A Nova Publication ★ 17th Year of Publication

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

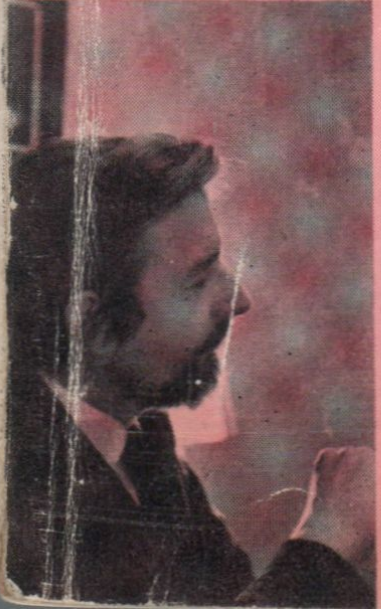
April 1963 2/6 Volume 43. No. 129

Window On The Moon

New Serial

E. C. TUBB

- **ADAPTATION – Roy Robinson**
- **DOSSIER – John Rackham**
- **QUEST – Lee Harding**
- **COMPENSATION – James Inglis**



Guest Editor

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Michael Moorcock

Guest Editor

London

This month's Guest Editor is not particularly well-known to readers of *New Worlds Science Fiction*, very little of his work having yet been published in this magazine, but in our two companion magazines, *Science Fantasy* and *Science Fiction Adventures* he has built up a big reputation. In fact, his "Elric" stories in the former magazine, have produced more correspondence than anything we have yet published.

Still only 23-years of age (and just married) he has had a variety of interesting jobs which have given him the necessary background to become a professional writer—bookshop assistant, book designer, reporter, reviewer. At 17 he became the editor of the boys' paper "Tarzan Adventures" and became an expert on Burroughsiana, later advancing to be assistant editor of the popular "Sexton Blake Library," introducing into both publications numerous fantasy and historical themes before leaving to write political material for the Liberal Party Headquarters.

One of his favourite pastimes is the reading and study of Man's early cultural activities and many of the background settings to some of his long stories are placed against possible extrapolations of our own early civilisations.

If there was a yearly award for the most promising new writer, our vote would automatically go to Michael Moorcock. We can predict many fine stories coming from him in the near future.

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 43

No. 129

MONTHLY

APRIL 1963

CONTENTS

EDITOR : JOHN CARNELL

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

Subscription Rates

12 issues 34/- post free. North American, 12 issues $6.00 post free

Published on the last Friday of each month by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.,

7 Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2

Telephone : TEMple Bar 3373

Sole distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.
in New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street Christchurch, N.Z.

Printed in England by Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby

Guest Editorial

Unlike most of the previous guest editors, Michael Moorcock very astutely points out the possibilities inherent in the future of science fiction as a literary medium—and, incidentally, for such a young writer, offers some very sound commonsense suggestions to most of the writers in the field.

Play With Feeling

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

Science fiction has gone to hell and Kingsley Amis is mapping it. The fans shout that s-f isn't what it was (which is true) and critics are treating it seriously at last (which is kind). That's the present situation.

Yet it's still almost impossible for the best-intentioned critic to apply his usual standards to a science fiction novel because although he can like the plot, approve of the ideas and enjoy any humorous points (intentional or otherwise) which the author has made, he often finds himself hard-put to discover in the average s-f book originality of style or characterisation, and he knows, that almost before he's begun reading, that any serious treatment of human affairs will not be attempted.

Various writers of previous Guest Editorials have made the point that fiction is meant to entertain. As long as it's enjoyable, they say, what the hell ?—after all, we have a duty to our readers to entertain them. I may have overlooked any attempt to define this somewhat ambiguous word ' entertainment '—but that's show business, I suppose. Certainly the writer has a

duty to his readers, even if it resolves into self-interest (if they don't like it, they won't buy it). Yet what seems to be forgotten is that fiction can entertain on many levels—that there is serious entertainment as well as the lighter variety, that s-f is one of the most potentially flexible media for the presentation of the human drama there has been and that only lazy writers or bad writers or downright stupid writers find it impossible to stimulate the mind and the emotions at the same time.

There are many kinds of thriller story for instance, from Micky Spillane-type titillation of our brutal instincts, through writers like Graham Greene and John Lodwick, to Jamesian subtlety of the *Turn of the Screw* variety which keeps our emotions high while titillating our intellect. Presumably, as science fiction grows up (which obviously it is doing in England —perhaps more than in the States, where many writers appear to have been sidetracked into the belief that ' fine writing ' means inconsequential plotting and sentimentality) it will produce as many variations as there are in ordinary fiction, from comic-books to—who knows ?—something as massive, inspiring and complex as *War and Peace*.

It is with what s-f can become, at its best, that I want to deal.

To say that good science fiction is essentially a romantic medium of expression (in that it deals, usually, with things on a broad scale and tends to ignore detail) is not to condemn it as unrealistic. Shakespeare combined romanticism with an almost cynical realisation of what things were and why. The same can be said for the great modern playwright Bertolt Brecht who combines irony, satire and high romance into the most moving and dynamic plays of our time—proving that strong views do not a prison make or social injustice a cage.

Strong views do not a prison make. By this I mean that science fiction can, as John Brunner states and Lan Wright denies, be used as a vehicle for serious messages but it needn't stop the writer from telling a good story (nobody has complained, to my knowledge, that Wells' strong views spoiled *The Time Machine*) and I'm sure that the most escapist of readers will not mind so long as the ' serious ' theme does not intrude, as long as the writer doesn't put long, unnatural speeches into the mouths of his characters and as long as he *shows* what he's getting at rather than having wooden characters describing it in black and white.

Continued on Page 123

Author Tubb's last highly successful serial was "Star Ship," back in 1955, although he has had numerous short stories since then. Now he returns with a thrilling story of mystery and intrigue based on the Moon not very far in our immediate future.

WINDOW ON THE MOON

by E. C. TUBB

Part One of Three Parts

one

There was no real justification for the room. It had been built to accomodate a window, nothing more, but it made the British bacteriological station unique on the Moon.

Neither the Russians, the Americans nor the Chinese had anything like it. The former crouched in their armed and armoured bases buried deep in ground-level caverns, with only electronic eyes covering the surface, too wary and watchful to spend time and effort on fripperies. The Chinese, burrowing in their base on the Mare Foecunditatis, remained an uneasy enigma.

Only the British with their native aptitude for making the best of a bad job had decided that, if the Moon was to be their home, then that home should have a room with a view.

For once Sir Ian Macdonald had the chance to enjoy it alone.

He stood before the polarised pane, hands clasped behind his back, the regulation coverall tight on his compact, stocky

frame. He was not a handsome man. A strong beak of a nose jutted over a firm mouth and a square chin so that he looked more like a terrier than a bird of prey. In an earlier age he would have been a cunning Laird plotting to lead his clan to gory victory. Now he was the Director in Charge of Her Majesty's Luna Station One.

Below him the time-eroded peak fell away to the plain below, stark shadows sprawling like black-painted smears on the sun-bright detritus. In the far distance the rim wall of Tycho hugged the horizon, smooth and featureless at this extreme of vision. From it the ' rays ' starfished over the grey monotony of the Luna landscape, one passing very close to the foot of the peak, a broad expanse of high-albedo stone looking a little like some giant highway miles in width.

But the best view of all was none of these.

There could never be a sight as beautiful as that of the Earth as seen from where he stood. Four times larger than a full moon, seventy times as bright, it hung against the midnight of space in shining splendour. The continents were splotches of deep blue, blue-green, soiled white and dusty orange with here and there a hint of sombre brown. Bands of milky, pale-blue haze girdled the globe parallel to the equator and the whole was softened and aureoled with a misty blue luminescence. Bisecting the planet the broad band of the terminator gently divided night from day.

It was beautiful because it was home.

Macdonald sighed, feeling impatient with the nostalgia the sight always encouraged. Home was here, where he stood, not on a planet a quarter of a million miles away. But it had been a long time since he had felt the feather-touch of the accolade and heard the voice of the Queen, thin with age but still vibrant as she bid him rise. Later, after the investiture, she had spoken with him, wishing him well and God speed. She had even jested a little. The journey should not bother him unduly, she had said, for the Scots were accustomed to travelling far.

Idly he wondered just how long it would be before another would hear the same jest and travel even further; to Mars, perhaps, or Venus. Not yet, that was obvious. Not until the probe rockets met with better success and by that time it could be another who would wield the accolade. Prince Charles would make a fine king.

He snapped from his reverie as his personal attention signal hummed from the intercom. Pressing the button he spoke into the apparatus.

" Yes ?"

" Location call from Professor Ottoway, Sir Ian."

" I'm in the Eyrie. Send him up."

" Yes, Sir Ian."

The soft voice died as he released the button and he stood frowning, wondering at the supressed note of excitement in the woman's voice. A stranger wouldn't have noticed it, would have sworn that she spoke with all the emotionless cadences of a machine, but Macdonald knew his staff too well to make any such mistake. Something had excited her and he had a shrewd idea what it was.

Reginald Ottoway confirmed his guess. Tall, thin, his hair in normal disarray, the biophysicist cursed as the spring-loaded door slapped against his rear and impelled him into the room.

" Blast the thing ! I keep forgetting. Why does it have to be fixed like a gin trap anyway ?"

The question was rhetorical. Should the window fracture, air pressure from the shaft would ram the door hard against its gaskets sealing off the rest of the station. The springs were to make certain it would always be in the right position for that to happen in case of need. Ottoway knew that but he was in a temper which inflamed his natural impatience.

" A message from space, Sir Ian. Her Majesty's Space Ship *Enterprise* will arrive within the hour."

" I see." Macdonald smiled a little at the other's tone. " Is that all ?"

" They only gave the E.T.A. They didn't volunteer extra information and I didn't ask, but they wouldn't shoot up an unscheduled vessel just to deliver the mail. My guess is that she's loaded with an assortment of VIP'S." His voice was bitter. " Why can't they leave us alone ?"

" It's their station too," reminded Macdonald quietly. Ottoway shrugged.

" I suppose so, but I wish they'd remember it more often and in more useful ways." He looked sharply at the Director. " You knew about this ?"

" I've expected it. There was no point in informing the station because I didn't know just when they would arrive.

We've had false alarms before." He paused. "The others know now, of course?"

"They know." Ottoway shook his head, his expression quizzical. "Don't ask me how they know, but they do. I swear I was the first to know of it but before I reached the shaft it was all over the station. Those paraphysicists over at the American base should set up a project to measure the speed of grapevine rumour if they want to investigate something really unusual."

"I'll mention it to General Klovis the next time I see him," said Macdonald solemnly. "He might even reward you with a gallon of ice-cream."

Ottoway, who hated ice-cream, told the Director just what he thought of the offer, venting the last of his anger in an impolite suggestion for the disposal of the delicacy. Then he sobered as he stared through the window.

"You can't see them," said Macdonald quietly. "London lies asleep beneath its blanket of cloud."

"Twelve million people," mused Ottoway. "A hundred square miles of jam-packed humanity and, if they're awake and the conditions are just right, we can just see them by their lights. We can see them—but they can't see us."

"They know we're here."

"Sure." Ottoway leaned forward, thin shoulders straining the fabric of his coverall. His face was intent, eyes narrowed as he searched the distant globe. Macdonald hesitated, then stepped to the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Macdonald. The Estimated Time of Arrival of the *Enterprise*, please."

"Forty-three minutes, Sir Ian."

"Thank you. Announce further progress."

He touched Ottoway on the shoulder. "Time's getting short, Reginald. We'd better get below."

Ottoway grunted and turned from the window. He looked back at the pane, a peculiar expression in his eyes. "You said that they know we're here, Sir Ian," he said, and jerked his thumb towards the Earth. "I guess that's true enough. But I wonder if they would sleep so soundly if they knew just why?"

It had taken six months to bore the shaft, a thousand feet of vertical tunnelling from the station proper to the Eyrie above, and climbing it was a matter of mounting some three hundred steps. High steps, naturally, but with a gravity only one-sixth that of Earth to contend with they were in proportion. Even so, climbing to the Eyrie was equivalent to climbing the Monument in London's Billingsgate and provided the main exercise of the station personnel. Most chose the easy way down.

Macdonald jumped lightly from the slide, automatically brushing down his coverall as Ottoway ended his descent.

"Having fun, Director?" Doctor Brittain, tall, slim, thirty-seven years old and with the body of a girl, smiled at the two men.

"Hi, Gloria!" Ottoway pretended to limp as he walked from the slide. "I think I've damaged myself in the region of the lumbar. Can fix?"

"Can fix." She lifted one foot. "Just turn, bend, grit your teeth and I'll jar the spine back into position." She sobered as she looked at Macdonald. "Worried, Director?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"Well, you know, visiting brass and all that." She shrugged as if the mere mention of their existence annoyed her. "Is this just a publicity gimmick, a routine visit or is there a deeper significance?"

"I don't know." Macdonald was honest. "In this age of mutual distrust," he explained, "the policy is not one of complete confidence. They may simply be coming to see how we're getting on or they may intend making some drastic changes. I simply do not know."

"They won't make changes," said Ottoway. "We've a good team here and they must know it."

"That," pointed out Gloria, "is sometimes considered by Whitehall as the very best of reasons to mess things up. Unless . . ." She broke off, her face strained.

"Yes?" Macdonald had caught her change of expression.

"Unless you're going to be relieved!"

"They can't do that!" Ottoway was explosive. "I . . . I'm sorry, Sir Ian, but . . ."

"Any speculation at this point is a waste of time." said Macdonald evenly. "We can know nothing until they arrive. In the meantime I suggest we get ready for them. Doctor, perhaps you had better stay in the hospital. Ottoway, continue

with inspection. I am going to check with Major Crombie and then go to control."

" Right, Sir Ian."

Ottoway watched the stocky figure vanish down one of the corridors leading to the complex maze of the station then, without warning, he turned to face the woman. Too late she forced a smile and slowly he shook his head.

" Not good enough, Gloria. Your emotions are showing."

" You're a fool !"

" And you're as scared as hell in case he's going to be relieved. Well, so am I. This place won't be the same without him. Damn it, he *is* the station !" He caught himself and shrugged. " We're acting like idiots ! What was it he said ? Speculation at this point is useless. The time to worry about trouble is when it comes."

An intercom on the wall broke into softly modulated life.

" E.T.A. of *Enterprise* is thirty-five minutes."

Trouble was on its way.

In the largest area of the station, the unloading annex of the main lock, Major Jack Crombie carefully inspected his command. To the uninitiated the position of Military Commander of the Luna Station held promise of glamour, excitement, trust and responsibility. To such a man the future must be bright with promise.

Major Jack Crombie knew better.

There was no glamour, not even that of a gaudy uniform. There was no excitement. There was trust, yes, and responsibility which was made no less by his full awareness of his inability to meet it in case of need. And for him, in a military sense, there was no future.

" All present and correct, sir." Sergeant Echlan reported in his drawling Australian, snapping a salute that would have done credit to the Guards. Crombie nodded and proceeded with the inspection.

Slowly he passed down the line, checking each man's coverall, examining each rifle. They were small, hollow-stocked, light and of tiny calibre, and, to him, they handled like toys. Oh, they would kill a man if aimed correctly. They could puncture a suit and the bullets would travel as far as required but he cursed the economy which dictated their use. He consoled himself with the thought of the other weapons he had stored away.

Three bazookas with fifteen rounds for each. One light machine gun. Two mortars with two dozen shells. And, of course, the service pistol at his waist.

Grimly he stepped back and nodded at Echlan.

" Very good, sergeant. Dismiss the men and have them assemble at zero E.T.A."

" Yes, sir." Echlan saluted then faced the men. " Squad ! Squad . . . shun ! Slope . . . arms ! Left . . . turn ! Dis . . . miss !"

Crombie returned their salute then saw Macdonald as he turned. Sourly he faced the Director.

" A fine lot of warning you gave me," he grumbled. Macdonald smiled.

" You didn't need any warning, Jack. Anyway, I didn't get much myself."

" Like that, eh ?" Crombie's pouched but shrewd eyes studied the other man. " What gives, Sir Ian ? Are they trying to catch us out ?"

" I doubt it. Control tells me they communicated in tight-beam scramble code and that means they're operating under top security. Don't ask me why."

" Seems idiotic to me," grumbled the Major. " You can't hide a spaceship and everyone knows that this is an unscheduled shot. The least they could have done is to have tipped us off."

" So that we could get ready with plenty of spit, polish and bull ?" Macdonald shrugged. " This isn't the army, Major."

" Different name, same thing," said Crombie. " You can call it the Space Service if you like but if you give men guns and something to walk on then you've got an army." He snorted. " Some army !"

" Don't underestimate them, Jack. They're good men."

" The best," snapped the Major. " But the job's too big for them. We've got to protect you, your staff and the station from espionage, sabotage and attack. Attack ! What good can we do with those glorified air-rifles ? I tell you, Sir Ian, if there's a Service man on that ship I'm going to tell him a few things in a language he'll understand !"

Looking at the irate Major, Macdonald fought the impulse to smile. It was unfortunate, of course, but whenever Crombie lost his temper he reminded the Director of an irate cockerel ready to flutter into the air at any moment.

The intercom came to the rescue.

" E.T.A. of *Enterprise* ten minutes."

" Let's go into control," suggested Macdonald. Crombie gave a final snort.

" Good idea, Director. Maybe we'll see them break their necks."

They didn't break anything. Captain Star of the *Enterprise* was as skilled as his brother pilot on the sister-ship *Endeavour* and he took care not to damage one half of Britain's space fleet. At exactly the right moment, tongues of blue-white fire spurted from the triangular base of the vessel and, riding on the triple thrust of the rockets, the ship lowered itself safely to the ground.

" E.T.A. of *Enterprise* zero," announced the woman on the intercom, then leaned forward to watch the screen as unloading commenced.

Even on colourless television the manoeuvre was interesting to see. From the base hangar the crawler lumbered towards the ship, powdered rock pluming beneath the wide, churning treads as it swung into position facing the unloading hatch of the vessel. Suited figures ran beside it, uncoupling the flexible communication tube and clamping it home against the hull. A pause and then the tube stiffened from internal air pressure. One of the figures slapped his hand three times against the tube and lifted his arm.

" Contact established," said the woman radio operator to the ship. " It is now safe for you to undog your hatch."

" Message received and understood," came back from the radio. " Am commencing embarkation."

" It's not like Star to be so formal," mused Crombie. " Usually he cracks a joke at this time. Must be the company he's keeping." He glanced at Macdonald. " I'd better go down and arrange the reception committee." Macdonald caught the hint.

" I'll be down in time," he said, and began to time the embarkation.

It took five minutes, no longer, human freight was, after all, self-mobile, but he was disappointed. He had hoped for at least a part-load of supplies but it seemed that all the cargo-weight had been reserved for passengers. He sighed as the radio broke into life.

" Embarkation complete. Am breaking contact."

The suited figures swung into action. A brief cloud gushed from the edge of the tube, the hull of the ship glistening with momentary frost. Slowly the crawler churned back to base.

two

It was cold in the hangar and Felix wished they would get on with it. His head still drummed from the roar of the retro-rockets and he still ached from the punishing thrust of take-off but, it seemed, you just didn't walk into Luna Station. There were formalities.

First identification. Then the formal request and equally formal permission to enter. The whole thing smacked of navy-type ritual, natural enough, he supposed, but tedious even though the station was a military establishment. But, finally, the inner doors swung open and they stumbled into the base.

Lord Severn, of course, took it all in his stride and Felix felt a sneaking admiration for the old man. No one could tell from his expression the discomfort he must be in, but the diplomat was used to travel and had long since learned to wear a mask of graciousness in every situation.

" Sir Ian !" His tone was one of pleasure at having met an old friend. " It's good to see you again. Seven years, isn't it ? A long time to be away from home. You know General Watts, of course."

The general, presenting his usual enigmatic vagueness, clumsily shook hands but his eyes, shadowed beneath the brim of his uniform cap, darted like gimlets over the vestibule. They rested with particular intentness on the file of men who, with rifles at the present, stood in stiff salute. Their stance was impressive but their numbers were not. They would, thought Felix, just about make a reasonable guard of honour at a not too fashionable wedding.

Then it was his turn to be introduced.

" This is Professor Larsen, Sir Ian. He travelled with us."

" Welcome to the Moon," smiled Macdonald. His handclasp was firm, his eyes direct. " I won't ask you how you enjoyed your trip—I know the answer. Those rockets are sheer murder. Odd, when you come to think of it. Our most modern form of transport is the most uncomfortable ever devised. Still, that's the price of progress."

Felix smiled, liking the man for trying to be polite and wondering how he wasg oing to correct the Director's obviously false impression of the reason for his presence. Lord Severn did it for him.

" This young man's your's, Sir Ian, he isn't with us. Whitehall sent him here and he rode up with the Commission."

" Commission ?"

" Why yes, dear chap, we've come to look you over."

For a moment Macdonald looked blank and Felix felt a sharp sympathy for the man immediately followed by a quick admiration at his self-control. It was a hell of a way for anyone to learn that he and his establishment were the subject of a Royal Commission of inquiry.

" I'm afraid that I don't understand, Lord Severn." The Director was sharp. " Why was I not informed ?"

" Political necessity, dear chap, you know how it is." Severn was bland. " No need to create a lot of fuss and bother when it isn't essential. It was impossible to inform you of what was planned without telling the world of our intentions." He coughed. " You understand, I'm sure. The political situation is . . ." he made an awkward gesture, " . . . delicate. It is best to keep a thing like this to ourselves. But there is nothing personal in this, I assure you. Her Majesty's government holds you in the highest esteem, the very highest esteem, but . . ." Another gesture and a smile completed the sentence.

" I see." If Macdonald had intended to pursue the matter he'd changed his mind, but Felix could sense the rage he must be feeling. " Are these other gentlemen the rest of your party ?"

" Yes, come and meet them, they've heard a lot about you." Severn smiled blandly as he moved awkwardly towards the others. Connor, the accountant. Prentice, the biologist. Meeson the junior minister. It was, he joked, a very small team and it would probably work faster than any Royal Commission in history.

Macdonald, from his expression, was not amused.

A little at a loss Felix waited, not knowing quite what to do. Around him, in the fifty-foot square vestibule, the reception committee disintegrated as they resumed normal activity. The file of soldiers dissolved beneath snapped commands, disappearing into one of the tunnels with which the room was pierced. A group of white-coveralled personnel stood talking and some space-suited men, helmets swung back on their shoulders, passed him on the way to the hangar. Finally he lumbered towards a blond, scandinavian-type man standing on his own.

" Steady !" A hand gripped his arm and he looked down into the vivacious features of a girl. Almost immediately he

corrected the impression. She was almost his own age which meant that she was past thirty, but her cropped brown hair and smooth skin matched her slim figure. The name lettered over her left breast told him she was Avril Simpson.

" Hello," she said. " I'm the dietician and I've been told that you've come to join us."

" That's right." Felix held out his hand and almost fell as the gesture spun him round. She laughed at his awkwardness.

" Take it easy, you're not on Earth now. The trick in this gravity is to move in miniature slow-motion. Walk as if you're going to take a six-inch step. Move your arms as if you're dying of fatigue. You'll soon get used to it."

" And if I don't ?"

" Then you'll suffer from strained muscles, torn ligaments and even broken bones. Try walking now, but do it slowly."

Cautiously he did as she advised. It was an odd feeling, almost as if he had the strength of a giant which, in a way, he had. But it was a dangerous strength.

" That's better." Slipping an arm through his she led him towards the group who stood, still gossiping. They fell silent as he approached.

" Meet some of the gang," introduced Avril. " You can read their names so I won't introduce you. This is Professor Larsen, folks, he hasn't been branded yet."

" That's the first essential," said Jeff Carter solemnly. He was a short, swarthy man with a pronounced widow's peak. " We've enough to remember as it is and every little helps." He held out his hand. " Pleased to have you join us, Professor."

" Call me Felix."

" The cat kept on walking, eh ?" Jeff grinned. " Well, you've certainly walked a long way, about as far as you can get, in fact. What's your line ?"

" I'm just a mechanic."

" So ?"

" I've come up to install some electronic hardware," he explained. " Nothing to do with the present set-up of the station. I've some laser-beam equipment coming up and I'm to fix and install it."

" Laser-beams ?" Bob Howard, the scandinavian-type he had seen before, pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. " Heat

rays, no less. Why, for Pete's sake? Are we expecting an invasion?"

"It's those dirty Reds," said another man. "We've got to be ready on land, on the sea, in the air and now, more than ever, in space. Hell, it makes you sick!"

"Wait until Crombie hears about this," said Jeff. His eyes were sharp as they stared at Felix. "How about that? Does he know or is this another little surprise Whitehall is springing on us?"

"Don't ask me." Felix shook his head. "I only work here."

"Imagine them springing a Commission on Sir Ian without a word of warning." Avril was indignant. "And that old fool Severn lying his head off about Security. What's the matter with all those pen-pushers? Have they forgotten how to write?"

"Those laser beams interest me," broke in Bob. He pressed closer to Felix. "How do you manage to get the beam phase so that . . ."

"Hold it!" Felix smiled and shook his head. "I told you, I'm just the mechanic. As far as I know the details are buried deep in red tape."

"But—"

"Give him a rest, Bob." Felix breathed a sigh of relief as Avril came to the rescue. "The poor devil's only just arrived. Why, he hasn't even had a chance to get adjusted and you want him to join you in one of your gab-sessions. Well, I'm not having it."

"Three cheers for the women," said a man sourly. "Trust them to interfere."

"You'd miss us," said Avril causticly. "Anyway, there'll be time for talk later. Now, I guess, he'd like to see something of his new home."

It was as he'd expected. Gouged from the solid rock at the foot of a mountain, Luna Station was a complex of tunnels, rooms and inclines all lit with lamps which simulated natural sunlight. Many of the corridors were fitted with metal doors hinged on both edges so that they could be opened from either side; an obvious precaution against accident or attack.

"You want to be careful of these," warned Avril the first time they reached one. "It could happen that some fool is

opening it from one side while you're on the other. Even in this gravity it isn't nice to be smacked in the face with a sheet of metal."

" Why not a pane of transparent plastic ?"

She shrugged. " Some genius in the War Office never thought of that and it's too late to alter the specifications."

He nodded and clumsily, but gaining confidence with every step, followed his guide until he was hopelessly lost.

" You'll soon get used to it," said Avril cheerfully when he complained. " For the first few days you'll need a guide, be nice and I'll volunteer."

" Surely you're too busy to spend time on a stranger."

" I'll fit you in." She smiled up at him and he smiled back, warming to her nearness. " Married ?"

" Not now."

" Dead ?"

" Divorced." He felt he had to add to the bald statement. " We didn't get on," he explained. " When that happens it's best to part. We had no children so it wasn't too hard."

"Parting is always hard," she said sombrely, then brightened. " I wouldn't have said that you were hard to get on with. Tall, dark, intelligent eyes and a mouth that isn't a trap. I'd say you've been around quite a bit."

She was, he realised with inner amusement, trying to flirt with him.

" That's why I left home," he said seriously. " I just couldn't beat them off any longer." Devilishly he added: " And I've heard that the most beautiful women in the system are to be found on the moon."

" Are they ?"

" Well . . ." He looked at her, letting his eyes rove over her coverall with deliberate lechery. " From the sample I'd be prepared to say they are."

" You're sweet !" Impulsively she planted a kiss on his mouth. " Let's get on with the tour."

They passed recreation rooms, stores, sleeping chambers and gymnasiums. They passed many sealed, enigmatic doors and he pointed to one before which stood an armed guard.

