JULY 1954 35¢

# Universe

SCIENCE FICTION

ALL STORIES COMPLETE!

**DEAD END KIDS OF SPACE** *By Frank M. Robinson*

*Special!* **NO SPECIES ALONE** By Tom Godwin

Also: *Betsy Curtis, Irving Cox, Judith Merril*

# Editorial

We have both good and bad news for you in this issue, and we might as well get the bad news out of the way first to clear the way for better things. As of the April issue (No. 4) we've suspended our sister magazine, SCIENCE STORIES. We didn't want to do this, but circumstances made it necessary, so . . . SCIENCE STORIES, for the time being, anyway, is out of the picture

This raises two questions. What happens to the contest we were running in SCIENCE STORIES, and what happens to your subscriptions?

The contest has been dropped, but entries received will be considered for publication in UNIVERSE, at our regular rates, and will be handled accordingly unless the authors write in requesting the return of their manuscripts.

Subscriptions to SCIENCE STORIES will be fulfilled with copies of UNIVERSE; if you already subscribe to UNIVERSE, ,we'll extend your subscription to cover the balance due on SCIENCE STORIES. In the event that you'd rather receive MYSTIC, or would like the balance of your subscription refunded, just drop us a card to let us know.

And now, having dispensed with the bad news, let's look at the good news we promised you. For some time now you readers have been telling us that UNIVERSE had terrific stories and illustrations but that "something's missing." And that "something," you were quick to point out, was *personality*—that friendliness, and the feeling that it was partly your magazine hadn't been carried over from OTHER WORLDS.

This is a situation that we want to correct—and the sooner the better.

From now on, you'll find Rog Phillips present in each issue with his long-time-favorite fanzine review column—The Club House. He'll review our fanzines and keep you up-to-date on fan news, as well as giving out some of his personal opinions on fandom in general. We're giving him a free hand, and it looks like he's off to a flying start.

Rog, by the way, has finally found his ideal job. He's avoided work in the past by refusing any job that didn't offer good pay, no duties, and a chance to do his writing on company time. Last week he stopped by the office and tossed the copy for the Club House on our desk announcing that he'd written it while working at his new job.

"New job," we said, playing the roll of straight man, "don't tell us you've finally found that dream-job you've been holding out for."

"Yep." He grinned a canary-eating cat type of grin. "Got me a job as night watchman. There's a typewriter in the office, and they gave me permission to do all the writing I want to. I did The Club House last night, and now I'm working on a science-fiction story. Quiet place, too—it's a casket company."

There should be a moral here somewhere about patience, determina-

(*Continued on Page* 6)

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# UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

*Issue 6*

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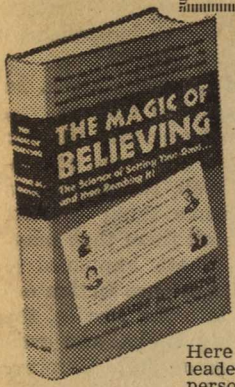


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ation and other virtues, but all we can do at present is mutter enviously about "soft jobs" and "some guys having all the luck."

Along with The Club House we are bringing back the Personals and Letter columns—both of which will be dependent on you. So send in your notices for the Personals column, and your letters telling us how you like the magazine so far, and what type of stories and features you'd like to see in UNIVERSE.

Although it may not be evident to you who are reading this editorial, there is a sharp break where the word UNIVERSE appears above. What kind of a break? Well, that word was the last one written by Bea Mahaffey, who was writing the editorial this issue. Right at that word she packed up and went to Cincinnati for a vacation that she says will last at least a month! And unfortunately, that last word, when it was set up in type came exactly 132 lines short of filling the space she'd left for the editorial.

Now don't get the idea that Bea just up and left in the middle of a job — she's been planning this thing with us for months. But the day came, and she went, on schedule. She had no idea the word UNIVERSE would fall so far short of even filling a page, much less the space it is usually presumed to fill. And anyway, this editor is supposed to be able to come up to emergencies like this, and right now he's trying to do it.

In rejecting a manuscript last night by Mack Reynolds, we noted a brief comment penned to Bea, which we think is worth mentioning. He said: "What's happened to the science fiction field?"

That's a good question, Mack. In your case, it is asked because you are getting rejections from all over the place, just as hundreds of other writers are. Well, the publishers are asking the same thing "Whar in tarnation are all them thar magazine buyers?" What's happened to the big boom that science fiction entered on, going into the movies, the radio, TV, the big slicks, and even into Moscow (says Bill Hamling of *Imagination* who says he has a subscriber there, which we doubt, as he is a devotee of McCarthy, and entirely agrees with his tough methods in the case of Communism, which he mistakes for Kremlinism, and all he'd send to Moscow is a bomb, and certainly not his fine magazine)? Well, the answer is, that science fiction got too big for its britches, and it went bust.

Plain and simple bust.

Long ago at a science fiction convention we were asked why we publish science fiction. We answered because we loved it, and certainly not because it would make money. We knew then what a lot of stupid—no, that's not the word, because it includes us!—publishers have since found out: that there aren't enough science fiction readers to justify all this fuss. So, all these new pubishers, rushing in to make a million, went broke. And do you know what? We went broke, too!

Naturally, not having any money in the first place, accustomed as we are to *paying* for our hobby, it didn't mean much. We have no objection to paying. And so, we are continuing to publish science fiction, which is a losing proposition, at best, and we hope to have a lot of fun at it now that all the greedy boys are back where they shoulda stood in the first place.

There now, we've got that off our chests. It serves them right for not listening to us. They thought we were making a killing, and they swarmed in like a bunch of weasels. Listen next time, boys; Rap ain't no liar, and he's been in this business for twenty-five plus years.

However, there still remains one thing we want to mention. Back in the early days, when we got our start, it was as a writer of science fiction. And just as we began to sell the depression came. We found ourselves writing for ONE EIGHTH of a cent a word, and at the low ebb, SEVEN YEARS after publication! Well, Mack Reynolds, this may answer your question—the new depression is on. Things are going back to normal. Rates are going down. Stories will have to be terrific to sell. And the day of the amateur who can sling a few wisecracks and call it science fiction and gets 3c a word for it is over. Now, maybe, when these boys starve, you really competent writers can come on back in. I'll make you a bet, Mack—some really fine science fiction is going to be written from now on. And brother, is it overdue! Rap.


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"HAVE you ever thought of stealing a planet, Jarvis?"

Ensign Jarvis raised an eyebrow. "Has anybody?"

Leftenant Junior Grade Harkins leaned back in his wood-and-reed chair and nodded. "The State Department thespian team that landed here tried to steal this one—first team in history that ever tried it."

"They tried to steal Nibelung?" Jarvis asked, wiping the foam off his mouth. "I doubt that State could even give it away—worst stopover planet I ever saw!"

Harkins sighed contentedly. He liked Nibelung—it had a certain rustic charm. Besides, if Jarvis was going to hate it, then the least he could do was to take the opposite view.

"You get tired of the mass produced refueling depots, Jarvis. They're all steel and chrome and each of them looks exactly like the other. You have to be fair about Nibelung. It's different, it's clean, it's"—he hesitated a moment, trying to think of something complimentary to say—"picturesque. You appreciate something like this when you get older." (He was exactly three weeks and two days older than Jarvis; a point he never failed to bring up when the occasion warranted.)

"The inhabitants are nothing but savages," Jarvis sneered. "Look over there!"

Harkins had been looking "over there" in the moments when he wasn't looking down at his mug of grog (odd name that; he'd have to look up the derivation some day)

# THE DEAD END KIDS OF SPACE

## By Frank M. Robinson

*Stealing a planet is a big undertaking for three people, but the Chief, Nugent and Kate decided they could do it. They overlooked two items, unfortunately: Peter didn't approve of stealing planets, and Nibelung didn't want to be stolen.*

**Illustrated by H. W. McCauley**

or searching for the grog shop's keeper who wandered around his open air establishment servicing his customers from a huge flagon.

The grog shop fronted on the edge of town facing the rocket port, a wide expanse of meadow that was pretty well covered with the bulk of the *Churchill* and her sister ships, the *Atlee* and the *Bev-*

*an.* A little beyond the ships was some sort of monument; an alabaster statuary group surrounding an earthen pit where burned what Harkins assumed was an eternal flame. (It probably went out on the average of twice a week, he thought; the natives were hardly what you would call the reliable sort.) Four gigantic, space-suited figures raised their arms towards the evening sky in an attitude of hail and farewell.

The meadow was swarming with natives. A procession started to form at the edge of town and Harkins watched it with interest. The natives had smeared themselves with green dye—not too unlike the Pearlies at home who covered themselves with buttons—and were carrying a huge sphere on a palanquin. Harkins strained his eyes and could just make out the familiar continents of Terra, painted rather haphazardly on the globe.

Fireworks suddenly lit up the evening sky, the priests in the procession group started chanting and swinging their charcoal braziers, and the procession lurched to a start, wending its slow way past the monstrous bulk of the ships and towards the monument in the distance.

"Savages," Jarvis repeated from the depths of his mug. "You see how they paint themselves green?" He pounded on the table for the grog shop keeper. The burly keeper filled their mugs from his flagon, and held out his hand for payment.

Jarvis made a show of searching the pockets in his knee length shorts, then said apologetically: "I'm fresh out of Cash, Leftenant. You'll have to get it this time."

Harkins grimaced. Jarvis was broke as usual, but he had gotten the ritual of searching for Cash down to a science. Next time he'd probably take off his plasto-boots and apologize for not having hidden some Cash in them.

Jarvis drained his mug, then gestured towards the meadow. "What's the celebration about, anyway?"

"The anniversary of the landing of the thespian team, a little over a hundred years ago."

"I got a closer look at the woman's statue this afternoon—very pretty."

Harkins nodded. "As a matter of fact she was. I've seen solidographs of the original landing party."

There was a gasp from the crowd in the meadow and more fireworks burst in the air. Jarvis blinked and tried to focus his eyes on the celebration, then gave it up. It was a warm evening and the grog was going to his head.

"What was the team like, Leftenant?"

"The standard team of four," Harkins said. "Three experienced thespians and one apprentice. All of them very brilliant, actually."

"They were a brilliant team," Jarvis said sarcastically, "and we still end up with this?"

Harkins glanced around at the crude grog shop and the brightly bedecked natives out on the landing field. He knew what Jarvis meant. Stopover planets followed a pattern that seldom varied. Highly advanced scientifically, a stable political set-up, and the standard centers of amusement for space-weary men. A planet that was buzzing with industry and commerce, one that was a little on the sophisticated side.

Nibelung was the exception. The natives were advanced enough scientifically—they had to be, to service the huge transports and line cruisers that plied between the different star systems. But Nibelung was the only planet in Harkins' experience where technicians chalked a pentagram on a landing platform and sacrificed a young goat before servicing an atomic drive.

"Well you see, Jarvis, there's a story behind it. . ."

"Not again," Jarvis said disgustedly.

Harkins stood up, brushing little circles of drying grog foam off his tunic. He wondered darkly if he could get away with assigning Jarvis on an expedition to the interior, in hopes that some of the more primitive tribes were still in the cannibal stage.

"You don't have to listen, Jarvis. As a matter of fact, I'd been thinking about going back to the ship. There's a soccer game between officers and enlisted men tomorrow and I could use the sleep."

Jarvis tilted his mug—it had a decided empty appearance to it—and managed a sudden smile. "You know I wouldn't pass up one of your stories, Leftenant—nothing else to do on this blooming planet anyways." He pounded on the table for the keeper again.

Harkins cleared his throat. "It began about a hundred years ago, when the State Department team landed. An excellent team in many ways, which I've always thought was their trouble. You see, they were a little overconfident . . ."

## I.

Peter Johnston crouched in the bushes, holding his breath and hoping the others wouldn't hear him. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop. He had put down the container of water to rest a moment—Thespian Nugent had sent him after a liter for analytical purposes—and there he was, standing in the deep sha-

dows of some bushes just outside the clearing, while Kate and Cliff and the Chief were sitting around the solidograph projector, talking.

It was Kate's voice that had made his ears perk up. She had the low, husky type of voice that set his pulses pounding and introduced an eccentric cam into the gears of his heart.

Kate had said, "But I've never heard of stealing a planet before!"

"That's just because it's never been done before," Clifford Nugent said pursuasively. "If there's anybody who could bring it off, Kate, it's us! Cripple the 'visor, fail to report, and State will simply chalk us off as martyrs." His deep baritone dropped to a stage whisper. "We're all accomplished thespians; we shouldn't have any difficulty infiltrating the civilization. Within a year, we'll be running it! Think of it, Kate—a whole world to play with!"

Peter was shocked. He spread the bushes slightly so he could get a better view. Nugent was leaning towards Kate, his dark handsome face outlined by his black hair and faintly glowing in the light from the campfire. Clifford Nugent, one of the fastest rising team members that there was—the team operator in State after whom Peter had tried to pattern his own career. He bit his lip. And now Nugent was talking . . . treason.

Kate brushed her reddish-brown hair back from her face and drew in on a self-light cigarette.

"What's your opinion, Chief?"

Joseph Saunders shook his head. "Give me a moment to think about it."

Peter felt a little sick, even thinking that the Chief might consider it. Joseph Saunders was a legend around State. An autocrat with close-cropped hair and a heavy moustache, just beginning to be sprinkled with gray. Getting near sixty but you couldn't beat him for experience and ability. . .

"What's the extrapolation of the planet, Kate?"

She walked over to the solidograph projector and punched a series of buttons on the side. The plastic cube shimmered in the darkness and then glowed with a three dimensional image of an old-fashioned colony rocket; a rocket whose design, Peter computed, was at least three hundred years out of date.

"Nibelung was settled three hundred years ago by colonists aboard the ship *Wotan.*" She paused a moment to blow out a stream of smoke into the cool night air. "Population, allowing for an average mortality rate and the usual large number of children per colony family, should be close to two hundred million. Predictions by

State include intercontinental commerce, a strong electronics and scientific industry—you recall the precautions we took when we landed—and a well developed sense of aesthetics."

Another stream of smoke fanned out into the evening air. "Due to the relatively light population, there will probably be a certain number of draft animals in use, so I'm quite sure Silver won't be out of place."

"It's just right," Nugent said softly, speaking to nobody in particular. "A civilization ready for the plucking! An advanced technology, wealth, power, ease, no more tramping around the stars . . . Anything we could want, and it's ours!"

State had always warned the teams against just that, Peter thought chaotically. The colony planets were bound to be a little retarded in comparison with Terra. But when a planet was needed as a stopover point or a refueling depot, it's scientific development had to be speeded up. And since every planet was sovereign, you just didn't march in and take over outright.

Keeping their identity a secret, the thespian teams would infiltrate the civilization, contact the scientific and business men, and plant a suggestion here and an idea there. By the end of a year, the seeds of a hundred new technologies and sciences would have been sowed. A century later, the whole political and scientific set-up of the planet would be similiar to that of a thousand other stopover planets.

But an unscrupulous thespian. .

Peter concentrated on what was going on in the clearing again. The Chief had relaxed against the bole of a tree, his face a battleground of conflicting emotions. "You realize this is treason, Nugent?"

"They'll never know!"

The Chief hesitated a moment longer. "All right," he said finally. "Count me in."

"You, Kate?"

She frowned and stared down at the ground. "I . . . suppose so."

"Then it's settled!"

"What about Peter?" Kate suddenly asked.

Nugent snapped his fingers "Johnston! I'd forgotten all about him."

"I'm quite sure he won't come in," Kate continued. "Peter is hardly the type."

"I know that," Nugent said, annoyed. "Holy Peter wouldn't think of bucking State on anything like this."

Peter felt like something was chocking him. So that's what they thought of him. Holy Peter, just an inexperienced thespian who was a millstone around their neck. Some-

body you despised and felt sorry for. Even Kate didn't give a damn.

In the clearing, Nugent suddenly laughed a particularly dirty laugh. "By God, we'll do exactly as State wanted us to! Nibelung is civilized; he'll get along."

"Then that's that." The Chief glanced at his watch, frowning. "I wonder what's keeping him. He should be back by now.

Peter hoisted the container of water, took his courage in his hands, and started making noises in the brush. A moment later he stepped out into the clearing.

He'd have to play it very cleverly, he thought, the sweat starting out in the palms of his hands and under his arms. State would have to be informed, which meant he'd have to get to the 'visor in a hurry . . .

The blessed thing wouldn't work.

Peter pressed the plastic turn dials on the 'visor and adjusted the tape in the SEND slot but the machine remained cold and inanimate. Maybe he had just forgotten the tuning procedure, he thought nervously. Perhaps he had it in the wrong sequence. . .

He went back through the tuning up process with no result. The perspiration was crawling down the back of his neck now and soaking through his undershirt. Holy Victoria, he thought frantically, what the devil could be wrong? He put his hands on the plastic bars to try again when he heard the hatch close behind him.

"Something wrong, Peter?"

Peter clutched the bars until his knuckles ached, afraid to let loose for fear his hands would betray his trembling.

"Just checking it out, sir. But it doesn't seem to be . . . working."

Clifford Nugent relaxed. "I meant to tell you about it earlier today. I think a bank of transistors is out. Let it go—we can always fix it when we come back."

But they weren't coming back, Peter thought sickly to himself. He tried to laugh but the laugh came out as a high pitched giggle. "Yes sir, certainly, sir. We can always fix it when we come back. . ."

Nugent found a bottle in the tape locker and filled two plastocups, offering one to Peter.

"I usually don't. . . " Peter demurred.

Nugent frowned. "Come on, Johnston. The last drink on board —bottoms up!"

Peter gulped it down, then fought back the tears that sprang to his eyes. Damn Nugent anyways, the man knew he couldn't take liquor . . .

Nugent relaxed in the pilot's seat

and put his feet up on the 'visor. "This is your first time out, isn't it?" He didn't seem to notice Peter's white face and the sweat that trickled down the young man's nose and steamed his glasses.

"Yes sir, yes it is," Peter stuttered.

"You're on a good team," Nugent drawled. "The Chief is tops in the field. And Kate is more than just good." He paused a moment, looking at Peter shrewdly. "You like Kate a good deal, don't you?"

"She's . . . rather nice," Peter said, reddening.

"She's not your property, Peter so keep your hands off." Nugent filled his plasto-cup again and drained it, then stood up and clapped Peter on the shoulder, smiling the friendly smile that was supposed to make you feel great to be included in the world of Clifford Nugent.

"Don't mistake me now, Johnston. She's just not your type, y'know? And to be honest, I sort of have a yen for her myself." He started for the hatch. "Better help the Chief with the tractor beams and set up the camouflage outside. It'll have to be done by morning."

Peter felt a wave of relief that Nugent was leaving. "In a moment, just until I finish with the 'visor . . ."

He stopped the sentence too late. He heard Nugent freeze behind him, then a fist grabbed him by the tunic collar and hauled him out of the seat. A huge hand appeared from nowhere and slapped his head lightly back and forth until the compartment exploded in a blaze of stars.

"I thought you took too long to get that water," Nugent said between tight lips. "Well, Peter, you might as well face it. We're not going home and neither are you. The Chief has hidden the arc-pins for the drive, and I've disabled the 'visor. Whether you like it or not, we're staying here!"

Peter sat on the deck, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. He ought to have it out with Nugent, he thought. Then he looked up at the man standing over him and changed his mind. Nugent was taller and heavier than his own frail 130 pounds and could handle him like a baby.

"The Chief's waiting, Peter."

Peter didn't stir. "You're a traitor and a blackguard!" he said, tears of rage standing in his eyes. "Go help him yourself!"

In the morning Peter started to pack. Three suits of specially designed clothes that could be easily altered to conform to any one of the predicted urban clothing styles, a

heavy, ornate belt that carried his protective screen and powerpack, and a finger ring that was his communications receiver.

"You coming, Johnston?"

"When I'm ready," Peter said coldly. He took one last look around the compartment, then walked down the gangway into the mottled sunlight that streamed through the tall trees edging the clearing.

"All right, Mr. Johnston—let's be a little alert this morning!"

Peter hurried over to the group at the edge of the clearing. The Chief had a skimmer strapped on him—a fragile device of fused power pack and spidery quartz bars that could nullify gravity and propel you at a reasonable rate of speed through the air. Kate had a skimmer for herself and was holding one for him.

Nugent was riding Silver, the animal the Terran zoos had bred back from specimens in captivity. It was quite an impressive beast, Peter thought, what with the long horns that projected out from the sides of its head. A horse, he thought they called it. Standard equipment for the colony planets.

"You all know the plan," the Chief said in his clipped voice. "We'll keep in touch via the ring transceivers. If our plans don't work out, at the end of the year, we'll return to the *Argus*. There's equipment aboard the ship that will automatically destroy it if events go as we expect and we don't return."

He turned his cold gaze on Peter. "Mr. Johnston, regardless of whether we stay here or not, the first year will be identical with what we would have done before." He smiled humorlessly. "At the end of a year, perhaps you'll change your mind about cooperating with us."

Peter stared straight ahead. "I hope you all rot in hell," he said distinctly.

"We'll see. Kate, you'll take care of Mr. Johnston for the indoctrination period." He worked the dials of his skimmer and soared a few feet off the ground. "Good luck!"

Peter worked his own skimmer dials and a moment later, he and Kate were flashing over the forest top.

The others had been too eager, Peter thought to himself as the ground fell away beneath him. They hadn't taken an adequate survey or made a thorough investigation of the planet, as State always recommended. They had been so enthusiastic about pulling the wool over the eyes of the local inhabitants they could hardly wait to get started.

Good luck, the Chief had said. Well, he had a hunch they were going to need it.

## II.

A mechanico would have been better, Nugent thought disgustedly. They went on indefinitely, they didn't suddenly come to a stop in the middle of the woods and refuse to budge. He had tugged at the bridle, his muscles rippling and bulging in his back and legs, but Silver had anchored his hooves and tugged the other way.

Then he had found a lump of sugar in his back pack and held it out in front of the animal. Silver had moved a step and daintily plucked the cube out of his hand but when he had scrambled back on board, the animal had stopped again.

Nugent dismounted. It was getting towards late afternoon and he shivered. He had hoped to find civilization before nightfall but it didn't look like he was going to be successful. Of course, if Silver hadn't balked .. .

He suddenly laughed from sheer relief. What a ninny he had been. Of course—the animal was hungry!

He tethered Silver to a tree in the middle of a small, grassy area. "Help yourself, boy! Go to it!"

Silver stared at him with a baleful look in his eye.

Horses grazed—or did they?—Nugent wondered. Silver never had before; the zoo had kept him in practically spotless cages and fed him from a trough and he had been trough-fed all the time he had been on the *Argus*.

Nugent plucked a handful of grass and held it out before the animal. "Good grass, boy! Nice, green grass. . . "

Silver sniffed suspiciously, tried a shoot or two, and gingerly nibbled on the rest.

It wasn't going right, Nugent thought suddenly. It wasn't going right at all. He had run across no roads, no towns, or even human beings. He had ridden for miles without encountering any signs of the civilization that Kate had predicted they would find.

And now he was faced with teaching his horse how to be a horse.

He finished feeding Silver, remounted, and rode for a few more miles through the gradually darkening wood. He stopped to pitch camp in a clearing that had a stream of fresh water running through it. He was hot and sweaty and his hams ached from riding all day; a quick dip in the water would feel good.

He stripped and hung his clothes and power-pack and safety-screen on Silver's convenient horns. The animal shook its head slightly at the extra weight, then gave up and wandered into the brush. Nugent let it go. It wouldn't wander far;

not if it didn't know how to get its own supper.

He walked over to the stream that pooled in the center of the clearing and dove in. It was a clear, cold, forest pool in a basin of rocks, and fairly deep; the water felt clean and refreshing. He paddled out to the middle, blowing a stream of bubbles out of his nose, and floated for a moment on his back.

A few miles more and he'd make contact, he thought languidly. And once established, he'd have a pool at least as large as this one. A little air-car to get about in, a hundred suits of plasto-sheen and dylon, and maybe he'd keep busy by dabbling in the production of stereos. And he might as well throw in an apartment of twenty or so rooms and Kate as his wife. Or perhaps two or three wives—at best monogamy was boring.

He was drifting closer to the bank, and started to twist to swim out to the middle again. A few feet from the edge, a huge, hairy hand shot down into the water, entwined itself securely in his hair, and pulled him gasping and struggling up the bank.

"You got rats in the attic?" a hoarse voice asked. "Adam's ale's only for drinking—or were you trying to make a hole in the water?"

Nugent stood there streaming, his scalp feeling like it would come loose in his hands if he should pull on it even gently. He brushed the hair out of his eyes and took a watery look at the native. Big, and young, and dressed in crudely tanned leather garments. And now that Nugent could catch his breath, he knew for a fact that the man himself smelled almost as bad as his leather clothes.

"I . . . don't understand."

The man frowned. "What were you doing out in the drink, trying to take the Dutch cure?"

"I was bathing," Nugent said faintly. "I was taking a bath and . . . "

There was a crashing sound in the brush. Silver, on whose back and horns Nugent had draped his clothes and safety screen and transceiver, came bounding into the clearing. The huge giant of a man standing over his master had a considerably different odor from the four human beings on board the *Argus* and was, therefore, an enemy.

Silver lowered his head and charged.

*"Silver!"* The animal paid no attention to the shouted command. The giant was directly before him now and he aimed slightly to the left to catch the man with a horn.

The native took one horrified look and toppled backwards into

the icy pool. Silver halted abruptly on the bank, but Nugent's clothes, safety screen, power pack and transceiver kept right on going, sailing gracefully over the animal's head to join the native thrashing about in the water. There was a splash and a brief, sputtering, arcing sound.

In a half daze, Nugent hauled the native out of the water. He was genuinely stranded now, he thought sickly. With no clothes, no protective screening, no power pack, and no transceiver.

The native looked apprehensively at the shadows that were lengthening in the meadow.

"We'll have to find a burg," he said anxiously.

He probably meant a town, Nugent thought.

"Why?"

The man shuffled his feet nervously. "If you're caught alone after dark, out in the open like this, the buggers will get you," he said earnestly.

Nugent's jaw dropped. The man was young, but not that young. He couldn't believe . . .

Suddenly he felt sick. They had made a mistake, he thought.

A horrible mistake . . .

Settle down, that's what he'd do Joseph Saunders reflected after he had finished lunch. He was tired of being a space-tramp, doing State's dirty work. He'd settle down and start raising a dozen kids like he had always threatened to. He'd seen enough of the star systems—Centaurus, Deneb, Procyon . . .

The glamour was gone—what he wanted now was a comfortable home near a southern waterway, a servant or two or three, and maybe a small rocket boat . . .

He wriggled his gnarled feet in the sunshine and gazed critically at a hole in his right sock. And perhaps a pretty girl or two to keep his socks in good repair and knit him some heavy, plasto-sheen ones for the winter.

You had to play it smart, of course, like Nugent said. Choose a planet that had an adequate medical service. You never know what disease you might come across on some of these wretched worlds, and a man couldn't take too many precautions.

He picked up his back-pack and rummaged around in it until he located the vials of anti-biotics and the plastic envelopes of pills. The scratch-test kit was in the bottom of the bag. He made a sharp mark on his forearm and waited. The red-line showed no inflammation.

He looked around guiltily, on the off chance that somebody might be watching, then shook the thermometer and pushed the hair-line

point into a vein. His temperature was average, which was a little disappointing, but he'd try again in the morning.

It wouldn't have done, of course, to let the rest of the team or State know how he felt about it—but if you looked at it logically, well, a man just couldn't be too careful.

The sun was setting now and a chill wind swept through the massed branches of the trees overhead. He worked his finger-ring a moment.

*"Kate?"*

There was a short, answering buzz. *"All clear, Chief."*

*"Any signs of civilization?"*

Her voice sounded worried. *"No. You?"*

That was odd, he thought. He hadn't encountered any roads or cities of even small towns, but with a lightly populated planet, that wasn't too unusual. But for both he and Kate to miss seeing any . . .

*"None here. How about you, Cliff?"*

There was no answer.

*"Cliff?"*

Silence.

