Remould
Robert Presslie
Trek for survival

Guest Editor
Edward Mackin

David Rome
JOGI
A trespasser

A Nova Publication
17th Year of Publication
Edward Mackin

Guest Editor

Liverpool, Lancashire

Readers may think that it is a little presumptuous for an author who has never had a story published in New Worlds Science Fiction to be in the Guest Editorial chair, but Mr. Mackin's highly successful and humorous series of stories concerning one, Hek Belov, cyberneticist extraordinary, which have appeared for several years in Science Fantasy, more than qualify him. In fact, many readers have pointed out that the series would have been better suited in this magazine. Certainly they would have been just as successful.

The wacky background to the Belov stories comes obviously from Mr. Mackin's several years as a press-tool setter and his hobby of wrecking radios, television sets and tape recorders (in the process of repairing or rebuilding them). When the factory life palled he moved on to a variety of occupations including postman, salesman and painter, but more recently he has settled down to being the central Editor of a small circulation literary review paper which reaches most parts of the world.

He believes "that science fiction has something important to offer, including a deep mine of ideas with direct bearing on the pattern of existence, past, present and future," and his major ambition is "to live long enough for the laugh when mankind reaches the nearer planets and, quite possibly, finds a sort of Easter Island assemblage of monuments commemorating the landing . . . and the landing . . . and the landing of mankind on the nearer planets."

A neighbour of Eric Frank Russell's (geographically speaking) he, like Russell, spent the 1939-45 war years serving with the Royal Air Force—most of his term being with 235 Squadron of Coastal Command, where doubtless the embryo Hek Belov performed incredible feats of repair work to "keep them flying."
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TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Guest Editorial

As the author of the incomparable Hek Belov series of satirical short stories in Science Fantasy, Edward Mackin can look at science fiction as a Guest Editor from a slightly different viewpoint to most of our previous contributors.

Anything Is Possible

by EDWARD MACKIN

It might be useful to commence with a definition of science-fiction; but it covers such a wide field, and has been moulded by such a diversity of talent that to set up a definition is simply to invite criticism from every quarter. Besides, it would be rather like trying to get a very large parcel into a very small paper bag. It just can’t be done.

Like a host of other science-fictionists I started reading the stuff way back in the days when it was practically bootlegged into the country from America, stashed around machinery, and minus the lurid covers. I don’t deny that the writing, to say the least of it, was occasionally a bit rough. Nevertheless, in those early days, it was all systems go for the writer, and although the vehicle may have been a bit crude and racketty his enthusiasm, not to speak of his effrontery, got him where he wanted to go.

The universe just wasn’t big enough to contain him. Besides the planet-hopping there was the frequent sideslip into other dimensions, and no holds barred. There were the contiguous worlds, too, where we could see what would have happened if certain historical turning points had been different. If the southerners had beaten those damn Yankees, for instance; or if the Normans had been clobbered in 1066. It was great fun even if it wasn’t great s-f.
The quality of the writing, and the techniques employed, have improved tremendously over the years; but something of the old magic seems to have vanished along with that first innocence. As we get older I suppose we tend to get more cynical, but now and then a story pops up that has that extra something—Lee Harding’s “Terminal” (New Worlds No. 118) for example. This was in the old tradition; but far better handled.

A short story, of course. It always is. What, I wonder, happened to the longer epic with its strange, new horizons, and the feeling that you were on the brink of a revelation? I haven’t read one in years, and somehow I don’t expect to if the present sociological, and yawningly pedestrian, trend continues. By all means let us have satire; any story, in fact, that traces the sociological implications of fashions in sanity—but it might be a good idea if the writer cut it short or kept it funny, and left current politics out of it altogether.

Part of the trouble, it seems to me, is that since someone coined that well-worn jibe ‘space-opera’ s-f has been pretty well hog-tied and nailed down by the ears. Certainly, there is no dearth of ideas if writers (and editors) weren’t so afraid of the space-opera label, and that other jibe BEM. Personally, I don’t subscribe to the theory that intelligent life forms on other planets (outside the solar system) must necessarily be humanoid or should even remotely resemble anything in our experience. We could be miles out with the bems; but nearer, I think, than the peddlars of double-gutted, six-fingered freaks.

Cut it any way you like, man is due for a number of surprises when he eventually makes his planetary first-footing outside the solar system. Without flogging the imagination there could be, for example, whole galaxies where Time has a different meaning; not necessarily accelerated or slowed down, or even sequentially different, but just different. In what way? In a way that might place life on a retreating or even negative portion of the cycle of existence.

Illogical? Maybe; but there is no guarantee that our ‘facts’ have not been fashioned, or arbitrarily chosen, by the particular mind-force that operates our fleshy mechanisms. Look at it this way. There must be so much going on around us of which we can know nothing with our limiting five senses, unless of course all that we perceive is a mere extension of those same

Continued on Page 124
Like the ‘long voyage’ story, the ‘big trek’ also lends itself admirably to a survey of human emotions under adverse circumstances. In this story, unstable atmospheric conditions induced deliberately from outer space, force Mankind on the run—for survival.

REMOULD

by ROBERT PRESSLIE

One

Henneker was the one with the horse. The remainder travelled on foot, except for a few who still clung to their bicycles. But Henneker was the only one with a horse. And for all that anyone knew it was probably the only horse in the world.

The tribe was thirty thousand strong. The pattern of their short stay in Istanbul was the same as it had been in any large city they came across.

First the scouts were sent in to report on the presence or absence of aliens. They had found Istanbul clean. There were no aliens. They prised open cellars, crept into all the old aqueducts and underground cisterns in search of Moles. In the cavern of a Thousand and One Columns they found signs that Moles had been there for a while. But now the city was clean. No aliens. No Moles. Not even one surviving member of the million people who once populated Istanbul.

When the scouts had made their report, the tribe moved in. Henneker went in first. Only when he had scoured the city
for the best pickings and ridden back to signal the others were they allowed to swarm through the streets in search of loot.

There was no fresh food to be found, a sure sign that the citizens of Istanbul had made their exodus many weeks before. But there was still plenty of canned food in the vacant shops, and smart new clothes, and sharp knives; and in the chandlers’ shops down by the edge of the fiord that bifurcated the city there were nets to be found for those with the foresight, the willingness and the ability to use them at some later date.

The tribe’s last big camp had been in Bucharest. In the Rumanian capital they had, as now, arrayed themselves in fresh clothes and restocked their larders. Since then they had marched down the coast, through Bulgaria and Turkey, to the last foothold in Europe. Across the Bosporus from Istanbul lay Asia.

Henneker made all the decisions. And it had been Henneker’s rule that they stopped only at night; in the morning they moved on. There was no argument. Those who did not wish to continue dropped out. The old, the sick, the weak and the lame were left. The trek was a ruthless test of survival. Henneker imposed the test deliberately. The only hope of the human race’s survival lay below latitude 20° North and it was imperative that only the strong got there.

Yet Henneker was not credited with any such highminded motives. There were many who thought he was a fool, a braggart, a tyrant who exulted in ordering the rest to follow his whim.

Ned Cash from England and Wayne the Canadian were two of Henneker’s strongest critics. After they had done their share of pillage they had explored the waterside until they had found one of the many wisteria-bedecked cafes with a stock of spirits on its shelves.

“This,” said Cash, “is the life. Look at us. Dressed like kings, our bellies full and a bottle of Scotch at hand. Why don’t you and me just park ourselves here?”

Wayne put down the bottle. “You said that in Bucharest. Before that you said it in Vienna. And in Prague before that. For all I know, you’ve been saying it since you left England. I don’t know. I only joined the tribe at Prague.”

“Why? Why did you team up, Johnnie?”
“What else was I to do? Spend the rest of my life in splendid isolation? I tried it. I watched forty different tribes get together and leave Prague. And when the Czechs had gone, I let two tribes that came down from Germany pass through. One of the Krauts told me he thought his would be the last tribe to come my way. He said most of the northern peoples had already gone south through France and Spain, making for Africa. When Henneker’s horde came along I was damned glad to see them, I can tell you. I reckon this must be the last tribe in Europe.”

Cash said, “I still think we’re dopes to follow Henneker around when and where he dictates.”

“I know it. He’s the type of man I would have ignored before all this. But as I said, I’ve had my fill of loneliness and this seems to be the last tribe. So I’m stuck with Henneker because he’s the trekmaster.”

“He’s everything,” Cash said bitterly. “He’s trekmaster. He’s the sole member of the tribe who doesn’t have to walk at any time. And he’s the only man who isn’t sterile. How did he escape, that’s what I’d like to know.”

“There were a few others.”

“Where?”

“They were trekmasters of the other tribes I told you about.”

“So we’re not the only dopes?”

“By no means, Ned,” Wayne said. “All over the world there are tribes like this one, all of them on the move south. Well, maybe not all. If I’d been home in Canada, I would probably have joined a trek going north out of the Sterility Belt. I expect my folks are doing that, and maybe some of the people from the northernmost American states, and the Russians too I don’t doubt. In a way I was lucky—I’d sooner be going south than up into the barren northlands.”

Cash laughed. “Barren!” he said.

Wayne too saw the grim humour. “The unfunniest joke of the century,” he said. “But we’ve still got hope, Ned. We know for a fact that the Sterility Belt ends about latitude Twenty North. The Africans, the South Americans and the Australians, they’re okay. Which is why we’re going south.”
"If we ever get there, Johnnie. How many of us will reach the other side of the Bosporus alive? You know we've got to swim it, don't you?"

Wayne nodded. "All able-bodied men, Henneker said. And quite a lot of the women too. It's a pity we didn't get here earlier. I was talking to a young Turk who joined us at the border. He says there used to be a fleet of steamships plying up and down the Bosporus. But they're gone now."

"Somebody was lucky," Cash said. "Luckier than us. All we have is tramcars."

"There are plenty of them. Istanbul had the biggest tramway system in—"

"So what?" Cash cut in. "We can't cross two miles of water in a tramcar!"

"Maybe you will. Henneker has the carpenter types building rafts out of old doors, barrels, anything that floats. And he says there's enough foam rubber in the tramcar seating to make lifebelts for most of those who can't get a raft to cling to."

"That's what I like about Henneker. He does so much for us! I'll bet him and his horse won't be swimming!"

"Do you think the women would let him? The only fertile man among thirty thousand people? They'll be fighting each other to give him the safest place on the biggest raft."

Cash snarled. "That's another reason why I love him. It makes me sick to see decent women...aw, it makes my guts knot. There isn't one of them who would have looked twice at him in the old days."

"That's just it," said Wayne. "These aren't the old days. I don't think you can really blame the women. It's only the survival of the species urge working in them. It happens even in a minor catastrophe, like a war. It isn't that morals get any looser. It's the triumph of the survival urge over society's acquired conventions."

Cash gave Wayne a speculative look. "If I didn't know you better I'd say you were lining yourself up for a job as one of Henneker's lieutenants—"

"That'll be the day! Come on, drink up. We'd better get back and see if there's anything we can do."

"Why should we? I'm happy here with this—" Cash raised his bottle.
“I’ll tell you why, Ned. A minute ago you were professing concern over the number of people who would die before we get across the Bosporus. Well, Selim—the Turk I was telling you about—he said something that makes me think we should go and help with those rafts.”

“What did he say?”

“Something about a black wind. Karayel, he called it. He thinks it’s due to blow. Being a local boy he should know. And according to him, when the Karayel blows—”

Cash stood up. “Okay, okay. You’re frightening me to death.”

The crossing of the Bosporus was undertaken next day. Late the previous night, hundreds of rafts of all sizes and shapes had been launched along the banks and moored there ready for the morning. The once beautiful gardens at the waterside were churned by many feet and then the scars were hidden beneath masses of crudely cut foam rubber lifebelts.

When morning came, the tribe was restless and there was a steady drone of grumbling voices in the heavy air. Selim had not been the only Turk to join the tribe, and in the night he and his kinsmen had spread their foreboding around. The black wind was sure to come that day.

As always, Henneker put his own judgment above that of others. They were moving out at first light, he said. And while the tribe grumbled, move out it would—each individual having his or her own personal reason for taking Henneker’s orders.

Whatever else he was, Henneker was not a coward. Some said he was too brutally stupid to know fear. But there for all to see he was the first to board a raft. The biggest raft, naturally.

Henneker was not a particularly large man. Yet his lack of inches was never obvious, because he was tremendously broad and his width was always accentuated by a thick wool-lined leather coat which he wore through all the seasons. Mounted on his horse—a big-muscled intractible beast—he looked like Attila the Hun must have looked.

He kneed his animal into the water, urging it out to the raft. At one moment it seemed as if the horse foresaw danger. It reared back its head, its wild eyes rolling. But Henneker
dug with his heels and forced it on. At the raft, he boarded
the construction himself, then dragged at the reins until the
horse jerked its forefeet out of the water and on to the edge
of the raft.

The raft tilted steeply with its weight. Henneker leaned
back to increase his stability and pulled hard. The horse had
the choice of boarding the raft or having its mouth torn. It
lashed with its hind legs and scrambled aboard. Henneker
backswiped it across the nose for its timidity and led it to
the well in the centre of the raft.

With his precious mount safe, he bellowed the signal for
the rest of the tribe to enter the water. Almost in unison,
three thousand people turned their heads for a last backward
glance at the safety of the land behind them before stepping
into the water.

There was no disorder, no instances of men trying to get
a place on one of the rafts, which were exclusively reserved
for the women and children. There was no disorder because
there were Henneker’s lieutenants all around to see that
nobody tried to get what he was not entitled to by Henneker’s
reckoning.

The lieutenants were men like Bassano the Greek, three
hundred pounds of hairless strength. Bassano was really
Italian, but in the halls of the world he had wrestled as
Bassano the Greek. He swam and waded ceaselessly around
his sector of the flotilla, ready to slap down any man who
dared disobey his master’s decree.

In the tribe, the sexes were roughly equally represented.
And of the fifteen thousand men, ten thousand were to be
sea-donkeys. Their job was to cling to the ropes that hung
all around each raft and to push the rafts across the
Bosporus. The rest of the men—selected for their lesser
physique—had nothing to cling to. Their only aid for the
crossing of two miles of water was a lifebelt.

The morning was well established when the last person had
left the shore and the strange flotilla began to edge slowly
out into the Bosporus.

Being summer, the water was reasonably warm. And being
summer, there seemed little danger to those who had not
heard the Turks’ premonition. But the rafts had gone barely
half a mile when the sky began to belie the season and fulfil the omen.

Instead of the day getting brighter, the sky seemed to close in on itself until it was a solid dome of grey which, minute by minute, appeared to get lower until it was within touching distance. As the sun was shut out, the warmth of the day never got started and to those who had been farmers and seamen, there was a perceptible drop in atmospheric pressure.

Feet kicked faster as the swimmers stepped up their pace in answer to an inner summons to make for the safety of the far shore as quickly as possible. Tightly as the women on the rafts were packed, they still managed to huddle closer together, partly because they were cold and partly because people in fear tend to congregate for mutual strength of spirit.

The rain came with a shocking suddenness. At one instant the dark sky was whole. At the next it seemed to be ruptured by a gigantic hand and the rain was unleashed in a torrent of water almost as solid as the sea itself. In seconds the women were as wet as the swimmers.

And in a few more seconds many of them had joined the men, involuntarily.

The black wind of the Turks followed the rain like a villainous actor on cue. It came roaring down southwards from the Black Sea, seemingly intent on driving the flotilla out into the Sea of Marmara at the other end of the Bosporus.

Of itself the wind was nothing. But as it ripped down the length of the Bosporus it tore out great sheets of water, dragged up mountainous green waves and threw them down again on the rafts and swimmers alike.

The rafts reared and plunged and righted themselves again to meet the next onslaught. And each time they tilted, they spilled more of their cargo overboard.

The first few waves forced many of the men to relinquish their grasp on the ropes at the sides of the rafts. Human beings became animals fighting for their lives. There was a battle for the vacant places. Men and women tore at each other in their efforts to find a precious hand-hold. Dignity, gallantry, respect for age and sex were lost in the wind and the rain and the sea.
And only the wind and the rain and the sea were witnesses to the shame that was nakedly displayed.

A strong young boy, still in his teens, wrestled with a frail grey woman of sixty. She had one bony hand clenched round a rope and the boy was trying to prise open her grasp.

Bassano the Greek saw this incident. With unpredictable chivalry, he lifted the woman clear over his head and on to a raft. With characteristic savagery, he clubbed a fist into the boy’s neck and did nothing to save his life as he went under.

“Merci, merci—” the woman screeched.

“Shut up, you old crone!”

Somebody swam close to Bassano. “You didn’t have to do that to the kid,” he yelled.

“He showed weakness. Only the strong must be saved.”

“What about the woman?”

“She is a midwife. She is valuable. Maybe more so than you, eh, Cash?”

“You know me?”

“I know every face in the tribe. Ask Henneker... if you ever get to the other side.”

“I’ll get there. You won’t hit me like that—”

“Don’t tempt me!”

 Everywhere the wail of human terror was in competition with the wind and the sea which had now smashed up the frailrer craft and intensified the struggle for a place of refuge.

“To the other side! Everybody over to the other side of the raft!”

“Who does that German bitch think she is, ordering us about... Holy Mother!... the raft’s going down, I can’t keep hold! Help me somebody... Help!”

A bare foot kicked backwards. “Get your hand off my ankle!”

“Please! I am pregnant!”

“You’re lucky. Most of us haven’t had a chance yet.”

“Pull her in, Eloise. Henneker will be mad if... Got her? God, I’m slipping myself! Oh, it’s righted itself. Thank you, God. Quick, give me her other hand. Who is it?”

“Can’t see till I’ve got her hair off her face... The lying cow! It’s that Belgian tart, the one who used to teach school. She’s no more pregnant than I am.”
“Eloise! You shouldn’t! You shouldn’t have pushed her over the side again.”

“No? Some of the women in the water really are pregnant. She shouldn’t have lied... Scram, mister! Get your hands off that rope, this raft is for ladies only.”

The rain still lashed down as heavily as ever, but for a brief two-minute spell the wind abated. In the interval all seaworthy rafts were boarded, the spars of the others were greedily laid claim to as floats, the dead and the dying were wrenched out of the lifebelts they no longer required.

“Here,” said Johnnie Wayne to a girl who could not find a place on a raft. “Grab this!” He pushed his own rubber belt into her hands.

She thrust it away. “I can swim,” she said.

Another of Henneker’s lieutenants, an Austrian named Adler, who was as big as Bassano the Greek but less vocal, came between them. He pushed Wayne under the surface, grabbed the rubber ring and forced it over the girl’s head and past her shoulders until it was safely round her waist.

Wayne came up spluttering. He yelled, “I wasn’t stealing it! She wouldn’t have it when I offered it.” But Adler was already moving towards another group in trouble. Wayne took his anger out on the girl.

“You could have told him,” he said.

“I didn’t ask for your help in the first place. Not yours or any other man’s.”

She clutched a loop of rope on a raft that came alongside. With her free hand she pulled off the lifebelt. In the process she rumpled her sodden blouse till it was bunched round her neck.

“Take it,” she said. “And keep your eyes to yourself!”

Wayne put the belt on and swam out of her company, seething at the injustice and determined to make her pay for it if and when they reached the other side. He joined a tightly packed group of men who were doing their best to keep a big raft moving.

“You got a belt,” his nearest neighbour accused. “You got no right hanging on here.”

“—the belt!” Wayne swore. “If we’re going to get these people across the Bosporus it’ll take every hand available—and don’t tell me you haven’t lost a few. I’ve seen.”
"Sorry," the other said. "But you wouldn't have been the first one we've had pretending he wanted to help when all he wanted was to hang on. I hope you're a strong swimmer—this thing takes some pushing. And if this storm doesn't quieten down pretty soon—well, we ain't going to see the bigger half of Turkey."

Two

The storm did not abate. After the brief lull it seemed to have redoubled its strength and its fury. In the increasing darkness it hammered and pounded the diminishing flotilla, as if it had singled out the tribe as its personal enemy.

For hours the black wind blew. The sea was a picture of ceaseless change as raft after raft was riven apart by waves, as newly formed groups suddenly found themselves separated again when their new refuge fell apart under them. All attempts to keep the fleet moving were abandoned. The solitary purpose was to keep alive, to keep as many as possible alive until such time as progress could be resumed.

The sea held as many women as men now. They bobbed as aimlessly as corks.

Henneker's lieutenants were still trying to prevent complete chaos. They had gangs of men working in the most atrocious conditions to tighten the lashings of the remaining rafts. They had even managed to cannibalise several fragments into complete new rafts—not altogether seaworthy constructions but at least some form of safety for those of the women who no longer had the strength to swim.

Ned Cash thought he must sink. It did not seem possible that a human body could hold that much water and still remain afloat. It was against the law of Archimedes or something.

He roused himself from his detached introspection and grabbed at a hank of hair. He twisted it sharply, turned the face in the water upwards. She was dead. He pushed the head away, wondering remotely how it was he could be so callous about death. The world certainly had changed, he thought.

He was watching the streamered hair in a deliberate test to see how much his feelings had been cauterized when he saw the head twist convulsively. He forgot his tiredness, the leaden weight of his body, and plunged through a wave towards the girl.
Since that single convulsion she had not moved. Yet he rolled over on his back and swam backwards with his arms supporting the girl's head on his chest. Several times the pair of them were engulfed—if the limp body had held any life it must have been slowly threshed out like corn from a sheaf.

Something struck him behind the ear. He flung one hand overhead, felt the timbers of a raft, then went as flaccid as the girl he had been carrying. She floated out of his arms as he vanished under the water.

But the flame of life was hot inside him and he sensed he was drowning. He stretched desperate fingers in the direction he last remembered the raft.

His nails ripped out splinters. But the pain only served as a beacon, a sign that he had clutched in the right direction. He kicked and stretched again. A loosely hinged plank got locked in his grasp and he hung like that for many minutes, neither conscious nor yet unconscious, only a plank held by a hand at one end and a rusty nail at the other between him and death.

When the light of real consciousness returned to him it coincided with the return of daylight.

He unclenched the stiff cramped hand that had saved him and took a new hold with both hands.

The rain had stopped except for an occasional sigh, of the storm's regret perhaps. The wind—it was so calm, the wind might never have been. And already the black sky had broken into frightened clusters of clouds which scuttled for the horizon to escape the heat of the sun.

He looked around for the girl before he remembered that she must have been washed from the vicinity long ago.

A touch on his hand made him look up to the raft.

"You're all right!" he said, astonished to see her alive. He looked closer, saw that even now she did not seem to have too strong a grip on life. She was young, elfin-faced, slim-bodied. She was shockingly pale, only her great black eyes really alive.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She smiled weakly, shook her head. He tried again in French, the lingua franca of the tribe.

"Je m'apelle Monique," she replied. "Et tu?"

"Cash. Ned Cash."

"Okay, Mister Cash, your time's up. Get moving."
The intruder was Bassano. "Get over to Henneker's raft," he went on. "He wants to talk to us."

The intact state of Henneker's raft was good evidence of the care that had gone into its construction. The storm had so subdued the horse that only its rump was visible as it lay in its well. But Henneker was unsubdued. He stood wide-legged on the planking, a barbaric yet magnificent figure, larger than life as always.

"If you have eyes to see," he thundered, "you will have noticed that we have been blown out of the Bosporus and into the Sea of Marmara. This involves a change of plan. We can no longer make for our original destination which was Uskudar, directly across the strait from Istanbul. Our nearest point of land is now the southern coast of the peninsula.

"But this change of plan does not mean the storm has beaten us! We have gained a victory not suffered a defeat. Because, if our numbers are less——" there was a murmur of voices at this euphemism "—the tribe has yet been strengthened. The weak of flesh and of spirit are no longer with us. We who survive are the strong and the mighty! And you must continue to be strong. You must forget your fatigue. You must find more strength and get our fleet to the shores below Uskudar."

"How far?" many voices asked at once.

Henneker repeated the question. "How far? Only as far as you think it to be. If you have no thought for the survival of the human race, then it is an infinite distance. But if you have a burning desire to get our women to safety and to take a step nearer regaining your manhood, then it is no distance at all."

The trekmaster undid the leather thong around his waist, stripped off his sodden coat.

"See!" he cried. "I will show you. I will join you in the water——"

The women on Henneker's raft wailed, tried to pull him back.

"You are the only one," he was told. "Without you there will be no children. Without children the tribe dies now."

Henneker thrust the women aside and plunged off the raft. When he came up, he grasped a loop of rope, raised his head high and asked, "Well, who's going to earn his manhood."
Ned Cash and Johnnie Wayne had found each other's company again.

"Now he decides to help," said Cash. "When it's like a millpond."

"Do you think the women would have let him earlier?" Wayne said. "Not that I'm suggesting he would have. But dammit, the man's a terrific showman. He knows everybody is feeling pretty bushed and low, and he knows how to stir them back to life. Look at them! Swimming like mad!"

The fleet beached on the mainland of Turkey ninety minutes later. It was almost exactly seven hours since the tribe had left Istanbul on what should have been a two-to-three hour swim.

While the tribe rested and licked its wounds, Henneker's lieutenants took a rough census. They found that seven thousand people had perished—about four thousand men and three thousand women, including two of the eleven who were Henneker's wives. In normal circumstances this one-fourth loss of life would have been appalling. But Henneker only looked at it as an expendable ratio, a lightening of the load as regards feeding, with perhaps a slight regret for the loss of men who had useful talents.

Even among the tribespeople there was no deep sorrow. There was only thankfulness in each individual for his or her personal survival. Family relationships had long ceased to exist except as loose companionships—the loss of a husband, wife, brother or sister was simply the loss of an acquaintance.

Only a few couples persisted in preserving a husband-and-wife relationship. Mostly they were people of Latin or Hebrew extraction, people brought up to expect strong family ties. But even among these the continued partnership was no more than an insistence on travelling together. Since the coming of the aliens and the creation of the Sterility Belt they had no hope of becoming parents, of becoming a real family, not while they lived between latitudes 60 and 20 North. Their only hope for a restoration of normality lay south. And south they went with Henneker, clinging together until the great day came.

The aliens had arrived at a time when the world was at peace with itself. Observatories tracking American and Russian satellites had reported the presence of unknown objects in space, about a thousand miles out from Earth. It
But the tribes came into existence before the trekking began. Because it had been found that not all men had lost their virility. Here and there—one in ten, twenty or thirty thousand—there was a man unaffected by the radiation belt. An integrated society would have set its scientists to discover the reason. But society was already disintegrating. Nobody wanted to wait while reasons were found. Out of the great depths of human experience, usually vaguely called instinct or human nature, came an order, an unspoken and unheard order, yet one which led to the formation of tribes.

