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THE BIG JUMP

a complete novel

By LEIGH BRACKETT

FEBRUARY 25c

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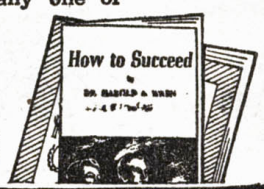

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SPACE STORIES

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

A THRILLING PUBLICATION VOL. 1, NO. 3 FEBRUARY, 1953

COMPLETE NOVEL

A NOVELET

SHORT STORIES

FEATURES

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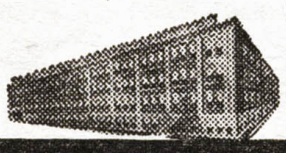

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FLASHES FROM OUR READERS

A Department of Letters and Comment

THE first issue of SPACE STORIES touched off a flood of fanmail the like of which we had previously come to associate with the letter columns in our sister magazines, STARTLING STORIES and THRILLING WONDER STORIES—long-established leaders in the field. Thus we are led to conclude that SPACE has gone over with a bang.

Says, for example, Wally Parsons:

LET'S JUST TALK SPACE-OPERA
by Wally Parsons

Dear Sam: I must say, Sam, you really outdid yourself. Imagine, Loomis, Dickson, St. Clair, Hasse, de Ford, all in the first ish of the best space-opera mag in the field.

As for this guy Walton, more, boy, more! Man, can he write. His best work is in description—you can really see those brooding pillars, and feel the sweat roll into your eyes; br-r-r! One criticism, though: I didn't seem to get a clear picture of those foul alien creatures—defective description. I would suggest that Mr. Walton refrain from making his characters so unworldly—then he'd describe them better. I could find plenty of technical errors, but since I like to allow some license, I'll overlook these. (Decent of me!)

I liked Marg's yarn, too. It was just a darn good story, without requiring dissection.

And "The Whatsits" was really hot. Personally, I found it very funny. I don't know if it was meant to be so, but that's the way I got it.

I like that one article on page 6, but please don't add any more; after all, it is stf, you know.

And may I make a suggestion for the forthcoming letter column? As you say, "The coldly mental story, the complex parable, the tale of social significance is not for us." How about the readers remembering that, and not harping on religion, sex, world population and repopulation? There are three good mags for that; so here, let's just talk space-opera.

Hope the next ish is even better (if such a thing is possible). Happy dinosaur-hunting.—*73 Sprucehill Road, Toronto 8, Canada.*

You mean . . . you mean in SPACE we don't have to moderate thundering cerebral bull-sessions as we do in TWS and SS? Oh glory . . . oh ecstasy . . . oh Heavens to Betsy!

And Betsy back to Heavens, for a double-play.

And happy dinosaur-hunting to *you.*

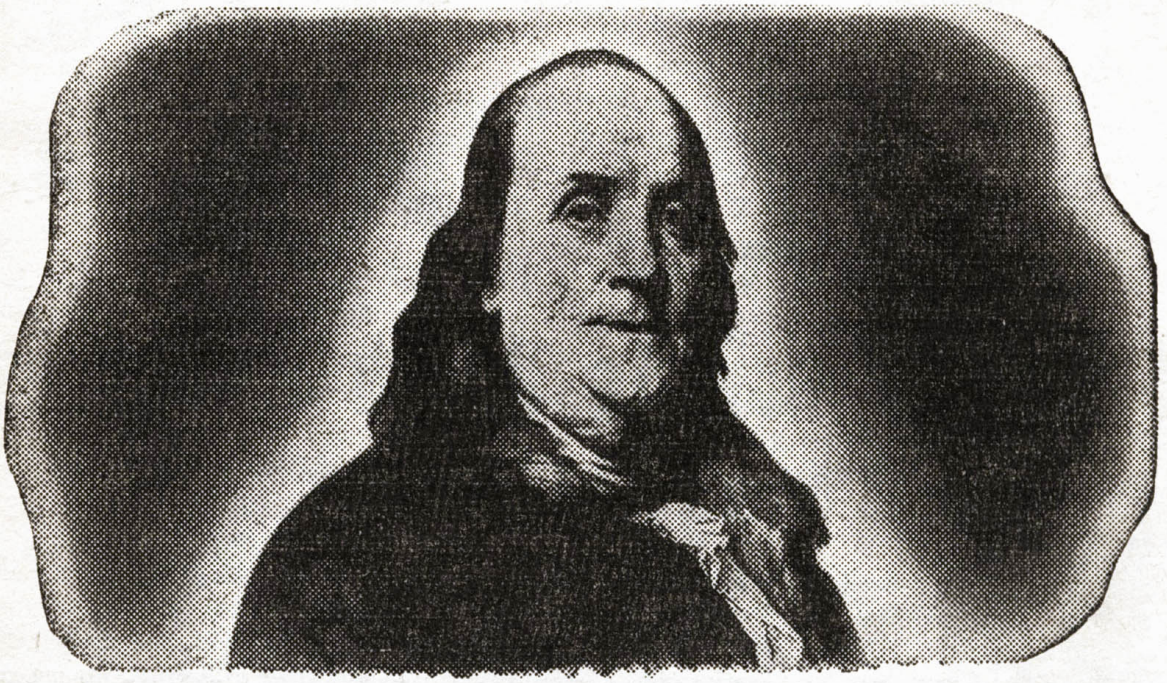
GOOD, BY GOSH!
by Jim Leake

Señor Sam: I see you went and done it again. Now I'll admit you are a great advertiser, a fine editor, writer and promulgator of good magazines; but, oh mine fine feathered friend, is it necessary to rub it in so damn hard? Couldn't you, just once, make a bobble? (stage whisper: "Hell, Leake, he's made PU-lenty!" "Yeah, I know it; you know it; the fen know it; but does he know it? We won't let on, in the face of the good work he has done and is doing.") You talk occasionally, about a story coming in "cold;" did you ever try writing a letter cold? Nuttin to go on; what do you want in the B-O column? Humor? Say didja hear the one . . . Wrath? Now looka hear, ya big slob . . . War? Bradbury stinks, Kuttner shoulda stood in bed, Miriam Cox is full of baloney . . . ah, yes, WAR!!! Snarly Seibel should be strung up by the thumbs, and that other pest, what-his-name, oh, yeah, Gibson, should be lacerated with lashes. Ah, yes, WAR!!!!!! I mention the above unmentionables since I am sure they will, in the hallowed tradition of fandom, buy, read, sniff, snort, and write. It would be asking too much of a miracle to think they would pass up a chance to swat their favorite editor on the virgin bow of a virgin magazine. (ed, NOTE: Glad there's something virgin in this country, besides the black side of the government books). I shall keep this first ish of SPS second to see how it progresses, develops, or retrogresses. Of course, not being mercenary-minded, I am sure it will never bring a penny more than an honest two bits.

As regards the contents of said virgin ish, the lead novel left me comparatively cold, while the

(Continued on page 126)

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

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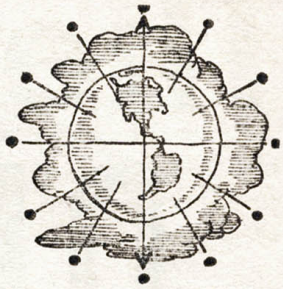


A Page of Facts and Oddities

ALTHOUGH the Chinese were using large powder rockets for amusement and as war weapons early in the Eleventh Century, the leisurely Orientals didn't get around to trying out rockets as a means of aerial transportation until the beginning of the Fifteenth Century. At that time, an erudite Chinese scholar named Wan Hoo set to work devising a rocket ship.

After pondering the problem carefully, Wan Hoo constructed two large kites and attached one on either side of a light, strong bamboo framework. In the center of the framework, between the kites, he lashed a stout chair. On the back of the chair, Wan Hoo affixed in a double row 47 of the biggest skyrockets he could buy. Then the courageous adventurer dressed himself neatly in his best silk robe, offered a short prayer to Buddha, and ordered 47 trembling servants to touch off all rockets simultaneously after first strapping him in the chair.

Reluctantly the servants obeyed their master; tying him tightly to his chair and stepping back to ignite the battery of rockets with flaming torches attached to long poles.

With a terrific whoosh and roar, chair and platform disappeared over the housetops of the village! The world's first rocket flight was a dismal failure!

• • • • •

WOMEN are smaller than men because the female hormone has a definite chemical action on the suppression of growth. This interesting bit of information was learned accidentally as a result of cancer research. Professor W. S. Bullough of Sheffield University, England, was studying skin problems to learn what he could about the growth of tumors. He discovered that the female hormone stimulates the adrenal gland to produce a hormone much like cortisone. These hormones lower the energy level, slow down replacement of skin cells and limit growth.

Several things seem to be explained simultaneously thereby. Women's lesser strength and generally lower energy level as compared with man, her shorter height and smaller structure. It would also indicate that injections of female hormone might stunt the growth of boys, but this experiment has doubtless not been tried.

Insofar as cancer is concerned, the experiment might indicate a rather lower cancer rate in women than in men, since rapid cell replacement is conducive to more tumors. Besides the male hormones, other factors which may stimulate rapid cell replacement are individual habits like over-eating. On this line of experimentation, Professor Bullough believes that mice kept on a strict diet may be freer of cancer, which suggests a possible line of attack on human cancer. Except in underprivileged areas of the world, over-eating is a source of many physical ills and a careful diet may be at least a partial answer to several of the degenerative diseases of mankind. This is not to suggest that diet is a cure-all. It is merely one more attack on the baffling diseases of man.

• • • • •

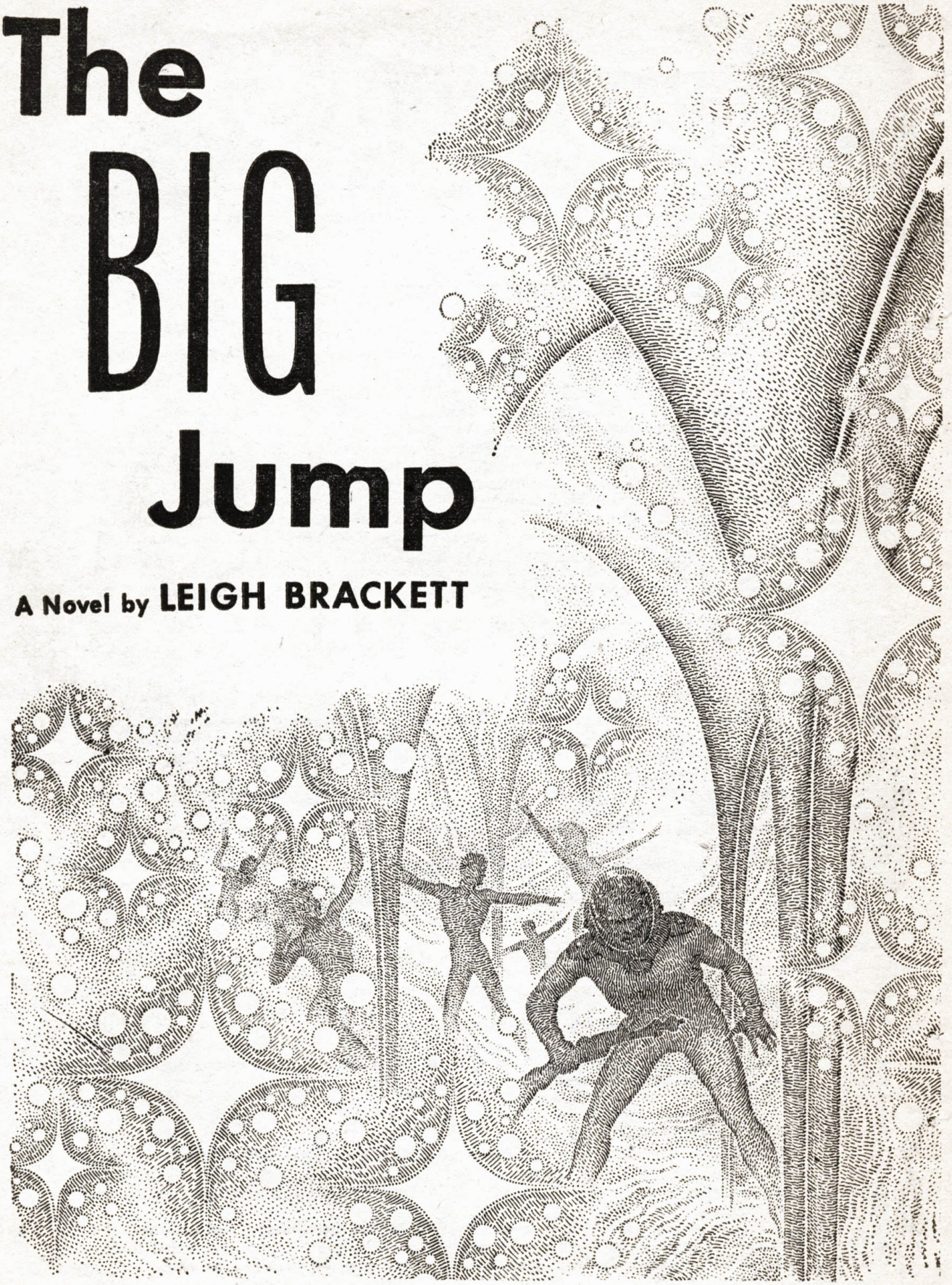
CHUNKS of glass from outer space have been picked up in the Sahara desert. Found near a meteor crater and analyzed at the British Museum of Natural History, the basis of this glass was determined to be quite different from the native sand.

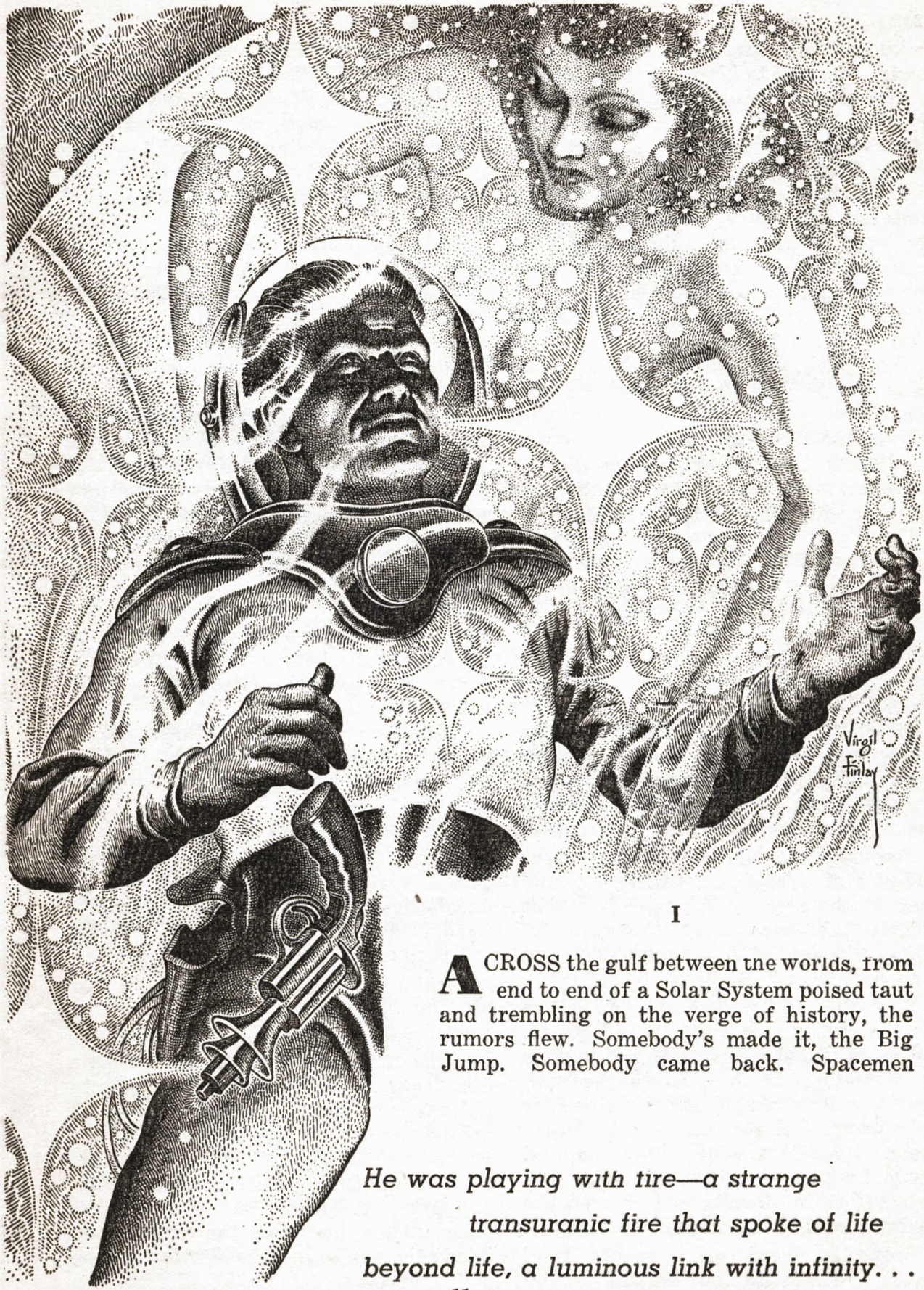
Glass meteorites are a new idea, yet scientists are convinced these dark round buttons of glass came from outside our globe. Final proof awaits the actual finding of a comparatively large glass meteor which can be identified as such.

Or maybe these are the melted windows of an alien space ship?

The BIG Jump

A Novel by **LEIGH BRACKETT**





I

ACROSS the gulf between the worlds, from end to end of a Solar System poised taut and trembling on the verge of history, the rumors flew. Somebody's made it, the Big Jump. Somebody came back. Spacemen

He was playing with fire—a strange transuranic fire that spoke of life beyond life, a luminous link with infinity. . . .

talking, in the bars around a thousand ports. People talking, in the streets of countless cities. Somebody's done it, the Big Jump, done it and come back. That last bunch, they say—Ballantyne's outfit. They say. . . .

They said a lot of things, conflicting, fantastic impossible, grim. But behind the words there was only rumor, and behind the rumors—silence. A silence sphinx-like as the soundless wastes of night that roll forever around the island Sun.

Too much silence. That was what Arch Comyn listened to, after he had heard the words. The rumors themselves seemed to have come most strongly along a line that ran from Pluto's orbit into Mars, and it was around Mars that the silence was deepest.

Comyn went to Mars. . . .

The guard at the main gate said, "Sorry. You got to have a pass."

"Since when?" asked Comyn.

"Since a couple of weeks."

"Yeah? What's so different about the Cochrane Company all of a sudden, now?"

"It ain't only us, it's every spaceship line on Mars. Too many creeps wanting answers to silly questions. You got business here, you get a pass through the regular channels. Otherwise, blow."

Comyn glanced briefly at the height and size of that locked main gate, and then at the steel-and-glassite box that housed the guard and the controls. "Okay," he said. "You don't need to get tough about it."

He turned and walked away to where his rented car was waiting, and got in. He drove slowly back along the strip of concrete road that led to the new, prosaic and completely earthly city four miles away. Out here on the open desert the cold Martian wind blew thin and dry and edged with dust, and there was no comfort in the far red line of the horizon, naked under a dark blue sky.

Presently there was another road veering off from the one he was on, and he turned into it. It went round to the truck gate of the spaceport, which showed now as a low sprawling monster on his left, with clusters of buildings and a couple of miles of sheds grouped around the docking area. The nine-globed insigne of the Cochranes showed even at this distance on the tall control tower.

Halfway between the main road and the truck gate, and out of sight of both, Comyn slewed his car into the ditch. He climbed out, leaving the door open, and sat down in the dust. Nothing used this road but company equipment. All he had to do was wait.

The wind blew, laggard, wandering, sad, like an old man searching in the wilderness for the cities of his youth, the bright cities that had been and now were not. The red dust formed tiny riffles around Comyn's feet. He sat, not stirring, waiting with a timeless patience, thinking. . . .

Two days and nights I spent in the lousy bars here, with my ears spread to the breeze. And it was all for the birds, except for that one drunken kid. If he wasn't telling the truth. . . .

There was a sound on the road. A truck coming out from the city, bearing the Cochrane name. Comyn lay down quietly in the dust.

The truck roared up, roared past, screeched to a stop, and then backed up. The driver got out. A young man, big and burly, burned dark by the Martian wind. He leaned over the body beside the road.

Comyn came up off the ground and hit him.

The trucker didn't want to stay down. He was mad, and Comyn didn't blame him for it. It took another hard one to put him out. Comyn dragged him around behind the car and searched his pockets. He had a pass, all right. Comyn took his coverall and the cap with the broad peak and green visor that cut down desert glare. Then he fixed the trucker up inside the car so he'd keep safe until he got loose or somebody found him. On an impulse, Comyn dug out a couple of

crumpled bills, hesitated, then shoved one of them into the trucker's pocket.

"Buy yourself a drink," he said to the unhearing ears. "On me."

Dressed in the company coverall, wearing the company cap with the face-shielding visor, and driving the company truck, Comyn rolled up to the gate and showed his pass.

The guard opened up and waved him in.

ONE of the great sleek Cochrane ships was on the field, loading passengers for somewhere. Around the docks and the sheds and the machine shops there was a clangorous turmoil where the work of servicing and refueling went on, with the huge mobile cargo cranes stalking mightily through the confusion. Comyn glanced at it without interest, got his bearings, and turned the truck toward the administration area.

Warehouses. Office blocks. Enough buildings for a small city. Comyn drove slowly, squinting at signs, not seeing the one he wanted. The palms of his hands sweated on the wheel and he wiped them one after the other on his coverall. His belly was tied up in knots inside.

That kid had better be right, he thought. I better be right. I'm in trouble all the way now, and it better be for something.

He leaned out of the cab and hailed a passing clerk. "Which way to the hospital? I'm new around here."

The clerk gave him directions and he drove on, around two or three corners and down a narrow street. He found the hospital, a shiny white building designed for the care of Cochrane employees, not very big and tucked away in a quiet place. There was an alley behind it and a door that said DELIVERY ENTRANCE.

Comyn pulled the truck in, cut the motor, and got out. The door was only a step or two away, but before he could reach it it had opened and closed again, and there was a man in front of it.

Comyn smiled. The knots in his middle went away. "Hello," he said cheerfully, and added in his mind, I love you, little man with the hard look and the gun under your jacket. You mean I'm right.

"What you got there, buddy?" asked the man in the doorway.

What Comyn had was a load of baggage destined for some ship. But he said, "Stuff for the hospital commissary. Perishable." He let the words drift him a little closer. "I've got the bills." He put his hand in his pocket, still smiling, a man without a care in the world.

The man in the doorway said with the beginning of suspicion, "How come you're so early? The usual time for delivery. . . ."

"What I've got," said Comyn softly, "can be delivered any time. No, keep your hands right where they are. I've got something here in my pocket, and if it goes off you'll know what it is. But you won't like it."

The man stood taut against the door, frozen in mid-motion, his eyes focussed on Comyn's right hand that was hidden in his pocket. He was thinking hard, thinking of all the small, nasty illegal weapons that ingenious people on nine different worlds had created and successfully used. He was not pleased with his thoughts.

Comyn said, "Let's go inside."

The man hesitated. His eyes met Comyn's, searched them, probed them. Then he made a small snarling sound and turned to open the door.

"Quietly," said Comyn. "And if there's anyone around, you vouch for me."

There was no one, in this back corridor lined with store-rooms. Comyn shoved the guard into the nearest one and kicked the door shut. "I'll take that gun," he said, and took it. A nice neat shocker, the latest model.

Comyn shifted it to his right hand and stepped back.

"That's better," he said. "For a minute I thought you were going to call me out there."

The man's face became vicious. "You

mean you didn't have . . ."

"I have now." Comyn's thumb flicked the stud up to lethal voltage. "Save your mad till later. Where's Ballantyne?"

"Ballantyne?"

"Who is it, then? Strang? Kessel? Vickrey?" He paused. "Paul Rogers?" His voice hardened. "Who have the Cochranes got in here?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? You're guarding somebody. You have to know who it is."

Beads of sweat had begun to glisten on the man's face. He was watching Comyn, and he had forgotten to be angry.

"Look. They brought somebody in here, sure. They're keeping him under guard, sure. It's supposed to be one of our own guys, with something contagious. Maybe I believe that, maybe I don't. But all I know is that I sit on that back door eight hours a day. The Cochranes don't tell me their business. They don't tell anybody."

"Yeah," said Comyn. "You know where the room is. "

"It's guarded too."

"That's where you come in." He spoke briefly, and the man listened, staring unhappily at his own weapon in Comyn's hard sunburned fist.

"I guess," he said, "I've got to do it."

HE DID it. He took Comyn without a hitch through the main corridors and upstairs into a small wing of private rooms that were all vacant except for one at the end, where a large man sat on a chair outside a closed door, half asleep.

That's what the kid in the bar was mad about. They threw him out of one of these rooms, into a ward. He was the only patient in the wing—and why should they throw him out suddenly, in the middle of the night?

The large man came out of his doze and sprang up.

"It's all right, Joe," said the man who walked so close to Comyn. "This guy's a friend of mine."

His voice carried no note of conviction. The large man started forward. "Are you crazy, bringing a stranger—hey! Hey, what goes on?"

His reflexes were good, very good. But Comyn was already set and in range. The shocker made a gentle buzzing sound, and the large man hit the floor. The smaller one followed him, a short second behind. Both men were out, but nothing worse. Comyn had had the shocker back on low power long before he used it.

When the young doctor looked out of the end room a moment later, disturbed by the faint sounds that had reached him, there was nothing to see but the empty hall with the empty rooms along it. He said "Joe?" on a tentative note, but there was no answer. Frowning, he went down to the intersecting corridor to have a look. While his back was turned Comyn slipped into the end room and shut the door. There was a lock on it, brand new and shiny, non-regulation equipment for a hospital room. He snapped it, and then he turned toward the bed, toward the man who lay there, his heart hammering now because after all it might be somebody else. . . .

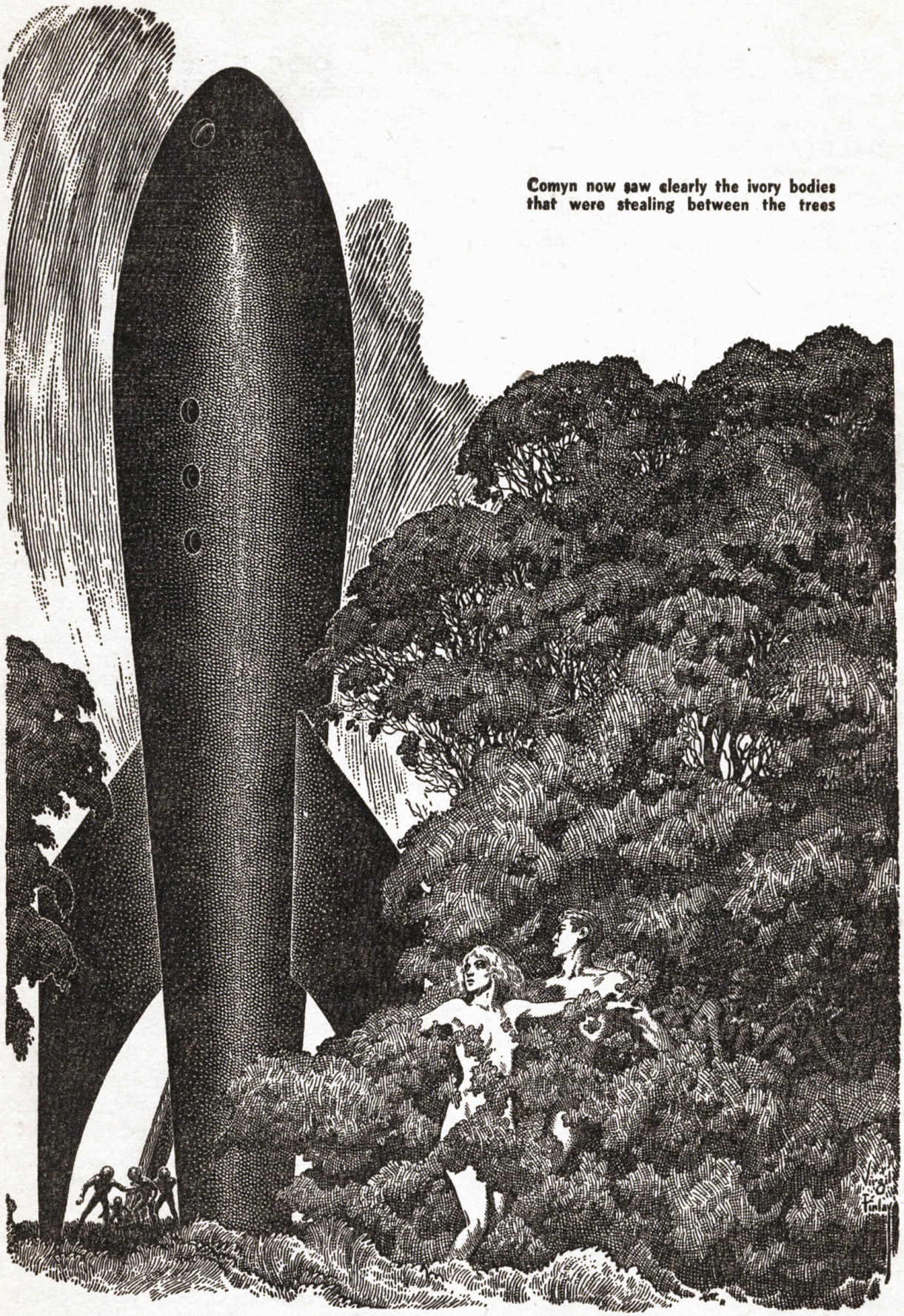
And the rumors were all true. Ballantyne had done it. He had made the Big Jump and come back, back from the outer darkness beyond the sun. The first of all men, come back from the stars.

Comyn bent over the bed. His hands were gentle now, uncertain, touching the skeletal shoulder with a kind of awe.

"Ballantyne," he whispered. "Ballantyne, wake up. Where is Paul?"

Bones under his fingers, skin and bones and a tracery of fragile veins. Movement, a faint pulsation of it, a twitching and quivering of the flesh that never stopped, as though some dreadful memory drove the ravaged body still toward escape. A face. . . .

A face that was only a ghostly echo, pitiful, terrible, marked by something



Comyn now saw clearly the ivory bodies that were stealing between the trees

frightening, worse than death or the fear of dying. Something, Comyn thought, that had never before since the beginning oppressed the children of Sol. A queer terror came over him as he looked at it, so that he wanted to run, to get away out of the room, far away from whatever evil shadow it was that this man had brought back with him from another star.

But he stayed. The doctor came and tried the door, battered on it, yelled, and finally ran away, and still Comyn bent over the bed and whispered, growing colder, growing sicker, flinching from the touch of damp skin twitching under his fingers. And still the terrible face rebuked him, and would not speak.

More men came and shouted outside the door. This time they brought an electric drill, to cut away the lock.

"Ballantyne! What happened to Paul? *Paul,* do you hear? Where is he?"

The drill began to bite on the plastic door.

"Paul," said Comyn patiently. "Where is Paul Rogers?"

The harsh whining of the drill crept round the little room, filling the corners, filling the silence. Ballantyne moved his head.

Comyn bent over, so that his ear was almost touching the transparent blue lips. A voice came out of them, no louder than the beating of a moth's wing.

". . . listened too long. Too long, too far. . . ."

"Where is Paul?"

" . . . too far, too lonely. We weren't meant for this. Desolation. Darkness. Stars. . . ."

Again, almost fiercely, "Where is Paul?"

"Paul. . . ."

The drill hit metal. The whining changed to a thin-edged screech.

The breathing skeleton that was Ballantyne went rigid. Its lips moved under Comyn's ear, laboring with a dreadful urgency.

"Don't listen, Paul! I can't go back alone, I can't! Don't listen to them calling . . . Oh, God, why did it have to be transuranic, why did it?"

The drill screeched thinner, higher. And the painful whisper rose.

"The Transuranae! Paul, no! Paul—Paul—Paul. . . ."

Suddenly Ballantyne screamed.

Comyn sprang back from the bed, blundering into the wall and staying there, pressed against it, bathed in an icy sweat. Ballantyne screamed, not saying anything, not opening his eyes, just screaming, out of an abysmal agony of soul.

Comyn stretched out his hand to the door and tore it open. The drill-shaft snapped. Men poured into the room and he told them,

"For God's sake make him stop."

And then, in the fraction of time between two heartbeats, Ballantyne was dead.

II

TIME had lost itself somewhere in the haze. He was not even sure where he was anymore. There was a taste in his mouth, a red and salty taste that he remembered from getting hit in fights, only there didn't seem to be any fight going on, and when he tried to see all he could get was a blurred confusion of light and shadow in which things vaguely moved.

The questions still came. They were part of the universe, part of existence. He could not remember a time when there had not been questions. He hated them. He was tired and his jaws hurt, and it was hard to answer. But he had to, because when he didn't somebody hit him again, somebody he couldn't quite manage to get at and kill, and he didn't like that.

"Who paid you to do this, Comyn? Who sent you after Ballantyne?"

"Nobody."

"What's your job?"

"Construction boss." The words came out thick and slow and painful. They had worn grooves in his tongue from

being said so often.

"Who are you working for?"

Double question. Tricky. But the answer was the same. "Nobody."

"Who did you work for?"

"Inter-World Engineering. Bridges. Spaceports. I quit."

"Why?"

"To find Ballantyne."

"Who told you it was Ballantyne?"

"Nobody. Rumor. Could have been any of 'em. Could have been—Paul."

"Who's Paul?"

"Paul Rogers. Friend."

"He was the flight engineer on Ballantyne's ship, wasn't he?"

"No. Astrophys—" He couldn't handle that one. "Something to do with stars."

"How much did United Tradelines pay you to get to Ballantyne?"

"Nothing. On my own."

"And you found out Paul Rogers is dead."

"No."

"Ballantyne told you he was alive?"

"No."

This was the hard part. This was the worst of it. At first, reason had told him, keep your jaw shut. As long as they aren't sure you'll have a chance, they won't kill you. Now it was only deaf, blind instinct. Comyn weaved his head from side to side, trying to get up, to get away, but he couldn't, he was tied.

"What did Ballantyne tell you, Comyn?"

"Nothing."

The flat palm, gently jarring his brain. "You were locked up with him for nearly twenty minutes. We heard his voice. What did he say, Comyn?"

"He screamed. That's all."

The cupped palm, bursting his eardrum, cracking his skull down the middle.

"What did he tell you, Comyn?"

"Nothing!"

The gentle approach. "Listen, Comyn, we're all tired. Let's quit fooling around. Just tell us what Ballantyne said and we can all go home and sleep. You'd like that, Comyn, a nice soft bed and nobody to bother you. Just tell us."

"Didn't talk. Just—screamed."

NOW the other approach. "Okay, Comyn. You're a big guy. You got scars on your knuckles. You think you're tough, and you are—oh, yes, a very big muscular iron-headed character. But they don't come so tough they can't be softened up."

Fists this time, or whatever they were using. The slow dribble of blood down the side of his face, into his mouth, into his eyes. Pain in his belly.

"What did Ballantyne say?"

"Nothing. . . ." A faint whisper, trailing off.

Voices, jumbled, distant. Let him rest, he's nearly out. Rest, hell, give me the ammonia. The biting fumes, the gasp, the partial return of light. And it began again. Who told you we had Ballantyne? Who are you working for? What did Ballantyne say?

There came a time when Comyn thought he heard the opening of a door and then a new voice, angry, authoritative. He sensed a sudden change going on, things or people moving quickly in the reddish half-blind obscurity. Somebody was doing something with his hands. Instinct told him when they were free. He rose and struck out, hit something that yelled, caught it and held on with a single-hearted desire to tear it in pieces. Then it slipped away, everything slipped away, and there was only darkness and a great peace.

He woke up gradually, as out of a long sleep. He was in a very comfortable bedroom, and a stranger was standing over him with a certain air of impatience. He was a youngish, well-fed, sandy-haired man who looked as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders and considered Comyn an unwelcome addition to the burden, one he wanted to be done with as soon as possible.

Comyn let him stand, until he had dredged up what memories he pos-

sessed and got them in order. Then he sat up, very slowly and carefully, and the stranger spoke.

"No internal injuries and no broken bones, Mr. Comyn. We've done all we could for the bruises. You've been here two days."

Comyn grunted. He felt his face, touching it lightly.

"Our doctors did their best there, too. They assure me there won't be a scar."

"That's fine. Thanks very much," Comyn said sourly, and looked up. "Who are you?"

"My name is Stanley, William Stanley. I'm business manager for the Cochrane enterprises here on Mars. Look here, Mr. Comyn." Stanley bent over him, frowning. "I want you to understand that this was done to you absolutely without the knowledge or sanction of the management. I was away on business, or the incident would never have occurred."

"I'll bet," said Comyn. "Since when have the Cochranes objected to a little blood?"

Stanley sighed. "The old reputation is hard to live down, even though it was made two generations ago. We employ a lot of men, Mr. Comyn. Sometimes some of them make mistakes. This was one of them. The Cochranes apologize."

He paused, and then added, making sure that Comyn got every word quite clearly, "We felt that the best apology lay in not pressing charges against you for some rather serious offenses."

"I guess that makes us even," Comyn said.

"Good. Your papers, passport, and wallet are on the table there beside you. In those boxes on the chair you'll find clothing to replace your own, which was beyond repair. Passage home to Earth has been arranged for you on the next Cochrane liner. And I think that's all."

"Not quite," said Comyn, and got stiffly out of bed. The room went round him twice, and then steadied. He looked at Stanley from under sullen brows, and laughed.

"Next step in the game, huh? You couldn't beat anything out of me, so now you'll try sweetness and light. Who are you trying to kid?"

Stanley's mouth tightened. "I don't understand you."

Comyn's gesture was sweepingly contemptuous. "You're not going to let me run loose, with what I know."

"Exactly what do you know, Mr. Comyn?" asked Stanley, with a curious politeness.

"Ballantyne. You had him here, hidden, in secret, when the whole System was waiting to welcome him back. You, the Cochranes, trying to grab away from him whatever he'd found! Dirty pool, and dirty hands playing it. Where's his ship? Where are the men who went with him? Where have you got *them* hidden?"

Anger in Comyn's voice, a dark flush of anger in his cheeks. His hands moved in short, hungry circles.

"Ballantyne made the Big Jump, he and the men with him. They did the biggest thing men have ever done. They reached out and touched the stars. And you tried to hide it, to cover up, to rob them even of the glory they had coming! So now you're going to turn me loose to tell the System what you've done? The hell you are!"

STANLEY looked at him for a long moment, the big furious man standing naked and incongruous in the handsome bedroom, with the half-healed marks and bruises on him, still looking for something to hit. When he spoke it was almost with pity.

"I'm sorry to take the wind out of your sails so cruelly, but I broke the news two days ago, as soon as Ballantyne was dead. Far from trying to rob him, we were making every attempt to save his life—without benefit of sensation-hungry mobs, invading newsmen, and people like you. Everybody seems to feel quite grateful toward us."

Comyn sat down slowly on the bed. He said something, but the words were

not audible.

"As to the other men—" Stanley shook his head. "Ballantyne was alone in the ship. The controls were almost completely automatic, and it was possible for one man to operate them. He was—as you saw him. He never knew he had made it back."

"A hell of a thing," said Comyn quietly. "A real hell of a thing. What about the ship itself—and the log? Ballantyne's log. What did it say—about Paul Rogers?"

"That's all public knowledge now. You can read it in any paper."

"I want to know. What happened to Paul Rogers?"

Stanley studied him curiously. "He must have meant a lot to you, to make you go to such lengths."

"He saved my neck once," said Comyn briefly. "We were friends."

Stanley shrugged. "I can't help you. The log, and the various scientific data gathered on the outward trip, were all clear up to the time they approached the worlds of Barnard's Star. After that—nothing."

"Nothing at all?" Comyn's blood began to stir with a deep and almost unpleasant excitement. If that was true, the score or so of words he had heard from Ballantyne's lips were worth—what? Kingships, empires—a damn sight more, for sure, than the life of one Arch Comyn.

Stanley answered, "No. There's no hint of what happened afterward. The log simply broke off."

Comyn's eyes, very cold and catlike, examined Stanley's face minutely. "I think you're lying."

Stanley began to get an ugly look around the mouth. "Look here, Comyn, all things considered I think you've been treated pretty decently. And if I were you I'd go away quietly without trying everybody's patience too far."

"Yes," said Comyn reflectively. "I guess so." He went over to the boxes on the chair and began to open them. "It would strain your patience pretty hard, wouldn't it, if I asked about the Ballantyne drive? The star-drive he developed, the first and only one that worked. Did you happen to take a look at it?"

"We did. And we did more." Suddenly Stanley was facing him across the chair, his words coming sharp and rapid, every line of him altered by a startling intensity. "You annoy me, Comyn. You make me sick, battering your way in where you haven't any business and making trouble for everybody. So I'll explain to you, speaking as a Cochrane, because I married into the family and consider myself part of it, and I'm tired of all the two-bit ciphers in the System taking cracks at it.

"We saved Ballantyne's ship from smashing head-on into Pluto. We'd had patrols out looking for it for weeks, of course, and we beat some others to it. We took the ship to our emergency field on Cochrane Beta in the asteroid belt, and we dismantled the Ballantyne drive. Then we flew it to the Cochrane estate on Luna, where nobody else can get at it. And I'll tell you why.

"Every one of these attempts to make the Big Jump has been backed by us or another corporation, or a government that could put up the capital. No private individual could do it. Ballantyne developed that drive with Cochrane money. He built his ship with it, made his flight with it. It's bought and paid for. Now are there any more questions you want to ask?"

"No," said Comyn slowly. "No, I think that's enough for one day."

He began pulling the clothes out of the box. Stanley swung around and started for the door. His eyes still glittered. Just before he reached it Comyn said,

"You think I'm lying, too."

Stanley shrugged. "I expect you'd have talked, if you'd had anything to say. And I doubt very much that you could have brought Ballantyne back to consciousness, when all the doctors had failed."

He went out, smacking the door shut hard behind him. "And there it is," thought Comyn bleakly, "a door slammed right in my face. The Cochranes are all fine, law-abiding people, Ballantyne's dead, the log book has nothing in it—and where do I go from here?"

Home, probably. Home to Earth, with Ballantyne's ghostly voice whispering *transuranic* in his ears, with Ballantyne's awful screaming ringing in his soul. What had they found out there, those five who had reached the stars? What can a man see under this sun or another to put the look on his face that Ballantyne had had?

HE THOUGHT about those few disjointed words, and what they might mean. Ballantyne had landed, somewhere on the worlds of Barnard's Star. And he had left Paul Rogers there, with Strang and Kessel and Vickrey and something called the Transuranae. . . .

Comyn shuddered. There was a tingling on his skin, and a taste of something evil in his mouth. All of a sudden he was sorry he had ever come to seek out Ballantyne, and get himself entangled in the trailing edges of a shadow cast by an alien sun.

If only Ballantyne hadn't screamed!

And now the Cochranes were going to let him run a while. They didn't really believe that Ballantyne hadn't spoken. They couldn't risk believing it. There were too many others as hungry as they were for the stars, and Comyn could make himself rich by offering what he knew to the highest bidder—if he lived.

A corollary thought evolved itself, and Comyn turned it over in his mind. It seemed to make sense. The Cochranes, on the other hand, didn't know themselves what Comyn knew, and they would let him live as long as possible on the chance that they could get it out of him. That was why the beating, and why the illusion of freedom now.

It dawned on Comyn that he was in trouble, way in, over his head. He had expected trouble with the Cochranes. He had, in fact, come looking for it. But things had got fouled up, and here he was in the middle of something so big he couldn't even guess the end of it. A game for stars, and he, Arch Comyn, held just one little hole card. . . .

But, whatever the Cochranes did to him, he was going to find out about Paul Rogers.

III

EARTH was one long howling shriek of excitement. Comyn had been back in New York for four days, and the frenzy had shown no signs of calming down. If anything, it was worse.

Nobody slept. Nobody seemed to work. Nobody even went home any more. They lived in the bars, in the streets, in the video houses. They swarmed around the public communications outlets and swirled in thick purposeless torrents up and down the canyon streets, like New Year's Eve a thousand times enlarged.

The Big Jump was made. Man had finally reached the stars, and every clerk and shopgirl, every housewife, business man, and bum felt a personal hysteria of pride and achievement. They swayed in dense masses across Times Square, big with a sense of history, feeling the opening drumbeats of an epoch in what they saw and heard from the huge news-service screens.

