

ward. Ocean, and there was no ocean in Iowa.

And this wasn't Iowa.

The explosions had ripped the world, and he'd tried to get to town to save Davie, and there'd been no town and there'd been no people and there'd been only death and poison in the air and even those few people left had begun to die, and then the truck with the huge trailer had come, the gleaming trailer with the little man and his trembling wife and his two sons. . .

SUDDENLY, he understood. And understanding brought not peace but the greatest terror he'd ever known. He screamed, "We're on. . ." but the switch was thrown and there was no more speech. For an hour. Then he got out of the chair and said, "Sure glad I took my wife's advice and came to see you, Doctor Hamming. I feel better already, and after only one . . . What do you call these treatments?"

"Diathermy," the little doctor muttered.

Harry gave him a five-dollar

bill. The doctor gave him two singles in change. "That's certainly reasonable enough," Harry said.

The doctor nodded. "There's a police officer in the hall. He'll drive you home so there won't be any trouble with the travel regulations."

Harry said, "Thanks. Think we'll ever see the end of travel regulations and rationing and all the rest of the emergency?"

"You will, Mr. Burr."

Harry walked to the door.

"We're on an ark," the doctor said.

Harry turned around, smiling. "What?"

"A test, Mr. Burr. You passed it. Goodbye."

Harry went home. He told Edna he felt just great! She said she'd been worried when an officer found Plum wandering on the road; she thought maybe Harry had gone off somewhere and broken travel regulations.

"Me?" he exclaimed, amazed.

"Break travel regulations? I'd as soon kill a pig!"

— HERBERT D. KASTLE

mail your contribution



give AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

*The offices of
Singlemaster, Hucksting
and Battlemont held something
that could destroy the universe
and its name was . . .*

A-W-F

UNLIMITED

By FRANK HERBERT
Illustrated by GAUGHAN

THE MORNING the space armor problem fell into the agency's lap, Gwen Everest had breakfast at her regular restaurant, an automated single-niche place catering to bachelor girls. Her order popped out of the slot onto her table, and immediately the tabletop projecta-menu switched to selling Interdorma's newest Interpretive Telelog.

"Your own private dream translator! The secret companion to every neurosis!"

Gwen stared at the inch-high words doing a skitter dance above her fried eggs. She had written that copy. Her food beneath the ad looked suddenly tasteless. She pushed the plate away.

Along the speedwalk into Manhattan a *you-seeker*, its robo-flier senses programmed to her susceptibilities, flew beside her ear. It was selling a year's supply of Geramyl — "the breakfast drink that helps you LIVE longer!"

The selling hook this morning was a Gwen Everest idea: a life insurance policy with the first year's premiums paid — "absolutely FREE if you accept this offer now!"

In sudden anger, she turned on the roboflier, whispered a code phrase she had wheedled from an engineer who serviced the things. The roboflier darted upward in sudden erratic flight, crashed into the side of a building.

A small break in her control. A beginning.

Waiting for Gwen along the private corridor to the Singlemaster, Hucksting and Battlemont executive offices were displays from the recent Religion of the Month Club campaign. She ran a gamut of adeicals, layouts, slogans, projos, quartersheets, skinnies. The works.

"Subscribe now and get these religions absolutely FREE! Complete text of the Black Mass plus Abridged Mysticism!"

She was forced to walk through an adecal announcing: "Don't be Half Safe! Believe in Everything! Are you sure that African Bantu Witchcraft is not the True Way?"

At the turn of the corridor stood a male-female graphic with flesh-stimulant skinnies and super-voices, "Find peace through Tantrism."

The skinnies made her flesh crawl.

Gwen fled into her office, slumped into her desk chair. With mounting horror, she realized that she had either written or supervised the writing of every word, produced every selling idea along that corridor.

The interphon on her desk emitted its fluted "Good morning." She slapped the blackout switch to keep the instrument from producing an image. The last thing she wanted now was to see one of her co-workers.

"Who is it?" she barked.

"Gwen?" No mistaking that voice: Andre Battlemont, bottom name on the agency totem.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Our Gwenny is feeling nasty this morning, isn't she?"

"Oh, Freud!" She slapped the disconnect, leaned forward with

elbows on the desk, put her face in her hands. *Let's face it, she thought. I'm 48, unmarried, and a prime mover in an industry that's strangling the universe. I'm a professional strangler.*

"Good morning," fluted the interphon.

She ignored it.

"A strangler," she said.

Gwen recognized the basic problem here. She had known it since childhood. Her universe was a continual replaying of "The Emperor's New Suit." She saw the nakedness.

"Good morning," fluted the interphon.

She dropped her right hand away from her face, flicked the switch. "Now what?"

"Did you cut me off, Gwen?"

"What if I did?"

"Gwen, please! We have a problem."

"We always have problems."

Battlemont's voice dropped one octave. "Gwen. This is a Big problem."

Uncanny the way he can speak capital letters, she thought. She said: "Go away."

"You've been leaving your Interdorma turned off!" accused Battlemont. "You mustn't. Neurosis can creep up on you."

"Is that why you called me?" she asked.

"Of course not."

"Then go away."

Battlemont did a thing then that everyone from Singlemaster on down knew was dangerous to try with Gwen Everest. He pushed the override to send his image dancing above her interphon.

AFTER the momentary flash of anger, Gwen correctly interpreted the act as one of desperation. She found herself intrigued. She stared at the round face, the pale eyes (definitely too small, those eyes), the pug nose and wide gash of mouth above almost no chin at all.

Plus the hairline in full retreat.

"Andre, you are a mess," she said.

He ignored the insult. Still speaking in the urgency octave, he said: "I have called a full staff meeting. You must attend at once."

"Why?"

"There are two military people in there, Gwen." He gulped. "It's desperate. Either we solve their problem or they will ruin us. They will draft every man in the agency!"

"Even you?"

"Yes!"

She moved her right hand toward the interphon's emergency disconnect. "Good-by, Andre."

"Gwen! My God! You can't let me down at a time like this!"

"Why not?"

He spoke in breathless haste. "We'll raise your salary. A bonus. A bigger office. More help."

"You can't afford me now," she said.

"I'm begging you, Gwen. Must you abuse me?"

She closed her eyes, thought: *The insects! The damned little insects with their crummy emotions! Why can't I tell them all to go to composite hell?* She opened her eyes, said: "What's the military's flap?"

Battlemont mopped his forehead with a pastel blue handkerchief. "It's the Space Service," he said. "The female branch. The WOMS. Enlistments have fallen to almost nothing."

She was interested in spite of herself. "What's happened?"

"Something to do with the space armor. I don't know. I'm so upset."

"Why have they tossed it into our laps like this? The ultimatum, I mean."

Battlemont glanced left and right, leaned forward. "The grapevine has it they're testing a new theory that creative people work better under extreme stress."

"The Psychological Branch again," she said. "Those jackasses!"

"But what can we do?"

"Hoist 'em," she said. "You run along to the conference."

"And you'll be there, Gwen?"

"In a few minutes."

"Don't delay too long, Gwen."

Again he mopped his forehead with the blue handkerchief. "Gwen, I'm frightened."

"And with good reason." She squinted at him. "I can see you now: Nothing on but a lead loin-cloth, dumping fuel into a radioactive furnace. Freud, what a picture!"

"This is no joke, Gwen!"

"I know."

"You are going to help?"

"In my own peculiar way, Andre." She hit the emergency disconnect.

ANDRE Battlemont turned away from his interphon, crossed his office to a genuine Moslem prayer rug. He sat down on it facing the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked eastward across midtown Manhattan. This was the 1479th floor of the Stars of Space building, and it was quite a view out there whenever the clouds lifted. But the city remained hidden beneath a low ceiling this morning.

Up here it was sunny, though — except in Battlemont's mood. A fear-cycle ululated along his nerves.

What he was doing on the prayer rug was practicing Yoga breathing to calm those nerves. The military could wait. They had to wait. The fact that he

faced the general direction of Mecca was left over from two months before. Yoga was a month old. There was always some carry-over.

Battlemont had joined the Religion of the Month Club almost a year ago — seduced by his own agency's deep motivation campaign plus the Brotherhood Council's seal of approval.

This month it was the Reinspired Neo-Cult of St. Freud.

A test adecal superimposed itself on the cloud-floor view beneath him. It began playing the latest Gwen-Everest-inspired pitch of the IBMausoleum. Giant rainbow letters danced across the fleecy background.

"Make your advice immortal! Let us store your voice and thought patterns in everlasting electronic memory circuits! When you are gone, your loved ones may listen to your voice as you answer their questions exactly the way you would most likely have answered them in Life!"

Battlemont shook his head. The agency, fearful of its dependence on the live Gwen Everest, had secretly recorded her at a staff conference once. Very illegal. The unions were death on it. But the IBMausoleum had broken down with the first question put to Gwen's ghost-voice.

"Some people have thought patterns that are too complex to

permit accurate psyche-record," the engineer explained.

Battlemont did not delude himself. The sole genius of the agency's three owners lay in recognizing the genius of Gwen Everest. She was the agency.

It was like riding the tiger to have such an employee. Singlemaster, Hucksting and Battlemont had ridden this tiger for 22 years. Battlemont closed his eyes, pitched her in his mind: a tall, lean woman, but with a certain grace. Her face was long, dominated by cold blue eyes, framed in waves of auburn hair. She had a wit that could slash you to ribbons, and that priceless commodity: the genius to pull selling sense out of utter confusion.

Battlemont sighed.

He was in love with Gwen Everest. Had been for 22 years. It was the reason he had never married. His Interdorma explained that it was because he wanted to be dominated by a strong woman.

But that only explained. It didn't help.

For a moment, he thought wistfully of Singlemaster and Hucksting, both taking their annual three-month vacation at the geriatrics center on Oahu. Battlemont wondered if he dared ask Gwen to take her vacation with him. Just once.

No.

He realized what a pitiful figure he made on the prayer rug. Pudgy little man in a rather unattractive blue suit.

Tailors did things for him that they called "improving your good points." But except when he viewed himself in a Vesta-Mirror to see the sample clothes projected back onto his own idealized image, he could never pin down what those "good points" were.

Gwen would certainly turn him down.

He feared that more than anything. As long as there remained the possibility . . .

Memory of the waiting Space Service deputation intruded. Battlemont trembled, broke the Yoga breathing pattern. The exercise was having its usual effect: a feeling of vertigo. He heaved himself to his feet.

"One cannot run away from fate," he muttered.

That was a carry-over from the Karma month.

ACCORDING to Gwen, the agency's conference room had been copied from a Florentine bordello's Emperor Room. It was a gigantic space. The corners were all flossy curliques in heavy gilding, an effect carried over into deep carvings on the wall panels. The ceiling was a

mating of Cellini cupids with Dali landscapes.

Period stuff. Antique.

