

impulse  
Science  
Fantasy

*Ballad from a Bottle*

by Hugh Simmonds

A message came through time and space—and an old green bottle



# SCIENCE FANTASY

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Associate Editor: Keith Roberts

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## Editorial . . . . . by Kyril Bonfiglioli

Eighteen months ago I watched a bishop buy a copy of **SCIENCE FANTASY** and walk away reading it absorbedly. Having just accepted the editorship I counted this as a very good omen, until I noticed the expression on his face, which was that of a High Court judge reading *Fanny Hill*, or Maria Callas listening to Millie singing *My Boy Lollipop*. His interest was, so to speak, clinical rather than empathetic. "So this," he seemed to be thinking, "is what the choirboys read when they should be practising the anthem. How strange a preference, to be sure."

It was then that I realised that in my whole science-fiction reading life I had only ever bought one copy of **SCIENCE FANTASY**—although I had acquired quite a few in various more-or-less honest ways—and I set myself to analysing the reasons. These boiled down to three, all concerned with the outside of the magazine. First, I always felt "If I can buy straight science-fiction, why bother with a bastardised version called science *fantasy*? Alternatively, if I feel like fantasy, why buy *science fantasy*?" In short, I felt—and still feel—that this title promised the worst of both worlds. Second, I simply felt shy about asking at a bookstall for this magazine—I always felt that the assistant might give me an odd, sidelong look, as though I were a curate buying the latest number of *Frilly Scanties*. Lastly, although the cover-designs were always very good of their kind, I must confess I was careful to tuck them inside my newspaper when in public. All this is, I agree, very stuffy and pompous and cowardly of me but I cannot help feeling that there is a large potential market for our product amongst the stuffy, pompous and cowardly—after all, they seem to make up some seventy per cent of the population.

Anyway, we're changing our name, starting this year: if you look closely at the cover you will see the new name casting its shadow before, or rather behind the old title. Many readers will, I know, be horrified at this, as I was when *Astounding* changed to *Analog*, but I sincerely hope and believe that the new name will give us the chance to reach a wider audience which in turn will enable us to

produce a better magazine. Along with the change of name goes an increase in size to one hundred and sixty pages, so that each issue will now contain the equivalent of a full-length novel. This of course will entail an increase in price—to 3/6d.—but we are pretty confident that most people would rather pay the extra shilling to get a bigger and better “read.” Readers holding subscriptions have been thought of—full details are to be found on page 55, where there are also details of concessions to new subscribers, etc.

If you believe, as we do, that there is a tremendous future for our kind of fiction, then you will wish to help its growth. Any gardener knows that the roots are what matter and the roots of science-fiction are unquestionably here in the monthly magazines, where new writers get their first chance, where novels get their first serial run and where new approaches are tried out and acclimatised. There are three things the ordinary reader can do to help. The first is, if you can afford it, to take out a subscription: the proportion of subscribed sales to casual sales is a vitally important factor in magazine economics. The second is to send your copy—or a spare—to a friend overseas who might care to subscribe: there are still many places abroad where it is not practicable to set up distributive machinery. The third is simply to promote IMPULSE verbally in your own circle, which we hope will now be easier under the new title: I used rather to dread this sort of conversation:

“What’s that you’re reading, Bon?”

“Oh, well, er, hrrm, it’s something called, ah, *Science Fantasy* as a matter of fact, heh heh . . .”

“Good Lord.”

—KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

*A tale of two Continents, one million years and a man called Simon who met a pieman.*

# BALLAD FROM A BOTTLE

by Hugh Simmonds

Strange things come out of bottles. Simon was not thinking of the usual edible, pharmaceutical or bacchanalian preparations as he stood on a lonely stretch of beach on the Argentine coast, his eyes fixed on the surf. He was thinking of messages borne along on ocean currents—messages, cryptic or crying for help—messages that have survived time and great voyages, to be extracted finally, by good, honest hands from all kinds of stoppered bottles.

There was nothing uncommon about this bottle. It seemed squat and narrow-necked, transparently, aqueous-green, like the swells it rode, bobbing and swirling ever nearer to the shore. It rose now in the nearest swell and then came rushing forward, lost in a cream of broken water. He moved over to meet it and was mildly disappointed when he picked it up. It was empty though well corked.

He sucked his tongue against his teeth. Although he liked it less, realism was once again in command. Fantasy and romance escaped with a little hiss as he raised the bottle to toss it back into the sea. Then he noticed the thickness of the glass. They didn't make bottles like that these days. He lowered his arm and took another look at it, then, against the judgment of reason, decided to keep it for a while. The tiny room he called home was a clutter of junk anyway. An old bottle wouldn't make much difference, might even come in useful some day. And . . . well, there *was* something curious about this one. But then there had always been something curious

about every item of junk he had collected over the years. He had always found room for this little tin or that little rod. In fact, he wouldn't admit it, he loved collecting useless bits of rubbish.

For three days the bottle stood neglected on his cupboard. Long after nightfall on the fourth he was thinking himself to sleep on a subject never very far from the central shrine of his romantic thoughts.

Take them collectively, he was thinking, women must be among the greatest of all mysteries. He called upon God to witness that he, Simon the deformed, loved them in every way, sex included, that it is possible for a man to love anything whatever. Greater glories there might well be in God's universe of strange things, but whatever is feminine and wherever found, this, of all mysteries, must surely be the most charming of His inventions.

Images moved gracefully across the screen of his lonely mind. All were human females; little girls, teen-agers, newly weds, mothers, grandmothers, spinsters, the mated, the separated, the widowed, all ages, shapes and conditions.

His eyes were closed and he was along the edge of his dreams, and there was God and the things beloved of Simon: Warmth, plump and illogical, woman's warmth; woman's kindness, timid, gentle, yet courageous; shrewish, feline and full of hurt; all the characteristic strengths and foibles of a lovable half of humanity.

If only he could find within himself a similar, embracing reverence for the other half, that would indeed be something. But no, that something must be the infra-virtue reserved for the strong lights that blazed once or twice in a few centuries. There was no mystery about the male section of his species. Generally it was belligerent and transparently conceited, with unpleasant shades of arrogance. No, there was a long way to go before he could tread the abstract paths of detachment that led to disinterested love.

But he was a male, and that brought him back to himself and it was here his bitterness was concentrated. It had taken more than forty years to condense and turn

inwards. And no wonder: He had, during those earlier years of post-adolescence, looked with longing at women, but not one had so much as noticed his existence, let alone returned his look—no need to examine the reason. The mirror had long ago shown him this.

His long, bony nose looked as if it had swerved erratically across his face, driven in early youth by a form of paralysis affecting all of one side of his body. His eyes were porcine and bloodshot. His mouth sloped away like a jagged scar. Not one redeeming feature had looked back at him from the mirror. Not only his appearance, but his speech was distorted by an over large and bobbing adam's apple. Therefore he talked little. It didn't matter much, because he had no friends and there was hardly anyone he could talk to. Even the harlots turned from him when they saw him coming. But that was long ago. Well, so he was a recluse. Some called him a misanthrope, but they didn't know how much he loved femininity. That was his secret and he would probably die with it. So what? Ah, yes . . . the bottle. There was something curiously feminine about that bottle . . . Or was it his imagination?

Thought had come back full circle to the bottle. He was suddenly fully awake. He rose and took the bottle down from the cupboard. For the first time he removed the cork stopper. Thoughtfully he turned the bottle over, examining it from all angles. Then he yawned, replaced it on the cupboard with the stopper by its side and, with a deep sigh, returned to bed.

He was cruising towards the deeper waters of sleep when he heard the singing, not loud, but very clear. He sat up, listening. It was much more than pleasant. It was beautiful, and *that* was a word that didn't figure much in his vocabulary. Most important of all: It was feminine. But where in God's name was it coming from? He had pawned his radio years ago, yet this glorious sound seemed to have its source somewhere in his room . . . *somewhere in his room*. Finally he found himself staring unbelievably at the bottle. He could hear every word. No doubt now where it was coming from.

*If anything of errantry  
Can stir your mind,  
You who listen ;  
If compassion and courage  
Are stronger in your heart  
Than the fear of depthless hells ;  
If a woman in distress  
Is a sacred charge  
To you who listen,  
Then go with all speed to the Snell  
Parade.*

There followed a hollow, glassy plop and the voice emerged from song into speech, imploring and fading into what seemed great distance: "Help me . . . help me . . . he . . . elp me . . . ee . . ."

If Simon was thrilled by the charm of the voice that sang he was quite stunned by the appeal in speech. The owner of such a voice could have no superior in all the world.

There was silence. For several minutes he stood gazing at the bottle. Then he took it down once again, more gingerly this time. He closed one eye and peered down the neck. There was nothing, only the green glass and the visible world beyond and, not another sound. He held it away from him, against the light, under the light, behind the light, but still no material sign of anything that might explain the phenomenon.

Scepticism began understandably to trample on astonishment and wonder. No, he must have been dreaming. Maybe it was a temporary hallucination rising from his obsession with that which lay forever beyond his reach. He was about to replace the stopper when the voice sounded again, a little more faintly. But two things were unmistakable: The words and that they came from the bottle.

*. . . a woman in distress . . . with all speed to the  
Snell Parade . . .*



He dug his nails into his arm, feeling the pain with satisfaction. No doubt now that he was awake.

When the volume of sound lessened yet further he quickly replaced the stopper and stood fingering it for a long time before returning the bottle to the top of the cupboard. It occurred to him that the stopper was important, like the switch on a dry cell torch. It seemed he was right. On the three succeeding nights he removed the stopper when the same message emerged in song, but each time it was fainter. On the fourth occasion he could only just catch a word here and there by applying his ear to the opening. The following night there was nothing at all, only a faint whirring which could as easily have been a scent as a sound. That was the last distinguishable vibration of any sort. But by then he had written down every word he had heard.

The public library in Buenos Aires was one of the centres where he began to pay frequent visits. There he spent more than a week, searching two or three hours a day. It was, however, at the tourist bureau nearby that he discovered, while leafing through some pamphlets on foreign travel, a pictorial recommendation to visit "the sun drenched beaches of Southern Africa". It was the section of Durban that attracted him. The words *Snell Parade* stood out like the eyes of a crab. His mis-shapen face was alight with jubilation. But that didn't last long. He began to think of Durban and how he was going to reach it. It was thousands of miles away and he was a poor man with an insignificant income. What ship's master would ever take on as a crew member such a deformed weakling as himself?

On the other hand, the very fact of having no possessions was an advantage. He was alone and there was really nothing to hold him here. Moreover, English was his own language and, most important of all, *he must get to Durban*, and sooner than possible. He had the will, therefore a way must be found. It was.

In less than eight weeks he was on Durban's beach front. Within another two weeks all his meagre resources

were gone. He found himself a small job, but that didn't last long because he was unable to keep his mind on it.

Strollers, hawkers and holiday-makers along the Snell Parade were by now used to seeing his limping, tattered figure, night or day. He slept on the beach, mostly during the day to avoid the discomfort of August winds and relatively low night temperatures. Nothing would have been able to persuade him to leave the place.

His cheeks sagged inwards and brown rings of exhaustion underlay eyes that shone with the unhealthy light of fanaticism. His clothes were crumpled and fraying and none too clean. Wherever he went he clutched his precious bottle. The thought of losing or breaking it terrified him. When he lay on the sand he would carefully place it between his head and the wooden paling that divided the beach from the street. On waking his eyes always sought the bottle before anything else.

Since those three days of paradise back in the Argentine no further sound had come from it, but he couldn't forget the angelic music of that voice. It had taken the place of his former concept of woman. Where once he had turned his head to admire a pleasing example of feminine grace, he now limped gloomily along his circumscribed course, seeing nothing but beach sand, tarmac and paving slabs, and moving instinctively from the paths of passing vehicles.

He thought ceaselessly of the woman who could command such a voice. A clear picture of her had already formed in his mind: Slender, with a hint of plumpness, hair soft and brown and full of mysterious lights, eyes dark and sparkling, ready to dissolve in mist, to infiltrate the secret regions of a man's soul. She would be charged with awareness and be the kind who could love, and know reverence. And, moreover, she would have one of those beautiful eyes turned vigilantly on two dainty feet to see that they were firmly placed on the ground of practical reality. What more, he asked himself, could a man want?

But then he looked down at his own body and thought of his unattractive countenance. Two tears made furrows

in its dirt, tears of disgust and frustration. "Man indeed," he almost snorted. On the other hand, the voice had said, "Whoever you may be."

Apart from finding his lady-in-distress, only one other matter occupied his mind. He was hungry, frighteningly hungry, so hungry that he was afraid he would die before he could find her. In fact, it was only the compassion of an Indian pie vendor that saved him from death by starvation. On the evenings when he passed that way with his pie cart he would give Simon a meat pie and a toothless smile. Except for a mumbled word of thanks from Simon no word passed between them, until one evening when the sun had already vanished far up, behind the Kloof hills.

The pie cart came rumbling past the snake park. Involuntary jets of saliva began to lubricate Simon's mouth when he knew that his benefactor was approaching. The man had not come the previous evening and Simon's hunger was something only those who have known real hunger would appreciate.

The vehicle came to rest a few feet from him. He stood at the kerb, eyes cast down, one hand clutching the bottle, the other in his pocket. Almost immediately there was trade. It seemed that customers had been waiting for this moment. After a few minutes things began to slacken off and people came in ones and twos. In one of the longer intervals between customers Simon raised his eyes. They met those of the Indian.

The cripple had made up his mind he was going to talk to this good Samaritan. He wanted first to say how grateful he was for his kindness and then ask how long he, the vendor, had been plying his trade in this place, and lead up as best he could to the question of an unusual woman who must have been frequenting it.

In that moment, however, he was quite unable to speak. The vendor was not smiling now. He gazed calmly into Simon's staring eyes. It might have been only one or two seconds but it seemed to the cripple that centuries had passed. He recalled with awe how he had felt long ago, as a boy, when he had gazed deep into the black spaces

between the stars. That was his first and last experience of the universe, through the medium of a twenty-two inch reflector. This was even more awe inspiring, perhaps because of his personal proximity to something too big to be within the possibility of explanation.

The deep violet eyes held him until, with an effort, he disengaged and noticed for the first time the leathery signs of excessive age on an uncommonly refined set of features. This man must have been beautiful when he was young. Simon was wondering how long ago that was when the vendor spoke. A tremor passed along the cripple's entire nervous circuit. Goose pimples raised themselves on his skin. He shot a bewildered glance at his bottle and clutched it even more tightly.

"I didn't come yesterday . . . You must be very hungry?"

Simon merely nodded. It was the best he could do. That voice was the same that had come from the bottle. Even the thought of food almost left his mind, but not quite. The vendor produced two pies.

"You'd better eat first. When you have done, you and I have things to talk about."

Simon took the pies and ate with his eyes lowered. He had a sensation of being punctured and falling into bottomless disappointment. When he had finished the man gave him an orange which he also consumed with absent minded relish. Behind his thoughts now was a nagging worry. How could such an old man have so young a voice, and that, the voice of a woman . . . and the same that had come from the bottle?

The vendor answered the question as though it had been spoken.

"*I am* a woman, and much older than you think. This voice I don't normally use. It is my call sign, my recognition signal . . . for your ears alone. I have called and you have answered, and my ancient heart rejoices to see with what diligence, and even more so, to see that the twin spirits of romance and chivalry are still abroad in your world."

"But how . . . ?" Simon found his voice at last.

She smiled and a beauty that had nothing to do with youth was about her face as she indicated the bottle in his hand.

"Into that bottle I sang my appeal, using a very ancient method of sonic wave preservation which your scientists have yet to discover. I sealed it with a chemical treatment of the stopper and tossed it into the Indian Ocean when you were a child. In my life that was but yesterday."

Simon started and took another look at her.

"My God, are you as old as that?"

"Almost two and a half millennia. It was I who comforted Yasōdhara when her Lord Siddārtha, the Buddha deserted her for the Bodhi Tree and the good of all his kind. I was scarcely thirty then, a mere child, though Yasōdhara looked upon me as a mother. It was in fact from that time that I, a Scanner, became known as *Mother of Mothers.*"

*A Scanner.* Simon turned the word about in his mind. It had a strangely familiar ring in the quiet places there, as if he had heard it before and should know what it signified. Again she apprehended the question before it was spoken.

"Scanner is the modern Earth term for an Arcturan messenger. Certain centuries have been remarkable for these. There were those among them who were understandably regarded as gods. Theirs was a higher mission than mine."

Simon bowed his head and said with reverence: "I know nothing of Arcturan messengers, but I am convinced you speak the truth. What I do know is: If there were a shrine dedicated to the spirit of Woman, there I should worship . . ." He thought for a moment. ". . . But *two and a half thousand years!* . . . With such a life span you must be numbered among the immortal gods, even those you mentioned?"

"First," she replied, "I am not immortal, as you will learn presently, and second, I could not be numbered among those I have mentioned. Longevity on any scale does not necessarily confer spiritual maturity. It is merely a term of office and depends on the work to be done.

Jesus accomplished His task in a mere thirty years. Mine was longer because it was of a coarser nature. The great ones taught man in the thinner atmospheres of the spirit. I have guided his wife in the denser vapours . . . through the medium of her body.

“My instructions were clearly imprinted in my own characteristic psyche: ‘Be loyal under all conditions to the cause of man’s survival and be active in supporting it.’”

She fell silent as a group of young people came by. When they were out of earshot she continued:

“In a dark cave, on this very continent, nearly a million years ago, an ape-like creature that walked erect, fashioned a weapon from the jaw bone of a hyena. From then until now, man’s chief concern has been with weapons . . . Why? Because he is a fighter . . . Again, why? Because generations of Scanners, two and three millennium females like myself, have whispered into the consciousness of all female anthropoids from that time until this: ‘Your first need is a nest, quiet and secure, where you can have your babies. To this end use the spur of sex, given to you by the ageless Schemer who straddles the brain of nature. Ride out the great tempests that burst and buffet because of it. Trap your man and make of him a fighter so that he may secure your piece of territory and hold it against all comers. Encourage his conceit. Nourish the confusion in his mind that confounds self respect with pride, dignity with haughtiness, self assurance with arrogance. Ensure that his ego remains sensitive and defenceless, so that its slightest injury by another male will make him a dangerous killer. Only thus can you protect your nest to keep your babies safe.’

“As you know, fighting and territorial acquisition did not commence with the birth of Homo Sapiens. For just so long as there has been animal life on this planet this urge has lived powerfully in all species of fauna, thanks to Arcturan Scanners with other shapes than mine. Where that urge has weakened and died the species has dropped away to extinction. Right now, for example, the gorilla is on his way out, because Arcturus deliberately with-

drew her last gorilla Scanner, leaving Mrs Gorilla without an advisor and him with nothing to fight for."

Instead of clearing, the look of puzzlement had deepened on Simon's face.

"Improbable dreams . . .", he sighed. "This is how I have lived . . . in a state of improbable dreams . . . And now, this, the most improbable of all. Yet, I must believe you. But tell me, why have I been summoned?"

"Because my task is done. It has been a long way from the jaw bone to the megaton bomb. My sort of advice instead of aiding survival, now threatens it. If I remain longer the evolution of weapons will end abruptly in annihilation of all species, and we don't want that, do we?"

"Well, if you must go then why not . . . go?"

"Can't. It would be as much against my nature to kill myself as it would to destroy deliberately the fighting spirit in man. So long as I remain on Earth must I continue to cultivate the nesting spirit in woman and through her, the desire for territory in man. A more advanced Scanner than I is required to give advice now."

"But . . ." Simon was in a sweat of anxiety. "But you don't have to kill yourself. Why can't your Arcturans take you home and send a replacement?"

"Like all Earth men you think of bridging the distances between the stars in terms of three dimensional space travel. It is not like that with us. Our much older science knows a great deal more of nature. We know, for example, that it is impossible to transport gross material through scores, thousands or millions of light years of distance using such gross three dimensional mechanical methods as contemporary Earth science has in mind. The bodies you and I possess are simply not constructed for such purposes. For me to return to my home on the fourth planet of Arcturus there is only one way: Death, and entry into another set of dimensions, just as I entered this set and your world, through birth. For reasons that can't be explained now, no replacement Scanner can enter here until I leave."

"So," Simon said dully, "It is not to save a life, but to take one, that I have been summoned?"

"True, but you will be saving your planet from destruction . . . and," she added with a disarming smile, "Rescuing a woman in distress. In any event, it is not the life that is important but the living of it."

"Then why all this romantic stuff with the bottle?"

"Even this last act must have its tradition, its ritual, its strong connections with all that is romantic, for, you see, from here Man moves on to something that no longer breathes in these mediums. Sad thought, but only for me. The new Scanner will possess more endearing qualities. Succeeding generations of men will appreciate these where past and contemporary man would have scorned them, simply because they would not have understood them. My successor will live for a few thousand years, then she too must necessarily be replaced by a yet more refined representative of the Scanners.

"It is already written: *Mother of Mothers, Mother of Mercy, Mother of the Blessed* . . . Come now, it is for you to find a way of sending me on my journey. The time, the place, the method, these I must not know. You have three days to think about it. Meanwhile, here is my itinerary and route." She handed him an envelope.

"Madam," he said, "That is unnecessary." As he uttered the words he brought the bottle down with every ounce of his strength on the quite bald head of *Mother of Mothers*. The thick glass shattered and the Scanner was no more, on this earth anyway.

He had not even taken the trouble to look about him before committing the deed. That was why he had not noticed two customers approaching the cart, and that they were young policemen.

The blood was still flowing when he was arrested. He was so confused he could not decide whether he had obeyed her command in anger or in reverence.

— HUGH SIMMONDS



*Mr. Brunner, too long absent from this magazine, returns with a mutt called Jeff and a happy tail to his ending.*

# THE WARP AND THE WOOF-WOOF

by John Brunner

A rabbit—even a dream-rabbit—running through long grass ought not to make crunching noises like small stones being ground together. Which meant, Jeff decided, that he was being woken up.

Regretfully abandoning the chase after the white bob-tail, he stretched himself from the tip of his blunt nose to the end of his long and somewhat kinky tail, and grew aware of three things in quick succession. The first was an itch behind his ear, but that could be attended to later. The second was a savoury smell in the room; even if it wasn't rabbit, it had possibilities. The third was that the crunching sounds were made by someone coming up the gravel path to the front door, who was now stopping and pushing a key into the lock. Master was home!

Jeff—who had been called Jeff for the good and sufficient reason that that was the next thing to a mutt—picked himself off the floor and threw himself bodily at Tom Halliday.

“Oof!” said his master explosively. “Get *down*, you preposterous beast!”

Jeff sat back on his haunches and looked up worriedly, giving the tip of his tail a tentative wag. Tom glared at him long enough to make his mis-shapen ears droop, and then grinned and rubbed the top of his head.

“You be careful!” he said. “You don't have to murder me to prove you're glad I'm here!”

Jeff gave one really frantic wag to show he understood, and followed his master as he went through the hall into the kitchen, doing his best not to knock over anything on the way. It was difficult, of course, because he was the

kind of dog which is always too large for any room it is in—not a sensitive, snooty, pedigreed type of dog, but an accidentally-evolved one who looked like a retriever from *that* angle and a sheepdog from *that* angle, with a touch of spaniel about the ears and a nose like a Stafford. He was, in fact, none of these; he was Jeff.

“Hullo, darling,” said Susan Halliday without turning round from the stove. “That tickles, but I like it.”

“Good,” Tom answered, and reached past her to lift the lid on one of the pans. The smell suddenly redoubled, and Jeff gave a fairly quiet woof of joy on recognising it.

“You shut up, Jeff,” said Susan, poking him in the ribs with one small toe. “How did it go today, Tom honey?”

“Pretty hectic.” Tom splashed water into the sink until it ran warm, and reached for the soap. “Ferris put me through the reaction tests again this morning, and I had another session in the G-chair this afternoon, and then Doc gave me the works. I didn’t know one could feel naked inside as well as out till he started on me.”

“And—what did they say?”

Tom shot a sharp glance at his wife, but reached for the towel and dried his hands before answering. “They said I was in terrific shape.”

“That’s good,” Susan said with forced brightness, and began to stir the contents of the pan. Jeff sensed that something must be wrong, and put out one immense forepaw to touch her leg. Barely in time he remembered that on the last occasion when he did that he ruined something called “a perfectly-good-pair-stockings”; he changed his mind and merely whimpered.

For a second Tom hesitated. Then he tossed the towel over the back of a handy chair and crossed the floor to put his hands on Susan’s shoulders, turning her round gently. He said, “Darling, why don’t you say it straight out—that you don’t want me to go?”

She pulled away from him and looked down at the stove. “Of course I don’t, honey,” she said huskily. “But of course I *do*—because you want to, and I know how much it means to you, and I know what a happy, wonderful sort of person you’re going to be when you come back to me. . . . But I can’t help it if I’m afraid for you, Tom!”

