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SCIENCE FICTION

Virgin Planet

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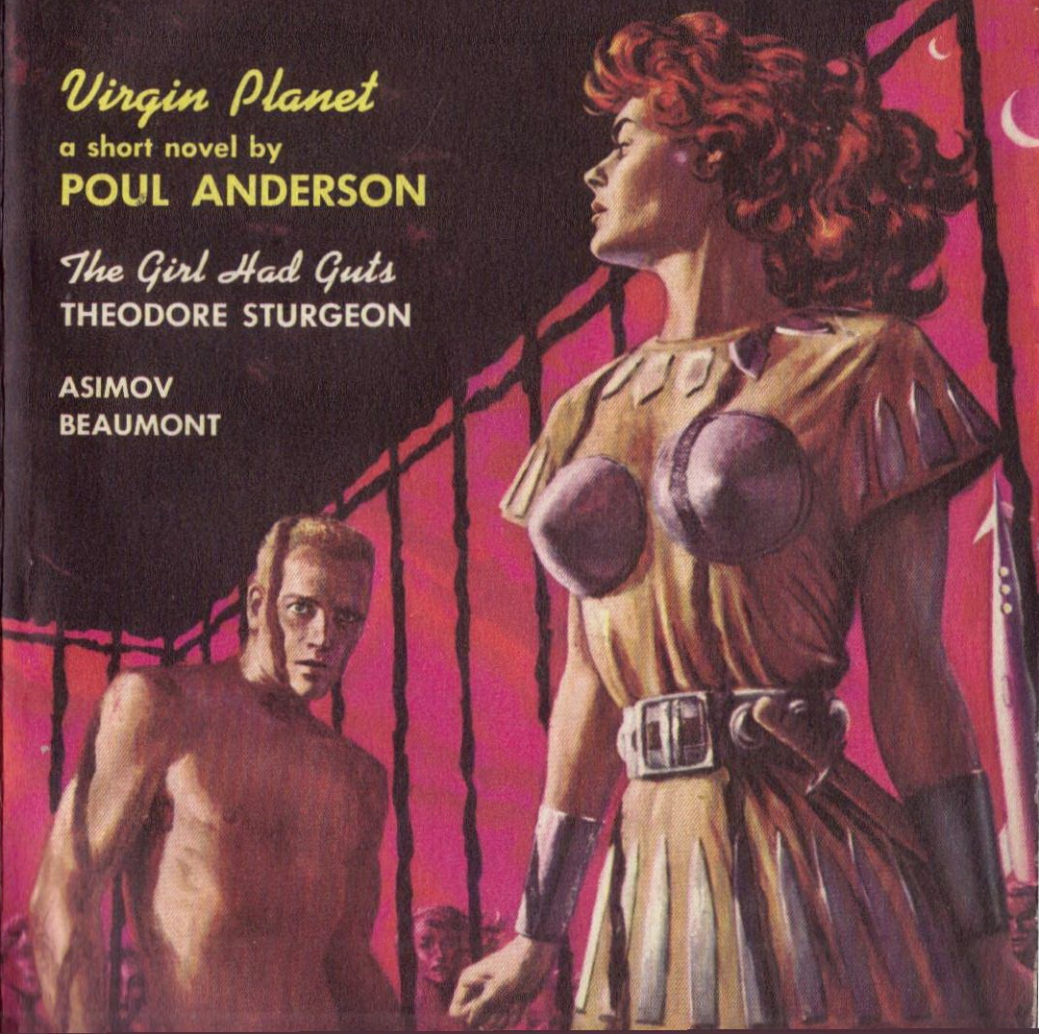
POUL ANDERSON

The Girl Had Guts

THEODORE STURGEON

ASIMOV

BEAUMONT



Publisher's Note

This first issue of *VENTURE Science Fiction* offers, we think, a pretty fair example of the kind of strong stories of action and adventure that future issues will contain. And we believe there is room in the field for such a magazine.

Science fiction offers to the storyteller a diversity of subject matter and an imaginative scope not equalled in many other fields of literature. And the types of science fiction are rich and varied, ranging from comic strip simplicity up through H. G. Wells-Huxley-Orwell inspiration and profundity. In the magazine field, the range is almost as great. We are proud of the solidly established quality reputation of *FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION*, and we are now publishing *VENTURE S F* in the belief that we can make it another fine s f magazine—with a substantially different approach.

There will be two prime requisites for *VENTURE* stories: In the first place, each must be a well told *story*, with a beginning, middle and end; in the second place, each must be a strong story—a story with pace, power, and excitement. This does not mean that pace will be substituted for sense, cardboard for characters, or improbability for excitement. It does mean, we think, first-rate entertainment, and a worthy sister magazine for *FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION*.

Robert P. Mills, managing editor of *FSF* from its first issue, will be the editor of *VENTURE Science Fiction*, and Anthony Boucher will serve as advisory editor. The over-all plan is to have a short novel, or two or three novelets, in each issue, together with shorter material—and short or long, to have the most powerful, exciting and generally entertaining material we can find. We hope you enjoy it.

—JOSEPH W. FERMAN

Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

VIRGIN PLANET

POUL ANDERSON

4

It was a daydream come true— a brand new world, like Earth but more beautiful, and Davis Bertram the only man among a million women. And holy Cosmos, he'd found it, and he wanted out!

• World of the Future

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VIRGIN PLANET

by POUL ANDERSON

A planet of girls could be any young man's dreamworld.

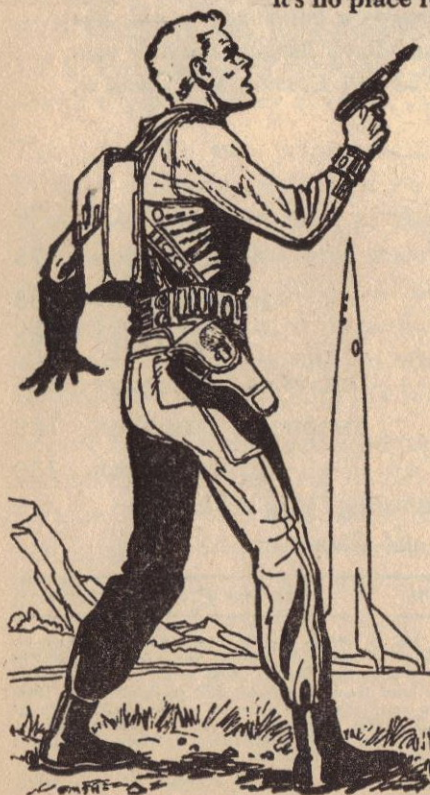
But a government of girls, a lusty fighting army of girls,

a swaggering roistering navy of girls . . .

it's no place for a man, even when the girls

are as beautiful as Barbara

and Valeria



CORPORAL Maiden Barbara Whitley of Freetoon, hereditary huntress, wing leader of the crossbow cavalry, and novice in the Mysteries, halted her orsper and peered through a screen of brush. Breath sucked sharply between her teeth.

From this edge of the forest, the Ridge mountains rolled away in a green blaze of grass to the wide floor of the Holy River valley. Tall white clouds walked in a windy sky. With midsummer approaching, both suns were

a short novel



visible. Ay was a spark so bright it hurt the eyes, following the great golden fireball of Bee down toward the western horizon. Minos was waxing, huge and banded, in its eternal station a little south of the zenith. The moon Ariadne was a pale half-disc. The other moons had not yet risen, or were drowned by daylight, but the six hours of night to come would be bright.

It was on the thing in the valley, five kilometers away, that Barbara focused her eyes.

It stood upright, like a lean finless war-dart, and she estimated its height as 40 meters. That was much smaller than the Ship of Father. But it was nearly the same shape, if the hints dropped

by initiates were truthful . . . and it had been *seen* this morning, descending from the sky.

A chill went along her nerves. She was not especially pious; none of the Whitleys were. But this was Mystery. They had always said it, they sang it in the rituals and they told it to children on rainy nights when the fires leaped high on the barracks hearths—

Some day the Men will come to claim us.

If this was the Men.

Barbara's hand strayed to the horn slung at her waist. She could call the others. Claudia, the Old Udall, had sent out the whole army to look for the shining thing, and there must be others within earshot.

The stillness of that big metal beast was unnerving. It could well be a vessel of the Monsters. The Monsters were half folk-tale, it was said they lived on the stars like the Men and had dealings with the Men, sometimes friendly and sometimes otherwise.

A stray lock of rusty-red hair blew from under Barbara's morion and tickled her nose. She sneezed. It seemed to crystallize decision.

Surely there were Monsters in that thing! The Men would arrive much more portentously, landing first at the Ship of Father and then at the various towns. And there would be haloes and other prodigies about them, and crea-

tures of shining steel in attendance.

Barbara was rather frightened at the idea of Monsters—she felt her heart thump beneath the iron breastshields—but they were less awesome than Men. If she merely went back to town and reported, she knew exactly how Claudia Udall would take charge—the army would move according to tactics which were, well, simply rotten, like the time when it had been led directly into a greendale ambush. And a mere corporal would be just nobody.

She checked her equipment with rapid, professional care: iron helmet, reinforced leather cuirass and kilt, boots, ax, knife, lasso. She cocked her spring-wound repeating crossbow and tucked it in the crook of her left arm. Her right hand picked up the reins, and she clucked to the orsper.

It trotted downhill at the swift rocking pace of its breed, the feathered head, beaked and crested, erect. The wind blew in her face, murmuring of the sea and the Ship whence it came. The object grew nearer—still not a sound from it, not a stirring. Barbara grew quite convinced that there were Monsters aboard. Men would have been out long ago. It was a less terrifying prospect. Monsters had unknown powers, but they were still mortal, limited creatures, but Men. . .

Barbara had never thought a

great deal about the Men. Now the songs and rituals came back to her. "The Men are the males of the human race. We were coming to join them, but the Ship went astray because of our sins. The Men are taller and stronger than we, infinitely wiser and more virtuous, and they have hair on their chins and no breasts . . ."

She came up into the long shadow of the—boat? "Hoy, there!" she cried. No answer. A flock of gray rangers went overhead, calling to each other, incredibly unconcerned.

Barbara rode several times around the thing. There was a circular door in the hull, out of her reach and smoothly closed, and there were blank ports. Not a face in any of them. Really, it was getting ridiculous! Fear vanished in a gust of temper.

The startled screech of the orsper jerked her back to reality. There was someone running from the west.

She spurred her mount forward. The person was approaching the boat . . . must have been looking around when she arrived. . . . Person? No!

It was strangely dressed in some kind of tunic, the legs sheathed in cloth, a small pack-sack on the shoulders. But the form of it was grotesque, inhuman. Broad shoulders—not unpleasing, that, but the hips were of an ugly narrowness. There was yellow

hair cropped short, and a lean face with too much nose and chin, altogether too much bone and too little flesh.

Barbara knew what all the 500 families looked like, and this wasn't any of them. She remembered from the old stories that Monsters had many shapes, but some of them looked like deformed humans.

"Hoy-aaa!" she yelled. "What are you doing here?"

The Monster drew a small tube from a holster and pointed it at her. Dashing close, Barbara saw that its crimson tunic was open at the neck, the chest was flat and hairy and there was thick hair on the arms—

Then she hardly had time to think. The Monster might or might not be peaceful, and she couldn't just shoot it down. But she knew better than to take unnecessary risks.

Her knees guided the leaping bird and her hands whirled up the lariat.

The Monster stood there gaping.

She heard words in a distorted, alien accent: "Holy Cosmos, what's going on here?" No human had so deep a voice!

Then the lasso snaked out, fell, and drew taut.

Corporal Maiden Barbara Whitley galloped in triumph toward Freetoon, dragging the Monster behind her.

II

DEFINITIONS AND REFERENCES

"DELTA CAPITIS LUPI: Double. [Coordinates given, indicating its distance from Nerthus as about 200 light-years; Nerthus is a Service base planet, ca. 300 parsecs from Sol.] Primary of type AO, mass 4 Sol, luminosity 81 Sol. Companion Sol-type, average distance from primary 98 Astronomical Units. Unexplored due to trepidation vortex in neighborhood . . ."

—*Pilot's Manual, Argus 293 Region (with much expansion of abbreviations)*

"TREPIDATION VORTEX: Traveling region of warped space, primary effect being that of violently shifting gravitational fields. Responsible for some planetary perturbations. Spaceships on hyperdrive encountering a vortex are thrown far off course and usually destroyed . . ."

—*General Encyclopedic Dictionary*

". . . Davis Bertram. Born in Sigma Hominis Volantis system, where father had grown wealthy. (Odd how anachronisms like private ostentation redevelop on the frontier, isn't it?) Basic schooling on Earth; astronautical training on Thunderhouse (the most notoriously slack academy in the

known Galaxy—must assemble data and file a complaint when I get the time). Having bought his own robotic cruiser, he came to Nerthus to start a career in stelligraphic survey by going to Delta Wolf's Head—alone! As far as I could gather, his preparations here consisted mostly of bottle hoisting, skirt chasing, and a little amateur landscape painting.

"I could not legally refuse him clearance, since he had the training and a sufficient goodwill quotient to protect any natives he might encounter. I checked the physiological data, hoping for an excuse, but somatically he is first-rate; I presume he makes himself exercise regularly to attract women, but the law does not make this any of my business. He is, in fact (or was), quite a large, good-looking young man of the vanishing Nordic type; his brain is excellent, if he only cared to use it; how can I extrapolate disaster on the basis of mere cocksureness and flippancy?

"I warned him of the vortex, and that the Service did not plan to visit Delta until it was safely gone from the region, in about 30 years. He replied that it was probably safe as of now. I told him that if he did not come back, we could not hazard lives in a rescue party. He could not conceive that he might not return. What he wanted, of course, was the glory. If Delta turns out to

have intelligent autochthones or be an uninhabited, colonizable planet, he will go down in history with Carsten.

"In the end, then, he left, and his *At Venture* is now somewhere near the vortex. If he avoids that, and avoids hostile natives, wild beasts, poison, disease—the million traps a new planet lays for us—he will come back and have all the adoring females he can use. So much for Man's Starward Yearning. Or am I merely envious in this winter of my own lifetime?"

—*Diary of Yamagata Tetsuo, Chief of Coordination Service, Argus 293 Region, Stelamont, Nerthus*

III

Minos was full, drenching Freetoon with cold amber light, and the air had grown chilly. Barbara Whitley walked through silent streets, between darkened buildings, to the cavalry barracks. It formed one side of a square around a courtyard, the stables and arsenal completing the ring. Her boots thudded on the cobbles as she led her orsper to its stall.

A stone lamp on a shelf showed the snoring grooms—all Nicholsons, a stupid family used only for menial work—stirring uneasily on the straw as she tramped in. She nudged one of the stocky, tangle-haired women awake with

her toe. "Food," she demanded. "And beer. And take care of the bird."

Afterward, she undressed and washed herself in the courtyard trough. She regarded her face complacently in the water. The Minoslight distorted colors, ruddy hair and long green eyes became something else, but the freckled snub nose and the wide mouth and the small square chin were more pleasing than . . . oh, than that Dyckman build. Dyckmans were just *sloppy*.

The dying hearthfire within the barrack showed long-limbed forms sprawled on straw ticks. She stowed her weapons and armor, trying to be quiet. But Whitleys were light sleepers, and her cousin Valeria woke up.

"Oh, it's you. Two left feet as always," snarled Valeria, "and each one bigger than the other. Where did you park your fat rump all day?"

Barbara looked at the face which mirrored her own. They were the only Whitleys in Freetoon, their mothers and four aunts having perished in the Greendale ambush 15 years ago, and they should have been as close as relatives normally were. But it was a trigger-tempered breed, and when a new wing leader corporal was required, the sacred dice had chosen Barbara. Valeria could not forgive that.

"I took my two left feet and

my fat rump—if you must describe yourself that way—into the valley and captured a Monster in a star ship,” said Barbara sweetly. “Goodnight.” She lay down on her pallet and closed her eyes, leaving her twin to speculate. . . .

Bee had not even risen when there was a clank of metal in the doorway and Ginny Latvala shouted: “Up, Corporal Maiden Barbara Whitley! You’re wanted at the Big House.”

“Do you have to wake everyone else on that account?” snapped Valeria, but not very loud. The entire company had been roused, and Captain Kim was a martinet, like all Trevors.

Barbara got to her feet, feeling her heart knock. Yesterday seemed unreal, like a wild dream. Ginny leaned on her spear, waiting. “The Old Udall is pretty mad at you, dear,” she confided. “We may have all sorts of trouble coming because you roped that Monster.” The Latvalas were slim blonde girls, handy with a javelin and so made hereditary bodyguards in most towns.

“I was never ordered not to lasso a Monster,” said Barbara huffily.

She let the barracks buzz around her while she dressed for the occasion: a short white skirt, an embroidered green cloak, sandals, and dagger. The air was still cold and the fields below the

town white with mist when she came out. A pale rosy light lifted above the eastern Ridge, and Minos was waning. The moon Theseus was a red sickle caught in the sunrise.

There were not many people up. A patrol tramped past, all of them husky Macklins, and the farmhands yawned out of their barracks on the way to a day’s hoeing. The street climbed steeply upward from the cavalry house, and Barbara took it with a mountaineer’s long slow stride. They went by the weavery, she glimpsed looms and spinning wheels within the door, but it didn’t register on her mind—low-caste work. The smithy, a most respected shop, lay beyond, also empty; the Holloways still slept in their adjoining home.

Passing a window of the maternity hospital, Barbara heard a small wail. Must be Sarah Cohen’s kid, born a few days ago. The sound broke through her worry with an odd little tug at her soul. In another year or so, she would be an initiate, and make the journey to the Ship. And when she came back, no longer called Maiden, there would be another redhaired Whitley beneath her heart. Babies were a nuisance, she’d have to stay within the town till hers was weaned and—and—it was hard to wait.

The stockade bulked above her,

great sharp stakes lashed together and six Latvalas on guard at the gate. Inside, there was a broad cobbled yard with several buildings: barracks, stables, sheds, the Father chapel. All were in the normal Freetoon style, long log houses with peaked sod roofs. The hall, in the middle, was much the same, but immensely bigger, its beam-ends carved into birds of prey.

Henrietta Udall stood at its door. She was the oldest of Claudia's three daughters: big and blocky, with sagging breasts and harsh black hair, small pale eyes under tufted brows, a lump for a nose and a gash for a mouth. The finery of embroidered skirt and feather cloak was wasted on her, Barbara thought. None of the Udalls could ever be handsome. But they could lead!

"Halt! Your hair is a mess," said Henrietta. "Do those braids over."

Barbara bit her lip and began uncoiling the bronze mane. It was hacked off just below her shoulders. *Spiteful blowhard*, she thought. *I'm barren if I do and barren if I don't. Come the day, dear Henrietta, you won't find me on your side.*

The death of an Udall was always the signal for turmoil. Theoretically, the power went to her oldest daughter. In practice, the sisters were likely to fight it out between themselves; a defeated

survivor fled into the wilderness with her followers and tried to start a new settlement. Daydreams of heading into unknown country for a fresh start drove the sulkiness from Barbara. If, say, she rose high in the favor of Gertrude or Anne . . .

"All right," said Henrietta as Bee rose. She led the way inside.

The main room of the Big House was long and gloomy. Sconced torches guttered above the Old Udall's seat. Servants scurried around, serving breakfast to her and to the middle-aged high-caste women on the bench below the throne.

"Well!" said Claudia. "It took you long enough."

Barbara had learned the hard way never to blame an Udall for anything. "I'm sorry, ma'm," she muttered, saluting.

The Old Udall leaned back and let her chambermaid comb the stiff gray hair. Elinor Dyckman had gotten that job; an Udall usually took a Dyckman for a lover.

Elinor was in her middle twenties; her baby was dead and she hadn't asked for another. Dyckmans had scant mother instinct. She was medium tall, with a soft curving body and soft bluish-black hair. Her small heart-shaped face smiled sweetly on the chief, and she combed with long slow strokes.

"You'll have to be punished for

that," said Claudia. "Suggestions, Elinor, dear?" She laughed.

Elinor blinked incredible lashes over melting dark eyes and said: "Not too severe, ma'm. I'm sure Babs means well. A little KP—"

Barbara's hand fell to her dagger. "I'm in the army, you milk-livered trull!" she exploded. "*Dishwashing*, by Father—!"

"Watch your language," said counsellor Marian Burke.

Elinor smiled and went on combing. "It was only a joke, ma'm," she murmured. "Hadn't we better get down to business?"

The Old Udall gazed at Barbara. *Trying to stare me down, are you?* thought the girl savagely. She would not look away.

"Enough," said Claudia at length. "Yes, Elinor, you're right as usual, we can't stop to quarrel now."

She leaned ponderously forward. "I've heard reports from the scouts who met you," she went on.

Barbara remained silent, not trusting her tongue. Captain Janet Lundgard had emerged from the woods with some troopers and taken charge: set a guard on the ship, slung the unconscious Monster on a spare orsper, and ridden to town with the rest of them for escort. She had reported directly to the Big House—but what had she told? The Lundgards were not as predict-

able as most families; that was one reason they were hereditary army officers.

"Apparently you attacked the Monster unprovoked," said Claudia coldly. "Father knows what revenge it may take."

"It had drawn a weapon on me, ma'm," answered Barbara. "If I hadn't lassoed it, maybe it would have destroyed all Free-toon. As it is, we have the thing a prisoner now, don't we?"

"It may have friends," whispered Elinor, her eyes very large. A shiver went through the hall.

"Then we have a hostage," snapped Barbara.

The Old Udall nodded. "Yes . . . there is that. I've had relays of guards sent to its ship. None of them report any sign of life. It, the Monster, must have been alone."

"How many other ships have landed, all over Atlantis?" wondered Henrietta.

"That's what we have to find out," said Claudia. "I'm sending a party to the Ship of Father to ask the Doctors about this. We'll also have to send scouts to the nearest other towns, find out if they've been visited too."

Both missions would be dangerous enough. Barbara thought with a tingling what her punishment would be. As a non-initiate, she couldn't go to the Ship, but she would be sent toward Greendale, Highbridge, or Blockhouse,

to spy. *But that's terrific! When do we start?*

The Udall smiled grimly. "And meanwhile, for weeks perhaps, we'll have the Monster to deal with . . . and our own people. The whole town must already be getting into a panic.

"We have to learn the truth about the Monster—yes, and all the people had better know the facts. We'll do it this way. The carpenters will set up a cage for the Monster, right in the plaza, and while everybody not on duty watches, someone will go into that cage and we'll see what happens."

"Who's going to volunteer for *that* job?" grumbled Marian Burke.

Elinor smiled gently. "Why, who but our brave Corporal Whitley?" she answered.

IV

Davis Bertram woke when the door was opened and lay there for a minute, trying to remember why his flesh ached in a hundred places. Then he got his eyes unglued.

There was a boot in front of his nose. He rolled over, cautiously, and sent a bleared gaze upward. Above the boot was a shapely knee, and above that a leather-strip kilt reinforced with iron bands; then a belt supporting a knife and pouch, a cuirass

of laminated leather with an iron bust bucket, a slim neck, a lot of yellow hair braided under a helmet, and a rather attractive suntanned face.

Cosmos! That girl on the nightmare bird, the lariat and—

"What's going on?" croaked Davis. "Who are you?"

"Father!" stammered one of the girls. "It talks"

She spoke Basic—a slurred, archaic form, but it was the Basic of all human-settled planets. She must be human, thought Davis groggily; no alien was that anthropoid.

A handsome wench, too, though a bit muscular for his taste. He began to smile through bruised lips at all ten of them.

"Gak!" he said.

The ten were identical.

Well, not quite . . . some leaned on spears and some bore light, wicked-looking axes, and some had a beltful of needle-nosed darts.

He shuddered and grew aware that he had been stripped mother naked. Between the cuts and abrasions, he started to blush, more or less all over. He scrambled to his feet. A jerk at the wrists told him his hands were tied behind his back. He sat down again, lifting his knees and glaring across them.

"I imagine Monsters would have learned the Men language, Ginny," said one of his visitors.

On closer observation, Davis saw that she was older and had a scar on one cheek. Some kind of insignia was painted on her breastplate . . . sunblaze, it was the six-pointed star of an astrogator's mate!

"It *looks* fairly harmless," said one of the others doubtfully.

"You, Monster!" The officer raised her battle ax. "Up!" She was tense as a drawn wire. Davis rose.

They marched him out of the shed. He saw a courtyard, rudely paved with stones, a number of primitive wooden buildings, and a high palisade around all. There was a catwalk beneath the stakes, and warriors posted on it with some kind of crossbow.

Beyond the gate, Davis saw quite a small army, alert for whatever he might try to pull. Some were on foot, some mounted on birds like the one he'd seen before: larger and stouter than ostriches, with feathers of blue-tipped white and cruel hawk heads. He decided not to pull anything.

A rutted unpaved street snaked downhill between big, clumsy houses. Outside town it became a road of sorts, wandering through cultivated grainfields. They covered a sloping plateau, which dipped off into forest toward the river valley. Behind the castle, the mountains rose steep and wooded.

Ignoring botanical details, this might almost have been Earth of some elder age. But not when you looked at the sky. It was blue and clear, yes, with towering white clouds in the west; overhead, though, were two crescents, dim by daylight: one almost twice the apparent size of Luna seen from Earth, the other half again as big. And there was the emperor planet, the world of which *this* was only another satellite. When full, it would sprawl across 14 times as much sky as Luna. Now it was a narrow sickle, pale amber. The morning sun was approaching it. That is, the smaller, Sol-type sun, Delta Capitis Lupi B, about which the giant planet moved. The primary sun, bluish-white A, had not yet risen; it would never seem more than the brightest of the stars.

Davis shook an aching head and wrenched his attention back to the ground. Be sundered if this was like Earth, after all, even with the women and children clustered around. Not just their dress—the civilians wore a short skirt, the kids nothing. Their *likeness*. Women and children—all female, the children—seemed to be cast from a few hundred molds. Take two from the same mold, like those gawping dairy-maid types over there, and the only difference was age and scars.

Cosmos, but he was thirsty!

At the farther end of a broad open space were some thousands of civilians, jammed together, craning their necks, held back by a line of guards. Their high-pitched, excited voices sawed on his nerves. In the middle of the square was a large wooden cage.

"In there," said the blonde captain. She drew her knife and cut his bonds.

Davis shuffled through the cage door. "Is this a zoo?" he asked. "Where are all the men, anyway?"

"Don't *you* know?" the captain asked acidly.

"Very well, Babs, let's see how you get out of this one!"

It was a new voice, pleasantly husky in spite of its jeering note. Davis looked through the bars and saw a redhaired girl among the cavalry. Holy Valdaoth, the same one who'd roped him yesterday!

Or was she? Her twin, also in armor, came walking slowly forth across the square. Davis stepped warily back as the newcomer entered. The blonde officer latched the door behind them.

The girl touched her dagger. He could have gone for her in better circumstances. Her greenish eyes widened, and she breathed hard. It would have been an interesting sight if it hadn't been for that iron bra.

"I'll fight if I must," she whispered.

Four women approached the

cage, all of the same unprepossessing genotype. The oldest wore a headdress of plumes. "Well, Corporal," she snapped, "question it."

"Y-yes, ma'm," said the girl in a small voice. "I . . . I am Corporal Maiden Barbara Whitley, Monster."

"The same who captured you," said one of the bags.

"Be quiet, Henrietta," said the oldest witch. With a certain fearless pride: "I am Claudia, the Udall of Freetoon."

"Honored, Citizen," said the man. "My name is Davis Bertram."

"Why . . . that could almost be a human name," said Barbara shyly.

"What else should it be?" asked Davis.

"Oh . . . oh, yes, the stories do say you Monsters learned the arts from the Men." She smiled, the least little bit.

"But I—Who said I was a monster?" He was not, Davis told himself, vain; but more than one woman had informed him she liked his face.

"You are! *Look* at you!"

"Blast it, I'm as human as you are!"

"With all that hair?" rapped Henrietta Udall.

Davis gave her an unfriendly glance.

"Look here," said Barbara reasonably, "we're not blind. I ad-

mit you have two legs and five fingers and no feathers. But you're bigger than any of us, and haven't got any more breasts than a ten-year-old."

"I should hope not!" said Davis.

"In fact—" Barbara scratched her neck, puzzledly, and pointed. "Just what is that? Do you fight with it?"

"It doesn't look prehensile," said the blonde captain.

Davis told himself wildly that he had not gone insane, that he really was here on the Earth-sized third satellite of Delta Capitis Lupi B I. But somehow it seemed to slip through his fingers.

He put his face in his palms and shuddered.

"Poor Monster." Barbara trod impulsively forward.

He looked up. She paled a little with fright, under the smooth brown skin, and made half a step back. Then her lips—unfairly attractive lips—stiffened, and she stayed where she was.

"We had no way of knowing," she said. "Some Monsters are friendly with the Men and some aren't. We couldn't take chances."

"But I am a man!" shouted Davis.

A groan went through the crowd. Somebody screamed.

Barbara clenched her fists. "Why did you say that?" she asked in a wobbly voice.

"Can't you see, girl?"

"But the Men . . . the Men are powerful, and beautiful, and—"

"Oh, Evil!" Davis took her fingers and laid them against his cheek. "Feel that? I haven't got much yet in the way of whiskers, but—"

Barbara turned faintly toward the Udall. "It's true, ma'm," she whispered. "There's hair starting to grow out of his face."

"But you *captured* him!" protested the blonde captain.

Davis took hold of his sanity with both hands. "Look, kenno," he began between clenched teeth. "Let's be reasonable about this. Just what the jumping blue blazes do you think a man is?"

"A Man is . . . is . . . a human male." He could barely hear the Barbara girl's reply.

"All right. Now, have you ever seen a human male before?"

"Certainly not." Her courage was returning. "You must indeed be from far away, Monster, There are no Men on all Atlantis."

"Oh . . . is that what you've called this world? But how do you manage—how long since—"

"Humans came here some 300 years ago. That is, by a year I mean the time Minos needs to go once around the sun Bee."

Minos . . . the big planet, of course. Davis had measured from space that it was about one Astronomical Unit from B, which had nearly the same mass as Sol.

So one Minos year was approximately one Earth year. Three centuries—why, they were barely starting to colonize then! The hyperdrive was newly invented and—

"But you have children," he said feebly.

"Oh, yes. By the grace of Father, the Doctors at His Ship can—I don't know any more. I've never been there."

Davis took a while to swallow that one.

Something came back to him. In the few hours he'd been on Atlantis, before this Barbara wench caught him, he had seen plenty of animal life: reptiles, fish, insects, flying and flightless birds. Some of the earthbound avians had been the size of buffalo.

But no mammals. In all those flocks and herds, not a mammal.

Excitement gripped him. "Wait a minute!" he cried. "Are there any . . . I mean, well, does Atlantis harbor any warm-blooded animals with hair that give live birth and suckle their young?"

"Why, no," said Barbara. "Except us humans, of course."

"Ahhh-ha. Mammals never evolved here, then. And they're the only terrestroid form where the males are . . . hm—" Davis blushed. "Obviously male. No wonder you didn't recognize—I mean, uh—"

"What do you mean?" asked Barbara innocently.

"This is ridiculous," barked the Old Udall. "It's well understood that the Men will come in all their power and glory. This wretch is a Monster, and the only question is what to do about it."

Another girl trod forth. Even now, Davis felt his eyes bug out. She was dark, throaty-voiced, with gold bangles on slender arms and red flowers in her long hair, high in the prow and walking like a sine wave. "Please, ma'm," she said. "I have an idea."

Claudia smiled at her. "Yes, Elinor?"

"It says it is a Man." Elinor waggled her eyelashes at Davis. "Let it prove it."

"How?" demanded Davis.

"By fertilizing the corporal," said Elinor with scientific detachment.

"What?"

Barbara stepped back, white-faced. "No!" she gasped.

"Corporal Whitley," said Claudia earnestly, "we've had our little differences, but now the future of Freetoon may depend on you. You won't fail your duty."

"Unless you're afraid, darling," murmured Elinor.

Davis saw Barbara flush red. She knotted her fists. After a very long minute, she looked squarely at him with an air of having but one life to give for her country.

"Yes," she said defiantly. "You may fertilize me, Davis—if you can!"

He looked at several thousand interested faces.

How did you explain the effect of social conditioning to a tribe which had never heard of such matters?