" Where does that lead ?"

" To the bug factory." She pulled at his arm. " You won't be going down there."

There were many places, he realised, where he wouldn't be expected to go, but he would worry about that when the time came. In the meanwhile he listened to the chatter of his guide as she showed him around. They halted as a file of men walked past. They were hot and grimed and had obviously been doing heavy manual labour.

" We're extending all the time," explained Avril as he stared after them. " This place is much larger than when I came."

" When was that ?"

" Five years ago. I've served my time."

" Going back home ?"

" Surprised ? Well, you shouldn't be. I've no one to go home to so I might as well stay where I'm comfortable."

Comfort, he mused, remembering the seemingly endless borings through the rock and the mine-like atmosphere of the establishment, was relative, but he didn't say so. She must have guessed his thoughts.

" Maybe living like a mole isn't the best way to grow old but it has its compensations. Good company, real companionship and interesting work. We get along. You'll see."

He nodded, feeling strangely light-headed, the nagging ache which had ridden in his temples since he landed increasing to a throb of real agony. The marching lights were haloed with tiny rainbows and the glare hurt his eyes. When he touched his face he discovered that he was sweating.

" Are you feeling ill ?" She had noticed the gesture. He swallowed.

" Just a headache. I'm all right."

" You don't look it." She was anxious. " If you feel sick then say so. Low gravity gets some people that way at first."

" Stop worrying." He tried to smile and then, intending to step forward, suddenly found himself pressed hard against the rough stone of the corridor. Desperately he swallowed the saliva filling his mouth.

" You *are* ill !" Her face was very close to his own. " I'm a fool. I should have had better sense."

" It's just that I feel a little sick," he confessed. " It'll pass."

" You've overdone it," she said. " It's my fault but I just didn't think. Your sense of balance is all to hell and your eyes are fighting your reflexes. I should have known it would happen but you seemed to adapt so well I just didn't think. I'm sorry."

Her concern seemed genuine but he was feeling too miserable to analyse it.

" How about the others ?"

" Severn and his mob ? They'll be all right, Sir Ian has better sense than I have. They're probably sitting nice and quietly with Gloria fussing over them to see that they're comfortable." She gripped his arm. " What you need is rest and some food. Can you make another two hundred yards to the dining room ? You can crawl if you like. I won't mind."

Fortunately for his masculine pride he didn't have to crawl.

The food was a surprise. He had expected a tiny portion of protein knowing that plentiful calories weren't needed when there was little physical exertion, but his plate was heaped with something like spaghetti covered in a thick, brown sauce.

" Synthetic, of course," explained Avril. " Mostly bulk from the chollera vats flavoured with yeast derivatives." She began to eat her own, smaller meal. " It takes time to break the habits of a lifetime and to the stomach small quantity means small nourishment. So we design the meals to fool old mother nature. Anyway, we don't want to contract the stomach by disuse more than we have to. So we compromise with a low-calorie diet with plenty of bulk. Eat up, now, and you'll soon feel better."

Dutifully he forced himself to eat knowing that, if he were to succumb to nausea, it would be better to do so on a full stomach, but it was hard work.

" I'll get some tea." Avril rose and walked to the serving counter and, while she was gone, a pert brunette accompanied by two men sat at the table. She smiled at Felix.

" Hello, there ! Are you the new one ?"

Felix nodded.

" Glad to have you with us. Where are you from ?"

" London. Maida Vale.

" You don't say ! I'm from Willesden and that makes us almost neighbours. What's the West End like nowadays ? Have they finished building the M.1 extension to Finchley yet ? Just what did happen in the Hyde Park riots last year ? Is it true that . . ."

" Give him a rest, Mary." Avril had returned and stood glaring at the other woman. " Can't you see he's suffering from low-g ?"

" Sorry, I didn't know."

" Well, you do now. And you can take those big, cow's eyes off him, he's mine !"

Rudely she shoved the other woman off her place on the bench. Mary resisted for a moment and they struggled in soundless violence. Then one of the men parted them with a grin on his freckled face.

" Take it easy, girls," he chuckled. " If you want to fight, do it in the gym." He winked at Felix as if they shared a common bond. Mary hesitated, then reluctantly moved over. Triumphantly Avril sat down and gave Felix his cup.

" Tea," she said. " God's gift to the British. What would we do without it ?"

" Drink coffee," snapped Mary. " Other's do."

" No thanks." The man who had winked at Felix stared solemnly at the little group. Felix couldn't make out his name. Sipping his tea he tried to conquer the waves of nausea rising from his stomach.

His head swam and he had the horrible conviction that, at any moment he was going to be sick. The buzzing in his temples was deafening and his whole body streamed with perspiration. Eyes closed against the unbearable brilliance of the lights he staggered to his feet.

" I . . ." he gagged. " I . . ."

" Felix ! Are you all right ?" That was Avril. He tried to answer and then, suddenly, vomited the contents of his stomach.

And then, from far away, a voice whispered to someone, the words clear by a trick of acoustics.

" Well, one thing is certain, he's never experienced low-g before."

three

The woman smelt of the ineffable perfume of hospitals, a blend of soap and starch, iodoform and anaesthetics and yet, mingled with the clean, utilitarian scent, was the subtle, basic odour which turns a woman from a female machine into a thing of romance and excitement, a blend of flowers and night, the perfume of femininity.

Felix opened his eyes.

The tips of her fingers were cool to his skin as she touched his wrist and, with a strange detachment, he studied the curve

of her cheek, the high, aristocratic nose, the full, sensuous mouth. Like Avril she wore her hair close-cut to her head and the style gave her a severe beauty.

She noticed his opened eyes.

" Hello, there ! Feeling better ?"

" What happened ?" Felix swallowed and tried to sit upright. He was, he discovered, naked but for a pair of abbreviated shorts and lay on a bed made of smooth canvas stretched taut over a metal frame. A hard pillow rested beneath his head and a single blanket covered his body.

" You went under. I'm Doctor Brittain, by the way. Everyone calls me Gloria."

" Did I pass out ?"

" Not exactly." She released his wrist. " When I was a young girl," she said, " I loved fairs. I liked to ride the roundabouts and all those devices which throw you this way and that, upside-down and over, you know the kind of thing. I loved them—but I couldn't ride them for long. I used to get terribly ill."

" Me too," he said, then understood. " Is that what happened to me ?"

" Something like that. All your life you have been used to a constant of gravity. Your reflexes are adjusted to a regular pull and your sense of balance is a delicate mechanism on which you rely. Up here everything is different. Your eyes tell you that a thing is a yard away but to your muscles it is only six-inches. The co-ordination of the body finds itself at variance with the mental impulse-signals and sensory impressions. The result is an inner conflict as they try to adjust."

" I understand." He stared at the shadowed wall. " Does everyone suffer this way ?"

" More or less. The trick is to take things quietly for a while."

" Which I didn't." He frowned then put into words something which bothered him. " You may think me very rude or very stupid but what you've just said doesn't make sense. Men have experienced zero-gravity without suffering ill effects."

" That is quite true." To his relief she didn't seem annoyed. " But in zero-g there is not the same confiict. Those experiencing it do not try to walk, act and move as they would on Earth. And there is something else. When you were small

didn't you ever envy those of your friends who could spend hours on the swings and roundabouts without ever feeling ill?"

He nodded.

" It affects some more than others. I suppose you rode up under sedation ?"

" Yes. The usual thing. Scopolamine to ease the tension and pentathol to knock us out. By the time I recovered we were well on our way. From then on it was just a matter of waiting in the cocoon until we landed." He gave an apologetic smile. " I'm sorry."

" For what ? Asking questions ?" She shook her head. " As a scientist you should know better. The universe is one big question mark and the only way we can get an answer is to ask questions. No scientist should ever be reluctant to ask what he wants to know."

" I agree, but I'm no scientist."

" No ?"

" I'm a mechanic." He told her what he had told the others, then felt a sudden panic. " Did you give me anything when I was ill ?" He forced himself to sound casual, as if it were of minor interest. " You did tell me to ask if there was anything I wanted to know," he reminded.

" Asking doesn't always mean that you'll receive an answer," she pointed out, then shrugged. " Not that it matters. I gave you a sedative and you slept for several hours. While you were asleep I gave you something to reduce your pulse-rate; your heart will make automatic compensation if it has not already done so. If you should feel light-headed in the future, an almost semi-intoxicated feeling, then let me know."

" I will," he promised. " Is there anything else I should be warned against ?"

" Warned ?" She looked at him, an odd expression in her blue eyes. " That's an odd word to use."

" Sorry," he said quickly. " That was rather loose terminology. I meant forewarned, naturally."

To his relief she let it pass, accepting his explanation, at face value, but a normal man would have been curious and he wanted to appear normal.

" Why did you say that ?" he asked. " About ' warned ' being an odd word to use."

It was her turn to look abashed.

" The trouble with doctors," she said with a smile, " is that they never stop working. When you talk to someone you're studying them from a physical point of view. I suppose it's pretty general with all professions. Don't you find yourself looking at mechanical things in a critical manner ?"

" I suppose so," Felix pretended to think about it. " Yes, now that you come to think of it, I do. Those doors, for example, and the way they're designed. I mentioned it to Avril."

" Did you ?" She was vaguely polite.

" Yes." It would be wrong, he knew, to appear too ignorant. " But surely, Doctor Brittain, a physician isn't concerned with the words people use. A psychiatrist, perhaps, but not a physician."

" That's right. But the name is Gloria, we don't stand on ceremony here."

" Do you mean that literally ?"

" Of course. There are exceptions, naturally. Sir Ian is never called anything else except ' Director.' Jack Crombie likes to be called ' Major,' he says that it's bad for discipline if he isn't and I agree with him, before his men anyway. It boils down to the fact we use a title if there is one to use and first names if there isn't." She chuckled. " More exceptions. The station is thick with Doctors and Professors so we don't use those either." She paused. " You mentioned Avril, do you like her ?"

" She's all right."

" She's a fool," said Gloria evenly. " If it hadn't been for her, you would have had a chance to adjust and wouldn't have had this unpleasant experience."

" So ?"

" I'm wondering if you blame her for what happened."

" I don't think so." He gave a rueful smile. " She didn't mean any harm. In fact all she did was to make me feel welcome."

" I can imagine." There was a world of feeling in the simple statement. Quickly she corrected any false impression she may have planted. " Don't misunderstand me. Avril is a nice person even though she sometimes acts like a wild nymphomaniac. Believe me, she isn't. I suppose that her basic trouble is simply that she is lonely."

" Here ? You're joking."

" No, Felix, I'm not joking. We've plenty of companionship here but it's still possible to be lonely. She was in love and her man was killed working outside. That was over a year ago and she's been trying to replace that love ever since." Her eyes were direct as she stared at him. " I said love, Felix, and I meant love. Do you understand ?"

" I think so. Why are you telling me this ?"

" Because you look very much like the man who was killed. It would be very easy for her to transfer her affection from the dead to the living, but I don't think it would be a good idea unless it were possible for you to reciprocate."

" In other words," he said slowly, " you are asking me not to break her heart. I won't, I promise you."

" Thank you." Abruptly she rose from where she sat beside the bed. " You'll understand the situation here a lot better when you begin to work among us. In any small, closed community there are certain modes of conduct which make life pleasant for everyone. Sometimes those modes of conduct take a little getting used to."

" I understand." He leaned back against the pillow and smiled up at her. " Is there anything else you think I should know ?" He chuckled. " You will please take note of the careful choice of words."

It was, in a sense, playing with fire but it was a calculated risk. She was undoubtedly a clever woman but he was considered to be a clever man. Now, he knew, she would appreciate his change of subject. The relaxation of her expression, slight though it was, revealed that appreciation.

" Such as ?"

" Medical matters, what else ? I guess I'll get filled in on the general routine of the station when I start work but I don't want any more physical upsets if I can avoid it."

" You won't have any once you're adjusted. There's one thing though, you may find it difficult to get to sleep."

" It will be the first time," he said drily. She smiled.

" It will be the first time you've slept on the Moon," she reminded. " Using less energy than you do back home you don't get tired so quickly. Physically tired, that is, but you can still get mentally tired as fast. That's why it's best for you to do a certain amount of manual labour—you'll be told about that. In the meantime I'll leave you a pill. Just swallow it when you feel like sleep."

" No thanks." He invented a rapid explanation. " I don't need it, really I don't. I never have trouble dropping off, in fact I'm ready for sleep now." He yawned to prove his point. " See ?"

" I'll leave it just the same." It rested on the bedside table, an innocuous-looking yellow capsule. " It's there if you need it. The light switch is above your head. Goodnight."

There was, he noticed, no lock on the door which clicked softly behind her.

It had begun when he was twelve and had discovered how words could defeat a bully's strength. It was a time when the psychological aspects of advertising moulded itself into a science and the field offered rich rewards to a young man, so he had studied until sickened by the naked cynicism of the trade. Then had come the long files of mentally tormented men and women whom he had helped to a fuller life.

At thirty he had won fame by averting the engineers' strike—breaking the apparently impossible impasse with a neat, face-saving formula, and the government had begun to take an interest. That interest grew when, by luck, he had been at Dartmoor during a riot and had turned what could have been murderous fury into jeers, cat-calls and grumbling. Then had come the Portsmouth Mutiny and finally the interview with Sir Joshua Aarons.

But there was something wrong with the image of Sir Joshua. He was distorted, the heavy features wavering as if seen through water and his voice rolled echoingly along an endless tunnel.

"*. . . a delicate situation, Larsen, but we dare not take any chances . . . chances . . . chances . . .*"

Felix wondered why the room was so hot.

"*. . . something odd on the Moon. I don't want to tell you too much in case I influence your judgment . . . judgment . . . judgment . . .*" Then louder "*. . . Seldon will help . . . help . . .*"

He was, of course, talking about Luna Station.

"*. . . Security is concerned and we have to be certain . . . certain . . . certain . . .*"

The image wavered even more and the rolling voice faded among the echoes.

"*. . . go up there and look around . . . around . . . around.*"

And then, very faintly.

"*. . . traitors . . . traitors . . . traitors . . . traitors . . .*"

Felix jerked upright, eyes wide in the darkness, feeling the hammering of his heart as he started awake. He had thrown off the blanket and was wet with perspiration and his throat was parched. Clumsily he fumbled for the light, the soft glow searing his eyes so that he squinted and shadowed his face with his hand.

He suspected that he had been poisoned.

Nursing his throbbing temples he reviewed the past few hours. The initial sickness was, he admitted, probably a normal consequence of too much exertion too soon after landing. But that sickness would have passed, certainly, despite the doctor's facile explanation, it should not have left him so weak and ill.

But, if he had been poisoned, it was too late to worry about it now.

Cautiously he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and lunged for the door. He needed water and there was no faucet in the room. Outside he blinked at the sun-glare of the lights and stood, swaying a little, wondering which way to go.

" Felix !" Avril stood before him, her face anxious. " Is anything wrong ?"

" What are you doing here ?"

" I dropped by to see if you were all right." Unconsciously her eyes fell from his face to his near-naked body. He was in excellent physical condition despite his age and he didn't suffer from false modesty. But, for some reason, her interest angered him.

" Water," he said. " I want some water."

" Down here." She led him down the passage to a bathroom. " Washing facilities, a shower, all the usual essentials. Do you want me to help you ?"

" No."

He plunged into the room and discovered a faucet over a bowl. He rinsed his mouth and laved his face and neck then gulped water. Finally, when he could hold the water without retching, he stripped off his shorts and stepped under the shower.

The water was ice-cold and he cringed from the impact but resisted the impulse to heighten the temperature. There were no towels but a vent blasted him with hot air when he stood before it on a switch-mat. A dispenser over the wash bowl

yielded a depilatory cream and he removed his stubble. Then, clean and dressed and feeling much more capable he stepped into the corridor.

Avril was waiting for him.

" That's better !" She made no effort to hide her admiration. " You know, Felix, you're quite a man."

He nodded, not answering.

" You're mad at me." She slipped her arm through his. " If you want to take a crack at me then go ahead but don't get all distant and frozen. I wouldn't like that."

" Forget it." He halted outside his door. " Thank you anyway."

" For showing you the toilet ?" She looked at him from under her lashes. " That was no trouble."

" I didn't mean that." He pushed open the door. " I meant for coming to see if I was all right. It was good of you to bother."

" I'm just selfish," she said. " I was protecting something I want very much." She moved closer to him, her eyes very bright and her lips very soft. " Would you like me to come inside ?"

Her directness startled him, unused as he was to blatant invitations, and he fumbled for a face-saving excuse to refuse her offer.

" That would be nice," he said, " but there's no lock on the door."

" Of course there is, silly." She showed him, a thin strip of metal slid from the panel into a catch. " See ? No one will bother us, not that it matters if they do." Her breathing, he noticed, had accelerated.

" Some other time."

He stepped past her into the room, closing and locking the door, leaning against it as a sudden return of nausea welled within him.

Damn her, he thought. Damn her and her long, nice route march designed to make him sick so that he could be doped and questioned. If he had been questioned. The chances were that he had but he hoped his conditioning would have stood up to any techniques the doctor may have used.

Damn the doctor, too, with her talk of transference and warnings not to get into something which might hurt someone.

Did they all take him for a simple, reactive fool without a mind and emotions of his own ?

He had begun to sweat again and the ache in his temples seemed an actual physical pressure within his skull. Absently he took his pulse; his heart hammered with uncomfortable speed and the heat of his body warned him that he was in a fever. He tried to imagine the members of the Royal Commission suffering the same discomfort and knew that they wouldn't. He had, for some reason, received special treatment.

One day, he thought grimly, he would find out just why. He sighed and settled on the bed, adjusting the hard pillow and covering himself with the single blanket. The light stung his sensitive eyes and he snapped it out, staring into the warm darkness. The darkness was a friend and he frowned as he recognised the symbolism, the dark, all-embracing, all-protecting womb.

It was, he thought, no way for a very special agent of Her Majesty's Government to feel.

four

The woman at the office smiled and said; " Hello, Felix, feeling better ?"

" Yes, thanks." News obviously travelled fast in the station. " Is Sir Ian available ?" He misunderstood her hesitation. " Doctor Brittain . . . Gloria, passed me as fit and told me to report here."

" I know. She called through and said that you were ready for work. It's just that Sir Ian is engaged with the Commission at the moment and I . . ."

She broke off as Macdonald, together with the members of the visiting team, emerged from an inner door. He recognised Felix at once.

" Larsen ! It's good to see you on your feet again !"

" Not as glad as I am to be on them, Sir Ian."

" I can imagine." The Director smiled. " Well, I suppose you're all ready and eager to get on with this job, eh ?"

" The sooner the better," said Felix then, delicately. " Did you happen to read my papers, Sir Ian ?"

" I glanced at them." Macdonald looked thoughtful. " You will be working with Major Crombie for the most part but he is engaged at the moment. Have you had a chance to look over the station ?"

" Hardly, Sir Ian."

" Of course you haven't. Silly of me to ask. Well, I'll tell you what, we are about to look over some of the laboratories, the bio-physical ones. If these gentlemen have no objection you could tail along at the rear."

They had no objection and Felix followed the little procession as it wound through the corridors. He wondered how the status-conscious members of the Commission must feel at the Director's action. They had hardly been in a position to refuse without causing friction but Macdonald had made it very clear that he regarded Felix as being more important than they. For a man of Macdonald's political experience it was an odd thing to do.

An armed guard stood before a sealed door and he snapped to attention as Macdonald halted before him.

" Inform Professor Ottoway that the Royal Commission would like to inspect his laboratories," said Macdonald. He turned to the others as the guard spoke into one of the ubiquitous intercom boxes.

" Certain areas of the station are restricted to casual visiting," he explained. " The atomic pile, the stores, these laboratories, the food rooms and, naturally, the biochemical laboratories, arsenal and hospital."

" Why the hospital ?" Meeson was curious but General Watts had the answer.

" Drugs," he said curtly. " Right, Sir Ian ?"

" Correct, General. We have quite a large supply of various drugs and narcotics here and we have no intention of taking any chances." He faced the door as it swung open and Ottoway stood facing them.

Felix's first impression of the man was one of anger. It was a deep, smouldering, clamped-down rage which revealed itself in a slight narrowing of the eyes and a betraying tension of the mouth. An untrained man would have missed it and would have merely thought that the scientist was consumed with impatience, but to Felix the signs were plain.

" Professor Ottoway, I think you have met these gentlemen before. They would like to see your laboratories."

" Certainly." Ottoway stepped to one side. " Will you please enter, gentlemen."

They shuffled through the narrow door and for a moment Felix stared directly into the bio-physicist's eyes.

" I'm just along for the ride," he said easily. " I hope you don't mind."

" Should I ?"

" Well, I don't suppose you welcome a lot of ignorant laymen stamping over your working space, Reg." He held out his hand. " By the way, I'm the new boy around here."

" I know." For a moment Ottoway hesitated, then his hand gripped Felix's. " We must have a chat when this lot's over. Now I'd better get on with the guided tour."

It was, like most tours of laboratories, a matter of looking blankly at unfamiliar apparatus and listening to those who knew trying to tell those who didn't just what was done in such places. Felix had expected no different but he was due for a surprise.

" This is the last room." Ottoway opened a door. " This is where we keep Abic."

He ushered them inside to where a glistening apparatus bulked large in the centre of the chamber.

It was a box, thirty cubic feet of sterile plastic from which snaked a complex of wires, tubes and conduits. It stood on a metal frame rigidly bolted to the floor and the frame was sturdy enough to support a small military tank. A grid of metal bars protected the box and beneath, housed in the framework, humped machinery glistened with the sheen of crystal and polished alloy. The entire installation was a masterpiece of technical engineering.

It must have cost, Connor knew, a fortune.

" What is it ?" he asked.

" This is Abic." Ottoway turned to the other occupant of the room. " Professor Jeff Carter," he introduced. " Jeff, I think you know everyone here."

" Pleased to meet you." Jeff gave a mechanical smile which quickened into life as he saw Felix. " So we meet again ! Feeling better ?"

" Yes, thank you."

" Good." Jeff smiled again, his eyes locking with those of the Director for a moment before he stepped back. Someone cleared his throat.

" Just what," said Lord Severn blandly, " is Abic ?"

" Artificial Biochemical Integration Computer," said Ottoway. " We had to twist words a little to arrive at a pronouncable diminutive."

" I see. What does it do ?"

" Nothing."

" I beg your pardon !"

" It doesn't do anything," repeated Ottoway impatiently. " It's just a great big brain in a box. We have grown it from the basic elements of life and we feed it with synthetic blood but it doesn't do anything."

" That," said General Watts, " doesn't seem to make very much sense."

" Pure research rarely does seem to make sense, General, but without it we would still be in the Dark Ages." Ottoway leaned against the guard rail. " What you are seeing in this laboratory could be the founding of an entirely new branch of science. As a military man, General, you can surely see the advantages to be gained if we can learn how to regenerate the human body."

" I don't understand," confessed Prentice. " Just what do you mean by that ?"

" Every living thing holds within itself the ability to heal its injuries but with the higher orders, men for example, that healing ability is ' wild.' By that I mean the new tissue is not the same as the old. A cut will heal but it will become a scar and scar tissue is not as efficient as ordinary cellular growth. Broken bones never heal as good as they were before being broken. An ear, or limb, is lost forever if severed or damaged too badly and, of course, nerves never grow at all under any circumstances."

" I follow you."

" The lower orders, starfish, lobsters, simple organisms like that, heal much better than we do. They ' regenerate.' Cut a starfish into pieces and each piece will grow into a complete starfish. If a lobster loses a limb, a claw for example, it will grow a new claw. If we had the same ability we could grow new eyes, new limbs if we had to." He glanced at the enigmatic box. " Abic may help us learn how to do that."

" How ?" Meeson was blunt.

" We have grown a brain. It's only a question of time before we learn how to grow other organs."

Meeson surprised them with his knowledge. " Tissue has been grown before," he said. " But without the results you so confidently claim."

" That is true," admitted Ottoway. " But when you say that tissue has been grown you mean that living tissue, from a chicken's heart, has been kept alive and has shown natural growth. Abic isn't like that. We have, quite literally, created living tissue from the basic nucleic acids DNA and RNA. That makes what is in this box quite unique. I call it a brain because it has minute cell-structure, contains an electric potential and registers various patterns on an encephalograph. Jeff, show them some of the records."

Jeff Carter, his widow's peak and flared eyebrows accentuating the Mephistophelian appearance he assiduously cultivated, handed round strips of narrow graph-paper.

" They are not facsimilies of what would be recorded from a human brain," pointed out Ottoway. " There are five distinct wave-patterns and the alpha line, the one in red, shows a peculiarly erratic fluctuation."

" Interesting." General Watts handed back his roll of paper; he had hardly glanced at it. " I can see this could be a fascinating scientific experiment but isn't it rather a costly one ?"

" Very costly," said Connor. Ottoway flushed.

" I'm afraid I don't understand," he snapped. " Cost, surely, is a relative term. What we hope to do here may well affect the future of every human creature on the face of the Earth—and beyond. I fail to see how anyone with an ounce of imagination can think of money in such a context."

Ottoway had gone too far. Men, especially such men as these, were not accustomed to being made to look and feel cheap and small. Stepping forward from where he had watched quietly from the rear, Macdonald did his best to smooth things over.

" Professor Ottoway has rather strong views on the subject, gentlemen." His tone and smile gave them to understand that he too had had his share of dealing with the vagaries of long-haired scientists who seemed to hold common men in contempt.

" So I gather." Watts wasn't to be easily mollified. Neither was Connor.

" I'm rather surprised, Sir Ian," he said waspishly, " that you've permitted such expenditure on what is apparently a

scientific novelty totally divorced from the real function of the station."

" Now, gentlemen." Lord Severn, despite his own feelings in the matter, was the born aristocrat. Quarrelling, if there were to be quarrels, should be in private and not before members of the staff.

" Reg has done it now," whispered a voice in Felix's ear. Jeff stood close beside him. " A damn shame, though, to put Sir Ian in a mess. If he's got any sense he'll apologise and do it fast."

" Do you think he will ?"

" I don't know. He doesn't like those stuffed-shirts, but who does ? But he might do it to keep the peace."

Privately Felix doubted it. The repressed rage he had sensed in the bio-physicist needed an outlet and it had found one. It would take a tremendous effort of will to control that rage and he didn't think Ottoway was capable of it. The man proved him wrong.

" I'm sorry," said Ottoway. " Lord Severn, General Watts, Mr. Connor, please accept my apologies for an unpardonable outburst. Sir Ian, the rest of you, the same."

When Ottoway did a thing, thought Felix, he didn't stop half-way. But the man hadn't finished.

" I feel I owe you all an explanation." He gave an apparently rueful smile, but Felix recognised it for the sneer it really was. " It's just that, when I think of the fantastic sums we are spending to ensure the total annihilation of humanity, then no expenditure to save them can be considered too much. But this is a private view and, again, I beg your pardon."

He had, if anything, made matters worse. Quickly Macdonald changed the subject.

" I should point out that Abic, though a monumental discovery, is really only a by-product of our main line of research. It is, however, one which promises to develop into a tool of extreme scientific and financial value. Professor Ottoway ?"

For a moment Felix thought he would refuse then, taking a deep breath, he did as the Director had asked.

" Look on it as a computer," he said abruptly. " You know what they are—big, limited and expensive. Now the human brain is small and, as far as we know, we only use a part of it, so that the effective mechanism can be held in the

hollow of your hand. That mass of tissue is the finest computer known. It has an incredible memory-capacity. It has the ability to weigh probabilities and make decisions on the basis of both learned and assumed information. It controls a highly organised machine, the body, and it is self-maintaining; a human brain, even if aberrated, can still function. No machine built by man can do that."