The maternal urge in all women drove them to seek out the rare men who were still normal; not to have children by them there and then, but simply to be near them. Like the passengers of a ship who hope they never have to use the lifeboats, yet are comforted to know they are there.

With the women went their children, then the children’s fathers and all the other members of the family—the cousins and the grandparents until gradually a gregarious tribe was formed with a fertile man as its figurehead. And the tribes began to move south, taking the figurehead with them. In one sense men like Henneker were trekmasters. In another they were prisoners. They were there as insurance so that if the promise of the south was not fulfilled, men like Henneker could be used to ensure that the human race did not peter out with the present generation.

The women were either for or passive to Henneker and his kind. From injured pride and jealousy the men were nearly always against. Every decision the trekmaster made was criticised.

A few men, like Ned Cash and Johnnie Wayne, while being as critical as the others, were at the same time fair and reasonable in their criticisms.

“Sometimes,” said Ned Cash, when the tribe was resting in Ankara five weeks after its ordeal in the Bosporus. “Sometimes I think he’s a madman, a power-crazy megalomaniac. Then when I look back at what he did I wonder if he wasn’t right after all.”

“For instance?” asked Wayne.

“Well, just think. We lost a lot of people after Istanbul. But, as Henneker said, they were mostly inferior physical specimens. If we hadn’t lost them then, how many do you think would have been capable of the mountain climbs
we’ve had lately? Six thousand feet high, some of them, and worse to come before we hit the plain.”

“It was and will be tough,” Wayne agreed. “But some of them would have got through.”

“I’m not so sure. Until we get out of the Sterility Belt we are getting bigger and bigger doses of radiation. Therefore the sooner we get out of the belt the better. Don’t kid yourself that anybody would have agreed to slow the whole tribe’s pace to match that of its weakest members. No, Johnnie, those people would have been left behind. And I think the quick way they died in the sea was better than the slow and lonely death they would have faced in the mountains.”

“You’re getting to sound like Henneker, Ned.”

“Getting hard, you mean? Who isn’t? I don’t see any signs of mourning. Those people have been forgotten.”

“Maybe you’re right. I’ve certainly never seen the tribe looking so fit. It’s smaller than before but it’s a whole lot tougher. You know something——?”

“What’s that, Johnnie?”

“A thought I’ve had for a while. About Henneker. What do you suppose he gets out of it? He’s got no particular reason to go south. Yet he drives the tribe like a man with an obsession.”

Ned Cash thought about it. “I suppose he can’t do otherwise. The women wouldn’t let him drop out.”

“That’s true. But if that was the only reason he would just go along with the tribe. Instead of which he acts like he was carrying out an appointed task. You know, I think friend Henneker is a lot deeper than we realise . . .”

**three**

From Istanbul to Baghdad the distance is about one thousand miles. Henneker had set a target of four months to cover that distance.

Close to his schedule, they crossed the whole of Turkey in three months. They came down out of the mountains into Iraq and made contact with the Tigris at Mosul. From then on they had an easy and pleasant two hundred miles through low-lying country to Baghdad, with the great river as a constant landmark.
They entered Baghdad in high spirits. The crossing of the mountains had been arduous, but remarkably few lives had been lost. The incident of the Bosporus had been forgotten. The waters of the Tigris had fed them well for the past two hundred miles. Instead of being a major restocking station, Baghdad was going to be no more than a place of temporary rest.

They were singing as Henneker, a square figure of strength and exuberance astride his horse, led them into the city.

The singing died after the first few streets and the march was continued in cautious silence. There were ample signs of recent conflict—ugly stains of dried blood, rat-picked bones of many corpses.

Henneker sent Bassano and two other lieutenants ahead while he halted the tribe in a square. Closely packed in the streets they would be sitting ducks for any attackers. It was better to see who or what still occupied the city before going further—although it did not seem possible that they could run into another tribe at this late date since by all reports and signs they were the last tribe going south.

There was a deep tense silence among the tribe as they waited, a silence so perfect that when a rattle of gunfire sounded it was as startling as if a pot of crimson paint had been thrown on an empty canvas.

Apart from a great breath drawn in unison, the tribe remained silent until Bassano and the others could be seen running back from their reconnaissance.

“There’s somebody down in the old part of the city,” Bassano reported.

“Did they see you?” asked Henneker.

“No. They were firing at each other I think.”


Bassano made to push him back but Henneker butted in, “Let him speak. You know my rule—we always ask an expert’s advice.”

“Thanks,” said Wayne. “Baghdad is a funny town. Out here in the north, and the same in the south, it’s all new—modern buildings, wide streets. Down in the centre is the old town, a congested mass of yellow brick and dried-mud buildings. If you move the tribe in there while there’s somebody
with guns who probably won't love us very much—well, I think you should get rid of those other people first."

Henneker decided immediately. "We'll do that. Bassano, you get all the strongarm men together. Wayne, you'll go with them too."

"I'm willing," the Canadian said. "But how do we fight them? They've got guns. We've got nothing but knives and clubs and hatchets."

"And wits!" said Henneker. "I've said it before and I'll say it again—in a primitive community living a primitive life, the knife and the hatchet and the club are the ultimate weapons. We don't carry guns because we can't afford to carry ammunition and we can't depend on always finding the right calibre ammunition in our travels. Those people down there are fools to cling to their guns. See who they are, find out their intentions and, if necessary, kill them."

"Can I take somebody with me? Ned Cash, he's my friend."

"No! You're the one who knows the city. Bassano can supply the strength. You don't need Cash."

Wayne knew it was hopeless to argue. When Bassano had his men together, he led the way down to the heart of the city.

Most of the streets were as he had described them, narrow tortuous lanes. But here and there the lanes were punctuated by wider modern streets. They proceeded along these with extreme caution, hedge-hopping from doorway to doorway as they approached the quarter from which the gunshots had sounded.

Further shots were heard, obligingly pinpointing their source.

Wayne told Bassano, "They're down at one of the old bridges. There are two steel bridges which connect this part of Baghdad with its partner across the river. It sounds like there are two factions down there, one on either side of the river. It's unlikely that either party will welcome the intrusion of a third. We'd better be careful."

The one-time wrestler grunted and waved his patrol on.
They found the protagonists at the northernmost bridge. A small group, less than a dozen strong, was huddled on the river bank. Another group, larger but impossible to enumerate because its members lay on their bellies, was about three-quarters across the bridge, slowly crawling towards the first group.

Bassano used tactics which took Wayne by surprise.

He let out a screaming yell like a Japanese samurai going into battle and charged down the slight incline of the street towards the group at the end of the bridge. It was a moment or two before Wayne realised with a start that he had joined Adler and the other lieutenants in Bassano’s wake.

The noise and the sight of a score of tremendously muscular men descending on them caught the bridge’s defenders off guard. They turned sharply, but by the time they thought of raising their weapons the tribesmen were among them. Being completely outnumbered, they were immobilised by club and fist in seconds.

A triumphant cry came from the bridge itself where the second group, scenting the arrival of a provident ally, rose to its feet and came racing across the river.

To prove his impartiality and to show who was going to boss any parley, Bassano took a rifle from one of his captives and picked off the first two men to come within range.

Bassano turned the gun on his captives, who were just beginning to take an interest in their surroundings again.

“Who are you?” he snapped. “And them?”

“We come from Moscow and the north.”

“Only you? Was there no tribe?”

“There was a tribe. But we were left behind.”

Bassano gave them a quick once-over. “You look strong enough. How did you happen to get left?” His eyes glanced on something else, a pile of satchels, haversacks, dufflebags, anything that would serve to carry goods.

“I see,” he commented. “Hoarders.”

Every tribe had them, men who could not believe that gold and silver were no longer valuable and who burdened themselves and slowed their pace because they could not resist amassing and taking with them what they thought was a fortune.
Bassano had no more interest in them. Hoarders were held in contempt by most tribesmen.

“What about the others on the bridge?” he asked again.

“Local people. Iraqi.”

“Moles?” asked Bassano.

“We think so.”

The wrestler looked at the bridge with interest. This was the first time he had seen Moles in the open. But not the first time he had met the type.

When the existence of the worldwide Sterility Belt had first been suspected, there were many who went underground. Usually they were the rich and the powerful—people who had built themselves subterranean caverns against the possibility of a different sort of calamity and had taken to them in the hope of sitting out the disaster of the Sterility Belt until it had faded.

Not all of the Moles were rich. Some Moles were people who could not afford underground caves of their own and who had taken over the occupation of their city’s sewer systems.

And not all the rich were Moles. Many of them had bought up airliners, steamers—anything that would take them out of the Sterility Belt faster than their own legs.

Bassano did some guessing. “You’ve had many fights like this?”

The others nodded.

“I thought so. And that’s where you got the guns, isn’t it? Ordinary tribesmen don’t bother with them, but most Moles took guns underground with them. Tell me, why have those people left their caves?”

“Starvation. Their supplies ran out. They were forced into the open. Now they won’t let us across the bridge.”

Johnnie Wayne said, “There are two bridges.”

The Russian spokesman denied this. “There were. But somebody blew the other one up after they had crossed. I think I know why.”

“Well?”

“Rats. Millions of them. All hungry.”

Bassano said, “Then why leave one bridge still standing?”

“Who knows? Perhaps they didn’t have time. Perhaps they tried and the shot failed to fire. Anyhow we must get
across to the other side, away from the rats here.”

“There may be just as many on the other side.”

“There may be. But wouldn’t you try?”

Bassano agreed. The Sterility Belt was a radiation effect. It had certain similarities and certain differences to radiation as the pre-invasion people of the world knew it. It was reported to be different in that the sterility effect was local and temporary. It was similar in its choice of victims. As with gamma radiation, it had wreaked less devastation on rats and mice than on any other animal. All cattle, dogs, cats, horses within the Belt had died out as species. When it was seen that they would produce no progeny, they had been killed off for meat. Henneker’s horse was one of the few surviving larger animals. But the rats had continued to live and to multiply. And in the absence of natural enemies their increase had been more than normal. But like the human survivors of the alien invasion they were constantly on the search for food.

Bassano told one of his men, “Go back to Henneker. Tell him to bring the tribe through fast. And tell him about the rats.”

Johnnie Wayne wondered about the Russians and the Moles. He said, “Do we take them with us?”

The lieutenant handed him a gun and took another for himself.

“We clear the way,” he said. “Starting here,” he added and emptied his gun into the Russian group. Wayne hesitated for only a second before following suit. It was not until afterwards that he thought about the change in him that permitted him to shoot the hoarders without a question—and even then he dismissed the thought with a shrug.

The taking of the bridge was easy with their superior numbers. Within three hours of their arrival in Baghdad the tribesmen were all safely across the river to Karkh, the eastern part of the city.

At Wayne’s request, Henneker called a halt while the Canadian engineer scouted the railway workshops for which the city had been famous.

Wayne was not so foolishly optimistic as to expect to find any engines and rolling stock in working order. But he had
hoped to use his engineering skill to repair any derelict engines, even to build new ones from stock parts.

"It was a good idea," he reported to Henneker. "Only somebody thought of it first."

"Nothing at all?"

"One hand-worked bogie that could be fixed. Nothing else. And that won't take twenty thousand people to Basra."

Basra was three hundred miles distant. The metre-gauge railway, if available, would have taken the tribe on an easy journey to there and beyond, right to the edge of the Persian Gulf. Wayne expected Henneker to be disappointed. He was quite unprepared for the trekmaster's suggestion.

"You take it," said Henneker. "You and your friend—Cash, isn't it?—and as many others as the bogie will carry."

"Four is all it will carry comfortably," Wayne said. "I think I know who else I'd like to take with me. But why? I mean why are you letting us have it?"

"I'm not letting you. I'm ordering you. And you'll take six people. The extra two will be of my choice."

"I'd still like to know your reasons."

Henneker told him: "When you get to the Persian Gulf you'll be running into the outer fringe of the Sterility Belt. There may be people there who have not chosen to migrate south. When the rest of us get there our future journey lies along the coast of the gulf—through Persia, Baluchistan and then India. There will certainly be people there who have made no attempt to migrate, for the simple reason that they will be simple people who have no knowledge of the Sterility Belt beyond the fact that their birthrate has fallen. There could be trouble."

Wayne asked, "Some of them will still be fertile?"

"And some won't," Henneker said. "It follows that the first incomers they meet are liable to be blamed for their calamity. Do you still want to go on ahead?"

"I had thought of taking two women. But now—"

"You would have Bassano and Adler as my representatives. I don't want you to think I'm sending you on as bait. If at all possible I want you to stay out of trouble. I take you to be a man of some courage and sense. I want you to try to talk any hostile natives into letting us through their territory in peace. I'm giving you Adler and the Greek as protection."
Wayne blinked. He sensed that Henneker meant every word he said and the solicitude surprised him.

"Okay," he decided. "I'll give it a try."

"What about the women?"

"I'll take them if they'll come. There will be six of us altogether but in spite of Bassano's strength I don't think we would be much of a match for any angry tribe of natives. So it doesn't matter who goes, does it?"

Henneker agreed. "I don't expect you to fight your way through. I told you, stay out of trouble if you can. I ask only one thing—whatever the attitude of the people you meet, do your best to get word back to the rest of us who will be making the journey on foot. And if you should get into trouble, don't expect any help from us. The journey which you will cover in five or six days will take us as many weeks."

Besides Henneker's lieutenants, Wayne's companions were Ned Cash and two girls. One of these was the diminutive Monique who owed her life to Ned's courage in the crossing of the Bosporus. The other was the buxom Scandinavian girl who had spurned Wayne's help in the same circumstances. Her name was Tina. She had been equally reluctant to join the bogie run to the coast.

"I can walk!" she had said. "I told you once before, I don't need any man's help."

Johnnie Wayne had snapped back, asking why she always had a chip on her shoulder.

"I've seen enough of men," was all the answer he got. He also got a counter-question.

"Why take me? Why not one of the other women?"

"You're going to be my mate when we get out of the Belt." Wayne's frank assertion was indicative of the tribe's reversion to caveman courtship. He was being no more and no less unromantic than any other man in the tribe would have been.

Tina had laughed derision. "And I'll just accept you, eh! You conceited—"

"I haven't time to argue. You're coming with us. Of your own free will or by force, the choice is yours."

"Who said I wasn't coming?"

"For Pete's sake!"
She had laughed again at his exasperation. “The company of only four men is a whole lot better than that of several thousand. But don’t get any ideas I’m coming to please you.”

If Johnnie Wayne had been harbouring any such thoughts they were soon squashed. For the whole of the week it took them to hand-crank the bogie to the coast she never spoke another word to him.

four

The railway track was whole and undamaged. It took them along the path of the Euphrates most of the way, leaving the river about seventy miles from Basra. At Basra they turned east, met the Tigris again at the place where it marked the frontier between Iraq and Persia and crossed the river into Abadan.

And all the time their journey was peaceful and unmolested.

Wayne tackled Bassano. “Looks like the boss man was wrong.”

The mountainous wrestler grunted. “We’ve only just got to where trouble might start. It’s another forty miles to the coast of the gulf. Let’s get there first before we start crowing.”

But they found cause for excitement before leaving Abadan.

They were manhandling the bogie along the track on the outskirts of the city itself. They were in the midst of a forest of oil refineries. It was Ned Cash who called for a halt.

“Over there,” he said. “There’s something that looks like part of a refinery but it’s different. It’s cleaner for one thing—”

Leaving the bogie they went closer. It did not need Johnnie Wayne’s engineering knowledge to tell them that the thing was an alien spaceship.

“How did they get it in there without blowing up the place?” asked Cash.

“It’s not rocket-powered, that’s how,” said Wayne. “Some of us had an idea they used antigrav devices. This proves it. They must have left this one here in hiding—you must admit we nearly missed it.”
Monique clung to Ned Cash. “Are they here?” she asked, and Ned looked to Wayne for an answer.

Johnnie pointed to the ground. “There’s been nobody here for a long time.”

He asked Bassano. “Mind if I take a look inside?”

“Please yourself. But don’t be too long about it. Somebody will have to go back and tell Henneker about this.”

“Maybe I’ll find something else to tell him,” said Johnnie. He circled the ship, looking for a metal ladder or a series of indented finger-holds. There were none.

“They got down,” he muttered to himself. “So there must be a way up. Probably a switch somewhere that retracted the ladder. Let’s see... if I had designed this, where would I put the switch?”

Ned Cash watched for a while before saying, “Remember they’re alien, Johnnie. It doesn’t follow they would do things the same as you would.”

“Eh? Of course, you’re right.” Wayne stood back to get a full picture of the ship. “Its shape is only incidental,” he mumbled. “Nothing to do with aerodynamics or distribution of rocket motors. Could be the entry isn’t up top but is at the base somewhere.”

Having changed the direction of his search, he soon found what he wanted—a rectangular etched line just above eye-level.

“That’s the door,” he said. “All we need now is the key to open it. Bassano, I guess you’d better despatch whoever is going back to Henneker, and tell the trekmaster we’ve found an alien ship, found its entry, but don’t know to open it.”

Adler came forward. He had an immense twenty-pound hammer resting on his shoulder. He gave Bassano an enquiring look.

“Give it a try,” the wrestler said. “I’ll spell you.”

They tried for a quarter of an hour to beat open the door of the ship. The noise of hammer on metal made the Scandinavian Tina think of her people’s ancient gods in battle. But in spite of the two giants’ efforts the door remained unassailed.

Bassano regarded the ship with respect. “They build good,” he said.

“We do indeed!”
The stranger was staggeringly human and ordinary. Apart from the revelation of his announcement, the only thing that proclaimed him an alien was a spanking grey uniform.

Henneker’s burly musclemen tensed themselves for action. The stranger warned them.

“I could kill you before you took one step. I don’t want to but I could.”

Perhaps it was the calm self-assurance that tamed Bassano and Adler. Or perhaps it was the memory of the example of alien weapons that could girdle the Earth with the Sterility Belt.

Ned Cash appointed himself spokesman. He did so because he was a natural for the job, having been in the advertising business all his pre-disaster days and also because he felt that until now his talents had been of no help to the tribe. Confronted with the opportunity to use his talents for the communal good, he seized it.

“You’ve done enough already,” he said. “You’ve almost doomed our species to extinction as it is. You don’t have to kill anyone outright. All you have to do is wait.”

The alien looked genuinely apologetic. “I have no wish to kill. Any action I threatened was in self-defence. As to the other thing—that was a mistake.”

“Oh, sure,” said Ned. “You just happened to explode a score of nuclear weapons by being butter-fingered!”

“I can explain—”

“No doubt. But to whose satisfaction? How could you convince everybody from Vancouver to Tokio that it’s all a mistake that they have had to abandon their whole culture and get as far north or south as possible if they want the human race to have any future? And how can any explanation make life easier for them when they settle in South America or Africa or Australia or Greenland? Four-fifths of the world’s population is going to be crowded into one-fifth of the available land. There’s going to be mass starvation, followed naturally by mass rioting. And you say it was all a mistake! Oh, brother!”

The alien looked more contrite than ever.

“Have you a tribe?” he asked, seeming to change the subject. “Who is your trekmaster?”
Ned wondered how much he should reveal. He told half the truth.

"We had a tribe. We left it. The leader was a man called Henneker."

"Ah!" The alien brightened. "Henneker. It's a pity you left your tribe. Because if Henneker was here now he could convince you that I speak truly."

Ned frowned. "You know him?"

The alien evaded again. "Where was the tribe bound?"

"South," said Ned, giving nothing away.

"To Africa? Henneker should know better. There is no room for another tribe there."

Bassano took the ball momentarily from Ned. He said, "Henneker knew that. He was making for Australia. We've done about a third of the trek. The rest of the way lies through India, Burma, Malay, across the straits of Singapore to Sumatra and then hopping over Java and the chain of small islands to Timor, then across the Timor Sea to the Australian mainland."

"You have great courage," the alien said. "Such an immense journey. So many waters to be crossed. And it is all our fault...you have cause indeed to be angry and distrustful. But I assure you again that we did not intend these things to happen to you. You are sure you don't know where Henneker is?"

Ned felt that so much had already been revealed that he might as well disclose the rest.

"Henneker and the tribe should be here in about a month," he said. "We are scouting the territory in advance. We thought we might meet some hostility. We didn't expect to meet you."

The alien smiled faintly. "Nor I to meet you. Your hammering triggered the alarm inside the ship, causing a signal to be sent out. I came to see who was interfering with our craft."

Ned pounced on the first person plural. "Our?" he said. "There are several of us back there." The alien pointed into the heart of the oil refineries.

"Doing what?"

"Trying to undo what we did."
“Like hell! You’ve got our finest territories—why should you try to lose them again?”
“Because we didn’t want them in the first place. It was a mistake—”
“You said that before!”
“Truth always bears repeating.”
“Now it’s epigrams!”
“If Henneker was here—”
“What’s Henneker got to do with it?”
“He could make you believe. You are accustomed to Henneker but not to me. Yet we are no different.”
Ned could see the next sentence coming.
“Henneker is one of us.”

With the opposition struck dumb, the alien had it all his own way to proceed with his explanation of the great mistake.

In the beginning their ships had been only passing through, so to speak, on their way from their own world in the system of Schedar to a friendly world in Alioth. It was a journey they and the Alioths had made many times without coming near the solar system. But from observation made in the passing they had found reason to believe that Sol might have human life on one or more of its planets. So on this particular trip they had come in for a close look.

The last thing they had expected was to be attacked.
Ned found his voice. “Attacked? Nobody made a move against you.”

The alien countered with the date, the time and the place of origin of the attacking weapon.
“That was no weapon,” Ned barked. “All you ran into was one of Earth’s artificial satellites. Small harmless things. America and Russia were both sending them out. With near-space almost fully probed, they were scouting the atmospheres of the closest planets.”
“We were not to know. All we knew was that one of our ships, screens down, expecting no trouble, was hit. We immediately retaliated by completely screening the orbit our ships were running in.”
“It looked like a nuclear attack to us!” Ned said.
But it hadn’t been. According to the alien, the twenty explosions which had lit the skies of Earth had been nothing
more than the erection of a force barrier against any further attack from below. That the nature of the barrier was similar to sterility-causing hard radiation was purely coincidental.

With their curiosity roused, the aliens had delayed the resumption of their journey until they had examined the nature of the creatures which had dared to hit one of their ships. A contingent had landed in France in the dead of night.

The aliens were immensely impressed with what they found. Here was a race almost identical to their own. As soon as they had learned the language, they had discovered by stealthy questioning that there had been no intentional attack against them. It was not long either before they learned of the peculiar phenomenon of the disappearance of certain short-lived animals like the rabbits and the birds. And having learned of the sterility which had affected the quick-breeding species, they waited to see what would happen to the human race.

When their suspicions were confirmed they were aghast at what they had done, even if it had been done inadvertently. And there was no known way to disperse the radiation which had become known as the Sterility Belt.

"So we came down to Earth, all of us," the alien said. "It was unthinkable to go on our way without trying to ameliorate the calamity we had brought on you."

Ned Cash looked a lot less sceptical, but he would not commit himself. He merely, "How? How did you propose to undo something which you just said couldn’t be undone?"

"It couldn’t be undone. Not then. But it was theoretically possible to disperse the Belt. We decided to try. We knew it would be a long job and in the meanwhile those of you under the Belt would be producing no young, so we organised wholesale treks to go north and south out of the Belt’s influence. Those of us who were the best scientists went into hiding in places like this. The rest appointed themselves as tribe leaders, and also as—"

Tina said it. "Lady-killers!" she spat.
The alien shook his head vehemently. "They had strict instructions not to force their attentions where they were not wanted. The fact was that there was no knowing how long it would take us to find a way of dispersing the Belt. In the meantime it was our duty to help keep your race going. One difference between us is that the radiation does not affect us as it affects you."

Ned Cash tried to whip up some disgust at the idea. But this alien—and Henneker—was too much like any other human for the emotion to live. Instead, he struck at another point.

"Do you know how many people have died because of Henneker's leadership, people who couldn't stay the pace he forced?"

"I can guess. It has been the same in all the tribes we have observed. But think—could it have been different? Dispersing the Belt was only a faint hope. Eventual resettlement was the main solution to your problem. And as such, it had to be accomplished as quickly as possible."

"Even if it meant overcrowding?"

"You must have thought it worthwhile before you came this far—"

Ned and Johnnie Wayne and the others stood so silent and expressionless as they digested the news that the alien mis-took their attitude for disbelief. He made a decision.

"Come with me," he said. "I'll show you what we have been doing."

He walked them about half a mile to a block of oil company offices. Remembering that Henneker had at no time been deliberately homicidal, the Terrans felt reasonably safe in going with the alien. And when they found themselves in one of the offices, outnumbered two-to-one by aliens, they were still not afraid because all they could see on the alien faces was earnest endeavour.

When they began to make an explanation of their efforts, Johnnie Wayne was the only one who could follow to any extent. He was able to affirm to the others that at least the aliens were making sense.

The Sterility Belt—or protective screen as it was originally intended to be—should have dispersed by itself in time. Since
it had remained, like a ring round Saturn, the aliens had searched for some reason due to the nature of the Earth itself.

They had found it in Terran scientific publications.

Several factions on Earth had made tests of their nuclear weapons. With these, in addition to local radioactive fallout, there was also a world-wide fallout due to fission products being carried up into the stratosphere and slowly deposited over decades in a belt around the whole world. The maximum distribution of this fallout was between latitudes 30-50 N. And it was thought that this was due to the fact that nearly all the nuclear tests had been held in the northern hemisphere.

The aliens had seized at the phenomenon but had ignored the explanation. The similar distribution of the belt of their own creation pointed to some other reason.

After exhaustive tests they got it tied in with the Earth’s natural magnetism. And, in time, this pointed the way to a method of dispersing the Sterility Belt. For a short period it would be necessary to set up a magnetic field equal and opposite to Earth’s.

"It looks nice on paper," Wayne said. "About as nice and easy as saying all you have to do to achieve interstellar travel is to find some way of travelling faster than light."

"Which we can do!" he was told. "We’re here, aren’t we?"

Johnnie shrugged. "That’s only manipulating spaceships."

He laughed at himself. "Only! But what I meant was—well, to switch a planet’s magnetic field!"

One of the aliens said quietly, "We can do that too."

When they went into the finer details of their achievement, Johnnie was lost. But he was able to keep up with them far enough to grasp the wider facets of their scheme.

Throughout the evacuated belt of the world, the aliens had set themselves up in groups located near every main source of power. In England, France and Germany, they stood by, ready to couple neglected nuclear power plants into their proposed magnetic grid. From Scotland to Nigeria, hydro-electric stations were at that moment charging alien-built capacitors in readiness for the big discharge. In Abadan
and Texas, every drop of produce from the oil refineries had been burned and converted by turbine to electrical energy.