Nothing from Nugent, he thought slowfly. But the man could take care of himself; there was no sense in imagining things. Come morning, he'd try again and the chances were ninety-nine out of a hundred that Cliff would answer.

*"How's Mister Johnston?"*

Kate's voice sounded waspish. *"Unhappy."*

Saunders smiled to himself. Not nearly as unhappy as Johnston was going to be. In a way, it wouldn't be fair to the boy but everybody had to learn sometime.

*"Maintain contact, Kate. Six in the morning."*

He relaxed on the hilltop. It was dark and there were no sounds except his own breathing and the noises that the animals made in the woods.

Antares, Aquila, and Pollux, he thought, staring at the stars overhead. And Andromeda and Altair Canopus. A hundred different suns and a thousand different planets, but now he had come home. No more roaming, no more hopping from star to star and wasting his life masquerading as somebody he wasn't. From now on, it was going to be a life of ease and—he yawned —luxury.

He turned on his side and slipped into a light slumber. The dream was about a small rocket boat a thousand feet long and a sea where six-hundred-pounders leaped right onto the deck and where a golden haired girl stroked his cheek and assured him she liked older men because they were more experienced.

"I don't think Old Mr. Grim has

got him," a voice said. "I think he's just bo-peeping."

"He looks like a busher to me," another voice added. "A regular John Smith."

Saunders cautiously opened his eyes and found himself looking at a cart about twenty feet away from his head. An eight wheeled cart.

He sat up abruptly. The wheels were square, staggered on each side so no two adjoining wheels were on a flat surface. Two natives were riding in the cart itself, holding the reins of a beast that looked much like Nugent's Silver.

The cart moved a few feet towards him and there was a ringing sound from somewhere beneath it, like a bell going off.

"What's the good word, busher?"

The native who had asked it, like his companion, was a middle-aged, cheerful looking man dressed in rag-tags of animal skins and bits and pieces of a homespun cloth. They were not, Saunders decided without any difficulty, the clean-cut, sanitary, and well dressed inhabitants that he had been expecting.

He had a sudden premonition and snatched up his back-pack. The antibotics, the histamines, and the pain killers were missing. The thermometer and the scratch-kit were broken—it looked like somebody had taken them apart and then had tried to jam the fragile pieces back together again.

"Sweet stuff," one of the men grunted, showing no remorse at all. "Damned good."

The men had searched his gear, Saunders thought, found the sugar coated pills and tablets, and had eaten them on the spot. No compunctions about property rights at all. And then they had probably investigated the skimmer . . .

The skimmer! He looked frantically around; it was no place in sight. One of the natives pointed upwards and he paled. He slowly raised his stricken gaze towards the bright blue sky.

They had ransacked his pack and then they had turned their attention to his skimmer, he thought sickly. They had punched every dial they could—and let go.

The skimmer, complete with his power pack and protective screen and ring-radio, was hanging in the air directly above him—two hundred feet above him.

*"Chief?"*

No answer.

*"Cliff"*

No comforting buzzing in reply. Kathryn Spencer bit her lip and tried again, with no results.

"Maybe something's happened to them," Peter said maliciously.

She gave him a withering look.

"If something's happened to them, it could happen to us, too. Or hasn't that occured to you?"

"It has," he said dryly.

She finished the remains of her dinner and buckled on her skimmer. "I suppose you're getting a good deal of pleasure out of this."

"It wasn't my idea to try and steal the planet."

She clamped down hard on her self-light cigarette and stared at him coldly. "I hope when you grow up, Peter, you'll get over making holier-than-thou statements."

"I'm 23," he said coldly.

"Then why not act like it?"

She dialed her skimmer and rose slowly to the tree tops. Peter followed her up. As far as he could see, there was nothing but trees and meadows laced with the thin streams that caught the sun's rays and reflected them as a dazzling string of brilliance. There were no spires of cities or the tell-tale clouds of smoke that hung over the towns on some industrial planets.

"We've traveled for two days," Kate said anxiously. "And no sign of a civilization."

"Seems to me I heard something about two hundred million population," Peter mused. "Intercontinental commerce and a strong electronics and scientific industry."

"Peter Johnston, I hate your guts!" Kate said furiously. She worked the skimmer dials and flashed away to the east. Peter caught up with her and they continued over the virgin country-side, not speaking to each other.

Kate didn't break the silence until that evening in the tent. Peter was almost asleep when she suddenly stirred on the opposite side of the ridge pole.

"Peter?"

"Yes."

"If something ever happened to me—if you had to get along without me—do you think you could get by?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you, Kate."

"You can never tell."

Very seriously. "I shouldn't like to see anything happen to you, Kate." He hesitated a moment, getting up his courage. "I'm very fond of you."

"Don't be silly."

His face grew hot in the darkness. "I'm not." A long minute of silence. "It's Nugent, I suppose."

She laughed and didn't say anything.

The laugh could mean almost anything, Peter thought, perplexed. Then he thought of how illogical it was to feel protective towards Kate and to want to take care of her when she was so damned capable of taking care of herself. It would be like a little tu'penny des-

troyer like the *Agrus* trying to protect a line cruiser.

"Kate?" There was no answer; only the slow, steady sound of her breathing.

Well, it could wait, he thought.

In the morning he discovered, to his horror, that Kate was gone.

III

The first frantic few minutes he did all of the illogical things, like looking through her bedroll and underneath the blankets in the stupid hope that somehow she had shrunk to half her size and hid in them. Then he calmed down and went at it with some degree of logic.

She must have gotten up and gone outside during the night; probably to enjoy a self-light cigarette or to pace beneath the stars.

He lifted the tent flap and went out. It was early morning and the dew was heavy on the turf; the grass crushed easily beneath his feet, leaving a clearly distinguishable print. He walked slowly around the tent, looking for any possible prints or bits of clothing or any indications of a struggle.

Back to the tent entrance where he could make out the very faint imprint of her walking boots. The prints led to the middle of the small clearing and then gradually faded. She could have left for a reconnaissance without telling him, he thought, clutching at straws. But that . . . was hardly likely.

He stood in the middle of the clearing and looked around him. The heavy glare of the sun was already beating down on the thick, greenish-blue grass, steaming the dew that had gathered there. The Nibelungan forest was a hundred feet away; thick trees that rose for eighty or ninety feet into the air, shredding the sunlight that lanced through them.

Alone, he thought, absolutely alone.

He reached for his pocket handkerchief and made a show of polishing his slip-on lenses. It was the first time he had been in a situation like this, the first time he had been absoluetly on his own.

But he was getting dramatic. Kate would probably walk out of the forest any minute.

At noon, she still hadn't showed up. He tried to reach her via the ring-radio but there was no reply. Kate had been kidnapped, he thought, his heart turning to lead. Therefore, he'd have to rescue her. He wasn't the hero type but it looked like he was going to have to learn—and in a hurry.

He looked around the clearing again and felt his sudden resolution run out the toes of his shoes.

Find Kate . . . in how many mil-

lions of square miles?

He rolled up the bedrolls and struck the tent. It would do little good to use the skimmer now; the trees would hide everything below. The only practical thing to do was to circle the clearing on foot and try to pick up her prints again or spot broken twigs or torn leaves.

It didn't take long to find what he thought was a path broken through the forest. He crashed into the brush and feverishly followed a trail that existed only in his imagination. By nightfall he had made a complete circle and blundered back into the same clearing. His feet were a mass of blisters and his clothing scratched and torn by the scrub brushes. He was footsore, tired, and a little frightened. His small ray-pistol, which he thought he had secured tightly in one of the bedrolls, was missing. And without it, there was no chance of obtaining meat for his meals.

For his evening supper he was forced to a diet of small, bluish berries and what roots he could dig. He wasn't positive which ones were edible and which ones were not; thespians were trained to infiltrate urban cultures, not to live off of the countryside. He had been thoroughly schooled in the psychological nuances of obtaining food from urban restaurants without the aid of Cash, but which tubers were edible he would have to learn from experience.

He wasn't successful in his first attempt. It was midnight when the pains started and he suffered his first attacks of dysentery. By morning he was almost too weak to leave the tent to dig for tubers or to go to the nearby stream for water. Thirst forced him to do it in the afternoon but he very nearly didn't make it back to the tent.

The second day he made it once for water and the third, not at all. His stomach felt like it had shrunk to the point where an anti-pain tablet would have made a good sized meal. He lay weakly on his bedroll and watched the parade of life outside; he was resigned to death, regretting only that Kate wasn't there for the deathbed scene.

Kate. Well, he had made a horrible botch of it all the way around, he thought. He couldn't even take care of himself, so how could he do justice by Kate?

Late that evening, he lapsed into a semi-delirium, mumbling incoherently to himself.

The fourth day, although he didn't know it until several months later, he went from the frying pan into the fire.

He was rescued.

"You were really wonky," the voice said cheerfully. "For a while

I thought you were going to wink out."

Something cold and wet swished around in Peter's face and his parched lips sucked greedily at the drops of moisture. He lay there for a moment before opening up his eyes. He felt weak, but well—at least his stomach felt like it might be on nodding terms with his food again.

Apparently somebody had found him and taken him to the local hospital. Then he thought about it for a moment and changed his mind. Hospital beds were never this hard, there was too much of a draft, his face itched from a quarter inch of stubble, and his clothes had that lived-in-feeling and . . . smell.

"You can bo-peep all day if you want to," the voice continued casually, "but I think you ought to take on some fixings."

The voice was coming from a boy, about 17 years old, who was squatting by the tent entrance. A bright-eyed, alert youth dressed in a soft tunic and short pants of some dirty homespun. His dark hair was tangled and matted and there was a small collection of scars and scabs on his wiry arms and legs. He was smoking what looked like a version of Kate's self-light cigarette, but one that gave out considerably darker streams of smoke which weren't nearly as fragrant.

"Good silk," the boy said. "Best you can get." He offered Peter a gourd full of hot gravy with little chunks of meat floating in it. "Here's some fixings; go easy, you don't want to get wonky again."

Peter sniffed reluctantly, almost afraid to try it. It was nothing like the concentrates he had been used to but it was a huge improvement over the tubers he had been living on and it smelled good. He dug in with his fingers and settled back to solemnly chewing and studying the boy across from him.

Homespun. Which meant no textile industry. No shoes, so no adequate tanning industry. A weak, scraggly moustache and vast amounts of fuzz on his chin. No razor blade or steel industry and an interesting insight into the national character.

As a prophet, Kate was strictly a failure, he thought, his heart sinking. There was no urban or industrial society at all; probably all hunting and fishing and maybe a little agriculture.

"You're a busher, aren't you?" the boy asked.

Peter stared at him. "Busher?"

"I mean you're new around here. I've never seen you before."

"Yes . . . I'm new," Peter said carefully.

The boy waved at the sky.

"From out there, huh?"

Peter's jaw dropped. "How . . how . . ."

The boy shrugged. "The witch's guild knows everything. Besides, I tried your kite and it went straight up, so that's what I figured."

Witch's guild. And they knew. And the boy had lost his skimmer for him.

His head felt like it was whirling. Then he glanced around the tent. It was cleaned out; there was nothing left but the bedrolls and the tent itself.

"Sold the gear," the boy said cheerfully. "Made a lot of Cash out of the deal." He held out his hand, admiring the ring that was on one of his fingers. From what he could see of it, Peter knew his ring-radio would never work again. It looked like somebody had hammered it with a rock trying to take it apart. And his power pack was gone. And most important of all, his glasses—he was blind as a bat without them.

"The gear didn't belong to you," Peter said finally. "You stole it."

The boy looked surprised that he should be concerned. "But you can always steal it back!"

Peter tilted the bowl for the last of the gravy. It was a mixed-up world, he thought. There was no industry, and there should have been. There was no science—and there should have been. And the same people who saved your life proceeded to rob you blind.

It didn't make sense.

He struggled weakly to his feet clutching at the plastic tent pole for support. The stream was only a few feet away and he staggered down to it and started to strip off his matted clothing and sponge the dirt off himself.

The boy followed him and sat on the bank. "My handle's Thomas Stearnes," he offered. "What's yours?"

"Peter. Peter Johnston." He lowered himself into the water. "Have you heard of any other bushers, Tom?"

"One," the boy said indifferently. He watched Peter lather up with a bit of soap he had carried in his bedroll. "What's that for?"

"To get clean. What happened to the other busher?"

"The Boss sent him to the work stockade." He picked a blade of grass and stuck it between his teeth. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"Water never hurts. What do you mean—the Boss sent him to the work stockade?"

Thomas looked annoyed. "I mean he wandered into the burg where I live and the Boss put the arm on him and sent him to a place where everybody who hasn't

got a job has to go. Somebody has to work the tubs, and it might as well be the bushers."

The boy had said *him,* which meant either Nugent or the Chief. And tubs. Hydroponics tubs?

"What did he look like?"

The boy shrugged. "Never saw him. Just heard about him."

"Has anybody seen a woman busher?"

"Not that I know." The boy dabbled a hand in the water and pulled it out immediately. "It stings!"

"That's because it's cold," Peter said dryly. Probably the only time Thomas Stearnes had ever been wet was when it rained out, he thought. He climbed out of the stream and started to dry off on a fragment of dirty towel. "Why did you help me?" he asked curiously.

"There was something in it for me." The boy frowned. "I got the boot from the sin-buster in the temple where I used to work. He said I didn't say the spells right but I think it was because he had a nephew he wanted to break in." He looked at Peter sharply. "You come from out there—you must know a lot. Maybe you could help me set up my own temple?"

Religion must be split sixty different ways, Peter thought, if any man could go into business for himself.

"Suppose I don't?"

The boy looked uneasy. "The sin-buster has talked to the other busher; he knows that four of you landed and he's been out looking for you. He even sent runners to other members of the witch's guild." He hesitated. "I wouldn't want to be you if they find you." The threat was obvious.

That was something he hadn't stopped to consider, Peter thought slowly. It was the other face of the coin, the face he had never looked at. They were on a primitive planet where even elementary knowledge meant power. The sin-buster was an intelligent man who understood that. And Nugent or the Chief might already have told him that Peter Johnston was the scientist of the team.

Which meant that for the next year he'd have all he could do to keep one jump ahead of the primitive torture chamber.

"All right," Peter said finally. "I'll tell you. You help me and I'll help you. Fair enough?"

Thomas nodded. "You want to big-brother it, it's all right with me."

Peter started to get dressed. "The first thing we'll have to do is to get in touch with the other busher, the one in the work stockade."

"I . . . don't think we ought to go back yet," the boy said hesitant-

ly. "Not right away".

Peter looked at him blankly. "Why not?"

Uneasily. "If the sin-buster has your description, he might recognize you." He looked away from Peter and carefully inspected a passing cloud. "Besides, you're weak and skinny, you don't know how to handle a cutlass, and I'll bet you've never seen a pig-sticker in your life. You wouldn't get along."

It was a rough and tumble society, Peter thought, appalled. A society with hair on its chest and blood in its eye and probably a chip on its shoulder. But somehow he'd have to measure up . . .

"You've got a while," Thomas said, hacking at the bark of the tree behind him with a knife. "I can learn you a lot. It'll be a time before the other busher has to play follow the leader, anyways."

Peter frowned. "I don't understand."

Thomas smiled a somewhat bloodthirsty smile. "All bushers have to play it. The best player in the burg starts and you do everything he does. Follow him across the Swaying Rope, walk through the Fire Pit—things like that." He paused, looking at Peter speculatively. "Not every busher can do it."

"What happens to those who aren't able to do it?"

Thomas shrugged. "Old Mr. Grim gets them."

Meaning, Peter thought slowly, that if you didn't succeed in duplicating what their leader could do, you died in the attempt.

## IV.

He waited in the brush, not moving a muscle. A fly hovered over his face, landed, and walked slowly across the heavy blonde moustache on his upper lip. Peter didn't wriggle. Any movement or noise might scare away the game, he thought. Thomas, hiding behind a tree, a few feet away, had told him a *smallbeast* was cropping its way within cutlass-reach.

Too bad he couldn't see it.

The trees and brush blurred in his vision a few yards away and Peter wished to hell that Thomas hadn't sold his slip-on lenses when he had found them. He strained his eyes and made out something moving in the blurred forest. The blur worked its way nearer and finally focussed into a small, fox-like animal, following a thin trail of particularly luscious grass. It stretched its neck for one last shoot and there was a sudden *snick* as Peter swept the blade down in a hissing arc.

He stepped out from the bushes

and hoisted the animal by its rear legs, tying it to a tree limb overhead.

"You're getting better," Thomas said grudgingly. "Every day you're getting better. You're as good a cutlass man as I am now."

The thin, near-sighted thespian he had been on board the *Argus* was all but gone now, Peter thought. He was still near-sighted but days of learning how to wield the heavy cutlass and tramping through the forests and living in the open had hardened him and added a muscular 30 pounds of weight.

Thomas started to skin the *small-beast* before cutting up the carcass for breakfast. "I think we ought to go to the burg today. I been talking with the sin-buster's nephew and he tells me your friend is supposed to follow the leader tomorrow."

Peter grunted and started a small fire with some dry brush and flint and steel. "You hear anything about the woman?"

Thomas cut off two slabs of thick meat from the flank. "I keep thinking you haven't told me what you're doing here," he evaded.

"Do you have to know?"

"If you want to put the shush on, it's all right with me." Thomas pierced the meat with a twig and set it over the small flame. "What do you want to find the woman for?"

Peter reddened. "I guess because I love her."

"Women," Thomas sneered. "They're a lot of trouble."

"You'll change your mind when you get older," Peter said in a superior voice. "Wait until you're married."

Thomas burst out laughing and Peter looked at him, surprised.

"What's so funny?"

"I've been blended twice," Thomas said sarcastically. "Never took, either time."

Peter revolved the twig so that the meat which was getting burned on one side would have a chance to get burned on the other. So Thomas had been married twice, he thought wonderingly. He looked over at the boy from under lowered lids. There was still fuzz on his cheeks and his moustache was practically invisible. His voice had a tendency to break when he talked and, despite his prowess with the cutlass, he still had the gangling awkwardness of a youngster.

Peter started to walk over to the stream to wash up. Thomas stopped him, wiping his own greasy hands on his tunic.

"You want to look like a busher?"

No, he didn't, Peter thought regretfully. When in Rome and all of that, and the Roman on Nibe-

lung just didn't wash.

He tied the cutlass to his waist and hid the pig-sticker in his tunic. "You set?"

Thomas nodded and they started out for the town. They hit a trail and followed it towards a river that flowed silently between tree-lined banks. Then the trees started to drop behind them and be replaced by broad, grass covered meadows that were dotted with small, primitive farms.

"The tubs," Thomas said, waving at the farms. "The busher has probably been working those closer in."

Tubs. Short for hydroponics tubs, Peter thought. The name must have carried over.

The path broadened out and became sticky with mud that oozed between Peter's toes and covered his ankles. There were more natives on the path now, walking beside or riding on the primitive carts that kept emitting a bell-like, ringing sound.

"Trucks," Thomas said, pointing to one of the vehicles.

Peter looked at the cart and frowned. Four square wheels on a side, all pitched at a slightly different angle to each other. Ideal for traveling in the mud of Nibelung—but how had the idea occurred in the first place?

"There's two thousand people in the burg," Thomas said proudly. "It's the largest burg I've ever seen."

There should have been two hundred million people on the planet, Peter thought, and large cities. But from what Thomas had said, there couldn't possibly be over a million—perhaps only a few hundred thousand altogether.

The stream widened, the path became more crowded, and the meadow filled with the building of a small town. A town with mud streets and plank sidewalks and wooden frame houses, not over three stories in height, with balconies that projected drunkenly over the walks.

Thomas strolled into one of the open air grog shops that fronted on the muddy main street and Peter followed him. They found a table at the rear and huddled over it, watching the other customers drink and pound the table for the shop keeper.

Thomas pounded the table with the flat of his hand. The keeper filled the mugs and the boy flipped him some coins. "When does the game begin, Keep?"

"Tomorrow, according to the sin-buster."

The local witch-doctor must pretty well run the town, Peter thought. Secular authority would be with the Boss but he was prob-

ably under the thumb of the sin-buster.

Thomas sipped at his mug of grog and made a show of smacking his lips. "We'll wait until tonight and try and break into the stockade then." He glanced at Peter sharply. "If you're still up to it."

Peter drained the mug and waited a moment for the fire in his stomach to cool down.

"I'm up to it," he grinned. "Any time." And then he buried his face in the mug so Thomas couldn't see the tears that sprang to his eyes.

He was going to have to practice at it, he thought grimly—he still couldn't take his liquor.

It was just getting dusk when the grog shop started to empty as the customers cast nervous looks at the lengthening shadows and hurried home.

"They're afraid of the buggers," Thomas said in a low voice. "Of course, we know there aren't any—but they don't. And the witch's guild doesn't tell them."

They waited a moment more and then slid out into the gathering gloom. In a way, Peter thought, he couldn't blame the natives for hurrying home. Nibelung was a fairly watery planet and as soon as the sun went down and the air cooled, fog rose from the streams and marshes and blanketed the world in a mantle of gray.

They walked down the muddy street until Peter could just barely make out the outlines of the stockade ahead, then they loitered at the corner of a building for half an hour until the light of the setting sun had faded entirely.

"Do you think you could make it yourself?" Thomas asked nervously.

Peter smiled to himself. Despite his apprenticeship in the witch's guild, Thomas wasn't absolutely sure that there might not be . . . something out on the streets after dark.

"I think I can. You don't need to wait for me."

Thomas sounded vastly relieved. "I'll meet you in the clearing come morning." A moment later Peter could hear the sloshing of his footsteps slowly fading away.

Probably going home to his third wife, Peter thought.

He strained his ears. The streets were empty, there wasn't a sound. He crept across the muddy lane and flattened himself against the stockade. Still no sound, except the quiet wash of waves in the river nearby. He reached into his tunic and drew out the leather gloves and foot gauntlets that he and Thomas had made. Short nails had been imbedded in the leather, so the sharp

points stuck out on the other side.

He slipped them on, thinking it would take but a moment to get Nugent out of the stockade and then that would make two who could look for Kate. Poor, capable, confident Kate who had rushed in where you couldn't even have pushed the angels. . .

He pressed his hands against the wood wall of the stockade until the nails caught, and cautiously edged upward. He hung at the top a moment, but the inside of the stockade was as foggy as the street and he could see nothing. Then down the inside and a moment to hide the gauntlets inside his tunic once more. Thomas had explained the lay-out of the interior of the stockade and pointed out the small buildings where the workers slept.

Peter started across the open yard, then suddenly stopped. Somebody was pacing back and forth by the stockade wall . . . Guards? Unlikely, since the whole population hid indoors when the sun went down. It was probably either Nugent or the Chief.

He edged closer, his cutlass out, hoping that the whirling wisps of fog would hide him in case he was mistaken.

*"Psst!"*

The figure stopped pacing and the head snapped up in attention. It was Nugent, Peter thought. He couldn't mistake that profile anywhere.

"Who's there?"

"Peter."

*"Johnston!"* The voice shook with surprise.

Peter walked over to him. "You all right, thespian?"

"A little on the thin side," Nugent said sourly. "But I'm all right."

"I'm glad to hear that," Peter said beneath his breath. He doubled up his fist and plowed it into Nugent's face. "That's for the time in the control-room!"

Nugent grunted and sat down in the mud, then scrambled to his feet, his arms outstretched for a tackle. Peter caught him under the chin with his knee and the thespian flipped backwards to sprawl in the mud again.

"And that's for talking the Chief and Kate into joining your crazy scheme!"

"My God, Johnston," Nugent bleated, "somebody will hear you!"

"No, they won't—they're all inside."

Nugent held one hand to his bleeding nose. "I think you broke it," he accused weakly.

"If I didn't, I meant to," Peter said, helping him up.

Nugent wriggled it slightly, then sighed. "Well, Peter, old man, I guess I deserved it." He squinted

through the fog at the man in front of him. "You've changed a lot, haven't you?"

"So have you," Peter said succinctly. Clifford Nugent wasn't the impeccable suave thespian he had been on board. He was dressed in the filthy rags of a Nibelungan native and had shed about as much weight as Peter had gained. His hair was matted and there were callouses as big as Cash coins on his hands.

"I've been through hell," Nugent said in a tired voice. "We work from dawn to dusk and nobody's ever heard of taking Sunday off. And dirt!" He pointed to his evil smelling clothing. "I've worn these since the second day we landed; nobody's ever heard of clean clothes and soap and water!"

Peter smiled to himself. He would like to have been there when Nugent went out on his first day of work.

"All I want to do is get back to the *Argus* and get out of here," Nugent continued, shivering. "The planet's worthless as a stopover point anyways."

"You talked pretty freely to the sin-buster," Peter said suddenly.

Nugent shrugged. "I only confirmed what he already knew." He paused a moment. "I didn't tell him anything else, Peter," he continued earnestly. "With a little knowledge, sin-buster Anderson could rule this world—and even Nibelung doesn't deserve that!"

"Did they try to force you to talk?"

"I'm glad you're here," Nugent said simply. "That was supposed to happen tomorrow."

Peter suddenly grew curious. They had been talking for five minutes and Nugent hadn't asked about Kate. "Kate was kidnapped shortly after we landed, Nugent. I'm getting you out of here so both of us can look for her."

Nugent was looking unhappy. "But she wasn't kidnapped, Peter! She left of her own free will."

Peter was stunned. "What do you mean?"

"That was part of the plan," Nugent said in a stricken voice. "We were going to desert you . . ."

Peter had him by the neck with one hand and was tickling his throat with the knife he held in the other. "That was a mighty poor plan, thespian!"

"We were following State's orders!" Nugent said in a strangled voice, his frightened face looking ghostly in the fog. "You know how it is, Peter—sink or swim. It's done on every trip with inexperienced thespians; that's the quickest way for them to learn!"

Peter let him go, thinking of the conversation he had had with Kate

the evening when she had disappeared. She had asked him if he could take care of himself—knowing that she was going to walk out the next day.

"She was going to try to infiltrate the religion," Nugent offered. "Something like an evangelist, I think she said."

Which meant she'd probably be in the witch's guild, Peter thought. Or trying to get in. And the local sin-buster knew there were four of them and had sent runners out to all the members of guild warning them. . .

If Kate hadn't already come to grief, he thought slowly, it wouldn't be long before she did. And he had no lead on her at all.

"I'll get you out of here," he said slowly. "And then we'll split up. The two of us separately can run down twice as many leads than if we stuck together."

Nugent glanced around apprehensively. "How do we get out?"

"Same way I got in—with these," and Peter showed him how to use the gauntlets. "When you get to the top of the stockade, throw them back over the wall to me."

Nugent slipped them on and started up. Peter watched him vanish over the top and a moment later the gauntlets thudded into the mud at his feet. He had just finished putting them on when there was a noise in the mist behind him.

He whirled. Even with his poor eyesight and the fog, he could make out three figures coming towards him.

"It's unfortunate your friend got away," the tallest of the three said quietly. "But one busher is just as good as another."

Charles Anderson, the sin-buster, Peter thought. With two assistants.

He drew his cutlass and waited.

## V.

"It will be much easier if you don't decide to be a hero," the voice continued. "I'm not at all interested in losing you to Old Mr. Grim. You know a lot; you could be very valuable to me—and I think I might be of value to you."

If he was going to play the hero's part, Peter thought, he might as well play it to the hilt. But he fervently wished that Thomas had never sold his protective screen—and probably to a native who would never have nearly as much use for it as he had right then.

"If you want information, you'll have to dig it out of me!" he snarled, spitting dramatically in the mud.

"That can be arranged." The thin figure made a motion and the two men at his side darted towards

the waiting Peter.

The first man's cutlass rang against his own and Peter felt the thrill of the shock race up his arm and down his side. He dropped to his knees as a blade whistled over his head, then staggered back catching another blow on the flat of the blade. He parried another swipe, flattening himself against the stockade wall.

One of the figures suddenly darted in, Peter ducked, and there was the solid *thunk* of steel cutting wood. The wood held the blade for a moment and Peter lanced out with his own, frantically trying to remember the sword scenes from the stereos he had seen as a boy. The blade sheared easily through leather and bone and the man dropped without a sound, sprawling ungainly in the mud.

