WORLDS OF TOMORROW

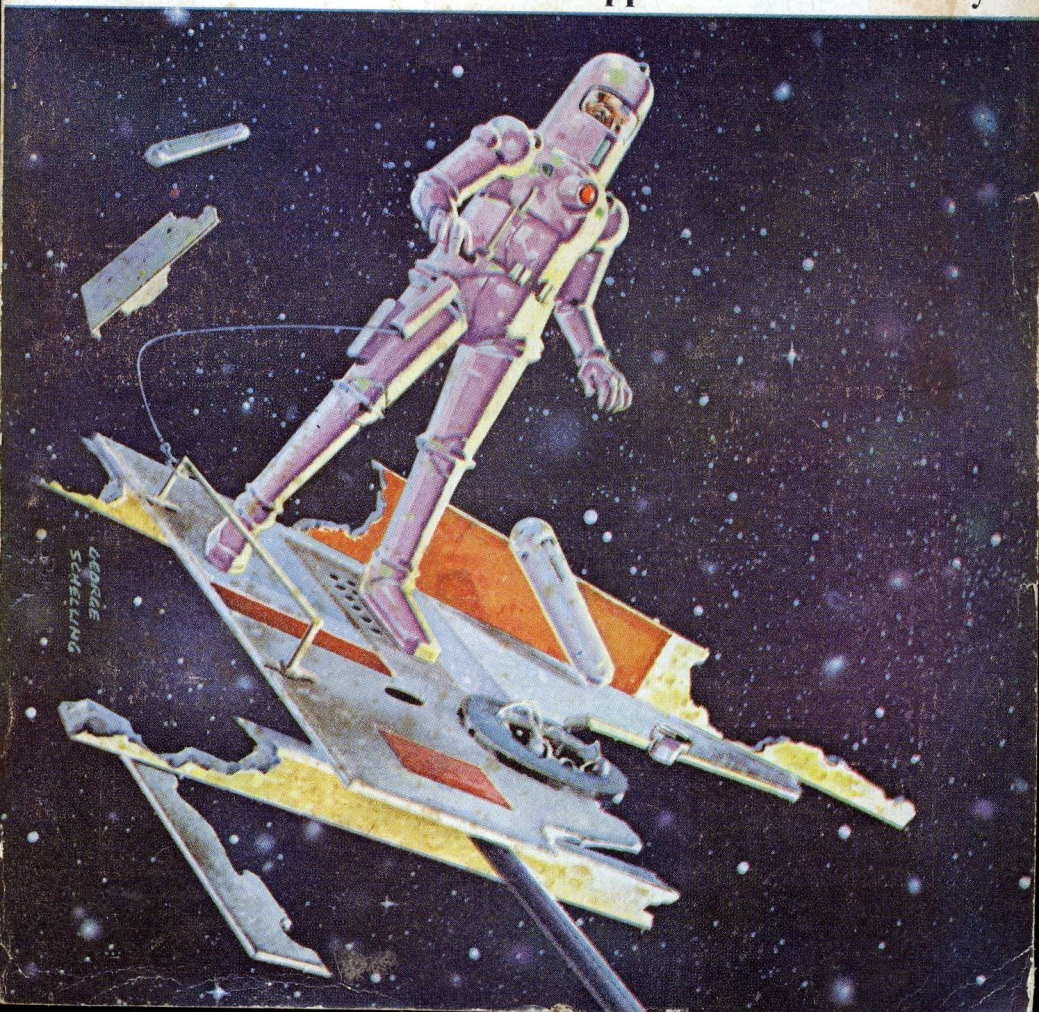
NOVEMBER · 1964 · 50c

THE LONG WAY
A. Bertram & Susan Chandler

THE KICKSTERS
J. T. McIntosh

SOMEWHERE IN SPACE
C. C. MacApp

FRUIT OF THE TREE
Lester del Rey



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WORLDS OF TOMORROW

NOVEMBER 1964
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ALL NEW STORIES

FREDERIK POHL
Editor

SOL COHEN
Publisher

DIANE SULLIVAN
Associate Editor

DAVID PERTON
Production Manager

DAVE GELLER ASSOC.
Advertising

MAVIS FISHER
Subscription Manager

Cover by SCHELLING for SOMEWHERE IN SPACE

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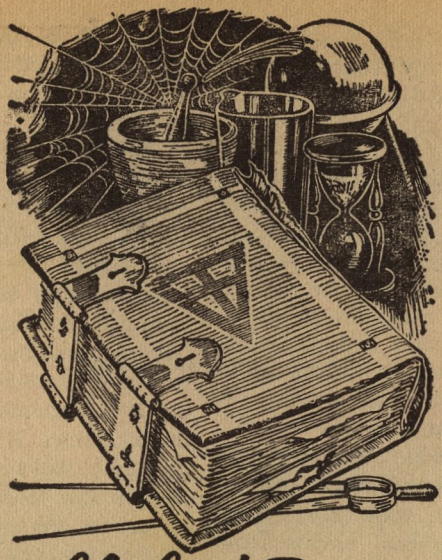
HOW TO BE HUMAN

In Robert Ardrey's remarkable polemic, *African Genesis* (Delta), a very large can of worms is opened indeed. What is Man? Ardrey asks, and answers, "Man is a predator with an instinct to kill and a genetic cultural affinity for the weapon." He is a descendant of "killer apes." His first tool was a weapon, and indeed it is not so much true, Ardrey thinks, that men made weapons as that weapons made Man.

The central facts from which Ardrey derives this hypothesis came out of digging for Pleistocene fossils in Olduvai Gorge and elsewhere in Africa. The Pleistocene period, half a million years ago or so, was in Europe and North America a time of advancing and retreating ice ages. Not in Africa. Africa was spared the ice. Its Pleistocene was an epoch of teeming, year-round deluges and periods of rainless aridity, an age in which the continent's fauna were continually being driven from their ancient habitats because of violent, cyclic changes in climates, in one millenium expanding into a rain forest that had once been a desert, in the next parching in a desert that had once been a jungle.

There is a good deal of evidence that these epochs of violent weather do speed up the process of evolution. As M.J.S. Rudwick and others point out, the great proliferation of species in the Cambrian period followed very closely on the first of the great ice ages, the pre-Cambrian, some 600 million years ago. And it is also pretty clear that, whatever fossil type you take to be the first "man", he made his earliest appearance on Earth sometime around the Pleistocene — as did any number of other modern or nearly modern sorts of animals.

Ardrey's "killer ape" is better known to science as *Australo-pithecus africanus*. He did not look very human. There are some drawings of him, based on reconstructed fossils, in Richard Carrington's book, *A Million Years of Man* (Mentor), and they show a small, animal-eyed, furry, squatting creature as much like a baboon as a human being. It is only a matter of opinion, actually, whether he is our own direct ancestor or not; Ardrey and others say he is; a great many say he is not; probably Carrington's own verdict is fair: "The australopithecines, although perhaps not directly ancestral to ourselves, were so close to the human line of descent that they certainly represent an evolutionary phase through which our species must have passed." But what is most interesting about *A. africanus* is not his external ap-



Secrets entrusted to a few

The Unpublished Facts of Life

THERE are some things that cannot be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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pearance. It is his technology. He used weapons; and he used them to kill.

It is, says Ardrey, this basic instinctual inheritance which shapes much of Man's conduct today — not only the instinct to bear weapons that is our legacy from the australopithecines, but those drives toward territorial protection and peck-right dominance which we inherit from lesser species. To think otherwise is to fall into "the romantic fallacy", which he defines as "the central conviction of modern thought that all human behavior, with certain clearly stated exceptions, results from causes lying within the human experience." Self-preservation, sex drives and the instinct to protect the family are the "clearly stated exceptions," but Ardrey thinks they are not enough. He would add weapon-bearing, territoriality and dominance.

And, as a matter of fact, the newspaper headlines would seem to do a lot to bear him out.

Is that why we have riots in the streets of our cities? Are the zip-gun and the bicycle chain the latter-day equivalent of Australopithecus's bone clubs? When Mississippians attack CORE marchers, are they driven by the same compulsions that make rhesus monkeys fight trespassers from a nearby tribe? Is a presidential campaign only a ritualized variation on the quarrels of chickens in a hen-run?

Pending argument from someone with better credentials than our own, we are inclined to think the answer to all of these questions may well be "yes".

Yet we are not the prisoners of our instincts. We overcome them every day. There is not an adult alive and abroad in this world who has not learned this trick, for if he had not he would not be abroad — he would be confined in jail or lunatic asylum until he learned.

We do indeed believe that humanity is perfectable, and that it makes its own rules. If this is a "romantic fallacy," that's too bad. We will simply have to convert a fallacy into a fact, as we are now in course of doing with such other "fallacies" as the inborn equality of men. For the "instincts" — or, if you will, the "convictions" — of men change as their society changes. The truths that were held to be self-evident in 1776 were not in the least self-evident a few centuries earlier; they in fact did not become "truths" until they were stated.

Man's list of great inventions has not by any means ended. The inventions of fire, the wheel, the city agriculture — everything from the early neolithic to the hydrogen bomb — are only the beginning. Man is still in process of inventing his most remarkable artifact, a true creation, as unlike its animal origins as the wings of a jet aircraft are unlike the bauxite from which it is refined.

The name of this remarkable new artifact?

Modern Man himself.

— FREDERIK POHL

KILLER!

by ROBERT RAY

ILLUSTRATED BY MORROW

He was a killing-machine. Earth had turned him loose on an enemy planet—could they stop him now?

I

The benign looking figure on the balcony slowly turned to his right. Slightly bowing his head, he raised his left arm to shoulder level, the floppy wrist to the distance.

Nol brought up his right arm. There were three sharp hisses—and the next moment his arm was beside his body, his head turning, to follow the shoulders, on his face an amazed expression.

The man next to him started to curse him in a monotonous, but highly picturesque language.

"Nol, you raving maniac, what were your instructions?"

Nol snapped back to face the other, on his face now an almost mischievous smile, his stance relaxed. Shrugging his shoulders, he looked up into the furious face of the other. In his tone when he answered there was a very discernible pride.

"You said, 'stand in the crowd, wait until he turns to his right and lifts his left arm, and then get in a shot'. What's the matter with you? That's exactly what I did. What's more, I'm willing to bet you even money that all three shots are through the heart as well as both lungs. Take it?"

"Nol! Stop swaggering. Never you mind how long we've known each other, I'm now your Instructor. I have asked you to repeat what you were told to do. Now do it again without any of the other comments."

Nol grinned, but said in an even tone, "I was told to stand in the crowd, wait until Father turns to his right as he always does, watch when he raised his left arm, get in a shot and, instantly hiding the gun, turn around and stare at the people behind me."

"Right! And what did you do?"

On Nol's face there was an honest bewilderment. Wrinkling his forehead, he looked towards the balcony at the dummy manhandled by two robust agents. He asked petulantly, "What did I do wrong? I did exactly as you told me to."

"Like Hell you did!"

"But Mark . . ."

"I said *one shot.*"

"Oh. that. Well, I thought I might as well make certain."

The other didn't wait for him to finish. He cut in, his voice lashing at him with an unabashed fury.

"If you can't finish somebody off from this distance with one shot, you're in the wrong game! And by the same token, if you can't fulfill an order *exactly* as it was given, you're again in the wrong game, and I will be the first to recommend your removal from the training school. Is that absolutely clear?"

"Yes, Mark."

"And my name to you is not Mark, but Instructor."

"Yes, sir."

Mark walked away a few feet, his large body bulging through the summer suit he was wearing, his shorts of a beautiful green, exhibiting two muscled legs.

He asked, "Would it be any good asking you why it was idiotic to do what you did? Don't start talking at once. I want you to think a bit."

Nol opened his mouth, then shut it again. It would be fatal to antagonize Mark any more than was necessary; he damn well meant what he said about recommending his removal from the training school. He was just the type who would do that sort of thing. Having his lofty ideals, the fact that he was Nol's own brother would be a definite disadvantage. In fact it was, all the way along. Nol didn't grimace now. He blinked his eyes several times, using the back of his right hand to scratch the corner of his right eye, a gesture very typical of the Vasart; and between his blinks he watched the observant face of Mark to see whether he noticed his perfect behavior pattern of being a Vasart. Thoughtfully he said:

"I suppose it's really logical. No matter how fast I pull the trigger, it would be a physical impossibility to let out three shots as fast as let-

ting out one. In other words, the time I'm given to hide my gun and turn around is cut down by anything up to a second and a half."

He pressed the emphasis on the end part of his statement ever so slightly, hoping that Mark wouldn't recognize the hidden humor.

Mark did, but gave no sign of it. He turned to the two agents coming from the mock-up balcony. One of them nonchalantly walked by, nodding smilingly at Mark but not even noticing Nol. The other stopped by Mark, giving him a thin sheet of paper.

"Here you are, Mark. The kid is really good. Look, he got the heart as well as both lungs, and the three shots were within a two and a half centimeter circle. Some shooting — but why three shots?"

"Oh, just a try-out."

"I . . ." The chap seemed to change his mind. With a none-of-my-business look on his face he grinned at Nol and walked away. Agents weren't a gabby lot.

Mark looked at the target paper and nodded to Nol.

"All right, Nol, come out of there."

Nol pushed his way through the dummies that were secured to the ground in a tight group, representing the crowd — or his shield, if that turned out to be the only way to do the job. Walking up to his brother, he stopped in front of him and looked up into the resolute square face of Mark. He had to look up, because there was a difference of almost a foot between them.

For the millionth time he thought he would have liked to know Mark's father. But then again, so would Mark. Their mother being as capricious as she was, it was almost an impossible business. Mark put the target paper into his pocket and, putting his huge hand on Nol's shoulder, something Nol had hated from early childhood, steered him towards the house. Mark was looking ahead of him instead of at Nol. He spoke without emotion.

"You never really liked me, Nol. I must say it's almost the same with me. I didn't care a lot about you until recently."

"You mean until you needed more agents who could resemble a Vasart?"

"That's right." Mark's voice was completely unconcerned. After all, they did know each other. "But you must get it into your head that what I, or any other Instructor for that matter, tell you to do, we do because we know how much of the success depends on the conditioned reflexes we set you up in the college. When I tell you something, I tell you because we've tried every other way. And the only way which really works and works again is the one we experimented with out here and perfected. I'm not saying that you won't be using your own initiative. But we lay down the framework. If you have any respect for your neck, and care about the job, you're going to do it the way we tell you. If not . . . there are others."

"Five foot one?"

"There were others before you."

"Well, I was picked for this job."

"And you can be unpicked."

Angrily Nol shook Mark's hand off his shoulder and faced him.

"What's the matter with you? Why do you keep on needling me? I'm trying my best! Just because we happen to have the same mother you're giving me the roughest treatment out of the lot. I'm getting sick of it, Mark, I warn you."

"The rules apply to everybody, even to agents who've been in the service for years."

"So I'm told, but what's the matter with me? I'm doing my best and . . . well, if it comes to the worst —" Nol's tone was cutting — "I can't break through a hypnotic conditioning. For the sake of the double Sun!" This again was a Vasart expression. It surprised even Nol how easily he slipped things like this into his everyday conversation. "Once I'm on my way, all my major decisions will be made on the basis of what you're going to pour into my mind in the Hypno course, so why the constant fuss?"

"Because you'll have to make all the minor decisions, you twerp!"

Mark said this with violence, towering over Nol's head. They stood there, facing each other as they had so often done in the past, before a fight. They couldn't help it. There was something there all the time between them, some intangible feeling of — neither ever cared to put a name to it, because once they did, all which seemed to tie them together in their tenuous relationship would disappear. They just knew it.

Mark ran out of patience first, as he invariably did when he was dealing with Nol. He turned on his heel and marched away in the direction of the house, his long legs flexing in the late afternoon sun. Nol shrugged his shoulders and glanced around. There was nobody in sight. The only noises were the insane prattlings of birds in the surrounding bushes. Angrily, he kicked an innocent daisy and with studiously slow steps started after Mark.

II

Mark reached what they called the House. It was a bit more than that. It was Earth's training college for agents, who were flung out to all the worlds with which Earth had contact. Sometimes it was only to observe, sometimes it was to gather specific information. Sometimes, as with Nol, they were trained for a specific job.

The House was big and fantastically elaborate. For one thing, it had a hospital crammed full with all branches of medical science — not only of Earth, but of all the worlds they'd known about. It had classrooms, sleeping quarters, flying field. In fact, it had everything they could possibly need, and was so huge that very few people could navigate its myriad passageways and floors without the help of route maps. Each of these maps was supplied individually, with the photo of the bearer and his retina identification. They were allowed to go only into those areas which were indicated on their maps.

Mark didn't need a map. He walked through the portals, not

noticing anybody. He stepped into one of the identification booths and, placing his hand into the fingertip holes, laid his eyes on the retina viewers. There was a momentary delay, then a voice snapped at him from a wall speaker.

"Identified. Where to, Mark?"

"Chief Inspector Bord."

"Right-o, old chap. Pull your hands out or you'll be leaving them behind."

Mark stepped away from the wall, pulling his hands from the fingertip holes, and wordlessly crossed them on his chest. He hardly noticed when the floor moved and dropped him fifteen feet below ground level. When the motion stopped he stepped out and hopped into the first passenger cart, settled his bulky frame and pushed a combination of buttons, staring into himself as the cart silently moved away, gathering speed as it passed over the step-up current blocks. He was not so much unhappy as frustrated. The same feeling as when, with enormous fingers, somebody tries to catch a flea on a hairy leg.

It was five minutes before the cart suddenly stopped in front of a small cubby hole, but it was five minutes wasted; he had tried to marshal his thoughts but failed. Sighing, he got out, and hoped that he could present an argument strong enough to sway Bord.

There was a hissing sound behind him as a steel curtain clicked into place, enclosing the cubbyhole. When contact had been made between the edge of the curtain and the touch switches in the wall the light came on. Mark pulled his medallion from his shirt and wordlessly held it in front of the analyzer hole. There was a few seconds delay, then a deep voice sounded from the ceiling.

"All right, Mark. Reception viewed me."

Almost before the short sentence came to an end, the tiny lift sank down and Mark stepped out in the office of Chief Inspector Bord. It was a large office, one wall completely covered with viewscreens. There was a large filing cabinet beside another, then the usual floor-to-ceiling curtain to hide the private quarters. Bord's table was in a corner, with his huge armchair behind it, the arm-rests full of tiny buttons, but Bord wasn't sitting in it. He was standing in front of the Galaxy globe, chewing his lip. When Mark stepped out from the lift he straightened up and massaged his back.

"If you hadn't come I would have sent for you, Mark. Take a seat."

"Olaf . . ."

"I said, sit down." Bord smiled, and going up to the two low couches in one corner, sat down on one, not saying a word until Mark had carefully deposited his large frame on the other.

"I know you have problems, Mark, and I think those problems have just been solved."

"Nol?"

"Nol."

Mark waited. The other picked up a jug from the ever-flame and opened the lid a fraction, letting the smell waft in Mark's direction.

"Coffee?" Bord offered.

"About Nol —"

"This is the reason why I'm Chief Inspector and you're still under my jurisdiction, Mark. You know damn well that we're going to talk about Nol, if only you give a chance to talk the way I want to — relaxed. Now, I ask you again . . . coffee?"

Mark grinned sheepishly.

"Yes, please."

Bord pulled two cups from the rack attached to the side of the table and slowly filled them with the fragrant smelling black liquid. This done, he pushed one to Mark and picked up the other, his nose twitching delicately in the small steaming from the cup, his eyes watching Mark.

"Mark, he's going tonight."

"He can't! That's what I'm here for, Olaf, I must speak to you. Nol is not the man we want. I don't think he's ever going to be. I put in my reports on him through the normal channels, but I must tell you . . ."

"I know what you want to tell me, Mark. I've read those reports every day. I'm quite up-to-date with his progress."

"There isn't any progress!"

"I don't want to argue with you, Mark. Let's say then that I'm up-to-date with his lack of progress."

"Olaf, he is nothing more than a psychotic killer."

"Is it the first time we've had one? For that matter, is it the first time that we went out of our way looking for one?"

Mark put down the cup and started to speak. But Bord, still sitting serenely with the cup held delicately in his hand, cut in, not giving him a chance.

"Have you a lot of brotherly love toward Nol?"

"We had the same mother, that's all."

"That's good, Mark, because you're going to be one half-brother short within a very brief period of time."

"It doesn't sound like a mission. It's a sentence!"

"It is."

Mark carefully placed his cup on the small table between them and got up. Absentmindedly he walked to the Galaxy globe, bending over and looking into it. His hands were behind his back, his eyes wide open, not seeing anything, just wide open.

He tried to locate exactly the peculiar feeling that was filling him. It wasn't love, or horror. It wasn't even confusion; more of a mixed sensation of wanting to be sick and being glad at the same time. His eyes suddenly came into focus and centered on a planet near the fringe of the globe. It was Vasart with its three satellites, dominating a large segment of space, the two large continents stretching right across the planet. He thought of the mission to Vasart. Standing straight again, he looked across to Bord.

"What happened?"

Bord swirled the coffee in his cup and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"The inevitable . . . complications. Father suddenly pushed forward the bill for proper conscription. He pull-

ed from the bottomless pit of their cruel but highly effective semantics a real lulu. Vasart is plastered all over with pulse posters, saying, 'Vasart and Vasat are one and the sky belongs to us.' Their cinemas are flooded with films in which repulsive-looking aliens are battling with Vasarts. More often than not they win, virtually annihilating the Vasarts. Need I go on?"

"So Father actually succeeded in uniting Vasart and Vasat!"

"That's the picture, Mark. But of course he couldn't have succeeded unless he wisely give a substitute to their pugnacious and masochistic little hearts. Now it's — can they prove they are as good, compared with the aliens, as they were in their own murderous little wars."

"The aliens? Humans?"

"No."

Bord got up and came to stand beside Mark, thoughtfully looking into the globe.

"However, the way he brought in this sudden change could also mean, that when they are good and ready they'll wallop hell out of the Morgas in their section. And the next thing we know . . . tell me, how does Nol like the difference between the two of you? I mean, the physical difference?"

"You have the report from the psychologists?"

"Of course. That's what I mean. Aren't we the obvious final challenge to Vasart? Of course we are."

"Olaf — let's get back to today. In what way did we change, the plan?"

"We must have a martyr."

Mark walked back to the couch and sat down, picking up his cup and looking into it. There was only coffee in it, a brownish-black liquid, leaving a rim of slight deposit as the level subsided in the cup.

"What would you say if I told you that Nol isn't good enough even for that?"

"You're not trying to save his neck." It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"No. Or rather, if I could, I would save the neck of every agent we send out. But I know it's impossible. No, Olaf, even though there are the years we spent together, the only feeling I have for Nol is a feeling of fear, that he isn't good enough. And the feeling that no matter who that agent was, I'd try anything before sending him to certain death. Hell!" Mark slammed the cup down on the table and twisted in his seat to look at Bord. "We're supposed to be the great grandmasters of subterfuge and diplomacy. Isn't there any way we could operate without all this loss of life?"

"I wish there was."

There was genuine regret in Bord's voice when he said that. Going behind his desk he sat tiredly down in his huge armchair and leaned back. He was looking at the ceiling with unseeing eyes, his voice betraying his fast-moving emotional moods as he spoke.

"I didn't even like the idea of assassinating Father, but it had been proved pretty conclusively by the backroom boys that it was the only solution. Right. We all agree that we couldn't use one of our agents

already on Vasart — because it took us long enough to infiltrate, and because every man down there is worth far more than an ordinary assassin sent from here. Well, so far, so good. But with this latest proclamation of Father, the finger of suspicion automatically points in our direction if the assassin gets away scotfree. After all, we're the only race in the Galaxy absolutely identical to the Vasart . . ."

" — so long as we are five feet tall and have white skin and blonde hair."

"Well, yes. But if the assassin gets away, he might have looked like anything, mightn't he? However, if he is found on the spot of the crime with all the quaint specifications you just mentioned — furthermore, if he is dead, committing suicide on the spot — it will take an awful lot of talking away, won't it?"

"The same would have applied to the original plan."

"Not at all, Mark. There wasn't all that talk about aliens and the sky belonging to the Vasart. And — " Bord turned his head in the direction of Mark — "that's why we need Nol more than ever. By the time he is fully Hypno'd he'll do the shooting of Father and his own suicide with the same fervor. To put it bluntly, all the reasons against Nol because of his character, are in fact in his favor. You do see that, don't you?"

There was naked pleading in his voice and on his face a troubled frown. Mark looked at Bord. He had known him for as long as he had known his own half-brother, and there was compassion in his voice.

"I know what you're worried about, Olaf. I see."

Bord looked back at the ceiling again. His voice hardly carried the distance to where Mark was seated.

"To think . . . the Galaxy is virtually ours. We have got as near to an earthly paradise as science can get us, and we're still incapable of rubbing out something as simple as mental illness."

Mark said gently, "It's not only Nol, Olaf. We're all a bit sick if we can send him so easily to his — "

"I was thinking of us."

There was no need to talk any further. Mark ran his fingers through his unruly hair and noticed detachedly that there were exactly 64 viewers on the wall, the number of squares in the ancient game of chess. Bord straightened up in his seat, and with a resolute move depressed one of the switches on the arm of his chair.

One of the viewers lit up, showing a room bare of furnishings except for a couch, a chair behind it and a peculiar looking metal arrangement stretched across the couch. The picture was clear even though the lighting in the room was very dim.

Nol was lying on the couch, with a white-coated man sitting behind him holding a sheaf of papers in his hand. His voice came through, muted, but distinct.

"— your only target is Father, who is the leader of the Vasart militant party. His death is your sole

and only responsibility. Kill if you must. Kill others only if there is a risk that you cannot fulfill your mission. You will do everything in your power to succeed in that mission. You have five alternative plans for the eliminaton of Father and you will not deviate from those plans unless there is no alternative. The moment you have achieved your aim — which is, I repeat, to kill Father — you will promptly shoot yourself. I repeat. You must always remember and obey this command. As soon as you have killed Father you will commit suicide by shooting yourself. Plan number one is as follows, and you will remember this plan and will not divulge it to anybody under any circumstances and you will act on it. Plan number one is as follows . . ."

Bord turned the switch and with half-closed eyes looked at Mark.

"Any more coffee?"

Mark didn't answer. He picked up the jug from the ever-flame and wordlessly poured another half inch into the full cup.

III

Nol was flat on his stomach, his helmeted head peering over the edge of the platform, the fingers inside his right-hand glove playing with the controls.

His descent was faster than it was advisable to strain the capacity of a platform, but he wanted to get down undetected. Not that the Vasart had any instrument as yet which could in fact pluck him out of the sky, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Caution alone made him dive at such a fantastic speed. Now he could see the countryside below him, with odd-looking trees and bushes sprouting all over the place. There was no sign of any house or people. He gently touched a few keys in his glove and the platform slowly descended to the ground. He thought it was gentle, but when he actually came into contact with the solid ground beneath he was jarred quite sharply. There was a metallic clanging as his spacesuit settled on the platform.

It was dark where he had landed, but already on the horizon there was a slight glow as the second sun of Vasart started to rise and throw light from its feeble rays. Nol got up. That alone was a job! After hundreds of years of research, the damn scientists still couldn't come up with anything better than the bulky and very difficult monster he was moulded into. That was another thing. Not only were these suits hard to manage and, what was worse, slow, but they had to be made for each individual separately. A half-centimeter difference in reaching the controlling keys could easily mean the difference between life and death.

When he was upright again, still standing on the platform, he slowly swivelled around, his fingers playing a sonata of complicated patterns, changing his night vision from various lights, satisfying himself that indeed there was nobody to witness his unheralded arrival. When he had made a full circle, satisfied at last, he arched back his thumb and flick-

ed the switch to release his helmet.

After that, it was quick work. In five minutes he was out of his suit and attaching the various pieces together again. He pulled out the connection of the suit from the platform and, moving the control to platform-manual, he knelt on it and raised it above the ground, but now only a couple of meters. Casting another glance around to satisfy himself that he was still alone, he gently pushed the forward button. The platform skimmed above the ground, making his eyes water a little after the antiseptic shield of his helmet. Suddenly he grunted with satisfaction. The ground started to make sense to him. Granted, he had memorized the terrain where he was supposed to descend, but models and reality have a disconcerting habit of being frighteningly different.

However, he was now sure he knew where he was. He tilted the platform and added a bit more speed, which made him slit his eyes, and veered off to the left.

After about ten minutes of flight the hill which had been marked with a cross on the Headquarters model came into sight. Nol raised the platform another twenty meters and slowed it down at the same time. It didn't take him long to find the large, in fact extraordinary large, Oont tree on the side of the hill, reaching upwards with its branches, carrying a huge crop of flowers, which normally delighted the eye with their multicolored splendor but were now only dark blobs on the thin branches of the tree. He twitched his nose. There was, of course, no need for it, because he had a thorough indoctrination in his hypno-technique, but the knowledge was there that the Vasarts found the smell of the flowers positively putrid.

To him, there was only the smell of almonds. Almonds it was which the technicians of the House had substituted, because there wasn't any flower or tree in Vasart which had the same smell and he needed a smell in order to produce a reaction. It wouldn't have done for him to walk by an Oont tree without expressing revulsion.

He brought the platform down to ground, stepped off it and pushed the branches aside to find the small cave he was told would be there. He remembered to clean off any petals or liquid centers of the flowers which might brush on his clothes as he pushed his way into the cave. The people of Vasart had a very keen sense of smell.

Working quickly but thoroughly, Nol pulled the vines of the Oont tree to one side. He piled bits of rock on them to keep them in place. He then pushed the platform into the cave and, undoing the square container attached to the platform, started to jam his pockets full of miscellaneous items, all necessary to make him an inhabitant of Vasart.

The first item was, of course, the awkward belt with the holster on it, housing the archaic explosive weapon all Vasarts carried as a matter of habit. His own special compress gun was already hidden in the right sleeve of his jacket. The jacket

would have been worth a lot on Earth because of the diamond frill all over it, but it too was an everyday custom on Vasart. Into his pockets went a large wad of paper money, his identification papers — beautifully forged — the yards of lace which served the primitive Vasart as a handkerchief (Nol appreciatively sniffed the scent on it) and the tiny box with the counting beads inside, telling all his prowess as a fighter. Finally he pocketed the compact first aid kit. The Vasarts were very anxious to patch themselves up after each fight, because that was the only way to prepare oneself for yet another fight.

So long as the fight wasn't fatal, of course.

Nol grinned. As if anybody had any chance with him after the gruelling year spent at the House! He looked around and, satisfied that he had done all that was expected of him, stepped outside and kicked off the rocks holding the vines.

He thoughtfully looked at the cave. There was no reason to work, because even if there was a Vasart mad enough to go near an Oont tree, the vines were thick enough to hide everything which had to be hidden. Carrying his small holdall, secreting nothing more dangerous than a change of clothes and some fantastic-looking toilet requisites, he started down the hillside. Now it was only a matter of getting into town without arousing suspicion.

After about three Earth hours, Nol was well and truly chafed. He wasn't much of a Loam rider.

He'd seen a Loam in the zoo; that was part of his training. It looked like nothing on Earth. Fair enough: it wasn't of Earth. The Loam was an animal bigger than a horse, with six legs and a head resembling, even if the resemblance was only slight, the head of a dolphin. There was mechanical traffic on Vasart, but still not widespread enough to obviate the need for the Loam. Nol didn't particularly care what might come his way, so long as something did come. The second sun of Vasart, Volat — they were mad on alliteration — was by now high up in the sky. It wasn't exceptionally hot, but with walking and carrying that stupid holdall Nol was getting irritable.

If nothing came he had another five Earth hours to walk. He didn't really care for that. If only he could have flown a bit nearer to the town; but H. Q. had decided that it would have been too risky. Nol swore, with feeling and with a remarkably large vocabulary. It was remarkable, because he was swearing in Vasart. It gave him pleasure to realize the number of utterly rude words he knew.

About the time he had decided that there was no point in killing himself walking there was a slight noise from behind him.

Turning around, and at the same time casting a glance in the immediate vicinity for cover if it was necessary, he shaded his eyes and stared at the vehicle appearing from the direction he had come himself.

At least it wasn't one of those Loam-pulled things. It was the

mechanical equivalent of an Earth platform. True, it was driven by hydrochloric acid instead of the silent cosmray principle, but at least it was faster than walking. And from his studies he knew it had some primitive sort of springing. From the direction of the vehicle, Nol looked to where the town lay sprawling in the distance. Without hesitation he put his holdall on the ground. First checking that his compress gun was loose enough in his arm holster, he thoughtfully lifted his Vasart gun. After that, he just stood there and waited. He didn't as yet know what he was going to say. But he was certain of one thing . . . he had had enough walking.

It was the best part of fifteen minutes before the — for want of a better term — car came up to where he was standing. Nol stood resolutely in its path and waited with curiosity to see what would happen.

The car pulled up with sharp hiss, a vapor cloud behind it. The driver was wearing huge goggles. He jumped from his seat and stood belligerently in front of Nol.

"You'd better have a good reason for stopping the squire of Moonoo!"

Nol felt the beginning of a murderous rage, maybe quite unnecessary, but his training came to his rescue.

"My Loam went crazy. I had to shoot him a bit further back. I would certainly appreciate a lift to town."

"I said I was the squire of Moonoo."

Nol sighed audibly. Moving carefully, so it wouldn't look suspicious, he got his fight record from his neck where it hung and offered it to the squire of Moonoo. The Vasart leaned forward and glanced at the impressive number of beads on the right-hand side of the record. He changed visibly.

"Excellent! It is a rare pleasure to meet you, stranger. Would you care for a lift to town?"

Grinning, Nol dropped the record, walked around the awkward looking vehicle and swung himself up into the front seat. His tone was hard and uncompromising when he spoke.

"How long are you proposing to stand there? I want to get to town as soon as possible."

"We're on our way."

The Vasart jumped up into the driving seat and turned a lever, and the thing started to move. It wasn't very fast, but it was a hell of a sight easier than walking. Nol stole a guarded glance at the driver. He looked very much like himself. He had blond hair and his driving coat was studded with diamonds. His face was shallow, the goggles, because of their size, making the face even smaller and narrower. Altogether he didn't look much, but he had said he was the squire of Moonoo. That, Nol remembered, was a huge estate not very far from where he landed his platform. The fellow might be useful. He was on the verge of starting a conversation with the driver when the other looked in his direction and spoke.

"Are you going to see Father?"

"No. I'm just travelling." Then he added as an afterthought, "I'm from Vasat."

"What's the difference? Vasat or Vasart, we're all one and the sky belongs to us."

"I don't know about the sky, but if you care I'm willing to settle whether we're all one or not."

The other looked at him. Although in his tone there was a certain element of caution, it was without fear.

"What would that prove? You may kill me or I may kill you. It depends of both skill and luck. But have you ever thought, stranger, how we line up against aliens?"

"Often. That's why I'm going to Boran."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I understand they have a large settlement there. In Vasat we've never even seen one." He looked belligerently at the squire. "I would like to see the way they fight. I ran out of opposition where I come from."

"Ah yes. It's a noble desire. But no matter how good you are, you won't have much of a chance to fight an alien."

"And why shouldn't I?"

"Because they never fight."

"Impossible!"

"I'm telling the truth. People in Boran tried time and again. But they are a coward lot. They refuse to fight."

Inside Nol was grinning, but for the benefit of the other he put on a fierce expression and said gruffly:

"Well, I shan't ask them to give me the privilege. If they don't fight, they will just die."

The other one looked at him.

"Didn't you know?"

"What am I supposed to know?"

"Well, when they don't want to fight, they just put up some sort of a screen and you can't get near them. Not even with pellets."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

The squire half turned in his seat and his face went a rather unattractive red.

"I'm not in the habit of lying, stranger —" Nol suggestively slid his hand nearer to his holster — "but I don't want to fight." The squire added quickly, "And don't call me a coward. It's not because of your impressive record. In fact, not so very long ago I would have made an attempt, especially since you came from Vasat. But not any longer."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But what made the Vasart even more cautious than before?"

The squire swallowed hard. For a moment it looked as if he was about to give up his hard-won control. Then he said resolutely:

"Just spend a bit of time in Boran and listen to Father. Then you'll see why we are reluctant to fight. I tell you again, Vasart and Vasat are one and the sky belongs to us."

Nol gave a loud snort — which was mildly insulting in Vasart. Leaning back in his seat, he remained silent. His mind was ticking over. Now he'd seen why he had to come to Vasart and assassinate Father. If the dictator really succeeded in uniting those bellicose little bastards — if they discovered that the aliens truly didn't like to fight at the drop of a hat — there would be nothing

to hold them back from spilling out into the Galaxy and creating the biggest havoc since the time Earth pretty nearly subjugated everything there was to own.

True, they had no space drive as yet. But how long would it be before they discovered it for themselves? Even if that was unlikely for quite a time to come, they might unite with another alien culture that possessed one, and lacked enthusiasm for Earth's playing the leading role. It seemed that the House was right. But what about the rest of the people? Did they have any idea at all of all these little dramas virtually on their doorsteps?

Of course not; and if there came somebody like him, full of go and guts, they just labelled him antisocial and thrust him well away from what they termed "society." Still, he shouldn't really complain. At least he would have the type of life he always wanted. He would flee across the fantastic distances of the Galaxy and live the way he'd always wanted to . . . dangerously. Nol's mouth turned down at the corners in a sharp grin. He had certainly been given an interesting first job. He was looking forward to it.

If there was one small fly in the ointment, it was the way the Vasart were outclassed. The job was really a pushover.

Settling down more comfortably in his seat, he shut his eyes and pretended to be resting. There was no more need to talk to the pompous little squire of Moonoo; he was a self-reliant little world to himself.

IV

The pretense of resting was too successful. Nol woke up, because someone was roughly shaking his shoulder.

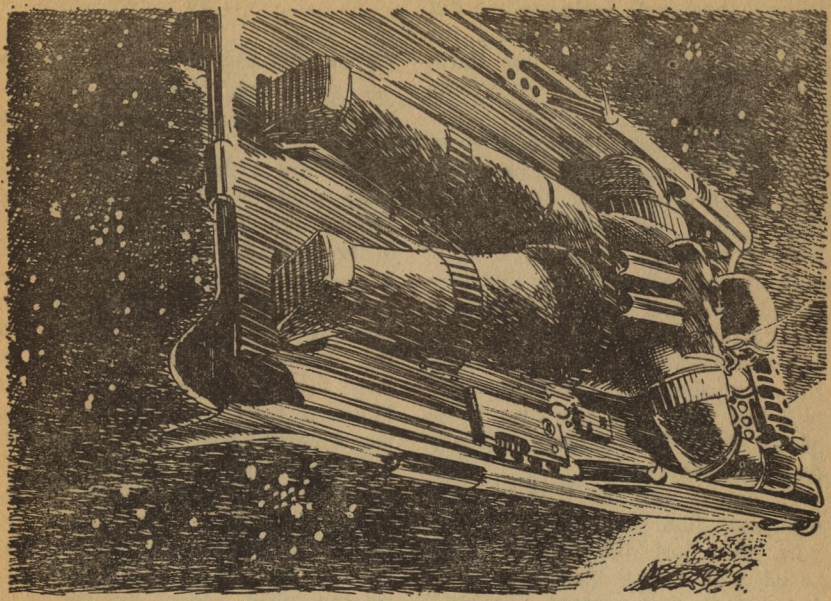
Blinking a few times he desperately tried to take in the picture around him. The car was stationary at the beginning of a street. A street it was because there were houses on each side. On his left was a large building which he recognized from the dummy city spread out on a large table in the map room of the House as the Customs House. There was a barrier thrown across the car, and the squire was standing open-mouthed beside two uniformed men, who were holding their guns at the ready, the barrels pointing at him.

There were more of the uniforms on the other side of the car. The one who was shaking his shoulder had the native dagger in his left hand, the feeble shine of Volat reflecting from the finely honed blade. Guns pointing at him or not, Nol automatically slid his right hand to his holster, but his gun wasn't in it. Before he had a chance to recover from that, the one who was shaking him rapped out angrily:

"Get down and make it quick." He suggestively twirled the dagger in his hand. Nol was badly scared, but he put on an expression of righteous indignation and didn't move.

"What's the explanation of this? Is this the way Vasart welcomes visitors from Vasat? Or maybe the customs have changed, and this is the way to overcome a fighter."