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Tom said comfortingly. "Robot rockets have done the round trip, landed and come back safely—there's no reason why a rocket carrying a man instead of machinery shouldn't do the same! I've been up to the moon twice, and you didn't object then."

"But the moon's different! Lots of people have been to the moon, and anyway it's all barren, no air or anything. But on Mars—well, just suppose that . . ."

"Martians, you mean?" A slow grin broke out across Tom's face. "Martian monsters? You've been watching too many teleshows, my sweet! I wondered what could have got at you!"

"But—" Susan began defensively, and got no further before she found that Tom's grin was infectious. Well, really it was rather ridiculous; she couldn't keep from an answering smile, and then they broke out laughing together.

Jeff, realising that whatever had been making his owners unhappy was over with, got up from the floor and did his personal dance of joy. Somehow or other he managed to knock over a chair almost at once, and when he backed hastily away to avoid it, his tail wreaked considerable havoc among pans racked under the sink.

"Sometimes," Tom said when the last echoes of the crash had died away, "I'm very glad Jeff has no dachshund in his family tree."

"How do you mean?" Susan said, wiping her eyes.

"Think how much extra trouble it would be," Tom answered as he bent to clear the mess, "if we had to go into the next room to pick up the things he'd knocked over."

Jr-Ktuk had never seen a teleshow, and therefore had no prejudices about Martian monsters. He was quite content to *be* one: pseudopods, palpitating brain-case, sixteen eyes and all. At the moment twelve of his eyes were registering expressions of mingled astonishment, disbelief and dismay, and the remainder were studying Ol-Pshok as though he were a singularly unpleasant sand-louse.

"*What* did you say?" he demanded. He had heard quite well, but he had so many eyes expressing incredulity that he thought he'd better make certain.

Ol-Pshok was patently very flustered. To gain time, he embarked on a complicated obeisance which would have taken him the best part of four days if he had completed it, but Jr-Ktuk was in no mood to squat on ceremony. He cut short the bow after less than three hours with an impatient wave of a pseudopod. "Speak up!" he ordered.

"Well," Ol-Pshok resumed obediently, "as you know, a year ago we were again scheduled to reconnoitre the surface of our planet on the off-chance that it had returned to habitable condition. The odds against such an occurrence are of course tremendous, but the caves in which we have been compelled to reside for the past ninety-six and one-third generations induce a certain claustrophobia which the excursions to the surface tend to ameliorate—"

Belatedly Jr-Ktuk recognised the opening of the first indoctrination lecture to the young, which a fast talker had trouble in delivering in under thirty-nine hours, and gave vent to a bellow of annoyance. Ol-Pshok disappeared automatically behind the nearest boulder, while Jr-Ktuk muttered some pointed remarks about the drawbacks of promoting a pedagogue to the post of Chief Assistant, no matter how distinguished his academic career.

With commendable restraint he tore off only three of Ol-Pshok's pseudopods before he calmed down, but all his eyes showed impatience when he said, "This is your last chance, Ol-Pshok! *Get—to—the—point!*"

Since each word of the last sentence was emphasised by a bang of his head against the rocky wall, Ol-Pshok could not help but nod agreement. "Very well, then," said Jr-Ktuk, relenting a little.

"When we were surveying the ninety-fourth quadrant," Ol-Pshok stated comparatively baldly, "we found a rocket-propelled vehicle parked on a sand-flat. It was apparently under remote control, since while we watched it took off again and entered an orbit which seemed to be aimed at—" He paused impressively for effect, and Jr-Ktuk was sufficiently shaken by the information so far to let the silence last for all of an hour and a quarter before he made an ominous move.

"—Earth!" finished Ol-Pshok just in time, wagging all available pseudopods with suppressed excitement.

"Oh no!" said Jr-Ktuk from the bottom of his cardiovascular system.

"Oh yes!" contradicted Ol-Pshok, greatly daring. "Definitely yes!"

"Anything else?" Nine of Jr-Ktuk's eyes showed deep concentration, and Ol-Pshok was startled. It was commonly known in the caves that Jr-Ktuk was too vain about his ratiocinatory faculties ever to allow anyone to see that a problem engaged more than a fraction of his attention. Nine-sixteenths was a new high.

But the baleful glare of the remaining seven eyes soon recalled him to his purpose.

"Er—yes," he went on hastily. "We found traces of five similar landings in the recent past. Our psychostatisticians, whose function as predictors of—"

Something warned him just in time that his enthusiasm for the ninth basic indoctrination lecture had better not run away with him. "Well, anyway, they tell me that it looks very much as though the Earthmen have got air-current of our plan to take over their planet and have decided to strike before us." As Jr-Ktuk had feared, he automatically added the associated platitude: "Eight-tentacled it is whose cause is just, but sixteen it which gets its blow in fust."

"Enough!" snarled Jr-Ktuk. "But that reminds me. I haven't had a report from the Invasion Department for two and a half generations now. Who's in charge of the department at the moment?"

"I am," said Ol-Pshok with more than a trace of pride. That was too much.

When Jr-Ktuk had finished burying the remains, he stuck a pseudopod down the communications aperture in the wall of the throne-cave, and sent for Wy-Thob, formerly deputy chief and now full chief of the Invasion Department. He liked Wy-Thob considerably more than he had liked Ol-Pshok, and therefore waited with only a little bad grace while Wy-Thob performed the six-day-long wave of farewell over his predecessor's grave.

"Now," said Jr-Ktuk when the formality was over, "how about a progress report? And remember: Ol-Pshok's worst fault was taking his time."

"Things aren't so dusty," the new department chief said. "As a matter of fact, Tlo-Krog tipped me the closing of half his eyes about this missile from Earth, so I ordered a reconnaissance to find out what the Earthmen were actually up to. We only finished it three months ago, but the information is already on the way to you."

"Fast work," said Jr-Ktuk approvingly. "What did you find?"

"They don't apparently plan a full-scale invasion yet. They've gone to a great deal of trouble to prepare a being called Tomalliday for the job. Odd names the Earthmen give themselves," he added in passing, and Jr-Ktuk frowned. Only in the job for a couple of weeks, and here he was developing the habit of wandering off down side-tracks instead of sticking to the point at issue.

"However," pursued Wy-Thob, oblivious of the risk he was running, "we've established this being's location, and we know he's the only one they intend to send here."

"By rocket, I suppose," said Jr-Ktuk musingly.

"Of course." Wy-Thob looked reminiscent with three of his eyes. "You know, it's just as well the Earthmen haven't discovered the spacewarp, or they'd have overrun us already. It's so much easier to send something away from the sun—downhill, as you might say—but as for the other direction . . . well, as you know we've been working on the invasion problem for sixty-three generations without getting anywhere, least of all to Earth." He chuckled with all his mouths at once, which was abominably bad manners in the presence of a superior, and Jr-Ktuk tore off two of his pseudopods as punishment. Slightly chastened, Wy-Thob went on—as soon as he could.

"As I was saying, the Earthmen are very close to achieving their object."

"But they're sending only one being?" Jr-Ktuk pressed. Wy-Thob signified assent.

"Fine!" said Jr-Ktuk energetically. "You will arrange to spacewarp him here. The loss of the being they have trained for the trip will subject them to delay and give your department an inhaling space in which to produce the results your late unlamented predecessor did not get."

Wy-Thob turned maroon with astonishment, but Jr-Ktuk

pursued relentlessly, "In order to make certain nothing goes wrong, I propose to supervise the operation myself. Come on!"

Following his superior out of the throne-cave at a respectful distance, Wy-Thob was thoughtful. He had long ago come to the conclusion that since the only possible reason for invading another planet was to dispossess the original owners, and since the Earthmen were only planning to send a single individual in their rocket, they must be certain that one of their kind could handle the whole job. Consequently attendance at the opening of a warp containing that Earthman would be dangerous. He said nothing, chiefly because prior to the decease of Ol-Pshok he had been six hundred and eighth in line for Jr-Ktuk's job, whereas now he was six hundred and seventh. The future looked rosy.

Jr-Ktuk was obviously going through one of his periods of self-abnegation, because they ran all the way from the throne-cave to the Invasion Department on the other side of the planet, arriving less than a month later. The business of setting up the warp was easy; they had so many machines arranged to send Martians to Earth—which was impossible—that they could have spared dozens of them to be reversed. One was all they needed for Jr-Ktuk's plan. Barely three days after their arrival Wy-Thob cleared most of his throats and began.

"We have established," he said in a didactic tone of voice which made Jr-Ktuk look at him sharply to be sure it was he and not Ol-Pshok speaking, "that the being called Tomalliday is located at this point." He used five pseudopods to indicate appropriate five-dimensional co-ordinates. "The machine is set to transfer the living being of maximum intelligence located within a certain radius of that point. The materialisation will occur on that bench of rock over there. It is protected by glass, so there's no need to worry."

Jr-Ktuk nodded his approval, and Wy-Thob jabbed the technician who squatted at the controls in the large of his back. "You may start the process now," he said.

The complicated warp machinery began to glow and hiss and spit, and Jr-Ktuk watched it. Believing that his chief's

attention was fully occupied, Wy-Thob started to edge for the exit.

"Where do you think you're going?" said Jr-Ktuk sternly, reaching out a pseudopod so long he would surely have torn it off a subordinate. Since he was junior to no one he could extrude it with impunity.

"Oh—well—" hedged Wy-Thob, realising too late that Jr-Ktuk's reputation for multiple attention was well-founded, "I was—uh—that is, check the power supply . . ."

Jr-Ktuk subjected him to a withering glare from all his eyes. There was a short pause of an hour or two. Finally he spoke.

"How large a radius is your machine set for, Wy-Thob?" he asked in a dreadfully silky tone. "How big, in other words, is this Earthman?"

In spite of knowing what he was in for, Wy-Thob flinched when he glanced at the materialisation bench. He calmed himself with an effort.

"L-look for yourself!" he suggested, waving a pseudopod at the alien which had just arrived. Jr-Ktuk spared one eye to do so.

The shock was so great that he involuntarily brought all his eyes to bear a moment later, and Wy-Thob, ultramarine with relief, seized his chance to break the current record for the distance between himself and the door, leaving the hapless technician and Jr-Ktuk to face the danger on their own.

There was a long silence. Then Jr-Ktuk remembered that he was supposed to set an example. White-carapaced, he said, "What—a—*monster!*"

"This has been a lovely evening, darling," said Susan Halliday, snuggling up to her husband as they walked along the path towards their bungalow. "Hurry up back so we can do it again."

Tom slid his key into the lock of the front door. "Trust me, my sweet. I'm not going chasing after any lush Martian princesses when I have you to come home to."

She smiled sleepily. "I can hardly believe it's tomorrow you're leaving. Hasn't the time flown?"

Tom's eyes went up to the tiny racing star overhead



which was the launching station. In the same orbit was the ship which would carry him to Mars. He said, "But aren't you glad the psychologists said we could carry on a normal life together till the last day? Instead of my having to be treated like a lab specimen the way it used to happen?"

"Mmm!" said Susan, and took his hand to draw him into the dark hallway. "Hullo!" she added a moment later. "Where's Jeff?"

"Dreaming about rabbits, I guess," Tom answered lightly. "Jeff! Here, boy—we're home!"

There was silence.

"That's odd," said Susan. "Did you shut the back door?"

"I think so." Tom went forward and turned on the light in the kitchen. After a moment he called back, "Yes, it's shut. And I closed the windows before we went out. Is he on our bed?"

"Oh, not Jeff!" said Susan. But she went to look all the same.

He wasn't on the bed. He wasn't on the sofa in the lounge, and he wasn't hiding because he'd misbehaved himself, or if he had he'd done it somewhere where they couldn't find it.

"Ah well," said Tom finally, dismissing it. "He's too clever by half. He must have managed to get out somehow and go chasing cats. He had his collar on, and somebody will find him and get him back to us. Come on, darling—don't worry."

Rabbits, decided Jeff, even in dreams, don't make high-pitched squeaking noises. Only mice did that, and if he was going to dream about chasing mice he might as well see what turning over would do for him. Mice weren't worth the effort, even in dreams—they were too small and too agile to catch.

He opened one eye lazily, giving his tail a brief wag for luck in case what had disturbed him had been his owners coming home. Then he forgot all his manners and scrambled to his feet, legs and tail flying in all directions. This wasn't his home!

To start with, the light was wrong—dim and reddish. And the walls should have been straight up and down, not

curved as if they had been scraped out underground. For a moment he was afraid that he was having a nightmare about being stuck down a rabbit-hole, but there was nothing rabbit-y about this place. It didn't smell right at all.

But it smelled good.

He wagged his tail, and thereby demolished a bank of fragile equipment. The noise startled him, and he half-expected to hear his master scold him for being a clumsy brute. Nothing happened.

After a while he remembered that he hadn't stretched on waking up, so he did, and the glass surrounding the ledge of rock on which he stood proved unequal to the strain. It gave with a crash, and on turning one astonished eye towards the source of the noise he saw something move. More puzzled than ever, he extended his neck and snuffed at it.

It wasn't a mouse. On one or two occasions he had got close enough to mice to see what they looked like. This object was about the same size, true, but its smell reminded him of the crumbs of cheese he was sometimes given off the dinner-table at home. He loved cheese, but the Hallidays would never give him as much as he wanted. He put out his red rag of a tongue.

Yes, *very* like cheese. He licked again. The second time was more than Jr-Ktuk could stand, and he did the only thing a good Martian ruler could do. He ran.

Not so nippy as mice, either, thought Jeff with satisfaction, putting down one of his ungainly forepaws on top of Jr-Ktuk's yell. This looked promising.

When he had finished Jr-Ktuk—who tasted *exactly* like cheese, except for the hard bits, which he left—he got down from the ledge and snuffed around. He was sure he had seen two of the cheese-creatures, but the other one had gone.

The warp machinery attracted his notice. He snuffed at it, decided there was one thing wrong with it, and put that right after the manner of dogs. He suffered a small electric shock in the process, so he trod on it to teach it better.

Then he snuffed along the trail left by the one that got

away, and it led him to a gap in the wall which was too small for his body by nine-tenths. But the earth around it yielded to his experimental scraping, and he gave himself up to the task of excavation with a small wuff of pure joy. Even in his wildest dreams he had never come up with anything like this. To be chasing mice which weren't fast enough to get away, and which tasted like cheese when they were caught, through something similar to an endless rabbit-burrow, was to Jeff a good preview of heaven.

A long time later a rather swollen Jeff struggled out of the surface entrance of one of the caves and looked about him, panting. The technician who got away had spread the news through the tunnels that there was a monster from Earth on the rampage, and so many of the Martians had been able to take to their own personal escape routes—some into the past, some into other dimensions, and most of them into refuges which they themselves didn't understand. They were now kicking themselves (which, with their number of legs, was quite a painful process) for not finding out about this before, instead of wasting time in stuffy caves on a dying planet. Nonetheless, Jeff had persuaded quite a few of them to remain behind.

His heaven, though, was wearing thin. He had eaten so much that he had been having to make his holes larger than usual, and he was coming to realise that with their usual remarkable wisdom and ineffable perspicacity his owners had been right to stop him eating too much cheese. He burped frequently, and was beginning to feel queasy.

Wanting to express his feelings in the most sublime and artistic manner open to him, he scrambled up to the top of a little ridge nearby, wriggled his haunches into the dusty soil, and threw back his head to howl.

The first sounds died in his throat as he suddenly took in something he hadn't noticed before. Then he closed his eyes, an expression of doggy ecstasy on his face which not even his indigestion could dim. This was almost too much.

*Two moons to bay at!*

*And his master was coming.*

*About a girl who remembered the sea and looked for it  
in an attic.*

# MARINA

by John Harrison

Marina lay still and watched faces form and break in the hypnotic flames, feeling the heat stretch the skin on her own face. Lazy, she was, drifting on tides of fire-glow: glutted with heat, swamped and swallowed, soaked in warmth. She stretched her slim young body—rose and marble and fierce flaming silk, spun fire for her hair, all molten round smooth shoulders—and yawned a little.

“Tell me a story,” she said.

Dog laughed from his corner of the hearth, in a pink-tongue-panting, tail-waving sort of way, and heaved his big, grizzled self on to its old legs. He padded over to her, ears raised, claws clicking on the floor: then, placing a heavy paw on her breast, licked her face enthusiastically. She sent small hands fluttering over him—to pull and smooth his floppy retriever ears; to scratch his hackles the wrong way, so they stood on end; to tickle his sand-coloured belly—and then eased his weight off her.

He began to tell a dog-story about the outside: a story of smells to follow on fascinating pavements, along crowded streets, cigarette-stub, ice-cream-wrapper gutters; smells that led through a maze of five o'clock legs to the very edge of the town, and beyond.

What a place, beyond, bigger than a whole day's trotting and sniffing. Woods? Yes, with brambles and burrs to lodge in your coat; damp leaf-mould paths tended by tall black trees; rustlings in the deepest thickets: and dark, loamy earth to stain your muzzle and paws. . . .

But Marina had heard such stories before. They all ended by the glowing fire and concerned rabbit (sometimes pheasant or perhaps wild-duck, it is true; but mostly rabbit).

“Dog,” she said, for the thousandth time, “Have you

never seen the sea?" And Dog had to admit once again that he had not.

"Then I'll tell *you* a story: about the sea and the white birds that sail on the wind around grey toppling cliffs."

Marina remembered the sea.

In fact she thought that she might once have lived very near to it when she was much younger, a gull-crying, wave-pounding shore only a heartbeat away and the sound of the waves in her pink shell-ears to whisper her softly asleep. But if she tried too hard, the picture would fade, leave her searching through her misty memory: and then she would cry deep sea-tears because it was so hard to find again. This late afternoon, the picture was clear. Dog settled the weight of his bony head on her stomach, and she began to tell him of a stone house by the sea.

Surrounded by slim evergreens like dark flames of rough bark and feathery branches, that swayed and murmured secret things to the blind wind, it grew solidly from the top of a soft-swelling hill. Down the hill fell a winding stairs of white steps, warm to the touch in Summer when swallows flashed over the green, wind-patterned slopes of grass.

These were magic steps: for they led to the sea.

Mile after mile of wet hard sand, pink and brown; little shells—white, so white, ribbed with tiny ridges—and small pink crabs; her own diminutive footprints—how old had she been? Three, four? Five years?—running side by side with her father's, three strides to every one of his, across the sand to that incredibly distant thunder, the thin bright thread of the surf: this was Marina's sea.

Marina remembered the sea.

Black-buttressed walls of rock, the lowering eyebrows of the land; starting, towering suddenly from puckered waves of sand; scarred and slashed by streams, mineral-tinted, fallen from enormous heights, dizzying reaches of easter-egg sky and racing clouds; rich, live-green weed stranded to salt-bleach on the shingles until the questing, pushing tide—relentless, hesitant—engulfed and gave it undulating, streaming life; this was Marina's sea.

Then Mother had gone: into the night, toward the

dark, moon-flecked swell. It had all gone with her—the dream of the grey house, the whispering pines. That night a strange song had blown on the night wind.

There was a great, black, powerful train, hard-angled and sweating steam. There were cases and humming lines of baggage trolleys on bleak, sour-smelling station platforms that echoed and shook when stiff-steel dragons hurled through without stopping or slowing, crushing the warm, tiny, flesh-and-blood personalities of aimless, waiting passengers. Mother was gone; and the sea and the falling sea-path were gone, whirled away at rail-rattling, whistle-shrieking speed across chess-board fields.

Now, only a little brown house in a brown street in a little brown well-fed town of brown streets and black chimneys. Now, the fire and Father and Dog and a hole that nothing but the wonderful sea could fill, an empty ache for Mother who seemed, somehow, part and parcel of the sea, part of a story told in front of the glowing, whispering fire to a sleepy retriever: no beginning or end other than the flying fire, the flame faces. . . .

“But wait,” said Marina.

Tonight there was another bit of the dream-story. A dusty forgotten little corner of the memory, dingy and cobwebbed. Tremulously, her mind explored the thought, like a tongue exploring a painful tooth.

The attic.

No.

The attic was a sea-chest of pirate gold; a pistol and a sabre, a parrot in a wicker cage; a salt parrot, a sea parrot that squawked mysterious longitudes and pirate curses. In the attic lived Silver and Flint and Captain Billy, Jim Hawkins and his map. The attic was an old adventure; a well-thumbed adventure; a comfortable old fantasy of billowed sail and creaking timbers.

Marina had never been in the attic.

She had thrown tantrums and sobbed; or merely pouted like a sulky November day; but no attic. It was always too near bed-time; or too dark or too far or too dirty.

So, from the early days in the little brown house, the

attic had remained a place of mystery and pirate's gold, and, over the years, Marina's desire to pry out its secrets had faded, until one sun-speckled, leafy day in Summer.

With the sea-smell strong in her nostrils, and the sound of an O so distant surf pounding in her ears as though they were shells people hold to hear the sea, she had climbed the last flight of dark-brown stairs, to stand in the warm, golden dust-mote-dancing pool of sun at the top. Now desire had gone. Instead, something had called from outside herself, something she had not been able to refuse.

She had put her hand to the latch, head tilted to one side, listening for the call whose icy, insistence bubbled in her bones. And had gone no further.

Father had been there, his brown, worn face—usually so kind and smiling and open—closed and hard; his eyes flashing steel anger, terrible, suddenly not Father. He had shaken her, and the sea-music, fading and calling, laughing and calling, had lost itself in a jangle of bells inside her head.

But before it had flown, like a small bright bird, so very far away, it had shown her a picture of the singing sea. And on a dark rock, the tide swelling around her, sat a tall beautiful woman, combing her long, sunlight-and-silver hair, humming a descant to the song of the water. Marina had locked the picture to her, while her Father's anger had played itself out like a wave on a shore. He had made her promise not to go there, but she had known then that she must follow the sea-music if ever it called again.

For the woman on the rock had looked so much like her Mother. . . .

The answer lay in the attic.

No: she had promised. . . .

The stairway was deliciously, skin-caressingly cold after the heat of the fire. Marina savoured each movement of the air and shivered delightedly.

Up and up. The polished banister hissed and squealed under her hand. Up and up. Dusk drifted through a landing window and settled like dark snow in corners, drifts

of it piling up against the skirting-boards. Up and up. The last flight of threadbare-carpeted stairs creaked like the timbers of an ancient galleon. Marina stood still and heard a silent hiss of water round a cold keel, heard a mist curling in over a mill-pond ocean, heard that song come calling, calling out of the mist.

There was a tiny window at the top of the stairs, spilling the last light of a pink and gold and tangerine sunset on to the attic door. Such a waste thought Marina, to spill all that colour, and no-one to watch. What a painting she could make with it. But there was no time. The answer, the sea-singing-call, was so near, pulling, a running tide in her blood.

She opened the door. For a moment, sunset dappled her back. She felt it brush her gently, and turned. Her eyes found the window, black cooling-towers, smoke haze and pale inland faces mouthing nothings.

"No," she said, "I won't come back. Not for all your sunsets, town."

She opened the door. "Come back?" She laughed. "Come back?" But I'm not going anywhere. Only an old attic, to look for. . . ." The sea. Marina laughed again, for who could find the sea in an attic? She stopped laughing because it wasn't her own laugh, warm and young: it was cold and a little shrill, and it made her gulp suddenly, as if a March wind had taken away her breath in August.

She opened the door.

The sense of urgency was a knife. Her eyes flashed like needles, embroidering the dusty room, piercing the grey-ness, searching, threading thin fibres of desire and demand through the dimness.

There was nothing.

Here a broken trestle, there a chest of drawers looming huge in the gloom; here a musty roll of carpet, there a dust-sheeted armchair. Nothing: but here the sea-call was strongest, pulsing, slowing her heart to its rhythm. Marina stepped forward slowly. Then the tide broke on her.

Where, where? She fluttered and rushed round the attic like a captive bird, pulling off old sheets, throwing



open drawers and cabinet doors, daring disappointment, defying disillusion. Somewhere was the answer, the end of the song. She stopped.

There was a dark bundle against the darker bulk of a broken table. For a moment her slow index finger traced a line in the dust covering. Oilskin: her heart thudded faster.

Suddenly, Marina was reluctant. Her finger continued to draw aimless circles. She had the strange feeling that it didn't belong to her, this finger; that someone else was moving it, and the hand that flowered at the end of her arm, to reach for the deeper gloom, slowly . . . to pick up the bundle.

It was heavy. She carried it carefully to the dying little pool of sun at the door, and began to unwrap the oilskin, still hesitant. But the sea-call would not let her stop, drop it and run back to Dog and the warm fire; she had to stand, watching hands that weren't her own peel off the stiff black covering until only one thin layer remained. Then she let the music sweep over her, carry her on, helpless, fumbling with the final wrapping.

Oilskin dropped to bare floor, rustling softly.

And Marina had found the answer.