Peter felt sick for a vital second and the second man in front of him whacked at his cutlass, near the hilt. The sudden pain deadened Peter's wrist and his cutlass dropped to the ground. The next moment his opponent's blade was at his throat, the sharp point digging slightly into his skin.

But it wasn't supposed to end this way, Peter thought, helpless.

The cowled figure of the sin-buster moved closer. The wisps of fog cleared away for a moment so Peter could see the face—an old and appropriately evil face with a faint grid of lines around very intelligent and very cruel eyes and wrinkled cheeks sinking away from a narrow slash of a mouth.

"You're not a regular busher," the figure said musingly. "You look a lot like the one whom you just helped escape." He paused. "What's your name?"

"Peter."

"Peter what?"

Peter thought for a moment, then grinned crookedly. He rather wished that Kate was there so she could see how he was carrying it off. "Peter the Wit."

"Where do you come from, Peter?"

Peter didn't answer.

"Then I'll tell you," the old man said quietly. "You come from the stars." Peter blanched and the man in front of him chuckled quietly. "We're not as stupid as you might think, busher. I know there are four of you, I know you have valuable information, and I mean to have it." His hand suddenly lashed out and raked Peter's cheek. "How many marches to the stars, busher? And where is the house of fires you came in?"

Nugent and the Chief had wanted power, Peter thought coldly. They hadn't stopped to consider that some of the local natives might be just as eager for it and a good

deal more dangerous in their attempts to get it. The man knew something of where he had come from—there had probably been stories and tales handed down from generation to generation all the way back to the original colonists. The stories would be distorted with the passage of time but there would still be a germ of truth in them.

Peter blew casually on his knuckles and smiled in the face of death.

"You can go straight to the devil."

The old man glared, then turned away, motioning for his assistant to take Peter to the building on the far side of the stockade. "You'll follow the leader tomorrow, busher."

His assistant prodded Peter in the rear with his cutlass and they started for the far end of the yard. Peter skirted the body in the mud, taking a quick look as he went by.

Thomas could have his old job back now, he thought. The sin-buster had run out of nephews.

The bunk house was crowded with men who lay on cheap pallets of straw or gathered in the corners where the flaming tapers cast a little light and talked and gossiped among themselves. Odd, Peter thought, interested. The inhabitants were all off the street at dark but apparently nobody was interested in going to bed early.

He picked a pallet in the middle of the room where the gloom was deepest and spread out on the straw, first giving it a minute search for any stray animal life it might harbor.

"Busher?"

Peter groaned to himself. *Nobody* went to bed on this damned world. He rolled over on his side so he could see the figures on the other pallet, leaning on his elbow.

"They pick you up for just being a busher?" the voice asked.

"Me and the sin-buster, we didn't get along," Peter explained briefly.

"He's a bad one," the voice agreed soberly. "A busher in here has to follow the leader tomorrow."

Peter laughed grimly. "There's been a change of plans. I'm to take his place."

There was a moment of silence from the figure on the other pallet. "That's a rum go. Phoenix Hall will probably be the leader."

Peter stirred. Maybe it was just as well that his friend on the other pallet hadn't gone to sleep. "What's his favorite routine?"

"He starts off with the Swaying Rope and ends with the Fire Pit." Pause. "That's usually when Old Mr. Grim gets them."

"What's the Fire Pit?" Peter asked innocently.

"They've got the middle of the burg, where the square is, roped off

and filled with red-hot stones. You have to cutlass fight Hall in the middle of it."

Hall had probably toughened his feet by now, Peter thought. But for a novice to try and fight him while standing on the stones was impossible.

Peter changed the subject. "Busher," he asked slowly, "where are the women in this burg?"

The man sat up in surprise. "Why, at home, of course? Where else?"

"I just . . . never see them much on the street," Peter said casually.

"You shouldn't" the voice grunted. "Women are to sew and cook and keep the house straight, not to wander about on the street."

Score another one for the mystery of Nibelung, Peter thought. A world where men were men with a vengence and woman's place was in the home.

He yawned, turned over on his side, and pretended to sleep. He estimated it was three hours later before the bushers in the building were dead to the world. Then he got up and crept silently to the door, pushing aside the heavy strip of home-spun that hung in front of it.

A cutlass blade poked him gently in the somach.

Well, that was that, he thought, going dejectedly back to his pallet. It looked like he was going to end up with blisters on his feet whether he liked it or not.

"You can still get out of it, busher."

"I don't expect to lose the game," Peter said quietly.

"We shall see. Remember, you can stop it at any time, Peter the Wit." The sin-buster turned his gnarled hands palm upward. "Is it so much I ask? A little knowledge —and you withhold that!"

He would sooner give a ray pistol to his six year old nephew, Peter thought, shivering.

"Are you ready?"

Peter looked down at the square where the men in their bits of skin and homespun were a mere dull blur to his eyes. The old Roman circus, he thought, with himself cast in the role of a martyr.

"Any time," Peter said with an ease that he didn't feel. He was sweating, hoping that the man wouldn't notice how unusually heavy he looked, how filled out his tunic was. . .

"Then it's time to begin."

There was a boom from the starting drum and Peter craned his neck, staring nearsightedly at the other rooftop where a young dandy in fancy leather shorts and tunic had been waiting. At the sound of the drum, the man advanced to the

rope that was stretched tautly from roof to roof, three stories above the ground. He placed one foot on the rope, hesitated a moment testing the slack, then advanced the other. He swayed for a moment, arms outstretched and ran nimbly across.

"Hah, busher—let's see you beat that!"

Peter strode resolutely to the rooftop and peered at the start of the rope. One of the few advantages of being near-sighted, he thought—the ground was a mere blur beneath him, with no sense of depth at all. He could fool himself into thinking that the ground was only a foot beneath the rope and walk across quite easily. It was the fear of falling you had when you looked down that usually defeated a person.

But he could look down all he wanted to and it wouldn't make a particle of difference—he couldn't see anything anyways.

He put one foot on the rope, then the other. It swayed alarmingly but he forced himself to relax, to move with the rope. He lightly advanced one foot letting the rope center itself between his big and first toes. Nothing to it at all, he thought. Just don't be afraid to walk across. . .

There was a roar of disappointment from the crowd and he was on the other side.

On the ground, the sin-buster reluctantly congratulated him. "The next test will not be as easy, busher." He hesitated. "You have only to cooperate . . . "

"I won't," Peter said cooly.

They walked to the center of the town where thirty square yards had been spread with red hot stones and ashes. The crowd had spread out around the edges of the pit, waiting expectantly for he and Hall to start across it. Everybody in town was there, Peter thought, even the stableboys. . .

He strained his eyes. Two of the stable-boys had been grazing a horse, and from what little he could tell, one that looked remarkably like Silver.

He looked around the square, estimating his chances. Phoenix Hall and the sin-buster were on one side, he was on the other along with half of the crowd, while the rest of the crowd was gathered on the third side. The fourth side was taken up by the dawdling stable-boys and their beasts.

It was all right, Peter thought. It was perfect, even if he wouldn't be able to stand up for a week after it was over.

The drum sounded and Hall started to race lightly across the stones. Peter felt himself pushed from behind and then he, too, was

on the coals. The trick was to keep in motion, he thought, moving lightly from stone to stone. But even then he wasn't good for more than a few seconds at best.

Hall was in the middle now, his cutlass out, bearing down on Peter. Ten yards out from the edge, Peter suddenly threw down his own cutlass and ripped off his tunic. He tore at one of the leather bags strung around his neck and threw it at Hall. It hit the stones and burst and a quart of water went up in blinding steam. Then the other bags were thrown at the stones on three sides and he was hidden for a precious few seconds by clouds of steam.

He raced for the edge where the stableboys were standing by the horse. By God, it *was* Silver, he thought triumphantly. He threw himself on the animal's back, holding on to the horns.

*"Up, Silver!"*

The animal snorted, caught one of the stable boys a glancing blow with a horn, then wheeled and raced off down the street.

He had won, Peter thought viciously. It might be a day before he could get around on his feet again, but when he could, he'd come back to the burg. After dark when there was no one on the streets and when the sin-buster wasn't expecting company.

There was only one reason why the man had been willing for him to play the game and possibly lose his life—thus being of no help at all.

That was because the man had captured another one of the thespians.

Kate.

Thomas was waiting for him in the clearing, for the first time in his life wearing a worried expression on his face.

He helped Peter off of Silver and anxiously bathed his burned feet with water from a gourd. Actually, it hadn't been bad at all, Peter reflected. His feet had been fairly toughened up in the last two months and he hadn't been on the rocks long enough to more than crisp his callouses.

"I was afraid you wouldn't get back," Thomas said, somewhat unsteadily. "I was down at the square watching and I didn't think you'd make it." He paused a moment to brush at his face. "I was real glad you did."

Which was quite a concession to make, Peter thought. It was the first time since he'd known Thomas that the boy had showed anything like emotion.

"I had a little trouble with the sin-buster after you left last night," Peter said casually. "I'm pretty

sure you could get your old job back if you wanted it. He's minus a nephew."

"I wouldn't want it back," Thomas said with a catch in his throat. "If you don't mind, I'd just as soon stick with you."

Something in the way he said it made Peter glance at the boy sharply. It didn't sound at all like man-of-the-world Thomas Stearnes. Then he had the answer. For the first time in his life he had played the role of a hero.

And had found his first hero-worshipper.

Later in the afternoon, when his blisters had subsided, Peter lay in the shade of a tree to rest up. Thomas came over and dropped a brightly-decorated knife by his side.

"It's yours—if you want it."

Peter hefted it in his hand. The wooden handle was finely carved, and the leather wrappings delicatly tinted with colors.

"You . . . didn't need to."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Why not? It isn't mine—the people in the square were so interested in watching you, they grew careless."

So much for fame, Peter thought, feeling like a spaceways Fagin.

The next night he decided to visit the home of the sin-buster. They waited until after dark, when the sun had gone down and the fog had rolled in off of the river and the marshes. The streets were deserted as usual and they walked bravely into town, past the shuttered and locked houses where little streamers of light showed through the chinks in the wall and Peter could hear the sounds of laughter and merriment within.

Everybody stayed inside but nobody went to bed, he thought again. A world of damned insomniacs.

Thomas was staying so close to him he was brushing his tunic. "Scared?" Peter asked quietly.

"No." the answer chattered back. "Are you?"

"I never am," Peter lied. "Which house is it?"

"The one on the corner, with the metal knocker."

Thomas led him to a side-door and Peter leaned his ear against it, listening. There was a low mumble of voices in the building but they were muffled, apparently coming from a far part of the house. Peter took a small blade from his pocket and cautiously inserted it between the frame and the door—at least one phase of his thespian training was going to come in handy. Most doors in the burg, Thomas had assured him, operated on the drop-bar principle, which meant they would be fairly easy to open up.

He worked the blade through the

space and slowly brought it up. It caught on an obstruction and Peter worked it back and forth gently, then lifted straight up with it. There was the small sound of a wooden latch dropped back in place and the door swung slowly open.

They glided into the darkness and Peter silently latched the door behind them. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom, then sauntered over to the door behind which he could hear voices. Kate and the sin-buster, he thought immediately, and if the old man had so much as hurt a hair on her head. . .

He peered through a crack in the door. The room was some sort of office, from what he could see, dimly lit by flickering tapers in holders on the wall. The sin-buster was seated at a desk in the far corner, his back to Peter.

The voices droned on and Peter found his curiosity growing. There was nobody else in the room—apparently Kate was kept elsewhere—and yet the old man was talking to somebody. To whom? Peter listened closer. The old man was doing all the talking. First a sentence, then a pause, then another sentence or two and another pause.

It sounded very much like a man talking over a primitive sort of 'visor, Peter thought excitedly. Which meant some sort of science and electronics industry which meant he could work up some sort of 'visor to call State and ask for help.

He battered the door open with his shoulder and leaped at the startled man in the corner, brushing him aside with one hand and reaching for the 'visor phone with the other.

He felt a shock of disappointment. He knew what the system consisted of, what was on the other end.

The phone.

Two cans and a taut piece of string.

## VI.

There was a sudden movement behind him and Peter whirled, automatically striking out with his hand and knocking the knife from the gnarled fingers of the oldster. The old man bleated and Peter snarled, "Shut up, before I skewer you to the wall!"

It sounded bloodier than he had meant it to be, but the old man quieted immediately.

"Where's the girl, sin-buster!"

The old man spread his hands. "If the busher is so wise and knows so much, then it isn't necessary to ask me!"

"Watch the door, Thomas." Pe-

ter took out his pigsticker and backed the old man against the wall, the blade a hair's breadth away from the scrawny throat. "I think you would be doing the burg a favor if you painted the floor with your own blood, sin-buster!"

(Which was poor acting, he thought, but it would have to do. And besides—he was enjoying it immensely.)

The man in front of him paled and his eyes showed a rheumy white.

"The girl's left," the old man said his voice rattling dryly in his throat. "I had her bound but somehow she got loose when I was not here. When I returned, she became a wildcat and escaped!"

Peter looked at him closely, then roared with laughter. One of the man's eyes was blackened and near to closing and there were deep scratches on his face and neck. Kate had gotten away all right . . .

"How long ago?"

"A few moments before you got here."

Peter relaxed and looked around the room, feeling his curiosity build up again. Several curling photographs were pinned on the wooden walls—photographs of a rocket that was several hundred years old highlighted against a background of stars.

The old *Wotan.*

"Where did you get these?"

"The mines," the old man said reluctantly. "A day's march from here."

"The mines?"

Little tears of sweat were trickling down the sin-buster's bald head. "Where we get our metals, busher."

Photographs from the same place where they got their metals, Peter thought. From the original ship that had landed, naturally.

"What do you know about the other burgs around here?" Peter suddenly asked.

The old man's eyes narrowed slightly. "What should I know?"

Peter thumbed the sharp blade of his pigsticker. "Like if there have been any bushers like myself around who might be staying in them."

"There have been none—I would know if there were."

Peter pricked the old man's throat lightly with his knife.

"None?"

"None!" the old man babbled. "I swear it!"

Peter relaxed the pressure slightly.

"Where did you find the girl?"

The old man looked reluctant and Peter pushed slightly on the blade.

"I traced her through the witch's guild. She was new in the guild

and she was suspect. She did not know our history."

Kate had tried to infiltrate the witch's guild, Peter thought. Probably the most logical thing for her to try and do—and the most dangerous. If the sin-buster was a sample of the membership, then the others wouldn't be above torturing her for what she knew, if they ever laid hands on her again.

He took the knife away and the old man collapsed into his chair.

"What do you mean by history?" Peter asked.

The man pointed to a pile of thin wooden plates in the corner. Peter picked them up and started through them. On each plate was a drawing—but no letters or writing. A simple form of pictographs, he thought.

Because the natives didn't know how to read or write?

"Do you have schools, old man?"

"Schools?"

The man didn't even know what he was talking about, Peter thought, disgusted. He tried another tack.

"Are there any men who make machines. Any men who put numbers on paper?"

The sin-buster shook his head. "Not in this burg, or any others that I know of."

No schools, Peter thought. No scientists. Or inventors.

"Thomas, do you have a good memory?"

The boy nodded and Peter turned back to the sin-buster. "Give him a list of the burgs in this area and the Bosses and the sin-busters in them."

Halfway through, Thomas suddenly cocked his head. "Someone's coming!"

Peter leaped to his feet, knocking over his chair. What a fool he had been! The old man had been talking to somebody on his "phone" when they had come in, probably reporting the escape of Kate. And when the conversation was suddenly cut off, it was only natural that the party on the other end of the line should become curious.

Thomas was at the old man's side, his knife against the trembling throat. "One slash below the chin, Peter?"

The boy wasn't fooling, Peter thought. He would just as soon let out the life of the old man as he would the life of a *smallbeast* in the forest. Peter weighed it a moment. Kate was no fool; she was adept at changing her appearance and she probably wouldn't repeat her mistakes. And to kill the old man in cold blood . . .

"Let him go, Thomas."

The boy reluctantly put his knife away. We'll regret it," he said

quietly.

And Peter knew he was right.

Two months of jogging over the hills and along the trails of Nibelung, Peter thought. Two months to the day since he had almost run into Kate and five months since landing. And still no trace of her in all the small towns and villages he had visited.

"What's the next burg, Thomas?

"Adamsville."

"Know anything about it?"

The boy shook his head. "Nothing. We're a long way from my home burg." He paused. "I never knew the world was so big," he said wistfully.

They had strayed perhaps a hundred miles from where the colony rocket had originally landed, Peter thought. And Thomas thought the world was huge. What would he think if he knew how big it really was?"

He looked over at the boy. A little neater now than when he had first met him. He had finally inviegled Thomas into taking baths by showing him how to swim and presenting it as a sport. And he had managed to hone the primitive knives until they had a fairly decent edge to shave with. And to cut hair.

He had even managed to introduce Thomas to the strange art of washing clothes; a habit that had taken Thomas weeks to see any point to.

He had changed a little himself, he thought. He could sleep anywhere, he could eat anything, and physically he was hard as a rock. He had learned to lie with ease, to take care of himself in a fight, and if necessary, the safest and simplest way of letting out the life of an enemy.

Peter the Wit, he thought sadly. Hero.

"The usual thing?" Thomas asked, reining to a halt.

In the meadow beneath lay the village of Adamsville. Peter reached into his tunic for a home-made telescope of coiled bark and silicon-lenses that he had stolen from another village. He held it to his eye and inspected the town for a good ten minutes, then tucked it away in his tunic, puzzled.

"Yes—we'll pitch camp here and go into the burg just before dusk."

Just long enough to find a grog shop and get the information he wanted, he thought. It was easier now than it had been; the grog no longer brought tears to his eyes and if he was absolutely honest with himself, he'd developed quite a taste for it. There was even the time in Blackstown when he had gotten uproariously drunk and

Thomas had introduced him to an older sister of his first wife. . .

The town in the valley below, however, worried him a little. It didn't look like the average Nibelungan town. And—considering that the wind was from the right direction—neither did it smell like one. Planks covered the streets as well as the sidewalks and the houses didn't look quite as near to falling down as they usually did.

It was after dark when they left the grog shop for the Boss's house at the edge of town. Peter let himself in and quickly found the bed chamber of the man. There was only one bed and one figure beneath the covers. A bachelor, Peter thought, which made things easier; Thomas usually had to gag the wife while he questioned the husband.

He curled his finger around the hilt of his knife and approached the bed while Thomas lit the taper on the wall.

"One move," a voice said quietly behind him, "and I'll cleave you from block to bottom. And tell your friend to freeze. Now turn around."

He had fallen for the oldest gag in history, Peter thought—pillows beneath the covers. He let his knife fall to the floor and turned around.

*"Chief!"*

"What were you going to do, Peter—knife me?"

Peter grinned. "Not unless I had to."

The Chief moved back a few feet and stared at him critically. "You've changed."

"That's what Nugent said."

"You've seen Nugent?"

"Tell you about it in a minute." He turned to Thomas. "Get some food, Thomas—two joints and any grog, if it's handy."

"How does he know where to go?" the Chief asked curiously.

"We've been second story men in so many towns, we automatically know where the kitchens are," Peter said in a melancholy voice. "We've had to live by our wits and so far we've managed to be at least well fed."

"Peter the Wit. I've been hearing a lot about you." He paused. "Well, what happened to Nugent?"

Peter told him and the Chief roared. "You say he had callouses?" he asked, wiping away the tears. "Peter, my boy, if you had only known Nugent before. Suave, polished Nugent—what a thespian when it came to urban civilizations!" He sobered. "What happened to him after he got out of the stockade?"

Peter shrugged "Lit out, I suppose. We're supposed to meet him back at the *Argus* at year's end."

Thomas came in with the joints of cold meat and a pitcher of grog.

Peter drank thirstily and tore at the meat. "What about yourself? I didn't expect you to be a Boss."

"They found me much as they found you and Nugent, Joseph Saunders explained. "I didn't get the work stockade, probably because I'm older. The government is actually run by a system of elders, incidentally."

He helped himself to some of the grog and relaxed in his chair, smacking his lips. The Chief's iron self-discipline had broken down somewhat, Peter thought. He had never allowed himself much pleasure before—it went against his spartan nature. But now he was obviously enjoying his food and drink and his waistline showed it.

The Chief shrugged. "I drifted from village to village, doing odd jobs. Then I happened on this one. There was an epidemic at the time." He leaned forward in his chair. "The mortality rate is fantastic, Peter. They have no idea of simple sanitation or cleanliness at all. I taught them to boil their water and enclose their sewers and the epidemic died out. It probably would have, anyway, but they gave me the credit. It wasn't hard to become Boss after that."

"You haven't heard anything about Kate, have you?" Peter asked suddenly.

The man looked unhappy. "I wish I had some information, Peter, but I haven't heard a word."

"If she doesn't turn up before the year is over, then we'll have to leave without her, won't we?"

The Chief nodded heavily. "I'm afraid so, Peter."

Peter finished off the last of the meat and grog and stood up, ready to leave. "We'll meet you at the *Argus*, then—year's end."

"What are you going to do?"

"What I should have done a long time ago," Peter said thoughtfully. Thomas used to be an apprentice of the guild, he knows the way around. I think we're going to have to infiltrate the guild itself."

"It'll be dangerous, Peter."

Peter turned at the door. "*I* know—but that's the only place left to look."

## VII.

"Not that way, you fool—hold the knife like this!"

Peter changed the position of the knife and brought it up sharply against the throat of the priest. "Be careful of what you call us, sin-buster, or perhaps we'll change our mind and instead of sacrificing the goat, we'll sacrifice you!"

The man paled beneath his cowl. "You do not sound like a member of the guild," he accused.

"The guild has many members,"

Peter said softly. "And customs differ."

"Perhaps so." The man paused, then took up his instructions again. "The proper way for sacrifice is thus . . . "

"The chants go thusly, apprentice . . . "

"High key or low?"

"It depends on the occasion, whether for magic spells or sacrifice."

"It differs in the eastern burgs."

Coldly. "You may study there if you wish."

"We are satisfied with your instruction, master."

Thawing. "You are good students."

"Master." Pause. "Have you heard of a young girl in the guild?"

Sharply. "I have no time for women! Now the chants . . . "

It was two months before Peter and Thomas qualified as graduated apprentices and could make their way from village to village, helping out the local sin-busters on Sacrifice Day and doing maintenance work around the temples. And incidentally, feeling their way for information about Kate. And then one day, the year was nearly up and Peter found himself back in the vicinity of the first town he had visited.

Kate was probably dead, he thought dully. He had found no shred of information about her. It had been a dangerous life and there had been times when he had even acted as a stake-out, not bothering to mask who he was and where he came from, in the hopes of being kidnapped by the same guild members who had hold of Kate.

And now there was no more time to find Kate. But at least he could clear up the mystery of the planet before returning to Terra.

"Want to go to the mines, Thomas."

The boy blanched. "No—but if you go, I'll go with you."

The guild had probably encouraged the superstitious fear to keep everybody away from the colony rocket, Peter thought. Thomas was having a hard time fighting it, but at least he was fighting.

Some day, he mused, Thomas might even make a fairly decent scientist.

They saddled up and headed out to the forest. It was a warm day, not yet noon, and Peter knew that he could take his time, that he had all day ahead of him. And it would take all day to be as thorough as he wanted.

The virgin timber started to fall away and be replaced by younger, smaller trees and brush.

Judging by the timber growth, Peter figured, the ship must have come in from the north and the superheated air during its descent had set the trees in the surrounding area on fire.

They went deeper into the brush and the ground started to rise in small hillocks and waves. Peter frowned. The shock waves from the landing of the ship—like dropping a stone in mud. But then the ship could hardly have made an ordinary landing.

The folds of ground rose in height and then he was at the top of the hill, looking down into the narrow valley below. It took him a moment to notice anything unusual. Vines and creepers had grown over the contours of the rocket, silt had washed around its side, and trees had grown up and partially obscured it. Peter blanked out the trees and the brush and imagined the shape of the rocket beneath it. Something about the outline bothered him.

The ship hadn't made an ordinary landing, he thought. It had crashed, which accounted for the rolling hills that led up to the valley. It had plowed into the ground at a tremendous speed, splashing the earth like it would water and almost burying its bulk.

"Want to go down, Thomas?"

The skin over the boy's cheekbones tightened. "I'm . . . game."

Peter followed the ridge for a mile until he found a path leading down. The vine covered remains grew before him until finally they towered dozens of feet above his head. He jogged along the side to an open port, the hatch rusting and almost separated from its steelite hinges.

The hole was pitch black.

"Light a taper, Thomas, and we'll go in."

Thomas worked for a moment with flint and steel; the strip of tarry wood flared and finally burned with a steady, smoky light. Peter held it in the hatchway, locating the ladder that led to the bowels of the ship. He hesitated a moment, placed a foot on the rung of the ladder, and started down.

He saw the first skeleton on the next level down, in a corner where the deck met the bulkhead. There was horrified gasp from Thomas and Peter imagined the boy was already wet with sweat. He lowered the torch to take a good look at the bones.

The man hadn't had a chance. He was manning an escape hatch when the crash occured and the sudden deceleration had mashed him into a corner, shattering his bones.

Peter followed the passageway

towards the nose of the ship, stepping over other huddled heaps of bones on the way. The poor devils hadn't had a chance, he thought. Every emergency post on board ship had been manned and everybody who had manned them had died—and had known they were going to die.

He found another ladder and climbed towards the nose of the rocket where the control room was located. The air was thick with dust and small spiders had spun their webs across the hatch, still dogged down and partially rusted shut.

There was a piece of pipe clamped to the bulkhead and Peter took it down and fitted it over the dogs. He heaved the dogs to an open position and pushed through the hatch. The nose of the ship was badly crumpled; the control room was only half its original length. It was partly filled with dirt and shale and the roots of trees poked through the broken ports.

They had died in their seats piloting the ship in, Peter thought. Sticking to their posts while they watched death rush towards them.

He held the taper high and the light fell across a small inset shelf in the bulkhead. A metal clamp in the shelf held a small, aluminum bound book. Peter leafed through it, slowed down, and thoroughly read the last few entries.

"There's only one more hold I want to see," he told a shivering Thomas when he had finished. "Then we'll go back to the burg."

The compartment was towards the middle of the ship, on the tenth level. A compartment that was filled with stanchions between which were strung the spring deceleration cots. Because of its position in the center of the ship, it was hardly damaged at all.

He circled the compartment holding the taper high, then lowered it and looked along the dust on the deck. A book or two, their covers rotting off and the pages moulding. Small piles of mould and dust in the corners that had once been children's toys.

"Let's get out of here, Thomas."

He opened the hatch that led out into the passageway.

"Stand where you are, busher," a voice said quietly.

Peter stood stock still and raised the torch a little high so he could see. Three men with cutlasses were in front of him, dressed in the cowls and tunics of the witch's guild.

Acting as a stake-out had finally paid off, Peter thought. But at the wrong time and in the wrong place. They had, undoubtedly, followed him from town.

"What do you want?"

"You," the answer floated back.

Peter threw the torch into a corner where it still flickered, lighting up the floor and illuminating their bodies from below so their faces looked like death's masks. He pulled out his cutlass and ducked as one of the cowled figures thundered past him, slashing at his head. There was the ringing sound of metal against metal and then the two figures were facing him, forcing him back against the hatch. They were experts with the cutlass and out of the corner of his eye, Peter could see that Thomas was fully occupied with his one man, that he wouldn't be able to give any aid at all.

Another slashing blow and Peter felt his tunic part down his side. A thin rivulet of blood ran down his leg and puddled on the steel deck. He backed against the bulkhead and dodged another blow from the man on his left. The cutlass rang against the metal of the bulkhead and jumped back in the man's hand, unbalancing him for a fraction of a second.

Peter held his blade with both hands and slashed out with it. The man on his left crumpled, trying to hold himself together with his fingers. Now for the man on his right, the tallest of the three . . .

"You got away once, busher," the man grunted. "You won't be so lucky this time."

Phoenix Hall, Peter thought coldly. The man he had cheated in the contest on the Fire Pit.