"Not now," he begged hoarsely. "Give me time . . . privacy, for Cosmos' sake . . . can't do anything *here*—"

The Old Udall lifted a skeptical brow.

"Oh, never mind," said Davis. "Have it your way. I'm a monster."

V

Barbara was not happy.

That sorry business in the plaza had won her a good deal of respect, but she didn't enjoy baiting captives, even Monsters. In the four days since, a growing moodiness had driven her to get permission to go out alone after game. It was not quite safe, but she felt somehow that a companion would be more of a hazard.

We Whitleys are a crotchety lot, she admitted. For once the reflection was less arrogant than gloomy. She had not, before, felt it a loss to have no sweetheart, not even a close friend, and to be forever at odds with her only kinswoman in Freetoon. But suddenly she wanted her mother back . . . Or someone. She couldn't understand the pull she felt, as if her thirteen-year-old self

were reaching across seven years of time to invade a body gone all soft and unsure. Ever since those moments in the Monster's cage . . . *Damn* the Monster! Had the thing psyched her?

She headed northward into the woods and steepes of the Ridge, spooed a stamper herd on the second day and caught up to it on the third and shot one of the great grazing birds. She didn't have it cut up before dark, and wasn't sleepy even then.

And she saw that the night was cool, a bright mystery where dewed leaves sparkled gold beneath Minos, a scent of young blossoms, the High Gaunt rearing its stern stone peak among the stars. An irrational happiness lifted in her, she gathered armfuls of sweetbird and fernish, crooned, threw her arms about a slim white tree and rubbed a hot cheek against it and was near crying when a night-triller began to sing. There was a tingle all through her.

And this was not to be understood either. All at once she wanted very much the harsh sweaty comfort of the barracks. The trail had arced, she could be in Freetoon tonight if she rode hard.

Sleep was no problem. Normally you slept about four hours out of the twelve between a sunset and a sunset, but huntresses could go for days on birdnaps. Barbara loaded her pack orsper, mounted the other, and started at Bee-rise.

She ate in the saddle, not stopping even for the holy time of eclipse, when Bee went behind Minos and the stars came out. Ay and Ariadne gave light enough for those ten-plus minutes, and a muttered prayer to Father met minimum requirements.

Shortly afterward she struck the Ironhill road. It was wider than most—all towns, however hostile, met at the mining settlement to trade. Jogging along in her own apprehension, she forgot all care. She rounded a bend and could have been shot by the Greendalers before realizing they were there.

A dozen of them, in full armor, riding toward Freetoon . . . Barbara reined in, gasping, and stared at the crossbows as they swiveled around.

The Greendale leader, a middle-aged Macklin with a broken nose, laughed. "We won't harm you today, darling, if you behave yourself," she said. "Freetooner, aren't you? We're on embassy."

Barbara nodded distantly and joined them. She felt no hatred, but war was as normal a part of life as the harvest festival. She had been in several raids and skirmishes since gaining her growth, and her kin were dead at Greendale hands.

There was a Whitley sergeant among them, about fifty years old. "I'm Gail," she introduced herself.

"What's your mission?" asked Barbara, rather snappishly.

"What do you think?" answered Gail. "You people ought to know better than to send spies our way when I'm on patrol duty."

"Oh . . . you bushwhacked them, then." Barbara felt a chill.

"Every one. Caught three of them alive. One, Avis Damon, got pretty much cut up in the fracas, and rather than bleed to death she told us what she knew."

It was bad news, very bad, but Barbara's first reaction was scorn. "I always claimed those Damons aren't fit for combat." Then, slowly: "So what do you think you learned?"

"A star ship landed in your country." Gail said it with care. "There was a Man aboard."

"A Monster," corrected Barbara. "We made it admit that."

"Mmm . . . yes . . . I thought so myself. You couldn't have captured a Man against his will."

A thin, dark-haired Burke interrupted softly: "Are you sure it was against his will? Maybe as a test of faith, he—"

That was the trouble with the Burkes. They thought too much. Barbara's hands felt clammy. "We've sent to the Doctors, of course, to ask what we ought to do," she said defensively.

"And meanwhile you have the Monster and its ship." Anger writhed across the Macklin's leathery face. "Do you think we're going to stand by and let you make an ally of the Monster?"

"What do you want?" replied Barbara.

"We're bringing an ultimatum," said Gail Whitley. "Your Udall has damned well got to turn the Monster over to a joint guard till we get word from the Doctors. If you don't—war."

Barbara thought about it for a while. She ought to make a break for it, try to reach Freetoon ahead of this gang . . . no, that would earn her nothing more than a bolt in the back. There was plaguey well going to be a war, no Udall would cough up a prize like the Monster. Well, *who says we can't defend our own fields? Hell and thunder, we'll toss them out on their fat cans and chase them all the way home.*

The battle would probably start tomorrow. It was about thirty hours' ride to Greendale, but the enemy soldiers must already have left and be bivouacked somewhere in the Ridge.

So be it! Barbara felt a welcome tension, almost an eagerness. It was a pleasant change from her eldritch moods of the past days. She chatted amiably with the others for the rest of the trip.

Bee and Ay were under the horizon when they clattered by the patrols up to Freetoon, but Minos, Ariadne, Theseus, and tiny Aegeus gave plenty of light. The embassy had dismounted in the courtyard and stamped into the Big House when Barbara realized

her usefulness was over. She turned her kill over to the servants and put the two orspers in the castle barn. Poor birds, they were so tired. Then she ought to go tell her barracks mates, but—

"Where's the Monster being kept?" she asked, before thinking.

"In the shed under the north wall, ma'm," said the Nicholson groom. "Didn't dare have him anywhere else, they didn't, though he ain't done no harm yet but you can't never tell."

"He!" said Barbara with a flash of anger. "Why call it 'he'?"

"Well, he says he's a male, ma'm, and, uh, well, he says—"

Barbara walked off. No reason why the Monster shouldn't be male. They were Man and woman, the wise happy people of the stars, and doubtless Monsters too — But why should the thought of this Davis creature's maleness be so odd, half frightening and therefore resented?

She grew suddenly aware that she had rounded the Big House and was in its multiple shadow looking toward the Monster's prison.

A door of wooden bars had been erected for the shed. It . . . he . . . Davis stood against the bars, flooded with cool Minos-light and moonlight. He showed sharp and clear in the radiance, and somehow the hollow cheeks and flat hairy breast and bulging muscles were no longer ugly.

They had given him clothes, kilt, cloak, and sandals, his hair was combed and a yellow beard was growing out on his face.

He was holding hands between the bars with a girl in a long feather cloak. Their voices drifted to Barbara—Elinor Dyckman, of all foul pests!

"Oh, I really must be going, Bertie. Those awful Greendalers . . . didn't you see them come in? Claudia will be just *furious*."

"Stick around, beautiful." The Monster's low chuckle was paralyzing, Barbara could not have moved after hearing it. "It's worth all my woes, just to get you here alone at last."

"Really . . . Bertie, let go, you scare me." Elinor giggled.

"Aw, now, macushla. I'm not going to eat you. Let me only feast on your silken hair, your starry eyes, your—" Etc., etc.

"You say *such* things." Elinor leaned closer against the bars. "Nobody says such things here."

"Ah, nobody is able to appreciate you, my little one. To think I crossed the stars and found you. Come here . . . lend me that adorable mouth—"

"Bert! I . . . I . . . mmmmm—"

The night blurred before Barbara. She wondered why, gulped, realized it was tears, and cursed herself.

"I *mustn't*, Bertie, dear! Why, you're a—"

"A man. And you're a woman."

"But you said—"

"I had no choice then." Davis leered. "But come in here and I'll prove it to you this time."

"Oh, I can't, Bertie, I just can't! You're locked in and—"

"You can swipe the key, can't you? Here, give me another kiss."

It was too much. And a Whitley was no sneaking spy like a, a, a Dyckman. Barbara strode across the yard, jingling her spurs as noisily as possible. "What's going on here?" she yelled.

"Oh!" Elinor squealed. "Oh . . . Babs, is it? Babs, dear, I was only—"

"I know what you were only. Get out before I knock your teeth down your throat!"

Elinor wailed and fled.

Barbara turned furiously on Davis. "What were you plotting?" she snarled.

The Monster sighed, shrugged, and gave her a rueful grin. "Nothing very evil," he said. "You again, eh?"

Heat and cold chased each other across Barbara's face.

"You know," went on Davis, "this is the kind of thing I used to daydream about in my teens. A brand new world, like Earth but more beautiful, and I the only man among a million women. And holy Cosmos, I've found it, and I want out!"

Barbara raised a fist. "Yes, so you can go home and call your friends to come raiding."

"Look," said Davis earnestly, "we want to help you—blast it all, we're not your kind of blood-thirsty pirate. And I *am* a man, as human as you. If you'd not come along, Elinor Dyckman would have found that out . . . nine months afterward, at most!" His smile grew altogether insolent. "Maybe you'd like to give me another chance? Honestly, you're one of the best-looking girls I've seen anywhere."

"Hell spit me out if I do!" Barbara turned her back.

"Don't go away," begged Davis. "It's lonesome as space here. All I've done is argue with that barrel-shaped queen of yours."

Barbara couldn't help laughing. The epithet was too good.

"That's better," said Davis. "Shall we be friends?"

"Why do you claim to be a Man?" she countered hastily. "You've already admitted you aren't."

"I had no choice then, blast it! You and . . . the other girl . . . only ones who might give me a chance to convince them. I tell Siz Claudia that I'm a benevolent Monster and if they'll let me at my boat—under guard, if they want—I'll go home and bring the Men. I mean it, too."

"But she doesn't dare," said Barbara slowly.

"Well, not so far. Can't really say I blame her. Say, have you found my blaster?"

"Your what?"

"My weapon. I had it in a hip holster, dropped it when you—No? I suppose it must be lying out in the grass somewhere. You won't find much in my pack. Medical kit, lighter, camera, a few such gadgets. I've offered to demonstrate them, but the old sow won't let me."

"What were you doing when I . . . found you?" asked Barbara. Really, she thought, he wasn't a bad Monster at heart.

"Just looking around. I analyzed basic surface conditions from space, then came down to let my robots check on the biochemistry, bacteriology, and ecology. That looked safe too, so I violated all doctrine and went for a stroll. I was just coming back to the boat when—Oh, Evil, I don't imagine you understand a word." Davis smiled gently. "Poor kid. Poor little Amazon."

"I can take care of myself!" she flared.

"No doubt. But come over here. I won't hurt you."

Barbara went to the door. He held her hands and pressed his face against the bars. What right had that hairy, jut-nosed, thin-lipped face to look beautiful? Her temples hammered.

"I want to show you something," he said in a grave tone. "Maybe that way . . . one kiss, Barbara."

She couldn't help it, she felt

bonelessly weak and leaned toward him.

The main door of the Big House crashed open. Torchlight spilled on the cobbles, Minos became suddenly wan. The Greendale Macklin strode angrily forth, her women bristling about her.

The voice jerked Barbara to awareness, she sprang from the Monster and grabbed for the crossbar slung at her shoulder.

"This means war!"

VI

Civilians and movable property were brought inside the stockade that night, and armed females streamed forth. But the fighting didn't start till well after sunrise.

Davis could just hear the horns and shouts and clash of metal. There was a good-sized battle on the edge of the forest, he guessed. He looked across a courtyard littered with women, children, and assorted dry goods and wondered what the desolation to do.

Claudia Udall tramped over to his jail, in full armor and toting a battle ax. Elinor Dyckman undulated in her wake, thinly clad and scared. Davis would rather have looked at her but thought it more tactful to meet the queen's eyes.

"Well, Monster, now a war has started on your account," said Claudia grimly.

Davis gave her a weak smile.

"It wasn't my idea . . . uh, ma'm. What do they want me for, anyway?"

"The power, of course! Any town which had you and your ship could conquer the rest in days. Now we'll have those Greendale pests chased away by eclipse. Then will you help us?"

Davis hesitated. Union law was unreasonably strict about one's relationship with primitives. You could fight in self-defense, but using atomic guns to help a local aggression meant a stiff sentence.

"Let me aboard my boat—" he began.

"Of course," beamed Claudia. "Under guard."

"Hm, yeh, that's what I was afraid of." Davis had intended only to light out for Nerthus and never come back. Let the Service disentangle this Atlantean mess. He gulped and shook his head. "Sorry, I can't use the boat to fight with. You see, uh, well—"

"Bertie!" Elinor wobbled toward him. Her white indoor face was beaded with sweat. "Bertie, darling, you've got to help us. It's death for me if the Greendalers take this place."

"Hm?"

"Don't you understand? The Greendale Udall already has two Dyckman lovers. They won't want a third . . . they'll see to it . . . *Ber-r-rtiel!*"

Davis got the idea. A queen's

favorite dropped the word to some unsentimental captain—

"Nonsense, child." Claudia glared jealously. "Monster, right now the Greendalers do hold the area where your ship is. Can they get in?"

Davis laughed nervously. "Axes and crowbars against inert steel? I'd like to see them try!"

Short of atomic tools, there was only one way to open that airlock. He had set it to respond to himself whistling a few bars of a certain ballad. And *The Jolly Tinker* was not a song which any lady ought to know.

"You won't help us?" Claudia narrowed her eyes.

Davis began a long, thoroughly mendacious speech about friends who would avenge any harm done to him. He was just getting to the section on gunboats when Claudia snorted.

If we can't have you, Monster, I might decide not to let anybody have you." She swung on her heel and walked off. Elinor followed, throwing imploring looks across her shoulder.

Davis sat down on the straw and groaned. As if he didn't have troubles enough, that sex machine had to slither around in a thin skirt and few beads . . . just out of reach.

Then he found himself wondering about Barbara Whitley. He hoped very much she wouldn't be hurt.

Eclipse came. It happened daily, at high noon in this longitude, when Atlantis, eternally facing her primary, got Minos between B and herself. An impressive sight: the planet, dimly lit by the remote companion sun, fourteen times as wide as Earth's moon, brimmed with fiery light refracted through the dense atmosphere . . . dusk on the ground and night in the sky. Davis looked hungrily at the stars. Civilized, urbane, pleasant stars! . . .

An hour later, the battle had ended and the Freetoon girls came back to the castle. Davis noticed that the warriors were divided into about thirty genotypes. When everyone in a single line of descent was genetically identical, a caste system was a natural development. And, yes, he could see why the Atlanteans had reverted to the old custom of putting surnames last. Family in the normal sense couldn't be very important here. For a moment the image of his father drifted across Davis' memory. He'd been rather a disappointment to the old man; it occurred to him that he had spent most of his life trying to justify himself in his father's eyes. But his chromosomes had never intended him for a solid citizen.

The armored lasses, foot and orsper (horse bird?) troops, clamored for lunch and beer. They had casualties and prisoners with

them. There weren't many dead or seriously wounded—couldn't be, with these clumsy weapons powered by female muscles—but some had been killed, by ax, knife, dart, bolt—

"Barbara!" Davis whooped it forth.

The tall redhead looked his way and strolled over through the crowd. Her left hand was wrapped in a wet crimson bandage. "Barbara! Cosmos, I'm glad to see you're all right!"

She gave him an unfriendly grin. "Mistake, Monster. I'm her cousin Valeria."

"Oh. Well, how is she?"

"No damage. She's helping mount guard on your ship."

"Then you did win."

"For now. We beat them back into the woods, but they haven't quit." Valeria gave him a hard green stare. "Now I know you're a Monster. The Men would fight."

"Why can't you tribes compromise?"

"Who ever heard of an Udall compromising?" laughed Valeria.

"Then why do you obey them?"

"Why? Why, they're the . . . the *Udalls*!" Valeria was shocked. "When I took arms, I swore—"

"Why did you swear? My people have learned better than to allow absolute rulers. You've got a whole world here. What is there to fight about?"

"A gutless Monster would say that." Valeria spat and left.

The day dragged. Davis was fed, otherwise ignored. Night came, and he tried to sleep, but the refugees made too much noise.

Toward morning he fell into a doze, huddled under his feather quilts against the upland chill. A racket of trumpets and hurrying feet woke him.

Another battle! He strained against the bars, into darkness. And wasn't it getting closer? The sentries were shooting and—

Elinor screamed her way across the courtyard. The multiple shadows thrown by Minos and the other moons rippled weirdly before her. "Bertie, you've got to help! They're driving us back!"

He reached out and patted her in a not very brotherly fashion. "There, there." When it made her hysterics worse, he shouted. After a struggle, he got some facts.

The Greendalers had returned with allies. Outnumbered three to one, the Freetooners were being hammered back through their own streets.

Newburgh, Blockhouse, and Highbridge banners flew beyond the walls. It was clear enough to Davis. Having learned about the spaceship, and well aware she couldn't take it alone, the Greendale Udall had sent off for help, days ago, probably. And the prize looked great enough to unite even these factions for a while.

"But now Claudia will have to make terms," he blurted.

"It's too late!" sobbed Elinor. She moaned and ran toward the Big House. Only warriors were to be seen, the artisans and helots had retreated into their sheds. Davis told himself to stop shaking.

The fighting didn't halt even for eclipse. At mid-afternoon the gates opened and Freetoon's army poured into the court.

Step by step, their rearguard followed. Davis saw Barbara at the end of the line. She had a round wooden shield on one arm and swung a light long-shafted ax. A red lock fell from under the battered morion and plastered itself to a small, drawn face.

A burly warrior pushed against her. Barbara caught the descending ax-blow on her shield. Her own weapon chopped for the neck, missed, and bit at the leather cuirass. It didn't go through; low-carbon steel got blunted almighty fast. The other woman grinned and began hailing blows. Barbara sprang back and threw her ax between the enemy's legs. Down went the woman. Barbara's dagger jumped into her hand, she fell on top of the other and made a deft slicing motion.

Davis got to his pot barely in time.

When he came back to the door, there was a lull in the battle. The Freetooners had been pumping bolts and javelins from the catwalk, discouraging the al-

lies long enough for the gates to be closed.

Presently Barbara herself came to him. She was a-shiver with weariness, and the eyes regarding him had dark rims beneath. There was blood splashed on her breastplate and arms.

"How is it for you?" she asked hoarsely.

"I'm all right," said Davis. With more anxiety than a neutral party ought to feel: "Are you hurt?"

"No. But I'm afraid this is the end."

"What . . . what do you think will happen? To you, I mean?"

"I'll get away at the last if I can." Her voice was numb.

Davis told himself sternly that this mess wasn't his fault. He had seen from space that there were small towns and agriculture on this continent, and had landed to bring the gift of Union civilization to all its natives. The last thing he wanted was—

The *first* thing he wanted, he thought in self-abasement, had been the glory of finding a new inhabited planet. And the money prizes, and the lucrative survey commissions, and the adoring women.

"Cosmos curse it," he shouted, "I can't help your stupidity!"

Barbara gave him a blind, dazed look and wandered off.

At B-set the battle resumed.

Trumpets howled, and by Minos-light he saw Claudia hurry toward the gate.

Its wood groaned. The ladies from Greendale must be using a battering ram. Fire kindled outside, flame ran up and splashed the sky. Somehow a house had been touched off. The top of the stockade loomed black across the blaze, like a row of teeth; the warriors on the catwalk were silhouetted devils. Davis wondered crazily which of them was Barbara, if Barbara was still alive.

The main gate shuddered and a hinge pulled loose.

Someone galloped toward him on a frantic orsper, leading two others. She jumped from the saddle. "Barbara!" he whispered.

"Valeria again." The girl laughed with scant humor. "Stand aside, I'm going to get you out."

Her ax thudded against the bolt.

"But what—why—"

"We're finished," snapped Valeria. "For now, anyway. For always, unless you can help us. I'm going to get you out, Monster. We'll escape if we can, and see if you can remedy matters."

"But I'm neutral!" gibbered Davis.

Valeria grinned unpleasantly. "I have an ax and a knife, my dear, and nothing to lose. Are you still neutral?"

"No," gulped Davis. "Not if you feel that way about it."

Another orsper ran from the stables, with a rider who led a spare mount. Valeria turned, lifted her ax. "Oh, you."

"Same idea, I see," answered Barbara. *Of course*, thought Davis, *genetic twins normally think alike*. He saw that Barbara strove not to weep. It could be no fun to watch your country conquered.

"Put on your cloak, Monster," ordered Valeria between blows. "Pull the hood up. They won't bother with three people trying to get away . . . unless they know what you are!"

The bolt gave way. Valeria threw the door open. Davis stumbled out, got a foot in a stirrup and swung himself aboard. Valeria mounted another bird at his side, Barbara took the lead. They jogged toward the broken gate, where Claudia and a few guards still smote forlornly at a ring of enemies. The orsper's pace was not so smooth as a horse's, and Davis was painfully reminded that a mounted man does well to wear tight pants. This silly kilt was no help. He stood up in the stirrups, swearing.

Someone ran from the Big House. "Help! Ohhh—" Davis glimpsed Elinor's face, blind with terror. He leaned over, caught her wrist, and whirled her toward a spare orsper.

"Get that pantywaist out of here!" yelled Valeria.

Elinor scrambled up. Barbara

freed her ax and broke into a gallop. Willy-nilly, Davis followed.

A band of women stood before them. A bolt hummed maliciously past his ear. Barbara's orsper kicked with a gruesomely clawed foot. Davis' mount stumbled on something. Valeria leaned over and swung at a shadowy form, sparks showered.

Then they were out of the melee, on the street, into the fields and the forest beyond.

VII

Davis woke up after eclipse. For a moment he knew only one pulsing ache, then memory of his all-night ride came back and he gasped.

Barbara, crouched over a little smokeless fire, preparing a meal from what supplies and equipment had been in the saddlebags, smiled at him. "How are you?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. Oof!" Davis crawled from his bedroll. His legs were so sore from standing as he rode that he didn't think he would ever walk again.

Dousing his head in a nearby spring helped, and he looked around. They had come a goodly ways from Freetoon, into a tall country of ancient woods and steep hillsides. Northward the land climbed higher still, with snow on the peaks. The day was clear and windy, sunlight spilled across green slopes and Minos

brooded remotely overhead. Ay was a searing spark to the east, daily overtaking the closer sun.

"Bertie!"

Davis lurched to his feet as Elinor came from the forest, sleeking back her long hair. She fell into his arms and kissed him.

"Bertie, you saved my life, oh, I'm so grateful . . . do you know, Bertie, I believe you're a Man!"

"You might come slice your Man some bread," said Barbara acidly. "Why did you bring her, Davis? Of all the useless— And good women are dead back in Freetoon!"

Valeria strolled into sight, crossbow on her shoulder and a plump bird in one hand. "Hell," she drawled, "all we need to do is leave the Dyckman beast here. Let her make her own way back."

"I'll die!" screamed Elinor. "There are jacklins in these woods! I'll be killed! You can't — Bertie!"

"Keep out of this, Davis," snapped Valeria.

He blew up. "I'll be damned to Evil if I will!" he roared. "I've been pushed around long enough!"

In his present mood, he would have welcomed an excuse to clip that coppertopped hellion on the jaw, but Barbara intervened just as Valeria pulled a knife. "Enough out of all of you," she said. "We have to stick together. Davis, if you insist, we'll let this . . . Eli-

nor come along till we reach some town. Now sit down and eat!"

"Yes, ma'm," said Davis meekly.

The food was strengthening, it seemed to give him back his manhood. Now that he was out of that filthy jail, he ought to start exercising some choice. He would have given much for a cup of coffee and a cigaret, but neither being available, he opened the council. "What are your plans?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Valeria. Both Whitleys had calmed down as fast as they'd flared up, though Elinor remained tactfully inconspicuous. "Last night I only thought about getting away."

Davis tugged his beard. It itched. "Just what will happen at Freetoon?" he asked. "No massacres, I hope."

"Oh, no," said Barbara. "There've been conquests before. As far as the lower castes are concerned, it's only a change of bosses. And some of the soldiers will take a fresh oath to the new Udall—Damons, Burkes, Hausers—" She snorted the names. "But families like us, who don't switch loyalties so easily, have to be killed. Though I imagine a lot of our sort got away into the woods. Outlaw life—" She shrugged, woefully.

"All right," said Davis. "But what do you want to *do*? Claudia and her daughters are most likely dead now. You haven't got any chief to be loyal to."

The cousins stared at him and

each other, as if suddenly bewildered. It was a moment before Valeria said savagely:

"Well, the powers of your ship aren't going to be used for Bess Udall of Greendale! Not after she killed barracks mates of mine."

Davis nodded, thinking his own thoughts. If Bess got her hooks on him, the situation would return to what it had been. He wouldn't lift gravs for her without a spear at his back and strict orders to destroy some town which Union law said he must die rather than bombard. He might well be tortured by way of inducement.

Therefore he must recapture his boat, somehow, despite all the guards the victorious allies would mount over it . . . big joke!

Barbara looked at the northern ranges. "We've scant hope of finding help this side of Smoky Pass," she said. "But nobody's crossed the mountains for, oh, generations. They say there are some strange folk living over there. If they'd help . . . we could promise them the loot from the enemy—"

"Wait a minute!" Davis' brain whirled. He was not forbidden by law to use violence against primitives, if it would save himself or rectify an obviously bad turn of affairs. But he doubted that a Coordinator board would see eye to eye with Barbara on what constituted rectification. "Look, look here," he stammered. "Wasn't

there a message already sent to this, uh, holy Ship of yours?"

"To the Doctors? Yes," said Valeria. "They would decide—"

"Ah, ha!" Whoever these mysterious Doctors were, they knew enough science to operate a parthenogenesis machine. He'd have a better chance of convincing them of the truth than anyone else. And they could order his boat returned to him!

"Let's go to the Doctors," he said quickly. "They have the final disposition of the case anyway, and we'd be safe there."

"We can't!" said Valeria, quite aghast. "Barbara and I are only Maidens. And *you*—the Ship is sacred to Father!"

"But I'm a man," argued Davis. "Or a monster, if you insist. The rules don't apply to me." He glanced at Elinor. "You're an initiate, aren't you?" She nodded eagerly. "All right. You can escort me through the taboo area."

It took a good deal of wrangling. Being roared down out of bigger lungs was a salutary new experience for the Whitleys. Eventually they agreed, reserving the right to find allies if the Doctors, who seldom mixed in politics, would not order Freetoon liberated. The meaning of "liberation" in such a context was vague to Davis, but the poor lost kids needed something to hope for.

"We'll have to continue north," said Valeria. "Over Smoky Pass

and down through the valleys on the other side to the coast . . . because the Holy River route, all this region, will be full of people hunting you, Davis. Once we reach the coast, we can maybe get passage with the sea-dwellers, back to the Ship at Holy River mouth."

The prospect looked strenuous, thought the man dismally.

At least it was summer. The Atlantean seasons were due only to the eccentricity of Minos' orbit, but he had gathered that hereabouts the variation of weather was considerable. A satellite always facing its primary: permanent tidal bulge, terrific mountains on the inner hemisphere and mostly ocean on the outer . . . oh, well.

He remembered an item. "Do you have a sewing kit?" he asked. "I'll need a, uh—" he blushed—"special garment."

"I'll make it for you," said Barbara helpfully. "Just let me get the measurements."

Davis' ears glowed cadmium red. "No, thanks! You wouldn't understand."

Elinor, who had picked up a little self-confidence, piped: "This trip will take just weeks, won't it? But the Freetoon couriers will have reached the Ship pretty soon. The Doctors will send word back. Why, we may meet one of their legates!"

"That's all right," said Valeria.

"Just so we don't fall into Green-dale hands." She drew a finger across her throat.

"Must you?" said Elinor faintly.

Davis glanced up at Minos. The big planet 5000 Earth masses, was almost half full, its amber face blurred by a crushingly thick hydrogen atmosphere, cloudy bands of dull green and blue and brown, dark blots which were storms large enough to swallow Terra whole. He shivered. It was a long, lonesome way home; the Service wouldn't visit Delta of its own accord for decades, and he didn't think he could survive that long. Why, missing his anti-geriatric treatments would alone cut his life down to a lousy century! *In short, me boy, you've got no choice. You're jolly well on the Whitley team.*

He looked at the cousins and then at Elinor; she smiled back at him. It could be a lot worse, he reflected. One man alone with three beautiful girls—if he couldn't make a good thing out of that, he didn't deserve to . . .

Some days later, Davis Bertram shivered on the heights of the Ridge with Elinor.

It had been a cruel trek, through the forests and then up over the glaciers to this pass. Davis wanted to help with the twins' pot-hunting, at least—he soon mastered the spring-powered repeating crossbow—but Valeria

told him coldly that he walked too loud. Maybe that had been the worst of the situation, the feeling of uselessness. He had always before taken the lead while women watched and made admiring noises.

However, as they rested atop Smoky Pass, in a mordant wind and whirl of dry snow, Elinor shared his ragged cloak.

The range dropped even more steeply on its north side than the southern approach. Davis looked across a downward-rolling immensity of green, veined by rivers, here and there the flash of a lake, and wished for his paints.

"I don't see any signs of man . . . uh, woman . . . down there," he said, "but there must be some. Haven't you any idea what the people are like? Seems you'd all meet at the Ship."

"Oh, no," replied Elinor. "You see, Bertie, each town sends its own parties to be fertilized. It's seldom that two groups are at the Ship at the same time, and even if they are, they don't talk to—Oh, I mustn't say more. But it's *thrilling!*" She clasped her hands. "And safe. Nobody would dare attack a party going to or from the Ship. If anyone did, why, the Doctors would refuse to fertilize that whole town forever after."

Which would be one form of excommunication that really worked, thought Davis. He gave Elinor a sidelong glance. Her nose

was frostbitten and peeling, she had lost weight, but she was still an interesting lesson in solid geometry. And he wanted a lot more information from her, whether it was taboo to non-initiates or not. He was going to enjoy persuading her.

Meanwhile, though, they had to get down where it was warm.

Later he remembered the next two days only as a nightmare of struggle. He could hardly believe it when they reached timberline and the nearly vertical descent began to flatten.

This was a conifer forest, trees not unlike jack pines though the smell was different, sweeter and headier. The ground was thick with brown needles, the orsper footfalls a muted *pad-pad*. They saw only small birds, darting red and gold between bluish-green branches, but there was spoor of big game.

Even Davis could see how worn the orsper were. No choice, they had to rest.

At the end of the day, they reached a king-sized lake. It blinked amiably in the low sunshine, reeds rustled on the banks and fish leaped in the water. "We couldn't find a better campsite," said Barbara.

"Skeeterbugs," said Valeria.

"Not this early in the year."

"Yeh? See here, rockhead, I've seen them when—"

There were no skeeterbugs that

night. This did not improve Valeria's temper.

In the morning, both Whitleys went out afoot after game. Davis and Elinor were to watch the camp and try for fish: there were hooks and lines in the saddlebags. It was a cool, sun-drenched day and a flock of birds with particularly good voices were tuning up nearby. Davis' grin spread.

"What are you so happy about?" Elinor looked grumpily up from scouring the utensils.

"At having you all to myself," admitted Davis candidly. He knew her type. "Let's take a stroll."

"Bertie! No!" Elinor pouted. "I'm so tired."

"As you wish." He sauntered off. In a moment she pattered after him. He took her hand, squeezing it rather more than necessary.

"Bertie! Bertie, be careful, you're so *strong*—"

Davis wandered along the lakeshore, eyes alert for a secluded spot. He was in no hurry: all day before him, and he was going to enjoy the fishing too.

"You're a brave little girl, Elinor," he said. "Coming all this way and—" he paused, took a deep breath, and prepared the Big Lie— "never a complaint from you."

"I could complain," she said bitterly. "Those awful Whitleys. Skin and bones and nasty red hair and tongues like files. They're just jealous."

It might have been profitable to agree, but for some reason Davis couldn't backbite Barbara. "I hope the worst is over," he said. "You ought to tell me what to expect when we reach the Ship."

"I can't, Bertie. I mustn't. Nobody who's been there is allowed to talk about it to anyone who hasn't."

"But I'm a Man," he argued. "You do believe that, don't you?"

"Yes . . . you must be . . . even if your whiskers *tickle*."

Davis stroked his short yellow beard patriarchally. "Well, then," he said, "since the Doctors are only filling in for men . . . I mean . . . Sunblaze!" He backed up and started over. "What are they like, the Doctors?"

"I can't—" Davis stopped for some agreeable physical persuasion. "I mustn't—Mmmmm! Bertie!" After a while: "I really *can't* say. They have this big beautiful town, with the Ship in the very middle. But I never saw a Doctor's face. They're always veiled. Bertie, please! I *mustn't* tell you anything!"