Folded in her trembling hands lay the stuff of dreams. It glittered, threw splintered shards of light back into the fading sun: no: it was *woven* of sunlight—wave-reflected sunlight trapped by music—spun by quick, flashing fingers on a lonely shore at noon. The weaver had threaded it with her sea-song, and left it where the restless foam could sprinkle it with sequins. Marina gazed at the wonderful thing, lost.

For a long minute, for sixty eternal seconds, time stood, looking over her shoulder.

Time reached out, there was a click in the hall as the front door opened; heavy feet walked to the lounge.

Dog whined ecstatically and a deep voice laughed: "Down lad!"

Time watched as Marina listened, and paused again as she ignored her father's cry of: "Marina! Where are you?"

Then time reached out again—ever as gently—and gently, O so gently, shook out the bundle of gold and silver and sequins, to hang fire from Marina's small hand.

Father was rushing up the stairs to the attic, his feet thunder, shouting: "Marina! Marina!" The light was dying, the brown old town fading.

And Marina never moved.

She stood and was lost in the timeless music of a mermaid on a rock, combing her long sunlight-and-silver hair: she stood and looked and looked at the tail, the wonderful, impossible tail.

— JOHN HARRISON

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Brian ALDISS

Poul ANDERSON

J. G. BALLARD

James BLISH

Harry HARRISON

Next month, in our first issue under the title *IMPULSE*, we are printing specially commissioned stories by all these authors—surely the most impressive line-up in a single edition of any science-fiction magazine, anywhere. You really cannot afford to miss this one.

*"Tell me the secret," said the Czar of All the Russias. Those were the great days, when your fees were paid in sacks of roubles.*

# OUR MAN IN 1900

by Paul Jents

As the climax of the act was reached, the dark man in the third row of the stalls tensed and the glasses shook in his hand. Sweat was beginning to bead on Justini's forehead. He had seen the trick so often and yet—it just wasn't possible. He still couldn't believe it.

"You will observe, ladies and gentlemen, that the sides are solid, and so is the back. No trap-doors. No hidden mirrors."

Marvo the magician turned to his two helpers.

"Satisfied, gentlemen? No trickery? Right. Will you bolt the sides into place please. On the base here."

One of the men, red-faced and clumsy, was having trouble.

"Just slip the catch over, sir. There. You'll always find a catch in a bit of magic."

One or two of the audience chuckled briefly at the well-worn joke.

"Now the top, please. Let me help you. Slide it right over, to make sure no-one drops in from the roof. That's fine. Slip on the catches again. Good."

As they manhandled the top into place, a full size plywood structure representing the three sides, top and base of a motor-coach stood assembled in the centre of the stage.

"Now, before I put on the front, would you make sure that it's all solid. Solid, gentlemen, solid."

Marvo tapped his head as he spoke, but this time no-one bothered to laugh.

The two stooges tramped stolidly round the structure, banging it knowledgeably here and there, and then returned to Marvo's side.

"All right, my friends? Sure? Thank you. Give them a great big hand, then."

A thin patter of applause broke out as the men resumed their seats.

"Now for the front, ladies and gentlemen." Marvo the magician trundled it forward, pushing with difficulty. "You think there's something at the back? You're wrong."

He swung it round, showing the blank, unpainted hard-board. "It's just the engine that's heavy."

Briefly he flicked up the painted bonnet, revealing a flash of metal.

Justini, in the audience, was puzzled. There seemed no purpose in the gesture, and yet—

Quickly Marvo sprang the remaining bolts into place.

"Now—what have we here, then? A motor-coach."

The effect was not particularly impressive. The paint-work was shabby and clumsily done. The blank windows were obviously faked, and so were the wheels.

The audience were beginning to stir restlessly. Soon they would begin to chatter. Only Justini was sitting on the edge of his seat, the glasses misting as he gazed.

"Clear the stage, please!" Marvo walked first to one wing and then to the other, making sure that no stage-hands were present. Justini had good reason to know that was his invariable routine.

Then he turned to the centre of the stage again, pressing his ear to one of the dummy windows of the coach, listening.

"Can't hear anything yet," he remarked to the audience. "Trade's not very good on the mystery trip tonight." He lowered the front once more, revealing the empty interior. Then he bolted it back into place.

"Never mind. Let's see what a little magic will do. But first, some seaside music to get our visitors into the mood. Maestro?"

He nodded to the leader of the small orchestra. They broke into the first few bars of *'We do like to be beside the seaside.'*

Justini's eyes were riveted on the coach, alone in the middle of the stage.

"Stop!" With a peremptory gesture Marvo the magician halted the orchestra in mid-bar. Again he listened intently at the dummy window.

"Ladies and gentlemen—" He paused. For a moment the silence in the theatre was absolute. "We have visitors!"

The cardboard door of the coach swung open and a man emerged, clumsily nondescript in his blue suit and fawn raincoat.

"One," Marvo counted.

A girl followed. "Two." And another. "Three."

"Four," he continued. "Five . . . Six . . ." and at last, "Twenty."

Blinking under the lights the crowd on the stage bobbed awkwardly to the audience. Then the curtains swung to, and Marvo himself appeared to take his bow.

The applause was genuine enough, but the theatre was only half-full. He took two curtains, and then the clapping wavered, died away. The spotlight lingered for a moment, half-heartedly, after his exit, and then swung away as the opening music struck up for the next act.

Justini rose from his seat and made for the bar, his mind revolving in the same old circles. What possible method could Marvo have used for his effect? A trap-door? No—the boards were solid. He had played the same theatre himself. So was the base of the coach—half-inch timber, and the sides, and the back.

The rear was the obvious place to smuggle in one person, two, even three—but not a coach-full. And he had religiously kept his eyes on the back-cloth of the stage. It was of light material, and it had never moved. There never had been the flicker of a movement, all the scores of times he had watched the act.

The sides, then? Impossible. And the top was in full view—he had watched carefully for angled mirrors.

It wasn't even as if the "visitors" were professionals—you could tell a mile off that they had never been on the stage before. How then? How had Marvo done it?

Savagely Justini stubbed out his cigarette. Marvo. The man wasn't even a proper showman. His timing was

wrong for one thing, and he had no stage presence. The rest of his act—it was almost contemptible, to a true professional. And yet he had this great, great illusion—which he hadn't even taken the trouble to publicise.

Justini looked out over the rows of empty seats as he left the theatre. Next week it would be full—for strip-tease. He grinned, bitterly.

The great days of magic had gone, with the old Egyptian Hall, with Maskelyne and Cooke, Maskelyne and Devant, Robert-Houdin, Houdini—they had all vanished with the other immortals. Then an illusionist was appreciated for what he was—a master craftsman, an artist, the crown prince of variety.

Morosely he shouldered his way towards the station, and home.

In the train the little man rummaged in his pocket and produced a well-worn book, its cover carefully protected by brown paper. On it, neatly lettered in ink, stood the title: *Justin: The Life and Death of a Master Magician*.

Justini opened the book at chapter nine—he knew the page number by heart—and read:

'Undoubtedly Justin's greatest illusion was the production of a score of passengers from a horse-drawn omnibus in mid-stage. This illusion he performed until his death.

The empty omnibus, a faithful replica, would be drawn onto the stage by four grey horses, and would be minutely inspected by members of the audience. Only the driver's seat would remain locked and unexamined, but this represented a space of five or six cubic feet, at most.

Justin would then cause the entire omnibus to be covered by a large cloth-of-gold sheet for a few moments. When the sheet was removed, upwards of twenty persons would be discovered, sitting inside the omnibus.

Naturally, this feat caused an enormous sensation, and Justin received many royal commands to display it, at all the courts of Europe.

"Tell me the secret," said the Czar of all the Russias—himself a keen devotee of the art—"Tell me the secret and I will double your fee, and create you a knight of Saint Nicholas, into the bargain."

Justin steadfastly refused, which impressed the Czar so much that he dubbed him knight, nevertheless.

Justin never revealed the secret of this great illusion. He carried it with him to his grave.'

Justini closed his eyes. Those were the days—the great days, when your rewards were sacks of roubles, decorations. And now what did you get?

Fifteen pounds a week—twenty, if you were lucky. When you were working. And then your name was half-way down the bill, after the interval. Just a conjuring act to fill in, while the bars emptied and the customers came back to their seats. Magic was for mugs.

The train lurched and the book slipped from Justini's knee. Instantly he dived for it as it reached the floor, dusting it reverently before he slipped it back into his pocket. In the gesture was all his love for the profession.

He knew that magic could never die—not while the tremendous illusions of Justin were still alive—even though it was Marvo who performed them. How he hated the man—more and more each time he refused to disclose the secret.

How many times had he asked—how much had he offered last time? Three-hundred pounds, was it? Lord knew how he would have paid, but he would have got the money somehow, somewhere. If Marvo had accepted. But of course, he always refused. The great key to Justin's art was locked away, and Justini wanted that secret more than anything else in the world.

Just as Harry Houdini had modelled himself upon his great predecessor, Robert-Houdin, even to the extent of borrowing his name, so Justini revered Justin. But there the resemblance ended. Houdini had gone on to surpass his master, but it was to Marvo that the mantle of Justin had fallen. Marvo—that charlatan! And he wouldn't sell.

Justini glowered at his reflection in the dark night-

mirror of the train window. He had tried every way to discover the secret. He had even tried to bribe the "visitors" Marvo produced, but they were a different set of people each evening, and Marvo led them straight to his dressing-room after the act.

Those few who Justini had managed to buttonhole afterwards had just looked at him strangely and walked away. He didn't believe that even they really knew.

Whenever he was 'resting'—too frequently—Justini followed Marvo around, from theatre to theatre, studying his act, analysing it, desperately trying to discover the method. Always he was met by a blank wall of ignorance and silence. Marvo never played the big towns—he seemed to shun publicity. He did not belong to the Magic Circle, he talked to no-one.

With every defeat Justini hated Marvo more, and now he was on the point of giving up. There was one last long-shot left.

Soon Marvo was to play at a small variety theatre, new to him but one which Justini knew well. In the dressing-room which he would occupy was a small, disused closet, partially concealed by a mirror, which was always kept locked. An air-brick there communicated with the dressing-room, so that anything said could be heard inside.

And the doorkeeper owed Justini his job. He had promised to let him into the cupboard well before Marvo arrived, leave him the key—and forget it.

Justini knew that Marvo's "visitors" always assembled in the dressing-room afterwards—probably to be paid off, he thought. So there was just a chance that they would talk, that he would pick up something. A chance. . . .

He found that the cupboard was not only cramped, it was damp and dirty as well. Gradually his first thrill and mounting excitement tailed off into boredom as he waited there, in the cold and deepening darkness. He began to find it difficult to keep awake.

Suddenly he heard the dressing-room door open. Streaks of light appeared through the air-brick as Marvo moved about the room, making the preparations for his act. It seemed an interminable time to Justin, waiting



there, until he heard the call come, and the magician left for the stage.

Again the waiting period seemed endless. The little man could hear nothing at all in the gloom of his stone vault. It was almost as if he was removed from the world, cold, remote, buried—

Impatiently he shook his head as he heard Marvo returning, and the scurry of footsteps accompanying him. The door closed and a hum of conversation arose.

Justini strained his ears as Marvo's voice cut professionally through the babble of sound.

"Ladies and gentlemen—please. Your attention please. You are now in the twentieth century, and I wish you an enjoyable visit. But it is my statutory duty to remind you of the undertaking which you signed before you began your journey. You are spectators here, only. It is illegal for you to take any active part in what you see. In the case of any personal involvement you are to report immediately to your guide. Especially you are not to interfere in any way whatsoever with history. That, as you know, is an extremely serious offence."

He paused for a question.

"Yes, of course you'll have your guide with you for the first few days. And you'll find your previous indoctrination course perfectly adequate. We have very few emergency returns, I'm glad to say."

He paused again. "Yes?"

"I want to get the most out of this twentieth century cruise." It was a new voice, flat, with a slightly foreign accent. "I've only got three weeks. Would you suggest, friend, that I stop in this country? Or should I—"

"Your guide will help you on that point." Marvo's tone was incisive. "I'm only the receiving agent. Now—any more questions, please?"

Justini was in utter bewilderment. At first he thought it must be some giant leg-pull, that somehow Marvo had been tipped off about his presence, and was deliberately playing with him. Either that or the whole lot of them were mad. Or else he was barmy himself. Or—

If he raised himself very cautiously, wedging one foot

against a shelf, he could see through the holes of the air-brick. It was a frightfully awkward angle but—there. They looked sensible enough. Perfectly ordinary people, chatting away amongst themselves. That girl, there, was quite good looking.

“Well then, ladies and gentlemen,” Marvo began again.

Edging slightly to the left, Justini could just see his face. A little bit more—

The shelf gave way like the crack of doom. Justini’s head hit hard against the wall as he fell into a corner, his feet crashing against the cupboard door. Sprawled there ignominiously, with an aching head, he was aware of the sudden and utter silence in the dressing-room next door.

“Will you come out, please.” It was Marvo’s voice. “Slowly.”

Justini was too dazed to move for a moment.

“If you don’t come out, whoever you are, I shall be forced to kill you.” The voice was calm. Businesslike.

“Hold it!” All at once Justini was very, very conscious. He struggled for the key in his pocket. “I’m coming out.”

“Slowly,” Marvo repeated. “Slowly, if you please.”

As he stumbled into the room, the light slashed across his eyes like a whip. The faces looked a long way away.

“Yes, I thought it might be you.” Marvo seemed tall against the light. “This is unfortunate. Very unfortunate.”

Suddenly Justini became aware of all the eyes looking at him. Not cruelly. Dispassionately.

“Very unfortunate.” The voice was soothing. “Very, very un—”

“No!” Desperately Justini jerked back to full awareness. Aware of the hands coming. Of the needle. “No!” He gasped “Don’t—don’t kill me! I won’t tell—I won’t!”

Tell? Still his inquisitive mind queried wordlessly. Tell what? It was all confused. What was clear was the needle. The needle—and the door. It wasn’t far away. It—

Frantically he dived for it, feeling himself falling, feeling the hands bearing him down, feeling the sting in his arm, seeing the syringe depress.

“No—no—”

For the last time he saw Marvo’s face. Big it was, and

blurred. Bigger than the whole room. And then—nothing. . . .

“You really are a very naughty chap, you know.” The director of Thirtieth Century Time Travel Inc. tapped nervously with his pencil as he looked over his desk at Justini. He was wearing his habitual worried expression. He would have felt undressed without it.

“It’s a definite violation of history, your being here. And the second one we’ve put up this month. The first was that ghastly tripper smuggling his nasty little aero-rocket into the nineteenth century. Thank the Lord they all thought it was Haley’s comet. But what the C.I.D.’s going to say about you, I don’t know.”

“C.I.D.?” Justini blinked. “Have you still got criminals to investigate then? In the thirtieth century? I wouldn’t have thought—”

He broke off as he noticed the glazed expression in the other man’s eyes.

“Criminals? Investigate?” The director looked down at his translation recorder to make sure the dial was set correctly. “Whatever are you babbling about? C.I.D.? That stands for the Correlation and Integration Directive—not one of your archaic cops-and-robbers institutions. No, the C.I.D. grant us our licence for time travel—and they’re likely to take it away from us, too. All because of your darned curiosity! Really, it’s too bad.”

“I’m sorry. But I still don’t understand.”

The director sighed as he reached for yet another tranquillizer.

“Let’s go over it again then, Justini. Words of one syllable, eh? I knew they came pretty dim from your century, but this is the end. Never mind. Again. Are you listening, then?”

Justini nodded sourly. He had been treated like a dim-witted schoolboy ever since he had regained consciousness, and he was beginning to lose his patience. If this chap came the old acid much more, he’d—

He looked up, into the director’s very wary and telepathic eye.

“I shouldn’t, old man. Not if I were you.”

Justini didn't.

"Now then, very simply. We run time trips to the twentieth century, and the nineteenth as well, fifth, fifteenth—you name it, we've got it. We operate under licence from the C.I.D., and the M.I.5. Never mind what *that* stands for—you'd never guess. Anyway—"

The director crunched on his tranquillizer and gulped a glass of water.

"We're the biggest operators—well, apart from Inter-time International. They're our rivals. And there's only a very few of us in this rack—er—profession. We're all strictly controlled. When time travel first began, it was different."

The director shuddered. Whether at the memory or the taste of the pill, Justini didn't know.

"People were travelling all over the centuries—madly, my dear chap, quite madly. They accounted for half the ghosts, vampires, flying saucers, demons, gremlins and things-that-went-bump-in-the-night, timewise. And history was chaos, believe me. Complete and absolute chaos. So they clamped down with the C.I.D.—and quite right too."

"But I still don't see—" Justini began.

"You want to visit the nineteenth century, say." A beautifully manicured finger stabbed at him. "You've got to pass your character and status tests first of all, naturally. Then a six month indoctrination course—language, customs, money, the minuet—the lot. Then you sign about a dozen forms, you swear not to interfere with history, to observe only. Then you get the o.k., if you're lucky. Then you come to us. We arrange it, transport you, supply a resident guide, kit you out—"

"Resident guide?" Justini interrupted. Light was beginning to dawn. "Like Marvo, you mean?"

"No, no, *no!* Give me patience!" The director raised his eyes to heaven. "How many more times—Marvo was only our receiving agent. Mind you, that's always the trickiest of the lot—producing twenty trippers out of nowhere, six days a week. We had some ghastly errors at first."

He closed his eyes to shut out the memory.

“You might think it’s easy, old chap—produce ‘em at dead of night, say, in the middle of a blasted heath. And you’d get away with it ninety-nine times, I grant you. But the hundredth—there’d be a couple of lovers in the grass—no-one stirring for miles—and suddenly twenty pairs of thirtieth century feet trampling all over them. They’d notice, you know.”

“I see. Very difficult.” Justini got the picture.

“And the first day or so in a new century—you’re bound to be a bit awkward. However well you’ve done on the indoctrination course, the real thing’s different. You’ve got to find your feet. Well, then. On the stage they expect magic—good, we provide it. They expect stooges to be awkward, on the stage. Ours are—so what? We use arrival centres like that, right back through the ages to—oh, the ancient Egyptians. We’ve got a first-class high priest operating there. At Luxor.”

“Can I have a tranquillizer, please?” Justini gulped. “And—er—trippers arrive every day?”

“Sure.” The director nodded.

“And you get rid of them the same way?”

“Oh no, no bother there. People disappear left, right and centre, and no questions asked. Look at the number of unsolved murders in your time, for instance. No—your particular despatch centre is an egg-factory, I think.” He checked in his note-book. “Twentieth century, yes, that’s right. The return party are shown round the factory as day-visitors, into a little private office half-way through—and away. Back home in fifteen seconds flat. The guide’s our man, of course. And the manager.”

“And how do you—”

“Look, old man, delightful chatting to you, and all that, but I’ve got work to do. First thing is to report you to the C.I.D. I’m sure I don’t know what they’ll—”

He turned to the video screen, switching the sound-beam to his own private channel.

“Just a little—er—contretemps, sir.” The director glanced quickly at the impassive, official face on the screen. “We’ve had to—so to speak—carry over a man from the twentieth. A chap named Justini.”

He listened and then continued.

"Justini—that's right. I think you'll agree, sir, that the history interference factor is practically negligible. It wasn't our fault in any way—no carelessness, dear me, no. It was just that—"

There was a longer pause at an interruption, inaudible to Justini.

"Eh?" The director frowned.

"I beg your pardon?" He turned for a moment to Justini, and then back to the screen.

"You *knew*, sir, yes. Arranged. I see. Of course. Sir. I'll—just leave it all to me. Yes, very kind, I'm sure. Right. Sir."

The screen went blank, but the director still sat facing it, red-faced, mouthing to himself.

"They knew—they *knew*. And they didn't even have the courtesy to tell me. Just let me sweat it out—who do they think they are, anyway? God, or something? I'm a taxpayer too, aren't I? I've got some rights!"

At that moment, Justini felt sorry for the discomfited man, a thousand years younger than himself.

"If there's anything I can do—" he began.

"Oh, there's a lot for you to do!" Suddenly the director swung round to him. "You're a magician yourself, right? Interested in the early 1900's—the great days of magic, right? And especially in a chap called Justin, who died in 1898, right?"

"Wrong." Justini shook his head. "Justin didn't die until 1926."

The director looked down at his notes.

"He was very ill in '98—remember? He died—oh yes, he did. But then you took over—take over—will take over—you sort out the tenses. Remember his sudden recovery? *You*, my dear chap."

"Me?" The man was mad.

"You. You, of course. Who else?" For the first time the director smiled at him. "Born again into the great age of magic, Mr. Justini. Mr. Justin, I should say. Our man in the 1900's . . ."

Carefully Justin locked the seat of the omnibus, the

seat containing the instrument. He nodded to the grooms holding the four greys—all was in readiness. He had just time for a glass of wine before the act.

He sipped it calmly, at his ease, in the luxurious appointments of the improvised dressing-room.

There was a knock on the door and a court official entered.

“His Imperial Majesty will be arriving shortly, sir.”

Justin nodded as he set down his glass.

Then he stepped out to meet the Czar of all the Russias.

—PAUL JENTS

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## Story Ratings For No. 80

1. SEALED CAPSULE by Edward Mackin. Much pleasure expressed at the master's return. Many cries of “Where's Hek Belov?”
  2. GOD-BIRDS OF GLENTALLACH by John Rackham. One letter, probably a spoof, complains that Tallach is a very dirty word in Gaelic.
  3. FOR ONE OF THESE by Daphne Castell. Tied with *IN VINO VERITAS* by E. C. Tubb which, of course, was accused of not being true science fiction.
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# SING ME NO SORROWS

by E. C. Tubb

It sounds like rain. It sounds like the rush of surf, waves beating on a shore, the endless fall of a cataract and, mingled with it, is the steady beat of a talking drum. But it isn't water and it isn't a drum. It is the sound of your own blood pulsing beneath the beat of your own heart.

You've never heard it before. You've heard other noises, the big sounds, the belch, the stomach rumble, the release of wind but never the little sounds, the trickles, creaks, snappings, gurglings, the gusty roar of your own breath. You've never heard the working of your body before but then you've never been alone with it, not really alone, not so alone that it is all you have. It's hard to realise that the body is such a noisy thing.

You snap out of it. You roll off the bunk and your feet hit the floor. You rise and walk three steps and curse as you hit the wall. The sound of your curse dies and now there is nothing at all, no echoes, no body noises, nothing. Just the thick, black silence piled deep all around.

The silence is bad; worse than the body noises though you know that you can only hear them because of it. You could sing, shout, talk to yourself but you've tried all that and it does no good. Too much like a boy whistling in a churchyard . . . a churchyard . . . a grave. . . .

It takes a while to stop the trembling.

The wall is of metal, smooth, probably aluminium but you can't be sure. You've never seen the wall, the bunk, the room you are in. You've never seen it but you've felt every inch of it and you've a plan of it in your mind. Ten feet long, give or take a few inches. Six feet wide and maybe seven high. A bunk in one corner, a washbowl and faucet



in another, a dispensing unit and closet in a third. There is one more corner but you don't like to think about it. There must be a door but you can't find it. It could be in the roof, the floor, hidden in one of the walls. You've searched for it until your fingers are sore.

No windows, of course, and no lights. No radio, books, television, cigarettes. No games, no toys, nothing to occupy your mind. Just a room fitted with the bare essentials. You wonder how long you've been in it.

The wall is still in front of you, inches from your face, neutral when you touch it, not cold, not warm, just there. You rest one hand on it and move towards where the washbowl should be. You hit something, it isn't the washbowl. You feel a lever, a rising pipe, the cupped nozzle and know it is the dispensing unit. You drop your hand and feel the seat of the toilet. Somehow you've lost orientation, confused left with right. It happens all the time.

The faucet is one of those you have to keep pressed down. The washbowl has no plug and it's awkward having to wash with only one hand. Too awkward. You settle for a drink and a splash, wiping your face on the back of your hand. No towels, no blankets or sheets, not even clothing. Just a rubber-covered bunk and you as naked as the day you were born.

There's no point in just standing around or crawling along the walls. You've done all that and you know better. The bunk is hard but softer than the floor. And you know where you are when lying down. Sometimes, when you step from a wall, you feel as if you're lost in the middle of an endless plain. At other times you feel as if you're being crushed by the weight of a world. It's better to lie down.

Better still to lie down and remember.

You recall all the good things, of course, the bright, cheerful, happy things. You try to, that is, sometimes you can't make it. Like the time you thought of women and then began to remember the girl you intended to marry. And how you felt when you learned that she'd been cheating. And the other time when you'd acted the fool and she took care to let you know it. Then you go over it again and again, word for word, gesture for gesture, reliving all the old pain.

Times like that it's bad but not as bad as when you begin to forget. That's when the trembling starts. You forget that there is another world outside. You must never forget. And you must never worry about time.

