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WORLDS OF



SCIENCE FICTION

RETIEF, GOD-SPEAKER

by KEITH LAUMER

THE RECON MAN

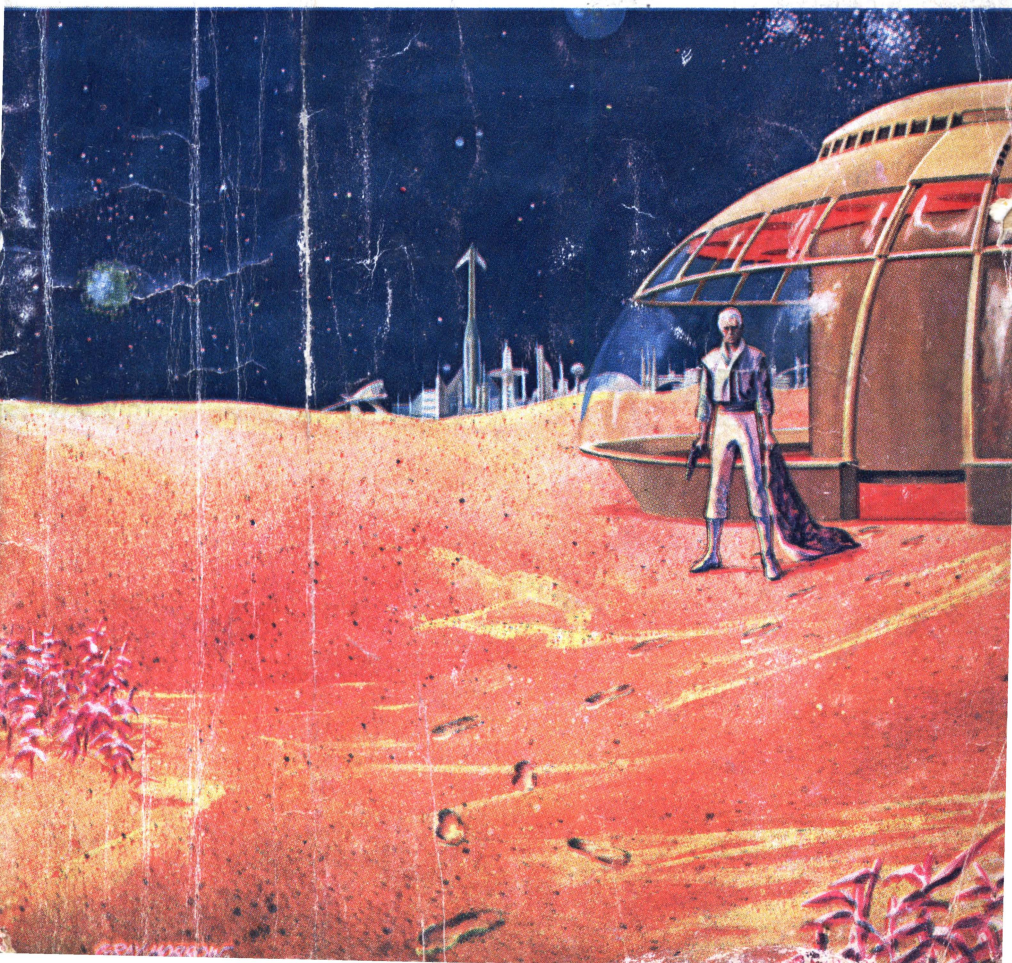
by WILSON TUCKER

Beginning This Issue —

STARCHILD

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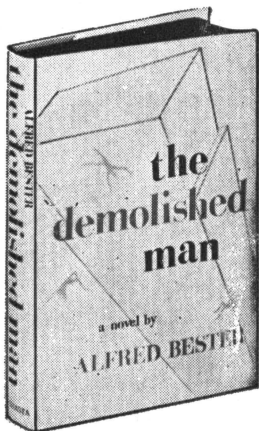


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WORLDS OF



**SCIENCE
FICTION**

**JANUARY, 1965
VOL. 15, NO. 1
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**ALL NEW
STORIES**

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Diane Sullivan, Associate Editor*

*Sol Cohen, Publisher
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Cover by MORROW for STARCHILD

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Worlds of When...

As professional forward-lookers we science-fiction writers sometimes lose sight of the fact that others are in the business as well. A group specializing in "when-ness" are the computer people of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a first-rate book summarizing their opinions about what tomorrow will look like is *Computers and the World of the Future* (MIT Press), which Martin Greenberger assembled out of transcripts of a lecture and discussion series held at MIT a while ago.

The contributors to the lecture series include Vannevar Bush, Marvin L. Minsky (perhaps best known to the lay public as the inventor of the Minskytron, a computer program which displays what are essentially complete universes on a cathode tube), John R. Pierce, C. P. Snow, the late Norbert Wiener and any number of other articulate and informed men and women.

We don't propose to review the book here; we only want to tell you that it is a rewarding reading experience. Everybody knows about the job—doing capacities of the computer, how it measures out the proportions of meats that go into bologna, makes out payrolls, runs oil refineries, etc. But did you ever think of computer programming as an art form? More than 300,000,000 words of programming are written a year; the Library of Congress has recently

amended its rules to permit copy-righting a program; and it seems at least a possibility that composing a program for a computer to operate may very shortly attain the same cultural and philosophical standing as composing a symphony.

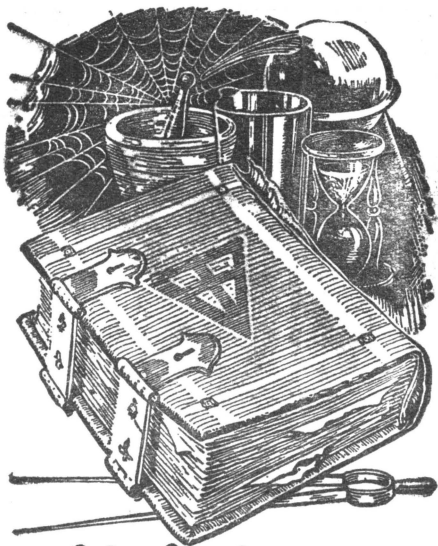
Indeed, "possibility" is too thin and remote a word. A number of the book's contributors speak of the esthetic enjoyment of preparing "software" (i.e., the programs, etc. — as distinguished from the "hardware" of the machines themselves) for computers.

The implications for a word-worker like the undersigned, who has been cheerfully viewing the cybernation revolution as one that meant serious dislocations for steelworkers and subway motormen — but surely not for himself! — are fascinating, and a little frightening. One can imagine some future *If* in the form of binary codes, proceeding through some latter-day 7090's input into a quantified readout like the Minskytron . . .

But not today, at any rate. Today there's *If*, and as John Pierce says in one of his remarks in this book, speculation "is the only way we have of giving variety to the future. When the future comes there is going to be just one future, but here in anticipation we can enjoy a lot of different futures."

And we did. We enjoyed the whole book!
—THE EDITOR

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entrusted
to a
few



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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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STARCHILD

by JACK WILLIAMSON & FREDERIK POHL

First of Three Parts

Illustrated by MORROW

**This was the day when the sun
went out—and mankind shook
at the name of the Starchild!**

I

It was the day, the hour and the moment of Earth's vernal equinox . . . and the near stars blinked.

A dozen of them flickered at once. Blazing Sirius and its dense

dwarf sister. The bright yellow twins of Alpha Centauri. Faint red Proxima . . . the distant sparks of Eta Eridani and 70 Ophiuchi A . . . the bright Sun itself.

The vast cosmic engines declared a vacation in their processes: the fusion of smaller atoms into large,

the flow of surplus mass into energy, the filtration of that energy through layered seas of restless gas, the radiation of their atomic power into space.

By the shores of Earth's oceans, within the crater walls of Luna, on the sands of Mars and the ringed satellites of Saturn, out past the Spacewall to the reefs, the great billion-headed human race stirred and shook and knew fear. The whisper spread out into the galaxy, propagated at the speed of light: "The Starchild!"

That was the way it began.

The flickering of the neighbor stars lasted only a moment, and it was seen first on the reefs nearest each star. Then slow Pluto caught the twinkle of 70 Ophiuchi A while Neptune, lumbering in its dark orbit on the far side of Sol, was the first to catch the dimming of white-hot Sirius. On Earth, where the fat old Planner sat chuckling on his golden chair, every momentary pulse of darkness arrived at once. His chuckles stopped. His pouchy face darkened. As his astronomers reported in, he exploded in wrath.

His first reports came from a hardened station in the zone of twilight on the planet Mercury, where sliding concrete doors uncovered a pit beneath a saw-toothed crater rim.

A silvered dome pushed out of the pit, out of the ragged shadow, into the white blaze of the near sun. The barrels of a dozen optical and radio telescopes, pyrometers, telescanners and cameras thrust out at the great orb, under

the blazoned slogan that the dome displayed to the universe in letters of cast bronze:

THE MIGHTIEST REWARDS THE MOST FAITHFUL

And inside the insulated, refrigerated observatory, three astronomers watched a thousand boards and gauges and dials. They were waiting.

For they had been warned.

The senior officer on duty lifted his eyes from a chronometer dial and growled:

"Five minutes!"

The other two men squinted at their instruments in silence. The grizzled Technicaptain peered at them through the pale lighting of screen that dominated the glitter of instruments. On it swam the visual image of the sun, golden and engorged, reaching out with fat, slow tendrils of superheated gas as it lay above the rock-fanged horizon of the planet Mercury.

"Yeah," he grumbled, half to himself. "We're ready."

The junior member of the team was a lean young Technicadet, an ambitious young man, already embittered by the harsh facts of survival and promotion in the Technicorps. He dared a comment: "Ready for nothing, if you ask me. This is idiot business!"

The senior officer rolled a yellowed eye toward him, but said nothing.

"So?" murmured the third man. He was a plump little Techtenant who had found a satisfying philosophy in his recent promotion. "The

Machine's business is idiotic, then?"

"Now, look! I didn't mean—"

"No. But you didn't think, either. The Machine discerns the greater plan; we only execute the parts. If the Machine attaches importance to this fanciful creature, the Starchild, then we may not question its motives."

The Technicadet gestured at the huge solar globe angrily and cried: "Look! What could put that out?"

The Techtenant shrugged, and the senior officer only said:

"Four minutes."

The cadet's military courtesy was worn thin under the abrasion of their long, tense vigil. He scowled at his telemetering pyrometers and grumbled: "Not a flicker! We've been here three miserable weeks, and we haven't seen a thing."

The Technicaptain rumbled: "We'll stay here three years if the Machine orders it. The Machine is above injustice or error. The Machine was built to rule the Plan, and it is guarded against human blunders."

"Oh, yes, sir. But we've seen nothing at all," cried the Technicadet. "No Starchild. No major sunspots — or whatever it is we are supposed to expect."

"Practice patience," advised the fat captain. "Or you may find yourself serving the Plan more personally. There is always a need for spare parts in the Body Bank! Three minutes."

The Technicadet subsided grudgingly apologetic. All three men sat strapped in their ob-

servations chairs, watching the great golden image of the sun. Wreathed in its red coronal streamers, pocked in its middle latitudes with a trail of small black spots, it hung over the black horizon like a god's eye. The instruments around them clicked and murmured.

"I remember," the Techtenant said at last, as though to himself, "when that sun was only another star in the sky. No brighter even than great Vega."

The Technicadet cried eagerly: "You were out in the Reefs?"

"Two minutes," growled the captain, but his eyes were on the young Techtenant.

He nodded. "Looking for my sister's — boy friend? Fiancee? Looking for Boysie Gann. Because he was looking for the Starchild. And we didn't find either of them."

The cadet said simply, "I've never seen the Reefs."

"A beautiful thing," said the Techtenant. "There are spiked forests of silicon plants, shining with their own light. Like jewels, and sharp enough to shred your space-suit. There's a growth that makes great brain-shaped masses of pure silver. There are thick stalks of platinum and gold, and there are things like flowers that are diamonds."

The cadet's breathing was suddenly loud. The grizzled old captain turned to look at him, all his recent scorn now frozen into longing — and a sort of fear. He snapped: "Pay attention to your work man! The Reefs are dangerous business!"



"Yes, sir," the Techtenant agreed earnestly. "I saw a great beast like a nightmare, shaped like a scorpion, huge as a horse—"

"No, you fæol! Dangerous to the Plan of Man. There is something there that nearly destroyed us once. If the Starchild has his way—"

He stopped himself and only said:

"One minute."

The Techtenant reddened. "I'm sorry, sir. I certainly did not intend to seem unplanned. I don't mean to suggest that those savage nomads beyond the Spacewall are worth considering, even if they do believe the Starchild to be more than human."

"Tend your instruments!" The captain set the example, resolutely taking his eyes from the men and the screen, clamping them on the bank of gauges and dials before him. A vagrant thought stirred his mind of the blonde Togetherness girl who had first whispered the name of the Starchild to him. What had become of her? The Body Bank?

—But there was no time for that. It was only seconds now.

In spite of all the insulation and the cold air sighing from the vents, the dome was suddenly stifling. The captain felt a tickle of perspiration running down his sides. "Twenty seconds!"

The captain stood with his eyes frozen on the black chronometer needle that raced to meet the red, still one he had set. When they touched it would be the vernal equinox on Earth. And the Star-

child's threat would be proved an empty bluff — Or would not.

Suddenly the whisper of the instruments changed. A camera shutter began clicking gently.

"Ten seconds!"

The shielded floor lamps shut themselves off. Only the instrument lights rivaled the phosphor glow from the image of the great yellow sun in the screen.

"Five seconds! ... Four! ... Three! ..."

— twenty reels of tape began to spin shrilly in the darkness; the breathing of the men was like sobs—

"Two! ... One! ..."

"Zero!"

The captain gulped and rubbed his eyes.

There was a dimming. Then the filters went down and then there was a burst of flame — then darkness.

The lights were gone. All of them. The sun's image had winked out. He heard a gasp from one of the other men, then a shout: "The Starchild! He's done it!"

And the other man sobbed: "We're blind!"

That, too, was how it began. But there was more.

Like a ripple from a pebble dropped into a still pond, a wave of darkness spread out from the sun. Three minutes after the instant of the vernal equinox it reached that clucking camera in the dome on Mercury, unseen by those sightless eyes.

In not quite three more minutes, it struck the men watching from

the orbital stations above the eternal hot, dank clouds of Venus. A falling shadow of fear, it darkened their screens, whitened their faces, silenced their talk. But their instrument lights remained visible. They had not been blinded by that last great burst of light from the sun.

Eight minutes from the sun, the wave of blackness washed over Earth. All across the sunward face of the planet a crushing night came down. Bewildered, men paused and fumbled through the endless seconds before the city lights came on. Terror electrified those who had heard the whisper of the Starchild's threat. On the dark side of Earth and on Luna, astronomers blanched as their near, familiar stars flickered. Some had heard whispers of the Starchild, too, and of a Writ of Liberation. Others merely knew that the images in their great spaceborne mirrors, or in the scopes that peered up from Earth's highest mountains, suddenly were missing familiar points of light. They came back—

But the sun did not. Not then. Not for half an hour and more, and while it was gone there was panic.

To the Planner on his great golden chair the news came and quenched his chuckling good humor. His huge soft face turned pale with fear.

To a man named Boysie Gann, locked in the dungeons of the Machine, no word came—but he knew. For he heard a guard whisper to another, "*The Starchild!*"

To a girl with haunted dark eyes,

telling whispering sonic beads before a console of the Machine, the word came in a language that Man had not invented, and few men could understand. Her name was Delta Four, and she did not fear. She did not care at all... And that was how it began for them, and the wave of darkness raced on into infinite space.

Twelve minutes from the sun it swept Mars, halting the dedication of an enormous new project to extract oxygen and water from the dead crust of the planet. The Deputy Planner of Mars, a poorly planned individual who had seen the Writ of Liberation with his own eyes, snatched a gun from his honor guard and shot himself.

During the following quarter-hour that shadow bathed the asteroids, terrified a few, left others unconcerned. For they either did not know, being buried in the mining shafts that hollowed out the precious cores of the tiny planets, or they were so dazed and uncaring with the eternal hardship of their toil that nothing could frighten them again.

The racing wave of light overtook the scattered outposts of the Plan on the Moons of Jupiter. It darkened Saturn's rings, swallowed the satellites of Uranus and Neptune. It fell upon the Spacewall Command complex on distant Pluto, where only those whose eyes fell upon the sun by chance noticed it—but they were afraid.

It drowned the Spacewall itself—more web than wall, a net of far-scattered stations whose laser beams

and patrol craft kept watch on the little-known infinities beyond, alert to guard the Plan of Man against vagrants from the Reefs, or such enemies as the Starchild.

A wave of unexpected terror, it sent the crews of a thousand slow-wheeling spaceforts shouting to their emergency stations. It awakened sirens and horns on ten thousand lonely patrol ships. It set the laser beams winking with a million signals of confused alarm.

A day or so beyond Pluto it washed the frontiers of the solar system, the snowball protoplanets of solid methane and ammonia which the distant gravitational arms of the sun had never gathered into actual worlds.

And then at last, days beyond that last fearful outpost of the Plan, it began to bathe the Reefs of Space.

Out on the reefs, those living asteroids grown through unending ages by the minute fusorian organisms, feeding on the thin seas of interstellar hydrogen, the wave of shadow no longer meant terror. It was only another event, in a life that was filled with danger and surprise.

On one lonely worldlet a prospector stopped to peer in annoyance at where the sun had been. He fumbled in his pack for a luminous crystal of fusorian diamond, and bent over his drill again.

On another reef a lay preacher in the Church of the Star glanced at his watch, then at the sky. He was not afraid when he saw that

Sol was gone from its accustomed position.

He had been expecting it.

He left his work to face the blue blaze of Deneb; knelt, whispered a few words of supplication and thanksgiving. Calmly then he bent back to the unfinished space boot on his last, for he was by trade a cobbler.

The shadow washed over a grave, but no one saw it. No one could have, for no one was there. Not even the cadaver; the grave was empty.

The shadow rested lightly on a city of stern, hard-faced refugees from the Plan of Man—on a great cluster of reeflets where a mighty space armada was being fashioned from fusorian steel—on a girl named Quarla Snow, who stood watching it flicker out with tears bright in her eyes.

On another living rock, a herdsman stood guarding a calving member of his herd from a flight of marauding pyropods. Lying behind a sheltering ledge of organic iron, one eye on his parturient spaceling while he searched out the armored killers with frugal flashes from his laser gun, he failed to notice that the sun had gone out.

That was how it began, for every man, woman and child alive.

And thirty-nine minutes later the sun began again its mighty outpouring of heat and light, but the wave of brilliance that followed the dark looked down on a changed solar system.

The sun's atomic engines ran

again. Hydrogen fused into helium, through the carbon cycle. Filtered energy flowed toward the solar surface. Radiation poured into space.

Three minutes from the sun, the wave of radiation crashed against that insulated dome on Mercury. It was recorded by the clucking camera, analyzed by the thousand automatic instruments. Sobbing with joy—or fear!—the blinded astronomers flashed the word to Earth: *The sun lives again!*

But its light reached Earth before their message.

That first rebirth of light brushed a high mountain on Earth, where the Planner sat on his golden chair, the gray metal falcon that perched on his shoulder darting a red-eyed glare about the room, whirring its steel wings. The Planner was staring at a sheet of creamy parchment which bore the heading:

WRIT OF LIBERATION

It had been delivered to him by the hand of one of his own guards, who had found it at his door. It said:

The Starchild requires the release of all of his followers who are held in the service of the Plan of Man by security collars.

The Starchild requires that all of his followers who have been consigned to the Body Bank for salvage shall be restored to their original state, and then that they too shall be released.

The Starchild finally requires

that the barrier called the Spacewall shall be dismantled, and that free passage between the worlds of the Plan and the Reefs of Space shall be permitted.

The Starchild is aware that the Plan of Man considers itself invulnerable, and thus he has arranged a warning demonstration. At the moment of the vernal equinox on Earth the sun will be extinguished. Twelve near stars will blink.

If the Planner fails to meet the Starchild's requirements after this demonstration, further measures will be taken. These will result in the destruction of the Plan of Man.

"Unplanned nonsense," groaned the Planner. "Impudence! Treason!"

A tall Technicolonel said uneasily, "Sir. We must take measures . . ."

"Measures," grumbled the Planner, while his steel falcon clashed its pinions. "What does the Machine say?"

A girl in a hooded gown said: "No data, sir." Her voice was like distant music, her expression serene.

"No data! Find me some data! Find who this Starchild is! Tell me how he did this thing—and how I can stop him from doing it again!"

The Technicolonel coughed. "Sir, for some years we have had reports of a Church of the Star. A new religion, apparently springing from the Reefs —"

"Always the Reefs! They should have been destroyed twenty years ago!"

"Yes, sir. But they were not. And the pioneers—that is, sir, the tramps and vagabonds on the

Reefs — they invented new superstitions. They worship, I believe, the star Deneb. Alpha Cygni — the star at the top of the Northern Cross. They have imagined a paradise on the planets that they imagine to orbit around it. They wish to migrate there, or some of them do — though at maximum drive for conventional spacecraft," he continued earnestly, "they might average some one per cent of the speed of light, in which case Deneb, at four hundred light-years distance, would not be reached for forty thousand—"

"Get to the point!" cried the Planner fretfully. "What about the Starchild?"

"Well, sir, we had heard rumors of such a person in our investigations of this cult. Sometime ago we decided to send a — uh — a special investigator to secure intelligence concerning him and it. The investigator's name was Boysie Gann, sir, and—"

"Bring him to me! Is he here on Earth?"

"Yes, sir. But — well, sir, he did not return as we expected. In fact —" the Colonel's face was a picture-puzzle of confusion — "I must confess, sir, that we don't properly know how he *did* return, as—"

"Fool!" shouted the Planner. "Bring him to me! Never mind what you don't know. Bring me Boysie Gann!"

... And that too was how it began; but in fact some parts of it began earlier.

For Boysie Gann it began many months earlier, when he was a spy.

II

For Boysie Gann the beginning was on Polaris Station, that great metal wheel that floats in the icy space past Pluto, one link in the Spacewall between the Plan of Man planets and the Reefs.

Boysie Gann was twenty-six years old and already a Machine Major.

Boysie Gann was six feet tall, brown-haired, blue-eyed. He was broad through the shoulders and slim at the waist. He moved like a cheerful cat. He looked like a fighter, and he was.