Peter parried a blow and felt the steel cut lightly into his forearm. Not badly enough to sever the muscles, but another cut for the blood to run out and add to the slickness of the metal deck.

During the next flurry of blows, they both slipped on the deck and Peter had a chance to take a quick look at how Thomas was doing. The look turned his stomach to ice. Thomas was on the deck, weaponless and helpless, and the man standing over him was holding his cutlass high, ready to bring it sweeping down.

Peter had no chance to think, to weigh the consequences of his own actions. He lifted his own cutlass and threw it like he would a long knife. It struck the cowled figure square in the back and only the hilt prevented it from passing clear through the body.

Phoenix Hall charged towards him, his eyes glittering with triumph. Peter waited, fighting off his nausea of fright, then suddenly kicked out with his feet, catching Hall in the pit of his stomach. The man doubled, lost his balance on the deck, and skidded backwards in a flurry of arms and legs.

Peter seized the fallen cutlass

and rushed over to Hall; he put the blade against the man's throat.

"There's a meeting of the guild tonight, busher. Some people didn't want you there." Hall licked his lips. "The sin-buster has the girl."

"What does he intend to do?"

"I don't know." A little pressure on the blade. "I don't know a thing about it!"

"Get up." Peter prodded Hall into the compartment behind him, then swung the hatch shut and dogged it down. There was air—the ventilators were still open—so Hall wouldn't die. But he would keep until they were good and ready to let him go.

They climbed down the ladder to the level where they had come in and stepped out into the open air. The sun was warm, the air was dry and fresh, and the sky was a cloudless blue.

It felt very good to be alive, Peter thought.

Very good indeed.

## VIII.

"How do I look?" Thomas asked.

"A little young, perhaps, but I don't think that anybody will look beneath the cowl."

"When's the meeting?"

"After dark—in a clearing just outside of the burg." Peter checked his pigsticker hidden beneath his own tunic. "It's about time we got started."

The sun was sinking and the shadows had started to cut across the path. Little wisps of fog curled up from the ground and hung a few feet above it until it looked like Silver was treading on thick clouds. It was chillier than usual and Peter shivered.

Well, tonight was the last night. Then back to the *Argus* and back to a civilization where there was running water and stereos and air cars and blocks and climate control.

The fog deepened and other horses joined them on the path, carrying cowled figures on their backs. Then the path widened and they were in a clearing that was filled with the gaunt figures of the sin-busters. A plumper than usual priest suddenly jostled his elbow.

*"Peter!"*

The ruddy face of the Chief peeped out from under a heavy hood, a finger to his mouth in warning. Next to him was Nugent, managing to look unhappy and grimly determined at the same time.

"They got Kate," the Chief said.

"How?"

"Strictly on a fluke." The Chief beamed proudly. "She had worked her way all the way up to what

amounted to secretary of the organization—and then she ran across the old sin-buster who had picked her up for the first time." He shook his head. "Sheer bad luck!"

"What are they going to do?"

The Chief gestured to a small rise in the ground, a hundred yards away. "Look over there."

"You know I can't see that far," Peter said, annoyed.

"They've got Kate up there," Nugent explained. "All trussed and tied like a postal package. I think our friends intend to sacrifice her."

"Any ideas?"

"We are hoping you would have some, Peter."

Peter looked around at the others near him, noting the different village symbols on their tunics and cowls. They were from a hundred different villages, he thought. And each of them was proud of his customs . . .

"I have," he said, somewhat smugly. "Just follow my lead." He turned to Thomas and said in a loud voice: "When you sacrifice a goat, Thomas, do you stretch it north and south or horizontal as the sun travels?"

Thomas goggled a moment, then picked him up. "Horizontal as the sun travels, of course!"

One of the members of the guild standing near by turned around annoyed. "The proper method is north and south!"

Peter tugged cheerfully at the sleeve of a priest from a southern village. "What think you?"

"Horizontal as the sun travels," the man snapped, glaring at the northern priest.

"The southern religions are a fraud," the northern priest answered hotly.

"I quite agree," Peter murmured, and moved away, leaving the two arguing behind him.

"Thomas," he said, when he was near another group. "Did the first prophet actually exist or was he merely an invention of the followers of Norab?"

(Behind him, the first group had grown to nearly a dozen, all arguing hotly.)

"An invention of the followers of Norab," Thomas said confidently, and just loud enough for some western village priests to overhear him.

"Blasphemer!" a priest said indignantly. He and several of his friends edged towards Peter.

An eastern village priest overheard the end of the argument and stepped forward as peacemaker. "There should be no disputes among members of the guild," he said, trying to pour oil on the troubled waters.

(The first group, which now numbered close to thirty wrangling mem-

bers, had split into minor factions. Peter wasn't sure but he thought he could hear the sounds of scuffling.)

"This blasphemer just said that the first prophet was an invention of the followers of Norab!" the western village spokesman said.

The eastern village priest froze. "The man was merely speaking the truth!"

Peter sighed gently and moved on.

(In the first group, one priestly hand smote another priestly face. In the second, it was only the intervention of some friends that were keeping two sin-busters from using their knives.)

"I think the parables of the second prophet are meaningless," Peter said within earshot of another faction.

(On the other side of the clearing, the Chief and Nugent were arguing the merits of short chants, thus successfully antagonizing all the members of the long chant school.)

"I think you're a liar!" Thomas said hotly.

"He called me a liar!" Peter wailed, enlisting the aid of another unsuspecting priest. When a fourth joined the fray, Peter and Thomas bowed out.

Things were going rather well, Peter thought cheerfully. The members of the guild were now split into a dozen different fighting groups, none of which was remotely interested in what was about to transpire on the ridge.

Peter located Nugent and the Chief not more than a dozen feet away, calmly shook Thomas' hand, and the four of them made a concerted dash for the sin-buster and the trussed-up girl.

The priest had no chance to open his mouth before Peter had hit him a scientifically calculated blow on the chin and dumped him in a heap on the ground. Then he slung a fainting Kate over one shoulder, leaped on Silver's back, and thundered into the woods.

They stopped on a path about a mile away.

"I'm going to be leaving, Thomas."

Thomas shrugged, careful not to show any emotion. "I knew you would go some day."

"You've got a wife and a family waiting for you," Peter said, trying to cheer him up. He had a suspicion that Thomas' adventuring days were over and the boy knew it.

A shadow passed over Thomas' face. "I know." He held out his hand. "Luck, Peter—and may we meet again some day, busher!"

When Thomas had left, Peter slashed Kate's bonds and carried water from a nearby stream to revive her. She flickered her eyelids and opened them, staring at Peter's silhouette half hidden in the shad-

ows. She lay there a moment, rubbing the circulation back into her arms.

She was very pretty, Peter thought, the blood racing faster in his veins. And he had waited a year . . .

He took her in his arms. "I've waited so damned long," he said softly.

She clung to him with a sudden passion, passing her hands over the hardened biceps in his arms and the corded muscles in his shoulders.

"Cliff . . . "

The small fire crackled brightly in the clearing, lighting up the faces of the four around it. Kathryn Spencer, Clifford Nugent, the Chief, and Peter Johnston—the thespian conquest party from Earth.

"It was an odd culture," the Chief was saying. "At times I thought I had it figured out and then at other times, I knew I didn't. I consider myself a clever man but it stumped me."

A lean and calloused Clifford Nugent leaned forward and spat into the fire. "All I want to do is get out of here. We can turn in a negative report to State and let them figure out what to do with it. I'll be perfectly happy if I never see the planet again—I couldn't figure it out, either."

"It was very simple," Peter said quietly.

"I suppose you know?" Kate asked tartly.

"Shut up, Kate," Peter said without rancor. "Yes, I know. I visited the original ship. The Captain's log was still in the control room cabin."

The others fell silent and waited for him to continue.

"When the *Wotan* came in for a landing, she blew three of her forward tubes," Peter continued. "She couldn't possibly achieve full braking power and the colonists knew it. The adults and all the children above the age of twelve manned the emergency landing stations; all the children below twelve were bedded down in a central compartment that the colonists figured would escape injury. The children in that compartment were the only ones who escaped . ." He paused. "The civilization on Nibelung is their civilization."

He helped himself to one of Kate's self-light cigarettes. "You know how children are. When they were taken to the cabin, they took their books and playthings with them—playthings like pull-toys with square wheels and a bell that rings when you pull it along the floor, a child's telephone system made of two cans and a stretched string. And their books. They assumed life was supposed to be

lived the way it was lived in the books—complete with cutlasses and knives."

"You could tell in other ways, too," Kate added thoughtfully. They had no schools—little children can't see the necessity for it. They were afraid to go out after dark but when they stayed inside, they never went to bed. Their amorality—there was nobody to warn them against puppy love so when they felt like it, they married." She smiled faintly in the firelight. "The whole system reflected their background — big brothers and sisters, woman's place being strictly in the home, the game of Follow the Leader and what it was corrupted into."

"All children's ideas," Peter went on. "The way they never showed their emotions, never let on that they were impressed, the lack of sanitation and their unfamiliarity with soap and water . . . "

The Chief yawned and stood up to stretch. Don't forget their religion. In any group of children there's always some who are smarter than the rest. They became the witches and the sin-busters, the ones who saw to it that the fear of the dark and the 'things that go boomp in the night' was perpetuated. One of the reasons they were out to get us, apart from what we knew, was that they were fearful we would upset the status-quo.

Kate laughed lightly. "Their religion is actually very primitive—hardly a religion at all but just their opinions of what one ought to be. Fortunately for us, everybody had a different opinion and was convinced that it was right."

"You know," Nugent objected, "I should have thought that the culture would have evolved."

"It did," Peter said. "It evolved considerably from what it must have been when they first landed. But they're still too close." He leaned back against a tree and sighed. "Poor kids; they were lucky they were even alive. And the mortality rate must have been fearful the first generation or so. How in the world they ever made a go of it . . . "

"Speaking of going," Nugent interrupted, "let's."

Peter stood up, turning to where the *Argus* was hidden in the trees.

"I've still got the arc-pins for the drive," the Chief said. "And Cliff has the timer for the 'visor and . . . "

He broke off. Behind the trees there was a faint, pink glow that rapidly grew to an orange and then a cherry red.

*"Back!"* Peter shouted. *"Get back!"*

They ran out of the clearing and into the brush. Peter could

feel the heat blistering his back and then they were just past the danger zone. They watched the ship flame to a brilliant white, then the outline melted and ran together in rivulets that sank into the scorched soil.

"It went off early," the Chief said dully. "We should have checked it right away. We're stranded for good now."

"Stranded!" Nugent echoed brokenly. My God!"

They huddled in the brush for an hour, watching the glow of melted steel gradually fade. Finally Kate said, "Well, if we're here for good, what are we going to do about it?"

"Why, we'll do what we planned in the beginning," Peter said slowly. "We'll take over the planet—be midwives to a new civilization."

Nugent showed his teeth. "Very funny."

"Not funny at all—I'm serious."

"Just how do you propose to do it?" the Chief asked testily.

"*I* don't propose to do it," Peter said quietly. "*We* propose to do it. Now consider. Nibelung has an infantile civilization. Unless we want to live in primitive squalor all our lives, it's up to us to see that it grows up. Now, what's the first thing to do?"

The Chief spread his hand. "You tell us."

"All right—I will. The first thing we'll have to do is convince them that they want a better life."

"How?"

"Who convinces people they want anything?"

The Chief looked thoughtful. "You mean political parties."

"That's right."

"They're usually started on a crusade basis," Nugent objected.

"We've got one. Health and sanitation, if nothing else. Equal rights for women. Take your choice, there's a million of them."

The Chief looked sourly at Peter.

"Just who had you figured on to master-mind this?"

Peter grinned. "The only politician among us—Joseph Saunders, the people's choice!"

He turned to Nugent. "Cliff, what's the one thing you really wanted when you were working the tubs?"

"To get out of them," Nugent said bitterly.

"I mean if you couldn't leave, if you had to stay there."

A shrug. "Shorter hours."

"And double time for overtime?"

Nugent looked thoughtful. "Better living conditions, of course . . ."

". . . and health and welfare benefits . . . "

" . . . higher pay . . . "

" . . . bonuses for a good crop. . ."

Nugent snapped his fingers.

"Unions, am I wrong?"

"Unions and you're right—and you'll make a damn good agitator!"

"What about science?" the Chief suddenly asked. "How are we going to shoe-horn science into the culture?"

"I know the answer to that," Kate said. "We'll go back to the witchcraft." She raised a hand at the sudden objections. "We might as well face it—that's where the brains are. But we'll organize it. You know—collect all the different magic formulas and put them down in writing, then set up experiments so the brighter boys coming into the guild can throw out the ones that don't work and start investigating the ones that do."

She looked thoughtfully at the stars. "I think we can have a primitive chemistry in a few years. Of course, we probably won't be able to throw away all the witchcraft trappings and we certainly won't see a full fledged scientific culture in our times. But it will be a start. And it should grow fast."

"Do you think it will really work?" the Chief asked doubtfully.

It was Nugent who supplied the answer. He looked out at the darkness that surrounded the clearing and said cheerfully: "Y'know, this used to be such a primitive planet . . . "

"Kate—did you really think it was Cliff who had rescued you?"

She moved away from the tree and turned towards him so he could see her faint outline against the stars. "Do you think I did?"

"I don't know."

"Poor Peter," she said softly. "Always doubtful."

He smiled to himself. "If you want the hero type, Kate, I'll let Cliff know. I found out for sure that I'm not; it was getting to be pretty much of a strain."

"I never really cared for heroes."

He reached towards her. She held him away with one hand and asked dubiously, "Do you honestly think the idea will work, Peter?"

He laughed quietly in the darkness and drew her with him into the forest.

"They'll never know what hit them," he said confidently.

The End

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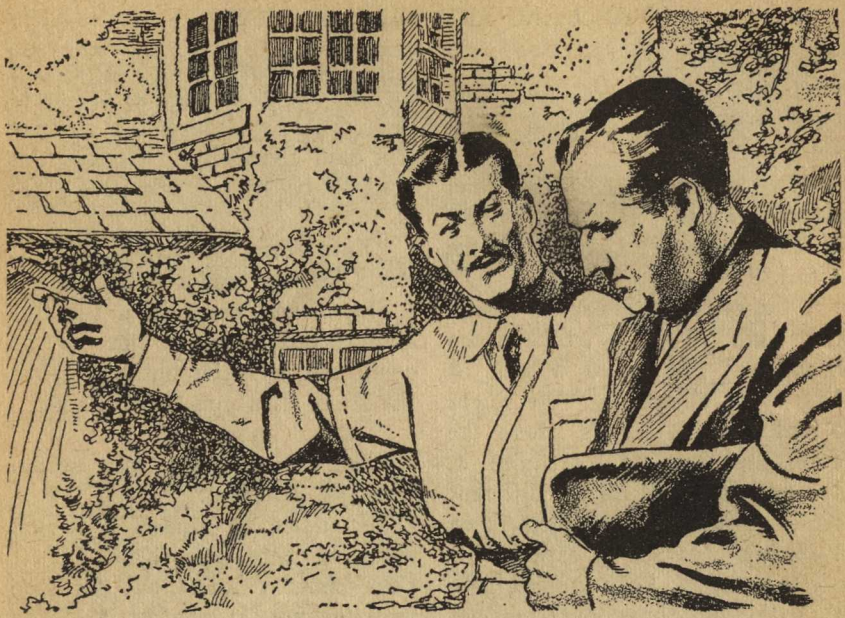

# OF THE FITTEST

## By Betsy Curtis

**Illustrated by H. W. McCauley**

*By presidential request Finchley went to the Commissioner of National Danger, taking the plans for his new secret weapon. His thoughts strayed to other men who had made this trip; men like Albrecht, who had never returned.*

IN a jet plane slower than panic to a White House more graceful than sturdy to see the President of a country more tranquil than secure, came Dr. Redmond Finchley with his news of the hideous weapon which could be developed on the basis of last night's final proof in his own nuclear laboratory in the western desert. Dr.

Redmond Finchley, sturdy, balding, competent, confused, described; a gravely concerned President listened, agreed on the danger, shook his head with slow regret.

"I'll have to have expert advice before I can make a decision on this emergency," he informed the perturbed scientist. "You can count on government funds, of course; but whether they will be funds for further research and development or funds for relocation of personnel to other projects will depend on that advice. If you really want to help me out on this," (Finchley nodded his bald head violently, as the President did not pause for an answer), "you'll go right up to New Bellview in upper New York State and see the man at the head of the hospital there."

Finchley looked away from the President's intent gaze and got his first and last impression of the President's study . . . a cheerful room through whose wide windows sunlight poured sparklingly in on bright cretonne slipcovers and through the translucent green of potted plants. "You think I'm a little off my rocker," he said, choked, difficulty, and looked back at the President.

The President jumped out of his chair and came around the end of the massive mahogany desk to put his arm on Finchley's shoulders. "Not on your life, man!" he roared. "I didn't get this fifth term as President as a reward for telling the country's highest paid specialists like you to go see a psychiatrist." His voice grew quieter, more confidential. "But I didn't get it by having only one expert on the staff, either. You go up and see this man at Bellview and then come back again if you need to and we'll see what we can do. He's a sort of special Commissioner of National Danger; and most of the classified stuff in the country comes his way sooner or later."

By airplane slower than anticipation to an establishment vaster and older and dingier than his own acre-spanning laboratories to see a Commissioner of National Danger whose official title was probably the all-concealing simple "Doctor," went Dr. Redmond Finchley, taut, precise, ready to spread out his problem in all its national and international complexity.

He was met at the plane by an orderly with a car. He was driven at the legal fifteen miles an hour along the winding tree-lined pavements of the institution grounds. He reprepared his speeches, his expositions, and regarded his black bloated briefcase at his feet until the orderly opened the rear door of

the car at the steps of the mellow old brick administration building.

"Up those steps and first door to your left, sir," the orderly said. "Dr. Mikon is expecting you."

And so he was . . . a young man with a serious face, crisp brown hair, fresh white lab coat and duck trousers, standing in a mere tan box of an office with a bit of a rug on the floor between his desk and Dr. Finchley in the door. He waved Finchley in and toward a straight oak chair.

Dr. Finchley was not outraged, merely suspicious. He did not sit down. "You're Dr. Mikon? The head of New Bellview?"

The young man's face relaxed and he grinned. "I'm Mikon, yes," he informed his guest, "but I'm not the head of New Bellview."

Dr. Finchley stood his ground stiffly. "I was told to see the head of the hospital," he said.

"That's quite right, Dr. Finchley," replied Mikon. "But I believe he wants you to see something of our layout here first. He won't be able to talk with you for a while."

"Can't I just wait here?"

"There are much more comfortable places if you're tired. The trip around the place comes before you see him, though. Orders. When you're ready, I'll take you on the grand tour myself." Dr. Mikon's face joked but his voice was firm.

Annoyance ballooned inside Finchley's chest and fell limp at the puncturing thought of the senators he himself had sent on a four-mile walk last month while he babied a reactor through a tantrum. He brought out a reasonable facsimile of a smile for Mikon. "Orders are orders. Let's go now and get it over with . . . if it's convenient for you." He stood aside to let the doctor precede him through the door.

At the door Mikon hesitated. "Want to leave your briefcase here?" he asked. "It'll be perfectly safe."

Finchley's grip on the handle tightened with a spasm. "I'll take it with me. It's not heavy," he lied. It was heavy . . . as the cares of a nation; but he was no weakling to lay it down for mere comfort.

The men left the office and Mikon led the way leisurely out the front door and down the steps with strides so long that Finchley was able to walk briskly and purposefully alongside.

Mikon gestured up the drive to the left. "Mostly dormitories up that way," he informed his companion, "and staff housing. Old farmhouses, but comfortable."

The two men crossed the drive and followed a gravel path leading

downhill across a tree-shaded lawn. The air was balmy with May. At the foot of the hill they came to the drive again and turned right on it. Neither spoke. The air vibrated gently to the faraway chatter of a power-mower and there was an occasional afternoon chirp of a bird among the upper branches. On the left, the ivied walls of a large pseudo-Norman grey stone building became apparent through the trees and shrubbery.

Mikon spoke. "The conditioning and testing goes on here," he said. "Personality evaluation and all that." He did not swerve toward the main door.

Finchley tried to sound interested. "What sort of conditioning?" he asked.

"Electric shock, mostly. Primitive stuff."

"No, I meant what responses are you stamping in?"

"The primitive things . . . toilet training, wearing clothes, using silverware." He lengthened his stride.

Finchley slowed his. "Do you consider those things so important you have to shock people to get them to do them? I eat chicken with my fingers," he added truculently.

Mikon laughed abruptly and explained, "You're no primitive. Subjects for electric shock are what they used to call 'hopelessly retarded.' They're much easier to take care of if they can do a few things for themselves even if they'll never understand why."

He pointed on along the roadway to a Victorian pile huddled into the hillside on the right. "There's the school," he said with warm parental pride. "I teach here whenever I have a chance."

"Sort of rehabilitation center?" Finchley didn't very much want to know.

"You hit it that time," his guide sounded pleased. "Evolutionary rehabilitation, that is."

"I don't follow you."

"Come on in and see." Mikron paused on the doorstep and looked down at himself, buttoned the middle button on his white coat, felt for and adjusted his necktie, smoothed back his hair with his hand, held the door open for Finchley.

Finchley shifted his briefcase from his right to his left hand and entered.

The splintered wooden floors, the high-ceilinged corridor and its opposing rows of tall wooden doors gave him an instant of remembrance of a small town high-school of his youth. There was a smell of sharpened lead-pencils and sweeping compound in the air. Finchley's voice sank to a whisper automatically. "What do you

teach?" he asked Mikon.

A clatter arose through the transom of the nearest room on the left and the door opened to spew a noisy crowd into the dingy hall. Before the nature of the class was distinguishable, a pretty blonde girl bounced up to the doctor.

"H'lo Mike!" She lifted her chin toward the doctor's face as if for a kiss, then caught sight of Finchley. "Oh, 'scuse me! I didn't realize we had visitors." Her heels clunked back on the boards.

"Pol, this is Dr. Finchley, taking the grand tour. This is my wife, Polly, Doctor." Mikon smiled affectionately at her, and Finchley noticed that she had a smear of green paint on one cheek, was wearing a flamboyant orange smock with blue-green buttons.

The rest of the class pressing toward and out of the front door, he realized, were similarly dressed in smocks and several carried easels and a few were loaded with palettes and brushes.

"Pol teaches visual paraphrasing, obviously," Mikon informed him.

"And Vis-P is moving outdoors so's not to miss this heavenly day, also obviously." Polly waved a hand to indicate the class in transit. "Would you like to come out and watch us paraphrase some trees, Dr. Finchley?"

"I think not today, thank you." Finchley looked questioningly at Mikon. He might have to do the rounds, but he certainly wouldn't be required to take side trips to watch people paraphrase trees, whatever that was. After all, this tour was a mere formal preface to an urgent meeting. Urgent.

"Not today, Pol," Mikon was agreeing when someone bumped full into Finchley. When he regained his balance, he saw it was a middle-aged woman with sparse, frizzy, greying hair, dressed in a purple smock with white polka dots.

She backed off a few steps and apologized flusteredly in a rapid excited voice, "Oh, I'm so sorry. So very sorry. Are you all right? Can I help you? Did any of my fleas get on you?"

She approached Finchley again, this time apparently looking him over for fleas. One hand extended to pluck them from him, the other vigorously scratching at her own scalp. Finchley shrank back a little.

"I'm sure he's all right, Mrs. Lotska," Mikon took Finchley's arm. He's in a hurry now, though, trying to see the whole school in one afternoon. We can look him over for fleas before he leaves."

"Oh." Mrs. Lotska gave her head a little shake. "That's nice. Going to see ontogeny recapitulat-

ing philogeny. How's that, Dr. Mike?"

"Splendid, Mrs. Lotska! Remember to tell the class that one tomorrow. With a slight pressure on Finchley's arm, he signalled that they should proceed.

Just as they passed the woman, she plucked at Finchley's sleeve. "Don't worry," she said reassuringly, motherly. "They'll get you quite clean. My bedbugs are *all* gone." She scuttled on toward the door after the vanishing class.

Finchley drew a long breath. "This place looks so much like a school that one tends to forget . . ." he said a little shakily.

Mikon let go his arm. "Mrs. Lotska has a long way to go yet, of course; but she's already paraphrased her bedbugs *and* her spiders. And she's grasped the ontogeny business already. "

"You mean you teach the patients biology? Do you think that helps?" Curiously, whispered.

"We don't teach them biology as a mass of data, if that's what you mean. Mrs. Lotska was referring to the purpose of the whole school: to fill in the gaps for individuals who missed out on one or another of the evolutionary steps man's gone through since he passed the purely instinctive stage and began to rely on learned behavior." They paused by a door halfway down the corridor. "You know . . . mimicry, rote learning, paraphrasing, abstraction, mock-up, re-abstraction, psi . . . here are some rote learners now." He turned the knob on the door and opened it toward him a couple of inches.

" . . . had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men . . . "

He shut the door gently; and the chorus of unsure adult voices was held inside.

"Beginners you see." He opened the door on the other side of the hall.

" . . . whether 'tis nobler in the mind," a rich baritone voice asked itself with brooding introspection, "to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them."

"Advanced class," Mikon approved, closing the door.

"Isn't it rather dangerous having them learn that suicidal gloomy Shakespearean stuff?" Finchley felt called upon to make some evaluative comment, even though it had to be whispered, "or don't you let patients into the school till you've cured suicidal mania?"

"As long as they know it's rote learning, it doesn't seem to bother them. In fact, they usually are quite relieved to find out somebody else had the same idea. And

we don't call them patients any more, just members of the school. They're not particularly patient, anyhow . . . it's the teachers that have to be."

The physicist had no notion how to respond in a whisper to a rather pointless joke, so he remained silent till they reached a steep steel-treaded flight of stairs and started up. He paused on the third step. "While we can talk out loud, would you tell me a couple of things?"

Mikon stopped his ascent obligingly.

"I suppose the rest of the school is just more classes in rote learning and paraphrasing and . . . abstraction and those other things you said."

"Essentially."

"Then why don't you just tell me what they do in the different classes?" so I wouldn't have to see them all, he didn't add.

"Why sure. Then you'd understand what you're going to see." Mikon seemed eagerly agreeable as well as rather dense.

Finchley set the heavy black case on the step above his feet, held it tightly against the iron posts with his knee, rubbed his tired left wrist wth the other hand.

Settling hmself against the iron railing, Mikon plowed into his subject. "Well, mimicry classes are mostly held in gyms. The beginers are learning to smile in front of mirrors and to walk and write with pencils and such. We call 'em coordinators. It's a lot like rote learning on a bodily basis. Paraphrasing, of course, is just saying or doing something in different terms from the way you first saw or heard or felt it. Abstraction is digging for the general terms and principles involved in any experience. Mock-up is like paraphrasing . . . putting flesh and bones on the general principles, so to speak. Mockers-up are doing everything from lying around daydreaming to writing stories or playing psychodrama or making models of inventions . . . "

"I know what a mock-up is."

"Re-abstractors are finding out what they've written about and why their models run or don't run."

Uneven, clumping footsteps resounded in the hall above. Mikon looked up. Finchley looked inquiringly at Mikon. "Cripple?" he asked.

"Not as far as I know, the young doctor said, puzzled. "Come on up." He turned and took two more steps toward the midway landing.

Finchley picked up his briefcase.

A man appeared at the head of the stairs. Finchley, straightening up, saw first the olive green slacks, then the man's bare arms pressed

tightly across his green-shirted chest. Then he saw the face, so starkly white under the black thatch of hair that it looked like nothing. Or like a disembodied grimace of pain.

The briefcase thumped down four steps and Finchley was at the top of the stair, his right arm supporting the sagging man's waist, his left levering them both upright against the railing. Mikon faced them a few steps lower, his left arm outstretched as if he expected both men to pitch forward on top of him. The frozen appearance of a tableau was broken only by the newcomer's rasping breath after rasping breath.

Mikon was the first to relax. "Hit a tough one, John?" he said gently, apparently not expecting an answer. "Better get down to the lounge and lie down for a while. What class was it? Do they need me?" He came up the few steps to the top and shifted John's weight to his own arm. "I'll help you down to the ground floor."