Time, for you, has no meaning. There is only the silence and the dark, nothing else. You sleep but you don't know how often or for how long. Your sleep could last minutes or hours and you have no way of telling because you sleep from boredom not fatigue. You eat and drink and use the toilet but there is no rhythm in these things, no cycle. You've lost your orientation in time.

It would have been different if they hadn't stunned the follicles of your beard. You wondered why at the time, now you know. It would have helped to feel the growth of your beard, given you some idea of the passage of time, but that wasn't what they had wanted.

And it's their jail.

You turn on the bunk, eyes closed because that way you feel safer, wishing that your mind wouldn't run down the same old grooves. You remember the captain, the deep-set eyes, the thin mouth, the uncompromising voice.

"There's no choice. We're wholly dependant on these people. Unless they continue to help us we'll never be able to repair the ship. I've got to do things their way."

You tried to protest. You wasted your time.

"The facts are simple. You went into town, got drunk, beat up a native. Anyway you look at it you committed a crime. They insist on trying you under their legal code and, if you are found guilty, of punishing you as if you were one of themselves."

You reminded him that you were both earthmen. The lines only deepened around his mouth.

"I keep telling you that I have no choice. It's you against the welfare of the entire ship and crew. I've offered to punish you myself but they won't accept my promises. They won't accept any form of payment, either. We've got to do things their way."

So, an eternity ago, you woke up in this room.

Your thoughts are like rats. They scurry, one after the

other, devouring each other until there is nothing left. Nothing but the endless silence, the endless dark, the terrible stillness. Then you begin to hear it, the surf and the talking drum, the rush of your blood and the beat of your heart.

You roll from the bunk and step towards the wall. You turn and make for the dispensing unit, holding out your hands until you feel the lever, the rising pipe. You pull the lever and a mess of thick goo drops into the cup of the nozzle. You scoop it out with your fingers, stuffing the tasteless paste into your mouth. You're not hungry and you don't want to eat but it gives you something to do ; replaces thought with action. While you're eating you don't have to think.

You finish the paste and fumble your way to the faucet to wash down the goo. You misjudge, curse as the edge of the washbowl hits you where it hurts, then misjudge again as you stoop over the bowl. The edge of it hits your forehead and, momentarily, sparks fill your vision. They die and the blackness is deeper than before.

And, suddenly, you know that you're blind.

You hold your fingers before your eyes, moving them closer, closer, knowing they are there and yet unable to see them. Gently you touch your eyelids then, carefully, touch the ball of each eye. You see nothing, the darkness is complete. You are blind.

You have been blind ever since you woke in this room but this time it is different. Then you put the darkness down to absence of light ; this time you know that you cannot see. Terror rises within you, aided by the logic which now takes on a fresh significance.

You must be blind. If this is a jail cell, and it is, they would be watching you. Oh, you know all about infra-red projectors and scanning devices, but even those would surely make some light. There is no light so, obviously, you are blind. The edge of the washbowl hurts your hands as you grip it.

You try to keep calm. You stand there and tell yourself that there is nothing to worry about but it does no good.

The trembling starts again and all the thoughts you've shoved to the back of your mind come forward and demand attention.

You've been here too long.

You've been here for months, years, and that is too long.

The ship should have been repaired by now, ready to leave, and still you haven't been rescued. You're not going to be rescued. The one hope which has kept you going has blown up in your face.

Something must have happened, you don't know what and you don't care, all you want is to get out. You begin shouting, screaming at the darkness, hearing your own voice come back at you, flatly, from the walls. That's all you do hear; your own voice. After a while you stop shouting.

You know that it is of no use.

There is no one to hear. No one to answer. No one to care. You are alone.

The water still comes from the faucet and you wash your face again, drinking as much as you can hold, suddenly afraid lest the flow should end. You turn and head towards the dispensing unit, hitting the bunk instead. You try again and this time make it, jerking the lever to fill the cup, scooping out the goo and dropping it to the floor, jerking the lever again. There is plenty of goo, the supply seems endless, you only stop when your arms are tired.

The silence, because of the noise you've made, seems deeper than before.

You move and your foot slips on some of the goo. You tread on some more and almost fall, grabbing wildly at darkness to regain your balance. The wall comes from somewhere and hits you in the face.

Hatred grows inside you like a flower and explodes like a bomb.

You don't mind your words. There is no one to hear but that doesn't stop you. You curse the natives and what they've done to you, curse the captain for letting them do it, curse the crew for allowing the captain to sell you short. You get pretty foul and more than obscene but you don't give a damn. You stand and shout and feel sweat on your chest and your throat grows sore.

Nothing happens.

Deep inside you hoped that something would happen, but now you know that there is no hope, no future. This is the end.

And, suddenly, you're very tired.

You awake and lie for a long time listening to the surge of your blood, the beating of your heart. They should be comforting sounds; while you hear them you know that you're alive, but you wish that they would go away. You become aware that you are lying on one side, your knees drawn up to your chin, your arms wrapped around your knees. It doesn't seem to matter.

Nothing seems to matter.

You are alone.

You have never been so alone. You are alone as the dead are alone, unwanted, rejected, abandoned, hidden away deep in the ground. You have been there for years, for a lifetime, you will stay here until you rot. Rot, not die, you are already dead. Worse than dead—the dead don't have to think.

Tears fill your sightless eyes. If it were possible you would kill yourself.

It is possible.

You rise and fumble your way to the fourth corner. The corner holding the panel and the two enigmatic buttons. They have told you about those buttons and what they will do.

One will give you release.

The other will fill the room with lethal gas.

You don't know which is which. There is no way of telling. The buttons are exactly the same, recessed deep so as to prevent accidental pressure. You haven't wanted to think about them. You haven't wanted to test your luck. Instead you've held on, waiting for rescue, unable to believe that you would be abandoned. Now you know there will be no rescue. Now you have to face the decision.

One button for safety. One for death. A fifty-fifty chance of survival. All you have to do is to press the right button. The right button! The one on the right!

You press it.

And hear the hiss of escaping gas.

Now you know what it's like to die. It's just a matter of waiting, waiting, crouched and whimpering in the dark while fear tears you apart, hating yourself for the position you're in. And knowing that no one is to blame but yourself.

Then finish—just like that. Only you're not dead. You open your eyes on a dark ward among a mess of hospital smells and an orderly who looks like an angel as he takes your pulse.

"Easy!" He grins down at you and then hurries away. A big man takes his place, an officer, but you wouldn't care if he had horns and a tail. He is a man, that is enough, you are no longer alone.

"You were in a bad way when they handed you over," he said. "We've had you under anti-shock treatment. You should be O.K., now."

You hear a voice and realise that it's your own. You still can't believe that he is an officer and that you're in the sick bay of the ship.

"Still here?" He looks surprised. "Of course we're still here. The repairs aren't even finished yet." He hesitates. "They told us what your punishment would be. You were in there a long time."

You know that. You were in there for all eternity. Well, years at least.

"They're clever," he says, "Damn clever. When you feel better I want you to tell me all about it. How you felt, what you thought, things like that."

You just look at him. He will never know how you love the sound of his voice.

"It proves what we've always known," he continues, and you know he's talking more to himself than to you. "Once the time-orientation is destroyed complete breakdown is automatic. As they explained, a prisoner really punishes himself." He stands looking down at you, still musing. "It's logical, I suppose. In the old days we used to figure the best punishment for a thief was to cut off his hand. That

way he couldn't use it to steal again. And, when you come to think about it, there isn't really much sense in cooping a man in a cell for years at a time. It costs too much and it isn't a true deterrent."

You could tell him something about deterrents.

"The buttons are the final touch. As a first offender you were never in actual danger. Do it again and the buttons are loaded for real. Do it a third time and the odds against you climb by another button. So it goes on. Sooner or later a criminal runs out of luck—and they run out of a criminal." He sees your expression. "But you didn't know the buttons were harmless. All you could hear was the hiss of gas. Knockout or lethal, you just didn't know." His face darkens. "No wonder you were in shock! Well, maybe we can make it up to you."

You have no objections, but there's still one thing you have to know. You call to him. He stops. You ask the question.

"Twenty-six days, eleven hours, fourteen and a half minutes," he says. "I timed it. If it's any consolation to you the natives were impressed. You set a new record."

He lies, you know he lies. It was longer than that. A lot longer. It was more like twenty-six weeks, months, years even. Whatever it was it was longer than that, even though it was a record.

But you aren't interested in records. You aren't interested in anything but getting up and out and back to life. You want lights and company and the sight of the sky. You want to rejoin the human race.

Now!

—E. C. TUBB

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# PLAGUE FROM SPACE

by Harry Harrison

*The last of three parts*

“This will have to be done at once, because the world is afraid. As long as the disease is localized and only vectored by animals Operation Cleansweep will continue.” His voice dropped, so low that it could be barely heard. “This programme, you must realize, is really a compromise. The people of the world are living in fear and they have a right to be. The only alternative acceptable was to drop a hydrogen bomb on Zone Red at once . . .”

He could not go on in the face of horrified expressions before him, he lowered his head, an old man who had been forced to be the mouthpiece of other people’s terror—and threats.

“Dr. Chabel,” Sam said, standing, a little surprised at his own temerity but being pushed ahead by the burning need to say what must be said. “Operation Cleansweep is a logical answer to this problem since it can’t be solved medically, at least not at once, we have all admitted that. And on a global scale it may be logical to say that an H-bomb should be dropped here—though as one of the prospective carbonized corpses I can’t think very highly of

the suggestion. Nor do I think very highly of the veiled threat here, that the rockets are waiting to deliver that bomb at any time it is decided that it is the best course. But that is an unimportant detail—what is more important is the unspoken desperation behind this decision—there is no medical answer, so let us scour the land clean of infection. All very good, but there is one more piece of medical research that should be undertaken before these desperate measures are resorted to.”

He stopped for breath and realized that they were all listening with an agonized intensity. They were beyond their depth in a problem that was no longer a medical one—but a matter of survival.

“What research do you talk about?” Hattyár asked impatiently.

“The spaceship *Pericles* must be entered and searched for evidence about this disease, some records or notes. There must be a reason why Commander Rand wrote ‘in ship’, after all he had survived the trip from Jupiter. If these heroic atomic measures are going to be used there can be no complaint that we will loose another plague on the earth . . .”

He was interrupted by the sharp rapping of Prof. Chabel’s gavel.

“Dr. Bertolli, there is nothing we can do about the *Pericles*. Part of the decision reached by the Emergency Council was that the ship must be left untouched. The final stage of Operation Cleansweep, after evacuation and radioactive neutralizing of the land, will be the destruction of the *Pericles* by a tactical atomic weapon. No chances are to be taken that Rand’s disease, or any other plague from space will depopulate the Earth. I’m sorry. The decision has been reached and discussion would be useless since there is no appeal, no one would listen to anything I or any of you might say. It is out of our hands. The only thing that might affect this decision would be the discovery of a treatment for Rand’s disease. If that happens Operation Cleansweep might be revoked. Without a cure we are helpless to change the planned course of events.”

There was little else to say. There were some protests—including a fiery one by Dr. Hattyár—but they were only

for the record because they knew the decisions had already been made without their being consulted and at a far higher level. Prof. Chabel listened to them all very carefully and where he could answer he did and, as soon as it was possible, he adjourned the meeting. There were no protests. Nita and Sam walked back to her laboratory together, the silence between them a tangible presence. They passed the glass doors of one of the wards, crowded with cases of Rand's disease: Nita looked away.

"I'm frightened, Sam, everything seems to be somehow . . . out of hand. This talk of bombs and radioactivity, and practically abandoning the research programme. It means that these patients, and everyone else who comes down with the plague, are good as dead."

"They are dead. This decision turns us into graveyard keepers—not doctors. But look at it from the outside, from the point of view of the rest of the world. They're scared and they are going to make a sacrifice here to save themselves, let a tiny fraction of the global population die to save the rest. It makes good sense—unless you happen to be one of the fraction. It's not that decision I'm arguing with, it's the nonsensical act of sealing up the *Pericles*, keeping it off bounds. That is an act of fear, nothing else. The answer to this plague may be in the ship, and if it is all of those already stricken may be saved."

"There's nothing we can do about it, darling, you heard what Chabel said. The ship can't be entered so we'll have to find the answer right here in the labs."

There was no one near, so she held his hand and gave it what was meant to be a touch of reassurance, then quickly took hers away. She did not notice the sudden widening of his eyes.

"Are you on duty now, Sam?" she asked as she opened the laboratory door.

"I go on in about an hour," he said, his voice steady as he went to the cabinet of instruments.

"We can't let it worry us, just go on doing—what is that for?" She was looking at the telltale in his hand.

"Probably just foolishness, my skin temperature is probably depressed from lack of sleep, that must be why your hand felt warm to me—" He touched the telltale to her

skin and the needle on the thermometer instantly wavered up to 102.

"You might be coming down with the 'flu, anything," he said, but he could not keep the tension from his voice.

Though there was no cure for Rand's disease, tests for its presence had been developed that were both simple and rapid.

Five minutes later they knew that the plague from space had one more victim.

## TEN

A sick doctor is just one more patient, no different from any other and with no special privileges. The best that Sam could do was to see that Nita was put into a semi-private room in which one bed had just been vacated; no need to ask what had happened to the last patient. He gave her the injections himself, including a heavy sedative, and when he left she was sleeping, just as dead as if she had been shot with a bullet. There was no cure for Rand's disease—what could be done?

Just one thing.

There was a phone at the nurse's station and he dialled locator and told them to trace Prof. Chabel, and if he hadn't left the hospital to connect them. The screen stayed dark, with just the expanding circles of the *hold* signal in the centre, and he looked over the floor nurse's shoulder at the ward display screens. The patients were sleeping and the wards were dark but clearly revealed to the watching nurse by the infra-red illumination and infra-red-sensitive TV pickups. There was still no answer to his phone call. Reaching over he dialled the number of Nita's bed on the close-up screen and her face appeared over the current readings from the telltales. She was weakening . . .

"I have Prof. Chabel, doctor."

He cleared the close-up screen and turned to the phone.

"Prof. Chabel, I would like to see you, it's urgent."

"I was just leaving the hospital . . ."

"This can be done very quickly, just a moment if you don't mind."

Chabel peered out from the tiny screen, as though try-

ing to divine Sam's thoughts. Then, "If you insist, but you had better come at once. I'm in 3911."

On the way down in the elevator he remembered that this was McKay's office which meant that Eddie Perkins would be there too. It couldn't be helped, the matter was too urgent. The secretary showed him in at once; Chabel was behind the desk packing papers into his briefcase and Perkins was at the window, drawing heavily on a cigarette.

"What do you want?" Chabel asked, without preamble, and strangely curt.

"I want to go into the ship, the *Pericles*, the ship must be investigated . . ."

"Impossible, you know that, you heard the decision."

"Damn the decision! We're here and it's our problem, and we can't be dictated to by a meeting in Stockholm. They are worried only about the possible danger, but we can arrange it so that there is no danger. I'll go alone into the air lock, remember I've been there already and nothing happened to me. I won't touch a thing until that plate you've put on has been sealed behind me, with just a phone connection through it so that I can report. Do you see? There is absolutely no danger—I'll stay in the ship after I have reported, stay there as long as is necessary . . ."

"Going to solve the world's problem all by yourself?" Perkins asked coldly.

"It's out of the question," Chabel said. "There is nothing more to be discussed, the decision has been made."

"We can't abide by that decision, this is too important—"

"You're beginning to sound hysterical," Perkins said. "You see what I said, Prof. Chabel, this man can't be relied on."

"I can't be relied on?" Sam said angrily. "That's very funny coming from you, Eddie. You're not big enough for McKay's shoes and for the general welfare I suggest that you resign. Have you told Prof. Chabel that you refused to take action on Nita Mendel's report about Rand-gamma in dogs—"

"That's enough, doctor!" Chabel interrupted angrily.

"I was afraid this would happen," Perkins said, not looking at Sam. "That was why I warned you. He has

made these charges in private and I have ignored them, but now he has made them in public and something must be done."

"Something will have to be done about you, Eddie—not me," Sam said, controlling his burning anger only with the greatest effort. "You've bungled and you've lied to cover it up. You may be a good surgeon but you are a lousy administrator."

They both ignored him, Chabel turned to the intercom and pressed it. "Would you have the officer come in now."

It was going too fast for Sam and he did not realize what was happening until the office door opened and the police lieutenant walked in.

"I don't want to do this," Chabel said. "But things . . . events leave me with no alternative. I'm sorry, Sam, and I hope you'll understand. The lieutenant is not arresting you, it's just preventative detention, you've forced us to do it. There are irresponsible people who might listen to you and infinite harm could be caused if any attempt were made to enter the spaceship."

Sam stopped listening. He turned and walked towards the door, head lowered and feet dragging, hoping that they had forgotten one thing, and stopped at the open door as the lieutenant took his arm. They *had* forgotten. Other than the secretary the outer office was empty, the lieutenant, fortyish and slightly balding, had come alone to arrest a doctor who had opinions different from other doctors, a political charge that could be enforced under martial law. Sam turned to face the room behind him.

"Thanks, Eddie," he said, and kept turning.

They had forgotten that for almost ten years he had been a combat infantryman.

The lieutenant had not been expecting any trouble, he was off balance and unready. Sam levered on the policeman's wrist, twisting expertly in a punishing armlock that spun the man about and jarred him off-balance just as Sam's lowered shoulder slammed into the middle of his back. He stumbled across the room and smashed into the white-faced Eddie Perkins—Sam had a last glimpse of them falling together as he closed the door and went quickly by the frightened secretary and into the hall.

*How long did he have?* The hall was empty and as he ran down it he tried to figure out what to do next. There was no time to panic or just to run, they would be after him within seconds. And no time to wait for an elevator—he pushed through a door to the fire stairs and went down them five at a time. *No time to break a leg, either!* With an effort he slowed down, then pushed open the door two floors lower down. There were people here and he walked slowly along the corridor and through the swinging doors into the old wing, to a different bank of elevators.

What next? The policeman would have rushed out into the hall to try and catch him, then returned when he found Sam gone. Neither Perkins nor Chabel would have had the presence of mind to do anything while the lieutenant was out. Then the cop would take charge. They were phoning now, probably to the police guard on the main entrance, then to the other entrances, then finally there would be a hospital wide alarm. The police would be waiting at his room too, he couldn't change clothes so even if he got outside the hospital how far could he get in these whites? The elevator doors opened before him and he stepped forward.

"What have you been doing, Sam—running the mile? You're all in a sweat."

Dr. Con Roussell walked into the elevator behind him.

"You should know, Con, we were out in the meat wagon together."

"I lost track of you after we got to the bridge, what a night it was! What happened?" The doors closed and Roussell punched his floor, the twenty-third Sam noticed, the residential floor above his own.

"A lot's been happening. For one thing Nita—Dr. Nita Mendel has Rand's."

"The hell you say! The girl with the red hair that was with you at the *Pericles*?" They came out of the elevator, walking together.

"Yes, that's the one. Everything is going to pieces and the end is nowhere in sight. Do you have any Surbital? I'm going to try and get a few hours' sleep."

"Sure, in my room—but don't you have any in your bag?"

"Empty. And I'm not trotting along to the pharmacy for more."

Sam closed the door as Roussell unlocked the wardrobe and took out his bag and rummaged through it. "Are you sure you don't want Noctec or something like that?" he asked, coming up with the charged hypodermic needle.

"I drink that like mother's milk," Sam said, taking the needle. "A few cc of this and I'll sleep like a babe."

"Take more than six and you'll be under for twenty-four hours," Roussell said turning away. Sam slapped Roussell with the needle, right through his shirt, and emptied the barrel into his arm.

"Sorry, Con," he said, holding the man until he stopped struggling and sank to his knees. "This way you'll be in no trouble for aiding and abetting—and you'll get a good night's sleep, which you need."

He quickly dragged the other intern to the bed, then locked the door. By happy chance both of them were almost the same size and the clothes would fit well enough. Sam stripped and dressed in a one-piece blue suit with a little leather-string necktie that was so popular these days. It was still raining so he put a raincoat envelope into the black bag before he picked it up and went out.

While he dressed he had been thinking, making his mind up as to which would be the safest way out of the giant hospital. More than twenty minutes had elapsed since he pushed over the cop, time enough to alert all the guards at the main entrances. But there were other entrances, to the clinics and kitchens, that were normally neither guarded nor locked. But which one? More police would have arrived by now and would be assigned to the various entrances as fast as they could be checked off on the floor plan of the hospital. That meant he could use none of them safely, but must find a way to leave that they would not think of until they had sealed all the doors.

He knew where he was going, and was sure he could get out that way, and he could be caught only if he met someone who both knew him by sight and was aware that the police were looking for him. To minimize the chances



he went through the new X-ray Clinic, not opened yet to the public, and down a back stairs in one of the older buildings. There was no one in sight when he reached the hall on the first floor, slipped on the raincoat then eased the window open. A few weeks earlier some children had pried this window open and broken into the hospital, and when they had been caught had told how they had got in. The window faced on an alley and was not too far above the ground. No one saw Sam as he swung his legs over the sill, closed the window behind him, then dropped carefully to the ground below.

Now he was out—but what was he to do? His plans didn't extend past this moment, everything he had done had been almost instinctive flight until now. They had tried to capture him and he had resisted, knowing that they were wrong and that the ship *had* to be investigated. The *Pericles*, that was still the most important thing, and there was one man who could help him.

General Burke, UNA.

The rain was still falling in steady sheets, blown into eddies on the windy corners, and he was grateful to it since the streets were almost deserted and it gave him some cover. He hurried down 34th Street—the rain was also a good excuse for his haste—and turned into the first open bar. It was one of the new automated we-never-close kind and, though empty of customers, it had not been shut down. The door opened automatically for him and he headed towards the phone booth in the rear.

“Good morning, sir. A little wet out today, isn't it.”

The robot bartender behind the bar nodded towards him, industriously polishing a glass, the perfect picture of the pink-jowled and bald barkeep—though if you leaned far enough over the bar you could see that it was only a torso that ended at the waist. Research had proven that customers, particularly the more inebriated ones, preferred even an imitation man to a flat-faced machine.

“A double Scotch whisky,” Sam said, stopping at the bar. Now that the hurried escape was over he was feeling the fatigue again. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept: alcohol would carry him a bit longer.

“Here you are, sir, a double it is.”

The robot poured the glass to the top, full, with a convex meniscus bulging above the rim: at least robots didn't spill the drinks. Sam handed over a bill. "I'll need some small change for the phone."

"Change it is, sir, the customer is always right."

Sam finished his drink then closed himself in the phone booth. Where was it Burke had said he had his HQ, Fort Jay, was that in the Bronx? No, of course not, it was on Governor's Island, he must be tired if he couldn't remember that. He called book information and the computer gave him the number and he dialled it. Instead of Fort Jay the local operator appeared.

"I'm sorry, but the number you are trying to reach is a restricted military one. Do you have a priority?"

"No, this is a personal call. Isn't there any way I can call without a priority?"

"Yes, I can connect you to police headquarters on Centre Street, you can explain to them . . ."

"No thank you—it's not that important." He disconnected at once, then realized that he was sweating. Either the Fort Jay numbers had been on priority for a while—or someone had thought fast and moved even faster. It didn't matter which because the result was the same, it meant it wasn't going to be easy to get in touch with the general. Time was ticking away steadily—and Nita's life was running out.

There was another possibility—the call might have been traced and the police could be on their way here now. Sam hurried out in the driving rain and turned west on 34th Street, there were other people in the street now, not many, but enough to give him some concealment. How did he contact Burke? By going to Governor's Island, there was no other way. The tunnel was sure to be guarded but he would worry about that after he reached the Battery where the tunnel entrance was. Getting there was the immediate problem. It was about three miles and he could walk it easily enough, but a lone pedestrian was sure to be spotted and stopped by the police. There were no cabs, and the subways were now running only one automated train an hour. Steal a car? He didn't know how to go about it. When he reached Lexington Avenue he stopped

under the monorail as he noticed a flicker of motion from uptown—a train was coming! Then he was running for the station escalator and pelting up the steps as fast as he could. If he caught this train before anyone realized that he had escaped from the hospital he might stay ahead of the search!

When he ran across the station the train had stopped and the doors were already open, he jammed the coins into the slot and pushed through the entrance, but he was too late—the doors were starting to close. Fully automated, without a driver or a conductor, the train was leaving as soon as the controls sensed that there was no one waiting to board.

“Wait!” he shouted angrily—and senselessly as he ran across the platform. He would never make it in time.

There was a thin girl, the only passenger in the car, and she looked up when he called, then put her hand out between the almost-closed doors. They sprang open and before they could shut again Sam was inside.

“Thanks,” he said, out of breath, as he dropped into a seat.

“That’s all right, you’ll do the same for me some day.” She stood and went to the other end of the car and sat down there, facing away from him. People didn’t get too close these days.