"I can guess. The, uh, fertilizing rite—it involves a machine, doesn't it? A lot of tubes and wires and things?"

"If you know that much," said Elinor, "yes."

Davis nodded absently. The picture was taking shape.

Three hundred years ago, the hyperdrive was new and coloniza-

tion more art than science. You couldn't trust an apparently Earthlike planet; chances were its biochemistry would be lethal to man. It was rare good luck to find a world like Atlantis. Therefore doctrine enjoined caution. First the planet was thoroughly surveyed. Then an all-male party landed, spent two or three years building, analyzing, testing in detail. Finally the women came.

Somewhere in the Service archives of three centuries back lay a record of a female transport with a female crew; you didn't mix the sexes on such a journey unless you wanted trouble. Judging from names, its complement had been purely North American. The ship was bound for a new colony, but vanished. A trepidation vortex, of course, perhaps the same one he had managed to avoid. That was back before anybody knew of such a thing.

The Ship had not been destroyed. It had been tossed at an unthinkable pseudovelocitv across hundreds of light-years. The hyperdrive must have been ruined, since it didn't return home. It must have emerged quite near Delta Capitis Lupi, or it would have drifted endlessly at sublight speed till the women died.

Pure good fortune that Atlantis was habitable. But probably the ship had been wrecked in landing, because it seemed never to have lifted grays again. And there

they were, cut off, no way to call for help and no way to get back.

They had little machinery, no weapons, scant technical knowledge. They did their best—discovered what the edible grains and domesticable fowl were, located mines and established crude smelters, named the planets and moons in classical tradition—but that was all, and their knowledge slipped from them in a few illiterate lifetimes.

But in the first generation there must have been a biochemist. The thought of aging and dying, one by one, with nobody to help the last feeble survivors, was unwelcome. Human parthenogenesis was an ancient technique, though little used. The biochemist had taken what equipment was in the ship to make such a machine.

The right chemicals under the right conditions would cause a single ovum to divide. Once that process was initiated, it followed the normal course, and in nine months a child was born, genetically identical with the mother.

"Three hundred years of virgin birth!" mumbled Davis. "An appalling situation. It will have to be remedied."

"What are you talking about?" asked Elinor.

"You'll find out," he grinned.

They had come to a little bay, with soft grass down to the water's edge, rustling shade trees, the mountains looming titanic above.

Flowers blossomed fiery underfoot and small waves chuckled against the shore.

It was, in short, an ideal spot for a seduction.

Davis planted his fishing pole in a forked twig, laid aside his weapons, sat down, and extended an invitational arm. Elinor sighed and snuggled up to him.

"Just think," she whispered. "The first Man in three hundred years!"

"High time, isn't it?" said Davis thickly.

"Ah . . . your kilt . . . what's the matter?"

"Never mind." Davis gathered her in. Their necking became furious. He fumbled at her belt buckle. She closed her eyes, breathing hard. His other hand slid up her thigh.

Something roared behind him.

Davis leaped a meter in the air from a prone position. Elinor screamed.

The thing looked like a saw-beaked, penguin-feathered seal, but bigger. It had swallowed his hook and was quite indignant. The flippers shot it up on the shore and over the grass at express speed.

Elinor tried to get to her feet. The fluke-like legs batted out. She went rolling and lay still. Davis clawed for his ax. He chopped wildly, saw blood run, but the damned soft iron wouldn't bite on that thick skull.

The seal-bird knocked him down and snapped at his face. Jaws closed on the ax haft and crunched it across. Davis got a hand on the upper and lower mandibles, threw a leg over the long sleek back and heaved. The brute roared and writhed. He felt his strength pour out of him, the teeth were closing on his fingers.

A crossbow bolt hummed and buried itself in the wet flank. Another and another. Barbara ran over the grass, shooting as she went. The monster turned its head and Davis yanked his hands free.

"Get away!" yelled Barbara.

Her bow was empty now. She crouched, drawing her knife, and plunged toward the creature. It reared up. She jammed her left arm under its beak, forced the head back, and slashed.

The seal-bird fell on her. Davis glimpsed a slim leg beneath its belly. He picked up his own bow and fired pointblank, again and again, hardly aware of what he did. Blood gurgled in the monster's voice.

Then it slumped, and the arterial spurting was only a red flow across slippery grass.

"Barbara—" Davis tugged at the weight, feeble and futile. His own throat rattled.

The leg stirred. Barbara forced her way out from under.

She stood up, gasping, adrip with blood, and stared at him. His knees gave way.



"Are you all right?" she whispered. "Bert, darling, are you all right?"

"Yeh." His palms were lacerated, but it was nothing serious. "You?"

"Oh, th-th-this isn't my blood." She laughed shortly, sank to her knees before him, and burst into tears.

"There, there." He patted the bronze head, clumsy and unsure of himself. "It's all over, Barbara, it's finished now . . . Sunblaze, we've got meat for the pot—"

She shook herself, wiped her eyes, and gave him an angry stare. "You fool!" she snuffled. "If I hadn't h-h-happened to be near . . . heard the noise . . . oh, you blind gruntbrain!"

"Guess I've got that coming," said Davis.

Elinor stirred, looked around, and started to cry. Since she wasn't much hurt, she got no attention. "Well!" she muttered.

Barbara swallowed her rage. "I never saw a thing like this before," she admitted. "I suppose you couldn't have known, Bert. You were giving it a hell of a good fight. And it is meat."

"Thanks," he said weakly. . . .

VIII

When Valeria had blown off enough pressure by a magnificent description of Davis' altogether negligible intelligence, she fin-

ished: "We'll start out again tomorrow."

"Oh, yes!" babbled Elinor. "Those *things* in the lake—"

"What about the orspers?" demanded Barbara.

"Ride 'em till they drop, child, and continue on foot," said Valeria. "It'll be quicker."

"Don't call me child!" exploded Barbara. "I'm only three days younger than you, and my brain is twenty years older!"

"Girls, girls," began Davis. Valeria's scarred left hand dropped to her dagger, and he shut up and let the twins argue.

Barbara gave in at last, against her better judgment . . . after all, if they camped longer, Davis and Elinor were sure to— Only why should she care? What was a Monster to her?

She regarded him with concern. He had seemed such a big coward, she reflected; and yet he had fought the lake bird to save Elinor's life . . . Damn Elinor! If Davis had died on her account— Maybe, she thought, his unwillingness to fight was only a different way of thinking. A Man wouldn't think like a woman.

But it was heresy to admit this creature barely two meters tall, who could sweat and bleed and be afraid, was a Man!

And yet, when you got used to him, he was a beautiful creature, beard like spun gold and blue eyes that crinkled when he laughed

... his hand brushed her knee, accidentally, and for a moment it seemed to burn and she got all weak and the world wobbled. What was wrong with her? She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Vague dreams chased through her head, she performed heroic deeds before his eyes, now they were together under a full Minos—

"Damn!" said Barbara.

"What's the matter?" asked Davis.

"Oh, nothing." His gaze made her want to squirm. "Leave me alone, will you?— No, I didn't mean that!"

All the next day, as they rode deeper into the valley, she churned over a new thought. Just suppose Davis *was* really a Man. What then? Yes . . . voice the thought, wait for Father's thunderbolt . . . when none came, Barbara's universe quivered and lost a few bricks.

He was at least a very dear Monster, with his songs and laughter, and he came from the stars. The stars! Man or no, he could bring the Men, and Atlantis would never be the same again.

Even if no Men ever came, she thought with sudden tears, her own Atlantis was dead. Let her return in triumph, driving out the enemy from Freetoon, return to the comradeship of the barracks and the unforgotten forest, Holy River below her like a dawn

knife and the remote lance of the High Gaunt wreathed with cloud—for her, after knowing Davis, it would be too narrow and lonesome. She could never really go home.

She wanted to blurt her woe to him. It was not the Whitley way, but there would be a strange comfort, like having her mother back . . . only he would not hold her like her mother—

For lack of anyone else, she confided in Valeria. They were sitting up by the campfire while the others slept.

"It would be better if the Men came," agreed her cousin. "We've never lived as Father meant us to. We've just hung on, hoping, for three hundred years."

Barbara felt a smile tug her mouth. "It would be fun to have a Man-child," she murmured. "A kid like his father—like both of us mixed together—" Suddenly: "Val! I've been thinking . . . I almost believe Bert is a Man!"

"Rotten specimen of one, then," snapped Valeria.

Barbara felt puzzled. Her twin was an obstinate nuisance, yes, but so was she. They had never thought so unlike before now.

On the following day, the descent became so steep that they had to lead the orspers. Toward evening they found themselves on the stony floor of a large canyon. The river flowing through it was

broad as a lake, brown and swift, toppling in a kilometer-high waterfall over a cliff behind them. The air was subtropically warm, this was a much lower country than Freetoon's.

"These birds are about finished if they don't get a long rest," ventured Elinor. She sighed. "So am I."

"Maybe we can find someone around here who'll trade us," suggested Davis. "Look, whether you believe I'm a Man or not, I can sure as Evil act the part, overawe them, demand their help."

"It's blasphemy!" said Valeria.

Barbara looked down at her own tanned form, saw no signs of shriveling, and grew skeptical of Father with a speed that astonished her. "Are you afraid to try, Val?" she purred.

"All right, then!" snarled the other Whitley. "If this oaf can act like a Man, all right."

They were up before Bee-rise the next day, trudging downstream along the barren riverbank. The first dawn-glow showed the end of their search.

An island, some ten kilometers across, lifted sheer cliffs from the water to a luxuriance of trees on its crown. There was no access but a suspension bridge from the shore to the heights. Barbara's crossbow clanked into position. "So we've found somebody," she murmured.

"The question," said Valeria, "is

who, and what can we talk them out of? Go to it, Davis."

He advanced to the foot of the bridge, cupped hands around his mouth, and bawled: "Hello, up there! We come in peace!" Echoes clamored from the canyon wall. There was a waiting.

Then a slender girl clad in long brown hair and a few flowers stepped from beneath the trees to the bridgehead. She carried an arbalest, but didn't aim it. "Who are you?" she called timidly.

"She's a Craig," muttered Barbara to Davis. "At home they're all poets and weavers. Now why would a Craig be on sentry-go?"

Davis drew himself up. "Know that I am a Man, come from Earth to redeem the old promise," he intoned. Barbara smothered a giggle.

"Oh!" The Craig dropped her bow and broke into a tremble. "A Man—Ohhhh!"

"I come as the vanguard of all the Men, that they may return to their loyal women and drive evil from Atlantis," boomed Davis. "Let me cross your bridge that I may, uh, claim your help in my, er, crusade. Yes, that's it, crusade."

The Craig squeaked and fell on her face. Davis led his tatter-demalion party over the bridge. The timing was perfect: Bee just rising in a golden blaze over the great waterfall above them. On the other side of the bridge, there

was a downward path. The island was cup-shaped, holding trees in orderly groves, clipped grass, brilliant flowerbeds.

A few more women emerged from the foliage. They were as sleek, sun-tanned, and informally clad as the first one. And their reactions were just as satisfactory, a spectrum from abasement to, awed gaping.

"More Craigs, couple of Salmons, a Holloway, an O'Brien," murmured Valeria. "Artist, artisan, entertainer classes at home—where are the warriors?"

A Holloway cleared her throat shyly and blushed. "We never thought there would be such an honor for us," she said. "We thought when the Men came, they'd—I mean—"

Davis puffed himself up. "Do you doubt I am a Man?" he roared.

"Oh, no, ma'm!" The Holloway cringed back from possible thunderbolts. Her voice, like that of all the islanders, had a melodiousness which betokened long training.

"Where's your Udall?" asked Valeria impatiently.

"Udall, ma'm?" The Craig they had first seen looked confused. "No Udalls here. Just us, ma'm."

No Udall! Barbara's mind staggered. But, but it wasn't possible!

"We'll take you to Prezden Yvonne Craig, ma'm," offered the Holloway.

"Do so." Davis beamed. "Inci-

dentally, 'sir' would be more suitable than 'ma'm'. And don't . . . I mean, be not afraid. Rejoice!"

Another puzzling alienness—the islanders needed no more than the Man's consent to start rejoicing! Like children! When they had walked through two kilometers of parkscape, the whole population swarmed out to meet them, laughing, singing, dancing, striking up music for them. Altogether they numbered about a thousand, including children, and all bore plain signs of good, easy living.

Their village was surprisingly large. Barbara decided dazedly that they didn't have barracks at all. Each of these simple grass huts was for no more than one woman and her children. The concept of privacy was so new it felt like a hammerblow.

She was led to a hut, and goggle-eyed girls brought her eggs, fruits, small sweet cakes, and sang to her while she ate. Only slowly did her mind stumble from the wreckage of its own axioms and wonder what Davis was up to. . . .

As a matter of fact, Davis, the past weeks catching up with him, had gone to sleep. He woke near sunset, donned the embroidered kilt, plumed headdress, and gold ornaments laid out for him, and strolled from the shack to find a banquet in preparation.

Valeria stood waiting for him

in the long mellow B-light. She had loosened her red hair and discarded armor for a kilt and lei, but the scarred left hand rested on her dagger. They started together across the green toward a dais draped with feather cloaks, where Barbara stood talking to a Craig who held a carved staff.

"We seem to have found the kind of place we deserve," he said.

Valeria snorted. "Oh, yes, they're friendly enough—but gutless. This island is *too* easy to defend. They fish, raise fowl, have fruits the year round, all the metal they need . . . spend their time on arts, poetry, craft, music—" She ended her list with a vulgarity.

Glancing at delicately sculptured wood, subtly designed decoration, intricate figure dancing, listening to choral music which was genuinely excellent, Davis got fed up with Valeria. Narrow-minded witch! Her own rather repulsive virtues, hardihood and fearlessness, would be as redundant here as fangs on a turtle.

"What's the place called?" he asked coldly.

"Lysum. There was a conquered town about a hundred years ago that a lot of its people ran away from. Up the river there's a settlement of nothing but Burkes. These people are all from the same class . . . Oh, here we are. Presiden Yvonne Craig, Davis Bert."

The woman stood up for him. She was in her middle thirties,

and given a stronger chin would have been quite pretty—though Barbara, in kilt and lei, was unfair competition. "Be welcome among us, Man." Now that the first shock had worn off, she spoke with confidence. "Atlantis has never known a happier day. Oh, we're so thrilled!"

Davis looked around. "Where's Elinor?"

"Still pounding her ear," clipped Barbara. "Want to wait?"

"Cosmos, no! When do we—I mean, let the banquet begin."

Rank, as the women of Lysum settled themselves on the grass, seemed strictly according to age. It was pleasant to be in a casteless society again. The food was delicious, and there was course after course of it, and the wooden winebowls were kept filled.

Suppressing a burp, Davis leaned toward Yvonne. "I am pleased with what I have seen here," he told her.

"You are so sweet . . . er, gracious," she trilled happily.

"But elsewhere there is devilment on the loose. I am only the vanguard of the Men. Before all of them can come, the wrongdoers of Atlantis must be punished."

Yvonne looked alarmed. Valeria, flanking Davis on the seat with Barbara, leaned over and hissed: "No help here. I told this featherbelly we'd want some spears to follow us, and she damn near fainted."

"Mmmm . . . yes." Davis felt a moment's grimness. He couldn't stay holed up here forever. No wonder Val was so down on the islanders. Not a bad girl, Val, in her waspish way. Davis tilted his winebowl. His free arm stole around Barbara's waist. She regarded him mistily.

"Strong, this drink," she said. "Not beer. Wha's it called?"

"A jug of wine, and thou," smiled Davis.

"Bubbles in my head . . ." Barbara leaned against him.

The Prezden gave him a large-eyed look. Minos-light streamed over sprawling feminine shapes. "Will you take your pleasure of us all tonight, sir?" she inquired.

"Yipe!" said Davis.

"Like hell you will!" Barbara sat straight up and glared at him.

Yvonne looked bewildered. Barbara was quite tight enough to start an argument, which would never do. Davis gritted his teeth and said: "No, thanks. Tonight I must, urp, think on weighty problems. I would be alone."

Yvonne bent her long-tressed head. "As the Man wishes. My house is his." Her dignity collapsed in a titter. "I am his, too, if he changes his mind. Any of us would be so *thrilled*—" She rose and clapped her hands. "The Man wishes to be alone tonight," she called. "All you girls scat!"

Davis gaped. It was not what he had meant. Too late now, of

course. A god couldn't say, "Hoy, wait!"

Valeria stood up, put an arm under Barbara's shoulders, and raised her tottery cousin. "I'll see her to bed," she said frostily.

Davis watched them disappear into one of the huts. "Death and destruction!" he said, and poured himself another drink.

He was tipsy, but there was no sleep in him. Presently he wandered off across a dewed sward, under the light-spattered shade of high trees, and stood on the island rim looking across a broken wilderness of stone and water and moonlight.

The fact is, me boy, and we might as well face it with our usual modesty, Barbara is in love with me. Maybe she doesn't quite realize it yet, but I know the symptoms. Well?

Well, so if they could only shake that Valeria hornet and that rather cloying Elinor, they could have a lot of fun. Only somehow Barbara Whitley wasn't a person you could simply have fun with. Davis grew a little scared. Cosmos sunder it, he didn't want to be tied down yet!

So, since he couldn't get away from her, he'd have to remove temptation by curing her of her feelings. In the absence of electronic psychadjusters, he thought woozily, he could do that by making her mad at him—say, by exercising his Man's prerogatives

with, yes, with Yvonne . . . who must be very disappointed in him . . . he grinned and started down toward the village.

As he emerged from a grove into the unreal light, he stopped short. A tall form approached him. "Barbara," he stammered.

She came to him, smiling and shaking the loose red hair down over her back, but her eyes were big, solemn, a little afraid. "Bert," she said. "I have to talk to you." She halted and stood with hands clasped behind her, like a child. Davis swallowed, because she was not at all like a child in other respects.

"Uh . . . sure . . . you got rid of that spitchat cousin of yours, I see," he began feebly.

"She's asleep. I wanted this to be between us two."

"Uh, yes, of course. Can't settle anything with Valeria around. Ask her a civil question and you get a civil war."

"Val . . . oh." Light and shadow flowed across the girl. Suddenly: "What do you have against Valeria?"

"She's just a natural-born shrew, I suppose," he shrugged.

"She means well. It's only that she—never quite knows what to say . . . we *are* of the same blood, I know her and—"

"Scuttle Valeria!" said Davis impulsively. "Come here, you!"

She crept into his arms, her hands stole around his neck and

he kissed her. She responded with an endearing clumsiness.

"I couldn't stand it, Bertie," she gulped. "You and all those other women—what's happened to me?"

"Poor little Babs." He stroked her hair. "Sit down."

They spent quite a while without words. He was delighted to see how fast she learned. Here in the shadow of the frondtrees, she was only a warm breathing shape close to him.

After a time, she blurted: "Do whatever you want, Bertie."

Davis reached for her—and pulled up cold.

It was one thing to seduce an Elinor or an Yvonne. Barbara was a different case entirely: too whole-hearted, it would hurt her too much when he finally left. And . . . and . . . oh, there were all the practical objections, a long dangerous road ahead and so on. At the same time—no he *could* not rebuff her or humiliate her into storming off.

"Well?" she asked with a hint of testiness.

"Well, this is a serious matter," said Davis frantically. "You should think it over . . . look here . . . but—"

"But nothing!" Small calloused hands closed on his wrists.

Davis talked. And talked. And talked. He wasn't sure what he said, but it included words like sanctity. At the end, sweating, he

asked her if she understood at all.

"No," she sighed. "But I imagine you know best."

"I wonder—never mind! Of course I do."

"There'll be other times, darling. Whenever you want to fer—"

"Cut that out!" groaned Davis. "Give me a kiss and go to bed."

She gave him a lengthy one. Then, rising: "There's one thing, dearest. The others in our party—you know it could make trouble—don't let's let on to *anyone*. Don't even talk to me about it unless I say the coast is clear."

"All right. That does make sense. Run along, sweetheart."

"Goodnight, Bertie. I care for you."

"The word," he said, "is 'love.'"

"I love you, then." She laughed, with a little sob, and sped off.

She ran like a deer, Davis thought. Evil, why couldn't she be trained for spatial survey? Married teams were common enough.

The girl stumbled. She spread her hands, regained balance, and continued.

Davis felt the wind go out of him. There had been a scar on her left hand. . . .

IX

Barbara woke up and wished she hadn't. What had she been *drinking*?

She rolled over on her stomach and buried her face in her hands. Foggy recollections came back, yes, Val had helped her to bed and then she passed out . . . Davis making eyes at that Yvonne trollop—Father!

A young O'Brien entered with breakfast, which helped. Barbara tottered out into the open. It was a little past eclipse, and the islanders were going leisurely about their business. Prezden Yvonne ran warbling to greet her, received a bloodshot glare, and backed off. Barbara smoldered her way toward a fruit grove.

Valeria came into sight, wringing out her hair. "O, hello, little one," she grinned. "I recommend a swim. The water's fine."

"What have you got to be so Father-damned happy about?" groused Barbara.

Valeria did a few steps of the soldier's ax dance. "Beautiful, beautiful day," she caroled. "I love this place!"

"Then it's too bad we're getting the hell out of here."

"Whatever for?"

"What reason is there to stay?" Barbara kicked miserably at the turf. "So Davis can make up to all the women in Lysum? I suppose he's still sleeping it off."

"Well, he did go to bed quite late, poor dear. But he just walked around, thinking." Valeria flushed at Barbara's look. "I couldn't sleep—sat up watching."

Quickly, she jumped after a red fruit and crunched it between small white teeth. "Look, Babs, we do need a rest. So do our orpers; there aren't any here."

"Don't you know?" said Barbara. "One of those yuts told me yesterday. This river runs straight to the sea. They have boats here, we'll take one and make the trip twice as fast. The Lysumites get to the Ship that way—buy passage from—"

"Oh, hell, Babs. Life's too good to waste. I say let's stay here a few more days, at least." Valeria wandered off.

Barbara drifted glumly to the bridge. She didn't like the idea. That Yvonne—ugh!

A swim did help. Seated again on the rocky bank, she found her head clear enough to hold the problem. Which was that she wanted Davis for herself.

Just what that would mean, she wasn't sure, but the thought made her hot and cold by turns. She no longer doubted he was a Man, but it wasn't just any Man, it was *him*. Hell fry her if she let anyone else get him!

Then the thing to do was sneak out tonight, find him and— It took more courage than facing a wounded stamper. But to know where she stood and what she meant to do about it was like a fresh cup of that wine drink. She put her kilt back on and returned almost merrily.

Davis was just emerging from his hut. He looked wretched. Barbara's heart turned over with pity, she ran toward him calling his dear name and wondered why he jerked.

"Bert, what's the matter? Don't you feel well?"

"No," said Davis hollowly.

Valeria joined them, walking in a new undulant fashion. Was everybody falling sick? "Lemme out of here," Davis muttered.

The musical winding of a horn interrupted them.

"Somebody's coming," said Barbara. "Over the bridge."

"It may not mean anything," said Valeria, "but let's get out of the way, just in case. Better collect the Dyckman."

Barbara nodded and ran off. Elinor, stretching herself languorously before a burly Holloway, found herself suddenly prodded up the slope at dagger point. Valeria and Davis joined them in a tanglewood stand on the rim. They stood peering through the leaves at a bustle down in the village, the Lysumites leaping to form ceremonial ranks.

"Father!" breathed Valeria. "It's a legate—messenger from the Doctors!"

The awe of a lifetime rose within Barbara. She had rarely seen a legate; now and then one had come to Freetoon to discuss such matters as the payment of annual tribute.

This was a tall woman. She wore a travel-stained uniform: hooded blue cloak, trousers and boots under a white gown, heavy veil. She was mounted on an orsper and led remounts and a pack-bird. As she stepped to earth, Yvonne prostrated herself.

Valeria snapped her fingers. "Of course!" she said excitedly. "Messengers from Freetoon to the Ship . . . remember? The Doctors must have sent to every town to inquire—"

"Well," said Davis. "Well, this is terrific! Our troubles are over, girls."

The veiled woman entered a hut. Her baggage was brought in after her, then she was alone. A party of women ran up the slope, calling: "Man! Man, the legate wants to see you!"

Davis smiled importantly and led the way down. He seated himself on the dais, much to the shock of the crowded islanders—nobody sat in a Doctor's presence!—and waited. Stillness lay thick.

When the legate finally emerged, Barbara's knees bumped together.

The woman had changed into ceremonials: green robe, gloved hands holding a metal staff, a plumed mask in the shape of an orsper head covering her own and making it coldly unhuman.

Davis got up. "Hello, ma'm," he smiled. There was no answer. He faltered. "I am the Man," he

stumbled. "You, uh, know about me?"

"Yes," said the legate. She had a low voice and a stiff accent. "The Ship and all Atlantis have awaited the Men for three hundred years. How many of you are there?"

"Just me," said Davis. "I need your help—the Doctors' help. Otherwise," he finished dramatically, "there won't be any Men coming for a long time yet."

The legate neither moved nor spoke. Davis looked disconcerted, but launched into his story. He warmed up to it as he went along, and clenched his fists to emphasize the main point: the Doctors could order his boat returned to him, and he would fetch the Men. Barbara thought he looked much too smug, but lovable all the same.

At the end, the legate asked coolly: "Have you any weapons?"

"No, I told you. Just this dirk here. But—"

"I understand."

She strode from him, toward the bridge guards who stood holding their bows in what Barbara considered a miserable approximation of dress parade. Her voice rang out:

"This is no Man, it's a Monster. Kill it!"

X

For a moment nobody stirred.

The legate whirled on Yvonne.

"I order you in the name of Father," she cried. "Kill the filthy thing!"

Barbara had no time to think. She jumped, snatched a bow from a half paralyzed guard, and lifted it to her shoulder. "The first one of you to move gets a bolt in the belly," she announced.

Valeria's dagger flared directly before the legate. "And this witch gets a slit throat," she added. Her voice cracked across. "Hold still, you!"

In Freetoon the arbalests would have been snapping already. But these were a timid folk who had not known battle for generations. "Drop your weapons," said Barbara. She swiveled her own from guard to guard. Armament clattered to the grass. A moan went through the densely packed crowd.

Davis shook a benumbed head. "What's the matter?" he croaked. "I am a Man. Give me a chance to prove it!"

"You've already proved yourself a Monster by assaulting the Ship's own envoy," shouted the legate. "Prezden, do your duty!"

Yvonne Craig shuddered her way backward, lifting helpless hands. "You mustn't," she whimpered. "You can't—"

Through a haze of terror, Barbara saw Davis shake himself. He spoke swiftly then: "Unless you want to die, lady, you'd better tell these people to obey us."

Valeria emphasized the request

with a dagger flourish. Malevolence answered him: "So be it, then . . . for now! Don't think you'll escape Father."

Davis turned to the Whitleys. He was pale and breathed hard, but the words rattled from him: "We have to get out of here. Keep these people covered. I'll take charge. You, you, you, you—" his finger chose young, horror-smitten girls. "Fetch out all our stuff. And the legate's pack. And food, plenty of it. Elinor, pick up some bows."

"No—no, you Monster," she gasped.

"Suit yourself," he laughed harshly. "Stay here if you want to be torn to pieces as soon as we're gone."

Shaking, she collected an armful of weapons.

When the supplies were ready, Davis led his group up the path, a scared and sullen village trailing them several meters behind and staring into the Whitley bow-sights. Once over the bridge, he cut the cables with a few hard ax strokes. The bridge collapsed into the water and broke up.

"How do we get back?" cried a young Holloway.

"You can swim out and let 'em lower ropes for you," said Davis. "Now, take us to those boats I heard somebody mention."

The burdened women trudged along the shaly bank while Yvonne stood on the cliffs and howled loyal curses. On the other side of

a bluff, jutting into the river, a score of long slim bark canoes with carved stemposts were drawn up. Davis told his prisoners to load one. "And set the others afire," he added to Barbara.

She nodded mutely and took forth tinder and fire piston from her pouch. Flame licked across the hulls. Her mind felt gluey, she didn't know if she could have moved without him to think for her.

"All right, said Davis when the job was done. "Scram, you females. Boo!" He waved his arms and the youngsters fled screaming.

Barbara took a certain satisfaction in binding the legate's wrists and ankles and tossing her among

the bundles. Elinor huddled near the captive, big help she'd be! They shoved the canoe into the river and climbed aboard. Davis demonstrated the use of paddles, set Valeria in the bow and Barbara in the stern, and said he and Elinor could spell them.

Ariadne rose above Ay-set, and Theseus was already up. It would be a bright night. Father! Barbara could have wished for clouds, she felt so exposed under the naked sky. There was a blotch on Minos like a great bloodshot eye glaring down at her.

No, she told herself, Father was a lie . . . at least, the stiff lightning-tossing Father of the Ship did not exist, or if he did



then Bert with his long legs and blue eyes and tawny beard was a stronger god. Merely looking at him made her want to cry.

He grinned and wiped sweat off his face. "Holy Valdaoth, I don't want to go through that again!" he said.

Valeria looked over her shoulder. "But we got away," she whispered. "Thanks to you, we got away."

"To me? Thunderation! If you two hadn't— Well, let's take the cash and let the credit go." He regarded the legate thoughtfully. "I wonder what's beneath that helmet," he said.

He lifted the gilt orsper head. Barbara, who had half expected haloes or some such item, was almost disappointed when the ash-blond hair and coldly regular features of a Trevor appeared.

Elinor covered her eyes and crouched shivering. "I d-d-didn't want to see, ma'm," she pleaded.

"You've fallen into bad company, child," said the Trevor. Then, to Davis: "Are you satisfied, Monster?"

"No." He ran a hand through unkempt yellow hair and asked plaintively: "What have you got against me? Don't you know I'm a Man? You must have *some* biological knowledge to operate that parthenogenetic wingding."

"You aren't a Man." The Trevor lay back, scowling in the light that spilled from the sky.

After a moment, Davis murmured: "I see. It's a common enough pattern in history. You Doctors have had it soft for a long time. You must always have dreaded the day when the Men would finally arrive and upset your little wagon. When I told you I'm alone and there won't be any others for a long time yet if I don't return—well, your bosses at the Ship must already have told you what to do if that was the case."

"You're a Monster!" said the Trevor. Dogmatic as ever.

"Even if you honestly thought I was, you wouldn't have ordered them to cut me down. Even a Monster could go home and call the true Men. No, no, my friend, you're a pretty sophisticated lot at the Ship, and you've just decided to rub out the competition."

"Be still before Father strikes you dead!" she cried.

"Legates sent to every town," went on Davis. "Orders to learn what the facts are—dicker with the Men if there really are a number of them or if they can call for help; otherwise kill them and deny everything."

"I'd like to kill *her*," said Barbara between her teeth.

"Babs, have you any idea who the Doctors are . . . how many, what families?"

She frowned, trying to remember. A child always picked up scraps of information meant only

for initiates . . . she overheard this, was blabbed that by a garrulous helot. "There are a few thousand of them, I believe. And they're said to be of the best families."

"Uh-huh. I thought so. Inferior types couldn't maintain this system. Even with that tremendous monopoly of theirs, there'd have been more conflict between Church and State unless— Yeh. Trevors, Whitleys, Burkes, that sort—the high castes of Freetoon, with the wits and courage and personality to override any local chief. Well."

Barbara shoved her paddle through murmurous moonlit waters. "But what are we going to do?" she asked in helplessness.

"I think—yes. I really think we can get away with it." Davis took a long breath. "The word from Lysum will be far behind us. Now, either of you two is about the size of this dame. You can pass for a legate yourself—"

Barbara choked. After a moment, Valeria shook her head. "No, Bert. It can't be done. Every child in the soldier families gets that idea as soon as it can talk: why not pass a Freetoon Whitley off as a Greendaler? There are countersigns to prevent just that."

"It isn't what I meant," said Davis. "Look here. How are the sea people to know you're not a genuine legate, bringing back a genuine Man? Only, on his be-

half, you requisition an escort and a lot of fast orspers. We ride back to Freetoon, demand my own boat—oh, yes, our pseudo-legate can also order your town set free. Then we all hop into my spaceship and ride to Nerthus—and return with a thousand armed Men!"

Barbara thought dazedly that only he could have forged such a plan.

XI

Eighteen Atlantean days later, the canoe nosed into Shield Skerry harbor.