Into this baroque setting had been forced a one-piece table 6 feet wide and 42 feet long. It was an enlarged bit of Twentieth Century Wallstreetiana fenced in by heavy wooden chairs. Beanbag paperweights and golden wheel ashtrays graced every place.

The air of the room was blue with the smoke of mood-cigs. ("It rhymes with Good Bigs!") The staff seated around the table was fighting off the depressant effect of the two Space Service generals, one male and one female, seated in flanking positions beside Battlemont's empty chair. There was a surprising lack of small talk and paper rustling.

All staff members had learned of the ultimatum via the office grapevine.

Battlemont slipped in his side door, crossed to his chair at the end of the table, dropped into it before his knees gave out. He stared from one frowning military face to the other.

No response.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry I'm . . . ah . . . Pressing business. Unavoidable." He cast a frantic glance around the table. No sign of Gwen. He smiled at one officer, the other.

No response.

On his right sat Brigadier General Sonnet Finnister of the WOMS (Women of Space). Battlemont had been appalled to see her walk. Drill-sergeant stride. No nonsense. She wore a self-designed uniform: straight pleated skirt to conceal bony hips, a loose blouse to camouflage lack of upper development, and a long cape to confuse the whole issue. Atop her head sat a duck-billed, flat-fronted cap that had been fashioned for the single purpose of hiding the Sonnet Finnister forehead, which went too high and too wide.

She seldom removed the hat.

(This particular hat, Battlemont's hurried private investigations had revealed, looked hideous on every other member of the WOMS. To a woman, they called it "the Sonnet Bonnet." There had been the additional information that the general herself was referred to by underlings as "Sinister Finnister" — partly because of the swirling cape.)

On Battlemont's left sat General Nathan Owling of the Space Engineers. Better known as "Howling Owling" because of a characteristic evidenced when he became angry. He appeared to have been shaped in the officer caste's current mold of lean, blond athlete. The blue eyes reminded Battlemont of Gwen's

eyes, except that the man's appeared colder.

If that were possible.

Beyond Owling sat Leo Prim, the agency's art director. He was a thin young man, thin to a point that vibrated across the edge of emaciation. His black hair, worn long, held a natural wave. He had a narrow Roman nose, soulful brown eyes, strong cleft in the chin, generous mouth with large lips. A mood-cig dangled from the lips.

If Battlemont could have chosen his own appearance, he would have liked to look like Leo Prim. Romantic. Battlemont caught Prim's attention, ventured a smile of camaraderie.

No response.

General Sonnet Finnister tapped a thin finger on the tabletop. It sounded to Battlemont like the slack drum of a death march.

"Hadn't we better get started?" demanded Finnister.

"Are we all here — finally?" asked Owling.

Battlemont swallowed past a lump in his throat. "Well . . . ah . . . no . . . ah . . ."

Owling opened a briefcase in his lap, glanced at an intelligence report, looked around the table. "Miss Everest is missing," he announced.

Finnister said: "Couldn't we go ahead without her?"

"We'll wait," said Owling. He

was enjoying himself. *Damned parasites need a touch of the whip now and then!* he thought. *Shows 'em where they stand.*

FINNISTER glared at Owling, a hawk stare that had reduced full colonels (male) to trembling. The stare rolled off Owling without effect. *Trust the high command to pair me with a male supremacy type like Owling!* she thought.

"Is this place safe from snooping?" asked Owling.

Battlemont turned his own low-wattage glare on the staff seated in the mood smoke haze around the table. No glance met his. "That's all anybody ever does around here!" he snapped.

"What?" Owling started to rise. "Busybodies!" blared Battlemont. "My whole staff!"

"Ohhh," Owling sank back into his chair. "I meant a different kind of snooping."

"Oh, that," Battlemont shrugged, suppressed an urge to glance up at the conference room's concealed recorder lenses. "We cannot have our ideas pirated by other agencies, you know. Absolutely safe here."

Gwen Everest chose this moment for her entrance. All eyes followed her as she came through the end door, strode down the length of the room.

Battlemont admired her grace.

Such a feminine woman in spite of her strength. So different from the female general.

Gwen found a spare chair against the side wall, crowded it in between Battlemont and Finnister.

The commander of the WOMS glared at the intruder. "Who are you?"

Battlemont leaned forward. "This is Miss Everest, our . . . ah . . ." He hesitated, confused. Gwen had never had an official title with the agency. Never needed it. Everyone in the place knew she was the boss. "Ahh . . . Miss Everest is our . . . ah . . . director of coordination," said Battlemont.

"Why! That's a wonderful title!" said Gwen. "I must get it printed on my stationery." She patted Battlemont's hand, faced him and, in her best undercover-agent-going-into-action voice, said: "Let's have it, Chief. Who are these people? What's going on?"

General Owling nodded to Gwen. "I'm Owling, General, Space Engineers." He gestured to the rocket splash insignia on his shoulder. "My companion is General Finnister, WOMS."

Gwen had recognized the famous Finnister face. She smiled brightly, said: "General Woms!"

"Finnister!" snapped the female general.

"Yes, of course," said Gwen. "General Finnister Woms. Must not go too informal, you know."

Finnister spoke in slow cadence: "I . . . am . . . General . . . Sonnet . . . Finnister . . . of . . . the . . . Women . . . of . . . Space! The WOMS!"

"Oh, how stupid of me," said Gwen. "Of course you are." She patted the general's hand, smiled at Battlemont.

Battlemont, who well knew the falsity of this mood in Gwen Everest, was trying to scrunch down out of sight in his chair.

In that moment, Gwen realized with a twinge of fear that she had reached a psychic point of no return. Something slipped a cog in her mind. She glanced around the table. Familiar faces leaped at her with unreal clarity. Staring eyes. (The best part of a conference was to watch Gwen in action.) *I can't take any more of this, thought Gwen. I have to declare myself.*

She focused on the military. The rest of the people in this room owned little pieces of her, but not these two. Owling and Finnister. Space generals. Symbols. Targets!

Let the chips fall where they may! Fire when ready, Gridley. Shoot if you must this old gray head . . . Wait until you see the whites of their eyes.

Gwen nodded to herself.

One misstep and the agency was ruined.

Who cares?

It all passed in a split second, but the decision was made.

Rebellion!

GWEN turned her attention on Owling. "Would you be kind enough to end this stalling around and get the meeting under way?"

"Stall . . ." Owling broke it off. The intelligence report had said Gwen Everest was fond of shock tactics. He gave her a curt nod, passed the nod to Finnister.

The female general addressed Battlemont. "Your agency, as we explained to you earlier, has been chosen for a vital task, Mr. Battlemont."

"Battlemont," said Gwen.

Finnister stopped short. "What?"

"His name is Battlemont, not Battelfield," said Gwen.

"What of it?"

"Names are important," said Gwen. "I'm sure you appreciate this."

The Finnister cheeks flushed. "Quite!"

Owling stepped into the breach. "We are authorized to pay this agency double the usual fee for performance," he said. "However, if you fail us we'll draft every male employee here into the Space Service!"

"What an asinine idea!" said Gwen. "Our people would destroy the Space Service. From within." Again she smiled at Battlemont. "Andre here could do it all by himself. Couldn't you, ducky?" She patted Battlemont's cheek.

Battlemont tried to crouch farther down into the chair. He avoided the eyes of the space brass, said: "Gwen . . . please . . ." "What do you mean, destroy the Space Service?" demanded Finnister.

Gwen ignored her, addressed Owling. "This is another one of the Psych Branch's brainstorm," she said. "I can smell the stench of 'em in every word."

Owling frowned. As a matter of fact, he had the practical builder's suspicion of everything subjective. This Everest woman made a good point there. But the military had to stand shoulder to shoulder against outsiders. He said: "I don't believe you are properly equipped to fathom military tactics. Let's get on to the problem we . . ."

"Military tactics yet!" Gwen rapped the table. "Deploy your forces, men. This is it! Synchronize your watches. Over the top!"

"Gwen!" said Battlemont.

"Of course," said Gwen. She faced Finnister. "Would you mind awfully outlining your problem in simple terms that our

unmilitarized minds could understand?"

A pause, a glare. Finnister spewed her words through stiff lips. "Enlistments in the WOMS have fallen to an alarming degree. You are going to correct this."

Behind Gwen, Battlemont nodded vigorously.

"Women can release men for the more strenuous tasks," said Owling.

"And there are many things women can do that men cannot do," said Finnister.

"Absolutely essential," said Owling.

"Absolutely," agreed Finnister. "Can't draft women, I suppose," said Gwen.

"Tried to get a bill through," said Owling. "Damned committee's headed by an anti-military woman."

"Good for her," said Gwen. "You do not sound like the person for this job," said Owling. "Perhaps . . ."

"Oh, simmer down," said Gwen. "Miss Everest is the best in the business," said Battlemont.

Gwen said: "Why are enlistments down? You've run the usual surveys, I suppose."

"It's the space armor," said Finnister. "Women don't like it." "Too mechanical," said Owling. "Too practical."

"We need . . . ah . . . glamor,"

said Finnister. She adjusted the brim of her cap.

Gwen frowned at the cap, cast a glance up and down the Finnister uniform. "I've seen the usual news pictures of the armor," she said. "What do they wear underneath it? Something like your uniform?"

Finnister suppressed a surge of anger. "No. They wear special fatigues."

"The armor cannot be removed while they are in space," said Owling.

"Oh?" said Gwen. "What about physical functions, that sort of thing?"

"Armor takes care of everything," said Owling.

"Apparently not *quite* everything," murmured Gwen. She nodded to herself, mulling tactics.

BATTELMONT straightened, sniffed the atmosphere of the conference room. Staff all alert, quiet, attentive. Mood had lightened somewhat. Gwen appeared to be taking over. Good old Gwen. Wonderful Gwen. No telling what she was up to. As usual. She'd solve this thing, though. Always did. Unless . . .

He blinked. Could she be toying with them? He tried to imagine Gwen's thought patterns. Impossible. IBMausoleum couldn't even do it. Unpredictable. All Battlemont could be certain of

was that Gwen would get a gigantic belly laugh from the picture of the agency's male staff members drafted, slaving away on space freighters.

Battlemont trembled.

General Finnister was saying: "The problem is not one of getting women to enlist for Earth-based service. We need them in the ships, the asteroid stations, the . . ."

"Let's get this straight," said Gwen. "My great-great-grandmother was in some kind of armed service. I read her diary once. She called it the 'whackies' or something like that."

"WACS," said Finnister.

"Yes," said Gwen. "It was during the war with Spain."

"Japan," said Owling.

"What I'm driving at is, why all the sudden interest in women? My great-great-grandmother had one merry old time running away from some colonel who wanted . . . Well, you know. Is this some kind of a dodge to provide women for your space colonels?"

Finnister scowled her blackest. Quickly suppressed chuckles sounded around the table.

Owling decided to try a new tack. "My dear lady, our motives are of the highest. We need the abilities of women so that mankind can march side by side to the stars."

