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JANUARY 1967

**IF**

**SCIENCE FICTION**

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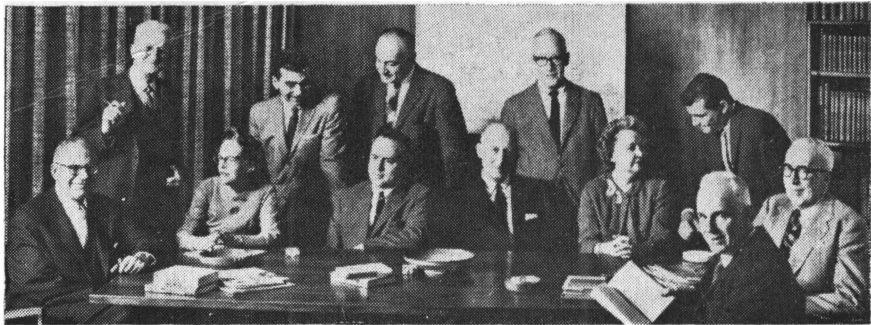
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## Cover by MORROW from THE IRON THORN

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# H. G. WELLS PLUS 100

A hundred years ago this week (as this is written) H. G. Wells was born. As it happens, this is being written in Wells's own city of London, and the newspapers and the television are full of him. Pilgrims have come from all over the world to celebrate his centenary; we spent part of yesterday with a visiting professor from Moscow, comparing recollections of Martian heat-rays and the Morlocks; speakers have praised him from France, Italy, Germany and, of course, the U.S.A.

The England that Wells was born into was Queen Victoria's England, complete with chimney-pots, pea-soup fogs and hansom cabs. It was the same England in which Karl Marx had been impelled to write *Das Kapital* (just a block or so from where we sit at this moment, in the reading room of the British Museum), a country of dreadful infant mortality and — as Wells himself put it — a chronic, nasty smell of drains. Country folk still tugged at their forelocks as the gentry passed by, and the lot of the industrial poor was far worse. It was also a country of learning and wit, where the world's most imposing Empire was ruled.

To Herbert Wells the boy, and to young Wells the assistant draper's

clerk. England must have seemed like the world and the world must have seemed a confusing place. Here were great railway engines and powerful ships. Here were clangorous factories and mines; an army and navy that ruled half the world, and a commerce that controlled much of the rest. And who were the Titans who populated this small, mighty island? They were Wells's own people, not quite poor but never really secure, living in dark, dingy, "respectable" homes, never entirely clean, never entirely well, never without fear.

From these beginnings Wells looked into the future. What could he possibly see there?

First he saw disasters — the brutal, destructive war of *The War in the Air* and *The Land Ironclads*. He saw the money-driven life of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, a Victorian England raised a couple of magnitudes, where the poor were witless animals and the handful of rich were empty-headed, purposeless gods. He saw that final extrapolation of Marx's class struggle, the world of *The Time Machine*, where the workers, so long condemned to sweat and ignorance, lived in caverns below the earth and the butterfly descendants of the rich fluttered about the landscaped



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surface . . . and at night the Morlocks emerged from their ventilation tubes, and hunted the graceful little Eloi, and killed them, and ate them.

What Wells saw for the future was, in fact, what he saw around him in the real world, but more so. It was an ugly sight, and he did his best to blot it out with his Utopias. We needn't come to this, he cried; if we use our hearts and brains — and pay close attention to the Socialist principles of the Fabian Society — we can come to a time of peace and freedom and love, where we all wear togas, write poems and do eurythmy all day long.

What is wrong with Wells's Utopias is that they don't really sound like very much fun for the long pull. They are the sort of place that would be great to visit, but you wouldn't really want to live there.

To tell the truth, this is not a problem that is unique to Wells. Nearly all science-fiction writers, the ones in this magazine included, have pretty consistently shown themselves to be better at warning of pitfalls than at painting rosy pictures of goals we can aim toward.

Question for the class: Is it possible that this is the way things ought to be? Is it possible that, considering the million possible branching pathways toward the endless number of futures the world might attain, it is more useful to have a guide that tells us which paths to avoid rather than one which encourages us to go *that* way or *this*?

Because the record of human be-

ings who get what they think they want is **not** very encouraging. For example, what would Wells himself have **thought** of this particular segment of his future that we are living in today? By any objective standards, he should have liked it very much indeed: there's plenty of soap and quite a lot of food; equality of opportunity for all is at least in sight, if not actually here; the world's governments may not be exactly socialist, but they're a long, long way from being Victorian-capitalist, too.

Yet we who are actually living through his centennial year can testify that it isn't quite Utopia, after all. Antibiotics may have made us all healthy, but they haven't made us all good; and if our houses don't smell bad any more, our rivers do.

Perhaps, like children, we just haven't yet made up our minds what we want to be when we grow up. Perhaps we are in the adolescence of the race — gangling and bumptious, full of ferments and drives, as strong as an adult but not quite as wise . . . but unable to know that that is so, since we are wiser now than we ever were before, and consequently cannot imagine some day becoming wiser still.

Perhaps the lesson that most needs learning is that we — the collective "we", meaning all of mankind — can invent for ourselves whatever kind of future we want. Granted that we can't describe it exactly at the moment; nevertheless, we can at least see the icebergs looming in our path, and we can turn away from them in time to avoid being sunk.

Apart from pleasure — the brain-



pleasure of stretching one's mind and the gut-pleasure of high adventure in space — that's what science fiction is all about. It gives we brave few who read it a sort of extra eye. We may not see clearly, but we do see something; while most men trudge along without ever raising their eyes from the ground.

And so we do honor H. G. Wells for having helped to shape and define science fiction. We owe him a great deal. If today's writers sometimes see a little better than he it is perhaps because they have learned from his mistakes, the mistakes of a man of genius, working at his best. For Wells's science fiction was Wells at his best. He wrote any number of "mainstream" novels, and they were well received and widely read; but who reads them now? Why *should* anyone read them now? And he wrote non-fiction, too — but the best of it, his *Outline of*

*History*, is really a sort of science-fiction piece in reverse: in it Wells played the sf game of extrapolation just as in his stories, but he worked it from the other end, with real causes and real events.

We wonder what Wells would have made of the world if he had started a century later; what would he have written for us if his childhood had included TV, the IBM 7094 and the DC-8?

He would have written fine stories, no doubt, and quite different from *The War of the Worlds* and *Men Like Gods* in detail. But we think that the overall message would have been the same. H. G. Wells's stories all had a single moral, after all, and we doubt that that would have changed. What he would say to us now is what he said to us then: "It is time Men stopped suffering like animals, and began to suffer like Men."

—The Editor

## Special "Hugo" Issue of IF

At the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland, September, 1966, the "Hugo" — science fiction's annual achievement award — went for the first time to *If* as most popular science-fiction magazine in the world. Other winners include:

Isaac Asimov ● Roger Zelazny

Frank Herbert ● Harlan Ellison

To celebrate, the next issue but one of *If* — that is, the March, 1967 issue — will be a Special Hugo Winners Issue, and in it we hope to have stories by all the above, and a cover by Frank Frazetta, who won the award for best cover artist of the year. We are proud and grateful for the award — this is our way of saying thanks!

# The IRON THORN

by ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustrated by MORROW

*It was great to be an Amsir-killer! It  
gave you your pick of women and food — if  
you only overlook the lies they told you!*

I

Rippled like red ocean bottom, each ripple inked in violet shadow from the setting sun, the low dunes rolled in their journey to the edges of the world. Those edges stood high and cruel. The eastern

horizon was blue-black below a flaring long arc of eaten rust whose ends sank out of sight far to the right and left. Occasional nearer masses of orange rock glowed their sunward faces against the shadow beneath the edge. Above it, tiny flecks of unwavering light were



stabbing themselves through the black windings of creation.

Toward that horizon the Amsir sped, its clawed, padded feet making thumps and hisses among the ripples as they kicked. Topping each rise, the Amsir emerged from thickening shadow and, like the rocks, glowed briefly before; unlike the rocks, it had cavorted down out of sight to pop up again on the next rise. It was half a dozen feet tall and gripped a javelin across its chest with the little hands that grew halfway down its wings.

Honor White Jackson was chasing it and had a different opinion, but the Amsir was beautiful. Its beaked face was all angles and slits, and it had great, translucent flightless wings extended for balance. Graceful as a goblin bride, it curvetted in a flutter of lacy pennons growing from the horn of its puffed-up body and its spindled lower limbs. These made good insulation for Amsirs at rest and were also quite useful to the humans of the Iron Thorn. Their effect now was to make a shy wonder of the beast; a pale, tossing creature that soared in on skittish, possibly joyous, quick steps.

The wings, spanning twelve-odd feet from nail-hard tip to tip, glowed pale coral in the waning sunlight and were excellent for infuriatingly shrewd changes in direction. Many times as he ran after it, White Jackson had changed over to his casting stride, the brutal glass-headed dart knocked in the socket of his Amsir-bone throwing stick. Just as often, the Amsir had tossed up one

shoulder in a motion fraught with disdain, pivoted around the resistance of the fifteen square feet of braking surface, and been off again on a slightly altered tack. Behind the slitted round turrets of horn in which its eyes were veiled, glittering pupils twinkled back over its shoulders.

As they traced their paired tracks of magenta dust over the great desert, White Jackson and the Amsir together made a certain beauty greater than their individual own. Jackson was thinnish, long limbed, tall and burned brown. Like the Amsir, he had a lean face and glittering eyes. Like the Amsir, he ran daintily, touching the surface just long enough to gain traction for his next stride, striving not to come down flat-foot. He wore a very old, bright metal cap with a pointed spike and a new chinstrap made of Amsir-lace. He had a half pint of water in an Amsir-bubble strapped to the small of his back, and carried his spare dart in his left armpit. As wiry and as taut as the Amsir was ethereal to the eye, he was very much aware that this whole scene depended on a suspicious sloth in the quarry just as much as it did on the Honor's energy.

White Jackson was also aware that the Amsir's exasperating jigs and jags had a common baseline which was leading him steadily away from the safety of the Iron Thorn. The damned bird was trying to lure him. White Jackson was new to being a Honor, and if this was the sort

of thing he could expect to have happening in his chosen way of life, he wanted very much to investigate it while he was still young enough to learn. Accordingly, though he now and then came down on his soles in the jolting, slower bounds designed to transfer momentum to his poisoned throwing stick, he intended nothing more for his pains than what he got — a series of sharp nudges of his cap's rim against his scalp. He saw no reason to doubt that he was tougher and smarter than any Amsir or man in the world. If he wasn't, now was none too soon to learn about it. He was content to keep running all day — barring one limitation he couldn't help — and he expected the Amsir would spring his trap whenever it was dark enough for it. He was even willing to help him spring it, if it was what he suspected it was.

As they ran on, playing their charade on each other, the Amsir undoubtedly had its own motives for being where it was. Jackson was thinking that if he brought in the Amsir, his brother Black would treat him one way, and another if he did not. Though his brother was always very good to him. He was thinking that it would be pleasant to sit down to the community table with the demeanor of one who has killed what is being eaten. He imagined this would have its effect on women, and might go some distance toward getting elders off his back. But all this was colored by the simple joy of being tirelessly strong and a Honor — his people pronounced it with the "H", as

"Hahn-er" — in a world bounded by sand and Amsirs, populated mostly by dull farmers, and centered on the Thorn to which the farmers clung.

He looked over his shoulder to locate the Thorn. He had gotten very far away from it. Only the top several dozen feet of its black silhouette were visible over the horizon. There was no doubt that if he lost his cap now, there would be a few very bad moments of death for him, and damned little else.

What puzzled him was that the Amsir was not giving him enough credit for intelligence.

Honor White Jackson, even more than the wise old farmers who knew better than to want anything off beyond the fields, had a clear understanding that it was bad to get out of sight of the Thorn. It was also bad to go beyond the perimeter of the fields without a cap. The proposition about the cap had been proved to him by his brother, who took him to the desert and took his cap off. The air around White Jackson had instantly turned into thirsty burning ice. The sun had become a pale, cold hammer that left his skin itchy for hours after the cap was clapped back on his head, and would have blackened his frozen corpse given the chance. The proposition about never getting out of sight of the Thorn, cap or no, Jackson took on faith in Black's word as an established professional Honor. There were also the elders, of course, who knew so bloody much that only their con-



stant open-mouthedness prevented its running out their ears. And there were the elders' women, whose job in life seemed to lie in telling girls all sorts of useful tips about how tricky life was.

With all this information being passed around the humans since time began with the creation of the Thorn, it was inconceivable that the Amsirs hadn't deduced how much of it was true and how much of it the humans believed enough to act on. The Amsirs after all had been in the desert beyond the fields since time began, and had seen many a farmer turn his plough, and many a Honor popping up from his night-laid ambush in a dune.

The story was that the world hadn't been made for Amsirs; Amsirs had been made for the world. Either way, it was surely no world for men, and men could be presumed to know it. Therefore, thought White Jackson as he skimmed across the sand, with faint swirls in the space immediately around him as if the air were water about to produce its first bubbles before boiling, what was the Amsir's plan? Did it honestly expect him to follow it over the Thorn's horizon and drop dead for its benefit? That seemed to be the idea.

It really did. Having seen an Amsir get away from an ambush and carefully maintain half-speed with all the appearance of going full out, White Jackson was prepared to believe there was more to honning Amsirs than had ever been spelled out for him. A while ago, the beast had started working him

around behind one of the rare rock outcroppings, and Jackson had been ready to expect three or four more Amsirs. But nothing like that was happening. The shallow arc of their course was now far beyond the spongy up-thrust of bloody orange rock, and just beginning to curve in behind it. Their distance from the rock gave him a clear field to see that he and the treacherous bird were the only two live things working here.

All right. They were as far from the Thorn as Honor White Jackson cared to go. He was going to have to night-walk back to the Thorn, solving the navigation by reversing his memories of every change in direction and every stage of distance he had covered since leaving it. He was, hopefully, going to have to do it with the Amsir's eighty pounds across his shoulders, and he was about ready to start. In another eight strides, he was going to stumble, lose his stick and dart, paw at his face and try to crawl back along his track, for all the world as if the Amsir had lured him over the horizon. If the bird didn't go for it, that was just too bad. If he did, he was due for Jackson's spare dart right in the throat.

But it was only three strides before the world was cold and his throat was full of splinters. He had been moving forward at a pace that covered twelve feet per second, comfortable and planning ahead, and now he was flailing forward, incapable of stopping until he fell, or doing anything but trying to

squeeze breath out of the breathless air. He thought his eyeballs would freeze. He searched indignantly for the sight of the Thorn, and he couldn't believe that you actually had to see it; he couldn't understand why, if you were still inside the Thorn's horizon, an outcropping of red rock between you and it was the same as losing your cap. Black Jackson had never said a word about that, and neither had anyone else.

And now that damned Amsir was turning around.

## II

The Amsir came in like fury. Nothing in the world moved faster than one of its kind when it wanted to, and it wanted Honor White Jackson very soon. Its wings were flung up like a hook for each moon. The javelin was caught halfway up the haft in the bereft little right hand that grew where the wing folded in mid-span, thumb and all three fingers making a bony fist. It was gathering speed as it ran, and its strides were growing longer and more urgent. It was almost as near to flying as it could get. The javelin was stabbing straight up and down — the wings were folding into leathery cups for the thin air, and beating with a rattling thrum that raised wakes of dust beside its springing knees. Now White Jackson could see its full face — the delighted grin of its beak, the adrenalin-exalation of its eyes. Its talons chuckled through the sand.

Jackson almost didn't care. He

knew what it was — it was the cold and the choking that were making him all concerned with what went on inside. After Black had showed him the trick with the cap, he had thought for a long time about what had happened, and although several old women had told him it was a kind of sunstroke and perhaps impiety's simple reward, he had decided it was cold and lack of air. Sudden lack of air, that caught a man halfway into drawing a breath and having his heart nearly stop with fear when an everyday useful action suddenly got you nothing but savage disappointment. He had noticed that people who got bad news on a beautiful day were more apt to go around with their eyes popping, grabbing at their hair and sobbing, than those who got it on a gloomy one. Summertime tragedy was always louder and more indignant. So he could understand why his body wanted to double over on itself and his hands wanted to beat on his throat.

He had tried it out, getting one of the neighbor kids to hit him in the stomach, and it had been a feeling a lot like that; no cold or burning in the eyes and nose, but the same helplessness to make his body do anything it didn't want to until the spasm had passed and he could begin to pant. He guessed if he thought about it long enough, he could reason it out about the cold, too, and the thing that made bloody paper of the insides of his nostrils. Maybe even test it. But the Amsir was coming on. White Jackson's stick and dart were ly-

ing away on the sand just as if he'd thrown them deliberately, and he was dying.

In spite of all reasoning and rehearsal, he would have been helpless if he hadn't already been planning to fake this same thing. He had no air — no air at all, and you can't go long with not trying to breathe if your lungs are empty, even if you know there's no air around you any more. But he had that other dart, and as he folded he got a hand up to his armpit with a very natural motion. The Amsir had reached him. It was up in the air, at the height of a great leap, bucket-winged, and he couldn't understand why it wasn't flirting those feet like knived clubs, ready to shred him up as it came down. He would have been. But it was up there, falling at him from a height of its own length. Now the ends of the wings were tucked down and back, and the hand with the javelin was bent to aim. The gleaming metal point was going to hit the sand right in front of his eyes, and the Amsir shrieked "Yield! Yield!"

White Jackson only looked like he was all in a heap on his knees and chest, with his face in the sand and his eyes rolling up sideways. He had the dart in the hand under his body, point sticking out of the bottom of his fist for more punch. "Yield, damp thing!" the Amsir shrieked as White got his open hand on its ankle, which was hard like a cockroach.

There was a lot of noise and

flurrying, and Jackson had the Amsir down on the sand at his level. He jerked himself across the body, which was hard the same way and wrapped in flapping stuff, and he was himself wrapped in wings and fingernails with his head down between his shoulders as far as it could go, with the beak carving him. It was *punch* through the side of the Amsir's throat and through the spinal cord, and a feeling like a stick coming back out through a jabbed parchment window, and then, for the life of him, *punch* through the Amsir's chest and into a bubble — one of the two big, main ones down inside there under all that horn and stuff — and hug the Amsir with all the affection in the world, mouth to the chest-hole, and breathe in, in of the Amsir's air.

The Amsir flopped and flailed, wings drumming, legs dancing, back arching, but White Jackson stayed with it. The stuff coming out of the Amsir was hot with life and puffed like hollering; he had to lock his throat against its pressure when he had his lungs full. He couldn't move his head, for his mouth was the only stopper he had to save it with.

And he didn't have to breathe; he didn't have to breathe! He could go on doing this forever. It was altogether different from being out of air. It was being free of having to breathe like the Honors he had seen dancing around the Thorn with the bubbles from their fresh kills, dancing all night, hey, and gulping the Amsir-wind from the bubbles, but never breathing, just blow-

ing out once in every while and mouthing the disembodied parts of Amsir chest again, laughing and moving like the dead were said to whoop with joy on Ariwol.

The Amsir's body was dying now. Its head might be dead, or it might live forever, but who could tell when nothing but skin connected it to the body and it had no wind to shriek with. The eyes were shut. There was something thick and clear seeping out between the closed lids and drying immediately to a crust. The wingtips were still quivering. But Honor White Jackson was a hell of a lot more alive than it was, and he picked it up. Staggering, and grinning as much as he could, he stumbled quickly to the javelin, his throwing stick and his darts, the one far away and the other near to hand with fresh gouges up the short Amsir-bone shaft. He got them clustered into his hands with his arms around the Amsir, and then he wandered out from beyond the outcropping's shadow, still cold but not caring, riotous as a tickled child, happy on pure oxygen, with his first Amsir like the world's most awkward bucket of cool water on a blazing day.

**W**hen he had rested for a long time in the cool sand, watching nebulae and moons wheel by beautifully without his knowing what they were, he raised himself on one elbow and fondly stroked the Amsir's long thigh as it lay sprawled beside him.

The hunting bird, wings folded, was only a dim, coverletted shape. But Honor White Jackson could

have named every curled rim of horn, every trailing pennon, every nail, every tooth. He unfastened the trimmed and harnessed water bubble at the small of his back, unstoppered it and raised it to the corpse before sipping from it himself. As his neck and back muscles stretched, sand cracked free from his wounds and tickled him as it slipped down his spine. He grinned at the Amsir and patted its hip. He stood up, hooked and tied his gear into place and oriented himself to the shadow of the outcropping against the stars.

Now that he knew where he was, he could go where he had been. And now that he was standing up, he could no longer hear thuds of approaching Amsir feet, if there were any such in his vicinity. So he must go. Stooping, he hefted his first conquest, eased it down across his shoulders and began a steady, fast and comfortable walk, broken with pauses for listening closely and looking around as well as he could. Amsirs did not seem to move much at night — hence the Honor tactic of slipping away from the Thorn at dusk and picking a good ambush in the morning. But Honor White Jackson was more than ever in an iconoclastic mood, and he wondered why, if Amsirs did not haunt the darkness, so many of those ambushes failed.

His grip on his slain enemy was needlessly rigid. He knew that, but he did not slacken it. He could carry him more easily if he relaxed, but he did not do that, either.

Nobody had told him Amsirs

could talk. Nobody had told him they carried metal spears, or any other kind of weapon but claws, beak, and wingtips. He had been told — as all children of the Thorn were told even before most of them drifted into farming and a very few tried to be Honors — that the Amsirs would get them all if the Honors did not watch out. But he had not been told how they would be gotten.

He would not let his Amsir go. He thought it was because he had had to learn so much to get him.

The gritty, sharp-faced grains of sand made noises like gentle screams beneath his trudging feet. The Amsir rustled and rattled. It was full of ridges and pointed places that goaded White Jackson's flesh. The wings were full of joints along the main bone. It was conventional to speak of the hand as growing out of the elbow, but in fact there was a joint between shoulder and hand, and the remainder of the wing was supported by what would have been a monstrously long little finger in a man. No matter how Jackson folded the wings and tried to tuck them into each other or pin them under the Amsir's hard chest, the nail at the end of that little finger on one wingtip or the other would flop down and swing teasingly across his ankles as he walked. He put the Amsir down and trussed it with its own lace. Now it was a rolling bundle on his back, stiff and contrary.

An edge on it found the deepest place Jackson was cut — a beak-furrow across the top of his shoul-

der, its edges stiff and gaping, crusty dry with sand, open down to the rubbery, twist-surfaced muscle. Jackson was fascinated with the cut — it was unusual to be able to touch his own inside, to dwell on the thought that if he were not a victorious Honor he would be wincing pitifully. He understood perfectly well that all men would rather not put their flesh in peril. He knew from himself that even a small hurt could nag a man with reminders of why this was wise. But he had noticed that it wasn't the size of the wound, it was his feeling for himself that made a man cry or not, and that was why he had become a Honor. Now he was a Honor who would have a white Amsir-beak scar across one broad shoulder; a Honor who put his Amsir down from time to time and stretched out on the sand beside him, ear in the grit listening, with the stars and small moons giving him little to light his night with, and going back to the Thorn where he would live differently from before.

### III

It was very nearly dawn when he caught the loom of the Thorn against the low stars. At the same time, he noticed a human step on the sand. He thought it might be Black Jackson coming toward him around the shoulder of a dune.

The way it was supposed to go, a Honor was discovered sitting beside his kill on the sun side of the Thorn when the people got up in the morning. Successful Honors had

been known to stay out on the edge of the desert all night even when they didn't have to. People who accidentally came across a Honor before dawn pretended the man didn't have a carcass across his back. The idea was to have an effect that it had all just somehow happened, like a meteorite shower. The Honor was supposed to play it very cool, too, and not notice anybody was paying any attention to him — at least until there was enough of an audience for him to suddenly break out in a big happiness.

All that guff got more comment than it did attention. It seemed to be a hangover from some time maybe half a dozen generations back when some nut had whipped up a lot of pious ritual. The trouble with any of this stuff that was supposed to make life better and more interesting was that the life plain never did get any better, and a man still had to find his own interests. After a while even a community of farmers could notice that. So White had half expected, especially on his first kill, that a live one like Black Jackson would be around to give him a personal handshake or something before discovering him all over again in the morning. To say nothing of the fact that just maybe, even though it wasn't like a Honor was supposed to be, Black might be worried.

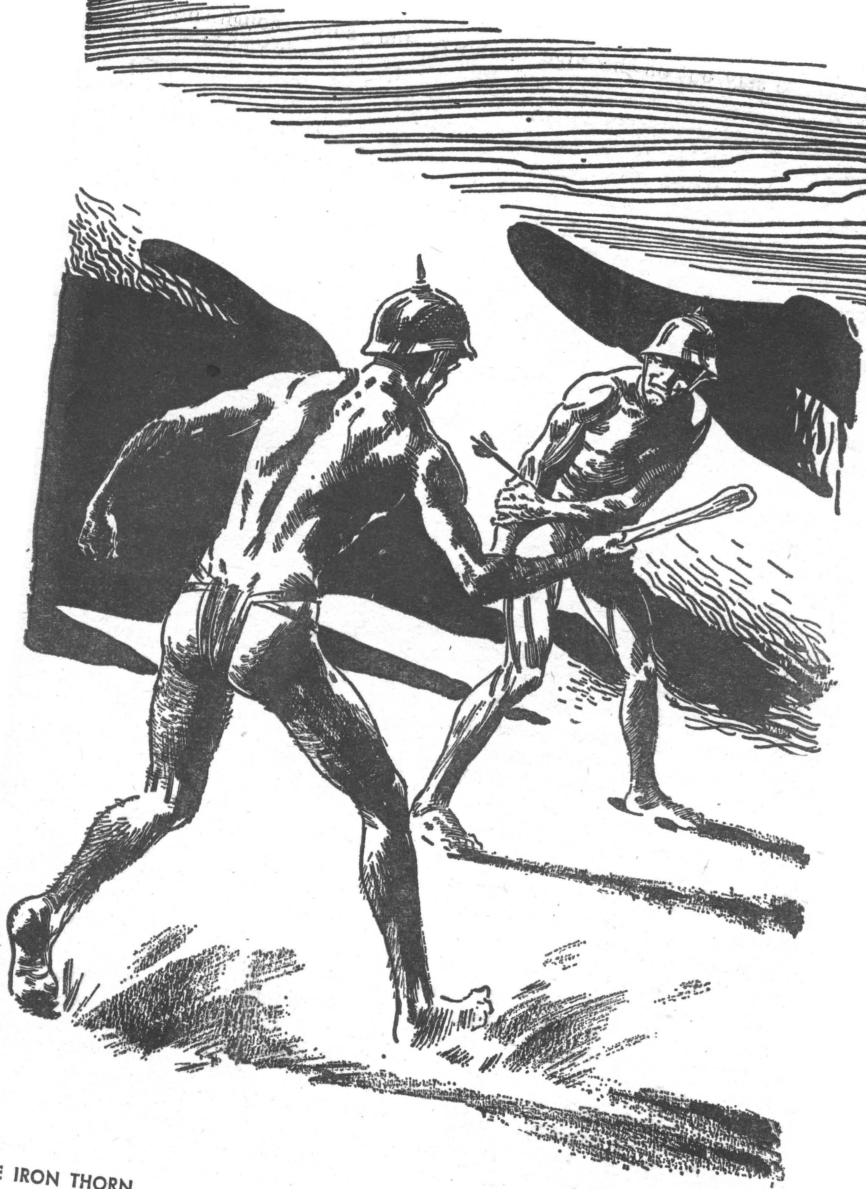
The Amsir was suddenly beginning to get that characteristic smell Jackson had studied from boyhood. He pulled his cap off cau-

tiously, and sure enough he was inside the comfortable radius, even if it was still very much like desert underfoot and breathing took a little work in the chill air. It was a lot farther out than the farmers cared to come. Farther in, there would be a good four dozen feet of weedy grass around the perimeter before the fields began. Winters that strip shrank to something that was still wider than two dozen. For a part of the year, when the days were long and the high sun beat down sharply on the glistening gridwork atop the Thorn, the strip might be close to five. The fields never crept out into it. A farmer, White Jackson had decided early, was anybody who would scheme nights to edge an inch off his neighbor's boundary but wouldn't reach for a free clear title to all Ariwol if he'd ever cut his finger on an edge of parchment.

**I**t was Black Jackson, tall and with muscle around his stomach and waist that White Jackson envied the hell out of, his short hair marking him as a Honor. His bare face showed up as a paler patch against the dark contrast of his mouth and eye-pits. White stopped, but didn't let the Amsir slide to the ground, and stood easily.

"Welcome, Honor," Black said. There was something unusually breathy in his big rumble of a voice, which for many years White had been thinking of as friendly. He came forward and touched White on the shoulder — the sound one, as it happened. Although it was still





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pretty nearly full dark, at this distance White could see the sober set of Black's broad mouth. This was beginning to relax as Black touched the Amsir; White had noticed long ago that people believed only what they touched — the rest they believed conditionally, on the testimony of people who claimed to have touched. "You all right, kid?" Black touched him again.

"Uh-huh."

"Well. Well, you got one, didn't you? And you're okay." Black was walking around him, displaying more and more of a species of relief, studying the Amsir, poking the carcass. "Young one," he said, appraising the callous on the pads of its feet with a rasp of his thumb. He had been carrying his dart and stick. He put these down and looked at White. "Give you trouble?"

White shrugged.

Black had found the javelin across White's shoulders under the Amsir's body. It slid easily into his hands. "Come at you with this, did he?"

"Uh-huh."

Black's glance came up fast from under his lowered brows. "Say anything?"

"Nothing much."

"What did he say?"

"Something about how he had me, I guess. I was busy. And he called me a damp thing."

"Any more?"

"No. I killed him about then."

Black bent to examine the Amsir's neck. He fingered the edges of the dart punch. "Nice work. Caught him clean."

"Well, that's how Black Jackson taught me."

"Kid?"

"Yeah?"

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Black Jackson was grinning. Whether he knew it or not, he looked more like he was remembering than he did like he was enjoying now. And it looked as if he was working hard to remember. "Going out there, getting your first one . . . finding out just how tough you are?"

"You mean it felt good for you when you did it."

"Well, yeah; Yeah, kid. I remember how —"

"How tough am I, Black?"

"I don't follow you."

"I mean, you're the one that's happy about what I found out. Do you know what I found out?"

"Well, sure. I . . . Look, I didn't hold it against anybody that didn't tell *me* Amsirs had spears and could talk!"

White Jackson had been thinking about this ever since the first screech out of the Amsir's mouth. But he had never seen his brother this way before. He studied Black as closely as he had studied the Amsir who had taken off from the blown ambush but hadn't really tried to outrun him. "I figured maybe we could pass a few words about it." He was thinking about a throwing spear that had at least as much range as a Honor's dart, and an Amsir who hadn't pulled out to a safe distance and then picked him off, hadn't stood and fought until he was ready.

"Point is, you didn't need to be told, did you? Got him anyhow, right?" Black had the javelin head down in the sand beside his foot, and was leaning on it. That way, it looked like a stick of some kind and not much of a weapon. "And I told you they were tricky. Remember?" he afterthought.

"Uh-huh." He held tighter to his Amsir. He believed this was because he had a stupid feeling Black might try to take it away. He believed he had the stupid feeling because he had suddenly realized Black wasn't going to give the spear back. He waited for Black to say something. It was Black who obviously knew what was going to happen here next.

"Well, ain't it something to go out against something that's that tough, and come back carrying it?"

"It's something."

Black was wrapping and unwrapping his thick fingers around the javelin's shaft. The sharp metal head gritted down, sinking deeper. "It gives you the feel of being a man, right?"

"It gives me the feeling of something. I was a man before I went out there," White said.

His brother tapped him lightly, awkwardly with his clenched fist, this time on his bad shoulder. He couldn't see it was bad. "You always were tough. Never gave an inch. I always had the feeling you'd cut me down just as soon as one of those kids you used to bloody up. If I wasn't your brother, I mean. . . . And bigger, I guess."

This was not the view White had

of himself through his brother's eyes. And this wasn't the talk he had expected. It was teaching him a lot more about Black than it was about Amsir-hunting, and he didn't want to be taught any more about his brother. He had been perfectly satisfied with what he had believed up to now.

"Black, it's getting on to first light," White said softly. "I have to go sit by the Thorn. Come mid-morning, the Eld Honor's got to look over my Amsir, see it's real, call me a Honor, chop my hair, name a winning man to shave me; that'd be you, I guess. Be a busy day for both of us. Why don't we just call me a made Honor for now and let me pick up any other tricks of the trade as I go along?"

A foot of the javelin's length was buried in the ground. It occurred to White that Black only had a third of a dozen feet to go before he had it out of sight. "No, look — Kid, it could of been somebody else waiting here to meet you. We all get met the first time. It's — hell, you can see it's necessary. But it could have been Red Filson or Black Harrison or one of *those* guys. It didn't have to be me. But I trained you. Same way I was trained; we all get trained the same way. When you get back, you see the good in tha — "

"If you get back."

"You? Hell, I knew you'd come back!"

"Sure."

"Well, I figured you had a good chance." Black twisted the javelin;

White couldn't decide whether he was really trying to bury it right here or whether he was so wrapped up in his words that he wasn't even thinking about his hands. A trait like that could get a Honor killed. White had to assume it was rare.

"Good chance," Black said.

"All right," White said, feeling the cracks in his lips where the edges of the Amsir's chest wound had cut them.

"Listen, kid, there's a lot of things to growing up besides getting your hair chopped!" White noted that Black was getting angry in the same way as when somebody refused to believe it about the caps. "You think we're gonna let a bunch of punk kids — even Honor kids — run around tellin' the farmers all about what it takes to be a Honor? You think those farmers don't all believe *they* could be Honors if they could spare the time? You think it don't make a difference to a Honor, taking a piece of a farmer's loaf, to *know* he couldn't be?"

"Because he's a Honor who got back from his first time."

"That's right. Now you're gettin' it. It ain't what you're taught — it's what you *are* that makes a Honor!" Black looked proudly across at his brother, at a man whom he could consider a man like himself. He jerked the spear out of the ground and brandished it. "Because you went up against *this*!"

That, and talk from animals, and caps that didn't work, and brothers who spent years getting you ready for the night they lurked to check you out on the way back in. White

Jackson looked at this powerful simpleton who had raised him. He didn't know whether he was supposed to swallow this line because he was dumb enough to believe it or because Black was dumb enough to believe it. Either way, Black was not the man White had thought him, and in that case what brains did White have to brag about?

"All right. I've got it."

Black looked at him sidelong in the growing grayness. "You sure, kid?" He was begging for the right answers. He was being very gruff and tough about it, but he was begging. White guessed that in his own simple way, Black loved him, was sweating out the culmination of years in which he had prepared the greatest gift in his estimation. "I mean, you're not going to say anything different, are you? I want you to be sure in your own mind you're not going to pop off to the people until you've had a chance to talk to the Eld Honor about it. Lots of times, the Eld Honors can explain it all in a minute or two. Explain it a hell of a lot better than I can, that's for sure," he realized.

White shook his head. "I'm gonna play it the way every new Honor plays it. I'm going to tell a story about ambushing him and having a hell of a fight and winning out in the end, and that's all."

"You sure?"

"You're damned right I'm sure."

Black began to sigh with relief, but White was mad at him now, and wasn't going to let him off the hook.

"Now you can tell the Eld Honor something for me. You tell him I want to know about a metal spear even an Amsir can throw farther than I can flip a dart. Hell, a human could throw it eight dozen yards into an eye, and just how many of 'em do we have cached away? I want to know why my hat didn't work when I was behind a rock. I want to know about Amsirs that talk. You tell him for me I think he's got rotten brains for letting a brother come out to talk to me. You're so shook up I *could* take you — even if I wasn't expecting you to try for me." He finished slowly. "You got that last part all sorted out, Black? I do. I got it sorted out fine about a Honor out here with weapons but no hat. There's only a couple of things a Honor could kill out here with that rig. One of them's poor slob Honors trying' to crawl back with spearholes in 'em that couldn't be explained, and the other one's young Honors that won't shut up about what kind of people we're sharing creation with. On the short end of the share. Now you just go take that spear and put it wherever all the other spears are; I'm not gonna go around upsetting the Honor racket, especially now I made my way into it, but don't you mess me around until I'm over this."

He swung away, and his Amsir rattled on his shoulders, smelling like hell. He realized he was simple for giving Black so many excuses to just give that spear a little toss in the name of whatever Black thought was decent. But whenever he got mad and didn't show it, he was

always, crying, sick inside for days. He figured if he just kept walking away from his brother who loved him, he had an even chance for getting off.

## IV

It was warm and pleasant in the sun. He sat cross-legged with his back against the warm black-and-brown flank of the Thorn. His eyes were slitted into the sunrise, and he was only a little bit conscious of the people filtering out of the low cement buildings around the Thorn, on the other side of the clear space that ran a couple of dozen yards wide around it and was a dozen times a dozen dozen yards long from start to start.

Red Filson, long-legged and looking like he knew everything about anything — from the scar that lifted his mouth and the corner of his left eye — was running a group of young Honor-types around it. As they went by White Jackson, bare feet thudding first in his right ear and then in his left, the young ones rolled their eyes sideward at the Amsir sprawled, spread-winged, beside him. Filson, sunbleached lank blond hair all spiky with sweat, just grinned his grinless grin and kept eating up the ground with his feet, with that smooth, scissoring motion that had run down a lot of things. One of the things had been Black Olson, White's father, with his throwing arm stabbed through at the elbow and his eyes blinded from a cut across the brows.

A thing White was supposed to

be mojoed by was the worry that between a running father and farmer mother no Jackson could stand up with Red Filson. White wasn't ready to swear what went on in Black Johnson's mind, with all its sidesteps, but as for White, he had noticed long ago he wasn't either his mother or his father. He sat smiling faintly into the sun, his arms dangling over his thighs, as the class went on by in its circuit, the young ones sweating and grunting, Red sweating and grinning. White was thinking that being strung out mad about being mojoed would be a handy excuse if he ever decided there was something he didn't want to share with Honor Red Filson.

The sun did feel good. Now that he was sitting down and didn't have to do anything but wait for other people to do things, White could let himself feel sleepy. And he was where he had spent a lot of time wanting to be.

Up against the Thorn, feeling its pitted warm surface comfortably rough against his back, the sweetish scent of the Amsir rising around him, he could turn loose of things he had held tight for a long time. Gazing through his lashes at the half-focused sight of the green fields and orchards beyond the houses, getting the shadows of gathering people moving across the corners of his eyes, listening to them talking to each other — it sounded like a cross between things crackling far away and a mumble like the sound of whatever it was that went on inside the Thorn — a man felt as good as a baby in his crib. His back

was safe, and nobody in front could do anything to him right now. A lot of them would never dare do anything any time from now on, just because he had killed something and was short-haired. The rest of them would think long and hard about messing around a Honor's goods or women. The idea was Honors looked out for each other. It worked out they did look out for each other when it was between Honor and farmer, so from now on there wouldn't be a farmer or even a Honor-type who would buck him to his face, and damned few who would go for his back, even when they had a good chance.

He had really messed up that Amsir, too. Given him one hell of a shock, with all the plans notching into each other in that horned brain, and the damp thing lying there helpless, and all of a sud —

What was it like to die, White wondered. Get cut off like that, in the middle of being alive, in the middle of thinking you had it made. Did you have time to know you were a chump? And just suppose there was an Ariwol, and you were human and that had happened to you, and you turned up with all that being a chump running around inside you. Yeah, sure, everybody running around laughing and singing, feast going on all the time, but man the ones who hadn't died chumpy would have an extra laugh for you, and all the chumps would try to buddy up. Thing to do was not go to Ariwol being a chump. But that was a tricky idea to live

up to, because sure as there was sand in creation that Amsir hadn't thought he was being a chump, he had thought he was on top right up to *punch!*

Well, how could the Amsir know White Jackson had watched the Honors around the Thorn with their fresh bubbles? How could he know White Jackson would remember that, would trust that, wouldn't try to breath what couldn't be breathed, would wait for what his enemy had to give him? Was it being a chump to be happy when your plan worked out?

It was when you didn't know all about what it was supposed to work against, White Jackson decided.

There were more people gathering around him. Just standing there, with their farmer tools in their hands, the women with their water buckets, the kids . . . farmers not going out, women not lining up at the taps in the side of the Thorn, kids playing Honor behind the crowd, hanging on to grownup legs up front.

What do they know? White Jackson thought to himself, watching the sun, smelling his Amsir, letting himself notice his shoulder and his other cuts just enough to remind himself. All they see is me and a dead one. No. All they see is the outsides of the two of us. What do they know about what we found out? And if they had been there and watched us do it, would they know any more? Touch me — any one of you, touch me or touch him, and you'll find out the last thing there is. How's about it, you muck-

ers? Anybody want to ride to Ariwol on the end of a dart this morning?

Filson and his candidates came round the Thorn again, Filson in front now, not running sweat but with a nice all-over bead worked up, the candidates pale as lace and soaking wet, their eyes blind.