He reported aboard the Polaris Station with a grin and a disarming look out of his bright blue eyes. "Boysie Gann reporting, sir," he told the deck officer. "Technicadet Gann, at your service." And that was a cheerful lie. He was no cadet, but at the spy school on Pluto the briefing officers had given him a new rank to make his job easier. A Machine Major was a man of importance. He would be watched. A cadet could go anywhere, see anything.

The deck officer assigned him quarters, procured him help in stowing his gear, shook his hand to welcome him aboard, and ordered him to report to the commandant of the Station, Machine Colonel Mohammed Zafar.

Gann's assignment was to investigate rumors of strange anti-Plan activities on the Polaris Station. Gann was a soldier of the Plan, and he could hardly conceive of anything anti-Plan that was not at the same time corrupt, slovenly,

evil and wrong. He had come to the station expecting to find it run-down and rusty, manned by surly malcontents.

Yet the discipline was good. The men were on their toes. On the way through the plastic passages of the wheel, stepping high in the light gravity of the station's spin, he saw that the metalwork was bright. Confusing, thought Gann, mildly perplexed; but he knew his duty and he knew how to do it.

He knocked on the door of the commandant's office and was ordered inside. He came to full attention and a brisk salute.

"Technicadet Gann reporting as ordered, sir!"

The Machine Colonel returned his salute methodically. Here, too, Gann was faintly surprised, though he allowed none of the surprise to show through his military bearing and engaging grin. Machine Colonel Zafar was a short brown man in meticulously pressed dress whites, who looked as solid and enduring as the Plan itself. "Welcome aboard, cadet," he said. "Give me your orders, please."

"Yes, sir!" Gann's orders were also a lie. They showed him to be a relief laser operator fresh out from Earth. They did not mention his true rank, or his intensive training on Pluto. The commandant read them carefully, then nodded.

"Cadet Gann," he said in his soft, precise voice, "we are glad to have you on Polaris Station. As you know, this station is a major unit in the Spacewall. Our primary job is to detect and intercept any un-

authorized traffic between the Plan of Man and the areas beyond Pluto — the wastes that are called the Reefs of Space. Our secondary job is to monitor as much activity in the Reefs as possible. Our radar, laser and optical systems are the heart of our mission — and so, Cadet Gann, what you do is the most important part of our work here. Don't fail us."

"Sir!" said Boysie Gann earnestly, "I won't fail you! I serve the Plan of Man without question or pause!" And he saluted and left.

But before he left he dropped his orders and retrieved them, with a flashing grin of apology to the colonel.

He left with his shoulders high. For in the instant when he was bent out of the commandant's sight, picking up his papers, he had planted a listening bug under the projecting rim of Machine Colonel Zafar's desk.

Within an hour of Gann's arrival on Polaris Station he was fitted with an iron collar.

He had expected it. In so sensitive an installation as the station, every man wore one of the Machine's collars, so that at any instant, wherever he might be, any one of them could be destroyed. There was no other way. A space man gone amok — a traitor loose in the fuel stores — a drunken armorer at the studs of the station's mighty missiles — any individual could do so much harm that it was necessary to have instant control over every man aboard.

Still, it was an uncomfortable feeling. Gann touched the collar lightly, and for once the smile was gone from his cheerful face. It was disturbing to know that someone somewhere—the distant Machine on Earth, or one of its satellites nearby; a security officer on Pluto, or the commandant here on the station—could at the surge of a radar pulse detonate the decapitation charge.

His bunkmate was a tall, lean Nigerian, Technician M'Buna. Lounging in the security office, waiting for Gann, M'Buna saw his involuntary gesture and laughed. As he held the door and they started off to their duty post M'Buna said, "Makes you nervous, eh? Don't worry. If it goes off, you'll never know it!"

Gann grinned. He liked M'Buna, had at first encounter already realized that here was an intelligent, patient friend. Yet he said at once, "Nobody likes a collar. And —" he acted a pause, glancing around — "I hear there are people somewhere who do something about it. Out on the Reefs. Men who know how to get the collars off . . ."

M'Buna said uncomfortably, "I wouldn't know anything about that. Here's our station."

Gann nodded and let it pass. But he had not failed to notice that M'Buna had overlooked one essential act. What Gann said hinted at treason to the Plan. M'Buna's duty was clear: He should have called Gann on it and established exactly what was meant by the hint. And then reported Gann at once.

Huge as an ocean liner, flimsy as a dragon-kite, Polaris Station was a big plastic wheel. Its spin was just fast enough to keep the crew's soup in the plate and the plate on the table. The hub was stationary, with the radar-laser search dome on the north face, the entry locks on the other.

The station had been set up first, more than a quarter-century before, as a base for exploiting the Reef cluster immediately to the galactic north of the sun. The snowball that had supplied reaction mass for the old nuclear rockets was still in detector range, swinging a hundred miles from the station in their coupled orbits. Now there was no need for reaction mass, but the snow-asteroid still had its uses. It served as a cosmic garbage dump, the unreclaimed wastes and offal of the station hauled out there after every watch and left on its surface so that free-orbiting particles of trash would not return false signals to the search instruments back at the station.

Within forty-eight hours of reporting aboard the station, Machine Major Boysie Gann had bugged the offices of the commandant, the executive officer, the quartermaster and the intelligence chief. Each tiny instrument was broadcasting a sealed-wave pickup of every word that was uttered in those sacrosanct chambers. Gann himself spot-monitored the transmissions when time allowed. The rest of the time the great records machine on Pluto received the signals, taped them and transmitted them to Earth and the

buried citadel of the Planning Machine itself.

But all his bugs produced nothing.

Gann's orders had been less than explicit: *Seek out and identify enemies of the Plan.* Beyond that there had been only rumors. A vast smuggling enterprise, shipping valuable strategic materials from the inner Plan Worlds to the Reefs. A strange new cult that threatened to unite the reefs against the inner planets. A leader preaching a hegira. A security leak . . . But which of these was true, if any, Gann had not been told. It was not security doctrine to tell agents precisely what they should be looking for, on the grounds that their time was most productively employed when they could develop and follow up on many of their own leads.

Yet here there were no leads at all.

No real leads, at least. A few unguarded remarks at mess. Some slipshod accounting of spare parts for the laser banks. These were anti-Plan irregularities, to be sure, and men had gone to the Body Bank for far less. Men would go to the Body Bank for them now, from Polaris Station, for Gann had promptly filed the names and data. But he was certain that what he should be looking for was something bigger and worse than an occasional disgruntled or sloppy officer.

Within one week Gann had proved to his own satisfaction that if there was any major anti-Plan

activity going on, it was not on Polaris Station.

He had to look elsewhere.

But where else was there?

... It wasn't until he had been there twice that he realized where the "elsewhere" had to be.

Like all the noncommissioned personnel, Gann took his share of KP, garbage detail, cleanup orderly and so on. It was not usually a burdensome chore. The radar ovens and cybernated housekeepers did all the work; the only thing left for the men in charge was to make sure they were working properly. Even the short hop from station to the snowball for garbage disposal was a welcome break in the routine.

He shared his garbage tour with M'Buna, and they spent their time chatting desultorily at the controls of the "scow" — actually a reactionless space-tractor — while the garbage pods steered, unloaded and returned themselves. M'Buna had never referred to Gann's leading remark about collars. Nor had Gann ever been able to draw him into any unplanned talk; he had given up trying. They talked about home. They talked about promotion. And they talked about girls.

For Gann there was one girl, and her name was Julie Martinet. "No bigger than a minute, M'Buna," he said earnestly, "and with those beautiful dark eyes. She's waiting for me. When I come back—"

"Sure," said M'Buna. "Now, this girl I knew in Lagos—"

"You're talking about a girl,"

said Gann. "Julie is *the* girl. The only one who matters."

"How come you never get any mail from her?" asked M'Buna.

And Gann froze.

"She doesn't like to write letters," he said after a moment, but inside he was cursing himself. So foolish a slip! There was a reason, and a perfectly good one, why he got no letters from Julie Martinet. They were piling up for him on Pluto, he was sure of that; but they could not be forwarded here. There was too much risk of someone reading one, and learning from some chance comment that Gann was not the simple laser tech he appeared.

As soon as he could Gann changed the subject. "Say," he said, "what's that on the scope?" It was a tiny blip, settling down feather-light toward the surface of the snowball protoplanet. A clutter of trash, of course. Nothing more. It was by no means unusual for some part of the garbage cargo to rebound from the tenuous clutch of the snowball's gravity and wheel around in space for minutes or hours before finally settling into place.

But M'Buna glanced at the radar display and said casually: "The commandant, I suppose. He comes out here every once in a while to check things over."

Carefully, trying to hide his excitement, Gann said, "Wonder what he does there." M'Buna shrugged, reached forward and turned a switch. The pod had emptied itself and returned to the ship. "Tell you what," Gann went on. "Let's look."

He didn't wait for an answer. The pod back, the scow ready, there was nothing to stop him. He fed the ion-stream to the reactionless drive and cut in the course-correcting side-rockets. The scow began to move.

M'Buna said tautly, "No! Cut it out, Gann. The Old Man isn't going to want us skylarking around without permission."

But Gann wasn't listening. He was watching the screens intently.

If Machine Colonel Zafar was paying surreptitious visits to the ice-planetoid there had to be a reason. He was going to find out what that reason was. He cut in maximum magnification on the screens, and the surface of the little protoplanet of frozen gases leaped up toward him.

The thing was eight or ten miles thick, shaped more like a broken cinder block than a sphere. It was unusually dense, as the distant, orbiting blobs of frozen methane and hydrogen went; if it ever drifted in near the sun, it would make a major comet. In the screen its greenish crust of solid gases looked like a blizzard in slow motion. Disturbed by the impact of the waste they had dumped, the whole snowball was quivering and shaking, its light gas-snow rising in sheets and falling again.

There was absolutely nothing to be seen . . .

But even a tiny planetoid has a great deal of surface by human standards. Somewhere on that surface Colonel Zafar had gone in his flying suit. Gann reached again for

the controls to circle around.

Some noise warned him.

He turned, and saw M'Buna leaning toward him, a strange expression of mingled pity and hate on his face; and in M'Buna's hand was a glittering metal pencil, pointed at him.

In that split-second of time that was left to him Gann thought wildly: *If only I could get the report in, I've sure found something anti-Plan going on now...*

And that was the last thought he had for a long time. He heard a hiss and had just time to realize that the sting on his cheek was a nerve-pellet fired from M'Buna's contraband gun. That was all. Blackness closed over him, and cold.

III

A nerve pellet is an instant anesthetic. It is also something more.

It does not wear off. Not ever. The victim of a nerve pellet does not recover consciousness until he is given an antidote.

When Gann woke up, he had no idea of how long he had been under the influence of the nerve pellet. But what he knew for sure was that he was no longer in the control room of the garbage scow.

Nor was he anywhere else in the universe where he had ever been before.

He lay on an uneven, rocky ledge. Under him was a soft, moist—and warm!—blanket of something that seemed to be a lichen,

a kind of clinging moss that grew in thick, flaky scales.

It was glowing with a soft steady light. On the rocks around him the light was greenish in hue. Farther away, on higher ridges, it shone purple and red.

And above the rocks the sky was velvet black, with a single dazzling star blazing down on him.

Boysie Gann struggled to his feet—and soared into the air.

As he came down he stared about him. When he looked away from the rocks and that bright star his eyes adjusted and he could see other stars. All the familiar constellations... And then it hit him.

That bright star was the sun.

He was on one of the Reefs of Space.

Gann never knew how he came there. The man who would surely know was M'Buna, and Gann never saw M'Buna again. But it was clear that while under the influence of the nerve pellet he had been transported and marooned. Alone, without a radio, without instruments, without a ship or spacesuit, he might live out his life on that Reef—but he would die there in the end. For he could never leave.

It was surely a good way to dispose of an unwanted man—simpler even than murder, since there was no body to get rid of.

He was stiff and cold. His wrists were swollen and his ankles numb. Evidently his captors had not trusted to the nerve pellet to keep him quiet, but had shackled him as well.

But the shackles were gone now, with every other evidence of who it was who had brought him here. His head hurt. He was parched and hungry.

He began to look around him more methodically.

His first needs were food and water; but he could not resist a look around at the wonder of the place. Bright metallic fern fronds tinkled like wind-gongs from an overgrown vale to one side. A distant whirring sounded like a flock of grouse. Impossible that there should be grouse here, Gann knew; yet there might be some sort of life. The Reefs of Space were created by life, like the coral atolls on Earth's warm seas. Life inhabited them all...

But it was not always—not even often!—life of a sort compatible with humankind. For the Reefs were formed from clusters of fusorians, feasting on the hydrogen formed between the stars according to the laws of the Neo-Hoyle Hypothesis, converting it into heavier atoms, and then into atoms heavier still. The life in the Reefs was sometimes warm-blooded, carbon-based, oxygen-breathing animal. But more often it was metal or crystal—at best, worthless for food; at worst, a deadly danger.

The bright star, Sol, was near the south celestial pole, Gann discovered. That put him more or less galactic north of the sun—and therefore, almost straight out from Polaris Station. How far out? He had no way of knowing, except that the major Reef clusters were

thought to be some two hundred astronomical units from Sol. At a guess, twenty billion miles.

Gann turned his eyes from the stars and looked about him. He had a world to explore. It might be less than a hundred yards in its longest axis, but it was all he had.

He rubbed his aching wrists and ankles and began to explore. He climbed carefully out of that small, glowing green dell—carefully, because he knew the danger of a reeflet. The fusorian symbiotes held an atmosphere, somehow; but it was like a soap bubble, and if Gann were so incautious as to step too high and soar through it, he would find himself in the hard vacuum of the space between the stars, and death would come in a horrible explosive burst as his blood boiled off and his cells ruptured.

He climbed toward the ridge paused and looked around.

Ahead of him was another dell, this one bearing some sort of glittering bush. The plants were shoulder-high, with plumes of narrow gloss, sprinkled with what seemed to be individual fusorian cells that glowed with their own light. Each leaf darkened from green at the base to black at the tip, and each ended in a bright red berry.

Queerly, they grew in rows.

They looked, in fact, like a truck farm in Earth's populous market valleys, and at once Gann's hunger surged forth. They looked like food! He started toward them at a shambling run—

And from behind him a voice spoke.



"Well, good for you. See you woke up finally. Headed right for the feedbag too, eh?"

Machine Major Boysie Gann's training had prepared him for any shock. It was trained reflex that stopped him in mid-flight, turned him, brought him back down to the glowing mossy surface of the reeflet in a half crouch, ready to do battle.

But there was nothing warlike in the figure that was coming toward him.

He was a stubby little man with a big belly and a dirty yellow beard. His clothing was woven out of some kind of rough fiber. It was ragged and filthy and half unbuttoned.

And clinging to his bald brown head was a black-fanged, green-scaled, red-eyed creature the size of a capuchin monkey. It looked like a toy dragon. And from under the knife-sharp edges of its scales seeped little wisps of smoke.

Boysie Gann said warily: "Hello."

"Why, hello," the man said in a mild voice. "You was sleeping. Figured I'd best leave you to sleep it off. Nice to have you here. I wasn't expecting company."

"I wasn't exactly expecting to be here."

The man nodded and thrust out a dirty, gnarled hand. "Figured that. Couple fellows dropped you five, six hours ago. Looks like they gave you a rough enough time so I let you be."

The creature on its head wheeled to face Gann as its owner moved,

glaring at him with hot red eyes. Gann shook the man's hand and said, "I need some water. And food."

"Why, sure. Come along then." He nodded, the creature scrambling back and forth, and turned to lead the way across the cultivated field toward what seemed to be a tiny black lake. "Omer don't like strangers," he called over his shoulder, "but he won't bother you none. Just don't make any sudden moves, is all. Omer's a pyropod — just a baby, of course, but they can be mean."

Silently Gann agreed. The little creature looked mean enough, with its oozing plumes of smoke and fiery eyes. They loped across the glowing rows of the man's little farm and reached the shore of the lake — no more than a pond, really, fifty feet across, its surface disturbed with the slow, tall waves of low-gravity fluids. On its far bank a sharp cliff rose in a glitter of metallic outcroppings, softened by glowing plants and mosses, and in the base of the cliff was a metal lean-to that hid the mouth of the cave. "That's home," said the man cheerfully. "Welcome to it, such as 'tis. Come in and rest yourself."

"Thanks," said Gann. "By the way, we didn't really introduce ourselves."

"Oh? Guess you're right," said the man. "I'm Harry Hickson. And you—" Gann started to speak, but Hickson didn't pause — "you're what you call it, Machine Major Boysie Gann, out of the spy school on Pluto."

For twenty-four hours Gann rested in the cave of the hermit, Harry Hickson, and his thoughts were dark.

How had Hickson known his name? Even more — how had he known that he was not a shanghaied radar-laser tech, but a graduate of the spy school?

There was no answer in Gann's brain, so he shut off his mind to conjectures and applied it to restoring his physical condition and reconnoitering his surroundings.

Evidently he had been unconscious for longer than he had thought on the ship that had dumped him on this reeflet, for he had lost weight and strength and there was a straggly stubble of beard on his chin. But Hickson fed him and cared for him. He gave Gann a bed of sorts to sleep on — only a stack of reeking blankets, but as good as the one he slept on himself — and fed him from the same pot of greasy stew as himself. The diet was crude but filling, supplemented with fruits and roots and shoots of the plants he grew on the rock. The reddish berries, which tasted like a sort of acid citrous fruit, were a good source of all necessary vitamins, Harry told him earnestly, and one of the lichens was a source of protein.

Gann did not question the food. Clearly it had kept Harry Hickson alive for a long time — the cave showed that it had been his home for months or even years — and it would keep Gann alive for at least as long as he intended to stay on the reeflet.

And that would not be long. For he had learned from Hickson that there was a way of communicating that would bring help if he needed it. "Never needed it, o' course," he said, fishing a long string of a rhubarb-like vegetable out of his bowl of stew and licking his fingers. "But it's comforting to know it's there . . . Say, you worried about that collar, Boysie?"

Gann stopped in mid-gesture, suddenly aware that he had been tugging at it. "Not exactly," he said quietly.

"Get it off of you, if you like," Hickson offered mildly. "No trouble. Done it lots o' times."

Gann stared. "What the Plan are you talking about?" he demanded. "Don't you know what this is? These things are built with automatic destruct circuits, as well as the remote triggering equipment. If anybody tries to take them off—" He touched both sides of the collar with fingertips and flipped them up and outward, pantomiming the explosion of a decapitation charge.

"Oh, sure, I know all about *that*," said Hickson. "Hold still. No, not you, Gann. You, Omer! Don't wiggle so. Makes me nervous. . ."

He got up from his squatting position at the rude plank table where they ate and came around behind Gann. "Just you sit there, Boysie," he said. "Can move if you want to, it don't matter, but don't look toward me . . . Omer con-found you! Get your claws outa my scalp! Raised him from an egg, that little devil, right here in my own smoke-pot, but he gets jumpy

when he knows I'm going to— Well, here we are.”

And something moved around Gann's neck. He couldn't see what Hickson was doing, was sure that the tubby little hermit had not brought any tools or instruments. Yet there was a sudden constriction at his throat.

He heard the lock snap. . .

The collar fell of his neck and clattered to the floor of the cave. Gann leaped to his feet and spun, white-faced, to be ready for the explosion. But no explosion came.

“Now, rest easy, Boysie,” complained the hermit. “You're spooking Omer, here. That thing can't blow up any more.” Casually he picked up the collar and lifted it to examine it in the light of a mass of luminous diamond that would have been worth millions on earth. “They make them real nice,” he said admiringly. “Lot of detail in this thing. Too bad it can't be something more useful—” And he tossed it to the rear of the cave. “Well,” he said, “you about ready to move on now?”

Gann stood silent for a second, looking at him. “Move on where?” he asked.

“Oh, don't worry, Boysie. I know what you were thinking. Plain as day. You figure I ought to go back and get examined by the Planning Machine, 'cause you don't quite understand what I'm up to but you think it's unplanned. Well, that's right. Unplanned is what I am. And I don't mind if you do what you're thinking, and take my laser-

gun and call help so you can get out of here. But I'm not going with you, Boysie. Make up your mind to that.”

“All right,” said Gann, surrendering. But in his mind he was not surrendering at all.

Hickson had put it very mildly when he said that Gann wanted to take him back for study. Gann not only wanted to, he intended to. In fact, he had never intended anything as hard in his life—had never been so determined or insistent, not even about his career in the service of the Machine, not even in his great love for Julie Martinet.

This man Harry Hickson was an unplanned disaster in the making.

Whoever he was, however he did what he did, he was a terrible danger to the Plan of Man. Gann could almost hear the instructions of his briefing officer back on Pluto—if he had been able to report Hickson's existence to him, and if the briefing officer could issue an order: *Subject Hickson is a negative factor. His uncatalogued knowledge must be retrieved for the Plan. Then each organ of his unautomated body must be obliterated. . .*

But how to get him back into the jurisdiction of the Planning Machine?

There had to be a way.

There would be a way. Machine Major Boysie Gann was sure of it. All it required was that he be patient — and then, when his chance came, be ready.

Gann said, “If you mean it, then

let's take your gun and signal right now. I'm ready to move on."

Harry Hickson led Gann to a point of red-scaled rock, puffing and wheezing. On his bald scalp the fledgling pyropod wheeled and slithered, keeping its bright red eyes on Boysie Gann.

"See up there?" called Hickson over his shoulder. "That star there next to Vega—"

Boysie Gann followed his pointing finger. "You mean Theta Lyrae?"

The hermit turned and looked at him, mildly surprised. "That's right, Boysie. You fellows learn a lot in that spy school. Too bad you don't — Well, never mind that. One I mean, it's just below. Theta Lyrae. The faint red one. Forget the name, but that one right there. That way's Freehaven."

Gann felt his blood pound. "Freehaven? I've heard of it. A colony of reef-rats."

"Aw, Boysie don't say it like that. They're free men, that's all. That's the biggest place in the Reefs, Freehaven is. Like a — well, what would you call it? A kind of a town only its one whole cluster of Reefs, maybe a hundred thousand miles across. And maybe half a billion miles from here."

"I see," said Gann, thinking with exultation and pride: *What a prize to bring back to Pluto! A whole city to be Planned and returned to the brotherhood of the Machine!* He could almost see the glowing jet-trails of the Plan cruisers vectoring in on the cluster . . .

"Don't get your hopes up," Hickson said dryly. "You ain't there yet, Boysie, and maybe even when you get there you won't find it too easy to pick up a phone and call the Machine. Now hush a minute while I send for your ride out there."