Gwen stared at him in open

admiration. "Go-wan!" she said.

"I mean it," said Owling.

"You're a poet!" said Gwen. "Oh . . . and I've wronged you. Here I was — dirty-minded me — thinking you wanted women for base purposes. And all the time you wanted *companions*. Someone to share this glorious new adventure."

Again, Battlemont recognized the danger signals. He tried to squeeze himself into as small a target as possible. Most of the staff around the table saw the same signals, but they were intent, fascinated.

"Exactly!" boomed Finnister.

Gwen's voice erupted in an angry snarl: "And we name all the little bastards after the stars in Virgo, eh?"

It took a long moment for Finnister and Owling to see that they had been gulled. Finnister started to rise.

"Siddown!" barked Gwen. She grinned. She was having a magnificent time. Rebellion carried a sense of euphoria.

Owling opened his mouth, closed it without a howl.

Finnister sank back into her chair.

"Shall we get down to business?" snapped Gwen. "Let's look at this glorified hunk of tin you want us to glamorize."

Finnister found something she could focus her shocked attention

on. "Space armor is mostly plastic, not tin."

"Plastic-schmastic," said Gwen. "I want to see your Iron Gertie."

General Owling took two deep breaths to calm his nerves, snapped open the briefcase, extracted a folder of design sketches. He pushed them toward Gwen — a hesitant motion as though he feared she might take his hand with them. He now recognized that the incredible intelligence report was correct: this astonishing female was the actual head of the agency.

"Here's — Iron Gertie," he said, and forced a chuckle.

Gwen leafed through the folder while the others watched.

Battlemont stared at her. He realized something the rest of the staff did not: Gwen Everest was not being the usual Gwen Everest. There was a subtle difference. An abandon. Something was very wrong!

WITHOUT looking up from the drawings, Gwen addressed herself to Finnister. "That uniform you're wearing, General Finnister. You design that yourself?"

"What? Oh, yes. I did."

Battlemont trembled.

Gwen reached out, rapped one of Finnister's hips. "Bony," she said. She turned a page in the folder, shook her head.

"Well!" exploded Finnister.

Still without looking up, Gwen said: "Simmer down. How about the hat? You design that, too?"

"Yesss!" It was a sibilant explosion.

Gwen lifted her attention to the hat, spoke in a reasonable tone: "Possibly the most hideous thing I've ever seen."

"Well of all the —"

"Are you a fashion designer?" asked Gwen politely.

Finnister shook her head as though to clear it of cobwebs.

"You are *not* a fashion designer?" pressed Gwen.

Finnister bit the words off. "I have had some experience in choosing —"

"The answer is no, then," said Gwen. "Thought so." She brought her attention back to the folder, turned a page.

Finnister glared at her in open-mouthed rage.

Gwen glanced up at Owling. "Why'd you put the finger on this agency?"

Owling appeared to have trouble focusing his attention on Gwen's question. Presently, he said: "You were . . . it was pointed out that this agency was one of the most successful in . . . if not the most successful . . ."

"We were classified as experts, eh?"

"Yes. If you want to put it that way."

"I want to put it that way." She glanced at Finnister. "So we let the experts do the designing, is that clear? You people keep your greasy fingers off. Understood?" She shot a hard stare at Owling, back to Finnister.

"I don't know about you!" Finnister snapped at Owling, "but I've had all —"

"If you value your military career you'll just sit down and listen," said Gwen. Again, she glared at Owling. "Do you understand?"

Owling shook his head from side to side. Amazement dominated him. Abruptly, he realized that his head shaking could be interpreted as negative. He bobbed his head up and down, decided in mid-motion that this was undignified. He stopped, cleared his throat.

What an astonishing female! he thought.

Gwen pushed the folder of design sketches up to Leo Prim, the art director. "Tell me, General Owling," she said, "why is the armor so bulky?"

Leo Prim, who had opened the folder, began to chuckle.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" said Gwen.

Someone farther up the table asked: "What is?"

Gwen kept her attention on Owling. "Some jassack engineer in the Space Service designed a



test model suit of armor like a gigantic woman — breasts and all.” She glanced at Finnister. “You ran a survey on the stupid thing, of course?”

Finnister nodded. She was shocked speechless.

“I could’ve saved you the trouble,” said Gwen. “One of the reasons you’d better listen carefully to what *expert me* has to say. No woman in her right mind would get into that thing. She’d feel big — and she’d feel naked.” Gwen shook her head. “Freud! What a combination!”

Owling wet his lips with his tongue. “Ah, the armor has to provide sufficient shielding against radiation, and it must remain articulate under extremes of pressure and temperature,” he said. “It can’t be made any smaller and still permit a human being to fit into it.

“Okay,” said Gwen. “I have the beginnings of an idea.”

She closed her eyes, thought: *These military jerks are a couple of sitting ducks. Almost a shame to pot them.* She opened her eyes, glanced at Battlemont. His eyes were closed. He appeared to be praying. *Could be the ruination of poor Andre and his lovely people, too,* she thought. *What a marvelous collection of professional stranglers! Well, can’t be helped. When Gwen Everest goes out, she goes out in a blaze of*

glory! All flags flying! Full speed ahead! Damn the torpedoes!

“Well?” said Owling.

Fire one! thought Gwen. She said: “Presumably, you have specialists, experts who can advise us on technical details.”

“At your beck and call whenever you say the word,” said Owling.

BATTELMONT opened his eyes, stared at the back of Gwen’s neck. A ray of hope stabbed through his panic. Was it possible that Gwen was really taking over?

“I’ll also want all the dope on which psychological types make the best WOMS,” said Gwen. “If there is such a thing as a best WOM.”

Battlemont closed his eyes, shuddered.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever been treated this high-handedly in my entire career!” blurted Finnister. “I’m not entirely sure that —”

“Just a moment, please,” said Owling. He studied Gwen, who was smiling at him. The intelligence report said this woman was “probable genius” and should be handled delicately.

“I’m only sorry the law doesn’t give us the right to draft women, too!” barked Finnister.

“Then you wouldn’t really have this problem, would you?” asked Gwen. She turned her

smile on Finnister. It was full of beatitudes.

Owling said: "I know we have full authority to handle this at our own discretion, General Finnister, and I agree that we've been subjected to some abuse but . . ."

"Abuse!" Finnister said. "And high time, too," said Gwen.

A violent shudder passed through Battlemont. He thought: *We are doomed!*

"However," said Owling, "we mustn't let our personal feelings cloud a decision for the good of the service."

"I hear the bugles blowing," murmured Gwen.

"This agency was chosen as the one most likely to solve the problem," said Owling.

"There *could* have been a mistake!" said Finnister.

"Not likely."

"You are determined to turn this thing over to . . . to . . ." Finnister broke off, tapped her palms on the table top.

"It's advisable," said Owling. He thought: *This Gwen Everest will solve our problem. No problem could resist her. No problem would dare!*

General Owling had become a Gwenophile.

"Very well, then," snarled Finnister. "I will reserve my judgment."

General Finnister had become a Gwenophobe.

Which was part of Gwen Everest's program.

"I presume you two will be available for technical consultations from time to time," said Gwen.

"Our subordinates take care of details," said Owling. "All General Finnister and I are interested in is the big picture, the key to the puzzle."

"Big picture, key to puzzle," mused Gwen. "Wonderful idea."

"What?" Owling stared at her, puzzled.

"Nothing," said Gwen. "Just thinking out loud."

Owling stood up, looked at Finnister. "Shall we be going?"

Finnister also stood up, turned toward the door at the end of the room. "Yesss!"

Together, one on each side of the table, they marched the length of the room: tump-a-thump-a-tump-a-tump-a-tump . . . Just as they reached the door and Owling opened it, Gwen jumped to her feet. "Charrrrge!" she shouted.

The two officers froze, almost turned, thought better of it. They left, slamming the door.

Battlemont spoke plaintively into the silence. "Gwen, why do you destroy us?"

"Destroy you? Don't be silly!"

"But, Gwen . . ."

"Please be quiet, Andre; you're interrupting my train of thought." She turned to Leo Prim. "Leo, take those sketches and things of that big-breasted Bertha they designed. I want adecal workups on them, full projos, the entire campaign outlay."

"Big Bertha ad decals, projos, the outlay," said Prim. "Right!"

"Gwen, what are you doing?" asked Battlemont. "You said yourself that —"

"You're babbling, Andre," said Gwen. She glanced up at the ceiling. An eye in one of the Cellini cupids winked at her. "We got the usual solid recordings of this conference, I presume?"

"Of course," said Battlemont. "Take those recordings, Leo," said Gwen. "Do a sequence out of them featuring only General Sinister Sonnet Bonnet Finnister."

"What'd you call her?" asked Prim.

GWEN explained about the Finnister nicknames. "The fashion trade knows all about her," she finished. "A living horror."

"Yeah, okay," said Prim. "A solid sequence of nothing but Finnister. What do you want it to show?"

"Every angle of that uniform," said Gwen. "And the hat. Freud! Don't forget that hat!"

Battlemont spoke plaintively. "I don't understand."

"Good," said Gwen. "Leo, send me Restivo and Jim Spark . . . a couple more of your best design people. Include yourself. We'll . . ."

"And, lo! Ben Adam's name led all the rest," said Battlemont.

Gwen turned, stared down at him. For one of the rare times in their association, Battlemont had surprised her with something he said.

I wonder if our dear Andre could be human? she mused. *No! I must be going soft in the head.* She said: "Andre, go take a meditation break until time to call our next conference. Eh? There's a good fellow."

Always before when she abused me it was like a joke between us, thought Battlemont dolefully. But now she is trying to hurt. His concern now was for Gwen, not for the agency. *My Gwen needs help. And I don't know what to do.*

"Meditation break time," said Gwen. "Or you could go to a mood bar. Why don't you try the new Interdorma mediniche? A niche in time saves the mind!"

"I prefer to remain awake for our last hours together," said Battlemont. A sob clutched at his throat. He stood up to cover the moment, drew himself to attention, fixed Gwen with a despair-

ing glare. "I feel the future crouching over us like a great beast!" He turned his back on her, strode out through his private door.

"I wonder what the devil he meant by that?" mused Gwen.

Prim said: "This is the month of St. Freud. They go for prescience, extrasensory perception, that sort of thing."

"Oh, certainly," she said. "I wrote the brochure." But she found herself disturbed by Battlemont's departure. *He looked so pitiful, she thought. What if this little caper backfires and he gets drafted? It could happen. Leo and the rest of these stranglers could take it. But Andre...* She gave a mental shrug. *Too late to turn back now.*

Department heads began pressing toward Gwen along the table. "Say, Gwen, what about the production on..." "If I'm going to meet any deadlines I'll need more..." "Will we have to drop our other..."

"Shaddup!" bellowed Gwen.