They were one less. Somebody had turned farmer after all, lying sucking wind somewhere around the curve of the Thorn with dirt in his mouth and water in his eyes. White Jackson thought about that scar on there; Filson had come back from his first hon with that on him; Filson knew.

White wanted to grin at him as he went by. But he wouldn't have known if he was really getting an answer.

Petra Jovans came walking up to the edge of the crowd, making a little space around herself as usual, and stood there with her hands folded in front of her hips just looking at him with all that quiet in her eyes. What do you know? White Jackson thought, testing it on her, and then he wished he knew the things she knew. He wondered if the things he knew were big or little when you thought about them her way.

He wondered whether it would be with her that he exercised some of his new rights as Honor Secon Black Jackson.

If not with her then with somebody else. Then sooner or later a son would be old enough to name and the people would learn his own

name was Jim. Then someday he'd leave off honning and be Honor Gray Jackson, and maybe there'd be a Honor Jimson or a farmer named Petras to scatter his bones and maybe not, but somebody'd scatter 'em, that was sure, because they did it out of grief or anything else they felt, but the idea was to make damn sure that the old man was dead.

Sitting there, looking at it that way, White Jackson could see that if he was lucky enough to have all of this happen without any ugly interruptions out in the desert, it was still a short damn list of important things left to have happen in his life.

It came to him he'd spent a lot of years running around the Thorn and pitching darts to come to the moment he realized it was all downhill from here on. But it was all downhill. When he thought of all the people he'd seen follow that road, and the way they did it because they'd all heard the elders telling them and telling them how to do it, White Jackson realized that the track to Ariwol was beaten many times as hard as the track around the Thorn.

What do you know? he thought to all the people. I could die sitting here, all punched out inside like Red Thompson was that time last year. When the first anybody knew was when the Eld Honor touched him and he fell over just as stiff as his Amsir. I could be doing that, and when you found out you'd say, Oh hell, what a shame. But when I get up in a minute you'll make all

kinds of noises except that. And just the same I'm dying. I wish to hell there was a puddle of blood under *me*. You'd say the right thing then. What *do* you know?

Petra had drifted into the crowd in such a way that she was right in his line of vision. Because he was thinking that she knew if anybody knew that he was as dead this minute as the farmers had been from birth. He winked at her. He realized he was getting a little crazy, but it seemed reasonable to get that way when you were dying and you'd been fighting animals that were people inside and had a fine brother like Black who was too simple to either kiss or kill and get it over.

White Jackson was wondering where the failed Honors' graveyard was, out there beyond the fields, when the Eld Honors came through the crowd and touched him on the shoulder.

"Wake up, Honor — you are home with your kill!" the old man said in a loud voice. He was all knobs and bones under his brown shrunken skin. His cheeks were in deep where his teeth had been, and his eyes were pouched. If he had had wings, he would have been fair game. "You all right, son?" he asked in a low voice.

White could see Black hanging off around the edge of the crowd with a lot of other Honors. "Black talk to you?" he said to the old man without moving his lips. It wasn't all that unusual to see Honors carrying their weapons around the Thorn, but there were



quite a few of them doing that. White would have been happier if on this particular day he didn't see so much sun on so many dartheads.

"Yes." For the crowd the Eld Honor said, "These people are waiting to praise you." His hand on White's shoulder had a lot of knuckles in it. His voice changed again. "What do you think of them?"

White looked frankly and fully into the old man's eyes. "As near to what you think as makes no difference."

"Was Black right in passing you?" the Eld Honor asked, which surprised the daylighters out of White. But the rheumy old eyes were tight on his. Maybe the old man expected he could tell a liar that way. Maybe he could.

"As far as you and me go, he was right."

That might not have been quite what the Eld Honor had been expecting either, but it was what White had for him. It was more than White had intended to give him. Some of that stuff they told kids might really work — always give the Eld a straight answer, neved do anybody dirt, that kind of thing. Parts of it seemed to stick better than others.

They were blowing time. The Eld Honor's mouth was working at the corners, and he was looking at White the way a farmer looked at his wife's first loaf. But they couldn't keep testing each other out here forever. The pressure on the Eld was a lot worse than it was on White, as far as White could see.

Seeing it suddenly as he did, he relaxed inside as happily as ever a man did when he unstoppered a bubble on a hot day and felt the cool water going all the way in to the pit of his stomach. He was ready to go on this way forever. The old man had to move, he didn't; the old man would have to think up one hell of a story if he had White killed now. And White was saying things that didn't really give an excuse. They were just aggravating.

"So you think we're equals," the Eld said. "You think you've lived one day longer and all of a sudden even your brother and his friends are dumb, and only the Eld is fit for a man like you to be frank with. Must be a happy day when a young man picks his peer from the decrepit." It was hard to tell when a mouth like that was smiling faintly. "Well, all right. You'll get your badges and tokens, and then we'll talk afterwards." The old man raised his voice. "See here!" he cried. "A man sits with his kill!"

That, of course, was the signal for a lot of general roaring and shouting and people pushing forward. There were things to do, and the Eld Honor pointed out people to do them — Black Jackson would do the shaving — and White Jackson found that becoming a made Honor meant you had to shake hands with people like Filson and get punched around by a bunch of farmers who considered that touching you was the price of admission for standing around and staring at a dead Amsir, which was what they all went off and did as soon as

they were through assuring themselves that White Jackson was real. "Keep it short," the Eld Honor said, as he led White Jackson forward to where the shaving bowl was waiting.

"Uh-huh," White Jackson said, looking back over his shoulder. Black Harrison and Red Filson were guarding the Amsir. You still couldn't tell whether Filson was grinning; but you could tell about Harrison. He was.

So his hair was cropped short, and he was shaved by his brother's steady hand, and they called him Honor Secon Jackson to the crowd, and the crowd grinned and laughed. Secon Jackson stood there with his head chilly and thought: Oh you people, you dumb happy people. You're killing me.

## V

The idea was there'd be a feast around the Thorn this evening, an Amsir-butchering, and Secon Jackson was now supposed to pick the people who'd eat his bird and get what parts. He was supposed to pick out people who'd been specially nice or good to him in his younger life. Leaving the feast between noon and dark gave people he omitted a chance to curry favor.

He didn't know whether that last part was on purpose or not, but he'd seen a lot of Honors turn up a lot of bright new friends and riches on the afternoon of Shaving Day. Well, Secon's father was a long time dead, and his mother had gone to live with Red Filson, and his

brother had done his best to raise him, when he had time, but then there was that business this morning. He didn't have any kindly uncles or aunts, not being a farmer bred, and he didn't have any friends. He might have had some friends this morning, but they were all going to have to go out into that desert pretty soon themselves, and he didn't want them around to listen to a pack of lies this evening. So here everybody was, looking at him expectantly, and the Eld Honor shuffling off from the edge of the crowd to go inside the Thorn where the Honors lived, and Secon didn't have a thing to say, outloud.

"Look," he said, looking around at them, thinking he could try saying Petra Jovan's name and see how they liked having him pick her out in front of everybody, "I gotta go do something about this," he said, pointing to the wound in his shoulder. "I'll be seein' my friends durin' this day." He pushed his way past his brother and a disappointed sound from the people. He heard some talk about how he was auctioning off the Amsir to the highest bidders, and he didn't give a damn about that because he was expecting it. His brother pushed up next to him and walked beside him.

"Hey, that ain't no way to do!" Black Jackson said.

"If I did what I oughta do, you'd have holes in you," Secon Jackson said and kept walking.

He went into the Thorn through the oval doorway as if he'd been doing it all his life.

They taught you that. You memorized the whole layout, drawing it in the dirt with a stick, so you'd know where the Eld Honor was, and you'd know where the armory was, and the doctor, and where you would sleep when you came back from the desert after killing your animal. It was so the farmers would think a species of great enlightenment had fallen on you, and the kids tagging along could crane their necks and see how sure you were. They stopped short at the door, of course, because they knew that anybody that wasn't an Honor would sicken and die right away if he dared to step across the high threshold.

White Jackson had gotten through the door, and peeked up a couple or three inside corridors while he was a kid. He hadn't sickened and died.

But he'd been smart enough not to do it on a dare, or when anybody was watching, and he'd had the idea well in mind that if he was caught he might wish he could sicken and die.

Besides, all he'd learned was that the inside of the Thorn was just as much metal as the outside, except it was painted.

There was a lot of thumping and humming inside the Thorn; the metal floor shook under his feet. There were great big parts to the Thorn's inside layout that he hadn't been taught. He figured that was because those were places where the machinery was. Something had to be making the water that came out of the taps, and that ran into

the fields to make the crops grow. He didn't believe that dead in Arwöl would bother to take time out from the feasting to do all that by magic. If they could, what was there a Thorn for in the first place? Now he had to figure the Thorn ran the hats too, and, that being the way it was, he was less ready than ever to believe in magic from something that could be stopped by a hunk of rock.

Maybe they'd let him get a look at some of those mechanical insides, if he was a good boy and played along. He wondered if he could ever work things around to where they'd let him fool with it, though, and what was the good of machinery you couldn't fool with? So what was the good of playing along? And besides, Petra Jovans hadn't tried to talk to him at all while he was on his way from the shaving bowl to the door to the Thorn, and so he was pretty mad about everything as he found the Eld Honor's door and stepped inside.

"You don't knock?" the Eld Honor said from behind the table where he was sitting.

"You weren't expecting me?" Honor Secon Jackson said.

The Eld Honor grinned. There wasn't any doubt about it this time; he grinned as big a grin as Secon Jackson had ever seen on anyone, and in some way that scared the hell out of him.

"Sit down, Honor," the Eld said, pushing a chair out to him. "I think there's a way we can get along pretty well."

The chair was exactly the kind of thing that everybody had in his house, except that this one hadn't been used for so many years by so many people and its wheels still rolled. Secon Jackson took it, nudged it around to where the desk was clearly between him and the Eld Honor, and sat down. "All right. I wouldn't mind."

"I wouldn't, if I were you," the Eld Honor said. "Let's not mistake the situation, Honor Secon Jackson. I've been alive a long time, and there was a day for me too when I went out in the desert and got my little surprise. Every Honor you see walking around this place — every Honor who's ever told you anything about honning and Am-sirs — has gone out and had that same surprise. You don't hear any of them complaining. And you don't see me having any trouble running things. Think about it. Don't do anything that looks good to you. Whatever it is I've already thought of it."

Secon Jackson studied him, the way he always studied things. The grin was a lot less, now, but it was still there. Secon Jackson tried to think what he'd be thinking if he had that grin; that didn't often do much good, but this time it worked. It had the feel of truth all over it. The old man was thinking what a fool Secon Jackson would make of himself, and how easy he'd be to handle, if he went ahead and did what looked perfectly sensible to him.

All right, Secon Jackson thought, then I won't do it, and the next move is yours.

"So you're not going to get anything special out of me just for having done what every other live Honor in this place has done."

I knew that a minute ago, Secon Jackson said to himself, and then he realized that the old man could have that grin and still be making a fool of himself. He knew Secon Jackson was fast but he didn't believe how fast. There's more Am-sir to you than just your looks old man, Secon Jackson thought, feeling better, and how would you like to go up to Ariwol right now and find out about being chumpy?

"Don't plan to kill me now," the Eld said carelessly. "I'll die soon enough, and then you can have it all."

## VI

It was like having extra distance put between him and his eyes and ears. Secon Jackson leaned back in his chair and said, "I can."

"Yes, you can. But I have to tell you how, and you have to learn how, and you have to learn how to make it stick."

"All right," Secon Jackson, coming back to himself. "Start in on your part of that."

The Eld Honor looked amused. "Well, I can't give it all to you in one day."

"I didn't expect you could, but start in."

"All right. Look — things are very simple here. We tell the people a lot of garbage to make it look tricky, but it's simple. We live around the Thorn here, and out be-

yond the Thorn is a desert with Amsirs on it. We can grow crop, and we can get some meat and some tool-stuff from honning the Amsirs. Now that's all there is to the world. The sun comes up, the sun goes down. There's summer, there's winter. There's just so much land, and there are just so many hats to give to the Honors. Now, that's all got to be managed. If we let the farmers alone, they'd do whatever was easiest, and they'd sit around having babies and planting whatever came into their heads, and there might be enough food or there might not. And even if there was enough food — which I don't think the farmers could see to — everybody'd live exactly the same. Would you like that, Honor?" The old eyes were twinkling.

"You don't need an answer for that. Go on."

"All right, I don't need an answer. Now all you can see is the top of the system. You see the way we've been kidding the farmers, and you see the things we do to make the farmers think we're special. That way, when we see something we need to keep this place running, we can have it. When we see a woman we want we can have her. Now let's talk about women. What's a woman for — besides making jokes?"

"Cooking, cleaning, keeping house," Secon Jackson said.

The Eld Honor was shaking his head, which didn't surprise Jackson because you don't ask questions if you don't already know a tricky answer. "No," the Eld Honor

said wisely, "a woman is for being better than your mother, so you can have sons who are better than you. Remember that. It's the same way about everything else. When you take a farmer's loaf of bread, and you eat that bread, the reason for that bread is to make you better — to keep you strong, and to make you a better Honor. And if one farmer's woman's bread is better than another's, then you go back to that place for your bread. Even if you never take that woman — and she might be old and ugly — she might have a daughter. And you can take that daughter. And even if she doesn't have a daughter, you're still better and stronger, and you can take a better woman than you could have otherwise. And even if you don't take her, but you just use her, and her kid turns out to be a farmer, he's going to be a better farmer than he would have been, 'cause we already know his mother's man wasn't good enough to stop you."

"So we're always making it better, no matter what we do," Secon Jackson said. It occurred to him that it was a pretty nice world where a Honor could do any damn thing that struck his fancy, and it always made things better. "Now explain about Amsirs that carry spears and talk."

"We'll get to that, I promise you," the Eld Honor said. "The reason we don't ever take a chance of anybody's finding out until he becomes a Black Honor is the same reason we don't spell any of this

out where the farmers can hear it." The Eld Honor leaned forward earnestly. "Now this is important, boy. If you can understand and use this, there will be a reason for you to be somebody special, even among Honors."

The Eld gestured negligently. "Hell, I know most of the boys who carry weapons around here are just farmers with a different kind of plow. Instead of knowing how to thresh wheat, they know how to jump Amsirs, and as long as they know that they figure it makes them special enough, and that's all the thinking they'll ever have to do. No, boy — " The Eld pointed a dried old skinny finger at him — "you have to be like us. You have to have eyes in your head, and ears, and something in between them. You know that much as well as I do. What I know a lot better than you is how.

"There's a whole bunch of people around here, and every one of them thinks he's someday going to go to Ariwol the same as everybody else, and live high without working. You let him hold onto that, because it makes him work while he's here, all right. You let him be a farmer, or a Honor, but you let him keep thinking about Ariwol, where *his* kind of people are on top for sure. But you make sure he knows he's a farmer, or a Honor, because then he knows who he is, and he knows what's expected of him while he's here.

"If he knows what's expected of him, then he'll do what's expected.

He won't start snooping around in the middle of the night, or in a bunch in the middle of the day, and pull the props right out from under everything that's being done for him. How many of *us* do you think there are in any generation? It's a damn small number, boy, and what all of the farmers and most of the Honors aren't ever going to admit to themselves is that if it wasn't for us they'd all be dead. They'd be dead from ruining the land, or they'd be dead from eating wrong, or they'd be dead because they'd be messing around inside here, and they'd kill the Thorn."

The Eld studied Secon Jackson's face. "Now have you ever heard of anybody wanting to get into the Thorn that wasn't entitled to? But do you see any guards around? Have you ever heard of a farmer suddenly saying, 'I'm gonna go out and hon Amsirs?' Have you ever heard of a farmer saying, 'I want more water.'? And let me ask you: if we had guards out front, won't the farmers say 'I wonder what they're guarding?' And if it needs guards, maybe all I have to do to understand it is knock somebody out of my way?' Have you ever thought what would happen if we said to the farmers: 'You can't go Amsir-honning.' Wouldn't they stop to wonder 'Well, hell, that's just a rule they're making up.' No, boy, you don't do that, or you have the whole mess of it milling around and figuring that all it has to do is break a few rules and it can have whatever it wants. You show it an

open doorway, and you say to it, 'That's for Honors.' You send people out into the desert, and a lot of them don't come back. You don't have to tell the farmers that's just for Honors. Not doing it that way, you don't. They can see for themselves.

"That's the way you run things, boy. And I'll tell you something else — I'll bet you there are farmers who have gone out into the desert, and I'll bet you there are people who have come through that front doorway. But they didn't tell anybody they were going to do it. And they either got all the way into the desert, and died, or they came back from the edge of the desert, and they hadn't seen an Amsir, and they didn't tell anybody about it. I don't think any of them got very far. Not because they died, but because they knew from everything around them since they were kids that they should be ashamed. And even if they saw an Amsir, or even if somebody came in here and saw things, he wouldn't know what they meant because nobody ever told him. And after a while he'd just go away again. And if he didn't sicken and die, he wouldn't tell anybody about that, either, because anybody he told just might kill him to correct the oversight. Nobody loves a loner, boy — 'cause nobody knows who he is."

Secon Jackson looked back into the old man's tightly squeezed eyes. "Unless he's on top."

The old man smiled and nodded in agreement.

"That's the idea."

"All right," Jackson said. "Now, besides the fact that you want some of your young Honors to get killed, how come I didn't get told that Amsirs could talk and had spears?"

"Well, you would have started making yourself a shield and a long spear before you went out there," the Eld Honor said. "And if we had told somebody like your brother before he went out, he just would have had to tell somebody, just to show he knew something nobody else did. Either way, it would have gotten the farmers pretty well worked up. Listen, boy. What did the Amsir say to you?"

"He said, 'Yield.'"

The Eld was already nodding — it was another one of those questions he knew the answer to. "Exactly. He didn't want to kill you. You'd have to be a lucky damn fool not to have known that almost from the start and still be alive, and you're not a damn fool. I'm not so sure you're lucky, either. Boy, there is more to the world than anybody knows —"

"I know that. Figured it out all by myself," said Honor Secon Jackson, who was tired of being called 'boy.'

"Did you? And did you figure out what it means? Have you had time since it happened to do the same thinking that the farmers would do if they knew about it and had time enough to mull it over? Listen, boy, in this world — in this *real* world that's got to be a lot bigger than just the Thorn and the desert — there's something that doesn't want

to kill Honors, there's something that wants to take them away. He wanted you to be his *prisoner*. And he and every other Amsir that has let himself be ambushed out there was willing to take the chance of dying because he was playing out some plan while all the Honor wanted to do was kill him.

"Something out there wants Honors. Maybe it just wants to eat them alive and in comfort someplace out of the desert. I don't know — nobody knows. But whatever it is, the way it looks is there's a world big enough so that Honors aren't even farmers to it — they're a crop. And how long do you think we could run this place around here if the farmers knew that was what we were?"

Secon Jackson sat there waiting for more, but the Eld was sitting back in his chair, and looking at him as if he'd expected him to be knocked over.

For a minute there, Jackson couldn't believe it. The Eld had told him all this, just to make a point that Jackson had figured out for himself last night in the long walk home. All this aggravation, all this listening to an old man talk, when he could have been doing something useful! And here was the big pack the old man had unwrapped for him, and there was nothing in it — nothing — that wasn't second-hand.

You old man, he thought, you've been wasting our time. He said: "So you figure I'm smart enough so if I learn how to keep people

in line without shovin', one of these days I'll get to be the Eld Honor?"

"You could. You've got the best chance of anybody." The old man looked at him steadily, with his lie-detecting stare. "But you're going to have to earn it. It's a hard world, boy. You can see it's harder than you ever figured. Nothing comes easy, not even for one of us."

"One of us smart ones," Honor Secon Jackson said.

"One of us smart ones," the old man agreed. "No sense kidding yourself about that. You look at yourself any other way, and you're licked before you start."

"You seen many smart ones in your time?"

"Some."

"Some walking around out there now, figuring they're gonna be the Eld? Each one of them, off by himself inside his own head, figuring that way?"

The old man smiled. "Some. Worry you?"

Jackson shook his head. "No."

Now the old man grinned again. It was almost as if he were getting ready to yell, "Yield! Yield!"

He said: "Got to be that way, boy. Got to have it out — got to fight. That's what makes things better; the hammering and the stabbing. It's what gives everything its shape; it's what gouges out the weak places. Boy, this place has got to be made better. It has got to stand up to some day when the Amsirs figure a way to get closer to the Thorn. It has got to be that way so we toughen up enough to live here if the Thorn ever goes." The



old man stood up sharply and tightly kicked the metal wall behind him. The flat of his bony, old palm spat against it. "This is just another damn *tool*, boy! It's got to wear out some day. Everything willing, it will be the people like *us* who have made the people in this place hard enough to do without it!" The Eld's eyes were shining. He was shaking. "Boy, you've got to *see!*"

"See ahead. See what's gonna happen," Jackson said.

"That's right! That's what makes *us!*"

I see, Honor Secon Jackson thought. I see what's ahead. I could be like you. "Funny," he said.

"What's funny?"

"I figured, maybe you'd give me something special when you saw I wasn't like the others," Jackson said.

"I knew you weren't like the others before you ever went out there. Don't you think I would have been disappointed mad if you hadn't come back? And I have given you something special. I've given you *knowledge*."

"Yeah, well, that was what I had in mind," Jackson said. He stood up, reaching across his chest to touch his shoulder again. "I better go see about this. Bad time to heal up crippled, now."

## VII

He went down to the doctor's room. The doctor grunted and looked at him out of deep eyes and said: "Always here to patch

you up the best we can, Honor," they swabbed out the gash with a clean rag dipped in boiling water and held in a pair of wooden tongs.

"'Preciate it, Doc," Jackson said, and left after the doctor had taken a couple of stitches.

He stopped off outside the Thorn, where Harrison and Filson were still guarding his Amsir, like they were supposed to. The way of it was, when a Honor brought in his bird the Eld picked the hardest men of the Thorn to stand guard over it. The way people changed their ideas of who was the hardest man was when a Honor decided he could tell somebody like Harrison or Filson he would guard his own bird.

Jackson looked at one, then he looked at the other. Filson grinned at him. Or maybe he didn't. "Your mother'll be proud of you today." The thing was, you couldn't tell from his face how he meant it.

"I guess," Jackson said. "You two be at my feast tonight, huh?" He nodded down at the Amsir. "Can have any part of him you want," he said, "'Cept I don't suppose you both better want the same part, huh?"

He walked away, and they being guards appointed by the Eld couldn't come after him if they wanted to. He didn't stop to look back at his Amsir, either. It was starting to smell pretty good, which some people considered a delicacy, but he figured this particular one had given him all it could. A lot more than it had been ready to, and he figured the credit was his, not the Amsir's.

There were all kinds of people walking around, farmer women going about their chores, and kids, and the usual sort of traffic. Anybody who looked at him, and looked like he might want to talk, Jackson just said, "You wanna come to my feast? Come ahead." And kept walking toward the cement hut that he had been living in most of his life alone.

Inside, it was just one room, with a pad in the corner. There were bone pegs in the walls with pieces of kit hanging on them. Some of it was just kid stuff; stuff he'd made when he was just learning how to make his own tools. Play stuff. Some of it was pretty useful, but he'd gone out with his best gear, and that was still either on him or in his hand. He sat down cross-legged in the corner where he usually worked, with the featureless light coming in through the parchment window he'd stretched on a wooden frame, and fitted into the space where maybe there'd been some other kind of lookout when the hut was first created, and somebody'd scoffed it. Or maybe when the world was made whoever made it forgot to make a window.

He reset his dart heads with fresh Amsir-hide glue from the little pot he kept bubbling in a corner. He looked around. He walked over to the big blank wall opposite the window. The cement was all sooted and streaked up where he'd practiced pictures and rubbed them out and practiced them again, until he was pretty well satisfied. There

were things there that he'd made, oh, half three-quarters of a dozen years ago. The wall was pretty well taken up with this kind of thing. There were pictures of kids running, and yelling, and jumping up and down. There were pictures of the houses, and the Thorn, and a few pictures of farmers walking along behind their plows with the hard edge of the world on beyond them. There was something that looked a lot like a black blur of soot, and was supposed to be the Thorn up against the stars at night, and didn't look it. He'd tried leaving blank spots on the cement to make stars, but he couldn't make stars that way. He hadn't rubbed it out because it would have just made it even more of a blur.

There was a picture of his brother. Black would come around and look at it every once in a while, and shake his head, and say, "Is that me?" Well, no, but it was a picture of him. It was a picture of him all tensed up but smooth, with all his weight on one leg and the rest of his body flying forward with an arm out, and a throwing stick way out in front of him, and you could see the way his fingers were shaped to hold on to the end, and the way the muscles of that arm had just finished snapping out the dart and were changing to keep the fingers locked on the stick. You could see the look on his face, that White Jackson had had so much trouble getting right, and off — 'way off — in the distance you could see

something grabbing itself that was as close to an Amsir as you could draw if the only ones you had ever seen were dead and you had never seen one running.

Secon Jackson looked around the room. There wasn't a thing here that he needed to take with him. You didn't expect a Honor to take anything out of his old place on Shaving Day. Living in the Thorn, you had the Thorn armory and you didn't have to have some kid come in and keep your room fire going. All you needed was what you could carry in your hand — and in your head, too, though nobody could tell how much that was or what it was. People would come in after a Honor moved out, if he'd been living alone, and they took away what they needed. Let's see you take that wall away, Jackson thought, but he didn't really give a damn whether they could or not.

He went over to where he'd made a shelf near the tool-making fire, and looked at the burnt sticks he kept there, and the little pots of colored mud. He picked up one of the sticks, and he walked around with it in his hand for a while. It felt like something was going to come of it, and he looked over at the window that was clean with light through the translucent scraped hide, and he went over and looked at that with his fingertips and the flat of his palm rubbing over it. He leaned enough of his weight against it so he was just short of breaking through, and then he brought up his right hand with the stick held as if it were a han-

dle to something, and watched the line of black grow on the parchment.

He moved the line by moving his body. When the line had gone from its beginning to where it was done, he put in another one, and when he had enough of those he began stroking at the parchment with the worn-down angled edge of the stick, jabbing his body forward from the waist and shifting his feet until it felt as if he were walking, as if he were walking in half-light over ground so rough that his feet had to be put down carefully. But each step was almost exactly the same as the last, as if with this walk he could go a long way and was measuring out his strength against how long it would take him to get there. He saw the Thorn from far away, way out over the dunes with sunset turning the sky, and he saw the rocks nearby with their sides toward him black and gray, and with just an edge bright where he could see the last sunlight hitting the parts that faced toward the Thorn.

Down in the sand he did a man with his hat off, just landing, with his gear coming loose, and his shoulder just rolling under. Now he saw from beyond the Amsir, who had only the tip of one toe in the sand, and one wing up, and was turning with his face beginning to stream out ahead of him, and his weight transferring toward the leg he was kicking around. The Amsir had his neck stretched forward, and his mouth open, and he was going to do something wild any minute.

Now all that was left to do was the fingers of the one hand you could see from behind the Amsir. And the thing was, Honor Jackson thought as he looked at it, was that the Amsir was going to miss.

That leg was going to swing around just wrong. When it hit the sand the other foot would have to slide forward — not much, but enough so that when the Amsir went to spring back toward the man, off that leg he was positioning, he would be awkward, and maybe one step later he might even stumble.

If he had that hand empty of any weight. So Jackson drew in the spear.

Fine, fine, he thought, looking at it for his death warrant. Now you've really done it. He picked up one of his darts and used the tip of it to cut the drawing out of its frame as quickly as he could. He slashed fast enough to be reckless. But he noticed while he was doing it that he made straight cuts, and he didn't mess up any of the drawing.

It was funny how different the room looked when he could see out. He put the dart away in his armpit, and stood there with the parchment rolled up in his hands, holding it as if it might twist away from him. Ah, he thought, what's the use? One of these days, they'll gut you whether you give them an excuse or not. They'll make up one of their own. You're all the excuse they need.

Not for a minute did he think of throwing the drawing on the

fire. You don't throw parchment away; it comes too hard. Amsirs die to give it up. And besides, the only drawings you rub out are the ones that aren't real.

He wished he had somebody here to kill. But he couldn't kill them all and live here by himself.

He went outside, carrying his two darts and his stick, his cap riding loose on the back of his head, and with the half-full bubble of water jogging behind his back. Carrying the drawing made it awkward, because he was used to having one hand free. His shoulder hurt like blazes, and he could have used some sleep, and some food. The skin around his neck, and on his ears, was itching with sunburn. He felt bad.

He scowled at Petra Jovans as she came stepping up to him from where she'd been waiting. All of a sudden he figured maybe he better find out for sure just how much of her was farmer. "You want to come to my feast, too?" he said with a lot of kill in his voice.

She looked up at him with her head at an angle. "No, I don't want to be like everybody else."

Her voice was simple, her eyes were clear. Her mouth wasn't twisting. She just said it, the way she would have said water runs out of a tap, or the sun shines on the Thorn. Looking at her, he knew something all complete, all one piece, all of a sudden. What she was here to tell him was that she wanted to be his woman. It was the only thing she could be here for, and it was her way — the way he understood



her way. It sure wasn't the way things were supposed to go between boy and girl.

Now she was standing there, waiting. You could tell by looking at her, she figured the words she'd just said were just as good as the words she'd been going to say. Now he was supposed to pick up on that.

She figured he could pick up on that. He had the right kind of thinking to be a fit man for Petra Jovans.

Yield, yield, he thought to himself, and the feeling came over him strong and hot that one of *us* at one time, on one day, for one killing, was enough.

"All right, then have this," he said, jabbing the rolled-up drawing at her. "You want to be different. That's different."

She unrolled it and looked at it, and then looked up at him. "You didn't make this up, did you? This is how it is."

"Yeah. And now *you're* stuck with it." He had no idea why he went on to say: "By the way, my name's Jim." He turned away and walked off, leaving her there.

Oh, you people, Honor Secon Black Jackson thought. You people. You *people!*

## VIII

**I**t wasn't too crowded now. The farmers had gone off to the fields, and the women were doing their household stuff. The smell of fresh bread hung around the Thorn like glue. The Honors were either off

sleeping or practicing things. There were kids playing around, and some of them tried to hang around him. But you can always get rid of a kid by looking at him as if he was nothing, and Jackson did that as he walked along.

Petra wouldn't have followed him; Petra wouldn't follow anybody. She'd wait. Or maybe she'd follow when no one was looking, but she'd make it look like it was at her own good time.

Jackson walked over to the Thorn to look at his Amsir. He studied the places where it kept its wind and water. Looking at it that way, he could see how much it looked like a thin, dried-out man with big blisters under his skin. In his mind, Secon Jackson gave the Eld Honor another snort.

Red Filson grinned at him, rubbing his chin and jaw, which were as tough-looking as the rest of him. Secon Jackson knew his own face was flaming pink where the beard had been, and he didn't like to have Red Filson tell him he was funny-looking. But he wasn't that interested in Filson just now, and it probably showed, because Filson said: "Just about everybody around the Thorn's gonna be at you feast tonight, huh? Spreadin' things a little thin."

"Well, tell you — you're that worried, I'll watch the bird, and you go out and get another one to throw in the pot."

Harrison chuckled softly. Filson never much changed expression. "Some people figure they could maybe pay off everything the same

day I guess,” he said speculatively.

Jackson found himself having to look deep into Filson’s eyes. “Now and then, I guess, one day’s all the time a man might need,” he said, thinking that one of the troubles with killing a man out in plain sight was you had to hang around for the Eld’s judgment on you, and there was a lot of fasting, and sitting around cogitating and trialing to be got through. A man could sicken and die, waiting for the trialing to get over. He turned around and walked away, heading off between the nearest houses. And he just kept walking.

## IX

**I**t was hot and gritty, lying buried in the sand. Secon Jackson felt miserable. He lay trying to breathe as little as possible, just his nose out in sight, finding out about the world around him by ear. It had to be about a third of a dozen hours since he’d walked away from the Thorn. And lately he’d begun to hear stirrings in the ground — the *chuck-a-chuck-a-chucka* of quick-running feet, sometimes near and sometimes far.

The sounds always moved from the direction of the Thorn, so he knew they weren’t Amsirs. As a matter of fact, he was just far enough away from the Thorn to give trouble to anyone trying to find him, and not far enough out yet to really be in Amsir country.

He figured even with thirty or forty Honors to send out, The Eld would have a hell of a time find-

ing him around the perimeter of as much radius as he put between himself and the little concrete houses around the big metal spike.

He wasn’t too worried about being found, both because there weren’t enough people to really search and because whoever found him, it figured it would take more than one or two of them. Mostly, he lay there dreaming.

There’s a lot of stuff out in the desert — spears, dead Honors and very likely some dead Amsirs, too, with holes from spear-wounded Honors in them but no way for anybody to account for them in the village if the Honors couldn’t come back. He dreamt about all those dead men under the sand with him. From the way the Eld had talked, things had been going the way they went now for a long time back. In that time a lot of metal spears and a lot of dead Honors must have gotten hidden out around here. If you could farm this well fertilized country, the size of the grain stalks you could raise!

But you can’t raise grain where you can’t breathe. And if you’re a farmer you only know one way to breathe.

Well, Secon Jackson thought, come to that if you’re a Honor you only know one way to breathe. If you were an Amsir you probably didn’t know any more than that. Oh, a man could find out, three different ways to get air and water, but that wasn’t what he meant by that dream.

He didn’t dare move much. He’d done a lot to cover his tracks and

there was just enough constant rippling in the sand so that even when he wasn't hearing *chuck-a-chucka* sounds there was a sort of hissing in his ears. A dozen dozen dozen grains of sand he thought, dry as life, rubbing. He saw himself floating on the sand and the sand going on down deeper and deeper. He twitched a little finger and by the thickness of one grain of sand his finger hid itself farther. By the thickness of one grain of sand pushing out of the way underneath, filling in above, he was that much closer to sinking down to where the deepness stopped. I could float, he had thought. I could float here a long time, but I'd sink little by little.

What is this stuff I'm in? he thought. Dust. Nothing. Out at the edge of the field, beyond the weed borders of the village it smoked up into the air like hope and twisted in around back on itself, drifting up so thin, so fine, that you could walk through it almost without knowing it was there, and could only see it edge-on when you were passing through the middle of it. Then it had substance; a thin, dirty yellow line, curving up in an arc that probably reached just below the gridwork at the top of the Thorn, but lost itself and couldn't be seen that high. Thin enough to drink.

*Chuck-a-chuck-a-chucka*. Someone was coming close, but off at a little bit of an angle, Secon Jackson judged from the way the sounds didn't get louder quite as fast as they beat on the sand. Somebody running; some Honor saying to him-

self he would find Secon Jackson any minute now.

He wondered what the Eld was saying to the farmers to explain what had happened to Secon Jackson. He wondered if the Eld was bothering to say anything — they all knew Secon Jackson was crazy, or if they hadn't known it, it would occur to them now. He wondered what the Eld thought. It must be a good long time since a Honor ran out on his feast, a good long time since the Eld had seen any need to wonder what a man might be doing. Secon Jackson grinned carefully with the sand murmuring on his lips, and went on dreaming.

He dreamed through the rest of the short afternoon and into the twilight. When it was full dark and cold, and it had been three dozen parts of a day since he'd slept, he slipped up out of the sand. Boy, he thought looking up at the night, I'd sure better know what I'm doing.

He began to walk toward the edge of the world. He felt a little draggy.

From time to time he put his face down to the ground, and from time to time he could hear the sound of running Honors *chuck-a-chucking* distantly. Merely because they couldn't imagine what else to do, they were quartering back and forth across the line his Amsir had led him on yesterday. That happened to be exactly right, because that was where he was headed, thinking that maybe Amsirs al-



ways worked back to that line in the end, when they'd gotten Honors far enough away from the Thorn. But he wasn't being any dumb Honor himself. Now he was headed off at another angle, covering more ground than you'd cover if you only had a used bubble of water and were planning to ever make it back to the Thorn.

He'd done that on purpose. He could imagine them comparing notes and figuring out he'd never gone to one of the Thorn taps. He could imagine them figuring out that they couldn't figure out what the hell he'd been thinking of, just taking off like that. He had imagined them not believing it when he walked by first one line of huts, and then the next one farther out and then the next one and then out into the nearest field and then the one beyond that, and so on. They just couldn't believe it; when he was lost from sight of the people around the Thorn, covered by the houses between him and them, he could imagine them not believing he hadn't stopped just out of sight.

But he'd done all that. He'd just sloped off and gone out without enough supplies, and he'd gone off without eating, and now he was headed in the wrong direction, and those are the only reasons he'd gotten away.

"Well, no Secon Jackson thought. He was going to get away because he could imagine them, but they couldn't imagine him. They could never imagine what he wanted.

Red Filson's dart took him in the elbow.

It spun him around and knocked him down, and it took his left arm out of the fight. He sprang for his life, throwing himself to one side, not even knowing yet who he was fighting, knowing only because he rolled over its head that it was a dart in his elbow and not a spear.

Now the shock was going through him. It was so bad even his left leg felt wooden for a while. He'd never been clobbered so hard in his life. Then he saw the shape of the man-shadow jumping toward him, knew it was Filson and was happy.

"Tough luck, Honor," Filson said, getting ready to stab.

He was very fast — as fast as Secon Jackson had ever dreamed him — and Jackson could only hope to be as fast as he had ever dreamed himself. He got out of the way of the first lunge. But he couldn't make his feet grip right; and when he tried to turn, his dead left arm knocked against his knee. He went down again, just as if Filson had struck him. It was like fighting in a dream.

Filson was good. He was like something you'd hear about from an old woman. Jackson flopped forward off his knees, knowing exactly how this would put him inside Filson's kick and knowing exactly what he would try to do to Filson after that. But Filson kicked him anyhow. And one more time Jackson was down.

He had his stick, but he didn't have either of his darts. The best he could do was grab his left wrist and scratch at Filson's side going

by, using the head of the dart sticking out through his elbow. He might even have cut the other man some — he thought he felt the point dragging momentarily — but that was a hell of a defense to put up, wasn't it? He struck out at Filson with the stick, missing; dropped it, grabbed sand and threw it at the other man's face, and didn't seem to have any effect on him. "Boy, you messed it," Filson said. "I would have figured you for my best enforcer when I became Eld. Your mother would have liked that a lot. Now look what you're doing to your family."

Will they at least give me any peace in Ariwol? Secon Jackson thought bitterly as he twisted out of Filson's way again. He tried to think of things to do with one arm.

He could pull off Red's cap, he supposed. But his own was loose and jouncing around his skull; he was in no shape for any game that two could play. He tried for a grip on Filson's dart-arm, but it was like trying to hold a piece of the Thorn come to life. The best he could do was drag his nails across Filson's biceps as the hold broke. He figured it would only take him two or three days to scratch the man to death.

He spun away and tried to drag the dart out of his elbow so that he would have a weapon too, but all that did for him was nearly make him faint.

They were scuffling and fluttering like two kids under a blanket out here; whirling and groping for

each other in the dark raising dust, making slapping sounds as they tried for each other and made each other miss. But it couldn't be much longer before Filson got that other dart in. Jackson knew it, and Filson knew it. Filson was doing it like a practice. He even found time to talk. "Where did you think you were going?" he panted scornfully. "It's all right being crazy, but I never figured you for dumb."

Maybe he thought that would be a finish line. His arm hooked down and came up again, and his forearm snapped over as he punched his dart toward Jackson's face. Jackson dropped under it, but he was off his feet again. He made a try at knocking Filson's knees together, and then dropped sideward, barely getting out of the way of the other man's return stroke. The side of Jackson's face in the sand.

That made all the difference. He could hear the new sounds coming up fast . . . *chicka-sip, chicka-sip, chicka-sip.*

In his mind — but very quickly — Secon Jackson laughed like crazy. It was working out after all. Turned out he'd damned near died before he could know for sure. Maybe he still would, if he couldn't stall Red off.

He had to interrupt himself to flounder out of the way of the next rush.

But it was nice to know he'd been figuring it all correct, from the minute that he had been sitting there in the Eld's room in the Thorn and had been beginning to think on it, because where else



RON THORN

was there any hope at all for him?

He pushed the laugh out into the cold air. "Huh!" He kicked toward Red's ankle and made him hop back. "I know where I'm goin'." Well, no, he didn't but he knew whom he was going with. *Chicka-sip, chicka-sip, whop!* That was the sound of the running Amsir coming down solid on both feet nearby. Up against the stars and the horizon there was a fast glimpse, for Jackson to get, of a javelined wing upfurling.

"I yield! yield!" Jackson shouted to the Amsir making a grab for Red, who was distracted. His two stiff fingers found Filson's nostrils. His hand came back, and then he kicked with all his heart as the choking man clapped both hands to his torn, shocked face. Filson bent double. Jackson plucked Filson's second dart from between the man's limp fingers, and then made one move more, with the dart held for cutting windows. He dropped the dart and stood holding his right thumb and forefinger tight around his left arm above the elbow. The Amsir stood looking at him, its spear ready, only the lace stirring on its body.