He picked up the clumsy old laser gun he had taken out of its greasy rag wrappings back in the cave, checked its power settings, raised it and aimed carefully at the distant red spark that was the line-of-sight to Freehaven. Three times he snapped the trigger, then lowered the gun and turned to Gann.

"That's all there is to it. Take 'em a while to get here. Might as well go back to the cave."

But he paused, glancing at Boysie Gann as though he were mildly embarrassed about something. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

He turned back to the stars, set down the laser pistol and stretched out his arms. His lips moved, but Gann could hear no sound. On his bald pate the pyropod hissed and slithered. The hermit's whole body seemed stretched, yearning, toward — toward what?

Gann could not tell. Toward Freehaven, perhaps. Toward the faint red star that marked its position — or toward Theta Lyrae nearby — or toward the great bright giants of the Summer Triangle that marked that part of the sky, Vega, Altair and Deneb. . .

Then Harry Hickson relaxed and the pyropod scuttled down from his scalp onto his shoulder, as the hermit raised one arm and made a sinuous, undulating motion. Like

the wriggle of a snake, Gann thought. Or the looping movement of a swan's neck.

Swan? Some faint old memory stirred in Boysie Gann's mind. Something about a swan—and a star—

But it would not come clear, and he followed Harry Hickson back to the cave.

Harry Hickson's little reeflet was one drifting island in an expanding infinity of matter and space. The doctrine of the Neo-Hoyle Hypothesis was clear: The universe was limitless, in space, in time—and in matter. New mass was forming everywhere in the form of newly created hydrogen atoms, as the old complexes of matter—the stars and planets, the dust clouds and the galaxies—were spinning slowly apart.

Hickson's reeflet was an infant among bodies of organized matter, probably only a few millions of years in age, in size no more than a dust mote. Yet it was like most of the universe in that; for most matter is young. The spiralling growth in rate of creation of new matter makes that sure. Some galaxies, and even some of the reefs between them, are old beyond computation and imagination, because the steady-state universe has neither beginning nor end. And life is the oldest phenomenon of all. Older than the oldest stars—but yet young, though those scattered and forgotten stars are black and dead.

Life in space has lived—literally—forever.

Every possible ecology has been evolved, through every conceivable evolutionary test.

Watching Harry Hickson play with his pet pyropod, Boysie Gann reflected that the strangest life-form he knew was man. For here was the pudgy, balding hermit—unplanned and deviant, a deadly danger by every standard of the Planning Machine—solemnly attempting to teach his pyropod to fly.

He lifted the little horror off his head and set it carefully on a high ledge, then retreated. Spitting and hissing, its red eyes glittering, its scales seeping the smoke of its internal jet fires, it wailed in a thin, raucous screech for him to come back. Then, despairing, it launched itself out into the air, missed Hickson by yards and crashed into the rock wall at the far side of the cave, where it remained, writhing and hissing, until Hickson took pity on it and picked it up. "It's a wonder it doesn't dash its brains out," muttered Gann, the fifth time the little beast crashed into the rock.

"Oh, I guess so," Hickson agreed mildly. "Don't suppose it has any, really, though. A pretty clumsy kind of beast it is, right, Omer?" And he patted the little monster with the appearance of real affection for a moment, then sighed and set it down. He carefully inverted a crate and set it down over the pyropod, then put a mass of silvery fusorian coral upon the crate.

The pyropod squalled and hissed but Hickson ignored it. "Hoped I could teach it to fly before I go,"

he said regretfully, "but I guess I won't make it. Boysie, your transportation ought to be here in an hour. Care to see what the pilot's gonna look like?" He thumbed an old-fashioned two-dimensional color print out of a button-down pocket in his ragged coat and handed it to Gann. It was a pretty, quite young girl, one hand resting on the head of a seal-like creature, before a background of a glowing purple and silver Reef. "Name's Quarla," said the old man affectionately. "Quarla Snow. Daughter of an old friend of mine. He treated me, couple years ago. Doctor, he is, and a good one. Don't know much about what ails me, though..."

The hermit seemed to realize he was rambling and caught himself up short. "Guess that's all," he said, smiling with a touch of embarrassment. "Swan bless you, Boysie. Give Quarla my love." And in a moment, before Gann could realize what he was about to do, the old man had turned, pushed aside the metal door that overhung the entrance to the cave, and stepped out.

Gann shook his head, half in rueful amusement, half in surprise. "Hey!" he called. "Hickson! Where are you going? Wait for me!" And he hurried to the door of the cave and out onto the sward the old hermit had so carefully cropped.

The man was not there.

His footprints were there, still visible in the faint bruises on the lichenous surface of the earth.

But Harry Hickson was gone.

Gann ranged the surface of the

entire reef in the next few hours, shouting and searching. But there was no answer to his call, no sight of Hickson anywhere.

The man had simply vanished.

IV

In the cave Machine Major Gann found the old man's laser gun—an ancient Technicorps model that must have been smuggled into space before the Space-wall was set up. It gave him a small feeling of confidence to carry it, though there was no visible enemy to shoot it at.

He needed that confidence.

No man can be alone. Each man has his place in the Plan of Man, under the benevolent guidance of the Planning Machine. Each man serves the Plan, so that the Plan may serve all men...

That was doctrine, and Boysie Gann found himself foolishly repeating it as he clambered up the red-scaled rock to the point from which Hickson had signaled to Freehaven. It did not help very much.

No man can be alone . . . but Boysie Gann felt very much alone indeed, on that tiny floating islet of reef, under the blazing stare of a billion stars.

There was no reason for him to be on this point of rock, rather than anywhere else on the surface of the reeflet. He had no reason to believe his rescuer would come to look for him there. Had no reason to be sure there would be a rescuer at all, in fact, for what the

half-demented hermit, Harry Hickson, had said could not be accepted as reliable . . . Yet he stayed there, waiting, for hours. He leaned against a cairn of rock and scanned the skies. Only the distant, unfriendly stars returned his look. He sat, leaning against the rock, and drowsed. No sound or motion disturbed him. And then . . .

There was a faint blur of greenish mist in the low black sky, moving at the threshold of vision.

Gann sprang to his feet, eyes peering into the immense emptiness above him. The greenish blur was so faint he could not be sure it was real. Yet — surely there was something there; and, following it, a cluster of even fainter reddish sparks.

Gann raised the laser, checked the settings to make sure he was not firing a blast of destruction into the sky, and thumbed the trigger thrice, as he had seen Hickson do, pointing it toward the greenish blur.

A moment . . . and then the green glow veered toward him.

It was his rescuer, he was sure of it. But what were the red sparks? Even as he watched, the tiny, distant coals veered too, following the greenish glow. Rapidly they grew nearer . . .

Then one of the red sparks dashed ahead of the rest, with a long blue trail of incandescence faintly visible behind it. It was like an ominous comet as it dived through the greenish cloud.

Noise smote Gann's ears abruptly: a sudden roaring, like the jet of an old-time rocket.

The things had come at last into the shallow atmosphere of his reef-let. He heard the shriek of their motion through the air — and something else.

Something was screaming.

The red spark thundered overhead, out of the green cloud, toward Gann like some deadly ancient missile homing in on a radar trace — then at the last moment rose up a dozen yards above his head, and as it passed he caught a sudden glimpse of nightmare.

Metal scales like broken mirrors. Enormous talons, dripping something that glowed and was golden, something that splattered to the ground near Gann like a soft, fitful rain. The red spark divided into two red, monstrous, blinking eyes, mirror-rimmed, in a head like a maniac dragon's. And the roaring blue flame was the tail of the thing.

"Pyropod!" breathed Boysie Gann aloud, transfixed.

He had never seen an adult before — had heard of them only as distant rumors, like the sort of ghost stories unplanned parents used to tell their children. The baby pyropod that had been Harry Hickson's pet had not prepared him for the huge, menacing reality that shrieked through the air above him now. He stood, stunned.

A pyropod is a living rocket, flame-footed and deadly. Their chemistry is not that of Earthly air-breathers; their primeval genesis came from the same non-carbon evolutionary strain that shaped the

fusorians. On their plasma jets, nuclear in temperature, fired by fusorian symbiotes, they can outrun a Plan cruiser and outfight any Terrestrial beast in search of prey. And to the pyropods, anything that moves is prey. Their jets take enormous quantities of reaction mass. Their appetites are insatiable. Scavengers of space, they will attack anything.

Fortunately for the continuation of life on the inner planets and the Reefs of Space, atmosphere is a slow poison to the pyropods and gravity damages their reflexes. They are beasts of the interstellar void, ship-sized monstrosities at their hugest, big as cave bears even when barely mature. Standing in shock, watching the great beast Boysie Gann stared at the red eyes pulsing in their telescopic mirrors, wheel and flash back toward him, imagined the black talons ripping metal or rock like bread . . .

And realized, almost too late, that he was the target of those monstrous talons now.

Instinctively he raised the laser gun and fired.

The charge was minimal, only the message setting; yet the great pyropod felt it, screamed and soared away. Gann hurled himself to the shelter of the rock cairn, staring about. The torn green cloud of luminosity was dissolving in the night sky above him. Streamers of mist scattered and faded. And where the cloud had been, Gann could see what had brought it.

A spaceling. One of the warm-blooded, seal-like creatures that

roam the space between the stars, natural prey to the pyropods, friend to man. It had brought the cloud — for it was the spaceling's ability to hold atmosphere about it, in a Ryeland-effect field, that permitted them, as oxygen-breathers, to live in space at all.

The spaceling had been grievously wounded. Even from so far away, Gann could see the hideous slash that ripped along the whole length of its sleek, golden body as it came tumbling down. Something was clinging to its fur — a rider? Gann could not be sure; but what he was certain of was that the end for both the spaceling and its burden was very near.

The pyropod that had attacked him had wheeled again and was diving on the wounded seal-like beast.

A louder howling drowned out the spaceling's scream as the pyropod came out of the dark over a purple-scaled ridge, red eyes pulsing and dripping talons reaching again.

Gann reacted without thought. He twisted the crystal of that old laser to maximal intensity, steadied the tube on the rocks of the cairn and fired into those dreadful flashing eyes. They exploded.

The pyropod bellowed in agony. Its eyes were gone — eyes or eye-like structures; actually, Gann knew, they were more like laser search gear. But whatever they were, they were gone now, burst like the shattered hull of a subtrain when the field of its tunnel fails and the fluid rock crushes it. The pyropod drove blindly up and

away, squalling until its sound was cut off like the dropping of a curtain.

It had passed beyond the atmosphere into space. Blind and wounded, Gann thought it would not be back. And a blessing that was, since an orange light was blinking on the laser gun, warning him that the fuel cell was fully exhausted.

He knew there were other pyropods still out there, somewhere beyond the veil of air. He could see their faint red sparks circling, and the blue trails of their fiery exhausts. They veered all at once, and drove in toward the retreating comet-tail of the pyropod he had wounded. There was a puff of incandescent vapor . . .

Dimly Gann realized that its mates had destroyed the wounded one, torn it open and were now wheeling and diving, fighting for their shares of the kill. But he had no time for them. The spaceling had tumbled to earth halfway across the little reeflet, and Gann stumbled and leaped across the red-scaled rocks to find it.

It was lying at the edge of Harry Hickson's little plantation, spurting glowing yellow blood across the green moss. Beside it was its rider, bent over the terrible wound, trying with both hands to stanch the flow of blood.

The rider was a girl. Hickson had been right. It was the girl in the photograph he had displayed.

The spaceling moaned and shuddered as Gann drew near, its voice a faint, inarticulate sob

The girl was sobbing too.

"Can I help?" said Boysie Gann.

The girl, Quarla Snow, turned quickly, startled. She stared at Gann as though he were himself a pyropod, or some more fearsome monster from legend. There was fright in her eyes—and yet queerly, thought Gann, almost relief as well; as though she had expected something even worse. It was the expression of a man who finds himself confronted by a wolf—when he expects a tiger.

"Who are you?" she demanded. Her voice was low and controlled. She was tall and strong, but very young.

"Boysie Gann," he said. "And you're Quarla Snow. Harry Hickson told me you'd be here."

Her hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes widened in fear. For a moment she seemed about to run, then she shook her head in a pathetic gesture and turned back to the spaceling.

Its golden blood had ceased to flow, its body to move. The sounds it had uttered were still.

"Sultana's dead," the girl said softly, as though to herself.

"I'm sorry," Boysie Gann said inadequately. He glanced aloft—the pyropods were out of sight entirely now—then back to her. Quarla Snow's face was lightly tanned, almost to match her honeycolored hair. She was nearly the color of her spaceling. Her white coveralls were splashed with that golden ichor, her hands dripping with it. Yet she was beautiful.

For a moment a buried emotion



GRAY MORROW

trembled inside Boysie Gann, a memory of Julie Martinet and the taste of the fresh salt surf on her mouth when he kissed her on the beach of the little Mexican resort. Playa Blanca, long ages ago when they had said good-by. This girl did not in the least resemble Julie Martinet. She was blonde where Julit had hair like night; she was tall, and Julie tiny. Her face was broad, friendly and, even in her sorrow and fear, it showed contentment and joy in life, while Julie Martinet was a girl of sad pleasures and half-expressed sorrows. Yet there was something in both of them that stirred him.

He said hastily: "Those things may be back. We'd better do something about it."

The girl's tears were drying on her cheeks and her expression had become more calm. She looked down at the dead gun in Gann's hands and half-smiled. "Not with that, Boysie Gann. It's empty."

"I know. We'd better get back to Hickson's cave. He may have left other charges."

"Left them? But I thought you said he was here!" The shadow fell over her face again, her eyes bright and fearful.

"He was, yes. But he's gone. Disappeared. I don't know where."

The girl nodded absently, as though she were too dazed to take in what he had said. She dropped to her knees beside the dead space-ling and stroked its golden head. "Poor Sultana. I'll never forgive myself. When I got your signal I — well, I was frightened. I didn't

know what to do. Dad was gone on an emergency call. He'd taken our ship, and — I decided to ride Sultana out here by myself."

Her mouth set white for a moment. "I didn't really think of any danger. There aren't many pyro-pods in these clusters any more — been hunted out years ago, though they keep straying back. But I'd outrun them on Sultana often enough before. I didn't think about the fact that she's — that she was — getting old."

She stood up and touched Gann lightly on the arm, a gesture of reassurance. "But you're not to worry. We aren't marooned here; Dad will come for us in the ship as soon as he gets home. I left a message."

Gann nodded. "So he'll wait a while," he said, comprehendingly, "and then, if you haven't returned in — what? a day or so? — then he'll come looking for you."

But Quarla Snow shook her golden head, her expression unreadable. "No. He won't wait. Not even a second. I said in my note that Harry Hickson's old distress signal had come. He'll be here as fast as his ship can bring him, to see who sent Harry's signal."

Gann stared. "Harry did. Harry Hickson. I told you!"

"I know you told me," the girl said, her voice calm but with an undercurrent of wonder and of fear. "But you see, it couldn't have been Harry. I — no, wait. I'll show you."

And she turned and led him away from the cultivated little field,

back up to the red-scaled crest of rock, where he had rested his laser gun on the cairn of rocks to fire at the pyropod. "See?" she said, touching the cairn.

He bent closer to look, and there on the lowermost rock, on one half-smoothed face of a boulder, was a faint scratching of carved letters, whittled out a line at a time with a laser gun, almost invisible unless you knew just where to look:

Harry Hickson
Died of a fusorian infection
Deneb light his way

"You see?" said the girl. "Harry could not have sent the message. He died here three years ago."

V

All this was months before the Writ of Liberation. On Earth the old Planner sat in silent, joyous communion with the Planning Machine. In solarian space the great Plan cruisers arrowed from satellite to planet, from asteroid to distant Spacewall post, carrying the weapons and the orders of the Machine to all the farflung territories of the Plan of Man. On the island of Cuba, in the Body Bank, a Nigerian ex-Technicorps man, broken for inefficiency, gave up the last of his vital organs to serve some more worthy servant of the Plan, and died. (His name had once been M'Buna. He had been captured and court-martialed for desertion.) A girl named Julie Martinet, in a

dormitory hall far below the surface of the Peruvian Andes, sat with stylus in hand deciding on which letter to write—one to the man she loved "but had not heard from", the other an application for special duty in the service of the Machine. And out on the reefs, in the sprawling hundred-orbed community called Freehaven, Machine Major Boysie Gann began to understand that his greatest opportunity for service—and his greatest hope of reward!—had been handed to him on a silver platter.

For he was at large in Freehaven, the very heart of the Reefs of Space. And he knew, or thought he knew, a way to get back to the worlds of the Plan.

True, there were some puzzling problems. Some of them, indeed, were almost frightening.

What could Quarla Snow hope to gain by pretending that Harry Hickson was dead? What did she think Gann had seen on the little reeflet? A ghost?

It was no ghost that had fed him, healed him, taken the collar from around his neck.

And it was no coincidence, he was coming to believe, that had brought him to Hickson's world in the first place.

There was no proof, of course. But he was sure that M'Buna, perhaps Colonel Zafar as well, were in some way related to Hickson and the treasonable activities that were going on all around him in this unplanned, decadent, dangerous world of the Reefs. He had heard hints. An unguarded word,

a look, a remark that was halted before it began. Nothing tangible — but enough to make him sure that there were links between the Reefs and the Plan worlds — links that extended even into the Technicorps, even into the vital defenses of the Spacewall itself.

If he could get back— No! he thought. *When* he got back, with the proof of this spreading rot, with the names of the conspirators and the evidence that would send them to the Body Bank, then no reward in the Machine's power would be too great to give to Machine Major Boysie Gann. And Julie Martinet would be waiting...

Meanwhile there was a lot of work to do.

Gann dared not make notes or attempt to secure tapes or photographs; but he missed no opportunity to scout and examine every part of this queer community of Freehaven. Even the name was strange and somehow disconcerting. Freehaven.

As though "freedom" were important!

And yet—Boysie Gann could not help but notice that strangely the decadent, unruly mobs that dwelt in Freehaven seemed somehow sturdier, somehow happier, in some way more alert and even more prosperous than the billions who lived under the all-powerful and protective embrace of the Plan of Man...

It was confusing.

But his duty was clear. Gann set himself to learn all there was to know.

Freehaven consisted of a couple of thousand people, scattered over a hundred fusorian-grown rocks and a hundred thousand miles of space. Many of the rocks had been terraformed, Gann learned, with the lichenous air-plant he had first seen on Harry Hickson's little reef. The rest of them were airless, but all of them supplied useful metals and minerals to the bustling economy of Freehaven.

Gann was not sure just what he had expected — tattooed savages, perhaps, dancing to a wild tomtom — but he had surely not been prepared for this modern, busy community. There were farms and herds — of spacelings, but even in one case a stock farm with sixty head of what seemed to be Guernsey cattle, stolen somehow from the Plan of Man and transported in some improbable manner out to this hydrogen-based worldlet twenty billion miles from the sun. On one airless reef that was mostly pure fusorian iron there was even a steel mill — one of the small nuclear-powered units developed by Technicorps engineers for use on the asteroids, to save the high cost of lifting Terran steel into space. Gann marveled at it all. He admitted it to Quarla Snow and her father, with whom he was staying as guest...or prisoner, he was never sure which...at a meal when he was served as fine a steak as he had ever tasted, with wines that bore the bouquet of French vineyards.

Dr. Snow boomed: "It isn't only the food that is good here, young

man. It is life! It has a flavor here that the Plan worlds will never taste."

Boysie Gann said engagingly, "You may be right. I—well, you have to excuse me. You see, I've never known anything but the Plan."

Quarla's father nodded briskly. "Of course. None of us had, before we made our way out here. None but Quarla, at any rate, and a few others like her who were born here. They've lived in freedom all their lives."

Gann said, with just the right inflexion of doubt: "But I don't understand. I mean—how does it work? Who tells you what you're to do?"

"No one, boy! That's the whole point of freedom! We came here because we didn't want to live under the collar of the Machine. We work together, and as you see we work well. Prosperity and happiness! That's what we've built out of nothingness, just as the fusorians build our worlds for us out of thin gas and energy. Why, when Harry Hickson and I came here—"

He broke off and tugged at his chin, frowning at Boysie Gann. "Yes?" said Gann. "You and Hickson—?"

"It was different then," said Dr. Snow shortly. "Boy, do you still want us to believe that story of yours about Hickson? A man I helped to bury myself, right under the rocks of his home?"

Gann said carefully, knowing that he was on dangerous ground: "Well, sir, of course I don't know

anything about Hickson. But what I told you was true. The man who summoned Quarla said he was Harry Hickson, and I had absolutely no reason at all to doubt him at the time."

Snow nodded somberly and said no more; but Gann noticed that he no longer seemed to enjoy his meal.

Gann put the matter from his mind. He was thinking of something bigger.

He was thinking of the gratitude of the Machine when he returned, riding one of Quarla Snow's space-lings, as she was even now teaching him to ride—bringing word of the community of Freehaven and its precious crop of several thousand splendid candidates for tissue salvage at the Body Bank!

He rose and strolled with Quarla outside. Harry Hickson's pet pyropod, which Quarla had insisted on rescuing from the cave when her father arrived to take them off the reeflet, hissed and slithered around the area outside the door where its staked chain permitted it to move.

He took her hand and held it, as they looked over the green ramble of glowing vines toward the distant beacon that was the central urban area of Freehaven. "You promised to let me ride one of your space-lings," he said, squeezing her hand and grinning. "If I'm going to be a permanent inhabitant here, I'd better get started learning my way around."

She looked at him thoughtfully,

then smiled. Under her golden hair her eyes were an intense blue. "Why not?" she said. "But not out of the atmosphere, Boysie. Not at first."

"I thought the spacelings brought their air with them—"

She nodded, but said firmly: "Not out of the atmosphere. For one thing, there might be pyro-pods."

He scoffed: "So close to Free-haven? Nonsense, Quarla! What's the other thing?"

She hesitated. "Well," she began—

She was saved the trouble of answering. A pale blue wash of energy brightened up the sky over their heads.

Both of them turned to look; a spacecraft was coming in for a landing, full jets blazing to slow its racing drive. Whoever it was who was piloting the craft, he was in a hurry. In a matter of seconds the ship was down on the lichenous lawn before Dr. Snow's clinic, its lock open, a man leaping out. He glanced toward Quarla and Boysie Gann, cried, "Emergency!", and turned to receive something that was being handed to him out the lock of the ship.

