Every army has one like him. He doesn't win wars—

but he can make sure the right people lose them!

THE ABOMINABLE EARTHMAN

By FREDERIK POHL Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

ONE night when I was C.Q. at the 549th, the Officer of the Day came in, swearing, with a tall, dark-skinned private wandering sullenly along behind him.

We were up to our eyeballs in frantic work; Trenton had just been evacuated. "Get me the M.P. barracks," yelled the O.D. "What do you think? This rat's been selling rations to the civilians." That was Lt. Lauchheimer, who was a pale young man with enormous integrity. He looked at the prisoner as if he wanted to kick him. I could understand that.

The prisoner looked back at him calmly, without very much interest at all. He leaned back against the wall, put one elbow on the hammering teletype and sighed. Behind him was a poster of a great green bug being bayoneted by an American infantryman, captioned:

SIRIANS, GO HOME!

"Sit down," snapped Lt. Lauchheimer, "— you. Whatever the hell you said your name was."

"He's Private Postal, sir," I said reluctantly. "Pinkman W. Postal."

The prisoner looked at me for the first time. The orderly room was full and bustling, so it wasn't

surprising he hadn't noticed me. "Oh. Hello, Harry."

I dialed the M.P. barracks without answering him, but it was already too late. When I handed the phone to Lt. Lauchheimer he glared at me. I said, "We took basic together, Lieutenant. We, uh — We weren't very close buddies."

"Sergeant, I didn't ask you."

I listened while he was talking on the phone, although I was supposed to be checking casualty reports resulting from the morning's assault on the Sirian bubble. It seemed that Pinky had been given a truckload of supplies for evacuees and told to deliver it to a relief center in Bound Brook. They'd picked him up in New Brunswick with the supplies gone and a pocketful of cash. It was about what I would have expected.

The M.P. jeep was there in less than five minutes, and Lt. Lauchheimer escorted Pinky out without another word to me. But he didn't forget. Two weeks later, when we were packing up for the move to Staten Island, he was in charge of my section and he put me on every rough detail he could think of. I guess I didn't blame him. I would have done the same. He didn't know me very well, but he knew I knew Pinky Postal.

Lauchheimer didn't get off my back until the Boston Retreat, when we were bombed-in together for twelve hours and had a chance to talk things over. After that we were pretty close. He asked me to come along when he volunteered for the Worcester booby-trapping mission that almost worked, which I did, so in a way you might say that Pinky Postal was responsible for my getting the Congressional Medal of Honor.

I'm glad I got it. There were fifteen awarded that day, including mine and Lauchheimer's. They lined us up alphabetically, and my name begins with a "W". So, although my Medal looks like all the others, it's pretty special. It was the last one issued. After that the Sirians englobed Washington.

WHEN Pinky Postal got his bright notion of selling GI canned milk in New Brunswick he was twenty-three years old. He had been drafted at nineteen, out of Cincinnati.

He hated it — hated both. He hated being drafted; and he hated Cincinnati. He had never done a day's work. He liked to drive around down in Kentucky and try to pick up girls, but he was a poor man's son. The girls were not usually impreseed by his wobbly old Ford. In basic training his unmade bed cost the whole platoon a weekend pass at

Saturday inspection, so the platoon gave him a bit of a hazing. He wasn't hurt. But the next day he went AWOL.

He got as far as the railroad station. He spent the rest of the eight-week training cycle cleaning latrines after duty hours, and our platoon had the dirtiest latrines on the post.

By the time the Sirians landed three years later Postal should have been out of the Army, except that he never stopped trying. He fought the Army with everything he had. A warrant officer called him a Dutch mudheel — well, something like that — and Pinky hit him. That was three months in the guardhouse with forfeiture of pay. A mess sergeant got somehow in the way of a toppling vat of boiling dried limas after a few words with Pinky, who had been on KP. The court-martial called it deliberate assault with intent to maim. While he was awaiting trial for that he got out of the stockade and went AWOL again, and . . . add it up yourself; he had enough bad time to keep him in as long as they wanted him; and he was still trying to make it up when the Sirians blew their bubble around Wilmington.

Pinky couldn't have cared less.

They weren't shooting at him, were they? So what difference did it make to Pinky? What was there to choose between a hopelessly inimical government of human beings, whose rules were beyond him, and a hopelessly alien government of green-chitoned bugs, whose rules were never explained?

The difference was too small for Pinky to bother with. Pinky was as much an alien as the Sirians, in his unattractive, angle-shooting way.

But the Army still thought of him as a soldier, after all. In the massive redeployment that tried to put an armed perimeter around the bubble, Pinky found himself put to work. He hated that most of all.

We were throwing everything we had at the Sirians. The troops in Delaware and Maryland lived in lead suits for a month because we tried to break in with hydrogen bombs. All we accomplished was to kill off every green thing and wild animal for forty miles south of Wilmington. The bubble didn't even bend, and the troops got plenty of chance to become pretty foul inside those suits. I remember it very well; I was one of them.

So was Pinky but, heavens knows how, he managed to get sent north. He was supposed to be driving a truck again in the evacuation of Philadelphia. The place he was evacuating was Bryn Mawr, and probably he mistook

the girls' panic for another kind of excitement. They screamed to the colonel. Pinky wound up in a punishment battalion once more, and there he met the missionary from inside the bubble, an exile from Eden.

"GIVE IT to me straight, Rocco. What's it like in the bubble?"

"Go to hell."