"We are almost ready," Wayne was told. "We are waiting for a few more of our men to call and announce their preparedness, then all that remains is a co-ordinated discharge of the electrical energy we have accumulated."

"How soon?" Johnnie asked.

"A week at the most."

"And then?"

"You can go home."

"If it works—"

"We are absolutely certain of that. Your troubles will be over. We realise that we cannot compensate for your loss of life and of comfort. Incidentally, not all of that loss was our fault. We only created the situation, the reactions were yours. However, we will play our part in helping to organise the mass repatriation. We shall also stay with you—if you are willing, of course—to help restore your world to some semblance of its former appearance. Animals living outside the Belt will have to be imported, the fields must be—"

Monique had heard only one phrase. She interrupted. "It's over? We can go home?"

The aliens smiled in concert. They nodded.

"Ned," said Monique. "We can go home."

She said to Tina, "Ned and I, we're going home together."

Johnnie Wayne watched for Tina's reaction. To his surprise she turned and hid her face. It didn't seem possible but it looked as if the big tough Tina was crying. Johnnie went to her, put his arm around her and she did not shrug it off.

He turned her face to his and said, "I'd like you and me to go home together too. I did some question and answer stuff behind your back. I know what you've been and I know why you've got that grudge against men. And I'm still asking if you'll go my way."

She looked up at him. "Even knowing—?"

Johnnie put a finger over her lips. "That was in the old world. Right now we're going to find the bogie and start on our way to the new world. We can break the glad news to the tribe and then—"

He had a last word for the aliens.
“Go ahead with your paramagnet,” he said. “But before you start helping us to remake the world I think we should have a conference. There’s a whole heap of things in the old world we probably won’t want restored. When the time comes, let’s make it a better place.”

They were back with the tribe when the aurora filled the sky, a soft rainbow that promised light after darkness, hope after despair, a bright new world in exchange for the loss of a shabby outworn model. A complete remould.

Robert Presslie

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THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Robert Presslie’s return to science fiction is, we hope, no flash in the pan, as many of his earlier stories showed great promise of things to come. Next month, he has the central place in the magazine with a novelette based upon a psychiatrist who induces schizophrenia in a spaceship test pilot purposely to see what effects certain drugs will have upon the man should he ever go into space. The experiment produces certain side effects which have far-reaching results.

With no serial next month there will be room for at least five short stories, amongst the authors you can expect to see will be Philip E. High, Joseph Green and Steve Hall. Two new writers will probably be included—Russ Markham, who has just made his debut in *Science Fantasy*, and Archie Potts.

Story ratings for No. 118 were:

1. The Dawson Diaries (conclusion) - John Rackham
2. Dictator Bait - - - - - Philip E. High
3. Terminal - - - - - - Lee Harding
4. Think Of A Number - - - - - Steve Hall
5. The Analyser - - - - - Bill Spencer
A transference in Time between one person and another could produce a complicated sequence of events, especially for the people directly connected with the 'new' personality.

SCHIZOPHRENIC

by RICHARD GRAHAM

John said goodbye to Pete outside the pub and started his walk home. The night was clean and pleasant but he walked through the old town without enthusiasm. Pete's suggestion to come out and have a drink had lost the attraction it had exercised before the event, and his wife's implied suggestion to remain at home seemed, in retrospect, a much more desirable way of spending the evening. He pondered on this odd transformation which seemed to be a common occurrence with regard to Pete's suggestions. At the time the cheerful "Coming for a drink tonight, John?" had a magnetic and irresistible appeal; afterwards, when confronted with his wife in an acid mood, it was impossible to conceive of the idea as being in the least attractive. Every step brought him nearer to the second stage of the transformation, with a result which was clearly evident in his style of walking.

The streets emptied as he trudged away from the areas of pubs and cinemas. His footsteps sounded loud in the quiet air. All at once, as he turned down a narrow cobbled street, the world seemed to twist beneath him and jerk like a badly projected film. He stopped. A moment later a piece of the brick wall on his right dissolved out of existence. Two strangely dressed men appeared. They spoke to him politely and led him firmly through the gap in the wall.
John was completely astonished. The bright light on the other side of the wall blinded him. The two men seemed to surround him. He was dimly aware of a vast space and of machinery and constructions sprouting up around him, and of noise and of continuing to walk between the two men.

He thought he protested but his voice didn’t seem to be working. He tried to look round. He didn’t recognise anything. His world seemed to have disappeared.

One of the men spoke reassuringly to him and said that everything would be explained in due course. They reached one side of the vast space and entered some kind of glass-fronted office building. He was ushered into a lift, then along a passage and through an imposing door into a richly carpeted office. The men left him.

His bewilderment was still at maximum strength. He looked round the office. He noticed first something which looked like a slab of unsupported light; he then took in the man sitting behind it. He was stoutish and half bald and dressed in sleek silvery materials. He looked up from something resting on the slab of light.

“Ah yes, Mr. Raymond it will be, won’t it? Welcome aboard, sit down. Just come through have you? Nothing to it, is there. Now, what have we...” He looked down at the slab. “Ah yes, Dignum is the man for you. Well,” he said, getting up and coming round from behind the slab, “perhaps I can put you in the picture. It’s all a bit confusing for people when they first arrive here. You must be wondering... When did you say you came from? Twentieth, wasn’t it? Ah yes, very different, but one of our most attractive offers all the same. You must be wondering where this is and all that. Perhaps if I give you a view of what’s outside the studio, it’ll help.”

John had not yet managed, somehow, to get seated in the chair indicated, so he was forced to take a further shock standing up. A wall of the office appeared to dissolve and in its place a city appeared; the spires of some fantastic architecture jumped into being in front of him. He found the chair with a groping hand and sat down abruptly. Mr. Draycott continued.

“In terms of place, of course, you’re not very far from wherever—that is from your own home town. What we have taken the liberty—”
A side door to the office opened and a man came into the room. John recognised him immediately and jumped hurriedly out of his newly-found seat. The man was himself: his perfect double, clad in what looked like his own clothes.

“Ah Dignum,” said Mr. Draycott, smiling at the newcomer. “Come in. Meet our gracious host, who is taking our discourtesy in such a splendid spirit. We can always rely on the British of the twentieth. Mr. Raymond, this is—” He looked from one to the other—“Yes, that’s right, this is Dignum Crowther, and Dignum, this is Mr. Raymond.”

Dignum shook hands with an inarticulate John, studying him closely. Then he turned back to Mr. Draycott.

“I like the thoroughness of your staff, Paul; we’re really quite alike.”

“Thank you, Dignum,” said Mr. Draycott; “but of course the whole business depends on thoroughness in that direction. We have some wonderful craftsmen, I’m glad to say. But now: if our visitor will excuse you, you’ll probably want to be getting off. I envy you the trip. What else can we do for you before you go?”

“Personal effects? I still haven’t got a thing in my pockets except for a handkerchief.”

“Of course, I’m sorry. Mr. Raymond, I apologise for encroaching on you again, but I wonder if you would be prepared to loan us the contents of your pockets for what would be only a few minutes of your time. We will happily give you a signed guarantee against their safe return.”

John was forced to try his hand at speaking again. His voice had lost even more of his power, and emerged thin and hoarse.

“You want the contents of my pockets?”

“It would be very kind, though I’m sure we could make other arrangements if you felt inclined to keep possession.”

“What do you want them for?”

“Mr. Crowther here would like to make use of them for a short time. I understand your hesitation, Mr. Raymond; I suggest you make us the loan and accept our guarantee to the value of fifty doll—that is pounds.”

John’s resistance to suggestions was at an unusually low ebb. He turned out his pockets and handed over the contents.
“Very generous of you indeed, Mr. Raymond,” said Mr. Draycott. “Now, I think that completes everything. Dignum; they’ll be waiting for you down below. Have a good holiday. You’ve chosen well, there’s plenty of interest back there. I should like to see those four-wheeled vehicles in action myself. Anyway, you have the full literature. Mr. Raymond and I should see you in a few minutes time, and we’ll hear how you got on.”

“And I should see you in a week,” said Dignum.

“Quite right. Goodbye Dignum, best of luck. Enjoy yourself.”

Crowther left the office with a final nod. Mr. Draycott turned back to John.

“Now as I say, Mr. Raymond, we have a few minutes to wait. If you’d like to stay here in the office, I’ll do anything I can. You’ve really been very helpful to us.”

“I don’t quite understand,” said John weakly, sitting down for the second time, “just what’s happened.”

“Of course, I hadn’t finished explaining. Where were we? Ah yes, the city. This,” he said, pointing again at the incredible spires, “gives you an idea of the sort of place you’re in. Rather beautiful, isn’t it? But, as you must have guessed, we’ve also moved you in time. The present year is 2376. I’m really sorry I forgot to tell you that; that must have had you puzzled for a while.” He sat down at the slab of light again. “Yes, this is 2376.”

“But that doesn’t explain it,” said John, growing a little petulant at last. “What am I doing here? Why was I brought?”

“Ah yes, that’s a point as well. It’s one of the snags of time-travelling you see; you can’t send a man back unless you also bring a man forward. It’s a question of balance, you might say.”

“What’s special about me, then, why use me?”

“Simply, I’m afraid, because you bore a strong resemblance to our client, Mr. Crowther, which we could turn into a perfect resemblance with the aid of some really astonishing surgical devices we have. It’s an incredible age we live in, Mr. Raymond, this twenty-fourth century; I’m sure it would fascinate you. As a matter of fact, we would gladly arrange for you to have a week’s holiday here at our expense, but we generally find that our guests are anxious
to return to their own time as soon as possible. That’s one of the first surprises you get in this business. However, you’re more than welcome . . .”

“You mean, I can go home, almost straight away?” said John

“I’m sorry, I thought I’d made that clear. Dignum will be back in a few minutes, then we can send you straight off. Of course we shall have to set you down a week later than you left, because that’s the length of Dignum’s holiday, but I’m sure our compensation for that will make the idea seem quite attractive. Yes, you can go almost as soon as you like.”

There was a silence as John tried to absorb this information.

“Then this Dignum,” he said finally, “is going to pretend to be me for a week while he has a holiday.”

“That’s correct,” said Mr. Draycott with an encouraging smile.

“And that’s why he’s been made up to look like me.”

“No, that’s really an incidental. I should have explained that. It’s another of the snags of time-travelling; you have to get the physical features of the two situations almost identical before you can make a transfer. It’s a kind of resonance effect, they tell me, although that makes me none the wiser.”

“So anyway, he’s going to be there a week, and in a few minutes I’m going to be sent back to take up again where he leaves off.”

“You’ve got it.” Mr. Draycott clapped his hands together and got up. “That’s the score exactly. I must say again that we’re all very grateful to you for being so sporting and helpful. You’ve made this a very pleasant transaction.” He looked at his watch. “I think we can expect Dignum at any minute.”

John didn’t know what to say. It didn’t seem in order for him to be annoyed. And now that his fears had subsided somewhat, his mind drifted away from the immensities of the situation, and he began to think about his return. There would be a lot of explaining to do to his wife.

Dignum Crowther arrived on the cobbled street of the old town at exactly the same time that John Raymond left it, and in exactly the same place. An observer would scarcely
have noticed the change; a slight jump in the smoothness of the walking perhaps, but that would be all. Nothing sufficient to cause even the mildest suspicion or alarm.

Crowther continued along the street, following the route he had memorized. He was in a gay mood, and kept a lively eye open for any outstanding curiosities. The flickering gas street lamps caused him to stop and take from his pocket an object which looked very much like a fountain pen. He pointed it in the general direction of the lamp and pushed a concealed button in its base. He then returned it to his pocket with a smile, thinking of the time he would show the resultant photograph to his friends and tell them how frightfully quaint the twentieth century really was.

He produced his camera-pen on several more occasions before he reached the house of John Raymond. Here he paused to check the number on the gate and to survey the house: small and ordinary by the standards of the time, but intriguing to the visitor from the future. As he went up the path, he felt in his pockets for the key which John had transferred to him amongst his personal effects; finding it, he fitted it into the lock in the way he had been instructed and turned. He was pleased to find that the door opened smoothly. He went inside and found himself in a small hall. He took the key from the lock and shut the door carefully, watching the catch work. A voice called “John” from one of the rooms. He opened the door again and looked at the mechanism more closely, then watched it click home as he shut it. A thin woman of about thirty-five appeared from one of the doors which led off the hall.

“John, what on earth are you doing? You’re not going to start off trying to mend a door at this time of night.”

Dignum looked up briefly then turned back to the door.

“Not too bad at all,” he said, more to himself than her.

“Considering the resources they had available.”

He shut the door for the last time and straightened up.

“So you’re Alice,” he said, regarding her with interest for a moment, then letting his attention wander to the other features of the hall. “And this is a typical class C2 house. Really amazing.” His eye caught sight of a light switch, and he went over to it and started switching it on and off in delight.
“My God, you’re rolling drunk,” said Alice, moving towards him. “I told you not to go out to that pub. Here, let me smell your breath.”

“What?” said Dignum, still manipulating the switch; “No. Go away. I’m not accustomed to having my breath smelled. I suggest you get me some typical class C2 food and drink while I have a look round. Wives do that sort of thing here, don’t they?” He opened the nearest door to hand and disappeared into a room.

Alice stood stock still for a moment then followed abruptly. She found him examining some china ornaments on the mantleshef in the sitting-room.

“What have you been drinking, John Raymond, just tell me that. You’ve gone crazy. You’ve seen your own house before. Are you listening? For goodness sake look at me, or I shall hit you or something.”

Dignum put down the ornament and stared at her in curiosity.

“Hit me? Would you really hit me?”

“Yes. I’ll hit you. Unless you start behaving sensibly and tell me what’s happened to you.”

“Do you often get upset like this?” asked Dignum. “Say more than once or twice a week? Don’t you find it makes life rather unpleasant?”

“Oh, stop your drunken joke. I can’t stand it, John. Stop it.”

“I’m not drunk and I’m not joking. And I wouldn’t stop it for the world. This is splendid stuff, class C2 social life in the raw. What generally happens now? Do we make it up and go to bed together, or do we spread it out for days?”

“You have, you’ve gone crazy,” said Alice, a trace of uncertainty in her voice. “You’ve been drinking all evening, then Pete or somebody put you up to this stunt. Well you can jolly well sober up by yourself. I’m not going to endure this farce of trying to be reasonable. You’d better be different in the morning.”

There was a swish of skirts and her angular figure left the room; then her footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Dignum seemed scarcely aware that she’d gone. He turned his attention back to the room and, pulling out his
camera, took a number of photographs. He then wandered from room to room examining everything with interest. He sampled various foodstuffs in the kitchen and got lost in analysing the function of the different bits of machinery. In the hall his eye caught sight of the telephone, and recalling that it was the current instrument of communication he lifted it from its cradle. After some debate about which end was which, he put the earpiece to his ear.

"Number please," said a voice.

"Good Lord," said Dignum, taken aback for a moment.

"Is this an era of identification numbers?"

"Number please."

"How do I find out what my identification number is? Should I have an identity card or something?" He started feeling in his pockets. "I want to know my number."

There was a silence then the voice said suspiciously,

"You want to know your own number?"

"Yes, how do I find it?"

"It should be written on your phone."

Dignum glanced down. "So it is. Just a moment, though, there's a mistake. There are two of us in this house, and there's only one number on the phone."

The voice became even more suspicious. "What number are you calling please?"

"Calling? A number? Oh I see, that's the way you make contact, is it, by calling numbers down the thing. No, well leave that end of it for the moment, I'm intrigued by this identification number business. I suppose this number here is mine, and my wife puts a W on the end or something?"

"If you're not making a call would you please replace the receiver."

"A crowd waiting to go, is there? Well, I'll have a stab." He pitched his voice up a few tones and raised the volume.

"One four six seven two three nine zero eight three—"

There was a click and he felt somehow as though he had lost contact with the voice. He waited a few moments for something to happen, then put the receiver back in its rest. Before leaving the phone he copied the number on it down in a notebook: ROE 5271. Then he took a few more photographs and found his way up to bed.

The next morning he carefully avoided speaking before the breakfast was actually on the table. Alice looked fretful.
and upset and kept silent as well. Dignum happily ate his way through a bowl of porridge, bacon and sausage, toast and marmalade. He tried to be pleasant.

"Really very good, Alice, considering my income and everything."

She looked up in surprise, then her face hardened.

"Don't start worrying about your income again, John," she said, getting up and collecting the plates together. Dignum looked at her critically.

"It's a pity if you're going to be like this," he said. "I think you misunderstood about last night—"

"For goodness sake, don't mention last night. I want to forget about it. There's no need to tell me, I know it won't happen again, so don't say any more. We'll forget it."

"What fascinating behaviour! The trouble is, one can have too much of a good thing. I have a feeling I won't be seeing very much of you in the next few days, my dear Alice, though I may drop in occasionally to add a bit of spice to my affairs. Before I go, though, perhaps you could tell me what there is of interest in the town; I like historic sort of things in particular."

Alice banged some dishes down on the table.

"You're carrying this too far, John Raymond," she said, and left the room in a temper. Dignum shrugged and swallowed the rest of the coffee. He forgot all about Alice and started making plans for the day. A few minutes later he left the house, whistling.

His first call was at the office at which John worked. There he tried, out of curiosity, to do the simple tasks expected of him, but found them impossible. He left again, explaining that he was ill and wouldn't be back for a week. He took a photograph of their faces just as he went through the door.

For the rest of the day he was absorbed in the marvels of the era. The noisy bumping buses delighted him; every shop seemed like a souvenir shop; the cinema held him spellbound. The food was disappointing, but he was prepared for that; somehow it added authenticity. It was late when he arrived home and Alice was in bed. Looking at her, he wondered about joining her. Wasn't it true that class C2 marriage conferred unrestricted sexual privileges. But her appearance awakened no desire, and in any case the tiresome
woman would probably have objected, despite the class C2 marriage structure. It was still a very inhibited era. He went to bed, thinking that that was the one disappointing feature of the holiday.

The next day he delved into history. For the history that was just past, he visited museums, war memorials, and libraries. For the history that was being made, he discovered the television; that evening he sat mutely in front of the set at home, totally absorbed, while Alice, misconstruing his silence, became more and more distracted and fidgeted away the evening, refusing herself to yield to speech. In the end she escaped from the exasperating situation by going haughtily to bed, leaving Dignum to watch the screen until it finally went blank.

The day after that he discovered the English public house. Alcoholic drinks seemed quite nauseating to him, but the atmosphere of the different pubs he found very exciting. He spent all the time possible in one or other of them; talking to the regulars and soaking up the spirit of the age. He learned many fascinating things in his conversations; among others, that in a certain sector of the population the era was not quite as inhibited as he had supposed. When he arrived home that evening he was accompanied by a platinum blonde called Suzy. Alice was still up. Suzy seemed reluctant to meet his wife, but Dignum assured her that it would be all right and took her into the living room. Alice looked up as they entered.

"Hullo Alice, still up are you?" said Dignum. "Just as well. I wonder if you’d mind sleeping in another room tonight? We have a visitor and I’d like her to sleep with me. Suzy, Alice."

The colour left Alice’s face and when she spoke her voice sounded as if it was about to crack. "John, get her out of here, or I shall never be able to look at you again."

"Oh come now, it’s not that serious," said Dignum. "She’ll only be here a night or so, and then I don’t suppose it will ever happen again. A change of partner now and then does a man good, don’t you know that?"

Alice was silent a second, the tension in her pale face giving way to a great weariness.

"No, I didn’t know," she said finally, "but if that’s that . . . have a good night. I hope you have everything you want.
I'll sleep in the spare room."
   She got slowly to her feet and left the room.
   "Why on earth did you go and marry her," said Suzy.
   "I don't like her."
   "No; I find her a bit of a bore myself at times," replied
Dignum, as he led her out of the sitting-room and up the
stairs.

The fourth day of his visit passed pleasantly enough, once
he had got rid of Suzy. The pubs, the bus-rides, the bad
meals, had not yet ceased to absorb him. The television, too,
drew him back home at an earlier hour than was necessary,
and held his attention for the rest of the evening. Alice
seemed even more preoccupied than usual. Eventually,
forcing herself, she spoke.
   "John, I must talk to you."
   "Oh? This should be interesting. Go ahead."
   "Just listen for once. Do you realise how much you've
changed in the last few days, how—" She stopped and
controlled herself better. "You may not remember what it
was like a few days ago, but you were totally different,
John. Your personality has changed completely. I've heard
of cases like this, I don't think it's anything to worry about
but, please, I think you ought to see a psychiatrist. Just to
see what he thinks."
   "Splendid idea. Get one in for tomorrow," said Dignum,
his eyes still on the television.
   "I don't know when you're serious any more. Will you
see him?"
   "Yes of course. Now that you've suggested it, I find the
idea immensely intriguing. Get talking into that telephone
thing and tell them your husband's mentally sick."

Alice sighed and didn't look any happier. She hoped the
psychiatrist would be very experienced.

Dignum spent the morning of his fifth day collecting
souvenirs. In the shops he found the system of openly
displaying goods rather confusing at first; eventually he
realised that he was expected to pay for them at the time
of acquisition. He felt his earlier mistakes were quite under-
standable and didn't worry about them unduly. In the
afternoon he returned home to keep his appointment with
the psychiatrist.
The man arrived at about three o'clock and Alice answered the door. From the living-room, Dignum could hear her mumbling some final preparatory remarks, then he was shown in and she retreated.

"Hallo, Mr. Raymond," he said in a quiet friendly way. "I'm Mr. Bronson. I'm glad you decided to see me."

"Hallo, Mr. Bronson," said Dignum in the same sort of way. "I'm delighted you could come. So you're a psychiatrist. A better symbol of the times I couldn't wish for." He got out his pen and took several rapid photographs.

"Nothing to sign yet, Mr. Raymond. But if I might sit down and take some notes? Good. Sit down yourself, I would. This may take a little time."

"Yes of course," said Dignum as if he had just remembered something. "The therapeutic situation. Sit down and relax. Very significant. It's always been an interest of mine, the uh, history of psychology, it has such great potential. But I must admit I'm a little vague on one or two points. Would it have been Freud who started off this kind of technique, relaxation and so forth?"

Mr. Bronson looked up from his notes where he had apparently become engrossed and smiled slightly. "It's unusual for people to know much about what a psychiatrist really does today. The notorious Freud is still largely misunderstood I think. It is true that he used to try and relax his patients, but doctors of all kinds have been doing the very same thing for a long time. There's much more to the psychoanalytic situation than that. And in any case I'm not here to psychoanalyse you, Mr. Raymond. I'd just like you to tell me something about the last week or two—what you've done, how you've felt and so on. Then we can—"

"You're not going to psychoanalyse me?" interrupted Dignum from the seat he had found in the meantime. "I thought that was the whole point. That's realy tragic, I was looking forward to a good chat about sex and aggression. I think you'd find me an interesting case. But I'm not mistaken am I? Psychoanalysis and its variants form the basis of today's psychotherapy."

Mr. Bronson remained unruffled. "That's more true of America than here. In this country we do very little full psychoanalysis. It consumes too much time."
Dignum laughed out loud. "I'm glad you realise that, anyway. But this is even more absurd than I thought. If you don't psychoanalyse, what do you do?"

"We simply do whatever we can, with the time and techniques available." Mr. Bronson scribbled a note unnoticed. "We know that we're compromising and guessing half the time, but there isn't a simple answer to mental illness."

"The techniques available! In other words you chop out bits of the brain and dole out good advice. My friend, Mr. Bronson, you don't realise how ridiculous this is. The principle of reinforcement was first formulated, if I remember correctly, some fifty years ago: in fifty years you could have developed the basis of a good workable therapy. Of course you wouldn't have some of the—but never mind about that. Instead of that, anyway, psychoanalysis is about the only thing there is: a technique which takes years to perform, is only available to people with time and money, and which nobody has even proved to work! I wouldn't mind betting that that is one of the anomalies which this fascinating age is remembered for."

"This is surprising," said the psychiatrist patiently. "You seem to have a good deal of knowledge about certain aspects of psychology. I'm aware of Thorndike's law of effect, and I even know something about its later developments in the hands of people like Hull. You may well be right, that their results should have found greater application to clinical work. But this is still a theoretical problem. I'm not a behaviourist. As a doctor I must do what I can for people now. And I think we're straying from the subject. Do you not have enough confidence in me to tell me what's been happening to you recently?"

"No. I assure you it would be a complete waste of time for both of us. I'm much more interested in what's been happening to you recently; what it is you've done for people, and what's happened to the people you've done it for."

"To tell you the truth I'd enjoy a discussion of that kind, but it's hardly why I'm here. You expressed a willingness to see me; you must be aware of some problem or change. Do you think it possible that you're attacking psychiatry to avoid discussion of this problem?"
Dignum left his seat energetically; something in his manner caused the psychiatrist to do the same.

"You must know, Mr. Bronson," said Dignum, "that I have no problems at all. In fact I'm probably the healthiest specimen you've ever seen in your life, though I wouldn't expect you to realise that with your methods. You must think of me as someone entirely different from this John Raymond individual, who is probably loaded with the typical conflicts of the culture. I seem to remember that sex and aggression are the chief trouble spots at the present time—I'm sure that Raymond has problems in both directions. But, let me inform you, I do not. If you're in doubt about the sex, have a word with my friend who patronises the Wild Boar. As for aggression, that is simply demonstrated. At the moment I feel very much like hitting you and every psychiatrist who so incredibly ignores the scientific findings in his subject. Being normal of course, I do so."

Dignum bunched his fist and slammed it into the jaw of the unfortunate Mr. Bronson, who staggered back into his chair and for the moment was unable to speak. Dignum massaged his hand with satisfaction.

"There now," he said sympathetically, "I'm sorry if that hurt, but I feel a great deal better. You can hit me now if you like."

"Mr. Raymond, please sit down," said the psychiatrist shakily. "I'm not convinced that you're entirely free of problems. I rather think you have a big one."

"Rubbish. And I don't in the least feel like sitting down. I'm in a nicely aggressive mood. I must say you took that rather calmly though; aren't there laws against hitting people?"

"You needn't worry that I shall try to prosecute you for assault. That would hardly improve the situation."

"But of course, you must, that's an excellent idea, prosecute me for assault. We'll go down to a police station and clear the matter up straight away. The wicked must be punished."

"It's extraordinary, but you seem to be living in a world of complete unreality. Perhaps something drastic is in order. The threat of punishment might restore the world of reality."

"Sound reasoning, Mr. Bronson. Let's go and visit the police."
Dignum and the psychiatrist left the house with Dignum in a happy mood. Just before leaving he called out to Alice that he had assaulted the psychiatrist and they were going to the police. He didn’t wait for her reply.

