhouettes in the blaze of space, they merged into grey shadows and the men in the bellies of the ships would have screamed loudly had they not already gagged themselves and strapped themselves in the couches of dark green velvet, hung with tassels of gold and scarlet. They were rich those ships, for the men who rode them were the darlings of Veildo, their world. The ambassadors to 'Home.'

And the captain, alone, was clear about why they were going.

Captain Hardrek unbuckled the belt which held his sword and gun. He let it fall on to a chair of yellow-cushioned gold. On one wall of the large cabin were the duplicate instruments which told him the condition of the five ships which were now moving, without difficulty, through hyperspace. Hardrek walked across the soft-carpetted cabin and studied the instruments with satisfaction. He had been afraid that not all the ships would make the transition, and he was glad that he had been wrong in his fears.

He lowered his strong body into a deep chair. On the polished wooden table beside him was a brass box of herbal cigarettes. He took one and lit it. He closed his eyes, relaxing, and hardly heard the doorbell ring. It rang again and he said: "Enter."

Malarak came in, his scarlet lieutenant's uniform as neat as always. He rested one dark-skinned hand on the butt of his energy-gun, saluting Hardrek with the other.

Hardrek smiled and waved an arm at the chair on the other side of the table. "Sit down, Malarak, and have a cigarette. We did pretty well, I think."

Malarak nodded and made an attempt to return his captain's smile. But his squat, hard face wasn't built for smiling. Malarak took life seriously and was embarrassed when other people didn't seem to take it so. He was given to brooding. He reached over and lifted the box towards him, extracting one of the herb-filled paper tubes. He was a man who spoke when he was spoken to, so he said nothing.

He was also sensitive, and hoped that he was wrong when he thought the captain was laughing at him silently.

Captain Hardrek yawned before he said: "Well, Malarak? We're having a good trip and there won't be any technical worries until we break out. What's on your mind? Or did you come to congratulate me?"

"I just wanted to talk to you, sir. I don't really know why I came. I just wanted to talk . . ."

Hardrek began chewing little pieces of skin off his lower lip. The herbs in the cigarettes did that—dried the skin and made it flake, but the chewing was more of a habit than the smoking. He always did it when he felt uncomfortable.

He said calmly: "Are the men happy?"

"Well—I suppose they are, sir, yes."

"What's the matter with them?" Hardrek had not expected any trouble quite so soon, but he sensed it now. "I haven't noticed anything, Malarak. They can't be dissatisfied with the conditions—they can't have had second thoughts and want to return. You know the number of enthusiastic volunteers we had. This is a big mission—an historic mission..." Hardrek stopped himself, smiling ironically. "I'm beginning to sound like the politicians, he thought. "They're aware of this, I know," he continued, "and they all wanted to come. We're going home."

"Why, sir?" Malarak blurted. "That's what's troubling them—and me—now they've started to think about it—now there's two months of waiting ahead. We're going home; but that's not enough." He frowned, continuing at a slower pace:

"None of us have reasons, really. We don't know why we left—and we don't know why we're going back. All we know is that our ancestors came and settled on Veildo. Soon after this they destroyed most of the records pertaining to their reasons for leaving Earth, as well, of course, as those other records. We know, now—though they tried to clean that bit of history of the records as well—*how* they managed to settle on Veildo."

"They wiped out the original inhabitants, yes," Hardrek said quietly. "We don't like to admit it, even now, do we? Even after three centuries we feel guilty about the sins of our ancestors. Well, they must have done, too." He thought over what Malarak had said. Then he murmured:

"We don't know why we left—and we don't know why we're going back. Well, I know. Lieutenant Malarak. The first part of the question answers the second, doesn't it? We're going back in order to find out why we left in the first place. We want to set the record straight, to know our own history, however dark. Why did they leave Earth? That's one thing our conquering ancestors did manage to keep a secret."

"Is that a good enough reason for going back, sir?"

"It's the only one," Hardrek smiled. "Make sure the men know that we have a mission. We're going to find out why we ran away from home..."

The ships pressed onwards towards 'Home' while the news got around among the men that they had a purpose for going there, after all.

But the reason wasn't enough for them. They began to speculate.

There were many obvious reasons for their ancestors to have left Earth—overcrowding of the home planet, political differences, persecution, war, just plain restlessness. And almost every man had a different theory. The crews began to argue among themselves, mainly out of boredom, who was right?

Then some became so certain that they used force to back up their arguments. Captain Hardrek had difficulty in straightening things out, but he managed it.

When they were done with fighting, the men, wondering still, settled down at last. Settled down to wait-and-see. This was now their smiling catch-phrase—Wait-and-See. Two months had nearly passed and they were nearing 'Home.'

'Home' was the planet called Earth, the third from its sun. The ships materialised painlessly, just on the edge of the system. The ships were a credit to their designers and the men who had lovingly built them. They were far better than the ships which had left Earth three hundred years before to land, eventually, on Veildo. They were lovely things, slim and fine. Even the gun-mountings were beautiful as the ships, like eagles of silver, cruised in towards Sol, bound for Terra.

There are many names to call a planet, but this one was called 'Home.'



Hardrek, in full dress uniform of scarlet and ice-blue, sword and energy-gun buckled firmly, was nervous as he stood beside his operator who was attempting radio contact with Earth. The operator was sending signals on all the wavelengths he could muster. Hardrek smiled as he thought of the havoc they must be playing with communications down there. Then he thought that they might not have radio of any kind—not now. They might have found something better, something different, in three centuries.

But at last the operator got through to someone. The voice was puzzled and Hardrek had difficulty in understanding the words. The language had changed quite a lot. The voice he heard was not speaking the lilting speech of Veildo. The words were clipped and harsh to Hardrek's sensitive ears. He didn't like the sound of them.

*"Who are you? What is your call-signal? Are you in difficulty? Use your vision if you can. I can't see you."*

But the ships were not equipped for vision, and Hardrek ordered his operator to inform the Earthman of this before he told him who they were. The operator spoke slowly into his microphone, pained by the harsh rasping tones in his ears:

"We are not equipped for vision," he said.

There was a longer silence than there should have been at the other end. Eventually there came back: "Message received. Repeat: Who are you?"

The operator said: "We are a friendly fleet from Veildo, a planet in a Rim System. Of the same race as the men of Earth. May we land?"

The puzzled voice eventually came through: "Message received. You may land. Standby to receive instructions."

Hardrek spoke swiftly through the intercom, readying his ships for planetfall.

The ships, like eagles of silver, fell gracefully towards the planet called 'Home.'

They landed almost delicately on the ice-fields of the North, standing upright in the sunshine, gleaming and silver and waiting... Waiting to see.

The welcoming party was not large.

It was contained in one big wingless aircraft, bulbous, sleek and most unpleasing to the eyes of the Veildomen who

sometimes put the considerations of design before those of function. It was not Good Taste. There was nothing beautiful about this ship which, fast as it was, seemed to wallow through the air. It came to rest about fifty metres from the five spacecraft.

Because of the extreme cold, Hardrek and his men were forced to wear their space-suits since they had no heavy clothing with them. The Earthmen who came to meet them were wrapped in shapeless garments resembling animal fur. Hardrek, whilst cursing their caution, thought it wise of them to choose a place like this to meet strangers. He approached them, his lieutenants behind him.

The fur-swathed leader of the Earthmen said, raspingly: "Welcome, sir. Welcome to Earth. Would you be good enough to accompany us back to the capital?"

Hardrek nodded clumsily: "We should be glad to." He switched over his speaker and said, so that only his own people could hear him: "We are returning with these men. I do not expect trouble of any kind—but be prepared for treachery. We have been out of touch with Earth for three centuries and they are obviously somewhat wary of us, otherwise they would not have met us here, in the wilderness. It would be as well for us to imitate their caution."

He allowed the Earthmen to lead him inside the aircraft, even as he spoke. Hardrek looked around the interior of the vessel and concealed his distaste well.

It was functional enough—but it lacked even the beauty which functional things could have. It was ugly—as bad inside as it was out. The Earthmen took off their heavy furs and the Veildomen noted, depressed, that they were dressed in overalls, undistinguished, of a drab, brownish colour. After Hardrek and his men had rid themselves of their space-suits and stood in bright contrast to the Earthmen, one of the welcoming party put out a hand to Hardrek. The captain took it and introduced himself. The Earthman had a soft hand and a soft smiling face. He said: "Orvin is my name, Captain Hardrek."

Hardrek noticed that the Earthmen were apparently unarmed. He was glad, now, that the wearing of the space-suits had necessitated the leaving behind of his own party's swords and guns. There were introductions all round and the people of Earth were friendly and bland.