Quarla cried: "I'll get my father. Boysie, run and help them!" Gann was already in motion, hurtling across the lichenous ground, though the two men in the rocket needed little help. What was coming through the lock of the ship was a man on a stretcher, wrapped in white sheets. In the light gravity of the Reef the two of them were

perfectly adequate to handle it. Gann bore a hand anyway.

"Sick," panted one of the men. "Don't know who he is, but he collapsed in my spaceling corral. Thought it might be something dangerous—"

Gann nodded, helped lift the stretcher on which the sick man was thrashing and babbling—

And almost dropped it, light gravity or not.

He stood there, jaw hanging, eyes wide.

Face streaming with perspiration, eyes vacant, head tossing from side to side in delirium, the face of the man on the stretcher was nevertheless very familiar to Boysie Gann. It was the face of Machine Colonel Mohammed Zafar.

If ever Boysie Gann had needed all the wits and wiles that had been drummed into him in the spy school on Pluto, now was the moment. "Dangerous," the reef-rat who had brought Zafar had called him. He was more than dangerous, he spelled a strong probability of disaster for Boysie Gann. Zafar of all people would know him—and if, as Gann was morally certain, Zafar and M'Buna had been joined in some anti-Plan scheme on Polaris Station, Zafar would surely now know that Gann was no simple radar tech.

He dared not risk Zafar's recovering consciousness and identifying him.

Yet his every loyalty to the Plan of Man demanded that he take every chance to learn more about

Zafar from the colonel's disjointed ravings.

Dr. Snow made it easy for him, without knowing it. "You, boy!" he snapped. "Stay out of here. Quarla, too! May be contagious... But stay where I can find you if I need you," he added, bending over his patient.

The two of them stood at the door of the emergency room, Quarla's hand, forgotten, in Boysie Gann's. He's bad, Boysie," she whispered. "Don't know what it is. I haven't seen anything like that since Harry—" Then she stopped, and went on in a different tone, to the men who had brought him: "You'd better wait until my father's examined him. You might have been exposed."

In the emergency room Dr. Snow was lifting a bimetal thermometer out of Zafar's slack mouth, mumbling incoherently. Boysie Gann strained to hear what the man was saying, but all he could catch were words like "... trap for minds..." "... living dust and lying dreams..."

Dr. Snow's expression was serious. "High," he muttered, then glanced toward the group at the door. "Quarla!" he called. "You'll have to compound an injection for me. Standard broad-spectrum antibiotics, afebrilium, analgesics. Call his weight — let's see — ninety kilos. And make the dosage maximum."

Quarla nodded and hurried to the pharmacy room, while Snow bent back to the man. Even at this distance, Gann could see that the

former machine colonel's face was contorted in agony and fear. There was more than sickness in Zafar's wild muttering, there was terror. He pushed himself erect, eyes staring, and shouted: "Graveyard of the galaxy! Starchild! Beware the trap! Beware your heart's desire!" Then Quarla was back with a spray hypodermic. Her father took it from her, pushed her out of the room again and quickly injected the man.

Zafar slumped back onto the examining couch, eyes closing, still mumbling to himself.

The doctor watched him for a second, then came toward the group at the door. "He'll sleep for a while," he said. "Nothing else to do at this moment. We've got to see how he responds to the drug."

The man who had brought him said, "Doc, what is it? Are we all going to —?" But Dr. Snow was shaking his head.

"I can't answer your question," he said. "I don't know what it is. But I don't think you're in any danger. I've only seen one other case like this, three years ago. But I was exposed, and so was my daughter, and several others — and no one was infected."

He hesitated, glancing at Gann.

He said abruptly, "The other case was Harry Hickson, Mr. Gann. It killed him."

Boysie Gann started to speak, then nodded. "I understand."

"Do you?" Dr. Snow's voice was heavy with irony. "I don't! I don't understand at all. Let me show you something — then tell me if you understand!" He stood away from

the door, reached out a hand and switched off the lights in the emergency room. "Look!" he cried. "Do you understand that?"

The four in the doorway gasped as one. "Father!" cried Quarla, and the men swore softly. Inside the emergency room, in the semi-darkness Dr. Snow had brought about, Mohammed Zafar's leather-colored skin was leather-colored no longer.

Like the spilled blood of the spaceling Gann had seen murdered, Zafar's skin was bright with a golden glow! His face shone with the radiance of a muted sun. One wasted hand, dangling out of the sheets, was limned in a yellowish, unsteady light like the flicker of a million flashing fusorians.

Quarla choked: "It's — it's just like Harry, father!"

The doctor nodded somberly. "And it will end the same way, too. Unless there's a miracle, that man will be dead in an hour."

He sighed and reached to turn the light on again, but there was an abrupt hissing, swishing sound and something darted past them, over their heads. "What the devil!" cried Dr. Snow, and turned on the lights.

Something was on the dying man's head, something that scuttled about and glared at them with hot red eyes, like incandescent shoe-buttons.

"Father! It's Harry's — I mean, it's the pyropod! The one Boysie and I brought back!" cried Quarla Snow.

Gann said tightly: "Look! He broke the chain." And then he

laughed shakily. "Harry would be pleased," he said unsteadily. "At last the thing's learned how to fly."

Machine Colonel Zafar lived longer than the hour Dr. Snow had promised, but it was obvious that the extra time would not be very long. He was sinking. For minutes at a time he seemed hardly to breathe, then roused himself long enough to mumble incoherent phrases like: "The Starchild! But the Swan won't help him. . ."

Snow was working over his laboratory equipment in the corner of the room, pausing every few minutes to check his patient's breathing, and shake his head. He summoned Quarla and Gann to him and gestured to a microscope.

"I want to show you something," he said, his face somber and wondering. "Look." And he stepped aside.

Quarla looked into the slim chromed barrels of the microscope, then lifted her head to stare questioningly at her father. He nodded. "You see? Mr. Gann, look."

Slowly Boysie Gann took her place. "I'm not a scientist, Doctor," he protested. "I won't know what to look for."

But then he was looking through the eyepieces and his voice stopped. He did not need to be a scientist. The spectacle before him, standing out clear in three dimensions in the stereoscopic field of the microscope, was nothing he had ever seen before.

Straw-colored erythrocytes and pale eosinophils floated among colonies of benign microorganisms that

live in every human's blood. Rodlike and ameoboid, radial or amorphous, all the tiny bacteria were familiar, in a vague, half-remembered way, to Gann.

All but one.

For dominating the field were masses of globular bodies, dark and uninteresting looking at first, but bursting under his eyes into spurts of golden light. Like the luminous plankton of Earth's warm seas, they flared brilliantly, then subsided, then flared again. It was like tiny warning lights signalling disaster in the sample of the sick man's blood — hundreds of them, perhaps thousands — so many that the field of the microscope was brilliantly illuminated with a flickering golden glow.

"Great Plan!" whispered Boysie Gann. "And this is what made him sick?"

Dr. Snow said slowly, "It is the same thing I saw in Harry Hickson's blood. Just before he died."

He took his place at the twin eyepieces and glanced for a second at the tiny golden spheres. "Fusorians," he said. "It took me a month with paper chromatography and mass spectrograms to verify it in Harry's blood, but that is what they were. Colonies of fusorian symbiotes gone wild. They're killing him."

He stared blankly at the microscope, then roused himself and hurried back to his patient. Machine Colonel Zafar was gasping for breath, his eyes wide and fixed on the ceiling, his fingers working aimlessly, his whole skin suffused with that golden glow. "Quarla!" rapped

Dr. Snow. "Seal the room! We'll give him a positive partial pressure of oxygen! . . . It won't save his life," he added wearily. "But it may prolong it — by minutes, at least."

The girl hurried to close the door tightly against its resilient seals, while her father adjusted valves on his mediconsole. Boysie Gann heard a "white" sound of hissing gas and felt a quick increase of pressure in his ears. He swallowed and heard Quarla's voice, queerly distant, say: "Father! He's — he's trying to get up!"

Machine Colonel Zafar was sitting up.

His eyes were less remote, his breathing easier in the hypobaric atmosphere. But the golden glow was even more intense, the perspiration streaming from his brow.

And his eyes were on Boysie Gann. "You!" he cried. "Swan take you! Get back to the Machine, you traitor!" And he made the curious looping gesture with his arm that Gann had seen in Harry Hickson . . .

And then Boysie Gann remembered what the star was that lived in the heart of the Swan.

"Alpha Cygni!" he cried. "Deneb!" The star in the constellation of the Swan!

Zofar fell back on an elbow, glaring at him. "Your dirty mouth profanes the sacred name," he hissed. "The Starchild will punish you. In the heart of the Planner's citadel — in the bowels of Terra, where the Machine plays with its human toys — the Starchild will seek out and destroy its enemies

His eyes closed and he gasped for breath. Gann looked at Quarla and her father, but their expressions were as clouded as his own. "Starchild?" whispered the girl. "Father, do you know what —"

The doctor rumbled: "No, Quarla. I know nothing. Only rumors. A myth that there is a Starchild, and that he will bring the faithful of the Church of the Star home to Deneb's planets one day."

"No rumor!" shouted the glowing, golden man, and paused to cough hackingly. "The Starchild lives! I've seen him in the heart of the Whirlpool! He has touched me with his radiant hand!"

But Dr. Snow was beside him, thrusting him back down on the bed, hushing him. "No!" cried Zafar wildly. "Don't stop the word of the Starchild! See here!"

And with a convulsive effort he drew out of the pouch of the one garment he still wore a stiff cream-colored sheet of parchment. "The Writ of Liberation!" he shouted. "The Starchild gave it to me to send to Earth. And I send it — now!"

The pyropod that had belonged to Harry Hickson scuttled wildly about, its red eyes bright orange in the high-oxygen air. It hissed and shook its scales; and Zafar's eyes, too, were almost orange — glowing with tiny, dancing golden atoms, even in the pupil. They seemed blind — or fixed on something far more distant than the walls of the doctor's clinic.

Boysie Gann felt a shudder, as though the floor of the room were shaking. It had not moved.

He staggered and thrust out a hand to support himself, yet there was no motion. "To Earth!" cried the sick man, and threw the sheet of paper from him. "Swan, carry it! Starchild, guide it! To Earth . . ." he broke off.

The doctor tried again to calm him, but the dying man thrust him aside. "To Earth!" he cried. "And you — spy, traitor, slave of the Machine! Swan take you . . ."

Gann opened his mouth to say something, anything, but words would not come. The room lurched again, more violently. Sickeningly. The others did not seem to notice, yet the shock came again. He stumbled and almost fell, caught himself and reached out instinctively for the fluttering sheet of paper Zafar had thrown into the air.

It slipped away from him . . . and disappeared.

One moment it was there. The next moment it was gone.

Where it had been Gann saw a queer flow in the atmosphere, like flawed glass, spinning.

The whirlpool grew. It enlarged and came near him, and the room moved around him once more. Frantically he tried to leap back, save himself, but he was falling, falling into the whirlpool . . . falling . . .

. . . and falling . . .

He fell for what seemed to be a thousand years, while the room turned queerly dark and disappeared. Quarla's worried face, the doctor's look of shock, Mohammed Zafar's dying glare of hate — all disappeared, and around him he saw the dim shapes of stars and planets,

of galaxies and dust clouds, rippling and glowing . . .

He fell for a long time, through what seemed to be a distance of billions upon billions of empty, airless miles —

And was.

For when the falling stopped and he staggered, shaken and frantic to his feet, he fell flat and cut his face, bloodied his nose, against a gray, soft-lighted metal floor.

He was in full Earth gravity.

He was on the Reefs no longer. He was on a planet. And around him stretched long empty corridors of metal walls and spinning tapes and glittering lights.

Machine Major Boysie Gann was home at last. He was in the catacombs under Earth's surface that housed the mighty electronic masses of the Planning Machine.

VI

And that was how it began for Boysie Gann, with a twenty billion mile drop that landed him in a place where no one could possibly be, in the heart of the Machine.

A warm wind blew between the narrow walls of the corridor. There was a faint distant hum, overlaid by the whir and hiss of rushing tape, the drone of enormous far-off machines. Gann stood up, gasping with the effort of moving his new weight — nearly a hundred kilos, when for months he had had to carry only a fraction of that, or none. He looked around, dazed.

He was in a long corridor. At the end of it, hundreds of yards off,

was a brighter light that seemed to be a room.

He stumbled toward it, stanching the flow from his nose with the back of a hand, coughing and tasting the acrid blood at the back of his mouth.

The gray light turned out to come from a strange, round chamber, its roof a high concrete dome. The great floor was broken with little island clusters of consoles and control panels, unattended. The wall, almost circular, was pierced with twenty-four dark tunnels like the one he had come from.

Gann leaned dizzily against the frame of the door through which he had entered for a moment. Then, summoning his strength, he shouted: "Help! Anyone! Is anybody here?"

The only answer was a booming echo from the great concrete dome, and the distant whirring of the tapes.

The control stations were empty, the corridors vacant. Yet, as Gann stood there, he began to feel that the place was somehow alive. As the echoes died away his ears began to register fainter, more distant sounds — a muffled mechanical murmur, a hum and whir. All the corridors were as empty as the one he had left. He peered into them one by one, saw nothing but the endless banks of computing equipment, the jungle of thick cables that roofed them.

Almost on tiptoes, humbled by the immense hush around him, Gann went to the circular islands of consoles in the middle of the chamber. One unit, glowing with illuminated

dials and buttons, faced each radiating tunnel. He stood entranced, watching the race of indicator lights across the face of each console.

He had never seen this place in his own person before, yet it was all familiar to him, had been repeated a hundred times, from a hundred angles, in the texts and visual-aid lectures at the Technicorps academy.

He was in the very heart of the Planning Machine—the most secret, the most elaborately guarded spot on nine planets. The nerve center of the Plan of Man.

And the Planning Machine did not even know he was there!

That was the fact that most shook Boysie Gann, almost terrified him—not only for himself, although surely he was on dangerous ground, men had gone to the Body Bank for far less. His fear was for the Plan of Man itself. How was it possible?

With all its storage of facts on every act of every human being in the plan—with its great taped mass of data covering every field of knowledge, every scientific discovery, every law—the Planning Machine seemed to have no way of telling that an unauthorized human being was at large in its very heart.

Gann found himself sobbing. Dizzied, he clutched at the edge of the nearest console and frantically tried to make sense of the unfamiliar glitter of dials and scopes and racing lights. There was a linkbox! For a moment he was hopeful—yet the linkboxes to the Machine were meant only for those who had received communion, who wore the flat plate in their skulls that gave the Machine

access to their cranial nerve centers. Dared he use the linkbox?

But what else was there? Gann thought swiftly, crazily, of punching a button at random—throwing a switch—turning a dial. Any small change would alert the Machine. Serving robots or human techs would be there in moments.

And then his eyes caught sight of a small, flat red plate, bearing a single bright-lit button, and one word. It was at the top of the console nearest him. The single word was: STOP

He stood staring at it for a long moment, forgetting to breathe.

If that plate meant what it so clearly, unequivocally said, he had it in his power to—to—

To stop the Machine.

Machine Major Boysie Gann, Technicorps academy graduate, veteran of the spy school, trained and toughened against the worst a solar system could produce, found himself babbling in terrified hysteria. Stop the Machine! The thought was unbearable.

He flung himself on the linkbox, found a switch, wept, babbled and sobbed into it. He was not speaking in the Mechanese that the Machine had developed for the links—didn't know it—would have forgotten it if he had known it. He was literally terrified, as nothing in his life had ever terrified him before.

When the squad of Plan Guardsmen in Machine gray came boiling out of the access elevators, racing down the corridors, their weapons at the ready, they found him slumped on the floor, all but unconscious.

Boysie Gann nearly died right then, with twenty bullets in his body.

But the Techtendant in command issued a sharp order. He peered wonderingly at Gann, restrained his men, thought for a second, then shook his head. "Don't hurt him," he growled. "Or not so he can't talk! Let's get him up to the security office—fast!"

For four days Boysie Gann was questioned around the clock by the brawniest bullies in the Techni-corps, and they were not gentle with him.

He answered all their questions—told the absolute truth—and paid for it with the impact of a club against his kidneys, a kick in his ribs. They knocked him unconscious a dozen times, and each time he revived again with a hardfaced medical orderly pulling a hypodermic out of his skin, brought back to face more interrogation.

Finally they let him sleep—not because they were satisfied with his answers, but because the medics feared he would die.

When he awoke he ached in every part of his body.

He was strapped to an operating table. *The Body Bank*, he thought at first in a surge of panic. But it was not the Body Bank; it was a prison. Clearly the medics had been working on him. Although he ached, he could move. His toes curled, his fingers responded to his brain. His eyes opened, and moved where he willed them.

Only one thing was different:

there was a cold, hard pressure around his neck.

The security collar that Harry Hickson had removed so easily had been replaced.

Men were all around him, removing the straps, forcing him to his feet. "You! Risk." growled one of them, a radar-horned NCO with a chin that was stubbled blue with beard. "On your feet! You're going to talk to the general."

They hurried him through gray-walled corridors to an elevator. It rose with a sickening thrust of acceleration, stopped as rapidly. Gann nearly fell, but was thrust to his feet again by one of the guards. "Out! Move on, Risk!" And he stumbled through more corridors, into a bare gray office, and there he stood at attention for a long, long time, waiting.

Then—Boysie Gann heard no signal, but perhaps it had been relayed through the radar-horned helmet of the guards—the security guardsman barked: "In there!" and thrust him through a door.

Gann entered into a larger, brighter office. It was beautifully furnished, with a bust of the Planner in glowing gold smiling down from a pedestal, and a golden link-box to the Machine dominating the desk. On the desk was a nameplate.

Machine General Abel Wheeler

And the man who sat behind it was the general himself.

He sat regarding Boysie Gann for a long moment. Machine General Wheeler seemed more than half a

machine himself. He was a big man, an angular, perplexing, abrupt-moving man. His whole body looked metallic: skin-tan of bronze, eyes the color of steel, spikes of copper wire for hair. He stared at Gann and then, without a word, looked away, his eyes going to something invisible on his desk.

Boysie Gann felt choked by the hard, cold constriction of the security collar. Bruises aching, skin clammy with sweat, he stood painfully rigid. At the Technicorps academy he had learned the art of standing endlessly at attention — the imperceptibly slow shifting of weight and muscular tensions that kept a man from pitching forward on his face. He blanked out his mind, thought of nothing but of the importance of standing there.

The general's frowning eyes clung to the tilted communications screens that faced him on his desk, invisible to Gann. After a moment he tapped soundless keys, communicating, Gann knew, with the Machine. Gann wondered that he did not use the linkbox. It did not occur to him that the general might fear that Boysie Gann, the man who had appeared inexplicably in the heart of the Planning Machine's caverns, might equally inexplicably have learned to understand Mechanese.

The general waited, reading something, frowning stiffly.

Abruptly his head jerked up and he stared at Gann.

The screens had ceased to flicker. His flat bronzed face was expressionless. It was a mask of meat,

as though some bungling surgeon at the replacement center had failed to connect the nerves and muscles that would have given it life.

General Wheeler said sharply: "Machine Major Boysie Gann!" Gann jumped; could not help himself; the voice was like a metal rasp. "You may stand at ease!"

Gann let his lean shoulders sag slightly forward, drew a long breath, shifted his feet. But he was not really at ease. General Wheeler's eyes were on him, steel-colored, as coldly merciless as though they were the probes of a surgeon planting electrodes in his brain. He snapped: "The Machine requires information from you."

Gann said painfully, "I know, sir. I've already been interrogated—about a hundred times, I'd say."

"It will be a thousand! You will be interrogated again and again and again. The Machine's need for truth is urgent." Wheeler's broad head jutted forward like the sudden thrust of a piston. "The Starchild! Who is he?"

There was a dry lump in Gann's throat. He swallowed and said stubbornly: "I don't know, sir. I've told everything I know."

"The Writ of Liberation! Who wrote it?" Gann shook his head. "How did it get into the Planner's headquarters?" Gann kept on shaking his head, hopelessly but obstinately. "And yourself, how did you get into the Planning Machine's tunnels? Who is Quarla Snow? Why did you kill Machine Colonel Zafar and make up this preposterous lie—?"

"No, sir!" cried Gann. "I didn't! Colonel Zafar was anti-Plan!"

The general's wide mouth hardened. His bloodless lips shut like the jaws of a trap. His voice was like a muffled, ominous clang: "The evidence," he said, "suggests that you are lying. Can you prove you are not?"

"No, sir. But—"

"Machine Major Boysie Gann! Are you the Starchild?"

"No, sir!" Gann was honestly surprised, indignant. "I—"

"Machine Major Boysie Gann! Do you know what became of the *Together*ship?"

Gann cried hopelessly: "The what? General, I never even heard of the—what is it? The *Together*ship. I don't know what you're talking about."

Like the steady pulse of a laser scan, the general tolled: "The *Together*ship went into space forty years ago. It was never heard of again. Major Gann, what do you know of this?"

"Nothing, sir! Why, I wasn't even born!"

For a moment the mask cracked, and the general's face looked almost human. Worried. Even confused. He said after a moment, "Yes. That's true. But—"

Then he tightened up again, bent forward stiffly from the hips. His steel eyes narrowed. "Are you loyal to the Plan of Man?" he asked softly.

"Yes, sir!"

The general nodded. "I hope so," he said bleakly. "For the sake of the Plan—and for your own sake, too."



GRAY MORROW

For I am going to tell you something that cannot ever be told again. If you whisper a word of it, Machine Major Boysie Gann, your death will come at once. *At once.*

"You see, the Planning Machine is not unique. There is another one."

Gann's eyes widened. "Another—" he stopped, and had to begin again. It was like being told there were two Jehovahs, a second Christ. "Another Planning Machine, sir? But where is it?"

The general shook his head. "Lost," he said somberly. "Another Machine—as great, as powerful, as complete as the one that guides the Plan of Man. And we do not know where it is.

"Or what it is doing."

There was a man name Ryeland, the general told Boysie Gann. A great mathematician. A brilliant scientist. The husband of the daughter of the then-Planner, and close to the center of power surrounding the Planning Machine itself. And decades before he had gone into space, just as Gann himself had done, and seen the Reefs of Space, and come back with the tale of countless thousands of unplanned humans living their lives out on the fusorian worldlets, outside the scope of the plan.

"What he said," rasped General Wheeler sternly, "was false! But the Machine wisely determined to test it out! The Planning Machine does not leap to conclusions! It weighs the evidence—learns the facts—makes a plan!"

"Yes, sir," said Boysie Gann.