She smiled sweetly into the shocked silence. "I will meet with each of you privately, just as soon as I get in a fresh stock of crying towels. First things first, though. Number one problem: we get the monkey off our backs. Eh?"

And she thought: *You poor oafs! You aren't even aware how*

close you are to disaster. You think Gwen is taking over as usual. But Gwen doesn't care. Gwen doesn't give a damn any more. Gwen is resigning in a blaze of glory! Into the valley of death rode the 600! Or was it 400? No matter. War is hell! I only regret that I have but one life to give for my agency. Give me liberty or give me to the WOMS.

Leo Prim said: "You're going for the throat on these two military types, is that it?"

"Military tactics," said Gwen. "No survivors! Take no prisoners! Death to the White Eyes!"

"Huh?" said Prim.

"Get right on that assignment I gave you," she said.

"Uhh..." Prim looked down at the folder Owling had left. "Workups on this Big Bertha thing'... a solido on Finnister. Okay." He shook his head. "You know, this business could shape up into a Complete Flap."

"It could be worse than that," Gwen cautioned.

Someone else said: "It's absolutely the worst I've ever seen. Drafted!"

And Gwen thought: *Ooooh! Someone has trepidations!* Abruptly, she said: "Absolutely worst flap." She brightened. "That's wonderful! One moment, all you lovely people."

There was sudden stillness in the preparations for departure.

"It has been moved that we label this business the Absolutely Worst Flap," she said.

Chuckles from the staff.

"You will note," said Gwen, "that the initials A-W-F are the first three letters in the word awful."

Laughter.

"Up to now," said Gwen, "we've only had to contend with Minor, Medium and Complete Flaps. Now I give you the AWF! It rhymes with the grunt of someone being slugged in the stomach!"

Into the laughter that filled the room, Prim said: "How about the U and L in awful? Can't let them go to waste."

"UnLimited!" snapped Gwen. "Absolutely Worst Flap UnLimited!" She began to laugh, had to choke it off as the laughter edged into hysteria. *Whatinell's wrong with me?* she wondered. She glared at Prim. "Let's get cracking, men! Isn't a damn one of you would look good in uniform."

The laughter shaded down into nervous gutterings. "That Gwen!"

Gwen had to get out of there. It was like a feeling of nausea. She pushed her way down the side of the room. The sparkle had gone out of her rebellion. She felt that all of these people were pulling at her, taking bits of her-

self that she could never recapture. It made her angry. She wanted to kick, bite, claw. Instead, she smiled fixedly. "Excuse me. May I get through here? Sorry. Thank you. Excuse me."

And an image of Andre Battlemont kept intruding on her consciousness. *Such a pitiful little fellow. So... well... sweet. Dammit! Sweet! In a despicable sort of way.*

TWENTY-FIVE days slipped off the calendar. Twenty-five days of splashing in a pool of confusion. Gwen's element. She hurled herself into the problem. This one had to be just right. A tagline for her exit. A Gwen Everest signature at the bottom of the page.

Technical experts from the military swarmed all through the agency. Experts on suit articulation. Experts on shielding. Pressure coefficients. Artificial atmosphere. Waste reclamation. Subminiature power elements. A locksmith. An expert on the new mutable plastics. (*He had to be flown in from the West Coast.*)

Plus the fashion experts seen only by Gwen.

It was quite a job making sure that each military expert saw only what his small technical world required.

Came the day of the Big Picture. The very morning.

Adjacent to her office Gwen maintained a special room about 20 feet square. She called it "my intimidation room." It was almost Louis XV: insubstantial chairs, teetery little tables, glass gimcracks on the light fixtures, pastel cherubs on the wall panels.

The chairs looked as though they might smash flat under the weight of a medium-sized man. Each (with the exception of a padded throne chair that slid from behind a wall panel for Gwen) had a seat that canted forward. The sitters kept sliding off, gently, imperceptibly.

None of the tables had a top large enough for a note pad and an ashtray. One of these items had to be balanced in the lap or placed underfoot. That forced an occasional look at the carpet.

The carpet had been produced with alarming psychological triggers. The uninitiated felt that they were standing upside down in a fishbowl.

General Owling occupied one of the trick chairs. He tried to keep from staring at the cherub centered in a wall panel directly across from him, slightly to the right of the seated figure of Andre Battlemont. Battlemont looked ill. Owling pushed himself backward in the chair. His knees felt exposed. He glanced at General Finnister. She sat to his right beyond a spindly table. She

pulled her skirt down as he watched. He wondered why she sat so far forward on the chair.

Damned uncomfortable little chairs!

He noted that Battlemont had brought in one of the big conference room chairs for himself. Owling wondered why they all couldn't have those big, square, solid, secure chairs. For that matter, why wasn't this meeting being held in the big conference room? Full staff. The Big Picture! He glanced up at the wall panel opposite. *Stupid damned cherub!* He looked down at the rug, grimaced, tore his gaze away.

Finnister had looked at the rug when she came into the room, had almost lost her balance. Now, she tried to keep her attention off it. Her mind seethed with disquieting rumors. Individual reports from the technical experts failed to reveal a total image. It was like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces from separate puzzles all thrown together. She pushed herself backward in the chair. *What an uncomfortable room.* Intuition told her the place was subtly deliberate. Her latent anger at Gwen Everest flared. *Where is that woman?*

Battlemont cleared his throat, glanced at the door to his right through which Gwen was expected momentarily. *Must she always be late?* Gwen had avoided

him for weeks. Too busy. Suddenly this morning she had to have Andre Battlemont front and center. A figurehead. A prop for her little show. He knew pretty much what she was doing, too. In the outward, physical sense. She might be able to keep things from some of the people around here, but Andre Battlemont ran his own intelligence system. As to what was going on in her mind, though, he couldn't be sure. All he knew was that it didn't fit. Not even for Gwen.

Finnister said: "Our technical people inform us that you've been pretty interested —" she pushed herself back in the chair — "in the characteristics of some of the newer mutable plastics."

"That is true," said Battlemont.

"Why?" asked Owling.

"Ahhh, perhaps we'd better wait for Miss Everest," said Battlemont. "She is bringing a solido projector."

"You have mockups already?" asked Owling.

"Yes."

"Good! How many models?"

"One. Our receptionist. Beautiful girl."

"What?" Finnister and Owling in unison.

"Oh! You mean . . . that is, we have the one to show you. It is really two . . . but only one of . . ." He shrugged, suppressed a shudder.

Finnister and Owling looked at each other.

BATTELMONT closed his eyes. *Gwen, please hurry.* He thought about her solution to the military problem, began to tremble. Her basic idea was sound, of course. Good psychological roots. But the military would never go for it. Especially that female general who walked like a sergeant. Battlemont's eyes snapped open as he heard a door open.

Gwen came in pushing a portable display projector. A glance of mutual dislike passed between Gwen and Finnister, was masked by mutual bright smiles immediately.

"Good morning, everybody," chirped Gwen.

Danger signal! thought Battlemont. *She's mad! She's . . .* He stopped the thought, focused on it. *Maybe she is. We work her so hard.*

"Anxious to see what you have there," said Owling. "Just getting ready to ask for a progress report when you called this meeting."

"We wanted to have something first that you could appreciate as an engineer," said Gwen.

Owling nodded.

Finnister said: "Our people report that you've been very secretive about your work. Why?"

"The very walls have ears. Loose lips lose the Peace! Don't

be half safe!" Gwen positioned the projector in the center of the room, took the remote control, crossed to a panel which swung out to disgorge her chair. She sat down facing Finnister and Owling.

Seconds dragged past while she stared in fascination at Finnister's knees.

"Gwen?" said Battlemont.

Finnister tugged down on the hem of her skirt.

"What do you have to show us?" demanded Owling. He pushed himself back in the chair.

"First," said Gwen, "let us examine the perimeters of the problem. You must ask yourself: What do young women want when they enter the service?"

"Sounds sensible," said Owling.

Finnister nodded, her dislike of Gwen submerged in attention to the words.

"They want several things," said Gwen. "They want travel . . . adventure . . . the knight errant sort of thing. Tally-ho!"

Battlemont, Finnister and Owling snapped to shocked attention.

"Gives you pause when you think about it," murmured Gwen. "All those women looking for something. Looking for the free ride. The brass ring. The pot at the end of the rainbow."

She had them nodding again, Gwen noted. She raised her voice:

"The old carousel! The jingle-dingle joy journey!"

Battlemont looked at her sadly. *Mad. Ohhh, my poor, poor Gwenny.*

Owling said: "I . . . uh . . ."

"But they all want one commodity!" snapped Gwen. "And what's that? Romance! That's what's that. And in the unconscious mind what's that romance? That romance is sex!"

"I believe I've heard enough," said Finnister.

"No," said Owling. "Let's . . . uh . . . this is all, I'm sure, preliminary. I want to know where . . . after all, the model . . . models they've developed . . ."

"What's with sex when you get all the folderol off it?" demanded Gwen. "The psychological roots. What's down there?"

Owling scratched his throat, stared at her. He had a basic distrust of subjective ideas, but he always came smack up against the fear that maybe (just maybe now) they were correct. Some of them appeared (and it could be appearance only) to work.

"I'll tell you what's down there," muttered Gwen. "Motherhood. Home. Security with a man. The flag."

Owling thought: *It all sounds so sensible . . . except . . .*

"And what does your armor do?" asked Gwen. "Armor equals no amour! They're locked up in

desexed chunks of metal and plastic where no men can get at them. Great Freud! Men can't even see them in there!"

"Women don't really want men to get at them!" barked Finnister. "Of all the disgusting ideas I've ever —"

"Just a minute!" said Gwen. "A normal woman always wants the possibility. That's what she wants. And she wants it under her control. You've eliminated the possibility. You've taken all control out of their hands, put your women at the mercy of the elements, separated from cold, masculine, angular **ABRUPT AND FINAL DEATH!** by only a thin layer of plastic and metal."

Battlemont stared at her helplessly. *Poor Gwen. Doomed. And she won't even sell this idea. We're all doomed with her.*

FINNISTER glared at Gwen, still smarting under the implied dig of the word *normal*.

"How do you propose to get around these, ah, objections?" asked Owling.

"You'll see," said Gwen. "Let's go in from the perimeter now. Remember, the basic female idea is to be able to run away with the assurance that she will be caught. She wants a certain amount of exposure as a female without being too bare-ahhh-faced about it."

"Mmmmmph!" said Finnister.

Gwen smiled at her.

Gwen is deliberately destroying herself and us with her, thought Battlemont.

"Do you see what is lacking?" asked Gwen.

"Hmmmm-ahhhhhh-hmmmmmm," said Owling.

"A universal symbol," said Gwen. "A bold symbol. A symbol!"

"What do you propose?" asked Owling.

"That's it!" said Gwen. "A proposal! Plus —" she hesitated — "the symbol! The key is very simple." She sat up, perky, grinning at them. "In fact, it's a key!"