He never had a chance to finish



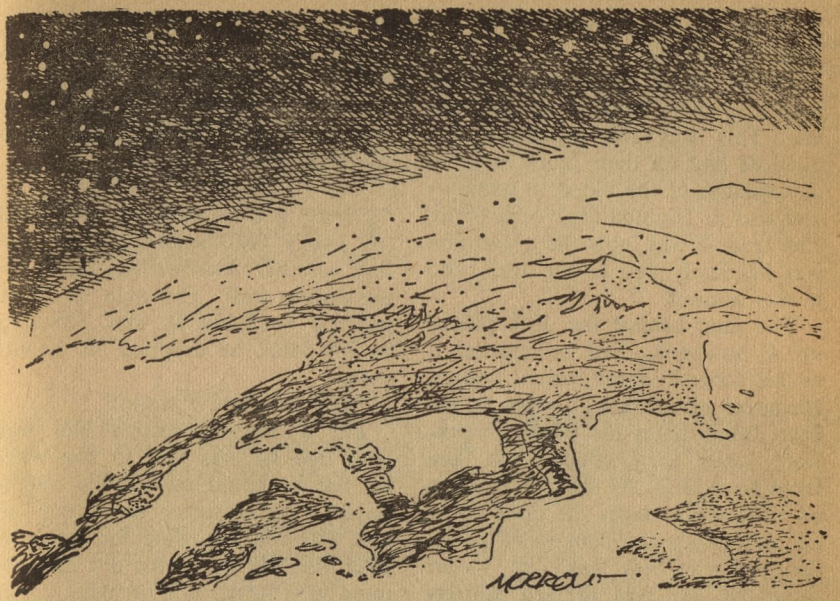
his sentence. Somebody from the back grabbed his shoulders, and the next thing he knew he was thrown to the ground, right in front of the squire He was up in the next instant, but before he could tackle anybody a coil of rope fell from behind, tightening cruelly over his arms. He was half pushed, half dragged through the archway of the Customs House, along a long corridor, ending up in a large room with no other furniture but a desk and a chair facing the door.

The wall beside the door was studded with large metal rings, to one of which they were tying him.

Something had gone wrong. But good Lord, what could it be? Nol was disregarding the panting guards as they were making sure that his bonds were as tight and probably as painful as they could make it. He was looking through the splendidly uniformed figure who had just come through the door and sat down behind the desk. His brain was working overtime trying to figure out what had gone wrong. The squire? But what could he have said to make this happen? He had been brought right up-to-date with the local customs and idiosyncrasies. He was sure he had neither said or done anything to deserve this. Granted, it took him more than a month to get here, but there just couldn't have been all those changes.

The guards were now standing beside him, one on each side. The one on his right croaked respectfully to the officer.

"The prisoner is secured, your grace."



Your grace? What the hell is going on here? thought Nol frantically. He was familiar with the ranks in the various uniformed branches on Vasart. And he was sure there was no such title.

The officer called "his grace" waved negligently with his hand and the guards obeyed the signal of dismissal. As they were tramping out, he called out after them.

"Tell Party Leader Mongo to come in."

Party Leader? Nol quietly started to sweat. Every blessed thing he'd seen or heard in the last ten minutes were completely new to him, never mentioned in his indoctrination. What in the name of Heaven was going on? Now the only ones in the room were the officer, and himself tied to the wall. Nol decided that the time had come to throw a little light on these mysterious-goings on. Flexing his muscles impotently, he said with hurt dignity:

"After this is all over, I shall of course expect you to draw guns with me. Meanwhile may I have an explanation, please?"

The officer looked at him without any emotion showing on his face.

"Shut up," he said.

"How dare you! My name is Hansot Kagaroo and I'm a very influential man in Vasat. I have all my identification papers. I demand an explanation!"

The officer grinned at him. With goose pimples on his back and arms Nol recognized that grin. He'd seen

it on the documentary cine films the local agents had shot of the hundreds of duels taking place every month in every sizeable city on Vasart. This was the expression the duellists had on their faces in sheer anticipation of the blood to come — and also to frighten their opposition. The trouble was, now the opposition was helplessly tied to the wall, and it was himself.

The man behind the desk picked up a notebook. Nol recognized it as his forged identification papers. He never even knew it when it had been taken from his pocket — possibly when they slipped his gun from his holster. As the officer started to turn the pages the door opened, and beside the door stood an individual who was lanky by Vasart standards. He was dressed entirely in black, a radical departure from the rainbow habit of the planet. He shut the door and just stood there, not even noticing the officer standing up respectfully. He stared at Nol with a wolfish grin on his face.

"Aha!"

The exclamation sounded very foreboding. He walked up and stood in front of Nol. He looked at him with meticulous observation, taking him in from his soft boots to his dust-covered and perspiration-marked face. Rocking on his heels, his eyes penetrated into Nol's.

Nol didn't like the look. He was on the verge of starting to complain again when the next words of the Party Leader made him numb, and his body was suddenly covered with cold sweat.

"Hard to believe. He does look like a Vasart," said the man in black.

Nol said, "Don't hold that against Vasat, just because we are in the minority. If we could change to look less like a man from Vasart, we'd gladly do so."

There was a stinging blow and Nol's head snapped back, getting another hammering from the unyielding wall. The man in black grinned wolfishly at him. Rocking on his heels, he dropped his bombshell.

"For an alien, I mean."

For a fleeting second Nol was glad that he was tied to the wall, so that he could put all his weight on his sagging torso, disguising the fact that his legs were too weak to hold him. He licked his dry lips, his mind in a whirl. But he managed to riposte:

"You stinking Vasart!" There was another slap. Nol felt the blood running from the corner of his mouth. "How dare you call me an alien? My name is Hansot Kagaroo and I've lived in Vasat all my life. I demand — "

The next blow was with a closed fist.

For a moment Nol thought the ceiling had fallen on him. There was a momentary blackness, interspersed with flashing lights and a heavy buzzing in his ears. He must have passed out for a moment, because the next thing he heard was a string of instructions given by the Party Leader to the respectfully standing officer.

". . . none whatever. Drive one of the covered cars and use a

stretcher to take him out to it. You mustn't breathe a word to anybody about this or I promise that Father will personally hear about it, and you know what that means."

"Yes, sir."

"Where is the driver of the car?"

"Sir?"

"The one you stopped, you idiot. Where is the man who was driving that car?"

"Oh, the squire of Moonoo. I know him, sir, I've known him for —"

"I'm not interested in how long you've known him . . . as yet. He is to be sent to Party Headquarters ten minutes after this swine has started."

"Certainly, sir. I'll tell him."

The man in black nearly shrieked at the poor terrorized officer.

"What on Vasart do you mean, you'll *tell* him? He's to be sent the same way as this one. I hold you personally responsible for their safe arrival, is that understood?"

"Yes, but — "

The Party Leader, with two long steps, was at the table and leaning over it, saying in a foreboding tone:

"Are you tired of wearing your new uniform?"

"No, sir!"

"Then do as you're told. You're the arm of Vasart and the Party is the brain. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then move!"

Turning on his heel the Leader went to the door. He stopped for a moment to smile at Nol, the smile provoking shivers down his spine.

"I'll be seeing you soon," said he, and purposefully whisked through the door. The officer came out from behind the desk and trotted up to the door. Then, casting a glance at Nol staring at him, came back again and stopped in front of him, his right hand automatically creeping near to his holster. Taking a visible grip on himself, he spat at Nol and gave him an almighty whack in the solar plexus. This time Nol passed right out.

V

The next thing he knew he was lying on something hard and narrow in the primitive car of Vasart bouncing on, by the feel of it, an unmade road.

He couldn't see anything. A heavily scented blanket or something was thrown right over him, irritating the open wound at the corner of his mouth. What had happened? His mind was buzzing round in a mad circle of speculation. How could the Vasart know, or, as seemed the case, expect him? An alien? Earth made a most stringent point of sending ambassadors as unlike the natives as they could possibly find. It wasn't really difficult, because anyone who didn't have black, or at least dark brown, complexions on Earth was an obvious throwback. Also, the general height of an Earthman was over six feet. To the best of the knowledge of the House — and if they didn't know, it wasn't usually worth knowing — the Vasart never dreamed that there could be people on Earth who could pass for one of themselves. Nor was their medical science

specialized enough to realize that certain changes could be made to a human or a Vasart body, bringing the tone of difference down to a safe level.

But it wasn't only that. They were obviously expecting him. What's more, without the awareness of the House.

The Morgas? It didn't seem possible. Granted they were on a much higher technical and cultural plane than the Vasart, but they were also soft and completely devoid of ambitions of creating an empire of their own. Or at least, that was the assumption.

The House?

Nol gritted his teeth. He couldn't see any reason why they should do a thing like this. But he was absolutely certain that the House would indeed use him like a pawn if necessary. The whole plan of assassination — yes, of course, they had provided him with alternative plans, but it wasn't really for his own safety. They just wanted to make sure there would be no way of tying up the House with any of their very odious manipulations.

Nol flexed his back to relieve his cruelly tied arms from the whole weight of his body. He thought of the many cheap space operas he had viewed in his life. There was a sarcastic grin on his face. The hero invariably jutted his chin forward, breathing humanistic slogans and declaring his readiness to die for the cause. As for himself, there was nothing further from his mind. He wanted to live all right, and wanted to find out how he had got into this hell of a mess. Mainly he wanted to live. He couldn't really concentrate on marvellous plans for escape, because he couldn't think how he could do it, tied up tight as a salami. And in any case, at the moment he was far to scared.

One tiny peephole in his mind relived the expression on the face of the Vasart in the black outfit. He fervently prayed that the journey was going to take a long, long time.

It didn't.

After about ten minutes the car came to a jerky halt and there were hurried footsteps around his mobile morgue.

There were murmuring voices nearby. His stretcher was grabbed, and by the swaying he could tell that they were on steps leading downwards. How extraordinary, thought Nol, almost detached, it's always down, never up. By the frequent swearing from front and back it became obvious that the passageway and the corners weren't made for carrying stretchers. That was a small consolation.

Abruptly the carriers stopped. There was the rattle of a key turning in a lock and the archaic noise of a metal door opening. The stretcher began to move again; then quite unexpectedly it was tipped sideways. Nol jerked his head upright and saved himself a nasty knock as he fell to the floor, but not his stomach and his chest. In the moment when he felt himself tipped, he had unconsciously taken a deep breath, which now gushed out with great force. There was a clang as the door banged shut be-

hind him, accompanied by a furious voice from outside.

"As heavy as a Loam, Vasart rot his gun hand!"

Turning on his side, Nol looked up towards the door. It appeared to be more like a steel gate. Resting his head on the ground, Nol stared at two uniformed Vasarts standing outside, looking down at him contemptuously.

The angle from the floor, as he watched them through the bars, distorted his vision, and the two Vasarts, clad in black, looked huge and threatening. Whilst Nol was gasping for air, the two outside turned and walked away, muttering to each other, their soft shuffling on the floor gradually dying away. Nol painfully twisted his head around.

There was nothing much to see. In fact, his cell was very much like his rest cubicle in the House, except that it was completely bare. Breathing out through his mouth and taking deep breaths through his nose, he quieted the mad racing of his heart. After a few minutes he forced himself into a sitting position. He ached all over.

Now sitting, he caressed the cell with his eyes, starting at the door, slowly moving his head and looking right round. There was absolutely nothing more to see than he had seen before. There wasn't a stick of furniture in the place. There didn't seem to be any form of lighting. The door still looked as solid and final as before.

What now?

Was he to sit there and wait until they came back to make mincemeat out of him? Suddenly he realized that the rope had been taken off his body. Only his wrists were tied together. Wriggling himself into a knot, he pulled his wrists forward under his bottom and heels. In a few seconds he had succeeded in having his arms resting in his lap and his legs stretched out in front of him, leaning exhausted with his back to the wall.

Whoever had tied him up wasn't squeamish of drawing blood. A thin rope — he lifted his hands nearer to his eyes; it was rope all right, made of the long and extremely strong hair of the Loam — was tied so tight that his fingers were already a peculiar shade of blue. Sighing deeply, Nol dropped his hands back into his lap and winced as the barrel of his compress gun dug into his side. Mournfully Nol came to the conclusion that there wasn't a thing he could do.

It was all very well to have five alternative plans for the assassination, but not one of them had included the possibility of his being captured long before he could draw a bead.

He sat up and listened to the reverberating sound coming from behind his forehead, his own blood pulsing through a suddenly keenly aware and madly calculating brain. Lifting up his wrists again, he brought them over his left shoulder and with his chin unbelievingly felt his compress gun still strapped to his right arm. Impossible, but it was there!

Getting up was jerky and slow.

When he straightened up, still leaning against the wall behind him, Nol moaned aloud from the pain in his belly. Again taking deep breaths, with shaking legs he explored his cell with frantic urgency, but to no avail. There just wasn't anything. No sharp corners or pieces of furniture. The bars of his cell door were perfectly smooth and round. He went back to the door again and looked carefully at the individual bars. They were about a centimeter in diameter and perfectly smooth. Pressing his face to the door, he looked outside. From where he was he could only see smooth walls curving away in either direction.

Lifting his wrists to eye level, he laid the hair rope against the bars and started to rub hard against the smooth metal.

VI

After what seemed hours there was still no change.

Perspiration was running down his face, into his eyes, biting stingingly into the broken flesh beside his mouth, soaking his clothes . . . and there was still no change. He strained his ears for footsteps or voices, but all he could hear was his own gasping for air. Now the perspiration running down his face was mixed with tears of frustration. His sobbed his white fury and banged his feelingless hands against the bars. There he was, with a gun strapped to his right arm, and still he had to wait impotently for the sure slaughter to come.

Sinking down to the ground he laid his hands on his buckled knees and stared at that rotten, primitive hair rope, which nevertheless was good enough to make him sit there, waiting for his own execution. Then, out of the blue, a sudden thought struck him. The next moment he was all agog, pressing his wrists against his face and biting and tearing the rope with his teeth. Idiot! He kept on calling himself the most vile words he could think of, whilst he was gradually tearing the rope, practically hair by hair.

After the first mad burst it didn't take long before the rope, sprouting into dozens of individual bits, had fallen from his hands. Jumping up, he thrust his right arm forward. The compress gun clattered to the floor.

Nol stood looking at the gun uncomprehendingly until the realization hit him . . . there was no feeling in his hands at all. Glancing out into the silent passageway, he kicked the remains of the rope to where he was thrown when they brought him in and gently eased the gun beside it. Then he started to walk up and down, shaking his arms to help retrieve the blood circulation and rubbing his hands together, feeling a fool because of the lack of feeling in them.

If only they didn't come! If only they gave him this small chance! He didn't know how long it took, he only knew when the pain suddenly hit him.

Nol doubled over in the middle of the cell, putting his wrists on his thighs, bending over them, hiding them in his stomach, his eyes bulging out in agony. It was almost un-

bearable. There were noises coming from him, and he forced himself to throttle them to a whimper. Now he was on his knees, feeling the cold of the stone floor through his forehead pressed against it. Through the agony, he whispered to himself:

"It's all right. It's all right."

And then it was over.

Shaking uncontrollably, sitting with his back to the wall, Nol massaged his hands. Now there was only a sharp tingling sensation in them. Using the sleeves of his perspiration-soaked coat, disregarding the cutting edges of the embedded diamonds, he wiped his face. He felt as if he had been through a gruelling two day's march, full of the fiendish obstacles only the House could dream up. But his mind was working with clarity and there was an ocean of hatred within him.

His chances of getting out from this rat hole were almost non-existent. That he knew. But with the utmost faith he also knew that a few of the Vasart would accompany him to wherever he went.

There were shuffling noises from the passageway. Nol put his hands behind him, with his right grabbing the gun, and, slowly rolling his head to his right . . . waited.

The Party Leader came first, followed by another in black uniform. Tailing them was — a Morgas!

A key was inserted into the lock of the door, but Nol couldn't tear his eyes away from the thin figure of the Morgas, towering above the two Vasarts. So that was it! Even the omnipotent House didn't know everything. The peaceful, ambitionless Morgas were working hand-in-hand with a race poles apart.

Of course they were waiting for him! The Morgas had space travel, even if it was limited to their own section of the galaxy. If there was any monkey business, which seemed pretty conclusive, they'd probably supplied the Vasart with a few little technical gadgets, such as space radar.

The door opened, and at that moment Nol jumped into action.

His gun was suddenly in front of him. In a millisecond there were three sharp hisses, amplified by the low ceiling. Nol jumped to the door, and, gun ready, crouched in the direction the three came from. The passageway was empty. From the three on the floor came a tiny sound. Nol slammed against the opposite wall, but it was only blood dripping from the slightly reptilian head of the Morgas. The three were very dead. The gun was made specially for his assignment and the high-velocity bullets made a right old mess from such close quarters.

Nol slipped the compress gun back into his arm holster, bent down and unbuckled the gun belt of the guard. The Leader, now lying supine, his mouth wide open, had no weapon on him. The Morgas never carried anything one could term a gun. Checking the magazine, he found it was fully charged. For a moment Nol toyed with the idea of stripping one of the corpses and changing into their black uniform, but looking at the mess his bullets

had made, he decided against it. Anyway, he had no idea what those uniforms were, how many of them were around, and how one behaved in them.

If he had any chance to get out of this dungeon, time must be the vital factor. Watching the three, he slipped his newly acquired gun a couple of times in and out of the holster. Satisfied, he walked toward the steps at the end of the passage way.

At the steps Nol stopped, undecided. There wasn't any other way out. He had to go on; but something was bothering him. There were about twenty steps. After that there was a sharp left turn. Back where he came from, the only opening was his cell.

There was something screwy about the place. Well, he had no time to waste. Flattening himself to the wall, he was a shadow creeping up. When he got to the turn, Nol, still pressing himself to the wall, listened desperately for any noise at all. There was none. He turned the corner, crouching low, but there were only further steps leading up, and another turn. Furiously he ran up, turned the second corner without thinking and stared into the surprised eyes of a black-clad guard, leading the tied-up squire of Moonoo.

With one leap Nol was on the guard, slashing hard at his neck artery. The guard was only halfway to the floor when his relentless right hand chopped down the squire, who was still gaping at him, with ugly, bloody welts criss-crossing his face. Frozen in his last position, Nol looked down the passageway. Nobody was around. A short check was enough to show that he had brought his grand total of dead to five. He had never thought he could be squeamish . . . up to this moment. Logic told him he could do nothing else, and in any case, his moves were almost without thinking, just a blind reaction. But the crumpled form of the squire was like a slap.

His stomach turned over and, not caring if the combined black regiment of Vasart came marching towards him, Nol supported himself against the wall. It was different with dummies and shooting at a distant figure, not even seeing the bullets strike home.

And he had wanted to be an agent!

For a short space Nol lost his sense of time. Slowly recovering, he resumed his careful way to the end of the passage, not looking at the two prostrate forms on the ground. At the end was a door. Not hearing anything, he opened it.

On the other side was a courtyard. The middle of the space was taken up with loads of building material, masons walking around carrying their various tools and, on the opposite side, a gate wide open with a figure in black lolling by it, eyeing the passers-by in a wide street full of people. Nol hesitated for only a moment, then stepped outside and pulled the door shut.

He noticed the extreme thickness of the door, and small things started to add up. This was obviously the H. Q. of the black crow party, still

in the process of conversion. Probably because of that was the easy way he had got so far. Trouble was, he had to get through that gate. Round the courtyard was a wall, originally the normal Vasart type of building, but now being increased to twice its height, just too high for him to try any fast climbing. Regretfully Nol made the decision . . . through that gate and fast.

While he strolled across the yard he was hoping for all he was worth that the guard at the gate was used to the builders coming and going and wouldn't take any extra notice when he stepped out into the street. If he did stop him . . . he let the thought hang in midair.

Nol could hardly believe his luck when the guard, at the precise moment when he was almost level with him, looked lecherously after a giggling girl, offering his wide back to him. Turning sharply to the right and exerting force not to run, Nol continued his stroll until he got to the nearest side street. Around the corner, he increased his pace until he was almost running, trying to look harassed and absent-minded.

The street looked exactly as he had learned at the House, with single story buildings on either side, and wide verandas protecting the shops from the glare of the two suns. The women kept close to the shops, whilst the men, taking the extreme edge of the pavement, walked more slowly, eyeing one another with searching looks. They were all wearing guns, of course. All of them were ready for a fight with guns or with daggers at any provocation.

Nol wondered for a second how they could achieve even this primitive civilization, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sight of black uniforms walking toward him on the same side of the street. Fear knotted his stomach, but the three of them passed by without taking any notice of him. They were immersed in a deep conversaton, something about the crooked ending of a Loam race the day before.

Not taking any chances, Nol turned right again and kept on criss-crossing streets, gradually feeling the lay of the land and associating the plan of the city with the dummy model at the House. He was going toward the poorer section of the city, trying to come to a decision. He had to find a place to hide.

None of these complications had been foreseen — that he would end up without money or papers, and would very soon be the target of a manhunt. He looked like a Vasart, all right. But he had no papers, and he couldn't keep on walking the streets until he fulfilled his mission. Stopping in front of a pulse placard, letting the gently moving colors play with his eyes, he tried to put himself into the shoes of that mysterious black-clad bunch.

VII

They would be waiting for him — or, at any rate, waiting for an alien. The Morgas were helping in the background. That meant a much higher opposition technically, and a greater skill in organization. Their failure to keep him a prisoner, and

the almost comic-opera Party with their incredibly muddled security measures, wasn't a redeeming factor. After all, they had captured him in the first place.

More important, no one on Earth had ever dreamed of all this as recently as a month ago. To whip the fiercely independent Vasarts into discipline of this sort was a very red danger sign indeed.

Right. The first point was — they knew they had an escaped and dangerous alien in their midst.

Second, they knew he had neither money nor papers.

Third, by the wounds on those corpses he had left behind, they would realize that he had a weapon. That would be a dead giveaway if he was searched — not that he proposed ever to get that near.

Well, the obvious thing for them to do was to put a cordon round the city and make a systematic, street-by-street search, hunting for somebody without papers and possessing a strange weapon. With every minute nearer to darkness, his chances of remaining alive became more tenuous as long as he stayed in the open. Ergo, he must make his move at once.

But what move?

He started to walk again, steering a careful course in the middle of the pavement to avoid any possibility of getting into a fight. Now he was moving with a purpose behind his steps, weighing up the quality of the area, looking at the houses and the generally poorer appearance of the Vasarts, bustling about their mysterious errands. Gradually, there were less people. The shops with their open windows grew less in number and shoddier in looks.

He turned down a narrow alleyway and, walking halfway down, paused in front of a half open door. Stepping right up to it he gently pushed it further in, taking the room in with a glance. It was a very ordinary living room, opening straight from the street as was the custom. Nol hesitated, then his decision was made for him. There was a complaining voice coming from behind the door, standing now at right angles to the alley.

"What's the matter, why don't you come in? Are you drunk again or beaten up?"

There was a swish of cloth and Nol was faced with an unpleasant looking female, staring back at him open-mouthed.

He moved with desperate urgency. A chapter heading flashed through his mind as he applied a hold that caused instant unconsciousness: *The five primary holds in unarmed combat.* Dropping her body to the floor, Nol kicked the door shut and rushed through the rest of the place, his hands in front of him ready to pounce.

The female was the only one on the premises. He couldn't have missed anybody because there were only two other rooms, one obviously the kitchen, the other a bedroom, stinking with the favorite incense of the day. With half an eye watching the door, listening for footsteps, he threw things around until he found what he wanted. In one corner, on a small table, was a workbox con-

taining threads and needles, and also the inevitable rolls of ribbon which were sewn onto most garments as decoration. Trying the ribbon's breaking strength, he went back to the female, tied her hands behind her back and led the ribbon down to her ankles. In a few moments she was tied up like a parcel, her body arched like a bow.

It was certainly a painful position — but a safe one.

Ransacking a bit further, he found the first aid kit, took a wide strip of plaster and gagged her thoroughly. He carried her into the bedroom and tossed her onto the bed, thinking that she was getting a better deal than he himself not so very long ago. Back in the living room, Nol pulled a chair well behind the door so he wouldn't be seen when it was opened, and sat down to wait.

Whoever she thought she was talking to was obviously due home.

Well, he was there first!

Nol lost count of the times he looked at each article in that room before he heard steps coming down the alley.

Standing up, he strained his ears. Yes, it was one person. He was hoping that the steps were making for that house, because his nerves were taut from the waiting. The door opened. The next moment the elderly Vasart was lying on the floor and Nol was shutting the door and leaning on it. The tying up was a great deal faster this time because he had everything he wanted to hand. In a few moments the securely tied Vasart was sitting in a deep chair with Nol opposite him, in his hand the old chap's own dagger, the blade moving restlessly only centimeters away from his face.

When the Vasart opened his eyes he opened them wide, and not a sound came from him. Nol said in a quietly threatening voice:

"I'm from Vasat and the guards are after me. I need some information. A lot of things seemed to have changed since I was here last. Do you understand me?"

The other nodded numbly.

"Right. If you tell me all I want to know I promise you I won't harm you, but you try to mislead me or give me away and I'll cut your throat. You got that?"

The old man croaked out some unintelligible sound, but made his meaning clear by vigorously nodding his head.

"Right again. Now, since when have you had so many party members in that black uniform running around in the city?"

There was sheer wonderment on the face of the other, which also crept into his voice when he answered.

"Don't you know?"

"Answer my question."

"I'm sorry, stranger, but Vasart and Vasat are one—"

"I know . . . and the sky belongs to us. Now unless you're going to answer my question fast, I'll—" He moved the dagger.

"Well, Father formed the Party Corps three weeks ago. Let me tell you, a hard lot they are. The best fighters in the area signed up. Those who didn't—phwt!"

"I see. And since when have the aliens been moving around so freely on Vasart?"

"Aliens?"

"Yes, yes, the aliens. The Morgas, I saw one in the city this afternoon."

"I don't know what you're talking about, stranger." The dagger moved, and the old man strained his body trying to get away from it. "Honest, I've never seen one from close quarters. I know they have their domes, but I've never seen one."

Nol was deep in thought. This was entirely possible. The Morgas were probably behind most of this, but were doing it in a more clandestine manner that he had believed after seeing one in the jail.

"My wife—"

"Eh?"

"I said, my wife—is she—did you see anyone when you came in?"

"Oh, yes. Your wife is in the bedroom. Unharmed. Don't worry. You can start worrying if you don't answer the rest of my questions."

"I will, stranger. I will, just let us be in peace. I'm only a poor leather maker, I never did any harm to anybody—"

"Shut up!"

The old man shut up, his eyes bulging at Nol, obviously every second realizing more and more the frightening position he was in. There was a sudden fleeting expression of eagerness on his face. Without prompting he started to talk again.

"We have a drive once every week. We gather in front of the city hall and Father makes a speech. Then we have music and drinks. Tonight's going to be even finer than usual, because we'll have a Loam race, right around the square and—"

Standing up, Nol started to pace up and down the room, followed by the frightened eyes of the Vasart, who now again became silent and filled with fear.

There appeared to be a few discrepancies, but it still made sense. Impossible or not, Father had accelerated the growth of his party. He had formed an armed corps, got the Vasarts behind him and held weekly recruiting drives—seeming to be doing years of growth in weeks or months. It wasn't a point of Nol coming on time, he was wondering if he wasn't too late. Turning to the Vasart, he rapped out his next question.

"What time is this speech by father?"

"He comes on the balcony the moment the lamps are lit."

Nol resumed his walking. If they hadn't changed lighting-up times as well, that would be about another three hours. That was just about the time they were expecting him to strike. He smiled grimly. The time when all these assumptions were made on Earth seemed years ago, unreal and make-believe. Reality was here, as he was walking nervously in this room, followed by the eyes of the old boy. Reality was in the peculiar tight feeling in his groin, which meant fear, and finally reality was that now he didn't really want to go outside and sneak around corners, dodging uniformed men who were after his blood.

Most important, he didn't want to draw his gun and kill yet another man—well, creature.

No, but he knew he had to!

Nol stopped in front of the old man and gruffly asked:

"Where are your identification papers? And I want money."

"In my jacket pocket. But I have very little money, and what I have we need badly. I'm only a poor leather maker and—"

"And your wife expected you to come home drunk. And I'll cut your throat if you don't give me what I want. Which shall it be?"

"In my money belt, and — there is little money of the wife's in the kitchen." The old man was badly shaken. His body was convulsing from time to time, his eyes wide and filled with fear, open and spine-gripping fear. Nol felt mean, but there was no alternative.

He unbuckled the old man's belt, and pulled up the flap curling back inside the belt. There were a few yellow ones, and one green one with large blue stripes across. Good. Now he had the buying power of a good dinner, a bottle of wine and some change to boast about. However, better be on the safe side. He went out into the kitchen and systematically ransacked everything in sight. He'd been taught that in the House, but they hadn't expected him to find money hidden away by a female from a drunken Vasart. She was ingenious, sure enough! He was on the verge of going back to the living room and manhandling the old chap for misleading him, when suddenly, standing in the middle of the kitchen he'd turned inside out, his annoyed gaze rested on the huge and utterly idiotic shade on one light.

Pushing the table to the corner, Nol tried the strength of a fragile looking chair, then placed it on the table and gingerly mounted his improvised ladder. His hunch paid off. In fact, there was a double prize. He found a thin wad of green ones with stripes, and a large box of sweets. That is, sweets to a Vasart; they tasted like turnips. Spitting the thing out, he got down and, carrying the box with him, returned to stand in front of the old man. Lifting the box, he asked:

"What's the matter, can't you even be trusted with this?"

The old boy's eyes lit up for a moment, then his manner became bellicose.

"I knew it! I knew it! Would you believe it, stranger? Only a few cycles ago I asked her if we had any dorsa in the house. My mouth was sore and painful, I wanted a dorsa more than anything else in Vasart and the begetter of Loams said we hadn't any. She said that to me—her man! Is that the way for a mere female to behave? To me she said we hadn't . . ."

His voice petered out as Nol picked him up without any difficulty, carried him to the bedroom and laid him on the bed. He made a point of seeing that the old man was lying on his stomach, then he shook the dorsa out of the box and placed them within reach of the Vasart's gradually understanding and beaming face.

"This is your revenge. Eat as much as you like, but not a peep out of you. I'll be back later to put a tape on your mouth, but if in the meantime I hear a word—"

There was no need for him to go on. The Vasart was already munching away at the slightly intoxicating dorsa, his big nose making merry furrows among the sweets.

It made Nol feel a little better.

Going back into the living room, he sat down to think, but almost at once he got up again and started his irritable walk. Absentmindedly stroking the sore spot beside his mouth, he tried to marshal his thoughts and make a plan.

He would have to rely on one of the improvisations they had so laughingly suggested if all of the five alternative plans happened to fail. Oh brother, had they done just that! And there was something very wrong with his conditioning. Ever since he had escaped from that underground cell, something had been shouting in his mind, demanding recognition. Something about the compress gun.

Stopping in the middle of the room he slipped the gun into his hand and thoughtfully looked at the blunt finish of the hardened plastic. How was it possible that he had forgotten about the gun? Damn it, half the plan was built around this innocent looking piece of plastic rod! How was it then that he never even thought about it until he felt it physically? Wrinkling his forehead, he thought back painstakingly. On the day of departure he went to the stores, got out the same clothes he wore on all practice days, and the gunbelt . . . He dressed and . . . there was something which didn't fit in. Do it again! He dressed and buckled on the belt with the holster, then he—it was gradually coming clearer—he wanted to ask for his compress gun, but the stores man went to the opposite end of the room to answer a viewscreen call, and he, shrugging his shoulders, had just helped himself to a holster and gun from the shelf.

Now, why didn't he mention the stores oversight, when the other had finished his call and came back to him again?

Nol didn't like to think about that. He began to have a headache. He felt—no, he *knew* there was something wrong here.

It had something to do with conditioning, because if they changed the plans at the last moment they might have decided not to let him know about it to avoid confusion, and relied entirely on the hypnotechnique.

But what sort of a change?

Slipping back the compress gun into its holster, he pulled out the awkward and heavy weapon of Vasart and thoughtfully weighed it in his palm.

Naturally, he was fully trained with that as well—even though it was more cumbersome and a damn sight louder than the other. But at least he could use it. Yes, and then what? One bullet from this gun and he'd have all Vasart and half Vasat after him. And those boys could really shoot.

Putting the gun back in the heavily embroidered holster, Nol stared

in front of him. It didn't really make sense.

Suppose he used the Vasart gun. He'd get Father, but in the process he would leave himself set up as target practice for Father's henchmen.

What then? At the worst they would shoot him dead—which would leave his body behind for a full examination and the telltale compress gun as evidence that there was inter-Galaxy subterfuge going on . . .

But they didn't officially issue him the compress gun!

Oh yes, it made sense. If he was shot dead with no evidence of his extra-Vasart origin — and there wouldn't have been any careful examination, as recently as a couple of months ago—if there was no artifact found on him, the conclusions were almost foregone.

The only way Nol could express his murderous rage was to hit a clenched fist into his reluctant palm. He was set up as a fall guy! The little gods in the House made their decision, and he was carefully trained and prepared for more than a year, just to fire one bullet true to its target and then give his absolute body to the bellowing crowd!

But the sacrosanct House had never guessed the real enormity of the situation on Vasart. Now their glib little plan, throwing him as the sacrificial goat to the Vasarts, would be the most dangerous thing that could happen to Earth. The idiots! The stupid, conceited idiots!

If only he could break the conditioning and *know* what he was supposed to do, then he could make the necessary changes to have the plan succeed. Because, oddly enough, he was going through with it.

Nol felt sure that it wasn't all conditioning which made him so nervous and eager to risk his life. There was more to it. The House had been right at least about the importance of Father in this madhouse world. If he didn't act, the fantastic growth of Vasart, especially now he knew about the Morgas, would soon envelop Earth itself.

Before, only the excitement and the daring had counted. But now he had beliefs, he had principles. Maybe those silent bodies in the cellar had something to do with it. Nol didn't know. All he knew was that he was an Earthman and he had a duty to perform. With a smile he thought of Mark. Wouldn't he be surprised if he knew the new Nol —Nol with principles!

Well now, how was he going to apply them?

There came an inane giggling from the bedroom. Nol drew his gun in a blurred motion and threw himself to the door of the bedroom, then grinned and went back to the living room. Getting the plaster from the table he walked back again, turned the old chap onto his back and ruthlessly taped his mouth.

The laugh was drunkenness caused by the gobbled up dorsa, it continued silently in the old man's wiggling eyebrows and ears. The old Vasart was drunk and happy. Well, at least somebody was! Nol brought over some more ribbons and, putting a loop over the ankles and

arms behind their backs, fastened both Vasarts to the opposite end of the bed. Better be safe than sorry. When he had finished, he turned to the old Vasart, bowing from the waist, and wished them a happy mating beginning.

The joke was feeble, but the Vasart had tears of merriment in his eyes, at the same time shaking his head negatively. Nol pulled the bedroom door shut behind him and looked round the other room. One thing was clear. This was the beginning and might very well soon be the end. Since there was no reaction unless there was first something to provoke it, he'd better be going. With a final look, he went out into the alley and firmly shut the door behind him.

The click of the latch from inside was the sound, he felt, of his starting pistol, now come what may.

VIII

At a guard line strung across the street, he stopped as one of the black uniforms stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

"Your papers."

Nol pulled his papers from his pocket. He was about to act in a nonchalant and demanding manner when a thought struck him and he went cold all over. He had almost started to say that he was from Vasat, when in the fraction of a second he remembered that his papers were in fact the papers of the old Vasart, who was a native or at least a resident of this city. As the guard studied the papers Nol desperately hoped that the feeling of perspiration on his forehead was in fact only his imagination.

"A leather maker, eh? Your belt isn't a showpiece for your craft, leather maker. Is that the best you can make?"

In a millisecond Nol sunk his shoulders, altered his weak grin and said with a slight whine:

"Oh no, I'm a good craftsman. But you know how it is—a Loam jockey never rides for pleasure."

"Sir."

"Pardon?"

"Haven't you listened to Father? We who take pride in this uniform deserve to be called sir. Or do you object?"

"Oh no, sir! Of course not."

"And you promise to do something about your belt?"

"Yes, sir."

"On the other hand, why should you? You're only a simple leather maker when all's said and done, aren't you? I said, aren't you?"

"Indeed that's true. And things are a bit slow, to confess—"

"I'm not interested in your confession, leather maker. What's your name?" Nol nearly went for his gun, the question was purely rhetorical realized only at the last moment that because the guard was looking at his papers and reading out his name. "Onda Ca. I tell you what. If you want to do a little service to the Party, you could make me a nice, and I mean a really nice, belt as a favor. How about that?"

"Well—"

The guard put his hands on his hips and his tone was ugly.

"Don't you want to contribute to the betterment of the Party?"

"Oh, I do, but—"

"There is no 'but'. Vasart and Vasat are one and the sky belongs to us, but somebody has to do the dirty work. If you're not in uniform, you'll do your work this way. Any objections?"

Nol blinked at his papers held in the hand on the hip. Licking his lips, he nodded convincingly.

"It'll be a pleasure, sir."

"That's better. Now, where do you live?"

"In Foon Street."

The guard brought up the paper again and looked at it, then stared at Nol and there was suspicion in his voice.

"It says here that you live in Marko Street."

"Oh, that. Well, yes, sir, I do. But I thought you asked where to come for your belt and that's where I work."

"Foon Street, eh? All right, Onda Ca, I'll be there tomorrow."

With that he threw the papers on the ground. Nol retrieved them and slunk away.

Yes, he thought, give these characters a victory and it would be Hell on Earth!

The street veered slightly to the left. The guards who had challenged him were standing round the point where this slight divergence started, so he had been unable to see that not very far after that point there was another lot of guards, strung across the street in the same way. In charge was a fat guard with

a wide sash slung across his chest, sitting behind a table.

Nol slowed down but, afraid to show reluctance. kept on walking toward the line.

With relief he saw that some other Vasarts in front of him were also stopped, all of them taking off their belts and leaving them at the table, getting a metal ticket in exchange. There was already quite a pile of guns, haphazardly thrown between the table and the wall. Father certainly didn't take chances.

When he got to the table Nol was unbuckling his gun and offering it to the guard—who didn't say anything, but gestured toward the pile. Nol obediently threw his belt with the others and reached for his metal tag.

"You've got half a cycle after the meeting to pick up your gun. If you're not here by that time you'll have to come to Party Headquarters tomorrow. We can't stay here all night to guard your miserable property, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

His obedient tone was wasted. The fat man behind the table was picking up another tag, saying the same to the Vasart coming next. His tone was bored, doing a dreary and uninteresting duty.

Nol went on his way, wiser about two things. Father had this organizing down to a fine art. And he was sure it was due to the Morgas. There had never been anything in the history of Vasart to account for this.

Secondly, if it wasn't for the compress gun strapped to his arm he would be entirely unarmed, creating quite a headache as how to do his job.

There was more spring to his step as he came nearer and nearer to his final objective. Vasart were walking around in a holiday mood. As he got nearer to the main square, where the Loam race and Father's speech were supposed to take place, the crowd thickened. Mainly they were Vasart males. The few females to be seen were obviously living within the area enclosed by the net of the guards, possibly doing last minute errands.

When he got to the main square, Nol had to use his shoulders to make headway in the five and six deep crowd standing beside the mobile barrier erected right round the square. Only one footpath was left for the Vasarts, the main roadway and the other side of the square having been converted into a makeshift race track. To his far left Nol could see the impatiently dancing Loams, with all the riders dressed in black. "My, my," he murmured to himself. "I shouldn't be surprised if Father has a small profit even on the race." He weaved his way through the crowd, cutting down the distance between him and the balcony.

What he was going to do when he got there he wasn't sure. Small things like that didn't bother him any longer. He would improvise as he went along.

He had nearly reached his objective when he saw something that stopped him dead in his tracks.

Coming from the main stand were more uniformed guards.

The crowd was tightly knit together. Six or seven of them in one line were sufficient to close the gap between the mobile barrier and the wall. Pressing his back to the wall, Nol stood on his toes slightly to get a better view. The guards were grabbing the Vasarts one by one and taking a good look at all of them, making a thorough body search. Nol could hear arguments. Now and again one of the guards would lift something which looked like a truncheon and it would swish down with force. Nol looked across the square. Now that he knew what to look for, he could see the same performance going on on the other side. He had to admit one thing, they'd organized this down to a T. By the narrow gap which they'd left between the barrier and the wall, they could comb through the entire crowd with the minimum of effort and with the assurance that they wouldn't miss anybody.

Not even him!

Still pressed to the wall, Nol took a look to left and right. There were of course no windows. It was against tradition to have windows onto the street, and all the doors seemed to be closed. Naturally, with so many people jammed together, it was an elementary precaution. Or was it an order by the guards.

