

CASE RL472 XYA 386.
Oral report of Claims Adjuster
Mark Atkinson (#384 762).
Transcribed by Telepath Oper-
ator #842 765J (Tellus).
First and Final Report.
CASE CLOSING SYMBOL:
AAA.

*When a planet turns in an insurance claim, it could
run to more than real money.*

A MATTER OF TASTE

By JOSEPH WESLEY
ILLUSTRATED BY RITTER

I ARRIVED on the fourth planet of Sunder's Pride stark naked and stood comfortably in the snow, listening to the wind howl by, while waiting for the Expedition Manager to approach from the edge of the small clearing and welcome me. The Manager's name is Obadiah Jones. Like the rest of the expedition, he's from one of the minor Vegan colonies—Kinnison III—but he's undifferentiated Earth stock.

He hustled forward, wearing a full protective suit and helmet—the temperature is thirty degrees below zero centigrade at noon and the atmosphere is poisonous—but I could see the expression of relief on his face through his face plate.

"You're from Interstellar Insurance?" he panted under the one and a half G of Sunder's Pride.

I assented with a dignified nod.

He looked me up and down—my skin wasn't even showing goose pimples, of course—and then shrugged his shoulders. "The insurance company sent a first-class Mental Control Operator, I see, but it was a waste of talent. Maybe they didn't believe our reports. We've had our own operators here—good ones, too—and they haven't been able to find any solution. The Aliens are much better at all sorts of Mind Control than even our most talented men. I know our Policy says that you can keep us from calling in the military authorities for a week, but it's just a waste of time—and, more important, it's a waste of lives, too. I suggest that you give us authority to call in the Navy right away."

"How many lives have you lost so far?" I asked.

"Only a dozen, but at regular intervals."

"That hardly seems excessive for an exploratory expedition," I commented.

He shook his head impatiently. "I said *at regular intervals*. The Aliens treat us like we were cattle. Or sheep."

"Not exactly," I said, "or you would scarcely have called *me* in. You must be operating at a profit, and that means you're trading with these Aliens."

He scowled, but did not deny it.

OF COURSE I knew this already. As an independent Claims Adjuster, it goes without saying that I'd checked into the case before teleporting to the planet. Their profit was enormous, and our losses would be proportionately large if the military was invited to come in and spoil trade while saving lives.

Their charter called for exclusive trading rights on any planet they opened for ten years. And they had the usual clause in their Policy against loss by "government" action, meaning the military, even at their own invitation. The military is fast, but it's not neat. The cost could run to billions for us, so my job was to try to find another way.

"Well," he said, "can we send an emergency signal to the Navy?"

"When does the next regular interval expire?" I asked.

He checked the timepiece set into the sleeve of his suit, and then scratched some number in the clean wind-swept surface of snow. His watch kept local time, of course. "In about fourteen Earth hours," he translated at last.

"Then there's no hurry, is there?" I leaned against the gale that was blowing across the clearing. "Why don't we go to your office so you can brief me?"

He turned and stumped his way heavily to a gap at the edge of the clearing, and then

along a narrow path that wound its way circuitously among tall, slender, tinkling, half-living ice trees. I strolled lightly beside him, but my bare feet left deep imprints in the crustless snow. In about fifteen minutes we reached the human settlement, with its airlock set modestly into a great mound of snow.

Here we had a little difficulty; the lock was designed to pass bulky protective suits. If I had gone through it bare, I'd have let in some of the poisonous atmosphere into the camp. We solved that, though. Mr. Jones passed a suit out to me through the lock and I put it on. I wore it all the way to his office, and then he rustled me up one of his spare kilts—an ugly purple thing.

"Now, Obadiah," I said, after I'd lighted one of his stogies and settled myself into his most comfortable chair, "why this urgent call for help? Our records show that you've never hollered copper in your life, and you've had two expeditions nearly wiped out around you. You've got the best profit record in your organization."

"It's those Aliens," said Mr. Jones. "They arrived here on Sunder's Pride just a few days behind us. I've always felt that someday we'd come up against some life-form that would be too much for us, and I'm afraid that we've done it at last. They trade us some of

the most magnificent works of art that have ever been seen in the universe—you've undoubtedly admired some of them, and I'm sure you know the prices they bring—and they do it as if they were tossing glass beads to savages."

"And if we are such savages, what can we have to trade in return?" I asked.

"They don't seem to be any great shakes with mechanical things," he answered. "They call them 'gadgets,' but they buy them. The only trouble is, that's not all they buy." He was sweating, his face turning as green as the polka dots on his kilt. He mopped his face and chest with a large handkerchief, and then sat there holding it and looking at it as if he'd never seen a bandanna before.

I FELT sorry for him. These provincial types have an automatic feeling of horror at the thought of meeting some superior creatures that will replace man in the Galaxy. So I let him sit there for a couple of minutes to recover before I prompted him.