The aircraft was now moving South. In their heavy cloaks of blue and their scarlet uniforms, trimmed with gold, the Veildomen sat uncomfortably on the tubular steel seats and tried not to notice that the ship was devoid of decoration, colour or character.

It was also, they saw, unarmed.

"Earth has changed, I suppose, since your ancestors left, Captain," smiled Orvin, sitting down next to Hardrek.

Hardrek hated himself for it, but he was beginning to feel superior to these drably dressed men. He said: "Three hundred years, sir, brings many changes."

"Oh," said Orvin, "not so many as all that, Captain. You'll probably find Earth, on the surface at least, much the same as your forefathers knew it. I suppose you have studied our planet in the records they left?"

"There weren't many records," Hardrek said. "Most of them were—destroyed—unfortunately. We don't know a great deal about Earth. It will be interesting to see the planet since most of its aspects will be new to us."

Orvin nodded: "Our libraries are extensive," he said. "You are naturally free to make use of them. Many pioneers left Earth for the stars after the hyperspatial craft were built. You will forgive us if we do not recognise the names of the families which colonised—"

"Veildo," Hardrek told him, "it was the old name for the planet—not an Earth name."

"So your planet is populated by another intelligent race?"

"They died out," Hardrek said nervously. "There were very few left when our ancestors came to Veildo. They died out..."

Orvin said nothing. He glanced towards the nose of the ship which was transparent. "We are nearing the capital," he told Hardrek. "The President will be pleased to see you. We have few visitors—not many of the children of Earth return to the home planet. You are the first in over a hundred-and-fifty years." His voice was a monotone, rehearsed, unfeeling. He pointed: "There—I think you can see the city, now."

The city was built in a perfectly square area measuring about forty kilometres. All the buildings were of the same height and of the same pattern. At regular intervals were small green parks, oval splashes of colour in the grey mass of concrete and steel. Hardrek shuddered.

The place was in direct contrast to the slender towers of his home city with its tree-lined avenues and wide spaces, its statues and its delicate colourings. He was sure that the Earth of his ancestors had not been like this. What had happened here? He began to despise these soft men of Earth with their total lack of taste. They seemed to have no art at all, not even a rudimentary sense for the visual arts.

He tried a question:

"I suppose your literature and painting has undergone considerable changes in three centuries," he smiled, "I hope I can take some examples back to Veildo."

Orvin said vaguely: "Ah, yes—well, we don't have much time for that sort of things these days, you know. There are no neurotics left on Earth. We are all very happy."

Hardrek was angry then. Angry for no apparent reason. A boiling, frustrated anger which ran about inside him and which he couldn't let out. He wanted to tell Orvin something, but he didn't know how to put his emotion into coherent words. He controlled his anger and sat back until it was replaced by a dull feeling of disappointment and frustration.

The ship circled in and landed on the roof of one of the grey buildings. Overhead the sky was beautiful as the sun set, colouring the clouds with a score of subtle shades. It was as beautiful as Veildo's sky—but so very different. Delighted as he left the aircraft, Hardrek stood for a moment and looked at that sky, almost jubilant in his appreciation.

Orvin, walking ahead, stopped and turned round. He frowned, perplexed. "The President is expecting us, Captain," he hinted firmly.

Hardrek cursed to himself and followed the soft man to the entrance of a lift. They all got in and the lift began to hum downwards.

They haven't had any visitors for one hundred and fifty years, the captain thought, and they give us a welcome like this! What's wrong with Earth? This isn't what it used to be like. This planet is decadent—it has no life. But why? Why?

They met the President, a pink-faced man with short grey hair.

They met the President, that was all.

There was no ceremony, no chance for Hardrek to make use of his mentally prepared speech. They were invited to refresh themselves in the rooms which were set aside for them. Later, they would attend the dinner which was to be given for them. They went despondently to the rooms and sat around wondering, privately, what was wrong.

Every man in the party felt the sense of anti-climax.

Hardrek, as he sat talking to Malarak, felt it most of all.

"If this is Earth," Hardrek said, "they can keep it. I'll be glad to get back to Veildo."

"No wonder our ancestors left, sir," said Malarak softly, sadly.

"Earth wasn't like this three centuries ago," Hardrek reminded his lieutenant. "It was a thriving planet—it was active in all the fields of human endeavour. It sent its sons to the other planets of its System, to the stars—it had a tremendous wealth of artistic talent. The dramacord was beginning to replace the novel as the new literary form. Vermer's 'psychic painting' techniques were beginning to be used to brilliant effect. We know this—our own records at least show that. Three centuries ago there seemed to be a new renaissance on Earth. Now look at it." He mimicked Orvin's words: "'There are no neurotics left on Earth. We are all very happy.'" Hardrek swore and laughed. "Why—if we wanted to, we could take Earth with just the five ships we have. We could take it back and make the soft little people sit up. We'd give them some neurotics, then."

Malarak was uncomfortable: "I don't think we're welcome here, sir. I think we should find out about our ancestors and then get out."

Hardrek snorted. "Over twenty years of perfecting the ships and training the crews. More time than that spent in speculating what wonderful new achievements the men of Earth would have made when we got here. Two months of travelling through the blazing insanity of hyperspace—and now we do what we came to do and leave. Is that what you want, Malarak?"

"What else is there to do, sir?"

Hardrek shook his head impatiently, but he didn't answer Malarak. He couldn't. He had expected many things of Earth. He had been prepared for a hostile reception,

possibly, to be threatened with superior armament—but there seemed to be no weapons of any kind discernible. Peace, he reflected cynically, hung like a pall over the planet. He had thought that they might find the planet experiencing a new dark-age. He had even readied himself to find a desolate planet, ruined by war—or even a deserted planet. But he had not expected the polite, unenthusiastic welcome that Orvin and the President had given him—the sight of a planet which seemed to have no artistic flowering now, when once it had produced books, music and painting which still inspired Veildo artists who had never seen Earth. What had happened to Earth? When he visited the library, he hoped he would find out. There would be an indication, there, at least.

Hardrek and his party, at the appointed time, traipsed into the President's featureless dining hall and sat down to eat. The food was good, but unimaginatively prepared. They ate it, but they didn't like it. The President seemed only vaguely interested when he said to Hardrek:

"Tell me about your planet, Captain. I gather it is an Earth-type."

Aware that the President was conscientiously making conversation, Hardrek answered him quite briefly: "Yes, sir, it is. We have a comparatively small population with two large cities and a number of small townships. You might call Veildo a 'rural planet.' There is plenty of land available for those who desire to make use of it. We are a freedom-loving people."

"The men of Earth always were that," smiled the President, and he seemed to display a genuine feeling for a moment. He looked almost sad. Hardrek didn't know why—couldn't find any special meaning in the President's statement.

"We have our records of wars, of course," Hardrek said, "but they were small wars and soon over. There is too much space on Veildo for people to quarrel for long. As for our Art..." he noticed that the President was looking uncomfortable and that the other Earthmen at the table seemed embarrassed, also. He stopped speaking and it was several seconds before the President said:

"Ah—yes..."



And then there was silence again for a little while. The President and Hardrek were both trying to think of something to say, something to chase away the silence.

At last, Hardrek said: "Mister Orvin informed us that we could make use of your library, if we desired."

"Of course," the President said gratefully, glad of the change of subject. "It is at your disposal. For how long did you expect to stay?"

Almost grimly, Hardrek said: "As long as it takes to discover why our ancestors left Earth."

"You are naturally welcome to stay as long as you wish," the President was trying to make up for his apparent rudeness.

The meal continued—partly in silence, partly in strained conversation. Everybody was very uncomfortable indeed. It was a relief to leave the dining table and return to the rooms to talk savagely among themselves for a short while, to indicate their disgust, and to think before eventually going to sleep.

Hardrek wondered, sardonically, how the people ever managed to find their way about the characterless city. The ground car drew up outside a building, much the same as the rest.

Orvin was his guide. The other Veildomen were with him. Orvin said: "The Archives. Shall we go in?"

The place was very clean inside. Neat and orderly. There weren't many people there—and those there were seemed to be employed in the Archives. Orvin consulted a huge plan of the building which had been placed on one wall of the main hall. "We'll need the ninth basement for records regarding people who took ship from Earth at the time we want," Orvin told Hardrek. They entered a lift and went down.

The custodian of the records was a sour-faced man who, in his own way, seemed pleased to see Hardrek and his party. He shook hands with all of them. "What was the exact date of the expedition?" he asked Hardrek. The captain told him. The custodian pressed certain buttons on a huge container—it occupied the entire room. "Name of the leader?"

"Callahan. Henry Callahan," Hardrek supplied the rest of the information necessary. Within a few moments, the

custodian was holding a printed card in his hand. "This way," he said and left the room. They walked down a long corridor and entered another room containing a microfilm projector and banks of filing cabinets.