"Come on, Rocco! Look, you don't like working in the boiler room, do you? Maybe I know how we can cut out of here."

"Shut up, Postal. The sergeant's looking at us."

Vindictively Pinky turned the steam valve a moment before Rocco was ready for it. The high-temperature jet barely missed boiling his fingers.

"What the hell did you do that for? Get off my back, Postal!"

"Come on. What's it like?"

"Shut up, you two! Drag tail!"

Pinky sulked. The job of delousing refugee clothing took two men, one to lift the hundred-pound bundles in and out of the steam boiler, one to turn the valve. Pinky was twice the size of the little ex-prisoner of the Sirians, but it was Pinky who sat at ease with one gloved hand on the valve.

"Don't you want to get out of here?"

"Look, Postal. They won't take me back. Now leave me alone, will you?"

". . . Well, what's it like? Do they feed you?"

"Sure."

"Work you hard?"

The little man said dreamily, "There's a stud farm down in Delaware. Fifteen hundred women, they say. Only a couple dozen men. For breeding, see?"

"Breeding? You mean —"

"They're growing slaves, I guess. Well, I was working on a farm and they closed that up. I got friendly with the overseer and he put me in for the breeding farm. Plenty of food. Nothing else to do. I —"

"I'm warnin' you two! For the last time."

But then, after the last smelly, flea-ridden bale had come out of the sterilizer, Pinky had a chance for one more word with the missionary. Why couldn't he go back?

"Postal, I don't want to talk about it. They threw me out. I was all set, passed the overseers, right up to one of the bugs. He — He said I was too little. They don't want anybody under six feet tall."

Back in the barracks, Pinky slipped out of his dirty GI shoes and painstakingly marked his height off on the wall. The tape measure showed that nothing had changed. He was exactly six feet, one and a quarter inches tall.

II

ALTOGETHER there were six Sirian ships that landed on the Earth — two in Russia, one in the United States, one in Canada, one in India and, the first one of all, one in New South Wales. The first we heard of them was when the Russian radio satellite began a frantic emergency message in clear, and then went dead before it finished. Then all the other space stations went dead.

Then the ship came down on Australia and, pop, up went the pale green bubble.

The bubbles were like a wall, except more flexible and beautifully controlled. The rule was: What the Sirians wanted to pass could pass; everything else could not.

Time passed; the other ships landed; there were more bubbles.

Then the bubbles grew bubbles. They clustered in groups, expanding. Sometimes the new bubbles were big, sometimes small. Sometimes a couple of months would go by without much expansion, sometimes half a dozen little buds would pop up in a week.

No metallic object could get through them at all after the first week. Evidently the Sirians had decided that was their simplest defense.

We tried non-metallic attacks, of course. We drifted poison gas and bacteria through them easily enough. But nothing happened as far as we could see . . . as far as we could see was, after all, only the outermost skin of the bubble.

A man could walk through — or most of the time he could — without feeling a thing, as long as he had taken off his wrist watch and laid down his gun. Not always. I was in Camden when the 5th Mountain Division sent in an attack with wooden spears and pottery grenades. Fifty men got through but the fifty-first bounced back, knocked unconscious, as though he'd hit a stone wall. I don't know what happened to the fifty men who got through. The only thing I'm pretty sure of is that they didn't much worry the bugs.

Some people did come back. The Sirians threw them out, like Pinky's missionary, Rocco. Probably the Sirians had chosen types who would have little of importance to tell, except how much they liked living under the Sirians. That's what they told, every one of them.

They were a problem to the Army. Most of them were soldiers, as it happened. The Army didn't much like the idea of sending them back to their units, whose morale was already hanging low, so they put the missionaries in special battalions, along with the

goof-offs and low-grade criminals, like Pinky Postal.

Pinky heard the message of the missionaries loud and clear. He didn't like the punishment battalion at all.

He got his chance when he was handing out tetanus shots for a line of children and a jeep skidded in the slush, side-swiping the medics' personnel carrier. The kids scattered like screaming geese. By the time the medic corporal got his detail rounded up again he had only five men instead of six.

Pinky was in the back of a truck, heading south along the old Turnpike. Snow was driving down on him, but he was very happy.

He had outsmarted the Army. They would look for him, but they would look North. It is always easy to desert in the direction of the enemy in wartime; the traffic is all the other way.

He walked the last mile to the edge of the bubble, looming over him in the darkness like a green glass cliff. The snow was easing off and it was almost daylight as he stepped through.

THE Sirians never intended to destroy the Earth, only to own it. Pinky's missionary was quite right. Almost at once they began breeding slaves.

It was exactly the sort of job that Pinky would seek. He was not a bookish man, but he was immensely erudite on prurience. He knew very well what a breeding farm was like. There were the dozens of helpless, tamable does; and there was the big stud stallion, himself. What would be closer to the heart of any red-blooded boy? He made his way there, finally, very much elated. There were fifteen others in the shipment, all tall, heavy, muscular men, all extremely cheerful. They rode in the back of an old Ford pickup truck, in warm sunshine. They didn't mind that it had a purplish tinge (green, Pinky would have thought, if he had thought about it at all; but the bubble reflected the green bands of the spectrum and what came through left the sun looking like a violet spotlight in the sky.) There were lavender clouds in a mauve sky, and all around them the bugs were busy with their reconstruction. Snow-white machines on wire-mesh treads were neatly paving over the rubble that had been a small Maryland town. "Bring on the girls," bellowed Pinky, waving a bottle in one hand. It was only California sherry, but it was all he'd been able to find in the abandoned supermarket where they'd spent the night.