Well, there was only one way to find that out. And he had to find it out before it was too late. Facing the direction he had come from, Nol started shouldering back until he came to a door. Swearing loudly about the constant bustling, he put his hands behind him and tried the latch. The door was closed. He went further down and tried again, with the same result.

By that time he realized that there was another line of guards coming from the bottom part of the street, working towards the main stand. Nice, a pincer principle. Frantically he tried the next door and gasped with relief as it opened and he nearly fell in.

Kicking it wide open, he grabbed the shoulders of a Vasart who had inadvertently followed him into the room, pressed by the crowd, spun him outside and closed the door. Turning around, he groaned as he stood face to face with yet another agitated Vasart female. To move from the door in three huge steps into the middle of the room, and to put one hand over her mouth was a moment's work, then he just stood there, hanging onto the female, feeling furious. He was just about tired knocking Vasart women insensible. Not that he had any choice in the matter.

He selected the necessary spot on her neck and punched down very hard.

The next few moments were like a bad movie seen for the second time. On tiptoe he searched the house. Apart from the unconscious form on the floor, the only other occupant was a baby, fast asleep in his very human seeming cot. It took him only a few minutes to find the inevitable workbox. Using the

same techniue, he had the woman tied up and gagged exactly as before, a few hours and a few streets ago.

As soon as he was finished Nol searched the ceiling, looking for a small trapdoor to get on to the roof. He found it in the kitchen. With frantic haste he improvised a ladder. Standing on it and balancing precariously, he gently lifted one edge of the trapdoor, tilted it to one side and pulled it through the opening. To climb down with the door in his hand was quite a job. Leaning it beside the table, he climbed up again and, grabbing the rim of the opening with his fingertips, put all his weight on them.

Slowly, very slowly, he pulled himself up level with the rim.

He found himself looking to the end of the street where he had entered the square.

All he could see was the wide expense of rooftops. Swivelling his body, his fingers trembling from the exertion, he turned the complete circle, and froze as his eyes took in the two uniforms not very far away, sitting on one roof. He gently lowered himself back into the room. Gradually he put his weight back on the chair and massaged his fingers.

Well, what now?

They weren't looking in his direction, or he wouldn't be puzzled as to what to do. Nevertheless, if he pulled himself right out they'd be bound to see him. Not only would he stand no chance of rushing them, they'd cut him down before he completed climbing onto the flat roof.

Quietly getting down to the floor, Nol looked around for something about a meter high, sturdy enough to stand on and square enough to put solidly on a chair which was already resting on a not very wide table.

He went around the rooms several times before his eyes alighted on the bulky viewing screen.

It was housed in a wooden cabinet. It looked strong enough, but just to make sure, Nol stood on top of it first. Then he dragged it over beside the table and with two heaves placed it on top of the chair. He was soaked through by the time he was satisfied that the dangerous-looking and shaky contraption would bear his weight so long as he stepped on it very carefully. The climb up was the worst.

He had to get down once and reposition the balance before he found himself crouching on the top, supporting himself with his fingers on the rim of the trapdoor with alternative hands wiping perspiration from one after the other.

The time came when he had to make a move. Wiping his right hand for the last time and taking a deep breath, Nol slipped out his gun and ever so slowly poked his head above the rim.

The two guards were where he had seen them before, their long-range weapons on the roof beside them, engrossed in some sort of an argument. Nol laid his gun on the edge of the trapdoor rim and got the two guards into the sight. The weapon was all right, but its accuracy depended on the automatic re-

sponse of his eyes and their orders to the sweaty fingers. Not daring to waste any more time for fear that his nerves might give out, Nol straightened out, jutted his right arm out rigid in the direction of the guards and fired twice, his aim based entirely on the subconcious co-ordination of much target practice. There were two sharp hisses and the guards crumpled up without a noise. Nol looked around, then slipped his gun back in the holster, put his elbows on the rim and levered his body onto the roof.

Keeping very low, bent almost double, he ran across the intervening space and knelt down beside the two bodies. They were dead all right. It had been instantaneous. For a moment he was tempted to pick up one of their long-range guns, but threw the idea away immediately; he'd be back where he started, with the rumpus those old-fashioned weapons made at the moment of firing. Keeping away from the edge of the roof where he could be seen from below, Nol made his way further up, on the connected flat roofs, going parallel with the street and getting level with the balcony and the main stand below it.

There wasn't anybody on the balcony. For that he was duly grateful, because only now that he was where he wanted to be did he realize how easily he could have been spotted if a guard had been there. Lying flat on his stomach, Nol got out his gun. He took cover behind a ventilation window and sighted in on the balcony. Just right!

Abruptly he stared at his gun. With a sinking sensation he realized suddenly that he tad exactly one charge left.

It was a fabulous weapon, but it had this one shortcoming; the space required for the silent but still powerful charges was so great that they could compress only six into it. Then it was all over. You couldn't even recharge it. You used it and threw it away — or rather, you destroyed it. Even empty, the principles were built into it. It would never do to have it examined by a technology like the Vasart or the Mo-gas.

Well, one shot would do!

From below came the noise of a great crowd yelping in a disorganized fashion. Scared, sharp and alert, Nol crept a bit forward.

Then he saw. The hateful image of Father was standing in the middle of the main stand, below the balcony. He was in the middle of a large group of Party dignitaries, by the look of all those sashes. They kept weaving about him. Nol swore volubly. How the hell was he to pick Father out with all those Vasarts hemming him in? Was it a protective measure?

There was a concentrated scream from the crowd and slowly Nol realized what was going on. Of course, the Loam race. Possibly Father, giving this extra kick to his meeting, started the race from the main stand and would award the winner from there. Only then would he climb up to the balcony to start his hateful little campaign.

Well, Nol could wait. On his extreme left now he could see the

ragged line of Loams galloping at their ridiculous but fast pace. They turned the first corner, coming up the street in front of him. The noise of the crowd was like a long, slow fuse. Nol could judge accurately the position of the Loams by the increased yelling. Now it was in front of him; then it gradually died away like a doppler effect. In the next moment they came into sight, rushing in front of the main stand, right to the end of the square. There they turned left again, now running parallel, on the far side of the square.

Nol couldn't take his eyes off Father. There he was, this alien. One little man like himself, who had necessitated him travelling all this distance with the duty of killing him. This one man — he smiled grimly as he realized his hesitation at referring to the bloodthirsty Vasart as a man — this one man, on a relatively primitive planet, causing so much upheaval that Earth itself felt unsafe.

The Loams made five complete circuits, and eventually the race was over. There was a concentrated scream from the crowd as the foaming animals crossed the line in front of the main stand for the last time, and the riders battled with the overenthusiastic animals to stop them. Nol was chewing his lips with impatience as the five Loams pulled up in front of the main stand and Father, holding a black flag in his hand, dismounted the steps to stand in front of the nervously dancing animals, offering the flag to one of the riders.

Get on with it! Nol cursed. He was unable to take his eyes off the benign figure at the center of his hatred. The rider leaned forward to accept the flag. his Loam still foaming, its six legs dancing on the stone pavement. The sudden shift of balance seemed to unsettle the Loam, because it reared up in the air.

It came down with the foremost four legs beating a tattoo in the air.

The next moment Nol's world exploded into fragments. The Loam came down directly over the escaping figure of Father. In that second the dictator of Vasart was smashed into pulp.

Even from the distance where he was, Nol could see the Vasart's body torn open by the madly gyrating legs. There was blood spattering over the group of Party dignitaries. The next moment was shattered into violence, as the guards fired at point blank range into the group of five loams and their riders.

Within ten Earth seconds there were five loams massacred, their great bodies sprawled on the pavement, their riders torn to pieces by the high-velocity bullets from a range of only a few metres. All the loams were dead and all the riders — and so was Father.

IX

There came a moan from the crowd right round the square. Just one. Then there was a noise like a pine forest rustling in a storm.

The many-faceted crowd was rapidly breaking up and dispersing. There was a heavy expectancy in

the air. Nol sat up and looked dumbly at his gun. All in vain! He had failed before he started. He knew it must be the conditioning to a small extent, but he felt tired and cheated.

Shaking himself into awareness again, another picture appeared in front of his eyes; the two dead Vasarts on the roof. If he wanted to get away alive from here he'd better make a move at once. Bending double and running rapidly on the interconnecting roofs, he passed the two guards and in a few seconds was at the gaping offering of the trapdoor. His gun was still in his hand. Nol slammed it back into the holster and lowered his body through the hole. Getting down was fast and dangerous. He was on his way to the door when suddenly he changed his mind.

Running back to the table, he slid down the cabinet from the chair, grabbed the trapdoor climbed up and put it back in position. Then he dismantled the whole caboodle, roughly straightening out the room to its previous order. Hiding the manner of his operation might mean an extra twenty minutes of escaping time. Satisfied, he went to the door and opened it a slit to glance outside.

The mobile barriers were trampled into distorted and meaningless objects. Vasarts were overflowing the entire square. Opening the door slipping outside and shutting the door behind him was a flurry of action. In the next moment Nol threw himself in the middle of a large group, running down the street and away from the main stand, which was now speckled heavily with black uniforms. Nol ran with them, moaned with them and, as other groups tangled with his own cursed with them. At any moment he was expecting a barricade to be thrown up against them.

But nothing happened. They reached the end of the square and, turning to the left, they rapidly put distance between them and the square. They now passed the second group of confused guards, pressed to the wall, not knowing what to do. Nol increased his pace. It was only a matter of a very short time before the zealous Party members made the accident a sky-given opportunity for a massacre. Didn't the old Vasart — what was his name? Onda Ca — say that all the hard and tough characters were Party guards? If Nol wasn't mistaken, and if the similar structures in other and previous societies were anything to go by, the types making up the guards would be as happy shooting down Vasarts as fighting against aliens.

The Vasarts running with him must have had the same ideas. They were all intent on getting as far away from the square as they could.

As if to underline the correctness of his theory, and the intuition of the Vasarts, volley after volley of gunshots echoed behind them. As one body, the running crowd turned madly into the first street on their right, jamming the entrance, kicking and shoving each other mercilessly. Nol was caught up in a free-for-all. In the rapidly developing dusk he used all the tricks he was taught

at the House. The fight was fast, ruthless and silent, except for grunts and moans and the sound of fast moving feet from in front.

The crowd slowly dispersed in various turnings. After about five more minutes there were ten or twelve of them, gasping for breath, slowing down, exerted to the limit. Changing into a fast walk, Nol kept a wary eye on the Vasarts, but they were all obviously far too puffed out and much too much scared to cause any bother.

What now?

Nol fell in step with a Vasart about his own age. After a look at the other's bulging eyes and staccato breathing Nol relaxed and started planning.

First of all he had to know how the other felt about the biggest drama Vasart had ever had.

"What a mess, eh?"

The other looked back at him guardedly. Nol breathed harder, looking very exhausted.

"Yes and what's to come?" said the Vasart. But he went no farther.

They walked in silence. Nol looked back. They must have got out of the danger area, because he could only see a few more stragglers behind them and all those were walking. Still, showing anxiety he turned to the other.

"My gun — I've forgotten my gun! What if those guards come after us?"

"With the most expensive shops in the main square to loot? Never!"

It seemed that the Vasart didn't have too much love for the Party. Nol tested farther. "Not a very lovable lot, are they?"

"They're scum. I'm a Vasart and proud of it, I never ran away from a fight in my life, but I'm also a road builder and proud of my job. Those good-for-nothings know nothing else but how to fight." The Vasart gave a loud snort of disgust.

Nol couldn't help looking at the so-called road under their feet. Some road builders! Still, it seemed that not all Vasarts were as bloodthirsty as presupposed. It was even a possibility that there were some among them who were directly opposed to the Party. Nol phrased his next sentence very carefully.

"Actually I'm from Vasat. I just arrived this morning, and I must say I was a bit surprised. We haven't got the Party half as strong as it appears here. I thought —"

The other stopped. He turned to Nol in the dim light and suspiciously looked him over. There was definite sharpness in his voice and he had his hands on his hips, a typical Vasart pre-fighting gesture.

"I never said anything against the Party. I don't know how it is in Vasat, but we all agree in Vasart that Vasart and Vasat are one and the sky belongs to us, not to those dirty-looking aliens you can see in the viewers. The Party is right! And what happened is a great loss to Vasart."

"Then why did we all run?"

"I don't know why you ran. I ran because of the guards, because they're scum and all they care about is easy riches and blood. If you think in Vasat that we like the

guards, you're mad. But we have to have them for the cause. Don't worry, we'll get rid of them when the time comes. But you sounded as if you didn't agree with the Party!"

Now he knew! To think he had imagined even for a moment that there were Vasarts who didn't want to whiz though the galaxy, trailing blood and the curled insides of all they met! It was the usual logic; we know they're scum, but we'll use them and get rid of them when we want to. Nol thought, they are not only bloodthirsty, they're as simple and idiotic as their culture indicated from the beginning. Oh, well, it made his job easier.

"You've got me wrong!" he protested. "I never said anything against the Party, I merely said that it wasn't as yet as strong as it is here. Don't worry the sky belongs to us!"

The Vasart forgot his pugnacious attitude of a moment ago, turned to Nol and said in a conspiratorial voice:

"I heard a rumor this afternoon that the guards captured an alien, but it escaped."

"No!"

"Yes! And there were road blocks all over Boran. For all we know, it might have been one of the riders in the race."

"Ah, that's why guards mowed the lot of them."

"For all we know, it might have been one of the Loams."

"What?"

"Why not? You've heard Father

talk about them, haven't you? You've seen some of the horrible shapes on the viewers."

"But a Loam?"

"That would be just an alien. Just like Father said — have the fabulous ground soft to his body! — they are bloodthirsty and will do anything to kill us off unless we kill them first. They would do it in a way like this, not like an honest Vasart, gun in hand".

"You may be right. The more I listened to you, the more I realize how backward we are in Vasat."

Nol could see that the other was visibly swelling, the murderous little idiot.

"Don't blame yourself. Vasart is so much bigger. And here we have the domes of the aliens, the rotten lot. All rotten but one, I mean."

"Really, which one?"

"The fan-fan headed ones. The Morgas," the Vasart added helpfully.

Nol grinned, even though it was grim to realize that the Morgas co-operation was common knowledge on Vasart. The fan-fan was a snake-like animal on this planet and a very unpleasant one. The description was quite apt.

For just that reason it was frightening. If the Vasart, all set to exterminate all aliens from the Galaxy, were so indulgent about the Morgas, it showed careful whisper propaganda — by the sound of it, successful. Nol changed the subject.

"I only hope the Party's not going to suffer too greatly because of the loss of Father."

"It will, it will, because he was a great Vasart. But don't worry. He had his handpicked man; the Party will go on."

"Oh, it must! Who is he?"

"Who else but Cafa, his right-hand man."

"Of course! You're quite right, it couldn't really be anybody else."

"You ought to be proud of Cafa. I believe he too came from Vasat, but he's been with Father almost from the beginning. There isn't anybody else who could take over. I think we'll hear a lot about him."

Under the cover of the darkness Nol clenched and unclenched his hands. Suddenly there was a purpose again.

With Father the kingpin had been removed, thanks to a fickle Loam. But now, if he went on with the assassination plan, but with Cafa, the right-hand man, as the target, surely Morgas or no Morgas, it would have to slow down operations. At least until Earth heard about the latest development and did something more than send solitary gunmen to their . . . there was again a strong wave of headache and nausea.

Nol gritted his teeth. Just wait until he got back to Earth!

The Vasart was rambling on and Nol became all ears again, his headache forgotten in a flash.

"— just next door. I see him coming and going every day. I suppose he'll move out now that he's going to become the Father of the Party, but at least I can say that the second Father used to live right next door to me. And he is a nice chap, too. Mad keen on the Party, though. That you can see — "

The Vasart had just nominated Nol to be his shadow until he got home.

This was Nol's first piece of really good luck since he had landed on this planet. Out of the teeming thousands he was fortunate enough to land up with the neighbor of his next target. His mind was already on his mission.

After a few more minutes the Vasart pulled up short, looking at him tentatively, and nodded with his head to the cavity-like door, set in the wall.

"This is where I live. You live far?"

"No, no, just the second street from here. Temporary, you know. I'm just visiting."

"Yes, you told me. Would you care for a few slices of dorsa?"

Nol calculated rapidly his thoughts jostling for position in his mind. If he accepted, he might learn something which would be useful in making a watertight plan of assassination — and also further information for the time he got back to Earth. If he got back. On the other hand, any drawn-out conversation with a fanatical Vasart, sucking dorsa, could become highly dangerous. He hadn't eaten anything for quite a while. Even the low alcohol content of the dorsa might make him careless. Nol felt that he'd better not risk it, attractive as it was. Regretfully he shook his head.

"Thanks, but I'd better be getting inside. I feel naked without my gun."

"Maybe you're right. Well, we may meet again at Party headquarters. I'll have to get mine tomorrow."

"It was nice speaking to you. By the way, which side is Cafa's place? I'd like to tell the Vasat when I get back that I've seen the house where the second Party Father used to live."

The Vasart turned with obvious pleasure and pointed to the house, utterly nondescript, on the left side.

"This is it. I've often said 'hello'."

"You did. You must be proud."

"I am. These are historian times, you mark my work." The Vasart looked thoughtful. "You know, I may even join up with the guards."

"I was thinking the same. Well, we may meet again."

"Dream of battle."

"I will."

The Vasart turned his back on him, stepped up to the door and hammered on it sharply. Nol, casting one more glance for identification at the house next door, continued in the direction they had been heading. The Vasart houses — being very nearly identical, in contrast to the colorful dress they wore — made his job difficult. Fortunately, on Cafa's place there was a large chunk missing from beside the doorway. It looked as if one of their awkward vehicles had backed into it. Keeping the missing piece in his mind for identification later on, Nol marched on, listening sharply for sounds from behind him.

When he heard the Vasart hammering on his door for the second time, he gritted his teeth and hoped

the Vasart female was going to be belted for her slowness in answering. The longer he had to keep in the direction he was walking, the bigger the chance that he bumped into guards or got too far away from Cafa's place. He was nearly at the end of the street when he heard the noise of a door opening and loud recriminations in the still air — well, almost still. He could still hear occasional gunfire from where he came from, a very unsettling sound in his present position.

As soon as the click of the shut door echoed down the street, Nol turned sharply on his heel and ran back to the house.

He identified it by the missing piece at the doorway and looked in both directions. He was the only one in the street. Nol was standing in the middle of the road, looking up at the roof of the house, trying to find a way to climb it, when suddenly the street lights came on. For the space of a heartbeat he stood rigid from shock. The next minute he had dived into the nearest doorway, opposite Cafa's house, frantically searching for guards running around with drawn guns.

The street was as still as before.

Leaning weakly on the wall, he reasoned out what had happened, and cursed. The rumpus in the square had caused havoc. Obviously it was only now that the machinery of the public services, prodded no doubt by the guards, had started to function again.

What was more, now the search for an alien would start. It was obvious. Whilst on the one hand the Morgas were anxious to get him, knowing better than to believe that he was one of the slaughtered Loams, on the other hand, what a beautiful first act for the new head of the Party to produce an alien, and flog the enthusiasm of the Vasarts even higher.

Looking back to the opposite side, Nol thought he could see a way to climb the house by using the uneven finish on the edge of the doorway. The trouble was it might take some time. If anybody came along while he was playing spider he'd be a sitting target, his only weapon a gun which had only one bullet.

And that bullet was earmarked for Cafa.

X

Nol stepped out from the safety of the doorway. Seeing the gaping emptiness of the street, he turned his head in both directions and listened with breathless concentration for footsteps. There were none. Running silently across to the house, Nol took a deep breath, put one foot into the first tiny hold, pressed his body against the wall and began his climb.

Nol not only glued his hands on the sharp corner of the wall and felt with his feet as if he had fingers on them instead of toes, he used his face, his chin and muscles he never even knew existed. Every time he released a hand to secure another grip, he rubbed it on the wall to make sure it wouldn't slip. His footholds he tried half a dozen

times before he was satisfied they were safe enough. There was a sharp pain in the middle of his chest and stomach. But that was one thing he didn't dare do — he didn't dare to suck in his hurtful ribs, because he felt he'd fall down unless he was stuck to the wall like a suction cup. He didn't know how long it took him to reach the level where it was only a matter of reaching out with one hand in order to grab the edge of the roof, but it seemed like hours. Every moment he was expecting shadowy figures to pick him down with one shot.

Nevertheless, he was there!

Now he only had to let go with one hand and grab the edge, transfer his whole weight on one arm, grab with the other, and lever himself up the roof, into the comparative security of being above the street lights. He took a few guarded deep breaths, pictured sharply in his mind the spot he had to grab — and realized he couldn't do it! There he was, stuck to the wall like a primitive ornament, his maltreated body begging for release, fear of discovery clutching his throat — and he couldn't do it!

In the distance, but getting nearer every second, there was the unmistakable loud hiss of a Vasart car, and loud voices.

Nol stayed frozen for a moment, locating the approximate origin of the noise, then his body became galvanized. With a desperate effort he reached out with one arm, swinging his body away from the corner of the wall. For a moment he thought he hadn't made it. Then his fingers felt solidity. Closing them like a vice, he broke free, hanging on his right arm, swinging like a pendulum, grasping with his left, in no direction, but above his head. A loud moan broke from his lips as his left hand steadied beside the other and his body hung almost motionless from the edge. Blinking several times, Nol listened to the hissing coming nearer, then with a desperate, now or never feeling, he jerked his body upwards, twisting sideways at the same time. He landed on his right shoulder, nearly breaking his fingers, forced his body up and to the right, and as soon as he felt firmness under him, stretched his arms straight and rolled away from the edge.

By the sound of the approaching vehicle, it was just in time.

Amid loud hissing it stopped in front of the house. There was the sound of many people speaking all at the same time. The door opened and, with a wolfish grin on his face, Nol listened to the agitated conversation immediately below him, and the moving around of a number of people.

This was it!

Sitting up on the roof, in the comfortable shadow of a sunless Vasart, Nol flexed his arms and fingers to get feeling back into them to stop the shaking.

After some time he came to the conclusion that no matter what he did, the electric tingling and the slight wavering of his fingers wouldn't stop. He had pushed the capacity of his body too far and that

was all there was to it. Getting on all-fours, he searched for the inevitable trapdoor in the roof, lay beside the covered opening and put his ear to it. The Vasarts were in the room beside the kitchen. He could hear rapid talking but couldn't distinguish what they were talking about. Still, he could wait.

He sat up rigidly as a thought suddenly struck him. What would happen if the Party provided a permanent guard of honor for Cafa? In fact, it was obvious.

Furthermore, now that Cafa was to become the next Father, he was bound to move into the elaborate house on the outskirts of Boran.

Nol brought out his compress gun and held it, irresolutely. What could he do?

He only had one charge left. That precluded any possibility of tackling the lot of them underneath, no matter how few there were. Thanks to the precautionary measures of the Party, he didn't even have his Vasart gun. Nol's cold fury, meticulous in its highly stepped up reasoning, threw up idea after idea, only to be discarded one by one. Almost without thinking, he got on his knees and, very carefully lifting the edge of the trapdoor, put his eyes to the slit. As he suspected, underneath was the kitchen. The lights were on, and now the full power of the voices in the next room came streaming through to him. Staring at the bottom part of the door leading from the lounge into the kitchen, he was toying with the idea of jumping down and risking everything on one wild rush. His mind, or at least one part of his mind, observed aghast this self-destroying line of thought.

Then, the decision was made for him. The door opened and two Vasarts came into the kitchen. Nol lowered the trapdoor until there was only the merest slit, excitedly looking at no less exalted a person than Cafa himself.

Of course he recognized him. He'd seen enough pictures of Father and his comrades in the House, although there had been astonishingly little reference to Cafa. In any case, the only reason he had to memorize those couple of dozen or so faces was to ascertain that he got the right man. It seemed now to be a very wise precaution indeed.

Nol was so busy with his own thoughts, lightning fast as they were, that he missed completely what the two in the kitchen were talking about. He was on the verge of lifting the trapdoor a bit higher and taking whatever risk there was to take, when the other Vasart bowed and went back to the lounge.

Nol blinked in sheer amazement at his luck. Then, without wasting an extra millisecond, he tore open the trapdoor, and with one sinuous movement pushed his right arm into the opening and pulled the trigger. There was the subdued hiss. The figure of Cafa collapsed as in slow motion.

The next moment Nol had the gun out of the hole. Still holding onto the trapdoor he turned the compress gun, pressed it to his temple and again pulled the trigger.

Then again.

Woodenly he lowered the trapdoor back into position and with a gigantic sense of realization swung the gun in a wide arm across the roof. Before it hit the roof with a dry clatter Nol was on all-fours, his body shaking uncontrollably, in his head there was an almost unbearable pain.

He didn't know how long he was there. Time lost its meaning. By the time he could again take in his surroundings, his lids felt as if they were made of lead and now the pain was transferred down into his stomach. For the second time that day, Nol was sick. There was nothing he could bring up, there was only the dry, racking desire to see strips of his own throat come tumbling out, and the wish that the heavy steel ball, which was where his heart used to be, would stop so that he could lay down on the unresisting, comfort-offering roof and just cease to be.

After an endless time he got to his feet. First drunkenly staggering, then, as momentum grew, faster and faster, he was jumping across the interlocking roofs, feeling that his hair must have turned white.

As if it mattered!

Yes, it did. He had to get back. He had to throw his body in front of the eyes of those who had so easily sent him to die.

To send him on a mission with the certainty of death was one thing. To send him on a mission with the hypno-techniqued command of suicide was another.

He didn't know how long he could retain his senses, he didn't even know if now he did. He might be rushing to find death in a different guise. Or he might have broken the hypno-command when he failed to shoot himself immediately after the assassination. He didn't know.

He knew only one thing: he would try his damnedest to get back and to look Mark and Bord in the face.

His jumps across the roofs were sure by now. He leaped to survive, but there was a suspicious tremoling in his legs and he didn't dare to stop. He thought of the compress gun laying somewhere on a roof, and he didn't care. Coming to the end house of the street, with one glance he enveloped the scene. Hardly breaking his stride, he clung to the roof with straightened-out arms and dropped to street level, using bent legs to cushion his fall. He was up the next instant, turned left and astonished himself at the speed he was making in the empty street. Twisting, turning, getting further and further away from the house of the deed, untiringly he ran.

At one time he thought he heard some sort of a commotion. But by that time he was using the old technique of breathing through the nose for four strides then breathing out through the open mouth with the same rhythm, counting his steps, getting himself into a semi-hypnotic state, when tiredness rolled away and no other thought existed but the accomplishment of his present

endurance test. It was a good method — and a highly dangerous one. He could disregard physical exhaustion for an incredibly long period, but when he stopped it might finish him off with one sledge hammer blow. Now he just couldn't stop. If at the end of the street there were Vasarts suddenly forming up in line and it was only a small matter of stopping and turning into a side street, he couldn't have done it. In his bulging eyes he held the picture of the platform behind the Oont tree. There was nothing but gaping void between the tree and himself.

He was running for hours. For a while he broke into a fast trot, then again he slowed down to a long stepped walk. Nol didn't know when he tore his jacket wide open. He didn't realize that Voltar was sneaking up at the edge of the planet, throwing a feeble and foreboding light on the hostile countryside.

What he did know was that the hill in front of him hid the opening behind the Oont tree — and that he was still unpursued and still breathing.

Still holding himself in rigid command, he pulled out the platform, somehow lowered himself into his spacesuit, then lay down on the platform, connected up his suit control, turned a switch to blast his presence up in the black waste of space and thumbed the vertical key.

His last conscious thoughts were droll. There was always a patrol ship in a wide orbit around Vasart. He wondered how they would feel when they homed in on his signal and found a Vasart-looking creature in the spacesuit.

In the teeming, black-skinned and tall billions of Earth, his looks were strange . . . and the regular patrol were never told about agent activities.

He smiled as the first trickle of blood burrowed through in the corner of his mouth.

XI

Mark sat solidly in his armchair, alternately watching the tips of his fingers and the nervous pacing of Olaf Bord. Not that the direction of his eyes really mattered. Although his eyes scanned the outside, his self was looking squarely at his own conscience.

He little liked what he saw. In spite of his training and the many years spent at the House, he was emotionally shaken.

Bord stopped for a moment to look through the diminutive window on one wall, then turned around, gave a long look at Mark and nervously wiped his forehead.

"He's coming out of it. He's being wheeled out now," said the Chief Inspector.

Mark stood up and turned in the direction of the dilating opening. He stared at the supine figure on the mobile stretcher, a smile on its face.

The dilated opening closed again, leaving in the small room with Mark and Bord only the stretcher, and a doctor examining Nol's eyes by pulling up the lids and observing the pupils. Satisfied, he turned

to Bord and said authoritatively:

"Physically he's as good as ever, but those boys on the ship dipped too deep inside his brain. Blasted mechanical mind probes. I advise keeping him relaxed. He's going to go through such an ordeal that I'd hate to have to start with a serious trauma."

"Thank you, doctor. We won't be long."

Bord walked up to the stretcher and looked down at Nol. The doctor was already standing beside the dilated door when Nol opened his eyes and stared back at Bord.

"Where am I?" asked Nol, puzzled.

The doctor looked back at him, then whispered to Bord, "The return from the womb. He'll have total recall in a moment."

The opening soundlessly closed after his disappearing figure. Mark walked to the side of Bord, put one oversize hand on his shoulder and gave it a small pressure. The two stood there.

Nol turned his head and tried to sit up. Straps across his body prevented it. He shut his eyes for a moment, and the wrinkles on his temple showed concentration.

When he opened his eyes again, there was sense on his face — and hatred.

"It's all coming back. So I got through after all, in spite of the odds. In fact, in spite of you. What happened?"

"The patrol ship picked you up. Although they had orders not to leave the orbit, the sight of a Vasart, or what they thought to be a

Vasart, made them think it was important enough to hightail it back to Earth."

Bord's voice was precise and without emotion. When he continued, the sentences came out neat and prepared.

"The captain, apart from putting you in the medical chamber, also tried to help by deep-probing you with a mechanical mind probe. It's taken you a long time for you to recover."

"I see." Nol was bitter, his mind clouded in what he remembered as his last half hour. "Then you've got the whole story, haven't you? Including your stupidity about the Vasart situation?"

"Yes, Nol. We got the whole story. Before you call us stupid, think logically. The situation was as we described it to you before you left for Vasart. What we didn't know was the extensive and sudden meddling of the Morgas."

"It was your job to know."

Bord nodded, preoccupied.

"Quite right. But until we have communication which is faster than the Cosmray drive —"

"It must have shook you when you discovered that I didn't commit suicide. Didn't it?"

"If we'd known about the Morgas —"

"But you didn't. And you sent me to blow my brains out, you scum!"

Mark still didn't say a word. Bord glanced at him before looking back at Nol's twisted face.

"Yes, I did. I believed it to be the right decision. One man's fate against what we represent is very small indeed. If you doubt my word, think back over your own actions. After Father was mauled to death by that Loam, there was no need for you to go on. You were making decisions. You were acting on assumptions which you arrived at by reasoning — though you knew that there was more to your mission than you were led to believe. Why did you do it?"

"Because I might look like a Vasart but I'm a human being! Since I had little chance to get out of that mess alive, I thought I had a duty. Now, I'm not only not sure, but I can't wait for the moment to get up and have this out with both of you. You might have trained a large surface area of my brain, but you couldn't get down into the little corners — a fact you may live to regret!"

Bord glanced at the dial of the automatic anesthetic on the side of the stretcher. The time was nearly up.

"Nol. I wish I didn't have to say this to you, but by law I'm bound. Your personality is going to be terminated."

Nol's face sagged. His eyes jumped wildly from one to the other.

"What do you mean?"

"You're unstable, Nol. We had to have you. We needed you badly. But even then, it was only at the last moment that we made that decision. If the situation hadn't been so urgent — and even we didn't realize how truly urgent it was — we would not have used you, because you just had to rebel."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Nol's voice sounded hysterical

"You were a killer, Nol. That was one thing we couldn't eradicate from you. You were sent to kill Father, but he was killed without you. So you made deductions based on your own personality and you killed Cafa — and left the compress gun behind to be duplicated. You panicked, Nol. And because of that little mistake, we had to send the entire second fleet to take full charge of both Vasart and Morgas. Yes, Nol. You were terrified when you realized the Morgas intervention, but you still went ahead and risked everything," Bord said, keeping his voice calm.

"You're mad! I had to!" Nol gaping at them, full of fear. "If I hadn't killed Cafa, the second kingpin on Vasart, you'd be in a still bigger mess!"

For the first time Mark spoke up. His voice was both gentle and bitter.

"Nol, I told you in the beginning that an agent must do *only* do what he is told to. No one man can ever beat the combined planning of the House. You had to be the individual genius. Did you ever ask yourself why Father had to be assassinated? Of course you didn't. Just to eliminate a leader wouldn't make much difference."

"Cafa, who was to take over, was as much an agent of the House as yourself. You cost Earth thousands of lives and the wealth of a couple of planets. You're not safe while you are — you."

Nol opened his mouth to say something. Suddenly he twitched once and only an incoherent fragment of sound escaped from him.

The anesthetic, pumped through a needle already placed in a main artery, acted with a terrifying quickness, Nol's body became relaxed and his face smoothed out.

The door dilated and an attendant wordlessly pushed the stretcher into the next room. Bord and Mark stood side by side, for a few moments lost in their thoughts, their eyes on the circular door, their minds were both on the same thoughts.

Bord was the first to move. He went up to the small window again and looked through. He said in a low voice:

"One hour and his mind will be a blank."

"Yes, Olaf. But in six months the vacuum will be filled," Mark said, turning toward Bord.

"True. Six months and Nol the gardener will take his place in society — never remembering that once he was a self."

Mark tiredly rubbed his forehead.

"And because of that he'll never miss it."

"I know, Mark. That's what I envy."

And Chief Inspector Bord, who only a few weeks ago had sent the entire second fleet into action, with an estimated loss of life of twenty thousand people, laid his hands beside the small window and looked through it longingly. END

NATURAL HISTORY OF THE KLEY

by JEROME BIXBY

Pity the Kley — destroyed by a deadly blow that was aimed at something else!

Not until 1988 did a startled world realize that for millenia it had co-existed on Earth with a submicroscopic civilization, possessing technological and cultural assets comparable to Mankind's own.

The terrible tragedy is that this was not discovered until the tiny race was dead.

The *Kley,* as they had called themselves, were for the most part artistically rich, socially wise and scientifically brisk. At the time of their demise, some of the more advanced *Kley* were working to develop the equivalent of space travel. Other segments of the race still were primitive.

It was on a hair from the tail of his housecat, Linus, that Dr. Enrico Wolfschmidt, inventor of the Wolfschmidt neutron-microscope, first discovered the vanished *Kley* civilization. As he zoomed in for a close look at the hair, the neutron-microscope provided magnifications and resolution of detail hitherto thought impossible. He was astounded to see a city, 2.873 millimeters from the tip.

The city was dark and lifeless. Vehicles sat abandoned in the streets. Exploring, Wolfschmidt moved the focus of his microscope here and there throughout the city, as one would point a telescope.

In strange, arched buildings, resembling chapels, he found the still figures of the *Kley* — thousands and millions of them, dead in attitudes of prayer.

Beside himself with misery and remorse, Wolfschmidt realized at once what had happened. Three days ago, he had sprayed Linus, the cat, with a brand-new insecticide, XK-120, advertised to be the ultimate in insect-killers. (Wolfschmidt's examination of the hair was prompted by his curiosity to know what effect the compound had produced on the submicroscopic level.)

XK-120 had received heavy promotion. As a result initial sales had been enormous — almost every pet in America had been treated with it. Moreover, the manufacturers claimed that its deadly effects (harmless to pets and humans) were readily transmitted by air, and therefore that within weeks every flea, louse, chigger, mite and other such vermin on Earth would be dead, even in remote portions of the globe where XK-120 was not sold. (At $4.95 per spray-can, the manufacturers would profit mightily, despite the fact that they would be out of the insect-killing business within a month. Then there would be the medals, the decorations, the subsidies to finance experimentation on variations of XK-120 designed to attack other types of undersirable life-forms. The War Department alone should be good for billions.)

The manufacturers' claims were borne out, just as XK-120 was borne by wind to every corner of the Earth. One hundred and twenty-seven varieties of insects perished forever. So did the *Kley*.

Subsequent investigation showed that the tiny humanoid species had inhabited only animal fur. It was estimated that 163,000,000,000,000,000 *Kley* had been obliterated in three days.

While anthropologists and social scientists wept and frequented liquor stores, physical scientists labored feverishly to develop new instruments of research. Wolfschmidt invented the neutron-bantron-microscope, which wouldn't smoke under even the heaviest voltages. Social scientists were sobered up by sizable cash offers from American industry. The long program to uncover and interpret the secrets of the *Kley* was under way.

An early discovery was that the high level of civilization found on the tail-hair of Linus had not been universal among the *Kley*. A hair from the vicinity of the middle left-hand teat of a female aardvark bore signs of a Stone Age, verging into Bronze. The *Kley* on this hair, nothing more than skeletons at the time of their discovery, wore animal skins and clutched tiny hatchets, as if they had fought the giant XK-120 molecules to the bitter last. All the animals of the *Kley* worlds, wild and domestic, had perished with them. In many cases they bore startling resemblance to Earthly fauna.

On a hair found in a *yeti* track in the shadow of Nanga Parbit were discovered the remains of a feudal-state *Kley* culture, whose castles

resembled those of 14th Century France. The whisker of a mink stole yielded the remains of an ocean-going culture, a curious mixture of Polynesian and Viking. On a very short hair from the inner ear of a toy poodle, was found a desert Nomad culture, but with signs of growing urban tendency.

Thus it was concluded, after a year of study, that all these various races of *Kley*, like the races of Earth thousands of years ago, had been unaware of the existence of others like themselves. A single hair of an animal host had been the world of each. Most had supposed that they were unique and alone; though apparently the more advanced *Kleys* had speculated on the possibility of intelligent life on other worlds, while discovery of religious artifacts among even the most primitive *Kley* tribes gave evidence that they had been much concerned with the mystery of What Lay Beyond, or Outside.

It is not yet known, at this date, why the *Kley* did not inhabit the hairs of human beings. With reluctance, we must suspect that no answer will be found to that mystery. Theories abound, however.

As the fact became obvious, Dr. Immanuel Kann, of the Reich-Hubbard Foundation for Sub-Mental Research, stated that the electrical brain-waves of humans, reflecting very complex processes of thought, might, on the submicroscopic level of the *Kley*, virtually have assumed the character of Universal Creative Forces — of God forces, restricting the evolution of human-hair *Kley* cvilizations to our exact pattern.

If the *Kley* had indeed existed on an accelerated time-scale, as many scientists believed, then the fate of *Kleys* living on human hairs became dreadfully clear. According to Dr. Kann, the tiny creature, following the path dictated by human brain-waves, always blew themselves up as soon as they were able.

By the same token, the theory argued, the hairs of beasts, and their brain-waves, provided an ideal environment for the formation of worlds closely remembling our own — but not identical.

While Dr. Kann's notion was not popular, especially among the clergy, it found certain support among serious thinkers.

However, Prof. Rollo Isaacimov pointed out that if Dr. Kann were correct, then surely evidence would exist on human hairs of the past civilizations — ruined cities, artifacts, and so on — plus all the lower animals which should not have been affected by the hypothetical human God-waves. Dr. Kann retorted that all artifacts had long since turned to dust, along with all animals, as Evolution's thrust had buried consequent mutations as a futility.

At this point, Dr. Peel thrilled his followers with the theory that, since the *Kley* civilizations had resembled our own in so many significant respects, why couldn't they have evolved under the long-distance influence of our God-forces, located the while on their animal hosts? Perhaps we were their "Overselves," which they evolved toward being!

Immediately the proponents of Zen reversed the order: "Back to the *Kley!*" was their cry.

Then there burst into flame the controversy as to whether or not the billions of *Kley* cultures had been complex genetic mixtures, each the product and survivor of a succession of animal hosts. On every occasion when hosts had mated, had the essence of a tiny, individual civilization been passed from each parent to the progeny in the womb, there, through some microbiological alchemy, to be combined as the heritage of a new *Kley* race on a hair of the progeny? Or (somewhat simpler) had each new-born animal host, through the God-effect forces of its brainwaves, created lower life in its fur which inevitably evolved, on the micro-time scale, into *Kley* who ultimately perished soon after the death of the host? Were there, or were there not, genes-upon-genes and chromosomes-upon-chromosomes, which somehow . . . well, *somehow* . . .