"I've heard of this Ryeland, I think. A leading scientist even today!"

The general nodded. "Today," he said cryptically, "Ryeland has abandoned error. A loyal servant of the Plan. And so is the former Planner, Creery, who also has turned away from falsity. But then—" He sighed, like the wheezing of a high-vacuum pump.

Then, he told Gann, both men had been duped—and had caused the Machine to commit—not an error, of course. That was impossible to the Machine. But to conduct an experiment which failed.

The experiment was to bring the Plan of Man to the Reefs.

The Machine had directed the construction of a mighty spacecraft called the *Togethershhip*. The biggest space-going vessel ever built. A mobile spacefort. It was fabricated at the yards on Deimos, and powered with six detachable jetless drive units that were themselves great fighting ships. And more than half of its hull was filled with a slave unit of the Planning Machine—a linked bank of computers and storage banks, as advanced as the Machine itself, lacking only the network of communications and implementation facilities that the Machine had developed out of the race of Man.

The *Togethershhip* was built, launched, tested and fitted out. A selected crew was assembled and came aboard. Supplies were loaded for a ten-year cruise. The slave Machine assumed control—the *Togethershhip* flashed out past Orbit Pluto—passed the Spacewall—and was gone.

Days later a message came back via laser relay chain. All was going well. The *Togethership* had sighted a major cluster of the Reefs of Space.

No other message was ever received.

Machine General Wheeler paused, his steel-gray eyes on Gann.

"No other message," he repeated. "It has never been heard from again. Scouting vessels, attempting to locate it, came back without having found any trace. Or did not come back at all. Or returned early, damaged, having been attacked by pyropods or something worse.

"That is the story of the *Togethership*, Major Gann. Except for one thing: The cluster of Reefs it last reported sighting was in the same position as what you have called Freehaven. And you were there, Major. What did you learn?"

Wonderingly, Gann shook his head. "Nothing, sir. Believe me. Not even a rumor."

The general looked at him for a long second. Then he nodded. "Gann," he said bleakly. "I will tell you one more thing." Abruptly he snapped three switches on his desk, glanced at a monitoring dial, nodded. "We are cut off," he declared. "Not even the Planning Machine can look in on us now. What I have to tell you is for *no* ears but your own.

"You see, Gann, it is not only the welfare of the Plan of Man that is involved here. I have a special interest in solving these mysteries. Solving them myself.

"Major Gann, I intend to be the next Planner."

Boysie Gann was adrift in dangerous waters, and knew it.

He had heard rumors of the power-struggle of the human leaders who surrounded the great central power-fact of the Machine, jockeying for position, seeking personal advantage. The Technicorps academy had been filled with sly jokes and blazing-eyed, after-dark discussions of it. Some had viewed the political strife as treason (though they dared only whisper the thought). Some had taken it as a joke, or as a natural law of human affairs which they proposed to follow for their own advancement. Gann remembered the brother of the girl he had left at Playa Blanca, a white-hot idealist; remembered one of his instructors, a cynical humorist whose japes had seemed half in earnest and had set his classes wriggling with astonishment and something like fear. The instructor had disappeared one day. The young cadet who was Julie Martinet's brother had become an honor student at the Academy. He had even gone on to spy school on Pluto, just as Gann himself was leaving.

But idealist or cynic, whatever the attitude of the individual, the whole question of political maneuvering had been remote. It was something that took place far off, high up—not in the life of Boysie Gann.

Not until now.

Machine General Abel Wheeler leaned forward from his desk and rapped out the words: "I must know this. Do you know who sent the Writ of Liberation?"

Gann shook his head. "Sir, I've never even seen it. I don't know what it says."

"Foolish threats, Major Gann! An insane promise to stop the sun's light. A warning to the Planner and to the Machine that freedom must be restored—hah! And yet—" the man's steel eyes grew colder and more distant still, as he contemplated something far away — "it seems that there is something behind the threats. For the sun is indeed stopped."

He paused. Boysie Gann blinked. "Stopped? The sun? Sir, I don't understand . . ."

"Nor do I," rasped the general, "but that does not matter. What matters is the security of the Machine. It matters particularly to me, since I am entrusted with its defense. This Writ of Liberation is a threat; I must protect the Machine against it. If I am successful, I will receive—a suitable reward. To those who can help me—"

He glanced about his spy-tight room, leaned farther forward still, and merely mouthed the words: "I can offer them rewards, too, Major Gann."

His steel eyes stabbed restlessly about the room, then returned to Gann. "Major," he said. "I need you for a friend."

Gann was still turning over in his mind what the general had said about the stoppage of the sun. The sun? No longer shining in the sky? It was hard to believe. He shook himself free from the questions that were burning at him and said un-

easily, "I hope to be your friend, sir. But I still know nothing of the Starchild."

The general nodded like a metronome. "You will be questioned again," he rapped out. "This time, directly by the Machine, through one of its servitors—a human who has taken the Machine's communion and speaks directly to it. This will perhaps help you to remember certain things. It may even be that from the questions the acolyte asks, you may be able to deduce other things—perhaps even make a guess at things that are stored in the memory banks of the Machine that even I do not know. If so," he said, his face a bronze mask, "I will be interested. The choice is yours. My friend or my foe—and even now," he added, his bronze jaws hardening, "I have power enough to punish my foes."

He opened the switches again, glanced at his communications screens, nodded, tapped out an answer and turned once more to Gann.

"You will go now to Sister Delta Four," he stated. "There your direct-link questioning to the Machine will begin. Major, look at this!"

Unexpectedly he raised his right fist. It clenched like a remote manipulator into a bronze hammer. "This hand," he droned somberly, "once belonged to someone else, an unplanned traitor who threw a bomb at the Planner. His aim was poor. He missed the Planner, but his bomb shattered my own right hand.

"My hand could not be repaired by the surgeons, so it was replaced.

With the hand of the would-be assassin."

The bronze fist slammed against the console.

"Gann, remember this! If you fail to serve the Machine in the way that is first required, you will serve it in some other way — more than likely, in the Body Bank!"

VII

The radar-horned guards were waiting.

"Come on, Risk!" growled the NCO in charge, and once again Boysie Gann was thrust and dragged through the long gray halls, into the elevators, out again—and left to wait in a bare gray room.

Only for a moment. Then the guards came back, looking angry and confused. "Come on, Risk!" growled the NCO again — he seemed to know no other words, be able to speak in no other way—and Gann was taken out again.

A girl was standing in the doorway, telling her sonic beads, her head bent. She wore the robe and cowl of one of the Machine's communing acolytes, one of those adepts who had learned the Mechanese that the Machine now spoke in preference to any other language, whose very brain centers were open to the touch of the Machine. As they passed she spoke to one of the guards. "Orders changed!" he said roughly. "Come along if you like—we're going to the Planner!"

Gann hung back, trying to turn and see her, but the NCO shoved him ahead. He could hear the girl's

oddly melodious voice, not so much speaking as chanting Mechanese in the quarter-tones of her sonic beads, but could not make out her words.

She would be—what had General Wheeler called her? Sister Delta Four. The one who was to interrogate him.

But he was going instead to the office of the Planner himself!

In all his years of life under the Plan, Boysie Gann had never seen the Planner in the flesh. Few had. There was no need, with communications reaching into every home, even every room under the Plan—and the Planner was something more than human, removed from even the condescending social intercourse of emperors.

Gann shivered slightly.

He was already assuming the attitudes of the convict of any land or time. He feared change. He dreaded the unknown. And the Planner represented a very large unknown quantity indeed.

Again the tunnels, again the high-velocity drop of the elevators. Again Gann was thrust into a tiny room and left there.

He was somewhere far underground. Listening, he could hear no sound except the muffled murmur of air from the duct overhead. The walls were an unpleasant yellowish gray — no longer quite the sterile Technicorps color, but tinged with Planner's gold. Gann wondered if it were deliberate — or if it was merely that this cell was so old, its occupants viewed with so little favor, that the baked-in coloring of the

walls had yellowed with age. The ceiling gave a cold gray light. There was only one bare metal table, and one bare metal chair.

The security collar was hard against his throat.

Gann sat down and laid his head on the table. His bruises were beginning to stiffen and ache. His brain was whirling.

Confused images were filling his mind. General Wheeler and his menacing hints of reward. Quarla Snow's spaceling, and the pyropods. Julie Martinet. A daytime sky with the sun somehow gone out . . . the sun-like fusorian globules in Colonel Zafar's blood . . . Julie Martinet again, and Quarla Snow.

He lived again the endless frightening drop that landed him in the bowels of the planet Earth, among the memory banks of the Machine. He saw again sterile Pluto's vistas of ice, and the great slow spin of Polaris Station. He thought of the Writ of Liberation and wondered at the love for freedom of the Planless men of the Reefs—the love for freedom—the freedom to love—

He thought again of Julie Martinet, and submerged himself in memories of the Togetherness resort at Playa Blanca, the slight, dark girl he had heard singing, their golden dawn together on the beach, with the taste of salt spray on her lips. He could see her face as clearly as though she were in the room with him.

"Julie," he whispered, and she opened her lips to reply —

"Come on, Risk!" she said queerly—roughly. "Get up! Move!"

The radar-horned NCO was shaking him angrily. "Risk! Wake up!"

Gann shook himself. He had been asleep. His arm was numb and tingling, where his head had rested on it.

He was still dazed as they dragged him out of the cell, into another room — larger — brighter — furnished in splendor. It was all gold. Gold tapestries on the wall, showing the spinning worlds of the Plan of Man. Gold light fixtures, and gold trays on the golden tables. The floor a carpeting of gold, the furniture upholstered in a golden fabric.

A guard stood by him at each side, gripping his arms. They brought him to the center of the room and stood there, waiting, while the NCO went to a gold-arched door and whispered to a Technicorps officer in the uniform of the Planner's guard who stood there. The officer nodded impatiently and held up a hand.

The radar-horned guard turned and signaled to his men. *Wait.*

Boysie Gann was very sure, without being told, of where they were. Beyond that door was the Planner himself.

They were not alone in the room. Turning his neck—the grip of the guards did not allow him to turn his body—he saw that the acolyte girl, Sister Delta Four, was in the room, kneeling on a golden hassock, telling her sonic beads. She was slight. What small sight he could get of her face, under the great soft cowl, was oval, grave and pale. Her loose black robe fell to the floor

around the hassock. Her cape bore the luminous emblem of those who had undergone communion with the Machine—the symbolic ellipses of electronic orbits intertwined.

The guards wrenched him straight again. One whispered to the other across him, "Watch! She's going to go into communion."

Even in his precarious position Gann could not help wanting to see. He had never before been with an acolyte during communion. It was something to be desired—and dreaded.

If the deadly security collar around his neck was the stick that the Machine had invented to enforce the Plan of Man, the communion plate was the carrot that rewarded faithful service.

Gann knew what it looked like. He thought he had caught a glimpse of it in the forehead of Sister Delta Four, the bright metal disk grafted into the skin, starred with its black pattern of holes that accepted the prongs of the communion plug.

He knew that communion was supposed to be the perfect experience.

The communion plate was only its exterior symbol. It was in the brain itself that the delicate stereotaxia of the Machine's neurosurgeons had done their finest work. Through electrodes wired to the plate in the forehead, the Machine required its deservng servants with tuned electronic stimuli. Its messages flowed directly into the pleasure centers of the brain.

The perfect experience—for it had no taint of reality to corrupt it, no

bill presented in the form of exhaustion or physical damage—no substance! It was the quintessence of pleasure. Stripped of tactile, visual, olfactory — of all sensual complications—it was the great good thing that men had always sought, and found imperfectly as a side-effect of eating, or drinking, or inhaling the crisp air of a mountain morning, or sex. It was all of them, distilled and served up in a tidy package, received through a bright metal plate.

It was so perfect, thought Boysie Gann wildly, that it seemed somehow wrong . . .

"She's getting ready!" whispered one of the guards, and Gann ventured to turn his head again to see.

He succeeded—only for a moment, but he succeeded. The guards were watching too, and loosened their grips just enough for him to turn.

Sister Delta Four lifted the black hood to uncover her forehead.

There on the smooth white skin he saw the bright metal disk—saw it, trembled, looked away—looked back again, and saw clearly what his mind had rejected.

He saw the face of Sister Delta Four.

There was a hoarse whisper from the doorway. "Let's go!" The guards started, and jerked him away, thrust him facing forward so that he saw the radar-horned NCO with a face like fury, beckoning them angrily, signaling that the Planner was ready for them now.

But Boysie Gann fought them, struggled like a wild man. "No!" he

shouted. "Wait!" And he battled the astonished guards, trying to turn, to go back to the girl whose serene face he had seen, eyes closed, lifting the communion plug to her forehead.

The guards lashed out at him, struck him. He hardly felt the blows. He turned, breaking free of one of them, colliding heavily with the other so that they fell sprawling on the thick golden rug, the other guards leaping toward them. But as they fell, Gann saw the face again.

He had been right. There was no doubt.

Sister Delta Four was Julie Martinet.

The girl he loved was now no longer entirely human. Her vows were no longer to him. She was an adjunct to the Machine, as dependent on it for her every bit of life and thought as some remote-directed subsea mining dredge . . . and as little a part of the race of men.

Julie Martinet had become a part of the machine.

TO BE CONTINUED

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ANSWERING SERVICE

BY ALMA HILL

Emory's problem didn't present any difficulties. It was the solution that was complicated!

Singing a worried song Emory Clark rode out on his unicycle. It was very early on a summer morning soft with honeysuckle and roses, merry with bird calls. But Emory regarded none of those things.

He wheeled a straight line, green across the dew silver lawns, up to the entrance of the City Hall. There he slotted his unicycle, fingertipped the Welcome, and went up the hundred steps two at a time while the bronze doors were sliding apart.

Recessed in deep shadow the four-story facade of the Master Index confronted him.

"Emory Clark," it welcomed.

"Private citizen. Single. 23 years 164 days. Occupation garden-hobbyist. Is it a question or a problem?"

"Your Honor, I have a problem."

"Problem number 101," it assented. "Series Bb37, year 2000, city of Atlanta, Georgia. Go."

"Your Honor, I have a mouse in the house."

Lights flickered ruminatively. "Mouse. Mus mus, harmless non-aggressive mammal, average length 7 centimeters not counting appendages. Intelligence .009. Please restate your problem to show that it is a problem."

"Harmless—nonaggressive! What

do you call harmless nonaggressive? This beast has somehow entered my home—uninvited—and will not leave no matter what I say to it. And the worst of it is, it's chewing on a fine stand of grass in my living-room garden and making itself a nest in there. I have been expecting to take a prize in the Garden Club Show with that grass. If that goes, what becomes of my hard-won position of leadership! My community status? My peace of mind?"

"Which of these questions do you want answered first?"

"Never mind those question, your honor. I only hope I never find out; and while I stand here palaver-ing another stalk of timothy may be falling. Just tell me how to rid me of mine enemy."

"Answering problem 101, series Bb37, year 2000, city of Atlanta, Georgia," replied its honor, briskly. "First catch your mouse then transport it to any distance over one kilometer and it will be unable to find its way back."

Emory fidgeted his feet. "Your honor I already tried that. But all I achieved was information: that mouse can dodge faster than I can grab. I need a gadget."

The Master Index reminded him that the law forbade manual combat with harmless nonaggressive creatures. But it agreed that if the mouse would not accept a ride a suitable gadget could be used. A library pass tingled into a tray under a slot.

"Permit to withdraw one hypothecator, model T, seven-day loan, renewable. Best mousetrap ever in-

vented. Success to your efforts," and it switched off all its lights.

Delighted, Emory pocketed the pass, strode over to the basement entrance, and leaped singing into the downshaft.

All was peaceful in the gadget library because of the early hour. Emory presented his pass to the librarian, which slotted it with a businesslike snap.

There ensued a wait of fifteen minutes which Emory spent whistling. Then the permit came back stamped "Not On Shelf."

"Will you ask the Master Index for a second choice!" inquired the librarian. "Or will you wait until some other borrower returns an hypothecator!"

"What, me wait while a wild animal makes hay with my status symbols!" cried Emory, running for the upshaft.

Lights were on in the audience hall, and Emory was third in line for his next permit; but its honor recognized him and his problem, and provided a permit for a transmog without delay.

So Emory presented this at the gadget library and found that all the transmogs were also out on loan.

After several such trials and mis-es, he appealed directly to the librarian.

"Just tell me what you do have on shelf in the way of mousetraps. Any old kind of trap, just so I rescue my grass while there's still some left."

"But," protested its accuracy, "I am a finder, not a keeper. My

bins have always had plenty of everything, or if not the Master Index can recommend something else just as good and possibly better depending on circumstances unforeseeable, or if not or if not or if not or if not."

"Clear the request, your accuracy," said Emory, in some haste, seeing that the librarian was about to flip its catalog. "I will apply to the Master Index again."

By this time, the waiting line was so long that Emory had to take his place twenty steps back down outside the entrance. He was beginning to think about lunch but he held his place sturdily and referred its honor back to problem 101, etcetera, subsolution E, with a protest of these delays.

"I realize, your honor, that solutions take as long as they take. But in this case time is of the essence."

"Certainly your solution is taking longer than it should," agreed its honor. "I have been able to locate such problems without this difficulty. Considering the number it may be that the community is having a plague of mice. This would justify the reactivation of a gadget factory. But as all gadgeteers are humans, and therefore work only when they feel like it, this is on the human level of negotiation. Do you wish to be an emissary?"

"Anything!" cried Emory. "Anything! My grass, my grass!"

"I have now notified the Engineering-Hobbyists' Club," its honor assured him, "with full details of your predicament." Five address cards and an Emissary's Badge

tinkled from slots into trays. "Call on each of their committeemen and obtain their choice of a factory site. Once this is known, we will then also know which hobby club is using it now, and can seek the use of the space for your purposes."

Next day Emory was back at City Hall looking desperate. "Your honor, I have been able to locate only two of these five people so far, and they disagree. In the meantime, another mouse had appeared, or may have been lurking all the while, for in the nest are five small mice, or possible six. All I know is that when I tried to count them the larger mice bit my finger, after which they went back to dancing in my garden."

He had to wait while its honor outlined the correct medical procedure and warned him against manual combat with small nonaggressive creatures. "Second warning," it added, and rang a gong twice.

"Nonaggressive!" exclaimed Emory. "If these animals are nonaggressive, what's an aggressive one like!" and the Master Index presented him with a zoo pass.

Several days later he had occasion to use it. He was canvassing all members of the Engineering-Hobbyist Club in the hope of obtaining a committee able to agree on something. One of them was locksmithing a new zoo cage and after interviewing him, Emory found himself in conversation with the hobbyist who ran the zoo park.

"Certainly is a great plague of mice," agreed the zoo keeper. "This

is the only place you won't find any mice. We have a lion, a tiger, a leopard, a puma—actually only one house cat, but they all smell alike to mice. No mouse will ever go near a cat."

"Cats?"

"Finest mousetrap ever invented," he said.

Emory leaped to the saddle with a whoop and hedge-hopped his unicycle all the way to City Hall and danced on the steps as the line moved up to his turn.

However, the Master Index knew all that already and declared itself unable to issue him a permit to borrow a cat.

"If we turn loose a creature classified as aggressive, you would be in bigger trouble than you're in now," it explained. "The tiger, the lion, the puma and the rest of the cats are apt to kill people. The only small ones are the variety known as house cats, and be assured that those also are far from tame," he warned.

Exasperated, Emory made a few remarks about the general situation and some of its particulars. He had said somewhat the same before and its honor told him so.

"All you are doing is holding up the line," it chided. "Emotion solves nothing but the existence of emotion. I am myself restricted by law, as you are."

Regardless of what emotion might solve, Emory had feelings which had been kept hot by days of methodical endeavors. He turned to the waiting line and expressed his sentiments.

Everyone agreed with him. More than half of them were there on similar errands. The community was overrun with mice. All anyone had been able to do was gadget them from one place to another. This provided the mice with fresh fields to conquer.

"Reclassify the mice!" cried Emory, waving his fist above his head. The other citizens cried with one voice, "Reclassify the mice!" While Emory referred all that to its honor and demanded an answer.

Its answer was that it could only expound the law, not make it or change it. "But you, Emory Clark, private citizen, etcetera, have one vote and a human voice. If you want to get the mice reclassified, success to your efforts." And it gave him a library pass for several hundred massive volumes of pertinent data.

There was nothing Emory could do but begin upon these studies. The whole community was up in arms; but reclassification was a world affair, in which the problems of one community are proportionately as small as is a mouse to a house.

Emory had to face up to the fact that the Master Index had, as it said, limits.

At least, Emory now had leisure and impetus for study. His gardening occupation was no more, for the multiplying mice had taken over the premises to such an extent that he was sleeping out-of-doors under his unicycle cover.

He had made a lot of new friends,

However, and when a man needs to adjust his frames of reference, conference can help.

One of his first calls was upon Henry Adkins, the zoo hobbyist, a man who might converse intelligently on the subject of the classification of the creatures with whom mankind shares his universe.

"Henry," he said, "I am thinking of lobbying for Freedom for Cats as well as Down with Tyranny of Mice."

Henry pulled at his chin. "It's not that I would object to losing my show specimens, though I would," he mused. "But if Leo ever gets loose in this town, you'd better move. That brute is not only large, he's neurotic. But the house cat, now — I must admit, reluctantly, that there is a case of injustice. Bird Watchers' Lobby, of course," and he introduced Emory to the zoo's only living specimen, a handsome Siamese male with a hard blue squint.

"Nanki. Very gentle. Nanki is a lineal descendant of the original Nanki-Poo, and all those are especially gentle."

"But they catch mice nonetheless!"

"Mice, rats, snakes — of all house cats, a Siamese is the fastest and grabbiest."

Emory extended the hand of friendship to Nanki, who immediately bit it. Emory snatched his hand back and stared at the oozing marks. "What was that about gentle!"

"Oh, Nanki IS gentle — at heart he really IS, but he displays pseudoneurotic behavior because he is lonely. The nearest Siamese queen

is in the Topeka, Kansas, zoological park."

Emory was already leaving, but he paused, awed. "Say. You sound like a Master Index. And you're just a human. You are, aren't you? I wouldn't even know which way it was to Topeka."

Henry waved a deprecating hand at the westering sun. "Just hobby-information, really."

It seemed that the aggressive species were dwindling so fast in captivity that animal-hobbyists held conventions just to brag about the rare specimens they still had alive, and to swap stuffed ones.