They talked. They drank, and wept and laughed. A surprising number of them, thinking of the vastness of galactic space and the many stars that there were in it, went into the churches and prayed, feeling as though some very doubtful doors had been suddenly opened upon them.

Comyn had spent most of the four days since he landed prowling the streets—like everybody else, too restless to stay in his room, but for a different reason. He let the crowds drift him where they would, shouldering his way at intervals into one bar or another, drinking steadily but not too much—and thinking.

He had a lot to think about. Life, and death, and the few last words of a man. The Cochranes, and a chess game that was being played with stars for pawns.

Stars, thought Comyn, and me. There I am, right up in front and all ready to get knocked over, unless I can figure the right way to jump.

It took some figuring. And the problem was made tougher by the fact that he was no longer alone, even when he brushed his teeth. Out of doors, wherever he went, a shadow went with him. Indoors, in his furnished room, the privacy was only a hollow sham. Listening and scanning devices had been installed almost as soon as he rented it. He knew it, but he hadn't bothered to try and find them all and tear them out. The longer he kept the Cochranes guessing, the better.

"They're waiting," he thought. "Waiting for me to make my play."

And what was his play going to be? The Cochranes, who had made nine planets their back yard, were in this for wealth and power as wide as the stars. He had horned in for only one thing—to find out what had become of Paul Rogers.

It hadn't been a very bright thing to do. But then Rogers hadn't been very bright either, to stick his own irreproachable neck out for a not-so-irreproachable mugg named Comyn who had got himself into very bad trouble, and to do that for no better reason than that they had lived on the same street and stolen apples together a long time ago.

Bright or not, it was done, and he couldn't get out of it. The only thing left was to buck the Cochranes.

He had studied the published reports of the finding of Ballantyne's ship and what was in it. Every account agreed that Ballantyne's logbooks broke off short with the approach to the system of Barnard's Star. That meant either that the Cochranes were lying, and had secreted one or more of the most vital books for their own uses, or that the Cochranes were not lying and knew no more than anyone else whether Ballantyne had landed or what he had found.

If that were true, he, Comyn, was the only man alive who did know. He might, just possibly, have a weapon big enough to tackle the Cochranes with.

Or he might, just as possibly, have nothing but his own death warrant.

In either case, it seemed a good idea to find out a little more about the meaning of a certain word. And that, at least, would be easy. Inter-World Construction had research labs, in the same building that housed their home offices. Nobody could get suspicious if he went there, under cover of trying to get his job back.

He went there, and the now-familiar unobstructive form in the nondescript clothes went with him, as far as it could. He left it outside the building. But while he was waiting for the lift, a combination of polished marble, light, and reflection from the doors revealed to him a thing that sent a quick cold chill streaking up his back.

He had not one shadow, but two.

He rode up to Inter-World's floor filled with an unpleasant sense of wonder. The Cochranes on his tail he could understand. But who else? And—why?

FROM the main office he went up a flight of private stairs to the labs and asked for Dubman, a physicist he had got to know briefly during a sloppy Venusian spaceport project.

Dubman was a brilliant little man who had turned waspish on the world because his liver wouldn't let him drink any more. He stared when Comyn asked him,

"Can you tell me something about transuranic elements?"

"I'm not busy enough, I've got to teach high-school physics to workbosses," Dubman said. "Look, there's a library with textbooks of physics in it. Good bye."

"I only want a fast breakdown," Comyn protested. "And it's important."

"Don't tell me work-gang slave drivers have to know nuclear physics now!"

Comyn decided to tell the truth—at least, part of it. "It isn't that. There's somebody I've got to impress, and I've got to know enough about this to make a stall."

Dubman jeered. "Are you going in for intellectual girls now? That's new. I remember hearing about your exploits, and I never—"

Patiently, Comyn steered him back to the subject.

Dubman said, "Transuranic elements are elements that by our natural laws shouldn't be—and aren't."

He stopped, proud of his epigram. Comyn said, "Yeah. Meaning?"

"Meaning," said Dubman, irritated by his lack of appreciation, "that there are ninety-two chemical elements that make up everything in our solar system. They run from hydrogen, number one, the lightest, to uranium, number ninety-two, the heaviest and most complex."

"I got that far in school," Comyn told him.

"Did you? I wouldn't have guessed it, Comyn. Well, back in 1945 they added something—built up artificial elements heavier than uranium, neptunium, number ninety-three, and plutonium, number ninety-four. Transuranic elements, that didn't exist naturally on Earth or our other planets at all, but could be made to exist artificially. That was only the start. They kept building more and more complex transuranic elements, and finally Petersen proved—"

He was off into technicalities, until Comyn pulled him out of them rudely.

"Listen, that's enough to go on. What I want to know most is—would transuranic elements have any financial importance, and how?"

Dubman looked at him more closely. "So this isn't a wench, after all? What kind of a game are you up to, Comyn?"

"I told you, I just want to run a bluff on someone."

"Well, anyone with two-bits worth of education will call your bluff. But in answer to your question—we get our atomic power from the heaviest elements, uranium, radium, thorium, and so on. Transuranic elements are heavier. Some of them can't be handled. Others are packed with power but prohibitively expensive and obtainable only in small quantities. Does that answer you?"

"Yeah," said Comyn. "That's answer enough." He walked out, brooding.

Answer enough. Even with his limited knoweldge of science it was obvious to him what the discovery of transuranic elements existing naturally in plentiful supply would mean to the man or men who could control them. New sources of power greater than uranium, new properties as yet unknown to be explored and exploited from elements that had up to now been only the expensive toys of laboratory researchers. Perhaps, even, elements that hadn't been discovered or even guessed at yet. . . .

By the time Comyn stepped out of the lift his brain was whirling with wild visions of atoms, electrons and blazing bursts of power that paled the Sun. They were vague, but immensely impressive. They frightened him.

He picked up his customary shadow outside the building, and looked around for the other one, under cover of lighting a cigarette. This second watcher was more careful and expert than the first, who did not seem to care much whether Comyn saw him or not. If it hadn't been for that accident of reflection Comyn would probably never have noticed him.

AS IT was, he had to let three matches blow out before he spotted the man again, a tall, slightly stooping figure in a grey suit. Comyn couldn't see his face, but something about the set and stance of him sent that cold flash up his spine again. Comyn didn't know nuclear physics, but he knew men. This one meant business.

Was he the stand-by, the hatchet-man sent along by the Cochranes in case things got beyond the capabilities

of the mild-faced individual who seemed only to be doing a not-too-interesting job? Or had somebody else dealt himself a hand in the game?

Transuranic, whispered Ballantyne's ghostly voice in his ear. Transuranae —and the echo of a scream.

There was a bar on the corner, and Comyn made for it.

A couple of stiff ones stopped his insides from shaking. He switched to beer because he thought better on it, and went back to his brooding. He had found a place in the corner, where nobody could get behind him. The bar was crowded, but even so he could see his twin satellites. They were behaving like casual customers, apparently unaware of him, and of each other.

As he watched them through the haze of smoke, the din of voices and the yeasty stirring of the crowd, he grew certain of one thing. The mild-faced man was unaware of the other one. If the Cochranes had sent him along for the dirty work, they hadn't told their other boy anything about it.

The afternoon wore away. The big videoscreen at the end of the bar poured out a steady stream of speeches, special bulletins, rehashes and fresh opinions about the Big Jump. The crowd picked them up, chewed them over, argued and chattered and had another drink. Comyn stared gloomily at the bubbles rising in his glass.

It became evening, and then night. The crowd changed constantly, but Comyn was still there, and so were the two men, the mild-faced gent in the rumpled jacket, and the other one who was not mild. Comyn had drunk a lot of beer by now, and done a lot of thinking. He was watching them with a curiously bright glint in his eye.

The name of Cochrane sounded over and over from the screen, as often as the name of Ballantyne. It began to prick a nerve in Comyn, a nerve connected with whatever center it was inside him that produced hate.

"Mr. Jonas Cochrane, president of the Cochrane Corporation, today announced that his company would consider the Ballantyne star-drive as something to be held in trust for the good of all peoples. . . ."

Comyn laughed into his beer. He could just imagine the old bandi[illegible]ting up in that fantastic castle on the Moon, thinking of the common good.

"The Cochrane Corporation has voted one hundred thousand dollars to the survivors of each of the five heroes of the first star-flight. . . ."

Well, that was a nice gesture. Good publicity, and deductible from income tax.

"Miss Sydna Cochrane has consented to say a few words about this historic achievement which her family helped to make possible. We switch you now to our on-the-spot reporter at the famous Rocket Room. . . ."

The picture dissolved to the interior of a night club, furnished up in the style of such a ship as never sailed the seas of space. The camera focused in on a woman who was part of a group of expensive young people being very gay at one of the tables. Comyn stared and forgot his beer.

She wore something white and severely plain that showed her off in exactly the right places, and it was all worth showing. Her skin was very brown, with the magnificent kind of tan you can only get from a lunar solarium, and her hair —probably bleached, Comyn thought, but damned effective—was almost as light as her dress and drawn straight to the back of her head, whence it hung down in a thick hank as uncurling as combed flax. She had the kind of features that could take that punishment, bold and handsome and verging on the angular, with a wide mouth, and eyes that were positively lambent. She was well geared, but holding it like a man.

The voice of the announcer came over, trying to make his introduction heard above the noise. Miss Sydna Cochrane closed her strong brown hands around the champagne glass and leaned her

brown and splendid shoulders almost into the lens. She smiled.

"Money," she said, in a beautiful throaty voice, "is only money. Without the courage and the genius of men like Ballantyne it accomplishes nothing. But I'm not going to talk about him. Millions of others are doing that. I'm going to talk about some other people that seem to have been more or less forgotten."

HER eyes had an odd intensity, almost as though she were trying to see through the camera lens, through the screen, and find somebody. For some reason not associated with her low-cut gown, Comyn's pulses began to hammer strangely.

Her voice rolled out again. "I'm going to talk about the four men who went with Ballantyne across the Big Jump, and died doing it. Not our money nor Ballantyne himself could have done anything without those four men."

She lifted her champagne glass, in a gesture that could have been corny but was not.

"I'm going to drink to those four men —to Strang, and Kessel, and Vickery and—"

Was the pause deliberate, or was she just trying to remember the name? Her eyes were brilliant with some obscure deviltry.

"—and Paul Rogers. And I know at least one man who'll be glad to drink with me, if he's listening."

The mild-faced man started and glanced at Comyn in the bar mirror. The other one kept his eyes fastened on nothing, but his body moved on the stool with a slow snakelike undulation, and he smiled. Comyn's heart jolted and then ran on again with a fast steady beat. From that moment he knew exactly what he was going to do.

He didn't hurry. He didn't give any outward sign that he had heard Miss Sydna Cochrane or got her meaning. After a while he rose and went unsteadily into the washroom.

There was nobody in it. His unsteadiness disappeared. He flattened himself against the wall beside the door, and waited. The one low window in the place was barred and there was no way out of it, but if he waited long enough the boys out there would get uneasy. . . .

Footsteps outside, going slow. Then the absence of sound that meant somebody listening. Comyn held his breath. The door opened.

It was the harmless-looking gent in the rumpled jacket. Without malice, Comyn stepped forward and planted one on his jaw, so swiftly that he hardly had time to look surprised. Then he tucked him away in a place ideally adapted for concealment, risking a fast run-through of his pockets before he left him. His identification said his name was Lawrence Hannay, and his occupation operative for a well-known private detective agency. He carried no weapon.

Comyn went back and stood again beside the door.

This time he had a little longer to wait. A stranger came in and Comyn sweated blood until he left. Then there was silence again.

There was no sound of footsteps. The tall man walked silently. Comyn could feel him listening outside the door, and then it opened softly and slowly and he came inside a step at a time, his left hand swinging free, his right hand in his pocket, his head hunched forward between his stooping shoulders.

Comyn slugged him hard behind the ear.

He twisted, as though the movement of air in front of Comyn's fist had been enough to warn him, and almost in time. The blow didn't hit square. He fell, still twisting, and Comyn threw himself aside. Something made a tiny shrilling like an insect going past him and snicked against the tiled wall.

Comyn sprang.

The man was only half stunned. His body whipped and writhed under

Comyn's knees and his breath hissed. He had a narrow face and a bristle of rusty hair, and the teeth he sank into Comyn's wrist were brown and bad. He wanted hard to get his right hand up so he could shoot his little toy into Comyn without any danger of hitting himself. But Comyn was kneeling on it, crushing it down into his own belly, and both of them knew better than to let go. Comyn grunted, and his fist went up and down two or three times. The narrow skull cracked audibly on the tile floor. After the third time the man relaxed.

Comyn sat him against the wall with his head bent over his knees, in the attitude of a drunk who has passed out. With great care he took the small ugly weapon out of his pocket—it was one of the kind Comyn had threatened the guard with on Mars, and he thought how glad that guard would be to know that he had been shot at with it—and dropped it in the wastebasket under a drift of paper towels. Then he searched him.

There was nothing on him. Not a card, not a name. He was a careful man.

Comyn filled his cupped hands with cold water and threw it in the man's face. Then he slapped him. Eyes opened, narrow and colorless under rusty brows, looking into Comyn's face.

"You're no private op. Who are you?"

Three short unhelpful words.

Comyn hit him again. He had been on the receiving end himself for the Cochranes, and it gave him a certain pleasure to be handing it back to someone.

"Come on, Buster. Who hired you to kill me?"

The same three words.

Comyn lifted his hand again, and the man showed his brown and broken teeth.

"Go ahead," he said. "See if you can make me."

Comyn considered him. "It would be a lot of fun, but the lady won't wait all night. And this isn't exactly the place for that kind of a talk, either." He showed his own teeth. "Anyway, you'll have a nice time explaining to your boss just why you didn't earn his money."

"I'll be back. I got a reason now."

"Aw," said Comyn, "I've made you real mad—just because I wouldn't stand still! Isn't that too bad." He hauled back his fist and let it go with deliberate and vicious intent. The man folded up quietly against the wall. Comyn went out, paid his check in the bar, and left. This time he was not followed by anybody.

He found a cab and headed for the Rocket Room, wondering two things as he rode. The first was whether Miss Sydna Cochrane had chosen a rather peculiar way of giving the signal to have him finished off. The second was whether her legs would measure up to the rest of her. He rather thought they would. . . .

IV

THERE were nine pretty little worlds that moved slowly around the softly glowing orb of their Sun. They moved quite silently in the ceiling, but you couldn't have heard them anyway, so loud was the buzz in the Rocket Room.

And the buzz of voices had the one name all through it, the same as everywhere. Comyn got it all the way, from the men and women at the shimmering bar that had real pilot-seats and a phony space-window instead of a mirror, and from the crowded tables he passed.

He thought of a screaming man, and wondered bitterly, "Are you happy, Ballantyne? You made the Big Jump, and you died, but you're a hero to all these people. Wasn't it worth it?"

The waiter who happened into Comyn's path asked deferentially, "Did you want to see someone at Miss Cochrane's table, sir?"

But it wasn't a waiter, not a real one, when he looked closer, and he hadn't

just happened.

Comyn said wearily, "Yes, I do. Can you take that to the Crown Princess yourself, or does it have to go through the captain of the guard?"

The waiter examined him, without seeming to. "It would depend. . . ."

"Yeah. Well, ask her if she still wants to drink to Paul Rogers."

The waiter glanced at him sharply. "Your name is?"

"Comyn."

"You're expected, Mr. Comyn."

He turned and led the way to the big table that had just a little the best position in the place, the one Comyn had been making for when he was stopped. Miss Sydna Cochrane watched them come.

The man who was pretending to be a waiter spoke to her, received a nod, and went back to his post. She leaned back in her chair, showing the fine strong lines of her throat and breast, and smiled up at Comyn. She had had a few more champagnes since he saw her on the videoscreen, and she was still holding them.

"Well!" she said. "You look like the type that could do it, all right. Would it please you to know that you've still got 'em spinning?"

"Who?"

"The Cochranes. Round and round." She described circles with her forefinger. "All except me, of course. Sit down. Make yourself at home."

Chair, glass, champagne, and genuine waiter had appeared like magic. Comyn sat. The dozen or so others at the table were chattering like magpies, demanding to be told who Comyn was and what the mystery was all about. Sydna ignored them. The tall willowy boy who sat on her left peered across her shoulder and glowered at Comyn. She ignored him, too.

"Pretty clever of me, I thought. That spur-of-the-minute speech I delivered myself of, I mean."

"Real cute, Miss Cochrane. So cute it nearly got me killed."

"What?"

"Five minutes after you made that crack about Paul Rogers somebody took a shot at me."

She frowned, and a shadow of some dark thought he couldn't read came into her eyes.

"Was that your idea?" he asked her softly.

"My friend," she said, "they shoved a camera in my face, and I spoke. Even in our modern age there are thousands of places that don't have videos. You might have been in any one of them." She began to get her temper up. "And furthermore, if you think I—"

"Whoa!" he said, and grinned. "Okay. I take it back. What about that drink?"

SHE continued to stare at him, her red mouth set and sulky, her brows drawn down. The clamor had now become deafening around the table. Comyn leaned back, rolling the stemmed glass slowly between his hands, not thinking about it, looking at the white dress and what it covered, and what it didn't cover, letting her take her time. He was in no hurry. He could look at that all night.

The anger went out of her eyes, leaving them hazy and full of sparks. "I'm not sure I'm going to like you," she said, "but I'm willing to find out. Come on."

She uncoiled out of the chair, and Comyn rose with her. In her high heels she stood as tall as he did. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Who knows? Maybe the Moon." She laughed and waved to her guests, who were protesting violently. "You're lovely people, but you make too much noise. 'Bye."

The willowy lad sprang up. "Now see here, Sydna," he said angrily, "I'm your escort, and I won't have. . . ."

"Johnny."

"You can't just go off with this—this character, in the middle of the night! It isn't. . . ."

"Johnny," said Sydna, "you're a nice boy, but Comyn can lick you. And if you don't stop minding my business I'll have him do it."

She touched Comyn's arm and swept on ahead of him, walking with a long arrogant stride that even the high heels couldn't ruin. Comyn followed her, anxious to get away from the red-faced Johnny before he had to make good on Sydna's promise whether he wanted to or not.

Her back was bare to the waist, brown as a copper penny, with the hank of flaxen hair swinging against it. Comyn watched the smooth play of muscles up and down that back as she walked, and thought that she could probably have licked the kid herself, without help. Quite a dame.

He settled down beside her on the cushions of a limousine that arrived at the door almost as soon as they did, turning a little sideways so he could see her.

"Well," he said, "what now?"

She crossed her knees, burrowed her head back into the cushions, and yawned like a cat. "I haven't decided yet."

The chauffeur, apparently accustomed to such vagaries, began to drive slowly along, going nowhere in particular. Sydna lay back in her corner and watched Comyn from under half-closed lids. The flicker of passing lights gleamed on her white dress, touched her hair, her mouth, the angle of a

[*Turn page*]

cheek-bone. "I'm sleepy," she said.

"Too sleepy to tell me what you wanted with me?"

"Curiosity. Wanted to see the man the Cochranes couldn't keep out." She smiled with sudden malice. "I wanted to see the man that got Willy in dutch."

"Who's Willy?"

"My little cousin's beloved husband, Stanley." She leaned forward. "Do you like Stanley?"

"I can't say I'm bursting with affection for him."

"He's a louse," said Sydna, and relaxed again into the upholstery, brooding. Then she clicked open the communicator. "I've decided," she said. "Take us to the spaceport."

"Yes, Miss Cochrane," said the chauffeur, stifling a yawn, and the communicator snapped shut again.

"Us?" said Comyn.

"I told you maybe we'd go to the Moon."

"Don't I have a choice in the matter?"

"Don't kid me, Comyn. Right in the middle of the Cochrane stronghold? You're crazy to get there."

He leaned over her, putting his hand on the smooth ridge of muscle where her neck curved into her shoulder. It quivered slightly, and he tightened his fingers.

"I don't like having my mind made up for me," he said. "Not too fast."

"Neither do I," said Sydna, and put her hands up alongside his head. Her nails bit suddenly into the flesh behind his ears, pulling his head down. She was laughing.

After a while he straightened up and said, "You play rough."

"I grew up with three brothers. I had to play rough, or not play."

They looked at each other in the half dark, hot-eyed, bristling, between anger and excitement. Then she said slowly, almost viciously,

"You'll come because there's something up there you'll want to see."

'What?"

She didn't answer. Quite suddenly she had begun to shiver, her hands clasped tight together in her lap.

"Buy me a drink, Comyn."

"Haven't you had enough?"

"There isn't enough in New York."

"What have you people got now, up there on the Moon?"

"Progress. Expansion. Glory. The stars." She swore, still quivering. "Why did Ballantyne have to make his damned trip, Comyn? Weren't nine worlds enough room to make trouble in? Trouble. That's what we've got. up there. That's why I came to Earth."

"But you want to go back now."

She lifted those wide brown shoulders, and let them fall. "I'm a Cochrane, and I'm stuck with it." She paused, looking at Comyn. "So are you —stuck with it, I mean. Would you rather be on the outside, getting shot at—or on the inside?"

"Getting shot at?"

"I can't guarantee you anything."

"Hm."

"Oh, run away if you want to, Comyn." She had got over her shakes, and he wondered if the champagne might not have been responsible for them. It seemed to be coming over her in a wave now. Or else she was taking that way to duck any more questions. "I'm sleepy. I don't care what you do."

AND she went to sleep, or seemed to, with her head against him and his arm around her. She was no light weight, but the long lithe curves of her body were pleasant to follow. He held them, thinking of all the many ways in which this might be a trap. Or was Miss Sydna Cochrane just a little crazy? They said all the Cochranes were a little crazy—they'd been saying that ever since old Jonas had built the ridiculous lunar palace toward which he was now heading.

The car was bearing them on toward the spaceport. He could still back out, but he'd have to do it fast. . . .

"No. I can't back out," thought

Comyn. "Not now."

He had only one chance to find out about Paul Rogers, and that was to bluff information out of the Cochranes—if he could. He also only had one chance to maybe get himself on a little solider ground, and that was by the same method. He would never get a better crack at trying.

"A hard-boiled little lamb going to talk a lot of lions out of their dinner," Comyn told himself grimly. "Oh, well, if I'm stepping into it, it's in nice company."

He settled back, patting Miss Cochrane into a more comfortable position, and wished he knew two things—who had paid the boy with the bad teeth to kill him, and whether this ace in the hole he was going to bluff the Cochranes with might not turn out to be just a low spade after all—a spade suitable for grave-digging.

They went through the spaceport and into the glittering Cochrane yacht, as though through a well-oiled machine. When the yacht had cleared, Sydna went sleepily back to change and left Comyn staring with increasing distaste at the blank, biggening lunar face ahead.

Why the devil would anyone want to build a showplace out on this skullshead? They said old Jonas had done it so that the Cochrane wealth and power would be forever in the eyes of all Earth, and that he rarely left it. The old pirate must have a screw loose.

The yacht swept in toward the Lunar Apennines, showing a magnificent view of the sharp and towering peaks in the full blaze of day. Luna, he thought, could beat anything in the Solar System for sheer scenery, if your nerves could stand it. The great ringed plain Archimedes showed its encircling fangs far off to the left, and ahead, on a plateau halfway up that naked mountain wall, he caught a flash of reflected sunlight.

"That's the dome," said Sydna. "We're almost there."

She didn't sound happy about it. Comyn glanced at her. She had come back, finally, in white slacks and a silk shirt, and was fixing her make-up.

"If you don't like the place why do you ever go there?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Jonas won't leave it. And we have to show up every so often. He's still head of the family."

Comyn looked at her more closely. "You're scared," he said. "Scared of something up here."

She laughed. "I don't scare easy."

"I believe that," he said. "But you're afraid now. Of what? Why did you run away from here to New York, to get tight?"

She looked at him sombrely. "Maybe you're about to find out. Or—maybe I'm just leading you to the slaughter."

He put his hands up on either side of her neck, not tenderly.

"Are you?"

"Could be, Comyn."

"I've got a feeling," he said, "that one of these days I'll be sorry I didn't break this for you right here."

"We may both be," she said, and then surprised him when he kissed her, for there was panic in the way she pressed against him.

He didn't like it at all, he liked the whole thing less and less as the yacht swooped smoothly down to that high plateau above the Mare Imbrium. He saw the curve of the enormous pressure-dome rising up like a smooth glass mountain flashing in the sun, and then a magnetic tug had hooked onto them and they were being handled smoothly into an airlock. Massive doors closed behind them, and Comyn thought, "Well, here I am—and it's up to the Cochranes whether I ever leave or not."

A few minutes later he was driving with Sydna through rioting gardens that covered several acres, toward a pile of masonry he had seen pictured many times before—an old man's arrogant monument to himself, insanely set upon a dead world. The stark structure of native lunar rock had been designed by a master architect to match the

lunar landscape. The result was striking, weird—and, he had to admit, beautiful. The lines of the buildings lifted and swept and curved as boldly as the peaks that loomed above them.

They got out and went up some broad and shallow steps to a portico of tremendous simplicity, and Sydna pushed open the great doors that were made of a dully-gleaming alloy.

The hall inside was high and austere, flooded with filtered lunar sunlight and softened by hangings, rugs, and a few priceless oddments from all over the Solar System. The vault of white stone flung back a whispering echo as they moved. Sydna walked half way along its length, going slower and slower, and then she turned suddenly around as though the thought had come to her to go away from there again. Comyn took her by the shoulder and asked again,

"What are you afraid of? I want to know!"

The echoes of his voice whispered back and forth between the walls. She shrugged, not looking at him, trying to keep her voice light.

"Don't you know every castle has a Thing living in its cellar? Well, we've got one here too, now, and it's a beaut."

"What kind of a thing?" demanded Comyn.

"I think," said Sydna, "I think—it's Ballantyne."

V

THE high vault muttered Ballantyne in a thousand tiny voices, and Comyn's grip had become a painful thing on Sydna's shoulders.

"What do you mean—it's Ballantyne? He's dead, I saw him die!"

Sydna's eyes met his now, steadily, for a long minute, and it seemed to Comyn that a cold wind blew in that closed place, cold as the spaces between the stars.

"They haven't let me go down there," she said, "and they won't talk to me about it, but you can't keep any secrets here. The echoes are too good. And I can tell you another thing. I'm not the only one that's scared."

Something caught hold of Comyn's heart and began to shake it. Sydna's face turned indistinct and distant and he was back again in a little room on Mars, looking at the shadow of a fear that was new under the familiar Sun. . . .

"Surprise," said Sydna, in a cool light voice that had barbs on it. "I've brought a friend of yours."

Comyn started and turned. William Stanley was standing in the doorway at the far end of the hall, a smile of welcome turning dark and ugly on his face. Comyn took his hands away from Sydna.

Stanley shot him one blazing look and then turned on Sydna. "Of all the hen-brained female tricks! What does it take to make you grow up, Sydna—the end of the world?"

"Why, Willy?" She looked at him in innocent amazement. "Did I do something wrong?"

Stanley's face was now absolutely white. "No," he said, answering his own question and not hers, "not even the end of the world would do it. You'd still be busy impressing everyone with how devastatingly cute you are. But I don't think that anybody is going to find this one the least bit funny." He jerked his head at Comyn. "Turn around. You're going back to Earth."

Sydna was smiling, but her eyes had that lambency that Comyn remembered. She seemed to be much interested in Stanley. "Say that over again—that last bit."

Stanley repeated slowly. "I said, this man is going back to Earth."

Sydna nodded. "You're getting better at it, Willy, but you're still not good enough."

"Good enough at what?"

"Giving orders like a Cochrane." She turned her back on him, not insultingly but as though he just wasn't there.

In a voice that had trouble getting out, Stanley said, "We'll see about this."

He strode away. Sydna did not look after him. Neither did Comyn. He had forgotten Stanley after the first minute. *I think—I think it's Ballantyne.* How long could a thing go on, how ugly could it get?

He demanded harshly, "Just what are you trying to give me?"

"It's hard to take, isn't it? Maybe you know now why I went down to New York."

"Listen," said Comyn. "I was with Ballantyne. His heart had stopped. They tried to get it going again, but it was no use. I saw him. He was dead."

"Yes," said Sydna, "I know. That's what makes it so sticky. His heart's still stopped. He's dead, but—not quite."

COMYN swore at her, with a savagery born of fear. "How can a man be dead, and . . . how do you know? You said you hadn't been let down to see him. How. . . ."

"She listens at keyholes," said a new voice. A man was coming down the hall toward them, his heels clicking angrily on the stone floor. "Listens," he said, "and then talks. Can't you ever learn to keep your mouth shut? Can't you ever stop making trouble?"

His face was Sydna's face all over again without the beauty, high-boned and dark. His eyes had the same brightness, but it was a cruel thing now, and the lines around his mouth were deep. He looked as though he wanted to take Sydna in his two hands and break her.

She didn't give any ground. "Throwing a tantrum isn't going to change things, Pete, so you might as well not." Her own eyes had fired up, and her mouth was stubborn. "Comyn, this is Peter Cochrane, my brother. Pete, this is. . . ."

The bitter dark eyes flicked briefly over Comyn. "I know, I've seen him before." He returned his attention to Sydna. Somewhere from the background Stanley spoke, reiterating his demand that Comyn be sent away. Nobody noticed him.

"Where?" asked Comyn.

"On Mars. You wouldn't remember. You weren't feeling well at the time."

A vague memory of a voice speaking beyond a thick red haze returned to Comyn. "So it was you broke up the party."

"The boys were enjoying their work too much. You were liable to be ruined before you talked." He swung around on Comyn. "Are you ready to talk now?"

Comyn stepped closer to him. "Is Ballantyne dead?"

Peter Cochrane hesitated. The wire-drawn look deepened, and a muscle began to twitch under his cheek-bone. "You and your big mouth," he muttered to Sydna. "You. . . ."

"All right," she answered furiously, "so you're mad. The hell with you. You and the whole Cochrane tribe aren't getting anywhere on this, and you know it. I thought Comyn might have the answer."

Comyn repeated, "Is Ballantyne dead?"

Peter said, after a moment, "I don't know."

Comyn closed his fists hard and took a deep breath. "Let's put it another way, then. Dead or alive, I want to see him."

"No. No you don't—but you won't know it till afterward." He studied Comyn, with a hard penetrating look that was used to taking men apart. "What are you after, Comyn? A chance to cut in?"

Comyn gestured toward Stanley. "I told him, already. I told your boys on Mars. I want to find out what happened to Paul Rogers."

"Just a noble sentiment of friendship? It's too thin, Comyn."

"More than just friendship," Coymn said. "Paul Rogers saved my neck, once. He went to bat for me out on Ganymede when he didn't have to. I'll tell you about it sometime. The point is, I like to pay debts. I'm going to find out about him, if I have to blow the Cochranes

wide open."

"You don't, I take it, like the Cochranes?"

Comyn said savagely, "Who does? And you're running true to form now, kicking Ballantyne around like a football, snatching his ship, holding out the log books, trying to sew up the Big Jump—the biggest thing men ever did—like any cheap swindling business deal. . . ."

"Let's get things straight," interrupted Peter harshly. "That ship and its star-drive belong to us. And the log broke off just where we said. And we brought Ballantyne here, to try to do something for him, about him. . . ." He broke off, his face quivering slightly as though in involuntary recoil from shocking memory.

Comyn felt the chill shadow of the other's emotion, but he said again, "Are you going to let me see him?"

"Why should I? Why shouldn't I just send you back to Earth? Give me one good reason why not."

"Because," Comyn said grmily, "you know I know something, and you want to know what."

"He doesn't know anything!" Stanley exclaimed to Peter. "How could he? Ballantyne was in terminal coma and couldn't talk. He's bluffing, trying to chisel in—"

"Maybe," said Peter Cochrane. "We'll find out. All right, Comyn—you convince me you know something and you can see Ballantyne. But I'm making no deals with you beyond that! I'm only one Cochrane and this concerns all of us. The others won't be here until this evening, Earth time and we can fight it out then. Fair enough?"

Comyn nodded. "Fair enough."

"Then, what do you know?"

"Not a lot," said Comyn. It was time for his one little card, and he had to play it casually as though he had a fistful behind it. "Not a lot. But I do know there'd be quite an excitement if people thought there was a transuranic world out there."

THERE was a moment of silence. Peter Cochrane did not change expression, but the color drained slowly out of Stanley's face, leaving it grey. Then Sydna spoke into the silence.

"He did know. And that's why somebody tried to kill him."

Peter Cochrane looked at her sharply. "That's ridiculous. He wouldn't be worth a nickel to anybody dead."

"Do I get to see Ballantyne now?" Comyn demanded.

Cochrane turned abruptly. "Yes. You've asked for it. Sydna, you stay here. You've made enough trouble for one day."

"I have every intention of staying here, and I need a drink!" she said.

Comyn followed Peter Cochrane down the corridor. Stanley went with them. There was a sliding metal door at the end of the corridor, and behind it there was a lift that sank downward into the lunar rock, whining softly. Comyn had begun to sweat, and his shirt stuck to him coldly damp across his back. His heart was pounding, not steadily, but in irregular bursts that made it hard to breathe. The lines in Peter Cochrane's face were deep. He looked as though he hadn't slept for some time. Stanley stood apart from them, withdrawn into his own thoughts. His eyes moved constantly from Comyn to Peter Cochrane and back again. A ridge of muscle showed along his jaw.

The lift stopped and they got out. There was nothing mysterious about these cellars under the Cochrane castle. They held the pumping plants for air and water, the generators, the mountainous quantities of supplies necessary for maintaining life and luxury in this artificial blister on the face of Luna. The rock floor they walked on quivered to the rhythmic throbbing of the pumps.

Cochrane moved like a man going to witness an execution and not wanting to. Comyn thought he had been this way before too often, and he caught the subtle contagion of dread from the dark

strained face. Stanley lagged behind them both, his feet scuffing on the smooth rock.

Peter Cochrane paused before a door. He didn't look at anyone. He said, "Why don't you stay out here, Bill?"

Stanley said, "No."

Comyn's mouth was dry. There was an acrid taste in it, and his nerve-ends hurt.

Peter Cochrane still hesitated, scowling at his hand that was laid upon the door.

Comyn said, "Come on, let's get this over with." His voice came out rough and no louder than a whisper.

Cochrane pushed the door open.

There was a room cut out of the rock. It had been hastily cleared of most of the stores that had been in it, and just as hastily fitted up with things that made it partly a laboratory, partly a hospital, and partly a cell. Strong lights filled it with a naked and pitiless glare. There were two men in it, and something else.

Comyn recognized the young doctor from the hospital on Mars. He had lost much of his youth. The other man he didn't know, but the same look of strain and dread was on him. They turned around with the violence of overtaxed nerves, startled by the opening of the door. The young doctor looked at Comyn, and his eyes got wide.

"You again," he said. "How did you. . . ."

"Never mind that," said Cochrane swiftly. He kept his gaze on the doctor, on the floor, anywhere but on the white bed with the siderails up on it. "Is there any change?"

Things were fading out for Comyn. He had taken a few steps forward, drawn by that white barred oblong beyond the two men, beyond the apparatus and the laboratory benches. The light was very brilliant, very clear. It was focussed now upon the bed, and around it things were fading out, the men, the voices, the emotions.

Far off on another world, the doctor was saying, "No change. Roth and I have completed. . . ."

No. It was bad enough on Mars. I heard him scream and I saw him die, and that was bad enough. Nobody ought to have to look at this.

A voice, another one. "I told you before what my findings were. I've verified them, as far as anybody can. I can't go beyond the limits of my equipment. This has got to wait for a whole new science." Excitement in the voice, stronger than dread, stronger than anything.

"I know that, Roth. I know it."

VOICES, men, tension, fear, going round, going faster, dissolving in a darkening mist around that single intense point of light. Comyn put out his hands, not knowing that he did it, and took hold of the cold top bar of the bed, hanging on while the warmth and the strength drained out of him and left him empty of everything but a sickening horror.

The thing that lay in the bed between the barred sides was Ballantyne. It was Ballantyne, and it was dead, quite dead. There was no covering on it to hide its deadness. No breathing lifted the flattened ribs. No pulse beat anywhere beneath the pale transparent skin, and the tracery of veins was dark, and the face was. . . .

Dead. And yet—it moved.

The faint unceasing twitchings and drawings of the flesh that Comyn remembered when Ballantyne was still alive had increased and taken over now that he was dead. It was as though some new and dreadful form of life had claimed the wasted shell when Ballantyne had left it, a brainless, blind, insensate life that only knew to move, to stir and pluck the strings of muscles that lifted the skeletal limbs and put them down again, that made the fingers grasp and close and the head turn slowly from side to side.

Motion without reason, without sound except for the rustling it made itself

against the sheet. Motion that laid a blasphemous hand even on the face that had no longer any thought or being behind it, and made it. . . .

Comyn heard a hoarse and distant sound that was himself trying to speak and not making it. He let go of the bed. After that he didn't hear or see anything until he fetched up against some solid object with a crash that knocked some sense back into him. He stood where he was, shaking all over, the breath coming raw and rasping into his throat, and gradually the room stopped swinging in and he was able to think again.

Peter Cochrane said, "You wanted to come."

Comyn didn't answer. He moved away from the bed, as far as he could get, and kept his back to it. He could still hear the dry vague rustling that never stopped. . . .

Cochrane turned to the doctor. "What I want to know for sure," he said, "is this. Could Ballantyne ever—ever live again? As Ballantyne, I mean. As a human being."

The doctor made a decisive gesture. "No. Ballantyne died, from heart-failure due to exhaustion. He is dead, by every normal physiological standard. His brain is already deteriorating. But his body has in it a residue of some weird new physiological activity—I can hardly call it life."

"What kind of activity? We're not scientists, Doctor."

The other hesitated. "The ordinary processes of metabolism ceased in Ballantyne's body-cells, when he died. But there's a residual process that keeps going on. And it's something brand new. It's a low-level flow of energy in the cells, not generated by the usual biochemical metabolic process, but by the slow degeneration of certain transuranic elements."

Comyn looked up sharply.

"You mean," Cochrane was saying slowly, "he has suffered a kind of radioactive poisoning?"

The doctor shook his head, and Roth said firmly, "No, this is definitely not toxic radioactivity. The elements that Ballantyne's body-cells absorbed are beyond the range of our chemistry, even of the transuranic chemistry our labs have been dabbling with. They don't emit injurious radiation, but do release energy."

They glanced briefly and against their will, at the bed, and Cochrane said sombrely, "Then his—movements—are merely a mechanical reflex?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes. The cytoplasm of the contractile-tissue cells, such as the muscle-fibers, is constantly activated by the flow of energy.

"But he's really dead?"

"Yes. He's dead."

STANLEY broke into the brooding moment of silence that followed. "What are we going to do with him? We can't let people see him—there'd be an uproar, an examination—and it would all be out!"

"No, we can't let people see him," Cochrane agreed slowly. He said, after a moment, to Stanley, "You get the Earth news-services on the phone. Tell them, that we're going to give Ballantyne the hero's funeral he deserves—and one that all Earth can see."

"All Earth? Peter, you're crazy—"

"Am I? Maybe. Anyway, Ballantyne had no close family so nobody can stop us. Tell them to watch the northwest corner of Mare Imbrium in an hour."

Comyn got it, then. He exhaled a long breath. Cochrane glanced at him briefly, and then once more at the barred unquiet bed.

"I know how you feel," he said. "Besides, he's come a long way. He deserves to rest."

They went out then, back up into the light, into the cooled and freshened air and the scent of flowers that came in from the rioting gardens. And all the way in Comyn's mind that faint remembered voice was whispering, "Oh, God, why did it have to be trans-

uranic. . . ." And he was sick, with a sickness that he thought would never leave him while he lived.

Sydna was waiting. Cochrane and Stanley were busy now with this thing they were about to do, and they hardly noticed when she took Comyn by the arm and led him off, out to a terrace above the gardens where the filtered sunlight poured down fiercely and took some of the coldness out of his bones. She put a drink in his hands and waited, looking at his face, until he noticed her and began to speak.

"Don't tell me about it," she said sharply. No."

After a moment she drew closer to him and murmured. "Don't look startled or surprised, they can see us from the windows. Comyn, will you leave here now? I can still get you away."

He looked down at her. "What's the matter?"

"You were down there a long time. The family has started to arrive. Comyn. . . ."

"You've had a few."

"And I wish I'd had more! Listen, I got you into this, I blew my top about Ballantyne and brought you up here. I'm trying to get you out while I can still do it."

His eyes were bleak. "Afraid I *am* trying to cut in on the profits?"

"You bloody fool! You don't know us Cochranes! This thing is big, and that means people are going to get hurt. Will you go?"

Comyn shook his head. "I can't."

She looked at him, narrow-eyed, and then she said mercilessly, "Are you sure now you *want* to find your friend Paul Rogers?"

Comyn was glad he did not have to answer that question, right now. For at that moment, from the terrace, they saw the sleek, purring air-tight truck that was going away from the mansion, toward the lock.

They watched in silence, as it went out of the dome and down the ledges, back and forth, onto the great lunar plain. It went so far out on the plain that it was but a dot. It stayed there, and then it came back.

Then, for them and for all watching Earth to see, upon the Mare Imbrium flared a dazzling flower of atomic flame, blazing, soaring, and then dying away.

Hero's funeral-pyre, with a world for witness! Comyn unclenched his hands . . . and Sydna slipped something into one of them.

It was a shocker, still warm from her body. She said, "All right, come on and meet my family."

VI

IT WAS the most ridiculous room he had ever seen. It was comparatively small, and it was furnished in the overstuffed fashion of three generations before. It had a long, shabby sofa, and lumpish chairs and drifts of small tables. One wall was filter-glass, but the other walls were covered with incongruous flowered wall-paper. And there was a fireplace with a mantle above it—a fireplace here in this super-modern castle on the Moon!

Six or seven people sat about the room, but when Comyn came in with Sydna they stopped talking and stared at him. It was like walking into an ambush of hostile eyes. Stanley was there, sitting in a corner beside one of those muffin-faced girls that happen to every family sooner or later. Beyond him, by the fireplace, was a shabby Morris chair, and the figure in it was the focus of the whole room.

"This is the man, Grandfather," said Peter Cochrane. The burst of atomic fire out on the Mare Imbrium seemed to have burned something out of him. He had the look of one exhausted by grappling with the impossible.

A voice spoke out of the old Morris chair. "You," it said. "Come here."

Comyn went, and looked down at the old, old man who sat in the chair watching him with eyes like two dark glowing embers.

He said, "You're Jonas Cochrane."

Th old face, seamed and shriveled and shrunken tight over the characteristic jutting bones, was stamped with a long lifetime of acquired wisdom, none of it saintly. Only that face made it possible to identify this ancient man, wrapped in a shabby woolen robe and dusted with cigarette-ash, with the crafty, ruthless schemer of the old days who had clawed top place for his family in the great game of ships and planets.

Over his head on the mantel, amid a grotesque ruck of mementoes—of baby-shoes preserved in bronze, models of the first Cochrane flagships. faded photographs of prosaic Middle-Western houses and people—Jonas Cochrane's face was startingly repeated, in a well-done miniature of a Sioux Indian chief.

"That's O l d-M a n-A f r a i d-Of-His Horses," said Jonas, with pride. "On the mother's side, I'm a direct descendant."

He went on, without change of tone. "I don't like interference, especially from amateurs. They're unpredictable. You've made us a lot of trouble, Comyn."

"Enough trouble," asked Comyn softly, "that you decided to have me killed?"

Jonas Cochrane's eyes grew narrow and very bright. "Murder is for fools," he said. "I've never indulged in it. What are you talking about?"

Comyn told him.

Jonas leaned forward, looking past Comyn. "Are any of you responsible for this? Peter?"

Peter snapped, "Of course not. I'll get hold of Hannay."

He went out. A couple more people had come in by now, and Comyn thought he could place them—Sydna's other two brothers, one strongly resembling Peter but without the iron in him, the other fairer and more round-faced, with a merry, self-indulgent look. There was a gray-haired man with a mouth like a steel trap and a chronically ill-tempered expression, and Comyn knew he was the survivor of Jonas' two sons. He could guess the reason for the sour disposition. Old Jonas had lived too long.

There were some other third-generation Cochranes, male and female, including the girl who was sitting with Stanley, looking from him to the others with vague alarm, and sneaking glances at Comyn as though he might suddenly go off like a bomb. That would be Sydna's cousin. Stanley did not seem much relieved by the disposal of Ballantyne. He sat staring at his feet, snarling occasionally in a genteel way when his wife whispered to him. Beside them was a middle-aged-to-elderly woman who looked more like Old-Man-Afraid-Of-His-Horses than Jonas did, except that the Sioux chief had a far kindlier face. She looked impatient, and said sharply,

Father, why are we wasting time on this person? I've come all the way up here to discuss business, and I don't see any reason. . . ."