Expertly he guided Mr. Bronson to the nearest police station, a building which had attracted his curiosity several days ago. Inside, he presented himself to the desk sergeant and launched into a full account of the circumstances which had led to his grievous misdemeanour. At the conclusion of the narrative his enthusiasm got the better of him and he struck the psychiatrist a second blow on the jaw. This time Mr. Bronson sank to the ground and didn’t try to get up again.

The sergeant looked strangely at Dignum and called a constable to his side.

"Take a look at that, Bill," he said, pointing to the psychiatrist’s limp form with a pencil. "This madman here just knocked him down to prove to me that he’d assaulted him five minutes ago."

"Well I’ll be . . ."

"Better see if he’s all right, give him a hand. He’s a psychiatrist, which I suppose explains it all." The sergeant licked the end of his pencil. "Well you’ve got yourself an assault charge now, if that makes you any happier. Any other murders or anything you want to tell me about?"

"No, that’ll do for the moment. I expect you want my name and so on—"

"Yes, all right, give us time. I might be able to pin something on you myself. Bill, do you reckon this funny looking chap here fits the description of the bloke that’s been walking out of shops with things?"

"Could do, sergeant."

"Oh that," said Dignum. "Yes, I did have some trouble about finance, but I straightened it out in the end."

"Glad to hear it," said the sergeant. "Right, that’s a couple anyway. Let’s have the name and address."

Dignum supplied them. Then on a sudden thought he pulled a notebook from his pocket. "I expect you’ll want my identification number as well. This is it: ROE 5271. My wife hasn’t got one."

The sergeant looked disgusted. "What can you make of the human race, Bill, when a bloke comes into a police
station with his psychiatrist, knocks him out, then tells you his wife hasn’t got an identification number? ”

“Queer, isn’t it?”

“Very queer, Bill.”

Dignum concluded his interview with the sergeant, said goodbye to Mr. Bronson, who had recovered somewhat, and decided to go home until the pubs opened. He judged it to have been a very satisfactory day.

On the sixth day of his holiday he received a summons to appear before the magistrate.

On the seventh day, of course, he left.

Dignum arrived back at Mr. Draycott’s office exactly nine minutes after he had left it. John was listening in silent bewilderment to something Mr. Draycott was telling him. At Dignum’s entrance he was forgotten while the two men discussed the success of the holiday. Then at last Mr. Draycott apologised to John for his rudeness, summoned an escort for him, and persuaded Dignum to return his personal possessions.

“Once again our sincere thanks, Mr. Raymond,” he said.

“In fact we’d be glad if you’d accept this gift from the twenty-fourth century.” He produced a silver pen and showed it to John. “This is a variant of the device which Dignum used to take photographs in your time. This end is an ordinary pen. But when you press this button the other end starts making electronic movies. And this button projects whatever you’ve taken on to a wall.” He demonstrated by projecting the shot he had taken of John’s puzzled face.

“You can shoot sequences up to about an hour before projecting back. Then of course you use it again and so on. The power supply should last about five years.”

He handed it over with a smile and John thanked him. Then he was taken out into the great studio by one of the men who had collected him originally, and placed in the mock-up of the scene he knew so well. Following instructions, he walked steadily down the “road” and felt for the second time the sensation of the world twisting slightly beneath him. He continued walking until he was convinced that the street-lamps and houses and cobbles were real and that he was back in the world he knew. Then he stopped and wondered just what had happened.
By the time he arrived home he had decided that although it wasn’t long, to him, since he had been drinking, he wasn’t drunk; he had decided that he could expect a week’s damage to have been done by his acquaintance from the future. He entered his house with a crumbling sensation in his stomach.

It was the later part of the evening, and having looked tentatively for Alice in the sitting-room, he decided she must be in bed. But passing through into the kitchen, he found her sitting quietly there doing some sewing. She looked at him coldly when he entered but did not speak.

“Alice?” he began hopefully.

“I’m not getting you any food,” she answered in a dead voice.

“No of course not. I just thought, now I’m back, I’d tell you.”

“What do you want?”

John paused. The interview was not going as he had expected. She was not shouting at him, she didn’t even seem angry. He had never seen her look so weary and defeated. He moved towards her. After all he would have a chance to explain. And he had a silver pen to add conviction to his story.

“Look,” he began, “I may have seemed very different this past week, but you must believe that it wasn’t me who’s been living with you, that is—”

Alice’s perceptions were very quick. Hope and a kind of anguish danced across her face as, without listening to his words, she comprehended the numerous details of manner which told her that her husband had changed again.

“—I know I can never convince you that I’ve just jumped ahead a week, but—”

He got no further, for suddenly he found Alice crying in his arms. He felt a great relief and a strange sense of renewal as he comforted her. Explanations, it seemed, were over; he had a feeling the subject would not be raised again. The silver pen burned in his pocket. He felt oddly he would now have to get rid of it or keep it hidden. He hadn’t used it to prove his story; and that somehow excluded using it in the future.

The following day life became a burden again. He learned of his summons to appear before the magistrates on what, it seemed to him, was a long list of impossibly serious
charges. The psychiatrist phoned and suggested bravely that they have another consultation; always a prey to the suggestions of others, John agreed to see him. Amongst the mail which Dignum hadn’t bothered to open, he discovered a letter from his firm, telling him that unless he supplied adequate reasons for his continued absence he would be permanently dismissed from their employ. He became a very worried man indeed, supported only by the unexpected change in his relationship to his wife.

The psychiatrist came and went, after John had feebly tried to explain what had happened. The visit to his place of work, the attempted explanation there, John felt unable to face at the moment. The magistrate he had no choice but to face, and he stood in the court with a sinking heart while witnesses piled up unshakeable testimony against him.

The psychiatrist admitted that he had been struck by the accused, but tried to exonerate him by a discussion of his remarkable split personality. The sergeant was not so kind and expressed the view that an asylum would be the best place for the accused to be lodged. Several shopkeepers were called and testified to the theft of articles such as postcards and magazines. Other witnesses appeared and gave evidence which would have surprised even Dignum. The magistrate conducted the proceedings with a kind of detachment that frightened John. In his imagination the gravity of his offences grew to proportions requiring trial by a higher court; from there it was but a short step to a picture of long years behind prison bars.

At last the evidence was taken and the magistrate addressed himself directly to John. “I think we have heard enough, Mr. Raymond, to be convinced of the range of your activities during the past few days. There seems little doubt that you are guilty of, among other things, both theft and assault. These are serious crimes. But I find one extenuating circumstance which is, I think, critical. Mr. Bronson and also your wife have informed me that the outbreak of these activities was accompanied by a complete change in your personality, and that that change has now been reversed. Mr. Bronson tells me that the change is unlikely to recur, at least for some time. It seems unfair to punish a man for something, so to speak, someone else has done, and I there-
fore propose to send you from this court without fine or punishment. The only condition I make is that Mr. Bronson examine you again in a few months time. I shall also contact your employers and suggest that they reinstate you, subject to your satisfactory attendance.”

Surprise could be felt amongst the few people in court at the leniency of this ruling; most surprised of all was John. It took him some time to clear away the cloud of worry in which he had surrounded himself. It was evening before he felt the full effects of a deep relief.

It was several days before he realised that he had lost the silver pen.

In another century, another trial was taking place. The court, however, was a higher one, and grander in appearance, and differences in procedure were apparent. It seemed that five men stood accused of a crime. A man, dressed in an official robe of shining material, and whose full title was Prosecutor to the Court of Preventative Law, was reading from a printed sheet.

“I am instructed by the court to present the following specific charges in this, the case of the State versus the organisation known as Twenty-Four Centuries Holidays Ltd. Mr. Paul Draycott, as manager and owner of the organisation referred to, is here charged with illegally contracting to transport persons in time, for purposes of personal gain, and further for actually engaging in such transportation on a number of occasions. There are ten additional sub-charges, to be presented later in the hearing. Mr. Dignum Crowther, as a client of the said organisation, is here charged with knowingly visiting the past by exchange for unauthorized purposes. There is one additional sub-charge: Mr. Dignum is charged with creating a severe disturbance in the time visited, necessitating the exchange of a police agent with a Mr. Collins, magistrate to a court of the year 1962, and the recovery of a silver pen of high potential anachronism. This sub-charge will be considered together with the original charge. Mr. Lesley Robinson, as a client of the said organisation—”

The Prosecutor continued to list the charges to be dealt with in the present session. There were quite a number of them.

Richard Graham.
The big mystery was how the Sirian’s had attained a warp drive before Earthmen and without the latter knowing. Carpenter’s job was to find out, but it wasn’t made easy because the Sirians didn’t know the reason either.

A Question Of Drive
by H. B. CASTON

From his seat in the bar lounge, Carpenter could just see into the cavernous, vaulted exhibition hall. He grimaced and returned his attention to the glass of imported Scotch at his elbow. Why was Sirian architecture so uninspired? All the large buildings were simply great oblong boxes with vaulted ceilings; all the small buildings were small oblong boxes with vaulted ceilings.

Four days he’d been here. Four days, during which he’d beamed unwillingly from his Company’s exhibition stand with its model spaceships and its mock-up of a control room, down at the throngs of blue-faced Sirians. Four evenings and nights spent in a Sirian hotel, eating Sirian food, listening to the boring small talk of the Company’s animated little agent on Sirius IV. At least, Carpenter told himself, the man was a Terran, which was something.

He had not heard a word about the new drive yet, but that was not really surprising. It must be pretty high up the Sirian Navy’s secret list.

He sipped his Scotch. It was over a month now since he’d sat in the boardroom back on Terra and learned for the first
time about the new Sirian warp drive. Over a month ago, he thought, but the sleep-freeze during the voyage made it seem merely like last week.

"I can’t show you the report, John," the Chairman had said, squinting at Carpenter from beneath bushy grey brows, "but what it amounts to is that a Sirian Navy Scout-J lifted from Lunar last week. A little over eleven minutes later, the same Scout-J was in orbit around Sirius IV waiting for planetfall instructions!"

Carpenter had shuffled his enormous bulk on to the edge of his chair. "But, Mr. Holland, that kind of trip would take over three weeks even on our latest polarity warp. How can we be certain it was the same ship that landed on Sirius IV?"

"The Resonance Pattern Identifier stations at Lunar and Sirius both confirmed it. You’ve been a spaceship engineer over twenty years—need I say more?"

Carpenter had nodded and lapsed into puzzled silence. It was the first Sirian invention he had ever heard about. Usually the Sirians weren’t original enough to devise a new cook-book recipe, let alone a virtually instantaneous space drive!

"Naturally," Holland had continued, "Terran Intelligence are already working on it. But we want that drive, John. We need it if we’re to stay in business another five years."

The engineer had caught the tone in the other man’s voice, and knew what he meant.

Martian Matter Transmissions were slowly strangling the space-freight business. After only a year in existence, M.M.T., were out of the experimental stage and slowly winning over new cargo contracts. Photon rockets and polarity warps were no match against the speed of a matter transmitter. So far, M.M.T., had contented themselves with the shipment of raw materials and crude ores, but their techniques were improving all the time. Already, shares had plunged alarmingly in merchant service circles.

Buying out M.M.T., was out of the question, of course. They had the backing of the Martian Treasury. The Mars government wasn’t going to pass over a chance of their catching up on the milk-and-honey economy of Terra.

In a few years the situation would become serious. And when it did, it would not be a mere question of shareholders’ money; the entire Terran way of life would be at stake.
So here was Carpenter, officially, Astral Spaceways' Technical Representative at the annual Trades Exhibition of Sirius IV—Kandal, as the locals called their planet. And unofficially, he had instructions to get hold of the new drive by any means at his disposal.

It was early evening. Carpenter's Terran wrist-watch told him little about Kandal's thirty-nine hour day, but a new influx of visitors indicated that business outside had finished for the day, and people were out seeking an evening's diversion.

There was a sudden commotion at the entrance to the exhibition hall. A couple of blue faced-Sirian commissionaires came through the bar frog-marching a third blue-faced, shifty looking character. Swiftly, the trio vanished into the foyer. Carpenter watched, faint amusement crinkling his grey eyes. Then, presently, the two commissionaires, rid of their charge, strolled back in, their broad, duck-egg blue features utterly deadpan.

Carpenter climbed out of his chair and approached the Sirians. "Pickpocket?" he asked casually.

One of them nodded. "We get them all the time," he said.

"We throw them out on sight."

"You know them by sight?"

"Most of them. That one, especially. An incorrigible rogue. Name of Svann. Watch your wallet when he's around!"

"Thanks." Carpenter smiled faintly as the two resumed their duties among the crowd. Then he hurried outside, his glass of Scotch forgotten.

He found Svann leaning against a wall, moodily dusting himself down. He strolled easily up to the Sirian.

"Hurt?"

"No, no!" Svann replied, and spat accurately in the gutter.

"It's getting so an honest citizen can't visit a public place without being accused of theft! Aar, those uniformed ghunks!"

Carpenter grinned and offered his cigarettes.

"Thanks," Svann grunted. He peered at Carpenter in the darkness. "You are a Terran?"

"Yes."

"In the spaceship business?"

"When it suits me to be," Carpenter murmured slyly, "plenty of other ways to make a fast credit. Let's get a drink someplace."
Without further talk, the Sirian led the way through a series of dark alleys to a cellar bar where they found a poorly lit table. Carpenter ordered two glasses of Scotch.

"What's your name, Terran?" Svann asked.

"Carpenter, what's yours?"

"Venhar."

"That's funny, I'd heard you were named Svann," the engineer said softly.

Svann winced and threw a sharp glare across the table.

"You seem to know much. What do you want?"

"Just some information."

"Aar, information. An expensive commodity."

Carpenter picked up his drink and inspected it. "I realise that," he said.

"I may be able to help you," Svann said in a careful voice, "and then again, I may not. I should of course need proof of your good faith."

The engineer took a hundred credit note from his wallet and slid it across the table. "I'm not the police."

Svann's six-fingered hand flashed and the money was gone.

"I think I shall accept your statement unproven. What exactly are you seeking, Carpenter?"

"Sirian Naval Research has an instantaneous warp. You've probably heard of it."

"An instantaneous warp . . ." Svann's head wagged slowly from side to side. "This is news to me. Still, it might be so."

"It is so, and I want it."

"It would entail your entering the Research Station. The security arrangements there would make such a venture difficult."

"But not impossible?"

"Carpenter," the Sirian grinned, "with the right conditions at the right time, nothing is impossible." He finished his drink in one noisy gulp. "Now, tell me as much as you know about this new drive."

"It's rather difficult to explain in everyday terms . . ."

"I spent four years in the Navy, Carpenter, before I was, arr, invalided out." Svann interrupted.

The Terran grunted. Four Sirian years amounted to around eighteen Terran years. Idly, he wondered why the Sirian Navy had seen fit to dispense with Svann's services. He recounted briefly what he knew.
Carpenter whistled through his teeth. That was over half his total funds. “I’ll be frank with you Svann,” he said. “I don’t have that amount of money.” He consulted his pocket-book. “The best I could manage would be . . . twelve thousand.”

“Twelve thousand? Arr . . . Very well, it is a deal, Carpenter.”

The Sirian, Carpenter decided, hadn’t made much of a job of hesitating. He wondered if he should have tried beating the price down to ten thousand. Still, too late now.

“I can make arrangements for two days from now,” Svann said. “Can you be at the bar we visited—bringing the money, of course?”

“I’ll be there.” After concluding the final details, Carpenter broke the circuit.

A frown creased the engineer’s heavy features as waves of doubt washed over his mind. Svann might not turn the whole business over to the police, but once the Sirian had his hands on the twelve thousand credits, his next move could be anyone’s guess. And even supposing Svann did get him aboard the ship, what guarantee had he that it would be the one fitted with the new warp?

Deep in thought, Carpenter took a small pocket blaster from his suitcase and slipped it carefully into his pocket.

A keen wind whipped round Carpenter’s legs as, two nights later, he scrambled on top of the old outbuilding. With brief stabs of light from a hand torch he located an ancient, grimy ventilator grill in the masonry. He took an envelope from inside his tunic and fastened it to the back of the grill with adhesive tape. He looked round. No-one in sight. He climbed to the ground and hurried to his rendezvous with Svann at the bar a few blocks away.

Svann was waiting in the doorway. “You’re late, Carpenter,” he greeted.


“You have the money?”

Carpenter handed the Sirian an envelope. “Six thousand there. You get the rest when I get what I want.”

Svann frowned. “You mistrust me, my friend.”

“Let’s just call it insurance, Svann.”

“Come,” grunted the other, and led the way down an alley. A few minutes later, Carpenter was bundled hurriedly into a waiting turbo-car.
The driver of the turbo was a complete stranger, and Svann made no attempt at introduction. They sped through the city and out over the drab, bleak countryside of Kandal. On the top of one hill, a stark, brash, new building made Carpenter grimace. It was the new M.M.T., receiving station.

After a half-hour’s drive, the masts and squat, barrack-like buildings of the Naval Research Station came into view in the distance. The turbo slowed at the next bend and came to a halt.

“Not the first security check,” Svann explained in a low voice.

“Do not worry. Everything is arranged.”

After a brief exchange of words between the turbo driver and the security guard, they drove on.

There were two more similar stops, and then they approached the boundary gate of the Research Station. Without hesitation, the driver swung the turbo into the opening and turned in the direction of a solitary ship standing on the launching pad. Carpenter recognised the silent, black shape of a Scout-J.

Fifty yards from the great fins, they stopped. Svann clambered out and motioned Carpenter to do the same.

As the turbo door slammed after them, Carpenter noticed for the first time the Navy crest painted on the side. Svann had certainly made thorough preparations. The engineer had heard of the corruption that flourished on Sirian worlds, of course, but to be able to buy oneself a look at the Navy’s latest brainchild for a few thousand credits . . .

His thoughts were abruptly cut off by the hiss of an opening airlock. Thirty feet above his head a five foot slit of blue light appeared, expanded to a thick line, then to a rectangle. Svann removed his finger from the airlock control button on the edge of the fin. The ship was open for inspection.

As the slender, flexible ladder wheezed downwards, Svann came and stood by Carpenter’s side. “After you, my friend,” he said.

Carpenter shrugged and climbed the ladder, the Sirian following a few rungs behind.

It was not the engineer’s first time aboard a Scout-J, and with little difficulty he found his way to the control room. Svann followed silently.

He glanced quickly round at the vaguely familiar controls. He took a more thorough look. There was nothing new that he could see. He swung on Svann.
"What guarantee have I that this is the ship with the new drive? I don't see any controls for it."
"We made a bargain, Carpenter," the Sirian told him steadily. "You wanted to see the ship which surveyed your moon. This is that ship. It is the only Scout-J based here." He reached for a book from a rack. "Inspect the log if you wish."

Carpenter scowled and took the log-book. Svann was right, he realised, as he flipped the pages. This was the ship that had made the survey, and then made the return voyage in virtually no time flat. The two log entries for lifting and planetfall had the same date; that much Carpenter could gather from the Sirian hand-writing. The two entries were the last ones in the book. Obviously the ship had not been in space since the voyage in question.

"Let's take a look at the engine room," Carpenter muttered, throwing the log book on the desk.
There was nothing new in the engine room, either. Carpenter frowned at the familiar photon tubes and warp generators, all Terran design, and made locally under licence.
Slowly, the engineer turned to face Svann. "I don't get it. There's no special equipment here. And yet..." His voice faded and he shook his head worriedly.
The Sirian turned to the companionway. "It is time we left, Carpenter," he said gently. "There is no new drive. I would have heard of it had it existed."
"But there must be some explanation!"
"Perhaps," Svann answered.
Carpenter caught the hint of hidden knowledge in the other's tone. "Svann! What else do you know?"
"You wanted to see the ship, Carpenter, and you have seen it. A bargain is a bargain."
"And part of the bargain is six thousand credits back in town, hidden only I know where!"
The Sirian sighed. "Very well. The crew on the survey voyage consisted of a junior lieutenant and two cadets. The peculiar times entered in the log, it has been decided, were due to errors on the part of the cadets. The officer was severely reprimanded for his lack of vigilance."
Carpenter was silent. Not even the Sirian brass could be that stupid, surely! What of the Resonance Pattern Identifier results? The R.P.I., on a ship was like fingerprints on a man.
The only way to alter the resonance pattern of a spaceship was to tear it apart and rebuild it. No, the R.P.I., couldn’t be wrong. But, of course, the Sirians didn’t have R.P.I., equipment, so they didn’t make routine checks. In fact, come to think of it, the Sirians had nothing of their own in the technical line. Even the turbo outside would have a Terran designed motor unit. The whole darned business, Carpenter felt, was completely screwy.

“There is no new drive, Carpenter,” Svann repeated.
“Come. We must not be caught here.”

The engineer nodded. Svann was right. With a sigh, he followed the Sirian to the airlock and down the ladder.

He was about three rungs from the bottom when the first blaster bolt smacked against the hull a few feet from his head. He whipped round to see another turbo-car hurtling towards them, occasional blaster flashes dancing in the window frames.

“Patrol!” Svann snapped. “Back in the ship, quickly!”

Carpenter felt the ladder shake as the Sirian threw his weight upon it immediately below him. With half his mind, as he raced for the airlock, the engineer heard the screech of wheels as their turbo and its unknown driver fled into the night.

Then, he was back in the ship, sweating under the blue illumination. With a trembling hand he grabbed Svann by the armpit and hauled him aboard.

They were not a moment too soon. The last thing they heard as the airlock swooshed shut was the grinding brakes of the patrol turbo.

“Control room! Come!” Svann gasped, and ran for the companionway.

They stood panting before the control desk.

“We shall have to lift, Carpenter,” said the Sirian. “If we are caught here, we shall be shot.”

“Where can we go? As soon as we lift, this ship’ll be hounded all over the system!”

“We can drop on the other side of Kandal—in a forest, perhaps—and work it out from there.” Svann punched the energising button and threw himself into the pilot’s couch.

“There is no time to lose!”

Hurriedly, Carpenter clambered into the co-pilot’s position. Staring at Svann, he found himself wondering just what the Sirian had done in his Navy days.
“Were you a Navy pilot?” he asked as they waited for the drive to warm up.

“Navigator.”

“Cashiered?”

There was a short hesitation, then Svann muttered, “If you must know, I thought it provident to resign.”

“Am I allowed to know why?”

“Drug running,” the Sirian sighed.

The whine of the generators rose steadily, and at last, vanished beyond sonic range. Svann pressed the firing button. In his time away from space, he had apparently forgotten nothing about handling a ship.

The slight jerk as the gravity plates cut in told Carpenter they had lifted. He watched dumbly while Svann leaned forward and switched on the viewplates and radar scanners.

They were well out from Kandal now. Svann glanced keenly from one instrument to another, presumably deciding on their course, and mentally planning a likely landing spot.

Carpenter was the first to spot it. They had been in space for perhaps ten minutes. “Ship!” he yelled. “Two-fifty degrees!” Then, realising that the Sirian used a different navigation principle, supplemented his shout by pointing at the blob of light on the port-quarter viewplate.

Svann jerked his head round. “Coming up quickly, too,” he muttered. He turned to Carpenter. “If we are caught, there is no hope. I have made no calculations for a warp. Are you prepared to take a chance on where we shall come out?”

Carpenter hesitated for a moment. More than one ship had been lost by haphazard warp calculations. Dropping back into normal space from the warp, it was just possible you would end up slap in the centre of some star or other—if you didn’t work things out carefully beforehand.

“Go ahead, Svann,” he growled at last. “What do we have to lose?”

They warped, and the viewplates immediately went dead. Save for the air conditioning, the ship was utterly silent.

“Give it five minutes,” Carpenter muttered, “then unwarp. We’ll see where we are then—still in the system, I should think.”

Svann nodded. “As close as I could estimate we were heading for the orbit of Hecton. Sirius X, as you know the planet.”
“I know it.” Carpenter’s lips pressed themselves tightly together at the memory. He’d been in Hecton City six months earlier when M.M.T., had opened their new transmitter. The ballyhoo and drunken carousing he had seen afterwards had turned him sick. The Martian pioneer traits showed up in odd ways.

Svann’s reckonings had been accurate. When they unwarped, Hecton was clearly visible on the starboard plate. They changed course and proceeded on photon drive. Presently, they went into orbit.

“I have contacts in Hecton City,” Svann said, as the city winked at them from the night side, “I suggest we try to drop as close to there as we can.”

“Okay by me,” the engineer told him.

Svann busied himself over a chart. “As I recall, there is a large ice desert around Hecton. I shall try to get us down there.” The Sirian was about to add something else, but the stern viewplate suddenly held his attention. He pointed to the blob of light moving rapidly across it. “Ship!”

Calmly, Svann switched on the ship-to-ship VHF. As soon as the receiver warmed up, a high pitched voice came spluttering from the speaker. The owner of the voice had clearly been calling for some time.

“. . . Scout from Patrol. Calling Naval Scout from Patrol. Identify! Identify!”

Still calm, Svann clicked off the receiver. “We cannot drop now. We should be located immediately.”

Carpenter frowned at the viewplate for a moment, then said, “Svann, how would you feel about setting a warp course for Sol?”

“Sol?”

“Yes—Terra, ultimately. At least, we would be safe there.”

The other stared for a moment, then sprang to the small computer bolted in the corner of the control room. “We only have a short time,” he called over his shoulder.

Carpenter glanced at the viewplates. The Patrol would be on them in minutes.

Then, Svann was back at the control desk clutching a punched paper tape. Quickly, he fed the tape into the slot provided.

“It’ll be a long trip, Svann,” said Carpenter. “Any food aboard?”
"There will be emergency rations somewhere. And we can go into sleep-freeze if necessary."

Both men were silent then, as the ship automatically took up a new course for warping.

The viewplates blacked out again and the warp generators took over the ship with a faint jerk.

Nothing to do now, except wait a few weeks, Carpenter thought to himself. He felt good, somehow. There was something decidedly cheering about going home to Terra, even if he hadn’t got what he’d set out to get.

He climbed from his couch for the first time since they left Kandal, and took a stroll through the ship. He made a brief inspection of the sleep-freeze cubicles. They would be using them before the voyage was over. But not yet, not yet. He wanted a couple of days to relax first. He’d done all he could to get the new drive—dammit, he was even bringing the ship home with him! He snorted. He had been a foolish choice in the first place, anyway, he told himself. He wasn’t a trained intelligence man; he was just a general trouble shooter employed to get the bugs out of spaceships before the crews took over.

"Carpenter! Carpenter!" It was Svann’s voice, deep and urgent, bellowing from an intercom speaker just above his head. "The warp has failed! Come!"

Carpenter made the control room in seconds.

"See!" Svann indicated a planet on the forward plate which was growing visibly. He threw a quick glance at the other plates, then turned hurriedly to his charts.