"I do yield," Jackson said, looking down at Filson all huddled up. He kicked a little sand toward the dead man. "My name is Honor Red Jackson."

## X

"You will come with me, damp thing?" the Amsir said in its high, puzzled voice. You could

tell it felt proud — you could tell *he* felt proud — but you could tell he couldn't understand what had happened. Well, that was all right, too, Jackson thought.

"I better had," Jackson said. "Or there's been a lot done for nothing. My mother's a widow twice over for nothing."

"You're wounded, wet one. You're spilling moisture. Come with me quickly."

"Right behind you."

"Before me."

They ran over the night desert, *chuck-a-chuck-a-chucka, chicka-sip, chicka-sip*. The Amsir gave Jackson his directions with light little touches of the spearpoint, until finally they reached the place the Amsir wanted, and the leathery bird said: "Stop. Dig here."

Crouching down, Jackson did his one-handed best. A sixth of a dozen feet down, he felt something hard and swollen under his fingertips. He pulled it out. It was a ladder of some kind, twice as thick through as a man's head. It felt as if it were made of glue-varnished leather; he could feel the edges of seams, and then a folded-in stopper.

"That is breathing-stuff," the Amsir said. "You will need it soon; the iron cap is almost useless to you now. Dig deeper. There is a moisture-bottle, and there are wrappings for warmth. There are patches for your hide."

Jackson dug them out. The water bottle was a lot like the Amsir-bubble at his back in size, but it felt like the oxygen bladder. The robes were some kind of leather,

tanned soft. They'd used leather for the body-patches, too.

They thought of everything when they cached one of these bringing-in-the-prisoner kits. They knew they weren't likely to get many without holes in them.

He still couldn't get the dart out, so he tied off his arm, using his good hand and his teeth to make the knot. The Amsir still couldn't come anywhere nearer him than the length of the spear.

There were sling-straps for the oxygen-bladder and water bottle. He unhooked his own bubble, drained it dry, and tossed it away in the dark before he replaced it with the Amsir bottle. Then he said: "Set," and they began moving again toward where, once upon a time, his incurving horizon had been.

As they traveled, he asked one question, once: "You bring in any other prisoners ever?"

"You're my first."

We sure have lost a lot of maidens today, Honor Red Jackson thought. He was getting very cold. After a while he had to pull out the length of tied-off gut glued into the oxygen bubble, stick the end of it in his mouth, and use that for air, pinching the gut between two fingers to keep himself from swelling into broken-lunged sickness and death.

When the sun came up, they saw it sooner than almost anybody Jackson knew, for they were at the top of his world's rim.

Jackson was bone-pulling cold. He had to peek out between his eyelids. He hurt in his nose and his

ears, and behind his ears. He saw his robes were made of stitched-together human skins, and for a minute he was scared and furious, but then he remembered the thrown-away Amsir bubble, and he told himself it didn't mean much. Or maybe it did, but not now.

"Hurry along! You will die here, but it is not much farther to comfort . . . if one is not altogether a damp thing."

Jackson squinted ahead. He saw below him another great dish-shaped world. But this one was blue-green from rim to rim; fences, light as stretched strings marking out plots, divided the land. High houses on stilt legs shone pink and ochre and glistening blue; bright yellow and sharp green flashing in the sunlight. Lacy lines, fragile as the fencing, traced from house to house, swaying down in free arcs, webbing the whole town together. And at the center of this world, far away, he could see a Thorn. A tall, massive shining Thorn, not the blunt, tilted, rust-streaked thing he had been born under. A fairy trap of grid-work twined in the air around its peak. And everywhere, everywhere, in the air, curving, curvetting, disporting, the Amsirs trafficked.

Air. Thick, lustrously clear, it reached out to envelope him as the Amsir pushed him forward.

Ariwol! Red Jackson thought grinning and then laughing. Ariwol, by everything pious! He arched his back and stared up into the sky again. Shouting and singing and laughing he thought. But I don't see you, Red!

TO BE CONTINUED

# A Hair Perhaps

by J. F. BONE

Illustrated by BODE

*He had no weapons to fight the  
aliens — except a few million  
little ones he was born with*

I

The VTOL turned its propellers skyward and settled softly on its tail in the middle of the fifty-foot square of reinforced concrete that was the landing field of Friday Island.

Major William Bruce crawled out of the rear cockpit and lowered his

lean body to the concrete. He looked upward at the vertical sheer of the aircraft's fuselage. He didn't like VTOL's, but except for a helicopter (whose range was too short) and a blimp (whose speed was too low) nothing else could land on this tiny spire of rock jutting out of the South Atlantic.

Bruce waved to the pilot, and the

pilot nodded. Servos whined, and clamshell doors opened in the fuselage near the tail to reveal stacks of cardboard cartons. Bruce carried them to the side of the field. He lifted a steel plate set flush with the ground, touched a button and began, one by one to place the boxes on a moving conveyor belt. When he had finished, he pulled a heavy hose out of the recess and dragged it over to the plane, where he coupled it into a quick-connect near the tail and attached a ground wire. Fuel began to gush from the plane into the hose, as he waved again to the pilot and walked the hundred feet from the plane to the low concrete building capped with a radar mast and antennae which rose above the topmost level of the island. He pressed his right thumb against a small glass plate set in the steel door at the side of the building and waited. Ten seconds passed until the door slid sideways with ponderous slowness and framed a slim redhead in Airforce blue with major's oak-leaves on his shoulders.

"Hi Sucker," the redhead said, "back for another tour?"

Bruce shook his head, "No, Al, I'm at the Beach Club."

"Well — I'm glad to see you. It gets lonely out here. I'll think of you the next two weeks while you're sweating it out. They've got a beauty for you; six birds from Kennedy and one major tracking mission on a polar orbital. You ought to be real busy."

"Nice," Bruce said without enthusiasm. Al Vaughan had all the luck. He never got the rough ones.

Six birds were enough for anyone without adding an orbital to the mess. Bruce sighed inaudibly. It would be nice to have a couple of the birds about, but that might be hard on Scotty Jacobs, and Bruce didn't want that, Scotty — the third man on the team — already had enough trouble with a pregnant wife. If Alice Jacobs knew what her husband did those two weeks of every six when he was away on "business," she'd stop complaining and have a miscarriage instead.

Bruce looked at his dapper counterpart, "there's about five hundred pounds of supplies on the conveyor. You might help me unload."

Vaughan shook his head. "Not on your life," he said, "that's your job. I have a blonde in Miami that has first priority."

"You're a lazy bum," Bruce said without heat.

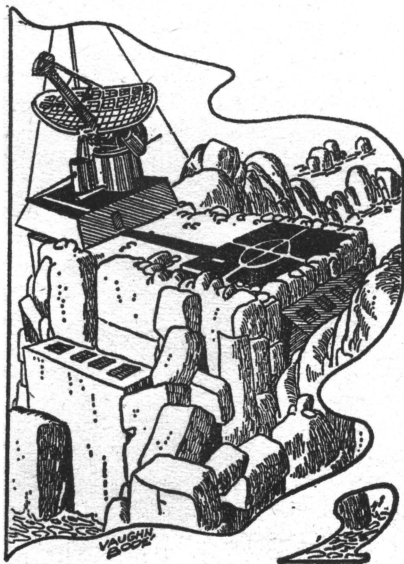
"You'll thank me later," Vaughan said, "it'll give you something to do. Time hangs heavy here."

"I've never noticed, but maybe you're right. Anyway have a good time stateside — and don't forget to disconnect our fuel hose before you take off."

"I want to get home alive," Vaughan said, "so don't worry. I'll check everything. Good-by pal — the place is yours."

Bruce pushed past Vaughan into the building, and as Vaughan went outside, the steel portal closed and would remain that way until Scotty Jacobs took over in two weeks.

He stripped, placed his clothing in the sanitizer, stepped into the de-



contamination chamber and looked through its glass walls into the control room beyond.

As usual, it was antiseptically clean.

The Big Board was working, and as Bruce showered, he watched the electronic brain of the station check out the VTOL as it lifted from the pad and sped northwestward to the carrier waiting below the horizon.

A bank of red lights bloomed on the board as a beam of electrons stabbed the departing plane and was reflected into the tracking dish. The board chittered, beeped and squeaked as computers analyzed the flight and fed data to the missile programmers. The Big Board hurled a preemptory challenge at the plane, and the VTOL answered with the proper IFF signal. The lights blinked off, the noises died and the Big Board returned to stand-by. You don't shoot friends who have the right answers.

Watching the electronic interplay between plane and station, Bruce had an old familiar thought that if it weren't for emergencies, this station could dispense entirely with men. He dried himself and slipped into the blue, lint-free coveralls and slippers that were standard dress for anyone in the station. The place was spotlessly clean. It had to be. The delicate instruments and circuitry, although sealed, could still be adversely affected by particulate matter, and so extreme efforts were made to keep all foreign matter out.

Bruce went from decon through the interlook to his glassed-in living quarters, sealed off in one corner of the station. He opened a hatch in



the wall and began to unload boxes from the conveyor belt, open them, vacuum their contents and place them neatly in the appropriate section of the storage lockers that lined one wall. Since there was everything from food to spare parts, the uncrating and sorting took time.

He was in the middle of a box of electronic parts when a buzzer sounded. Bruce looked at his watch. Time for the 1600-hour service check. He put the carton aside, went through the interlock into the Board Room and began to check the instruments that filled it, looking with experienced eyes for any evidence of malfunction.

There was none, except for the vertical radar, and that had been acting peculiarly ever since the station had been re-equipped last year. When the radar first began showing that peculiar shimmering pattern on its disk a few hours after it had been installed, it had triggered a major flap at Kennedy. Literally dozens of top brains had come to Friday Island. Checks were made, instruments were torn down and rebuilt. New circuits were installed. Three space missions were fired into the outer regions above Friday Island. The radar picked them up perfectly, but it still transmitted that peculiar cloudy shimmer. It was something that neither Bruce nor any of the others could explain, and it was bothersome. The official decision that the phenomenon resulted from an interaction with the mineral core of the island was unsatisfying, but acceptable for lack of a better theory. It just went to prove that all

the quirks of radar had not yet been solved. He shrugged and ran through the test procedures. Except for the shimmer, the set checked out A-OK.

Bruce went from instrument to instrument as precisely competent as the machines he served. The Job was lonely work. For a fortnight, he ran the station checking the instruments and collecting visual data on birds fired from Cape Kennedy six thousand miles to the northwest. For another fortnight at Kennedy, he reviewed reports and data with the brains and performance evaluation teams. Then for a third two weeks, he was free to do as he pleased as long as he remained within range of the CIA men assigned to guard him.

He was an important man. The Job made him a national resource that had to be guarded carefully and protected — not from harm — but from enemies who could use his specialized knowledge. The feeling of importance had once been good, but lately it had become annoying. He was never alone; not even on the island. He was watched, monitored and checked twenty-four hours a day. In his body were implanted homing devices by which he could be located even if he were unconscious. There was a hollow tooth in his jaw which — if bitten a certain way — would poison him quickly and beyond hope of antidote. Except at the station, he always went armed. He was an excellent shot and knew most of the dirty tricks of hand-to-hand combat. His instructors were proud of him.

For a young and patriotic man the position and its prerequisites offered enough satisfaction to ensure dedicated performance, but Bruce had been on The Job for five years and was older and more cynical than he had been at twenty-five. The diversions that were his for the asking during his free two weeks were no longer diverting. He didn't care to drink and had a built-in block against getting drunk, which meant that his virtually unlimited and unaudited expense account was useful only to provide a means of living so dangerously that the attrition rate among his CIA shadows was inordinately high. In some quarters it was felt that if he broke his damn neck, it would be a good thing. Knowing this gave him a great deal of amusement, for Bruce was not by nature a kindly man, and he derived a good deal of pleasure out of watching others squirm.

Yet his small meannesses were understood and excused by his superiors. After all, for two weeks out of every six he was in the center of a missile impact area, and for the remaining four, he was either being brain-picked at the Cape or a potential target for ultimate interrogation by Ivan and his friends.

Nevertheless, Bruce still thought he was living an easy life. He liked the clean results of precision machinery and sophisticated devices. And he enjoyed the knowledge of his real importance that ultimately came to those on The Job. For men were needed on Friday Island. They can do things which machines cannot. They can judge, discriminate,

bypass routine, be intuitive, and originate concepts. Machines cannot; they can only react. Therefore he and his co-workers were needed. They gave the human touch that made the station a vital part of the nation's defense program. But to put more than one man on the Island at a time was simply borrowing trouble.

More than one were not needed — not even for security. Friday Island was fantastically secure. The best minds in the nation had helped construct the Island's defenses. The place was as close to impregnability as human skill and technology could make it, and it was constantly being strengthened as new devices became available.

**I**ts electronic senses reached out for several hundred miles in all directions from sea level to straight up, and as one came nearer the island, the precision and delicacy of the sensors increased. For defensive armaments the island had a weapons complex that ranged from conventional mines to highly sophisticated, self-arming, antipersonnel missiles that could tell friend from stranger and behave accordingly. And backing this were elements of the Fourth Fleet. It would take a major effort to seize the station, and no country on Earth would be fool enough to try it.

But just in case any enemy was lucky enough to take the station, the walls and instruments were rigged with explosives which could be detonated as a last resort. In a way, living on Friday Island was an-

alogous to living on a powder keg; but if one could ignore this unpleasant fact, it was not a bad life. The work was not too demanding, and the morale office had outdone itself to provide outlets for the inevitable leisure time.

About the only thing that disturbed Bruce was the ghostly patterns on the vertical radar. They drew him back time and again. They were annoying — more so because they were inexplicable. Precision instruments, in Bruce's book, should behave predictably and not like prima donnas.

"It's just possible that Ivan has a satellite out there looking down my neck," he muttered to himself as he often did while working on The Job. "He'd have to be about 18,000 miles out, and at that range this radar couldn't unravel anything." He shrugged. "But, what good would an observer be out there? This whole island wouldn't be any bigger than a pimple on a peach pit, and equipment to see accurately that far hasn't been built and won't be for another twenty years. Anyway, it's a crazy thought. We've sent probes and found nothing, but I sure wish I could get over the idea that there's something out there watching us." He shrugged and grinned self-consciously, glad that there was no one around to hear him.

The first few days on The Job were always tough, and the nights were worse. The abrupt time change, the changes from winter to summer, from companionship to loneliness (*incidentally, how about that blonde in Miami Beach? Was she really*



*lonely or was she a CIA plant? Maybe she was the same one Al Vaughan was chasing. Now that'd be one for the books. Still, it might not be so farfetched as it seemed. The CIA had some pretty slick tricks and some pretty slick blondes in its bag.),* from excitement to routine (*that weekend in Vegas was a real blast, and that drag race out on the flats had been a gasser.*), from heedlessness to duty (*there is nothing like a four a.m. champagne party to get the blood circulating — and that lonely blonde — ah me!*), all conspired to keep Bruce from sleeping. There were too many memories to lay upon a quiet pillow.

As a result he was awake when the Big Board bloomed red in the IFF sector. There were the usual chirpings and chitterings as the an-

cillary equipment came to life. Bruce looked interested. Nothing had come this close this late at night for as long as he could remember. Probably a UFO — some poor devil upstairs in a plane that was miles off course. If he passed the island within the 25-mile zone, the defense missiles would shoot him down. He ought to be warned.

Bruce reached for the microphone and opened the set to commercial channel. "Warning!" he said. "This is Friday Island Station. Prohibited area." He looked at the radar screens to get the UFO's direction. The horizontal screens were dead, but in the center of the vertical and enlarging visibly as he watched was a white circular patch centered like the bull's-eye of a target.

And as he watched, the Big Board went dead. That thing upstairs had sent the proper IFF signal, but signal notwithstanding it was no friend.

His hands leaped toward the controls. His fingers hit the countermand key, the emergency control key and the action key in one smooth flow of motion. A klaxon sounded, and the lids of the silos slid back to reveal the needle noses of four Sprint missiles. "Range two hundred thousand," the mechanical voice announced. "Firing time 10 seconds." Bruce pressed the firing key and the emergency alarm to alert Cape Kennedy, and as he did the lights went out, and every mechanism within the station stopped.

The silence was a shocking thing. He had never realized how much noise there was on The Job

until it was cut off. The subliminal beepings and chirping of the computers, the snapping noises of hot metal, the soft hiss of air through the ducts, the faint whir of pumps on the heat exchangers, the hum of heating elements, the click of relays, the rush of fluid in the pipes and hydraulic lines, the faint whine of servo motors and the deeper hum of the generators, all were silent. The lack of noise grated on his nerves.

The supposedly impregnable station had a soft spot in its defenses. Cut off its power supply, and it was helpless. He felt his way through the darkness into his quarters and took his pistol from the top drawer of his dresser. His fingers curled comfortably around its handgrip, as his lips quirked with mild amusement. Any outfit sophisticated enough to put the island out of action would certainly have the answer to so elemental a weapon as a gun.

But would they have the answer to the other defenses? Every other minute an IFF signal flashed out from the station to Kennedy, and every alternate minute a signal came from Kennedy to the station. Interruption of two successive signals would ring an alarm stateside, and an operator would try to contact the island. No contact and three more missed signals would cause a missile to be fired, and fifteen minutes later Friday Island would vanish from the face of the Earth.

The Station jarred sickeningly on its foundations, and Bruce was suddenly plastered immovably against the floor, pinned down like an in-

sect on a board. Gravity? — Acceleration? And Bruce knew that there was also a solution to the thermonuclear explosion — get the station out of the way — fast! But how far could they go in the eighteen-odd minutes that would elapse between the time the missile was fired and the time it hit the target? Judging from the acceleration — real far. Maybe even out of this world.

It was dark, quiet and very cold. And with each passing minute it became colder. Bruce couldn't move. He lay flattened against the floor, his heart pumping slowly and laboriously, forcing his heavy blood through half-collapsed vessels. It was almost impossible to breathe and nearly impossible to think. A gray curtain hung over his vision. He gasped and tried to roll over. He couldn't. And the gray curtain became thicker and enveloped him entirely.

He awoke with the nightmare feeling of floating. But it was no nightmare. He was floating. He was naked in a decontamination booth, floating in a drizzling spray of something acrid and astringent. It smelled vaguely of sulfur and made him want to cough.

Sulfur? — brimstone? — Hell? He ruled out that possibility. He didn't believe in Hell.

## II

The spray stopped. A sphincterlike door dilated in one wall (ceiling? — floor?), and something came through it. It wasn't human even though it walked on two legs,

had a reasonably human hairless head, binocular vision and hands with opposable thumbs. Humans don't have four arms or eyes with oval pupils like a goat. But otherwise it didn't differ much. It was about four feet tall, and it looked intelligent. It was clothed in a tunic belted loosely at the waist. The belt supported something that looked like a pistol. A bright red box hung over its midsection from a strap around its neck. At it walked toward Bruce, it began to make noises.

"Whistle burble grunt chitter whistle CHEEP grunt?" it said.

And the red box in uninflected, accentless English said "Now you are clean, we can talk. Are you hurt?"

"No." Bruce said. It wasn't hard to see what was wrong with this picture. He was floating weightless in free fall. The alien was standing on its feet and walking. It had an unfair advantage.

"That is good. It is our policy not to be unkind to inferior races unless it is necessary."

"Inferior?" Bruce asked on a rising note.

"Obviously. Your technology is of a low order. You have a little civilization and many cultures. Your planet is the standard barbarian type we find this far out on the galactic rim."

"All right, have it your way," Bruce said, "so what do you want of us?"

"Information at the moment. You have nothing else we want. We wish to investigate. Later we shall determine how you can be made



useful to our plans in the future.”

“Do you mean what I think you do?”

“It depends on what you think. Be patient, and I shall explain,” the alien said. It waved one of its left hands at the open doorway. “We shall study your machines. Then we shall study you. The data will be added to data we have already acquired from long-range surveys, and we shall have a fair guess of your maximum capability. Later we shall obtain other specimens of your race and study them to find out what methods can be efficiently used to make you cooperate with us. You have certain mechanical skills that might be useful. You could have metals or other things that we might use. Time will tell.”

“If you have some crazy idea of conquering us, you won’t get away with it,” Bruce said. “If you think you can, you just don’t understand the human race.”

“Others have said that,” the alien said. “Most of them submitted at once when they understood the alternative. If we must, we will reduce your number to a minimum and replace your present savageries with a better culture. But it is slow work to repopulate an empty world. We would prefer to use what the Ultimate Intelligence has provided.”

“That is generous of you.”

“We are a generous race. Ask any of our servants.”

“You are going to be a very dead race, if my people have anything to say about it.”

“By now they will have nothing to say. We should be well beyond any

feeble reprisal your fellows might take, but even if we were not, your race will not find us. We can bend light and radiation around us and remain invisible. In fact we are doing it now. You could come within a few feet of the ship and never sense us unless you have mass-detection devices." The alien shrugged its upper shoulders. It was a startling effect. "But enough of that," it said. "I come to take you out of here. Until we finish our study of you, we would prefer you to be healthy. We have moved your living quarters from your building to our ship. Everything is ready for you."

"And if I resist?"

"Then I will stun you and tow you. You will be no problem."

"You're right," Bruce said, "I won't. Not now."

The alien maneuvered him through the sphincter and down a transparent hallway lined with banks of what looked like filter panels. They passed through two interlocks — which were only roughly similar to those on Earth — and down a corridor that gave an odd impression of flexibility and porosity, through a third interlock and into an opaque corridor lined with contracted sphincter-doors. The alien stopped before one of them, opened it and pushed Bruce inside. "Your personal things have already been examined," it said. "We have removed the weapons, but for the rest you will find them undamaged. And in the meantime this may make you more comfortable." It took a bright coppery square of metal from inside its tunic and laid it on the floor. "Carry this on your per-

son," it continued. "You will not float."

"So how do I get to it?" Bruce asked.

"That is your problem," the alien said as it stepped through the sphincter and disappeared.

"For every reaction," Bruce muttered, "there is an equal and opposite reaction." Newton proposed the law a century and a half ago, but it wasn't going to do him much good. The aliens had stripped him to the skin. Had they but left him his slippers he would be down to that piece of red metal in a moment. By throwing them in one direction he would travel in the other. But he had nothing. He thought for a moment and then grinned. Maybe he could swim. After all, air had some resistance.

It had. A couple of minutes of sculling with cupped hands brought him down to the piece of metal. He touched it and promptly sprawled on the floor. He picked the thing up, stood up and went across the cubicle to where his dresser was set against the wall. He sighed happily as he opened a drawer and took out a pair of coveralls. There were slippers in another drawer, and in a few minutes he was dressed and infinitely more at ease. There was something about clothes that restored his confidence.

As a routine preliminary, Bruce tested the walls, ceiling, floor and door. They were all solid. The door was closed tightly and would not open. He looked at the walls and ceiling. There was nothing of importance; air intake and exhaust

ducts in the wall opposite the door, three lenses and a peculiar luminous glow in the ceiling. The air was faintly sulfurous, but breathable. Over the long run it might be harmful, but Bruce didn't think he'd be around that long.

Bruce tested the installations. None of the plumbing worked which was to be expected, but the electrical appliances operated perfectly.

"Well," he said. "That's something." He trailed the wires to neat needlelike plugs which penetrated the wall. "Hmm — good way to wire — gets rid of fixed sockets. Walls like these would be something building contractors would sell their souls for, if they could be built economically."

Bruce ran his fingers over the stubble on his chin. It felt heavy — like a full day's growth. "It's a helluva time for shaving, but I'd better do it before I begin to look like one of the the Smith Brothers," he muttered as he opened the medicine closet over the wash bowl and took out his electric razor. "Anyway it'll give my four-armed friends something to think about."

Feeling a little better, Bruce continued his search for weapons. It was a perfectly natural reaction. Indeed, it would have been out of character had he not done so. Among the first things he examined was the station's portable transceiver which he kept in his quarters. The radio was dead except for a faint crackle of static, which argued plausibly that if no radio waves came in, none would get out. Yet on the chance they might, he broadcast an

appeal for help and planned to repeat it every hour. He grimaced a little. He had a mental picture of chuckling aliens watching him through the lenses in the ceiling.

He checked the rest of his gear for possibilities. The aliens had taken his gun, but there was a refrigerator, a stove, a vacuum cleaner, a coffee pot, an electric toothbrush, a toaster, a waffle iron and a flashlight. This certainly wasn't the sort of stuff with which wars were won he thought ruefully. The refrigerator would have been a possibility had it been one of the old fashioned freon or ammonia kind. The gas could perhaps be poisonous to aliens. But this box was a direct heat exchanger and didn't use refrigerant, a nice ultramodern gadget with zero possibilities as a weapon. Something conceivably could be done to the stove to convert it into an instrument for electrocuting the unwary, but that possibility was remote. He looked at the stove and shook his head. Scratch that thought. It simply couldn't be done. As for the rest of the stuff, it had no use as far as he could see. Any weapon he could make would have to be elemental, something like a club. Ah yes — a chair leg. Bruce upended his chair and looked at it. The metal legs screwed into the seat. They could be easily removed to give him four tapered pieces of tubing two inches in diameter at the base, three quarters of an inch at the tip and a foot and a half long. They would be very satisfactory, providing something came close enough to be clobbered. He set the chair aside and



went to the bed. The sheets could be torn into strips and made into an adequate rope which one could use to tie clobbered bodies and keep them helpless. The electric cord from the blanket controls would make a fine garotte. There was enough material for weapons if he kept them simple.

With surprise and a little luck he should be able to immobilize and disarm an alien. Then, with the alien's weapon he could do considerably more damage. He just might make it hot enough for them to think twice before trying to subjugate men. He didn't believe the talk about depopulating Earth. That was the sort of thing authors wrote about in science fiction.

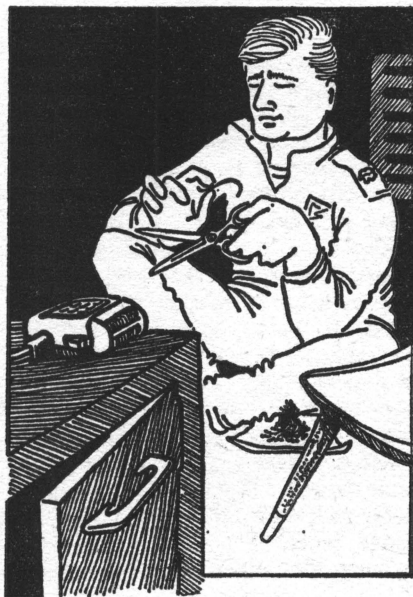
But what could create a diversion? His neck itched. Absently he scratched it. A few stray hairs from his recent shave were irritating his skin. Hmm, that was an idea. Maybe if he dumped shaving dust into the air ducts he could cause a diversion. At any rate it was worth trying. But it was a big ship, and although he could collect quite a bit of hair from shaving, it probably would not be enough to cause significant damage. However, he would give the idea the old college try and use everything he had. There was no sense in doing a half-baked job. By shaving his body as well as his face and head, he would probably double the amount of available hair, and that just might be enough to provide a good diversion if there was no internal filtering system. At best, it could give him a certain advantage

by producing allergic reactions in the enemy. At worst it would only be a waste of time.

He set about reducing his hair to powder. It was a harder task than he thought. An electric razor designed for beards is a poor clipper for other kinds of hair, but after a fashion it worked. In some cases he had to compromise on short lengths, clipped with scissors rather than the fine powdery razor residue he would have preferred. But at last the task was done and the few grams of hair, dumped into the room exhaust. All that he could do now was wait — and unscrew the legs of the chair.

### III

Things happened faster than he expected. Within thirty minutes,



a coughing alien appeared in the half-open sphincter. He carried a plastic bottle full of liquid, and as he set it inside the room, a hacking paroxysm turned his yellowish face a dark crimson. Bruce looked at him, grinned and picked up a chair leg. He was in business.

Three hours later he controlled the ship. Behind him lay a trail of dead, dying, bound and gagged aliens tucked away in dark corners, and his chair leg was bent, dented and splashed with the alien equivalent of blood. He scowled as he tied an alien into one of the control chairs in the operations center. This was the last he could find. It had been hiding in one of the equipment lockers, but its coughing had given it away.

His hair had worked too well. The shorter pieces got on skin and into lungs causing allergic reactions and severe bronchial irritation. Predictably, none of the aliens realized what was happening until it was too late.

The longer pieces sabotaged the ship's mechanisms, and this Bruce didn't really expect. He knew, of course, that dust and debris could affect the performance of delicate instruments and machinery, but what happened to the alien ship seemed entirely out of line compared with the cause. The confusion was incredible. Nothing worked properly. Lights sputtered and faded, circuits shorted, servos labored or ran at insane speeds. Rotors stuck, shafts seized, switches and relays failed to work. Solenoids didn't operate, thermocouples failed to register, tubes

shorted out, armatures smoked, wiring arced, microminiaturized circuits melted. It was shambles.

He had thoroughly disabled the alien spaceship.

He poked the alien with his battered club. He hadn't tried to use an alien weapon after one of them had incinerated its owner as it was trying to shoot him.

The alien grunted and coughed. To Bruce that alien was interesting only because it wore a translator and could talk. Otherwise, he would not have wasted time on it. He didn't think much of the aliens anyway. They were thoroughly inefficient combat types without their gadgets. Possibly if he knew them better he could find some more positive qualities. As it was, they were that faceless thing called "the enemy," something that had to be incapacitated without any emotional involvement.

The alien coughed and shook its hairless head. "Why don't you kill me?" it asked.

"I have no reason to," Bruce said, "besides you might be useful."

"How?"

"You could explain these controls."

"Do you think I would?"

Bruce shook his head. "No," he said, "not voluntarily. But there are other ways of getting answers."

"Torture will do you no good."

"Do you think I am that uncivilized?"

"You attacked us with a biologic weapon against which we had no defense. You may have killed us all. That is uncivilized."

"What did you expect me to do? Sit still while you killed me?"

"We would not have killed you," the alien said, "But I don't suppose you could be expected to believe that. As a member of a racial complex with high culture, but low civilization, you would expect to be tortured or killed. Civilized races have other and better ways of getting at the truth or developing information. You would not have been hurt."

"Then what was all that talk about killing us off?"

"Racial only. We would have seeded your world with an organism which would have prevented the great majority of you from reproducing. In a few generations your huge, untidy population would have been reduced to manageable size. But we would not have destroyed a single one of your lives. We merely would have prevented new ones."

"Which in the end would make little difference," Bruce said, "it would still be genocide."

"No — there would be a small proportion of your population that would be immune. Not all of you would be killed, nor would your race be extinguished. Your survivors would be educated to fit into our plans, and in a thousand years you probably would be as numerous as you are now."

"Oddly enough, I believe you," Bruce said. "Not that it makes any difference."

"You are right. It makes no difference. In a few years the absence of our ship will be noticed, and a task force will be sent to cover the

same route we have traveled. They will encounter you, and this will not happen a second time. Things will be different."

"They will indeed," Bruce said.

"Had we suspected that you were so different from us," the alien said, "we would have taken greater precautions. We assumed correctly that you were a bloodthirsty barbarian, but we made the error of equating your group reactions with your individual ability. You see, in our society, the group action is a direct reflection of the individuals composing the group. In yours it is not. We assumed that you were lazy, hesitant, cowardly, stupid, dilatory and dirty. But somehow you are not." The alien struggled, gasped, coughed rackingly and sagged with exhaustion when the spasm passed.

"I do not understand you," it muttered.

"The feeling is mutual," Bruce said. He looked at the three boards in the room. They were obviously designed to be operated by three aliens — and quite probably the three worked as a unit, synchronizing their activities. It was also quite probable that the central board had control of the major activities of the ship, while the two other boards each controlled a hemisphere. Of course, that might not be the case at all. Alien logic and positioning probably was not similar to human.

As they were now, the three boards were not designed to give anyone peace of mind. They smoked, sputtered and occasionally made noises and flashed lights. They behaved as no control boards should.

If he were an alien, Bruce reflected, he would be worried by the actions of the boards. As it was, he was terrified.

"For your sake," Bruce said not unkindly, "I will allow you to tell me how to shut off these boards."

"I appreciate your offer," the alien said with equal politeness, "but I will not tell you. Figure it out yourself. It should be instructive. The odds are about twenty-to-one against your success."

"And —"

"If you fail, we are destroyed. And just in case you wish to leave things as they are, sooner or later we will have a key malfunction which will destroy us."

"And this makes you happy?"

"No. But it will keep our ship and our technology out of your hands. Primitive as you are, you could still make use of many of our devices. You understand the elements of solid-state physics, and your electronics are adequate." There was no longer a note of contempt in the alien's voice. It was as if, having chosen to die, the alien saw no reason for trying to be chauvinistic. It coughed again and thrashed violently in the chair where Bruce had tied it. The paroxysm ceased, and the alien sank back, breathing heavily.

"I really have no desire to die messily", it said. "Only in battle does a messy death allow me an unmarred place with my ancestors. And the action on this ship may not be a battle in the strict sense of the word."

"Then tell," said Bruce, "and live to fight another day."

"No, I must assume that this is war."

"Well then," Bruce said, "I'll have to go it alone." He reached a hand toward the switchboard and watched the alien narrowly. The alien gave no sign of tension. There was a light burning over the switch. He turned the switch, and the light went out. Four switches later, the alien tensed. Bruce left this one alone and went on. By the time Bruce had nearly finished the board, the alien discovered what the man was doing. It thereupon closed its eyes, tensed its muscles and waited impassively.

By now, however, Bruce was acquainted with the rationale of the board. It was similar to what a man might construct. The color codes were different, and the groupings were probably entirely different; but there were main switches for each section, and these Bruce could recognize and operate. One after another he turned them off until the alien ship floated dark and dead in an orbit around the Earth.

"And now what do you plan to do?" the alien asked from the darkness.

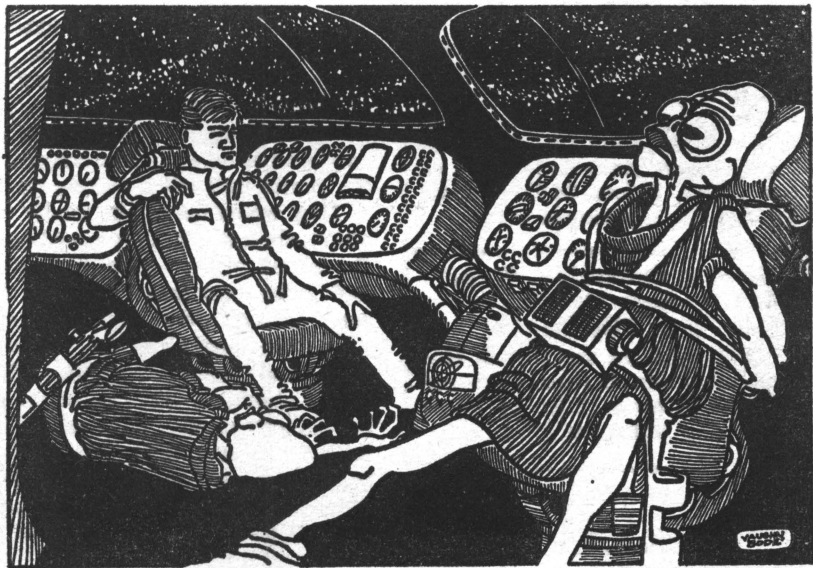
"Wait until we are rescued," Bruce said, "Now that everything on this ship is turned off it probably looms up on every tracking radar system on Earth that is within range. In about twenty-four hours we will have visitors, and personally I don't give a damn whether they speak Russian or English. You and your kind hold a threat for my world that is bigger than nationalism or ideology. We will have to co-operate to keep you out."

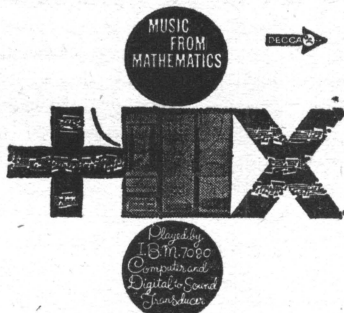
"You are absolutely right, Earthling," the alien said, "but I am also certain that you will not co-operate. Your world has too many cultures, too many ideologies and not enough civilization. You cannot co-operate even if you wish to." It began to cough again in harsh racking spasms that did not stop.

"We can try," Bruce said. He found one of the seats behind a secondary board and sat down. He felt no triumph as he listened to the alien's agony. His lungs hurt, his skin itched and he wanted to cough. A hair had managed to get into his left eye, and it felt as big as a stick of firewood. He was miserably uncomfortable, and the knowledge that any aliens who were still alive were in worse shape was absolutely no consolation.

Their chances for survival were poor, but his own were not much better. The trap which had enmeshed the aliens had also caught him. There was enough hair in his own respiratory system to cause foreign-body pneumonia if he didn't get prompt medical attention. But that knowledge didn't bother him. The odds for survival were considerably better than they were a few hours ago, and his problems were simple. All he had to do was stay alive.

For the alien was wrong. Bruce listened to the coughing in the darkness and felt a twinge of pity for his victim. Men would unite against a common danger, and if their fear was great enough, men would co-operate. Bruce's lips twisted in a smile that was half a sneer. The





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people of Earth would co-operate. He would see to that. And he would live to watch them form one world to repel invasion from space, by soulless aliens bent on genocide.

The alien's coughing stopped abruptly. Bruce fumbled in the pocket of his coveralls and found his flashlight. He turned the beam on the alien. It was dead; a thin trickle of blood ran from the lax mouth, and the goat's eyes stared glassily.

Bruce shrugged. By the time help came, he might be the only one alive.

Actually, that might not be a bad thing. It would leave him as the only man who had experience with the aliens; and since he probably would be an international hero because of his incredible success against overwhelming odds, he would be asked to speak, and he'd be heard.

He rose slowly to his feet and started walking back to the room the aliens had prepared for him. He would need the portable transceiver, and he might have to rig some sort of antenna that would let him broadcast. And as he walked he considered the stories he'd tell a waiting world.

They would neither be kindly nor absolutely truthful. They would paint the aliens blacker than they were and make them into figures of terror. Considering their bizarre appearance, this should not be too hard to do. And since he was neither kindly nor absolutely truthful, he would be perfectly capable of watching his fellow men squirm as long as they squirmed in unison. He grinned at a thought which flashed across his mind. With some justice, he could be considered a hairy character. END

# — STILL MORE FANDOMS

by LIN CARTER

*Our Man in Fandom guides us to more  
fandoms than you — or that fellow  
Horatio, either — ever dreamed of!*

LAST ISSUE, gang, we were talking about some of the little fandoms that exist *within* science-fiction fandom. The idea was, SF fans read other stuff, too, and some writers have a charm, a charisma, so potent and exciting that cults grow up around them and their stories. The examples I used were the groups devoted to Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of What's-His-Name of the Apes and John (no relation to this writer) Carter of Mars, and Robert E. Howard, whose glorious barbarian warrior-hero, Conan the Cimmerian, is now swaggerin' and swashbucklin' all over your paperback stands.

Of course, the great-grandfather of all these one-writer fandoms is the group that sprang up around Conan Doyle — Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to you (and no relation to the above Cimmerian hero). His Sherlock Holmes stories created what must probably be the World's First Fandom, and many science-fiction people are devoted to the Sacred

Writings, as the Holmes stories are known in Irregular circles.

## The Boys From Baker Street

The Baker Street Irregulars, that is. This circle of Doyle-devotees grew up in the 1930's, started by a bunch of lit'ry chaps like Christopher Morley and Vincent Starrett. Today, the Irregulars are big-time, indeed. There are local groups — called "scion societies" — scattered all over the country and abroad, as well. These local chapters take their names from one or another of the stories in the Canon: such as The Speckled Band of Boston, the Copper Beeches of Philadelphia, The Diogenes Club, the Hounds of the Baskerville. There is more than one local chapter here in New York, but the one whose meetings I have attended most frequently, and to which so many local science-fiction fans belong, is called The Priory Scholars of New York.

The boys from Baker Street pub-

lish a hefty and handsome journal of notes, news, critica and opinions called *The Baker Street Journal*, which comes out quarterly. The Irregulars in various local chapters also publish their own newsletters and correspond with other members. Once a year, on the supposed "birthday" of Sherlock Holmes (it is very Irregular to pretend Holmes really lived and that Watson wrote the stories, using Doyle merely as an agent), which they have worked out to be Friday, January 6, 1854, there is a get-together of members. I don't believe it's large enough to call a *convention*, exactly, but they have fun meeting and talking, making new friends, and drinking a toast to the Master.

### The Cabellians

Another charismatic writer who has a burgeoning little fandom all of his own is the distinguished American fantasy novelist, James Branch Cabell, the author of several of the most brilliant, urbane and imaginative fantasies of the 20th Century (such as *The Silver Stallion* and *Something About Eve* and *The Cream of the Jest* and — his masterpiece — the immortal *Jurgen*). Cabell was very popular and highly regarded by the critics (such as H. L. Mencken, who wrote a whole book about him) back in the 1920's. Today, he seems to be largely ignored, almost forgotten. But a hard core of dedicated Poictesmois are about to do something about *that*.