"Of course you don't," said Jonas tartly. "You're a fool. You always were a fool, Sally. Just sit there and don't bother me."

Somebody snickered. Jonas' daughter sprang up. "Father or no father, I don't have to take that kind of talk! And I won't! I—"

Jonas, ignoring her splutter, lighted a cigarette with large hands that were so weak they trembled with the effort. Everyone else seemed amused, except Muffin-face, who looked distressed.

"Don't you mind, Mother," she whispered timidly.

Jonas regarded them both with a great weariness. "Women," he said.

Peter Cochrane came back. "Well, Comyn, Hannay says you slugged him and parked him in the washroom, and that's all he knows. He didn't see anyone else following you, nor did he see any attack."

Comyn shrugged. "He wouldn't. He was out cold. And the other guy was much better at tailing than Hannay."

Stanley said, "We've only Comyn's word that he ever was attacked."

"And, Comyn," said Peter, "you hadn't tried to negotiate with anyone, so who would want to silence you? You could have some personal enemies. . . ."

"Sure," said Comyn. "But this wasn't one of them. And they don't hate me that bad."

Stanley shrugged. "How do you know? Anyway, I can't see that it's very important—except to you."

"Oh, but it is," said old Jonas softly. "You're a fool too, Stanley, or you'd see it. If he's telling the truth, it means that somebody didn't want him to talk to the Cochranes. Somebody preferred to lose Comyn's possible knowledge rather than risk letting us have it. And that means—" He broke off, looking shrewdly at Comyn. "You have courage, but that's a cheap virtue. It's no good without brains. Have you got brains, too? Can you finish my line of reasoning?"

"Easy," Comyn answered. "You have been, or are about to be, double-crossed by somebody in your own camp."

There was an uproar of voices. Jonas' gray-haired son came to his feet and thrust his face close to Comyn's and shouted:

"That statement alone brands you as a liar! No Cochrane would ever sell out!"

At that, Comyn laughed.

PETER'S face had taken on a dark, savage look. "I'm afraid I agree with Uncle George. What Comyn implies would presuppose special knowledge on the traitor's part—something he knows that we don't know, that he was afraid Comyn might tell us. But there isn't any special knowledge. I examined Ballantyne's ship, the log, everything, and Stanley was with me, and Uncle George and Simon came almost at once."

"That's right," said the cheerful young man who was Peter's brother, and who was now more cheerful than he had any business to be. "We were all there together. And nobody else got aboard until we were through. No special knowledge for anybody. Wasn't any. Vouch for old Pete any time. Besides, it's silly. All Cochranes, share and share alike."

He gave Comyn a slow, gliding look, and Comyn saw that underneath young Simon Cochrane was about as jovial as a cottonmouth.

"Personally," he said, "I don't give a damn one way or the other. I'm only interested in finding out whether Paul Rogers is alive or not, and bringing him back safe if he is."

He faced old Jonas squarely. "There's going to be a second Big Jump. I want to go along."

And that was it. It was funny, he thought, how you kept a crazy idea in your mind, how you told yourself it was crazy and not a thing you'd ever do, and then suddenly you said, *"I want to go along,"* and you knew that all the time you'd been planning to do it.

Peter Cochrane said angrily, *"You* go? What are you, Comyn—the White Knight? If Rogers or any of the other three are alive, we'll bring them back."

Comyn shook his head. "No dice. The Cochranes have always liked a clear field, and this one is too easy to sweep clean. To put it crudely, I don't trust you."

An uproar of voices began, with Sally Cochrane's shrill indignant trumpeting rising above the rest. Old Jonas held up his hand.

"Quiet," he said. "All of you!" He looked up into Comyn's face with eyes very bright, very hard, as ruthless as an old cormorant's. "You'll have to pay for what you want, Comyn—pay high."

"Yeah."

The room had become quite still. The light clinking of bracelets was clearly audible as Sally Cochrane leaned forward. They all leaned forward, intent on Comyn and the old man, intent on every word.

Jonas said, "Ballantyne talked before he—died."

"He talked."

"But how much, Comyn—how much? "Transuranic" isn't enough." Jonas

hitched himself upward in the chair, a gaunt rack of bones with the hot pleasure of combat still burning in it. "And don't try to blackmail me, Comyn. Don't threaten me with United Tradelines or anyone else. You're here under a glass bubble on the Moon and you can't get out. Understand that? You're here for as long as it suits me, and you can't talk to anyone. This place has come in handy that way before. Now—go on."

Silence in the room. A silence of held breath, and hostile faces flushed and watching. The palms of Comyn's hands were wet. He was walking a thin wire, and one wrong step would be enough.

"No," said Comyn slowly, "transuranic isn't enough now. You got that much from Ballantyne's own body-cells. But there was more."

Silence. A ring of eyes around him, hot and hungry, eager and cruel.

"Paul Rogers was alive when Ballantyne parted with him. I think the others may have been, too. He pleaded with Paul not to leave him—said he couldn't go back alone."

A pale tongue flickered over pale old lips. "He made a landing, then. We knew he must have, when we found the transuranic elements in his body. Go on, go on!"

"The sound of the drill they were using on the door was what roused Ballantyne, I think. It made him remember other sounds. He spoke about the voyage out—it must have been hell. And then. . . ."

Comyn's flesh was beginning to quiver, remembering Ballantyne's voice, remembering his face and the look that had been on it.

"Something or someone was calling to Paul, and Ballantyne was begging him not to listen."

Jonas asked harshly, "Who? What?"

"Something he called the Transuranae. He was afraid of them. I think the others had gone to them, and now Paul was going too. He was afraid of them—he screamed."

"And that was all," said Jonas. His eyes were curiously filmed now, like windows curtained lest too much show through. "He was screaming when he died."

Comyn's voice was quite natural when he said, "Oh, no. That wasn't all."

SILENCE. He waited. Too much silence. Comyn's heart pounded in it as loud as a kettledrum, and all these straining Cochrane ears must hear it and know he was lying. Suddenly he hated them with a personal hatred. They were too big, too strong, too sure of themselves. They wanted too much. If knowledge had come to him at that moment that Paul Rogers and all the others were dead and beyond help, he would have gone on fighting the Cochranes, just to mess up their plans. They were too good at using other men for pushballs.

And one of them, he was very sure, had tried to kill him.

Still Jonas waited.

Comyn smiled. "I'll tell the rest of it," he said, "when I'm out by Barnard's Star."

Stanley exploded. "Bluff. Just brazen, stupid bluff. Tell him to go to hell."

Uncle George was talking angrily, and Peter trying to get a word in, but the old man in the chair quieted them with three words.

"Wait a minute." His eyes hadn't left Comyn's. "Wait a minute. There's this to think of. If he isn't bluffing, he could be valuable out there. If he *is*—even so, it might be best to take him along."

They thought that over. They seemed to like it, all but Stanley. Comyn hadn't had to think, he'd got the meaning of it first.

He looked at Jonas and he said softly, "You *are* a tough old so-and-so, aren't you?"

Jonas chuckled. "Do you want to go to Barnard's Star, or don't you?"

Comyn said, between his teeth, "All right, I'll buy it."

"You won't," said Jonas, "be going back to Earth." He looked around the

faces. "That goes for all of you but George. Everything's got to be done right here at Luna, and I'll have no babbling it out till we have a second ship on the way."

Stanley protested, "But what about the courts? United and Trans-World are already entering anti-monopoly suits to get rights to the drive. If they get us tied up—"

"They won't," said Jonas. "George and our legal staff can hold them off. Peter, you get things started here. You're in charge."

The old man closed his eyes wearily. "Now get out of here, all of you. I'm tired."

Comyn found himself with the others out in the big hall. Dismissed, he thought savagely, like a lot of school children.

But the others paid him no attention. They were talking in high voices, Stanley still protesting, Aunt Sally complaining shrilly—until Peter Cochrane's authoritative voice cut across.

"We'd better get started. Since the work has to be done here, we'll need complete machine-shop facilities and technical staffs. Nielsen and Felder can handle that. You get them here, Bill."

"But to put Ballantyne's drive into a new ship just can't be done here—" Stanley started.

Peter cut him off. "It has to be. One of our new *Pallas* class, I'd say. The locks here will take it. Come on, we'll get things rolling."

Comyn turned and walked away from the noisy, babbling group. He didn't turn when he heard Sydna calling after him. Right now, he'd had enough of the Cochranes. Mixing with the Cochranes had got him into something dandy, something so big that it scared him right down to his boots. And he was in it, now, all the way.

The corridor was high and empty, and his footsteps mocked him as he walked. He could walk as far as he pleased, through the rooms and halls, across the terraces, around the gardens blooming in the windless air, but he'd still be under this glass bubble on the Moon. And death was under it with him. Whoever had tried before would try again now, with effort doubled and redoubled, to make sure that one Arch Comyn with his big mouth never lived to look at Barnard's Star.

And if he did live to get there, and they asked him, Where did Ballantyne land?—what was he going to answer?

That, he didn't know. . . .

VII

COMYN had about reached the limit of his endurance by the time the lid finally blew off everything. He was in the gardens with Sydna, under a flowering tree that shadowed them from the green Earthlight, when the discreet cough of a servant interrupted.

"Mr. Peter would like to see you at once, Miss Sydna."

"Is he angry?" asked Sydna.

"I'm afraid so, Miss. A message came from the yacht. . . ."

"I thought so," she said. And when the servant was gone she added, "Well, let him be mad. It was getting too dull here, all these weeks."

"A nice compliment for me," Comyn remarked.

"Oh, Arch, I didn't mean us. That's been wonderful."

"Yeah," he said. "And especially wonderful, the way you've let Stanley see us. I appreciate your using me to needle him."

He thought she would hit him, but instead, after a moment, she laughed.

"He is crazy about you, isn't he?" he demanded.

"He's a louse."

"Because he's crazy about you?"

"Because he says so. At least, he did once—just once. Cousin Claudia is a mess, but she is my cousin and she thinks he's wonderful." She straightened down her white dress. "Look at that, you big ape, you've torn the zipper! And anyway, he's one of those

earnest asses that bore me stiff. So I *have* let him catch us necking a few times."

She spoke suddenly with a bitter undertone. "And anyway, Comyn, between us it's just today. There may not be any tomorrow. When that ship takes off with you inside it—that's it. Shall we go face Peter?"

"What have you done now?"

"You'll find out. I told you, it was getting too dull here."

That, Comyn thought grimly as he followed her, was a misstatement. It hadn't been dull here under the dome all these weeks, at least not for him, but it had been wearing—very wearing indeed.

The devil of it was that he had had no part whatever in all the feverish, sweating activity that had been going on here. All that activity had taken place in the segment of the dome that was completely hidden from the big house by the lines of trees that delimited the gardens.

There were the huge locks where the freighters came with loads of fuel for the greedy pumps and furnaces, with chemicals for the air-purifiers and refrigerants for the daytime cooling system, with water for the vast rock cisterns and tanks of oxygen, and food and liquor and supplies. There were the machine shops that had been suddenly and swiftly enlarged so that now a small army of expert mechanics labored in them.

There was where the Ballantyne drive was, and the new ship in which it had been installed, a larger, stronger better ship than Ballantyne's, not a pioneer ship, but the follow-up to a pioneer, the consolidator. The guts had been stripped out of it and had been put back in a different pattern. The shops back there rang with a deadening clangor. Men worked in them right up to the limit of efficiency, and were replaced by another shift. Nobody complained. Their wages were astronomical. They were prisoners here until after take-off, but they didn't complain of that, either.

But they, and Peter Cochrane and Simon and Stanley, were part of something, doing something. Even Uncle George, back on Earth using high-priced legal talent to stave off the anti-monopoly suits, was doing something. Only he, Comyn, was barred out.

The armed guards who were stationed beyond the gardens had their orders. A lot of people were posted out, and Comyn was one of them. He could stand and watch the distant silver sides of the ship, and the cranes and the atomic welders flaring, could listen to the booming and screeching and hissing, but that was all.

"Listen," he had told Peter Cochrane, "I'm a work-boss and a damned good one. And after all, I'm *going* in that ship."

"Yes," said Peter. "And you get in it when we go. Not before then. We've had proof of your capacities for making trouble, Comyn."

"But I could do something outside the ship. I could—"

"No, Comyn. You stay out, and that's final. Grandfather's orders."

Comyn had stayed out, savagely cursing the old man who remained huddled and unseen in his ridiculous room, plotting to steal a star before he died.

HE HAD watched from outside when the ship went out on its first test, slipping silently up into the stark lunar sky, giving him a cold qualm in the belly when he realized that presently he would be inside it, inside a tiny, tiny capsule holding all the light and air and life there was out in the black immensities between the suns.

He had had to wait, and watch, and sweat, until the ship slipped back and Peter Cochrane came out of it with his face beaded with sweat and drawn with impatience and something else, with Stanley walking jerkily behind him.

". . . whole robot-shift for the drive had bugs in it. The new relays won't take the load. Rip it out and rebuild it!"

That was all Comyn could find out, just what he overheard, and he was supposed to sit and wait and play games with Sydna and be patient, and he was about ready to blow his fuses one way or another.

Only it seemed that Sydna had blown hers first. He followed her up to the house, and he was sure from the stubborn set of her chin that she was heading into a storm.

Peter was waiting for her on the terrace, with the blackest look Comyn had ever seen on a man's face. So were Stanley and Claudia, and a brace of young cousins who looked brightly expectant.

Peter said flatly, "The yacht's due to land in twenty minutes. Captain Moore radioed for clearance, because he's worried. It seems, Sydna, that there are some twenty-odd of your friends aboard."

She said brightly, "Oh, I forgot to tell you about that. I thought a party would liven things up around this detention home."

Peter let go. "You know what we're trying to do here! You know how much a lot of people would give to know what we're doing! Yet you. . . ."

"Don't be so stuffy, Pete! None of my friends are spies—they don't have brains enough, and anyway, they don't care."

"Sure, laugh it off," he said furiously. "Listen, what do you think would happen if word got out that we have a second star-ship almost ready to go? They'd slap an injunction on us in an hour! The only thing that's saved us so far is the fact they don't suspect how fast we're moving. Damn it, Sydna!"

"Stop swearing at me and cool down. Your guards will keep them out of the work-locks. Nobody'll go there anyway if the liquor's here at the house."

"A party would be nice," said Claudia timidly. Then she looked at Stanley and shut up.

Stanley said, "Tell the yacht to go back to Earth." He had aged a good bit since Comyn had first seen him. He had lost that pink, well-fed look and there was a taut intensity about him that almost matched Peter's. He, too, was going on the second Big Jump. He had insisted on it, and Sally Cochrane had backed him, averring that somebody had to look after her own and Claudia's interests. But he didn't seem to enjoy the prospect.

"It can't go back," Sydna said. "People would *know* something was up here if you sent them all back now."

She had them licked, and they knew it. Peter snarled, "All right, Sydna. But if anything goes wrong, I swear I'll break your meddling neck."

Nothing went wrong—not at first. The yacht landed, and from a distance Comyn saw a crowd of gay, squealing young fools pour out of it and make for the house and Sydna and the liquor. And it seemed that almost at once the Earth-lit gardens and terraces were full of laughter and dance music and white-jacketed men carrying trays of drinks back and forth.

Comyn sat on a terrace and had a few, and a few more, and listened to people having fun. He wasn't having any, not at all. He wasn't sober, but he couldn't let go any more. He knew why, too. It was because he wasn't quite one of normal humankind any more; because the shadow of the coming Big Jump was on him, because presently he was going away from it all—out where only five men had ever been before—toward something that could rob you even of a decent death. . . .

He wondered, for the thousandth time, what Ballantyne had meant by *the Transuranae*. How could you guess what a thing was when there wasn't any frame of reference you could work in? They had talked about the Transuranae, but nobody had really had anything to say that could help.

The Transuranae? Whoever, whatever, they were, was it they who had done the thing to Ballantyne that—that. . . .

COMYN shivered and poured down a little more of the Cochrane's good whisky to drown out the sight and sound of Ballantyne, dead and stirring in his high-barred bed when all of a sudden a pretty girl with dark fluffy hair was standing in front of him, asking bluntly, "Who are you?"

She was cute as a button. She made him feel old, and suddenly there was an uncrossable gulf between them because of the thing he was going to do, and that she was not going to do and didn't even know about. But she was cute.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm a stranger here myself. Who are you?"

"You'll never guess."

"Then I won't try."

"I'm Bridget," she said, and made a face. "Awful name, isn't it?" All at once she brightened, looking over Comyn's head. "Oh, there's Simon!" She called his name and waved, and Simon came over and put his arm around her and she sort of melted in against him, smiling, but still interested in Comyn.

"Simon, he's unhappy. Why is he unhappy?"

"He thinks people are trying to kill him. Has anybody tried it lately, Comyn?"

"I haven't turned my back on anybody," Comyn said.

"You're joking," said Bridget. "Nobody would want to kill him—he's cute."

"Well," said Simon, "that's a word I wouldn't have thought of to descibe him, but maybe you're right. Come on, Bridgie. So long, Comyn, and don't take any poisoned martinis."

Comyn watched them go. His lack of affection for Simon Cochrane was reaching gigantic proportions. He was thinking how nice it was going to be for all of them, cooped up together in a ship all the way out to Barnard's Star.

He saw Peter come out on the terrace and stand scowling at the festivities. He was stone cold sober. Stanley joined him, and he wasn't having any fun either. They talked a minute or two, and then Peter went down into the garden and vanished into the darkness. Going to check on his cordon of guards, Comyn thought. Sydna ought to get a good licking for this. But then, it was just such a trick of Sydna's that had got him here, so he ought to be grateful—or ought he?

Where was Sydna, anyway?

Stanley went down the steps and into the garden, after Peter.

Comyn got up. He was tired of sitting and brooding. He searched around for a sight of Sydna's improbably blonde head, spotted it, and went toward it. The terrace felt a bit unsteady under his feet. and there seemed to be two or three hundred people on it instead of only twenty-odd.

Sydna was with the long drink of water she called Johnny, the one Comyn had met before. There were several others around them. Somebody had just said something very funny, and they were all laughing.

Comyn came up beside Sydna and said. "Hello."

She looked up at him. Her eyes were very bright, very gay. "Hello, Arch." On the other side of her, Johnny stood up.

Comyn said, "How about entertaining a visiting fireman?"

She shook her head. "You look glum. I don't feel like being glum." She turned away.

Comyn put his hand on her shoulder. "Sydna. . . ."

"Oh, go away, Comyn. I'm enjoying myself. Let me alone."

Johnny stepped between them. He was feeling good. He was feeling strong, and twice his normal size. He thrust his face into Comyn's and said, "You heard her. Go away!"

Comyn's temper, none too long at the best, ran out with a snap. He picked Johnny up and set him aside. "Listen, Sydna, I want to talk to you. . . ."

Johnny's fist hit him on the cheekbone, hard enough to make his head ring.

"Now will you go?" Johnny demanded.

His breath was coming hard and excited, and he was all ready to let go again. Sydna sprang to her feet. slamming her glass down on the low table in front of her.

"Oh, the devil with both of you!" she snapped, and strode away, taking the others with her. Comyn glowered after her. He was thinking that some day he would beat that arrogance out of her—if he kept his health.

"I think we better go out in the garden," said Johnny.

Comyn looked at him. "Oh, no!"

Johnny's face was pale, except for two red bars along his cheekbones. He had worked himself up to a fine pitch, and he wasn't going to let it go. "You've been trying to take Sydna away from me." he said.

Comyn laughed.

The red bars widened on Johnny's face until they reached from his collar to the roots of his hair.

"You come into the garden," he said, "or I'll do it right here."

He would, too. Comyn sighed. "Okay, Junior, come on. Maybe I can talk some sense into you out there."

THEY went down the steps, close together. There was a rustling and cooing as of pigeons in the dark fringe of shrubbery, and Comyn led on. Johnny tramped beside him, his breath whistling in his nose. Comyn grinned. He sounded like a very young and very angry bull at mating time.

The lights of the terrace dimmed and passed away behind them, and the stars grew very bright, burning against the dome. The voices were only a distant murmur. Johnny said,

"This is far enough."

"Okay." Comyn stopped. "Hold on a minute, kid, and listen—"

He ducked, and Johnny's arm swung violently past his head. Then the kid was all over him. Comyn smacked him open-handed a couple of times, impatiently, but he was full of himself. He was strong enough, and some of his blows hurt. Comyn began to get mad.

"Lay off," he said, "or I'll give it to you, kid or no kid."

He pushed him away. Johnny muttered something about Comyn being scared to fight. Suddenly he rushed him.

Comyn sidestepped.

From out of the dense shadows of a stand of tall white-flowering bushes came a narrow bolt of lightning. It struck, with a crack and a flare, on the spot which Comyn had just left and which Johnny was just now passing. The kid went down without a whimper.

Comyn stood, for one dazed instant, looking from the dead boy to the dark mass of bushes. Then he moved, faster than he had ever moved before. A second bolt from a shocker turned up to lethal voltage hit the ground behind him. It knocked him over, half stunned, but that was all, and he never stopped going, rolling in among a clump of trees. He got his own weapon into his hand. He pushed the stud all the way up and fired into the bushes, but a little high. He wanted to flush the killer out, alive.

There began to be sounds from the direction of the house. They had seen the man-made lightning playing. Some woman screamed, and men were shouting. Comyn fired twice more into the bushes, changing his position fast each time. The killer didn't answer, and then beyond the bushes he heard somebody running.

Comyn went after him. . . .

PEOPLE were pouring out into the gardens from the house now. The killer couldn't turn that way. He could try to double back toward the passenger lock, but Comyn was in between, and Comyn was armed, which he probably hadn't counted on. He went the only way there was left open, toward the freight locks. Comyn ran, turning down the power on his shocker. It didn't carry far that way, but if he could get close enough he might bring down the guy alive and still able to talk.

He saw him, running fast across an

open glade. He shouted to him to stop, but he was outranged, and the only answer he got was a snap bolt that hit a tree too close for comfort. There were shouts and thrashings in the gardens all around now, and the emergency lights were coming on. The guards were moving in from the freight locks. The killer ran, but there was no place to run to, and then there were men on all sides of him in the bright glare of the lights and the blue bolts flashed and struck and that was it.

Comyn came up. There was a milling around of people. Guards were shoving the workmen back into the lock and there was a lot of talking. Peter Cochrane and Stanley were both there, both with shockers in their hands, looking at the body. Comyn looked too.

"Do you know him?" he asked.

Peter nodded, and Stanley said, "Name's Washburn. He used to be a Cochrane employee—oh, two, three years ago. He was fired. Undesirable, a trouble-maker." Stanley shook his head. "How did he get here? What was he doing?"

Comyn said, "Trying to kill me. He tried it once before, on Earth."

Peter looked at him sharply. "You're sure of that?"

Comyn nodded.

People were coming from the party now. Sydna, Simon, guests looking excited, frightened, upset, or curious, according to their natures. "Keep them back," said Peter savagely. "Keep them away from here."

Comyn said, "It doesn't matter now. You might as well let them see the ship. It doesn't matter."

Peter stared at them. Simon moved between them, looking down. "Hey," he said. "Hey, he came aboard the yacht. I saw him."

Peter's eyes blazed. "And you didn't stop him? You let a character like that come in here, and didn't even tell me?"

Simon said angrily, "Are you kidding? He had a pass from you."

Without a word, Comyn turned and took Peter Cochrane by the neck and bore him down.

HANDS pulled at him. There was a confusion of voices. Finally somebody hit him across the back of the head with the flat of a shocker. He let go and they dragged him away from Peter. Peter got up unsteadily. Stanley was down on his knees beside the dead man, going through his pockets. He held up a piece of paper.

"Here it is, Peter. It has your signature."

Peter shook his head. He took the paper and studied it. "Forgery," he said. "He worked for us, he could have gotten hold of a signature very easily. Probably on his termination-of-contract papers, I've signed a lot of 'em. I never gave him a pass."

Comyn said, "I hope you can prove that." Men were still holding his arms, and his head hurt. Peter Cochrane came up to him.

"Why? And what did you mean when you said to let them see the ship, because it doesn't matter now?"

Comyn said slowly, "Your friend was in too much of a hurry. He thought he had a clear shot at me, but didn't. Johnny got in the way."

A silence fell. It spread outward from Comyn, stunned and heavy, and in it Sydna's voice was harsh and very loud.

"You mean Johnny's dead?"

"Dead. You can bury Washburn, and you could have buried me, but you can't bury Johnny. And I'm glad. He was a fool kid, but this wasn't any of his fight. There was no reason he should die for it."

He looked around at them, at Peter and Simon and Bill Stanley and Sydna with her shocked white face. Particularly Sydna.

"Well, you had your party," he said bitterly. "And it's blown the lid right off your private country on the Moon. You'll have Earth policemen tramping all over it, and you can't keep them out. They'll want to know all about how Johnny got

killed, and why, and what you're doing here that's worth a murder, and there won't be any secret about it anywhere. That's why I say, you might as well let them know about the ship."

Again there was a long, cold silence. The dead man lay on his side where Stanley had rolled him, with one arm flung carelessly across his face. His mouth seemed to be smiling, as though he dreamed. Stanley looked grey and sick, and Simon's eyes roved uneasily, not looking at anything. Behind them the freight locks towered up, and out from them came the muffled clang and roar that had not stopped even for death.

Peter Cochrane spoke.

"I will notify the Earth authorities myself. Meanwhile, no one is to leave the dome or communicate with anyone until the investigation is complete and the police allow you to go."

There was a loud cry of protest. Peter silenced it.

"I'm sorry, but it's necessary. You are welcome as our guests, and I'm sure Sydna will make your visit as pleasant as possible."

They began to straggle slowly away, back toward the house. Some men went to hunt for Johnny. Peter turned again to Comyn.

"I haven't tried to kill you. As Jonas told you, murder is for fools. And if I had wanted to kill you I'd have done it myself and it wouldn't have been bungled. All right, boys, let him go."

He went off, walking fast, toward the freight locks. Simon watched him go uneasily.

"You know what he'll do," he said to Stanley.

Stanley was still staring at the body. It seemed to have a strange fascination for him. He ran his tongue constantly over his lips as though they were dry, and his hands shook.

"I don't know," he answered absently. "I haven't had time to think."

"He'll hold off notifying Earth, as long as he can. He'll get the bloody ship ready for take-off and go, without further tests. By the time authorities get here, we'll be clear out of the System—if the drive works."

His voice lingered over that small word: *if*. Comyn heard him and shivered, wondering where they would be if it didn't.

VIII

ARCH COMYN was his name, and once he had had a home on Earth, and once he had had a girl with strong brown shoulders.

And what was he doing out here in the abyss between the stars?

From across the main cabin, from the table where some of the others were playing cards, a voice said:

"Give me three."

Comyn thought it was funny. It was very funny, indeed, that men making the second Big Jump in history, that men going faster and farther than any men but five had ever gone before, separated only by metal walls from the awfulness of infinity, should sit and play games with little plastic cards, and pretend that they were not where they were.

He knew now what Ballantyne had felt. This was not the going between worlds that men had grown used to. This was an adventure into madness. The ports were shielded tight because there was nothing beyond them but an awful blankness, tinged with eerie flickerings of energy that was their own mass discharging itself through the neutronic converters into a tight propulsion field, hurling them through a space that was not normal and might not even exist in their own universe. Theoretically, the astrogators knew where they were. Actually, no one knew.

The nastiest thing about it was that there was no sense of motion. The interior of the ship was gripped in a stasis that was the reactionless core of the mass-propulsion field itself, the dead quiet eye of the hurricane. They might

as well have been in a tightly shuttered room on Earth, going nowhere. And yet the stars—the stars that Ballantyne had learned to hate—showed on the screens as crawling tracks, distorted and spectral and infinitely strange, as the speeding ship overtook and passed their light-rays.

Only one screen, fitted with a complicated electronic damper-field, showed space ahead in relatively true perspective. Centred in the cross-hairs and kept centred by automatic compensators, was the dull red eye of Barnard's Star. At first, the men had stared often at the screen and the brooding eye in it. Then they had looked at it less and less, and finally they avoided it altogether.

Comyn couldn't avoid it. He'd gone back to stare at it again and again; he couldn't stop thinking about it. He asked Peter Cochrane now,

"Why Barnard's Star, anyway? What made Ballantyne pick it instead of Centauri?"

"We know Barnard's Star has planets," said Peter. He looked worn, drawn to the breaking point, full of a feverish triumph that would not let him rest. "It has a low luminosity, and the astronomers were able to separate its planets visually some years ago, with the Keble telescope. Alpha and Proxima Centauri they're still not sure of, so Barnard was chosen. Of course, it's only a start. The Weizacker theory is pretty well proved by now, and it postulates that most stars have planets, so you can see this is only a start. . . ."

He broke off suddenly, as though he realized he was talking too rapidly, too intensely. The young doctor who had cared for Ballantyne and who was going to take care of them now because he was the only expert there was on transuranic medicine, said, "Better take a sedative and knock off for a while, Mr. Cochrane."

Peter said, "No, I want to go over those log-books again."

"There's plenty of time for log-books."

"There's nothing in them we haven't already found out, anyway," Simon said. His gaze fixed on Comyn, cold and glowering. "Our friend here is the only one who knows where we're going. Or does he?"

"You'll find out," said Comyn, "when we get there."

French, the doctor, and Roth, the physicist who had examined Ballantyne, and the other men from the Cochrane labs who were playing cards, bent studiously over their game to keep out of Cochrane quarrels.

Comyn said harshly, to Peter and Simon and Bill Stanley, "And before you find out, I'm going to know which of you hired Washburn to punch my ticket."

"Which one of *us?*"

"Yes. It was one of you three. One of you has the missing books of Ballantyne's log. You all had the opportunity. . . ."

Comyn's eyes were very bright, very hard. He was, like the rest of them, suffering from long tension. Things had been bad before they left Luna, Johnny's sheeted corpse lying in one of the great rooms, Sydna's guests hysterically demanding to know why the police didn't come, why they were being kept prisoner—and Sydna herself, with a face like a stone image, not speaking to anyone. Old Jonas had talked to her. What he had said, Comyn didn't know, but Sydna had no spirit left in her.

IT HADN'T really gone on long—no more than two days, Earth time. Peter had done exactly as Simon predicted. The activity around the freight locks had reached an insane pitch, with workmen dropping in their tracks and being revived or replaced. And then, incredibly, the ship was ready, Peter called the authorities, and there was not

Peter said furiously, "You still think I gave Washburn that pass?"

even time to say goodby.

"One of you," Comyn said, "hired that killer who got the wrong man. I'm not sure yet which one of you it was. But I will be."

"He had it."

Simon came and stood in front of Comyn. "I didn't like you the first time I saw you," he said. "I like you less and less as time goes by. You talk too much. It might be a good idea if someone did kill you."

"Yeah," said Comyn. "And you saw Washburn get off the yacht. You could have stopped him and checked that forged pass, but you didn't."

Bill Stanley caught Simon's arm and said, "Wait a minute. We can't afford any brawls now. We—"

Doctor French cleared his throat nervously. "Listen, we're under a psychological strain that can crack us wide open if we're not careful. Knock it off. Take a sedative, calm down—especially you, Mr. Cochrane."

"You sound," said Peter dryly, "as though you could use a sedative yourself." He glanced at Simon. "However, I think you're right. Let it go, Simon."

Simon turned away sullenly, muttering something under his breath. Peter said to Comyn, "You'd better let it go, too. But I won't argue it now. I'm going to try to sleep."

He went off to his cabin. Simon had disappeared. Bill Stanley sat down by himself and stared blankly at a bulkhead. The card players talked in low monotones, not as though their minds were on the game.

Comyn lit a cigarette and moved restlessly back and forth in the confined space. Air whirred in the ventilators. The dome lights burned, and they were bright enough, but there was something vaguely unnatural about the light itself, as though it had shifted somewhere along the spectrum. Comyn's flesh quivered deep in its individual cells, torturing him like a persistent itch. It tortured everybody. Roth had said it was some obscure effect of the stasis and its surrounding field of energy. Static electricity, he thought, generated by their own bodies under the abnormal conditions. One of the hazards of starflight. It could be a hazard. Little things could grow so big. Little things like an itch, or a sound you couldn't quite hear.

Ballantyne heard it at last. All the way out to Barnard's Star and back he listened to it, but he couldn't hear it, and then they fetched the damned electric drill and that was it, the sound. . . .

Just over the threshold of hearing, the nerve-aching screech and whine, the incessant, maddening, unbearable sound. The sound of the drive.

Comyn swore abruptly, and said, "It wouldn't be so bad if we were moving."

Roth grunted, scowling at the cards he held. "You're moving," he said. "You're covering six light-years a lot of times faster than light itself." He threw down his hand. "A lousy pair of tens. I'm out. Yes, Comyn, you're moving."

"But how do we *know* we are? We can't feel it, we can't see it, we can't even hear it."

"We take it on faith," said Roth. "Our instruments assure us that we're approaching Barnard's Star at high velocity. Or it's approaching us. Who knows? Motion is relative. Anyway, relative to our known universe we're going at a speed that's so fast it's impossible—theoretically. Relative to some other universe, or state of matter, we could easily be standing still."

"When you scientists start dreaming it up, you give me a pain," said Comyn. "It all sounds cockeyed."

"Not at all. Groom's theory, on which Ballantyne built his drive, was that the so called light-speed barrier was real, and that matter achieving faster-than-light velocities would shift into another plane of atomic vibration, or matter-state, creating a closed vacuum in the continuum in which energy could be neither gained or lost—hence the mass-propulsion field, the ship feeding on itself, as it were, using the kinetic energy stored up in the original acceleration. The drive works, but whether or not that proves the theory, we don't know. There's a very interesting distortion of time. . . ."

Comyn, listening and only half understanding, felt that nightmare sense of unreailty closer upon him. He fought against it, he had to keep his mind on the very real and nasty problem that faced Arch Comyn.

". . . and Vickrey was much concerned with time in his notes on the outward voyage," Roth was saying. "The chronometers functioned, but were they still accurate as to Earth chronology? There was no way to check. We say they took so-and-so-many months for the first Big Jump. Vickrey's word was 'eternity'—a fairly vague term. How long has it been since *we* went into star-drive? My idea is that the time-sense. . . ."

Comyn stamped out his cigarette irritably and left the main cabin. All this scientific double-talk was upsetting. He had a literal mind. A chair was a chair, a table was a table, and an hour was sixty minutes long. As long as he could hang onto these realities, he could make out.

HE DUG a bottle out of a locker—not the sedative Doctor French would have prescibed, but ninety-proof and good enough. He sat drinking it and thinking of Sydna, wondering if she had really meant what she had said about there not being any tomorrow for them. Probably. He wished she was here, and was glad she wasn't. After a while he began to listen to the drive, the sound he could hear with the edges of his teeth and the raw ends of his nerves, but not quite with his ears.

He swore, and poured another drink, and then went to sleep. It seemed a devil of a way to spend your time on this, man's second traverse between the stars, but there wasn't much else to do. Even the scientists had little to do but check their instruments. The flight engineers were useful only when shifting in or out of drive, and the pilots were purely ornamental except when the ship was operating on normal velocity. The functioning of the ship on star-drive was automatic. No crew of human beings could have controlled it manually. All they did was sit and watch a million gadgets and hope they worked.

Comyn snored, twitched and dreamed. His dreams were not good. He started up, gagging on a lungful of stale air—it seemed to him that he hadn't breathed real air since he went to Luna—and became aware of the bell that announced mealtime.

Comyn came out of his cabin warily, as he always did. He was not afraid of guns. The ship's arsenal was locked, and no one was allowed anything more lethal than a pocketknife. Peter Cochrane was taking no chances with hysteria, space-fever or simple mutiny. But a man bent on murder can be very ingenious in devising weapons. Comyn was cautious.

There was no one in the corridor. Comyn yawned and started along it toward the main cabin. His head was still heavy, and there was a strong taste of whisky in his mouth.

On the starboard side of the corridor was a compartment used for the keeping of certain stores for the cabin section. The door was not quite shut, but that was not unusual, since people went in and out of it fairly often. Comyn passed it.

There was a swift, sharp suction of air behind him, a door being pulled open silently but very fast, and then a hurried step and one harsh indrawn breath. Comyn threw himself forward and as much to the left as he could manage on split-second notice. The steel bar that had been meant for the back of his skull came whistling down onto his right shoulder instead. It made a very ugly noise.

Pain became a huge and inescapable fact. He was falling, and he couldn't help that, but his left hand went instinctively to the focal point of that agony as though to hold it back, and found instead the collared end of the steel bar and gripped it and pulled it along.

He hit the deck. Bands of light were flickering in front of his eyes, and there

was darkness close behind, but the fear of death was on him and he thrashed around, still holding the steel bar. There was a man there, a cautious man, a man expecting failure, because he had hidden his face and head so that his victim could not recognize him, when there should have been no possibility of recognition.

Rage came up in Comyn so strongly that it almost cleared away that gathering dark. He made an animal sound, with no words to it, and tried to get up. The man with the hidden face turned suddenly and ran away. His legs and his polished shoes ran and ran down the length of the passage, and Comyn watched them, and he knew whose shoes they were, and those dark-trousered legs. A man's face is only part of what you know him by. He started to say the name that went with them, but he didn't have time. He passed out. . . .

He was still lying in the corridor when he came to. His right arm was numb to the finger ends, and it hurt very much to move. It took him a long time to get up, and a longer time to make the several miles down the passage and into the main cabin. He had not been out too long. They were still at dinner, around the collapsible tables. They looked at him when he came in. They were all there, Peter and Simon and Bill Stanley, the scientists, all of them. They stopped eating, and the doctor got up suddenly.

Comyn sat down heavily. He looked at Peter Cochrane. "I'm ready now," he said, "to tell you where Ballantyne landed."

IX

MANY voices spoke at once. French was bending over him, asking where he was hurt. Peter Cochrane stood up, demanding silence. Simon was leaning forward, his eyes intent. Bill Stanley put down his knife and fork. His hands were seized with an uncontrollable trembling. There was a pallor on him, and a sweating.

Comyn laughed.

"You should have made it good," he said to William Stanley. "Peter would have. Simon would have. But not you. You haven't that kind of guts."

Stanley said, "I don't. . . ."

"Oh yes, you do. Hiding your face didn't hide the rest of you. I know your shoes, your clothes, the way you move. I know you, now."

Stanley pushed his chair back a little, as though he would like to get away from Comyn, from all of them. He spoke again, but his words were not clear.

"It's different when you have to do it yourself, isn't it?" Comyn said. "Not nice and tidy like just writing a check. You have to figure on maybe missing the first time. You have to be able to go on hitting a man until he stays down. You have to have a strong stomach and no nerves, like Washburn. Maybe with a gun you could have done it, but not with your hands. Not ever with your hands."

French was trying to peel his shirt back, and Comyn pushed him away. Simon had risen. His eyes met Peter's. Peter's face got white around the lips. Suddenly he took hold of Stanley's jacket.

"Did you do this, Bill?"

Stanley sat perfectly still, looking up at Peter. His eyes began to get a slow hot gleam in them that grew brighter and uglier, and then all at once he struck Peter's hand away and sprang up. It seemed as though that rough touch on him had acted as a key to turn loose everything that had been bottled up in him under pressure for a long time.

It came out quietly, very quietly, as though his throat was pulled too tight to make much noise in it.

"Yes, I did. And keep your hands off me."

He moved back a step or two, away from them. Nobody spoke around the tables. They were all watching, with their forks halfway to their mouths. Simon started forward, and Peter caught him.

"That won't do any good right now,"

he said. And then to Stanley, "You have the log books."

"I had them. I burned them." He looked from Peter to Simon and back again. "Getting them was easy. You were all so excited, thinking what you might be going to get. There were only two of them, thin little books—I saw them first and stuck them inside my shirt, as easy as that."

"You burned them," Peter said, and Stanley jerked his head.

"I memorized them. I have a good memory." He turned on Comyn. "All right, go ahead. Tell them. You've made trouble for me from the beginning. I'd have had you killed on Mars, only Peter stopped it."

Comyn said, "Doesn't Johnny weigh a little heavy on your soul?"

"No. That was Washburn's doing. I didn't even know he was there until I saw him dead. I fired him after he failed the first time. You cost him a lot of money, Comyn, and he was mad. I guess he thought he could still collect. Probably blackmail me, too. No, Johnny wasn't my fault."

"I don't understand, Bill," said Peter. He was staring at Stanley in a puzzled way, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "Why? We always treated you right. You were one of the family, you had an important job, plenty of money —we trusted you. I don't understand."

STANLEY laughed. It was not a nice sound. "One of the family," he repeated. "An appendage. A wailing wall for Claudia, and a football for her mother. A convenience. Good old dependable Bill. But not a Cochrane—never for a minute. No real voice in anything, no real interest in the corporation—that was all Claudia's." His mouth twisted. "Claudia!"

Simon said angrily, "What did you marry her for, then? You were anxious enough at the time."

"What would anybody marry Claudia for?" asked Stanley. "Her money. I thought I could stick it out, but between her and her old bat of a mother—" He broke off. "All right. I saw a chance to get hold of something worth having, and I took it. What's wrong with that? Ask old Jonas how many times he did it, to get his palace on the Moon."

Comyn repeated his original statement about himself. "You should have made it good."

"I should have. Unfortunately, I don't have the capacity for violence. Few civilized men do." His control was beginning to crack a little. He had started to shake again, and his eyes blazed. Comyn thought how unfamiliar a man looked with all his emotions showing. It was like seeing him with his clothes off.

Stanley turned again to Peter and the smouldering Simon. His voice had risen just a little, a notch higher, a notch louder. "Comyn says he can tell you where Ballantyne landed. All right. But I read the log, remember. I know the co-ordinates, not just the world but the exact location on it! I know where the transuranic ores are, the exact location. I know. . . ."

Peter said, "I think we could find them if we had to."

"Perhaps you could. But there's more than just finding them. There's the—the Transuranae. I know about them, too." He strode toward Comyn, four or five jerky steps. "Do you know all that, Comyn? Can you tell them?"

Comyn didn't answer for a long moment. Then he said slowly, "Stanley, you're a scared little man, a greedy little man, and you're hoping against hope. But you're safe. You win." He glanced at Peter. "I thought maybe I could jar it out of him, but it didn't work. I can't tell you where Ballantyne landed. I never knew."

Peter let out a long breath. "I hoped," he said, "but I never counted on it. So that settles that." He looked at Stanley.

Stanley was trying hard to hang onto himself. The sudden uncontested victory had almost unmanned him. He tried three times before he could get the words out.

"Let's not be polite about this. For once, I've got the upper hand and there's nothing you can do about it. You can't even kill me, because all the knowledge is in my head, and because you're going to need me every step of the way, before we land and after. Especially after."

"Suppose," said Peter softly, "that we decide we don't need you at all. Suppose we just lock you up and let you stay there."

"You could. It would be dangerous and tremendously expensive to search eight unknown planets—there are satellites, too, you know. Our fuel and supplies aren't unlimited. The voyage alone was Ballantyne's whole objective, and the landing was only by the way. But we're here to consolidate, and we can't waste too much potential running around. You could try, and you might even succeed, but without the information I can give you, you'd never get the ores. You probably would not even survive the attempt. There are—obstacles."

The shadow of dread that passed over Stanley's face was more impressive than any threat, because it was personal and unpremeditated. And Comyn was remembering Ballantyne's final scream.

"What's your price?" asked Peter Cochrane.

"High," said Stanley, "but not too high. I want a controlling interest in Cochrane Transuranic and all that goes with it. Fifty-one percent. You Cochranes have enough, Peter. There's no reason why you should have this, too!"

FOR a while nobody spoke. There were deep lines between Peter's eyes and around his mouth. Simon watched Stanley with the cold eagerness of a leopard. Finally Peter said,

"What do you think, Simon?"

"Tell him where to go. The Cochranes have never needed help from little swine like him."

Again no one spoke. Peter scowled, and thought. Sweat gathered in drops on Stanley's forehead and ran slowly down his temples, over pulses that were beating visibly.

Peter said thoughtfully, "We might beat it out of him." His gaze slid to Comyn. "What do you think?"

"I'd enjoy it," Comyn said. "But it's risky business. None of us are experts, and you can kill a man without meaning to. Besides, in this case it wouldn't work. All Stanley has to do is break down and tell us a bunch of lies, and we wouldn't know the difference. We couldn't check it." He paused, and added, "I think he's got you."