"Man!" cried one of the other eager breeders. "Women!" Pinky

dropped the bottle in his excitement, staring.

They were women, all right. They were flat on their backs on a grassy meadow, their legs in the air, pumping invisible bicycle pedals under the direction of a husky blonde girl. "*Vun*, two. *T'ree*, four! *Vun*, two. *T'ree*, four! All right, ladies. Now some bending and stretching, hurry up, *yoomp!*" As the breeding stock clambered to its legs, Pinky observed that they had in fact already been bred, some months before. It was only mildly disappointing. Where these were, there were bound to be others.

The truck slowed and stopped, and Pinky saw his first Sirian.

The creature was twelve feet high but flimsily constructed. It had a green carapace like a June bug's, jointed in the center. It was not paying any attention to the snorting volunteer stallions. It stood on four hind legs, holding in its front pair of legs an instrument like a theodolite. (It had two smaller pairs of legs clasped across its olive-colored belly plate.)

"Out! Everybody out!" bawled a man in a green brassard, circling respectfully around the Sirian toward the truck. "Nip along, you!"

Pinky was first off, and first to reach the man in the green brassard. He had at that time been in the bubble for less than thirty-six hours, but he knew who to butter up. Green brassards were overseers. They were the human straw-bosses for the Sirians. "Excuse me, sir. Say. I happened to get some good cigars last night, and I wondered if you . . . ?"

THE Sirians were not hard masters, but they were firm. They knew what they wanted in the way of a slave population — strength, size, stupidity — and it was only a detail that they found it necessary to kill some of those who gave them trouble. The trouble did not have to arise from viciousness. As Pinky Postal was entrenching himself with the man in the green brassard, one of the other candidate breeders made the mistake of gawking too close to the Sirian, who moved, which startled the captive, who brushed against the horny edge of green chiton at the Sirian's tail. It was like green fire. The man did not even make a sound. Washed in a green blaze of light, he froze, straightened and fell dead.

At about that time the first dead Sirian fell into our hands — partly because of Lt. Lauchheimer and myself — and we had a chance to discover what the green fire was. Not that it helped us. It was a natural defense, like the shock of an electric eel; electromagnetic, at neural frequencies, it

paralyzed life. Nothing else. It would not set off a match or stir a cobweb, but it would kill.

Pinky did not know this, but he knew what he had already known, that the Sirians were deadly. Shaken, he waited for the physical examination.

The overseer was not kind to Pinky because of the gift of cigars. He knew that kindness was not involved; it was a simple bribe. But as he shared Pinky's code he repaid the bribe. He did not volunteer information, but he answered questions. Would all of them be kept for breeding stock? "God, no. Six jobs want to be filled, the rest of you go back." Was there any special trick to passing the examination? The overseer jerked his thumb at a door labeled: *Dr. Lessard.* "Up to the doc." And was it really what they said, inside, all girls and fun? The overseer laughed and walked away. There had only been two cigars.

The doctor had overheard part of the conversation. He was human, a dark little man with a dark little mustache. "I give you one piece of advice," he said grimly, "stay away from Billings. What? Billings—him; the man you were talking to. He's been working for the bugs since they landed in Australia."

Pinky said, "But aren't you working for them?" The doctor did not answer, unless the extra, unnecessary twist of the blood-sampling needle was an answer. There were a lot like the doctor in the bubbles — policemen, doctors, a few elected officials of towns, who saw only one duty and that was to continue at their jobs. They worked for the bugs, but not as Billings did.

Twenty minutes later the doctor had completed his blood tests. "Do I pass?" Pinky demanded eagerly. "You know, do I get to breed?"

The doctor looked at him thoughtfully.

Abruptly he laughed. He erased a little mark on the paper and substituted another. "I think you do," he said.

Pinky didn't understand the doctor's laughter for several hours.

Then the five of the lot who had been selected were led into a long, narrow, white room with a bank of refrigerators against one wall and a remarkable quantity of test-tubes, flasks, glass tubing and other chemical-looking instruments on benches against the other. The five potent studs stared at each other, until a sour-faced human male, wearing a laboratory smock, came reluctantly in to start them on their duties.

There was a storm of questions; the man said, "Oh, shut up, all of you. I *hate* this job."

MEANWHILE there was a war on, and we were losing it.

I don't know all the battles that were fought, I only know we didn't win them. I saw the atomic cannon on Cape Cod, I heard about the *George Washington's* attempt to penetrate the Atlantic Coast bubble, which resulted in its flooding and sinking in a hundred fathoms of water. We heard that the Russians had managed to penetrate with a plywood missile, built with a ceramic skin and guided by a human kamikaze volunteer. There was a latrine rumor that the Canadians got through with a whole squadron of gliders. But whatever results were achieved were invisible from outside the bubbles.

The one small victory that went to the human race came through Lt. Lauchheimer and myself. We buried ourselves in a little cave off a railroad tunnel, just outside Worcester, Massachusetts. We were there four weeks before the Sirians got around to expanding the bubble to include us. They finally did; and the gamble paid off.

We were inside the bubble with a live bomb.

According to Intelligence, its information derived from correlating the accounts of returned missionaries, our target was a Sirian scout vessel in the mathematical center of the sphere; blow that

up, and the bubble would burst. We did. It did. We traveled at night and never saw a Sirian. At night the bubble was a wet-looking, faintly luminous lavender shroud. Lauchheimer had a portable electronic gizmo which triangulated the center for us. We found the center, located the ship, fused the bomb, had an hour to get away, did . . . and saw, in the first rays of the morning sun, a great mushrooming cloud that rose into a blue, bubble-free sky.

