

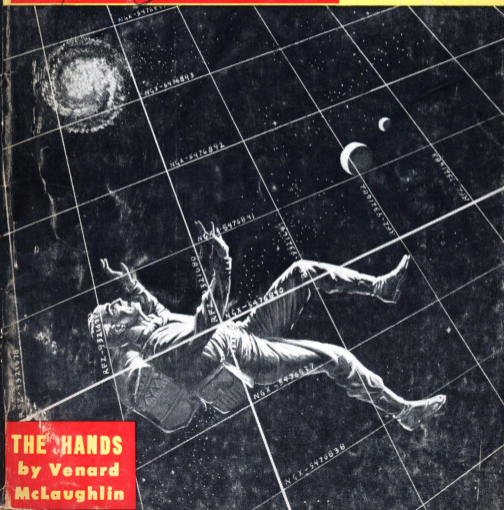
# THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

MARCH 1960

## STORIES

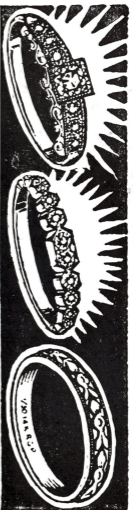
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**ARTERY OF FIRE**  
**by Thomas N.  
Scortia**



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by Venard  
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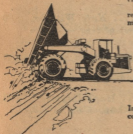
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## STORIES

VOLUME 11

MARCH, 1960

NUMBER 1

### BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

ARTERY OF FIRE ..... *Thomas N. Scortia* 6

Earth was starved for power, and its only power-source was The Artery, the greatest engineering feat of the ages. And to Norman Bayerd, who had fought the issue through the political and scientific opposition to the construction of it, The Artery was life itself. But now another political crisis had arisen, and Bayerd had to fight again. Then came the strange, senseless act of sabotage . . .

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*Book - Length Novel*

by THOMAS N. SCORTIA

# Artery of Fire

*It was the greatest engineering feat ever accomplished, the Artery that piped power from Pluto to impoverished Earth, and it was life itself to Norman Bayerd. And now politicians and scientists who had opposed him all along were here to needle him yet again. But worse than that was the sabotage which threw off the beam...*

**"Y**OU'RE a liar!"

The pent violence of the voice hissed in Norman Bayerd's ears, jarring him from his reverie. He stood on the edge of the precipice, feeling a sudden vertigo, a sense of disorientation, so that the star-flecked sky of Pluto into which he had been staring seemed to writhe and pulse like the black surface of something alive.

Then he was over it and filled with a quick anger. Just for an instant he had felt somehow divorced from the

reality that stretched out before him. You could lose yourself in the blackness of that sky, he told himself.

Standing on the very brink of creation... Looking out through the infinite distances and knowing that there was nothing between you and the nearest point of light but endless emptiness. Nothing, not even the tiniest speck of rock—nothing but the sheer impassable loneliness of interstellar space.

"I'll break your swinish head," a second voice said.



Bayerd remembered the frantic search for uranium on the planets...

Bayerd moved to the edge of the precipice, his heavy forelegs raising puffs of volcanic dust—which arced in low parabolic sheets back to the corduroyed rock, rock which still showed the flow patterns of ancient lava. He looked out over the vast polar tableland that stretched from this one prominence to the horizon, searching for the two figures

near the southern tip of the great smelters. He adjusted his vision to infra-red to take advantage of the heat radiating from the smelters and the ionization chambers and stepped up the magnification. The two men were near the far end of one of the massive conveyor belts that brought the pulverized uranium hydride from the great beds to the south. The

image of four-legged massive bodies danced before his eyes, wavering in the schlieren distortion of hot hydrogen spewing from the decomposing ore in the smelters.

**"NO** BOCHE speaks to me so," the first voice. One of them raised a mallet-like fist.

"Amazonian grave-robber!" the second voice sneered, and both figures moved in for contact.

"Stop it," Bayerd yelled. For an instant both figures froze motionless amid the glowing towers and throbbing chambers of the plain.

"Trubner, Sanchez," Bayerd demanded, "what's got into you two?"

"This smelling pig has a tongue that wags at both ends," Trubner said.

"Cut it out. Another crack like that and I'll put you on report."

"Whose tongue wags too much now?"

"You too, Sanchez. We're cutting our deadline too close without any private wars."

"Sanchez is to blame," Trubner said thickly. "He and his

lies about the Lichtenstein robbery, and..."

"You heathen Germans would steal food from your mother's grave," Sanchez cut in hotly.

"I said that's enough," Bayerd snapped. "We've no time to fight among ourselves. Every minute the Artery is out of action means the power shortage Earthside becomes more critical. The Lichtenstein census trouble is just a taste of what's to come."

**H**E PAUSED for a moment, thinking of home and the darkened cities and the building tension. It was only a matter of time until the situation blew up in their faces unless...

He cut to the command net and said, "All right, can all of you hear me? Check in." Trubner and Sanchez acknowledged immediately with Chang, Girard and Muletti coming in seconds later.

"Gentlemen," Bayerd said, "we're two thirds through our count-off. That gives us barely four hours to beam time. The power shortage back home is now a class 'A' emergency. That means power rationing to

private homes and to all but critical functions. We've run into delays here that we didn't anticipate."

He paused listening to the murmur of agreement.

"We can't afford the luxury of quarreling among ourselves," Bayerd said. "Chang, you're senior here. I want a report on the next man who shoots off his mouth. You're all under military jurisdiction here, and I'll use every bit of that authority—up to and including court martial proceedings—if there's any more of this bickering of the last two days. That's a promise, and I'll make it stick."

**H**E CUT from the circuit and snorted in disgust. *Complete glibbering idiots*, he thought. He switched to the 'A' net and said, "Elliott, did you get all of that?"

"They're all pretty jumpy with the power shortage and the political situation Earth-side," Elliott said quietly. He sighed and for a moment Norman Bayerd had the odd illusion that the man was standing beside him, rather than being nearly three and a half billion miles away in the Black Field

Station orbiting nearly a million kilometers from Terra. But, Bayerd thought wryly, even that wasn't true. Actually Elliott was perhaps fifty feet away if he were on the station's metering bridge, less if he were in the Commo room. The paradox made for some confusion in thinking, unless...

"I've got some news that should take your mind off your troubles," Elliott said dryly.

"That sounds ominous." Bayerd adjusted his sight to watch Girard and Muletti far inside the accelerator area as they stripped a foot-thick shield from one of the towering resonators of the accelerator. The chambers of the accelerator itself stretched far beyond his vision like a fantastic metal Midgard serpent encircling Pluto's arctic circle.

"Our guests are coming a day early," Elliott said.

"Mendoza and Gilchrist? Mendoza promised me he'd keep that rabble-rouser out of our hair until after beam time."

"Apparently the good Councilman from Greenland has found some new ammunition.

He's bringing a friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Patel," Elliott said

**F**OR A SILENT moment, Bayerd considered the implications of the statement. Patel! He'd rather have ten Gilchrights on hand rather than the Indian. He'd counted on Mendoza's presence to act as a counterbalance to Gilchrist, but Patel's presence more than tipped the balance. The political atmosphere could get tense.

"How long have I got?"

"Barely an hour."

"What are they trying to do?" he demanded angrily.

"Catch us with our house dirty?"

"Looks like it. We wouldn't have this much warning if Mendoza's secretary hadn't radioed us from the Antilles Shuttle Field just after they took off."

"After fifteen years, that little bastard comes back to haunt me."

"Patel? You think this is a personal attack brewing?"

"What else?" Bayerd asked. "He's been after me ever since the Fissionable Resources Com-

mittee hearings fifteen years ago. Don't worry, though. I clipped his wings once and I can do it again."

**B**AYERD thought for a moment and then he said, "I want a news blackout on what's happening Earthside until I tell you otherwise. We can't have any more trouble with the crew." *As if that would solve the major problem*, Bayerd thought. After five years of jockeying for a bigger slice of the very finite power pie, national tempers at home were at the breaking point. The problem among the engineering crew was only a pallid reflection—like the accusations last week that the census reports of the Lichtenstein district had been falsified. If only they could have delayed the Artery change-over a year... No, the situation would only have worsened with the delay.

"Look," he told Elliott, "I've got another hour's work just checking the calibration on the remote metering circuits. Can you keep the firemen amused until I get back?"

"There's the planetarium."

"Good. Take care of it, will

you?" Bayerd said and cut from the circuit.

For seconds he stood, feeling the tensions of his body. Patel. This was the end. As if there wasn't enough pressure on him. It would be so good, he thought, just to lie down and rest; he should never have allowed them to talk him into coming back on duty to handle the change-over.

But he realized that he would have insisted, had they not made the offer. That some other hand should touch this creation of his was unthinkable. Norman Bayerd had worked and fought for the Artery until it was the very core of his life.

HE LOOKED back over the plateau on which he stood. The control station, built on the truncated top of the "Needle," a massive volcanic splinter thrust up from the polar plain, was an organized confusion of cables buried in fused rock, complex instrument banks and control consoles. Actually, once count-down had started, the station functioned strictly as a monitor. Automatic units in a control capsule buried in a pit on the plain initiated the transmission. This directed the

stream of plasmoids that was the Artery upward at the proper angle; it controlled the density and orientation of the magnetic lens generated by the orbiting lens stations two and a half million miles sunward in Pluto's warped orbital plane.

He turned his eyes downward, scanning the polar plain from the base of the jagged stone tower of the control station outward, pausing on the bottomless crevice that ringed the stone outcropping like a ragged moat, moving outward through the jet shadows that striped the irregular plain toward the sprawling units of the Artery. His gaze took in the vast curve of the accelerator itself; the glowing stokers, storage towers for their product; the great ionization towers—all the vitals of the Artery that rose like a vast creature from the dead rock. It stretched its octopoidal arms over the polar region and far south via the great conveyors to suck the very substance of the planet out of the continental beds of uranium hydride and turn it into the pulsing blue beam that would hurl sunward in a few short hours.

THE WHOLE panorama with its eerie half-lights and strange brilliances was like something compounded of the fire and brimstone of the Christian hell of his childhood. Pluto, with its endless stretches of centuries—old snow and blackness that filled the vacuum plains and airless mountains like some yeasty dough in colorless ferment when they first came—had changed from a Norse hell to a Christian hell. It was a place of energies where a creature of flesh and blood could not survive an instant, where the very space was laced with surging magnetic fields that would magnetolyze a man's body fluids to their component gases in seconds. Where the alpha and beta particals from the power pile, accelerated to near light speeds where their vectors coincided with the accelerator fields, would blast a fatal path of ionization through animal tissue regardless of the shielding.

Yes, he thought, they had indeed turned it into a Christian hell, a thing built on the pattern of warped images from some medieval heretic, shivering in anticipation of fire and

brimstone. Not that it made too much difference, he thought. No man could live an instant here. Were there any part of him that owned the weakness of flesh and blood, or carried a deadly dependence on protein and body fluid, he would cease to exist in an instant.

*Metal*, he thought, looking down at his thick metal torso and seeing the radiation from the generator making power in his vitals, *to live in hell you have to be a man of steel.*

For a moment he looked up into the black sky, seeing the stars, and wondering how much more one must be to go there.

## II

AYERD completed the final check on the monitoring board for the orbital lens stations. He checked to see that the tape which recorded each reading and adjustment against a time scale on its edge was threaded and properly positioned, and closed the base of the console. Then he got to his feet, pausing for a moment to rest. God, but he was tired—so fatigued that he had trouble keeping his attention on his work.

Just a few more hours, he thought. He felt a warm hand on his shoulder then and in an instant his whole orientation changed. He was a flesh and blood man, enclosed intimately in the pantographic harness of a Schrenk transmitter, again existing in a small cubicle on the "S" level of the Black Field Station, millions of miles sunward from Pluto.

The transition had been near-instantaneous with the speed of a c-cube radio impulse. He drew his face from the vision mask, cut the power that left his puppet body cold and lifeless atop the Needle, halted the recording tape within the unit, and started to remove his arms from the sleeves that enclosed them.

"Everything check out?" Elliott asked as Bayerd stepped from the seat of the unit.

"Everything so far," he said, rubbing his hand across his forehead. "Why aren't you with our guests?"

"They're below at station center. I wanted to catch you before we started the circus." He handed Bayerd a message flimsy.

"What's this?"

"I CHECKED Commo just before our guests arrived. You know, the usual routine of checking the log against the morning transmissions. This one wasn't entered."

"Looks like a communication code," Bayerd said, scanning the sheet.

"It's not one of our routine codes. Can't make it out. If I hadn't been running a spot check, it would probably have been erased from the tape automatically at the watch change."

"I don't like this coming on the heels of Patel and Gilchrist's arrival," Bayerd said slowly.

"Do you think Gilchrist might have an agent planted in the station personnel?"

"You know these men better than I do. What's your idea?"

"Doc Beckworth, Chang, Girard, Muletti, Trubner, Sanchez," Elliott said, checking them off slowly. "No—I can't see any of them working for Gilchrist. Maybe one of the group we had here during the major operation, but they've all gone back."

"Whoever sent this message," Bayerd said tiredly,

"probably knows there are only the eight of us left on the station. That's fairly common knowledge. If there's a plant, he's still here. Otherwise the message wouldn't have been sent."

He folded the message and placed it in the pocket of his tunic. "You get back to our visiting firemen," he told Elliott. "I have a few things to do before I join you."

"Right," Elliott said and left.

**A**S SOON as the door closed, Bayerd found a seat on the low case of the Schrenk unit's oscillator and sat breathing heavily. Thank heavens, he thought, Elliott had left when he did. He felt the throbbing in his temples and the pain at the base of his skull from the old injury. He found the vial of capsules the doctor back home had given him and took one. Without water, the capsule made a hard lump in his throat; he sat for several minutes after the lump had faded, waiting for the lax calm to steal over him, waiting for strength to ooze back into his tired muscles. Finally he left the cubicle,

walked down the long corridor line with Schrenk unit cubicles—most of them now unused—and found a tube, leading downward toward the center of the station.

The center of the Black Field Station was a hollow sphere, nearly five hundred meters in diameter, laced with silver cables like the trceries of a careless monster spider. It was cut by fragile catwalks, thrown up with no apparent regard for "up" until one realized that "up" was away from the center of the hollow sphere. Quite apart from the hollow interior's function as an auxiliary station in the Black Field, it served a somewhat more frivolous purpose needing darkness.

**B**AYERD pushed from the personnel tube and made his way over one of the catwalks in the darkness. He was still feeling faintly nauseated and he anchored himself to one of the cables in the darkness without a sound. He could hear a murmur of voices and saw vague, man-size blobs of darkness floating near the center of the sphere, their forms outlined by the light from the projection

on the walls that enclosed them.

For a moment he felt a secret thrill at the vast panorama spread across the darkness. Not even death, he thought, could be frightening with such a thing to leave behind him. For the first time in the last hour he felt better, more secure. To hell with the Patels and the Gilchristes, he thought. A hundred years from now, when the Artery still blazed across Earth's night sky, who would remember *them*?

Even after years of familiarity, the illusion was breathtaking. It were as if he were floating in space with a blazing wealth of stars surrounding him. Then the sense of disproportion grew as he saw that he was viewing the solar system out of scale from a vantage point above the plane of the ecliptic. The sun was unnaturally small; far out, he could see the exaggerated point of light that was Pluto.

From Pluto's displacement in relation to the ecliptic, Bayerd decided that the time was just past perihelion but before Pluto had crossed Neptune's orbit. That marked the time as just before the turn of the millen-

ium. He could understand Elliott's reasons for picking this period rather than one more recent.

**H**E WATCHED as Pluto enlarged for the instant that Artery transmission began. A brilliant ribbon of blue, swirling with sub-tones of pulsing green, darted from the point of light upward at an angle and then bent sharply to parallel the ecliptic as it touched the field of the Alpha Orbital Lens inside Pluto's eccentric orbit. The lens was microscopic on this scale, but the image enlarged for an instant to show the five lens stations revolving around a common center, while the incredibly dense magnetic field that they generated within their mutual circle warped the beaded beam of the Artery from its original path.

The ribbon of cobalt light traced its path slowly toward the sun, curving in opposition to the planetary motions of Pluto and the Earth, its velocity a pedestrian quarter the speed of light. The increasing radiation-pressure of the sun was making itself felt as the

beam passed the orbits of Jupiter and Mars, introducing a new distorting influence upon the beam.

The tiny image of the Earth-Moon system enlarged now; the Moon trailed by the tiny nodal plane lens station in its meta-stable orbit. The beam, almost at Earth's orbit but well displaced above the ecliptic, touched something in its path and disappeared. Whatever the interfering object was, it did not scatter the beam; but the blue streamer emerged from the area at a snail's crawl, as though in some fashion it had shed most of its quarter light velocity.

**"A**T THIS point," Elliott's voice cut the darkness, "the major portion of the beam's kinetic energy has been absorbed by the Black Field. It then passes through the Earth-Orbital Lens, and is deflected downward through the Nodal Plane Lens that trails Luna to the plating surfaces on the Moon."

"Humph," a harsh voice rumbled, "why get rid of all that energy? Needless waste."

"If we didn't, Councilman,

we'd probably melt down a good hunk of the Moon during the course of operations, not to mention losing most of the transmitted metal by reflection."

The glowing beam, scarcely moving, intersected the Earth Orbital Lens and turned sharply down toward the ecliptic. It was showing a tendency to spread now as it slowly approached and touched the Nodal Plane Lens. There was a moment of suspense as the lens redirected the beam perpendicularly to Luna's surface and it crept slowly toward contact. The blue radiance touched the surface of the Moon; it flared faintly, and contact was made. The two worlds, Pluto and Luna, were joined in a thin band of glowing U-235 plas-moids, a pulsing umbilical cord of ions.

"Marvelous," Councilman Mendoza's voice said from the darkness. "Like Archimedes and his lever."

"Marvelous?" the harsh voice grated. "So was the dinosaur."

"Lights," Elliott said and the interior of the station was

suddenly flooded with brilliance.

**B**AYERD freed his line and pulled himself across the intervening distance to the five men who were floating in random orientations in the center of the station. Beckworth, the station's M. D., was holding the small control box from whose side a thin cable snaked up to the projector positioned on one of the catwalks.

"The dinosaur was a necessary evolutionary step, Mr. Gilchrist," Bayerd said.

"You know Commander Norman Bayerd?" Mendoza asked, his nervous white smile punctuating his dark skin.

"We've met," Gilchrist replied in a rumbling voice. He was short and beefy with a ragged fringe of yellow-gray hair circling his otherwise bald scalp. "At the committee hearings fifteen years ago," he added. "Patel, come here and say 'Hello' nicely to the man." He turned and beckoned at the small, olive-skinned man who had stayed somewhat apart during the exchange.

"Hello, Norman," Patel said, his large liquid eyes glistening.

"It's good to see you again."

Bayerd nodded without speaking, feeling the quick warmth on his face.

Bayerd checked his watch and said, "We have ninety minutes to beam time. Elliott will assign you Schrenk units and you can observe our final check-out. There'll be alternate robots for each of you on the Needle and below on the plain."

"Good," Gilchrist said. "I want a good look at this dinosaur of yours."

**E**LLIOTT turned and led the way for one of the personnel tubes. Bayerd remained in the same position as the group moved out. As soon as they were out of earshot, Patel, who had remained to the last, said, "It is *good* to see you again, Norm."

"No doubt," Bayerd replied.

"I had hoped we might talk."

"I have nothing to talk about."

"After this was over, Diane thought you might like to spend a week or so with us and the children."

"Do you think you can change all that with a few pret-

ty words?" Bayerd demanded.

"It's not right," Patel said, "for a daughter and..."

"I thought it was quite clear," Bayerd said, moving away, "I have no daughter."

Mendoza was waiting for him at the entrance of the personnel tube. As soon as Patel had pushed silently past them, Mendoza said, "Norm, watch your step, will you. Those two are up to something."

"When did Patel climb on Gilchrist's bandwagon?"

**"H**E'S BEEN around Council Hill for the last year or so. Some private committee. He and Gilchrist got together when the power crisis started giving the Council headaches."

"That political hack," Bayerd said softly.

"No—he's bull-headed and about as single-minded as they come, but give the devil his due. He wants a way out as badly as we do and he can be dangerous if he's crossed."

"What's keeping you two," Gilchrist yelled from the tube at that moment.

"Right with you," Mendoza called.

"Before you go," Bayerd said, "I want to know something. Do you have anyone spotted on my crew?"

"What do you mean?"

Bayerd told him about the message in the unauthorized code.

"I don't know," Mendoza said. "It might be an agent planted by either Gilchrist or one of the individual countries involved in the Lichtenstein affair. Trying to dig up something to embarrass the administration."

"Whatever the explanation," Bayerd said, "I don't like it one damned bit."

### III

**I**N THE last half-hour before count-down, Norman Bayerd ignored the visiting party. He could not, however, completely dismiss them from his mind. Their presence was an ill-perceived mass, hanging over his head. He wished again that they might have delayed the change-over another year, but he knew that he was only running away from the problem to be solved.

Anyway, there was another factor. Sixty wasn't so old, he thought; but every time he returned from this strong metal self to the flesh and blood shell in the station, he felt as if he had crossed from the living to the other than living. This vicarious existence was something that breathed new life into him, knowing that the world on far Pluto was a world he'd built—complete, an intimate part of his life. A part that would collapse into the rubble of history and be forgotten if Patel and Gilchrist prevailed.

Ever since Pluto had passed out of Neptune's orbit, after perigee in 1989, it had moved in a path more and more displaced below the ecliptic. The eccentricity and inclination of the orbit had changed Pluto's orientation to the ecliptic all the while its distance from the Earth had increased. The problem of control had grown greater and greater as the beam, originally parallel to and displaced above the ecliptic, now cut through the plane of the ecliptic for its contact with the Black Field and Earth Orbital Lens.

THE CHANGE-OVER had become imperative after the turn of the millenium. It had taken the engineering team six months to change the positions of the two lenses and the Black Field, jockeying the fragile stations in a broad path perpendicular to the ecliptic while still maintaining their proper motions. During the period, of course, the Artery could not transmit; the Earth's fissionable reserves had steadily dwindled, forcing an even tighter rationing than that which prevailed when the beam was in operation.

Fortunately, the rationing system was already well established. Terrestrial power demands had caught up with the new supply of fissionables from the Artery scarcely five years after the beam was in operation. Rationing on a complicated formula, weighing both population and industrial development had been the only answer. The political situation had been tense before the change-over. Now tempers had flared again and again in the World Council, and threatened to explode in open violence over the week-old scandal following the dis-

covery of the attempt to falsify the count in the Lichtenstein district during the current census.