" But the soul ?" Prentice was a regular church-goer and could not look on anything human as simply a machine.

" I am not interested in theological fantasies," snapped Ottoway. " I look on the brain as an instrument. Well—we have grown one just like it."

" What the professor means," said Macdonald, " is that we have discovered a method of actually growing a computer-type device. I need hardly point the obvious advantages of such a mechanism. The saving in manpower alone would be colossal not to mention the cost of components and I need scarcely remind you, General, what it would mean in a military sense."

He was hitting below the belt, appealing to Watts's military nature and making him, if only reluctantly, an ally. It was a practical use of applied psychology and even Connor, the mean-minded counter of figures, was impressed.

five

There was no natural time on the Moon. There was a fourteen day ' night ' and an equal period of day on the surface but in the station it was always the same, and time, by the old system, was merely a useful appendage to living; not something which controlled the hours of sleep and activity.

It was, to Felix, an interesting routine. Meals were always the same size, altering in variety but with nothing to differentiate breakfast, lunch, dinner or supper. The personnel ate when they felt the need of food and slept when sleep became a necessity. Most of the time they worked and when they relaxed it was usually to exercise at manual labour or to do work of choice rather than of schedule.

It was, he thought, a little like the hive or a colony of ants but without the sharp diversity of types to be found in either. There were men and women, all mature, all, apparently, well-adjusted. There were scientists and skilled technicians of

both sexes. There were soldiers; again of both sexes but, aside from the insignia on their coveralls, there was no way of telling military and non-military personnel apart. Social barriers simply did not exist.

And, to any psychologist, that was all wrong.

It was wrong because it wasn't normal. No matter where men gather there is always demarkation. Either by colour, creed, wealth or responsibility, accent or intelligence, there are always social barriers. Many of them would not apply in the station. All were, in various degrees, intelligent. They spoke very much alike. They seemed to share a common lack of interest in religion and such people would not be prejudiced against the colour of a man's skin. That he could accept but, after all, the station was a military establishment and there should have been a far stronger barrier between the military personnel and the others.

He mentioned it to Avril.

" Why should there be any difference ?" She was honestly puzzled at his question. " We're all alike, aren't we ?"

He had to admit that basic truth.

" Well, then ?" She hugged his arm. " Now that you've finished prowling all over the station how about letting me take you up to the Eyrie ?"

" The Eyrie can wait !" He smiled to take the sharpness from his tone. It had been impossible to avoid the woman without being obviously unpleasant and he hesitated to make an enemy.

" You've been here a long time," he said. " Five years, isn't it ?"

" Almost six. Why ?"

" Think back," he urged. " Was it like this when you first came here ?"

She frowned and absently tasted the meal she was supervising. Around them the kitchen was in its usual bustle and he felt an interloper but she had grabbed him in one of the corridors and, as she put it, ' made him walk her to work.'

" More salt," she decided, and he wondered if she had forgotten his question. She read his expression.

" I was just thinking. No. No, I don't think it was. We had separate messes and a lot of stupid regulations which didn't work anyway. So things just . . . well, just became as hey are now."

" When did that happen ?"

" I don't know. I told you, it just seemed to happen. Why ?"

" No reason. I'm just naturally curious."

" I'd hardly call you that," she said suggestively, then bit her lip at his frown. " I'm sorry. I annoy you, don't I ?"

" No, not really, but—"

" But what ? Do you find me repulsive ? Is that it ?"

" Of course not !"

" Then what's the matter ? Is there anything wrong in a person feeling the way I feel about you ? I'm not ashamed of it. I can't understand why you . . ."

". . . why I don't take what is offered ?" He was deliberately crude. " I eat when I'm hungry, Avril, don't you ?"

She was not offended. " I'm hungry now, Felix. How long must I wait ?"

He sighed, not answering, wondering how to tell her how oddly outrageous her conduct seemed to him, fresh as he was from a society in which normal women simply did not express themselves so frankly. But he was in a different society now and one in which, he had learned by observation, her conduct was not outrageous at all.

But morals had nothing to do with his reluctance to become emotionally involved.

He had to find Seldon !

Major Crombie entered the dining room as he was about to leave. The officer caught his arm.

" Felix ! I've been wanting to have a word with you. Come and join me."

" I've just eaten, Major."

" Well, have a cup of tea then. It's about time we had a talk."

Felix waited as the Major fetched his food and the tea from the serving hatch. He looked sharply at Felix as he sat down. " Having a spot of bother with Avril ?"

" No, Major. Why do you ask ?"

" The poor woman's crying her eyes out back there." He spooned food into his mouth, chewed, swallowed and gave a grunt. " Damn nice woman, that. You're a lucky man if you but knew it."

Felix remained silent, toying with his cup.

" I haven't had a chance to talk with you earlier," said Crombie, still busy with his spoon. " What with the Commission and the General keeping me busy there hasn't been the time. Still, from what I hear you haven't been twiddling your thumbs. What do you think of the station ?"

" It's nice, once you get used to it," said Felix drily. Crombie chuckled.

" It hit you harder than others," he said, and pushed aside his empty plate. " Adjusted now ?"

" Perfectly, Major. You want to talk about the lasers, I take it ?"

" Yes. From what Sir Ian tells me you've come to install some new weapons. Whitehall, naturally, hasn't told me a thing about it. Just what does their installation entail ?"

" I shall need a plentiful source of power. The atomic pile can provide that, of course, but the cables will have to be protected against accident and enemy action. We'd better have two separate sources of supply; but you'll know about these details. The lasers, there are two of them, must be situated at strategic points from the viewpoint of defence and field of fire."

" Range ?" Crombie was laconic.

" Theoretically the range is infinite." Felix smiled at the Major's expression. " Just my joke, Major," he apologised. " They are energy weapons and, as a searchlight beam can be said to carry to infinity, so with the beam from a laser. However, the effective range is about ten miles."

" On a line-of-sight, naturally." Crombie nodded, his face thoughtful. " Can they be geared to automatic sighting and firing mechanisms ?"

" Yes. Their main function will be to guard the approach to the station from missile attack. We can arrange for cross-linked firing and sighting devices for concentrated or dispersed defence together with variable aperture—I'll go into that once they're installed."

" Good. Now about the positioning ? I know the territory better than you do, of course, and . . ."

Crombie was wrong but Felix didn't tell him so. He'd studied the contour map of the area and experts had decided on the exact location of the weapons. He had learned those locations together with the reason for their choice when he had suffered the forced-tuition which had left him with an

aching head but a complete knowledge of the theory and practice of the lasers. As long as he steered clear of technical discussions with electronic experts he would have no trouble in maintaining his cover.

Crombie's next words gave him a shock.

" You will be staying here to supervise their operation and maintenence, of course, and that brings up the question of your exact status."

" How so, Major ?"

" If you're military," explained Crombie, " you come under my orders but if you're a civilian technician then you come under Sir Ian's. Not that it makes any real difference, you understand. In any case of emergency I take full command anyway, but it's as well to have these things straight."

The Major, Felix realised, assumed that he was to be a permanent member of the community on the standard five-year minimum contract, and so must Sir Ian and all the rest of the station personnel.

" Surely my papers make my position clear," said Felix quickly, and wondered if Sir Joshua had changed even more of what he had been given to understand. " I come under Sir Ian as a civilian technician."

Despite Crombie's assurance that it made no difference, he knew better and he wanted to make his position clear from the start.

Crombie finished his tea and came to a decision.

" We'll go up to the Eyrie," he said. " You haven't been up there yet, have you ?"

" No, Major. But you know that."

" I do ? How ?"

Felix smiled and gently shook his head.

" I am a stranger on the station," he said. " You are the military commander. Are you honestly going to tell me that there isn't a move I've made that you haven't been kept informed about ? If so, then you are failing in your duty and that I simply refuse to believe."

It was a risk but a calculated one. Felix had no desire to appear stupid and it was obvious that, as he had pointed out, Crombie would have done his job. But he wasn't simply trying to flatter the Major.

He was conscious, as every spy is conscious, and he was in a sense a spy, of the thin line of danger between knowing

too little and knowing too much; of being too curious and not curious enough. It was better for him to gain a reputation for shrewd inquisitiveness than dull nosiness. The former held the lesser risk.

For Felix needed information and, unless he could contact Seldon, he could only get it by asking questions. Those questions had to be hidden so as to disguise his true intent.

For a moment Crombie stared at him from hard, blue eyes, then he smiled.

" You're a shrewd one !"

" I'd be a fool if I couldn't see the obvious," said Felix. " But, as you know, I haven't been up to the Eyrie."

" Then it'll be an experience for you." Crombie chuckled, accepting the change of subject. " Though, if Avril has her way, you'll be going up there quite a lot in the future. It's a favourite place for romance, you know, Earthlight and all that." He sighed with obvious reminiscence. " Well, you'll see."

They climbed to the Eyrie and, as Crombie had promised, Felix found it an experience. Even after a short time in the low gravity his body had become so adjusted that to exert his full strength needed a conscious effort. The yard-high stairs seemed monstrous at first but he soon adapted.

" Good exercise," puffed Crombie when they were half-way up. " It's important to keep in good condition."

" There it is." Crombie gestured to the window as they entered the room. " Not bad, eh ?"

" Very good." Felix had left home too short a while to be homesick but he was impressed. " When was this room built, Major ?"

" Not too long ago. Why ?"

" Just curiosity. It must have been a tremendous effort to bore that shaft."

" Yes. Yes, I suppose it was, but we all joined in. Off-duty exercise, you know, something to keep us from getting soft. We're always digging and working at something like this." He pointed at the window.

" From here we've a clear view right to Tycho, that's that long mound on the horizon. Now, if we set the lasers at about this level, set them in the face to either side, for example, we'll be able to cover the ground with cross-fire as well as an almost vertical cone. You agree ?"

" It's hard to say." Felix squinted through the window, his face pressed against the crystal. " The bulk of the mountain protects the rear but we don't want to limit the field of fire more than is essential. I'll have to go outside."

" Of course." Crombie was affable. " I'll have sergeant Echlan arrange a detail and we can discuss it again after you've had a chance to study the ground." He hesitated. " That is unless you'd rather have a technical detail ?"

" No. Not at first, anyway. It's a military matter and I'd prefer military personnel."

" Glad to hear it," beamed the Major. " Technical men are too concerned with engineering problems in terms of supply and construction rather than military necessity. Why, I remember one time when . . ."

His voice rambled on but Felix wasn't consciously listening. He stood by the window, looking down at the vista outside, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking of a certain type of psychotic personality, a symptom of which was a necessity and a delight in looking down from high places.

A paranoid personality with delusions of grandeur—one of the most explosively dangerous forms of insanity known.

six

The intercom hummed a series of notes and Crombie broke off his reminiscences.

" That's for me," he said and, crossing to the instrument, pressed the button with a spatulate thumb. " Yes ?"

" General Watts would like to see you, Major. He is waiting in control."

" Thank you. I'll be right down." He shrugged as he met Felix's eyes. " Back to the grind," he said disrespectfully. " Well, maybe I can manage to persuade the General to send me up some real weapons instead of the toys I'm supposed to defend this place with. It's worth another try."

" That shouldn't be a problem." Felix fell into step with the Major as he moved towards the door. " Couldn't you get some from the Americans ?"

" That's what the General keeps telling me," grumbled Crombie, " but I don't like begging and there's a snag. The Yanks are willing to defend us, no doubt about that, but they want to do it their way. They want to send us weapons and men both."

" That seems reasonable. Their base is too far away for them to get here in a hurry with ground forces. What's the objection ?"

" To operate efficiently they'll have to have a permanent garrison here at the station and we don't want that." Crombie's face tightened and, studying him, Felix saw something of his true nature. " Britain shouldn't have to rely on anyone. This station is ours, built with our own hands and we want to keep it independent. We can't do that if we're saddled with a foreign garrison, no matter how close they are as allies."

At that moment he looked, not like a ruffled cockerel, but a stubborn bulldog.

" I see your point. Does the General agree ?"

" The General," said Crombie grimly, " is too concerned with avoiding treading on certain political toes. Damn it, no soldier should ever get mixed up with politics, it's a dirty game at the best of times."

" But a pact—?"

" A pact merely means that you've got to do what the other fellow wants you to do when he wants you to do it." Crombie gave a disgusted snort. " And what kind of a pact is it when you've no option ? Any soldier worth his salt knows that you can't buy friends. You have to earn them and you can only do that if you have independence. No one respects a lap-dog."

Felix knew better than to argue. The Major had revealed an unsuspected stubbornness and he began to understand why he had been chosen to command the military garrison on the moon. Britain's true strength depended on just such men as the Major.

" You'd better go and inspect the suits," Crombie said as they reached the top of the slide. " Ross is in charge of them, a good man at the job. Tell him I sent you and that he's to look after you." He hesitated at the opening of the spiral tube. " Do you want to go first ?"

" After you, Major."

" Can't say that I blame you." Crombie settled himself into position and grinned up at Felix. " Every time I ride down this thing I wonder if I'm going to arrive safe at the other end. Well, here goes ! See you at the bottom !"

He released his hold and vanished with a soft slither of clothing against the polished stone. Felix waited a moment

then settled himself on the slide, holding on for a few seconds to give the other man a chance to get well ahead. Then he let go.

It was a startling experience. Centrifugal force flung him hard against the winding wall of the slide as he plunged endlessly down through the solid darkness. Then, just as he wondered if the ride would ever end, the slide evened out and he slowed to a halt as lights stabbed at his eyes. Blinking he rolled to his feet and met the Major's grin.

" Like it ?"

" It's something I'd imagine you have to get used to."

Felix was a little shaken by the descent. " Is there another way down ?"

" Only by the stairs but no one ever uses them." Crombie pointed down one of the radiating corridors. " You'll find Ross down that way close to the hangar. O.K ?"

" I'll find it," promised Felix, and dusted himself down as the Major moved away.

He was too optimistic. Even though he had wandered over the station he had yet to learn the maze-like windings by heart and he tended to get confused by the sameness of the corridors. With a shock he realised that he had reached the foot of the stairs leading up to the Eyrie. They were necessarily some distance from the foot of the slide and he must have taken a wrong turning. He frowned, wondering just how to retrace his steps and then, with a shrug, began to climb the stairs.

He was in no hurry to inspect his suit, the exercise would do him good and he wanted to experience the thrill of descent again. None of those reasons accounted for the speed with which he raced up the stairs. He was panting when he reached the top but did not hesitate to jerk open the door of the room. It swung hard behind him, slamming against his rear and thrusting him forward. He didn't notice the blow.

A woman was standing before the window and she was being strangled to death.

She stood very still, very calm, almost as if unaware of the hands which so savagely gripped her throat. Only her eyes, lustrous in her almond-shaped face, moved sidewise towards the soft thud of the closing door. For a moment the tableau

held, then her companion, a thin, haggard-looking soldier, realised they were no alone.

His hands fell from the woman's throat, the left arm hiding the name lettered on his coverall. He stared at the woman, then at Felix, then back to the woman. He made a peculiar, sobbing, animal-like sound deep in his throat and rushed blindly across the room.

" Wait !"

Felix made a grab at the man and was thrust aside with frenzied strength. He staggered, flung himself at the door and ran outside just in time to see the man vanish down the slide. Grimly he returned to the woman. Her name, he saw, was Shena Dawn.

" Are you all right ?"

" Yes, thank you." Her voice was soft and held the trace of a lilting brogue. She was very beautiful in a black-haired, earthy kind of fashion.

" Who was that man ?"

" A friend."

" Some friend. He tried to kill you."

" You think so ?" She swallowed, frowned and touched the slender column of her throat. Angry against the smoothness of her skin, the marks of fingers told of the relentless pressure that had been used. Eyes narrowed she explored her injuries; more upset at the threat to her beauty than at her narrow escape.

" The marks will fade." Felix examined the angry welts. " The pressure was constant. There might be a little bruising and some soreness but nothing serious."

" Good." Her composure was incredible. " Then there's no harm done."

" No harm !" Felix was baffled. " Look," he said as if speaking to a child. " You don't seem to realise what has happened. That man intended to kill you." She could, he thought, be suffering from shock. It would explain her indifference.

" But he didn't."

" Only because of the sheerest luck," he snapped. " If I hadn't arrived when I did you would be dead by now. Can't you understand that ?"

" Of course I can." She smiled, showing perfect teeth and expanded her chest in a deliberate gesture that was almost as old as the human race. " But I can't see what you are so

serious about. You did arrive and he didn't kill me. That's all there is to it."

" Not quite. He could try again."

Her smile irritated him. He was close enough so that he could see there was no dilation of the eyes and, when he touched her wrist, her pulse was normal. She was not suffering from shock.

The woman, he realised, was actually enjoying the experience and he thought he knew why. She had never consciously accepted the threat of personal extinction so that, to her, she had never been in any real danger at all. The man had been demonstrating emotion, that was all, and she probably found it amusing rather than anything else. He knew better.

The man had intended murder. Both instinct and training told Felix that there could be no mistake about that. He had seen his face, illuminated from the light from the window, and it had been a killer's mask.

" This man," he said casually. " Is he a serious type ?"

" Who, Colin ?" She looked thoughtful. " I suppose you could call him that. He certainly can't take a joke."

" It would have been a joke if I hadn't arrived on the scene."

" But you did."

" Only by chance. I still don't know what really brought me up here."

" So ?"

" So, damn it, you were almost murdered !" Her calmness was exasperating. Even if she were inwardly convinced that she had not been in danger her reactions were all wrong. She laughed and that made it worse.

" If pigs had wings they would fly," she said. " If you're going to worry about all the things that might have happened but didn't then you'll have no time to live at all." Her hand, resting on his arm, tightened with a gentle hint of intimacy. " If you've got to have a reason then I can give you one. You were impelled to climb up here in order to save a maiden from distress."

" All right." He accepted defeat. " What was the quarrel about anyway ?"

" Nothing important." Her smile was purely feline. "The poor man thinks he owns me, I can't see why. Silly, isn't it ?"

It was more than silly. Only a blind, infatuated fool would ever hope to think that she could ever be faithful to one man. Shena was a born courtesan. Felix knew the type too well.

He had met them before; women who took a sadistic delight in their power over men and who used sex as a weapon of conquest rather than as a thing of personal satisfaction. They played the field and continued to do so until age or the accident of finding someone too intense terminated their career. Age rendered them harmless but too often they met an unnatural death and some poor devil paid for his infatuation by suicide or the scaffold.

As Colin would have done had Felix not arrived in time.

He grew thoughtful at the sudden shift of perspective. Until this moment he had regarded his almost accidental reclimbing to the Eyrie as benefiting only the woman but she wasn't the only one concerned. Had he not lost his way downstairs and yielded to an inexplicable impulse, the woman would have died—but so also would the man, either by suicide through remorse or by the due process of law.

Suddenly he felt an imperitive, almost overpowering need of haste.

" His name," he said sharply. " What is his name ?"

" Whose name ?"

" Colin's. The man you were with. What is his other name ?"

" Does it matter ?" She increased the pressure of her body against his with subtle invitation. " Forget him. Let's just sit and enjoy the view. It's a wonderful sight, don't you agree ?"

He was not deluded. She was not trying to protect her friend and neither was she genuinely interested in Felix. To her he was simply a new problem, an exercise in conquest and something on which to practise her skill. He felt the same repugnance he always felt when approached by her more commercial sisters; the reluctance to be used without consideration for his own emotions or feelings in the matter. Even so it was more than that. To her, as to them, he was no more important than any other man and he had never had any desire to belong to a group of nonentities.

It was something he had never felt when with Avril.

" You're a better sight than any view," he said smoothly, knowing how stubborn and how vicious her type could become when faced with refusal. " But I'm going to ask you to let me postpone something I want very much."

" Why ?"

" I've got to meet the Major," he explained. " But there will be other times, lots of them, I hope." He smiled into her eyes. " In the meantime I like to know who my enemies might be. I don't want to go raving about how lovely you are before someone who might kill me through jealousy."

It was the right note but still she hesitated. Gently he gripped her shoulders, fighting the desire to slap her face.

" Please, darling. What is his name ?"

" You're a funny one. It's Maynard but—"

" Thanks." He gave her the kiss she obviously expected, a swift pressure of his lips and then released her.

" Felix ! When am I . . ."

He didn't hear the rest. The door thudded behind him as he jumped on the slide and, as he whirled into darkness, he scrubbed his mouth with the back of his hand.

The descent took too long. A thousand feet of vertical fall through a winding tube that must be five times that distance and his speed was much slower than it would be on Earth. Inwardly he cursed himself for having overlooked the obvious but his natural concern with the woman had blunted the keen edge of his professional understanding. Maynard, not the woman, had needed his help. He should have known at once!

A man gaped at him as he rolled from the slide and stumbled to his feet. It was Bob Howard, the expert on electronics and Felix fumed at the bad luck which had brought him to the foot of the slide at this time.

" Hello, Bob."

" This is a stroke of luck," said Bob. He pumped Felix by the hand. " I've been waiting to have a chat with you but I've never seemed to be able to catch you on your own. There's still that question of the beam phase of the lasers which interests me and I'd like us to get together on it."

" I'd like it too," lied Felix. It was no accident that the other man had found him difficult to engage in conversation. The man knew too much to be fooled by anyone less than a real expert. " But I'm just a mechanic, remember ?"

Bob winked. " I understand, but you don't have to worry up here. Security's all right back home where there could be a spy in every corner but we're all in this together. Now, about the focusing, they were trying out synthetic crystals but couldn't get over the problem of resonance shattering the jewel unless

it was phased to a six point decimal place accuracy. How do you manage to ensure that the power flow doesn't fluctuate too far beyond the permissable limits ?"

" Trade secret," said Felix. Despite his screaming need for haste he dared not step out of his assumed character. He forced a smile. " I'm sorry, Bob, but I mean that. The details are still classified information and even I don't know all the ins and outs of it. The units, you understand, are sealed components and all I have to do is to assemble them."

" I see, but . . ."

Felix could guess what was in his mind. It was the logical question for any intelligent man. If the units were so simple to assemble then why send up an expert at all ? He had a ready-made answer.

" You know, Whitehall," he said. " They don't trust any other means of communication but personal courier. There's nothing personal in this, I'm sure, but that's the way it is." He registered impatience. " Look, Bob, I don't want to be rude but I'm in a bit of a hurry right now. You understand ?

Bob hesitated then gave a slow grin as he jumped to the obvious conclusion. He was helped by Felix's smile.

" I get it, you lucky devil. She's waiting for you, is that it?"

Felix kept smiling.

" Well, that does it, I guess. When beauty calls mere scientific discussion has to wait. See you later ?"

" Sure, Bob."

Running would attract attention of the wrong kind so he could not run. At a fast walk he strode through the corridors cursing the lack of any guiding directions. He paused as he reached one of the sealing doors, some inner sense warning him that someone was on the other side. He waited until the panel swung towards him and a man stepped through. If he hadn't paused the panel would have hit Felix in the face.

" I'm looking for the barracks," said Felix. " Can you help me ?"

" What ?" The man was a stranger, a face and a name, nothing more, but he would know of Felix and his supposed position. Again he had to restrain his impatience.

" I'm to meet the Major," he explained, " but I'm still a stranger and I've got lost. I told him I'd be right along and I don't want to keep him waiting."

" Call through and explain," suggested the man. He gestured to one of the intercom boxes.

" No. General Watts is with him and I'd rather not."

The man shrugged, obviously thinking the refusal odd but, to Felix's relief, he didn't pursue the matter.

" Follow this tunnel," he directed. " Take the left fork at the junction and then the second right. That'll lead you right to the barracks."

" Thanks."

" If you get lost again," called the man after him, " just call through. Control will put you right."

" Thanks again."

A guard stood at the opening to the barracks. He was armed and looked bored as he leaned against the stone wall. Felix guessed that normally he wouldn't have been there at all but was window-dressing for the General. A bit of military bull which served no real purpose. He straightened as Felix approached.

" Halt !"

" I've halted." Felix glanced past the guard to where corridors ran from a wide area. " I'm looking for Colin Maynard. Where can I find him ?"

" I don't know." The guard lowered his rifle. " I've only this minute come on duty," he explained. " Why don't you have him paged if you want to see him ?"

" With the General around ?"

" No. No, I suppose not." The guard looked disgusted. " Him and his mania for playing tin soldiers !"

" He probably passed the other guard," said Felix. " Where would his room be ?"

" Down there, second on the right." The guard hefted his rifle. " But that's out of bounds now to all civilian personnel. The Major . . ."

" . . . won't know anything about it. I promise you."

" But—hell, where's the sense ? Go ahead then and make it snappy."

Felix nodded, pushed past the guard and headed for the corridor inwardly thanking the logical mind of the guard who saw no good reason for dividing the station personnel into two species of humanity. The close affinity between military and non-military was not to be easily broken if it could ever now be broken at all.

He reached the corridor and stared at the line of matching doors, each with its single name. Running along the passage Felix glanced at the neat lettering.

He couldn't be absolutely certain that Maynard would be in his room but it was a logical assumption. A wounded creature will always return to its lair and the man had been deeply wounded in the psyche if not in the flesh. His room would be the only place where he could be certain of privacy and which he could really call his own.

" Maynard !"

The door was locked but that was to be expected. It opened inwardly which made things that much easier but Felix didn't make the mistake of throwing himself against it. That would have bruised his shoulder and made a lot of noise and, while he didn't care about his shoulder, he didn't want an audience. There was a more efficient way of tackling the problem.

Lifting his foot he rested it on the panel where he imagined the latch would be, then, thrust with all the power of calf and thigh. The fragile catch tore from its socket and the door swung open.

Maynard didn't look up. He sat hunched on the edge of his bed, his eyes tormented in the pallor of his face which was contorted about the muzzle of the rifle he had thrust into his mouth. His left hand gripped the stock of the weapon and his right thumb rested on the curved trigger. He had, Felix Felix guessed, been sitting in that position for some time.

" Maynard ! Don't !"

He was too late. Even as Felix ran forward he saw the thumb depress the trigger and tensed himself for the expected crack of the explosion, the blood and brains which must come spurting from the shattered skull.

Nothing happened.

No shot, no blood, no broken body writhing in death throes on the bed. Nothing but the dry click of the firing pin.

" I . . ." The rifle fell from the contorted mouth as Maynard lost control. He seemed numb, dazed with the mental acceptance of imminant destruction, still not fully aware that he was still alive. " I . . . It didn't . . ."

Gently Felix took the rifle from his hands. He worked the bolt and stared at the tiny cartridge gleaming in the hollow of his hand.

On the primer, deeply gouged in the soft copper, the mark of the firing pin made a spot of shadow against the soft sheen of the metal.

To be continued

Popular Australian author Lee Harding comes up with another gem of a story—Johnston's quest was to find something real in the man-made world; when he found it, it wasn't really there, but, in fact, he had had it all the time.

QUEST

by LEE HARDING

Behind the desk sat the Divisional Controller. Tall, gaunt, expressionless, the skin stretched tightly across the unyielding bones of his face, his lips moving with mechanical precision.

"And what exactly is it that you want, Mr. Johnston?"

Before him, on the other side of the wide desk, sat a small, pale, insignificant little man with his hands tied nervously together. His eyes were troubled, his manner uneasy.

"Something *real*," he said. "Something that hasn't been made by man. Something that isn't synthetic. That's all. Not to keep. Only to see. So that I will at least know that it is there. Where can I find such a thing?"