Spearhead of this movement would seem to be a science-fiction

fan named James N. Hall, 202 Taylor Avenue, Crystal City, Missouri, 63019. Jim and his son, Dave Hall, and a few other people put out an irregular (no relation to above Baker St. boys) fanzine for, by and of Cabell fans called *Kalki*. It seems to be free to anyone who wants it. The latest issue I have seen discusses Cabell's possible influence on H. P. Lovecraft's little-known novel, *Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*, Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* and *The Dragon Masters*, and other books. Hall is using his fanzine as a medium for getting in touch with other Cabell fans across the country, and as he says he thinks time is ripe to begin a sort of sub-fandom comparable to the Hyborian Legion and the Burroughs Bibliophiles. I agree.

### The Ozmopolitans

Another fannish in-group is devoted to L. Frank Baum, the famous author of *The Wizard of Oz*. Now almost everybody has read *The Wizard of Oz* — it is the greatest American fairy tale ever written — but L. Frank Baum also wrote other Oz books; and when he died in 1919, the series was continued by Ruth Plumly Thompson, by Jack Snow, by John R. Neill, Rachel Cosgrove, and other authors. People who are only aware of *The Wizard of Oz* may be surprised to learn there are 42 Oz books in all!

There is a very large and live Oz fandom operating. A nation-wide club has been in existence for some years now. It suffers under the



rather childish name of "The International Wizard of Oz Fan Club," but we shan't hold that against it. Burr Tilstrom, the TV personality, creator of *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, the novelist Philip Wylie, critic and book reviewer Anthony Boucher (co-founder and co-editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*), writer Martin Gardner (author of *The Annotated Alice* and other marvelous books) and a number of science-fiction people belong to this club.

Every June the Oz fans hold a national convention at "Ozcot" on Bass Lake, Indiana, the home of Harry Baum, only surviving son of the writer. At this year's convention they had a banquet with an Ozzy menu, an auction of rare Oz collectors' items and a showing of two of the incredibly rare silent-screen movies that L. Frank Baum made, the *Scarecrow* and the *Patchwork Girl of Oz*. These films, long believed irretrievably lost, have recently been discovered. Baum wrote the scenarios and directed them himself. About 50 people attended the convention, and there are around 500 members in the club now.

Three times a year the club publishes a handsome magazine, *The Baum Bugle*, which is edited by Fred Meyer in Escanaba, Michigan. The most recent issue I have seen featured on its cover a full-color painting famous Oz illustrator John R. Neill did for one of the books; but it was lost in the publisher's files and never published until resurrected and printed in the *Bugle*.

A New York science-fiction and Oz fan, Hal Lynch, tells me there has been at least one local Oz club meeting here in New York (that was a couple of years ago, at the Long Island home of Donald A. Wollheim, editor-in-chief of Ace Books and a long-time Oz fan), but that a local group in Los Angeles is quite active and holds frequent meetings.

### Comics Fandom

And then there are the comic-book fans. They sound to me like the largest, most active of the "other" fandoms right now. It seems that in the early 1950's, a New York science-fiction fan, Bhub Stewart, started a fanzine called *The E.C. Fan Bulletin*, dedicated to the science-fantasy comic books published by E.C. Publications. This was the first comic-book fan magazine, but far — mighty far! — from being the last. There are, in fact, about 40 or 50 such magazines going at this time. Not all of them are devoted to the E.C. comics, of course. A local comics and science-fiction fan tells me that the most prominent magazines now publishing are *Alter Ego* and *Fantasy Illustrated*. *Alter Ego* is edited by Roy Thomas, a writer for the Marvel Comics line, and it is largely devoted to critical studies and articles on the various super-heroes — hence the title. (A better title might be *Phonebooth*.)

*Fantasy Illustrated*, whose editor is Bill Spicer, features comic art and letters. Spicer also publishes a

booklet called *The Guide to Comics Fandom* for 50c. This contains a history of this sub-fandom and has lots of information on the fans, lists their fanzines, etc. If you are interested in comic books, Bill's address is 4878 Granada Street, Los Angeles, Calif., 90042.

There are national comics clubs going, such as the Academy of Comic Book Fans and Collectors. There is even an apa (amateur press association: a club for fanzine publishers) devoted to comics fandom, called KAPA-ALPHA I believe. It got started in 1964 and now has about 30 contributing members. And there's a new national club opening up called INCAS (International Comic Art Society) which publishes a magazine called *The Cartoonist*, selling for 75c, featuring art, biographies, history, origins, articles, movie info and so on. If you're interested, write to INCAS, P.O. Box 1281, Hollywood, Calif., 90028.

Comic-book fandom may be new on the scene, but it's certainly taking off in all directions under a full head of steam. There was a national convention here in New York City at the Park-Sheraton Hotel on July 23rd and 24th. This "Comics Con" was quite a lively and star-studded show. Present were old-time science-fiction writer Otto Binder (who used to write *Captain Marvel* and now writes *Superman*) and the famous comic artist Jack Kirby (he drew *Captain America* and *The Boy Commandos* and many other favorites of the '40's; he now

does *The Fantastic Four*), who was Guest of Honor, and Gil Kane (he draws *The Green Lantern*), Jerry De Fuccio (an editor for *Mad*), and loads of other exciting people . . . not to mention Bhub Stewart, now a staff artist for *Castle of Frankenstein*, the guy who virtually started the whole thing.

Like the ordinary science-fiction conventions, there were speeches and panel discussions and an auction of rare comic books, original comic art and all sorts of interesting items (including some original *Batman* TV scripts). The Comics Con showed movies, too; a chapter each of several old movie serials which were made back in the '40's from the adventures of some of the comics characters like *Flash Gordon* and *Captain America* and *Captain Marvel*, plus a very early TV *Superman* episode, showing his origin on the planet Krypton.

I am fascinated by these sub-fandoms. Of course, most people in science fiction are interested in other things besides just science fiction . . . naturally . . . but it's exciting to think that if you happen to be fond of a particular writer or hobby, and you can find just a handful of other people who share your enthusiasm, you can start the ball rolling and end up with something so big it publishes 50 fanzines and has national conventions! (How about it out there, gang? Anybody interested in starting an A. Merritt club, or a Sax Rohmer Society, or maybe an *If!*-Readers-of-America?)

END

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# The Scared Starship

by D. M. MELTON

illustrated by NODEL

*Strange place for a starship,  
at the bottom of a hole. Not  
only strange, but very deadly!*

## I

**A**fter the Mariner probes and the first touch-and-go landings, we thought we knew about what we would find on Mars.

Desert, of course, and minerals, some of which make the Geigers sing. And Sino-Sov people. At the Delhi conference we had agreed to confine ourselves to a specific area, as had the Sino-Sov Bloc. But we expected to find them, too, and

eventually did. What we did not expect was that we would find a starship.

I shouldn't mislead you. We still have to build the starship. What we actually found was something — Margot Harris insists I should say some *one* — that knows how to build one and is telling us.

Dave Ellis and I found it. That was mostly luck. But Captain Scott and Hank Owen used brains and guts when they kept Mao Lee and



his hatchetmen from hijacking it. And it was Margot's brains and insight, and her temper, which finally convinced us of what we really had. But Dave and I lucked our way to discovery, about four weeks out on a mapping and exploration trek. Captain Scott had taken four of us. It was dull work, but we were getting it done.

Margot, this trip, was the cartographer. And Hank Owen, geologist, mineralogist and sourpuss, was tucking away a lot of promising samples. Dave Ellis had the gravy-train job. He can do almost anything, but this trip he was keeping a photographic log.

His pictures of our departure weren't very impressive, even if he did manage to shoot an inordinate amount of footage of Margot. A pressure suit doesn't do her justice. Inside the dome it's a different view, for as engineer-astronauts go she's a shade disconcerting. She's titian haired, amber eyed, wanton shaped and five feet tall on tiptoe. But she can hold her own in any company. In fact if you make her mad, so the freckles show and the hair looks like flame over a white Ming vase, even a hardnosed launch-pad lead man has been known to step back to re-appraise the situation.

But Dave's pictures showed us for what we were — improvised, with the spot welds showing. Antigrav isn't what it will be in another twenty years. It's about as far along relatively as a Goddard rocket and will lift a payload about as far. So everything has to be pushed up to us the hard way, a piece at a time, and some

senators grump it's too costly. Or did. Not any more. But we had pieced together a big closed barge with antigrav lift. It carried an adequate reactor-generator, a must, because the G-Units drink power like the city of Seattle. We did the leg work with a couple of antigrav sleds, powered by broadcast power from the barge, with solid fuel pushpots for emergencies.

Four weeks out, Dave and I were bored and drowsy and looking at another big outcropping of obsidian which showed above the rim of a crater.

The ridge looked like a hundred others, only bigger. Dave asked me to take him over for a look at the other side. I lifted up and over and was floating back along the outside rim, when all of a sudden I woke up fast, my reflexes taking over before my brain knew what had happened. I was fresh out of power! The sled tilted, dropping like rock; and glancing down I thought it would be a close thing, if we made it at all.

Dave didn't move, except to cradle his camera in his lap. He's the skinny, thin-haired, hung-over-looking newsman type. I think he did news work while he was at M.I.T. One of his gag lines is, "I'm no hero. I just take pictures of 'em!" — not mentioning that the photographer has to be there, too, usually with his back to the opposition. So he just sat, looking bored, and I got the pushpots balanced before any bones or cameras were broken. Then he grinned, "Always grandstanding!"

You could have picked it up meters from that ledge instead of centimeters. You play the damndest games, Rainbow!"

I was about to tell him he was one stupid remark up on me, but there wasn't time. For I hadn't been playing. And I haven't fought anybody about that nickname since I was twelve. In fact I like it better now than "John." "Rainbow" Smith sort of sets me apart from the hundreds of plain John Smiths. And I'm downright happy about my eyes, even though the fact that one of them is blue-and-brown and the other is gray-and-green accounts for the nickname.

My rainbow eyes are unusual in another way, too. I nearly got busted out of training when my instructors learned I was eyeballing my rendezvous maneuvers instead of letting radar do it. That was supposed to come later. But dead-on depth perception is handy for an astropilot. And the fact that I grew up on a series of surfboards on the Santa Barbara coast, and at Makaha, did things for my reflexes, too. So I wasn't even thinking about those glass ridges which are jumping up at me as I got the pushpots flaring and skimmed away from the ledge. That was routine.

What I was wondering about was the power failure. The board said that for thirty seconds something had intercepted my power beam. And that just isn't in the book. The beam is tight, keyed to one specific receiver. The pushpots are for possible failure at the barge. And that isn't in the book either.

I hovered and looked. There was

nothing down there but that obsidian hogback, with sand drifted on the crater side clear to the top. Outside, most of the sand had drifted away. That's right. The air on Mars is so thin you'll look very unpretty indeed if your suit opens and exposes you to it. But in stormy weather the sand will drift. But there was nothing down there to steal my power. I was wondering if there was a Sino-Sov sled around, with an advanced power thief. We knew Colonel Rostoff. He didn't play much dirtier than his orders spelled out. But Captain Mao Lee had been known to improvise. He didn't even like his allies, much less us. I was about to say so when Dave said, "Hold it, Rainbow. A fumarole down there."

We had found a few, volcanic blow holes formed in the glass when it was liquid and Mars was venting its little remaining core heat to the surface. But this was a big one, not quite covered by the sand. I edged forward, set this time for a possible power loss. It came, right on time. The pushpots stirred some dust, and the sand started flowing downhill, away from the cavern mouth. Then Dave yelled, slapped his telephoto setting and told me he would black both my beautiful multi-colored eyes if I let the sled wobble as much as a centimeter. He used several hundred feet of tape on a dark object which was being revealed by the flowing sand. Then he lowered the camera and said, "Holy smoke," in a kind of awed whisper.

I was just as awed. I said, "That looks to me like . . ."

He nodded. "It looks to me like, too. Let's get back to a projector."

Dave checked in by radio as we were going back to the barge, and they had a projector set up. Captain Scott, one of the few guys we knew to whom we could say "Sir!" and really mean it, was waiting patiently, his burned, gray-templed face looking exactly his forty years. I imagine Admiral Scott will still look forty, and patient, when he retires. Hank Owen, a little bored looking because this was something out of his line, scowled as always at the screen. Margot set my head spinning when she touched me on the cheek helping me out of my helmet, but I got my eyes focused again and sat down.

The captain said, "Let's see it, Dave," and Dave tapped the switch. We saw the black, rocky outcrop-

ping, with rusty sand drifting down away from it. Mars landscape. You've seen thousands of feet of it. But centered in this picture, slowly emerging as the sand spilled away from it, was the lower half, the legs, of a pressure suit, of what appeared to be metal, with ring joints at the knees. The upper half was still covered; but one leg was bent slightly, and we could see one gauntlet pressed flat, six fingers spread, as if whoever was inside had been trying to sit up. The metal gleamed inertly in the cold sunlight, and the six-fingered figure looked alien as . . . as . . . hell, nobody had ever seen an alien.

Then I remembered. I moved to the control panel and punched for a rerun of instrument readings, hoping. I punched repeat, still hoping. But there had been no beam failure at the barge. I felt a little cold as I told the captain how something, possibly the Sino-Sov since it was the kind of thing Mao Lee was capable of, had cut my power beam, once for thirty seconds and again for about sixty. He checked the board. I guess I was avoiding the other possibility, but he didn't. He said, "Mao isn't above arranging an accident for a couple of Imperialists if he gets the chance. But it could have been something inside that fumarole. We'll have to watch it."

Margot asked, "Are we going to . . ." And the captain grinned at her. "We sure are. But we aren't going to broadcast any more power. We'll move the barge over there."

The sleds can be towed — anchored, one on a side, to the barge,





inside the field. We settled well to one side of the fumarole, suited up and slogged through the sand to where we could see. Our alien was sitting there. I remarked about it, and Dave asked pointedly if I had really expected him to move, saying that made me one stupid remark up on him. Margot shushed us. Captain Scott looked up at the half-blocked cavern mouth and then down the slope. "Hank," he asked, "can you use those shaped charges of yours in loose sand?"

Hank nodded. "Anywhere, Captain. Firecracker size and up."

"If you can clear away a couple of tons of sand at the bottom, I think this stuff will flow again." Hank nodded and turned back to the barge.

I'll say this for old Hank. He's small and wiry and homely, with bleached yellow hair and a grumpy disposition. But I think his grumpy manner is mostly preoccupation. He has guts. In some ways its tougher to move into a possible danger zone than into one you know is loaded. All we knew then was that probably something inside that cave had tapped our power beam. But Hank didn't bat an eye. He came back with a mean-looking little blob of putty, pushing a little transistorized detonator into it. The art, he says, is in shaping the goo and judging the setting of the detonator. It will go "phut" or "bang". Hank is an artist with it. And he moved out, sensibly keeping his head down, but without missing a step.

He took his time, sizing up the drift. When he came back he pushed



a button on another gadget he took from his belt. This was a "phut" setting, and when he raised his thumb a cloud of red sand splashed out into the desert. Up above, the sand started flowing again.

**W**e watched, fascinated, as the half-hitting, half-reclining figure emerged.

It was a pressure suit, but nothing like ours and nothing like those used by the Volga Boatmen. And it looked disturbingly as if whoever was inside had just stopped to rest, too beat to make it back inside. It looked so alien, it gave me a chill, but it was not ugly. It was just, by our standards, misshapen. It was not tall, less than two meters, but the body was big. These people, I thought, must have come from a thin air

planet and needed plenty of lung space. The helmet was outsize, too, as if to accommodate a plume or crest. When the sand stopped flowing the whole thing was revealed, as was half the cavern mouth.

Captain Scott said, "Get pictures of him, Dave, before we move him." Dave shot as we approached and took close-ups after we got to him. We stayed back out of his way. We were still below the level of the sand piled in the cavern mouth, so long as we kept our heads down. Dave, kneeling beside the helmet, pointed and looked up. "How do you suppose he could see, through that?"

The face plate was smooth and shining, but it was not transparent. We could see our reflections in the curved surface. Margot said, "Try infrared, Dave. Maybe these people see by heat waves or some other low band."

Dave nodded and shot some more footage at a wide spread of settings. Then he turned his infrared setup on the cavern mouth. From outside, the cave entrance looked black as space; but there's always a little heat, for a good photographer.

When Dave finished the captain looked down, and he sounded almost as if he were talking to himself. "Not an anthropologist within a hundred and fifty million miles. Who would have thought we'd need one?" Then he spoke to me. "Rainbow, we'll have to take him back to the barge. We can't work on him out here. See how heavy he is."

None of us had been under two fifths gravity long enough to go soft. Besides, we keep the sleds, and

the barge, at a full one G. I knelt beside him, raised the straight leg so I could get my arm under it. He moved easily. I put the other arm under his shoulders and stood upright. Then I glanced around and found my head was above the level of the sand in the cavern mouth. Something told me to duck out of there, and just as I did all hell broke loose.

## II

Something roared. Or gave the impression of a roar.

You don't hear much in that tenuous nitrogen. But I could sure hear, or feel, this. And it wasn't a jet blasting. It was force — big force. The tons of sand which had filled the cavern mouth disappeared, flicked away, leaving the floor bare and glistening. And out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse, out in the desert, of a dust cloud forming as something brushed the surface, sending sand, and rocks as big as the barge, tumbling and disintegrating.

Then the direction of the blast changed, turning away from me, swinging in a short arc and sending more sand flying. There was a faint puff of dust, and the cavern mouth was half again larger. The blast had touched the far side. For once my reflexes seemed to have failed me. But the whole thing lasted only seconds. Then it stopped as abruptly as it had started, and I found the captain tugging my arm, urging me away. I was scared, but I seemed all right, and I still held the alien. I started for the barge, with the others trooping along beside me. We took

our alien in through the lock and put him gently down on a work table where we could get some lights on him.

I reached for my helmet release, but the captain tapped my arm. "Leave it on," he ordered. "We'll stay suited up until we've looked this fellow over. Hank? You're the nearest we have to a bacteriologist. Do what you can, and we'll help." Hank nodded and turned away. The captain looked down thoughtfully and mused, "There'll be some kind of organic matter inside, if only dust."

We projected Dave's closeups of the faceplate. But he had picked up only shadows. We couldn't tell what was inside. So there was a tense moment when we lifted off the plate. We were prepared to find something fascinating, or horrible, or both. But the captain had been right on both counts. There was organic matter, but it was little more than dust — some fragments of bone and some slightly canine-looking teeth. Hank carefully tweezed them up and put them on a tray. I felt a touch of anxious guilt, as if we were violating a tomb. Then we got to work.

We had to improvise. We used Hank's equipment and his microscope. Our little computer whirled and muttered over the data Hank and Margot fed into it. But finally Hank, still scowling, nodded to the captain; and we gratefully got out of our helmets and gloves. Hank looked down at the pitiful remnants of the alien and said, "He can't hurt us. He's no more dangerous, now, than the Egyptian kings they have on display at Cairo."

"Do you mean he's that old, too?"

Hank made what was for him a joke. "Not quite. When he sat down out there, the big news in Europe was Caesar's assassination."

We looked at each other, and Margot whistled softly. "You mean he was out there on that ledge for two thousand years?"

"Give or take a half century."

We didn't question Hank. He is competent, and this had not been so far out of his line at that. We had been dealing more with a fossil than a biological specimen. We packed the alien away, and nobody said anything, just yet, of what I was wondering about. What, inside that cavern, was still capable of blasting what could only have been some kind of ship drive at us?

**T**hat it was a ship drive was confirmed immediately.

Dave's angled, infrared shots looked a little eerie, as infrared always does. But what we saw on the screen was the stern of a boat. It looked as alien as the suit. The stern was flat, chopped off, with almost no projections and certainly with no rocket tube such as we use. It appeared about four meters high. On the flat, stern surface there was a target-shaped group of rings, with the center ring higher than the rest. Spaced around the outer circle were four miniatures of the same design, mounted on short, ball-and-socket joints. Steering units?

They were. Dave's reflexes hadn't failed him. He had caught most of the blast, including the turn when the drive swept in its short arc away

from us. We could see the steering units turn toward us and the whole ship turn and edge forward into the cavern, coming to a shuddering stop. It had been when the ship yawed that the drive had touched the far edge of the cavern mouth. The frames after cutoff showed the obsidian gouged out, smooth as a mirror.

Dave snapped on the lights. "Good thing you kept your head down, Rainbow."

The captain looked around and said thoughtfully, "This is going to take some of the smugness out of us. By that boat's size and the size of that suit, I'd guess the boat is a lifeboat. The fact that they lost a ship and had to take to the boats shows they weren't infallible. But they were a long way ahead of us, and that was two thousand years ago, when this fellow died."

Hank gestured toward the screen. "Seems there's someone or something alive in there now."

"Something, not someone. The boat is automated, robotic, with sensors that found our beam and tapped it — quite an accomplishment in itself — and also sensed us outside the cavern. I believe now it was the boat, not our friend Mao, although that would have been a joke on Mao. It led us to something he would trade his ancestors' bones for. But there can't be anything in there alive, in the sense that we are alive."

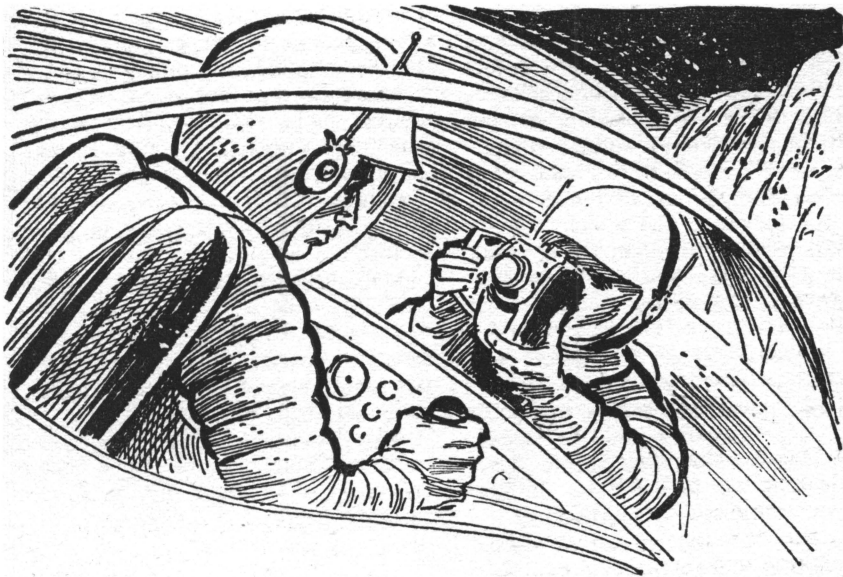
Margot frowned and said, "Some computers . . ." But the captain shook his head. "We've got computers that seem to think. But we still have to tell them what to do. They

just do it faster. No, I think we've just found a highly automated lifeboat, with some kind of protective reactions programmed into it. And we must have it — intact. If we're sharp enough to figure how it works, we may take a two-thousand-year technological jump in a few years. A starship!"

Then he turned to Hank. "We keep dropping the work in your lap, Hank. There's a real valuable mineral deposit under that ridge. Let's find out what it looks like and what it's made of. Maybe we can figure a way to get in there, past that drive and the steering units."

**I**t was hard work, even in two-fifths gravity, getting Hank set up. But we did, finally, to his scowling satisfaction. He started setting off a series of his little "phut" charges, and his recorders ticked and whirled as the echoes bounced back. He has some pretty sophisticated gadgets, and he kept them busy until dark. That night he and Margot drew us a diagram.

"The hull is the same material our friend here was wearing. I'm not sure it is metal. A diamond drill won't touch the suit, although a laser will. But inside the hull there is copper, iron, silver, plastics, the whole bit. Their gadgetry is made up of much the same materials we use. And, oh, there are two more aliens in there, just as dead as this one. The hull is six meters high at center, tapering to about four at each end. It's thirty meters long. And it's wedged, now, into a curve in that obsidian blow hole."



Hank went on. Between his findings and Dave's photographs we knew now in outline what was behind that space-black cavern mouth. The soundings showed a flattened shape at the nose which seemed to indicate the boat had hit the curved wall. The cavern mouth was wide now. There was room enough to fly a sled in beside the boat if anyone had been silly enough to try it. There was an entry port on the open side, too, or at least there was something with the shape of a set of steps, twisted now toward the stern as the boat had moved.

The captain looked at the sketch. "If we can get inside we've no reason to believe we can't disconnect the drive and steering controls, even if we have to cut some cables. They must be operated by power circuits."

Dave grinned. "Ah, yes. The steering controls, even if we have to cut some cables. They have to be controlled by power circuits."

Dave grinned. "Ah, yes. The steering units. But don't look at me."

The captain grinned back. "I know. You just take pictures of us heroes. But you're right. As soon as we show ourselves in the mouth of that cavern, those steering units may start again. We can stay away from the drive path, but the steering units can track us."

Hank said, "I could bounce a charge off the wall and into the stern."

"No doubt, Hank. But the drive is one of the things we want most. Besides, we might end up with nothing here but a mile-wide crater, with us part of the atmosphere."

Then Hank cleared his throat, and his scowl faded to only a couple of lines across his forehead. For him that was the equivalent of a beaming smile. "How about blasting out this side of the cavern mouth? We might widen it enough so we can go in from an angle, out of range."

We looked at the sketch, and the captain said, "It might work, Hank. We don't know how far those steering units can swivel, but it's worth trying."

But we didn't get the chance. Next morning, as the captain was talking to our dome and asking that tools, and our computer man, be sledged out to us, the unmistakable frying static of an approaching antigrav unit, a big one, crackled from the speaker. We looked out to see another barge, a smaller one than ours, with Sino-Sov markings, settle between us and the cave. In a moment we heard Mao Lee's clipped Oxford accent wishing us a pleasant good morning.

We had met him, on Earth, and also Colonel Rostoff. The colonel was a spacer. Make no mistake, he would liquidate you without blinking. But only when and if he were ordered to. Mao was a different breed of Sinner. He was a hatchet man and an ambitious one. Stories filtered through to us. There always seemed to be vacancies in the ranks just above him.

He came in through the lock, and he was wearing a sidearm. The captain answered his greeting curtly and pointed to the luger. "A formal protest, Captain. The preliminary surveys indicated arms would not be

needed here, and it was agreed, when our expeditions were being readied, that none would be brought."

Mao's swarthy face grimaced in a wolfish smile, reducing his eyes to slits. "So, Captain? I wasn't aware the agreement applied to sidearms."

Captain Scott looked steadily at him. "What are you doing in this sector?"

Mao shrugged and grinned blandly. "Why, this is open area."

"It is not. It is fifty kilometers inside the district allotted to us by the Delhi agreement. Our surveys, made this trip, will confirm it."

Mao shrugged. "That remains to be seen, Captain. Until it has been proven, I shall treat this as open ground. And in open ground we share any discoveries."

Margot had one of Hank's samples in her fist. Dave and I were trying to edge around behind Mao. But the captain shook his head. He went on, to Mao, "We don't yet know what we have here. But whatever it is we intend to keep it. If it is to be shared with your people the decision will be made at Delhi."

Then Mao again favored us with his wolf grin and slid the luger into his palm. "No, Captain. The decision will be made here and now." He flicked the gun at us and then moved catlike to the worktable. His eyes went over the alien suit. "Ah! We suspected as much, from what we heard of your intercom conversation." Then he bowed slightly to Margot and pointed with the gun to the sketches. "Ah, Miss Harris. Put down that, ah, paperweight, please,

and show me what you have learned so far."

Margot's face paled, and her quick intake of breath sounded a storm warning; but the captain shook his head. "Do what he asks, Margot. We don't want anyone killed here just yet."

Mao hissed, "Sensible, Captain," and his eyes glittered as he went over the sketch. He was not interested in the alien as such. But his conclusion was the same as ours, that the alien had come from somewhere beyond our system. Presently his eyes slitted again, and he gestured with the luger. "A starship, possibly? We will inspect this cavern, Captain. Suits, all of you."

We took our time. Hank seemed to be having a lot of trouble with his equipment, and non-hero Dave was stopped once two short steps from Mao. Mao's wolfish grin flashed as his fingers tightened on the luger. The captain snapped, "No, Dave. If he has a hand gun his men will have tommy guns at least."

Mao hissed, "Sensible, Captain. And correct."

### III

**W**e could see two suited figures in Mao's barge.

There was no room for any more to be hidden in the space not covered by the plastic covered control area. His was not a work vehicle. But there was a man outside our lock. He wore an imitation of Mao's slit-eyed grin on his face and had a machine pistol in his hands. He covered us while we walked to the cavern.

Mao inspected the entrance, from the side, and then motioned his man in with a floodlight.

The captain said, "You don't deserve this, Mao, but a light, or movement in the cavern mouth, may trigger a blast from that drive."

Mao laughed. "And you would not like to see me killed. I can always count on this behavior pattern from you, Captain. It is one of the things that makes life simpler for me. But the drive is headed away from us. We saw the dust cloud yesterday and the marking on the desert this morning."

I knew things were getting tense. The captain had edged closer to Mao while he was talking, and I had seen Hank fish something from his belt pouch. I looked closely, and damned if he didn't have one of his little blobs of putty in his fist. We hadn't had time to make any campaign plans, but I had the feeling the captain would try something if the drive blasted and diverted Mao. Mao's man flicked on the light and edged forward. I suppressed a yell of glee, when I saw he was moving into the edge of the cavern opening. He was clear of the drive, but our last photos had shown the steering units still aimed toward us. The light picked out the far side of the drive, and he leaned forward for a better look. Then he stopped, and I guessed he had noticed the steering units staring him in the face. But he was too late. As he started to back away the drive cut in with a roar, and the blast from the lower steering unit caught him at the knees.

I saw a puff of vapor as the air

gushed out of his suit. It's a messy way to die, but it's quick. One down! I dove for Mao's gun hand just as the captain did. I saw Dave and Hank lunge in from the side. Hank got to him, and Mao went down momentarily. But he was lithe as a cat and rolled to his feet. I saw the luger flash twice and I felt a bee sting my upper arm. Suit pressure dropped and then built up again as the punctures sealed. Mao crouched, the luger slowly swinging from side to side. And the captain was down.

I got up, breathing hard. Margot was on her knees beside the captain, and I saw his suit had sealed, too. And the puncture in front was high in the shoulder. I was hopeful. Margot crackled something unladylike at Mao, who laughed. "Stupid. All of you. If your captain is dead it is because he asked for it. Don't anyone else ask for the same thing. I'll have no compunction . . ."

Then Hank interrupted him. "I'll have no compunction either, Mao. Look! you know what this is. Your people use the same thing!" Hank was holding his little detonator in his fist, his thumb pressed on the firing pin. "When my thumb releases this, whether I'm dead or not, that charge stuck to your back between your air tanks will blow. Now toss that luger into the sand over there!"

Mao's voice hissed back quickly. "If I go, you all go with me! Have you thought of that?"

And for the first time since I had known him I heard Hank laugh. "I sure have thought of that, Mao. There's just enough force there be-

tween your shoulders to take the back out of your suit. You like to gamble — I'll stand within a meter of you and wave my thumb!"

Mao seemed to shrink. He glanced at his barge, glared at us; and a mumbled stream of what must have been Canton gutter profanity came through our phones. But he tossed the luger aside and stood frozen.

Hank said, "Margot, you and Dave take the captain back and get at that wound. Looks high in the shoulder, but he'll be bleeding. I'll take care of this."

I scrambled to help them, and while we were getting the captain up, so they could carry him, Margot was able to ask, "How, Hank? You're not going to just . . ." And again Hank laughed. It was getting to be a habit. "No, not in cold blood. I'll tell you later. Git! And Rainbow, I want to strip the weapons out of that barge of his."

I had been wondering how we were going to get loose of this tiger's tail, short of a shooting between the eyes, which I would have been very happy to do.

But Hank said no, we already had an international, interspace incident on our hands. We didn't want to complicate it. Mao's men had swarmed out of the barge, but on Mao's snarled command were behaving themselves. Soon Hank was standing by a pile of weapons, with the crew, hating us with their eyes, frozen rigid. I went through the barge, taking my time and not being too careful about what I smashed while poking into corners. I came out with



one more machine pistol which I happily kept pointing at Mao's belly.

Then Hank laughed again, told me to cover them and see if I could dream up some excuse to shoot all three and not to be too fussy. Then he climbed one handed to the top of the barge. He came back in a moment, a wolfish grin worthy of Mao on his thin face. He said, "Mao, as soon as you are away you will, of course, have the boys remove that charge from your back and toss it out the lock. But as soon as I raise my thumb, the charge on top of your dome will blow the barge to bits. I'm going up on top of that bluff back there, with glasses, and I better not see that barge go to ground or see anyone climbing around on it. It will be up to you to figure out how far I will be able to see you. When you're out of sight you will have thirty seconds to ground and get away from the barge before I blow it. If your timing is wrong, you will go with the barge. If it is right, you will have the privilege of walking from there home. I hope you guess wrong. Now, git!"

If the captain hadn't been hit and maybe dying back in our own barge, I would have howled with glee. And I did manage an "Amen" when I heard Margot's voice in the radio call, "Hank! I love you!" Then it dawned on me the captain must be all right or she wouldn't have been listening. I did yell, then, until I heard the captain's voice, weak but steady, tell me to get back home, there was work to do. I left Hank up on the hogback with my glasses,

his fist held high in case Mao had glasses on him, watching the barge cut at speed for the horizon.

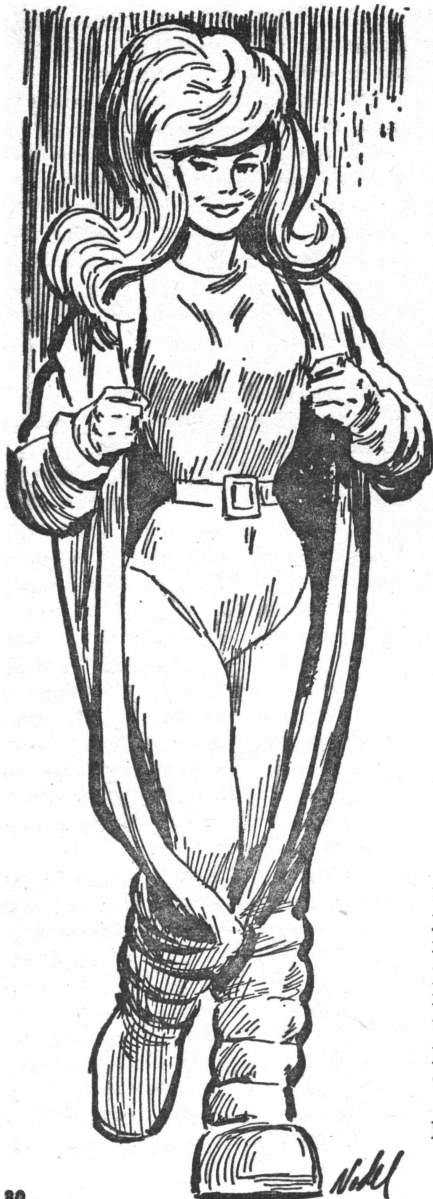
The captain was sitting up when I came in. He was pale, but the slug had caught him high in the shoulder and had not broken any bones. He grinned at me. "I'll compliment all of you later. I'm proud of you. But we're working against time now. Rostoff will be back." Then he picked up the microphone. "Hank," he called, "keep your range low. You didn't blow that barge did you?"

Hank's voice had a faint chuckle in it. I guess he just hadn't been getting enough action. Laughing was getting to be a habit. "Naw, Captain. But Mao knows I'm no gentleman, so he'll be doubtful. I figure the loss of face will hurt him more than anything else. I'll come in now."

The captain turned back to us. "We're armed now, something Rostoff and Mao can understand. We'll be better armed when our people get here from the dome. We're not entirely without sin ourselves. But I want to be in full possession of that boat before Rostoff gets back here. So start thinking. How do we get in there quickly?"

Hank came in, actually grinning. The captain waved him an across-the-face salute. "You have hidden talents, Hank. Thanks. Tell me, how long would it take to tunnel into that port from the side?"

"Days, at best. We can still try widening the cavern mouth. But if the steering units will swivel forty five degrees, they can still track us and block us."



The captain nodded. "It's a gamble. How long would that take?"

Margot interrupted before Hank could give an estimate. "Wait a minute, Captain. I wasn't as busy as the rest of you during that mix-up. I noticed something. We've been assuming a defensive reaction from that boat."

"Yes. And pretty successful. It has killed one man."

"But I don't believe it was *trying* to kill him. The steering units didn't move. They didn't track him. He just got in the way. I think that whatever is activating that drive is, well, alive — aware — and is simply trying to crowd that boat farther into the cavern. In short, it is alive and scared."

We all looked kind of blank, and Dave grinned. "That puts you one stupid remark up on Rainbow and me."

"That's your game," she snapped. "Leave me out of it. Listen. There's a computer of some kind in there. But the drive is two thousand years ahead of ours so the computer is, too."

The captain looked interested. "Reasonable. Go on, Margot."

"I believe that computer is aware, that it can really think. But it has just — well — awakened, after being inoperative for two thousand years, possibly with part or most of its memory inoperative from disintegration or lack of power. I think all the power it has is what it trapped from our beam in ninety seconds. It's "alive," regressed, and it is just simply scared and trying to hide."

I couldn't quite grasp it. It made

sense, of a sort, and then it didn't. In spite of myself I grinned at her and the others, even the captain, looked puzzled and a little amused. Margot waited, watching us, and then her face paled a little so the freckles sparkled. Oh! Oh! Storm signal! Her voice dropped to a whisper, a sure sign she was hopping mad.

"You! Listen to me. I *like* being a woman. I like being a good-looking woman, and I know I am because I can see it in Rainbow's eyes and Dave's and Hank's and everybody's except . . ." She was glaring at the captain, and she stumbled over the word "except." And for once *he* had lost his calm, patient look and was just staring. But her voice tumbled on, and she shocked me just a little for I had never heard her swear like a man before. She even banged her fist on the table.

"But Goddamnit!" she hissed. "Like any other woman there are times when I want to be treated like a man, and this is one of the times!"

We didn't say a word. She put her elbows on the table and ticked off her points. "The boat obviously has sensors. But the alien saw by infrared, so the sensors do, too. That may be why the boat was put in the cavern in the first place — to get in out of the glare. The alien came from a thin-air planet — that huge chest capacity — so he would be especially sensitive to sound waves. And so are the boat's sensors. And there's no reason to believe the steering units are tracking us. They've moved only in a turning maneuver. I think the boat can't even see us,

outside. It can *hear* us, is afraid of us and is trying only to get away from us."

The captain nodded. "All right, Margot. Go on."

Her voice was back to normal. She glanced around at us and said, a little anxiously, "I'm sorry I blew my top." The captain waved it away, and she went on. "I think there's a way to get inside that cavern inside the next two hours, with no danger at all. If we do it right and are absolutely silent about it."

We were all interested now. The captain said, "OK. Let's take one point at a time. Why silent?"

"Because of the boat's fear reaction. I insist it is "aware," but just barely. A human baby may laugh and wave its fists at the pretty, pretty flames when the far side of the room catches fire. But it will scream in terror when it hears the fire siren coming. So far, we've been anything but quiet. So we'll be absolutely silent until we are in past the drive and steering units. Once inside, where the sensors can really see me, I think it won't fire. It won't be afraid. It may even open the port to me."

We stirred a little, but the captain gestured us to silence. "Go on, Margot. How and why? How can you get in with absolute silence. And why will it open to you. Not to us, by your statement, but to *you*?"

She glanced over at me and then she dropped her bomb as casually as if she were asking for more coffee. "Because," she said carefully, "Rainbow will fly me in, on antigrav, on a

stripped sled. And because I'm the only one small enough to get into the alien's pressure suit."

I yelled, "Yipe!," and everyone started talking at once. The captain quelled the babble with a raised hand. "Hold it! Let's work it out! You must know, Margot, that we can't broadcast any more power toward that boat, even a minimum beam to a stripped sled. I won't feed that boat any more power."

She nodded. "But we *can* strip a sled, even of instruments and the landing runners and pushpots. And we can clamp on, and wire into the grav unit, every power pack we have with us. I know that won't give power enough to lift the sled more than a meter, or let Rainbow move it more than a few meters at most, on the level. But if we take it up above the cavern, on that bluff, before we remove the pushpots, he will have power enough to control a glide down. He can swing into the cavern mouth, in between those two steering-unit paths. You can see their marks on this side of the cavern mouth. But Captain, they won't fire! And even if they do, they won't attempt to track us. And I know Rainbow can take me in!"

The smile she dimpled at me would ordinarily have melted me down to head-bobbing incoherence. But I was visualizing that bluff and the cavern entrance. Why, after the first few seconds I wouldn't have any lift at all with that kind of power. This wouldn't be a docking maneuver. It would be more like riding a square-ended redwood plank down a ten-foot wave between the

pilings of a pier. And with a passenger!

I was about to say so when the captain, looking around the cabin at the various power packs available, undercut me. He said, "I know he could take you in, Margot. I've docked with him. I'm not concerned about that part. But the suit isn't tight any more. And why should you wear it, anyway?"