**I**N THE LAST minutes before final check-out, Bayerd remained on the plain, away from the group on the control point. After he had checked the vapor tower of the main smelter, and the grid temperatures of the first bank of ionization chambers, he moved across the plane and out of the accelerator to the control capsule. The ceramic shield which covered the electric winch which would lower the capsule into its hundred-foot pit in the rock, had been stripped half-away; the face-plate and remote visual pick-up that scanned the capsule instruments had been moved back on their gimbals to facilitate the final adjustment of the capsule mechanism. Once the controls had been set and locked on the capsule, it controlled the wide-spread functioning of the units within the accelerator circle by a dozen coaxial cables buried deep in the rock, as well as the orientation and density of the Plutonian lens.

A signal from the Needle could override the capsule and cut the beam; but the capsule and the massive computers buried beneath the plain handled the actual transmission at speeds impossible to an organic nervous system. Once the Artery was in operation, only the capsule site was accessible. The raging magnetic fields near the accelerator would completely destroy control of a Schrenk robot. The capsule would transmit an initial calibrating segment of the beam. Then, twenty hours later, it would make any necessary adjustments from data fed back to it by the Earth Orbital Lens Stations, and begin continuous transmission.

**H**E PAUSED by the capsule and looked out over the plain, feeling his inner self fill with pride. What a magnificent concept. Without the Artery they would still be chasing the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow as Patel had wanted. Patel and his single-minded search for a new power source! You couldn't harness the hydrogen reaction—that had

been proven—and what else was there but the old standbys, uranium and plutonium fission? With the twenty percent conversion you got with the Black Field, that meant a lot.

When the vast beds of U-235 rich ore had been found on Pluto, the power famine on Earth had been critical. It was commercially impractical to bring the metal back by ship. The drain on world resources of merely building the ships would have been fantastic. The Artery had been a heaven-sent solution to the dilemma.

Who cared how much energy you burned at the source? So . . . so smelt the ore on Pluto; vaporize it, raise the vapor to an ionizing temperature and squirt out the cloud of ions and electrons. You shape them with electromagnetic pulses; bite them into small chunks of plasma with internal particles rotating fast enough to organize it into those almost-living cohesive clouds of particles called plasmoids; accelerate them endlessly in a giant accelerator until they reach nearly a quarter the speed of light

and hurl them sunward. Twenty hours later, you plate out precious metal on the Lunar plains.

THAT WAS the concept, ready made, a mere matter of engineering—complex engineering to be sure, but the technology already existed. No striking into *terra incognita*. They couldn't wait for the vain hopes of a new power source; nor was there enough to back that expensive phase of research and still build the Artery. A choice had to be made. They built the Artery.

If there had been any sense at home, Bayerd thought, the power would have been enough for centuries. It wasn't his fault that industry and power usage had expanded so rapidly to meet the new supply. The point was he'd given them what they wanted, and in the process built the greatest structure that man had ever conceived.

He checked the time quickly and called "Check in!"

"Trubner. Ionization chamber full potential."

"Girard, how about smelt-

ers?" Bayerd asked.

"Intake full idle. Reservoirs at ninety percent."

"Field stability?"

"Sanchez here. Accelerator field oh point oh oh five variation at reserve."

Quickly he took the reports from Muletti at the far side of the accelerator below the horizon, and Chang who was running a final remote check on the computers far below. He checked the settings on the capsule once more, made sure the screws were tight on the verniers and said, "Trubner, grab Girard and get the capsule sealed and seated... Gentlemen, ten minutes to count-down."

**H**E WATCHED two figures detach themselves from the shadows about the blue-hazed ionization chambers and move toward him. For an instant the scene seemed unreal, as though he were displaced miles from the site. He shook away the sensation, stepped back a pace and deactivated the robot. A brief adjustment, and he was in the alternate robot atop the Needle, feeling somehow vaguely depressed

after the surging emotions of the plain.

There were three active robot bodies and, when he switched to the normally unused 'B' net, he heard Elliott explaining the functioning of the metering stations, while Mendoza and Gilchrist occasionally made comment. He started to break in on the conversation when one of the three inactive bodies standing on the far edge of the area straightened and moved toward him.

Bayerd, turned to look out over the table land below, trying to ignore the robot which he knew must be Patel. He switched to the 'A' net to rid himself of the three-way conversation between Elliott and the Councilmen. Below him, the whole plain was aglow with energy except for the deep fossa ringing the base of the needle as a moat rings a castle, cutting it from menace.

"It *is* magnificent," Patel said quietly.

"The culmination of every engineering technique since the pyramids," Bayerd said.

"With something of the attributes of them," Patel said.

When Bayerd did not answer, Patel asked at last, "Have you ever read Shelley's *Ozymandias*?"

FOR SECONDS, Norman Bayerd struggled with the anger surging within him. Elliott's voice cut into his thoughts "Norm! Three minutes."

He switched to the command net and moved quickly to his station at the accelerator monitor, where flickering meters told of the varying potentials below and the prognosticated azimuth of the beam on transmission. Elliott took his position at the console that monitored feedback information from the Plutonian Lens as the others withdrew and waited silently. Elliott keyed the warning signal, waited thirty seconds, and then checked to see that the team below had withdrawn.

"Thirty seconds," Bayerd announced as the timing light on his board glowed. "We are now on automatic."

The twenty-second light glowed on Bayerd's board as Elliott took up the count down. Impatiently Bayerd lowered

the volume and thought. *A minute from now and it's ended. Only Patel and Gilchrist left and their fangs are pulled.*

Like mice nibbling at the feet of a steel colossus.

"Fifteen seconds," Elliott announced tensely.

"Lens check-out."

"Computer reading forty-five two three two."

"Orbital lens?"

"One thirty four...thirty six...fifty eight."

"Check." Bayerd released the override switch. The countdown began as a taped voice said, "Ten, nine, eight..."

HE CHECKED his own readings again. Right on the nose. The beam would strike the lens at just the right angle, and arrow its way sunward. The Artery would be whole again in just twenty hours.

"T h r e e...two...one...zero!"

"Look, look!" There was a quick intake of breath from someone on the net as the three visitors peered upward at the band of pale blue springing from below the horizon and piercing the sky. Bayerd

switched to ultra-violet vision and the beam blazed as though a giant brush, dipped in liquid fire, had been raked across the sky. Below it, the space above the smelters was a riot of swirling color like a phosphorescent oil slick on black water as secondary radiation excited the escaping hydrogen and painted the sky with Geissler colors.

The group was lost in the sudden wonder of it and he could only stand and drink in the beauty spread across the sky. Only in the last instant did he hear Elliot shout, "My God, cut it!"

**A**UTOMATICALLY, his hand lashed out for the override switch. Something arched within the console and sudden brilliance bloomed on the plain below. An invisible sponge wiped the colors from the sky.

"Something happened," Elliott said. "The angle was wrong at the lens."

"Did you stop it?" Bayerd demanded.

"I managed to reorient the lens before the board went dead."

"Did you stop the whole transmission?" Bayerd demanded.

"Almost all," Elliott said. "All but about a thousand-meter segment."

"Will somebody explain what happened," Gilchrist demanded.

"The transmission was wild," Bayerd said. "There's a thousand meter segment of the beam heading sunward."

"Heading for where? The lens...dead space...what?"

"Councilman," Bayerd said, feeling a constriction in his throat, "I wish I knew."

#### IV

**"H**OW COULD it happen?" Elliott asked quietly. "What could have gone wrong?"

Bayerd looked out over the deserted metering bridge of the Black Field Station and shook his head. "I don't know. The monitoring board was calibrated just the hour before. Something went wrong badly enough to cause arcing and fusion of the cable to the capsule."

"Any word from the crew yet?"

"No," Bayerd said. "The shield was damaged. They have to cut through it before they can raise the capsule. What I'm interested in now is the results from the Earthside computers."

"They've had the data for two hours now," Elliott said.

"I know it," Bayerd snapped. "And we can't do a damned thing until we know. Chances are the beam will cut through the system and head into interstellar space, but..." He moved along the bridge to one of the monitoring screens. Idly he taped a combination on the console and the screen flickered and came alive. The view was from one of the lens stations. Against the blackness of space the points of light that were the other five lens stations were a new constellation moving slowly in concert as they revolved around a common center.

**T**O THE PICKUP, the stations were perfectly stationary. It was the star-flecked backdrop of space that seemed to revolve counterclockwise about the fixed constellations. Separated somewhat and at a greater distance, Norman Bay-

erd could see the five subsidiary stations that generated the Black Field forming a second circle of points. The slightly brighter, sixth point of light was the Black Field Control Station from which the field was propagated. It gave him an odd sensation, watching the point of light that was his present position, rather like the old illusion of the picture of a man looking at a picture and so on, down into the infinitely small.

"You know," Bayerd said, "this seems pretty coincidental, the arrival of Gilchrist and Patel, the beam failure, and that coded message."

"Take it easy," Elliott said. "Don't start chasing shadows."

"I guess you're right, Bayerd replied with a faint shrug.

**B**AYERD watched Elliott as he mounted a light ladder and disappeared through a ceiling port. He debated going below himself for a nap. Then he smiled to himself at the use of the word "below" in his thinking. "Below" to a planet dweller meant toward the center of gravity. Automatically you began to think of "below" in a station as toward the center of

the station, forgetting that the "gravity" you worked under in a station was actually centrifugal force from the spin of the station—and that as you traveled toward the center of the spherical station, the force of this pseudo-gravity dropped until at the exact center of rotation, you were completely weightless.

But you didn't revise your thinking on such basic terms. You still held to the old patterns of thought, mostly because it was easier, because you didn't want to stop each time you used a direction oriented to a gravity field and decide the correct term. "Below" and "down" were always toward the center of the station but in exactly the opposite direction, toward the outer shell when you were talking in terms other than that of movement between levels. It did make, he thought, for some odd contradictions.

**H**E DIDN'T hear Patel until he stepped from the ladder to the deck. The small scuffing sound of a foot on metal broke him from his reverie and he turned as the Indian placed his other foot on the deck.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Have you got the beam path yet?"

"No," Bayerd said. "We transmitted the data Earthside. Our analogue machines can't handle such a wide variation."

"Too bad," Patel said. "As time goes on, they'll have to."

"I was never very good at innuendo," Bayerd snapped, "so cut it out. You're not playing to an audience now."

Patel sighed. "Do you have to interpret everything I say in terms of innuendo?"

"I've got good reason, I think."

"Look," Patel said, "the last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you. I'd give my right arm to be able to stand on your side of the fence, but I think you're wrong—terribly wrong."

"As has been demonstrated."

"Yes," Patel said, "as has been demonstrated."

**"W**ITHOUT the Artery," Bayerd said, turning back to the metering board, "there'll be no fissionables today. You know what that means. We'd have slipped back

to a level of technology that could never have supported space travel or the world's population."

"Perhaps," Patel said, "but you haven't done the world any favor. I remember when we first met and you had stars in your eyes when you talked about an interstellar drive. Well, you've shoved the human race into a straight-jacket now, restricted him to this one second-rate sun simply because further growth is limited by the present supply of fissionables. We're spending a major portion of the world budget for operating the Artery in just maintaining the status quo. What happens if the Artery can't supply us with even the present fissionables? What happens if we have to fall back on some other resource?"

"Don't try to pretend that this accident threatens the existence of the Artery in any way," Bayerd snapped, turning to face the man. "You'd like to believe that with this little malfunction, the Artery is through."

"If you believe that..."

"What *I* believe is not important," Norman Bayerd said.

"The Artery is my justification."

"And your monument."

"And my monument."

"To endure through the years," Patel said. "Only it won't endure through the years. The existence of the Artery is already practically at an end. Today is just a symptom of troubles to come."

"Today's accident was just that, an accident. Our control of the beam is normally damned good."

"Yes, your control is good—but will it always be?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"JUST THINK about this for a moment," Patel said. "Pluto is outside Neptune's orbit now and moving away from perigee. With an eccentricity of point two six, that means that its distance from Earth will increase radically in the next decades. By the time it reaches apogee, it will be well over one and a half times as far from its conjunction with Earth as at perigee in 1989."

"Do you think you're telling me something I don't know?"

"Perhaps you just haven't

been willing to consider the implications. What's your feedback oscillation in initial transmission?"

"Less than one ten-thousandth of a second."

"What happens when the target subtends an angle less than that?"

"An undamped oscillation, but..."

"Go on," Patel challenged. "Calculate the probabilities. How many situations like today are going to arise in the next two decades? How long can you continue to operate under those conditions?"

"You can't convince anybody of that."

"Can't I? I can convince *you* if you'll think about it."

"**A**NYTHING to destroy the Artery. It's a personal crusade with you. I wouldn't trust any calculations of yours to navigate across a deserted street."

"Because you distrust *me*? Or because you can't face the destruction of this massive symbol of ego."

"Even if there were an element of truth in this, we're constantly improving our equip-

ment," Bayerd said.

Patel shook his head.

"No, Norm, it won't work. You've put all of our eggs in this one basket. Our growth is geared to and limited by the fissionables from the Artery. In forty years, you'll have reached the point where you can't deliver. Even if you refine your equipment, there's a limit—and after that you can't hope to meet the control problem."

The intercom on the duty officer's desk chimed; Bayerd turned on his heel and walked to the instrument. The screen mirrored Elliott's worried face. Bayerd could see he was calling from Commo.

"Norm," Elliott said, "are you alone?"

"Patel's here."

"We've got the results from Earthside."

"Bring them to the bridge, will you?"

**E**LLIOTT nodded as his image faded from the screen. Bayerd waited silently, avoiding Patel's eyes. He rose and walked to the hatch when he heard Elliott ascending.

"Here," Elliott said, breathing heavily. He handed Bayerd

the flimsy pages with their dark brown markings.

"Never mind," Bayerd said. "What's the verdict?"

Elliott pointed silently at the last page.

"Are they sure?" Bayerd asked after a moment.

"I checked with Kepling, the mathematician who ran the problem on the Palembang Computer. He's sure."

"A one-in-a-million chance," Bayerd said, slapping the papers against his thigh.

"It could be a lot worse."

"Or a lot better."

"What's the answer?" Patel asked.

Bayerd walked over and handed him the sheets. Elliott motioned to him and walked back to the hatch. "Trubner's just reported on the capsule. They've got the shielding off. The cable suspending the capsule was severed by the arc. The capsule's still at the bottom of the well, with a hundred pounds of melted metal debris from the short circuit on top. It may take two days to cut down to it."

"My God," Bayerd said, "and that thing is set to start transmitting the continuous

beam twenty hours after the calibration pulse."

"Unless it's overridden."

"But the control circuits from the lookout are gone."

"But not the metering circuits."

"What good do they do?" Bayerd asked disgustedly.

"**NONE**, BUT they gave us a picture of the capsule settings. The angular settings were way off. The set screws that lock the verniers were all loose."

"Norm," Patel asked behind them, "are they sure of these figures?" He pointed to the flimsies in his hand.

"They're sure," Bayerd said.

"Then the beam will tangent the Earth's upper atmosphere?"

Bayerd nodded silently. He turned to Elliott and said, "Get down to Commo and contact Lunar relay. Get data on every ship in space along the beam path. Also any available magnetic field generators that we might get shipborne within the next fifteen hours. Anything else that you can think of. We've got seventeen hours to either intercept or deflect that beam."

"What about the Pluto installation?" Patel asked.

"Get on it," Bayerd said and Elliott headed for the hatch. Then he whirled on Patel. "Don't worry. We'll get to the capsule before too late."

"If you don't, what then?"

"Perhaps you'd like to blow up the accelerator?"

"You may have to."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"No," Patel said. "I would *not* like that. We're too dependent upon the Artery...all of us."

"I'm surprised to hear you admit it."

"Why? It's obvious...but you know what happens when you cut an artery?"

"Huh?"

"When you cut an artery, Norman," Patel said with a worried frown, "you bleed to death."

## V

"I'VE RADIOED Earth for complete information on all ships in space within the beam area or about to take off into the area," Bayerd said, scanning the faces of

the men on the bridge. Only Chang's face was emotionless. His black eyes were lidded in thought his face completely composed. The other men—Elliott, Patel, Beckworth, the two councilmen—showed varied expressions of worry and anger.

"Damn it," Gilchrist said, "we can't be worrying about ships in its path. We've got to divert that beam."

"Councilman," Bayerd snapped, "that's exactly what we're trying to do. But you need ships to move any equipment into the beam's path."

"What about the Black Field?" Gilchrist demanded. "Can you move the generating stations into its path?"

"Impossible," Chang said slowly. "It would take months."

"The drive units are still orbiting around Terra," Mendoza said. "Can we interpose one of the stations?"

"As a last resort...perhaps. But that knocks the Artery out of business for a year."

"We can't have that," Mendoza said. "We can't survive even six more months without the Artery's fissionables."

"What if we don't stop the beam?" Beckworth asked.



Bayerd had forgotten that Patel was a young man, who might be attractive to Diane...

"IF JUST the fringes of the atmosphere are involved," Bayerd said, "the beam will lose only a fraction of its kinetic energy. There'll be heat generated, but not so much that it won't be dissipated without danger."

"And if it penetrates more deeply?" Gilchrist asked.

"A great deal more heat, secondary radiation from the high speed of the beam; ionization; shock waves from the localized heating."

"And what does that mean in terms of damage?" Gilchrist demanded.

"I'm afraid," Patel said slowly, "that it might mean a great deal. The radiation can probably be discounted. Mostly short half-lives. The shock wave could be disastrous. The effect of so much heat generated in the path of the beam would be equivalent to a giant meteor penetrating the atmosphere."

"Chang," Bayerd said, "what's the situation at the capsule?"

"This is not easy," Chang said slowly. "We have lowered four robot units to the bottom of the shaft and are sending

down cutting tools."

"Any chance of blasting?"

"Through the metal? I do not think it advisable."

"Give me an estimate of how quickly you can get to the capsule."

"That I will have in another hour."

"My God," Bayerd said, "an hour? We've got only sixteen before that damned thing is keyed to start spraying plasma all over the system."

"THIS HAD to happen," Gilchrist said. "You can't stake the whole future of a world on a gamble like this."

"Councilman," Norman Bayerd said, "Terra won't have a future if you don't stop pushing the panic button."

"You forget yourself," Gilchrist said, jumping to his feet. Mendoza half-rose, trying to restrain him.

Gilchrist seemed to swell for an instant in his fury. Then he turned without speaking and stalked from the room. Mendoza said, "Damn it, Norm, watch your temper. You can do both of us a lot of harm," and followed Gilchrist from the room.

"You know how most of the commercial space drives operate?" Bayerd asked Patel.

"A combination chemical plasma system?"

"That's right. They throw colloidal aluminum into an arc chamber to increase the arc temperature by a magnetoconstriction effect, accelerate the metal vapor jet to supersonic by an eddy-current funnel and then get the last bit of juice out of the fuel by injecting water to oxidize the aluminum. The point is they throw out a wake of colloidal aluminum oxide, and each particle is charged. What would happen if the beam penetrated a large enough cross section of that stuff?"

"Something as tenuous as that?" Patel asked. "It can't possibly stop the beam."

**"NOT STOP,"** Bayerd said. "Just deflect. Each one of those colloidal particles of aluminum oxide is charged. How large a cross section do we need to deflect each individual plasmoid of the beam just the bit necessary to make sure it misses Terra?"

"I can run it on the Station

computer," Patel said, moving toward the hatch. "It might work."

"That leaves me pretty much dead weight," Beckworth said when only he, Elliott and Bayerd were left on the bridge.

"How's your supply of pep pills?"

"Stimulants? Well, I've a fair supply of PALA—para-amino-lacto-amphetamine—but I don't like to use the stuff except in an emergency."

"This is an emergency in spades," Bayerd said. "Look, we're going to have to keep driving these men for the next sixteen hours at least, probably longer. They'll be dead for sleep and we need everyone. At top alertness, top efficiency."

"All right," Beckworth said, "but you'd better radio for replacements. I want those men off their feet and in bed for at least forty-eight hours afterwards."

He paused, looked expectantly at Bayerd, then said, "And I won't go over a hundred fifty milligrams on any man, regardless of what you say."

**B**AYERD turned to Elliott. "Give them the situation

down below. I want a complete new crew up here in twenty-four hours with another standing by Earthside. And goose them on that ship data. I want cargoes as well."

"Cargoes?" Elliott asked.

Bayerd passed his hand over his head and sighed tiredly. "Playing to a blind hand. Still, you never know what one might be carrying that would prove useful."

"Right," Elliott said and started for the hatch.

As soon as Elliott was out of earshot, Beckworth said, "All right, Norm, sit down a minute."

"Haven't got time."

"You'll take time. I want to take a look at you."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Norman Bayerd said.

"That's for me to say," Beckworth said, pushing him into a chair. He felt for Bayerd's pulse, paused as he checked the count, and then produced a small pencil light from his pocket. After a moment looking at each eye and pursing his lips, he said, "What are you taking?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that."

BAYERD shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and said nothing.

"Tranquilizer?" Beckworth asked.

Bayerd started, then tried to speak. Finally he nodded.

"What for?" Beckworth demanded.

"I've been a little jumpy lately," Bayerd said. "Nothing serious. Got these from my doctor Earthside. He patted the vial of capsules in his breast pocket.

"I think you should be in bed," Beckworth said. "You look like a man who's gone through a concrete mixer."

"Don't talk to me about resting at a time like this," Bayerd snapped, getting to his feet impatiently. "I can't even think in those terms for the next twenty-four hours."

"All right, all right," Beckworth said. "Kill yourself. That's your privilege, but watch your step each minute. Those things, coupled with fatigue, can affect your judgment and your reaction time. And I want a detailed physical on you as soon as this mess is cleared up."

Bayerd shifted his weight uncomfortably, feeling like a

small boy who has been caught stealing cookies. "I'll have it done Earthside."

"Huh uh," Beckworth objected. "That's my department. I want an official record on anyone connected with the project. I haven't received one for you from below, and I want to run a few tests."

"Don't be so damned persistent," Bayerd said tiredly.

"That's what I get paid for."

**M**ENDOZA, who had apparently followed Bayerd after he left the bridge, stopped him on "S" deck as he was about to enter the Schrenk Cubicle assigned to him.

"Look," Mendoza said, "give it to me straight. What are the chances of stopping the beam?"

"I don't know. I told you everything I knew at the briefing."

"You don't understand. I've got to know. Things are pretty touchy down below. You don't have the complete picture of the political situation. This could give the Eastern Power Combine a lever in its bid for a bigger ration slice. Up to now, the ration has been on the basis of pre-Artery power usage—modi-

fied by population growth. Europe and Asia have always had high birth rates. We've had to do some juggling."