Paratroopers captured four live Sirians; eight others were found dead from the blast.

That was what gave Lauchheimer and me our Congressional Medals.

The hostages didn't stay with us very long. They were brought to Washington too, for study. Ten minutes after we got our Medals — flicker, whine — there was a sudden surge of color and a distant sound; the sun outside the White House window went purple and we were all caught.

Some months after that I found myself sharing a kennel with Pinky Postal.

III

I HAD NOT expected to see him there, though I suppose I could have guessed it. I knew more than he, though. I knew that the Sirians' idea of breeding was by no means the joyous sport that had inspired troubadors and axe-killings for thousands of years. After all, we use artificial insemination on our domestic animals, why should the Sirians be less efficient?

I knew enough, in fact, to have tried to avoid the breeding farm, for more reasons than one. Destiny makes games of our intentions; I was selected out of a thousand casual laborers in the work camp near Bethesda, and trucked to the farm overnight.

Pinky was thin, pale, trembling. He recognized me at once. "Help me, Harry! I got to get out of this place."

I looked around the place. It had been the Bethesda Naval Hospital at one time, with changes made by the bugs. It was now one enormous lying-in home, with beds for eighteen hundred women, dormitories for thousands more in the grounds around, and a special small detention home for we fortunate donors. "You got what you wanted, didn't you?" I said.

Pinky had lost forty pounds, and there was no more flesh on his arms than on a spider crab's, but he surprised me. Without a word he jumped at my throat.

I beat him off with difficulty. "All right! It was a joke."

He slumped in a heap, whining, "Oh, Harry! I been here fourteen

months and one of the bug boys tells me I have a hundred and twenty-three kids already, and more on the way, and — And, I swear, the closest I've been to a woman is looking at them out the window. You know what? They've got some of my — They've got samples, you know, in the deep freeze. They could kill me tomorrow and I'd go right on having kids for maybe twenty years. Harry! I didn't know it would be like this at all."

I left him and looked out the window. There was an exercise yard, a mess hall, a community shower — and a wall. Donors were not allowed outside of it.

I said, "You ought to feel honored. There are only ten of these stud farms in the world."

"And they're all the same — all this artificial insemination?"

"All exactly the same, Pinky. I'm sorry." That was a lie, of course — about being sorry; why would anyone waste compassion on Pinky Postal? But I was committed to telling lies. I could not trust him with the truth.

"Maybe it will work out all right," I said vaguely, reassuring not him but myself.

It had to. Some*thing* had to. Of the twenty-five of us who were abruptly sworn in as intelligence officers when the bubble closed in over Washington — the last real hope of any organized effort against the bugs — I was pretty sure that I was the only survivor.

THE only hope of accomplishing anything against the Sirians lay in the possibility of destroying their central high command which was not a Sirian, or at any rate not an organic Sirian, but a machine. A computer. It did not rue them, but it detailed their plans.

There was a chance, said the general who swore us in, that if we destroyed the computer they would be confused and weakened, then we might get at them with conventional arms.

I followed Pinky's example and made friends with the man in the green brassard, Billings. I had no cigars. "I want to help you," I told him.

"My oath." He sat down with contempt and lit a cigarette with loathing. "You chaps get queerer every day."

I wheedled, "You never know, Billings. They might put you on stud any day."

"Too true." But it had shaken him. "And what can you do to stop them?"

I built a dream castle for him. "I have something they want, Billings. I can tell you about something the bugs will want to know."

Scornfully: "Hell! There isn't anything they want to know. They've a shootin' big machine

that tells them everything they need."

"But the machine only knows what it's told. There's something the bugs have never known to tell it."

He looked impresed for a moment. "Dinkum? But —" Then he shook his head. Casually he flicked ashes on my shoe. "I know what you're up to. You fellows are always coming to me with crook stories about how this is going to help me and that's going to save my life. It's no good. You can't fool me, cobber. And if you could, I can't fool *them*."

I said persuasively, "Let me try, won't you? It's a matter of human nature."

"What is?"

"What information they've given the computer. You were caught in the first landing, weren't you? Don't you remember what happened? They took a hundred men and women and subjected them to tests; the results made up a profile of human psychology for their computer." He nodded, watching me. "But they didn't have a Pinky Postal."

BILLINGS said positively, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

But gradually I worked him over. I had to. Pinky was my ticket to the Sirian central headquarters. What I could accomplish there I did not know, but I knew that nothing at all could be accomplished on the stud farm. Besides, the argument was plausible — if not to Billings, then it would be to a Sirian. For what I had said was true. Their data was biased in favor of decent human beings, for their first captives were those who stood and fought. "Sure you know what you're talking about, pal?"

"I'm sure."

"You're not just sore because they wouldn't let you in with the sheilas?"

"I'm looking for a way out of here, Billings. That's all. Think it over. You'll see I'm right. They'll reward you."

He looked at me with contemptuous eyes. "You don't know much about them, do you? But probably they won't *hurt* me. Worth a try, no doubt. . . ." He said thoughtfully: "They'll be wild as cut snakes if this isn't right. And I'll be wild at you." But he finally gave in.

Pinky was pathetic in his gratitude. I was his only friend. He would never forget me; and, say, come to think of it, I was getting a break out of this too, wasn't I? How about giving him first pick of the food, for instance, or would I rather that he told the Sirians he couldn't react properly to their tests with me along?