The enormous, shifting tides raised by the other great moons turned the coasts into salt marshes at ebb, brackish lakes at flow. But the local life had adapted, there were even trees and grass, and a few of the low-caste families lived here, sunken to a naked neolithic stage but available as guides. Valeria, impressive in robe and veil, commandeered their help.

Davis had tried to quiz the legate. Beyond the information that her name was Joyce and he was a Monster destined for hell's hottest griddle, she would tell him nothing.

For Davis, lack of privacy and the weariness of incessant paddling had its good points. It staved off his own problem. The notion that someday he'd face it again—maybe alone in space with two jealous

Whitleys, because he couldn't leave them defenseless against the Doctors' revenge—made his nerves curl up and quiver at the ends.

Unless he gave himself to a psychadjuster on Nerthus and had his own hankerings electronically exorcised—which he didn't want to do—he would have to pick one or the other. And now that he knew them both, he couldn't choose!

What have I done to deserve this?

Elinor had been very quiet on the trip. She made herself useful to Joyce, probably too scared of both sides to reach a decision. Davis felt sorry for her, in a patronizing fashion.

And then finally they were out of the marsh.

The chief Nicholson had told him in her barely intelligible argot that there were many many seafolk on many many islands, that Shield Skerry was only a port for the inland trade. Davis looked eagerly ahead. Behind him the swamps were a vaporous gray, low in the sea, a storm of shrieking birds made a white wing-cloud under Minos and the two suns—otherwise there were only the huge foam-flanked waves that marched out of the west. The water was a chill steely bluish-gray, the wind shrill in his ears.

The rock was nearly hidden by the stone walls erected on its

back: massive blocks cut square, a primitive lighthouse where oil fires behind glass burned in front of polished copper reflectors, two long jetties enclosing a small harbor. As they entered this, Davis saw that a good-sized ship—by Atlantean standards—was in. A capstan-powered crane was unloading baled cargo. Strong suntanned women bustled about, barefoot, clad in wide trousers and halters, their hair cut off just below the ears. Beyond the dock were warehouses and dwelling units. They were of stone, with shingle roofs, in the same uncompromising angular style as the town wall and the pharos.

The ship was carvel-built, with a high poop and a corroded bronze winged-fish figurehead. Davis guessed it had a deep draught and a centerboard, to maintain freeway in these tricky waters. There was no mast, but a windmill arrangement turned idly amidships. What off Earth—? Otherwise the harbor held only a few boats, swift-looking, more or less yawl-rigged.

"Highest technology I've seen here," he remarked.

"What? Oh, you mean their skills," said Barbara. "Yes, they say the seafolk are the best smiths in the world. It's even said their captains can read writing, like Doctors."

Davis assumed that the pelagic colonies were old, founded per-

haps before the final breakdown of castaway civilization. The sea held abundant food if you knew how to get it. "What kind of people are they?" he asked.

"We don't know much about them in the uplands," said Barbara.

"Well," said Davis, "we'll find out pretty quick." His stomach was a cold knot within him.

Work at the dock was grinding to a halt. Women swarmed from the buildings and hurried down tortuous cobbled streets. "*A legate, another legate, and who's that with her?*"

Valeria did not thank their guides, it wouldn't have been in character. She stepped haughtily onto the quay. Davis followed. Barbara nudged the wrist-bound Trevor with a knife and urged her after. Elinor slunk behind.

There was a crowd now, pushing and shoving. A few must be police or guards—they wore conical, visored helmets and scaly corselets above their pants. Davis noticed flamboyant tattoos, earrings, thick gold bracelets . . . and on all classes. A Nicholson stood arm in arm with a Latvala, a Craig pushed between a Whitley and a Burke, a Holloway carrying a blacksmith's hammer gave amiable backchat to a Trevor with spear and armor.

Valeria raised her staff. "Quiet!" she shouted.

The babble died away, bit by

bit. A gray-haired woman, stocky and ugly, added a roar: "Shut up, you scupperheads!" She was an Udall, Davis recognized uneasily. She turned to Valeria and gave a crude salute.

"Are you in charge?" asked the girl.

"Reckon I am, ma'm, being the skipper of this tub . . . *Fishbird* out o' Farewell Island, she is. Nelly Udall, ma'm, at your service."

Joyce Trevor opened her mouth. She was white with anger. Barbara nudged her and she closed it again.

Valeria stood solemnly for a moment. It grew quiet enough to hear the waves bursting on the breakwater. Then she lifted her veiled face and cried: "Rejoice! I have brought a Man!"

It had the desired effect, though a somewhat explosive one. Davis was afraid his admirers would trample him to death. Nelly Udall cuffed back the most enthusiastic and bellowed at them. "Stand aside! Belay there! Show some respect, you—" What followed brought a maidenly blush to Barbara herself, and she was a cavalry girl.

When the racket had quieted somewhat, Davis decided to take charge. "I am a Man," he said in his deepest voice. "The legate found me in the hills and brought me here. She knows you are a pious people."

"Bless you, dearie," said the Udall through sudden tears. "Sure, we're pious as hell. Any Father-damned thing you want, ma'm, just say so."

"But there is evil afoot," boomed Davis. "Before all the Men can come, you must aid me to destroy the evil in Atlantis."

A certain awe began to penetrate those hard skulls. The show was rolling. Davis turned to Nelly Udall. "I would speak with you and your counselors in private," he said.

She looked confused. "Sure . . . sure, ma'm. Yes, your man-ship. You mean my first mate?"

"Oh . . . no authority here, is there? Well where does the Udall of the sea dwellers live?"

"What Udall? I'm just me."

"Who is your queen, chief, president—who makes the decisions?"

"Why, why, Laura Macklin is the preemer, ma'm," stuttered Nelly. "She's at New Terra, that's the capital. Did you want everybody to come there and vote, ma'm?"

A republic was about the last thing Davis had expected to find. But it was plausible, now that he thought about it. Even under Atlantean conditions, it would be hard to establish despotism among a race of sailors. The cheapest catboat with a few disgruntled slaves aboard could sail as fast as the biggest warship.

"Never mind," he said majestically. "I'm afraid you misunderstood me, Captain Udall. Take us to a place where we can talk alone with you."

"Yes, *ma'm!*" Nelly's eyes came to light on Joyce Trevor's sullen face. She jerked a horny thumb toward the prisoner. "Enemy of yours, ma'm? I'll chop her up personally."

"That will not be required," said Davis. "Bring her along."

Elinor cringed back, looking at the Udall from terrified eyes.

"Awright, awright, clear a way!" roared Nelly. "Stand aside there, you bilge drinkers!" Her fist emphasized the request, but nobody seemed to mind. Tough lot.

Davis led his party after her, through a narrow street to a smoky kennel with an anchor painted on the gable. "We'll use this tavern," said Nelly. "Break open a keg of — No, you fishbrains! This is private! Git!" She slammed the door in a hundred faces.

Davis coughed. When his eyes were through watering, he saw a room under sooty rafters, filled with benches and tables. A noble collection of casks lined one wall, otherwise the inn was hung with scrimshaw work and stuffed fish. A whole seal-bird roasted in the fireplace.

Nelly fetched heroic goblets and tapped a brandy cask. "Now then, your maledom, say away." She leaned back and sprawled

columnar legs across the floor. "Death and corruption! A Man, after all these years."

Formality was wasted on her, Davis decided. He told her the same censored tale he had given Lysum.

"Heard of those wenches." Nelly snorted. "Well, ma'm . . . sorry, you said it was 'sir,' didn't you? What happened next?"

"This Trevor showed up," said Davis. "She was one of the agents of evil, the same who had whipped Greendale and the other towns into attacking Freetoon. She stirred up Lysum against me. I made her captive and we went down the river till we came here."

"Why didn't you see her gizzard, sir?"

"The Men are merciful," said Davis with a slight shudder. "Do you have a place where she can be held incommunicado?"

"A what? We've got a brig."

"That'll do." Davis continued with his demands: passage to the Holy River mouth and an escort to Freetoon, where the lady legate would give the orders of the Ship.

Nelly nodded. "Can do, sir. There are twenty good crewgirls on the *Fishbird*, and a causeway from the Ship over the swamps—"

"We needn't stop at the Ship," said Valeria quickly. "In fact, I'm commanded not to come near it till the rest of the Men arrive. And you understand, this has to be kept secret or we may have

more trouble with the, uh, agents of hell."

"Awright, ma'm. We'll just leave the *Fishbird* at Bow Island and get orspers and ride straight to Freetoon. There's a ridge we can follow through the marshes."

Davis frowned. Whatever legate had gone to Freetoon might have planted a story that he really was a Monster, to be killed on sight. Or no, probably not . . . *that* legate had no way of knowing he was the only male human on Atlantis; she'd have to ride back for orders. . . .

"The faster the better," he said.

"We'll warp out at Bee-rise tomorrow, ma'm," said Nelly Udall. She shook her head and stared into her goblet. "A Man! A real live Man! Father damn it, I'm too old . . . but I've seen you, sir. That's enough for me, I reckon."

After Joyce Trevor had been safely locked in the town jail, with the guard ordered not to speak to her or let anyone else do so, Nelly led Davis' party down to the dock, where he made a short but telling speech to the assembled women. The inquiries of the preceding legate as to whether a Man had been seen had paved the way for his arrival; no one disbelieved him.

Cloud masses piled blackly out of the west, wind skirled, and scud stung his face. He felt the weariness

ness of being hunted. "I would retire," he said.

"Yes, sir, this way, sir," said Nelly. She gave him a wistful look. "Sure you won't come down to the Anchor with us and fer—"

"Quite sure!" said Barbara and Valeria together.

The crowd trailed them to a long house reserved for ships' captains. Beyond a common room, there was a hall lined by small bedchambers. Elinor slipped into the first, then Valeria, then Davis, then Barbara . . . he closed the shutters against the gale, turned off the guttering oil lantern, and crept through a sudden heavy darkness into bed. Ahhh!

But it wasn't easy to sleep. Too much to think about . . . it would be good to be among men again . . . what to do about the Whitleys?—oh, blast, face that problem later . . . he'd be coming back to Atlantis, surely, to help these forlorn female devils through the difficult period of readjustment . . . *Hello, Dad! I seem to've been pounded into a sober well-integrated citizen after all . . . But nobody mated to a Whitley would ever get too sober—*

Drowsiness spilled from him when the door opened. He sat up. "Who's that?" Bare feet groped across the floor. His scalp pricked.

"Shhh!" The husky voice was almost in his ear. He reached and

felt a warm roundedness. "Bertie, I just had to come to you—"

Davis made weak fending motions. The girl laughed shyly and slid under his blankets. Two strong arms closed about him.

His morality stood up in indignation, slipped, and tobogganed whopping down his spinal column. "C'mere!" he said hoarsely.

Her lips closed against his, still inexpert, her hands shuddered their way along his back. Well, he thought with an intoxicating sense of release, if Valeria chose to enter his bed, why, Val was a wonderful girl and he'd make a more or less honest woman of her when he got the chance.

"Bert . . . Bert, darling, I don't know what . . . what this is, to be with a Man . . . but I care for you so much—"

"I told you the word was 'love,'" he chuckled.

"Did you? When was that?"

"You remember, Val, sweetheart . . . you didn't fool me—"

"Val!" She sat bolt upright and screeched the name. "Val? What's been going on here?"

"Oh, no!" groaned Davis. "Barbara, listen, I can explain—"

"I'll explain you!" she yelled.

Davis scrambled to get free. The blankets trapped him. Barbara got her hands on his throat.

The door opened. The tall red-haired girl carried an ax in her right hand; the left, holding a lantern, was scarred.

"What's happening?" barked Valeria.

To the untrained eye, a wrestling match is superficially not unlike certain other sports. Valeria cursed, set down the lantern, and strode forward with lifted ax. Barbara sprang out of bed, snatched up Davis' knife, and confronted her twin.

"So you've been mucking around!" she shouted.

"I wouldn't talk," answered Valeria from clenched jaws. "The minute my back is turned, you come oozing in and—and—"

"Now, girls," stammered Davis. "Ladies, ladies, please!"

They whirled on him. Something intimated to him that this was not just the correct approach. He got out of bed one jump ahead of the ax and backed into a corner. "It's all a mistake!"

"The mistake was ever bringing you along," snarled Valeria.

The wind hooted and banged the shutters. Above it, suddenly, he heard a roar. It swept closer, boots racketing on cobblestones, clattering iron, a mob howl.

The Whitleys reacted fast. Valeria whirled her ax, Barbara darted back to her room for a bow. The vague light threw their shadows monstrous across the walls.

Feet pounded down the hall. Nelly Udall burst into the chamber. There were gashes on her squat body, and the ax in her

hand dripped blood. "Hell and sulfur!" she bawled. "Grab your weapons! They're coming to kill you!"

A Macklin and a youthful Lundgard followed her. They were also wounded, hastily armed, and they were crying.

"What happened?" rattled Davis.

"I bolted the outer door," panted Nelly. "They'll break it down in a minute." A groan of abused wood came from behind her. "I believe you're a Man, dearie . . . that's how I got these cuts . . . but the Trevor—Why didn't you kill that snark when you had the chance?"

"Trevor!" Davis grabbed the Udall's shoulders. "Is she loose?"

"Yeh," said Nelly in a flat voice. "We was all down at the Anchor, drinking your health, and this Trevor walks in with that Dyckman of yours, says she's the legate and you're a Monster. Proves herself by running through the rites every mother knows are said at the Ship—challenges your Whitley to do the same—" Nelly shook her head. "It was quite a fight. We three here beat our way out o' the tavern and got here ahead of 'em."

"Elinor!" Barbara's voice seethed.

"She must have sneaked out," said Davis wanly. "Gone to the brig, told the guard she had new orders from me, set Joyce free.

... Oh, almighty Cosmos, what're we going to do now?"

"Fight," answered Nelly. She planted herself in the doorway.

There was a final crash, and the mob came down the hall. A Salmon leaped yelling, with drawn knife. Nelly's ax thundered down, the body rolled at her feet. A Hauser jabbed at her with a spear. Barbara shot the Hauser through the breast.

It dampened them. The women milled sullenly in the narrow corridor, the noise quieted to a tigerish grumble.

Davis stepped forward, trying not to shake. A scarred elderly Damon faced him boldly. "Will you call a truce?" she asked.

"Yes," said Davis. "Hold your fire, Barbara. Maybe we can—"

Joyce Trevor pushed her way through the crowd and regarded him over Nelly's shoulder. Ragged skirt and matted hair took away none of her frozen dignity. "I say you are a Monster," she declared.

"Elinor," said Davis, very quietly, still not believing it. "Elinor, why did you do this?"

He glimpsed her in the mob, thin, shaking, and enormous-eyed. Her lips were pale and stiff. "You are," she whispered. "You attacked a legate. The legate says you're a Monster."

Davis smiled wryly. "I was alone, and there were a lot of Doctors," he murmured. "That's why, isn't it?"

"Shut up, you Monster!" screamed Elinor. "You and those Whitleys kicked me around once too often!"

"This is a waste of time," snapped Joyce. "If that Whitley is a true legate, let her prove it by reciting the rites."

"Never mind," sighed Davis. "She isn't. But I am a Man. I can bring all the Men here. The legate lies about me because the Doctors don't want them. It would mean the end of Doctor power."

"I sort of thought that," muttered the Lundgard beside him.

"Let me go to my spaceship," said Davis. "That's all I ask."

Joyce whirled on the crowd. "Let him summon the other Monsters?" she yelled. "I lay eternal barrenness on anyone who helps this thing! I order you to kill it, now!"

Nelly hefted her ax, grinning. "Who's next?" she inquired.

Davis heard feet shuffle in the corridor, voices buzz and break, spears drag on the floor. And there was the sound of new arrivals, a few pro-Davis women stamping in and making their own threats. Women have slightly less tendency to act in mobs than men do; the crowd was wavering, uncertain, afraid.

He straightened, licked his lips, and walked forward. "I'm going out," he said. "Make way."

Barbara, Valeria, Nelly and her two companions, followed at his

heels. A handful of determined roughnecks shoved through the pack, toward him, to join him. Otherwise no one stirred. Joyce boiled under the menace of Barbara's cocked bow, Elinor hid her eyes. If nothing broke this explosive quiet—

The wind raved in coalsack streets. A lonely score of women tramped in a circle about Davis, toward the dock. He heard the crowd follow, but it was too dark to see them.

Barbara—he felt the hard stock of her arbalest—whispered venomously: "Don't think I'm coming along for your sake, you slimy double-face. I haven't any choice."

When they emerged from canyon-like walls, onto the wharf, enough light to see by trickled down from the pharos. Nelly led the way to her ship.

"I'm staking one hell of a lot on your really being a Man," she said desolately, into the wind. "I don't dare believe anything else."

The Shield Skerry folk swirled on the edge of darkness, still paralyzed. He had to get away before the shooting began. He crossed the gangplank to the deck. Valeria edged close to him and hissed: "Yes, I'll believe you're a Man too . . . and the hell with all Men! I'm only coming because I haven't any choice."

Nelly seemed to draw strength from the planks booming beneath her feet. "All aboard, you scuts!

Man the capstan! Look lively now!"

She went aft, up on the poop to a nighted helm. The other women scurried about, doing incomprehensible things with ropes and pulleys. The great windmill jerked, gears whined as they engaged, there was a white threshing at the stern. The *Fishbird* moved slowly out of the harbor.

XII

Morning was gray over an ice-gray sea, where waves snorted from horizon to horizon and the ship wallowed. Davis emerged from one of the little cabins under the poop to find the crew—mostly young women of the more warlike families—chattering happily. Barbara and Valeria sulked on opposite sides of the deck, elaborately ignoring him.

The windmill, facing into the stiff gusts, turned, driving a propeller through a set of gears and shafts. As he waited for breakfast, Davis tried to lose his gloom by admiring the arrangement—it made the ship independent of wind direction. Evil! Who cared?

Nelly Udall waddled into view. "Morning, dearie," she boomed. "Not seasick, I hope? No? Good—kind of hard to believe in a seasick Man, eh? Haw, haw, haw!" She slapped his back so he staggered. Then, seriously: "Come into my cabin. We got to talk."

They sat on her bunk. She took out a pipe and stuffed it with greenish flakes from a jar. "We can't go on to Holy River now, that's for sure, chick. That Father-damned legate's been preaching hellfire to 'em back at Shield. The boats must already be headed for the Ship to bring the glad tidings. With a wind like this, a yawl can sail rings around us. Time we get to Bow Island, even, all the country will be up in arms."

"Glutch!" strangled Davis.

Nelly kindled her pipe with a fire piston and blew nauseous clouds. "Sure you aren't seasick, duck? All of a sudden you don't look so good."

"We've got to raise help," mumbled Davis. "Somewhere, somehow."

Nelly nodded. "Figgered as much. I'm bound for Farewell, my home port. Got plenty of friends there, and nobody to conterdick whatever you say."

"But when they hear the Ship's against us—"

"I know a lot who'll still stick by us, dearie. Girls like our present crew. We've gotten almighty sick of the Doctors. We see more of 'em than the uplanders do, the—" Nelly went into a rich catalogue of the greed, arrogance, and general snottiness of the Doctors. Davis guessed that a mercantile culture like this would naturally resent paying tribute . . .

and then, generations of sexual frustration had to be vented somehow.

The Doctors could not all be villains. Doubtless many were quite sincere. But Davis knew enough Union law to be sure that anything he did to them would be all right with the Coordination Service. It was they who stood between Atlantis and civilization—more important, a normal family life.

The idea grew slowly within him as the Udall rumbled on:

"I reckon we can raise quite a few shiploads, then go far up the coast and strike inland toward your boat."

"No!" said Davis. Words poured from him. "Too risky. It'll be guarded too heavily; and they may have tools enough left in the Ship to demolish it. We've got to act fast. If you think your friends are willing to hazard their lives to be free—"

Nelly smiled. "Chick, with that beard and that voice you can talk 'em into storming hell gate."

"It won't be quite that bad," said Davis. "I hope. What we're going to do is storm the Ship."

The rebel fleet lay to at Ship city at high tide, just after B-rise.

Davis stood on the *Fishbird's* deck and watched his forces move in. There were about forty vessels, their windmills and sails like gull wings across waters muddy-blue,

rippled and streaked by an early breeze. At their sterns flew the new flag he had designed. His girls were quite taken with the Jolly Roger.

The rebels numbered some 2,000 women from the Farewell archipelago. There were more than that to guard the Ship, but less tough, less experienced in fighting—the seafolk were not above occasional piracy. The odds didn't look too bad.

Valeria stamped her feet so the deck thudded. "I'm going ashore," she said mutinously.

"No, you don't, *chicakabiddy*." Nelly Udall twirled a belaying pin. "Got to keep some guard over the Man. What's the bloody-be-damned use of it all if he gets himself skewered?"

Barbara nodded coldly. "She's right, as anyone but you could see," she added. "Not that I wouldn't rather guard a muck-bird!"

Davis sighed. In the three Atlantean weeks since they left Shield Skerry, neither of the cousins had spoken to him, or to each other without a curse. After the hundredth rebuff, he had given up. Evil take all women anyway! He just wanted to go home, go back and get roaring drunk and have the psych machine numb the pain which went with red hair and green eyes.

He twisted his mind elsewhere. The Ship must have been badly

crippled, to land here; probably it had come down where it could, on the last gasp of broken engines. The walls which now enclosed it had been built on a hill that just barely stuck out over high tide. Eastward lay the marches, a dreary gray land where a stone causeway slashed through to the distance-blued peaks of the Ridge.

There must have been heavy construction equipment in the Ship's cargo. A few thousand women could not have raised this place by hand. The machines were long ago worn out, but their work remained.

The city was ringed by white concrete walls five meters high, with a square watchtower at each corner. The walls fell to the water of high tide or the mud of ebb: inaccessible save by the causeway entering the eastern gate or the wide quay built out from the west side. Against this dock the rebel boats were lying to. Gangplanks shot forth and armored women stormed onto the wharf.

Davis let his eyes wander back to the city. He could see the tops of buildings above the walls, the dome-roofed architecture of three centuries ago. And he could see the great whaleback of the Ship itself, 300 meters long from north wall to south wall, metal still bright but a buckled spot at the waist to show how hard it had landed.

Barbara looked wistfully at the

yelling seafolk. She was clad like them: visored helmet on her ruddy hair, tunic of steely-scaled orcfish hide, trousers, spike-toed boots. The accessories included lasso, knife, ax, crossbow and quiver, she had become a walking meat grinder.

Davis, likewise armored, felt the same sense of uselessness. Not that he wanted to face edged metal, the thought dried out his mouth. But when women were ready to die for *his* sake—

Bee struck long rays into his eyes. Ay was so close as to be hidden by the glare of the nearer sun. Minos brooded overhead in the gigantic last quarter. There was a storm on the king planet—he could see how the bands and blotches writhed.

Horns blew on the walls, under the Red Cross flag. Women, lithe tough legates and acolytes, were appearing in cuirass, greaves, and masking helmet, all of burnished metal. Crossbows began to shoot.

There was no attempt to batter down the iron door at the end of the quay. A howling mass of sailors raised ladders and swarmed skyward.

"Cosmos!" choked Davis.

A Doctor shoved at one of the ladders, but there was a grapnel on its end. Davis saw her unlimber a long rapier. The first rebel up got it through the throat and tumbled, knocking off the woman

below her, they fell hideously to the ground.

"Let me go!" yelled Valeria.

"Hold still," rapped Nelly. Her worried eyes went to Davis. "I didn't think they'd have so good a defense, chick. We'd better get them licked fast."

He nodded. They had only a couple of hours before the tide dropped so far that any ship which remained would be stranded, in mud or the harbor locks, till the next high.

"So we stay," growled Barbara. "Isn't that the idea?"

"Yeh," said Davis. He drew hard on a borrowed pipe. "Only the Doctors must have called in a lot of upland warriors, to patrol between here and Freetoon. Now they'll send for their help. If things go badly, I'd like a way to retreat."

"You would," she agreed, and turned her back on him.

Axes, spears, swords clashed up on the wall, bolts and darts gleamed in the cool early light. The Doctor fighters were rapidly being outnumbered. One of them, in a red cloak of leadership, winded a horn. Her women fought their way toward her.

Davis gulped. It couldn't be that simple! Yes, by all creation, the Doctor forces were streaming down a stairway into their town. A slim young Burke cried triumph, he could hear the hawk-shriek above all the racket and

see how her dark hair flew in the wind as she planted the Jolly Roger on the city wall.

Now down the stairs! There was a red flash of axes. The last legate backed out of view, thrusting and slicing at sailor shields.

Nelly grabbed Davis and whirled him in a wild stomp around the dock. "We got 'em, we got 'em, we got 'em!" she caroled. Planks shuddered beneath her.

The man felt sick. His whole culture was conditioned against war, it remembered its past too well. If he could have been in the action, himself, taking his own chances, it wouldn't have been so gruesome. But he was the only one on Atlantis who could bring the Men. He had to hold himself back—

"Scared?" jeered Valeria. "If it looks like you might get hurt after all, we'll take you away where it's safe."

"I'm not going to retreat!" he said in a raw voice.

"Yes, you will, duck, if we got to," said Nelly. "If you get killed, what's for us?" Her seamed face turned grimly inland. "We've got to win . . . no choice . . . if the Doctors win, there'll never be another baby on the islands."

That was what drove them, thought Davis. Below all the old grudges and the glamor of his cause, there was the primeval mother urge. The seafolk had not

told it to themselves in so many words, but their instincts knew: a machine was too unsafe a way of bringing life into the world.

The iron harbor doors were flung open. So the west end of town was firmly held by his side. The noise of battle was receding, the Doctors being driven back . . . So what? A victory where you yourself did nothing was no victory for a man.

Damn! His pipe had gone out.

"I think we'll have the mucking place before ebb," said Nelly. "But then what do we do?"

"We'll have the parthenogenetic apparatus," Davis reminded her. "Not to mention the prestige of victory. We'll own the planet."

"Oh . . . yeh. Keep forgetting. I'm growing old, dearie—*huh?*"

There was a shriek through the gateway.

Sailors poured out of it, falling over each other, hurling their weapons from them in blind panic. A couple of hundred women made for the ships.

"What's happened?" bawled Nelly. "Avast, you hootinannies! Stop that!" She went into a weeping tirade of profanity.

Barbara snatched her megaphone from the captain. "Pull in!" she cried. "We're going ashore now!"

The helmswoman looked ill, but yanked a signal cord. The ship moved across a narrow stretch of

open water and bumped against one of the docked schooners.

"Let's go," snapped Valeria. She leaped onto the schooner deck.

Barbara saw Davis follow. "No!" she yelled.

"Yes," he answered harshly. "I've stood enough." Blind with fury, he dashed to the wharf.

The mob was still coming out of the door and over the quay to mill on the ships. Davis grabbed a Craig and whirled her around.

"What's the matter?" he shouted. She gave him an unseeing look. He slapped her. "What happened in there?"

"We . . . street fighting . . . Doctor troop . . . flame, white flame and it *burned* our forward line—" The Craig collapsed.

"It's Father himself!" gasped a Macklin.

"Shut up!" rapped Davis. He felt sick. "I know what it is. They must have found my blaster up by Freetoon, and the legate took it back here. Maybe records in the Ship describe blasters." He shook his head numbly. "Chilluns, this is not a good thing."

"What are we going to do?" breathed Barbara.

Davis thought, in a remote part of his mind, that later on he would break out in the cold shakes. If he lived! But for now he had to keep calm—

"We're going to get that blaster," he said. "There's nothing su-

pernatural about an ion stream. And there's only one of them."

"You'll be killed," said Valeria. "Wait here, Bert—"

"Follow me," he said. "If you dare!"

They trotted after him, a dozen from the *Fishbird* and as many more from the retreat whose morale had picked up. He went through the doorway and saw an ordered gridiron of paved streets between tall concrete houses. The Ship rose huge at the end of all avenues. From two other streets came the noise of fighting. The battle had spread out, and few had yet seen the fire gun. They would, though, if he didn't hurry, and that would be the end of the rebellion.

"We went down this way," pointed a Latvala.

Davis jogged between closed doors and broad glass windows. Looking in, he saw that the inhabitants did themselves well, no doubt luxury existed elsewhere on Atlantis. He could understand their reluctance to abandon such a way of life for the untried mythic civilization of Men.

He skidded to a halt. The Doctors were rounding the corner ahead.

There were about twenty. A line of legates, their helmets facelessly blank, spread from wall to wall with interlocked shields. Behind them lifted swords and halberds.

"Get them!" shouted Nelly.

Three girls sprang ahead of Davis. One of them was a Whitley, he thought for a moment she was one of *his* Whitleys and then saw Barbara and Valeria still flanking him.

Over the shield tops lifted a Burke face. It was an old face, toothless and wrinkled below a tall bejeweled crown, and the body was stooped in white robes. But his blaster gleamed in a skinny hand.

Davis flung out his arms and dove to the ground, carrying Barbara and Valeria with him. Blue-white fire sizzled overhead.

The three young girls fell, blasted through. It could have been Val or Barbara lying there dead and mutilated on the pavement, thought Davis wildly. He remembered how he loved them.

He rolled over, into a doorway. His gang were already stampeded. Nelly stood firm in the street, Barbara and Valeria were beside him. Nelly threw her ax, it glanced off a shield, the legate stumbled against the old Doctor. Her next shot missed, and Nelly pumped thick legs across the street.

She hit the door with one massive shoulder. It went down in splinters. Davis sprang into a sybarite's parlor.

Two legates appeared in the doorframe. Barbara's crossbow snapped twice. Valeria and Nelly

led the way through another door.

Davis followed and saw a stair. "Uncoil me your lasso, Babs," he said. "I have an idea." They pounded up after him.

A bedroom overlooked the street. Davis shoved up the window. The blaster party was just underneath. Barbara nodded, leaned out— her lariat closed around the chief Doctor.

"Help!" screamed the Burke. "I've been roped!"

Davis sprang into the street. He landed on an armored legate and both went down with a rattle and a gong. She didn't move. Davis jumped up and sent a left hook to the nearest jaw. Valeria's rope snaked from the window, fastened to something. She came sliding down it with her ax busy. Valeria and Nelly followed.

The old Burke snarled. She fought free and reached for the blaster. "Oh, no, you don't!" Davis put his foot on it. A rapier struck his scaly coat and bent upward, raking his cheek. He kicked, and the woman reeled off to trip somebody else.

Nelly had picked up an ax. "Whoopee!" she bawled, and started chopping. Barbara and Valeria stood back to back, their weapons a blur in front of them. Davis was still too inhibited to use whetted steel on women, but every blow his fist dealt shocked loose some of his guiltiness.

The fight was over in a few

minutes. Male size and female skill had outweighed numbers. Davis stooped for his blaster. "Let's go," he panted.

XIII

They went on down the street. There was a narrow passage between the Ship and the wall. On the other side lay a broad open square, lined with impressive temples. . . . No more sound of fighting. Odd!

A sailor troop emerged from behind one of the columned sanctuaries. "It's the Man!" squealed somebody. They ran toward him and drew up, flushed. The leader gave a sketchy salute.

"I think we just about have the town, sir," she puffed. "I was patrolling on the east end. Didn't see anyone."

"Good!" Davis shuddered his relief. He could *not* have used a blaster on women, the memory of the dead Whitley girl was burned too deeply in him.

"Get our people together here," he said. "Post guards. Round up all the Doctors left, herd 'em into one of these chapels . . . and don't use them for target practice! Set up a sickbay for the wounded, and that means enemy wounded too. Nelly, you take charge, I want a look around."

He walked through empty avenues. Behind him he could hear cheers and trumpets, the tramp of

feet and triumphal clang of arms, but he was in no mood for it.

Minos was a thin sliver, with Bee sliding close. Nearly eclipse time . . . had all this only taken three hours?

The Whitleys trailed him. He heard: "I take a lot back, Val. You fought pretty good."

"Hell, Babs, you're no slouch yourself. After all, darling, you are identical with me."

The street opened on a narrow space running the length of the east wall. There was a doorway in the center, with wrought-iron gates. Davis looked through the bars to the causeway and the marshes. Mud gleamed on the ridge which the road followed, birds screamed down after stranded fish. The tide was ebbing, the ships already trapped . . . but what the Evil, they had won, hadn't they?

Hold on there!