In all, it led to the bitter tussle that still is going on among evolutionists, reincarnationists, Marxists and the Christian church.

Dr. Hubbard, now in his eighties, wrote a book after breakfast explaining that the *Kley* were solely responsible for human psychoses. Heavily financed, he is now checking to see why the *Kley's* inimical influence still persists.

All the foregoing could not have occurred, had it not been for the discovery on the whisker of a Borden cow (not Elsie) of the city of Bosch — a megalopolis rising as a shining monument to the greatest, most advanced *Kley* cvilization yet found.

It was in Bosch, a decade ago, that the first spaceships were found. These *Kley* had been preparing to blast into the Unknown!

There is some evidence to indicate that the destination of their spaceflight was to have been the revolver carried on the hip of the Borden night-watchman, possibly because of its high albedo. Their brave motto was: Hair today! . . . Gun tomorrow!

Most important, in Bosch was found the great scientific library of the Kley Institute of Advanced Learning, with its invaluable key to the hitherto mysterious *Kley* language! It was that discovery alone that put our research into high gear, and enabled us to know the *Kley* and reap the benefits offered us by their dead hands.

Within a year, linguists had translated the language. Within five, the science of Earth was familiar with the science of the *Kley,* and already many new and wonderful things had been added to our daily lives. New power sources for electric toothbrushes, the present hopeful research directed at developing a trillion mega-megaton bomb, the advertising technique known secretly to Madison Avenue as "Pushbutton," the feminine deodorant which turns sweat into witch-hazel . . . all these would have been impossible or long-delayed without our understanding of *Kley* technology.

There are many fascinating paral-

lels to be found between the growth of *Kley* science and knowledge, and the growth of our own. So many of the terrible struggles, the hopes, the great moments of enlightenment, are similar. We will devote the remainder of our space to a recounting of some of these similarities, since they afford insight into grave problems which face Mankind today and which may face him in the future.

For example, in the year 3096 (*Kley* time, on the Borden-cow-whisker world), a state of war existed between the state of Tellur (of which Bosch was the capitol) and the state of Paulling, 17.0019 millimeters further up the whisker. After the third year, things were fairly deadlocked, the armament of each side being about equal to the other's. Warfare was limited to bombing raids, espionage and slanderous speeches.

At this point, a certain Dr. Onston, an eminent physicist, approached the leader of the Paullings with plans for a revolutionary and terrible new weapon. The leader, Efdyar by name, listened to Onston's proposal, and thought long and carefully. Then he ordered *five* specimens of the new weapon constructed.

He then ordered Onston to an isolated island where, carefully supervised, the scientist devoted the rest of his life to devising peaceful applications of the power he had unleashed. Thirty-seven other noted scientists were deported to the same island, with their families, mistresses, libraries and machines. All of them spent many happy years in peaceful research, inventing much of benefit to *Kley*kind.

Meanwhile, Efdyar had unexpectedly passed away — but his successor, a former musician of great sensitivity, paid close heed to Efdyar's written instructions. He invited the fierce rulers of the enemy state, Tellur, to witness a demonstration of the terrible new weapon. Four islands were blown up. Shaken, the Tellurians surrendered, and peace was restored.

Having wisely avoided setting a precedent for the wartime use of the terrible power, the world of the Borden-cow-whisker settled down to a long period of serenity and prosperity. Funds that might otherwise have been prodigiously poured into defense budgets were instead devoted to social and medical research, with the result that the *Kley* lifetime was doubled, diseases, advertising and poverty were forever eliminated, and everything was going swimmingly at the time the XK-120 hit.

Let us stay with the Borden whisker. A few centuries earlier, a *Kley* named Klumbis had maintained that the world was round — a view that earned him hoots and derision. He entreated his Queen to finance an expedition to prove his theory. She also hooted and derided. Discouraged, he entered business and became a successful importer of cut-rate electronics merchandise from a nearby Oriental state.

The true shape of the whisker was not proven until centuries later,

when two expeditions set forth from Bosch — one to the east, around what was theorized to be the circumference; the other to the north, along what was theorized to be the long axis of the world.

The first expedition marched triumphantly back into the city from a westerly direction, two years later.

Of the second expediton, under the command of Sir Edmundhilry, nothing more was heard, and it was presumed that all had perished.

Much later, when air travel was developed, the tragic remains of Edmundhilry's last camp were found, close to the dreaded Root. Scientific truth had prevailed, at the cost of terrible sacrifice. The world *was* cylindrical. And it was attached to the Universe.

Its rate of growth was observed, and gave rise to theories of the Extruding Universe.

There is another record — badly muddled by time — of an intrepid adventurer who took off in a homemade spaceship to fly entirely around the Universe. Careful interpretation of his journal would indicate that he flew outward and down from the whisker, then rearward around the curve of the left

Coming . . . Tomorrow!

For more than a decade, Philip Jose Farmer, who wrote *The Lovers*, *Strange Relations*, etc., has been working on one of the most challenging ideas science fiction writers have produced. It starts with the basic sf question, "What if — ?" What if, says Farmer, every human being who ever lived, from the Pleistocene to the present and indeed on into the future, were to find themselves *all* alive at once? The answer is not a single story; it's a series of them. The first in the series is *The Day of the Great Shout* — a short novel in its own right — and it's complete in the next issue of *Worlds of Tomorrow*.

In the same issue: Theodore L. Thomas's *Manfire*, Robert S. Richardson's *Stella and the Moons of Mars*, and much more. The next issue is dated January, by the way. Why the change in dating? Because since *If* went monthly we've been putting out three magazines one month and one the next; it makes more sense to put out two a month and so we've moved this issue up to a November date and will continue on that basis.

shoulder and flank, passed *under* the tail and returned to his home whisker along the other side of the cow.

The records are vague because he mutilated them before landing, and thereafter was subject for the rest of his life to nightmares and depressive fits. One scrawled notation in his log read: "I feel a ghastly compulsion to steer . . . to *steer!* . . . to *STEER!*" Thus it seems possible that, under the influence of the cow's All-Powerful brain-waves, he had some difficulty in navigation.

Earlier, it was the same Dr. Onston who first acquainted the *Kley* with relativity concepts. For centuries *Kley* scientists had wondered about the strange universal constant M, popularly nicknamed "The Music of the Spheres." Actually, this phenomenon was the mooing of the cows in the Borden barn, detected by the *Kley* as vast, slow oscillations in the ether. Once, when all the cows got frightened and ran out of the barn in different directions, Dr. Onston noted the Doppler effect in the M wavelengths, and formulated his famous equation $E=MC^2$ (or Energy equals Moo multiplied by Cows, Scared).

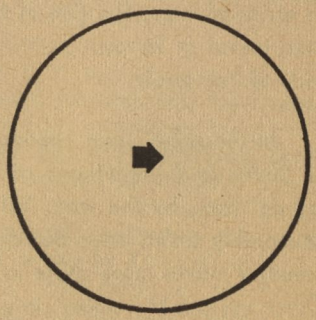
Lastly, there was Galily, a famous astronomer, who after many years of observation stated his belief that the Universe did not grow from the world, but rather vice versa. It would appear that he may have had some inkling of the true nature of his Universe — that it was a vast Superbeing, of which known reality was but a tiny part. At any rate, his defiant statement, when subjected to persecution for his beliefs, is a model of scientific courage. He said: "Nevertheless . . . *it does moo!*"

While there is not space in the present article to further describe the wonders and mysteries of the *Kley,* future articles will explore their Arts, their social and political systems, and many other fascinating facets of these tragic victims of human stupidity. The next article will deal with a primitive tribe who had conceived an entire race of stern and vigilant gods, accurately cast in the *Kley's* world-image. The gods were called The Fuzz.

In closing, the publisher of this periodical has arranged to include with each copy, on this very page which you hold, the actual corpus of a deceased *Kley* woman, exhumed from the strange northern city of Amzon, on the icy hair-world of Frigit, recently found on the ear of a Kodiak bear.

If you have access to a neutron-microscope, you will note the interesting similarities between *Kley* and human females. (Arrow points at *Kley* woman, in perfectly preserved state):

END



THE LONG WAY

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER & SUSAN CHANDLER

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

They reached for the stars—and grasped a strange world!

I

There was Bruce Clayden, spaceman on holiday, and there was Betty Gavin, who was a not unsuccessful painter. They were naked, both of them.

Nevertheless their relationship (although Clayden had entertained hopes that it might become otherwise) was purely platonic. They were wearing the rig of the day of the Helios Club. Clayden had joined from the need to relax after months cooped up in a tin coffin, and as a revolt against the obligatory wearing of uniform every waking hour. And the girl had become a member partly because of the opportunities for the study of human anatomies of all shapes and sizes.

There was not, thought Clayden, watching her as she fussed with her little portable coffee maker, anything wrong with her own anatomy. The sunshine was lustrous on her

golden hair, on the gleaming skin that was perhaps two shades darker, on the firm yet soft curves of her. She was frowning as she tinkered with the temperamental machine. She was one of those women who, in such circumstances, somehow convey the impression of a very charming little schoolgirl whose sums just will not come out right... Not that she was little.

He said helpfully, "I suppose you charged the power pack."

She snapped, "There's no need. This thing lives on solar energy."

Clayden looked up at the cloudless sky. "You must have left it standing in the shade."

She told him, "The trouble with you, Bruce, is that you think that only qualified astronauts are competent to handle even the simplest machinery."

"The trouble with all of us," he said, half seriously, "is that we have all become far too dependent upon machinery. Even on the premises of this club, where we come to lead a simple life. If we were doing it properly we should be building a fire to boil the billy."

"And could you light it by rubbing two dry sticks together?" she demanded.

He said. "One could use a burning glass."

"That'd be cheating." Suddenly the little contraption clicked sharply and then began purring to itself. "Well, that's that. Coffee's under way." She got to her feet, stretched gracefully. "Coming into the pool? A swim will do you good—help to get your tummy down."

He said, looking at her, "Then *you* don't need a swim." Then, softly, "I wish that *I* were an artist."

"And I," she laughed, "wish that I were a spaceman. Or a spacewoman."

"Why?" he asked, genuinely puzzled, "Oh, it's a job, and it pays well enough, but—"

Half seriously she replied, "The romance."

"*Romance*!" He made the word sound dirty. "Oh, there might have been romance once upon a time, when the first manned rockets landed on the Moon, when the first ships touched down on Mars. In spite of all the robot probes that had gone before, nobody knew quite what to expect. But we know what to expect now. We expect worlds that are quite incapable of supporting human life, worlds on which the colonists live under domes in which Terran conditions are duplicated as closely as possible." He got to his feet and stood there, a dark, rather sullen giant, somehow primitive in his nudity. "That's the trouble these days. Everything—but *everything*—is so damned artificial." He flung out a muscular arm. "Even here. There's the pool—but we should be doing our swimming in a river or the sea. And there're all these pretty bubble tents, each one equipped with all the latest electronic household gadgets. If we took ourselves seriously we should be living in grass huts and cooking over open fires!"

She laughed. "You should have a good talk with Bill. You and he


Hodel

would get on very well together."

"Bill?"

"Haven't you met him yet? He stays here quite often. His guiding principle is 'The natural way's the *right* way'. That's why he became a nudist, and that's why he's always campaigning to have all machinery banned from the club grounds. He almost left in a huff when the committee stopped him from building cooking fires on the lawn."

Clayden grinned. "Sounds like a man after my own heart."

"He's here now. I saw him in the toolshed. I'll ask him for coffee."

II

Clayden sat down again, picked up his pipe from his gaily colored beach mat, filled it, watched Betty walking gracefully towards the club's administration buildings, permanent structures but no less gay than the bubble tents. He saw her vanish into the open door of the toolshed, and emerge after a few minutes with a little man walking by her side.

The spaceman regarded him with interest. Here was a real primitive, a being who would not have looked out of place squatting outside a cave, chipping flint arrowheads, somewhen in the prehistory of the race. Although his hair was neat enough, his beard was untidy and straggly. Gnarled muscles were prominent beneath his sun-darkened skin. Something metallic, gleaming, in his right hand looked out of character.

"Bruce," said Betty as the spaceman got to his feet, "this is Bill. Bill, this is Bruce. He's another primitive, like you."

Bill transferred the bright wire and brass tubing to his left hand. His grip was strong. He said, in a rusty baritone, "A primitive, Betty? You surprise me. That is what a man in Captain Clayden's profession can never be."

"And why not?" demanded Clayden, neither expecting nor receiving an answer.

The three of them sat down. The girl pulled beakers from their rack under the coffee maker.

"I would have thought," said Clayden, pointing with the stem of his pipe to the contraption that Bill had dropped to the grass, "that a man like yourself would have had nothing to do with metal."

The other told him, "I would have preferred to have managed without it. But hazel twigs are hard to come by in this part of the world."

"Hazel twigs?" asked Clayden.

"Yes. They are the recommended material."

"Bill," explained Betty, "is trying to revive the lost art of dowsing."

"Dowsing?"

"Water divining," said the little man testily. "Although it can be used to find other substances—oil, for example, or metals. And it's not a lost art, Betty." He turned to Clayden, "No doubt there are dowsers on Mars, Bruce."

"I'm sorry, Bill, there aren't. Not unless you class people who fly around in blimps with cabins stuffed with electronic gear as dowsers."

"I don't. That's just another example of making life complicated when the natural way's so much cheaper and better." He picked up one of the short brass tubes and an L shaped length of stout wire. He inserted the short arm of the L into the tube, held it so that the long arm was horizontal. It pivoted easily. "This is a simple divining rod as used at the present day."

"But why are you playing around with it?" asked Betty. "There's plenty of water here."

"Just an experiment. Just trying to find out how it works when the operator is completely naked, when his body is absolutely open to the currents. . ."

"Currents?" asked Clayden. "What currents?"

"Well, fields, then," snapped Bill. "Every element has its own field, and, given the right conditions, the human mind and body act as an amplifier . . ."

Clayden groaned inwardly. People like Bill were not common — but they were not uncommon enough. They possessed a smattering of scientific knowledge — and this smattering was always distorted to make it fit within their own cranky frames of reference. The last person of Bill's type with whom he had come into contact had been a passenger on a voyage from Earth to Mars, and this passenger had with him an absurdly complicated affair of gyroscopes that he had claimed was an interstellar drive, a device that would enable spaceships to travel faster than light and which would put the stars, with their teeming planets, within the reach of expanding Mankind.

"And then," Bill was explaining, "the current flows back from the body into the rods and induces like polarity . . ."

"Perhaps," said Betty hastily, reading aright the spaceman's expression, "we could see it actually working."

"Of course." The little man had the two divining rods assembled now.

"But we can *see* the water," Clayden told him unkindly, pointing with his pipe at the swimming pool.

"Shut up, Bruce," snapped Betty.

"It must be *moving* water," muttered Bill.

"All right," said Clayden. "See if you can trace the line to that tap." He got up, walked a few yards to the standpipe and turned on the faucet. Bill followed him, a divining rod in each hand, an oddly rapt expression on his face. The two Ls swung aimlessly.

"Now!" the little man ejaculated — and the other man and the girl saw that the rods were no longer swinging. They were standing out stiffly away from each other as though they were, in fact, bar magnets with like polarity. Clayden thought that the brass tubes in which they pivoted must be tilted. But so far as he could see this was not the case.

Slowly Bill paced over the close-cropped grass. Sometimes the rods seemed to be no longer subject to whatever force it was that was mak-

ing them behave in that strange manner. Then a step to the right or to the left would restore the effect of repulsion. Once Bill seemed to be baffled, then he announced, "There's a right-angled bend here."

"Could I try it?" asked Clayden.

"But surely." Bill's manner became professorial. "It is a common misconception that only a very few people are capable of dowsing. In actuality very few are not."

"Is that so?"

The spaceman took the rods. The brass tubes felt somehow odd in his hands, almost alive. When he was over the buried pipe the long arms of the L-shaped wires twisted sharply away from each other. Clayden looked at his hands, made sure that he had not inadvertently tilted the tubes away from each other. If anything, he decided, he had tilted them towards each other.

He said slowly, "You know, you've got something."

"It's something that the human race has had ever since men were men — and perhaps our non-human ancestors had it before us. The pity of it is that it's disregarded. People reply upon clumsy assemblages of electronic gadgetry rather than their own talents."

"There are times," said Clayden, thinking of the control room of an inertial-drive spaceship, "when we have to rely on electronic gadgetry. As you call it."

"I don't agree," Bill said. "What talent is that as used by migratory birds? If you could develop the same talent, it would make all your navigational systems obsolete."

"Unluckily," laughed Clayden, "birds migrate only from place to place on the Earth's surface, and not from planet to planet in the Solar System."

"But perhaps the talent could be developed so that it could be used for interplanetary navigation."

"Perhaps." He handed the rods back. "Well, Bill, you've convinced me that there's something in dowsing, anyhow. When I retire I might set up shop as a diviner on Mars."

"You could do worse," the little man told him seriously.

"I've a good mind," went on Clayden, "to make a set of these."

"It's easy enough. You'll find some tubing and plenty of wire in the toolshed."

III

That afternoon Clayden made his own set of divining rods. To the amusement of other members of the club he stalked seriously about the grounds, tracing buried pipes and then, more ambitious, attempting to find small metal objects dropped in the grass.

He carried his experiments further, finding that although he did not altogether lose the strange power when he was shod it was, to a certain degree, diminished. It was diminished still further when he put on shorts and shirt in addition to his sandals. Betty helped him at first and then, tiring of the new game, set up her easel and started work on a promised portrait of one of her other friends. Bill drove away in his battered, antique car — one of the

last of the wheeled road vehicles — and left him to his own devices.

That evening he had dinner with Betty in her tent and then, after coffee, retired to his own. He had brought a stack of back numbers of *The Journal of the Institute of Astronautics* with him and wished to catch up on his back reading, especially a series of articles on the problems of interstellar flight, a subject that had always interested him.

He had never made any secret of his desire to still be around when a practicable interstellar drive, preferably faster than light, was brought into operation— if ever. A landing on the Moon or Mars or Venus or the Jovian satellites was merely boring routine. A first landing on one of the planets of, say, Alpha Centauri would be . . . *something.*

As Clayden already knew, techniques for interstellar travel. were already in existence. The crew of a starship would pass most of the voyage in a state of suspended animation. They would return to Earth to find that their friends and families had grown old during their absence, to a world in which their own status would be that of mildly interesting strangers. There had been volunteers for such a ship — but there had been no professional spacemen among them.

Clayden's reading was interrupted by the scratching of fingernails on the flap of his tent. He called, "Come in."

The sheet of plastic was lifted to one side. Betty stood there, the dark green of the material framing her golden body. She said, "Sorry to disturb you, Bruce."

"Not at all. Come in, Betty. Make yourself at home. This is Liberty Hall — you can spit on the mat and call the cat a skunk."

She said, "Can you help me, Bruce?"

"But of course. What's wrong?"

"Nothing serious. You know those earclips of mine — the ones shaped like little, golden stars? I've just found that I've lost one. It must be in the grass somewhere between here and the pool. And old Peter will be running his precious mower over the grounds first thing tomorrow morning."

Clayden went to the table upon which he kept various odds and ends, picked up a powerful torch. Then he hesitated.

Beside the portable light were his divining rods, and his experiments during the afternoon had convinced him that the talent, or whatever it was, worked on metals as well as on water.

He asked, "Have you the other one handy?"

"Yes." Her hand went up under the gleaming hair that covered her right ear, came back into view with the little, glittering object displayed on the open palm.

"This is how we'll work it," Clayden said. "I'll carry the rods and I'll concentrate on a star. You take the torch."

"But how . . .?"

"I've had plenty of practice. When we get outside the tent, both rods should point in the direction

of whatever it is we're looking for. And then, when we're directly over it, the rods should fly apart. Quite simple."

"You don't mean that you really took all that guff of Bill's seriously?"

"Not his explanation of it. But there's *something* there. Coming?"

"Oh, all right."

They left the tent and walked out into the warm night, the grass soft and springy under the soles of their bare feet. Clayden felt the brass tubes in his hands twitch as the rods pivoted, saw that both lengths of wire were pointing towards the pool. He started walking slowly towards the sheet of water, the girl beside him, the white beam of the torch slicing the darkness before them.

Not that it was really dark. The sky was clear, ablaze with stars, the Southern Cross and the pointers, Alpha and Beta Centauri, low on the horizon. "Wish on a star," he murmured. *Wish on a star,* he thought. *Wish on a star a mere* 4.3 *light years distant . . . but that's one helluva long way away...*

The brass tubes seemed to be alive, and there was a surge of power from — from — *from some field of force,* he thought. *The ideal conditions for dowsing. Nudity, and night? Does the absence of sunlight make any difference at all?*

The girl clutched his arm. She said tartly, "My star's in the grass somewhere. It's not up in the sky."

He said "The rods tilted —"

He deflected the brass tubes from their backward pointing position and then from the vertical, so that they were tilting away from him. But the two wires bent as he did so, remained pointing up at an angle of about fifteen degrees from the horizontal. He swore softly, felt Betty's free hand holding his arm tightly.

She whispered, "Do . . . do you feel it?"

He felt it. He felt that unnameable force flowing through his body. He felt the surge of it, and the tug of it, and he resisted it and then, in spite of himself, he looked along the two rigid wires, the wires that were pointers, to the star of which he had been thinking when interrupted.

He looked to the star, to Alpha Centauri. (How many times had he wished upon it, staring out from his control room viewports when falling down the long, boring trajectory from a drab Earth to an even drabber Mars?) He looked to the star — and then the star was gone.

The star was gone and the sky was no longer black, star-spangled; it was gray, and there was coarse sand under his feet instead of soft grass, and there was the dull booming of the surf in his ears instead of the stridency of cicadas.

IV

He stared at the sagging clouds, tumescent, threatening. To windward there was the incessant flicker of lightning, the continuous low grumble of thunder. The sea was gray-green and empty, a vast, barren expanse already white-flecked by the approaching squall.

He turned to look inland. The rising wind was cold on his back.

"Where are we?" Betty was saying, her voice small and frightened. "Where are we?"

Clayden did not answer at once. He looked inland, but could see nothing but a seemingly endless undulation of low dunes, some of them sparsely covered with a straggle of vegetation. There was neither tree nor hill to break the line of the horizon. There was no evidence of human habitation.

Human habitation? Clayden asked himself suddenly, and the uneasy goose-flesh prickling his skin was not altogether the result of the cold wind.

"Where are we?" Betty was whimpering.

He said roughly. "Your guess is as good as mine." He looked at the girl, saw that she was shivering violently. He looked from her to the squall driving in from seaward. "Wherever we are, we'd better find shelter."

With something like a return of her old spirit she demanded, "Where?"

"That," he admitted, "is the sixty-four thousand dollar question." Then he remembered what a Martian prospector, one of his passengers, had told him once about the way in which he had survived when trapped away from his tractor by a sudden sandstorm. This storm would not be sand. It would be rain, or hail, or sleet, but it could easily prove fatal to two naked human beings.

He took her hand in his, ran inland. It was heavy going over the loose sand of the dunes, but the first icy spatters were like whips on their unprotected backs. Clayden dragged Betty over the first three of the low sand-waves. The fourth one was higher, its surface firmer, bound by the wiry plant life that was more vine than grass. In the trough behind it he came to a panting halt, dropped to his knees and began to shovel with his hands. The girl joined him, helped him to excavate a shallow trench. When he judged that it was deep and long enough he pushed her into it, flopped down beside her and then, as the torrential downpour began, tried to pull the coarse sand back over their bodies.

It helped. It was insulation of a sort. It did not keep all the moisture out, but what soaked through was warmed by their body heat and, combined with the sand, made a sort of humid but warm blanket. And when the wind, after the brief lull that had coincided with the start of the rain, rose again they had a good lee from the dune.

Clayden thought, *We have no clothing, and nothing to eat or drink, but we could be worse off.* He felt Betty's skin hot and soft against his own. *Yes,* he thought, *we could be worse off...*

She stiffened in his arms, managed to get her hands against his chest, pushed. "No!" she snapped. "*No*!"

He said, "We have to keep warm."

"Then we will keep warm. Period. But nothing else."

He said, "The wind seems to be easing."

"All right. So it's easing. And

what do we do when it has eased?"

He said, "I don't know."

She managed to widen the slight gap between them. "You don't know? You got us into this mess."

"I did?"

"Yes. You and your damn silly divining rods, and your stupid experiments."

He said coldly, "As I recollect it, it was a friend of yours who started all this."

"No friend of mine," she told him. "An acquaintance, possibly. But that's all."

He said, "All right, have it your own way. But we may as well talk things over, since there isn't anything else we can do."

"There isn't," she said definitely.

There was a pause. Then, "Have *you* any ideas on the subject?" asked Clayden.

"Yes, Bruce I have, as a matter of fact. We shan't have been the first to vanish from the face of the Earth — people have been doing it all the time."

"So you don't think that this is Earth?"

"I'm sure it's not. It . . . it *feels* wrong. Well, at least we know something of the mechanics of our own vanishment. It was your messing around with divining rods in the nude that . . . that tapped some power source..."

"Go on."

"You tell me something. When we were looking for that stupid ear clip, what were you *really* concentrating on?"

"It was shaped like a star," said Clayden slowly. "The ear clip, I mean. But it tied in with what I had been reading and thinking about when you disturbed me. I was reading about the problems of interstellar travel, and I'd been thinking about making the first landing on one of the planets of Alpha Centauri."

"And you've made it," she said. "Or we've made it. But where do we go from here?"

"Home," he said, with an assurance he did not feel. "I've still got the rods. When it's dark, if the sky clears, we should be able to find Sol, and then —"

"Why wait until it's dark? If you concentrate, the rods should act as pointers."

He said, "The rain has stopped."

He disentangled himself from the girl, scrambled out of the trench. She followed him, helped him to search in the loose sand for the two rods. Meanwhile, the sky was clearing. A westering sun, that could have been Earth's own sun, warmed their skins.

The rods in his hands, he stood there. He thought of Earth. He tried to visualize London, the city with which he was the most familiar — and then hastily wiped his mind clean.

This was not a puritanical age, but the sudden materialization of a naked man and a naked woman in the middle of Piccadilly Circus would occasion comment. Furthermore, it was midwinter in the Northern Hemisphere. So, hastily, he concentrated on the premises of the Helios Club — the gay bubble

tents, the smooth lawn, the swimming pool. But it was all, somehow, empty. He tried to fill in the picture — saw in his mind's eye the sun-browned bodies in and around the pool, engaged in various activities and non-activities around the tents. And still it refused to come alive, still the rods were lifeless.

He said to Betty, "You'll have to help. I'm trying to imagine Helios; we have to return to the same point as that from which we left."

She said, "I'll try."

Did the rods twitch, or was it only the effect of the breeze?

But there was so much at stake. Their lives, almost certainly. And more than their lives. If this worked, if the effect — whatever it was — could be licked into some sort of controllable shape, then here was the interstellar drive of Man's vain imaginings. No, thought Clayden, not an interstellar drive in the strict sense of the words, but a way to the stars, a road to the uncounted Earth-type worlds throughout the Galaxy.

The rods twitched again, and the two wires stiffened, dipped, lined up in parallel.

So Sol, with Earth, was below the horizon. But it should make no difference.

He whispered, "we almost have it . . ."

The sudden blaze of sunlight was like a blow on the face, but a gentle one. But the noise of the surf was still there, and there was still sand under their feet — but it was warm sand, fine, not gritty. And there were the happy, brown-skinned people playing in the blue-green shallows, singing as they helped beach an incoming outrigger canoe, some of them, others scampering up the beach with the ends of a long net in the bight of which threshed silvery fish.

Slowly Clayden turned his head, saw the coconut palms, their fronds graceful against the sky, saw the flimsy huts of matting under the palm trees, looked at the older people and the very young children sitting in the shade of their roofs.

He knew, suddenly, where he and Betty were, although he could not pinpoint the locality. This was somewhere in that vast sprawl of islands known as Polynesia.

But the huts were of flimsy matting, which antedated even the now antique galvanized iron, and that canoe had been driven by paddles, and there was not a powered boat to be seen. And even though there were coconut palms there was no plantation, there were no facilities for drying and shipping copra.

Oddly, he and Betty had not been noticed yet — or, perhaps, not so oddly. Clothing would have made them conspicuous.

He muttered, "I hope the natives are friendly."

"What do you mean?" she asked softly.

"I... don't... know," he said slowly. "I don't know. But I rather think that we've come a long way in a long time. Backwards."

"Is that so bad?" she said.

Clayden hoped that it wouldn't be, and tried not to remember what he had read about long pig. END

THE KICKSTERS

by J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated By MORROW

She lived for thrills and excitement. Now it was her time to die for them!

I

There were nine of them, five men and four girls. They all wore heavy black flying clothes, electrically heated. Over these they wore flying halters.

They took off from one corner of the field and climbed to five thousand feet. Then, at a signal from their black-haired leader, they switched off their jets and plummeted to the ground a mile below.

Two hundred feet from the ground one of the men lost his nerve and switched on. His headlong flight was instantly checked . . . but his disgrace did not pass unnoticed.

Half a second later, a hundred feet from the ground, one of the girls switched on. In the next two-fifths of a second all the others

switched on too. Despite the closeness of the timing it was quite clear who switched on first, second, third . . . and last.

Last was a golden-haired girl who looked slim even in her bulky black suit. Her timing was so coolly exact that she could not have been more than ten feet from the ground when her fall was arrested. A fraction of a second more and she would have been killed instantly.

They all landed and gathered together to talk.

On the highway, half a mile away, two patrolmen were watching.

"Who are they?" the young patrolman asked.

"Rich kids," said the older patrolman. "They call themselves the Smart Set. You want to join in the fun, your old man has to be worth at least a million — in the new currency, at that."

"Do they do a lot of this kind of thing?"

"All the time, pal, all the time."

"Then doesn't anybody ever get killed?"

The older patrolman shrugged. "Among this group, the Smart Set, no, not so far. They're like all kids, Pete — like you not so long ago. You'd have done anything rather than show yellow, wouldn't you? Even die if necessary? Sure you would. The difference was, you didn't have ten thousand dollars to spend on a flying halter."

"I get it," said the young patrolman. "That's why it's a rich kids' game. Flying halters are expensive toys."

"As you say, Pete, as you say. They're not of any practical value except to egg-collectors or cable-car repairmen. But those kids can afford to buy them and use them just for kicks. Another day they'll use hopters. But the halters are more fun because they have to dress up in flying suits, see?"

"More fun!" muttered Pete. "They're crazy, plumb crazy. If my old man was going to leave me a million, I'd take good care I didn't die before he did. Hell, they're not going up again, are they?"

"Sure, Pete, sure. One of them showed yellow, didn't he? Now he gets a last chance. Watch closely, Pete. This is the dangerous drop, the one that's liable to lead to somebody getting killed. The guy who showed yellow doesn't dare be first out again, see? He's got to wait until he's sure most of the others are out before him. But they aren't making things easy for him. They're going to wait as long as they can, see?"

"Shouldn't we do something?" said Pete.

"What, for instance? They're not breaking any law."

Once more the five men and four girls climbed to five thousand feet.

Flying halters had been developed too late to be regarded as a serious means of flying. In the early days of flight it might have seemed that the nearer humans could approach to the free flight of birds, the closer man would have come to conquering the air. And there was nothing nearer to bird flight than using a flying halter.

But people liked to be comfortable as they flew. In pressurized airliners you could travel from New York to London in an hour, wearing a Hawaiian shirt or a cocktail dress and drinking, eating and smoking all the way. Wearing a halter you couldn't climb ten thousand feet, you couldn't do a mile a minute except in a dive or more than twenty miles altogether, and you had to wear an insulated flying-suit even on a hot summer's day if you didn't want to freeze.

Flying like the birds was strictly for the birds. Or for kicks, of course.

At five thousand feet, registered on Rog's altimeter, they waited for his signal again, and then dropped through a mile of air and sunlight and nothing else.

Peach Gordon (the blonde who had won the last fall) wanted to scream her pleasure as she fell, but did not, since screaming was liable to be construed as fear. Peach didn't know fear, except as a pleasurable thrill. She had never had to fear anything not self-imposed in her life, and the self-imposed thrills had never gone sour on her yet. She was certain that they never would.

Her daring was based in utter confidence in herself. She expected to win more than her fair share of thrill-spills, but there was no thought in her mind that she'd ever be killed or even injured.

She wasn't just trying to beat the others, she was eager to beat her own best. A margin of ten feet was too much, she thought. Some day she hoped to brush the ground with her feet as the jets, like a thick rubber rope, first slowed her to a halt and then jerked her back in the air.

Dispassionately she was aware that other members of the Smart Set, lacking her own quick reactions and self-confidence, might easily make mistakes. Tim, now, wasn't really chicken, he just wasn't good enough. Last time he had switched on too soon. This time, to prove his nerve, he might wait too long . . .

But even if Tim splattered himself half across the field, why should that affect her? She'd be sorry, of course. She'd be subdued for a day. But all that would have been proved was that Tim wasn't as good as she was at thrill-spills, and surely everybody knew that already?

The thoughts of Tim Spieler, as the ground whirled up to meet him, were, naturally, very different.

Desperate, he knew he must somehow prevent his finger from pressing the button even when the button shrieked to be pressed. When fear took over, commanding him to start the jets, screaming that he'd die if he didn't, he must somehow hold off for another fraction of a second.

At Tim's age — seventeen — the only society that mattered, almost the only society that existed, was that of his contemporaries. The only rules that mattered were their rules. Despised by them, he might as well be dead. So he must, absolutely *must* avoid their contempt.

What he'd do this time, he decided, was shut his eyes and wait till he heard another jet roar. He

would then have perhaps half a second to get his own jet going. It could be done — provided somebody switched on a hundred feet up or more. If by chance the other six all managed to hold off, all dropped within thirty feet of the ground before their jets bit, or even fifty, he'd be too late . . .

After the long fall, the fall which seemed as if it would never end, the final seconds flashed past in a blur. One moment you were trying to speed up time, the next you were trying to hold time back.

Tim did manage to keep his eyes shut, did wait until he heard another jet. Then, as he stabbed the button, he opened his eyes — and only with a supreme effort cut back a scream as the ground rushed up at him.

But the jets bit and he relaxed in double relief. His fall was arrested thirty feet up; and at least four of the others had switched on before him. Rog switched on about the same time as Tim. Peach Gordon, for at least the twentieth time, came triumphantly within half a second of death and lived to boast about it.

Tim did not envy her her triumph. He was satisfied with his own margin. Less, and he wouldn't have been able to sleep that night.

The nine landed in the field again. "Velma switched on first," someone accused.

"I had to, I was a hundred feet below you," Velma said indignantly.

"You and I were second last, Rog," Tim said happily.

Nick, the smallest of the five men, was not happy at all. "The chances you take are going to kill you one of these days," he told Peach angrily.

She laughed as she stripped off her halter and black flying-coat. "I don't take chances," she said. "I know exactly what I want to do and I do it."

"That's right," Rog said. "That's exactly what you do, Peach."

They all looked at him.

Every group had to have a leader, and Rog, being oldest and strongest and most aggressive among them, led the Smart Set. The fact that his father was richer than anybody else's except Morris Gordon also had something to do with it, for in this society it was axiomatic that a man with two million dollars was just twice as good as a man with one million.

"Thrill-spills are okay," Rog said, "but they do depend on skill. Sure, that's all right. Peach can judge the right moment better than any of us, and I don't want to take anything away from her. But when a guy or a girl needs *real* nerve is when nothing he or she can do is going to have any effect."

"Like when I stopped the Millionaire Express," Tim boasted.

"Exactly," said Rog. "I guess it's about time we stopped the Moon rocket again."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Nick. "That stunt's out now — "

"Besides," Rog said, raising his voice, "my old man's going to be on tomorrow night's Millionaire Express and he particularly asked me to see there was no interference

with that run. Well, that practically forces me to stop it, doesn't it?"

The others laughed a little nervously. None of them would have admitted that anything their parents said or thought had any effect on their conduct. Very little that their parents said or thought did have any effect on their conduct. However, no one but Rog would have reacted to a special man-to-man request quite as Rog did.

"Wait a minute," Nick said, insisting on being heard. "We've pulled that one twice and other kids have interfered with other rocket trips. The police and the spacelines are getting real tough. They're threatening not to turn back any more."

Rog grinned. "That's just the point. Little brother hits the nail on the head. This time, there's the possibility that the Express *won't* turn back. A distinct possibility. Whoever gets the job is going to need guts. It's like Russian roulette. That's not a matter of skill either. It needs more guts than taking a risk you know is no risk for you."

His eyes rested on Peach for a moment. Nick wondered fleetingly if he was jealous of Peach, whose record in all the thrill-spills was so much better than Rog's.

"Look," Nick protested. "We've got to leave the Millionaire Express alone from now on. I tell you, the police are getting tough . . . Even if the rocket turns back, anybody who pulls that stunt again is liable to go to jail."

"So?" Rog said coolly.

Nick stood his ground. "I don't mind risking my neck. I don't mind going to jail for a reason. I don't mind trying something that means jail if I'm caught. But anybody who tries this crazy stunt again is caught from the moment he starts. So he either gets killed or he goes on trial for malicious interference with the operation of the Moon-rocket service. That's the only alternative. He gets six months or a year in jail without even a chance to make a break for it and maybe get clear. I don't see the fun in that."

"Scared?" Rog taunted.

Nick was sure enough of his ground not to wilt under the taunt. "Not scared. Sensible. It doesn't make sense to ask for trouble and then hand yourself over to make sure you get it. Give me a chance to tweak the President's nose and make a run for it and I'll do it. But to wait till you're handcuffed to a guard and *then* tweak the President's nose . . . that's strictly for nut cases."

"Okay," said Rog briskly. "Nick's out. That leaves eight of us. Which of us is going to stop the Millionaire Express?"

Peach stepped out of her black pants. Underneath she wore her shorts two sizes too small and a yellow sweater three sizes too small. Although she was a pretty girl, she didn't devote much attention to clothes. So long as a garment was short, tight and clean she was satisfied, and in a pinch it didn't even have to be clean.

"Count me in," she said, with a mischievous glance at Nick.

"Out, you mean," Nick said. "Peach, if there's any one of us who doesn't have to prove anything, it's you. You've got more nerve than the rest of us put together. We all know that. You don't have to try to stop the — "

"But Rog says," Peach observed, "that it doesn't take guts to do something you know you can do. He's right. It takes more nerve to stop a Moon rocket than to walk a high wire. You may climb down from the high wire afterward quite safe—"

"While if you hide in a rocket you're putting your head in a noose and daring the cops to pull the rope," Nick said. "That's not fun any more. There's no contest in that, no excitement. If the judge goes easy on you, that's no credit to you. You haven't challenged him and beaten him. You're relying on his generosity, his pity."

For a moment there was an uncomfortable silence. Nick had at last made a telling point.

The Smart Set were not much different from teenagers at other times and places. In their adolescent arrogance they allowed no importance or virtue to anything or anybody not in their adolescent world. Anyone over twenty was a square or worse, and they wanted to have nothing to do with them.

It was fun to cook a snook at authority, all authority. It was inadmissible that authority mattered or that it was ever allowable to ask authority for mercy.

So, apart from Nick, nobody admitted it.

"Eight of us," Rog said firmly. "We'll draw lots."

Velma had a pocket diary. In the long grass by the hedge she broke off eight straws, seven long and one short, and shut them in the book.

Rog drew first. "Is this supposed to be long or short?" he demanded, waving his straw.

"Long," Velma said. "You're out, Rog."

Nick, watching closely, thought he saw relief in Rog's manner. Rog wanted the Millionaire Express stopped, but he wanted somebody else to stop it.

Tim drew a straw the same length as Rog's.

Then Peach drew the short straw.

"Not you, honey," Nick said sharply. "Rog, call the whole thing off."

Peach threw the straw in the air and did a strut of triumph. "Call it off? Don't be silly, Nick. We'll take the next ship to the Moon—or aren't you coming?"

There was a pause, during which Nick realized the utter impossibility of getting Peach to cry off once the draw was made. Before she drew the short straw, maybe. Now, never.

"All right," he sighed. "I'm coming."

II

Two of the travelers on the Moon rocket at three o'clock that afternoon were Nick and Peach. But they didn't travel as Nick Farr and Peach Gordon. The Millionaire Express having been stopped twice al-

ready by the Smart Set, the spaceport authorities and the Lunar police always checked the passengers to the Moon, just in case.