The Controller looked perplexed. It was the first time he had come across such a request. "Something . . . *real*?" His lips formed the word as if it was alien to his vocabulary. "What are the grounds for your request, Mr. Johnston?"

The little man's hopes dwindled. How could he possibly explain this inexplicable desire that had swollen into an obsession, in words capable of being comprehended by the sombre individual seated opposite him?

Behind the Controller a wide window gaped at the world. Mr. Johnston saw the city stretching away from him like

the carapace of some gigantic crustacean. He stared bleakly at the towering confections of steel and plastic contesting dominance of the horizon, and shuddered.

" All around me I see a world made by man," he began, hesitantly. " The city we live in, the air we breathe, the clothes we wear and even the food we eat are products of our marvellous technology. Everywhere I see evidence of mankind's incredible skill—but where do I find the heart ? And how can I find my own when there is only this grim, awful world of gaunt buildings and unsmiling people to relate my feelings to ? Surely, there must be some tiny place that has not been swallowed by the relentless maw of human progress ?"

He gave a restless sigh, and slumped back in his chair. " It wasn't always like this. Even I know that. I must have been born in the twilight of the old world and the beginning of the new. I can remember trees and flowers and the sounds of birds. Wide streams of water passing by my feet. And clouds and rains and cold winds. Today I ask myself—what is a bird ? What is a cloud ? Is there no longer room for them on this earth we have *made* ? Have they gone forever, never to return ? Have our machines finally glutted themselves on the great banquet of our planet and left nothing but a barren core sheathed in metal, wandering aimlessly through space with no winter or summer to mark its passage ?"

Emotion, a dark stain newly risen to colour the little man's wan cheeks a fiery crimson, now faded. He stared emptily out through the window at the terrifying landscape.

The Controller was silent. Behind his shrewd, calculating eyes a razor-sharp intellect was busy digesting the information Johnston had spread before him, and was already preparing a carefully studied reply.

" But you haven't told me *why* you feel that you must have this something real."

Why ? Mr. Johnston didn't really know. " I must have it, that's all," he answered, a note of near-desperation in his outburst. " Something I can touch with my own two hands and know that it is real, that it hasn't been made by man, but by . . ."

" By *whom*, Mr. Johnston ?"

The little man looked into the eyes of the Controller. He imagined that he caught a faint flicker of cynicism in their icy dispassion. He swallowed quickly. " By . . . by . . ." *By whom* ? " I . . . . I don't know, really. Only . . . only that

it will not have been made by man. Don't you understand? Something *real*."

The Controller permitted himself the luxury of a smile. " But Mr. Johnston, surely you realise . . ."

At that precise moment his inquisitor's facial muscles seemed to suddenly freeze. A blank, rigid expression leapt into the cold eyes and they seemed to be fixed on a point in the air somewhere behind Mr. Johnston. From a hidden place somewhere between the Controller's shoulder blades a thin wisp of smoke curled lazily towards the ceiling.

" You must . . . pardon me," he stammered. " I fear that a . . . sudden adverse . . . overload has . . . *has* . . ." On the desk in front of him were two hands curled into tight fists of impotence. "Overwork . . . you understand. Undue . . . stress. I . . . if you would be . . . so kind . . . as to . . . go along to . . . room twelve you will be . . . attended to. I . . . I . . . please forgive this . . . this . . . *this* delay. I . . ."

He said no more. His mouth froze into a vacant oval. There was a brief scatter of sparks within the depths of his eyes. The curl of smoke thickened momentarily and then dispersed.

Johnston stared at the immobile figure for another moment or two. There was a bleak hopeless expression on his face. Then he sighed, and got up and left the room.

Whatever was happening to the world, he wondered. Machines that looked like people and people who looked like machines. Each day it became more difficult to tell one from the other.

He took the elevator to the ground floor and hurried outside. There was no sense in going to Room 12 and having to sit through yet another fruitless interview with yet another humanoid extension of some master computer. And besides, he had begun to realize that the concept of something real was beyond the programming of the city cybers.

And not only the machines, he thought, as he turned to watch the people moving silently around him. Their blank, purposeless manner seemed more appropriate to a machine than a creature of flesh and blood. There was something in their blank incomprehension when he had asked them about his problem that had frightened him, and sent him to his Divisional Controller for assistance.

It had been rather a nasty shock to discover that his friendly inquisitor was a robot. Under the circumstances he should have expected it, for there were not many jobs of administration these days that were not entrusted to the widely dispersed cyber units. Robotics had become so incredibly complex that Johnston wouldn't have been at all surprised to find out that more than half of the city's population was robotic, no matter how cleverly they were disguised.

He started walking. In no particular direction. Overhead wan sunlight from a bald sky drove a wedge between the towering ramparts of the city and sought the pavements below.

Johnston looked up at the dizzying cliffs of steel rising around him and marvelled at the way they clambered drunkenly towards the sky. Incredible blocks of artificiality marching doggedly towards infinity.

Was there really an end to his city ?

He had travelled all the surface and subterranean commuters in the hope of finding the perimeters where the monstrous canyons called streets gave way to more level circumstances, and where he might begin to feel the weight of sunlight upon his body.

He must have travelled miles in every direction, but always the city remained unchanged, and the furthest he could travel was to arrive back at his point of departure.

So had Johnston's nightmare begun. This terrible vision of a world encompassed by a solitary city that stretched from east to west and from pole to pole, covering the old world with the fused magma of man's work.

Was that the legacy of the Gods ?

He didn't want to believe that. He *couldn't* believe that the past had been obliterated. Something must remain. If only he could find it.

Perhaps it would give him courage to face his bleak tomorrows.

Had he really explored all the avenues ? What other means of transport were there ? Air-cars, elevators.

Elevators !

But of course ! There were more dimensions than one. He had searched *around* him, but he had never looked either down or up.

Excited, he made directly for one of the largest Administration buildings.

The elevator door slid open as he approached.

" Where to ? asked an impersonal voice from nowhere.

" Down," said Mr. Johnston.

" How far ?"

" As far as I can go."

The machine clucked to itself. The door slid shut. Then Johnston was being whisked into the bowels of the earth.

The lift fell at an incredible pace. He could sense that mile after mile of city was collecting above him and yet there was no sensation of moving. The lift was carefully balanced on a shaft of null-grav. He felt as light as the air within the cube.

The elevator finally came to a rest. The door slid back and Johnston stepped out.

And was dismayed. Before him stretched a long, empty corridor. A uniformed figure stood waiting.

" Sir," he said. " Your name ?"

" Johnston. Harry Johnston. I . . . I was just having a look around."

" Ah, I see. I will be your guide, then. I trust you will find that the lower depths are interesting."

Johnston didn't. He followed the silent guide for some time, but found little to bolster his disappointment. Narrow corridors and glossy panelling had replaced the wide streets and towering edifices of ground level—but it remained the city, even here. He had nursed the tiny hope that perhaps in the depths of the world he might discover rock and earth and soil in their natural condition. But there was nothing. Only the ever-present product of man's industrial genius. And behind the walls thrummed the energy of the mighty machines that made possible the existence of the miles of city overhead.

He turned around, defeated. " I think I'll go back."

" Very good, sir."

A sudden thought occured to Johnston. " How far down are we ?"

" Twenty-seven miles."

He repeated the figure to himself. " Is this the lowest level?"

" If you mean, does the city extend below us, no, it does not, sir."

Mister Johnston stopped and tapped the floor with the toe of one shoe.

" Then what's down *there* ?"

" Several miles of insulatory material."
" And after that."
" Hell, sir."
" *Hell* ?"
" An archaic term that describes the inner core of the planet. That is all. There is . . . nothing more."

Mr. Johnston stared down at the floor, trying to picture the elemental fury of the molten core of the raped planet. And he smiled. Ever so faintly.

It was something to know that man had never been clever enough or proud enough to master the molten fury of the world's core.

The guide saw him aboard the elevator and waited for the door to slide shut. When he saw the lift was safely ascending he crossed the passageway and wedged himself upright in a narrow niche carved into the wall. As soon as his shoulders made contact with a particular strip of metal a beam of ions lashed through his chest and deactivated him.

His eyes glazed over and he stared emptily into a soulless darkness.

Johnston's first thought upon reaching the surface was to hire an air-car and sweep the air above the city until he found what he was looking for. Perhaps from such a high vantage point he might yet see where the city ended and what lay beyond. But what if the city was interminable ? That would mean that anything real could only exist in tiny, hidden places that could easily be overlooked in his haste. He had no idea what he was looking for or what he might find. It might be something as tremendous as a ragged mountain range or something as fragile as a single flower blossoming between the towering cliffs of the city's blocks.

He would have to walk. Scour the city on foot. Journey to the limits of the megapolis and beyond. He had plenty of time, so what matter if it took him months or years to find what he was looking for ? It was something he *had* to have. Against that tremendous desire time ceased to have relevance.

He began his quest the following morning.

He travelled light. There was no need to burden himself with anything other than the clothes he wore. The city would take care of him. That was what it was there for.

He strode out when the early light of morning was jesting with the almost invisable ramparts of the city and the pavements at street level were deserted and still lit by the ghostly neons. The sullen walls regarded his progress with disdain and then stared glumly towards the eternally bare sky.

He wore a compass strapped around one wrist. That was to enable him to keep a constant northwards course. He had no wish to revolve in circles. And his eyes were bright with the fires of adventure.

By mid-day his enthusiasm had diminished. His legs ached and he felt peculiarly light-headed. He sat down on the edge of the pavement and let the frantic bustle of the city move around him. Overhead, air-cars whispered silently through their lanes. People and robots made meagre use of the pavements; most of them preferred the speed and hygiene of the subterranean commuters to actual physical movement along the once crowded streets.

A while later he got up and resumed his journey. The eagerness had faded from his step and now he looked forward resolutely to a long, painful ordeal for the next few days. After that he hoped his legs would become accustomed to the unfamiliar exercise.

By dusk he had covered a distance of perhaps nine miles. The city remained unchanged. The gaunt ramparts still glared dispassionately down upon his insignificant figure.

He was again alone on a deserted street. The blank-faced people of the earth had descended to their burrows.

Where he must soon follow. His body was one fiery, intolerable ache. More than anything else in the world he needed rest.

He found a hostelry and booked in for the evening.

In the morning he arose, refreshed, and resumed his patient journey.

So the days passed. Five of them. In that time he lost count of the miles he had journeyed northwards and still there was no sign of a break in the stifling atmosphere of the megapolis. He had explored a hundred different streets and by-ways, only to be rewarded with the familiar featureless walls of interminable buildings. There did seem no end to his prison.

He began stopping people in the streets and asking them a question.

" Excuse me, but have you seen anything *real* ?"

Blank, sad-happy eyes would stare back at him. Some would say, " Seen *what* ?"

And Mr. Johnston would explain, excitedly, " I thought you might know of a place somewhere in the city where there are things that are real and not . . . you know, *made*. Trees and flowers and that sort of thing."

Many times only incredulous disbelief would be his answer.

" What are you talking about, you there ? Something that hasn't been *made* ? No make sense, man. Better see your psych . . ."

And they would hurry off.

Others didn't even bother to answer him but shook their heads and went on their way, embarrassed by his question.

What was the use, he wondered. If human beings had forgotten the concept of what something real was, then how would he ever find what he was looking for ?

So he didn't ask any more, but continued northwards, wandering aimlessly and disillusioned towards he knew not what.

When dusk came that evening he continued walking. He resented the night and the fatigue it brought. He wanted to make use of every possible hour in the hope that each step was bringing him a little closer to his precious goal.

But he pushed his weary body too much. The world around him dissolved into a whirling blur and he flung out his hands suddenly to keep from toppling over.

In vain. He collapsed into an unconscious heap upon the pavement. Night buried him and the neons bathed his body gently with a friendly radiance.

A while later an air-car came cruising along and hovered beside him. A door opened and two men stepped out on to the concrete. Together they lifted Johnston into their vehicle.

Their handling brought him back to a semi-conscious state. He looked up into two curious, intelligent eyes.

" Your name ?" The question was brisk and to the point.

" Johnston," he said. " Harry Johnston."

" Are you a resident of this district or a transient ?"

He thought the matter over for a moment. " Transient, I suppose. Traveller, really. You see, I'm looking for something real."

The eyes didn't even flicker. " How far are you going ?"
" As far as I can. But it's so . . . slow. So slow . . ."
The face before him frowned. " You've been . . . *walking*?"
Mr. Johnston nodded. He was wide awake now.
" Then I suggest you hire an air-car. There's an agency in Block 10789. You can go there first thing in the morning. In the meantime, we're taking you to a hostelry for the evening. I think you'll find it more comfortable than the sidewalk."

The following morning he took the patrolman's advice and hired an air-car. There was no harm in trying, he figured. And besides—six days of fruitless walking had all but beaten him. An ascent skywards might at least provide him with the widest possible view of his environment.

But he feared the discovery it might bring. Perhaps that was the real reason why he had kept putting it off for so long.

As the car shot skywards his fears took substance. He looked down at the miles of city unwinding beneath him and felt a great shaft of despair sink deep into his heart. There did indeed seem to be no end to it. It stretched out all around him and swept up against the horizon in ragged, bitter ramparts.

The maximum altitude of the air-car was only a few thousand feet. There was nothing for him to do but proceed morosely northwards across the unfriendly mantle of the megapolis.

The hours accumulated like drops of sweat upon his forehead and then, miraculously, he perceived a gradual tapering off of the city's rooftops. The great monster was gradually lowering the height of its mantle. Towering blocks gave way to smaller units. He followed the pattern further until the buildings ceased to grasp at his little vehicle and contented themselves by slumbering closer to the surface of the world.

The air-car sped out across the incredibly diminished city. Behind him rose the central nucleus, forming a gigantic barrier against the sunlight.

It was almost as if he had travelled through some immense mountain range and was now wandering, a little dazed, through the rolling foothills. The intense concentration of buildings and roadways had given way to wide, almost deserted avenues of glass and concrete. Johnston stared down happily and pushed his carriage to maximum speed. This was the first time he had found any alteration in the apparently inevitable pattern of the city. The thought of what lay ahead of him sent his heart thumping excitedly.

Too soon. Another hour saw a grotesque shape lumbering up from the horizon, until the familiar shape of yet *another* city began to grow before him. His elation was swallowed by the ever present despair. And dimly, or was it only in his imagination, he perceived beyond it the ghostly shape of still another city. And beyond it another and another and another. Erupting from the metal sheath that encompassed the planet like monstrous boils.

He punched a button on the dash. " Maximum altitude," he snapped.

The car hesitated and then shot skywards.

At fifteen thousand feet he looked down at the world spread beneath him and cursed angrily at the voracious little biped that had made it so. For now, indeed, there did seem no end to it. A world encased by a succession of gigantic cities, each one connected by the slumbering suburbs that spread between them like a mottled table-cloth. And nowhere was there a break in the terrible carapace. No lakes, no rivers, no trees, no birds. Nor was there a cloud in all the sterile sky.

He let the car spiral towards the rooftops, idling through an atmosphere where every season was but a mild summer and every current of air predictable, until the brilliance of an unclouded sunset brought the filters automatically across the windows.

From a spot far to the west a sudden difference became apparent. A colour jumped up from the horizon and beguiled his memory.

While the air-car continued his descent he puzzled over the strange hue. There was something *different* about it.

How different ?

Why, because it was *green.* And not a shade he was accustomed to. Not at all like the drab and harsh colours that infected the cities. Much more subtle. As if it was a composite of many varied but similiar hues. The colour one expected to find in, oh, trees and gardens, where each growth possessed its own personal variation of the general shade, and where . . .

He swung the air-car in a sharp turn and accelerated towards the west. Swept across the motionless ocean of steel. And gradually the almost imperceptible smudge of impossible

green blossomed and grew across his range of view, until he was staring with unbelieving eyes at the grandeur swelling up before him.

Abruptly, the Great Park exploded across his eyes. He recoiled from the assault of greenery that filled his world, and punched the descent button eagerly.

The tiny vehicle spiralled down and came to rest upon a richly-carpeted lawn in the middle of the Great Park.

Mr. Johnston sat there, unmoving, blinking his eyes and telling himself that it wasn't a dream and that such a place really existed in the world, after all.

A park. A gigantic park. And he had thought that man had forgotten.

How could any man forget such beauty as this ?

He stumbled through the doorway and stood a little unsteadily beside the air-car. His eyes swung down and marvelled at the manner in which his feet sank into the soft, green grass. And all around him was a silence so incredibly still and satisfying that he began to doubt the sanity of it all.

Green hills rolled away into the distance. Trees dotted and sometimes dominated the landscape. And there was a sense of timelessness hanging over the great land that rendered the cities to some great limbo.

And indeed, there was no sign of them here. Tall as they were, the park was so placed and recessed so as to render them invisible. Johnston could well have been alone in his own private world.

Never had he imagined such a prize.

Paradise. And if not, as close to it as he could wish. What strange quirk of human nature had presaged the isolation of this oasis from the rest of the world ? Perhaps he had been a little too quick in his bitter judgment of his fellow men.

But why hadn't the Controller told him of such a place ?

His brief puzzlement disappeared when he recalled his own impatience. If he had gone on to Room 12 as directed he would no doubt have been directed to the park—and have saved himself several long, wearying days of trekking. Still, there was no denying the fact that privation heightened pleasure. He would never have been able to experience the blissful fulfilment he now felt if he had been calmly ushered off from the city to this idyllic refuge.

He left the air-car and wandered slowly across the grass to where a cobbled pathway wound up through the trees. He followed the stones for some distance until the vehicle was hidden behind a small rise and the last contact with the city world vanished. He was alone in Eden.

As he walked he left the path occasionally to take a closer look at the different species of trees and shrubs growing at carefully spaced intervals, each with a descriptive name plate attached to a trunk or imbedded in the soil. The words were incomprehensible to him. Most of them had long since vanished from the world's vocabulary. But just the same he smiled and nodded his head as if he understood what the plaques said, and moved on to the next one.

The pathway seemed determined to wind on indefinitely through the trees. After a while he wearied of walking and sat down upon the unfamiliar grass. Long slanting rays from the setting sun sent shadows racing across the landscape. Wondrous perfumes rose up from the ground around him. A sudden desire swept down upon him and he sprawled out full length upon the grass, one hand flung indolently across his eyes to shield them against the sunlight.

He swam lazily in the waters of fulfilment. All his resentment crumbled and he forgot the world he had left behind. He took in a great lungfull of the heavily perfumed air and expelled it grudgingly. It was so different from the stale smell of the city air.

He rolled over on to one side and stared into the grass. He studied the tiny slivers of green as if he was investigating some profound secret.

And there was movement in the grass. Fascinated, he watched a long column of ants moving through the miniature jungle, and marvelled at their patience.

A strange sound danced overhead. He looked up and saw a strange creature beating the air with wide appendages and flitting through the dusk to disappear amongst the branches of a nearby tree.

A bird !

It gave another shrill cry and was silent.

Johnston sat up excitedly. There were live creatures in the park ! What momentous discoveries had he yet to make ?

And night was falling rapidly now. He didn't have much time.

He scrambled to his feet and hurried over the crest of the next hill. Below him the ground dropped away to a small hollow, and rose again towards another crest. But the hollow was the most remarkable thing he had ever seen. It was covered by a broad sheet of water that could only be a lake, and upon the placid surface several strange creatures sat with their long necks arched indolently towards their reflections.

In his haste to get down the hill he stumbled and rolled the last few yards. But he got up laughing with the sheer joy of existing. Then he approached the edge of the lake and stared, wide-eyed at the impossible creatures now condescending to take notice of him.

He watched them for a long time and then, when the stars began to break out like an impatient rash upon the fading face of day, he lay down on the grass by the water's edge and marvelled at the way his park became transformed by the magic of starlight.

Later, he fell asleep. The air was pleasantly warm and he had no thought of dangers. His last conscious thought was that his journey of discovery had only just begun.

He awoke to a green morning, the first he could ever remember. He bathed his face in the cool waters of the lake and then bade goodbye to the indolent swans. There was another hill he had yet to surmount.

He left the lake below him and passed over the crest of the next rise. And he was unprepared for the splendour that opened at his feet. Instead of the familiar, all-conquering green he had become accustomed to, the country below him erupted into dazzling colour. Mile after mile of gaudy and subtle hues stretched before him, where even the horizon was a bewildering explosion of flowers.

So great was the onslaught of colour that it made him dizzy. And he descended the pathway like a man in a dream. Long colonnades of beautifully landscaped gardens beckoned his step. He began to wonder if he was really dreaming it all. So much beauty had no right to exist in his world. And yet, the roses were real enough to his touch. The fragrance they poured forth would have intoxicated a Controller and would have been capable of shattering any false dream. And then there came the incredible splendour of the orchids, remarkably resplendent with life in such a temperate climate. And there was more.

Much more. Mile after mile of exotic blooms. A veritable forest of flowers stretching for as far as the eye could see.

But who looked after all this, he wondered. And who tended the lawns and trees and fields ?

He was still puzzling over this annoying little detail when he came upon the Caretaker's house.

He stood quite still on the edge of the small clearing and studied the peculiar building on the other side. It was only a small construction, and seemed to have been made from the same material as the trunks of the trees surrounding it. Wood, or something like that, he remembered, proud of his latent memory. He had never seen wood before. It seemed impossible that some still existed in the world of the cities.

And it quite surprised him. He had been thinking along the lines of a vast army of robots marching backwards and forwards across the endless lawns and keeping watch over the blossoming of the roses. He had never imagined that the Great Park was cared for by a little old man sitting alone in the centre of everything in a small house carved from the very wood of the trees.

He knocked uncertainly on the door.

" Come in," answered a patient, tired voice.

Mr. Johnston opened the door.

The room inside was lit only by the sunlight filtering in through a number of uncurtained windows. The furniture was incredibly archaic and also fashioned from wood.

The old man was sitting near a window in the far corner. He nodded to Johnston and motioned him to close the door behind him and sit down.

" You've come to see my park," the old man said, in a voice that could quite easily have been compounded of wood as well. The words were a statement, not a question.

Johnston said, " That's right. I . . . I had no idea that such a place existed. I thought that it was . . . all gone. That the cities had swallowed everything."

" No, not everything is ' gone,' " the old man said, softly. Johnston thought that he had never seen anybody look quite so old. Ancient, really. As if he had been sitting here like this for . . . centuries. " Some places remain. Parklands, like this estate. But not many people come to them any more."

" Why not ?" To Johnston it was inconceivable that people should want to stay in the cities when beauty such as this existed on their very doorstep. He said as much to the old man.

The Caretaker nodded his white head, sadly. " What you do not understand, Mr. Johnston, is that most people have forgotten what beauty is. And the rest . . . can't be bothered."

That made sense. It wasn't only that a percentage of humanity had been replaced by machines that moved and looked and acted almost like human beings, but that the remainder of the people had assumed the manner of the machines. Their personalities had been swallowed up by the bare, mechanised world around them until they were almost indistinguishable from the robots. A sterile environment had moulded their thinking into equally barren channels. And that was why it was so difficult to separate man from machine.

" You're the first visitor I've had in . . . years," the old man said. In a voice heavy with time.

The subtle pause that separated the last word from the rest of the sentence was lost upon Johnston. His mind buzzed busily with urgent questions.

" But surely you don't look after all *this* yourself ?"

" Heavens no, young man. There are . . . robots,"—he used the word with obvious reluctance—" Machines to tend the gardens and the lawns. I am too old to do anything but sit and wait."

" But I didn't see any—"

" Of course you didn't. They do their necessary work by night. Senses such as theirs have no need of the light of day. It prevents them from despoiling the landscape when visitors arrive. Not that it would make much difference these days."

Johnston thanked the common sense that had prompted such a decision so long ago. He couldn't bare the thought of the sight of a machine trundling over his park. By now it had become *his* park—his and the old man's.

" Do you live here, all alone ?"

The old man shrugged. " Where else ? I have no need of the cities. The cities have no need for me. Here I can be as one with nature. I am fed and looked after by . . . by the machines. A necessary evil, I'm afraid. My life is complete. I wish for no more."

To Johnston it began to sound more and more like Paradise. "I'd like to stay here. With you," he blurted out, passionately.

The old man frowned, uneasily. "I doubt if that would be possible. The city—"

"To hell with city! It doesn't care what happens to me. What difference does one life here or there matter?"

"On the contrary, a great deal. You must remember, Mister Johnston, that you represent part of an equation. A monstrous equation that enables the city cybers to keep the world functioning smoothly. You are part of a vast, complex system of automation where every act is predictable and measured against the consequences of a billion others. To remove you would introduce a random factor into the calculations that could easily endanger the successful management of the city and, ultimately, the entire world. No, I'm afraid that you won't be able to stay. But you may visit often."

"But what if I apply for permission?" Johnston pressed. "They couldn't refuse, could they? I mean, what does it matter, either way?"

The old man was silent for a moment. Then he said: "I suppose they might consider it. It would certainly bear investigation."

They both fell silent. Johnston stared out of the window at the garden and listened to the birds punctuating the stillness with their cries.

"How did it all begin?" he wondered, aloud.

The old man looked up. "How did *what* begin, Mr. Johnston?"

"The cities. The world. Everything. When did we start eating our planet?"

"No one knows, my boy. No one. Perhaps it began when the Gods left earth and ascended to the stars. And closed the Gates so we could not follow. And left us here to perpetuate. We had only one world. What else could we do?"

"But where will it *end*?" Mister Johnston said.

"End? But it has ended, hasn't it?"

They stared at each other, unable to answer each other's question.

"Do you think they'll ever come back?" Johnston said.

"Who?"

"The Gods."

" Who can answer such a question ? For all we know they may have already forgotten us."

Forgotten us.

As we, too, will one day forget them.

The ultimate end of everything, to be lost in the great vaults of memory.

He asked the Caretaker further questions about the Park. How far it extended, what else it contained, and when the old man spoke of wild life and rivers and fish, an impatience suffused his thoughts. Conversation with the old man only brought a return of his despair. He longed to be out in the open air again.

" I think I'll be on my way," he eventually announced, and got up from the old chair that miraculously had not sundered under his weight. " There is so much I want to see before nightfall."

" Certainly. But do call again. It is not very often that I have the opportunity to . . . converse."

They walked to the door and the old man opened it for him and let in the splendour of nature again.

Already the afternoon was drawing to a close. They must have talked for hours. Or was it only that the days seemed so terribly short now ? He seemed to remember them being much longer. But that was a long, long time ago. Man had changed all that, as he had changed everything else.

Except this, he thought. *All this beauty around me. He had sense enough to retain this.*

By the doorway was a tremendous rose bush. Scarlet blooms burst hungrily towards the sunlight. A sudden desire swept over him and he stretched out a hand to pluck one of the flowers to carry with him, next to his heart.

" *No.*" The cry from the Caretaker shattered the solitude abruptly.

Johnston stayed his hand a scant few inches from the irresistable petals. He looked around at the little old man.

" You must not touch the flowers."

A sudden anger of resentment flared inside Johnston. He had had enough of orders. They had no place *here*.

Defiantly he curled his fingers carefully around a thorn-free stem of a rose and plucked it quickly from the bush. He held

it up in plain view of the Caretaker and sniffed the delicate perfume arrogantly.

In his hand the rose withered and died. Dead leaves crumpled into a wraith-like, gossamer remnant of the texture of a spider's web.

Johnston stared down at his empty hand. And then looked up at the Caretaker. The anguished look of despair in the old man's eyes was the most terrible sight he had ever seen.

Trembling, he knelt down by the bush and got a firm grip upon the base of the plant. The whole splendid thing came away easily. And while it withered and faded away to gossamer fragility he saw the almost invisible tendrils whipping back into the dark soil.