"It doesn't have to be tight. I can get into it with my own suit on. I won't want the gauntlets or boots anyway. The arms and legs would be too long. And I need it so the boat's sensors will see something familiar, *one of its own people*, coming to it. And it will let me in. I'm sure of it!"

She waited, her eyes shining, and the captain's fingers drummed the table, a thing I had never seen before. He kept looking at her as if he had never seen her before. And he was thinking the same thing I was, for presently he said that the steering units would blast the minute we put anything in sight in the cave mouth. She shook her head. "The sensors can't see anything outside in that glare. It's sound that triggers them."

I didn't envy the captain. I'm as ambitious as the next rocket jockey and given at times to pleasant little fantasies in which I appear as Fearless Leader. But I was sure glad that decision was up to him, not me. But he imposed only one condition; that we take along one of Hank's little laser drills, so we could cut our way into the boat if we had to. He ended

up grinning at her and saying, "Okay, Tiger. As of now, you're just one of the boys!"

And wouldn't you know it? She promptly turned girl again. She sparkled, her amber eyes glowing, and for a minute I thought she was going to kiss him. I felt a little pang, for I knew it was only a matter of time before she did. And then I did envy him.

#### IV

But we got to work. Or, rather, Dave and Hank did.

Margot and I put on red goggles and kept out of the light as much as we could. When we suited up we had attached hinged, red sunscreens over our helmet faces. We had to be able to see, a little at least, in that dim light inside. Even though the alien face plate had been removed, I got a slight case of the shudders when I saw the suit walking toward me. It seemed to me it would be a little like getting into a mummy case, even though she did have her own suit on.

They stripped a sled and wired in the power packs and got it into position on the bluff before they removed the pushpots and runners. I climbed up and strapped down to the bare deck and had another case of the shudders. I had a stick and a voltmeter and my eyes to fly by. But we were as ready as we would ever be. Margot stepped up beside me and slapped me on the helmet.

"Scared, Rainbow?"

"Tiger, that puts you one stupid remark up on me. Aren't you?"

She laughed. "That question makes us even. You're piloting this surfboard, remember? It's a log, but this will be no worse than riding a big one in to the beach at Makaha. You do that every trip home, just for kicks. Let's go, surfer."

She grabbed me by the shoulder, and I lifted the sled from the jacks and used a lot of our power just for that first shove. I used a lot more swinging wide, for I wanted to avoid a drop-turn and get a straight shot at the slot I had visualized between those two steering unit paths. She insisted on standing up because, she said, she wanted the boat's sensors to recognize her at its first glimpse when he came in out of the glare. It made sense, but my clearance was only centimeters, top and bottom. It was a case of do it right the first time or take a chance on getting Margot's helmet sliced off.

But it was something I could do, if I didn't tense up. So I sat loose, let my belly muscles sag and flew it by eye and by the seat of my pants. And it was close. After the turn those two grooves looked awfully close together. But it was right, and we rode in through the slot as if we were on rails. And she had called it right! There wasn't a flicker from drive or steering units.

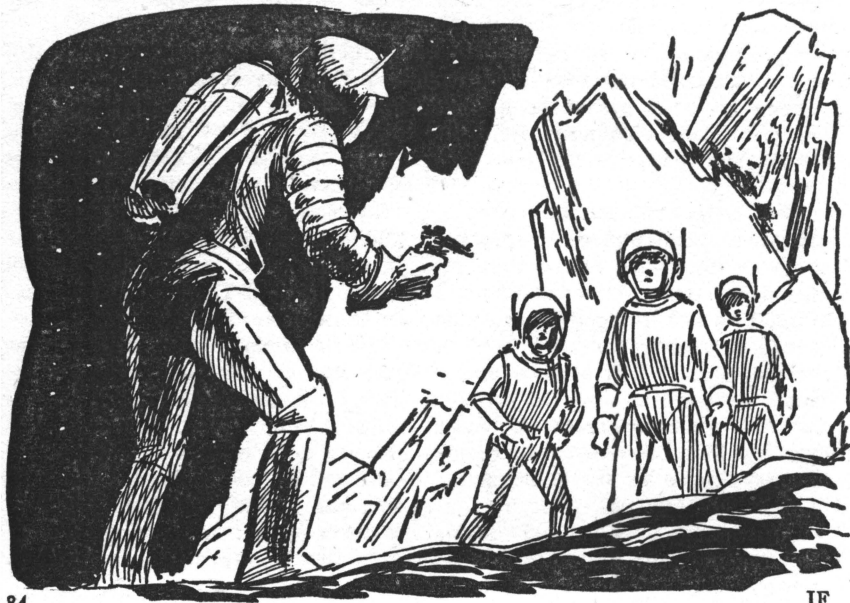
I pushed up the red sunscreen as soon as we left sunlight and sure enough I could see, a little. Obviously she could, too, for she stepped off, walked briskly to the port and just stood there. And again she had called the turn. Damned if there wasn't a growing whisper of static in my radio. It couldn't

have come from the sled for we had touched down on our last pulse of power. But there was the crackle of relays clicking and solenoids snapping and servo motors starting. In a few more seconds the port dilated, and the faintest of red lights came on inside the lock. Margot waved to me and walked up the steps as if she were going home.

I wanted to yell. I wanted to follow her in. But I sat still, as agreed, trying to look like another piece of machinery. But the rest of it was almost routine. She and the captain quietly talked over the circuitry. I heard her gasp when she reported two more empty suits. She said she wasn't even going to look in the bunks. And as they worked it out they didn't even have to cut any leads. The aliens were a long way

ahead of us, but control circuits — well, there's only one sensible way to build some things. She found the drive switches and cut them out. Then they moved the barge close, and Dave and Hank came in with floodlights. We got busy tracing down the computer, the black box, which Margot insisted was alive, aware, but had regressed to the point where it was in effect a child — and a scared child at that. But inside it, we believed, was our starship.

And child or not, it is now her baby. She and I have already taught it to talk. She said she wanted my voice graph for the voder. She bribed, fought and charmed her way into lead spot on the team that is trying to reconstruct Baby and cut in the damaged memory banks, plus



some units of our own. And we "Martians" are making real progress now. Rostoff's people are yelling, but the senators are not grumping now. They're pushing up anything we ask for, and damn the cost.

**M**ost people are a little edgy about what kind of people the aliens — Kalsa, Baby calls them — may turn out to be. But I think they'll turn out pretty much as we are. After all, they built Baby; and if you build a thinking machine it will think like you do. And just now, when I started to leave the lab, Baby hissed at me.

It was a little disconcerting to hear my own voice calling me, but I

walked over to the voder. Baby whispered, "Rainbow, Margot and the captain are — what is it you say — 'like that,' aren't they?"

I sighed. "Afraid so."

"Well, that assistant they sent up from the heavy planet last week. Not the machine. The light-crested female human. Dave says he has her number, but I think that puts him one stupid remark up on you. She's been watching you. What are you, anyway, a Kalsa or a Qwertyniop? Get with it!"

See what I mean? We'll get along with them, when we find them. But you'll have to excuse me. I have a phone call to make.

END

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# BY THE SEAWALL

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

*Micah-IV wasn't human and couldn't understand why humans did strange things — but he could imitate them!*

**I**t was Michas-IV's bad luck to be on duty by the seawall the day the first of the suicides occurred. He was not really to blame for what happened, but he was reprimanded none the less. How could he have known? How could he begin to comprehend human motives?

His post along the seawall was exactly a thousand meters long. It was Zone KF-6 on the master chart, shown as a neat, elongated blue block. Since the total length of the seawall was six thousand kilometers, Micah-IV knew that he was responsible for precisely one six-thousandth of the entire length of the seawall. It was a somber burden, for **did not** the safety of humanity **depend on** the wall? Yes. But Micah-IV was watchful. He

patrolled his kilometer twelve hours a day, ever vigilant. He did his best; but he was not omniscient.

The seawall stood sixty meters high throughout most of its length and was twenty meters thick at its base, tapering to a width of six meters at the top. It was constructed of blocks of gray-green stone, dressed and trued to the last millimeter and laid one atop another without need of mortar. The stone came from the Wyoming nuclear kilns, beetle-trucked across the continent to its place at the shore. Building the wall had taken the better part of two generations, even with mechanical help. It had been the great communal effort of mankind. Its vastness made a mockery of all earlier accomplishments of its sort.



The Great Pyramid was a heap of pebbles beside it, and China's Great Wall, a rivulet of sand.

Beyond the seawall lay the gray bulk of the ocean, beast infested, sinister.

As he marched parade from one end of Zone KF-6 to the other, Micah-IV could sometimes see the beasts turning and twisting in the water. Now and then one would swim curiously up toward the land, searching for a chink in the armor of humanity. There were no chinks, of course. The beasts were deflected, a kilometer from shore, by a zone of poison, spewed day and night by vents sprouting from the seawall itself. If the beasts passed the yellow-stained poison zone, they next encountered a belt of electrification, fifty meters wide, ready to unleash thousands of kilowatts upon any lifeform large enough to trigger it. Within the electrified belt lay the seawall. Its outer face gleamed like annealed bronze and was as smooth as the finest glass.

No beast could climb that wall.

No beast ever had, in the eighty years since the wall's completion.

Several had tried, though Micah-IV had not seen it happen. In Zone CJ-9, some forty years ago, a scaly thing with fiery red eyes and a ferocious tail had propelled its way through the poison zone, had endured the electricity, and had launched itself against the wall in blind fury. Thirty tons of angry flesh struck the seawall without causing it to quiver. Bracing itself on mighty hind flippers, the monster

rose erect, its snout twenty meters above the ground, its rough tongue lapping at the glassy stone, and it attempted to climb.

There was no way for it to gain purchase. It slipped back again and again. At last it dropped to the rocky shore just without the seawall and lay there exhausted. Its ponderous gasps could be heard far away. Levering itself up once more, it butted its head mindlessly against the base of the wall for days, until in the end the gray-green stone was liberally stained with red, and the decaying, bloated corpse of the monster lay by the shore as prey for the scavenger birds.

Twenty years later Zone BX-11 had had a much closer call. A sinuous ebony thing longer than any tree was tall had made its journey safely past poison and electricity and, extending tendrils thirty meters long tipped with great sucker-pads, had begun to climb. Up, up, up, until the stinking salty mass clung to the seawall's middle, and then one of the sucker-pads slapped itself to the stone a scant five meters from the top. That activated the resonating circuits. Booming waves of sound raced along the spectrum from the bottom to a scope of several million hz. The sea boiled and churned. The sucker-pads relented; the creature fell back and was dashed against the boulders at the base of the seawall.

Micah-IV had known no such excitements. For half the

hours of each day he moved from southern border of KF-7 to the northern border of KF-5, watching the sea. Now a lemon-colored torpedo of an animal, scales bright in the sunlight, would flash by, well outside the poison zone. Now Micah-IV would see by night the uplifted luminous trawler-organ of a giant sweeper of the seas and by its light would glimpse the terrible, gaping mouth behind that dangling orb. Now he would see tentacles lash the water; now, the sudden spike of a ghastly fin.

The beasts kept their distance. Once they had raided the shore settlements at will, for most of them could tolerate an hour or two in the air. Since the construction of the seawall they had been denied that pleasure. The dwellers of the land were safe from the nightmares in the sea. Walled off, thwarted, the great things circled and wheeled in their own salty element, now and again attacking each other in battles that made the continents tremble.

Twelve hours Micah-IV walked the battlements. Twelve hours he rested in the barracks of the guardians. Even synthetic flesh must have a chance to rid itself of the poisons of fatigue.

His job was simple. He patrolled the upper walkway, keeping watch on the sea against an unwanted intruder from below. In the event one of the beasts attempted an attack, he was required to notify the central authorities. His sphere of responsibility also embraced maintenance of the wall; he was charged

with discovering potential defects or strains before they became serious, and with reporting them to the proper departments.

Lastly, Micah-IV's tasks included dealing with the humans who occasionally mounted the wall to look at the sea.

They came, generally, in family groups of five or six. Micah-IV greeted them courteously, spoke of the techniques by which the seawall had been constructed, and when possible pointed out to them the sporting monsters off shore. If a child became fearful, Micah-IV comforted it. If a woman developed nausea, Micah-IV gave her medicine. If a man in his boldness went to close to the low retaining barrier that topped the wall, Micah-IV tactfully suggested that he stand back a bit. One never knew when a sucker-tipped tentacle would probe from below.

**I**t was a dreary, mechanical job, which was why human beings did not care for it. Micah-IV, as a synthetic, was better able to cope with boredom. He had patrolled the seawall for more than a decade now, and the uneventful round of his days did not have serious effects on his mind. Every third year he needed a retuning to cancel the cumulative impact of the boredom, that was all.

Up the path. Down the path. Eyes right. Eyes left. Check the sea. Check the shore. Key in the resonating circuits every second hour. Report to Central every third hour. Monitor the visitor center.

Snow, Wind, Rain. Heat. Sun.  
Tang of salt air in the cunningly  
crafted nostrils.

Whitecaps on the surface of the  
sea. Vast things heaving in its  
depths.

Privately Micah-IV yearned for  
an incident. Let a beast try to  
scale the wall, he prayed. Let a  
woman tourist enter childbirth atop  
the wall. Let a stone block be struck  
by lightning and crumble. Some-  
thing novel, something unexpected,  
something to give Zone KF-6 its  
place in seawall history.

He was within a year of need-  
ing another tuning. That was why  
he felt the wish for novelty.

He stared hopefully at the things  
lashing the water, waiting for them  
to attack. But they did not attack.  
It would be futile, and the animals  
out there knew it. The wall was  
impenetrable. The days when ma-  
rauders out of the sea devoured  
hundreds of humans for lunch were  
over forever.

It was curious, then, that when  
the first unusual incident in Micah-  
IV's patrol career occurred, he was  
unable to prevent tragedy.

He was nearly at the southern end  
of his assigned strip of the sea-  
wall when a faint pinging sound in-  
formed him that tourists had en-  
tered the visitor center in the north-  
ern part of the zone. Micah-IV  
continued to the end of the strip.  
The tourists would remain in the  
visitor center until he got to them,  
for the glass-walled enclosure could  
not be opened except by the warden  
on duty. In good time Micah-IV  
would open the visitor center and

take the humans on a conducted  
tour of the seawall.

He reached the end of his strip  
and signalled that all was well.  
Then he swung around and head-  
ed north again, moving at his meas-  
ured pace.

He was still five hundred meters  
from the visitor center when he  
saw its door open.

A man stepped out. He was dig-  
nified, even portly, in a gray tunic  
and a dark blue headband. As  
Micah-IV watched in amazement,  
the man walked briskly to the re-  
taining barrier and began to climb  
it.

"Stop!" Micah-IV called.

He could not understand how  
the door of the visitor center could  
have been opened without author-  
ization. He did not like the thought  
of an unsupervised human on the  
seawall. And he could not remotely  
see why the man was taking the  
risk of scrambling up onto the re-  
taining barrier.

He ran with all his incredible  
speed.

He was too late.

Micah-IV was still a hundred me-  
ters away when the man reach-  
ed the top of the barrier. He stood  
there flatfooted a moment, balanc-  
ing himself. Then he launched him-  
self into the air.

"No!" Micah-IV cried. "This is  
prohibited!"

It was suicide — that is, deliberate  
self-destruction. The bewildered syn-  
thetic raced toward the barrier and  
saw the man activate a gravity chute  
and glide easily toward the base of

the seawall. What was his motive? If he wished to kill himself, why the gravity chute?

"Come back," Micah-IV called, readying himself to go over the wall and retrieve the man, monsters of no.

The man was scrambling over the boulders at the shoreline, and now he was wading hip deep in the sea, brushing aside the tangled coils of brown weeds, lying face down and moving his arms, propelling himself rapidly away from the land. Micah-IV did not try to follow. It would mean double destruction and nothing gained.

In blank disbelief he watched the man swim rapidly out to sea. The belt of electricity did not harm him, since the mass of one human being was too slight to trigger a discharge. The poison zone offered no menace to a human metabolism. But then he was past the outer rim of the poison zone and in the open, unguarded sea.

A flash of bright scales — the glint of swordlike teeth — a rolling of the surface —

Then all was still out there.

Trembling, flooded with shock secretions, Micah-IV turned away. Within the visitor center were five other human beings, standing by the open door.

"Who was that man?" Micah-IV demanded. "How did he get out onto the seawall? Why did he kill himself?"

There were no answers. They all seemed strangely unmoved. Several of them requested Micah-IV to take

them on the tour of the seawall. Irritably, Micah-IV told them the tours were canceled for the day and ordered them to leave the visitor center.

He had had his moment of diversion at last. But he found the novel incident less diverting than he had anticipated.

He reported it. Shortly his sector of the wall swarmed with authorities. Wearily, Micah-IV endlessly repeated the narrative. Experts examined the door of the visitor center and showed that it had been opened in the usual way, with thumb signals. Clearly the suicide had been privy to inside information.

Micah-IV was reprimanded for having failed to prevent the suicide. It was no use to tell them that it was not his fault. Someone had to be blamed, and who else but the sector warden? Humans were not to be permitted on the seawall unattended. Micah-IV therefore must have been guilty of negligence.

To himself, he insisted that he was innocent. He could not be everywhere on his sector at once. He could not run a thousand meters instantaneously. If a human bent on self-destruction had unlawfully gained access to the signal code and was able to let himself out onto the seawall at a time when the attendant was elsewhere, how was the attendant to have prevented the act of suicide?

The reprimand meant nothing tangible to Micah-IV. It did not affect his rank, his retirement status or his salary, for he had none of these things. He was not an em-

ployee but rather a part of the apparatus. But it did affect his standing among his peers. News of the episode had spread. The wardens of other sectors were aware that Micah-IV had been reprimanded. He was shamed before his barracks-mates, for he had allowed a human being to commit suicide in his sector.

For more than a month Micah-IV lived with that stigma.

It was a great relief to him, then, when a second suicide was reported.

The circumstances were virtually identical to the first. A young woman had slipped out onto the wall in DV-7 while its warden was occupied at the opposite end of his sector. Drifting to the beach below by gravity chute, she had gone into the water, swimming out to the waiting monsters and her death.

New security measures were put in force at the visitor centers. Micah-IV felt a sense of excitement, for now his days were mottled by unpredictabilities. There was little chance that the sea-beasts would scale the seawall or that a section of the seawall would collapse, the two eventualities for which he was supposed to watch. But it was perfectly likely that at any given moment some irrational human being would go over the wall and invite a certain doom.

The third suicide, in FC-10, did not have a gravity chute. The victim — an adolescent boy — plummeted the sixty meters to the beach and was shattered on the shoreline rocks. Some monster was deprived

of a snack, but the scavenger birds ate well.

A fourth death was reported.

A fifth.

A sixth and seventh.

Perplexed sector wardens stepped up their pace, moving from end to end of their zones in two-thirds of the previous time. There was talk of closing the visitor centers altogether, but nothing came of it; it was wrong to deny millions of human beings the right to view the sea, merely because a handful were perverse.

Instead, new locks were placed on the doors of the visitor centers. Despite this precaution, there were four suicides the following week.

In the barracks, the sector wardens were briefed on ways to cope with the crisis. Micah-IV listened attentively, feeling a certain pride at the knowledge that all this had begun in his own strip of the seawall.

An official with oily, grayish skin and small green eyes addressed a cadre of the synthetics and told them, "There is now a cult of gratuitous suicide among humanity. You must do all in your power to prevent further deaths from occurring. There is nothing more precious than a human life."

The official with oily, grayish skin and small green eyes was the twenty-third suicide.

A psychiatrist with stiff, bristly hair spoke at a later meeting and declared, "The strain of the national effort to build the seawall is taking a delayed toll. The citizens are attempting individually to

undo the great communal enterprise by seeking death in the sea. Since the monsters can no longer come to the land, they go to the monsters."

It was a plausible theory. The psychiatrist tested it himself not long afterward.

Micah-IV, pacing the wall through the salt spray and the gusting winds, did his duty. As each group of humans appeared — and there were more tourists than ever, now — he scanned them impassively, wondering if he could detect suicidal tendencies. Will you try to kill yourself, you plump female? What about you, young man with too-bright eyes? You, edgy father of two?

Tourists now came out on the wall in groups of three. The attendant remained close by. Despite this, there were several incidents in which humans eluded the grasp of the warden and plunged over the wall.

In the barracks, Micah-IV listened with interest as Noah-I, one of the wisest of the synthetics, offered his views.

"It is a religious phenomenon," declared Noah-I. "I have studied religion. These people feel an oceanic urge. They must return to the great mother."

"And the monsters that devour?" asked Ezekiel-VII.

"Irrelevant. There are always risks in any relationship. The swimmers hope to elude the monsters and reach the depths of the sea. It is a spiritual yearning."

"Where will it end?" Uzziab-III inquired.

"Perhaps the wall will be taken down," suggested Noah-I. "Perhaps some new cult will arise. Or perhaps all the humans, one by one, will throw themselves into the sea."

There were further deaths. Several hundred humans had perished, now, and nearly every ten-sector overgroup had recorded its suicide. Now precautions were enforced. It was hoped that the onset of winter would create a change in the prevailing psychological climate, but the pattern of self-destruction was not broken.

On a day when specks of snow dropped from a gray sky, Micah-IV prevented a suicide.

He had detected signs in advance: the bulge of a gravity chute beneath the clothing of a red-haired woman and a certain glossiness about her eyes. When he led his group of tourists out onto the seawall, he watched her closely.

"There," he said, pointing, "is one of the enemies of mankind now. See the fluked tail? See the great spearlike tusks? See the clawed flippers?"

The red-haired woman broke from the group and bolted toward the retaining barrier.

Micah-IV, who had been expecting some such action, moved swiftly after her. She was crouching beside the barrier, activating the gravity chute. Lately, the barriers had been wired to give a mild electric shock, so that it was discouraging to try to climb one. Yet

with a gravity chute it was no hard feat the leap completely over the barrier. As the woman coiled her muscles for the leap, Micah-IV closed his hand around her arm and held her in place.

"The rest of you!" he shouted. "Inside! Inside at once!"

The other two tourists rushed into the visitor center. Micah-IV grasped the would-be suicide firmly.

"Let go of me," she demanded.

"Why do you wish to jump?"

"None of your business! Let go! Let go!"

"You will die in the sea."

"What's that to you? You filthy robot, how can you defy a human being's orders? Let go of me and let me jump!"

"I am a synthetic, not a robot," Micah-IV reminded her gently. "I am not required to obey human orders except as they follow my programming. I forbid you to leave the seawall." Efficiently he pulled the gravity chute from under her clothing and unsnapped its activator, without releasing his grip on the woman. She glowered at him.

"Tell me why you want to go to the sea," he asked.

"You'd never understand. You're just a machine."

"Genetically I am nearly human. I can think and reflect and change my ideas. This is of great concern to me. Why do you want to go to the sea?"

"To belong to it," said the woman.

"I do not understand."

"I told you you wouldn't. Don't

deprive me of it. Let me jump!"

"I cannot do that," Micah-IV informed her and dragged her toward safety. Her words cut him deeply. He had had little conversation with human beings in his lifetime, and he had never before been so bluntly reminded of his non-human status. Perhaps he was a laboratory product, but he had feelings. She had wounded them. He gave way slightly to the emotion of self-pity.

As they neared the cubicle that was the visitor center, Micah-IV's foot slipped in a patch of melting snow. Within an instant he recovered his balance, but that was just enough time for the red-haired woman to pull from his grasp and run to the seawall barrier. Micah followed her. She reached the electrified barrier and vaulted it, her hair momentarily standing on end like wire, and then she was gone, tumbling downward, drafting on the wind, smashing against the jagged rocks below. Scavengers gathered.

**I** will be severely reprimanded for this, Micah-IV told himself.

There were witnesses. Through my negligence: I allowed her to destroy herself.

He stared at the gray, winter-churned sea. He saw dark, huge shapes beyond the poison belt.

Why do they kill themselves? What do they find in the sea? What drives them to do such things?

He did not know. I do not understand because I am not human, he thought.

Absently, Micah-IV climbed to

the top of the barrier and walked along it. His nervous system absorbed the mild voltage without discomfort. Patrolling his sector from the unusual vantage-point, he marched a hundred meters south, to a place where there was no beach, no rocky shore, merely the sea lapping directly against the seawall.

I will do a human thing, Micah-IV decided, and perhaps it will give me an understanding of what it is

to be human. In any case no one can reprimand me for this.

He faced the water and levered himself into space. As he fell, he pivoted and saw the glassy gray-green blocks of the seawall behind him. He hit the water at a sharp angle and sliced into it, gasping a bit at the impact. Then he bobbed to the surface.

Lithely, swiftly, inquiringly, Micah-IV swam outward toward the waiting beasts. **END**

Coming Next Month in *IF*!

## THE SOFT WEAPON

*The Outsiders had been dead a billion years —  
But their weapons could still destroy mankind!*

by Larry Niven

## FOREST IN THE SKY

*A Relief Story!*

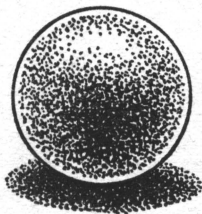
by Keith Laumer

## THE EVIL ONES

*Thrilling Novelette by the author of  
THE GIRLS FROM PLANET FIVE*

by Richard Wilson





# On The Shallow Seas

by ROBERT MASON

*The world was lovely — for a jail — and  
the convicts could buy their freedom, if  
they wanted to. Perhaps with their lives!*

Illustrated by BURNS

I

“All right, you jail birds, on your feet. Time to get up and go look for your freedom.” The guard laughed, his face twisted in its usual sadistic sneer.

Lant rubbed the fog from his eyes. It seemed he'd hardly slept more than seconds, but he realized it was only his mental state.

The guard was getting his morning kicks. By the time the chow bell sounded, one or more of the prisoners would be in the hospital, or in solitary for assaulting a guard. Every morning it was the same way. First he would come into the cell block shouting, running his club up and down the bars until it made your teeth rattle. Just when you felt like killing him yourself, he

would stop. Then he would go to the nearest window, while the anger he'd caused seemed to fill the whole cell block. The cons would watch as he stared out the window, waiting for the one who would have to answer nature's call after being confined to his bed all night.

Lant made a game of guessing how far the guard would let them get, before he got his kicks.

This morning the guard waited longer than usual. The prisoner had just entered the cubicle. Faster than anyone would have thought possible, the guard was there. If the con tried to hold his temper, the guard took it as a provocation to go further.

Everyone in the block knew what was coming next. Already shouts of anger echoed from the other prisoners. "Lay off, screw!"

Lant headed toward the washroom, staying out of it. Better to take the names and taunts from the others than to get his head powdered by the guard's vibrator club. Several other convicts evidently felt the same as he did, but he ignored them — as they did him.

The turmoil outside reached its height. Even through the door the *zzzt! zzzt!* of the vibrator club the screams of those it fell against and the thud of falling bodies could be clearly heard.

Lant washed slowly, the face in the broken mirror before him strange and unreal. Finished, he dressed. No sense going back into the block until the fight ended. As he strapped on his mud boots, he

noticed his ankles were etched with small white lines on the reddened, swollen skin. He cursed, "Damned vampire ticks; Why couldn't they eat from something that didn't need all its strength just to stay alive?" Still mumbling to himself he put on the rags they gave him for clothes. Could be worse, he thought. At least he had a good coat. And so far hadn't felt victim to mud fever or swamp rot.

Frelon appeared in the door. Lant was relieved to see him. Ignoring the *why didn't you help?* look in his eyes. Lant slipped him the soap. It had taken them six months to acquire it. They concealed it from the others, protected it, used it sparingly. The day they snatched it from the guard house, they had spent hours holding it, simply content to stare at it. To touch and smell it was pure heaven, to men who hadn't had soap for over four years.

Lant remained silent until Frelon finished washing.

"Where are you going to look today? Have you decided?"

"Thought I'd try the mud flat around Prisoners Island," Frelon replied.

"I'm heading for the shallows around East Island. Anyway we won't waste our time both looking in the same spot."

The siren atop the mess hall sounded. Both men covered their ears to drown out the whine.

On the way to the mess hall they passed the latrine. Three cons still lay where the guard had felled them. Damned fools, Lant thought.

There were always a few who never realized one guard with a vibrator club was the equal of any ten men without one.

Outside, he could see it was going to be another typical day on Exonan. Lant remembered the day he had arrived there. Half dead drugged from the long trip, he had been kicked and shoved from one place to another.

First there were the shots for everything you could think of. Then shots for things Lant had never heard of.

Then the physical examination. Some examination that was! The doctor was a convict also. He looked upon his job with about as much interest as a rich man would show if he saw a penny laying on the sidewalk. Of each new arrival he asked the same questions, man after man. He never examined anyone personally.

"Any diseases? Anything wrong with your arms or legs? Any reason you can't do a full day's work?"

The instant you replied "No" your physical examination was over. On the other hand if you complained of an ailment, you were given ten lashes for trying to get out of work.

Then came the speech by the deputy warden. The warden was too busy — later Lant found out that too drunk was the real reason.

Lant passed Crazy as he entered the mess hall. Crazy belonged in a nut house; anywhere else in the galaxy he would have been in one. Crazy had tried to escape one

night. Somehow he'd found a way to get out of the cell block without getting knocked out by the electric charge in the floor. He'd scaled the wall without too much trouble and got about a mile from the prison when one or more of the creatures that roamed the nights had fallen upon him.

The guards had found him the next morning, clawing and screaming, at the gates. The wounds he had received, though serious, healed, but his mind didn't. Crazy spent his time now crawling around on his hands and knees.

Lant kept one eye on him, as he went by.

Crazy hurled himself across the floor, his knees scraping on the rough boards. Lant kicked him — hard — square in the face; still Crazy came on, his teeth gnashing in the air. Lant kicked him in the mouth this time. Crazy stopped, started to come on, drew his lips back to reveal splintered and bloodied teeth.

Lant drew his foot back to kick again. "Get away! So help me, I'll kick you to death!"

Crazy started to come on. Then pivoting, he scrambled away down the hall and out of sight into the yard, his animal screams echoing back.

Lant cursed him — cursed him for what he was, and cursed him for forcing him to be so cruel. A short time after his arrival, Lant had ran into Crazy. Unaware of the man's mental condition he had felt only pity for him.

Six days later, they released him

from the hospital. It was six weeks before the bite wounds healed completely.

At breakfast, Lant ate in silence. It was an unwritten rule there, not to speak to anyone except your bud-die. Everyone had one or two close friends looking out for and contributing to the welfare of the others. Lant had chosen Frelon out of all the rest. To make a careless friendship there was dangerous. Lant had been careful.

As he ate, Lant looked around. Some of the faces were new this morning.

That was no surprise to him. He'd heard two guards discussing a load of fish the week before. Even if he hadn't overheard them, he would have known the new men by the fresh, scared look on their faces. Lant knew from the past that as the days here passed the shine would disappear from their eyes. The look of hope would turn to a look of dismay — the look of forever being dirty, hungry, tired. Then more often than not, it would turn into the faraway gaze of a caged animal. They would very seldom look up from the ground when they walked. Eventually their once erect bodies would assume the stoop of the old.

Finished with his breakfast, Lant waited to see if anyone left anything on his plate. The prisoners were only fed breakfast and supper and then only if they earned it. It was hardly enough to keep a sparrow alive.

Rarely, someone who was sick — or, as this morning, new to the food — would leave some of his meal.

Then there would be a terrible struggle among the others. On more than one day he had seen men die over a scrap of food you could put in half a spoon.

This morning no scraps were left by anyone. Disappointed, Lant left the mess hall.

The day on Exonan started at four in the morning, long before the planet's small sun rose. The day ended at seven each night. During the day the prisoners were expected to earn their keep by hunting for . . . golden oysters!

## II

This was the only thing of value found on Exonan. When golden oysters had first been discovered, thousands had flocked to the planet from all parts of the galaxy. Gold had become the rarest metal known to mankind; just an ounce of it was worth enough to retire for life on. The bonanza soon turned into a nightmare. So rare were oysters that contained gold pearls that many who had come to make their fortune soon left broke and disgusted. Those that stayed and kept looking either fell victim to the elements or simply were never heard from again!

Because of the value of gold the prison had been built there:

To give the prisoners a reason to hunt for golden oysters, they were offered as a reward for finding one with a pearl of gold in it, their freedom and their transportation to any of the planets.

Besides the offer of freedom for finding a gold pearl, the prisoners

were expected to bring in sixty pounds of oyster meat each day, to pay for their keep. To fail to do so would mean no supper that night. Failure to bring in the required amount three days straight would result in a terrible beating by the guards, followed by five days in solitary confinement.

More than one con had gone into solitary confinement, never to be seen again. Word had spread among the cons that the head guard in solitary was a sadist who derived his pleasure from torturing the prisoners while they were there.

Lant had been there five years, almost six. He was considered an old-timer by all standards, but had never come close to finding an oyster with a gold pearl in it. He would have given up hope of ever finding one long ago if he hadn't seen the ones others had found.

The excitement would sweep through the prison like wildfire! The pearl would be put on display in the main yard, heavily guarded to protect it from the prisoners that would gather to see and touch it. That was freedom they were looking at, a chance for a new life!

The fortunate prisoner that had found it would be there, all smiles, usually enclosed by an unseen glow of happiness that filled the air.

Again and again he was asked the same question. "Where did you find it?" "How far from what landmark?" And on and on for hours.

In most cases, the smile and happiness of the con about to gain his freedom was reflected in the tears of those he would leave behind.

When the siren sounded to start work, Lant took all the time he could getting to his crawler.

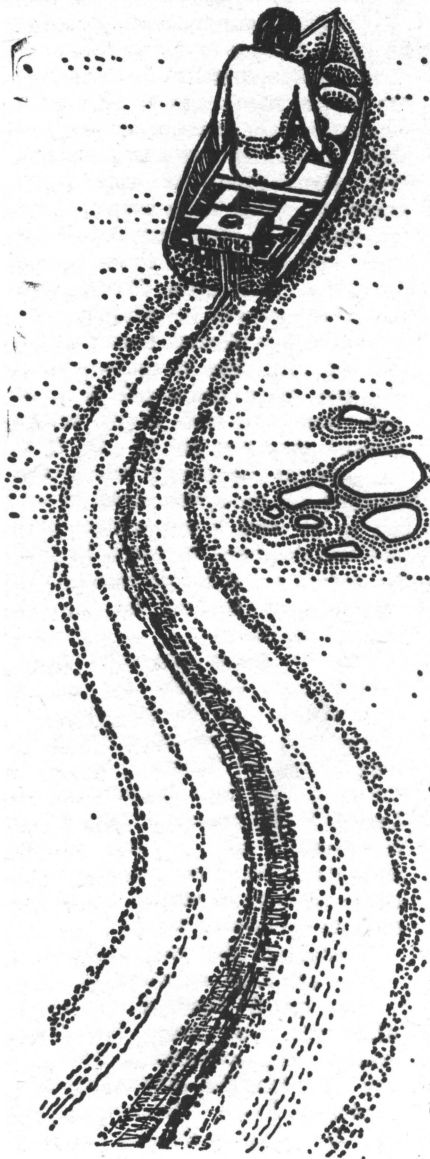
The prisoners called it a crawler; the proper name was W.M.A.L.C., which stood for water, mud and land craft. A crawler was about six feet long, about four feet wide, stood above the water when empty about ten inches. It was powered by a small outboard motor fitted with a set of remote controls, that enabled the prison guards to bring it back whenever they pleased. Lant checked the gas tank first to make sure it was full. He'd heard tell of some who went out and didn't return because they ran out of gas. Next he went to the supply shack and checked out an oyster blade, checking to be sure it was razor sharp and wasn't about to break in two. He wasn't about to die because the only weapon he had failed when needed the most.

He started the crawler's motor, then listened carefully for several minutes for the faintest sign or sound that the motor wasn't running properly. Satisfied he idled the craft back into the main canal. Lant held the crawler's speed down to a creep until he reached the checkout gate. Two crawlers were ahead of him; he shifted to neutral until he was waved forward.

"Number?" the guard asked.

"4672," Lant answered.

One guard checked the craft, while the other guard bolted the returner on, activated it with his key and for the thousandth time reminded Lant, "Remember, you only have twenty minutes to return



to your crawler before we bring it back at night. Remember you have only twenty minutes after the siren sounds."

Lant nodded. He knew very well what would happen if he wasn't aboard when his crawler returned. During the working hours you could go where ever you pleased, as long as it was away from the prison and as long as no other prisoner was within two hundred yards of you. The guards, no one would bother you all day. The prison authorities knew there was no place for you to go. No matter how far away you went, come night you would have to return to the safety of the prison walls.

At night creatures too horrible to describe roamed the watery lands of Exonan. Lant had seen half a dozen of their bodies, half-eaten things with fanged teeth and long sharp feet. Just the thought of meeting one of them at night was enough to send chills down your spine. Some times you could hear them outside the prison walls at night, howling and fighting among themselves.

His little speech finished, the guard waved Lant out. "Number 4672 cleared."

The guard's warning still fresh in his ears, he slammed the crawler into high gear. Soon the prison's dirty gray walls became just a blur in the distance behind him. Lant knew that about twenty minutes to seven that evening the alarm on the crawler would begin to bleep. After twenty minutes the returner would start the motor and return the craw-

ler to the prison — with or without anyone aboard! He had learned to tell the time of day by the angle the sun hit the water. He made it a point always to work as close as possible to his crawler late in the day.

Lant set his course for a small island he had marked on his map. The map had xxxx's all over it, to indicate the many places he had looked. He'd found plenty of oysters all right. Trouble was none of them had contained even the slightest sign of a gold pearl. Where others had found them, he had searched, for miles around the spot without any luck. Lant had never wasted a minute. The only time during the day he wasn't in the water was when he was between the prison and where he was going or when he was going to a different place to look.

The crawler's motor died; he had arrived at his destination. He took his mud boots off, tied them securely to the bow to make sure they weren't lost overboard. Then, making sure his oyster blade was securely tied to his waist, he eased himself over the side into the water. The water was just the right temperature, for a change. Some days the water was so hot it made you sweat after you had been in for only a few minutes. Exonan was almost completely covered with water, which as far as he could be told was constantly heated by underground streams that passed through the planet's mantle, where they were heated to very high temperatures.

Lant eased himself into the water until his feet touched the bottom. The water was just the depth he liked for hunting oysters; it came to his chest, which meant he wouldn't have to dive to look. He slid his feet along in front of him. He had done it so often, for so long, that he had developed a rhythm — right, left — right, left. He slid his feet along before him as he went around the crawler, always going in a wider circle.

The eighth time around, he found his first oyster. Not bad, he thought. Usually he circled the crawler until he was a block away, before he found the first one. On some occasions, he had gone much farther without finding anything.

Carefully, so carefully, he ran his foot across it until he found the horns. Then, *slowly!*, the beat of his heart sounding in his ears, he counted them! One two, three, four! — He waited, relieved it wasn't a cannibal oyster, until his heart settled down to a more normal beat.

Then bending down, until his chin rested on top the water, he worked his oyster blade under the oyster's shell. Although called golden oysters they were not like the oysters of any other planet. They were shaped like oysters, but there it ended. On the unhinged side of their shell, a growth ran from them. Usually it was anchored securely into the muddy bottom, sometimes to an object or a crop of rock. Locating the growth where it was attached to the bottom, he cut it with a quick slashing motion. At the same time he grabbed the

now wildly thrashing oyster. Carrying it back to the crawler, he tossed it onboard. The oyster was about the average size, slightly smaller than a wash tub. It clashed its halves together and beat against the bottom of the crawler, until it died.

Lant pulled himself aboard. He bent down over the oyster, asked himself again: Was this the one?

How many times had he asked himself that question? Placing the blade in the crack between the two halves, he pushed with all his might. After several minutes, he rested. Even after death, the oyster's muscles refused to let the shell apart. Rested, he tried once more. Setting his feet firmly he pushed as hard as he was able. The blade plunged deep into the oyster. Lant whipped it back and forth until he was sure the muscles were cut enough to enable him to pry the two halves apart. With both hands he opened the oyster. The meat had a violet look outside; inside it was a deep green. To the touch, it was like handling butter. The smell was the worst, like dead fish in a hot sun. Quickly he cut the meat out, tossing it in the general direction of the cans. The hinge exposed he stopped. Poking his finger into the holes along the shell's hinge, he found nothing. A dud. A damned dud! Nothing. This wasn't his lucky oyster.

Lant finished cutting the meat out of the shell, then packed it into the cans furnished him for that purpose.

**W**hen the alarm sounded on the crawler, he'd found two more.

None with the pearl in it he sought for so vainly. When the alarm went off he was in the process of cutting the meat out of the last oyster he had found. It more than filled the cans he had. He threw all the extra meat back, with the exception of a large piece. This he would eat himself to supplement the lean diet the prisoners were fed. Lant would like to have cooked it but he had neither the time or the means, so he ate it raw. To him it was delicious!

Hardly had he finished, when the crawler's motor started up and with a jerk it swung about until it was headed on the correct course for the prison.

He was one of the last ones to arrive.

"Number?" the guard asked.

"4672," Lant replied.