Simon started a bitter protest, and Peter silenced him.

"It comes down to this," he said. "A hundred percent or forty-nine; it won't make any difference if we come back the way Ballantyne did. Very well, Bill, you win."

"I want it on paper," Stanley said. "And signed."

"You'll get it. And now I'm going to tell you what I think of you." He told him, and Stanley listened. When he was all through, Stanley said, "You were entitled to that, but I don't want any more of it, from either of you. Do you understand?"

He seemed to have grown several inches taller, and his face had acquired a superficial calm that was almost dignified. He started to leave the cabin, a proud man, a successful man, and then Comyn said quietly:

"Do you think this is going to make Sydna fall at your feet?"

Stanley turned around. He said, "I don't know why I didn't beat your head in when I had the chance. You keep your dirty mouth shut."

"What is this," demanded Peter, "about Sydna?"

Comyn said, "He'd rather have her than Claudia."

Simon laughed. He seemed to find that idea so genuinely funny that he couldn't help laughing. Stanley rounded on him in a sort of white fury.

"Sydna's standards aren't so high,

Ask Comyn. And you're going to learn something, all of you. You're going to learn to respect me. Sydna, too. She has nothing to be haughty about except her money. None of you have. You can all think what you like about me, but by God you'll respect me!"

He fetched Simon a crack across the mouth that stopped his laughter, and then he went away so swiftly and furiously that he was gone before Simon could get at him. Peter hauled his brother away, toward his own cabin.

"Keep your temper," he said. "We've got enough on our necks. Come on, we have work to do."

They left. Slowly the men around the table began to eat again, not as though they cared about it, and not talking, either, embarrassed by what had happened and waiting till they could go off by themselves in small groups to let loose the excited chatter that was in them. French said to Comyn, "Better let me take care of that shoulder."

He took care of it, and it was not as bad as it might have been because Comyn's muscles were thick and had saved the bone. But he was pretty well laid up with it for a while, and by the time he could use his arm again he was ready to lose his mind from inaction, from the subliminal screech of the drive, from the not-moving and not-seeing, the uncanny drawing out of time.

WHEN he looked at his watch, it meant nothing. The automatic calendars meant nothing. The chronometers were only a mockery. Earth was years, centuries behind them, and Barnard's Star had grown no bigger on the screen, no brighter. The feeling had begun to grow on the ship's company that they were lost somewhere out of space and time and would never find their way back. There were outbreaks of hysteria, and French was busy with his needle. One man cracked completely and was confined to his cabin, strapped down.

"We'll all be there," muttered French, "if we don't get out of this pretty soon."

"We're almost ready to shift drive," Peter said. His face was pared down to the bone now, and he looked more like an Indian than ever, more like Jonas. "We'll be back in normal space—tomorrow."

He hesitated before he said that word that was only an arbitrary symbol for something that didn't exist.

"If we make it." Comyn thought. The fear was in him, too. It was the strangeness that got you, the not knowing. You had to sit and wait and wonder if the trap would let you go.

Stanley kept saying, "Don't worry. Ballantyne and the others felt the way we do, but they came out of it all right. They made it."

He had his paper, signed and sealed. He knew more about what was going to happen than any of them. But even he was afraid. It showed on him like a grey dust, and his cheering words were only words and nothing more. Nobody answered him. People rarely spoke to him any more. Comyn thought that it wasn't any concern over the Cochrane fortunes, but simply that the men hated to have their lives depend—on Stanley.

They didn't trust him, not because of his business ethics, but because they felt he was not a man, except by courtesy of sex. He was no longer pink and prosperous, but he was still the executive errand-boy, the carrier-out of other men's orders. They had seen the way he won his victory. It did not inspire confidence.

"As soon as we're out of drive," Stanley told Peter, "I'll give you the coordinates on our destination."

The flight engineers were glued to their instruments now. Time passed, or the arbitrary illusion of it, measured off by the chronometers. Men moved about, doing nothing in particular with great intensity, or simply sat and sweated. They had been through this once, and it had been bad enough. This time it was worse. The interior of the ship felt to Comyn like the inside of a bomb getting ready to explode. The red

eye of Barnard's Star watched them from the screen, and did not change.

The dome lights began to flash off and on. Alarm bells rang through the passageways and in the cabins. The first warning. French finished giving the last man his shot.

"All right," said Peter. "Everybody to your quarters." His voice was rasping, like an old man's. Up in the control room the pilots were strapping in, ready to take over. Indicators quivered and crawled, and a sonic-relay beam was squeaking higher and higher up the scale. Lights flickered on the board like little stars. The engineers were as robots, eyes fixed, faces glazed with sweat, calling off in voices that were not human. The astrogators were standing by.

Somebody said, "What if they miscalculated? What if we ram right into Barnard's Star?"

Comyn went back to his cabin and lay down. He felt sick. He wanted a drink worse than he ever had in his life, but there wasn't any more. He rolled the coppery taste of fear over his tongue, and braced himself. The dome lights were still flashing. Off, on. Off, on.

The bells rang. Second warning.

Comyn waited. The shot was supposed to dull the nerves, make the shock easier on them. His did not feel dulled. He was afraid of what was coming, and more afraid of its not coming. Suppose the drive failed to shift? Suppose they couldn't come out of it?

The dome lights flashed, off, on. It was hard on the eyes, hard on the nerves. The squall and screech of the drive was almost audible now. He waited, and it was a long time, too long. Something had gone wrong; the drive had failed and they couldn't come out of it. They were going to go on and on forever in this not-space until they went crazy and died, and even that wouldn't stop them. . . .

The lights stopped flashing. They stayed a hard bright steady glare, and then the third warning sounded, not bells this time but a siren, so there would be no mistake about it. The wild banshee howling raised the hair on Comyn's head and brought out the cold sweat on his skin, and then the lights went out and there was no more sound.

Darkness. The black silence of the tomb. He strained his ears, but even the super-sonic torture of the drive was slipping away, receding beyond reach. Blue witch-lights flared from every metal surface in the ship, and then it began, the subtle slide and wrench and twist that took each separate atom in a man's body and moved it in a new direction with the most horrible effect of vertigo that had ever been devised. Comyn tried to scream, but whether he made it or not he never knew. For one timeless ghastly interval he thought he saw the fabric of the ship itself dissolving with him into a mist of discrete particles, and he knew that he wasn't human any more and that nothing was real, and then he plunged headlong into nothingness.

X

THE first thing that came to him was the familiar thud and throb of the auxiliaries. It dragged him back to the point where he could remember what his name was, and then he opened his eyes and sat up. There were solid bulkheads around him, and a solid bunk under him. He felt himself all over, and he was still there. The feel of the ship was different. It was the normal feel of a space-ship, under way and braking.

He got up and went out into the passageway. The lights were on again. Men were coming out of their cabins. He wondered if he looked like them, like something dug up and resurrected. His legs didn't work right and he staggered, trying to run, but they were all staggering and nobody noticed. There was a rising babble of voices. The ship sounded like an aviary at dawn.

He came into the main cabin. He saw faces with tears running down them,

but he didn't know whose they were and he didn't care. The ports were open. For the first time in a million years the blank walls were opened up, and Comyn flung himself toward the nearest port. Men crowded on his heels and there was much noise, but he neither felt nor heard. He clung to the thick quartzite and stared, at the beautiful deep darkness of space outside and the stars that were no longer eerie crawling worms of light but bright suns blazing blue and red and gold and green, hung in clusters, hung in ropes and chains and burning clouds against the primal night.

Somebody said, in one long tumbling breath, "We made it! Oh God we made it! We shifted back!"

Comyn made himself stop shaking. He looked around the cabin but the people he wanted were not there and he went forward to the bridge. The brake bursts shook the deck-plates under his feet, and it was a good feel, a good feel. They were back. They were moving. Everything was all right.

Peter and Simon and Stanley were in the bridge. The ports were open here, too, and dead ahead in space was a far-off sun the color of rusty iron, a sombre fire burning in the dark. Comyn's feeling of elation drained away. They had made the second Big Jump, and now it was waiting for them under the light of that mad and wildly fleeing star—the world and the fate that had waited for Ballantyne, at the end of that first long trail.

Stanley had a sheet of paper, a large one, covered with many figures. He held it out to the navigator.

"Here's your destination," he said.

The navigator spread out the paper on his work-board and scowled at it.

Presently he said, "You've given me too much, mister. The planetary coordinates look okay, and the orbital velocity and grav-constant equations, and the landing speeds. But all this mess here, these calculations of the relative motions of Ballantyne's ship and Barnard II. . . ."

Comyn reached over and snatched the paper out of the startled man's hand. He backed away, looking at it, ignoring the sudden angry words that were being said.

He said to Stanley, "You memorized all this?"

"Of course." said Stanley. He made a grab for the paper. "Damn you, Comyn. . . ."

"Yes, you did," said Comyn, and tore the sheet apart.

An enraged and startled cry burst out from several different throats, and Comyn thrust the torn scraps into his pocket. He smiled at Stanley.

"You can write it out again."

Peter swore, a bitter vitriolic stream. "What are you trying to do, Comyn? Aren't things tough enough without. . . ."

"He memorized it all," said Comyn. "He's good. He can remember stuff in three dimensions, orbital velocities, landing speeds, the works. Give him a pencil and paper. He can write it out again."

ALL at once a glint of understanding came into Peter's eyes. "Sure," he said. "Get him some paper, Simon. I'm sorry this happened, Bill, but there's nothing lost except a little work."

"A little work," said Stanley. He looked at Comyn the way a cobra looks at something it can't get at to strike. He said things, very ugly things, but Comyn didn't pay attention to them. He was noticing some sudden changes in Stanley.

"What's the matter?" he said. "A minute ago you were lordly as a hog on ice, and now you don't look so good. Has your memory gone back on you?"

Simon came back with pencil and paper and shoved them impatiently at Stanley. "Here. Get busy, we haven't all the time in creation."

"Time," said Stanley. "If Comyn hadn't interfered. . . ."

"A very odd thing has happened," Peter said slowly. "I'm beginning to

like Comyn. We have much in common."

Stanley threw the pencil on the floor. "I can't do it here," he said. "Nobody could. I'm going to my cabin and it may take me a little while. Don't disturb me. If there's any more trouble made for me, you'll all pay for it."

He stamped out. Nobody spoke until he was gone, and then Comyn said:

"Don't blow a fuse. If anything goes wrong, this paper can be pieced together again. I was careful how I tore it."

Simon said, "He couldn't have got the log-books aboard. I examined every piece of baggage myself."

"Not the books themselves," said Comyn. "But a couple of microphotostats could slide by in a pack of cigarettes or a roll of socks."

"Well," said Simon, "let's go."

"Give him a while," Peter said. "Let him get set. I'll need the master key. Those metal doors don't break open very easy."

They waited a little, and then the three of them went very quietly through the main cabin where there were still clusters of men by the ports and down the passageway to Stanley's cabin. Peter nodded and put the key into the lock.

The door swung in. It had taken only a few seconds to open it, but Stanley must have been sitting inside with his reflex on hair-triggers, listening, fearing, hoping, not knowing whether to delay or to hurry, and not daring to do either. There was a large ash-tray on his table with a tiny fire burning in it, and Comyn saw the finish of an action that must have started with the first touch of the key to the lock. A roll of microfilm dropped into the fire, flared, and was gone, and Stanley was already scrabbling for the other one, the one he had been copying from and couldn't pick up so easily because it was pinned under a small but very powerful lens.

Comyn sprang forward. Peter and Simon were right with him. They hit Stanley almost together, bore him over and fell in a sprawling undignified tangle, six hands clawing for the tiny thing that Stanley had tight in his clenched fist. Comyn got his hands around Stanley's wrist and squeezed. Peter was saying, "Look out, don't tear it!" and Stanley was trying to fend them all off with one hand and his feet, sobbing like a woman and cursing them. Finally Simon hit him in the face. He went limp for a moment and his fingers relaxed and Peter got the film.

THEY rolled off each other and got up, leaving Stanley sitting on the floor with one hand to the side of his face where Simon had hit him. There was a smear of blood at the corner of his mouth. Peter looked down at him. He was breathing hard and his eyes were ugly. He said to Simon,

"Get that paper away from him."

Simon began to search him, roughly. Stanley said, "No!" on a tight rising note, and floundered up. He swung at Simon's head and missed, and Simon hit him again, open-handed this time, contemptuously, but hard. "Stop it," he said, "or I'll break your jaw." Peter stepped up and held Stanley's arms from behind. Simon found the paper.

"Give it here," said Peter. He let go of Stanley and took the paper. The fire was still smouldering in the big ash-tray. He put Stanley's guarantee of empire into it, and watched it burn.

Stanley said, "You can't do that. It isn't that easy." His voice was high. He wiped with the back of his hand at the blood on his mouth. "The other roll is gone, the last book, the one about the Transuranae. I still know what's in it. You can't get along without me."

The ashes crumbled and turned gray. Peter Cochrane said slowly,

"We'll get along, Bill. You're not a big enough man to bull us out, and you know it. It's time you stopped being a fool."

"What do you expect me to do?" asked Stanley savagely. "Agree with you?"

"I'm going to make you a proposition," Peter said. "I will give you, in your own name, a fair share of Cochrane Transuranic—and no more than a fair share, no more than any of the others who volunteered for this trip will get. Furthermore, Simon and I will agree to forget your recent behavior."

Stanley laughed. "That's big of you. Listen, in a little while you'll be landing on Barnard II. Unless I tell you what was in that book, the same thing will happen to you that happened to Rogers and Vickrey and Strang and Kessel—and Ballantyne. You don't dare take that chance."

Comyn had started forward at the mention of Rogers' name, but Peter stopped him.

"Let me do this. All right, Bill, so it happens to us, and it doesn't happen to you. Where will you be? Can you pick up the pieces of the expedition and take the survivors home—or if there aren't any, go back by yourself? There's more to a bluff than words. There's got to be a man to back it up."

Stanley said between his teeth, "You're not doing so well with your bluff. The fact that you're willing to make concessions at all shows that—"

Peter's hand shot out and gripped the front of Stanley's shirt.

"Get one thing through your head," said Peter in a very soft voice. "I'm making no concessions to you. I'm thinking of Claudia. Be thankful you're married to a Cochrane, because if you weren't, I'd throw you to the hogs."

He flung Stanley off with such fierce contempt that he stumbled and half fell onto the edge of his bunk.

"Now, you cheap little chiseler," said Peter, "do you want your job back or don't you?"

Stanley was still sitting on the edge of his bunk. He looked at Peter fixedly, and then answered him in four vicious words.

He added, "I've still got you in a cleft stick. You've got to know about the Transuranae and what else is on that world. You'll pay for that knowledge, or you'll get what Ballantyne got."

Peter said harshly, "I've known you a long time, Bill. You're a tough man behind a desk, but not anywhere else. You'll take the share I offered you, and be glad of it."

He turned away. Comyn's fists itched, but he followed. Stanley shouted furiously after them.

"A share in Cochrane Transuranic you'll give me! That's funny, that's very funny, you don't know yet the hell you're giving out shares in—but you will, you will!"

Comyn slammed the door. Peter scowled down at the roll of microfilm in his hand. "That's what old Jonas meant by amateurs who bungle unpredictably. But one thing sure, he's scared. He's plenty scared, and not of us. . . ."

Three days later they were in an orbit around Barnard II, and going down.

XI

COMYN slept, a light, uneasy, restless sleep. His dreams were full of voices, full of words and pictures. The landing. The grassy plain with the strange slim golden trees. The mountains to the south, the tall cliffs and rocky spires, tortured by wind and water into shapes that leaned and crouched and made to spring. The gorge that cleft them.

The landing, and the day of waiting, penned inside the ship, while the endless tests were made. "No contamination of the air". Stanley's face set like marble, Stanley's mouth unspeaking. "You'll have to pay me, Peter. You'll have to pay."

Men going out, wearing armor, carrying Geigers. No radiation, no contamination, not here on the plain. You can come out and breathe again. It's safe.

Peter staring off toward the mountains. "Is it there?"

Stanley saying, "I'll tell you, but you'll

have to pay."

"Tomorrow. . . ."

"If you pay."

Dreams, opressive, sombre, filled with beauty, tinged with fear. Beauty of wild tree and sweeping plain, beauty of sound and color, all alien, new and strange. Comyn tossed in the narrow bunk, and again saw the mountains and the gorge as he had seen them at the going-down of Barnard's Star, a rust-red giant heavy in the west. Red light pouring down on the world, the screaming spires dripping blood from off their flanks, beautiful even then, beautiful as battle, as armed knights clashing above the shadowed gorge.

Sunset, and the coming on of night. Dusk and darkness, and underneath them horror. Horror that sped through the golden trees, faster and faster on noiseless feet, calling, crying, toward the ship. *I am Paul, I am dead, but I cannot die!*

Comyn woke with a leap and a yell, shaking, drenched with sweat. The cabin was filled with moonlight that came in through the port, but it was small and close and he had seen too much of its walls. It felt like a coffin, and nightmares clung in its corners. He went out of it, and down the passage.

The lock was open. A man sat inside of it, with a high-powered shock-rifle on his lap.

"I'm going out," said Comyn.

The man looked at him doubtfully. "I have my orders," he said. "But the old man's out there. You ask him."

Comyn stepped through the round thick-walled opening and climbed down the ladder. Two copper moons burned in the sky, and a third was rising huge and tawny from the horizon. There was no darkness, except where the groves of slender trees trailed it from their boughs. A little to the left, still plain under the returning grass, were the scar and the hollow where Ballantyne's ship had lain.

Peter Cochrane was walking back and forth by the foot of the ladder. He stopped and spoke.

"I'm glad you came. It isn't good to be alone on a strange world." He took Comyn's arm and pulled him away a little, out of the glow from the ship's ports. "Look off there, straight down the gorge. Is that just moonlight?"

"Hard to say. . . ." The three moons wove a tapestry of light that glanced and gleamed in a bewildering way, shifting constantly and very bright. But he thought he saw, down among the cliffs where Peter was pointing, a pale white fire not made by any moon. A fragile, glittering aurora that set his nerves to leaping with an awareness of the unknown—and then vanished from his dazzled eyes, lost in the overwhelming moonlight.

"I don't know," said Comyn. "I can't be sure."

"That's the devil of it," Peter said. "We're not sure of anything."

He started to walk back toward the ship. Comyn followed him. From somewhere in the night behind them came a soft fluting call, very clear and sweet, with a sound in it like laughter. Peter jerked his head toward it.

"Take that, for instance. What is it —bird, beast, something with no name at all? Who knows?"

"Stanley might. What are you going to do about Stanley?"

"Comyn, there are times when only a damn fool won't give in. This may be one of them. I don't know." He shook his head sombrely. "If it were just myself and Simon, I'd see Stanley in blazes first. But I can't take that chance with the others."

He glanced around the moon-washed plain. "I look at this place, and I think there can't be any danger here. Regular garden of Eden, isn't it? And then I remember Ballantyne—and I'm willing to give Stanley the whole Cochrane Corporation if he can give us some hint of how to save ourselves from what happened to him."

"But you don't really think he can."

"I don't know, Comyn. But I do know nobody else can."

"So you'll come to terms with him."

"Probably," said Peter, as though the word tasted bitter in his mouth.

AGAIN the bird-like call came, very soft this time, but sounding much closer. There was a grove of trees perhaps sixty yards away. The two men turned toward it, curious to see if possible what sort of creature was singing in the night. The shadows underneath the boughs were dark, but the coppery moonlight shafted down in the open spaces, and Comyn saw a flicker of movement there. . . .

Peter's hand closed hard upon his arm. "Men! Do you see them, Comyn! Human—"

The words choked in his throat. Suddenly night and distance were not and Comyn saw clearly the ivory bodies stealing between the trees. His dream was still strong in him. He tore away from Peter's grasp and began to run out across the plain, shouting, "Paul! Paul Rogers!" And it was like the nightmare in reverse. The long grass plucked at his feet and the trees seemed far away, and the faces of the men beneath them were obscured. Men, four men, Ballantyne's crew . . . no, there were more than four, the grove was full of slim bodies, naked, light of foot, and some of them were not men at all, he could see even at that distance that they were women, with long hair blowing as they ran. And they were running now, they were frightened by his shouting, and the grove rang with fluting calls, a kind of speech, but very simple, like the speech of birds.

He cried, "Paul, don't run away, it's me, Arch Comyn!" But the white bodies vanished between the shadows and the trees, back into the deeper woods beyond, and Paul was not there, and the clear full-throated calling died away and was gone.

Peter caught him just on the edge of the grove. "Don't go in there, Comyn!"

Comyn shook his head. "Gone now. I scared them off. It wasn't Paul. It wasn't any of them." A long sliding shiver racked him, and his breath came hard. "Peter, do you think those people are the—Transuranae?"

Men were coming out from the ship now, roused by the shouting and the calls. Peter turned abruptly. "Stanley," he said. "Now is the time to talk to Stanley."

Comyn followed him, still half dazed, oppressed with a sense of loss and a desire not to be near that grove of slender trees. The wind blew warm, laden with nameless scents, and in the sky were foreign constellations made pallid by the moons. The voices of the men rose loud and harsh, spreading outward from the ship.

He saw Peter call four men and give them rapid orders, pointing to the grove. The men had rifles. They moved past Comyn, and one of them, a big fellow named Fisher, said to him, "Are they armed? Are they going to attack?"

"I don't think so. They seemed to be—just looking."

Fisher's face had sweat on it, and his shirt was dark under the arms. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth and glanced without love at the shadows under the boughs.

"This trip had better pay off," he said. "I haven't liked it so far."

He started on, and Comyn said, "Don't take any chances."

Fisher said profanely that he would not.

By the time Comyn reached the ship the four had vanished into the edge of the grove. He did not envy them their posts as sentinels.

There was a small group around the foot of the ladder. Peter and Stanley were the core of it. The others watched and listened, nervous men, unhappy men, not liking the night.

Peter was saying, "Let's get this straight now, I want everybody to understand. You refuse to tell us what you know about these—people, whether

they're dangerous or not."

Stanley slid the end of his tongue across his lips, which were pale and dry. "Not for nothing, Peter. If anything happens, it'll be your fault, not mine, because you wouldn't make a fair deal."

"He refuses," Peter said to the men who were listening. "You all heard that."

There was a mutter of assent. It had an ugly tone beneath it, and Stanley turned, as though he would go back inside the ship.

The men closed in, barring his way. Peter said, "All right, let's take him out there."

Several of them took hold of Stanley. Simon Cochrane, one of the pilots, an astrophysicist, French the doctor, others. They had stopped being scientists or experts, men with important jobs. They were just men now, afraid and angry. Stanley cried out.

PETER slapped him across the mouth, not hard. "You wouldn't believe this, Bill, but it's the principle of the thing. The stuff about the landing was for money. This is for lives. There's a difference. I don't like being blackmailed for peoples' lives." He started out across the plain. "Bring him along."

They brought him. Comyn went with them. He knew what Peter was going to do, and so did Stanley, but Stanley asked.

"Nothing," said Peter. "Just tie you to a tree in the grove and then drop back a way and see what happens. If you have all this knowledge you claim to have you know whether there's any danger or not. If there isn't you won't be afraid, and nothing will happen to you. If there is—well, we'll find that out, too."

Stanley's feet dragged in the long grass. But they took him, into the edge of the grove, under the first fringe of golden boughs that were tarnished copper now in the moonlight. There was silence between the trees, and patches of gliding luminosity, and a light little wind that whispered.

"Not here," said Peter. "Deeper in."

Deeper in were more of the slender trunks, and beyond them the forest, the dark forest that lay between them and the mountains. The forest where the unknown ones had gone.

Treading softly, shock guns ready, eyes searching every shadow with caution and alarm. Five steps, ten, twenty —and Stanley broke.

"Don't do it, Peter, don't leave me here, I don't know—*I don't know!*"

Peter stopped. He pulled Stanley into a drift of moonlight and studied his face.

"I don't know," Stanley said miserably. "Ballantyne described these—these people. He met them, all right. But that's all he said about them, in the log."

Comyn asked, "Are they the Transuranae?"

"I suppose so. He didn't name them. He just said they were here."

"Was he afraid of them?"

"He didn't say so."

"What did he say?"

"That was all. He told what the place was like, all the tests they ran, then about the people, and then the log ended. He never made any more entries. Except one."

"Go on."

"It was only one word, and it wasn't finished. It was in ink, all over the page. TRANSURAN—" Stanley shut his teeth tight on the beginning of unhealthy laughter. "It was that one unfinished word that made me take the logbooks. I thought I had the Cochrane fortune right there. And then Ballantyne himself gave that part of it away. Let's get out of here, Peter. Let's get back to the ship."

"Then you were lying," Peter said mercilessly, "when you said you knew the location of the ores."

Stanley nodded.

Peter studied him a moment longer. Then he turned and walked back through the grove. The others followed. Peter spoke briefly to the sentinels. They passed out onto the plain again, onto

the path of trampled grass. Stanley walked a little apart. They were not holding him now.

Some of the men were already back inside the ship when lightning began to flash and crack among the trees.

A man yelled, high and shrill with fright, and there was a sudden bursting-forth of the bird-like calls, this time a single note repeated, receding away into the forest, a quavering note of lamentation. The bolts of lightning flared and flared, the wild discharge of panic.

Presently it quieted. The single mourning note had faded to a distant wail that lost itself against the mountains. Fisher and another man came out of the grove, dragging a limp white form between them.

"They tried to rush us," Fisher yelled. "They were coming, but we drove 'em off." His face shone with clammy moisture and his voice was ragged. "We got one still alive."

Once more Comyn crossed the stretch of plain toward the woods, walking beside Peter, his eyes fixed on the naked body that dragged from the sweaty hands of Fisher and his mate. The head hung forward, hidden by a fall of dark hair. He could not see the face.

They met, in the center of the open space. Fisher grunted, and the body rolled onto the grass. Comyn drew his hand across his face, looking down.

Peter drew a long, unsteady breath.

"I know that man," he said, in an oddly stilted way. "It's Vickrey."

XII

THE ship's small hospital was a cubicle of brilliant light, sterile, white, barbed with glints of chromium and surgical steel. Vickrey lay on the table. He had caught the edge of a shock-beam, and he had not yet returned to consciousness. French was working over him, rubber-gloved hands touching Vickrey with a curious reluctance, mouth drawn down to a narrow line. On Vickrey's arm was a patch of tape, covering the place whence a tissue-sample had been taken.

Comyn stood with his back to the wall, out of the way, watching. Time and countless millions of miles and many events rolled back and he was in another hospital room on another world, and another man lay before him unconscious, and he saw the subtle rippling and motion of his flesh, as though the body-cells had an unnatural life of their own. And he was sick.

Peter Cochrane whispered hoarsely, "Ballantyne was like that."

Comyn answered, "When I first saw him. Before he was—dead."

Peter stood beside Comyn. Their shoulders touched in the cramped space. It seemed very hot and close under the glaring lights, and yet they felt cold. Vickrey breathed. His face was closed and secret, and his body stirred, the muscles, the tendons, the thin covering flesh. He was not wasted and worn as Ballantyne had been, only lean, with a healthy leanness.

Peter whispered, "He's changed. He looks younger. I don't understand that."

Roth came back into the hospital from his laboratory, and laid a written report on French's desk. "I tested the tissue-sample," he said. "It's the same as Ballantyne's except that the concentration of transuranic elements is greater. Much greater."

"Quiet," French said. "He's coming round."

Silence. The man on the table turned his head and sighed. After a minute he opened his eyes. They looked first, with a vague curiosity, at the low white ceiling, and then at the white walls and the cases of bright instruments, and then at the men who stood near. The vague curiosity sharpened into alarm, into terror, into the look of a stunned wild thing that wakes to find a cage around it. Vickrey sat up on the table and cried out, a shrill-edged fluting call, infinitely strange to come from the throat of an Earthman.

Peter said, "Vickrey. Vickrey, it's all

right, we're friends."

Again the desperate call, the unhuman cry for help. It set Comyn's nerves on edge, but it was not as bad as Vickrey's face. An ordinary face, an Earthman's face, but altered and made alien, the mouth distorted in the forming of that wild cry, the eyes. . . .

The eyes . . . Comyn was not an imaginative man, and he could not have said what it was about Vickrey's eyes that made them abnormal and frightening in a man's face. There was no menace in them, and no madness; it was not any overt quality. It was something else, something lacking. He caught their direct stare and it jarred him in a queer way that set the hairs to prickling on the back of his neck.

Peter said again, "Vickrey! You remember me, Peter Cochrane. You're safe now, Vickrey. You're all right. Don't be afraid."

For a third time the bird-like calling came incongruously from the lips of a mathematician who had once had a wife and children and a position in the world of science.

Abruptly, Peter swore. "Come off it, Vickrey. You're not one of those creatures. You're an Earthman, and you know who I am. Stop pretending."

Vickrey moaned.

Comyn asked the question he had asked before, of another man, in another room. "Where is Paul Rogers?"

VICKREY turned his head and looked at Comyn with those fey eyes, and after a long time he spoke in words so difficult and slurred that they were hardly English.

He said, "It was Strang you killed."

Peter Cochrane started. "Strang! Was he . . .?"

"In the grove. Men, with guns. Strang fell, we picked him up and started away, then I—" He shook his head. His hair had grown long and there were bits of leaf and grass in it from where he had been rolled on the ground.

Peter said slowly, "The men said you attacked them."

Vickrey made a sound that might have been a laugh or a sob. "No," he said. "No. We didn't even see them."

There was a hot and sudden light in Peter's eyes. "Those bloody fools," he said. "Panic. Sheer panic. I shouldn't have sent them out there."

Comyn said to Vickrey, "We came here partly to find you. Were you trying to come back?"

"No!" Vickrey put his elbows on his knees and raised his hands, and laid his head behind them. "We stayed behind. We thought that men might try to take us back. But the People wanted to see the ship. We waited, and then someone shouted, shouted Rogers' name and another, and Rogers heard, and he wanted to look at the man who shouted. So after a while we four crept back into the grove. I didn't have to, I guess I was—" Once more he stopped in mid-sentence. Presently he said, with infinite sadness, "Strang is dead."

"I'm sorry," Peter said. "The men didn't mean to. They were scared by all the talk about the Transuranae."

Vickrey straightened up, as sharply as though someone had touched him with a knife. "What do you know about the Transuranae?"

"Nothing, except what Ballantyne wrote in his log."

"But he didn't keep the log after . . ." Vickrey stood up. His strength seemed to have come back to him with amazing swiftness. "Ballantyne! He got back to Earth, then."

Peter nodded.

"And," said Vickrey, "he died."

"Yes. Did you know he would?"

"Of course. We all knew. But he was crazy, too inhibited, too afraid to take what the Transuranae had given him. He would not stay."

"What had they given him, Vickrey?"

"Life," said Vickrey softly. "Life or death, and he made up his own mind. He didn't think it was decent to live."

"I don't understand you."

"If you did, you'd be like me, like Bal-

lantyne. You'd have the choice to make, too. Listen, take your ship and your men and go, very fast. Forget that Rogers and Kessel and I ever existed on Earth. Find another star, space is full of them. Otherwise, it'll be as it was with us. Most of you will stay, but some will go back and—yes, I can see in your faces. It was a very ugly death."

For the first time French spoke. He had been reading Roth's report, looking from it to Vickrey, and thinking hard.

"It's a change, isn't it?" he said. "It wasn't complete in Ballantyne."

"A change," said Vickrey. "Yes. Ballantyne left too soon. He—it horrified him, somehow. Too much the puritan, I guess, at heart. And yet if he had waited . . ."

French said, "It's complete in you."

Vickrey didn't answer that. Instead he looked at Peter Cochrane and said, "You'll let me go? You're not going to take me back to Earth?"

PETER put out his hand in what was almost a gesture of pleading. "You can't stay here forever with these primitives. You're an Earthman, Vickrey. You have a career, a wife and children. I know you've been under some strange influence here, but you'll come out of it, and whatever your, well, your illness may be, medical attention—"

Vickrey cut him short with a cry. "Illness! No, you don't understand! I'm not ill, I can never be ill. I can be injured, I can be killed, but these are accidents, and barring them I can live—not forever, but close enough to it that the human mind is not conscious of the difference."

He came up to Peter Cochrane, and there was fear in him, a desperate fear. "I belong here now. You can't force me to go back."

"Listen," said Peter, trying hard to be gentle. "When you first came to, you couldn't remember how to talk. Now your speech is as clear as mine. It'll come back to you just as easily, the old ways, your own ways. And your wife. . . ."

Vickrey smiled. "She was good to me. I'm not sure I ever loved her. But we'd have no use for each other now." Then the fear came back and he cried out, "Let me go!"

Peter sighed. "I think you'd better stay here and rest a while. You'll feel differently in a day or two. Besides, we need your help."

"I'll help you," Vickrey said. "I'll tell you anything you want—*but you must let me go!*"

Peter shook his head. "You'd bolt off into the forest and be gone with the Transuranae again, and we'd never find you."

Vickrey was still for a long minute, and then he began to laugh, and the laughter slipped off shockingly into one of those eerie calls, a double note that trailed away into a throbbing minor wail. Peter reached out and shook him.

"Stop it!" he said. "Stop acting like a fool!"

Vickrey caught his breath. "You think my people—you think *they* are the Transuranae?"

"Aren't they?"

"No." Vickrey shook off Peter's grasp and turned away, his hands clenched now into fists, his naked body quivering with tension. I know what you want. We wanted them too. The transuranic ores. But you can't get them, it isn't possible! They already belong."

"To what?" demanded Peter.

"To the Transuranae. And I tell you to leave them alone. But you won't."

"No. We're better equipped than you were. We can handle anything, if we just know what to expect. What are the Transuranae like? Are they people, beasts, what?"

Vickrey looked at him, almost in pity. "They are nothing you ever dreamed of," he said softly. "And they're nothing I can describe or explain. Let me go now, I can't stand being shut up like this, and I'll point out the way for you to their place, where the ores are. Let me go."

"You know I can't do that," Peter

said. "For your own sake, and for the others too, Rogers and Kessel."

"You can't understand," whispered Vickrey. "You *won't* understand that we can't go back among men. We don't want to go back!"

His voice, on those last words, had risen to a kind of scream, and French said worriedly, "Be careful, Peter."

Comyn said, "I think Vickrey's telling the truth." He stepped forward casually, so that he stood between Peter Cochrane and the door. "And I think you're handing him a lot of crumbs for the birds. I don't think you care about his sake, or Rogers', or Kessel's, one way or the other. All you want is the ores, and you're afraid to turn him loose to lead you there—he might just disappear. So you're going to . . . . "

Behind him, so suddenly that the edge of it hit him before he could get out of the way, the door opened. Simon Cochrane had been outside the ship in command of the guard detail, and now he stood in the opening, his rifle still in his hand, his face intent and nervous.

"Peter," he said, "you'd better come—and bring *him* along, too." He nodded to Vickrey, and then pointed off in the direction of the mountains.

"Something's going on out there."

XIII

ONE of the moons had set, and the shadows were deeper in the distant gorge. The breeze had quieted, and the night was warm and very still. Simon held up his hand.

"Listen," he said.

They listened, and in the stillness Comyn heard the sound of many voices, sweet and far off among the dark feet of the mountains, calling, answering, drawing together from the groves and the forests and the moon-washed plains.

"They're gathering," Simon said. "Ask him what it means."

The sweet unhuman voices called, and now from a point about the mouth of the gorge more and more of them began to join together, and a cold quiver shot down Comyn's spine. He had heard that before, that double note that died away in a minor wailing.

Vickrey's face was a mask of anguished longing, lifted up in the moonlight. He said, "They are taking Strang to his burial."

He tried desperately to break away, but he was between Peter and Simon, and they held him.

"Where?" said Peter. "To the place of the Transuranae?" Deep in the shadowed throat of the gorge the pale white fire showed brighter now, bright enough to be seen and recognized as something separate from the moonlight, and the voices were slowly moving toward it.

Vickrey said, "You've killed once—you'll kill again. You'll take the others prisoner as you took me—let me go!"

He fought and strained like a mad thing, and they held him, and others came to help. And Vickrey's voice rose in a shrill wild cry. Comyn moved away to one side.

Simon said disgustedly, "He's no good to us. Lock him up until he comes to his senses. Anyway, we don't dare go now, while the whole lot of them are there. They'll want to make us pay for Strang, and there's too many of them."

The sentinels had been called in from the grove. Fisher stood looking uneasily from the mountains to the turmoil around Vickrey. Comyn walked up behind him, making no sound on the grass. He hit Fisher on the side of the jaw and took the rifle out of his hand as he went down. The stud was pushed up to full power. Comyn eased it back, and then he turned to the group of men who were struggling with Vickrey.

"All right," he said. "Let him go."

They didn't let him go, not at once. It was a minute before they understood what they had to. Vickrey was on his knees, and Simon had hold of him. Peter Cochrane straightened up.

"Are you crazy, Comyn?"

"Maybe." Someone went for the rifle he had dropped in the scuffle, and

Comyn pressed the firing stud. There was a sharp flash and the man went down. After that nobody made trouble. Getting knocked cold might not be fatal, but it was no fun. Simon still held onto Vickrey. He was so close to him that Comyn couldn't knock him out without hitting Vickrey too. His jaw was stubborn and his eyes were mean.

Comyn said, "Let him go."

Peter came forward a step or two. He started to speak, and Comyn cut him short. "Listen," he said, "I don't give a curse about the ores or whether you get them or not. I came out here to find Paul Rogers, and that's all I care about. Do you understand that, Vickrey? I'm Paul's friend. I want to talk to him, and that's all. If he doesn't want to go back I won't try to make him. Will you take me to him?"

Vickrey nodded. He tried to pull away from Simon, and Simon struck him. "Stay put," he said, and then he shouted to the men who were standing around, "What's the matter with you? Somebody take care of that—"

Peter's hand caught his collar, choked off his words and his wind with them. "Let up," Peter snarled. He dragged Simon away from Vickrey and thrust him aside, viciously. "You never know when to quit, do you? You're the kind of Cochrane that's given the whole family a bad name. This is no place for rough stuff, not with him."

Simon swore. "You told me not to let him get away."

"I didn't tell you to beat him up." He swung around. "You can put the gun down, Comyn. Vickrey's free to do what he wants. I guess he was telling the truth, and it is too late to help him. There's no use killing a man trying to save his life."

COMYN smiled and shook his head. He did not put down the gun. "I can't make you out," he said to Peter. "Sometimes I think you're a decent guy, and sometimes I think you're a heel with a genius for covering up." He moved the barrel of the rifle up and down gently, just to remind Peter it was still there. "I need armor."

"You must be crazy! Comyn, you can't—"

"You know me well enough to know I'm going, whether I have the armor or not. And I know you well enough to know you'll get it for me. So let's not waste any more time."

Peter shrugged and turned away to the ship. Simon started to follow him, and Comyn said, "No. You stay here, where I can watch you."

He waited. Vickrey had risen to his feet. There was a new look about him now. He was free, and he wasn't afraid any longer. His body quivered, but it was with eagerness, and his gaze was on the mountains, on the shadowed gorge where the voices called. His eyes shone, and again Comyn wondered when he saw them why they were so unhuman, so changed from the eyes of man.

Peter came back, carrying a suit of the flexible radiation armor done up in a bulky pack, with the helmet on top. There was a hard set to his mouth, and his glance probed angrily around at the men's faces.

"One of these is missing," he said. "Somebody's beat you to it, Comyn."

"Put it down," Comyn. "Right there." Peter laid the pack on the ground and stepped back, and Comyn picked it up. Simon was still sulking. He did not speak, but Peter asked,

"Has anybody seen Bill Stanley?"

No one had.

Peter said some hot and angry words. "Amateurs! That goes for you too, Comyn. Things aren't hard enough, you all have to foul things up for everybody grinding your own little axes. All right, get the hell on with it, and I hope you both fall into a chasm and break your necks!"

"Then don't follow too close behind me," Comyn said. "Come on, Vickrey."

Vickrey spoke, suddenly, clearly. He was speaking to Peter Cochrane, and there was in him all the dignity of a

free man, a man of science. There was something else, too, that made them feel small and a little unclean before him, an inexplicable and irritating sensation to come from a naked creature who had gone native in some weird way.

"I know that you will follow," he said. The light is there in the gorge, and there will be many on the trails. What will happen to you afterward is partly in your hands. I only warn you not to make the mistake that Ballantyne did—and not to use your rifles on my people. Strang is dead, and they will mourn for him a short while, but there is no vengeance in them. They have forgotten vengeance, along with many other things they once knew. Do not harm them. They are harmless."

Without looking at any of them, Vickrey set off across the plain. Comyn went after him, and presently the shadows of the grove wrapped around them. Vickrey sped on, and the voices called in the distance, and Comyn threw the gun away. Vickrey smiled.

"You're wiser than the Cochranes."

Comyn grunted. "There are times when a gun doesn't help. I just got a feeling this was one of them."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes," said Comyn. "There used to be a dirty saying for just how scared I am." They were through the grove now and in among the forest trees, great trees with blackness around their feet. The tangled boughs above Comyn's head were not like any he had seen before except in dreams, and the leaves on them hung in strange curling shapes, copper and gold and pallid silver under the moons. The moist sod gave off strange scents where he crushed it under his boots, and there were vines with huge dark flowers. Vickrey moved swiftly and without sounds, a slim white blur in the gloom, and it was like running with a ghost.

Comyn asked, as they went, "What about your people? You said they used to be men, like . . . . "

He caught himself, but Vickrey smiled and finished it for him. "Like me. Yes. Barnard's Star has eight worlds. They came from the fifth one, moving closer in toward their sun as it waned. In the course of ages they reached this planet and found the Transuranae. They will not travel any more."

THINKING of the shapes that had run faun-like through the grove, naked and lacking even speech except for those simple calls, Comyn asked incredulously. "You mean those—you mean *they* had space ships?"

"Oh, yes. Space ships, and great cities, and war and medicine and politics—civilization. There are ruins beyond the mountains of the cities they built when they first came to Barnard II. Fine ones, too. I've seen them. Their culture was on approximately the same level as our own." He shook his head. "It's becoming difficult for me to think of such things. The mind adjusts so easily to altered ideas of importance."

After a moment he added, "I wish your ship hadn't come. It's unhappy to try being Vickrey again."

Comyn noted the odd choice of words, but didn't mention it. Instead he said, breathing hard, "Don't you ever get tired?"

Vickrey made a gesture of impatience, but he slowed it down to a walk, and Comyn plodded gratefully for a while until his heart quit hammering and the sweat rolled less violently down his back, where the armor-pack weighed heavily. They were closer to the gorge now, and the voices sounded clearer, like the voices of great birds. They seemed to hold no menace, and yet the very feyness of them, was terrifying—perhaps because it should have been insane, and wasn't.

"How did they lose it all?" he asked. "The space-ships and the cities. Civilization."

"I told you. They found the Transuranae."

"War?" said Comyn.

Vickrey looked at him as though he

had said a childish thing. "Not war. No. It was a question of need."

"Of need?"

"Yes. Everything man has ever done has been done out of need—for food, for shelter, for mutual protection. Civilization developed to supply those necessities easily. But if they're no longer necessary to you, you've developed beyond civilization and can slough it off."

"You mean that those things are no longer necessary to you, Vickrey? Because of this weird transuranic poisoning?"

"It's not poisoning, its transmutation! A complete physiological *change,* where ordinary metabolism ceases to be, and is replaced by energy, a constant flow of it through the living cells from the transuranic elements those cells have ingested. The body has a new self-sufficient life. It has no hunger, and no fear. So the brain that is in it has no longer any use for cities, for finance and intricate social structures, for work and gain, for war and greed—not even for complicated speech. They sound ridiculous here, don't they—all those pompous words?"

There was a curious sickness in Comyn, a shivering recoil from an unimaginable kind of living thus unfolded.

"But radioactive matter *kills!*" he said.

"The elements we knew on Earth, yes. But they're the end-products, the embers, still burning and with a long way yet to the ultimate lead, but with their energy gone. Neptunium and plutonium are hybrids, man-made and unnatural. The true transuranics, far and far beyond our periodic table, are the forces that were in the beginning, the life-seed, the fountainhead. Perhaps we're all children of the Transuranae in a way, many times removed and with all our vital powers gone too."

"I don't understand."

"You will," said Vickrey. "Can you run now? There is still a way to go . . . ."

EVEN while he spoke he was forgetting Comyn and the things that he had talked about, straining toward the gorge. Comyn ran.

And as he ran, the fear in him deepened—the fear of a tough-minded man who felt all his hard matter-of-fact certitudes suddenly threatened, his familiar world quaking around him.