The truth took a while to break over his reluctant knowledge. And with it came the realization that the beautiful roses were only fakes, complex re-creations that, once separated from the field that produced them, became only a miniscule plastic film that could be screwed up in the palm of one hand.

And if so the rose, so the entire garden. The trees, the lawns, the birds—everything. Why had he been foolish enough to believe that such a place had really survived? It was nothing more than an elaborate memorial. Nothing else. A brilliant mock-up of a diversified group of flowers and trees that could never exist and promulgate under the same identical conditions.

He had been tricked.

A low cry began in the depths of his throat and rose to an anguished scream. "You filthy liar! And you almost had me believing . . . Damn you! All I ever wanted was the truth. You could have given it to me. Only you. And you chose to lie, lie . . . !"

His eyes widened suddenly, and then narrowed into angry slits. His fingers curled into angry fists. "And why? I should have known, should have guessed. Because you're a robot, a bloody machine, like all the others. Aren't you? Aren't you?"

The old man tried desperately to repair the damage. "I . . . I told you not to pick the rose," he stammered. "I tried to stop you from . . . from finding out."

"From finding out the truth!" Johnston screamed, and he smashed one fist into the old face. The Caretaker staggered back against the wall. Johnston followed him, hammering

away with vicious fists, screaming over and over again, " Machine ! Bloody machine !"

The old man fell to the ground. Johnston slammed one foot against his head and kept kicking away at the face until the synthetic fibres appeared through the mashed protoplasm. Then he turned away and ran across the clearing, away from the house and into the long colonnades of flowers.

He began sobbing and tearing away at the bushes, hoping desperately to find at least one that was real. But every bloom withered in his hand. Every branch he wrested from a sapling crumbled into nothingness in his hands. He swore and grappled with the wires retreating into the soil. Tore them free and watched them writhe like drunken snakes in his hands. Saw how his furious haste had scratched and ripped at his arms. How the blood began to flow from the cuts.

And he laughed.

There was a whisper of thunder overhead. He flung back his head and looked up at a hovering air-car. There were two men inside studying him dispassionately. The same two men who had picked him up in the city.

Agents of the city. Who had watched him, followed him, let his whim have its way.

Come to take him back. Back to the constricting horror of the city man had made, that encompassed the world in a strait-jacket of steel twenty-seven miles thick.

Where nothing real existed and where robots had become so close to humans and humans so close to machines that it was no longer possible to tell one from the other.

" Don't you understand ?" he screamed up at them. " *I might be the last man alive* !"

They just looked at him. The air-car began to ascend.

Johnston watched it come closer. Knelt amongst the flowers he had once thought real and which now appeared as artificial as the world he had fled. He lowered his head and looked down at the bright spots of blood on his hands.

There was something real. His own blood. It had been there all along. The only thing that distinguished him from the machines. The one mark of man that remained uncopied.

And he made his decision. He would never return to the city. Better death than intolerable strangulation in that hideous prison.

He tore up a bush and grabbed the writhing tendrils of wire and scraped away savagely at his wrists until the blood gushed redly from the swollen artery.

The air-car lurched and fell the last few yards. The door opened and the two men got out. They approached him cautiously. One of them held a long, narrow instrument that could be a weapon.

Johnston didn't care. He felt weak and dizzy now.

He held his bleeding wrist aloft. " You see *this*, you damned machines ? I can do something you can never do. I can die. *Die* !"

They said nothing, but stood there, a little apart, staring at him. He marvelled at their patience, at their lack of concern, and wondered if they really understood the concept of death.

Only when the blood stopped flowing and the earth had swallowed the last drop of his precious fluid did he comprehend their patience. He stared at his upheld arm and willed the blood to flow afresh. But none gushed forth from the tattered wrist. His veins were empty, already collapsing.

And still he lived. The pulsating awareness buried within his skull had no need of the external carapace designed only to delude his conscience and his fellow men. His was the ultimate evolution. A mind that existed independently of his synthetic body.

There were no tears to express Johnston's grief. His weary body seemed suddenly to split asunder. He sprawled out upon the treacherous earth and, with his face buried in the lying grass, wept for the passing of all things real.

And he never sensed the approach of the watchers nor felt the narrow shaft of ions that entered his chest and cancelled his soulless life.

Lee Harding

Psychological reasoning powers can often come up with a satisfactory solution to a difficult problem where brute force would hopelessly fail. It is the application that counts, however, not the theory.

DOSSIER

by JOHN RACKHAM

One of the basic errors made by every known form of Government at some time in its history is the assumption that the exigencies of war are in some way unique, and that the methods employed at such a time should not hold at any other time. As we now know, such emergencies differ only in degree ; not in kind.

A perfect instance of such a mistake may be seen in the records of what was called at that time ' World War Two.' Faced with the need to make quick and accurate estimates of potential of large numbers of people, and drawing on the clumsy but workable techniques of ' personality assessment ' developed in an earleir war, the authorities sanctioned the large-scale usage of so-called ' intelligence tests.' Later statistics show that such tests were effective.

With the cessation of hostilities, however, the pure lesson was obscured, and ' IQ tests ' were perverted to suit commercialism, to estimate the probable earning power of the testee. Not until the early years of the 21st Century was it fully realised that these instruments could, and should, be used to detect the hidden potential in an individual. With this new emphasis, personality tests were improved, and large-scale testing became mandatory. Then it was found that, with a frequency of approxi-

mately one in ten thousand, the PQ instruments were turning up individuals so far above the common norm as to be unmeasurable. For such extraordinary people, extraordinary measures had to be evolved and put into effect. The 'X' People . . as they are now called . . .

(Extract from Standard Teleducation Talks for Schools; Sociology III . . 16 to 18 years.

Gavin Strike sat, if you could call it sitting, in his favourite posture. His shoulders were deep down, his spine bent in a graceful curve, and his heels were hooked over the window-sill. Vacant blue eyes stared at nothing, somewhere beyond the sky. His little office was absolutely quiet. He was 'working.' Then, at his back, a hidden bell gave out a gentle 'ting,' and he stirred, slightly. His hand went to a switch in his chair-arm. Moving it to the left would have told his caller to cease, go away, do not disturb. That was for those moments when a train of thought was too important to be broken.

Now, self-confessing that he was as thoroughly idle as he looked, he set the switch in the other direction, swivelled his chair and came to rest in front of the screen on his desk. The face which grew there was that of Dr. Owen Prescott, Chief of Personnel, able psychiatrist, wailing-wall, and very good friend.

"Sorry to bother you, Gavin. Can you come up here a moment?"

"Right away." Strike sat up, blanked the screen, levered himself lankily to his feet and went out. Characteristically, his stride was long, loose-jointed, a seeming stroll, but it got him along at surprising speed. Equally in character he made no attempt whatever to guess what Prescott wanted, and it was with mild but uncomplicated curiosity that he reached the Personnel Chief's office, and went in, with a formal knock.

Prescott sat at his desk, a small, rotund man, thinning on top. The look on his face was of the cat-stealing-cream type, and Strike knew, at a glance, that his Chief was anticipating some 'fun,' according to his own peculiar ideas. There were two other men present. Strike gave them swift but keen study. Military, but out of uniform, was his first, almost instantaneous conclusion. The one ol d, embittered, determined; the other younger, cynical, superior; that much he had gathered in the time it took to cross the floor and stand by a chair.

" Ah !" Prescott smiled his self-hugging smile. " Thank you for being prompt, Gavin. Gentlemen, this is Gavin Strike. Colonel Strang . . . Captain Lomax . . . sit down, Gavin . . ." Prescott shoved a cigarette box forward, but Gavin waved it to one side, took out his pouch and began rolling. He caught a flash of interest from Strang, and a curling lip from Lomax, and stored the data along with the rest, to await developments.

" What's the problem ?" he asked, directly, and Strang smiled.

" Get to the point, eh ? Suits me, young fellow. Damned if I think you can do anything where Military Intelligence has failed, but we're snatching at straws, by this time. Absolute security, Prescott ?"

" My dear Strang . . ." Prescott sighed. " We deal with matters here that would make your security hazards read like academic exercises. You can speak in full confidence."

" Just a minute," Lomax leaned forward, curiously. "Strike —don't you accept the findings of science ? That untreated cigarettes have a definite carcinogenic effect ?" Gavin noted the woolliness of the words ,and made rapid conclusions. Another psychiatrist, with a bonnet-bee.

" What science ?" he asked, innocently. " Statistics ?"

" Statistics show a definite correlation between cigarette-smoking and the incidence of lung-cancer," Lomax said, flatly.

" More people are killed on the roads on a Saturday night than at any other corresponding period in the week," Gavin answered, watching Lomax curiously. The military mask slipped a little in the grope for relationship. Then it tightened again. Lomax smiled, acidly.

" You prefer the third factor theory, then ?"

" I'm risking my life on it," Gavin said, mildly, waving his cigarette. The Colonel frowned, staring from one to the other.

" What the devil are you two talking about ?" he demanded, angrily. " What's Saturday night got to do with it ?"

" Ask him, not me," Gavin sighed. " Later. What about this problem . . ?"

" No—I want to know now." Strang became stubborn. " What is it, Lomax ?"

" A belief that cigarette smoking and lung-cancer have a third factor in common," Lomax said. " Just as road deaths and Saturday night have this in common, that there are more drunken drivers on a Saturday night . . ."

" A certain type of person is predisposed to lung-cancer. The same type of person is more likely to be a cigarette smoker than not. Nervous tension," Gavin supplemented. " Check the contrary statistic . . . that those who smoke because they are driven to it seldom enjoy it, and seldom inhale; that among those who do inhale, the frequency of lung-cancer is less !"

" Oh ! Ah !" Colonel Strang muttered, foggily. " All right . . . let's get to the meat. To put you in the picture, you need to know about two men, and a few circumstances. That won't take long . . ."

" I'm sorry, sir," Lomax came back, grimly. " I must go on record as saying that I don't consider this man a fit person to advise. We are wasting our time."

" All right !" Strang set his jaw, suddenly, and showed why he was a Colonel. " I've heard you. We are wasting our time. But, seeing that we have been running round in silly circles for the past week trying to figure our own way out of this mess, and failing, I propose to waste our time a little further. In short, Captain—shut up !" He relaxed his jaw again, turned to Gavin.

" You'll know Harris West ?"

" Heard of him, know of him, yes," Gavin nodded, feeling his interest grow large. " The one-man nuclear-energy brains-trust, they call him."

" And that's not far wrong. Well, we've lost him ! Cut the details, it's all spilt milk, now, anyway. Long and short of it is, a certain person has him as a captive. Now, you must appreciate the circumstances. None of this can be brought out into the open. We are not, technically, at war with anyone. We do not know, officially, that West has been taken. He is just—missing. We dare not admit, in fact, that without him at least half-a-dozen high-priority weapons programmes are hanging fire. We want him, very badly, but it has got to be done under cover, not out in the open. You understand ?"

" A case for the cloak-and-dagger branch, or a Pimpernel, isn't it ?"

" It ought to be, but that's where the other man comes in. You won't have heard of this chap. Hans Neider, his name is. Call him a master-spy, a superman counter-espionage agent, whatever you like. He's all of that, and more. He has Harris West, and means to keep him. We know this, because he has ' leaked ' the information to us. That's how confident he is that we can't get him back. And he's right, damn him."

" Open force is out, I suppose ?"

" Absolutely. As I say, this is all under cover. If we tried anything in the open, Neider would promptly deny everything, and destroy West. Also, if we tried furtive violence, and failed, West would die just as surely."

" Time factor ?"

" Yes . . ." Strang sat back and scratched his jaw. " That's a point, too. Neider has given us six weeks. Quite candidly. Just to harry our nerves, in my opinion. Within six weeks, either we dance to his tune, or he sells West to the highest bidder. And you know what that means. It's a fine and noble sentiment to say you can't compel a man to produce works out of his talent, but we all know, here, that it's rubbish. With the latest techniques, drugs, nerve-controls, and the rest of it, West can be opened up like the proverbial goose that laid the golden eggs, but without spoiling him in the so doing. Quite simply, we need him—we have got to get him out of there, and we have six weeks."

" Where ?" Gavin demanded, and Colonel Strange gestured to Lomax.

" It's an island," Lomax unfolded the diagram he had brought, and laid it on the desk. " Never mind where. Just remember we have no legitimate reason for any armed reconnaisance in that area, at all. Now, this end is devoted entirely to living quarters for troops, masquerading as guests, of course. The other end is an old house, in perfect order and very comfortable, but walled like a fortress. That's where West is. Probably living in luxury, but captive, just the same. And this, where this narrow neck joins the two ends of the island, is Neider's own headquarters. The whole island is englobed in a detector-screen. Nothing can come within five miles without being detected. I need hardly stress that any unauthorised approach will mean the finish, for Harris West."

" How about supplies, food, mail ?"

" Those are all taken care of, open and above board, but there's no chance of smuggling anything in, certainly not a person, or a weapon—and absolutely no way of getting anyone out, not at all !"

" You're beaten before you start," Gavin commented, pushing the plan away and leaning back. " With that attitude, I mean. This should be quite simple. I want to ask just three questions, and make a condition."

" Eh ?" Strang was bewildered, for a moment, then he brightened. " You have a solution ?"

" That's what you wanted, isn't it ?"

" Eh ? Oh, certainly. Fire ahead !" Gavin saw Lomax sit back in his chair, with a twist of disbelief on his thin face. Prescott, to one side, had on his ' guarded ' face, but was listening intently. Gavin ran through the idea just once more, in his mind, cutting out all the emotional weighting, and leaving the impersonal values prominent.

" Condition . . ." he said. " Complete autonomy ?"

" Don't be ridiculous " Lomax said, almost in a whisper.

" It's a hell of a lot to ask for," Strang agreed, scratching his jaw again. Gavin put one hand flat on the table, as emphasis.

" Take it or leave it," he said. " You may be used to arranging death. I'm not. Success or failure, here, could alter the fate of nations. I am not prepared to halve the responsibility for that with anybody else, to have the blame thrown my way if it fails as a combined effort. I avoid responsibility, as a rule, but when I take it, I take it all. Autonomy—or nothing !"

Prescott broke in, soothingly, to pour reasonable oil on the tension that swelled and grew stormy.

" Gentlemen," he said, " there's nothing to prevent you going on with your own measures, with seeking to devise other schemes at the same time !"

" That's a point," Strang sighed. " All right, Strike. Whatever you say."

" The questions, now. First, what is happening about West's hobbies ? Is he receiving mail from people ?"

Lomax let his cynical smile show again. " Professor West usually keeps in touch with large numbers of people from all over the world," he said, " but, at the moment, all his mail is being held at his home, by his sister, because she has no idea where to send it."

" Good ! That's fine. Second question should probably go to you, Dr. Prescott. Is this Hans Neider one of us ?"

" One of the ' X '-People ?" Prescott frowned, then shook his head, slowly. " Not so far as I recall. I'll look it up for you, just to be sure."

" I'd like that," Gavin nodded. " You see, I'm going to have to get rid of him. It's the only way."

" That's been tried a few times," Strang said, heavily. " You're wasting time, there. Neider is a wily bird. He has to be. Getting at him direct, if that's what you have in mind, will be about as easy as getting into Fort Knox with a bag."

" That's my worry," Gavin said, almost in a whisper. " Third question—do you regard Harris West as expendable?"

" My God !" Lomax leaned forward again, his thin face bent into an expression of disgust. " That's pretty cold-blooded, isn't it ?"

" Just what is your function here, anyway ?" Gavin demanded. " What does a psychiatrist do in Military Intelligence ? "

" How'd you know he was a psychiatrist ?" Strang wondered curiously. Gavin shrugged.

" Values—actions—attitudes—obvious enough. But what is he for ?"

" A bloody behaviourist," Lomax sneered. " You wouldn't understand. Part of my job is to understand the thinking patterns of the opposition, and to advise our lot accordingly."

Gavin eyed him, thoughtfully.

" I think," he said, slowly, " that you, being known to Dr. Prescott, here, from old acquaintance, suggested this whole thing to Colonel Strang, and wangled an invitation for yourself, too, because you were curious to see me. And that is the real and only reason you're here. How about that ?"

There was no need for Lomax to answer. His face betrayed him, and the face of the Colonel supplied extra evidence. But Lomax tried a bluster.

" You told him . . ." he accused Prescott. The Personnel Chief laughed, openly and with genuine enjoyment, at the suggestion.

" Excuse me," he said, apologetically. " My dear Lomax, even you don't believe that. Why not admit it, now ? Strike is completely beyond you, just as he is beyond me. Admit it, man ! It won't hurt you."

Into the awkward silence, Strang discharged a throat-clearing cough.

" About West being expendable, if you mean we'd rather he was dead than sold to the brain-washers, it's a devil of a choice to make, but—yes ! I'd wish any man dead, in preference to that."

" All right," Gavin nodded, calmly. " This is the action, then, so far as your end is concerned. Get in touch with every-

body who might, under any circumstances at all, write or communicate with West. That includes advertisements, circulars, notices, reviews, letters, bills—everything. Urge them to write, to send whatever mail they would usually send, and in quantity. The more the better. Give them this address, right here where we are now, say it's an accommodation—and that will be true. Then, from here, after we have—processed it—and passed it on to you, get it to West, through the normal channels. By that I mean get it delivered to this island in the normal way. Can you do that much ?"

" Should be easy enough," Strang nodded, but with a frown. " I don't see . . . you're going to plant some kind of code message ?"

" You could call it that, yes."

" Neider will crack it."

" I doubt it very much."

" Well then . . ." Strang was patient, " if he can't crack your code, none of that posting will get as far as West. Obvious, isn't it ? Neider won't let it go until he's certain it's safe, or understood, one way or the other. He can't afford to."

" Exactly !" Gavin nodded, cryptically. Then he swung on Prescott. " I shall want some co-operation from our facsimile department, sir, to handle all the paper work. It should be massive. Will it be all right ?"

" Whatever you say," Prescott nodded. " Military Intelligence is footing the bill, so help yourself."

" We foot the bill only if successful," Strang put in, hurriedly, and Gavin smiled and stood up.

" You follow instructions, and everything will work out. You'll see. I shall want to get in touch with you again, in about three weeks or so. And you'll want a small armed landing party, when the time comes, to pick up West. The arms will be purely a precaution," he added, hastily, as Strang would have protested. " You probably won't need them."

Strang took the hint and stood up. Lomax, unwillingly, did the same. He was furious, under the cold set of his thin face.

" I don't like this," he muttered. " For the record, again, Colonel, I am against this whole operation, and the way it is being handled."

" That's natural," Gavin said. " You have no idea what I'm thinking, and it bothers you. I have no idea what you are

thinking, either, but I know, pretty well, what you will do at any given time. Call it behaviourism, if you like, but it works. As you will see."

"And that's all you're going to tell us?" Strang hesitated, unable to curb his curiosity entirely.

"That's all, for now. I'll tell you why, when the time comes."

Seconds after the door had closed on the military men, Gavin collapsed. Prescott, anticipating this, was quick to render assistance, to help Gavin to a couch and to provide stimulants, and soothing words.

"Just how bad was it?" he asked, curiously. "I was tempted to refuse them, knowing it would hurt you, but you've always asked me to let you make your own choices, so I did. Was it very bad?"

Gavin shook his head, weakly, not daring to speak for a moment. He was feeling as disorganised as a dozen dropped eggs, and, in that moment, it was hard to remember that this shattered feeling would pass. It always did, and always would, but the sensations were no less devastating for knowing that. Fifteen seconds of nightmare swirled by, and order began to come out of the chaos as he regained control of his faculties. Breathing more easily, the pinched look faded from his face, the sweat dried on his forehead, and he was able to sit up. Prescott sat still, watching and wondering, all over again, just what it must be like to let go everything like that.

Gavin had explained to him once, that in dealing with a problem, any kind of problem, he acted like a financier paying out a certain amount of capital into a venture, to prime the pump. "I surrender as much of myself as is necessary to handle all the variables, the rest of me sits back and waits until the process has worked itself through to a conclusion. Then I take back the original units, plus the answer. I have the answer, or a series of answers, and the job of clearing the personal units I've used, until they are free to fit back into me again. I've got back my capital outlay, plus the results."

It was a useful analogy, but it broke down entirely when 'people' were involved. In such cases, Gavin had to surrender his emotional self, also, and take on the colouration of the people involved. While he was doing it, he could keep an outer semblance of cold rationality. But afterwards . . .

" What always horrifies me," he said, sitting up, and shivering, " is the renewed knowledge that ordinary people are like that all the time. A queasy mixture of reasons, feelings, prejudices, urges and impulses, all churned up in a revolting mess. I'm sorry . . ." he added, quickly, with a faint smile. " I'm not meaning to be offensive, you know that."

" I know," Prescott nodded, gently. " The truth shouldn't be offensive—and it *is* true. We are *all* mixed up, to some extent. Lord love you, that's partly what we mean by 'human' —and my turn to apologise for possible offence. You're as human as anyone."

" Except that I refuse to use 'human' as an excuse for dodging issues," Gavin drew in a deep breath and laughed, shakily. " I'm all right, again," he said. " And after all that, it wasn't worth it. A simple matter, really . . ."

" Perhaps to you, but I haven't the faintest idea what you're up to, nor have the military men. Was it necessary to bamboozle them in that way ?"

" Part of the mechanism," Gavin grinned. Now, after the convulsion of regaining integrity, and with the solution merely a matter of operation, he was in a childlike mood. " Lomax will burst himself trying to guess, and that is exactly what I want. Now if you'll pass the authorisation, I'll get along to the fax section. They're going to hate this, as it will mean work, and plenty of it."

He went out as Prescott reached for the desk-speaker. Minutes later he was in close discussion with the supervisor of the facsimile section, and explaining just how he wanted the big photocopier machine modified.

" Quantity relationships are vital here," he explained. " That's something for the statistics department. I'll get it." Using the visor-intercom, he raised the statistics section, got a bespectacled and beautiful blonde whom he knew well.

" Maisie," he said. " Darling—a funny question for you."

" Coming from you," she retorted, " the adjective is superfluous."

" All right, then," he said, meekly. " A superfluous question . . ." and she made a face at him. " Seriously, though," he went on, " can you give me an approximate figure for the weight relationship between ink and paper over a wide range of materials, all the way from bound books to glossy circulars and advertisements ?"

" You certainly can ask them, can't you ?" she scowled. " Give me two minutes. I'll call you back."

Half an hour later, having set all the necessary wheels in motion, Gavin went back to his own little office and promptly forgot about the whole thing. Not just by default, but deliberately. He had just arranged to kill a man, possibly many, and for all his swift recovery in Prescott's office, that kind of twist was not easily removed from his psyche. It took effort, of a kind known only to himself and, possibly, another ' X '-person.

Three weeks later, to the day, Lomax called, alone, meeting Prescott first. As Gavin had so rightly deduced, the two were old acquaintances, had been teacher and pupil. Now Lomax was inclined to derogate a little.

" Don't send for Strike, just yet," he suggested. " I want to hear your version of it first."

" Regarding the West operation ?" Prescott asked, with a faint smile. " I'm afraid I can't tell you anything, because I don't know."

" You mean you let Strike go ahead without explaining ?"

" We use giant computer-complexes, here, regularly. In common with most of my staff, I let them go ahead, too, without having the foggiest idea what they are doing. So long as they deliver the solutions. You know," he leaned across the desk, confidentially, " you are trying hard not to face the idea that a person like Gavin Strike can out-think you. As a psychiatrist, of a kind, you resent it, refuse to admit it. And he can see it at once."

" I could understand, if he were to explain . . ." Lomax said, defensively, and Prescott shook his head, sadly.

" Colour-harmony to a blind man, Einstein's Field Theory to a moron, or, to take a better analogy, a good psychological conjuror could trick you into doing exactly what he wanted you to do—you know that. But not if you knew what he was trying to do. Your knowing would upset the balance. In this instance, Strike has to work with several human variables. You're one of them. I'm probably putting a bias on the calculation, merely by telling you that much."

" It's not possible to predict people exactly . . ."

" Not for us, no."

" What the devil do you use him for ?" Lomax demanded, to get away from an uncomfortable trend of thought. " How can he fit into this kind of organisation ?"

" Well, now," Prescott leaned back comfortably, " suppose I put it this way. This institution deals with the possibilities of various new and experimental ideas and processes. We try and test, as they say, and report back on the feasibility or otherwise. That's expensive, especially since there was all that bad publicity about irrational-seeming inventions actually turning out to be workable. We are more or less committed to giving everything, even the wildest of ideas, a fair trial. It's costly. Strike, let me tell you, cuts our costs by as much as a half, on average, just by being what he is."

" You mean he uses his gifts to ' divine ' whether an invention will work or not ?" The disbelief was thick in Lomax's tone.

" Not at all. I have a massive scientific and technical staff for that. No, Gavin sits all alone in his little office; gets first crack at anything that comes in; and predicts what the outcome will be, assuming the submitted device works as it is supposed to do. Let me give you an example, from a few years ago. The big problem of parking space in our major cities is yet to be solved. It never will be. I repeat—*never*. We still get suggestions, by the dozen, but we throw them out, automatically. Because Gavin Strike says so."

" You're as mad as he is !" Lomax said, unthinkingly, and then fumbled with a half-hearted apology. " But really," he went on, " how can anyone say such and such a thing is impossible ?"

" Parkinson's Law," Prescott said, succinctly, and paused to let Lomax think it through. " Isn't it obvious ? Provide more parking space, let it be known, and all those people who at present do not drive into town, just because there is nowhere to park, will decide to do so because there is space—and then, again, there won't be space. Or, the more space you provide, the more cars there will be to fill that space. Ergo—there *is* no solution. And that's a simple and obvious example. Strike thinks like that, at times, and is worth his weight in plutonium, not just to this establishment, but to the country as a whole. I'll send for him, now . . ." he reached for his desk-speaker, while Lomax sat silent, trying to smooth out his upset thoughts.

" One more thing," Prescott warned, having made the contact. " When you set a person like Strike on to a job involving premeditated violence to people, it's very like shooting an overload through a delicate instrument. You got your answer, this time, but don't call again, unless it is something desperately urgent."

" You're making it sound as if it's all cut and dried !" Lomax protested. " We have no results of any kind, so far. Not a thing."

Strike came in, all in a loose-jointed rush, saw Lomax, and smiled.

" Very nice timing," he said, and it was not until long after that it occurred to the psychiatrist to wonder just who was being congratulated. " The egg is ready to be hatched. Here's your last piece of mail, to go to West," and he held out a thick volume. Lomax took it, looked at the jacket. It was a recently-issued anthology of scientific speculations and untried hypotheses. In the list of contributors, on the fly-leaf, was the name Harris West.

" You want this to go along with the rest ?" Lomax asked, foolishly, and Gavin nodded.

" That's the key item," he said. " Now, can you give me an accurate estimate as to when it will be delivered, on the basis of previous performance ? It must go just like everything else has gone, you understand ?"

" Yes—with fair certainty, it will be in the delivery to the island for seven p.m. day after tomorrow."

" Right. Then you will have a small task-party, say two landing-craft and a couple of squads of Marines, handy to move in at that time. And I would like to come along, if that can be arranged."

The landing-craft smelled of wet leather, engine-fumes and closely-packed bodies, taut with excitement under repression. Gavin absorbed the smell, ignored the dark, and the slow heave of the oily swell. The figures on his watch shone with a green glow as he looked at them.

" Isn't it about time you told us what's going to happen ?" Lomax demanded, peevishly. " If anything *is* going to happen, that is."