"Well?" I said at last. "The additional stuff they buy—what is it?" This hadn't been part of the reports.

"Oh. Yes. Once every five days they take one man. I may have given you the idea that they killed them. They don't. They ship them off. They say we are very popular, and

when there are enough of us on the market to bring the price down, we should make ideal pets. And we can't do a thing to stop them."

I flicked the ash of my cigar delicately onto his carpet. "You can't? What have you tried?"

He leaped to his feet and balled his fists belligerently. "I'm trying to call in the military, but first I've got to get through the red tape of calling in you insurance people. Now will you give me authority to call in a fleet before it's too late?"

I smiled in a superior manner and straightened a pleat on the hideous kilt. "If you feel this way, then why do you worry about money? Why didn't you just call the fleet directly and forfeit your insurance?"

He glared at me through red-rimmed eyes. "I tried that," he said. "If only we had some central government to turn to—but that's impossible in space, of course. So I went to the only centralized force there is. And they said that they have to count on voluntary contributions from the member planets, and they couldn't afford to answer every call for help. They told me to contact my insurance company."

"Which," I commented mildly, "is another centralized force in space, in spite of what you say. It's widespread,

it's profit-making, and it gets the job done. Nobody has to try to beg for voluntary appropriations from penurious planetary governments."

"This isn't a crackpot fear of aliens," he said, as soon as I stopped talking. "I've seen aliens before, in all parts of the Galaxy. I don't panic."

"Then you must have tried something else before hollering Uncle," I said. "Like, perhaps, keeping all of your men inside the dome here when the time for another abduction approaches?"

HE WAVED a hand impatiently. "We've tried everything a large group of top-flight minds can think of," he said. "My own organization has an exceptional research staff, as I'm sure you know. The Aliens work by mental control. We've had everyone brought into this building, have double-checked them, and have sealed the doors with a time lock. It turned out that one of the men was missing—we'd only imagined he was among us when we assembled."

"We scoured the planet before we landed and saw no signs of the Aliens. We've seen no Alien ships land since we arrived. We have no idea where they are, except that there's one sizable area not far from here that we can't seem to penetrate. The only evidence we have that the

Aliens arrived after we did is that they told us so. Whatever that's worth.

"We've brought in some of mankind's best Mental Control Operators. People like you, who are able to walk around in a poisonous atmosphere in sub-zero weather without any protection or any clothes at all. Every one of them is now among the victims. The Aliens apparently thought it would be a good joke to take them."

He paused. "So you see, we don't expect you to be around very long. Just so you call in the military before the Aliens call *you* in, we'll try to control our grief when you go."

"That's courteous of you," I said. "But you are suffering under an understandable misapprehension. You seem to believe—probably because of my somewhat unorthodox costume when I arrived—that I am a Master Controller. In point of fact, nothing could be farther from the case. I have no such powers. Or almost none, anyway.

"I arrived naked because of the enormous expense of transportation. Those machines require gigantic amounts of power and skilled technicians. At ten thousand a pound, I saved the company five thousand by leaving my kilt behind, and even more when you consider my shoes. As for a protective suit—why, such an unnecessary cost would have

been thrown out by our accountants in a minute."

Obadiah Jones sneered at me in disbelief, but I tolerantly ignored his attitude. "Let's admit, for the time being, that these Aliens are better at Mental Control than we are," I said. "Then does it make sense for us to fight them with their own weapons, giving them cards and spades before the start of the game? Now take me to the edge of this place where you say we can't go."

In spite of Mr. Jones' urgent pleas, I refused to wear a protective suit, except to go out through the lock. I knew he was worried about the Mind Control he still was convinced I was using to survive unprotected on the surface. He was afraid that when I came up against the Aliens and what he called their "superior powers," it would mean my death, if I didn't have a suit. Since I had equally valid reasons for not wearing the suit, and since I didn't want to explain them, I refused to argue. I just took the thing off as soon as we were outside. I left the kilt on, though. I thought its ugliness might irritate the Aliens.

OBADIAH Jones kept up a running patter of conversation as he led me toward the forbidden area. "We haven't been idle," he said. "We've learned a lot about the Aliens'

Mind Control. For one thing, they work on our emotions. Several of us who are still alive have been exposed to that. There were eight or nine of us in a group, the first time one of us was Chosen. He said an overwhelming feeling of love was drawing him in one direction; right after that, the rest of us felt a strong sensation of revulsion and fear. We ran away, leaving him behind. We never saw him again.

"They also control our senses. We see and hear what they want us to. It's perfect hallucination. But you'll know that for yourself in a few minutes."

I knew it already, of course. It had been in Jones' reports—all except the bit about their capturing his men. And I had come prepared. I must admit to feeling a distinct sensation of excitement as we approached the area. But it was not induced, I am sure, by the Aliens, and in any event it was not sufficiently intense to trigger my defense mechanisms.

