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Stopover in Space

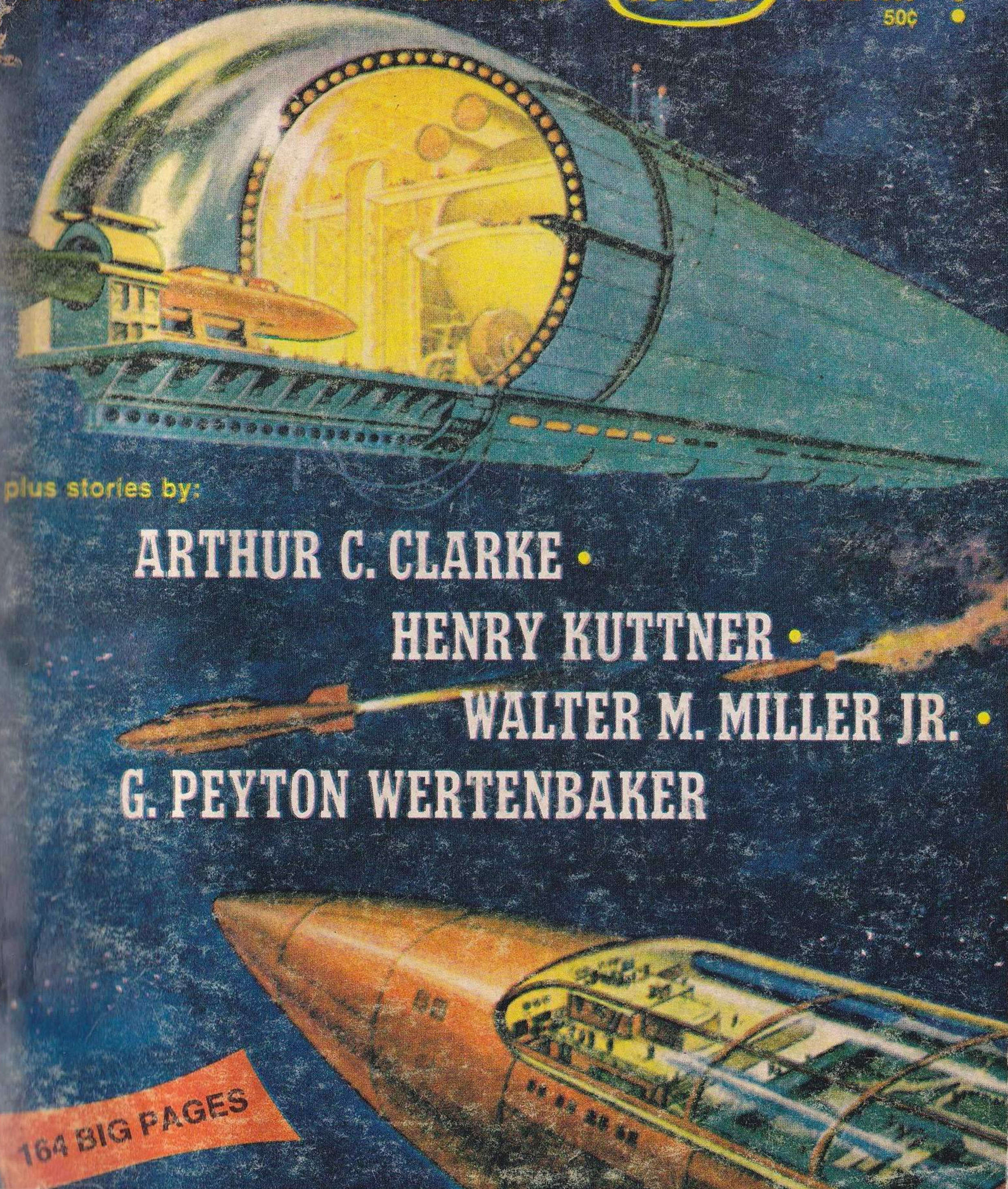
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Amazing stories

June, 1966 Vol. 40, No. 6

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HERBERT A. LEHRMAN, Assistant Editor

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EDITORIAL

We doubt if Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Sage of Concord, ever wrote any science fiction as such. But, frankly, you never can tell about a thing like that, what with the scholars among us busily proving—now it's as far back as the 19th century—that nearly every American man of letters, from Herman Melville to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, made at least one try at writing some early s-f.

So far, though, we haven't seen Emerson's name listed, nor do we expect to—because he was probably much too busy reflecting on weightier matters. In "Each and All," for example, he made an observation that now bears a particular relevance to the current wave of "nostalgia" publications beginning to flood the market. He wrote:

The delicate shells lay on the shore;

.....

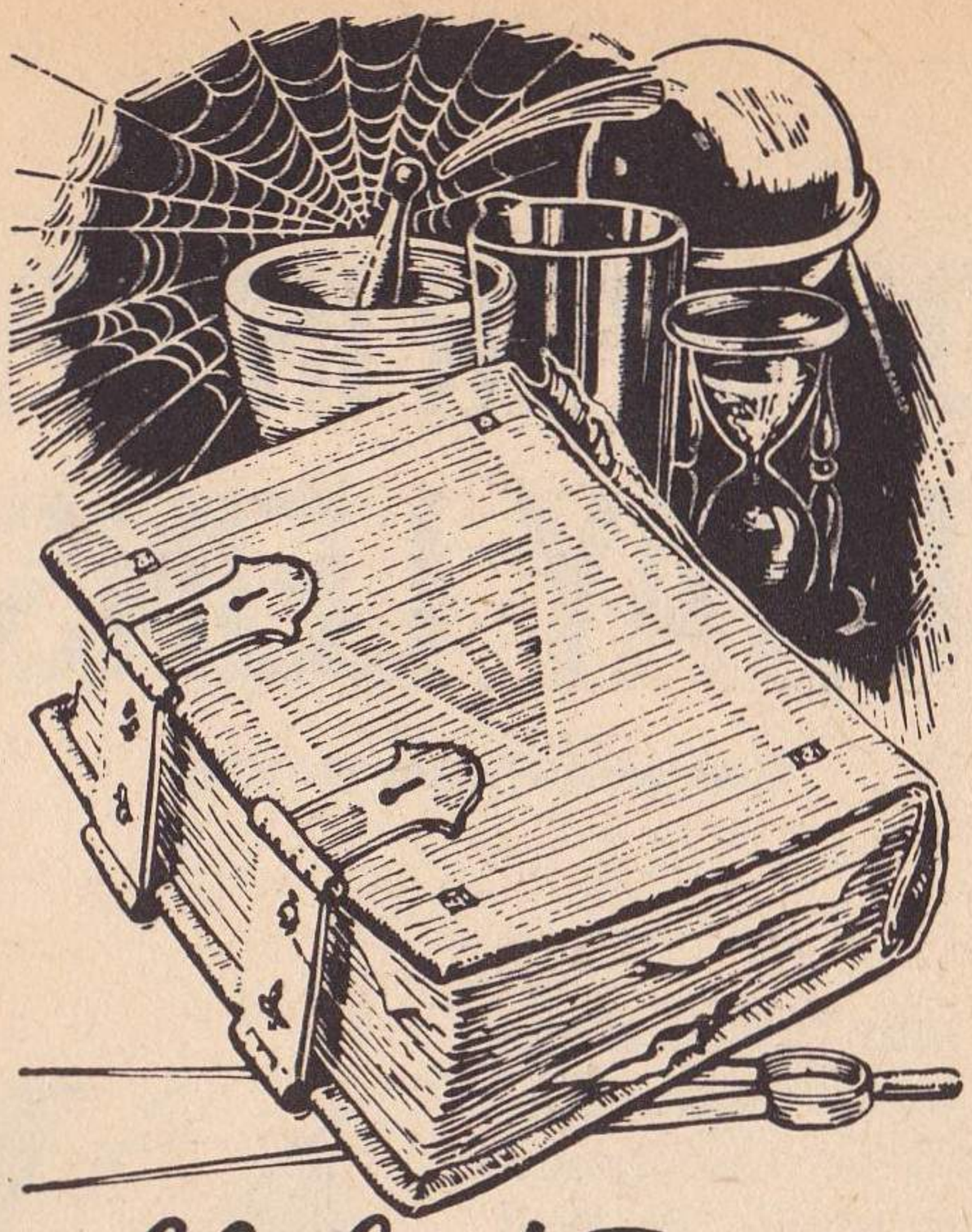
I wiped away the weeds and the foam,
I fetched my sea-born treasures home;
But the poor, unsightly, noisome things
Had left their beauty on the shore
With the sun and the sand and the wild uproar.

If for "delicate shells" we substitute "pulp stories of the past" and for "shore" we think of "the particular issues of the s-f magazines in which those stories first appeared," we can see the analogy between Emerson's point and some of the present attempts—especially in paperback form—to exploit the past at the expense of the present. For just as that glistening scallop shell you brought back from the shore last summer now lies dull on your desk, how often have you hunted up some old s-f "classic" you've wondered about for years—only to locate it at last in a disappointingly plain—usually cheap—paperback edition?

What it probably lacked was its original "context," the once wonder-bright setting of the brand-new issue in which that story first appeared—the original illustrations, perhaps the editor's comments or introductory blurb, and certainly the *other* stories in that issue, all of them fresh and "modern" in a way that we here in the present can never think or feel because we do so in an entirely different kind of world from the one in which that issue was brand-new.

In other words, what you probably miss elsewhere is just what

(Continued on page 162)



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STOP OVER IN SPACE

MURRAY LEINSTER

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

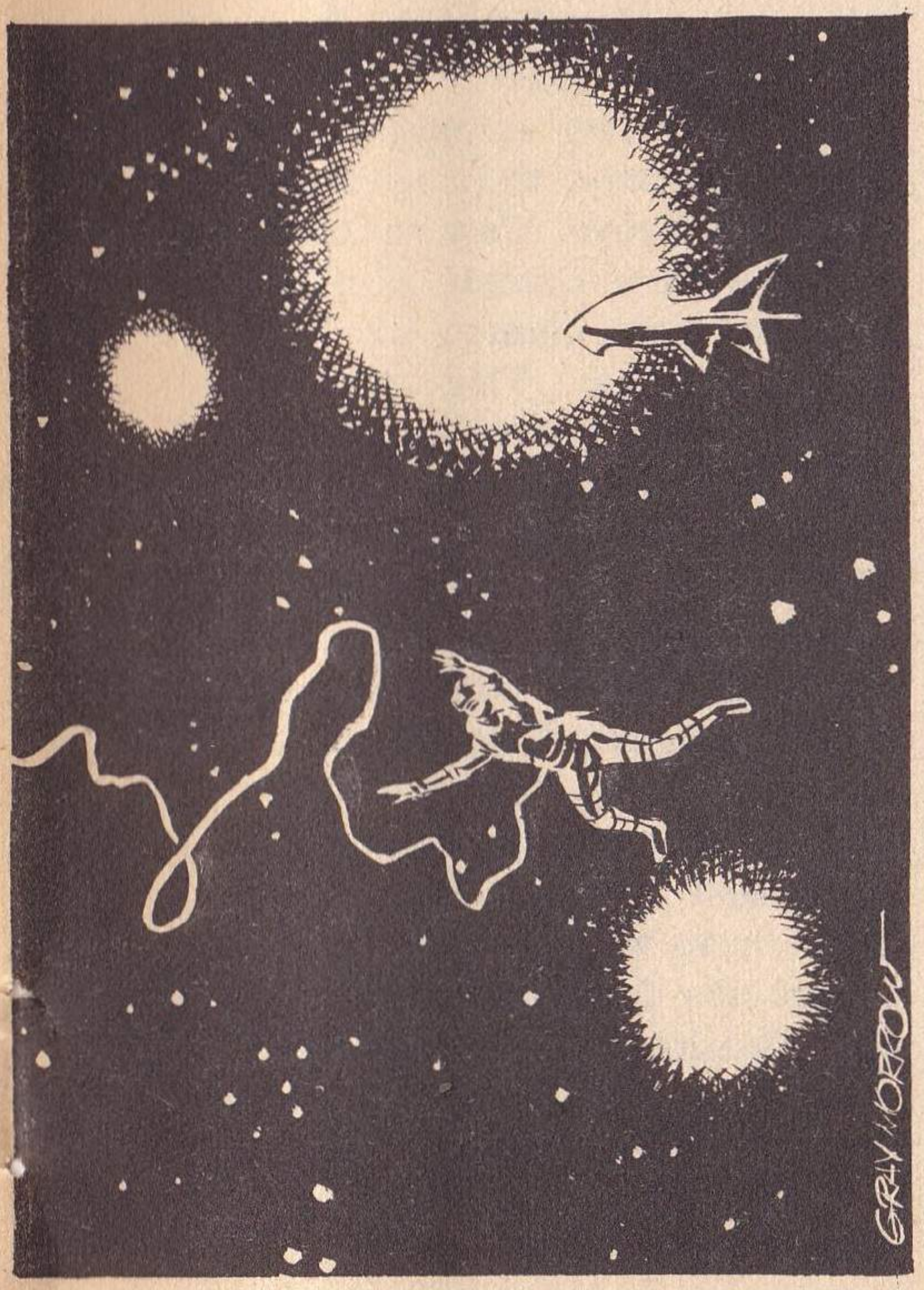
SCOTT ran into the situation on a supposedly almost-routine tour of duty on Checkpoint Lambda. It was to be his first actual independent command as a Space Patrol commissioned officer. Otherwise the affairs of the galaxy seemed to be proceeding in a completely ordinary fashion. On a large scale, suns burned in emptiness, novas flamed, and comets went bumbling around their highly elliptical orbits just as usual. On a lesser scale, where the affairs of men were concerned, there seemed to be no deviation from the customary. The Golconda Ship was vanished, to be sure, but it was the habit of that fabulous vessel to disappear once in every four years, while half the galaxy tried to guess where it had gone, and the rest tried to think of ways to intercept it when it came back.



Other human activities were

First of Two Parts

The latest of the "Overdrive" stories by Murray Leinster, the Dean of Science Fiction (author of "Killer Ship" and "The Runaway Skyscraper"), this one about Scott of the Space Patrol, bound for Checkpoint Lambda and his first independent command as a commissioned officer. But what was wrong aboard the gold-plated space-buoy? Why did the crew refuse to accept Scott? Why did it deny having any passengers or cargo to transfer? And—most ominous of all —why couldn't anyone see that unless Lambda changed its present position—and fast!—every last soul aboard would be snuffed out in an inferno of meteoric flames?



commonplace. There were huge bulk-cargo carriers lifting off from spaceports and moving slowly out to emptiness. At appropriate distances the landing-grids which had lifted them let go, and the ungainly objects flickered and abruptly were not. Actually, they were on their way to destinations light-centuries distant, wrapped in cocoons of overdrive-field which carried them many times faster than light. There were sleek, bright-metal ships, graceful in outline, which popped into being from nothingness and then swam slowly to where the same landing-grids' force-fields could lock on and let them down to worlds totally new. There were mile-long ships with swimming-pools and hundreds of deck-levels, carrying cargo and passengers between star-clusters, and small, grubby cargo-craft carrying minerals from airless satellites to

the planets they circled. And there were space-yachts, and there were battered tramp-ships of space nosing into queer corners upon their sometimes lawful and sometimes other occasions.

The galaxy was a very busy place. It was busiest, perhaps, near the yellow sun on whose third planet humanity had begun and from which it had spread to distances meaninglessly great. But it was busy everywhere.

There was a space-lane from Rigel to Taret two thousand light-years from one end to the other, and upon it colonized worlds were threaded as if upon a string. There were space-lanes to the Coalsack and from the Rim to Betelgeuse. There were other surveyed lanes which forked, and joined, and ended, and began once more. Sometimes they crossed each other. Then it was desirable that there be a space-port for the exchange of passengers and freight between ship-lanes. Men displayed great ingenuity in arranging such things.

There was the sun Canis Lambda, for example. Scott was on his way to take command of the checkpoint that floated in orbit around it. Canis Lambda was a yellow, Type G. sun which should have had as many planets as ancient Sol. At some unthinkably remote period it had possessed them. But once Sol had owned an unnamed world which blew itself to bits, now floating aimlessly between Mars and Jupiter. Canis Lambda had owned four such now-detonated children, reduced these days to fragments from mountains and islands in size, to particles of celestial sand. None was large enough to be called a planet and all seemed useless. Yet— The sun Canis Lambda burned brightly in emptiness where no less than six man-marked space-lanes crossed each other. And men needed a course-marker and a buoy and a transfer-point there. So they built one.

The first two attempts were failures, because they attempted only to be buoys. They vanished, and the Five Comets of Canis Lambda were blamed for their disappearance. The current checkpoint was more ambitious. Men took an ancient ship become unsuited for any other use. They drove it to Canis Lambda —they took out the overdrive engine later—and put it in orbit near a mile-big fragment of an exploded world. They put radars and telemeters and space-radio equipment aboard. They filled three decks with growing things, to provide food and purify the air. Finished, the former liner was not only a buoy and a checkpoint for space-traffic, but it was a hotel and a warehouse and other things beside.

Scott hadn't seen it when he heard about what he was running into, but he'd studied its plans. It had freight-doors in its hull. It had lifeboats in their blisters. It had cabins, and a tiny theater, and a restaurant, and a small hospital far down in its stern-most section. It had air-locks and any number of conveniences. Passengers could board it from a liner following one space-lane, and wait in it for another liner following another lane to take them to a world the first would never touch at. Freight could be transferred to it, too. The buoy—the checkpoint—was a very useful facility for interstellar traffic.

But one day, while Scott was on his way to take it over as his first independent command, several passengers were supposed to leave it on a ship for Dettra. One of them was a girl. They were supposed to transfer. And they didn't.

This started everything, so far as Scott was concerned.

He heard about it in the controlroom of the liner taking him to the space-buoy. The skipper had checked for passengers to be landed, and found that Scott was not only routed for Lambda, but was a lieutenant in the Space Patrol and headed for duty there. He was traveling as a paid passenger and in civilian clothes, as Patrol men always do when off duty. The liner-skipper'd assumed he was only another passenger. But when he realized, he urgently invited Scott into the control-room.

"I'd no idea you were Patrol," he told Scott apologetically, "or I'd have invited you here before."

"I've spent enough time in control-rooms," said Scott, "not to mind being just a passenger."

"We don't often see a Patrol man," explained the skipper, "and I didn't think—."

"I'm obliged," Scott told him. "I haven't worried about a thing since we left Dettra."

It wasn't quite the truth. Checkpoint Lambda was his first independent command, and he'd been assigned to it for a very special reason. The whole affair would go off best, and he'd seem better fitted for other commands later, if absolutely nothing unusual happened on Lambda before he got there, while he was there, and after he left. He'd been uneasy on that account alone, but so far everything seemed normal.

"I may have a problem at Lambda," said the skipper after a second. "I'm glad you're aboard to take over if it turns up."

Scott waited. The Patrol is the only interstellar service with authority to order anybody around, but it leans over backward to avoid any such behavior.

"Just before we left Dettra," the skipper explained, "a ship came in to the space-port. She

was minus some passengers and some freight she should have picked up at Lambda. But at Lambda they insisted there were no such passengers nor any freight for that ship. They said for her to go on her way. There was no point in making contact."

Scott frowned a little. At this particular time it wasn't likely there'd be any confusion about passengers or freight at Lambda. It was exceedingly important that everything be right. Within the past months one necessary change in the landing arrangements at Lambda had turned up. Among Scott's special orders were directions for him to take care of that change. But this was way out of line.

"One of the passengers was a girl," said the skipper. "She was bound for Dettra. The liner skipper knew her family. She had to be on Lambda! She had to! He put up an argument. So the Lambda Patrol officer came on the vision-screen. He swore at the liner and ordered it on its way. There was some freight to be put off there, too. The Patrol officer refused to take it. He swore again. He was threatening. So the liner went on to Dettra. He told me about it an hour before we lifted off."

Scott didn't swear, but this sort of event at this special place at this particular time had implications that would have justified much profanity. He said, "And your problem?"

"You," said the skipper uncomfortable. "You're supposed to be landed on Lambda. Before I knew you were Patrol, I was wondering what the devil to do if they refused to accept you. I couldn't think of any reason—"

"They'll accept me!" Scott assured him. "Don't worry about that! I'm taking command there, And I'll look into the matter of the passengers and freight." Then he considered for a moment. "I'll ask you to wait nearby until I've checked things, though. The transfer-passengers might prefer to go on with you, on this ship, to waiting longer on Lambda."

The skipper looked relieved but still uneasy.

"I thought it might be—quarantine stuff."

"It's not that," said Scott.

He gave no outward sign, but he didn't like this at all. The Golconda Ship was due to land at Lambda almost as soon as he got there. That could mean trouble of which refusal to exchange freight or passengers was a sign.

"I'll go aboard," he said casually, "and ask you to wait around for half an hour or so. Of course if there's nothing really the matter, you can forget the whole thing. But passengers shouldn't be staying aboard when they're scheduled to leave."

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The skipper looked relieved indeed.

Scott said, "We're due to break out for Lambda in a couple of hours, aren't we?"

When the skipper agreed, Scott said casually, "I'll get set for landing."

He left the control-room and went to his cabin. A Patrol man travels light. There was no great amount of preparation to make. He did write a brief, specific report of what the skipper had told him. He didn't need to draw any inferences. Headquarters could put two and two together. But it would be a long time getting action.

There'd have been no need for a buoy if there were a habitable world within a reasonable distance. But the next port beyond Lambda was six days' journey in overdrive—very, very many light-years in normal space. There'd be no Patrol ship at that port. It could be fifteen days or more before the seemingly innocent news from the checkpoint would reach an operating Patrol base with an available ship. Then it would be acted on, but it could be thirty days or longer before an armed ship could be ordered out and arrive at Checkpoint Lambda. Which would be too late. A tale of passengers not transferring and freight undelivered could mean—it did—a number of murders on Lambda and the most stupendously profitable crime in human history under way.

Which was exactly what Scott had special orders to prevent.

He looked at his watch. It was midday mess-time by the liner's clocks. But he abruptly found that he couldn't eat. But he did look into the liner's dining-saloon, and eating seemed less possible than ever. There were families with children. There were honeymooners. There were elderly folk to whom the discomfort of going into and breaking out of overdrive was distressing in the extreme. There were young people. None of them had the least imaginable link with the Golconda Ship, but Scott knew that the dining-saloon on Lambda might have looked like this not long ago. It wasn't likely that it looked like this now.

The reason was the Golconda Ship. Ordinary shipments of treasure by spacecraft were routinely put under the special protection of the Space Patrol. The transfer of thousands of millions of credits in interstellar currency happened often enough. In such cases the Patrol made a matter-of-fact check of the ship's proposed passengers, made an equally matter-of-fact check of the crew, and then briskly examined freight-parcels. The checking of individuals would show up anybody with ideas of traveling as passengers to seize

the ship in space. Examination of freight would disclose ambitious people with ideas of stowing away for any similar purpose. Such precautions had always been enough. But passengers who didn't transfer to their scheduled ship seemed to say that something else had happened. To Scott's first independent command. And while he was on the way to it.

The Golconda Ship's crew had not been checked. It wasn't necessary. It came from some place nobody-knew-where with a cargo of treasure its crew had acquired nobody-knew-how. In theory, Scott had needed only to go to Lambda, to take command, and to see that when the Golconda Ship arrived, there would be no trouble with the Five Comets. Recent computations said there could be. Then he should see that its incredibly valuable cargo was divided into shipments of reasonable size and in course of time transferred to a series of other ships which would deliver each fraction of the whole to a different colonized world. That was all. It was almost commonplace.

But passengers — including a girl — hadn't left the checkpoint when they should. Freight had been refused. And most peculiarly of all, a supposed Patrol officer had sworn at the skipper of a merchant ship and ordered him to go on, or else.

There should be no weapons on Lambda to back up a threat. A Patrol officer shouldn't threaten, anyhow. He was violating all discipline if he used profanity or made threats of any kind to a civilian. The officer who'd sworn at a liner-skipper didn't sound like a Patrol officer.

Scott very grimly decided that he wasn't.

The Golconda Ship would be the answer. It was fabulous riches and impenetrable mystery and the subject of feverish speculation over half the occupied galaxy. Four ships in turn had made voyages to an unknown destination and returned. A fifth was somewhere out in space now. The first had appeared from nowhere years ago, with a cargo of treasure not everybody even now was able to believe. There'd been fighting on board, and the first Golconda Ship's crew was smaller than even a small space-tramp should carry. Apparently they'd killed each other off, down to a skeleton crew which brought the ship to port. But they kept their lips tight-locked. They had treasure greater in value than any that ship on any space or sea voyage had ever brought to port before. But nothing criminal could be proved against them. Nothing of any use could be learned from them. Ultimately they scattered, every man a multi-millionaire and with the secret

of where they'd obtained their treasure still intact.

Four years later the same men gathered again. They'd had another ship built. It was a very special ship indeed. They went aboard and out to space. Nobody knew where they went. They were gone six standard months. They came to port again with even more treasure than before. Again they kept their mouths shut. They scattered again, and every man was a multi-millionaire. The second Golconda Ship had brought back more wealth than most planetary treasuries contained. And nobody knew where it was found or how it was gathered or even —actually—how much there was of it. But a sudden excess or riches caused a financial crisis on the world where they landed it.

A third Golconda Ship and a fourth had made voyages, each time with a crew whose every member was so many times a millionaire that an estimate of his wealth was meaningless. Now a fifth Golconda Ship was due, to make them richer still. But this time it would not make port where an embarrassment of riches would cause a financial panic. It would land at Lambda.

And this was why a few non-transferring passengers and a threatening Patrol officer on Lambda made Scott feel grim and savage and almost helpless as he watched the diners in this space-liner's dining saloon.

They were innocent bystanders. Their lives shouldn't be endangered. If this liner made freight or passenger-transfer contact with Lambda, they would be —if anything was as wrong as it appeared. He, Scott, would have to arrange matters so that he took all the risks. And, acting alone, the risk would be practically suicidal.

He was about to move aside from the doorway when loudspeakers all over the ship said briskly, in a sort of echoing chorus: *"Attention all passengers! Attention all passengers! Breakout from overdrive coming! Breakout from overdrive coming!"*

There were unhappy sounds here and there. Overdrive is the only conceivable way by which space-traffic can be carried on across light-centuries of space. But ways to mitigate the physical discomfort of going into or out of it are not too successful.

"This is a checkpoint breakout, at Checkpoint Lambda," the voice said cheerily. *"If you wish, stewards will provide you with the anti-malaise pills which reduce breakout discomfort. We are required by law to report our passage past the checkpoints set up along the space-lanes we follow. You know all this, of course. Usually that is*

all that happens. Today, though, we have a passenger to transfer by tentacle to the buoy Lambda. It will be interesting to watch. This checkpoint buoy was formerly a crack interstellar liner. In its day—"

Scott moved on to the control-room as the brisk voice described the former liner now floating as a hulk in emptiness. It was still equipped with the solar-system drive-engines which could shift its position about the local sun, but they could not conceivably drive it to any other solar system. Here it was, and here it must remain, depending on passing ships for its contacts with the rest of the galaxy. The voice mentioned antennas and radar-mirrors and telemetering equipment as if they were strange. It pictured the transfer of a passenger by space-tentacle as an operation of vast interest. Scott reached the control-room and heard a mate off to one side completing the sugary speech into a microphone. The skipper nodded a greeting. He looked uneasy. Every skipper worries about breakout. There is no authenticated record of a ship breaking out to collide immediately with a planet or asteroid or a sun's blazing photosphere, but a ship does come back to normal space almost at random.

A voice from overhead in the control-room said with careful distinctness: "*When the gong sounds, breakout will be exactly five seconds off.*"

There was a slow, monotonous tick-tock-tick-tock. It lasted an interminable time. Then a recorded gong sounded, and the same carefully distinct voice said: "*Five-four-three-two-one-*"

The vision-screens flickered. Everybody on the liner felt a ghastly dizziness, and the sensations of a spinning, spiral fall. Then there was nausea, quick and sharp and revolting, but mercifully it lasted only a heartbeat.

Then the screens blazed with light. A thousand million specks of brightness glittered upon the formerly rust-red screens. A tinny voice said, "*Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report.*" And a tiny whining sound began where the liner's automatically taped log now automatically broadcast itself in a high-speed transmission for the checkpoint to record. The Milky Way sprawled across no less than four vision-screens, and the distorted black nebula, the Coalsack, loomed large and near. It was visibly of another shape than when seen from Earth. To the left, and ahead, a bright yellow sun with a barely perceptible disk shone luridly. There were peculiar luminosities close by. They would be the Five Comets of Canis Lambda, matters of interest to

professional astronomers but not usually to anybody else. Scott, though, regarded them frowningly. The liner's skipper shook his head.

"Good that we broke out short," he observed. "I'd hate to come out of overdrive close to them!"

Scott said nothing. All overdrive runs are timed to stop short of their destination, with shorter jumps to closer approximation. The odds against collisions on breakout are enormous, and research expeditions have actually penetrated the hearts of those clumped meteoric hordes which are cometary heads and nuclei. But that is a hair-raising trick, and possible only by the most tedious and painstaking matching of velocities. One definitely would not want to break out inside a comet. Definitely! And meteor-streams trail most of them. The Five Comets of Canis Lambda were particularly undesirable close neighbors for spacecraft. Two robot checkpoints in succession had vanished from orbit around this sun. Still, most ships merely reported their passage here and went on to the infinite emptiness beyond.

"Umph," said the skipper. "We will go on in."

The operation of approaching a landing was much more complicated on a liner than on a Patrol ship. There was verification of the ecliptic plane. There was careful measurement of distance. Micrometric adjustment of the short-jump relay. A man could not time an overdrive jump to less than the fiftieth of a second. A properly timed relay could split a fifty-thousandth. The figures were checked, and checked again, and the settings made and verified. All the while the ceiling speaker continued to say metallicly: *"Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report."* The call had been travelling at the speed of light for almost an hour before the liner picked it up from the yet unseen and unseeable space-buoy. The liner's automatic reply was now traveling back to it. But the ship itself would get there before its broadcast.

Another warning to passengers. A gong. A count-down. Then there was dizziness once more, and the feeling of falling, and intolerable nausea. The screens flickered and rearranged the innumerable specks of light which were stars. And then, suddenly, the sun Canis Lambda was blindingly bright with a disk half a degree across, and the call from the ceiling speaker was a shout for the fraction of a syllable before the automatic volume-control cut it down.

The skipper looked pleased. One does not often have a chance to show off before a Patrol man. He watched complacently, giving

no orders, while the direction of the checkpoint signal was ascertained and its distance measured. Then the liner began to drive toward it on that slow—never any great fraction of light-speed—solar-system drive by which men first explored the planets of the First System. It was still necessary for lift-offs and landings.

But Scott stared ahead. The Five Comets were heading in toward the sun: five separate luminosities, some larger and some smaller, some with enormous trailing tails and others with lesser ones. All were concentrated in one very small region of the sky.

Scott didn't like the look of things, but unless he knew their distance he couldn't tell how close together they really were. Even then, distances in space are not easily realized. There's no believable sensation of depth where astronomical objects are concerned. Everything looks flat. It's impossible to see more than angular relationships. Actual distances are no more than numerals on paper. But Scott didn't like what he saw.

"Very nice work," he said politely. "I'll go get into my vacuum-suit. I'll be back by the time you've raised the buoy."

He went back to his cabin. He changed his civilian clothes for his uniform. He put on the Patrol spacesuit that is so much less bulky than the vacuum equipment used on merchant ships. It took a considerable time. He picked up the report he'd prepared. He went again to the control-room. The skipper was red-faced and angry and apprehensive.

"Look here!" he said indignatly. "They got our approach-call. They said, 'What ship's that?' When I told them, they didn't answer! They don't answer now!"

As if deliberately to contradict him, the communicator-speaker said harshly: "*There is nothing to come aboard you. No freight or passengers will be accepted. Proceed on your voyage. Message ends.*"

The skipper looked at Scott. "What am I to do?"

"Proceed on your voyage," said Scott drily, "as far as the space-buoy." He hesitated a moment and then said: "As an extreme precaution, put a man by the overdrive-button. Set it up to move the ship for a short jump away.—if they get too insistent."

The skipper gave orders. Even a brief period in overdrive would put the liner beyond this solar system. Up to now, the skipper had been concerned only because he had a passenger who might be refused by Lambda. There was no precedent to tell him what to do. But Scott had asked for a precaution which took it out of mere

irregularity on the part of the checkpoint. There was more wrong here than passengers who didn't change ship and freight that wasn't accepted. Scott had come to that conclusion earlier. The skipper said uncomfortably, "I don't understand this!"

Scott said, "Presently, you will."

To him the situation was self-evident. The Golconda Ship was coming back from wherever it had gone on its fifth voyage after riches unthinkable. It was going to make port at Checkpoint Lambda instead of a normal spaceport. It planned to distribute its treasure among the financial institutions of a dozen or a hundred worlds instead of one. It was a very sound idea provided that the secret — which even now Scott didn't feel he could reveal — provided that the secret of its intention and the time of arrival remained unknown to anybody but the commanding officer of Checkpoint Lambda until after the operation was over.

But that was apparently just what hadn't happened.

Assuming a leak in highly classified information, and the report about the passengers for another liner, and now the insistence that this liner should go on without attempting further communications — assuming those things only, Scott could have written a very plausible outline of events and conditions on the checkpoint.

Someone who knew where the Golconda Ship would reappear could have organized what could be the most profitable criminal enterprise in human history. Men could have taken passage from various worlds to Lambda, there supposedly to wait for further transportation to somewhere else. Other men from other worlds could arrive to add to their number. Then, suddenly and without warning, the pseudo-passengers could act. It could be swift and terrible. They'd take the space-buoy, perhaps with crackling blasters. They might capture and imprison the crew and the authentic passengers. On the other hand, they might not take that risk.

In any event, if that had happened the present occupants of Lambda would be waiting for the Golconda Ship to arrive and to link to the buoy for heavy-freight transfer — and then there would be other swift and terrible action. It was unlikely that anybody on the Golconda Ship would survive. And then the captors of that ship would sail away with treasure so vast that divide it as they might, no one of them would ever be able to waste or throw away his share.

All this was inference. Only Scott suspected it, and there was no Patrol ship which could be summoned and arrive here within

weeks. Scott could make a part of the crime impossible. But there were the Five Comets. If any part of the crew, or anyone listed on the passenger-list was still alive, it would be murder on Scott's part not to go aboard and attempt the impossible. He had to prevent their deaths, if they had not already been murdered. The fact that even the attempt could mean that he'd be killed couldn't alter the fact. He had a clear obligation.

But all this was still deduction from facts which allowed of no other interpretation. Scott was wryly contemplating the total problem when the communicator-speaker rasped: "*What the devil are you doing? There's nothing to go aboard you and nothing will be received. Get on course and go away!*"

Somehow the voice sounded like someone speaking correctly against his usual habit—to seem something he was not. Scott went to the transmitter. He said formally: "Calling Checkpoint Lambda. This is Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol. I have orders to take command of the checkpoint. I am coming aboard. You will prepare to receive me. Message ends."

There was an indefinable sound, as if someone had uttered a choked exclamation. Then silence. Scott knew what was happening, of course. There was a conference, on the buoy. To decide what to do about him. Scott moved the microphone to one side and said in an official voice: "Captain, if there is difficulty here, I shall commandeer this ship by Space Patrol authority to stand off this checkpoint and warn all other ships of suspicious actions aboard and not to make contact with it. We will request that all ships report the situation to the Space Patrol."

The skipper of the liner gaped at him. Scott pointed to the microphone, close to his lips. The sound of his voice would have changed as he spoke to the skipper, but he'd have been overheard. They've have heard him on the buoy. He could, actually, have done what he'd just mentioned. But there were the Five Comets. And also there is an unwritten rule in the Patrol that a Patrol man never waits for help, though he may send for it. In the long run, it pays off.

He put the microphone aside.

"Keep a man at the overdrive-button," he said, frowning. "If anything leaves the Lambda headed for this ship, he'd better push it—. I don't intend to keep you here, of course. It wouldn't be practical. But I don't like this!"

The skipper opened his mouth to ask an uneasy question, but a duty-man across the control-room said: "I've got the buoy, sir."

A vision-screen faded out and

brightened again with a relayed telescopic image. It showed first a monstrous, glittering mass of unoxidized metal. It would be one of the fragments of one of the planets Canis Lambda had lost aeons ago. They'd blown themselves to bits like the fifth planet in the First System. Now it was an asteroid, too small to be called a planet or to have an atmosphere or to be of any use except the one that was made of it. It was a marker. Its orbit around the sun was nearly circular and could be computed with precision. And the buoy stayed close to it. Ships seeking the former liner, now a freight-station and hotel, could know exactly where to find it in the three-hundred-million-mile orbit the checkpoint followed. The buoy would, quite simply, be where computation placed the marker. And that was known and printed for every imaginable month, day, and hour far into the future.

It loomed large as the magnification on the screen increased. A twinkling speck appeared beside it. Scott started, and shook his head incredulously. The Five Comets on the way, and the buoy not moved to safety? Even criminals . . . But then his lips tensed. Things looked worse than he'd guessed at before.

The buoy was — it had been — a ship not unlike the one from which Scott regarded it. Now it sprouted radio and radar and telemetering equipment seemingly by hundreds of pieces. By the size of the ship, Scott could guess distances, now. The glittering marker-asteroid was about two miles from the buoy. They floated in the same orbit, very near each other. More magnified, now, Scott could see peculiar ringed depressions in the substance of the marker. They were craters, like those found on the inner moons and Mars and Mercury in the First System. They were impact-craters from bombardment of the asteroid by hurtling rocky masses in the sky. They were evidence that space wasn't always empty where the checkpoint floated. Two robot checkpoints had vanished from their orbits here, and astronomers blamed the Five Comets and pointed to the impact-craters as proof that they were the cause.

Scott turned his head. There were the vaguely circular patches of brightness against the stars. They were the Comets, on schedule. Their orbits were commensurable, and every so often they reached perihelion all together. This was such an occasion. It had been known for a long time, but the buoy was ignoring it. It floated obliviously in space, some tens of times its own length from its marker-asteroid.

"I'll go down to the airlock," said Scott. "Keep your man on the

overdrive button. After I'm aboard, wait nearby until I release you or at least half an hour has passed. And" — he passed over his written report — "See that this gets to a Patrol office as soon as possible".

He went down to the airlock. Liner crewmen waited to let him out. Merchant ships carried many more men than comparable Patrol ships. They did things more elaborately. Quite unnecessarily, now, they checked the tuning of his suit to communicator-frequency to make sure he'd overhear all talk between the liner and Lambda, and that he could take part in it.

For a long, long time there was nothing. He heard small sounds from somewhere where a microphone was open. Then a voice in his helmet-phones said ungraciously: *"We'll receive Lieutenant Scott. Put him in a spacesuit. We'll send over a tentacle for him."*

The liner-skipper's voice came through the same headphones in Scott's helmet.

"He's on his way to the airlock."

Scott watched the small monitor screen in the airlock wall. Its function was to show the immediate outside of the lock, to facilitate emergency operations of any kind. At first, Scott could see only a shining field of stars. Then, slowly, the glittering metal object which was the space-buoy seemed to creep past the edge of the screen and into plain view. Its steel hull was coated with that golden plating which old-style overdrive fields required of ships they transported. There were ports along the fish-shaped flanks. There were cargo-doors. There were lesser doors which would be personnel air-locks. And there was almost a jungle of antennae for communication and meteor-watch and telemetry.

Scott's eyes fixed themselves on an open airlock door. It could be nothing more deadly than a door already opened for him to enter. But a short-range rocket could issue from it, if any had been shipped to the buoy as freight.

The star-field moved. The liner was shifting position. It changed its angle to the buoy until if there were a missile in that open lock, it would no longer bear on the liner. It implied an informed uneasiness on the part of the liner's skipper. Scott took time out to approve of him.