"Now, let's see," said the custodian to himself, consulting the card and glancing along the rows of cabinets. He found the one he wanted and pulled out a drawer. He took out a packet.

He read what was written on the packet and his sour face became serious. He replaced the packet in the cabinet.

He looked at Orvin. The custodian said nervously: "Excuse me, gentlemen—I'm having some difficulty. There seems to be an error—something wrong with the system."

Hardrek knew he was lying. He growled: "What is it? What's in that box?"

The custodian waved his hand. "Nothing, captain. The wrong co-ordinates. We can straighten this out in a short time. I'll get my assistant on the job."

Hardrek could do nothing, for the moment. He was suspicious, but that was all. He agreed to accompany Orvin back to a waiting room.

They waited for over an hour and Hardrek and his men became impatient. What had been written on the packet that had so upset the custodian?

Orvin left them, apologising, saying that he would be back soon.

Malarak said, "Something's cropped up, sir. Maybe the secret our ancestors brought from Earth was darker than we suspected. Perhaps the Earth people blame them for their current mediocrity?"

Hardrek cursed. "I'd like to know what's happening! We've a right, I think." His men agreed, their faces taut. "By God," Hardrek said savagely, "if we don't find out—I'm going to tear this city apart until we do. *I'll burn it to the ground!*"

They were hurt and bewildered, those men. They had returned to their mother and they felt that their mother had rejected them. When this happens to children, their reactions are unpredictable. Sometimes they show their frustration in violence. Hardrek was beginning to hate Earth.

Sometime later, Orvin came back and, avoiding looking directly into Hardrek's face, said: "The President would like to see you."

The captain seized Orvin by the slack material of his overalls and growled: "*We* want to see these records, little Earthmen! We want to see them, d'you hear?"

"Please," Orvin struggled helplessly. "Please, Captain. Let me go. The President will explain."

With an oath, Hardrek flung Orvin aside. "He'd better, by God!"

They marched out of the Archive Building in silence, anger surging through them. They entered the ground car and it took them to the Presidential Palace—a drab 'palace,' indeed.

The President's round face wasn't smiling. He said quickly, as Hardrek strode towards him: "I'm afraid we must ask you and your ships to leave Earth immediately, Captain."

"What?" Hardrek nearly shouted. "*Why?*"

"You should not have come here. Your ancestors should have warned you. I must order you to leave."

"Tell me why," Hardrek ordered harshly.

"Leave, Captain, please. It will be for our mutual good, I assure you. We cannot blame you, but..."

"If we leave Earth without knowing why, my friend—then we'll leave your city burning behind us. We'll devastate the planet!"

The President turned away. "I ask you again—please leave Earth as soon as possible."

Hardrek's face was bloodless. He wheeled about, signing to his men to follow him. An aircraft awaited them. It took them back to the Northern Icecap. The five ships, the sun turning them into tall fires of dancing golden light, waited...

Hardrek sat in his cabin, thinking. He was mad with anger, bewilderment and grief. He wanted to return to the capital—to loot and destroy—to show the Earthlings that he had meant what he said. And yet he was intelligent enough to know that control over these emotions was the thing for which he should fight. But he *had* to discover the reason why Henry Callahan's expedition had left the Earth. It was becoming even more of an obsession with him. The President had said that he should leave for their mutual good. Well, if feeling were to be mutual, he could attempt to make the people of Earth feel like he felt, like his crews felt. He got up and went to the central control cabin. He

picked up a microphone: "Prepare for take-off," he said harshly.

The slim ships cruised slowly in towards the capital, guns pointing their cold snouts at the Presidential building. Hardrek spoke over the radio:

"This is Captain Hardrek, Commander of the Veildonian Fleet. We have guns trained on the Presidential Palace—guns capable of flinging megabombs and wiping out your city in moments. We wish to depart in peace, but will not do so until the records relating to the Callahan Expedition are given into our hands."

Eventually, the President himself answered Hardrek.

"Captain, if we hand these records over to you—do we have your word that you will leave Earth and never return?"

Hardrek said cynically: "With all due respect, Mr. President, we have no desire to return to your sterile planet. There are many others which will reward visiting better, I think." He knew that his words were childish—but he could not resist one bitter stab at the Earth culture which had so disappointed him.

"Then you may have the documents and film," the President said slowly.

Hardrek was elated. He had won.

The silver ships climbed, bellowing, through the night sky, back towards Veildo.

The President of Earth and the Custodian of the Archives stood together on the roof of the Presidential Palace, watching the ships leave. The Custodian stared around at the drab, grey city—and hated it.

He had spent many years among the records. He had studied the history of Earth. He felt he knew what Earth lacked. He sighed with regret as the ships disappeared into the soft blackness above.

"We could never have protected ourselves against their—weapons—you know," said the President. "Those poor, sick people. To think that they are of the same race."

"To think . . ." agreed the Custodian.

On board the flagship, Captain Hardrek sat in his cabin studying the documents on his lap. He picked one of them up and read it through again. It began:

*FACTS RELATING TO THE EXILE OF  
HENRY CALLAHAN AND PARTY*

*Callahan was given three of the latest J-type Hyper-spacial Craft on condition that neither he, nor his descendants, would make any attempt to return to Earth. 76 adult men, 54 adult women, 104 adolescent boys (judged incurable) and 89 adolescent girls (jic) were put aboard the HS Craft. All members of the party had been fully examined and under observation for periods ranging from 3-8 years. Psychologists were unanimous that their condition was hopeless and their existence, on this planet, detrimental to Earth's general wellbeing.*

*Callahan, who in earlier years had been a high-ranking officer in the since disbanded United Terran Space Fleet, was put in charge of the party. He, more than any other member of the party, had displayed paranoiac tendencies to an alarming degree.*

*President Lidén was quoted in contemporary newspapers as saying: "At last our planet is free of the elements which might have destroyed our culture. The threat of war, the threat of dictatorship, the threat of cultural death is over. A new era for Earth has begun. An era of peace—an era of freedom."*

*Callahan's party was the last such to be exiled from Earth. Since then, all potential neurotics have been treated and cured before reaching adolescence. The proof of Lidén's statement lies in the last two-hundred-and-fifty years of peace and prosperity which has existed, and which can only continue to exist, on our planet.*

When he had finished reading, Hardrek began to laugh. "You can't have one without the other, so it seems. Well, little Earth people, you threw your waste into space and we are the result. You complacent, ruined degenerates. We may be neurotics—but our neoroses lead us somewhere, and give us the strength, even, to overcome the neoroses when we've used them to our advantage."

He was still grinning when he gave the orders for the ships to enter hyperspace.

As he completed the orders, Hardrek said cheerfully over the intercom: "Good luck, men. We're going home."

This time, he was not a bit self-conscious about using the word.

—Michael Moorcock

*In a paranormal world perhaps only a normal person would have the advantages.*

# DEVIANT

by ALAN BURNS

---

A favourite amusement of deviants is the observation of behaviour in non-deviants, so when Karen's high-powered thought trilled "Hey devs let's go watch normals," we finished what we were doing, got washed, dressed respectably and headed for the nearest town some eighty miles away.

Jungle planets, like Horsch IV, especially where the jungle is full of fauna and flora which regard human flesh as a dainty dish, tend to have towns where vice is winked at. The local rep of the order corps came over to us as we parked our air cushion truck.

"Devs behave themselves amongst us poor normals," he said agreeably.

"That so?" drawled Arn. "Little man you don't have to worry, whatever we take apart we put back together again."

Well we went this way and that way, and no-one suspected, we lost money in gambling dens, we even considered visiting strip shows, because Karen and Lissa and Rita share the thoughts while Arn, Len, Pedro and myself enjoy the action. We wound up with a glow on, heading down one of the lesser streets when Karen, who reads minds, and Pedro who's a teletac, stopped suddenly and then headed for a small alleyway. Arn shone a handtorch to add to the feeble light from a single lamp and the big spacer who was just about to assault a teenage girl turned round.



"'s none of ya business," he snarled. "Now go 'way or ya burn," and he had a heater in his hand."

"Tsk, tsk," said Rita who teleports, and the heater vanished.

"Devs," said the spaceman, all the fight out of him, "I wasn't doin' nothing, this kid said she—"

"You're a damned liar," came two thousand watts of Karen's mind.

"Which of us takes him?" rumbled Arn.

"He's not worth the taking really," said Len, who weighs about a hundred pounds and is a telekin. "My turn I think. You," he said to the spacer, "try me, devs can't use their powers when fighting normals, law says so." The spacer grinned and rushed at Len who expertly stabbed five iron hard fingers in the big man's solar plexus, karate is Len's speciality, and the spacer's breath whooshed out and he fell flat. We looked at the kid then who was still very frightened, probably educated on a diet of anti-dev tales I guessed.