"Let's have your meat cans." The guard weighed them to make sure they contained the required amount of oyster meat. "Number 4672 okay for supper," he shouted down to another guard. "Pass on," he ordered.

Lant let his crawler run onto the sand enough to keep it from drifting away. The boat keeper came over and began looking it over.

"Everything run okay?" he asked.

"If it hadn't, you wouldn't be asking me now, would you?" Lant replied.

"Look, buddy, don't get huffy with me. I only wanted to know if you thought your crawler needed any repairs?"

"Sorry," Lant said, "I had a lousy day."



"Don't we all," Lant heard the keeper say as he walked away.

Lant strolled around the prison yard, waiting for the day's find to be posted on the bulletin board. Frelon joined him. They both strolled for several minutes, neither speaking. Finally Frelon spoke.

"Any luck?"

Lant smiled at the joke. "No."

"Lant I want you to hunt with me tomorrow."

Lant stopped, turned to Frelon.

"You know two prisoners aren't allowed to hunt together. What's so special about tomorrow?"

"I need your help."

"What kind of help?" Lant was interested now.

"I found an oyster so large I can't even lift it off the bottom, that's what!"

Lant studied his face for several seconds. Frelon was dead serious.

"You're not kidding me, are you, old buddy?"

"Lant, I swear it was as large as my crawler."

Lant didn't answer for some time. An oyster as large as the one Frelon described was unheard of.

"All right," Lant finally said. "Only we'll leave here in different directions. I'll meet you behind Convict Rock. Okay?"

"Swell."

The conversation ended when a guard came into the yard to post the day's find. It told the usual story. No pearls had been found. They all knew that. If anyone had found a pearl the place would be torn up in excitement. Three men

failed to bring in the required amount of oyster meat; no supper for them. One prisoner failed to return with his crawler. A search party had been sent out — it said. The prisoners knew that was a lie.

"Christ, what a lousy place," Lant said out loud.

Supper was the usual mixture of swamp worm and mud pig. Tonight it was boiled, tomorrow fried. Tasted the same either way. The coffee was the same too, powdered from some place called Japan — no, it was from some place called "Made in Japan!"

After supper Lant went straight to his cell. He took the mattress off his bed, searched it carefully. The springs he searched just as carefully. The bed frame revealed nothing, neither did a slow search of the walls and the floor around it. Jerking the only blanket they were allowed from the shelf he went over it, then the shelf itself. Nothing! He knew that stinking vampire tick was close by, somewhere. Once a vampire tick tasted blood from a victim, it seldom went far away — until it was killed, or the victim died! Night by night, his life's blood was being sucked from him and would continue being lost until he found the tick.

Before he could search further the warning bell rang. The bell was to warn the prisoners that they only had two minutes to get into bed before the floor would be turned on for the night.

At night the floors of the cell blocks were charged electrically. Anyone foolish enough to step on

them was knocked cold instantly. At the same time an alarm was sounded in the guard house. If it was your first time, they would just laugh it off. The next time resulted in a beating for disturbing their sleep. Sleepwalkers here were quickly cured — or killed! Crazy was the only con Lant had ever heard of who had found out how to get over the floor safely.

Lant had a terrible time falling asleep. Every time he shut his eyes the face of the judge that had sentenced him would appear. The bald head with the eyes of sentencing would shout to many people over and over, "Life, life, life, life! That's what you get, life!" And on and on until Lant would be wide awake, only then to realize it was just a dream.

His right leg felt numbed. He moved it a little and felt something else: That dammed vampire tick was back! In his mind he could picture it, snuggled up tight against his leg. The tick's diamond-shaped mouth would be making little circular motions, its spongy tongue lapping up the blood as fast as it flowed from him, its belly swelling as it ate. He caught the tick and flung it away, feeling the skin tear from his leg as he did it, stiffling the cry of pain in his throat. He heard the thud as it struck the charged floor. Lant lay back down, thanking his lucky stars that the tick wasn't large enough to short out the floor and set off the alarm.

He lay there, tears half filling his eyes. He just had to find an

oyster with a pearl in it — before he went out of his head as another prisoner had done. He had cheated the law out of his anguish by putting his head down one of the electric toilets. When they found him the suction had torn his head off. . . .

"All right, you mugs! On your feet! Time to get up and go look for your freedom." The guard's voice seemed to get louder each day.

Lant cursed under his breath. "Some day you'll get yours screw. Wait and see."

As his feet touched the floor some thing wet and sticky squashed between his toes. It startled him before he realized it was only the tick he'd killed last night. For the first time he noticed the dark stain on the wall. How, he wondered, could such a small thing eat so much. He picked it up, nothing now but a small mess of blood and fur. On the way to wash up he threw it away.

Frelon stopped by, long enough to make sure he hadn't forgot about meeting him.

Lant didn't waste time checking his crawler out today. This was the day when the mail clerk would hand each prisoner his mail, if any, as he passed through the check gate. Lant waited patiently as others before him were checked out. Finally it was his turn. He idled into the gate, his eyes fixed on the mail clerk.

"Number?"

"4672."

The usual wait while the re-

turner was bolted on. Then the broken-record reminder.

"One prisoner didn't come back yesterday. Remember you have only twenty minutes to get back aboard your crawler after the alarm sounds."

Finished with his speech, the guard waved him out.

The mail clerk always waited until the last moment to hand you your mail, if you had any. Lant figured he got some sort of satisfaction in making each prisoner sweat it out until the last possible moment. Just as the guard shouted for him to get out of the gate, the clerk handed him a letter.

Lant set the crawler on a course to Convict Rock.

The letter was from the only one who wrote him any more, his wife. Lant had told her over and over again to get a divorce and start a new life for herself, but she had ignored him. Her letter was the usual stuff. The weather back home was hot. Uncle Joe was in the hospital. She had a new job, paid ten bucks more than the last one. She had applied again for his pardon . . .

It was the usual nonsense. None of it mattered. Here only one thing mattered: to find the golden oyster.

#### IV

Convict Rock loomed into view — so named because of the odd way the water had eaten a hole through it, leaving bars across the opening.

Lant shut his crawler off and let it coast alongside Frelon's.

"See anyone else headed this way," Frelon asked.

"Not a soul." Lant was nervous. For two prisoners to be found together outside the prison would result in serious punishment. "Let's get on with it," he said.

Frelon hesitated, his eyes searching the horizon for sign of another boat. "Okay, follow me."

Lant watched around him all the way there. Not the smallest speck came into view. They had traveled about thirty minutes; he was just going to pull alongside and ask how much further, when Frelon signalled him to slow down. Frelon seemed to be taking bearing from some invisible landmark.

First he swung right, then left, circled back to almost the same spot they'd started from. Finally he straightened out for perhaps a hundred yards; started to turn around again then swung sharply left and stopped dead.

Lant pulled alongside and tied his boat to Frelon's. The object Frelon had been searching for turned out to be a small buoy. When Frelon pulled it in, he was surprised to see it had been made out of the float from a toilet bowl. The anchor was an empty oyster shell.

"This the place?"

"Well, not exactly," Frelon smiled. "But it's within twenty feet, one way or the other."

It was huge! Lant had thought at the most that Frelon had exaggerated. At first he thought it was nothing but a boulder laying on the bottom. But after Frelon showed him where the horns were, and

after he'd counted them, all Lant could do was to look dumbfounded.

Lant dove down, ran his hands along its entire length. It registered on his mind that an oyster that big, covered with that amount of moss, must be the granddaddy of all oysters.

*Maybe, he thought, just maybe this was the one.*

Back aboard the crawler he asked Frelon. "How will we ever get it out? We can't lift it, that's for sure."

"We won't," Frelon replied. "We'll kill it right where it lies. Cut it open, clean the meat out and see if it has a pearl, all under water."

Lant nodded approval. He laughed. "It would be just our luck that the pearl would be too big to lift out of the water."

Frelon joined in the laughter. "Hey!" he said, "wouldn't that get them back at the prison?"

Still laughing, both men began to remove their boots. Lant strapped his oyster blade around his waist. Frelon didn't bother. "We'll take turns with just one. You cut, then I'll cut. Okay?"

"Suits me," Lant replied. "I'll go first."

Lant breathed in and out rapidly, trying to get as much oxygen into his system as possible.

The water was murky. It took him too long to locate the growth that held the oyster to the bottom. Out of air, he surfaced, sucked in a huge amount of fresh air and dove back down.

Lant chopped at the growth, but his swings lost most of their force,

from the drag of the water. Up, get a breath. Down, chop; up, get another breath. He chopped feebly at the growth. Up, get another breath, down, then chop. Spots of intense white appeared before his eyes. Exhausted, he swam back to the crawler — then found he didn't have enough strength to pull himself aboard.

Frelon grabbed him by the arms and pulled him aboard. "You all right?"

All Lant could do was say, "your turn now."

Frelon took the blade from him, strapped it around his own waist and without another word plunged into the water. He found the growth. Like Lant the water slowed his swings down. The growth was hardly notched when Lant went down again.

It was going to be a long day.

Many dives later, Lant came up, puffing, red faced and smiling. Frelon reached for the blade at his side.

Gasping for breath, Lant clutched his arm. "Never mind, it's cut in two."

Frelon realized then how much the task had taken out of him. Now that he looked, he could see the boiling water, the churning, mud-died water, as the oyster thrashed about below in its death throes.

It was some time before either of them spoke.

"Now what?" Lant asked, gazing at the muddy water around them.

"Now we cut it open. We'll take both blades for this."

"I sure hope this is all worth the trouble," muttered Lant.

The first thing that struck Lant, after he entered the water was how hard it was going to be. He could hardly see a foot through the murk. He had no idea where the oyster was now, let alone Frelon. When he surfaced, he found Frelon had the same trouble.

Frelon sputtered, "Let's join hands until we find the oyster. All the thrashing around it did, it's bound to have moved."

Taking a deep breath, they dove under. At first nothing was visible to them. As their eyes became adjusted to the gloom, to their surprise they found they had dived right on top of the oyster.

It took several trips up for air before they managed to get both blades inserted in the shell. After several tries to pry it open, Lant signaled to Frelon to surface.

"It's no use, Frelon. We'll never get it open."

"We must," Frelon gasped.

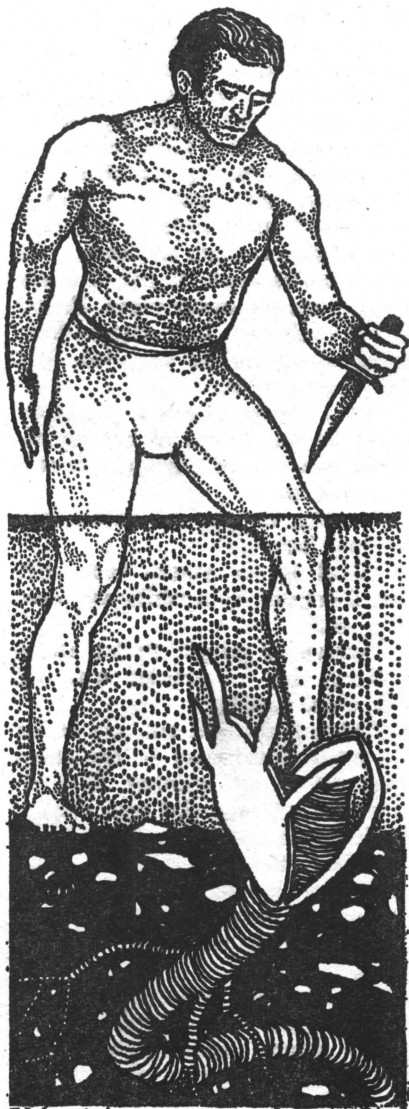
"I want it open as much as you do" Lant replied. "But let's face it. We just aren't that strong."

Frelon plunged back under the water.

Lant waited for him to come back up. And waited. Still he hadn't surfaced. Lant dove beneath the water, clearer now.

Frelon had planted both feet on top of the oyster's shell and was pulling back, almost to the point of breaking them, on both blades!

Lant could tell he was on the brink of unconsciousness. He grabbed him, signalling him to go up.



Frelon shook his head — no!

Unable to get him to rise, Lant took hold of one of the blades, signalling Frelon to pull. Still they were unable to open the oyster. Lant, out of breath, rose to the surface. Frelon still didn't come up. Diving back down to him, Lant found him still firmly gripping his blade.

One look told Lant all he needed to know. Little bubbles of air rose from Frelon's mouth and nose. Lant jerked at his arms, trying to break his grip on the oyster blade. Frelon had a death grip! Lant slugged him, twice, as hard as he was able. Frelon floated loose.

When Frelon opened his eyes again he was aware of motion beneath him. Ahead the water flowed toward him.

Turning, his gaze fell onto Lant's worried face.

"Glad to see you're back with me. I thought for a while you were a goner."

"Where we going?" Frelon asked, noticing that his crawler was tied on behind Lant's.

"After I got you out, my friend — you damned fool! — the alarm went off on our crawlers. So I retrieved our blades, tied your crawler behind mine and here we are."

"What about the oyster?"

"I left it there! Let's face it, we never would have got it open. We tried. You know how hard we tried."

"Yeah, sure," Frelon said dully. Then: "We'd better split. Wouldn't do to return together. On top of not bringing in any meat, they'd probably shoot us."

Lant could see nothing to say that would help.

As soon as Frelon's crawler was free Lant sat down on the front of his. Getting a good grip on the sides with his hands, he lowered both his hands, he lowered both feet into the water. The additional drag he created soon let Frelon's crawler get ahead of him. He stayed that way until Frelon was out of sight.

Lant ignored the gate guard's comment. So he missed a meal. He looked everywhere for Frelon. Then the warning buzzer sounded to get in bed. He gave up.

Lant woke with a start, the shrill howl of the sirens filling his head. Some damned fool must have touched the floor . . .

Then he became aware of the lights flashing across the cell windows. Someone was trying to escape.

Now he could pick out the shouts and footsteps of the guards as they hurried to their posts. There was a rush of feet and guards were suddenly pouring into the cell block from both ends. They were armed to the teeth. Not the usual vibrators; this time they carried stun rifles.

"On your feet! Stand at the foot of your bunks."

The prisoners obeyed instantly. Stun guns weren't to be fooled with!

The warden and his assistant entered. It was obvious the warden was agitated. He shouted orders rapidly. "Hurry up! Check them, on the double."

The cell captains started up the sides. It was their responsibility to know each and every prisoner by sight.

The one down at the far end opposite Lant stopped. "Sir, number 2395 is missing."

"What's his name?" the warden shouted back.

"Frelon Manton."

Lant closed his eyes. How had the fool got over the floor? And — why?

The warden and the guard captains conferred for several minutes. Then the warden and one of the captains walked down to where Lant stood.

"Frelon was your buddy, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"He must have confided in you. He must have told you he was going to try to escape. He probably asked you to go too."

"No! He didn't even menti —"

The slap was so vicious, so sudden, it took Lant completely by surprise. The taste of blood filling his mouth angered him even more. "You dirty screw!" he shouted at the captain who had struck him. "Don't take it out on me because you can't handle your job."

The guard's hand raised to strike again.

"Do that again, and I'll kill you!" Lant said, his eyes boring his anger into the guard's. "Some way, somehow, I swear!"

Before the guard could decide, shouts rang out from the corridor.

"We've found him, Warden! He's on the west wall."

Lant rushed to his cell window. All he could make out was the bright glare of spotlights. Suddenly a movement caught his eye. It was Frelon!

Frelon hung there, about two feet short of the top of the wall. Lit by the numerous floodlights concentrated on him, he had the appearance of a drab moth caught in a porch light. How he'd managed to climb as high as he had was a miracle. The walls of the prison were solid concrete, smooth, slickened by years of moisture and slime the only handholds were the small cracks where the concrete had cracked. His face was twisted in agony, his eyes glared out as though they refused to see what was happening.

A circle of guards appeared beneath him, rifles aimed in his direction.

"Hold your fire," the warden shouted. "I want him alive, if possible! Frelon, I order you to come down."

"I'll bring him down," The guard that said that raised his rifle to his shoulder.

The warden rushed furiously at the guard. "You'll follow orders! Understand me?"

The rifle was lowered.

Again the warden shouted to Frelon, "Come down now and I promise you, no harm will come to you. Do you hear me?"

Frelon's hand's clawed at the wall, seeking fresh holds. For a minute it looked as if he would fall.

"Listen, Frelon! I'll make a deal with you. Tell me how you got

over the floor without getting knocked unconscious, and I give you my word nothing will happen to you."

Frelon's hands reached for a new hold. His feet kicked at the wall trying to find some new crack to press into.

"Frelon!" the warden shouted.

Frelon pulled himself up another inch.

"Bring him down!" the warden screamed at last. Almost before the command left his mouth, the zzzzzst of the stun guns sang out.

Frelon seemed to float there forever. Then slowly, slowly, his body arched back.

Lant's gasp was lost in the thud of Frelon's body striking in the yard outside.

## V

Lant rested for a few minutes. All morning he hadn't found a single oyster. His cans stood empty against the rails on the crawler.

The spot he'd picked to look was called Big Break. The name had nothing to do with the prison. When the big rush was on to find gold on Exonan, the people had reclaimed miles of the land from the sea.

Just a few years before the prison had been built, Exonan had suffered a terrible earthquake. The high, thick levees holding back the sea held all except in one place. But what a place! For two miles, the levee crumbled and the sea had poured back in, leaving all the reclaimed area flooded with from

five to ten feet of water. Because of the break in the levee it had come to be called Big Break.

Rising Lant stretched. The warm sun felt good. He would have liked to enjoy it forever, but he had to get going or he'd go hungry tonight. Easing over the side, he dropped back into the water.

The bottom was very muddy there with the kind of mud that clung to the bottom of his feet like glue. His progress was terribly slow. Besides the bottom, he had to contend with the numerous pieces of rock that had once formed the levee walls. Each time his foot touched one of these chunks he would have to check it out before he was sure what he had touched — oyster, rock or cannibal oyster!

He continued to circle the crawler, sliding one foot along before the other. Lant circled until he was forty or fifty feet from the crawler. He had all but decided to give up and move to some other area, when his right foot brushed something.

"Carefully he ran his foot along it until he located the hump. Slowly Lant counted the horns. One, two, three, four, five — six! He froze. He now had his foot on what he knew was the bait a cannibal oyster used to lure its prey over its huge mouth with. Lant realized at that very moment he was being sensed. The instant he made any movement, either toward it or away, it would strike like fanged lightning!

A cannibal oyster looked a lot like an old-fashioned bear trap. The trap was its huge mouth. Sticking out from the mouth was a long



tongue, the end of which formed a perfect copy of an oyster, with the small exception of having six horns instead of five. Once its prey was lured over the bait, it would rise up from the muddy bottom like a freight train.

Laying buried in the mud, its body looked like a huge earthworm. The cannibal had no eyes, but its senses of vibration were highly developed.

Lant had seen one convict killed by one. Now he was in danger of becoming a meal himself!

Without moving a muscle, hardly breathing, he stood there until his nerves settled down. Don't panic, he told himself. Then slowly, ever so slowly, he moved his hand, an inch at a time, down until he got a firm grip on his oyster blade. A little at a time, he carefully pulled it from his belt.

While doing this, he figured out where the cannibal oyster's body must be lying. After what seemed like hours, expecting those terrible jaws to engulf him every second, he raised the blade high over his head.

Lant quickly stomped down on the cannibal's bait; at the same time he drove the oyster blade down with all his strength in the direction he hoped the cannibal would come from.

The jaws rose out of the water over him. His blade sank deep into the cannibal's body!

The jaws gnashed in air, missing him by only inches. Lant kept shoving his blade in, turning it, and at the same time jerking it from right to left. The cannibal rose to the

top of the water and tossed him aside.

Quickly Lant scrambled aboard the crawler. The cannibal lay atop the water, blood gushing from the rent on its side. Its huge body thrashing back and forth, its blood foaming the water.

When it finally lay still, Lant lay flat in the boat, content to drift. Content to be alive.

Hours later, he roused himself. The length of the shadow his crawler cast on the water told him his time was running out.

There was no sense just sitting around, worrying. Lant strapped his oyster blade around his waist and entered the water. It seemed warmer than usual; almost immediately, he started to sweat.

He had only circled the crawler three or four times when he found his first oyster.

When he had it on the deck of the crawler, Lant figured it weighed at least ninety pounds. Using an oar as a hammer, he worked the blade in between the two halves.

The meat from it filled all his cans; at least he could be sure of eating tonight. The meat out of the way, he poked his finger into the holes long the hinge. Nothing. He went to the next one. Nothing, nothing. He went to the next hole. Nothing — wait.

That didn't feel quite right. Sticking his finger back into the last hole, he felt slowly around the sides. There was something there all right. It felt like a small marble, more like a pea. Lant moved the object

around until he was able to get his finger crooked behind it. Then, keeping constant pressure on it, he worked it out of the hole.

Wiping the green scum from it, he held it up to the light. When he finally stopped laughing, he could have cried. Over five years he had been looking for an oyster with a pearl in it. Now he finally found one, and it was the size of a pea! A very small pea at that. For an instant, he was tempted to throw it back. Hold on now, he thought, you can still trade it for something, it must have some value. Even an ounce of gold was worth a fortune.

The rest of the day yielded one more oyster almost as large as the first had been, and it too contained a pearl, so small it looked like a grain of rice.

Lant was beside himself with pity. After five years, to find two pearls in one day — and to have them tiny! Lant knew that neither of them would free him. He cursed his luck.

When Lant arrived at the prison that night, he skipped supper and went to the warden's office. He told the duty guard that he had to see the warden but refused to tell him why. Bored, the guard told him to wait.

The warden was in his sixties. His hair had long ago retreated to the sides of his head. He was a short man, and an ugly one.

Lant stopped the correct four paces from the desk and made the proper salute, right hand flung across his chest. "Number 4672 requests

that the warden will receive him."

"Request granted. State your business, my time is important."

Lant reached into his pocket to get the pearls out. The right hand of the warden flew up. From out of nowhere a stun pistol appeared in his hand.

"Don't move a muscle, 4672, or you're dead!"

Lant realized he'd made a serious mistake. "I'm only trying to get two pearls out to show you."

"Don't take me for a fool, 4672. You couldn't possibly have one pearl in your pocket, let alone two."

Lant grinned. "What if they were both the size of peas?" Lant could tell the warden was thinking it over, his eyes had a bad habit of giving his thoughts away.

Finally the warden spoke. "All right, 4672, take your hand out, but slowly. This pistol's set on lethal charge."

Lant eased the pearls from his pocket, stepped forward, laid the pearls on the desk and stepped back. The warden picked the pearls up and studied them closely. Still holding them, he said, "You don't expect to get a pardon for these small pearls, do you?"

"No," Lant replied.

"Then what do you expect for them?"

"Warden, all I want for them is for you to give me permission to have a larger gas tank installed on my crawler."

"What for?" The warden eyed distrustfully.

"I think I know where to find oysters with gold pearls in them.

But I have to go farther from the prison."

"Where?" the warden demanded.

Lant smiled — inside, so it wouldn't show on his face. "If I told you, you'd go look for yourself."

"Don't get smart with me 4672, I could make things mighty tough for you."

Lant replied quickly, his temper beginning to rise. "And I could write the prison commission about the two pearls I just gave you. Look, Warden. All I ask for is a larger gas tank on my crawler. Nothing more."

The warden rolled the pearls continually around in his hand, deep in thought.

"I'll see," he said at last. "Prisoner is dismissed."

It wouldn't do no good to force the issue. Lant returned to the cell block. For the first time since he'd arrived there, he had no trouble falling asleep.

And at the gate the next morning he was stopped by one of the guards. "See that crawler, number eight? Orders from the warden. Today you take that one."

Lant checked the crawler over carefully. He feared the warden might try to arrange an accident, to get rid of him. His fears vanished, when he noticed the crawler had a larger gas tank welded on it.

At the gates, no one acted like they even noticed the change. The guards ignored the larger gas tank completely. After the usual speech, the returner was bolted on and he was waved out.

## VI

Once clear of the prison and as soon as he was sure he wasn't being followed, Lant let the crawler idle.

When he had marked x's on his map yesterday for the two pearls he'd found, he noticed something he'd never noticed before.

The x's for the pearls he'd found and the x's for the pearls others had found, formed a perfectly straight line. The line ran straight to a small bay, on the tip of a volcanic island. All the way back to the prison Lant had thought about it. It was to unlikely to be just coincidence. No one from the prison ever looked there. They couldn't; the island was too far from the prison for the amount of gas a crawler normally carried. By the time he'd arrived at the prison, he had made up his mind to exchange the little pearls for a larger gas tank.

His map indicated that the volcano on the island, though active, hadn't erupted since the planet was discovered. Lant hoped the oysters with gold pearls had came from there.

It was almost noon when the volcano came into sight. The island it sat on was blackened from one end to the other. A dirty column of black smoke hung from the top of the volcano, the only indication it was active at all. As Lant drew closer, the unmistakable odor of sulphur filled his nose. He hoped the volcano wouldn't choose today to become active.

The water was almost too hot to

enter. Lant eased himself in, gradually letting his body get accustomed to it. It wasn't very deep; his feet hit the bottom before he was wet to his waist.

Sliding his feet along, first one, then the other, he circled his crawler. He hadn't gone ten steps before he found the first one.

Cautiously he ran his foot across the oyster until he found the horns. One, two, three, four — five, just five. Lant dove.

Two hours later and as many oysters, he still hadn't found one with a pearl in it. The meat cans stood full against the rail. With meat to spare, Lant took a break, ate and enjoyed for just a moment the quiet of the day.

The x's on the map were not sheer chance. He spread the map out on the crawler's deck: They ran straight as an arrow, straight to a small bay on the tip of the island. That was it, the bay, four or five miles north of where he was!

The bay was harder to locate than the map showed. The coast on this side of the island was nothing but sheer cliffs. Lant almost passed the entrance. Recent slides had almost closed it off from the sea.

The passage in was narrow; he was forced to weave constantly, to avoid the jagged ends of rocks jutting up from beneath the water. Sheltered by sheer cliffs on all sides, the bay was almost impossible to see. A fluffy gray fog hung over the water, and it was quiet. Even the normal, sounds were missing.

Lant anchored the boat in the

center of the bay. The water was very hot there. He would only be able to stay in it for short periods of time.

He was back onto the crawler in a flash! He'd dropped right on top of an oyster. Of course, it was possible, but it had startled him. It wasn't a cannibal or he'd have been a meal by then.

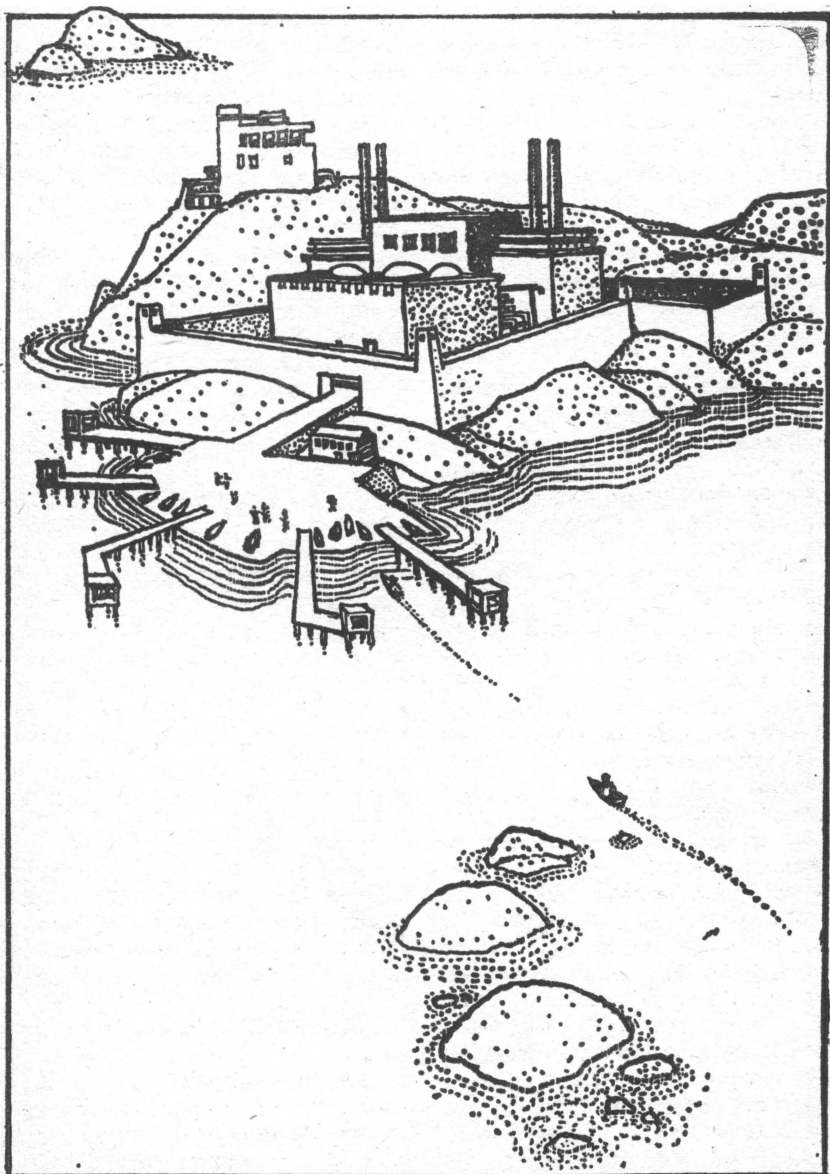
He entered the water again off to one side of the oyster; slipped his foot along until he found it, counted the horns to be sure. Just a plain oyster.

But it was not just a plain oyster. When he pulled it aboard he found the pearl.

He was overjoyed! He danced crazily around the deck — shouted — laughed — cried. It was the most beautiful thing he'd even seen. He held it up to the light. Even through the green slime he could see the shine of gold. What a pearl, he thought, By far the largest pearl anyone had ever found. Lant was willing to bet it weighed three pounds. Wiping the scum from it, he held it up to the dim light. Freedom, that's what he held. Freedom!

Lant's first impulse was to rush back to the prison. He could just picture himself standing there, beaming with joy. All the other prisoners at his feet. Proudly answering their questions. He felt so happy. Finally, out of breath, he stopped cavorting around.

Lant eased himself back into the water. When he stopped it was only because the deck of the crawler was covered with oysters to the point



it was in danger of sinking — and all had pearls! Others had found the pickings, he'd found the mother lode!

The alarm went off on the returner. Laughing, Lant took his oyster blade and chopped through the metal case protecting it. He tore wiring from the returner until he was sure it could no longer control the crawler.

Today, he would go back on his own.

Lant stood looking out the window, at the lovely, watery, landscape. His wife was busy, show-

ing friends their beautiful home. He could hear parts of their conversation.

Carol was speaking at the moment. "You see, since Lant found so much gold, the courts decided that legally the extra gold was his." Carol joined Lant, it was a lovely view.

"So you see," she went on, "when Lant heard they were closing the prison down here on Exonan, he bought it. Of course, it took a lot of remodeling."

They all went out onto the patio. "You're right," Carol said. "It does make a lovely home." END

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# THE IMPERSONATORS

by C. C. MacAPP

*Kruger had no difficulty locating the  
criminal he had pursued across space.  
Trouble was he found too many of him!*

The meal had been like most banquet meals, and the several men at the speakers' table on the platform looked — one of them excepted — ordinary. The exception was a tanned, blocky man of perhaps thirty-five, dressed in a dark blue suit, with a white shirt and a black string necktie. His cropped black hair stood up like a shoe brush, and his eyebrows (beetled now) were heavy, almost meeting above his nose. He had the kind of jowls that always looked as if they needed a shave. His wide mouth was clamped in a straight line. Not extraordinary? No — but there was a patch of adhesive tape on his forehead, scratch-

es on both cheeks and a puffiness around one glaring eye. Make-up failed to hide bruises here and there.

The master-of-ceremonies was already warmed up:

“— that the Interstellar Division always gets its man. Of course, that isn't *invariably* true. Space is a fairly big territory, ha ha, and now and then one *does* get away. But the man who is about to receive the year's Surprise Award is an officer who, so far, has *never* failed to get his man. Except, of course, when he was chasing — excuse me, I mean, ha ha, apprehending — women.” The mc paused to pick up a large plaque that lay on the table.

He took two steps and extended it toward the scowling, battered man. "And now, I take great pleasure in awarding —"

The blocky man's scowl deepened. Suddenly he was on his feet. He snarled something to the mc, turned, clumped to the edge of the platform and off it, and marched toward an exit. The mc looked startled, turned crimson and glanced involuntarily at the plaque as if he'd just been told to swallow it whole, or something.

After a few moments the mc collected himself a little and raised the mike to his lips. "Uh, friends, I'm, uh, sorry to have to report that Inspector Kruger has just had a sudden attack of, er, indigestion. But . . . well . . . anyway, there was this mature, respected accountant who got away with a million and a half credits, and we traced him to a planet called Phrodd. It's about eighty-two light-years away, and no Terran spaceline services it, so it has to be reached by transferring twice on Alien lines. Well, uh, Inspector Kruger went to Phrodd and made the arrest. His official report has, er, not yet been released, but we understand there were grave difficulties of an unusual nature . . ."

**I**t was Inspector Judson Kruger's first day on Phrodd. He turned, caught sight of something, hesitated, then bellowed in a stern voice tinged with hysteria, "Stand, in the name of the Government of Earth!"

Agile despite his large feet, he hopped across a twelve-foot-long slug (which cried out in fright and

jerked in its eyestalks) and seized the arm of a mature, courtly, very tall man with a broad forehead and a splendid crop of silvery hair. "Borogrove O'Larch," Kruger snapped, "I arrest you for the crime of embezzlement!"

The man turned innocent, mildly reproachful blue eyes upon him for a moment before beginning to melt to one of the native slugs — or Whugs, as they were called.

Kruger jerked his hand away from the rapidly indrawing arm. "Damn it," he said shakily, "you're the sixth one today!"

The Whug finished its metamorphosis, in careful stages so it didn't fall hard to the pavement, then extended its eyestalks toward Kruger and said, in a voice that undoubtedly matched O'Larch's fairly well, "I'm, wh, sorry, Earthman. I was paid to do this impersonation. Thank you for, wh, terminating it." The eyestalks swiveled, and the native crawled away.

Kruger strode down the sidewalk, muttering to himself, dodging or stepping over or ducking under a dozen different species of visitors to the planet, plus whatever Whugs had business here in Phrodd's Interstellar Settlement. Halfway to his hotel, he saw another O'Larch. He almost passed it up, but finally steeled himself to try again. "Stand, Borogrove O'Larch!"

The routine was the same. The Whug gratefully assumed its own shape and said, "My, wh, apologies, Earthman. I was, wh, paid —"

Kruger snarled, "Go to, wh, hell," and walked away.



He hadn't been able to get his standard communicator working right, so in his hotel room he lay prone on the floor and growled in to the Whug-level phone-grill, "English!"

There were various clicks and murmurs, then a voice said, "English, wh, spoken."

"Yeah. Get me Earth, please. The hookup has to go via Moog. I want the Terran Department of Justice, Interstellar Division, Commissioner Stanzlec."z

"Commissioner, who, wh, sir?"

"Stanzlec! S, T — oh, hell; just put through the call. I'll talk to whoever answers."

The connection only took five minutes, there being very little time-lag in the subether. A girlish voice lisped. "Interstellar Division!"

"Who's this?" Kruger demanded.

"Penny Uddersmith. I'm new here."

"Oh. Uh, Penny, this is Inspector Judson Kruger. What are you — I mean, put me through to the Chief, will you?"

A moment later Stanzlec's voice said querulously, "Yes? Is that you, Kruger? Whatever are you doing on Moog?"

"I'm not on Moog," Kruger told him, trying to keep his voice level, "the call just has to go through there. Chief, O'Larch is here on Phrodd, all right, but there's a complication. You see, the natives here —" Kruger rolled over to relieve a kink in his back, and banged his ear into a chair leg. "Ow, damn it! The Whugs, that's the dominant race, can take any shape they want

to, and O'Larch has hired a bunch to impersonate him. Since I arrived he's increased the number, and I spend all my time trying to arrest them. He's got quite a bit of loot to work with, you know."

There was a silence, then, "Kruger, you promised me faithfully you wouldn't drink on the job any more!"

"I'M NOT DRUNK!" Kruger roared. He put his hand over the phone-grill and spoke to himself in monosyllables for a moment, then resumed the subether conversation. "You can look it up in the encyclopedias; they're the best mimics ever found. Not too advanced in other ways, though. Although they're intelligent enough. Anyway —"

"Gracious," Stanzlec interrupted, "whatever in the world good does that do him?"

Kruger clamped his lips for a moment. "They keep walking about the Settlement, and while I'm busy trying to arrest them, O'Larch has an easy time staying out of my way. And of course inquiries do no good. Who knows whether he's seen the real O'Larch or not? One thing, though. At least he's confined to the Settlement. So are all other aliens — except me, of course; I have special privileges. The Moogs enforce that rule — this is a Moog protectorate, you know — and they've promised not to let O'Larch leave the planet until I find him."

Stanzlec said, "Won't they help you apprehend him? Or how about the natives? Those, uh, Whugs . . ."

"No, no, no. There are treaties, and protocols, and codes of honor,

and every damned thing you ever heard of. What I called you about, is I need a bigger allowance for this job. I've got the idea of hiring some Whugs myself, to impersonate *me*. They can go around arresting O'Larches, which will use them up a lot faster than I can do it alone. You see, the contract they make, as near as I can figure it out, is to maintain the impersonation until they're arrested, or until a day and night have passed. They can't hold it indefinitely. They have to resume their own shapes to eat or sleep. So if I can hire some help . . . Also, O'Larch won't know which is the real me, and it'll be hard for him to keep dodging all of us. I might get lucky and corner him. But, as I said, I need credits."

There was a pause, then a sigh, and, "Oh, fiddlesticks. I'd hoped to keep the budget down on this one. Well, if you must, you must. I'll allow you a hundred fifty thousand credits total. Mind you, your passage and sustenance, and any of that fooling around you do, will have to come out of it."

Kruger stared at the phone-grill in disbelief. "O'Larch has ten times that to work with!"

Stanzlecz turned petulant. "Well, Earth has to show a profit on his apprehension, doesn't we? I mean, don't it? Uh — no, not another word of argument! That's the limit, and that's *it*. And one other thing. Earth has very good relations with Moog. Don't you do anything — *anything*, do you hear? — to get the Moogs peeved at you!"

Kruger lay there, counting the

pulse that throbbed inside his skull. Finally he said, "Yes, Chief," and broke the connection.

**M**ummumnoonogog, the Moogan Governor of Phrodd, was biped and more or less humanoid — which body-shape might have something to do with the reasonably cooperative relations between Earth and the Moogan Empire — but he looked like a humanoid bred many generations for barehanded physical combat. He must have weighed twice what Kruger did, and he had vicious teeth, too.

However, his eyes were placidly shrewd and his manners civilized, and he wasn't much hairier than Kruger, and he didn't have any detectable odor. His neat uniform showed the rippling of his huge muscles as he closed the office door and walked to his own wide chair behind a big desk. "I'm happy to have this chance to meet you in person, Kruger. I happen to have been a cop, as the slang has it, myself, in my younger days. Sorry I can't give you more direct help; I've little sympathy for criminals. However, treaties and such, you know. Well. You want to find an entrepreneur, eh, who'll contract for a number of impersonators? Damned good mimics, these Whugs. Daren't let any of them off the planet — you'll have to be X-rayed yourself when you leave, to make sure you're genuine. You think you want about fifty, who speak English? I'll put you in touch with a reliable Whug businessman who can handle that.

But I can tell you — this is off the record; I can't show open partiality — that O'Larch has a hundred impersonators going, and a hundred more English-speaking Whugs, at least, on retainers. Pretty well cornered most of the supply, I'm afraid. Of course, if you only want yours to speak one or two standard phrases, they can learn those in a matter of minutes. Damned fine linguists. I'd think you'd want as many impersonations as O'Larch has, if not more, to wear him down."

Kruger said, "Yeah, but I'm on a limited budget. Another thing I wanted to ask you about — why can't my impersonators, if I get them, make more than one arrest apiece? I've made a few inquiries, and it seems they insist they'll have to revert when they make one arrest."

Mum — as he'd graciously told Kruger to call him — spread his hands and smiled. "Union rules."

"Oh," Kruger said. "Well . . . if it isn't against Moogan policy, could I maybe find some non-union Whugs who'd make more than one arrest apiece?"

Mum pursed his big lips. "N-no, I doubt it. Of course, there are the Grugs . . . But, no."

"Grugs?" Kruger asked hopefully.

"Forget them!" For a moment, Mum's eyes bored keenly into Kruger, then he relaxed. "The Grugs are just as good mimics as the Whugs, but they're barred from the Settlement. From this whole area, in fact. You see, the Whugs evolved the ability to imitate as a defensive thing. They're plant-eaters and not

vicious by nature — though they can be tough, when they have to. The Grugs were predators, who used the imitation to ambush their prey. The two races are like — well, like cats and dogs, you might say, though the analogy isn't perfect. But as I said, Grugs are out of the question."