" Neider will have the book, by this time," Gavin said, almost musingly. " He will be studying it, just as he has studied all the other literature. He will soon be convinced that there is a hidden, or code, message in it, somewhere. Now, will he struggle to decipher it at once, or will he put it along with the rest, while he has a meal. Saving it, as it were, for a comfortable moment. My guess is that a man who can readily extend a time-limit of six weeks deliberately to play on the nerves of the opposition, will also be the type to save, and

savour, a problem such as this. So he will wait—and have his meal, first. Therefore, any minute now, the balloon will go up. Better stand by, Captain."

" For what ?" Lomax snarled.

" You take a certain chemical compound, in itself harmless and well-nigh indetectable. You disperse it in a micro-granule form, englobed in a suitable polymer, and you treat a paper surface with it. It appears to be ordinary white paper. You print over it whatever you like. Garble it to make it look like an intricate code, if you want to. You also imprint marks in another chemical, which fluoresces under ultra-violet light. Your spy will try U.V. as part of his routine. He will see the glow, and think ' Aha !,' and . . ."

" But those glow-marks were simple plain ' X's . . ." Lomax burst out, and bit his tongue, but Gavin smiled.

" That's part of it, of course. Go back to our original chemical. First dose of U.V. causes the polymer to flow and incorporate with the paper, changes the bond-linkage, and a second dosage of U.V., within a certain time, rearranges the structure still more, in a very special way. Neider will have all that suspicious literature in a dossier, by now, and be certain that, given time, he will be able to crack the secret code. If he has examined the book, and given it a dose of U.V.—a second dose, thanks to you—then he has applied the trigger to what will, very soon now, reach . . ."

There was a sudden vivid glow, from over there on the horizon, and an eye-searing fount of light squirted high into the dark sky. Seconds later a huge shock-wave and mighty sound struck at them across the surface of the water. The landing-craft leaped and heaved for a moment or two.

". . . Critical mass," said Gavin softly. " You can move in, now, Captain. I don't think you'll have any trouble picking up West." As the engines roared into life under Lomax's barked orders, a bone of foam grew and fell away from the bows.

" You've probably sent West up along with that lot," Lomax growled, still shaken by the immensity of the bang.

" I think not," Gavin said, gently. " You see, Neider would have quizzed him on the hidden meaning of that meaningless succession of ' X 's. That would be all West would need. He could figure out the rest for himself. He's one of us !"

John Rackham

Man had achieved spaceflight, but missed one vital link in his genealogical tree. On another world the link had been forged but spaceflight had been overlooked.

COMPENSATION

by JAMES INGLIS

The forest below was a rippling, soft-red darkness, now revealing, now obscuring the silver water courses which flowed in the light of a tiny, distant moon. High in the warm, perennial wind, the landing-craft checked its downward plunge from the night. For a time it swayed in luxurious, unhurried deliberation as it sought a place to rest.

It came down west of the forest, upon a plain which seemed to stretch half-way round the world in search of hills. A few, moon-white peaks at the limit of vision were somehow a reassurance.

Philip Edwards was the first to speak : " Better let them know we're down, Pete. I'll begin the inspection."

Peter Drake was already activating the transmitter. In words which barely betrayed his tension he said into the microphone : " Landing craft to *Stardrift*. We are down safely in selected area. First indications are that craft is in good shape. We are commencing detailed inspection to ensure flight readiness."

Within seconds a voice came through the speaker, accompanied by some muted ionospheric crackle. " Congratulations to the three of you. Let's hope the rest of the mission goes as smoothly. You're not due to make contact for another two

hours, so don't rush things—and remember, *don't* leave the craft until the sun comes up, By the way, we have just sent your message to Earth . . ."

Drake stared at his two colleagues and for a moment, their minds travelled back across the route which they had followed. The route which stretched across a wilderness of fifty billion miles.

It would be eleven years before that winging message, travelling at the speed of light, would reach the distant Earth. Eleven years before their mother world would know that they were down, that the first interstellar expedition had not been fruitless. *Don't jump the gun*, was Edward's warning thought. *Phase Two has still to come.*

Long ago, when men had planned this expedition, the possibility of finding a populated planet at the other end of the line had been foreseen. What could not be foreseen was the reception. In any event, the procedure in such circumstances was simple, sane and logical. No large-scale planet-fall would be attempted until a small landing party had sampled the native hospitality of the planet.

So the *Stardrift* remained in her element, hovering in a stationary orbit some twenty-thousand miles above, her human cargo waiting, praying. As they had waited and prayed for thirteen space-going years.

Between them, Edwards and Drake had soon completed their inspection. Although the outer surface of the craft could not be directly examined until someone was allowed outside, the complex of sensing systems left little room for doubt. It was *something* to know that they could get off again in a hurry. Just in case.

While Drake was reporting their findings to the *Stardrift*, Edwards crossed the small cabin to where the third member of the party was preparing the Environmental Analysis System. With characteristic care, Anna Kalinan completed her tasks, leaving the mechanics of the analysis to the craft's computer and its robotic retinue.

They stood together watching the dials registering the figures which would soon spell out whatever conditions awaited them. Except for the almost imperceptible electronic hum of instruments, the cabin was very quiet.

" Waiting isn't going to be easy," murmered Edwards. He was wishing that *something* had gone wrong with the craft. Something trivial but tricky enough to keep their minds occupied till sunrise.

Before Anna could reply, Drake rose with a yelp and rushed to the window. He stared out into that alien night, his body tensed with something akin to dread. Then his shoulders sagged and he turned to his colleagues, somewhat sheepishly.

" I could swear I saw something," he muttered. " Something close by the window. It seemed to float up and away just as I moved."

Edwards felt an icyness at his spine. " Must have been some sort of bird, Pete. What do you think, Anna ?" He could see she was trembling.

" Could have been. Yes . . . that's what it would be. Some sort of bird."

There was a silence in which unspoken fears seemed to clash together in the night of their subconscious. Life had suddenly become decidedly unpleasant.

At last Anna said : " I can't speak for you two, but *I* don't know whether to be frightened or not."

It was a strange statement. Edwards hadn't realised till then just how much control people could exert over their feelings, as well as their outward responses. Anna's candid remark had somehow dispelled the atmosphere of almost superstitious dread. They had begun a journey into fear, and stopped short at the threshold. Together they would wait and there would be no panic. Sunrise was just an hour away.

The big breakthrough had come too late to be of use in the conquest of the Solar System. Electro-magnetism as a space-drive had remained an elusive dream until near the end of the twentieth century. But the rate of expansion from that point on was comparable only to that of the old chemical vehicles after the first application of rocketry on a large scale.

Within a decade, probes were being launched from orbiting platforms into the vastness of the local galactic arm. Some were swallowed up in the yawning void, their fabulous payloads of electronic intelligence silenced by some unknowable catastrophe. But others got through. A fortunate few reached the vicinity of the nearer stars ; Proxima, Sirius A, Procyon, Tau Ceti, Epsilon Eridani.

Epsilon Eridani had long been known to astronomers as a faint star in one of the less significant constellations. A star not unlike the Sun, but older, larger, approaching the red stage. Now, suddenly and dramatically, their knowledge of this star was expanded as the electronic senses of a star-probe ripped apart its veil of secrecy.

Epsilon had a retinue of at least five planets, though more were suspected. Of those, two appeared to have several terra-type characteristics. Estimated temperature, gravity and spectrum appeared to fall within the tolerable range. Surely one of these twins was right for man !

Half-way through the twenty-first century a vast ship was assembled out beyond the orbit of Jupiter. Two years slipped by while the new colossus of space was being built. The third year saw a thousand tests and trials, ranging from the most routine checks to full scale circum-solar flights at near optic speeds.

It was in the fourth year that the four-hundred were ferried out from Earth. Four-hundred human beings who had voluntarily agreed to participate in the controlled experiment of interstellar exploration. For forty-eight hours they waited, their senses numbed with history and sadness, for the signal which could commit them irrevocably to their wild journey to the stars.

At last, as near to a state of perfection that any human creation could aspire, the *Stardrift* slipped out from solar orbit, her vast, ovoid form pointing to a faint star in Eridanus.

Entry into the Epsilon system was an experience long awaited, and one which would be even longer remembered. In their long arc of decelleration through the system, they passed two of the outer giants ; baleful gaseous apparitions each one bigger than Jupiter. Then had come a comparatively long haul to the inner reaches, past a crumbling stony sphere which might once have been a living world. And so to the Twins of Epsilon. The first extra-solar worlds on which man had set his sights. One of these might prove—*must* prove—to be second Earth, Novaterra, man's first tiny claim to galactic conquest.

A brief examination of the outer twin was sufficient to dispel any hope of setting up a flourishing colony. The world *could* have supported them, true, but not with any expectation of long-term success. It was a jungle planet, nine-tenths

swamp and steaming inland sea. Life there was, but life which, from first observation, seemed better left alone.

The thirty-million mile hop to the one remaining hope was torture, and short though it was, time dragged by more slowly than ever before. An unspoken question hung like a sword of Damocles over their heads : *Would the twins prove identical*?

They did not.

As the observation ports of the *Stardrift* swung round to peer into the blue-veiled surface below, reassurance settled like a divine benediction upon the travellers. This world was right for man.

Then had come the discovery of indigenous intelligence, hardly a complete surprise but electrifying with its implications. Whatever civilisation existed down there was peculiar by man's standards. When the miles of film from the tele-cameras were studied, there was no indication of the vast artifacts one associates with advanced civilisation. And yet neither was there evidence of barbaric chaos. Small, neat townships, surrounded by many acres of cultivated land. Transport systems between these centres seemed scarcely to exist at all. No signs of industrial areas could be found.

As the *Stardrift* settled into her high, unpowered orbit, it was an anxious complement which debated the next move. Only one course seemed possible. Go down to meet these beings, to parley an agreement in order that the children of Earth might not yet again be cast out into the stellar wilderness.

They selected a site for the first landing in relatively close proximity to a native settlement. With understandable caution, they ensured that the geographic conditions were such as to afford some natural camouflage. The landing craft was prepared and the crew selected from a tense squad of volunteers. A wise and reasonable approach to the problem, but to Anna Kalinan, Peter Drake and Philip Edwards, it was a long way down.

Edwards' heavily booted feet sank into the moist, morning earth. Anna, first to descend to the surface, awaited him. The orange sunlight came filtering through the red-fern forest, casting long shadows across the plain on which they had come down. The eternal wind, product of a dense atmosphere and fourteen-hour rotation period, drove past them in warm frenzy.

" Let's get Betsy checked out first," Edwards' voice was half-carried away in the wind.

Both scouts were garbed in highly protective suits, equipped to meet almost any demands of a strange environment. The results of Anna's analysis had confirmed that no toxic elements existed in the immediate area. To Edwards' intense relief, there had been no need for the restrictions and privations of oxygen equipment.

Drake, remaining within the craft as vital link with the orbiting ship, passed on their reports confirming the flight readiness of the craft. Then he paused, and said with artificial casualness : " Well, you lucky pair, it looks like this is *it*. But for Heaven's sake stay within range, and . . . stick together !"

Stick together.

Maybe not such a bad idea, considered Edwards as they moved towards the forest. He had always liked Anna. Her calmness, her consideration, and yes, her looks. That liking was growing into something new, something stronger. It was somehow good to know that whatever happened to them in the next few hours would find them both together.

Anna stopped suddenly by his side. He turned quickly to look at her. She stood like a statue, only her dark hair moving, flowing with the wind. Her face was frozen, as though she had witnessed a revelation. Her eyes were troubled.

Edwards felt his heart tick faster. He was immediately annoyed, for their survival suits were jammed with sensors, continually telemetering to Drake their physical responses and well-being.

Fear was less easy to bear when it was constantly being advertised.

" What do you see, Anna ?" He forced an unfelt calm into his voice. " Is something wrong ?"

" No." She seemed to give a mental shake. " It's just . . . *queer*. As though someone was speaking to me."

" Speaking ?" Despite himself, Edwards could not keep the sharpness out of his tone. " Well, what did they say ?"

She laughed. A somewhat short, brittle laugh, but spontaneous enough. " That I don't know. And yet—something inside seemed to understand." She brushed her forehead lightly.

Edwards asked more gently : " Sure you want to carry this thing through ?"

This seemed to bring back her native determination with one sharp jolt.

" You bet," she flushed a little with self-anger. " I'm just being an idiot. Look, we'll soon be at the forest."

The plan was to reach the cover of the forest and trace their way around it, up the brow of a gentle slope until they could obtain a view of the nearby settlement.

After that . . .

Edwards forced his thoughts away from that inevitable moment, for reluctance was taking a sudden hold of him. Something within him cringed from the prospect of Encounter. He realised, with a shiver of panic, that his control was slipping.

A voice flared in his ear. Drake . . .

" Where the hell are you two going ?"

Anna stiffened by his side. Together they looked around them. Edwards gasped with shock. Instead of following the planned route up the slope, they had entered the forest !

" It's all right, Pete," he covered up as best he could. " We just wanted to have a look around."

" Well just watch what you're doing," was the instantaneous retort. " Remember, I can't see you now."

Anna stared up at him with pleading eyes. *Why* ? was the voiceless question. *What made us come in here* ?

What indeed ?

It was then they realised that whatever had brought them here wouldn't let them go. Inexplicably, Anna and he knew precisely where to go. The fern-trees which sprouted all around seemed to be no obstacle to the directive force which guided them, lured them on.

There was no longer any doubt in Edwards' mind that *something* was waiting for them. And they had to go to it. To face it. To swallow their trembling fear and find dignity and calm. For *they* were the representatives of man. For a million years a distant world called Earth had laboured and suffered, had limped and stumbled along the road to reason. Edwards found himself thinking of all the faith and pain and dedication which had been necessary before his race had launched itself towards its destiny.

This was destiny.

The wind weaved through the ruddy growths, stirring them to a weird melody of nature. A song of sadness and compulsion.

Suddenly, the two scouts came upon a clearing, and shock fell upon their senses like an anaesthetic.

A creature stood before them.

Tall and slender, the strange figure seemed to fit its surroundings. Like the swaying fern-trees, it had the appearance of fragility ; an appearance, one somehow realised, that was deceptive. The face was approximately human, though dark and sharp. The garments which it wore were bright in the orange sunlight and tight-fitting.

But it was the eyes which held them breathless. The green, dancing eyes which seemed to sweep into their souls, eyes afire with an intelligence which could have been angelic or satanic, or something vastly more inscrutable.

With one of these sudden, psychological asides, Edwards realised his arm was around Anna, and that they had both ceased to shiver.

The great calm which fell upon them came from outside. Edwards was no longer directly aware of the forest around him, or the figures before him, or the summer sighing of the everlasting wind. They existed for him now only as part of a pattern ; it was towards the unity that his mental eye was focussed.

His mind had become a great lake of calmness, complete, healing calmness. And then, movement. A ripple, an incoming stream of consciousness. The alien was communicating.

You are very brave.

Edwards knew that Anna " listend " too. Her presence beside him was an invisable warmth, and he could distinguish her thoughts as they formed. This was a three-way rapport, a complete merging of being. The alien's thoughts flowed on :

It took great courage for you to come to me, as it must have done to take the great leap between our stars. When you landed in the night, we came to your machine. Right away we believed it to be a starship, for we have always considered that one day we might be visited this way.

And then we listened to your thoughts. We learned that there were more of you, up there in that sky of ours. That there were many more back in your native world, waiting. You want to share our planet, to send thousands of your people here. You

want to spread throughout the galaxy. That is why you came to Thorm.

In the fragment of his mind which remained aloof from it all, Edwards felt a quiver of excitement. Thus far, the reception was anything but hostile. But at the same time the alien had done no more than state the facts. And why had they eavesdropped in the night, failing to reveal themselves ?

Why ?

As soon as the thought was born, Edwards felt it drawn from him by the same irresistible power which had bodily drawn Anna and he to this encounter.

The alien replied without hesitation. *In the vicinity of your machine we felt unwell. This puzzled us for a time but we believe it due to a mild contamination which you brought down from space. Your machine must have passed through the many radiations which surround our planet. On the surface of Thorm scarcely any of these radiations ever reach us.*

Possible, mused Edwards. The atmosphere was denser than that of Earth. An ozone layer of great thickness would shield the planet from almost all contamination.

So the aliens had waited for them to disembark. Luring them to the forest had probably been child's play.

Now we must consider your request. Our first reaction is one of excitement. The Thorm are an advanced race, but have their discontents. We long for a greater union with the Universe. In one respect at least, you people from the stars have reached ahead of us. We would like to share your secret.

Edwards interjected. *Then you have no starflight* ?

The answer was a quiet sadness, a negative :

From the picture I get of your world, your Earth, I see you are a many-sided race. You have many conflicts and many sudden, forward leaps. Perhaps not always forward ? *But you are a populous planet. You can do things, good and bad, on a grand scale. We Thorm are different . . .*

Just how different, soon became apparent as the Thorm expanded on the set-up existing on the planet. One basic factor was the complicated nature of reproduction. Although the average Thorm lifetime was at least four times that of human beings, the capacity to procreate was limited to an astoundingly short period in the Thorm's development. This, they believed, was nature's way of easing up on her vital demands for race preservation. The Thorm considered that

when a race reached a certain point in its development, the need for large numbers becomes superfluous, self-defeating. Thus, Thorm society was unpressed by rigorous physical demands.

Edwards was quick to seize on this point. As Thorm was, if anything, an underpopulated planet, surely there was room for more ?

Room there is. Indeed the extra numbers would be a mutual advantage. We could pass on to you our knowledge of the psyche and in the fullness of time, we could accompany you in an eternal surge towards the stars. Room ; yes. There is room for you in your millions. But what we still must decide upon is our mutual compatibility.

At this point, the alien seemed to withdraw slightly from their minds, and Edwards guessed that he was using almost all his energies in debate with the distant councils which had been hurriedly set up over all the planet. It was in that moment of slightly reduced rapport that across the smooth surface of Edwards' mind there came a cross-current of distraction. Quickly, it became such a disturbance that he emerged suddenly from his trance-like state.

The result was shattering. Sight and sound exploded into focus ; the red forest, the wind pouring in upon him, the impossible alien creature standing there in front of him. Terror and hate suddenly rose within him, primordial reactions which had somehow worked loose from his subconscious. He struggled, his being split between opposing instincts. When he had eventually silenced the screaming monsters of his id, he was conscious of a weakness, a lethargy, that was entirely new.

Then he became aware of what had roused him from his trance. It was his radio, screaming in his ear.

" . . . for God's sake answer ! This is the last time—I have been ordered to lift-off unless you come in. Look—I know you're in the forest. I know that your hearts are beating and your breathing is normal. Now what's going on ? They've told me not to leave the craft, in case whatever has happened to you happens to me too. But I'm coming out, do you hear ? I'm coming out and I'm going to bring you back."

The outburst stopped and Edwards bit his lip at the desperation in his friend's voice. Drake must have been through hell back there. Sitting alone, waiting, wondering. God, what an ordeal !

" Pete . . ." his voice was weak and pale. " I'm sorry. I can't explain now, but we're all right. Come out. You'll be able to follow our tracks. This . . . this is big, Pete."

Peter Drake arrived just as Anna emerged from rapport. Edwards held her as she began to tremble while Drake just stood and stared at the creature of the red-fern forest.

Anna had been in deeper rapport than Edwards, and had lasted the full course. Long enough to hear the Thorm verdict and to gain a deeper glimpse into their way of life. Long enough to be prepared for what was soon to follow.

When she recovered from the nervous struggle of awakening, her face was pale, exhausted. When she spoke, it was weakly, sporadically, her words only half-heard in the driving wind.

" We . . . we're in ! The Thorm will have us . . . if we . . . have them . . ." She collapsed into his arms. Briefly, she looked up into his eyes.

" The Thorm . . . they can . . . they can . . ."

Her strength had gone completely. Edwards propped her up against the soft resilience of a fern tree. He knew there was nothing wrong with her; he was familiar with the symptoms of dog-tiredness.

Too wearily familiar.

But suddenly he was galvanised with the realisation of success. They had made it ! Man and Thorm would live together. After the first shock of unfamiliarity wore off, they would partner a rich new heritage. In the years to come, Earth would send many of her children here. At last she would find an outlet for her seething millions. And not only on Thorm. The success of the first interstellar mission would set off an explosive expansion to the stars. Man would begin to populate the Milky Way in earnest.

But for the time being, Thorm was enough. Success depended upon the ability of the two races to set up a mutual dependance, a cultural symbiosis which would blend their differences into compatibility.

For Man and Thorm were very different entities.

The alien stood quite still, only the green-fire eyes alive and moving. Whether or not he was still in communication with his fellows was impossible to judge. Perhaps he was resting, his mind limp within him after the tremendous output of energy which must have been necessary to communicate with them.

To his own surprise, Edwards was conscious of a strange sense of pity. The Thorm were undoubtedly a splendid race, physically and mentally. But was there not a lack ? No great pioneering achievements. No expanding frontiers.

No starflight.

Just at that moment, as Edwards felt the slight edge of a contempt that would soon be gone forever, the alien moved. A slight tendril of farewell slipped into their minds, warm with the promise of a great re-union. Then, in a single, graceful motion the Thorm rose slowly from the forest. Upwards he sailed, his great scarlet wings unfolding, shimmering like gossamer in the orange sunlight.

High above the forest, his outline shrank with altitude, until he became a speck of light, moving with the wind in a trajectory of utter freedom. Freedom so exquisite that Edwards could barely breathe for longing.

Dusk was stealing in with stars and shadows when the *Stardrift* began her descent. The three scouts sat around the landing-craft, numbed by their experiences. As one, they arose when the great ship of night appeared. The world was humming to a tune it had never heard before. The song of man-made power.

As the *Stardrift* settled down in her long-yearned-for resting place, Edwards could not help but compare the might of this colossus with the freedom of the winging Thorm. The one, an acquired power ; the other, an inborn grace.

For too long, on Earth as well as Thorm, had these been seperated.

It was still too light to distinguish the star which men called Sol. Only the bright giants of the night could be seen, together with the tiny moon and the neighbour world, the twin upon which, one day, man and Thorm would at last set foot. Edwards felt somehow enlarged. Grown in wisdom and experience.

It was man, he realised at last, not alien, whom nature had deprived. By comparison, he was crippled, sealed-in, impeded by the very structure of his being. But nature had supplied him with the need to improvise. To enlarge himself, and, eventually, to forge a way to freedom.

An imprisoned mind and flesh were man's misfortune ; the stars his compensation.

James Inglis

The entire motive of the expedition was to prepare the way for the colonisation of the planet. Inadvertently, the members of the exploration team did this so successfully that the final answer was totally different to the one expected of them.

ADAPTATION

by ROY ROBINSON

The spherical exploration ship, *Ventor* III, materialised as the tiniest of motes against the immense back-cloth of celestial space. It glittered coldly as it slowly rotated, the weak light of innumerable stars being reflected briefly from an occasional burnished surface. The rotation slowed and the ship was stationary for a moment, only to vanish in a sharp pin-point of dissipated energy, to re-appear many macroparsecs from its initial position. The process of jumping through hyper-space was repeated many times as a well-known route was transversed inside the curved arm of a galactic spiral. The intervals between jumps became smaller and the number of jumps more frequent as the route became less familiar, until eventually the ship was stilled; it had reached one of its scheduled stops.

Upon receiving notice of his appointment as leader of a research expedition, Alan Foster commenced to tidy up his affairs in preparation for the handing over of his present duties to a successor. Alan was a young member of the executive staff and his feeling of urgency was brought into being by the notification accorded the members of such expeditions. A get-together meeting was scheduled for that very afternoon (ship time), merely a few hours away, and there were a number

of farewells to be made. Eventually he was finished and he hurried along one of the main corridors of the ship to collect his orders in person. He planned to give these their first reading while he had a meal.

He arrived punctually at the briefing room but, even so, there were three other men already present. One he recognised from a previous meeting but he deliberately included all three in his greeting.

"Morning, gentlemen. I'm Alan Foster."

"Ronald Hayman," answered one of the three. "You remember me, no doubt." He reciprocated Alan's acknowledging smile. "Then may I introduce George Kinlay who is our zoologist and Vivano Leobner from agriculture."

Alan shook hands in passing with each man and walked over to the small table facing the short rows of chairs. More people were trickling into the room and Alan noticed that included among them were the three women members of the team. A quick count of heads indicated that everyone was present and Alan leaned across the table to touch a buzzer to call the meeting to order.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the meeting is now in session," he began formally. "Please identify yourselves and your speciality so that we can get to know each other."

Alan sat down in his chair and checked against the official list the statement of each person as he or she rose to speak. In addition to the three people he had spoken to earlier, there were Felina Grey who would handle the geological aspects, Zoal Spath, the ecologist, Harris Tala, an engineer, Doris Paling for botanical matters, Norman Webster of physiology and Violet Di-Renso from biometrics who was also in charge of the computer. Alan was on his feet again.

"There is no need for me to go into details of our expedition, since these will be available to you later, but I feel sure you would all welcome a general picture of the task ahead of us."

A general murmur of agreement confirmed the remark.

"Very well," went on Alan. "The system we are in has been coded ENLO-128, a slightly bluish sun with four planets, the outermost one of which, Delta, has been coded as suitable for human colonization. In all major aspects, the planet is an earth-type. The physics boys have given it a thorough going over. The rotation period is twenty-six hours and the meteorological conditions are similar to those of earth: there is ample

atmospheric water, a carbon-nitrogen cycle for plant growth, with animals living off the vegetation. We have been assigned the job of sampling directly the conditions which may confront the first colonists. In particular, we have to look for anything that physics may have missed. We all know that a purely physical scrutiny cannot forecast everything, although we can be confident that there are no obvious dangers."

Alan saw that Zoal Spath wished to raise a point and he paused for the man's question.

" Could you give us an indication of the difference between Earth conditions and those of the planet ?"

Alan pondered briefly. " There are, of course, many minor differences, but if you mean differences which could affect us directly, there are none which cannot be overcome. However, your inquiry gives me the opportunity to introduce Doc Hayman to you."

Hayman was on his feet almost at once.

" Thanks, Alan. The only difference—and how the physics department can dismiss it as minor, I can't imagine—which will immediately affect us is a rather high level of ultra-violet radiation. This could produce severe sunburn. However, I have prepared a cream which will mitigate the worst effects until we have become acclimatised. As for the long term effects—well, that is something we have yet to discover. It would be unwise to eat the vegetation found on the planet, its chemical content will probably be too different for our digestive system to assimilate. Thus, we shall be growing Earth crops in order that we may live off the planet as much as possible. Indeed, as the early colonists will attempt to do. Whether our health will suffer as a consequence is something we have to find out. It is part of the task before us."

" Yes, indeed," said Alan. " It should be remembered that we shall be acting as guinea-pigs for the colonists. In addition to our researches, we have to live as they will do. Doc Hayman —that is, Ronald—and Norman here, will be coming along specially for that reason. Fortunately, I know we shall be in good hands. Before I open the meeting for a general discussion, are there any more questions of a specific nature ?"

Alan paused and looked searchingly at the seated assembly but no one responded to the invitation. Alan accordingly declared the meeting open for informal discussion. He left

the table and mingled with the several chattering groups of two or three people as the gathering rapidly lost its formal aspect. Presently he signalled for coffee to speed up the familiarisation process. They seem to be getting to know one another quickly, he mused, but he did not labour under the delusion that the team had been got together at random. Over a year would be spent on the planet, with no other company for the humans but themselves, and the psychological aspects of this had undoubtedly been taken into account most carefully. From his point of view the process of selection could not be rigorous enough for, as leader of the expedition, he would be held solely responsible for its conduct. The responsibility was awe-inspiring, but it was the job for which he had been trained and, now that his first assignment had materialised, he was looking forward to it with youthful enthusiasm. In a few hours he would be the scientific co-ordinator of a research team setting forth to tackle the problems presented by colonisation of a virgin planet. A world in which there were no intelligent natives and one, therefore, under the colonisation laws, which could be legitimately colonised by man.