The buildings swept by soundlessly outside, the rain lashed across the window. Sam opened his collar and dabbed away some of the sweat. Once he opened the black bag and looked inside, then slammed it shut without taking anything out. He was tired—but not that tired yet. If he was going to take any chemical stimulation it would be best to wait until a time when he would really need it. The jointed silver tube of the monorail train rushed downtown.

There was a stop at Wall Street and Sam got off there, the girl watching impassively as he left. No one else emerged from the train and he was alone on the platform, looking down at the narrow and empty canyons of the streets. The business heart of New York, the financial centre of North America, empty and deserted in the middle

of the day. He bent his shoulders into the driving rain and walked south.

There were police all around the entrance to the tunnel, a squad car parked in a side street and guards on the platform where the small, remote controlled buses departed for the island. Sam huddled back into the deep doorway and watched the entrance a block away. Had the police been here all the time—or was this all for his benefit? If it was he had better start moving, it wasn't safe near here. A truck came out of the tunnel and went on without stopping, one policeman waved to it, the only notice they took. Then a staff car appeared, going towards the island and was stopped. Only two officers went over to it but a number of other ones were watching carefully and the barrier remained down. It wasn't until the identity of the driver had been proven that it was allowed to proceed. Sam started to turn away when he saw another vehicle coming out of the tunnel, a jitter, he recognized the high-wheeled, thin outline at once. He should know it, he had been pounded about in one often enough, these airborne jeeps were overpowered and underweight—magnesium, dural, foam rubber—and riding them was like no other experience in this world. Only the UN army used them.

Sam eased away from the doorway and as soon as he was out of sight of the tunnel entrance he began to run. Where would the jitter be going? Probably north, uptown—but to the east or west side—or to the local streets? He had to catch it before it reached the first junction—he ran harder, the breath tearing in his throat.

When he turned the corner the jitter had already passed—but was waiting at the street light while the driver idled the engine, his foot on the clutch. Training—for once he loved it. The streets were empty but the man still stopped for the light. There was an officer seated next to the driver.

“Wait! Over here!” Sam shouted as the light changed and the jitter surged forward. The driver automatically applied the brake when he heard the shout and the officer turned; his .75 recoilless machine pistol pointed at Sam.

"I'm a doctor!" Sam called, waving the black bag. Perhaps it might help. The officer said something out of the side of his mouth and the machine wheeled around in a tight circle and rolled towards Sam. The muzzle of the gun stayed trained on him.

"What do you want?" the officer asked, a young second lieutenant, hard and thin, but still young.

Sam looked at the lieutenant's shoulder patch, the familiar battered dove with an olive branch in its beak and a crutch under its wing, and he couldn't help smiling.

"You're with the Fifth Airborne so you must know Cleaver Burke . . ."

"Are you referring to Gen. Burke? Make it fast, what do you want?" The lieutenant poked the gun in Sam's direction. He was tired and on edge. And Sam had to convince him quickly; a police car might pass at any moment and would certainly stop to see what was happening this close to the tunnel. He leaned closer to the lieutenant with his face expressionless as he spoke through his barely open mouth.

"General Burke is 'Cleaver' to his friends, lieutenant—but *only* to close personal friends. Do you understand that? I want you to bring him a message from me." Sam opened his bag and reached for a pad of prescription forms, ignoring the gun that swung to cover his movements.

"Why should I bring any messages for you . . ."

"Because I've asked you to, and Cleaver is waiting for this message—and just what do you think would happen to you if Cleaver didn't get it?"

Sam wrote swiftly without looking up, the silence grew taut.

*Cleaver—I've changed my mind. We're going into it. Having trouble. Have boat pick me up land end pier 15 East River. Capt. Green.*

"I won't be going back to the island for an hour at least, sir," the lieutenant said, and Sam knew he had won. The officer's tone was the same, but the Sir made all the difference.

"That will do fine." Sam folded the note and handed it to him. "For your own sake, lieutenant, I suggest that you do not read this message nor show it to anyone other than Gen. Burke. That will be the best for everyone."

The officer buttoned it into his breast pocket without a word and the jitter buzzed away. Even if the man did read it, it wouldn't mean much—to anyone but Cleaver. The signature was meaningless—but the rank was his old one and the lieutenant would describe him. If the note reached Cleaver they would come for him at once.

It was ten now and it would be physically impossible for the boat to be there before eleven at the very earliest. Sam began to slowly work his way north, keeping a careful eye out for moving cars. Two patrol cars passed, but both times he saw them well in advance. In one of the doorways where he took shelter he found an open garbage can and he buried the black bag under the rubbish in it. The alarm would be out for him by now and anything that marked him as a doctor had to be avoided. On Maiden Lane, within sight of the grey water of the East River, a robot bar was doing a good business; it takes more than a plague to keep sailors out of a saloon and the place was half full. Sam ordered a roast beef sandwich, there were still some in deep freeze, and a bottle of beer from the robot bartender—it was tricked out in an unwholesomely cute pirate eyepatch and neckerchief—and ate slowly. By eleven he was walking along the waterfront looking for a secure spot where he could wait. There were some heavy crates next to the warehouse on pier 15 at the foot of Fletcher Street, and by hunkering down between them he was concealed from sight on the land side. It was wet and uncomfortable but he had a good view of the slip, although the end of the pier was half concealed by fog and falling rain.

There was the sound of heavy motors as an occasional ship passed, but too far out for him to see in the mist. Once a loud hammer of an engine drew his attention and he pulled himself further back between the boxes as a River Police launch rumbled by, sweeping close to the end of the pier but not turning into slip. By noon he was soaked through and getting bitter, and by one o'clock

he was thinking of the 80 different things he would like to do to the pin-headed lieutenant if he ever saw him again.

At exactly 1.13 the silent shape of a small recon boat swung from its slip and coasted towards him with only the slightest burble of sound coming from its underwater hydraulic jets. Standing in the bow was the lieutenant. Sam pulled himself to his feet, stiff and cramped, and the boat nosed in his direction.

"If you knew what I have been thinking about you—" Sam said, and smiled.

"I don't blame you, sir," the lieutenant said, chewing nervously at his lower lip as he held out his hand to help Sam off the ladder. "I was less than an hour getting back to the tunnel, but there was some kind of trouble there with the police and everything was jammed up. It was only about half an hour ago that I got through and brought your note to the general. You were right, sir," he tried a tentative smile. "I've never seem him act like that before, not even in combat. He went up like an A-bomb and he got this boat from somewhere and had it in the water and me and the coxswain and all in it, inside of ten minutes."

"Here we go," the coxswain said, opening the throttle and turning in a tight circle. Sam and the lieutenant moved into the bow to get some protection from the low wind-shield and, at the same moment, they saw the River Police launch nose around the end of the pier and head towards them.

"Get down!" the lieutenant said, but Sam had already dropped onto the deck, sheltering behind the low sides. "Get under that tarp."

The T5 coxswain in the stern kicked a bundled up tarpaulin towards Sam without looking down as he did it, and it stopped at the ammunition boxes in the waist. Sam wriggled over to it, drew it towards him and struggled to open it without rising high enough to be seen: he could hear the launch rumbling closer. The stiff canvas resisted and in desperation he kicked hard into the folds with his feet and pulled it up over him. With his knees against his chest he could just about fit under the unrolled

part and the last thing he saw as he pulled his head under was the lieutenant turning to face the police boat and resting his fingers, by chance, on the trigger guard of his machine pistol.

"Stop your engine . . . what are you doing here?" an amplified voice bellowed across the narrowing stretch of water.

"Keep it moving, slow as you can," the lieutenant said, just loudly enough for the coxswain to hear. Sam sweated under the stifling cover, unable to move or to see the launch swinging closer. "Official business," the lieutenant shouted across the water.

"What do you mean?" The launch was so close now that they had abandoned the bullhorn. "Catch this line, we want to search you."

Sam controlled his involuntary movement as the rope thudded across the canvas. The lieutenant reached out his foot and kicked it into the water.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This is a unit engaged on active duty and we've just put some equipment ashore and our orders are to return at once."

The launch had stopped and the policemen on deck were all armed: a power turret with quadruple recoilless one-inchers was manned and the barrels depressed. The army boat, moving slowly, was already past the stern of the other boat. The police sergeant looked down at it angrily.

"Stop at once—that is an order. Or . . ."

"This is a military zone, you cannot issue orders to me." The lieutenant swung up his machine pistol and aimed it at the launch. "Open her wide when I say good-bye," he said in a low voice to the coxswain, then loudly, "If you attempt to restrain us I will open fire. I'm sure you don't want any incidents like that, do you? So let's just say good-bye."

A loud burbling sounded under the keel and the boat leaped forward, the lieutenant braced himself against the sudden thrust and kept the gun aimed at the launch.

"Stop there! Stop!" the bullhorn shouted and the launch started to swing about but no shots were fired. Before it had turned all the way the recon boat had cleared the end of the pier and swung downstream. The lieutenant



dropped down as they began pounding from wave crest to wave crest.

"Can we outrun them?" Sam asked, throwing off the tarp.

"With one jet plugged," the lieutenant said, holding out a pack of cigarettes. He was smiling easily but his forehead was dotted with drops of sweat as well as rain. "This is one of the new jobs, no armour, no range—but it can beat anything that floats."

Sam took one of the cigarettes and looked back, the dock had vanished in the mist and the launch still hadn't appeared.

"Thanks, lieutenant . . . ?"

"Haber, Dennis Haber. They call me Dan."

". . . Thanks, Dan. That wasn't so easy."

"It *was* easy, I guarantee it. The general told me to come back with you, or to get you back alone, but if I came back without you. . . . Listen, you know the general. I would much rather get into a fire fight with the cops any day."

"I think you're right."

They grabbed for handholds as the boat heeled over to miss a buoy, then straightened out towards Governor's Island again. The dark shape of the fort was already visible ahead and the coxswain throttled back, heading for a narrow dock that paralleled the shore. A jitter was waiting there and its motor ground into life as they approached. Cleaver Burke climbed out of it and helped Sam up from the boat himself, his fingers clamping like pliers.

"I'm glad you changed your mind, Sam—it's about time we had some action over that spaceship. Now, with the right publicity, we can get enough public approval to open it up." Lieutenant Haber went into the front of the jitter while they stepped over the low side into the back.

"It's too late for the publicity, Cleaver. Too much has changed and I—well I'll tell you when we're alone."

"Alone?" The general lowered his thick eyebrows in the well-known scowl that always meant trouble. "Don't you know where you are? This is *my* unit, *my* driver . . .

and Dan there is one of *my* officers. Now bite it out, boy. What's all this cloak-and-dagger nonsense?"

"The police are after me."

"Is that all? They won't arrest you here, hah! Is there any secret why they are after you?"

"They don't want me to get in touch with you."

"Well they haven't been doing too well." He glanced at Sam out of the corners of his eyes. "And just what is wrong with your getting in touch with me?"

"That should be obvious, Cleaver—they're afraid of trouble and they don't want any interference with Operation Cleansweep."

"Maybe I'm being a little thick today, Sam. What can you or I do that could possibly interfere with Cleansweep?"

"You might cause trouble over the Emergency Council's decision about A-bombing the *Pericles*."

"Now isn't that interesting," Cleaver said, and his voice was suddenly very cold. "This is the first time I have heard anything about that."

The jitter bounced to a stop in front of the headquarters building. "Come up to my office," Cleaver told Sam, then turned to the lieutenant and the driver. "Pass the word along that no civilians have come to this island today and no one here has ever heard of a Dr. Bertolli."

"Yes, sir," Lieut. Haber said as he saluted. "You'll be alone in your office now, General?"

"You catch on quick, boy. You better hang around the orderly room and take my calls for a while. The corporal here can carry the message back to the dock."

Once inside, with the door closed, Cleaver relinquished his hold on his temper. "Politicians," he snorted, stamping the length of the room. "Meatheads! Sitting up there on their fat duffs and making unilateral decisions that may affect the entire future of the human race—and making those decisions out of fear. I hadn't realized that the old philosophy of a bomb-waving solution for international problems was still lurking in dark spider-filled corners of the political mind. Cretins! They talk about war on disease without realizing that it *is* a war, particularly now, and has to be run like a war. We need good intelligence and the only place we're going to find it is inside that

spaceship. They're operating out of fear—if you can't run away from the unknown, why just blow it up!"

"They seem to be afraid of you too, Cleaver—even though you are under UN command. Why else wouldn't they inform you about the decision to destroy the *Pericles*?"

The general pulled open a file cabinet and took out a giant, two-quart bottle of bourbon. "Get the glasses out of the desk drawer," he said, then filled the large water glasses almost to the brim. "Are they really afraid I'll bust into that spacer?"

"It looks like it."

"Well—should I? What's the reason *you* want to look at it? What do you think we can find?"

Sam had the glass raised to his lips when he stopped suddenly, frozen, then slowly lowered it, untasted, back to the desk.

He knew what they would find in the ship.

This was no logical conclusion but a leap in the dark as his subconscious put together a number of clues that had been collecting ever since the spaceship had landed. It was a single answer that could explain everything that had happened—yet it was an incredible answer that he did not dare speak aloud if he wanted Cleaver to help him get into the *Pericles*. He couldn't tell him this, so he had to fall back upon the general's own arguments.

"We can't possibly know what we'll find in there, Cleaver, though there should surely be records of some kind. The important thing is that we cannot completely ignore the possibility of missing out on anything that might be of help. And there is—well—something else."

"What?"

"I don't know, it's just a guess—a wild hunch—and so wild I don't want to talk about it. But I do know that we *must* get into that ship."

"That's not much to go on, Sam, you realize that? Not now. It would have been enough a while back when we could have raised a political stink and got some public pressure working on our side to take a look into the ship. But public pressure and publicity are out now and there is only one way left that we can get into that ship . . ."

He broke off, swirling the liquor round and round in his glass before drinking the remainder in a long swallow.

"I'll say it so you won't have to, Cleaver. We'll have to break into that rocket by force—in spite of the guards."

When he finally answered the general's voice was flat and empty of emotion.

"That's treason you're talking about, boy—do you know that? And I'm a serving officer in the army in a time of international peril. If I did what you're suggesting I could be shot."

"If you don't do it people are going to keep right on dying by the thousands then by tens of thousands—because I can guarantee that we're no closer now to finding a cure to Rand's disease than we were the day it started. I took the same oath of allegiance that you did, Cleaver, and I'd break it in an instant if I felt that the people on the top had made a wrong decision over a danger as big as this one. And they *have* made a wrong decision . . ."

"I know they have—but it's asking too much, Sam! I agree the ship should be entered, but I can't bring myself to do it this way, not with the slight evidence, guesses and hunches that we have—"

A light knocking on the door interrupted him and he threw it open angrily. "What the devil do you want?" he asked Lieut. Haber who was uncomfortably standing there.

"I'm sorry, sir, I've been turning away all the calls and people who wanted to see you but, there is a call on the hot line, I didn't feel qualified to take it."

Gen. Burke hesitated for a single instant. "That's fine, Haber. Put it through to me here."

He relocked the door then seated himself behind the large desk where there sat three phones, one of them a brilliant red.

"Top secret direct line," he said, picking up the handset. "Keep out of range of the pickup."

It was a brief conversation, almost a monologue because Burke said little more than yes and no, then hung up. He seemed to have aged a bit and he rested his hands on the desk top as though he were tired.

"It's happened," he finally said. "More cases of the plague, people dropping on the streets. Your labs at Bellevue have confirmed the change."

"You mean that . . ."

"Yes. People can catch it now from one another, it doesn't need the dogs and birds any more. I can see them at the Emergency Council as soon as they hear about this, reaching for their bombs. Just as sure as eggs is eggs they are going to wipe out this plague spot and a few odd million people that happen to be in it at the time, which will probably include you and me."

He stood and tightened his belt.

"We're going to crack that rocketship *Pericles* open, boy. That's the only hope we have in hell."

## ELEVEN

General Burke checked the points off on his fingers as he made them.

"First," he said, pushing up his thumb, "we need a military operation, which I trust you will allow me to organize. A small, light force will be the best, I'll lead it myself . . ."

"You shouldn't get personally involved in this," Sam said.

"Horse apples! I'm responsible for this show and I'll be just as guilty giving the orders from the front line as I will from the rear. Plus the fact that I'm getting too desk bound and I'm hard pressed these days to find any reasons at all to get into the field. So that's set. Second, we need a medical man along since it's medical intelligence that we're after, which will be you. Thirdly, there must be someone who knows something about spaceships, the *Pericles* in particular, who can get us into it and show us around, and there is a natural choice for that job."

"Stanley Yasumura?"

"Correct. He flew into California as soon as the *Pericles* landed and he's been bugging everyone since then—myself included—to be allowed to enter the ship. He was one of the principal designers of the *Pericles* and seems to feel personally responsible for what has happened. I think

he'll come with us, but I'll talk to him first and sound him out before I give him any details."

"You can't use the phone, you'll be overheard, cut off."

"We in the military are not without resources, boy. I'll send Haber up to Yasumura's hotel with a command transceiver, one of the new ones fitted with a scrambler and wave length wobbler, they can't be jammed or eavesdropped. I can handle this part of the operation—will you need any medical kit?"

"No, nothing that I can think of."

"Good. Then your assignment now is to get some sleep so you'll be ready for tonight."

"We can't wait until then!" As he spoke Sam saw Nita's face clearly, sick, silent, unmoving. In the rush of events he had pushed the memory away: it returned with doubled impact now. She was dying minute by minute and there was no time to waste.

"We *have* to wait, Sam, because, aside from the fact that you look like you've been on a ten-day drunk and have given up sleeping as a bad habit, what we have to do can only be done after dark. We can't just walk up to the spacer and climb in. It's surrounded by city police who have orders to shoot anyone crossing the wire. Then there is the covering plate and the airlock to go through—and how much chance do you think we should have in daylight? Plus the fact that it will take awhile to set this operation up. So here's what you do, go into the next room where I have a cot that I use when the work keeps me here. Just take a rest, don't sleep if you don't want to, and you will be able to hear everything that goes on in here. You're going to be no good to us if you're pooped even before the operation begins."

Sam could find no holes in the arguments and the sight of the cot reminded him just how tired he was.

"I'll lie down," he said, "rest a bit. But I don't want to sleep."

Someone put a blanket over him and through the closed door to the adjoining office came a mumble of voices. Sam jerked awake, sitting up: the room was almost dark

and the sky outside the rain-streaked window was murky and grey. He hadn't wanted to sleep but was glad now that he had—it was going to be a long night. When he opened the door the officers around the desk looked up, Gen. Burke put down a blueprint and turned around in his chair.

"You're just in time, Sam, I was going to wake you. We're in the final stages now and it will be dark enough to leave in about an hour. Have you met Dr. Yasumura?"

The circle of soldiers opened up and the small, globular form of the nisei engineer bounced out, dressed in oversized army fatigues.

"Hi, Sam, I heard a lot about you," he took Sam's hand and pumped it enthusiastically. "I've been trying to see you ever since I got into town, but you were never available."

"None of the calls reached me, Doctor Yas . . ."

"Stanley, the name's Stanley, you're the doctor around here, Sam. The general has been telling me about the plot to keep us all apart. He sent an armed guard and a fancy radio to my hotel then got on it and explained what has been happening—I signed on for the duration. His boys had this uniform for me—wrong size naturally—and even an ID card, so I had no trouble getting here. Now you have to tell me, when you were in the airlock did you . . ."

"Hold it a moment, Yasumura," Gen. Burke broke in. "Let's take the whole operation in sequence, it wouldn't hurt to run through it once more and we want to brief Sam, then he can give you the technical advice at the end."

"I just wanted to know . . ."

"It'll keep. Sit down, Sam, have a drink and look at this map, see where we are now on Governor's Island, right in the top of the Upper Bay? From here we have to cross all of the end of Long Island filled with citizens and cops to reach Kennedy Airport, right?" Sam nodded. "Well there is an easier and a lot less public way to get there—by water." He traced the route with his finger.

"Out through the narrows and the Lower Bay, then east past Coney Island and in through Rockaway Inlet.

We pick our way through Jamaica Bay and come ashore on the end of the airport runway where it sticks out into the water.”

“There’s only one thing wrong,” Sam said, tapping the map. “It must be over thirty miles going this way, we’ll be all night in a small boat finding our way through those inlets and marshes.”

“No boat, we use a hoverjeep. With all the equipment we’re taking it will only hold four, but that’s all we need since you, I and Haber can take care of any trouble we run into. All right, we’re at the airport now. Haber flew over it in a chopper earlier today—we found him a legitimate excuse. He took pictures and he kept his eyes open. Haber.”

The lieutenant tapped the map where the shallow water of the Bay touched the edge of the airport. “There are no guards here at all, but in the blown-up prints we found ultra-violet trespass alarms and infra-red detectors. Getting by them will be no problem. Trouble starts here, around the *Pericles*, more detectors and a barbed wire fence—patrolled by armed police. The real difficulty will be getting by those police guards without raising the alarm. I assume that they will . . . that is, we will want to show discretion about injuring them?” He looked up at Gen. Burke, then glanced quickly away.

There was a lengthening silence as the general looked impassively at the map: someone’s shoe scraped as he moved his feet and there was a muted cough.

“We finally come to that, don’t we,” Gen. Burke said quietly. “We’ve all fought in a lot of campaigns, with the exception of Dr. Yasumura, and in some odd corners of the world. The Fifth Airborne is an American division so therefore, in keeping with UN policy, we have never been in active service in North America before. We’ve killed when we had to, when killing was the only way to enforce the peace, and while we have perhaps regretted doing this, we know that many times it has been the only choice. Now we’re serving in our own country and the enemy is a handful of over-age cops who are just following orders on a dull guard detail. I’m beginning to appreciate the UN dictum of never fighting where you’re



recruiting. All right. Keep the safeties on your weapons, use your blackjacks, but if it comes down to a matter of you or the other guy I want it to be you. We have too much at stake here. Is that understood?"

"It may not be that bad," Sam said. "I'll bring a pressure hypo of Denilin, it's a quick-action sedative that will put a man under in seconds."

"You bring your needle, Sam, and we'll give you every chance to use it. Let's hope it works out that way, and if it doesn't I don't want any of you to forget what you have to do. We pass the guards, get through the wire and reach the spaceship—then what? How do we get in Dr. Yasumura?"

"Through the airlock, there is no other way. This ship was built to stand up to Jupiter's gravity and atmosphere and there is very little short of an A-bomb that will make a dent in it." He picked up the photograph of the *Pericles* made that morning. "The police cut away the ladder when they welded that plate over the lock—do I hear any suggestions how we can get up those twenty feet from the ground?"

There were a half-dozen officers in the room, men from Gen. Burke's staff, seriously considering the problem of illegal entry of the spaceship. Sam knew that none of them questioned the general's decision to enter it by force, they just did as they were directed with a loyalty given to few officers. Perhaps they wouldn't walk off a cliff if the general demanded it, but they would certainly follow him if he went first.

"What's the hull made of?" a greying captain of engineers asked.

"A specially developed titanium alloy, it contains no iron."

"Then magnets are out. Our longest folding ladder is fifteen feet . . ."

"Then bolt an extension on the end," Gen. Burke interrupted. "We have very little time left, let's get on with this. We're on the ladder now, standing in front of that plate they welded on—how do we get through that?"

"No problem, general," the engineer said. "You'll carry one of the portable lasers we use for cutting heavy metal

in the field. I understand that plate is made of mild steel, the laser will cut it like butter.”

“Now we’re moving along, we’re in the airlock and that’s where you take over, Dr. Yasumura.”

“I will need tools, a multi-tester, portable scope and some things like that, I’ve talked this over with your engineers and they’ll give me everything I need. There are only one or two ways that Commander Rand could have disconnected the controls so that the inner door will not open, and once I crack into the control box there I’ll find out and open it up. Once we’re through that door we’ll go through the ship from bow to stern until we find what Rand meant when he wrote *sick in ship*. And I’ll find the log, see how the ship handled during the landing, the equations . . .”

“Just try to control your technical enthusiasm until you get there, Yasumura, we’re not in the ship yet. I suggest you get what gear you need from the engineers so it can be loaded into the jeep. Lieut. Haber will go with you to draw the anti-detector units. Sergeant Bennet will get some coffee and sandwiches up here. Dismissed.”

The first trouble came fifteen minutes later.

“Sorry, sir, but we can’t get all the equipment into the hoverjeep,” Haber reported.

“Lieutenant, you’re an idiot. Stuff it in, boy—stuff it in!”

“Yes, sir. What I mean is we can’t get in the equipment and four passengers and get the thing off the ground. There just isn’t enough power.”

“We’ll take two jeeps then, and if we can we’ll squeeze in another man to help carry that gear.”

“That will be me, sir,” Sgt. Bennet said.

“Agreed. Get into night fatigues and bring a can of blackface.”