"Here we are," said Obadiah Jones at last, pointing to a marker attached to one of the ice trees. "Beyond that sign the troubles begin."

"It doesn't look like an alien artifact to me," I said, examining the crudely made marker carefully.

"It isn't. I had it put up after one of our men was missing for two days, wander-

ing around in that area that they claim for themselves."

"Well, I'll find out just how good their claim is," I said. "I'm going in there."

"Good luck," said Mr. Jones. "I'll wait for you here. But, just in case I never see you again, won't you please give me authorization to call in the Fleet? You can postdate it, and cancel it if you get back."

I nodded. "I'll give you an authorization dated tomorrow—if you'll give me your gun first. You might just accidentally happen to kill me after getting that paper from me, considering how important you think it is to get the Fleet here fast, and how sure you are that I'll be trapped."

Jones looked startled, and then sheepish, and gave me the gun without comment. I wrote out the paper he wanted, and then strolled up the path past the marker. It didn't look any different on the other side. It went straight into the forbidden area, and I do mean straight. It went on without the slightest sign of a turn, as far as the eye could see, and there were no cross trails anywhere along it.

I stepped out at a good swift pace, striding along it long after Jones disappeared from view behind me. I saw no signs of Aliens; I saw no signs of anything unusual at all, until, about two hours after I started, I saw a mark-

er in the distance ahead of me. Jones was sitting on the snow, just on the other side of the tree with the marker on it. I strolled up toward him, crossed the invisible line, hiked up my kilt to keep it from getting damp, and sat down on the soft snow beside him.

"HELLO," he said non-committally. "You made pretty good time. In fact, that's a new record for the course."

"Then I'm not the first man to take that walk?" I asked.

"Nope. Just the fastest. I'm glad you didn't try to turn around and come back along the path. That way, you'd have gotten lost. Well, shall we go back to the camp and call in the Navy?"

"No, I'm going back in," I said calmly.

He waved one gloved hand at me. "It's your funeral," he said. "Or what amounts to the same thing, anyway."

I stood up, dusted off the snow where some of it had stuck to me, and settled my kilt into as fashionable a manner as was possible. I crossed the line and started down the trail again, just as I had before, but this time I didn't follow my eyes. Soon after losing sight of Mr. Jones, I cut sharply off the clearly visible trail to the right and started to weave my way through a thicket of the ice trees.

Gradually a sensation of

fear entirely foreign to my usual nature built up within me, but I ignored it and kept going. As the sensation increased to a nearly uncontrollable level, one of the automatic mechanisms I had had the foresight to have implanted in my body operated, and a few drops of a drug were shot into my veins and almost instantly took effect. I still felt the fear sensation, but it no longer had the power to bother me much. With that drug in my blood stream, no emotion could affect me strongly.

As I worked my way through the tinkling jungle of ice trees, there was an amazing change. Before my eyes, the trees suddenly seemed to clothe themselves in leaves and bark, and the sounds became those of birds and insects. I was working my way through a jungle of Earth. The heavy gravity of *Sunder's Pride* had not disturbed me before, but now it was replaced by the almost buoyant feeling resulting from the far lighter gravity of Earth. The harsh yellow glow of the sunlight striking on eternal ice was replaced by the vibrant blues and greens of tropical Earth.

My fear sensation, which had been generalized, suddenly sharpened. I was reminded of a time, on Earth, when I had nearly died in a tropical river teeming with piranha

fish. I still have a couple of scars from that episode. Before me I could see the river flowing. Even under the calming influence of the drug, I could feel my heart pounding in my throat.

I must confess that it took a distinct effort of will for me to wade into the water. It was boiling with the flashing forms of angry fish. As I stepped forward I could feel their greedy jaws snapping into my flesh, feel the pointed rows of teeth on the bones of my ankles, then my legs, then my thighs.

DESPITE the agony I continued on, and the water level gradually rose until it closed over my head and my sight faded as the fish bit out my eyes. I think I might have screamed then, if I hadn't already felt the fish tear out my throat, so that I knew screaming was impossible. Besides, I didn't want to open my mouth and let them get to work on my tongue. I protected the soft spot under my chin with the hand that held Obadiah's gun.

If any of you homeside heroes ever wonder if we Claims Adjusters really earn our considerable salaries, let me clue you: We do.

When, stripped to a skeleton, I still kept moving stolidly ahead, the boiling of the water slowly died away, the pain ceased, and my sight

gradually came back. The jungle was still there, but I found that I was climbing up out of the river onto a trail that somehow seemed familiar. The fear sensation was gone, too, to be replaced by a very different one.

I remembered why I had gone into the jungle on Earth, so many years before, and why the trail was familiar. And who had been at the end of it. And who *was* at the end of it. She was soft and beautiful, and she had loved me for a while. She loved me still, I realized, and she was waiting for me. I hurried my steps and the automatic mechanism again put a few drops of the drug into my blood stream.