Bayerd rubbed his chin wearily. "I don't see how this ties in with the present situation."

"Well..." Mendoza paused for a second, then seemed to come to a decision, "...you may as well know. All hell will break loose at the next session. We forced this Lichtenstein scandal, accused them of falsifying the census records to up their power allotment. It was easy to do. Small district and not too many people to get to. The idea was to throw doubt on the larger census areas."

"No wonder they blew a valve," Bayerd said. "I wish you hadn't told me that."

**"P**OLITICS is a dirty business when national survival is at stake," Mendoza said. "Don't you see, the West... Amazonia, the American States... are the best hope of pulling us out of this mess. We're the technological leaders, the countries needing the most power..."

"I'm sorry," Bayerd said,

shaking his head. "I appreciate all you've done for the project—but I don't want to be a party to anything like this, regardless of what you want from me."

"Damn it, Norm, I'm not asking you to be a party to anything. I'm trying to be honest with you so you'll understand why you can't allow Gilchrist to involve you in any personal issues. Shifting attention from an issue to a personality conflict is the oldest trick in the book. Don't give him the chance."

Bayerd thought for a moment and then eyed the councilman. Mendoza's olive face was shining with perspiration, and his black eyes dropped to the floor when Bayerd looked at him.

"Oh, I know, damn it," Mendoza said. "I get a little sick of the mess myself sometimes. I fight for what I believe in, Norm, just as you do. And dirty if I have to. We're alike in that respect."

**B**AYERD ignored the thrust and said, "Look, just how dirty will their side fight?"

"Hard to say, what's on your

mind?"

Bayerd told him about the changed settings on the capsule.

"My good Lord," Mendoza said. "Whoever would do such a thing? He must be insane."

"Not necessarily. He could have intended the beam to go out into space. The chances were all in favor of that."

"But the capsule..."

"Someone wants the beam shut down for a time. What he didn't anticipate was that the mechanisms in the capsule would continue to transmit the beam, and that we would not be able to get to the capsule in time."

"What are our chances there?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Bayerd said, gesturing toward the Schrenk cubicles. "I want to check on the spot and see how Chang's crew is coming."

"Is it possible at all to get to the accelerator?"

"The magnetic fields would disrupt robot control."

"Can't you just cut off the ore supply to the smelters?"

"We've done that," Bayerd said, "but there's about a ten-

minute reserve within the accelerator area."

**M**ENDOZA sighed. "Then if you have not cut down to the capsule in the next fifteen hours, you must stop transmission some other way."

"No one's touching that installation," Bayerd said angrily.

"What do you want? Do you want your equipment intact and that uncontrolled beam running through the system? You said there's enough reserve metal within the system for four days of transmission and what may not happen in that time?"

"You can't touch the accelerator," Bayerd said angrily.

"When the time comes, if you can't give the order..." Mendoza replied, and then didn't finish the statement.

"Oh, go to Hell, all of you!" Bayerd turned away from the man.

**H**E FELT the door of the Schrenk cubicle slide close behind him and he leaned back, feeling its magnaluminum solidity through the cloth of his tunic. He felt emotionally drained, as though he had been laughing or crying for hours. A

part of him churned with rage at Mendoza's betrayal.

He seated himself in the webbing of the Schrenk suit and buckled the mesh about his legs. The chest harness felt cold and constricting as he moved the facepiece toward him.

He felt tension stealing over him, the thin quivering of thighs and the tightness of jaw muscles. If he could just hold off until the mess was finished. He freed his hand and fumbled for the medicine in his pocket, thinking of how they symbolized the thin distance between him and the end—not only of his personal existence, but in a larger sense the end of the existence of this entity he had created out of his life and his brain and his body.

He thrust his left arm into the glove, activated the controls for the robot atop the lookout point, and thrust his head into the facepiece. The image of the two cathode tubes reflected in the angled mirrors of the facepiece lightened for a second, flared and...

**A**ND HE WAS looking out over the deserted rock, seeing the dead control con-

soles, the empty robot bodies standing apart where they had been thoughtlessly abandoned. He made walking motions in the harness and moved to the console he had occupied just before the transmission. He activated the metering circuits and checked the board. One meter registering grid potentials on the self-contained amplifier flicked, but the rest were dead. He touched the remote-register and a dim picture flickered on the tube, transmitted from the face of the capsule, buried in the rock.

He saw the loose locking screws and the fatal setting on the face of the capsule. There could be no doubt about it; the settings were quite different than the ones he had placed on the capsule the day before. Norman Bayerd tried to think back. Could *he* have possibly made a mistake, changed one of the settings while he was adjusting the automatic timing device? No, to make such an error, he would have to have changed three settings from those the Earthside computers at Pelambang had given them. The change was deliberate. No doubt of it.

Then the thought hit him. Whoever had changed the settings might conceivably have trapped himself without knowing it. He stooped and slid back the panel in the base of the console. Inside, a series of coils of tape recorded the readings of the meters above from moment to moment. Normally they were erased after every twenty-four hours unless they were needed to compute some slight adjustment of the beam inherently undetectable by the beam's own mechanisms.

**H**E EXTRACTED the two tapes that recorded deflection and elevation of the transmitted beam and laid them on the surface of the console. After a moment of searching, he found the spot on one where the capsule setting had been changed, and then he found the similar change on the other spool. He noted the time on each and rewound the tapes. Then he found a small wrench in a nearby kit and carefully unseated the oscilloscope from the upper right-hand corner of the console panel. He wedged the two spools into the space beside the tapering tube and

reseated it. Then he threaded two new spools onto the recording devices. Now, he thought, should anyone else have the same idea, they would think that the spools had been erased.

Then he rose and walked to the edge of the precipice. Below, he could see the capsule installation, its ceramic shield peeled away like the husk of a walnut. There were two Schrenk robots on the near side, struggling with a heavy mass which he finally identified as a generator for a monatomic hydrogen cutting torch.

"This is Bayerd," he said. "How much progress are you making?"

"Trubner, here," the voice came back. "The other generator broke down. We had to bring this one up from the mining installations."

"Hold it a minute," Bayerd said. He withdrew from the facepiece and for a moment the confusion of the transition startled him. He touched the switch that activated the robot unit on the plain and suddenly, as he returned to the facepiece, he was standing a hundred yards from the group with the generator. He walked over and said,

"Here, I'll handle the rear."

"THANKS," replied a voice that he identified as Mulletti's. He had a mental image of the small wiry Italian, his normally-curly black hair clipped short in a matted crew-cut. Carefully he moved the generator toward the capsule shield and then slowly set it on the rock.

"I'll get it hooked up," Mulletti volunteered.

"Good," Bayerd said, turning to look out over the plain. The accelerator installations still glowed with the bright radiance of infra-red near the smelters. The scene reminded him of something out of a surrealist painting, with the inverted highlights seemingly twisting the familiar shapes into alien forms. Strange to think that this great thing of metals and energies might soon end.

It would be so easy, though, he thought. There were three cargo ships based to the south near the ore pits. One need only man a ship, take it up, and crash-dive it into the installation. No necessity of using explosives. Only...

That would be killing the ar-

tery. And the man piloting the ship would die a kind of death, though vicariously.

If it had to be done, Bayerd promised himself, it would be done at his hand. He would ride the ship down, die flaming in the wreckage and walk the Black Field Station afterward to go at last back to Terra to die another kind of death.

WHEN TRUBNER responded over the new channel, Bayerd said, "How soon after I gave the order did you seat the capsule?"

"Three...four minutes, I suppose."

"Did you log it on your tape?"

"Yes," Trubner said.

"Check it, will you?"

Trubner's robot became immobile. Bayerd waited impatiently for seconds, then turned to watch Muletti lowering the generator through the shielding into the capsule pit. They had improvised a second winch to replace the one damaged by the arcing, welding the drum to the interior metal frame of the shield.

"Who's down below?" Bayerd asked.

"Sanchez, Chang, and Girard," Muletti said.

"How are they coming?"

"Very hard working. The metal spattered, however, so that it's somewhat porous and we occasionally cut into a series of vapor pockets which helps."

"Good," Bayerd said as Trubner's body came erect.

"The time was 9:02," Trubner said.

"Are you sure? I have to have this pinpointed."

"Yes. I was recording from the command net. I dictated the time as I started to lower the capsule. It checks with the time index on the tape."

"That would mean about 9:01 for your time of arrival at the capsule site itself."

"I should think so."

"THANKS," Bayerd said.

As Trubner returned to work, he deactivated the body and he was again in the station, leaning tiredly into the Schrenk harness. He freed himself and debated his next move. The obvious one was to check the tapes on each Schrenk unit. Find the one

showing a break in control a minute or so before 9:01."

Overhead, an intercom speaker crackled and Elliott's voice said, "Norm, can you come up to Commo? I've got your shipping information."

He made his way up to Commo to find Elliott and Patel seated at the transceiver. Elliott sprang to his feet and held out a pad. "There's the story," he said.

Bayerd scanned the sheet, noting orbital figures, velocities. "Never mind. You've screened these already. What can we use?"

"Here," Elliott said, "we've made a sketch." He unfolded a sheet of five foot square graph paper and fastened the sheet to the bulkhead with gummed tape. He had sketched in the orbits of the Earth and the planets past her out to Pluto. The distances were not to scale, Bayerd saw, the trans-Jovian distances being much foreshortened. Beside each orbital circle, Elliott had noted figures in hours and minutes, denoting, Bayerd decided, the anticipated progress of the beam front.

"This is all approximate," Elliott said. "You'll notice that Terra is 'zero' and 'Pluto' is 20 hours. The beam front is approximately at this point." He touched a spot just outside of the orbit of Uranus and made a small "x" with his pencil, labeling it "*11 Hours.*"

"All right," Bayerd said, "give me the ships."

"**F**IVE OF various size including the *Ingrid*, a cruiser assigned to the Norwegian Astronomical Society, and a 'drifter', the SAU-62, carrying air to the Callisto Experimental Ecological Station. All in this general sector." He pointed at the area past Jupiter and near Saturn. At this point he penciled the inscription: "*Approx. 4 Hours.*"

"Then," Elliott said, consulting the sheet, "there's another drifter, the CX-248, here just above the asteroid belt. Cargo is an orbital radar lens for the radio telescope the Council is building in the Trojans—you know, one of those big inflatable polyparalene balloons plated with a layer of sodium metal. There are also four plas-

ma drive ships and one chemical ballistic freighter in the same region. It's only an hour and forty minutes to 'zero' at that point though."

Bayerd looked at the sketch. The drifter near Saturn might be promising. Drifters were huge cargo vessels operating on a direct caesium ion drive. They were capable of an acceleration of perhaps one-thousandth of a gravity. The trip to Saturn, if he recalled correctly, took almost seven months with a hundred days or so of acceleration and an equal period for deceleration. That meant that the drifter was barely moving at this point so close to its destination.

**H**E CHECKED the sheet for the data on the second drifter above the asteroid belt. The ship, he saw, had been out of Terra orbit sixty-seven days and now had a velocity of 200 miles per hour. That was not exceptionally high, he realized, but the fragile construction of the vessels, which were never meant to withstand strong acceleration, made maneuvering the things a touchy proposition.

"Patel," Bayerd asked, "what about the exhaust trick?"

"I ran the calculations on it," Patel said. "The theory is pretty, of course. You can build up quite a few stat-coulombs on the particle cloud but they're moving pretty fast at that temperature, and the particles are all charged alike—which means they repel each other. A ten mile cross-section might give you the three-tenths of a second deflection you need at Saturn's orbit—but you couldn't hold the cloud together even if you had the fuel for the density I calculated. No good, I'm afraid."

"It was a wild idea, anyway."

"If we can set up an electrostatic point source close enough to the beam path, we might deflect it," Patel said. "It would deform the plas-moids, but the later impulse might be sufficient to deflect the beam enough."

"All right—we'll play both our cards. Let's see if we can move the SAU-62 into the beam path with the ships in the area and build up a skin charge

using its motors and those of the other ships in the area. We can cut out the charge dissipators and throw out every bit of ionizable mass. That should build up a pretty good charge."

"What about the drifter in the asteroid belt?"

"The CX-248? We'll do the same with it. We'll have to have close observations on the path of the beam. Can that Norwegian ship give it to us?"

"**WAIT,**" PATEL said, "that second drifter with the radar lens—why not unship it and inflate it in space? With so much of a metallic surface, we could accumulate an enormous charge."

"It won't work," Elliott said.

"We've got to try."

"That's not what I mean. Look, drifters are fairly fragile. They're not intended for high accelerations. The CX-248 might take one 'g' but not much more without breaking up. At one 'g' deceleration, it will take ten hours to decelerate the CX-248 and we don't have that long."

Bayerd rubbed his hand

tiredly across his eyes and said, "Then we'll just have to do without it."

"No," Patel said, "it's the polyparalene lens we want. We can decelerate the ship, even if it does buckle. Just so long as the lens is intact."

"All right," Bayerd said. "How much time does the first group have?"

"Six and a half hours. Nine and a half for the second."

He moved past the two men and said, "Raise Luna Station and give me a line to the president of the Council. We'll need his weight behind us before we can start tearing up somebody else's property."

As Elliott began to call Luna Station, Norman Bayerd was thinking of what he had discovered at the accelerator site. Then he remembered the conversation with Muletti. He had, he realized, forgotten to change back to the command net after talking with Trubner. Yet Muletti had answered him immediately when he spoke.

Why, Bayerd wondered, had the man been eavesdropping on his conversation with Trubner?

## VII

“THIS DAMNED business of waiting,” Elliott said, his voice husky with fatigue. “You feel so completely helpless.”

“There’s nothing we can do now but wait,” Bayerd replied.

“Look,” Elliott said, “You look bushed. Why don’t you grab some sleep?”

Bayerd shook his head. “No, I want to check with Chang’s group.” He started for the door and then turned. “Do me a favor and keep your eye on Patel, will you?”

“You think he’s the one?”

“I wish I knew. This whole business is completely insane. I don’t know who to trust.”

All the way down to the Schrenk cubicles, Norman Bayerd could feel the growing tenseness of his body. He was afraid as he had not been in years. He remembered the last time it had hit him—the horrible tensing of the muscles, the uncontrollable desire to scream, and the complete inability to...

“Take it easy,” the doctors had told him. “Don’t fatigue

yourself, keep up the medication, and there’s no reason why you should ever worry about an attack again. We’ve gone pretty far in treating this sort of thing.”

As though this were a nice simple recipe, he thought, that one could follow at one’s ease. Well, they’d never found out about his illness, the ones who might have taken him away from the project. But carrying this seed in your body, waiting for another descent into darkness... It was like carrying death as a sable shadow on the rim of your consciousness for the rest of your years.

HE THOUGHT of Elliott’s advice, but he knew he could not rest—not as long as the man who had tampered with the Artery was free and undiscovered. Who was it? Trubner? Muletti? Or even Elliott? No, he couldn’t believe that. Elliott was devoted to the project. It was more than a mere job to him. Why, he remembered when Elliott had first been assigned to his staff.

When Elliott had joined the beam project, fifteen years before, Bayerd had said, “Oper-

ating the Artery will be like standing back a hundred yards and stoking a furnace by throwing capped blocks of TNT at the open door. As long as your aim is good, the TNT lands inside and burns quietly. But if you miss, chances are the block will land on its fulminate cap. Now, that won't do a great deal of damage, but suppose the furnace supplies the only heat there is in one of the polar cities and suppose there's a tank of chlorine stored in the same room. Now, if you miss the door and the TNT explodes, the tank goes up, too—and you poison the whole block, perhaps the whole city. But you've got to keep the fire going, or the whole city freezes.

"So," Elliott had said, "you keep the game going because the city can't survive otherwise and you pray your aim is good."

"Which is why you're part of the project."

"Because I'm to be trusted with TNT?"

"Because," Bayerd said, "we think your aim is good."

**A**ND SO far, Bayerd thought, so far their aim

had been good. When they first built the Artery, he had held doubts, secret doubts he would never have admitted. How do you concede a possibility to an antagonist without his seizing it, emphasizing it in terms of black or white, beating it out of shape with endless argument until a possibility became a probability and then a certainty? That's what would have happened with the Artery had Norman Bayerd agreed that the possibility of misdirection, of loss of control, existed at all.

He remembered the bitter exchanges in the newspapers, the parade of innuendo with a single fact overriding all others... the growing power-starvation of the world. The opposition had centered around Patel, the young physicist with visions of new power sources, of eventually doing what two generations had already failed to do: harness the hydrogen fusion reaction for power. Young, starry-eyed, all of them, conveniently forgetting the disastrous explosion that had leveled the British Experimental Station on the Isle of Man in the first

instant of operation, vaporizing the tons of rock and dirt and scattering radioactive ash abroad on the winds. After that one, there had to be an end. Not even the need for power could justify the danger of annihilating the whole race.

**P**ECULIARLY enough, the arguments of both sides hinged on the Black Field effect—that strange, accidental by-product of binding energy research that promised up to twenty percent conversion of matter in the fission reaction by its ability to contain the incredible forces of even an atomic explosion. Actually, “contain” wasn’t the proper term. The Black Field partitioned energy within its influence in a most complex fashion. Particles with a given kinetic energy within the field crossed its boundaries and emerged with that energy much reduced. This was controllable. The density of the field would yield reductions of energy of from eighty to almost 100 percent. Coincidentally, a certain number of particles in any group disappeared utterly. Statistically,

the mass loss could be related to the reciprocal of the energy loss. The effect was essentially linear.

A German physicist by the name of Kulz found that reversing the polarity of the field under certain conditions resulted in a failure to contain the energy of the nuclear reaction. Had he not communicated his intended experiment to a colleague in Pakistan, no one would have known what happened. One thing developed from the disastrous experiment. Even if you calculated the energy release from total conversion of the contained mass, you came out with less energy than actually released. Something for nothing. Energy out of nowhere. Perpetual motion.

Only it wasn’t so.

**A** TEAM financed by the World Council finally came up with a theory that fit the facts. There was...incredibly...complete conversion within the normally-operating field, or very nearly complete conversion of mass into energy. Not just binding energy, the

inconsequential residue of splitting into simpler atoms, but complete annihilation of matter.

The initial stage was simple fission, but the Black Field's energy partitioning effect came into operation. A small portion of the enclosed matter gained the major portion of energy within the field, and achieved velocities exceeding that of light in fractions of a microsecond. The stuff disappeared, but not before shedding a phantom particle: a positron where an electron had been; an anti-proton where a proton had been; a gamma-neutron where an ordinary neutron had been. The anti-particles destroyed more of the contained matter, producing more energy, more particles accelerating to the speed of light and disappearing. The creation of the phantom particles? All a matter of topology. Where were the accelerated particles going?

Imagine another...call it dimension, universe, continuum, what you will. Whatever it was, it was smaller than this one of ours, smaller not in terms of dimensions for that concept

had no meaning. Smaller, say, in terms of the amount of available free energy it could contain. A young universe, perhaps, a continuum with a point-for-point congruency with the real universe—if you accepted the postulated geometry for this other place—with an inverse entropy, so far as we were concerned.

The available free energy of that micro-universe could increase; that's what was happening to the partitioned energy. The particles, traveling faster than light, were carrying it elsewhere and dropping back into the real continuum turned inside out, the way you turn a glove inside out. The available free energy of that micro-universe was greater than that of ours for a given... could you say...volume of space. There was an energy incline. If you reversed the field as the unfortunate German had, well...

UNDERSTAND, though, you weren't creating energy. You had already, through a decade of experimenting, poured energy into this other

place and the reversal of the field merely released it. Just a matter of two continua seeking equilibrium. (Perhaps, as someone pointed out, the very operation of the first Black Field had created this other place. No matter. It was there, and the effect could be used.)

The Black Field offered two possibilities. Controlled fusion or the Artery. A long-term gamble with the certain price of failure a collapsing technology—if you were willing to invest the money and the massive labor of building the Artery. The deposits of U-235, as the hydride, had been discovered on Pluto; but it wasn't commercially feasible to bring the metal back by ship. The fleet of freighters needed alone would have severely taxed the metal resources of three worlds—not to mention that the energy requirements for such a commercial flight were such that you'd be lucky to achieve a ten percent payload.

**G**AMBLE on the development of controlled fusion? With the world starving for power; with space flight itself

hanging in the balance; with the populations of one quarter of the world on a minimum subsistence diet after the past two decades' debauch of using Terra's fissionable resources at a drunken rate? The nice thing about the Artery was that there was a near-inexhaustible supply of power to run the accelerator and the other equipment right on the site. Why worry about how much U-235 you consumed, just so long as you didn't have to burn the stuff in a ship?

End result? Hearings following hearings, Bayerd leading them along, explaining, cajoling, meeting the attacks of the Patel faction, seeing always the massive vision of a band of metal stretching from far Pluto to the Earth, pumping in new life. Patel had called the concept a "Goldberg". The solution Bayerd was proposing, he said, was so complex that the expenditure of effort in another direction could find a simpler solution. Only he wasn't sure of just what that solution would be.

Norman Bayerd had seen a great deal of Patel during that

period. At first they had been friendly rivals, sane men who had disagreed. Only Patel's people had gone on to attempt to discredit Bayerd. Bayerd's own backers in the Council had rushed to the attack, and the whole affair had been pretty nasty.

What really hurt, of course, was that during the summer when he was in Toronto testifying before the special commission of the World Resources Board, he had brought Diane with him as his secretary. Bayerd should have realized that something was going on, but he had been too busy, putting his final testimony into shape. That she should have found something in Patel to attract her was unthinkable; she knew how he felt about the man at that time. Actually, Bayerd had fallen into the habit of thinking of Patel as being his own age, forgetting that the man was actually only in his mid-twenties.

He still remembered the anguish he felt when she came to him and said that she and Patel were planning to be married. She was the only person Norman Bayerd had any real

feeling for since his wife's death, and in many ways she was the living embodiment of his wife as he remembered her: young, vibrant, alert with a ready sense of humor, flavored with a bit of sugar and a dash of vinegar.

**B**AYERD had moved into one of the vacant Schrenk cubicles and he stood, staring into the half-gloom of the room, remembering her face with the skin so smooth that it had an almost transparent paleness. And that little swine, Patel, who had never intended any real interest in the girl. It was his way of striking back after Bayerd had crushed him and almost ruined him professionally.

The cubicle he was in was, he saw, the one assigned to Gilchrist. He found the monitoring tapes with their time codes and carefully ran the last one back to the hour of transmission, searching for the tell-tale hiatus in the impulse which would indicate a shift to another Schrenk robot. He searched on either side of the spot that marked 9:00 but failed to find

any indication of a jump. As nearly as he could determine, the councilman had occupied the robot on the Needle for the entire period after the tour which Elliott had shepherded through the plain installations.