Sodium vapour lights sliced the darkness of the yard, illuminating the falling rain with their crackling blue glow and casting black shadows under the cigar-box bodies of the hoverjeeps that rumbled and whistled noisily as they floated a yard above the ground, supported on the cushion of air blasted downwards by their fans.

“Drop them!” Gen. Burke shouted. Like the others

of the raiding party he was dressed in black coveralls and dark boots with a black beret pulled low over his hair. Their faces, hands and visible skin were soot-coloured, without highlights, stained by the blackface cream.

"Engine warm, tank full, radio and radar tested, sir," the driver of the first hoverjeep said, switching off and climbing out. "She'll lift, hover and do full speed with this load you're carrying."

"Let's move then. I'll drive the lead jeep, Sam and Yasumura come with me. Haber, take the second and the sergeant will ride shotgun for you. Stay close behind me and be ready to turn southwest as soon as we see the docks on the Brooklyn shore. We're going to start out of here going due east so keep your eye on the compass, I'll be using radar but the compass is all you'll have, that and the sight of my rear end going away from you, so don't get lost. We're going to put on a bit of a show in case the police are using radar too, there are five copters going out with us and they'll fly low and we'll go at maximum altitude so all the blips will merge. When we get in the radar shadow of the shore installations we'll drop down and cut out while the copters fly around for a while. Any questions? All right then, here we go."

The whistling of the fans was drowned out as the flight of copters came over, dropping low. The general signalled and all the lights went out at the same moment; watery darkness filled the yard and the hoverjeeps were invisible as they drifted across the ground and slipped down the ramp to the water. The riding lights of the copters vanished into the falling rain, their unseen companions moving beneath them.

"Shore about 200 yards ahead," Sam reported, bent over the hooded screen of the radar.

"I can't see a damn thing," the general muttered. "No, I'm wrong, there it is." He touched the switch to the microphone. "Cut in your silencers, be ready to turn—*now!*"

With the silencers engaged their speed dropped by a third and the copters rumbled away into the darkness. As the two hoverjeeps turned towards the ocean their passage was marked only by the dimpled water which they

floated above and the muttering, muted whistle of their fans. Silent jets of air drove them forwards, down the Upper Bay and under the briefly glimpsed lights of the Narrows Bridge and into the Lower Bay and the higher waves of the Atlantic. Once they were well away from the shore the silencers were cut out and they tore through the darkness with racing-car speed. The rain was stopping and through patches in the haze they caught glimpses of a row of lights on their left.

"What's that?" Gen. Burke asked.

"Coney Island, the street and boardwalk lights along the shore," Sam said, squinting at the radar.

"Blast! Just when we could use some filthy weather it has to clear up—what's that I'm coming to ahead?"

"Rockaway Inlet, it leads to Jamaica Bay. Stay on this course, we're in the middle of the channel and we have to go under the bridge that crosses it."

There was no traffic on the bridge that they could see and it appeared to float in mid-air, vanishing out of sight into the mist in both directions: they drifted under it with muted fans. Ahead lay the wilderness of mud banks, waterways, swamps and waving cattails that made up the heart of Jamaica Bay. They floated over it, ignoring the marked channels as the hovercraft crossed water, reed clumps and mud flats with equal facility. Then the bay was behind them and just ahead was the straight line of the filled land and the lights marking the end of the Kennedy Airport runway. With engines throttled back they drifted up the bank.

"The alarms begin right there at the lights, sir," Haber's voice whispered in Gen. Burke's earphone.

"Put down then, we'll go the rest of the way on foot." They dropped like silent shadows and the men climbed out and unloaded the equipment. "Sergeant, you've had the most experience with the cheaters, we'll hold here while you put them in."

Sgt. Bennet shouldered the heavy equipment pack and crawled forward in the mud, the detector rod held out before him. They could see nothing of his advance and Sam held his impatience under control and tried to keep his thoughts off Nita back there in the hospital dying by

degrees. He wished that he had put in the cheater: though he knew they must have changed in the ten years since he had last handled one. Trying to picture what Bennet was doing would keep his mind off that hospital bed. The swinging prod cutting a regular arc over the ground, then the twitch of the needle on the glowing dial. Knocking out the infra-red detectors wasn't difficult, as long as you didn't bang them with the insulation hood when you were dropping it over them at the end of the long rod. The ultra-violet alarms were the tricky ones, first making an accurate reading of the output without cutting the beam in order to adjust the cheater lamp. Then the smooth, continuous motion they had practised so much, moving the tiny UV generator in front of the pickup so that there was no change in the level of received radiation. Once it was in position you could break the original beam to the photocell because the cheater-light was shining into it from a few inches away. Nita, Nita. The minutes stretched out and the air cleared, stars broke through above them. At least there was no moon.

A silent figure loomed up before them and Sam's hand automatically found the butt of his pistol. It was Sgt. Bennet.

"All in position, sir, a push-over, dead easy. If you'll all walk behind me single file I'll take you through the gap."

They went carefully, one behind the other, treading as lightly as they could with the heavy packs and the ladder. The infra-red detectors were ignorant of their passage since their body heat was shielded from the pickups by the insulating covers, and though they cut through the invisible beam of ultra-violet light there was no alarm since the cheater fed its own steady UV source guarding photocell.

"That's the last of them," Haber said, "there's nothing now between us and the guards around the ship."

"No cover either," Gen. Burke said, "and the rain has stopped. We'll stay in the grass here and parallel the runway. Keep low and keep quiet."

With its attendant rows of lights the wide runway stretched away from them, terminating suddenly in the

dark bulk of the spaceship that sprawled across it, blocking it. A few lights on the ground near the ship marked the location of the guarded, barbed wire fence that ringed it, but there were black gaps in between the lights. The general led them towards the nearest patch of darkness, midway between two of the lights, and they crawled the last hundred yards on their stomachs. They dropped into the mud, motionless, when a slowly plodding policeman appeared in the nearest illuminated circle. He cradled a recoilless .75 sub-machine gun in the crook of his arm. No one moved as the guard squelched by them, a dimly moving form against the night sky. Only when he had passed through the next circle of light did Gen. Burke issue his whispered instructions.

“Bennet—knock out the detectors and as soon as you do we can cut through the wire. Sam and Haber move towards that light and get ready to take out any cops that come this way. Yasumura lie still and shut up. Let’s go.”

For Stanley Yasumura this was the worst time, just waiting, unable to do anything as the minutes ticked by. The cliff-like bulk of the *Pericles* loomed over him and he tried to study it, but there was little to see. The general and the sergeant were working as a team, neutralizing the different alarms. The other two seemed to have vanished in the darkness and all he could do was lie there, plastered with mud and soaked to the skin, and try not to hear the racing thud of his heart. There was a stir of movement at the far side of the nearest light and another policeman appeared, walking steadily towards the spot where Yasumura lay, approaching with measured, heavy steps. It seemed incredible to Yasumura that the man couldn’t see him lying there, or that he hadn’t heard the rustling movements of the two others working their way towards the barbed wire. And where were the ones who were supposed to be on guard?

In unvoiced answer to his question the two figures rose behind the policeman and closed with him in a silent rush. Haber had his arm about the cop’s neck so that the incipient shout became only a muffled gasp, while Sam held his flailing arm, twisting it so that it was palm

up and pressing the nozzle of the pressure hypodermic against the bare skin. There was a brief hissing that blasted droplets of the sedative through the skin into the tissue below. For a few seconds there was a soundless struggle as both men held the policeman's writhing figure so that he could not raise an alarm or reach the trigger of his gun: then he collapsed and they eased him to the ground.

"That's fine," Gen. Burke said appearing out of the darkness. "Lay him over here and take his weapon, we're ready to go through the wire. Pick up the ladder and the rest of the gear and follow me."

"The second strand up from the bottom is carrying a charge," Sgt. Bennet said, pointing to it where it was stapled to the tall wooden pole: the wire fence stretched ten feet above the ground. "I've jumped it with an insulated wire so we can get through, but don't touch the ends."

The wire cutter clicked loudly in the night and they eased the cut sections back.

"That's enough, let's go," Burke said when the wire had been cut up to three feet above the ground.

They crawled under, one at a time, passing the packs through the gap before them. Then they were skirting the base of the towering black ship, picking their way over the broken ground and, as they came round the bulge of a gigantic fin, they saw in the light of the distant hangars the still open outer door of the airlock.

"Ladder!" the general hissed, and Haber stood it up beneath the door and switched it on. The two small motors, with their power packs, were built into the bottom of the legs, they whined softly and the ladder extended until the top touched just below the lock. Sam had shouldered the heavy-duty batteries and converter unit that powered the laser that Yasumura carried and, while the others steadied the ladder, he followed the engineer to the airlock.

"Plug this in," Yasumura whispered and handed the end of the cable to Sam. The laser was a milk-bottle-sized tube with a flaring, bell-shaped mouth that automatically spaced the output lens at the correct distance from the

work while it shielded the operator's eyes from the fierce light. He put the open end against the large sheet of half-inch steel that had been welded over the lock and switched on the power. It hummed loudly, too loudly in the quiet night, and when he moved it along slowly a black line appeared in the steel: there was the acrid smell of burnt metal.

The laser cut steadily and surely, marking a yard-wide circle in the covering plate. Yasumura didn't complete the circle, when it was almost finished he made an adjustment on the laser then did the last few inches at the bottom. This time the intense beam of monochromatic light did not cut the steel, heating it instead to a cherry red. He turned off the laser and pushed his shoulder against the plate, the ladder swayed and Sam reached up and braced the engineer's legs. Yasumura tried again and slowly the heated hinge bent and the disk of metal leaned inwards, he climbed higher and put more weight on it until it was bent almost parallel with the inside floor. He stepped carefully over the still hot edge and vanished inside.

"Up we go," Gen. Burke said and Haber started slowly up the ladder under the weight of the heavy pack of equipment.

"If you please, sir," Sgt. Bennet said, "I think I can do more good right here on the ground. If any police come by I might be able to keep them quiet, the doctor gave me his hypodermic. You need all the time you can get."

Burke hesitated only a fraction of a second. "You're right, Bennet. Rear guard and take care of yourself, no foolish chances."

"Yes, sir." He saluted and moved off towards the opening in the wire.

When the general climbed through the hole in the covering plate he had to brush aside the heavy folds of blackout cloth that the others were fixing across it, and once he was inside the edges were sealed and the battle-lamp turned on. They blinked in the sudden light and Yasumura hurried over to the control panel, rubbing his hands together happily. The airlock controls were dead,



just as they had been when Sam first tried them, so the engineer began at once to remove the covering panel.

"Is this the phone you used?" the general asked.

"It's the one," Sam said and began running through the numbers. They were connected to compartment after compartment, all empty just as before.

"No signs of anyone, or any kind of disturbance," Burke said, scratching at his blackened jaw. "Try the control room again. Nothing there either, this is a puzzler, Sam."

There was a muffled clang and they turned to see that Yasumura and Haber had lowered the heavy plate to the floor, exposing the interior of the junction box. The engineer probed with a circuit tester, then probed again. He shorted two terminals with the jaws of a pliers and the frown deepened on his forehead.

"That's strange," he said, "there doesn't seem to be any power through this box at all, I can't understand it. Maybe Rand rigged some kind of device inside the ship to break all the current past the inner door once he had opened the outer one. A timing device of some kind, perhaps."

"You mean that you can't open the door?" Burke snapped.

"I didn't say that, it's just difficult . . ."

"What about the powerpack from the laser, will that give you enough current for what you need?"

"Of course! I'm eight kinds of idiot for forgetting that, it's more than we need in fact, I'll have to cut down the—"

His voice broke into a mumble as he opened the powerpack and changed connections quickly, then ran two wires from it to the open junction box on the wall.

"Here goes!" he said as he closed a relay with an insulated screwdriver.

"Nothing happened.

Gen. Burke's voice crackled like sheet lightning. "Well—can you open it or can't you?"

"It should be opened now—but it's not, something has been disconnected inside the ship."

"Then forget the electricity, isn't there any other way through that door—or maybe the wall?"

"You have to understand the construction of this ship, general, since this airlock was designed to be opened to the Jovian atmosphere it is just as strong as the rest of the hull. The inner lock is thick as a bank vault and twice as tough."

"Are you trying to tell me that—after all we have done to get here—that you can't get us into the bloody ship?"

From somewhere outside there came a sudden hammer of a machine gun and the clang of bullets on the hull. Even as they were turning, a light was focused on the opening they had cut in the metal, a beam strong enough to show through the thick weave of the blackout cloth.

## TWELVE

Another light came on and at the same instant a line of holes stitched itself across the cloth and death screamed and ricocheted around the compartment as half-inch armour-piercing slugs clanged off the impenetrable metal of the walls. It lasted less than a second, then there was more firing outside and the light was gone, darkness enveloped the lock as the battlelamp shattered and in the sudden silence that followed there was a single, choked-off moan.

"That tears it," Burke said. "They know we're here and our time is cut to nothing. Bennett won't be able to hold them off very long. Get us into the ship, Yasumura . . ."

A tiny cone of light sprang out from Yasumura's penlight, sweeping across Lieutenant Haber lying sprawled out on the floor with blood soaking out through the leg of his coveralls. Sam cut the cloth away quickly and began to dress the wound with his first-aid pack.

"Is there anyone else hurt?" he said.

"I'm fine," the general snapped. "Yasumura—what about you?"

"There is no trouble—listen, we could close the outer port, would that help?"

"Keep us from being shot to death," Burke grunted. "And buy us some time—now you're beginning to think."

"The outer door isn't a problem," the engineer mumbled around the light he clutched in his teeth as he swiftly changed the connections in the junction box. "The motor for it is here as are the wires, so—"

A relay sparked as he closed it and there was the loud-pitched whine of an electric motor in the wall.

"It should be closing . . ." his words were cut off as another burst of firing tore the cloth covering from the opening and a shaft of burning light poured in. This time there was no answering fire from below and the light remained on. They dropped to the floor and saw the massive door outside swinging slowly towards them. More shots boomed out, a continuous fire, but it was aimed at the closing door not at the open lock. Bullets roared against the metal, screaming away in vibrating ricochets and still the door kept moving, coming on until it hit the steel plate over the opening. The plate bent, tore and the motor whined louder in the wall, then suddenly stopped. The plate had buckled and jammed leaving an opening just a few inches wide.

"The circuit breakers blew when the motor overloaded," Yasumura said.

"It's good enough." General Burke stood up. "Now, how do we get the inner door opened? Can we cut through it with the laser?"

"We could—but it wouldn't do much good. This door is sealed like a bank vault, a motor-powered ring gear inside the door turns pinion gears that drive out three-inch thick bars into sockets in the housing. We can't cut them one by one."

"The trouble then," Sam asked, "is that something is stopping the current from getting to this motor in the door?"

"Yes—"

"Well, couldn't you cut an opening in the door big enough to reach through and connect the motor to the power pack? Then you could move it as you did the outer door . . ."

"Sam, you're wasted in medicine," Yasumura shouted enthusiastically, "because that's just what we're going to do." He began to draw on the sealed door with a grease pencil. "Here are the bars, the ring gear . . . and the motor should be about here. If we cut through at this spot we should miss the motor but be in the central cavity where we can wire into it."

He threw down the pencil and began to pull the wires from the powerpack and to reconnect it. There were more shots from outside, but none of them found the narrow slot of the doorway. The laser buzzed and Yasumura pressed it in the door over the spot he had marked.

It was slow work, the metal of the door was dense and resistant and the laser cut only a fraction of an inch at a time as he worked it in a slow circle the size of a saucer. He finished the circle and went over it again to deepen it. The metal heated and stank. General Burke crawled over to the door and shielded his eyes from the light and tried to see out, then put his gun to his shoulder and fired a burst. He dropped low as the firing was returned and the lock rang like a bell with the impact to the slugs on the massive door.

"They're bringing up a fire engine with a tower, I scattered them a bit. But they'll bring it back again or someone will think to use a high pressure hose and they'll wash us out of here. How is it coming?"

"I should have cut through by now," Yasumura gasped, leaning on the laser, "but this metal. . . ." There was a clatter as the plug of metal dropped free.

"Now open it!" Burke snapped and fired another burst through the gap.

It was slow, painful work teasing the plug of metal out of the hole far enough to get a grip on it with a wrench. Sam stood ready and clamped down quickly as soon as he could and pulled the hot cylinder from the hole and threw it the length of the airlock. Heedless of his smouldering sleeve, Yasumura flashed the light into the opening.

"There it is!" he chortled. "Bang on. Pass me the long-shanked screwdriver and the cables from the powerpack."

Attaching the wires at the bottom of the deep hole was

exacting work, made even more difficult by the hot metal that burned into the little engineer's flesh. Sam could see the angry welts rising on his skin and the way he bit hard on his lip while beads of sweat sprang out on his face.

"Done," he gasped, and pulled the screwdriver out. "Turn on the power, the motor is hooked up."

There was an angry whirring buzz from the opening that lasted almost a minute and, when it rose in frequency, Yasumura switched the electricity off. He squinted in through the opening with the light.

"The rods are withdrawn, so let's see if we can push this thing open!"

They heaved against the door's unyielding bulk, planting their feet on the deck and straining until their muscles cracked. It didn't move.

"Once more--" Burke gasped, "and this time give it everything."

With their lips drawn back from their clenched teeth they strained at the massive door and Haber dragged himself across the floor and struggled up on one leg to add his weight to the effort.

Slowly, with reluctant motion, it moved inwards.

"Keep it going . . ." the general gasped as the gap widened, first a fraction of an inch, then more, until light streamed out and it was big enough to get through. "That's enough . . .!"

Sam eased the wounded lieutenant back to the deck as Burke slid cautiously through the gap with his gun pointed before him. He lowered it and laughed brusquely.

"I don't think it's much good for shooting germs. Come on, all of you in here and bring the equipment."

They handed it in through the opening, then Sam helped Haber to his feet and passed him through to Burke before squeezing past the door himself.

"Look at that," Yasumura said, pointing to a jagged, smoke-stained opening in the wall of the corridor. "That's where the junction box for the airlock controls used to be, there must have been a charge of explosive in there—it would have been simple enough for Rand to rig that with a time fuse. But why . . .?"

"That's what we're to find out," Burke said. "Haber, you're not so mobile so stay here as rear guard and see to it no one gets in to bother us."

"Yes, sir."

"Dr. Yasumura, I imagine the control room would be the best place to look for anything—will you lead the way?"

"Down this connecting corridor, there's an elevator that goes directly there."

He went first and their footsteps echoed loudly in the empty ship. They walked warily, looking into every doorway they passed, cautious although they did not know why.

"Hold it," Yasumura said and they stopped instantly, guns swinging to the ready. He pointed to a thick insulated wire that crossed the floor of the corridor before them, emerging from a jagged hole in one wall and vanishing into the other. "That cable, it wasn't here when the ship left Earth."

Sam knelt and looked at it closely. "It seems normal enough, from the ship's supplies I imagine. The *Pericles* was on Jupiter for almost two years, this must be a modification of some kind that they made there."

"I still don't like it," the engineer said, glaring at the heavy wire suspiciously. "There are cableways between decks, they could have run it there. Better not touch it now, I'll take a closer look at it later."

The destroyed junction box for the airlock seemed to be the only damage that had been done to the ship, the atomic pile was still in operation, the electrical current was on and the air fresh, though it had the canned odour of constant recycling. When they rang for the elevator its door slid open at once.

"The control room is right up top, in the nose of the ship," Yasumura said, pressing the button. As the elevator hummed up the shaft the tension increased with every passing instant, a spring being coiled tighter and tighter. When the door slid open both Sam and the general had their guns raised and pointed without being aware of it; they stepped out. Some of the tension ebbed as they saw that the domed chamber was as empty of life—or death—as it

had been when they had first looked at it on the phone screen in the airlock.

“What the devil is that?” Yasumura asked, pointing to a foot square metal box that was welded to the deck against the back wall. “Another new installation since the ship left—I wonder what it is for?”

It was a crude cube made of ragged edged metal sheets welded together with a wide and irregular bead. Small cables emerged from holes in its sides and a larger, wrist-thick cable came up from the top and vanished through a jagged gash cut into the wall. They traced the smaller cables and found that they ran to the control boards, most of them to the communication equipment. Sam stood in front of the control chairs and faced out into the room.

“That’s interesting,” he said. “I didn’t think I had seen these cables or the box before when I used the phone to look in here—and I didn’t. It may be just an accident, but none of them are visible from where I’m standing—right in front of the pickup for the phone.”

“Something even more interesting,” Yasumura said, pointing. “All of the communicators, long wave, FM everything—they’re all turned on.”

General Burke turned slowly, his eyes following the converging wires back to the box, to the heavy cable that ran up the hole in the wall and vanished. “I think we had better take a look and see where that big cable goes to,” he said.

“What about the ship’s log?” Sam asked. “There should be something about the disease there, or there may be other records.”

“They’ll keep for the moment,” the general said, starting towards the door. “I want to find out first just what is going on with all these wires and connections. Come on.”

The next compartment was banked with navigation instruments and the cable writhed across the floor like a dead serpent, then plunged through a cracked opening in the plastic panel of the far wall. They tracked it through two more compartments before it dived through a small doorway and down the spiral steps in the tunnel beyond.

Another cable looped down from the ceiling and joined it: both vanished out of sight below.

"This is an emergency stairwell," Yasumura said, "it runs the length of the ship."

Only tiny glowtubes illuminated the steps as they wound their way down, deeper and deeper into the spaceship. Other cables came in through open doorways or through ragged holes cut in the metal wall until there were more than a dozen spiralling down with them, sprawling across the steps. Then the end came, suddenly, as they walked around the turn of the steps where all the cables bunched together and ran out through an open door.

"What's out there?" the general asked, "at this level."

Yasumura frowned at the stencilled number on the wall, then counted off on his fingers: he looked surprised. "Why—there's nothing here, we're in the fuel levels. There should be nothing but tanks out there, empty tanks, the fuel here would have been used up on the outward flight."

They eased out through the door, stepping carefully over the tangle of cables, and faced the white wall into which the cables dived.

"That shouldn't be here!" the engineer said.

There was a chill in the air and Sam leaned over and ran the muzzle of his gun along the wall knocking off a spray of fine ice crystals. Massive, crudely formed girders ran from the wall to the frame of the ship. There was an ordinary tv phone fixed to the wall above the spot where cables entered, Yasumura pointed at it.

"That phone shouldn't be here either there's no phone station at this point. And the number is blank—"

Sam stepped by him and turned the phone on, but the screen remained dark.

"You're going to talk to me whether you want to or not," he said, then waved the others to stand back. Before they could stop him, or even knew what he was doing, he had sighted along his gun and fired a short burst at the outer edge of the bundle of cables. The bullets screamed away and two of the insulated cables jumped and were severed.

The phone hummed and the screen came to life.

The Jovian looked out at them.



DOWN THROUGH THE HURLING TORRENTS OF THE ATMOSPHERE the bulky form of the *Pericles* dropped pitting its mass and the thrust of its thundering jets against the gravitational pull of Jupiter and the attacking weight of the dense atmosphere. Screaming winds buffeted it, tried to turn it from its plotted course, but sensitive instruments detected the deviation even as it began and informed the computer: the incandescent finger of an atomic jet flared, then another, making the constant compensations and balances that kept the ship's fall under control. Lightning crackled through the soup-thick atmosphere that was compressed by a gravity almost three times greater than Earth's, while methane and ammonia rain hammered at the rocket's metallic skin.

No echo of the tempest outside penetrated to the control room where the ordered calm was disturbed only by the distant hum of the air vent and an occasional rustle as one of the three men in the deep chairs changed position and spoke a few words in a low voice. The thick and insulated walls cut off all sound and sight, the few tiny direct vision ports were sealed and capped, and only one viewscreen held a televised view of the surging atmosphere outside, a dark and rolling cloud mass of no interest. The display on the other screens was far more relevant, the course plot, altitude, speed, radar soundings. The ship fell.

"On course so far without readable deviation," the second officer, Commander Rand, said. "We're going to sit right in the middle of that iceberg." He was a blond man with a mild expression, and seemed too young for the naval rank of a commander, even though it was a technical rank earned by his prowess in the mysteries of computer control. He had programmed this landing precisely and completely so that now all he had to do was sit back and watch it happen.

"I wish you would not refer to the Reef as an iceberg," First Officer Weeke said with slow Dutch thoroughness. "It is made of ice not as we know it on Earth but instead compacted to an incredible hardness. The radio probes have shown that and we have all the readings to prove this is a solid object on which we can land with impunity—"

"Wind velocity is below a hundred m.p.h. What's the air temperature?" Captain Bramley asked.

"Minus 150 degrees," Rand said. "Just a few degrees lower than the Reef temperature. We're almost down."

They watched the indicators in slence, alert for the emergency that never came, and in each sweep of their eyes across the crowded boards they rested longest on the trajectory display screen where the red blob of their position was sliding down the white line of the selected course towards the rising bulk of the Reef.