A misfortune befell the work of the team about one month after planet-fall. Up to that time, all of the various work projects had gone smoothly. Their ship, a much smaller version of *Ventor* III had landed in an area which appeared to be potential farm land. The main laboratories were aboard the ship but ancillary buildings and storage sheds had been erected. Much of the heavy work had been undertaken by robotic machinery. Some twenty acres of land had been cleared, sterilized of indigenous organisms and planted with Earth crops. These crops were composed of plants with ultra-rapid growth, capable of completing a life cycle within a few weeks, and these were approaching maturity. The fertilised ova of a variety of Earth animals had been brought out of the refrigeration tanks and cultured. The life cycle of these animals had been speeded up and many of the rapidly growing animals were penned about the cultivated fields. An aerial view would have shown the little settlement appearing like a cross between a farm and a menagerie.

Zoal Spath had activated his ecologics robots and had commenced a detailed survey of the area. A vast array of all sorts of vegetation was brought in and soon Paling was overwhelmed with work. It was quickly apparent that the flora

evolution was as expected. Each variation of habitat had its own characteristic flora. A large number of a mammal-like animal was also brought in but no other living creature. These animals could be described as a generalised rodent; they varied in size but were usually about that of a large rat; they possessed semi-prehensile fore-paws and could squat on their hind limbs. At first, they were singularly fearless and could frequently be seen watching the robot machinery but later they became increasingly elusive and difficult to catch, even by Spath's specialized robots.

Kinlay's announcement that they could all be of the same species, though differing in size, number of teeth and in colour of their curiously straggly hair, was met with disbelief. Curiously, no animals were found which could be equated with a carnivore. The contrast between the flora and fauna of the planet could scarcely be greater and everyone thought it was very peculiar. Kinlay's subsequent discovery that all the animals appeared to be hermaphrodite served to deepen the mystery, for this sort of reproduction should produce wide divergence of evolutionary forms.

Alan was at his desk, busily ploughing through some routine paper work, when Leobner hurried in to see him.

" Alan, something has ravaged one of my plots, half the plants have been eaten or ruined !"

Alan looked at the agriculturalist incredulously. " What—but that's impossible ! What could have done it ?"

" I don't know—will you come to see for yourself ?"

" I sure will," replied Alan coming round from behind the desk. " But have you any ideas ? The animals ?"

Leobner shrugged his shoulders. " I suppose it must be but I thought this had been checked. I thought they refused all Earth food."

" That is true. George found that their digestive system could not cope with Earth proteins. They invariably died from severe allergic inflammation of the alimentary tract. You know very well that this discovery led us to believe that fencing would be unnecessary. Anyhow, I think that we should pick up George, some new animal may have put in an appearance."

They left the building and walked to Leobner's carrier. Leobner eased in the gravity control and the little craft zoomed away in the direction of Kinlay's laboratory. As they skimmed along about six feet above the ground, Alan tried to puzzle out

this unexpected turn of events. The huddle of buildings, which made up Kinlay's laboratory, was quickly reached and Leobner guided the carrier to a halt outside the main entrance. Kinlay must have seen the carrier approaching for he appeared from a low outbuilding before either of the two men had risen from their seats. Alan called him over and explained the situation.

" So you see, if there is anything new, I think that you should be with us."

Kinlay acquiesed immediately and climbed aboard with the others. The carrier rose gracefully into the air and speeded away towards one of the outlying fields.

" You will observe that it is a plot right on the edge of our cultivated area," Leobner explained, as he set the carrier astride a narrow pathway. Alan alighted and walked out among the damaged plants.

" It isn't easy to judge how many, if any, plants have been eaten, although I can see that the leaves have been stripped away," said Alan, bending down to pick up a denuded stem.

" I'm sure that some have been eaten," declared Leobner. " I checked this before I decided to fetch you. If you look carefully, you can see that in most cases, the plants have been nibbled through at the base and in others have been stripped of leaves as well. Not all of the fallen leaves are on the soil and—look—here is a leaf eaten half away."

Alan took the leaf which Leobner had picked up and offered to him. It had every appearance of being half eaten.

" I don't see any living creatures," commented Alan, as he glanced around.

" There are some here, however," remarked Kinlay, who had been glancing hither and thither with a practised eye. " Watch this." He bent down and lifted up a sod of earth, deftly throwing it into a clump of greenery. One of the rat-like animals scurried out and promptly disappeared into a neighbouring clump.

" They're here, all right. If you know what to look for," went on Kinlay. " Although I do not mind saying that I have never before seen the ratoids so timid."

Alan turned to the zoologist. " Well, it is up to you now. The presence of this animal doesn't mean that it is responsible for the damage. Some other beast may have appeared. If so, it must be found and precautions taken against it. You had better bring Zoal into this and see what you can uncover before

further damage occurs." His voice grew tense. " Destroy this particular crop if you must, but find out the cause of the damage."

" What about the other crops," demanded Leobner, waving an arm to indicate the various fields. " How about a barrier?"

" We haven't enough power to spare to enclose the whole area in a force-field, if that's what you want," stated Alan. " A mechanical barrier will have to be devised if it becomes necessary."

" In case it is important," asked Kinlay, " what are these plants ?"

" Beans," Leobner answered, fingering a limp vine with a regretfulness to be found only in a lover of plants.

Two days were to pass before a satisfactory answer was forthcoming. Kinlay brought the report to Alan personally.

" It was the ratoids !" explained Kinlay. " Zoal and I threw a force-field around the plot and Zoal sent in his robots. The only animals caught were ratoids, over a hundred in fact. I caged these and dropped in some bean foliage. A few died but the great majority ate the foliage with no ill effects. What's more, they can now eat any Earth vegetation, for I have given them sixteen different types so far, with no further deaths. This is simply amazing; in view of the earlier results, the change in metabolism is incredible."

" I see," said Alan. " From now on, I suppose the ratoids must be regarded as a pest. What actions has been taken to protect the remaining crops ?"

" Well—the fence was a bit of a problem, for the ratoids can climb and dig only too well. Anyhow, Harris has designed a fence which should keep them out and the construction of this is in hand. Zoal is clearing the various fields one by one with his robots. But for Leobner's prompt action, the destruction could have been far worse, however."

" That is something," muttered Alan. " Ah well, I suppose we must expect some set-backs of this nature. I hope the fence will be successful."

The keeping out of the ratoids proved to be a difficult operation. No matter how deep the fence was sunk into the ground, the animals tunnelled deeper. In the end, Spath was compelled to commit many robots to patrolling the fence. All was well for three days, then several of the robots homed for

minor repairs and others were found battered and wrecked out in the fields. Kinlay and Tala were completing their investigation of the wreckage when Alan glided in. He jumped out and hurried over to see for himself. To his amazement, he did not have to look far for the cause; several robust and heavily muscled animals were lying about, quite dead.

" A new animal ?" brusquely queried Alan.

" Who knows," frowned Kinlay. " Give me a chance to examine these cadavers and I'll tell you. I don't like it—if I can make a guess, I'd say that these are ratoids too."

" What !"

" I've seen many small ones of this general shape. If they can adapt to eat our vegetation, an increase in size may also be possible. I'll say one thing, though, we had better arm ourselves. An encounter with one of these brutes could be unpleasant. Look at those teeth !"

" I can see that," grunted Alan thoughtfully. " Harris, can you make a robot to deal with these brutes ?"

" Oh yes, that should not be difficult," replied Tala, with firm assurance.

Alan stepped back aboard his carrier and sent the versatile little transporter soaring back to the main buildings. To his dismay, he saw a group of the large beasts threshing around in a plot of grain. He almost set the carrier down for a closer look, when one of the beasts lunged towards the carrier, snapping and leaping into the air. Alan hastily raised the carrier to its maximum height and continued his journey. He noted with irritation that none of Spath's robots appeared to be in the vicinity to deal with the brutes.

Arriving back at his office, Alan found a message from Leobner which succinctly stated that widespread and serious damage had been caused. Many of the experimental crops had to be written off as a total loss and the situation was getting out of hand. After pondering for a short while, Alan reached for his pocket radio. He pressed a stud which activated a signal in Spath's instrument. Presently, Spath's voice issued from the tiny speaker, acknowledging the call. Alan raised the radio to his lips.

" Alan here, have you heard the news of the large beasts ?"

" Yes."

" Could you have missed these during your surveys ?"

" Not a chance, Alan. When only the ratoids were discovered I made a special search for other forms without finding one. I even roamed outside the ecological area I had set myself."

" I see. George has suggested that the large beasts are modified ratoids. What do you think ?"

" I don't know. George's opinion is obviously better than mine on that score."

" This problem is urgent. Harris is constructing some larger robots to deal with the beasts but I want you to catch some alive and deliver them to George before they are all killed. One last item, these beasts are dangerous, so be careful."

Alan pressed the stud on his radio to clear Leobner's frequency from the transmitter and then activated other frequencies successively so that he could talk with the remaining members of the expedition. He briefly informed them of the changed situation and described his own experience with the beasts. The large ratoids were clearly dangerous and from now on everyone should be mindful of the hazard which they presented.

The next morning, following a thoroughly restless night, Alan awakened to the sound of the bleeping of his radio. Sleepily he fumbled for the receiving button. He snapped it on and mumbled an acknowledgement of the call.

" George speaking. Alan, the ratoids have destroyed most of the pens containing the animals. Many are running around loose, some have been slaughtered, while others have simply disappeared."

Alan was shocked into full wakefulness by the time Kinlay had finished speaking. " Have you taken steps to round up the animals ? You have . . . Good . . . Do you want me to come over ? . . . Very well, I know you can manage but let me know if anything more breaks."

The destruction of most of the compounds and loss of valuable livestock filled Kinlay with chagrin. Grimly he set to work on the thankless task of salvage. The question posed itself: was the destruction solely wanton or had the ratoids developed a taste for flesh ? Kinlay was prepared to consider this last possibility in view of the other changes. One of the compounds had contained a number of sheep-dogs and the number of dead beasts scattered around testified that the dogs had defended themselves vigorously. Kinlay squatted

down to examine one of the beasts. It appeared larger than the ones he had seen the day before and its jaws were lined with the most formidable teeth he had yet observed. Kinlay leaned back on his heels. So further changes were occurring; what did this portend ? He was roused from his reverie by the arrival of Spath.

" I've brought some live beasts for you, as requested by Alan," announced Spath without preamble. " By the way, Harris has produced a more powerful robot to deal with the beasts. Luckily, they cannot hide very well and we hope to have the area cleared by to-day."

Spath's prediction was correct. The large ratoids were no match for the improved robots and the extermination was swift, if bloody. The fence was strengthened and the robots were programmed to patrol it. Fresh plantings of crops were made and, after a short while, conditions within the settlement approached normality. Seven days passed without incident and the majority of the team were inclined to dismiss the episode as the sort of occasional disaster to be expected upon an unknown planet.

Kinlay demurred at this suggestion. He advanced the hypothesis that the correct explanation, when found, would probably be more subtle. The large ratoids in his possession would attack and kill any Earth animal within reach yet make no attempt to eat any part of the corpse. They were obviously vegetarian and, this being so, Kinlay demanded to know why they were so ferocious. Developing the theme, he argued energetically that the ratoids were a reaction to the presence of the settlement. Despite Kinlay's warnings, the occurrence of further developments almost caught the group unprepared.

It was Leobner who made the next discovery. A call on the radio gave the news that he had shot a new type of animal and that he was bringing in the carcass. Alan could not contain his curiosity and went out to the open space in front of the administration offices, to await Leobner's arrival. He was joined by Di-Renso, whose computer laboratory was situated close by. Presently, the carriers of Kinlay and Hayman skimmed in to land. Evidently Leobner had broadcast the news generally. Hayman had brought along Webster in his carrier and the two men converged with Kinlay as they walked over to greet Alan and Di-Renso.

" Vivano not here yet," remarked Hayman unnecessarily. No one bothered to reply for, at that instance, Leobner's carrier came into sight, speeding effortlessly along on its gravity control. The carrier slowed to a halt alongside the gathering and Leobner lifted out a plastic covered bundle. He unwrapped the bundle exposing its contents. A tolerable facsimile of a large, vicious looking monkey was revealed. Di-Renso gave a little gasp of surprise and disgust, and turned away. Kinlay dropped on to one knee for a closer look.

" Remarkable," he breathed, as much to himself as to the others.

" I found it in a field close to the perimeter," started off Leobner. " As soon as I landed it came at me. I didn't have time to think. It was it or me."

" Yes, yes," interrupted Kinlay. " Was it alone ? And could it have been hiding and you startled it by landing ?"

" Why . . . I suppose so . . . yes," Leobner admitted, mentally struggling to recall events.

" What are you getting at ?" queried Alan.

" Only that the other beasts have always turned up in packs. Perhaps that is not important just now. What is important is this thing here. Where did it come from ?"

" Perhaps Zoal may know," suggested Webster.

" I don't think so," replied Kinlay. " You know how definite he was that the large ratoids could not have been overlooked. No, I think that this thing was made."

His listeners looked at him aghast.

" How can that be ?" jerked out Hayman. " Where ? How ?"

Kinlay gave a weak smile. " If only I knew ! I know my animals and this thing is part Rhesus monkey in conformation. Oh, I know it's got the wrong sort of hair and no Rhesus ever had those teeth but, if I may say so, it was modelled on a monkey !"

There was a brief pause as the impact of Kinlay's statement was mentally digested. Alan was the first to break the silence.

" Rhesus monkeys were among those animals which were missing," he said. " But it's fantastic."

Kinlay nodded. " Maybe it appears so. We can do the same."

" Hold on," interjected Hayman. " I know we can—but only with great hunks of equipment and months of work."

Again Kinlay nodded. " I'm aware of that, but we are up against an unknown environment and unknown reactions to our arrival."

" Are we back to that argument ?" countered Hayman. " How can there be anything here to harm us ? None of us has shown the slightest ill effects due to a biological agency. Even the equivalent organisms to bacteria find our bodies too alien to multiply."

" I'm not suggesting any sort of attack of that nature." retorted Kinlay. " Alan, I make a formal request that the problem of the origin of these beasts be given top priority. In particular, I should like to have the full-time assistance of Ronald and Norman, and any other facilities I may need."

Alan cut short the protests of the two men at the interruption of their own pursuits. " George is right. His request is granted. I believe that the problem is . . ."

The sentence was never finished, for at that precise moment, all their radios began to bleep. Alan drew his out of a pocket and thumbed the receiving button. The agitated voice of Spath sounded from the receiver.

" Help, I'm being attacked by . . . ughhh . . ." his voice died away in a moan, accompanied by a burst of static.

Alan and the others were galvanised into action. Scrambling hastily into the carriers, they sent the little machines rocketing into the air.

" Spread out ! Take different directions," yelled Alan, as he manoeuvred his carrier out into the open fields. He thrust the accelerator control to maximum as he anxiously searched the ground for sight of either Spath or the ecologist's carrier. It fell to Hayman to find Spath. Alan's radio bleeped and his automatic response enabled Hayman's voice to be heard.

" I've found him. Sector six. Quick ! He's surrounded by apes."

Alan banked the carrier around quickly, causing the craft to sway alarmingly as it skimmed in the direction of the field known as sector six. Presently he was circling the spot where Spath's body lay sprawled on the ground. Hayman was bending over the body while Webster was keeping a lookout with a neuro-gun at the ready. Five ape-like creatures lay motionless on the ground. Alan set the carrier down and Di-Renso and he rushed across the field to join Hayman.

The doctor looked up and shook his head at Alan's unspoken question.

" He's dead," he said simply.

A scuffling of earth heralded the arrival of Kinlay as he ran over from his carrier to join the group. Hayman repeated his statement for Kinlay's benefit.

" He's dead," declared Hayman positively. " George, I withdraw my objection to your proposal to give priority to the beasts. The seriousness of the situation is only too apparent."

" Alan !" Kinlay suddenly shouted. " Quick, call up Felina, Doris and Harris ! They may not know what's going on. They may be in danger."

Alan immediately pressed the studs on his radio to contact the three people. A brief delay and the voices of Grey and Tala were heard. Alan quickly acquainted them with what had happened and ordered Grey to join Tala as quickly as possible and stay together. No answer was received from Paling. The group looked at each other uneasily. Kinlay tried with his radio, pressing repeatedly the stud which should activate Paling's frequency. Still no reply.

" I don't like this. Does anyone know what she was working on ?" asked Alan.

No one answered him.

" We shall have to search. There is nothing else for it. If we fan out from here, we could cover the fields on this side of the labs. If we find nothing, go on to the other side. Make the main labs a focal point. Get moving, all of you. Don't land unless you have to and keep your eyes peeled."

Alan hurried over to his carrier with Di-Renso close behind him. They clambered aboard and Alan sent the carrier zooming away. Now that the first shock was over, he felt more composed. He noted that Hayman and Webster had delayed their departure long enough to pick up the lifeless body of Spath, while Kinlay and Leobner were well away. It was only a question of time before they would know the reason for the failure of Paling to answer.

Paling's carrier was eventually located by Kinlay in a field near the edge of the perimeter but of Paling herself there was no sign. Kinlay lowered his carrier beside that of Paling's and stepped out to search for evidence of a scuffle. He radioed that there were signs of a struggle, some of Paling's instruments were smashed and thrown about, while prints of ape-like feet

were everywhere. A search was extended over a wide area on both sides of the fence without revealing anything. As darkness began to fall, Alan reluctantly abandoned further effort. Paling had completely vanished and it had to be presumed that she was dead.

It was a subdued team which met that night for a meal and to take stock of the situation. The violent death of two of their number had a depressing effect which was not easily dispelled. Despite the cramped conditions, the meeting by common consent was held in the spaceship, with the heavy hatch closed as a precautionary measure. Grey and Tala had reported that they had not seen apes in the vicinity of the main buildings but Alan was loath to take unnecessary risks.

The meal finished, Alan decided that a general discussion might bring forth some interesting ideas.

" It seems fairly obvious that we are up against something which is quite new in our experience," he began. " Whatever our feelings on the death of Doris, the problem of the apes has got to be solved. We know that George has been arguing that the appearance of the beasts had special significance and it appears that he was right. Now, where do we go from there ? I have already decided that George should be given a free hand. Have you any definite plan in mind ?"

Kinlay was slightly embarrassed at the quick switch of the limelight but he realised that the others were floundering and looking to him for guidance.

" Well, yes," he said thoughtfully. " The first task is to catch some of these apes. I feel that these may be our first real break. I have analysed the ratoids to some extent and I intend to compare the results with a similar analysis of the apes. We already have detailed information on the structure of the Rhesus monkey and if, indeed, the apes are a model of the Rhesus, it may be possible to find out how it was done. The Rhesus is not a large monkey and these models are much larger. The fact that we refer to them as apes is an indication of their larger size. From the viewpoint of attacking us this could be called an improvement."

" A directed change," mused Alan. " But that implies intelligence."

" It appears so," continued Kinlay. " But not necessarily of a high order. There is also the case of the large ratoids

attacking any Earth animal even if this was larger than themselves. I don't consider that to be the behaviour of a normal predator. Besides, the large ratoids are phyllophagous. I suggest that the large beasts are directed or orientated against us."

"The large ratoids were not very effective against us personally," objected Norman.

"They may have been a first attempt or the best that could be done with the material at hand," answered Kinlay. "Until we, in our ignorance, allowed better material to fall into its grasp, or be taken, or what have you."

"Ye Gods, don't get metaphysical with us," burst out Grey, who had hitherto been listening in silence.

"I'm not," reposted Kinlay. "These beasts were made somehow. I don't know if I can say by someone, or even by something, but I mean to find out !

"It is not altogether a question of not accepting your hypothesis," Alan observed. "We are all professional sceptics here but we are willing to wait and see. Has anybody else got any comments to make ?"

"Yes," said Tala. "I assume you wish to have robots made to kill the apes ?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Alan. "Unless George has any objections."

Kinlay shook his head. "Not me. Though I should like to have several caught alive."

"That means someone has to take on Zoal's job. Can you do that, Vivano ?"

"Yes," complied Leobner.

"I have a suggestion," said Alan. "You may remember that we were unprepared for the damage caused by the large ratoids during the night, before we could kill them off. The apes may cause similar damage. I think we should check on this from the observation room of the ship. I know it is dark but we could use the lights."

A chorus of assent greeted the suggestion and the meeting spontaneously broke up. Alan led the way to the observation room, where Tala automatically assumed control of the large searchlight. He snapped on the switches and waited for the apparatus to warm up. Alan and several of the others scanned the area with night-glasses but nothing could be seen. At Alan's signal, Tala activated the searchlight and sent the beam

of light roving over the buildings and adjacent fields but nothing unusual or moving could be seen.

" I think we have the wrong approach," said Kinlay. " Try the infra-red scanners."

Tala extinguished the powerful searchlight and moved to the panel controlling the infra-red equipment. Presently, the infra-red screen flickered into life and everyone crowded closer for a better view. Tala turned the range dial to maximum and the picture on the screen expanded to show a curiously distorted representation of the laboratory buildings and panoramic lay-out of the fields. Initially, everything appeared to be still but as their eyes became accustomed to the shimmering picture, numerous small pin-points of light could be seen to be moving.

" They're there, all right," Kinlay concluded. " They are evidently wary of light. These brutes are not to be underestimated."

" Harris, can you programme one or two robots to destroy the apes and to patrol the laboratories ?" queried Alan.

" Yes, but I shall need an ape to collect olfactory and other data for the programming."

" Will a corpse do ?" offered Kinlay. " I brought in one of those which killed Zoal."

" Ye . . es, I suppose it will have to," answered Tala, as he hurried away to attend to the programming of the robots.

The next morning saw the team in action at an earlier hour than usual. All of them were anxious for the safety of their laboratories and equipment. Alan went straight to the observation room and peered out in several directions. Everything appeared serene enough. He could see the two robots which Tala had hastily programmed weaving between the buildings on their weak anti-gravity fields. There was no other sign of life. Alan called the team together and announced that Leobner and himself would reconnoitre the laboratories, just in case some of the apes were lurking about.

Alan and Leobner climbed aboard a carrier and sent the machine in a wide circuit of the buildings. He counted about thirty dead apes laying in various attitudes on the ground, victims of the two hovering robots. The two men went cautiously through all of the buildings individually, but no live apes were discovered. The apes had evidently forced their way into one laboratory room and the robot had gone in after

them, for five dead apes lay crumpled among smashed work-benches and shattered glassware. Apart from this damage and a host of broken windows, the various buildings were untouched.

Alan radioed the others that it was safe to leave the space-ship and that the laboratories were in good enough shape for Kinlay to proceed with his investigation. The zoologist complied with alacrity and in no time all the team were active at one task or another. Tala withdrew the robots from the fence and re-programmed them so that they would seek and kill both ratoids and apes. These were then deployed around the central buildings in order that the team could work without fear of molestation. Several days of bitter skirmishes and one pitched battle were to be fought before the apes were beaten off. Several of the robots were immobilised by flying rocks but no organism with a central nervous system could withstand the devastating effects of the nerve ray. Leobner was able to execute the capture of three of the apes alive during one of the early skirmishes.

Six days later, Alan and Kinlay called the team together for a meeting on the situation. Alan was customarily in the chair and, with the minimum of preliminaries, he requested Kinlay to open the discussion.

" The analysis of the structure of the apes has been completed and we are now working on the biochemical aspects," said Kinlay soberly. " As I surmised earlier, the apes were modelled upon the Rhesus. They were bigger and more powerful but basically a Rhesus, as I had conjected. For instance, I can give you a practical example. Harris, here, programmed the robots to attack the apes on the basis of sight and smell. Well, these robots would attack one of our Rhesus monkeys without hesitation, thus showing the close identity of odours."

Kinlay leaned forward upon his chair as he warmed to his theme.

" The apoids—as I think we could call them—showed the usual pattern of implacable hostility to Earth animals, killing any which came into reach, while being indifferent to the presence of either type of ratoid. The apoids would not respond to or co-operate in any psychological problem set for them. This is usually a good test for a mildly intelligent being which is strongly hostile towards the experimenter. May I recall the violent self-sacrifice of the apoids against the robots,

resulting in their reckless death. I suggest that all these bits of information support my view that somehow life on this planet is directed against us, probably because we have been detected as alien."

Kinlay paused before speaking again, his demeanour perceptibly more serious. " The apoids withdrew after the last massacre, or at least the survivors did ! Since then, no apoids have been seen. Is that not so, Vivano ?"

Leobner spoke up in agreement. " Yes, that is so. I even sent one robot far beyond the perimeter—but no apoids."

" I am inclined to think that whatever it is behind the beasts realized that the apoids failed in their purpose," carried on Kinlay. " Something else may be launched against us—and in the near future."

" I have been critical of your hypothesis in the past," said Hayman slowly. " And I'm still a little dubious. Still, I'm prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt."

The weeks passed and the tedious, repetitive work of biochemical analysis of the apoids slowly approached a climax. Kinlay had transferred all the important work to the laboratories aboard the space-ship and no one ventured outside unless it was imperative. Late in the afternoon of the thirty-fifth day, Tala and Leobner had entered one of the storage barns for some lengths of small diameter metal rod, only to find that the racks were empty.

Tala was astounded. " Look here. There was plenty here a few days ago. No one has been using rods to my knowledge. There's something funny going on."

Tala's hand darted to the neuro-gun at his belt as he stepped warily between the racks. After a brief search he came back to Leobner.

" There's nothing there," he said, his eyes still on the racks. " Let's go. I'm going to report this."

The two men re-entered the carrier in which they had loaded a quantity of stores obtained elsewhere and sped back towards the ship. Leobner landed the little carrier close to the entrance ramp. He half turned in the control seat and said to Tala " Are you sure the rods were there ?"

" Of course, I'm sure," retorted Tala. " Besides, there was lots of it. That's why I'm sure."

He swung himself over the side of the carrier and looked back at Leobner, his hands still resting upon the side.

" Do you want help in unloading this stuff ?"

" Hey, what's the hurry. You can see Alan later. During the evening meeting."

Tala shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation and set-to helping Leobner to unload the supplies they had brought.

The meeting had not proceeded very far before Tala decided to raise the question of the missing rods.

Alan glanced at him quizzically. " Are you certain of this?"

" Certain as I can be."

" Huh, I should like to say something," interposed Webster. " I noticed that certain items were missing from my lab but I didn't attach much to it. I thought someone in this room might have taken them."

" Me too," said Grey. " Except that it was rather a question of articles being moved from their usual positions."

Kinlay was on his feet in an instant, breathless with excitement.

" By all that's . . . Don't you see, this is it ! What a fool I am ! What does an intelligent being do when confronted with a superior force ? It hides ! Or, it becomes cunning. The next stage has arrived. Whatever it is, it has taken to prowling around at night."

" What about the robots?" Webster felt compelled to ask.

" That's what I mean," declared Kinlay. " Whatever it is, it's not a ratoid, nor an apoid, or the robots would have got it. It's something different, something the robots ignore because they're not programmed to react to it."

" If you are right," said Alan pointedly, " what's the next step ? To catch one of these things ?"

" Yes," replied Kinlay. " Firstly, we can check with the infra-red screen as we did with the apoids. We can get on with that right away."