Finchley let go. John did not move at first; but the color was returning to his face. His arms rose and fell as he gulped air. "Advanced Re-abstrac . . . " he gasped out. "Personal attack during crit . . . " (gulp), " . . . icism. Mr. Barr saw me go," (gulp, sob), "so I guess he can handle it." (Pause.) "God, my chest hurts!"

He let go his chest with his right arm to steady himself on Mike's shoulder. Finchley stared at the chest expecting to see, helf feeling, the warm sop of blood soaking the green shirt. But there was no blood. He tightened his hold on the railing and shut his eyes. Mikon and John were moving cautiously down the stair away from him.

When he opened them, Mikon was beside him holding out the briefcase.

He let go the railing and took it with a deep sigh. "What was all that?" His voice sounded thin.

"John's a conflict-sensitive," Mikon said, taking Finchley's free arm. "One of the meanest jobs or cases in the place, depending on how you look at it. You see," he started to explain; but Finchley held back.

"Can we get outdoors from here?" Finchley wanted to know.

"Why yes. Right down the hall."

Finchley pulled loose from the supporting hand, walked hurriedly to the door, pushed the clanking iron bar down and was in the fresh air. Even that seemed too close, sultry. He leaned for a moment against a cement retaining wall that held back the hillside. He was aware of his pulse racing, thought for a moment that he was either going to faint or be very

sick. He began to relax as the door clanked and Mikon came out.

"I'm awfully sorry," the young doctor said, scrutinizing Finchley's face. "Didn't notice that you got a dose of secondary effect. You'll feel better in a minute or two. John's all right. That's just his job here."

"I don't know what you mean by secondary effect," Finchley's fear rose a couple of notches toward anger, "but that man's in bad shape. I don't think you should have left him alone. I . . . I saw a man shot once. Looked just like that. He said 'personal attack' . . . you're a doctor . . . why didn't you *do* something?"

Across from the walk and the wall was a park bench. Mikon gestured toward it. "Sit down and I'll tell you about John."

Finchley sat down grudgingly at the far end from the door.

Mikon took the other end. "You don't get many like John," he said. "He was a highschool Latin teacher, inspired, inspiring. Most of the few kids who take Latin nowadays take it because they want it, so it's real fun to teach it, John says. But if they whispered in class or threw spitballs, John got nervous. And if they argued with him over grades, he got mad or sick. He was shy to start with; but he began stammering, getting stage-fright, having to walk out on his classes before he broke down and swore or bawled. He'd never been able to sit through a football game or a wrestling match; and it got worse than that very fast. A well-meaning friend took him to see a chess tournament which he thought would appeal to an intellectual like John . . . and they brought hm here from Schenectady in an ambulance full of agony and the screaming mimi's after one chess player wiped up the board with some poor hopeful of an opponent after having needled the opponent to distraction with all kinds of purposefully annoying mannerisms. We have no use for conflict here . . . almost no use for competition . . . but most of us are so insensitive to it that we could spoil a lot of good effort by letting it get out of hand. Like a 'personal attack' or attack on a personality in criticism classes when the objective evaluation is the real goal. But John and a few others here can smell conflict a mile away . . . and even though it's personally painful to them, they keep the place from turning into a madhouse."

"Madhouse." Finchley turned the word over on his tongue. "But can't you cure him?"

"We could dull his sensitivity, if that's what you mean. But then

where would we be? Besides, he's a volunteer for as long as he can stand it. The choice is his. Certainly the outside world doesn't seem to want his particular talent. And of course it seems to hurt him a little less each time he uses it on purpose."

Feeling vaguely cheated, Finchley said, "On purpose, huh. You mean he's just a . . . a sort of hypochondriac making himself sick so people will stop fighting out of sheer pity?"

"You could call it that. We don't. He gets sick on purpose the same way you see on purpose when you open your eyes. Or the same way you reacted to his pain. What I called our 'secondary effect' was an example of a sort of racial chain-reaction. When something is seriously wrong but unidentified in a society containing a sensitive, people who won't stop fighting from fear of combat will often stop from fear of or for the sensitive. Or they used to before war got so impersonal that the sensitive's reaction seemed to have no bearing on the basic situation."

The briefcase on his lap felt as heavy to Finchley as if it contained the concrete firing emplacement for the magnijector whose outline it sheltered. He set the case on the walk without looking at it.

Mikon's pump was apparently too well primed and he continued without pausing, "The modern variation of the sensitive, therefore, usually reacts to a much more limited stimulus: antagonism against his own personality only. He recognizes the very slightest signs that someone dislikes him with the same response that you or I would feel if an enemy were holding a knife on our windpipe . . . and reacts accordingly."

This sounded vaguely familiar. "You mean paranoia . . . delusions of persecution . . . manic violence?" Finchley interpreted.

"Exactly . . . except the word 'delusion.' The stimulus of dislike is usually perfectly real."

"But the response is out of all proportion," the listener objected. "The paranoid is more dangerous to society than a little brotherly hate." One corner of his mouth smiled. That was a clever summary.

"To our society, yes. To the society of five hundred years from now, who knows? The paranoid sensitivity may represent an evolutionary development which will be showing up in the mass of men generations from now in a society so peaceful and cooperative that we can't easily imagine it . . . one where brotherly love is almost universally taken for granted. It's fascinating to speculate about."

"Well, I suppose you have time to speculate here. In the outside world, of course, time is shorter." Finchley grasped the handle of the briefcase almost affectionately. It was real, solid. He stood up. "Shall we finish our sightseeing? I'll try to keep my secondary effects at a minimum."

Mikon glanced at his watch. "Well, we can see some of the classes through the windows and then go on over to the next division. Naturally, I'd like to have you spend all day seeing the school; but it's hardly necessary." He got up and indicated that they were to follow the walk as it descended to the left around the side of the building.

Tall windows were open there, guarded on the inside with heavy wire netting. Mikon beckoned to Finchley to come close and look through. The latter craned his neck.

Inside, an incomprehensible motion up, down, across the wide gym floor suddenly resolved itself into a muscular male figure in black tights doing an incredible series of leaps down the length of the floor away from the windows, coming to a quivering stop just short of charging into a pair of men fencing with flashing movements at the far end of the room.

Mikon withdrew from the window but Finchley watched, fascinated, till the dancer, turning and bounding sidewise, approached the window. Then he stepped back and bumped into his guide, laughed apologetically.

"Advanced mimicry," offered the latter, leading on again. "That human rubber ball was a child prodigy in math and physics. His guardian thought he was a spastic, his coordination was so poor. The two fencers were just businessmen who found life impossible when the government legislated the competition out of their businesses. All three are leaving in a few weeks."

"For jobs in the movies?"

"No, back to the jobs they had before. They liked them and still do."

They rounded the corner of the building, and Mikon glanced down the long line of windows there. "All gyms on this side," he remarked. "Do you want to see some mirror work and finger games and folk dancing and such?"

"I really think I've got the idea of what's going on . . . you explained it so clearly. What's next on the program?"

"Then we'll go up this way."

The narrow gravel path went up through a grove of elms. Mikon's long legs were still not in a hurry. Finchley's mind snapped back to his problem promptly with the per-

mitted release of his attention.

"I suppose," he cogitated aloud, " that in wartime you get a flood of cases of war hysteria and neurosis, and that the last fifteen or twenty years would show a slackening off in institutional populations of this sort."

"You're right about the lessening of war-stimulated imbalances," Mikon replied, turning off on a side path along the ridge, "but the accommodations and population of New Bellview have more than doubled in the past ten years alone. And the tragedy still remains of an out-patient population of twenty to every one we can take in and an unestimated number of undiagnosed cases which would benefit tremendously from training here."

"You mean that the whole country as a whole is becoming psychotic more rapidly now than it does during and after a war? that war might be considered mentally therapeutic for the mass of people?"

"By no means." Mikon's stride lengthened as his tones became defensive. "War does not require the degree of personal integration we're working for here."

Finchley concentrated. This might be pertinent data at last. "Self-perservation is more basic than most neuroses," he offered in challenge.

"Not exactly. What we think of as neurosis or psychosis *is* self preservation. A long peace period like the last twenty years has turned our attention from group survival to individual survival. My experience here leads me to believe that if war were declared tomorrow, the people of the United States would retire behind tight shells of psychosis almost as effective as a force field . . . so you could say war still would produce more mental trouble than peace."

"How about," (Finchley's heart was in his throat), "well, Pan-Asia? Are they in as bad shape as you think we are . . . soft, that is, when it comes to making war?"

The path joined a concrete sidewalk leading alongside a row of old pre-fabricated army barracks. Mikon slowed down to a stroll.

"I can only guess about them," he admitted. "Their change to an almost completely agricultural economy has probably had an emotionally stabilizing effect on their people to the point where they're less anxious about themselves as individuals . . . so they could make war on that basis . . . I don't know. Of course, they don't have much other basis. They achieved a lot of this stability by cutting down genetic strains of sensitivity . . . purges of scientists and malcontents. It'll be quite a while

before they have the technology or maybe even the instability to wage a modern war again." He paused to point back at the first of the string of barracks. "But I'm just rambling and forgeting your tour. That's the library. Seventy thousand donated books. This," he pointed to the one ahead, "is reading rooms. The others," he began to walk on, "are studies and studios and seminar rooms. Getting on good terms with one's self seems to take a lot of privacy as well as class work. We could use another row of these right now," he gestured at the broad lawn on the other side of the walk, "but the country's supply of condemned barracks has evidently run out. And permanent buildings are horribly expensive . . . at least the taxpayers think so."

"I suppose," Finchley offered dubiously, dragging his mind back to common day, "that rehabilitating all these failures costs the state a pretty penny."

"Not as much as you might think," Mikon answered promptly, defensively. "A good many pay their own way in money or services. And they're not failures in our terms, you know . . . only in theirs. This old man for instance," (a gesture toward an open window through which the sure, rapid piano notes poured forth in a logic which was Beethoven), "wants to be a composer but missed paraphrasing entirely. We pay him about what he pays us . . . and the state breaks even . . . because he does a little piano teaching to coordinators and a lot of work with rote-learners and gives his incredible concerts for psi-students, even though he spends most of his time in paraphrasing classes or practising. We have almost more applications to teach here than bona-fide admissions."

Finchley almost missed the end of this speech when his mind caught hold of a shocking word. "Psi-students?" he disapproved in tone and posture. "You train mind-readers and witch-doctors here too?"

The answer came with a patronizing sweetness, "Only the ones who are unhappy because they aren't good at mind-reading and witch-doctoring. We don't get the successful ones here unless they're worried about something else."

"Successful!" Finchley snorted, as if that took care of that concept for all time; and the two men walked across the grass toward a sprawling one-story structure that looked like an unfinished but roofed-over stone foundation thrusting itself upward like a growing thing through the turf.

"You didn't see most of the bed-

ridden cases here at Bellview. I didn't think you'd really be much interested," Mikon began again as they rounded a corner of the foundation-building.

Finchley's non-committal "Oh?" might have indicated that he was hardly fascinated by what he had seen.

"But this section is really important. Its official title is the Suspendory Ward of the Restorium Division of New Bellview. Tom Welland who will show you through calls it The Hall of Guardians, though. We've shortened that to The Hall.

They reached a double door in the windowless wall, a door that opened like a garage door on a concrete offshoot of the hospital drive.

"Sometimes bring the ambulance right in here," Mikon explained, opening half the door and motioning Finchley through. "Tom is expecting you. Go right in."

Finchley was inside the door and it closed behind him before he realized that his guide had left him. He sighed resignedly and regarded the prospect ahead.

The room was so vast in extension, so low-ceilinged, so dimly lighted in that ceiling that Finchley could not seem to make out the far wall facing him beyond the endless rows of white cots lined up end to end. Down the aisle directly ahead, however a man in a grey overall was making his way slowly toward the door.

Then he was simultaneously aware of several other grey-clad figures moving here and there among the further beds and of a penetrating chill in the motionless air. For an instant he wondered if he were frightened; then he knew that the cold in the vault was real. The grey overall of the man approaching was heavily padded.

The man's voice sounded stridently loud, although he was still forty feet away. "Dr. Finchley?" He came on with a bow-legged, almost tottering walk. "I'm Tom Welland." His outstretched hand preceded him for the last twenty feet. "Welcome to the Hall of Guardians." The voice seemed to boom along the cold silent aisles although there was no echo. In spite of the grey quilted hood, enough of his face showed to indicate his extreme age . . . the wrinkled folds that had been cheeks looked waxen, congealed.

Finchley dutifully shook the chill hand. His voice was a semi-whisper. "Dr. Mikon said I'd find you in charge here."

"Yes indeed, yes indeed. What was that last word? I didn't quite catch it. You can speak up here. They don't hear you," he added

waving a hand at the beds.

"Dr. Mikon said I'd find you in charge here," Finchley repeated loudly, lamely.

"Oh, Mike. Of course." The old man turned abruptly. "Come along and see them. "

He led the way down the aisle immediately in front of them. A few beds on each side were empty, each covered by a crisp white sheet diagonalled precisely at the foot. At the first bed holding a body he stopped.

Finchley, blocked, had to stop and look. The body was a series of lumps under the thin sheet; only the head, slightly raised on a flat pillow, protruded . . . a dark-haired masculine head, sparsely bearded.

Welland, near the head, grasped the sheet and stripped it smoothly back to the foot.

Finchley stared at the spindly naked body apparently offered for his approval. It seemed quite relaxed. The man was evidently asleep.

Welland raised the man's arm nearest him to a ninety degree angle, removed his own bony hand. The arm remained upright. Welland raised the opposing leg sixty degrees. The leg stayed a long second, then began slowly sinking toward the bed. Finchley looked at the bearded face, but the eyes remained shut. He felt relieved by a sudden memory. "Catatonic?" he asked.

"That's right." The old man replaced the arm beside its owner and pushed the leg down, massaged the thigh, the calf, the shoulder, the upper and lower arm, saying, "The natural ones will hold any position you put 'em in indefinitely, but it's hard on their hearts. We don't want them to wear out, so we have to be sure they're relaxed again." He continued to stroke the arm gently. "They know we're completely in their power, so they put themselves wholly in ours." He pulled the sheet once more up under the body's chin, patted the covered arm, turned and walked on.

Finchley hurried and put out his hand to catch the grey sleeve, reluctant to shout at the grey back, said, "Mr. Welland?"

The old man stopped and turned. "Tom, please," he asked. "Just old Tom. Mister's too much of a term of respect. All the respect we have to spare around here goes to these." He waved toward the acres of beds.

"Tom, then," Finchley said. "Anyhow, what is all this? Just the catatonic ward? Why the fancy title of Guardians? Why do *they,*" he gestured in turn, "deserve respect?"

"Didn't Mike tell you?"

"What?"

"About these guardians? I guess he didn't. He remembered I like to do it." The old man smiled, pleased, and Finchley thought his face would surely crack open. "Well all these people are guarding somebody else from death or a worse fate. And they're doing it in the hardest way of all . . . giving up their independent lives and personalities completely."

"Sorry, I don't get it." Finchley gripped the briefcase handle more tightly. *That* was guarding . . . with life and attention.

"I'll tell you about a few of them and you'll understand." Tom walked on, passing lumpy bed after lumpy white bed.

Finchley looked briefly at each impersonal, relaxed face as they passed.

Tom stopped again by a bedside. "This girl knows a secret that would kill her widowed mother with shame. So she is here and her mother is safe from the knowledge that one of her daughters loves another daughter's husband."

Finchley had an uncomfortable feeling that if there were animation in the face of the blonde girl she would be someone he knew. Welland led on.

"This man," he said, stopping where Finchley could see a bald head with a hooked nose, "has discovered a spell that will bring forty days and nights of rain to the world. Rather than be responsible for a great flood by pronouncing a few simple syllables inadvertently, he chooses mock death for himself and safety from the deluge for millions."

"Surely you're not serious," Finchley objected. "Surely that's just a delusion that Dr. Mikon could cure."

Tom insisted, "That man is protecting you and me. Who are we to question the terms of his sacrifice?" He turned abruptly and went on.

Finchley's eye was caught by a thin sensitive masculine face. "How about this one?" he asked loudly, casually.

"He had it proved to him that he was not the agent of God's vengeance on earth, so he came here to protect other sinners from his habit of murder by poison."

Finchley shuddered and remembered the temperature. "Why do you keep it so cold in here?"

"To slow down their metabolism, let 'em hibernate painlessly without having to have any more intravenous or tube feedings than necessary. Let em live more slowly, in other words."

"But if you can't do anything for them, why should it matter

how fast they live?"

"Everybody matters, son; and we can do no less for them than they do for us. Besides, we can do a lot for them. I'll show you a little of that later. And some of them, like that girl I showed you, have a simple time problem. As soon as her mother dies, she can wake up and solve her other problems."

"Can you really wake her up?"

"Any time we are ready to assure her that the danger is past. Not as easily, of course, as the drugged cases."

"Why drugged?" Why should anybody drug a catatonic?

"Oh, a few of these people want to bury their danger, even to the extent of trying to commit suicide, but don't seem to know how to induce catatonia, so we accept em for temporary drugging. Neonepenthol is safe up to ten or eleven months. Then we bring em out for exercise and re-evaluation. Is that all?"

Finchley felt somewhat abashed in the presence of a matter-of-fact competence in a subject he could not fit into his pattern of daily social life. "I guess so." They proceeded along the row, across three or four rows, and down a new one.

Finchley's eye was caught by a face. He stopped and stared incredulously. Surely it was Albrecht! From his own division at the nuclear laboratories! On extended leave of absence for study . . . or was it for his health? Disconnected pictures of the man's office, of his own secretary saying something, of interviewing a replacement, ripped by in his mind. "Tom!"

Tom Welland came back to the bedside. "Yes?"

"Tom, is this Darrel Albrecht? Or aren't you permitted to give out names?"

"I don't know their names, but I can tell you about him. He . . . "

Finchley interrupted hastily, "Maybe you'd better not. I think I recognize him."

"Oh that's all right. He won't hear us . . . and I was told to answer *any* questions you might ask. He was a scientist: he discovered some horrible weapon he thought would destroy innocent people; he didn't dare tell anybody about it but he was afraid he couldn't help it; so he's here guarding the race with the rest."

Finchley turned from staring at Albrecht's expressionless face to scrutinize Tom's. Did the man actually put Albrecht's problem on a par with that old spell-caster four rows back . . . or the poisoner? or was all this a put-up job for his benefit, staged on orders from the

head of the hospital . . . or even the President? Why had he been led directly past Albrecht when there were a hundred rows to choose from?

The old man met his gaze concernedly. "Sorry if it was a shock," he said in tones reminiscent of Mikon with his secondary effects. "We get so many scientists here these days. They're much more concerned about the human race than most folks give them credit for . . . and so much less trained to do anything about it. But I want you to come down this row to see our special case." He led on and Finchley followed slowly, thoughtfully.

Old Tom came to a halt beside a bed about forty feet from the back wall. The bed took the place of two ordinary beds and jutted out into the aisle on either side. It was the last bed in the row, the space between it and the wall being filled with white enameled carts of clinical and hospital impedimenta.

Finchley came up to the tremendous bed and stood near the middle of it. The bulk of the man under the sheet was incredible. Finchley looked along it to the face and stood riveted to the floor. Unlike the rows of blank faces this was clothed in a smile, gentle, wise, merry, a sort of Santa Claus smile without the false jollity that name suggested to Finchley. An angel's smile . . . if angels were not women or unvirile youths with wings. This was a man. This was the man. There was a warm tingling, pulling sensation high in Finchley's chest. He moved nearer to the head, His head.

Tom's strident voice interrupted his deepening contemplation. "Makes you feel like a little puppy dog, doesn't he. Like licking his boots."

"Who is he? What's he doing here? Why is he smiling?" Finchley ignored Tom's trivial questions.

"He's *homo superior*. He's here guarding people from being afraid of him and of what he can do. And he's probably smiling because one of the nurses likes to see him smile." He reached a hand over the gigantic face and smoothed a muscle here, pulled a muscle there. The great face still wore a look of gentle wisdom but also a grave and tender sorrow that made Finchley feel tears somewhere inside.

"Let him smile," he said brusquely. "I'm inclined to agree with the nurse."

Tom's hand pulled and smoothed; and a magnificiently mischievous grin covered the sleeping face.

Finchley relaxed. All jokes were good ones, even the joke of making him tour the whole damn

insane asylum while the director took a nap or whatever he was doing wherever he was. If that big face was *homo superior* with that foxy grin, he was queen of the May and enjoying it.

"Come on, Tom," he said, "let's see the rest of your show."

Jauntily he followed through the maze of carts, tolerantly he glanced in the doors of the awakening rooms, politely he listened to a description of what went on there, gladly he found himself out the back door and in the warmth of the late afternoon shaking hands again with Tom Welland.

A car was parked by the door, the same orderly at the wheel who had brought him to the administation building. Tom handed him into the car.

"Goodbye, Tom, thanks for the tour," Finchley shouted leaning to the window.

"It's been a pleasure, Dr. Finchley, a pleasure."

And they drove away.

Away and away. Finchley had tossed the brief case on the floor and smoked half a cigarette before he realized that they were going out the main gate of New Bellview.

"Hey, wait a minute," he called to the driver, "I was supposed to see the head of the hospital!"

The car did not slow. "D'ja see a big fellow in bed back there?" A thumb pointed along the drive. "Fellow that looks just like God asleep?"

"Yes."

"Well you saw him then, head of New Bellview for the last twenty years. Maybe he didn't see you, but you saw him."

"You're kidding. Where does the director live? Off the grounds?"

"No fooling! He's the director. Walked in twenty years ago, Tom told me, and reorganized the whole place before he went to sleep. Wakes himself up every couple of years to see how things are going. I've seen him up four times, but I don't get close to him. He kinda depresses me . . . makes me feel dumb and useless. He's the boss all right, though. He knows everything, even what you're thinking about, Tom says."

Finchley sank back against the cushions and thought it over while he finished his cigarette.

Then, without excuse to himself or the driver, he began to laugh.

BY U-Drive-M helicopter slow as enjoyment, over a countryside more picturesque than threatened, to a vacation more desired than needed, went Dr. Redmond Finchley through the transparent air of a May evening, his black briefcase tossed on the floor behind him.

And as he buzzed along after the vanishing sun, he composed his letter in his mind.

"Dear Mr. President," (Sally would have a book that told how to address notables), "In accordance with your directive, I have seen your commissioner and he has assured me," (a lovely touch), "as well as partially demonstrated that the country could better sustain the threat of attack than the possession of a defensive weapon."

"I cannot say," (well, he couldn't!), "that I personally concur in this conviction; but it has certainly been most enlightening to me. I understand also, from the example of the commissioner himself, that the principle of a weapon may be discovered and re-discovered without its necessary and inevitable development into an actual weapon. In fact, if a principle can be made so commonplace that it becomes ignored by most people, it can remain available indefinitely as a powerful secret weapon in case of real emergency."

"I intend, therefore, merely to place the data which I discussed with you at the general disposal of any research team, by the expedient of filing and cross-filing it in the general reference banks of our laboratories. This is, of course, a minor conclusion."

"Perhaps you will know where and how to file the great principle of our real secret so that everyone will have access to it and take it for granted . . . that you and I and millions of others are *homo sapiens ordinarius* and under no special compulsion to withdraw from the considerations, pleasures, and dangers of daily life for which we are, as a species, surprisingly well fitted."

Finchley considered a weighty punch line to end the letter, looked absently out the side window, on impulse lowered it and stuck his arm out. The cold, fresh darkness rushed through his fingers. He sighed contentedly; and the copter buzzed on westward.

THE END

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***We regret that***

**NO SPECIES ALONE**

**By Tom Godwin**

**was crowded out of this issue, but be sure to watch for it in the September issue of UNIVERSE on sale at your newsstand the first week of July**

# SPACE-MATE

## By Winston Marks

*This trip was going to be no picnic, testing the new magnetic shield, but when Kent got a look at his co-pilot he really gave a howl of dismay.*

**Illustrated by H. W. McCauley**

"FUNNY how 'high' a man can get on nothing but sugar and oxygen," Everard Kent remarked to the flight surgeon. "I'd have sworn I heard a woman's voice in the next compartment a while back."

He lay naked and supine after his preflight nap, four-feet eleven inches of g-toughened muscle, conditioned almost to the point of emaciation.

The surgeon slipped the intravenous needle from his arm where it had been loading up his blood sugar for several hours. Nothing must go into his stomach, for his whole alimentary canal was flushed clean for the trip.

"Imagine that," the medic said, not meeting his eye. "That last transfusion must have gone to your libido."

He made a last stethoscope survey of Kent's compact chest and slapped him on the thigh. "Get dressed. You're fit as you'll ever be."

Kent swung his legs over the edge of the table staring at the doctor's face. "All right, let's have it!" he demanded. "My co-pilot's a woman, isn't she?"

The doctor sighed and nodded. "Yes, she is, and don't blow up, Ev."

"Why should I blow up? You're running the show. I'm just one of the guinea pigs. If the other one happens to be a female that's none of my business at all, is it?"

"Take it easy, Ev."

"None of my dammed business," the little pilot repeated. "You test a thousand volunteers, and you have your own reasons for picking this woman. She's small and rugged like me, and she's got a

high I. Q. and manual dexterity—"

"She's got a lot of things we need. You might say, an optimum combination of factors. She absorbed the routine like a blotter."

"Routine, routine! If you'd have given me the gadgets I wanted on the ship I wouldn't need a co-pilot. A hundred pounds of servo's would have—"

"You'll need what she's got," the doctor said flatly.

His tone cut off further remarks from Kent. He knew the score. He had absorbed more radiation than they liked in his dozens of pioneering trips up here to the satellite. They had pronounced him fit for his first attempt at the moon only because they needed his know-how, not because they had faith in his body. You don't have to graduate from John Hopkins to know that an increasing frequency of blood transfusions means your anemia is getting worse.

Cosmic rays had proved the final barrier to man in space. Recently the math wizards had figured out a magnetic field to repel the dangerous primaries, but the gear was cumbersome, so much so that it was impractical except when installed in space at the rim of earth's gravitational field.

A man got a fair dose of secondary radiation on each unshielded gut-wrenching trip to the space-station, and Ev Kent had pressed his luck beyond the odds. So far he'd picked up no serious injuries from the heavy nucleus primaries, and his miraculous little body had demonstrated an abnormally high resistance to the effects of the secondary rays.

He had no illusions of safety concerning the Lunar trip. It was openly a hazardous test of the magnetic shield. Man had never ventured entirely out of the "shadow" of earth, and the engineering safety factor on the shield was pitifully small.

The psychologists coined the phrase, "When your blood gives in your guts give out." But Kent seemed to be the exception to the thumb-rule of fear that washed out so many ferry pilots after their first few trips.

What irked Kent was the psychologists' insistence on treating him like a child. Two months ago, when he had first learned of the design change in the *Loon* to accomodate a co-pilot, he had inquired about the identity of his prospective shipmate. They had stalled with one impalpable excuse after another.

Finally he had fairly beaten it out of them that their secrecy was on emotional grounds. "This conditioning program is rough on both of you," he had been told. You'll become more highly strung as the departure time approaches. We're running no risks of a personality problem developing between you two. You'll meet aboard the Loon for the first time, and you'll be too damned preoccupied with keeping alive to get into emotional difficulties from then on."

They lay prone. Separately they had been weighed, suited and stuffed into the needle-nosed *Loon* like meat into a sausage skin. Shoulder to shoulder, they lay on their empty bellies, across ship, at right angles to the longitudinal axis, under elastic webs that pressed them gently into the porous, heat-dissipating pads.

Their arms, thrust before them, slid easily in slick, shallow grooves allowing their fingers to touch the full array of dual controls even under maximum acceleration.

Kent squirmed himself comfortable, grunted and lay the left side of his head on the open-mesh sweat-pillow. The girl was already facing him.

The little speaker buried in the overhead, only fifteen inches from their skulls spoke introductions. "Ev, meet Miss Imogene Reath. She likes to be called 'Holly."