He was reacting exactly prop-

erly, of course. But the trouble was the Sirians had their own ideas. Billings brought us down to the big barn where the only Sirian for miles around sometimes stopped by to check performance at the stud farm and, after waiting for some hours, the Sirian appeared. Billings, trembling, tried to explain what it was I had said. The Sirian grasped the idea very quickly; my promise was kept; the Sirian took the bait. He said something into a small spherical contraption he wore dangling from one middle leg and in a moment there was a Sirian plane, and Pinky and Billings were herded into it.

Just them. Not me.

For me it was back to the stud farm. Pinky had been my ticket to the headquarters and the ticket had just been punched.

THE main Sirian headquarters on North America was in Maryland, on the site of what had once been the Bowie race track. Off to the south lay the horse barns. Where the grandstand and track itself had been, now tracelessly slagged over, stood the Sirian construction that they had flung up around their ship.

The building looked like a castle, worked like a palace. A palace is more than a home; it is workshop and office, an administrative center; so was this. But it did have a resemblance to a medieval castle, at least from a great enough distance in the air. There were things like towers and things like battlements. Closer up the resemblance was gone. The lobed wall that surrounded it was not for defense, as in a castle; it was the Sirian equivalent of a garage, where their ground and air vehicles were kept. The towers were viewless, except at the very top, where sweeping silvery needles performed a function like radar's.

Pinky and the Aussie came to it with suspicion and delight. Anything was better than the stud farm.

Or *almost* anything. But undeniably this was queer. They were sent to a hexagonal green-on-green room, small, bedless. Billings spat on the floor when he saw it. But even that satisfaction was denied him. The floor shimmered, the saliva collected in quicksilvery beads and trembled toward an almost invisible slit, where it vanished. Pinky said, "You don't like the accommodations?"

"It ain't Darling Point," said Billings. "You know what I wish? I wish that pal of yours was here. I've a notion of something I want to say to him."

But Billings had only been a strawboss at the stud farm, Pinky had actually been one of the

studs. "It's not so bad," he said with cheerful confidence, "and anyway we'll make out. Or I will." He hesitated and said: "You won't believe this, but I wish there were some women here."

The Sirians wasted no time. Considering the limitations placed on their researches by the lack of unimpeded communication (no human ever learned the Sirian speech, and they could manage human tongues only through a sort of vodor), they were thorough and complete. None of it made much sense to Pinky, of course. All he knew was that he and Billings were bored, annoyed and persecuted for twelve hours at a time with endless nibbling nuisances. Word associations, reflex tests, interpretive depth studies much like a Rorschach — the works. "There's not much in being a guinea pig," sighed Billings, exhausted and angry.

"Would you rather be a stud?" asked Pinky, very cheerfully. He was quite happy. He had discovered an angle to shoot.

IV

THE heart of the Sirian headquarters was a room thirty feet tall, a hundred feet square, lighted with a sourceless green glow and inhabited at all times by several dozen of the bugs.

Pinky had seen the room from a gallery above it. The results of his tests and Billing's were fed into receptors in a little room just off the great one. It was there, banked like a horseshoe along three walls, that the central computer whispered and glowed.

The Sirians did not trouble with electricity in its grosser forms. The computers operated on what seemed to be neural impulses, projecting their data on soft green-ivory breast-shaped bosses in letters of light. There is very much about those computers which is mysterious, but some things are sure: For one, at least a hundred problems could be worked and answered simultaneously, so that the feat of juggling Pinky's personality quirks into the standard human profile could go on whenever convenient to the bugs, without interrupting the calculation of Hohmann trajectories for the remainder of their fleet (then approaching Orbit Pluto), the logistics of their Canadian enterprise, the setting of breeding quotas and the computation of field strengths for each bubble in their chain.

Not all of the answers were expressed numerically; some were translated directly into action in their factories; some were expressed visually. In the center of the room, for instance, was what (although Pinky could not have recognized it) was a situation

map. The chart was of North America, but as the human convention of portraying bodies of water as featureless plains was not followed by the Sirians, Pinky could make of it nothing but a scramble of topography, as meaningless to him as the chart of the back side of the Moon.

If Pinky had had the wit to understand what he saw even he might have been shocked. The circles of Sirian bubbles were etched in fire. They had grown — *how* they had grown! All the Eastern seaboard was a string of fat Sirian beads now, and a beaded limb swung west as far as the featureless plain of Ohio. The last quick sproutings of bubbles had taken in and neutralized four Army Corps areas, eight SAC bases, the manufacturing centers of most of the eastern half of the continent and every center of population of importance north of Savannah and east of the Great Lakes. There was very little left.

Pinky Postal saw all that without comprehending. Or caring.

What he comprehended very clearly was that in the hours when he was not under scrutiny he was allowed to do as he liked.

The Sirians were not careless, they were merely confident. They had every reason to be. The few hundred humans at liberty within the headquarters had no weapons. All of them combined were no match for a single bug, who could effortlessly destroy them one after another at will. There was little prospect of effective sabotage in the areas available to the captives. Most rooms were featureless dormitories, halls, exercise areas, yards. The workshops and armories were closed to humans. The few chambers which had any strategic importance — principally the computer room — were never left untended.

Pinky restlessly prowled the headquarters and the abandoned human buildings surrounding it. He found treasures — in the old jockey's quarters, a wicker basket of champagne; in the Steward's office, a tin box full of money.