Nick and Peach went as Mr. and Mrs. Bill Jones, newly wed, on their honeymoon. In cheap, gay clothes bought off the peg and with other slight but significant changes in their appearance, they passed unnoticed in the crowd. Peach's genuine gold hair was tinted brassy gold, on the principle that no one would ever take an obviously fake blonde for a real blonde, and she had pads in her cheeks to add fullness to her face. Nick wore a tiny mustache so sparse that it looked absolutely genuine, such as it was, and added above it a slightly bulbous nose.

Monday night's Moon-Earth rocket was known as the Millionaire Express because a special ship was used—at special fares. Only very rich people—and a few once-in-a-lifetime vacationers like young honeymooners—went to the Lunar playground on weekends, when all the prices were trebled. Only working millionaires came back on Monday night, just before the prices reverted to normal.

When the Smart Set started playing tricks on spacelines, they naturally picked the Millionaire Express, the ship and route with which they were most familiar. The fact that more often than not at least one of their parents was on board was considered a point in favor of interfering with flight rather than against it. To do as your parents told you, or to give them any special consideration, was soft.

Sunday night Nick and Peach went dancing at the Golden Dustbowl. It was the smartest spot on the Moon, the gimmick being that you had to put on a spacesuit to get there. There was no reason why the Dustbowl should not have been reached by a tunnel or pressurized corridor like every other building on the Moon, but the owners had gambled that the customers would like the idea of having to bound adventurously across a rocky plain to reach the nightspot, and the gamble was paying off.

Since all the Dustbowl's patrons had to use a spacesuit and take it off when they arrived, men didn't wear evening clothes and women didn't wear long dresses. The necessity for spacesuits provided the perfect excuse for any costume that needed it. Underclothes would do if you couldn't think of anything better, the reasoning being that since normally only underclothes were worn beneath a spacesuit, the most exiguous scanties were entirely appropriate in a place you could reach only by spacesuit. Swimsuits, slacks and leotards were also suitable. But if you really wanted to make a splash, you had a special outfit designed for wearing under a spacesuit.

Nick, as Bill Jones, an impecunious young clerk recklessly spending his last cent on a honeymoon 'way out of his league, wore such an outfit. It was a midnight blue tunic over knee-length yellow pants. Peach, as usual, wore something brief and tight and whistle-worthy—in this case a black slip the top two-

thirds of which was transparent.

On arriving, they took a quick look around. "Gosh, aren't they old?" Peach said. (Apart from Nick, the youngest men were in their early twenties. Some of the girls were no more than a year older than Peach, but their escorts were in their thirties, forties or fifties.)

"Want to go?" Nick asked.

"No, we just came. Let's dance."

They stood facing each other on the floor, their bodies moving together. When the beat changed Peach leapt into Nick's arms and he worked her around behind his neck and down his body—a simple feat in the Moon's gravity. Then they moved rhythmically facing each other again.

It was such an erotic dance that they soon abandoned it to the older customers, who needed hors d'oeuvres and an aperitif to work up a sexual appetite. Nick and Peach didn't.

At the bar, drinking Moonjuice, Nick suddenly said: "Let's do something else, honey."

"Huh?"

"Instead of stopping the Express. Let's get drunk, do something crazy and get ourselves locked up. Then you won't be able to stow away on the rocket."

Peach didn't understand. "What for?"

"So you don't have to do it, idiot. So you can get out of it without showing yellow."

"But I don't want to get out of it."

Nick looked at her and a wave of desire for her came over him. They would have been married if it had not been considered soft to get married when there was nothing you could do in the married state you couldn't do better outside it. They would have been married anyway if Nick and Peach's father had their way.

Morris Gordon liked Nick and considered him (and his expectations) entirely suitable for his daughter. But Morris Gordon, president of Gordon Shipbuilding Company, was no fool. He knew that the best way to make certain Nick and Peach never got married was to ram Nick down Peach's throat.

One of the things that Morris Gordon liked about Nick was that he was a rebel against rebellion. Nick knew that anarchy, if it was to work, demanded stricter self-discipline than any system of government. And the teenage rebellion against rules imposed more rigid rules of its own.

You couldn't do what the squares did, because they were squares. But what the squares did had ten thousand years of empirical wisdom behind it. Sometimes, Nick found, the only sane way to do a thing was the way the squares did it—the way that was denied to Rog's group, the so-called Smart Set.

It was quite simple. Nick was growing up. And he knew it.

In the ordinary way the matter would have been perfectly straightforward. He would have gradually dropped out of the group and sought the company of others who had grown up too and accepted squaredom.

But Nick loved Peach Gordon, and she wasn't ready to do likewise. Indeed, she flatly refused to consider it.

"Look, honey," Nick said earnestly. "The police and Lunar Lines issued a joint statement after the last episode. Tim was admonished but the statement made it clear that no Moon rocket would ever turn back again to save a silly kid's life. It said that if anybody repeated what Tim did, it would be considered he'd committed suicide. You remember what the judge said?"

"They'll turn back," Peach said confidently. "If they don't, it's murder."

"No, it's not," Nick insisted. "If I say I'm going to set a hut on fire, and you hide yourself in the hut, I'm not committing murder when I set the hut ablaze. If you die, it's suicide. Not murder."

Peach laughed. "If I shout 'I'm here' before you set the hut on fire —*then* it's murder."

"Well, suppose—"

"Don't let's do any supposing," she said, signalling for two more Moonjuices. "Tell me, who's the prettiest girl here?"

It was a game. He turned and surveyed the company critically, affecting not to think of including her.

"How about the girl in the yellow pants?"

"Too thin. She's too thin even for tight pants."

"The girl in the red bikini is cute."

"Too fat. If this wasn't the Moon she'd have a tummy and her bust would be too heavy for that light scaffolding. On Earth, it would burst."

"Then I'll have the girl in the pink pajamas."

"That old hag? She must be twenty-three if she's a day."

He turned and looked Peach over. She still had brassy hair and pads in her cheeks, but from the mouth down to her lightly tanned, swinging legs she was his girl. There was nothing about her figure that would stop her winning beauty contests.

"Well," he said judicially, "since there's so little competition I guess you have a chance."

She laughed again. "Only a chance?"

"A good chance. You'd be in the first three, anyway." As he looked at her, the thought of what was going to happen to her in the next twenty-four hours brought back his frown.

"Look, honey . . ." he said.

Peach didn't want him to talk about it any more. "Nick, why does Moonjuice taste different from any drink you can get on Earth?"

"Because it's fermented here," Nick said. "Fruit concentrate is brought up here and fermented in vats. Since there's so little gravity, the carbonic gas that's formed with the alcohol doesn't all rise, even though the juice isn't kept under pressure. So Moonjuice always sparkles, without the complicated and expensive champagne process."

"You know just about everything, Nick, don't you?" said Peach, naively admiring.

"I know about fifty good reasons

why you should forget about the Millionaire Express."

"Nick," Peach said firmly, "I want to have fun and I don't like arguments. If you tell me once again that I'm crazy to stop the Millionaire Express, you and I will sleep in separate rooms tonight. I mean it."

Since she obvously did mean it, Nick dropped the subject.

III

The next afternoon they were back at the airlock nearest to the Dustbowl. The elderly attendant who issued spacesuits free to Dustbowl patrons nodded to them, recognizing them from the evening before.

"You like it out there?" he said.

"It's swell," said Peach enthusiastically, trying to act like a girl having an expensive vacation for the first and only time in her life.

"You want the black suit you had yesterday, miss?"

"Sure, that'll be fine."

They started out for the Dustbowl, which was open twenty-four hours a day, every day. Night and day didn't have much meaning on the Moon.

As soon as they were out of sight of the airlock, however, they turned back and made for the spaceport instead. They couldn't talk, their suits having no provision for communication. They were scarcely talking anyway, Nick having annoyed Peach by something he'd said.

Just before they left their modest hotel room, Peach had said complacently: "I guess this will make quite a splash in the papers."

"Because of your father," Nick had said quietly.

"Huh?"

"Honey, your own intrinsic importance to anybody but me is precisely nil, because you've never done anything to acquire importance. If you weren't Morris Gordon's daughter you'd never have seen your picture in the papers."

After that there had been silence. Peach didn't like being told that it was entirely because of her father's money and position that the press took any interest in her exploits. Like all heiresses used to seeing their picture in the newspapers and society magazines at least twice a week, she liked to believe that this happened owing to some intrinsic merit of her own.

It wasn't in her nature to sulk, however, and as they bounded over the jagged rocks between the Dustbowl and the spaceport she would have chattered eagerly if she could.

The Moon ships took off from the middle of the Mare Italica, the flattest area of rock available. The Express which was to blast off in a few hours' time already stood in position for the takeoff, with three caterpillar trucks running back and forth between her and the supply depot.

Nearly five miles from the ship, Nick and Peach had to say goodbye. When you wanted to approach a ship unseen, you didn't double or treble the chances of detection by taking an unnecessary companion along with you. Besides, Peach was going to be relatively safe when the

jets flared; anyone who went with her, intending to stay behind, would have to be at least a mile clear before take-off, preferably two.

In the vacuum of space — or the vacuum of the Moon's surface, which wasn't much different — there was no air to assist burning, but there was also nothing to hold self-sustaining flames in check or to direct them safely upwards. Jets a few hundred feet above a crowd on Earth did little or no harm. Jets above the Moon showered it with heat and burning particles.

Since they couldn't speak, they pecked through the faceplates and Nick, by gesture and expression, made a last attempt to persuade Peach to give up. By no means to his surprise, it was futile.

Then she bounded away across the plain.

Nick retraced his steps, returning to the airlock apparently from the Golden Dustbowl. Before he entered the lock, he set his features in an expression of black anger.

Naturally as he took off the suit the attendant asked about Peach.

"She's still there," Nick said shortly.

"First quarrel?" said the attendant sympathetically.

Nick grunted, discouraging talk, and bounced away along the corridor in the rock.

The simple explanation would satisfy the attendant and keep him from wondering why Peach failed to return through the lock, until it no longer mattered. It would seem readily comprehensible that after a row with her escort a girl might obstinately stay at the Dust bowl for several hours, just to prove how little she cared.

Peach, meantime, carefully picked her way across the bed of a sea which was never a sea.

There were no arc lamps illuminating the area round the ship, as there might have been if the authorities had thought interference with this particular flight likely. Evidently the spaceline staff and the Lunar police were satisfied that no member of the Smart Set had traveled to the Moon. Or that even the Smart Set would now have the sense to see that the game was no longer worth the candle.

The scanner on the nose of the ship was turning regularly, however. Someone was watching, or pretending to watch.

Even if there had been arc lamps Peach would probably have been able to get close to the ship unobserved. And the scanner didn't bother her. She watched it and made her leaps when it was facing the wrong way.

People on Earth who had no experience of space travel couldn't understand how stunt-mad kids could get close to the Millionaire Express without being detected. Why not keep a watch? they asked. Why not check the ship immediately before take-off? Why not land her only for long enough for passengers to embark, making sure nobody else came near the ship during that time?

If interference with space flights

became a regular hazard, security precautions could and would be devised. But the Millionaire Express had only been turned back twice.

And it was, after all, very difficult to guard a ship in such a locale.

Because of the blast, the ship had to land and take off miles out. Passengers were ferried to her in luxury tractors.

Any active person wearing a spacesuit could approach within a hundred yards of the ship without being seen even if fifty watchers were on duty constantly. Human eyes evolved on the Earth — not on the Moon. And to date ordinary civilian ships were not equipped with detection devices such as were standard in warships. Warships had to expect sabotage. Ordinary spaceliners did not.

Peach, leaping and creeping over the jagged rocks, did not have to take extreme care. Each time the scanner on top of the ship turned toward her she froze, waiting, and then leaped on again.

It was easy to get within two hundred yards of the ship. Only from here on would there be any great difficulty.

Hidden in the shadow of a six-foot spur of rock, Peach could stare openly at the huge ship, towering over her now, and know she could not be seen. Shadows on the Moon weren't luminous as they were on Earth. Unless a searchlight was turned full on her, she was invisible. Even then, in a black suit, all she had to do was turn her back and the searchlight would probably pass right over her without stopping.

Ten minutes' patient watching failed to reveal anyone in a spacesuit in or near the ship. The caterpillar trucks were all. It was a matter of waiting for a couple of minutes when none of the trucks were in sight.

Two were shuttling back and forth between the ship and the maintenance station three miles away. One had brought provisions; when they were loaded, it departed.

A moment came when one of the remaining truck was at the depot and the other was on the far side of the ship. Shielded by its great bulk, Peach gathered herself for a huge leap to the ship.

Then a bulky figure in a spacesuit appeared, walking slowly round the base of the ship.

Peach froze again. The man in the suit seemed to look straight at her. Then, noticing nothing, he examined the ship, ducked under the fins and flashed his torch about under the main jets.

It was several minutes before he was satisfied. At last, with another slow look round the apparently empty Mare Italica, he returned the way he had come.

Peach sighed. If there was one check, there might be others. She would have to wait where she was practically until the moment of take-off.

IV

"Everything in order, sir," the First Officer reported. "Ship in all respects ready for space."

"Except that we haven't any passengers," Captain Trevis growled.

"Transport's on its way out, sir."

"Good. And you're sure none of those silly rich kids are hanging around this time?"

"Quite sure, sir, but I'm going to check again. I put on a suit and had a look round three hours ago. I'll make a last check after the passengers are all on board and while we're waiting for the tractor to get clear."

"Better still. You looked in all the tubes?"

"Of course, sir."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody, sir."

"Pity," Trevis grunted.

"Sir?" Harry Secker was puzzled. Why should it be a pity that there wasn't going to be any trouble this trip?

"There's nothing I'd like better, Number One, than to catch one of those stupid spoiled brats trying something."

"Oh — I see, sir."

"I grew up in a slum, Number One, did you know that?"

"No, sir" said Secker diplomatically, though he didn't find it hard to believe. Trevis was a fine spaceship handler, there was no denying that, but Secker had never worked under any superior officer with fewer social graces. To describe Trevis as a surly bear was to flatter him. Still — Secker was tolerant, having known captains whose shiphandling made his hair stand on end.

"Kids these days," said Trevis, "don't know what hardship is. None of them. As for that gang of young fools that call themselves the Smart Set . . . Christ, I'd like to kick them in the ribs until they went soft. Who do they think they are?"

"They know who they are, sir," said Secker mildly. "They're the children of very important men. That's just the trouble. They've been brought up to believe that because their fathers amount to something, *they* amount to something."

"That's why I wish I caught one of them trying something, Number One. Suppose you think you're important. Suppose you think *Nobody can do anything to me.* What do you need to cut you down to size? I'll tell you, Number One. You need a poke in the guts. Then when you're screaming *Nobody can do this to me,* you need another jab in the same place. You need working over until your belly's black and yellow and purple. Then after you've finished retching you need a real going-over . . ."

No doubt Captain Trevis had been pushed around in his time. Secker thought, still tolerant. But the relish with which he outlined his plans wasn't nice to hear.

"The girls are the worst," Trevis went on. "Painted stuckup bitches . . . God, how I'd like to catch one of those little tarts, catch her so good I'd have a proper excuse to teach her a lesson. First I'd rip the clothes off her to see if a millionaire's daughter had anything special to offer, or if she was just like any other broad . . ."

Trevis went on to describe in de-

tail what else he would do. The captain, Secker thought in revulsion, was not a nice man. Perhaps there was something after all in the old-fashioned idea that men given power should come from a line of men who had had power.

The arrival of the passengers interrupted the captain's sadistic fantasy. Secker found himself free to make his final check. Although Trevis would hardly dare to do as he had threatened if some reckless teenager were found trying to reach the ship, Secker sincerely hoped he didn't find anyone.

Once more he walked round the ship, looked up all the tubes, swung his torch in an arc and then, satisfied, returned to the airlock. The passenger truck, having unloaded all the passengers, was already well on its way back to the embarkation depot, already out of the danger zone.

The moment he was out of sight, Peach leapt from her place of concealment, ducked under the fins and jumped lightly through the opening, twelve feet up, which was the main jet. Even in her heavy suit she jumped eighteen feet with ease.

Inside, she pulled herself onto the shoulder of the combustion chamber, which was shaped like a square-shouldered bottle with the open neck downwards. She sat with her back to the wall of the chamber, the jet orifice eighteen inches from her feet.

She had barely settled when the outer jets flared. Closing her eyes, she protected her face with her upflung arms.

V

Nick waited until the Millionaire Express had taken off and then for another hour. By that time he could be certain that Peach had made it all right. If she had been discovered, the takeoff would have been delayed; if she had failed to get into the ship's main combustion chamber undetected, she would have returned through the Dustbowl airlock.

An hour after the ship had blasted off, Nick checked out of his modest hotel and checked in at the Moonritz as Nick Farr.

The receptionist knew him all right. She looked puzzled. No ship had arrived from Earth for twenty-four hours. If Nick Farr came to the Moon it was by no means surprising that he should stay at the Moonritz, the most expensive hotel there was. But why wait twenty-four hours?

Nick didn't enlighten her. He went straight up to his room and, once there, immediately called police headquarters by visiphone.

Nick didn't recognize the lieutenant whose face appeared on the screen, but the lieutenant evidently recognized him, which was all to the good.

"Good evening," Nick said pleasantly. "Guess what I'm going to report."

"I'm not good at guessing," said the lieutenant sharply. "Shoot."

"The Millionaire Express left just over an hour ago. In the main combustion chamber is Miss Peach Gordon."

"Hell!" the lieutenant barked.

"I sympathize," said Nick, and he did.

"Don't move from your room," said the lieutenant. "We may want you."

"I won't," Nick promised.

At or about the same time on Earth, Rog, not having heard from either Peach or Nick, would deliver substantially the same message to the police there. He would also inform the newspapers. When the Smart Set pulled a stunt, it was seldom any part of their plan to keep quiet about it.

Ten minutes later a police superintendent called Nick by visiphone.

"Farr," he said grimly, "if this is a hoax you have my word for it you'll go to jail."

"It's no hoax," Nick sighed.

"If Peach Gordon arrived on the Moon with you, how did you both manage to stay incognito?"

Nick told him.

"We'll check your story," the superintendent said.

"Naturally."

"You realize that this time we're going to throw the book at the Gordon girl?

"I realize it."

"We're gunning for you as an accessory too."

"Superintendent, we both know you can't do anything about my part in this. I haven't done anything. I haven't seen Peach since about four hours before the ship took off. There's no law that makes me take responsibility for what another person may or may not do."

"No," the superintendent admitted bitterly, "more's the pity." And he cut the connection without saying good-by.

Twenty minutes later Morris Gordon called from Long Island.

Sound communication between Moon and Earth cost a mere $90 a minute. With vision the rate was $250. Gordon called on sound and vision.

"Nick, is it true?" Gordon demanded without preamble.

"Yes," Nick said regretfully.

Rog hadn't wasted any time calling the police. And the police hadn't wasted any time calling Peach's father.

Morris and Nick got on. Before Nick, Peach had had a succession of boy friends none of whom her father could stand the sight of. Since Nick came on the scene Gordon had hoped there would be no more. Peach, being a very pretty girl, might conceivably do still better for herself, but the chances were that she'd do much worse.

"Why did you let her do it, son?" Gordon asked.

"I couldn't stop her. If I'd spilled the beans to the police here in time for them to stop her, she'd never have spoken to me again. You know that."

"Yes, I know that, son. Well, I'll just have to pull what strings I can to try to make them go easy on her when the Express gets back to the Moon. Has the captain been told to come back yet, do you know?"

"I haven't heard, but he must know now."

"I guess so. Call me if you hear anything more, will you?"

Nick promised he would.

The radio operator gave the message to Harry Secker and he gave it to Captain Trevis.

Trevis didn't go up in flames as Secker expected. For a moment the First Officer thought he didn't really understand the message.

"I thought you made a search just before takeoff, Number One?" Trevis said in a tone no more unpleasant than usual.

"I did, sir. But I had to get back to the airlock. All this girl had to do if she was watching for some time was position herself at the opposite side of the ship and wait till I left. Then she'd have a few seconds to climb into the main tube before the fin jets came on."

"I prefer to trust your original report, Number One. There is nobody in the main tube," said Captain Trevis calmly.

Secker stared at him for several blank seconds. Then he said: "I don't think it can be a hoax, sir. The Lunar police have already checked — "

"As you did, Number One. You reported to me that there was nobody near the base of the ship, and the moment you entered the airlock the jets were started. It then became quite impossible for anyone to enter the main tube."

"Sir, if you're going to place the responsibility on me for our takeoff with a girl in the main tube, I can't stop you. But the point at the moment is that she's there. The insulation between the tubes and her spacesuit will have kept her safe so far, since we don't use the main jet for takeoff or landing on the Moon. But to land safely on Earth we need — "

"I don't need a lesson in ship handling from you, Number One," Trevis retorted. "Of course we'll need the main jet for the landing on Earth. I don't see the slightest reason why we shouldn't use it." Secker had to fight to keep his temper. If he lost it, he and the captain would rave angrily at each other and agreement might become impossible. Worse, Trevis might order him to his cabin and henceforth Secker would have no say in what happened.

"Sir, this message states that there *is* a girl in our main combustion chamber," he said earnestly. "The Lunar police and the spaceline are satisfied that this is so and they order you to return — "

"Order, Mr. Secker?" said Trevis, his voice rising in anger for the first time. "They order me to return? Nobody can order the captain of a ship to do anything. Even if the safety of his ship is at stake, land-based police and the shipowners can only suggest, not order. And the safety of this ship is not at stake."

He turned away, adding over his shoulder: "I'm going to tell the owners that the ship was searched before takeoff and suggest — hear that, Number One? — suggest they look for her elsewhere." He went back to his work.

VI

In the main tube Peach was anything but comfortable. She had not been comfortable for five hours now. But then, she had not expected to be comfortable.

The takeoff had given her quite a thrill, greater than any of the thrill-spills. Although she knew theoretically that rocket-tubes had to be extremely well insulated from each other and from the rest of the ship, it was hard to trust this knowledge absolutely with jets all round her flaring at fantastic temperatures. She had seen the flames through the hole. They had stopped now, because the Millionaire Express had gone into free fall.

Now she was satisfied that the insulation was all it was claimed to be. In her spacesuit she was no warmer, no colder, than she had been in the Mare Italica.

The slight magnetism of her suit held her in the corner of the chamber. Very little starlight got in, but she had a hand-lamp and the dials of her suit could be illuminated. She looked at them again and was reassured.

Spacesuits always had a generous reserve of air. Even suits like the one she wore, intended only for the short, easy hop to the Golden Dustbowl, carried a twenty-four-hour supply. There had been too many cases of tourists getting lost and not being found until after their air supply was exhausted and they were dead. Although accidents were not supposed to happen, insurance companies insisted on safety margins that insured that, when they did happen, they needn't be fatal.

So she was all right for air. Not for food, unfortunately. There was no provision for food and drink in her suit, and after five hours without either she was hungry and thirsty.

There was a clock, and she knew that about this time the captain of the Express would learn by radio that she was there. Soon the jets would flare again and the ship would go back to the Moon.

The ship had to go back, for there was no way to get her out in space — at any rate, no way without her cooperation. The tubes which surrounded her had all been used recently, and in the short Moon-Earth flight they would not cool enough to allow anyone in a spacesuit to clamber over them. For that matter they were not inactive for long enough to allow much maneuvering.

She wondered what the captain was like. She'd be hauled before him when the ship returned to the Moon, and no doubt he'd have some very hard things to say.

She laughed to herself. The captain would be angry because she'd made him turn back — because despite his precautions she had beaten him.

Nothing he said to her could change that.

The thunderous knock on Nick's door was unexpected. He had given the police all the information they needed. He didn't expect them to call on him that night.

Nevertheless, when he opened the door, it was the police superintendent who stood there — a burly, round-faced, beetle-browed man. With him were two others.

"Let's go, Farr," the superintendent said.

"Where?"

"I want you to show me where you left the Gordon girl."

"What for?"

"I'll tell you later if you're good. Meantime, don't waste time."

They hustled him to the airlock from which he and Peach had left, ostensibly to go to the Golden Dustbowl. Six cops were already there, all in the uniform spacesuits of the Lunar Police.

So ten of them went out into the perpetual Lunar night.

This time Nick wore a spacesuit equipped with radio.

"The captain of the Express says the ship was searched immediately before takeoff and there was nobody in any of the tubes," the superintendent said.

"She must have climbed in after the search, then," Nick said.

"You only assume that. She may be still out here, unconscious or with a broken leg."

"Nonsense," Nick retorted. "Peach doesn't have accidents like that."

"All the same, we're going to search the valley."

And they did, all ten of them, between the point where Peach had left Nick and the place where the Express had stood — easily identifiable by the still-glowing rock.

A man in a hurry could leap twenty-five miles in an hour across a Lunar plain. The superintendent was in a hurry. He wanted a search made so that he could make up his mind whether Peach Gordon was likely to be on the surface of the Moon or in the Millionaire Express, and he had to make up his mind soon. It was more important to reach a quick decision than to make a slow, thorough search.

It was possible that Peach had made a wide detour to approach the ship from a totally unexpected angle. The superintendent, having no time to waste, had to assume that she had not. Ten men could search a hundred-yard strip between the two fixed points in half an hour or less. It would take a hundred men a week to search the whole valley.

"Peach isn't here, superintendent," Nick insisted. "She knows the consequences of having an accident in a Lunar plain, alone and with no radio. She started out to get aboard that ship, and she got aboard her."

"Perhaps. Let's make sure."

As far as was possible in the time and the circumstances, they did make sure that Peach was not in the Mare Italica, injured or dead. But as all ten of them were well aware, any of them could have passed within three feet of Peach Gordon if she was unconscious and jammed in a fissure in the rock.

The superintendent had to make up his mind, however, and when they got back to the airlock he did make up his mind.

"Okay," he said. "She's not there. I've been having a search made in all the bars, hotels and clubs while we were out . . . if there's no sign of her here we can take it she *must* be on the Express."

He looked pensively at Nick, who was removing his spacesuit.

"You might as well come along to police HQ," he said. "You don't seem as nutty as I expected. How come you're mixed up in a crazy stunt like this?"

"I love Peach," Nick said.

"And that's the only reason you're mixed up in it?"

"I pleaded with her not to go. You're going to throw the book at her this time, isn't that so?"

"That may not," said the superintendent thoughtfully, "be the point."

And he strode off along the corridor, not glancing behind to see if Nick and the rest of his men were following him.

Nick had only been a few minutes at police HQ when a frantic call came through from Morris Gordon. The superintendent waved to him to go ahead and take it.

"Nick? Thank heavens I found you. The Express hasn't turned back yet, you know that?"

"Yes, but it will now," Nick said. "The captain claimed that he'd searched the ship and Peach couldn't be aboard. But now we've searched here and Superintendent Young is satisfied she isn't on the Moon. So the ship will be turned back now."

Gordon sighed with relief. "We didn't know any of that here. All I've been told is that the ship hasn't turned back yet."

"Don't worry, sir."

"Nick, I want you to promise. Next time anything like this is going to happen, let me know, will you?"

"I can't promise that," Nick said slowly. "It wouldn't be any good if I did. You know I'd only have to squeal once and Peach would never trust me again."

"I guess so. But this kind of thing can't go on, Nick. It's got to be stopped."

When Gordon had rung off, Young said quietly: "That was a man in torment. What kind of daughter does that to her father?"

"Peach is only a kid," Nick said.

"But old enough to travel to the Moon and hide in the Millionaire Express. Doesn't she know how selfish she is? Turning the Moon upside down and torturing her father just so that she can get a cheap thrill?"

"It's hardly a cheap thrill," Nick protested.

"It is when she puts her trust in the very people she's thumbing her nose at. Suppose the police and the spacelines and the crew of the ships were slow or inefficient or just plain callous? Suppose none of us acted until it was too late for the ship to turn back? Do you remember what Judge Escotier said last time?"

"Yes, I remember," Nick sighed. "The trouble is, I'm the only member of the group who really believed him."

"And even you," said the superin-

tendent significantly, "don't *entirely* believe him."

It took Nick several seconds to see what he meant—and instantly reject it.

Harry Secker took the second message to the captain, after waiting impatiently for it since Trevis's reply was radioed.

Trevis took the slip and read:

> Search on Moon has failed to reveal trace of girl. Yet she undoubtedly left airlock. Despite your search, believed here that she is in main combustion chamber of Express. Return to Moon immediately.
>
> Ford, Lunar Lines director.

Trevis looked up at his First Officer. "Do you think I'm going to obey this, Number One?" he asked.

"Of course, sir."

"Well, I'm not."

"Sir—that girl *is* in our main tube. There can't be any doubt any more."

"There is still doubt in my mind," Trevis said. "But there's something else, Number One. Even if she is there, she has no right, no excuse to be there. I am fully entitled to ignore her presence."

"But sir, to use the main jet with a girl inside it is plain murder."

"No, Number One. I didn't put the girl in the main jet, did I?"

"But . . ."

Trevis was completely sure of himself. "I don't think you're fully conversant with merchant navy regulations, Number one. There are safety regulations and there are rescue operation regulations. These cover passengers, crew and the passengers and crew of other ships which may be in trouble. There are no regulations, and I have no legal responsibility, to anyone who is neither a passenger or crew member of this ship, nor a passenger or crew member of a ship in distress."

"That's only a legal quibble, sir."

"Perhaps. Do you remember what the judge said when the last young lunatic who did this was admonished? He said: 'I am being lenient because no penalty seems appropriate for what must be regarded as a particularly stupid and inconsiderate prank rather than a crime. But I have to warn you that a repetition of this episode will be very severely punished as a crime and not as a prank—because whichever it is, it is something that must be stopped. I have to warn you further, together with your friends and all others who might be tempted to repeat this dangerous idiocy, that no spaceship captain is bound to acknowledge the existence of a deliberate saboteur. A captain cannot be denied the use of his main jet because an irresponsible young daredevil is illegally and maliciously blocking it with his body.' "

"Sir," said Secker, "that was a threat to youngsters who might want to try this stunt. Not an instruction to spaceship captains."

"All the same," said Trevis coolly, "you now know what I'm going to do, Number One. I neither know nor care whether there is a girl in the

main tube. It's not my business. If there is, she knew this ship was going to Earth, that the main jet would be used for landing, and that when it was her spacesuit wouldn't save her from being instantly consumed by the flames. Now kindly don't refer to the subject again."

"Sir, if you don't want to turn back, I could go out through the airlock in a suit and try to maneuver myself into the main tube by compressed air. I could drag the girl out and bring her in. Then we could land on schedule."

"What you suggest is dangerous and would take a long time. You would run very considerable risk of burning yourself on the hot tubes and thus depressurzing your suit."

"I'll take that risk, sir."

"Besides," said Trevis as if Secker had not spoken, "it would take at least an hour, and in less than half an hour I'm going to need the tubes."

"Not the main tube, sir!"

"No, not yet. But what you suggest is impossible, I forbid it."

"You mean to kill that girl!" Secker exclaimed.

"I don't expect to lose any sleep over her," Trevis admitted. "I think we can be sure after this, Number One, that we'll be able to get on with our jobs in the future with no further interference from sensation-mad morons."

Again Secker bit back a furious outburst. So long as he and Trevis were still talking, there was some chance of influencing him. If communications were broken, there would be none.

VII

Nick stared unbelievingly at the message. Ford, the Lunar Lines chief on the Moon, had seen it first, since it was addressed to him. Then Superintendent Young had seen it. Then Young handed it silently to Nick.

It read:

> **Repeat ship searched before take-off. Could do no more then, can do nothing now. Am landing Express on Earth, on schedule.**
>
> **Captain Trevis.**

"He can't do this, can he?" Nick demanded sharply.

Young shrugged. "I reminded you of what Judge Escotier said. I know Trevis. I saw this coming."

"But isn't Ford going to order him to come back?"

"Ford has already done all the ordering he can do. Decisions aboard ship have to be left to the captain. Any captain who acts contrary to his sailing orders can expect trouble, but a captain who insists on sticking to his schedule always has a lot of weight on his side."

"But if Peach dies, he killed her!"

Young shrugged, not without sympathy. "Who put her where she is? Captain Trevis?"

"No, but—"

"Whose idea was it? Who wanted her there? Trevis?"

"No . . ."

"Frankly, Nick," said the superintendent, "if a stunt like this goes on long enough, a Captain Trevis is needed. I know him, I tell you. He's a hard man, but not a bad man. He'd

die getting his ship through. He'd die to save his passengers or crew, because that's his job. When your girl friend stands in his way, daring him to kill her or abandon his duty, which is to land the Express on Earth, it's not really surprising he acts as he does."

Nick hesitated, and then said quickly: "Can I call Peach's father?"

"So long as one of you pays the bill," said Young drily.

When Morris Gordon's worried features faded in on the screen, he was already talking.

". . . heard nothing about the Express turning back. Have you, Nick? Is that what you called to tell me?"

"Afraid not, sir. The captain of the Express, a Captain Trevis, flatly refuses to turn back. He's been told to come back here and he won't."

Gordon paled. "That means . . . Peach will die."

"Unless somebody thinks of something, yes. I called you so that you could call Lunar Lines. You can put pressure on them. So much pressure that they'll *make* Trevis bring the Express back here."

"Maybe, son. Maybe. Anyway, I'll try. Just one thing—will you find out for me exactly when it'll be too late for the ship to turn back?"

"I'll do that, sir."

"Right. Now I'll call Lunar Lines."

The screen went blank.

Nick hurried over to Ford, the Lunar Lines director. "Mr. Ford . . . How long is there? How long before it's too late for the Express to turn back?"

Ford, a tall, thin, bespectacled man, was nervous and jumpy. "I've been thinking about that," he said anxiously. "Quite a while yet, quite a while. There's always a certain fuel reserve, though I'm sure you understand it has to be small . . . Very little fuel is needed for landing on the Moon, of course, so *that* isn't the difficulty. The point is that once a ship has in effect surrendered to the gravity of Earth, it takes nearly as much fuel to get away again as to land . . . just a moment."

He took out a notebook and scribbled furiously in it, looking at his watch several times. Then he said brightly: "Any time in the next half-hour is all right."

"Is that all?" Nick exclaimed.

"Half an hour is a long time," said Ford hopefully. "I'm sure Captain Trevis . . . We've told him now that he won't be held responsible in any way if he brings the ship back, that it won't be in any way a black mark against him. So I'm sure he'll . . . But he's a very difficult man, Captain Trevis, a very difficult man."

Peach saw the jets come on again and inertia pushed her hard into her corner.

She admitted to herself that none of the thrill-spills were quite as frightening as this, and that she really was afraid, not just pleasurably excited.

Less than two feet from her was a hole, and if she slipped or fell through it, she would die. The jets

from the other tubes would probably get her; but if by some chance they didn't, the ship would shoot away from her, leaving her to utterly certain death. Not one chance in a million, but no chance in a million. There was no record so far of anyone in a spacesuit ever being found in space. On the sea on Earth, survivors were quite often picked up —but the surface of the sea was only two-dimensional. Space had three dimensions.

It would be very easy to slip through the hole, too. There were no handholds inside the combustion chamber. Once she felt herself slipping toward it, there was nothing she could cling to, nothing she could grab to stop herself.

Nevertheless, despite her fear of the hole, she suddenly found herself craning over it to look out. For despite the flames elongating the ship to three times its length, she had caught a glimpse of Earth.

Earth . . . it *was* Earth, below the ship. She looked at the clock. Nick on the Moon and Rog on Earth should have told the police long ago that she was there—if nothing had gone wrong.

Fear clutched at her heart. Suppose Rog had a car accident and was knocked unconscious. Suppose Nick sprained his ankle and couldn't make it back to the airlock. Nobody would know she was in the Express's main tube. If nobody knew, the ship would land in the ordinary way on Earth . . .

And she would die.

Rog was right—it did need more nerve when there was nothing you could do. And there was certainly nothing she could do. She was utterly, one hundred per cent helpless.

There was no way through the top of a rocket combustion chamber. Falling out through the hole in the bottom was death. Trying to climb round the ship, through the blazing jets, was death.

Gradually she calmed herself. Yes, that was Earth all right. The ship was, at the moment, coming down on Earth.

But it was impossible that both Rog and Nick had failed to give the warning. Anyway, if Rog was in an accident the other guys and girls would realize the danger and somebody else would take over Rog's job of informing the authorities that Peach Gordon was in the Millionaire Express's main combustion chamber.

It was impossible that they didn't know. So any moment now the ship would blast away from Earth and back to the Moon.

Harry Secker paced his tiny cabin restlessly.

He was no sentimentalist. He had no sympathy for youngsters who caused inconvenience, delay and danger to others for nothing more than their own selfish amusement. He didn't deny the cold justice of the captain's attitude: that when a girl with an inflated idea of her own importance deliberately dared a ship's commander to go ahead and kill her, or turn back and save her, she got precisely what she deserved when the commander simply shrugged his shoulders and ignored her existence.

But the girl who was going to die if Captain Trevis could not be diverted from his intended course of action. After all, she was scarcely more than a child.

Secker had more sympathy with the view that Trevis had expressed on the Smart Set before they knew that there was going to be any interference with the present flight: that kids who thought the sun rose and set only for them should be hurt and hurt again and again to show that society had the last word.

Peach Gordon, however, was not going to be whipped to teach her a lesson. She was not going to be given any opportunity of learning anything. She was going to be executed.

Whether Captain Trevis was really going to get away with this was neither here nor there. It was more than possible that he would get away with nothing more than a court of inquiry reprimand. The authorities involved were getting concerned about the increasing incidence and audacity of vandalistic interference with public services, usually by teenagers. They were known to favor a very tough line indeed.

Although Captain Johnson, the man who turned back his ship when it became known that Tim Spieler was in the main combustion chamber, had not been blamed for doing so, there had been more than a few hints that it was up to an experienced spaceline captain to get his ship through somehow. How was not specified. Nobody said he should have gone on and burned Tim Spieler to a crisp. But it seemed pretty weak simply to turn back . . .

Yes, Captain Trevis would get a lot of powerful backing. But that wasn't the point.

The girl in the main tube wasn't dead yet. And if Secker could help it, she wasn't going to die.

He had considered letting the truth leak out among the passengers. But even if this resulted in further pressure being put on Trevis to change his mind, how would that help? Trevis was the kind of man who became firmer and more obstinate the more opposition there was.

No, Secker couldn't see the passengers doing anything to change the captain's mind. It was more likely that their knowing what the situation was would only make it more difficult for Secker to do anything himself.

For Secker fully intended to do something. In his own way he was as determined as the captain.

Secker stopped pacing and found his copy of the space personnel list. This was a checklist of qualified spaceship officers, published each year. Junior officers got a mention, and that was all. Senior officers with master's certificates, like Secker himself, got a brief biographical note mentioning all their professional qualifications. Experienced commanders got a page to themselves, summarizing their career.

Secker wasn't looking for anything in particular. Having served under Trevis merely on the outward trip

from Earth to the Moon, he knew very little about him. There might be something here that would help.

Ivan Trevis was 47, unmarried. Entered the space service at 31, this was a shock—most space officers began at 17 as cadets. Yet Trevis at 47 had caught up with his contemporaries, accomplishing in sixteen years what took most men thirty. Previously a clerk.

First command, a slow Earth-Mars freighter. Then aged 40. Freighter lost when jets failed, fell into sun, all hands saved.

Secker paused thoughtfully over this. Behind the terse note he sensed why Trevis had lost no prestige when he lost his ship. If your jets failed when you were in any strong gravitational field, it was usual to take to the lifeboat, extremely unusual to live to tell the tale. The fact that Trevis had managed to get a *lifeboat* out of a gravitational field which had caught his ship proved conclusively that the loss of the ship had not been due to any ship-handling incompetence on his part. The jet failure must have been nearly complete.

Next command, a new Earth-Mars freighter. Then one of the first Earth-Mars all-passenger ships. Then a Moon freighter.

The Moon was the first, biggest and most important human colony outside Earth, and communications with the Moon offered nearly all the plum jobs for space officers. You graduated from the longer runs to the Moon run.

In time the position would change, but at the moment it was a step up to move from command on an Earth-Mars passenger ship to command of an Earth-Moon freighter.

There had been another incident on Trevis's second Moon-Earth run, an incident which made Secker sit up. Again the entry was brief and bald, conveying little or nothing to anyone but a space officer.

Trevis had had to land a ship in Australia instead of America, after six braking ellipses.

That he should use braking ellipses at all showed tacitly that there had been another jet failure. And that six should be necessary, showed that the main jet must have been out of commission.

Trevis was capable of landing a ship without using the main jet.

Was that, then, what he intended to do? Was he mischievously giving everyone a fright, intending to land the Express on Earth without using the tube in which Peach Gordon was having a most uncomfortable trip? Did Trevis mean to give the girl the fright of her life when she saw Earth instead of the Moon below and consequently expected at any second to be consumed by the tremendous heat of a rocket jet?