"Holly Reath, eh?" Kent repeated. "Merry Christmas!"

"So this is the legendary Everard Kent?" she replied. "After the filter-tip cigarette, I presume?"

The voice buzzed above them. "Zero minus 120 seconds. Take a minute and get acquainted."

"Thanks," Ev replied dryly. "We're old bunkmates already."

"Cosy little coffin, isn't it?" she

offered. "The worst part was trying to learn how to shoot landings standing up and facing backwards."

"Don't worry, Mistletoe, you won't have to touch the controls." The tension caused the words to pop out without censorship. His tongue seemed hinged to his brain, and he longed for a male companion with whom he could relieve himself of a therapeutic string of profanity.

Her small, moon-face, pale in the faint glow of the star-illuminated scope and the instrument panel, had winced at his blunt dismissal of her talents.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I'm keyed up a little," he apologized.

She smiled, and he decided that she was pretty in a miniature sort of way. Her hair was clipped rather short without regard to the natural wave giving it a random, uncombed look.

He said, "Anything you want to go over in a hurry?"

"No thanks. I know the routine forwards, and especially backwards."

"Not nervous?"

"Extremely!" she admitted. "Believe me, I'm not banging ears with the skipper when I say I'm mighty glad you're along."

"Not a mean compliment at that," he said, and his face relaxed in its first smile in days. He heaved himself up on an elbow stretching his webbing to take a long, frankly bold look at Miss Imogene Reath in her entirety. The restraining nylon bands were translucent, revealing a figure smaller even than his own. He could easily have spanned her waist with the fingers of both hands, but her economy of weight was effected in the most flattering locations. She was smoothly curved under the single layer of fuzzy fabric that clung closely to her form to act as a perspiration wick.

"I hope you're hiding some muscle under that underwear," he commented unnecessarily. Actually, the worst acceleration had already been endured on the three-stage rocket up to the space-platform.

The speaker told them, "Zero minus 30 seconds. Good luck! See you at White Sands."

"Farewell, oh prophets," Kent sang back. "I forgive you for holding out on me. I think I know why."

Holly gave him a quick look, and they both buried their chins in the molded pillows. The time signal chimed, and Kent curved a digit on a switch-lever.

Through the distortion of his bulging eyes he stared at the array of fuzzy dials. The g-meter read 4.21, exactly on the green-line.

The flow-meters showed smooth delivery from both tanks, and the manifold temperature seemed to climb normally. He strained his eye-muscles to lift his bleary focus six inches to the vision screen and checked the star pattern against the grid. His cross-hairs showed a trifling deviation from the target constellation as superimposed in red by a clock-driven projector. He jockeyed delicately with steering blasts, brushing the studs with fingers that weighed half a pound each.

Then he let his fatigued hands relax in the arm grooves and gratefully closed his eyes. He could hold consciousness up to six g's, but anything over three was tiring. He wondered how Holly was making out, but speaking entailed manipulation of a two-pound tongue.

He was conscious of the thickening humidity, the laboured sound of their breathing audible even over the deep vibration of the rocket engine; he was conscious of each leaden second and their cumulative total, two minutes, three minutes, four minutes elapsed time —

A faint tremor in the hull brought his eyes open. A glance at the manifold temperature sent his left hand stabbing at the cut-off switch. Abruptly they plunged into the stomach-dropping chaos of free-flight.

It was as if they had been pressed out into space in the pouch of a giant sling-shot and were now hurtling back toward earth, falling, falling.

"Whoops," Holly groaned. "I'll never get to like that if I live to be a grandmother. Seemed like a short five minutes, Skipper. Hey, it *was* short! The chronometer says —"

"That school's out. The ball game's over. The play is finished," Kent said grimily. "In short, we bought a lemon."

"What happened?"

"Didn't you feel the vibration? Pocket firing. The mixing manifold overheated. That starts burbles in the mixture flow and premature ignition. Another ten seconds and we'd have blown our tail off."

"Oh," she said softly. "They didn't mention that possibility."

"We thought we had pocket-firing licked three models ago. New impellor design, new, high-conductivity ceramic lining, new feed control, new radiation fins—" he broke off angrily, shifting his gaze from the panel to his co-pilot's attentive face. "What in hell made you apply for this job, anyhow?"

"Call me a silly, moonstruck kid," she quipped. "You know, this reminds me of the blowout I had on the Golden Gate Bridge, rush hour, and me in the fast lane."

He wasn't listening. His mind was churning over the new set of circumstances. They were inscribing an orbit that would miss the moon by 10,000 miles and plunge them headlong into deep space at the velocity of six miles per second. Every minute was increasing the error, and the manifold temperature was sinking with maddening slowness. Without the planned braking of the moon's gravity it meant killing their velocity with precious power alone, then chasing after earth in a dead-reckoning orbit. It would be sheerest luck if their first few orbits came close to hitting earth's gravitational field. And after they did kill their present velocity there would be fuel for not more than three brief tries at establishing a return orbit.

"Better we should flip this scooter end for end and head for the nearest complaint department?" she suggested as though she had been reading his mind.

"You have the general idea," he granted. "How are you at dead-reckoning navigation?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I'm better at high speed landings."

"I hope you get a chance to shoot one more," Kent said as his fingers touched the buttons, and the ship began to pivot on its horizontal axis. He cut the useless pattern-projector off and watched the star field slowly rotate past their nose. The moon, looking somewhat fatter than usual, swept across the screen.

Holly said, "I didn't really care what the other side looked like, did you?"

Kent didn't reply. He was fighting the old vertigo that gripped him each time he tried to maneuver in free flight. The rotation further outraged his kinesthetic senses and the semi-curcular canals of his inner ear. The familiar constellations took on an alien appearance. He had lost all sense of celestial direction, and he had to fight the impulse to stop the swing. Executing a timed, 180-degree turn had to bring earth into view, at least in part.

Just when he was becoming positive that he must have picked up rotary motion and missed his point, Holly breathed, "Home!" and the bright, blue-green cut into the view screen.

It took minutes to stop the end-for-end rotation and stabilize the *Loon's* needle-nose on a constellation several degrees off earth's leading edge.

"You make it look so easy," Holly said. "I practised those turns for a thousand hours in a 3-D Link Trainer. Thought I'd wash out for sure."

"Only one trouble," Kent confid-

ed. "I haven't the foggiest notion of a proper bearing. The one thing we didn't anticipate was power trouble, and the only navigation equipment we have is a useless orbit on the projector spool."

"Funny," Holly said. "I used to picture space travel as lark. A space-ship would have automatic devices all over it, automatic calculators, fix-takers and orbit-plotters. All the pilot would do would be to relax in a nice big chair and jot down philosophical epigrams about the 'majestic void'.

"Some day maybe," Kent muttered, "but not as long as the payload depends upon chemical rocket-fuel. When they finished stripping the *Loon* to make way for the magnetic field generator they wouldn't even let me have a gyro turn-indicator—much less a gyro-stabilizer."

"Incidentally," Holly said, "the magnetic shield seems to be working very well. I haven't felt a single ping."

Kent had forgotten the radiation meter. The needle rested quietly on the zero pin. "Hurray," he said without enthusiasm. "The experiment is a success. All we have to do is return and let them know."

"That's a cinch. A pilot of your experience can't miss at this distance?"

"Thanks. Brace yourself, and we'll find out. We have just three tries to bracket Old Mother Earth. If we miss we're strictly step-children."

He fired the rocket and fixed his eyes on the cross-hairs. If his original timed turn had been accurate they should be decelerating precisely along their path of flight. The unplanned-for maneuver came off better than he expected. Only a few bursts from the steering rockets were needed to correct their drift. Two minutes passed, then the vibration began again.

Kent was concentrating so tensely on the drift that he failed to catch it instantly, and by the time his leaden fingers fumbled to the switch the *Loon* was racked with violent tremors. The chattering, jarring wrenches caused the rocket cut-out lever to dance under his fingers, and momentarily it evaded him. In the space of that last, deadly second, the vibration built up exponentially, and the *Loon* threatening to tear herself and her two fragile passengers apart.

He almost cried out in relief as the rocket died and the bone-crushing shock ceased. Then he lay for seconds listening for the high-pitched squeal that would tell of escaping air. It was quiet. Too silent. Something was wrong. Only the sound of their breathing was audible in the sodden solitude.

With a start he realized that the air on his face was becoming hot and foul. He waved a free-floating hand before his nose, and the slight draft gave him a fresh breath.

"Holly," he said, "you all right?"

Her voice sounded dead and a little strained. "Mighty stuffy in here all of a sudden."

"Fan the air with your hand. The impellor on the air vent has stopped. Only dammed automatic rig on the ship, practically, and *it* breaks down!"

Holly fanned with both hands. She gulped gratefully. "I thought we'd had it for a minute. Wouldn't take long to swallow all the air in this little pod."

We'll be all right so long as we keep fanning. The oxygen bleeds in from a diaphragm affair, and there's nothing much can go wrong with the release vent. But as long as we're in free flight there'll be no convection currents to carry away our used breath. Now, what the devil caused the impellor fan to fail?"

Holly humped her back sharply. Her voice quavered, "I think I know. The impellor isn't the only thing that isn't working. The vibration must have knocked out a few electrical circuits, including our field protection against radiation. Look at the radiation meter!"

He felt her body jerk against his again, and then a heavy primary nucleus stabbed into his shoulder expoding near a nerve ending. The pain was tiny but so sharp that his eyes watered.

Anxiously he studied the radiation meter. It showed the rate of secondary cosmic ray bombardment from the shell of the ship to be over 60 milli-roentgen units per day, some 50% higher than the considered safe limit.

Worse yet, the needle flickered and jumped for the limit peg every few seconds. A shower of primary protons was sifting through the hull, and their destructive power was some four times that of the secondary particles. Only one percent of these would be of the heavy nucleus type, Kent knew, but in such a dense shower, one out of a hundred was much too many.

Another "nuke" pierced him in the back, tearing its submicroscopic lesion through living cells, leaving an ion trail and exploding somewhere deep in his visceral organs. He timed the heavies, wincing in spite of his efforts to control the muscle spasms. They came regularly, once every three to six seconds.

Holly was taking it in silence, but her twitching indicated she was getting her share. When a nuke slowed down and exploded near a nerve ending it was sheer agony, and if one should strike the lens

of the eye, or, worse yet, the center of the retina —

"All my life," Holly said, "I've wished I were five inches taller. For once I'm glad I'm tiny. Smaller target, y'know."

"If you were five inches taller you'd probably been disqualified, and it's a crying shame you weren't," Kent said between gritted teeth.

She grinned a tight-lipped smile at him. "I feel like a voodoo doll swattin' flies while the old witch stabs me with hot hatpins. How about another shot of deceleration? Manifold has cooled off a little, and maybe it'll clear the air in here."

Her voice dragged his attention away from his internal misery. Concentrating on her words he looked at the temperature guage and cut in the rocket. This time he held his heavy fingers firmly on the switch until the vibration began again. They gained about a minute and a half.

The flattening pressure had been a tiny measure of relief, seeming to desensitize the body to the cosmic stings. And Holly was right. The acceleration revived the laws of convection. The relatively cooler and richer oxygen moved past their faces.

When they were free-floating again Holly said, "How we doing on the bracketing? The cross-hairs are lined up from your side, you know."

With a start, Kent heeded her reminder and took a sight. Luckily their drift had been slight, and no corrections were necessary. "Okay so far. We've killed velocity outward bound, and we should be moving back a little. We've got one good burst left."

Yes, they'd make it back now — — one way or another, some time or other. They were heading into earth's gravitational field. If the heavy nukes didn't tear their brains to shreds or if they didn't smother in the foul—

His head snapped back, and he screamed with all the strength in his lungs. Molten iron exploded savage arc lights in his right eyesocket. Pinwheels of colored sparks spun into his brain. His senses tottered on the brink of insanity and fell back into agonized despair.

Merciful numbness eased the pain, but when he blinked the tears away he found he was totally blind. The left optic nerve had cut out in sympathy from the blasted right nerve.

Now the incessant, random jabs elsewhere on his body refocussed his attention, goading him to the threshhold of insane fury again.

This was more than any man could endure. He had no right to subject Holly to this barbarous,

slow torture.

He lashed out blindly at the control studs. Pour on the power, shake the ship apart and end this obscene nightmare of hellish torment!

"Skipper! Skipper!" Holly's voice flowed like a cool breeze across his fevered brain. He felt a hand pinion his feeble wrists. She curved an arm around his head and held him gently. "Not yet, Skipper. Temperature's still up there."

He felt a light draft against his face as she fanned the air for both of them.

"It's no use, Holly," he choked. "We can't hope to make it. Why lie here and get cooked alive?"

She wiped the sweat from his face with fingers that jerked convulsively from the stabbing pains he knew she was suffering. "Take it easy, Skipper," she said. "We'll make it, all right. What happened to you?"

"Took a nuke somewhere in my right eye. Rainbow blew up in my brain. Can't see with either eye."

"Stinkin' luck, Skipper! But I've still got both mine. After the next blast we'll be moving into earth's shadow, and the radiation should start dropping off a little. The total dosage won't be too bad if we set down soon enough."

"But the electric system is shot! The impellor motor and the magnetic-field—"

"And that's all. They must have been hooked to the same loose circuit. I've checked the rest of the controls, and everything else still works. As long as the view screen doesn't go out on us we're doing all right."

A sense of shame filled him and added to his other miseries. *When your blood gives in your guts give out.* It couldn't happen to him, but it had. A wisp of a girl was riding the same bed of spikes, taking it without whimpering and keeping him from committing suicide.

Yes, he knew why they had concealed her identity from him. One date with Holly and he'd have been so damned in love with her he'd have refused to let her take the risk with him.

"Do you know what I'd like to do when we get back home?" she asked suddenly. "I'd like to go dancing at the Top of the Mark in San Francisco. With you."

"Me?"

"Don't sound so flabbergasted. You're just the right size. I'm tired of dancing with racehorse jockies. And other people, well, it's nice to see who you're dancing with."

"With a blind man?" he said bitterly, and almost added, "and a gutless one at that?"

"Quit feeling sorry for yourself," she said. "Your left eye will recover for sure. So will your right eye if the hit wasn't smack center on the retina. One of the other girls in training took a hit off-center in her left retina, and all it did was leave her with a little blind spot in her peripheral vision. Took a few days before the optic nerve got over the insult, but she's 20-20 again."

"Other girls in training? There were others?"

"Sure. They were all girls. Twenty of us. And guess who was number one pin-up boy in our barracks?"

"I—I don't get it."

"Why, you were, Skipper! You have no idea the competition I bucked to land this berth. Don't you realize that Everard Kent will be the most famous bachelor in the world when we get back? And pint-size, to boot!"

*If they got back!*

"How about yourself?" he asked playing out the farce.

"Me? Just along for the ride. Of course, with luck, lipstick and a real smooth formal, who knows? In training, we all sort of figured the gal who won would have the inside track. You know, like a date at the Top of the Mark."

She released his head. "Hold your gizzard, here we go again!"

She sent the remaining fuel of the main tanks into the firing chamber, and the breath grunted out of Kent's weary lungs. He felt the g's build up. With the tanks almost empty the acceleration was climbing well over five gravities.

Gradually he felt his senses slipping from him, and regret lay bitter in his mouth, regret that the cheerful fantasy Holly had pictured to comfort him would never come true. Once on earth she would have nothing but contempt for the vaunted pilot who lost his guts and tried to kill them both—but what was the difference? They'd never make it. Not both of them. Even if the orbit were dead center, even if Holly managed to drag them into the atmosphere before radiation cooked them, even if she managed to kill their speed without burning up the ship, and if she did find the dry lake bed and did make a 200-mile-per-hour landing—she still couldn't do all these things and keep fanning the foul air away from both of them. He was a dead man!

He awoke with the cold nose of a stethoscope poking his ribs. There was the familiar, post-transfusion nausea in his empty belly, the ominous smart of sunburn and the iodoform smell of a hospital. He tried to open his eyes. The right one remained jammed shut against a tight

patch.

One-eyed he recognized the square-jawed flight surgeon. Kent moved his parched lips experimentally. "I'm alive?" he asked incredulously.

"There are arguments to the contrary," the doctor said, "But the consensus is that you'll recover. At least you have no broken bones —"

"Holly! Is she all right?"

"Will be when her ribs mend."

"Oh, the landing. I — slept through it. She must have really messed it up."

"Not at all. I hear it was slick as a pig's eyeball. Her sternum caved in out in space somewhere. She said the *Loon* almost shook to pieces."

"Oh, no! And she took five g's after that?"

"And brought the ship in fanning you with her elbow. That was the incredible part of it."

"Doc—you were right. I did need what she had. Guts! I ran short out there."

"She had plenty," the doctor agreed, "but that wasn't the main reason we picked a woman."

"How about that? She told me that all the alternates were women. Did you jerks think I needed mothering?"

The physician smiled and shook his head. "The slip-stick boys were not too happy about the safety factor on the radiation shield. Afraid it might leak out yonder. What Holly had that you needed in that case was an exceedingly high pain threshhold. Almost all women have higher thresholds of pain than men, and Holly excelled the others. She was the toughest of the twenty, and the twenty were the best of a thousand we tested."

"You mean she didn't feel as much pain from the heavy primaries?

"That's right."

"Does she realize that?"

"Of course. She took enough tests—"

"Then she doesn't think I'm a dope for corking off?"

"She didn't mention it in the report. Why don't you ask her?"

A perky little ghost in an oversize hospital bathrobe came around the bed from his blind side. She grinned at him cheerfully. "About that date at the Top of the Mark Hopkins—can I have a rain check?"

His heart dipped. But she continued, "I've got a new lipstick, and after that landing I know I've got the luck, but— it's about that smooth formal—" she rapped a knuckle against the plaster cast encasing her whole chest under the robe. "It would look like the devil over this!"

*Surrounded by strangers, lost in an unfamiliar world, Mora-Ta-Kai resolved that he would destroy the illusion-world of the Sorceress even if it meant destroying himself as well.*

# IN THE CIRCLE OF NOWHERE

**By**

**Irving Cox, Jr.**

**Illustrated by H. W. McCauley**

PRETEND, yes. Let them think they had succeeded. Anything, so he could get away. The hard core of scientific reality was still intact. They hadn't destroyed it. Mora-Ta-Kai still believed in the old science, as firmly as they had made him believe in—this.

"On the whole, we've made remarkable progress, Mr. Smith." The doctor was smiling and shaking his hand. Smith was the name they had given him. Mora-Ta-Kai had used his own only once, in the first shock of panic, before he understood the detailed internal structure of the nightmare.

"It's all very clear now," Mora-Ta-Kai said, because he knew he was expected to. "There is the Conrad Hilton and the Blackstone Hotel, and beyond them Lake Michigan Avenue.

The doctor's car slid smoothly into the stream of Michigan Avenue traffic. "Excellent, Smith! We still have the amnesia to take care of, but we've conquered the other thing." The doctor pulled at his pipe, his face glowing with satisfaction. "You've earned your vacation, Smith."

"Have you arranged for me to have a room of my own?"

"Everything you asked for. Relax; enjoy yourself. The amnesia may clear up of its own accord."

"This Mrs. Armbruster—is she—"

"A personal friend of mine. You won't have any trouble. She'll leave you alone, or talk with you by the hour—whatever you ask."

And make a record of everything I do, Mora-Ta-Kai thought bitterly; but the expression on his face did not change. He must do nothing now to betray himself. It made very little difference what Mrs. Armbruster chose to set down in her case study; she would never have an opportunity to make her report. All Mora-Ta-Kai needed was a room of his own, a place to work; and the doctor had promised him that. The material he needed was available everywhere. His belief in the old science was not strong enough to restore reality; but he could at least use it to sweep the universe of the nightmare into oblivion.

The doctor's car rolled to a stop before a comfortable, brick house, decorously withdrawn from the street behind a mask of shrubs and vines which partly concealed the high, wire fence. Mrs. Armbruster met Mora-Ta-Kai at the door—a pleasant, gracious, gray-haired lady dressed in white. A nurse! Mora-Ta-Kai had merely exchanged one form of imprisonment for another, slightly more subtle.

But they kept their promise. Mrs. Armbruster gave him a room of his own. When the door was shut, he sat slowly on the edge of the bed.

In the glass above the bureau he saw his reflection: tall, gaunt, hollow-cheeked. His skin was a dusky reddish brown. His glossy, black hair was brushed back from his forehead, emphasizing the wasted, skull-like shape of his face. His black eyes were enormous, glittering pools of ebony.

It was his clothing that held his attention, that fantastic costume which nearly covered his body: a white shirt, open at the throat; brown slacks; hard leather shoes that pinched his feet. He would have ripped off the shirt, but he dared not. He must conform to the taboos of the White Savages. Only then would they allow him the freedom he needed.

The bedroom window was open. Outside Mora-Ta-Kai saw the rows of green buds marching in the bare branches of the trees, the young spears of sprouting bulbs breaking through the black garden soil. The air sang with the fresh-earth smell of spring.

Spring! The word hit his soul with the impact of a war club. The nightmare had started in the dead of winter. He had been trapped in this weird dream for three months, maybe longer.

Three months ago the nightmare had begun. . .

Mora-Ta-Kai was quarreling with Lassai. He couldn't remember why. Lassai was his squaw; he loved her very much. He had just returned from a trip across the Eastern Sea to the slave plantations. It should have been a joyous homecoming. But something came between them — the memory was vague, overlaid by the powerful sorcery of the dream.

Pyrn-Ute had been there, too. Ten months before Mora-Ta-Kai had won Lassai from him; now Pyrn-Ute was back, his arm draped around Lassai's shoulder. He jeered derisively at Mora-Ta-Kai.

Seething with anger, Mora-Ta-Kai flung out of the house. Snow was falling. A crying wind swept in from the lake, heaping snow in drifts along the walk.

(Why had they quarreled? Mora-Ta-Kai probed desperately into the tormented recesses of his mind, but the memory eluded him.)

He strode furiously, in long strides, over the slippery walks. The streets were snarled with vehicles, trapped by the storm. At every crossing Mora-Ta-Kai had to pick his way through a mass of stalled moto-canoes. Only the new degravs were moving. They rode comfortably above the turmoil, driven by

their whirring roto-paddles. Mora-Ta-Kai observed the performance of the machines critically and with satisfaction. The degrav was his invention; this storm was its first real test in commercial operation.

The quarrel with Lassai and Pyrn-Ute crowded his soul, poisoning everything else. He saw the bulk of the Council House, rising out of the grey mist of the storm, and the beckoning lights of the Teepee Room. Mora-Ta-Kai needed a drink; not one, but a dozen. If he made himself blind drunk he could wash the bitter memory of the quarrel out of his mind. He turned to cross through the snarl of traffic.

A noise-warner blared behind him. He heard the grind of wheels, the skid of safety grips on the slush ice. He dodged. For a moment, a shiver of sharp pain lashed his spine. The snow, the traffic, the light from the Teepee Room swirled together in a torturous pattern of light and sound.

Then everything was gone. Instead of the Council House, a different structure arose before him. The letters on the building were strange, nonsense syllables; yet Mora-Ta-Kai knew them.

The building was called the Conrad Hilton.

Mora-Ta-Kai had never before seen any of the weird vehicles which cluttered the street. Yet he recognized them all.

He saw the faces of the people: White Savages! White Savages walking the streets of—of—. Their name for the place was Chicago; Mora-Ta-Kai knew it, just as he had been able to read the sign.

In terror he began to run, fighting his way back to reality. But the nightmare closed over his mind. Hands reached out of the depths of his fear—the pale hands of White Savages. They dragged him down deep into a black, choking swamp, down into a world of quivering shock-pain.

And out of it they brought him to this—the pretense of conformity. From winter to spring, from one kind of prison to another.

But Mora-Ta-Kai could end the dream. The old science was more powerful than the sorcery.

He opened the bedroom door and called Mrs. Armbruster.

A young, yellow-haired woman came into the hall. "Mrs. Armbruster is in the solarium. Can I help? I'm Lydia Rand, Mrs. Armbruster's assistant."

He stood staring at the woman in the dim light. She resembled someone he knew, but he couldn't isolate the memory. Not Lassai; Lassai's hair was long and black, braided in a coil at the back of her head. Lydia Rand was like an-

other woman, a woman somehow associated with the beginning of the nightmare. The ghost of a new memory tugged at his mind, shapeless and momentarily out of focus.

"I need some things," he said tensely.

"Give me a list, Mr. Smith, and I'll—"

"No; I must buy them myself."

"You came to us for a rest." She put her hand gently on his arm. "If there's any work that needs to be done, leave it for us." She smiled at him, pleasantly and warmly. The White Savages had all been kind, attentive, helpful; and for that Mora-Ta-Kai was grateful. The nightmare was terror enough; if he had peopled it with real plantation barbarians—he shuddered.

"I'm not allowed to leave the house?" he asked. "Is that it?" His voice was choked with dejection. He had conformed; he had done all they asked. Surely, now, he would be able to escape!

Lydia Rand looked steadily into his eyes. "In your case, it might be a good thing," she decided. "But I'll have to go with you."

Mora-Ta-Kai sighed with relief. She would be no real drawback. If she were with him, he would not be able to buy the pure elements that he needed, because that might arouse her curiosity. But he knew the chemicals were a part of their commonplace compounds — toothpowder, face lotion, patent medicine.

(How did he know? The knowledge was a part of the dream like his facility with their language. He thought in terms of his own semantic symbols; but he spoke and wrote theirs.)

Lydia Rand walked with him to a drugstore a block from the house. She made no comment when he bought the strange assortment of drugs. From the point of view of her science, they were harmless. However, three vital items presented something of a problem: the copper wire, the foil aluminum, and the magnets. The aluminum he found in a roll. In that form it was sold to the White Savages as a wrapping for their frozen foods. The copper wire and the magnets were both available as parts of gadgets on the drugstore toy counter.

"What in the world do you want with these things?" Lydia asked.

He stumbled, almost betraying himself. "I—these seem to be—" He was in a panic. What excuse could he make?

Then she helped him out. "They seem familiar to you, Mr. Smith? Good! Perhaps you were a toy manufacturer before you—before you came to us. By all means take them. They may help us jog your

memory back into place."

They paid for his purchases and left the shop. She put her arm through his and they walked back to the house. It was dusk and long shadows fell over the street. The sky overhead flamed scarlet with the light of the setting sun.

Lydia laughed pleasantly. "It's a good thing you didn't send me out with a list of what you wanted, Mr. Smith." She gestured at the bulky package under his arm. "Such a conglomeration! Anyone would think you meant to indulge in a little witchcraft or sorcery."

He looked at her. The red blaze of the sun struck her face, like the sudden light from a burning fire. Her hair was transformed into a fragile crown of gold; her eyes were lost in shadow. He recognized her, then. The unfocused memory leaped into clarity, a bleak silhouette against a bursting chaos of fear.

Lydia Rand was the Sorceress.

The full recollection came into his mind. He knew why he had quarreled with Lassai; he remembered the real beginning of the dream.

Weak with fear, he went back to his room. He closed the door, but he could not lock it. He put his package, unopened, on the bureau and dropped limply on the edge of the bed. The full pattern of his memory was complete, unbroken.

The beginning of the dream: not the sudden terror of the winter storm; not the ritual of the plantation savages across the Eastern Sea; not the chant of the Sorceress.

The dream began in the eccentric scientific theorizing of his own mind. . . .

"You're joking," Pyrn-Ute said.

"No; I've already asked for leave and bought my ticket," Mora-Ta-Kai answered. "I'm going on the *Iroquois* this afternoon."

"But why, Mora-Ta-Kai? You've no reason to go out to the plantations. You're a scientist, a chosen brave—"

"I'm going because I'm a scientist. I have a theory; I want to prove it."

"You're a number-man, not a tribalist!"

"The same techniques apply to both fields."

"Don't tell me your fantastic notion of equality—"

"Red superiority is a myth. Given our opportunities, our environment, the White Savages could equal our civilization."

This was too much for Pyrn-Ute. His thin, sardonic face seethed with laughter. It was the reaction Mora-Ta-Kai had expected.