"Here comes our tentacle," said the grating voice.

Something slender and worm-like came out of an opening. It writhed and straightened and quivered, and continued to extend itself. It came fumbling across the emptiness between the two ships. Scott closed the inner lock door. He felt his formerly flaccid

vacuum-suit swell out swiftly. He saw the air-pressure gauge needle swing to zero. A flickering yellow light told him that he might open the outer lock-door. He opened it.

It was not a new experience to look out to infinite nothingness. The liner's artificial gravity made the bow of the ship seem up and the stern down. But he felt that he stood on an unguarded threshold with pure abyss before him. Some hundreds of yards away the space-buoy moved very slowly past. That was solidity. The liner was solidity. But in between lay such a gulf that all his instincts bade him shrink away.

He grew angry, as always when he felt weakness in himself. He watched the waggling tentacle as it groped toward him. It was not like an inanimate thing at all, but it gave an appalling impression of stupidity and of a bumbling ineptitude. It reached the liner's airlock.

Scott hooked his belt to it. It began to retract. It pulled him out of the air-lock. He ground his teeth as he felt emptiness below him — when he knew that he could fall for thousands and thousands of years and never fall to anything at all.

The harsh voice said: *"You can go now. He's on the way."*

As if in response, the liner surged ahead. At high acceleration it darted altogether away from the space-buoy. It dwindled.

The tentacle ceased to draw Scott toward the buoy. It held him still in the void. Then it stirred as if impatiently. But the liner was still within spacesuit-communicator range. When it disappeared in overdrive, though, something would happen. The tentacle could thrust Scott away to its own fullest extension with such violence that when it stopped he'd be snapped off its end to go floating away in emptiness forever. Or it could draw back, pulling him toward the buoy's metal hull with such velocity that he'd crash against the hull-plates, bursting his suit and helmet, and turning him into a horrible bubbling thing as his blood and tissues turned to steam in emptiness. Considering everything, it looked like one of those alternatives was due — as soon as the liner went into overdrive.

Scott inconspicuously unhooked his belt. He held onto the tentacle with a space-gloved hand. He'd made a third event possible. In that, the tentacle could extend furiously or retract furiously. But he'd be left floating a few hundred yards from Lambda, with a reaction-jet for propulsion as he tried to fight his way inside.

This last, rather than the others, was what he actually expected.

Chapter 2

But the liner checked its motion. It stopped some five miles away, where it was merely a silver splinter in space, far beyond the mile-big asteroid with the impact-craters on its surface. The skipper's voice came, dourly: "*We'll watch him over.*"

Then Scott said measuredly: "I left orders with the liner's skipper, you know."

He held on to the tentacle while his fate was debated. He heard the faintest possible sounds. A microphone was open somewhere. There was argument. He heard voices: "*...crazy fool! He'll...*" "*...that liner...*" "*...told you to take...*" "*...what's wrong with...*" "*...he can't do anything...*" Then a sneering "*...nice company for Janet...*" And then an authoritative "*Bring him aboard, then. Then we'll decide...*"

Scott clung to the end of the tentacle. The liner floated in space, miles away. Her skipper would be watching, of course, and he was showing a sudden perceptiveness. He'd moved the liner. Sound thinking. He wasn't trying to communicate with Scott. Proper behavior — leaving the conduct of this affair to a Patrol man. With a man ready to throw the liner into overdrive, it was safe from destruction by — say — a rocket-missile, if any had been gotten to the buoy in the guise of freight. But anything that looked suspicious or unusual would send the liner away, for the sake of her passengers. Anything causing alarm on the liner would be distinctly unwise. Anything causing the liner to linger near the buoy, on orders from Scott with the authority of the Patrol behind him, could be disastrous to an illegal enterprise, because if the Golconda ship appeared and found itself not alone at the checkpoint, it would be very cagey. Both toward the buoy and the liner. So nobody on the buoy wanted the liner to be dissatisfied.

He held on to the tentacle. It began to retract once more. Now it drew him smoothly and steadily toward Checkpoint Lambda. That golden-colored object grew larger; became huge, turned monstrous. Its welded outer hull-surface was very near....

Scott's magnetic shoe-soles touched and clung with that peculiar sticky adhesion which never feels really dependable. He released the tentacle, which went into its small hole in the electro-plated metal of the buoy's hull. There was a door there, which did not open. Scott was isolated on the outer skin of what once had been a liner of some thousands of tons capacity. He waited. The scarred and pitted asteroid-fragment seemed overhead. It

looked as if it should be falling upon Scott, to crush him. But Scott was accustomed to that sort of illusion. He waited to be admitted. He guessed grimly that either much preparation for his reception was going on, or else that the buoy waited for the liner to go away.

Presently he said in a bored voice: "I'm waiting to come in a lock."

His tone was the kind that already-disturbed men halfway through a crime would not be ready for. It didn't match the situation. They should be uneasy, not knowing whether he knew anything or had guessed everything or what. A bored air didn't fit! Criminals in an act of lawbreaking could be baffled. They might be embarrassed.

They were. There was a delay of perhaps three-quarters of a minute. Then there were clankings, reaching the air in Scott's spacesuit through the metal soles. A lock-door swung out and open. Scott went unhurriedly to it. He entered, and the sudden tug of artificial gravity restored sensations of up and down. He very matter-of-factly closed the outer door. He felt his suit go limp as air came in. He opened the inner lock-door and walked out of the lock into the ship-turned-space-buoy.

There was nobody to greet him. There was no one in sight at all. He heard faint music — Thallian mood-music. He stood still for a moment, awaiting challenge. Then he shrugged and got out of his spacesuit. He put it on a chair, tugged his uniform into shape, and walked briskly ahead. He knew, of course, that he was watched; if not directly, then by closed-circuit viewers set up somewhere.

He headed for the control-room. It was the one part of the ship officially occupied by Patrol personnel, who operated the check-point equipment and occasionally adjusted the buoy's position with reference to the marker-asteroid outside. The buoy had been elegant, once. High ceilings — there is no need to save room in a ship of space — and decorative woods and thick carpets gave this deck the look and feel of an old fashioned hotel. There was a desk for a room-clerk. There was nobody there. Scott passed the door of the dining-saloon, which somehow looked more like a restaurant. At one side there was a tiny theatre for solidograph film-shows.

He saw a girl. She was seated as if watching a film on the round-screen Scott couldn't quite glimpse. There was muted music. She did not turn her head. She continued to look at the invisible screen as Scott passed the doorway.

He almost hesitated. He hadn't guessed at women involved in this affair! But he must be watched. There was a specific line of action he must follow if the state of things here was to be handled properly. Something had to be done and only he was available to try to do it.

He went confidently to the control-room door. Since he was appointed to command, here, it made a good effect for him to seem to know unreasonably much about his ship and what he expected of it.

He opened the control-room door, and two men in Patrol uniforms got hastily to their feet. They weren't Patrol personnel. Uniforms or no uniforms, they were civilians. They saluted with an obvious attempt to be highly military. Scott raised his eyebrows. He only nodded in reply. One doesn't salute in active duty in the Patrol. He glanced here and there. There is a sort of timetable that can be deduced from neglected military quarters. Some things show it if they're not attended to everyday. Other items of housekeeping become noticeable a little later. This control-room had been occupied; yes. Overflowing ashtrays proved it. But proper Patrol housekeeping hadn't been done for nearly a week. He could tell.

The two civilians-in-uniform stood stiffly at what they thought was attention. Scott looked at them with a deliberately enigmatic air. Then he said drily, "Rest."

They relaxed, apparently satisfied that they'd passed inspection. Scott went to the checkpoint commander's desk and seated himself deliberately. He turned the chair around and faced them. Then he said, "Before he was killed, did Lieutenant Thrums say anything about the Five Comets?"

His predecessor in command had been named Thrums. Scott assumed casually that he was dead. The two pseudo-Patrol privates jumped a little.

"Ye-no, sir," said one of the two. "He didn't."

"Maybe," said Scott gently, "he didn't confide it to you. But he was much concerned. Or maybe he didn't have a chance to tell you before he was killed?"

This was hardly the line an unsuspicious new commanding officer would take. On the other hand it wasn't the way a merely suspicious man would act. The two men in Patrol uniform gaped at him.

One of them said uneasily, "He — Lieutenant Thrums, sir — he'd been glum for a long time. So one day he went into an airlock and closed the inner door and opened the outer one. Then he — walked out, sir. We — we didn't recover the body."

Scott raised his eyebrows again.

"Remarkable!" he said in gentle irony. "It was a remarkable achievement! If the lock was pumped empty, anyone else would have died of oxygen-lack before the outer door could be opened. Or if he let the air escape to space by emergency bleed, explosive decompression would have knocked him cold, and he couldn't have opened the door anyhow. Think of a better story and tell it to me later, will you? But right now —"

He snapped at them.

"Go get the top civilian here! The boss. The man people take orders from. He's gotten you into a hell of a fix. I have to get you out of it, if you're to be gotten out."

One of the badly-uniformed men reached for a communicator.

Scott barked: "I said go get him! I didn't say phone him! Get him!"

The two pseudo-troopers almost fell over each other getting out of the door. They were evidently not part of the killing members of a criminal group. An enterprise like the one in hand would need more organization than a bank-robbery or a more or less normal attempt at kidnapping or murder. If it went on from the seizure of Lambda to the capture of the Golconda Ship, it would be even more complicated. Men who could handle blasters would be needed, of course. But men who could carry on ordinary checkpoint routine were called for, too. The Patrol-uniform wearers would be small crooks, called into this really big operation for some supposed special skills.

Scott leaned forward to the desk microphone and pressed the G.C. button, for a general communication to every compartment in the checkpoint buoy.

"All personnel attention!" he said sharply. "I am Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol, assigned to the command of this installation. I have just come aboard. The liner on which I came is lying off Lambda now, ready to take on any passengers who may wish to avoid the danger the checkpoint faces. The five Comets of Canis Lambda are headed sunward now. Computation has shown that the nuclei, the heads, of not less than four of the five will cross our orbit at just the time we should be there. The head of a comet is a swarm of meteoric bodies, hundreds of millions of them, traveling in a clump hundreds or thousands or even tens of thousands of miles across. Two previous robot checkpoints at this station were destroyed by such encounters. This installation is not able to move fully out of the way. It has only solar-system drive. But I intend to stay aboard and take emer-

gency measures already planned. But it will be a risky business — an extremely risky business! I urge all passengers and as many of the crew as can be spared to transfer to the liner now waiting nearby. You will have to hurry. The liner will wait no longer than half an hour, because it has the safety of its own passengers to think of. Repeat. You will have to hurry! But I urge all not-needed personnel and all passengers to transfer immediately."

He clicked off the microphone. He expected absolutely nothing from the announcement he'd made, unless it was that those who now controlled the buoy would have a good laugh. But it would prepare their minds for uneasiness. Ultimately —

The traditions of the Patrol are many and varied. A Space Patrol man may send for help, but he never waits for it. When a problem seems unsolvable, a Patrol man does what he can to change some part of it, which at worst may cause confusion, and at best may cause it to fall apart. Scott had an appallingly complicated problem on his hands. But if he handled it exactly right and had a preposterous amount of luck, he might prevent the capture of the Golconda ship without allowing the destruction of the checkpoint. He might even manage to save the lives of legitimate passengers and crewmen — if any were left alive. But that was questionable. In any case he wasn't planning to capture criminals right now. The Patrol saves lives before it makes captures.

The two pseudo-patrol men came back to the control-room. With them there was a short, plump civilian. He seemed wryly amused.

"Ho-ya, Lieutenant," he said blandly. "I was afraid it was you."

"They tell me," said Scott formidably, "that you boss operations here."

"Partly. Partly," said the plump man as blandly as before. "My name's Chenery. Don't you know me?"

"No," said Scott.

"My name's Chenery," insisted the plump man. "You saved my life once. You'd ought to remember that!"

"I don't," said Scott.

"I was in trouble," said Chenery. He spoke cheerily. "Bad trouble!" I was headed for the gas-chamber for something I didn't do. Honest! And you found out I hadn't done it, so they gassed somebody else and didn't gas me. And now I'm a honest man and I run the hotel here. Because of you! I appreciate that!"

Scott dismissed the statement. He said, "You heard the announcement I just made. I've a job to do. I want to meet the men who won't go aboard the liner. Trying to keep the Five

Comets from smashing us is going to be tricky. I need to know the men who'll help me do it. I need to know the buoy. I want you to guide me and introduce me."

"Right!" said the plump man, cordially. "You did me a favor once. I'll do you one now! I'll show you over the ship, and I'll bring you back here safe and sound!"

"Very good," said Scott curtly. He stood up and addressed the two men in the uniforms they didn't exactly know how to adjust. "You stay on duty here. If the liner calls, tell her skipper I'll call him back shortly."

"Yes, sir!" said the taller of the two. He saluted with something of a flourish. It was irritating. Scott felt a certain impatient urge to tell him that the Patrol does not salute except on formal occasions. But he didn't. Instead, he followed the plump man out of the control-room.

There was a peculiar silence in the halls and corridors of the buoy. The only sound anywhere was the faint and muted Thallian mood-music coming from the miniature theatre. The plump man padded on ahead, making curious sucking noises with his lips. He seemed to think deeply. Presently he shook his head.

"Funny!" he said reflectively. "Plenty funny! Here's a man that saved my life — You still don't remember? Chenery?"

"No," said Scott. Nobody in the Patrol remembers all the names of all the people he encounters in the way of business.

"It was on Glamis," said Chenery. "They had me cold! I was headed straight for the gas-chamber — and you turned up the proof of who it really was. And you don't remember."

"No," admitted Scott. "I don't."

"That kind of hurts my feelings," said Chenery. "But I'll think it over. Whether you remember me or not, you did me a favor. And we meet each other here. It's a small galaxy!"

They were now on the deck-level below the control-room, where the desk arrangement of an old-fashioned hotel stood unused and gathering dust. The need for dust-particles to maintain a proper ion-content in a spacecraft's air was an old story, but one could tell how long it had been since conscientious housekeeping was done here. Scott estimated seven days, which was in good agreement with the results of poor housewifery in the control-room.

Chenery turned into the small theatre. The girl still sat there, her head turned toward the screen. But she did not seem to be watching it. It was as if she gazed blindly at it while her thoughts — desperate thoughts — were altogether elsewhere.

"Janet," said Chenery amiably,

"here's somebody for you to know. He's Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol. He just came aboard to take command of the buoy."

The girl turned her head as if reluctantly. Her eyes fell upon Scott. She saw his uniform. She looked at his face. Then a swift succession of emotions showed themselves. She was astonished — almost incredulous. Then a somehow terrible hope began to show.

But Chenery said blandly, "He came aboard all by himself to take charge of things."

The girl's face lost its look of hope and bitter disappointment took its place. Then she glanced at Chenery and back at Scott, and a sorrowful compassion showed in her eyes.

"I'm showing him over the place," said Chenery brightly. "Did you hear him telling everybody to get ready to leave here an' get on a liner he's got waiting?"

"I — didn't really listen," said the girl.

"He'll explain—probably," said Chenery with some zest. "He's an old friend of mine. He don't remember it, but he did me a big favor once. He wants to go over the buoy. 'Want to come along?"

The girl looked at him unhappily.

"It'll be okay," Chenery assured her. "I gave Bugsy a good talkin' to. And I'll be right there. Me and the Lieutenant. It'll be okay, and you can look in the hospital with us right along."

The girl stood up. The look of total hopelessness on her face was somehow harrowing. Scott revised an automatic first guess that against all probability a woman or women were involved in this affair. But this girl wasn't normally an associate of criminals. She was involved, but against her will. And she looked forward without the least hope of escape to disaster more complete than she'd known up to now.

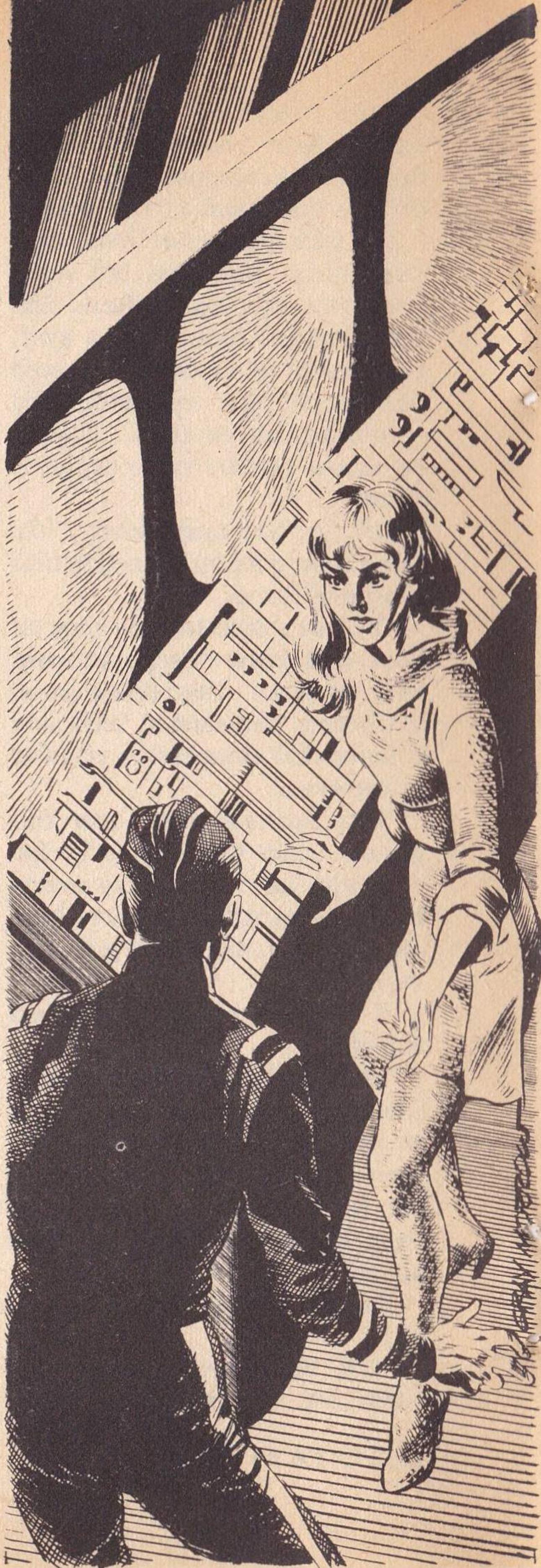
"Janet," explained Chenery cheerily, "she's a nurse. She's been takin' care of a couple of characters down in the hospital. They were on a ship goin' from where they'd been caught to where they'd be gassed. They tried to pull off a trick. They thought they'd burn down their guards and take their ship all by themselves. But they didn't. They got burned down themselves. So they were shifted from the ship they were burned on because they needed a hospital, and we got one. Janet's the nurse."

Scott said nothing. He realized that his pose of ignoring everything that was wrong, here, was paying off admirably. Lambda had been taken over by criminals because the Golconda Ship was coming to port here. It might be necessary to convince somebody

that everything was normal on the space-buoy, before they'd make fast alongside. So Scott was being used to test the look of things. So long as he pretended to accept conditions here as commonplace, the members of the criminal enterprise would be heartened. If he showed suspicion, they wouldn't. But he'd be killed after the liner waiting outside had gone on its way. That was self-evident. Still, for the better part of half an hour, there'd probably be no attempt to murder him. He'd walked so to speak, into the parlor of men waiting to capture the Golconda Ship. They were watching to see his reactions.

He followed Chenery down another level of stairs. Here were cabins, for passengers shifted from their liners to the buoy, to shift back to other liners going where they wanted to be. Scott did not pretend to be interested in the cabins. It was all too likely that in some of them he'd find evidence of murders done. It was not wise to uncover anything of that sort just now. But he was aware that the girl Janet was very pale as Scott glanced down a corridor.

He saw a scorched place on the wall. It wasn't especially conspicuous, but a blaster-bolt had made it, and blasters aren't normally fired in the passenger-quarters on ships of space. Scott



ignored it.

They descended again. There were three levels of passenger-cabins, and plainly they were all unoccupied just now. On the last of the cabin-decks, though, there was the sound of snoring and a faint, faint odor of drink.

"Somebody," said Chenery brightly," didn't hear your little speech, Lieutenant. Maybe. Maybe we'll wake him up to leave us. But not now. Not just yet."

Further downward—sternward—there was a deck for freight—passenger-freight. There was baggage here. On an average, a space-passenger carries twice as much baggage as he needs across the space between worlds. Nobody quite realizes that shops on a planet a light-century from home will stock just about the same articles one can buy around the corner. So space-travellers carry mountains of baggage. But it's possible to guess the number of passengers by a glance around the luggage-hold. Scott made a guess. Then he realized that men travelling to commit a crime would travel light because they'd expect to abandon other possessions when they took the Golconda Ship. There was baggage of the sort normal passengers carry. Scott had a feeling now that they'd never claim it. The girl's utter hopelessness told him much. But he guessed at seven legitimate passengers and perhaps as many as twenty others. He wondered sardonically if the baggage-master thought it strange when so many travellers with so little baggage began to accumulate in Lambda. It wasn't likely he'd been alarmed, though.

Down more deck-levels. Two of them were luridly lighted by glow-bulbs exactly reproducing the light-quality of a yellow Type G sun. Here were hydroponic gardens, growing lushly in the brightness, taking carbon dioxide and excess moisture from the air and supplying fresh foodstuffs to the Lambda's company. The third garden-level was dark, because plants require periods of darkness as well as of light if they are to grow and fruit.

So far there'd been no living being in sight. Scott was sure that there were many more men aboard. Only chosen ones would have been authorized to show themselves, because they'd be too much of a type to be convincingly either travellers or crewmen. They'd be blaster-men, with the expressions and the sharp and snappy costuming of their kind. And they'd be amused at Scott's seeming innocence, and they might show it. But it was desirable to know how far Scott could remain innocent of what had taken place here, and what was in prospect. It occurred to Scott that Chenery might have

had the idea for the test.

In the main freight-space, though, there were two men. This was a warehouse-level which once had been a freight-hold of an interstellar ship. These two were in strict deshabille, with hairy chests showing and soiled work-trousers exuding odors from long-ago-handled freight. They had a fali-board set on a box between them, with the pieces for the game arranged on the triangular pattern of the board. But the men were placed on the board at random. An outlaw-piece was on a black triangle. The game wasn't a game. These men were acting the parts of freight-handlers with no notion of how such parts should be played.

They looked up cordially when Chenery said, "Ho-ya! This is Lieutenant Scott, the new Patrol officer. He wants to know how things are goin'."

"Pretty good! Pretty good!" said one of them. He spoke to Scott. "About goin' on that liner, Loot'nt, we figure if you're goin' to stay, we'll stay with you an' do what we can to help. Okay?"

"Splendid," said Scott. He carefully kept all irony out of his voice and avoided another glance at the fali-board, which a fali enthusiast would have found unbelievable. He gestured for Chenery to lead on.

They reached the main engine-room, larger and more spacious even than a cargo-hold. In its center there remained the mounting that had held the ship's overdrive unit. This buoy had been refitted for its present use at some space-port aground, and had been driven to its present position in overdrive, because otherwise the journey would have taken generations of time. But after its arrival, the overdrive unit was removed because the buoy was to stay here for good. The solar-system drive remained, of course. Occasionally and for very brief periods it had to be run to adjust the position of the checkpoint to that of the marker-asteroid. The asteroid's positions had been calculated far into the future, and it was simpler to match it than to try to keep to a scheduled placing with shiftings bound to happen when liners stopped and hooked on and loaded or unloaded freight. But Lambda had no other use for drives. Not in ordinary times.

A man in oily garments appeared from behind a disconnected switchboard. He waved a hand and Chenery led the way toward him. Again he introduced Scott, identifying the oily man as the buoy's engineer. But Scott noted that his face and hands showed no trace of the oil so liberally present on his clothing.

"I heard your speech, Lieutenant," said the man in oily clothes.

"But you're going to stay, so I stay too."

"Everything's in good shape, then," observed Scott.

"Yes, sir! Everything! I've got a couple of hands—off duty now—who're good! When you want something done, you call on us!"

Scott said drily, "I'll do that. We may have a tricky time before us, dodging comets."

"You'll have all the rudder you need," the engineer assured him, beaming. "For any kind of driving!"

Scott reacted almost visibly to this remarkable statement. But he nodded and turned to Chenery, and Chenery led the way further astern — downward. On the way Scott reflected sardonically upon the assurance that Lambda had plenty of rudder. A space-craft doesn't have a rudder. It can't. There's nothing in space for a rudder to action, whether between worlds or stars. Off-ground, a ship is steered by tiny drive-engines which on demand push its bow to the right or left, and its stern to left or right. They can also turn the bow — and the ship — up or down. Eight miniature drives, four in the bow and as many in the stern, will swing a ship in any direction. They can even spin it like a top with no forward drive at all, which is unthinkable for a ship with a rudder. But the alleged engineer of Checkpoint Lambda plainly didn't know it. It was evidence that though the men recruited to seize the Golconda Ship might be good at handling blasters, they weren't spacemen.

The inspection-party of Scott and Janet and Chenery reached the hospital at the very stern of the ship. It was there because nowhere else would it be practical to lessen or cut off artificial gravity if a patient's need required it. There were glittering white plastic walls. There were soundless floors. There were hospital rooms with equipment ranging from aseptic-environment rooms for contagious illness to the items needed for surgery and even dentistry. There were two men seated in a corridor outside a door made of steel bars. Beyond them was a door with a lighted sign above it. "*Lifeboat. Do Not Enter.*"

"Ho-ya!" said Chenery. "This's Lieutenant Scott, the new Patrol officer." To Scott he said, "These two characters are the guards for the patients I told you about." Then he added to Janet: "Y'want to look the patients over, Janet?"

The girl went silently into the barred room. Scott heard her asking murmured routine questions of the two patients. She changed a dressing on a badly burned arm. The faint, unpleasant odor of a blast-burn reached Scott's nostrils. At least that was authen-

tic. It couldn't be faked.

"The Lieutenant," said Chenery amiably, "wants everybody that'll go off the buoy to a liner he's got waiting. He says there's a chance a comet'll smash us. But he's goin' to stay aboard and try to pull through it. You two—what d'you say?"

The two men here were singularly hard-featured. They didn't look like guards. They looked bored and scornful.

"The patients can't be moved," said one of them. He made no particular effort to seem other than derisive. "So y'wouldn't expect us to desert 'em, would you? Us bein' faithful to our duty?"

The tone was definitely sarcastic. Chenery said angrily, "That's no way—"

"Maybe you can say it better," said the second man truculently. "We ain't takin' orders from you!"

Chenery glared. He opened his mouth to speak, and stopped. The girl came out of the barred room. The two supposed guards smirked at her. One, with a derisive glance at Chenery, reached out his hand deliberately to touch her.

Scott took one step and made a chopping motion with his hand. It landed exactly right. Strangling, the man who'd reached for Janet went down. There was a muffled clatter. A blaster spun a half-turn on the floor. Scott paid no attention to it. He faced the second man, with no weapon drawn but with an expression of such concentrated ferocity that the other man gave back apprehensively.

Scott said nothing.

Chenery panted, somehow shrilly, "Dammit, you tell Bugsy—"

Scott reached out to Chenery. He whirled him about and thrust him through the door behind him. He swept the girl through that same doorway. His motions were smooth and precise, as if rehearsed. He faced back to the second supposed guard of the two injured men. He looked at that man, who instinctively gave ground again. Scott picked up the blaster the first man had lost from its holster. That man kicked and gasped. He'd been hit scientifically, and enough force in the blow at that particular spot would have killed him. Scott spoke to the standing, fearful other.

"You'd better tell Bugsy," he said evenly, "that I want to talk to him. I'll be in the control-room. He can come there. And tell him I'm liable to get impatient if he doesn't come soon."

The hospital-corridor door closed behind him. He turned to find Chenery in the act of actually wringing his hands. Janet was paler than he'd seen her before—which was very pale indeed.

"Back to the control-room," he said shortly. "I've got to speak to the liner. By the way, who's Bugsy?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He led the way, briskly. Janet came close behind him. Chenery brought up the rear. He made agitated, whimpering sounds. They went through the engine-room. The engineer wasn't visible. But on the level above the warehouse-space Scott turned aside from the way by which they'd descended.

Chenery said miserably, "Hey! Not that way—"

"Yes," said Scott, "This way."

He'd studied the plans of the space-buoy when appointed to command it. He made the rest of the way upward by stairs provided for the delivery of baggage and services to the hotel-level rooms. There was nothing secret about it. Scott chose it to check his own familiarity with the space-installation he'd never seen before.

They reached the control-room. It was empty. Chenery practically blubbered when Scott closed the door behind them. Janet was wholly pale.

"Discipline's gone," said Scott ironically. "I told those two privates to stay on duty here."

Janet said hopelessly, "You didn't really think they—"

"I was making a joke," said Scott, ironically. "Chenery, this place should be bugged. Where is it?"

Chenery gulped. Then he reached under the control-desk. He wrenched at something. He showed Scott a tiny microphone with thread-like wires attached.

"Good!" said Scott. "Now listen! I know the men I met were primed with answers for me. Quick work! I want to know if there's anybody who'll want to leave here—can anybody leave?"

Janet said quietly, "No. There's nobody—left to go."

"Except you," Scott corrected. "Chenery, she doesn't belong in this mess. You're in trouble too—and you know it. But if you'll help her get on that liner—I'll let you go with her. I can't make a better deal than that. You'll have a chance to disappear before this business is known anywhere but here."

Chenery swallowed. Then he shook his head. "I got—I started this. It's too good. It ain't working out the way I wanted it but—" He swallowed again. "She couldn't be got away anyhow."

Scott said, "No?" He pressed a button, grimly. He called, using the inter-ship communicator microphone. There was no answer. He called again. He looked for the light that would indicate a carrier-wave going out. It hadn't come on. The communicator wasn't working.

Lips tensed, Scott pressed the

trouble-finder stud such as all important equipment carries. A separate, battery-operated device went into action. It checked the circuitry and the elements of the space-phone by which Scott had tried to reach the liner. There was a humming sound. Something clicked. A slip of paper rolled out for his inspection.

"Power off," said the slip. *"This unit only."*

"It seems," said Scott very coldly indeed, "that somebody doesn't want any messages going out. Which is understandable!"

He turned in his chair. The screens were operating. Only the communicator was turned off, from somewhere outside the control-room. Scott could see the liner, probably as much as ten miles away. It had drifted so far since Scott came aboard Lambda. It seemed to be waiting to hear further from the checkpoint. But before Scott could even try to think how to get power back to the communicator, he realized that the liner was unnaturally still. He'd said for it to wait half an hour. Much more than so much time had passed. So far as the liner-skipper knew, he'd come aboard Lambda—and the rest was silence. Calls hadn't been answered. And there were those huge and increasing mistinesses which were the Five Comets. Comets are not solid. They are swarms of deadly objects, hurtling through emptiness. Even their neighborhood is dangerous, and the liner-skipper had his passengers to think of.

So the liner was aiming for its next port. Aiming took a long time. Minutes. The liner-skipper was doing the only thing possible. It wouldn't be a thing to be proud of, but he had no alternative.

The liner seemed to hang absolutely motionless for minutes while its aim was refined to fractions of fractions of seconds of arc. Scott had a feeling that it called, for one last time. But he couldn't answer.

The liner flickered out of existence like a bubble bursting. Actually it was wrapped in a cocoon of stressed space which carried it away at many times the speed of light.

Six days from now it would return to normal space and try to tell what its skipper knew about events on Checkpoint Lambda. He didn't know much. For one item, he didn't think of the Golconda Ship in connection with the behavior of the buoy. But he'd get Scott's report and his own knowledge to the Patrol as soon as possible. Still, it would be a matter of weeks before a Patrol ship reached Canis Lambda to find out what had happened.

Scott looked after the vanished

liner for a matter of seconds. Then he said evenly, "So that's ruled out! Things look pretty sticky. We'll take a look at the Five Comets again. That situation looks pretty nasty, too."

It did.

Chapter 3

The Five Comets moved in toward the sun Canis Lambda. They moved with a seeming deliberation, each in its own individual fashion and from its individual direction. There was one which was very large. Its nucleus — its coma — its head — was the center of a misty brightness scores of thousands of miles across. The actual heart of it, of course, was something else. The substance of the comet was an enormous aggregation of rocks and metal masses floating about each other as they plunged toward the sun. By the effect of sunlight upon them, minute quantities of occluded gases were boiled off into emptiness. Sunlight struck them and ionized them and made them into a mist, and by another process drove them away from itself toward remoteness in the form of a long and shining tail.

Another comet was very small. It came from very, very far out in space. It was speeding furiously to overtake the companions it knew only rarely and then for relatively a short time—a few weeks every so many years. It would rush with them around the yellow sun and then speed grandly away into the lonely and dimly lighted void. At the aphelion of this comet, Canis Lambda would be only a star, and not the brightest in the heavens, at that. But now it rushed sunward.

Then there were two comets like twins, identical in size and pushing sturdily together toward the rendezvous of their tribe. Astronomers had likened them to Beila's Comet in the First System, which was observed to have twinned itself somewhere out in the far darkness where comets spend most of their lives. Beila's Comet appeared several times as twins. Then it appeared no more, as if one of the twins had died far from the sight of men and the other would not survive its brother. Neither one was ever heard of again.

And there was a fifth comet, quite commonplace as comets go.

They drove in toward Canis Lambda, and in observing them Scott had a privilege many astronomers might have envied him. Not many men saw any of the Five Comets. Mostly they were invisible in remoteness. Sometimes one or three or two appeared. Not many ships happened along the space-lanes to break out of overdrive when they were visible, and few spacemen

stop to marvel at the wonders of the heavens. When Scott took his first observations in Lambda's control-room, all five could be viewed. Which was excessively rare.

He was making his notes when a ship broke out of overdrive two light-hours away—say, a thousand million miles or so—and it received the metallic-voiced message that Lambda sent monotonously toward the stars. "*Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report.*" Scott heard the whining, whistling sound which was that ship's log, broadcast to be recorded in the checkpoint files. Actually, the unseen ship had broken out, picked up the checkpoint call, automatically responded to it, and was gone again long before its log reached Lambda. But Scott went on with his observations.

He verified the state of things from the control-board. It required only the simplest of observations to make sure of Lambda's position in its orbit. It took only looking to see that if the Five Comets were on schedule—and they were—they would fill all space ahead for a completely unbelievable distance with plunging meteors which were really stray fragments of steel and stone. In a way, the hurtling objects would be like so many charges of buckshot fired at one target. They could penetrate each other without notable results. But any object moving across their course or in their way would be torn to shreds. And the Lambda would pass through four of the Five Planets' heads. It seemed unimaginable that the buoy could survive. But Chenery saw disaster of another sort.

"You don't know what you done then, Lieutenant!" he said frantically. "You don't know what you done! Those were Bugsy's men! You got me in bad trouble! Bad trouble!"

Scott said impatiently, "You're in worse trouble than I could put you in! Do you realize that we're headed on a collision-course with a good many millions of bits of scrap-iron and rock?"

"How'd I know that?" demanded Chenery fretfully. "Look, Lieutenant! I cooked up this whole idea that's happening here. I hadda get some help. I got Bugsy to come in on it. But he's a hard man to get along with. Now he's tryin' to take over. But I had the idea to start with, and he'd've played along, him and the guys he's got, but—"

Scott turned to the girl. He offered her the blaster he'd picked off the floor in the hospital area.

"Have you got one of these? No? Then take it."

He turned back to Chenery.

"I've got to shift this buoy out of its present place," he said reasonably. "I've got to put it

where it won't be running into certain destruction. We can't run away from it on solar-system drive, and I need cooperation! You can't be such an idiot as not to have an engineer and an astrogator to handle the Golconda Ship when you take it! I want—"

But Chenery jumped. Visibly. He clawed at his garments for a weapon.

"Drop it!" said Scott sharply. A blaster had appeared in his hand as if by magic.

Chenery froze. Then he panted, "What — wh-at was that you said?"

"I named the Golconda Ship," said Scott. "You're here to seize it when it arrives. And you've got to have an astrogator and an engineer to run it if you succeed. Now, I need those men to take my orders for the time being—the engineer, anyhow. And now! Else in a certain number of hours and minutes—"

Chenery panted, "Why d'you think we' after the Golconda Ship? What makes you think tha.?"

Scott fumed.

"Because it's coming here! There's nothing else you could be after! But you've got to scrap that scheme and let me try to save what can be saved out of the mess you've made!"

Chenery stared at him, at once aghast and bewildered.

"Look, Lieutenant! You done me a favor, once. What's this? How'd you know — Why'd you come aboard if you knew? You coulda spoiled everything just keepin' that liner hangin' off, here, an' warnin' the Golconda Ship when it come. Are you crazy?"

"I obey orders," Scott told him.

It would be useless to try to convince Chenery that he'd come aboard the Lambda because, as a Patrol officer, it was sometimes his duty to attempt the impossible. The Lambda was his command, and his first independent one. It should not be here where the liner had found it, with the Five Comets due to cross its path. No matter how wrong or how fatal or how abnormal matters appeared to be aboard it, it was his duty to come aboard and take over. Chenery wouldn't understand that. Chenery was, obviously, a professional criminal. Quite likely he'd never thought of any other profession. His gratitude to Scott for something Scott didn't remember might be genuine enough, but still he'd only see things from his own standpoint.

"But you're tellin' me—"

"I thought you were running things," said Scott. "Bring on your astrogator and I'll show him the state of affairs. He'll check what I've told you."

"He—ain't available. He's Bugsy's man. Bugsy'd have to tell

him, and—mmm . . ."

"That could waste time," said Scott. "All right, bring me your engineer. Not the man you told me was an engineer! He thinks a spaceship's steered by a rudder! Get me your engineer!"

"The engineer we got is one of Bugsy's men too," said Chenery unhappily. "And he's drunk right now. You heard him snore. I hadda have some help, y'see, and I called on Bugsy. But he's turnin' out a hard man to get along with. His engineer—"

"Get Bugsy—whoever he may be!" snapped Scott. "Look at that screen! That's what we're heading for!"

He pointed. And the Five Comets of Canis Lambda showed with an appalling size and distinctness on no less than three of the control-room vision screens. There was a very large glowing against the Milky Way and filling, all by itself, a space fifteen degrees across. Behind it to one side and even brighter—shining through the misty glow of the first comet's head—there was a similar other patch of glowing gas. Separated a little from the others were the twin comets, closing in to join the first-seen ones. And one could see the last, whose tail was more visible than the others because of the angle at which it drove to join the rest.

The matter, the mass, the actual substance of the comets was hordes and multitudes and unthinkable swarms of stones and metal lumps rushing through emptiness with impassioned energy to no purpose that human minds could fathom. All comets are made that way. Their solid part is particles from sand-grain size to houses to mountains. These particles have every possible form and size and meaningless shape. But they are never seen. They ride in an eery, misty luminescence. Unless they hit something. Then what they hit is destroyed.

In the control-room. Chenery seemed about to wring his hands.

"You're sayin'—" his voice had gone up a half-tone toward shrillness— "You're sayin' we can't take the Golconda Ship because the Five Comets are goin' to get us! But you could be lyin'! You're Patrol! It's your job to stop guys like me from doin' our stuff! But we' started on this one! We almost got it made! We can't stop now!"

"Get Bugsy," commanded Scott. "Maybe he's got some sense!"

Chenery hesitated in apparent soul-racking indecision. Then he went stumbling toward the control-room door. He went out. Janet moistened her lips. Scott noticed it.

"Would you want," he asked politely, "to tell me about the taking of the buoy? How they

actually managed it?"