"Come along with us little girl," said Arn.

"No please, I have to go home—"

"All lies," thought Karen, "she has no home."

"So-o," said Arn smoothly, "tell me little girl, what do devs like best of all for supper?"

"R-roast normal," she said.

"Exactly," agreed Arn, "but before we cook them we fatten them up. Come with us to supper." Then the girls went to her and presently she was walking along with us to a cafe not far away.

When we had fed her the next place we went was the Order Corps building. Karen had all the story long before we got there. Ellie Swinton, for that was her name, was an orphan and had been brought up in the Empire Orphanage on Cygni 11. A shipping millionaire had wanted a companion for his ailing daughter and had chosen Ellie. The daughter had died just before the space yacht on which they were travelling had planeted on Horsch IV where we were, and the best Ellie could hope for was a return to Cygni 11.

"Look," said Pedro to Chief Histon of the local Order Corps Unit, "I know what orphanages are like, couldn't you find some family here who'd take Ellie in and bring her up as a daughter?"

"If Horsch was civilised that might be possible," said the chief, "but as it is, food's tight, and everyone has enough to

do to keep alive without looking after an additional member of a family."

"That'll only be for another year at the most," thought Karen. "We're preparing our report on the jungle and we'll have it complete in another three months, then the dejunglising force will move in and Horsch will be a safe planet to live on within six months."

"I know, but I don't think I could persuade anyone, and I'd have to drag you in and that would automatically bring up anti-dev feeling. I'm sorry, truly I am. I'd take Ellie in myself only I've three daughters already."

"Okay," said Arn, "I guess it's Cygni 11, Ellie girl, but once we've finished here we'll see if we can't fix something up for you, and devs keep promises. Come on, we'll take you to the spaceport."

We got there and found it deserted except for an official seated in a reclining chair on the reception building verandah.

"Where's the *Lolanda*?" asked Arn.

"Took off two hours ago," said the official. "If any of you is Ellie Swinton I've a letter that was left." Ellie took the letter and opened it. There was a brief note along with several documents.

"It's from Mr. Legrand," she said. "He had to leave in a hurry and couldn't locate me, so he's fixed up an hotel reservation, a ticket on the next liner to Cygni and some spending money."

"The next liner's six months away," said Len. "We're going on it."

"I can look after myself," said Ellie.

"Sure," said Arn, "like tonight perhaps."

"Everybody but George is thinking the same," came Karen's mind. "George, you could use an assistant."

"But it's dangerous," I said.

"Not in camp," said Pedro, "and it would stop the occasional thought Karen gets that you're the only unmarried man and there's no female companion for you."

"Yes but I'm almost old enough to be Ellie's father," I said.

"So what?" said Pedro, "you can't have everything."

"Please George," said Ellie, "I'd help and I'd be very good." I looked around and saw I was voted down. I had the right to veto Ellie as an assistant, but I knew that only a

heel would do that. So it was settled and we went along to Chief Histon again to make a deposition to the effect that "George Learoyd, Deviant, elected to employ Ellie Swinton, Normal, as assistant during the period of his work on Horsch IV and for such time after as shall be determined by mutual agreement." As a normal Ellie would draw a wage from Deviant Control, and that would make her officially the only one of us with a financial status, devs are not allowed to own property or possessions, but that, of course, doesn't stop a dev from getting by very well.

With Ellie clutching her little kit bag we headed back for our camp, Arn driving, and Rita watching out for any inconvenient obstacles, animate or inanimate. At last through the undergrowth and trees we saw the flare of our screen and then we were safely in camp. From our stores we got out a kit for Ellie and then since it was late we turned in. Everyone excepting me, I lay on my bed waiting. At last I felt the life dynamic subside to a steady rhythm in the camp and this meant that I could feel the other rhythms from the jungle around. My deviation was called televio, I was abnormally sensitive to the presence or absence of life and all the variations between, I could tell also the origin of a life emanation, useful in a jungle where a dangerous beast might be on the prowl unseen. By training I was a biologist, a most necessary part of any expedition to report on the suitability or otherwise of a planet for terraforming. Deviants were always sent on such missions.

Contrary to the speculations of pre-stellar flight thinkers, a physically earth-type world didn't meant earth-type flora and fauna, as some of the early explorers found to their cost. There were beautiful worlds, but the snake in the Eden was usually there, and not always removable by ordinary methods. But nature sets up problems to be beaten, usually by natural means. The solution in this case was the deviants. Perhaps once in a hundred years on a world like Terra a deviant was born, out in space one in a hundred births was a deviant because no means, short of an impossible amount of equipment was able to shield crew and perhaps passengers from the subtle gene-changing radiations.

The deviants were almost without exception deviants only in the mental sense, most physically changed deviants were

born dead. In the early days the first deviants had a hard time, but with Galactic Unification and especially the control of the Order Corps passing into the hands of Lord Kirby of Aldebaran, himself a deviant, an agreement was reached. Deviant Control was set up, and laws for deviants were made, harsh laws, but necessary to give normals the security they demanded. Deviants more than earned their living, mostly by doing what normals couldn't do, such as survey expeditions into the jungle on planets like Horsch IV and listing the life to be destroyed, so that normals could go about their business in safety.

With the pulsing life emanations from the jungle filling my head like the fumes of wine, I went over to the part of the screen farthest away from the tents, even sleeping deviants had an intense life dynamic, which fortunately didn't extend very far and I could stand and take all the jungle life force in. It was like standing in a roaring sea, with waves racing this way and that, then the waves started shaking me. I came to, after a fashion, and saw that it was Ellie.

"George," she said, "are you all right?"

"Why yes," I answered, "I was just listening to the jungle with my mind. You'll have to get used to strange habits when you're living with devs."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Like shamelessness, or what normals call shamelessness, invading what normals call privacy is another habit, and you can't keep a secret. Speaking of secrets, what were you doing awake? Or is it a secret?"

"I was viewing." She handed over a projector and I read the title on the reel "Bambi" by Felix Salten, it was a Galactic Archive Reprint of the Disney film.

"You like reprints?" I asked.

"Of this sort," she said. "It seems as if we can't write a story now where animals have personalities that are kindly and good."

"Like that for instance," I said, pointing at a huge shape smashing its way through the trees towards the screen. "That's a killer-croc, thirty metres of concentrated wickedness, it hunts by smell. Look it's coming this way." The croc got within three metres of the screen, then there was the hiss and flash of the automatic disruptor cannon on the apex of the screen generator pole, the croc and part of the jungle surrounding it vanished.

"Oh," whispered Ellie, "need you have done that?"

"That's the only way to stop a croc, otherwise it would batter at the screen all night and no-one would get any sleep—and speaking of sleep—time for bed."

Over breakfast the following morning there were some questions about what had happened the night before and one of the moralistic discussions that usually arise.

"I'm with Ellie," rumbled Arn through a mouthful of steak, "it's wicked to kill an innocent creature."

"Sure when you're a telefield," said Pedro, "you just put up your field and what there is of your mind keeps even atomic shells from damaging your precious hide, but what do we poor innocents do?"

"You could get out of its way," said Ellie. "You wouldn't stand in the way of a landing spaceship would you."

"Dead right," said Arn. "Okay, as of now Ellie is appointed camp conscience," then he hit the ground with a bump as Lissa his wife, who is a telejump, sprang the clips holding up his camp chair. He was up in a second and after her, but gave a good imitation of a man running through mud as she jumped the cohesion of the soil under his feet until he spread his screen of mental force to give him traction, then Lissa slipped and fell as under Len's influence the ground beneath her feet suddenly developed a practically zero coefficient of friction.

"Foul," cried Rita and a dish of marmalade zoomed at Len who hastily pushed up the viscosity of the marmalade so that when it hit him it was hardly sticky.

"Break it up," came Karen's thought, "we've got a guest."

"It's rather fun," said Ellie, "but kind of spooky. I guess I'll have to get used to it."

"You could join in," said Rita, "devs are supposed to take orders from normals. If you want any of our talents just think, Karen would pick it up and relay it."

"That's good of you," said Ellie, "but it wouldn't be like being a deviant, and I don't feel big enough to give orders to anyone normal, let alone a deviant."

When the table was cleared I showed Ellie how to get into her jungle suit, got into my own and then having shouldered my pack set out with her to the 'zoo' as everyone called the place where I kept certain animals for observation. At one

point our path was blocked by a very dead tiger lizard, a carnivore almost as big as a killer-croc.

"What killed it?" asked Ellie, as I drew out a heater.

"A little thing," I told her, "a worm not the size of your finger. It probably ate something already infected, the borer-worm got into its bloodstream, and multiplied tremendously until the bloodstream was choked, and the worms also ate their way into vital organs."