I could still feel the sensation of longing, but the urgency was gone. I let the feeling continue to pull me forward without fighting it, and willingly followed the twists and turns of the still familiar trail.

As the trees thinned out until I could see the well-remembered cottage with its thatched roof, its single room, its wide veranda, I slowed. The house stood alone, with no trees around it, just the way she and I had wanted it.

I stopped at the last tree and looked at the house for several minutes. Nothing moved that I could see. Circling slowly from tree to tree, I continued watching the house until I was staring at it

from a point nearly opposite the place where I had first seen it. Then I began to walk toward it. Even the sound of the birds had faded away, although I could still smell the heady fragrance of tropical flowers. She had always kept a large bouquet of them on the table beside the bed.

When I had reached a point about twenty paces from the house, I wheeled suddenly and leaped forward, aiming at a spot where nothing showed to the eye. There was a moment—the merest instant—of dizziness, and then a room suddenly materialized around me. The room looked alien, and there were two Aliens at the far end of it. The usual drag of one and a half Earth gravities had returned.

THIS, I felt, was the first undistorted view any man on Earth had had of these Aliens, except as a pet. They had not expected any human to be able to find his way here, to this room at the center of their base.

The room was not what I had expected. I had thought that I would find myself on the inside of a spaceship, and by no stretch of the imagination could this ever have traveled between the stars. It was unmistakably a prefab hut.

The two Aliens better fitted my preconceptions. They looked something like overgrown sea anemones, with three

multi-jointed arms and three short legs. They were just over two meters tall. They were extremely sluggish in their movements, as might be expected from creatures that depended almost entirely on their mental abilities for control of their environment.

They looked at me for a few minutes—all of their eyes were startlingly humanlike in appearance—and I imagine that they had expressions of surprise, if I could have found any expression, or interpreted from their tendrils just where their faces were. Finally one of them moved slowly to the far wall, extended one of his arms and depressed a lever on a rather crude-looking panel attached to that wall. He then moved slowly back to his companion and both of them continued to stare at me.

I waved cheerily at them. "Hi, fellows," I said. I could detect no answer, but the room wavered a little before my eyes. I blinked and shook my head and my vision cleared.

"So you haven't been trained in the techniques of Mental Control of Earthmen," I commented. "That's interesting."

A feathery stalk slowly rose from among the coiling things that circled their tops, and at the same time I heard a gentle dragging noise approaching the door of the hut.

"It sounds as if we might be about to have company," I

said. "That will be pleasant."

I examined my two hosts closely, because I had the feeling that I wouldn't be able to see them much longer as they really were.

"It's good of you to be so cautious," I said. "If you hadn't been so careful as to shield this hut, just in case we Earthmen turned out to have adequate Mind Control powers of our own, I wouldn't have had this chance to see you two in all your natural ugliness. Your friends out there would have kept me under control all this time.

"And what's more," I added, "I wouldn't even have known that you creatures had something that would shield your power. Our scientists will be very interested in examining this hut in great detail."

JUST then the door of the hut swung open and two elflike creatures appeared to walk briskly in. I glanced at them and then back to where my two slow-moving acquaintances had been standing. They were no longer in sight.

"Perhaps we can make things a little more comfortable for you," said one of the brisk elves. "You have earned most special treatment from us." He gestured and the strangeness of the room strangely disappeared. The walls were suddenly paneled

in mahogany and hung with rich drapes. Easy chairs were placed at intervals around a long, brilliantly polished table. A picture window showed a bucolic scene bathed in cool sunshine. A deep pile rug covered the floor.

I looked around appreciatively. "Very nice," I complimented them. "And in excellent taste. But you have forgotten one thing, haven't you?"

"What's that?" asked the second elf, in a piping voice.

"Why, you forgot about the gravity. It's still at Sunder's Pride normal."

"So it is," said the elf. "But then you can't expect us to think of everything. Besides, it doesn't seem to bother you the way it does most of the other creatures of your kind."

The gravity did not appear to change.

"No matter," I said politely. I strolled over to the table and stroked it with the hand that was not holding the gun. It seemed very real.

"Won't you sit down?" asked the first elf. "I'm sure you will find the chairs very comfortable."

"I'm sure I would," I said, "but no, thank you. I'm certain it would provide you with a lot of innocent merriment if I squatted in thin air under the impression that I was settled into a cosy chair, but I did not come here to amuse you."

The elf smiled. "You are very different from the others who lumbered to this planet in those clumsy artifacts. You are almost like a Person, in spite of your feverish rushing around. Several of our laboratories will bid very high for the right to examine you."

I bowed acknowledgment of his compliment. "I'm not in one of your laboratories yet," I said mildly.