He moved from the room and entered the next one. In quick succession he checked the cubicles belonging to Mendoza, Beckworth (who had not used his in days, since he had no direct concern with operations), and finally Elliott's.

He paused outside of the vacant cubicle assigned to Patel. All at once he knew that he would find the solution here. It had to be here. Who else had a better motive for destroying him? He felt the rage buried within him beginning to stir again.

And he remembered that Patel had not been on the Needle when he had returned. Patel had been wandering somewhere below, completely out of sight of the members of the Needle group, out of sight of the crew below on the plain. How simple, when he saw Bayerd's robot go lax, to switch to the abandoned body, make the

changes in the capsule in seconds, and leave?

HE PUSHED open the door, feeling his heart pounding at what he knew must be here. The room was clothed in darkness, except for a glow-panel on the ceiling, shedding a residual light. He moved to the monitor unit, found the tape and began to rewind it to the spot which had recorded the instant when the hate and resentment of years had proved too much, when Patel with a quick movement of a switch had usurped the body by the capsule and condemned millions to disaster... to death.

In the dim light he inspected the tape. It was there! The tiny hiatus where the Schrenk unit had been switched to another robot body. And the time was 9:00.

For a second, he felt somehow depressed; the reaction was completely anticlimactic. This was the evidence he had been seeking. Yes, the index along the edge clearly established the time. The taped record would show which robot on

Pluto he had activated. Bayerd need only run the tape back on the reel and play back the coded data. He leaned forward to inspect the sound track running parallel to the data track, wondering what sounds Patel must have unconsciously voiced in that instant of betrayal. In the next instant intense pain lanced through his temples.

It felt as if someone had hit him with a steel bar. There was a suffocating something over his mouth, cutting off air. Swirls of color raced before his eyes as his body tensed. He felt his muscles snapping with the effort, trying to fight upward to consciousness.

He felt something crushing his lips inward, smothering him and he tasted the warm taste of blood before he fell into the smothering darkness...

### VIII

**H**E WAS wrapped in pale light while a part of him stood apart and watched the endless drifting of his body. There was something at the farthest range of Norman Bayerd's vision, separated

from his living self by great distance, by light years even, that was approaching him with fantastic speed.

It would be only a matter of minutes...seconds...days...years...time until it were upon him and all thinking, all feeling would cease.

Drifting in an eternity of soft light and warmth with the touch of chill on his back... Soft light and formlessness... And he knew that he could not leave in this manner with no form, no substance on which he might pin some memory of his past existence.

Drifting, he searched the light in which he moved and saw that he was enclosed in a fragile sphere whose boundaries were sharp and well-defined... that beyond this sphere of light, the endless black, flecked with bright stars, stretched to infinity and there was nothing that would carry him outward from his sphere of radiance to those other far spheres of light. There was only hereness and nowness and that soon to be dissolved... By something moving toward him with incredible speed, something cold

and stifling and smothering and...

SOMEWHERE dimly he heard a voice and he felt something drawing him upward. Bayerd fought against the pull, seeking only to drift silently in his tiny universe of light for the thing rushing down upon him. He looked far out and then he saw it.

Like a great sable curtain sweeping through space, blotting out the stars. A vast mass of utter lightlessness that swallowed his universe. But there was a speck of light that grew in a long parabola racing across his pool of brightness, and he knew that it was a thing upon which he might fasten and which would bear him ever outward to those distant universes before the endless black curtain would enfold him in its stifling substance.

He sent his consciousness outward in all directions, seeking for something. For a stone, a twig, a shard of metal with which he could mark the place where he had been...where in the night that would quickly fall, someone finding it might

know that he had been there and had afterwards gone hence...

But there was the pull, something binding him to the spot and pulling him upward...upward into greater light...

Into brilliance and...

"Norm," someone said. "Norm, what's happened?"

And there was a warm arm supporting him, buoying him up and away from the bright radiance, away from the on-sweeping blackness to...

Light as his lids faltered open.

THE ROOM was a mass of shifting shadows. He felt a deep throbbing pain behind his eyes and the blood pulsing frantically in his temples. There was a tight, burning sensation in the pit of his stomach and his muscles felt lax and drained of energy. He struggled into a sitting position as Elliott said, "Are you all right?"

He shook his head, trying to speak, but his throat was tight and his mouth dry. For seconds he couldn't manage a sound. He wet his lips and swallowed. He felt the astringent taste of

blood in his mouth and his exploring tongue told him that in his struggles he must have lacerated his own cheek lining with his teeth.

"I think so," he said at last. "It all happened so fast."

He tried to get to his feet and fell back against the metal bulkhead. For an instant, sharp pain shot through his temples. His exploring hand found a throbbing area at the back of his head.

"You were gone almost two hours," Elliott said quietly. "I began to wonder and came down to find you."

"Where's Patel?" Bayerd asked.

"Up in Commo. He's been handling the message traffic on the operations we set up."

"Has he been there all the time?"

"Why, yes," Elliott said. Then his brow wrinkled in thought and he said, "That is, I suppose so. I've been busy on the metering bridge. He's been in Commo every time I came down, though. Why? You don't think...?"

"I don't know what to think," Bayerd said, getting un-

steadily to his feet with Elliott's help. "I know one thing though."

**H**E MADE his way unsteadily to the monitoring tape unit and removed the spool.

"Hit the lights, will you?" he said.

Elliott touched the induction plate by the door and the walls and ceiling glowed a soft radiance. Carefully, Bayerd rolled the tape from one spool to the other, searching again for the significant area of the tape. After a few minutes he realized that something was wrong. The break was there, but the time code was not the same. The break was now coded at 9:05.

"This isn't the same tape," he said. "Someone's switched it for the original."

"What's so important about the tape?" Elliott asked.

Bayerd told him. Elliott whistled. "Are you sure?"

"Damn it, of course I'm sure. I was hunting for just such evidence when I started checking the monitor tapes. It isn't likely that I would make a mistake."

"But this means that Patel was the one who changed the capsule settings."

"It looks that way."

"I find that a little hard to believe."

"Don't be a fool," Bayerd said impatiently. "It's hard to believe about anyone, but Patel is one of the most likely. Only I can't prove it now."

He passed a hand over his eyes. The hand, he noticed, was shaking, the tips of the fingers vibrating with tiny tremors. His jaw muscles ached as though he had been holding his teeth clenched for a long time.

"You'd better get Doc Beckworth to check you over," Elliott said, reaching out a hand to steady him. "Give me the tape. I might be able to find something in the coded data."

"You're welcome to it," Bayerd said. "It's probably pretty crude. He didn't have time to do a good job of faking."

"Let's go," Elliott said.

"All right—but the story is that I fell and banged my head. No one's to know about this for the present."

Elliott shrugged. "Any way you want it."

**THEY FOUND** Beckworth in the Dispensary down the corridor from the Commo room.

"What happened to you?" he demanded as Bayerd seated himself.

"Never mind. I fell over my own feet. Just patch up this bump and take a look at the cut inside my mouth." He turned to Elliott and said, "Go on to Commo and see if you can help Patel. You might look into that other matter as soon as you find time."

"Right," Elliott said, checking his watch.

"How much time?"

"Less than two hours to first contact."

After Elliott left, Beckworth examined the wound on Bayerd's scalp, carefully clipping away a small circle of hair with a pair of surgical scissors.

"That's a nasty bump," he said. "Looks like somebody clouted you one."

"Maybe someone did," Bayerd said wryly and then, "Ouch, take it easy, will you." He felt moistness as Beckworth followed the antiseptic with a thin layer of topical antibiotic oint-

ment over the wound. He sealed the wound with a thin sheet of porous protein film which would eventually be absorbed into the open tissue and touched the button which rotated Bayerd's chair backwards.

"Open your mouth," he said. He took a small pencil light from an instrument tray and examined the wound on the inside of Bayerd's right cheek.

"How the blazes did you do this?"

"I told you, I slipped and fell."

"You've chewed a hunk of flesh the size of a dime out of the lining," Beckworth said, "The edge of the tongue is lacerated, too. Could give you a nasty infection."

**H**E EYED Bayerd speculatively. "You didn't do that in a single fall. Want to tell me about it?"

"Damn it, Doc," Bayerd said, "it's none of your business. Get the damage patched up and don't ask so many questions."

"And you can go to blazes, too," Beckworth muttered un-

der his breath as he secured a swab from a sterilizer. After he painted the interior wound and affixed two tiny plastic clamps with a forceps, he handed Bayerd two yellow capsules and a glass of water. "Tetracycline," he said. "We'll try to keep the bugs away from that fevered brain."

"Thanks," Bayerd said tiredly. "Look, I'm sorry about snapping your head off. I've been working under a lot of tension."

"Are you sure that's all?" Beckworth asked.

"What other explanation should there be?"

"Wait a while. There are a few checks I'd like to run through."

"Save it," Bayerd said. "I haven't got the time."

"You'd better take the time," Beckworth said. "From the looks of you, if you don't, we'll be taking you back Earthside on a stretcher."

At the door to the dispensary he said, "I'm sending you back anyway by the first shuttle after this mess is cleaned up. I want a complete check-up on you and this is one time I'm go-

ing to get my way."

"Your privilege," Bayerd said.

HE LEFT Beckworth, and went down the corridor to Commo. Elliott was working in a corner of the room with a tape data processor. When Bayerd entered, he removed the button earphone and touched the cut-off switch at the base of the mechanism. The jagged patterns on the scanning screen dissolved into a point of blue light which died. Patel was seated at the Commo desk, speaking quietly with Mendoza and Gilchrist. He looked up as Norman Bayerd entered and said, "We were wondering what happened to you."

"How are the two intercept groups coming?" Bayerd asked, ignoring the statement.

"The *Ingrid* has a pick-up mounted to give us a picture of the operations," Patel said. He touched a plate before him on the desk and the wall screen flickered. The image of the drifter, the SAU-62, slowly formed. It was a sphere of two hundred feet diameter with a thick tubular leg, and two

smaller open girder frames extending rearward to support the broad radiating units which contained the thrust surfaces from which the accelerated anions of the drive were expelled.

FOUR SMALLER points had clustered about the SAU-62, which was drifting slowly away from the screen. The ships were all of the corvette class, Bayerd saw.

"It's a touchy job," Patel said. "The drifter shape is a clumsy one to handle, and they don't dare try for more than half a gee acceleration."

"Can they get into position in time?"

"I think so, but then they've got to build up the skin charge. We'll position the corvettes nose-to-nose in a cross to balance their thrusts, cut out their charge dissipators, and build up a skin charge on each ship by throwing out as much ionizable mass as fast as possible. Then we'll bleed the charge away through a cable to the inner surface of the SAU-62's hull. The charge will migrate to the outside surface immediately, of

course, which will allow us to build up quite a charge density without worrying about electrostatic repulsion too much."

"What about beam data?"

"The *Ingrid* will be standing off with a bank of ultra-violet-sensitive 'strob' units. She should catch the beam angle with an error of perhaps five per cent. Certainly no more."

"What about the group at the belt? The CX-248?"

"I can't get a picture on them yet," Patel said. "The captain of the Cruiser *Orion* is handling that end. They're decelerating the CX-248 but she's buckling badly."

"Let's hope they get that polyparalene bag out intact. Can you give me the details on the charge density they can develop with that thing?"

"I'll check on it," Patel said.

ELLIOTT had approached them and he leaned over now and said, "Norm, the news is out Earthside."

"What do you mean?"

"We've just received a telecast. There's rioting in New Delhi, Stuttgart, and Boston."

"I radioed back," Gilchrist

said belligerently. "No reason to hide the fact. If I hadn't, you wouldn't have taken any measures to minimize the disaster."

"Councilman," Norman Bayerd said slowly, "it's difficult for me to tell you just how many varieties of a blow-hard idiot you are. There's absolutely nothing that can minimize the potential disaster in the short time we have, and your little political maneuver has probably cost thousand of lives just from the resulting panic."

"I don't take that sort of talk from anyone," Gilchrist snapped.

"You'll take it from me, mister. I'm damned tired of having you underfoot." He turned to Elliott and said, "All right, we'll be very proper now and declare this a military emergency. Elliott, escort Councilman Gilchrist down to his quarters under arrest."

"By God, that's just about enough," Gilchrist roared.

"It is indeed," Bayerd said. "Now get below quietly or..."

MENDOZA placed a hand on Gilchrist's shoulder.

"Let's go," he said softly. Gilchrist glared at Bayerd and then bowed slightly, his face twisted in a crooked smile.

"In a textbook situation," he said, "the little martinets always win. This isn't the end of it though." He withdrew with Mendoza as Elliott said, "He did that deliberately."

"Of course. He wants a panic to dramatise the issue in the Council." Bayerd turned to Patel. "Why didn't you stop that idiot?"

"I'm sorry," Patel said. "He must have got to the radio while I was away from Commo."

Bayerd drew Elliott aside as Beckworth entered and walked over to Patel. "Check that tape thoroughly," he told Elliott, "and get at the message tapes here in Commo."

"Why?" Elliott asked. "The message has gone out already."

"Yes, and it was sent while Patel was away from Commo. If we can get a time on the message, and it coincides with the time I tripped over my feet downstairs, well..."

Elliott nodded in understanding.

"Right now," Bayerd said, "I want to check on the work at the capsule."

"Anything else," Elliott asked, looking at Beckworth and Patel. Beckworth was handing Patel a message flimsy and explaining something to him in low tones.

"No," Bayerd said slowly, watching the other two men. He wondered what Beckworth was sending. It was probably in med administration code, and he couldn't find out by checking the tapes later. He had a strong suspicion of what the message was about. Why, he thought, didn't the meddling fool leave things alone?

ON THE way down to "S" level, Bayerd moved with a feeling of numbness and fatigue weighting his body. He was going to have to grab some rest shortly, he knew. He was pressing himself close to the limit of his endurance. As he entered his cubicle, he thought: *Please, God, just let me finish this last piece of work. Just this last watch and then it doesn't matter what happens.*

He thought of the vast chaos

sweeping whole continents. Of the cities crumbling under the shock wave—the vast, unheard sound toppling bridges, shattering the steel and concrete of buildings and the screams of the millions who would die in the short instant the beam penetrated the atmosphere and shed its energy in the fantastic compression wave that would grow from the livid wound in the air.

He pressed the thought down with quick panic and lowered himself into the Schrenk harness. He sat for long seconds, trying to gain control of his body which was suddenly wracked with a thousand small quiverings of fear.

At last he activated the unit and made the movements which hurled him in an instant across over five light hours to stand on that dark Plutonian plain.

**H**E HAD lost all track of time in the subdued frenzy of the work about the capsule site when Elliott's voice cut into his consciousness with: "Norm, fifteen minutes."

"Right," he said. He gave a few last-minute instructions to

Chang, who was down in the pit, and then turned away. For an instant he stared at the Needle, thrusting up from the pool of shadow that was the fissure circling the outcropping. It seemed almost as if the lookout point was floating on a sea of blackness, with the stars blazing intensely about it. He had not realized until this instant how completely isolated, physically and symbolically, the Needle was from the immediacy of the Artery and its installations on the plain.

He withdrew to the Schrenk cubicle in the Black Field Station and made his way up to Commo. Patel met him at the door and said, "They're cutting it awfully close. They've got barely ten minutes to bring skin charge up to strength."

Bayerd brushed past Elliott and Mendoza who were silently staring at the screen. The huge drifter took up a quarter of the image the *Ingrid* was transmitting. The four corvettes were grouped in a tight cluster, their exhausts flaming green and blue, while at some distance a faint gleaming haze expanded like a cloud of fog. The haze,

he decided, was colloidal aluminum from the drive and the ships had cut off their water injection so that the metal was being ejected in its elemental form.

"Three minutes," Mendoza said, consulting the wall chronometer.

Norman Bayerd held his breath and then let it out explosively. How long would it take to build up the skin charge? Would it be enough? Just a tiny deflection at this distance, that was all they needed.

IN THE screen one of the corvette motors flared brightly and in the next instant died.

"What's happening," Elliott said.

"The thrust is unbalanced," Bayerd said as the mass of ships began to move slowly towing the drifter with them. The four corvettes, now with a slight side velocity, began to move out of the screen. In the next moment, the *Ingrid* changed her orientation, bringing the group of ships back into the center of the screen.

"Five seconds," Elliott said.

"They've got to get back in position."

"They've moved in closer to predicted path," Patel said. "Perhaps it is not..."

He did not finish the statement. The beam passed at that point. No one in the room saw it, of course, but the effect of its passage was obvious.

The drifter bloomed in a fraction of a second into an expanding flower of brilliance, engulfing the lesser ships as it soared to an intensity the pickup could not register. An instant later, the pickup ceased to exist as the *Ingrid* was engulfed by the shell of hot gases.

The screen went blank.

"MERCIFUL saints—what happened?" Mendoza asked.

"The ship's pile?" Elliott ventured.

"No," Patel said. "It was something we did not consider. The ship's cargo was air for the Callisto Experimental Station. Oxygen, nitrogen, helium, hydrogen, the normal spectrum of gases. The heat from the beam..."

"A carbon-nitrogen reaction," Bayerd gasped.

"Yes, it appears so."

"But," Elliott said, "that means the same thing will happen if the beam touches the Earth's atmosphere."

"I'm afraid you're right," Bayerd said sickly.

## IX

"WHAT HAPPENED out there?" Mendoza demanded.

"The motor of one of the corvettes failed," Elliott said. "Don't ask me why, but the resulting imbalance started the whole group drifting into the path of the beam."

"How much chance do we have now of stopping the beam?"

"Councilman," Bayerd said, "our only hope now is the CX-248 and its group of ships near the asteroid belt."

"We'll need a greater deflection," Patel said. "Perhaps a quarter of a mile might do it if they build up a high enough charge."

"Well, if our beam data is

correct," Bayerd said, "we can get that close."

"I dislike saying this," Mendoza said, "but even if you do deflect the beam, there's still the problem on Pluto. I think the time has come for some drastic action there."

"What about it, Norm?" Patel asked. "Do you think they stand a chance of getting down to the capsule before transmission time?"

"I don't know. They're trying, but the work is slow."

"I think we should try explosives," Mendoza said.

"No, we can't risk damaging the accelerator. We've been all over this before."

"Nevertheless," Patel said slowly, "it doesn't look as if Chang's group is making any appreciable progress."

"IF THE accelerator is destroyed," Bayerd said tiredly, "it's doubtful that we can hold out long enough to build another one."

"I'm afraid it's the only solution," Elliott said.

"I hate to say it, but there is now no other choice," Mendoza turned to Elliott. "You'd better give the order."

"Now just a minute," Bayerd put in. "This is my command and I'll give any orders that have to be given."

"This is on my own responsibility," Mendoza said.

"I'm not in the habit of shifting responsibility to anyone else when it belongs to me," Bayerd said. "All right, this seems to be the general opinion and I frankly can't argue against it." He turned to Elliott. "Give the order he said." He turned on his heel and walked from the room.

He felt as if he were living a dream. His head ached from the scalp wound, and his exploring tongue found the inside of his cheek raw and tender to the touch. The weight of the last few hours pressed heavily on him and he knew now that he could not go on without some rest.

There wasn't much he could do, Norman Bayerd thought as he entered his small sleeping chamber on "R" level. He lay down on the web hammock, drew the counter webbing over him, and secured it to insure that, in this low weight area, a chance movement would not throw him out of bed while he

slept. Then he lay for a long time, staring into the darkness and savoring the cool breeze that blew over his face from the air-conditioning duct above his head.

WHAT DIFFERENCE did it make, he thought, if Patel had been the one who changed the capsule settings? It was too late now for recriminations, too late for accusations or revenge or...

No. Patel had tried to destroy the Artery, rob him of the product of his life, destroy the place he had built for himself in the advance of man to the stars.

Only... Only Patel had said that Norman Bayerd had pressed mankind into a strait-jacket with the Artery; that humanity had entered upon a period of stasis, of arrested development simply because it took every bit of its energy to survive at the present level.

Never get beyond this system, never go to the stars? He couldn't believe it. The drive was too strong.

Only what had been done in that direction in ten years? Had there been any major ad-

vances toward a stellar drive? There had been a thousand and one refinements of existing technique, but the significant breakthrough...

That wasn't right. The Artery represented the life of Earth. Without it she would never have come the distance she had. Nothing...disgrace, death...nothing could stop him before he proved that to Patel. Least of all death, he thought. Not even this thing...

He remembered that it was the summer after the hearings, after Patel and Diane...

*Don't think about that... hateful...tragic betrayal...*

**H**E HAD GONE back to the empty house in the mountains just above Colorado Springs, back to the silent green hills and the bite of cool morning air. He had taken to riding in the morning and evening, taking his path up the side of Pike's Peak along some of the old trains and abandoned roadways. The old concrete roads were crumbling, and footing upon them sometimes uncertain. The decayed roadbed had given way under

his mare and the poor animal had fallen to its death.

Bayerd had been more fortunate. A washout had indented the side of the slope perhaps ten feet down, and his body had lodged in the space behind a boulder. He had been unconscious for at least an hour. He remembered waking in the late morning sun with dried blood matting his scalp and caking on the side of his face. Somehow, he'd made it back to one of the traveled roads where a passing driver had found him and taken him down into the valley to a hospital.

Why couldn't it have been a quick death? he thought. Better than this waiting, this secret knowledge of the seeds of death lodged within him... better to...

No, every hour, every tiny instant was important to secure this thing he had built from the assaults of people like Patel... What had Patel said on the Needle those long hours ago, something about the Artery and pyramids?

Well, the Artery was a monument those ancient pharaohs might well envy in place of

their useless masses of ritual stone.

*I met a traveler from an antique land who said...*

What was that? Shelly? Patel had asked him if he knew Ozymandias. "*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings...*" Small, egotistic man who thought of the world as that tiny speck of sand about a muddy river and died, thinking that the stars were bits of fire set in a bowl over his head if he bothered to think about them at all. "*'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair'. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare...*"

THAT WAS the whole clue to Patel's thinking. Destroy the Artery because the Artery was the symbol of his life, how he had risen above the little Indian, and...

"Norm!" Someone was shaking him, and Bayerd opened his eyes to find that Patel had switched on the lights. He was staring at the glowing ceiling, trying to orient himself. Then he checked his watch.

"Why didn't you call me earlier."

"You needed the sleep" Patel said. "The *Orion* just radioed in. They've finished their installation."

He pulled himself from the hammock and they went up to the Commo room. "How's charge build-up?" he asked.

"They're still building," Patel said. "They're twenty per cent above what we calculated we needed."

"How much time?"

"Two minutes," Elliott said.