I reduced the corpse to ash and finally we came into the zoo field. Ellie knew what to do without being told, and explained that she'd always liked living things and back in the orphanage she'd looked after the various pets that some of the staff had. I was quite happy to be spared the routine of feeding and cleaning cages and pens, a duty properly the province of Rita who could teleport unwanted material away, but which I did myself because teleportation might have upset the animals.

So I got on with writing up reports and checking one or two experiments that were in progress. Then I went over to Ellie to see how she was getting on. I looked at the green and scarlet thing that was coiled round her neck.

"Ellie," I said quietly, "that snake is a tree-stinger, and just about the deadliest thing of its size in the jungle, can you take it off or shall I use a heater?"

"It's all right," she said, "it won't harm me, it knows I'm a friend, but if you wish—" she unwound it and put it back in the cage and I let out a sigh of relief.

"That sort of thing gives me grey hairs," I told her. "Before you start making pets consult me."

"No," she said, "I've had enough experience to know which animals are dangerous and which aren't."

"That tree-stinger was dangerous," I pointed out.

"There's a big difference between something that is dangerous and something potentially dangerous," she said thoughtfully, "I wonder if you have the right idea, George."

"I'm always willing to learn," I said, "from someone who knows more than I do."

"I haven't had your training George, and I can quite imagine that you think I'm being impertinent, but going back to what I said about potential danger. The tree-stinger was potentially dangerous, I knew that from its colouring. But it had been fed, and snakes like warmth, and, well, it was just



enjoying itself being coiled around my neck, and it could sense I meant it no harm. I suppose that tree-stingers are marked for destruction, and those cute-looking kit-rabbits aren't."

"True enough, but go along with what you're saying."

"I'm saying that if you preserve the kit-rabbits you'll have to preserve the tree-stingers. One look at the kits and you see that they never stop eating greenstuff, and they breed fast, tree-stingers will keep them down, or they'll eat the farmers out of house and home when the jungle is cleared."

"Quite an idea," I admitted. "I should have remembered the rabbits in Australia on Terra, and that will go for plants, do you extend your talents to botany as well?"

"I like flowers and trees," she answered, "but I don't know much about them, still if you like I'll try."

"All right," I told her, "as of now you rank equal, but that doesn't mean you don't have to take care though, original thought is not plentiful even among devs."

We worked through the morning and at Ellie's suggestion I removed three names from the list of dangerous animals and added two others. At last we got Karen's call to lunch, so we set off. As we headed for main camp Ellie said:

"What's King of the Jungle here, George?"

"Huh?" I asked.

"Something's got to be boss organism."

"Never thought of it," I said. "At a guess I'd say the killer-croc."

"It isn't attacked by borer worms?"

"Oh, now and then, parasitism's normal but if you look at it that way I can't think of anything unless perhaps it's the snake-trees."

"The snake-trees?"

"We'll go after lunch and I'll show you."

The snake-tree grove was a stiff three hour march from camp, but Ellie was tough and never complained. At last the jungle began to thin and then even the undergrowth disappeared and we were at the edge of the grove. The snake-trees were almost the first new plant-life I discovered on Horsch IV and almost the last.

If Rita hadn't been behind me when what looked like five of the biggest snakes I'd seen converged on me then I'd have been very dead. The snake-trees are a prime example of

neighbourliness in tree-life, they hang their big flexible branches round each other and if any life comes into the vicinity then a branch falls, spines on the branch paralyse whatever it is and the branches wrap round it and methodically ingest it. The trees give off a sort of perfume which must attract life native to Horsch because when Ellie and I stood at the edge of the grove a young killer-croc, already ten metres long went into the grove, and instantly a rain of branches fell on it, it struggled, but as fast as its strength tore away branches others fell, and soon it was cocooned and still. Ellie was fascinated.

"I think they're top," I said. "I've no evidence of parasites, there's no plant-life in the vicinity, animals only come because they're attracted and they've learnt that certain deviants are to be respected."

We went back to the zoo to get on with the classification and then when we came back to camp in the evening we found Rita had teleported the mail in and there was a bulky parcel for me, bearing the stamp of Deviant Control. I never knew mail from Headquarters to contain anything good so I unwrapped it with a bad grace. It was a volume of the Galactic Handbook, the 'H' volume, and the covering letter instructed me to read the section that dealt with the life forms of Horsch IV and to amend where necessary. Along with it was a facsimile of a letter from the producers of the Galactic Handbook which, stripped of the flowery phrasing, said that finally the producers had decided that deviants might be allowed to assist in the collection and correlation of data.

"Which means that we'll get whatever's too hot or too dirty for the normals—apologies Ellie—to soil their hands with," came Karen's thought. "It shouldn't be too hard, George."

"You don't know the half of it," I said. "There's quite a difference between surveying for a dejunglising project and surveying for the Handbook. The Handbook wants the far end of everything and evidence to support it, that means all the life from bacteria up to killer-crocs, and they'll insist on a detector check at H.Q. to make sure I haven't made a skimmed job of it.

"It's not inordinately hard, only tedious, but what makes it difficult is that we have to have our own report in in three months, and the dejunglising units will be in within a week and that'll finish most of the life forms barring what's kept

artificially. In other words, when I send in my report to the Handbook I have to do so in the knowledge that everything checks and double-checks and in my heart of hearts I know I've made a first class job of it."

"So what are you going to do?" asked Rita.

"Have a restful night and see what I can dream up in the morning," I answered.

However my evening was only restful to the extent of spending it reading the section of the Handbook on Horsch IV life instead of some more violent activity. The five thousand feet of tape that composed the 'H' section was, I knew, fifteen thick volumes in the fantastically expensive printed copy that graced Handbook Headquarters Library. No-one saw the Handbook as any more than a maker of sinecures, but the office-holders had a certain amount of political pull, and so the Galactic Government gave them enough rope, in the pious hope that they would one day strangle themselves.

The part of the tape dealing with the life of Horsch IV varied all the way from outright laughable to dangerously misleading, and was based, in fact, on the one week's survey conducted by the non-deviant crew of an exploratory ship two hundred years previously. Quite a lot I could correct straight away, but for the rest it meant work and more work in a race against time, with the good name of Deviant Control at stake.

So the next day I sent Ellie off with Len to see to the zoo while I worked with Rita on a bacterial survey in the vicinity of the camp. The magnitude of the task ahead was demonstrated by the fact that I located fourteen variants of *Micrococcus Lanceolatus* in a single culture. Of course the frustrating part was that it was all rather useless knowledge, since the advances in preventive medicine had made the human body practically immune to such diseases as pneumonia and therefore *Micrococcus Lanceolatus* just had to get by as best it could.

The other cultures had much the same story to tell. I nibbled lunch whilst working at the microscope and I began to realise what some of the earlier researchers such as Ehrlich and Leeuwenhoek had had to suffer; by the evening meal I was fed right up to the teeth. Unfortunately there wasn't any way out that we could see, because each organ-

ism's particular habits had to be tied in with those of other life forms and the picture had to check.

The next morning Len said that since Ellie appeared to manage the 'zoo' all right without his help he could employ himself more usefully working with the others. I agreed, mainly because I had too much work to do to argue, and anyway Karen could pick up a mental shout for help without any trouble. I had sent Rita out collecting specimens and was all alone in the camp when suddenly a pair of cool hands put themselves round my eyes.

"Guess who?" said a voice.

"Ellie," I answered, "you're back early—and I'm busy."

"I brought you along some specimens," she told me. I looked at the two big jars on a table, one contained water plants, the other contained almost an aquarium of small fishes.

"I finished quickly," she said, "so that I could go swimming." I looked at her curiously.

"Where did you go swimming?" I asked faintly.

"There's only one place," she answered. "The pool near the zoo."

"I suppose you know that there are about fifty nasty diseases you could catch there," I said, "and all sorts of poisonous and violent things live in and around it."

"Well I had a very nice swim," she retorted, "and found myself a pet." I had felt something rubbing against my ankles and I looked down on what appeared to be a rather amiable ginger cat, I backed hastily away.

"You know what your pet is?" I asked curiously.

"It will be something thoroughly deadly," she said in a bored tone.

"It's a baby sabretooth," I told her, "and quite probably its parents will be after it." From the bushes at the edge of the clearing where the camp was there came a coughing roar. Immediately Ellie went to the control panel of the field unit and touched the contact plate controlling the disruptor cannon, turning it off. Then picking up the baby sabretooth under her arm she went out through the door-shield.

I watched in a kind of fascinated horror as the two great yellow beasts came out of the undergrowth. I had a heater in my belt but I couldn't have pulled it to save my life, and in any case Ellie was by then too near the sabretooths for me to

fire at them without hitting her. I saw her put the little animal down and it trotted over to the parents, then the trio turned away and disappeared. Ellie came back, nothing the worse.