The highway bent around a clump of saltwater trees three kilometers from the city. Davis saw what approached from the other side and grabbed the bars with both hands.

"An army!" he croaked.

Rank after rank poured into view, with war-cries and haughty banners; now he saw leather corselets, iron morions, boots and spurs and streaming cloaks. They were the hill people and they were riding to the relief of the Doctors.

"A couple of thousand, at

least," muttered Barbara. "The legates must have gone after them as soon as we attacked. They've been waiting around to kill you, my dearest—" She whirled on him, her visored face pressed against his side. "And it's too late to retreat, we're boxed in!"

"Not too late to fight!" shouted Valeria. Sea women on the walls lifted horns to lips and wailed an alarm.

Davis looked at the gate. It was locked, but it could be broken apart. His hand went to the blaster. Before Cosmos, that would stop them. No!

The rebel army pelted into the open space. Right and left, arbalestiers swarmed up the staircases to the walls. *Hasn't there been enough killing?* thought Davis.

Behind him, Nelly Udall scurried along the ranks, pushing them into a semblance of order. Davis regarded them. Tired faces, hurt faces, lips that tried to be firm and failed; they would fight bravely, but they hadn't a chance against fresh troops.

Up on the parapets, crossbows began to snap. Orsperers reared, squawked, went off the road into the mud and flapped atrophied wings. The charge came to a clanging halt, broke up, fought its way back along the road . . . it stopped. Leaders trotted between panicked riders, haranguing them.

Hill women dismounted. Their

axes bit at a roadside tree. It wouldn't take them long to make a battering ram. They would slog forward under fire, they would be slaughtered and others take their place, and the gate would come down.

"When they're in range," leered Nelly to Davis, "burn 'em!"

Bee slipped behind Minos. The planet became a circle of blackness ringed with red flame. Of all the moons, only firefly Aegeus was visible. Stars glittered coldly forth. A wind sighed across the draining marshes, dusk lay heavy on the world.

Davis fired into the air. Livid lightning burned across heaven, a small thunder cracked in its wake. Screams came from the shadow army on the road, he fired again and waited for them to flee.

"Hold fast! Stay where you are, Father damn you!" The voices drifted hoarse through the gloom. "If we let the Monster keep the Ship, you'll die with never another child in your arms!"

Davis shook his head. He might have known it.

Someone clattered up the road. Four short trumpet blasts sent the sea birds mewing into the sudden night. "Truce call," muttered Valeria. "Let her come talk. I don't *want* to see them fried alive."

The mounted woman approached. She was an Udall. Barbara squinted through the murk

at the painted insignia. "Bess of Greendale!" she hissed. "Kill her!"

Davis could only think that the Doctors' desperation had been measured by their sending clear up to Greendale for help. The swamp and the upper valley must be alive with armies intent on keeping him from his boat.

"No," he said. "It's a parley, remember?"

The Udall rode scornfully up under the walls. "Is the Monster here?" she asked.

"The Man is here," said Barbara.

Davis stepped into view, peering through iron bars and thick twilight. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Your head, and the Ship back before you ruin the life machine."

"I can kill your whole army," said Davis. "Watch!" He blasted at the road before him. Stone bubbled and ran molten.

Bess Udall fought her plunging orsper to a halt. "Do you think that matters?" she panted. "We're fighting for every unborn kid on Atlantis. Without the machine we might as well die."

"But I'm not going to harm the damned machine!"

"So *you* say. You've struck down the Doctors. I wouldn't trust you dead without a stake through your heart."

"Oh, hell," snarled Valeria. "Why bother? Let 'em attack and find out you mean business."

Davis stared at the blaster. "No," he said. "There are decent limits."

He shook himself and looked out at the vague form of the woman. "I'll make terms," he said.

"What?" yelled Barbara and Valeria together.

"Shut up. Bess, here's my offer. You can enter the town. The sea people will go back to their ships and sail away at next high tide. In return, they'll have access to the life machine just as before."

"And you?" grated the Udall. "We won't stop fighting till you're dead."

"I'll come out," said Davis. "Agreed?"

"No!" Barbara leaped at him. He swung his arm and knocked her to the ground.

"Stand back!" His voice rattled. "I'm still a man."

Bess Udall stared at him through the darkness. "Agreed," she said. "I swear to your terms by Father."

The rebels shuffled forward, shadow mass in a shadow world. "Don't move," said Davis. "It isn't worth it . . . my life . . . Evil! The Men will be here in another generation anyway."

His blaster boomed, eating through the lock on the gate. He pushed it open, the hot iron burned his hands, and trod through. With a convulsive gesture, he tossed the blaster into a mudpool.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

Bess edged her orsper close to him.

"Move!" she barked. A few women surged from the gateway. She brandished her spear. "Stand back, or the Monster gets this right now!"

Minos was a ring of hellfire in the sky.

"Wait!"

It was a Whitley voice. Davis turned. He felt only an infinite weariness, let them kill him and be done with it.

He couldn't see whether it was Barbara or Valeria who spoke: "Hold on there! It's us who make the terms."

"Yes?" growled the rider. Her spear poised over Davis.

"We have the life machine. Turn him back to us or we'll smash it and kill every Doctor in town before you can stop us!" They faced the crowd defiantly.

A sighing went through the rebels. Nelly cursed them into stillness. "That's right, dearie," she cried. "What the blazes is a bloody machine worth when we could have the Men?"

The Whitley walked closer, cat-gaited. "These are *our* terms," she said flatly. "Lay down your arms. We won't hurt you. By Father, I never knew what it means to be a Man till now! You can keep the town and the machine—yes, the Doctors—if you want. Just let us bring the Man

to his ship to bring the Men back for us!"

Bess Udall's spear dropped to the ground.

"You don't know he's a Man," she stammered.

"I sure as hell do, sister. Do you think we'd have stormed the Holy Ship for a Monster?" She waited.

Night and silence lay thick across the land. A salt wind whined around red-stained battlements.

"Almighty Father," choked Bess. "I think you're right."

She whirled her orsper about and dashed down the road to the army.

Davis heard them talking in the orsper host. It seemed to come from very far away. His knees were stiff as he walked slowly back toward the gate.

Several riders hurried after him. They pulled up and jumped to the ground and laid their weapons at his feet.

"Welcome," said a voice. "Welcome, Man."

The sun swung from behind Minos and day burned across watery wastes and the far eastern mountains.

Davis let them cheer around him.

Barbara knelt at his feet, hugging his knees. Valeria pushed her way close to lay her lips on his.

"Bert," she whispered. He

tasted tears on her mouth. "Bert, darling."

"Take either of us," sobbed Barbara. "Take us both if you want."

"Well, hooray for the Man!" said Nelly. "Three chee—whoops! Catch him there! I think he's fainted!"

XIV

It had been a slow trip up through the valley. They had to stop and be feasted at every town along the way.

Davis Bertram stood in tall grass, under a morning wind, and looked up the beloved length of his spaceship. He whistled, and the airlock opened and the ladder descended for him.

"I'll be back," he said clumsily. "Inside a hundred of your days, the Men will be here."

And what would they say when he walked into Stellamont wearing this garb of kilt, feather cloak, and warbonnet?

The Freetoon army was drawn up in dress parade a few meters off. Sunlight flamed on polished metal and oiled leather, plumes nodded and banners fluttered in the breeze. More of their warriors had survived the invasion than he expected. They came out of the woods to worship him as their deliverer when he ordered the town set free.

Gaping civilians trampled the

meadows behind them. Davis wondered how many of their babies he had touched, for good luck. Well, it beat kissing the little apes . . . not that it wouldn't be nice to have a few of his own someday.

Barbara and Valeria stood before him. Under the burnished helmets their faces were drawn tight, waiting for his word.

His cheeks felt hot. He looked away from their steady green eyes and dug at the ground with his sandals.

"You're in charge here," he mumbled. "If you really want to make Freetoon a republic—and it'd be a big help, you folk have a difficult period of adjustment ahead—at least one of you has to stay and see the job is done right. There has to be someone here I can trust."

"I know," said Valeria. Her tone grew wistful. "You'll bring that machine of yours to . . . make her forget you?"

"Not forget," said Davis. "Only to feel differently about it. I'll do better than that, though. I'll bring a hundred young men, and you can take your pick!"

"All right," said Valerie. "I pick you."

"Hoy, there!" said Barbara.

Davis wiped sweat off his brow. What was a chap to do, anyway? He felt trapped.

"It'd be better if you both stayed," he groped. "You'll have a

. . . a rough time . . . fitting into civilization—"

"Do you really want that?" asked Barbara coolly.

"No," said Davis. "Good Cosmos, no!"

After all, he was a survey man. He wouldn't be close to civilization for very long at a time, ever. Even a barbarian woman, given spirit and intelligence, could be trained into a spacehand.

And a few gaucheries wouldn't matter. A Whitley in formal dress would be too stunning.

"Well, then," said Valeria. Her knuckles tightened around her spearshaft. "Take your choice."

"I can't," said Davis. "I just can't."

The cousins looked at each other. They nodded. One of them took a pair of dice from her pouch.

"One roll," said Barbara.

"High girl gets him," said Valeria.

Davis Bertram stood aside and waited.

He had the grace to blush.

In the next issue of *VENTURE S F* . . .

THE QUEER ONES, by Leigh Brackett

A tale of a handsome, yellow-haired hill girl and her strange child, of a TV repairman who wasn't, of a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder . . . all told in Leigh Brackett's best headlong, breathless style

VENGEANCE FOR NIKOLAI, by Walter M. Miller, Jr.

A harsh, powerful story of a girl whose baby has been killed in a war of the near future, and who seeks vengeance in a way that only a woman could

Also, *Marion Zimmer Bradley, Rose Sharon, and others*

World of the Future

Two stories about the world after the Blowup . . .

1. A MAN OF THE WORLD

by LES COLE

A man in that day will call himself civilized . . .

but what would we call him by our "civilized" standards?

One thing is certain: basic hungers do not change

THE DAY DAWNED BRIGHT BUT cool, and it was the cold snap in the air which awakened John Reeves. He rolled out of the blankets, cast a wary eye around the area to see if there had been any intruders. He tasted his mouth, grimaced, and stood up.

This would be the day, he felt it in his bones.

"Today you'll find it," he said aloud, "so why not celebrate? Brush your teeth—you can afford it." A slight breeze caused the branches of the trees to rustle a lonely answer. "After all," John Reeves said, "you're still a civilized man."

Carefully Reeves lifted a small leather case from his pack. He ran his fingers over the zipper and fumbled in his pack until he found a small can of oil. He put one drop on a finger and spread it over half the zipper's length; then the operation was repeated for the unoiled portion and it slid easily.

"Save it," he said, over and over. "Save it. Use it up wear it out make it do or do without."

Finally he opened the case, easing the zipper along its path with slow pressure. Inside was a soap dish, broken and empty; a toothbrush holder, frayed; the shaving mirror cracked; the comb still firmly in its holder but missing more than half its teeth, an aged crone mocking him. He drew out the toothbrush, and the half-empty tube of toothpaste.

Down at the stream, with loving fingers, he unscrewed the cap and stared at the tube, with its beautiful sheer white background, blue letters, and a red dot over the "i." Three times he sang it—"Brusha, brusha, brusha: New Ipana toothpaste—" and then gave himself over to the ecstasy of brushing.

Finished, he wiped the traces of paste from his beard with his hand and licked his fingers clean.

Then he returned to the camp site.

The gutted rabbit he'd killed the day before was still lying where he'd left it. He hacked off the head and paws, inserted the point of his knife at the belly and made a circular cut around the body. Working his fingers in until he could grip the fur, he yanked and the skin slipped off like a pull-over sweater. He did the same for the rear portion.

The man squatted and ate, rocking back and forth on his heels. At one point his teeth could not bite the raw flesh free. Rage and frustration swept over him; he let the rabbit drop, then, and jumped up, staring at the puffy masses of clouds in the sky.

"Filth!" Reeves shrieked, "swine—" He broke off, so choked up all he could do was gulp convulsively. He then was able to continue, "Swine and pigs. And why did you do it to me, you filth!" Abruptly he stopped and returned to breakfast.

John Reeves had been without human companionship for a long time, now. . . .

He'd been over this country before, but it had been more than a year since, just after the Blowup, and the conditions then were far from good.

Reeves was a meticulous man; he'd had a survival kit prepared and escape route chosen. He was enough of a survivor type to real-

ize instinctively the route ran through a fall-out pattern: the animals he had seen then acted erratic, almost drunk. Many were dead. So he had left his planned route and moved at right angles, and the new path had taken him across the country he was exploring today, a year later.

When he saw the house on the small hill, he remembered his waking thought that *today* would be the day. The desire to rush to the house was nearly overwhelming. Yet the pellet holes in his pack bore testimony to the efficiency of the shotgun which repulsed him the first time he'd blundered up to a house.

He spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon working his way up the hill. There was little cover; just an occasional clump of scrub brush growing from dry, grassy slopes.

He went on his stomach most of the way. At intervals he would rise and run, falling behind a selected bush. The late fall sun had dispersed the morning mists; now it was hot. The sweat on his eyebrows and cheeks ran down into his beard and itched, and he scratched his face cruelly.

Excitement began to mount as he drew closer. The house looked deserted, and, better, not to have been looted.

"I wonder why, John," he whispered aloud during a rest. "Is it because this is back woods coun-

try off the beaten trails?" He quieted abruptly, for the last words had been spoken in normal conversational tones.

Finally he made it to the top, behind the house. He took cover in back of the woodshed, and eyed the house, noticing for the first time that some of the windows had been broken: apparently looters *had* been here. There was even a slim chance that someone was occupying the house now. His hopes fell, yet he could leave no possibility uninvestigated.

"What would you do, John, under those conditions?" he asked. His face took on a cunning look as he replied, "I'd wait in the barn till the intruder was in the house and then take him unawares." He paused a moment and then laughed silently. "You fool them—try the barn first."

He slipped out of his pack and put it on the ground. Then he picked up a small rock and a length of two-by-four lying nearby. He swung it, feeling the balance.

He darted over to the barn, running openly. By now, if there were occupants, they would be aware of him. He was careful, however, to run to the rear of the structure, keeping it between him and the house. Then he worked his way cautiously to the front.

The barn doors were hanging open. Quickly Reeves tossed the rock inside, bouncing it against a

wall, and ducking back. There was no reaction, so he eased inside. The place was deserted—he realized that with considerable let-down.

"Where are you?" he whispered, "come and fight."

He stood momentarily, surveying the prize he'd won. The barn was his, and the woodshed, too, and if the enemy was around, he must be in the house.

Boldly now he strode to the back door. It was open, slightly ajar. With his foot he kicked it farther open; the crash, as it swung around and hit the wall, echoed throughout the structure. Survival instinct made the man jump to one side of the doorway, in spite of his aggressive attitude.

Nothing happened. "All right, I'm coming after you," he said and entered. In room after room, the story was the same: the house, too, was deserted. Reeves had won his victory over the ghosts of an extinct era.

Obviously looters *had* been here. The place was a shambles: the furniture upset and strewn about, the front door hanging by one hinge, the kitchen torn apart in a search for staples.

With mounting disappointment he began the room-to-room search he'd not had time to conduct on his first trip through.

The bathroom was first on the list, and it took only a quick glance to realize it wouldn't be found

here. The wall cabinet mirror was gone, of course, as were its contents. A dark brown stain in the tub suggested evil.

The bedrooms, too, yielded nothing. His hopes fell further. There was small likelihood of finding what he wanted in the living-dining area. . . .

It wasn't much of a sound—a faint whistle—but it brought him whirling to a crouch at the window. Two figures were approaching; he thought he could distinguish a man and a woman.

Their tactical approach was clumsy, much too open. Professionally he sneered at them, even while planning his defense. One thing was certain; they weren't going to steal his house from him. It would, however, call for an amount of slyness. He doubted that he could handle two at once; they'd have to be taken separately.

Silently he crept out the back, angling to the barn, keeping the house between himself and the intruders. He circled in back of the barn, watching.

They came, much too quickly. They blundered into the area, trying to be silent, failing. He could see them clearly. They were young, about ten years his junior. The boy was unbearded: either clean-shaven today, or still too young to need it.

The girl stood between the house and the barn while the man investigated the latter. Reeves'

sneer almost turned to pity. The fool didn't even bother to check the woodshed. But both their packs were full and looked inviting. Maybe this punk kid had one!

He was close enough to hear their whispered conference. She was to stand guard in front while he investigated the house. The boy went past his line of sight; up the steps and into the house—the door crashing as it had with him. Now all Reeves could see was the girl, watching and then slowly turning to cover the front, a wicked looking Winchester .32 rifle held at ready.

Now is the moment, he thought to himself, as he eased forward. Now, on your stomach, your knees, your feet, but silently. So silently.

Dim memories came back. It was a different war, a different time, a different world . . . the sergeant's voice in his ear, repeating over and over, "Fast . . . fast . . . fast . . ."

She fell silently and he caught the rifle as it slipped from her hands. He paused and listened, but there was no noise from inside.

Then he looked again at the unconscious girl. Vague stirrings began in him; this was the first time since the world died that he'd been this close to a woman. His heart beat too fast; his temples throbbed. He bent down towards her—

The noise inside the house reminded him: he still had something to do.

Ignoring the sudden sweat which had sprung out over his body, he put down the rifle and stole silently up the steps and stood beside the door. He checked his knife wiped his palm on his shirt, and took a firm grip on the haft of the weapon. He scratched his beard, fiercely.

He screamed once, in falsetto, hoping it sounded feminine. Footsteps, urgent running footsteps pounded down the hall. Just as they got to the doorway, Reeves stuck his foot across it. His enemy burst out, tripped, and rolled down the front steps, dropping his rifle.

Reeves jumped after the youth, raised the knife, and struck. He hadn't counted on the other's quick recovery; he missed as the youth rolled away. Growling, he threw himself on his foe's body, unaware that he'd dropped his knife.

The youth fought silently; Reeves mouthed syllables of idiotic filth. The youth fought silently—but with desperation and knowledge. Reeves did not recall knowledge or experience, and slowly, not understanding why, he began to lose. He felt himself tiring.

His teeth were firmly clenched in the other's arm when he let go, suddenly kned. He doubled and

blindly staggered aside in time to avoid a fatal cut from the now unsheathed knife of the foe. As it was, the point passed glancingly below his ribs and opened a nasty cut.

The sharp, biting sensation of severed skin seemed to clear his mind. In detailed perspective he saw what he would lose: the house, the woman, his life. The youth's momentary advantage was gone; by the time he struck again, with all his force, Reeves dodged. The other stumbled by, and Reeves, with all his fading strength, struck him in the throat with his balled fist.

The boy fell, gasping, and tried to rise. Reeves was already there, kicking at the same vulnerable spot. The enemy dropped his knife and fell on his back. Quickly Reeves scooped it up and plunged it home.

With nervous fingers he rolled the body over and undid the pack. He spilled the contents on the ground, pawing through.

Suddenly, with sharply in-drawn breath, he saw it! The object of his long search was over. Rising, he danced merrily in circles, holding on high the straight razor, the strop, and an unbroken shaving mirror.

Spent finally, he stopped and began laughing with joy. "John, John, you can shave again. John, you will be clean-shaven! You will be civilized again, John, and

when you are, the world will be civilized, too. . . ."

He fondled his prizes, gazing at himself in the mirror, seeing a strange bearded face, seeing the reflection of the sun's rays bounce off nearby objects. The circle of light, in one of its trips, caught the hair of the girl where she lay.

Reeves stopped then, staring at her anew. Tears ran from his eyes as the tension began again. With dirty, red-stained fists he wiped them away until he was no longer aware of them.

His world compressed to a

tight sphere upon which a giant pounded. Each jar shook him to his being; each beat was a blacksmith hitting an anvil multiplied a thousandfold; each throb the pounding of the sea a hundred-fold.

Slowly, the bleeding and pain in his side unnoticed, he rose. Daintily he stepped over the still form of his scratched, battered and deceased foe. Hypnotically, unaware he still held the mirror and blades, he strode toward the supine form of the woman.

John Reeves, civilized man.

2. A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

by ROSE SHARON

And the woman of that future day?

The same feeling of civilization, the same

(and not quite the same) hungers . . .

and how will they express themselves?

IT TOOK LONGER THAN SHE planned to fill her pockets and lock up the cabinet again. After that, she had to find some place to leave the key where they could find it, but where the children couldn't reach it. Then when she got back to the party, Tom was nowhere in sight. Naturally.

And—wouldn't you know it?—Steve was right there, just inside

the door. He had his back to her, talking to somebody else, but the first step she took inside he turned around as if she'd gone right up and touched him; he heard her or smelled her or something.

She stood there, just inside the doorway, convinced that he had also sensed somehow the weight of the sagging full pockets that pressed against her hip, on the

inside of the carefully arranged coat over her arm.

"Well, hi there, Princess," he said, and only his voice made a joke of the name. His eyes meant it. "I was beginning to think you were going to stand us all up to-night."

"I went back to get my wrap . . ." she began.

"Here, I'll put that away for you—" he interrupted.

Then his hand touched the coat over her arm, and both of them stopped short as her muscles jumped in recoil, shrinking away from the touch.

She saw the hurt cross his face as he pulled his hand back, and she was almost sorry for him—the damn fool! Just like the rest of them here: they wanted and wanted and wished and wailed, and not one had the guts to go get what he wanted.

But she did.

She made a remote small smile at Steve, and stepped forward a pace to search the room with her eyes. When she found Tommy, she just stood there waiting till he saw her too. He came across the big barn floor, weaving between the dancing couples, and she held out her coat to him with an inward sigh of relief.

Everyone there would have noticed, and they'd all feel sorry for Steve, and nobody would be surprised at all when she walked out with Tommy Handley later.

But that was all just helpful; the big thing was what nobody knew, except Tommy. The way the pockets of her coat were sagging with the weight of the rifle shells, she could no more have let Steve carry it than she could have stood up there and made a public speech about what she was doing.

It was a wonderful party—the best one she could remember. Partly because it was Tommy's party in a way, and she was Tommy's girl. But probably more because she knew it was the last one, and her own excitement was catching. She could feel it coming back at her from every man she danced with.

They stayed just long enough to make it look barely all right, and walked out, her coat on his arm while everything was still going strong.

As soon as they were out of earshot she whispered fiercely: "You still *have* it?"

"Sure," he said. "What did you think?"

"I don't know. He might have asked you for it . . ."

"He did—when I got back to the party. I told him I left it in my other pants."

"No," she said loudly. A shadow had passed the door. "I want to go down to the dock." It was what any girl would say. If you left the dance with a boy, you could only be going to the woods or to the dock, where they

had a floodlight on party nights. And the way to the dock took them past the small barn.

The little barn was a carpentry shop and machine shop now; this was one of the keys Steve usually kept after working hours; it was the one Tommy had lied about leaving in his other pants.

Inside, the two of them worked feverishly. The stores of food, smuggled out of the kitchen by Ellen and into the shop by Tom; the few tools he thought he *had* to have; two rifles off the wall hooks; their stored ammunition, plus her last two pocketfuls; the three spare cans of gasoline—everything went into the car, where two empty packs, and a change of clothes for each of them were already hidden under the seat.

By the time anybody who cared enough to watch could be sure they weren't coming out onto the lighted path again, Ellen *did* come out—walking fast, and headed straight across toward the gate, not toward the dock at all.

This was the only tricky part, and she was the one who had to do it, because they weren't sure if she could drive well enough to manage the car. At the barbwire fence she stopped and waited, till she heard the roar of the motor and the sudden shouting voices, and the headlights seemed to be

coming straight at her. She pulled the gate open wide, jumped onto the running-board of the ancient Ford as it slowed to go through, and held on tight till they were round the bend and far enough down the road for Tom to open the door and let her get in.

It was just as easy as that. The thing was, nobody back there ever thought anyone would want to get out. All their barbwire and trick gates and sentry posts and alarm rigs—all of it was just to keep outsiders *out*. And except for a few things, like the gas and the ammo that really took some doing to get at, the supplies were no problem to store up, as long as you took a little bit at a time, and got out before Inventory, which wasn't till next month.

The real crazy part of it, though, was the car: the way they all sat around watching Tommy tinker with his old Ford every night for the last month and chatted about the fine thing he was doing for the Farm. And every time he wanted to try it out again, he'd get the keys for the gas pump, and every time he got the keys, he'd draw a couple gallons more than he wrote down. And just to top it all off, the big party tonight, to celebrate getting the car fixed . . . right on top of the demonstration trial that gave him the extra cans of gas.

All it took was timing. Timing and guts.

"Hey, Tommy?"

"Yeah?"

"You got the geiger, didn't you?"

"Sure, honey. We got everything. Listen, kid, you can relax now. Quit worrying. We got it made." He took his eyes off the ruinous road just long enough to smile at her, and reached out with his arm and pull her closer.

Contentedly, she let her head settle on his shoulder, and stayed there, feeling the wind in her hair, and listening to the sound of an automobile engine again. Funny how quick you forgot. It wasn't much more than a year since they used to drive back up the hill from the movies this way . . . a whole crowd together—or just two alone, like now.

Not like now at all, of course. That was fun; this was deeply exciting, this going out to find a new life in a new world. Drowsily she wondered how far they'd have to go, how hard they'd have to look to find good land with maybe a decent house on it, where they could settle. . . .

She must have fallen asleep, or part-way at least, because she sat up with a jolt when he pulled the car to a skidding stop on wet gravel.

"Where are we?" She couldn't see anything in the blackness. "What . . . ?"

"Hobeyville," he said, and tried to pull her back against him.

"That's a good twenty-nine mile. They'll never get this far. Take it—" She shook off his hand impatiently.

"You mean right in the middle of town?" she demanded, as the outline of a parking lot between buildings began to suggest itself through the darkness.

"What's the matter? Take it easy, baby. We got it made now . . ."

"Keep your goddam hands off me! I don't know *what* you think you got made, but it aint gonna be *me*, brother. Not *here*."

"Now look, honey. . . . It's safer here than it would be up in the woods, or off the side of the road someplace, or . . ."

"It ain't safe anyplace," she said flatly. "Not till we get a chance to look around in daylight and see what's what. If you wanted something safe, you should of stayed with big old Uncle Steve on the farm. *He's* safe! . . . Oh I'm sorry, Tommy." Her anger was gone as suddenly as it had come. "I'm all on edge, I guess. Maybe I was asleep. What time is it, anyhow?"

He was right, of course. If it took them three hours to travel a lousy thirty miles, it made sense to wait till dawn here in town, and get some sleep, and then be able to pick their roads a little better in the light. Nobody would come this far after them. And even if they did, they wouldn't

start till after the sun was up.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "Look, we better take turns sleeping. I had a kind of a nap already. You've been doing all the work. Why don't you go in back and stretch out, and I'll wake you up later . . ."

"There's other things I could use more than sleep," he said, and tried to get hold of her again.

"Oh, Tommy," she said, "not now. Here, I mean. Where anybody could be . . . oh you know!" And when he wouldn't stop, she said, "Besides, I'm scared. Listen, one of us has to keep watch. If anybody came up, we might not hear it, and maybe we'd both fall asleep . . . please, Tommy, can't you wait a little while?"

So he climbed over into the back seat, and she sat there wide awake and waiting eagerly for dawn.

One hundred and eighteen miles from Hobeyville, about ten o'clock in the morning of their third day, the motor coughed feebly, and Tommy got out to unscrew their next-to-last spare can of gas.

"Nice-lookin' country here," he said wistfully, when he got back in, and this time she agreed with him.

"There's a river over that way," she reminded him. "If we can find a way to get over to it . . ."

"Okay, baby, you're the boss."

He started the motor again, and they crept forward, bouncing and jumping as the two bare rims hit the potholed remnant of a highway. It was easier, actually, when he turned off onto a grassy strip between trees and brush, that looked like it might have been a dirt road once; here the new growth cushioned them a little. They emerged on a high cliff, overhanging the river bank.

He parked in the shelter of a tree, and got out to scout the woods a little ways in, while she covered him from the car with the Winchester.

"Don't see no signs of people," he announced when he came back. "Plenty of rabbits, though. Pretty lively-lookin', too."

She nodded, and got out and stretched. Then they both strapped on their packs, and picked up their rifles, and locked the car up tight.

Single-file, because there were bad chunks out of the road, they started walking down along the edge of the cliff. Below them, they could see a stretch of water for perhaps a mile in either direction.

On the opposite shore of the river there was no cliff: just a slow-rising hillside, with brown-leaved trees not turned near as far as the ones back home; and between the trees and the river a grey dry stretch of rubble and debris from the spring floods. Stones and boulders, twisted

branches, a piece of somebody's roof standing on edge not twenty yards upstream from the dug-out foundations of what once must have been somebody's river-edge cottage or camp.

Outside of the river and themselves, and a few birds circling lazily near the cliff, nothing moved. It was hard to think of danger lurking in the painted landscape.

The girl nodded, smiling. "Just like home," she said, thinking of the creek down in the village, when the big dam went last spring.

"Yeah." Tommy stopped to sling his rifle over his shoulder, and shift the knife on his belt closer to his hand. "If I see another one o' them rabbits, I'm gonna try for 'im—what do you think?"

"Sure," he said. "Steve's crazy anyhow." Steve wouldn't let them hunt any farther than ten miles from the farm. He kept saying the animals anyplace around a bombed area would be poisonous, and there was no way to know how close you were to a fallout section, once you got away from the farm. But they'd have to start living off the land sooner or later, and this certainly *looked* like healthy country. "He's crazy," she said again. "He's got everybody up there so scared they won't blow their noses without asking. . ."

They got a rabbit for lunch, and made a fire and hot coffee

and Tommy carried up water from the river for them to boil and fill the jugs again. He even made an extra trip for a bucket full to get washed with; and in spite of her kidding, he heated up a cupful for himself, and got out his father's old straight razor, and shaved himself carefully.

"My beard might not look like so much," he said mildly, "but it sure can itch like hell."

After that he wanted to make love again. Naturally. But this time even he could see they ought to use the daylight to look around some more. They had to find some place to stay pretty soon now. This country looked good, but they'd have to find a house, or get started building one, if they were going to stay. . . .

It was past the middle of the afternoon when they came out of the woods into a clearing, and saw the house. That wasn't what they noticed first, though, either of them. The way they came to it, the first thing they saw was the fields behind the hill, and the red barn on the top. And Ellen gave an involuntary low whistle of surprise when the house suddenly came into view around the edge of the barn.

It didn't look as if anybody had been near the place since spring. Everything just *empty*. But they had to play it careful anyway.

She covered him while he looked into the barn. "Nothing

there," he said, but he was jumpy. "I don't know what it is," he said uneasily.

She felt it too, but *one* of them had to show some guts. "Want *me* to take the house?" she asked contemptuously.

"You better stay out front," he said. "And listen, honey—don't think twice before you shoot."

"All *right!*" she said. "I know what to do." She'd been covering him from the car and the woods and one place and another for three days now. "Yell out when it's okay."

She watched him go up to the door and push it open. There was a crash that made her jump, and then she felt ashamed, because she realized it wasn't a gun, it wasn't anything at all, it was just the door banging.

She turned around slowly, covering a half-circle with the rifle. *Jumpy*, she thought. *Both* of them. What the hell was *she* so jumpy about? . . . But she knew why . . . knew it because she was standing here waiting to go into the house they'd probably live in, and the thought of it gave her the creeps.

It was Tommy . . .

Tommy with his *Please, honey* . . . and his *Take it easy, baby* . . . and his *I'm sorry and better be careful and what do you think?*

Tommy with all the careful little safety rules Steve had taught him. But at least Steve was a *man*,

and thought he knew what he was being careful for.

A *good* kid. . . . Sure. . . .

All she ever heard was a whistle of air behind her.

After a while she realized she was lying on the ground, and couldn't find her gun. She patted the ground around her with her hand; got her eyes part way open, and became aware of sound. Grunts. Thrashing. Two men were fighting. She could see better now, and the first thing she saw clearly was the knife.

Flash. Thrash.

Men fighting. A man and a boy. Tommy . . .

She ought to do something. She tried to move, and lightning streaked through her head. *He hit me!* The other man, the bearded one with the filthy bloody clothes—he must have been here all the time. Came up behind, and knocked her out.

She saw the gun now, on the ground, two body-lengths away. She started toward it, and the movement made the lightning crack again, inside her head.

When she looked at the noises again, the boy was on top. She could lie still then. Tommy didn't need her. He could win. . . .