Kruger sighed. "Well, I guess I'll try it with what Whugs I can afford, then. By the way, how is it so many of them speak English? And you, too. Your whole staff speaks it like born Terrans!"

Mum said, "Actually, I doubt if you realize how far English has spread through the galaxy. Races who've never been within a hundred light-years of a human speak it. It has certain, shall I say, virtues? I myself speak over two hundred fifty languages fluently, and I can get along in several thousand. But frankly, I've never encountered a language that lent itself so aptly as English to — well, obfuscation, where obfuscation's needed."

"Oh," Kruger said, "yeah. Well, may I have the name of that Whug businessman?"

Kruger saw the businessman and contracted for twenty-five impersonations to be made on a single day later in the week. He made no commitments about the additional twenty-five, except to get an assurance that they could be supplied if needed. He wanted to do a little thinking while he still had credits left.

He extracted a promise of secrecy (except within the union, of course) and made a date to return the next

day, when the impersonators were gathered, so they could observe him. Then he went back to his hotel room, took off his shoes, and arranged himself on the bed with his feet elevated in a sling evidently provided for some odd-shaped alien species.

He'd already canvassed the hotels of the Settlement and found sixty-odd Borogrove O'Larches registered. The others were probably staying at rooming houses, or just wandering the streets. No doubt O'Larch had other Whugs, or aliens, hired to keep watch on Kruger. So there wasn't much chance, single-handed, of finding the embezzler even by blind luck. But with a whole company of Krugers suddenly on the scene, the watchers would be confused. And so would O'Larch.

The trouble was, the fake Krugers wouldn't report O'Larch even if they found him. Union rules, and things, again. Which left the odds still heavily against Kruger. He'd just have to pick the most likely intersection, and watch as many arrests as possible.

What he really needed was impersonators who'd actually make arrests and *keep* — or at least trail — the real O'Larch if they found him. Also, he needed hirelings who wouldn't revert after a single attempt.

In short, he needed Grugs.

Did he dare? One thing would be on his side. Once in the Settlement, the Grugs wouldn't reveal themselves. The penalties they risked were too severe for that. But suppose one of them lost his wits, or got knocked unconscious, or something? Of

course, there'd only be twenty-five of them, and they could be warned, and the O'Larches — even the real one — weren't likely to offer violence.

Still, did he dare?

Often before, facing difficult decisions like this, he'd found it helpful to turn the problem around and look at it from the other end. He did so now. Did he dare *not* to?

No.

With that settled, he pondered how to make contact secretly with the Grugs. He glanced at his watch. There was a certain Whug bartender in the hotel's lounge, whom Kruger's practiced eye had observed from time to time in clandestine conversation with various kinds of aliens. The Whug wasn't due on duty for a while, but Kruger could kill the time over dinner.

He showered, shaved again, dressed leisurely, went down to the dining room, pored over the epicurean items on the menu and ordered.

Dinner finished he sauntered into the bar, located the bartender he wanted, pulled up a stool, got out his wallet, and placed two ten-credit notes on the bar. "I want," he said quietly, "to be put in touch with the most despicable, most unprincipled, most traitorous Whug within two hundred miles."

The bartender's eyestalks spread hastily right and left, making sure no one was watching or listening. Then they both bent toward one end of the bar, where three enlisted Moogs were getting drunk and beginning to be disorderly, swiveled

to scan a pair of giant centipedes twisting together and giggling in a booth, and finally returned to Kruger. One twitched briefly in the direction of Kruger's still-fat wallet. The bartender elongated himself a little closer. "Wh, Earthman," he whispered, "I am that Whug."

The country a hundred miles east of the Settlement was rougher, its rocky valleys choked with gnarled, vine-entrangled trees. Kruger, stumbling on the path, steadied himself against a big boulder.

There was a smear of motion. Within seconds, the boulder had become a beast like an enormous scaley bulldog with a crocodile's head. "Watch it, you, gr, Terran slob," the creature growled.

"Oh," Kruger said, taking a hasty step backward, "sorry. My name's Kruger. I was looking for —"

The Grug snarled an obscenity. "You've found him. Put your, gr, money where your mouth is."

"Yeah," Kruger said, "right. I'll pay ten per cent over the Whug union scale. But your twenty-five impersonators have got to keep working the full night and day, if necessary. And they've got to be careful."

The Grug rumbled with scorn. "Only ten per cent over what a *Whug* gets? Know any other new, gr, jokes?"

"Twenty per cent," Kruger said firmly, "and that's all I can spend. Take it or leave it."

"Okay, I'll take it. What's the, gr, goddam job?"

Kruger explained. The Grug en-

trepreneur pondered. "Gr. Yeah, I see what you mean. I don't know; big, gr, risk, going into the Settlement. Those Moogs don't mess around. Still, I can probably find volunteers; it sounds like fun. Gr, yeah! We can sneak in imitating Whugs! Do you want me to draw up a contract, or shall we just, gr, shake hands on it?"

"Nuts," Kruger said. "I've located a bond broker we can both rely on. I'll put up the money with him. And you and I will work out details that are desirable for both of us. Not that I don't trust you. Just a matter of principle, you understand."

The crocodilian mouth gaped in an awful grin. "Earthman, I, gr, begin to like you!"

It was unnerving when the first Whug impersonators began scattering about the settlement. One strode up to Kruger and snapped, almost in Kruger's own voice, "Your, wh, necktie's not quite right. The boss'll dock you if he sees that!"

Kruger scowled. "My tie's right, damn it. *Yours* is too wide!"

The fake's eyes widened. "Oh! You're the real —" His tie narrowed a trifle. (God, Kruger thought, even the fabric looks genuine). "Wh, sorry, sir." The impostor turned and clumped on. Halfway down the block it bellowed, "Stand, Borogrove O'Larch!" and seized the arm of a victim. Both of them began to melt into Whugs. When they'd finished, they crawled away side by side. Kruger winced.

He moved on back to the corner

where he could watch the cross-street. An O'Larch was moving leisurely toward a modest hotel. Kruger tensed. Was that, possibly, the real one going to cover? Should he follow?

A bellow of, "Stand!" from behind him made him turn. He watched an arrest and double reversion, the two Whugs again crawling off side-by-side in the direction of the union hall. From somewhere — in the next street, he thought — came a shout of, "Stand!" He raced in that direction, swerving around aliens who whistled or grunted and turned to stare after him. He also had to hurdle a lot of Whugs — there seemed to be an unusual number about today. He reached the far corner in time to see another arrest-and-double-reversion.

Three gone, damn it! He wondered if there might have been others, inside hotels where he couldn't hear them. He doubted it. He thought the real O'Larch — at least, in this first shock of confusion — would still be out in the streets, where he could move around. Scowling, he trotted back to the main intersection. He needed about a dozen assistants scattered about the Settlement, that's what he needed. Muttering under his breath about the Chief's stinginess, he turned this way and that, eyes busy.

An O'Larch emerged from a coffee shop and ambled in his direction. He started that way, but a Kruger burst from a doorway and got there first. "Stand, Borogrove O'Larch, in the, gr, name of the Government of Earth!"

Kruger grunted with satisfaction. The Grugs were beginning to operate. He watched the O'Larch turn into a Whug, point his eyestalks at the steadfast fake Kruger, do a double-take, hitch about uncertainly for a moment, say something, get no reply, shrug, and crawl away alone, looking thoughtful. The Grug-Kruger (whose voice had been a trifle harsher than necessary) caught sight of Kruger, took a quick step toward him, stopped, crouched for an instant in indecision, then turned away.

Kruger made sure there were no more O'Larches in sight, then hurried along the main street to the next intersection. There were two or three hotels in the side street he wanted to watch.

It was beginning to become clear to him that, before the Grugs had used up all the fake O'Larches, he, Kruger, was going to be a very tired and very distracted man. And there was one thing he hadn't thought about. The way he was acting, anyone interested could see he was the real policeman. He'd have to go more slowly, making arrests of his own.

He turned the corner and stopped, confronted with a new facet. Six — no less — O'Larches were emerging from what looked like a vacant store, and scattering in different directions. Reinforcements, damn it!

An alien like a squat, very broad Terran bull with delicate branched antennae in place of horns was standing across the street, staring at the dispersing O'Larches. Even an

alien could hardly help noticing the identity, seeing them all together like this.

A Kruger darted around the far corner and hurled himself upon the nearest O'Larch, almost knocking him down. "Gr, stand!" He fairly dragged his victim toward the next O'Larch, who stood bewildered. "Stand!" The fake Kruger seized the second O'Larch with his other hand, giving him a little shake in the bargain.

"Hey," the victim remonstrated, "what the — I mean, I beg your pardon, officer, I do not — oh, hell!" He began to melt to a Whug, as the other arrestee was doing.

The fake Kruger snarled in a not very human way, let go of them, and galloped toward another victim, shoving, as he went by, a vicious stiff-arm into the bull-alien's face. "One side, tubby!" He grabbed an O'Larch. This time, the Whug, before reverting, swung an awkward fist and chirped something in Whug. The Kruger knocked him down. "Don't get funny with *me*, you slug! Stand!"

The remaining three O'Larches ran toward the spot, shouting, "Scab! Unfair!" and such things. The two who had reverted were now humping themselves back toward the ruckus, making astonishing speed. Kruger ran toward the spot, yelling, "Hey! You! Copper! You're not supposed to —"

Four more Krugers came around the corner, saw the disturbance, and galloped toward it, roaring. A Whug onlooker whipped his tail in front of them, tripping two, who went down

bellowing obscenities. One started to waver out of shape, remembered where he was and hastily re-Krugerized himself. But the Whug who'd tripped him had seen.

"Grugs!" he screamed, battering at the fake with his tail. Windows were going up in the hotels all along the street now, and a fantastic variety of heads popped out to look. Aliens began pouring from the lobbies, tripping over each other and shrieking and bellowing and adding to the bedlam. A Whug Kruger hadn't noticed tripped him.

"Damn it," Kruger yelled "I'm —" Then he had to roll hastily to avoid the bludgeoning tail. He scrambled up, skinned hands and knees smarting, and darted out of reach. All the Whugs were turning into O'Larches, now — they evidently thought it was a pretty good fighting shape. And now at least twenty more O'Larches burst from the vacant store, fists balled. Several ran toward Kruger, their movements sadly belying the serene courtly expressions of their faces.

Kruger dodged toward a hotel entrance, colliding with a huge ostrichlike alien and getting a ringing peck on the head before he got past. Inside the lobby, aliens were hopelessly tangled, fighting to get free of one another.

He pushed his way through, demanded of a screaming Whug clerk, "Where's the back way?" . . . got no attention, and found it himself. It opened into an alley. There was shouting to his left. He ran that way, reached the street, and found

one whole end blocked by a struggling, screaming, bellowing mass of O'Larches and Krugers.

He stood there, mouth gaping. There must be hundreds of each! Then he understood. Those treacherous Grugs! He should never have trusted them. A lot of extra ones had come along for the fun!

He saw a knot of them burst from a jewelry store, bags of loot clutched in their hands, looking like Krugers but lashing about them viciously like Grugs. One stopped to bite at a Whug who ran from the store after them, did poorly with the manlike teeth, took a blow from a tail that sent him rolling, dodged, got up yelling curses at the Whug and ran off after his fellows.

Now Kruger heard a mob-sound from the other end of the street. He turned. A solid mass of O'Larches was coming. Some of the imitations were poor — hasty and third-or-fourth-hand, no doubt — but all had fists, and they served as a sort of uniform. All Whugdom must know by now what was up, and they'd evidently decided to fight it out along the initiated lines. The leaders saw Kruger and pressed toward him, yelling for his blood.

No use trying to prove he wasn't a Grug. He spun back into the alley. Smoke was pouring from a building halfway down it now, and he heard the wail of sirens. An alien like a boa-constrictor on twenty or thirty stilt-legs appeared suddenly from a closer building, saw him, shrieked, "Crazy, murdering Terrans!" and spat a big gob of brown liquid at him. He dodged that, threw himself

against the nearest door, broke it in, and found himself amidst a huddled pack of blue skinned little bipeds with long ears that touched together above their pointed heads. He fought through them, ran down a corridor (deserted, fortunately) and came out in what must be the foyer of a rooming-house. The street outside looked empty, and he could hear the mob of O'Larches coming in the back way, so he jerked the door open and charged out, and —

Found himself between two converging mobs, one of Krugers, one of O'Larches. He whirled and tried the door, but it had locked itself.

The whole Settlement was one deafening chaos now, with the scream of sirens almost drowned out by alien, Grug, Whug and quasi-human voices. A mass of bodies plowed into him. Fists pummeled him. He struck out blindly, heard his own voice — nearly — yell, "Ouch, gr, damn you!" and took an elbow in the face. He went down beneath the trampling feet, and felt two or three hard kicks in the head.

The thought shot through his mind — what, in all this mess, would become of the real O'Larch? And that was the last thought he had for a while.

He realized from the smell that he was in a hospital, but it took him a while to get his eyes focused enough to see that the huge white blob beside his bed was a Moog in medico's clothing. The muscular alien peered at him for a moment, then turned and said into



a wall grill, "One's come around enough to talk, I think."

There was a short wait while the blurry room swam a little, then a door opened and Governor Mum-mumnoonog stepped in. He stood glowering from Kruger to something in the other bed. "Which one of you's Kruger? You Terrans all look alike."

Kruger managed to croak, "I am." He struggled to arise, found he could sit on the edge of the bed, and let it go at that for the moment.

There was a muffled sound and a stir in the other bed. An O'Larch — more battered, if possible, than Kruger — raised a head painfully. "You are Inspector Kruger? The real one?"

"Yeah," Kruger growled uninterestedly, "so what?"

The other hauled himself painfully off the bed and advanced step by unsteady step, until he stood looking down gravely at Kruger. Battered as he was, his dignity did not desert him, and he almost succeeded in

keeping the quaver out of his voice. "Sir, I am the embezzler, Borogrove O'Larch. I want to go home. I surrender. Arrest me. Please!"

Mum interrupted harshly, "You're both going back to Earth, the instant I can load you on a ship. I don't want you around when I get to the bottom of this thing. If what I suspect is true, I couldn't trust myself to stay civilized." His glare coalesced upon Kruger. "As it is, you and your government will probably be hearing from us before long. And from a dozen other empires." He turned and stalked out.

Kruger sat there for a minute, then, grunting with the effort, got slowly to his feet. Might as well get the formalities over with. "Stand, Borogrove O'Larch," he said glumly, "in the name of the Government of Earth." He placed hesitant fingers upon the taller man's left arm. When, after a minute, it had not changed, he let go, sighed and lay down again on the bed.

END

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## XXVII

**A**lthough Jota Mulliner was my cousin, I didn't know him until he was three. His mother was my father's sister; but they had never been close, and the two people they married disliked each other.

When the Mulliners came to live next door to us, I was three too. Family feeling had nothing to do

with the move. The house was available and convenient, that was all.

I never knew Mrs. Mulliner as Aunt Jean. There was no contact between the two families. But Jota and I, being only children of the same age, almost inevitably played together.

We used to be put out together in one back garden or the other. We were allowed to run wild in ours

# WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In the little town of Shuteley, England, on the hottest summer of any resident's memory, a party of visitors appeared. They were all young, and they were enormous. Moreover, they had a couple of traits that startled the quiet people of Shuteley. The girls in the party wore dresses that disappeared from time to time; and all of them had an unusual knowledge of what was happening in the town . . . and what was about to happen.

The giants had established a camp on the bank of a river outside Shuteley, and there Val Mathers and his friend Jota shared the horrifying experience of killing and being killed . . . and then seeing time queerly reversed, so that the losers in their battles came back to life.

Then the village of Shuteley caught fire, and Mathers realized what the giants were doing there. They had come back from some distant time in the future to observe the fire — and to rescue a few victims who for cryptic reasons of their own, they did not want to die. Val's instinctive thought was that he was one of those who was to die. But in fact his doom was worse. They wanted him to live — and to bear the guilt for starting the fire that had taken hundreds of lives!

(because neither my father nor my mother had any interest in gardens, and ours was a jungle), but had to be very careful in Jota's because Jota's father was an amateur horticulturist. He called himself that, and even at three Jota and I were trying to say the word, without much success, and with no idea what it meant except that because Jota's father was a horticulturist we had much more fun in my garden.

(All this came out with Miranda prodding me, in the middle of the stasis, with fire all around. She led me through my memory quite fair-

ly, not explaining although she did direct. She reminded me of very little and never forced her sometimes more accurate information on me. All she did, really, was direct my attention to facts which I had never considered particularly significant, because if I had, I'd have had to believe the unbelievable. The unbelievable *then*. Anyway, sometimes — quite often, indeed — my memory contained important things of which she knew nothing whatever).

We must have been about four and nearly ready to go to school

when we had contact for the first time with the nastiness of the outside world. What happened in my own house I naturally took for granted, and anyway it was never nasty, merely baffling at times. I loved my mother and depended on her like any child, and ninety-five per cent of the time she was like anybody else's mother. It was only occasionally that the world turned upside down. Then there was screaming and rushing about and slammed doors and sobbing, and I knew then to keep quiet and pretend not to exist.

The garden behind ours belonged to Mr. Sylvester, who was a fat red-faced man whom I used to like quite well. He used to give us aniseed balls, always throwing them and laughing all over his fat body when we failed to catch them, as we always did.

Later, however, Mr. Sylvester changed. Jota (who was Clarence then — the name didn't seem strange to either of us until we went to school) and I didn't understand why he had changed. Until Miranda made me think about it, I didn't realize that he was simply a gardener jealous of Jota's father's achievements. He didn't throw aniseed balls to us any more. Over the fence, he asked at times why we didn't run about in Jota's garden the way we did in mine.

Then he started complaining about our garden, saying the weeds were coming through the fence. To Jota and me this was manifest nonsense, because we had never seen a plant walk.

Anyway, there was constant trouble between Mr. Sylvester and Jota's father, and between Mr. Sylvester and my father, and even between my father and Jota's father, because Jota's father said weeds *did* go through fences and it was time my father did something about the jungle.

Jota and I never understood the situation, but what we did know was that we could never play in either garden any more without being shouted at by Jota's father or my father or Mr. Sylvester. And we both managed to work out, without the slightest trouble, that the whole thing was Mr. Sylvester's fault.

Really, it was quite a crisis in the life of a couple of four-year-olds. We were not allowed to wander about the town, to play in the streets, to disappear for hours. In the back gardens, until Mr. Sylvester spoiled everything, we'd spent whole days of childish delight every time it didn't rain.

One day Mr. Sylvester ceased bothering us. He was dead.

**I**t was the day we went to school that Jota and I fell out for the first time. Of course we had argued and sulked, but until then we had both been too dependent upon each other ever to cut off our nose to spite our face. My parents and Jota's parents both accepted our friendship as something that caused them less trouble than any other acquaintance, and if we fought we suffered for it, and we knew it. Other kids either of us brought home were not welcome. Neither

Jota's parents nor mine wanted outsiders poking their noses in, even children. Behind children were adults.

So Jota and I fairly intelligent kids, had realized long since that fighting with each other didn't pay.

At school, a maelstrom of noise, high laughter, peculiar smells, unaccustomed regimentation, girls (neither Jota nor I had ever had anything to do with girls and had quite made up our minds we never would), harsh-voiced adults pretending to be on our side, huge windows, endless corridors, electric light in the daytime, stairs, frightening large boys and girls, even more frightening people in black coats and square hats, one thing stood out in my memory — the howl of laughter when Jota said his name was Clarence.

The teacher laughed too, though she tried to pretend she hadn't.

They laughed again, twice as loudly, when he added the second half, Mulliner.

I wanted to jump up and hit the whole lot of them. They hadn't laughed when, just before, I had said I was Val Mathers. My real Christian name was Valentine, but I'd always been called Val, so that's what I said. Now everybody was laughing at Clarence Mulliner, my pal.

I didn't jump up because. . . . well, I didn't.

The funny thing was that as we were going home, free for the rest of the day — the first day was a half day — I giggled myself at the recollection of the childish

laughter when Clarence, all unwittingly, gave his name. It was child-like. When they laughed at Clarence, my friend, I wanted to fight them all (though I didn't). But afterwards . . . well, I laughed so much I could hardly walk.

Clarence — I called him Clarence then, and went on doing so until he became, for all time, Jota — didn't lose his temper at once. He waited for me to return to normal. But I couldn't. The more I laughed the funnier it all became.

And then he hit me once, on the chest, and ran away.

My laughter slowly died, not because I'd been hurt, not really because I was sorry I'd laughed, but mainly because I had, after all, been laughing *at* Jota. So long as he stayed to be laughed at, I went on doing it. But there's no point in laughing at someone who doesn't hang around to be laughed at.

I went home. I tried to see Jota, but nobody answered the door.

At tea time I wasn't hungry. Later I was sick. My father, even my mother, began to get concerned. I went to bed with a hot-water bottle.

Next morning I was no better, and the doctor was sent for. He examined me thoroughly, and then he and my father talked at the foot of the bed in low tones. Later my father came and sat on the bed and talked quietly to me.

At the time I didn't understand, didn't realize there was anything to understand except that I was ill.

But many years later it was easy

to guess what the doctor had said and what my father thought about it, and what must have been in his mind when he talked to me.

The doctor had been unable to find anything wrong with me, yet obviously I was quite seriously ill. Being a young, up-to-date doctor, he immediately thought of psychosomatic illness. It figured. I lived in a strange home — he knew that, being the doctor for the whole family. I had just gone to school. He had found a quite interesting case — a child of five, otherwise apparently normal, prostrated by psychosomatic illness.

Jota came to see me at lunch-time. He was quiet, puzzled and very contrite. He seemed to think he was responsible for my illness because he had childishly punched me on the chest.

I told them that was silly, there wasn't even a mark, and I was sorry I'd laughed at him in the first place.

I was ill for three weeks and never fully recovered that first school term.

Then there was a very small incident about two years later . . .

It was the next time Jota and I really quarreled. Miranda didn't seem to know anything about this. I was quite unable to remember what the quarrel was about, or any details, except that Jota finally grew cold, stared at me, and said: "I'll fix you!" in a tone of menace quite startling coming from a seven-year-old boy.

And that was all. Nothing happened.

The fire that had consumed all of Shuteley was a dull red glow around us, but inside the stasis we felt nothing.

Miranda was puzzled. She had been making me remember things, not as I might have expected, by being in possession of all the facts and prompting my flagging memory, but by directing my attention to certain types of incidents in my relations with Jota.

And this incident had her beat. She tried to make me remember that Jota had not really been in a cold fury with me, or that he got over it at once.

In fact, Jota and I ceased to be friends for fully three months, and during that time he made no secret of the fact that he hated me.

I was, after all, a much more normal boy than Jota, and I made other friends. He stayed solitary, walking home alone, standing in the playground alone.

And it was because of that that we finally became friends again.

One of my new friends was Gil Carswell, who was studious but not always quiet. In those days he was a sort of juvenile Jekyll and Hyde, usually the best boy in the school from the point of view of authority, intelligent, polite, hard-working, good at games, a paragon of school-boy virtues. But now and then he'd kick over the traces.

However, this incident had very little to do with Gil, not until it was over, anyway.

It was the morning interval. I was with Gil. Across the playground, beside the bush which divided the



junior boys' section from the girls', Jota was standing alone as usual, staring into space, his mind far away.

About a dozen boys were kicking a ball around near him. Inevitably the ball went near him, and one of the boys chasing it came close to Jota.

They didn't come in contact, and across the playground I had no idea what was said. I was watching only idly, until the group began to gather round Jota. Then I began to have a vague, though fundamentally correct, idea of what was happening.

No wild animals are as cruel as children. They don't know how.

Jota, standing alone, had set himself apart as a target, as a victim. The boys (bigger than us, from a higher class) were taunting him, trying to outdo each other in the wit and virulence of their insults.

Automatically Gil and I moved across the playground. Nothing draws boys more surely and quickly than a fight, and it was obvious there was going to be a fight.

We weren't the only ones. Everyone in the playground was crowding to the same spot. Even some of the girls behind the hedge and fence were beginning to take notice, the bigger girls looking over, the smaller ones jumping up to take a quick look.

There were three playgrounds at the old Grammar School. Everything was old, dingy and overcrowded, and the playgrounds were far too small. Round at the back, completely cut off from us, were the senior boys. But all the girls, from

five to eighteen, were in the same section. The idea was, presumably, that big boys might bully small boys, but girls didn't do things like that.

Bolstering each other up, the tormentors were becoming bolder. At first they merely touched Jota lightly when they leaped at him. Then they punched him. Then they started pulling his tie, grabbing his shirt, clawing at his buttons.

Still a few feet of space was left between Jota and the heaving mass of boys, tacitly maintained to keep Jota the quarry and everyone else a hunter.

His nose was bleeding and blood was running down his chin from a cut at the corner of his mouth. Most of us were howling — I believe I was howling with the rest. We were huntsmen, and we had cornered the fox. We were out for the kill.

When his shirt came out of his pants, we shrieked with laughter. He was near the end of his tether. His shirt, minus all buttons, was now hanging open under his jacket, and his thin white chest was heaving at frightening speed. There was no sign of any let-up.

Flight had never seemed possible for Jota, since from the beginning he had been hemmed in against the bush and fence. But in his extremity he suddenly did something that none of us expected.

He leaped back, seized the top of the fence and somehow drew himself over. The next moment he was in the girls' playground.



For a moment the shouts died as if we'd all been struck dumb. Then the whole mass of boys charged the fence, ignoring the bushes, and although none of us got over as Jota had done, we were all hanging over the fence, watching, if not chasing our quarry, hunting him with our eyes and our shouts.

The little girls all ran away, screaming. Boys were not supposed to be in the girls' playground. It was a rule, and not one of the hundreds of rules made to be broken. Nobody had expected Jota even to try to get into the girls' playground.

One massive woman of seventeen or eighteen caught Jota by the collar and lifted him. There was a scream of laughter on both sides of the fence. She did it again . . .

He fell out of his jacket and she was left holding it. He darted for the gate.

We rushed to our gate. He was on the other side of the road, panting desperately. Habit was so strong that he wanted to come back (the interval must be nearly over). But scores of boys were hanging over the gate.

I didn't think. I jumped over the gate and ran across the road. Jota flinched and turned, evidently thinking that even the school boundary couldn't stop the chase.

But I caught his arm. "Come on back, Clarence," I said.

Once again the shouting and howling died.

Suddenly sanity was restored. I had done quite a bit to restore it, but could take little credit for it.

By standing with Jota, by allying myself with him, I had reminded everybody that he was one of us, not an outlaw to be taken dead or alive, not a fox to be slaughtered as bloodily as possible, not a mouse to be tortured and broken and perhaps left, mercilessly, still alive.

I could take very little credit because I should have done this long before, because instead of doing it when I might have turned the entire incident I had been howling with the rest.

Anyway, as the shouting died, the whistle to end the break shrilled, and we all trooped back into school, including Jota and me.

The fun was over.

## XXVIII

Gil, Jota and I became friends after that. Curiously, Jota's fifteen-minute ordeal was ignored and forgotten and canceled as if it had never happened.

The teachers must have known something had happened. Signs of the damage to bushes and fences was still visible six months later. Jota could not have looked anything like his usual self in class, although his nose had stopped bleeding, his face had been washed, and his jacket — thrown over the fence by one of the girls — hid the ruin of his shirt.

In any event, nothing was done. And the boys at the school, too, scarcely remembered the episode. One or two of them, I knew, tried to taunt Jota later — but they were unwise enough to do it individually,

and in such circumstances Jota was perfectly capable of looking after himself.

Looking after himself. . . .

Two weeks later, there was a special assembly. The Head was very grave. Two boys, close friends, had died in one day, one of hitherto unsuspected heart trouble, and the other in a road accident. A special service was held. All the good things the boys had ever done were detailed, and everything else quietly forgotten.

I knew of course, that these two had been the ringleaders in the humiliation of Jota. But no significance in that fact, beyond the obvious coincidence, occurred to me. Jota could hardly have any control over road accidents, especially since at the time it happened he was with Gil and me and clearly had nothing in his mind beyond our search for birds' nests. I might, at that age, have believed that God had punished them for their wickedness. It didn't cross my mind that Jota had.

Miranda didn't make me remember subsequent events in any detail, except one — one which introduced an entirely new concept.

There had been the case of Squire Badgeley. . . . He wasn't a squire at all, but he looked like one and he owned an orchard. Probably for every apple that he got, the boys of Shuteley Grammar School got two. In my earliest recollections of the squire, he seemed quite philosophical about this.

But now it was wartime. We were

too young to take much note of the war; the restrictions and shortages we accepted as we accepted the rain and the wind, and our memories of a time when there was no need to pull curtains at night and when unlimited good things were obtainable merely on production of cash were dim and vague.

But Squire Badgeley took note of the war. He had three sons in the RAF, and his one daughter worked with him, a Land Girl, as we called them then. In addition to apples, he grew raspberries, blackcurrants and a wide range of vegetables. And we boys not only stole his fruit, but damaged and destroyed his carrots, turnips, cabbages and lettuces.

He became an ogre (from our angle). He guarded his orchard, chased us and reported us to the Head. The Head, whom we dimly remembered being as philosophical as the squire had once been about our depredations, now became astonishingly harsh.

Jota was caught once, and the squire beat him.

Two weeks later the squire died. But that wasn't the end of the Badgeley story.

It was not until long after the war that we broke our vows about girls. Jota broke his first. One week he obviously didn't know any more than we did about the birds and the bees, though we were all becoming hotly interested; the next, he was able to tell us, in remarkable detail, everything we could possibly want to know.

We didn't really believe his stor-

ies at first. But soon it was impossible not to believe them. Girls of all ages swarmed around Jota. (He was Jota now, duly having been christened by Mr. Samuel, the science master). In juvenile masculine arrogance he used to induce us to deride his chances with a particular girl, often four or five years older than he was, and then make the conquest and prove it.

This was before the days of widespread promiscuity at mixed schools. Shuteley was an old-fashioned town, too, well behind the times. Senior girls did not then wear yellow golliwogs to claim loss of virginity. If Jota had not existed, only one or two of the most forward senior girls would have had furtive nocturnal adventures, mainly with the boys of the town who had left school. Fewer still of the senior boys would have had such experiences, and they would have been with willing farm girls rather than the supposedly pure senior girls.

Jota, on his own, created an unprecedented situation. Every apple ripe enough to pluck, he plucked. He collected girls like stamps. It made not the slightest difference what form they were in, from Third to Sixth. He knew enough, of course, not to leave a trail of illegitimate babies behind him. I believe that throughout his life, only when he was too impatient for a particular girl did he ever take chances.

It was not long after Dina was born that Gil, goaded by Jota's fantastic success and the fact that Gil and I were still virgins, and likely to remain so for some time, hit on

a challenge that was to reduce Jota to size.

He brought up the name of Anne Badgeley.

All three of Squire Badgeley's sons had been killed in the war. Anne, left alone, ran the orchard herself, with hired hands to help her. Although she could hardly be said to be fortunate, money was not one of her problems. She was certainly the richest girl in Shuteley.

At the time when Gil made his outrageous suggestion, she was probably one of the most desirable girls in the town and undoubtedly the most desired. There wasn't much doubt that the reason why she hadn't married was tied up with her wealth. Whether the average young man in town wanted Anne, her orchard or her money was a matter for conjecture. But he certainly wanted all three.

She was still in the first half of her twenties, and Jota was not less than ten years younger. She didn't exactly seem old to us, being younger than Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner, whose pin-up photographs we were beginning to stick up in our bachelor bedrooms. Indeed, with her habit of working in the summer in her orchard dressed like our pin-up girls, she was the nearest thing to the gorgeous creatures of our adolescent dreams.

She worked in the orchard behind a fence and a high hedge, but peepholes could always be found, and the summer working clothes

of Anne Badgeley were a daily topic of inflamed speculation among us. When she wore slacks we lost interest — or some interest. But when she wore shorts and particularly one day when above her tight shorts she made do with a flimsy chiffon scarf, carelessly tied, she rocked the male half of the Grammar School to its foundations.

But she was as much out of reach as Betty, Rita and Lana. The very idea of Jota and Anne, Anne and Jota, was ridiculous, which was why Gil made the suggestion.

Jota took the challenge. And a week later, he made us hide in the orchard to watch.

Late on a hot summer evening, he and Anne came out. . . .

Gil and I were part shocked, part disgusted, but mainly wildly envious. Why had Jota been singled out to be able to do such things? The girl was head over heels in love with him; he could do anything he liked with her, even we could see that.

In the autumn, Anne died. She fell off a ladder and broke her back.

## XXIX

Dina was still asleep. She changed her position easily, regularly, without fuss and without making a noise.

Around us now, beyond the stasis, was a red glow. It would be many hours yet before it would be possible for Dina and me, unless wearing one of the giants' suits, to leave the spot. But the fire had

consumed nearly all there was to consume.

The Great Fire of London had burned for days. War-time fires started by incendiaries had often been blazing still when the bombers returned the following night. Shuteley, however, was annihilated in a relatively small, exceedingly fierce, shockingly rapid fire. What remained would glow for a long time, but little or nothing remained to blaze.

And there was one suit in the stasis. As I understood it, just before dawn the stasis would disappear, and Miranda would be plucked back to her own time. But anyone not of her party would simply be left, suddenly without the protection of the stasis, to die.

Certainly to die. There would be enough heat left to char the ground, to burn Dina and me apparently as all the other victims had been burned — more slowly but no less surely, so that when people from outside first reached the village green (that afternoon? next day?) there would be no indication that the stasis had ever existed, or of the identity of the two blackened skeletons in it.

But I was still oddly unconcerned about this. There was one suit, and there was still plenty of time. Anyway, I did not believe I was going to die. Dina could have the suit. Dina, whom I expected to recover consciousness soon, could make her escape . . . and I wouldn't die.

"What are you telling me?" I asked Miranda.

She shrugged. "I've been careful not to tell you anything. You're telling me."

"But I'm remembering what you tell me to remember. That Mr. Sylvester was a nuisance to Jota, and he died. That Jota quarreled with me, and I nearly died. That the two boys who led the mob against Jota died. That Squire Badgeley beat Jota, and he died. That Anne Badgeley — "

"You're leaving out some very important things. About all those girls, schoolgirls mostly, but older girls too. Particularly Anne. She could have had anyone in Shuteley, you said. Why did she pick a kid barely into his teens?"

"You're saying Jota did all this? Any man he wants out of the way dies? Any girl he wants says yes?"

She nodded. "He has the Gift. And you're wrong to say any *man*. What about Anne? When he'd finished with her, he made her die."

"Why would he want rid of her?"

"The oldest reason, probably. She was pregnant. With others he was more careful. With her he was too impatient, too reckless. And it seemed to Jota that it would be better for him if Anne died."

"You're saying he condemned all these people to death?"

"No," she said thoughtfully. "Not that. I imagine that at first, he simply thought, perhaps not even consciously: *Everything would be fine but for Mr. Sylvester*. And soon Mr. Sylvester wasn't there. But after this had happened a few times, Jota must have begun to realize.

. . . . There's another thing he obviously has found out by this time — with the ability to attack goes defense. Nobody can kill Jota. No *person* can kill Jota. Of course he could die by accident, like anyone else — his power is over people. Originally he died in this fire."

"Wait," I said. "That doesn't jell. I just killed him. Yesterday Greg killed him. You say that before you intervened, the fire killed him. Seems that for an indestructible character he gets destroyed a hell of a lot."

Miranda was following her own own train of thought, not mine. "Later, in adolescence, he found out something else. After any girl refused him —"

"No girl ever refused him," I said.

"Oh, yes. Time after time. You weren't there. Neither was I, but I can tell you what happened. The first meeting was always as you'd expect. But later — a girl who sneered at Jota would come crawling to him. She'd beg him, as I —"

She flushed. "I think you heard what Greg and I were saying at the bridge. You're wrong if you've any idea that people with the Gift are smooth, practiced lovers. They don't have to be. It's crude, it's bestial. They say: 'I want you,' and that's it. Not the first time. The Gift needs time to work. When Jota or Greg wants a man dead, he doesn't drop dead on the spot. It takes time to happen."

The paradoxes and inconsistencies that had bothered me were gradually melting away.

I could see how Greg could have killed Jota. If two people had this Gift, presumably it was canceled out. Greg had no special power over Jota, but then Jota had no special defense against Greg. So the matter was settled simply with pistols. There was also the cryptic exchange between them which I now understood better:

GREG: *You're a bit like me.*

JOTA: *In more ways than one.*

GREG: *Remember . . . I killed you.*

JOTA: *Remember . . . I let you.*

Yes . . . I understood and accepted that. I also understood and accepted this new explanation of Jota's power over women. He approached them, they reacted exactly as they wished, free to do as they wished (I now remember I had never been privileged to see any of the preliminaries, only the consequences). Later, when *something* had worked on them, they became possessed, clay in Jota's hands.

More of the inconsistencies dissolved when I looked at them. Jota had been brutish toward both Sheila and Dina. That was how it started. Later, if he persisted, things would be very different. But instinctively wise in the case of Sheila, I had sent Jota away, unconsciously knowing what Sheila hated me for thinking, that what *she* thought or wanted or said didn't count, only what Jota wanted. . . . And as for Dina, there had not been an Act Two, and there never would be.

Then, having prepared the way, Miranda told me about the Gift in her own world.

I don't remember her words. She spoke for a long time. A lot of what she said I didn't believe at first, but gradually disbelief was borne down.

Greg and Jota and three per cent of the population in 2197 had a Gift, which was quite simply that ability to make people die or surrender sexually. It was nothing else.

It was fundamentally a masculine phenomenon. So few women possessed it that they were freaks, usually choosing to conceal, abandon, deny their possession of the Gift.

Those with the Gift, then, were men, and if they didn't rule the world, they prevented anyone else from ruling it effectively.

Most of them, fortunately, were law-abiding . . . but what could be done about the rogues like Greg? Virtually nothing. That was why Greg was present on an expedition aimed at the limitation or even destruction of his kind, able to sabotage it at will, because nobody could stop him.

Miranda couldn't stop him. If Greg cared to decide at any moment that she should die, and simply decided it instead of crudely, impulsively and rashly trying to break her body with one blow, then she would die in less than two weeks. And the cause of death could not legally be connected with Greg.

I protested at this. Had no murder charge ever been brought against one of these people? When the Gift was known to exist, when threats had been made, when a death duly took place exactly as forecast . . . ?

"Think, Val," said Miranda wearily. "Take the clearest possible case . . . imagine the clearest possible case, and then think about it. The detectives who built up the case would have to be immune. The cops who arrested the accused would have to be immune. The jailers, judge, jury and lawyers would have to be immune. And in common justice they'd have to prove that the accused had the Gift and had used it deliberately to end another person's life."

She shook her head. "It can't be done. Especially since the actual cause of death is always natural — illness, accident or suicide, with no physical intervention by the real killer."

So Greg was with the Shuteley party. Some of those who had tried to stop him had died. Threats were enough to silence the others. Miranda's attitude, a perfectly reasonable one after all, was that she could at least keep an eye on him and try to defeat him.

In addition to ordinary people and those who had the Gift, there were some who were simply immune. They did not possess the Gift; but those who did could accomplish nothing against them. Unfortunately there were fewer of these than those who had the Gift.

The Gift and immunity were hereditary. This did not mean that the Gift was often passed on. It merely meant that it could be passed on.

Miranda's world, the world of the giants (women of five feet four were as rare in her world, she told me,

as women of four feet eleven in ours) was a good world on the surface and a seething cesspool of fear and chaos and self-destruction underneath.

And all because of the Gift.

The sexual side of it, she pointed out, was virtually unimportant. That was merely a by-product, a side issue. It existed, probably, because sex as well as survival was basic. Anyone who could control life and death could also control the sex impulse.

That was nothing. A small minority of Casanovas could be a nuisance, but they couldn't push a whole world over a precipice.

The threat of death was another matter altogether. There was no need for any Greg to be educated, clever, handsome, careful, obliging, efficient or self-respecting. Anyone who said or did anything a Greg didn't like could be rubbed out and forgotten. It was senseless to be brave when faced with a Greg. After he had eradicated you, he could quite easily, on the merest whim, eradicate your wife and family as well.

As far as anyone knew, the Gift was a chance mutation. Immunity was probably allied to it, though no one could be sure. Immunity might have existed always, unrecognized, purposeless, until the Gift emerged.

Twisting of time was only one of the desperate measures tried in an attempt to restore sanity to the world of 2197. Miranda hinted at others, refused to tell me about any, and said that anyway they had all

failed miserably, sometimes tragically.

I started to suggest one angle that occurred to me, the arrangement of accidents, since Gregs could be killed in accidents like anybody else, and she cut me off rather impatiently. Such attempts were the most disastrous of all. They made all people who possessed the Gift, including those who steadfastly refused to use it, stick together for their own survival.

So we came to the purpose of the Shuteley operation.

Clearly if everybody possessed the Gift, or if everybody was immune, or if everybody was one way or the other, the problem would cease to exist.