"It will be very interesting to find out how you managed to get here in spite of our Mind Control," said the second elf. "Your arrival without the necessity of swaddling yourself in awkward garments indicated a certain amount of ability along mental lines, but I sense no more of it in you than several others of your kind have managed to muster. The others all brought premium prices on the market, despite conveyances and garments."

"I gather you don't think much of mechanical contrivances," I said lightly.

ALIENT the First shrugged. "They make interesting toys," he said. "But, of course, they are useless crutches in building a civilization. They bring good prices when peddled for the amusement of our children and the shallower-minded adults."

"Listening to your remarks about our spaceships," I continued, "I presume all of you

teleported here. We Earthmen may not be very good at Mind Control, but I think we have a good grasp of the principles, and I don't see how you could teleport without some sort of terminal device. Didn't you have to send that here by machine?"

There was a brief silence, and then Alien the Second answered. "I suppose it doesn't matter if we tell you. After all, we have you in our possession. As you suggest, we do need a terminal device. But we didn't use machinery; we used minds—the minds of you Earthmen. When the first of you landed on this uninhabited planet, we discovered that your undirected capacities were sufficient to serve as the terminal of a teleport system.

"We couldn't go directly to any of your more populous planets, because the vast numbers of your untrained minds cause so much static that the noise level is too high to permit a sharp enough focus for teleporting.

"Of course, now that we're here, where you've set up a teleport terminal that connects into your foolish mechanical network and ties into all of your thousands of planets, we'll have no trouble going anywhere among your worlds that we want to. And as soon as we have built up enough consumer demand for you creatures as house pets, we'll move in for the harvest."

"It might not be too bad at that," I said. "I've got a cat back home on Earth and she runs my household pretty much to suit her fancy. But I'm afraid it's not the same thing for Earthmen to be house pets."

"The ones we've got are doing a very good job at it," said Number Two. "And, as we indicated, you won't get the chance to be a pet."

"You seem very sure that you have me under your control."

"Very sure," said Number One. "In this confined space, with our training, the two of us could overcome all but one in a thousand of our own kind—so do you think you have a chance?"

I decided that a simple explosive would suffice as an answer. I didn't know enough about them to be sure it was biologically possible for them to carry out my suggestion, but it wasn't important. They ignored me.

AT LEAST they didn't answer me. Instead, a cage suddenly appeared around me, leaving me scarcely room to move around. I reached out and tapped one of the bars. It seemed very strong. I didn't think I was even close to panicking, but the implanted device in my body fed some more of the drug into my veins. I may have felt a little more tense than I realized.

At any rate, the time for action seemed to have arrived, and it was not on the mental level. I spun toward an apparently empty portion of the room and emptied Obadiah's pistol. The sound of the explosive pellets was very loud in the room.

The bars writhed, wavered and disappeared, as did the elflike creatures. The atmosphere of the room turned momentarily opaque, and when it cleared, what I could see was once again a clumsy pre-fab. Two of the Aliens were still standing in a corner. The remains of the other two were splashed pretty generally throughout the room. It was quite a mess.

"Well," I said, "thanks for the party. You'll excuse me for running."

There was no answer. The two surviving Aliens hadn't learned much about Earthmen. I walked over and lifted one of them. He weighed about three hundred pounds, I judged. That would be a couple of hundred on Earth. Hefty creatures. I figured that one was about all I could handle. I looked around at the articles in the room and then decided not to use any of them. I was sure that everything I saw was actually there, but it didn't seem wise to take chances.

I took off Obadiah's purple kilt and tore it into strips without regret. Then I used



the strips to fasten one of the Aliens securely, so he couldn't use his arms or his legs. I didn't know if he could do anything, loose, but I didn't want him to try. The other Alien I heaved up onto my shoulders. Then I walked out of the room.

There were a few of the ice trees scattered around, but the countryside looked barren. I couldn't visually identify any landmarks, but I started off without hesitation, and in about three hours I was back at the marker. From there on I used my eyes to follow the path back to the airlock. I had no trouble.

This time Mr. Jones gave me a checked kilt. I know you won't believe me, but it was even more hideous than the purple one. The red and yellow squares were at least three inches across. Luckily, I didn't have to look at it—just wear it.

Jones was a little confused as to why I had brought back one of the Aliens. He didn't even recognize it as an Alien at first, of course. He'd never seen one of them before—just the elfin form they'd wanted him to see.

I'd had no more hallucinations and the other Earthmen seemed to be seeing normally too. Apparently there had been only the two trained beings among the Aliens on Sunder's Pride—and only the four of them in all.

NEVERTHELESS, I was in a hurry. I sent out an urgent call for one of the most skilled Mental Controllers in Interstellar Insurance. I'll admit that there are times when they can be put to use.

Jones and I went down to the clearing that was the teleport terminal to welcome him.