He waved the hundred-dollar bills in Billing's face, but the Aussie only snarled, "What's the use of *that?*"

"Oh, cheer up," said Pinky dispassionately. "What's the use of anything? But money's always good. You'll see."

"I'll see we'll spend the rest of our lives whingeing about here," groaned Billings. He had become very morose. He almost stopped eating and, as days passed, stopped speaking. In the tests he failed to cooperate.

Not Pinky. Pinky was a model of cooperation. He had learned that the way to get along with the bugs was to do what they wanted, and he was not surprised when

one night as the tests were concluded Billings was detained. Pinky walked slowly toward their room, and did not even look back when from behind him he caught a flash of silent green light and heard a sharp, panicky sound from Billings, then silence. Too bad. But Pinky had his plans.

BY THEN I was in the hills around Frederick, Maryland, with the freedom forces.

Well, we called ourselves that, for morale mostly; but actually my work lay mostly in nurse-maiding chitinous young Waldo, our ace of trumps.

I had not escaped from the breeding farm, I had been liberated. A fire and noise woke us donors one night; we saw human figures dancing around the flame of burning buildings, and in the confusion the raiders broke into our close-penned corral and led us away. It was none too soon for me, and I was not only grateful, I was astonished. For these were free men and women living under the bubbles!

It was inconceivable, but there they were.

Undoubtedly the Sirians could have hunted us down, but they didn't bother. Probably there were too many humans loose under their screens, like silverfish in an old house. They had ways of locating weapons as long as there was a metallic component like the barrel of a gun or shaft of a knife — magnetic or electronic detectors, no doubt — but while we kept free of metal they never troubled us.

So our weapon was the torch.

We killed bugs, too. We fried a dozen one night in firing a stand of yellow pine where they were —I don't know; perhaps camping. We clubbed a few, killed some from a distance with bow and arrow. Strike and run, we must have destroyed fifty of them in six months. That was not a small number. It was more than one per cent of all the Sirians on Earth.

It was relatively easy for us to move about because the expanding bubbles had swept so much of the human race ahead of them. The towns were deserted. The bug centers were easy to avoid. All of North America was now under the green umbrella; a mauve sun sailed over all of Europe and most of Asia. We learned, through such sparse communications facilities as were left to us, that Africa and South America were largely bug-free. Evidently the warmer parts of the Earth were not attractive to the Sirians. They were now a sort of game preserve, nearly all that survived of humanity packed into those two continents, almost two billion people crowded into

the malarial Amazon basin and the hot savannahs of the Congo.

So we crept about under their feet and stung them when we could. We became ingenious in setting snares. With the high-octane gasoline from an abandoned storage tank we washed one of their landing strips one night, and set it ablaze just as one of their gull-winged flyers came in. The intention was to incinerate them all, and then for us to vanish tracelessly; but the Sirian pilot saw danger at the last moment and almost soared free. The flames caught him, and the ship pinwheeled into the side of a hill. And that was very fortunate for us, because that was how we captured Waldo.

WALDO was a small, dark-green creature the size of a puppy, newly hatched and not very dangerous.

He was our first living Sirian captive. We dared take time to poke about in the wreck of the plane, knowing that there would be investigation, and we found that only two of its crew were adult Sirians; the others were eggs or hatchlings. The crash had killed them handsomely. All but one. John Gaffney found the one; rummaging through the dark he suddenly screamed: "The little louse! He bit me!" But it wasn't a bite, it was a neural shock. It was Waldo. He was alive. As he was only a newborn, his shock was painful but not deadly.

We roped him and dragged him out onto the side of the hill. In the light of a quarter million burning gallons of gasoline, pinned on his back with ten legs waving, he did not seem dangerous, only comic. "Kill him," said Gaffney, rubbing his leg.

"No." I had a better idea. "They'll never miss him. Why don't we keep him? He can be — We can use him for —"

"What?" demanded Gaffney. "No, kill him!" But I had my way finally. We had no plan for a captive Sirian, because it had never occurred to us we might catch one. But surely something would turn up!

So we swung him in a hammock and lashed him tight, and we got out of there minutes before the Sirian rescue parties were circling the sea of flame.

It was months before we had any idea of what to do with him. As I had insisted on kidnapping him, he was given me to raise. This was not pleasant. He was a painful pet, and difficult to handle.

I mention only the difficulty of feeding him. Infant Sirians were nurtured on a sort of nectar, probably once secreted by Sirian adults but now, in their dwellings, synthesized in quantity. We had

none. We tried everything. Honey was good but hard to come by. Molasses made him drunk. Simple sugar solution he refused to touch. We finally settled on maple syrup with, after experimenting, a few drops of whiskey.

On this he thrived. I determined to try to teach him English.

I could not hope that he would ever speak it, but neither can a dog. He was much brighter than a dog. "Walk," "sit," "come" — he learned those before he was a month old. He showed that he could learn much more.

In the winter evenings he would cuddle in my lap and we would look at the pictures in magazines together, I pointing out "car" and "house" and "washing machine" and Waldo reaching out with a jointed, taloned leg to scratch at the picture on the page. He made a faint humming sound, and his hardening chiton was rather warm. I grew almost fond of him, he was so eager to learn. Yet I was kept from oversentimentality by the potent sting he carried with him always. He would fall asleep in my lap. Just as a human child will restlessly turn over a time or two before drifting off, so Waldo would emit one sleepy shock before the black, hard eyes unfocused and he went into the catalepsy that was their sleep.