"The White Savages are slaves, Mora-Ta-Kai," Pyrn-Ute said. "They have always been slaves."

"Only because of a quirk of his-

tory that caused our war canoes to stray across the Eastern Sea. We discovered the dark continent of the White Savages when they still lived in scattered, stone-walled villages, savage tribes warring constantly upon each other. Suppose our canoes had arrived two centuries later? In that time, if they had been left alone, the White Savages could have learned how to live together as a united nation, just as we did ourselves."

"Oh, I know the radicals trot that nonsense out whenever they find an audience. They tell us the yellow-hairs are noble, beautiful people." Pyrn-Ute's lip curled with disgust. "I've seen the plantations. I've seen the dirt and the disease; their barbaric ritual."

"Our basic science was stolen from them, Pyrn-Ute."

"By accident, perhaps—"

"Our explorers brought back the number system, the astrology, the philosophy of science which an earlier culture of White Savages had developed."

"But they had rejected it and forgotten it themselves."

"Nevertheless, the knowledge was theirs, and their science became the foundation for our industrial society."

"I grant we owe a debt to their ancestors, but not to the barbarians we know today. Neither history nor the ranting of the radicals can explain away one fact, Mora-Ta-Kai. At the time when we discovered the dark continent, our races stood on an equal footing; they even had an advantage, because the science was theirs. Their environment was like ours. Their land was as rich as ours in mineral resources; their fields were as fertile. Our two races started from scratch. Yet only the Red man learned how to exploit the earth; only the Red man learned how to build a civilization. The answer, Mora-Ta-Kai, is obvious; we have superior brains."

"I think I can prove otherwise."

"How?"

"I want to visit the plantation stations and examine the records on station help. We've taught them to use our language and our numbers like our own people. I think I can show that their rate of learning is no slower than ours."

"But the station help constitutes less than one percent of the white population. They're superior because—"

"Because we've made them so by teaching them our knowledge."

Pyrn-Ute chuckled. "You've never seen the slave plantations. It'll be different when you stand face to face with the truth. Are you going alone?"

"Lassai isn't the kind of squaw

who can rough it on a plantation. We talked it over; she'd rather stay here. I may want to push into the interior, you know."

"You've been married only three moons, Mora-Ta-Kai. You have strong convictions, when they drag you away so soon from your bride. But very little sense."

"It's good sense if I prove—"

"Who cares? When you come back, you'll write a learned monograph for the tribalist files; they'll put it in the archives and forget it."

"I won't let it die like that. Pyrn-Ute, our system of slave plantations has to be revised! Think what we might accomplish, if our two races could work together in equality."

"Follow the implication of equality to its logical end, Mora-Ta-Kai. Then ask yourself this: would you let your own sister become the squaw of a White Savage?"

"Intermarriage has nothing to do with it! The two races can live together, as brothers."

Pyrn-Ute held out his hand. "I rely on your good sense, Mora-Ta-Kai. You'll change your mind when you see the yellow-hairs for yourself. How long will you be gone?"

"Six or seven moons."

"Enjoy yourself. I'll look in on Lassai occasionally. By the way, this new invention of yours, the degrav unit—"

"I've ironed out all the bugs, I think. They're going into commercial production immediately. If you will, Pyrn-Ute, I'd like you to handle the royalty contracts."

"Of course."

"If anything of an emergency nature comes up, you can contact me at the slave station on Angle Island. I'll make that my headquarters."

Two hours later Mora-Ta-Kai set sail in the *Iroquois*. It was an enormous sky freighter on the food run, making tri-weekly trips between the Angle Island plantations and the Lake Cities. Mora-Ta-Kai sat in the cabin as the sphere shot up from the field. Below him were the five great lakes, lying like a giant hand upon the heart of the continent. Girding the shores were the towers of the interlocked Lake Cities.

As the sphere moved eastward, the pattern of cities on the earth below did not change. No mountain, no valley, no river bank stood unoccupied. The entire continent was one vast city, teeming with life.

It was the civilization Mora-Ta-Kai knew, crowded, complex, dynamic, built on the knowledge which scientists like himself had developed. The structure seemed permanent, eternally enduring. Yet

the foundation for that glittering superstructure was riddled with the slow moral decay of slavery. The food, the labor, and a large percentage of the resources for Mora-Ta-Kai's civilization were produced by the slave plantations across the Eastern Sea.

The *Iroquois* was an old ship. It had neither the speed nor the comfort of the modern pleasure liners which sailed the routes to the Ethiopian Empire, or to the Shogun Republic across the Western Sea. It was a strange irony, Mora-Ta-Kai thought, that the black men of Ethiopia should live so much closer to the continent of White Savages, yet practice so little racial animosity. The Ethiopian Empire had encouraged the growth of free colonies of whites within the Empire. In some areas whites and blacks had intermarried, with no loss of social status to the black man.

Because the *Iroquois* was so old, it was ten hours before the sphere settled into the export crib on Angle Island. Precision trained natives swarmed into the hatches and the job of loading aboard the cargo was begun at once.

It was the first time Mora-Ta-Kai had seen the yellow-hairs. They wore gray, crudely woven tunics; their feet and arms were bare. When he came close to them he had to admit that, at least in one particular, Pyrn-Ute had been right. The White Savages were filthy. Vermin crawled in their matted hair. Their bodies were covered with running sores and scabs.

When he went to the plantation station, he found the native station personnel somewhat more attractive. They were relatively clean. They wore cheap imitations of the Red man's civilized costume—leather loin cloths, jeweled chest straps, and soft sandles. But they had no pride, no bearing. Their manner was abject. Once more it seemed that Pyrn-Ute had been right. How could such fawning things be considered the equals of free Red men?

Yet Mora-Ta-Kai believed that slavery had made the whites adopt the attitude of slaves. If they were born in freedom and reared in freedom, they would be no different from their masters. He was convinced of it because he knew that the dependence of the Red man upon the slaves was slowly destroying civilization, weakening the incentive and the ambition of the Red people.

Mora-Ta-Kai doggedly assembled his data from the educational records of station personnel. For five moons he traveled from one plantation to another, compiling his statistics. He made three excursions to interior stations, to the heart of

the dark continent.

The Red men who were station directors gave him no help. They responded to the idea of equality with uproarious derision. The White Savages themselves were afraid when Mora-Ta-Kai tried to talk to them. They would take orders, yes; they would wait obediently on his wants. But simply to sit and chat with a Red man was an unheard of violation of established relations between master and slave.

At the end of the sixth moon Mora-Ta-Kai sat in his room at the Angle Island station tentatively outlining the report he would make when he returned to the Lake Cities. The regular station personnel were in the recreation room, watching a command performance of a native ritual. Many of the Red men were very drunk. A score or more of the station directors had not been sober at any time during Mora-Ta-Kai's visit to the plantations.

His door creaked open. A yellow-hair slid into the room. Mora-Ta-Kai felt sure he recognized the man, although it was hard to distinguish one savage from another.

"The Red-master is busy? He does not wish to be disturbed?"

Mora-Ta-Kai put his papers aside. "I always find time to talk to my friends. You are—" He paused and studied the white face carefully. "Your name is Harold?"

"I am proud you remember me, Red-master." The yellow-hair glanced at the desk. "You are making a study of my people, master; that, too, gives me pride."

"I wish I had more information, Harold."

"The heart of the White Savage is not to be found in the plantation house."

"But where else—"

"Would you be willing, Red-master, to see a Sorceress?"

Mora-Ta-Kai laughed uneasily. "I've heard the legends, Harold; but you're an intelligent man. Surely you don't believe the sorcery-makers exist!"

"The Red man has never seen one."

"But you have, Harold?"

"The Sorceress says, Red-master, that you are an honest man."

Mora-Ta-Kai stood up and drew his pleated animal hide around his naked shoulders, for the night was cold. "Would you take me to a Sorceress, Harold?"

"She has sent the call; I obey. But, Red-master—" The yellow-hair hesitated, wringing his hands nervously. "There is danger."

"I go armed, Harold."

"Not physical danger, sir; but to the soul. Your protection must be integrity, a conviction which is like a flame in the night."

Mora-Ta-Kai suppressed a smile.

This was the typical superstitious mumbo-jumbo of savages everywhere. The ancient ritual of his own people had been no different. "We can go now, Harold," he said. "The others are busy downstairs; we'll not disturb them."

"So the Sorceress arranged it, Red-master."

Mora-Ta-Kai followed Harold away from the plantation house. They slipped past the noisy, cluttered slave pens to the forest.

And then the Red man felt the first pang of fear. The night seemed alive with unseen things. Frost lay heavy on the ground, in sprawling, white shadows, which leered at Mora-Ta-Kai like grinning masks. The darkness pulsed with a clanging sound that he heard with his soul rather than with his ears. There was a slow, subtle rhythm to the fear, keyed to the beat of his heart.

In the distance they saw a fire glowing among the trees. Naked white men swirled in a circle around the flame, their bodies contorted in the grotesque pattern of a ritual dance. Yet they made no sound. Mora-Ta Kai heard nothing but the muted beat of a skin-drum and the low-keyed melody of a reed pipe.

The fear burst explosively over his mind. The feeling was sensuous, hypnotic; vaguely he wondered if they had somehow drugged him when he ate that evening. Despite his civilization, his training as a scientist, he was powerless to hold the fear in check. The White Savages had wiped away his superiority and reduced him to savagery with themselves; he had found equality.

He would have turned back; but he could not.

He followed Harold to the fire. He saw the Sorceress standing above the flames, her arms raised to the night sky, her pale face red in the glare.

His fear dissolved into pure terror. . .

Mora-Ta-Kai felt the same terror again as he sank weak and exhausted on the bed in Mrs. Armbruster's house. The Sorceress had made this dream. She had created the nightmare universe and condemned him to it: this strange world where a city called Chicago took the place of the Lake Cities, where an ugly thing called the Conrad Hilton stood on the site of the beautiful Council House. Why? Mora-Ta-Kai did not know. His intention had been to help the White Savages; yet they had destroyed him.

He knew only this: he could wipe out the thing the Sorceress had made.

This distorted world existed only in his own mind. The Sorceress

had put it there. But she had not entirely removed the full substance of himself. Mora-Ta-Kai was a scientist and his scientific knowledge was intact.

The universe of the Sorceress, perhaps as a result of her scientific ignorance, had physical laws different from reality, far less complex. In the structure of the dream world, mechanical degravitation was a mathematical absurdity. But in the real science which Mora-Ta-Kai knew, degravs had been popular toys for centuries. Mora-Ta-Kai himself had invented a practical application of the degrav to commercial transportation.

To end the dream, he would apply the science of reality to the nightmare. He would set up a degrav core which would activate the planet itself. The dream universe, held together by a clock-work balance of opposing gravitations, would fall in upon itself if he disturbed the fragile structure by the degravitation of one of its parts. Perhaps, in the process, Mora-Ta-Kai would also destroy himself. He didn't know. At least he would escape, if only into oblivion.

He got up and opened his package of drugs and toys. He laid the material out on the bed, carefully separating the items he needed. He spread the aluminum sheet in the correct pattern on the floor and began to compute the angle of magnetization.

There was a knock on the door.

Mora-Ta-Kai's throat went cold with panic. He could not hide the aluminum. The sheet was too fragile. If he wrinkled the surface, the distortion angle would be too complex for him to compute without a calculator.

The door swung open. Lydia Rand came into his room.

"Dinner's ready, Mr. Smith," she said cheerfully. "But if you'd rather eat in here—" Then she saw the aluminum. "What is it, Mr. Smith?"

"A—a toy," he whispered. "A machine."

"But you want to build it?"

"I—I've made one before."

"Then you're beginning to remember!" Her eyes glowed with pleasure. When he saw her face in the light, he realized that her resemblance to the Sorceress had been superficial. All the yellow-hairs looked so much alike. "Could you tell me about it, Mr. Smith?"

He had recovered poise enough to lie. "It's very vague—like a shadow in my mind. I thought it was something I remembered." He shrugged his shoulders and pretended to lose interest. "I'm wrong, of course. It looks rather foolish, doesn't it?"

"I'm sure it isn't. Please finish it, Mr. Smith. It may help you

find yourself. You stay right here and work on your toy; I'll bring you a sandwich and a glass of milk."

She was gone again. With trembling fingers he went back to building the degrav core. Lydia Rand was very naive. It had not occurred to her that his innocent machine would sweep her world into disaster.

Slowly Mora-Ta-Kai stopped and sat down again on the bed. They had given him nothing but kindness, these dream people. Was it worth destroying their universe, even on the chance that by doing so he might regain his own?

All reality, all truth were subjective phenomenon. To the doctor, to Lydia Rand, to all White Savages on the crowded streets, this dream was reality; his was the aberration, the abnormality. Universe upon universe, the Sorceress had said, as infinite as the complexity of human thought. . .

The black night, the throbbing, primitive forest closed in on Mora-Ta-Kai. He stood looking into the eyes of the Sorceress, sapphire orbs framed by the wild filagree of her wind-blown, yellow hair.

"Mora-Ta-Kai, you come among us on a quest, and the thing you seek is within yourself. All possible worlds lie dormant in the soul of man, all possible good and all possible evil. Take my hand, Mora-Ta-Kai, and look with me into the fire. We go a journey, you and I, a long journey in the circle of nowhere, to other worlds and other faces—"

The lilting chant faded, like the dying whisper of a summer wind, as he took her hand. Her fingers were light, fragile, the feather touch of a ghost; yet they held him like bands of steel. He looked into the blaze.

Like the turning pages of an open book, Mora-Ta-Kai saw the churning kaleidescope of possible time. He saw yellow people, who lived across the Western Sea, stray from the drive that had created the Shogun Republic, and sink slowly into the stalemate of a decayed Empire. He saw the proud Empire of Ethiopia lost in savagery, splintered into a hundred helpless tribes, enslaved by other men. And he saw the White Savages rise up and claim the world. He saw them flow in a restless flood into the continent of the Red man. Mora-Ta-Kai's people were debased, debauched, cheated and murdered, driven slowly into extinction while a proud culture of white men was built on the face of the land.

The pictures vanished. The fire was dead. Mora-Ta-Kai was alone in the clearing with the yellow-haired Sorceress.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"Meaning you must find for yourself, just as the things you saw came from your own mind Mor-Ta-Kai. The worlds are there, universe upon universe—as infinite as the complexity of human thought. I have shown you how to reach them. At another time, you will be able to find the way for yourself."

She turned and disappeared into the forest.

A week later Mora-Ta-Kai took the *Iroquois* back to the Lake Cities. He published his report through the tribalist institute. He called it *The Myth.* The opening sentence set his theme, "All men are brothers." The monograph was a mild sensation, bought and read like a piece of pornographic literature.

But Pyrn-Ute and Lassai met Mora-Ta-Kai with rage and revulsion.

"I suppose you took a squaw among the yellow-hairs!" Lassai cried. "Filthy, vermin-ridden beasts. And you prefer them to me!"

"Of course I don't, Lassai. Even if I had, it wouldn't matter. The idea of brotherhood—"

"Don't you touch me!" In terror she fled to Pyrn-Ute, and he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Brotherhood," Pryn-Ute said in his aloof sardonic way, "is a very dangerous concept, Mora-Ta-Kai. We use it among ourselves. We always have. But to suggest that we include—"

Suddenly Mora-Ta-Kai understood what the Sorceress had meant; he read the fire pictures. "It was brotherhood that made us strong," he said. "Nothing else. When our war canoes first discovered the continent of White Savages, the Red men were a united people. We had learned how to live together in peace. The White Savages had not. It was not their science that made us great, but the thing we were ourselves!"

"This I know, Mora-Ta-Kai: the idea of brotherhood that you give us would destroy us."

"If we are so weak, we deserve destruction!"

Mora-Ta-Kai stormed angrily out of the house, into the winter storm. Five minutes later he had lost his universe. The chant of the Sorceress sang at him: other worlds, other faces—a journey in the circle of nowhere.

He sat on the bed and looked at his degrav machine; and he knew he would not complete it.

Lydia Rand returned and put a sandwich and a glass of milk on his bureau.

"You haven't finished your toy, Mr. Smith!"

"I have no reason. In this uni-

verse or in that, all men are brothers—the rest doesn't matter."

She sat down beside him and took his hand. "You were saying that when we brought you in, Mr. Smith. Have you remembered anything else?"

"All of it." He began to laugh. Very slowly he picked up the sheet of aluminum and crumpled it into a tight ball.

"What were you making?"

"A degravitation core."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Smith! We know better than that, don't we? Degravitation is a physical impossibility."

"Here in your world, yes. But in the circle of nowhere, there is a time, there is a place— Sit beside me, Miss Rand, and I will tell you about it."

As he talked he embraced the dream and the dream became real. Lassai, Pyrn-Ute, the White Savages: they were gone, exorcised from his mind like demons. Here, in this new reality, he was a Red man in a culture of White Savages; but they treated him kindly and generously. He had found the thing he sought in the forest; the Sorceress had shown him the way to brotherhood. He asked for no other reality.

The End

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# FIELD TRIP

## By Frank R. Williams

*In all of his well-ordered life, Lennie had never met anyone like Susan. She was an enemy of the State, a spy, but such a beautiful enemy.*

**Illustrated by H. W. McCauley**

*"O how shall summer's honey breath hold out*
*Against the wreckful siege of battering days,*
*When rocks impregnable are not so stout*
*Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?*

*"O fearful meditation! where, alack!*
*Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?*
*Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot ba . . ."*

"JUST a minute!" The old man silenced the girl and listened intently. She heard only the quiet forest noises and the little burbles of the nearby stream, but the old man seemed to hear something else.

"I think someone's coming," he said at last. "Sounds like three or four of them."

"Swell, dad!" the girl cried. "Is there anything I should do? Must I put the book away? I'm so excited I can hardly stand it."

The old man smiled and looked at his daughter. She was standing before him on the grassy river bank, looking like a wood-sprite in her short bearskin sarong and fiber sandals. Late evening sunlight slanted down through the tall pines, making her long brunette hair sparkle with tiny lights. She clutched the book to her breast as though it were a baby.

"You don't need to hide the book. Pull your bearskin up around your shoulders, though. And remember, I do the talking. You speak only when you have to. Be very cautious."

"Yes, daddy. And I suppose we should go ahead and pretend we don't know that they're coming. So they won't think we're . . . scared."

"That's right. They hurt people only when they think they're frightened, or when they're frightened themselves."

The girl lay down on the grass and put her head on her father's lap. She continued reading, but the words had no meaning now. The scene was the same as it had been a few moments before, save for the hush of expectancy that hung invisibly over the couple.

*"Or what strong hand can hold hs swift foot back,*
*Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?*

*"O! none, unless this miracle have might,*
*That in black ink my love may still shine bright."*

Suddenly the green foliage rustled sharply and three men stumbled into the clearing. They were almost up to the old man and the girl before they saw them, lying peacefully on the ground and looking up at their visitors in a curious but friendly way. Two of the party jumped back in surprise and the third, the youngest, fumbled at his belt and finally managed to get a metal thing into his hand.

"Don't move," he said.

The old man replied, "If you like," and the girl giggled. She was laughing inwardly at the strange trio that had found their quarry and were now afraid of it. All three were ludicrously dressed in

blue uniforms consisting of shorts, shirts, and peaked caps. The young one, who apparently was a protector or bodyguard for the other two, wore his starched clothes with a brisk and military air, while the others looked like they were in costume. He's quite handsome, the girl thought, looking at the man who cautiously approached with the metal thing pointed at them.

She's . . . amazing, he thought in turn. But the old man looks crazy. We're probably the first civilized people they've ever seen and they act as though we just dropped by for dinner. I wonder how the old guy would look if I blasted a hole in him.

"Get up and hold your hands over your heads." He searched them perfunctorily and stepped back, motioning to the other two uniformed men who still acted as though the bearskinned couple might bite at any moment.

"May I introduce myself?" the girl's father asked, extending his hand. The two men facing him looked at the hand and then at the old man. Then they looked at each other. Finally one of them took the hand, shook it gingerly, and spoke.

"Name's Edson, from the U, cultural anthropology. My associate here is Barnes, U, sociology. Field trip and spy hunt. Oh yes," he added, indicating the young man who still stood grasping the metal thing, "that's Lenny, City Police. You?"

"Just call me Doc. And this is my daughter, Susan. Can we be of service to you?"

Edson, who seemed to be in charge of the group, didn't answer. Instead, he looked around the clearing, automatically cataloging in his mind what he saw. A man, a young woman, trees, grass, a stream, a book. Oh yes, a real book.

"Give me that book," Edson said to the girl.

"Certainly, you may see it if you like." There was something almost condescending in her voice that made Eddie feel uncomfortable. He took the book and opened it carefully, respectful of its age.

"Ever heard of this?" he asked Barnes, handing the volume to him.

"Hmm. Shakespeare. Seems to me I've read of him somewhere. Sixteenth century poet, I think. This must be a valuable antique. Where did you steal this?" he asked Susan.

Susan started to answer, but Doc broke in: "Steal? We have never known anyone to steal from. We found it near the city gates in a rubbish heap. We have quite a collection of discarded books; would you care to see them?"

Barnes drew Eddie back a few feet and whispered. Eddie nodded and came back, checking to see that Len was alert. "We know you are both spies from Ov' There. Your chief sent you to see if your missiles were hitting The City, and now that you're caught you're trying to pretend you're some kind of aborigines."

Susan burst out laughing. She knew it was the wrong thing to do but she couldn't help it. Such pompous little people, she thought.

"Hush, Susan. That's not polite." Then, suppressing a smile himself, Doc said, "Edson, my friend, would you care to come to our hut for dinner while we talk this over? Susan is quite an excellent cook."

Again Edson and Barnes withdrew for a conference. From their gesticulations, Doc knew they were in a heated disagreement over the offer.

"Don't be afraid of us," Doc said. "As you see, we're unarmed and alone."

"Afraid of you?" Edson exclaimed. "Your impertinence is insufferable. However, since we must question you it may as well be in your hut. You two lead the way, Len, you go next, and Barnes and I will follow. If you try to escape you will both be blasted instantly."

They started along a trail that wound through the forest, twisting and doubling back on itself until the three city dwellers were hopelessly lost.

"Edson," Barnes whispered.

"Yes?"

"She walks like that animal Lenny killed, that one that surprised us in the forest yesterday. I've never seen a woman walk like that."

Eddie looked at Barnes with what he hoped was scorn. "From the tone of your voice I would judge that the girl attracts you. If you've noticed, Len is practically helpless when he looks at her, but I thought that you had more sense. She walks like a deer because she's practically an animal herself. Remember, it takes a clear mind to serve The City. Snap out of it or I'll have to report you. How would your wife like to know that your judgment was swayed by a girl young enough to be your daughter?"

"I was merely making a clinical observation," Barnes retorted cooly. "If my daughter walked like that I'd have her checked by the City Brain. Now that you make an issue of it, I seem to recall something that this Shakespeare person write. Methinks you doth protest too much."

"Shakespeare!" Edson was burn-

ing with anger, but even he couldn't keep his eyes from the girl who moved through the forest like the deer. He wondered if her eyes would be like the animal's if she lay dying from a blast wound. He could still see the poor animal looking up at them, its eyes filled with pain and wonder but not with fear. It wasn't their fault anyway. None of them had seen many real animals before, and when it jumped almost at them . . .

As they walked, it grew dark. The greens of the forest turned black and the warm, moist air gradually became cool. Something small and furred ran across the path and Lenny had his blaster half way out of the holster before he remembered that the forest animals could not harm him. He was just about to ask the old man how much further the hut was when he suddenly saw it off to one side, a shapeless mass of logs tied loosely together with grass rope. In the darkness the hut looked almost like a tree, a squat but not ugly thing that seemed like it had sprung from the ground.

As they entered the hut, Lenny looked around curiously. I wonder how they stand it, he thought. Living like animals. One room, a crude table, a bench, and fireplace. Oh yes, and books. Of all things, books! What good were books, once you had been trained? Books are only for museums and for people who forget their training.

When the guests were seated around the table, watching their hosts uneasily, Susan brought the dinner from the fireplace where it had been cooking. A strange perfume, a little like the smell of the forest, flooded the room.

"What is it?" Edson asked.

Susan smiled at him. "Stew. It's made from grasses and wild vegetables."

"You do not eat cooked animals?"

"Susan is too kind-hearted," Doc explained. "She's never met a bird or beast that she didn't love so well that to kill it would be unthinkable. Her stew is quite palatable, but it doesn't quite have the tang of steak."

"Steak?" Len asked. "What is steak? Is it a new kind of food concentrate?"

"It is cooked animal,," Edson explained. "A barbaric dish that civilized people did away with years ago."

The meal progressed uneventfully after a minor crisis occurred when Edson forbade any of his troop to eat until their hosts had swallowed several mouthfuls of the stew. The strangeness of the food did not seem to diminsh the appe-

tite of the three men from The City; on the contrary, they ate as though they had never had a full meal in their lives. After dinner, Doc handed a cup of purplish fluid to each of his guests and took one himself. Len sniffed his cup suspiciously.

"Does this brew have alcohol in it?" he asked.

"Why, yes," Doc replied. "It's wine. Not the best, perhaps, but pretty good for a beginner. You may see my press later on, if you wish.

Edson got to his feet importantly. "Are you aware that it is against the laws of The City to brew, caused to be brewed, or aid another to brew, any alcohol, without a City License?"

"Yes," Doc said, "I've read about that in your newspapers."

"Impertinence again!" Edson tried to thunder but succeeded only in squeaking. "Whether you are spies or not, you have admitted to a crime. We shall take you to The City and imprison you."

Doc took a long drink and smiled around the table. Everyone, including Susan, seemed to be waiting for him to commit himself further. He smacked his lips pleasantly and said one word: "Why?"

Len was astounded. How could anyone talk to a professor like that? Professors weren't really big men, like the City Police, but they were necessary to teach people their jobs. Why, they even taught those who would become City Policemen and Missile Throwers and Gun Makers! He felt that he would soon be able to exercise his authority and arrest the two.

"Why." Edson seemed to think for a minute before answering. Then he said in a prim and mechanical voice, "There is no need to continue this foolish conversation. The City Laws need no explanation or justification. They apply to every City Member equally. If you have studied your stolen books thoroughly, you should know that we live in a democracy where laws apply equally to everyone, from the Chief himself on down."

"Ah, my friend, it may be so," said Doc, leaning over his cup and winking into it. "But we do not belong to The City."

"Daddy, you've had enough of your horrible old wine. When you wink in your wine it's time you stopped drinking. You're not as young as you used to be." Susan came over and tried to take the cup.

Doc brushed her away. "As you see, gentlemen, my daughter is the epitome of logic. I am older now than I was yesterday. And tomorrow, I dare say, I shall be older

yet. Only the forest stays young forever."

"That's called 'philosophy'" Barnes whispered to Edson.

"Humph. I think he's stalling," Edson whispered back. Then, to Doc: "If you don't belong to The City, then you belong to Ov' There. In which case you could be shot where you stand."

"But we don't belong to Ov' There either," Doc said.

"Nonsense," said Len and stood up. "I learned in grade school that everyone belongs either to The City or Ov' There. The rest of the world is dead."

"Dead?" said Susan. "You mean this entire green planet is dead except for two warring cities? How pitiful."

Edson spoke abruptly. "Girl, and you too Len, I do the talking here. You seem to have forgotten that." Lenny sat down again.

"It's only that we're so uneducated," Doc said humbly. "Having lived in the forest so long, we know little of The City and the rest of the world. Would you tell us about it?"

Susan interrupted. "Daddy, I don't want to hear about it. May I go out for a walk? Maybe Lenny would like to go."

Len looked over to Edson and said nothing. Edson consulted briefly with Barnes and said, "Go ahead Len. Perhaps we can get some information from our psycho friend if you and she leave us alone for awhile. That is," he added, "if you think you can take care of yourself."

Len got to his feet. The insult didn't show in his eyes, but he made a mental note to watch Edson very carefully when they got back to The City in case he happened to break a law. Susan took him by the hand and half pulled him through the door, anxious to leave before her father could call her back.