That is what had been called from the very first, the Reef. There might be other reefs lost in the planet-wide sea of frigid and liquefied gas, but they had not looked for them since there was a limit to the number of radio probes they could expend. This reef, the Reef, had been found by one of the first radar rockets and its position had been exactly plotted. There had been speculation that it might be floating free in that stupendous ocean but it had turned up exactly on schedule ten hours later when Jupiter's rotation brought it back to the same spot. Once they knew where to look and what to look for a constant watch had been kept on the Reef from where they hung in orbit, and when radar observation proved that it was joined inflexibly to the planet's surface all the later rocket probes were directed to it.

Now they were landing on it. Rocket exhausts lanced down slowing the ponderous *Pericles* almost to a stop, jamming the men deep into their acceleration couches, as radar waves probed the surface below looking for the optimum spot for a landing. Then lateral rockets fired, easing them over as they dropped so that they could come to rest on the flattest surface. Hotter and faster burned the jets digging into the ice and sending out clouds of steam that instantly froze and were whipped away by the ceaseless wind, until finally the great mass was suspended above the surface almost unmoving, dropping at inches a second. In spite of this the ship jarred and creaked as they struck and when the jets went off it was gripped by Jupiter's trebled gravity. The structure of the ship groaned and settled to rest under the load. They were down.

"Feels like we're still decelerating," Rand said, pushing himself painfully forward in the chair.

Captain Bramley did not answer until after he had made a visual check of all the stations and exchanged a few words with the men there. This took less than three minutes since the total complement of the *Pericles* was just forty-one, while only a third of this number were even indirectly involved in the operation of the fully automated ship.

"We're down and in one piece and no one injured," the captain said sinking back into the chair. "These 3G's are going to be hard to live with."

"We'll only have to take it for a week," Rand said, just as the instrument board went wild.

It was unprecedented and unallowed for in any of the instructions that the computer had ever received and, after running through all the possible solutions in its memory bank within nanoseconds and finding no answers, bank after bank of lights flashed red on the boards. The ship's officers took over then, testing and clearing circuits, fighting to find out the trouble and correct it before they were destroyed. Bit by bit, as urgent messages proved that the hull was sound and that no alien atmosphere was leaking in, they regained some of their composure and began to cross check. There was nothing wrong that they could discover easily since it was the instruments themselves that were acting wildly and producing impossible observations. They cut them out one by one and it was First Officer Weeke who finally located the trouble.

"It is a magnetic field, a tremendous one that must be over 10,000 kilogauss to cause this trouble, it is low down in the ship, near to the ground, near to the ice I should say since there is no ground here, and it is affecting all the instruments within range. It came on suddenly, an unusual phenomenon."

Just how unusual they discovered two hours later when the affected instruments had been taken out of circuit and a measurement had been made of the interfering field.

"Very simple," Captain Bramley said, staring at the typed sheet that had just emerged from the computer. "It is an incredibly powerful field and we have enough steel in the

stern of the ship to be affected strongly by it. The attraction of this field just about equals our maximum thrust under full jet."

"Do you mean . . ."

"Exactly. This field is holding us down and if we try to take off while it is still there we will blow ourselves up. For the present moment at least we are effectively trapped on Jupiter."

"It is impossible phenomena," Weeke protested. "Even if this *onaangenaam* planet is a natural cryogenic laboratory for creating magnetic fields of this strength."

"Perhaps the field is not natural," Captain Bramley said, very quietly, just as the signal lights came on indicating that something was moving against the lower portion of the hull.

There were floodlights in armoured housings on the outer hull and over half of these had survived the landing. The captain ran his fingers rapidly over the testing circuits, cut out the damaged units, then switched on all the remaining lights at once.

Outside was eternal night since no visible light from the sun could penetrate the banked clouds and Jupiter's compressed, two-hundred-mile-thick atmosphere, where only the occasional flare of lightning lit the darkness. There was light now, intense burning light that picked out every detail of the icescape and clearly revealed the Jovians.

"They are not what I would call handsome," Weeke said.

There may be a law of natural selection that states that an intelligent creature should have its organs of vision placed high for effectiveness, its organs of locomotion low for mobility and its organs of manipulation at the end of flexible extremities for dexterity. This is a crude description of a man although a much more accurate one of a Jovian. They did look like caricatures of *homo sapiens*, a waddling pack of squashed down, broadened, elephant-hided men with tree trunk limbs and wrinkled saurian heads.

"The light doesn't seem to be bothering them, sir," Rand said. "You'd think it would blind them."

"It would—if those creases on the top of those neckless

heads cover eyes, but we don't know, we don't know anything about these creatures except they seem to have enough intelligence to generate a magnetic field to hold us here. We'll have to find some way of communicating with them."

"Perhaps they are trying to do the same thing," Weeke said, pointing to the screen where a group of the Jovians were near the ship's hull. "They seem to be doing something out there. I cannot see what since it is outside of the range of the pickup, but it is the area from which we are having the readings of movement against the hull."

"That's the port engine room plating," the captain said, dialling that compartment on the phone. He had just made the connection when the far wall of the engine room rang like a drum. "Turn the pickup around—let me see that wall," he ordered and the scene swam on the screen and steadied on the featureless grey panel.

With a clang like a monster forging press the wall bulged inwards and from the centre of the swelling emerged a reddish-green rod, no thicker than a man's thumb and tapering to a blunt point on the end. It penetrated a foot or more into the room and although made of material hard enough to stab through the multiple layers of the specially built and strengthened wall it smoked and changed colour in the oxygen atmosphere.

The rod began to move, bending and writhing like a snake.

"Evacuate that compartment!" the captain ordered as he hit the alarm button that began an ear-shattering clanging throughout the ship as the emergency, airtight doors started to close.

It was alive, that was obvious, alien flesh of some Jovian creature that was harder than the hardest steel—yet still sentient and aware. It was burning in the air as they watched the screen, smoking and crumbling yet still moving in that slow questing motion as though seeking something. Then it slithered backwards out of the hole and the captain's roar of warning was drowned out as the pressurized, frigid atmosphere of Jupiter blasted in through the hole.

Two men did not escape from the compartment before

the mounting pressure sealed the door. It was pure chance that saved the ship, if any other compartment had been holed the thin interior walls would have gone down, the poisonous vapour would have spread through the ventilation system and they all would have been dead. But the engine rooms were provided against flare-backs from the combustion chambers with thicker walls, heavier doors and automatic vent-seals. They held. Metal strained and creaked as the pressure heaved against its surroundings but nothing gave way.

For nine more ship days the Jovians left them alone. Occasionally one could be seen passing but they ignored the ship as though it were not there. Rapid work with the remote handling controls in the engine room—before they chilled too much to become inoperable—managed to slap a patch over the small opening and weld it into place. Heavy beams were placed to support it until the pressure could be lowered enough to permit a space-suited volunteer through the airlock to fix a more permanent and stronger patch. This was completed and the air painfully cleaned of the contaminants that had been blasted in through the hole and the engine room was back in operation. Not that there was anything to be done there, the fierce magnetic field still held the ship immobile.

They tried to communicate with the Jovians. With much labour they manufactured a solid state, fixed frequency television transceiver. There were no moving parts and the screen and orthicon were of the nonvacuum partinotype and when the set was completed it was poured full of plastic, then embedded in a larger cube of plastic so it was completely resistant to any pressure changes. The external manipulators swung it out and placed the device where it could be seen clearly by any passing Jovian. Captain Bramley's loudly amplified voice came from it and his image could be clearly seen on the screen and it was ignored completely. Finally one of the Jovians trod on it accidentally and crushed it.

"It looks like they're not interested in talking to us," Rand said, but no one smiled.

On the ninth day the Jovians began to gather again about the ship as a precaution the captain had everyone move to

the higher levels and sealed all the airtight doors. A good deal of communicating equipment had been installed in the port engine room while the repairs were being made so there was a crystal clear view of what occurred next.

"They're punching through again at the same place," someone shouted. Though it wasn't the identical spot it was very close.

This time the hole was much smaller and whatever had made it withdrew instantly. There was only a single spurt of the frigid hydrogen-helium atmosphere that was cut off as something else came in through the opening, a thin brown tendril that projected a full yard into the room before it began to sag. When it touched the deck it ceased growing in length but the end began to swell as though the tendril were a tube that was inflating it. No one spoke as they watched the shape expand until it was the size and shape of a barrel covered with a shining and transparent coating. The top of the object writhed and shaped itself into a collection of nodules and there it stopped.

"What—what can it be?" Commander Rand asked, phrasing the question for all of them. The captain looked at it with fierce concentration.

"It's alien, it could be anything—but I'm hoping that it is a communicator of some sort." He switched on the phone in the engine room. "Hello—hello—can you hear me?"

A slit opened and gaped in the top of the barrel in the midst of the nodules and a pulsating, high-pitched sound bubbled out.

"Ha-rrr-rrr-ooo . . ." it screamed in vile imitation of a human voice. "Harrrooo. . ."

They worked with it during the coming weeks and learned to accept it. The men would have been rebellious and frightened if it weren't for the endless gravity that dragged at them and made life a continual torment. They were spending most of the time in the float beds where their bodies displaced the water so that the drag of gravity was relieved at least for a time. The captain and the ship's officers were taking turns teaching English to the biological communicator, which is what they thought the alien thing—they called it the barrel—to be. It seemed to have no

intelligence of its own, yet it was alive underneath the hard coating that shielded it from the oxygen atmosphere. At first they read to it through a loudspeaker but when it showed no signs of either emotion or aggression they stayed in the compartment with it, near the door in case of emergency. The barrel would refuse to answer any questions—other than those directly involved with the language lessons—and after a few days they stopped trying. There had to be an eventual end to the instruction and they would find out what they wanted to know then. In the meantime the lessons were vitally important, they had to learn to communicate with the Jovians before they could find a way to convince them that they should remove the magnetic field that held them trapped.

In the middle of a lesson, at the end of the 17th day, the barrel suddenly stopped talking and withdrew the single eye that it had grown to look at the blackboard used for demonstrations. Rand, who was reading at the time, ran for the door and sealed it behind him. He watched from the control room with the others and when the eye opened again after a few minutes it had changed colour and seemed to have a quality of intelligence about it that had been lacking before.

“What thing are you . . . ?” the barrel asked.

The conversation between the two differing life forms had begun.

Words and the simple mechanics of communication were easy enough for the Jovians to master, their memories appeared to be eidetic and no word was ever forgotten once explained. But referents were another thing. Nouns that could be pointed out, *chair*, *glass*, *knife*, were simple enough to convey, as well as easily demonstrable verbs, such as *walk*, *run* and *write*. When abstractions were reached communication of meaning became difficult and there were entire areas of misunderstanding.

“You come from where . . . ?” the Jovian asked, and when informed that they were from Earth, the third planet from the sun in this solar system they asked “What is earths? What is planets, What is suns . . . ?”

Buried here, at the bottom of hundreds of miles of near-



liquid atmosphere covered by solid layers of clouds, they had never seen the stars nor had they any inkling of knowledge that worlds other than their own existed. Yet they seemed to understand when it was explained to them, though they had very little interest and let the matter drop quickly and went on to something else. This was a pattern they seemed to follow—if they could be said to be following any pattern at all. They would pick a subject up, ask questions, then quickly abandon it. They (or it, the men in the ship never knew if they were talking to one or more Jovians) seemed to lack the simplest knowledge of the mechanical sciences, though they apparently absorbed explanations easily enough. There was only one thing that held their attention, that they kept coming back to: they never seemed satisfied with the answers.

“What thing are you . . .?”

It was the captain who first understood something about them.

“The biological sciences,” he said, “chemistry when it is biochemistry, neurophysics and all the rest. And electricity . . . of course! Bioelectricity.”

“Sir . . .?” Commander Rand asked.

“Those Jovians out there. Try to imagine the world they live in, from their point of view. They have no machines or artifacts that we have seen, yet they have intelligence and they have installed a device to communicate with us—even though they didn’t recognise our own communicator. They must work with living matter alone and seem to have an incredible degree of control over it, look at the speed with which they constructed the barrel and installed it here.”

“That’s true, sir, and it explains a lot—but what about the magnetic field that is holding us down? They must have machines of some kind to generate that.”

“Must they? Bioelectricity is well known on Earth, look at the electric eel. But let’s ask them and find out, I think we have finally established a level of communication good enough to try that important question.”

“There is a magnetic field at the base of this ship,” he said, “do you know that?”

"Coming from electricity fields of force abide, yes . . ." The barrel spoke clearly and precisely as ever, the single eye turning towards the captain who stood at the far side of the engine room.

"Our ship cannot leave while that field exists, do you know that?"

"Yes . . ."

"Will you remove the field so that we may leave?"

"The fields of force will no longer rest . . . after the talking. . . ."

It was a clear enough answer, except for the fact that they had a great deal of difficulty finding out exactly what *the talking* was. It obviously meant much more than conversation—but how much more? By indirection and suggestion the captain finally discovered that what they wanted to know about was human biology and that they wanted to examine living human cells.

"By *talking* they seem to mean *knowing about*. Gives some insight into how they think—though it doesn't help much."

He sent for a hypodermic needle and before the unblinking alien eye drew out some of his own blood. "Here . . ." the toneless voice said, and an opening gaped in the top of the barrel just below the eye. When Captain Bramley walked closer he could smell the sharp burn of ammonia: he emptied the hypodermic into the dark opening which instantly rolled shut.

"There is talking we must do . . ." the voice spoke as the captain stepped away. "Talking to do of you. . . ."

"I'll show you X-rays of human beings, there are also text books."

"There is talking to do with the eye. . . ." The alien eye trembled a bit on top of its stalk as the captain stepped forward again.

"Don't get too close, sir," Rand called out. "We still can't be sure what they mean by the word talking."

"This time it appears to mean looking." The captain stopped. "After you have 'talked' to me with your eye will you release the ship?"

"The field of force will no longer rest after the talking. . . ."

"I don't like it, captain!"

"Neither do I, but it sounds clear enough—or rather as clear as they ever get. Someone is going to have to be examined by the creature or we'll never leave. And I can't ask anyone else to volunteer for this."

The captain stepped forwards again and the eye stretched forward as its stalk thinned and elongated. It hung quivering for a second before the captain's face before plunging forward into his chest and slashing down the length of his body, laying him open in one hideous wound that killed him instantly.

## THIRTEEN

The Jovian stared out of the screen at the three earthmen, immobile and stolid. Yasumura gasped and unconsciously stepped backwards a half step.

"What in Satan's name is that?" the general asked.

"Look for yourself," Sam said, pointing to the frost-covered wall. "Heavy supports, thick walls, a very cold pressure container big enough to half fill this compartment. . . ."

"A Jovian!" Yasumura shouted. "They brought one back alive, and an ugly one at that. I didn't know there was any kind of life on Jupiter. . . .!"

"Obviously there is," Sam said. "But don't you have it reversed—about who did the bringing back? All the cables in the ship lead *here*—and this thing is still alive while every member of the expedition is dead. . . ."

"Can it talk?" the general asked.

"Do the wire correct. . . ." the Jovian's highpitched and toneless voice sounded from the speaker. "The talking is impaired. . . ."

"You're talking fine," Burke said. "Now you can tell us what you are doing here and how—" he broke off in mid-

phrase and turned to Sam. "This is no accident! Do you think this creature has anything to do with the plague?"

"I think it is responsible for Rand's disease, I had something like this in mind when I asked you to come here. But would you have come if I suggested we would find *that*?"

"No, I would have thought you had cracked."

"So I couldn't explain to you. But you see—it had to be something like this. Everything about Rand's disease seems so *planned*, the timed mutations, the varying hosts, the incurability. If you look at it that way the disease stops being alien and instead is . . ."

"Artificial!"

"Right. And I think this creature here has had something to do with it. That's what I mean to find out now."

"Do the wire correct . . . the talking is impaired . . ." the Jovian said.

"The wire will be fixed after you have answered a few questions!" Sam realised that he was shouting; he lowered his voice. "Are you responsible for Rand's disease, for the sickness here in the city?"

"This is a meaningless . . ."

"A communication problem," Yasumura said. "This Jovian has learned English, undoubtedly from the men who manned this ship, but it has to relate the words to things in its own environment, which makes it impossible to get a one to one identity. Be very simple and clear when you ask a question, Sam?—try and establish basics and build up from there."

Sam nodded. "I am a living creature, you are a living creature, do you understand me?"

"I am living. . . ."

"When small living creatures live inside a larger creature and hurt it, it is called a disease. Do you understand?"

"What thing is hurt. . . .?"

"Hurt is not a thing it is what happens—no, forget hurt for a moment. A disease is when a small creature breaks a big creature. Stops it. This is my arm—you see it—if I have arm-disease from a small creature my arm falls off. If my arm falls off I am hurt. There are other ways small

creatures can hurt my body. That is disease. Did you bring the disease that is hurting many people now?"

"I now know a disease is what . . . do the wire correct the talking is impaired. . . ."

"The creature is being evasive, it won't tell us the truth," General Burke said.

Sam shook his head *no*. "We can't be sure of that. This last part sounded like it was offering a trade—fix the wires and it will talk. Can you hook up the ones I shot away, we can always cut them again?"

"Take just a second," the engineer said. He touched the severed ends of the cables to each other lightly, then to the metal deck to see if they were carrying a heavy current. "No sparks so they shouldn't be lethal—I hope!" He quickly spliced the break in the wires.

"Did you bring the disease that is hurting my people?" Sam asked again. The Jovian pushed out an eye on a stalk to look at something to one side and not visible on the screen, then retracted it.

"Yes . . ." it said stolidly.

"But why?" Yasumura shouted. "Why did you do a dirty thing like this?"

"A talking has been done . . . what is a dirty thing?"

"Hold it awhile, Stanley, please," Sam asked as he pulled the engineer from before the screen. "I know why you're angry and I don't blame you, but it's no help now. This creature doesn't seem to have any emotions at all, so we're going to have to control ours." He turned back to the Jovian. "If you started this disease you must know how to stop it. Tell us how."

"The talking is not complete. . . ."

"I don't know what you mean by *talking* and I don't care." The hatred of this creature that Sam had been containing broke through at last, he swung his gun up. "You saw what this gun can do, the way it tore up those wires, it can do the same thing to you, tear you up, tear up that tank you are in, tear you to pieces. . . ."

"Stop it, Sam!" the general snapped, and pushed Sam's hand away from the trigger. The Jovian stared out at them, unmoved in any way that they could see. "You can't frighten that thing, you said yourself it has no emotions

the way we know them, maybe it isn't even afraid of dying. There has to be another way to get to it—"

"There is," Sam said, pulling himself from the general's grasp. "We have already found out one thing it doesn't like—having those wires cut—so maybe we should cut a few more."

The general jumped forward, but Sam was faster. He spun on his heel and the gun hammered out a torrent of slugs that howled away, ricocheting and tearing holes in the walls, chewing their way through the massed cables: electricity arced and spat and the shots boomed deafeningly in the enclosed space. Burke tore the gun from him just as he let up on the trigger.

"That stirred the beast up!" Yasumura pointed to the screen. The Jovian was writhing, turning back and forth while its eyestalks swung about jerkily.

"The talking is not complete . . . the many wires are not complete. . . ."

"The many wires and the damned talking and everything are going to stay not complete until you give us what we want!" Sam leaned forward until his face almost touched the screen. "Give us what we need to stop your disease."

"The talking is not complete. . . ."

"Sam, let me fix the wires, you may kill the thing. . . ."

"No I won't—it doesn't look uncomfortable, just unhappy. All the wires we traced came from the radio and television pickups, they are feeding the Jovian information of some kind, that must be what it means by the talking. And the talking is not going to be complete until it helps us. Do you hear that?" he shouted into the screen. "The talking is not complete. Give me what I want then I will fix the wires. Give it now."

The Jovian stopped moving and the eyestalks withdrew until the head was just wrinkled slits again. "You shall . . . must shall . . . complete the wires. . . ."

"After I get it."

"Complete. . . ."

"After!"

His shout echoed away down the metal compartment and was followed by silence. They stared at each other,

man and alien, or more correctly alien and alien—for this is what they were to each other. Alien, meaning different, alien meaning unknown. They faced each other in silent communication for the choice had been clearly stated by both of them and there was nothing more to be said until one or the other of them decided to act.

“Sam . . .” Yasumura started forward, but General Burk’s fingers clamped onto his arm and whipped him back.

“Let him be,” the general muttered. “He’s layed it out clear and simple and I’m glad he did it because I don’t know if I would have had the guts to.”

“*After!*” Sam shouted into the silence and raised his gun again towards the cables over half of which had been cut by the last burst.

The Jovian slid sideways and vanished from the screen.

“What is it up to?” Yasumura asked as he rubbed away some of the sweat that was dripping into his eyes.

“I don’t know?” Sam said grimly. “But I’m going to hurry it up.”

He held his hand out to the general who reluctantly passed back the gun. Sam fired a short burst that cut two more of the electric cables. An instant later there was a booming that jarred the wall above the phone screen.

“Get back!” Burk shouted and hit Yasumura with his shoulder, knocking him aside.

With a rending screech something came through the solid metal of the wall and crashed to the deck. A screaming of released pressure tore at their ears and from the hole came a jet of frigid gas that filled the space around them with clouds of burning vapour. As they drew back the roaring jet cut off and the vapour swirled and dissipated. They looked down at the foot-long, grey cylinder that had cracked open when it hit the metal flooring, disclosing another cylinder inside made of some mottled and purple substance. This was rotting and falling away as they watched giving off an intense odour of ammonia that drove them away from it. There was a lemon-yellow layer inside this, then still another—all of them melting and dropping to pieces under the corrosive attack of the earth’s air.

This seething process lasted for almost three minutes and at some moment during this time the Jovian reappeared on the screen but no one noticed it. When the pool of liquid on the floor ceased bubbling there remained only a waxy, translucent cylinder the size of a six-inch length of broomstick. Sam used his gun barrel to roll it from the puddle and bent over to examine it more closely. When it moved he saw that it was hollow with quite thin walls and seemed to be filled with a liquid.

"The talking is will be complete . . . do the wires correct. . . ."

## FOURTEEN

"Is it . . . a cure for the plague?" General Burke asked, staring down at the capsule of liquid. "It could be a trick of some kind—"

"The wires correct . . ." the flat voice squealed from the speaker.

"I'll get into that," Yasumura said, taking out his knife. "What a mess—it's a good thing that they're colour coded."

Sam took off his beret and picked up the waxy tube with it. "I hope it's the cure—but we won't know until we've tried." He looked down at it, startled. "It's not cold! Yet it should be frozen solid at the temperature inside that tank. This may be it, Cleaver!"

"Then let's get it out where it can do some good. I want a phone and I want to know where the elevator is—in that order."

"Yes, sir, general," the engineer said, twisting together the ends of a severed wire and reaching for another one. "You'll find them both down there, follow the bulkhead that way and out the first door, they're in the corridor outside. Send someone back to let me know what happens, I'll stick here and wire up this heavyweight Jovian then see if I can get him to talk some more."

General Burke called the phone that was located on the



desk nearest to the airlock and after tapping his fingers for an impatient 30 seconds the screen cleared as Lieutenant Haber answered. "Report," the general snapped.

"Quiet now, sir, the firing stopped some time ago but they have the lights on and the opening ranged and they must have a scope on it. I tried to take a look a while ago and they almost blew my head off. So far they haven't tried to get in."

"Hold there, Haber, and keep under cover. I'll contact them so we can get out of this ship. It looks as if we may have a cure for the plague but we're going to have to get a hospital to prove it." He rang off before the startled officer could answer. "I'm going up to the control room, Sam. Tell Yasumura that he is to join Haber at the lock as soon as he finishes the wiring job and make him understand that it is important. Then join me in control."

By the time Sam had delivered the message—and convinced the engineer that now was not the time to talk to the Jovian—General Burke had found the way back to the control room and was shouting into the radiophone. He had cleaned most of the blackout cream from his face so there would be no doubt of his identity. When Sam came in he waved him towards the phone.

"You Chabel of World Health, you talk to him. He doesn't believe a word I say." Professor Chabel stared out of the screen at them, white-faced and trembling.

"How can I believe what you say, General Burke, or whatever Dr. Bertolli tells me, after what has happened? The Emergency Council is in session right now and do you know what they're considering—? I don't dare say it on an open circuit. . . ."

"I know what they're considering," Sam said, in as controlled a voice as possible. "They want to start dropping H-bombs and atomize Zone-Red—New York City and all the area within a hundred miles of it. But they don't have to do this, there is a chance now that we can stop Rand's disease." He held up the capsule. "I think this contains the cure and there is only one way to find out, get it to Bellevue as soon as we can."

"No!" Chabel said, his voice quavering. "If you do not leave the ship there is a chance that the Emergency Council will not take any desperate measures. You will stay where you are."

"I would like to talk to Dr. McKay, I can explain to him what we have found."