The company chose to send that young self-styled genius Ralph Carter. He's supercilious and conceited and altogether obnoxious—I don't know why you hire such people—but no question of it, he's a real expert in his field. He was dressed in a dark green kilt in the latest style, and he smirked when he saw the thing I had on. I ignored his attitude, as befitted a gentleman.

I figured that it was time to move fast. While I showed Carter the way to the headquarters, I explained why I had called for him. I wanted him to get into communication with the Alien and find out the location of his home worlds.

"But how can I do that?" Carter asked. "I don't know anything at all about these Aliens."

"Can't you use your mental training to help you learn to talk mind to mind?"

"I suppose so. That shouldn't take more than a few days. The techniques are well established with other new races we've encountered. But learn-

ing his language won't make him answer."

I looked at him with my most superior manner. "While you're learning his language, I suggest you learn some of his psychology. Then you can get some of our engineers to design you a machine that will function the way a polygraph does with humans—act as a lie detector. With the proper choice of questions, you should find out anything you want to know."

He shuddered delicately at the mention of that naughty word "machine." Mentalists sometimes become purists and make fools of themselves by trying to do without machinery—something like the attitude of the Aliens.

When I had given Carter his instructions, I turned to the rest of the expedition. "I want all of your weapons," I said. "And don't try holding out on me. That's to include knives and scissors, too. We'll lock them up in Jones' vault."

"Now see here," said Jones. "Some more of those Aliens may show up any time. We can't afford to go out without our guns."

"That's just the reason you've got to get rid of them. I don't want you to start shooting each other—and me. Now, send out a party as fast as you can to bring back a sample of the building material that blocks out their minds. We'll ship it back to

Earth and see if they can put it into mass production. Have the party bring back that second Alien, too. If we happen to spoil the one we've got making him talk, it would be nice to have a spare."

WHILE the small group was away, I had Obadiah improvise some leg irons out of light chain and padlocks, and used them to hobble all of the Earthmen who remained in camp. Jones screamed like a holta whose mate has estivated, but it didn't do him any good. I had the authority.

He got even madder when I put the irons on him and at the same time turned him down again when he wanted to call in the military. The idea of a space fleet around while the Aliens were still free to use their mind powers gave me cold chills.

When the group returned from the Aliens' camp, they did so without the Alien. They brought back the still tied strips of the purple kilt. It looked as if he'd teleported right out of them. But at least they did have a piece of the prefab hut with them. I had it sent back to Earth, but not until after I'd attached chains to the party's legs, so that they had to creep along with six-inch steps like the others.

As the days passed without any apparent action from the Aliens, dissatisfaction and

grumbling grew. My precautionary action with the chains was very unpopular. At the end of the first week after my arrival on Sunder's Pride, Jones tried to invoke the Policy he'd signed with the company to call in the military, on the grounds that the situation hadn't been resolved in the prescribed time, and that the use of chains proved that the colony was in even greater danger than before I had arrived.

I invoked the "substantial progress" clause, of course, but the fact that I'd changed the combination to the vault and had the only gun in the entire camp outside of it probably was more convincing to him.

Carter called in a top-flight Engineer and made real progress in developing lie-detector techniques against the Alien. The Aliens were basically a guileless lot. I almost felt sorry for them.

Things eased up a little when Earth sent us a stack of sheets they claimed would be just as good in blocking out thoughts as the sample we had sent them. The Alien captive told us, after Carter persuaded him a little, that the blocking power was impressed on their building materials by a mental process. We used electronic techniques, and our Engineers said they could have done it years before, if Mentalists and they could have

gotten together on the work.

By testing, we found that the stuff we had blocked out anything Carter could transmit, so I let the rest of our people take off their chains as long as they were inside camp—as soon that is, as we had it fully protected. They worked faster on that job than they ever had worked in their lives before.

A FEW hours later, I was strolling down toward Telepath Clearing with a courier to send a report back to Earth when the Aliens returned. The first warning we had was a sudden wave of hate that struck like a physical blow. It brought the courier to his knees, momentarily helpless. Even with an automatic and instantaneous shot of the drug, it had me grinding my teeth.

Whether it was the rapidity of my recovery and my quickness of thought, or whether it was just the effect of the hate spasm, I didn't know—at any rate, I did the right thing. Before the courier could get up off his knees and try to kill me, as I was sure he would do, I slugged him alongside the ear with the butt of my pistol.

The hatred sensation seemed to be channeled and directed. It made us want to destroy Aliens—not each other—and that was unexpected to me. And because the courier was

on his way back to Earth, I'd left the chains off him. In another few seconds, I figured, he'd have tried to kill me—or, at least, that was my initial thought, until I realized that, since I am a human, he wouldn't have felt hate for me. By that time, and quite properly, I had laid him out cold.

I reached down and picked up the courier, intending to toss him lightly across my shoulder and start back to the camp. I found that I had a problem—I couldn't figure which one of my three stumpy legs to start walking with. I extended all my eyes and examined myself. I looked like an Alien wearing a checked kilt.