She said unsteadily, "I was asleep. I waked when I heard a scream somewhere and a blaster-shot. I heard doors banging. Sometimes there were shots and —other noises. Then I heard men running. They came along the corridor my—cabin was on, banging open doors as they came. Two cabins away there was a—fat man. They kicked open his door, and I heard him say, 'What's the matter? What's happening?' And there was a blaster-shot and he cried out—terribly. They opened the door next to mine. I stood—paralyzed. I couldn't believe— And then somebody fired a blaster down the corridor. It hit one of the men who'd been opening doors—almost in front of mine."

She swallowed.

"They—fired at the man who'd shot at them. They rushed toward him. Wh-when they came back, the man who'd been shot in front of my door had crawled blindly a little way. So they skipped my door without knowing it. Down the corridor a woman peered out. I heard her asking anxiously what was the matter, and a blaster fired and — that was all. They went on. To other levels. And there were—other shots, some far away."

Her voice stopped abruptly. She made a gesture.

"That—that's all . . . ."

Scott said, "But somebody found you later."

"Y-yes. It was—Chenery." Her throat sounded dry. "I think—anybody else would have—killed me. But he found me and he was —upset. He told me he hadn't meant for the buoy to be taken that way. He was — apologetic. Apologetic! He explained that he'd meant to call for the crewmen, one by one, and make prisoners of them, not kill them. Then he'd meant to capture the passengers the same way. He seemed quite miserable about it! They'd have told afterward, he said, that it was a beautifully handled robbery—the cleverest, biggest trick ever done! You see the Golconda Ship—"

"He didn't expect to take that without fighting!" said Scott.

"But he did! He'd—planned to have a banquet ready for the Golconda Ship's crew, to celebrate their return. He'd lead them to tables set with luxuries they'd have missed—"

"The Golconda Ship didn't carry regular crew's rations," said Scott sardonically. "Every man aboard's a multimillionaire. They wouldn't have missed any luxuries!"

"He thought," said Janet, "that they'd stuff themselves. And there'd be—knockout drops, and they'd wake up to find the Golconda Ship gone, and the passenger-prisoners would tell them

how they'd been fooled. Chenery was terribly proud of that plan! He'd have been known as pulling off the biggest robbery in the smartest way in all history. But Bugsy took over—"

"Chenery's idea wasn't practical," said Scott. "It wouldn't have worked."

"Anyhow—now he'll be known as a — butcher. And he said he'd save my life, or try to, so I could explain that he'd only meant the robbery to be the smartest and cleverest ever."

She added helplessly, "I thought he was crazy! P-people killed and he talking like that. . . But he did keep the others from —harming me. He told them I was a nurse and two of them were—wounded. I'd cure them, he said. So I've—pretended to be a nurse. I have—kept them alive. Maybe."

"Two wounded," said Scott. "Their men, of course. But there was some fighting. That's good."

He rubbed his chin. His expression was wry. Now he began to see something like a complete picture of the situation in the buoy — if only the part which made least sense and was the kind that gives the Patrol so many unpleasant problems. It helps to solve them, too, because planetary police and the Patrol together know that most crimes aren't committed for money. Your professional criminal, like any other professional man, does not practice his profession to get rich. Chenery had the motivation of very many members of his craft. He wanted to be smart.

With half of humanity envying the Golconda Ship's crew, and the other half trying to guess their secret, Chenery had planned a robbery which not only would be the most stupendous one known, but would also show that he'd outsmarted all the rest of the human race. His vanity wouldn't be satisfied with the Golconda Ship's treasure. He craved to be admired for his cleverness. So he really had wanted to have as many witnesses as possible, to relate how clever he'd been and how brilliantly he'd worked out his coup.

Scott shrugged, Chenery's ambition to be smart had cost lives. It was silliness, but still the fact. Similar silliness has caused wars and cost lives throughout all history. It was still highly likely that Scott's own life would be among those lost in this affair, and it was no comfort at all to reflect that Chenery himself would eventually be killed through the essential silliness of crime as a profession.

The control-room was silent. The checkpoint's identifying signal, though, still went out to emptiness in every direction. It continued to call upon all passing ships to report. It would record

their reportings. As Scott moved restlessly about the control-room, a tape-spool on the wall began to turn. A ship had come and gone, out somewhere, and the whine recorded was its log. Perhaps a dozen to three dozen ships passed Checkpoint Lambda daily, but very few opened communication direct.

Footsteps. The control-door opened. Scott turned, aware of Janet's fright. But it was Chenery who came in. He looked less scared, less uneasy. He had color in his cheeks again.

"Ho-ya!" he said cheerily. "I talked to Bugsy, Lieutenant! Things look better! Bugsy's agreeable. He'll listen. We're go-in' to have lunch together!"

It was preposterous. Scott almost did not believe his ears.

Chenery turned exuberantly to Janet. "You'll fix it, Janet? We got to work things out. You'll fix something to eat, and Bugsy and the Lieutenant and me, we'll have lunch together and talk things over reasonable. We'll cook up some kinda businesslike deal."

Scott listened unbelievingly. When he'd forced himself aboard the space-buoy, it had been with a reasonable expectation of being killed. There'd been some hesitation, to be sure, because then the liner still lay nearby and could spoil the whole intended robbery. But he'd been used to test the intended deception of the Golconda Ship's crew. Now Chenery was aware that he knew of the purpose of the buoy's seizure, and more than guessed at the way it was done. And that meant that for Chenery's and Bugsy's safety, and that of every other living man on the ship, Scott had to be killed sooner or later.

On the face of it, then, to lunch with men who had such stark need to kill him was out of all reason. Chenery spoke of a deal to be arranged over a businessman-like luncheon table. Only Chenery would think of such a thing. He might have some incredible proposal in mind that would salvage some part of what he'd lost. And that, naturally, would be the splendid gratification of his vanity. He might have contrived some trick to gain information, perhaps a specious and involved bargain for Janet's and Scott's escape. But there were too many murders in the past, and too many more in prospect, to make any bargain plausible. Scott shrugged.

"Lunch, eh?" he said drily. "Why not?"

Chenery grandly led the way out of the control-room. If he hadn't gone first, Scott would have put him there. But they went down, the three of them, to the next level below.

They found Bugsy in the lobby of what looked so much like an

hotel. He was seated in an elaborately upholstered chair and smoking a very black cigar. Where Chenery was short and plump, Bugsy was short and square. He was hard-featured, as a man needs to be when he has more blaster-men than specialists among his followers. He regarded them coldly from under thick eyebrows.

"Here's the Lieutenant, Bugsy," said Chenery brightly.

Bugsy said, "Huh!"

He waved a hand at chairs nearby. Scott held one for Janet. This was a situation so near to lunacy that Scott still felt that it was unreal. He was Patrol, and ignoring the past he was obligated to prevent the monster crime now in plain prospect. Chenery was the one who'd found out the destination of the Golconda Ship. Janet was a passenger who knew too much, destined to join the other murdered passengers. Bugsy was the man who'd been recruited by Bugsy to make up the force of blastermen needed for the capture of the checkpoint and the following seizure of the Golconda Ship. And Bugsy was now the man who decided things because he had the most men with the most blasters on the spot.

In a peculiar way, this was another case of something found in all history and all over the galaxy. Always there are men



who start things, and other men who take over what someone else had begun. They always assume that possession means not only ownership but competence to manage the enterprises they have seized. Very often it means the total failure of the thing taken over. But these men can't understand that. It is an inevitable stupidity of the violent mind.

But it can bring about much disaster to non-violent people.

"Chenery says," said Bugsy in a flat voice, "that you got on fast to what's happened here."

"Naturally!" said Scott.

"What was wrong?" asked Bugsy in the same flat voice.

"Everything," Scott told him without cordiality. "Your men in Patrol uniforms didn't know how to salute. Your freight-handlers didn't know how to play Fali. Your engineer thought spaceships used rudders. The guards in the hospital were too smart. Much too smart!"

"No good, eh?" said Bugsy.

"No good!" said Scott coldly. "You should've known it. But I knew something was very wrong before I came aboard."

Bugsy considered, regarding Scott unblinkingly.

"How?"

Scott told him scornfully. The buoy remained in its proper orbit a mile or two from its marker-asteroid when the Five Comets were approaching and were already closer than any professional spaceman would have waited for. Before that, the buoy's insistence that there was nothing to leave it for other destinations, and that it would receive no freight. The arbitrary, profane behavior of its supposed Patrol commander.

"If you're going to pretend that you're a normal space installation," said Scott coldly, "you should know how one acts. Your men didn't. They don't know now."

"So this ain't normal," observed Bugsy. "Chenery here don't run the hotel. The Patrol guys aren't Patrol guys. The engineer— Nobody's what he says. You figure it that way?"

"Naturally! Do you think I'm an idiot?" demanded Scott.

"Yeah," said Bugsy. He paused. "You came on board."

He looked at the ash of his cigar.

"I could use you," he said flatly, after a moment. "You could fix things so nobody else'd think there was anything wrong. You could be useful, that way. But I'd be a fool to let you try it."

"He says," interposed Chenery uneasily, "that we got to do something about some comets that are headin' in to the sun, here. We're headed to run into 'em."

"Yeah," said Bugsy. "I seen a comet. It's got a long tail.

Shines in the sky. A scientist fella said the tail was so thin you could gather it up and put it in your hat."

"Not these comets," said Scott. "And it's not the tail we have to dodge. It's the heads. They're masses of hunks of rock and metal. They give off gas that shines."

"Forget the comets!" rasped Bugsy. "There's something else I want to know! You came on board. You say you knew there was something wrong before you did come. Why'd you do it?"

"Partly about the comets," said Scott. "To find out why the buoy hadn't gotten out of danger when it should, being on a collision course. Partly to find out if there were any passengers left alive. Since I'm here, I don't think there are."

"Just why'd you think the passengers stopped living'?"

Scott shrugged again.

"You came here to take the Golconda Ship," said Scott. "You took over the buoy as a start. There was some fighting. There are two wounded men in the hospital. Your men. No wounded passengers. No wounded crewmen. Where are the passengers and crew?"

"There's her," said Bugsy, indicating Janet. "She's a passenger and she's all right!"

"I'd like to talk to the others," said Scott.

He heard Janet draw in her breath sharply. There weren't any others. Scott seemed to be bringing matters to a head.

"Oh!" said Bugsy. His tone was pure irony. "When d'you want to talk to them?"

"Any time after there've been measures taken about the comets," said Scott evenly. "There's no use talking to passengers or anything else unless something's done about that!"

Bugsy's features twisted into something that should have been a grin.

"D'you want to know why I don't buy that?" He paused. "When Chenery propositioned me about this bit—takin' the Golconda Ship and all — I looked things up. How a Golconda Ship landin' has been managed. They hire guards. They buy flatfeet! They set up a security force that costs millions, and they don't care. Nobody gets in miles of that ship while it's aground. They guard it like it was a planetary president!"

Scott frowned, but waited.

"You're no Patrol man!" rasped Bugsy. "You took a chance. Sure! Get rid of us and the Golconda Ship'll pay you a million or two or ten if you wipe us out protectin' them! They ain't stingy that way! You get us outa the way and tell them what you' done for 'em—"

Scott shurgged his shoulders. "You sound to me," he said,

"like somebody working himself up to use a blaster."

Bugsy said, "I—am!"

He made a sudden, violent, movement. Chenery gasped. Then there was stillness. Bugsy's hand was halfway into a shoulder-holster, and there it seemed frozen. Scott had a blaster all the way out and very accurately bearing.

"You were," agreed Scott. "And if you'd been a little more skillful, Bugsy, I'd have had to kill you to save my own life. But there's a Patrol regulation against killing anybody if it can be helped. If I were a private guard for the Golconda Ship's crew, that regulation wouldn't apply. So maybe you'll believe I am Patrol, now."

He paused.

"You can take your hand away —if it's empty," he added. "Think things over," Bugsy's hand came slowly and very carefully away from the holster. "It's quite a problem, working out a way to handle this situation. Everything I've been able to think of so far works out making you a corpse. Sometimes a pretty messy one. So think! Bend your massive brain to the job, Bugsy. And when you've an idea how to adjust matters considering the comets and the Golconda Ship and the fix you're in now—let me know! But there isn't much time!"

He stood up. He gestured Janet up, and behind him. He took her to the stair leading up to the control-room. He nodded, and went up the stairs behind her.

In the control-room as the door closed, she said unsteadily, "You took a terrible chance!"

"Not as much as Bugsy," he said briefly, "and what I did may be useful. Now I want to look at the comets again."

He pointed to a chair. He busied himself about the instruments as she sank into it. It wasn't necessary to squint into eyepieces of the instruments, of course. They gave their readings on the vision-screens. He punched them into the board-computer. Presently he pressed the integrator-stud. There was a little "click." He looked at the slip of paper slid out from a slot in the computer.

"Two hours, thirty-seven minutes, forty seconds," he said in a tone indicating no particular rejoicing. "That's the most probable time for us to hit the first cometary mass."

Janet said, "But is that—really a danger? I thought—I hoped—" Then she said in a suddenly level voice. "Absurd. I didn't have any hope."

"I didn't have any lunch," said Scott, "and after accepting an invitation for it, too! —Seriously, yes. There is hope for the buoy, if that means anything. If Bugsy gives up the idea of interfering—which he probably won't—we can

almost certainly manage to get by the comets. We—"

"We?" asked Janet.

"The buoy," Scott agreed. "You and I and our prospects are something else entirely. I think you'd better stay with me. I've something to do. Chenery isn't what you'd call a strong character, and I think he's going to get weaker. Yes. Come along!"

He led the way. His air was purposeful, though there was no apparent utility in anything he might do. If the buoy wasn't somehow moved to safety, it would be smashed by the swarms of stones and metal masses which constituted the real substance of the comets. If it was moved away —why—the Golconda ship might not find it, and Scott and Janet would be marooned in space with the buoy's present company. If the Golconda Ship made contact and was captured, the men who'd captured the buoy before would feel it necessary to kill them. They'd know too much. Because every man aboard the buoy, now, had earned a seat in a gas-chamber by the murder of the Lambda's original crew and passengers.

Scott went along a corridor and opened a door with the confidence of a man who, having been appointed to the command of a space-station, has carefully studied the hull-plans and deck-plans and installation diagrams. Such a study is not enough for a thorough acquaintance, of course. But it's likely to be useful.

The door closed behind them. There was a peculiar singing stillness. This was a service-area, so arranged that stewards and chambermaids on a luxury liner could give swift and detailed service, popping into view as by magic. There was no particular secret about it, any more than there is about the kitchen of the restaurant of an hotel. But passengers don't see or use such places. Nor would men waiting for the Golconda Ship bother with them.

Scott led the way down a circular iron staircase.

Janet said uneasily, "Where are we going? What do you have to do?"

"I've already done some of it," Scott told her, "under Chenery's guidance. But I'm supposed, technically, to be in command here. As commanding officer, I naturally want to make an inspection of what I command. Without knowing it, Chenery showed me some things I want to know more about."

"But do you really expect—"

"Expect, no," he admitted. "But I think things will eventually be fairly well in hand—that is, if I don't happen to get killed first."

He went on down the stairs. Then he said vexedly, "That's the ticklish part — not getting killed. The odds against that

aren't too good."

Chapter 4

The Golconda Ship remained out of overdrive in space between the stars. Which was an oddity. Men are so made that they have a need for the presence of substance nearby. The most nightmarish of all terrors is that experienced in falling, which is simply the feel of nothingness all around one. Lack of weight does not cause such terror—in swimming one has no sensation of weight. To be firmly enclosed, even with artificial gravity as in a space-ship, will not prevent the terror in the absence of a firm belief that something huge and solid and comforting can be reached and at least emotionally embraced. It is irrational, but nobody likes to break out of overdrive unless he arrives where there is at the least a shining sun, recognizable as such, to promise solidity and not less than one planet available to land on. But the Golconda Ship broke out where there was no solar system, and it stayed there.

It was not an ordinary ship. Cargo-craft are never graceful. They would be globes, for efficiency, if landing-grid fields could land them right side up on spaceport tarmacs. But they can't. So cargo-ships are built in various bulbous, unpleasing forms, to get the maximum of volume with the minimum of hull-material and still be of shapes that landing-grid forcefields can juggle deftly and bring to ground upright. Passenger-ships are another matter. They traditionally follow the forms of fish—not for speed, because in space there is no resistance, but so they can be touched to ground with exit-ports aligned with landing-ramps and cargo-doors with warehouses.

The Golconda Ship was peculiar in design. It has a shape that landing-grids could handle easily, but built out from its hull there were unseemly masses of machinery. The ship itself was a machine for a particular purpose—probably excavation — and every four years there was a new one or something modified from an earlier one. It went out to space. It vanished. Eventually it returned. And then its crew—invariably the same—unloaded treasure past envy by any creatures but other men. Each crew-menber was a multi-millionaire, even to the oilers in the engine-room. Each was close-mouthed. Save for the voyages every four years, they lived in grandeur while every human around them tried to cajole from them some clue to where they found their riches. And all of them remembered, from time to time, the original Golconda Ship on which there had been killings to weed out any of their number

who might be loose-mouthed.

Where the Golconda Ship had appeared, there was no sun. There were only millions of millions of unwinking specks of light, of every possible tint and brightness. The nearest would be light-decades away. This was the loneliness, the emptiness, the utter desolation of between-the-stars. It is this gigantic void which makes the lifeboats of interstellar ships so nearly useless. Survivors of catastrophes in ship-lanes have made port in lifeboats, to be sure. But not many. And those survivors are never quite normal afterward, and never quite unterrified for as long as they live thereafter.

But the Golconda Ship stayed in this abomination of desolation for a long time. Its pilot had to make very many observations. Very many. But now he had luck. A very short-period Cepheid identified itself. The information checked with other data. The Golconda Ship was—here! So, very deliberately it turned. It aimed in a new direction. It adjusted its pointing with microscopic precision. If another ship had looked on, it couldn't have noted the new bearing within a degree of arc. The time it would be in overdrive couldn't be known. The nearest of companions couldn't have duplicated its aim, much less the distance it would run before it broke out of overdrive and into normal space.

But there wasn't any other ship. This one carried more wealth than any single planet's treasury contained. Therefore it traveled secretly and untraceably, and there was nobody who knew where it was, and very few who knew where it was bound.

On Checkpoint Lambda, Scott thought very little about it as a ship. To him it was part of a problem. If he solved it, he should live on for some while longer. If he didn't, he wouldn't.

Janet asked hesitantly, "Is it all right to talk?"

"Why not," asked Scott, "if it makes you feel better?"

She descended the circling stairway behind him. So far, this area behind the walls was a service area. But below the cabin-levels it would become something else. It carried cables to and from the control-room. There were cables which had controlled the now-removed overdrive unit, and the solar-system drive, and waste-pipes, and controls for the eight small steering-drives that pushed the ship's bow right or left and up or down, and the stern in appropriate opposite directions, in the only way a ship could be steered.

These lower between-hull bilges, too, served yet another purpose. They were divided into tunnels leading down all the buoy's length. Through them there could

be communication between any two decks. It was a provision for safety. No disaster which let out air from any one level could separate the still-intact portions of the ship from each other. Unless the buoy broke literally in two, there would always be a passage-way from bow to stern. One or more tunnels might be broken, when they would automatically seal themselves off, but others must remain. Scott went on.

"We're down past the cabins," he observed, when passenger-service equipment disappeared from beside him.

Janet shivered. It occurred to him that the cabins where murder had been done probably hadn't been tidied since. Janet would have thought of that. To change the direction of her thoughts, he said, "What did you want to talk about?"

He went on down and down the metal stair.

"I'm—thinking of Bugsy. He —would have killed you!"

"Surprised?" asked Scott ironically, "after what's happened already? I'll give him credit for one thing, though. If a man's bloodthirsty — and Bugsy is — I like him to want to do his killings in person, rather than hire somebody else to do it. And Bugsy did intend to do just that."

"But you—let him go free . . ."

"I could have killed him," agreed Scott. "But I certainly couldn't have jailed him. What else could I do?"

He stopped. Here was another level, with a door in the side-wall—it was metal, here—and two other doors forming the usual emergency air-lock. If the air in any part of the tunnel was lost, the two doors would close. If disaster was foreseen, every tunnel could be closed from the control-room until the danger was past.

"Here's the baggage room," he said. "I want to inspect this. No more talk for the moment."

He made sure the compartment was empty. He entered, from the tunnel. Janet stood still, listening. The buoy was intensely silent, save for the almost inaudible sound of Scott's shoe-soles a little distance away. It was a peculiar, singing silence. There was something like the just-ended ringing of a bell in the air. Once Janet heard a clicking noise, and then the ringing sensation increased for a little while. It would have been a micrometeorite's impact on the buoy's hull. It was a tiny and infinitely fragile particle, no more massive than so much foam. But its velocity was enormous. It clicked when it struck, and there was a tiny speck of blue-white flame where it turned to rocky or metallic vapor, with a microscopic quantity of plating from the buoy's hull vaporizing with it. There was no real harm

in that kind of thing.

A long time later Scott came back. He looked disturbed.

"Hand-grenades," he said distastefully, "in the baggage. Some of them have been taken out. I brought along a few for samples."

He showed them to her. They were flat, rounded objects which looked cryptic rather than menacing. He slipped them into his pockets. He led the way down again. He peered out into the hydroponic-garden level, where the air of all the ship was processed by plants growing lushly in blazing artificial light. He seemed curious. He plucked some leaves. He fingered them.

Back in the tunnel he said, "Odd. They'll burn."

But he immediately began to descend again. The circling of the stairway became tedious.

Scott said, "I've got two errands. One's in the engine-room. I doubt the man who posed as an engineer is still there. He was there for my benefit. The other errand is—I want to know where Bugsy's men are gathered. He wouldn't let them use the hotel-deck. If somebody from the Golconda ship were to come aboard to check things, their piggishness would raise a question. They'll have some place to be drunk in. —This should be the engine-room deck."

He listened. He applied his eye to the crack to which he opened the door. He nodded to Janet and went in. He seemed confident that no one else was apt to enter. She thought she heard a faint murmur somewhere and grew frightened. He seemed to be gone a long time, and she was trembling when he returned.

"I—thought I heard—voices," she whispered. "I — thought someone was coming down the stairs!"

"When you were a passenger, you didn't think about such things," he told her drily. "A wall was a wall was a wall. I don't think any of Bugsy's men — or Chenery's — are curious about the holes and corners of Lambda. It's more likely you heard the sounds of a poker or a crap-game. Which is what I want to locate."

Then a door slammed somewhere. The sound carried through metal which would hardly carry voices, but Scott stopped absolutely still for long seconds. Then he beckoned to Janet and made a last descent. At the bottom he opened the door with very great care. Janet was right. She had heard a faint murmur. This was louder. In fact, there was argument.

Bugsy's voice, muffled, rose above the rest.

"But I tell you, that comet stuff is crazy! It's all lies! The Golconda Ship men had him watchin'! He got aboard an'

Chenery knew him! So he knew Chenery an' filled him fulla lies! The Golconda Ship's comin' here! We're gonna take it when it comes—here! An' we're gonna be rich! What it's bringin' ain't worth a million credits apiece! Not ten million! After we take the Golconda Ship you can warm y'self with thousand-credit notes in a bonfire! Y'can throw it away —"

Scott listened. Bugsy was having trouble with his men. They were uneasy. Chenery's voice came, perhaps more high-pitched than usual. He was scared. But he was placatory. He was anxiously soothing.

"But look, Bugsy! The comets are there! You can see 'em in the vision-screens! They're gettin' bigger! We're runnin' into 'em! If we don't move the ship like Scott says—"

Scott looked sardonically amused. Janet watched his face. She was frightened.

"Forget the comets!" rasped Bugsy's voice. *"A scientist fella said you could gather up a whole comet an' put it in your hat! That Golconda Ship's comin'. It expects to find us close to the big rock that's a marker for it. If we're anywheres else it might get cagey and not land. D'you want it to figure out something's wrong and go away—leavin' us to get away from here by walkin'?"*

There were rumblings. Someone said querulously, *"We shoulda had our own ship to make sure if anything went wrong!"*

Bugsy was having trouble with his men. Scott had accomplished that much, anyhow. Chenery was genuinely scared. He'd no solution for the predicament Scott told him he was in, but he didn't want to be killed by the Five Comets. If his terror became contagious, Bugsy's men might insist on not being killed by the Five Comets. If they escaped that, they might insist on not having the Golconda Ship see through their pretense of normality. Bugsy hadn't handled that properly — Scott's immediate suspicion proved it. Scott would be the only man capable of certainly luring the Golconda Ship to a mooring. At that point Scott stopped trying to work out details in his own mind. Bugsy's men would begin shortly to insist that they didn't want to go into gas-chambers. They hadn't anticipated any danger at all in that line. Bugsy'd be on a spot.

And it was Scott's present problem to arrange for the survival of the buoy, because it was his first command and he wouldn't face the idea of losing it. Also he had to prevent the capture of the Golconda Ship, because that was his duty as a Patrol officer. Then he had to see that Janet wasn't mur-

dered or otherwise injured under his protection. And after that, strickly speaking, he should deliver Chenery and Bugsy and all their followers as nearly unharmed as possible to a Patrol ship which couldn't arrive for weeks, that they might keep overdue appointments with gas-chambers.

He rather wryly doubted whether Bugsy's or his problems were less likely to be solved.

But Janet was looking fearfully up into his face.

He whispered, "They're in the crew's quarters I think. 'Not bad! But I'll make sure."

He went down the few steps remaining and arrived at the bottom level. She listened. He moved a little distance from the door. She followed. Now he could definitely hear the murmuring of voices. Nearly every man aboard would be there. They'd have been forbidden the hotel-area by Bugsy and Chenery, and they'd have gathered here to pass the time until the purpose of the whole enterprise was to be accomplished. They'd been gambling—for cash only, because the treasure they hoped for was still imaginary. Now, though, they'd stopped their crap-game to argue.

Scott regretfully touched one of the grenades he'd acquired. If Bugsy were in his shoes, he'd have opened the crew's-quarters door and tossed in a couple of grenades. Prompt action with a blaster could have settled the whole affair. To Bugsy, that would have been congenially violent and very likely effective. But Scott couldn't do it. He simply, flatly, couldn't do it. If orders had been necessary, they'd have been issued to forbid it. He shook his head.

"Bugsy's voice rose again!

"All right! I'll ask him! Chenery an' me, we'll ask him!"

A door-catch stirred. On the instant Scott had seized Janet's hand. He drew her swiftly away. Past the hospital space. Past the barred door where two wounded men had been put hastily to make window-dressing for a test of the look of things. Around a corner in the corridor. There he stopped and whispered close to Janet's ear.

"This I didn't intend! But we're all right."

The door-catch stirred again and the sound of voices rose in volume. The door closed, and the murmur diminished.

Chenery's voice came fearfully: *"I'm not sayin' anything but we oughta make sure, Bugsy! It's your life as much as mine! I'm not tryin' to put anything over! But those comets are there! They're showin' bigger on the screens! We oughta make sure!"*

Chenery's voice seemed to be approaching. Bugsy rasped something unintelligible.

"We can ask him!" protested Chenery. *"He's your man, not mine! You picked him! An' now he's hurt, but he can tell if the lieutenant's lyin' about those comets!"*

Scott murmured under his breath, "They're going to talk to one of the men in hospital! Their astrogator's hurt! Not a bad break!"

He heard the curious, very minor rustling sounds which were footfalls on supposedly soundless floor. Then he frowned. Bugsy and Chenery were between Janet and himself and not only the tube-stair they'd come down, but the normal stairway to the upper levels. Lifts and elevators hadn't been built into the buoy when it was a ship, because one can't put emergency-locks into an elevator shaft. It can't be divided into air-tight sections. But there were the two men moving to cut them off, if there should be an alarm. He got out his blaster. If anything happened to him, it would be the same as if it had happened to her.

He said reluctantly, very softly indeed, "If it comes to shooting, I think you'd better join in. This is no time to be a lady. They aren't gentlemen."

She caught her breath. He didn't look to see if she'd brought out the weapon he'd given her. He watched.

He didn't actually see either Bugsy or Chenery. He heard their almost unhearable footsteps on the supposedly noiseless flooring. He saw shadows moving on a wall. They vanished. Chenery and Bugsy had gone into the barred hospital-room in which the two patients had been put.

Bugsy rasped, *"Halley!"*

No stir or answer. Then a movement in the other hospital bed. A voice spoke weakly. The words were slurred.

"Keep outa this!" snapped Bugsy. *"Halley, wake up! What's a comet made of? Gas or what?"*

There was a shaking noise. Bugsy angrily shook the injured man from whom he demanded information. It could have been brutal, and it could have been agonizing. But this figure did not respond at all.

"Wake up, dammit!" snarled Bugsy. *"What's a comet made of?"*

The faint voice spoke again, more distinctly.

"Keep out—" Then Bugsy's voice stopped. *"What? Dead?"* Movements in the room. Then Bugsy again. *"Yeah!"* His tone was purest sarcasm when he spoke once more: *"Okay, Chenery! you ask him!"*

Then the faint voice spoke for the third time. And Scott moved faster than he'd ever moved in his life. He was standing in the doorway, blaster out, before Bugsy grasped what the remain-

ing injured man had said.

"Th' lieutenant went past—."

"That's right, Bugsy," said Scott. "Please don't reach for a blaster! If you do, I'll have to kill you."

Bugsy whirled, but he'd had his lesson. He did not reach for a weapon.

Chenery raised his hands without orders. His throat worked. Then he managed to protest: "I'-been arguin' with him, Lieutenant! 'Tryin' to work out a deal—"

Scott beckoned with his blaster. The sound of voices was only murmurous, where the captors of the buoy argued with each other. But the raising of a voice here would bring them all out—not alarmed, but ending all hope.

But no voice was raised. Scott took Bugsy's blaster as he came out, grinding his teeth. He touched Chenery's, and left it in place. Chenery caught his breath.

"We go back to the control-room," said Scott in a very low tone indeed. "I've got to put it into Bugsy's thick skull what the situation is. There's just been a development you don't seem to realize yet."

He gestured to point out the way they were to go. It was the regular route upward. There was no point in giving out useful information. As they ascended, they could hear almost distinctly the voices in the crew's quarters. It was not a murmurous noise now. It was dispute. Once men shouted at each other. Bugsy muttered profanely. In times of crisis when the ultimate nature of comets determines whether men live or die, there should be a leader suppressing argument and giving orders.

"I was looking into something important," said Scott quietly, "when you came along. When we get to the control-room, I'll tell you what you don't seem to realize, and maybe you'll act sensibly!"

He was acutely aware of the irony in that statement. There was nothing for his captives to do but die in white-hot meteoric flames, if they could come to no composition with him, or surrender meekly, with dying a matter of weeks off instead of hours. Then might not think it sensible to accept either alternative. But it wasn't easy to think of a third.

"You should," he observed while they were climbing the "stairway from the engine-room, you should have had a getaway ship, just in case. You could have made a deal with somebody just to come by and take all the freight aboard here as a gift. Space-freightjis usually pretty valuable stuff."

Bugsy spat.

Chernery said unhappily, though he was bewildered by having his blaster left to him, "You'd

have to tell 'em what the job was. And they might take it over."

It was true enough. Scott made no comment. They went through the heavy-freight level. There was no one there. The men who followed Bugsy and Chenery wouldn't like to be alone at any time. They would uniformly be men who needed constant reassurance of their own importance. One can alway consider any crime important. They'd be infinitely dependent; they could not satisfy their needs for themselves. They depend wholly on other people, in a fashion the ordinary citizen doesn't. And they need constantly to be with other people. So the big hulk which was the space-buoy was empty except in one crowded, smoke-filled place. There, men gambled exactly as they would on any planet between jobs. If there'd been women present, their enjoyment would have been completed. If they captured the Golconda Ship and escaped with their riches—why—they would crowd together in other places and continue exactly similar diversions. The only real change would be that they'd gamble for higher stakes and the women would be fancier. And for this they committed multiple murder and ultimately faced execution.

Scott drove his captives up the three levels of hydroponic gardens. The middle one was in darkness now. They, came out to the lowest of the three levels of passenger-cabins. There was snoring somewhere and a faint, stale alcoholic smell.

"Who's that?" asked Scott.

"Our engineer," said Chenery helpfully. "He's stayed that way ever since—"

He stopped. They went on. The hotel-restaurant level. All was silence. All was stillness. Scott shepherded the others up to the control-room.

"I didn't expect this," he said politely. "I don't think you've realized it—Bugsy, that man you found dead in the hospital. What was his specialty? What did he do? On the way up here it occurred to me that it might be important."

Bugsy rasped;

"He was an astrogator. He was—"

His throat clicked shut. He stared at Scott. The blood went slowly out of his cheeks and lips until the stubble of blue beard around his jaws looked unclean. It looked like soot. His mouth opened and closed. Then he stared blankly at the wall and tried to swallow—and failed.

"You needed him," said Scott, "to astrogate the Golconda Ship when you took it. Now you haven't anybody who can set a course—or know where to drive—and nobody who can time an overdrive jump, or get a ship to ground

if you found a planet. But it's not likely you can even approach a sun. It's certain you can't find the place you planned to ground the Golconda Ship. My guess would be that without an astrogator you couldn't do more than drive blindly around the galaxy until all of you go mad—or die."

Bugsy began to swear. Horrible, unbelievable words rose to his lips and came bubbling out. Scott slapped him sharply across the mouth.

"Stop it, you idiot! Stop it!"

Bugsy stopped, numbly. That particular kind of violence wasn't in his experience. To him, violence was blaster-bolts or on occasion admirably engineered weapons for breaking skulls. But he'd never been slapped before.

"Whatever you believe or don't believe about comets," said Scott coldly," you know you've got to have an astrogator. You can't find a sun, or a planet circling it, and you couldn't get to ground if you did."

Chenery was wringing his hands, off at one side of the control-room. Janet sat quietly by the instrument-board. The blaster she'd held ready during the climb from the buoy's stern now lay in her lap. She was even unnaturally composed. Now and again she glanced at Scott, and then she looked somehow confident. But her eyes stayed mostly on the two men Scott had brought here.

He went to the vision-screens. The image of the glittering marker-asteroid had moved a little, yards or fathoms only. There were many stars, except in the forward screens. There huge luminous mistinesses seemed to have leaped toward Lambda since he last looked at them.

"There," said Scott briskly," are the Five Comets. We're headed straight for their heads. I can get the buoy through them. you can't. I have to be obeyed if we're to make it. And I can astrogate any ship to anywhere it needs to go. But I've no mind to save the lives of a pack of killers only to be killed for it afterward!"

Chenery said pitifully, "Listen, Lieutenant! I'll do anything! What' you want? What' you want done?"

Bugsy said harshly; "Y'say you can astrogate us —

"Yes," said Scott. "Anywhere."

"Maybe y'can toll the Golconda Ship alongside—"

"I'm Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol," said Scott. "I've been given the recognition-signal for the Golconda Ship—which you didn't think of. There's a password to give to assure the ship that everything's all right and that it can safely come alongside and make fast."

"What's th' deal?" demanded Bugsy fiercely. "What' you want?"

"I haven't thought," Scott told him. "It just occurred to me that you might have some ideas. I don't trust you the length of a gnat's whisker. That makes it difficult to bargain. You figure out a guarantee that we can believe in for our own safety! Try it! If you do, I'll listen. But it had better be good! And there isn't much time! On our present course we'll hit the first mass of meteors in under two hours. There'll be a good many strays barging around before then, too—strays big enough to wreck us."

Bugsy said harshly, "I don't buy that comet stuff! All I want—"

"If I'm astrogating it's bought!" said Scott grimly. "It's like two cars racing for an intersection and neither one can stop and they're going to hit! That's no lie! If I don't attend to that, there's no use making a deal!"

"Okay," said Bugsy hoarsely. "That's okay with me. The Golconda Ship comes after. You're in. You're safe, and she's safe too if you want it that way. We cut the take three ways—"

Scott grinned at him without mirth.

"That's something I don't buy! I don't buy trusting you for half a second. Think, Bugsy! Use your brains! Figure out something better than your word — And for now, get out! This is my control-room!"

He pushed Bugsy outside.

Chenery said desperately, "But Lieutenant—what kind of a deal—"

"It's up to you, Chenery," said Scott. "I'd rather deal with you. Think!"

He closed the control-room door with Chenery outside. He turned to Janet. She looked at him strangely.

"It's the devil to have a conscience," he said sourly. "Bugsy isn't armed and Chenery is. I left him his blaster. I've told him I'd rather make a deal with him. But my conscience wouldn't let me mention that things would be better all around if Bugsy dropped dead. I hope the idea occurs to Chenery!"

Janet moistened her lips.

"But you offered—you proposed—"

"I pointed out that they've got to have an astrogator. They do. I pointed out that I was one. I am. I said I wanted you safe. I do. I said if they contrived a deal, I'd listen. I will. But I didn't say I'd make a bargain with them. I won't."

She stared at him.

"They need to be kept doing something useless," said Scott impatiently. "Such as thinking of ways to outsmart me. But the comets are coming closer. I'm stalling until they're really close. —until Bugsy and Chenery have to let me save the buoy in my own way and on my own terms."

"But then—"

"This is my first real command," said Scott vexedly. "Do you think I want to lose it in my first twelve hours aboard? I've got to take the buoy through the comets! I can do it. Bugsy and Chenery can't. But after it's through, they'll feel cocky. They'll consider they own me. And they've got my ship! I have to get it back!"

Janet was bewildered. Scott seemed to be talking nonsense. There were at least twenty men aboard, with blasters they'd used to do murder. They expected to do more. Up to now, they'd tranquilly let Bugsy and Chenery do the worrying. But if they began urgently to suspect or to believe the danger from the comets Scott insisted on—

"Can't you—tell them how you'll do it?" she asked uncertainly. "You're asking them to trust you—and they could—but they'll judge you as like themselves. . . ."

"I can't tell them how I'll do it," said Scott drily. "The bare idea would scare them to death!"

To Be Concluded

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Although never very prolific, Kris Neville has done enough stories on the order of the classic "Bettyann" to earn a respected place in the field, so much so that all of us eagerly look forward to every new manuscript he sends in. While waiting, however, we recommend this grim little snapshot of the future—of Utopia so perfect that everyone walks in deathly fear!

IF THIS BE UTOPIA...

KRIS NEVILLE

"LO, SUE."

He shuffled papers without looking up. "You're late."

He had half seen her, out of the corner of his eye, when she came into the office.

She didn't answer; he looked up, annoyed.

The room was empty.

It took a full minute for him to steady himself after that. Even after his mind was calm, his heart still fluttered wildly. He stared at the desk top. He remembered, quite clearly now that he thought of it, that Sue *had* come in. But at her regular time. He had sent her over to Johnson with the production figures on the Calton case; she would be gone all morning. And yet, it seemed that, just a moment ago, she—

He shrugged and hazarded a laugh that didn't quite come off.

His left eye was twitching again. A distressing nervous tic he had first noticed three months ago. It was getting worse.

Nerves.

And now—hallucinations.

His morning was shot.

He looked at his watch; he looked at the unread reports, some left over from yesterday. He wanted to scream.

He walked into Wilson's Bar and sat down. Alcohol relaxed him, and when he was relaxed, the tic went away.

No sooner had he adjusted his bulk to the stool than he knew

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that he had made a mistake. The bartender was eyeing him with obvious disapproval. He should have gone somewhere else. Too late now. Nothing to do but brazen it out.

He flipped the card across the bar.

The bartender laid the card down and glared across the bar. "Mr. Morrison, I don't want to seem nosey, but—You came in here yesterday. You drank. You got your last punch. Now, you come in with a new card. How come? That ain't right, and you know it ain't. *I* couldn't get a new card, not for anything."

Mr. Morrison cleared his throat; he was afraid his left eye was going to start twitching again. "I—I got it from Department A. I've been overworking lately. My duties are quite heavy."