Emory looked at Nanki with more sympathy and less resentment. The unfortunate beast must remain imprisoned though gentle at heart, until death, after which he would be stuffed and perhaps traded off, who knows where.

"I forgive you, Nanki," he said, wrapping his hand in his handkerchief. "I feel a sense of doom myself."

Then he went home, thinking profoundly without any help at all from computers. His premises were in a state of ultimate disgrace. Chattering mice ran everywhere, with cleaning machines scurrying anxiously after little black droppings. The furniture was chewed, walls tracked. The dining-room disposal groaned over tainted food shoveled into it by the automatic checkup, while more food clicked restlessly and temporarily into the pantry pockets.

Emory admitted to the mice that

victory seemed to be theirs for the time being. "But not forever. Meanwhile, I choose other company. I go but be warned, I shall return."

With that, he switched off all the house power and turned grimly away.

Once more he returned to the City Hall. But this time he merely applied for a Nansen passport.

"I shall become an Emissary-at-Large," he explained "wandering upon my quest until this matter is reclassified by the citizens of the world. A man does what he can," he said humbly.

"Success to your efforts," and with routine courtesy, its honor flipped out the requested badge and turned out all its lights, for the day's business was done and there was nobody in line behind Emory. He examined the jewel in the slanting light. It carried the code number of the Master Index and his own finger prints, and thus gave him welcome to the services of all the Indexes of the world. He donned the badge and strode out of the building, humming solemnly in a baritone undertone.

Next he called on a hostess-hobbyist and obtained a picnic hamper of lunch. Then he paid another visit to the zoo keeper.

"Henry," he said, "right now there are some points we might not agree on. But some day you will understand." With that, he punched Henry on the button, took his keys, and locked him into the monkey cage.

Then he went to see Nanki, and emptied the basket of lunch before the indifferent cat. A mouse sprang

out of the sandwiches — truly, the whole city was being plagued with mice.

Nanki came to life. He caught the mouse with a flying leap and ate it at once.

Emory waited patiently and approvingly while Nanki finished his snack. Meanwhile he was drawing on a pair of long heavy riding gauntlets.

"You and I can get along, Nanki," he declared. He scooped Nanki into the hamper, snapped down the lid, secured it and swung the whole thing over his arm.

In the monkey cage, Henry was trying to sit up. Emory wondered whether he had the heart to hit him again, and for that matter, whether he could safely attempt it now that Henry would not be surprised.

"Next stop is going to be Topeka, Kansas." He tapped the basket which was yowling in a loud nasal tenor. "What this world needs is more cats like this one. You going to try to stop me?"

Henry's eyes widened. He rubbed his aching jaw. "You din have hit tha har," he grumbled. "Topeka tha way. Lodge pathword thith year, 'Leo he roar!' Think you can ge i righ?"

"Leo he roar," and Emory roared for himself. Leo heard it and took it up. Other animals joined the chorus and soon the whole zoo was in an uproar.

To this farewell, Emory sprang to saddle; and he and Nanki whirled off together towards the sunset, singing new songs. END

THE RECON MAN

by WILSON TUCKER

illustrated by NODEL

***He only lived for one day —
and perhaps it was too long!***

I

Owen Hall's one day of life began with uncertainty.

In that first moment of total awareness he found himself standing outside a door, facing a road that moved.

The door had slammed shut behind him — after he had been shoved through it — although there was no distinct recollection of his passage through the doorway, or who had done the shoving. It was rea-

sonable to assume that the same hand was responsible for both. A thrust against the small of his back, a slam — and awareness of self and surroundings began with that.

The light hurt his eyes.

The sun was shining, the weather was bland and summery. Airy brightness engulfed him, contrasting sharply with the blackness behind that door and the blackness which replaced memory.

Owen turned his attention to the road. It rolled.

The moving roadway was actually a street, a wide and smoothly surfaced street which flowed toward the rising sun at a speed equal to a fast walk. It appeared from the southwest, curving gently around an endless series of low buildings as it approached, and vanished into the southeastern distance. Owen inspected the street with a growing sense of wonder; he guessed that it completely encircled the city, and he knew without proof what it was. He had never before seen a Heinlein rolling road, but there it was.

There was no telling what science would do next!

In the following moment that mysterious door behind him was yanked open and a woman shouted belligerently. Owen turned around to examine the newest discovery.

The woman popped through the door. She was perhaps thirty-five or forty years of age, and rather chunky about the middle. Her hair was brown, her eyes were angry and her hands were large enough to push him through any door with ease. She was clad from neck to sandals in form-fitting pink clothing. Baby pink. The single garment resembled mechanic's coveralls and it was reasonably flattering except for that bulge in the middle. The woman staggered as she approached him.

"What you doing here?" she shouted at him. "Told you to go to work. Go!"

Owen murmured politely. "Honey, you're loaded."

Ignoring the accusation or per-

haps not understanding it, the belligerent woman strode close, leaned over to peer into his eyes and splashed him with eighty-six proof breath. She bellowed. "What's wrong with you? What went wrong? How is your equilibrium? Huh?"

"There's nothing wrong with my equilibrium," Owen retorted. "Did you shove me through that door? What's the big idea?"

"Can you walk without falling down?"

"I might ask you the same thing."

Owen discovered that he possessed a baritone voice, and was pleased. He realized the pushy, loudmouthed woman wasn't his wife; he didn't have a wife. And he found time to wonder what he was doing there — wherever *there* was. The city was a new one on him.

"Show me you can walk," the woman demanded.

Owen obediently marched back and forth along the path between the door and the street. His legs were strangely weak and for a brief moment he felt like an infant learning to walk, but then he mastered the technique as familiarity returned. It was like regaining an old skill.

"Nothing to it," Owen said.

"Ready to go to work?"

"Work?" Owen blinked. He didn't particularly care whether he worked or not. It was a nice day; he'd just as soon go fishing if there was a stream handy. But he was certain he didn't want to go back inside that door with the old harridan. "I guess so. What work? Where?"

"Get on that road. Follow those men. Go."

He craned his neck to look again at the rolling road and found it thinly populated. Owen revealed his surprise. Men were beginning to appear from the southwest, singly and in small groups, riding past him toward some unknown destination to the east. They did not look at him or the swaying woman as they went by, but instead contented themselves with studying their shoes or the haircuts of the men in front. They traveled like zombies.

"What's wrong with those guys?"

Owen came around again to question the woman, but found that she had deserted him and was staggering up the path to her door. He held his breath until she made it. The door slammed.

Owen hesitated with indecision and then realized he just couldn't stand there all day. He joined the other men on the rolling road, swinging onto it awkwardly and very nearly losing his balance.

That trick certainly wasn't familiar. Owen braced his feet apart to keep his balance and noted with a small envy that the other riders were having no trouble. Maybe he could do better tomorrow. Unless he skipped out to go fishing tomorrow.

Owen looked away from the city, staring across the road at the open countryside in hopes of finding a stream or even a promising gravel pit. Little more than a vast, uninhabited prairie met his searching eye. In the distance, already fading behind him, he discovered a small stand of timber but there were no

birds or grazing animals to suggest water there.

Perhaps twenty minutes later the moving road carried him past a square mile of broken monuments and tumbled tombstones, but he wasn't interested in finding a fishing hole in an ancient cemetery. The prairie remained vacant. It revealed no farmhouses or cattle or people. The road carried him eastward around the rim of the city as the sun climbed higher into the sky.

There were no individual houses along the road, as Owen discovered after a while. He saw nothing but an unbroken row of buildings monotonously stacked side by side, their walls touching or clinging to each other. Men came out of countless doorways, came from hundreds of apartments or rooms or even warrens along the way to join the other hundreds already on the road. They did not speak, did not gang together to gossip about this or that. The men simply stood in one place, waiting stolidly.

Owen thought that was pretty stupid. He walked across the road and stared into the face of a rider.

"What's the name of this here town, sport?"

The fellow returned his stare for a fraction of a second and then dropped his gaze, pretending to study his feet.

Owen bent down, craned his neck and peered up into the man's face. "D'ya think the Senators will ever win a pennant?"

The man turned around and rode backward to avoid him.

Owen said aloud that was a hell

of a thing for a grown man to do, and lost interest in the clod. On an impulse, and in an attempt to create a diversion, he trotted here and there along the road, staring impudently into faces, saying nonsensical things to provoke a reply, deliberately sliding between a pair who appeared to be traveling together, stepping on toes and jabbing with his elbows.

He was ignored. His co-riders would not respond in any way nor even acknowledge his presence except to turn away when he thrust his face into theirs. Owen told them loudly they might as well be a pack of zombies.

Still curious, he decided to examine the mechanism of the road. Moving carefully to the edge of the rolling surface, he dropped to his knees and searched for a crack in the construction materials, seeking a space between the road itself and whatever bed it rested on. There was none. Owen thought that failed to make sense. There had to be a separation between the two bodies. If the road was suspended on jets of air there ought to be little wheels of some kind to implant forward movement, or so it seemed to his unmechanistic mind. And of course there should be a nameplate or something giving Heinlein credit — or revealing his protective patent number.

Owen was sitting there, puzzling it, when somebody tapped his shoulder. A side glance revealed a pair of feminine legs clad in pink coveralls.

She was back.

Owen realized his mistake when he jumped up and said, "Hi, Mother! Did you bring the jug?"

This woman was dressed in the same fashion, the same garment, but most decidedly she was not the same female he had last seen staggering up the path. This new one was a bit taller, a trifle less mature about the bust and hips, and easily ten years younger. Her hair was sandy blonde and she had a minute brown spot on the tip of her nose.

She asked, reasonably enough, "What were you doing down there?"

"Looking for the little wheels."

"What little wheels?"

"The little wheels this road runs on."

"Did you find them?"

"No."

"Do you feel all right? Are you well?"

"Of course I am. Want to dance?"

"Is your equilibrium satisfactory?"

"Why do you people keep asking that?" Owen retorted with some heat. "There's nothing wrong with me — except that I don't remember last night. Or yesterday."

The young woman peered at him with speculation.

"What is a jug?"

"Booze."

"What is booze?"

"Stuff that comes in a jug. You drink it."

"Why?"

Owen said, "Oh, fudge! Go ask your sister."

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b02-136

Recon/H-478318-30?



Wohl

"I have no sister. Where did you originate?"

"I don't know — back there, somewhere." Owen waved a negligent hand to indicate some vague distance behind him and almost struck a man standing there. He hadn't been aware that anyone else was so near. The man blinked at his passing hand but did nothing else.

To the waiting woman, Owen said dryly, "Here, watch this." And he deliberately thrust a finger against the man's nose, pushing it off center. At the same time he emitted a throaty, "Beep!"

The man turned his back.

"See that?" Owen demanded of the woman. "No guts."

"Why did you do that?" she wanted to know.

"For the hell of it."

"Your behavior is certainly unusual," the pink woman admitted. "I suspect you are incomplete. Are you sure you don't remember your point of origin?"

"I wouldn't go back there again if I did remember," Owen said. "That dame was loaded but she wouldn't share it." He stared at the back of the man standing near them and suspected the fellow was listening. Nosy zombie. Owen grasped the young woman's hand and pulled her to the middle of the street.

"Now we can talk," he explained. "These guys give me the creeps."

The woman was startled by his action.

"You touched me."

Owen looked at her chest. "Want an encore?"

"No." And then she did something which startled him. Reaching for the breast pocket in his coveralls she pushed her fingers down inside, rummaging around for something.

Owen looked down and discovered he was wearing dun-colored coveralls. His garment wasn't nearly so well tailored as hers, and of course he didn't fill it in the same manner. All the men on the street were dressed as he was.

"What are you looking for, lint?"

She did not answer but instead searched the other of the two identical pockets in his garment. Both were empty. Pulling the collar away from his neck she ran her fingers around the neckband without finding anything, and then frisked him by moving her hands down each sleeve of the coveralls.

A small oblong bar of stainless steel was fastened inside one sleeve, above the wrist. The woman removed it with an exclamation of annoyance and pinned the bar in its proper place, under the flap of one pocket. She then placed the flat of her thumb against the bar and gently pressed it to his chest.

For the sheer fun of it, Owen did the same to her. The young woman was taken aback by the gesture but stood firm when she realized what he was doing. An identical bar of stainless steel was pinned beneath a pink flap, riding high on her breast. It gave softly as Owen pushed.

A sensation was transmitted to his

thumb, a peculiar sensation he did not immediately recognize. He pushed again. His thumb felt or read numbers, and then he knew he was reading a message imprinted on the bar. The thumb transmitted a legend:

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"That is enough," she told him, and removed his hand from her body.

Fascinated, Owen put a thumb to his own pocket bar.

Recon/H-478318-30?

"Hey," he cried, "dig those crazy bug numbers! What's that question mark for?"

"Your original age is uncertain."

"I'm twenty-eight."

The pink and blonde doll zeroed in on that. "How do you know?"

Owen blinked, parted his lips to attempt a rational explanation, and then paused, hung on a dilemma. He didn't know how he knew. "Well, I just am, that's all." His thumb lingered over the identification bar a second time. "What does Recon/H mean?"

She ignored the question. "Were you given instructions?"

"I was told to follow these creeps to work."

"Nothing else?" The doll again betrayed annoyance. "Weren't you told to return, afterward? Don't you recall your point of origin? What was the number on the door? Do you remember the woman there?"

Owen shuddered. "I remember she was loaded."

"Loaded? She was weighted down?"

"She was loaded with booze. You know, looped."

"I don't know. What is looped? Where did she obtain the booze?"

"How should I know?" Owen demanded with irritation. "Maybe she had a still in there."

"A still what?"

"Honey, you're a dull cat. Don't you know anything? How'd you ever get to be strawboss' around here without knowing anything? You pink babes are running this crazy place, aren't you?" He examined the cute little brown spot on the tip of her nose. "Where did I come from, anyway? How'd I get into this zombie business?"

"There is something terribly wrong here."

"You can say that again."

"But why should I repeat it?"

"Oh, go fly a kite. I know, I know, what is a kite?" Owen shook his head with bewilderment. "No organization all the way down the line. Let's start over." And he reached for the bar on her breast.

She stepped back. "Stop that. Do you remember your name?"

"Owen Hall."

"And you are twenty-eight?"

"Yes."

"When did you cease being twenty-eight?"

Owen said, "When the —" and came up short, astonished at her question and his own attempt at an answer.

He had almost answered. *When the — what?* Owen poked about the huge and nearly empty cavern which substituted for a memory. Something was moving in there.

He focussed on the object. An automobile. There was a vague image and wondered what it had to do with him.

"Do you remember anything prior to that door?"

"No. She just shoved me through."

"You don't recall the location? The number?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea."

"But where will you spend the night?"

That gave him pause. "I don't know. I hadn't even thought about it. Any park benches around here?"

"What is a park bench?"

"That's what I thought," he said gloomily. "Honey, whatever happened to the Indiana I lived in?"

"Is Indiana a town? I don't know that name. But I think you should come to my place tonight. You simply can't go roaming around."

Owen's jaw dropped. "Do you mean that?"

"Certainly. You have to sleep somewhere indoors."

He stole a glance at the nearby men. "Won't people talk?"

"Talk about what?"

"This sure as hell ain't Indiana."

The blonde charmer gave him a small metallic plate about the size of a calling card. Owen moved his thumb over it, inwardly pleased at his new-found skill. The plate repeated the legend he had already read on her bar, while immediately below that identification was another number he supposed to be a house number, or at least a door number to one of the warrens along

the road. Owen allowed his thumb to tarry over the plate and his imagination to play in the blonde hair. It was difficult to accept.

"You want me to spend the night with you?"

"I certainly do. I want to look into you; there is more than a suspicion that you are incomplete. Your present behavior isn't normal, you know. It needs correcting."

"So what's in it for me?"

"The works," she replied enigmatically. "Obey your previous instructions and then obey mine. When you are dismissed from your job report to this address." And she left him as abruptly as she had come.

Owen watched her swing off the road in expert fashion. He even turned around to watch her exciting figure until it vanished in the distance behind him. Owen pulled himself from an erotic dream to find himself looking into the blank face of a blank man standing several feet away.

"You poor sap! The trouble with you is, you're all there. Know what I mean?"

III

The rolling road eventually delivered its human cargo to some large building Owen took to be a factory, or possibly a warehouse. There were no signs to indicate the nature of the place. For once he sorely missed the ubiquitous billboard. The men ahead of Owen were leaving the road and entering the building in their listless fashion, behaving like so many stereo-

types on their way to another boring day at the office. Owen followed them, knowing curiosity. A great doorway engulfed him.

A factory, Owen decided. In that first quick glance around, he saw what appeared to be hundreds of machines of totally alien design, geared to produce something equally alien. There were no scraps of anything on the floor to lend a hint of the product, no stockpiles of raw material waiting to be fashioned. The incoming men pushed past him, scattering through the building and each choosing a machine with practiced familiarity.

Still led by curiosity, Owen walked perhaps a hundred feet along the most convenient aisle and stopped again. After a moment he bellowed aloud.

"Hey! What the hell is going on here? *Anybody home?*" The far reaches of the building echoed his shout.

The soulless factory workers did not pause in their tasks, did not look up or even peek around at him, did not cover their ears as his hoarse bellow beat around the great building. Owen considered yelling *fire!*

The yell was unnecessary; he caught a sudden flash of pink in the distance and concentrated on that. Someone had heard him. Another one of those pink women came along the aisle on the run, panting from the unusual exertion.

"Who did that?"

"Who did what?"

"What is the matter here? Why did you raise your voice?"

Owen inspected her. This newest specimen was a distinct disappointment and he didn't try to conceal that fact. She was a much older woman than any he had seen thus far: gray haired, gray eyed, gray skinned, singularly straight up and down, and utterly without a sense of humor.

"We don't raise our voices in here, man." Her enunciation of *man* contained a built-in gibe.

"Grandma, except for you and me, nobody has voices in here," he retorted.

That brought a titanic frown to the gray forehead. She opened her palm as if to slap him but changed her mind as the hand was traveling toward him. Instead, she quickly flipped open his pocket flap and jabbed an angry thumb down on his identification bar. The gray lips curled.

"I might have known it. A brand new one. Didn't they teach you manners?"

"What are manners?" Owen asked with secret delight.

Grandmother managed a double take. She snapped at Owen. "Who was your fabricator?"

"Do you mean that crazy doll who kicked me out of the house? She didn't introduce herself. Hitting the jug, you know. One of those women who booze up and then want to fight." Owen clucked with disapprobation. "But don't worry, Granny, I've got another date for tonight."

"I should hope so," the gray lady retorted. "Now behave yourself and come with me."

Owen followed the woman to an unmanned machine. In four minutes time she introduced him to the production line, and it was the most confounding thing he's ever seen.

The machine itself was a monstrous affair the size of an overland truck. Almost all of its working parts were concealed from view behind a casing, hiding the wheels and gears from curious eyes but at the same time preventing him or those mindless operators from sticking their fingers into the works. The nearby face of the machine contained a window perhaps two square feet in area, with a short stainless steel bar above the window and a row of push buttons beneath. The bar was about five inches wide and two inches high, of concave design, and set into the machine wall at about the height of a man's head.

Owen discovered it was intended to receive a man's forehead.

Following the gray dame's explicit instructions he bellied up to the machine, placed his forehead against the bar and visualized a slice of bacon.

He just stood there and thought about a slice of bacon. When he had formed a complete image in his mind, the full, rounded picture of a succulent strip of bacon fairly oozing with vitamins and goodness, he pushed the first button as he had been told to do and the machine began operating. A light went on behind the window.

A strip of bacon—the one he had visualized — dropped from somewhere overhead onto a paper tray.

Owen stepped back to stare at it. "Well, how about that!"

"Continue!" the gray grandmotherly type snapped in his ear. "You haven't completed the ration. Follow my instructions."

"Say, that's a damned good trick. How'd I do it?"

"It is reconstituted pork. Complete the ration."

Again he bellied up to the machine, placed his head against the think-bar, pressed the button and produced a second slice of bacon. It dropped down to rest on the tray alongside the first slice. Owen kept at it until he had five slices in all.

"That is sufficient. Now wrap it."

Punching the second button with a feeling of secret exhilaration, Owen watched through the window as a sheet of transparent wrapping paper spewed up from below, wrapped itself around the rasher of bacon with an assist from a pair of mechanical fingers and tidied up the package for somebody's breakfast.

"Dispatch it."

He punched the third button and the package was whisked out of sight. An empty tray dropped into place and the machine waited for the young creator's next visualization.

"Neat — very neat. I didn't even say *shazam!*"

"Stop that noise. Talking isn't permitted here. Continue working until the shift has ended."

"You mean this is all I have to do?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Well, I guess so," he said.

"Then get at it. And keep your mouth shut." She watched over his shoulder for the next several minutes, making certain he did a competent job.

Owen thought bacon, made bacon, wrapped bacon and sent bacon on its way to some mysterious place, five slices to the package.

All of his bacon was of the finest quality, prime meat, because it suddenly occurred to him that one of those packages might be his breakfast in the morning, and he would surely be hungry if the charming pink and blonde creature lived up to her enigmatic promise.

After a while the gray haired supervisor seemed satisfied with his output and left him, disappearing into the vast distance from which she had come. The production of bacon went on for nearly an hour.

And then Owen made a necktie.

It wasn't a very good necktie. The colors were poor and the pattern awry, but it was his very first necktie and he was proud of it. He wondered if perhaps he could create a fad for neckties, something to relieve the 'dun monotony of the coveralls. He made several neckties, each an improvement on the one before, wrapping each one in an individual gift package and sending them on their way.

Next he tried a loaf of bread but it was a dismal failure and had to be scrubbed — his visualization of the interior had been faulty. A handful of cigars came out better.

They looked so good he wished he could reach through the window and help himself. Then it occurred to him that a fine monkey wrench might please somebody, so he visualized that, wrapped it and sent it along to wherever the things were going.

Other tools followed, sometimes one to a package and sometimes several just for variety: screwdrivers, pliers, ball peen hammers, chisels, awls, saws, squares, files, everything a journeyman carpenter would want in his toolbox. The quality and abundance of his tools provoked a mild wonder. They were so well made, so meticulous in detail, so workmanlike. Perhaps he had been a carpenter before.

Before what?

Before he had ceased being twenty-eight. Before that fuzzy image of a moving automobile.

Owen stopped work to think about that.

Scrawny wisps of memory skittered about the barren places of his mind. Sometimes two or three wisps touched and thereafter clung together.