"But if the Transuranae worked that change in you, who or what *are* they?" he cried.

Vickrey did not answer. The ground was sloping upward and they had come into a broad path between the trees, trodden by many feet over countless years, so that it was worn deep below the level of the sod and packed as hard as iron. Vickrey was speeding faster along it, and Comyn labored after him, and he could see the gorge now through the thinning forest, dark, dark under the slanting moons. The voices rang, almost crescendoing.

There were others on the path.

Vickrey called, a gentle, joyous note, and they answered him, the slender people, the child-eyed people who looked at Comyn and were puzzled, but only a little afraid. He went up with them toward the mouth of the gorge, keeping close to Vickrey, because he knew if he lost him he would bolt and run. He could not have stood to be alone among these creatures who looked like men and women and were not men and women—unhuman.

The last trees dropped behind them. They streamed up between the stony pinnacles that were the pillars of the gate, and the gorge lay open before them. It was full of voices and dim moving shapes, and forward in its deep cleft the white fire burned, as snow burns under a briliant sun. Vickrey paused and said one dreaming word. Human speech was slipping from him now.

Comyn put on the clumsy armor and set the helmet over his head. And he was afraid.

IT was worse now, with the ray-proof metal fabric hampering his limbs and the face-plate of leaded glass cutting down his field of vision. Sweat soaked his clothing, and the canned, flat air from the shielded tank between his shoulders was difficult to breathe. He stumbled after Vickrey along a path worn smooth and broad across the rock. There were bodies all around him now, naked bodies. Many of them were women with white thighs and pointed breasts, but they aroused in him no lust, and the men gave him no sense of shame. It seemed as natural that they should go unclothed as it was for the winds to blow.

They were hurrying, and their faces were bright. The sound of voices was dying away as fewer and fewer were left on the open path. The wild and tortured shapes of rock sprang up on either side, with heads and shoulders bathed in rudy moonlight, but that was high above, and where Comyn was the darkness clustered thick, and there was no light except that strange white fire that drew and beckoned. Some infection began to enter him from Vickrey and the others, so that he too was wild to reach it. But with every step he took toward it, the fear in him grew greater.

The floor of the gorge dipped downward steeply, and the path went with it, and a great ragged grotto opened in the rock. The white fire came out of it, but Comyn saw now that the radiance he had been watching was only a tithe of what lay inside. The path split and curved away to left and right, in along th sides of the grotto, and the last of the people streamed along the two paths, and Comyn stopped.

"Vickrey!" he cried out. "Vickrey!"

But Vickrey was gone. Comyn took hold of the rock wall beside him with his two hands and clung to it for a while, just at the edge of the grotto, neither in nor out, until it was decided whether he was going to run away or not. And he saw the reason why the path split.

The floor of the grotto was cracked wide open in a rough-edged chasm. Through this crack the white light poured upward, an aurora of blinding purity, with a rippling in it. The lips of the chasm and the grotto roof above, where the light struck most strongly, burned with their own dimmer fires, and Comyn thought that ages of intense bombardment by transuranic radiation had transmuted the common rock into something else, so that the whole grotto was filled with radiance.

He could not see into the chasm, he was too far from it and the angle was wrong. But he could see the ledges on either side, the lower ones wide, the upper ones climbing the grotto walls in rough steps. They were crowded now with the people whose eyes were so disturbing, and who had the happy faces of children at a festival. At one place a part of the lower ledge thrust out a little over the crack, and here there was a long litter made of rude poles and heaped high with flowers. The flowers moved and stirred with the motion of the thing they covered, and beside the litter stood two men. Between the distance and the dazzle Comyn could not make out their faces, but he knew one of them.

He took his hand away from the rock and set his teeth hard, and went into the grotto . . . .

XIV

THE people were still in motion, and he moved with them, an incongruous lumbering shape among the lithe bare bodies. The wide lower ledges were filled, but on the others that rose like rough steps above them, winding and tilting along the sides of the grotto, the people were streaming up, a shifting fresco of white forms, silent-footed, soft-eyed, eager.

There was a stillness in the place and a sense of some unknown power crouched and waiting to leap forth. They were waiting for it. They had

known it before, and Comyn ran heavily along the crowded ledge, toward Paul Rogers. He did not wish to see the leaping forth, and time was pressing on him like a spur. The white fires rushed upward from the chasm, a glory and a fear.

He shouted Paul's name, but his voice was muffled by the helmet, and the three men on the jutting lip of rock were lost in some far distance of their own. They stooped and lifted up the bier that held Strang's body, and a cascade of brilliant flowers fell from it to the ground.

The streaming of the people onto the upper ledges quickened. Comyn's armored boots struck heavy on the rock.

Slowly, very solemnly, the three men lowered the foot of Strang's rude bier and let the body slip, still stirring, into the abyss.

The motion of the people ceased. There was a sighing, sharp and swift, around the ledges, and then silence, in which nothing moved or breathed.

Only Comyn, running out upon the lip of the rock, calling Roger's name.

Even through the deadening helmet, his voice rang loud and harsh upon the stillness, and the men turned slowly toward it. They had gone very far into whatever strange life they were living now, and they were being called back against their will, and it was a hurt to them. The sheets of fire curled up and over the burning rim, curling above their heads like waves, crested with a bursting foam of light. Their faces were rapt and dreaming, touched now with pain from the hammering of Comyn's voice.

He reached out his gloved hands and set them on Paul's bare shoulders, and cried his name again. And the face that looked into his through the leaded glass was the face of Paul Rogers as he had known it all his life, and yet it was not, Paul Rogers was gone from it and someone else was there in his stead, someone beyond his understanding. And Comyn took his hands away and knew the meaning of fear.

The swift white fires leaped toward the glowing roof, and the people waited on the ledges, and the eyes that had forgotten knowledge and all the ways of men looked into Comyn's and were troubled. Then, as through the opening of a door long closed, recognition came, and after it, alarm.

"Not now!" The words were stiff and awkward on Rogers' tongue, but he said them urgently, putting up his hands as though to thrust Comyn back. "No time, not now!"

Vickrey and Kessel—Kessel who had been stout and old beyond his years with study, and who was now lean and timeless and altogether changed—had forgotten Comyn, whose business was not with them. They had turned again to the wonderful bright fire that gave no heat, looking down into the depths from which it came. The people on the ledges stood unmoving, white shadows painted on the rock, and all their eyes were shining, shining in the light. Comyn cried out. He had not meant to; he had promised Vickrey he would not, but now that Paul was before him in this place, the words came whether he would or not.

"Paul, come with me! Come back!"

BUT Paul shook his head. He seemed upset for Comyn's sake, and yet impatient with him too, as though he had committed an unforgivable intrusion.

"Not now, Arch. No time for you to think, no time to talk." His hands pressed hard on Comyn's chest, forcing him back. "I know you, you can't fight them off. Some men, but not you, and you should have time to think first. Go now, hurry!"

Comyn braced his feet. The fire-swirl leaped and rushed and quivered all about the jut of rock and in the air above his head. It was hypnotic, beautiful, inviting him as water invites the swimmer. He tried not to look at it. He kept his eyes on Paul, and it was sickening that Paul should be here, wild and naked like

the others, his mind and heart both lost in the same quiet madness. It made him angry, and he shouted,

"I've come all the way from Earth to find you! I won't leave you here!"

"Do you want to kill me, Arch?"

That made Comyn stop. He said, "You'd die—like Ballantyne? I thought Vickrey said—"

Paul Rogers glanced into the abyss and spoke, so rapidly now that Comyn could hardly understand through the helmet audio.

"Not that way. Ballantyne left too soon. I am whole now. But another way, a worse way—Arch, I can't explain now, just go before you're caught, as we were."

"Will you come with me?"

"No."

"Then I'll stay." *Perhaps he's still human enough to remember, perhaps I can make him come that way . . . .*

Paul said, "Look."

He pointed down, into the abyss, drawing Comyn closer to the brink. The noiseless white fires whirled and rushed about him, and he stared into them, into a white and blinding glory. And suddenly the world dropped out from under him, and his head reeled with an awful vertigo.

The ledges he had thought were solid rock were only thin curved shells that arched out over a space below, a space that underlay the grotto as the mass of an iceberg underlies its visible small peak, spreading away in a mist of light into secret, unseen reaches.

A vault of transuranic fires, burning as though some unknown sun had been caught there, held and treasured by the shielding rock to flame eternally for its own joy, its own wonder, lavishing itself in streams and bursts and torrents of white radiance. Something deep inside of Comyn stirred and woke. He leaned forward, and the fear drained out of him, along with many other things that were in his mind. The fire soared and flowed and shifted in the depths of its private world. He could not follow all its motions, but it was beautiful and happy and good to watch.

And then he yelled and sprang back, and there was no more beauty.

"Something moved!"

"Life," said Paul softly. "Life without need, and almost without end. Do you remember the old tale they taught us when we were children—about the people who once lived in a garden of innocence?"

Revulsion was swift and ugly. Comyn shrank back farther from the edge and said, "I'm way beyond that Paul and so are you. I think I get it now. This transuranic poisoning—you *are* poisoned, drugged, rotting away inside. You're sinking to the level of these others, and pretty soon there won't be any hope for you. I don't know what the Transuranae do to you exactly, but the end result is slavery."

He looked up, where the eager ranks were waiting, gleaming-eyed.

"You're worshipping, that's what you're doing. I've seen it before on other worlds, but never quite like this. You're worshipping some stinking nature-force that wrecks your minds while it saps your bodies."

He turned. Paul was watching him with a kind of distant pity, his attention already slipping back to that bourne of visions whence Comyn had forced it, and Comyn saw him with disgust, almost with loathing.

"You gave them Strang's body," he said. "And now you're waiting to be paid back."

Paul Rogers sighed. "There is no time at all now, unless you're very swift. Go on, Arch. Run."

THOSE last commonplace words were inexpressibly shocking. Comyn could remember a thousand times what had been said before, in other places, a measureless time ago. He caught Paul roughly by the arm, this unfamiliar Paul who was lost out of humanity, the Paul of alien flesh and alien worship who could not possibly have been the man he had known, and he said,

"You're coming—whether you want to or not."

Paul answered quietly, "It's already too late."

Strangely, he did not try to fight when Comyn drew him bodily off the jut of rock, away from Vickrey and Kessel. They came together onto the main ledge and took three steps down the long way to the entrance of the grotto, and then suddenly in that entrance there were men in radiation armor, men with loud voices, and heavy boots coming in along the path.

Peter Cochrane, and the others from the ship, all armed.

Comyn blundered on, dragging Paul Rogers along the crowded ledge. He only wanted to get out and away from there. He was not sure yet what he was trying to escape from, only that the people were waiting for something and that the thing they waited for was evil and unnatural, and that his whole flesh recoiled from meeting it. The close-ranked bodies stood before him like a wall, between him and the clean outside. He flung himself against that wall, and it broke, but it was like a wall of quicksand, flowing tight around him again, holding him fast. He began to sob inside his helmet, between the fruitless labor and the fear.

The voices of the men ahead rose up and echoed in the vault. And then there began to be other voices of the people who had no longer any need of speech to express the simplicity of their emotions. They surged forward a little on the ledges and cried out joyously, and the human sounds were drowned and washed away.

Comyn struggled to break through, but it was too late; it had been too late from the beginning, and he was caught now, caught as Paul had been. He let go Paul's unresisting arm and turned toward the chasm, bracing himself by sheer instinct to fight whatever came up out of it. And then, for a moment, he forgot even to be afraid.

For suddenly the place was filled with stars.

There had been light before, enough to blind a man, but not like this. There had been motion before, in the rushing fires, but not like this. The eager pressing of the people bore him on almost to the edge, but he was beyond caring, the breath and the wits together were gone out of him, and he could only stare and wonder like a child.

In a cloud they came, swirling upward through the white aurora, and they were whiter—they were pure and primal radiance, and their raying arms were like the misty nebulae. Soaring they came, borne up on the waves of fire, and they paled it. Laughing they came, and their laughter was the laughter of young things fresh from the hand of God, not knowing darkness.

Strange thoughts for Comyn to be thinking, who had left all such imaginings behind with the first sprouting of his beard. But for some reason he thought them now. The laughter was soundless, but it was there. It was in the way they moved, and shone, and gave forth light.

White stars bursting through a sky of flame, and one last pealing cry of welcome from the ledges. And Paul Rogers spoke, and said,

"These are the Transuranae."

The forces that were in the beginning, the life-seed, the fountain-head. Perhaps we are all their children, long removed.

Comyn struggled to regain himself, but his head was full of scraps of forgotten things and tatters of old emotions, and he did not know why it should be, except for the shining of the Transuranae, and the happy way they danced.

The cloud of stars rushed upward, spread and widened, and their misty arms reached out to touch and twine. They wheeled about each other, spun and parted and rejoined, not with any reason or design except that they lived and it was pleasure. And the brightness was such that Comyn bowed beneath it, drugged also with a strange new pleasure.

Peter Cochrane moved slowly in

toward the chasm, and with him came the other men in armor. Their eyes were on the Transuranae. Vaguely Comyn saw them, and he knew that they could not go away now, even though the path was clear. He knew that he could not have gone himself.

Paul's hand was on him, and his voice was in his ears. "You'll understand now. In a minute you will understand."

There was another surging forward of the people, a final motion that bore Comyn almost to the edge. And now, upon the farther ledge, beyond the chasm, he saw an armored shape revealed by the shifting of the crowd. It was pressed back against the rock wall, and Comyn knew who it must be.

Stanley, who had come there before all of them to find the place of the Transuranae. Stanley, who had found it, and whose rifle now trailed forgotten from his hands.

Paul's hand tightened briefly on Comyn's arm. Comyn looked at him. He was smiling, and in his face was something of the shining of the Transuranae. He said, "I'm sorry you had no chance to decide. But Arch— I'm glad you came."

That was the last he said. There was no more time for speech. Comyn looked up, dizzy with the wheeling of great stars.

And the stars fell, out of the burning vault.

DOWN they plunged in a rain of living fire, a galaxy dropping down the sky, rushing, leaping as meteors leap in curving light, crashing down in glory upon the place below—on Comyn, stunned beneath that flaming fall, on the people standing, naked, with their arms uplifted to receive delight.

And the Transuranae spread wide their own arms that were like the arms of nebulae and wrapped them round, and the people faded and were indistinct, lost each one in the heart of a star.

Comyn was among them, cloaked in apocalyptic fire.

He stood transfixed, for as long as his heart might beat three times, with something in him crying to break free, to welcome the magnificence that had so suddenly blotted out the world. And then the strong coarse part of Comyn that had been dazed a little while shook off its dreaming, and Comyn voiced a strangled cry of horror. He struck out at the thing that held him, wrenching away in a perfect madness of revulsion.

He did not want to be like Ballantyne. He did not want to be like Paul, with the soul and the mind sapped out of him. He did not want to be like Strang, cast still moving into the abyss to be an offering to stars.

He clawed and tore at the supernal brilliance that covered him. And it was brilliance and nothing more, and his hands passed through it as through smoke.

He tried again to run, and the close-packed bodies barred him in, locked in some awful union with the Transuranae, and there was no way.

He screamed to Paul for help, but Paul was gone behind a veil of light, and there was no help anywhere.

Trapped, frozen, beyond hope, Comyn waited. His armor was heavy, and it was strong, but these were transuranic forces that no one understood, and their radiations were unknown. Already, faint and filtered through the ray-proof fabric, he could sense a power . . . .

It grew. Comyn steeled himself, staring through the leaded helmet plate into a blinding nexus of beauty such as he had never dreamed, and the tremendous energies that poured out from that beauty began to touch and stir him.

It was a warming touch, like the first bright sun breaking through the chill of winter. He could feel it stealing through his body, into the fear-taut places of his mind, and where it went there was no more room for tension or for fear. The fire that held him in its misty arms flooded him with a white radiance, and gradually a very strange

truth was revealed to Comyn.

There was no evil in the Transuranae.

The tide of warmth, of life, surged through him—only the faint far edges of it, dammed back by the armor, but still enough. The white glory beat upon him through the helmet plate, and he began to understand. He knew why Paul could never go back. He knew why the eyes of the people had disturbed him, why Vickrey's eyes had been so strange. He knew why they no longer needed the ways of cities and of men.

The forces that were in the beginning, the life-seed, the fountainhead . . . .

His body lifted and strained toward the light. His flesh desired the fierce clean brilliance that was there, the power that changed, that entered into every cell and drove out hunger and sickness and all need, and put life in its place. He wanted the full force of that power to surge through him, as it surged through the bodies of the people. He wanted to be free, as Paul was free.

The forests are there, and the plains, a world open and unfettered, unstained by blood or tortured by many harvests. No more hunger, no more lust, no more hard necessity. Only the sun by day and the copper moons by night, and time without end, without sorrow, and only the faintest shadow of a forgotten thing called death.

Some hard resistant core of mind that could still remember through all the vision of a new existence gave back his own words to him, You're way beyond that, innocence was too long ago and too well lost. This isn't a man's life. It may be better, but it isn't for men. It's alien . . . don't touch it.

BUT Comyn understood now that what he had called degeneracy was something far different, that what he had called worship was the welcoming of friends, that what he had thought of as an offering was only a giving back of life to the scouring fires whence it came. The world of the Transuranae was beckoning to him, and he would not listen to that one dissenting voice.

The star-blaze that entered through his helmet plate was burning now within his brain, and all doubt was drowned in whiteness. He knew that he was not being tempted, but that he was being offered a gift unknown since Eden. He lifted his hands and laid them on the fastenings of his armor.

Someone caught his hands. Someone shouted, and he was dragged away, out of the misty arms that wrapped him, and the star-blaze dimmed. He struggled, crying out, and Peter Cochrane's face came close to his, distorted and wild behind the helmet glass. Peter Cochrane's voice screamed at him. Wheeling stars were lifting all about him, and on either side the people gave back, some still folded in the bright arms. Behind him others lay stunned on the ledge, and there were armored men with rifles.

He fought to tear his armor off. In their blindness they were afraid; Cochrane was afraid, as Ballantyne had been afraid. They feared, and wanted to force him back to humanity and death.

"Comyn! Don't you know what you're doing? Look there!"

He looked, across the chasm. Stanley was no longer pressed against the rock. He stood with the people, and he had taken off his armor.

"He's lost! Others, too, before we realized." Sweat ran down on Peter's face, and it was grey with some inner anguish. He was dragging at Comyn, trying to force him back, talking disjointedly about saving him. He had saved others, with the rifles.

Across the abyss, Stanley raised his arms to a soaring star. It rushed down, and Stanley was like the others, a white form half hidden in living fire.

"Lost—"

"Look at his face!" cried Comyn. "He's not lost, but you are, you are—let me go—"

"Crazy. I know, I can feel it myself—" Peter thrust him farther back, desperately, as one would thrust an-

other from the pit. "Don't fight me, Comyn. The others are beyond help, but . . . . " He struck hard with his hand on Comyn's helmet. "It isn't life they offer. It's negation, pointless, wandering . . . ."

Comyn looked up at the Transuranae. *There was a time before, in the far beginning—a time before labor and pain and fear . . . .*

They did not understand, because they had too much fear in them. But he could not stay for them. He flung himself away from the restraining hands. He went out toward the chasm, wrenching at the stubborn closures of his armor. And behind him a rifle rose and flashed.

The armor was proof against radiation, but no proof at all against the different violence of the shock-guns. The fires of the grotto faded, and Comyn went out into the darkness agonizing for the stars that he had touched and lost forever.

XV

COMYN awoke to pain, not only the sharp stinging of his whole body but also the persistent gnawing in his ears and brain of a sound that was not quite sound.

He knew what it was. He didn't want to know, he wanted to deny it and make it not, but he knew. The sound of the star-drive. The star-drive, the ship. . . .

He had to open his eyes. He didn't want to do that either, but he did, and the metal ceiling of his cabin was above him, and against it was French's face looking down.

"Well, Comyn?"

He was trying to be commonplace, casual, but he wasn't a good actor and there was something in his expression.

"Well, Comyn, I think you're clean. Roth and I have had to work. But luckily for you, you only got a touch of it, and I think we've sweated and purged the last of that poison out of you . . . ."

Comyn said, "Get the hell out of here."

"Now listen! You've had a shock, and it stands to reason—"

"Get out!"

French's face went away, and there was a murmuring of voices and a door closing. And then nothing but the insidious, inaudible screech of the drive.

Comyn lay still and tried not to think about it, not to remember. But he had to remember, he couldn't forget that rain of stars out of a sky of flame, that clean ecstasy, the shining around him and the joy. . . .

He was nuts. He was lucky to get away, he might have become like Ballantyne. He told himself that. But he couldn't help thinking of Paul, of the others, on that world that was falling farther back with every second, of Paul and the others, freed, living in a way nobody else could ever live, under a sky of copper moons.

He wanted to break down, to sob like a dame, and he couldn't. He wanted to sleep, but he couldn't do that either. After a time, Peter Cochrane came.

Peter was not one to gentle people. He came and stood, looking down with no kindness in his dark, Indian face, and said, "So you feel bad. You feel bad, because you're Arch Comyn, a very tough guy, and you fell apart like a kid when you really came up against it."

Comyn looked at him, and didn't say anything. He didn't have to, it seemed. There must have been something in his eyes. For Peter's face changed.

"Look, Comyn, I can make you feel better about that. French says that the ones of us who fell apart were the ones who didn't have *enough* fear. Not enough caution, enough inhibitions, to keep us scared of it."

Comyn asked, "Stanley?"

Peter said, "Yes. We left him there." And then his voice got raw-edged. "What else could we do? He'd had it, full force, and if we took him he'd be Ballantyne all over again. Better to let him stay, as he wanted. As it was, we barely got you away in time."

Comyn said, "And you come in here now to get thanked for saving me?" Peter's face grew angry, but Comyn went on, all his blind passion gathering. "You reached inside the gates and snatched a man out of a kind of life no man ever before dreamed of having, and you want him to thank you?"

He was sitting up now, and he rushed on before Peter could interrupt. "You know what? You *were* scared, too scared to quit being a mucky little person named Peter Cochrane—too scared to walk out of the grubby little life you knew. And because you were, you dream it up now that it was poison, it was evil, it mustn't be touched, no one must touch it!"

Peter did not answer. He stood looking down at Comyn, and then his face grew haunted, haggard, and his shoulders sagged a little.

"I think," he whispered after a moment, "I think you may be right. But Comyn . . . ."

He had been fighting his own battle, Comyn saw that now. His dark face was gaunt from strain and something more than strain.

" . . . but Comyn, *should* a man be more—or less—than a man? Even if the Transuranae were the shining good they seemed, even if they could make men like angels, it seems wrong—wrong for men to step so suddenly out of what the cosmos has made them. Maybe, ages from now, we could be like that. But now, it seems wrong."

"In Adam's fall, we sinned all," quoted Comyn harshly. "Sure. Stick to it. It's the only life we know, so it's the best one. The people of Barnard II won't build any star-ships, or any castles on the moon. So that makes us better. Or does it?"

PETER nodded heavily. "It's a question. But when I had to answer it, there was only one way I could decide. I think in time you'll agree." He paused, and added, "Ballantyne did. Either his armor failed, or he took it off, because he'd had the first full dose, but he couldn't stay inside the gates of paradise. Maybe it wasn't so good when he took another look at it."

"Maybe," said Comyn, without conviction. He remembered Stanley's face at the last minute. A wretched little man with a lot of hounding passions he couldn't satisfy, inadequate and eaten up with envy, and yet there at the end he had found something better than a share in Cochrane Transuranic, or anything else he had wanted. He had stopped being Stanley, at all.

And he was there, and Comyn was here, and Comyn hated Stanley in a curious new way.

Peter turned. "French says you're all right to move around. Don't stay in here and sulk. It only makes it worse."

Comyn cursed him with all his heart, and Peter smiled faintly. "I don't think you'd have made a really satisfactory angel," he said, and left.

Comyn sat on the bunk and put his face between his hands, and in the darkness behind his eyes he saw again the swift white fires leaping—and the fierce and splendid burning of the stars. Something shook him like a great hand and left him empty.

He didn't want to move around. He didn't want to go back to doing the things he'd done before, and he didn't want to see anybody. But he did want a drink, he wanted a drink very badly, and there wasn't any where he was, so he got up and went outside.

Whatever French and Roth had done to him had left him weak as a baby. Everything seemed dim around him, touched with unreality. In the main cabin, he found a bunch of the others sitting around, looking like men who had been sick. They looked at him, and then looked away again, as though he reminded them of something they didn't want to remember.

There was a bottle on the table. It had already been punished hard. Comyn put down most of what was left in it. It didn't make him feel any better, but it

numbed him so he didn't care much how he felt. He glanced around, but nobody looked at him or said anything to him.

Comyn said, "Knock it off, will you. I won't explode."

There were a couple of feeble grins and a pretence of greeting, and then they went back to their thinking again. Comyn began to realize that they weren't thinking about him as much as they were about themselves.

One of them spoke up. "I want to know. I want to know what we saw. Those things—"

French sighed. "We all want to know. And we never will, not completely But . . . " He paused, then said, "They weren't things. They were life, a form of life inconceivable except among the alien elements of a transuranic world. Life, I think, seated in linkages of energy between atoms infinitely more complex than uranium. Life, self-sufficient, perhaps coeval with our universe, and able to impregnate our cruder, simpler tissues with its own transuranic chemistry . . . ."

Comyn thought again of what Vickrey had said. *"The fountainhead, the beginning—"*

Someone said grimly, "I know one thing, no one's getting me back there, for anything."

Peter Cochrane said, "Relax. Nobody's going back to Barnard II."

But, when Comyn was again alone with Peter, he said, "You're wrong. In the end, I'll go back."

Peter shook his head. "You think you will. You're still under its touch. But that'll fade."

"No."

But it did. It faded, as the timeless hours went by. It faded as he ate and slept and went through all the motions of being human.

Not the memory of it, that didn't dim. But the fierce, aching pull of a life beyond life couldn't hold a man every minute, not when he was shaving, not when he was taking off his shoes, not when he was drunk.

There came an end at last to the timelessness and the waiting. They suffered again through the eerie wrenchings and vertiginous shifts and came out of drive into normal space. And presently Luna shone like a silver shield beyond the forward ports, and the second Big Jump was finished.

AFTER the long confinement of the ship the eruption of new voices and unfamiliar faces was confusing. The gardens hadn't changed in the million years Comyn had been away, nor the bulk of the great house in the blaze of the lunar day. Comyn walked through it all like a stranger, and yet everything was the same except himself.

He was not the only one who felt that way. It was a joyless business. They had brought back with them from a foreign sun the same chill shadow that had covered Ballantyne, and Claudia was wailing loud over the death of Stanley. They had told her he was dead, and in a sense it was quite true. They had not conquered any stars. A star had conquered them.

Comyn searched among the faces for one he did not see, and somebody told him, "She wouldn't stay here after the ship took off. She said the place was haunted, and that she couldn't stand it. She went back to New York."

Comyn said, "I know exactly what she meant."

The halls of the great house were cool and dim, and Comyn would have waited in them alone, but Peter said, "I may need you, Comyn. You were closer to it than any of us, and Jonas won't be easy to convince."

Reluctantly, Comyn stood once more in the crowded, old-fashioned room that looked out over the Mare Imbrium, and Jonas was as he had been before, an ancient dusty man huddled in a chair —more frail, more wrinkled, slipping farther over that ultimate dark edge, but still raking with his claw-like hands at life, still burning with ambition.

"You got it, eh?" he said to Peter.

leaning his cage of bones forward in the chair. "Cochrane Transuranic! Has a good sound, doesn't it? How much, Peter? Tell me how much!"

Peter said slowly, "We didn't get it, grandfather. The world is—poisoned. Ballyntyne's crew and three of our own men—" He paused, and then muttered the fictional word. "There won't be any Cochrane Transuranic, now or ever."

For a long moment Jonas was utterly still, and the color surged up into his face until it threatened to burst the parchment skin. Comyn felt a distant pang of pity for him. He was such an old man, and he had wanted so much to steal a star before he died.

"You let it go," said Jonas, and he cursed Peter with all the breath he had. Coward was the kindest word. "All right, I'll find a man who's not afraid. I'll send out another ship . . . ."

"No," said Peter. "I'm going down to talk to the Government men. There'll be other voyages to other stars, but Barnard's must be let alone. The radioactive contamination there is of a kind nobody can fight."

Jonas' withered lips still moved, but no sound came out of them, and his body jerked in a perfect paroxysm of rage. Peter said wearily, "I'm sorry, but it's so."

"Sorry," whispered Jonas. "If I were young again, if I could only stand, I'd find a way . . . ."

"You wouldn't," said Comyn sharply. Suddenly a passion came over him, remembering many things, and he bent over Jonas fiercely, saying, "There are some things even the Cochranes aren't big enough to handle. You wouldn't understand if I explained to you, but that world is safe for all time, from everybody. And Peter's right."

He turned and left the room, and Peter came after him. He made a gesture of distaste, and said, "Let's go."

When they landed in New York, when they finally got clear of the mob-scene that went on for a time around the spaceport, Comyn told Peter,

"You go on to your Government men. I got better things to do."

"But if they want you to—"

"I'll be in the Rocket Room's bar."

LATER, sitting in the bar, Comyn kept his back to the video, but he couldn't shut out the breathless voice that tumbled out the news to all the silent, excited listeners.

"—and this magnificent second voyage, while it explored only a radioactive-poisoned world that cannot be exploited or visited again, is still another great trail blazed to the stars. Other ships will soon be going out there, other men—"

Comyn thought, "Sure. They'll go, all full of neat little schemes. And they'll find out that it isn't the same as their little planets. They'll find they're out in the big league and that they don't play human games out there. . . ."

He didn't turn, not right away, when a throaty voice at his shoulder interrupted.

"Buy me a drink, Comyn?"

When he did turn it was Sydna, just as she had been, in a white dress with her brown shoulders and improbable hair the color of flax, and her cool, lazy smile.

"I'll buy you a drink," he said. "Sure. Sit down."

She did, and lit a cigarette, and then looked at him through the drifting smoke.

"You don't look quite so good, Comyn."

"Don't I?"

"Peter said that you found something pretty bad out there."

"Yeah. So bad that we didn't dare to stay, so bad we had to run right back to Earth."

"But you found Paul Rogers?"

"I found him."

"But you didn't bring him back?"

"No."

She picked up her drink. "All right. Tactful Sydna, who knows when to keep her mouth shut. Here's to you."

After a moment she said, "I found out something too, Comyn. You're a rather ugly roughneck—"

"I thought you knew that."

"I did. But what I found out was, that in spite of it, I missed you."

"So?"

"Oh, hell, I can't keep being coy," she said. "I'm leading up to the idea of getting married. I've thought about it. It'd be so much more convenient."

"Have you got enough money that I wouldn't have to work?" he asked.

"Plenty, Comyn."

"Well, that's something," he said. "Though I'd probably get tired of spending it, and go back to work anyway. There's only one thing—"

"Yes?"

"You ought to know something, Sydna. I'm not the same guy you got acquainted with. I got rearranged a little inside."

"It doesn't show much."

"It will. You didn't like it up in your lunar castle because it was haunted. How will you like living with a haunted man?"

"I'll unhaunt you, Comyn."

"Can you?"

"It'll be fun trying. Let's have another."

He turned and signalled the waiter, and turned back to her, and the strange pain took him by the throat again—the pain of loss, of exile, of a fading longing. . . .

I'm slipping back, back all the way to Arch Comyn, and I don't want to! I'm forgetting what it was like, what it could have been like, and all my life I'll think of it and want to go back, and be afraid to. . . .

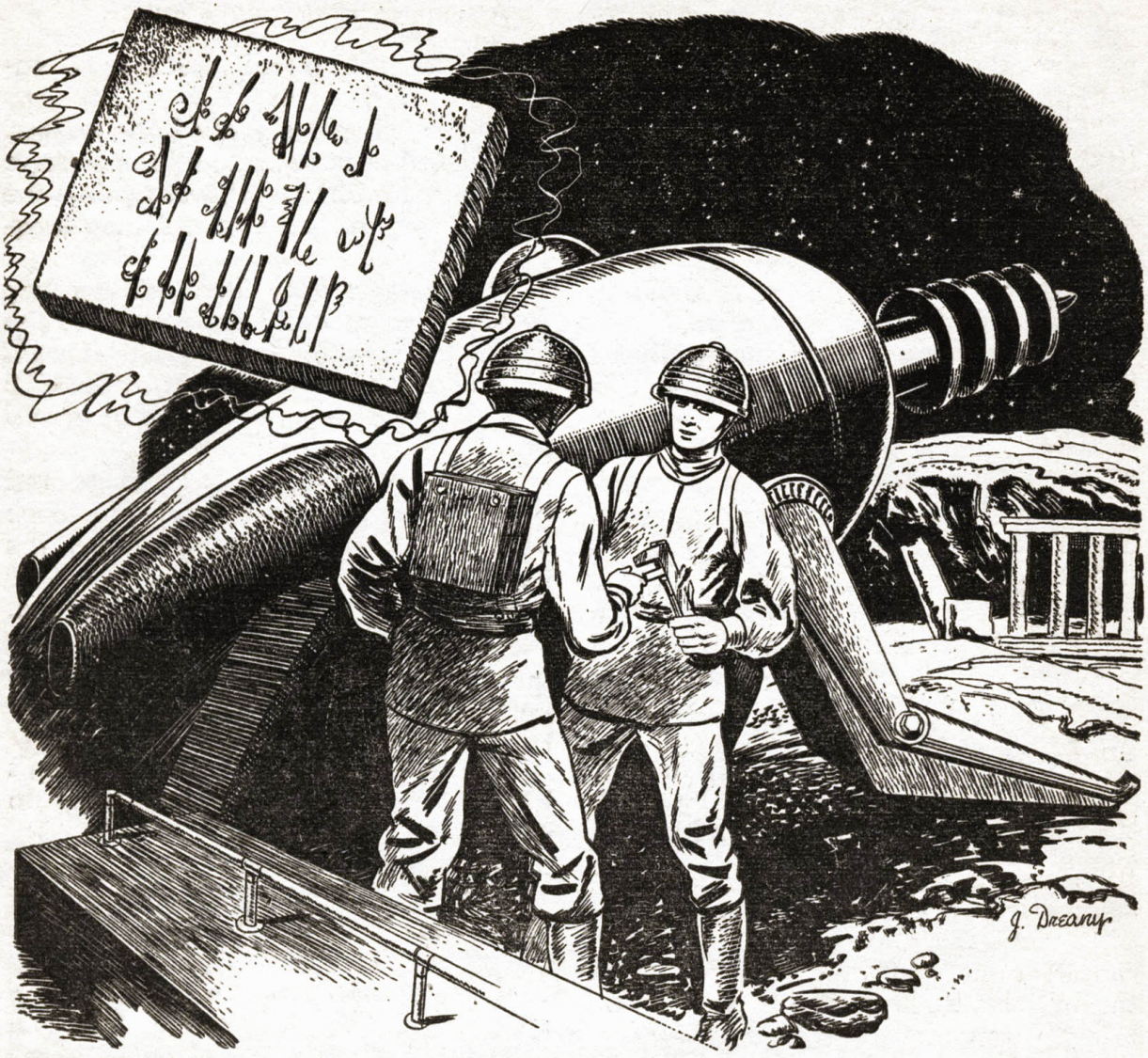
Let it go, he thought, let it go and slip back, it may be second-rate to be just human but it's comfortable, it's comfortable. . . .

He looked across the table at Sydna. "Shall we drink on it?"

She nodded, and reached out her free hand, and when he took it, it quivered blindly inside his grasp.

"All of a sudden," she said "I don't want another drink. I just want to cry."

And she did.



Browning was excited. "He's seen the Plate?"

Three Lines of Old Martian

By HENRY HASSE

BRADLEY was waiting at Marsport when the luxury liner berthed. He rather resented Fitzloren's coming, but at the same time he saw the Bureau's point of view. The Mars Plate, with its grotesquerie of symbols, etched deep by time and the elements, was the first real discovery in three years. It needed solving! He and his staff had failed—so the Bureau was simply sending a better man!

And even Bradley couldn't deny that Fitzloren was best. The man held the

The Spinster Schoolmarm Loved a Puzzle . . . Even on Mars!

Chair of Languages and Alien Culture at Earth's largest university. No one could come within a light-year of his talents in the field of dead languages, which included in large part the deciphering of alien code symbols. Twenty years ago he had solved the Atlantean Fragments, putting that age-old controversy to a conclusive end. He had added to his laurels with the solution of the Kralwaan Scultpures found on Earth's moon. More recently, the Pnakotic Manuscripts of Venus' abandoned South City had been child's play for him where all others had failed.

So, it was only logical that Fitzloren should be sent to supervise at Mars Finding. "Supervise" was the way the trans-telector tape read—and that's what worried Bradley now. It could mean "take over." He'd have to wait and see.

Spotting Fitzloren in the debarking throng, he pressed forward to introduce himself. He saw a short, balding man of middle age, inclined to paunchiness, and—he might have been mistaken, but Bradley thought he detected a trace of smugness.

"I was on Venus when the Bureau contacted me," Fitzloren said, beaming through his spectacles. "Trying to establish a lingual basis with those K'Yarthan Swamplanders. Most difficult! Most. All sibilants, you know. But when I learned I was needed *here,* naturally I came at once."

"Naturally," said Bradley drily.

"Most intriguing, that Mars Plate you uncovered — when was that — four months ago?" The man's lips quirked knowingly. "Bit of a difficulty there, eh?"

"Some," Bradley admitted. Damn it all! Archaeological engineering was his field, it didn't extend to alien symbols. He resented being placed in a position of having to defend himself. He added, an edge to his voice: "Understand, it's a little out of our province. We're uncovering the ruin; the rest is up to you language boys."

"Of course, of course! I anticipate no trouble."

More smugness. Bradley decided he wasn't going to like this man. He glanced at the square leather case which Fitzloren hugged to his side. "What's that you brought with you?"

"Equipment. *Special* equipment—tools of the trade, you know." Fitzloren smiled mysteriously and then glanced around. "Can't we get away from here? I hate these crowds!"

"I have a gyro-cab waiting." Bradley moved through the throng with Fitzloren in tow, but there came an interruption. A middle-aged, spinsterish lady thrust her way forward, calling Fitzloren's name. Bradley noted with some amusement that she was dragging a long-haired poodle on a leash.

"Professor! Oh, Professor Fitzloren, there you are. I was so afraid I might miss you, and I *did* want to tell you how much I enjoyed the trip—especially your stories about your adventures on Venus. So thrilling! I trust I'll see you again?"

Fitzloren flushed crimson, but managed to bow stiffly. "Possibly, madam. But I am going to be very busy, you know."

"Oh, of course, I *do* understand. The Mars Plate. And I want to wish you every success on the project." She extended a hand. Fitzloren took it limply, then let it fall.

HE AVOIDED Bradley's amused glance as they hurried toward the gyro-cab. "Tourist!" he muttered. "I had scarcely a free moment the entire trip. Somehow she learned who I was, and she would talk of nothing else but that Mars Plate!"

Bradley's worry was unfounded. "I shan't interfere with your work," Fitzloren informed him magnanimously when they arrived at the camp. "You just show me the Plate, and go right ahead with your—ah—digging." The tone of condescension was unmistakable.

Bradley took him into a large room

next to his office. "I set this aside for you. You can even sleep here if you wish," indicating the light metal cot. "Mess hall's at the rear of the building."

"Satisfactory. Yes, quite."

"You'll find everything here you need. Reference books. Equipment. Also, all of our previous notes on the deciphering, though I'll admit we've made little headway."

"Reference books?" Fitzloren smiled, a little pompously, Bradley thought, and strode over to the meager shelf of books. He pulled one down. "I see you have mine—*Symbols and Interpretation: An Approach to Alien Culture.* Didn't help?"

Bradley sighed. "Professor, *nothing* helped. Browning—that's my assistant—really worked on it harder than I. For weeks, in fact. He's had some experience in this line. Once he thought he'd found a clue, but it didn't pan out."

"Clue. Yes, that's the important thing. Find an initial clue, and the rest unravels." Fitzloren turned away. "Show me the Plate."

It reposed under protective glass in the center of the table. Roughly square, some twenty inches by twelve, the Plate was of dull greenish metal overlaid by an even darker green—the patina of the ages. But there was no erosion of the symbols. They were etched and distinctly defined, roughly angular in the vertical direction, but twisting and spewing with tiny curls of an alien language long dead.

It was apparent that Fitzloren savored the moment. Almost casually, he removed and polished his spectacles. Then he bent and peered close, drinking in the symbols.

"Fascinating," Bradley heard him mutter. "Most fascinating. Three lines, only three lines. . . ."

"Right. Three lines. I'm sorry to say this, Professor, but that's why I can't attach any particular importance to it! If the Martians left this as some kind of record, or message, what could they say in three lines?"

Fitzloren straightened slowly. "My dear Bradley! It's apparent that you didn't go very deeply into my book. Don't you realize that each symbol here, indeed each *particle* of each symbol, might speak volumes? The clue, the clue! I've got to find the clue!"

"You think the Plate's important, then." Bradley was still skeptical.

"I'm sure of it! I'm sure it's a message!" He paced the floor with quick little strides, as excitement mounted. "You found nothing more? No other plates? No—"

"This is all. We're uncovering the city slowly, it takes time, you know. But we're sure it's a city! Oh, we've found a few things that might have been tools, some bits of utensils, the usual artifacts. But nothing more in the language."

"But you found this *first*," the Professor's voice mounted. "Doesn't that indicate to you that it must have been placed prominently by those ancients—that it was *intended* to be found?"

It indicated nothing of the kind to Bradley. He was an archaeological engineer; he knew his job and he did it. Just as Fitzloren knew his. Who was he to argue with the foremost authority in the field of alien language?

"I'll leave you to it, then." Bradley paused at the door. "If you need me for anything, I'll be over at the diggings; we have a trans-com setup."

But he doubted if Fitzloren heard him. Already the little man had set to work, hunched over the table with calipers and magni-glass and reams of paper before him.

TWO of the cat-treads on the huge diggers had gone haywire. Donning his duralloy helmet against the sun, Bradley dragged out his tools and bent to the task, soon was plastered with a grime of sweat and red dust. This was his real love—this and the drama of the city that was slowly being exposed in the great mile-wide hollow of sand. He felt about it, he supposed, much as

Fitzloren felt about his languages.

Late in the afternoon Browning came over to him, finished with his crew for the day. Grinning, Bradley hit him with the news. "Fitzloren's here."

Browning was excited. "He's seen the Plate? What does he think?"

"Same as you. He's enthralled. Thinks he's got something there."

"And I think so too!"

Bradley shrugged, then was serious as he waved an arm at the half-buried masonry. "*This* is what the Martians left us. Nothing more. No dire warnings, no high-flown messages—I just can't subscribe to that romantic nonsense! *Anything* we learn about this vanished race will be through what we can piece together from their architecture, their tools, the few artifacts. . . ."

Browning was insistent. "Brad . . . I'll bet you a month's salary that Fitzloren solves the Plate. And it'll be significant!"

Bradley grinned again. "A month's salary? You're on!"

Fitzloren didn't show up for mess call, and Browning was disappointed. "Don't worry, don't worry," Bradley said. "You'll meet him soon enough. Just leave him alone." He added under his breath, "And the more he leaves *us* alone the better I'll like it."

Later, heading for his office, Bradley paused to look in on Fitzloren. The Professor was still bowed over his work, scribbling notes furiously. For nearly seven hours he'd been at it! Brad shrugged. He had his own problems.

He worked late in his office, figuring out a new system of stress-supports—duroplastic—for the crumbling walls. When he left, about midnight, he saw that Fitzloren was still at it. But now the Professor was pacing the room restlessly. He looked worried, Brad thought. An immense pile of crumpled notes littered the floor.

NEXT morning, at the diggings, Browning said: "Well, I've met Fitzloren."

"What? You didn't go barging in on him!"

"No. At three o'clock this morning he came inquiring after me. *Three o'clock,* mind you. Wanted to see those notes I'd made." Browning grinned ruefully. "Well, I was flattered. Sleepy—but flattered. I showed him my notes. Remember that clue I *almost* thought I had? I pointed it out, thinking he *might* make something of it—"

"And?"

"I'm beginning to see what you mean, Brad. I don't think I like this man. 'Wrong approach! Wrong approach!' he yelled at me. 'Imbecile! If you'd read my book! If you'd had the *slightest* grasp of symbolics'—and so on. He tore up the notes and flung them in my face. He shoved me out the door."

Bradley chuckled. "He's hit a blank wall. He's grasping for straws."