The bartender glanced at the wall clock; it was still an hour until lunch. "Humph," he said emphatically. "*I* overwork. *I*—don't get no over-rations. Not for liquor or anything. Especially not for liquor. And *I* don't get off no hour before dinner."

Mr. Morrison wasn't accustomed to that tone of voice; under other circumstances, he would have taken the man's number and lodged a Class 11a complaint immediately. That he did not now was due solely to the fact that the new card wasn't really authorized by Department A, and the publicity involved in an appearance at a job transfer hearing would look bad on his master record.

He tried to outstare the bartender and felt his left eye twitch. "There are worse jobs than this," he threatened. And the bartender's eyes wavered. "A rye-high," Mr. Morrison ordered crisply.

The bartender reached out for the card, punched it. "Yes, sir."

Mr. Morrison nodded to himself. Mentally he filed away a reminder to do something about this man; just what, he would figure out later.

The drink came. He gulped it, picked up his ration card and stalked out.

He would have to be careful, in the future, never to drink up over one card at any one place . . .

That damn tic. Symptomatic. He was worried, definitely worried. Maybe they would call him before a review board; maybe they would recondition him; maybe they would say he was losing his grip—

And transfer him!

Mr. Morrison went cold at the thought.

A job like this—Consultant for Production Management of Eastern District—wasn't easy to get. It represented the labor of years; years of—

And to lose it just because of

that damn uncontrollable tic!

He needed a drink. Bad.

By three o'clock Mr. Morrison was pleasantly drunk. He sat on a bar stool with his tenth rye-high before him.

He told himself that, in another couple of hours, he would have to leave. The white-collars would be coming around to sit huddled over their drinks, nursing them along. Then at six-thirty the bartenders would chase them out, and they would trudge home to their uninspired meals. Then the workers would arrive; rough, uncouth, rowdy people.

Mr. Morrison shuddered.

He decided it was a shame—a very great shame and a public disgrace—to give the workers a liquor ration. But to give them an *equal* ration (not that men of ability and position couldn't subvert the law) was really carrying things a little beyond all reason.

The person on the stool next to him was leaning over.

"You're getting drunk," the person said. "You're getting *drunk*. You got enough rations to get *drunk*!"

Mr. Morrison knew it was time to leave. He got up from the stool and moved, on unsteady legs, to the door.

He hailed a cab, fumbled for his transportation card– the blue one—found it. Mr. Morrison got in the cab, wondering why people like Mr. Morrison didn't get just one card—good for everything.

"Sue, I'll want you for dictation most of the day."

"Yes, Mr. Morrison."

He studied his thumb nail. "I'm afraid I'm a little behind on my paper work. You see, yesterday I —I had to see a man." Mr. Morrison realized that it sounded pretty lame.

"Yes, sir. When I came back from Mr. Johnson's office you were gone. So I said to myself, 'Now Sue,' I said, 'what would Mr. Morrison want you to do?' so I took out the Miner's file—you remember, you told me to check if for that missing report on June production when I had time—and I—"

Her voice, Mr. Morrison realized for the first time, was thin and altogether unpleasant.

"Very good, Sue," he interrupted.

"Yes, sir, but I—"

"Never mind, Sue. Another time."

"Yes, Mr. Morrison."

Mr. Morrison elevated his eyes; he focused them to her left. He didn't want to look directly at her. "We really must get on with the dictation."

She crossed the room to her chair before the steno; she sat down, looking crisp and efficient.

All at once, Mr. Morrison didn't know where to start: There was so much to be done. In desperation,

he snatched the top report and began to read it savagely.

The hangover, it filled his stomach with butterflies, and he couldn't concentrate on the words. His mind was vacant.

He cleared his throat—that usually helped. He fixed his eyes determinedly on the heading.

"Inter-departmental memo. To Jacoby."

The keys clicked harshly on the steno.

"It has been brought to my attention that report—uh—" His eyes skipped frantically, searching for the file number . . . Ah, there it was, right where it should be . . . "uh—your file—You better put that in parentheses. Sue—your file 739.82—No, on second thought, don't put any parentheses."

He felt his hands growing moist. Should there be parentheses? He shook himself. Tried to tell himself that it didn't matter.

But it did. Mistakes (even little mistakes) count against you on the efficiency files. You can't be too careful.

He cleared his throat the second time.

There it was: the tic again.

He winced. Had Sue noticed?

He sprang out of the chair and turned his back on her. He resumed dictation.

"Report number so-and-so, dealing with decreased efficiency in Factory Seven."

Factory Seven?

Oh, God! He remembered, now. He was supposed to inspect it. This afternoon. At two.

The reports would have to wait.

No. The reports *couldn't* wait. He was already behind schedule. Too far behind.

"What? What did you say, Sue?"

"I said I wish you wouldn't face the wall like that, Mr. Morrison. It makes it sound like your mouth is all full of mush. It makes it awful hard to copy you."

"Oh . . . Of course."

If he turned around, she would be sure to notice the tic.

He glanced down. His hand was shaking.

"Sue. Will you run out and—uh—get me some tobacco."

"Yes, sir. May I have your card?"

He didn't turn around.

"Use an official ration form," he snapped irritably.

Silence a moment. Then: "Certainly, Mr. Morrison."

He heard her heels clip-clop sharply on the bare floor; he heard the door close.

He turned around.

He was weak.

He sank into his chair and tried to relax his taut muscles.

His efficiency rating was down, and he knew it. That meant they would be calling him in, any day now, for a check up. He twisted his mouth bitterly. How could

they expect a man to—?

It was the pressure, he decided. The eternal pressure. The eternal fear of losing a point on your job rating index and getting a transfer. The certain knowledge that you are being watched, your every mistake noted down on the balance sheet. The insecurity.

Even an iron man couldn't stand it.

Mr. Morrison looked at the reports and sighed.

There would be another twenty years of it. God! twenty years. And even then—He wondered if he could believe the State propaganda about the new retirement program. In twenty years, when he was ready, maybe by then . . . But twenty more years of it, God! Twenty more years.

He checked his thoughts; lately he had a tendency to let them wool-gather. That was bad; it interfered with his work.

He looked over at the production chart on the wall; followed its downward swoop with his eyes. Off a point and a half, this month.

He envied the men in Distribution. Distribution was functioning smoothly, as usual. When there was anything to distribute.

Production lousy. Men weren't working like they used to, before the New State.

The new incentive plan . . . hmmmm . . . It was getting some consideration in Central Planning. He disapproved of it. No sense in pampering the workers. *Keep after them,* he told himself. *No slackers.*

There he went. He had to gather up his thoughts again. He cursed inwardly.

His eyes drifted back to the papers on his desk. He wondered if he could duck out before Sue got back; get a couple of quick ones before time to inspect Number Seven.

No. He *had* to keep at it. Once you get behind—

Absently he took out his pipe and loaded it. He lit it and let it go out. His left eye was still jerking.

The factory was a riot of noise. It didn't help his throbbing head. He nodded absently in answer to the foreman's question and walked on to the next machine.

The female operator took her foot off the pedal and looked up. She was sweating.

Mr. Morrison reached over and picked up one of the helical coils and examined the knots. He turned the coil over in his hand.

It was hot in here.

He put the coil back in the rack and turned to the female.

"How do you like your job?" He had to half shout to make his voice carry above the pounding of the machines.

Her eyes were dull. Her lips half formed a word, and then she thought better of it. "It's my

assignment. It's what I'm best fitted for," she said.

Mr. Morrison nodded. "A good answer."

He moved on.

At the next machine, the operator wiped damp hair back out of her face and looked up. Mr. Morrison studied her features. Well moulded.

Her lips drew together in a tight, thin line.

Mr. Morrison felt his face getting red. The female thought he had winked at her. And she didn't like it.

She was mad. Boiling mad. He could see that.

She said something that was lost in the roar.

Mr. Morrison knew that he should move on. He could see trouble coming if he stayed. An argument.

"How do you like your job?" he asked.

"I hate every damn minute of it, you fat leech!" she screamed above the roar of the machines.

Mr. Morrison winced.

"Now, now," he placated. "After all, the assignment—"

She sputtered something else.

Mr. Morrison turned to the foreman.

"A discipline case!" the foreman shrieked above the noise.

Mr. Morrison eyed the female and nodded gravely.

She was coming around the machine, fast. She placed herself squarely in front of him.

"I work, see! Ten hours a day! Hard, see! And then some fat, ugly slob comes around to leer at me! Some fat slob that's got an office, comes around to wink at me—"

He felt very ineffectual. He wanted to explain that he couldn't help the tic; that it was involuntary.

"Here, here, really—you aren't being quite . . ."

"'How do I like my job?' he asks. That's a laugh! 'How do I like my job'? he says. Listen, mister," she reached out and hooked a greasy hand in his lapel, "you can take this job and—"

Later, in the foreman's office, Mr. Morrison was once again master of the situation. He leaned back in the comfortable chair and clasped his hands together.

"How many discipline cases do you have, like that poor female?" he asked.

The foreman stood up and crossed to the steel filing cabinet. "I have the certified list here." He rummaged among papers and finally came up with a crisp, new sheet. He carried it over to Mr. Morrison.

Mr. Morrison read it. "Seven. I see." He ran his finger down the list. "Hummmm. What about that man—uh, I believe—uh—number 314? Why isn't he on this?"

The foreman looked up. "Oh.

Him. He's a good worker. Today was just his bad day. After all, the machine could have fouled up on anyone."

"But he *deliberately* jammed it with that coil!"

The foreman shook his head. "It just seemed that way. When the guide lane broke, it twisted the coil out of his hand. It was the effect you saw, not the cause."

Mr. Morrison pursed his lips whitely. "You must realize that 'a bad day' is no excuse. If we permitted that sort of thing, you know, pretty soon every Tom, Dick and Harry—" He let his voice trail away significantly. He took out his pen and unscrewed the cap.

"But, sir: He's no discipline problem!"

Mr. Morrison fitted the cap over the end of his pen. The point touched paper. "Maybe so, maybe not. That's my job. He will serve as an example to the rest. After all, we must consider the Whole."

He wrote "314" on the paper.

"I'll get these approved for reassignment. I'll fix it so you can appear at the transfer hearing by proxy under the 'due cause from direct overseer' section."

He continued to talk, half to himself. "There are some vacancies in the Eastern Fields, and I received a requisition for three men and a woman, this morning, to report at the deep mines in the North—which should solve—"

He looked up.

"You may alert these eight people for transfer." He extended the pen. "Now, if you'll just sign right here, we'll have all this unpleasant business over and done with."

Mr. Morrison was glad to be home. He took off his clothes and showered; he made a conscious process of washing the grime of the factory off his body. When he had toweled dry, he slipped into his lounging robe and went into the front room.

It was a pretty room; tastefully done. The last occupant—poor fellow—had been very cultured; in addition, he had had a way of wrangling extra requisitions through Distributions.

Take this phono, now. Properly speaking, you should find one like it only in an A2 job-rated house. Mr. Morrison was lucky.

All at once his mood changed.

He stood up and began to pace the room.

It was a small room. Funny he'd never noticed before just how small it really was. So small that it oppressed him.

And it wasn't a very pretty room, either. No, it was a cramped, stultifying rabbit warren.

And he wasn't really lucky.

He was unlucky!

It was the workers who were lucky. They always had the best

of it. You never saw one of them with a nervous tic. Not that their homes were like this—couldn't expect it, of course—but after they put in their ten or twelve hours a day, they were through. Free.

Men like Mr. Morrison weren't. *Their* work day didn't end at the office. When they left there, they brought their jobs home with them. To worry over . . .

Mr. Morrison looked down at his shiny black shoes.

Nervous strain.

He might as well face it. Too much responsibility. Too much pressure.

He should see a doctor. He was afraid to. A doctor would have to report it if there was anything wrong. And then it would go on his index. They would put it down in ink and never erase it. It would always be there.

Still. They would find him out sooner or later. The signs were all there. He knew them as well as the next man. Decreased efficiency. Irritability. Procrastination. Excessive concern over petty details. Fear. Day dreaming.

It was bad. He was cracking up. The tic in his left eye. The hallucination yesterday morning. The argument with Keller last week.

That damn tic; having it was worse than working twelve hours straight, every day, in the pits. Anybody that saw it could tell you were on your way down.

He let his thoughts drift in self pity.

He had crossed the room and thrown himself on the sofa. He fidgeted . . .

Had he done everything all right, today? At least he had caught up on the reports. At least he had done that much.

He reviewed the day.

There was the case of 314. He was sorry about that, now. Too late, of course. Nothing could be done about it.

Not that he minded making an example, now and then. It was necessary. And far more satisfactory than all the "incentive plans" in the world. But that sort of thing could be over done.

Mr. Morrison was not too sure that he hadn't been over doing it. The last three months.

Maybe it was another symptom of nervous strain. A tendency to be less than lenient with the faults in others, realizing, subconsciously, your own. A sort of self punishment.

Mr. Morrison did not care to pursue that line of reasoning any further.

Mr. Morrison settled back on the decorative pillow.

He wasn't going to be able to sleep again tonight!

Mr. Morrison wanted to scream. He couldn't explain it. He just wanted to scream.

He screamed.

Mr. Morrison was very conscious of the hammering of his heart; and equally aware that there was nothing he could do about it.

Sure he was nervous. Even a little frightened. But who wouldn't be? He tried to pacify himself by repeating the old bromide, "A hundred years from now it won't make the least difference," and, as always, he failed.

He felt like a little boy waiting for the doctor.

Mr. Haskins had come in fifteen minutes ago, stalked through the room without even looking at him, and entered his office. He should be finished reading the sheaf of reports any minute now.

The chair on which Mr. Morrison sat was uncomfortable. He fumbled out his pipe.

Mr. Haskins was the board review officer for cases involving A and B rated personnel. He took transcripts of transfer hearings and rendered the decisions. A very competent man. Used to be a practicing psychiatrist, Mr. Morrison understood.

It hadn't been too bad, the hearing. Not nearly as bad as he had expected. Everyone had been very kindly and sympathetic, intent only on getting the facts and getting them straight.

Mr. Morrison wouldn't be overly surprised if he got six months recovery leave. He would like that. Perhaps he could get a priority to Hawaii. Spend four months in the sun; no worries at all. Come back relaxed.

Of course that was up to Mr. Haskins. Whatever his disposition, it would be final, but it was difficult to see how it could be anything more severe than a transfer to class C rating. That, at the very worst. Which wouldn't be too bad. Less responsibility.

Mr. Morrison lit his pipe. He smiled wanly at the empty room.

He centered his attention on the uncurtained window. Outside, it was spring. Mr. Morrison liked spring. He liked to hear the birds chirping and to feel the faint, warm wind on his face. Mr. Morrison wondered how spring in Hawaii felt.

The door opened.

"Come in, please, Mr. Morrison."

Mr. Morrison sprang erect. He looked around for a place to tap out the pipe dottle, saw none, dropped the pipe into his side pocket. Automatically he adjusted the knot of his tie and squared his shoulders. But his step was almost reluctant.

The receptionist stepped aside to let him enter and closed the door after him.

Mr. Haskins was seated behind a huge oak desk. He looked up. "Ah," he said. "Come here."

Mr. Morrison advanced across the carpet and stopped before the desk.

Mr. Haskins didn't offer him a chair. That was a good sign; the interview would be short' just long enough to clear up a few minor points.

For a long moment Mr. Haskins studied him in silence, pursing and unpursing his lips, speculatively. Mr. Morrison squirmed.

"Morrison, uh?" Mr. Haskins grunted.

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Haskins looked down at his desk.

"Your number 37-533-338?"

"Yes, sir."

"This your case, then."

Mr. Haskins built a pyramid with his hands by putting the finger tips together, palms facing each other. He was wearing a pair of loose, white gloves. He looked down at his hands, relaxed them, and let them drop below the level of the desk top, out of Mr. Morrison's range of vision.

"Understand you created quite a disturbance last week. Screaming in your apartment."

Mr. Morrison turned red and stammered out a weak, "Yes, sir."

"What made you do it?" His voice was like a whip lash.

Mr. Morison flinched. He made movements with his hands, expressive of his confusion and embarrassment. "I—that is, sir, you see—overwork and—"

"Speak up, man! Can't you speak whole sentences?"

"No, sir . . . I mean, yes, sir . . . I mean, it's overwork. I'm not quite myself."

He winked at Mr. Haskins.

That made him want to turn and run.

Mr. Haskins threw back his head, narrowed his eyes and snorted. He got up, walked deliberately across the room, and then whirled around. He stood planted firmly there, legs apart, hands behind his back, neck thrust forward, staring fixedly at Mr. Morrison.

"I'm going to ask questions. Expect concise answers . . . Now, how long ago did you first notice the . . ."

It was over. He had never spent a more terrible hour and a half in his life. Mr. Haskins had been like a big, enraged bull. Thank God it was over.

Mr. Morrison was clammy with dried sweat.

He tried to steel his shattered nerves. He had been too optimistic all along. This might even result in a transfer down to a class D. Back to his old job, filing clerk in Maintenance . . . But he could stand that. He'd been class D before. He was still young, fairly young. And in another ten years or so he would work his way back up to B1 again . . . If Mr. Haskins didn't static check his records—"not recommended for future promotion."

If that damn pipe hadn't burned a hole in his pants, and if that damn tic hadn't—May as well forget it.

Mr. Morrison wanted to go home and go to bed, try to sleep, drown the whole ordeal in sleep.

But Mr. Haskins had told him to wait out here. He'd been waiting nearly half an hour.

Finally a Security man entered the room from the street door. He eyed Mr. Morrison queerly for a moment and then crossed to Mr. Haskins' private door and went in.

Within two minutes he was back, carrying a typewritten slip. He consulted it.

"You Morrison?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Morrison felt a tightness around his heart and a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The skin over his back bone crawled.

"You're to come with me."

Mr. Morrison stood up. He was numb. He rubbed the palms of his hands on his pants. He gulped. "Could you—tell me why?"

The Security man's eyes clouded briefly. With pity?

"No," he said. "They'll tell you at Central."

Shock. It hit him like a hammer between the eyes. The room swayed before him. His knees were weak.

He felt the Security man's hand under his elbow, steadying him, forcing him, gently, toward the door.

He couldn't believe it. He *wouldn't* believe it. He felt sick at the stomach.

Good God—

He had been declared of no further value to the State or to himself.

That slip was an euthanasia authorization!

Mr. Haskins opened the top desk drawer and took out his bottle. He poured himself a stiff shot, drank it at one gulp. He put the bottle back.

Too bad. About that chap. Morrison.

He leaned back and tried to relax.

He looked at the desk clock. It would be all over by now. Too late to do anything about it.

It worried him, though.

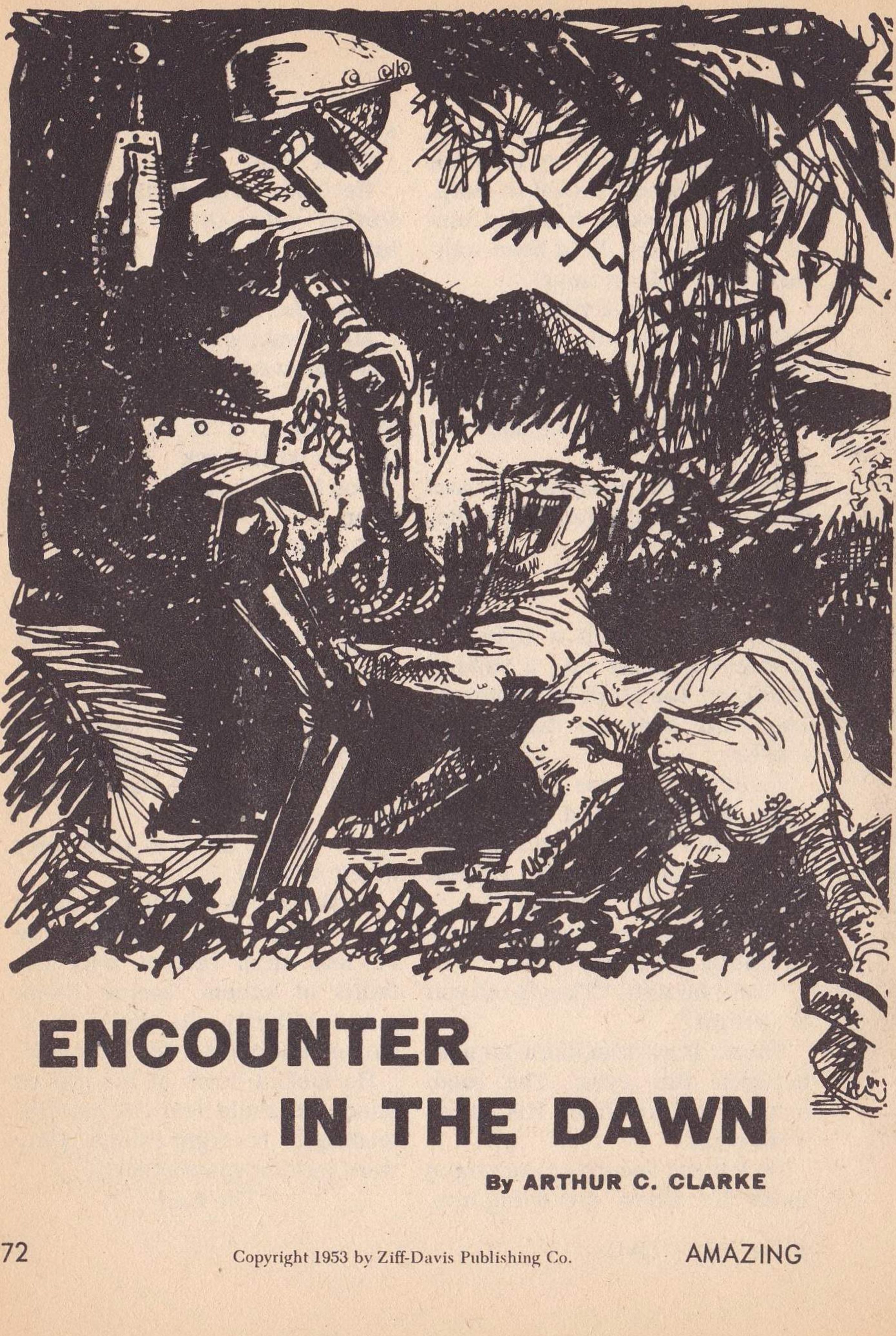
Not that he minded making an example out of somebody, now and then. Kept the rest on their toes.

But maybe he had been over doing it lately.

Maybe it was another symptom of nervous strain. A tendency to be less than lenient with the faults of others, seeing them, subconsciously, in yourself. A sort of masochism by extension.

He looked down at his gloved hand. He could feel the muscles leading to his right thumb. They were jerking spasmodically.

The End

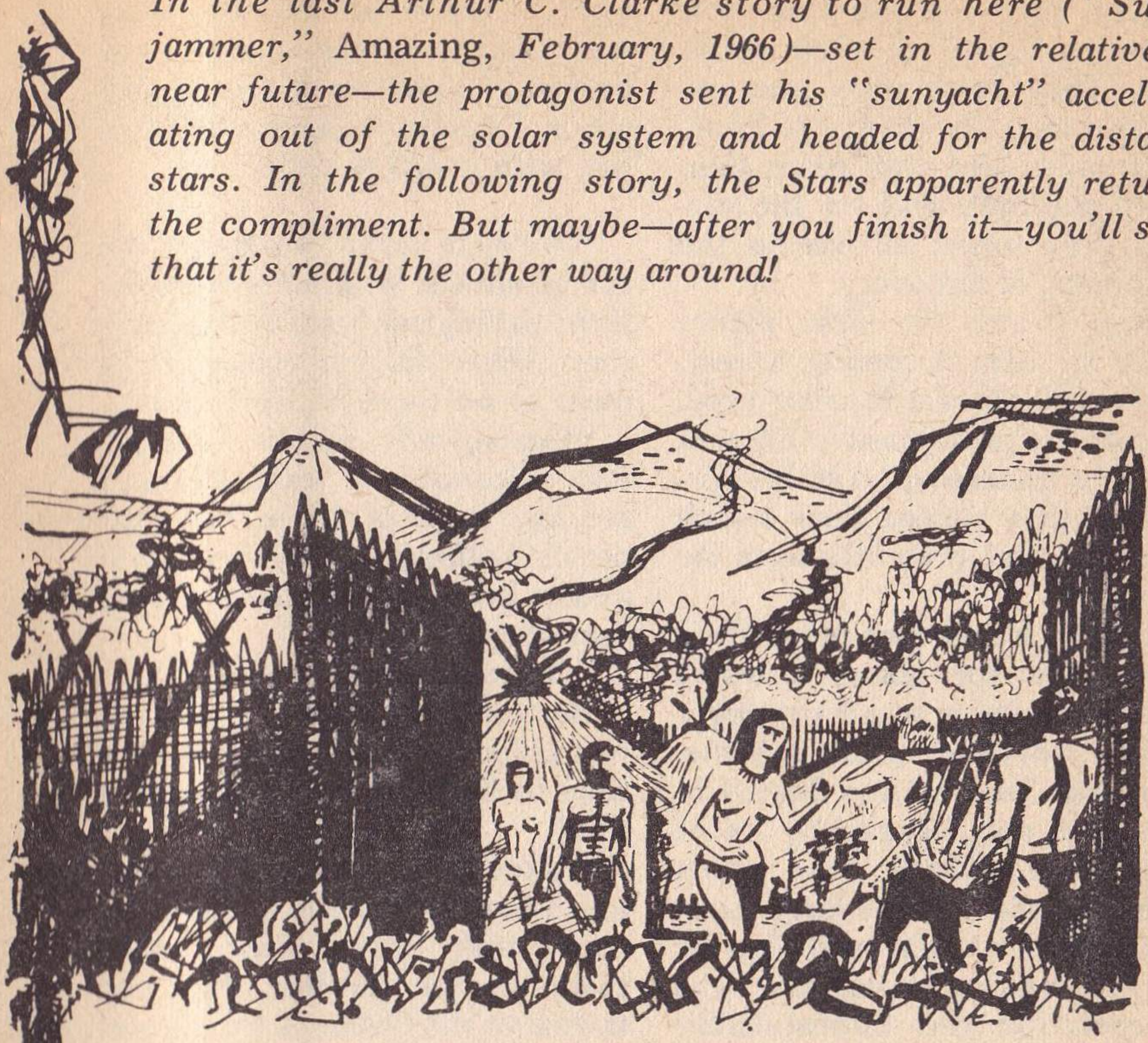


ENCOUNTER IN THE DAWN

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

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In the last Arthur C. Clarke story to run here ("Sunjammer," Amazing, February, 1966)—set in the relatively near future—the protagonist sent his "sunyacht" accelerating out of the solar system and headed for the distant stars. In the following story, the Stars apparently return the compliment. But maybe—after you finish it—you'll say that it's really the other way around!



It was in the last days of the Empire. The tiny ship was far from home, and almost a hundred light-years from the great parent vessel searching through the loosely packed stars at the rim of the Milky Way. But even here it could not escape from the shadow that lay across civilization: beneath that shadow, pausing ever and again in their work to wonder how their distant homes were faring, the scientists of the Galactic Survey still labored at their never-ending task.

The ship held only three occupants, but between them they carried knowledge of many sciences, and the experience of half a lifetime in space. After the long interstellar night, the star ahead was warming their spirits as they dropped down towards its fires. A little more golden, a trifle more

brilliant than the sun that now seemed a legend of their childhood. They knew from past experience that the chance of locating planets here was more than ninety per cent, and for the moment they forgot all else in the excitement of discovery.

They found the first planet within minutes of coming to rest. It was a giant, of a familiar type, too cold for protoplasmic life and probably possessing no stable surface. So they turned their search sunwards, and presently were rewarded.

It was a world that made their hearts ache for home, a world where everything was hauntingly familiar, yet never quite the same. Two great land masses floated in blue-green seas, capped by ice at either pole. There were some desert regions, but the larger part of the planet was obviously fertile. Even from this distance, the signs of vegetation were unmistakably clear.

They gazed hungrily at the expanding landscape as they fell down into the atmosphere, heading towards noon in the subtropics. The ship plummeted through cloudless skies towards a great river, checked its fall with a surge of soundless power, and came to rest among the long grasses by the water's edge.

No one moved: there was nothing to be done until the automatic instruments had finished their work. Then a bell tinkled softly and the lights on the control board flashed in a pattern of meaningful chaos. Captain Altman rose to his feet with a sigh of relief.

"We're in luck," he said. "We can go outside without protection, if the pathogenic tests are satisfactory. What did you make of the place as we came in, Bertrond?"

"Geologically stable — no active volcanoes, at least. I didn't see any trace of cities, but that proves nothing. If there's a civilization here, it may have passed that stage."

"Or not reached it yet?"

Bertrond shrugged. "Either's just as likely. It may take us some time to find out on a planet this size."

"More time than we've got," said Clindar, glancing at the communications panel that linked them to the mother ship and thence to the Galaxy's threatened heart. For a moment there was a gloomy silence. Then Clindar walked to the control board and pressed a pattern of keys with automatic skill.

With a slight jar, a section of the hull slid aside and the fourth member of the crew stepped out onto the new planet, flexing metal limbs and adjusting servo motors to the unaccustomed gravity. Inside the ship, a television screen glimmered into life, revealing a long vista of waving grasses, some

trees in the middle distance, and a glimpse of the great river. Clindar punched a button, and the picture flowed steadily across the screen as the robot turned its head.

"Which way shall we go?" Clindar asked.

"Let's have a look at those trees," Altman replied. "If there's any animal life we'll find it there."

"Look!" cried Bertrond. "A bird!"

Clindar's fingers flew over the keyboard: the picture centred on the tiny speck that had suddenly appeared on the left of the screen, and expanded rapidly as the robot's telephoto lens came into action.

"You're right," he said. "Feathers — beak — well up the evolutionary ladder. This place looks promising. I'll start the camera."

The swaying motion of the picture as the robot walked forward did not distract them: they had grown accustomed to it long ago. But they had never become reconciled to this exploration by proxy when all their impulses cried out to them to leave the ship, to run through the grass and to feel the wind blowing against their faces. Yet it was too great a risk to take, even on a world that seemed as fair as this. There was always a skull hidden behind Nature's most smiling face. Wild beasts, poisonous reptiles, quagmires — death could come to the unwary explorer in a thousand disguises. And worst of all were the invisible enemies, the bacteria and viruses against which the only defense might often be a thousand light-years away.

A robot could laugh at all these dangers and even if, as sometimes happened, it encountered a beast powerful enough to destroy it — well, machines could always be replaced.

They met nothing on the walk across the grasslands. If any small animals were disturbed by the robot's passage, they kept outside its field of vision. Clindar slowed the machine as it approached the trees, and the watchers in the spaceship flinched involuntarily at the branches that appeared to slash across their eyes. The picture dimmed for a moment before the controls readjusted themselves to the weaker illumination; then it came back to normal.

The forest was full of life. It lurked in the undergrowth, clambered among the branches, flew through the air. It fled chattering and gibbering through the trees as the robot advanced. And all the while the automatic cameras were recording the pictures that formed on the screen, gathering material for the biologists to analyze when the ship returned to base.

Clindar breathed a sigh of relief when the trees suddenly thinned. It was exhausting work, keeping

the robot from smashing into obstacles as it moved through the forest, but on open ground it could take care of itself. Then the picture trembled as if beneath a hammer-blow, there was a grinding metallic thud, and the whole scene swept vertiginously upwards as the robot toppled and fell.

"What's that?" cried Altman. "Did you trip?"

"No," said Clindar grimly, his fingers flying over the keyboard. "Something attacked from the rear. I hope . . . ah . . . I've still got control."

He brought the robot to a sitting position and swivelled its head. It did not take long to find the cause of the trouble. Standing a few feet away, and lashing its tail angrily, was a large quadruped with a most ferocious set of teeth. At the moment it was, fairly obviously, trying to decide whether to attack again.

Slowly, the robot rose to its feet, and as it did so the great beast crouched to spring. A smile flitted across Clindar's face: he knew how to deal with this situation. His thumb felt for the seldom-used key labelled "Siren".

The forest echoed with a hideous undulating scream from the robot's concealed speaker, and the machine advanced to meet its adversary, arms flailing in front of it. The startled beast almost fell over backwards in its effort to turn, and in seconds was gone from sight.

"Now I suppose we'll have to wait a couple of hours until everything comes out of hiding again," said Bertrond ruefully.

"I don't know much about animal psychology," interjected Altman, "but is it usual for them to attack something completely unfamiliar?"

"Some will attack anything that moves, but that's unusual. Normally they only attack for food, or if they've already been threatened. What are you driving at? Do you suggest that there are other robots on this planet?"

"Certainly not. But our carnivorous friend may have mistaken our machine for a more edible biped. Don't you think that this opening in the jungle is rather unnatural? It could easily be a path."

"In that case," said Clindar promptly, "we'll follow it and find out. I'm tired of dodging trees, but I hope nothing jumps on us again: it's bad for my nerves."

"You were right, Altman," said Bertrond a little later. "It's certainly a path. But that doesn't mean intelligence. After all, animals —"

He stopped in mid-sentence, and at the same instant Clindar brought the advancing robot to a halt. The path had suddenly opened out into a wide clearing, almost completely occupied by a

village of flimsy huts. It was ringed by a wooden palisade, obviously defense against an enemy who at the moment presented no threat. For the gates were wide open, and beyond them the inhabitants were going peacefully about their ways.

For many minutes the three explorers stared in silence at the screen. Then Clindar shivered a little and remarked: "It's uncanny. It might be our own planet, a hundred thousand years ago. I feel as if I've gone back in time."

"There's nothing weird about it," said the practical Altman. "After all, we've discovered nearly a hundred planets with our type of life on them."

"Yes," retorted Clindar. "A hundred in the whole Galaxy! I still think it's strange it had to happen to us."

"Well, it had to happen to *somebody*," said Bertrond philosophically. "Meanwhile, we must work out our contact procedure. If we send the robot into the village it will start a panic."

"That," said Altman, "is a masterly understatement. What we'll have to do is catch a native by himself and prove that we're friendly. Hide the robot, Clindar. Somewhere in the woods where it can watch the village without being spotted. We've a week's practical anthropology ahead of us!"

It was three days before the biological tests showed that it would be safe to leave the ship. Even then Bertrond insisted on going alone — alone, that is, if one ignored the substantial company of the robot. With such an ally he was not afraid of this planet's larger beasts, and his body's natural defenses could take care of the microorganisms. So, at least, the analyzers had assured him; and considering the complexity of the problem, they made remarkably few mistakes. . . .

He stayed outside for an hour, enjoying himself cautiously, while his companions watched with envy. It would be another three days before they could be quite certain that it was safe to follow Bertrond's example. Meanwhile, they kept busy enough watching the village through the lenses of the robot, and recording everything they could with the cameras. They had moved the spaceship at night so that it was hidden in the depths of the forest, for they did not wish to be discovered until they were ready.

And all the while the news from home grew worse. Though their remoteness here at the edge of the Universe deadened its impact, it lay heavily on their minds and sometimes overwhelmed them with a sense of futility. At any moment, they knew, the signal for recall might come as the Empire summoned up its last resources in

its ultimate extremity. But until then they would continue their work as though pure knowledge were the only thing that mattered.

Seven days after landing, they were ready to make the experiment. They knew now what paths the villagers used when going hunting, and Bertrond chose one of the less frequented ways. Then he placed a chair firmly in the middle of the path and settled down to read a book.

It was not, of course, quite as simple as that: Bertrond had taken all imaginable precautions. Hidden in the undergrowth fifty yards away the robot was watching through its telescopic lenses, and in its hand it held a small but deadly weapon. Controlling it from the spaceship, his fingers poised over the keyboard, Clindar waited to do what might be necessary.

That was the negative side of the plan: the positive side was more obvious. Lying at Bertrond's feet was the carcass of a small, horned animal which he hoped would be an acceptable gift to any hunter passing this way.

Two hours later the radio in his suit harness whispered a warning. Quite calmly, though the blood was pounding in his veins, Bertrond laid aside his book and looked down the trail. The savage was walking forward confidently enough, swinging a spear in his right hand. He paused for a moment when he saw Bertrond, then advanced more cautiously. He could tell that there was nothing to fear, for the stranger was slightly built and obviously unarmed.

When only twenty feet separated them, Bertrond gave a reassuring smile and rose slowly to his feet. He bent down, picked up the carcass, and carried it forward as an offering. The gesture would have been understood by any creature on any world, and it was understood here. The savage reached forward, took the animal, and threw it effortlessly over his shoulder. For an instant he stared into Bertrond's eyes with a fathomless expression; then he turned and walked back towards the village. Three times he glanced round to see if Bertrond was following, and each time Bertrond smiled and waved reassurance. The whole episode lasted little more than a minute. As the first contact between two races it was completely without drama, though not without dignity.

Bertrond did not move until the other had vanished from sight. Then he relaxed and spoke into his suit microphone.

"That was a pretty good beginning," he said jubilantly. "He wasn't in the least frightened, or even suspicious. I think he'll be back."

"It still seems too good to be

true," said Altman's voice in his ear. "I should have thought he'd have been either scared or hostile. Would *you* have accepted a lavish gift from a peculiar stranger with such little fuss?"

Bertrond was slowly walking back to the ship. The robot had now come out of cover and was keeping guard a few paces behind him.

"*I* wouldn't," he replied, "but I belong to a civilized community. Complete savages may react to strangers in many different ways, according to their past experience. Suppose this tribe has never had any enemies. That's quite possible on a large but sparsely populated planet. Then we may expect curiosity, but no fear at all."

"If these people have no enemies," put in Clindar, no longer fully occupied in controlling the robot, "why have they got a stockade round the village?"

"I meant no *human* enemies," replied Bertrond. "If that's true, it simplifies our task immensely."

"Do you think he'll come back?"

"Of course. If he's as human as I think, curiosity and greed will make him return. In a couple of days we'll be bosom friends."

Looked at dispassionately, it became a fantastic routine. Every morning the robot would go hunting under Clindar's direction, until it was now the deadliest killer in the jungle. Then Bertrond would wait until Yaan — which was the nearest they could get to his name — came striding confidently along the path. He came at the same time every day, and he always came alone. They wondered about this: did he wish to keep his great discovery to himself and thus get all the credit for his hunting prowess? If so, it showed unexpected foresight and cunning.

At first Yaan had departed at once with his prize, as if afraid that the donor of such a generous gift might change his mind. Soon, however, as Bertrond had hoped, he could be induced to stay for a while by simple conjuring tricks and a display of brightly colored fabrics and crystals, in which he took a childlike delight. At last Bertrond was able to engage him in lengthy conversations, all of which were recorded as well as being filmed through the eyes of the hidden robot.

One day the philologists might be able to analyze this material; the best that Bertrond could do was to discover the meanings of a few simple verbs and nouns. This was made more difficult by the fact that Yaan not only used different words for the same thing, but sometimes the same word for different things.

Between these daily interviews, the ship travelled far, surveying the planet from the air and sometimes landing for more detailed

examinations. Although several other human settlements were observed, Bertrond made no attempt to get in touch with them, for it was easy to see that they were all at much the same cultural level as Yaan's people.

It was, Bertrond often thought, a particularly bad joke on the part of Fate that one of the Galaxy's very few truly human races should have been discovered at this moment of time. Not long ago this would have been an event of supreme importance; now Civilization was too hard-pressed to concern itself with these savage cousins waiting at the dawn of history.

Not until Bertrond was sure he had become part of Yaan's everyday life did he introduce him to the robot. He was showing Yaan the patterns in a kaleidoscope when Clindar brought the machine striding through the grass with its latest victim dangling across one metal arm. For the first time Yaan showed something akin to fear; but he relaxed at Bertrond's soothing words, though he continued to watch the advancing monster. It halted some distance away, and Bertrond walked forward to meet it. As he did so, the robot raised its arms and handed him the dead beast. He took it solemnly and carried it back to Yaan, staggering a little under the unaccustomed load.