"Ellie," I said, "I'm inclined to think you're a dev." Her hand cracked across my face.

"Don't say that," she said, "I wouldn't like to think I was as low as that. You devs are a lot of dirty cowards, you're out here and you're just plain scared to death despite the fact that you've shields and disruptor cannon and heaters and the rest. You think I can't see it, well I can, even though I can't read thoughts or teleport or do any other of the parlour tricks that you're so proud of. As soon as possible I want to go back among decent normals, even if they do sometimes forget themselves."

"Anyway you want it, Ellie," I said. "Now you'll have to excuse me, I've work to do."

It was a fairly miserable day after that. Even in the short time Ellie had been working with me I'd got used to having her around. I looked at the two jars of specimens she had brought and began work on them as a change from the bacterial counts and examinations. Oddly enough I found nothing especially remarkable about them. So I put on my jungle suit and taking the two jars I set off towards the pool.

When I came to it everything was as I remembered, an evil scummy surface, unmentionable things stirring faintly in its depths and a general impression of badness all around. With almost a shudder I emptied the two jars and headed back to the camp. On the path there suddenly appeared a poison-frog, I tried to think how Ellie would have reacted and then ashed it automatically as it leapt at me with poison teeth bared.

When I got back the truck was missing and so were Arn and Ellie, the rest of our group were there and from the accusing glances I got from everyone excepting Karen I gathered that Ellie had been fairly popular.

"Some people don't know how to handle normals—" began Rita when a savage blast of thought from Karen stopped her in her tracks.

"Sometimes I wonder how devs can be so stupid," came the thought. "Ellie was a nice kid, we brought her along because she couldn't get by on her own thought, and what do we do,

we cosset her as if she was made of crystal. Well, I tell you any organism, normal or dev, likes to stand on its own feet. Ellie can look after herself—”

“Like with that spacer—” began Lissa.

“Like with that spacer,” came the thought, almost a snarl. “I went that way when I was Ellie’s age, only it would have been quick with her. With me I knew for half an hour, and it was like half a lifetime. Deviant Control sent out after him once they’d got me out of range, I guess eventually he died. It took me five years to learn to like normals after that. You George,” the thought intensified in my way, “should have had more sense than to suggest that Ellie was a dev, especially in her hearing. She hasn’t shown the slightest trace and if there was I’d have known it.”

“If you’d seen the way she handled that sabretooth cub—” I began.

“Tell me why do children often have the ability to handle savage animals that other people can’t even get near?” came back the thought. “They haven’t had time to get conditioned to fear. I’m surprised that didn’t strike you, George.” With a thunder of atomic blast motors the truck came back into the camp. When the motors had died away Arn climbed down.

“I took Ellie where she wanted to go,” he said heavily.

“And you let her get off and go into the jungle,” came Karen’s surprised thought.

“Sure,” said Arn, “and all of you,” he looked at us, “leave her alone. If she wants to prove us cowards that’s up to her, we’ve fulfilled the contract to the letter of the law, forget about her, devs haven’t room for normals, have we?”

“I’m having no-one’s death on my conscience,” I said. “I’m going after her.” I was slammed flat on my back.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” said Rita. “We’ve a job to do and you’re the most essential part of the team. Loyalty to Deviant Control comes first. We can’t let any normal say that we didn’t deliver what was required.” I stood up and looked at them. There wasn’t one I could fight normally or deviantly. Karen could turn on a mental howl, Lissa and Rita could hold me by jumping or teleporting, Arn and Pedro could wreak physical violence and Len could use either Karate or telekinesis.

“I’ll behave,” I said.

I worked then as I’d never worked before. I hated the job, hated myself, and most of all I hated normals and took it



out in sheer effort, and by the beginning of the last week of the time we had, my list and the cross-checking was about finished, except that it was unbelievable to a normal.

"It wants a clincher," thought Karen, "it needs irrefutable evidence. If Horsch IV had any intelligent life that would be acceptable for confirming what you say, we could put it over, but as it is I don't think the normals will accept it, and once the dejunglising crews come in they won't be able to check, since the stretch of jungle we plan to leave untouched won't count with them."

"I've done my best," I said.

I felt hollow then, with nothing more to do. It was evening, and I ought to have turned in early and got my first decent night's sleep in days, but instead I decided to go and turn the specimens in the zoo loose, since the dejungling units would collect for any zoo in the galaxy interested in the life-forms of Horsch IV.

I set off through the jungle, using a handlamp where necessary, though it was high summer and there was a sort of faint light that was enough to see by most of the way. I came to the compound and turned off the screen, then I went round the cages opening the doors and that was that. We had decided that the centre of the proposed park would be the snake-tree grove, because they were a life-form almost unique. Then I thought that it might be a good idea to have a look at them by night, a foolish thought that I should have rejected without any consideration as dangerous. But I made my way through the jungle towards the grove.

I came to the edge of it and stood puzzled, because there was the unmistakable evidence of a small camp there. Without thinking I walked forward, a ton weight smashed down on my neck and the world exploded in a shower of stars.

I came to looking at the ceiling of our camp medical tent, paralysed, with most nerves dead, unable to move a muscle, but Ellie and Karen were there. Soothingly Karen thought. "You're all right, George, and you'll be up in about twenty-four hours when the snake-tree venom wears off. You've got Ellie to thank that you're alive, she came back to the grove, where she's been living incidentally, and found you all ready to be ingested. She got us out and we persuaded the trees to give you up."

"Living? I queried mentally. I saw Ellie talking but my auditory sense was dead.

"Yes," came Karen's thought, "Ellie's a dev all right only she wasn't conscious of it. I suppose you'd call her deviation telemem, or something such. It's a bit like your life emanation sense only it's much more finely tuned and it lets her listen to cell memories."

"I don't understand," I thought.

"You know that when some animals and insects lose a limb they can grow another," thought Karen, "that's because the cells can remember, if it isn't too complicated. We have to rely on regeneration units for new body parts because our limbs are too complicated for cell memories. Animals don't have a human style intelligence, and cell memories play a big part in their thinking, that was why Ellie could sense if an animal was dangerous or not, and also because of that she wasn't afraid, and therefore she didn't emit adrenalin which acts as an exciting agent to a whole range of animals when they smell it. For that same reason she could go swimming in the pool although she admits she took a risk of disease from it."

"But the snake-trees?" I enquired mentally.

"That's the really important part I saved till the last," said Karen. "The trees are enormously long-lived, and have a plant intelligence of a high order. They've fought and beaten every organism on the planet, accordingly they've a colossal fund of cell memories to tap, and Ellie has been living at the grove and filling a note-book with what she learnt, and what we've read confirms your work a hundred per cent and will fill in some gaps you've left."

"Fair enough," I thought, I felt tired then.

"Just one thing," Karen thought, "Ellie wants to apologise to us all for calling us cowards."

"Cell memories," I guessed mentally.

"Yes, fear of discovery and such goes deep in deviants. Anyway Ellie wants to join us and asks for permanent assignation as your assistant."

"Tell her the rule," I thought, "deviants with like talents are supposed to get married."

"I think she knows," thought Karen, and Ellie bent down and kissed me. There was just enough of me not paralysed to make it not a waste of effort on her part, and to give a sense of anticipation on mine.

—Alan Burns

*Mathematics proves Disintegration Day—the end of the world, the Solar System, the Universe.*

# EINSTEIN'S UNIVERSE

by STEVE HALL

---

Could you rest easy in your mind if you knew when it was all going to end? I'll be specific about it—I mean the end of the world, the end of the Solar System, the Universe—the lot. One big bang, then a miasma of subatomic particles. It's not funny to contemplate if you know the date, and if you have irrefutable proof to back it up. You may dicker about what constitutes irrefutable, stone-wall, brassbound, scouts honour truth—again I'll make it straight forward with no holds barred—it's evidence which satisfies you completely, leaving you no loophole to escape through.

A friend of mine had facts and figures that all added up to the Day of Disintegration.

Harry (or to give him the title by which he was known in scientific circles, Doctor Harold Andrews) and I, met during the closing years of the war. We'd both interrupted our studies; his scientific, mine engineering; and when we resumed them after demob, we returned to the same red-brick fount of knowledge to prepare ourselves for the civvy street rat-race. He had one of those phenomenal memories you often hear about, but seldom meet. Armed with this and a diamond edged brain, Harry devoured facts like a starving man in a supermarket. Inevitably, he collected after his name an assorted alphabet of scientific status symbols.

I plodded on, a tortoise alongside the hare, got the solitary engineering degree which was my limit, then went into industry to learn how much of it I could forget.