"Impossible, Dr. McKay is still ill after his heart attack, in any case I would not allow you to speak to him. . . ." Sam reached out and broke the circuit, then signalled for the operator to put in a call to Dr. McKay.

"Damned old woman," the general said angrily. "Hysterical. Does he think that *I* am lying?"

The call signal chimed but it was Eddie Perkins not McKay who appeared on the screen.

"*You!*" he said, taut with anger. "Haven't you caused enough trouble? I heard what you have done at the airport, you must be insane—"

"Eddie!" Sam broke in. "Shut up. I'm not going to feud with you any more. This is the only chance you are going to have in your entire life to make up for some of the mistakes you made. Help me now and the matter will end there. I must talk to Dr. McKay, General Burke here will tell you why. General Burke of the United Nations Army—you recognize him—and you can believe him."

"It is very simple, Dr. Perkins. We are in the *Pericles* now and we have discovered the cause of Rand's disease. Dr. Bertolli here has the serum that will cure it. We must leave this ship and go to Bellevue Hospital at once. We are being stopped from doing this and Dr. McKay is the only man who can help us. Now, if you will connect us. . . ."

He said it in a matter of fact way, simplifying the situation and using the crisp tones of command that admitted no other choice. Sam looked at Eddie Perkins, who sat silently chewing his lip in agony, and realized for the first time that Perkins was without malice, he was just in a situation that was too big for him, that he was unequipped to handle and was too afraid to admit that he had been doing badly.

"Put us through, Eddie," Sam said softly.

"McKay is a sick man."

"He'll be dead like the rest of us soon if Rand's disease isn't stopped. Put the call through, Eddie. . . ."

Perkins made a convulsive movement towards the switch and his image faded from the screen. They waited tensely, not looking at each other, while the *hold* signal swirled its endless circles. When McKay's face finally appeared on the screen Sam let out his breath: he had not realised that he had been holding it.

"What is it, Sam?" McKay asked, sitting up in a hospital bed looking strained and gaunt but still alert. He listened intently while Sam explained what they had found in the ship and what had been done, nodding in agreement.

"I believe it, simply because I never believed in Rand's disease, it has acted in an impossible manner from the first. Now this is completely understandable if it was a manufactured and designed disease. But why—no, never mind that for now. What is it you want me to do?"

"We want to get this liquid to the team at Bellevue at once, but we're trapped in this ship. Professor Chabel's orders."

"Nonsense! I can talk to one or two people and do something about those orders. I was placed in command of the team to discover a treatment for Rand's disease, and if you have one there I want it *now*." He rang off.

"Game old boy," the general said. "I hope his heart lasts until he gets some action out of those mumblebrained politicians. Come on Sam, let's get down to the airlock and see if those chuckleheads will let us out."

Lieutenant Haber and Stanley Yasumura were resting against the corridor wall well away from the fire through the partially opened door.

"Stay where you are," General Burke said as Haber started to struggle up. "Anything to report?"

"Negative, sir, unchanged since I talked to you last."

"We want to open that outer door again since we should be getting out of here soon. Is that junction box in the line of fire?"

"I don't think so, sir. Not if you were to stay flat on the

floor until you got to it, but I think if you stood up you could be seen from outside."

"Tell me what has to be done, will you Stanley," Sam said. "I'll take care of it."

"I would love to," the engineer said, biting his teeth together hard to control their growing tendency to chatter, "but it would take too long and you would take too long doing it and—I'm the one who has to do it so let me get going before my nerve fails completely. Just pay this wire out to me as I go. And wish me luck."

He dropped flat at the open inner door, hesitated just a moment then crawled through the opening. Nothing happened as he made his way around the wall to the open junction box, nor did he draw any attention even when he had to stand up to connect the wires. But on the return journey he must have been seen because bullets drummed on the outer door and the hull and some found the tiny opening and ricocheted around the airlock. Yasumura dived through into the hall and lay there exhausted but unharmed.

"Good work," the general said. "Now let's open the outer door and see how those gun-happy police react."

As soon as he was able to stand, the engineer made the connections to the powerpack and closed the circuit. The circuit breakers had cooled off and automatically reset themselves: the motor whined and the outer door began to slowly open.

A hail of bullets was the first reaction, but they were well out of the line of fire.

"Shaky trigger fingers," the general said contemptuously. "I wonder if they have any idea of what they hope to accomplish by this."

Others must have shared his opinion because the fire broke off suddenly and was replaced by an echoing silence. Almost fifteen minutes passed before someone shouted from outside.

"General Burke can you hear me?"

"I can hear you all right," Burke bellowed back, "but I can't see you. Are those nervous policemen going to shoot me if I enter the airlock?"

"No, sir . . . we have orders not to."

If the general was concerned he did not show it. He straightened his beret, flicked some of the dried mud from his coveralls and strode forward to the rim of the airlock, standing straight and unmoving in the glare from the lights that flooded in.

"Now what is it?" he called down. "And turn those lights down—are you trying to blind me?" There were some muffled commands and two of the lights went out.

"We have received orders that you are to be allowed to leave the ship." The speaker came forward, a grizzled police captain.

"I'll want transportation. A copter."

"We have one here—"

"Warm it up. And what happened to my sergeant?"

"If you mean the one who was firing at us, he's dead."

The general turned around without another word and stamped inside. "Let's go before they change their minds." He had the fixed, unhappy look that soldiers get who have seen too many friends die.

"You won't need me any more," Yasumura said. "So if you don't mind I'll stay here and take a look at the ship's log and have some chit-chat with that overweight passenger."

"Yes, of course," the general said. "Thank you for the aid. . . ."

"Wrong way around, general, I'm the one who should be thanking you for getting me back into the ship."

A service lift truck was backed up to the *Pericles* and its platform raised to the level of the airlock. They stepped out onto it, carrying the wounded lieutenant between them, and the operator swung it around in an arc and dropped it to ground level; a few yards away was a 'copter with its blades slowly turning. They ignored the grim-faced and heavily-armed policeman who stood around watching them. Sam held the capsule tightly in his free hand as they helped Haber into the 'copter and laid him gently across the rear row of seats.

"Bellevue Hospital, just as fast as you can make it." Sam dropped down next to the police pilot. The man said

nothing but opened his throttle and the machine leapt into the air.

Ahead of them the light-dotted skyline of Manhattan grew larger and before it, just as real as the buildings for Sam, swam the memory of Nita's face, swollen and ill. It had been hours since he had last seen her and he knew she would be worse now, far worse—or perhaps . . . he would not accept the thought. She couldn't be dead, not now with salvation so close. Or was it? He looked down at the waxy cylinder in his lap, it was soft and it gave when he squeezed it. Could it really contain a cure? Memory of the past hours reassured him, it had to be right. What would the Jovian have gained by giving them the wrong substance? Or why should it bother to give them the right one? Both questions were meaningless since he had no idea what motivated the alien. The 'copter swung around the bulk of the hospital, locked onto the control beam and was brought in for a landing. Two attendants hurried towards them.

"Take care of the patient in here," Sam called as he jumped down from the door and pushed by them, knocking one aside when he didn't move fast enough. Before Sam reached the entrance he was running and at the elevator he pounded his free hand against the wall until the doors opened. General Burke jumped in after him.

"Easy, boy," he said. "You'll get there soon enough."

It was dark in the room and he turned on all the ceiling lights. There was a moan from the bed where a strange woman shielded her eyes from the sudden glare: he wheeled to the other bed. My God, how bad she looked. Nita. . . .

"What are you doing here? Who are you? Get out at once!" A doctor he had never seen before was pulling at his arm and he realised how he must look with his mud-stained coveralls and blackened skin.

"I'm sorry, doctor, but I'm Dr. Bertolli, if you have a hypodermic. . . ." He broke off as he saw the autoclave against the far wall and hurried over to it, kicking the floor switch to open the lid.

The contents were still hot and he burned his fingers as

he assembled a hypodermic needle, but he didn't notice this, nor was he aware of the general who had drawn the doctor aside and was explaining in a low voice.

The capsule. He swabbed the end with alcohol and pushed the needle against it: it slid through easily. Was this a treatment for Rand's—or was it poison? How could he know. He inverted the capsule and drew back the plunger on the needle until the barrel was half full of straw-coloured liquid. He pulled out the needle and handed the capsule to General Burke who had appeared at his shoulder.

“Keep that end up,” he said as he gently took Nita's arm from under the covers and, working with one hand, swabbed alcohol on the inside of her elbow. Her skin was dry, burning hot, lumped here and there with the swollen red nodules. Nita! He forced his mind away from her as a person, she was a patient, his patient. He massaged her vein with his thumb until it expanded then slid the needle into it. How much? 5 c.c. for a start, then more if it was needed.

On the telltale her temperature read 106 degrees and in conjunction with the recordings of her blood pressure and pulse showed that she was dying. Her deep rasping breathing broke off suddenly and her back arched under the covers: she gave a deep chattering moan. He reached out and touched her in panic—what had he done? Had he killed her?

But when he looked back at the telltale he saw that her temperature had dropped to 105.

It was unnatural the way it happened, and completely impossible. Yet so was Rand's disease. As they watched, in a matter of few minutes, the disease was destroyed. Within five minutes her temperature was normal and within fifteen the flushed swellings had changed colour and begun to subside. Her breathing steadied, became smooth and deep.

When she opened her eyes she looked up at them and smiled.

“Sam, darling . . . whatever are you doing with your face painted up like that?”

## FIFTEEN

"Dr. McKay sent me," Eddie Perkins said when Sam turned around. He was surprised to find that there were at least a dozen people in the room with him.

"Here," Sam said, handing him the hypodermic needle. "Take this and the capsule the general is holding—keep it upright—and get them to the team at once and tell them this is the cure for Rand's disease. Be careful with it, I don't know what it is and there is no more where it came from, at least not right now. Microanalysis—they'll know what to do. I'll call Dr. McKay and tell him what has happened."

"He's under sedation, you'll have to wait until the morning. We were afraid of the strain he . . . he was quite forceful in arranging that you be let out of the ship." Perkins started away cradling the hypo and the capsule in his cupped hands, but he halted for an instant at the door and turned. "Listen, Sam . . . thanks . . ." he hurried out.

Nita was sound asleep and Sam was washing the dye from his hands and face when the general reappeared.

"You have five minutes," he said. "I've had a call from Dr. Yasumura at the ship and he wants us out there right away. I've had enough of the police for one day, thank you, so I sent for my own transportation and it's on the way up here from the fort now. Is this going to work, Sam?"

"I don't know," he answered, towelling himself dry. "The Jovian gave us the cure all right—you saw how it worked with Nita—but there's not enough in that capsule to treat fifty people, and there must be fifty-thousand cases by now. It's all up to the team in the lab. If they can analyse it, break it down and build it up again on their own then the plague is over. I certainly hope they can."

"What are the odds?"

"No odds at all—or a billion to one. All we can do is wait and see. And go back to the *Pericles* and try and make some sense out of the Jovian conversation. Did Stanley say what he wanted?"



"I didn't talk to him. Just got the message to come at once."

When they came out on the 'copter platform Sam was surprised to see that it was already light, the last stars were fading in the west and the sky had that clean-washed look that you only see after a rain. A rumble of heavy engines sounded from the south and grew to a roar as a flight of five heavy VTO craft thundered overhead. They began to circle as one of them dropped straight down towards the hospital below, aiming for the platform where the two men waited.

"When you said transportation I thought you meant a 'copter," Sam shouted above the roar of the propellers. "Those vertical take off things aren't even supposed to land here."

"I know all that, but being a general has its compensations. And I'm still not in love with those police at the airport, so I thought a little waving of the big stick might quiet them down. . . ."

His words were drowned in the howl of the engine as the plane touched the platform lightly, then settled down onto its landing gear. The blast of sound died to a mutter as the canopy slid open and the pilot leaned out. "They told me you wanted this, sir," he said, passing down the belt and holster with the long-barrelled, chromed, teak-handled pistol in it.

"Now that's more comfortable," General Burke said, settled it into place on his thigh before he climbed up into the plane.

Sam followed him, it was a tight squeeze with the three of them in the cockpit, and as soon as the canopy was shut the plane hurled itself into the air. The other VTO planes closed in around it while it was still rising and they all swung over into horizontal flight in a practised manoeuvre and headed eastward towards Kennedy Airport. They came in high and first swung in a rapid circle above the towering projectile of the *Pericles* before settling down slowly next to it. The blunt nose slid by and the length of the scarred grey hull as they grounded together near the base. This time the stares of the police were not as menac-

ing as they walked through the gap that had been opened in the barbed wire, to the landing ramp pushed up below the open airlock.

"Has anyone entered this ship?" the general snapped at the two policemen who were on guard at the base.

"No, sir—we've had orders that . . ."

"That's fine. No one is to enter."

He pushed by before he had a chance to hear what the orders were and stamped up the metal steps: Sam followed him through the airlock and into the elevator. Stanley Yasumura was slumped down in the captain's chair on the bridge and waved them over when they entered.

"It's all on the record," he said. "The log was kept right up to the very end, the men who manned this ship had guts, but really."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

"The *Pericles* was trapped right after they landed, something to do with a magnetic field that the Jovians generated, I skipped over the early part fast but you can go back and hear it for yourself. Then the natives contacted the crew, learned English and killed the captain—just like that, opened him up and called it *talking*."

"That's the same word the Jovian here used—what do they mean by it?"

"I would like to find out the answer to that one myself—I've been trying to get through to our specimen but he won't answer his 'phone. Anyway, the men on Jupiter thought that it meant total understanding or total comprehension, or maybe the understanding of basic life processes. The Jovians apparently have no machines and never developed a machine culture—but what they do have is a bioculture, they seem to be able to do whatever they want with living cells. They acted like kids with a new toy when the ship landed with a different life form, they wanted to take them apart to see what made them tick. And they did, one by one, tracked down the crewmen and dissected them. . . ."

"'Hell is cold', just as Dante wrote," General Burke said as he softly stroked the butt of his pistol. "They're devils right out of the Old Testament, no souls, no feelings, we're

just going to have to outfit this ship again and go back there with a hold full of H-bombs. . . .”

“No, Cleaver, you have it wrong,” Sam said. “They’re a different life form and they obviously think and feel—if they can feel—differently from us. They didn’t ask the crew of the *Pericles* if they wanted to be taken to pieces to be examined, but do we ask laboratory rats if they want to be dissected or do we give the chickens any choice between growing up or being given vile diseases while they are still in the eggs?”

“Nonsense! We can’t ask questions of dogs and eggs, nor do we want to. . . .”

“You’re right. So maybe the Jovians can’t ask us the right questions—or maybe they just don’t want to. Perhaps they take each other apart the same way without asking permission so why should they ask us?”

“That’s what some of them thought on the *Pericles*,” Yasumura said. “The First Officer, Weeke, he always talked like a stolid Dutchman but he had a real imagination, theoretical physics. He put his theory into the log that the Jovian individuals weren’t really individual but had a single mass mind. If this is true they wouldn’t care in the slightest if they were killed, as individuals, any more than a fingernail cares when it gets clipped off. And if that’s the only kind of existence they knew they would automatically assume that we are the same so they would have started taking us apart with great pleasure.”

“It’s only a theory,” General Burke rumbled.

“But it explains a lot. Either every Jovian is a sizzling genius or there is one mind big enough to handle almost everything. It—or they—learned to speak English just as fast as it could be read to them. And they had never even seen or imagined there could be machines, yet they mastered machine technology in a matter of days, almost contemptuously. They needed to use it to work inside the alien environment of the ship, to build that pressure tank down below and control the ship, so they learned what they had to.”

“Wasn’t there any resistance to all this?”

“A good deal, but all ineffective.” Yasumura turned on the log and began scanning for the entry he wanted. “Maybe in the beginning before the Jovians were established in the ship something might have been done, though it is hard to imagine what. Remember, they couldn’t take off and short of blowing up the ship and themselves with it there was little they could really do. Anyway, here’s how it ended, this is the last entry in the log made by Commander Rand.” He pressed the *playback* button.

“. . . May twenty-fourth according to the bridge clock but we’re not keeping track of the time any more. I shouldn’t say we, they got Anderson a little while ago and he was the last one, I mean outside of me, those tendril things can go through any kind of metal and they are all through the ship now and there’s no way to cut them. One touch and you’re paralysed and that’s the end of that. I saw what they did to him too, he’s down on C deck in one of those tanks right next to two of the others. All of them keep getting sick then getting cured though they don’t look the same afterwards and finally they die. I’ve never seen anything like . . . they must have mutated the diseases from germs they found in our bodies or I don’t know what . . .”

There was a rattling noise then a crash of glass before Rand began speaking again, and his voice was thicker. “If I sound like I have been drinking I have because it’s a little hard to bear, you know, with everyone else. . . .” He stopped, and when he continued he sounded much better. “But I’ve broken the bottle because I can’t be drunk to do what I have to do. Listen, whoever you are, I hope you never hear this, I hope I can get through to the engine room and do what I have to do. I’m going to knock out all the safeties and crank up the pile until it blows. That’s just my suicide because the rest are dead or should be dead. Those things out there are smart and they’re going to learn all about us and learn how to fly this ship and then I don’t know what they’re planning to do. But I want to stop them. This is Commander Rand, closing the log, the day is May twenty-fourth and one way or another there are going to be no more entries in this log.” The loud-

speaker rustled with background noise but there was nothing else after this.

Yasumura reached out and flicked it off and it was awhile before anyone said anything.

"He was right," General Burke said. "They did bring their hellish disease and try to destroy us all."

"No they didn't," Sam said. "What they did here looks more like a laboratory experiment than any deliberate attempt to wipe us out. The way they tailor-made a disease to fit earthly conditions, to attack animals they had never seen, to mutate under these conditions, means they have a perfect or almost perfect knowledge and control of biochemistry at every level. We still have no idea of how they spread the virus from the ship, sending it across Long Island in almost a straight line—a physical impossibility by our state of knowledge. If they had wanted to they could have released a plague that would have spread around the world and have wiped us out in a day. But they didn't."

"Then what *were* they trying to accomplish . . .?" the general started to say, but Stanley Yasumura cut him off.

"Look at those needles jump—there's juice being fed into the high-power rig, the ultra-frequency radio!" The radiophone buzzed and he turned to answer it: a uniformed man appeared on the screen.

"This is the tower, what are you broadcasting? We're getting interference on our navigating frequencies. . . ."

"Not us, but there is a thing in a tank downstairs that has cut into all the circuits. What does the signal sound like?"

"Just a moment, I'll hook it into this circuit. And see if you can't do something about cutting it off, it has harmonics that are lousing up almost all of our operating frequencies."

The voice died and a moment later was replaced by a high-pitched, shrieking moan that set their nerves on edge like a fingernail on glass. The engineer quickly cut the volume down to a sinister mutter.

"What on earth is that?" General Burke asked.

"Better say 'what on Jupiter', in a strange way it sounds

something like the Jovian's voice. Stanley, could that signal get through to Jupiter and be understood there?"

"I don't see why not—if there is a good receiver out there, that frequency should cut right through the Heavyside layer and be detectable that far out if it has enough power behind it. But, do you mean . . .?"

"I don't mean anything, I'm just wondering—look, those meters just dropped back to zero. What's happening?"

Yasumura checked them, then other instruments in the room. "No power being drawn at all any more. Wonder what our friend in the tank is up to?"

"Let's get down there," Sam said, starting for the door.

The first thing they noticed when they emerged from the elevator was the sharp smell of ammonia that the blowers were labouring to remove from the air; they started to run. The deck near the reinforced wall of the pressure tank was running with moisture as was the wall of the tank itself. The layer of frost has vanished.

"The tank has warmed up . . .!"

"And the pressurised atmosphere is gone from it too, I imagine," Sam said, looking at the darkened phone screen.

"Then the thing is dead—it committed suicide," the general said. "But why—?"

Sam shook his head. "I wonder if we really can call it suicide? That Jovian in there probably never had any intention or desire to return to its own planet. It came here to do a job—or maybe to make an experiment, that might be a better description. Our world was its laboratory and we were the experimental animals. The experiment was finished, it made its report. . . ."

"The radio signal!"

". . . when everything was gone. So it died, or disconnected, or whatever you want to call it. Function performed. About as unemotional as an epithelial cell in your skin, it protects your body, dies and falls off."

"One consolation," General Burke kicked out at the tangle of cables. "At least it had to report its mission or its experiment a failure."

"Did it?" Sam asked. "Perhaps it was a social experiment, not a medical one. They certainly knew beforehand

how the disease would affect our bodies, so perhaps it was our social grouping or our science they were interested in. How we would combat the disease, what we would do when we found they had caused it. After all, they made no real attempt to hide the fact they had brought it, the log is still here and once the door was opened the Jovian's presence was obvious. And it had the capsule ready, don't forget that, once it understood the threat to cut off all communication it delivered the thing at once. . . ."

There was the sound of running footsteps and they turned to see Eddie Perkins in the doorway.

"I tried to call you on the radiophone but I couldn't get through," he said gasping a bit as he caught his breath.

"What is it?"

"Rand's . . . Rand's disease. The cure. We can duplicate the stuff in the capsule. It's all over. We have it licked."

## SIXTEEN

A gust of wind hurled a spattering of snowflakes against the outside of the window where they hung for long seconds until the heat of the room melted them and they ran down the pane. Killer Dominguez, sitting reversed on the chair with his arms leaning on the back, blew a jet of cigarette smoke towards the window.

"Turning into a real crummy day, just look at that, if I didn't have arthritis already I would catch it today. Sorry to see you go, Doc."

"I'm not sorry to leave, Killer," Sam said, digging a handful of white socks out of the dresser drawer and dumping them into the suitcase that lay open on the bed. "This is a great room for an intern to live in, it's handy to the work and bearable because you don't see it much. But it's a little too spartan—reminds me too much of the army."

"And also no place for a married man, right Doc?"

"There's that too," Sam smiled. "I can just see myself carrying Nita over this threshold. About the only thing

I'm sorry about leaving in the ambulance, I'll miss your driving, Killer."

"No, you won't, Doc. It'll be easier on your heart once you're off the meat wagon. They'll need you in this new Lab 30 programme, what with you knowing all about the Jovians and such, I hear that they got the idea from them."

"In a way." He closed the dresser and went to the closet. "It was the cure for Rand's disease that the Jovians gave to us that started the entire thing off; it's an entirely new concept in medicine. The J-molecule, that's what they're calling it, appears to be alive like a virus or a micro-organism and capable of reproducing itself easily. That's how they managed to make enough of it so fast to stop Rand's disease in a matter of days, you just put it on a petri dish and fission begins."

"Great—instant medicine! That will put the drug stores out of business, everyone grows their own."

"It might at that. We're just beginning to find out what the J-molecule can do and if it turns out to be just one-tenth as effective as it seems to be we should thank the Jovians for bringing us the plague—and the cure—because it is going to make such a basic change in medicine."

"C'mon, Doc—think of how many were killed. . . ."

"I'm thinking of how many are going to live, because thousands and eventually millions of lives will be saved for every one that died. You see that not only does the J-molecule reproduce itself, but under certain conditions it can be trained to attack other diseases. Then the new strain is specific only for the disease it has been trained to attack—and it breeds true."

"Now you're getting outta my depth, Doc. I bring 'em in, you patch 'em up, let's leave it at that. What's the big hush-hush rumour I hear about another ship to Jupiter? Not enough trouble from the first time?"

"Is there anything you don't hear, Killer?"

"I got my contacts."

Sam closed the bag and locked it. "So far we're only a pressure group that are trying to convince the UN that the Jovians aren't really inimical, but we're having heavy going. They're still too much afraid. But we'll have to go



back there some day and contact them and this time we want it to be a friendly contact. All volunteers, I imagine, and safeguards will have to be worked out to make sure nothing like Rand's disease recurs."

Nita had opened the door while he was talking but his back was towards her and he hadn't noticed.

"And I suppose you would like to volunteer?" she asked, brushing drops of melted snow from her coat.

He kissed her first, well and long. Killer nodded approval and ground out his cigarette. "I gotta be moving, duty calls." He waved good-bye as he left.

"Well, you didn't answer me," she said.

He held her at arm's length, suddenly serious.

"You wouldn't stop me, would you?"

"I wouldn't like it, darling, but no—I wouldn't stop you, how could I? But please, not for awhile. . . ."

"Not for a good long while, and in any case I wouldn't be going alone. Stan Yasumura is in on the project and Haber will be with us as soon as he can get off crutches—even Cleaver Burke is on our side. I don't know how he wangled it, but he managed to get assigned to the Space Commission—he's even going to space-fitness school so he can be with the second expedition."

"The poor man, at his age! All those free-fall exercises and multiple-G stress chambers. I feel sorry for him."

"I don't," Sam said and taking her by the arm, picking up the suitcase in his other hand, he started for the door. "I feel sorrier for the Jovians."

— HARRY HARRISON

THE END

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