Bertrond would have given a great deal to know just what Yaan was thinking as he accepted the gift. Was he trying to decide whether the robot was master or slave? Perhaps such conceptions as this were beyond his grasp: to him the robot might be merely another man, a hunter who was a friend of Bertrond.

Clindar's voice, slightly larger than life, came from the robot's speaker.

"It's astonishing how calmly he accepts us. Won't anything scare him?"

"You will keep judging him by your own standards," replied Bertrond. "Remember, his psychology is completely different, and much simpler. Now that he has confidence in me, anything that I accept won't worry him."

"I wonder if that will be true of all his race?" queried Altman. "It's hardly safe to judge by a single specimen. I want to see what happens when we send the robot into the village."

"Hello!" exclaimed Bertrond. "*That* surprised him. He's never met a person who could speak with two voices before."

"Do you think he'll guess the truth when he meets us?" said Clindar.

"No. The robot will be pure magic to him — but it won't be any more wonderful than fire and lightning and all the other forces

he must already take for granted."

"Well, what's the next move?" asked Altman, a little impatiently. "Are you going to bring him to the ship, or will you go into the village first?"

Bertrond hesitated. "I'm anxious not to do too much too quickly. You know the accidents that have happened with strange races when that's been tried. I'll let him think this over, and when we get back tomorrow I'll try and persuade him to take the robot back to the village."

In the hidden ship, Clindar reactivated the robot and started it moving again. Like Altman, he was growing a little impatient of this excessive caution, but on all matters relating to alien life-forms Bertrond was the expert, and they had to obey his orders.

There were times now when he almost wished he were a robot himself, devoid of feelings or emotions, able to watch the fall of a leaf or the death agonies of a world with equal detachment. . . .

The sun was low when Yaan heard the great voice crying from the jungle. He recognized it at once, despite its inhuman volume: it was the voice of his friend, and it was calling him.

In the echoing silence, the life of the village came to a stop. Even the children ceased their play: the only sound was the thin cry of a baby frightened by the sudden silence.

All eyes were upon Yaan as he walked swiftly to his hut and grasped the spear that lay beside the entrance. The stockade would soon be closed against the prowlers of the night, but he did not hesitate as he stepped out into the lengthening shadows. He was passing through the gates when once again that mighty voice summoned him, and now it held a note of urgency that came clearly across all the barriers of language and culture.

The shining giant who spoke with many voices met him a little way from the village and beckoned him to follow. There was no sign of Bertrond. They walked for almost a mile before they saw him in the distance, standing not far from the river's edge and staring out across the dark, slowly moving waters.

He turned as Yaan approached, yet for a moment seemed unaware of his presence. Then he gave a gesture of dismissal to the shining one, who withdrew into the distance.

Yaan waited. He was patient and, though he could never have expressed it in words, contented. When he was with Bertrond he felt the first intimations of that selfless, utterly irrational devotion his race would not fully achieve for many ages.

It was a strange tableau. Here at the river's brink two men were

standing. One was dressed in a closely-fitting uniform equipped with tiny, intricate mechanisms. The other was wearing the skin of an animal and was carrying a flint-tipped spear. Ten thousand generations lay between them, ten thousand generations and an immeasurable gulf of space. Yet they were both human. As she must do often in eternity, Nature had repeated one of her basic patterns.

Presently Bertrond began to speak, walking to and fro in short, quick steps as he did, and in his voice there was a trace of madness.

"It's all over, Yaan. I'd hoped that with our knowledge we could have brought you out of barbarism in a dozen generations, but now you will have to fight your way up from the jungle alone, and it may take you a million years to do so. I'm sorry — there's so much we could have done. Even now I wanted to stay here, but Altman and Clindar talk of duty, and I suppose that they are right. There is little enough that we can do, but our world is calling and we must not forsake it.

"I wish you could understand me, Yaan. I wish you knew what I was saying. I'm leaving you these tools: some of them you will discover how to use, though as likely as not in a generation they'll be lost or forgotten. See how this blade cuts: it will be ages before your world can make its like. And guard this well: when you press the button — look! If you use it sparingly, it will give you light for years, though sooner or later it will die. As for these other things — find what use for them you can.

"Here come the first stars, up there in the east. Do you ever look at the stars, Yaan? I wonder how long it will be before you have discovered what they are, and I wonder what will have happened to us by then. Those stars are our homes, Yaan, and we cannot save them. Many have died already, in explosions so vast that I can imagine them no more than you. In a hundred thousand of your years, the light of those funeral pyres will reach your world and set its peoples wondering. By then, perhaps, your race will be reaching for the stars. I wish I could warn you against the mistakes we made, and which now will cost us all that we have won.

"It is well for your people, Yaan, that your world is here at the frontier of the universe. You may escape the doom that waits for us. One day, perhaps, your ships will go searching among the stars as we have done, and they may come upon the ruins of our worlds and wonder who we were. But they will never know that we met here by this river when your race was young.

"Here come my friends; they would give me no more time. Goodbye, Yaan — use well the things I have left you. They are

your world's greatest treasures."

Something huge, something that glittered in the starlight, was sliding down from the sky. It did not reach the ground, but came to rest a little way above the surface, and in utter silence a rectangle of light opened in its side. The shining giant appeared out of the night and stepped through the golden door. Bertrond followed, pausing for a moment at the threshold to wave back at Yaan. Then the darkness closed behind him.

No more swiftly than smoke drifts upwards from a fire, the ship lifted away. When it was so small that Yaan felt he could hold it in his hands, it seemed to blur into a long line of light slanting upwards into the stars. From the empty sky a peal of thunder echoed over the sleeping land; and Yaan knew at last that the Gods were gone and would never come again.

For a long time he stood by the gently moving waters, and into his soul there came a sense of loss he was never to forget and never to understand. Then, carefully and reverently, he collected together the gifts that Bertrond had left.

Under the stars, the lonely figure walked homeward across a nameless land. Behind him the river flowed softly to the sea, winding through the fertile plains on which, more than a thousand centuries ahead, Yaan's descendants would build the great city they were to call Babylon.

THE END

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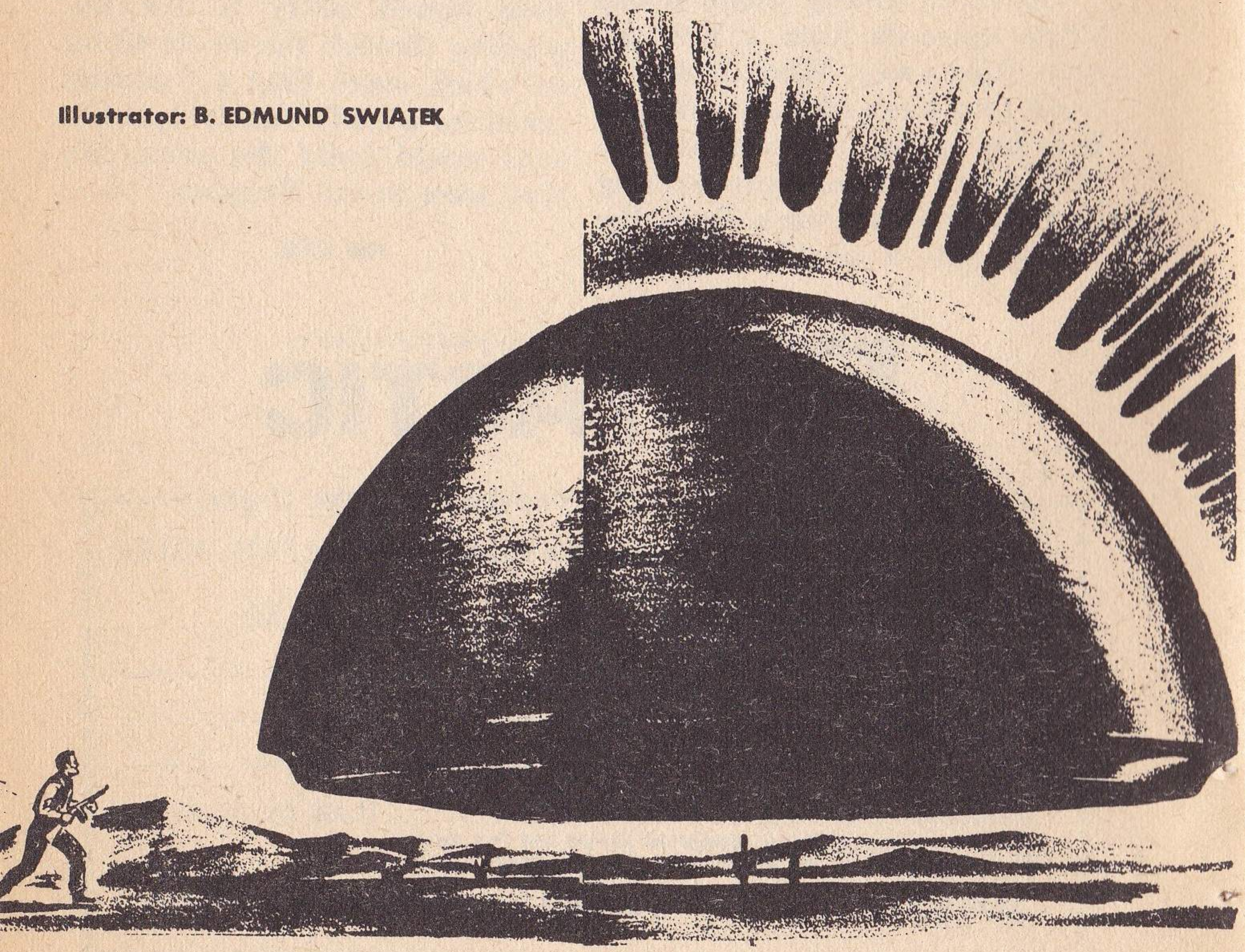
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Here's the very first s-f story by the Hugo-winning author of A Canticle for Leibowitz *and "Six and Ten Are Johnny." —The Martians invade Earth—in a huge dome that H-bombs can't dent—plunk down in the desert for* ten *years, vivisect a few curiosity-seekers, then make* one *mistake. They let Barney Willis—or what* was *Barney Willis—go back to his bride!*

SECRET OF THE DEATH DOME

WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

Illustrator: B. EDMUND SWIATEK



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THE martians came in a huge dome from out of the sky and sat it down in the desert, to watch. Earth was their zoo, and their dome an impregnable cage. So it seemed at first. Then it was whispered in the halls of Man that Earth was the cage, and the dome was the *Outside.* For Man had thrown himself in vain fury against the dome's outer surface, while the dome-men yawned and watched from their unassailable fortress.

Their mission was obscure. They did not attack. Neither did they offer friendship. For ten years thereafter Earth was like a house of glass. Man lived in it uneasily, but without change. Boys who were eleven had grown to adulthood with the dome as a constant, ominous shadow. They were tired of hearing about it. They got married and had children. Martians? So what?

A state of war existed in theory. The Martians had behaved in a manner that justified war. They seized curiosity-seekers and used them as specimens. The dome was the target of the most magnificent of Earth weapons. Its resistance was passive. It sat unharmed. Martian hostility was evidently only curiosity. And when H-bombs exploded harmlessly, Earthmen blushed and ceased the attacks to save themselves embarrassment. For want of a better course, they finally decided to ignore the dome.

But the military maintained an alert. Towns grew up at a safe distance from the dome to house scientific investigators and the men who patrolled the neighboring desert. They had jobs to do—routine jobs with government salaries.

Then Barney Willis came in out of the desert and died. Another specimen for the Martians. He died at the edge of town. Masterson, the blacksmith, saw him pitch off his horse and lie in the road. He saw the uniform of the special patrol—blue and gray—fluttering in the hot wind off the desert. He went out and felt his wrist: then he called the colonel.

The colonel sent Jerry Harrison to see about it. Jerry was just a sergeant, but there wasn't any need for brass. Death is for privates. And Barney's death was his wife's tough luck, but it was nothing new. Of course, the colonel didn't stop to think that Barney was Jerry's best friend—so good a friend that they were still friends after Barney married Jerry's girl. Big blond Barney with the damnfool grin and thin hard Jerry with the angry eyes—side-riders. MacPearson, who ran the Tavern, chained a couple of barstools together for them as a joke. Sort of a marriage ceremony, he said.

Jerry got to Barney while the

crowd was gathering. Barney was a limp heap. The blank face looked queer without its grin. Stand back, stand back for the special patrol! Give him light! It's almost dark and he's got to see!

There wasn't any blood. The body was still hot—too hot, fresh from the desert and the sun.

"You women scram," Jerry growled. "I'm going to loosen his clothes. It may not be pretty."

The women retreated to the outer circle.

"How long is this going to last?" somebody wanted to know.

"Blow them off the planet, I say!" said a plump man in a business suit.

Jerry opened the dead man's shirt. No chest wound. The abdomen, maybe. Maybe they borrowed his liver to see how it worked. They were like that.

"Blow the dome ten light-years into space!" said the plump man. "If we can't dent it, we can move it half to hell."

"Then what'll we breathe for air?" asked a calm voice. "Alpha particles? Do you realize how much uranium. . ."

Jerry loosened the dead man's belt. Then he buckled it again lest the crowd see what he had seen. Earth men were funny about some things, especially in crowds. They might form a mob and go out to the dome. Damnfool living, loving, hating humans.

"What's wrong with him, sergeant?" asked the plump man.

Jerry stood up with Barney in his arms. "He's dead. That's all." Then he added— "Sunstroke, mister."

It was true. Barney had left his hat at the dome. He'd left something else too. They'd closed the wound with the strange white film they used for surgery, so there wasn't any blood. But the crowd didn't have to know about that.

Jerry put him in the back of the station wagon and drove toward headquarters. He was glad Barney had left his hat behind. Barney would be glad too. He was *mercifully* dead. Because he wasn't a *man* anymore. And Betty was young and brown and firm as a grape. And loyal. She wouldn't have left him if he'd lived. She'd have moved to another bedroom to save embarrassment; but she'd have gone on cooking his meals and singing while she worked. That was the way she was. Barney couldn't have faced it.

Knowing Barney, Jerry was puzzled. Why had he tried to come back at all?

Colonel Beck's rock-ugly face wore its usual hard hatred as he peered over the coroner's shoulder at the body laid out on a table under the glaring light. He turned to glare at Jerry who sat slumped by the door.

"Why the hell did they do *that,* sergeant?" he snapped.

Jerry shook his head.

The colonel cursed softly and looked back at the body. "You'd think they *knew* he just got married. You'd think they. . ." He paused and frowned. "Now how the hell would a damn sexless Martian think of a thing like *that!* Make an eunuch of him and send him home to his new bride. It beats me, sergeant."

"How do you know they're sexless?"

"Hell, man! Their broadcasts from the dome! Don't you listen?"

Jerry knew what he meant. The Martians barged in on the broadcast-band to ask questions about earth biology and other things that they couldn't learn by dissecting captives. They offered information about Martian society and Martian science in return. The government finally ordered that non-secret material be released to them in the hope that the brutal vivisections would cease. The dome-men replied by radioing lectures on Martian history, psychology, and physiology. But how much of it was true?

"What bothers me," Jerry muttered, "is why Barney came back *at all*—like that."

The colonel snorted indifferently.

"Maybe he had something to say. Maybe he found out something new and important that he wanted to report. Maybe. . ."

The colonel was impatient. "Use your head, sergeant," he said. "The Martians can erase a human mind like a blackboard. Nobody that's ever come back from them alive can remember anything about them. Even what they look like. You know that! They get through with a man and then pick the memories out of his mind like fleas off a dog."

It was true. Yonkers, who had left his legs in the dome, could remember riding out on patrol and passing the jutting rock. Then his memory cut off like a light. He could then remember being in a blackened room whose ceiling was so low that he had to stoop. Then memory stopped again. He remembered intense pain and a grating sensation in his legs, but no visual image accompanied it. The Martians pinched out just those memory images that they didn't want to be there.

"Maybe he knew or saw something that they didn't *know* he saw," Jerry suggested.

"That's silly!"

"Then why did he come back?"

"Because he wanted to *live*, man!"

With his new bride? Like that? The colonel didn't know Barney like Jerry did.

The coroner called it death by sunstroke, and there was no use running an autopsy.

"Sergeant Harrison," the colonel said sweetly. "I'm detailing *you* to find out what it was you think he saw. *You* take his patrol tomorrow."

Jerry nodded. He had meant to ask for it anyway. But Colonel Beck was angry. He had lost a scout. Good scouts were scarce. He couldn't get back at the Martians, so he took it out on Jerry. But Jerry was willing.

"Check your little theory, sergeant," the colonel went on in a sugary tone. "Get close to the dome. Poke around a bit. Prod it with a stick, maybe. Don't forget your magnifying glass."

Jerry stiffened. No horseman had ever been that close—voluntarily. Only infantry and tanks.

"You think I'm afraid?" he asked.

"I don't give a damn whether you are or not!" Colonel Beck growled. "It's an order."

Jerry stood up to leave. "Yes, sir. I'll see what I can find."

The colonel's sadistic appetites were not yet satiated. "One other thing, sergeant," he said. "Take Willis home to his wife."

"Colonel! . . ."

"I'll call her, of course—and drop in to pay my respects tomorrow. But you take him home. The jailhouse is no place for a dead family man. We can get an embalmer out of the city tomorrow."

"I'd rather not. . ."

"Sergeant! You don't have to tell her what they did to him. Just sunstroke, that's all."

There was no arguing with him. Jerry obeyed reluctantly. It wasn't going to be a pleasant task—carrying Barney in to Betty. He drove as slowly as he could on the way.

Two questions troubled him. The colonel's and his own. How had such an amputation occurred to a sexless Martian? And—why had Barney come back—unless he knew something? There were a lot of *maybe's,* but none seemed satisfying.

Barney's house was like all the houses in the row—government construction—a white frame house with ivy-trellises. One thing was different—the woman who kept it. She stood in the doorway when they drove up—white, tight-faced, grim, beautiful. A strong girl. No girl to wail helplessly with grief. Barney knew her well—too well. She would sit and think and hate. She would be a widow until the Martians were driven from the earth.

Jerry and the corporal took the stretcher up the walk. Barney was covered with a sheet. She held the door open for them.

"Save it, Jerry," she said when he opened his mouth. "The colonel called me."

No use complaining about it,

she might have added. *He did what he could for Earth.*

They laid him out on the bed, and the corporal went back to the car. Betty bent over the body in the evening gloom that came from the window. And her thin fingers barely touched his yellow hair. Her own dark hair shrouded her face, a black curtain about her cheeks, hiding whatever she felt. Then she kissed him—lightly—as she might kiss a child. Jerry shuddered. A childish kiss. No use kissing him like a *man,* even in death. Not after what they did to him.

She turned, but he couldn't see her eyes in the dim light. Thank God for that! It hurt bad enough just to look at her; he had loved her long before Barney.

"When are we going to get even, Jerry?" Her voice was icy.

Vengeance—an Earth-woman's concept. Good old Earth, with its grief and its rage and its fiery hate. Martians couldn't feel such illogical emotions—so the broadcasts said.

"Sorry, Betty," he said weakly. "I'm just a scout, not a senator."

She watched him for a silent time. Then she turned away. "And I'm just a woman."

Her tone struck him like a slap. There were a lot of things in it—scorn, hate, determination.

He left as quickly as he could. He sent the corporal back with the car and walked silently homeward in the moonlight.

The Martian dome glimmered faintly in the distance across the desert. High, proud, evil. Shining in the moon-glow. What right had Martians to bask under the Earth's moon? He passed a couple with two small children—going home from the movie, maybe. Life went on; there was nothing else it could do. While the dome watched it.

The couple with the children reminded him of Barney. And Betty. She was built just right for bearing kids. Efficiently constructed. . .

Jerry hated himself suddenly for the thoughts that began creeping up from the depths. But hell! He couldn't help feeling what he did. The Id had a hairy chest and carried a stone axe; it never heard of moral law.

The Martians had no Id—so the lecturer said. Their minds operated entirely on the conscious level.

He stopped in the Tavern for a beer. MacPearson saw him coming and sneaked around to unchain his stool from Barney's. But Jerry saw him do it. A hush fell over the place when he came in, and several voices murmured at him as he passed. "Sorry to hear about. . ."

He took a seat and the conversation picked up again. For awhile he listened to the sibilant

murmer of angry voices.

"Get all the uranium on earth and blow the dome to hell!"

It was the old argument, and Jerry was sick of it. How to get rid of the dome. It had been blasted and bombed and gassed and infected with bubonic plague. But the dome's radio voice congratulated the bombardiers for their accuracy—on the aircraft command frequency. And thanked them politely—ominously, perhaps—for such an insight into Earth's military science. The dome was undented.

"Keep pumping lewisite into the vents. Their air-filters can't last forever."

Jerry looked disgustedly at the speaker. But the speaker was too interested in his own opinions to notice. Everybody had helpful suggestions; but nobody was mad enough to spend millions of dollars and millions of lives. After all, who had died? Only a few scouts. Everyone was intellectually angry; no one was mad down deep in the belly. Except Betty, maybe.

And Jerry?

Why should Jerry be mad? Now he had a chance at Barney's widow. Wasn't that just fine?

He pushed his beer aside and left the bar quickly. He went home to a breezy bed. The wind came off the desert, bearing with it the familiar odor of—of whatever the Martians were doing. It kept him coldly awake.

Four blocks away was another bed—with a dead man in it. And Betty sleeping on the couch. Life went on. And death.

Funny, though—the Martians didn't die. They just went to sleep and split in half like amoebae—and then there were two. They kept their sexless daddy's memories. Why not? Same brain, divided between them. The lecturer said so. Wouldn't it be funny if you could remember when your thousand-times-great grandfather bashed in his brother's head with a club? And stole his wife, maybe?

Betty. He kept thinking of Betty. *When are we going to get even, Jerry?* Vengeance. Earthbound Betty, corn-fed, and raised up by common old earth-standards. A dark little snake who could love or sting.

Did she think hate would work better than H-bombs?

Did *he* hate the big pink bodies inside the dome? With the red stripe down the middle where they divided? The headless creatures with humps on their back for brain-cases? They loved to have the line stroked—so the lecturer said. Maybe the lecturer lied. Maybe they *didn't* like to have the stripe stroked. Maybe they had screaming meemies if you even touched it. Everybody believed the lecturer. They drew sketches of the Martians from the

lecturer's descriptions. But why should the lecturer lie about such trivialities?

The Martians were so polite. They thanked the scout when they plucked out his eye to see how he saw. Not torturers—just curious. And when the engineers burrowed under the dome secretly to plant a few H-bombs, the dome picked itself up out of the crater, sat down a mile away, and ignored the incident as a lady ignores a drunk.

Jerry couldn't sleep. He could hear Minnie shifting about restlessly in her stall. So he pulled on his boots and went out to keep company with his mare. Maybe she was thirsty. He had forgotten to water her.

But ten minutes later he had saddled up. He gathered his paraphernalia, swung into the familiar seat, and trotted westward under the midnight moon. The dome was a faint luminescence in the distance. He had no idea what he meant to do. It was just an urge.

He rode for two hours until he reached the row of stainless steel stakes that marked a five-mile circle around the dome. It was the scouting radius; he had ridden it thousands of times. He reined up and gazed at the hemispherical fortress. Its impenetrable surface shimmered slightly in the silvery light, like an asphalt road in the hot sun. Perhaps it was the desert air. Or perhaps the Princeton professor was right in his theory that the dome's metallic sheath was immersed in a field that increased the inter-molecular forces by a tremendous amount.

The dome appeared to be sleeping peacefully under the moon. But Jerry knew that it was awake and watching. It saw the single rider on the scouting circle. It could devour him if it wished. But it could feel neither anger or amusement. Its only dangerous sentiment might be curiosity.

How many more days would he ride around it before they got curious? Or needed another specimen. Then they would pluck out his heart, or muse over his cortex. Or do what they did to Barney. He was helpless before it.

He dismounted and sat under the edge of a bluff to think. He felt more comfortable in the shadows. There was nothing he could do—except his job. Just ride circles around the beanpot and hope for the best.

Soon he dozed. He was awakened by a faint thump. He started up. Another thump. It came from nowhere in particular. He could feel it more than hear it. It was in the ground and in the air. Suddenly he knew what it was. It had happened to an old prospector once. He got too close to the dome and said he felt a kind of thudding in the air that grew and grew until it beat him sense-

less. He told about it just before he died of a brain hemorrhage.

Thunk! Thunk!

He winced and looked for a place to hide. Minnie neighed and strained at her rope. The *thunks* were little twinges in the bones.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Harder this time. He made a dash for the mare. But Minnie reared up with a shriek and the rope pulled loose from the rock. She set off homeward at a gallop.

The thudding stopped, as if its purpose had been accomplished. The Martians had driven away his horse. Why?

He looked around. He had stashed his Thompson sub and his walkie-talkie under the edge of the bluff. But he'd left the two canteens of water on the horse.

He thought of calling for help on the radio. But no one but the Martians guarded the frequency at night. He would have to wait for daylight, or try to go back on foot. But if the Martians wanted him, walking away would do no good. They could thump him down or prod him with the stinging beams that hurt on the side away from the dome and made the victim run screaming toward it, to escape the intense burning that followed behind.

He sat down under the bluff again to wait for dawn. He stared at the hateful fortress until he could close his eyes and see its pale, floating, after-image.

The sky grew gray, then red in the east. The dome took on the color of the sunrise. He called control. The channel was silent. He tried again in half-an-hour—this time with results.

"Scout Three from Control. What happened Jerry? Your horse came trotting into town at six o'clock."

"Martians sent her scampering. Get somebody out here with another. Six miles east of the beanpot."

A cold metallic voice cut into the frequency. "That will be unnecessary. That will be unnecessary."

And that was all. The dome had spoken and fallen silent. Jerry breathed heavily into his mike but said nothing. He watched the dome fearfully. It *wanted* him. No use sending another horse.

The dispatcher lowered his voice as if to keep the Martians from hearing "Sit tight, Jerry. We'll get somebody out there right away. We'll send everybody that's not out looking for Betty Willis."

Jerry found his voice again quickly. "*Looking for who?*"

"Betty Willis. She may be off her rocker. Sat up all night with the body. When your horse came in, she called up the colonel and said it was her fault. Something she said to you. Next thing you

know somebody saw her galloping out of town. She's headed for rough country, or she'd have taken the car."

The metallic voice cut in again. "Tell us why the woman reacts in this manner. Tell us why she behaves illogically."

The dispatcher began cursing and went off the air to finish the oath.

"Hate, beanpot," Jerry hissed at his mike. He had nothing to lose by being brazen. "Now tell us one. Why did you do that to her husband?"

The voice came back calmly and quickly. "We wish to examine human heredity mechanisms. We wish to make a human organism. We have tried previously without success. Now we shall succeed.

Jerry's vision clouded with red flashes of hate. *Make a human organism!* "Why don't you just borrow one," he choked. "Me, for instance."

"Thank you. But we wish to make several changes in the structure. Thank you."

Jerry pushed the walkie-talkie aside and stood up. Then he lifted it for a last word to the dispatcher. "When you find Betty, tell her we're going to get even." Then he dashed the radio to the rocks. And with the submachine gun under his arm, he began walking toward the dome.

He was running amok. He knew it. Don Quixote. Damn fool. They could kill him any instant. He was going to die. Foolishly. For nothing at all. He couldn't even make it count. Still he walked on.

Make a human organism!

And the Lord God made man of the slime of the earth. And breathed in his face the breath of life. And man became a living soul. Maybe that wasn't true. But it sounded better than the way the Martians said it.

The impotency of his wrath! He realized it. It made him more angry. The meaninglessness of his gesture. Of his grim march toward the omnipotent enemy.

The radio was still working. Far behind him he could hear its voice. The dispatcher was calling excited questions. The Martian was asking about illogical behaviour.

Why didn't they shoot him? Or blast him with the thumping outfit. (Was it supersonic?)

A sane spark in Jerry's mind told him to go back. The sane spot spoke coldly, logically. But it had no control of his rage. For years he had ridden the circle, knowing every moment that he was helpless. A mouse stalking a tiger. A foolish strutting little earthling, at the mercy of the dome. He had grown to resent it more and more. Now the resentment broke the dam and swelled into a torrent of hate. He stalked onward.

In two hours he was within tommygun range of the dome. He stopped to slip a fifty-round drum on his weapon. No one but infantry and tanks had been this close before. They had assaulted it futilely. It closed its shell and went to sleep while they gnawed at the impenetrable—*what?*

It looked like ordinary steel. But diamonds couldn't mark it. Uranium couldn't dent it. Acid was harmless to it. It was curiously non-conductive to electricity and heat; the Martians could not be roasted out. Its thermal conductivity had been estimated—somewhere around a billionth of a BTU per hour per degree Fahrenheit per cubic foot. It could sit on the surface of the sun for awhile with that kind of insulation.

Jerry fired a burst at it, just to spend a little anger. The bullets never ricocheted. They stuck to the surface, like iron to a magnet. Maybe the Princeton professor was right. There wasn't any such metal.

Well, here he was. And there it was. Why didn't they come out and get him? But they never came out. Even the desert was too humid to suit them. Moisture made them itch. The lecturer said so.

He was thinking more calmly now. They had let him come this close for a reason. Maybe they wanted to observe anger reactions. Martians couldn't feel anger. The lecturer—*damn* the lecturer! Maybe they'd take out his adrenals to see how they worked.

Maybe it gave them a warm feeling to see him wandering about helplessly. "There goes the enemy, but here we are nice and safe in our igloo."

The sun was getting hot. It gleamed on the glazed ground, where the uranium blasts had fused the rocks. Once the ground had been grazing land—poor land, to be sure, but covered with a sparse grass. But that part of the desert had had no rain for ten years. Since the Martians came. Mother Earth had changed her weather to suit Martian comfort. But the meteorologists said it was a coincidence.

He started walking around the dome. They knew he was there. They watched silently. They hadn't even bothered to retract the stilts it stood on. It sat on three short fat legs, its flat bottom three feet above the desert floor. When the infantry came, it pulled in the legs and sat down on its belly. Once it sat down on some of the infantry. They had crawled under to find an air-vent through which to pump gas. The Martians had evidently cleaned up the G.I. cadavers for specimens, because the ground beneath the dome was barren and boneless.

He shouted at the fort. "Come out and get me, you bastards! Come on!"

Of course they couldn't answer him without his radio. They had no vocal cords. But their bodies could generate radio waves and modulate them in any way they pleased. The lecturer said their synaptic connections were so quick-triggered they could perceive each separate radio frequency pulse and duplicate it exactly with a modulated carrier wave. That was the way they communicated with each other. They could vary their output from a whisper to a hundred watts.

"Well, damn it! Do something!" he shouted helplessly.

The desert was silent, and the dome shimmered in the heat. He glanced back toward town. A single rider was approaching the scouting circle. Too late now.

The sun was beating upon him heavily. His throat was dry and burning for water. He wandered about aimlessly for a time, cursing and firing bursts against the dome.

Hell, if they wouldn't come out, then he'd try to get in! There were bound to be vents under the dome. He slung the tommy-gun and crawled under the edge. The center would be the logical place to look. But it was a half-mile crawl. He set out over the slag determindely dropping to his hands and knees.

As he moved slowly and painfully along, the darkness deepened and the white desert sunlight was a painful band of brightness in the distance. Folly upon folly. The Martians were playing with him. Willfully he was moving into their trap. When he was far enough under, they would start to sit down—slowly, so he would make a run for safety. Then when he was almost out, they would drop their low, flat belly upon him. He began to feel the things a claustrophobiac feels.

I'm just a woman, Jerry. Betty's scorn was a whip that lashed him on. Or maybe the scorn wasn't in her tone, but rather—in his own conscience. And in the conscience of the world. *Why isn't humanity man enough to do something?*

A sudden shrill sound made him freeze. It came from behind. Far behind. He knew the deathshriek a horse sometimes makes. It chilled him. A rider had followed him to the dome. The Martians had killed the animal—and perhaps the rider.

He crawled on.

He kept bumping against the ceiling. Had the dome moved, or was the ground rising slightly? The metal felt body-temperature—illusively. But that was because it was non-conductive, according to the Princeton theory. The physicists said it was near

absolute zero, its molecules locked tightly in place by the strength of a field which was thought to irradiate it from within. The particles could not even vibrate with heat energy. What would happen if the field were suddenly released? A wine-glass dropped in molten steel?

His hands and knees were bloody from the rough ground. But as he neared the center, he felt a strong draft of air. He was approaching a vent.

He found it by moving downwind and feeling with his hands. He could see nothing but the thin vein of white light around the rim of the dome.

He found it—and his heart sank. It was protected by heavy louvers, set a few inches back in the opening. He stretched out in exhaustion beneath the vent. A gale of air arose about him. He fired a short burst up into the vent, but nothing happened. The sound was deafening, and the flashes lit up the blackness for a moment. That was all.

He lay quietly recovering his strength and waiting.

Thump! Thump!

He felt the shocks pass through him and his hand went numb. At close range, the sonic cone was narrow. It missed his body. The Martians were firing in darkness. He looked around quickly. Something broke the thin vein of light. A silhouette! It moved, scrambling drily feet away.

He rolled over and blasted at it with the tommy-gun. Something crumpled and fell to the ground. Then the metallic slap of a hatch closing. He crawled to his target and felt it cautiously. A hot gritty little body. Hard as a rubber tire. But the rubber had holes in it, and they oozed a thick, viscous fluid that began to crystallize in the dry air. Martian bodies were dry-fleshed.

But was *this* a Martian? He had seen sketches of them, done from the lecturer's descriptions. The sketches were wrong. He could tell just by feeling the body. The wrongness was quantitative. The sketches showed huge, thick-limbed creatures. This dead beast was bony and rather small. The lecturer had lied. Why? Were they afraid, in spite of their impenetrable dome?

He struck a match and looked. A spindly, pink, headless creature, whose brain was in the bulge on its back. The dividing line was a livid red scar that ran along the bulge and around under the belly, marking the creature exactly in half.

Before the match flickered and burned his fingers, he made another discovery. The lecturer had lied more than once. He said the Martians were sexless. But this dead thing was obviously *a female!*

It startled him. They might try

to hide weakness with lies. But why sex?

They split, all right, like the lecturer said. There was the red scar. But two sexes. The female probably must be fertilized before she could divide. And perhaps the male couldn't divide at all. The male shouldn't have the scar —or else only a vestigal one.

But why the secrecy?

He shifted uncomfortably in the cramped darkness and bumped his head on the ceiling. His hands flew upward, and his palms pressed against it, like Atlas supporting the sky.

He choked back a scream.

The dome was sitting down. The ceiling was moving slowly but perceptibly. The desert was half a mile away.

He crawled back to the vent and fought at the louvers with his hands. They were of the field-strengthened metal. But they were recessed a few inches. If he lay under the vent, he would have another minute or two of life —before he was cut in neat slices.

He cursed his foolishness. He cursed Colonel Beck and the Martians. He thought a curse at Betty, then drew it back. She couldn't help saying what she had.

He fired a burst into the dust again. No effect. He shouted insults into the black maw. The dome settled without a pause.

"I came to bargain with you," he called in desperation. "The government sent me."

The descent continued, but after a moment a loud-speaker voice crackled in a monotone. "That is an untrue statement. We have observed your duties. You spoke an untrue statement." The voice was coldly polite.

He shrieked more curses at them.

"Your emotions are interesting," the loudspeaker noted. "We are recording your audible expressions. Would you please notify us when pain begins?"

He fell silent. The louvers were about two feet above the ground, now. He tried digging in the earth, but it was caked and dry. The blast of air faded as the fans were shut off. Then he heard the slow scrape of doors closing above him. He reached through the louvers and felt the metal jaws pulling together. But they stopped ajar. The Martians would leave a narrow opening so they could hear and record his pain-sounds.

The ceiling pressed down. He was flat on his back and trying not to cry out in fear. In a minute or so, he would feel the vise-grip. The dead Martian, who was not under the vent, was already caught in it. He could hear the popping sounds she made, and the damp hiss when her air-sac ruptured. Pressed like a flower in a book.

The louvers touched him light-

ly. He called into the vent to keep from screaming.

"I tell you the government sent me to bargain!"

"That is an untrue statement. We have refused such offers. You spoke an untrue statement."

The pressure was robbing him of breath. "Not as untrue as the damn lies your lecturer tells."

There was a long silence.

"Would you repeat that, please?

He repeated it as best he could.

There was another silence, during which the pressure stopped increasing.

"Would you please explain your meaning?" the loudspeaker asked coldly. "And give the origin of such a belief."

Jerry stalled for a few more minutes of life. "You're no more sexless than earthmen. Your broadcasts were lies."

"What is the origin of such a belief?"

"Barney told us before he died. It's going to be common knowledge."

The Martians were apparently slow thinkers. Slow but accurate. Soon they would remember the dead female under the dome.

"That is an untrue statement. The scout's memory was sifted before he was released."

The pressure began to increase again.

"He saw something you *didn't know he saw!*" Jerry shrieked.

Gradually the pressure stopped again. A long silence. Apparently they were mulling it over. He waited. Then —

Thunk, thunk... from out of the vent.

The blast rocked his senses. He squirmed helplessly and moaned. His skull was bursting.

THUNK, THUNK, THUNK THUNK...

He shrank and cringed under the sledge-hammer shocks. They seemed to explode inside his head. They came faster.

TUK TUK TUK TUK TUK...

Gratefully he surrendered himself to the tide of blackness.

He awoke in a dim room. His skin was brittle. His mouth was numb with dryness. The ceiling was absurdly low — but high enough for Martian stature. He was obviously inside the dome.

He moved. Pain stabbed a thousand needles in him. He was bound with thread-thin barbed wire. The movement caused the tiny pinpoints to bite his flesh. He moved again, and moaned.

"Do not stir," said a voice. "The wire is coated with an irritant. Motion will cause sufficient pain to result in fainting."

Jerry carefully turned his head to see the source of the voice. It came from his walkie-talkie! It was on a low table. A Martian female stood nearby. It was like watching a ventriloquist.

"Your statement was untrue," the Martian went on. "The scout told nothing. You simply examined the dead Yy-Da beneath the vent. The scout died before speaking to another Earthman."

"What makes you think so?"

"We have questioned another captive."

Jerry watched the female warily. She seemed to feel no anger or sorrow for her dead compatriot. Her insect-like eyes gazed at him blankly as she crouched in the queer Martian stance. The red welt down the center of her body made her look cleft by a sword.

"Who is the captive?" he asked.

"It is the Earth female. It is the female of the scout. It is—"

"Good Lord! *Betty!*"

"That is a true statement."

He lurched toward the Martian in a rage. She listened calmly to his howl of pain and watched him stiffen into immobility as the snake-fangs of the wire pierced his body. He sickened with shock. The wires were worse than a black swarm of angry wasps.

"That was an illogical action."

He wished fervently that they would keep their analyses of his behaviour to themselves.

"What are you going to do with her?" he groaned.

"We need parts of the human organism as models." She paused, then said, "This is an ineffective and illogical procedure. You will remember nothing of what I tell you. Therefore it is a waste of time for you to ask."

He tested the wires again and winced. He could break them—but perhaps have an immediate convulsion. The Martians evidently had a great respect for pain. They didn't expect him to try. Maybe he'd faint, but when the time came...

She saw him examining his bonds. "The irritant is also a debilitating agent," she said. "If you continue stirring, you will become too weak to move. That would be illogical."

His mouth was cottony. "Can I have water?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment, then shuffled silently out of the room. Cautiously he tried to slip out of his loosely wrapped bonds. But the wires adhered to his skin like tape. Soon he was in agony. It was no use. He felt sure a sudden muscular surge would burst them, but it was too early to try it. He had no plan. No way to escape.