Finnister and Owling spoke in unison: "A key?"

"Yes. Two keys, actually. Symbolism's obvious." She produced two keys from her jacket pocket, held them up. "As you can see, one key is hard, angular . . . a masculine key. The other has fancy curves. It's daintier, more the . . ."

"Do you mean to tell me," howled Owling, "that you people have spent all these weeks, all those consultations with our experts, and come up with . . . with . . . with . . ." He pointed, unable to continue.

Gwen shook her head from side to side. "Oh, no. Remember, these are just symbols. They're important, of course. One might even say they were vital. Each

key will be inscribed with the name of the person who gets it."

"What are they keys to?" asked Finnister. She was fascinated in spite of herself.

"To the space armor, naturally," said Gwen. "These keys lock your people in their armor — both men *and* women."

"Lock them?" protested Finnister. "But you said . . ."

"I know," said Gwen. "But, you see, a key that will lock people into something will also let them out. As a matter of fact, any one of these keys will open any suit. That's for the safety factor."

"But they can't get out of their suits when they're in space!" howled Owling. "Of all the . . ."

"That's right!" said Gwen. "They can't *really* get out. So we give them the *symbol* of getting out. For exchanging."

"Exchanging?" asked Finnister.

"Certainly. A male astronaut sees a girl astronaut he likes. He asks her to trade keys. Very romantic. Symbolic of things that may happen when they return to Earth or get to a base where they can get out of the suits."

"Miss Everest," said Finnister, "as you so aptly pointed out earlier, no astronaut can see one of our women in this armor. And even if he could, I don't believe that I'd . . ."

She froze, staring, shocked speechless.

Gwen had pushed a stud on the solido projector's remote control. A suit of space armor appeared to be hanging in the center of the room. In the suit, wearing a form-fitting jacket, stood the agency's busty receptionist. The suit of armor around her was transparent from the waist up.

"The bottom half remains opaque at all times," said Gwen. "For reasons of modesty . . . the connections. However, the top half . . ."

Gwen pushed another stud. The transparent upper half faded through gray to black until it concealed the model.

"For privacy when desired," said Gwen. "That's how we've used the new mutable plastic. Gives the girl some control over her environment."

Again, Gwen pushed the first stud. The upper half of the model reappeared.

Finnister gaped at the form-fitting uniform.

Gwen stood up, took a pointer, gestured in through the projection. "This uniform was designed by a leading couturier. It is made to reveal while concealing. A woman with only a fair figure will appear to good advantage in it. A woman with an excellent figure appears stunning, as you can see. Poor figures —" Gwen shrugged — "there *are* exercises



for developing them. Or so I am told."

Finnister interrupted in a cold voice. "And what do you propose to do with that . . . that uni . . . clothing?"

"This will be the regulation uniform for the WOMS," said Gwen. "There's a cute little hat goes with it. Very sexy."

Battlemont said: "Perhaps the changeover could be made slowly so as to . . ."

"What changeover?" demanded Finnister. She leaped to her feet. "General Owling?"

Owling tore his attention from the model. "Yes?"

"Completely impractical! I will put up with no more!" barked Finnister.

Battlemont thought: *I knew it. Oh, my poor Gwenny! They will destroy her, too. I knew it.*

"We can't waste any more time with this agency," said Finnister. "Come, General."

"Wait!" yelled Battlemont. He leaped to his feet. "Gwen, I told you . . ."

Finnister said: "It's regrettable, but . . ."

"Perhaps we're being a little hasty," said Owling. "There may be something to salvage from this. . ."

"Yes!" said Battlemont. "Just a little more time is all we need to get a fresh . . ."

"I think not," said Finnister.

GWEN smiled from one to the other, thought: *What a prize lot of gooney birds!* She felt a little drunk, as euphoric as if she had just come from a mood bar. *Rebellion, it's wonderful! Up the Irish! Or something.*

Owling shrugged, thought: *We have to stand together against civilians. General Finnister is right. Too bad, though. He got to his feet.*

"Just a little more time," pleaded Battlemont.

Too bad about Andre, thought Gwen. She had an inspiration, said: "One moment, please."

Three pairs of eyes focused on her.

Finnister said: "If you think you can stop me from going through with our threat, dissuade yourself. I'm perfectly aware that you had that uni . . . that clothing designed to make me look hideous!"

"Why not?" asked Gwen. "I was only doing to you what you did to virtually every other woman in the WOMS."

"Gwen!" pleaded Battlemont in horror.

"Be still, Andre," said Gwen. "It's just a matter of timing, anyway. Today. Tomorrow. Next week. Not really important."

"Oh, my poor Gwenny," sobbed Battlemont.

"I was going to wait," said Gwen. "Possibly a week. At least

until I'd turned in my resignation."

"What're you talking about?" asked Owling.

"Resignation!" gasped Battlemont.

"I just can't toss poor Andre here to the wolves," said Gwen. "The rest of our men, yes. Once they get inside they'll chew your guts out, anyway."

"What are you talking about?" asked Finnister.

"The rest of the men in this agency can take care of themselves . . . and you, too," said Gwen. "Wolves among wolves. But Andre here is helpless. All he has is his position . . . money. He's an accident. Put him someplace where money and position are less important, it'll kill him."

"Regrettable," said Finnister. "Shall we be going, General Owling?"

"I was going to ruin both of you," said Gwen. "But I'll tell you what. You leave Andre alone and I'll just give one of you the business."

"Gwen, what are you saying?" whispered Battlemont.

"Yess!" hissed Finnister. "Explain yourself!"

"I just want to know the pecking order here," said Gwen. "Which one of you ranks the other?"

"What does that have to do with it?" asked Finnister.

"Just a minute," said Owling. "That intelligence report." He glared at Gwen. "I'm told you've prepared an adecal on the test model we made before coming to you."

"Big Bertha," said Gwen. "And it's not just an adecal. I have everything needed for a full national campaign. Look!"

A solido of the breast-bearing test model replaced the transparent suit hanging in the center of the room.

"The idea for Big Bertha here originated with General Owling," said Gwen. "My campaign establishes that fact, then goes on to feature an animated model of Big Bertha. She is a living panic. Funniest thing you ever saw. General Owling, you will be the laughing stock of the nation by nightfall of the day I start this campaign."

Owling took a step forward. Battlemont said: "Gwen! They will destroy you!"

Owling pointed at the projection. "You . . . you wouldn't!"

"But I would," said Gwen. She smiled at him.

Battlemont tugged at Gwen's arm. She shook him off.

"It would ruin me," whispered Owling.

"Presumably, you are capable of going through with this threat," said Finnister. "Regrettable."

Owling whirled on Finnister.

"We must stand together!" he said desperately.

"You bet," said Gwen. She pushed another stud on the remote control.

A projection of General Finnister in her famous uniform replaced Big Bertha.

"You may as well know the whole story," said Gwen. "I'm all set with another campaign on the designing of this uniform, right from the Sonnet Bonnet on down through the Sinister Finnister cape and those sneaky walking shoes. I start with a dummy model of the general clad in basic foundation garments. Then I go on to show how each element of the present WOMS uniform was designed for the . . . ah . . . Finnister . . . ah . . . figure."

"I'll sue!" barked Finnister.

"Go ahead. Go ahead," Gwen waved a sinuous arm.

She acts drunk! thought Battlemont. *But she never drinks.*

"I'm all set to go black market with these campaigns," said Gwen. "You can't stop me. I'll prove every contention I make about that uniform. I'll expose you. I'll show why your enlistment drives flopped."

RED suffused the Finnister face. "All right!" she snapped. "If you're going to ruin us, I guess there's nothing we can do

about it. But mark this, Miss Everest. We'll have the men of this agency in the service. You'll have that on your conscience! And the men we draft will serve under friends of ours. I hope you know what that means!"

"You don't have any friends," said Gwen, but her voice lacked conviction. *It's backfiring, she thought. Oh, hell. I didn't think they'd defy me.*

"There may even be something we can do about you!" said Finnister. "A presidential order putting you in the service for reasons of national emergency. Or an emergency clause on some bill. And when we get our hands on you, Miss Everest . . ."

"Andre!" wailed Gwen. It was all getting out of hand. *I didn't want to hurt anybody, she thought. I just . . .* She realized that she didn't know what she had wanted.

Battlemont was electrified. In 22 years, Gwen Everest had never appealed to anyone for help. And now, for the first time, her appeal was to him! He stepped between Gwen and Finnister. "Andre is right here," he said. He felt inspired. His Gwen had appealed to him! "You assassin!" he said, shaking a finger under the Finnister nose.

"Now, see here!" snapped Owlwing. "I won't stand for any more of —"

"And you!" barked Battlemont, whirling. "We have recordings of every conference here, from the first, and including this one! They show what happened! Don't you know what is wrong with this poor girl? You! You've driven her out of her mind!"

Gwen joined in the chorus: "What?"

"Be still, Gwen," said Battlemont. "I will handle this."

Gwen couldn't take her attention off him. Battlemont was magnificent. "Yes, Andre."

"I will prove it," said Battlemont. "With Interdorma psychiatrists. With all the experts money can buy. You think you have seen something in those campaigns our Gwen set up? Hah! I will show you something." He stabbed a finger at Owlwing. "Can the military drive you insane?"

"Oh, now see here," said Owlwing. "This has gone —"

"Yes! It can drive you insane!" said Battlemont. "And we will show, step by step, how you drove our poor Gwen out of her mind with fear for her friends. Fear for me!" He slapped himself on the chest, glared at Finnister. "And you know what we will do next? We will say to the public: This could happen to you! Who is next? You? Or you? Or you? Then what happens to your money from Congress? What

happens to your enlistment quotas?"

"Now see here," said Owlwing.

"We didn't . . ."

"Didn't you?" snarled Battlemont. "You think this poor girl is in her right mind?"

"Well, but we didn't . . ."

"Wait until you see our campaign," said Battlemont. He took Gwen's hand, patted it. "There, there, Gwenny. Andre will fix."

"Yes, Andre," she said. They were the only words she could find. She felt stupified. *He's in love with me, she thought. Never before had she known anyone to be in love with her. Not even her parents, who had always been repelled by the intellect they had spawned. Gwen felt warmth seeping through her. A cog slipped into motion in her mind. It creaked somewhat from long idleness. She thought: He's in love with me! She wanted to hug him.*

"We seem to be at a stalemate," muttered Owlwing.

Finnister said: "But we can't just —"

"Shut up!" ordered Owlwing. "He'll do it! Can't you see that?"

"But if we draft —"

"He'll do it for sure, then! Buy some other agency to run the campaign."

"But we could turn around and draft —"

"You can't draft everybody who disagrees with you, woman!

Not in this country! You'd start a revolution!"

"I . . ." Finnister said helplessly.