When they were outside, Len said, "Let go of me, girl," and disengaged his hand. He tried to follow her through the forest, which had changed into a solid black wall with the setting of the sun. He felt like he was walking through a nightmare, though his pride made him keep silent and follow the girl's movement through the trees. Suddenly he lost the sound of her and stopped.

"Girl!" he called. Only little night noises could be heard, tiny insects talking to each other, the trees brushing against one another, and the everpresent sound of the stream.

"Girl!" he called again. Then he heard her stifled laughter and somehow felt relieved.

"I know you're near," he called out. "Come here or I'll blast you."

He was disconcerted when the girl didn't become frightened but only said, "You don't have your weapon any more. You're the policeman who's lost his billy club. Your boss made you leave it behind." Then she gurgled with laughter again.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked as imperiously as he could.

"No. Are you frightened of the dark?"

"Come here!"

"Not as long as you call me 'girl'. I have a name, you know."

"For the last time, come here or I'll report you. You'll be executed in The City before dawn."

"I'd better run, then," she said, and started away.

"No! Come back! Susan!"

"That's better."

He heard her making her way toward him and then he could barely see her standing in front of him. He grabbed her arms and said, "Got you. Now it's my turn."

She "ouched "as his fingers dug into her flesh, but she made no movement to get away. "Don't hurt me. I was just playing with you."

"A City Policeman does not play with a spy." He eased his grip on her, though, and tried to make out her face in the night.

"You don't think I'm a spy," she said, looking up at him. He was trying so hard to look angry that she almost laughed but caught herself just in time. She removed his hands from her arms and took one of them again. He's just a man, she thought. He's just a man and I'll have to be careful or I'll hurt him.

She leaned toward him and whispered, "Tell me the truth now, weren't you just a little bit frightened when you thought you were alone out here in the dark?"

"Yes," he said and regretted it instantly. "I mean, it is perfectly normal to be afraid when one's life is in danger."

"I wouldn't have left you here." She was so close that he could have kissed her by nodding his head. He looked so pale that she became frightened herself and gently pulled him along the invisible path. "I know a place by the stream where the moon can come through the trees," she said. He followed her without a word.

When they reached the stream he began to feel a little better. I can always kill her, he thought without conviction. It doesn't matter what I do or say, I can kill her and say she tried to escape. I wouldn't like to, though. She's probably a deserter from The City

and it's a crime to kill anyone belonging to The City, even a deserter. Anyway, I don't think she would tell on me.

"Let's sit here," Susan said and pulled him down to the grass near the bank of the stream. She relaxed her hand to see if he would pull his away, but he didn't seem to notice. She held it tightly again.

"Are you married?" she asked irrelevantly.

"No. City Policemen cannot marry until they reach the age of twenty-five. I've got three years to go."

"Oh. I'm eighteen. Who will you marry?"

"Why, whoever the City Brain picks out for me." She was certainly uninformed; she probably was taken from The City as a small child and never went to school.

"Good heavens! Why can't you marry who you want?"

"Because," he said patiently, "the only way we can beat Ov' There is through efficient living. The City Brain helps us. It checks records of every member of The City and tells us whom to mate."

She giggled. "Suppose you don't like your wife?"

"That doesn't matter. Since you apparently have had no education, I'll explain how The City works and how perfect it is. It's the only perfect thing in the world.

"It's really very simple. Our common aim, the very reason why we live at all, is to beat Ov' There. To do that, everything inside The City must run as perfectly as possible so that we can manufacture the maximum number of missiles and repair the damage that Ov' There sends us. For that reason . . . "

"Oh fooey!" Susan sounded petulant now. "I didn't want to talk about your silly war; I wanted to talk about you. Anyway, what's going to happen when you beat Ov' There?"

He hadn't thought of that. "I don't know. We've been fighting forever, I guess, and it will be a long time before we win."

"And you're just as likely to get killed as not."

"The mortality rate isn't bad. I'll live to be forty-two, on the average."

"Forty-two." There was pity in her voice. "Forty-two little years in a bird-cage, if you're lucky enough to be average."

"Maybe we should get back to the hut," he said nervously.

"No, not yet. Father will be angry with me for leaving, so we might as well stay for awhile. He can't get much angrier than just plain mad, anyway."

"You mean he didn't want you to go with me?"

"No. He wanted me to stay and listen to Edson and Barnes."

"Then why didn't you do what your father wanted?" Lenny was incredulous. One's parents always knew better than their children because they had lived longer and had more training. It was a misdemeanor to disobey one's parents.

"I thought it would be more fun to come with you," Susan said. She leaned against him and smiled. He seemed to be so much at a loss. Suddenly he put his arms around her and kissed her crudely.

"Hey!" she cried out, for some reason surprised and indignant. Then she remembered who Lenny was and said, gently: "No, Len. I was just playing with you. I'm sorry."

Lenny stood up brusquely and pulled her to her feet. "I should kill you here. What in the name of The City are you?"

She felt sorry for him. So big and so hopeless, she thought. There's not the barest shadow of a slim hope for him. But I'm glad he kissed me. It proves I was right about him.

"I'm just a rather normal girl with rather less than my share of brains. Anyway, that's the way I feel sometimes. And don't worry, Len, I won't tell them. If they ask me what we did I'll just say we took a walk. I promise."

"Take me back to the hut."

She led him back through the forest, slowly, thinking over everything that had happened. He's right, she thought. I'm not very educated yet.

A little light shone through the trees, flickering.

Lenny stopped and she could feel his hand trembling. "What's that?" he asked.

"The hut. Father's lit the candles."

"Oh." Lenny's fear of the dark was leaving him now. He let go of Susan's hand and strode confidently toward the light. Then he stopped and said, "You go first. I'm supposed to be guarding you."

Susan couldn't tell if he meant it humorously or not, so she kept a straight face and walked toward the hut. Inside, she found the three men still talking together, but now each of them had wine before him. She ran over to her father and kissed him. "Don't be angry with me, daddy dear. Are you furious?"

"Umph. We'll talk tomorrow. Our guests have decided to stay the night with us and leave in the morning. See if you can make three more beds.

She went outside and they heard her breaking twigs and gathering leaves.

THE three guests had hardly left

the next morning when Doc called Susan into the hut.

"Now don't bawl me out," she said hurriedly. "I know I missed the lesson, but I had a different kind of lesson and I bet I learned just as much. Anything those two dryed-up frogs could have told me I can get from books."

"Come here." Doc put his daughter on his lap and looked at her as seriously as he could. "Playing hookey will get you nothing but a bad reputation and low grades. It's not the easiest thing in the world to arrange these trips, and it's not free, either. What did you learn that you couldn't find in a book?"

She put her arms around her father and snuggled up on his chest. I hope I can handle my husband this easily, she thought. Then she grew a little serious.

"Dad, do you remember where the books try to explain why the two cities kept fighting and were afraid to stop? They say it might have been a result of the radiation, that the gamma rays lowered neurone sensitivity to the point where mass neuroses and mass compulsions were established by munitions makers. The books say that these people were different from us, and that they grew out of it only through centuries of natural selection."

"Yes, baby. Do you have a better theory?"

"Not exactly. But I know something important. These people, and I can't call them ancestors even though I know it's true; they weren't any different from the way we are now. I know Len isn't. He is . . . or was, as normal as a pine tree."

"Anyway," she continued, and her father could feel her beginning to sob a little, "I don't see why I have to take practical history lessons anyway. It's horrible! Why can't we just read about it instead of coming all the way back to see it?"

"You know why, baby. You saw them and talked to them. You know why every father on earth takes his children back through time to show what happened. If you learn nothing else in school, you'll always remember this field trip and what happened to our beautiful planet . . . five thousand years ago."

THE END

★ ★ ★

# THE CLUB HOUSE

*By Rog Phillips*

WHEN the editors of *Universe* asked me to revive my old fan review column, it brought back vivid memories of the old days. Needless to say, I regretted the ending of the old *Amazing Stories* in which the CLUB HOUSE was a regular feature, and for a long time I missed my monthly study of what was going on among the active group of science fiction fans.

During the past two years, I have been out of touch with most of fan doings. The only fan editor that continued to track me down and send me his zine was Charles Lee Riddle, who had given me a life subscription and was going to see, by gosh, that I got every issue. Many other fan editors I know continued to send their zines to me through the publishers of *Amazing,* but they weren't forwarded to me since half the time the editors didn't know where I was, I jumped around so much.

When I was asked to start up shop again I didn't know whether I wanted to or not. A lot of things have changed, including me—but then, a lot of things haven't changed, including me. I am still Rog Phillips in spite of the addition of a few new pen names.

Fandom has perhaps changed more than I have. There are actually stf fans who have been active for almost a year who never heard of me! I haven't met them, but theoretically they must exist. The idea is a blow to my ego, but there it is . . .

The biggest change in fandom since the CLUB HOUSE stopped appearing is the change of spirit that seems to have settled on the annual convention over Labor Day weekend.

At Chicago in 1952 I saw the Ultimate in stf conventions. I was sorely afflicted with an intense ear ache, among other things, which made it necessary for me to practically live on codeine; but I was not too drugged to be aware of the stupendousness of the Chicago convention. There were people there I wanted to see, whom I nev-

er got to see. You just don't have time to see and talk with over a thousand people in three days.

Something happened at that convention which seemed insignificant at the time. Whether it will work permanent harm or not only time can tell. I'll tell you about it as I saw it.

As those of you who have attended the national convention know, the site of next year's convention is voted on by those attending the convention—those who are actually there. The cities who want next year's convention have as many of their fan group at the convention as possible, and actively campaign to get all the votes they can. For as many years as I have known fandom, New York had been trying to get the convention. At Cincinnati in 1949 it almost got the bid, missing it by only one vote on one ballot. The same thing happened in Portland the following year. I didn't attend the next convention, at New Orleans, so I don't know what happened there.

There is no question but what New York could put on as big and successful a convention as Chicago did. One thing kept New York from getting the bid every year: two groups — antagonistic toward each other—were present and made speeches, giving the impression that if New York got the bid there would be a war over which group would run the convention.

This came to a head at the Chicago convention. Philadelphia also was putting in a bid for the convention for 1953; and Philadelphia is within easy distance of New York. You can get from one city to the other in less time than you can get into either from its suburbs.

Now, there are several fan groups in Greater New York. On the spur of the moment they conceived and executed a masterpiece of political strategy. I saw it with my own eyes. Each of them put in a bid for the New York area and each withdrew its bid in favor of Philadelphia, making a speech to that effect. The psychological impact of that seeming rush toward one group was too powerful for the tired and bewildered audience to withstand. Philadelphia was voted the 1953 convention site. The only thing wrong was, Philadelphia *really* hadn't wanted it and was slightly dismayed at getting it. She apparently hadn't been consulted beforehand.

The ultimate result was the poorest excuse of a convention fandom has ever seen. That's my opinion, and the opinion expressed almost universally (and that "almost" is used charitably.). No real effort had gone into making a convention

other than making arrangements with the hotel for halls. The convention programs were not ready when the convention started, the price per plate at the banquet was such as you might expect to find in an exclusive supper club where you listen to a name band or to singers whose recordings you have at home in your record collection. I could find no visible sign of a convention poster anywhere, no attempt to make it a science fiction convention.

But I would like to say that that was the least of the evils. It has been the almost sacred tradition of the national convention to have Erle Korshak introduce the outstanding figures at each convention. Over the years he has made a point of knowing them all. It's important. It starts the convention off right, and the new fans get a chance the very first hour of the convention to get a good look at those writers and big name fans and editors they came hundreds of miles to see and meet.

The person who got that honor at Philadelphia apparently considered it only a chore. He did not know many of the people he introduced, and didn't care whether the audience got a chance to spot them or not before calling the next name.

Tradition is what has built up the annual national convention to the stature it attained in Chicago. Dozens of little things, made sacred because they were at the last convention, and the one before that, and the one before that. It dumfounded me to see tradition totally scuttled, partly through design, partly through sheer group laziness, as it was in Philadelphia — especially since that city's hotel and neighboring restaurants gave poor accommodations at absurdly high prices in the *name* of tradition. Tradition is noted for being synonimous with Philadelphia!

But the Philly group had a good reason for just barely getting rid of its unwanted duty. It didn't want the convention in the first place. And 1953 is over. We should forget it—if we can.

But can we? Another evil was born in Chicago in 1952. The San Francisco group wanted the convention in 1953. They had worked and saved for a whole year and came to Chicago to prove to the people at the convention that they could and would put on a convention equal to the one at Chicago. They were not millionaires, as the whispering campaign that defeated them implied. They had saved and gone without for a year, to rent a penthouse suite. They had come in large numbers to show they had enough members interested in putting over a real convention.

They, too, watched the brilliant political maneuver of New York that gave the convention to a Philadelphia group which didn't want it. It wouldn't have been so bad if they had lost fairly, or lost because there were a majority of intelligent fans voting for something they had thought over carefully. But it was a bitter pill to be beaten under the circumstances existing at Chicago.

Let's analyze those conditions. At the Chicago convention more than at any other before, there were a large number of local people attracted by the spectacle. Several hundred of them, in fact. A great many of them voted, and probably all of them voted for Philadelphia — because they didn't know anything about what was going on, and it was so *nice* of all those other groups to want Philadelphia to have it. So *unselfish.* And anyway, since they wouldn't be going, it didn't matter. They were fertile soil for New York's maneuver.

But another bad condition has existed during the voting every year. Feverish haste to get it over with. Get it settled. Excitement, during which whispering campaigns can work. "The Frisco group has a *penthouse,* they are trying to *buy* next year's convention!" "The Frisco group is handing out *already printed buttons.* They were *planning* to take the convention *even before they came!"* It became the *smart* thing to sneer at this "wealthy" bunch from Frisco, who had each saved five bucks a week for a whole year to make it to Chicago.

And after it was all over and too late to change things, a lot of fans began to realize what had happened, and feel bad about it. Bad enough, so that in Philadelphia in 1953, although Frisco had only a token attendance and put in a token bid, Frisco was given the 1954 convention, and another group that really went after it was told they might have it in 1955 .

We will not know until Labor Day whether the original crowd in Frisco that wanted to put on a convention are still interested enough to do so. At this writing, in early March, there has been no report from Frisco on plans, nor on the formation of a planning committee.

I am sure that if Frisco is unable to get organized by summer, the Los Angeles group will step into the breach and put on the convention for them, so there will *be* a convention, and a better one than at Philadelphia last year.

But the evils of the machinery for picking a convention city have grown too great for fandom to trust any longer. Something has to be

done. A start was attempted at Philadelphia in that direction with a proposal to have a permanent convention committee headquarters with perhaps a salaried secretary to supervise the details each year.

My personal opinion on such a plan is that it would work harm. The secretary would hold office for several years, have control of the purse strings, be a one man boss telling the local committee what it could and couldn't do, and have certain dictatorial powers which couldn't be corrected overnight—such as withholding funds if the committee members wanted to run the show their way.

The injustices of the present machinery have in each case worked against a group that really wanted to put on the convention. They have worked against even New York, who has wanted the convention longer than any other city, forcing them to perform a brilliant political maneuver to get the next best thing, a convention an hour away from New York, run by a group that didn't want it. Those injustices will eventually destroy the big annual convention, leaving only the regional conventions — unless something is done.

There is one plan that would eliminate all the injustices, so far as I personally can see at this time. That plan is to allow each convention member to have a vote whether he attends the convention or not, and have those cities that want the convention for the next year put on their political campaign by mail well ahead of the current convention, and have sealed ballots mailed in to the current convention committee to be opened and counted.

This plan would enable the cities bidding for the convention to present their case clearly and consistently. It would enable the fan voter to use a little rational thought instead of convention fever in making his decison. It would make the local non-fans who attend every convention a negligible factor as a voting bloc. It would do a lot more—

It would increase fan activities, publishing, letter writing, and discussion, all through the year. It would largely take the control of the convention out of the hands of the non-fan pro and put that control where it belongs, back into the hands of the real stf fan, too many of whom can't afford to go hundreds of miles every year to have a voice.

How could such a change in voting method be effected? I am no authority on that, but I am sure it could be done at San Francisco this year—if enough of you want it done. And by you, I mean you

west coast fans, because you will outnumber all others ten to one at Frisco on Labor Day.

* * *

Now we come to the fanzine reviews and the conduct of the CLUB HOUSE in the future. Bea Mahaffey turned over to me several fanzines for review, but I have decided not to review any of them this time for two reasons: (1) you fan editors who want reviews should all have an even start; (2) one of those fanzines does not want new subscribers at this time and says so, and I would not want to get you readers to send money and ask for a subscription to a fanzine whose editor is not expecting or prepared for an influx of hundreds of new subscribers. The poor fan editor would have to shell out stamps and envelopes to mail you back your money.

So the fanzine reviews will start in the next issue, and will be fanzines that know they are going to be reviewed and are prepared to send out fanzines to you readers.

What is going to be my policy in reviewing fanzines?

In the past I have received criticism, constructive and destructive, on my policies in reviewing the amateur publications. Also, I have observed the policies of other fanzine reviewers in the prozines.

Ed Wood, a well known stf fan of Chicago, and one of the people whose tireless work during 1952 made the Chicago convention so great, discussed with me in great detail the things he felt were wrong with my policies, and his criticism was not unique. Several other fans feel the same way.

Ed said, in effect, that I should not give favorable reviews to a fanzine that doesn't measure up to the best. He says the reason I should not is that the reader is often misled, and sends for a fanzine that is no good, then mistrusts me after that. That sounds like good criticism, but Ed feels that only a few fanzines deserve to see the light of day. His ideal objective if he were running the CLUB HOUSE would be to build up the circulation of the best fanzines and ignore or give very critical reviews of the others. That has been the policy of some of the review columns in other magazines. The fan editor had to really put out a production to get into the reviewer's Top Ten bracket and avoid getting hit by a briquette—brick to you suh. The bracket-or-briquette technique of reviewing sounds fair and good until you analyze it in the light of what a fanzine is.

And *who* a reviewer thinks he is.

There's something about judging your fellow man critically that gets you into the habit. Once you start

saying this is good and that stinks, you are pleasantly surprised to find people who want your approval crawling up to lick your boots. It gives you a pleasant feeling of intellectualism to be able to judge their works clearly and absolutely according to obvious literary standards and send the worms away weeping. Pretty soon you're getting thick with a little clique of experts who think everything is bad that you think is bad. You become an *authority*. It feels good. It's like becoming a pyromaniac, in a way. A pyromaniac passes a nice looking building and experiences a sense of power at the conscious realization he could *destroy* it. Maybe he gets to the point where he feels a sense of godlike well-being when he lets a building, that he could burn at a mere whim, remain unburned. Critics seem to me to be much like that at times. They seem to think it necessary to scatter praise for this and that with attempted destruction of this and this and that, on the theory that it makes their favorable remarks carry more weight. I've noticed this in everything from book reviews to reviews of movies and plays. It's overdone. A Broadway critic doesn't even blush any more when a play he condemned becomes a smash hit in spite of him.

I went to the Metropolitan Opera once in New York. I enjoyed it more than I can ever express in words. Why? Because I was seeing true artists in the field of singing and acting, living at the topmost pinacle of their careers for an hour. I was conscious of the lifetime of work and heartache and singleminded purpose that had carried them through to the very top. I could see the joy of success in their expressions, their eyes. I actually worship Rise Stevens who was the star that night because she lives the materialized dream of every true artist—success and recognition.

The sad faced piano player in a side street beer point had that dream once, and missed. But he had it. Maybe he really had the spark once, too. And maybe some critic made the difference—some smart guy who listened to a few notes between cocktails at the Big Opening, and wrote "intelligent" comments showing amazement that the guy ever thought he could play the piano. They're doing that to Liberace right now, and I think Liberace is great. I always have.

So what is a fanzine? A fanzine is an amateur publication. The writing in it is in it usually because it isn't good enough to find a professional sale. Unless the printing is done by a professional jobber, it's generally far from perfect

mimeography or hectography or planography or whatnot.

The editor of the fanzine is generally some one in school, or some working stiff who refuses to sink exhausted when he gets home from work. Or he may be some old codger who hates to let go of life and doesn't know when he's licked.

Or he may be a young genius who will some day be Editor of Astounding, replacing Campbell in the far future.

So how am I to know? I might want to sell a story to the guy some day when he grows up and becomes a pro editor!

All kidding aside, though, I have just put my finger on the one thing I *feel* about fanzines. Their editors publish them because they love them and what they represent and what they bring in the way of friends and friendly enemies to cross swords with. Their contributors are generally of two kinds, those young hopefuls such as Bradbury was at one time, who do their best, and will someday be among the great writers of their time—or at least will have tried their best to make it, and those who enjoy creating little literary gems without any desire to tear their heart out becoming a professional. That's the literary part of the fanzine field. The really fan part is from the letter writers and article writers who have fun and look for people to have fun with, and aren't perfectionists in particular.

So when I review a fanzine, I think of it in the light of the people behind it, who might not have learned to mimeograph well yet, but who will in a few more issues; who can't write worth a darn yet, but are trying. I want you to meet those fans and see if you like them. That's the purpose of this department. And if you feel strongly that you wasted your time and dime, I'll personally refund your dime, and write a letter to Death to hang off another half hour when he comes to pick you up. Okay?

Incidentally, you might be starting a fanzine of your own one of these days when you get the bug. That's the way they all started . . .

So, next issue, I'll start reviewing them.

—ROG PHILLIPS

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# LETTERS FROM THE READERS

Dear Bea:

It isn't very often that I write letters to the science fiction magazines—many years have gone by since I cranked out the first one (writ by hand) to F. Orlin Tremaine of the old Comet Stories. It was printed too, by golly, even if the editor couldn't read my writing and got my name and address wrong . . .

But I noticed the recent issue of Universe with Tucker' "Home Is Where the Wreck Is" and couldn't pass it up. And once I bought it, I couldn't put it down. It isn't very often that you see humor in a science fiction magazine and when you do, it isn't very often that you see it well done. Tuck's story was a refreshing breeze in the rather musty field that science fiction seems to have turned into of late.

Isaac's contribution was a delightfully underplayed story that was appreciated here, too.

And all the illustrations by Lawrence! How long has it been since he was illustrating for the old FFM? It's great to see him back and how about a cover by him or by Finlay?

The only suggestion on the issue that I could make, and one that I sincerely hope you pay some attention to, is to bring back some of the old departments. I got my first mention in science fiction in RAP's "Personals" column in Amazing Stories long ago. (And do you remember Chester Hoey in the old Personals? Chet started out by trading his magazines and then became interested in the guitar and finally sold that and asked for correspondence from attractive members of the opposite sex. I often wonder how he made out.)

And what in the world has ever happened to the letter sections and the old fan magazine review columns? Seems to me that a lot of the magazines, in going high hat, left the common touch behind. The columns added a lot to the magazines back in the old days . . . I think they could add a lot now.

Best,

Frank M. Robinson
2318 Hazeltine Drive
Long Beach
Michigan City, Ind.

PS: And while I'm at it, how about an editorial column letting the readers in on what goes on behind the scenes and which writer just stopped in for coffee Heck, I'll stop in myself.

*Glad to hear from you, Frank, particularly when you have such nice things to say about UNIVERSE. Be patient, and you'll get that cover by Finlay—two, in fact. They're here in the office now, and they're beautiful! We'll probably be using them on issues 8 and 9. As for Lawrence, we'll see what we can do about getting a cover painting from him, also. Just give us a little time. As you can see by this issue, we've brought back a couple of the reader depart-*

*ments and have added a fanzine review column.*

*We may just take you up on your suggestion about future editorials, and we'll certainly take you up on your offer to drop in for coffee. And while you're at it, why don't you bring a manuscript or two with you? Or at least some do-nuts to go with the coffee?*

*— Bea*

Dear Bea:

Please trim this letter down to size and get only the essential information in UNIVERSE. It concerns a *service* project that entails much more work than appears on the surface, and is done in the interest of the whole of fandom and the persons who are serious students of the stf media.

This is a yearly project that *Destiny* has assumed, carrying on in the tradition of the Don Day and Ed Wood indexes. If possible, the *Destiny* index will contain even more detailed information than the previous indexes. No publication date has been set as yet, but it is safe to assume that it will be distributed to the subscribers before mid-1954.

This 1953 index is the *largest single year index to be compiled and published yet,* and present conditions indicate that it will remain the largest single year index in the history (future and past) of the stf artform. It contains the entire 1953 index of all stf and fantasy magazines published in the English language, including WEIRD TALES (which has been grossly neglected) and MYSTIC.

Any help you can give in getting this information circulating will be more than gratefully appreciated.

Earl Kemp
3508 N. Sheffield
Chicago 13, Ill.

*We didn't do much trimming Earl, since all the information in your letter seemed essential. Destiny has undertaken a big project here, and I hope you get all the support you need. You didn't mention anything about the price of the index, or how to obtain one, so if you want to send in that information for the next issue of UNIVERSE, we'll be glad to let our readers know. Or, perhaps they could drop you a post card?* *—Bea*

Dear Editor

May I compliment T. P. Caravan on his fine story, *The Soluble Scientist,* in the March issue of Universe It was a refreshing change and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

MORE! !

And, may I compliment you on your format, features and policies.

Sincerely

Bill Wynne
WOWL
Florence, Ala.

*Compliments are always welcome, and they make us want to do a better job and earn more of them.* The Soluble Scientist *is one of a series, more of which will be coming up in future issues. We think they're terrific, and most of our readers feel the same way.*

*— Bea*

Dear Editor:

I have heard a lot about science fiction but it wasn't until the other day that I decided to try a copy. I picked up the April issue of Science Stories out of curiosity, and now you have me hooked for life!

Has Robinson been writing for long? I think this story should have appeared in the Saturday Evening Post or Colliers! The characters really came to life!

I also enjoyed the stories by Robert Courtney and James Causey. Who is this Causey that you printed two stories in the same issue? I lent the magazine to a friend of mine in school and he thought "Inferiority" was great!

I also liked the illustrations very much, though I thought the girl in the Pierre Cotreau story should have had more on. This was the only story that I didn't like very much.

Why don't you use staples in holding the magazine together? I opened mine all the way out and now the pages are falling out.

But I thought it was a very good issue and I promise I'll buy copies until the first man lands on the moon.

Get more Robinson and Causey.

Sincerely

Michael Lee
1447 Main St.
Cincinnati 10, Ohio

*Mike, now that SCIENCE STORIES has been suspended, can we count on you to switch your loyalty to our other magazine, UNIVERSE? You'll find stories by Frank Robinson (he has the lead story in this issue) and, we hope, more by James Causey. As for your comments on the Pierre Cotreau illustration and staples, I have a hunch that our readers will answer you, so I'll leave the field to them.* —*Bea*

# PERSONALS

Start sending in your notices, the Personals Column is back again.

There is, however, a change here. We're still running your notices free (science fiction *fan* notices, not professional ads), but in order to get as many items as possible in each issue we're limiting the number of words per notice. Instead of listing each magazine or book you have for sale or trade, give the general classification and have interested readers write for price lists. In this way we can help more of you, and keep the column up to date. Believe it or not, when we ran the column in OW we were so swamped that notices received in February couldn't be published until May or June!

So, if you have stf material to sell or trade, if you want to buy material, if you're looking for pen-pals, collecting stamps or trying to organize a colony on the moon just send in your notice—but try to keep it down to fifty words, more or less.

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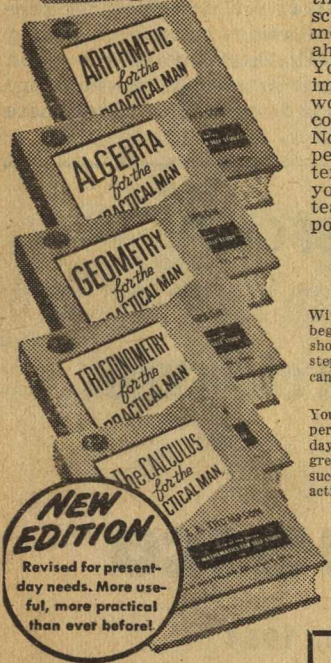


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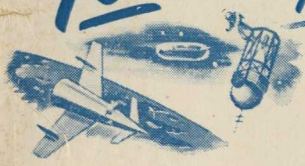

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