The martian was gone a long time. He stared at the walkie-talkie. Betty had probably found it and picked it up before they caught her. Maybe she'd used it to call for help—not that it would do any good.

The Martian shuffled back with a ping-pong ball full of dirty fluid. A flexible tube was at-

tached. She held it away from her distastefully and kept the tube pinched closed. He remembered that Martians took a drink about once a month. Moisture made them itch, except when their systems required the tiny periodic amount.

He took the water in a quick suck. It furred his teeth. Full of iron—probably Martian water. A ten-year supply would be a light load for such a small consumption. When their skins became numb, they knew they were thirsty—the lecturer said. They drank a small amount, scratched happily, then were disgusted with themselves and let if alone for another month.

"I need *water,*" he said. "A whole bucket of it."

She thought about it for a moment. "It will be necessary to take you to the water. There is no large closed container available."

She was afraid of even the nearness of water. Apparently the slight evaporation caused itching.

She loosened the wires that bound his legs by painting his skin with a clear oil that caused them to pull away easily and painlessly. He watched for an opportunity to kick at her braincase. He spoke to distract her.

"What's in store for me here, Gertrude?"

"We wish to trace out the synaptic connections which deal with rage, lust, and hate in the human organism."

"I don't get it."

"Certain areas of your cortex will be paralyzed. Then you will be offered various stimuli and your behaviour observed. We will find the areas which affect these emotions which we do not possess."

He tentatively aimed a foot at the center of her abdomen. "What sort of stimuli?"

"The ones which normally evoke rage, lust, or fear, respectively. It will require considerable time. Your brain will gradually be destroyed."

He held the foot back for a moment. "Lust? . . ."

"You forget that we have one of your females. You will be closed together in a room. The logical functioning of your brain will be paralyzed . . ."

He lashed out with his foot. She caught it in her claws and forced it to the floor easily. There was strength in the thin Martian arms.

"Such behavior will result in continued thirst," she warned calmly.

He subsided. She wrapped a wire around his neck and fastened it to his knees, so that he would have to walk hunched over and take mincing steps. She produced a small device that looked like a camera, pointed it at the drink-

ing container on the table, and snapped a lever. The ping-pong ball exploded into a fine powder, and a low *thump* filled the room. It was a convincing reminder of the bludgeoning he had received beneath the dome.

"You will walk ahead," she announced, and lifted the radio from the table.

They stepped into the corridor. An occasional expressionless Martian passed as they moved along. Jerry managed to crane his neck to get a glimpse of each — all females. Maybe the women were the workers.

"After you drink, you will be put to sleep until you are needed," his guard told him. "You will be spared any pain that is not necessary to our work."

"That's good of you, Gertrude."

"Thank you."

He snapped a curse at her, and expected a thump from the device she carried. But she showed no anger.

They entered a huge circular room with a bulging ceiling. The top of the dome, perhaps. He looked around as best he could. Machinery. Heavy, complicated machinery of massive design. The room smelled of the strange foul odor that sometimes blew toward the town. Some of the machinery was lead shielded. Ductwork led from it to the ceiling. The ducts were yellow helices that glowed with a faint corona discharge. Some sort of wave-guides, perhaps. They all passed through the jaws of a tremendous electromagnet before they spiralled upward. Near the ceiling they straightened, and each duct flared out into a flat sort of reflector, focused upward. He tried to trace the ductwork back to its origin.

"You will move faster, please," said the radio speaker. "And keep looking at the floor."

The Martian didn't want him to inspect the machinery. The ducts with the hovering corona did they supply the field to the outer shell of the dome? And if the field were suddenly destroyed...

He stole another glance toward the electromagnet.

Thunk! The Martian gave him a light jolt with the sonic gun. It staggered him. The wires needled him painfully.

"Look at the floor, please."

He looked at the floor and walked in the direction she indicated. He had seen what he wanted to see. The ducts all ended in a spherical shell surrounded with gold-colored tubing.

They passed into another corridor. Still he had seen no Martians but females. As they moved along they passed a flanking wall of glass-partitioned cells. A few of the cells were occupied by pink sleepers in various stages of division. He found the sight revolting.

"Where's all the men, Gertrude?" he asked suddenly.

He got another throb from the gun. Just enough to make him wince. He bit his lip with rage.

"You will ask no more questions," said the female.

Two things he wasn't supposed to know about — the machinery and Martian sex. Two weaknesses of some sort?

They moved onto a narrow catwalk and approached a large cylindrical tank. The tank was on stilts above some kind of rotating machinery below the catwalk. Pipes ran downward from it. He could feel hot currents of air arising from the machinery. Apparently the tank contained either condensate or cooling-liquid. The frame of the machinery glowed a dull red.

"Here is the water. You will drink now."

She found a flexible hose with a valve, then loosened the wires about his neck and held the hose to his mouth. She kept the gun on his belly and one hand on the valve. She didn't want any of the irritating fluid to spill. The water was hot, but he drank greedily of it. When his thirst was satisfied, he filled his cheeks with it. Then he nodded that he was finished. She cut off the valve.

"We will go now," she said as she replaced the hose.

Now or never! He spurted the mouthful of water at her. It drenched her gritty skin. She cringed. The thump-gun punched, and the sonic blast spun him sideways. The radio shrieked gibberish. She clawed at herself and dropped the gun.

He struggled against the wires. They burst. The sudden pain was maddening. He screamed and fell. Nausea caught him. Vertigo. To faint was to die. He lurched about on his hands and knees, tearing at the adhesive wires. They came loose from his back like the ripping off of his own skin.

He found the thump-gun and pawed at it weakly. Gertrude was doing spidery contortions on the floor.

He aimed at the tank and fired the gun. Not even a dent. There was a dial setting on the weapon. He twisted it to the extreme and fired again. The recoil hurt his wrists and sent him off balance. This time there was a dent in the cylinder. He kept on firing, and the dent grew deeper.

Quick shuffling steps were ringing on the catwalk behind him. Martians! He continued concentrating on the dent. It grew deeper. The metal gave way and a thin jet of dirty water spurted out.

The fringe of a sonic blast caught him from the rear and sent him on his face, half-conscious. But he heard the spitting hiss of the water-jet as it struck the red-hot furnace. Billowing

clouds of steam rolled over him. He glanced weakly around to see the Martians beating a terrified retreat before the advancing vapor.

He lay gaining strength for a moment. The first skirmish was won. Now to find Betty.

Gertrude was in a twitching coma. Perhaps she would die if her crystalline hide became saturated. He needed her help. He strapped on the walkie-talkie.

He caught her two-toed foot and dragged her along the catwalk. The steam was rolling along the walls and floor. He turned a corner and came to a glass door with a guard post beside it. The guard had suddenly left for a dryer climate. Beyond the door was a tiny cubicle with a smaller door in the opposite wall. The guard post suggested a prison cell. He dragged the limp Martian into the cubicle.

The smaller door was locked. He pressed a button in its center. A motor whined. He felt a sudden draft. The cubicle was an airlock. His ears crackled with the changing pressure. In a few moments he was gasping for breath. But the door to the corridor had locked automatically. He was trapped.

Suddenly the draft died out. The motor groaned to a stop. Then the small door slid slowly open.

He stared into a large, weirdly-lit room. The walls were rust-red panoramas of Martian scenery. Light came from orbs suspended from a black ceiling — the moons of Mars. A blue gray dawn-light was reaching up behind a range of hills. It was like a visit to the fourth planet. Even the thin, dry atmosphere was duplicated. He was choking for breath.

But the female was reviving quickly. He dragged her into the large room. Then he saw its occupant. Another Martian lay asleep on a satin couch in the center of the room. Asleep, but not dividing.

He kicked the quaking female. She stopped squirming and gazed at him without anger. For an instant he felt remorse. Her even stare was like turning the other cheek; she couldn't get mad. Then he remembered that Martians could feel no pity either. He kicked her again. She showed fear.

"Where is Betty?" he demanded.

Her blank stare was a direct refusal. He shifted the gun to low and gave her brain-case several quick twinges. The radio crackled with static.

"She'll be dead before you reach her," said the Martian.

"Then I'll kill you now," he snapped.

She was afraid for herself, but she was also afraid for her race, apparently. She remained silent. He set the gun to medium and

jolted her in the belly. She doubled with pain.

The sleeping Martian was stirring. Jerry turned the gun toward the couch.

"*No! Do not shoot the male!*" The burst came loudly from the radio.

The male? He backed to a position where he could cover them both and stared at the rousing sleeper. The male was thin and weak. The crystalline coating had worn away in spots, leaving smooth places on his wrinkled hide. He was old. And there was no red welt down his middle.

"Tell me where Betty is!"

"She will be dead before you reach her."

"Then I'll kill you both. Uncle Fidgety first."

He aimed the gun at the tottering male, who stood staring stupidly at him, as if unaware of what was happening.

"No! I will tell you where to find her!" the female called quickly. "Do not kill the male."

She climbed anxiously erect and placed herself between Jerry and the old one.

"That's better!" he snapped. "Call the others. Tell them to bring her here. And no tricks. Stay on this frequency and use earth-language."

"They cannot come here." she said. "They cannot endure the moisture in the corridors. They will be crowding in the drying rooms. If the skin becomes moisture clogged, they die of suffocation. We take in oxygen through our skins. Our air-sacs are for hydrogen feeding."

"I don't give a damn if they die or not. Do what I say."

"There is a more logical way," she said. "The male has two suits of moisture proof plastic for his personal use. I will wear one of these and take you to the girl."

"And be led into a trap? No, thanks. Tell your cronies to direct her to the central power room. Where the *field generators* are."

It was a stab in the dark, but it struck home. She straightened and emitted a surprised crackle of static.

He laughed. "So they *are* field generators!"

She was silent.

"Call the others!" he ordered.

He was beginning to totter in the rarefied air. The female was watching him closely for signs of weakness, and she was stalling for time. He gave her a thump, but missed. She edged toward him. Swaying and gasping he turned the gun toward the male.

"I will call the others," she said quickly.

She went into a deeper crouch and seemed to be straining inwardly. The radio was suddenly blocking, and feedback whined in the audio stage. Her output was reaching out to the others.

He turned down the volume and listened.

"...man-organism threatens to destroy male. Do not molest Earth female. Free her at once and direct her to central control. Man-organism threatens to destroy cherished male."

"And tell her *I'll* be there," Jerry snapped.

She relayed the information, while he tried to breathe.

"All right," he snapped. "Let's go to central control — both of you!" His heart was pounding. Bright specks in his eyes.

Static crackled again. "It is not necessary to take the male," she protested. "Why do you take..."

"He makes a good hostage, dearie. Let's go."

She found the moisture-proof suits and began helping the male into one of them. Jerry's breath was failing. He thumped them lightly. The male cringed.

"Put 'em on—in the airlock," Jerry gasped.

They moved into the small room. He jabbed at the button and his mind went black for a moment. But the female was taking no chances. The pumps whined, and after a few moments Jerry was sucking in the good moist air of the corridor. The male was scratching and dancing feebly as he scrambled into his suit.

"It'd be hell if you got caught in the rain," Jerry snapped shuddering with disgusted.

The female took him seriously. "We have prevented it from raining here," she said coldly. "Eventually we shall stop all precipitation on your planet. The water will stay in the seas, and our people will live in comfort."

Rage gripped him again. He sent her sprawling with a sonic blast. She shook herself, and climbed slowly erect.

"Let's start moving," he snarled.

"You will never escape alive," she said as she moved ahead of him. "The moisture is passing."

It was true. The steam had condensed on the walls and was already evaporating again as the airdryers worked furiously. As they passed the water tank, he noticed that the leakage had drained its contents to the level of the hole and had stopped. Soon the Martians would be coming out of the drying room in full strength—with more potent weapons than sonic guns.

So they wanted to borrow the earth and make it a desert! Keep the water in the seas. Make the land like arid Mars. Jerry thought about the field-strengthened skin of the dome. To release the field? A wine glass dropped in molten steel. And destruction to all within, perhaps?

And destruction to Betty and himself. He was no hero.

The thin male staggered feebly beside the female. She led him by the arm. Jerry wondered if all the Martian males were like that—or perhaps he was a senile king or priest. There seemed to be an acute scarcity of males.

Betty was standing alone in the power-room when they hurried in. She was glancing nervously about at the machinery which dwarfed her tiny figure and towered over her. She saw them enter, and hurried toward Jerry with frightened eyes. She was dark and pretty in her jeans and riding boots. And she was unharmed—except for the red welts about her arms from the adhesive wires. He murmured thankfully.

He wanted to hug her—and then he saw that she had something like that in mind. So he glared at her. She was Barney's widow.

"Why the hell did you come out here?" he bawled at her.

She stopped and looked hurt. "I thought I could stop you. I thought you came out here because I said—"

"Never mind!" he snapped. "Let's get out of it!"

"Wait, Jerry!" she said excitedly. "I found out what they're going to do. They're going to conquer the Earth and dry up the—"

"I know it. Let's go."

"But can't we *do* something?"

He hesitated. "Listen, I'll get you outside, and then I'll come back..."

There was a distinct murmur of pleasure from the loud-speaker. He glanced at the Martian female.

"You like the idea, do you, Gertrude?"

The Martian was silent.

"There isn't time, Jerry," Betty said. "And I'm sticking with you. Can't we wreck some of this stuff?"

"We'd be sacrificing..."

He didn't finish. Three Martians sped into the power room and ducked behind a generator. Their pink bodies were dusted with white — and absorbent powder, perhaps. A transparent globule sailed over the generator and burst at their feet. A white vapor floated up from it. The female scurried away from it and dragged the male behind her.

"Hold your breath!" he snapped at Betty. They ran after the Martian hostages, and he snapped a sonic throb at them.

They stopped and looked back at the white vapor. It suddenly flared into a flash of greenish flame and disappeared.

"An anaesthetic," he said to Betty. "They won't hurt the male."

The room was suddenly thronging with Martians. They sent a flanking movement along the outer wall, and Jerry fired rapid thumps at the scurrying little bodies as they leaped hurriedly

across the open stretches.

"This way!" he called, and led Betty toward the golden sphere with its radial ducts. "That mess of yellow pipe. It's the key to the dome."

He no longer had time for the female hostage, but he dragged the male behind him. The female set up a howl on the radio and followed at a safe distance.

"Call off the hounds, Gertrude," he shouted at her. "Or I'll punch holes in your ductwork."

"That would be an illogical action," said the radio in his hand. "The whole dome would collapse. You and the Earth-female would be destroyed."

Betty gripped his arm tightly as they ran. "Do it, Jerry," she panted. "Do it and don't worry. It's worth it."

"Feel like dying, honey?" he asked her weakly.

They came to the base of the sphere and pulled the wilting male between them. A circle of pink bodies was slowly closing in from all sides. Jerry kept firing, but none of his blasts were lethal. Martians fell and arose again. Evidently the power of the sonic weapon needed replenishing. There was little choice. Either waste the last of its energy on the attackers, or fire at the ducts.

"Do it, Jerry," she begged. "It's our only chance. It's Earth's only chance, anyway."

He had moved away from the sphere to look up at the ducts. Suddenly a thump-gun blast caught him below the hips and sent him careening to the floor. He tried to get up, but his leg wobbled sideways and bent between his knee and ankle. Broken! Martians were rushing in for the kill. He fell back in pain and stabbed a sonic blast at a stretch of duct above him. It dented the metal. A shock-wave rocked the dome. A pulse of high-pitched sound pierced the control room.

The Martians had halted.

"Do not fire again," blared the radio. "Your rage destroys yourself. That is illogical. Do not shoot."

"Stay back, then," he warned.

"Shoot, Jerry, shoot!" Betty was screaming. "Don't wait."

He grinned at her weakly. He was no Samson — to pull the temple down on his own head. But if he *had* to do it...

"Come here, Gertrude," he snarled at the Martian female, and kept the gun pointed at the duct.

She obeyed quickly. "Do not shoot. That would be illogical."

"Turn your output down to a whisper."

She obeyed. "Do not fire again at the duct."

"Then get us out of here. We'll take the male as a hostage."

"No. That would be totally

unsatisfactory. Intolerable."

He snorted his contempt. "Is one sorry male worth more to you than the whole works?"

"He is the only male," she said. "You will not take the male."

The *only* male! So that's why Martian sex was a weakness. If anything happened to the male...

"The only male of your whole race?" he asked.

"There are two others on our planet. Both are as old as this one. There was a great plague. And no male has been born of a separation since that time. The plague attacks the male during division. We find that the plague virus cannot exist on earth."

"So you decided to move in on us and take over."

"That is our intention."

"Blast the ductwork, Jerry!" Betty was begging. "They keep moving closer."

He glanced around at the circle of Martians. They were edging nearer and nearer.

He grinned at Betty. "Bring the male over here," he called to her. "And don't ask questions."

She obeyed, and the old Martian followed her tug without protest. He seemed not to understand what was happening.

"You won't lead us out of here? With the male as a hostage?" he asked the female.

"We will not, Earthman." She made a sudden move toward him.

He blasted her, and she sat down weakly. But the gun had been turned to full strength. It should have crushed her.

"Now there is not enough energy in the device to puncture the field-guides," she said triumphantly.

The Martians began to close in again. He didn't like the thing he was about to do, because he knew what pity was. But he also knew the smell of a cornfield in the rain, and the gurgle of a happy baby, and the look on Betty's face when she married Barney—and all the other things of earth that tie a man down to his race and his kin and his great-green planet.

He shot the Martian male in the belly. He doubled up weakly and crumpled. Jerry dragged the quivering old beast to his side.

The radio was ranging and Betty was wrestling with the female. The others were plunging swiftly toward him.

He pressed the sonic gun against the male's brain-case and fired again. The creature lay still. He kept firing until clawed hands seized him roughly and pulled him away. He felt the shattering pain of his fracture compounding as they dragged him across the floor. He moaned and grew faint.

When he was fully conscious again, Betty was bending over him and holding his head.

"Why don't they kill us?" she asked.

He glanced toward the dead male. A quivering, pulsating, excited circle of Martian females was gathered about his body.

"Why don't you run while you can?" he asked her in return.

"And leave you here?" She shook her head.

He chuckled. "That's what I wanted to know. Don't worry. They won't bother us now. They can't feel anger or rage. And we're no good to them as specimens anymore, because their mission's a failure. They'll die if they don't go back to Mars."

"Why?"

"Well, why did they bring a male with them on a dangerous mission in the first place? Not to build up numbers; this was a preparatory mission. They could have brought the males later. But the male is undoubtedly very necessary to them."

He reached for one of the sonic guns dropped by the panicky females. "Come here, Gertrude," he called.

She broke away from the mourning circle and approached them slowly as if in a daze.

"What happens to a Martian female if she isn't fertilized?" he asked.

"When it is time to divide, she will go to sleep," she answered dully. "But in dividing, she will die."

"Next question. When are you leaving?"

"Immediately."

He waved the gun in the general direction of the yellow helices. "Of course you'll call our men and inform them. And have someone come pick us up."

She kept her eyes on the gun. "You are useless to us now. We cannot risk another male on this planet. We can not return. We have no need for you. We shall release you."

He grinned at Betty. "Well, baby. Are we even now? Here's a couple of hundred widows to your one."

She looked away sadly but not angrily. "It was Earth I was thinking about, Jerry. Not just Barney."

"Sure, I know. Everybody was thinking about Earth. But nobody was really down-deep *mad*. It takes a big mad to win a fight. And Martians just can't get mad."

He was in bed with a plaster cast when the dome blasted off. They watched its bright yellow streak taper up into the night sky — and disappear into the clouds. Too bad they couldn't see the faint red eye of Mars.

"Why were they mutilating people, Jerry?" she asked as she stared out the window.

"I asked Gertrude about that. They were trying to find out why Earthmen are immune to their

plague virus." He paused and decided he'd better tell her a lie.

"They're good biologists," he went on. "They wanted to synthesize a living Martian female on the mamalian principle. They can build robot animals like that. They wanted to see if she'd be immune to the plague."

Jerry wondered how she'd react if he told her the *truth*. That it wasn't going to be a Martian female—but an Earth female, furnished with Martian genes. That in very fact—it was going to be Betty. She wouldn't like the idea of mothering a lot of little Martian boys—she wouldn't like it even in the retrospect world of possibilities bypassed.

She was still gazing out the window. "I feel sorry for them, Jerry—in a way."

He watched her silently.

"Millions of women—and just two men," she murmured.

"See what could happen?" he said. "If you stay in mourning too long? And a plague descends? How'd you like to share a husband with that many."

She stood up quickly and reddened. "I'm going now, Jerry," she said nervously. "I'm going away and be — well — anyway, don't try to see me..."

She moved toward the door, paused, and looked back. "...for a couple of months, anyway." She hurried out quickly. The back of her neck was bright pink.

He settled back with a grin and listened to the sound of the rain that was beginning to fall outside. Two months? The dry, dry desert had waited ten long years.

The End

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ELAINE'S TOMB

By G. PEYTON WERTENBAKER

Illustrated by MOREY

CHAPTER I

An Idea of Charles Weber's

THERE was often more life in the small colleges of my early life than people generally realized. When I graduated from my state University and went down to teach at Wilmar College, I resigned myself to four or five inevitable years of boredom. The professors, I thought, would be provincial; the students would be country boys, rude and uninterested in any sort of intellectual existence. To some extent I was right. Yet the extraordinary adventure I must tell here would never have occurred if I had not gone, where it began, to Wilmar College.

My immediate superior among the members of the Faculty was

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a young man like myself, Charles Weber. Weber had been at Wilmar five years, and even there his genius had not been recognized. In the solitude and obscurity of a small school, he carried on his experiments with ideas so far-reaching and diverse in their implications that he could not himself entirely grasp them. He was too deeply and personally immured in his work to have achieved any publicity. He lectured to his classes twice a day. The students knew him as a pleasant young man, slightly (and conventionally) absent-minded. The rest of his time was free. He spent it in the way that he preferred, isolated in the small laboratory he had fitted up behind his house.

My future life was dictated, almost fortuitously, by this quiet man and by a girl, Elaine Stafford. It is nearly impossible to compare and measure her influence over my subsequent actions against that exercised by Weber. Subtle, intangible things sway a man in the more vivid movements of his life. I know that Elaine, unknown to either of us, made for me the decision that shaped my adventure. Perhaps, in some profoundly subconscious way, she foresaw and determined, even, where it would end. There was no surprise in her face at the instant when, a long time afterward, she awoke and found me bending over her.

I don't know when I became aware for the first time that I loved Elaine. The truly momentous occasions in our lives are usually forgotten—those which lead impenetrably to the sudden, remembered, inevitable climaxes about which stories are written. Elaine was a freshman student in my chemistry class. Certainly I must have noticed her the first time I met the class. I must have singled her out unconsciously from among the others. Within a few weeks, I know, I found myself considering her, somewhat bewilderedly, during the hours when there were no classes, and when I should have been at work.

Elaine Stafford was interesting and mysterious to me in a way that I can hardly explain. There was no actual suggestion of intrigue or of sensual mystery such as we commonly associate with these words—she had certainly none of a courtesan's allure. Her charm, as I was aware of it, seemed to be something unknown to herself: a sort of inarticulate life within, that spoke mutely to me with an assurance that we had mutual desires, mutual understandings.

I used to watch for her when the bell on the campus stammered in its sleep and began to ring. She would always come promptly, walking on the alert soles of her tennis shoes. She always seemed

to wear blue or white — sport clothes rather than gowns—with a beret over her smooth, slightly waving brown hair. I never tired of watching her. She was always silent and absorbed, a faint smile on her lips (thinking, perhaps, of beautiful things, and perhaps of nothing); and it always seemed to me that she was extraordinarily, miraculously clean.

For two whole years, and for part of a third, I used to lecture to her daily. Often my lectures were addressed almost personally to Elaine. Because of her presence, I tried to make them beautiful and imaginative in a manner that, before, I should not have thought chemistry could be. Because I wanted her to listen to me and understand me, I tried to render interesting lectures; and after awhile I discovered that my classes were growing popular among the students. They attended in growing numbers. They watched my face while I spoke, laughing readily and without restraint at my witticisms. But Elaine never seemed to notice what I was saying, and her eyes remained absently on the floor. I wondered in what way she always succeeded in making high grades; I wondered what suppressed emotion made her care for chemistry and go on with it, even after her requirements for a degree were satisfied.

All this while, I never spoke a single word to her on any subject except chemistry. What would I have said? I was a young man, but I was older than any of the boys she knew. I was a professor. I had no way of meeting her more intimately. Then, too, my life had been spent since childhood in the midst of work and speculation. I was a scientist, well bred but without any distinguished social graces. If Elaine had been accessible to me even as a friend, my shyness and reserve before youth would have isolated me from her understanding. I was afraid that she would see no further than the exterior, which in all earnest men is, in one way or another, slightly ridiculous.

But I had made a friend of Weber. I had been admitted to his laboratory and his work. We were engaged in some experiments together, although, I must admit, my part in them was slight enough. It was an inspiring thing for me to follow his fine imagination moving easily among ideas that awed and startled my own mind. Much of his work I could not grasp. Sometimes he was too absorbed with it to spare me an explanation. Sometimes it was simply too complex for me.

One evening, when I called at his house, I found him weary and despondent. He had been working on an idea, of which I had received only vague hints from time to time over a period of six

months. This was near the close of my third year at Wilmar College.

"Alan," he said, lighting his pipe with a perplexed frown, "I'm not going to be able to come back here next fall."

Startled, I said, "Not come back? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to Egypt," Weber said.

For awhile I sat there and tried to puzzle out for myself why he should want to go to Egypt. I recalled something he had said once, but it was only a hazy impression. Finally I asked him, "What have you got to do in Egypt, Weber?"

He glanced at me in surprise. "Haven't I ever told you?" he said. I shook my head. "Why, the greatest of all my researches is connected with Egypt—with some temples there."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"There's not much to tell—just now. While I was at Harvard, you know, I had a chance to go to Egypt with Lord Rayvon, and I took it. We found some unknown temples there, of the most remote antiquity, that suggested an idea to me. But Lord Rayvon, as you may recall, died suddenly, and I had to come back. I've kept the temples a secret, for fear they might be disturbed in my absence. And I've tried to work out that idea of mine over here, but I'm at a standstill. I'll have to go back."

"But what's the idea, Weber?" I insisted, moved by the atmosphere of mystery he had created.

"You'd laugh at it," Weber said. "It's a fantastic idea. But I think there's something in it."

"Go on."

"You are familiar with the work that has been done lately with glandular injections and other attempts to restore the life of people who have just died?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I found these temples," Weber said, "and as well as Rayvon and I could estimate, they belonged to a civilization in Egypt older than any that has so far been known to exist. Alan, they are incredibly old—perhaps sixty or seventy centuries before Christ. They antedate the Pharaohs by thousands of years."

"Good Lord!" I muttered.

"But that wasn't all. What amazed me was this: we found bodies there in a perfect state of preservation. It was not embalming of the sort that produces ordinary mummies such as we have found in Egypt. It was some process infinitely superior to embalming—a process of which embalming may have been merely the decadent survival handed down to later civilizations by the priests."

"And is that," I said, "what you have been trying to discover?"

"No — better than that. There were inscriptions, you see. They were difficult to decipher—a language with peculiarities I had never encountered before — but they were alphabetical, not picture-writing. Rayvon knew all about inscriptions. He translated a few of them roughly. And Alan, they were the damnedest things you ever saw! They hinted at scientific knowledge absolutely unknown to us. They *were* only hints, of course, but they suggested amazing possibilities to me. I can't begin to tell you everything about them; but what I seized on at once was the suggestion that those people knew a way to revive life in their dead kings."

"But that's absurd!" I exclaimed. "If they could revive their kings, what did they leave them in those temples for?"

"It's not so absurd as it sounds," Weber said. "That's the interesting thing about it. It seems that the kings had been preserved before the process for reviving them was known. It was all linked up with a lot of mysterious religious ideas. Apparently, though, the kings were Messiahs of some sort; and the priests (who were the scientists too) expected to bring them back some day, in the midst of an expected crisis, to save the world."

"I see," I said thoughtfully. "And then the crisis came along, of course, and something happened so that they couldn't revive the dead kings?"

"That's the way Rayvon and I figured it," Weber said. "Anyhow, what struck me at once was the possibility of making something out of those obscure hints about reviving life. That's what I've been working on, whenever I could spare the time, ever since. But," he added, "as I told you, I'm stopped. I can't do any more without going back there and trying to decipher some more of those inscriptions."

Weber told me a great many things that night about the temples in Egypt, and about his experiments. But, as you will shortly see, there is no need for me to repeat all that he said, because it came to nothing in the end. Nothing—that is—in the way that he expected. We sat up half the night, talking about Egypt. Weber was determined to go.

"They'll give you leave of absence for a year, you know," I told him. He nodded.

"Yes, I think they will."

Rising and struggling slowly into my coat, I murmured, "I wish I could go along with you. That's fascinating stuff you've been telling me about."

Weber laughed.

"Why *don't* you come along?" he said. "I'll be glad enough to have you." I shook my head.

"I couldn't manage it," I said.

"I haven't been here long enough."

"I don't know . . . perhaps it could be arranged . . ." Weber said thoughtfully.

I walked home in the spring darkness and the silence, my feet falling in a muffled sound on the hard earth of the road, my thoughts mingling chaotic visions of dead Egyptian kings with the tantalizing picture, never quite buried in my mind of Elaine.

CHAPTER II

Temples in the Desert

Thanks to Weber's influence, I was able to go with him. When I left the President's office, realizing that I had before me a year of travel and leisure in Weber's company, at first I was incredibly happy. I walked across the campus, looking with a certain relief at the buildings and the old trees. Three years of them should have been enough for a little while.

Later, when I had grown used to the idea of my release, I began to wonder whether I cared so much about going. I had been physically content at Wilmar; I felt a sort of affection for its remoteness and for its unsophisticated people. I regretted that I should have to go away from my small house, with the woods near by and the old road in front that led to the river. And there was Elaine.

The last time I should see Elaine would be this morning, when I held my examination. I walked over to the building with slow steps, glancing around at the students on the walks. If I saw her now, perhaps I should be able to speak to her, and tell her. But Elaine was not among the students.

I went in. When the bell rang, I was writing my questions on the blackboard. I didn't see Elaine when she entered.

I spent that morning in my office near the class room. Every few moments a student would knock wearily and come in to ask me questions. I'm afraid I wasn't very helpful—I was preoccupied with other things. I was thinking of Elaine, who was writing her examination in the other room. With the greatest ease and dignity, I thought, I could go to the door and call her. The others would look up abstractedly, and go on writing. I could ask her to come into my office; then I could tell her. But of course, I wouldn't.

There was another knock on the door.

"Come in," I said. The door opened gently. Elaine was there. I looked up startled and a little guilty.

"Good morning," I said. "Won't you sit down?" I pointed out a chair.

Elaine smiled faintly, as she

always seemed to smile, and said, "Thank you, sir."

"Is the examination hard?" I asked her anxiously. "Is it giving you trouble?"

"No, sir; it's not very hard. I wanted to ask you one question."

It occurred to me fleetingly (as if it mattered!) that this was the first time Elaine had ever questioned me about an examination.

"What is it?" I asked. For a moment we looked at each other intently, as if we each had something else we wanted to say. I was disturbed. But that might have been an illusion. I dropped my eyes, and drew aimless designs with a pencil, on my blotter.

She asked me about one of the problems, and I explained it briefly. She listened in silence, still watching me. Then I leaned back in my chair, and she stood up.

"Thank you, sir," she said. She was about to leave.

I said—"Miss Stafford."

"Yes?"

"Are you going on in chemistry next year?" Elaine nodded.

"Yes, sir—if I get through all right."

"I just wondered," I said lamely. "You're a good student . . . I won't be here next year, you know." I looked out of the window at the President's office across the campus.

Elaine said slowly, "You won't be here?"

No. I'm going away on leave of absence."

We were both silent a moment. There was a knock at the door. Ignoring it, I waited until Elaine said:

"I'm sorry, sir. I've enjoyed your class."

It was impossible. I couldn't speak to her. I shrugged slightly, and looked at her with a smile.

"I'm sorry, too," I murmured. "I'd like to be here." I called abruptly, "Come in!" Elaine turned away, while the door opened.

That was all. I didn't see her again before I left with Weber in August.

I think Weber found me a dull companion during the trip across to Marseilles and Cairo. We had books with us. We would sit on deck during the day while Weber read and I looked at the sea, unable to read. Life held more zest for Weber than it did for me. He was capable of enjoying his holidays as completely as he enjoyed his work. In the evenings we would watch the people dancing inside; sometimes he made an acquaintance, and would walk about the deck for hours, talking to a young man, or to a girl. But I spent my time standing by the rail at night, looking at the water as it went by underneath, gurgling absently and mysteriously to itself.

Weber was worried and solicitous. One day, near the end of

the voyage, he asked me whether I felt well. It was late in the evening, in the darkness on deck, and we could hear the orchestra playing distantly. I was tired of thinking about Elaine.

"Would you think me very much of a fool if I told you what's the matter with me?"

Weber smiled, and said, "Probably. But tell me anyhow."

So I told him. He listened quietly, smoking his pipe until I finished.

"And you said nothing to her?" he asked me finally.

"No." I tapped my fingers on the chair, and frowned at the moon rising out of the water.

"But my dear fellow!" Weber said. "It sounds to me as if—just possibly — she may have been interested in you."

"Do you think so?" I said. "But I couldn't say anything. I'm a fool about things like that." Weber nodded.

"I know," he murmured. "But she'll be there when you go back."

"No—this will be her last year. There's nothing to be done."

"Where's she from?" Weber said.

"I don't know. I don't know anything about her. I never dared to talk to her."

Weber laughed softly, sympathetically, in the darkness.

"You *have* been a fool, Alan," he said. "But you'll get over it."

"I doubt it," I said.

"You can change your mind, if you'd rather, and go back?"

"It would do no good." I shook my head morosely in the darkness.

"Well—wait till you see Egypt," Weber suggested. "That will help you."

We arrived in Cairo a few days later. Some day, when I write my book about those times, I will tell what I saw in Cairo. It was, to me, a strange, bewildering place, full of noise and heat and color, very different from the Cairo of today. But Cairo hardly enters into this story. During the week we spent there, Weber, who was an experienced traveler, guided me about among various officials, arranging the details of our expedition and fitting it out.

Early one morning, with our guide, we set out along the Nile. Even if I remembered it—which I don't — there would be little enough to tell about that long, monotonous trip. I recall best the miles of sand when finally we left the Nile and headed into the desert, days later. We were quite alone, in country where oases were rare. The temples were only a day's ride distant from the Nile; but they lay in a spot as empty and deserted as the moon.

We saw them first as we came to the top of a small rise. They were not pyramids. They were three temples, grouped together about a central court. Bushes and

weeds, and a few tired-looking trees grew about them and in the court. They stood massive and white against the long rays of the setting sun. They hardly resembled the sort of architecture we speak of as Egyptian. They seemed almost modern in design. To me, it seemed quite strange.

Our guide looked at them impassively and said nothing. Weber smiled faintly. He was relieved that he had been able to find them at all. Our two cars rolled gently down to the ruined court, and stopped.

"Here we are," Weber said carelessly. But we sat there awhile in silence, looking at them, oppressed with a feeling of awe before these buildings that had stood here in the desert, almost unvisited, for perhaps eighth centuries or more.

CHAPTER III

The Fever

Opening from the court were lofty halls and antechambers where men had worshipped once. Passages led away from them into other rooms, and downward into the crypts where the kings lay. We made our camp in one of the halls. It was cool and dark there, during the day, and the sun beat down blindingly on the court outside. At night the stars were visible from the place where we slept, a few brilliant stars between the distant hill top and the outline of high arches. The wind stirred restlessly along the floors and among the fallen stones of old altars.

On the day after our arrival, leaving our guide, we went down into the crypts. There were long, dark stairways winding down from the halls. They led finally to a low room in each building where piles of strange ornaments and treasures lay, covered with dust. They were the kings' possessions, undisturbed for thousands of years. Over the door of each of these rooms Weber pointed out to me an inscription in a strange alphabet.

"What do they mean?" I asked him.

"They are a warning. Rayvon translated them to me. I have forgotten the words; but they utter a curse on the head of any man who disturbs the rest of the kings before the appointed day. Whoever intrudes on the king's sleep, they declare, or carries away his possessions, will sicken mysteriously and, at last, die."

I shivered slightly.

"It doesn't sound like a very great threat," I said. Weber laughed.

"The natives take it quite seriously. You see? None of those treasures has been disturbed—except once, when Rayvon and I examined them. But we carried

nothing away."

I said thoughtfully, "Rayvon died . . ."

We left the treasures untouched, and found the entrance to the king's burial chamber. There was a secret door, cunningly concealed. Weber had been there before; he knew the secret. He pressed a portion of the wall above his head, and it swung inward, pivoting around a hidden hinge. An opening was revealed on either side of the massive door, large enough for a man to pass through crouching. I boosted Weber up; he gave me his hand and assisted me up behind him. We stood on a ledge about six feet thick—the depth of the wall—and darkness lay beyond us.

The crypt was ventilated meagerly in some fashion which we could not at once discover; the air was musty, but apparently pure. Weber leaped down to the floor within, his torch lighted, and I followed him. Together, we found the bronze lamps he had predicted we should find. We poured oil into them, and lit them.

The room, in the lamplight, was simple and small. The walls and floor—even the ceiling—were covered with inscriptions in small letters of the strange alphabet I had seen before, carved into the stone with delicate precision. Before us, a series of broad, low steps led up to a platform. At first I couldn't see the body; but when I ascended the steps, I found it. The body lay in a depression on the platform, surrounded by a soft, fine dust that might once have been clothes or cushions. The dust rose gently and hovered over the body in the draft of air we had created.

Weber said softly, "This is Tomen-Ashto."

I nodded silently, examining the still figure at our feet. It was a startling picture. The body lay naked, not swathed in the coverings of the Pharaohs; its hands were at its sides; it was quiet and calm. There was no color in the skin. It hardly seemed the body of a sleeping man, yet it hardly seemed quite dead. It was the body of a man composed for rest, caught in the moment between life and death. I touched his flesh hesitantly: it was cold, but it yielded to my fingers. Gradually the skin rose again, after I brought my hand away, and it remained white.

"You see," Weber said, "—it's death."

"Yes," I muttered, smiling faintly.

"And yet the body has been here for eighty centuries . . . He might have died only five minutes ago." That is how the king looked.

I seated myself on the steps, staring curiously at the body,

while Weber brought out his notebook and a pen. I waited awhile, immersed in my own thoughts; Weber copied down page after page of the endless inscriptions. Before long, the atmosphere of the place seemed to grow oppressive. I rose.

"Do you mind if I wait for you in the other room?" I asked. "If you don't need me just now?"

Weber nodded absently.

"Go ahead," he said.

I climbed up to the doorway again, and crept over into the room beyond. The treasures were there, thousands of delicate jewels and vessels of gold and silver. I spent hours examining them while I waited for Weber. They were so old that even their value hardly impressed me. They wrought in my imagination vivid pictures of the ancient world over which Tomen-Ashto had ruled, a world of which there remained no record, no memory, no legend—nothing, except the still body lying beyond the heavy door and the faint whisper of old inscriptions.

Weber stirred finally, and came back through the small doorway, closing it carefully behind him. I said slowly, rousing myself from a deep lethargy, "What have you discovered?"

"I don't know yet," Weber said. "I'll have to work on them with Rayvon's code."

Our voices sounded muffled and distant; I tottered a little, dizzily, as we climbed the stairs, and my forehead felt cold and damp.