"Don’t bother, Svann," Carpenter murmured, his voice shaking slightly. "I’d know that world anywhere. It’s Mars—Sol IV."

"But that cannot be!" Svann gasped.

"I know it can’t. But it is." Carpenter looked at his watch. They had been in warp for just on eight minutes. He sighed and lowered himself into the couch.

The Sirian eyed him steadily. "You were right about the new drive, Carpenter."

"Um, but we don’t know why it works, or even what it is. Let’s get to Terra, we’re doing no good out here."
A week later, Carpenter was called to the Chairman’s office. “I thought you ought to be the first to know, John,” said Holland, pushing a box of cigars invitingly under Carpenter’s nose. “We cracked the drive last night.”

Carpenter helped himself to a cigar. “I’m glad to hear it, Mr. Holland.” He paused and leant forward expectantly.

The Chairman smiled at Carpenter’s expression. “When you warped, you were almost directly over Hecton City, and when you unwarped, you were approaching Marsport.”

“‘Yes?’”

The Chairman placed his finger tips together and inspected them. “What,” he enquired slowly, “do you know about those two places? What have they in common?”

The engineer’s features creased into a frown. What had two cities, in different systems, the homes of different races, in common? Then it hit him!

“M.M.T.!”

“Exactly! By accident, you lined yourself up on the M.M.T., transmission beam between Hecton and Marport. We don’t know why yet, but the beam causes the warp effect to be cubed.”

Carpenter let his breath come out slowly between pursed lips. “So on the first trip, the Scout-J must have been in line with Mars and Kandal.”

“Correct. Mars was the other side of Lunar when the ship lifted.”

“How did you discover all this, Mr. Holland?”

“We stumbled across it yesterday. We sent the Scout-J out to retrace your course. They went on photon drive as far as Mars, then warped, using a reciprocal of your course. Then they came back. The round trip took less than half an hour.” The Chairman took a cigar himself and puffed it to life. “We tied it down to the M.M.T., beam last night.”

Carpenter grinned. “So all we have to do is line our ships on their beams and...”

“We can be independent of them, John,” Holland broke in. “All we need is the carrier beam. We don’t need matter decomposers or modulators. We can have our own beams in a matter of months.”

The Chairman suddenly pressed his office intercom button. “Send in Swann,” he muttered shortly. Then, to Carpenter, he said, “We’re sending your Sirian friend home—suitably
rewarded, of course. He won’t need to pick pockets any longer.”

Svann came in, nodded at Holland and grinned broadly at Carpenter. “It was a great pleasure knowing you, Carpenter,” he said. “I leave in a few moments.”

Carpenter suddenly remembered something and grabbed a stylus from the desk. He scribbled a hurried note, and handed it to Svann. “Along the alley from the bar, over the wall on the right you’ll find an old ventilator grill. Six thousand credits—remember?”

The Sirian grinned again. “Where money is concerned, my memory is photographic, Carpenter.”

H. B. Caston

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Jogi only jumped ship for the excitement of investigating the smells of a new planet—his loss however, was of the utmost importance.

Jogi

by DAVID ROME

Captain Kamis Obel beat a tattoo of impatience on the console of his interstellar trade-ship. His long face was agitated by concern, and in his right hand he held the ship's telephone. He was speaking with tight anger: “No, we cannot jump-off without him. No, I don't give a damn how many ships are queuing to use this berth? We can’t leave without him! All right . . . Fine. Yes, put me through to the Ambassador . . .”

Jogi’s head was spinning. His legs were tired, for he’d come a long way since that first impulsive moment when he had slipped away from the ship to see the world. His eyes had been bright and sparkling then, each new sight drawing a squeak of pleasure from him.

He had wriggled under the gleaming fence that surrounded the Port, crossed the teeming highway in a thrilling scamper, and plunged his pointed, inquisitive nose into the sweet-smelling brush on the other side.

This was the world. A wonderful store of strange treasures for the daring trespasser. Jogi sniffed the air and squirmed with pleasure. With whiskers trembling, he set out to explore.

He hadn’t intended to go far. Just a short distance into the scented undergrowth—or perhaps just a little further, across this dark shining street to stare at the warm squares of curtained
windows? "Dare he creep right up to this enticing little porch? Dare he snuffle for food-thought under this strip of lighted doorway?"

His questing, ferreting nose had drawn him on along tiny laneways, across dark squares of parkland, where stupid creatures with long ears had bounced up to him and challenged his right to pass this way. Jogi had bowled them over and hurried on, tasting the winter night with a new urgency now... for at last, as his excitement faded, he had begun to realize that he was lost.

Lost and hungry...

It was ten hours since Jogi had last tasted food-thought. He remembered with longing the rich flow of vitality that had entered his body, when Captain Obel found him stealing bright trinkets from the trade-box.

Oh, Jogi longed to be with his friends again! Tears began to fall from his eyes as he pressed on through the darkness. He was dizzy and weak, shivering and unhappy. He struggled under a wire fence which squeezed him flat and squashed the breath from him. His fur got caught in sharp little barbs, and he kicked and wriggled, and the barbs spiked his flesh. He squealed with pain... so loud and so long, that he didn’t hear footsteps hurrying toward him.

And then a beam of yellow light fell on his upturned face, and a deep, calm voice said: “Well, what’s wrong here, little friend?”

Jogi lay quite still, while gentle hands cupped around his body and worked him free of the wire. Then the light flooded over him again, and he blinked up into a round, red-cheeked face. Atop the face was a bush of white hair. Two spectacled eyes looked down on him.

“And what kind of creature are you, lost on a night when the stars are like silver...?"

The man’s voice was warm and friendly, and Jogi tried to wag his slim tail gratefully, though there was no trace of food-thought here. But his head had begun to spin again, and he crouched down with closed eyes and shivered in misery.

Oh, why had he ever been so daring!

When he opened his eyes, he was in a cosy room, a soft light burning overhead and a flickering fire in the grate. He was still cradled in the gentle hands, but now there was a second
face looking down at him—a paler, smoother face, with golden hair shimmering down to tickle his nose.

A tender voice said: “The poor little pet!”

Eagerly, Jogi searched for even a taste of food-thought; but there was none. Despair filled his heart, and for a moment he almost lost hope. Then he thought of his friends. His friends needed him! They could not go out into the lovely emptiness without him!

He turned his head. Looking over the girl’s shoulder, he could see a half-open door, and beyond that a stretch of shadowed hallway. At the end of the hall was the front door. Closed tight.

Jogi stared longingly at the door. He wished fleeting wishes for strong sharp teeth, to bring food-thought into the man’s mind. But with the same breath he felt ashamed for his ungratefulness. He blinked up into the girls golden hair, so bright he thought he saw his own reflection, and he felt himself suffocating in her pity. Panic-stricken, he forgot all his gratitude. In desperation, he gathered his legs under him and leapt upward into the golden hair.

For an instant, a delicious instant, he felt food-thought rush into his mind. He clung to the girl’s hair, squeaking—but his joy did not last. The source of vitality died away as quickly as it had come. He felt the girl’s hand reach up and take hold of him, gently. She tumbled him over on to his back, and he kicked his legs frantically in the air. He wriggled and squirmed. And fell, tumbling, from her hand . . .

The shock of impact knocked all Jogi’s breath from him. Wide-eyed, he stared up at the man and the girl. The girl was making soft clicking noises with her tongue, her face concerned. She bent quickly, her hands reaching out.

“Dad, the poor pet is shivering all over! Haven’t you got a warm box for him in the garage? A saucer of milk, too,” this last as the man nodded his head and went out into the hallway.

Jogi struggled weakly in the girl’s hands, trying desperately to hurt her with his mouth. But she only called out anxiously: “Hurry, Dad!”

The man came back into the house. Under one arm he was carrying a deep white box, and in the other hand a saucer of milk. He stooped to place the box close to the fire. There was an old woollen cardigan snugged warmly down in it, and now the girl bent down to place Jogi into the box. But the man took
her arm. "The milk . . ." he reminded her, and he smiled as he held out the saucer.

Jogi, trapped in the girl's hands, found his nose pressed suddenly into a cold wetness. He had experienced nothing like it in his life before. He tried to breathe, and the wetness came up into his mouth and made him choke. He kicked out in panic, terrified now—and the suddenness of his movement took the girl by surprise. She released her hold on him, and he leaped to the floor beside the box. His fear had sprung a new source of strength somewhere within him. He ran to the open door, gasping for breath, his whiskers wet and sticky with the white fluid.

Behind him, he heard the girl cry out in concern; but he was free now, running out into the hallway. He hugged the wall, dodging from one piece of furniture to the next. When the light came on, glaring down on him, he flattened himself under a chair in the shadows. He heard the girl coming closer . . . and then, in the same moment, Jogi felt a breath of cool air on his face. He raised his eyes and stared out from beneath the chair. The front door was open! Just a crack. Just wide enough for him to slip through.

Gathering all his remaining strength, he leapt out from his hiding place—hearing the girl's startled cry behind him. Then her cry became one of despair.

"Dad, you left the front door open!"

And in the same moment, Jogi was through, and free, out under the winter stars and scurrying across a little patch of lawn to the hedge . . .

Captain Kamis Obel turned with the telephone still in his hand, his grey eyes regarding his first officer. "I'm getting through to the Ambassador," he said steadily. "I don't know what he'll be able to do for us . . . but he's the only goddamn official on this world who can see past the end of his—" He turned suddenly to the telephone, as the connection was made. "Hullo, Ambassador. Yes, this is Captain Obel, sir . . ."

As soon as Jogi's first fright began to leave him, the dizziness came back. His momentary taste of food-thought had done no more than tantalize him. His whiskers shivered at the memory, and his questing nose searched the air.

He was on a stretch of quiet roadway now, the black surface lit by streetlamps. On each side of him, lighted windows shone
behind coloured curtains; but now Jogi had no time for adventuring. His heart was beating painfully, his whole world beginning to turn in huge, giddying circles. He staggered a little as he passed a gateway, almost identical to the one through which he had so recently escaped. He came to a halt, turning his head to peer up the pathway to the porch. His remaining strength would carry him as far as the front door. If he did not find food-thought here, then he would lie down on the top step, huddle close to the warmth, and wait for his friends to find him . . .

His mind made up, Jogi began to shuffle in through the gateway. But something stopped him. A voice. A loud voice that carried to him from a group which had come into view down the street.

He stared—and the beat of his heart quickened. His mind went spiralling outward, and he tasted—food-thought! His whiskers trembled. He turned out of the gateway, his paws patting weakly on the pavement as he struggled toward the group. He saw them pass under a streetlamp, and he glimpsed their young faces as they swaggered arrogantly along.

But Jogi could go no further. With his ears pricked up to their full height, and his whiskers stuck straight out on either side of his pointed face, he flopped on his haunches and waited for them.

The tallest boy saw him first. Jogi had carefully chosen a spot directly under one of the streetlamps. Now, the tallest boy put a hand on each of his companions’ arms, halting them in midstride.

"Look!"

The boys stood in a cruel semi-circle, staring down at Jogi. He blinked up at them.

"Well, look, a damned mouse!" the tallest boy said.

"A squirrel!" said the boy on his right, with dark leather jacket and hair combed into a quiff.

Jogi snuffled their food-thought and continued to blink up at them. He squirmed with pleasure when the tallest boy—advancing with exaggerated caution—made a sudden lunge and clasped him tight.

The hand closed around his middle, and he squeaked with joy.

"Hey, he says mama!" the third boy said. "You hear him say mama? You hear him, Eddie?"
Eddie squeezed, and Jogi squeaked again. The boys laughed and took turns in squeezing him, until Jogi was almost delirious with delight, swallowing their food-thought hungrily.

When they got tired of squeezing him, Eddie nipped his tail between two fingers and held him high in the air. "Tick-tock! Tick-tock!" he chanted, and the others howled with laughter.

And then, quite suddenly, their laughter died—and Jogi shivered with fresh-born fear.

They had drawn level with a familiar gateway. A little square of lawn lay on the other side of the hedge. The front door stood open and a girl was looking out. Just inside the gateway, a man with white hair was searching the shadows with a flashlight.

"Whooh-whooh!" The boys whistled in unison.

The girl stepped back a little, into the hallway, and the man near the gate straightened slowly. He shone the torch on the boys, and Jogi trembled as the light fell on his face.

"Tick-tock!" Eddie swung him violently, in the torchlight.

"Hey, pop, you see our clock? Tick-tock!"

For a moment, the beam from the torch clung to Jogi. Then the man said steadily: "What d’you think you’re doing . . .?"

Jogi felt the boy bounce a little on his toes. "You mean with this mouse, pop?" he said. "Why, we’re just taking care of it!" He held Jogi high and swung him again. "See? We’re taking care of it. Tick-tock!"

The man reached out deliberately with one hand and opened the gate. And Jogi crouched, his heart hammering.

"Give it to me," the man said softly.

"Give you what, pop? Give you what?"

"Give—it—to—me!" The man lunged forward and caught hold of Eddie’s arm. Jogi squealed with fear, and Eddie stepped backward into the roadway.

"Keep your hands off me, pop! You leave me alone!"

"Yah, get lost, pop!" shouted Eddie’s friends from a distance. "C’mom, Eddie, let’s go!"

Eddie hesitated a moment, and Jogi hugged himself close down in his hand and wagged his tail pleadingly. But with a low curse, Eddie shoved out his hand. "Here, take it! It’s nothing but a mouse!"

The man’s hands were gentle as they closed around Jogi. "It’s a living creature, hungry and afraid . . . ."

"Yah, preacher!" the boys howled, as they ran off down the street. "Give us a sermon, preacher!"
Captain Kamis Obel sighed with massive patience. "But surely you understand, Ambassador, that Jogi must be lost somewhere out there. Yes, sir, but a replacement wouldn't be available until we were out on the Rimaway; we'd be risking the normal tension until then—the feuds, the petty quarrels..." Obel spoke softly. "Without Jogi to eat 'em up, Ambassador, those quarrels could begin to grow..." Then his tone lightened. "Yes, sir, I would appreciate that. A bulletin during tonight's Coast to Coast news. Yes, Ambassador. Thank you, sir."

The white box had been placed close to the warmth of the fire. In the depths of it, wrapped in an old woollen cardigan, lay a motionless, brown-furred animal.

A man with white hair sat looking down into the box. Across the room, his daughter moved to turn off the television set. "We've missed the news," she said, smiling.

The man didn't turn. But he began to nod his head, his eyes on the animal in the box. "You hear that, little friend? All this upset you've caused. You'd better get well for us soon..."

The girl came to his side, looking down into the box. Her foot caught the rim of a saucer of milk, tilted it, and spilled the milk on the floor. She bent quickly, and picked up the saucer. Now her free hand lingered close to the box. She reached in and fondled the little animal.

"Are you hungry yet, my pet..." she asked softly.

David Rome

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**'Gone Away—No known address'**

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us known in good time.
Through the minds of the Earthly psions echoes a cosmic shout foretelling the end of the universe. Nobody knows where it emanates from but its urgency creates vast complications throughout the galaxy.

CRACK OF DOOM

by KEITH WOODCOTT

Conclusion

foreword

When Mankind first reached the stars, it found evidence that a vastly superior intelligence had preceded them—a race of beings who had left behind them only fragmentary relics of their advanced technology. Philip Gascon, studying the cosmoarchaeology of the Old Race on the planet Earth, becomes involved with a group of psions (mutated human beings who can read other people’s thoughts but not communicate mentally with them) during which time he discovers that he is a psinul (a person whose mind a psion cannot read). The psions, virtually outcasts because they are a minority group, live in a small community called Hopestown outside one of the main cities, and are steadily becoming obsessed by a mental cosmic “shout” which infers that the end of the universe is approaching. Exactly how they are unable to discover.

Gascon, picked up by a special Agency patrol who constantly guard Hopestown, is sent to Executive Harys Fold, Minister of All-Human Affairs, and offered the chance of studying little-known Old Race relics on the planet Regnier in Starfolk territory (descendants of colonists who had long broken with Earth).
Initially, the Starfolk had discovered that mating within their own groups proved sterile and they were dependent upon females from subjugated or allied worlds to produce their children. For this reason they had imposed a yearly quota on each planet, the selections being made by computer tests.

Errida Crowb, a girl living at Plainsedge on the planet Regnier is selected for the next shipment, but Jazey Hine, an elderly psion who can work with normal humans without his mind breaking, plans to smuggle her and her family away. They make for town under cover of night, arriving at a time when anti-psion cultists are demonstrating to curry favour with a visiting Starfolk emissary as an act of propitiation against the apparent loss in space of a Starfolk spaceship carrying one of their leaders, Angus Chalkind. Just as the family reach the main square, Franek, Errida’s young brother, cannot stand the mental pressures any longer and leaps from their aircar in a frenzy. The crowd quickly realises that the Crowb family are psions and move in for the kill.

nine

In Irdus’s mind Hine could read—not dismay, exactly, for the Overlord was too stupid to know how greatly he depended on his confidential aide, but—irritation at the ordinary human weakness that had made him ill.

It was impossible to hide this sickness. Last night, all the city had been bathed in an aura of psion-hate, and even without the redness of blood-lust which had eventually coloured it, Jazey Hine, like every other secret psion for fifty miles, would have been weary and distraught.

But the knowledge that the Crowb family had been lynched was an accusing brand. He was a fool, an incompetent, a murderer by stupidity.

And yet—what more could he have done? He had no way to know that the Starfolk were going to search the Old Race site until their ship landed yesterday! Immediately he did know, he signalled to all the psions he could reach who would otherwise have come here believing they were safe. He could not reach the Crowbs . . .

He checked himself. This was self-justifying rubbish. It was not the fact that he had failed to warn them that made him guilty; it was that he had failed to look into Breckitt’s foul mind long and deep enough to assess the tremendous anti-psion
hysteria he planned to arouse, so that the Starfolk should see and be impressed by Breckitt's loyalty.

Sending the Crowbs, with Franek, through the city then . . .

He had failed through weakness. True, it was always hard to probe the mind of a maniacal anti-psion cultist such as Breckitt, but he should have done it. Now, of course, Breckitt was thinking with delight of Hine's obvious illness, and wondering whether it would render him so sick he could not manage Irdus's affairs any more. What an opportunity!

If it were only possible to tell the smug power-hungry bastard that the Starfolk were not impressed by what he had done; without revealing his talents, that is . . .

Full of chopped-off thoughts today, Hine told himself. Why hadn't he chopped off the idea that the Old Race site was a good hiding-place? What had given him the idea in the first place? What was it that made him even now think this was a place of safety?

He leaned on the half-buried snag of one of the ivory-white spiral towers that the Old Race had liked on Regnier, and stared around him. The hosts—Irdus, with Hine himself in attendance as usual, but without his consort, and the three rivals Chem, Owitz and Breckitt—were gathered here with their retainers in a small cluster, gaudy in the sunlight. Those who mattered, and those to whom they had turned for advice, were out there crossing and re-crossing the site on foot, in cars and in floaters, using metal-detectors, sonar probes, crystal recorders, and every now and then pausing and coming together so that a question could be put to the portable computers they had brought from the ship in a cushiontruck.

How long would it take them to reach a decision? Hine's head swam with the strain of worry. How long would it take them to find out that Jazey Hine had helped the Crowbs to move to Plainsedge years ago, had spoken for Crowb when he applied for a job with the Plains Conversion Commission, had visited the Crowbs on two occasions recently? Who would inform on him?

And who would be told first—Breckitt?

Now, the never-ceasing flood of concepts of disaster that was engulfing the mind of every psion, battering at the whole race except the rare psinuls, was blending in Jazey Hine's thoughts with the anticipation of his own torment and death.
The Old Race had not been quick and greedy, like humanity; they had been change-resistant, conservative, perhaps even cautious. Artifacts which to the casual eye looked as though they might have been made in the same batch sometimes dated out a thousand years apart. It was tempting to think that they used nothing perishable, but of course the soft or friable materials they left behind might have vanished more than fifty thousand years ago.

No one had ever found a skeleton or carapace to show their bodily form. Their associated animals had skeletons, so either they cremated their dead—or they did not die, which was ridiculous. In any case, they were a confident, capable species.

And they had left nothing, anywhere, more than what Jazey Hine could see now: the carefully-exposed stumps of spiral-fluted towers whose foundations were sunk all the way to the living rock, with non-native plants wreathing about them as on forty-odd other planets; traces of what men would call public-works, like the mysterious cavern-tunnels in the rocks near the river, which might have been sluices for a power-plant; objects of indeterminate purpose which—if they ever "worked" in human terms—had long ago broken or worn out.

But they were here once! Jazey Hine shook his foggy head to clear it. Supposing the shout from the stars actually was a warning, how were those who heard it going to calm their minds enough to understand it before persecution drove them mad?

A mile and a half away, near the tide-mark and the edge of the salt-marshes where the Old Race had once experimented in their own counterpart of terraforming, the Starfolk had gathered in a group headed by Gustus Arraken, the new Zone Dominator, to put questions to Urner from the puppet government's Department of Archeology. Without shade, the nominal lords of Regnier shifted on their chairs all around Hine, and called on their attendants to fan them more assiduously. How it hurt them, these vainglorious fools, to be neglected by Arraken in favour of a mere scholar!

But Urner was an honest man within his limitations, and he knew about the Old Race on Regnier, and—since Earth had requested permission to send an expert of their own here—the Starfolk wanted hard facts. Hine could sense the balance in their minds between suspicion and acceptance. Despite their discomfort—far worse than Irdus’s or Breckitt’s—in their
artificial supports clutching free-fall-weakened limbs, their hot masks against infection, the Starfolk were thinking coolly.

They too were afraid of going the way the Old Race went. Possibly the psionic shout was affecting them, too. Hine wondered when they would see the sense of employing psions rather than exterminating them as rivals, but fought the depressing divergence of his thoughts.

Now Arraken was moving towards a decision. It was possible that Earth had received word of the threat made to abandon Regnier, but unlikely, Regnier being completely dependent on the Starfolk for offworld communications. The request to send an expert here was high-order coincidence. The need to find out more about the Old Race was very real. The expert, when he arrived, could be watched closely enough to make sure he concentrated on his job and had no chance to pass on any news. The request had included facilities to send out material for examination and dating on Earth, but the material would travel in Starfolk ships to some frontier-zone planet and be trans-shipped. Care could be exercised...

Arraken rapped a question at Urner. “The Old Race must have had spaceships or something similar, yes? But nothing of the sort has ever been discovered?”

And the answer, coloured by discomfort due to weak eyes and fierce sunlight: “No, we’ve never found any ships.”

Suddenly, Arraken had reached his decision. Hine could not follow the process of intuition that led to it, he was too tired and ill. The expert from Earth was going to be allowed to come here and work with Urner. There was one more area of the site—that near the river, with the cavern-like tunnels—to be surveyed before the decision was made public, but Arraken’s mind was made up.

Hine’s heart leapt. He had expected the Starfolk to do their investigating themselves, to try and find what had so much interested Earth. But this was wonderful! Somehow, during the Earthman’s visit, he must find a chance to talk to him, appeal to him!

His mind was so full of possibilities that he barely noticed when Arraken’s car returned to where Irdus and his party were waiting, a filter-screen darkening the air around the occupants. The Zone Dominator—a rangy man with the loose flesh characteristic of those who spent all their life in space—said
something to a Regnier-born youth beside him, who repeated it over a loud-hailer.

"The Dominator is going to inspect the tunnels. He wishes you to accompany him."

Hine was jerked back to the present. Were there any traces over there of the intended occupancy by psion refugees? Had anyone misguided left supplies there in advance? He covered his agitation smoothly and stepped forward.

"We are honoured that the Dominator desires our presence," he said, and caught a note of mental approval from Irdus, who was too fed up with waiting in the hot sun to have remembered to be equally polite. Grumbling in their minds, but keeping expressionless faces, the party of notables rose and moved in a straggling column behind Arraken's car. Other vehicles had proceeded direct to the mouth of the tunnels, and the computer-loaded cushiontruck was parked on the river's edge.

When the car stopped, the filter-screen was turned off, but Arraken did not get out. He was tired by the gravity, Hine noted with relief. He grunted at the youth beside him to call for Urner, who came hurrying over. Hine moved inconspicuously close, trying to peer into the dark tunnel-entry with eyes dazzled by the sunlight.

There was something lying in the mouth of the tunnel. He felt a pang of dismay. It looked like a shoe—a cheap shoe, torn on one side, and abandoned. Possibly it meant nothing. But then again, so many people had planned to hide here ...

Urner was saying something about how little he knew of the tunnels. "Featureless," he was explaining. "Simply burrows in the rock. Signs of the river having been diverted through them, and the diversions silted up over the millennia. We have never found anything of great interest in them."

Arraken gave a nod. Eyes turned towards the tunnel. It was in Arraken's mind to walk through it, and if he did ...

Hine was moving almost before he thought of it. He said, with a bow towards Arraken, "Tell the Dominator that the use to which the tunnel is currently put is—uh—biological! It's a popular place for young couples to come to by night, because it's absolutely dark in there."

Arraken smiled patronisingly.

"Here's an example!" Hine said, and strode to the tunnel mouth. He bent to pick up the thing he had spotted—yes, a shoe, of the kind issued to schoolchildren, badly scuffed and
torn and marked like all schoolchildren’s property with the owner’s name to distinguish it from a thousand identical ones. When he read the name, he almost lost control of himself, but somehow he managed to turn, displaying the object so that Arraken could see what it was but could not see the name inside, and summoned all his energy to swing it at the end of his arm and send it arcing away from him towards the river.

It splashed into the water, and was gone.

“‘It’s disgraceful that people should use this site as a rubbish-tip!’” he said loudly. There was a pause, and he sought to probe Arraken’s mind; his relief was great as he sensed the idea of investigating the tunnel personally fade and die.

“Very well,” the Dominator said abruptly. “The Earthman will be allowed to come here, but he will be carefully watched. We’ll give you full instructions, Irdus, and you will see that you carry them out better than our instructions to find the criminals who destroyed my predecessor’s ship!”

His last words had the effect he wanted—they made the local lordlings jump half out of their skins.

“You had better not try and talk with this Earthman about your plight,” Arraken continued meditatively. “Don’t plead for the charity of Earth if you force us to keep our word and withdraw our services from your planet.

“For if you do, we shall leave nothing but a smoking and barren desert for them to inherit from us, and the people of Regnier, including you”—he stabbed his finger through the air towards Irdus, like a sword—“will be as irrevocably lost as the Old Race who once lived here.”

He spoke to his driver, and his car spun round and was gone, leaving all of them visualising the power the Starfolk had to enforce their threat.

Except Hine.

He was wondering how—by what miracle—a shoe found here in the tunnel bore the name of Errida Crowb.

ten

The man who had delayed Errida by grasping her arm in order to complain about her bumping into him saved her life. It was thanks to him that when her parents caught up with Franek she was not close enough to them to be engulfed by the fury of the crowd.
She did not see what happened to her family, but the screams told her.