Unhappily, I tried to lick my labial fringes with my tongue—and suddenly realized that I had no tongue! It was an unnerving realization, even to me. But then I knew why the Aliens were transmitting hatred of themselves; any Earthman who knew what an Alien looked like would attack me on sight.

I closed all of my eyes and concentrated, but I couldn't seem to be able to figure out which of my three hands held the gun, for I could no longer see it. I decided it was time for me to get back inside the barrier.

That was a devil of a lot easier to decide than it was to do. I could see three legs and I could feel three legs, but I

didn't know how to operate three legs. I was slowed down to a sort of hobble. It wasn't as slow as the sluggish amble of the real Aliens, but it wasn't any faster than the other Earthmen could move, hobbled by chains.

I couldn't afford to delay very long, though. Some of the unchained men inside of the shack might take it into their heads to step outside without remembering to hobble themselves, considering that I was not there to remind them, and I didn't feel up to trying to handle anything like that.

I SNEAKED up as close as I could get to the lock without being seen. There were six men gathered in front of it, waiting for me. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I just lit out for the airlock, shuffling along as fast as I could go. The men swarmed around me. I threw the courier at the first group to arrive—he was still out—and gained a few seconds. But then they hung on me, they pummeled me, they bit and they clawed.

I just kept struggling bravely forward; I couldn't think of anything else to do. At the last minute, just as I thought I was going down under the mass of feet and fists, two of the men somehow got tangled in each other's chains, and I managed to break loose

long enough to pull myself into the lock.

As the outer door swung closed, I found myself with two arms, two legs and, praise be, a tongue. Obadiah's kilt was missing and I'm happy to say that I never saw it again. The gun was visible once more, still firmly clutched in my right hand. It was empty; my fingers were squeezing tightly on the trigger. Much good it had done me!

I passed quickly into the headquarters building, bringing with me a breath of poisonous outer air that set the men inside, except for Carter, to gasping and choking. Not even pausing to say hello, or to apologize for bringing in some of the outer atmosphere with me, I hurried over to the control panel and switched on the visual receptors that showed the outside of the lock. The men out there were fighting each other to get inside the building and kill me. As they managed to battle their way in through the lock, they looked bewildered for a moment, and then all of them, released from the frenzy of hate, collapsed into unconsciousness.

We were a bloody mess, every one of us, but not one of us was seriously hurt. The Aliens had outsmarted themselves. While I had looked like one of them, those parts of me—like my eye stalks—that had seemed to be most vulner-

able, so that the Earthmen had gone after them, had turned out to be things like ears and noses. They hurt, but they didn't put me out of action when they were battered. That's all that had saved me from being killed. I didn't figure that out till later, I must admit.

I counted us. We were all safe inside. Then I used an amplifier, connected up to a loudspeaker outside, to call the Aliens. I called for several minutes, without receiving any response, before I realized that they spoke with their minds exclusively and couldn't penetrate into the headquarters where we were with their pseudo-voices.

I sighed and started to go outside, but Jones hauled me back and made me put on a protective suit. He said he couldn't stand another whiff of that atmosphere.

ONCE outside, I had no trouble communicating with the Aliens. They were very anxious to talk. Apparently they were convinced that, since they believed my mental powers were at least as strong as theirs, there were probably many more Earthmen like me that they wouldn't be able to tackle. I had no trouble at all making a lucrative trading deal with them for Jones' company, once I convinced them that I knew the location of their planets,

and that it would be an easy matter to blast them from the face of the universe with primitive, uncivilized fusion bombs. They even promised to send back the men they had taken as pets.

After that, I staggered back inside the camp and slept the clock around.

When I woke, I found that all of the men were very anxious to know the secret of my success, especially Carter, who knew very well that I had no skill at Mental Control.

I was glad to oblige them, as a reward for Carter's courtesy in giving me his stylish green kilt, which fitted me very well. Obadiah gave Carter another of his horrors—and it was the worst we had seen to date, as I let that young worthy know with a simple cock of an eyebrow.

It was all very simple, as I explained to my admiring audience. The reports we'd had back at the headquarters of the Interstellar Insurance Company indicated that it was useless to try to compete with the Aliens on the mental level, where they were strongest. This was the mistake that Jones and his so-called experts had made.

I decided, when I was given the assignment to straighten things out, that the best way to compete was where we Earthmen are strongest: with mechanical "gadgets." So I had our scientists implant a

power source in my body. It made use of short half-life radioactive isotopes for the energy source—not too well shielded, but what the hell, I've already fathered my family—and gave me more power than I could ever need.

In order to be able to use that power, I'd had the scientists set up a closed-cycle system in my body. The combustion products created by the "burning" of food by my body cells, as in all humans, were carbon dioxide and water. These were broken down, in another gadget implanted in my body, into oxygen, carbon and hydrogen.