He had been sitting in an automobile. Sitting in the front seat. The automobile was moving very fast, almost too fast, hurtling along a road at breakneck speed. Perhaps he had been rushing to his carpenter's job. Something happened next. Something very big happened.

Another shadowy image. The image crawled out of a worm hole at the bottom of his mind and crept forward to be examined. It touched

another image. A large truck. There was a large truck on the same road and it was moving toward him. Toward his automobile.

Owen stepped back and stared up at his machine.

The machine was as big as a truck; when he used his imagination it was the size and shape of a large truck — that other truck which had appeared in front of his car.

There it was! He had been sitting in the front seat of his own automobile, hurrying along a road, and a truck had rushed at him from nowhere. Well, the truck might have been there all the time but he hadn't been looking at it, hadn't seen it. He remembered a toolbox resting on the seat beside him. Suddenly the box was open and tools were flying through the windshield. Some of them were even hitting him. His automobile stopped quite suddenly.

Owen was very certain, now, what happened to him.

The speeding car, the unexpected truck, the hurtling tools were too vivid, too substantial to be dismissed. That had happened to him.

Owen blinked at the unexpected mildness of *that* and wondered briefly why the experience hadn't followed the book. There had been no sharp division, no definite period of transition between the tools striking him and that drunken woman thumping him on the back as she shoved him through a door. The one blow had followed the others without meaningful separation. No rest period.

Movement in the corner of his eye. Owen hastily returned to his

machine when he caught a glimpse of the supervisor coming along the aisle.

Pink clothing was like a neon signboard in such drab surroundings. The gray woman paused for a sullen moment and looked over his shoulder while he dutifully manufactured packages of bacon; rich, tasty bacon.

When she continued on her way, Owen made a cucumber. He was fond of cucumbers.

IV

He was surprised at the shortness of the work day; it had union hours beat handily.

Owen guessed it wasn't much beyond noon when the gray haired supervisor blew a piercing blast on a whistle and stopped the works. The shrill noise careened around the building. He was the only one to cover his ears. The lifeless creatures manning the machines trooped to the great door and departed, exhibiting neither surprise nor regret; they mounted the road, which was now rolling in the opposite direction, and rode away without emotion.

Owen followed them in like manner because the old gray eyes were watching him with frustration and suspicion. She seemed upset about something. Owen conquered a sudden impulse to turn around and waggle his fingers at her — she might see well enough to note where he held his thumb.

His return trip was uneventful. The old cemetery was dismissed

with a casual glance because it no longer seemed important to him. He was preoccupied with a belated realization that no one at the factory, including himself, had made a trip to the drinking fountain or the men's room all morning long. That was decidedly odd.

The little metal card in his pocket bore the pink blonde's door number. Owen fished it out to read it again. He began watching doors. The numbers dwindled as the road carried him to the southwest. He found the proper dwelling after a while and swung off the road, looking over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching him.

They weren't — they were busy seeking their doors.

Owen walked up the path and tried the door but it did not give under his hand. He put more strength into a second attempt but still it held fast. So he kicked the door open.

The apartment reminded him of the factory, but on a smaller scale of course. It consisted of one long room, having a number of opaque screens and other room dividers set here and there to break the vast, monotonous expanse of the whole. There were no pictures, no carpets, no useless dustcatchers. He located a lounging area, a dining area, a vaguely feminine place which would be the blonde's bedroom (double bed), a cubbyhole alongside it which served as a bath and another, smaller cubbyhole which contained a single stainless steel cot and nothing more. Owen stared at the cot and shuddered.

The remainder of the apartment was a workshop, and here the suggestion of a factory was too broad to be ignored. The dominating structure in the room was the think and do machine — a scaled-down replica of that same machine he had used this morning to manufacture bacon. The only other discernable difference to this machine was that it contained a delivery door on one side, an opening exactly resembling an oven door. Owen pulled it open to peer inside. The oven was empty but for a smidgin of dust and an odor which caused him to wrinkle his nose and quickly close the door.

Three oblong boxes were stacked at the rear of the machine. Because he was nosy, Owen lifted the lid of the topmost box and looked inside. He closed it fast.

A worn book caught his eye and he picked it up to ruffle the pages. Owen guessed it to be a service manual. Several of the large inner pages folded out to resemble blueprints or schematic drawings or something. The text of the manual was written in a peculiar kind of English he failed to understand, but the illustrations were remarkably clear and comprehensible. They depicted men.

Owen slammed shut the book, suddenly ill at ease. He did not like to look at skeletons and at livid, man-like things with their skins off. It was indecent.

Owen found a jar of old coins tucked away in a corner of the workshop and was twisting off the lid when he heard a noise at the

door. He put down the jar and went to investigate. The blonde had come home.

He said, "Nice little place you've got here."

The blonde was staring at the shattered remains of her door. Her surprise on seeing him was equal to the dismay caused by the wreckage.

"What are you doing here?"

"Unfair! Unfair! You invited me — now don't try to wriggle out of it."

"What happened to this door?"

"I kicked it open."

"But why did you do that?"

"Because it was locked," Owen said simply.

A sharp, penetrating frown. "Are you *looped*?"

"Not yet. I couldn't find anything in the house."

"Why did you leave your job?"

"The old woman — you know, Granny — stopped the works. She sent us home."

"Why?"

"I didn't ask. I'm not a company man."

"Was there a breakdown?"

"I didn't see any."

"That is very unusual. Something must have gone wrong."

"Too bad," Owen said. "I liked the hours, too."

She looked past him into the interior of the house. "What were you doing in there?"

"Casing the joint. It's a square layout."

"It isn't square, it's a trapezoid. Our buildings are planned."

Owen shook his head. "Honey,

do you have any idea what a dumb broad is? The slightest idea?"

"No."

"I didn't think so." He waved her forward. "You might as well hop over that kindling and come on in. You stand out there yakking all day, people will think you're selling subscriptions or something."

The blonde stepped over the wreckage of her door and entered the apartment in, something of a daze. "I confess I don't understand you at all. You are unlike any other man I have ever known. You are incomprehensible."

"That makes two of us," he retorted. "What did you do with Indiana?"

"I never had your Indiana. I don't know what it is."

"Indiana was the place I lived in, back there, back when. What time is it now — I mean, what year is it?"

"One Hundred Sixty-one."

"One Hundred and Sixty-one *what*?"

"What do you mean by *what*?"

"There you are!" he shouted triumphantly. "*What* is A. D. or something like that."

The blonde was bewildered. "What is A. D.?"

Owen muttered, "A rose is a rose is a rose."

He seized her hand and pulled her into the workshop. As before, she seemed startled by his unfamiliar action but went along readily enough. Owen paused near the think and do machine and pointed dramatically to the stack of oblong crates stacked beside it.

"Poor old Yorick is stuffed in there, in that top box. Shame on you."

There had not been sufficient time for the startled expression to leave her face. "Do you *know* him?" she asked incredulously.

"Never saw him before in my life. Either of my lives. Do you specialize in reconstituted orange juice?" Owen stepped close and peered into her eyes in what he hoped was an accusatory manner. "I've got your number, baby!"

"Of course you have. I gave it to you this morning."

"Not that number!" Owen roared. "I mean, I know what's going on here. In this house—this town. I know all about them zombies out there. They're recon jobs!"

The pretty blonde stared at Owen for a long while as the shout died away and silence returned to the room. At last she said thoughtfully, "*You are flawed.*" Each word was given a careful enunciation to make it properly significant.

Owen shifted uncomfortably under her stare, looked away, took a backward step and searched for something to distract her attention. He felt like an ant under glass. The jar of old coins caught his eye and his imagination; he'd been about to examine them when the blonde came home. Now *there* was a handful of clues. Owen darted across the shop. He twisted off the lid and spilled the coins on a bench. Apparently she had tried to clean them.

"Come here—look at these things. Where did you get them?"

The blonde joined him at the bench, watching him carefully. "They turn up here and there, during excavations. The ancients used them in their religious ceremonies; they are called monies."

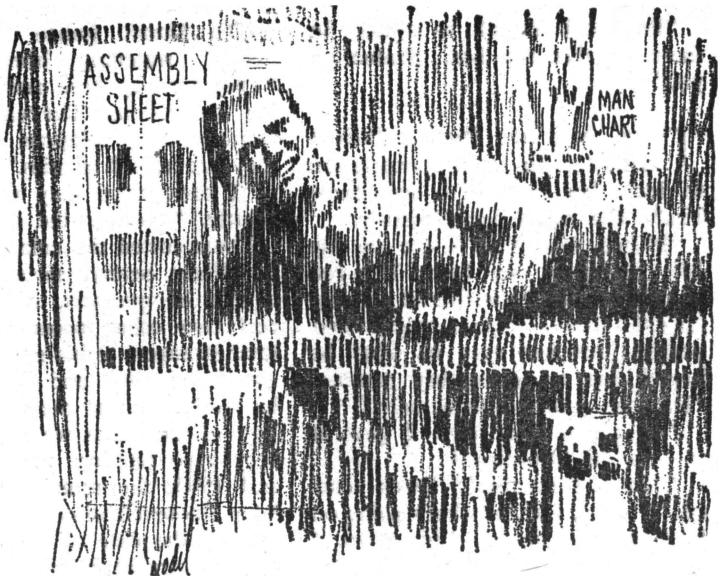
"I know what they are," he said shortly. "Look at the dates!"

Owen sorted the coins. There was a solitary penny, several dimes, a couple of quarters, a half dollar, and two other coins which were total strangers to his eye. The penny was dated 1948 and Owen grunted his satisfaction at the familiar date. Two of the dimes were of the Mercury type bearing the dates 1916 and 1945; the remainder were the later Roosevelt dimes and Owen inspected the date of each one with a concentrated interest. One dime was carefully put aside. The two quarters were of minimal interest because the dates were common. The half dollar was something else again and earned a careful scrutiny. Owen stared with disfavor at the man's profile stamped on the coin and muttered an indistinct vilification; imagine that jackass winding up famous! It was put aside with the dime.

He hunched over the remaining, unfamiliar pieces.

"Look at these things," he commanded the blonde. "*Ten Shul.* What is ten *shul*? What do you know about the AmerCan States? Does that mean what I think it means?"

"It is said that AmerCan was a most ancient land, supposedly the possession of a mythical deity. I know nothing more than that." She



studied his face, anticipating an expected ritual. "Do you know about it?"

"Never heard of the fool thing, but I can guess. Look here, they turned out these pieces in 2073 and 2109. Boy — talk about Buck Rogers stuff!" Owen dismissed the strange coins and returned his attention to the dime. He inspected it somberly, turned it over to read the mint mark and then rolled it in his fingers. It had the old feel of Indiana, the feel of home. After a moment he gave the dime to the girl.

"Read it."

"Read what?" It was not what she was expecting.

"The date."

"One nine six zero. Is that significant?"

"It sure as hell is, honey. 1960. That was minted just one year after I . . . after the . . . you know." He groped for the proper expression to mark the event.

"After you ceased being twenty-eight?"

Owen nodded, knowing a melancholy mood. "It gives a guy a funny feeling at the bottom of his stomach. I mean, I didn't get that far, but here it is in my hand. The date reads funny. It makes a guy think."

She asked softly. "Do you want me to withdraw?"

"Withdraw? What for?"

"You might want to pray privately."

Owen nearly hurled the dime across the room. "You don't on it, dimwit, you spend it!"



"Spend? How do you spend it?"

"On beer — when you can find dime beer."

"What is beer?"

"Booze," he retorted.

The blonde brightened. "I know that term now. I have discovered that Booze was the name of a prehistoric god who manufactured alcoholic beverages for his people. The ancients drank it during their ceremonial orgies."

"We sure as hell did, honey, with or without the orgies. And so did that crazy dame who had me last night. Where did *she* get the stuff?"

The young woman revealed her frustration. "I don't know that. I have not been able to locate your fabricator; you haven't been very helpful, you know. But I am certain that her unfortunate experi-

ments with the alcohol was responsible for your flawed condition. It never happened before. There is no such thing as a faulted worker. That simply can't be permitted, of course."

"Of course. So what do we do now? Fly kites?"

The blonde folded her arms. The hesitation in answering was noticeable. "I admit to a certain curiosity."

"About what?"

"About you, Owen Hall. The flaw may have been deliberate."

Owen studied the pink coveralls. A lively rubber ball of exhilaration snapped up and down his spine.

"Do you suppose that babe had something in mind?"

"I intend to find out."

"How?"

She only smiled and looked at him.

"Goody," Owen said after a moment. "I like surprises."

v

Owen Hall woke up at some unknown hour of the night. He peered around in the darkness, seeking orientation, and then turned over in bed to gently prod the shoulder of the sleeping mechanic. The absolute hush of an untenanted night enfolded the apartment and the city beyond it. Owen knew without looking that the road was motionless and empty, and the park benches — if they existed — would be folded away. Perhaps even the moon had deserted the earth lest its light cause a stirring among nightbirds. The silence on the other side of the door was total.

The blonde moved under his prodding. "What's the matter?" she asked drowsily.

"I'm hungry."

"Go to sleep. It isn't time to eat."

"But I'm hungry now," Owen insisted.

She pulled herself awake and sat up in bed, obviously annoyed. "Can't you wait until morning?"

"No," Owen said and bounced out of bed. "Hit the deck." He pulled back the cover. "Chop, chop."

The young woman climbed out with a suspicious word on her lips that aroused his wonder. He was sure he wouldn't like it if he understood it. She walked on bare

feet to the kitchen and turned on a light.

Owen said, "Wow," and looked at the view while the blonde snapped a switch above a stainless steel box set into the kitchen wall. Another contraption that reminded him of an oven. He watched in silence as she sullenly pushed a series of buttons below the shiny box ordering a meal. Nothing happened immediately and the blonde leaned against the wall, fighting sleep. Time slipped away.

"What's holding up the show?"

"Be patient," she said crossly. "It will be cooked and delivered in a moment."

"Right out of the factory, eh? You babes sure have this town organized."

A signal light winked into sudden brilliance over the wall box and the blonde pulled open an oven-like door on the front. His breakfast was there, steaming hot.

Owen stared at the monkey wrench. The wooden handle was done to a crisp.

The woman was stunned. "What is that?"

"A monkey wrench. What did you think it was?"

She turned on him, her face clouded with the color of anger. Despite himself, Owen was entranced. He couldn't remember ever seeing a woman angry all the way down.

"Look at me!"

Owen lifted his gaze. "I am."

"You did that!"

"Guilty, your honor."

"That is why the processing plant was shut down, that is why you were sent home early!"

"I thought it was the union hours."

She shook an excited finger in his face. "Do you realize what you've done? Do you realize people might go hungry tomorrow? Did you make many of those things?"

"No," Owen said truthfully. "Just one of them. That one."

"You are totally irresponsible!"

"Aw, calm down. You said that before, you're always yakking about my flaws and my equilibrium. Go sing a new song." He inspected the smoking handle of the wrench and decided he wasn't hungry after all. It wouldn't be wise to request another order just now.

She said ominously, "There will be no question about your equilibrium in the morning. There will be no flaws when you leave here."

"Going to rebuild me, eh? A complete overhaul?"

"You will not be flawed when I am finished with you."

"That's what I thought." Owen looked at her symmetrical witchery. "Always wanting to take the fun out of life, always wanting to knock everybody down to size. Honey, you've got a screwball world here and you can damn well keep it. If you prefer them zombies out there to me, the hell with it."

He turned and stalked out.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to bed," he called back from the other room. A moment later: "I'm in bed. See in what peace a Christian can die."

The young woman stood in the kitchen for a long moment before snapping off the switch on the wall oven. The light followed, and still she waited in the darkness. At length she realized her bare feet were cold.

Owen Hall's single day of life ended better than it had begun.

END

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VANISHING POINT

by JONATHAN BRAND

Illustrated by MORROW

It is good to place things in perspective—but can you be sure the perspective is yours?

I

The moment Bill Wheeler stepped into the bathroom, both little girls shrieked and leapt out of the bath. Bill grabbed for Hannah and his wife grabbed for Tammy. She missed, he connected, but Hannah twisted out of his grasp, left him with a handful of suds, and chased

the other handful of suds into the nursery.

A moment later they were back brandishing sheets of drawing-paper covered with bold drawings.

"Look, Daddy! Look what I drew at school!" yelled Tammy.

"Look, I drew something too!" shouted Hannah.

"Look, look, look, look!"

Their mother shushed helplessly through the steam but Bill just laughed.

"Look, Daddy, stop laughing Daddy. Look at our pictures."

"All right, already," he said. "Now one at a time, for Heaven's sake. Get in a line, why don't you?"

"They'll get in the bath again if anywhere," said Mrs. Wheeler, and firmly lifted Hannah — the nearest and smallest — over the rim, her pink sudsy legs kicking in the air.

"Well, you seem to have your feet on the ground," he said to his other daughter.

"Oh, come on, Daddy," she answered, and thrust the drawing towards him.

He took it from her, and, prolonging the suspense, slowly fetched from his inside pocket a leather case from which he took his lenses and fixed them deliberately on his nose. Meanwhile Hannah was energetically resisting her mother's efforts to soap her arms and was beating the back of her father's neck with a roll of drawing paper. Mrs. Wheeler acted like a wise mother, and whipped the roll of paper out of one daughter's hand and wrapped the other in a shroud-sized towel.

"Let's keep it a little quiet," said Bill. "I'm concentrating on Tammy's picture." There was a comparative silence, broken only by a suppressed whinnying from the two girls.

"Now let's see. Right in the front, bigger than everything else, there's a man with a fur round his neck —"

"That's not fur, Daddy," said Tammy from inside the towel. "That's a beard."

"And he seems to be wearing a sort of yachting jacket covered with bottle tops."

"Silly, Daddy! That's his Space Police uniform with his rows and rows of medals."

"Oh, yes. Well, behind him a piece there's this space cruiser on its hind legs, there's a couple more people in yachting jackets —"

"Oh, Daddy!"

"— round a little fire, and then there's trees and flowers and so on and a monster artichoke —"

"It's a Murray person, Daddy. A Murray person."

"I see now by the warts. And then there's more trees very small in the background, and after that there's a little, little man walking away into the distance."

"Now look at mine! Now look at mine!" came a shout out of the steam in the bath, and Hannah pummeled at her mother's arm.

"Put that somewhere safe for me," said Bill to his elder daughter, handing her back her drawing. "I must look at Hannah's." From the window-sill he picked up the other drawing and opened it. "Remarkable unanimity of theme, I see," he said. "There's this big man with a beard in the front and then halfway back the other two medium-sized men by the fire and the warty artichoke —"

"Murray person!" screamed Hannah, incensed, from the bath.

"And then the line of trees and then the little man in the distance."

"Come on, Daddy! Guess what it represents, Daddy!"

"I really can't think," said their father in mock mystification. "Something you read about in school?"

"You're being so *stupid*, Daddy," said Hannah. Tammy released herself from the towel and wound it instead round her father's legs.

"Daddy really knows," she said scornfully. "He's just pretending."

"I don't know," said Bill.

"It's you on the Federation satellite, Daddy. Don't you see?" said Hannah eagerly. "There's you in the front with the medals, and behind's Levine and Matsuki and right in the back's the old man getting smaller and smaller. "Don't you see?"

"Well, now you mention it. I *do* see Levine and Matsuki and I just see the old man, though he's got a bit small in this picture. But I don't see me. Unless you mean this bearded monkey up front here — but he's nothing like me."

"You're so silly sometimes, Daddy," said Tammy. "Of course it's you in the picture."

"I guess they've finished their bath," said Bill's wife.

"Time for our story! Time for our story!"

"Okay, so let's be off," said Bill. He waited for the resolution of an unequal three-way struggle between Hannah and her mother and Hannah's flowered nightshirt and then they were ready. Bill snatched his two children up into his arms, from which point they instantly started tugging at his reddish beard.

"Easy on the steering," he said and swept them through into the

nursery, where he inserted one into the bed with the elephants on the quilt and the other into the bed with the lions on the quilt. They popped straight out again like corks from a champagne bottle and, bouncing round him, changed beds. He bared his teeth and hooded his eyes Satanically. "Drat it," he said. "Where did I put those children?"

"Wrong beds," said Hannah, snuggling down into the covers until only her curly topknot showed.

"Now tell us the story of you and Levine and Matsuko on the Federation satellite."

"You don't want that old story again? I've told it to you a dozen times. And it's sort of sad."

"The Federation satellite! The Federation satellite!"

"Don't you want the one about the witch, the wolves and the little girl who lived on Endymion IV?"

"You and the Federation satellite!"

"The Federation satellite it is then. Ready now. It was like this."

He stopped. Hannah's topknot had disappeared and he could see nothing of her except a bulge under the bedclothes like a goat in the stomach of a boa constrictor. "Did I lose you?" he asked. "Oh, I see. Ten! Nine! Sight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! — um — um — One! Fire all!"

With a whining and a spluttering Hannah emerged from her boa constrictor and sat up straight with her arms above her head, grinning and giggling.

"All shipshape now? Well, I'll begin."

“**B**ackaways in the dim past before you two nonsenses were thought of, (he said), a ship set out from Glenn Field, New Mexico, carrying three men, a Murray and just a heap of papers and pictures. The first man was Levine, Earth’s ambassador to the Galactic Federation; the second was Matsuki, a captain in the Space Police; and the third man was his engineer, as stupid, lazy and bearded a man as you could hope to meet. I’ll not tell you his name.

“Daddy!” shouted Tammy and Hannah together.)

Don’t interrupt. Their mission was to deliver Levine and his heap of papers and pictures to a meeting-place where he would talk to people from the Federation. Levine was going to do the talking; the Murray, as you know, just keeps the artificial gravity going; the engineer was to run the ship and Matsuki was there sort of to run the Murray and the engineer. So when the ship got to the meeting-place they found the Federation hadn’t arrived. But they’d left a biggish disk-island floating there — luckily the right way up or we’d all have slipped off. And they’d left a signal beacon which guided the ship in to land. The signal beacon also said they should wait there, the Federation people would be along in about four Earth days. The engineer looked through a port-hole and everything looked okay; he opened the ventilator and the air sniffed okay. So everybody got out and took a walk.

Well, you kids these days know as much about the Federation as I do, but I’ll just say that in those days we knew pretty little about them. We sort of suspected they were good eggs, but it was Levine’s job to find out exactly how good. Very brave man, Levine.