There was only one way to find out: ask him.

Secker found the captain alone in the control-room, which was slightly unusual. If Secker himself was not there, one of the other officers was generally with him.

"Captain," Secker said without preamble, "I've just discovered that you once landed a ship on Earth without the main jet."

"Did you now," Trevis growled. "How did you find that out, Number One?"

"In the checklist, sir."

"I wasn't aware that the checklist revealed anything of the sort, Mr. Secker."

"Indirectly it does, sir. You landed a freighter bound for America in Australia instead, and only after six braking orbits. You'd only have done that if the main jet had packed up."

"Well, Number One?"

"Is that what you're planning to do this time, sir?"

Trevis glared at him. "Are you out of your confounded mind, Number One? Do you know how many hours it would add to the journey?"

"It would also save a girl's life," Secker said quietly.

"You may be interested to know that her life is already beyond saving, if she really is in the main tube," Trevis retorted. "Evidently it has slipped your notice that we are now too close to Earth to escape without using the main jet?"

Secker whirled and leaped to the dials. It did not take long to confirm what Trevis said.

About three-and-a-half times more thrust was needed to escape from Earth than from the Moon. The only reason why the main tube was not used for Lunar takeoff and landing was that the other jets gave greater stability and could be more precisely controlled.

No ship at the present stage of spaceship development ever had very much in reserve, either in fuel or in maximum thrust. It didn't take very long for a ship descending into the gravity field of Earth to reach a point where only by using the power of the main tube could she climb out of it again.

And the Express had already reached this point. Her course, moreover, was such that it was too late to use braking ellipses, a technique which depended on missing Earth by several hundred miles.

Secker turned slowly from the control panels. "So you've done what you wanted," he said. He didn't say "sir".

"What do you mean, what I wanted?"

"You intended all along to kill that girl. First, when there was still plenty of time to turn back, you pretended not to believe she was there. Later when there was still a chance of getting her out, you said there wouldn't be time before you needed the jets."

"I also said it would be too dangerous," Trevis reminded him. "I wasn't going to allow you or anyone else to risk his life to save a silly fool of a girl who—"

"I was willing to try."

"I tell you, I couldn't let you try, Number One."

"You mean you didn't want the girl saved."

The captain's chronically bad temper was under surprisingly firm control. He answered quite calmly: "Suppose, Number One, I had let you try. You might perhaps have succeeded. You might even have

succeeded within the half-hour I could spare before I needed the side-jets, though you must admit it's unlikely."

He paused, but Secker said nothing. Maneuvering around a ship in free fall by the use of compressed air took time. You *had* to do everything extremely slowly. When you applied an infinitesimal thrust it didn't move you very fast, but your movement, such as it was, went on for ever. There were no brakes in space. Canceling any impetus present was a tricky job. Too little, and you went on, but more slowly. Too much and you started going the other way. A fraction out in any direction and your movement became eccentric.

Even so, going out into space to repair damage to a ship wasn't too difficult, so long as you didn't try to hurry it. Trying to get at the main tube without touching any of the metal round it—worse, trying to get *into* the main tube—was a job so tricky as well as dangerous that Secker could not deny the captain's claim that it could hardly be done in half an hour.

"Right then, suppose you've tried it," Trevis said. "Suppose you've been gone thirty minutes and I want the jets. What do I do?"

Again Secker remained silent.

"I've no duty, no responsibility to the silly bitch in the main jet," Trevis said. "But I have a responsibility to my First Officer. Could I start the jets with you out there? Could any captain? Of course I couldn't. I'd have to send someone out after you. Now are you beginning to get the picture? I've got a responsibility for the passengers and the ship too. I'd be placing them in danger while I waited for you and the man I sent after you to get back . . . In the end, since my duty to the passengers comes first, I'd have to blast and kill you and the other man, Number One. And all for a girl who deliberately put us in this impossible position."

Most of what the Captain had said was unanswerable. So Secker returned doggedly to the last point which was assailable. "You could have turned back when we first heard she was there."

"I told you, I didn't believe it."

It was an impasse. Trevis's story, whether it was true or not, was now firmly fixed. It would never change, neither now nor in the subsequent court of inquiry. His First Officer having made a last-minute search, the captain had not at first believed that the story of a girl in the main tube was anything more than a hoax. When he did believe it, it was too late to do anything about it.

As they faced each other angrily, the radio officer buzzed through. "Nick Farr, the girl's fiance, wants to talk to the captain," he said emotionlessly to Trevis and Secker. He knew that Peach Gordon was in the main combustion chamber, had made up his mind from the beginning that the matter was nothing to do with him. He sent the relevant radio messages and that was all.

"On behalf," he added, "of himself and the girl's father. That's Mor-

ris Gordon, president of the Gordon Shipbuilding Company."

"I'm not going to talk to him," Trevis grunted.

"You have to," Secker said. "You're going to kill his girl. The least you can do is explain to him how inevitable and necessary and just it is that she should die."

"You can talk to him if you like. But go to the radio cabin and do it."

Secker hesitated for a moment. Then he said: "Okay, I will."

VIII

When Nick turned away from his radio conversation with the First Officer of the Millionaire Express, he was too dispirited to feel any anger against Captain Trevis.

If Secker had been hard and unsympathetic, if Secker simply told him that Peach had asked for death and she was going to get it, Nick would have gone on fighting and hoping. But when Secker explained the captain's attitude and outlined the arguments that he had used unsuccessfully against it, Nick saw how hopeless the situation was.

It was cruel luck that a man like Captain Trevis had happened to be in command of the ship when Peach made her bid. And yet . . . Nick, who had all along been against the whole business, saw more clearly than ever the shattering idiocy of the prank.

If demonstrators lay down on the track in front of trains due to start, sooner or later the drivers had to go ahead anyway.

The fact that the Express could at one time have turned back was now of academic interest. If the facts were as Secker said, and Nick didn't doubt that they were, there was now *no* way in which Trevis and Secker could save Peach's life . . . Secker, on the other hand, turned away from his conversation with Nick thoughtfully, seeing a possible grain of hope—if only he could sway the captain slightly at last.

Was there any way to force the captain to cooperate? There was.

"The intercom between here and the control room will be on in a couple of minutes' time," he told the radio operator. "I want you to record what's said, and even more important, to listen closely. Got that?"

"Sir," said the radio operator, "I don't want to get mixed up in—"

"If you don't do as I say," said Secker grimly, "you'll be in it up to your neck. At the inquiry the first and most important thing we'll have to prove is that we didn't wilfully ignore a way of completing this flight successfully and saving the girl too. If you refuse to help me, I'm going to have your refusal put on record first chance I get."

"Okay, sir," said the radio operator hastily. "If it's just a question of listening and recording what's said—"

"Right then," Secker retorted. "Do it."

He strode back to the control room. A quick glance at the controls, almost automatic on entry, gave him a chance to switch on the intercom.

Then he said: "Captain, all along you've thought Peach Gordon is a crazy, self-important, spoiled butterfly of a girl, haven't you?"

"That's what she is. No less and no more."

"Maybe. But I've been talking to the young man who ought to know her best, the man who's going to marry her. Nick's a sensible youngster, sir. He did his best to talk her out of this stunt. He'd have stopped it, only he knew that if he squealed the girl would never have anything more to do with him."

"Number One, in just a few minutes I'm going to be very busy. Hadn't we better consider the whole subject closed?"

"No, sir. This is my point. Suppose the girl in the main tube is smart, quick, plucky. Suppose she can weigh things up pretty quickly and act on them. Suppose her reaction times are those of a trained athlete."

"I don't get it."

"Suppose she's the kind of girl I'm describing, sir."

"But she's not. She's . . . huh! I've used all the words I can think of."

"There's a way of leaving it to her, sir. Of letting her prove what kind of girl she is. If she's the kind of idiot you think, she dies. If not, she saves herself."

"There's no way."

"Shut off all jets for five minutes, sir."

Trevis went purple. "Are you mad, Number One? We're braking. I'm just about ready to use the main jet."

"Sir, you're one of the best shiphandlers there is. There would be no real danger in allowing a few minutes of free fall now, knowing you could use all the jets including the main tube the moment you really had to. And the girl gets her chance . . ."

"She'll never take it. If she does, she'll only kill herself one way or another."

"At least she'd have a chance, sir. If she takes too long to work things out, or works them out wrong, or doesn't have the necessary courage, she dies. If she has the brains and the guts to take her one chance, perhaps she doesn't. What do you say, sir?"

Perhaps it wasn't fair not to tell the captain that the conversation was being recorded. The next step, when he refused, was to tell him so . . .

"All right," Trevis said. "To prove she's what I think she is—we'll do as you say."

XI

Peach's thoughts were a turmoil. The ship was really coming down on Earth. What could it mean?

Nick and Rog couldn't both have failed to make their reports, couldn't both have been disbelieved. Even if they had, the absence of any alarm on radio or television must make some other member of the Smart Set act . . .

The only conclusion she could reach was that it was known she was where she was and it wasn't going to make any difference.

Only for a moment she was angry.

Then, with fear, came realization.

Nick was so right. She wasn't important after all. She couldn't be: the captain knew she was there and he had not turned back.

Then another explanation came to her. The ship's radio was out of order. It had thus proved impossible to inform the captain.

A moment later, however, she realized that it made no difference. She was going to die anyway.

Then, suddenly, the side jets went off.

For a moment Peach was only anxious about floating away from her anchorage now that deceleration no longer kept her in place. Then she started to think.

In Moon-Earth space flights there was a period of free fall, but once gravity came on, it stayed on. You were warned before it started and you were warned every time it increased or decreased.

It never went off again after coming on. Either something was wrong or . . .

She stood up, positioned herself carefully, and aimed the movable air valve of her suit at the invisible jets over her head. A quick squirt and she tumbled out into space.

The next moment she had to release air in a reverse direction to send herself back toward the ship. But not in exactly the opposite direction. That would send her back against the hot metal around the jets, and she was well aware what would happen if she touched them.

It was terrifying to see the ship slipping away from her, so terrifying that she overdid the counter-blast and sent herself shooting right on past its nose. After that, however, she made no mistake, guiding herself carefully to the airlock.

To her relief, it opened.

Captain Trevis was not a nice man.

He had two crewmen tear the suit off the girl and then drag her before him and Secker, with specific instructions not to be gentle. The same two crewmen held her while Trevis talked to her. Evidently they had obeyed orders. There was a bruise on her cheek and the shoulder of her overall was torn. She also had the dark flush of a girl who had been crudely humbled.

Telling her what he thought of her, Trevis really let himself go. He used all the words which are not normally used in polite society, and he used them with deliberate crudity. Once, when Peach raised her chin and defiance seemed to be growing in her face, he hit her.

When he had finished with her he sent her in the care of the two crewmen to the smallest and most uncomfortable confinement he could think of, a storeroom where she could neither stand nor sit, and where she was likely to find the landing extremely painful.

"She'll get off," he said more to himself than to Secker. "Her father will pull strings . . . Well, Number One. Tell me what you think of my treatment of her since you hauled her through the airlock."

"I thought it was admirable, sir," said Secker truthfully. "I agreed with every word you said." END

THE CARSON EFFECT

by RICHARD WILSON

Illustrated by NODEL

It was a day no one could ever forget—or remember!

Andrew Grey sat tensely at the National news desk of the New York *Times*, remembering the last time he had been asked to write an impossible story.

That dilemma had arisen some years ago, when he was briefly New York, and therefore North American correspondent for an overseas wire service, European Press. A celebrated case at the time was that of Zeb Speed, a convicted killer who had spent a dozen years in the death house at Utah's state prison while he prepared appeal after appeal based on his careful research in the prison library. Finally Speed's resources appeared to be exhausted and the governor set the next day, a Friday, for Speed's execution.

But Speed spent Thursday addressing last-ditch appeals to the Vatican, the White House, to every senator and to each of the Supreme Court justices. There were new developments every hour. Many times a new lead Andy Grey had just written was outdated before he was able to get it on the cable to his head office in Paris.

It was while Grey was trying

frantically to keep up with the story, swallowing aspirin and black coffee as he revised and re-topped, that Paris sent him a service message requesting a forward-looking story under Friday's date.

This request, tantamount to a demand, reached Grey at 6 p.m. his time. He was in New York, covering the story from the machines of the American press services his office subscribed to, making an occasional long-distance telephone call and drawing on his knowledge of Utah's death house, seen a year ago when he had covered a riot at the prison.

Six p.m. New York time was midnight in much of Europe, of course, and time for the evening papers there to start thinking about scheduled events of the coming day, Friday. The European eveningers like their American cousins, came out fairly early in the morning. It was only natural that, with the dawning of Friday in Europe, thought should be given to Zeb Speed's scheduled execution in Utah — a story spiced by the fact that Utah offered a condemned man his choice between the gallows and a firing squad. (Zeb, his mind on the appeals he was flinging out desperately, hadn't yet thought it necessary to choose.)

The trouble was that midnight, European time, being 6 p.m. New York time, was only 4 p.m. Utah time. This meant, obviously, that there were still eight hours of Thursday remaining for Zeb Speed to use in such a way as to render potentially untrue a story Grey might write under a Friday dateline.

Grey knew the kind of story Paris wanted: a simple, straightforward piece with "today" in the first sentence. It might read:

> SALT LAKE CITY, Feb. 4 (EP) — Zeb Speed, his last appeal denied, was due to choose whether he would die today by the hangman's noose or by a squad of riflemen aiming at a tag pinned over his heart.
>
> Speed, part-Indian convicted killer of 12 whose claim that his trial was unconstituitional, bolstered by appeals researched in the prison library . . .

That was what European wanted. The only trouble was that anything Andy Grey wrote as a Friday story before midnight Utah time (8 a.m., Paris time) would be science fiction.

Not being a writer in that genre, therefore, he sent Euro a service message which read: "Regret fast-breaking developments in Utah where it only four p.m. make tomorrow-dated story out of question. Propose cabling spot developments, leaving rewrite desk do forward-throwing piece as feel warranted."

It was exactly this sense of caution which got Andrew Grey fired from his European Press job, (EP acted on his dismissal with the benefit of hindsight, since it turned out that Speed's last appeal was denied and he was executed on Friday, choosing the firing squad) and hired by the New York *Times*.

And now Andy Grey sat hunched over his portion of the *Times*' national news desk, trying to write, as responsibly as he could, a story far more difficult.

A copy boy dropped the latest

fragment of the story in front of him. He already had more facts than he needed. Here were bits and pieces from all over.

When you hear the-one, it will be exactly 10:26 *a.m., Eastern Standard Time.*

Douglas Roche tried to walk casually from the door of the bank to the waist-high tables where the deposit and withdrawal slips were kept.

He'd never done anything like this before. He took a deep breath, wiped his sweating palms on the sides of his coat and picked up a pen. He printed on the back of a withdrawal slip: "Give me $10,000 in medium size bills. Don't do anything crazy, this bottle is full of nitro."

Roche was 34 years old, married, with three kids. He had a job that paid him $127 a week before deductions. He also had a mortgage, a second mortgage, a car, a deep-freeze, a new TV, a power lawn mower, a revolving charge account with three-figure balance, new storm windows and a bill three months overdue at the high-priced grocery store that delivered and gave credit.

He had two dollars and eighteen cents and a subway token in his pocket and his wife had just gone to the hospital to have an operation. They had let her in without payment in advance only because he promised to bring $200 at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. He didn't have hospitalization; that had been one of the things he'd economized on. He'd also heard that surgeons charged up to a thousand dollars for a laminectomys. He hadn't yet discussed fees with doctors. Oh, yes, there was the bookmaker, Roche owed him fifty bucks.

Doug Roche was no bank robber. He was just a man driven to the wall. But now he was a bank robber.

He got into the shortest line; only one person was ahead of him at the teller's window. But the person was a woman with a wad of books and papers in her hand which she handed to the teller one by one: a deposit in the checking account; a payment on the personal loan; a deposit in the savings account; a money order to be cashed; a dollar in the Christmas Club. Finally she was finished.

Doug Roche thought for the last time of walking away. But there was nowhere to walk to. He shoved the note across the counter and opened his fist to show the little bottle containing a colorless liquid. It was only water, of course.

The teller looked up from the note and Roche made a small threatening motion with the bottle. At the same time he began to regret that he had demanded so much. Two thousand dollars would have got him out of his immediate troubles. Ten thousand might get him a bullet in the back from some hidden guard.

But the teller said: "Sure. Don't worry; I won't do anything foolish." He began taking bills out of the drawer and stuffing them in a big

manila envelope. Roche saw the wrappers on the wads of bills: $1,000; $5,000; $3,000; $50,000.

Almost hysterically, he said in a strangled voice: "That's enough!"

"One more," the teller said, and shoved in a thin stack whose wrapper said $100,000.

Roche tried to keep his voice steady as he said: "Okay. Don't ring the alarm till I'm out the door or I throw the bottle right at you.

"Don't worry," the teller said again. Then he said: "God bless you."

Roche, perspiring, so nervous that he nearly dropped the manila envelope, turned and walked toward the door. It took all his determination not to run. He went out into the shopping crowds, turned a corner and walked fast. He went into a department store and out the exit on the far end and took the subway out to Queens. But nobody chased him.

He got home and locked the door and pulled down the shades. He put the manila envelope on the kitchen table and got a can of beer from the refrigerator and peeled it open. He took a big swig and lit a cigarette and counted his money.

... two hundred and twenty-three thousand six hundred and fifty dollars. $223,650.

By the time he had finished a second can of beer he had counted the money five times. It always came to the same amount. Just under a quarter of a million dollars. He felt numb.

After a while he took a ten-dollar bill from one of the stacks and put the rest in a paper bag which he hid under the sink among other paper bags containing potatoes and onions.

He went out intending to buy a bottle of whiskey and get drunk. Instead he came back with a take-out order from a Chinese restaurant and ate his first full meal in days.

Later he took out the money and counted it again. Minus the ten dollars, it came to $223,640. He began to laugh and couldn't stop himself. For a long time he laughed hysterically, lying on the bed and muffling his face in the pillow.

Finally he got up, washed, shaved and put on a clean shirt. He took $200, put the rest back under the sink and went to see his wife in the hospital.

When you hear the tone, it will be exactly 2:17 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.

Freida Barring — some of the older women in the office called her Theda Bara in fun, as she was anything but a glamour girl — went hesitantly to the head bookkeeper's cubicle. She was nervous because the expense money she wanted to collect was a whole $3.65 and the man who'd authorized it had quit a month ago. He had forgotten to sign a petty cash slip. It would be Freida's word against the company's.

What happened was that the assistant sales manager, the man who'd quit, had asked her to take a cab downtown and pick up some papers he needed right away. He'd told her to have the cab wait and it had

waited what seemed to Freida a long time.

It was a complicated story to have to explain and she dreaded the ordeal she faced with the head bookkeeper of Schlarf & Son, a man notoriously reluctant to part with a nickel.

But today the head bookkeeper, a gray-haired man in his 50's, was almost jovial. "Ah, Miss Barring," he said. "What can we do for you? Sit down, sit down."

Freida sat on the edge of the chair and said: "It's about a petty cash slip. I had to take a cab for Mr. Westfall—this was before he left—and it's $3.65. That includes a 35-cent tip and I laid it out, but if you don't think I should have tipped the driver then it's only $3.30. I mean Mr. Westfall didn't specifically say to tip him and maybe Schlarf & Son don't authorize—"

The head bookkeeper held up a hand. "The tip is authorized, Miss Barring, of course. Here." He opened a drawer and lifted the lid of a metal box filled with bills and change. "Three dollars and sixty-five cents even. Just sign this slip."

Freida signed and took the money. She got up to go, tremendously relieved. This was wonderful. Now she could pay the electric-light bill before next payday, by which time they would have shut off the electricity.

"Don't go, Miss Marring," the head bookkeeper said. "There's another little matter we can settle as long as you're here." He smiled in a sad-kind way which filled Freida with dread. Were they going to fire her for her audacity in demanding the cab fare? Had they found out about the half dozen boxes of paper clips she'd taken home to make that stupid mobile hanging from the ceiling of her kitchenette?

But the head bookkeeper was saying: "...your pension plan. We find you've overpaid your share by $34 a year. And since you've been with Schlarf & Son a trifle over 12 years, we owe you $414.80. Plus interest, of course."

He began counting out the money in twenties and tens. It made quite a pile on the desk.

"I hope you don't mind taking it in cash, Miss Barring," he said. "You see, our check-writing machine has broken down."

In a daze, Freida took the money and put it in her bag.

"And now, Miss Barring, Mr. Schlarf has asked me if you'll show that you forgive him by taking the rest of the day off."

Freida stammered: "But it's only two-thirty..."

"To be sure. But Mr. Schlarf thought you might have some shopping to do. A new hat, maybe. You have a beautiful day for it."

When you hear the tone, it will be exactly 3:49 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.

Billy Boyce, aged six, was going shopping. He had saved up seventy-four cents to buy his mother a birthday present. His sister, aged fourteen, gave him twenty-six cents more, which made it an even dollar, and said she'd pay the sales tax.


NODEL

They were on Fifth Avenue and had walked past many fascinating windows. There was a five and ten around the corner.

"Do I hafta go to the five and ten?" Billy asked. "Do I *haf*ta?"

"You've only got a dollar," his big sister said. "Where do you want to go — to Tiffany's?"

"Sure, Tiffany's," Billy said. It sounded nice.

Eunice, his sister, thought why not? She was going to be fifteen soon and in a few years she'd be eighteen and maybe by then somebody would have proposed. She'd never been to Tiffany's or anywhere like it. It would be a good idea to see what they had, just in case. She could always tell the clerk that she was just humoring her little brother.

"As a special favor to you, Billy," Eunice said, "we'll go to Tiffany's. But don't be disappointed if you don't have enough money. They're expensive in there."

"Okay," Billy said, "but I got a whole dollar."

Such nice things they had! Rings and necklaces and brooches (Eunice called them broaches) and earrings and pendants and lockets and especially rings and necklaces.

"I want that one for mommy," Billy said, pointing to a glittering diamond necklace resting in a velvet box. There was a discreet price tag: $6,760 plus F. T.

Eunice smiled at the clerk to show she was humoring her little brother. The clerk smiled back. "It is nice, isn't it?" he said. "We're having a special on that one today."

She could imagine. Even at 10% off it would be . . . 6,760 minus 676 equaled whatever it equaled, plus 10% back on for the federal tax.

"Do you have anything a little . . . you know, not quite so *gaudy*?" she asked, to show him that it was a question of taste, not price.

"This is, if I may say so, not gaudy," the clerk said. "And if the young man really wants it for his mother. . ."

"I want it," Billy said. "I got a whole dollar."

The clerk smiled and Eunice was mortified.

"That's not quite enough," the clerk said. "You see, there's the ten per cent federal tax and the four per cent sales tax. I'm afraid this necklace comes to one dollar and fourteen cents."

"But I only got a dollar," Billy said. Eunice was glaring at the clerk.

"Perhaps," he said, "The young man would care to have us spread the payments over three months— say forty cents down and forty cents a month for the next two months? That would include the credit charge."

"Don't kid him, mister," Eunice said. 'He's just a little boy." She was *so* embarrassed. "Don't you have a nice . . . sweater clasp or something?"

"No, miss," the clerk said, smiling. "We have nothing like that in my section. And I am anxious to make this sale. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll pay the federal tax myself. That leaves it at a dollar four. Do you have four centsyou might lend him?"

Eunice was a woman of the world, as she had often told herself. There are times when you must seize the opportunity or call the bluff. She took a nickel out of his pocketbook and put it on the counter. "There," she said. "We'll take it, Mr. Smarty Pants. Give him your dollar, Billy."

Billy dutifully took the crumpled bill out of his pocket and put it on the counter. "Could you wrap it up nice?" he asked.

"It will be the nicest package you ever took home, Billy," the clerk said.

"My mother's birthday's tomorrow but we're giving her her presents tonight," Billy said.

"I'm glad to hear it," the clerk said. "That's really the best way."

When you hear the tone, it will be exactly 4:03 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.

Orion Newcastle, who had fought hard for his party's top nomination and then, heartbreakingly, had seen it go to a much less capable man, hurried to the office of that man, now the President of the United States.

Vice President Newcastle, who had not attended the secret National Security Council meeting that morning, had no idea what the urgent summons to him could mean.

Orion Newcastle had missed other N.S.C. meetings, sometimes by his own choice. After all, his role there was usually limited to telling a few stories to the early-comers before the President arrived and, later, replying, "Certainly, Mr. President" whenever the other man said "Don't you agree, Orion?"

Since the convention he had always agreed. After all, there was the President's second term to be considered. Orion had no wish to be dumped, as Roosevelt had dumped Henry Wallace for Harry Truman. Orion sincerely hoped he bore no ill will toward the President. It certainly was his devout wish that the President should live to complete two full terms. But no one could read the future and man was mortal, as had been confirmed several times in Newcastle's own lifetime. Thus it was wise not to jeopardize one's position by thought or deed. And the Honorable Orion Newcastle, Vice President of the United States, walked a little faster toward the President's office.

When he got there he found not only the President but the Secretary of State, the Chief Justice, the Speaker of the House, the top leadership of both parties in Congress, the diplomatic correspondents of the Washington newspapers and the chief Washington correspondents of the nation's other leading papers and of the world's press services.

Orion knew all these men by their first names. They had drunk each other's liquor and told each other bawdy stories. One or two of them, he knew, were responsible for spreading the so-called Orion Stories which had become a national fad, and which held him up to ridicule because of the Down-East accent which he had never lost. But all of them, it seemed to him, were

now looking at him with new, and in some cases unprecedented, respect. He could not imagine what was in their minds.

So he said, grinning and broadening his accent slightly: "Well, Mr. President and gentlemen — Mr. President and *other* gentlemen, *I* should say—what solemn occasion is this?"

But none of them laughed at his quip. The others looked to the President who said finally, after gazing out the window and then at each of them in turn:

"Gentlemen, in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of the United States of America, I am resigning in favor of the Vice President."

Although he must have hinted at this in some way before Orion came in, there was a murmur of dissent which the President stilled by holding up his hand.

"It's all been decided, gentlemen. I have drawn up the necessary papers — which I now sign." He scratched his name quickly several times. "They require only the signatures of some of you to make them official and binding. Then in your presence, Mr. Newcastle will be sworn by the Chief Justice as the next President of the United States."

"But why, sir?" the Secretary of State asked. "What possible reason can you have?"

"One of the very best," the President said with a wry smile. "The reason is simply that I have learned, gentlemen, on the highest authority, that I have only a few more hours to live."

And within the quarter-hour the shocked assemblage had signed their names and watched Orion Newcastle, whom two or three of them considered to be nothing more than an aging buffoon, be sworn in as President of the United States.

When you hear the tone, it will be exactly 7:10 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.

Andrew Grey wasn't the only newsman trying to write the impossible story, of course. Fully 15 others in the huge newsroom were assigned to various angles. But his was to be the main story, the one which would appear in the right-hand column of page one under the eight-column, three-bank headline.

The final editions of the evening papers had already had a bash at it. To them it was a straightforward, if hopeless, story to be told. Perhaps the *Post* told it more simply than its rivals, with the one-word headline: DOOMSDAY.

Actually it was the penultimate day, the day before doom. This was what the President had been leading up to when he said shortly after 4 p.m. that he had only a few more hours to live. What he meant, and what he said a few minutes later, was that everybody was going to die. The end was due at midnight, Eastern Standard Time (9 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, 5 a.m. the next day London time, 6 a.m. Paris time, 7 a.m. Mecca time, 8 a.m. Moscow time) and so on around the poor, doomed world.

The President had known for some weeks that the end was approaching. So had the State Department and, abroad, 10 Downing Street, the Quai D'Orsay, the Vatican and the Kremlin. Computers in all the capitals had been working at top speed, 24 hours a day, looking for a flaw, a way out, anything. The computers — Communist, neutral and western — agreed there was no way out. There was nothing Earth could do to save itself.

Had it been a meteor, this extraterrestrial menace, something might have been done. Even a good-sized asteroid, having strayed out of orbit and into a collision course with Earth, could have been broken up into relatively, small, harmless chunks that would burn up in the Earth's atmosphere if the world powers cooperated in firing their space-age weapons at it.

But there was no way known of dispelling a cloud of noxious gas so huge that it would envelop the Earth for 37 days, poisoning every breathing thing.

The evening papers put out their final editions and their staffs went home to their loved ones, went out to get drunk, went to holy places to pray. The *Journal-American* said:

WORLD ENDING

President, Pope
Kremlin
Confirm Holocaust

NO WAY OUT FOR EARTH

Moon Flight Couple Also Doomed

The *World-Telegram* revealed the reasons behind the President's resignation in favor of Orion Newcastle — the fact that during World War II, when both were unknown noncoms, the older man, though wounded, had dragged the younger one inch by inch through a minefield to an aid station and to the treatment there which had saved his life; and the fact that Newcastle had never again mentioned that incident, publicly or privately, in all the years since the war. A man of such courage and unselfishness, who, moreover, had been elected by the people to the second-highest office in the land, surely was entitled to be President, if at all possible, during the last several hours of his and the world's existence — even if he was an incompetent buffoon.

The *World-Telegram* also found room for half a dozen human interest stories. There was the one about the bank president who had been told confidentially by his friend the Secretary of the Treasury about the imminent end, and who had amused himself by taking a teller's place and giving away vast sums of money, including a quarter million or so to a bank robber who had threatened to blow up the place with nitroglycerine but who obviously was an amateur with a little jar of water. There were the stories of the publisher who had given the beatnik poet a $15,000 advance on an impossible sheaf of non-verses and of the partner in Tiffany's who, pretending to be a clerk, had sold a little boy a seven thousand dollar necklace for a dollar fourteen.

Only an elite few had known the truth before the President's announcement but the truth had trickled down among the influential, moneyed group, enabling many who had never before considered playing the role to become philanthropists in various ways, either for the honest fun of it, or because of the good will this presumably would lay up for them in the next world, if any.

Oh, about that moon flight couple. They were a cosmonaut and a cosmonette, so-called, Russian. They were doomed like the rest of humanity, Tass explained unhappily, because the killer cloud would envelop the moon as well as the Earth and the space between them.

Let's get back to our man on the *Times*, Andy Grey, struggling with syntax in his attempt to write today's story from tomorrow's mythical (because nonexistent) point of view. To put it another way, he was trying to manipulate the language so his story would look back as honestly as possible, from a day that wouldn't exist, on the events of Earth's last day.

Yet his story could not be 100% positive.

The first edition appeared at 10 p.m. and there was always the possibility, however slight, that something might happen between press time and midnight to change everything. Theoretically it was an impossible story to write. Actually, though, it could be done if it were sufficiently hedged, with enough loopholes left.

Andy Grey rolled another sheet of copy paper into his typewriter, lit another cigarette (at least lung cancer would never touch him now) and tried again to write a lead that would, as they say, "stand up" through all editions, both those that came out tonight and those printed, or due to be printed, tomorrow.

The world came to an end yesterday. Of course you couldn't say *that.* If it had, there'd be no one left to write such a sentence.

The Earth was due to be destroyed last night, the top international scientists agreed. Said when? Last night, presumably. But the concept of "last night" cannot exist unless there is a "today" to look back from. Thus, if the world had ended last night, there could be no today and the sentence, designed to be read by today-people, was nonsense.

There will be no today, despite the date on this newspaper. Never in the New York *Times* — too whimsical!

It could have been done entirely with out-of-town datelines like Washington, London and Moscow — there were plenty of such stories already in type under "yesterday's" date — but the publisher and president of the paper had decided that the over-all lead had to be an undated one, so-called, written from the point of view of the date of the newspaper: "today," meaning tomorrow.

Andy Grey crumpled up his umpteenth piece of copy paper and lit his next cigarette, reflecting that the problems posed by European Press in bygone days were pikers com-

pared to his present dilemma.

A copy boy brought Andy the first editions of "tomorrow's" tabloid, the Daily *News*, which came out two hours earlier than the *Times*.

END NIGH, the Daily *News* said in its biggest, thickest headline type. Before pursuing this to p. 3, where the story was, Grey turned to the center fold minus one, to see what the editorial said. Typically colloquial, it was headed SO LONG, EVERYBODY, and went on:

> We hear we're wasting our time writing this editorial for a paper that won't hit the stands today (which is really tomorrow to us — that is, the man writing this), but there's an old show business adage which, adapted to our business, applies here: the paper must come out if it's at all possible.
>
> We naturally greet the news of our impending doom, and yours, as so dramatically described by our Washington man on page 3, with mixed emotions . . .

Grey envied the *News* its easy, colloquial approach to doomsday. Inside was a sidebar under these encouraging words: RELIGIOUS LEADERS PLEDGE HEREAFTER.

None of this was of any help to Grey.

He was well into his fourth pack when the boy came up with the *Herald Tribune*, which had obviously advanced its publication time. The *Trib*, which had been livelying itself up these many year, much to the *Times*' annoyance, had put all its columnists on the front page, as if to assuage the grief of its readership by showing them that Walter Lippmann, John Crosby, David Lawrence, Judith Crist and Art Buchwald were going, too. Each had something wise, funny, wry or profound to say about the putative end of the world. Donald I. Rogers, the financial editor, was not on the front page but his comment was summarized there, in the Topic A column. He said, in part, "If these words are read today, I predict the biggest, best, bull-est day Wall Street has ever had!!!" (Exclamation points his.)

The *Trib*'s headline, all-encompassing in its simplicity, said: NO TOMORROW?

That question mark, after the word which so magnificently ignored the petty journalistic fetish of yesterday-today-tomorrow by transmuting itself into its metaphorical sense— meaning, loosely, the future — was the despair of every other newspaper editor in New York and, eventually, the world.

Because, of course, the world did not end.

There had been a mistake by the computers, which had been operating on old data, fed to them by old programmers, who had got their stuff from old scientists.

Had it been 1900 when the noxious cloud touched Earth, or even 1930, mankind, not to speak of animalkind, birdkind, fishkind and insectkind, would have perished instanter. But, in the years between, Earthmen had contaminated their atmosphere with radiation, automobile exhaust, DDT and other anti-

insect sprays, smokestack exhaust, cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke autumn weed smoke from the proliferating suburbs and multifarious miscellaneous contaminants. It was this unwholesome combination, called by some the Rachel Carson effect, which saved Earth.

The whole shemozzle, as Buchwald later called it, was far more poisonous than the petty little toxic-cloud menace alleged to have been threatening the planet.

What had happened was that humanity, little by little over the decades, had built up immunities to the various poisons it was forced to live with and ingest. The cumulative immunity was a fantastically powerful one which it would have taken a real hoopdinger of a menace, as Earl Wilson was to put it, to outdo.

Thus Earth lived — as recorded in an Associated Press flash sent (by who knows what group of dedicated newsmen) at 12:01 a.m. EST. It said, simply, FLASH-EARTH LIVES, and there were an awful lot of bells ringing on the teletype machines. UPI was only about half a minute behind with its own realization that another day had begun.

Consternation reigned, of course.

There was a bull market, as the *Trib*'s Don Rogers predicted.

There was also a lot of panic in high places as the bosses who had given it away went crazy trying to get it back.

And an awful lot of people, from President Orion Newcastle to little Billy Boyce, weren't giving up a thing. END

Earth was their hunting ground —

Man was their natural quarry!

THE HOUNDS OF HELL

by Keith Laumer

Read this thrilling new serial in *If!*

FATHER OF THE STARS

by Frederik Pohl

— and many more! New *If* on sale soon —

watch for it!

the fruit of the tree

Here's the story of man's next great scientific step forward — the one he is taking right now!

by LESTER DEL REY

The entire story of human progress from brute to astronaut can be described in terms of only three pairs of basic inventions. Now suddenly science has made a seventh discovery. As a result, by 1980 every science-fiction story written to date will seem as conservative and antiquated as Plato's *Republic!*

At least 500,000 years ago, man learned how to change time for the race. He invented language, which let him pass on acquired habits, ideas and stupidity to later generations. He also learned how to change himself by discovering tools, thus effectively making himself into an all-purpose animal. The exploitation of these two ideas used up most of human pre-history.

Perhaps 15,000 years ago, he learned how to change his environment through the dual discoveries of agriculture and animal husbandry. These twin inventions gave him leisure, cities, wars and cultures. The inter-weaving of the first two pairs of discoveries carried him through nearly all of recorded history.

Finally, roughly 300 years ago, man learned how to change matter through chemistry, leading to nylon stockings for women and tranquilizers for men. He also found how to change energy from one form to another. Heat became motion in the steam engine and motion was changed to electricity in the generator. At the end of the present era, these discoveries were fused, and man learned to change matter to assorted energy in the atom bomb.

Now, after having mastered everything outside himself, man has turned inward. He has discovered that it is possible to change life and the living cell.

The story of this discovery is one of the romantic feats of science, requiring fantastic theoretical insights and ultra-refined techniques. But some of it has been appearing in the daily press for the past decade as the story of the cracking of the genetic code.

We have known for some time that every living cell contains

a code, or blueprint, for the entire organism. This code is locked up in bunches, known as chromosomes, each of which is made up of genes — the basic determinants of the characteristics of an organism. Now we have discovered that the genes are made up of fragments of amino acids locked into long chains to form precisely ordered DNA (desoxyribonucleic acid) molecules. These DNA molecules have the power to duplicate — or replicate — themselves to permit reproduction and the development of multi-celled living things. Many of the links in the chains have been charted, and most of the steps of the duplication have been determined.

Of more effective importance immediately, however, is the fact that these DNA molecules can be altered within the cell. This happens spontaneously in mutations, but can be produced deliberately. Parts from one cell can be switched to a different cell, sometimes to produce a type of cell never before encountered. It has even been learned that some viruses can cause alterations within a cell or can swap parts. Cancer may be produced by just such alterations of cells by the action of a virus; reversing the change or producing still other alterations may eventually give us a cure for such cancer.

This year, the first great step to true genetic engineering was reported. A scientist reported to a biochemical forum that he had found ways to handle a single cell without damaging it and to manipulate the DNA molecules in that cell.

Now a living cell can be restructured to order and into a form that would never have occurred naturally. New forms of life can be designed directly. There are also indications that chemical means may make it possible to manipulate large numbers of cells in a complex organism simultaneously.

The possibilities are litertally beyond our imagination. But it is obvious that with such power, man can rebuild himself. He can give himself immunity to disease and even to age. He can regrow damaged parts. There will be no need to wait for accidental mutations to produce superman. And parents will be able to order precisely the type of son or daughter they wish. Less happily, a dictatorial society will be able to create the horrors of soldier men, worker men, drone men, etc.

Such science-fiction developments are almost certain not going to come about within any future we can predict easily; man is far too conservative about himself. It has been possible for a long time now to use the same type of planned breeding we use for animals to make considerable changes in ourselves. So far, we've resisted even the faintest beginnings of such eugenics. We'll certainly continue to resist the newer means of changing ourselves.

However, this conservatism doesn't apply to much outside our own bodies. We change our machines annually for the mere desire to have something new. Most of the plants and animals we deal with have already been changed through many generations of selective breeding.

We've exploited most discoveries

before they could even be tested. Our soils and waters are sicklied over with dozens of inadequately tested insect and weed killers; even our foods are loaded with chemicals that have been imperfectly tested for their effects during years of consumption. And new medicines are on the market as soon as the public can be told about them; thalidamide was taken from the market when it was found to produce changes in our offspring, but hosts of other drugs are available without time to know fully what their effects may be.

We can and we will begin altering our environment through the tailoring of living cells as fast as the engineering techniques can be developed. Judging by our increasing rate of technical progress, this will begin within the next decade, and should be a basic part of our way of living by 1980.

— And here we begin to shape our Earth and our habits into forms that swiftly branch away from anything in any science-fiction story yet written.

Until the present time, living things as we know them have all been designed by trial and error for one purpose — to survive. Even our highly unnatural milk cow is only a minor variation on the original cattle which were designed for survival. But synthetic life forms need have little survival value, since they can be created as needed and since they will not have been selected by thousands of generations of survival of the fit. They will be tailored to *function,* regardless of any other criteria.

That tailoring will probably be done in huge new engineering research plants that will make any current biochemistry laboratories look minuscule. Life is a complex affair. An exploration of its possibilities will involve almost every other branch of technology.

There will, of course, be the classical laboratories where men will work under sterile conditions to avoid outside contamination of new forms. There men will use electron microscopes and instruments we haven't yet begun to develop to pry apart the delicate chains of the inner cell, to build new complexes of amino acid links, and to reassemble cells like none that have ever existed. At first, there will probably be variations on current life forms, but time and experience will move further and further from nature. There will be other rooms where men feed the letter-coded data on molecule chains to computers, and those computers form electronic analogues of the life that would be produced by such changes. Other computers can hunt backwards, from desired characteristics to necessary DNA molecules.