Realization swept through her like the warmth of the sun in a mist-chilled dawn. It was *her* they were fighting for. She *had* to lie still.

Grunt. Flash. Thrash. Grunt.

And the man was on top now. Reflexively, she inched forward again, but even before the pain hit, she stopped. *The best man . . . best man always wins. So that was all right . . .*

She lay still, waiting and watched the man, the *best man*, drive the knife home.

She lay there, watching, through slitted eyelids, while the best man, *brute, bloody-beard-bad-man*, pawed with animal fingers through the dead man's pack. Watched while the bullets and blanket and beans went flying to the ground. Watched while the man, *best-brute-madman*, jumped to his feet with the razor blade and the strop and the mirror.

The long straight razor, old man Handley's, *he used to hit Tommy with the razor strop*. Crazy-beard best man, dancing in the wilderness, *yellow-dog-dingo, mama used to read me*, dancing like a maniac, flashing in the sunlight. Flash, blade, spin, strop, flash, dance. . . . *Ma!*

She lay still, as absolutely still as she could be. She did not even breathe. Her slitted eyelids closed, as the man with the beard, the blood, and the razor, *forever and ever, amen*, stepped over the dead man, over the tall grass, over the rifle, over to her.

Eyes closed; but she could see the razor still. If she moved, he would kill her. He would certain-

ly kill her if she as much as moved.

Could he hear her heart beat? Her lungs were bursting. If she breathed, would he kill her? If she didn't, she would die.

The shiver that ran through her body as she felt his approach was movement too. But for this, she knew that she would not be killed.

Slowly, with a sense of infinite relief, she let the air out of her bursting lungs. Her body went limp, every muscle relaxed. She breathed in deeply, filling her chest with air, and her blood with the smell of him as he bent over her: the blood and the dirt and the sun and the wind and the male sweat smell went into her lungs and pumped through her veins, and the smell was foul, but it was not death.

Her eyes came open. She stared into the crusted bearded face, the fierce eyes, the wild smile of delight. The razor dropped from his hand as he seized her shoulder and pressed it painfully into the ground.

He was strong.

He could fight.

He could conquer.

She forced herself to breathe in deeply once again, absorbing the rank stench, making it her own; and she felt her mouth curve in an answering smile of welcome. . . .

Ellen Reeves, mother of civilized man.

THE DUST OF DEATH

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Farley had not spent half a year alone on Titan with only robots to talk to just to see another man take the credit. He'd fight for his rights—he'd even murder . . .

PART I

LIKE ALL MEN WHO WORKED under the great Llewes, Edmund Farley reached the point where he thought with longing of the pleasure it would give him to kill that same great Llewes.

No man who did not work for Llewes would quite understand the feeling. Llewes (men forgot his first name or grew, almost unconsciously, to think it was Great, with a capital G) was Everyman's idea of the great prober into the unknown: both relentless and brilliant, neither giving up in the face of failure nor ever at a loss for a new and more ingenious attack.

Llewes was an organic chemist who had brought the Solar System to the service of his science. It was he who first used the moon for large scale reactions to be run in vacuum, at the temperature of boiling water or liquid air, depending on the time of month. Photochemistry became something

new and wonderful when carefully designed apparatus was set floating freely in orbits about space-stations.

But, truth to tell, Llewes was a credit-stealer, a sin almost impossible to forgive. Some nameless student had first thought of setting up apparatus on the Lunar surface; a forgotten technician had designed the first self-contained space-reactor. Somehow both achievements became associated with the name of Llewes.

And nothing could be done. An employee who resigned in anger would lose his recommendation and find it difficult to obtain another job. His unsupported word against that of Llewes would be worth nothing. On the other hand, those who remained with him, endured and finally left with good grace and a recommendation, were sure of future success.

But while they stayed, they at least enjoyed the dubious pleasure of voicing their hatred among themselves.

And Edmund Farley had full reason to join them. He had come from Titan, Saturn's largest satellite, where he had single-handed (aided by robots only) set up equipment to make full use of Titan's reducing atmosphere. The major planets had atmospheres composed largely of hydrogen and methane, but Jupiter and Saturn were too large to deal with, and Uranus and Neptune were still too expensively far. Titan, however, was Mars-size, small enough to operate upon and large enough and cold enough to retain a medium-thin hydrogen-methane atmosphere.

Large-scale reactions could proceed there easily in the hydrogen atmosphere, where on Earth those same reactions were kinetically troublesome. Farley had designed and redesigned and endured Titan for half a year and had come back with amazing data. Yet somehow, almost at once, Farley could see it fragment and begin to come together as a Llewes achievement.

The others sympathized, shrugged their shoulders, and bade him welcome to the fraternity. Farley tensed his acne-scarred face, brought his thin lips together and listened to the others as they plotted violence.

Jim Gorham was the most outspoken. Farley rather despised him for he was a "vacuum man" who had never left Earth.

Gorham said, "Llewes is an

easy man to kill because of his regular habits, you see. You can rely on him. For instance, look at the way he insists on eating by himself. He closes his office at 12 sharp and opens it at 1 sharp. Right? No one goes into his office in that interval so poison has plenty of time to work."

Belinsky said, dubiously, "Poison?"

"Easy. Plenty of poison all over the place. You name it, we got it. Okay, then. Llewes eats one Swiss cheese on rye with a special kind of relish knee-deep in onions. We all know that, right? After all, we can smell him all afternoon and we all remember the miserable howl he raised when the lunchroom ran out of the relish once last Spring. No one else in the place will ever touch the relish, so poison in it will hit only Llewes and no one else. . . ."

It was all a kind of lunch-time make-believe, but not for Farley.

Grimly, and in earnest, he decided to murder Llewes.

It became an obsession with him. His blood tingled at the thought of Llewes dead, of himself able to take the credit that was rightfully his for those months of living in a small bubble of oxygen and tramping across frozen ammonia to remove products and set up new reactions in the thin, chill winds of hydrogen and methane.

But it would have to be some-

thing which couldn't possibly harm anyone but Llewes. That sharpened the matter and focussed things on Llewes' atmosphere room. It was a long, low room, isolated from the rest of the laboratories by cement blocks and fire-proof doors. No one but Llewes ever entered, except in Llewes' presence and with his permission. Not that the room was ever actually locked. The effective tyranny Llewes had established made the faded slip of paper on the laboratory door, reading "Do Not Enter" and signed with his initials, more of a barrier than any lock. . . . Except where the desire for murder superseded all else.

Then what about the atmosphere room? Llewes' routine of testing, his almost infinite caution, left nothing to chance. Any tampering with the equipment itself, unless it were unusually subtle, would certainly be detected.

Fire then? The atmosphere room contained inflammable materials and to spare, but Llewes didn't smoke and was perfectly aware of the danger of fires. No one took greater precautions against one.

Farley thought impatiently of the man on whom it seemed so difficult to wreak a just vengeance; the thief playing with his little tanks of methane and hydrogen where Farley had used it by the cubic mile. Llewes for the little

tanks and fame; Farley for the cubic miles and oblivion.

All those little tanks of gas; each its own color; each a synthetic atmosphere. Hydrogen gas in red cylinders and methane in striped red and white, a mixture of the two representing the atmosphere of the outer planets. Nitrogen in brown cylinders and carbon dioxide in silver for the atmosphere of Venus. The yellow cylinders of compressed air and the green cylinders of oxygen, where Earthly chemistry was good enough. A parade of the rainbow, each color dating back through centuries of convention.

Then he had the thought. It was not born painfully, but came all at once. In one moment, it had all crystallized in Farley's mind and he knew what he had to do.

Farley waited a painful month for the 18th of September, which was Space Day. It was the anniversary of man's first successful spaceflight and no one would be working that night. Space Day was, of all holidays, the one most meaningful to the scientist in particular and even the dedicated Llewes would be making merry then.

Farley entered Central Organic Laboratories (to use its official title) that night, certain he was unobserved. The labs weren't banks or museums. They were not sub-

ject to thievery and such night-watchmen as there were had a generally easy-going attitude toward their jobs.

Farley closed the main door carefully behind him and moved slowly down the darkened corridors toward the atmosphere room. His equipment consisted of a flashlight, a small vial of black powder, and a thin brush he had bought in an art-supply store at the other end of town three weeks before. He wore gloves.

His greatest difficulty came in actually entering the atmosphere room. Its "forbiddenness" hampered him more than the general forbiddenness of murder. Once in, however, once past the mental hazard, the rest was easy.

He cupped the flashlight and found the cylinder without hesitation. His heart was beating so as almost to deafen him, while his breath came quickly and his hand trembled.

He tucked the flash under his arm, then dipped the tip of the artist's brush into the black dust. Grains of it adhered to the brush and Farley pointed it into the nozzle of the gauge attached to the cylinder. It took eons-long seconds for that trembling tip to enter the nozzle.

Farley moved it about delicately, dipped it into the black dust again and inserted it once more in the nozzle. He repeated it over and over, almost hypno-

tized by the intensity of his own concentration. Finally, using a bit of facial-tissue, dampened with saliva, he began to wipe off the outer rim of the nozzle, enormously relieved that the job was done and he'd soon be out.

It was then his hand froze, and the sick uncertainty of fear surged through him. The flashlight dropped clattering to the floor.

Fool! Incredible and miserable fool! He hadn't been *thinking*!

Under the stress of his emotion and anxiety, he had ended at the wrong cylinder!

He snatched up the flash, put it out, and, his heart thumping alarmingly, listened for any noise.

In the continuing dead silence, he regained a portion of his self-control, and screwed himself to the realization that what could be done once could be done again. If the wrong cylinder had been tampered with, then the right one would take two minutes more.

Once again, the brush and the black dust came into play. At least, he had not dropped the vial of dust; the deadly, burning dust. This time, the cylinder was the right one.

He finished, wiping the nozzle again, with a badly trembling hand. His flash then played about quickly and rested upon a reagent bottle of toluene. That would do. He unscrewed the plastic cap, splashed some of the toluene on the floor and left the bottle open.

He then stumbled out of the building as in a dream, made his way to his rooming house and the safety of his own room. As nearly as he could tell, he was unobserved throughout.

He disposed of the facial-tissue he had used to wipe the nozzles of the gas cylinders by cramming it into the cigarette-ash disposal unit. It vanished into molecular dispersion. So did the artist's brush that followed.

The vial of dust could not be so gotten rid of without adjustments to the disposal unit he did not think it safe to make. He would walk to work, as he often did, and toss it off the Grand Street bridge. . . .

Farley blinked at himself in the mirror the next morning and wondered if he dared go to work. It was an idle thought; he didn't dare *not* go to work. He must do nothing that would attract attention to him on this day of all days.

With grayish desperation, he worked to reproduce normal acts of nothingness that made up so much of the day. It was a fine, warm morning and he walked to work. It was only a flicking motion of the wrist that was necessary to get rid of the vial. It made a tiny splash in the river, filled with water, and sank.

He sat at his desk, later that morning, staring at his hand-com-

puter. Now that it had all been done, would it work? Llewes might ignore the smell of toluene. Why not? The odor was unpleasant, but not disgusting. Organic chemists were used to it.

Then, if Llewes were still hot on the trail of the hydrogenation procedures Farley had brought back from Titan, the gas cylinder would be put into use at once. It would have to be. With a day of holiday behind him, Llewes would be more than usually anxious to get back to work.

Then, as soon as the gauge-cock was turned, a bit of gas would spurt out and turn into a sheet of flame. If there were the proper quantity of toluene in the air, it would turn as quickly into an explosion—

So intent was Farley in his reverie, that he accepted the dull boom in the distance as the creation of his own mind, a counterpoint to his own thoughts, until footsteps thudded by.

Farley looked up, and out of a dry throat, cried, "What—what—"

"Dunno," yelled back the other, "something wrong in the atmosphere room. Explosion. Hell of a mess."

The extinguishers were on and men beat out the flames and snatched the burnt and battered Llewes out of the wreckage. He had the barest flicker of life left in him and died before a doctor

had time to predict that he would.

On the outskirts of the group that hovered about the scene in grim and grisly curiosity stood Edmund Farley. His pallor and the glisten of perspiration on his face did not, at that moment, mark him as different from the rest. He tottered back to his desk. He could be sick now. No one would remark on it.

But somehow he wasn't. He finished out the day and in the evening the load began to lighten. Accident was accident, wasn't it? There were occupational risks all chemists ran, especially those working with inflammable compounds. No one would question the matter.

And if anyone did, how could they possibly trace anything back to Edmund Farley. He had only to go about his life as though nothing had happened.

Nothing? Good Lord, the credit for Titan would now be his. He would be a great man.

The load lightened indeed and that night he slept.

PART 2

Jim Gorham had faded a bit in twenty-four hours. His yellow hair was stringy and only the light color of his stubble masked the fact that he needed a shave badly.

"We all talked murder," he said.

H. Seton Davenport of the Terrestrial Bureau of Investigation

tapped one finger against the desk-top methodically, and so lightly that it could not be heard. He was a stocky man with a firm face and black hair, a thin, prominent nose made for utility rather than beauty, and a star-shaped scar on one cheek.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"No," said Gorham, shaking his head violently. "At least, I didn't think it was serious. The schemes were wild: poisoned sandwich spreads and acid on the helicopter, you know. Still, someone must have taken the matter seriously after all. . . . The madman! For what reason?"

Davenport said, "From what you've said, I judge because the dead man appropriated other peoples' work."

"So what," cried Gorham. "It was the price he charged for what he did. He held the entire team together. He was its muscles and guts. Llewes was the one who dealt with Congress and got the grants. He was the one who got permission to set up projects in space and send men to the Moon or wherever. He talked spaceship lines and industrialists into doing millions of dollars of work for us. He *organized* Central Organic."

"Have you realized all this overnight?"

"Not really. I've always known this, but what could I do? I've chickened out of space-travel, found excuses to avoid it. I was

a vacuum-man, who never even visited the moon. The truth was, I was afraid, and even more afraid to have the others think I was afraid." He virtually spat self-contempt.

"And now you want to find someone to punish?" said Davenport. "You want to make up to the dead Llewes your crime against the live one?"

"No! Leave psychiatry out of this. I tell you it *is* murder. It's *got* to be. You don't know Llewes. The man was a monomaniac on safety. No explosion could possibly have happened anywhere near him unless it were carefully arranged."

Davenport shrugged. "What explosion, Dr. Gorham?"

"It could have been almost anything. He handled organic compounds of all sorts: benzene, ether, pyridine. All of them inflammable."

"I studied chemistry once, Dr. Gorham, and none of those liquids are explosive at room temperature as I remember. There has to be some sort of heat; a spark, a flame."

"There was fire all right."

"How did that happen?"

"I can't imagine. There were no burners in the place and no matches. Electrical equipment of all sorts was heavily shielded. Even little ordinary things like clamps were specially manufactured out of beryllium-copper or

other non-sparking alloys. Llewes didn't smoke and would have fired on the spot anyone who approached within a hundred feet of the room with a lighted cigarette."

"What was the last thing he handled, then?"

"Hard to tell. The place was a shambles."

"I suppose it has been straightened out by now, though."

The chemist said with instant eagerness, "No, it hasn't. I took care of that. I said we had to investigate the cause of the accident to prove it wasn't neglect. You know, to avoid bad publicity. So the room hasn't been touched."

Davenport nodded. "All right. Let's take a look at it."

In the blackened, dishevelled room, Davenport said, "What's the most dangerous piece of equipment in the place?"

Gorham looked about. "The compressed oxygen tanks," he said, pointing.

Davenport looked at the variously colored cylinders standing against the wall cradled in a binding chain. Some leaned heavily against the chain, tipped by the force of the explosion.

Davenport said, "How about this one?" He toed a red cylinder which lay flat on the ground in the middle of the room. It was heavy and didn't budge.

"That one's hydrogen," said Gorham.

"Hydrogen is explosive, isn't it?"

"That's right—when heated."

Davenport said, "Then why do you say the compressed oxygen is the most dangerous. Oxygen doesn't explode, does it?"

"No. It doesn't even burn, but it supports combustion, see. Things burn in it."

"So?"

"Well, look here." A certain vivacity entered Gorham's voice; he was the scientist explaining something simple to the intelligent layman. "Sometimes a person might accidentally put some lubricant on the valve before tightening it onto the cylinder, to make a tighter seal, you know. Or he might get something inflammable smeared on it by mistake. When he opens the valve then, the oxygen rushes out, and whatever goo is on the valve explodes, wrenching off the valve. Then the rest of the oxygen blows out of the cylinder which would then take off like a miniature jet and go through a wall; the heat of the explosion would fire other inflammable liquids nearby."

"Are the oxygen tanks in this place intact?"

"Yes, they are."

Davenport kicked the hydrogen cylinder at his feet. "The gauge on this cylinder reads zero. I suppose that means it was in use at the time of explosion and has emptied itself since then."

Gorham nodded. "I suppose so."

"Could you explode hydrogen by smearing oil on the gauge?"

"Definitely not."

Davenport rubbed his chin. "Is there anything that would make hydrogen burst into flame outside of a spark of some sort?"

Gorham muttered, "A catalyst, I suppose. Platinum black is the best. That's powdered platinum."

Davenport looked astonished. "Do you have such a thing?"

"Of course. It's expensive, but there's nothing better for catalyzing hydrogenations." He fell silent and stared down at the hydrogen cylinder for a long moment. "Platinum black," he finally whispered. "I wonder—"

Davenport said, "Platinum black would make hydrogen burn, then?"

"Oh, yes. It brings about the combination of hydrogen and oxygen at room temperature. No heat necessary. The explosion would be just as though it were caused by heat, just the same."

Excitement was building up in Gorham's voice and he fell to his knees beside the hydrogen cylinder. He passed his finger over the blackened tip. It might be just soot and it might be—"

He got to his feet, "Sir, that must be the way it was done. I'm going to get every speck of foreign material off that nozzle and run a spectrographic analysis."

"How long will it take?"

"Give me fifteen minutes. . . ."

Gorham came back in twenty. Davenport had made a meticulous round of the burnt-out laboratory. He looked up. "Well?"

Gorham said, triumphantly. "It's there. Not much, but there."

He held up a strip of photographic negative against which there were short white parallel lines, irregularly spaced and of different degrees of brightness. "Mostly extraneous material, but you see those lines—"

Davenport peered closely. "Very faint. Would you swear in court that platinum was present?"

"Yes," said Gorham at once.

"Would any other chemist? If this photo were shown a chemist hired by the defense, could he claim the lines were too faint to be certain evidence?"

Gorham was silent.

Davenport shrugged.

The chemist cried, "But it is there. The stream of gas and the explosion would have blown most of it out. You wouldn't expect much to be left. You see that, don't you?"

Davenport looked about, thoughtfully. "I do. I admit there's a reasonable chance this is murder. So now we look for more and better evidence. Do you suppose this is the only cylinder that might have been tampered with?"

"I don't know."

"Then the first thing we do is

check every other cylinder in the place. Everything else, too. If there is a murderer, he might conceivably have set other booby traps in the place. It's got to be checked."

"I'll get started—" began Gorham, eagerly.

"Uh—not you," said Davenport. "I'll have a man from our labs do it."

The next morning, Gorham was in Davenport's office again. This time, he had been summoned.

Davenport said, "It's murder, all right. A second cylinder had been tampered with."

"You see!"

"An oxygen cylinder. There was platinum black inside the tip of the nozzle. Quite a bit of it."

"Platinum black? On the oxygen cylinder?"

Davenport nodded. "Right. Now why do you suppose that would be?"

Gorham shook his head. "Oxygen won't burn and nothing will make it burn. Not even platinum black."

"So the murderer must have put it on the oxygen cylinder by mistake in the tension of the moment. Presumably he corrected himself and tampered with the right cylinder, but meanwhile he left final evidence that this is murder and not accident."

"Yes. Now it's only a matter of finding the person."

The scar on Davenport's cheek crinkled alarmingly as he smiled. "Only, Dr. Gorham? How do we do that? Our quarry left no calling card. There are a number of people in the laboratories with motive; a greater number with the chemical knowledge required to commit the crime and with the opportunity to do so. Is there any way we can trace the platinum black?"

"No," said Gorham hesitantly, "Any of twenty people could have gotten into the special supply room without trouble. . . .

"What about alibis?"

"For what time?"

"For the night before."

Davenport leaned across his desk. "When was the last time, previous to the fatal moment, that Dr. Llewes used that hydrogen cylinder?"

"I—I don't know. He worked alone. Very secretly. It was part of his way of making sure he had sole credit."

"Yes, I know. We've been making our own inquiries. . . . So the platinum black might have been put on the cylinder a week before for all we know."

Gorham whispered disconsolately, "Then what do we do?"

Davenport said, "The only point of attack, it seems to me, is the platinum black on the oxygen cylinder. It's an irrational point and the explanation may hold the solution. But I'm no chemist and

you are, so if the answer is anywhere it's inside you. Could it have been a mistake—could the murderer have confused the oxygen with the hydrogen?"

Gorham shook his head at once. "No. You know about the colors. A green tank is oxygen; a red tank is hydrogen."

"What if he were color-blind?" asked Davenport.

This time Gorham took more time. Finally, he said, "No. Color-blind people don't generally go in for chemistry. Detection of color in chemical reactions is too important. And if anybody in this organization were color-blind, he'd have enough trouble with one thing or another so that the rest of us would know about it."

Davenport nodded. He fingered the scar on his cheek absently. "All right. If the oxygen cylinder wasn't smeared by ignorance or accident, could it have been done on purpose? Deliberately?"

"I don't understand you."

"Perhaps the murderer had a logical plan in mind when he smeared the oxygen cylinder, then changed his mind. Are there any conditions where platinum black would be dangerous in the presence of oxygen? Any conditions at all? You're the chemist, Dr. Gorham."

There was a puzzled frown on the chemist's face. He shook his head. "No, none. There can't be. Unless—"

"Unless?"

"Well, this is ridiculous, but if you stuck the oxygen jet into a container of hydrogen gas, platinum black on the gas cylinder could be dangerous. Naturally, you'd need a big container to make a satisfactory explosion."

"Suppose," said Davenport, "our murderer had counted on filling the room with hydrogen and then having the oxygen tank turned on."

Gorham said, with a half-smile, "But why bother with the hydrogen atmosphere when—" The half-smile vanished completely while a complete pallor took its place. He cried, "Farley! Edmund Farley!"

"What's that?"

"Farley just returned from six months on Titan," said Gorham, in gathering excitement. "Titan has a hydrogen-methane atmos-

phere. He is the only man here to have had experience in such an atmosphere and it all makes sense now. On Titan, a jet of oxygen will combine with the surrounding hydrogen if heated, or treated with platinum black. A jet of hydrogen won't. The situation is exactly the reverse of what it is here on Earth. It *must* have been Farley. When he entered Llewes' lab to arrange an explosion, he put the platinum black on the oxygen, out of recent habit. By the time he recalled that the situation was the other way round on Earth, the damage was done."

Davenport nodded in grim satisfaction. "That does it, I think." His hand reached out to an intercom and he said to the unseen recipient at the other end, "Send out a man to pick up Dr. Edmund Farley at Central Organic."



HERO AT WORK

by JOHN JAKES

After what he'd done to the Marsport girl
Boone was through on Mars—
There was only one way out,
and it took a shocking weapon to find it . . .

AT THE NARROW INTERSECTION, Martin Boone stumbled and fell. He might as well have died then and there. He had the deep conviction that he could if he wanted to; but he didn't want to just . . . die. He wanted to kill himself, and this time, by God, he thought bitterly, it's going to come out the way I plan it. Not the best way. Not the worst way. My way.

His head hung buzzing, for long seconds, and in a drunken all-fours animal posture he stared at the heat-cracked, dust-stuffed cobbles. Finally he rose and got himself around the corner into the Street of the Terran Merchants. He slid with his back along a wall, choking and shivering; then, driven blindly by some instinctive homing sense, he twisted away from the wall and staggered down the center of the narrow, sour little street.

Two silent natives hurried past, like animated bluestone carvings. Boone swung around and

leered at them, waiting for an insult. Then he slumped and sniffled, watching them vanish in the shadows with their resentment of Earthmen sharp as the planes of their wide bony shoulders. *We're just too damn good for you*, he thought, but his heart wasn't in it.

MARTIN AND HEDDA BOONE

TERRAN ANTIQUES

the sign read. Boone stood weaving under it and glared at his distorted image in the glass. Hedda, one of the things he had planned and planned for, and now look. The antique shop, fighting him every hour of every day, never in any detail being what he had wanted it to be. The planet itself, for that matter, the lousy arid dustbowl of a planet, hadn't given him what he wanted, and had taken what he couldn't afford.

He cursed into the dry wind, threw back his head and stared

bleakly up to the windows above the antique shop. "Well, this time," he promised his twisted twin in the glass, "*this time* I'll . . ."

He had to fumble for the opening to the stairway, and he almost fell once halfway up. At the top he put his head up, squared his shoulders, and defiantly kicked the door open like a man.

Hedda was waiting for him in the dim apartment, crouched like a lard billiken under the smoky glow of a kriswood lamp. Her ridiculous yellow hair was dirty and her robe was too short, and one eye was a circle and one a slit as she took in her husband, the filthy white suit, the bruise on his cheek. Then her nostrils writhed.

Boone knew she smelt the Martian girl.

Carefully he walked to the window and stood looking down on the cobblestones, trying to focus his eyes. He heard behind him the savage decisive stabbing of her cigarette in the tray, and other movements, and oh God, he thought, she knows, she knows; and before I can find my own clean way out I have to argue.

He sighed and turned around, and self-pity fled with the alcohol. A dry shriek started in his throat, and stayed there stifled by fear.

Hedda Boone held a shotgun in her hands. Boone had paid a

lot for that shotgun, sure he'd have the customers bidding against each other for such a collector's piece . . . quite over-looking that in these times such an instrument of blood-letting and flesh-tearing was not attractive. These were the days of sanitary, incisive death from the silent needles of a projector no larger than a pencil. And so the shotgun had attracted only Martian dust and had lain inactive with the rest of his plans, until now, when its two black muzzles, like eyes, stared at Boone's stomach.

Hedda spoke very softly, all the months of festering sickness which had grown between them implicit in every syllable. She said, "I'm going to kill you, Mart."

For the Martian girl? he was going to cry. *But Hedda, Hedda—she wouldn't have me!* But he never got the chance to say it, because his wife, his soft-lard tired-eyes wife pulled the triggers, and the eyes staring at Boone's stomach flashed red, one after the other.

Indistinctly Boone heard thunder, like the roar of the old freight rockets. The thunder spun him around with hurt lashing at his left ribs. He doubled over and capered forward in pain, crashed against the window and dove through it.

There was a time of infinite relief for him, then, when with a kind of joy he knew he could die

now and be finished with all this; and then another time of slow reflection and growing fury, when he realized that again he had not been permitted to follow through. At the intersection he hadn't wanted to die, because he wanted to kill himself. By the same token, he didn't want to be murdered. *Just let me do it my way once, huh?* he whimpered childishly to the spangled blackness around him. And then there was a time of gathering, of focussing, until all things in the world came down to an incandescent demand, a total anger. If ever he had in him an atom of pity, of sympathy for what Hedda had gone through, it disappeared now. If ever it had been in him to blame himself, shame himself—even *see* himself, it was gone. For by her act, Hedda had at last given him something to hate, something to destroy, a purpose of purposes, symbol of everything he had ever done, half done, not done in all his miserable years.

These reflections completed, he struck the cobblestones with a crunch; and this was how he learned that time can be compressed.

Much more dead than alive, more unconscious than not, he began to crawl into the blackest alley shadows. Again and again the other blackness rose about him, squeezing away breath and trying to plug throat and nostrils and

hood his eyes. He beat it back and down, and went on crawling, grunting and slobbering with effort. *Hedda, he thought, damn you, Hedda. I have to live to get you.*

A grey rat ran chittering down the alley. He wormed after it, sobbing.

Sometime after dawn he scratched at a grimy subsurface door and hung on to consciousness until he felt hands under his armpits, lifting. Gratefully, then, he accepted the tide of black and let himself drown a little.

When next he saw anything, it was the ragged back of a tall man who was washing his hands in an inch of water in a bowl. Boone felt luxuriously comfortable. His side no longer hurt; the constriction of bandages was comforting, and the heap of dusty sacking on which he lay was like clouds. "Stickney . . ."

The tall man turned around, wiping his hands on an aqua-saver. He dropped it into the chipped reclaiming unit and grunted. "You with us again, Boone?"

"Is it bad?"

"It was. It might've been. It isn't," said Stickney. "What did that to you? Never saw anything like it." Stickney's eyes shone green with narcotics, which, although they had robbed him of his practice, had not quite destroyed the skill of his hands.

"Stickney, is the teleportation house still in existence?"

"I'd say somebody dropped you on the comb-dunes," said Stickney, "except that I dug out eighteen pieces of lead."

Boone sat up and grunted. "It was a shotgun, damn you," Boone spat. "Now what about the teleportation house?"

"It's illegal."

"Stickney, so help me, if you . . ." Slowly understanding came, and he sighed and palmed open his money-pouch. Watching Stickney's greedy eyes, he realized clearly that if the pouch had responded to Stickney's palm-patterns, he would probably be dead by now. "Here," he growled.

Stickney pocketed the notes. "What do you want to know for?"

"None of your business."

"All right." Stickney shrugged and seemed to close the subject with an audible snap. If Boone had had room for a new hate in him, it might have started here. Instead he sighed and got his money out again. Reluctantly he skinned off one of the few notes left and gave it to Stickney, who said immediately, "You go to a telephone. Call Marsport 8-7734. That's all."

Boone smiled thinly, rose, climbed into his soiled white coat and left the place. He reached a plaza where mobiles moved like shiny bugs. Venusians, blue Martians with silent, servile faces,

bearded Terrans thronged the square. Boone stood in the crowd for long minutes, breathing and hating. He thought of the Martian girl and put her swiftly out of his mind. First, Hedda.

He went to a phone cluster and dialed the number. No one answered it, but Boone simply let it ring. He had no alternative to this, and wanted none. If he reached an obstacle, he would simply press against it until it went away or he died . . . and after a while someone answered.

Boone said, "A man named Stickney gave me this number."

"Stickney?" The voice was remote. "Describe him in detail, please."

Boone did so.

"Ah, certainly. We cannot be too careful. My name is Rakejian. I suppose you wish a job. Eighty solars a week. It is . . . rigorous. Were you ever a soldier?"

"It happens that I was," said Boone, who had been with Cruces at Black Hollow when they opened up Venus. "But I wasn't planning to go myself. Someone else."

"Ah? Perhaps you'd better have this man call himself."

"It isn't a man."

"Now you interest me very much. Three hundred and twenty solars, outright. All right?"

Boone had not thought about the money. He truly had not. Injecting it into the conversation confused him for a moment and

he was silent. Rakejian apparently misunderstood his silence, for he explained, "We compute it at four weeks of a soldier's pay. Women seldom last any longer than that out there, so we have some basis for computation. I'll make it three fifty, sight unseen. All right?"

"Where can I meet you?"

"Depends on what time."

Boone thought rapidly. "Tonight. After dark. Say around eleven."

"Admirable. Be at 81 Street of Hitler and Napoleon. Make yourself known to the man with the yellow face. And—bring the . . . ah . . . material."

"See you," said Boone, and hung up. Quickly, he dialed again. A sourness rose in his throat as he forced out the words: "Hedda? Mart. Please listen, *please*. Could I see you later today? Look, I'm all right. Yes, I'm sorry. Please, Hedda. Yes, I got someone to bandage it. No, it's not bad. Oh, Hedda, I must've been out of my mind, after all you . . ." He bent forward near the mouthpiece, crooning, injecting into his words every possible note of craven remorse. The conversation was extremely long, and at its end, Boone was chilly with sweat. Yet somehow he had succeeded. Death-mask lines etched his face as he left the cluster and hailed a mobile cab for the Street of the Terran Merchants.

Hedda Boone clutched her husband's arm. "Oooh, Mart, my head, my poor sick head." With a wet nuzzling of her lips, she leaned against him. Flick-flick-flick went the pattern of white lights through the cab's interior. Warm lips moistened his cheek. Hedda's bubbling, silly monologue went on as Boone crooked a wooden arm about her waist and attempted to keep from retching audibly. Her heavy body quivered as she raised one perfumed hand to touch his cheek.

"So many drinks, Mart. So many lovely drinks, my sweet Mart."