"The *Orion's* equipped with a 'strob' pick-up," Patel said. "They've modified it to give us an azimuth reading on the beam after deflection, if the thing triggers properly."

"Thirty seconds," Elliott said.

"Now we can only pray," Mendoza said from his seat in the corner of the room.

ELLIOTT began to speak into the microphone before him as a dim image from the *Orion* built up on the screen. It was apparent that the *Orion* was part of the group of ships building up the charge on the inflated lens, for only the sterns of two of the ships showed in the screen at close

range. The huge curve of the plastic sphere covered half of the screen, its metallic-plated sides gleaming in crescent. They had inflated the sphere and then cut a hole in its side to position the cable. The sphere once inflated, of course, had maintained its shape.

"Five seconds!" Elliott said.

Bayerd realized that he was not breathing and forced himself to inhale. *Pray God this will end it*, he thought.

"Zero," Elliott said with a sigh.

"Get their readings," Bayerd said. The overhead speaker crackled suddenly as Elliott cut it in for them to hear.

"B. F. Station," a voice said, "this is the *Orion*."

"B. F. Station to *Orion*. Did you get a reading?"

"We got one all right."

"How much deflecton?"

"We couldn't measure it."

"What do you mean? What's the accuracy of your sighting?"

"You don't get me," the voice said. "We clocked the beam right on schedule. The only trouble was that it passed five miles outside of the volume you calculated for it."

BAYERD walked over and grabbed the microphone. "What's that again?"

The intercom on the far side of the desk was buzzing insistently. "Patel," Bayerd said, "get that thing."

"You were way off, mister," the *Orion* voice said.

"This is Commander Bayerd. Explain yourself."

"Norm," Patel was saying.

"Shut up," Bayerd snapped.

"It's Gilchrist," Patel insisted. "He's on 'S' level...down by the Schrenk cubicles."

"I said," the *Orion's* man repeated, "You were way off. We didn't jog that beam a whisker."

"Gilchrist says Chang's team has collapsed the capsule tube. The capsule is buried under a ton of rock."

"What difference does it make now?" Bayerd said, sinking to a chair.

"You don't understand. Gilchrist has barricaded himself on 'S' level. He's warning us not to come down."

"What's got into him," Mendoza demanded.

"Hes given the men orders to blow up the accelerator," Patel said.

## X

“WHAT HAPPENED?” Mendoza demanded. “I thought you had the beam path pinned down?”

“We did,” Bayerd said.

“Where did we make the mistake?” Patel asked softly.

“That doesn’t matter. There must be some way of stopping the beam,” Mendoza said.

“And stopping that idiot Gilchrist from wrecking the accelerator,” Bayerd snapped. “I’m going down there and try to reason with him.”

“Wait a minute,” Patel said suddenly, “we must have had the path of the beam calculated fairly well or it would never have struck the SAU-62. The small distance she traveled was just enough to bring her into the path.”

“That was apparent enough,” Bayerd said. Then he slapped his fist into the palm of the other hand and said excitedly, “The explosion! We weren’t expecting that.”

“I don’t see...” Patel began.

“Radiant energy. Lots of it.”

“The light pressure,” Patel said.

“Of course. The radiant energy of the explosion overtook the beam in a fraction of a microsecond. The light pressure was enough to distort the beam course slightly.”

“But not enough.”

PATEL SEATED himself at the desk and began to calculate, occasionally referring to the sheaf of flimsies with the Earthside computer data. After a few moments, he looked up.

“This might do it. If we try for a hundred kilometer displacement of the beam above the Earth’s atmosphere, we’re probably safe. So...” he touched the last sheet of his calculations, “...if we touch off a reaction at...say the distance of the Black Field Station...a million miles from Terra, we need a deflection of about twenty seconds to each plasmoid segment of the beam.”

He continued to write rapidly and finally leaned back. “Under those conditions,” he said, “it figures out to a hundred and twenty kilos of U-235 at

twenty per cent conversion."

"Listen," Bayerd told Elliott, "get Luna Station and get a ship—any ship loaded with enough fissionables. They can load a Black Field and set it up on the way out. Better make it two hundred kilos just to be safe."

"Can you do it in an hour and a half?" Mendoza asked.

"We can try," Patel said.

"Just pray Luna can give us what we want," Bayerd said. "Now I've got to stop that idiot Gilchrist."

"I'm coming with you," Mendoza said.

They emerged from the personnel tube into the corridor leading toward the Schrenk cubicles. The pressure hatch, sealing the compartment from the rest of the station was partially closed, blocking their view of the passage.

**THEY WERE** within twenty feet of the hatch when Gilchrist's voice said, "Don't come any closer. I have a gun and I'll use it if you try to force your way in."

"Come out of there," Bayerd said. "We've got to talk."

"You think I'm a fool? You

do your talking from there."

"You've got to call off the men," Bayerd said. "If you destroy the accelerator, we'll never be able to rebuild it."

"Don't you think I know that? But the consequences of destroying the Artery are a hell of a lot more attractive than the consequences of that transmission starting again."

"Wait," Mendoza said, "what about the lens stations?"

"Lens stations?" Bayerd asked.

"Yes, the orbital magnetic lens that warps the beam above Pluto?"

"No chance," Bayerd said. "They're self-powered and keyed by c-cube radio to the control capsule. We can't change its position and we can't get a Schrenk body near one to turn off the field. Same problem as with the accelerator. The magnetic fields are too dense."

"There's another way," Mendoza said. "You can replace a lens station a lot easier than the Artery."

"Ram one with a ship?"

"Of course. Then the beam will head into space. It doesn't

make any difference if every bit of the reserve metal within the accelerator area goes out. It won't strike anything."

"All right," Bayerd said. "Gilchrist, I'll make a deal with you. Let us through to Chang and I'll take one of the lens stations out of action. We can't let them touch the accelerator."

**F**OR LONG moments, there was silence. Finally, the hatch door moved aside and Gilchrist stepped out. "You'll have to get out there immediately," he said. "They've already fueled one of the old supply ships. They're going to ram the accelerator with it."

"Thanks a lot, Councilman," Bayerd said savagely, stepping in and hitting the man with all of his strength. Gilchrist slid to the floor without a sound. Bayerd reached down, fumbled with the man's tunic until he found the revolver which he placed in a pocket of his tunic.

"Why did you do that?" Mendoza demanded.

"He had it coming. Now don't bother me."

In scarcely a minute he was in the Schrenk harness and on

Pluto. He made his way across the plain at a low run toward the field where the ships were berthed. He could see the men gathered around one of the ships as he approached. They were finishing the fueling, he saw. Two of the men whirled to face him as he came abreast of them.

"It's Bayerd," he said.

"Don't try to stop us, Commander," Trubner said. "This is the only solution left to us."

"I'm not trying to stop you," he said. "I'm just offering another target."

He explained the plan and Sanchez said, "All right, we'll try it. Chang was taking the ship out."

"That's right," Chang said.

"I'll take over that end," Bayerd said.

"No," Chang said, "I would rather..."

"That's an order," Bayerd said. "This is something that I have to do. I won't have anyone else touching the Artery."

"Of course," Chang said softly.

**M**INUTES later, Pluto was a fast-receding speck of light in the ship's viewplate.

Norman Bayerd was crowding the ship to the limit of its nine gravities acceleration but the Schrenk body gave no sensation of weight. Hurriedly he checked the time. An hour and ten minutes left.

He switched the viewplate to the forward pickup and saw at a distance the points of light that were the lens stations, revolving ceaselessly around a common center. Carefully he corrected his course and locked the controls. Then he waited, checking the collision course at intervals.

He knew when the magnetic field from the stations began to build up. The legs of the robot became imbued with a life of their own. They quivered and one lashed out against the bulkhead. He was losing his balance, falling...and in the next instant all sight and sound faded and he was an ordinary flesh-and-blood man, embraced in a tight womb of blackness. He waited for long moments for control to return. All at once he was again in the Schrenk body.

He was wallowing in space, his metal body turning slowly like some dancer in a dream

ballet. Around him the debris of the ship moved in complex patterns, colliding and bouncing away, still sharing his velocity and path. He thrashed his arms about, trying to stabilize his motion. In one slow turn he saw the lens.

The station he had destroyed was flaring brightly as its power piles erupted. It was falling into the center of the lens, he saw, and in the next turn he saw that the other stations were moving.

In the instant before he cut control of the body, he realized what he had done. The lens stations were falling in on each other, destroying each other as the equilibrium of their system was destroyed.

He was sick with the sight as he pulled from the restraining harness. Mendoza was waiting outside the cubicle and he pushed past him without speaking.

**I**N THE COMMO room he sank into a chair and lowered his body until his head was between his legs, trying to fight off the sudden wave of dizziness.

"Norm," Beckworth said, "are you all right?"

"I'll be o. k. in a minute," he said.

"We're finished anyway," Elliott said quietly.

"Leave him alone for a minute," Beckworth said.

"What do you mean, we're finished?" Bayerd demanded, raising his head.

"He means there's not a ship within flight distance," Mendoza said.

"It was a pretty idea," Elliott said, "but we'll never get to see if it works."

Norman Bayerd shook his head, feeling a sudden roar in his ears.

"Unless..." he heard Patel say.

"Unless what?" Elliott said.

"If we can reverse the polarity of the Black Field."

"Here? This station?"

"It's the only solution left."

**B**AYERD pushed Beckworth away and rose unsteadily to his feet. "That's what you've wanted all along," he said. "You've rigged this whole thing to destroy the Artery."

"You act as if I were re-

sponsible for this situation," Patel said.

"Norm, you'd better sit down," Beckworth said, placing a restraining hand on his shoulder. Bayerd shook it off savagely.

"Keep away from me," he said hoarsely. "Don't think I haven't found out what you've done," he yelled at Patel. "I've found out the whole rotten mess."

"Stop it," Elliott said. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Don't I? I have all the evidence I need. Patel was the one who changed the capsule settings. The monitoring tapes would have proven that, but he got those when he found me in his cubicle checking on him."

"Patel wasn't the one who attacked you," Elliott said.

"Norm," Beckworth said, "there's something..."

"Shut up, all of you," he shouted.

"You didn't find any incriminating tape in Patel's cubicle," Elliott persisted. Bayerd scarcely heard him in the sudden overwhelming hate that seemed to shake his body.

"You've tried to destroy the

Artery and me ever since we first met," he shouted. "Now your little underhanded trick has turned on you." He pulled the coded message flimsy from his pocket. "The whole pattern gets pretty clear, this message to one of your plants on my crew, your sabotaging the capsule..."

**P**ATEL rose slowly and took the flimsy from Bayerd's hand. He glanced at it and looked up. "This isn't mine," he said. "You, of all people, should know who this one was sent to."

"And you know there's no evidence on that monitoring tape from Patel's cubicle," Elliott said. "It's the original tape. He couldn't have faked it in that detail."

Bayerd felt the blood roaring in his ears. The room was suddenly dark with shadows crouching in every corner.

"This is the administrative code the computer sections use," Patel was saying. "Only top brass has the code and you're the only top brass here."

"No," Bayerd said. "It's all a part of the plot. Destroy the Artery. Discredit me."

"I didn't stop with Patel's tape," Elliott said. "I checked the one from your cubicle. You were still in control of the robot at the capsule site up until the moment the crew arrived to seat the capsule."

The room was awash with blackness. A horrible quivering had seized the muscles of his thighs.

"And there was nothing wrong with the calibration of your instruments on the console at the Needle," Elliott was saying.

"Damn it, cut it out," Bayerd yelled.

"It was Bayerd," Elliott said. "He was the one who received the code message. He was the one who changed the vernier settings on the capsule at the last moment."

**A**LL SUPPORT seemed to disappear from Norman's Bayerd's body. He was falling. He felt the hard floor strike him and nausea washed over him as his body jerked convulsively. From far above hands reached down to him and an echoing voice that might have been Beckworth's said, "Get me a pencil from the desk..."

Quick!... Pry open his jaws before he does any damage to his tongue..."

## XI

FROM A GREAT distance, Norman Bayerd heard Elliott say, "My God, what brought it on?"

"Originally? A riding accident. I sent for his medical records after I treated his scalp wound. I suspected something like this from the lacerated tongue and cheek lining. There was no mention of epilepsy in the medical records, of course, but one of the encephalograph runs looked significant."

"And the change in the beam setting, all of the other things..."

"*Petit mal*, I suppose. It can pass unnoticed as only a slight lapse of memory. The psychological reasons for doing what he did are another matter. You'll have to look elsewhere for the motivation for that."

"Perhaps the code message is the clue?"

"There has to be a reason. The Artery is his whole life."

Yes, Bayerd thought, wading through darkness, *my whole*

*life*. There was nothing that could force him to damage the Artery. It was the single thing he must leave behind after...

And then the memory came back.

The weeks of work over the new idea, the sudden realization that what he had found spelled the death of the Artery. How had he forgotten... The feeling of loss when he realized that it had all been for nothing... the sacrifice, the work... That the Artery was a useless toy, a vast clumsy makeshift answer, when the simpler solution had been before them all the time...

Who wouldn't have fled from the knowledge that his life had been useless?

ONLY...ONLY there was always a part of a man which demanded that he act in truth and honesty...and if he did not, that inner self would find a way...

He opened his eyes and sat up. He was in the dispensary, he saw, and Elliott and Beckworth had withdrawn somewhat from his bed. They hadn't removed his clothing, he saw.

"How long have I been out," he demanded?

"Fifteen minutes," Beckworth said, moving toward him. "Now lie down until it's time."

"Time for what?"

"We're evacuating the station in another ten minutes or so. Patel is going to reverse the Black Field. He has the engineering crew below making the modifications now."

Bayerd threw back the sheet they had draped over him and dropped to the floor.

"Get back in bed," Beckworth said.

"I've got to see Patel."

"No, absolutely not. You can't stop him anyway."

"No," Bayerd said, "I don't want to stop him."

"You're in no condition..."

"Please, Doc. This is important."

HE PUSHED past the medic and into the corridor. As he made his way to the metering bridge, he felt a kind of nervous strength flowing into his muscles. He found Patel on the bridge in the midst of confusion.

Patel had unbolted several of the control panels on the

bridge consoles, ripping wire from the back and inserting hasty cross connections. He looked up as Bayerd entered and said, "Norm, get below. There's not much time."

"How are you going to keep the five stations phased until the last moment?" Bayerd demanded.

"It'll be done."

"How?"

"Manually. How else?"

"I thought so. Now, listen closely. You were right about the code message. It was from the computer section at Pelembang. I had it coded for the simple reason that I didn't want anyone at the station to know what I was working on."

"It makes no difference now."

"Yes it does," Bayerd said. "The problem had to do with the basic nature of the Black Field. The idea came to me and I was checking on whether it was workable."

"What problem?"

"THE SOLUTION was there all the time," Bayerd said. "We had the reverse field effect, releasing all that energy. We knew all about the

micro-continuum the physicists had postulated, and how the energy that came from the reversed field was the energy that had been poured earlier into the micro-continuum. Don't you see? The micro-universe had a point-for-point congruency with our own universe. You can put energy into it and later take that energy out...*and you don't have to perform the operation at the same point.*"

Patel was suddenly laughing, his small frame shaking with mirth. "It was there all along," he said. "We've never needed the Artery."

"No," Bayerd said. "We can generate the power right on Pluto, shunt it via the Black Field into the micro-continuum, and draw on that power any place in the system."

"No—any place in the universe."

"Now," Bayerd said, "we've got the problem of the beam. Are you through up here?"

"Yes," Patel said. "The fields will have to be balanced manually on all of the stations in the Black Field up to the moment of reversal. I've wired the circuits into the controls in

one of the Schrenk cubicles so we can use the c-cube transmitter on "S" level."

He looked at Bayerd and said, "My cubicle, Norm."

"No, this is my job."

"You've got your hands full, converting to the new system."

"That's a young man's job," Bayerd said, stepping close to him.

"Get out of here," Patel said. "There's only a few minutes." He turned and began to activate the board before him. As soon as the board was operating, Norman Bayerd reached into his pocket and found the revolver he had taken from Gilchrist. He reversed it and brought it down on Patel's head. He collapsed silently.

**H** HE GRABBED the man by the shoulders and dragged him toward the hatch in the floor of the bridge. He was about to enter the hatch and pull Patel after him when he heard a noise below.

"Norm," he heard Beckworth yell, "come on. We've got to get away from the station within the next five minutes."

"Here," he yelled through the hatch and started to lower Patel's body. He felt Beckworth relieve him of the weight and he stuck his head through the opening.

"Get him to the lifeshuttle," he said. "This is my party." Before Beckworth could answer, he closed the hatch. Then he went to the console and finished the check that Patel had started. After a moment a light glowed on a far panel and he knew that the shuttle with the men had left the station.

He flicked the switch that cut in the transmitter relay on the bridge and said, "This is Bayerd, calling the shuttle."

The speaker crackled and Patel's voice said, "Norm, why did you do it?"

"Sorry about the bump on the head," Bayerd said. "It's better this way though. Now give me the details on this set-up just to make sure I've figured it out correctly."

**A**FTER PATEL finished speaking, Bayerd said, "All right. So we need some light. So we'll now burn the place down." He laughed half hysterically.

Then he said, "You'll be getting out of this system now, going to the stars."

"That's what we wanted all along."

"Now go home and have some more kids," Bayerd said. "Only don't name any of them after me. Name a planet for me."

And he cut the transmission. At five minutes to calculated contact time with the beam, he abandoned the bridge and hurried down to the Shrenk cubicle which Patel had modified. He laced himself into the harness and made the changes on the improvised board at its side which initiated the changing polarity and the building instability of the Black Field. Then, as the bridge chronometer signaled two minutes to the board, he threw in the automatic system, keyed to the "strob" units on the skin of the station.

"There," he said at fifty seconds before 'zero', "the rest is up to you."

He pushed his head into the Schrenk facepiece. "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair," he whispered, keying the unit.

**F**OR AN INSTANT he was in the body on far Pluto, poised on the edge of the Needle, looking down the precipice into the chasm far below.

He would fall into the great fissure, he saw, fall like a stone into the far depths at the instant the Artery ceased to exist.

Which was as it should be. The final irony.

He thought of the Artery, its vain glory, and those ancient kings of Egypt whose time-dusted eyes had looked upon their magnificent tombs.

Then he quickly switched to the body beyond the Plutonian Magnetic Lens, still holding static control of the body on Pluto.

He was surrounded with the debris of the wrecked ship but he was still moving at an incredible velocity. The last flare of energy from the colliding

lens stations must have accelerated him, he thought.

It was then that he realized he was probably moving at a velocity greater than the escape velocity of the system.

That he was moving out to the stars.

While the Artery would signal his going in a blaze of light.

"A damned magnificent tomb," he shouted.

And the cold Plutonian rock of the Needle with that one fraction of his consciousness, and the other part of him that was moving out to the stars... All this dissolved in fire as the thing that was Norman Bayard's life spark expanded in a wave of radiance until it seemed to encompass the universe in searing light and ceased to be.

————— ★ —————

### ***Coming Next Issue***

#### **THE CORIANIS DISASTER**

*An Absorbing New Novelet*

★

by Murray Leinster

★

# the hands

by Venard McLaughlin

*"My brother, this is an odd moment. For this moment you and I are the only beings on Earth. You are the last beast — I am Earth's First Man!"*

ON THE night my mother died I awoke to find my brother leaning over me, staring. In the light of the dying fire his eyes were strange and his hands were holding his wrists, in that way of his, and it came to me that the wrists of my brother Kaven had been concealed from us since childhood.

"Our mother," Kaven said, "is dead." He stepped back from my cot.

Across the one-roomed mountain cabin was our mother sitting upright in her chair, dead. Her face was livid from recent strangling death, and I knew *that* death, for my father had died in the same way.

Shuddering I looked at Kaven. Now his arms hung at his sides. His eyes were watching me. "We will bury her now," he said. "It is a good time, for the moon is coming over the peaks."

We buried her beside our father as the moon rose over the peaks and the cold air blew, and my brother laughed softly at my side.

"Little beast," he said to me, "don't try to hide your fear. Do you think you fool Kaven?"

Do you?" His strange eyes held mine.

"You killed her!" I said. "With your terrible hands you killed her. And now you will kill me!"

My brother laughed again, softly. "I could." He watched the moon rise in the blue sky, blue with mountain cold. "But not now. Come." He led me back to the cabin and threw wood on the fire. "You, brother, say aloud the story of our family."

**I** SHIVERED and drew close to the orange flames. "We are the last people of Earth," I began. "Father brought us into the peaks for he had once saved the son of Ahriman from death and the god was pleased and saved our father and his family, of whom we are the last, from the waters and the fire and the sickness."

My brother smiled as though listening to sounds deep beneath the Earth or far out into space, but he had heard me for he answered, "Thus were you taught, little beast."

Again he seemed to be listening to unheard things and his hands clasped his wrists, and fear was deep within me.

I shivered in fear for now I remembered that the moon was over the peaks, that it was night; yet Kaven my brother was here in the cabin.

Always at night he was gone—always, when the moon rose over the peaks. Always—except the night my father died, and this night at the death of my mother...

"Little beast," he said softly. He was close to me. One of his terrible hands closed on my arm. "Listen, now. Forget that old wives' tale of our fathers. Ahriman knows no gratitude. He brought our family here only that I, Kaven, might be born while the human race perished beneath our peaks. This is an odd moment of history..." He paused and his glittering eyes gazed into the fire. "...two races of beings face each other. The Man and the beast."

I shrank back until the flames burned my flesh. "But we—we are both human beings, my brother!" Fear was deep in that place, holding me—a cold, deep fear.

**K**AVEN shook his head. "Little fool. You are a

beast. Our father was a beast. All the billions of Earth's talking bipeds who for centuries have called themselves Man—they are nothing but speaking beasts... My brother, this is an odd moment. For this moment you and I are the only beings on Earth. You are the last beast—I am Earth's first Man!"

"No!" I cried.

His hand tightened on my arm. "Listen, little beast. Think of the days before Ahri-man sent the waters and the fire and the sickness. Remember the animals, the fish, the birds, and the race called by itself Man? Remember the bellies of them all, the lusts of them all, the senses of them all, the brains of them all—all, all alike! No difference except perhaps in degree..."

"No!" I cried. Tears of fear blinded me. A horror of new belief swept over me.

"What difference?" my brother asked softly, "between a king and a rainbow trout, a lawyer and a mountain goat? Degree only. Intelligence? Hardly. In the passions of love, war, hate and greed the beasts calling themselves Man were

stupider than the animals of the field, the fish of the sea!" My brother laughed silently.

I was sobbing now in terror. "But the cities! The machines! The beautiful and tremendous things Man has wrought..."