Surrounding this will be hot labs for radioactive treatments and literal hot labs and cold labs to stimulate extremes of conditions for growing cells. There may be vacuum labs for simulating lunar conditions. After all, plans might be able to use the sunlight on the moon to break down rocks and supply air and water to our colonists there. There may be Venus labs, where plants will be shaped for the superhot

atmosphere of Venus, to break its carbon dioxide down to oxygen, and to make that planet usable for human beings. Mars labs and even Jupiter labs are just one step farther into the future.

And surrounding everything will be the great growing and testing complex. No matter how much computer work is done, each new form will have to be tested *in situ,* under conditions similar to the real ones it will face. So we'll have great animal farms and plant farms, desert simulations, arctic simulations, forests, a little of everything. But our farmers will be botanists and ecologists who can evaluate the new life forms. And somewhere there will be the manufacturing plants for growing the cells that have proved valuable — using anything from airless tanks to fertile acres. The whole may well be like a cross between an oil cracking plant and a Texas ranch, with bits of pure fantasy thrown in.

Cell engineering is going to be even bigger business than electronics or our aero-space complex. The lucky few who choose the right stocks will probably make fortunes to rival those of oil billionaires today. Even a few seeds that could yield rich new harvests from our deserts and tundras would bring fortunes under tomorrow's patent law.

Probably plants will be developed first. Some of the early developments are foreseeable right now. A fruit that is uniform in size and time of ripening and which will store well without refrigeration would be a big improvement. In theory, this is no great problem. An apple has a skin that already offers excellent protection against decay as long as it isn't bruised. But there are enzymes in all living cells that eventually begin to break down those cells. We must engineer plants that remove such enzymes from their ripe fruits and have even better protective coatings. Such fruit can then be picked ripe (unlike the flavorless box-ripened garbage we now have learned to eat) and can be stored for several years without deteriorating or needing special storage.

While making such changes, the cell engineer will also adjust things so that the fruit changes color only at the exact time of full ripening, to simplify the problem of picking at the right time. The trees will be redesigned to make harvesting easier, and engineered to give yields far beyond any now possible for a given area of ground and total amount of sunlight.

Flavors can be designed with none of the natural limitations. Plants produce thousands of basic smells and flavors already, and these can be combined into exotic new taste thrills. For example, a pear might be given just a touch of the flavor of violets. It might be horrible — but it also might be delicious. There'll have to be an esthetics branch to our new laboratories. Similar alterations in shape, color and texture are possible.

Probably there will be new models of fruits and vegetables every year, like new models of cars. If you want an old fashioned peach or carrot,

you will find it only in one of the "health food" stores that cater to faddists and the hopelessly conservative. In those stores, you will also find a full variety of fruits and foods for almost any special diet: sweet but sugar-free melons, nuts with potassium instead of sodium salts for those on a sodium-free diet, non-allergic chocolate for those who have trouble with the normal kind. For that matter, the allergy-producing elements for most foods will be tailored out of the plants automatically, so you might find them in any food market.

Some fruits will be available only at the liquor store. There is no reason why grapes shouldn't remain on the vine and be designed to ferment quietly into excellent "vintage" wine inside their skins. (Champaign and sparkling Burgundy pose a problem, but even that might be solved.) Or you can find self-brandied peaches. If someone gets sufficiently ingenious, cherries might be modified to brandy themselves while growing a coating of chocolate outside themselves — milk chocolate a little more expensive, because a little harder to engineer than dark.

Natural trees are now badly designed. There is no reason for having separate nut trees, maple or latex sap trees on one hand and lumber trees on the other. All trees should handle a multitude of functions — and be given a bark at least as useful as cork. These are simple modifications that will be taken care of early in the beginning stages of cell engineering.

For lumbering, trees are now far from ideal. The trunks need a uniform diameter all the way up. (A square shape may be less wasteful than a round one, too.) They will reach a uniform height and size, and then the branches will all fall off cleanly, just as leaves now fall, and there will be no defects in the wood where such branches were attached. The sap will probably also contain a natural preservative against fungus, rot and termites.

While changing the trees, we may decide to grow plywood. Alternate "rings" will have the grain at 90° angle to other "rings" for better structural strength. Or layers of wood and an adhesive sap may spiral out, ready to be peeled into neat slabs of 3-ply wood. As an alternate to this, we can have a two-material substance grown with the characteristics of Fiberglas. This can be done by growing rigid threads of some silicate through the softer cellulose; there is plenty of silicon in the soil.

Obviously, trees will be made to grow rapidly, and there will be a wide variety of colors and grains, including trees that have excellent burl patterns throughout. But such details are routine.

Special trees will be developed for the cities. These will have long tap roots to reach out and down to water, and the roots will automatically avoid all metal objects to prevent damage to sewers, lines, etc. By careful design, they can be given uniform lower branches that will serve as supports for a second level road high above the street.

Plants needn't be strictly plant-like, either. There's a plant in

the sea, called the *Euglena virdis,* which is normally not too unlike other forms of algae, but which refuses to give up when conditions aren't favorable for growing under sunlight. It simply develops a mouth during hard times, turns into an animal and goes swimming after food. The cell engineers are going to be even less bothered by the artificial line between plant and animal than nature is.

Why bother with weed-killing chemicals or the difficult job of hoeing the garden? All we need is to give our food plants mobile shoots and "mouths" and let them crop the soil around them, killing off the weeds and feeding themselves at the same time. Or if we need mulch covering for the ground, we can have our plants send out low runners with heavy leaves that will provide their own mulch.

Of course such plants will have some way of fixing nitrogen from the air, as do some clovers and legumes now, so that no nitrogen fertilizer is needed. It will also be simple to see that they are selective enough to eliminate the dangerous radioactive isotopes completely. Most plants today don't differentiate between strontium and calcium; but some plants can make that distinction, and all can be adapted to do so.

With the current use of paper and the vanishing of the great forests, some plant will be developed to supply pulp for the paper mills. It will be an annual crop, of course. But there is no reason for it to supply only pulp — complete with small silk threads inside, if wanted.

Another badly needed plant is some extremely hardy type of ground cover for the land now ruined by overgrazing, deforestration, etc. Currently, erosion is washing much of our soil away and lack of soil cover brings huge, catastrophic spring floods. It will be fairly simple to design some fast-growing plant that would root deeply and protect our soil and rivers.

In the very near future, our growing needs are going to force us to go to the inexhaustible sea for most of our ores. We're already exhausting our mines and even our supply of fresh water is reaching a critical stage in many parts of the world. Plants can be designed to draw up water through the filtering fibers of their roots, taking it from the sea and ejecting a large excess into tanks for our use. We won't design for "pure" water, but will simply remove the minerals we don't want and retain those we do. (A trace of vanadium salts will control the fatty deposits in our blood vessels that now produces atherosclerosis, from the latest evidence, so we'd leave a little vanadium, of course.)

For our metals, beds of some kind of sea animals will serve. Many islands today are the remains of coral beds. The coral concentrated the calcium from the sea into its skeleton and then died to pile layer upon layer of skeletons into huge land masses. We've found that some clams can concentrate the extremely rare traces of cobalt into rich deposits in their shells. Probably some form of life will be used in great beds for each needed mineral, de-

positing it out as shells or skeletons and building huge stockpiles in the shallow waters along our coasts.

The ships that pass through those waters will find a use for another form of animal creation. We know that the skin of the dolphin somehow eliminates all turbulence in the water passing over it — and reduces drag to a minimum. We've been trying to find a synthetic ship covering that will do the same, with doubtful success; but if we can design an animal form that will plate itself like a thin hide over our ships it could cut our shipping costs in half.

Of course, someone is going to develop new pets. As an early experiment, real talking dogs will probably find a ready market. (Cats, however, might develop rather unfortunate vocabularies in their independent way.) In time, more adventurous novelty pets will be bred.

We probably need a host of new meat animals. Most housewives get tired today of a diet limited to fish, fowl, cow, pig or sheep. There will be a lot more flavors available in the future, with every bit of the meat fully "tenderized" in natural form. It may be possible to develop a "precooked" flavor in meat while also increasing its digestability. And, naturally, for those who observe dietary laws, there is no reason that beef cannot be true beef and still have the flavor and texture of pork — or tuna taste like beef.

Probably the big meat animals will tend to disappear. Rabbits are more economical to raise, and rabbits could be engineered to produce any kind of meat. For that matter, plants with some mixture of animal characteristics can be developed to give us our steaks, chops and filets without any need for slaughtering.

The luxury market and the market for simple conveniences is nearly as important as that for necessities. Furs for milady's coat can be grown on trees, in place of bark — designed for whatever specifications the current fashions dictate. One of the earliest developments will be truly evergreen "no-mowing" lawns and "no-trimming" hedges. Some type of grass can be developed to stand the traffic in place of sidewalks in the cities, and hedges can be dense and strong enough to replace wood fences and concrete retaining walls.

The development of home grown rugs and carpeting will take a little more time, but the rug as we know it must go. It's dirty, it wears out, and it's expensive. Something engineered from the grasses should be better, as well as more comfortable underfoot. This will grow richly to exactly the ideal pile height, requiring no trimming. It will quickly fill in any worn spot, but average such a slow growth that its energy can come from normal interior light. Housekeeping will now consist of giving the rug a light sprinkling once a week. Dirt tracked in will not hurt — in fact, it will simply form a better base for the rug. And additionally, the rug will help freshen the air inside the house. Colors can be adjusted over a wide range — as probably future lawns and decorative shrubs will also be available in many colors.

A mattress might be developed from some modification of such grass. But probably it will be an independent invention — a plant-animal form that will be yielding, pleasant in temperature, and so sluggish that little care will be needed. It will automatically adjust by instinct to the body contours. Hedonistic versions are too easy to imagine; certainly such a creature can be developed to provide gentle all-over massage while in use, aiding in falling asleep and reducing any discomfort from cramped muscles in the morning. With a little more intelligence, it can serve as an alarm clock, by lifting the sleeper out of bed at the proper time.

Perhaps there will be little chance of heating a house by new life forms. But cooling is certainly possible. An ivy-type plant can grow on the roof, sending long tendrils down to deep tap roots. The plant will draw large amounts of water from the ground in hot weather and evaporate this from a dense screen of leaves, both shading the house and cooling it, by such evaporation. In winter, the leaves will wither and fall off, leaving only a normal need for heating the dwelling.

Some men will probably find another type of thatch appealing. A man who is bald may not be able to have his hair follicles reactiviated during the early days of cell engineering. But he will be able to buy a special harmless type of plant or fungus which will live happily on his skin where the follicles were and exactly imitate the hair he should have. For severe climates, the same process can provide the benefits of an all-over fur covering.

The exposed skin will be safe from insect pests. Rather than using dangerous chemical pesticides, scientists will develop specific enemies against the pests — viruses, bacteria or killer insects. These will be released in huge quantities to kill off the entire population of any given pest. Then, with the disappearance of the pest, the "pesticide" will have no food supply and will simply starve to death, leaving no ecological bad effects from its use.

Specially designed bacteriophagic viruses may be engineered to kill off disease germs. Other special forms may serve as "chasers" for the fatty deposits in the blood vessels; still others can supplement the intestinal flora and produce the right amount of insulin automatically for the diabetic.

Then there will be a host of little creatures designed for a sort of symbiotic union with men. Electronic hearing aids are adequate, but many men still object to having any visible evidence or to the nuisance of having to change batteries. In this case, we can develop a friendly parasite with an "echo" instinct; any sound the beastie hears will cause a louder reproduction of that sound on the other side. It will fit completely inside the ear and live harmlessly off the blood of the wearer. The slight loss of food from the man's blood will never be missed.

New eyes are going to be harder. There is some hope for the cataract patient, at least. Rabbits with lenses removed have been found to regrow them when a bit of embryonic tis-

sue is introduced. Suitable tissue can be developed for human eyes. For other types of blindness, we already have learned that a simple photocell on the forehead, connected by a microscopic platinum wire to the "seeing center" of the brain, can produce awareness of light and dark, and will let the wearer avoid large objects in a room. Perhaps a flat beastie can attach itself to a man's forehead, see with its eyes, and transmit an "echo" of the impulse through tiny nerve filaments to the man's brain.

It will be possible to develop many other "organs" from symbiotic creatures something like the "ear". A kidney will be a creature that purifies the blood, but will not cause the immune reactions in the wearer which make real kidney transplants so difficult. Like an embryo in a mother's body, the beastie will have its own blood supply with a barrier layer between its blood and that of the wearer, through which food can be supplied to the creature while impurities are removed. (Probably, judging from our fondness for emotion-controlling tranquilizers, some will have the adrenalin removed by the beastie to help make the patient a nice, placid slob.) Other organs can be imitated the same way.

Beyond lie the greatest advances, for good or ill. The next step may be the growing of real organs engineered to cause no immune reaction. Then a gradual increase into the normal area of bodily repair and heredity "improvement" will begin, until man starts his full program of tinkering with mankind. I make no predictions of the results, having no knowledge of the wisdom or the folly of the future.

Maybe that wisdom can be improved, however, by feeding carefully engineered packets of DNA to men. We know that the literal feeding of education isn't wholly impossible. The planarian worm can be "educated" to a few simple procedures. If an educated worm is cut into bits and those bits fed to non-educated worms, the latter will suddenly acquire the "knowledge" of the former. Apparently the information is transmitted by DNA chains. It seems possible that DNA can be designed to contain whole groups of skills or knowledge and a way can be found to feed this into a man's brains, giving him painless access to a fuller education. Of course, folly can be transmitted as easily as wisdom, and I'd rather not comment on the possibilities.

I have simply tried to cover only the obvious developments in cell engineering, and those that apply to a very early stage. But there's another possibility to worry our imaginations. As I indicated at the beginning of this article, man has made his previous great discoveries in pairs occuring roughly at the same time. Speech came with tools, agriculture with servant animals, matter manipulation with energy manipulation.

The ability to change the living cell is only a single development . . .

So far. END

SOMEWHERE IN SPACE

by C. C. MacAPP

ILLUSTRATED BY GIUNTA

Somebody was stealing people. The only way to stop it was to let himself be stolen too!

I

"I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way." — Noyes.

As a maintenance foreman, Ben Auley was close enough to the higher echelons of Tele Ports, Inc., to sense anxiety. In consequence, he was apprehensive as well as puzzled when he was handed a sealed and unmarked envelope, containing a note directing him to report to the General Manager's office.

The receptionist looked at the note, then at him, and took him in to the boss. Ben accepted the boss's handshake and replied mechanically to the brief amenities.

The boss said, "We have you listed as single and without encumbrances. Is that still true?"

"Why, yes; it is, sir—I suppose."

"No serious lady friends?"

"Er, no. Not really."

The boss looked at him for a few seconds, then said, "We have a job for you that may possibly be dangerous. We don't think so, but it may. It's important. If you take it, there's a lifetime pension for you at full pay, above what you may earn if you don't want to retire now. A long vacation, if you want it, and a better job afterward. How does that strike you?"

Ben tried not to look bewildered. "Why, I don't know, sir. I'd have to—can you tell me more about it?"

"I can't, Ben. Unless you accept. Only that it probably involves a series of routine trips and maybe one that won't be routine." He eyed Ben, and continued, "You were on the crew that set up the Uranus station. We have the impression you're—well, an adventurous sort."

Ben didn't find the description unflattering, but it occurred to him that if this assignment he was being offered was worth so much to the company, it might actually be dangerous. Still, the boss had the reputation of being a man you could trust. And the money and the leisure, if he wanted it . . . He said, a little sooner than he really intended, "I'll take it."

The boss grinned briefly, then said, "Okay, here it is. In the last eleven months we've lost nineteen passengers. I mean it literally, *lost* them. They apparently arrived at their destinations and punched the 'Clear' buttons, and that's the last trace we have of them. What do you think of that?"

Ben sat for a minute, dumbfounded. The system was supposed to be reliable to a stupendous number of decimal places. He knew that a few people had suffered hysteria, and that one man, despite the careful health checks, had died of a heart attack. Those things weren't faults of the equipment. But nineteen people . . .! He said, "I had no idea, sir. I—it's hard to believe I wouldn't have heard something."

"We haven't publicized it. After all, the people have just disappeared. They may be walking around somewhere, perfectly safe."

"But the relatives!"

The boss smiled again, grimly. "There aren't any."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"No relatives. Oh, a few of them did list next-of-kins—cousins or something like that—but nothing close. You might say these people are unmissables."

"But haven't there been investigations?"

"Of course. But the government's helped us hush it up. I'd rather not think that's because we'll be paying most of the insurance to the government, if is comes to that. Only two of the missing people have beneficiaries. Besides—" the boss hesitated —"I shouldn't tell you this, and I want you to clam up about the whole thing; but two of the men were government agents, travelling incognito."

Ben was still dazed. "I'm very

sorry to hear it, sir. But how do I fit in? After all, we've ported millions of people in eleven months. The chances of my stumbling onto anything are pretty small, if you just have the idea of porting me around."

"Not as small as you think, Ben. You fit the category. Young; bigger, more athletic than average; and no troublesome connections. And they've all been trips beyond Mars."

"Oh!" Ben sat up straighter. The implications were clear enough. "But—I'm not welching, sir—if something—I mean somebody—has been kidnapping passengers, won't they spot me?"

The boss smiled the grim smile again. "They, as you put it, seem to have swallowed the two government men. You'll go under a false set of data too. And your baggage will include some innocent-looking tourist's stuff, cameras and whatnot, that will actually be weapons. And tools, in case it's some kind of equipment tampering you can fix."

Nearly two months later, prepared for his twenty-third trip of the assignment, Ben stood, nude and itching a little from the antibiotic spray, and watched the machine before him. The data had already been sent ahead. Now the red lights glowed as his baggage, in the small compartment set aside for it, was probed and catalogued down to its last sub-matter particle for transmission. Ben, though he was a practical engineer rather than a theoretician, knew about as much concerning the process as anyone.

It was not Terran technology. It was one of the miracles discovered on Mars, abandoned there by some race not native to that planet or, so the experts said, to the solar system. Man, with his quick grasp of a new toy, had adopted it and used it without understanding the principles on which it was based.

The red lights went out and the screen showed the message, "Baggage received at destination. Ready for passenger."

He lowered himself into the coffin-like chamber that opened for him and lay relaxed, waiting for the lid to close. It was arranged to slide shut slowly, while the interior lighting grew stronger, to avoid a sudden sense of confinement. Ben didn't need such solicitude by now, but it was standard.

He smelled the first whiff of sandalwood perfume that went along with the gas that would put him to sleep. That was a practical safeguard, not a comfort. The probe was fast enough so that the movement of internal organs didn't interfere significantly, but such a thing as a wink or a sudden jerk of a hand might produce a small "freak", as they were called.

He let the swift drowsiness take him.

II

He awoke without much feeling of elapsed time and waited for the lid to slide open, then raised himself carefully and climbed out of the compartment. The cubicle looked all right, as had all the oth-


GIUNTA-64

ers. A sign said, "You are on Titan, a moon of Saturn. Please check your baggage before pushing the 'Clear' button."

The screen suddenly showed the message "Passenger and baggage at destination." Simultaneously, the red lights went out and the white ones came on.

Ben frowned. The red lights should have stayed on until he pressed the "Clear". In fact, they should not have gone out, nor should the white ones have come on—it should have been impossible—until he'd opened the baggage compartment and removed the contents.

He opened that compartment. There was no baggage in it.

He crouched, really scared now. The screen went blank, and all the lights went off, even the one behind the small screen that said "Inactive". He pushed the "Information" button (so called because it was less suggestive than "Trouble"). Nothing happened.

He turned toward the door out of the cubicle, and as he moved was suddenly aware that gravity was Earth-normal, or near it. He was on no moon of Saturn.

The door opened and he looked into the frightened face of a girl. His own face went hot as he realized that he wasn't wearing as much as a fig-leaf, and he started a move of his hand so banal that, stubbornly, he did not complete it. He said, with as much composure as he could, "My baggage didn't come through."

She said, as if to herself, "English." She stared at him for a second, then said, "Come! You must hurree."

He said helplessly, "My clothes."

Her eyes looked amused for just an instant, then she frowned. "Hurree!"

He thought he'd better follow her, until he found out where he was and what had happened to him.

They stepped from the cubicle into a large room, featureless except for two doors and a line of ventilator openings around the ceiling. The girl opened one of the doors, and light spilled in, so bright Ben threw a hand before his eyes, "Hurree!" she said again.

Shielding his eyes as much as he could, he followed her out into the blinding day. The door luckily, opened on the shady side of the building. She led him along the shade to another door. "In here!"

It was good to be out of the light again. They were in a room filled with machinery of various kinds, including what Ben judged, from the conduits, to be the air-conditioning. She told him, "I think they will not come in here. You must be very quiet. I will bring you food when I can, and when it is dark I will take you to a better place."

He stared at her, then looked around the room. He supposed he could hide behind some of the machinery, if someone merely looked in the door. He said, feeling very helpless, "If my baggage comes, will you bring it to me?"

"It is not going to come."

"But . . . why? I need something to wear."

She looked impatient. "I will bring you something, if it is that important." She turned to go.

"Wait!" he said, stepping forward and taking her by the arm. "Where am I? Who are you?"

She frowned at his hand on her arm, and he took it away. She said, her eyes hard, "I am a slave, as you will be if they catch you." She turned and went out the door.

He explored the room briefly and found nothing he could use for a weapon, and certain bits of equipment he didn't understand at all. He thought he'd better not be prowling around; there might be detectors of some kind. He found a place near one corner, between two bulging machines, and made himself as comfortable as possible. He felt bewildered, but didn't doubt much that the girl was speaking the truth. He puzzled over the fact that she had spoken awkward English at first, but that it had improved with every word.

It was pretty clear that, somehow, he'd been kidnapped.

He sat trying to reason out how it could be done, conscious of how little he really knew about the teleportation. One thing very much on his mind was that the process couldn't be used to duplicate anything. A human, for instance, lay asleep and apparently unchanged until his new self, wherever it might be, came into being. At that moment the old body vanished, with an implosion of air behind it. Neither would the probing—though it could be easily recorded and reproduced as signals by any of a number of means—generate more than a new individual. Therefore, he was stranded. There was nothing the company could do to get him back. Unless, of course, they found a way to repeal what seemed to be a natural law.

The signals must simply have been intercepted. This machine, the one he'd materialized in, was a counterfeit. The kidnappers, whoever they were, obviously could snatch the signals from whatever unguessable, timeless non-space they traveled in. They were able to do more than that. They were able to edit out the baggage, and send false signals back to the origin. It was not clear why they bothered with that last, unless it was simply to delay discovery of the kidnap for a few minutes.

Nothing in his knowledge of the process suggested any way the transmission could be intercepted. He wondered whether he'd get a chance to look at the receiver and materializer here. It might be entirely different from anything he knew, except for the deceptive familiar front. Of course, without tools he couldn't even get the panels open.

An hour or more passed, then the door opened, letting in the awful light. He stayed where he was until the girl's voice said softly, "Food." By the time he stood up, the door had closed again and she was gone.

The food, wrapped in a slick tough kind of paper, was baked loaf of some kind of meat with grain and herbs. There were too small sweet

fruits and a jug of some juice that tasted like spiced lemonade. She had also brought him a length of cloth, quite thin and soft, about nine feet long and less than a foot wide, with fancy ends as if it were a scarf or head-wrapping. He tried to tear it but could not. He devised a way to wrap it where it was most needed, and felt much less vulnerable. He ate what she'd brought, then folded the paper and thrust it into the jug.

He had little relish for more waiting, but he thought he'd better do as the girl said. At least, he'd stay where he was until dark.

He wished he'd had a chance to talk to her more; to get a better look at her. Confused and embarrassed as he'd been, he hadn't noticed much. Her hair was long and black and her eyes a very deep violet. He thought her features could have belonged to a young American Indian maiden, but as he remembered her skin it had an odd tinge, grayish or even with a hint of blue-green rather than brown. He remembered very even, white teeth. And as she'd opened the door of the large room and stood silhouetted against the terrible light, he'd registered an impression of a tiny waist.

III

After what seemed a long time the door opened again and she called to him softly, "Come."

She giggled when she saw how he'd used the scarf, and he blushed miserably. She took the empty jug from him, then led him outside. The blinding light was gone, replaced by what he took for a soft twilight. They stood against the wall and he stared at an unearthly landscape. There were bushes twenty or thirty yards away, and, beyond them, tall bamboo-like trees or shoots. All the shapes and colors were strange. Even the sparse grass in the sandy soil near him was all wrong.

She said, "When you hear me singing go straight toward those closest bushes and hide. Do not go farther until I come for you." She left and went back inside.

He could hear muffled shouts and laughter, somewhere inside the building. Once in a while, from somewhere beyond the building, there were deep animal snarls that sent chills up his spine. After a while he heard the girl's voice begin a quiet little song. He went, quickly, to the bushes and hid himself, learning the hard way that the bushes had thorns. He was still in the building's long shadow.

A rhythmic thudding began, in time with the song. In a minute both sounds stopped, and a deep voice said something in an odd singsong language, with emphasis where it sounded wrong. The girl answered in the same language. The deep voice said something more, and the thudding and singing resumed. Ben waited, trying to control his nerves.

Eventually there was another silence. Then, after perhaps fifteen minutes more, the girl's voice came from behind him. "Here."

He moved cautiously toward her, and found she had changed from the plain light-colored dress she'd worn before to dark trousers and

jacket that covered her almost completely. She had something bulky over her arm.

"This way," she said, starting deeper into the trees. After a few yards she stopped and spread the bulky object over something ahead of her. "Cross over these rugs," she said. "Be careful. There is wire beneath, with a deadly voltage."

He hesitated, dumbly, until she urged him again, then went over the wires strung unobtrusively through the trees. He realized what the thudding sounds had been. She'd been beating rugs, as an excuse for bringing them outside. The deep voice must have been a guard, which meant they mustn't dawdle.

She followed him across and hid the rugs a few feet beyond the fence. "The beasts are penned tonight," she said, "so we can go safely, but do not make too much noise. We are going beyond that hill east of here — *that* way is east — and circle around the station when we are out of sight. I will go with you until the trees end, then you must go on alone. I can not be away any longer. Tomorrow night, or the next, or the next, when I can, I will come to the place where we part, and flash a light twice. Do not come until you see it. Come. We must hurry."

He followed her along what seemed to be a game trail through the trees, around the lower slope of the hill she'd indicated. Through the thick foliage he caught glimpses of a monstrous moon, which, in its brightness, he'd mistaken for a sunset.

He said, "Can't you tell me anything? What world is this? Why have I been brought here, and by whom?" She said nothing, and he went on, "I know I am not in the — in my own system of sun and planets."

She answered, after a minute, "I do not know where your world is, any more than my own. I was taught English because they have been taking people of your race, who sometimes need the care of someone more like themselves. I was a nurse on my own world. That is why they chose me. They take people to sell them as slaves."

He followed her silently for a while, digesting that. Finally he said again, "Who are they?"

"I know almost nothing about them. Sometimes they talk to me but not much. Sometimes I have talked to — but you will not understand about that for a while."

"I — How many of my people have you seen here?"

"Hundreds."

"Hundreds?"

"Yes. Some of them were different tribes. Nations. Not all spoke English."

He said, "You know other Terran languages too?"

"Spanish and German and French and Russian. They started to teach me another one — Chinese, it was called. But they have not taken any who spoke that language."

"You've learned all those lanuguages? You — so young?"

She turned and smiled at him. "Thank you. Sometimes I do not feel young. My race has good memory for sounds."

"I should say!" They walked for a while, then he said, "I haven't even thanked you."

"Today is one of their celebration days, and I knew they would have a party. I do not serve them. They have other slaves, and they do not find me pleasing. I thought with most of them drunk, and the beasts penned, I might save you."

"You — I mean they — were not expecting me, then?"

"The machine chooses. We do not know until a bell rings. They were all away, making some kind of ceremony, and I was all alone in the building. I did what I could."

"I don't know how to thank you. I hope you haven't put yourself in danger."

"There is always danger, of one kind or another. And what have I to lose?"

"I'm . . . very sorry, and very grateful. Maybe I can help you. It won't be more than a night or two before I see you again, will it?" he asked.

"If Fate wills it."

"Well . . . Where are you taking me?"

"To a place where you can live. I can do no more. I do not understand about the machines, and they watch them closely most of the time. Go carefully, now. We are near the end of the trees."

They stopped where the dense growth gave way to a stretch of desert. Not far south, a mighty butte or dune reared into the sky, but Ben only noticed it vaguely. He'd stopped in his tracks and was staring at the moon.

It was three or four times the apparent diameter of Luna, and brighter. It was still low in the southeast, but fully above the horizon now, and casting long shadows. It was more than three-fourths full. In the middle of it, occupying a large part of its area, was a great brooding face. It was broad-chinned and strong, with a skull as bald as an apple; intelligent despite its ruggedness. Something in the expression, the lines of care, tugged at the emotions.

The girl said, a little impatiently, "You will have plenty of time to stare at it. It is the face of a man whose people lived here long ago. You must go now, to the mountain, as fast as you can. If anything approaches you, do not run from it until you are sure it is hostile. If it seems too curious, growl at it." Suddenly she smiled. "Let me hear you growl."

Feeling very foolish, Ben growled.

She said, "I think that will do," and turned to go.

"Wait!" he said, and seized her hand. "I —" He stopped abruptly and stared down at her hand. It had no thumb. He let it drop.

She look at him almost sullenly for a moment, then said, "In my world it is normal." Then she was gone.

He stood for a moment, half inclined to follow her, then turned and went toward the mountain. As he trudged through the sand, picking up his pace as he remembered he was supposed to hurry, he saw that it was really a mountain,

farther away then he'd thought at first, with trees along its crest.

When he'd walked for perhaps twenty minutes he saw something loping toward him from the left. It was big, and it scared him, but he held his pace. As it got nearer he saw that it was like a huge overgrown puppy, with a big, ludicrous, short-muzzled head and enormous feet that were awkward in the sand. It dashed toward him so purposefully that he stopped and turned to face it, knowing he couldn't outrun it in the sand but ready to dodge. It halted a few yards away and cocked its head, staring at him. He said something, nervously. It began to make little dashes toward him that might be playful, or might not, with little grunting sounds that were not doglike. He growled at it as convincingly as he could, and it cowered back.

He went on, keeping an eye on it. It followed, making the grunting sound. Finally, too worried to keep on, he stopped and began talking to it. It edged closer. He held out his hand, talking soft nonsense, and saw that it trembled a little as it approached. He got a glimpse of its teeth and felt better. They were not carnivorous.

Finally it was close enough to sniff his fingers, then it let him stroke it. After that it lost its fear and came close, rubbing against him and grunting happily. He treated it with respect. Friendly or not, it stood on all fours almost as high as his shoulder and its mouth could have taken his whole head in. He found it was not so bulky as it looked, because its fur, thick-looking but not substantial when he touched it, stood out from its body. He guessed that might be a protection from the fierce sun, though with such moonlight he didn't see why anything had to be out in the daytime. Of course, a moon had dark phases too.

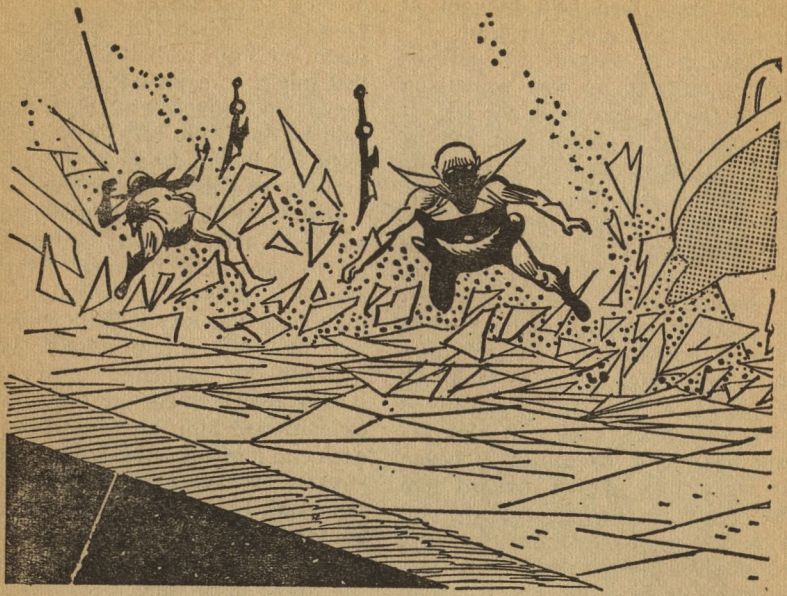
It stayed with him for possibly half an hour, then stopped and picked up its ears as if listening. After a second it broke into a gallop and went back the way it had come.

It took him a few minutes more to reach the mountain. He saw that it was really a curved ridge, concave toward him, tapering down at each end into a lunette. Several small streams trickled down to be lost in the sand before they got far. He couldn't see much more since he was looking into the shadow, but the whole slope seemed to be wooded except where rocky crags broke through.

IV

When he reached the base the mountain loomed over him so that he thought it must be close to a thousand feet high; and from farther back it had looked several times as long. The concavity was deeper than he'd thought. The ends curved around him like a giant revetment.

He sat down by one of the streams and dipped up cool water with his hands, realizing for the first time how tired he was. Now his predicament closed in upon him. He had nothing but the scarf wrapped around him. The girl had said he could live here, but he didn't see



how he was going to go about it. He'd never really believed fire could be made by rubbing sticks together, or striking stones; and though he knew, vaguely, that it was possible to make traps out of natural materials and catch rabbits and such, he didn't know how. Nor did he have any reason to believe there would be small creatures here to catch, or that they'd be edible if there were. He thought, gloomily, that he'd never realized how dependent he was on other people and on the things of society.

A voice said, "Those are the dullest thoughts I've met for a long time. Excuse me; I don't usually probe; but the way you acted I thought you might really be in trouble."

Ben jumped to his feet and whirled toward the voice. There was nothing in sight. Or he thought there wasn't until a spot of nebulosity appeared in the air above him. "Does this make you more comfortable?" it said.

There was no other way to describe it. The voice, quite Terran and matter of fact — and even peculiarly familiar — simply came from the thing, which might have been a small dense cloud of smoke or colored gas except that it had definite edges that did not diffuse or waver, aside from a slight undulation.

"I just vibrate the air," the thing said. "Isn't that a convenient way to talk? I could plant ideas in your brain, but I think that would disturb you."

Ben was paralyzed with fear, or

horror. Finally he managed to say, "What . . .?"

"Don't be such a primitive," the thing said, and chuckled. "I'm not going to eat you. And as for your own survival, that will be very easy. You can make fire if you must, though I can't permit you to kill any of my other guests. But you won't need it. There are plenty of fruits and berries for you to live on, and maybe I will fetch something to lay eggs for you."

The easy manner of the speech calmed Ben little. He said, "Who are you? I — I guess I should say, what are you? Are you just a cloud of gas?"

"Hardly. That is a manifestation I assumed when you were so frightened at hearing me. I can drop it. See?" The thing vanished suddenly, but the voice remained. "I see you like me better visible. How about this?" It reappeared, but luminous this time.

"Energy," Ben said, dumbfounded. "You must be pure energy!"

"Not at all. I can be, but it's boring. I told you this is just a manifestation. I could materialize as a biped if I wanted to, but it would take time and I see no reason to pamper you that much."

"Then . . . what are you?"

"I am the mountain."

Even after he got over his first disbelief, Ben could not adjust emotionally to a mountain's being alive. He thought of it as an immense beast lying there, and when he tried to climb the slope his instincts rebelled and he turned back.

The manifestation disappeared after chiding him once for being timid, and left him alone for a while. He found enough fruit to satisfy him when he was hungry, and otherwise sat through the night with his back against a tree.

When weary hours had passed the voice spoke to him again. "The moon will be setting before long. If you want to see the desert you'd better climb up now."

"I . . . No, thanks; I'm comfortable here."

"It's up to you, but you won't be safe down here in the daytime."

Ben thought about that for a few minutes, and his imagination supplied fears enough to get him on his feet. He started toward the slope. The voice said, "Go over to that stream on your left and follow it up. It's the easiest way."

The closest stream on his left was approximately in the middle of the curve, and flowed out the farthest into the sand, maintaining a ribbon of greenery. He found there was a trail of sorts, with what seemed to be wide stone steps in the steepest places. He did not have it to himself. Small creatures kept scuttling before him, all headed upward, and there was one dim shape ahead of him that stopped now and then to stare back. It looked as big as a man but walked mostly on all fours and was furry.

It took him probably an hour to reach the top, where the green plants gave way suddenly to pale things like the ones the girl had led him through. No doubt this was where the sun hit.

The southern slope was more even, or looked so from here, and much more gradual that the green side. It was sparsely covered with the light-hued plants. He studied one beside him. It looked like bamboo with wide paper discs flaring from each joint. At the tops, which were in some cases forty or fifty feet up, hung flowers like big corn-tassels but maroon-colored in the moonlight. The stalks and discs were almost white, just tinted with yellow-green. The plants made a dry rustling noise in the faint breeze.

The desert stretched away southward as far as he could see, though he thought there were a few hills on the horizon. To the west it was the same. In the east was a line of hills, wooded with the pale shoots, he thought. A river or perhaps a dry bed ran diagonally from the east to the south, with a few trees of dark green visible in its canyon.

The low hills from which he'd come seemed to be only a projection of the range in the east, as they didn't go far west. Beyond them was a mass that might be mountains, but he couldn't see now.

The moon was touching the horizon in the southwest. It had evidently not gotten very high at any time, which would mean that he was not far from the planet's north pole. He stood staring at the face on the moon, and now the voice spoke to him. "Are you looking at my ancestor?"

"Your ancestor?"

"Don't be so shocked. Your own race may evolve as I have . . . depending on a number of factors."

Ben felt prickly again. He'd forgotten for a while that he was standing on a live being. He controlled his revulsion as well as he could. "It must have taken millions of years. Many millions."

"No. Not millions; nor hundreds of thousands, even. Think of how you came here. If your own body can be broken down into impulses of energy, then rebuilt as it was, why should it not be rebuilt in a different form?"

Ben shook his head, unable to grasp it.

The voice said, "That's the way it started. Our world was almost too hot for us to survive, after a near-collision and change of orbit, so we had to adapt. We used a process similar to the one your own race has inherited, but we changed the chemistry of our bodies. We switched from carbon to silicon because it was more plentiful and we could arrange broader temperature tolerance, and from water to a synthetic fluid. Not many generations after that we perfected our control so that we had immortality, if we wanted it, and could change ourselves still farther. I've been a mountain for many thousands of years now, though I sometimes change size or shape to fit circumstances. But my ancestor's face there reminds me that I was once a biped, which is probably why I take the trouble to talk to you. I sometimes have such whimsies. Though I'm glad to say they do not rule me."

Ben was beginning to lose his horror of the voice, but the elusive familiarity of it bothered him. "Why," he asked impulsively, "do you sound so familiar to me?"

The voice chuckled. "Don't you recognize it? I picked the voice most deeply engraved in your subconscious."

Now it flooded over Ben, and he stood quiet, wondering how he'd failed to recognize it. His father had died when Ben was eleven. After a while he said, "It's not very comfortable to have my mind read."

"I don't do it often," the voice said. "But since curiosity is my only reason for tolerating guests, I reserve the right."

Ben didn't see what he could do about it. He stared at the moon, which was farther gone now. "Who was he?"

"A man who led my race through a great crisis. It is all in my accumulated memory, with a billion other stories I haven't recalled for a long time. I've pretty much outgrown reminiscence."

"So they put his face on their moon."

"A good idea, don't you think? It's still there, while the last trace of their cities is gone."

Ben napped a little on the top of the mountain, which was level and smooth, until dawn awoke him.

The sun, as he expected, arced low along the southern horizon. He could not look at it directly, nor could he stand it upon his skin. Even early in the morning, the desert and the hills within sight looked dry and sweltering. Only the curved shady side of the mountain showed moisture. He thought the mountain

must produce water, or draw it up from some cool depth.

Now he got to know the other guests, as the voice called them. They were mostly quadruped, and furred with the strange hair he'd found on last night's dog-like trail companion. One of the small things, rat-sized and with a prehensile tail, let him stroke it and he examined the fur. Each hair grew out from the skin as a stiff quill, then burst into a crown or parasol of very fine wool at the end. The hairs seemed to be mobile, or at least a shrug of the skin moved them in a wavelike motion that might be for ventilation.