He grinned rapidly in the hot flickering dark. "We'll have dinner soon, Hedda. This place I'm taking you to, it's—wonderful. Genuine animal flesh, cooked over coals." Boone's eyes flicked ahead. He sucked in breath as the mobile shot into the Street of Hitler and Napoleon. "Tonight we're going to be a real married couple, sweet."

She murmured childish syllables. "Eighty-one," said the driver. The mobile hissed to a stop. Boone handed his wife out. She staggered, and he held her up. He paid off the driver and the machine hissed away.

This section of Marsport was deserted, ancient. The house was large, with heavy double doors. It was a Terran house, built in the claiming days of the early seven-

ties to remind someone who did not count his money of some exactly similar house in Terre Haute or Bucyrus or Kankakee. The architecture was a jumble. Stone lions flanked the wide steps. Gables like crooked shoulders slanted up against the glare-yellowed night sky.

Lounging against the balustrade behind a stone lion was a man in an old-fashioned coat. He lit a match and raised it to his cigar, and the flickering light revealed a bland, heavy-lidded face, a yellow face—not the brown-yellow of a Terran oriental, but the clear greenish yellow of jaundice.

"Restaurant?" Hedda burred. "This doesn't look . . ."

"Shh. You'll see. It's 'way different from anything else. Just you wait." He urged her up the steps. As he passed the yellow-faced man, he met his eyes and murmured, "Mr. Rakejian?"

The man nodded very slightly. Boone made an equally slight motion of his head to indicate Hedda. The man blew out his match, and instantly two heavy-shouldered shadows appeared, one at the top, one at the bottom of the steps.

"Marty, Marty, I love you so . . ." crooned Hedda, and then the edge of a calloused palm caught her on the nape of the neck and she went down without a sound. The two dark-clad thugs

caught her up like a dropped garment, for all her weight, and whisked her through the double doors. They closed. Martin Boone stood on the dark steps numbly, not frightened, not surprised, not anything at all, until he felt a touch at his elbow. He turned his head slowly.

"Three fifty," said Mr. Rakejian. Boone looked down at the little roll of bills. He took it and put it away. Rakejian said, "Happy to deal with you any time. We never get enough females. The pit miners on Titan will be very happy tonight."

Boone did not answer, and when he walked away he did not look back. He found a cab and got in, thinking of the Martian girl. He gave the address to the driver, and in thirty seconds roared, "Can't you hurry?" Beneath his trousers his thighs were running with sweat. Far in the back of his mind something nibbled at him, something he had meant to do and hadn't carried out. No matter; he was alive again, unattached, unburdened. The Martian girl had calmly cited ancient laws to him: that a man must be these things, and a good man too, before she may go with him. Well, he was all these things and good enough for her, the blue bitch. "Hurry up, damn you!"

Nightmare, nightmare. . . .
Was it really asking such a hell

of a lot of life? he demanded whimperingly. Just to want something, and then get it—just that. And he'd never wanted much. Other people wanted to rule planets, buy castles, own, control, command. All he'd wanted was a nice little business and—and now, when everything else was gone, the Martian girl.

And she, so blue and cool, so polite to him, explaining about the ancient laws, and how freely they permitted such a union as he wanted; but money and freedom were not enough by themselves, and desire, even her desire, wasn't enough. He had to be a good man. What is a good man? Many things, any one of many kinds of things. Had he done anything for Mars? for example. Or for Earth, or Earth's people or interests? Had he had children, perhaps? That was a gift to his kind. Had he ever given anything to life?

Slender, blue, fine cold hair, narcotic lips and politeness, talking of ancient moralities while he sat with a drink in his fist and his glands fairly squirting within him. At first he had tried to follow her words, but soon, very soon, that became impossible, and all he could do was to watch the movements of her lips and head and the exquisite gestures of her slender hands. That couldn't last long, and it hadn't. He had exploded, hurled his drink, roared like a wounded animal, leapt on

her to take what she wouldn't offer. And even then she had been kind, careful of him, lithely twisting behind him and locking his forearms together in a thin blue vise, whispering cold cautions into his ear. He must not, he must not; did he not know the unspeakable cruelties the Martians worked on anyone, even their own kind, who attacked women? And how much worse it would be for a Terran, with his more sensitive nervous system?

He was past caring, and after that it was no conquest, for she would not fight him. He had not even the satisfaction of forcing her. Afterward, he realized fully what he had done, and the implacable, inescapable torture he had loosed upon himself. He had run away sobbing, while she lay and looked at him disdainfully. Would she tell the men now, or later, or tomorrow? Would she wait months? He would never know until the blue shadows closed on him one day (today?) and he disappeared into some dusty desert gopher-hole where the Martians, over months, would flick and flick away through tiny inexpressible torments.

A way out, a way out . . .

Rakejian!

He slid through alleys like the grey rats infesting Marsport, until he found the back of a phone cluster at the corner of one of them. He waited in the shadows

until there was no one, Terran or Martian, in sight, scuttled inside and slammed the door control. Private at last, he fumbled out coins and dialed Marsport 8-7734, all the while feeling his heart beat like a count-down before blast-off, each pulsation marking off one less left to him. Through the *louvres* in the cluster wall, he could see blue Martians in their steady pacing, going about their business two and two; and was their business Martin Boone by now?

Rakejian answered immediately.

Boone identified himself. "I want a job," he gabbled into the phone. "You said eighty solars a week, that's fine with me. Anywhere you say, but I want to leave right away."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Boone. I can do nothing for you. Not for a while. Certain mechanical difficulties—"

"Is it the money? Forget it. Is it the job? I don't care what or where, Rakejian; don't you understand? Titan, Ganymede, I don't care. Mining, murdering, anything you got, I want, long's it's off Mars."

"You're talking too much!" rapped Rakejian. "Calm down. I couldn't do anything today if I wanted to, and now I doubt if I want to. I told you there are mechanical difficulties, and that's what I meant. Call me in—"

"You don't understand!" Boone cried. "I'm in trouble with the natives!"

"A girl?"

Boone moaned in terror. Rakejian said, "You damn fool. Don't mix me up in anything like that." He sounded shocked—he, dealer in flesh . . . procurer, drug-pusher, slave-trader—he was shocked. He hung up.

Boone screamed hoarsely and dialed back. He got no answer. . . .

He went mad then, rat-mad, shrewd-mad, and in an odd way, superhuman as well. He flogged his weary body and lacerated lungs into carrying him all the way back to the Street of the Terran Merchants.

He burst into his deserted shop and tore into his own stock. He got an ugly little early 21st century blued-steel automatic and a half-dozen of the fourteen-charge magazines to fit. He fired four test shots at random, to see if the old charges were still operable, and it was this that first attracted attention. Then he went out at a dead run, making no attempt to conceal himself. He ran right up the middle of the main streets, half across Marsport, brandishing his weapon in one hand and a full magazine in the other, moaning for breath, eyes red and glazed. People of three planets faded away ahead of him and followed after. When he came to the

Street of Napoleon and Hitler, it was like the arrival of the mobs at the Bastille, with this difference: the mob had the numbers, but he alone had the hatred.

At number 81 he sprang up the steps. The doors opened and three heavy-set Terrans boiled out, two with needle pencils. Five needles were projected, and all missed. The automatic yammered, and the three guards fell screaming.

Boone ran through a deserted entry room and shot another guard just inside the main hall. Here perhaps forty men cowered and froze—dirty, ragged, scarred, rot-lunged, shifty, the very dregs of all in humanity that is rotten and beaten—Rakejian's recruits, ready to be shipped out to the moons of Jupiter, to the asteroids, to Venus . . . to whatever hidden, festering spot in the cosmos where they might be needed and need never be traced to. And here too was Rakejian himself, and his traitor Martian technicians.

Boone ran to Rakejian, bashed the yellow hand he saw emerging with a needle projector, and sank the cold muzzle between Rakejian's ribs. "Get me out," he said in a tattered, rasping, voice which was no longer human. "Put me through that thing or by God I'll blow your liver out."

"Boone, you fool, you don't know what you're doing!" said Rakejian, his face hideous as it paled under the yellow. "I told

you, it's not working! Can't you wait for just a—"

Boone shot him four times, and then turned his gun on the technicians. "You send me out, hear?" he barked, and ran and dove into the shimmering mist which hung in the transmitter ring.

Something like a gigantic padded sledge-hammer hit him between the eyes, and his consciousness clicked out.

On River Island in the City of Marsport stands a massive stone building blazoned with massive stone letters: PSYCHO.

In a cell, a man in white spoke softly to Martin Boone.

"Don't you remember? don't you remember?"

He did and he didn't. Men in white had asked him this, and asked him, time and again, insistently, for . . . for a long time. After they asked him, they would tell him a story, and that was the part he never could remember.

Here it came again:

"You're a hero, Martin. Don't you want to live, for that? Three worlds are waiting for you to come out, so they can tell you what they think of a man like you.

"Single-handedly you wiped out the most vicious racket existing today. Because of you the teleporter is in the hands of the government where it belongs, and you've changed the face of the

universe, opening up new frontiers, obsoleting space-ships. Because of you the illegal mines are closed, their slaves freed.

"But more than that, you've given us a new symbol for real devotion and sacrifice. The rescue of your wife from her kidnappers is a legend even now, and will make your name immortal. You saved her from something worse, even, than the worst *they* could have done to her, because she was trapped in . . . well, say trapped in a kind of time which isn't the time we know.

"The teleport field works *almost* all the time. When it doesn't, some poor soul gets lost in a twist of the continuum for all eternity. It probably kills, but it might not. It didn't kill Hedda. From what we can gather, it froze her as she was, loving you with all her heart, for twelve hours of time as we know it. *But in that place where she was, the twelve hours were countless years—years in which she did not age nor think nor change her mood.*

"And in a way that's your greatest reward; for when you freed her by flinging your own body into the choked teleport field, you freed the most devoted human being, I think, who ever lived. It was if she had soaked and marinated for half a century in noth-

ing but love for you. She will never leave you, and three planets are ready to see to it that you and she never are separated again.

"You have no idea how much you mean to us now, Martin; you will have no idea until you get up and come out and accept all that the grateful planets are ready to give you. Just to give you an idea, there's a Martian girl waiting for you, just waiting—knowing of your love for Hedda, knowing how impossible it all is, but still, waiting just for you. And you know how highly they prize civic duty.

"Won't you see Hedda now?"

Martin would scream then, trying to pull his arms out of the gentle immovable sleeves.

"Won't you see the Martian girl, even?"

He would scream some more.

"Martin, Martin, if you would just tell us—why do you keep trying to kill yourself?"

And Martin Boone would try to explain that he'd planned to kill himself, he'd *planned* it, and by God this time something was going to come out the way he planned it; but that never seemed to make any sense to them, and at last the laws of time would begin to perish again for him and he'd sink away and forget, forget, forget, until the next time they told him the story. . . .

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Oh father of mine

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

Mr. Pollet suffered from one fixation . . .

He had to forestall

that gleam in his father's eye!

TO MR. POLLET, TIME WAS A highway: a vast, gleaming, empty highway, waiting to be traveled. "It has road blocks, to be sure," he would say, "and there are altogether too many dangerous curves, much too sharp for even the minimum speed. Still, it's not unlikely that a really clever man will get through someday."

Of course, Mr. Pollet hoped to be that man. To this end he had devoted 37 of his 53 years, unswervingly, with monomaniacal faith. Friends he had none . . . acquaintances, few. His wife was afraid of him. And in the scientific clubs he was *persona non grata*, for when he was not mumbling jiggery-pokery about the "space-time continuum" and "the pretzel of the Past," he was nudging people with his bony elbow and asking them his famous, and perpetually wearisome, question:

"Well, now, what about you, what is *your* opinion? If I were to go back in Time and kill my own father—before my conception—what would happen?"

"Perhaps it is wishful thinking on my part," one beleaguered physicist had replied, "but I am of the notion that you would vanish instantly."

Among other shortcomings, however, Mr. Pollet had no appreciation for subtlety. "Oh?" he'd said, tapping his lean nose; "you think so? I wonder. It's an interesting theory, but somehow it doesn't seem possible. And yet—"

Indeed, it was for no other purpose than to solve this perennial riddle that he labored on his Time Machine. History certainly did not intrigue him, nor was he concerned with the fame that would surely come to the first man to pierce the time barrier. The Future? It was a bore.

Mr. Pollet wanted little. Only the answer to the question.

What would happen ?

It was a late summer evening when the lean man with the sallow cheeks and wispy black hair stepped, for the eight-hun-

dred-and-thirteenth time, into the large metal cylinder in his laboratory basement, turned a switch, waited, and, also for the eight-hundred-and-thirteenth time, stepped out. Another failure, Mr. Pollet mused. It was enough to discourage a saint.

He was a man not normally given to emotional excess, yet now he found himself yielding to a thoroughly wild impulse. He cursed loudly but not well, picked up a heavy crescent wrench and threw it at the Time Machine.

A bank of lights came on. The metal cylinder began to whine, softly.

Mr. Pollet stared. Was it possible? He advanced. Yes, there was no denying it—the random impact of the wrench had accomplished what he had failed a thousand times to accomplish with reason. The delicate balance was at last achieved—the Time Machine was ready to go!

Mr. Pollet beamed.

Now, his plan must be carried out methodically. He mustn't take any chances whatever.

He ran upstairs, pushed his wife aside and got a faded photograph from the bedroom trunk. Hand-tinted, it pictured a clear-eyed, square-jawed, heavy-set, middle-aged man with a fierce shock of red hair.

"Dad," Mr. Pollet said reverently, pocketing the snapshot and loading a blue-steel .38 revolver.

He changed into proper clothing, went back downstairs, and entered the cylinder. He made a careful adjustment of the dials, then pulled the main lever. There was a whirring of gears. Things fizzed. The machine bucked, smoked, clanged, whistled. Mr. Pollet felt dizzy. Blackness reached for him. He fought it.

Things settled down again.

He stepped out of the cylinder.

The landscape was immediately familiar to him: it was, without doubt, the Ohio valley region, the playground of his youth. But Mr. Pollet's mission was not to be delayed by sentiment. He looked about; then, certain that he was unobserved, rolled the Time Machine over to a clump of trees and locked it securely.

He began to walk across the field of alfalfa, and soon the town came into view, and he was confident that his calculations had been correct. He was in Middleton.

But what about the date? He would have to check that. It would not do to kill Dad after he, Pollet, Jr., had been conceived: for then, what would be accomplished?

He withdrew the photograph one more time. Pollet, Sr., was a stern-looking fellow. He remembered him dimly as a strict disciplinarian, at all times cold and distant and prey to a brooding disposition—but he could remem-

ber no more about his father, and nothing specific. After all, Pollet, Sr., had passed away in 1922. And Pollet, Jr., was only five years old then.

It is almost ironic, Mr. Pollet thought, as he jogged along, that Dad shall see his son grown to manhood, only to be slaughtered by him. . . .

Having been hatched scrawny and grown up the same, Mr. Pollet had never enjoyed an abundance of stamina. He slowed to a walk. At the edge of town he stopped, checked the action of his revolver to be sure it would not misfire, and felt his heart beating fast. He smiled wanly. Then he entered the main street of Middleton, Ohio.

The community was abustle. Children played with hoops and marbles and men sat on porches and women shopped. Some looked curiously at Mr. Pollet, and one, a lanky, dark-haired fellow, went so far as to stare; but this was only because a stranger had come to town, doubtless.

Mr. Pollet nodded genially and made his way down the main artery. At a drug store he paused. Inside the window was a calendar. It read: February 19, 1916.

Mr. Pollet frowned slightly. He was cutting it close, quite close. But he was still early. In fact, he could not now be even a gleam in his father's eye.

He walked to Elm Avenue,

where he turned right and walked three blocks more. At a large yellow house on the corner, he stopped. . . . Memories came and went.

He started up the path. Never had he been so full of excitement, never so nervous. He rapped on the door.

It was opened presently by a clear-eyed, square-jawed, heavy-set, middle-aged man with a fierce shock of red hair. "Yes?" he said.

"Mr. James Agnew Pollet?"

"That's right," the man said. Pollet, Jr., caught a glimpse of a slight, tall, exceedingly fair and moderately attractive woman seated in the living-room. It was his mother. He experienced a pang.

"Are you selling something?" James Agnew Pollet asked, brusquely.

"Not exactly," Mr. Pollet, Jr., said, and plucked out the .38.

"What's the meaning—"

The revolver roared, once. A small neat hole appeared in James Agnew Pollet's forehead. He gasped, toppled backwards and lay still.

There was a scream from the living-room.

Mr. Pollet pocketed the gun, whirled, and ran down the street. As he ran, he tried to absorb the fact that, so far, nothing had happened to him.

People turned to stare. Mr. Pollet saw the same man who had

gazed so intently at him before, only now the man was open-mouthed. There was something familiar about him . . .

Mr. Pollet went leaping and bounding across the field, panting heavily. Cars could not follow him: they were too primitive. Men could, but they were still reacting to shock. He had time. He ran to the trees, got the key in the lock, and entered the cylinder. He slammed the door. He pulled the return lever. . . .

After a minute, he opened the door again and stepped into his basement laboratory. His wife was waiting. She looked confused and frightened.

"Did you—go through with it?" she asked.

Mr. Pollet nodded, glumly. The gun, he saw, was still hot from its recent firing. "I killed him," he said. "Saw him die."

"Shame!" Mrs. Pollet declared, paling. "You may not have actually *known* him well, and perhaps it's true he was cruel to you as a child—but to murder your own father! That is unkind."

"Nonsense," Mr. Pollet snapped. "It was an impersonal gesture: purely scientific. I killed him and—nothing happened. Absolutely nothing." He stamped his foot and angrily brushed the dark hair out of his eyes. "Do you understand?" he bellowed, furiously. "*Nothing happened!*"

He reached out and grasped a crowbar and brought the heavy iron down upon the banks of delicate instruments, smashing them and the years that went into their making into a million bright pieces. "Impossible!" he raged. "*Something* should have happened!"

Mrs. Pollet watched him destroy the machine. When he had quite finished, she inquired: "Are you sure it *was* your father?"

Mr. Pollet froze, the crowbar raised high. He blinked and lowered his arm. "What do you mean?" he asked softly.

"Nothing," his wife said, "except that I never did think you looked much like that picture. It's very old, but even so—"

"Be quiet," Mr. Pollet commanded. "I must think."

He thought.

He thought of the undeniable truth of Mrs. Pollet's observation—of the myriad dissimilarities between himself and the man in the photograph.

Especially he thought of the lanky, sallow-cheeked, dark-haired man in Middleton, who had stared so intently. . . .

Mr. Pollet dropped the crowbar. He looked at the wreckage of the machine he would never be able to rebuild.

"Well, I'm a son of a bitch," he said.

And, in a manner of speaking, so he was.

THE GIRL HAD GUTS

by THEODORE STURGEON



When the alien appeared
death came too . . . and horror . . .
and fear that was more terrible
than the alien itself . . .

THE CABBY WOULDN'T TAKE the fare ("Me take a nickel from Captain Gargan? Not in this life!") and the doorman welcomed me so warmly I almost forgave Sue for moving into a place that had a doorman. And then the elevator and then Sue. You have to be away a long time, a long way, to miss someone like that, and me, I'd been farther away than anyone ought to be, for too long plus six weeks. I kissed her and squeezed her until she yelled for mercy, and when I got to where I realized she was yelling we were clear back to the terrace, the whole length of the apartment away from the door. I guess I was sort of enthusiastic,

but as I said . . . oh, who can say a thing like that and make any sense? I was glad to see my wife, and that was it.

She finally got me quieted down and my uniform jacket and shoes off and a dish of ale in my fist, and there I lay in the relaxer looking at her just the way I used to when I could come home from the base every night, just the way I'd dreamed every off-duty minute since we blasted off all those months ago. Special message to anyone who's never been off Earth: Look around you. Take a good *long* look around. You're in the best place there is. A fine place.

I said as much to Sue, and she

laughed and said, "Even the last six weeks?" and I said, "I don't want to insult you, baby, but yes: even those six weeks in lousy quarantine at the lousy base hospital were good, compared to being any place else. But it was the longest six weeks I ever spent; I'll give you that." I pulled her down on top of me and kissed her again. "It was longer than twice the rest of the trip."

She struggled loose and patted me on the head the way I don't like. "Was it so bad really?"

"It was bad. It was lonesome and dangerous and—and disgusting, I guess is the best word for it."

"You mean the plague."

I snorted. "It wasn't a plague."

"Well, I wouldn't know," she said. "Just rumors. That thing of you recalling the crew after twelve hours of liberty, for six weeks of quarantine . . ."

"Yeah, I guess that would start rumors." I closed my eyes and laughed grimly. "Let 'em rumor. No one could dream up anything uglier than the truth. Give me another bucket of suds."

She did, and I kissed her hand as she passed it over. She took the hand right away and I laughed at her. "Scared of me or something?"

"Oh Lord no. Just . . . wanting to catch up. So much you've done, millions of miles, months and months . . . and all I know is you're back, and nothing else."

"I brought the Demon Lover back safe and sound," I kidded.

She colored up. "Don't talk like that." The Demon Lover was my Second, name of Purcell. Purcell was one of those guys who just has to go around making like a bull moose in fly-time, bellowing at the moon and banging his antlers against the rocks. He'd been to the house a couple or three times and said things about Sue that were so appreciative that I had to tell him to knock it off or he'd collect a punch in the mouth. Sue had liked him, though; well, Sue was always that way, always going a bit out of her way to get upwind of an animal like that. And I guess I'm one of 'em myself; anyway, it was me she married. I said, "I'm afraid ol' Purcell's either a blow-hard or he was just out of character when we rounded up the crew and brought 'em all back. We found 'em in honky-tonks and strip joints; we found 'em in the buzzoms of their families behaving like normal family men do after a long trip; but Purcell, we found him at the King George Hotel—" I emphasized with a forefinger— "alone by himself and fast asleep, where he tells us he went as soon as he got earthside. Said he wanted a soak in a hot tub and 24 hours sleep in a real 1-G bed with sheets. How's that for a sailor ashore on his first leave?"

She'd gotten up to get me more

ale. "I haven't finished this one yet!" I said.

She said oh and sat down again. "You were going to tell me about the trip."

"I was? Oh, all right, I was. But listen carefully, because this is one trip I'm going to forget as fast as I can, and I'm not going to do it again, even in my head."

I don't have to tell you about blastoff—that it's more like drift-off these days, since all long hops start from Outer Orbit satellites, out past the Moon—or about the flicker-field by which we hop faster than light, get dizzier than a five-year-old on a drug store stool, and develop more morning-sickness than Mom. That I've told you before.

So I'll start with planetfall on Mullygantz II, Terra's best bet to date for a colonial planet, five-nines Earth normal (that is, .99999) and just about as handsome a rock as ever circled a sun. We hung the blister in stable orbit and Purcell and I dropped down in a superscout with supplies and equipment for the ecological survey station. We expected to find things humming there, five busy people and a sheaf of completed reports, and we hoped we'd be the ones to take back the news that the next ship would be the colony ship. We found three dead and two sick, and knew right away that the

news we'd be taking back was going to stop the colonists in their tracks.

Clement was the only one I'd known personally. Head of the station, physicist and ecologist both, and tops both ways, and he was one of the dead. Joe and Katherine Flent were dead. Amy Segal, the recorder—one of the best in Pioneer Service—was sick in a way I'll go into in a minute, and Glenda Spooner, the plant biologist, was—well, call it withdrawn. Retreated. Something had scared her so badly that she could only sit with her arms folded and her legs crossed and her eyes wide open, rocking and watching.

Anyone gets to striking hero medals ought to make a platter-sized one for Amy Segal. Like I said, she was sick. Her body temperature was wildly erratic, going from 102 all the way down to 96 and back up again. She was just this side of breakdown and must have been like that for weeks, slipping across the line for minutes at a time, hauling herself back for a moment or two, then sliding across again. But she knew Glenda was helpless, though physically in perfect shape, and she knew that even automatic machinery has to be watched. She not only dragged herself around keeping ink in the recording pens and new charts when the seismo's and hygro's and airsonde recorders needed them, but she kept

Glenda fed; more than that, she fed herself.

She fed herself *close to fifteen thousand calories a day*. And she was forty pounds underweight. She was the weirdest sight you ever saw, her face full like a fat person's but her abdomen, from the lower ribs to the pubes, collapsed almost against her spine. You'd never have believed an organism could require so much food—not, that is, until you saw her eat. She'd rigged up a chopper out of the lab equipment because she actually couldn't wait to chew her food. She just dumped everything and anything edible into that gadget and propped her chin on the edge of the table by the outlet, and packed that garbage into her open mouth with both hands. If she could have slept it would have been easier but hunger would wake her after twenty minutes or so and back she'd go, chop and cram, guzzle and swill. If Glenda had been able to help—but there she was, she did it all herself, and when we got the whole story straight we found she'd been at it for nearly three weeks. In another three weeks they'd have been close to the end of their stores, enough for five people for anyway another couple of months.

We had a portable hypno in the first-aid kit on the scout, and we slapped it to Glenda Spooner with a reassurance tape and a

normal sleep command, and just put her to bed with it. We bedded Amy down too, though she got a bit hysterical until we could make her understand through that fog of delirium that one of us would stand by every minute with premasticated rations. Once she understood that she slept like a corpse, but such a corpse you never want to see, lying there eating.

It was a lot of work all at once, and when we had it done Purcell wiped his face and said, "Five-nines Earth normal, hah. No malignant virus or bacterium. No toxic plants or fungi. Come to Mullygantz II, land of happiness and health."

"Nobody's used that big fat *no*," I reminded him. "The reports only say there's nothing bad here that we know about or can test for. My God, the best brains in the world used to kill AB patients by transfusing type O blood. Heaven help us the day we think we know everything that goes on in the universe."

We didn't get the whole story then; rather, it was all there but not in a comprehensible order. The key to it all was Amy Segal's personal log, which she called a "diary", and kept in hentracks called shorthand, which took three historians and a philologist a week to decode after we returned to Earth. It was the diary that fleshed the thing out for us, told

us about these people and their guts and how they exploded all over each other. So I'll tell it, not the way we got it, but the way it happened.

To begin with it was a good team. Clement was a good head, one of those relaxed guys who always listens to other people talking. He could get a fantastic amount of work out of a team and out of himself too, and it never showed. His kind of drive is sort of a secret weapon.

Glenda Spooner and Amy Segal were wild about him in a warm respectful way that never interfered with the work. I'd guess that Glenda was more worshipful about it, or at least, with her it showed more. Amy was the little mouse with the big eyes that gets happier and stays just as quiet when her grand passion walks into the room, except maybe she works a little harder so he'll be pleased. Clement was bed-friends with both of them, which is the way things usually arrange themselves when there's an odd number of singles on a team. It's expected of them, and the wise exec keeps it going that way and plays no favorites, at least till the job's done.

The Flents, Katherine and Joe, were married, and had been for quite a while before they went Outside. His specialty was geology and mineralogy and she was a chemist, and just as their sci-

ences supplemented each other so did their egos. One of Amy's early "diary" entries says they knew each other so well they were one step away from telepathy; they'd work side by side for hours swapping information with grunts and eyebrows.

Just what kicked over all this stability it's hard to say. It wasn't a fine balance; you'd think from the look of things that the arrangement could stand a lot of bumps and friction. Probably it was an unlucky combination of small things all harmless in themselves, but having a critical-mass characteristic that nobody knew about. Maybe it was Clement's sick spell that triggered it; maybe the Flents suddenly went into one of those oh-God-what-did-I-ever-see-in-you phases that come over married people who are never separated; maybe it was Amy's sudden crazy yen for Joe Flent and her confusion over it. Probably the worst thing of all was that Joe Flent might have sensed how she felt and caught fire too. I don't know. I guess, like I said, that they all happened at once.

Clement getting sick like that. He was out after bio specimens and spotted a primate. They're fairly rare on Mullygantz II, big ugly devils maybe five feet tall but so fat they outweigh a man two to one. They're mottled pink and grey, and hairless, and they have a face that looks like an angry

gorilla when it's relaxed, and a ridiculous row of little pointed teeth instead of fangs. They get around pretty good in the trees but they're easy to outrun on the ground, because they never learned to use their arms and knuckles like the great apes, but waddle over the ground with their arms held up in the air to get them out of the way. It fools you. They look so damn silly that you forget they might be dangerous.

So anyway, Clement surprised one on the ground and had it headed for the open fields before it knew what was happening. He ran it to a standstill, just by getting between it and the trees and then approaching it. The primate did all the running; Clement just maneuvered it until it was totally pooped and squatted down to wait its doom. Actually all the doom it would have gotten from Clement was to get stunned, hypod, examined and turned loose, but of course it had no way of knowing that. It just sat there in the grass looking stupid and ludicrous and harmless in an ugly sort of way, and when Clement put out his hand it didn't move, and when he patted it on the neck it just trembled. He was slowly withdrawing his hand to get his stun-gun out when he said something or laughed—anyway, made a sound, and the thing bit him.

Those little bitty teeth weren't what they seemed. The gums are

retractile and the teeth are really not teeth at all but serrated bone with all those little needles slanting inward like a shark's. The jaw muscles are pretty flabby, fortunately, or he'd have lost an elbow, but all the same, it was a bad bite. Clement couldn't get loose, and he couldn't reach around himself to get to the stun-gun, so he drew his flame pistol, thumbed it around to "low", and scorched the primate's throat with it. That was Clement, never wanting to do any more damage than he had to. The primate opened its mouth to protect its throat and Clement got free. He jumped back and twisted his foot and fell, and something burned him on the side of the face like a lick of hellfire. He scrambled back out of the way and got to his feet. The primate was galloping for the woods on its stumpy little legs with its long arms up over its head—even then Clement thought it was funny. Then something else went for him in the long grass and he took a big leap out of its way.

He later wrote very careful notes on this thing. It was wet and it was nasty and it stunk beyond words. He said you could search your memory long afterwards and locate separate smells in that overall stench the way you can with the instruments of an orchestra. There was butyl mercaptan and rotten celery, excrement, formic acid, decayed

meat and that certain smell which is like the taste of some brasses. The burn on his cheek smelt like hydrochloric acid at work on a hydrocarbon; just what it was.

The thing was irregularly spherical or ovoid, but soft and squashy. Fluids of various kinds oozed from it here and there—colorless and watery, clotted yellow like soft-boiled eggs, and blood. It bled more than anything ought to that needs blood; it bled in gouts from openings at random, and it bled cutaneously, droplets forming on its surface like the sweat on a glass of icewater. Cutaneously, did I say? That's not what Clement reported. It looked skinless—flayed was the word he used. Much of its surface was striated muscle fibre, apparently unprotected. In two places that he could see was naked brown tissue like liver, drooling and dripping excretions of its own.

And this thing, roughly a foot and a half by two feet and weighing maybe thirty pounds, was flopping and hopping in a spastic fashion, not caring which side was up (if it had an up) but always moving toward him.

Clement blew sharply out of his nostrils and stepped back and to one side—a good long step, with the agony of his scalded cheek to remind him that wherever the thing had come from, it was high up, and he didn't want it taking off like that again.

And when he turned like that, so did the thing, leaving behind it a trail of slime and blood in the beaten grass, a curved filthy spoor to show him it knew him and wanted him.

He confesses he does not remember dialling up the flame pistol, or the first squeeze of the release. He does remember circling the thing and pouring fire on it while it squirmed and squirted, and while he yelled sounds that were not words, until he and his weapon were spent and there was nothing where the thing had been but a charred wetness adding the smell of burned fat to all the others. He says in his unsparing report that he tramped around and around the thing, stamping out the grass-fire he had started, and shaking with revulsion, and that he squatted weakly in the grass weeping from reaction, and that only then did he think of his wounds. He broke out his pioneer's spectral salve and smeared it liberally on burns and bite both. He hunkered there until the analgesic took the pain away and he felt confident that the wide array of spansuled antibiotics was at work, and then he roused himself and slogged back to the base.

And to that sickness. It lasted only eight days or so, and wasn't the kind of sickness that ought to follow such an experience. His arm and his face healed well and quickly, his appetite was very

good but not excessive, and his mind seemed clear enough. But during that time, as he put it in the careful notes he taped on the voicewriter, he felt things he had never felt before and could hardly describe. They were all things he had heard about or read about, foreign to him personally. There were faint shooting pains in his abdomen and back, a sense of pulse where no pulse should be—like that in a knitting bone, but beating in his soft tissues. None of it was beyond bearing. He had a constant black diarrhoea, but like the pains it never passed the nuisance stage. One vague thing he said about four times: that when he woke up in the morning he felt that he was in some way different from what he had been the night before, and he couldn't say how. Just . . . different.