"And it's not just us he'd ruin," said Owling. "The whole service. He'd strike right at the money. I know his type. He wasn't bluffing. It'd be catastrophic!"

OWLING shook his head, seeing a parade of crumbling military projects pass before his mind's eye, all falling into an abyss labeled "NSF."

"You are an intelligent man, General Owling," said Battlemont.

"That Psych Branch!" snarled Owling. "Them and their bright ideas!"

"I told you they were fuzzy-heads," said Gwen.

"You be still, Gwen," said Battlemont.

"Yes, Andre."

"Well, what're we going to do?" demanded Owling.

"I tell you what," said Battlemont. "You leave us alone, we leave you alone."

"But what about my enlistments?" wailed Finnister.

"You think our Gwen, sick or well, can't solve your problems?" asked Battlemont. "For your enlistments you use the program as outlined."

"I won't!"

"You will," said Owling.

"General Owling, I refuse to have. . ."

"What happens if I have to dump this problem on the General Staff?" asked Owling. "Where will the head-chopping start? In the Psych Branch? Certainly. Who'll be next? The people who could've solved it in the field, that's who!"

Finnister said: "But —"

"For that matter," said Owling, "Miss Everest's ideas sounded pretty sensible . . . with some modifications, of course."

"No modifications," said Battlemont.

He's a veritable Napoleon! thought Gwen.

"Only in minor, unimportant details," soothed Owling. "For engineering reasons."

"Perhaps," agreed Battlemont. "Provided we pass on the modifications before they are made."

"I'm sure we can work it out," said Owling.

Finnister gave up, turned her back on them.

"One little detail," murmured Battlemont. "When you make out the double-fee check to the agency, make a substantial addition — bonus for Miss Everest."

"Naturally," said Owling.

"Naturally," said Battlemont.

When the space brass had departed, Battlemont faced Gwen, stamped his foot. "You have been very bad, Gwen!"

"But, Andre —"

"Resignation!" barked Battlemont.

"But —"

"Oh, I understand, Gwen. It's my fault. I worked you much too hard. But that is past."

"Andre, you don't —"

"Yes, I do! I understand. You were going to sink the ship and go down with it. My poor, dear Gwen. A death wish! If you'd only paid attention to your *Interdorma* telelog."

"I didn't want to hurt anyone here, Andre. Only those two —"

"Yes, yes. I know. You're all mixed up."

"That's true." She felt like crying. She hadn't cried . . . since . . . she couldn't remember when. "You know," she said, "I can't remember ever crying."

"That's it!" said Battlemont. "I cry all the time. You need a stabilizing influence. You need someone to teach you how to cry."

"Would you teach me, Andre?"

"Would I . . ." He wiped the tears from his eyes. "You are going on a vacation. Immediately! I am going with you."

"Yes, Andre."

"And when we return —"

"I don't want to come back to the agency, Andre. I . . . can't."

"So that's it!" said Battlemont. "The advertising business! It bugs you!"

SHE shrugged. "I'm . . . I just can't face another campaign. I . . . just . . . can't."

"You will write a book," announced Battlemont.

"What?"

"Best therapy known," said Battlemont. "Did it myself once. You will write about the advertising business. You will expose all the dirty tricks: the hypnosingles, the subvisual flicker images, the advertisers who finance textbooks to get their sell into them, the womb rooms where the *you-seekers* are programmed. Everything."

"I could do it," she said.

"You will tell all," said Battlemont.

"Will I!"

"And you will do it under a pseudonym," said Battlemont. "Safer."

"When do we start the vacation, Andre?"

"Tomorrow." He experienced a moment of his old panic. "You don't mind that I'm . . . ugly as a pig?"

"You're just beautiful," she said. She smoothed the hair across his bald spot. "You don't mind that I'm smarter than you?"

"Ah, hah!" Battlemont drew himself to attention. "You may be smarter in the head, my darling, but you are *not* smarter in the heart!"

— FRANK HERBERT



THE LONG WAY HOME

*It's a long way home from
outer space — especially
if you have to walk it!*

WHEN Marty first saw the thing it was nearly dead ahead, half a million miles away, a tiny green blip that repeated itself every five seconds on the screen of his distant search radar.

He was four billion miles from Sol and heading out, working his way slowly through a small swarm of rock chunks that swung in a slow sun-orbit out here beyond Pluto, looking for valuable minerals in a concentration that would make mining profitable.

By FRED SABERHAGEN Illustrated by IVIE

The thing on his radar screen looked quite small and therefore not too promising. But, as it was almost in his path, no great effort would be required to investigate. For all he knew, it might be solid germanium. And nothing better was in sight at the moment.

Marty leaned back in the control seat and said: "We've got one coming up, baby." He had no need to address himself any more exactly. Only one other human was aboard the *Clementine*, or, to his knowledge, within

the better part of a couple of billion miles.

Laura's voice answered through a speaker, from the kitchen two decks below.

"Oh, close? Have we got time for breakfast?"

Marty studied the radar. "About five hours if we maintain speed. Hope it won't be a waste of energy to decelerate and look the thing over." He gave *Clem's* main computer the problem of finding the most economical engine use to approach his find and reach zero velocity relative to it.

"Come and eat!"

"All right." He and the computer studied the blip together for a few seconds. Then the man, not considering it anything of particular importance, left the control room to have breakfast with his bride of three months. As he walked downstairs in the steadily-maintained artificial gravity, he heard the engines starting.

TEN hours later he examined his new find much more closely, with a rapidly focusing alertness that balanced between an explorer's caution and a prospector's elation at a possibly huge strike.

The incredible shape of X, becoming apparent as the *Clem* drew within a few hundred

miles, was what had Marty on the edge of his chair. It was a needle thirty miles long, as near as his radar could measure, and about a hundred yards thick — dimensions that matched exactly nothing Marty could expect to find anywhere in space.

It was obviously no random chunk of rock. And it was no spaceship that he had ever seen or heard of. One end of it pointed in the direction of Sol, causing him to suggest to Laura the idea of a miniature comet, complete with tail. She took him seriously at first, then remembered some facts about comets and swatted him playfully. "Oh, you!" she said.

Another, more real possibility quickly became obvious, with sobering effect. The ancient fear of the Alien that had haunted Earthmen through almost three thousand years of intermittent space exploration, that had never been realized, now peered into the snug control room through the green radar eye.

Aliens were always good for a joke when spacemen met and talked. But they turned out to be not particularly amusing when you were possibly confronting them, several billion miles from Earth. Especially, thought Marty, in a ship built for robot mining, ore refining, and hauling, not for diplomatic

contacts or heroics. And with the only human assistance a girl on her first space trip, Marty hardly felt up to speaking for the human race in such a situation.

It took a minute to set the autopilot so that any sudden move by X would trigger alarms and such evasive tactics as *Clem* could manage. He then set a robot librarian to searching his microfilm files for any reference to a spaceship having X's incredible dimensions.

There was a chance — how good a chance he found hard to estimate, when any explanation looked somewhat wild — that X was a derelict, the wrecked hull of some ship dead for a decade, or a century, or a thousand years. By laws of salvage, such a find would belong to him if he towed it into port. The value might be very high or very low. But the prospect was certainly intriguing.

Marty brought *Clem* to a stop relative to X, and noticed that his velocity relative to Sol now also hung at zero. "I wonder," he muttered. "Space anchor. . .?"

The space anchor had been in use for thousands of years. It was a device that enabled a ship to fasten itself to a particular point in the gravitational field of a massive body such as a sun. If X was anchored, it did not prove that there was still life aboard

her; once "dropped," an anchor could hold as long as a hull could last.

Laura brought sandwiches and a hot drink to him in the control room.

"If we call the Navy and they bring it in we won't get anything out of it," he told her between bites. "That's assuming it's — not alien."

"Could there be someone alive on it?" She was staring into the screen. Her face was solemn but, he thought, not frightened.

"If it's human, you mean? No. I *know* there hasn't been any ship remotely like that used in recent years. Way, way back the Old Empire built some that were even bigger, but none I ever heard of with this crazy shape. . . ."

The robot librarian indicated that it had drawn a blank. "See?" said Marty. "And I've even got most of the ancient types in there."

There was silence for a little while. The evening's recorded music started somewhere in the background.

"What would you do if I weren't along?" Laura asked him.

He did not answer directly, but said something he had been considering. "I don't know the psychology of our hypothetical aliens. But it seems to me that

if you set out exploring new solar systems, you do as Earthmen have always done — go with the best you have in the way of speed and weapons. Therefore if X is alien I don't think *Clem* would stand a chance, trying to fight or run." He paused, frowned at the image of X. "That damned shape — it's just not right for anything."

"We could call the Navy — not that I'm saying we should, darling," she added hastily. "You decide, and I'll never complain either way. I'm just trying to help you think it out."

He looked at her, believed it about there never being any complaints and squeezed her hand. Anything more seemed superfluous.

"If I was alone," he said, "I'd jump into a suit, go look that thing over, haul it back to Ganymede and sell it for a unique whatever-it-is. Maybe I'd make enough money to marry you in real style, and trade in *Clem* for a first-rate ship — or maybe even terraform an asteroid and keep a couple of robot prospectors. I don't know, though. Maybe we'd better call the Navy."

She stood up and laughed at him gently. "We're married enough already, and we had all the style I wanted. Besides, I don't think either of us would be happy sitting on an asteroid very

long. How long do you think it will take you to look it over?"

At the airlock door she had misgivings: "Oh, it is safe enough, isn't it? Marty, be careful and come back soon." She kissed him before he closed his helmet.

They had moved *Clem* to within a few miles of X. Marty mounted his spacebike and approached it slowly, from the side.

The vast length of X blotted out a thin strip of stars to his right and left, as if it were the distant shore of some vast island in a placid Terran sea, and the starclouds below him were watery reflections of the ones above. But space was too black to permit such an illusion to endure.

The tiny FM radar on his bike showed him within three hundred yards of X. He killed his forward speed with a gentle application of retrojets and turned on a spotlight. Bright metal gleamed smoothly back at him as he swung the beam from side to side. Then he stopped it where a dark concavity showed up.

"Lifeboat berth . . . empty," he said aloud, looking through the bike's little telescope.

"Then it is a derelict? We're all right?" asked Laura's voice in his helmet.

"Looks that way, yeah, I guess there's no doubt of it. I'll go in for a closer look now." He eased

the bike forward. X was evidently just some rare type of ship that neither he nor the compilers of the standard reference works in his library had ever heard of. Which sounded a little foolish to him, but . . .

At ten yards distance he killed speed again, set the bike on automatic stay-clear, made sure a line from it was fast to his belt and launched himself out of the saddle gently, headfirst toward X.

The armored hands of his suit touched down first, easily and expertly. In a moment he was standing upright on the hull, held in place by magnetic boots. He looked around. He detected no response to his arrival.

Marty turned toward Sol, sighting down the miles of dark cylinder that seemingly dwindled to a point in the starry distance, like a road on which a man might travel home toward a tiny sun.