Harry tried several avenues for his talents, including atomic energy and the electronics of super-cooled materials. None of them filled the bill for very long, until he went into the newly formed Combined Research Centre set up by the Government. Here, he found himself at the centre of a web of dynamic investigation. The periphery of the web was expanding rapidly in all directions, but radial lines of communication channelled the information from all departments into the central clearing house.

Van Vogt called such 'group specialists' in science, Nexia-lists, although as far as I know, Harry's mob haven't yet adopted the name. Be that as it may, the conditions there were Utopia for him. All around were willing and capable researchers hacking away in uncharted goldfields, coming across the occasional glittering nugget, and passing it back for examination and co-ordination with everything else.

The results obtained from the Combined Research Centre justified its establishment in a few short years, stilling the acid tongues of former critics. And as Combined Research waxed fat, so Doctor Harold Andrews waxed fatter, acquiring a housekeeper-run flat, a series of Jaguar cars, and a definite addiction to Mexican tequila in suitably ornate bottles.

During the years that Harry was laying the foundations for a large fortune for the Government, a smaller one for himself and a future peerage for the Minister of Science, I was not idle. First, I met and married Molly, then I did my share in bringing up our two daughters (although she hotly disputes this) and finally, I became a man of substance and owned a mortgage. To keep the Building Society wolves from the door, I succumbed to a long standing itch, sweated blood for eight days, and gave birth to a short story which was accepted by a new magazine. Spasmodically, I produced more.

When he was on the crest of a wave, or in a trough of depression, Harry would blow in out of the blue carrying a bottle of his customary poison. If he was on the downswing, he would regale us with gloomy fabrications concerning everything in general; when he was zooming upwards, we were treated to the most extravagant fantasies his imagination could weave. Always, these yarns were loosely based on some research being churned out in the cement mixer, as the boys at C.R.C. called their place of employment. All in all, he was quite a dish of almonds.

Molly would listen tolerantly to Harry's nonsense, somehow whip up one of his favourite dinners, then beam fatuously as he scoffed it. As far as I know, she was the only woman (apart from his mother) that he was happy with. He always swore that as I'd beaten him to it, he'd stay a bachelor unless I left her a widow. This was to remain one of his more tragic fantasies.

One Friday night last autumn, I was alone at home. Molly and the children had preceded me to her mother's for the weekend. Two thousand words of my latest epic remained to be written, so I was having twenty-four hours alone to finish it. We had accumulated enough for a down payment on a car, which I was to collect the next morning before following them. I had to finish that story the next day—thick head and chinchilla-coated teeth notwithstanding.

About 11 o'clock that night, the doorbell rang—I knew it was Harry, because, as usual, he spelled out his initial in morse. I was still five hundred words or so from the end—just coming into the home stretch—but it had to wait. Harry was the original irresistible force and I was no immovable object.

I let him in. The odour of tequila hung around him like a bridal veil. It seemed as if he'd been using it as perfume, yet he looked normal enough—normal that is, if you recognised as I did, that he was on a downswing.

"Where's my favourite wife?" he demanded.

"You're out of luck," I replied. "All my females are out of your reach this time."

"Oh, great. So all I've got to console me is you."

"Come off it, Harry," I said rather irritably. "Why should you need consolation? You've got a job which satisfies you, feeds you well, pays for your tequila jags and your Jag jags—what more do you need?"

"I don't need anything more John." He gazed bleakly at me before continuing softly, "I've got too much as it is—*too much knowledge*."

Taking the tequila bottle from his pocket, he lounged moodily into an armchair. There were a couple of glasses within easy reach, which he filled.

I was trapped and I knew it. God alone knew what was going on in that filing cabinet of a brain, but it looked as

though somebody had shuffled the cards and I was going to be stuck with the result.

Harry pushed one of the brimming glasses over towards me.

"Drink up, while I tell you the number of your days," he said melodramatically.

I groaned inwardly as I swallowed a slug of tequila—this one had all the promise of being a real killer-diller. The Mexican firewater started busily investigating every convolution of my empty intestines. Harry sat quietly waiting, mournfully confident of its ability to paralyse any resistance on my part. With perfect timing, he emptied his glass preparatory to speaking again.

"All my life, I've been avid for knowledge of all types. It's as if I've been searching for some sort of ultimate answer without ever imagining I'd find one." He paused for a moment, looking down at his hands as if locating his place on a printed page. "My job gives me plenty of facts to work with—pieces of a complicated jigsaw puzzle—two of them fit perfectly, one on the microcosmic scale and the other macrocosmic. Together they gave me the final answer."

Harry's right hand homed unerringly on the tequila bottle like one magnetic pole joining its mate. He refilled our glasses and continued.

"Lester Kinghorn, one of our physicists, has been messing about with subatomic particles. Without going into the 'how' of it, he's managed to produce a gadget that travels in time. Now before you start expostulating about murdering grandfathers, I'll tell you that it only travels into the future."

This one really was a lulu. I decided mentally to let him ramble on a bit before throwing in the proverbial spanner.

"Kinghorn's lab is on the top storey of his block. He set up the business end of the time traveller on the flat roof above. It was a three foot cube of steel plate with the lower half holding the innards. The top of the cube was just an empty compartment for temporal specimens. You appreciate why the thing was on the roof?"

"Sure," I said patiently, "he didn't want it to materialise in a space in the future that might have some other solid body already there."

Harry favoured me with an approving nod.

"Well, Kinghorn rigged it all up complete with the first time travellers, three white mice from the biology lab. The



first shoot was to be for six months ahead, for no particular reason I can think of, unless it was because that would be his next birthday. Nothing special was provided for the livestock, they were travelling strictly third class. When he switched on the juice for the first time, the thing vanished completely and materialized after about five minutes. Kinghorn got one hell of a shock when he opened up the lid. All that it contained was the remnants of two skeletons and one putrefied body. The two lots of bones had obviously been gnawed considerably. One of the pathology boys, without knowing of the experiment, gave it as his opinion that the animals had been dead about a year.

"Kinghorn became a lot more cautious after this experience, and lowered his sights to journeys of a few hours ahead. Of course, there were complications; the spaces occupied by the box had to be marked accurately and everything kept clear of them when we caught up with a future 'arrival point.' He roped me in at this stage in the game, and we soon had the roof set out in time squares all in chronological order. The place looked like a giant crossword puzzle.

"In a couple of days, we had the answer to what had happened to the mice. Kinghorn's device was a *time accelerator*. Anything placed in it, experienced a speeded up time sequence, but the occupants were affected in the same way as they would have been by a similar duration spent in 'normal' time—hence the mice being without food, turned cannibals. The solitary victor of the struggle for life survived a little longer, but had no chance in the round trip of one year. Bacteria, of course, finished off the job.

"It was obvious that sending living creatures on such journeys was profitless—it was just a quick way of killing them off. So we decided to build a private eye into the livestock compartment; a movie camera taking film at high speed for the minute or two that it spent in the future, before snapping back to the present. We dragged the whole caboodle over to the edge of the roof, and arranged the camera to take a quick general shot of the area around a bookstall on the ground below, then zoom in, to give us a view of the headlines on the newspapers."

Harry paused momentarily, his eyes vacant.

"Well," I prompted, "did it work? Do you know all the winners for the next few months?"

He snapped out of it at my words and looked at me pityingly.

"Since when have they printed the racing results on the front page? There was a headline though concerning one big race, it was won by a Russian horse, Rostov, I believe it was called. Anyway, the set-up worked like a dream, except for one session on October the 18th. Some idiot had parked his car right in the line of fire. All we got for that day was a closeup of the back end of a dark-blue Ford Classic, the registration number was YSF 667. I've checked to see who owns that number plate, but it hasn't been issued yet. Still, it didn't matter much, the worse was still to come. We got some film for all of the other days up to next March the 1st. That was the day that Kinghorn had sent the mice on the very first trip. For anything farther ahead than that, the film just came back with nothing on it."

"D'you mean that literally?" I asked rather stupidly.

"Yes," said Harry. "It showed us a beautiful picture of black nothing."

"And that made you conclude that March the 1st was the last day for the world?"

"Not then it didn't," he replied. "You see, I'd spent quite a few days with Kinghorn, and other stuff was piling up on my desk, so I decided to spend some time clearing up my office while he overhauled the machine."

Again, Harry stopped deliberately to pour out more tequila for us. The bottle was now less than half-full, and I was beginning to get tired.

"All right, then what?"