Daily, for a week, I worked with Weber in the temple of Tomen-Ashto. Overcoming the obscure feeling that troubled me in the crypt, I spent hours there copying long inscriptions while Weber, seated near the body, laboriously translated them into English from Rayvon's code. Often there were passages of which Weber could make nothing—Rayvon had not lived long enough to complete his notes. Many of the inscriptions were unimportant—endless praises of the king and of the gods, long histories of forgotten wars. Once in awhile, however, Weber would stumble on something that seemed to give him a hint of what he wanted. An exclamation would come softly to his lips; he would go on impatiently until the passage either ended or wandered off into other fields.

The sensation of strangeness never left me—it increased as the days went on. Gradually, while I worked, I would fall into a dream-like state, copying down the lines mechanically, while dim visions moved slowly through the silence of my brain, full of a significance that eluded me, forgotten as soon as they were conceived.

In the evenings, while Weber put his ideas together and tried to formulate into a clear meaning

the scattered sentences he had found important, I rested in the court yard, listening to the sound of our guide's voice singing mournful songs softly in the darkness. Or I wandered languidly about the desert, my bare feet sinking into the sands still warm and sensuous from the pressing of the sunlight over them all day. I was tired. My mind was like an empty hall, stirring with the distant echoes of momentous events. And I had forgotten Elaine.

One morning, when I awoke, I was unable to rise. My limbs were heavy and weak; my body was covered with a slight perspiration. I had tossed all night in the midst of nightmares I could not remember. I refused breakfast, unable even to taste it.

Weber examined me solicitously. At first he thought of carrying me back to the village on the Nile, where I could find some sort of medical aid; but I seemed very weak, and he thought it was only a touch of fever that would go away as soon as I had rested and and dosed myself with quinine. He left me in the guide's care, and went down to the crypt again.

There is nothing clear in my recollection of the days after that. My consciousness faded gradually, until I remember only long periods of time when I lay, nearly lifeless, on my pallet, while chaotic dreams pursued each other through my brain. There were long moments, at rare intervals, when my eyes would open and I would see clearly the dim, high hall around me, and the brilliant white sunlight of the court, the guide's hunched figure sitting motionless between two columns. The pictures would be fixed and interminable, without life. I would see them for awhile impersonally, as if they had no interest or significance for me. Then my eyes would close again, and the dreams come back.

Once or twice I wakened suddenly in the night to find Weber bowed over me, his face twisted and distorted by the flaring light of a lamp. I had forgotten him. My eyes opened wide and stared at him, startled, filled with horror, while I struggled to understand something whose meaning I had lost. Then his face blurred and faded into darkness, and I slept again.

One night, a little while before dawn, sleep dropped away from me suddenly, as water drops away from a body when it rises from the sea. I opened my eyes upon the dim length of the hall. Weber worked under a lamp at the far end. Shadows moved fitfully about the hall, as the flame of the lamp turned and bent with the wind. My head was clear.

"Weber," I called. My voice carried across the cool floor steadily and strong.

Weber looked up, startled, and

stared at me for a moment. Then, with an inarticulate cry, he jumped to his feet.

"Are you awake, Alan?" he said.

"Yes."

He came swiftly toward me down the hall and stood over my body, immensely tall in the lamplight.

"What is it?" he said. "Are you better?"

"Yes. I think so. But it won't last."

"You know that, too?" Weber said, frowning.

"I've just found it out," I answered.

For a few moments we said nothing, as if the approach of death had rendered speech no longer important.

"Weber," I said at last, "do you remember Elaine?"

"Yes."

"Say something to her, will you? Anything will do."

Weber stood motionless for an instant. They his body moved, heaved into an intenser life, and he said, "Alan! I've something to tell you."

"What?"

"I've discovered something."

"Your secret?" I said. "How to bring back life?"

"No—not that."

"What, then?"

"Alan," he said, "I was working over those inscriptions a few nights ago, trying to understand them. I found a formula, an obscure method, written in unfamiliar terms. I don't know what it is—whether it's science of a sort we've never known or whether it's magic. But I think I see what it means, what it will do."

"Is it important to me?" I asked, with the deep egotism of death.

"Alan, it's the secret of suspended animation. It will take your body and preserve it, as these kings are preserved—if it works."

I thought for awhile without interest, picturing myself a body like the body of Tomen-Ashto, lying dead in the stillness of a dark crypt.

"What does it matter, Weber?" I said finally.

Weber laughed nervously.

"Matter?" he said. "Why, it means that I can keep your body as it will be at the moment of death and preserve it here for years, if necessary, while I work out the secrets of these people. Alan, I'm sure that I'll find what I'm looking for, sooner or later. I'll find it soon! I'll be able to bring you back to life."

"And then?"

"You'll have Elaine."

"Elaine . . ." I muttered her name restlessly in the silence. "Yes—that would be worth it."

Weber knelt at my side.

"Alan!" he said. "You depend on me to do this. You're going

to die—yes. But at the very moment of death I'll take your body and treat it as those Egyptians treated their kings. And then, as soon as I find what I'm looking for, you can trust me to bring you back again."

I nodded, and glanced at his face.

"Yes, I'll trust you," I said. He seized my hand and shook it nervously.

I looked away, out through the columns to the court yard, and beyond that to the desert. Dawn was coming. A faint, cold, silver light was rising stealthily out of the ground.

I closed my eyes.

"All right," I muttered.

Velvet curtains fell, rustling, about my head.

CHAPTER IV

The Garden of Istal

Voices murmured for a long while, growing louder. I was cold, but warmth came sluggishly into my body. There was a tingling, itching sensation in my skin. One of the voices said:

"That's enough."

I opened my eyes.

Two men stood over me. They were not old men. They wore white tunics, falling from the shoulders to the knees, belted at the waist. One of them rubbed my arms vigorously with a lotion that had a pungent, penetrating smell. The other removed from my legs two metal bands, from which wires went to a small cabinet on the floor. The room was lighted with a huge electric torch on the wall that gave out a diffuse, soft glow.

I murmured mechanically, "Where's Weber?"

"Weber?" The man at my side examined me impenetrably, and shook his head. He dried his hands on a towel; the lotion evaporated slowly from my body.

After awhile I said, "Isn't Weber here?"

"No," the man said, pondering. "Weber isn't here."

"Where is he?"

"You don't understand," the man said. "Who was Weber?"

I considered his question carefully. I was confused. Instead of answering, I said, "Have I been here long?"

"Yes. You've been here a long time."

"How long?" I said.

The man looked at his companion, puzzled, and asked, "How would you say?"

"A long time," the other said, "a very long time."

I rested awhile. Then I asked, "What year is it?"

Neither of the men answered. I looked from one to the other, waiting. A vague alarm began to trouble me. I said again, "What year is it?"

The men said nothing, watching me. Finally the man at my side asked politely, "Would you like to get up? Here is a suit for you." He held out a tunic similar to the one he wore.

Very suddenly I was awake. A suspicion entered my head, surrounded by confused memories of my existence. I stood up, and grasped the man's arm. I said, "I *must* know what year it is."

But the men looked helplessly at each other and at me.

"We don't understand," they said.

I released the man's arm. I took the garment he offered me and slipped it over my head slowly, considering. The matter was not yet quite clear. There was an odd difficulty . . .

The room was the small room under the Temple where Weber and I had worked. One of the men leaped up on the ledge by the door and lowered his hand to me. The other man gave my feet a lift, and then followed me. We crawled through to the other side, and leaped down into the room where the treasures had been. The treasures were all gone. The men led me toward the stairs. One of them said, "What is your name?"

"My name? Alan Frazer."

"My name is Istal," the man said who had been at my side.

The other added, "I am Dras."

We climbed the stairs in silence.

The stairs were crumbling away.

The roof of the Temple had fallen in. When we came to the end of the stairs, we clambered up over loose rocks, through a jagged opening, to the light of a late afternoon. It was not very bright. A small breath of wind, blowing through the ruined walls, penetrated my slight tunic, and I shivered.

"Are you cold?" Istal asked.

"Not very cold," I said.

I looked up at the sun. It was a small globe, tinted with red and resembling a full moon, hanging in the sky. The sun wore a questioning look.

Frightened, unwilling to understand, I said:

"Has it been a very long time?"

I pointed to the sun. Dras and Istal followed my finger, glancing up. Dras said, "You mean the sun has changed?"

"Yes."

The two men nodded, a look of comprehension in their eyes. They showed no surprise.

"It must have been a long time," Dras said.

"But how long?" I insisted. "How many years?"

Dras shrugged.

The desert was gone. A tall, sickly sort of grass grew all about where the desert had been, like the grass that springs up along the shore, close to the sea. It waved gently in the wind, rustling, more desolate than the sand had ever been. When I saw the grass, I began to understand.

Near the ruins of the old buildings, half hidden in the grass, stood a small, light machine. Dras and Istal led me toward it. On a smooth, narrow platform of metal, it held three low seats. The men beckoned me to the center seat, and took the others themselves. Istal, in front of me, made a motion with his hands, which were concealed from me. There was a low humming under the floor. Without wings or propeller, the machine rose quietly from the ground and swerved up into the sky.

I leaned forward, touching Istal on the shoulder.

"How does it run?" I said. Istal smiled.

"I don't know." I glanced at Dras.

Dras said, "Maybe someone can tell you later."

The machine flew swiftly, but not so swiftly as it was able to fly—something I would learn in time. The men were in no hurry. Our faces were shielded from the wind by low, sloping panes of glass. I rested in my chair, trying to think clearly. I could feel nothing but a sort of deep terror. I understood that centuries had passed, perhaps thousands of years. The sun had changed . . . perhaps millions of years. But the men spoke English.

The grass altered gradually un-

der us, grew more green, and passed imperceptibly into a thickening stretch of woods. When the woods ended, we flew over cultivated land. There were houses at intervals, glittering, fragile structures of an unfamiliar metal. We passed over some people from time to time. They strolled about in a leisurely fashion along walks of the same metal, talking. They were dressed, like my companions, in light tunics.

We came to a wide canal, flowing with mathematical precision obliquely across our course. Beyond the canal, our machine dipped down, and headed toward one of the metallic houses that stood near the water, under a group of trees. We landed gently on a lawn, close to the doorway. Dras and Istal stepped down. I followed them.

"This is the house," Istal said. The words sounded oddly like an old sentence from a child's French Grammar.

We entered the house, Dras went on down a long hall to an open doorway through which I saw the cool shade of the garden behind the house. Istal took me up by a moving escalator to the second story. The inner walls and floors were also of metal, and the house had no doors. Metal curtains hung in all the doorways. Istal took me to some empty rooms.

"You shall bathe and put on another suit," he said. "Then we shall have food for you in the garden."

The rooms and the bath were not unlike those I had known before. I refused to think during the short while I needed to bathe. Later, after my breakfast, I would think.

The meal was served in the garden. There were three people seated at a table when we arrived. One was Dras; the others Istal presented as his sister, Talis, and his father, Lasti. Lasti was a vigorous old man who examined me with keen eyes and said little at first. Talis, a handsome girl dressed in a tunic like the men, because of nothing but her sex, reminded me suddenly of Elaine. I paused, and dropped unsteadily into a chair. The memory was too overwhelming for me at that moment.

For the first time that afternoon, I understood what a limited mechanism the human mind must be. Perhaps, fortunately, there are situations which, as ideas, affect powerfully a man's emotions; but when he finds himself involved in them as experiences they press down quietly on his mind, and he is unable to comprehend them. Certain changes, certain losses, are so transmuting and great that they leave only a vacancy behind them, a feeble stirring of unrecognized despair.

I ate my meal calmly while the

others talked. At first I tried to find some mental perspective in which to view what had happened to me, but that was impossible. Through the lethargy that possessed my faculties, I understood nothing, except that I had outlived my time by centuries—that Weber was dead, and that he had never found, after all, the method for which he was searching. I had lain suspended between life and death, while the world changed utterly. This world was profoundly different from mine in its very bases: although we spoke the same language, Istal and I could not converse because of some unbridged chasm between our minds.

When I had finished, I leaned back in my chair, fumbling unconsciously in imaginary pockets for a cigarette.

"What is it you want, my son?" Istal's father asked me. I answered in confusion. "Why—I was looking for a cigarette."

He said, "What is a cigarette?"

"A white tube of paper filled with tobacco. Don't you ever smoke tobacco here?"

Lasti shook his head.

"No. I think I have read somewhere of tobacco. But I have never seen it."

I followed for a few moments a vagrant idea—if I must live among these people, would I be able to cultivate tobacco on their soil? Istal roused me with a remark.

"My father," he said, "is a wise man. I am not wise, and I could not answer any of your questions. But my father may understand them."

Lasti nodded.

"Ask me what you like, my son. Perhaps I can help you a little."

I looked at Lasti eagerly, and said, "Can you tell me what year it is, then—how long I have been dead?"

Lasti pondered for awhile, and answered finally:

"My son, you speak of something which is unknown to me. You speak of time and of years. There are a few philosophers among us who have studied what time is, and none of them has agreed whether it exists or whether it was a notion peculiar to the ancients. When I was younger, I read some of the books of the ancients: they spoke continually of time. The words which we now use, that have no metaphysical significance, they used as a sort of measure, whereby they thought they could attach themselves to the dead, to that which is gone and done with. But the dead are dead, and they exist no more. We do not understand any difference between things that are dead; we do not understand what you mean when you speak of time."

I said, "Do you not count the

days, the months, and the years?"

"We do not count them. Perhaps today you are in Cario; perhaps you are in Assouan tomorrow. When both these days are behind us, does it matter which day found you in Cairo and which in Assouan? The days go on, one after another, and they are not in themselves very different from each other. We remember the things we have done; but does it matter on what day we have done them?"

"Surely, sir," I protested, "you must measure the hours of the day? If not, how could you keep a meeting in any distant place?"

"We keep the hours, my son; but is that time? What, then do you call time? The earth moves about the sun, and that is a physical movement through space. Perhaps I am to meet you in Cairo at the fourth hour of the day. Before that hour a hundred things may happen to me while you are performing one act, but the sun will be in a certain portion of the sky, when I come to Cairo and in the same place when you arrive there. If that is what you call time, I do not understand it."

"But if your machines and clocks," I said, "move as the sun moves, an equal distance while you are living your hundred acts and I my one, doesn't that prove the time is measured rightly?"

"How, my son? It proves that the nature of machines is to move in a certain way, as it is the nature of the earth to move through space; and we can learn, if we wish, to move our bodies with the machines. But time, I thought, was something more than that." He shook his head gravely. "It is a strange subject my son. We cannot hope to understand it, if our pholosophers cannot agree."

"And your crops," I said, "can you know when to gather them, without counting the days?"

Lasti smiled.

"They are gathered by the machines," he said, "and the machines know."

"Who sets the machines?"

"Sets them? The machines need nothing but their oil, and sometimes their repairs. If they are broken, we repair them with other machines. We have always had the machines. We do not quite understand them," he added with a puzzled frown, "but they work for us — they are very good machines."

I considered helplessly awhile, wondering how I could find myself in time, and whether, after all, it mattered.

"Have you no histories?" I asked. "Do you not study the ancient civilizations, and ask yourselves when they flourished?"

"We have books about the dead times," Lasti said. "We read them. Perhaps they are fairy tales, perhaps they are true—it doesn't

matter, if they are pleasing. Here we are," he said, "—those others exist no longer, any more than the countries on the moon, of which we also read in old books, or the people at the earth's core. Why should we care, if they amuse us? How can we measure the truth of those things which do not exist, or measure the distance between them?"

"They did exist," I said.

"Perhaps. But we have no memories of them."

I had a vision in that moment, of these people ending the career of man on earth. I think that for an instant I understood them. They had their machines, their knowledge of the physical properties of the universe. Perhaps, like the Greeks, they had clean and clear minds; but they had no understanding of time. Their life, without perspectives, was perfected and simple. They lived for the moment, and for the pleasures of life. Their civilization might endure for years or for thousands of years without change, until an unforeseen catastrophe ended it. Deprived of hardship and struggle, they had lost the deep, bewildered curiosity of my people; and their attitude, although it was alien to me, had even then a certain fascination, a certain sublimity.

After awhile, I said: "Lasti, if I should tell you about one of those old civilizations—the one in which I was born—would you be interested?"

"Surely," Lasti said. "I am always pleased by these tales. You shall tell me one day; and I will tell you the things of which I have read."

He was incurious.

Later, when the afternoon was nearly over, I asked Lasti to tell me something about the world as I would find it hereafter.

"The world," he said, "is a very interesting place, if you care to study it. Some day, if you like, we shall travel together. I will show you the people who live on the other side of the world. They have some curious customs and strange machines. Perhaps, even, you would find them interested in time, as you are."

"You see little of them?"

"We seldom leave the country where we are born," Lasti said. "We have all that we need here. Sometimes, if we are studying, or for curiosity, we travel. I have traveled a little. I spent a few months once in the North."

"The North," I said. "I wanted to ask you about the North. Is there still a nation called the United States? Does New York still exist?"

Lasti shook his head.

"I have never heard of them," he said. "There is nothing in the North. It is cold and barren, like the far South. There are a few barbarous natives living

among the ruins of old cities. The rest is ice and snow, when you go very far beyond the Sea of Cairo and the Mexican Sea.

I nodded somberly, and said: "There are glaciers, I suppose? The earth must be very old now."

"Were you ever in the North?" Lasti said.

"I was born there, in a place called Virginia. It was hundreds of miles north of Mexico."

"It would be almost deserted now."

"Of course. We loved it very much. . . ."

The sun had set. A strange, penetrating crimson glow lingered in the sky, more disturbing than any sunset I had ever seen.

"We must go in, Father," Istal said, "before the cold comes down into our own garden."

Lasti nodded. We all rose and wandered back toward the house.

I turned to Istal, and said: "Tell me, sir — why did you trouble to wake me? Surely it meant nothing to you that I had lived among the ancients? It was not curiosity?"

"I saw you there one day," Istal said, "when I was walking among the ruins, and dreaming. I found you by accident. So I took Dras to see you, and Dras is curious about these things. We thought that you might care to be alive again. We brought the machines down from Cairo. Soon, maybe, we shall wake the other man who sleeps across from

"Another man?"

"He is different from you—his skin is dark, and his nose curves. like this . . . ." It was not Weber; it was the ancient king.

"You did it for pleasure?" I said. "It was a sort of lark?"

Istal shrugged, smiling.

"We thought you would not have been there," he said, "unless you meant to wake again some day."

I walked for a moment in silence. Then I said: "And the other temple — the third? Who sleeps there?"

"The other temple is empty," Istal said.

Elaine? . . .

CHAPTER V

A Tomb in the North

In the morning, when I rose and put on another of the clean white tunics, I went down into the garden and found Tallis, the sister of Istal.

"Good morning," she said, smiling at me in the sunlight. She was having her breakfast on the table under the trees.

"Good morning," I said.

She beckoned me to a chair, and said: "Will you have some breakfast?"

"Thanks." I sat down by her, and she gave me breakfast from a silver dish on the table.

I was troubled about Istal's hospitality. I didn't know whether he cared to have me long as his guest, or whether he could afford it. I knew nothing of the economic conditions of this civilization. In any case, I was anxious to be independent, to find some work I could do in order to live. I wondered whether I should find any work left in the world that I was able to do.

"What do people do here all day, Talis?" I asked the girl. "How do they spend their time?"

"We amuse ourselves," she said, smiling still. "Sometimes we read, sometimes we walk among the fields and gardens, or fly about the country. Are you bored so soon?"

"Oh, no! But I wasn't used to idleness in my world. We were always doing things, working. That is how we managed to live. Is there no work here?"

"A few people work," Talis said, a faint note of scorn for them in her voice, "when they can't amuse themselves."

"But how do people make money?" I asked. "Where do they get food?"

She looked at me in astonishment.

"I've never heard of money. And as for food—why there's food everywhere. That's what the machines are for. They make food and clothes and houses." She said incredulously, "People don't have to do those things."

"You see," I explained slowly, "I wanted to know whether I couldn't do something for myself. I can't live on your brother's hospitality."

"I don't know what you mean," Talis said, with a questioning look. "If you don't like my brother—"

"Of course I like him!"

"If you don't want to live here with us, there are other houses. You can go wherever you please."

"I don't want to go," I said hastily. She watched me with inquisitive eyes, as if I were a strange creature of some sort.

Finally she said: "I wish you would say things I could understand. Are you lonely here?"

I reddened.

"No," I said, "not that, exactly. But I'd like to have my people with me, too."

"We like you," Talis said. "We'll all be kind to you. If you want to, you can be my lover."

"Thanks—that is very kind of you," I said, smiling in an embarrassed fashion.

Talis laughed, and said: "You're nice."

"The trouble is," I added soberly, "that I was in love with a girl before my—death. It's hard to forget about her."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Talis said. "But she's dead now, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Were you very fond of her?"

Her voice was kind and sympathetic, as if she spoke to a child. "What was her name?"

"Her name was Elaine."

"That's a good name." Talis thought about the name for awhile. "I've heard of a name like that somewhere."

"Have you?" I had a vague and fantastic suspicion, for just a moment, that she might have known Elaine. Then I smiled at myself, somewhat bitterly.

"I read it in a book once," Talis said.

Puzzled, I asked: "An old book?"

"I don't know—it's a book of my brother's. Maybe I could show it to you."

Still troubled with that curious intuitive suspicion, I said: "I'd like to see it."

Talis stood up.

"I'll find it for you," she said. "I think I know where it is."

She went toward the house. Again, as I had done the night before, I fumbled intently at the sides of my tunic, looking for a cigarette. I remembered that there were no cigarettes any more. Half eager, half listless, I waited for Talis.

After awhile she came back, a book in her hands. She held it open, turning the leaves as she approached. I stood up, trembling, and watched her eagerly and with impatience.

"This is it," she said. "It's a book about the North. Here—"

She held it out, and I seized it awkwardly.

The book was called *Wonders of the North*. It was like the books I had always known, except that the binding was metal, and the pages were thin sheets that might also have been metal. The letters were faintly exotic.

The passage Talis pointed out to me read:

> Among these ruins is a building of white stone that stands on a hill. The savages worship it. They have a legend that their Queen is buried there, and that she will some day rise from the dead, shattering the heavy walls, and come forth again bringing with her the secret of making their country warm. There is no door into this tomb. The walls are smooth and spotless everywhere, except on one side where there is an inscription in tall letters,
>
> THE TOMB OF ELAINE
>
> and the building rests on solid rock. It is a silent and mysterious place . . .

I stared for awhile at the page. There was no more about the tomb. The author went on to describe ruined cities and the curious customs of the savages. In the one paragraph that had any significance for me lay a hint so

feeble and remote that it was almost madness to follow it. Yet there was a pointed atmosphere about the matter, as if it had been intended by a beneficent god for my eyes, as if I had been expected to read a meaning between the lines.

I gave the book back, while Talis watched me curiously.

"What is it?" she asked solicitously, seeing my agitation.

I said: "It might be the same Elaine."

"Was your Elaine a queen?"

"She could have become a queen," I said, "and I should not have known the difference."

Istal and his father came toward us from the house.

"You have had breakfast?" Istal said. I nodded, my mind still on the book. Lasti noticed my excitement, and he said: "What is it, my son? Has the little Talis upset you?"

"No, sir. It's a book I have been examining—"

"About the North?"

"Yes. There is something in the North I must go to see."

Talis said, patting me on the arm: "It's his girl, father. He thinks she is buried there."

"But if she is dead, my son—?" Lasti asked.

"She may have been left half dead, as I was left. And, even if she *is* dead, I should want to see her."

Lasti nodded.

"Then you must go," he said.

"It will be a long journey," Istal said, "and you will be very cold."

"I shall stand the cold." I answered. "When I lived before, there were long, cold winters through which we always managed to survive. It can't be much colder than that."

Lasti said: "You will see, my son."

They sat down to their breakfast, and I wandered away through the garden with Talis.

CHAPTER VI

Elaine

I flew westward in a closed ship. I left one morning, circling over Istal's house while the family waved goodbye, and I headed for what had been the Canary Islands. Dras had taught me to pilot the narrow, graceful machine. It was easy to handle. Dras had found me another of the instruments with which he had given life back to my body, and taught me how to use it. The ship was stored with heavy clothes and with food. I carried maps and compasses and books.

During the day, there was no excitement in the trip. Underneath lay always the same miles of cultivated land—fields, woods, canals—that I had seen before. There was a certain exhilaration

in the mere feeling of lightness and grace that the ship lent me, and in the whistling of the wind along its sides.

The craft made, for these times, no great speed. I made an average of about three hundred miles an hour. It was five o'clock by the chronometer on the ship when I came to the Canaries; by the solar chronometer (which adjusted itself by the sun wherever I went) the time was about three. I continued a westerly course, a little to the south, that would bring me to Mexico City by the following afternoon.

A profound peace and stillness lay around me. The sea was calm, moving in long, slow swells under the ship. The sun had overtaken me—it dipped slowly down the sky over the unbroken horizon ahead.

Night came. The sun went down, large, vague and red among low clouds and mist. My cabin became a tiny cubicle of light in the mystery of endless darkness. My instruments guided me. After awhile, I turned off my lights, leaving only the dim glitter of the luminous dials, and watched the stars swinging down the sky overhead. Faint lines of phosphorescence moved like ghosts on the water, and the rising wind reminded me of lonely winter nights in my boyhood, when I had lain awake in dark rooms, hearing the wind whistling around house corners and rattling the cold window-panes.

There was a storm some time before midnight. It grew rapidly in intensity for nearly an hour. While it lasted, the sea twisted and struggled under me in high waves whipped by the wind; dark masses of cloud obscured the stars; and foam spattered thinly from time to time across the windows of my cabin. But the ship rode securely, unanswerable to the storm. The wind and the sea went down rapidly. The clouds drifted away, and the stars appeared again.

It was still dark when I came in sight of Cuba, a low, dark mass looming up along the horizon. By the chronometer is was after nine in the morning—I had been gone about twenty-five hours—but it was hardly three by the invisible sun. I had five more hours to go.

An hour before dawn, the moon appeared suddenly behind a jagged rent in the clouds along the horizon. A pale silver light spread over the water, diluting the sky with gray as dawn approached. Just as the sun snapped a long, brilliant cord of red over the sea behind me, I saw the coast of Mexico. I crossed above a long beach of white sand, and approached Mexico City over fields that were much like the fields I had left behind me in Africa. There were fewer houses here,

but the buildings were immensely large, like compact, miniature towns set in the midst of long miles of field. These gave way again to the waters of the Gulf of Campeche, and finally the coast appeared once more.

Half an hour later Mexico City, a glittering mass of blue, metallic towers, rose before me. I made for a tall building in the center of the city. Dras had described it to me—it was the Tower of Science. I lowered my ship gently to its roof, and stepped out. A small group of men stood negligently at the roof's edge, leaning on a balustrade and watching the glitter of the sun on a white, snow-capped peak in the distance. I accosted them.

"Gentlemen," I said. They turned. "Are you the members of the Science Club?"

They nodded gravely. They wore the simple, childlike air that Greek philosophers must have worn. They were not such scientists as the people of my time had been. Science was their hobby; they studied it for the pleasure it gave them. There were no more scientists of Charles Weber's sort left in the world.

"I am traveling toward the North," I told them. "I have learned about an old building there that I want to see. I thought perhaps you could give me some directions."

A little surprised, but without incredulity, one of them said:

"There are many strange things in the North, my friend. I went there once, as far as I could safely go. What is it that you want to find?"

I showed him Istal's book, *Wonders of the North.*

"Have you ever read this?" I said.

"My father wrote it. My family has always been curious about those barbaric places."

"There is a passage here," I said, opening the book at the page I had marked. "I wonder if you have ever seen this building?"

He took the volume, and read the paragraph slowly, frowning a little. When he had finished, he thought awhile, glancing up at the sky. Finally he handed the book back, and said:

"I have seen the place, but I don't recall where it is. Perhaps I could find more about it from my books."

"Would you be so kind?"

"Why not?" he said. "It's an interesting place, that tomb, and I have often wondered about it myself. Have you learned something about it?"

"Nothing yet, sir," I said.

"It has always been a temptation to me to open it . . . Well, come to breakfast with me, and I will look through my books.

I breakfasted with Kivro, the scientist. We piled hundreds of

volumes on the floor about the table and searched their pages while we ate. They were remarkable books, all describing the marvelous people, country, and legends of the North. But all of them, like the book I had brought with me, were vague about the details that a true scientist would have fixed first. They neglected to describe the location of the places they mentioned, and they were careless about all matters of chronology. Many of them contradicted each other.

In the end, after hours of searching, we found what I wanted. In one small book there was a footnote, in small type, buried near the end of a chapter about one of the places Kivro had visited.

> Near this town (the footnote read) stands the Tomb of Elaine, about which many travelers have written. It can be seen clearly from the ruins of the central square, nearly hidden by the trees and the broken walls.

"Of course!" Kivro exclaimed. "I remember the town now—a vast, ruined place, which the natives called Shika. It is remarkable for the little group of evergreens about the hill where the tomb stands. The natives live among the old walls at the foot of the hill."

I rubbed my tired eyes with a gesture of relief.

"Thank God," I said. Kivro glanced at me curiously.

"You are very eager to know?" he said.

"Very eager. If I find what I am looking for, when I come back, I will show you why it is so important to me."

Kivro nodded, and I thanked him hastily. Refusing his offer of a place to rest, I went back to the roof, shook his hand gratefully, and climbed into my ship. When I rose this time, the city flashing under me in the sunlight, I turned almost back on my former course, heading north and east, this time, toward the Gulf of Mexico. It was surprising how rapidly the cold increased. Long before I reached Louisiana, the air had begun to grow chilly. I shivered in my slight tunic, and finally turned on the heat in the cabin. Near sunset I came to the small town that stood on the site of Baton Rouge. A light fall of snow was on the ground. I descended there, without disturbing the inhabitants, and slept a few miles away, in my ship. I was very tired.

All the next afternoon, after resting until ten o'clock in the morning, I followed the Mississippi northward. Shika, the town for which I was searching, was the native name for what remained of Chicago. It would not be difficult to find. The cold, however, had a

definite effect on the mechanism of the ship, cutting down its speed more and more as I went on. It took me seven hours to reach Chicago.

I had put on the heavy clothes, but in spite of them I was cold. The heat in my cabin decreased proportionately with the ship's speed. I was glad that I had more resistance to cold weather than Istal and his people, but even for me the discomfort was difficult to endure.

All along my route, now, the earth was covered first with snow and later with sheets of ice. The wind was vicious during the afternoon, and from time to time there were flurries of thick snow through which my instruments had to guide me. The country, when I could see it, was unrecognizable. The centuries and ages during which I had been dead had changed the contours of the earth. The ice lay over everything, sweeping down in long glaciers from the hills to the banks of the river. Even the river, further north, was frozen solid.

I branched off from the Mississippi late in the afternoon, and followed the Illinois. Once there had been a canal from Joliet to Chicago, forty miles away, but there remained no trace either of the canal or of the city. I left the river and headed northeast toward Chicago. Just before the day ended, the blinding, low rays of the sun pointed it out.

Very little remained of Chicago. Most of the buildings had crumbled away long ago under the grinding weight of the ice. Here and there, perched grotesquely on the hills, stood isolated groups of walls, deep in snow. I had never before been to Chicago, but I had never thought of it as a hilly city. There were hills now. The ice had created them, or perhaps some previous ice age had created them—I had no way of knowing. They were there.

I found immediately the hill for which I was searching. It overtopped all the others, regular and rounded like an artificial hill. On its southern side, sheltered in a sort of natural amphitheatre from the wind, grew most of the bleak trees of which Kivro had spoken. Here, too, built against the jagged shelter of broken walls, stood rude, cave-like huts of stone and ice. Thin lines of smoke drifted up from them until, caught suddenly in the wind, they lifted and disappeared in the gray air.

Where the natives lived seemed a logical place to land my ship. I brought it down in a small open space among the huts. Snow had begun to fall again in thick gusts, blotting out the last of the twilight. I had seen no natives yet—they were all within their huts, apparently, for the night. I thought longingly of their warm

fires and suppers, but I hesitated to reveal myself. I was uncertain how I should be received; and I hated the thought, when I was so tired, of having to make interminable explanations. I could endure my cabin. I satisfied myself with the food I had brought, and, muffled in heavy clothes, lay down to sleep in the cabin. I slept fitfully during the night, thinking numbly of Elaine and of my fantastic surroundings.

As soon as dawn came, I was awake. The snow had stopped falling, and none of the natives was about yet. In spite of the smoke from their huts, I half doubted whether any natives existed. So much was fantastic and unreal in my life during those weeks that I had lost my standard of values in realities; sometimes I believed in the impossible, and more often I doubted the truth. Nothing was real, nothing was false—I lived in a state of continual bewilderment, through which I moved mechanically, directed only by the obscure habits of my past life.

Wincing at the contact of unbelievably cold air, I pushed open the door of my cabin and stepped out. The instruments I would need were not heavy. I lifted them out beside me, in two metal cases, and locked the door. Buckled to my belt was the long tube, like a flashlight, that would disintegrate the walls of the tomb.

I moved quietly through the snow toward the trees, past the native houses. The snow was deep, but heavily packed. I struggled slowly up the hill until I reached the trees. There the path was easier. I minded the cold less, now that I was exposed to it; it was bracing, in a way, and my activity rendered it bearable.

It took a long while to climb the hill, but finally I reached the top. A blast of cold wind swooped down on me at the summit, but I ducked under the shelter of the tomb, where the tall letters, cut deep into the stone, told me that Elaine — some Elaine — was buried here.

Removing the metal tube from my belt with awkward fingers, I pushed the button that turned on its power. I had to handle it carefully—it was a dangerous machine. It cut into the walls with an invisible ray, grinding them to a fine dust as if they had been attacked by a chisel. In about ten minutes I had made a circular opening large enough for my body to pass through. I leaped aside as the heavy portion of the wall I had cut out broke away and rolled heavily into the snow.

I lifted the instruments through first, and followed them hastily. I found myself in a small room, lit dimly by the opening in the wall. The room appeared to be bare. I examined the walls and the floor; there were various in-

scriptions on the wall, but it was too dark to read them. A metal ring in one of the inner walls disclosed a door. I tugged at it, and after a moment of resistance it came reluctantly open, on rusty hinges.

Too excited and too numb from the cold to care for any precautions, I stepped through into another room which sounded, by the echo of my movements, larger than the first. Here the darkness was profound. Again I explored with my fingers. This time I discovered a number of large metal boxes, none of them large enough, however, to be Elaine's coffin. The room contained nothing else.

Cursing myself for not having thought to bring a light, I examined the wall on either side of the door through which I had come. There should be at least two small rooms adjoining the antechamber I had first entered. But the walls seemed to be blank.

Disappointed, I felt my way nervously back to the metal boxes. I felt several of them thoroughly with my fingers, and they were apparently sealed. I was afraid to use my disintegrating tube—I might injure their contents. Nervously, I seated myself on the cold floor and wondered what to do.

It is possible that I was not quite rational at that moment. I had worked so far with the mechancial ingenuity of a robot or a madman. The intense cold and the strangeness of the whole adventure had deadened my faculties. I felt very little true emotion just then—indeed, I had been stunned beyond a capacity for emotion, ever since my awakening.

In any case, I think that I must have lost consciousness briefly. Dozens of faint dreams and impressions floated before my eyes in a condition between fantasy and reality. Suddenly, however, I found myself recalling the moment when Weber and I had first penetrated into the tomb of Tomen-Ashto. Clearly, and with a sort of startled fixity, I saw Weber push at the wall in the subterranean room, and saw the wall yield and turn on its hidden hinges. I was aware of a feeling of compulsion in this picture, as if someone had held it before me and said:

"Look!"

I stood up, a little weak, and groped my way back to the wall beside the door. Raising my arms, I pushed vigorously against it in all directions, but without success. Then I crossed to the other side of the door, and tried the wall there. After a moment, it seemed to stir gently beneath my fingers. I pushed harder, and it yielded. The wall swung inward, like a door.

And suddenly, as it opened, I jumped back with a startled cry.

The whole room had burst into a blaze of light, and a light came through the door from the room beyond, blinding my eyes after the intense darkness. Frightened, as if by an invisible presence, I crouched back against the wall and stared about me. The stillness was unbroken. Nobody appeared; nothing happened.

I grew accustomed to the light, and my nerves became quiet again. I knew now that I should find Elaine. This was not an ordinary tomb. I was too confused to question the lights, or to wonder how they had survived the passage of innumerable centuries; but I knew that they had not been left here merely to divert intruders. Nor were they for the use of the dead.

With a brief glance about the room, I turned my attention again to the door I had just opened. It came down to the floor, unlike the door in Tomen-Ashto's tomb, and it gave upon a stairway leading down under the floor. There was a warm current of air rising through the doorway.

I went to the antechamber and found my instruments. Then, shutting the two doors behind me against the cold outside, I came back to the stairway and descended. It was not a long stairway. It led to a room directly under the first floor of the tomb. As I entered this room, I gasped with surprise, and stood transfixed, staring into it.

It was a low, warm chamber, decorated with wood and plaster like the rooms I had known before my death. The wood seemed oddly fragile, as if it would crumble under my touch, and I was afraid to disturb it. There were chairs, tables, and all the other furnishings of a bedroom. The cloth covers of the chairs had long ago become tattered and crumbled into dust, leaving the bare wood and the springs exposed; and the rug on the floor fell apart, rising in fine particles of dust about my feet, wherever I touched it. But the combs and brushes, the bottles and boxes and jars, still remained intact on the dressing table.

There was an old iron bed in the corner. Elaine lay there.

I crossed the room slowly, and looked down at her. The bedclothes and her gown, like the covers of the chairs, were dust. She lay there, beautiful and immobile, as if suspended between life and death. Her eyes were closed. She lay with her hands at her side, quiet and calm, a girl composed for rest. The centuries had not changed her. A faint, mysterious smile rested on her lips.

"Elaine," I said wonderingly, lost in the miracle of my love and of her life. I dropped on my knees beside her bed, and rested my head wearily on my arms. I think

that I cried. I was afraid to touch her body.

CHAPTER VII

The Little Men of Shika

When the little hand on the dial reached ninety-eight, I turned off the switch and waited. Under the furs that I had thrown over her, I thought I saw Elaine move slightly. I bent down and touched her cheek with trembling fingers; it was warm again, and flushed with a soft color.

Her eyelids fluttered. I knelt beside her again, removing the metal bands from her wrists and from her ankles. Her eyes opened a little, and glanced at me gravely. Her lips lifted in a brief smile.

"Mr. Frazer. . . ." she murmured.

"Elaine!"

She examined my face with languid attentiveness, and asked: "Are we all right?"

"All right, Elaine," I said.

"What time is it, Mr. Frazer?"

I didn't know. I had no watch—only the chronometers on the ship. And it was ironic that, at the end of so many centuries, Elaine should ask first for the time. But I said carelessly: "Eleven o'clock."

She closed her eyes awhile, and frowned slightly, thinking.

"Do you feel better?" I said.

"Yes, sir. But—" She opened her eyes again suddenly—wide. "Why," she said, "where are we?"

I didn't know how to tell her.

"Don't you know, Elaine?" I asked.

"I think—" She was puzzled. "I thought you were—" And then her memory wakened. She raised herself a little and stared at me.

"Alan!" she said.

I smiled at her (she had called me by my name!) and took her in my arms, trembling.

"Why, that's all right, Elaine," I said. "Weber was right."

She glanced all about the room, and then back at my face.

"But this place," she said. "Has it been long?"

"It's been a long time."

"How long, Alan?"

"Years," I said. "You'll see."

She closed her eyes, and rested in my arms. With my hand I smoothed the hair on her forehead. She said, glancing at my eyes, "You love me?"

"Yes."

I kissed her lips gently.

I said: "Elaine. What happened? How did you get here?"

"Charles Weber told me about your death. I loved you, too."

"You did? All the time?"

"Yes. And when he told me, I made him promise to leave me here with you."

"Here?"

"Yes. And then I—did this." She pointed out to me a scar on

her wrist.

"Honey!"