As he grew larger (and he grew astonishingly fast), those light love-pats in good night became more and more agonizing. Twice I was knocked unconscious.

We tried insulation. We wrapped him in rubber sheets, shrouded him in layer on layer of quilts. We tried keeping him off my lap, merely close by on a couch. Nothing worked. Always he drowsily reached out with one leg or an eyestalk or the corner of his backplate, just before he drifted off. And I leaped half out of my skin.

ON CHRISTMAS day of the second year of the Sirian conquest, Gaffney brought us a new recruit.

I was not present when she arrived — I was out exercising Waldo, under the shelter of an overgrown old apple orchard — and I missed the questioning. By the time I got back to our camp she was asleep, worn out, but Gaffney was bubbling with news.

"She was actually in their headquarters! She drew us a plan of the whole thing, Harry—look!" It was crude, but if the girl was reliable it was all the information we had hoped for. We located the computer room, the Sirian sleeping quarters, the defensive installations, the shops, the laboratories. Slave quarters ringed one floor. Surveillance of half a continent

was carried on in an observatory near the top. "And look here," said Gaffney in excitement, "see this line? The inner part of the headquarters is almost independent of the rest. Double walls, limited access, construction heavier, stronger inside. What does that suggest?" I opened my mouth. "A ship!" he cried, not giving me a chance, "the central part of the building is a ship!"

More than that, the girl had told him that that ship housed all the brains of the Sirian expedition. They had but one computer; it had landed with the first touchdown on Australia, but had been moved to the United States. If we could destroy that ship. . . .

"But that's the part that worries me," admitted Gaffney, downcast. "How do we get in? They let her wander about pretty much as she wanted, see — all the humans do. Fact, the humans are pretty much independent, long as they do what the bugs want. Even have their own, well, boss, a fellow who — Never mind. What I started out to say, the bugs can afford to let the humans roam around, because the corridors are booby-trapped. It's something like Waldo's shock. There are places where this girl couldn't go, because she would die, unless a Sirian was with her. It didn't bother Sirians."

We puzzled that over for a while. Waldo, beside me, rested one talon gently in my hand — he was very well behaved and quite trustworthy except, as I said, just as he was drifting off to sleep. He loomed over us (being now more than nine feet tall), staring at the scribbled map with polite curiosity.

I turned and stared at him abruptly. "Waldo! *He* could help us!" Quickly I explained. If Sirians could pass the booby-traps, why, we had our own Sirian!

I said, "We'll have to ask the girl. Did they carry anything special? But she would have said so, and I think not. I think probably their own neural shock emanations screened off the radiations from the booby traps, and if that's the case —"

"Don't guess," said Gaffney. "We've woke her up with all our noise. Here she comes now."

And there was the girl, coming drowsily into the room. She glanced toward me, stopped stark, her hand flew to her mouth, she screamed.

I threw a look at Waldo beside me.

"Oh, you saw him? Don't worry about him, young lady! He's perfectly tame. But no doubt he reminded you of the horrors you suffered while the captive of the Sirians. . . ."

She simmered down slowly, shaking her head. "No — no. I'm

sorry to be such a fool. It isn't the *bug* I was worried about. It's just that seeing you standing there that way, so close to him — well. You scared me half to death. For a minute," she said with apologetic embarrassment, "for a minute I thought you were the boss. Mr. Postal."

V

EARTH had now been conquered in all of its important parts. We knew that the great colonizing fleet that would follow the first wave had long been orbiting the sun, reducing its velocity, knocking off miles-per-second to match speed with the Earth and to land.

What we did not know was how tedious life had become for the conquerors.

Pinky Postal, however, had them right under his eye. He saw how little there was for them to do. These were soldiers, not intellectuals, not artists, not even home-builders; their work was to fight, and they were fought out. They had won.

Two days before Billings was killed, Pinky caught a glimpse of what might be. He found five quarts of champagne and got quite drunk. In his intoxication he blundered where he knew he should not go — into Sirian quarters — and it was only the providence of drunks that kept him from a booby trap, but somehow he found himself in a small room where something heaved under a tarpaulin.

It was a queer sight, and he kicked it.

The tarpaulin flung free. There was a high-pitched Sirian chirp, and three great insect bodies bounded up from the floor, where they had been huddled. Gravely, drunkenly, Pinky realized that he was about to die. He had caught them at something, heaven knew what. And they would surely smite him low.

As he was drunk, he merely stood there, weaving slightly, breathing calm alcoholic defiance at the Sirian who bent dangerously toward him.

— But he did not die.

He did not die, and the next morning, through the pounding haze of his hangover, he wondered why. There were blanks in his recollection. But he remembered standing there, and he remembered that the killing bolt from the Sirian had never come.

He puzzled over it for a whole day.

Then, that evening, a Sirian came toward him and bent low.

Pinky was not drunk this time, and he was terrified. He tried to run, fell, squirmed and lay flat on his back while the great flat Junebug face swooped down at him.

Again the bolt did not strike.

The face hung there, for seconds and then for minutes. And by and by Pinky saw that the Sirian was twitching. It twitched and stirred. Then it definitely staggered. It stumbled, caught itself, almost fell athwart him, caught itself again. The faint cricket-chirp sounded, ragged and . . . and . . . *drunken.*

Drunken!

And Pinky, sleepless that night, staring at the black ceiling of his green-on-green cubicle, realized that he had found what he wanted.

He became a pusher. Of himself.