Her life was saved again, moments later, because among the bystanders there were a good many on whom Breckitt’s hysterical anti-psion propaganda had not finished its poisonous work, and who were too squeamish to watch while three human beings were beaten and trampled to death. Several of those who tried to get away from the scene were young girls, and Errida was not remarked as she turned to flee.

It was something of which she was going to be insanely ashamed for the rest of her life—not staying to try and help. But the very nature of the journey she was making had focussed her thoughts on self-preservation, and she recognised automatically that it was ridiculous to think of saving anyone from the rage of this mob... except herself. By staying, she might ensure her death as well; certainly she would witness the lynching of her family.

And she thought, with horrible detachment, that that would break her mind forever.

There was one fixed idea in her mind overriding all else: the idea of getting through the city and making her way to the Old Race site. Now that Franek was dead, there was no selfish reason why the psions who were going there for refuge should take in a non-psion fugitive. Nonetheless, she might appeal to their pity, or if the worst came to the worst, she could blackmail them by threatening to expose Jazey Hine to the Starfolk. They were unable to kill or punish. They would have to take her in.

After that, thinking stopped. She remembered later only vague, separate images: a short street lit corpse-white and ash-black, in which her shadow accompanied her on the walls of the buildings, falling behind and leaping ahead as she passed each standing lamp in turn; a group of three men all very drunk, who started to run after her uttering filthy invitations, until the drunklest of them fell down and they gave up the chase; a gathering of children abandoned by their parents in a residential area on the far side of the city, playing at psion-hunting with a stuffed doll as large as themselves.

The whole world had tilted lunatically on its axis, and the stars spun through idiot patterns in her personal sky.

She came through alleys very suddenly to the end of the city, and found herself on a track which she followed because it was
there. It led her between wire fences, behind which surrealist stacks of baled goods and scrap for reclamation heaved up towards the moon. She passed an automatic factory where ignorant machines were humming to themselves, and came to the edge of the river. Animal-like snouts from the factory drank the water for cooling purposes, and she heard the suck-suck-thud-suck of a pump.

She turned the correct way by instinct. The track sloped up and down, and where it went down the ground was muddy; she tried not to leave prints there.

She went a long way on that narrow path beside the river.

At last her consciousness stirred again, and she realised that in fact the upper end of the tunnel she was seeking was now nowhere near the river; countless centuries of silting of old channels and eroding new ones had changed its course. She could not even remember how she had found the river—they had planned to approach the Old Race site from quite a different direction. The lower end of the tunnel, the entry on the side nearer the flat expanse of the salt-marshes, was on the riverside. She would have to locate her sanctuary by that.

Somehow, she managed it. Completely exhausted, her shoes in ribbons from the rocks and her feet burning-sore, her throat dry as a desert, she stumbled into the tunnel’s mouth at last. She lost one of her shoes as she entered, and could not find the energy to turn back. When she was out of sight of the grey circle of dimness which was the entry, she fell face forward on the rock floor and began to weep.

Weeping, she fell into oblivion.

When the Starfolk came the next day to inspect the site and try and find what it was that had drawn Earth’s attention, the noise of their vehicles and the sound of voices blended into the nightmares she was enduring. By sheer force of will, each time wakefulness threatened to deliver her from the horrors of imagination to the horros of reality, she fought her way back; she could persuade herself that a dream was a dream, and knew on a level below consciousness that actuality would be worse.

But she had to waken eventually, and when she did, it was night again.

She was very cold, for a wind always blew in the tunnels, and she was thirstier than she had ever been before in her life. Carefully not thinking of anything else, she got to her feet and limped back towards the tunnel mouth, remembering the river
and wondering if the water would be safe to drink. She was
going to drink anyway. She had to.
Without knowing why, she hesitated as she came to the
entry. It was not so dark as the night before (was it so much
later? That problem could wait) and when she was almost out
of the tunnel she could see the ground before her.
Something should have been there . . .
Her shoe. Someone had found it. Someone had been here.
Wildly she stared around, and sounds came to her—motors
droning, men's voices calling in the distance, and irregular
hammering. Also there were distant lights moving.
"Errida," a voice said, very low. "Errida, don't be afraid.
I found your shoe. No one else knows you're here."
She shrank back against the rock wall. There was a noise of
movement, and a dark figure came towards her. A man,
carrying a large package.
"Yes, it's Jazey Hine," the voice said, coloured by such
weariness as Errida had never heard—but she had no pity for
him now. "I know how you feel. I know about your family.
I not only encouraged them to run into a trap. I suffered their
deaths. I'm a psion, Errida. I've been punished for what I
did."

There was a pause. Errida stared at the dark figure, her
throat too dry to utter words to match the hate she felt. But
of course words weren't necessary.
"I've brought food," Hine said pleadingly. He set down the
case he was carrying. "Enough for several days! And drink,
and a blanket and some new shoes—all here! Errida, they're
going to let a cosmoarcheologist from Earth come to this site,
and that's what all the noise is out there. I mean, they're
putting up fencing and alarms so that no one will trespass on
the site any more. If they find me here, they'll kill me too,
because I'm too weak to lie and twist and dodge their questions
now. I've lied my way here because I knew you were helpless,
because I wanted to warn you what was going to happen. I'm
going to try and get you away. But—"
He broke off, and put his hands to his temples. He gulped
once, as though punched in the belly, and spoke again in a tone
of despair.
"Then don't trust me! I won't ask you to come away with
me, ever! I'll leave you here to hide if you can! Just try not
to hate me, even if I am a fool!"
He turned and stumbled blindly away. When he had melted into darkness, Errida snatched up the package he had brought and retreated into the womb-like security of the tunnel.

As though the tunnel, waveguide-wise, were focussing her hatred on him, its virulence made Hine reel like a drunken man. He was trapped now. Errida’s feelings towards him, as responsible for her parents’ and her brother’s death, made it impossible to think of going back and persuading her to leave her hiding-place; any other psion would face the same wall of loathing, and probably be just as helpless. One could probe Breckitt’s mind, at least a little, or the minds of the psion-hating Starfolk, because their conception of a psion was one stage removed from direct experience. In Errida’s mind, though, there was personal disgust.

And he could trust no one to go to her in his place. Now that the Starfolk’s threat had become common knowledge, there was a risk that any non-psion would let the urge to placate the masters override long-term hopes of being rescued by Earth.

*Better the devil you know . . .*

So he was doomed, sooner or later. They would come to raze over the Old Race site; they would find Errida, and her hate would drive her to name him.

*I’m a dead man,* Jazey Hine told himself. And, like a ghost, reading the minds of those who might have spotted him so that whenever they glanced in his direction he was out of sight, he slipped through the working-parties fencing off the area and made his hopeless way back to the city.

“They’ve agreed,” Fold said. He glanced at Gascon in the chair facing him, noting how the young man’s training had changed him externally as well as internally; he bore himself with impressive confidence, his gaze was steady, and when he spoke his voice rang with a new authority.

“That’s very much quicker than we’d expected, isn’t it?” Gascon noted.

Mallow, sitting a little aside from them, made a noise between a laugh and a wheeze. He said, “I guess I know why, as well.”

Fold nodded. “They’ll have wondered why we’re so interested in Regnier, of all the Old Race planets. They may suspect that we know about their ultimatum, but they can’t be sure, because our information—as you know—has come
indirectly and is not much better than rumour. So they'll have realised the risk that they may, in order to keep their word, abandon the planet just as some crucial discovery is made there."

"The quick reply, then, you think," Gascon said, "is so that they'll have maximum time to pick my brains before their deadline expires."

Fold didn't smile. Looking straight at Gascon, he said, "After what's been done to you, nobody can pick your brains. Even the Starfolk."

"Even psions," Mallow grunted, and shifted in his seat. "Not that that's connected with your training. Harys, how are you going to get him to Regnier—is that settled?"

"Yes, they imposed conditions which suited me well enough." Fold used a switch on the arm of his chair to activate the nearest floor communicator panel, and a map of the systems between Earth and Regnier was projected above it. The others turned a little to look.

"One of our ships will take you to Mondelrey." Fold gestured at the map. "Logical. It's the only common trading-planet shared by us and the dependents of the Zone Dominator who services Regnier. One of their ships will be waiting, with—they were very frank about this—with an interrogation team headed by a man named Urner, supposed to be the leading expert on the Regnier sites. Did your instruction cover him?"

Gascon nodded. "He's a good classifier, but that's all. He was responsible for mapping the known sites on Regnier."

"And if he passes this—this examination?" Mallow said.

"Passage to Regnier in one of their ships," Fold answered. "Alone. With a specified maximum quantity of chemical and radiological equipment, subject to inspection on Mondelrey by their nominees. They will provide manual labourers and earth-moving equipment as required."

"It seems like a very limited concession," Mallow frowned. "Will it be enough?"

Instead of answering, Fold cocked an eyebrow at Gascon, who replied with assurance. "Merely to visit an actual Old Race site, knowing what I do now, will be a mental stimulant. I expect to make some discovery of value even if they only let me walk about and scrabble with my bare hands."
The knowledge thrust them into perspective in Gascon’s mind. The impassive masks were their shield against airborne bacteria; the sheaths covering their limbs were props, because they were unused to the pull of a planet’s gravity.

Weaklings. They would retreat to their ships as to wombs, for protection from the crudeness of the cosmos.

Gascon glanced at the man who was waiting in the doorway behind him, the young spacecrew officer who had escorted him from the ship, and gave him a confident nod of dismissal. The door closed, and Gascon moved to take the chair which had been set in the middle of the dull room, facing the table where the five Starfolk and Urner were ranked together.

He didn’t say anything when he was seated, but let his eyes range along the top of the table, identifying file-playbacks, crystal recordings prepared for use, and a device set before each of the interrogators which he did not recognise—a monitor, perhaps, a scanner, a semantic analyser, a lie-detector, anything.

It didn’t matter to him now what it was.

The man seated next to Urner spoke abruptly. He said, “I am Zone Dominator Arraken.”

“I’m Philip Gascon.”

He made his voice match the other’s exactly in tone and inflection, but looked at Urner as he spoke. The fact that the Starfolk were relying on an inferior for expert guidance was a potentially useful lever... or was it? With regret he saw signs of shock on Urner’s face. Perhaps it was too much to hope that a government—and hence indirectly a Starfolk—appointee would have resisted indoctrination about the masters’ superiority.

Arraken, on the other hand, showed no displeasure. He went on, “It’s been represented to us that if you’re permitted to visit the Old Race sites on Regnier you expect to make some crucial discoveries about their disappearance. It’s a matter of common knowledge that there are comparatively few Old Race sites on planets in Earth’s sphere of influence. So such a request is superficially reasonable. Why Regnier in particular?”

Not a man to waste time on irrelevancies, this Arraken! Gascon sat back in the chair and crossed his legs.

“One of the few things we have been able to establish about the Old Race is an approximate date-chart for the founding of some of their colonies. Work on the subject on Earth, where we have to concentrate on the synthetic aspects as we have no
on-planet sites, indicates a probable time-and-distance relationship which refers to a population movement outwards from a point in the neighbourhood of Regnier. With respect to Urner here”—he nodded at the cosmoarchaeologist, who looked startled and then suddenly pleased at being recognised—“nobody with adequate general background data has yet tackled the Regnier sites. We want to see if they fit the pattern we’re evolving, and if they do so confirm our hypothesis we may have an indication of their area of origin—”

“You’re talking of origins?” cut in Arraken. “It was stated to us that their disappearances concerned you, not their origin.”

“We reason that an expanding culture will most likely have retreated to its starting-point on suffering a disaster of the kind that seems probable. I have all the data with me, and if you like I’ll fetch them in for your inspection.” Gascon was looking forward to that; he, Scannell, and a team of experts in symbolic logic had spent much effort on doctoring the data, and he was certain it would pass any inspection.

Urner leaned forward. He didn’t ask Arraken’s permission to speak, Gascon noted. He said, “I’ve always inclined to the periodic-wave view myself. The anomalous short-occupation sites closer to Earth, where the Old Race had barely arrived before they took their leave, fit in well with the time-scale of the longer-established colonies.”

“Not only that,” Gascon agreed, “but we’re getting indications of a succession of culture-keys in the shape of type artifacts. Have any blue-grey Class Thirteens been found on Regnier?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Urner answered.

That was hardly surprising. These curious pear-like ceramics were only known from two planets, both very close to Earth. “There’s a hypothesis that the replacement of Class 551 by Class Thirteen marked a new phase in Old Race culture, which up to now has appeared so incredibly conservative. We anticipate finding a series of similar replacement—”

He became deliberately technical, and within five minutes he had lost Urner completely. The cosmoarchaeologist from Regnier simply sat there, eyes wide, nodding occasionally, while Gascon ranged over the entire complex of his subject: from the route of the Old Race’s wave of expansion he passed to radiochemical analysis of artifacts of common provenance,
which suggested a corresponding study of comparative anatomy in the Old Race’s associated animal species and revealed that there must have been cross-communication because adaptations found valuable on one planet could be shown by documented evidence to have been bred into lines six systems or more distant, which led to tentative metabolic analyses and hence to a tentative specification for the element-distribution on their planet of origin, suggesting a modification of the periodic-wave picture of their expansion, in that the wave folded back occasionally as the Old Race became able to terraform planets that had previously been beyond their powers.

Not only that, but it was possible to reverse the effects of age and exposure on many artifacts and to deduce a consistent range of colour-perceptions which curiously enough omitted yellow and part of the green spectrum, leading to speculation about their possession of two or more sets of radiation sensors—the first well-grounded theory about the Old Race’s bodily form apart from a rough idea of their metabolism . . .

Even to himself, Gascon was awe-inspiring. The promise Fold had made—that he would become the best-trained cosmoarcheologist ever—had not been made lightly. He had been the excuse to apply to the study of what was known about the Old Race, piecemeal and from many planets, the combined computing-power of Earth. It was almost a century since such a gigantic study of a single subject had been made; a century and a half since so much had been done in cosmoarcheology. He remembered Fold muttering something about redoubling the computer capacity if evidence became freely available from Starfolk space, but that was not his concern.

He had said to Fold in the first flush of his excitement, “But I never imagined that we knew so much about the Old Race!”

And the Executive had answered absently, “It’s been a problem for a dozen generations, trying to find out just what we do know.”

And it had been done so quickly, in a matter of days.

He talked for almost four hours, with occasional questions from Urner, and the Starfolk sat like statues, listening. At last he paused, sensing a change in Urner’s manner, and Arraken—whose attention had not wandered even when Gascon was
talking of matters that he himself as a student could not have understood a short time before—looked at Urner. He said, “Is he what he claims to be?”

Urner flung up his hands. He said, “I’ve spent my life grubbing in a dirty corner, and I’ve just been shown the stars!”

He leapt to his feet, and with a violent motion swept aside the file-playbacks and other equipment on the table before him. “Everything I have here is rubbish—out of date, or ignorant nonsense! And this man hasn’t even seen an Old Race site!”

“Sit down,” Arraken said coldly, and Urner remembered where he was. Suddenly frightened, he obeyed, and Gascon heard his teeth chatter in dismay at his own outburst.

Arraken’s voice continued silkily, “The fact that what you have is rubbish: is that due to having been prevented from studying your subject properly?”

Urner licked his lips. Gascon had not moved, but he sensed the tension in the air and reacted to it in his mind, coming alert with all his sharpened faculties.

“Uh—no!” Urner whispered at last, having decided that to say the opposite would be an indirect complaint against the Starfolk as effective lords of Regnier.

“Then it’s due to your own incompetence,” Arraken snapped, and the anger that had been rising unperceived inside him boiled into his voice. “You might as well not have come here. I see no reason why we should trouble to take you back. Get out.”

Urner’s face turned grey. His mouth worked, and hissing noises that might have been a plea for mercy came out, but no voice to make them comprehensible. Arraken went on looking at him, and the other Starfolk copied him. Very slowly Urner got to his feet, pushing back his chair, never taking his eyes from the Zone Dominator; walked around the end of the table, still gazing like an obsessive at the masked face; suddenly broke, burst into tears, and ran through the door sobbing.

There was an itch of sweat on Gascon’s body. He dared do and say nothing. Urner’s crime was unforgiveable—he had made the Starfolk seem fools for relying on him, and if Arraken saw him again he was liable to die for his shortcomings.

“Now we are free of that ignoramus,” Arraken said, turning to Gascon again, “we can get somewhere. We Starfolk have never been attracted by the idea of burrowing in the mud, and clearly one of the reasons why the Old Race decayed will have
been because they clung to planets when they should have freed themselves of dependence on an uncontrolled environment as we have done. Consequently I do not pretend to have followed all of what you said.”

Gascon did not react.

“However, the fate of the Old Race is certainly something to be investigated, and since your tastes lie there we have no hesitation in taking you to Regnier. You’ll be more productive than that moron Urner, obviously. You will of course share all your findings with our nominees, and anything you wish to have examined on Earth will have to be crated and shipped by us.”

Gascon was experiencing a curious blend of astonishment and relief. He had expected the process of establishing his authority to take several days. He said, “Yes, I understand that. You explained your conditions when agreeing to receive me here on Mondelrey.”

Arraken’s forehead, visible above his mask, drew together at the junction of the eyebrows in a deep-ridged frown. He gestured to his four companions, and they rose to their feet with a faint whir from their motor-assisted supports. Two of them went to the door and took positions on either side of it, like guards, and the other two moved towards Gascon’s chair. The one on his left drew something from a thigh-pouch: a mask, with a cylinder of anaesthetic gas attached.

“What’s the point of this?” Gascon said in sudden dismay.

“Another—condition.” Arraken seemed to have recovered the composure disturbed by his rage at Urner. “You are not so wrapped up in your professional work that you’ve overlooked the hostility your people feel against the Starfolk, I’m sure. It’s almost without precedent for us to permit an Earthborn voyager aboard one of our ships; however you’ve made a good case for yourself, and we’re willing to accept you. As inert cargo, and under no other circumstances.”

Gascon glanced from the mask and its bearer to Arraken again. He said, “But this is ridiculous! My equipment has to be—”

“You heard what I said!” Arraken’s domineering voice cut through Gascon’s words. “If you wish to go to Regnier, you go in my ship; if you travel in my ship, you accept my conditions. And I say I will not have an Earthman aboard except in a state of unconsciousness!”
Gascon made to get to his feet. Before the movement was completed, the man with the mask had slapped it over his face and the gas had hissed from the cylinder.
There was oblivion.

twelve

For all their self-appointed superiority, Gascon reflected grimly, the Starfolk appeared to regard a single unarmed Earthman as more dangerous than a fusion bomb. Their precautions had been direct and thorough, and showed no signs of being diminished. He had no idea how the crew of the Earthly ship who had taken him to Mondelrey liked the idea of the Starfolk moving him to Regnier in a drugged coma, but they hadn’t stopped it happening—probably they had instructions from Fold not to object to any conditions the Starfolk imposed.

But the situation called for all his trained patience.
The only important Old Race site on Regnier was the one near the human capital city. That was standard-pattern. By temperament, or because rapid transportation—of an unknown kind—was available, the Old Race had favoured small communities. They would found one large “town” to begin with, where they undertook their equivalent of public works and adapted their imported flora and fauna, and grew accustomed to their new environment. Elsewhere, they would leave very few traces; they would rely on solar or thermal-gradient power, presumably, they would choose coasts or islands rather than continental heartlands, and eventually—they would vanish.
The Starfolk had acted with brutal literalness. They had brought him to the main site, which they had fenced securely against intrusion. There was a small house for his headquarters—apparently built specially. Every day, a gang of a hundred or more labourers marched out from the city to work on Gascon’s instructions, headed by junior members of the languishing government department of which Urner had been in charge. The Starfolk had kept their word and abandoned Urner on Mondelrey, and that act had so terrified these underlings that they could barely bring themselves to look at Gascon.

There was adequate equipment: a small laboratory adjoined his living-quarters, and the Starfolk seemed able to meet his demands. Personal services were attended to. But there was
no hiding the fact that his status approximated a prisoner’s. Except when he was left alone for the night, he was watched—for a short time after his arrival, by one of the Starfolk, who clearly hated to be on a planet’s surface, but thereafter by an ill-looking, nervous, but extremely intelligent native of the planet whom he understood to be Overlord Irdus’s private aide. He had been missing the past two days, presumably ill.

He was not the only nervous person Gascon had met. The obvious explanation for the Starfolk’s absurd precautions was that they were scared, and whereas one could account for the natives’ tension by invoking the Starfolk’s ultimatum to withdraw their services, this did not apply to the Starfolk. The psionic shout, to which Gascon was immune, was taking its toll.

Restless, he wandered out of the little house and strolled towards the river. He had been wondering about the chance of getting in and out of the site that way. He was going to have to see something of Regnier apart from these few square miles, and talk with a few more people before he made his next report. His first one was waiting to be delivered by the Starfolk now—although, of course, they had no idea of the fact. It was in a crate which the Starfolk themselves had supplied and had inspected minutely as the artifacts Gascon wanted to send to Earth were packed inside. It had passed the inspection and was sealed ready for dispatch.

The message, recorded on the crystal structure of an unimportant Class 75 artifact, by an improvement on an Old Race technique with which the Starfolk were unfamiliar, was largely an account of his difficulties. The next one would have to be somewhat better—still, even if he couldn’t report on the present situation, he was doing valuable work on the archeological side.

He paused as he came in sight of the river, its surface glinting a little under the moon. A shiver passed down his spine. It was still awesome to think that he was standing where the Old Race had passed; to realise that from here, as the evidence already showed, they had moved restlessly on towards Earth; that but for their mysterious disappearance they might have encountered man’s ape-like progenitors . . .

Suddenly he froze. Ahead of him, a black silhouette was moving on the bank of the river. A man, moving cautiously, carrying something.

Softly, Gascon crept to intercept him.
Jazey Hine felt ahead of him for the mental presence of Errida, hiding in her tunnel. It was a miracle how she had eluded discovery now that the site was daily alive with labourers, Starfolk and archeologists. Still, more cunning than a wild beast, she had survived; because she was the sister of a dead psion, they were looking for her, but not here.

It had taken Hine a long time to realise that his forebodings of doom were coloured by the never-ceasing psionic shout of disaster that daily grew fiercer—now, it seemed to echo through the galaxy like a vast gong. The strain of fighting it was making him ill, and it was reported that undercover psions elsewhere on Regnier were going insane from it. He had found a last reserve of mental resistance, born of hatred of defeat, and he was still alive, still scheming.

When the Starfolk assigned to supervise the Earthman Gascon grew restive, he had seen his chance to lie and cheat his way into the responsibility of taking the job over. Arraken was no fool, but his assessment of Hine’s relationship with Irdus made him believe that Hine was afraid of Regnier being abandoned, lest he should be rent by the mob with his master. It was ordered that Hine should watch Gascon, and Hine had almost sobbed with relief. Contact with the Earthman was his last hope.

And the Earthman proved to be a psinul.

Unable to read Gascon’s mind and establish whether he was truly tolerant of psions, Hine had lacked the courage so far to make an overt approach to him. The dilemma was sapping his vitality; the past two days, he had had to hide, pleading illness—and not lying, though the illness was in his mind.

Yet there remained Errida, skulking in darkness. He had contrived to pass close to the tunnel where she hid during the day, and knew that her first blind loathing of him was fading, so that his hope of getting her away had returned. He had also smuggled more food and drink to her, not seeing her, but leaving it where she would find it before the workers came in next morning. He was on another such errand now, keeping a psionic watch on the perimeter guards as he made his way up the river-bank, the only place where he could pass the fences. Anything to show he wanted to help Errida, anything to make her hatred lessen . . . How paradoxically ridiculous that when the fate of at least one planet, and possibly of mankind, was at stake, he was reduced to currying the favour of a girl in a rock!
Errida must be asleep. He could barely sense—
“Why, it’s you, Hine. What are you doing?”
The voice, low and level, struck Hine like a black jack. Convulsively he tossed the package he carried into the river, and as the splash sounded spun to look with his eyes where his psionic sense had reported nothing. Of course. Gascon. A psinul. And that oversight had trapped him.

Gascon was standing quite openly, where Hine might have seen him at any time, a look of puzzlement discernible on his face. He did not look at all menacing.

Hine drew a deep breath, and an ice-cold determination took hold of him. He was tired of waiting. He was tired of fighting the psionic cry of disaster that assailed him. He was tired of wondering whether Earth would help Regnier if the Starfolk abandoned it. He was never going to find out anything unless he asked.

He passed a weary hand across his face. Somewhere at the back of his mind he noted that Errida had been awakened by the splash in the river, but that was of no importance. Let her creep out if she wanted to, provided she didn’t show herself.

He said, “Gascon, I want to talk to you. You’re my only hope.”

The Earthman hesitated for a moment. Then he shrugged and nodded, and glanced around for a place to sit down. “The house they supplied for me is full of spy devices,” he said. “Here is probably as safe as anywhere.” Choosing a flat rock, he sat down and leaned forward, elbows on knees. “What’s it about? This threat of the Starfolk to stop servicing Regnier?”

“You know about that? Who told you?” Hine whispered
“Then it’s true. We had rumours. What’s the reason—is it true that the Zone Dominator’s ship was sabotaged because a psion got aboard? And how did a psion get aboard, anyway?”

Hine felt a dizzying surge of relief. Clearly Gascon knew infinitely more than he had dared hope. Perhaps his presence here was no coincidence, then. He let down all his barriers of caution and began to talk in a wild flood of words.

“Earth has got to help us! The Starfolk always keep their gene-pool planets dependent—we’re populated to twice the level our own resources would permit, because they supply us with drugs, diet-supplements, agrobiological aids, most of our high-order technical requirements—you see, they’ve artificially
limited our technical expansion . . . Typical! Unless Earth steps in when they stop servicing us, half of us will starve and there’ll be riots and war and who knows what! The Overlord is a puppet, Chem and Owitz are jealous and so is Breckitt, they’re all more capable men but the moment the Starfolk go they’ll lose their hold on the people, government will go smash, and they’ll be lynched.

“The roots of it are there already. Breckitt’s been encouraging anti-psion feeling to raise his stock with the Starfolk, and it backfired when Hollur Starkness got aboard Chalkind’s ship and—”

“Hollur Starkness?” Gascon cut in. “The psion we heard rumours about? What was he doing in the ship?”