"That wasn't very hard. I was afraid I might grow old and—ugly, while you were sleeping."

After awhile, I said: "But Elaine, we're in Chicago now. And Weber left me in Egypt."

"In Chicago?"

"Yes. Who brought you here? And what happened to Weber?"

"I don't know. Isn't Weber here?" Elaine said. "Didn't he wake you?"

"Weber's dead. He died a long time ago. All the people we knew are dead, Elaine."

A look of fear come into her eyes. She stared at me.

"What do you mean, Alan? What year is it?"

"I don't know, honey. Everything has changed—it's been a long time."

Slowly she said: "And Weber didn't wake you up?"

"Weber is dead. Strange people woke me up, and you weren't there. But I looked for you, and found this place."

"How did you know?"

"I didn't. I had to guess."

Elaine lifted her hands and touched my hair.

"I'm glad," she said.

"We'll be happy, Elaine. Together."

"Yes."

Her body stirred restlessly under the covers. She said: "Shall I get up now, and come with you?"

"Are you strong enough?"

"I'm well now. I can go anywhere."

"You must take those clothes of mine. Your clothes are gone."

Elaine smiled, and said: "I won't need so much."

"It's cold, Elaine. You'll need them." I took off the heavy shoes I had worn to the tomb. "Take these, too. There's snow on the ground."

"But Alan! What'll you do?"

I smiled, shivering a little in my light tunic.

"I'll be all right," I said. "It isn't far to the ship."

I kissed her again, and rose. I left the instruments where they were. They would be in the way if I carried them.

"I'll wait for you upstairs, Elaine," I said.

. . . She came very soon, wrapped ponderously in the awkward clothes I had given her.

"Do I look all right?" she said.

"You look beautiful."

I closed the door behind her. Immediately the lights flashed off. They had been growing dim. I wondered absently how they had been contrived, and how they had been able to survive the centuries; but it was one of the forgotten things we should never learn to know.

"Come," I said, "maybe we'd better hurry, honey."

"Are we going somewhere?"

"We're going home. There are

strange people here. We're going back to Egypt—that's our home now." I led her, in the darkness, to the antechamber, where the gaping hole I had made in the wall revealed the waste of snow and ice outside. Elaine gasped with surprise when she saw the bare, deserted hillside, with its lonely evergreens towering against the sky.

"Where are we, Alan?" she cried.

"Chicago," I said shivering painfully in the cold air. "At least, it was Chicago once."

Without saying any more, I helped her through the wall and followed hastily, leaping with a shock down into the snow. The snow burned my bare feet like a blanket of white fire.

"We'll have to hurry," I panted. "I can't stand much of this."

We ran down the hillside, sliding and stumbling through the snow. My tunic was no protection against the cold. I was afraid to pause; I waved my arms and legs wildly to keep the circulation going.

We burst out of the woods, into the little gathering of huts. I saw the ship lying black and immobile against the snow in the clearing. A crowd of little stunted, dwarf-like figures was gathered around it. They heard the sound of our thrashing in the snow, and turned. For a few moments they stood transfixed, while we approached. Then they fell back a few steps beyond the ship. One of them waited at its door.

We reached the ship. The little man who had waited stood by helplessly while I unlocked the door. As I was about to open it, however, he laid his hand on my arm.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a strange dialect, but in English, "Who are you?"

I paused a moment, wondering what to tell him, and saw the rest of the little people watching us a few yards away.

"I've come from the South," I said. "Now I must go back."

"And the woman," he insisted, "who is she? Where did you find her?"

I said impatiently without thinking:

"I found her up on the hill. That's what I came for, and now I've got to go."

But the little man startled me with a loud cry.

"The Queen!" he shouted. "She is the Queen!"

Elaine and I looked at him in surprise, and then at the others. I remembered now the old legend in Istal's book, that Elaine would some day rise and come forth out of her tomb to rule over the natives. All the little people had fallen on their faces, prostrating themselves in the snow. The man by the door knelt in front of

Elaine.

"Our Queen!" he said breathlessly. "You have come back to us. I am your priest. You have come to give us back the Great Fire."

Elaine touched his head, muffled in heavy fur, with a gesture of pity. I shivered, stamping my frozen feet in the snow.

"Poor fellow," Elaine said, "he really believes I am his queen."

"I know," I said with difficulty, "but on the other hand, I'm nearly frozen. We haven't time to explain things to him." Elaine nodded and smiled. "Jump in," I added, pulling open the door, "and I'll follow you."

Elaine climbed into the cabin, resting on my arm. I unbuckled the disintegrating tube from my belt.

"Wait," the little priest cried in a frightened voice, "you can't!" He turned to the other little men. "He's carrying away the Queen!"

He moved as if to leap upon me, but I pressed the button of the tube, pointing it at the ground between us. The snow melted with a hissing sound under his feet, and steam rose about his legs. He leaped back with another cry.

"You can't stop me," I said. "Maybe, before long, we'll come back again. But we've got to go now."

"No! She's our Queen!" the little man insisted, frightened and unbelieving. "You can't carry her away."

"I'm sorry," I said, turning toward the door.

Suddenly, his hands before his face, in fear and desperation, the priest leaped at me with a cry. I glanced quickly at the others. They were standing back, afraid to move.

I didn't want to hurt the little man. I had meant to use the tube, but it was a sickening weapon—I was afraid of it myself. While I hesitated, the priest bore down on me and seized my arm, twisting it madly upward. He was amazingly strong. Before I understood what was happening, the tube had fallen from my hand. I heard Elaine crying:

"Quick, Alan! Hurry!"

With all my strength, I crashed my free fist into the priest's face. His grip loosened, and he fell back into the snow. The other little men were running toward us.

Leaping into the cabin, I slammed the door behind me and pressed the rising button. The ship rose sluggishly, and one of the little men, clinging to the side, fell back in the snow. I sank into my chair, weak with cold and exhaustion. Elaine threw her arms about me.

"Alan!" she said. "Are you all right? Can you guide the ship?"

I nodded, and pointed to the rear of the cabin.

"There are more clothes back there," I panted. "Get them for me."

Rousing myself, I leaned forward and moved the controls. The ship moved ahead, swinging west and south toward the Illinois river. Then I glanced down at the village we were leaving. The little men stood in a dejected group, staring after us with sorrowful faces. The priest was bending over, picking up some small object from the snow. While I watched, he examined it carefully, made a motion with his hands, and lifted it. It was the disintegrating tube. He pointed it at us from the ground. I could not see the ray.

I must explain the tube I had carried. It was small and comparatively weak. Designed originally for use as a weapon, it was powerful enough to cut through stone and metal—not suddenly and cleanly, like a knife, but gradually, like a chisel. Its chief virtue was its great range and its narrow, concentrated ray.

The priest was not adept with it. And, too, the ship by that time was hardly a good target. After a few minutes, during which the priest waved the tube clumsily in ragged circles, I heard a soft, searing sound along the bottom of the ship. It lasted a moment, then it went away. After awhile it came back. For some minutes, while we left the village further and further behind, I heard the sound. Finally it ceased.

I had no way of judging whether the tube had damaged the ship materially. The bottom was made of a strong metal, but I was unfamiliar with its design. The ship went on moving forward.

Elaine brought me the clothes, and I put them on. It was getting dark outside, and beginning to snow again. I didn't turn on the lights or the heat; I wanted the ship to use all its power in taking us south as soon as possible. Already the cold and the darkness of the North were wearing on my nerves. Elaine sat in my chair, and I sat beside her on the floor, my arms about her and my head resting on her knees. I was very tired, but I had begun to recover somewhat from my recent exposure.

It must have been well over an hour before Elaine or I moved, except once, when we came to the Illinois and I changed the course. We had said nothing, but waited in silence, content to be together. The snow increased until it was swirling violently about the windows, obscuring all trace of the earth. We were nearly in darkness, in a sort of long twilight, and pondering on the things we should do together.

There was, suddenly, a sort of grinding sound along the bottom of the ship. We both stiffened, listening. It came again. I jumped

up, and glanced at the instrument board. Our height was fixed by the automatic stabilizer at a hundred feet. That meant that we should be following the contour of the country (and Illinois was a flat country), rising and falling with it at a continual mean level of a hundred feet above its general outlines.

The sound went away. My heart beating violently, I raised the ship another hundred feet, and fixed it there. We had no instrument for measuring the actual height. The stabilizer was not expected to fail. I peered out through the windows at the snow, trying to penetrate it. I could see nothing.

"Are we all right, do you think?" Elaine said.

"I don't know, honey. I suppose so."

We listened anxiously. Nothing happened for, perhaps, twenty minutes. Then the scraping began again, very slowly and sluggishly. I looked at the speedometer. Our speed had decreased until the finger on the dial stood almost at zero. I was perplexed. I glanced through the windows again, and at that moment the snow lifted for a brief instant, and I saw the earth. We were barely creeping along, almost on the surface of the ice.

"Elaine!" I said. "Something *has* happened!"

"What is it?"

"The power much be going dead."

We looked at each other silently. There was nothing to be done.

Within another ten minutes the ship had come to rest on the ice. I knew nothing about its mechanism. An attempt to repair it would be useless. The priest had managed somehow to damage it with my disintegrating tube.

For a long while we waited in the twilight of the cabin, wondering what we could do. Gradually the storm cleared away again. It was late in the afternoon. I said finally:

"There used to be towns and cities along this river, everywhere south of Chicago, Elaine. There were hundreds of them." Elaine looked at me, her eyes deep and mysterious as I loved to see them.

"Yes?" she said.

"Do you suppose we could reach one of them on foot?" There are a few natives in all those cities, living among the ruins. And the storm has cleared."

"Do you want to try?" Elaine said.

"It might be better than sitting here, waiting for our food to give out. Nobody will come for us. We could be doing something."

"I'll go with you," Elaine said. I kissed her quickly, forebodingly. "Of course, we won't make it," she said.

"Of course not," I rejoined.

I pushed open the cabin door. Our pockets were filled with concentrated food. I leaped down. We rested on the ice-covered surface of the river, by good fortune. The snow was not very deep—most of it had blown up into great drifts along the banks. I helped Elaine out.

We said nothing more. In a situation of that sort, what could there be to say that we didn't understand already? Words could only burlesque our deep consciousness of love, and our willingness to die so long as we were together. For, even if that is a foolish and romantic notion, when a man and a woman have to die, they can do it somewhat more easily if they carry such an illusion with them.

Darkness came soon enough. The sky cleared for a little while just after sunset. The stars came out. Later on, there was a frigid, pale moon hanging over the low hills. We stumbled along through the dark, walking with difficulty in our heavy clothes, hand in hand. We were very cold.

We kept on, more and more slowly, until nearly midnight. Elaine was easily fatigued—she had risen literally from her death-bed—and I was already nearly worn out. Elaine stumbled at last, and went down on her knees. I caught her in my arms, and held her tired head up with my hand.

"Can't you go on any longer, Elaine?" I muttered. She shook her head weakly. Her face was very white in the moonlight; her eyes looked at me under long lashes beaded with ice. Her lips were unable to smile. She whispered, "No, honey."

"Then, we'll rest. . . ."

I laid her down in the snow. She was unconscious. I took off one of my coats and made a pillow for her head. The other I spread over her. I lay down, sheltered by her body from the wind, holding her tightly in my arms, my face close to her face. But she could not protect me from the cold. I had only my tunic again, and my shoes and gloves. I closed my eyes very soon, and forgot.

Once—it may have been only a few minutes later — I heard Elaine's voice, but I could not tell what she was saying. Opening my eyes, I saw her face dimly in the shadow. Her mouth was speaking to me, close to my ear. I kissed her weakly, once more, and then my eyes closed again. Darkness gathered in my head, even before our lips parted.

CHAPTER VIII

Conclusion

When I awoke, there were voices about me. A man said:

"How are you now, my chil-

dren?"

Elaine's voice answered: "Better now, sir."

Without surprise, I looked up and saw the man bending over me. It was Kivro, the Mexican explorer. He smiled with a touch of irony and a touch of tenderness. There were other men in the room. Kivro touched my forehead, and said: "He's all right."

"I'm glad," Elaine said. I turned my head. She was lying at my side, fair and beautiful, her brown hair tumbled on a pillow. Our hands touched, under the covers. I whispered: "Darling. . . ."

"We'll go away now," Kirvo said, his smile fading discreetly. "There are other things to do."

We looked up at him, unable to speak, while he joined the other men at the door and went away, closing the door gently behind him. We were silent for a little while. Then I said: "How did he find us, darling?"

"He was curious," Elaine murmured. "He wondered what you were after, so he followed you." She turned her head to me, with a smile, and added, "It was for the honor of his family."

"Where are we now?"

"On his ship. It's a big ship."

"Yes."

Elaine said: "There's nobody but ourselves left anywhere in the world?"

"Nobody," I said. "Nobody like ourselves. But people are kind."

"And we shall always be alone?"

"Yes. And there will be nothing to do, ever, except live—and be happy."

"That's enough," Elaine said.

"Quite enough."

"It's like being a child again."

I nodded. The walls and floor of the little room hummed faintly, as if powerful engines turned behind them. I thought of Egypt. The wind whistled beyond a high window over our heads. It was last afternoon; a warm red square of sunlight hung suspended on the ceiling.

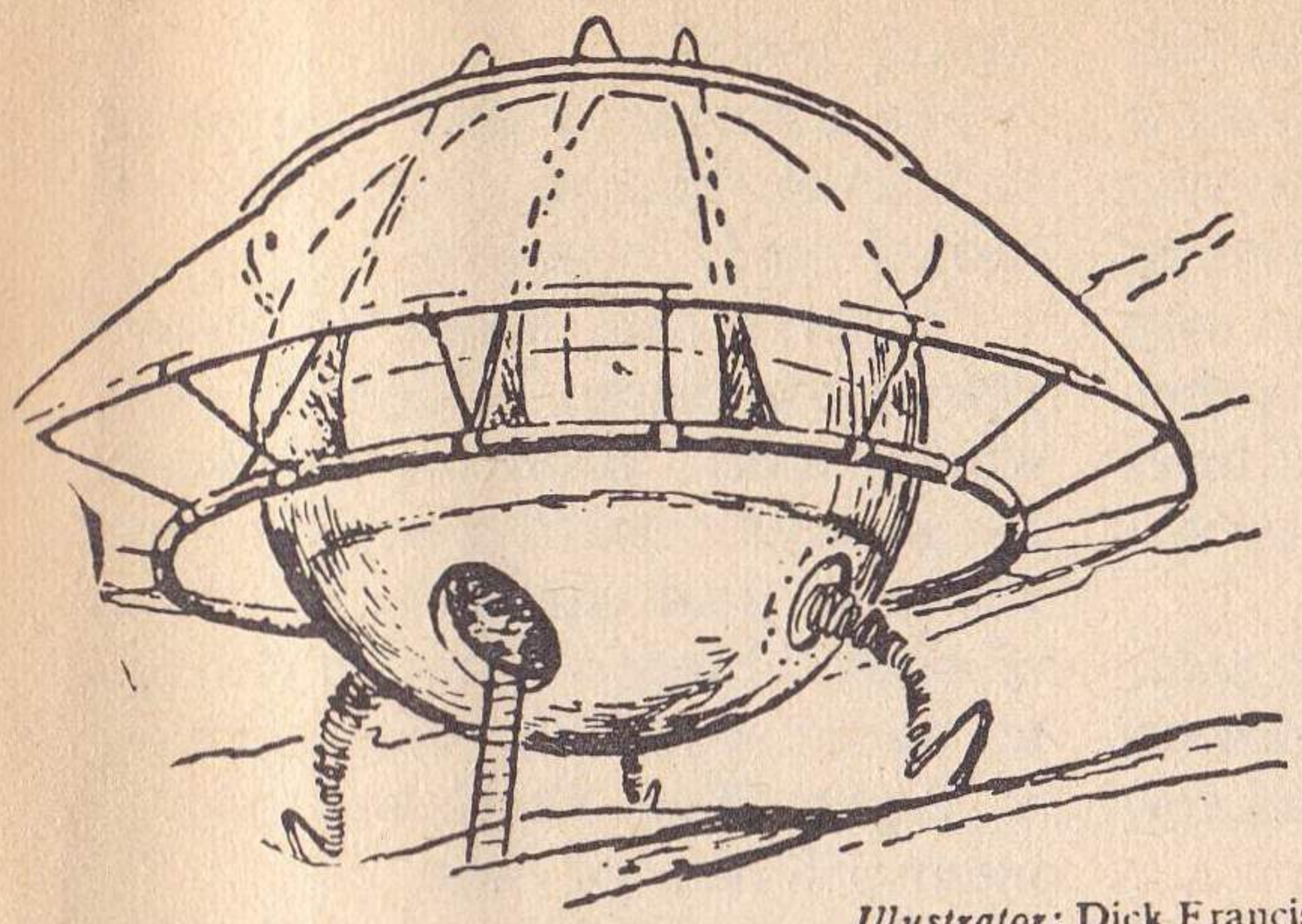
I whispered, "And you love me?"

"Yes," Elaine said.

THE END

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OR ELSE

By HENRY KUTTNER

Illustrator: Dick Francis

When Henry Kuttner died suddenly—early in 1958—Theodore Sturgeon wrote: "I never knew I could miss so very much someone I had seen so seldom. He shouldn't have died." And though we never met the man who—in collaboration with his wife C.L. Moore—did some of the best science fiction of modern times, even now, more than eight years later, we feel what Sturgeon meant—the ache that refuses to go away, the sense of loss that grows even greater whenever we reread stories as good as the one we offer you now.

MIGUEL and Fernandez were shooting inaccurately at each other across the valley when the flying saucer landed. They wasted a few bullets on the strange airship. The pilot appeared and began to walk across the valley and up the slope toward Miguel, who lay in the uncertain shade of a cholla swearing and working the bolt of his rifle as rapidly as he could. His aim, never good, grew worse as the stranger approached. Finally, at the last minute, Miguel dropped his rifle, seized the machete beside him, and sprang to his feet.

"Die, then," he said, and swung the blade. The steel blazed in the hot Mexican sun. The machete rebounded elastically from the stranger's neck and flew high in

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the air, while Miguel's arm tingled as though from an electric shock. A bullet came from across the valley, making the kind of sound a wasp's sting might make if you were hearing it instead of feeling it. Miguel dropped and rolled into the shelter of a large rock. Another bullet shrieked thinly, and a brief blue flash sparkled on the stranger's left shoulder.

"*Estoy perdido*," Miguel said, giving himself up for lost. Flat on his stomach, he lifted his head and snarled at his enemy.

The stranger, however, made no inimical moves. Moreover, he seemed to be unarmed. Miguel's sharp eyes searched him. The man was unusually dressed. He wore a cap made of short, shiny blue feathers. Under it his face was hard, ascetic and intolerant. He was very thin and nearly seven feet tall. But he did seem to be unarmed. That gave Miguel courage. He wondered where his machete had fallen. He did not see it, but his rifle was only a few feet away.

The stranger came up and stood above Miguel.

"Stand up," he said. "Let us talk."

He spoke excellent Spanish, except that his voice seemed to be coming from inside Miguel's head.

"I will not stand up," Miguel said. "If I stand up, Fernandez will shoot me. He is a very bad shot, but I would be a fool to take such a chance. Besides, this is very unfair. How much is Fernandez paying you?"

The stranger looked austerely at Miguel. "Do you know where I came from?" he asked.

"I don't care a *centavo* where you came from," Miguel said, wiping sweat from his forehead. He glanced toward a nearby rock where he had cached a goatskin of wine. "From *los estados unidos*, no doubt, you and your machine of flight. The Mexican government will hear of this."

"Does the Mexican government approve of murder?"

"This is a private matter," Miguel said. "A matter of water rights, which are very important. Besides, it is self-defense. That *cabron* across the valley is trying to kill me. And you are his hired assassin. God will punish you both." A new thought came to him. "How much will you take to kill Fernandez?" he inquired. "I will give you three *pesos* and a fine kid."

"There will be no more fighting at all," the stranger said. "Do you hear that?"

"Then go and tell Fernandez," Miguel said. "Inform him that the water rights are mine. I will gladly allow him to go in peace." His neck ached from staring up at the tall man. He moved a little, and a bullet shrieked through the still, hot air and dug with a vicious splash into a nearby cactus.

The stranger smoothed the blue feathers on his head. "First I will finish talking with you. Listen to me, Miguel."

"How do you know my name?" Miguel demanded, rolling over and sitting up cautiously behind the rock. "It is as I thought. Fernandez has hired you to assassinate me."

"I know your name because I can read your mind a little. Not much, because it is so cloudy."

"Your mother was a dog," Miguel said.

The stranger's nostrils pinched together slightly, but he ignored the remark. "I come from another world," he said. "My name is —" In Miguel's mind it sounded like Quetzalcoatl.

"Quetzalcoatl?" Miguel repeated, with fine irony. "Oh, I have no doubt of that. And mine is Saint Peter, who has the keys to Heaven."

Quetzalcoatl's thin, pale face flushed slightly, but his voice was determinedly calm. "Listen, Miguel. Look at my lips. They are not moving. I am speaking inside your head, by telepathy, and you translate my thoughts into words that have meaning to you. Evidently my name is too difficult for you. Your own mind has translated it as Quetzalcoatl. That is not my real name at all."

"*De veras*," Miguel said. "It is not your name at all, and you do not come from another world. I would not believe a *norteamericano* if he swore on the bones of ten thousand highly-placed saints."

Quetzalcoatl's long, austere face flushed again.

"I am here to give orders," he said. "Not to bandy words with —look here, Miguel. Why do you suppose you couldn't kill me with your machete? Why can't bullets touch me?"

"Why does your machine of flight fly?" Miguel riposted. He took out a sack of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. He squinted around the rock. "Fernandez is probably trying to creep up on me. I had better get my rifle."

"Leave it alone," Quetzalcoatl said. "Fernandez will not harm you."

Miguel laughed harshly.

"And you must not harm him," Quetzalcoatl added firmly.

"I will, then, turn the other cheek," Miguel said, "so that he can shoot me through the side of my head. I will believe Fernandez wishes peace, *Señor* Quetzalcoatl, when I see him walking across the valley with his hands over his head. Even then I will not let him come close, because of the knife he wears down his back."

Quetzalcoatl smoothed his blue steel feathers again. His bony face was frowning. "You must stop fighting forever, both of you," he said. "My race polices the universe and our responsibility is to

bring peace to every planet we visit."

"It is as I thought," Miguel said with satisfaction. "You come from *los estados unidos*. Why do you not bring peace to your own country? I have seen *los señores* Humphrey Bogart and Edward Robinson in *las películas*. Why, all over *Nueva York* gangsters shoot at each other from one skyscraper to another. And what do you do about it? You dance all over the place with *la señora* Betty Grable. Ah yes, I understand very well. First you will bring peace, and then you will take our oil and our precious minerals."

Quetzalcoatl kicked angrily at a pebble beside his shiny steel toe. "I must make you understand," he said. He looked at the unlighted cigarette dangling from Miguel's lips. Suddenly he raised his hand and a white-hot ray shot from a ring on his finger and kindled the end of the cigarette. Miguel jerked away, startled. Then he inhaled the smoke and nodded. The white-hot ray disappeared.

"*Muchas gracias, señor,*" Miguel said.

Quetzalcoatl's colorless lips pressed together thinly. "Miguel," he said, "could a *norteamericano* do that?"

"*Quién sabe?*"

"No one living on your planet could do that, and you know it."

Miguel shrugged.

"Do you see that cactus over there?" Quetzalcoatl demanded. "I could destroy it in two seconds."

"I have no doubt of it, *señor.*"

"I could, for that matter, destroy this whole planet."

"Yes, I have heard of the atomic bombs," Miguel said politely. "Why, then, do you trouble to interfere with a quite private little argument between Fernandez and me, over a small water-hole of no importance to anybody but —"

A bullet sang past.

Quetzalcoatl rubbed the ring on his finger with an angry gesture.

"Because the world is going to stop fighting," he said ominously. "If it doesn't, we will destroy it. There is no reason at all why men should not live together in peace and brotherhood."

"There is one reason, *señor.*"

"What is that?"

"Fernandez," Miguel said.

"I will destroy you both if you do not stop fighting."

"*El señor* is a great peacemaker," Miguel said courteously. "I will gladly stop fighting if you will tell me how to avoid being killed when I do."

"Fernandez will stop fighting too."

Miguel removed his somewhat battered sombrero, reached for a stick and carefully raised the hat above the rock. There was a nasty crack. The hat jumped away and Miguel caught it as it fell.

"Very well," he said. "Since you insist, *señor*, I will stop fighting. But I will not come out from behind this rock. I am perfectly willing to stop fighting. But it seems to me that you demand I do something which you do not tell me how to do. You could as well require that I fly through the air like your machine of flight."

Quetzalcoatl frowned more deeply. Finally he said, "Miguel, tell me how this fight started."

"Fernandez wishes to kill me and enslave my family."

"Why should he want to do that?"

"Because he is evil," Miguel said.

"How do you know he is evil?"

"Because," Miguel pointed out logically, "he wishes to kill me and enslave my family."

There was a pause. A road-runner darted past and paused to peck at the gleaming barrel of Miguel's rifle. Miguel sighed.

"There is a skin of good wine not twenty feet away —" he began, but Quetzalcoatl interrupted him.

"What was it you said about the water rights?"

"Oh, that," Miguel said. "This is a poor country, *señor*. Water is precious here. We have had a dry year and there is no longer water enough for two families. The water hole is mine. Fernandez wishes to kill me and enslave —"

"Are there no courts of law in your country?"

"For such as us?" Miguel demanded, and smiled politely.

"Has Fernandez a family too?" Quetzalcoatl asked.

"Yes, the poors," Miguel said. "He beats them when they do not work until they drop."

"Do you beat your family?"

"Only when they need it," Miguel said, surprised. "My wife is very fat and lazy. And my oldest, Chico, talks back. It is my duty to beat them when they need it, for their own good. It is also my duty to protect our water rights, since the evil Fernandez is determined to kill me and —"

Quetzalcoatl said impatiently, "This is a waste of time. Let me consider." He rubbed the ring on his finger again. He looked around. The road-runner had found a more appetizing morsel than the rifle. He was now to be seen trotting away with the writhing tail of a lizard dangling from his beak.

Overhead, the sun was hot in a clear blue sky. The dry air smelled of mesquite. Below, in the valley, the flying saucer's perfection of shape and texture looked incongruous and unreal.

"Wait here," Quetzalcoatl said at last. "I will talk to Fernandez. When I call, come to my machine of flight. Fernandez and I will meet you there presently."

"As you say, *señor*," Miguel agreed. His eyes strayed.

"And do not touch your rifle," Quetzalcoatl added, with great firmness.

"Why, no, *señor*," Miguel said. He waited until the tall man had gone. Then he crawled cautiously across the dry ground until he had recaptured his rifle. After that, with a little searching, he found his machete. Only then did he turn to the skin of wine. He was very thirsty indeed. But he did not drink heavily. He put a full clip in the rifle, leaned against a rock and sipped a little from time to time from the wineskin as he waited.

In the meantime the stranger, ignoring fresh bullets that occasionally splashed blue from his steely person, approached Fernandez' hiding place. The sound of shots stopped. A long time passed, and finally the tall form reappeared and waved to Miguel.

"*Ya voy, señor*," Miguel shouted agreeably. He put his rifle conveniently on the rock and rose very cautiously, ready to duck at the first hostile move. There was no such move.

Fernandez appeared beside the stranger. Immediately Miguel bent down, seized his rifle and lifted it for a snap shot.

Something thin and hissing burned across the valley. The rifle turned red-hot in Miguel's grasp. He squealed and dropped it, and the next moment his mind went perfectly blank.

"I die with honor," he thought, and then thought no more.

When he woke, he was standing under the shadow of the great flying saucer. Quetzalcoatl was lowering his hand from before Miguel's face. Sunlight sparkled on the tall man's ring. Miguel shook his head dizzily.

"I live?" he inquired.

But Quetzalcoatl paid no attention. He had turned to Fernandez who was standing beside him, and was making gestures before Fernandez's mask-like face. A light flashed from Quetzalcoatl's ring into Fernandez's glassy eyes. Fernandez shook his head and muttered thickly. Miguel looked for his rifle or machete, but they were gone. He slipped his hand into his shirt, but his good little knife had vanished too.

He met Fernandez' eyes.

"We are both doomed, Don Fernandez," he said. "This *señor* Quetzalcoatl will kill us both. In a way, I am sorry that you will go to hell and I to heaven, for we shall not meet again."

"You are mistaken," Fernandez replied, vainly searching for his own knife. "You will never see heaven. Nor is this tall *norteamericano* named Quetzalcoatl. For his own lying purposes he has assumed the name of Cortés."

"You will tell lies to the devil himself," Miguel said.

"Be quiet, both of you," Quet-

zalcoatl (or Cortés) said sharply. "You have seen a little of my power. Now listen to me. My race has assumed the high duty of seeing that the entire solar system lives in peace. We are a very advanced race, with power such as you do not yet dream of. We have solved problems which your people have no answer for, and it is now our duty to apply our power for the good of all. If you wish to keep on living, you will stop fighting immediately and forever, and from now on live in peace and brotherhood. Do you understand me?"

"That is all I have ever wished," Fernandez said, shocked. "But this offspring of a goat wishes to kill me."

"There will be no more killing," Quetzalcoatl said. "You will live in brotherhood, or die."

Miguel and Fernandez looked at each other — at Quetzalcoatl.

"The *señor* is a great peacemaker," Miguel murmured. "I have said it before. The way you mention is surely the best way of all to insure peace. But to us it is not so simple. To live in peace is good. Very well, *señor*. Tell us how."

"Simply stop fighting."

"Now that is easy to say," Fernandez pointed out. "But life here in Sonora is not a simple business. Perhaps it is where you come from —"

"Naturally," Miguel put in.

"— but it is not simple with us. Perhaps in your country, *señor*, the snake does not eat the rat and the bird eat the snake. Perhaps in your country there is food and water for all, and a man need not fight to keep his family alive. Here it is not so simple."

Miguel nodded. "We shall certainly all be brothers some day," he agreed.

"You must not use force to solve your problems," Quetzalcoatl said with great firmness. "Force is evil. *You will make peace now.*"

"Or else you will destroy us," Miguel said. He shrugged again and met Fernandez' eyes. "Very well, *señor*. You have an argument I do not care to resist. *Al fin*, I agree. What must we do?"

Quetzalcoatl turned to Fernandez.

"I too, *señor*," the latter said with a sigh. "You are no doubt right. Let us have peace."

"You will take hands," Quetzalcoatl said, his eyes gleaming. "You will swear brotherhood."

Miguel held out his hand. Fernandez took it firmly and the two men grinned at each other.

"You see?" Quetzalcoatl said, giving them his austere smile. "It is not hard at all. Now you are friends. Stay friends."

He turned away and walked toward the flying saucer. A door opened smoothly in the sleek hull.

On the threshold Quetzalcoatl turned. He said. "I shall be watching."

"Without a doubt," Fernandez said. "*Adiós, señor.*"

"*Vaya con Dios,*" Miguel added.

The smooth surface of the hull closed after Quetzalcoatl. A moment later the flying saucer lifted smoothly and rose until it was a hundred feet above the ground. Then it shot off to the north like a sudden flash of lightning and was gone.

"As I thought," Miguel said. "He was from *los estados unidos.*"

Fernandez shrugged. "There was a moment when I thought he might tell us something sensible," he said. "No doubt he had great wisdom. Truly, life is not easy."

"Oh, it is easy enough for him," Miguel said. "But he does not live in Sonora. We, however, do. Fortunately, I and my family have a water hole to rely on. For those without one, life is hard."

"It is a very poor water hole," Fernandez said. "Such as it is, however, it is mine." He was rolling a cigarette as he spoke. He handed it to Miguel and rolled another for himself. The two men smoked for a while in silence. Then, still silent, they parted.

Miguel went back to the wine-skin on the hill. He took a long drink, grunted with pleasure, and looked around him. His knife, machete and rifle were carelessly flung down not far away. He recovered them and made sure he had a full clip.

Then he peered cautiously around the rock barricade. A bullet splashed on the stone near his face. He returned the shot.

After that, there was silence for awhile. Miguel sat back and took another drink. His eye was caught by a road-runner scuttling past, with the tail of a lizard dangling from his beak. It was probably the same road-runner as before, and perhaps the same lizard, slowly progressing toward digestion.

Miguel called softly, "*Señor* Bird! It is wrong to eat lizards."

The road-runner cocked a beady eye at him and ran on.

Miguel raised and aimed his rifle. "Stop eating lizards, *Señor* Bird. Stop, or I must kill you."

The road-runner ran on across the rifle-sights.

"Don't you understand how to stop?" Miguel called gently. "Must I explain how?"

The road-runner paused. The tail of the lizard disappeared completely.

"Oh, very well," Miguel said. "When I find out how a road-runner can stop eating lizards and still live, then I will tell you, *amigo*. But until then, go with God."

He turned and aimed the rifle across the valley again.

DISCUSSIONS

Dear Editor:

First I want to thank you for bringing *Amazing* and *Fantastic* up from the grave they were slowly falling into. The world's oldest s-f magazine deserves a better fate than that. I applaud your idea of using old "classics" side-by-side with new stories.

"For Each Man Kills" by William F. Temple was one of the best stories I've read in a long time. Stories like this, "Mute Milton," and "Final Victim" (in your August issue) will keep me buying *Amazing*.

As for illustrations, I feel that putting interior pictures in this and your sister magazine is great. On the cover, how about featuring covers from some famous novels that you printed? Keep Paul illos abounding.

Also I suggest that you have articles and/or guest editorials about science fiction, and please leave straight science to science magazines. They could be about short biographies or special topics pertaining to s-f. Please give your editorial and letter sections more room.

I agree with the general opinion of your readers that science fiction should be left to *Amazing* and let *Fantastic* stay with fantasy and an occasional s-f story. My preference in fantasy is the swords-and-sorcery type or light fantasy—don't overdo the weird type.

One last thing I'd like to see: a reprint of *The Galaxy Primes* or the Gray Mouser stories. Good luck with *Great S-F from Amazing*.

Dennis Erokan
4346 Will Rogers Dr.
San Jose, Calif.

• *Stories like "For Each Man Kills" and "Mute Milton" are some of the best we've read in a long time too. But watch for even better ones—by Chad Oliver, Roger Zelazny and Philip K. Dick—coming up soon!* —*Editor*

Dear Editor:

At first I was a bit skeptical about the "return to the good old days" in *Amazing* and *Fantastic* . . . (I had liked the old *Amazing* and *Fantastic* . . . very much), but publishing Murray Leinster's "Runaway Skyscraper" in the February *Amazing* finally sold me—*I'm* one of those people who's been looking for a reprint of this story for years!

—Thank you very much, and keep up the good work you've been doing in bringing back into print the better works of the earlier years of science fiction and fantasy writing.

(Miss) Claudia Galik
2563 Fulton St., Apt. 3
Toledo, Ohio 43610

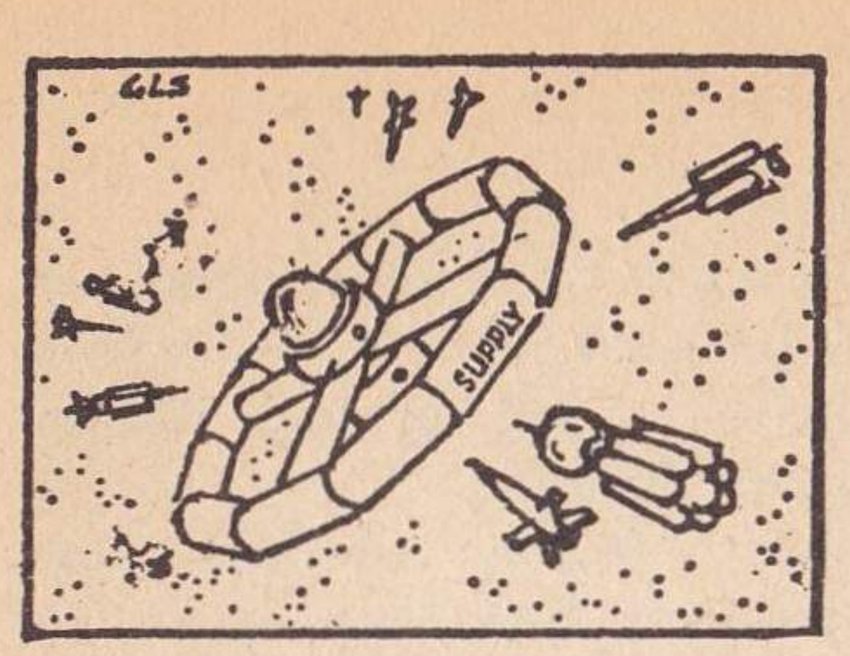
• *The return of "Skyscraper" caused quite a stir. And no wonder, what with Leinster still turning out stories as up-to-date as "Killer Ship" (last year) and "Stopover in Space" (in this issue).* —*Editor*

Dear Editor:

Your 40th Anniversary issue was a beautiful collection of the best that *Amazing* has given the public during its long history. I am extremely pleased that you have discovered the value of Frank R. Paul illustrations and hope that his portfolio on H. G. Wells is only the pilot for future reprints from the artist's collection. Further congratulations are in order for Doc Keller's poignant, almost Wells-like story and for Edmond Himilton's "Intelligence Undying."

However, ever since your October issue *Amazing* has been presenting more and more of the old Pulp, which by itself is commendable, but contemporary science fiction has been lacking. De Duyter is becoming scarce, and Robert Young should be about due for another story. As Joseph Ross stated in (the editorial of the) February *Amazing:* "publish a mixture of the

(Continued on page 162)



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DISCUSSIONS

(Continued from page 159)

very best of the new material . . . and some of the best of the older stories . . ." Nostalgia is fine but don't get carried away. Balance *Amazing*'s stories between the old and the new, giving neither a lion's share, and keep *Amazing Stories* the best magazine in the field.

I have a few more impossible requests and suggestions. Since *Amazing*'s archives seem to abound in classics, would it be possible to reprint some of the old Wells short stories as were illustrated by Paul in your April issue? Wells' stories are increasingly hard to find. I had never heard of "Aepyornis Island" or "In the Abyss," for instance. I would also like to see the return of a book review section in *Amazing*, preferably by Silverberg, and finally I would like to make a standing request for more Ray Bradbury.

W. F. Wilbert
23704 E. 2nd
Liberty Lake, Wash.

● *Balance? See the big chunk of brand-new Leinster in this issue. As for Wells, there's more of his work in print than you might think. For the short stories, try* Best Stories of H. G. Wells *(Ballantine) and the Dover edition of* 28 Science Fiction Stories of H. G. Wells. *(You'll find "In the Abyss" in the latter.)* —*Editor*

Editorial *(Continued from page 4)*

we've been trying to get into every issue of *Amazing*—not only some of the best s-f from issues gone by (balanced with healthy chunks of *new* material such as the Leinster novel in this issue) but a stronger sense of the "atmosphere" associated with earlier days. That's why we carefully reproduce some of those wonderful Paul, Finlay and Fuqua illustrations that most of you keep clamoring for. That's why every story—whether new or not—is thoroughly introduced so that all of us can keep our perspective. And that's why the new *Amazing*—with your continued support—will keep on doing just that. —JR

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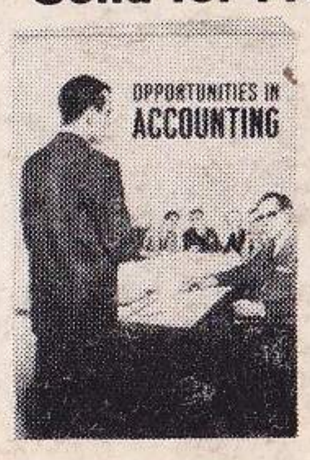
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