And in time it faded away and he felt normal again. That was the whole damned thing about what had happened—he was a very resourceful guy, Clement was, and if he'd been gigged just a little more by this he'd have laid his ears back and worked until he *knew* what the trouble was. But he wasn't pushed into it that way, and it didn't keep him from doing his usual man-and-a-half's hard work each day. To the others he was unusually quiet, but if they noticed it at all it wasn't enough to remark about. They were all working hard too,

don't forget. Clement slept alone these eight or nine days, and this wasn't remarkable either, only a little unusual, and not worth comment to either Glenda or Amy, who were satisfied, secure, and fully occupied women.

But then, here again was that rotten timing, small things on small things. This had to be the time of poor Amy Segal's trouble. It started over nothing at all, in the chem lab where she was doing the hurry-up-and-wait routine of a lengthy titration. Joe Flent came in to see how it was going, passed the time of day, did a little something here, something there with the equipment. He had to move along the bench just where Amy was standing, and, absorbed in what he was doing, he put out his hand to gesture her back, and went on with what he was doing. But—

She wrote it in her diary, in longhand, a big scrawl of it in the middle of those neat little glyphs of hers: "*He touched me.*" All underlined and everything. All right, it was a nothing: I said that. It was an accident. But the accident had jarred her and she was made of fulminate of mercury all of a sudden. She stood where she was and let him press close to her, going on with his work, and she almost fainted. What makes these things happen . . . ? Never mind; the thing happened. She looked at him

as if she had never seen him before, the light on his hair, the shape of his ears and his jaw, the—well, all like that. Maybe she made a sound and maybe Joe Flent just sensed it, but he turned around and there they were, staring at each other in some sort of mutual hypnosis with God knows what flowing back and forth between them. Then Joe gave a funny little surprised grunt and did not walk, he ran out of there.

That doesn't sound like anything at all, does it? Whatever it was, though, it was enough to throw little Amy Segal into a flat spin of the second order, and pop her gimbal bearings. I've read that there used to be a lot of stress and strain between people about this business of sex. Well, we've pretty well cleared that up, in the way we humans generally clear things up, by being extreme about it. If you're single you're absolutely free. If you're married you're absolutely bound. If you're married and you get an external itch, you have your free choice—you stay married and don't scratch it, or you scuttle the marriage and you do scratch it. If you're single you respect the marriage bond just like anyone else; you don't, but I mean you *don't* go holing somebody else's hull.

All of which hardly needs saying, especially not to Amy Segal. But like a lot of fine fools before her, she was all mixed up with

what she felt and what she thought she should feel. Maybe she's a throwback to the primitive, when everybody's concave was fair game to anyone else's convex. Whatever it was about her, it took the form of making her hate herself. She was walking around among those other people thinking, I'm no good, Joe's married and look at me, I guess I don't *care* he's married. What's the matter with me, how could I feel this way about Joe, I must be a monster, I don't deserve to be here among decent people. And so on. And no one to tell it to. Maybe if Clement hadn't been sick, or maybe if she'd had it in her to confide in one of the other women, or maybe—well, hell with maybe's. She was half-blind with misery.

Reading the diary transcript later I wished I could put time back and space too and tap her on the shoulder and say come along, little girl, and then put her in a corner and say listen, knothead, get untied, will you? You got a yen, never mind, it'll pass. But as long as it lasts don't be ashamed of it. Damn it, that's all she needed, just a word like that. . . .

Then Clement was well again and one night gave her the sign, and she jumped at it, and that was the most miserable thing of all, because after it was over she burst into tears and told him it was the

last time, never again. He must've been no end startled. He missed the ferry there. He could've got the whole story if he'd tried, but he didn't. Maybe . . . maybe he was a little changed from what happened to him, after all. Anyway, poor Amy hit the bottom of the tank about then. She scribbled yards about it in her book. She'd just found out she responded to Clement just like always, and that proved to her that she couldn't love Joe after all, therefore her love wasn't real, therefore she wasn't worth loving, therefore Joe would never love her. Little bubblehead! and the only way out she could see was to force herself to be faithful to somebody, so she was going to "purify her feelings"—that's what she wrote—by being faithful to Joe, hence no more Clement and of course no Joe. And with that decision she put her ductless glands in a grand alliance with her insanity. Would you believe that anyone in this day and age could have such a pot boiling inside a fuzzy skull?

From that moment on Amy Segal was under forced draft. Apparently no one said anything about it, but you just don't build up incandescence in small dark places without somebody noticing. Katherine Flent must have tumbled early, as women do, and probably said nothing about it, as some women sometimes don't.

Ultimately Joe Flent saw it, and what he went through nobody will ever know. I know he saw it, and felt it, because of what happened. Oh my God, what happened!

It must have been about now that Amy got the same strange almost-sickness Clement had gone through. Vague throbbings and shiftings in the abdomen, and the drizzles, and again that weird thing about feeling different in the morning and not knowing why. And when she was about halfway through the eight-day seige, damn if Glenda Spooner doesn't seem to come down with it. Clement did the reporting on this; he was seeing a lot more of Glenda these days and could watch it. He noticed the similarity with his own illness all right, though it wasn't as noticeable, and called all hands for a report. Amy, possibly Glenda, and Clement had it and passed it; the Flents never showed the signs. Clement decided finally that it was just one of those things that people get and no one knows why, like the common cold before Billipp discovered it was an allergy to a gluten fraction. And the fact that Glenda Spooner had had such a slight attack opened the possibility that one or both Flents had had it and never known it—and that's something else we'll never know for sure.

Well, one fine day Clement

headed out to quarter the shale hills to the north, looking for petroleum if he could find it and anything else if he couldn't. Clement was a fine observer. Trouble with Clement, he was an ecologist, which is mostly a biologist, and biologists are crazy.

The fine day, about three hours after he left, sprung a leak, and the bottom dropped out of the sky—which didn't worry anyone because everyone knew it wouldn't worry Clement.

Only he didn't come back.

That was a long night at the base. Twice searchers started out but they turned back in the first two hundred yards. Rain can come down like that if it wants to, but it shouldn't keep it up for so long. Morning didn't stop it, but as soon as it was dark grey outside instead of total black, the Flents and the two girls dropped everything and headed for the hills. Amy and Glenda went to the west and separated and searched the ridge until mid-afternoon, so it was all over by the time they got back. The Flents took the north and east, and it was Joe who found Clement.

That crazy Clement, he'd seen a bird's nest. He saw it because it was raining and because the fish-head stork always roosts in the rain; if it didn't its goofy glued-together nest would come unstuck. It's a big bird, larger than a terran stork, snow-white,

wide-winged and easy to see, especially against a black shale bluff. Clement wanted a good look at how it sheltered its nest, which looks like half a pinecone as big as half a barrel—you'd think too big for the bird to keep dry. So up he went—and discovered that the fish-head stork's thick floppy neck conceals three, maybe four S-curves underneath all that loose skin. He was all of nine feet away from the nest, clinging to the crumbly rock wall, when he discovered it, the hard way. The stork's head shot out like a battering ram and caught him right on the breastbone, and down he went, and I guess that waterlogged shale was waiting for just this, because he started a really good rock-slide. He broke his leg and was buried up to the shoulder blades. He was facing up the cliff, with the rain beating down on him almost enough to tear his eyelids. He had nothing to look at except the underside of the nest, which his rock-slide had exposed, and I imagine he looked at it until he understood, much against his will, that the nest was all that was holding up more loosened rock above it; and he put in the night that way, waiting for seepage to loosen the gunk that stuck the nest up there and send those tons of rock smack in his face. The leg was pretty bad and he probably passed out two or three

times, but never long enough to suit him . . . *damn* it! I got a list this long of people who ought to have things like that happen to them. So it has to happen to Clement.

It was still raining in the morning when Joe Flent found him. Joe let out a roar to the westward where his wife was combing the rocks, but didn't wait to see if she'd heard. If she didn't, maybe there was a sort of telepathy between them like Amy said in her diary. Anyway, she arrived just in time to see it happen, but not in time to do anything about it.

She saw Joe bending over Clement's head and shoulders where they stuck out of the rock pile, and then she heard a short, sharp shout. It must have been Clement who shouted; he was facing uphill and could see it coming, nest and all. Katherine screamed and ran toward them, and then the new slide reached the bottom, and that was that for Clement.

But not for Joe. Something else got Joe.

It seemed to explode out of the rocks a split second before the slide hit. It took Joe Flent in the chest so hard it lifted him right off his feet and flung him down and away from the slide. Katherine screamed again as she ran, because the thing that had knocked Joe down was bouncing

up and down in a crazy irregular hop, each one taking it closer to Joe as he lay on his back half stunned, and she recognized it for the thing that had attacked Clement the day the primate bit him.

She logged this report on the voicewriter and I heard the tape, and I wish they'd transcribe it and then destroy it. Nobody should hear a duty-bound horror-struck soul like that tell such a story. Read it, okay. But that torn-up monotone, oh God. She was having nine agonies at once, what with her hands all gone and what happened to Joe out there, and what he'd said . . . *arrgh!* I can't tell it without hearing it in my head.

Well. That stinking horror hopped up on Joe and he half sat up and it hopped again and landed right over his face and slumped there quivering, bleeding and streaming rain and acid. Joe flipped so hard his feet went straight up in the air and he seemed to hang there, standing on the back of his head and his shoulder-blades with his arms and legs doing a crazy jumping-jack flailing. Then he fell again with the monstrosity snugger than ever over his face and neck and head, and he squirmed once and then lay still, and that was when Katherine got to him.

Katherine went at that thing with her bare hands. One-half second contact, even in all that

rain, was enough to pucker and shrivel her skin, and it must have felt like plunging her hands into smoking deep-fat. She didn't say what it felt like. She only said that when she grabbed at the thing to tear it away from Joe's face, it came apart in small slippery handfuls. She kicked at it and her foot went in and through it and it spilled ropy guts and gouted blood. She tore into it again, clawing and batting it away, and that was probably when she did the most damage to her hands. Then she had an idea from somewhere in that nightmare, fell back and took Joe's feet and dragged him twenty feet away—don't ask me how—and turned him over on his face so the last of that mess dropped off him. She skinned out of her shirt and knelt down and rolled him over and sat him up. She tried to wipe his face with the shirt but found she couldn't hold it, so she scooped her ruined hand under it and brought it up and mopped, but what she mopped at wasn't a face any more. On the tape she said, in that flat shredded voice, "I didn't realize that for a while."

She put her arms around Joe and rocked him and said, "Joey, it's Katherine, it's all right, honey. Katherine's here." He sighed once, a long, shuddering sigh and straightened his back, and a hole bigger than a mouth opened up

in the front of his head. He said, "Amy? Amy?" and suddenly fought Katherine blindly. She lost her balance and her arm fell away from his back, and he went down. He made one great cry that raised echoes all up and down the ridge: "A . . . mee-eee. . . ." and in a minute or two he was dead.

Katherine sat there until she was ready to go, and covered his face with the shirt. She looked once at the thing that had killed him. It was dead, scattered in slimy bits all over the edge of the rock-fall. She went back to the base. She didn't remember the trip. She must have been soaked and chilled to the bone-marrow. She apparently went straight to the voicewriter and reported in and then just sat there, three, four hours until the others got back.

Now if only somebody had been there to . . . I don't know. Maybe she couldn't have listened, after all that. Who knows what went on in her head while she sat there letting her blood run out of her hands on to the floor? I'd guess it was that last cry of Joe's, because of what happened when Glenda and Amy came in. It might have been so loud in her head that nobody else's voice could get in. But I still wish somebody had been there, somebody who knows about the things people say when they die. Sometimes they're already dead when

they say those things; they don't mean anything. I saw an engineer get it when a generator threw a segment. He just said "Three-eighths . . . three-eighths . . ." What I'm trying to say, it didn't have to mean anything. . . . Well, what's the difference now?

They came in dripping and tired, calling out. Katherine Flent didn't answer. They came into the recording shack, Amy first. Amy was half across the floor before she saw Katherine. Glenda was still in the doorway. Amy screamed, and I guess anyone would, seeing Katherine with her hair plastered around her face the way it had dried, and blood all over her clothes and the floor, and no shirt. She fixed her crazy eyes on Amy and got up slowly. Amy called her name twice but Katherine kept on moving, slow, steady, evenly. Between the heels of her ruined hands she held a skinning knife. She probably couldn't have held it tightly enough to do any damage, but I guess that didn't occur to Amy.

Amy stepped back toward the door and with one long step Katherine headed her off and herded her toward the other corner, where there was no way out. Amy glanced behind her, saw the trap, covered her face with her hands, stepped back, dropped her hands. "Katherinel!" she screamed. "What is it? What is it? Did you

find Clement? Quick!" she rapped at Glenda, who stood frozen in the doorway. "Get Joe."

At the sound of Joe's name Katherine moaned softly and leaped. She was met in midair by the same kind of thing that had killed her husband.

The soft horror caught Katherine off the floor in mid-leap and hurled her backward. Her head hit the corner of a steel relay-rack . . .

The stench in the small room was quite beyond description, beyond bearing. Amy staggered to the door, pushing an unresisting Glenda ahead of her. . . .

And there they were as we found them, Purcell and me: one fevered freak that could out-eat six men, and one catatonic.

I sent Purcell out to the shale hill to see if there was enough left of Clement and Joe Flent for an examination. There wasn't. Animals had scattered Joe's remains pretty thoroughly, and Purcell couldn't find Clement at all, though he moved rocks till his hands bled. There had probably been more slides after that rain. Somehow, in those weeks when she maintained the basic instrumentation single-handed, Amy Segal had managed to drag Katherine out and bury her, and clean up the recording room, though nothing but burning would ever get all that smell out of it.

We left everything but the tapes and records. The scout was built for two men and cargo, and getting her off the ground with four wasn't easy. I was mighty glad to get back on the bridge of the flicker-ship and away from that five-nines hell. We stashed the two girls in a cabin next to the sick bay and quarantined them, just in case, and I went to work on the records, getting the story in about the order I've given it here.

And once I had it, there wasn't a thing I could do with it. Amy was at all times delirious, or asleep or eating; you could get very little from her, and even then you couldn't trust what you got. From Glenda you got nothing. She just lay still with that pleasant half-smile on her face and let the universe proceed without her. On a ship like ours we are the medical division, the skipper and the officers, and we could do nothing for these two but keep them fed and comfortable; otherwise, we mostly forgot they were aboard. Which was an error.

Status quo, then, far as I knew, from the time we left the planet until we made earthfall, the crew going about its business, the two girls in quarantine with Purcell filling the hopper with food for the one and spoon-feeding the other, and me locked up with the records, piecing and guessing and trying to make sense out of a limb-

less, eyeless monstrosity which apparently could appear from nowhere in midair, even indoors (like the one that killed Katherine Flent); which looked as if it could not live, but which still would attack and could kill. I got no place. I mulled over more theories than I'll go into, some of 'em pretty far-fetched, like a fourth-dimensional thing that . . . well, on the other hand, Nature can be pretty far-fetched too, as anyone who has seen the rear end of a mandrill will attest.

What do you know about sea-cucumbers, as another nauseating example?

We popped out of the flicker-field in due time, and Luna was good to see. We transferred to a rocket-ferry at Outer Orbit and dropped in smoothly, and came into the base here in quarantine procedure, impounding ferry and all. The girls were at last put into competent hands, and the crew were given the usual screening. Usual or not, it's about as thorough as a physical examination can get, and after they'd all been cleared, and slept six hours, and gone through it again and been cleared again, I gave them 72-hour passes, renewable, and turned 'em loose.

I was more than anxious to go along too, but by that time I was up to the eyeballs in specialists and theorists, and in some spe-

cialties and theories that began to get too fascinating for even a home-hungry hound like me to ignore. That was when I called you and said how tied up I was and swore I'd be out of there in another day. You were nice about that. Of course, I had no idea it wouldn't be just one more day, but another six weeks.

Right after the crew was turned loose they called me out of the semantics section, where we were collating all notes and records, into the psych division.

They had one of the . . . the things there.

I have to hand it to those guys. I guess they were just as tempted as Clement was when he first saw one, to burn it into nothing as fast as it could be burned. I saw it, and that was my first impulse. God. No amount of clinical reporting like Clement's could give you the remotest idea of just how disgusting one of those things is.

They'd been working over Glenda Spooner. Catatonics are hard to do anything with, but they used some high-potency narcotics and some field inductions, and did a regression. They found out just what sort of a catatonic she was. Some, you probably know, retreat like that as a result of some profound shock—after they have been shocked. It's an escape. But some go into that seize-up in the split second *before* the shock. Then it isn't an es-

cape, it's a defense. And that was our girl Glenda.

They regressed her until they had her located out in the field, searching for Clement. Then they brought her forward again, so that in her mind she was contacting Amy, slogging through the rain back to the base. They got to where Amy entered the recording shack and screamed, seeing Katherine Flent looking that way. There they located the exact split second of trauma, the moment when something happened which was so terrible that Glenda had not let herself see it.

More dope, more application of the fields through the helmet they had her strapped into. They regressed her a few minutes and had her approach that moment again. They tried it again, and some more, making slight adjustments each time, knowing that sooner or later they would have the exact subtle nudge that would push her through her self-induced barrier, make her at last experience the thing she was so afraid to acknowledge.

And they did it, and when they did it, the soft gutty *thing* appeared, slamming into a technician fifteen feet away, hitting him so hard it knocked him flat and slid him spinning into the far wall. He was a young fellow named Petri and it killed him. Like Katherine Flent, he died probably before he felt the acid

burns. He went right into the transformer housing and died in a net of sparks.

And as I said, these boys had their wits about them. Sure, someone went to help Petri (though not in time) and someone else went after a flame pistol. He wasn't in time either; because when he got back with it, Shellabarger and Li Kyu had the glass bell off a vacuum rig and had corralled the filthy thing with it. They slid a resilient mat under it and slapped a coupling on top and jettied the jar full of liquid argon.

This time there was no charred mass, no kicked-apart, rain-soaked scatter of parts to deal with. Here was a perfect specimen, if you can call such a thing perfect, frozen solid while it was still alive and trying to hop up and down and find someone to bubble its dirty acids on. They had it to keep, to slice up with a microtome, even to revive, if anyone had the strong guts.

Glenda proved clearly that with her particular psychic makeup, she had chosen the right defense. When she saw the thing, she died of fright. It was that, just that, that she had tried to avoid with catatonia. The psycho boys breached it, and found out just how right she had been. But at least she didn't die uselessly, like Flent and Clement and poor Katherine. Because it was her autopsy that cleared things up.

One thing they found was pretty subtle. It was a nuclear pattern in the cells of the connective tissue quite unlike anything any of them had seen before. They checked Amy Segal for it and found the same thing. They checked me for it and didn't. That was when I sent out the recall order for the whole crew. I didn't think any of them would have it, but we had to be sure. If that got loose on Earth . . .

All but one of the crew had a clean bill when given the new test, and there wasn't otherwise anything wrong with that one.

The other thing Glenda's autopsy revealed was anything but subtle.

Her abdomen was empty.

Her liver, kidneys, almost all of the upper and all of the lower intestine were missing, along with the spleen, the bladder, and assorted tripe of that nature. Remaining were the uterus, with the Fallopian tubes newly convoluted and the ovaries tacked right to the uterus itself; the stomach; a single loop of what had once been upper intestine, attached in a dozen places to various spots on the wall of the peritoneum. It emptied directly into a rectal segment, without any distinctive urinary system, much like the primitive equipment of a bird.

Everything that was missing, they found under the bell jar.

Now we knew what had hit

Katherine Flent, and why Amy was empty and starved when we found her. Joe Flent had been killed by . . . one of the . . . well, by something that erupted at him as he bent over the trapped Clement. Clement himself had been struck on the side of the face by such a thing—and whose was that?

Why, that primate's. The primate he walked into submission, and touched, and frightened.

It bit him in panic terror. Joe Flent was killed in a moment of panic terror too—not his, but Clement's, who saw the rock-slide coming. Katherine Flent died in a moment of terror—not hers, but Amy's, as Amy crouched cornered in the shack and watched Katherine coming with a knife. And the one which had appeared on earth, in the psych lab, why, that needed the same thing to be born in—when the boys forced Glenda Spooner across a mental barrier she could not cross and live.

We had everything now but the mechanics of the thing, and that we got from Amy, the bravest woman yet. By the time we were through with her, every man in the place admired her g—uh, dammit, not that. Admired her fortitude. She was probed and goaded and prodded and checked, and finally went through a whole series of advanced exploratories. By the time the exploratories began, about six weeks had gone by,

that is, six weeks from Katherine Flent's death, and Amy was almost back to normal; she'd tapered off on the calories, her abdomen had filled out to almost normal, her temperature had steadied and by and large she was okay. What I'm trying to put over is that she had some intestines for us to investigate—*she'd grown a new set.*

That's right. She'd thrown her old ones at Katherine Flent.

There wasn't anything wrong with the new ones, either. At the time of her first examination everything was operating but the kidneys; their function was being handled by a very simple, very efficient sort of filter attached to the ventral wall of the peritoneum. We found a similar organ in autopsying poor Glenda Spooner. Next to it were the adrenals, apparently transferred there from their place astride the original kidneys. And sure enough, we found Amy's adrenals placed that way, and not on the new kidneys. In a fascinating three-day sequence we saw those new kidneys completed and begin to operate, while the surrogate organ which had been doing their work atrophied and went quiet. It stayed there, though, ready.

The climax of the examination came when we induced panic terror in her, with a vivid abreaction of the events in the recording shack the day Katherine died. Bless that Amy, when we sug-

gested it she grinned and said, "Sure!"

But this time it was done under laboratory conditions, with a high-speed camera to watch the proceedings. Oh God, did they proceed!

The film showed Amy's plain pleasant sleeping face with its stainless halo of psych-field hood, which was hauling her subjective self back to that awful moment in the records shack. You could tell the moment she arrived there by the anxiety, the tension, the surprise and shock that showed on her face. "Glenda!" she screamed, "Get Joel!"—and then . . .

It looked at first as if she was making a face, sticking out her tongue. She was making a face all right, the mask of purest, terminal fear, but that wasn't a tongue. It came out and out, unbelievably fast even on the slow-motion frames of the high-speed camera. At its greatest, the diameter was no more than two inches, the length . . . about eight feet. It arrowed out of her mouth, and even in midair it contracted into the roughly spherical shape we had seen before. It struck the net which the doctors had spread for it and dropped into a plastic container, where it hopped and hopped, sweated, drooled, bled and died. They tried to keep it alive but it wasn't meant to live more than a few minutes.

On dissection they found it

contained all Amy's new equipment, in sorry shape. All abdominal organs can be compressed to less than two inches in diameter, but not if they're expected to work again. These weren't.

The thing was covered with a layer of muscle tissue, and dotted with two kinds of ganglia, one sensory and one motor. It would keep hopping as long as there was enough of it left to hop, which was what the motor system did. It was geotropic, and it would alter its muscular spasms to move it toward anything around it that lived and had warm blood, and that's what the primitive sensory system was for.

And at last we could discard the fifty or sixty theories that had been formed and decide on one: That the primates of Mullygantz II had the ability, like a terran sea-cucumber, of ejecting their internal organs when frightened, and of growing a new set; that in a primitive creature this was a survival characteristic, and the more elaborate the ejected matter the better the chances for the animal's survival. Probably starting with something as simple as a lizard's discarding a tail-segment which just lies there and squirms to distract a pursuer, this one had evolved from 'distract' to 'attract' and finally to 'attack.' True, it took a fantastic amount of forage for the animal to supply itself with a new set of innards, but for vege-

tarian primates on fertile Mully-gantz II, this was no problem.

The only problem that remained was to find out exactly how terrans had become infected, and the records cleared that up. Clement got it from a primate's bite. Amy and Glenda got it from Clement. The Flents may well never have had it. Did that mean that Clement had bitten those girls? Amy said no, and experiments proved that the activating factor passed readily from any mucous tissue to any other. A bite would do it, but so would a kiss. Which didn't explain our one crew-member who "contracted" the condition. Nor did it explain what kind of a survival characteristic it is that can get transmitted around like a virus infection, even to species.

Within that same six weeks of quarantine, we even got an answer to that. By a stretch of the imagination, you might call the thing a virus. At least, it was a filterable organism which, like the tobacco mosaic or the slime mold, had an organizing factor. You might call it a life form, or a complex biochemical action, basically un-alive. You could call it symbiote. Symbiotes often go out of their way to see to it that the hosts survive.

After entering a body, these creatures multiplied until they could organize, and then went to work on the host. Connective tis-

sue and muscle fiber was where they did most of their work. They separated muscle fibers all over the peritoneal walls and diaphragm, giving a layer to the entrails and the rest to the exterior. They duplicated organic functions with their efficient, primitive little surrogate organs and glands. They hooked the illium to the stomach wall and to the rectum, and in a dozen places to their new organic structures. Then they apparently stood by.

When an emergency came every muscle in the abdomen and throat cooperated in a single, synchronized spasm, and the entrails, sheathed in muscle fiber and dotted with nerve ganglia, compressed into a long tube and was forced out like a bullet. Instantly the revised and edited abdomen got to work, perforating the new stomach outlet, sealing the old, and starting the complex of simple surrogates to work. And as long as enough new building material was received fast enough, an enormously accelerated rebuilding job started, blue-printed God knows how from God knows what kind of a cellular memory, until in less than two months the original abdominal contents, plus revision, were duplicated, and all was ready for the next emergency.

Then we found that in spite of its incredible and complex hold on its own life and those of its

hosts, it had no defense at all against one of humanity's oldest therapeutic tools, the RF fever cabinet. A high frequency induced fever of 108 sustained for seven minutes killed it off as if it had never existed, and we found that the "revised" gut was in every way as good as the original, if not better (because damaged organs were replaced with healthy ones if there was enough of them left to show original structure)—and that by keeping a culture of the Mully-gantz 'virus' we had the ultimate, drastic treatment for forty-odd types of abdominal cancer—including two types for which we'd had no answer at all!

So it was we lost the planet, and gained it back with a bonus. We could cause this thing and cure it and diagnose it and use it, and the new world was open again. And that part of the story, as you probably know, came out all over the newsfax and 'casters, which is why I'm getting a big hello from taxi drivers and doormen. . . .

"But the 'fax said you wouldn't be leaving the base until tomorrow noon!" Sue said after I had spouted all this to her and at long last got it all off my chest in one great big piece.

"Sure. They got that straight from me. I heard rumors of a parade and speeches and God knows what else, and I wanted to

get home to my walkin' talkin' wet-tin' doll that blows bubbles."

"You're silly."

"C'mere."

The doorbell hummed.

"I'll get it," I said, "and throw 'em out. It's probably a reporter."

But Sue was already on her feet. "Let me, let me. You just stay there and finish our drink." And before I could stop her she flung into the house and up the long corridor to the foyer.

I chuckled, drank my ale and got up to see who was horning in. I had my shoes off so I guess I was pretty quiet. Though I didn't need to be. Purcell was roaring away in his best old salt fashion, "Let's have us another quickie, Susie, before the Space Scout gets through with his red carpet treatment tomorrow—miss me, honey?" . . . while Sue was imploringly trying to cover his mouth with her hands.

Maybe I ran; I don't know. Anyway, I was there, right behind her. I didn't say anything. Purcell looked at me and went white. "Skipper . . ."

And in the hall mirror behind Purcell, my wife met my eyes. What she saw in my face I cannot say, but in hers I saw panic terror.

In the small space between Purcell and Sue, something appeared. It knocked Purcell into the mirror, and he slid down in a welter of blood and stinks and broken glass. The recoil slammed Sue into

my arms. I put her by so I could watch the tattered, bleeding thing on the floor hop and hop until it settled down on the nearest warm living thing it could sense, which was Purcell's face.

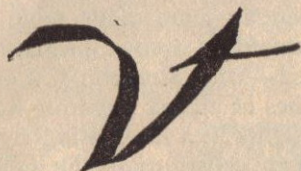
I let Sue watch it and crossed to the phone and called the commandant. "Gargan," I said, watching. "Listen, Joe, I found out that Purcell lied about where he went in that first liberty. Also why he lied." For a few seconds I couldn't seem to get my breath. "Send the meat wagon and an ambulance, and tell Harry to get ready for another hollowbelly. . . . Yes, I said, one dead. . . . Purcell, dammit. Do I have to draw you a cartoon?" I roared, and hung up.

I said to Sue, who was holding

on to her flat midriff, "That Purcell, I guess it did him good to get away with things under my nose. First that helpless catatonic Glenda on the way home, then you. I hope you had a real good time, honey."

It smelled bad in there so I left. I left and walked all the way back to the Base. It took about ten hours. When I got there I went to the Medical wing for my own fever-box cure and to do some thinking about girls with guts, one way or another. And I began to wait. They'd be opening up Mullygantz II again, and I thought I might look for a girl who'd have the . . . fortitude to go back with me. A girl like Amy.

Or maybe Amy.



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VENTURINGS . . .

● Speaking of science-fiction—as *VENTURE S F* proposes to do frequently—we believe that in “Virgin Planet,” POUL ANDERSON demonstrates beautifully his talent as a teller of exciting stories with sound and richly creative backgrounds. The following is a quote from a recent note from Poul (pronounced, by word of the man himself, “mid-way between ‘pole’ and ‘powl’”)—a quote which accurately describes both his own work and a guiding principle of *VENTURE S F*: “To me, there are two primary requirements of a good story: accuracy and entertainment. Known facts should never consciously be tampered with (though of course in science fiction one usually postulates additional areas of knowledge) and the psychology of the characters and logic of the plot should ring true. No matter how serious its purpose, a story should not be dull to read.” . . . One final note on “Virgin Planet”: it was written before this magazine had decided on its name; it seems a particularly happy confirmation of its rightness for this first issue that Davis Bertram’s ship should have been named *At Venture*. . . .

● On a recent weekend, a lean venturer dropped by TED STURGEON’S house, set on a high hill between lakes, not far from the Hudson River. He sat down in front of a coffee table, which his knee bumped lightly. Lights went on, and what had been an anonymous table base was abruptly revealed as a glass tank inhabited by strange, brilliantly colored fish. The venturer was not astonished—with Sturgeon you expect that sort of thing; reading the opening lines of almost anything he writes is like pushing a button that turns on lights in a fascinating world. . . . Warning: for those readers with delicate constitutions the lights in “The Girl Had Guts” may be a bit *too* bright. . . .

● About a year ago, shortly after the Third Ave. El was torn down, a member of our staff was walking east on 57th St. with ISAAC ASIMOV. “I wonder,” ruminated Asimov, “why Third Avenue reminds me of Christmas. . . . I know—Noel!” We contend that after that miserable pun the appearance in this issue of an Asimov story is sufficient evidence of our impartial editorial judgment; we have even asked him for another, to be written in collaboration with Paul French and tentatively titled, “I’m in Marsport Without Hilda.”

● We were impressed by the LES COLE story when it came in, but felt we ought to hear the woman’s point of view too. ROSE SHARON agreed to tell it, and she does it, we think, most convincingly.

—RPM

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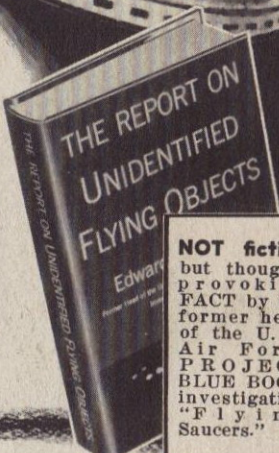
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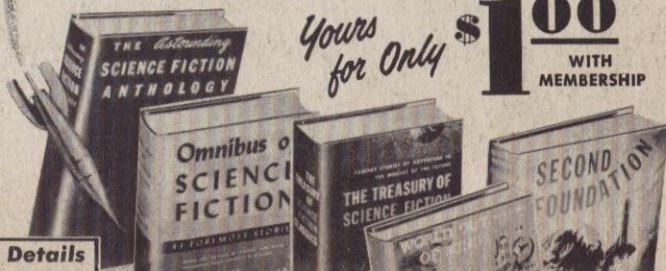
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