Without more ado, the team trooped out into the corridor and thence to the observation room. Tala went over to the control panel of the infra-red scanners and threw the necessary switches. Presently, the screen shimmered into life and Tala adjusted a dial for correct focus. Except for the tiny blobs of light denoting the ever restless robots, the picture was quiet.

" Perhaps it is too early," Alan commented.

" I don't know," said Kinlay calmly, staring intently at the screen. " If the things have been roaming about for some days, there is no need for them to be cautious tonight. Nor would I anticipate much delay in the start of their nocturnal activities."

" We could maintain a vigil," proposed Di-Renso.

" There's no need," exclaimed Kinlay, indicating a barely moving pin-point of light on the screen. " Here's something—look—and here, too. In fact, there are several points showing movement. Whatever it is, it is moving stealthily. We forget how big an area is scanned and the relative slowness of movement appearing on the screen."

Alan tapped Tala on the shoulder for attention.

" Can you programme a robot to pick up anything living, say, without knowing exactly what it is ?"

" Some of Zoal's ecological robots are specially made for that purpose."

Alan turned to Kinaly.

" Is there any reason why an attempt should not be made now ?"

" None at all. I'm quite as eager as you are to see what's moving about out there. There is just . . ." Kinlay's voice died away and then he shook his head. " No matter, carry on."

Alan looked at him as if in doubt for a moment, then nodded to Tala. " All right. Go ahead !"

It required very little effort to wheel out the appropriate robots and to check their programming. Tala alerted three of the robots and dispatched them through the air-lock. Di-Renso and Grey, who had been detailed to watch the infra-red screen, observed them clearly leaving the ship but eventually lost track as their blobs of light merged with the weaving pattern produced by the other robots. Quite a number of the slowly moving pin-points of light were apparent on the screen and it appeared that little time would be required before the robots returned. However, when forty minutes had elapsed, Alan realised that the robots had failed in their purpose.

Alan gazed at Tala critically.

" I thought these robots were capable of apprehending any living animal of fairly large size ?" he said sharply.

" I thought so, too," mumbled Tala. " You saw me check their programming."

" Yes, I did," said Alan. " So ? What went wrong ?"

" Hold on," butted in Kinlay. " I know what's the trouble."

" What !" ejaculated Alan and Tala simultaneously.

" The robots were programmed to work with Zoal. I mean that literally—out in the field—therefore, they were programmed to ignore a human being. I think we must face up to the fact that the things out there are facsimiles of a human being. Don't forget that Doris was carried away as were the Rhesus monkeys."

" Oh, how horrible ! How can you say such a thing," cried Di-Renso, staring wide-eyed at Kinlay.

" I don't like the idea any more than you do, but the non-return of the robots is an undeniable fact and I suggest that is the reason."

" Perhaps the robots have run into trouble," said Webster in a not very convincing tone.

" We can soon find out. Recall the robots. When they return, send them out again programmed to pick up a human being. This would quickly show if I am right."

Alan gesticulated at Tala. " Call them in—and we'll do as George says."

Tala did as he was bid, sending out a signal which would cause the robots to home on the ship. Each one of them watched the infra-red screen with anxious eyes, as if willing the robots not to return but they did, all three of them. Not a word was uttered as the robots were admitted and examined for defects. The examination revealed that the robots were completely functional. Alan glanced at the others.

" Programme the robots as George has suggested," he sighed finally. " We have got to find out the truth sooner or later."

The robots were re-programmed and sent forth on their questing mission. It seemed to be an eternity to the impatiently waiting men and women; but actually it was merely twenty minutes before the screen showed that one of the robots was returning. Presently, a signal indicated that it was hovering on the other side of the air-lock.

Alan bounded to his feet. " Be prepared for anything. We don't know what may have been brought in."

The inner air-lock door dilated and the robot glided in bearing a limp, white form. It was that of a large homoid, naked and muscular, with long hair, big hands and feet, and obviously female despite its size.

" It's not dead," said Tala. " Only under a sedative."

" Another robot is coming in," Di-Renso called over the inter-com, speaking from her position in front of the infra-red screen.

" Quick ! Get this one into a cage," ordered Alan. " And, Harris, make ready to let the other robot in."

Kinlay took over control of the robot and guided it into the recesses of the ship while Tala made arrangements to admit the second robot. It, too, was bearing a female homoid and Leobner, at Alan's gesture, took over control of this one, guiding it after the retreating figure of Kinlay.

Further conversation was interrupted by Di-Renso's voice over the inter-com. " Come quickly, the labs are on fire."

Everyone rushed up to the observation room and peered out of the observation ports. Several of the buildings were on fire and it was possible to see the large figures of the homoids occasionally silhouetted against the flames. Tala walked across the room to close down the infra-red equipment, when his eyes fell upon the screen and he let out an exclamation. " Look at this, there are scarcely any robots left !"

Instead of the twenty or more blobs of light usually showing on the screen, only three remained and, even as they watched, one of the small blobs disappeared.

" They must have realized that we have detected them," declared Kinlay. " They have found a means of putting the robots out of action."

" That would not be difficult," said Tala. " None of the robots was programmed to avoid us and these brutes probably slugged them with sticks or stones."

" It would be unwise to underestimate these brutes as you call them," Kinlay reproved the engineer. " I have had a chance to examine the two females down below. One of them had her hair tied in a tail while their bodies were clean, right down to their finger nails. And "—pointing towards an observation port—" you can see that they know how to make fire. Doris was a highly intelligent young woman and these homoids, modelled upon her, would be at least as intelligent in my opinion. They would have her intellectual capacity if not her knowledge—though the latter may not be impossible."

" What do we do now," demanded Tala. " We cannot allow them to destroy all our laboratories. I say, send out some killer robots."

" How many robots have you left ?" asked Alan.

" How many . . . why . . . er . . . three aboard the ship and those outside."

" Well I can tell you that there are none left outside," said Kinlay, turning away from studying the infra-red screen. Tala rushed over to the screen to see for himself and swore under his breath.

" I think we should send out the robots," remarked Alan. " If only to see what we are up against."

The three robots were briskly wheeled from their racks, programmed to kill any homoid found outside the ship and passed through the air locks. The team settled down to watch their progress as shown by the small blobs of light on the infra-red screen. The dancing patches of light, which represented the fires raging in the laboratory buildings, made full observation of the robots difficult but occasionally blobs of light would detach themselves from the patches and move across the screen.

Presently, Webster stirred in his seat. " I don't want to be pessimistic but I think there are only two blobs at any one moment on the screen."

Two intense points of light suddenly appeared on the screen, remained briefly as an after-glow and faded. After that, no more blobs separated themselves from the dancing patches.

" That's the end of the robots," said Alan in a resigned voice.

" I doubt if the robots could stand up for long a period against a resolute and intelligent foe," commented Kinlay. " Though the speed at which these were despatched has surprised me."

" I consider it unwise to stay here any longer," said Alan. " The homoids could sneak right up to the sides of the ship and it is possible for the ship to be damaged. We would be stranded here in that event. We should go into orbit and review the situation in the morning."

The spaceship, which had landed so confidently approximately three months previously, lifted itself effortlessly into the airless regions above the planet's atmosphere and settled into an orbit. It remained there until the rotation of the planet had shifted the position of the settlement past the leading edge of the sun-lit zone, to commence another day. About an hour later, the ship was falling steadily towards the settlement area.

Nothing remained now but blackened husks of burnt-out buildings and downtrodden crops. The descent of the ship halted a mere hundred feet above the ground where it suspended motionlessly.

Alan surveyed the area through the lens of a telescope, making adjustments from time to time to obtain closer views of particular spots.

" There's absolutely nothing worthwhile saving," said Alan gloomily. " From what I have seen there's no reason to set the ship down."

" No, I suppose not," Kinlay concurred. " I have plenty of apoid corpses and we have no robots to catch more homoids."

" You wouldn't catch more homoids, would you ?" cried Di-Renso. " I mean . . . they're really part of Doris . . . aren't they ? . . . I mean you just couldn't," she ended confusedly.

" There's no need to be sentimental," snapped Tala. " You saw what they have done down there. What do you think they would do to us ?"

" That's enough," barked Alan. " The question doesn't arise. We are not setting foot on the planet again for the moment. George how is the analysis coming along ? Is there hope of early results ?"

Kinlay's features grew pensive. " Yes, soon, I hope. Most of the processes are automatic once the analysers are set up, as you know, but the number of analyses to be made are enormous. All I ask is time. When the analysis is finished, successfully or otherwise, the situation can be reviewed."

" There is no alternative—that I appreciate," stated Alan flatly. " All right, we'll re-enter orbit and get down to it. There's plenty to be done—and our next meeting will be held when George has something concrete to report."

No amount of urging could hurry the delicate micro-techniques of the biochemical analysers. These infinitely complex machines, half computer and half chemical resolver, almost took the apoids apart molecule by molecule. The task would have taxed the combined efforts of a more expert team than Kinlay had at his disposal but he was inspired and this, more than anything, spurred the team into the necessary heights of achievement. The days passed and one by one the little group of researchers became hollow-eyed and tired, irritable, exhausted and almost forcibly rested by

Hayman for a period, before going through the cycle again. Eventually, the time arrived when Kinlay and Di-Renso, between them, gave the analysers their final problem.

Kinlay spent a long while with Hayman concerning a decisive course of action. Finally, he consulted Alan and received his assent. The last experiment was duly set in motion. The results of this experiment would be in doubt for hours, if not for a day or so, and Alan ruled that, in the meantime, an interim report should be made to the team. After all, the team had shared heroically in the labour of recent weeks and there was no reason why the results obtained should be withheld in order to complete an experiment which was in the balance. Kinlay reluctantly agreed and went to work on his report.

It was an eager group of men and women that met together to hear Kinlay's conclusions. With characteristic directness, Alan wasted few words on an introduction but invited Kinlay to speak.

"Forgive me if I have to recap a little," readily obliged Kinlay, "but I wish to put the facts in perspective. It may be said that the source of the trouble originated in the small ratoids which we arrogantly dismissed as unimportant. At first, they couldn't tolerate our food plants, yet later they could. Still, they could be exterminated without difficulty but what happened? The ratoids promptly became larger and ferocious. The controlling agent realised that we were alien and could harm it."

Webster indicated that he wished to put a question. "Why were the ratoids the only form of life?"

"I doubt if we shall ever discover the reason for that, Norman. The situation may have come into being by chance or perhaps there may be some special genetic reason. I favour the last explanation and, if I may make a bold speculation, I would say that the ratoids were one of the most advanced animals on the planet at the time the agent was evolved and all other species were destroyed by it. They were superfluous. After the large ratoids, came apoids. At this stage, a new factor appeared. The apoids were a modified Rhesus monkey, an Earth animal. The apoids, like the ratoids, were hostile towards us. It was at this point that I had an inkling of what might be happening. Suppose there was an agent which could control tissue development and differentiation, and could adapt to human cellular physiology. It could also apparently

control the nervous system of the animal enabling it to make the animal behave ferociously towards us. It would presumaby die with its host, hence the reason for the phyllophagus diet and the absence of attacks upon each other."

" Don't keep us in suspense," interjected Tala. " What is the agent ?"

Kinlay smiled and reached into his pocket and brought forth a small phial of colourless fluid.

" This," he said enigmatically. " Just a clear, slightly viscid fluid. I imagine that it could be called a virus. It can be isolated from the brain or major nervous system, primarily, and some other parts of the body of both the ratoids and the apoids."

Tala gasped. " It's unbelievable ! How do you know for certain that is the agent ?"

" You want proof, eh ? Here is something which will interest you." Kinlay rose from his chair and brought to the centre of the room a large black box on a trolley. He let down the sides of the box to reveal a cage containing a large ratoid. Before anyone could stop him, Kinlay opened a small door and reached into the cage to fondle the beast. The animal made no attempt to avoid the hand or to bite. Kinlay gave a half smile at the expressions of surprise on the faces of some of his audience.

" If that had been a normal ratoid," he said, " I would have been badly bitten and I strongly suspect in grave danger of being infected with the virus. However, the animal is now free of control by the virus. You can see that it behaves as a docile, non-vicious herbivore."

" How was it done ?" asked Grey, her eyes fixed on the ratoid contentedly nibbling at a leaf.

" By the same principle that disease viruses are inactivated. Di-Renso and I set up the analysers to produce a catalyst which would disrupt the complex molecular pattern of the virus. The helical pattern was very complex, as you can imagine, and unique. Once we had the pattern, the finding of the catalyst was simply a matter of time. Naturally, we had to have one which the virus could not adapt to, and on the eighth try we were lucky. We had it, a catalyst which acted too rapidly for the virus to adapt. This tame ratoid is the result of an intravenous injection of the catalyst."

" It is like administering a specific vaccine," Hayman was moved to add.

"Unfortunately, the live apoids which we had, died before the vaccine, as Ronald has put it, was available. However, there are the homoids and one of these has been given the vaccine," finished Kinlay.

" Do you mean that you would cure these dreadful brutes, even after what they did to Doris ? How awful," said Grey in a vexed voice.

" Don't be absurd," said Hayman sharply. " They were not responsible. Once the influence of the virus is removed they will be very different."

" Could we see the homoid ?" asked Alan.

" Well, yes, I don't see why not," replied Hayman. " If you will follow me, I will take you to her."

The little group trailed after the doctor as he led the way to the ship's tiny clinic. The change in the appearance of the homoid was remarkable. She was serenely sitting up in a bed, absorbed in a pictorial film of the planet projected on a portable viewer. Gone was the bestial and violent behaviour which the sight of a human usually induced in the homoids. Except for the alien amazonian proportions, she could be accepted as an exceptionally well-built young woman. As they crowded around the bed, the homoid's attention was diverted from the viewer and became fixed upon the humans. Her rather heavy features broke into a smile as her eyes travelled from one to the other. She appeared specially interested in the two women and reached out to touch Di-Renso, who happened to be nearest.

" She's human," breathed Grey. " I never imagined . . . She cannot understand me, can she ?"

" No," said Kinlay. " We're not skilled enough to teach her and we haven't had the time. All we can do is to show her films to keep her amused. I expect she could learn a language quickly under different circumstances, but it would be useless for her . . . she's not going to live very long. When I dissected the dead apoids, I found that their internal organs were improperly formed, though a decided improvement was apparent for the later apoids. My explanation is that the first apoids were a rush job and that somehow the process improved with time. In the case of the homoid on the bed, her internal organs are not functioning correctly. We have X-ray plates to prove it and her body chemistry is going haywire. Already she is too weak for much moving about. There is nothing that we can do."

" Oh, how sad," said Di-Renso, genuinely disturbed, as she gazed wistfully at the homoid.

" I would stress the improvement with time," continued Kinlay. " Doubtless many of them are perishing down there but there must be many others who are living. As I see it, the virus had only a woman's genes to work upon. So, all the homoids will be females and probably reproduce by a method of parthenogenesis. I doubt if the virus will ever relinquish a host which is more advanced than others it has chanced upon before. It seems to me that we have just given intelligence to a world. The homoids will take over this planet. Our plan of colonization will have to be dropped."

" Give up colonization of the planet," howled Tala, his face flushed with indignation. " Why should we ? That's . . ."

" We are not in a position at present to interfere with anything that's taking place on the planet," cut in Kinlay. " It will be months before we shall be able to contact *Ventor* III and by that time the homoids could be well established. We were sent here to prepare a report on the planet but ours will scarcely be the one anticipated. The world has been colonized but not in the customary manner."

" But not by man," Tala objected, still visibly furious.

" That's a distinction I would not care to make or argue over just now. The colonization laws are emphatic that indigenous intelligent races must be respected. If the homoids are not of human descent, then they must be treated as natives of the planet. Either way, we have effectively lost a world."

" Much as I would like to, I do not see a way out of the dilemma," said Alan slowly. " Our report will have to say as much. The colonization committee would never countenance an extermination policy against the homoids. On the contrary, a programme of assistance will probably be recommended. Confound you, George, although you have lost mankind a world, you are to be congratulated on a fine piece of work."

On this note of felicitation, Alan and the others left the clinic, leaving Kinlay and Hayman with the homoid. Hayman sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at Kinlay. " It is a shame, you know, that we cannot do something for her."

" Yes, but if we cannot help her, we can help her people. We can give them the vaccine to remove the scourge of the virus, and educational and technical aid to set them on the road to their particular brand of civilisation. It would be interesting to be around when this is in operation. Wow ! A world without men. I'm glad we haven't got to sort that one out."

Roy Robinson

Guest Editorial continued

Speaking as one who has made all the above mistakes I know what I'm talking about.

Let's have a quick look at what a lot of science fiction lacks. Briefly, these are some of the qualities I miss on the whole—passion, subtlety, irony, original characterisation, original and good style, a sense of involvement in human affairs, colour, density, depth and, on the whole, real feeling from the writer. I want to read an author who *feels* what he's talking about as well as knowing it.

Many will argue that these things are lacking in westerns, thrillers, detective stories, historicals and romances. This is true of the main mass of these categories. Is it true of *Oxbow Incident*, *Moon Through A Dusty Window*, *Maigret*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Jane Eyre*, all of which contain many of the qualities I listed ?

Will it be true of *Strife and Serenity*, *A Tale of Galactic Struggle* ?

Let us hope there will always be writers only capable of helping us escape from the ordinary world for a few hours—on the other hand there will always be writers who will want to do more than this, who will want to appeal to *all* the reader's senses, to strip away as much illusion as possible, to show things as they really are and to do so masterfully, with passion and craftsmanship. This is the science fiction writer I am interested in—but as yet he hardly exists.

There are signs, however, that he is beginning to come into existence—that adult writers are beginning to write adult stories and that the day of the boy-author writing boys' stories got up to look like grown-ups' stories will soon be over once and for all as far as the discriminating editor, publisher and reader are concerned.

J. G. Ballard is one of those signs with his *The Drowned World* Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1963) and E. C. Tubb—after Science Fiction Adventures No. 24; years of writing some of the most entertaining s-f in the field—is another who promises to be among the few who are going to turn their craft into an art at last. Brian Aldiss, in short stories particularly, looks as if he's going somewhere and the same can be said for John Brunner. As yet, all these writers are still feeling their way and I will be very disappointed indeed if they don't eventually produce work of which, potentially, they all seem capable.

Most readers are quite rightly demanding something more than a hyper-drive spaceship and a hero equipped with super-powers fighting against tyranny and oppression in the form of a naively delineated Galactic Empire constituted of either rascally aliens or rascally human beings. They are beginning to feel unsatisfied with s-f, whether the idea of the story is new or not.

Inventions, when you come down to it, are the least of a good science fiction author's worries. After getting his idea he must work out a coherent plot which ties in properly with the invention or extrapolation. Then he must consider his characters and whether they fit naturally into the framework of plot and idea. This done he must consider the implications of the story (this is his theme) and finally decide what he feels about it personally. If he is not writing automatically or is not a professional boiler of pots, he will want to put his own mark on the story because this, as well as everything else, is what the reader is interested in (otherwise why put author's names after stories at all ?).

The mistake new writers make when submitting manuscripts to *New Worlds Science Fiction*, for instance, is to imitate slavishly what has gone before. Mr. Carnell doesn't want to publish that which is, to all intents and purposes, what has gone before and his best writers are also his most original and independent writers who would rather say what they think than sell the story.

It is the author's attitudes, as well as his skill and style, which marks a story for a discriminating reader. And if the writer is good, then he has a right to set his views before the reader. The bad writer will not be read for long by anyone but the reader incapable of judging what's good or bad.

If an author is sufficiently interested in a theme, he should be capable of inspiring that interest in the reader. If he is passionately involved in a story he should exercise his skill to involve similarly the reader.

For some reason science fiction magazines contain the work of more amateur writers than any other kind of magazine. In some ways this is good, since the potentially gifted young author has a chance to try his hand and gain from reader criticism and it also encourages him to keep writing. But on the other hand s-f, is full of writers who anywhere else wouldn't have a dog's chance of being published—and they *haven't*

developed. As far as they're concerned they haven't needed to develop since standards have, in the past, been so slow that they could go on selling their work somewhere without having to improve it.

Nowadays things are obviously changing. Standards are being raised all round, thanks partly to critics like Amis and Wilson who, although they sometimes seem to have adopted the medium in order to show how modern and enlightened they are and also seem to favour *sociological* fiction to 'pure' *science* fiction, have done valuable work by applying their ordinary critical standards to the field. The readership, also, has broadened, again thanks partially to the professional critics, and has obviously become much more discriminating than it was ten or even five years ago.

And aided by criticism, spurred on by discontented readers, abetted by editors, the writers are responding to the more rigorous demands of an increasingly discrimatory readership.

The bad amateur still exists, but so does the good one. The bad amateur will soon be completely excluded—the good one will have to improve before he can be published. By amateur I don't mean part-time writers, since until s-f pays better, most of the writers will have to earn their livings in other fields. But naturally, as s-f improves and the readership widens, rates and royalties will improve also. The good amateur writer will be helped, in the future, by a higher standard of criticism applied to a higher standard of work, by studying that work and so on, just as the writer of mainstream fiction has to do today. And of course there are always experienced editors like John Carnell who are willing to take time out to encourage and help up-and-coming writers. They needn't expect many since they are rare in most other fields of magazine fiction. At the moment the best s-f falls between two stools—between the purely commercial stool and the 'literary' stool. Many of its authors write it for love and not profit, yet since the magazines which publish the greater part of the material have to sell in competition with detective magazines, westerns magazine and so on, their existence depends on love *and* profit.

The signs that s-f is growing up are everywhere—but the proof that it has grown up is harder to find. Occasionally a novel appears which can be judged by all but the most rigorous criticism—*Stars My Destination, A Case of Conscience, More*

Than Human, *Canticle for Leibowitz*, *The Drowned World* all contain qualities of good writing, good characterisation, good themes and interesting ideas. But they still contain flaws which, elsewhere, would be remarked upon, yet are overlooked by readers who have grown to expect flaws as being apparently symptomatic of science fiction.

They are only symptomatic at the moment—but as authors gain in stature (there won't be many, because there are never very many) they will overcome these flaws.

As the readership of s-f broadens, so will the kinds of s-f broaden to cater for different varieties of reader. The purely commercial escapist stories will remain, the half-and-half will remain, and the serious treatment of a theme within the framework of an s-f plot will come into its own.

As this happens, it is likely that good science fiction writers will no longer confine themselves just to science fiction tales and novels, and other writers, who will be more conversant with the best s-f, will attempt science fiction stories. In fact the definition between the good and bad will become exactly the same as the definition between good and bad writing of any kind.

I said earlier that good s-f is essentially a romantic medium of expression. That is to say, much of it deals with life on a grand scale, in terms of worlds and stars—with the cosmos rather than the microcosmos of Sillitoe and Braine. It describes mighty civilisations and mighty deeds, it is full of the sense of wonder (a term incidentally which has never been merely confined to s-f) it is, as John Brunner has pointed out, descended directly from the Sagas of Scandinavia, the Mythologys of Greece and Rome and the Romances of the Middle Ages with their tales of magic and magic-aided heroes. Now gadgets and psi-powers have taken over. This kind of thing will, I feel sure, continue to form the background of much good s-f while the means of description improve, the plots and characters become richer so that they are on a par with the background rather than subservient to it, and the themes become more realistic, more complex.

It is my contention that a mixture of the fabulous and the familiar can produce art which comes closer to defining Truth than anything else—so long, of course, as a good artist is in control of his material.

This is what science fiction can become. This is what the best writers are evidently working towards.

A final word about an element in s-f which has interested readers and critics of late. Science fiction, as Amis has pointed out, is the perfect vehicle for satire. So far it has not been particularly well exploited by most writers of magazine s-f. So far I have not seen a story to equal Huxley, Orwell or even the comparatively minor short stories of Bertrand Russell. Writers appear to be concerned, much as the publishers of *Private Eye*, with the obvious and easily satirised elements of our society. Satire has even become a cloak to hide otherwise poor writing. Surely the object of satire is not to point out what we can all see by reading our newspapers or looking around us, but to bring some otherwise overlooked aspect of our society into perspective ? Ar the moment the field seems to be entirely in the hands of Messrs. Frayn, Flook and Feiffer.

I'd like to see a good story satirising the satire industry.

And another point to authors—s-f is becoming a legitimate field for serious expression again (*Old Men And The Zoo*, *Clockwork Orange* etc.), and as it does so the mainstream writers are going to move in. Watch it, lads, we're going to need to be good.

Michael Moorcock

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

The second part of E. C. Tubb's new serial takes an unexpected turn next month as well as a sizeable portion of the magazine, but there will be room for several good long stories —" The Under-Privileged," by Brian W. Aldiss, a deftly handled plot concerning an emigration problem ; " Confession," by John Rackham ; " The Jaywalkers," by Russ Markham (in which the Planetary Survey Team unravel another alien problem) and " I, The Judge," a pithy, *different* type of story by R. W. Mackelworth.

Story ratings for No. 124 were :

1.	Lucky Dog - - - - - -	Robert Presslie
2.	The Method - - - - -	Philip E. High
3.	Just In Time - - - - - -	Steve Hall
	Who Went Where ? - - - -	Russ Markham
4.	Life Force - - - - -	Joseph Green
5.	The Warriors - - - - -	Archie Potts

British—Hardcover

It is pleasant to be able to record an instance of " local boy makes good " in the case of **The Drowned World** by J. G. Ballard (Gollancz, 15/-) for Jim Ballard is a ' Nova-nurtured ' writer whose early promise has almost matured in this, his second novel (the first, not yet published here, is not as good). I say ' almost', for despite considerable critical acclaim—and I join the concensus of opinion that this is one of the best s-f novels to appear for many years—*The Drowned World* shows some lack of discipline in its wordiness, vague character motivation and discrepancies in physical details. Yet these detract little from the vividly imagined overall picture of a world reverted to the Triassic age, swamped by the melting ice-caps, former temperate zones now miasmic jungles inhabited by the new dominant fauna—giant iguanas and crocodiles, the remnants of mankind endeavouring to reclaim silted-up areas for rehabilitation.

Basically the story concerns a small scientific expedition operating such a survey over the site of submerged London, whose peaks and tall buildings jut through the swampy lagoons. But the cause of the global catastrophe—the increasing solar radiation—is also working strangely on man's psyche, and it is on this level, even more than the entirely successful level of exotic adventure and equally effective descriptiveness, that the author explores with subtle insight the effect of the expanding sun on man's subconscious mind leading it back through primordial organic memories to the drowned world of his ultimate devolutionary descent. It is not often that the genre is rewarded by a writer of such obvious talent and I look forward to his next book with much anticipation.

By contrast, **After Doomsday** by Poul Anderson (Gollancz, 13/6) is pure space-opera on a galactic scale, with all the effrontery of pseudo-science and cultural inter-relations that it implies, but never more expertly done than by the acknowledged contemporary master story-teller of ' grand opry ' s-f in this tracking down of Earth's destroyers by the few remaining survivors of the human race. Thoroughly enjoyable, non-cerebral entertainment.

Leslie Flood

Back Issues

For readers and collectors who are missing any of the previous issues we can still supply the following copies but stocks are very limited

Nos. 67; 73; 75 to 81; 83 to 88
2/- each post free
(35 Cents each)

Nos. 89 to 128 2/6 each post free
(40 Cents each)

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD
7 Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2

Memo from

Nova Publications Ltd.

★

Our new address is now

7 Grape Street, Holborn,

London, W.C.2

Telephone : Temple Bar 3373

EDITORIAL ★ ADVERTISING

SUBSCRIPTIONS

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD

7, Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2.