"Ah!" said my brother.

"The mighty works of the hands of Man!" I cried, "second only to the might of Ahri-man!"

MY BROTHER'S eyes burned into me. "The hands of man," he repeated softly. He raised his own terrible hands into the light of the fire—dark, muscled, all-powerful hands—and held them before me stretched out from the taut-strained cuffs of his shirt. "Hands!—Yes, the human beast, like the ape, had hands. But like the ape his belly and his lusts guided the hands. The ape used hands to gather food. Has the human beast done more, save in degree?"

"The cities, the machines..."

With a movement of his terrible hands my brother silenced me. "You would have been happier beasts and suffered less had Ahri-man cut

away your hands. They destroyed you for you were beasts." Once again he raised his terrible hands in the orange light. "Know now the first Man!"

As his words sounded the peaks moved and Earth dust showered up toward the moon. Even my brother paled for in those signs was knowledge that Ahriman was abroad.

"Ahriman..." I whispered.

"Ahriman!" my brother said.

**AND** AHRIMAN was there in the cabin for the fire was blotted out in liquid blackness and we were blinded and motionless in his presence. The peaks groaned and the shudderings of Earth under the weight of Ahriman were awful.

"Silence," Ahriman said, and there was sudden silence as deep as the blackness. "The time is at hand, sons of Koje. Earth waits bowed before the two beings, the beast and the Man. Which is to rule the finite things of Ahriman?"

"I!" cried my brother. "For I am the first Man. Go with me, O Ahriman, out over the world I have built in the nights

—go with me and you will know that I am Man!"

Seized in mortal terror, I waited. The pain of Ahriman's presence bit through flesh and bone and sinew. "Ah!" I cried in agony. "Ah! *Mercy!*"

"Who speaks?" asked Ahriman.

"The last beast," my brother said.

Ahriman laughed. "My human beasts die hard. In him they have their last chance. In you, Kaven son of Koje, Man has his first."

The blackness vanished and I lay on the cabin floor near the ruined fire sick to death. My brother laughed.

"You heard. Now, fool, do you believe?"

In the dim light his eyes glowed. Slowly he came toward me. One of his terrible hands loosened the cuff at the wrist of the other and with a snap the wrist was laid bare and a great feathered wing sprang from his flesh, filling the room. And then the other wrist flashed naked sending forth its wing and in rhythm to the groaning of the peaks the wings beat.

**F**ASTER and faster, the wings beat until they sped invisible and the air from them was a blast. And with a great sweeping roar the terrible hands of my brother rushed from the cabin, and the body of my brother fell into my arms, and I laid it on the floor near the ruined fire and covered it with an old sail cloth from the days below of the waters.

"There is but one thing to do," I said at last aloud. "I must follow the hands of my brother. Ahriman has pitted us against each other and if I am a beast and he is Man, I am nevertheless what I am and I will do the best I can to establish myself on this earth."

Packing a knapsack and rekindling the fire so that my brother's body should not die of cold, I set out over the moon-drenched peaks. It was bitter cold and so still that the grind of the peaks was audible like a child's whisper, and I saw far over the eastern horizon the night-world of my brother.

"I will go and study this night-world," I said. "For my world below is yet washed with

the sickness, and I too will have to make a world for Ahriman." For a moment the peaks were deathly still, and I knew Ahriman had heard.

I leaped forward, then, and swam through space as the son of Ahriman had taught my father until I came to the turrets of the night-world of Kaven my brother. It was a high, unbelievable world of dark blue and its spires reached far beyond the Golden Cycle where the banished Legion lived and its streets were broad as life and paved with diamonds from the deepest mines and the power of this world was barely a whisper of turbines buried in the living rock, and it was a perfect world for no life was their but the hands of my brother.

**S**ILENT, invisible hands, building and building, rock upon rock, metal upon metal, higher and higher. I sat in the great central garden of this world and gazed in awe. Nothing like it had ever before been dreamed. Minarets and spires, lakes and castles, endless arches of marble and gold, flashing surface craft and si-

lent air cars, spears of rainbow light and soft hidden music—all controlled by vast intricate mechanism subject to the lightest touch of the hands of my brother.

At midnight I grew hungry but I dared not open my knapsack to eat. In that crystal cold air of purity even the presence of my body defiled. To eat was unthinkable. This night-world was too lofty for that. And as midnight passed I grew afraid.

"Kaven!" I called in fear to my brother, but there was only silence, and I thought of the banished Legion and ran to a giant spire of gold stretching beyond the Golden Cycle and leaped into a rocket car to flash alert.

"Someone there," I thought, "will talk to me and save me from the fear of this perfect night-world. Some one of the banished."

I jumped from the car as it flashed into the Golden Cycle and fell stunned until voices sounded about me and an arm raised my head and a liquor was poured down my throat.

"A visitor," said a voice at my side. "But he is neither

banished nor total Man—and the beasts are all dead..."

I LOOKED into the dark grave face of a young man and past him at the faces of the banished—all grave, proud people whom Ahriman had never been able to bend to his will. My eyes jumped back to the one who had spoken and widened in amazement.

He smiled. "Son of Koje, do you know me?"

"You—you are Ahriman's son!" I cried. "*Banished!*"

He stood up and lifted me to my feet. The soft glow of the Golden Cycle was all about us and far below was the night-world of my brother, and beyond that was death-ridden Earth.

"Banished by my own choice," he said. "I distrust this new race of total Man. I prefer the Legion to that hideous night-world, or to dead Earth."

I shuddered at the mention of the night-world. Hideous, it was. Beautiful and perfect—but horrible. "They say I am a beast," I said, "that all mankind were beasts and that I

alone remain to get back Earth for my kind..."

Ahriman's son stared. "There is one of you left? The son of Koje—a human being—and yet alive?"

"Yes," I said.

With a clap of his hands the god's son brought the Legion together—men and women from all ages, strong and proud. He addressed them.

"My Unconquered, our visitor is the last of the human race. He is pitted against the coming total Man for supreme command of Earth. Are you willing to aid him in the struggle, remembering that my dread father, Ahriman, fights on the other side?"

With one voice they answered, "Yes!" Among them were those of the future whose souls were too strong for the tricks of time. All hated Ahriman, the dread god of darkness, with an everlasting vengeance.

They counselled, and then sent me back to the night-world to speak with the hands of my brother, and back to survey death-ridden Earth.

"Report, then," said the son

of Ahriman. "And have courage."

**E**VEN IN the descending rocket car I felt a change and a menace in the night-world. Ahriman had walked there and the dread of his presence lingered, and as I stole back into the central garden I knew that the hands of my brother were no longer alone.

The air was full of soft rustling—the coming and going of invisible and terrible hands. And now the world was growing before my eyes, rising in unspeakable splendor and magnitude.

"Kaven!" I shouted, "you are not alone. There are others with you! Listen to me."

There was no answer and the blue world mounted higher. In that moment I knew that the new race of Man, of total Man, had come, and that Ahriman favored this race and that I was marked for death.

In fear I stared about me and with a tremendous leap launched myself, swimming, through space, back to death-ridden Earth. Swift-flying hands rushed toward me and then my brother spoke.

"No," my brother said. "Let the last beast live a little longer. Would you have it die so easily?" My brother laughed. Other laughter joined his and all the laughter was like the rush of a million wings.

The peaks of Earth were groaning, for Ahriman waited there. But he did not speak. In the cabin I made ready, strapping on the long knife of my father and wearing the ring of my mother's people, and rekindling the dying fire to preserve the body of my brother.

Down the vast peaks to the dwelling places of Earth I marched and there was no other living moving thing in all the world except the shadows of Ahriman. Across the Earth they pursued me, often taking the shapes of animals and human beings to attack me.

Europe was a flat, motionless sea; Asia, a desert; and the Atlantic, a bottomless pit over which I flew for days as the son of Ahriman had taught my father. The continents of North and South America had been rounded together in a great smooth ball on the surface of which the imprints of the bodies of two hundred mil-

lion human beings spread flat in the two dimensions of the sickness.

ON THE summit of this ball I drove a stake and although the shadows of Ahriman were near and Earth trembled with the weight and blackness of Ahriman himself I said, "I claim this planet for the human beings. If we are beasts, if we hunger and hate and lust and make war—if we are evil—we are also good. We are better than the mad, terrible hands of my brother—the All-hands of the new Man, the total Man."

A soft cry sounded beside me. I turned to see a child lying bleeding at my feet, lying exhausted as if from a long, dragging journey. Beating the child was a shadow of Ahriman in the guise of a human being.

Seizing up the stake I had just driven I leaped at the shadow. It straightened and tore the stake from my grasp and hit me hard across the eyes. Blindly I drew the knife of my father and whirled it around my head hoping to catch the shadow in its arc. When I could see again the

shadow was waiting safely beyond the arc. I stopped the knife-whistling. I set myself and threw the blade with great suddenness. It struck the shadow, pinning it to Earth where it struggled futilely a moment and vanished.

The child whimpered at my feet and kneeling I lifted it in my arms. In that instant I knew my error. Strong, terrible hands closed on my throat for the child was but another shadow. Bitterly we struggled. The child vanished and only terrible, invisible hands remained choking out my breath. Blackness came.

"You are dying," I thought, "the last human being tricked by an impulse of mercy, dying on the heap of two dead continents..."

**B**UT THE air parted with a clean swift rush and the son of Ahriman stood beside me and the hands were gone. "Fool!" he snapped, but his eyes were kind. Together we drove down the stake, and all the shadows of Ahriman withdrew.

"It is war now," said the son of Ahriman. "I have open-

ly defied my father's shadows. There is no time to be lost. Soon your brother's night-world will be transported to Earth and then you and your race are lost forever."

I sobbed in fear.

"Silence. You are not alone. With you are the Unconquered of all ages, and I—the son of Ahriman!"

"We must attack, then," I said. "We must destroy the night-world of my brother's hands!"

We counselled and at day-break, parted. I returned to the cabin and as the sun came over the peaks my brother's hands, soiled and bleeding from the night's labor, swept into the room, and joined his body.

For a moment we looked at each other in silence. I was thinking, "He is my brother. Once we played together. Once we were friends. Now one of us must destroy the other, for one is beast and one is Man."

Turning to the fire I stirred the kettle holding yesterday's broth and dipped a bowlful for my brother. In silence we ate. When we had finished I said, "Kaven, one of us must destroy the other, but we are

brothers and we must remain friends. Whoever wins, let us not have any hard feelings."

His strange eyes gazed at me and he was holding his wrists. "Fool!" Going to the window he drew the blind, then swiftly his terrible hands seized me, dragged me to my cot and struck me unconscious.

**W**HEN REASON returned it was night again and the body of my brother sprawled on the floor. Hastily I re-built the fire, covered the body and strapping on my father's knife and wearing the ring of my mother's people I swam through space to the night-world.

There, in the central garden, as we had counselled, were the Legion with the weapons of all ages, and at their head was the son of Ahriman resplendent in armor of light, most hateful of all things to his dread father. Quickly we placed the lancers and archers in front, then the riflemen and the modern artillery, and with a battlecry of many tongues and times we attacked the night-world of total Man.

Wings beat toward us and

gradually slowed becoming visible. Covering the spires, the minarets, filling the air were millions upon millions of terrible winged hands, and leading them were the dark, almighty ones of Kaven my brother.

**T**HEY CAME at us in a giant V formation. Our artillery roared, the archers' strings twanged. The air was filled with beatings and screamings and the awful indescribable noise of bleeding, dying hands. For the hands fell before us and we remained unscathed. The hands fell until they piled in heaps all about us, and still they came led and urged on by Kaven.

And then suddenly our guns were stilled and a black silence fell. Ahriman walked. Ghosts of the dead hands flew silently away. The whole night-world misted over and became whole and perfect again.

"It is unfair," Ahriman said. "My new race of total Man is mortal and the human beast is aided by my son and by the Immortals of the Legion. Let mortal fight mortal."

When the mist rolled back

I stood alone facing the hundred million winged hands. The Legion was gone and all that remained of the son of Ahriman was the memory of his voice saying, "Courage. I go to the region of the gods to fight there a last battle with my dread father. If I win all will be well for you. Courage." And as he departed he stripped me of memory of space-flying.

The terrible hands closed in upon me, battering, choking, beating, and then the voice of my brother: "Spare the last human beast. We are not ready yet for his death!" And I was bound in golden chains and placed in the middle of the garden to see the night-world transported to Earth.

Deep beneath me the turbine-hum increased, the blue world rose and swam through space to settle noiselessly over the battered face of Earth. Then the only sound was the last fitful lap of water and the last small spit of fire, and Earth was gone, covered over by the night-world of the new and total Man.

**T**EARS filled my eyes. Never again the sun, the moon,

the stars. Never again the cry of hungry children, the laugh of a man, the love of a woman. Nothing human, now, left in all the universe but my approaching human death. Then: Only the hideous, perfect night-world of mechanism and all-wise hands.

With a horror in me I remembered the blade of my father and the ring of my mother's people and with a mad human shout I tore off the chains of gold and stood upright feeling for the last time the valor of my kind. I marched out over that blue perfect world seeking total Man to destroy him, but there was nothing about me but whispering laughter and the beat of unseen wings.

"Ahriman!" I cried, but he was away in the region of the gods fighting his son.

"Kaven!" I said, but there was only laughter.

"Kill me, then," I cried. "I can't live in this blue night-world of sameness, of Perfection, of no contrast, of neither good nor evil!"

The air was filled with the fluttering of a million hands.

The time of total Man had come.

In the central garden of the world I lifted my head. Above me were the spires and minarets of perfection, the hideous sameness of the perfect world. "Son of Ahriman!" I cried out. "If you defeat your dread father and return to champion my race, take away our terrible hands! O, son of Ahriman, give

us stupid paws! Give us muffled pads! Let us crawl on our bellies like the wise serpents! But save us from the perfection of our terrible, our all-wise, hands!" Then I knelt weeping, and I waited.

But no answer came from the son of Ahriman, and I waited alone, the last human beast in the perfect world of Man.

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## The Reckoning

The cover on our November issue brought forth approval from a number of you who have expressed dislike of the "spot cut" covers we had presented formerly, although some thought that the picture was not large enough. And, in fact, a number who have not cared much for the 1959 covers said that they would feel differently if there were just one picture, large, rather than several small ones. This is something we can do something about — an area where reader preference, when made known to us, is meaningful and directive.

And I appreciate the suggestions from many of you on stories for a "second look". Some of your nominations are already in the works as this is being typed; others will be acted upon as early as possible.

In the November issue, you rated the contents this way:

1. The Hunted Ones (Reynolds)	2.00
2. A Little Knowledge (De Vet)	2.85
3. The Impossible Intelligence (Silverberg)	3.76
4. Luck, Inc. (Harmon)	4.26
5. For Sale — Super Ears (Hodgson)	4.77
6. No Star Shall Fall (Morley)	5.46

## UFObia

by KATE WILHELM

*Men and women feared the visitor; but a child went into the burning area, and ...*

THEY CARRIED in the horribly-mutilated Hogarty as Ted and Miriam huddled by the remains of the dead fire. And then, the third white-clad figure appeared, his arms outstretched with a small covered figure lying across them. He also disappeared inside the white trailer.

In stunned silence, Miriam watched until the door closed. Then she screamed—a shrill, inhuman, piercing scream of anguish. “Are you satisfied! You’ve shot down monsters and they killed to get even! Hogarty knew. He told me they were evil and he tried to save her. They killed him because he wanted to save one little girl! What do you think they’ll do to the rest of the world? Evil! Evil!”

“Miriam, stop it! Sit down in the car!” Ted pushed her roughly toward the car and started to run for the trailer. She groped blindly behind her for the door to hold to, remembering with bitter clarity the last night they had put Liza to bed. When it started.

★ ★ ★

At 7:40 Miriam Grayson

was saying, "And this little piggie was a bad little piggie and cried all the way home."

Liza squealed excitedly and tried to pull the little pink toes up into the gown out of sight, "Do it some more, Mommie!" The toes reappeared and wiggled in anticipation.

"Young lady, do you have any idea of what time it is?" Ted's voice preceded him into the bedroom where the two blue-eyed blondes exchanged guilty glances. The flannel-gowned four-year-old leaped for his arms laughing.

"Ok, ok, I give. Once more and then to bed." He leaned against the door and watched the play proceed with much giggling and mirth. Then it was his turn to read to the child and finally kisses were bestowed liberally and prayers heard. One hand was on the light switch when they heard it. The hand remained motionless over the switch.

**IT WAS** A whine as of ten thousand angry bees. A keening. A roar that thundered and shook the house. An explosion that shook the bedrock that was the foundation of the

house. And a silence that was almost painful.

Ashen-faced, Miriam intruded upon the deadly silence. "Ted! What...?"

"Get hold of yourself, Miriam," Ted shot back urgently and motioned her to the side of the frozen figure of the child in the bed. He ran to the rear of the house to peer out into the night.

"Ted!" Miriam's voice was even nearer hysteria; she was leaning over the girl, "Ted, she's not breathing!"

He raced for the medicine while Miriam fought off the weakness of her knees and the sudden light headedness that made the floor rock beneath her. As if from a great distance she watched the hypo bite into the skin smoothly, remain a few seconds and withdraw. Liza almost instantly sucked in a gasping sob that wracked her slight body and Miriam realized that she had been holding her own breath also.

"Rub her feet," Ted commanded and began soothing the child who was now fighting for her breath. "It's all right, darling; the noise is gone. Take a deep breath. Again. That's the

way." On and on he talked her—and Miriam—into calmness, into breathing in and out naturally without fear. As he talked, he stroked first her hands and then her hair that clung damply to her face. His voice was firm and normal as he talked, "It's all right, baby. Daddy's here, and Mommie. You're in your own bed. See? It's all right."

Much later Miriam clung to him weeping, "I can't stand it; I thought she was dead."

"I know," he murmured and held her to him fiercely, "I know."

"What was that thing? I thought a bomb hit us. Do you think it's started?"

"Hold it right there, honey. Probably a meteor. Don't go getting panicky all over. That certainly won't do her any good, you know."

She relaxed a bit then, as if part of the burden of fear had been taken from her. As she made coffee, Ted called the radio station in Colorado Springs. It was 11:28.

WHEN HE put the telephone down his face wore a doubtful expression. "It

seems," he said thoughtfully, "that no one else heard it or saw anything. They seemed to think I was playing a practical joke on them."

Miriam started to speak, then clamped her lips firmly together. It would only cause an argument for her to voice her constant fears again, she knew. He thought her to be superstitious and gullible. She poured the coffee and they drank in silence, grateful for the quiet, for the heat provided by the coffee. Mostly each wrestled his own feeling of despair and anguish over Liza.

The next morning brought the ill-assorted trio; one oversized, sullen deputy sheriff; one Air Force Intelligence captain in need of a shave; and his aide, whose grin remained wholly sceptical whenever his superior's eyes were busy elsewhere. In a way that was not actually a request at all, they asked Ted to show where he thought the noise had originated.

"Ted, I'm afraid" Miriam whispered sibilantly clinging to him tightly when he entered the kitchen to tell her. "You know the Air Force doesn't

send officers just because someone thought he heard a noise. It's something and they know what; but they aren't telling." Her pale blue eyes darted past the door to the child swinging on a tire swing in the backyard. "It could be a missile that got out of control. It could be atomic. Or a real saucer. Something big and important has kept that captain up all night and has him worried."

"Look Miriam," Ted said reasonably, "you have to stay calm; you can't go to pieces now. I'll try to get back in an hour. So don't worry."

"Hurry back, Ted, please."

"Sure honey. But don't let Liza get excited again. See that she has her nap. Ok?"

For an instant both their eyes fastened on the glistening-headed child, so small against the backdrop of the snow-topped mountains that arose abruptly behind her.

**S**HE WATCHED them leave with a feeling of dread closing in on her that had nothing to do with the illness of her child. The thing could be any of the things she had said—or something no one could even

guess about. If Ted were hurt, what would they do? She realized her hands had become clenched fists and she forced herself to relax them. Automatically she began straightening up the house, dusting, picking up, putting away. Liza tired of the swing and played with her dolls as Miriam deftly mixed pastry for a pie.

"Who's crying?" Liza asked abruptly, tilting her head in puzzlement.

"Crying?" Miriam listened a moment and then smiled, "Why it must be Betty. Is she tired?"

Liza didn't even glance at the curly-haired doll, her gaze intent and worried as she frowned, "I mean for real." Then she dimpled again, "Now it's not."

"Oh, honey, you are a strange little minx." Miriam slid the pie into the oven and looked once more at the clock. Eleven. They had been gone nearly two hours. She prepared Liza's lunch and set the table for the child, her two dolls and herself. Liza yawned before she had finished her milk. By eleven-thirty she was asleep in her bed, the pie out of the oven

and Miriam again staring at the clock with a consternation that was threatening to become panic again. She nearly sobbed her relief when the car returned to the house. She ran down the yard to the drive.

"Did you find it?"

"Not yet, honey. How's Liza?" Ted was driving the car which he hadn't turned off yet.

"She's sleeping. Ted, where are you going now?" she demanded sharply.

"Look, honey, the captain put in a call for some more men and I'm to meet them at the intersection and show them where he is. Then I'll be back. Ok?"

**S**HE SENSED his anxiety to get started and she drew back from the car reluctantly. "You won't go with them again?"

"Nope, just guide them to the captain and get back to the house. Oh, and Hogarty will be along soon to call the sheriff's office. They think horses might get in easier than men on foot." He handled the steering wheel decisively then and released the emergency brake. Casually he added, "When Liza wakes up, don't let her out un-

less I'm back. And you'd better stay inside too."

"Then there is something to be afraid of?" Miriam heard the I-told-you-so sound of the words and felt almost smug.

In her room Liza murmured sleepily, "Don't cry; it's all right." She turned over fretfully and flung one sunburned hand out over Betty.

Miriam returned to the living room and picked up a book which she hadn't opened yet when Hogarty knocked softly on the screen door. She welcomed his appearance eagerly; anything that broke up the dragging day was welcome.

"What do you think it is, Mr. Hogarty?"

"Don't know, Ma'am, but it's hot. They're sending for A-Men." His scowl deepened alarmingly as he snarled, "Damned Air Force ordering everyone. Do this. Do that."

"A-Men?" Miriam repeated in dread, knowing what he meant but denying the knowledge as long as she could. Ted's warning to stay inside assumed new dimensions.

"Radiation detectors. They wear suits so they can go in. The place keeps getting hotter

the farther we go in it." He gestured vaguely off to the right of the house. He turned to the telephone and growled savagely at the operator. Miriam's mind repeated the words incessantly, "Radiation detectors, A-Men," and she missed most of what he was saying on the phone.