The oxygen I used directly; another compact machine synthesized carbohydrates to complete the closed-loop cycle. I neither breathed nor ate during the entire time I was on Sunder's Pride, except for the purpose of talking, and that breathing never went past the larynx.

IT WAS lucky I didn't need to breathe, too. Otherwise I'd have drowned in imaginary water while wading in that river the Aliens had created in my mind.

"Also," I explained, "I had a sort of supersonic sonar device set into me, with the transponder in my chest. That's why I had to avoid wearing a protective suit; unless my chest was bare, I squelched the signals. I used

this sonar to judge what was going on around me, no matter what I seemed to see."

"Now don't feed us that," said Jones belligerently. "We aren't that dumb. Don't you think we tried using sonar and radar to fool the Aliens? They worked on all our senses. What we saw on a radar or sonar screen matched perfectly the false picture we thought we were seeing with our eyes. It was the same when we used aural reception. What came in through our ears matched what we thought we saw. So now stop kidding around and tell us the truth."

I smiled condescendingly. "I am telling you the absolute truth, Obadiah. You didn't use your head. Of course the sound signals I received from the sonar matched what I thought I saw. I didn't underestimate the Aliens. It's just that sound to my ears wasn't the only read-out method I used. In addition to connecting to the nerves of my ears, which the Aliens expected, the sonar output also connected to the nerves of my tongue. Anything ahead of me tasted sweet, and anything behind me tasted salt. To my left was bitter, to my right acid.

"The Aliens didn't expect me to *taste* what was to be seen around me, and what they didn't know about, they couldn't counter. No matter what I saw or heard, I just followed my tongue.

"I had a few bad moments one time, when by accident, more or less, the actions of the Aliens almost made me imagine that my tongue was being destroyed, but I managed to work my way out of that by keeping my mouth closed. Just the other day, though, I had some more rough minutes when I found that, along with thinking I had the body of an Alien, I also thought I had no tongue, like them.

"You see, I used what the Aliens consider to be primitive mechanical toys. Oh, and one more thing, not quite so primitive: my brains. You might all profit by trying that once in a while."

"Well," said Jones at last, "I've got to give you credit. You knew what you were doing."

"That's all right," I said magnanimously. "I had the choice of trying to combat them with Mental Control, where the Aliens are stronger, or with mechanical science, where humans are stronger. Which I chose to use." I punned, "was just a matter of taste."

End of report. I'm going on a long vacation with my bonus money.

And what I do while I'm away is none of your business. Don't send me any of your preaching letters this time. How I have my fun is also a matter of taste.

END

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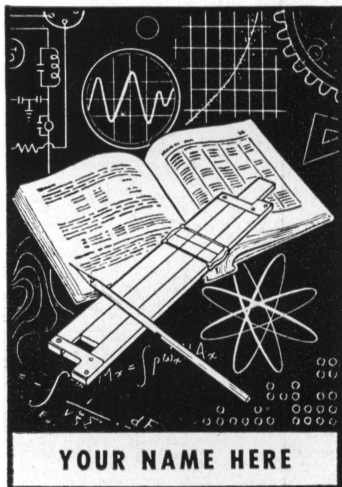
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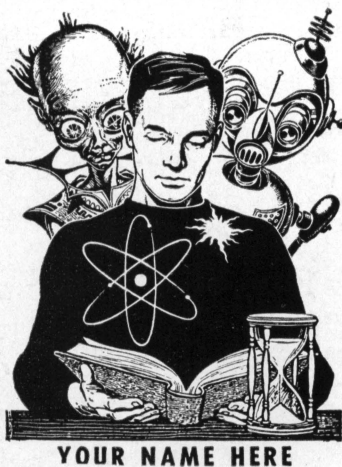
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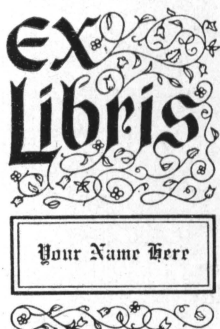
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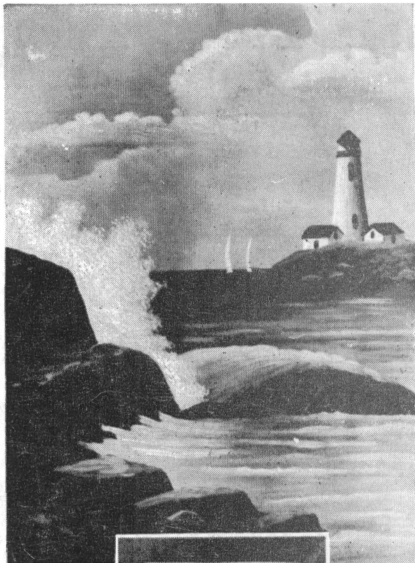
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