Few of the creatures were afraid of him, or of each other, though some of them kept a distance. He saw the large animal that had come up the slope ahead of him, or one like it; a plant-eater and not belligerent. It looked at him with resigned, sad eyes, and he wondered how long it had been separated from its kind.

Later in the morning he saw why everything had come up the slope.

A band of terrible things came scuttling from among the trees in the direction of the slave base. Their heads, bodies, and rasp-like tails were vaguely crocodilian, but instead of crawling they darted swiftly on four pairs of upright legs. Sometimes they reared their necks aloft and held the front pair of legs before them like arms, their taloned paws ugly and grasping. They were flushing out and catching small things that lived in the sand. And later they came to the shade of the mountain and stopped to drink from the largest of the streams.

The voice said, "See how hungrily they look at my guests. They don't belong to this world; the slavers brought them. They'd love to get up here if they dared."

"How do you keep them off?"

"Shrug them off, usually. I can cook up quite an earthquake. If that doesn't stop them I have other ways, of course."

Ben said, "I guess I ought to thank you for your protection."

"You owe me no thanks. I only tolerate you, all of you, as a diversion. Don't get the idea there's any sentiment in it. If you walked out there and got caught by those things or died of sunburn, I wouldn't stir an atom to help."

"Oh," said Ben. "But you could move from this spot then, if you wanted to?"

"What a question! Didn't you see the manifestation over your head last night? Here, look at it again!"

"I saw that," Ben said, "but it wasn't very far from the rest of you. I assumed . . ."

"I'm not flattered by your assumption. I could send a thousand energy-vortices patrolling the planet; I do send out a few to keep in touch. I could split into a thousand parts and fly away as a swarm of meteors. I could visit your own world that way if I wanted to, and pummel it into lifelessness without hurting myself; or I could go by instantaneous translation. I can do almost anything within the laws of nature. With time and raw materials, I could grow into a planet, or a sun."

"I'm sorry if I offended you."

"You can't offend me. Are you accusing me of atavism? I told you I'd outgrown such childish things as egotism."

"Oh. I'm sorry. You sound so . . . Well, human."

"That's because I'm talking to you. Naturally, I only display facets of my intelligence that you can grasp."

"I see. I guess — I've been meaning to ask you if you had a name, but I don't suppose you'd bother with one."

"You might call me Lith, since I am mostly stone now. Of course that's only a concession to you and your own language."

"Thank you," said Ben. It was a comfort to think that a being like this probably wouldn't bother to swat a fly.

V

He had no way of telling time, but the day seemed longer than a Terran one. It was uncomfortably hot, even where he was, and he took advantage of the cool springs. He didn't have much appetite, because the sweet fruit took it away quickly, but he remained vaguely unsatisfied. What he craved was meat. Under the cirmumstances, he didn't feel like trying to acquire any.

He went as high as he could without leaving the shade, and stared to the north. He could see the roofs of the buildings where he'd arrived, though the rest of the place was hidden by the bamboo-like stuff around it.

Farther north there were high hills, obscured by heat-shimmer but dry-looking, though there were dark spots.

The mountain talked very little to him during that day, but it did tell him that it soaked up the sun's energy, not only upon its surface but by other means, and stored what it didn't use at once. It answered affirmatively his question whether it made water, and said it moved slowly about finding water-bearing compounds.

He waited impatiently for the day to end, and long before twilight was gone he was at the edge of the greenery, staring across the sand toward where the girl had left him.

Hours passed, and the mountain chuckled at him. Then, at last, he saw two quick flashes of light.

He ran as fast as his bare feet would take him. When he was halfway there, she started out to meet him. She held out a package. "Some cooked meat. And I have brought you a knife." She handed him a simple table knife. "Come. It is not good to stand out here."

They went back to the trees, but before they reached them a movement to one side caught Ben's eye. He turned apprehensively, but it was only the overgrown puppything, or another like it. It galloped up and rubbed against both of them, and the girl said, "I see you have made one friend."

"Two," he said, "counting you."

She smiled and they hurried on toward cover, the playful beast coming with them. She said, "We

will be all right here, I think. How did you get along at the mountain?"

"Well, it's a little hard to get used to. I was comfortable enough, I guess. But this meat is welcome."

"Why don't you eat some of it now?"

"Too many things on my mind. Did they find out you were away last night?"

"No; but it wouldn't have mattered. When the beasts are penned I can wander where I like, except when they tell me not to. I always have to be there during the day. Tonight I left openly, by the gate."

"You mentioned servants. Are there many?"

"Eight others, now."

"Are any of them human? I mean, like me?"

"Neither like you nor like me. They are happy to be slaves as long as they are taken care of; they are little more than animals. Why did you ask?"

"Well, I was wondering if there were enough to help me overpower the slavers. I've got to get hold of some tools and get at that machine."

"Tools? You could do things to the machine?"

"Maybe."

"None of the others from your world knew anything about the machine."

"It was not their trade. Maybe I don't know enough either, but I've got to try."

"I can't see how you can get to the machine. They were all drunk yesterday, but they will not be that way again for a long time. And you cannot fight them. The other servants would not help, even if they knew how to fight."

"How many slavers are there?"

"Ten or twelve, now. They come and go. They have weapons, and the beasts which they control."

"How long have you been here?"

"Almost two of your years."

"And you don't know where your own world is?"

"No. I do not even know if it still exists. There was a war. I was on my way to an outpost when we were captured."

"You were a nurse?"

"Yes, in our fighting forces."

"Then your people are advanced. Scientifically, I mean."

"We had science, but we did not know much about war."

"Was your world defeated?"

"I do not know."

"Won't your — won't the slavers tell you?"

"They do not know, or care. I have been traded and shipped far. I do know I am not in the same part of the galaxy. The stars are not familiar."

Ben could see very few stars now, but that might be due to the moon's brightness. He wondered how far he was from Earth. He said, "At least you and I have the will to escape. What about tools?"

"There are tools. Four men, if you can call them that, are here permanently, and once they worked on the machine. I do not know where the tools are kept."

Ben said, "By the way, I don't even know your name."

"Naleen."

"Naleen? It's a lovely name. Naleen, you've already done more for me than I have any right to ask; but could you find out about the tools?"

"If you wish. But one man, without weapons . . ."

"Couldn't you sneak me back in the way you got me out?"

"They are usually on duty."

"But there must be some way. Some time."

"I do not know when it would be. I can only promise that when it is possible, I will help you. I am not afraid for myself."

"Do they treat you badly?"

"Most of the time they do not. I do my job and they respect me for that. But I hate them. They . . ."

"They what, Naleen?"

"They treat me like an inferior. They even put me below the other servants, who are of a race that looks more like themselves. And they brought me, as you would an — an object."

"Why do you stay there? You could live on the mountain," he asked gently.

"I ran away once and stayed there four days. I knew they would punish me when I went back, but I could not stay longer on the mountain. I was not free there either. And at least I have my work. Some of the people who come through the machine are sick or terrified and they need me. Besides . . ."

"What, Naleen?"

"I live in the hope my own people will find me some day. It is a foolish hope, but I stay near the machine because that is where they would come if they traced me. Can you understand that?"

"I can understand it," Ben said. "Look — I hope I can do more than wait. I may be able to fix the machine so it will take me home, or at least communicate and get help. If I can — go home, I mean — will you come with me?"

She was silent for a while, then she said, "I do not know. What would your people say about me? You thought my hands were ugly."

"I didn't!"

"It was in your face."

"I was only surprised. I swear it."

"And my color."

"Your color is close enough to my own. We have people on Earth who are a little different, too."

"Yes, I know. I was taught a little of that."

"Well, then?"

Suddenly she laughed. "You are a silly man, Ben. So far I have only been able to get you a table knife, and already you are going to fight the universe and rescue me."

It was Ben's turn to be silent. After a minute he said, "I guess it *is* silly. But will you help me try?"

"I have already promised that. I think I must go now."

"When will I see you?"

"When I can come. I do not think it will be tomorrow night, or the next. They will be busy, I think."

"I suppose I'll have to stay on the mountain."

"Until you know this world better. Good night, Ben."

"Good night." This time he held

her hand deliberately, not letting himself flinch at its strangeness.

He spent the rest of the night pondering weapons. Possibly he could make a bow and some arrows, but he didn't know how to use a bow and he thought it would take a long time to become adept. The same applied to a sling.

He'd been a good pitcher once. If he could find a number of smooth, round stones about the size of a baseball, he'd at least have something. Beyond that, he thought he'd investigate the bamboo-like stuff with the idea of making spears. Not that he'd be able to throw them, but a six-or-eight-foot pointed shaft would be some protection against animals.

There were no smooth, round stones on the mountain, and if there had been he'd have felt squeamish about using them. He remembered the river to the southeast. Possibly he could get to that and find rounded stones. Maybe he could even make a stone axe, if Naleen couldn't steal him something better.

Before the sun was up he hacked down one of the smaller bamboo-like things and took it to a cooler spot to work on it.

The circular discs were hard but too brittle for anything much. The tassels were fairly tough, and might be braided into a rope. The stalks were very much like bamboo, and each section contained a small amount of thick syrup that had a tart-sweet taste. Ben split the stalk, which was about four inches in diameter, into thirds and chose the strongest parts of each. A six-foot length was sturdy enough to stand a hard thrust. When he had three such crude spears finished, despair suddenly washed over him again. They were ludicrous, compared to real weapons.

Frustrated anger replaced the despair, and he called out, "Lith!"

The voice said, "You're quite bloodthirsty, aren't you? I suppose you're going to ask me for weapons to use against your enemies."

"I'll take any weapons you'll give me, gratefully. What I was going to ask was why you tolerate slavers on your planet. You do think of this as your planet, don't you?"

Lith chuckled. "I'm not really jealous about it. I can always go somewhere else and set up housekeeping, you know."

"But haven't you — don't you feel anything against a crime like slave-trading?"

"Feel? Feelings are immature, Ben Auley. And don't your own people indulge in slave-trading?"

"Certainly not!"

"You sell animals as labor-slaves. You even eat them."

"They're not intelligent beings."

"And are you, biped?"

"Why! . . ." Ben saw that was a dead end. "Intelligence is relative, of course. And there are different kinds. But beyond a certain point, a being isn't a beast any more. He's civilized."

"Your own point of view. Actually, you could argue that these particular slavers treat their property well. The slaves will be fed and tended, and they'll have a certain

amount of leisure to themselves. And since your race is bisexual, you'll be pleased to hear that the slaves are taken from both sexes, and allowed to mingle. Do you really think most of them would be better off free?"

"Why, of course! Freedom is worth more than anything!"

"A concept that some would dispute. I will not help you, beyond keeping the sanctuary here. If you want to bring the girl here, I will tolerate both of you."

"She won't stay here." Ben said. "She's — she has unselfish work to do where she is."

"I know about that. But are you sure she won't change her mind now that you're here?"

"You're certainly an old cynic."

"Just rational."

Ben gave up, and tried to nap.

VI

Fairly early in the day he was awakened by a whooshing sound and saw an aircar of some kind rise from the slavers' camp and head southward, carefully detouring around the mountain. He did not climb up to watch; he'd have to face into the sun if he tried. He looked back toward the base, and listened. There was no more activity that he could see. The day dragged.

Naleen did not signal him that night, or the next. The air-cars were busy, so he presumed slaves were coming in. He fought against a listless depression and tried to sleep as much as possible during the day so he wouldn't doze off at night.

The third night, not long after sundown, the two quick flashes came. He jumped up, clumsy with excitement, and ran across the desert as he had before.

He reached her and stood gasping for breath. When he could, he said, "I was worried."

She said, "I could not come sooner. Nine captives have been taken since I talked to you, and everything was under guard. They flew them away. Did you see?"

"I saw aircars. Where do they take them?"

"To another base that I have only heard bits of talk about. I think it is a spaceport where ships of other races land to buy slaves."

"Were they human?"

"One of them was Terran. The rest were of a race that has been taken often. Not an advanced race. They are captured somewhere and sent here by machine, and they always come in batches of eight. Five were female, and one was very sick, with a — a miscarriage, I think. They took her with the rest. I think she will die."

"What about the human?"

"A man. Not very brave and not very intelligent, I think. They took him with the others."

He said, "Did you find out where the tools are?"

"No. I have been very careful, because they are already suspicious that something has happened."

"How do you mean?"

"The day they had the celebration — the day you came — the one on duty was supposed to turn the machine off, but he was drunk

and did not. There is a record of your arrival — but he swears it is something wrong with the machine and will not admit it was turned on."

"Do they suspect you?"

"I do not think so. They accuse each other of stealing an extra slave, or of bungling some way and trying to hide it. But they are alert, so I did not dare look for the tools."

"I wouldn't want you to put yourself in danger. Is it dangerous for you to be here?"

"It would be dangerous if I stopped wandering around. I have done it for a long time."

"Do you have to go right back?"

"No. I think I can stay for a while."

"There's one thing I want to ask you. That river east of here. Do you know anything about it?"

"I have been there often. It comes from the north and has water in it all the year. I think there is snow in the north that melts. I do not know where it goes to the south."

"Snow? Does it ever rain here? Right here, I mean?"

"A few showers, not more than nine or ten a year. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering if a person could live here."

"You do not like the mountain?"

"No. It — I would rather be somewhere else."

"It is the only safe place in the day time."

"Well . . . The reason I asked about the river was, I thought there might be some rounded stones there. Small ones, to fit in my hand."

"I have seen such stones there. Do you want me to bring you some?"

"Can't I go there myself, at night?"

"It would be dangerous. Why do you want the stones?"

"For weapons. I can throw pretty well."

She was thoughtful for a moment. "I can take you there. If things approach you must be very quiet."

"All right."

They went back among the trees where there were game trails and followed them east. Ben judged it was about two miles to the river.

The river's canyon, not very deep but fairly wide, was a slash of green across this parched world. The stream itself was only a few yards wide now, and as far as Ben could tell there hadn't been much water for a long time. Still, the whole bed was fertile except where sand or rocks collected.

They walked up the stream, collecting the kind of stones Ben wanted. Suddenly Naleen said, "Stand still for a moment."

Something moved among the trees, and the puppylike thing bounded into sight. Naleen said, "Do not touch it."

They let the thing prance around them, nuzzling at them and grunting its disappointment at not being petted. After a minute something heavy could be heard coming through the trees. A hulking shape appeared, and Ben realized it was an adult of the same species. Another came into sight behind it.

They did not seem particularly menacing, but their size was enough to make Ben follow Naleen's advice. The young one was dashing back and forth now between its parents and Ben and Naleen.

Naleen began to talk soothingly. The two big things came closer, slowly, like outsize dogs suspiciously approaching a stranger. Naleen said to Ben, "They know me, but you will have to make friends with them."

Ben let the things come close and sniff him. They had a dignified, ponderous way about them. Slowly, he raised a hand for them to sniff.

It didn't take them long to decide he was all right, and they let him scratch them under the chins. After a few minutes one of them grunted and started back toward the trees. The pup nuzzled at Naleen a second longer, then followed.

Ben had a dozen or so stones in the crook of his left arm. He said, "A few more of these will be enough." They went on.

A little way upstream they came to a quiet pool, shaded by a growth of trees. Naleen said, "I swim here sometimes."

The pool did look inviting. Ben put down his stones and dipped a hand in the water. It was not too chilly. He said, "We don't have suits."

In the dim light, she seemed to look at him with amusement. She said, "Terrans have some strange ideas."

She left him and disappeared into the trees. He stood uncertainly, wondering if he'd offended her, but after a few moments she reappeared, nude and lithe and lovely, and stepped calmly into the water. He stood confused for a moment, then slowly unwrapped his own makeshift garment and went into the pool.

A happiness that was almost childish came over him; an exuberation so that he laughed and splashed water until she had to remind him not to make too much noise. A part of his mind regarded his reactions with amazement. It was strange that such a small thing as a swim, with a girl, could banish his depression and make him forget, almost, his predicament. She seemed to be happy too, laughing lightly. But after a while she said soberly, "I had better go back."

The effect on him was crushing, as if it hadn't occurred to him that they couldn't stay here forever. He stood waist-deep and stared at her. She looked at him for a moment, then turned and waded toward the edge. He followed, his pulse beginning to pound, seized suddenly in vague discontents and urges. She turned in the shadow and stood looking at him, her face unreadable. He took a trembling step forward and she came into his arms. Her body was tense and hot against him. She let out a sigh that was almost a sob and buried her face against his shoulder, clinging to him as if she were desperately afraid he'd let her go.

After their lovemaking they lay together for a time, silent, drawing comfort from each other's arms.

Then she said again, "I had better go."

She was quiet and serene now, only laughing a little as she helped him make a pouch of one end of his sash to carry the stones in. She held his hand as they started away.

At the top of the bank she paused and said, "There is something I must do." She went to a clump of the bamboo-like stuff and said, "Will you help me get some of these?"

He didn't understand until he'd broken off a few of the shorter stalks for her. Then she pulled loose the red tassels and chose the longest, toughest strands to tie into her hair, gathering it into a long braid. He said, "Let me help you," and she pulled away from him. "No! I must do it myself?"

"Why?"

"It is a custom of my people, when a girl — when she has taken a mate."

He noticed that her thumbless hands were quite deft. The two outer fingers simply turned to oppose one another.

On the way back he said, "Will you be able to come out tomorrow night?"

"I can't tell. I think I will. I will come when I can." They walked in silence for a while, then she said, "I was so lonesome, Ben. I can hardly believe that I am lonesome no more."

Ben said, "I won't be lonesome now either. But we can't expect things to go on. They'll discover me sooner or later, or something else will happen."

"Yes. For as long as it lasts, I will be happy."

"Do you think you can find out about the tools very soon?"

"Not until they get over their suspicions and quarrels. I think it will be several days. Do you really know enough about the machines to send us away, even if you get the chance? How will you find your own world?"

Ben walked glumly for a minute. "I don't know. Maybe I can tell when I look at the machine."

They reached the parting point, and Naleen's serenity broke and she cried a little as he held her.

He slept the rest of the night and napped into the morning, feeling a contentment that made him a little guilty.

Some chattering sounds brought him wide awake, and he found the mountain's other occupants all gathered near the top, nervously watching something on the desert.

When his eyes unblurred he gasped with horror. The puppy-like thing was down there, a hundred yards or so from the base of the mountain, surrounded by the vicious things he'd seen before. It was whirling and darting, trying to find a way out, but the scaley things steadily closed the circle. Ben could hear the victim's terrified grunting. The predators were purposefully silent. Ben grabbed several of his stones and two of the spears and hurled himself down the slope

One of Lith's manifestations formed in front of him and said, "Don't be stupid. You can't help."

"I can try!" he retorted.

"And get yourself killed. Think for a moment. Do you want to toss away everything for a mindless animal you can't save anyway? What about the girl? What about your own people?"

That brought Ben to a halt, but he blurted out, "You can help! It's practically at your base! You could save it! Can't you see it's only a puppy?"

"The predators seem to have decided it's worth eating. I've noticed you eating protein yourself."

Furious, Ben started down the slope again, but it was already too late. The killers closed in with a rush and the helpless thing went under, its grunts rising shrilly for a few seconds.

At least it was over quickly. Ben turned away, unwilling to watch.

Lith said, "Instead of dwelling upon the agony and terror of the victim, why not think of the predators' satisfaction? They too are living creatures."

Ben would not answer. If the predators, unhurried now about their meal, hadn't been keeping eyes turned toward him, he'd have left the mountain right then. In frustrated rage, he climbed back up the slope and threw himself down on his sleeping-spot.

Naleen did not signal him that night, and he spent the following day in sullen depression. He did not speak to Lith, nor Lith to him.

The next night Naleen's flashlight winked at him early, and he raced toward the meeting-place. She was flushed and laughing at his haste.

She sobered when he told her about the puppy-thing. They went silently toward the river. Finally she said, "I have seen many things die that way. Sometimes my masters put things into the pen, and laugh as the beasts tear them to pieces."

He said, "I wanted to help, but the mountain spoke to me and I hesitated. And I thought of you."

"Only of me?"

"Well, no. Of other things too, but mostly of you. It's the truth."

"You could have done nothing."

"The mountain could have . . . Why can't I stay at the river instead? It seems peaceful there."

"It is not peaceful in the day time. There are terrible things, and my masters go there sometimes to hunt or fish. At least the mountain will protect you while you are there."

"I doubt that, if anything made a serious effort."

"I have seen things try. The mountain will not help anyone or anything, but it will not tolerate violence on itself. I do not understand it."

"Neither do I; but I don't like it."

They reached the riverbed and started up the stream toward the pool. Suddenly Ben stopped and gasped. The puppy-like thing was bounding toward them, obviously well and happy. He stood dumbfounded as it reached them and pushed its way between them, grunting its happiness. He looked at Naleen. She was watching him with wide eyes. He said, "I — I guess

it must have been a different one. I was sure it was the same one. I thought it might be coming to the mountain to look for me."

She said, her eyes gradually calming, "I suppose there might be others, though I have never seen one."

He petted the thing and laughed with a glee that he could not resist. In a little while the thing's parents came and gravely renewed acquaintances; then, as before, left and took their offspring with them.

Naleen giggled as he pulled her into the thicket beside the pool. She said, "I was afraid you would want to swim first. Then I would have known you did not really love me."

VII

When it was time to go she made him get some more of the red tassels so she could renew the love knot.

As they walked away from the river she said, "I think I know where the tools and instruments are."

He seized her shoulders. "Where? Can we get at them?"

She met his eyes for a moment, then looked away. "You are very anxious to leave."

He stared at her. "Of course! Aren't you?"

"I think you may die trying. I am not anxious for that."

"But — the slaves! I've got to get back and warn my own race!"

"I suppose so. The tools will not be easy to get."

He released her shoulders. "We'll be very careful; plan and prepare. And you'll be going with me."

"If we are lucky," she said, and turned to go. Presently she took his hand as they walked.

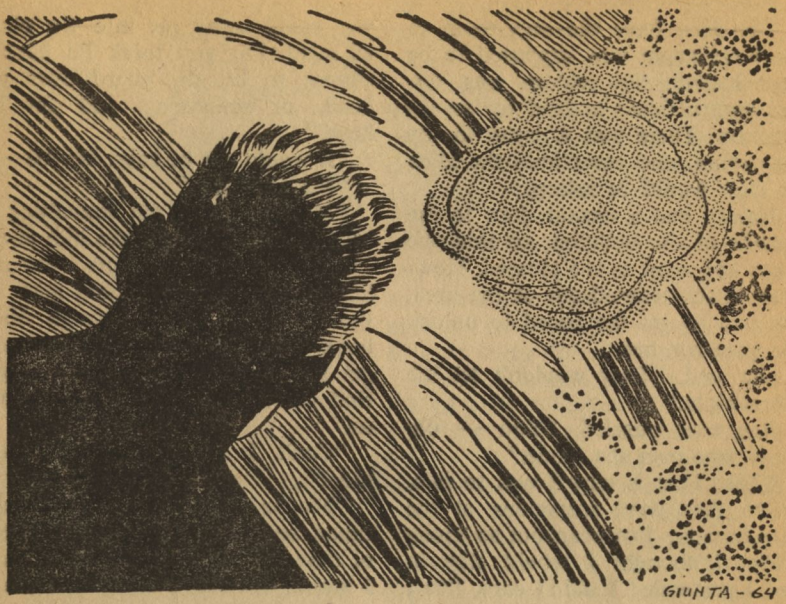
He spent the next day brooding, too tense to eat more than a little of the new supply of meat she'd brought him. The first thing he'd need was a map of the base. Naleen could surely draw that from memory. He felt irritated that he hadn't thought to ask her to bring paper and something to write with. Then, when he knew the layout, he'd have to know how the guards were handled and how they behaved, and many other things.

It was strange to ponder calmly the prospect of killing even aliens. He wondered if he'd hesitate, when the moment came — if it did. For that matter, he wondered how he'd go about it. Maybe they were scaley, like their beasts, so that a spear or a knife wouldn't penetrate easily. Maybe their skulls were so thick a blow on the head wouldn't hurt.

The essentials were that he get his hands on the tools and the instruments he needed to examine the teleporter, and that he have a chance to examine it without interruption. At least, that was the immediate problem. Considered that way, stealth might be more to the point than violence.

One thing he had to know about was the bell Naleen had mentioned. That would have to be disconnected before he'd dare touch the machine.

He realized he'd wasted several days already. He could just as well have asked Naleen more.



She was late that night, but when they met he found she'd done some thinking of her own. She had a pencil and some paper, and when they reached the river she drew him a map.

The whole area around the base was a narrow-necked inlet of the desert, surrounded by the low hills, thickets of bamboo-like stuff, and the denser, shorter bushes. Across the neck, which was at the west, was a fence with the only gate in it. The electrified wire was strung around the rest of the circumference.

The building Ben had arrived in was L-shaped and the largest of three. The teleporter was in the leg that ran east and west, while the other leg, at the east, extended south. That was why Ben hadn't seen anything but the one wall.

There were separate buildings for the servants and for the slaves when there were any to put up. They were south of the main building. The landing field and the pen for the beasts were more to the west, near the gate.

Naleen's room and dispensary were in the end of the northern leg of the main building, separated from the large room that held the teleporter cubicle by the attendants' quarters. Those latter consisted of a bunk room and a duty-room. The tools and instruments were in a cabinet in the duty-room, where at least one of the four attendants was supposed to be at any time. Each of the four had keys, but Naleen didn't know if there were any others.

The door from the duty-room to the large room was supposed to be kept locked, but seldom was unless high officials arrived for an inspection. There was a bunk in the duty-room, and sometimes the alien on duty would be asleep.

Naleen had a second door to the outside of the building, so that she came and went as she pleased. However, if she wanted out of the area, she had to get the guard to unlock the gate for her.

She said, "They wouldn't let me out tonight."

Ben was puzzled. "You — oh. You came over the fence."

"Yes. That is why I was so late. When they were suspicious at the gate because I've been out so much lately, I thought I would stay in and I pretended I didn't care. But I thought you would worry, so later I sneaked out."

"Would they punish you if they found out? You said they did before."

"I don't think they will look in my room."

"Suppose the bell should ring? They'd miss you then."

"The machine does not bring in slaves at night."

"I would rather you didn't take the chance, though. How did they punish you?"

"I would rather not talk about it."

"Was it pretty bad?"

"Yes. It was bad, but I got over it."

Ben felt upset. After a while he said, "I don't think we ought to wait too long. It sounds to me as if you could sneak me into the place all right. Do you think I'd have a chance to hit the guard over the head, or something, and get his keys?"

"It would not be easy. Maybe —"

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe I could put something in his food that would make him sleep. Then if the outside doors were not locked, I could get in and take his keys without going through their bunk room. Then I could come and get you. But of course they might find him asleep and be waiting for us."

"Can't I sneak in earlier and hide?"

"Maybe. They trade duties sometimes, so I would not know ahead of time which one it would be, and I would not know whether I could get a chance to put something in his food. I can get into the kitchens any time. But I do not know."

"I can't stand to wait much longer."

"You must not try to do anything until I have things arranged."

"But you'll do it as soon as you can? Look, I can always sneak away again if things don't work out, can't I?"

"I do not want you taking the risk if things are not ready."

"You got me out all right before. Promise me you'll try it as soon as you can."

"All right. If you will promise me one thing too, Ben."

"What?"

"Do not leave the mountain until I signal you."

"All right. I promise."

He took the sketch with him when they parted, and went up to the top of the mountain where the moonlight was bright enough so he could study it.

It still bothered him that the mountain might be reading his mind, and that he had to accept its hospitality, but he was in no position to be independent. When he'd learned the map as thoroughly as he could, he sat restlessly, unable to sleep. The sun came up, and he stirred himself to eat a little, and later was able to nap for a while.

When the heat of the day awoke him he doused himself in one of the springs to cool off.

With the knife he was able to hack off a piece of his scarf to carry his throwing-stones in. He puttered with his spears, making some better ones, and napped several times during the day.

Night came, and he alternately sat and jumped up to pace around, waiting for Naleen's signal. When the moon was halfway through its course he knew she wasn't coming, but he refused to abandon the watch until dawn and exhaustion compelled it.

The long day began. There was nothing for him to work on that was worth while, so he spent hours practicing with the rocks, until he was afraid to use his arm any more. He bundled them up in the length of cloth and unbundled them a dozen times, fretting over the best way to carry them so they wouldn't bounce too much if he ran. He tried ways of carrying the knife. There was no better way than simply thrusting it under the cloth around his waist.

Mostly he sat and worried

It might be simply that Naleen hadn't been able to come because there was something going on at the base, but his mind insisted on exploring all sorts of other possibilities. Maybe she was in trouble; or maybe her courage had failed and she was just delaying. He did not think she would go back on her promise entirely. He thought she'd at least come for him and explain.

It was miserable waiting. As dusk fell he forced himself to sit in one place and relax his muscles, though he could do nothing about the tumult inside. The moon, at its full phase now, was near midnight in coming. He tried to convince himself she was waiting for it. The idea didn't take very well. She'd come in the dark before.

Despair pressed heavier and heavier upon him until he couldn't stand it. When the moon began to touch the thickets north of him he grabbed up his weapons and started across the sand. After a few steps he stopped, hesitated, and called out, "Lith!" He was so full of sick despair he was ready to drop his pride and beg information, at least, of the mountain. Lith didn't answer, though Ben called several times and added bitter curses. Ben started on.

VIII

When he was among the trees he tried to find the same path by which she'd brought him the first time.

A line straight from the desert to the buildings would have been only a fraction as far, but there might be good reasons why she came this way. He got onto the wrong game trail and had to retrace, then finally felt he was skirting the right hill. Soon he saw lights ahead and cautiously sought out the place on the north side of the enclosure where she'd taken him across the wires.

Without the thick synthetic-fiber blankets, he wasn't sure how he'd make it across. He spent grudged minutes locating the wires and finding a place where large tree-shoots would let him climb. He went over and worked his way to the bushes where he'd hidden the first night.

This wall of the building had no openings except the one door, as he remembered it, and he could see no light around that. Off to his right, beyond the end of the building, light from somewhere fell on the fence shown by the map.

Beyond the building he heard slow footsteps which he thought must be the guard. They seemed to recede, as though they were moving to the east where the other wing of the building was.

Surely the guard must make a circuit around this side once in a while, and this might be the time.

Crouching, Ben slipped to the building and went along to the western end. He looked around it cautiously. He could see two aircars parked not far from the gate, but the gate looked untended and was no doubt locked. He still couldn't see the source of light but it was somewhere south of the building, possibly on the peak of the roof of the other wing. He heard the footsteps halt and move in a different cadence for a few steps, then stop again. He slipped along the end of the wing to the next corner.

The moon wasn't quite high enough to see; the buildings at the south of the enclosure, and the trees, cut off. He peered around the corner and saw that the light was where he'd guessed. The guard stood under it, unwrapping what looked like a candy-bar. He was biped, but squat and non-human, with no ears or nose that Ben could see, and with piggish eyes under jutting shaggy ridges and a grotesquely wide mouth from which a long pointed tongue flicked like a snake's to taste the stuff he was unwrapping.

Ben, with a shudder, moved back where he wouldn't be seen and fumbled for one of his throwing-stones. His heart was pounding so hard he had trouble controlling his breath. Could he hit the guard's head, if it came to that? It had been years since he'd practiced seriously with a baseball. Should he throw hard, or ease up a little to make sure of his aim? Or should he wait and try to use the knife, or one of the crude sprears?

Should he hide instead and hope the guard would go around the building?

It occurred to him that Naleen's room must be inside this very wall. The door would be on the south side of the wing, in plain view of the guard. He considered rapping softly, and decided against it.

The guard's footsteps had not resumed.

From the direction of the gate, but in the shadows to the south of it, came a rasping snarl. He glanced that way. He could barely make out the fence of the pen.

A soft moan came from that direction. He stared hard and almost cried out.

They had Naleen there, naked and exposed on a pole in the middle of the pen, sitting on a crossbar and clinging to the pole. In the dark he could not see her clearly, but he could see the awful sunburn and that her head sagged with exhaustion.

He stood half stunned, realizing slowly that this was her punishment, and that it was his fault. Even if they didn't know about him, they must be punishing her for leaving against orders. His eyes blurred with tears and a tight ache took hold of his throat. He took one step toward her, then caught himself. The guard had to be dealt with first.

Sudden scalding rage burned through him and he almost forgot caution. He tried to control himself, stop the violent shaking of his hands.

The guard said something that sounded amused, and the footsteps began again, coming toward Ben's end of the wing. Ben sucked in a deep breath. This wasn't going to be like pitching to a batter. The first throw had to be right on.

The guard came into sight, looking in Naleen's direction and grinning. Ben hesitated for an awful moment, then with a burst of anger at himself, drew back his arm. Emotion suspended for an instance as his whole being concentrated on the throw. He knew he was not going to miss, and that he was throwing hard enough. The guard was closer than pitching distance.

The stone hit behind the temple, two inches or so from where he'd aimed, but that was good enough. The thud was loud. The alien crumpled, completely limp.

Ben dashed to where the stone had bounced, grabbed it on the run, and whirled toward the pen. Naleen heard him coming and raised her head. He could not make out her features in the shadow.

"No!" she whispered in a weak, cracked voice, "No! They'll —"

He wasn't going to climb over the fence blindly — not without getting in a few blows first. The fence was of heavy wire mesh, with openings of about three inches, and at least twelve feet high. At the top were three strands of wire he thought would be electrified, on brackets that slanted in. He hesitated a moment. He could not throw through the mesh with any accuracy.

Several of the beasts scuttled toward him, raising themselves and clinging to the fence until he almost thought they were going to climb it, but they avoided the wires at the top. Their snarls and their struggles to get at him were almost frantic.

Naleen sobbed weakly, "You promised. You promised. Go away before they find you."

He didn't answer. He took one of

his spears and jabbed viciously at the underside of a beast. It screeched like rusty metal and hurled itself back, the shaft buried in its chest. Ben impaled two more before they got the idea and backed away. That was all the spears he had anyway.

Now he clambered up the fence, at one of the metal poles, being careful not to touch the wires at the top. It was awkward clinging there, but he set himself and got his right arm free. He tugged the bag of stones around where he could get at them. Naleen pleaded with him again, and made a move to climb down. He snapped, "Stay there!" and threw a stone into one of the gaping mouths. The beast made a muffled sound and rolled, thrashing, trying to dislodge the stone. The others came at him again, hurling themselves up the fence. One snapped at his bare foot, sticking through the mesh. Ben gasped with pain and jerked his toes free. More of them attacked, so viciously he had to jump away. He landed off-balance and went sprawling.

He rolled to his feet and threw stones, sometimes hitting the wire, sometimes getting them through. He stunned at least two of the beasts, but there were still a dozen untouched.

Sudden light bathed the area. Aliens came spilling from the large building, shouting and raising weapons. Naleen screamed. Ben stood where he was, hoping with cold fury that they wouldn't shoot him down until they got within range.

They came at him, seven or eight of them, all armed, shouting to each other. He stood still until they were near enough, then raised his arm very fast and threw. He got one of them in the face and shouted with glee as the blood spurted and the alien went down, gagging. Ben threw again, missed, then got another in the shoulder with a third stone.

The aliens had stopped, amazed, but now the weapons blasted. Ben felt a blow in the middle, harder than he'd ever imagined a blow could be. He tried to throw again but his arm wouldn't work, and neither would the rest of his muscles. He didn't know he was falling until he struck the ground.

He lay for a moment, wondering why he felt so little pain. He could feel it, but it was as if he held it at arm's length, examining it. Then his sight began to blur. He heard Naleen screaming and managed to turn his eyes to see her go down under several of the beasts.

Oddly, he didn't feel grief at her death, or at his own; he only hoped both would be quick. Mostly he was concerned with his anger. He thought that maybe if he lay still he could gather enough strength to get hold of one of the aliens when they approached him. But he knew he had no strength left. He concentrated, with what will was left, on his hate. He wished them every horrible death that could be invented; he willed them to suffer. And then it seemed as if he must be dreaming, or delirious, for he thought he heard a roaring, burst-

ing fury fall upon the aliens and the beasts, shattering them so abruptly they barely had time to scream. He imagined the buildings were blowing up too; he even thought he felt the concussion on his skin. But something was being pulled out of him irrestibly, so that he couldn't stay to dream any more.

Reluctantly, he let go of whatever it was and let it be pulled away.

IX

When he began to stir again to consciousness it was with vague memories of nightmares. It took a while for him to collect his thoughts. His rage came back first, then the grief. His eyes focused on what seemed to be a wall. He was in a bed, and there was a hospital smell.

A voice on the other side said, "Ben."

He rolled over and saw the boss. He lay for a minute letting his thoughts clear. Then he said, "I'm alive?"

The boss grinned. "Unless I'm dreaming too. We don't know how you got back, but you did."

"I got back," Ben repeated, trying to find meaning in the words, beyond the simplest one. "I'm — I'm on Earth?"

"Mars," the boss said. "I came out when you showed up. You've been pretty sick, so we didn't want to move you. How do you feel?"

"Dizzy," Ben said. "Just a little. And hungry as hell."

"I'd better call the doctors."

"No — wait." Ben tried to sort things out better. The alien world, even Naleen, were so foggy in his mind he wondered if he'd dreamt the whole thing. Maybe something had gone wrong with the teleporter; over-dosed him so he'd had a long dream. But he didn't think he'd been headed for Mars. He said, "Didn't they report me anywhere?"

The boss looked at him oddly. "I don't want to press you until you feel all right," he said, "but don't you remember anything?"

"I don't know. Where . . . Surely the machine must show a record of departure and arrival?"

The boss shook his head. "You didn't come in a teleporter."

Ben stared at him, and the boss said, "You disappeared for three weeks, then showed up right here, in this bed. Caused a hell of a row among the hospital staff. Ben, what happened? Don't you remember?"

"I remember a lot of things; or think I do. It's — no; I can't tell it to you all at once. It's too wild. Maybe I'm just nuts."

"No, Ben. Something *did* happen to you. For one thing, you've been changed. Your blood is different; and so are other things. Where'd you get tattooed?"

"What are you talking about?"

The boss stood up and pulled down the covers. "Look at your belly."

Ben stared down at himself. The face tattooed, or somehow imprinted, on him was upside down to him, but he recognized it. It was the face of the alien moon. He gasped out, "Lith!"

The boss made a gesture of resignation. "You kept saying that name in your sleep, among other things. Let me get the doctors."

The doctors had to admit, finally, that they couldn't find anything wrong with him except the changes in his blood and certain of his organs, and within a few days they let him go, though they'd have preferred to keep him for study.

He persuaded them that the teleporting had somehow made the changes. There was no use trying to tell them the truth.

He'd had time to adjust to things. It was pretty certain that Lith had saved him, or reconstituted him from memory, through what whimsy Ben couldn't guess. Maybe from nothing more than a cold sense of justice. But that didn't explain the tattoo. That must be a prank, and not a very kind one.

He'd told the boss about it, editing it a little, but nobody else. Lovely maidens rescuing him; mountains that talked; those would most likely have gotten him into the booby hatch.

He thought he was pretty well reconciled, and he was expected back at work after whatever vacation he wanted. He didn't think he'd take much. He needed the work to take his mind off things. It wasn't pleasant not to know whether Lith had reconstituted Naleen too. Even if he had, he'd no doubt sent her back to her own world.

There was a faint glimmer of hope in Ben's mind — one that he wouldn't let himself think of too much — that the experiments he was going to undertake with the teleporters might some day lead to the stars. It was a senseless hope, of course, that he'd ever find her even if they did. But he'd try.

They had fresh clothes that the boss had brought him, and at the desk where he checked out of the hospital there was even a wallet with a new set of identification and credit cards, and plenty of cash. He wondered where his old things had wound up. Maybe on the home world of the slavers, unless they'd been destroyed.

He walked out through the reception room, and stopped abruptly, staring at a girl who stood with her back to him. After a moment he started on, feeling depressed again. Apparently he was going to start seeing Naleen in every woman who happened to look the least like her. This one had the figure, the tiny waist, even the long black hair with a dark red ribbon. But Ben's eyes had gone to her hands, and they had perfectly normal fingers and thumbs. And her skin didn't have the same tint. This girl was dark, but with a Terran brunetteness.

As he passed her she turned, and he stopped again.

Her hands and complexion might be changed, but her eyes weren't. He stood in a kind of paralysis and watched the tears of joy come into her eyes. He did manage to lift his arms, and as she came into them he said under his breath, his own voice choked up, "Lith — you old fraud!"

END

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By J. D. Ratcliff

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