"...but look, Bud, the captain said it's hot, and he ought to know. I ain't going back in. If you want to send volunteers on horses, that's your business, not mine." In a lower, more ominous tone he added, "That captain doesn't think it's a missile, either." He listened for a moment and banged down the phone angrily, glowering at it. Still scowling he left the house with Miriam close at his heels. He paused outside the door and muttered to her, "Look, Mrs. Grayson, if I was you I'd get my husband out of here fast and let the men in uniform go after that thing in there. It's their baby."

**I**N HER ROOM, Liza sat up suddenly, listening intently. She started to call her mother, but remembered that she had pretended not to hear it, pre-

tended Betty was doing the crying. Stubbornly she closed her lips together and gave a scornful look at the wide-eyed doll. This was for real. She walked quietly to the window and listened again. With no more hesitation she slipped from the room and out the back door following the sad sound.

As Hogarty shuffled his feet restlessly, Miriam decided she wouldn't be left alone again. "Mr. Hogarty, would you like a piece of pie and coffee before you go back to the captain. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you stay a few minutes."

When he left finally, Miriam felt exhausted and wished desperately she hadn't asked him to stay. The man was vile and had done nothing to dispell her fears—had, in fact, only intensified them. With a newly-found resolve she knew that she had to get Liza and run. Get away from the invisible spreading death from radiation. She nearly collapsed when she saw the empty bed.

"Liza?" She made the automatic gestures of looking for the child beneath the bed, in the closet, in the kitchen and bathroom. All the while she

knew with a certainty that Liza was not in the house at all. "Liza? Liza!" Then she began to scream, and ran down the road calling the name over and over.

She didn't know how far she ran down the road before she came to the car and saw Ted's frantic face. Incoherently she yelled at him shrilly and he shook her until she sobbed and said through her hysteria, "She's in there with that thing! She was sleeping and now she's in there. She'll be killed in there!"

**THEY MADE** them sit by the car and wait. They couldn't go in unprotected, the captain, or someone, said. They stared at the tiny prints that appeared magically here and there where the ground was still soft and muddy from the rain of the Monday before. Such tiny prints, each toe firmly planted, the near-invisible arch and the round little heel.

Once someone handed Miriam coffee in a vacuum bottle top and she looked at it dumbly until the voice ordered curtly, "Drink it." Then she looked up and saw Captain Henley's

gaunt face and his head weirdly naked looking with his close cropped crew cut. She closed her eyes tightly and fought the new wave of fear that made her stomach heave. It was a bad sign, she thought wildly; he looked like a death's head with the skin stretched so tightly over his cheek bones and the sunken eyes and skull.

Once they made them move and dimly Miriam remembered getting inside the car and being driven backwards away from the prints. "No!" she had struggled to get out of the car.

"It's too hot to stay there any longer," they said.

Toward dark one of the grotesquely clad figures emerged from the dense forest and went into a white trailer. Miriam looked at the white trailer with a sense of wonder. When had it come? What was it? The figure carried something, geiger counter? No one told her anything.

She was lost in the endlessly frightening maze of her own thoughts as the search continued. If she hadn't been so afraid they wouldn't have had to come out here. Liza wouldn't have become sick. Psychoso-

matic asthma they called it. "It all comes back to me," she said, unconsciously giving voice to her self blame.

"Miriam?"

"Yes?" She had forgotten Ted's presence. It was a new source of guilt to look at his tortured face.

"Look, honey, you can't start blaming yourself. You'll go crazy. Who can say what made her decide to go into the woods now?"

"SHE SAID she heard something. A crying. Suppose she heard it again and went to see." Miriam turned to face the woods again and was shocked to see how deep the shadows had become. She lifted her face to the sky and already could make out a faint star defying the still evident daylight. Suppose she had an attack. She was so afraid when she was alone and it got dark. Or was that Miriam's fear. But she was small and it was getting so dark under the shadows of the trees.

Ted put his arm about her shoulders and drew her head against him, "Don't think about it now. They'll find her."

"Ted, if I hadn't been so frightened about war and bombs and saucers, do you think she would have been different? Could she have sensed my fear and reacted to it?"

"Why were you so afraid?" Ted brought his own eyes from the deepening gloom of the woods to stare at her. "For God's sake, why?"

"I don't know. When they tested new missiles, I could close my eyes and see how it would be to have one hit us. I would watch a movie with the atom bomb, or see it on television and again I lived through every minute of having it happen to us. But most of all the thought of people from out there scared me. I... I used to have such strong faith in God until they began saying others probably did live and might even have visited Earth, and it made me wonder if there is a God. We have been taught He created man on Earth. No one ever said anything about people or intelligence anywhere else. They would have known when they wrote the Bible, wouldn't they? They were supposed to be inspired by God when they wrote, but they nev-

er mentioned others. They would be such horrors, able to travel in space and spy on us. Maybe we'd just be animals to them, like the cows and rabbits are to us. Do you see?" She had no more tears now, only the emptiness and the fear.

**T**ED TIGHTENED his grasp on her shoulder as if by holding her tightly enough he could reassure her of the things she wanted so desperately. Could she have transmitted her fears to Liza? The doctors said there was nothing organic. They had wanted to put her in the hospital for an extended stay, but he and Miriam had refused. She was so much worse in the hospital, had more frequent attacks and came out of them slower. But Miriam never could help her, it had always been he. He had quit his job with the insurance brokerage agency, sold the house they had dreamed of owning outright with no mortgage, and he had come West, where there were no loud noises to frighten the child. No doctors, no television, no tires screeching around a corner, no ambulances

or fire engines. But were they actually the sort of things that would frighten a child? Or would they momentarily frighten a mother?

"Mr. Grayson?" They both jerked as if they had been scalded at the sound of the voice.

Quickly Ted pulled away from Miriam and met the captain striding toward the car. "There's something?"

"Something. One of the men just radioed in that there are another set of prints. Western boots. And we realized about an hour ago that Hogarty's missing also. His wife called in to find out when he'd be home for supper."

"Hogarty?" Ted repeated incomprehendingly.

"It's possible that he saw your daughter's footsteps leading toward the dangerous area and he followed hoping to find her before she was injured. Chances are that he did just that and has carried her out somewhere else." Henley's rigid face belied any of the hope he was offering them however.

"How bad is it in there?" Ted searched the officer's eyes for his answer. "Your men

aren't staying more than half an hour, are they? I've been timing them."

"Look, Mr. Grayson, I won't try to build up your hopes too much. Unless Hogarty got her out... Why don't you get your wife out of here."

"She has to live with it, Captain; she has to see it through," Ted answered flatly.

Miriam sagged back again as the captain left. The thought that Hogarty might have found Liza brought her no relief.

WHEN DARKNESS abruptly closed in, someone made a fire and they sat near it. The troopers were doing a good job of keeping sight-seers back, but a reporter got in and stayed becoming part of their group. A strained, quiet group huddled about the flickering fire that was surrounded by the impenetrable black of the night. A night that sighed and called with many voices, all frightening, that snapped twigs as explosively as rifle fire and stirred bushes and undergrowth. They were together and yet alone, each with his own thoughts, unreachable, unapproachable.

Henley haunched low staring at nothing, his face a mask of weariness. In the distance they could hear the loudspeaker one of the men had carried with him. It was calling over and over, "Liza! Hogarty! Can you hear us? Liza!" Henley shook his head abruptly and stood up, his voice very compassionate as he asked Miriam, "Mrs. Grayson, won't you please rest in the car for awhile? You'll be chilled out here."

"She doesn't even have her shoes on," Miriam whispered dully. Suddenly as if the spring had refused the tension and snapped apart she screamed at him, "You! Why do you pretend to care? Soldiers! Always playing God! Kill! Shoot it down! That's all you can think of when you see something you don't understand. Well, do you like killing my child? She's only four. Does that make you a better man? You murdered her! You're a killer!"

The figure of a tall man moved in quickly and before she could realize what was happening there was the feel of a needle in her arm. She struggled briefly, and just as rapidly as her outburst occurred, she

collapsed sobbing against the chest of the tall stranger. Ted stood by her side helplessly.

"I'll just take her to the station wagon for awhile. She'll rest without actually sleeping. It'll be better that way."

Ted nodded and watched him lead her away. To Henley he began, "She isn't really responsible..."

"Of course not. We are," Henley said quietly with finality. "I don't know what the Nike-Zeus shot down or what flew away from it and headed for the mountains. But it could have been a missile! Oh, my God, it could have been!"

**T**HE NIGHT became colder and Ted was grateful for the coat someone handed him without a word. He tried desperately not to think of Liza in there with no shoes, having an attack with no one to soothe her out of it. Gasping for air and not able to control her spasmodic breathing enough to draw it in. Trying to scream in fright and not enough oxygen in her lungs to allow her even that relief. He buried his face in his arms and let his

tears roll unheeded down his cheeks.

He had known about Miriam, had felt strong and masculine in permitting her the luxury of her fears. He could take care of both of them. He could erase the terrible frightening world for them and be their strength. They had needed him in such a way that daily his vanity had grown until he knew without doubt that nothing could get past him to harm them. He wept.

Morning came slowly, first a stirring of the air, and a fading away of stars not as if daylight were chasing them, but rather as if they tired of the grim game being played beneath them. Ted blinked and realized guiltily that he had dozed there by the fire, his head cradled on his arms. He stretched easing the stiffened joints, his cold numbed hands and feet. Henley was near the trailer talking over the field phone that linked him with the A-men. When he turned from it and stared unseeingly past Ted into the forest, there were grimmer lines about his mouth and eyes, a tightness that suggested that

for the first time he might actually be afraid.

"They found Hogarty," he said expressionlessly.

"Dead?" Ted knew by the very lack of expression. "The radiation?"

"Not the radiation. They say his back is broken; he's been beaten to death."

"It *is* a saucer!" Miriam's scream came from behind Ted. "They've got Liza!"

The tall doctor took her arm and led her to the remains of the fire. Very deliberately he said, "You sit down there and eat whatever they can find to give you. If you lose your self control once more, I'll be forced to put you to sleep and take you to the hospital in Colorado Springs."

Meekly Miriam sat down as directed, "I'll be quiet, Doctor. Don't make me leave."

"All right then. Now about Hogarty, are they bringing him out?"

"I told them to bring him here, but he'll be hot. He'll have to be put inside the trailer."

The doctor nodded and strode off toward the trailer. Ted watched him go with a

sense of unreality. He dropped to the ground beside Miriam and quietly held her hand. It was cold and lifeless in his, as if with hope dying her very life processes would soon cease to function.



AND NOW it was over. Hogarty. Liza. There was no purpose in living after all. Life was accidental and therefore useless. Miriam couldn't erase that last scene from her eyes although they were tightly closed. The tiny figure carried so carefully in the gauntleted hands. She opened her eyes and realized they had actually been closed less than a minute. The trailer door was opening as Ted neared it and the doctor stood there with Liza in his arms. He walked swiftly away from the trailer and gently placed her on the ground. Then he ran back. "Don't touch her!" he called shedding his helmet and suit even as he yelled. When he returned the second time, he was without the protective clothes of the A-men.

As Ted and Miriam were

held back by the restraining arm of Captain Henley, the doctor stripped the child in a flurry of activity and tossed the clothes behind him. "Get them inside the trailer. They're hot." One of the uniformed men picked them up gingerly and raced away with them. The doctor jerked his own coat off and carefully wrapped the frail girl in it. She seemed to stir and snuggled against the warmth of it.

"Get the counter over her!" he ordered crisply. The clicking rose only slightly as he played it over and around her. "We're taking her to the hospital; she's going to be all right."

MIRIAM couldn't remember later how they passed the time until the doctor motioned them into the room. "She's starting to wake up now. She's perfectly all right."

Miriam flew to the immaculate bed where Liza was stirring slightly, "Darling, it's Mommie! Liza!"

Liza opened her eyes sleepily and yawned much as she did every day of the week when she awakened from a deep

sleep. She grinned mischievously and said winningly, "Wasn't that a good game, Mommie?"

"Oh, Liza!" Miriam blinked back her tears and hugged the child to her. "It was a fine game."

"Mommie, you're not mad at me, are you? Because I went in the woods alone. You couldn't hear him, but I could and I had to get him loose." Her robin egg blue eyes widened with remembrance, "And that man with the boots was trying to catch me and acted funny and my friend made him stop it and leave me alone."

Miriam gasped as the implication hit home, "Hogarty!" she whispered in horror.

"It's all right, Mommie. He said don't be afraid ever again. And he made me warm and gave me a thing to suck and put me in his bed, and the light stayed on all night and when I woke up it made me go back to sleep." The dimple deepened and she yawned largely. Her voice was far away as she said happily, "He let me see his prayers before he went away. It made me feel good like bubble bath and a million, million kisses."

"You couldn't find a trace of him?" Ted asked outside the door once more.

"We have the capsule lifeboat thing, the cover, and your daughter's story. Period." He eyed Ted levelly and added, "While she slept before, she repeated some strange noises several times. And she said quite clearly that when they come, she has to tell him. He—it—whatever it was—left a message for others like him.

We'd better all pray it's not a condemnation of Earth and its people."

"It isn't," Miriam said softly, surely as she gently closed the door where her child lay sleeping with a smile curving her lips. "He gave her love and protection and he commended his own life to his God. Those things don't mix with a legacy of hate and revenge." Her face glowed with a reborn, unshakable faith.

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**Magazine**

# A Matter Of Philosophy

by Wilfred Owen Morley

AS SOON as I stepped into the Captain's quarters, I guessed that he had a surprise for me; I could tell from the genial way in which he swiveled around in his chair and inhaled a deep draft from his tobacco-tube.

"Elton," he announced slowly, "I have a treat for you. The consignment we picked up at Lunar Station was the one for which I have been waiting." He reached into his desk and

drew out a small disk. "Alfred Bristol's greatest work: *The Ascent of the Liberal*."

It was one of those rare moments when pure joy floods through you, drowning out all thought of anything else. There was nothing I could say. I merely sank into the chair beside him, smiling.

"Yes," he continued, "and the historians call the 20th Century the 2d Dark Age. An age that produced such titans

as Bertrand Russell and Bristol, men of such profound depth. Sometimes I am saddened, Elton, at the lack of vision shown by our contemporaries."

"I know," I replied, "I, too, have felt about it just as you. These pigmies to whom the sweep of events is nothing more than a conflict of blacks and whites; these gnats who can see but one factor; these minds so warped..."

A light on the skipper's desk flared. "Excuse me Elton," he murmured, snapping on the mike.

An instant later, Dr. Halley's face filled the screen. A most capable man, Halley, I thought, but, like so many others of our day one whose mind ran along a single track.

"An urgent matter, sir," he stated, his face set in grim lines. "May I see you and Mr. Elton alone?"

The Captain nodded and switched off the set. "I want you to read this work right away, Elton," he confided, "so I'll put it in the mentascope, and you can hop to it as soon as Halley's finished with whatever business is at hand."

THE DOOR swung open, and Halley stalked in, bristling with purposeful determination. "I must insist, sir, that Control Assistant Lucian be confined in the hospital immediately. His mental state is becoming increasingly dangerous and his actions indicate that he may burst into open violence at any moment."

I could see that the Captain was trying to retain his patience. "Halley," he contended in a tired voice, "I thought we had threshed this matter out before. Why must you continue in this dogmatic fashion? I have seen Lucian at work; I have spoken with him and studied the official reports upon him. There are no grounds for such a drastic procedure as you urge. Lucian is, I grant, a bit different from yourself and the other men, but that is no reason for imagining that he is dangerous."

"Sometimes I am inclined to feel that you are obsessed, doctor." He turned to me. "Mr. Elton, you have been in contact with Control Assistant Lucian, have you not?"

"I have indeed, sir."

"Have you observed any-

thing about him that would tend to substantiate Dr. Halley's contentions?"

**I** PONDERED carefully. One must not be too hasty in passing judgement. "It is true that he has been given, at times," I replied, "to—shall I say whimsical actions? And, further, he might be said to consider himself a trifle more important than his position actually warrants. But I believe sir, in keeping an open mind."

"As do I," echoed the Captain. "No, Halley; I cannot sanction such obviously uncalled for measures. If you feel that Lucian would benefit from a little more personal attention than the other men, why that is up to your discretion. But I cannot permit more."

"And I suppose," stated Halley with what I considered a note of sarcasm, "that Lucian's act of putting the forward engines out of commission a week ago was just clean fun."

"Dr. Halley!" At this point the Captain rose, his full kindly dignity enveloping him. "Dr. Halley, you forget that we have

only your opinion as opposed to Lucian's statement. Outside of your opinion, there is nothing in the way of corroboration. And it must not be forgotten that you are clearly biased in this matter.

"No, there is no evidence whatsoever that the affair was not entirely accidental, and more the fault of the Control than his Assistant. Unfortunately Fleming had not yet regained consciousness, so we cannot question him.

"My decision is final, sir. Now if you have nothing more important to discuss with me, I shall appreciate your returning to duty."

Halley departed without another word.

**THE CAPTAIN** turned to the mentascope. "What a welcome relief from this concept of black and white are Bristol's philosophies. For, as he has clearly shown, black and white rarely, if ever, exist. We are all various shades of gray, replete with innumerable modifying, rich tenors. Just think of all the hasty, ill-advised action that might have been avoided had only our for-

bears been advised by this wise, kindly counsel. But I must not digress farther." He helped me adjust the microscope and I sank back in utter bliss, my entire being drinking in the mellow charm of the *Ascent of the Liberal*.

Would that I could write with the eloquence of a Bristol, describe to you the gentle, yet firm thoughts which flow through this greatest of philosophical discourses. Under this influence, the harsh, sharply-etched temper of our current life melts away, and we see the blending, smoothly-flowing thoughts whose predominance could have resulted in a world fully as progressed as ours, yet one which avoided all the harsh, violent conflicts we see as having brought ours forth.

Temperance and tranquility is the keynote of Bristol's being; an attitude which investigates fully, learning all aspects of a situation, before acting. How different from the narrow, dogmatic outlook of a Halley, or of thousands like him.

And how often this narrow, biased viewpoint has resulted in bringing forth violence and

conflict, which so easily could have been avoided by an open mind, willing to compromise. Such is what occurred on that fateful voyage which I am describing; I have given much thought to the matter, and I cannot help but feel that Halley, not Lucian, was to blame.

For I had scarcely set aside the priceless volume, and taken out my tobacco-tube, preparing to enter into another mentally-invigorating discussion with the Captain, when the door was rudely broken in. Framed in the entrance to the Captain's quarters were Lucian and Halley, struggling desperately.

**H**ALLEY asserts that Lucian had taken weapons from the arsenal, but there is only his clearly biased word for it, as were there but his unsubstantiated charges against the man previously. Who knows but that the poor Assistant had been persecuted by the doctor, driven to what desperate ends. Perhaps he was seeking the Captain for refuge against his oppressor.

"Gentlemen!" I cried, "what is the meaning of this?" Even now, it might not be too late

to temporize and avoid needless violence.

However, I regret to say, it was too late. For in the tussle, the gun was discharged and our noble Captain mortally wounded. Of course Lucian was overcome, and treated shamefully; I do not think his story was listened to at all—or, if it was, with but scant attention.

I bent over our Captain as he lay on the floor, his life flowing out swiftly. "Elton," he whispered, "do not forget the words of Bristol. Do nothing rash because of me; keep your mind open and judge not hastily." So saying, the great man died.

It was at this time that, due to the confusion and ensuing

lack of attention to space, the ship's screens were not set in order at the proper moment, and a swarm of meteors riddled us like so much buckshot. Only Lucian, Dr. Halley, and I survived.

There was an investigation, of course, led by narrow-minded men who are incapable of perceiving the many-sidedness of human nature. They declared, in record time, that Halley had been completely in the right.

Sometimes I am inclined to feel bitter at the Terrestrial Board for revoking my Mate's license—but then, I, at least, am capable of looking at both sides of the question.

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by Hal Clement

*featured in the February issue of*

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by Hugh

Raymond

*It was a famous spot, this house. Here General Washington had slept the night before the battle of Long Island. Only...the plaque said that the house had been built of "sturdy American wood" — while anyone could see that it was a stone structure...*

**W**HEN I walked into the office that morning, Gus Heller, the owner of the New Life Realty Corporation, was sitting at his desk, as usual, his feet planted solidly on top, and smoking a big cigar. The phone bell shrilled as I slammed the door behind me.

"C'mere, Hank," barked Gus, snapping a suspender and crooking a finger at me with the other hand.

"Just a minute, boss, the phone's ringing. Good morning, Sylvia." I scaled my hat to a peg on the wall above my own desk, nodded pleasantly to Miss Bernstein and grabbed the phone.

"Hello. Yes, this is the extermination department—what's that? Roaches? Any bedbugs? Oh, no bedbugs. Silverfish. Wait a minute please, I'll refer you to the complaint department."

I switched the call to our stenographer's desk and turned my attention to Gus. Miss Bernstein's voice closed in behind me, buzzing away. She was thirty-five, unmarried, looked it, and was getting away from the blissful state at the

rate of thirty seconds to the minute.

"Well, what is it. I've got some mail..."

"Read this." He reached into a drawer, brought out an envelope and handed it to me. Then he popped his cigar into an ash tray. I could tell by such signs and portents that the boss was in a bad humor that morning. It remained to discover whether it was his mother-in-law or a bit too much salami-on-rye of which he was overfond.

I took the letter out of the envelope and cast my eye down the sheet. The handwriting was very bad, crabbed, as a writer would say, (even if it wasn't) and looked more like hen scratches or frog furrows. This is what it read:

Mister Gus Heller  
3012 Worth Street  
Manhattan

Dere sir,

My husbin says not to rite you, but I got to if we are going to get anythin settled. Since two months, weve had tree dets in the house and it is gettin awful hard to

rent a room ennymore. Last nite, Mr. Hardy on the tird floor back died and the poleece says it was heart faileure. They said the same thing about the other people who died. The poleece has been askin me questions all nite and my husbin is gettin pritty tired of it. He dunt like the way peeple are dyin and the way they died and he dunt like the way people keep disapirin and leavin there bags and stuff behint. The naybors are start in to talk and its getting awful hard to rent enny rooms (*here the handwriting changed its style abruptly*). Listen, Mr. Keller, I tuld my wife not to rite you but since she did, I suppose its al right. Ennyway, somepin has got to be done. Tree peeple died funny here, even if the poleece said it was heart faileure. They all had damn funny looks on their faces when they died, like they was seein a ghost. And the people

who keep rentin rooms and goin away without enny one seein em and leavin there bag benint aint doin business enny good atall. The naybors is talkin. Please do somepin, please. O, we will sent you the monthly rent in the morning. signed,  
Thomas Higgins, super.  
Macushla Higgins

**I** FOLDED the sheet, evidently torn from a child's school book, glanced at the return address and then handed it back to Gus.