Hine licked his lips. “Oh, this is so complicated—playing so many ends against the middle! Look, the Starfolk only accept spaceborn children into their own hierarchy. They take young people off their gene-pool planets but they never class them as true Starfolk. They use them for menial tasks and breeding, and there’s a fund of disaffection there. On Starfolk worlds, the only way psions can survive is by building up an undercover organisation. On some worlds there aren’t any—worlds like Fairhaven, where Starkness was making for, to help establish one and save the lives of children the Starfolk might discover and put to death. A very few crew members of starships hate the Starfolk so much they will help to smuggle psions, but it’s a desperately dangerous job negotiating with them, and sometimes they let facts slip. That’s what must have happened here—you see, they have no friends aboard the ships except their own kind, so these oppressed unaccepted menials, studs, broods, whatever you call them, seek the company of people on the planets they call at. The person arranging Starkness’s trip talked with someone else on board, who talked with someone in the city, who decided to strike a blow against a psion and the Starfolk both, and sabotaged the ship. Who knows how? I don’t.”

“So that was how I managed to sneak up on you without your noticing,” Gascon mused.

“What?” Hine jerked upright.

“You’re a psion, aren’t you? How else would you know that the man’s name was Hollur Starkness, or the details of the smuggling operation? And I’m a psinul, as you certainly know.”
Hine sat sweating, hands clenched, terrified.
Gascon hardly noticed. A scheme was forming in his mind, turning on the fact that a psion had managed to—not just survive on Regnier, but—establish himself at the very heart of the puppet government. It might be made to work.

"What do you make of this psionic shout?" he said abruptly.
Hine blinked at him. "What?"

"This—this warning signal all psions are sensing now. A warning that seems to portend the end of everything." Gascon stared. "You do sense it, don't you?"

"Yes," Hine said. "Yes, it's unendurable. End of everything describes it. It has something to do with Regnier, something to do with the Old Race, and it's all blended in with impossible concepts of going home, of sanctuary and security..." He shook his head. "It's beginning to drive us insane."

Gascon was silent for a moment. Then, with apparent irrelevance, he said, "What would happen if you were to disappear?"

The strain of talking to a psinul, on top of his already exhausted state and the emotional catharsis of the disclosures he had made so blindly, had dazed Hine. He had to struggle to formulate his answer.

"I don't know. Irdus—I guess he'd fall, because I prop him up. And..." His voice tailed away. "How did you know I was thinking of going into hiding?" he said at last.

"I didn't, but it seems like a sensible idea," Gascon murmured. "Before you can let any of your fellow-psions know as much about me as you've learned."

thirteen

Her days and nights of skulking in the tunnel, desperate to escape notice, had trained Errida in animal arts; she could breathe so softly she barely heard herself, she could move with fear-inspired patience so that her footfalls were soundless. And she had learned to sleep briefly and lightly, alert for any unfamiliar noise.

The splash of something falling into the river outside brought her instantly awake. Her fear and hatred of Hine had faded over the past few days; her crazed determination to stay where she was forever had given way to rational thought. She knew
Hine had come back, because she had found provisions left for her. Next time he came here, she wanted to speak to him, and she crept out of the tunnel to see if it was he.

She did not hear everything that was said when he met and spoke to the stranger she found to be the cosmoarcheologist from Earth, but she heard a good deal, for the night was quiet and she managed to get quite near. She wondered if Hine sensed her presence. He showed no sign of doing so, but that was to be expected. He seemed very tired and ill.

At the end of the conversation, when he collapsed, she almost cried out in horror. But she controlled herself. Later, when the Earthman moved off carrying Hine over his shoulders like a sack, she stole after him.

It was clever of the Starfolk to handle him like a fusion bomb, Gascon reflected with grim humour. Because he was at least as dangerous, and probably more so. The chance of sending an Earthman to a Starfolk-dominated world had been too good to miss, and Fold had given orders for every possible technique to be employed in creating a secret agent to exploit the opportunity. If it became necessary, Gascon—naked and empty-handed—could escape from any conceivable captivity, could mow down armies, could survive without food or drink in a secret hiding-place until the armadas of Earth came to Regnier after the departure of the Starfolk. If they didn’t go after all, there were alternative schemes. So long as they did not simply propose to kill him, he would last.

He had never done anything like this before, had never imagined himself doing it. But now it was necessary, he moved with precision and confidence. Under Fold’s direction he had been trained in the analysis of situations, and had acquired an Executive’s gift for extracting patterns of action.

Jazey Hine was going to disappear, like a conjuring trick, in so barefaced and obvious a fashion that it would be weeks or months before anyone seriously considered the possibility; by then, he would be on Earth. And what Fold would be able to do with first-hand information from a psion who had eluded the Starfolk so cleverly that he had become aide to the Overlord beggared imagining. This was why a psinul was essential as an agent on Regnier—because a psion from Regnier was wanted on Earth, and not even other psions could be allowed to know what had become of him. Had Fold told him that and left the memory as a post-hypnotic injunction? Or had he
deduced it for himself? He didn’t know and didn’t care.

But the psionic warning had something to do with Regnier, and a psion from that planet was going to Earth.

No overt physical changes had been made in Gascon’s body. The risk of the Starfolk making a radiological examination was too great. But the freezing-in of crystalline resonances left no conspicuous traces, and that was something the scientists of Earth had brought to a fine art. To impress his report on that insignificant artifact now awaiting shipment, he had needed only to handle the object and wait, pressing in coded patterns with his fingertips.

He picked up a piece of slate-like stone from the ground near him. Any flat, rigid material would do. He held it between his hands, and faced it towards Hine.

It took him about half a minute to get the frequencies right, and then the blended sub- and ultrasonics resonating out of the bones of his hands began to dephase Hine’s cortical rhythms. An increase in the sleep-associated component, and he was collapsing sideways.

Gascon put the piece of slate down and lifted the unconscious psion. He was quite light, wasted by nervous tension. His metabolic rate would be high, as with all psions. Walking quickly but quietly over the rough ground, Gascon did some mental calculations.

As he had told Hine, the house the Starfolk had provided for him was full of spy devices. He had not told Hine that he had immediately taken steps to neutralise them, using some recording crystals and a few yards of invisibly fine wire. If he wanted to go about some business undisturbed, he could tread on a buried contact outside or inside the house and switch in highly convincing recordings to report innocuous movements.

It was quite dark near the house. The Starfolk dared not be too open in their spying on him, because they doubtless hoped to lull him into betraying himself if he was not what he pretended. Confidently Gascon carried Hine into the house, setting the misleading recordings to play as he did so.

He spent a quarter-hour working with some of the chemical supplies he had brought with him, and another ten minutes with Hine. Then he left the house, carrying not only Hine but a good deal of equipment.
The fact that the guards around the site were there to prevent the local people getting in rather than to stop Gascon getting out simplified his next stop. Presumably the Starfolk envisaged the natives going to beg Gascon to invoke Earth's help against their overlords; the Starfolk had no illusions about their dependent peoples' love for them. Hine had managed to get in because he could sense psionically when the coast was clear, but no ordinary man would have managed it so easily.

Awaiting delivery to the starport in the morning, the crates of artifacts were piled close to the main gate through which the labourers filed in daily. There were two watchposts nearby, equipped only with searchlights and rather ineffective infra-red equipment—as Hine had pointed out earlier, the Starfolk artificially depressed the technical level of their gene-pool worlds.

There were two guards in each watchpost, idly talking as Gascon came up. He set Hine down behind a shrubby bush and selected from what he had brought with him a parabolic mirror that formed part of a small laboratory arc-melter. He would have to directionalise the vibrations with which he attacked the guards; though they were looking away from him, he could not hope to come close enough otherwise.

Then they were seated, which saved them falling down noisily when they became unconscious. With luck, they would not even realise they had missed the five or ten minutes it would take Gascon to complete his work.

Directly the guards were asleep, he went to the stack of crates close by. He had assessed Hine's weight when carrying him, and knew that one of the crates contained roughly the same total mass. He found it on the end of a line, which was a further lucky break. Picking it up, he hurried with it to the shelter of the bush where he had left Hine.

Maybe the Starfolk had given him this idea. If so, he was duly grateful.

The crate was welded and sealed with a simple crystal resonance pattern. He could have duplicated it to within one per cent with his bare hands, but he wanted to be more cautious than that. He recorded the original pattern on an empty crystal he had brought for the purpose, and then fatigue-fractured the welds around the lid of the crate with ultrasonics.

Out with the artifacts. A list and complete description was fastened inside the lid—Fold would have the wit to get Scannell
to fake replacements if necessary when the time came for the consignment to be returned. And in with Hine, folded like an unborn child.

A small power-source; an oxygenator-nutrefier which Gascon had been given in case he had to go into hiding after detection by the Starfolk; a mass-simulator intended for use in the event that he wanted to conceal a heavy object inside a lightweight Old Race artifact without the fact becoming known, which was not really intended to cope with an object the size of a man, but which would do the job for a while at any rate; lastly, a metabolic-rate reducer, fastened to the nape of Hine’s neck with a piece of tape and using subsonics to flatten out the master rhythms of the medulla. That also was for use if Gascon had to hide. All these items had been openly revealed to the Starfolk, because they were equally usable for the study of Old Race artifacts.

The crate was thickly insulated. The chance of the faint, faint vibrations emitted by the metabolic-rate reducer being detected from outside the case was minuscule. Gascon nodded, satisfied. He had had to guess at Hine’s actual metabolic rate, but he had erred on the safe side, and the psion would certainly not return to normal wakefulness until he was either aboard the ship between Mondelrey and Earth, or on Earth itself.

He closed the lid and picked up his arc-melter to replace the mirror. He glanced around cautiously before putting on the power, because there was bound to be some stray light no matter how carefully he controlled the beam. The guards were still limp, and no one else was in view as far as could be seen.

Rapidly he re-welded the lid of the crate, waited for the metal to cool, and then restored the original vibration pattern from the recording. He took the precaution of wiping the crystal afterwards. The Starfolk might wonder why he had a copy of that particular pattern.

Then he carried the crate back to its original place at the end of the line.

He woke the guards up as fast as possible, so that it would seem to them as though they had let their attention wander and nothing more, and stole silently through the night back to his house. There, he put away his equipment, copying exactly the former layout except where he had to conceal the lack of the items now in the crate with Hine, and went to bed. The misleading recordings were interconnected to provide a consistent
blend of fact and fiction; once safely lying down, he could wait till they reached this point and switch them off.

When he had done so, he went peacefully to sleep.

It was not yet dawn when there were slamming noises all around him. He jerked awake at the same moment as the door of his bedroom was opened and the lights came on. Two armed policemen strode into the room, with others visible behind them. From the sounds outside, the house was surrounded.

"Get your clothes on and come with us," one of the policemen instructed him.

"What the hell is this about?" Gascon demanded.

"Don't argue—just move."

There was nothing to do but obey. Wondering whether he was having a nightmare, Gascon dressed hastily. Then he was roughly urged outside, into an official car, and the driver started in the direction of the main gate.

They couldn't have discovered Hine!

They hadn't. Not yet. But at the gate, which was open, there was a flood of brilliant light and many people. Standing near the rows of crates was a man Gascon recognised: Breckitt, whom Hine had named as chief rival of Overlord Irdus. A white-faced girl, who could scarcely be more than fifteen, eyes swollen with crying and clothes filthy with long wearing, stood next to him, her wrists chained and the other end of the chain held by a gross pudding-faced woman in uniform. They were watching intently as a gang of four men armed with power-saws methodically cut open the lids of the crates, one by one.

In pure astonishment, Gascon wondered once more if he was dreaming. He could not conceive any way in which he could have been so swiftly found out.

He was forced out of the car and urged towards Breckitt, his escorts announcing volubly that they had brought him. Breckitt answered brusquely that he had eyes in his head, and that they had better wait for Arraken's arrival. Or for proof of the girl's accusations.

The girl? Gascon, standing numbly between the policemen, stared at her. How could she be connected with this? She was barely more than a child!
There was a cry from the men working on the crates, and they put aside their saws. The lid of the crate in which Hine was hidden was thrown back, and Breckitt strode forward to stare down with satisfaction at what was revealed. After a moment, he called for Gascon to be brought.

"Well?" he said. "How do you explain this Old Race relic?"

The surprise and disbelief which Gascon showed was so transparently genuine that for a moment Breckitt hesitated, and in that moment a car came screaming up the road from the direction of the spaceport, bringing a sleepy and angry group of Starfolk, ill-tempered at the time they were having to spend on-planet.

Fawning, Breckitt went to meet them, and as they heard what he had to say Gascon, also listening, chilled with dismay. The girl had watched everything, and had told all she knew.

fourteen

With part of his mind he pieced together the facts; with another part, he cast wildly around for a course of action. The girl was a friend of Jazey Hine’s. She had been hiding here on the Old Race site, for what seemed like a fantastically long time. She had followed when Gascon was taking Hine to hide him in the crate. The guards had found her trying to identify the crate, and had beaten the story out of her. She had no love for Breckitt or the Starfolk, and none for any Earthman either. She had been trying to rescue Hine, no more.

And she must have moved like a shadow, because Gascon had had no inkling of her presence.

With ill-concealed joy which Gascon put down to his delight at seeing Irdus’s right-hand man involved in a clear attempt to deceive the Starfolk, Breckitt explained, gestured, amplified the girl’s story. Sour-faced, the four Starfolk listened for a while; then with abrupt impatience they cut short his flow of words. The one who appeared to be the leader—a man named Pathue, whom Gascon had met while the crates were being prepared and sealed for shipment—barked at him.

"It sounds too stupid for the Earthman to have had a hand in it! The crate was tamper-proof—I put a vibration seal on the lid myself, and if it had been opened we’d have spotted it before it was put aboard the ship. Why didn’t you wait till we
got here? Now your idiots have sawn it open, we can't check on the seal, can we? You didn't think of that, did you? Like all you planetside idiots, you rushed straight ahead without stopping to figure things out first... Get that girl over here!"

Breckitt blanched, but obeyed. Gascon felt his hopes rise again slightly.

Questioning the girl turned out to be useless—she stared numbly at Pathue for a while, and at last burst into tears. Pathue gave a grunt of disgust, told the uniformed woman to take the girl away, and turned to Gascon.

"Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Gascon had been going over in his mind a number of possible lies. The flaw in most of them was the fact that his interference with the spy devices in his house might be discovered—still, that was a chance he had to take. These Starfolk were badly shaken by his barefaced attempt to smuggle Hine off the planet, especially since it was pure accident the plan had failed.

He said "I don't know who the girl is—"

Breckitt interrupted. "She's the sister of the psion who was lynched the night of Arraken's first call here as Dominator!"

"Then she's probably lying," Pathue said coldly, for the pleasure of seeing him react. To Gascon he added, "Go on."

"Of course she's lying," Gascon said shortly. "So far I haven't got a clear idea of what's supposed to have happened, but apparently Hine wanted to get off Regnier—he tried to sound me out once or twice about my helping him, but it's no part of my job to interfere in local politics, and it was stupid for me to risk my chance of working here. He seemed to be scared of something."

Glancing at Breckitt, he went on, "Maybe you could suggest why he seemed scared of staying here?"

Breckitt didn't answer. Pathue, however, apparently jumped to the conclusion Gascon was hoping for—the idea that Hine was afraid of being dragged down if the Starfolk withdrew support from Regnier's puppet overlord.

"You said the girl was supposed to be a friend of Hine's?" he challenged Breckitt.

Breckitt licked his lips. "She claims to be," he agreed. "That if anything is likely to be a lie, though."

One of the men who had brought Hine out of the crate came over to him, carrying the life-sustaining equipment Gascon had put in. "We found all this," he muttered to Breckitt.
Before anyone else could comment, Gascon spoke up. He said, "Some of that looks like mine! I've mislaid a few items of apparatus since Hine was given the job of liaison with me."

"We're not going to get anywhere," Pathue said harshly. "Not till we wake Hine up. You!" He addressed the man holding Gascon's equipment. "Is Hine asleep, or in a coma, or what?"

"Why—uh—he's dead, isn't he?" the man replied blankly. "His heart isn't beating and he doesn't seem to be breathing."

In the background the girl sobbed loudly. The uniformed woman she was chained to snapped at her to be quiet.

"Dead?" Pathue echoed. "Then what killed him?"

The other looked at Breckitt as though asking guidance, and shrugged. Pathue waited for an answer; when none came, he went over to where Hine had been laid on his back on the ground, followed by the other three Starfolk. They moved with ragged nervousness, and Gascon wondered whether there had perhaps been any increase in the intensity of the psionic shout he would never be able to hear. It would take something of that nature to make Starfolk so edgy—that, or a deep-rooted sense of the subtlety of Earthmen.

He was speculating on the value of a psychological weapon of such a kind when Pathue, after staring at Hine's motionless body for a while, grunted and rolled it over with a shove of one foot.

"What's that thing taped to his neck?" he said. "Get it off and have a look at it."

The man with the life-sustaining equipment thrust his burden into the hands of someone else nearby and dropped to one knee beside Hine. Gascon watched closely as the metabolic-rate reducer was handed up to Pathue. It was unlikely that it would mean anything to him, but once it was removed Hine would recover rapidly, his present undetectably slow heartbeat and respiration picking up their natural rhythm.

If he were not a psinul, he could communicate to Hine an awareness of what had happened—if Hine wasn't too dazed to comprehend it . . .

"It's buzzing," Pathue said sharply, dropping the reducer as though it had bitten him. "I felt it by bone-condition. Take another look at Hine. I think that gadget was meant to keep him in his coma, so now it's off him he may wake up."
Alertly, men moved to obey. They rolled Hine over on his back again and set crudely to work to revive him, chafing his limbs and pressing on his diaphragm while others fetched a medikit from the nearer watchpost.

There was an air of extreme tension. No one spoke. Even the sobbing girl was silent, and the distant noise of the river became incredibly loud by contrast. Gascon, maintaining deliberate calm by an act of will, waited for the moment when Hine woke up. On his reaction would hinge the decision whether to try and go on bluffing, or to account his mission an effective failure and make his escape, which would be a disastrous blow after the planning and care which had gone into bringing him here.

He felt angry with himself—he had allowed himself to be lulled into thinking that because he had been given so much training, so many secret weapons, he was infallible.

"He's waking up," Breckitt said loudly and unnecessarily, and Pathue and the other Starfolk moved a little closer to Hine.

First the unconscious psion stirred; the guard who had brought the medikit thought to move it out of reach.

Then, so quickly afterwards it seemed that there had been a gap in the flow of time, Hine had come to himself, had hurled himself to his feet, and was screaming.

It touched something in Gascon's memory, and he knew even before Hine shrieked his agony into words what it was that he was going to hear. Hine was crying out from the same intolerable torment that had driven Elze's son into the desert night on Earth, infinitely long ago, infinitely far away.

The scream was so shocking that it froze the men surrounding Hine, preventing them from leaping on him and pinioning him. Moreover, Hine did not open his eyes, but stretched his hands out before him like a blind man, as though groping in an invisible maze, and his hands shook with all-consuming terror.

Coloured with hysteria because words could not match the feelings he endured, his voice rained mad promise of doom on their ears.

"Fools, bastards, torturers, animals, why are you just standing there don't you hear it don't you hear him telling you telling you it's the end damn you why don't you understand me sick smug stupid crippled DEAF damn you why can't you hear
him shouting it’s the end of EVERYTHING stars planets US you me damn you it’s the end of you he’s telling you the end of EVERYTHING what shall I do where shall I hide what’s the USE—"

Pathue lifted his gauntletted right hand and his power-assisted limbs whirred with a noise like an insect flying. He slapped Hine twice, across his cheeks, and the mad outpouring of the psion’s terror broke off like a dry stick. For a moment Hine gaped, wide-eyed, wide-mouthed; then his face seemed to shrivel and wither and he collapsed forward on his knees, his forehead to the ground, hammering the earth with his fists like a child.

Nobody spoke. They exchanged uneasy glances. At last Breckitt said with forced assurance, “He’s gone out of his mind.”

“No.”

Gascon’s voice slashed through their indecision with a bite of authority. He strode forward. No one made to hinder him as he dropped on one knee beside Hine and spoke softly.

“Who’s ‘he,’ Jazey? Who is it that’s shouting at us? Who is it who’s trying to warn us all?”

Hine showed no response. Gascon hesitated—was he wrong in attaching so much significance to this curious turn of phrase? Was it accidental, a crazy mental slip? He tried again patiently, wearing down Hine’s barriers against answering, until finally he was rewarded by a hate-filled cry.

“Hollur Starkness, damn you! Why can’t you hear him?”

Like an electric shock, Gascon felt the jolting rightness of his spur-of-the-moment guess.

“Where is he, Jazey? Can you tell us where he is? Jazey!”

But he got nothing further. At length he rose to his feet, to find Pathue facing him and the other Starfolk grouped silent at one side. The focus of events had closed in. No one else of all the many persons present any more: only Gascon, Hine, and these four men braced and masked against the natural environment.

“You’ve been lying,” Pathue said without violence. “You’re no dispassionate scientist. You know something. What is it?”

“Why did you say Hine wasn’t crazy?” one of his companions cut in. “This wild talk of the end of everything is simple raving!”

“Quiet!” Pathue snapped, and to Gascon again, “Well!”
"Yes, I do know something," Gascon said after a pause. "I know that the psion who was aboard Angus Chalkind's ship is still alive, and if he's alive, Chalkind himself or others of his crew may be."

Stunned, Pathue recoiled. "How can you know this?"
"Because this man Hine is a psion!" Gascon rapped. "And before you think any further, he's under the protection of Earth as of now and on my authority. What matters at the moment is that he's a human being, and humanity is being warned of a cosmic cataclysm, so if you have brains to match your vaunted superiority you'll listen to what I have to say!"

Rapidly he outlined the reasons for his coming to Regnior. "It's a lie!" Breckitt cried when he had finished. He turned beseechingly to Pathue. "Don't you see? This story was started by psions—he said so! It's a psion trick to—to—"

"Shut up!" Gascon said brutally. "You've built your career on the deaths of psions, and decent people are sick of listening to you. I'm talking to the Starfolk and not you. Pathue, I just told you that Dominator Chalkind may still be alive, because Hollur Starkness is alive. You claim to set a pretty high price on the lives of your people—for the sake of Chalkind and his crew, you said you were prepared to abandon Regnior to famine and death. If this wasn't just petty cruelty, you'd better prove it, by acting on what I tell you."

"This is a matter for the Zone Dominator," Pathue said abruptly.

"Take me to him in his ship, then!" Gascon exclaimed.

He watched the reaction closely; it was as he had expected. Whether they knew it or not, they too were affected by the psionic shout, by its dual components of fearful warning tempered by concepts of home and security. To them, the idea of returning aboard ship was both a compliance with a psionic suggestion and an escape from the stress of terror, a retreat to the comfort of a space-going womb.

Pathue pointed at Hine. "Bring him with us!" he barked, and spun and marched with his companions back to the vehicle that had brought them. Unbidden, Gascon climbed up beside them, and none of them said anything as they accelerated down the road towards the starport.
The ship which had brought Gascon from Earth to Mondelrey had been luxurious and spacious. His first reaction on finding that Arraken’s vessel, though the flagship of a Zone Dominator, was cramped, drab and unimpressive was veiled amusement; then he realised the reason, and was more than ever confident that he could recoup his near-failure back on Regnier.

There was a curious paradox operating here. The Starfolk had developed their culture as a psychologically stable background at a time when rapid development on their old home planets had made them maladjusted and rootless. Accordingly, these ships were probably essentially unchanged since the earliest days of colonial starfleets. Hence their alleged evolutionary progress was set against environmental conservatism: That was a trap to be caught in! Still worse, they were compelled to hold back development on their gene-pool worlds for fear they might become self-sufficient and reject Starfolk aid.

He remembered what Fold had said about combating stupidity, and resolved to keep the point in the forefront of his mind.

Whatever else might be wrong with Starfolk society, though, there was nothing wrong with their medical science. Hine—who had come blubbering aboard between two brawny men—had been dosed by the staff of the ship’s infirmary, and within minutes recovered his self-possession, until now he was seated on a bench next to Gascon, pale, but calm and capable of rational speech.

Across the room—cabin, office, bridge, whatever it might be called—Arraken sat in a chair that was far more than a chair. Above it was a communications helmet poised to be pulled down; behind and on either side of it were banks of information-presenting equipment, which Arraken would face by swivelling the chair. Pathue stood to one side of the Dominator, and there were two guards. But Gascon doubted if they were necessary. Here in a starship Arraken was in his natural habitat. Even though it was a matter of environmental conditioning rather than evolutionary selection, one felt he was at home between the stars.

The quarter-gravity disturbed Gascon, but it was natural to Arraken and Pathue; the faces revealed by the removal of
their masks were strong and showed personality, while against the risk of their importing germs from Regnier, Hine and Gascon were now masked.

Yet Gascon still felt he had the upper hand. Every embryo decision Arraken took was coloured by the nagging tone of the psionic shout, and only a psinul could think unhampered by it.

"All right," Arraken said grudgingly, addressing Hine. "Assume I accept the story you and Gascon have told—how is it that until now you didn’t realise any connection with this psion Starkness, and with the loss of my predecessor’s ship?"

"It’s grown louder and clearer," Hine said, licking his lips. "Also I think the slowing down of metabolic rate which I underwent made me more sensitive to detail in the signal."

"But you didn’t get any clearer picture of the disaster itself," Gascon suggested. Hine glanced at him and away again.

"Oh yes," he said. "Unequivocally, the obliteration of everything."

"This is ridiculous!" Arraken snapped. "You say the source is in present time, yet you talk of the end of the universe—this is nonsense! We have some idea of the universe’s time-scale—"

"Please, Dominator!" Hine held up a hand defensively. "I know what you’re going to say, and I appreciate your doubts, but I can’t make it any clearer in words. I—I’m not responsible for what the signals say. I’m just interpreting to you."

Arraken, reminded of the fact that Hine was a psion and that he had only by an effort of will mastered his revulsion enough to allow him aboard the ship, was silent for a moment, and there was a feeling in the room as though the presence of death passed over them.

Absently Hine turned his head a little, following his eyes, to look up at a spot on the wall where there was nothing to draw his attention.

"Well, I don’t believe it," Arraken said finally. "And I don’t propose to act—"

"Just a moment." Gascon interrupted coolly, watching Hine. "Hine, what are you looking at?"

The psion seemed to come back to the present. He said, "Uh? Oh! I—uh—I—"

And he realised. He was on his feet, pointing to where he had been staring, shaking all over with excitement. "There!" he said. "That’s where it’s coming from—I know now!"
Abruptly he let his arm fall, and spoke in a voice of dejection.

"No, you'll never listen. You're thinking, 'This psion is very quick to invent new stories when I begin to see through his old ones.' Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm crazy."

He sank back on the bench and buried his face in his hands.

"People are going to say," Gascon murmured, addressing Arraken, "that you're unwilling to listen to Hine, not because he's a psion, but because if Chalkind is alive after all, you'll have to relinquish the post of Zone Dominator."