OF course the Sirians had their vices. What creature does not?

Carbon dioxide was their liquor. Their respiratory systems being what they were, it was only infrequently that their own waste gases reached their intake orifices; but the concentrated breath of a mammal could send them reeling; a few minutes inhaling a man's direct breath would stiffen them in a giggling paralysis.

But on their planet of Sirius, they had no mammals.

They did what they could with what they had to work with. Their most secret vice was bundling — two (or, rarely and most despicably, three or more) of the Sirians furtively huddled under an airtight sheet, exuding CO_2 and intoxicating one another. It was a fearful vice. It was also a dangerous one. It could not be practiced openly. And when done in secret there was always the risk that the drunks would pass out and ultimately die of hyperintoxication.

They were not merely drunks, they were alcoholics, a racial characteristic; for once they had tasted the happy-gas exuded by gross mammalian chemistry they were addicts. Pinky collected his first addict by chance, but he was courageous enough and thoughtful enough to make more. It took courage. It took exposing himself to a chance bolt from a new contact, but once the first few moments were past, so was the danger. A new habit had been formed; the pusher had hooked a new customer. It was the sort of industrious empire-building to which Pinky was best fitted, for he was perceptive to all weaknesses of the flesh — even chitinous flesh hatched under alien, blue-white stars.

Pinky was supply enough for whole roomfuls of Sirians, such clouds of intoxicant wafted from him. As days and weeks passed, more and more the work of the Sirian headquarters came to revolve around him. The business of occupying Earth tended itself

well enough. The quasi-radars kept their vigil and marked their targets, the computers never stopped monitoring the approach of the fleet and correcting its course. They gave him a vodor, so that he could talk to them direct; he talked in commands. They obeyed his commands, for he was intelligent enough to bait them. He sent them on scrounging expeditions to find choice food — a good bargain for them for, as with Earthly topers, it was not the simple chemical paralysis that pleased them best but the subtle bouquet and tang of contaminants. What bliss in the reek of green onions on his breath! What tingling thrill in the stale scent of tobacco! They sent parties rummaging through the nearby abandoned towns, for canned cheese and garlic, for spearmint chewing gum and cinnamon drops.

Food and drink supplied, he next demanded control over the other humans in the Sirian headquarters. This too they gave him — why not? It was Pinky, after all, who knew how to brew those rare blends of flavor that made all the difference. If Pinky chose to exercise the human crew in ways of his own, he never failed to share their breath with his employers. For tbis reason the other humans grew to hate, fear and despise him, but they feared the Sirians even more. Pinky was perfectly happy for the first time in his life. He was not a king, he was more.

The Sirians ruled the world. And, in all but name, he ruled the Sirians.

It was into this earthly paradise of Pinky's that we snakes wriggled, bringing destruction.

THE rest is history: How, emboldened by the increasing laxity of the Sirians, we attacked their headquarters; how Waldo, a happy child with no consciousness that he was betraying his race, led us through the trapped corridors into the Sirian fortress; how we were found out by that most Sirian of tyrants, Pinky Postal. For it was he who spotted us. He and his humans had ministered to the whole headquarters detachment, leaving them in a happy stupor, when the alarm bells rang, and though Pinky roused one of the bugs enough to locate us, the creature was far too tipsy to do anything about it.

It was the end of the world for Pinky Postal. His paradise was over.

He confronted us at the entrance passage, wild with fear and hate.

"Harry!" he bawled, screeching with rage. "You louse! You rat! You human!"

"Shut up," said I, and in truth

I paid him little attention. I was wondering where the Sirians were. We didn't then know that they were all dead drunk, or almost all; we thought they might come ravening down among us with murderous shocks blazing left and right. Pinky danced before us, almost weeping; but when we deployed left and right, as we had rehearsed it so many times, he bolted away and, crash, a steel door slammed behind him.

We invested the outer shell of the Sirian structure with no trouble at all. It was all too easy, in fact. It turned out to be costly. Fifteen of us died in the Sirian takeoff.

Yes, the Sirian takeoff—which so many have wondered at — now the truth can be told. Two of Pinky Postal's retinue at the last, when they saw what was happening, fled with only seconds to spare back to the Earth Pinky was spurning. They told us how Pinky, raving, strove to arouse the bugs to destroy us; failing, tried to get them to lock us out; failing even in that, managed at the last only to sober one Sirian just enough to pull the master switches that blasted their ship loose from its shell, sending it screaming up, out and away, Sirians, computer, Pinky and all.

Fifteen of our raiding party died in its rocket-flames. It was a cheap price, of course.

But how are we to explain to history that the Sirian conquest of humanity was defeated not by our strength but by our vices?

AND when it comes to that, what can I say to the President?

He is very sunburned and healthy looking from his summer on the Orinoco. He is a titan at the tasks of reconstruction. Life is almost normal again; and he assures me that, with what we have learned from the works the Sirians left behind, we shall have no trouble in fighting off their invasion if they dared to attempt it again. They left a hundred bubble generators, and now we know how to pierce any bubble. We have already mopped up their survivors. Young Waldo is busy every day, trying to learn to talk to his own kind and tell them that they have lost a war.

Naturally, the President wants to reward the man who made all this possible — at, says the President with sorrow and pride, the cost of his own dear life.

I wish I could stop it, but I don't know how. I don't mind, really, that mine should not be the last Congressional Medal of Honor after all.

But I resent it most keenly that the next should go in absentia to Pinky Postal!

— FREDERIK POHL