"Flatbush, eh? We haven't had any trouble out there for months."

"Kelly, I've been gettin' letters like that for almost eight months now." He replaced the smoldering cigar in his mouth, "I haven't said anything or showed you any of 'em until now because I was sorta ashamed to. This," he indicated the letter and pushed the derby hat he was wearing back over his forehead, "is kinda the last straw. It's gettin' serious. We're losin' money right and left. Our tenants mostly die—

or don't stay long enough to pay anything."

"Looks strictly in the line of everyday dying to me," I said firmly. "Higgins said in the letter that the police were satisfied the deaths were simple heart stoppage. After all, Gus—Murder Inc., is in the past. Fergosh-sakes, people die and disappear every day. Why, according to the paper this morning, three thousand people disappeared in this city alone last year. It's common enough..."

He fixed me with a half closed eye.

"Our firm accounted for about a hundred and sixty seven of the three thousand that vanished. They disappeared out of houses we owned. I got a stack of letters sayin' so."

I gritted my teeth.

"No wonder!" I yelled. "Who wouldn't scam out of old dumps like the ones we've got. Who was it started buying up those old shacks in the city and rehabilitating 'em for rooming houses? You did. My idea was to build new ones and then..."

He shut me up with a hard look, got up out of his seat and hobbled to the nearest wall.

"Here," he barked, indicating a huge map of the city he'd got out of some five and dimery; "is where the houses are."

I got up close to the map and peered. A lot of tiny red circles had been pencilled in around certain locations in the city. Most of them were ancient and decrepit. For that matter, so were most of our houses.

"Well?"

"I dunno. I dunno what to think. We ain't breakin' any laws. Everythin' legal and above board. But I don't like the way people keep dying and disappearin' in our houses."

"Maybe I'm not doing my job," I said sarcastically. "Maybe I'm so cruel that the bedbugs and cockroaches are working overtime to make people feel so bad that they die or go away in a frenzy and never come back. Maybe..."

"**F**ORGET it, son." He sat down abruptly and twirled the end of his cigar in the ash-tray for a minute or so.

"Well?" I repeated. "I've got to get back to the morning mail."

"Drop it," he said. "You're goin' out to Flatbush."

"What for? Do I look like a blooming detective? Gus, just because I'm related to half the Brooklyn police force—because my wife's a Flanagin—that's no reason..."

"I'm not askin' you to be a flatfoot—at least no flatter a foot than you are now. I'm askin' you to go out and take a look at this place because you've got imagination. Anyway, I want to find out what's goin' on and I don't want to get the police startin' more investigations. We'd be rooned. We need imagination." He lingered over the last word. "Let those orders go until tomorrow. A couple million cockroaches will be grateful if you let 'em live a few days longer."

"Sylvia..." I whirled, my face a mask of sarcasm, "this mental giant..." but the lady wasn't there. She'd gone outside, to the powder room as she called it.

I took the subway.

**F**LATBUSH is a neighborly part of town. Because of the influence of the movies, it is the best known section of the best known borough of the best known city in the world. Yet,

many people have a mistaken conception of Flatbush. It finds its duplicate in many another place throughout the country—sprawling, suburban areas where poverty is not so obvious because the entire area is genteelly poor or lower middle class and where the best homes are two story, seven and nine room cottages with oil heating and at least three kids scarring the woodwork.

Flatbush is the home of the comic character Major Hoople and you probably know what that means.

The section was originally settled by the Dutch, although it is practically impossible to detect the flavor any longer. There is a Dutch Reformed Church in the very heart of the old settlement and surrounding it, down streets and avenues for almost a mile on all sides are the pathetic remains of big old homes, magnificent and expansive in their day, but now dedicated mainly to the purposes of New Life Realty which has converted many of them into rooming houses of (I confess) somewhat doubtful quality.

The address on the agony letter was on Martense Street, be-

tween Bedford and Flatbush. I'd seen the house before. It was a fairly modern structure for one of our places—which is to say that it wasn't much over a hundred and ninety years of age; brick, dun-colored and two and a half stories high, the half story being characteristic of a certain type of old Dutch architecture.

"MRS. HIGGINS?" I asked anxiously as the door opened slightly after I'd rung the bell, and regretted instantly that I had failed to identify the sex of the body behind it. A large, amorphous and terribly weatherbeaten male face poked out from behind the jamb and looked at me balefully—which is a mild description of the real thing.

"Sure and I'm not missus Higgins," he said in a broken down brogue which plainly indicated his origin in Brooklyn's Irish colony far downtown. "I'm misther Higgins." Then he caught sight of my face. "Ye're a doctor—maybe a detective?"

"I'm from the New Life Realty Corporation." I said hastily and took off my hat. "We're the people who employ you.

You're—you're not the same man we had here before—when I was here before, I mean."

"We're not hivy drinkers," the door opened wider and his immense bony frame, attired in dirty overalls come into full view. "The MacPhersons who were here before us carried on sonthin' scandalous..."

"Yes, yes," I began and was about to push my way past him when a woman, apparently Macushla Higgins, his wife, appeared behind him out of the dark, deep hallways. Her face was florid, full of wrinkles and folds of fat. She had small pig-gish eyes and blinked them constantly. A filthy apron girded her ample figure.

"What's he want?" she mumbled to her husband.

**I** IMMEDIATELY hastened to reidentify myself, deciding that the superintendent would do a bad job of it.

"You—ah—sent us a letter as of this morning. Someone died, I believe. The last of a long—uh—line."

Mr. and Mrs. Higgins parted as if by magic. She made a sort of clutching gesture at her throat.

"He's upstairs. They came and embalmed him last night. Doctor Throne got them in. He's takin' care of the body."

She beckoned me forward. Two steps inside, and the brilliant light of the July sun was suddenly lost in the dingy gloom of the hall way. They led me up a rickety flight of stairs, then up another and another and finally I was pushed down a corridor. My hosts stopped at last before a door from which the paint had already entirely peeled. A pathetic rose, wilted in the summer heat was tacked to the jamb. This, I was informed, was the Christian work of Mrs. Higgins.

Mr. Higgins ostensibly out of respect, but probably more out of a supersititious fear, remained behind as we entered. His wife pushed a pudgy finger toward a bed lying near a shaded window.

"That's him," she said in a strangled sort of voice and again clutched her throat, very obviously swooning in delight at the situation. She glanced back contemptuously at her husband who was lurking in the door way.

I approached the rickety old

brass bed and glanced down at the body.

God, what a face! The embalmers had obviously been at work because the room smelled faintly of the formaldehyde and other ingredients they put in their private recipes, but they had failed entirely to straighten out the features of the dead man.

It was a small bulk, that body dressed in a shoddy business suit, evidently his best. The body itself was composed, relaxed. The hands lay quietly folded on the breast.

I've seen looks like that one before. On the face of a boy who had plummeted off the Palisades. On the faces of women who faint slowly and think they are dying. More especially, I've seen it on the faces of people choked to death brutally. But there was no sign of violence on the man before me. The embalmers must have tried to fix that face but the muscles couldn't be gotten at in the short time they'd had to work in. A job like that would have taken time—and money.

"Nice—eh?" I whirled, gripping my hat very tightly.

A BEARDED man, short, stocky, with skin as pale as a sheet and dressed in an old lounging robe over patched trousers walked into the room. His beady eyes lit up as he advanced, hand outstretched.

"My name's Throne, Ford. Doctor Ford Throne." He lit a cigaret nervously as I let go of his hand and explained who I was.

"Yes, I helped the police when they came, like I helped them the two times before. They called it heart failure. So it was. So it was." He dragged out the last three words. With his nervous hands he dragged a limp chair toward him and sat down.

"Leave us alone, Mrs. Higgins," he said suddenly, looking up at her, commandingly. The superintendent's wife, who had been hovering close, seemed to bridle—but there was no outburst. Instead, she nodded very humbly and waddled toward the door, closing it very quietly behind her. The mingled voices of Thomas and Macushla Higgins cadenced down the hall.

"You're a doctor," I said, needlessly.

"Retired," he answered, somewhat wearily. "I suppose you people at—New Life did you say it was?" I nodded—"are worried about these deaths." I nodded again.

"Well," he continued, "outside of the fact that there have been a lot of them—and some disappearances besides, which the police don't know about because the good Higginses have failed to inform them—there's nothing really much out of the ordinary about it."

He took several drags on his cigaret, pausing. When he spoke again it was eagerly. "This fellow died hard, apparently, but he died of heart failure, nothing else. I knew he had a bad heart, Mr. Kelly. All the roomers in this house come to me about their ailments when they find out I'm a doctor, and sometimes I tell 'em what's wrong. Homer Hardy—that's his name—had a very bad heart. Anything might have set him off—a bad dream, the fear of returning to his wife. O, he was a wife-deserter. Used to live in Cleveland. Ran away from his wife there."

I ignored the confidence.

"You seem to have been tak-

ing charge of the funeral affairs," I said.

He wagged his head.

"It's the least I could do. Those two—" he indicated the late occupants of the room with a look of disgust through the door—"wouldn't have known what to do. I looked through Homer's papers and cabled his brother in Cleveland. He sent a money order by return."

"Then," I began, "that's settled."

"Say," he stood up hurriedly, "how about a drink in my room. No use sending you away without some little memento of your house," he grinned.

I hesitated for a minute, then finally signified assent by nodding my head. I have never been known consciously to refuse a drink.

AS WE WERE walking out the door, my eye was caught suddenly by a plaque fixed to the wall to one side of the door with heavy bolts evidently sunk deep in some strong bracing member behind the plaster. An American eagle, defiant, rampant, circling a graven head of George Washington took my attention. Cu-

riously, I stepped closer and while Throne waited in the doorway, I read the small lettering, cut shallowly in the metal. It read:

ON THE NIGHT OF (the date had been blotted out) GEORGE WASHINGTON, COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE CONTINENTAL ARMY SLEPT IN THIS ROOM BEFORE THE BATTLE OF LONG ISLAND. WE LOYAL AMERICANS, ERECT THIS PLAQUE IN THIS STURDY AMERICAN HOUSE OF AMERICAN WOOD TO THE MEMORY OF THE GREATEST AMERICAN.

The metal plate was signed with the name Van Moederen.

Throne grunted.

"Too bad you read that," he lamented, mockingly. "You people'll probably go and raise the rent now."

His room on the floor above was large, bright and sunshiny and filled with plants. The herbiage might have been cheery, except that they were all Venus fly traps and cobra plants.

"Interesting little devils,

aren't they?" he grinned, handing me a stiff drink of Scotch he'd been busy pouring as I looked them over.

"I've seen some at the Prospect Park Botanical Gardens," I said, interestedly and suddenly staggered. "Eh?" I said weakly, leaning against an old bureau and setting the whiskey down hastily, "I'm as dizzy as a blonde."

THRONE leaped to my side.

"Sit down here," he said and led me to a chair. "It's quite all right. You're not sick. You're just drunk."

"What?"

He laughed a little.

"The air in this house, for some reason, is very rich in oxygen. I know. I've tested it."

"Where does it come from, pipes?" My head had stopped its swimming and I reached for the whiskey.

"That I don't know. There aren't any pipes other than the usual ones passing under the house—and even if one carried oxygen, whoever owned it would have fixed the lid. I don't mind it much. Makes me

feel good. Other people don't like it so much. My pets like it, I think." He nodded his head toward the plants that circled the room, set in clay pots. "Makes 'em feel as though their output is better every day." He laughed again and downed his drink. "Have another?" he asked.

I acquiesced and got up, by this time having rather forgotten my mission and the body downstairs. I approached one of the plants and gazed down at its spiked hood. He noticed my curiosity and immediately bagged a fly in the room with the aid of a small net.

"I keep this for my pets," he said. "They get hungry, sometimes, when they can't catch enough to eat. In summer time, like now, they gorge." He extracted the struggling insect expertly from the net and crippling its wings slightly dropped it into the mouth of the plant. Presently the hood began to close. I watched it narrowly.

"It takes some time, of course. About an hour. When they open up again, the fly is generally mostly digested. The plant eats 'em."

"Are they dangerous to human life?" I asked curiously, fingering one of the leaves of the feeding plant.

HE LIT A cigaret.

"Not in the least bit. They would be, of course if they were bigger, but no known variety is any larger than that one you're touching. One curious thing about them—a phenomenon I've observed in species I've bred myself—is their ability to change shape and color, as if they sensed that their prey was on to their tricks and they were trying to fool it.

"From the aesthetic viewpoint, Mr. Kelly, my plants are very beautiful. The flies and spiders they catch probably don't think so, but I do. Why, sometimes I think they are almost alive—really alive, I mean, not just instinctively. I've woken and seen them stretching their leaves and hoods to the faint light of the dawn, twisting and writhing in some of the strangest shapes you ever seen. You know Mr. Kelly, I have some theories about those plants. I..."

I interrupted the discussion, fearing he would go on forever. Gus was waiting at the office.

"I'm afraid they'll give me some bad dreams," I said jocosely, picking up my hat.

His eyes narrowed and twitched a bit and the fingers holding the smoldering cigaret shook.

"They give *me* bad dreams, sometimes. Sometimes," he glanced up musing at the walls, "I think they know where they are. There have been nights when I've awakened and thought I heard them talking..." he stopped abruptly, acutely aware that he was speaking like a man who is a fit candidate for the nearest asylum—in this case, Kings County, not many blocks away.

"I'm sorry," he said, abashed. "I shouldn't have talked like that...still," he paused and glanced furtively about. "There are some strange things about this room, Mr. Kelly. There are some strange things about this house..."

There's little doubt that as a detective I'd make a good plumber. Just as he was about to expound on the very things I

was here to find out about, I went away—but quick. And if you want to know why, I was scared, clear down to my corns. I left him standing quietly in his room.

I didn't go back to the office but went to my favorite bar, phoned Gus I'd be in in the morning and got a little tipsy. We Irish have an intimate and spiritual acquaintance with death. I suppose I was afraid I'd have been hearing the old Kelly family banshee wailing next.

HELLER was talking on the phone when I came in the next day, a half hour late. Something was wrong. I detected that instantly, because mousy Miss Bernstein was sitting rigidly in her chair listening to the boss's voice speaking to someone on the other end of the wire.

Gus' face was a definite shade of white. At any rate, there was damn little blood left in it. When he finished talking, he set the receiver down deliberately and picked up his cigar with shaking hands.

"That was Captain Geoghan out in Flatbush," he began.

Abruptly my heart did a few flipflops. "A Doctor Throne died last night at you know what address." There was a second during which I thought my heart stopped, then it began thumping very heavily.

"Was it—was—was it murder?" I asked weakly and he nodded. I looked at Sylvia but she was looking straight at Heller. Then I sat down.

Gus relit his cigar with a trembling hand.

"Murdered bad," he contin-

ued. "They found him in bed, cut up. Chewed, I mean. His legs seemed to have been eaten off and the top of his head was gone."

"What about Mrs. Higgins?" I grasped desperately at some scrap of humor in the situation.

"They've got her at the County. She's hysterical. Her old man's off his nut completely. Claims he heard Throne screaming something all night. Something like as if the house was falling down on him or the

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**STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF**

Science Fiction Stories published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1st, 1959.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., managing editor, Michael I. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y. business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.) Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., Maurice Coyne, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y., Michael I. Silberkleit, 241 Church St., New York 13, N. Y.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) (NONE.)

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.) Louis H. Silberkleit (Signature of publisher) Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1959.

**MAURICE COYNE**  
NOTARY PUBLIC, State of New York  
No. 03-5844500  
Qualified in Bronx County  
Commission expires March 30, 1960

room was caving in. "Grrrrrrr," he growled. "That brick white elephant is costing us more money than it's worth."

"Brick?" I pricked up my ears. "That house isn't brick; it's wood. There's a plaque dedicated to George Washington in Hardy's room which says it's wood." I quoted the dedication.

"Go on, it's brick," he jeered. "I ought to know. I bought the joint."

I suddenly realized that he was right. The house was brick. I'd noticed that as I walked up to it and then completely forgot it.

For some reason my heart started to pound even more heavily. I felt suddenly weaker and weary. I got up and put on my hat.

"Where you goin'?" asked Gus. "I'll need you here this afternoon on that Clagget business. He's buyin' some more land out around the Brooklyn Iron and Kettle Works. Some of our houses are on it."

"I'll be back in an hour," I replied. "Miss Bernstein, stick by that phone. I have a feeling I'll be on the other end in a little while. I'm going over to

Borough Hall—to the Hall of Records."

THEY WERE very courteous to me when I asked for the information on the Van Moederen. I'd known, of course, that all houses built in the city are registered and their plans submitted and filed. It had been more crudely done in the older days, but it had been done. At least, I hoped so. I heaved a sigh of relief when they came back with the stuff, but a chill went through me when I read distinctly that the original Van Moederen house had been built of wood.

I asked the clerk if there was any record of the house having been torn down and replaced, or even renovated. He shook his head doubtfully, peered over the dusty old records again and pursed his lips.

"Nope," he said finally. "The Van Moederen house has never been touched, according to these files except once in—uh" he raised the sheets to the light, "1903 when they were laying some electrical conduits on Martense Street and they had to excavate under part of the

foundation. See, here's the engineer's note." He paused and indicated some closely written words on the blueprint sheets. Then he picked up the older, original plan, drawn on crumbly brown paper and put it back in the folder.

I told him I'd be back, went out and phoned Miss Bernstein and got a few more addresses—mainly of the houses which Gus had circled in red on the map. Picking out the ones described on our deed papers as brick, I put the clerk to work again. He was very helpful about it and cheerfully reported that the houses were wood, had never been touched except for minor repairs plainly indicated on the sheets.

Feeling as cold as

[Turn Page]

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ice, I looked at him weakly. "But they're not wood, they're brick. Our deeds say they're brick." Hesitantly I pushed my list of addresses toward him.

He fixed me with a disbelieving eye, smacked his lips loudly, reached nonchalantly into a pocket for a stick of gum and filled his mouth.

"Nope," he said, confidently. "The records don't lie. Looks like your firm's been sold a phoney bill of goods, mister. Better have the housing commission look it up," then as I was about to protest further, he blinked again. "Noo Yawk records never lie."

I staggered out into the street, oblivious of the roar of the elevated train, the clash and clatter

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of street traffic. Picking my way up Court St. I bumped into numerous pedestrians. Dazed, a swirling fog numbing my brain I broached no excuses.

**T**HE HORROR grew on me as I stumbled through Brooklyn Heights, staring terrified at the old houses lining both sides of the short, narrow and crooked lanes.

Houses? Brick? Wood? Whose voice broke over me, mumbling, growing to a mighty crescendo? Throne's?

Throne was dead, eaten. Eaten by what? Already an answer was waiting, half-formed in my brain. I suddenly stopped, clutched my throat and almost choked. What was it Throne had said about those damnable Venus fly traps, that some species adapted themselves for new victims, changing their shapes and appearances in order to ensnare gullible flies wary of their old appearance.

I steadied myself on a bent and rusty lamp post. Throne, I told myself, had never been killed by his little pets. They were too small, too helpless. Bigger game needed bigger killers.

[Turn Page]

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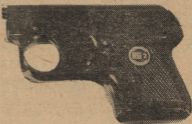
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Beyond me, a short distance away loomed the Brooklyn Bridge. Around it, clustering thickly in dark brown masses were the sooty dwellings of two centuries past, huddled together in squalid self-protection against the encroaching steel and concrete factories and apartment buildings. As I stared, my eyes watering, those wretched hovels took on the appearance of dank, loathsome toadstools, filled with an evil life, brooding, waiting...

THEN I SAW Throne's room and Throne on his bed and the walls of the old house buckling, caving in, drawing closer to his sleeping body, hungry, impatient for food.

Unable any longer  
[Turn to Page 126]

# Wonder Slim

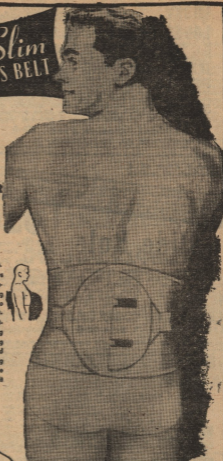
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to even absorb sensations, I found my way blindly at last to a telephone pay station in a small drug store near the subway, got Gus on the wire and talked hysterically for about a half hour. He shouted back at me every few minutes but I gave him no respite. I babbled on, ending with the shrieked statement that I was drunk, had been drunk the night before, and was going to get plastered again. Finally he told me to go to hell. I slammed down the receiver, staggered out into the street and headed for the nearest dive.

Two days later I had recovered sufficiently from a thirty-hour bat to go down to the office. I dropped in to find a new boss behind Heller's old desk. Gus, it

[Turn Page]

## WASHINGTON SLEPT HERE

appeared, had sold the business and left for Cleveland. Cleveland? I tried to hold down the sudden retch that billowed my stomach. Homer Hardy had come from Cleveland. Why remind me of it? Couldn't he just as well have gone to Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Miss Bernstein returned to my desk after a while. She had an easy, nonchalant expression on her face. It didn't take me long to guess that the new boss had made her deliriously happy by making a few passes. Then, very gently and with considerable tact I was introduced to the head man.

Sometimes I feel queazy about the whole business, especially when I have to go out to Flatbush to

[Turn Page]



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lay a horde of bedbugs or silverfish and more especially when the house they're making hideous is old. Sometimes I tell myself I'm nuts, batty as one of my cockroaches and a fit companion for poor Mrs. Higgins playing marbles on the backyard lawn of the Kings County bug house. But there is always a wee drapee or two in a convenient bar to drown the memories that arise when I sit at my desk making out reports and raise my eyes suddenly to find them fixed on Gus' old map with its pencilled circles making a red nose-gay around New York and remember the old Van Moederen house. House?

Plants, I remember, too, give out oxygen.

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# SKINNY

MEN ARE OFTEN ASHAMED TO STRIP FOR SPORTS OR FOR A SWIM. GIRLS ARE NOT ALLURING AND DON'T HAVE EYE-CATCHING CURVES! CHILDREN WHO WON'T EAT AND ARE UNDERWEIGHT, OFTEN CALLED SKINNY!

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We appreciate your letters, nonetheless, and you'll see a selection of the most interesting of them in our forthcoming issue. We also appreciate the fact that some of you miss the editorial when it is occasionally crowded out, or the editor was just unable to do one in time — as was the instance this time. Whatever they may be worth, we refuse to dash them out just for the sake of having an "editorial" each issue. Bear with our frailties, and may you have enjoyed the blessings of the Christmas season by the time you read this.

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