Near at hand the hull was smooth, looking like that of any ordinary spaceship. In the direction away from Sol, quite distant, he could vaguely see some sort of projections at right angles to the hull. He mounted his bike again and set off in that direction. When he neared the nearest projection, a mile down the hull, he saw it to be a sort of enormous clamp that encircled X — or rather, part of a clamp. It ended

a few yards from the hull, in rounded globs of metal that had once been molten but were now too cold to affect the thermometer Marty held against them. His radiation counter showed nothing above the normal background.

"Ah," said Marty after a moment, looking at the half-clamp. "Something?"

"I think I've got it figured out. Not quite as weird as we thought. Let me check for one thing more." He steered the bike slowly around the circumference of X.

A third of the way around he came upon what looked like a shallow trench, about five feet wide and a foot deep, with a bottom that shone cloudy gray in his lights. It ran lengthwise on X as far as he could see in either direction.

A door-sized opening was cut in the clamp above the trench.

Marty nodded and smiled to himself, and gunned the bike around in an accelerating curve that aimed at the *Clementine*.

"It's not a spaceship at all, only a part of one," he told Laura a little later, digging in the microfilm film with his own hands, with the air of a man who knew what he was looking for. "That's why the librarian didn't turn it up. Now I remember read-

ing about them. It's part of an Old Empire job of about two thousand years ago. They used a somewhat different drive than we do, one that made one enormous ship more economical to run than several normal sized ones. They made these ships ready for a voyage by fastening together a number of long narrow sections side by side, how many depending on how much cargo they had to move. What we've found is obviously one of those sections."

Laura wrinkled her forehead. "It must have been a terrible job, putting those sections together and separating them, even in free space."

"They used space anchors. That trench I mentioned? It has a forcefield bottom, so an anchor could be sunk through it; then the whole section could be slid straight forward or back, in or out of the bunch . . . here, I've got it, I think. Put this strip in the viewer."

One picture, a photograph, showed what appeared to be one end of a bundle of long needles, in a glaring light, against a background of stars that looked unreal. The legend beneath gave a scanty description of the ship in flowing Old Empire script. Other pictures showed sections of the ship in some detail.

"This must be it, all right,"

said Marty thoughtfully. "Funny looking old tub."

"I wonder what happened to wreck her."

"Drives sometimes exploded in those days, that could have done it. And this one section got anchored to Sol somehow — it's funny."

"How long ago did it happen, do you suppose?" asked Laura. She had her arms folded as if she were a little cold, though it was not cold in the Clementine.

"Must be around two thousand years or more. These ships haven't been used for about that long." He picked up a stylus. "I better go over there with a big bag of tools tomorrow and take a look inside." He noted down a few things he thought he might need.

"Historians would probably pay a good price for the whole thing, untouched," she suggested, watching him draw doodles.

"That's a thought. But maybe there's something really valuable aboard — though I won't be able to give it anything like a thorough search, of course. The thing is anchored, remember. I'll probably have to break in anyway to release that."

She pointed to one of the diagrams. "Look, a section thirty miles long must be one of the passenger compartments. And according to this plan, it would

have no drive at all of its own. We'll have to tow it."

He looked. "Right. Anyway, I don't think I'd care to try its drive if it had one."

He located airlocks on the plan and made himself generally familiar with it.

THE next "morning" found Marty loading extra tools, gadgets and explosives on his bike. The trip to X (he still thought of it that way) was uneventful. This time he landed about a third of the way from one end, where he expected to find a handy airlock and have a choice of directions to explore when he got inside. He hoped to get the airlock open without letting out whatever atmosphere or gas was present in any of the main compartments, as a sudden drop in pressure might damage something in the unknown cargo.

He found a likely-looking spot for entry where the plans had led him to expect one. It was a small auxiliary airlock, only a few feet from the space-anchor channel. The forcefield bottom of that channel was, he knew, useless as a possible doorway. Though anchors could be raised and lowered through it, they remained partly imbedded in it at all times. Starting a new hole from scratch would cause the decompression he was trying to

avoid, and possibly a dangerous explosion as well.

Marty began his attack on the airlock door cautiously, working with electronic "sounding" gear for a few minutes, trying to tell if the inner door was closed as well. He had about decided that it was when something made him look up. He raised his head and sighted down the dark length of X toward Sol.

Something was moving toward him along the hull.

He was up in the bike saddle with his hand on a blaster before he realized what it was — that moving blur that distorted the stars seen through it, like heat waves in air. Without doubt, it was a space anchor. And it moved along the channel.

Marty rode the bike out a few yards and nudged it along slowly, following the anchor. It moved at about the pace of a fast walk. Moved . . . but it was sunk into space.

"Laura," he called, "something odd here. Doppler this hull for me and see if it's moving."

Laura acknowledged in one businesslike word. Good girl, he thought, I won't have to worry about you. He coasted along the hull on the bike, staying even with the apparent movement of the anchor.

Laura's voice came: "It is moving now, towards Sol. About six

miles per hour. Maybe less — it's hard to read, so slow."

"Good, that's what I thought." He hoped he sounded reassuring. He pondered the situation. It was the hull moving then, the forcefield channel sliding by the fixed anchor. Whatever was causing it, it did not seem to be directed against him or the *Clem*. "Look, baby," he went on, "something peculiar is happening." He explained about the anchor. "*Clem* may be no battleship, but I guess she's a match for any piece of wreckage."

"But you're out *there*!"

"I have to see this. I never saw anything like it before. Don't worry, I'll pull back if it looks at all dangerous." Something in the back of his mind told him to go back to his ship and call the Navy. He ignored it without much trouble. He had never thought much of calling the Navy.

About four hours later the incomprehensible anchor neared the end of its track, within thirty yards of what seemed to be X's stern. It slowed down and came to a gradual stop a few yards from the end of the track. For a minute nothing else happened. Marty reported the facts to Laura. He sat straight in the bike saddle, regarding the universe, which offered him no enlightenment.

In the space between the anchor and the end of the track, a second patterned shimmer appeared. It must necessarily have been let "down" into space from inside X. Marty felt a creeping chill. After a little while the first anchor vanished, withdrawn through the forcefield into the hull.

Marty sat watching for twenty minutes, but nothing further happened. He realized that he had a crushing grip on the bike controls and that he was quivering with fatigue.

LAURA and Marty took turns sleeping and watching, that night aboard the *Clementine*. About noon the next day Laura was at the telescope when anchor number one reappeared, now at the "prow" of X. After a few moments the one at the stern vanished.

Marty looked at the communicator that he could use any time to call the Navy. Faster-than-light travel not being practical so near a sun, it would take them at least several hours to arrive after he decided he needed them. Then he beat his fist on the table and swore. "Must be some kind of mechanism in her still operating." He went to the telescope and watched number one anchor begin its apparent slow journey sternward once again. "I don't

know. I've got to settle this."

The doppler showed X was again creeping toward Sol at about six miles an hour.

"Does it seem likely there'd be power left after two thousand years to operate such a mechanism?" Laura asked.

"I think so. Each passenger section had a hydrogen power lamp." He dug out the microfilm again. "Yeah, a small fusion lamp for electricity to light and heat the section, and run the emergency equipment for . . ." His voice trailed off, then continued in a dazed tone: "For recycling food and water."

"Marty, what is it?"

He stood up, staring at the plan. "And the only radios were in the lifeboats, and the lifeboats are gone. I wonder . . . sure. The explosion could have torn them apart, blown them away so. . ."

"What are you talking about?"

He looked again at their communicator. "A transmitter that can get through the noise between here and Pluto wouldn't be easy to jury-rig, even now. In the Old Empire days . . ."

"What?"

"Now about air —" He seemed to wake up with a start, looked at her sheepishly. "Just an idea hit me." He grinned. "I'm making another trip."

An hour later he was landing

on X for the third time, touching down near the "stern". He was riding the moving hull toward the anchor, but it was still many miles away.

The spot he had picked was near another small auxiliary airlock, upon which he began work immediately. After ascertaining that the inner door was closed, he drilled a hole in the outer door to relieve any pressure in the chamber to keep the outer door shut.

The door opening mechanism suffered from twenty-century cramp, but a vibrator tool shook it loose enough to be operated by hand. The inside of the airlock looked like nothing more than the inside of an airlock.

HE patched the hole he had made in the outer door so he would be able — he hoped — to open the inner one normally. He operated the outer door several times to make sure he could get out fast if he had to. After attaching a few extras from the bike to his suit, he said a quick and cheerful goodbye to Laura — not expecting his radio to work from inside the hull — and closed himself into the airlock. Using the vibrator again, he was able to work the control that should let whatever passed for hull atmosphere into the chamber. It came. His wrist gauge

told him pressure was building up to approximately spaceship normal, and his suit mikes began to pick up a faint hollow humming from somewhere. He very definitely kept suit and helmet sealed.

The inner door worked perfectly, testifying to the skill of the Old Empire builders. Marty found himself nearly upside down as he went through, losing his footing and his sense of heroic adventure. In return he gained the knowledge that X's artificial gravity was still at least partly operational. Righting himself, he found he was in a small anteroom banked with spacesuit lockers, now illuminated only by his suit lights but showing no other signs of damage. There was a door in each of the other walls.

He moved to try the one at his right. First drawing his blaster, he hesitated a moment, then slid it back into its holster. Swallowing, he eased the door open to find only another empty compartment, about the size of an average room and stripped of everything down to the bare deck and bulkheads.

Another door led him into a narrow passage where a few overhead lights burned dimly. Trying to watch over his shoulder and ahead at the same time, he followed the hall to a winding stair and began to climb, moving with

all the silence possible in a spacesuit.

The stair brought him out onto a long gallery overlooking what could only be the main corridor of X, a passage twenty yards wide and three decks high; it narrowed away to a point in the dim-lit distance.

A man came out of a doorway across the corridor, a deck below Marty.

He was an old man and may have been nearsighted, for he seemed unaware of the spacesuited figure gripping a railing and staring down at him. The old man wore a sort of tunic intricately embroidered with threads of different colors, and well tailored to his thin figure, leaving his legs and feet bare. He stood for a moment peering down the long corridor, while Marty stared down momentarily frozen in shock.

Marty pulled back two slow steps from the railing, to where he stood mostly in shadow. Turning his head to follow the old man's gaze, he noticed that the forcefield where the anchors traveled was visible running in a sunken strip down the center of the corridor. When the interstellar ship of which X was once a part had been in normal use, the strip might have been covered with a moving walkway of some kind.

THE old man turned his attention to a tank where grew a mass of plants with flat, dark green leaves. He touched a leaf, then turned a valve that doled water into the tank from a thin pipe. Similar valves were clustered on the bulkhead behind the old man, and pipes ran from them to many other plant-filled tanks set at intervals down the corridor. "For oxygen," Marty said aloud in an almost calm voice, and was startled at the sound in his helmet. His helmet airspeaker was not on, so of course the old man did not hear him. The old man pulled a red berry from one of the plants and ate it absently.