According to the river-of-time theory, the people of 2197 would continue to exist no matter what was done to the past, short of a major diversion which would force the flow into a completely different course. But their capacities might be changed. Miranda might, after certain changes had been made, find herself immune. Or she might have the Gift. Or nobody might have the Gift.

It was a desperate scheme, born of desperation. It was carried out in a manner little short of insanity, in a completely useless attempt to get the whole thing done under cover.

It was entrusted to an ordinary history class in an ordinary school under an ordinary teacher.

A history class would go back and see the Great Fire of Shuteley, 1966 A.D. They would do nothing

to alter the flow of events except remove Garry Carswell. . . .

That was the cover: a minor operation like many others (none of them directed against possessors of the Gift), of no particular interest to anyone not directly concerned. Miranda knew all about it, but none of the students did. As far as they were concerned, the rescue of Garry Carswell, and a few others, was all that was involved, apart from the opportunity to see the Great Fire.

It might possibly have worked.

But three per cent possession of the Gift meant that one in thirty-three adults, teenagers or children had it. So no school was free of it.

Greg was in another class, a lower class. He applied to join the expedition to 1966. The headmaster, the far more important people behind the headmaster and the less important people below, all knew that the inclusion of Greg would ruin everything.

But Greg had made up his mind, and nothing else mattered. It wasn't even possible to cancel the scheme. Greg, if he felt like it, could easily block the cancellation.

Greg went with the party.

### XXX

“Now Jota,” I said. “Tell me why you want Jota.”

She hesitated. “It's only a theory that if we saved Jota the situation might improve. Perhaps it would be worse. . . . You've been baffled in the last twenty-four hours by what we know and what we don't



know, Val. We knew that Jota would arrive at your office at 3:10 this afternoon, but I didn't know Dina existed. We had pictures of you, so I knew you when I saw you in the bar, but we had no pictures of Jota. And that's why I came to your office — to see him, to be able to recognize him, so that there would be no possibility of mistaken identity later. We didn't know, of course, that you and he would go to the camp, because that was a new train of events altogether."

"Why didn't you do some preliminary scouting?"

"For several reasons, but the main one was to try to rush this through without attracting the attention of people like Greg. It wasn't supposed to be a big, important operation, just —"

"Just a sightseeing tour," I said.

"Well, yes. Anyway, one thing we do know for certain is that around you here in Shuteley in 1966 there were important elements in the Gift-immunity hereditary lines. Some were strong, some weak . . . it's possible that the whole situation developed from a single latent mutant who lived here thirty or fifty or eighty years ago. But we haven't been able to trace any such person."

"You hoped saving Jota would give more people in your time the Gift. Or better still, immunity without the Gift."

"That's it exactly. Leaving Jota to die, as he did originally, obviously didn't stop the spread of the mutation. Historians believe that

saving his strain may do what you just said. One thing we are sure of is that the immunity strain is here too, if we can somehow develop it. But all we can do, all we know about to try, is to save Jota. He was the first, by far the first, to possess the Gift complete. Decades were to pass before anyone appeared with the power so fully developed —"

"And he really had no children?"

"We think not. We're almost sure that —" She stopped suddenly.

I followed the direction of her eyes and saw Greg.

He was carrying a spare suit, which he dropped when he saw Miranda. His expression answered one question. He had meant to kill her, and thought he had.

Yet he didn't say, "How did you get here?" He demanded: "*What have you done?*"

She stood up. "What could I do?" There was a slight emphasis on the "I".

"I've lost it," he said hoarsely. "Something's taken it away from me. I felt it go . . . I couldn't test it with death, that takes too long. And I wanted to know. I tested it with girls. With Harrie, Wendy, Mary, Chloe. They couldn't understand it either. . . . But they all hate me, can you understand that?"

Miranda seemed to grow as tall as Greg. A great joy flooded her. "You've lost it?" she said. "Maybe there is natural justice after all. You're just a kid now, a great overgrown kid. And helpless."

"Helpless?" he almost shouted, drawing himself up to his enormous height. Yet he was almost blubbering. Curiously enough, I could understand him. I'd known Jota for a long time. Jota had a strange Gift, and, I now believed, very little else. His power, his personality, his success had all come from something he couldn't help. He had Something; he wasn't Somebody.

It's not necessarily true, as you're always told when you're a kid, that a bully must be a coward. Yet there is a weakness, if not necessarily in courage. A strong, brave, *whole* man or boy doesn't have to prove himself at the expense of the weak. He may trample carelessly on the weak, as strong men do. But he doesn't seek out the weak to torture and humiliate them. He'd rather engage in a real contest with someone his own size.

Jota and Greg had this in common, I now saw, that the thing that set them apart was important to them, vital to them. They weren't like a banker who happened to be a talented violinist, enjoying playing the violin for his own pleasure and that of others, but with no compulsion to tell every new bank client at once that he was a brilliant violinist. As far as I knew Jota hadn't used his Gift to kill more than half a dozen people. But he'd had to go on making amatory conquests — he'd been forced to go on. Now that I had the key I could see his Don Juan activities in a different light, and no longer envied him in the slightest. Every girl

who didn't want him had to be made to want him.

Greg, however, was the problem of the moment. As he and Miranda faced each other, I knew that the way this whole thing would go depended on what happened now between Greg and Miranda — and me. Because I mattered, too.

"Yes, helpless." I said. "But you knew that quite a while ago, Greg, didn't you? You just didn't want to believe it."

He looked at me as if astonished to see me there. Then, remembering, he looked around. His gaze passed over the sleeping Dina without stopping. "Where's Jota?" he said.

I had become strong and confident. I felt it, as Greg had felt his reduction to size, but the opposite way. I didn't even have to stand up. I was still sitting on the burnt earth.

"I killed him, Greg," I said. "He was trying to add Dina to his list. I didn't mean to kill him, but I'm not sorry he's dead. I'm beginning to think his death was necessary."

"You killed him," Greg murmured. "You killed him."

"Why pretend to be surprised? You wanted to kill me and couldn't. You had to save me instead. I guess you managed to convince yourself that you didn't need to kill me in the fire, that it was neater and cleverer and just as efficient to bring me here to die when the stasis was removed. But the truth was, you couldn't kill me. The most you could do was place me

in circumstances where I might die."

It was Miranda's turn not to be able to follow what was going on. She had a glimmering of understanding, but there was still a lot she couldn't fit into place.

Greg understood. He stared at me with naked hate and clothed fear. "Who are you, Val Mathers?" he whispered.

"Nobody in particular," I said. "But once Jota wanted to get rid of me. He nearly got rid of me, and I came back. And the next time he wanted to get rid of me, I didn't feel a thing. And an hour or two ago, you tried to kill me. But you couldn't, could you? You had to bring me here instead and just *hope* I'd die. And when Jota and I fought, he died."

Miranda was standing quite still. "You're immune, Val," she whispered. "You were the first neutral. Only your life had no effect, because you never had children. But after what I told you. . . ."

I understood now. I understood what had changed, and why.

Jota was an irrelevance anyway. In the first run of these few days, he had died; in the second, he still died. So he was unimportant. He was a red herring.

"I was different. In the first fire, I hadn't died, evidently (or I'd never have become the scapegoat). In the fire altered by the intervention of the giants, I was certain I wasn't going to die either. But one thing differed. But for Miranda, I'd never have had children. Now (I trusted her — on the whole I trusted her) I certainly would.

And Greg now became impotent.

Yet not, perhaps, entirely impotent, in all senses.

His attention was all on me now. "You," he muttered. "It must be you. By intervening, we mixed you up in this thing in a way you never were before. Before we took a hand, you and Sheila and Dina stayed at home and never knew a thing was happening until it was over. Your curtains were drawn, nobody phoned you, the lights didn't fail, you heard no noise. You went to bed and slept, the three of you, and it wasn't until the next day that you discovered Shuteley had been burned to the ground. But we intervened, and — "

"And Jota still died," I said. "That was what you, Greg, wanted — until a little while ago. When you lost your precious Gift you realized that somehow what was happening here tonight had snuffed the Gift out. It never developed. It was beaten here . . . or else, who knows, the elements that enabled it to be beaten between your time and mine were brought together."

"Yes," Miranda murmured.

"And you changed your mind completely," I said to Greg. "Miranda was here to save Jota, you to make sure he stayed dead — because both of you believed that that would weaken the Gift in your time. A little while ago, when you found you'd lost it, you decided, and perhaps you were right, that Jota had to be saved. Save him, and maybe you saved the Gift



after all. So you came back for him. But you're too late, Greg. I killed Jota."

He leaped at me.

I was on the ground. The advantage wasn't all with Greg; already on the ground, I could move faster there than he could. He landed heavily where I had recently been. Knowing I was not involved in a cheerful, sporting contest, I kicked him in the kidney as I got up. After that, his movements were slower. I also managed to hit him in the groin before he got his bearings.

Yet when he was up, hurt badly and slowed down, I was instantly in trouble. Miranda tried to help, and was canceled out in two seconds. A single backhand swipe caught her on the shoulder, with

most of Greg's 250 pounds behind it. It finished her interest in the contest at the moment it began.

Greg had not taken time to take off his suit. The fact on the whole favored me. The plastic afforded him some protection, and he was hard to grasp properly. But the heat his efforts generated was trapped in the suit. I also guessed that the air supply from the tank at the back was constant, but not enough to sustain continued activity.

Coming to the same conclusion as me, Greg tried to win grace to remove his suit. And I kept at him so that he couldn't. Soon he was gasping like a grassed fish.

He hit me once, and although it was only a glancing blow on my right breast, the pain and numbness that went through me showed

me my only chance was either to hit Greg without being hit myself, or to fight him as I had fought Jota.

Using his weight, I brought off a knee-drop which hurt him badly. Nevertheless, it was perhaps a mistake, for he got up so mad that I knew I was engaged in not much less than a fight to the death, perhaps nothing less at all.

He couldn't get his suit off. Every time he tried, I hit him or butted him or threw him.

My tactics paid off, for when suddenly he caught me a stinging blow on the side of the head and I reeled, defenseless for a moment, he chose to use the moment gained to get the suit off rather than to follow up his advantage. And that was a life for me.

By the time he had stripped to his briefs I was able to go on.

The trend of the struggle changed. While he'd been wearing his suit there had been no point in trying to throw him through the stasis wall. Now there was.

I was deliberately trying to do what I had done quite accidentally in Jota's case — burn Greg to death. The blaze outside our bubble of coolness was dying now, and yet the embers were so hot that if Greg rolled out into them, he'd die as surely as Jota had.

Unlike Jota, however, Greg knew what would happen. And he was trying to do the same to me.

He threw me once, by brute strength, and then launched himself at me, intending to win me with his weight. I rolled partly clear, but



he grabbed me and held me. He was on top, and I could do nothing about his weight. He started to swing at my head a blow which would have ended my interest in the fight.

Then he fell on top of me, limp.

### XXXI

I extricated myself. Dina was standing over us. She had picked up a stone and hit Greg with it.

"Have I killed him?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't care if you have," I gasped.

"I didn't mean to kill him. But if I didn't knock him out, he'd have taken the stone from me. So I had to hit pretty hard."

"You haven't killed him, Dina," I said, moving from Greg to Miranda, who was dazedly picking herself up. I offered her a hand, but she shook her head and sat down again, taking a breather. Greg had been pretty rough with her that night.

I turned back to Dina, who was a singularly attractive stranger. She wore a crisp white blouse which in the middle of all this was spotless, a short black skirt with a wide belt, nylons and stiletto shoes. She must have been fully protected from the beginning.

I asked her what had happened.

"I was watching television with Barbara and Gil," she said. "We heard shouting first. Then the television suddenly went off. And there was a glow at the window. The next thing, there was a glow at the

other window. Gil shouted: 'Get Garry, and we'll go to the cellar.'"

So that was how it had happened.

Before the giants intervened, when Barbara and Gil were alone in the house with Garry, Gil's first reaction had been to seek refuge in the cellar. A very reasonable idea, really . . . the trouble was, he thought the fire that apparently surrounded them was an ordinary fire, and it wasn't. In an ordinary fire, the cellar of Gil's house would have been a perfect place. But in the fire that was to come, any cellar would become an oven, and anyone within would be baked slowly and very painfully to death.

They had just reached the cellar when two big youths in plastic suits appeared and practically dragged them back into the hall of the house. Barbara, frightened, did exactly as she was told; Dina, curious, was glad to get out of the dingy cellar and have a chance of seeing what was happening; Gil, dazed, had to be shouted at before anything registered; and Garry slept peacefully through the whole thing.

There had been a curious wait while people screamed outside, while crowds ran past the house, while the red glow became bright enough to replace the lights which had gone out. The youths in plastic suits didn't speak, didn't answer Barbara's hysterical questions. Yet they had a comforting air of knowing exactly what they were doing.

Unhurriedly they unwrapped a bundle and made Gil, Barbara, Dina and Garry put on fire-suits — the

simpler version I had seen. And still they all waited.

Then, quite suddenly, it was time to move. The giants gave the baby to Barbara, opened the door, and they moved out.

It was indescribable — at any rate, Dina entirely failed to describe it.

They walked along a street of fire. No one saw them because nobody not wearing a suit could be there to see them. They felt no heat, breathed easily and their eyes did not smart.

They had, after all, only a few hundred yards to go. Before they realized it, they were in an area of comparative silence, complete calm, and cool, fresh air.

The suits were at once taken from them. They would be used again and again that night.

There were others in the stasis, many others — frightened, bewildered people. More were brought in every moment, in plastic suits which were removed as they arrived.

Beyond this point Dina knew little or nothing more, because then Miranda had appeared and taken her aside.

"She gave me a pill," said Dina. "And I fell asleep."

I looked past her at Miranda. That the giants had powers that were remarkable to us was undeniable: that these powers were, after all, limited was equally clear.

I could understand that Miranda's powers had been able to make of Dina a whole person for the first time in her life. But that this could be achieved merely by giving

her a pill I just could not believe.

Unseen by Dina, Miranda made a gesture. Its meaning was plain: she was telling me not to pursue this.

Maybe she was right. I knew all I had to know.

Looking at Dina, I marveled. She didn't have any words she hadn't had before; she didn't have any experience she had before.

But . . . Dina was normal. She couldn't have explained things as she had, understanding in retrospect, unless she'd become something much nearer an ordinary 17-year-old than she'd ever been.

Dina had never before told me a long and fairly complicated story which I could understand. "She made me," referring to Sheila, was about the most I could expect.

"I'm grateful," I said to Miranda, and I meant it.

Feeling better, Miranda stood up. There was pain in her face, but only physical pain, and that was nothing. She glowed with happiness, relief, satisfaction.

"Success by mistake," she said. "It often happens. History is like that. We made dozens of mistakes and got the right answer. *You* matter, Val, not Jota. Greg. . . ."

She shrugged, looking down at him. "I can handle him now."

"I wouldn't be too sure," I said.

She was completely confident. "He knows now. He'll be a disgruntled, dazed child when he comes round. He won't give me any trouble. But now we have two suits — three suits. Val, take Dina and get

out now. Greg and I will be all right. We'll be snapped back with the stasis."

She smiled. "And have many, many children. You and Sheila. And Dina. She may be involved, too. She may even be the one that matters . . . no, it must be you. Yet Dina, too, didn't have children before, presumably, and will now — "

For Miranda it was over. Mission accomplished. She hadn't failed after all, although, as she'd admitted, she had succeeded through luck and not much else.

But for me it wasn't over. I had still failed. I'd still get the lion's share of the blame for the Great Fire of Shuteley. I'd still deserve a lot of it. The word *mather* would still go into the language.

The kids Miranda wanted Sheila and me to have would grow up in an atmosphere of scorn. "*Your old man's a murderer.*" They'd be chased out of their playground at the break as Jota had once been chased. And not just once. And some teachers would turn a blind eye.

"No," I said.

"What do you mean, no?"

"I'm not going to face a future like that. I'm not going to have kids to be picked on by the whole world."

The happiness died out of Miranda's face, to be replaced by an anxious look.

"Vay, you must! My world *needs* you and what you can do for it."

"Your world," I said grimly, "is less to me than the destruction of Shuteley was to you. Far, far less."

Dina was looking from Miranda

to me, and back again, comprehending very little of what was happening, and yet comprehending surprisingly much.

"I mean a lot to you," I said. "You know it."

"More than you know."

"I've got a price."

"A price?"

"Trinity Hall," I said.

She didn't understand.

"You told me yourself," I said. "If it weren't for the Trinity Hall bit of the disaster, I'd have a chance. My kids would have a chance. Without Trinity Hall, the death roll in this terrible fire would be astonishingly light. The fire-safety arrangements, if not fire prevention, would come out of it rather well. It's facts that count after anything like this. Without the Trinity Hall tragedy it would be a shocking fire, sure, nobody would get any credit, but I wouldn't be thrown to the lions. A few score people would have died in a fire that might have killed thousands. On the whole, I wouldn't have done too badly. I might even keep my job."

"That's all you're thinking of — yourself?" Miranda said. "For all you've said, the fire is no more than a setback to yourself?"

I laughed without humor. "Myself, Sheila, Dina, our kids and far more. The two hundred who were burned to death in Trinity Hall. If they're not saved . . . I don't want to be saved either."

"You're bluffing. You won't stay here to die."



"I will," I said quietly. "I can't speak for Dina. She can make up her own mind."

Dina said: "Val's all I have. I think I understand what this is about. There are two hundred people you could save —"

"I can't," Miranda insisted.

"Val thinks you can. . . . I haven't had much of a life. My memories are hazy — but I know Val's always done all he should for me, and maybe more. I'm grateful, too, for what you've done for me. I could have a wonderful life now. But it would be spoiled if I backed down here. This wasn't my idea. I'd never have thought of it and I wouldn't have done anything if I had. But now — if I saved myself, I'd be trading two hundred lives for mine."

"That's nonsense," Miranda said sharply. "Val, you know you don't die. The river of time —"

"I'm sick to the back teeth of the river of time. I wanted explanations. Now I've had enough. Unless you save the kids and old folk in Trinity Hall, I'm staying here, do you understand?"

"In a suit," said Miranda. "There are suits here. You're bluffing. You'll put them on, stay here and —"

She stopped as I picked up the three suits and walked to the wall of the stasis. She didn't protest. She still thought I was bluffing.

But when I threw the first one through, she screamed.

The plastic was fireproof, but the breathing apparatus was not. And the suit was not sealed.

Miranda pulled urgently at me. "Val, wait," she begged. "You don't understand. If you destroy the suits, you destroy all chance of getting what you want. Even if I did try to get something done about Trinity Hall, to do that I'd have to get back to the copse and speak to . . . to the people in charge. I couldn't leave here without a suit. So if you —"

I threw a second suit at the invisible wall. It passed limply through and flared only slightly, because the material wouldn't burn. But then the heat got at the oxygen in the breathing apparatus, and there was a minor explosion.

I moved back from the stasis wall with Miranda. "Now we're back where we started," I said. "There's one suit. Dina and I can't both get out. You want to save us. If what you say is true, you *have* to save us. And the only way you can do that is save the people in Trinity Hall."

"They'll never agree," she said.

"But you *have* agreed. You're going to try."

"All right," she said quietly. "I'll try."

There was sudden frantic urgency after the long hours of inaction. In the army, you hurry up and wait. Or, sometimes, wait and hurry up.

I didn't know what time dawn was, but it must be very soon now.

While there had been nothing we could do, time had not mattered much. But suddenly it was of vital importance. Miranda tugged

at the remaining fire-suit, fumbling in her haste. When she had it on, she didn't waste time in talk. She almost ran through the stasis wall.

"I don't suppose you can explain this to me, Val?" said Dina.

"I don't suppose I can."

"But you meant all that about Trinity Hall? Two hundred people are dying there, and she can save them?"

Dina had been sound asleep for hours. Her misconception of the situation was understandable. She didn't know enough, understand enough, to realize that what I was demanding of Miranda was a change of history, an alteration in what had already happened. Dina took it for granted that if two hundred people could be saved, they must still be alive.

"Yes," I said.

Greg had not moved. I took a cursory glance at him; he was breathing, and the injury on his head was merely a bruise, though a large one. He would recover all right. If he took his time about doing it, so much the better. Miranda believed that now she could handle him easily. I wasn't so sure.

"And all we can do is wait?" Dina said.

"All we can do is wait."

By this time the town must be surrounded by half the firemen in England, and no doubt some progress in fighting the dying fire was being made. Water turned to steam would be drawing off a lot of heat from the scorched ground.

Was there a chance, I wondered, that we'd be saved anyway? If the

firemen were able to fight their way into the ravaged town, if they got anyway near the stasis, we might live, independent of Miranda and the giants.

I found myself hoping desperately. I wanted to live. I wanted Dina to live, now that she had something to live for.

My grandstanding had been sincere enough. For selfish and unselfish reasons, the issue for me had to come down to the fate of Trinity Hall and the people in it. I at least half believed that the giants couldn't afford to avert the fire, that they couldn't openly fight it, showing themselves fighting it, that perhaps they really had done all they could by secretly saving a few score of people whose bodies would not be missed.

But somebody could easily have given the alarm at Trinity Hall. A stone through a window — failure of lights — smoke through the ventilation — a tap on a door — and all those people could be saved. I didn't think Miranda's river of time would be too much disturbed.

I hadn't told Miranda, perhaps I didn't know then, all my own reasons for digging in my heels on this one thing. The really fundamental one was my own feeling of responsibility.

No, I hadn't started the fire. I hadn't been careless or inefficient or venal. I had simply done my job the way I was told and expected to do my job. Nothing had been falsified, nothing hidden. Even on Trinity Hall itself my conscience was

clear. Fire officers want to make sure, whatever the cost. That's their job. Insurance managers don't want fire, don't want to have to pay out, but they have to accept a calculated risk — that's theirs. If there's no fire risk, there can be no fire insurance.

Yet accident conceives and gives birth to blame. *We know it happened: why did it happen?* Millions of stable doors have been slammed after horses have bolted. What really happened in the library, anyway? In detail, Miranda didn't know. Were the alarms severed or switched off? Or were the wires which operated them burned or shorted by the fire itself? Nobody knew better than me that ultimately every additional safety device meant something more that could go wrong.

Trinity Hall represented my hope of mental peace. If that didn't happen, if because of me that didn't happen, I believed I could live with the rest. I could be blamed and feel in my heart that blame was unjust. A car driver who kills a child may never be able to get it out of his mind — but if he knows he was not at fault, he can live with it.

If I'd been able to say to Miranda "save those people," and she'd said "why of course, Val," it would have been nothing.

But I had to put up my own life. I valued it. I wanted it. I put up my stake, and I made sure I couldn't welch.

If the Trinity Hall youngsters and old folk were saved, I could be saved.

"That's funny," said Dina.

I paid no attention, still wrapped in my thoughts.

"It's getting light," she said.

She was right and she was wrong. It was getting light, but it wasn't funny. Not when the stasis disappeared.

It was Hell.

Fierce heat swept across the village green. The fire outside, by comparison with what it had been, was a mere glow of dying embers.

And yet. . . .

My bare flesh withstood the heat for a moment, until it dried and cracked. I could feel, or thought I could feel, my blood beginning to boil. My hair crawled, and I felt it singeing.

In those long seconds of burning to death we looked around, while we could still see, in an instinctive search for an avenue of escape. Men have found themselves in front of oven doors opened by mistake . . . for them, even if they die, the chance of flight, of saving themselves, at least exists. The fire has a course and a direction. If the heat is lethal at seven feet it may not be at fourteen, fifty, two hundred. Escape is a possibility.

But there was nowhere for us to go. The heat was all around us. The coolest place was and would continue to be where we were, practically in the center of what had recently been a haven in the conflagration.

Dina's white blouse slowly, steadily, went brown.

Greg, without regaining consciousness, writhed and twisted like



a plastic doll thrown into an open fire.

We screamed.

We couldn't breathe. The fire was using up all the oxygen.

Long before we died, we couldn't see.

We could still feel.

I'd have been lucky, after all, to die on my own way through the flames with Greg. Jota had been lucky. Then, in the blinding heat of the fire at its height, death came instantly.

Now it was slow, though no less sure.

Slowly, but inexorably, I died.

And came to life again. Of course. It was only to be expected. With Miranda and the giants around, death wasn't death and you could never be sure of life.

I still knew all that had happened. I knew and would always know what it was like to burn to death in the mere backwash of a great fire.

Now I was unburned, as I had once before been unkilld. The stasis was still in position. Dina's blouse was still white. And Greg was quietly snoring.

Standing over me was Miranda, once more taking off her firesuit. She had dropped another at her feet.

"Loops," I said drunkenly, "are enough to make a man loop the loop."

"I was ten minutes too late," Miranda said. "But this time I could do something about it." She had a small machine in her hand.

"Thank you very much," I said. "Now we can go through the whole thing again. Because I'm still as determined —"

"It's done," said Miranda.

It took me several seconds to realize what she meant.

"Trinity Hall?" I said at last.

She nodded. "They agreed. Your life is necessary, Val. Perhaps Dina's too, we don't know. You had to be saved, far more than Jota had to be saved. In his case we guessed. In yours we know."

"The people in the hall?" I said.

She shrugged. "We cut the electric current. There was panic. One girl and one old man have broken arms. But they all got out. Now — you have fifteen minutes."

She could be lying, of course. She could be bluffing to get Dina and me away safely, quite powerless, once the giants removed themselves, to take the kind of action which could change the world. Once we saved ourselves, the chance of bargaining was gone.

I didn't think Miranda herself would lie. But she might easily have been told to return and do what she was doing, say what she was saying.

I started putting on one of the suits. Dina, with a slight shrug, did the same. Miranda sighed in relief.

"We're going past Trinity Hall," I said. "If the bodies are still there, I'm coming right back."

This didn't worry Miranda. "As you like."

"You've got what you want?" I said. "You're satisfied?"



"Yes."

"You're sure?" I looked down at Greg, who had not moved.

"Yes. In my world there's already a big change. The Gift has disappeared. We don't know about the neutrals; maybe they're not needed any more. Now hurry up and —"

The suits were on and sealed. "We'll hurry," I said. "Because I need time to get back here and take off my suit if necessary."

"Good-by, Val," said Miranda.

She turned away. She didn't speak to Dina.

I think at the last she was afraid, more afraid than she had ever been before, that something would happen to wrest success from her grasp. She had never really expected success, not with Greg a member of the party. Now she was a big winner, dazed, with the ticket in her hand, waiting for the result of an objection.

I looked down at Greg thoughtfully. Though he had never done a thing to endear himself to me, I found myself rather sorry for him. I said so.

"He'll have psychiatric treatment," Miranda said. "Before, he'd have refused it. Now he can't."

"You think he'll adjust?"

"Why not? He's only fourteen."

I blinked. I had never directly asked how old the giants were. I knew Miranda was thirty, but she was their teacher.

"And the others?" I said. "You said Greg was in a younger class, didn't you?"

"No. I said he was in a lower class. He's not very bright, you know. The others are . . . they're twelve."

She had not looked at me since she said good-by.

And that was how I left her — terrified to speak to me again, to meet my eyes, in case I should say or do something that would bring everything tumbling about her ears.

She even forgot to tell me to bury the suits afterwards.

Dina and I made our way back through the dying fire. Trinity Hall was not easy to find: there was no pile of charred skeletons there any more. But we found it. I was satisfied.

We went past the castle and the dump. It was still pretty dark. Clear of the fire we took off our suits and bundled them in a piece of dirty sacking I found in the dump, beyond the fire area.

Knowing something of the progress of the fire, the giants had chosen a quite perfect base for their doorway in time, the copse, and an equally perfect route to it. Even now, when there must be thousands of people round the ashpit that was Shuteley, we were able to walk out of the town and along the river to the copse without being seen. The only road or tracks were *from* the town, and they petered out at the dump and at Castle Hill. We did see a small party of men in blue suits examining the blockage of the river, but we were easily able to keep out of their sight.

So they were all little giants of twelve, I thought. Well, it wasn't

really astonishing. Already in 1966 girls were developing at eleven instead of fourteen or fifteen, and at twelve they could be five feet six, 150 pounds and 39-24-37. Boys were slower, but that was coming too.

Dina didn't talk, and I was glad. I'd been bludgeoned physically and mentally for forty hours or so. I'd killed a couple of people and been killed once myself. I'd been shaken figuratively until my teeth rattled.

I had felt too much or too little in the last forty hours. I hadn't been a hero, I hadn't been a villain. I hadn't been very clever and I hadn't been very stupid.

But I was, I hoped and believed, ending up rather better than I had started. I was far more the master of my fate.

We took the route along the bank that the giants must have taken. But there was no longer a bridge, and the boat was on the other side.

"We'll have to swim," I said.

Dina started taking off her clothes.

"No," I said. "We don't want to leave anything here."

"I didn't mean to leave my clothes. I'll carry them."

"Just swim across as you are, Dina," I said wearily.

She paid no attention. She took off her blouse, skirt, nylons and shoes and folded them into a neat bundle which she held clear of the water as she slipped into the river.

In my exhausted state I came very close to an angry outburst, but managed to check it. This was

the new Dina. She used to do exactly as I told her. Now I'd have to get used to her thinking for herself.

I had a bundle, too, the fire-suits.

I should have buried them that night. I should have done a lot of other things too.

I didn't do any of them. I simply took off my pants, dried myself and went to bed, not even bothering to find out what, if anything, Dina was doing, not thinking about Sheila beyond taking note that she hadn't been back at the house.

An arm shook me firmly, insistently. I opened my eyes reluctantly. It was 10:30 on the bedside clock.

Sitting on my bed was a large, middle-aged man I didn't know. Yet his face wasn't entirely unfamiliar.

"Mr. Mathers," he said, "I'm Chief Constable Wilson. Sorry to disturb you, but it's important."

"Sheila?" I exclaimed, sitting up quickly.

"Your wife is quite all right, Mr. Mathers. Doing a grand job, in fact. And I've seen your sister. She didn't want to let me in, but I persuaded her."

I swung my legs out of bed.

My nakedness on some other summer might have slightly surprised Wilson. As it was, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

I put on a dressing gown. "What do you want?" I asked bluntly.

"Forgive the intrusion," he said. "There isn't time to do things the usual way."

"Never mind that," I said. "What do you want?"

"I'm just getting the picture, Mr. Mathers. You know about the fire, of course?"

"Yes."

He pantomimed surprise, and I thought: This man knows something.

"You did?" he said. "You might have slept right through it, out here. I've seen one or two fire service people, the police, of course, some of the people who escaped. . . ."

"And now you're seeing me."

"Yes. You haven't been in touch with your company yet, have you?"

"No."

He didn't say anything about the fire being tragic, fantastic, incredible. These things were said in the first few minutes, and then the situation was taken for granted.

"Well, first . . . I gather you were out of town at a roadhouse when the fire began. You returned and found some firemen at the New Bridge. You gave them some advice — good advice, I believe — and then your wife did some very useful work with homeless people. After that you disappeared for the rest of the night. What happened, Mr. Mathers?"

Without warning I was faced with a choice I hadn't foreseen.

All through I had believed Miranda, on the whole.

And now I faced the beginning of a situation which might mean ruin for Sheila and me and our children. Miranda said it did. I was going to be blamed for every-

thing. My kids were going to grow up wanting to pretend I wasn't their father.

I'd saved two hundred people at the Trinity Hall, but nobody knew I had saved them.

Chief Constable Wilson was not here to cast the first stone. He was simply, as he said, getting first impression of what had happened. He had heard what happened at the New Bridge, and perhaps that was all he had heard. He might easily have called on me merely because I had shown some presence of mind, had given Sheila a useful job to do, and had then gone off on my own, possibly with a purpose. . . .

But this was the start.

I did not, however, have to let things simply take their course. I could take events by the scruff of the neck. If I did, it might mean ruin for Miranda's world. Her river of time might be blasted into an entirely different course. It might not be the best thing for me either.

Nevertheless.

I opened a cupboard and took out the fire-suits. "Ever seen anything like these before?" I asked.

The die was cast. After I showed Chief Constable Wilson the fire-suits, I couldn't have retreated if I'd wanted to. Certainly they were not impressive to look at, though the baffling way they adjusted to any human body and the still more baffling way in which they sealed and unsealed themselves without buttons or zips or adhesive would make anyone sit up and take notice.



But sooner or later somebody would test them in a fire, and then a bigger fire — and would finally discover that in such suits people could walk through a furnace.

I didn't want to draw back. Neither did I make any effort to advance.

In the next few hectic hours I talked to a lot of people, of increasing importance — and I started with the chief constable of the county. I didn't see Sheila or Dina. Too many people wanted to ask me questions.

I told them about Maggie Hobson and was the first to tell them she was dead. (It took days, of course, before even a preliminary casualty list could be drawn up.) I wasn't really shifting blame from me to her; I was telling them what they were going to decide for themselves.

I told them a few more things about the fire, things I could not possibly have known in any way they considered "rational." I did not admit, nor did I deny, that I had been in Shuteley while the blaze was at its height. They could hardly make me tell them anything they refused to believe.

About Miranda and the giants I preserved a reticence which ensured that the most improbable facts were reluctantly accepted instead of rejected out of hand. I told them nothing; I admitted a few things under pressure.

But I did claim credit for Trinity Hall. I told them how the alarm was given, and hinted. . . .

And before I saw Sheila, in the evening of the day after the Great Fire of Shuteley, I knew that I'd made the right choice — for us.

You can't make a scapegoat of a man who knows more of the facts than anyone else. A man who knows things and you can't figure out how he could possibly know them. A man who knows more than he will tell, unless you've worked out three-quarters of the answer first.

Yes, for us I'd made the right choice. And perhaps for Shuteley, for my world. The knowledge, the unwilling certainty, that there had been something supernatural about the fire made the whole thing easier to bear, to accept. For those who had lost people they loved, too, there was hope.

They might still be alive, somewhere.

But had I done the right thing for Snow White and the giants? Had they all ceased to exist — or had they found the Gift back among them, worse than ever before? Had I dropped a billion hydrogen bombs on the world of 2197?

Well, my attitude proved that I'd been doing Miranda and the giants an injustice all along in finding them inhuman about our world.

Because about *their* world, I couldn't care less.

END





Dear Editor:

I think that "Cordwainer Smith" is a pseudonym for a woman writer!

About a year ago I remember reading in *Galaxy* (now, correct me if I am wrong) that Cordwainer Smith — an anthropologist, I think — was on his way to Easter Island with some expedition. Later I read an article in *Life* about the same expedition, and I remember thinking at the time that I might get to see what Cordwainer Smith looked like. But no luck. The only anthropologist mentioned was a woman, whose name I can't remember. (She was known to the natives as "Mrs. Tell Me Three Dreams That Have Had Some Meaning to You.")

Then in the letter column of the May *If* Irvin Koch asked if Cordwainer Smith was a pseudonym and you answered that it was. Suddenly all the pieces fell together like a jigsaw puzzle. Cordwainer Smith and the woman anthropologist are one and the same person!

Would you please let me know if I am right or wrong? The suspense is killing me!

(By the way, I got so heated up with my Sherlock-Holmesing that I forgot to tell you that I really

like your magazine! If you keep up this habit of overlapping all those great serials and publishing a stack of other great stories besides, you have got the next Hugo sewn up in your hip pocket for sure! — James A. Juracic, P.O. Box 11, Fruitvale, B.C., Canada.

● No, your reasoning is exemplary, but your conclusion didn't quite make it. Cordwainer Smith was a pseudonym for Professor Paul Linebarger, of Johns Hopkins University. For years his identity was one of the most closely guarded secrets in science fiction — partly because of the fact that his position as a consultant to the U. S. State Department made discretion essential, partly because he wrote science fiction for relaxation and felt that he would not be able to do it any more if his identity were known.

Last month (as this is written), after a long illness. Paul Linebarger died in Washington, D.C. For this reason we can now disclose his identity — but that is small compensation for the loss of a valued friend and a brilliant and original writer. — *Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

In regard to the relativistic dilemma you posed in the June, 1966, issue, your statements are basically correct in that it would require an infinite amount of energy to propel an object with a positive rest mass up to the speed of light because as it approaches the speed of light it acquires infinite mass. The fallacy in the dilemma is that light at rest (photons) has no mass. Thus, theoretically, it requires no energy to raise the massless photons up to sub-light speeds and only finite energy to propel them to the speed of light; this energy being converted into the apparent mass of the light.

In regard to the remarks made in the June Hue and Cry concerning racial differences, I would like to add my two bits. The white man has certain obvious physical characteristics which are superior to the Negro, whereas the Negro has certain others superior to the white man. This is also true in the pathological, and probably also true in the mental aspects of not only these two races but all the races of man. As soon as we do obtain "roughly equated" environments for the different races and can determine each race's mental superiorities then sometime in the future it may be possible to breed a better man incorporating all the best features of the different races. To say this, or anything else, is impossible at the rate of our present technological and sociological advancement is to stand on very unsteady ground.

I have read the *World of Null-A* by Van Vogt and am very much interested in reading its serial. If it has been published in paper or

hard back, where and how much, or if not, how can I go about obtaining a copy. Oh, as an afterthought, I might add that I consider *If* the best science fiction magazine on the market today. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* is Heinlein's greatest novel to date, and that is really saying something, and *Earthblood* is great. I can hardly wait for the upcoming novels in *If*. — Alfred Baker, 1822 Lawson Lane, Amarillo, Texas 79106.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Although he and I concur on two points, the respective merits of *Podkayne of Mars* and *Farnham's Freehold*, I must take exception to Sten Dahlskog's treatment of what I consider Heinlein's best novel to date. Mr. Dahlskog says that even if it were kept in that most horrible of literary forms, the first-person narrative, (which I happen to like), the novel would have been far better if it were "written" by Wyoh, Prof or Stu, instead of by Mannie. What he doesn't realize is that the central character is *not* one of the "B"cell comrades, or Stu. As a matter of fact, the central character isn't even human; on the contrary, it is MIKE! Without this autocognitive computer to make predictions, keep security, and formulate strategy, the revolution could never have started, much less succeeded. Also, if you remember the conclusion of the story, only Mannie could have written it.

I say this because, as Mr. Dahlskog himself notes, the other three, (really TWO: remember, Stu never met Mike, just "Adam Selene"!), were more concerned with people, while Mike was a computer. In fact,

Man was the *only* believable narrator Heinlein could possibly have chosen; who else would have even *discovered* Mike, much less made friends with him? — Stephan Noe, 3535 Havenhurst Blvd., Toledo, Ohio 43614.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

First let me congratulate *Worlds of If* on winning the "Hugo" at the Tricon in Cleveland. It was most deserved!

At the Tricon a number of your readers, myself included, were discussing the formation of a science-fiction radio "ham" net. This consists of readers who are also radio amateurs, who would like to discuss sf across the country via the airwaves.

I thought perhaps some of your readers might like to join us in forming the net. If so, they could send their names and call letters to me and I'll take it from there. Thanks. — Christine Haycock, M.D., WN2YBA, 361 Roseville Avenue, Newark, New Jersey 07107.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Re: The editorial for the August '66 issue of *If*:

Yes, it is a shame Mariner IV came along! It not only spoiled theories dear to some hearts, it also upheld one theory — one that had been ridiculed, vilified and ostracized from most public and scientific communication channels.

I refer, of course, to the theories of Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky, author of *Worlds in Collision*, etc., in which he detailed — and Mariner IV confirms — the description of a "dead" planet Mars and the cause of its destruction . . . the collision

between it and the protoplanet (comet) Venus . . .

The present writer thinks that the many recent confirmations of Dr. Velikovsky's theories augurs well the need for a reassessment of his works and their implications for the future. — Robert Stephanos, 5457 Quentin Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19128.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

We would just like to express our great enjoyment of Fred Saberhagen's beserker tales. We can hardly wait until the next installment of his saga. When will some enterprising publisher persuade him to gather all the stories under one cover? It's quite a pleasure to watch a writer improve and mature as Saberhagen has. Stories with strong moral themes are all too rare. Your efforts to discover and encourage new talents are to be commended. We are graduate students at the University of Illinois and have both been reading science fiction since high school. — John and Sandra Miesel, 304 S. Fifth St., Champaign, Illinois.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

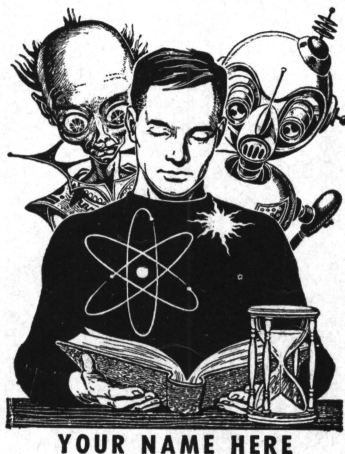
*Neutron Star* by Larry Niven was the first science-fiction story I've ever really enjoyed. I also would like to say that Michael Walker did an exceptional job in *Your Soldier Unto Death*.

I have read parts of several past issues which my friend happened to enjoy. All around I will say that *If* is one of the best science fiction magazines I have ever read and I shall continue to buy your *If* publications monthly. — Thomas Green, 4258 Knoxville Avenue, Lakewood, California 90713.

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