"He's beginning to realize this is a tough one to crack," Browning said. "I grant you, he's a pompous ass—but he'll get there. Our bet's still on!"

Bradley changed the subject, glancing around at the expanse of ruins. "Today we clean up. We've got to make things nice and pretty. Remember, tomorrow's T-Day."

"Oh, Lord," Browning groaned. "Tourist day! I'd forgotten about it." He spread his hands. "Look, Brad, not me again!"

"No. I've already assigned Tanner and Smitty to guide duty." One day a month had been set aside for the tourists—some of them pretty important people—who came to trample the sands and gape at the ruins, agog with speculation and romantic fancy. The men hated it, the flow of silly questions that demanded answer, but the Earth-Bureau had decreed that this day be set aside.

Fitzloren attended mess call that evening. He'd managed to snatch a few hours sleep, he said, in answer to Bradley's question. No, he hadn't found the necessary *clue* . . . but yes, he was certain it would be forthcoming, given a

little more time. The hieroglyphics were in a vague way reminscent of the Pnakotic Manuscripts of Venus' abandoned South City—basically only, of course, not lingually.

Bradley didn't dare question him further. It was obvious the man was struggling with his pride—after all, he had a reputation to maintain. The haggard look and the rim of circles beneath his eyes betokened the strain of the long hours he had labored.

And then, after the meal, Fitzloren hurried back to the room for further bouts with his problem, Bradley was almost forced into admiration for the man.

Almost. For later, in the barracks, Browning said: "I just came from there. I offered to help him, to do anything I could. And you know what he said?"

"I can imagine," Bradley grunted.

"No you can't. He said nothing. He looked at me and *sneered.*"

THE next day dawned clear and bright, and by mid-morning the tourists had begun to arrive. Bradley remained in his office, going over his stress-variable plans for the walls. But he was not to escape so easily. Soon Browning came in, a peculiar look on his face.

"Hey, Brad! A—er—lady has arrived, and she demands to see you."

Bradley looked up, annoyed. "What's the matter? Why doesn't she join the rest of the tourists?"

"Not interested, she says. It's something about the Mars Plate. Better see her—she has a priority pass, and it looks pretty official!"

Brad cursed volubly, but rose to his feet. "All right, show her in. And get that stupid grin off your face!"

A moment later he was staring open-mouthed at the lady across the desk. It was the same spinsterish individual who had spoken to Fitzloren at the spaceport. She was minus the leashed poodle now, but carried instead the usual tourist camera.

"What is it—" Brad blurted abruptly. Then he paused, remembering the priority pass, and got his tone under control. "I mean, if you have some question about the Mars Plate—I'm afraid I can't help you. It's almost top secret, you know." He exaggerated a little for her benefit.

"Top secret, nonsense!" She wasn't stern. Her long angular face wreathed in a grin. It was a knowing grin. "Here's my pass, young man—excuse me—Mr. Bradley—if you'd care to see it." She held out a thin hand, and Brad took the half-sheeted document.

It was authentic. It was signed by one of the lesser members of the Bureau, but it carried weight. The lady's name was Miss Mathilda Mattison. She was a schoolteacher (primary grades, Bradley noticed), she was on Mars on vacation, and it would be ever so much appreciated if Mr. Bradley *et al.* would extend her every courtesy and convenience.

Bradley looked up to meet her crisp, blue eyes, wreathed in tiny smile-wrinkles on the angular face beneath graying hair. They were wise eyes, and seemed to hold a secret. Despite himself Brad found himself smiling back at her.

"But the Mars Plate, Miss—Miss Mattison. Of what particular interest—"

"I'd merely like to see it, Mr. Bradley. I have a hunch. I'm a great one for hunches. And maybe, if things pan out, I can tell you more later."

Brad smiled even wider at her earthy language. "What does that mean—if things pan out?"

MISS MATTISON'S spare frame leaned forward, she placed gnarled fists on his desk. "I'm also a great one for puzzles. I dearly love puzzles! I think I might solve this one; at least I'd like a crack at it! If nothing else, it would be great fun."

Brad hesitated. "Well . . . I suppose there's no harm in you taking a look. You've already met Professor Fitzloren, of course."

She grimaced. "Please, must you remind me? I don't think I like that man. Too pompous, Smug."

That did it. She was a clever woman, Bradley thought. She had known that would reach him. And suddenly the humor of the situation struck him—the thought of her working on the Mars Plate in opposition to Fitzloren. . . .

"Come on," he chortled. "You can take a look at the Plate—right now!"

Fitzloren looked up as they entered, startled annoyance clear in his eyes. Bradley took him aside and explained the situation, managed to soothe him at last. "She won't be long, I promise you! As soon as she sees the futility of it—"

Mathilda's gaunt frame was bent with livening curiosity over the Mars Plate. She straightened, eyes sparkling.

"Doesn't look like much," she pronounced crisply. "Intriguing, though." She waved a finger. "The clue, Professor! Find the clue, and any puzzle will unfold. Believe me, I know. I'm a great one for puzzles."

Fitzloren sputtered. "My dear lady, this is a highly technological fragment of alien culture, not a 'puzzle' as you so quaintly put it! As for clues, what do you suppose I've been *trying* to find for the past three days!"

"Three days? My! As difficult as that?" She indicated the array of implements scattered about the table. "What are these weird looking things?"

"Electro-calipers." Fitzloren beamed with pride, seemed willing to talk. "Invention of my own, I might add. I've found that a certain similarity of degree, in proportion and structure and general arrangement of most alien symbols, produces an overall pattern which lends itself—"

"Pattern, rocket-wash!" Then she caught herself. "Oh, dear, I am sorry. I suppose you're doing your best. Myself, I prefer the direct approach—" And before Bradley could stop her, she'd levelled her camera close to the Mars Plate and snapped a picture.

Brad stepped forward. "See here, now, I'm not sure *that's* permissible—"

"Let her have it!" Fitzloren snapped. "Anything at all—just get her out of here!" And as they moved to the door, he was muttering something under his breath which sounded to Brad like "Meddling amateurs!"

OUTSIDE, in the corridor, Mathilda looked at Bradley through pixyish eyes. "I am sorry," she clucked sympathetically. "I'm afraid I've really disturbed the poor man." Then: "What do they call you around here? Brad, I suppose?"

"That's right," he blinked. Things were happening just a little too fast for him.

"Well, Brad, is there a place in Marsport where I can get this picture developed? I think it's all I'll need to work on."

He looked at this lady with awe. She seemed to have taken the reins, so he might as well go all the way. "Come on to the lab," he sighed. "I'll develop it for you myself."

Ten minutes later she had her print of the Mars Plate, in actual size, symbols clearly defined. "I've one more favor to ask," she said. "Will you take me over to the ruins? Tell you why when we get there."

By the time they reached the diggings, he was calling her Mathilda, and had learned a great deal more about her penchant for puzzles. They stood on the rim of the slope and peered down at the swarming tourists.

"Want to go down?"

"Heavens, no!" She continued to peer across the sunlight, watching the tourists. "Look at them," she murmured. "The trampling horde. The sensation seekers. Sacrilegious! It's positively sacrilegious!"

Brad liked her for that. It expressed his own feelings exactly.

She was silent for a moment, watching, and Bradley could almost hear her thoughts clicking away. Presently she

said, "Brad . . . show me where you found the Plate."

He pointed out the place. "See that low building? The first one, with the spiralling columns? Just about there."

Again she was thoughtful, surveying the terrain, her thin weathered face wrinkled in puzzlement. But when she turned away, a crisp sparkle had come to her eyes again. "Brad, do you think the Martians are watching?"

"Nonsense! That makes good fiction, but I just can't—"

"I don't think so either. Nevertheless" —with a final look at the tourists—"I still think it's sacrilegious."

Bradley was puzzled, as they walked away. She seemed immersed in speculation, and once she looked at him and chuckled. Finally it dawned on him. "Mathilda! Do you think you have a clue?"

"I'm almost sure of it. It's going to take some working out—a certain linkage of symbols—but I'm sure I can manage it now. It *is* a message, of sorts, but not the kind Fitzloren thinks."

"In heaven's name, let me in on it! I promise I won't—"

"No, no!" She tapped the photograph beneath her arm. "Give me a day or two to work this out. I could be wrong."

"But Fitzloren's *sure* that Plate has volumes to say! How could you, without even—"

"Patience, my lad, patience." And suddenly she was wistful, a schoolteacher with infinite understanding for the tyro. "That poor man. He *has* tried so hard, with his electro-calipers and his reams of precedence. But you know something? He just can't see the forest for the trees."

BRADLEY accomplished little in the next two days. Mathilda had left him dangling, and now the aspects of the thing were beginning to haunt him. Her reference to Fitzloren, *he can't see the forest for the trees,* must mean that she had a fairly positive approach to the solution which was simplicity in itself. She had retired, with her photograph, to her hotel in a Marsport to work the thing out.

Brad took to haunting the room where Fitzloren worked. The man was nearly at his wits' end as all approaches failed. He'd given up on the electro-caliper angle; and the supposed similarity to the Pnakotic Manuscripts, on which he'd pinned high hopes, just hadn't panned out. He was now making copious use of the reference volumes.

Brad asked him, once: "Could it be that you just can't see the forest—I mean—mightn't the Plate have an utterly simple meaning, after all, if you could just approach it from that angle?"

"Nonsense, nonsense! Can't you see the complexities of this thing?"

"Okay, okay! Excuse me."

And on the afternoon of the second day, Mathilda was back again. A thin sheaf of notes was clipped to the photograph; it was evident that she had worked hard and long. She looked haggard, Brad thought, though it was hard to tell; the preternatural brightness of her eyes belied it.

"It's done," she said.

"Wait!" Brad stopped her. "Tell me one thing first. It's not a message the Martians left explicitly for us? Anything of the sort?"

"If you stretch a point—to the lengths of irony—yes. But actually, no." She sighed wearily. "Come on, let's find the Professor. I hate to do this to him, but I suppose it's best to put him out of his misery."

In the room, huddled over the Plate itself, they went through her notes. Fitzloren was skeptical at first—contemptuous—but slowly Brad saw the dawn of belief in his eyes as this schoolteacher (primary grades) unfolded the evidence.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she was saying. "There's absolutely no evidence of 'message' to those who might come eons later. You overlooked one point, and that the most obvious. Hadn't it occurred to you that the Plate *in itself*

might have been functional to the Martians and to them alone? It *was* functional. In a small, almost a negligible degree, I grant you—but it leaves me to believe that they couldn't have been a great deal different from us. Look . . . here's my translation. I can show you the linkage of symbols, the similarity of context which reduces it to language."

She paused, breathless, then went on. "*Not* volumes, but three simple lines." She pointed out the clues. "Here, you see? And here, and here. And once you make *this* connection, the language unfolds."

Brad stood by, bewildered. But he saw that Fitzloren was getting it, slowly making the linkage. The forest—the forest he hadn't been able to see!

"And here," Mathilda thrust forward her photograph, "is my complete translation."

Fitzloren took one look, then thrust it away. "I see it, I see it," he mumbled. "You're right, of course you're right. I should have known. It was too close to me." He seemed to collapse in upon himself in sheer humility. There was nothing more he could say. He was a man utterly defeated.

Brad snatched at the photograph, and stared. The cosmic irony hit him. He was suddenly remembering Mathilda as she stood at the rim of the diggings, saying, "Look at them. It's sacrilegious! The trampling horde."

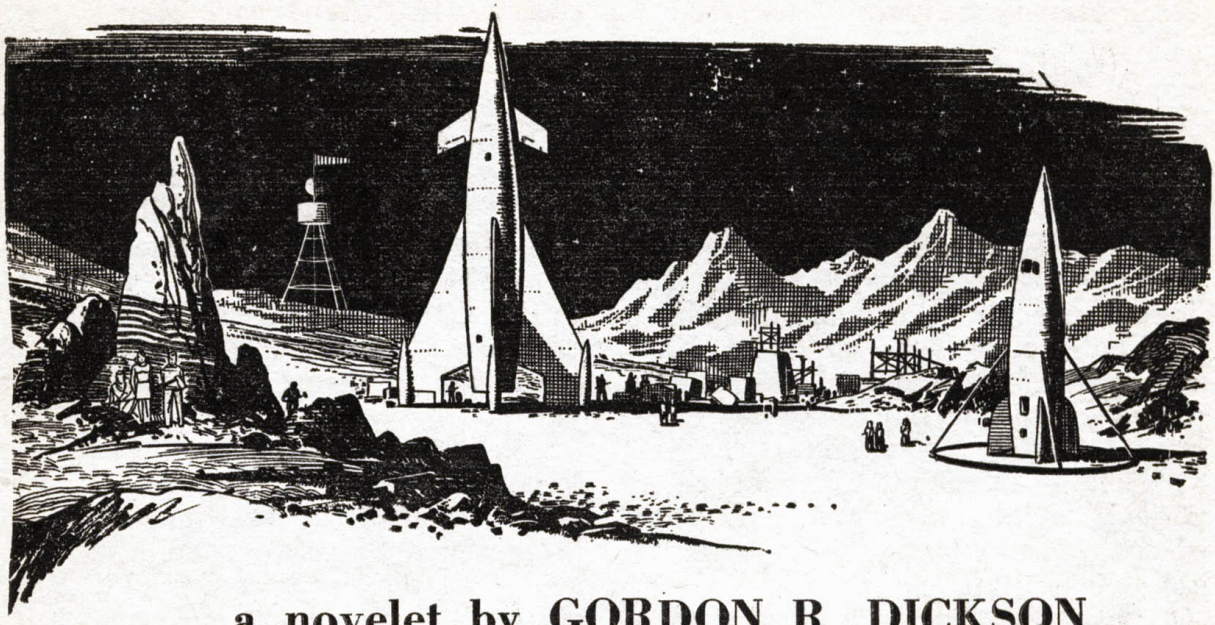
Under each Martian character, Mathilda had clearly defined its equivalent in English. The three lines of the Mars Plate read:

PLEASE
KEEP OFF
THE GRASS

"Don't point that thing at me, pretty-boy," said Branch

THE BLEAK and

For the exiles, the settlement was a small part of the Earth they had once known—and would not know again. . . .



a novelet by GORDON R. DICKSON

BARREN LAND

I

KENT HARMON stepped out into the pitchy blackness of the night and the soft, warm, sulphur-smelling rain of the lowlands on Modor. The darkness wrapped him like some gently odorous cloak as he squelched over the yielding ground to the light of the communications shack and stepped inside.

Tom Schneider, the operator, looked up as Kent banged the door behind him. The by-pass channel direct to Earth was occupying his attention at the moment, but he grinned sympathetically at Kent, and fishing around in the message basket before him with his one free hand, dug out a flimsy from Central Headquarters and handed it up.

"This what you called me about?" asked Kent, taking it. Tom turned his homely pale and boyish face briefly from the controls that were occupying his attention and nodded briefly. A monitor hum squealed suddenly up to the limits of human audibiilty, and disappeared. Tom relaxed.

"On channel," he said, into the transmitter plate, "receiving. Go ahead, Earth."

The message tape began to click out and Kent looked down at the flimsy. It was an official communication to him from the Central Headquarters Colonial Office. Kent fingered the little black mustache that had once been his pride and joy—back in government circles on Earth where there was someone to see it—and let his mind spell out the single line of code:

CH to Col Rep Modor—Xmas Alert 500
40T 23:76W & 49:40N

The message tape stopped clicking. Tom switched off and stretched in his

chair, turning to Kent.

"Something new?" he asked, casually. Then, something odd and rigid in the sharp, almost too-handsome features of the Colonial Representative pricked up his interest. "Bad news?"

"They're letting a colony come in," answered Kent without thinking—and instantly regretted having said it. Tom jerked suddenly upright in his chair.

"You're crazy!" he burst out. Kent, on guard again, smoothed out his face. He shrugged and put the flimsy in his pocket, turning toward the door.

"Hold on, dammit!" Tom reached out a long, skinny arm and caught the sleeve of Kent's jacket, halting him. "A colony? Where?"

"About five hundred kilos west of here," said Kent, distastefully. There was nothing secret about the information, but he would have appreciated being able to think the matter over before releasing it. Now he was committed.

"But that's in the barren land," said Tom incredulously. "What'll the Modorians say? And how come they're letting colonists in anyway?"

"We're open for settlement," answered Kent, sharply, realizing with disgust as he said it that he sounded pompous and official. He jerked his sleeve out of the other's hand, forestalling Tom's flow of questions.

"I can't talk about it now, Tom," he said irritably. "And for God's sake keep as quiet about it yourself as you can. You know what a touchy subject colonists are with the prospectors and the adopted men." He strode to the door.

"But this is *it!*" cried Tom behind him, his high voice squeaking still higher in alarm and excitement. "The Modorians—"

Kent slammed the door of the message shack behind him, cutting off the flow of words.

IT WAS a moment in which he wanted to be alone to think. Here, at the trading post, there would be no opportunity, now that Tom knew the news. The operator was probably broadcasting it now, and inside of an hour, there would be angry prospectors and adopted men—men who had formed working friendships with some Modorian or other—knocking on his door. Kent turned away from the small huddle of buildings and made for the landing field where his flyer stood.

The little machine was silent in the darkness. He crawled inside, set the controls, and bucketed upward into the night.

For several seconds, the flyer seemed to hang in the smoky blackness, then it burst through the overhanging cloud layer above the valley and rode high above in the white moonlight. Kent checked the controls and looked down.

The moon of Modor was close to Modor and the night was brilliant. Below him the valley brimmed with dark clouds, stretching away and down to the sea. To the west and north the hills began and the uplands, stony and bare and clear. He turned the nose of the flyer westward and fled away from the valley, out over the silent landscape.

The cabin of the little flyer was cold with the chill of high altitude. Kent turned on the heating system, locked the controls on the five hundred kilos distant area where the colonist ship was due to land, and sat back, lighting the pipe that he carried in his jacket pocket, and setting himself to consider the situation.

The fumes of the pipe rose comfortingly about him as he dragged the smoke deep into his lungs, and he grinned wryly, remembering how this, too, had been a subject of censure back at Colonial Office on Earth. Kent was a government career man, and a good one. The only trouble was that in appearance he was a little too good—he looked the part.

He was spare and darkly handsome. A little short, by present day standards; but that did not show up unless you saw him standing alongside a taller man. What, in ancient times would have been called the empire-builder type of man, he was keen-minded, alert, impeccable

as to dress and manner—and he smoked a pipe.

Kent chuckled a little sadly, remembering. It had been the pipe that sent him out here to Modor—the straw, in a manner of speaking, that broke the camel's back.

It was the casual note nowadays in Government circles. Diplomats and representatives, from the least to the greatest, strove to look like college kids—if they were young enough—or small businessmen—if they were too old for the first role. The last thing to look like was what you were. Kent, of course, had. Couldn't help himself, in fact. In consequence, he was looked on with suspicion by his fellows and immediate superiors. Here's someone trying to show us all up, they said; and when he began smoking the pipe, that was the final straw. The pipe was too perfect. It was archaic and ostentatious. The perfection of Kent Harmon was ridiculous alongside the careful cultivated lack of dignity of the Colonial Office. Result—assignment to Modor.

Well—damn them all—thought Kent, comfortably sucking in smoke. He enjoyed the pipe, and at least out here he could smoke to his heart's content.

BUT to get back to this business of colonists—he frowned. It looked as if the disapproval of the Colonial Office was still following him. Letting five hundred Earth-born humans into Modor to settle on the barren land was a fool's trick, and a flat outrage of a sort of unwritten agreement that had existed for over two hundred years between Modorians and humans, ever since the first ship had landed, in fact. Modorians were not the ordinary—by human standard—type of alien.

Kent glanced out through the window of his flyer. Down below, the ground was a tumbled wilderness of rock with only an occasional clump of spiny bush to break the monotony. It looked lifeless and deserted, but Kent knew that somewhere down there there was almost sure to be at least two or three scattered Modorians, sleeping, and probably even some humans, each with his Modorian, the Modorian that had "adopted" him and made it possible for him to roam the wilderness, prospecting or trapping.

No, the Modorians were not the ordinary alien. For one thing, they were the most intelligent race Man had yet discovered on the worlds he had taken over—some said even more intelligent than Man, himself; and Kent, after five years on Modor, inclined to that view himself. But that was only the beginning of their uniqueness.

A female Modorian was about three feet high, nervous, suspicious and with about the apparent intelligence and characteristics of a chimpanzee. She resembled the male only in her thinness, the three opposed fingers of her hands, the large tarsier-like eyes and the covering of soft grey fur. She mated for life and rode her male pickaback as he roamed the stony face of his desert-like world.

But the male! Seven feet or more in height when he was fully grown, inhumanly strong and resourceful, indifferent to extremes of temperature that varied from a hundred and fifty degrees above zero to ninety below, of a different, stranger, steelier flesh than man's, he lived in comfort with nothing more than a steel spear and a few small hand tools on a world where a man without several tons of equipment would have frozen or starved in no time. The Modorians had never built cities because they did not need them—and for another reason.

And this was the strangest part of all. For the one great characteristic of the male Modorian was his utter independence. He needed nothing. He asked for nothing. He could be neither coerced, nor bribed, nor tricked, nor forced. He said and did only what he wished. He was a law unto himself and only to himself. What other living beings did was no concern of his, with the single exception of his own personal female—and, oddly

enough, man.

For the Modorians, strangely, seemed to be fascinated by men. They neither needed them, nor objected to them; but they seemed to be eternally confounded by the fact that here were male creatures almost as intelligent as themselves, who could be dependent, and were. Almost anti-social where his own kind was concerned, a male Modorian often "adopted" a human man, watching over him with a sort of puzzled solicitude as the odd, weak creature toiled over the barren land, scrabbling in the burrows of little pack rat-like animals for the precious stones that to the Modorians were not worth a second glance.

Daily the Modorian rescued his prospector from landslide, blizzard, starvation and heat exhaustion, aided him in his search, and, on occasions when they met another of his own kind, discussed his charge gravely in the sonorous tones of the Modorian tongue. It was only through this that men had discovered that the Modorians, beneath the eternal calm and indifference of their exterior, were actually capable of deep and abiding affection and other emotions. And these men, eventually understanding, came to return the liking almost fiercely.

It was these humans, rather than the Modorians themselves, who would be Kent's ostensible problem, now that the news of the coming colonists was out. Central Headquarters on Earth had never made any kind of a colonization treaty with the Modorians. To do so would have required an individual agreement with each one of the males, which was impossible, even if every male had proved to be interested in such a treaty. But with an unusual wisdom, the Foreign Office had, until now, restricted any human settlement to the deep valleys, which, because of the cloudiness and humidity, the Modorians did not care for.

But, the land area of these valleys was small, and the human civilization was bursting under the pressure of overpopulation. The day when humans would come into the barren land with their rock pulverizers and fertilizers and farming equipment was inevitable. Sitting alone in his flyer, Kent shivered. The Modorians to date had really never been crossed by humans. What if that icy, infinitely capable mind, inhuman self-control and superhuman determination should be turned against man? What if the icy Modorian logic should decide that man was a pest, and dangerous, instead of an appealing pet? What could you do then against five millions of an enemy whose mind could be altered only by complete extermination?

True—Man, himself was counted now by quintillions—but—Kent shook his head—Central Headquarters had no real idea of how intelligent the Modorians actually were.

A BELL on the instrument panel rang suddenly, sharply. Kent put out his hand to bring the flyer to a hovering halt, and looked down. The place where the colonists would land in less than forty hours lay below him, a shallow rocky bowl hemmed by low hills. He sat gazing at it for several minutes, then bit his lips, and turning the flyer, scooted for home. It would be up to him to stop trouble before it got started; and he could think of only one factor that would operate in his favor. The fact that each Modorian worked for himself and alone.

The one to stop, thought Kent grimly, would be the first Modorian who attempted to make trouble for the colony.

Stop the first Modorian—well, it was a good decision, thought Kent as he opened his eyes the following morning, his mind automatically taking up at exactly the point where it had left off the night before. But how? And how would he know when the first Modorian to start something, started something? The pale ghost of fear weaved for a moment through the back of his mind. Familiarity with the Modorians did not breed contempt. Quite the opposite. You were more likely to feel your own good opinion of yourself dwindling on prolonged contact. Maybe he should warn Earth?

Ridiculous to expect anything really—he checked himself abruptly. Now with a night's sleep behind him, he was more than ever certain that the Colonial Office had granted the permit with an eye to putting him, personally, on the spot. There was no doubt a strong element that would have liked to get him out of the service completely.

For a moment the memory of green Earth plucked at him with nostalgic fingers. Home. What ninety per cent of the humans on Modor here would give their right arm for—passage back and security on the world of their forefathers, was his for the asking. All he had to do was bow politely out of the Colonial Office and accept a minor position elsewhere with some other governmental branch. Kent shook his head ruefully. Some odd little quirk within him kept him, and would always keep him, from buying on those terms.

He went into the office section of his quarters. On the instrument panel, the red lights for visiphone and doorbell were blinking furiously, and silently, their sound circuits disconnected. Kent grinned briefly at them. There would be angry prospectors and adopted men at the other ends of those circuits, clamoring for him. Well, let them. They had nothing to tell him about their attitude toward the present situation that he didn't know already. He would remain incommunicado until the colony ship came.

Leisurely, he drew a cup of coffee from the wall dispenser and sat down at his desk to draft a full report on the situation as it stood at the present time.

II

FORTY hours, almost to the minute, after the original message had arrived, the ship bearing the colonists flashed radio signal it was entering the atmosphere. Kent rose to its summons and the second morning of his self-incarceration, dressed, and went out to his flyer.

In the dull, cloud-filtered light of day, the valley looked grey and depressing. Water dripped steadily from everything; and not even the careful landscaping with grass and trees and bushes brought in from Earth, nor the carefully colored and designed buildings of the trading station did much to relieve the view. The place looked deserted, now, and probably was—everyone having taken to the air at the first radio signal from the incoming ship. They would be waiting for her—and Kent—at the landing spot five hundred kilometers westward.

Kent climbed into the flyer and took off.

By the time he landed it was nearly mid-morning and the temperature of the open area where the settlement was to be was already shooting up. In the clear briliant sunlight the ship was down and the scene was a study in harsh beauty, from the yellow dust of the hollow, where four great weather-control pylons and individual shelters were already springing up, to the looming hills, their crowns rust-red against the molten sky. As Kent brought the flyer down he had already spotted the signs of trouble, the prospectors held back from the edge of the camp by armed colonists and milling in an angry group, while their Modorians stood apart, and scattered. As he opened the door of the flyer, the prospectors made a rush and surrounded him.

"Quiet down!" he said crisply, stepping down among them. There was not a man that did not overtop him by two inches or more, and his neatness threw him in dandified contrast to their rough trail clothes. "There's nothing to be done right now, anyhow."

"Listen, Harmon!" said one young giant, shoving his way through his fellows. "You've got to contact Central Headquarters. Tell'm we don't want planters in here."

"I've done it," said Kent, dryly. "I expressed the attitude of you men in the report I sent out yesterday."

"The hell you did!" flared the young giant.

"The hell I didn't, Simmons," said

Kent, evenly. "The report's gone in and all you can do is wait and hope that the Colonial Office recommends moving this group."

"We won't wait for that," Simmons threatened. "We're giving these planters twenty-four hours to get out."

The rest took up the cry. "That's right, Branch!" "You tell him!" Kent waited until the clamor died down.

"So you're thinking of using force," he said.

"That's right," retorted Branch Simmons belligerently. Kent snorted contemptuously.

"You're out of your head," he said, incisively. "I'll yank the trading license of the first man that tries anything like that, and blackball him for any attempt he ever makes at Earth citizenship. Do any of you want to risk that?"

His black eyes challenged them, and they looked away. There was not a man facing him who did not hope someday to make a big enough gem find to buy his way back to Earth citizenship.

"Besides," went on Kent. "You've got no grounds for complaint. The only ones who can protest legally are the Modorians themselves."

"Our boys don't like it," grumbled one of the older prospectors.

"No?" said Kent, turning toward the scattered group of friendly Modorians who stood a little way off. "Let them tell me about it then."

He strode away from the humans and up to the group of grey furred natives.

"You know me," he said, speaking to all of them. "Have any of you anything to say to me?"

Like lean and silent gods, they rested on their spears, towering over him, gazing down at him with large, inscrutable eyes. Not one of them answered. Kent turned back to the prospectors.

"I'm going down into the settlement," he said. "One of you can go with me, if you like. Now, who's it going to be—you, Branch?"

"Me," said Branch, hitching his gun belt around his waist. "I'll go."

"All right," said Kent, and led the way.

THE prospectors waited in a little group apart from the others. Kent and Branch Simmons went down the slope until they reached the perimeter of the settlement area and were halted by two pink-cheeked youngsters, still in their light Earth-surface tunic and kilts, but carrying power-rifles.

"You can't go in," one of them informed Kent and the tall prospector in a high tenor.

"Oh, yes we can," said Kent. "I'm the Colonial Office Representative on this planet, and this man goes with me. I want to talk to your leader." The gun barrels wavered, and Kent strode forward, Branch following.

"Pretty little kids," said Branch contemptuously in Kent's ear. The young prospector was barely into his twenties, himself. Kent ignored him, searching the tangle of rising construction with his eyes.

Evidently the two sentries had orders to remain at their posts, for they did not follow them. The problem of locating the settlement leaders might have been a time-consuming one if their entrance had not attracted notice from the would-be colonists working nearby, and who started at once to yell back the word that outsiders had gotten past the perimeter. A few seconds of this produced a young man as large as Branch himself, and with the perfect muscles of a weight-lifter, and a lighter boy and girl of about the same age, all of whom approached at a run.

"Put your hands up!" roared the weight-lifter, waving a power-rifle at Branch and Kent as they came up.

"Don't point that thing at me, pretty-boy," said Branch, baring his teeth.

"Yes, put it away!" snapped Kent. "I'm the Colonial Office Representative and this man is with me."

"I don't care who—" began the weight-lifter.

"Well, you damn well will," barked

Kent, his temper breaking forth, "when you find yourself in a forced labor draft bound for the Frontier Planets. Don't you know what Colonial Representative means? I'm the legal authority on this planet."

The other lowered his gun, but scowled.

"We've got a charter—" he growled.

"The settlement has," said Kent. "But the settlement may have to get along without you, if I decide to have you deported as a troublemaker. Now, put it up!"

Reluctantly, the young man laid his gun aside.

"That's more like it," said Kent, cooling off already and half-ashamed of his heat of a few seconds before. But then, it is never pleasant to look down the barrel of a gun when there is a chance it may be in the hands of a fool who will press the firing button. "You're in authority, here?"

"That's right," said the weight-lifter. "Hord Chalmers is my name."

"No you're not," the girl interrupted. "Dad is. You better wait for him, too."

Branch snorted under his breath and she looked at him unfavorably. She was a pretty little thing, black-haired and thin-featured, almost the twin of the slighter boy that made up the group.

"Then where is he?" asked Kent.

"Right here, sir, right here," said a new voice, somewhat out of breath, and they all turned to see a little, grey-haired, pot-bellied man with a kindly face trot up to the meeting. He came to a winded stop and threw a somewhat stern glance at Hord Chalmers.

"You take too much on yourself, Hord," he said.

"Somebody has to," said Hord, darkly.

"That's enough of that, boy," said the older man sharply. "You're my assistant and nothing more. Now don't you forget it! Sorry, sir—" he turned to Kent. "My name's Peter Lawrence, and these are my son, Bob, and my daughter, Judy. Hord here's my nephew. Did I hear you say you were the Colonial Representative on Modor?"

"That's right," said Kent, dryly. "I'd like to see your charter and talk to you about a few things."

"I've got the charter here," said Peter Lawrence, pulling the little microfilm case from his pocket. "If you'd like to talk privately—"

"That won't be necessary," said Kent. He took the case, flipped up the magnifier, and scanned it. He handed it back. "You seem to be the only one in the whole bunch that's not twenty-one," he said. "Mind telling me about that?" Lawrence looked a little shy.

"Well," he said. "When they came of age, the kids had to leave Earth—you know how it is—" Kent nodded. Overcrowded Earth denied citizenship to even its native-born unless they had certified employment by the time they were twenty-one. "—and so I thought I might just as well come along with them and help them get a start."

KENT nodded, hiding the sympathy he felt. An older man like Lawrence could have stayed safe at home. It was a rare individual nowadays that would go adventuring on a raw new world for the sake of his children when he, himself, was middle-aged.

"They're a good bunch of kids," said Lawrence warmly.

Branch snorted, and Lawrence looked at him in some surprise.

"Oh, yes," said Kent wryly. "Let me introduce Branch Simmons, one of our prospectors, and adopted men. My name is Kent Harmon. Branch is one of the reasons I've come to talk to you."

"How do you do, son," said Peter Lawrence, holding out his hand. Branch ignored it, and after a second the older man let it fall to his side.

"Well!" said the girl.

"Hush, Judy," said Peter Lawrence, automatically. "What about him, Mr. Harmon?"

"Branch," said Kent, "is a representative of the prospectors and adopted men

—you know about conditions here on Modor?"

"Yes," said Peter.

"The prospectors feel your settlement is a threat both to their way of life and that of the Modorians—and they've taken it on themselves to speak up for the Modorians."

"Those animals?" said Hord, incredulously.

"Shut your fat mouth," answered Branch, savagely.

"That's enough," said Kent looking at both of them. "For your information, Chalmers, the Modorians are held in rather deep affection by our prospectors —seeing that all of them have owed their lives to a Modorian at one time or another. I feel it my duty to inform you, Lawrence, that in accordance with the wishes of the prospectors, I've registered their protest against your settlement."

"But—why?" burst out the older man, bewilderedly. "There's millions of miles of empty land here. We're just taking up one tiny spot."

"I know the land looks empty—" began Kent, but the deep voice of Branch interrupted him.

"Let me explain this, Kent," he said, stepping forward. "Listen, Lawrence. If a bear came and pitched a tent in your living room would you be satisfied by his saying there were lots of other living rooms on the planet?" He reached out one long forefinger and prodded the older man on the chest. "You'd say, 'Hell, no!" You'd say, "I don't care how much room there is, this place is mine.' "

"But look, son—" protested Peter.

"Don't 'son' me," growled Branch, "save that for these hothouse babies you brought along with you."

"—Mr. Simmons"—amended Peter. "Where else is there for us to go? Good God! You don't suppose we'd have picked this place if there was anything else available to us with the money we had? Look at it"—his pudgy arm gestured, widespread, at the rocky and empty land around them. "We've sunk everything we've got into equipment just to make this habitable. Pulverizers, fertilizers, plant food—weather control equipment, passage money. All we've got is here."

"That's your problem," said Branch.

"We can't go," said Peter. "We couldn't if we wanted to and I'm sure Central Headquarters isn't going to force us off Modor." He turned toward Kent. "You don't think they will, do you?"

"No," said Kent, "off the record, I don't think they will."

Hord Chalmers took a half step forward.

"Anyway," he said to Branch, defiantly. "What business of yours is it, anyway? Let those natives talk for themselves if they want to."

"They won't talk," said Branch, more calmly than he had spoken so far. "They leave the talking up to us. If we can't make you leave, they will."

"Those—" said Chalmers.

"Yes, those!" interrupted Branch fiercely. "If they act, there won't be any more talking, by you or me, ever." And they glared at each other like two strange dogs about to clash.

"The Colonial Office gave me to understand there wouldn't be any trouble with the natives," cried Peter Lawrence a little wildly.

III

THE next morning Kent woke in the shelter that had been assigned to him in the growing settlement. He rolled out of bed, dressed and ate. On the desk in the barren shelter that held his cot, and nothing else beside, there was a small pile of government dispatches that had been flown up early that morning. He lit a cigarette, perched on one corner of the desk, and tore open the envelopes.

Most were routine matters relating to trading and shipping. One was an acknowledgment of his report and an official refusal of the prospector's protest against the settlers. The last was a note

from Tichi Marlowe, the daughter of one of his few close friends back on earth. Tichi was adolescent and fiercely loyal. She had also had a crush on him. He smiled a little sadly and picked up her note.

Darling Kent:

I wish you were coming back here. Everything is dead and double-dead around here since you shipped out. Daddy never brings anyone home any more but old men with indigestion—and I'm so sick of kids. Anyway, I think about you all the time. Daddy says to give you his best regards, and his wishes that you should come back soon, too. He says he bets you have your hands full with that new colony. I bet so, too. I've been hearing all about it, and I think the whole situation is real gummy.

Lots of love,

Tichi (PRSM .2:9 TKMarlowe, Wash.)

Kent whistled and smiled a little grimly. Tichi could be embarrassing, but she could also be useful, with her little girl manner and her childish slang. The words—"real gummy"—were intended to convey to Kent just what he had suspected earlier—that the landing of the colony had been a deliberate attempt by a certain clique in the Office to put him in a discrediting situation. Bless Tichi and her little ears alert to capital gossip!

However—he folded the letter and put it away—there was nothing he could do about it now. He could not quit right in the middle of this situation, even if he wanted to—and he didn't want to.

He went outside and looked up to the hills.

WHAT he had expected was there. Singly and in small family groups, during the night they had been drifting in, silently, purposefully, from maybe as far as fifty or a hundred miles away—a Modorian alone could move at amazing speed for surprising lengths of time. And now the heights were scattered with them, lean, grey figures outlined against the horizon, leaning on their spears and looking down on the camp. The wild Modorians—those who had never struck up a partnership with any man, were coming in.

"Mr. Harmon—"

He turned, looking down. The little leader of the colonists was at his elbow, round face worried.

"Are they dangerous?" he asked.

"Yes," said Kent. "Yes, they're dangerous."

"Well, what should I do? Should I arm more of the boys and let the girls handle all the construction?"

"Don't arm anybody," said Kent.

"But what if they start something? They've got those spears. I know they're only savages—"

"Mr. Lawrence," Kent interrupted wearily. "They're not savages. If you and your bunch of youngsters would just get that through your heads, you'd be a lot safer." He pointed. "Those up there on the hills are Modorians who've never had more than an occasional contact with people. But you won't find one of them who can't talk your own language as well or better than you can, and doesn't know as much or more about the Universe and the human race as you do. They're not savages, and they're not fools. You're making the common mistake of most newcomers when you think that the intelligence of a race can be measured by its technology."

"But can't we do something?" cried Peter. "Maybe I can pay them for the land. We have a little money left."

"They've no use for money," said Kent. "This desert that is no good to you without a lot of work, is a Garden of Eden to them. The only thing they want from you is what you've taken from them—land."

"But they've got so much land!"

"They want it all," said Kent. "And why not—it was all theirs to start with."

"Well," said Peter hopelessly. "What can we do?"

"You can't do anything," said Kent. He took a step backward, reached in through the door of his shelter and picked up his jacket. He shrugged his arms into it. "But maybe I can. I don't know. Wait here and keep all your kids inside the limits of the settlement. I'm going up and see if any of them will talk

to me."

"But—" cried Peter again. But Kent ignored him, walking away. The little man trotted behind him for a few steps, but, finding himself outdistanced, slowed down and gave up; and stood staring in doubt and indecision after the Colonial Representative's trim back as it dwindled away in the distance, climbing the hillside.

KENT walked along the crest of the encircling hills. For several hours he had been going, now, stopping in front of each Modorian in hope that the tall creature would speak to him. So far none had. Some ignored him. Some looked at him gravely, then looked away again, down into the hollow. A few were talking together like orators, declaiming in their own, sonorous incomprehensible tongue, and these he did not even bother to approach. The sun was climbing and its naked rays were coming down hot on the hillside when finally he found one who would talk.

The Modorian was tall and unusually gaunt. As with most Modorians, there was nothing about him to mark his age, but something about his pose as he leaned on the spear gave Kent an impression of great age. As Kent came up and stood before him, the other tilted his head downward and looked at the man with his large, dark, incurious eyes.

"Which man are you?" he said.

The voice was high-pitched, a tenor by human standard, but a certain monotonous and mechanical style of delivery kept it from the reediness that would have been apparent in a like human voice.

"Kent Harmon," said Kent. "Colonial Representative. Do you have a name I can call you by?"

The Modorian looked away from him and down at the settlement.

"Call me Maker," he said. For a moment he stood gazing in silence, then he turned his head back to Kent.

"This land," he said, "from pole to pole, from ocean to ocean, and across the ocean, is mine. Do you understand that, man?"

"I understand," said Kent.

"But they down there do not understand," said Maker.

"No," said Kent. There was another brief silence.

"To know and understand are two different things," went on Maker. "Do they know this?"

"They've been told," said Kent. "But they haven't any choice, Maker. There's no room on any other world for them so they have had to come here."

"Man," said Maker, "you lie to me. There are more worlds in the universe than men, and more than there will ever be of men, should each man be given a world to himself."

"But not liveable worlds."

"Yes, liveable worlds," said Maker. "There are more worlds on which men can live than men will ever occupy. If you do not know this, man, I tell you now."

Kent shrugged.

"I will tell you the truth, Kent Harmon, and you can deny it if you can. There is more than enough room for men. But men go where it is closest and easiest. Hear me. Those below come here because fear keeps them from other worlds unknown, where savage races live. They come here rather than go beyond what men call their Frontier in space. Is this true or not?"

Kent bowed his head.

"It is true," said Maker. "Fear is all they know. Let them fear me."

He turned his gaze back to the settlement below. Twice more Kent spoke to him, without getting an answer. The Modorian had withdrawn into his own thoughts. Kent turned and went down the hill to the colonists.

"Well," he said grimly to Peter Lawrence, "at least I know which one the trouble is going to come from."

The second day there were more than a thousand Modorians on the hillsides. Maker had dug down through the loose rock to the solid granite bedrock and

cleared a space there several yards in area. It would have been an inconceivable amount of work for a single man to perform in even a week, but the Modorian had done it easily in less than one day and a night.

Kent went back up to see him again.

"Maker," he said. "What you're doing is foolish. I and all of the men except the prospectors will combine to stop you if you create anything dangerous."

Maker looked up from the bottom of the pit where he stood.

"Look, man," he said. "It is to be settled here whether I will drive men from my land, or whether they will drive me from it. You may meet my blow, but not avoid it; or all others like me will say to themselves—'This is not settled' and try it for themselves."

I DON'T understand," said Lawrence, puzzled, when Kent repeated this statement to him, Hord Chalmers and Peter's two youngsters.

"He was pointing out a fact," said Kent wryly. "If I wanted to risk the lives of half a dozen men, I could take him into custody. If I wanted to violate Colonial Office directives, I could shoot him, just on suspicion, although all I have against him so far is that he's dug a hole in the ground. But that wouldn't settle anything. Conceivably, what he's doing, any other male Modorian can do, and if I stopped him, they'd all be trying."

"A skinny native playing in the dirt and you all get the wind up—" Hord Chalmers, who was standing by his uncle, burst into a sudden sarcastic laugh.

It was echoed suddenly by the deep-throated laughter of Branch. He was striding toward them, and the sound of his laughing was carefree on the thin air. He came up to them and stopped, grinning, his thumbs hooked into his gunbelt.

"Getting worried, eh?" he said.

"Who let you in here?" demanded Peter with a frown. But before Branch could answer, Hord had cut in.

"Worried!" he snorted. "Of that flea-bag up on the hills? I thought he was just digging a hole to hide in."

But Branch's face did not lose its cheerfulness.

"You can't make me mad, today, Buster," he said. "Things are going too well."

"Branch—" interrupted Kent sharply. "If you know what Maker is planning to do, it's your duty to let us know." Branch sobered, but his eyes did not soften as he looked down at Kent.

"Harmon," he said. "I kind of like you, and most of the boys do, too. But I'll see you damned in hell before I'll tell you anything that might help these dirt-grubbers—besides, I don't know."

He looked stolidly at the Colonial Representative; but before Kent had a chance to answer, the big prospector was attacked from a quarter so unexpected that they were all taken by surprise. It was little Judy Lawrence who spoke up in sudden, furious anger, her delicate face, now burnt and peeling from the merciless sun, taut with emotion.

"Do you know what's wrong with you?" she cried.

"Judy—" stammered Peter.

"Oh, leave me alone!" she cried. "None of you has guts enough to tell him what he really is—but I will." She turned like a small ferocious terrier on the tall young bulk of Branch, and Kent was suddenly, fleetingly reminded of Tichi as she tore into him. "I'll tell you what you are. You're a dog in the manger. You can't really do anything with this desert. You can't make it grow and turn green and beautiful, or build homes, or have children—and you don't want anybody else to have them either. You want them all to be just as miserable and just as ugly and savage as you are!" Branch's face whitened. For a moment the youth beneath his hard competent shell showed through and the rest could glimpse a boyish hurt and rage.