Marty made a move with his chin to turn on his speaker, but did not complete it. He half lifted his arms to wave, but fear of the not-understood held him, made him back up slowly into the shadows at the rear of the gallery. Turning his head to the right he could see the near end of the corridor, and an anchor there, not sunken in space but raised almost out of the forcefield on a framework at the end of the strip.

Near the stair he had ascended was a half-open door, leading into darkness. Marty realized he had turned off his suit lights without consciously knowing it. Moving carefully so the old man would not see, he lit one and

probed the darkness beyond the door cautiously. The room he entered was the first of a small suite that had once been a passenger cabin. The furniture was simple, but it was the first of any kind that he had seen aboard X. Garments hanging in one corner were similar to the old man's tunic, although no two were alike exactly. Marty fingered the fabric with one armored hand, holding it close to his faceplate. He nodded to himself; it seemed to be the kind of stuff produced by fiber recycling machinery, and he doubted very much that it was anywhere near two thousand years old.

Marty emerged from the doorway of the little apartment, stood in shadow with his suit lights out, looking around; the old man had disappeared. He remembered that the old man had gazed down the infinite-looking corridor as if expecting something. There was nothing new in sight that way. He turned up the gain of one of his suit mikes and focused it in that direction.

Many human voices were singing, somewhere down there, miles away. He started, and tried to interpret what he heard in some other way, but with an eerie thrill became convinced that his first impression was correct. While he studied a plan of going back to his bike and heading in that di-



rection, he grew aware that the singing was getting louder. And therefore no doubt closer.

HE leaned back against the bulkhead in the shadow at the rear of the gallery. His suit, dark-colored for space work far from Sol, would be practically invisible from the lighted corridor below, while he could see down with little difficulty. Part of his mind urged him to go back to Laura, to call the Navy, that these unknown people could be dangerous to him. But he had to wait and see more of them. He grinned wryly as he realized he was not going to get any salvage out of X after all.

Sweating in spite of his suit's coolers, he listened to the singing grow rapidly louder in his helmet. Male and female voices rose and fell in an intricate melody, sometimes blending, sometimes chanting separate parts. The language was unknown to him.

Suddenly the people were in sight, first only as a faint dot of color in the distance. As they drew nearer he could see that they walked in a long neat column eight abreast, four on each side of the central strip of forcefield. Men and women, apparently teamed according to no fixed rule of age or sex or size — except that he saw no oldsters or young children.

The people sang and leaned forward as they walked, pulling their weight on heavy ropes that were intricately decorated, like their clothing and that of the old man who had now stepped out of his doorway again to greet them. A few other oldsters of both sexes appeared near him to stand and wait. Through a briefly opened door Marty caught a glimpse of a well-lighted room holding machines he recognized as looms only because of the half-finished cloth they held. He shook his head wonderingly.

All at once the walkers were very near; hundreds of people pulling on ropes that led to a multiple whiffletree made of twisted metal pipe, that rode over the central trench. The whiffletree and the space anchor to which it was fastened were pulled past Marty — or rather the spot from which he watched was carried past the fixed anchor by the slow, human-powered thrust of X toward Sol.

Behind the anchor came a small group of children, from about the age of ten up to puberty. They pulled on small ropes, drawing a cart that held what looked like containers for food and water. At the extreme rear of the procession marched a man in the prime of life, tall and athletic, wearing a magnificent head-dress.

ABOUT the time he drew even with Marty, this man stopped suddenly (young and old alike walked steadily at the same fast pace) and uttered a sharp command. Instantly the pulling and singing ceased. Several men nearest the whiffletree moved in and loosed it from the anchor with quick precision. Others held the slackened ropes clear as the enormous inertia of X's mass carried the end of the forcefield strip toward the anchor, which now jammed against the framework holding anchor number two, forcing the framework back where there had seemed to be no room.

A thick forcefield pad now became visible to Marty behind the framework, expanding steadily as it absorbed the energy of the powerful stress between ship and anchor. Conduits of some kind, Marty saw, led away from the pad, possibly to where energy might be stored for use when it came time to start X creeping toward the sun again. A woman in a headdress now mounted the framework and released anchor number two, to drop into space "below" the hull and bind X fast to the place where it was now held by anchor number one. A crew of men came forward and began to raise anchor number one . . .

He found himself descending

the stair, retracing his steps to the airlock. Behind him the voices of the people were raised in a steady recitation that might have been a prayer. Feeling somewhat as if he moved in a dream, he made no particular attempt at caution, but he met no one. He tried to think, to understand what he had witnessed. Vaguely, comprehension came.

Outside, he said: "I'm out all right, Laura. I want to look at something at the other end and I'll come home." He scarcely heard what she said in reply, but realized that her answer had been almost instantaneous; she must have been listening steadily for his call all the time. He felt better.

The bike shot him thirty miles down the dream-like length of X toward Sol in a few minutes. A lot faster than the people inside do their traveling, he thought . . . and Sol was dim ahead.

Almost recklessly he broke into X again, through an airlock near the prow. At this end of the forcefield strip hung a gigantic block and tackle that would give a vast mechanical advantage to a few hundred people pulling against an anchor, when it came time for them to start the massive hull moving toward Sol once more.

He looked in almost unnoticed at a nursery, small children in the care of a few women. He

thought one of the babies saw him and laughed at him as he watched through a hole in a bulkhead where a conduit had once passed.

"WHAT is it?" asked Laura impatiently as he stepped exhausted out of the shower room aboard the *Clem*, wrapping a robe around him. He could see his shock suddenly mirrored in her face.

"People," he said, sitting down. "Alive over there. Earth people. Humans."

"You're all right?"

"Sure. It's just — God!" He told her about it briefly. "They must be descended from the survivors of the accident, whatever it was. Physically there's no reason why they couldn't live when you come to think of it — even reproduce up to a limited number. Plants for oxygen — I bet their air's as good as ours. Recycling equipment for food and water, and the hydrogen power lamp still working to run it, and to give them light and gravity . . . they have about everything they need. Everything but a space-drive." He leaned back with a sigh and closed his eyes. It was hard for him to stop talking to her.

She was silent for a little, trying to assimilate it all. "But if they have hydrogen power

couldn't they have rigged something?" she finally asked. "Some kind of a drive, even if it was slow? Just one push and they'd keep moving."

Marty thought it over. "Moving a little faster won't help them." He sat up and opened his eyes again. "And they'd have a lot less work to do every day. I imagine too large a dose of leisure time could be fatal to all of them."

"Somehow they had the will to keep going, and the intelligence to find a way, to evolve a system of life that worked for them, that kept them from going wild and killing each other. And their children, and their grandchildren, and after that . . ." Slowly he stood up. She followed him into the control room, where they stood watching the image of X that was still focused on the telescope screen.

"All those years," Laura whispered. "All that time."

"Do you realize what they're doing?" he asked softly. "They're not just surviving, turned inward on weaving and designing and music."

"In a few hours they're going to get up and start another day's work. They're going to pull anchor number one back to the front of their ship and lower it. That's their morning job. Then someone left in the rear will raise

anchor number two. Then the main group will start pulling against number one, as I saw them doing a little while ago, and their ship will begin to move toward Sol. Every day they go through this they move about thirty miles closer to home.

"Honey, these people are walking home and pulling their ship with them. It must be a religion with them by now, or something very near it..." He put an arm around Laura.

"MARTY... how long would it take them?"

"Space is big," he said in a flat voice, as if quoting something he had been required to memorize.

After a few moments he continued. "I said just moving a little faster won't help them. Let's say they've traveled thirty miles a day for two thousand years. That's — somewhere near twenty-two million miles. Almost enough to get from Mars to Earth at their nearest approach. But they've got a long way to go to reach the neighborhood of Mars' orbit. We're well out beyond Pluto here. Practically speaking, they're just about where they started from." He smiled wanly. "Really they're not far from home, for an interstellar

ship. They had their accident almost on the doorstep of their own solar system, and they've been walking toward the threshold ever since."

Laura went to the communicator and began to set it up for the call that would bring the Navy within a few hours. She paused. "How long would it take them now," she asked, "to get somewhere near Earth?"

"Hell would freeze over. But they can't know that any more, or maybe they still know it and it just doesn't bother them. They must just go on, tugging at that damned anchor day after day, year after year, with maybe a holiday now and then... I don't know how they do it. They work and sing and feel they're accomplishing something... and really, they are, you know. They have a goal and they are moving toward it. I wonder what they say of Earth, how they think about it."

Slowly Laura continued to set up the communicator.

Marty watched her. "Are you sure?" he pleaded suddenly. "What are we doing to them?"

But she had already sent the call.

For better or worse, the long voyage was almost over.

— FRED SABERHAGEN



The BEMs in your neighborhood

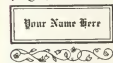
won't run off with your books
if you put inside the front cover
of each book... a gummed bookplate
with your name printed on it!



No. CF-614 by Emsh



No. GF-612 by Emsh



No. GM-12 by Cullen Rapp



No. GX-57 by Lynd Ward

FINAGLE SAYS —

The umpteenth corollary
of Finagle's General Law of
Dynamic Negatives says:

"No books are ever lost
by loaning except ones you
particularly want to keep."

100 for \$4; 200, \$6; 300, \$8
with owner's name imprinted

All Postpaid. Add state sales tax, if any.

ACTUAL SIZE, all designs, 3 x 4 inches

The designs shown above are the only ones we offer!

Order from **GALAXY** 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N.Y.

DON'T CLIP THE COUPON—

— if you want to keep your copy of **Galaxy** intact for permanent possession! Why mutilate a good thing? But, by the same token...if you're devotee enough to want to keep your copies in mint condition, you ought to subscribe. You really ought to. For one thing, you get your copies earlier. For another, you're sure you'll get them! Sometimes newsstands run out—the mail never does.

(And you can just put your name and address on a plain sheet of paper and mail it to us, at the address below. We'll know what you mean... provided you enclose your check!)

In the past few years **Galaxy** has published the finest stories by the finest writers in the field—Bester, Heinlein, Pohl, Asimov, Sturgeon, Leiber and nearly everyone else.

In the next few years it will go right on, with stories that are just as good... **or better.**

Don't miss any issue of **Galaxy**. You can make sure you won't. Just subscribe today.

*(If, on the other hand, your habit is to read them once and go on to something new—please—feel free to use the coupon! It's for your convenience, not ours.)

GALAXY Publishing Corp., 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N. Y. (50c additional
per 6 issues
foreign postage)
Enter my subscription for the New Giant 196-page Galaxy
(U. S. Edition only) for:
6 Issues @ \$2.50 12 Issues @ \$4.50 24 Issues @ \$8.50

Name.....City.....

Address.....Zone.....State.....