Arraken flushed and tensed. He said, "I've a mind to have you put into space, you foul-mouthed Earthling! When you have no more to say you turn to crude insults, which is what's to be expected, I guess."

"Dominator," Pathue said diffidently; he had been glancing over the data-presenting instruments ranked behind Arraken's chair. "Dominator, there's an odd coincidence here."

Hine raised his head, and all attention turned on Pathue as he operated a control and panels rolled back along the walls, revealing the majesty of naked space beyond pressure-tempered windows. It was not a sight that even Starfolk could accept indefinitely. Gascon felt a stir of excitement. The pattern of stars revealed was one which was familiar to him from maps. By a very strange coincidence, as Pathue had said, this was the most likely direction from which the Old Race might have approached Earth's corner of the galaxy.

But that wasn't what had surprised Pathue.

"Hine hadn't any knowledge of the ship's attitude in space," Pathue was saying. "So how did he know that the Fairhaven system lay this way? It's the line-of-sight for a Regnier-Fairhaven voyage."

"But Chalkind's ship was bound for Fairhaven, and never reached there," Arraken said slowly.

"Suppose the saboteurs didn't use a bomb, as we imagined," Pathue went on. "Suppose they used an oscillator and muddled the impulses of the subspace navigation controls, or piped gas into the ventilating system, thinking to lose the ship by putting the crew to sleep."

"Overshoot," Arraken nodded. "A long overshoot—we've combed the whole of explored space in that direction." He glanced at Hine and licked his lips.

"But your point's valid, Pathue. How he knew the ship's orientation. Very well, I'm convinced. I don't know anything
about cosmic disasters, but”—and he glared at Gascon—“I’ll not give anyone grounds for saying I did less than my utmost to find Angus Chalkind’s ship.”

He spun the chair in which he was seated and drew down the communications helmet over his head.

“Navigation! Engines! All stations alert!”

He was the only Earthman ever to have a chance to study Starfolk culture at first-hand, Gascon reflected. He should have been memorising, analysing, questioning those of the crew who were willing to talk to him—but somehow he could not find the will to do so. It didn’t seem worth it. When a disaster of impossible magnitude was impending, to probe this sterile, enclosed, drab culture seemed too petty.

Fold was right. The struggle to get rid of the Starfolk, whose barren influence englobed the realm of Earth and formed an impenetrable wall around human originality and restless need to explore, was a combat to match any in history. Here they were driving out beyond the explored systems, and they had only been in flight for a matter of days, so swift was a voyage in subspace. How many new systems had been opened since the Starfolk were established? How long before stability turned to decadence?

The ship dipped into the other-dimensional universe in which velocities were infinite, snapped back into normal space and swung into one planet-endowed system after another, and each successive time Hine called from the stupor in which the ship’s doctors kept him to preserve his mind from the waves of psion-hate surrounding him, insisted that the source of the emanations was yet further ahead of them. Tension climbed till it could almost be clawed out of the air, weighed, tasted.

It made Gascon nervous to read the expressions and manner of the Starfolk. He could not feel the psionic battering which Hine endured in its fullest force, but they, who were not psinuls or psions, were daily showing more of its effects. The Dominator himself, face gleaming with sweat, would shout at Hine that their trip was useless, that it was dangerous, that he was being deceived; when he was in this state it took all Gascon’s persuasion to keep him to his promise.

What could be the Meaning of a warning of the end of everything? No amount of argument could shake Hine’s certainty
that that was what he was being told, and that Hollur Starkness was telling him.

Once Arraken challenged him: "You're a psion! Can you communicate between the stars?"

Sickly, Hine swallowed and shook his head.

"Then how do you expect me to believe that Starkness does?"

"I can't explain!" Hine moaned. "I simply know!"

And now they were due to enter yet another system, the tenth—twelfth—Gascon had lost count. They were assembled in the Dominator's room, the panels shut over the ports because subspace was an unpleasant place to see, and the sourness of unformulated fear lay thick upon them. Hine was almost at the end of his resources, for all the doctors could do, and sat on the bench beside Gascon trembling from head to foot.

Psions couldn't beam between the stars.

Who could?

That was the question which now seemed to Gascon to be the crucial one.

"Now," Arraken said gruffly. "It had better be the right system this time—I'm weary of this lunatic hunting!" He bit off the last word just as the ship returned to normal space.

And went chalk-white and seized the arms of his chair.

Pathue, who was standing, choked and gasped and clutched at the nearest support.

Hine fell forward off the bench and lay, still as a corpse, on the floor, his fall under the light gravity having a nightmare quality.

From the inship communicators there came nothing but gasps and groans.

Gascon, who had felt only the usual discomfort attending the switch between the universes, leapt to his feet with a cry of dismay. Neither Pathue nor Arraken could answer when he demanded what was wrong. In desperation he cast around him; his eye fell on the switch that would roll back the walls and reveal what lay beyond the ship, and he jabbed at it.

And everything fell into place in his mind.

There was a yellow sun, which seemed darker in colour than the sun of Earth. There was a planet below—as the ship was oriented—with air and clouds and glimpses of dazzling-bright ocean. And there were . . .
How to describe them? Like veils, filmy, indistinct, of multiple soft colours, drifting in from the distant stars towards this planet of all planets, patterns of organised non-physical energy awareness beings. Yes: they were beings.

As a man born deaf, standing in the presence of a vast noise, vaguely senses the vibration and shock and violence, Gascon was sensing the merest trace of what had battered Hine into catatonia and everyone else aboard the ship into a state of illimitable despair.

The arrogance! Damn them! The arrogance of them, whatever they were! What right had they to claim that the universe was at an end, to shake the sanity of men innumerable?

Gascon hammered at the windows, dizzy with a rage which almost choked him. He screamed at the beings beyond, knowing what they were and what they had done, and trapped in his own impotence.

"I'll show you!" he mouthed. "I'll show you!"

He dragged Arraken out of his chair; the starman could not resist, but slumped to the floor. Gascon took his place, and did as he had once seen Arraken do—bring into circuit an overriding control allowing him to operate the ship's engines from his chair.

Slowly he turned the ship. When the nose was aligned towards the nearby planet, he closed his eyes and engaged the power of the normal drive.

sixteen

"Have you come to take them away?"

Gascon's eyes snapped open and his hand left the power-switch as though burnt. Hine's voice!

The psion still lay awkwardly on the floor, as he had fallen. But it had been his voice.

Gascon's momentary madness left him, and his mind was cool and calm. He said, "Is that Hine talking? Or is it—someone else?"

"I cannot reach you directly," Hine said. "Like a jointed doll his body began to jerk upright. "It is lucky you are crippled. This one is not crippled. Another is not crippled. Have you come to take him away?"

"Yes!" Gascon said fiercely. "Yes! All of them! Can you bring them here?"
Now Hine was getting to his feet. His face was quite slack, like an idiot’s, and his eyes were closed. He stood, swaying a little. “I will show you where they are,” he said after a pause.

“What good is that?” Gascon countered. “I can’t control the ship—I don’t know how, and anyway I doubt if it can be landed on a planet by one man. Bring them here—or kill them! They can’t be sane after what you’ve done to them.”

“They are all crippled except one,” Hine said. “And the one who is not crippled is no longer sane. They did not know as much as you do. They did not understand.”

Gascon gave a bitter laugh. “What’s wrong with them? Has your arrogance convinced them that the universe is going to end?”

There was silence from Hine for a long moment. Then his voice was heard anew.

“You imagine the universe differently. Death is the end of the universe. We will bring them all to you—they are so affected that we do not know if you can accept them.”

“I suppose you can bring them into the ship without killing them?” Gascon said sarcastically. “Without their suffocating on the way, without my having to open the locks to let them in?”

“Yes,” Hine said.

He collapsed, like a marionette when the operator lets the strings go, and Gascon clenched his fingers on the arms of the chair. A gust of wind made him blink, and they were there, and the wind was from their arrival in the room, and they must have been transported through some non-spatial pathway because there was no other route for them to have come by.

Before him, there were four people: two men, two women, all naked, pipestem-thin from starvation, dirty, their hair unkempt, their skins marked with cuts, bruises and mud. The women had the flabby breasts and ugly bellies characteristic of Starfolk breeding-stock, accentuated by their long time under full planetary gravity without artificial aids.

They were completely dazed by what had happened to them, and since they were not, even now, out of range of the terrible psionic shout that had bludgeoned their minds towards mania, they could not think about it. They gaped and moaned and huddled together away from the walls, and seemed not to hear Gascon when he shouted at them.
One of the two men had his eyes closed; he was tall and had been well-built before starvation. That one would be Hollur Starkness.

Gascon got slowly out of his chair. If he had understood correctly, there was only one thing to be done.

He would have to kill Hollur Starkness and Jazey Hine, and with their deaths he could buy for all men the knowledge that otherwise would be locked up, here, in an alien star-system, forever.

He looked about him for a weapon, and his eye fell on nothing he could use.

His hands, then. He moved to where Hine lay, dropped on one knee, and convulsively tilted back the psion’s head so that his throat was exposed. He thought of what had been said with Hine’s voice: that death is the end of the universe.

When he had killed Starkness as well, it was as though a great silence had fallen. Nothing had changed outside the ship—the sun, the planet, floated in space—but the beings seemed not to be there any more. They were there; it was simply that there was no longer anything human at all to modulate the tremendous blast of psionic emanations which had made them perceptible even to the worse-than-cripple—the psinul Philip Gascon.

Arraken stirred. His eyes opened. They fell first on the surviving man who had been brought from the planet below, and they widened with astonishment. He licked his lips and spoke, in a voice ringing with disbelief.

“Angus . . . Chalkind . . . !”

“Get up,” Gascon said. “Take command of your ship. Don’t ask questions. Wait until we are safely on the way to Regnier again and I will tell you all I know.”

Under his breath he added, “If I can . . .”

Fold said, “So the Old Race haven’t gone completely, after all.”

“No.” Gascon stared out from the terrace of Fold’s home towards the horizon; the sound of the sea came faint and distant to his ears. “They have become so nearly immortal that when one of them is old and knows it—he; they’re persons, after all—knows he must die, he makes his way back from the uttermost reaches of the cosmos towards the planet on which their race began. There is only one reason for dying when they
are so totally released from their physical limitations as they now are: satiety of experience. Literally, they have learned the universe, memorised it, explored it, accepted it. Death is the end of the universe."

"This isn't a concept unique to them," Fold said gently. "A mystic called Angelus Silesius preached that God died when his worshippers died, and many religious schools have said the same."

Gascon shrugged. His whole body expressed an ineffable weariness, and he seemed past caring about such matters. "Maybe it's the same," he said. "I doubt it."

"Never mind." Fold made a gesture of dismissal. "Well, when they gather together like this, is it out of—sympathy?"

"Not sympathy. Oh, what am I doing trying to explain it?" Gascon said with sudden anger. "I, who am not just a cripple but a—a cypher! A zero, a null, a negative!"

"Not necessarily," Fold shrugged. "We don't have to follow the same path as the Old Race."

"That's so, I guess. All right, I'll try and make it plain. It's not sympathy. More, it's that they take this concept of the death of the universe so literally they return to go with the one who dies as an earnest that the universe is still... being perceived." He hesitated. "Is that right? Nearly. To them, existence consists in being perceived by an awareness. So the dying one announces his plight by a psionic call, and the call is amplified by the whole planet, which resonates and booms and echoes through who knows how much of space."

"It must take time for them all to assemble," Fold suggested. "Surely! The call may have been going out for centuries—how can we say?"

"Perhaps we know how long. Perhaps it was under the impact of this signal that we began to select for psionic awareness—after all, it makes sound biological sense to respond to a subconscious warning of disaster."

Faintly surprised, Gascon nodded. "A point I hadn't thought of," he admitted. "Still, we can look into that now that we know the nature of the stress-patterns impressed on the artifacts they left for us to find. Physical analogues of psionic emanations! No wonder they baffled us!"

He leaned forward, not looking at Fold. "A planet resonating like a gong, though—isn't it a hell of a thing to grasp?"
“Suppose we gave some of these artifacts to—oh, to Elze, say,” Fold mused. “Would he understand the impressions?”

“No, absolutely not.” Gascon gave a harsh laugh. “Absurd having a psinul explain psionic questions, isn’t it? When I can never know anything about them! Well, as I follow it, the intelligibility of a psionic emanation is a function of the whole personality behind it. We couldn’t comprehend the Old Race’s signal, though it was loud as doom’s own knell, until Angus Chalkind’s ship was sabotaged and overshot its goal. Even so, Chalkind said, they would have survived and got home, except that the presence of Hollur Starkness made the psionic shout—what’s the word I want?”

“Modulated it,” Fold said.

“Exactly. Modulated it, imposing a human component. Once that happened, the whole crew was so overwhelmed they let the ship crash into the planet’s atmosphere, and the fact that Starkness wasn’t killed meant that the whole of humanity was bound to hear the signal eventually. Except psinuls like me, of course.” He grimaced.

“Once the signal was available, a kind of echo effect built up. It was reflected from one psion to another, and became more and more and more intense. And since human beings have so little in common with Old Race mentality, the concepts were interpreted in human terms. End of everything—literally! That’s what they said, when the Old Race meant: death of an individual. I was so insanely angry when I realised the truth, I lost my head, and screamed at them for their arrogance in telling humanity that the universe was doomed.

“The fact of death was the kind of large simple concept suitable for broadcasting through the cosmos. There were overtones to it. One suggested the idea of returning home, because that was what the Old Race had to do; others conveyed the idea of comfort and security, because they offer something of the kind to the dying one when they assemble together. And there were traces of Hollur Starkness as it were colouring the signal with ideas of Regnier, like dye tinting a river, but no more than that—powerless to affect the flow or change its direction or stop it.”

“You stopped it,” Fold said in a low voice.

“Yes.” Gascon turned his hands over, curling the fingers like talons. “Yes, I ended the universe with these hands. What am I doing thinking that you and I still exist?” He
laughed, and this time there was a suggestion of hysteria in the sound.

“Anyway,” he resumed after a pause, “the struggle to make sense of what was being emitted led to some strange confusions. As when Jazey Hine, not realising that he had blended the impression of the Old Race conveyed by the signal with the concept of refuge and security in trying to tackle his own problems, fixed on the notion that he could hide psions at the Old Race site on Regnier and that they’d be safe there. The girl Errida Crowb spoke of something similar—said she’d doubted Hine’s suggestion about a hiding-place, but without realising it was lured into accepting the plan by the associated sense of security.

“Elze’s boy, too, right at the start, was running back to where his family had come from. And Elze was perceptive enough to detect an association with Regnier long before we knew that a psion had been aboard Chalkind’s lost ship. All these bits of information fell together at once and showed me what must have happened, and because I’d made sense out of apparently lunatic events the Starfolk obeyed me like whipped curs when I took charge. This has broken the Starfolk, Harys—did you realise that?”

“I suspected it might have. When you declared Hine ‘under Earth’s protection,’ you had no authority to compel them to accept this, yet they did, without a murmur. They didn’t even object when you decided to bring the girl to Earth and save her from the same fate as her family. As you see it, what made them so tractable?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Gascon countered. “Chalkind and Arraken have seen the Old Race—I don’t mean seen, I mean something else, but anyway—they’ve experienced this, and they’ve seen that the Old Race achieved its grandeur and magnificence on a path foreshadowed for us not by Starfolk, but by psions.”

“I think you’re right,” Fold said. He got to his feet and walked across the terrace to stand gazing up at the clear blue of the sky. “I’m not quite sure what will happen on Regnier though it’s almost certain the Starfolk will seize on Chalkind’s survival as an excuse for withdrawing their ultimatum and continuing to service the planet.”

“And I expect they’ll throw out the existing puppet government,” put in Gascon.
"Yes, very likely. Breckitt first, then the rest. There's going to be chaos, but not disaster. Anyway, Regnier is only a symbol of a change that may take a generation or two, but which is long overdue. We'll get the Starfolk down off their dignity, and when that happens we shall really begin to go places. Let's face it—by artificially stabilising the level of development on their dependent worlds, they've already removed the prime psychological reason for maintaining their shipborne culture, and now it in turn has become insecure and frightening.

"Do you remember my saying to you that one of our perennial problems is finding out how much we actually know?"

"Yes," Gascon muttered.

"This was a fine example, wasn't it? We should have known all along that the power of the Starfolk was ripe to be broken. More than ripe—rotten." Fold shook his head wonderingly.

"Will we never be able to find out how much we know?"

"I hope not." Gascon said grimly. "A member of the Old Race decides to die when he knows that he knows everything. We'd better not fall into the same trap."

"That's not quite true," Fold corrected, turning to face the other. "The cosmos is infinite, and you can't know infinity. Weren't you closer to it when you called the Old Race arrogant? Don't you think that their deaths are a grandiose gesture, a monstrous act of conceit? By it, as they think of the matter, they kill the universe. That's the trap I'd be afraid of. A dangerous decadence—like a suicide undertaken for the petty motive of making others feel guilty.

"Luckily, it doesn't impress us." He gestured at the blue arch of sky above him. "There's the universe—as big as ever, as challenging as ever. Do you find life exciting?"

Very slowly, Gascon nodded. "Yes," he said after a while. "Yes, do."

Keith Woodcott
Guest Editorial continued

senses. It could be that the communal subconscious dredges up what it can from an all-pervading chaos, and fits some of it—pabulum for the ego—into the prepared slots that we call order.

An alien mind might have a different selective system, and a different set of 'facts.' Or it could work off a different sense range (how wide is the conscious spectrum?) so that there could be no rational contact between the two life forms, or only a limited contact, which would be misleading and harmful. Imagine it: a clash of logic, based on the idea that logic is only what a particular mind-force makes of the raw material of primeval chaos. It would be a battle of the gods.

Someone is bound to ask, isn't this pure fantasy? Possibly; but then so are the great, solid, rational civilisations that some writers place among the stars. I don't think it will be at all like that, and anyone who expects our particular brand of sanity to obtain throughout the universe is either committed to what others have written before him or just whistling in the dark.

Before going any further it might be as well to consider the market. A point that is seldom, if ever, taken into account by writers is that most s-f readers latch on to the genre at a very early age. I am fairly certain that no significant proportion of regular readership is recruited after the age of 12 to 13. If this could be proved correct it would come, I am sure, as an almost traumatic experience to those writers who talk profoundly of the sociological, psychological, and comparative-ecological aspects of s-f, or who wish to use it as a propaganda medium for the often laudable, but sometimes cranky, notions that are floating about these days.

It would come as a shock to some editors, too. To catch the juniors (and the regular readership) might mean slanting the covers, and the contents, in order to attract them. Actually, it is far more complicated than this. Although the regular readership is probably drawn from the very young, the bulk of the readership is almost certainly much older. At a guess, and from some chance observations, I would say that there are more readers of s-f between the ages of 35 to 50 than there are taking all the other age-groups together. A bit of market research would help here, and I pass the problem to any science-
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fictionist with money. He'd better have lots of it. I understand that m.r. is a costly business.

Most of this relates to the medium as we have known it. A few writers, however, including J. G. Ballard, have other ideas, which would mean moving s-f (their brand of s-f) into quite another market. I don't say that they are seriously thinking of splitting off from the main stem; but when the estimable Mr. Ballard talks about s-f becoming abstract and 'cool,' he is obviously stretching out a hand towards the intelligentsia. They could, I suppose, provide a new market, and there is room for both kinds of fiction; but, patently, not in the same magazine. Just the same, in breaking new ground, a breakaway movement of this character could prove important.

Back again to what might be called mainstream. The latest fad appears to be the injecting of raw sex into s-f. The majority of s-f writers in the past have tended to ignore sex altogether, treating the female of the species as not much more than a piece of excess baggage, with which they have been unfortunately lumbered. I don't know which is worse, the monastic attitude or the blatantly erotic. The problem should not be ignored; but neither should it be given undue prominence. I'm all for the balanced, if superficial, view when it comes to sex in s-f; for pulchritude rather than pornography.

_Venus Plus X_, by Theodore Sturgeon, was a brave attempt in this connection to invest the medium with something new in the way of sexual interest that would still be an integral part of the story. It failed, I thought, because novelty is no substitute for femininity, and those strange half-men were just plain ludicrous. I shudder to think what the youngsters made of it. Currently, there is "Minor Operation" by Brian Aldiss; but I have only seen the first instalment, and I haven't yet got over the bit about Huxley. I've looked at it all ways, and it still puzzles me, for a variety of reasons. His extraordinary 'elasticity of mind' will, I am sure, arouse as much interest as the story itself. This, of course, is the danger of including a real person in a work of fiction; particularly one whose opinions circulate among the higher echelons in the literary camp. Does his approval, I wonder, perhaps indicate that we are moving into a period of brave new s-f?
Although I'd like to see the space-opera tag ignored, and more yarns written around those 'new horizons,' it won't do to neglect roots. Head in the stars or no, if the genre is ever to regain the respect of non-s-f circles (H. G. Wells, among others, had it) it will have to build up from reality, and out from the kitchen sink. If the roots are right it is that much nearer being accepted as 'literature,' which Damon Knight once defined as something that will last. Like Dickens, I suppose he meant, or—dare we say it?—Ray Bradbury.

Even domestic trivialities can be part and parcel of an s-f story, as in "The Half Pair," by Bertram Chanler, for example. This was first published in New Worlds, and was chosen for the Penguin Science Fiction anthology, edited by Brian Aldiss. "Lot," by Ward Moore, in the same anthology, gets right down to the roots of a particular environment, and shows you what happens in one man's mind as he is forced to cut loose because of impending catastrophe. The result, although the author might deny it, is monomania. The character of the wife is skilfully drawn; but something is left out so that her essential stolidity is paraded as stupidity.

It is a sad fact that most of the women one encounters in s-f seem to be equipped with a head full of idiot-cards. They are all too predictable. Well, whatever the average woman may be, she certainly isn't that. She is full of contradictions. Full of surprises, too. Try and pin her down on some point of logic, related to the matter under discussion, Rather than admit defeat she will brazenly change the subject or, worse, switch to intuition and present you with something that leaves you in the unenviable position of having to answer a point that the experts have never considered, and probably never will. Someone once said that women are wiser than men because they know less and understand more. There are occasions when I am inclined to think that this is uncomfortably near the truth.

Finally, there have always been plenty of people around to lay down the rules for the medium; but—to paraphrase something that D. H. Lawrence had to say about the novel—if you try to nail anything down, in s-f, either it kills the story or the story gets up and walks away with the nail. The way I see it, as far as the future is concerned, anything is possible—and almost anything goes.

Edward Mackin
Never one to understate his chosen theme Brian Aldiss lets his vivid imagination run riot in Hothouse (Faber and Faber, 16/-), a novel collated from the series which ran in Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction last year. Basically it is an extension of the Burroughs' type of fantastic adventures and heroics, translated into the remote future of Earth. It's a lot more readable, of course, and a mite more subtle, but just as tedious in its repetitious violence, casual wonder, and the contrived terminology of the sentient vegetable creatures proliferating the green overgrowth covering all the Earth's landmass. A lot depends upon one's mood when reading this book—on one level it is possible to admire unreservedly the author's brilliantly conceived nightmare of animated chlorophyllic monstrosities, whilst rejecting all the premises of the story as absurd; to feel the hopes and fears of the tiny green-skinned arboreal remnants of humanity, a poor security risk in the rampant verdure, then as easily lose interest in their pointless odysseys. Still it has its moments, particularly with a memorable character called Sodal Ye, a fishy prophet, comparable to Weinbaum's Tweel back in the '30's, and a creation to relish.

By contrast Zenna Henderson's stories of "The People" are coolly refreshing, and have the same humanistic approach to supranormal folk first made by Ray Bradbury in his early work. Now in Pilgrimage (Victor Gollancz, 16/-) we have the complete Book of the People, deftly woven into a novel by Miss Henderson, who chronicles with a rare gentleness and evocative beauty the reassembling of the unusual talents of the People, who became stranded on this planet on their way to a new "Home," and eventually discover, despite their differences from us, a deep attachment for Earth and its people. Recommended.

A new acquisition for the Gollancz S-F series is an anthology from the American sequence of annual "Bests" from the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, and from its second editor we now have the 1958-59 collection the best from Fantasy and Science Fiction — 9th series, edited by
Robert P. Mills (Victor Gollancz, 18/-) a fine mixture as labelled, leading off with the moving case history of the rapid rise from moron to genius in Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon." Kem Bennett's "A Different Purpose," is a pre-Gagarin drama of the first Russian spaceman querying the purpose of his flight. Ron Goulter's "Ralph Wollstincraft Hedge: A Memoir" is a delightful spoof on the Lovecraft cult; and in "All you Zombies," Robert Heinlein perpetrates his most audacious time paradox. William Tenn looks forward to the White Man's gloomy post-holocaust prospects (or the Red Man's Revenge) in the sharply satirical "Eastward Ho!" Damon Knight contributes, inevitably, a powerful piece based on W. B. Yeats' couplet from "The Second Coming"... "What Rough Beast?"

There's a little gem by Walter S. Tevis called "Far From Home," about a boy's illogical wish come true. George P. Elliott's grimly matter-of-fact "Invasion of the Planet of Love" bitterly epitomises all man's colonial pioneering brutality. "The Pi Man," doomed to compensate the changing wave patterns of the universe, (whatever that may mean!) is Alfie Bester at his most convulsive and compulsive. Finally Ted Sturgeon's poignant last thoughts of the first man on Mars, "The Man Who Lost the Sea." Oh yes, there's also three weirdies for them aslikes 'em. On the whole an admirable and satisfying collection.

For the July S-F Choice, Gollancz have resurrected a little-known Algis Budrys novel, Who? (Victor Gollancz, 15/-) which attracted slight attention as an American paperback in 1958. However, within its limitations, it is a remarkable study of the thought processes of espionage and counter-espionage. Problem—(confronting clever American security agent who appreciates ability and subtlety of his Russian opposite)—is the man released by the Soviets, the same man who was a top American electronic physicist cruelly mutilated in an explosion during a top-secret experiment near the Russian border. Is this half-man, half-metal creature (result of incredible prosthetic techniques) a genuine repatriate or a clever ringer? Using a clever storyline involving flashbacks, and current detailed events on both sides of the Iron Curtain, Mr. Budrys builds a gripping, suspense novel—in spite of some doubtful premises and credulity-stretching angles—with strong emphasis on the sterile futility of cold-war espionage clashes. Recommended.

Leslie Flood.
This should interest you . .

Today photographs are being taken at speeds up to 10,000,000 pictures a second. Scientists "see" where there is no light; they examine the internal structure of huge metal castings; they "slow down", photographically, phenomena too fast for the eye to see; they measure every slightest vibration and stress in moving machinery.

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