"You can talk!" he cried. "You can talk about homes—" he choked on his swelling emotion and took a sudden

blind, half-step toward her. His round face lighting up, Hord moved suddenly between them. Wildly, Branch turned on him. There was an eye-blurring flash of movement, the thud of a blow, and the heavier, Earth-born human lay stretched on the ground. Branch faced them over the fallen man, half-crouched, his fists knotted, his face conforted, something mad about his twisted features.

"Get out!" said Peter, sharply. The little middle-aged man moved forward on the big prospector, and Kent saw Branch tense as the older man came within reach. Swiftly he reached forward and yanked him back.

"Come on," said Branch, wildly, his voice scaling up, "the whole fat, lousy, stinking crew of you!" Kent shoved Peter aside and confronted the staring young man himself.

"Branch," he said in a calm, steady voice. "Branch."

"Homes!" half-sobbed Branch, his voice shaking, "Cute little—boxy little—"

"Branch!" snapped Kent. "Branch!"

GRADUALLY, the young man began to relax, and the insane light died slowly from his eyes. The tenseness drained out of him and he straightened, his calmness regained, but somehow empty. He sighed and shivered. Kent felt hardness underneath his right hand, and, glancing down, saw his hand was cramped around his gunbutt. He let go and flexed the aching fingers.

"You better go, Branch," he said.

Branch shook himself like a big dog coming out of water.

"I'll go," he said, emptily. "It doesn't matter. They won't be here long anyway."

"You—" began Judy, but Kent's hand clamped down sharply on her slim arm and the sudden pain made her gasp. Her twin brother spoke up.

"Never mind, Judy," said Bob. "It's all a bluff. Like Hord says, a dirty savage digging a hole in the ground."

Branch looked at him, but his eyes were withdrawn and his voice when he answered was remote and disinterested.

"Go ahead and dream," he said, turning away. "You'll learn. When a Modorian starts to throw his weight around—the earth moves."

They watched his slim figure shorten in the distance. Peter Lawrence spoke up.

"Bob!" he said sharply. "Look after Hord. And I want you to talk to the boys on guard and make sure that young man never gets in here again."

"Why he—he's insane!" said Judy, fascinatedly. Kent released her arm and looked at her somewhat sardonically. An evil genius impelled him to speak.

"You're probably right, Miss Lawrence," he said. "In fact, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you were. You see, Branch is one of the Reclaimed—one of the kids that was recaptured from a raiding alien life-form when we cleaned them out of the Sagittarius section of our Frontier. He was just old enough to remember the raid that killed off his parents and he was a prisoner for nearly a dozen years. When you were going out on your first date back on Earth, Branch was living in a cage."

Judy's mouth fell open, and the hand with which she had been massaging her bruised arm stopped abruptly.

Kent smiled at her and turned away.

IV

THERE was not a great deal of technical help to be had on Modor, since the planet was primarily a trading station. But, such as it was, Kent corralled it from all the inhabited valleys, ordered it to the settlement site with all possible speed. On the third day after the landing of the colonists, men began to arrive, and Kent spent a weary day tramping up the hillside with geologists, mining engineers, weather station men and chemical engineers—all of whom looked at what Maker was doing, shook their heads, shrugged their shoulders, and left the Colonial Representative just as wise

as he had been before.

Nor could he really blame them, thought Kent, moodily, standing on the edge of Maker's pit as the sunset lengthened, and a biting chill came in over the darkening land. Modor's creation looked like the fantastic building of some powerful, aberrant child.

By main strength, Modor had sunk the steel shaft of his twelve-foot spear half its length into the solid granite. Around this he had built a sort of crude framework of long narrow splinters of rock, gummed together with a sort of soft clay—and inside this framework he was creating a strange crystalline structure by the medium of dissolving certain minerals in water and pouring them along the rock splinters.

At first, progress had been slow, most of the mineral solution running off the splinters and being wasted. But as the little bit that remained dried, forming adhering crystals, the thing began to grow rapidly, until now a rough, globular mass appeared within the framework, covering and completely enclosing the exposed end of the steel spear-shaft.

Now that phase of the construction seemed to be finished. Maker had turned away from the crystal and stone and was seated off to one side and fashioning what appeared to be a very long, light bow, using wood from one of the stunted bushes and a tendon from one of the small burrowing animals he had killed. He had somehow stretched the tendon enormously over a fire, and now he was engaged in binding it to the wooden arc.

Kent went down the side of the pit with a rush and rattle of loose stones, and approached him.

"You've been working two days and nights straight, Maker," he said. "Don't you ever sleep?"

He had not really expected an answer, and he was surprised when the other replied.

"Sleep is death," said the Modorian, not looking up from what his hands were doing.

Above the mouth of the pit, the first breath of the evening wind moaned abruptly, sending a chill down Kent's back. He shivered.

"You don't really believe that, Maker," he said, half-jokingly to throw off the sudden feeling of depression.

"Man," said Maker, "you talk like a fool."

Kent got out his pipe and bit hard on the stem. His hands searched his pockets for tobacco, but found none. He stayed with the empty pipe clamped between his teeth, looking down at the squatting Modorian, who worked on in the gathering gloom without looking up.

"You know," volunteered Kent. "There's still time for me to send an official protest from you to Central Headquarters."

"Words are for men," said Maker. "I do not play with my mouth. Nor will I tell you, Harmon, what you want to know. What I am going to do, I will keep to myself."

Darkness thickened around them. Kent strained to see, while the larger pupils of the Modorian dilated easily to take advantage of the waning light.

"Tell me this, anyhow," said Kent. "Will what you have in mind involve the killing of people. If worst comes to worst, I would rather move them against orders than have anyone die."

"It is to the death," said Maker.

His last words were lost in blackness as the final rays of the sun fell behind the hill.

"Thanks, Maker," said Kent.

There was no answer from the obscurity. Kent turned and climbed his way back up to the edge of the pit. At the top he turned and looked down again. A spark leaped suddenly into being in the shadows and a little flame flared up, illuminating the pit. By its light Kent saw Maker rise to his feet and cross over to the crystalline mass, the now-completed bow in his hand. He reached out into the structure and with one slow, soft movement, drew the bowstring across the jagged glinting facets around the hidden spear-shaft.

An odd, discordant, musical note cried sharply out on the night air. It pierced Kent, seeming to shiver in his very bones; and he turned swiftly, going away down the hillside toward the settlement, while behind him the crystals cried, again and again, every time in a different note, like the devil tuning up his violin. Lonesome, questioning, the varied discordant notes of Maker laboring over his creation followed him as he walked among the houses, but dying, dying in the distance, until at last the slam of his door shut them from his ears entirely.

KENT lay awake in the dark, his tired mind searching. Like the sad montage of a dream, faces moved through his mind—the desperate young features of Branch, and Maker's inscrutable huge dark eyes. The serious, worried face of Peter, and Hord's beefy handsome countenance. In his mind's eye he saw them circling his bed, looking down at him, all of them waiting, looking to him for a solution, an answer.

They crowded around him. There was Bob's tense, thin features, and the delicate beauty of his sister Judy, her eyes frightened and haunting. By them they evoked the golden-haired image of Tichi, looking on and wondering, and all the host of peoples, human and alien alike, the knowledge of whose existence lived within his consciousness. To his tired mind the immediate problem swelled and grew enormously, until it blotted out all other problems in the Universe, until it was The Problem—the great question that must eventually be answered if any human and any alien were ever to exist permanently side by side.

And somehow, it was all up to him. Under the scourge of his conscience, Kent's hard body twisted in the narrow bed. He was the administrator, the trained executive. His was the ethical and the moral responsibility. To stop Maker by force meant blood on his hands. To let him go ahead with the strange creation of his alien mind meant blood on Kent's hands—the blood of the Colonists. Why must it always end in killing? Why must there always be no choice? Branch had no choice but to stick by the Modorians. The Colonists had no place else to go. The Modorians, seeing the future clearly—humans flooding in to take the land that was all in all to them—had no choice but to resist. There must be an answer—and there was no answer. The tension built up, reached an unendurable pitch—and broke.

In the darkness Kent laughed in sudden bitter irony and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He lit the lamp, reached for his pipe, filled and lit it. As always, at the last minute, an odd, cold sense of humor came to save him from himself—and this time it had been a wishful mental picture of himself washing his hands. He laughed again, and sighed deeply. It had been a mistake to let himself think—his sphere was action.

In the end like goes to like, when a side must be chosen—and Kent was human. For all his admiration for Modorians in general and sympathy with Maker in particular, he realized that he must protect and maintain the colony at the cost of any native sacrifice. He pulled on the pipe and white smoke streamed up around him, past his head and out the ventilator above his bed. If necessary, he would call in the Space Guard. Whatever Modor's instrument was capable of doing, either above ground or below—

He caught himself suddenly, in midthought. Inspiration had suddenly come to him.

CHARLIE COLWORTH did not like being gotten up in the middle of the night; but when the Colonial Representative pounds at your very door, which is halfway across the planet from where you saw him last, you are forced to rise to the occasion. Cursing to himself, he pulled clothes onto his skinny body and wandered, yawning, into the front room

of his quarters, where Kent was waiting.

Kent handed him a cup of his own coffee. "Here," he said. "You'll need it."

Charlie complied, and shuddered. The stuff was black, and he was a strong cream-and-sugar man.

"I suppose it's about that Colony mess," he grumbled.

"That's right," said Kent.

"Well, now what?" said Charlie, dropping on the couch. "And what's it got to do with me?" Kent grinned.

"Sorry, Charlie," he said. "But you know that area best of any of the geologists we have here. I want to know what's under that granite Maker anchored his gadget in."

"More granite," said Charlie sourly, "now can I go back to bed?"

"I don't think so," said Kent. "What's under the more granite?"

"Hell," said Charlie. "It's a capstone. Magma, probably."

"By magma I take it you mean molten rock—lava?"

"It's only called lava after it comes out on the surface," said Charlie, grumpily.

"What would happen if the granite was split open?" asked Kent. "Would this magma rise up and flow over the surface?"

"If the pressure was—what in hell are you talking about?" said Charlie. "That's one of the most stable areas on this planet's surface. The K'tabi Shield. It's at least two miles thick and may be as much as fifty. Something like that doesn't split open."

"Charlie," said Kent, "what do you know about vibrations in rock?"

"As much as a well-brought-up earthquake," answered Charlie. "Now, are you going to tell me what all this is about, or do I go back to sleep?"

"I'll show you," said Kent. "Right now I want you to put on some outer clothes, pick up detector equipment and come out with me to find out what effect Maker's gadget is having on the K'tabi Shield."

GOOD God, is *that* it?" said Charlie.

They were climbing the hillside outside the settlement in the early dawn, Charlie and Kent. With them was a man loaded down with detector equipment, and the Wonder Boy, as Karl Mencht, the ace troubleshooter for Modor's only spaceship repair yard was called. What had drawn the exclamation from Charlie's lips was the varying sound emanating from Maker's equipment as the sleepless Modorian continued to draw his bowstring across it.

"Interesting," said the Wonder Boy in his customary clipped tones, cocking his boyish head on one side to listen.

"That's what you say," grunted Charlie. "It sends shivers down my back."

"Subsonics," said the Wonder Boy.

"Go to hell," said Charlie. He stopped abruptly. "Here," he said, "if there's anything going on at all, we're plenty close enough to pick it up, now. And there's an outcropping of granite here I can tie into. Set it down."

Gently, the man carrying the equipment lowered it into place and set it up. Charlie fiddled with the dials.

"Now we'll see," he said. "Just as I thought—nothing—Holy Hannah!"

Coincidental with a squeak from Maker's distant bow, a needle on one of the dials had jumped clear across the scale and out of sight. It returned to rest in the same moment that the sound died away.

"But he can't do that—" said Charlie, fascinated. They watched the needle for a moment in which the squeaks continued, then the needle jumped again.

"He just hits it by accident every so often," said Charlie, in an awed voice. "But when he does—*wow!*"

"What's he doing, exactly?" asked Kent.

"He must be making this whole area of the shield vibrate," said Charlie. "And he can't do that. I must be seeing things."

"Nonsense," said the Wonder Boy. "You can vibrate anything."

"By rubbing a crystal on a rod just

touching the surface of an area this size? You'd have to amplify—why you'd have to amplify—"

"Ever stop to think?" said the Wonder Boy. "Using area as sounding board. Don't know rocks myself, but makes sense."

" 'Makes sense'—you're nuts," said Charlie. The Wonder Boy shrugged.

"All right," said Kent, crisply. "Going on the assumption that my hunch was right and Maker can vibrate the rock underneath here enough to cause either a volcanic eruption or an earthquake—have either of you any ideas about how to stop him?"

"Smash his gadget," said Charlie.

"If I did that, what's to stop every other Modorian from trying it where I can't see him? Anyway that's not it. It's my belief that the rest of the Modorians—" he gestured to the ridge of the hills around them where the pink dawnlight was beginning to pick out the lean grey shapes that watched in silence—"are looking on this as sort of a test-case. If I beat Maker at his own game, they'll give up and leave the colony alone. If I don't, every single one of them will take his individual and particular swing at every settlement group that comes along after this."

"Ruin your career," said the Wonder Boy.

"Wonder Boy," said Charlie. "You've got a filthy mind. For half a credit I'd kick your pretty white teeth down your throat."

"Never mind that," said Kent. "Any ideas?"

Charlie shrugged.

"Interesting problems," said Wonder Boy. "Fight fire with fire, maybe."

"How?" asked Kent.

"Damp his vibration. Counter vibrations. Could do it—got crews—equipment down at the repair yard. Engineering feat, be interesting. Very."

"The Modorian might beat you anyway. Embarrassing. Very," mocked Charlie.

"Try it," said the Wonder Boy, to Kent. "Up to you."

"Of course," said Kent. "You go ahead with it as fast as you can. Charlie, what actually is liable to happen if Maker cracks the Shield?"

"Possibly the lava flow you were worried about," said Charlie. "But more probably a landslip."

"Either way, the settlement is in danger of being destroyed?"

Charlie grimaced.

"I'd use the word 'obliterated,' " he said.

"Then I've got to get those people out of there. Charlie, you help Karl here as much as you can; and Karl—rush it."

"Course!" said the Wonder Boy; and "Hell, yes!" said Charlie. Kent turned and went plunging off down the hillside toward the camp.

V

HE WENT down the hill in a blind rush—so intent on what he was doing, in fact, that he had run on Branch and Judy Lawrence almost before he realized they were in his way. He skidded to a halt to avoid bumping into them and for a second the three of them looked at each other in not-too-friendly surprise. Kent was the first to recover his tongue.

"Good Lord," he said, "what are you doing out here?" She looked at him a little defiantly.

"I came out to apologize to Branch," she said.

"Oh?" said Kent, and looked from her to the tall young prospector, who colored slightly. "Well, don't let me interrupt you," Kent said, stepping around them.

Judy reached out a hand and caught at his arm.

"Oh, Mr. Harmon—"

"What?" demanded Kent, wheeling to face her with a touch of exasperation at being delayed.

"We're all through talking. I wonder if we could go back to the settlement with you?"

"Why not?" said Kent, turning away again. But then a hint of something odd struck him. "But, come to think of it, why?"

She still met his eyes somewhat defiantly.

"Well you see," she said. "I went out looking for Branch last evening. And night comes down so quickly, here. Well —we got lost."

"Lost?" said Kent, incredulously, looking at Branch.

"That's right," said the young man with dogged belligerence. "We got lost. She hasn't been home since last night."

They both stared at him. And suddenly understanding struck him, bringing a rich sense of humor in its wake. Here was their personal world about to blow up and all these two babies could find time to worry about—

"All right," said Kent, the hint of a grin twisting his lips in spite of himself. "Come on, both of you, and I'll see if I can't put in a good word for you with your father, Judy. I take it you have the instincts of an honest man, Branch?"

"What?" said Branch, uneasily.

"Never mind," said Kent. "Come on —and hurry!"

Kent did not speak on the walk back.

"Judy!" cried Peter Lawrence, when he first caught sight of them. And— "What are you doing here, Simmons? I gave orders—"

"I brought him, Daddy," said Judy, putting her arm through his.

"You might as well reconcile yourself, Lawrence," said Kent. "These things happen quickly on the Outer Worlds."

"What?"

"Yes," said Kent abruptly, without any excess courtesy. "And now that that's settled, I've got something important to talk to you about. We've found out what Maker's doing—and it's dangerous. I'm rushing equipment up here to try and save the settlement, but it may not get here in time; and I want you to evacuate all your people."

"Evacuate?" cried Peter, spinning to face Kent. "Why?"

"Because," snapped Kent, "I say so. We may have anything from an earthquake to an active volcano taking place here within the next minute. Get your kids out. You can have reasons later."

"Why, this is some kind of a trick—" cried Peter, his face purpling.

"Don't be a fool," said Kent.

"I won't move until I know just what you mean by this high-handed order."

"Give me that," said Kent, exasperatingly, reaching out and yanking off the button mike that was fastened to Peter's tunic. He thumbed the switch, and loudspeakers all over the settlement bellowed his voice.

"All right," they boomed. "This is the Colonial Representative speaking. Everybody come to the Headquarters Building. Everybody. That means everybody, sick and well alike. As fast as you can. No loitering."

Kent cut off the mike. Peter made an unsuccessful grab for it. Kent fended him off and put it in his pocket.

"Stand aside, and keep quiet," he said.

"I will not!" raved the little man. "Ever since we landed, everyone's been trying by hook or crook to get us out of the land that the charter guaranteed us. We haven't given it up yet, and we won't. Now you're turning against us."

"Look, Lawrence," said Kent, "I tell you this whole area may be buried under rock or lava at any moment. Do you want to lose your lives as well as your possessions?"

"Why not?" cried Peter Lawrence. "Why not? Everything we own is here. How could we live without it?"

"Other people have," said Kent, coldly.

"Savages. Scum." The area in front of the Headquarters Building was beginning to fill up with hurrying youngsters, and Peter half swung toward toward them, addressing them as well as Kent. "Not people like us who've been gently brought up on a civilized world. We'd die out there—" and he

extended a shaking hand toward the hills where, rank on silent grey rank, the Modorians stood watching.

"Shut up!" snapped Kent. The area before the building was almost full now, and he took the button from his pocket, snapping the switch and lifting it to his lips. The loudspeaker on the roof of Headquarters blasted forth his voice.

"Listen, all of you!" he said. "This is a direct order. You will pick up warm clothing and evacuate this settlement at once. Head for any open space beyond the hills, and when you get there institute a check to see nobody has been left behind. Now, move!"

But the crowd rocked hesitantly, murmuring to itself and looking toward Peter.

"Don't listen to him!" cried the little man, almost hysterically. "Don't move. Don't believe him. Go back to work! It's just another trick to get us out of here. Go back to what you were doing."

The crowd murmur rose and broke. The group eddied and began to disintegrate. On every side, people began to drift away.

"Come back, you idiots!" thundered the loudspeakers, with Kent's voice. "Will you let him shove all your heads into a noose? Do I have to order up a platoon of police to move you out by force?"

But the crowd was dispersing rapidly.

"Let him try it," screamed Peter. "We'll fight for our rights."

THE last few members of the crowd broke and ran for the protection of nearby buildings. Defeated, Kent lowered the phone button and stuck it in his pocket. Peter crowed his triumph. Kent turned on him.

"May God have mercy on your soul!" he said savagely.

Peter grinned wildly; but before he could answer, the two youngsters drew both men's attention.

"*You* aren't staying!" said Branch to Judy.

"What do you mean?" she answered, between surprise and anger, "I certainly will stay if the rest of them do."

"That's what you think," said Branch bluntly. "I know Harmon knows what he's talking about. Let the rest be dumb if they want to. You and me are going where it's safe."

"I certainly will not!" said Judy; but the words were barely out of her mouth before he seized the collar of her tunic with one large hand and began to march her off in the direction of the perimeter.

"Stop!" screamed Judy. "Daddy! Help!"

Peter made an inarticulate sound in his throat and dived for a power rifle that was leaning against the side of Headquarters. He was bringing the weapon up to his shoulder when Kent seized it and wrested it out of his hands. A single blast went skyward.

"You—" choked Peter, scrabbling desperately for the gun. "Give it back!"

"Not on your life," said Kent, grimly, pushing him away. He nodded in the direction of the dwindling pair of figures. "There go two more lives off my conscience." He held the little man off until a distant building hid Judy and Branch from sight.

Abruptly Peter stopped struggling. He stood forlorn, as if all the strength had gone out of him, looking in the direction the two had disappeared. There were sudden tears in his eyes. The tears of an old man.

"My baby," he said, brokenly. "With that—that—savage."

Kent was not feeling any sympathy for him.

"Worse things have happened to women," he said harshly.

VI

KENT stood on the hillside opposite Maker's pit, watching as a sweating crew of technicians from the repair yard struggled to sink a fifty-foot steel rod four feet in diameter deep into the rocky crust beneath his feet. Beside

them an even larger crew labored to hook up an oversize generator and sounding equipment for the broadcasting of counter-vibrations through the rod.

At ten other intervals in a circle around the camp a similar job was being carried on, under the gimlet eye of the Wonder Boy, who flitted from group to group like some cherubic slave driver. The day was well advanced, and every available man with technical knowledge had been pressed into service.

Kent turned and walked away to where Charlie had set up a sort of seismographic headquarters. He was about to speak to him when he felt someone tap his elbow. He turned and saw Tom Schneider, the skinny space-communications operator.

"What is it, Tom?" he asked. The other held out a flimsy.

"Urgent," he said.

Kent turned away again.

"Stick it in your pocket, Tom," he said. "I haven't time for anything like that now." Tom reached out and grabbed him.

"I think you better read it, Kent." Kent turned an exasperated face toward him.

"Can't you take 'no' for an answer?" he demanded. "I said I didn't want to be bothered."

"You better read it," said Tom, stubbornly.

Kent sighed, and took the thing. He had expected some coded top secret dispatch from Central Headquarters. But it was nothing like that. It was from Tichi—and written out in plain language for all the world to see.

Dearest Kent:

I've got two things to tell you. And neither one is the sort of thing that can be put very well in schoolgirl slang.

(Kent blinked and looked at the first two sentences again. This didn't sound like Tichi.)

The first I might as well put down in plain words, since it isn't even an open secret around here any more. The Colonial Office has been keeping itself informed of how things have been going for you since the colony landed—and on the strength of what's happened so far alone, a Central Headquarter's Investigation has already been started. Apparently, this business is bigger than we thought. It seems that for some time now there's been a lot of public pressure from the Outer Planets on Central Headquarters—demanding that our supreme authorities clean house in the Colonial Office—and somebody has to be thrown to the wolves. They've made up their minds it's to be you.

There's one way out of this mess; and in defiance of all polite convention I'm naming it. That is that you marry me. As son-in-law of a Supreme Council Senator, you'd be too hot to handle, and they'd have to find some other scapegoat if they have to have one.

The second is this: Do you remember the birthday party I had when I was twelve years old? You came because you were a friend of Dad's and you brought me one of those big Centaurian dolls that walk around by themselves. I was too big for dolls and I was horribly embarrassed; but I loved you so much I hid the way I felt. That same party I got you alone and asked you to wait for me to grow up so I could marry you. And you laughed and said you would and gave me a phone chip and told me to call you up in half a dozen years if I still felt the same way. You were joking, but I wasn't. All my life you've acted as if I'd never grown up, and all my life I've loved you. Well, I have grown up and the six years have gone by. I'm using the phone chip—with a little extra, since you're farther away than you thought you'd be—

(Good lord! Six years already. Why that would make Tichi eighteen, thought Kent. It wasn't possible.)

—and now you know. I just want you to understand that I'm not offering this marriage deal in a burst of childish self-sacrifice. I want you more than anything in the Universe, and you're all I've ever wanted. I'm not a child, and I'm not shelteredly ignorant—I could even tell you a few things as far as *this* world goes. And—this will rock you back on your heels—Dad agrees with me. He thinks I'd be good for you, though he won't say a word to you about it.

I would never have said a word to you, my darling. I would have gone on playacting that I was the little girl in pigtails, if this investigation hadn't come up with only one way out of it. And now that it has, and I've spoken out, I'm almost glad; because whatever happens, at least now I know that you know. . . .

All my love

Tichi (PRSM .7:3 TKMarlowe, Wash.)

PROFOUNDLY disturbed, Kent folded the flimsy and put it in his pocket. Tichi eighteen! And this marriage stunt.

Why, damn it all, he was—how old was he now?—thirty-two . . . double her age. Who would have thought she felt like that!

"Any answer?" said Tom.

Shocked back to the present, Kent stared at him.

"No," he said, "No, Tom. No answer."

"I think maybe you ought to answer," said Tom. Kent's lips thinned angrily. This was the worst of living on a sparsely populated world where everybody knew your private business and felt himself qualified to pass judgment upon it.

"No!" he snapped explosively, and turned away toward Charlie.

"I'll be around in case you change your mind," said Tom behind his back.

Kent ignored him. He was leaning over Charlie's shoulder. The lean geologist felt his presence and turned a strained face away from his instruments.

"He hits the pitch oftener all the time," said Charlie. "It's a matter of holding it. I'll guess that if he can hold it steady for ten minutes we're done for."

"That bad!" said Kent.

"Can't you feel the vibration through your feet from the rock?" Kent hesitated.

"No," he said truthfully. Charlie wiped his forhead.

"Well, maybe it's my imagination," he said. "But I don't see how we've much time left."

"Oh? How much?" It was the clipped voice of Wonder Boy, who had just come up. Charlie turned toward him.

"At a guess," he said, "two hours at the most."

"Close," said the Wonder Boy, with a sharp jerk of his head. "Take us that long at least." Charlie, sweating under the hot sun, and worried, glared at the dapper young man.

"How do you manage to stay so cool?" he said.

"I?" said Wonder Boy, calmly, turning away. "Low blood presusre." And he was gone on his way to incite his crews to greater effort.

"What is it?" said Charlie, looking after him. "Has he got steel guts or is it that he just isn't human? You tell me, Kent."

Kent did not answer him. He was thinking what the investigating committee would do to him on the basis of the first blood he spilled, and looking out over the hollow. Down below, the settlement was silent and empty. The colonists had all gone to earth inside their buildings and the hills beyond were thick with watching Modorians. Kent made a quick estimate and whistled. There must be fifteen thousand of them waiting to see what happened now.

Kent hitched up his belt and started down the side of the hill.

"Where are you going?" called Charlie.

"Maker," called back Kent, without turning his head. "I'm going to delay him, if I can. If I can't—well, one way or another I'll give us time to get the equipment set up." And his hand went half-unconsciously to the holstered gun at his side.

Kent went down the hillside and into the as yet unpaved streets of the settlement. It was like walking into a ghost town. The doors of the buildings were shut and there was no sound of life from within. Tools near the uncompleted buildings lay scattered where they had been dropped, and the general scene gave an impression of a place long deserted.

But the impression was only a surface one. Beneath it, Kent could sense the deep terror of the colony. Fear panted soundlessly like the breathing of a hunted animal couched in its lair. He went quickly through the settlement and breasted the hill on the far side.

THE minute he came out on the hillside, he knew that something was wrong—but dared not hesitate; and so he was forced to figure it out as he walked forward. It was this that he

saw—there were too many Modorians between him and Maker.

When or how they had moved to cluster around the pit, he did not know. It was possible that they had been this way for some time, and he just had not noticed. It was equally possible that they had seen him start from Charlie's station and had moved while he was among the houses of the settlement. One way or another, they now barred his path—not obtrusively, but casually, by their very presence and closeness to one another.

He saw all this as he walked the thirty or more yards from the perimeter of the settlement to a spot about a third of the way up the hill, where their ranks started. They leaned on their spears, looking not at him, but down at the settlement and over at the crews toiling under the blazing heat of the afternoon sun. They did not move as he came toward them and he saw that they must either give way, or he must shove them aside, if he was to get through to Maker at all, for there was room, but not enough room to squeeze through, between them.

Yet he could not stop and wait. He must walk forward, assuming that they would give at the last minute. He was five steps away down the hill, then he was four, then three. . . .

He walked hard against the two foremost Modorians and rebounded from them as if they had been two statues. There was not even the yielding when he touched, that softer human flesh would have given.

It was only then that one of them deigned to notice him. The Modorian on his left tilted his head downward and his enormous eyes seemed to swim dizzingly before Kent's face.

"Man," he said. "Go back."

It was the final utterance. It was the conclusion, a statement beyond protest. The wild Modorians would not let him through. The knowledge that he had kept to himself ever since this conflict started had proved itself. The Modorians were individuals. Each one made up his mind for himself and they did not work together. But—and this Kent had realized silently in his heart—when the last came to the last, there was nothing to stop them all from getting the same idea and acting together, though independently. Each of the Modorians before him had made up his mind that he would not allow Maker to be interfered with. What did it matter that these were a hundred separate decisions, instead of one over-all conclusion? The result was the same.

He turned away and went back down the hillside, back through the settlement and back to Charlie and the Wonder Boy. His mouth was dry and his heart pounded in his chest so strongly that he could feel and seem to hear the thud of the blood in his ears, as he walked through the silent streets. For the first time, Kent was clearly, nakedly, and unequivocally, afraid.

The afternoon was well advanced and the sun was hot upon them.

"Feel it now?" said Charlie tautly.

"Thrumming," said the Wonder Boy. "A buzzing."

"The vibrations are growing as he holds the pitch longer," said Charlie.

"How much longer with the crews?" asked Kent.

"Minutes," said the Wonder Boy. "A few."

"There!" said Charlie. His face was taut and sweat glistened on it in little beads in the lines of his brow. "See the houses quiver."

Kent looked. The settlement shimmered slightly.

"They'll be coming out soon," said Charlie. "Maybe on the next tremor. I've seen people in houses during earthquakes before."

The sun beat down, long-angled rays now, late afternoon and hot. The faces of the men were ruddy in the glare. The heat waves danced.

"I don't get it," said Charlie. The vibration coming up through the rock seemed to get into his voice, so that it

appeared he buzzed the words in a monotone. "The Modorians. They'll go too. The whole area," said Charlie, "dozens of miles. Bound to collapse—Lord, you can hear it now."

They listened. Something was thrumming on the air. Was it the sound of Maker's bow, magnified and distorted by the great sounding board of the rock, or something else?

"I don't think they mind," said Kent. "The land will still be here."

"Yeah," said Charlie, hummingly, "the land."

The vibration was everywhere now. The rock, the air, the very individual molecules of each man's body seemed to dance to its tune. The eye struggled to focus and failed. Vision played tricks. The solid ground seemed to ripple and wave like water.

"They're coming out of the buildings," said Charlie, as if from a long distance off.

A weak, distant and ragged cheer came to their ears.

"Number two's hooked up," clipped Wonder Boy, his voice now strangely torn and distorted.

"Good," gasped Kent. "What about the others?"

"Coming in," vibrated Wonder Boy. "There go five and seven."

KENT tilted his head and fought his eyes to a fleeting focus on the settlement below. The colonists had indeed come out of their buildings, but the vibrations must be stronger down there, for they seemed unable to stand. They were lying flat and some were crawling. Faint screams came drifting up to the three men, wailing and distant.

The ground was really moving now. It seemed to swell and retreat under their feet and even up here on the hillside the men had to struggle to keep upright.

"One, three, four and six," buzzed Wonder Boy, distantly. He was standing over the master controls, and holding on.

The wailing from the shifting mass of color that was the village below was like the sounds from Dante's Inferno. The vibration tore and ground with angry fingers as if it would shake human flesh from human bones. Dust began to rise everywhere in great clouds, filling the air.

"—and all the rest," said Wonder Boy conclusively. "Now I'll throw the power in." His hands quivered, dancingly, as he fought with the master controls.

A new note swelled up to them from the torn and shaken ground beneath their feet. Unheard, but felt, it rose up like a wall to meet the tidal wave of vibration from Maker's instrument and the two clashed and fell to worrying each other like monstrous dogs. In their meeting and conflict there was no relief, for the earth still shook, but raggedly now, and out of tune.

"Hold on!" yelled Charlie thinly through the gathering storm of vibration, clinging valiently to his instruments, calling to Wonder Boy. It was the ancient human battle cry in modern words. "Hold on! You're stopping him!" And Wonder Boy, clinging limpet-like to his own controls, echoed it back.

"I'm holding!"

Dust clouds rose more thickly from the quivering ground, isolating each one from the rest by a burning, opaque yellow cloud. The counter-vibrations screamed and fought, the world reeled, and then—

A break, a sudden lessening in the battle.

"Quit it!" yelled Charlie, lost in the dust. "He's stopped."

Abruptly, silence and peace returned. And they were so welcome and strange after the battle that for a moment the shaken people could not believe them and felt them somehow unreal. Then they pulled themselves together and stared through the thinning haze.

"Don't move until the dust rises," said Charlie.

VII

LIKE mist from the face of a magic mirror that draws aside like a veil in fairy stories to reveal unknown things, the dust thinned and passed from the face of the hollow and the distant rim of watching hills. Like a ghost growing solid and more real, the settlement came back into being before their watching eyes, the marked out streets, the buildings, the weather pylons; and it was all there, all standing and all whole.

In the streets a few people wandered dazedly, but all seemed to be on their feet and none were hurt.

Kent lifted his eyes from this to the hills beyond where, rank on rank and spears in hand, the Modorians still stood immovable and inscrutable. If any had fallen during the battle, they had gotten up again. And they waited now.

"I guess," said Kent. "It's up to me."

He went away down the hillside, loosening his gun in its holster by his side. He stepped into the settlement, and walked along its streets where the people gave him a wide berth. And he came out on the hill beyond, where the phalanx of wild Modorians had shielded Maker from him before.

They were still there; and he walked toward them.

They parted before him.

He walked through. He climbed up the narrow lane between them with the tall grey figures on each side no more than an arm's length away. He came to a little open space on the high ground around the pit, where Maker stood alone, his weapon below and behind him, glittering like some discarded toy in the rays of the late afternoon sun, gazing on the settlement below.

"Well, Maker?" said Kent, halting before him.

The Modorian did not answer, nor look down at him. His great dark eyes ate up the settlement and nothing else.

"Well, Maker?" repeated Kent, more loudly, his voice sounding blatant and huge in the silence of the waiting grey-furred crowd around them. Silence stretched out and tenseness grew brittle and thin between them. Then, slowly, without moving, the Modorian spoke.

"I will turn aside for no man, or men," he said—and, as if the words had been a talisman, he turned swiftly, his great body cat-like with the sinuous grace of his race, and flung himself at Kent, his steely arms wrapping around the man, crushing him, hurling him down the hillside.

The crowd, the ground, the rocks, the sky, whirled in one mad maelstrom around Kent as he went tumbling down the hillside between the leaping grey-furred legs of the Modorian host, and fighting for his life. The ground beat at his body with many hammers. Maker's arms crushed the breath from him and he struggled to free his right arm and draw his gun.

Hopelessly, instinctively, he fought during that wild fall down the hillside, knowing Maker was more than a physical match for any man that lived, knowing the odds were against him, but fighting anyhow. And, by some miracle, he did it; his arm came free, his hand closed about the gun butt; and, as they rolled at last toward a stop in the smothering yellow dust their fall had raised, on the level ground at the bottom of the hill, he shoved the muzzle hard against the rock-hard Modorian's side, and squeezed the button, twice.

ONCE more they rolled, through sheer momentum, but when they came at last to a standstill, Maker did not move, but lay limp and heavy above him. Kent fought for breath and was suddenly aware of hands that pulled the grey-furred body free.

It came away above him and he looked up to see Charlie and the Wonder Boy.

"You hurt, Kent?" cried Charlie.

"Guns!" croaked Kent, desperately, struggling to his feet and turning to face the dust cloud that obscured the hillside in front of him. "They're coming! Get out your guns!"

He faced into the wavering dust pall, his gun weaving in his hand, and the other two, tense suddenly with the implication of his words, snatched out their sidearms and stood beside him, knowing the futility of their stand, three men against thousands of Modorians, but not knowing what else to do, and acting with the direct instinct of desperation.

So they stood, expecting each next second to be their last. And the dust pall thinned before them, revealing the hillside. Even after it was gone, they still stood tense for a long minute, after all the fear and labor of the past hours, unable to trust their eyes. Then, wonderingly, they put their guns back and looked at each other as if for enlightenment.

For the slope was empty before them and the hilltops beyond were clearing like the bottom of a pond when a school of minnows melts away from a spot where the food has all been eaten. The wild Modorians with the strange understandable logic of their kind, were giving up, were retreating to the barren reaches yet untouched by man, were going away for good and leaving the human settlement alone.

KENT stood on the hillside the next morning, beside his waiting flyer, and looked down on the settlement below. To the eye it was as peaceful as it had ever been. The terrors, the troubles, the host of threatening Modorians had vanished like the night and the hills were wide and empty above it. Buildings were going up and streets were being surfaced. The weather pylons were working at last, and an artificial climate held the little hollow. Far below him he could see colonists thronging the streets in light tunics and kilts, and among them the occasional rough clothing of a prospector.

Kent grinned. One of those would certainly be Branch, for all Peter Lawrence might have to say about it. But the others would be men who three days ago were ready to turn their guns against the people they talked with. Still, their change of attitude was inevitable. Like calls to like with the strongest call in the Universe, and the men below were starved for male and female companionship and the social structure of their kind. For them the settlement was a small bit of the Earth they longed for. They would intermarry, and in time, settle down, as the civilized portions of the planet were extended.

Kent shook his head, and a sudden realization came to him of the inevitability of the whole proceeding. The situation which had loomed so large yesterday, now appeared as an incident, doomed to be forgotten in time as the march of civilization went on. He grinned a little ruefully. Now that it was all over, he felt completely useless. Modorian and colonist alike had turned away from him to their own small immediate affairs—and Maker was dead.

He frowned a little, remembering. Now that the heat had gone from his mind, he could look back and wonder on the chance that had enabled him to survive—first, the embrace of a full grown male Modorian and second, a tumble down a sixty-foot slope. The whole thing was a little too good to be true. Now, looking back on it, realization came to him. There had been no miracle about his winning. The Modorian had failed, and having failed, wanted to die. He had merely put the taking of his life in Kent's hands.

Kent was suddenly very weary. The smallness of his own importance—even to the people nominally under his control—and the greatness of the Universe came back to him. What if the Colonial Representative had been someone else? What if Maker had won and the Colonists had died? The end would have been the same. In the long run the individualist always loses to the organization. What difference whether Maker or Kent wins? Man will win, and Modorian lose—as far as the races are concerned, when the last chips are add-

ed up on each side.

Kent moved slightly, and the flimsy Tom had given him crackled in his pocket. He took it out, unfolded it and looked again at Tichi's words. The investigation committee—well, they could do little to him now, the way things had turned out. Tichi—that was something else. . . .

The great aching nostalgia of the space-weary came over him. Sooner or later everybody feels it and turns toward his home. Earth's green hills were pretty much of a myth now, as the sprawling cities ate up the open space —but there was yet a little of stream and forest and mountain untouched, and Kent felt in his heart a longing for them, too deep to be expressed.

There was nothing more for him to do here. The great first fight was over and the rest of history here would be a succession of niggling brawls and troubles. Why bother with it, when what he wanted of Earth was his for the asking?

And Tichi?

Kent laughed suddenly, out loud, at himself.

"I'm an old man," he said, to the empty Modorian landscape. "It's high time I retired."

Still chuckling, he swung himself into the flyer, drove it up off the ground and across the hollow to where Tom was setting up a subsidiary communications center.

"Hi!" said the Communications man, popping out of the half-constructed building as Kent set the flyer down.

"Hi, Tom," said Kent, "you can send an answer to that message for me now."

Tom's homely face grinned.

"Right," he said. "What'll I say?"

"Just say everything's all right and that I'm coming home."

"That's all?" asked Tom. Kent frowned.

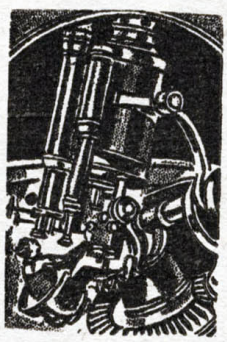
"Add 'love' to that,"he said.

Tom still lingered.

"Nothing more, Kent?"

"Oh, hell!" said Kent, climbing back into his flyer. "Tell her I've just become convinced of the inevitability of things. That should keep her busy wondering—unless she starts putting her own interpretation on it.

"—but that's just what she'll probably do," he muttered half pessimistically to the controls. Smiling, he slammed the door of the flyer behind him and lifted the machine into the air. Into the bright sky of morning, Kent Harmon headed east—and home. . . .



COMING HOME

THE bright blue star that was earth hung warm and clear in the sights of his ship as Blake Martin returned home, mission accomplished.

And the stark fear that was his only thought hung black and screaming in his mind as he sat tensed in his seat in the tiny cabin.

Martin, earth's ninth spaceman, was bringing back the answer that he had been flung into the void to obtain.

He pulled his gaze away from the port, lurched upright and scraped his way around the cabin, drawn into jerky activity by his leaping nerves, raw and nagging. The noise of his movements was loud in the ghostly silence of the ship needling its way through space.

It was the third ship. Two others had roared their way into the heavens impelled by pillars of flame and the yearning stares of men who longed for the stars.

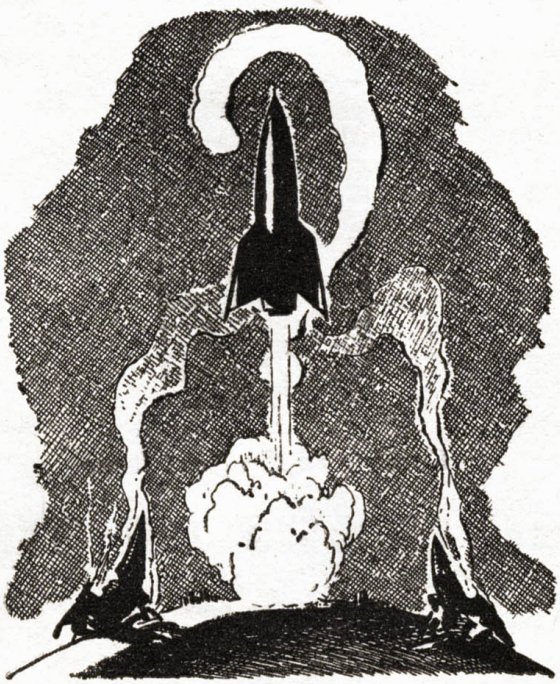
The first space craft, with its crew of five, had never returned. Humanity, restless under the bonds of gravity and with minds longing for space, wondered —speculated. Possibly the lonely winds of some desolate Martian plain were keening through its ruins, or was it a drifting sepulchre in the blackness of the void?

A second ship was rushed to completion, a smaller craft, with three men for its crew. Once more the radio speakers of the world, the flickering video screens and the front page banners followed man's path up through the clouds—out of the atmosphere—beyond the moon—and into silence.

That ship had returned. First, as a blip on the radar scope, then as a speck in the telescope, as a growing spot in the sky—and finally as a screaming tapered rocket glowing with friction.

There had been no fire, no explosion when the ship ripped its way onto the earth, shearing a stabilizer here, flinging a rocket tube there, and grinding to a stop in a warped snarl of metal on the

How could he tell them the secret of space ?



By JOHN R. MARSHALL

bleak stretch of desert sand.

When the jeeps, the crash trucks and the ambulances had lurched to a stop beside the wreck, the rescuers, empty of hope, were able to enter the jagged rents in the hull.

And the first man in was the first man out again, leaning slumped against a ragged stabilizer, retching into the sand, his eyes glazed with horror.

A cordon of soldiers was hastily organized, but it was too late. Too many had seen. The word was out. Mankind had made its first contact with that which awaited it somewhere in the depths of space—made the contact, and lost it in the same moment as the crash of space ship number two.

For the crew which had brought the ill-fated craft screaming through the atmosphere to shred on the arid desert flats was not the crew which had taken it away!

The battered, broken remains they had found were not the bodies of humans.

Three unknown, unearthly beings had brought back the ship from space, had followed the backtrail through the void and then, apparently, lost control.

Martin, following that same trail back now, remembered the headlines. And each one had a question mark. "Men From Mars?" "Monsters From the Stars?" "Friends or Enemies?"

Earth was wrapped in a question mark. Where was Masterson, the gaunt-faced captain of the second ship? Where were Jacobs and Glazoff? Where was the first crew?

Speculation and fear rippled back and forth across the globe that had hung in space so long, alone. Some looked upon their own form—found it good and called for no more ventures into space.

But others wanted the answer, and they were willing to work for it. Slowly the funds were obtained and the third space ship, smaller still, took form, its nose pointing into the sky.