"There was one report from the Astro-Physics section which had some meat in it. They had been following a programme which was designed to settle once and for all who was right about the Universe. You know the current ideas—Hoyle says that matter is being continuously created at a rate which balances the expansion of the Universe, so that the average density of matter throughout is a constant. The older hypothesis, usually called the 'Big Bang' theory, postulated that at some remote date in the past, all matter was in one relatively small volume of space in a state of quiescence. Some minor disturbance upset the balance, eventually causing the buildup of a vast explosion which started the myriad shattered chunks of matter receding from each other. This theory says that the process may be cyclic, and that the expansion of the

Universe will sooner or later stop, to be followed by a contraction of space, thus bringing all matter back to the starting point. The trick was to explain what could stop the recession of the Galaxies.

"One of our bright lads thought up an ingenious theory. The remotest Galaxies we can observe, are moving at a substantial fraction of the speed of light, that is, *they were when that light left them hundreds of millions of years ago*. Since then, their speed will have increased, because the gravitational force is weakening in inverse proportion to the square of their distance. Could we, in view of this, figure out what the present speed of their recession is?"

"All the data necessary for a solution was fed into our computers. It took two days before the result came out, and it's since been double checked. They will attain the velocity of light around the end of next February. The possible error is plus or minus a week."

Harry peered at me in morbid triumph, and stopped talking.

"So the dates when your pictures of the future cease and that for the Galactic recession reaching the speed of light, happen to be about the same—I still don't see the connection."

"Remember the Relativity Theory," said Harry urgently. "What happens when an object attains the speed of light?" I cogitated. "Its mass becomes infinite."

"And if an object develops infinite mass, what kind of gravitational force would it exert on everything else regardless of distance?"

"It would have to be infinite," I repeated foggily.

"So," my tormentor said softly, "a sudden and infinite gravitational force will appear in a few months time—and rip apart the fabric of the space-time continuum—hence no pictures after that date—there'll be nothing to photograph."

I raised my glass in salute, my eyes were burning, and I was more than a little drunk. "That's the best performance of your life, Harry, a beautiful theory—you should be writing science fiction, not me."

"Look laddie," he said belligerently, "Doomsday is March the 2nd next year, doesn't that register?" One corner of his mouth and one eyebrow, was raised and twitching.

I recognised the signs. He had reached the aggressive stage of inebriation.

"Of course," I said reasonably, "but I've still got to sleep and so should you. Now why don't you push off home for the night?" I stood up, patted him consolingly on the shoulder, and lurched off in the general direction of the bedroom. I didn't look back, but I heard the front door slam behind him—it sounded like the clap of doom. I fell on to the bed and into a sleep, a sleep which was punctuated by dreams of a dissolving Cosmos and a Building Society agent demanding the next fifteen year's instalments to clear my mortgage before the holocaust.

The next day I finished writing my story. Most times, the end of a yarn is dead tricky like the opening sentences; it's got to be just so. This one though wasn't too bad. After a breakfast of black coffee, two cigarettes and a handful of codeine tablets, I faced up to the typewriter. The only ordeal I had to withstand, was the hammer blows of the keys pounding over a couple of pages of quarto.

My car was ready for me at the dealers. It was a dark-blue Ford Classic, registration number YSF 667. I couldn't recall telling Harry I was getting a car, but evidently he had found out somehow, then craftily used the details to authenticate his story. I marvelled at the lengths to which some people will go, shaking my still throbbing head, until it made me slightly giddy.

The quiet hum of the car's engine coupled with the gentle October sunshine, helped to make my condition rather less delicate by the time I finished the thirty mile run to join my family. I had driven very sedately for one and a quarter hours.

I didn't tell Molly very much about Harry's visit, except to say that he had been at the top of his form. Quite naturally too, she was more interested in the new car.

Ten days later, we had an early morning call from a close-mouthed security type who escorted me on a pre-breakfast drive to the Combined Research Centre. He gave me no reason for the trip, other than to grudgingly confide that I would be told all about it at the other end. I noticed that the two cars parked outside the house when we came out, kept back and front of me for the whole journey—evidently I wasn't going to be allowed to stray.

Eventually, our little cavalcade drew up outside the only entrance I had seen in the twelve foot high, unclimbable fence

which enclosed the two square miles of C.R.C. I was shepherded through the gates, into a block-house, where I waited self-consciously while a monosyllabic telephone call was made. After this, we trooped back out and got into one of the security cars—mine was taken off to points unknown. A niggling doubt that I would get out crept into my mind as I watched them drive it away.

There were only three people in the Director's office when I entered ; the headman himself, a slick-haired, city business man type, and a muscular looking bod sitting silently near the door.

The watchdog who had brought me in, must have reported fully to them on the morning so far, because as soon as the introductions were over, my creature comforts were attended to in the form of a first-rate breakfast. While I ate, there was polite chit-chat about anything and everything. Looking back over that conversation, I realize how skilful my two hosts were. They could have written a pretty comprehensive case-book of yours truly when Mr. Muscles padded across and removed the dirty dishes.

Up to then, my attempted queries had been turned aside, but enough (as the bishop said) was enough. Offering my cigarettes around, I said drily, "I will certainly recommend the food at this establishment to all my friends, but would somebody mind telling me what this joyride is all about?"

The city slicker's eyes instantly became chips of pale-blue ice. Mentally, he had taken off the gloves.

"Doctor Harold Andrews' body and car were fished out of the sea yesterday. His general condition is consistent with death having taken place on the time and date shown on his calender watch." He went on relentlessly, "This places his death at an hour or so after he left your house in the early hours of October 8th. You were almost certainly the last person to speak to him, other than the garage attendant where he bought petrol at one a.m. Naturally we wish to know all about those last few hours. Will you now tell us what took place between the time he first visited you and the time he left. Leave nothing out ; imagine if you like, that you are writing a story, fill in every detail."

He and the Director listened in complete silence while I dredged through my ten day old memories.

When I had finished, the Director asked a shrewd question. "Did you believe what Harry had told you?"

I shook my head. "At the time it sounded like a good yarn, but later, I saw the flaw in his 'end of the world' theory."

"What?" said both of them simultaneously.

"It's obvious. Einstein's theory rests on certain basics which have all been proved. One of them is that the speed of light is an absolute which cannot be exceeded. Therefore, even if it is true that the remote galaxies will attain that velocity shortly and set up an infinitely powerful gravitational field, it will be hundreds of millions of years before the wave-front reaches our Galaxy *because it cannot travel faster than the speed of light*. In other words, the Universe may be cracking around the edges, but I'll still have to repay my mortgage in full, and at the normal intervals."

The Director started to reach across his desk to shake my hand, then stopped with his hand stuck out halfway.

"What about Kinghorn's machine and March the 1st?"

"There must be something wrong with the thing," I said flatly. "Build another one and try again."

Kinghorn built another one later, trying for five years ahead the first time. It worked, but it wouldn't go any farther on subsequent trials. For some reason beyond us all at the moment, the destination selected for the first run with a machine, automatically becomes some sort of a barrier. It's no great problem really—all you have to do is make your first date far enough ahead so that it gives plenty of scope for later trips.

Oh, one other thing; when I came out of the Director's office after my grilling that day, I found my car had been parked in front of the news-stand.

The headline on the newspapers read: 'Tragic Death of Prominent Scientist.' The dateline was, of course, October 18th.

Steve Hall



**11th Year Of Publication**

**Science Fantasy**

**2/6**

**Bi-Monthly**

Two long novelettes take special places  
in the make-up of the current issue (No. 51)

## **The Stealer of Souls**

by **MICHAEL MOORCOCK**

The third story in the necromatic series  
concerning Elric of Melnibone and his  
unceasing quest for the peace of his  
soul amongst the strange lands of sorcery

## **The Legend**

by **W. T. WEBB**

A modern weird story concerning a local  
legend which turned into a nightmare  
for those who investigated it too closely

**Plus Short Stories by**

**JOHN BRUNNER and P. F. WOODS**

And an unusual cover painting by  
**GERARD QUINN**

**ORDER FROM YOUR NEWSAGENT**

---

**NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD**

**Maclaren House, 131 Gt. Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1**

***Britain's Leading S-F Magazine***

# **NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION**

***Monthly 2/6***

Now appearing in the current issues

## **Field Hospital**

by **JAMES WHITE**

A great new "Sector General" novel in 3-parts in which Dr. Conway leaves the galactic hospital to investigate the conditions on a planet where the inhabitants are desperately in need of medical aid. From this simple beginning develops one of the most dramatic stories of the series.

★ Plus Short Stories by

★ **BRIAN W. ALDISS**      ★ **B. N. BALL**

★ **LEE HARDING**      ★ **PHILIP E. HIGH**

★ **JOSEPH L. GREEN**      ★ **JOHN BRUNNER**

★ Great new series of Guest Editorials

★ Articles

★ Features

**ORDER FROM YOUR NEWS DEALER  
NOW**

---

**NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD**

**Maclaren House, 131 Gt. Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1**