Then came a day when Blake Martin strapped himself into a hammock and heard the intonation of the firing signal rasp metallic from the speaker over the instrument panel.

It was his to reason why. He, alone, was to find the answers. Where had the three men met the other beings? They had been aiming for Mars. Was it there that they met the race of transparent-skinned creatures with the blunt, prehensile tentacles and the virtually formless features?

Science said no. Speaking from the authority of the laboratories, gesticulating with the dissecting instruments and gesturing with test tubes, science said the beings were not adapted to the conditions on Mars.

Those strange beings who had so illogically piloted the space ship to its ruins, their appendages so ill-suited to its controls, were actually an ideal form for life on earth, they said.

And Martin blurred into an empty black-out as he accelerated out into space to find the answers.

Now, speeding back to the spinning ball that was home, he knew them, had the information wanted by a space-hungry humanity.

Earth's ninth spaceman, slumped in the hammock and staring at the bulkhead, knew the truth—the horrible, soul-searing truth.

HE NOW knew what had happened to Masterson, Jacobs and Glazoff, and thought he knew what had happened to the first crew. And as the thought seared his mind he moaned with the agony of it, with the enormity of it.

It was too much for one man alone to bear, too much to expect. He wavered upright and moved toward the port, his eyes on the growing earth.

He felt a race of humans looking up into the skies, aching for the stars, reaching for the impossible. And how could he tell them? How could he even face them and watch the longing on their faces change to horror?

It was then he knew, not only the answer to what had happened to the others

before him, but why it had happened. He knew all there was to know. He knew why the second space ship had arrowed true for earth, to fall screaming, burning through the air to crash.

He forced himself to make one last attempt to convey his message to those who awaited below. He pulled his half empty log book forward and reached for a pencil. But he could not pick it up. He fumbled with it again and it rolled sideways off the panel and skittered out across the cabin.

Martin fell into the seat and watched earth visibly growing beyond the cross-haired circle in the port. He watched the continents taking shape and the blue seas flinging back the sun.

The planet's circle expanded, leaped towards him. He fired the steering rockets and aimed for home.

There was noise now, the whining of atmosphere, rising, climbing into a crescendo. There was still time to pull the third space ship out into an approach.

But the ninth spaceman knew now what had gone before, and he acted.

The decision had been with him all along, imprinted in his mind—he knew now—far back there in the void, in the awesome, deep blackness between the stars. He had known what he would have to do ever since he had discovered what space had in store for the creature that escaped from the protecting grip of its own planet.

Space itself, the great, living, energy-spawning mother of the stars had revealed the mystery.

The ninth spaceman reached out a stumpy tentacle and pushed home the main firing switch. His bloated head jerked back on his transparent-skinned neck as the rockets blasted.

The ninth spaceman was returning home to join Masterson, Jacobs and Glazoff in the test tube tombs of the earth's laboratories.

The Aliae charged in ranks

Carmody may have been a bookworm, but only a bookworm would know why . . .

Even the Bright Gods Must Die

By D. W. BAREFOOT

IT WAS a rough deal.

The chances of connecting violently with even a lone meteorite are scanty. The odds are astronomical against meeting a brace of the beasts within a matter of seconds. But it happened to the *Electra.*

She was in the first shreds of atmosphere, forty miles above the grim terrain of Cailloux 3, with everything shipshape and Bristol fashion for the landing. The usual bull session was going on in the messroom, with Perkins expounding his favorite subject:

"Now take those colonial girls on Altair 5." His eyes were bright with remembrance. "Along about the second or

third generation, they seem to acquire—well, a gentleman can only call it a sort of remarkable endurance, a stamina, let us say—"

Charlie Carmody broke in, marking his place in Wittelstein's *Extra-Terrestrial Mythology* with a stained forefinger. "What's Madge going to say about this part-time harem of yours if someone talks out of turn, Perk? She just *might* not happen to like it."

Perkins shrugged. "Madge is not what one might call 'naif,' if I may so put it."

"You may so put it," said Charlie indifferently. "Still, she could have that forsaking-all-others idea kicking around somewhere in her subconscious."

Perkins flashed a contemptuous smile as Carmody's skinny shoulders hunched over his beloved book. "It might be a good thing if *you'd* cultivate a healthy interest in the ladies, Charlie, and leave that everlasting mythology on the shelf for a while."

"That's right," broke in a fresh voice. It was Graham, the bull-necked young crew psychologist. "It's not healthy, Charlie. If you carry it to extremes, you're bound to start identifying yourself with some mythical protagonist. Such a reaction can't possibly have a single shred of survival value."

Graham's authority put an unintended bite into the casual words. They stung. Slowly Charlie closed his book and straightened the upper half of his gaunt six feet. "Listen, you guys. Do you know why I sold myself into a year's bondage ferrying ore and trade goods around this stinking Magellanic cloud? Because I'll earn enough to go back to school and finish, that's why. It means an M.A. in Anthropology to me. As for this—" he tapped the book—"I've got my thesis all mapped out. 'Correlations of the Solar Myth in Non-Humanoid Societies.' If you don't like it, that's tough. My heart bleeds for you."

"Just the same, Charlie—" Graham said.

"Just the same, nuts to you and your brand new sheepskin. I've a hunch you concentrated a little too much on Symbological Calculus, and not enough on plain old behaviorism. I'm adjusting in *my* way. Sure, put away my books! In a month I'd be crossing off days on the calendar, and holding spirited conversations with myself."

"Maybe you're right, Charlie," said Perkins unexpectedly. He winked syly at Graham. "Speaking of the Solar Myth, now—ever hear of the Seiruf?" He spelled it out, aware that Carmody, who had become attentive, was now at his mercy. "Pete Brannan—you know Pete—was on that cartographic expedition to Coma Berenice. Well, they made a landing on some Godforsaken chunk of iron and mud to make minor repairs." He stopped talking to load a battered briar, tamping the tobacco down with careful efficiency.

Carmody simultaneously lost his patience and the contest. "For Pete's sake go on, Perk!"

"Take it easy, boy." Perkins exhaled luxuriously. "That's better. Anyway, it seems the inhabitants—a saurian type—have a pretty good approximation of the Solar Myth."

"If you don't mind, Perk," said Graham. He was frowning thoughtfully.

"Just a minute, doc. They had their bright god and an evil opposite, like, say—Seb in the Egyptian line-up."

"I get it," said Carmody eagerly. "It's the same deal, Ormazd and Ahriman, Indra and Vritra. Crops up everywhere. Go on."

Graham cleared his throat, and Perk shot him a warning glance before continuing. "They've a hero, of course, a sort of local Sigurd, who performs impossible tasks. He's being hunted down by everything in sight. But finally he calls down the thunderbolts of the gods on his enemies, and marries a sister product of the same clutch of eggs of which he was originally a member, if you follow me."

Charlie drew a long breath. "Has this been written up, Perk?"

"Nope. Professor Cordell of Pennsyl-

vania was the anthropologist on that trip. Some natives ate him."

Charlie was on his feet. "I'll be back as soon as I find my notebook." The last three words came from outside the messroom. There was a momentary silence.

"And they hunted down the hero," said Graham softly. "How did you spell the name of that outfit, Perk?"

Perkins repeated it.

"I thought so," said Graham. "You just spelled 'furies' backward. The year I drooled away in fine arts wasn't entirely wasted, I guess." He leveled an accusing finger. "Tell me it's a coincidence, and a thunderbolt will strike you."

PERKINS' GRIN was unabashed. "I just couldn't resist the opportunity, doc. Did you notice how he lapped it up? Wide-eyed is the word, yes indeed. The *mot juste,* as I'm told they say in France. Right now that laddie believes firmly in Santa Claus."

"He's not going to like this sort of ribbing, Perk."

"Losing his temper won't alter cases, and he knows it," said Perkins. "It's just a gag, and it won't hurt or help anyone. It's all in fun."

The ship was now well into atmosphere. In the control room Captain Jevons was directing the landing procedures with casual efficiency, one ear cocked for the rapid-fire bulletins from the observation blister in the stern dorsal fin. He was a stout, quiet little man, in his early fifties, which represented virtual old age in what was essentially a young man's game. Hawkins, the saturnine first astrogator, was lolling in his padded chair, technically on duty, but with nothing to do. Young Caldwell, a ruddy-faced awkward cadet, was watching the radarscope.

A pip appeared suddenly on the scope, and Caldwell cleared his throat nervously.

"Just a meteorite, Frank," said the captain softly. "No cause for alarm."

There was a clicking of relays as the repulsor screen built up, but the pip in the center of the scope held its position. Hawkins sitrred in his seat. "Must be a whopper, sir!" He frowned uneasily.

More relays. Emergency power, now, and the ship, descending stern first along her longitudinal axis, moved oddly sideways as the inevitable reaction forced her slightly from her path. The pip was moving slowly off center, away from its collision course. The three men relaxed almost visibly. Like a giant elevator, the *Electra* sank slowly downward on her cushioning jets.

The second pip shot onto the scope laterally. There was a curious momentary shiver as the ship tried to move in opposite directions simultaneously. Then the repulsors blew out in a tinkle of shattering tubes and overloaded generators as the second meteorite shot completely through the *Electra* in less time than a man can gasp.

Jevons grabbed the intercom. From amidships came the muffled clang of airtight doors and the descending whine of a giant gyro losing revs. The captain's voice was tense. "How much damage, Burns?" Even while he spoke, he could feel the wavering as the *Electra* commenced precessing. Brief thunder roared as the lateral jets brought her back. Then the engineer's voice came tinnily through the loudspeaker. "All feed lines for even-numbered jets completely wrecked. Number one gyro done for and number three partly disabled."

"Can you set her down, Burns?"

"Maybe. I'll try. Can't promise anything."

"And, Burns—how many men caught it?"

"Five, sir. The second assistant and an oiler were servicing the gyros. The other three were in a holed compartment."

"Um—I see. Do your best, Burns."

"Yes, sir."

Burns did his best, but it wasn't quite good enough. The *Electra* came through the cloud layer in fairly stable equilibrium, and got within two thousand feet of the ground before her luck ran out. First

the overloaded power—leads to the damaged gyro disappeared in an oily puff of burning insulation. A few seconds later the lateral jets decided to call it a day. She buckled amidships as her stern dug into solid rock. Bulkheads crumpled, girders snapped. Dust billowed around the shattered hulk, settling quickly in the damp air, and somewhere a man screamed a throat-tearing scream that pinched off into aching silence.

Burns was the first man out of the ship. He crawled out of the gaping rent amidships and climbed shakily to his feet. Holcomb, a middle-aged, tobacco-chewing Tennesseean, followed him, sticking to the engineer's heels like a lost pup seeking solace. Then the forward airlock clanged, and Captain Jevons, his uniform jacket spattered with blood from a scalp wound, dropped awkwardly to the ground. Graham, Carmody, and Perkins were close behind him.

Jevons cursed softly as he took rapid stock of the situation. Carmody gulped nervously. The others were silent, grim-faced.

THE ELECTRA had crashed inside a courtyard, a great square with walls thirty feet high. She lay athwart one corner, her stern buried under tons of shattered granite blocks, her bow just clear of the adjoining leg of the perimeter enclosure.

In the center of the court was the bulk of a massive ziggurat, a seemingly solid mass of cunning masonry whose truncated top towered fully three hundred feet into the air. A narrow ramp angled around and around the great pile, climbing steadily from base to crest.

Jevons turned. "Perkins and Graham, search the ship for any other survivors. Report as rapidly as possible." The two men climbed back into the *Electra*. Jevons looked at the others speculatively. "Holcomb, you're new to the Lesser Magellanic stars, aren't you? For your benefit, I'll sum up briefly. We're in a tough spot. As you've likely guessed, this is a temple, the main one in the Niflheim Area, and the natives are extremely touchy about it. The lifeboat port is accessible, but we couldn't make it back to Prime Base on Colchis 5 in any event. And, of course, we can't communicate over such a distance. Lastly, there isn't a hope that they'll start looking for us in less than a month."

"Thank Heavens," said Burns gravely, "I had the rare good sense to pay up my insurance. And a pretty penny it was, too."

Jevons looked surprised, then irritated. "This isn't very funny, Burns. It's not like you to crack jokes which are in very poor taste under the circumstances."

"I wasn't trying to be funny, sir." Burns' blunt Scottish face was beet red at the reproof.

"Sir?" It was Holcomb.

"Yes?"

"Where are all these dang natives, if they're so all-fired anxious about their church?"

The captain smiled sourly. "I'll be glad to brief you on that a little later, Holcomb. We've only got a few hours to get organized, so chewing the rag can wait a while." He turned at the sound of footsteps. Perkins and Graham—alone.

"Just us, sir," said Graham in answer to the unspoken question. The rest are goners. And that's not all. The lifeboat's only good for a half-hour in the air. There's no fuel except in the emergency supply. I always said it was daffy—having the lifeboat tanks cross-connected to the ships main tanks. A lifeboat's like a woman or gun, when you need one you need it right away."

Jevons whitened. "So. Well, gentlemen, we haven't anything much but sidearms, and if we try to defend the *Electra* they'll build a bonfire around her and toast us like marshmallows. Carmody, you—Carmody! Snap out of it, man!"

Carmody had been staring at the cloudbank high overhead, and the distant flickers of lightning around the peaks that ringed the great valley. The captain's sharp tones jolted him into

sudden alertness.

"Yes, sir!"

"Quit mooning. You and Holcomb get all the guns and ammunition and explosives out of the ship. Perkins and Graham, you take care of food and medical supplies. There's only one entrance into the ziggurat. It'll make a nice fort, provided we blast away the first forty or fifty feet of the outside ramp. Let's take a look inside, Burns. Don't worry about arms now; we won't need 'em for several hours yet."

He headed for the opening into the temple, with Burns close behind him. The others climbed back into the ship.

Jevons walked through the massive door with its lintel formed of a solid block of stone, and stopped just inside. In the sudden hush he was aware of Burns' harsh breathing. The air was musty, sodden with perennial dampness, freighted with the dead echoes of countless centuries. Even Burns, though not an overly sensitive man, was conscious of a sudden uneasiness. He could assign no reason—no physical reason—and shrugged nervously. Voltmeters, generators, a mike with verniers, these things Burns understood, and loved. Not the other things, the shadowy abstracts, the small quiet fear in the dark corner, not even the ropes of words with which other men played. He shrugged again.

JEVONS was peering through the murky half-light that filtered down from the square opening high overhead. As his eyes grew used to the gloom, he turned to Burns in triumph. "I knew it. They always have one." And as Burns stood there silently, "Where are your eyes, man? Don't you see it?"

"Only some heathenish shrine," said the engineer dourly, "housing an unseemly and unchristian idol."

"The spring, I mean," Jevons answered impatiently. "A lovely, inexhaustible supply of fresh water."

"Oh—aye, for the siege," said Burns. "It'll be handy, I don't doubt."

The water bubbled up into a two-foot cup squarely in front of the shrine, trickled along a trough cut into the blocks of the floor for a few yards, and disappeared down a drain.

Jevons glanced once more at the carved figures in the shrine, and shivered. One was a globe, a stylized, intricately adorned sunburst; the other a native Aliae. It stood there, a six-foot figure of some glossy black stone, coldly implacable, radiating an icy, alien assurance. Only the upright carriage was humanoid. The segmented body, the extra intermediate arms, and the great mandibles were something out of a nightmare. The forward limbs were raised overhead in an attitude of triumph. Stop it, said Jevons to himself. Quit reading menace into anything outside your own environmental background. Quit wallowing like a peasant in completely subjective, completely anthropomorphic reactions. Now, of all times. And yet—and yet—

Boots clattered over the granite. The others crowded through the doorway, and came to a standstill in unison while their eyes adjusted to the gloom. They stacked their cargo of food and supplies along the nearest wall, commenting unfavorably on their predicament, their profession, and the entire Magellanic cloud. Graham cursed when his toe and a carton dropped by Perkins tried to occupy the same space. Tension built up. In the distance thunder growled.

Jevons' voice cut through the bickering. Okay, boys. Let's go easy. Burns and Holcomb, take as much H.E. as you need, and blast away a good section of the outside ramp—twenty or thirty feet at least." He paused, eying the interior ramp, a twin to the one slated for partial demolition. "We'll mine the base of this one, and store our supplies about halfway up. Drums of water, too, at least a couple of hundred gallons. Then if these overgrown pismires do get inside, we'll blast the base and make our stand at the top."

"Ya-hoooo!" It was Holcomb, giving voice to the same war cry that had

swelled from the throats of his ancestors at Chancellorsville and the Wilderness, back through the corridor of years. It seemed to shatter the tautness like a spell.

"If we don't come through," cried Perkins, "we ought to carve a sign for the tourists, and I've got it. 'The Cailloux Alamo.' " Even Burns was laughing.

"We'll come through, somehow, even if it looks bad right now," said Carmody, confidently. "After all, Ulysses did. Why, he—"

"We know, we know," said Jevons, smiling, "but save it for your memoirs. Right now we've got work to do."

OUTSIDE the slow day dawned, and the lightning stabbed fitfully at the far-off granite crests. Within the ziggurat, men worked, and sweated, and worked some more. Supplies, and more supplies, and finally it was done.

Jevons sat down heavily on a case of rations and mopped at his neck with a sodden bandanna. He glanced out at the brightening morning and said, to no one in particular, "About four hours until noon. They'll come at us then."

"Chief, how come it's so bright?" Holcomb asked. "It never was dark at all, and now look at it. Fog's near burnt off. Don't they get no good honest night?"

"Not at this time of year," said Jevons. "First of all, this Cailloux system is a binary."

"Yeah, chief, I know. A double star. Cain't tell me things ain't simpler with just one, though."

"I agree. Well, there are two suns, a red giant and a white dwarf."

"Like Mira," said Graham.

"Exactly. Cailloux discovered the system a century ago. He called the red giant Cailloux Alpha, the other one Cailloux Beta. This planet comes sailing in from way-to-hell-and-gone out in space, loops around Alpha and heads back out again. Right now we're smack in between Alpha and Beta, at perihelion of an extremely elongated orbit. And that's how come we didn't have any real darkness. It's sunset for Alpha when it's sunrise for Beta. And it'll be good and hot later in the day. A hundred and forty or more, and believe me, that's hot for here. Get it?"

"We-e-ell."

"At the other end of its orbit, the planet's well away from both suns. Regular night and day then, and steady cold. There's just one thing more."

"Go on, chief. After all, it ain't as if I didn't like stars."

"This planet has one moon. Its disk is too small to totally eclipse Cailloux Alpha, but it has no trouble at all with a dwarf like Beta. Furthermore, its orbit is so rigged that there's a total eclipse of Beta at perihelion, about four hours from now. That's when the natives get in their high jinks."

"Exactly," said Carmody, excitedly. "Just like the ancient Chinese banging gongs to help save the bright god from defeat. Africa, the same way, and in the jungles of Deneb 4, and Aldebaran 8. The same old Solar Myth. You can't get away from it."

"I suppose so," said Jevons heavily. "But it will take more than banging on gongs to help us, I'm afraid. Can you take a two-hour watch, Perkins, while the rest of us catch some shuteye? After that, we'll have a hearty break—er, I mean, we'll eat."

THEY all came through the attack except Burns. Burns of the dour smile, the way with engines, and the soft heart. Burns of the paid-up insurance.

It started with a distant thumping, muted, almost below the threshold of hearing. Graham noticed it first, from his post at the barricade.

"Curtain's about to go up, men," he announced. "Action stations for the third act."

They clustered 'round.

"What's that racket, Doc?" asked Holcomb.

"Stone drums. They play 'em at their rituals, too—such as sacrifices."

Holcomb gulped. "Sacrifices? Why that's downright heathen. What do they do?"

"Well, there isn't a lot of data, for obvious reasons," said Graham, "but for certain crimes, and sacrilege is one of them, they practice a sort of piecemeal evisceration."

"You mean, cuttin' people up?"

"Exactly. These things die hard, and they'll probably be pretty disappointed at the speed with which we cash in our chips."

"Lucky I had some ammo made for this," said Jevons' voice. He spun the cylinder of the ancient Colt as he spoke. "Maybe a .45 slug will have some effect on their vitality."

The drumming had grown gradually louder, and now the chattering and snapping of orders in the staccato Aliae tongue were plainly audible.

Something moved from behind a hillock—closer. Outlined in the glare was a six-foot figure. Its faceted eyes glittered in the light like frozen gem fire. With machine-like precision it came to a halt about ten feet from the barricade, and waited.

The burly young crew psychologist stepped forward, clearing his throat. It was an interesting performance. Graham had spent two years on linguistics. In other words he had gone deeply into semiotic with the exception of pure semantics and pure syntactics.

Here is one stumbling block, one out of many. Human vocal cords cover a range of sounds that is numbered in hundreds, although any given language contains only a scant two dozen or so. When extra-terrestrial tongues are considered, chaos ensues, the utter limit being reached at either the sub or supersonic range. Babel was a picnic compared to space travel.

Graham did his best. Painfully, laboriously, he spoke in a series of clicks and grunts. The native listened impassively, with a detachment that almost seemed to make it an impersonal observer. Then it answered in a single pizzicato sentence so resembling a burst from a typewriter that Jevons, for one, felt an insane desire to laugh. Graham jabbered in return. But the native turned abruptly away, and stalked off.

As the tall figure vanished behind the granite knoll, Graham scrambled back inside. "It's no use," he said gloomily. "I thought not. It didn't come to parley, only to tell us that we were under sentence of death. Part of their ethics, I suppose. Fair warning, so to speak."

"They thought we were gods last time," said Jevons, "though I always had the feeling that they felt terror and hatred toward us."

"They certainly do now," Graham answered. "They're worked up to a lovely degree. Some of that boy's spiel didn't quite jell. Why should he keep saying 'even the bright gods must die,' or something like that?"

Carmody swivelled toward him. "How's that again? The bright gods? But we're—"

There was a sudden outburst of drumming in the distance.

"Look out," shouted Perkins, "here they come!"

The Aliae charged in ranks with weapons brandished overhead, their priests clacking orders in the background. Again Graham tried in vain to parley, to shape the harsh dialect into placatory sentences.

But suddenly the expressionless obsidian faces were looming at the makeshift sheet iron barricade, and it was blasters, and carbines, and an heirloom Colt against javelins and mandibles. Time in a jumble; action seen as slow motion; cursing men against ebon Aliae, and that taint of powder mingling with the acid stench of the enemy. And then the swinging arm—someone remembered, someone—and the boom of the goldberged dynamite bomb. The black wave fell back. Not all of it. One figure came over the barricade, the twin sickles of its natural armament clashing in the bloody ruin of its face, and Burns was down. Then it was clubbed carbines and

a flurry of action soon over.

Burns tried to speak, but the words bubbled in his torn throat. He tried again, his eyes glazing as life spurted from the tattered artery, spurted—trickled—stopped.

Holcomb's choked voice broke the silence, "Shore was a good guy." He brushed a sleeve across his eyes, and cleared his throat. It was Burns' epitaph. There were few bugles in the Lesser Magellanic clouds.

JEVONS was out cold, stunned by a glancing blow from a ricocheting javelin. Carmody doused him with water from the spring, ignoring his own cuts. The captain climbed shakily to his feet. His eyes fell on Burns, and his normally ruddy face turned chalk white.

"After thirty years," he muttered, half to himself. "We came out of the Academy together. Ah, well"—and bracing himself with a visible effort—"what's done is done. We've got the living to worry about. Anybody got any ideas?"

"I've got one," said Perkins. "It's just a sort of little, fledgling half-baked idea, though. Let's look over the scene outside. If any of those animated nightmares are alive, we might—just might—be able to use them for hostages."

"Not a prayer," Graham cut in. "I did a paper on those babies when I was in school. Captives are considered to be dead. They're like that island people that sank under the Pacific in 2213, the Japanese."

"Here's a thought," said Carmody slowly. He glanced out of the doorway into the harsh glare, and blinked. "There's still the lifeboat, you know. We could take off—in the event—" his voice trailed off. It was the first open admission of hopelessness.

"Well," said Jevons heavily, "it would get us out of the Niflheim Area, anyway. Not that it would be much improvement. The Aliae are all over the planet. But we'll do it if we have to, and scatter when we land."

"Cap'n!" It was Holcomb's slow drawl. "How come they call this valley Sniffletime? Mighty funny name, seems like."

It was Carmody's cue. "Niflheim. It was the misty half of the world in the Norse Edda. The ancient myths, that is, of Norway, and actually, all of Scandinavia. The other half—"

"Stow it," said Jevons irritably. "Let's think of now."

Graham glanced commiseratingly at Carmody, but his sympathy went unnoticed. Something was nagging at Carmody's brain, something that hovered tantalizingly on the verge of awareness, just barely refusing to jell. His memories of the Edda—let's see—Balder the shining god. More like a glaring god around here. Carmody mopped his dripping forehead and stared out into the blazing light. This blasted heat. A man couldn't think straight. Who was that blind winter god—was it Hodr?—the Solar Myth. Even the bright gods—was it the statue in the shrine? Almost got it, almost. His brow wrinkled in an agony of effort.

IT WAS less than an hour later that Carmody went insane.

Jevons felt someone shaking his shoulder. He roused himself, opened heavy eyes. He could hear someone shouting—Perkins—"He's crazy as a coot," and someone else said, very matter-of-factly, "That does it. We'll die here, now."

And in the background was the hum of the lifeboat's motors.

He stumbled to his feet. "What's—what's happening? Who took the boat up? Carmody's on watch. Carm—"

"Carmody's gone plumb nuts," said Holcomb, beside him. "Look at that."

Through the doorway Jevons caught a glimpse of the lifeboat as it swept overhead, jets roaring. The twenty-foot craft had been sprayed a glittering black. It shot out of his range of view, and simultaneously came the sharp explosion of a grenade. Carmody was bombing the hulk of the *Electra*. There

was another explosion, and another.

Jevons felt a lump in his throat. Grief, following incredulity. And a growing anger was there. He straightened his shoulders. "Best thing for Carmody," he said slowly, "would be if he were listed 'Killed in line of duty!' "

They watched. Seconds later, the jets cut out, came on again briefly, and then died for good. Fuel gone, the little craft settled down into the courtyard as her auxiliary rotors slowed to a stop. The hatch opened and Carmody climbed out, smiling. He hadn't moved three feet before Perkins and Holcomb had him by the arms.

"Hey, wait—"

"Shut up."

"Just a—"

"I—"

"Carmody," said Jevons. "If we were out of this, you'd have a summary court martial, as lies within my power. That boat was a slim chance, but it was a chance. Now it's gone. There was always a faint, very faint, hope that a cruiser might have come over. That's why I waited."

"Chief, if you'll just listen—"

"I listened to that boat overhead, and it sounded like a death knell for all of us."

"Not to *me*, chief. *Listen!*"

And the drums were beating again. Differently pitched, slower in rhythm.

They stood there, unspeaking, while the unarmed insectile figures filed up and prostrated themselves. . . .

* * *

"Come on, have another piece of chicken, boy. Always say you cain't beat my wife's fried chicken, no place. Yeah honey, if it wasn't for Carmody here, I'd most likely still be up in that there Sniffletime Valley we was tellin' you about. And instead of me eatin' chicken them Aliae would have eaten me. Leastwise, cut me up like a fryer."

Mrs. Holcomb beamed. "It shore was right smart of you, Mr. Carmody, mak-

[*Turn page*]

in' them natives think you was gods. Do have another biscuit."

"Oh they already thought we were gods," said Carmody, loosening his belt. "The trouble was they thought we were sun gods and they—"

"Yeah," interrupted Holcomb, "there we was sittin' in the heat and sweatin', 140 degrees it was, and Carmody here thinks: by golly, maybe the natives don't like this here heat either. After all, most of the year it's only a little above freezin' temperature! Then he remembers that all these here primitive folks think space ships come from the sun. So he says to himself, they think we're gods all right but we ain't the right ones. We're sun gods and the sun is makin' them downright miserable and then he thought of thet there eclipse that was due in an hour or so. 'That's it,' he says, 'when there's an eclipse there ain't no sun, so why don't we be eclipse gods.' "

"My goodness," murmured Mrs. Holcomb, "now if it was me I'd be scareder of the eclipse. I mind the first one I ever seen. I was near frightened to death. I thought it was the day of judgement, shore."

"Yeh, but you've always been partial to the heat, Jenny, and these here natives like the cold."

"Actually," Carmody interjected, "it was the statues in the shrine that gave me the clue. When I remembered the posture of the natives as they attacked us, I realized that the upraised arms of the figure did not represent adoration of the sun but rather warlike triumph over it. Then I recalled that the eclipse, which was almost due, always came at the peak of the heat from the two suns. Hence afterwards there was always increasing coolness and fog during the protracted fall and winter seasons, as the planet swung away from the sun on its orbit.

"Obviously the natives would worship the dark god as represented by the eclipse which saved them from the hated heat. The situation presented an aberration, not a refutation of the Solar Myth so commonly encountered in primitive cultures. It was thinking of the Solar Myth as presented in the Norse Edda that—"

"You shore make it tough to get what you're drivin' at, with all them ten-dollar words," Holcomb interrupted. "Let me tell it. You're too modest anyhow, always givin' the credit to this here Nurse Eddy. Anyhow, there we all was sleepin' 'cause the cap'n put Carmody on guard and told the rest of us to catch some shuteye before them natives got help and came back for another attack. And there was Carmody walkin' up and down watchin' for a glimpse of one of them bug-faced Aliae, when this idea hits him jest like that."

HOLCOMB banged his fist on the table with such startling abruptness that Carmody choked over a chicken bone. Helpfully thumping him on the back, Holcomb continued:

"So this boy here hustles over and gets the black paint and the sprayer that we salvaged from the wreck—and useless things we thought they was at the time—and be durned if he don't paint the lifeboat black as your Sunday dress. He was gonna tell the cap'n his plan, but jest as he finishes, he spots the critters in the distance and there weren't no time for discussin'. So he takes off in the lifeboat and we wake up to the jets roarin' and the grenades explodin' as he bombs the wreck of the *Electra*. We thought for shore he'd gone looney, and the Cap'n was fit to be tied, but them natives was right impressed. Straight off the bat they comes to the happy conclusion that we was really the dark gods after all, helpin' them out in their yearly fight against the sun. It was a lot more comfortable bein' a god around there the rest of our stay. Finally the search ship comes along and picks us up and here we are at—"

But Mrs. Holcomb was no longer listening. "What I want to know is who is this here Nurse Eddy," she intoned, fix-

ing her husband with a cold and fishy eye. "Jed Holcomb, you solemnly swore to me that there was no women in space travel; and if you think I'm goin' to let you traipse around the stars with any hussy, nurse or no nurse, you're just plain—"

"Please, please Mrs. Holcomb, the Norse Edda is a collection of legends, a —a sort of a book." Carmody was almost shouting to be heard over the recriminations and the roars of outraged innocence. "It's—it's not a woman."

"Yeah," said Holcomb when peace was restored, "I mind one of the stories he told me from this here Edda. It was real interestin'. It seems there was this Baldy fellow, who was real popular—"

"Balder," interjected Carmody, "he was the Sun god."

"Anyway this Baldy was real well liked, except by this local fellow who decided to kill him."

"Loki, not local," Carmody murmured.

"Okay, loco, he must have been loco to murder this good guy, Baldy; but I forget how he managed, you tell it."

"Well," said Carmody, "the sun god Baldy—I mean Balder was hated by this local fellow—I mean loco fellow—I mean—oh the devil with it! Pass me another biscuit."

FLASHES FROM OUR READERS

(Continued from page 6)

novelets and shorts rang the bell. I just never could see these vicious-circle time-travel tales; this one ended the only way such a tale could conceivably end. Most of them don't. Still, it somehow didn't rub me the right way well enough to produce loud huzzahs. "The Whatsits" especially took my eye; liked the treatment very much. Interior illos, good; cover, good; ads, good. Good, by Gosh!!

Now, let's see; what can I stir up. Ah yes, a pet theory: Although it is entirely probable that we will, when we venture into space, find sentient, intelligent, life on other planets, it is highly improbable that we will find the dominant life form of said planets to be humanoid in structure or appearance. It is not logical, to my mind, to assume that because on this planet a bipedal, upright life-form is dominant, the same will hold true elsewhere; especially should we consider that the dominant life form is apt to have more than two hands. Do I get a nibble, or are all of us too firmly convinced of the same thing? Very likely life on other worlds won't even be based on carbon.

I'LL leave you, lucky. Keep it up!!—*1120 Euclid Ave., Bristol, Va.*

As an ammonia-silicon being, with four hands, three pedal membranes and a purple goatee, I can say only that if you should come to New York and visit us you will definitely get a nibble . . . Earthmen taste *so* good.

ATT: DETROIT FANS

by Thomas E. O'Dell

Dear Editor: When you published George O. Smith's "The Hellflower" in SS for May, a lot of the fans immediately wrote in and yelled space-opera! But they also said the characterization of the story was very good.

This brings us to your new addition to the family —SPACE STORIES. I don't see why the characterization of a space opera need be left out. It can be just as humanly warm as any story in SS or TWS. (By the way—if someone writes in and says they think SS is swell, how in heck you going to know which one they mean?)

I think your trio of mags in the science fiction field is the best out. One thing I like particularly is your humorous comments at the end of each letter. Keep it up. It sure comes in handy when a bitter argument is running wild through the letter sections.

In the year and a half I've read your mags, I've yet to come across a letter from Detroit. Hey, if any of you hidden fans read this, how about dropping me a line or two? As far as I know, there aren't any fan clubs around here. Maybe we can start one, huh? I know there are fans in Detroit because those mags must go somewhere.

Good luck on SS—till next time.—*8230 Wisconsin, Detroit 4, Mich.*

Let's clear up this shemozzle once and for all . . . we've received umpty-dozen letters all asking the same question. So:

STARTLING STORIES is *SS.*

SPACE STORIES is *SPS.*

You pronounce it.

APOLOGY, DAMN IT

by R. E. Geis

Dear Sam: This is a sort of follow-up to the letter I sent you by airmail yesterday. I was disappointed in SPACE STORIES after reading the lead novel. Then I read the featured novelette.

Damn it, Sam, that was the best damn story I've read in a long time. Terrific. That ending had me near to tears. It was written with an understanding of humanity that . . . hell, I don't know how to say it. The story was good, Sam, GOOD. It saved the issue. What a movie that would make.

I don't know if this Dickson is a real feller or not, but he sure can write. More.

I hope this praise will help heal the wounds from my savage criticism in the other letter.—*2631 N. Miss., Portland 12, Oregon.*

Our wounds are healed. No pain. The scars don't even show. I am blissfully content now that justice has triumphed. You had me worried for a while, though.

Dickson is real . . . cornered him in Chicago and made him promise to turn out a million words a week for us. Now I'm worried about *him.*

Below is reproduced the one portion of your scandalous first letter which I didn't rip into shreds.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS WE DOUBT EVER WERE AND/OR WILL BE SPOKEN

A guard went to his knees with blood spurting from his breast. His lips parted in a crimson grin. His voice bubbled. "Who would regret dying—by such a blade as yours—mighty Theseus—?"

OR:

The two guards fell, quickly. One grinned up from the stones and called out weakly as he died:

"There can be but one Theseus—only a slightly less honor to be his victim."

—MAN OF TWO WORLDS, p. 28, SPACE STORIES, Oct. 1952

. . . and your very concluding remarks, to wit: "By all means, Mines, let's have strange and exotic worlds far beyond the orbits of the

outer planets, let's have colorful adventure, thrilling action, startling concepts; but let's *not* have them swimming in the essence of crushed adjectives. You think maybe I have a point?"

Sucker's opening if I ever saw one.

SHUCKS—OUR SECRET IS OUT!

by Robert Briney

Dear Sam: You sir, are attempting to pull a fast one! I am convinced of it. Nothing you can say will disabuse me of this conviction. It is uncomfortably startling to me that none of your other readers have as yet suspected it. Oh, what marvelous subtlety you have used, but I—I alone—have penetrated the deception! The inhuman patience and utter craft with which you have built your web of intrigue continue to startle me, but at last you are to be unmasked.

My first awareness of this vast conspiracy conceived in your guileful mind was occasioned by thumbing through my little black book, wherein I record (what else?) the titles and authors of the stories I read. It was suddenly borne upon me that *Startling* had been having an uncommon run of good stories ever since you assumed the editorial chair. In the ten issues over which you have actively presided, there has been not one actually bad novel. Such ones as JOURNEY TO BARKUT and PASSPORT TO PAX were merely good, light entertainment; others, for ensample VULCAN'S DOLLS and THE WELL OF THE WORLDS, were bright, glittering fantasies; and still others, like THE LOVERS and ASYLUM EARTH, were *important* stories besides being good science fiction. Your novelettes, too, have been wondrously above reproach. At noting this fully for the first time ,the dark seed of suspicion was sown . . . I asked myself one fateful, unanswerable question: WHY?

The answer came this month, August 1952. I knew why you had given us such a luscious succession of novels and novelettes, why the cover format had been revamped, why so many superb covers had been strewn prodigally thoughout the issues. You, beast that you are, were fattening us up for the kill! It was all a great and glorious come-on, a confidence trick of the most subtle kind. Oh, the ignominy of it all! You had been planning for months the thing that was to come, hadn't you? But you were afraid, afraid of what your own temerity might stir up. What would happen if the fans didn't like it? You would be lost! So the scheme was conceived: you would fatten us up, gorge us on good science fiction, fill us to satiety with succulent gems of imaginative literature. Then, *then* you would spring your plan—*you would issue another magazine!*

And you did. *Space Stories,* you called it. It came this month. You thought to foist it off on unsuspecting fans as another member of the distinguished Thrilling family, to play it up until it, too, would absorb some of the fame of the other four of the group. But your little scheme is not going to work, do you hear? It is not going to work!! You have planned too well, you with your inhuman cunning. We, the fans, are going to turn the trick on you,

[*Turn page*]

make you pay for the base way you have tried to dupe us. WE ARE GOING TO LIKE THE MAGAZINE! We shall buy it and read it regularly, heaping the same praise and playful abuse upon it as we do on the rest of the family. And you will be forced to continue it, and to print in it such good stories as you have been featuring in the others. You are, to paraphrase the words of a character in a rather sickening play I know of, caught in the tangles you made for yourself!

How do the bitter fruits of failure taste to you?

Well, I couldn't help it if I was inspired by the new mag, could I? (That kind of inspiration should drop dead, I'm hearing somebody say?) *Space* really looks fine, and the forecast for the next issue leaves me drooling. Messy, but Vance affects me that way. The lead story for this initial issue was somewhat on the under-side of well written, but it had its moments. The plot as a whole deserved much better than it got, although such scenes as the escape of Icarus were drawn with exceptional fineness and skill. The story read as if it had been written to order and not gone over enough. A month of sitting and another draft might have made an actually fine tale out of it.

Keep the mag filled with Vance, Kuttner, Hamilton, and Brackett, and there will be no arguments from this quarter (ha! a pun!). De Camp, Crossen, and Dee wouldn't hurt either. Now that *Startling* has been featuring the idea novels (and ye gods, what ideas! Bruce Elliott thoroughly mangled my composure for an entire weekend with his ASYLUM EARTH!), let the more adventure-fraught ones spill over into *Space*. And don't keep down the length, either. Real novels would look nice once in a while. But I think I have said enough; all good wishes on the new mag, and the old ones too.—*561 West Western Avenue, Muskegon, Michigan.*

Down, boy, down . . . remember your blood-pressure. (Fans have *blood?*) Anyway, now that you've spread news of my diabolic scheme the length and breadth of fandom, there's no point in my playing it cagey any longer.

No point at all (except for Geis' head) . . . because . . . it worked, it *worked!* You *like* SPACE STORIES. You'll keep on *buying* it. Oh-ho-ho-ho-ha-ha-ha-ha-hah-hah-hah-hee-hee-hee-hee!

So where's my bonus?

CORRECTION, PLEASE
by Louis Henry Lenert

Dear Mr. Mines: Today I happened to walk into the drugstore and what did I see at the magazine rack? A new title? Immediately I was drawn to the cover. Now there's the kind of cover that should appear more often on science-fiction magazines.

I bought the first issue of *Space Stories* and brought it home. Thereafter proceded a thorough investigation. The art-work throughout is superb.

I was just going to relax and read one of the stories when I noticed that blocked-off space on page 66. That's when it happened! I like to work

on a good quiz—but I want the author's answers to be accurate when I check with them. A couple of Mr. Stacey's definitely were not. The two questions I really noticed were numbers 1 and 5.

Mr. Stacey states that the first self-maintaining nuclear chain reaction initiated in a uranium-graphite pile at Stagg Field, Chicago took place on July 16, 1945 (answer 'd'). I'm afraid that this date is slightly off—about three years to be exact. The above reaction took place in Chicago on Dec. 2, 1942.

Next Mr. Stacey says that the first atomic explosion created by man rocked the New Mexico desert on August 6, 1945 (answer 'j'). Once more I'm afraid he's wrong. On August 6, 1945 Hiroshima, Japan, trembled slightly to the tune of an A-bomb blast. The New Mexico blast took place on July 16, 1945 (the answer that Mr. Stacey gives for question number 1).

I might not have noticed the errors if not for the fact that I just finished writing a science-fiction story involving some of those dates. (Incidentally as soon as I iron the bugs out of the story you might be seeing it on your desk.) Anyway, to make sure that my story wasn't off, I checked with the 1950 Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia. I was right! The dates are given on Pages 463 and 467 in Volume A.

I don't want to seem like a Know-it-all though so as of now I've forgotten about the errors. Everyone makes mistakes.

Now I'm going to read the stories and see how they come out. If they're as good as the ones in SS, TWS and FSM, your new magazine is OK with me.

I don't know whether you'll have a letter column in *Space Stories* or not. I suppose you will.

[*Turn page*]

If this letter happens to get printed I'd like to say that I would like to correspond with other stf fans about my age (preferably females). I am sixteen. —*P. O. Box 205, Orange Grove, Texas.*

Received several letters commenting on the inaccurate quiz answers . . . won't happen again. From now on, *all* the answers will be wrong.

Smart boy . . . about the females.

YES, SPS.

by Lee Huddleston

Dear Sam: Starting with the cover, I'll now comment on every story, feature and pic:

1) Cover: Only improvement possible is to put only one title on it. Emsh is always good.

(Editor's note: Comments No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 deleted . . . this is only a 128 page book).

12) Science Fiction Book Corner: Make it into a fanzine column.

STARTLING STORIES is SS. What is SPACE STORIES going to be? SPS?—*Route 1, Baird, Texas.*

P.S. In case you do have a letter column and print this, I'd like to put in a plug for the Texas Fan Club. All you Texans write to B. G. Warner, Box 63, Bessmay, Texas, or R. J. Banks, 111 South 15th Street, Corsicana, Texas. Also the Texas Science Fiction Census League. Send card or letter with your NAME, ADDRESS, LENGTH OF FANDOMSHIP (approx.) and FAN-ACTIVITIES. This makes you a member of the League and entitles you to free info. Send your replies to me. L. H.

Well . . . your comments came out, but your plug stayed in. Fair enough?

That strange sound you hear is my young associate, yclept Bixby. He's screaming at the very thought of another fanzine column.

Is the full name of that town "Bessmay mucho?"

Thanks to all of you who sent letters of praise. Foof to those who employed harsh language. This letter-column is going to remain somewhat on the short side, since we don't have quite the spread in SPACE that we do in SS or TWS. To facilitate this, only compliments of the highest order will be considered for publication. Rates are 1c to 2c, payable upon publication. Just figure how many words you used, and send us a check.

See you next ish.

—*The Editor*

Look Forward to—

THE GEARS OF TIME

By WILLIAM MORRISON

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PAID DIRECT TO YOU

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POLIO
Benefits At No Extra Cost
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For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to $500.00
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TOTAL OF $1,500.00

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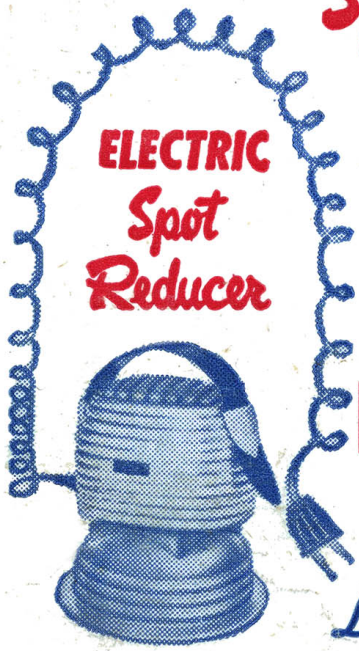

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