So anyway, everybody got out. The ship had landed in what looked like a clearing in a wood. Around them were trees and shrubs of all Earth varieties — more like the Botanical Gardens, really, than a natural wood. And between the trees were scattered irregular beds of vegetables and flowers. Some of them looked recently dug over. To be exact about the vegetables, there were beds of tomatoes, beds of carrots, beds of onions, beds of celery and beds of lettuce. Since there were also apple trees, peach trees, lemon trees, grapefruit trees, mulberry trees and grape vines the three men made themselves a delicious fresh salad like the one you had tonight. This, I may say, they were very glad and very lucky to get after weeks in space.

(He looked sternly at the children. Tammy giggled guiltily. Hannah squirmed and giggled.)

So the sun was still high and they decided to see what the rest of the country was like. They left the ship on automatic and set off along what might have been a path through the trees. The land sloped upwards, very slightly at first, then more steeply, so that finally they came to a nearly-vertical rampart or ridge about ten feet high which curved inwards round them on both sides. Along

the top of it grew a line of fir trees. They scrambled up the ridge and found themselves looking down on a flat and level plain that dipped away before them.

"I guess this is an old volcano crater," said Matsuki, who (as a good captain) liked to make classifications as firm as possible.

"Or maybe an old meteor crater?" said Levine, who (as a good diplomat) liked his classifications fluid.

"I guess so," said the engineer, who (as a good engineer) was stupid.

Beyond the ring of trees they could see countryside much like the area within the saucer — a pizza of flowers and vegetable patches, peppered with fruit trees. In some places the engineer thought he could discern paths through the trees, but they were so scattered and irregular that they might have been skeins of last year's leaves piled up by the wind between the trees. The sun was bright overhead; the light breeze was fresh and dry; the metal of the ship glinted sharply behind them across the grove. But the air in the plain beyond was misty and moist, and the horizon was lost in a faint blue haze which hid anything further than about five miles out. The engineer, with his marvellously sharp eyes, was the first to see the figure who is the strange hero of this story.

("The old man! The old man!" shouted the children delightedly.)

The old man. This rugged figure was climbing slowly through the trees up the rim of the glade in

which the Earthmen stood. He was dressed in baggy old blue denim pants and a patched tartan shirt. In one hand he carried a knobbly beechwood staff, in the other a bundle. The engineer nudged the other two Earthmen and together they stood up under the pines along the perimeter of the glade and waved and shouted to the old man. He untwisted himself as reluctantly as a 100-year old apple tree and raised his stick in greeting.

"I'll be along presently," he called up to them. "Just you wait where you are."

A few moments later the old man reached the top of the rise with a considerable puffing and blowing.

("And spitting, Daddy," said Hannah. "You forgot the spitting." And she gave a vigorous imitation of what she meant.

"Well, yes. That's true. He was spitting a bit, too. But that's no reason for you to." Bill fell silent for a moment, and cleared his throat. Hannah culminated her display in a paroxysm of sniffing and hissing, then settled back on her pillow grinning. "Well, when he got to the top, he held out his hand to Levine and said —"

"Welcome to the Federation, sir. My name's Gardner. Make yourself at home, sir, you and your company. I'll do what I can to make you comfortable, but don't ask no questions, I just work here," said Tammy all in one breath.

"That's right. Then he laid his bundle on the ground and unwrapped a striped flannel rag and fetched out the carcass of a fat hare.")



VANISHING POINT

MORRISON

"I trapped this out in the blueberry patch in the valley. I was busy with my traps and I didn't see you arrive until you was already here, almost. I'd better hurry and make your fire or he won't be done by dinner time."

"Well, I'm sure that's most kind of you, Mr. Gardner," said Levine. "But I don't think we need a fire. We've got a small stove built into the extension heat-engine of our ship."

"It'll be all the better done over wood, sir. And you'll need a little fire of an evening."

"Well, that's most hospitable."

"Now I hope you've everything you want. There's a spring for water to the south of your ship about 20 yards. You can tell which is south by the sun. I thought of making the fire between there and the ship. You'll see there's a couple of fallen trees there'll make comfortable seating, I think."

"Sounds like a holiday!" said Matsuki, rolling up his sleeves and taking deep breaths of the pine-scented air.

"I certainly hope it will be one, sir," said Gardner. "I'm going over now to make up your fire. Why don't you look around? I'm afraid I have to ask you not to go further out than the ridge around this dip here. Beyond there I'm not supposed to take you. And you'd need a guide."

Levine said, "Ya, sure. We'll just walk around for now."

When they got back to the ship they found the old man had picked a camp site for them. He was sitting

on a fallen log stirring a pot which hung on a tripod of sticks over a crackling fire. They crowded round the pot.

"Smells good," said Matsuki, rudely dipping his finger in. "Tastes good, too."

"It's the hare, sir," said the old man. "As a matter of fact I added to it some juice I made last year. You take grapes, and squeeze them, and if you let them ferment —"

"That's a remarkable process," said the engineer. "Perhaps you could patent it."

"Patent? I don't know the word, sir."

"Never mind," said Matsuko, who was a gluttonous eater. "What say we eat? Eh?" He looked round the group, his eyes pleading.

So the engineer was sent to get the plates and they sat down round the fire and helped themselves from the pot.

By the time they had finished the sun had gone down. The old man collected their plates and they heard him rinse them in the spring in the darkness beyond the fire. When he came back he was carrying an earthenware jar corked at the neck.

"I've got some more of that juice I spoke of," he said. "Would you like some to drink after dinner?"

"You bet," said Matsuki and ambled to the ship and brought mugs.

The old man uncorked the bottle. For a long time the four men sat around the little fire in a silence broken only by the sounds of the

engineer's gurgling pipe, and of Matsuki smacking his lips and of Levine's restless pencil.

"What are you doing?" asked the old man.

"I'm drawing," said Levine. "I do it when I've nothing else to do."

"Can I look, please?"

"Of course. Come and sit over here."

The old man moved round and the engineer made a place for him. "I see," he said. "But that's marvelous. You're making a picture of us. There's the cooking pot very big in front and beyond with the light on half his face, is Captain Matsuki picking his teeth. That's marvelous. Could you draw me?"

"Of course. Sit opposite me where I can see you without the light in my eyes."

The old man went over where he pointed. He tore out the sheet he'd been working on and selected a long stick of charcoal. The old man watched his hands in fascination. Levine began to draw.

"Who are you, Mr. Gardner? How did you get here? Are you human?"

"Oh yes, sir," said the old man proudly. "I'm human all right. I know why you ask. I've seen some clever robots. But my parents were human all right, servants to colonists on Stoneground."

Levine grunted. "There haven't been colonists on Stoneground since the Damp hit the planet 60 years ago. It's pretty far from Earth's other colonies, you know."

The old man didn't answer for a while. He was watching Levine's

careful movements. Following his gaze, the engineer realized that Levine was drawing much slower than usual, though the old man couldn't know that. The old man's attention was on Levine's drawing, but Levine's was on the old man's words.

"Oh, yes, the Damp got my parents, and my parents' master and mistress. But I was in a kiddy-cabin the master and mistress had used for their own children and passed on to my parents. So when the Damp came I escaped."

"That's funny."

"Why, sir?"

"Well, the police sent out a census force after the Damp passed on. They traced every single colonist who'd been noted in the census before. And buried them, too. I remember reading an abstract of the report. Even when colonies have to be written off we have to find out what happened. I'm sorry if this is painful, but it's important to Earth what happens to Earthmen."

"I'm not hurt. It's so long ago now. I'm proud you should inquire, sir. The truth is I was born after the last census of the living planet and then the Damp came. They never knew I existed."

"I see. Well, what happened then?"

"It's simple, really. When the Federation spotted the Damp on Stoneground they sent a fumigation team in right away. Now that you know about the Damp I expect you do the same."

"Yes, we do."

"You see Stoneground's one of Earth's farthest colonies. Well, it's

also on the outskirts of the Federation territory."

"I suppose it is, yes."

"I was the first human being the Federation ever met, so they tell me. I was eight years old. Well, they began to study my environment at once — fetched a whole farmhouse and everything in it from Stoneground and installed it on one of their planets, and brought along an old rancher and his wife from Stoneground's neighbor Bullrush. They were my stepfather and mother, old Mr. and Mrs. Gardner of Bullrush. They died years ago. I'm lucky to be alive myself."

"That's a strange story. How did you get here?"

"They put me here as curator. This is Earth-Heaven, the Federation's gift to Earth. They feel you should have somewhere in this sector you can call home."

"It's certainly like Earth, It's a wonderful job."

"I believe it is. But it's only a mock-up. Very beautiful, of course, but it's not Earth."

"I guess not, Gardner. Home's always something special."

"I wish one day I could go to your home, Man's home. I'd like to see it once. I hope you don't mind me mentioning that? I'd so like to go in a ship back to Earth."

The old man gazed into the fire. Levine glanced at Matsuki and Matsuki looked questioningly at the engineer. When the engineer felt their eyes on him he shrugged his shoulders. "There's room" he said. "Why shouldn't there be enough room for one more?"

III

Matsuki had been lying all afternoon in the long grass just below the boundary ridge of the encampment. Now he came strolling back towards the ship and found the others drinking mugs of tea.

"How on Earth —?" he asked.

"It's not perhaps quite what you're used to, sir," said Gardner, who was bustling around filling the mugs. "I did what I could with the local product. I found a bush down in the valley and I took the liberty of picking some myself last year and drying it in the sun."

"You know, this is some climate. Old Gardner gets us tea. And while I was lying out there I saw a couple of flights of duck, Striped and Peking, and pigeons and even a swan. I haven't eaten swan since once in Normandy, there was a little place . . . It hurts to remember those days. I wish we had a little gun, I really do."

"It's more than my job's worth, Matsuki," said Levine. "Not even one small atomic cannon."

Silently the engineer handed Matsuki a forked stick he'd been whitening. "I think this may serve. If you ask Levine pleasantly, he might open his briefcase and give you a few of the government's rubberbands. And even some paper clips as bullet."

"Hey, that's not a bad idea. But pebbles would make heavier bullets. What about it, Ambassador? You wouldn't lose your job over a few rubberbands?"

"I guess not. I'll get you some after tea." Levine settled back to

his drawing. He only knew how to draw two ways. Sometimes he would draw things around him at that moment; sometimes he would draw his wife. She was a cheerful, dumpy woman and they had several cheerful, dark-eyed children.

Gardner roasted hedgehogs in clay for dinner that night.

The next day Matsuki frightened several pigeons and bruised a woodcock. Levine drew his wife as a tall blonde, since his imagination ran away with him when he was away from home. The engineer made Matsuki a crossbow with a telescopic sight out of some pieces of an optical scanner, a tunic-hanger and three Space Police belts.

Gardner charcoal-grilled a brace of pheasants and washed Levine's white shirts.

The next day was a bit different. It happens that this engineer was a light sleeper. Like his youngest daughter — but not like his wife and his lazybones elder daughter. (Tammy squirmed protestingly.) Anyway, he awoke the next morning around 5 a.m. or 5:30. Mist hung among the trees in the glade; the shadows of the trunks slanted through it making a network of blue bars. The rail of the ship's ladder was damp with the morning dew and, running his hand along it, he swept up a stream of water. Below him the old man was poking around the campfire. A thin trickle of smoke wavered up towards the tree tops.

"Hullo, Gardner. How are you this morning?" asked the engineer,

belting his woollen robe around him.

"Good morning, Mr. Wheeler, sir," said the old man. "I'm just finishing your fire. Then I'll be off and maybe find some eggs for breakfast. That would suit, I hope?"

"Excellent. I'll come with you."

"Well, to be honest, sir, I'd rather you didn't, if you don't mind me saying so, sir. The chickens usually lay in the raspberry bramble that I have, and that's out beyond the perimeter."

"Come on, then. I'll come with you to the edge of the grove."

"Well, that's all right."

The two set off together, the old man switching away fiercely at nettles and ragwort in the grass, plants that hurt his professional pride. The young engineer watched him curiously.

"Why can't I go outside the glade?"

"It's not 'can't', sir, if you understand me. It's just sort of this part has been laid out for your party and in a way the rest hasn't. I'll show you what I mean when we get there."

In a few minutes they got up onto the rampart under the pines and stopped. "I'm going over there," said Gardner, pointing to a green patch about half a mile away. "That's the raspberry patch. But I doubt you could make it out there. You'd get lost. Walk a few yards and you'll see what I mean."

The engineer smiled at the old man's distrust of his sense of direction and stepped out amiably down the slope with him. Immediately he sensed that the air outside the bowl

was entirely different from that above. *It must be as steamy as a jungle.* was his first thought. He could hardly see the old man ahead of him, and the tops of the low fruit trees were lost in the swirling mist. He went forward uncertainly, tripped on the uneven ground.

When he looked up there was nothing to be seen anywhere.

He was surrounded by an even glow which cut him off from his surroundings as surely as if he had been sitting in a light globe. If this was mist, it was the thickest — and driest — he'd ever been in.

"Hey, Gardner!" he shouted. "Get me out of this."

Nothing happened. He experimented by putting his hand close to his face. When he held it a couple of inches from his eyes it was just visible as a dark shadow. Not only could he see nothing, but he discovered with a start that he could hear nothing except the beat of his own heart and a hiss that could as easily have been in his ears as in the trees.

"All right, Gardner. I see what you mean." He had meant to speak aloud, but his words were absorbed and muffled by the pressing blankness so that he did not know whether he had actually spoken. But immediately he felt a hand on his shoulder. He got up, and the hand guided him along a winding track that led upward.

Within a few steps his vision began to clear, he saw the trees take shape like people in a Turkish bath and a few minutes later they were

standing on the ridge looking down on the deceptively inviting country.

"It's just a little hazy down there, sir."

The engineer nodded apologetically.

"I'll be off for the eggs. You stay up here and you'll be all right."

The engineer watched the old man set off determinedly towards his raspberry patch, skirting the trees and shrubs without even looking up. When he was a hundred yards down the path the engineer turned and sprinted back to the ship. He mounted the ladder two steps at a time and skidded through the ship to the captain's cabin. Once inside he shook Matsuki awake.

"What's the matter? Can't you let anyone sleep?"

"Up, cap'n," said the engineer, saluting rudely. "Help's needed."

Matsuki leapt out of bed instantly and made for the door that led onto the conrol deck. The engineer put his arm across it.

"No trouble — yet. Relax. Just bring a rope, will you? And put on a robe. We're going outside."

The captain sighed. "I'll never get to sleep again now," he said grumpily. "I'll come."

Soon they both stood on the grass outside, the engineer in his matted wool gown and slippers and the captain in a quilted silk coat with a black dragon on it and his wood-soled sandals. "We'll go this way," said the engineer and led his chief the same way he had gone earlier. When they reached the ridge he waited for the captain to stop yawning and deep-breathing, and then

pointed to the raspberry patch and the dark dot within it which was the laboring Gardner.

"Now," he said. "I'm going to hold the rope and I want you to walk down there a short way just paying out the rope as you go. Right?"

"Sure, if that's what makes you happy for today. How far do you think I should go?"

"Please yourself, skipper. You won't want to go far."

Shrugging his shoulders, the captain gave the engineer the end of the rope and set off down the hill, paying it out off his arm. The engineer saw him set off steadily enough, then slow down and go more cautiously; then the captain walked straight into a bramble bush, and fell in. The engineer heard him make some rude comments on the engineer and on the bush. Then he got up again. He was moving his hands cautiously ahead of him, and shuffling his feet hesitantly.

"All right, if you're so clever!" shouted the captain. "What do I do now?"

"Come out," said the engineer. The rope was still coiled around the captain's fist, so the engineer pulled gently "This way," he shouted. Slowly and circumspectly (that is, with caution and care) the captain climbed the hill.

"Misty down there?" asked the engineer when Matuski reached the top.

"Misty? Are you kidding? It's absolutely impenetrable." He looked exasperated.

"So what's the story."

"Come back to the ship and I'll tell you." Together they set off over the spongy pine-needles. "Well, first, it's not misty down there. Not like with mist."

"I see what you mean. It's not damp."

"Second, it certainly is difficult to see. As if everything were out of focus and all energy were being absorbed."

"Hmm."

"Well, now, when we're both home at Glenn Field and I'm visiting you for the evening, what do I do first and always?"

"Kiss my wife, you slob."

"Well, second."

"Let me see. You get a drink. No, that's not it. I know! You go over to the solido cabinet and fiddle with the knobs."

"Right. And what is the result?"

"It sort of gets rid of some of the fog. I don't know how it's done."

"No. Well, I'm the engineer. But basically I'd say it stops the light running around like particles as disorganized as a herd of pigs and gets them in neat rows like waves."

"So you once told me. But I don't see any control panel."

"No, that's right, you don't. But if I run into the ship I think I can lay my finger on a device which would do the same for the landscape. You wait here and I'll look."

The engineer climbed the ladder and rummaged around as promised and sure enough laid his hands on the thing he wanted. It was a round thingumajig with a handle on one end and a dark eye the other. He handed it to the captain. "That's

the fellow. Now one of us goes out and looks around. The other stays and watches the power gauges on the power beam to this thing, and looks after His Excellency."

"His Excellency will look after himself," said Levine from the top of the ladder. He was formally attired in a black tee-shirt and pin-stripe morning shorts. His hair was combed, his chin irreproachably shaved and his teeth shone as brightly as a control board in an emergency.

"Good morning, you old liar," shouted the captain. "This morning the entertainment is provided by the engine-room."

"Since we're all here, I'll kind of assign everyone to their places," said the engineer, not at all taken aback. "Levine will sit here making us some coffee. If Gardner comes, say we're out gathering shredded wheat in the plantations and we'll be back any moment. I shall stay in the engine-room balancing the power output of the diblefook that the captain's carrying, and the intrepid captain shall walk down into the plain and see what he can see. Everybody know their lines?"

Levine said, "I'll be boiled if I know what's going on around this camp, but don't mind me."

The captain fingered the dandle-prib experimentally. "I just press this button, huh?"

"Right," said the engineer. "And point the suttelprobe at what you want to see. Give me a moment to lock the direction-finder on you, and then start walking. If you're not back by 1000 hours we'll send out

the bloodhounds." He turned and disappeared into the ship. A few moments later Levine and Matsuki heard the whine of the auxiliary power come on. The captain shrugged his shoulders and set off towards the pines.

Well, for the next hour the engineer did what engineers do in engine-rooms when they're controlling ganglehubs —

("You said diblefook before, Daddy," said Tammy.

"Suttelprobe," said Hannah.

"Hush. I said dinglegrape.") — And Levine did whatever people do with coffee. I should think he snoozed by the fire mostly. And finally the captain came running over the edge of the ridge and down into the camp.

"The weirdest thing," he panted. "The weirdest thing! Hey, greaseball, come on out of the ship! I've got news for you."

A few moments later the engineer came grinning down the ladder. "The gimbelstone really worked. It was sure drawing some power."

"Sure it worked. It was clearing out an area about 20 foot ahead and quite a bit on both sides and beyond that — just a wall of mist like a screen. Well, I walked down from the ridge and for, oh, say a hundred yards, two hundred, the country was like you'd expect — like an earthy slope, with some stones and rocks and grass and those old trees. Well, these kept on, but I gradually had the impression the grass was getting finer and the trees were sort of stunted, or as if they were only bushes out there. Pretty soon it got

so there wasn't a thing growing above knee high. Like toy trees. Or really like a Japanese garden—I remember those from when I was a kid. Well, here's the weird thing. I kept on even further and those trees got smaller and smaller the further out I went, and about a hundred yards further on they were nothing but a fuzz on the ground and beyond that nothing at all. Just nothing at all. I was walking in a bubble of mist on bare steel plates. That's all there is out there."

THE OLD MAN

IV

The engineer was the first to react. He got up and walked out towards the ridge. The others followed. When they reached the line of pines they stopped. The old gardener was half way back from the distant raspberry patch, a hunched figure growing larger with each step.

When he got up to where they stood in line on the ridge he opened his kerchief and showed them a heap of speckly eggs and dark red fruit. "I see Mr. Matsuki and Mr. Levine got up. I hope you slept well."

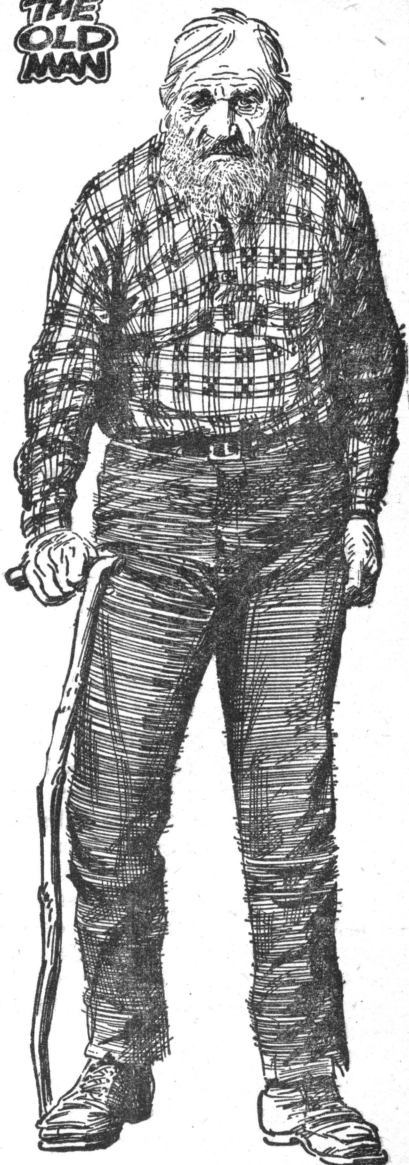
"We were just going to have breakfast. Come and join us."

"Well, thank you kindly."

They walked over to the campsite in silence. Levine poured four mugs of coffee. Gardner fetched water from the spring and put the eggs on to boil.

"Reckon you'll be off in a few days," he said.

Levine nodded, "I'm afraid so. Tomorrow back to work."



MORROW

"You won't forget to ask if I can come back with you, will you?"

"Of course not. You should see Earth. Earth's really something."

The engineer had been gazing into the fire without saying anything since breakfast started. Now he looked up and blurted out, "Look, I'm not sure you could come with us. It's not as simple as that!" He poked at the embers of the fire. "I think I could settle the matter, if we could do some tests."

"What would you want me to do?"

"Well, first, when you go out beyond the ridge do you find it difficult to see?"

"Yes, a little. But not so difficult as you. I'm more used to it."

"For instance, when you're out where you were this morning, could you look back and see the pines round our camp?"

"No. They'd be hidden in the mist. I'd lose sight of them after walking just a few minutes."

"Well, what I propose to do is fix up a sort of searchlight which will light up the trees on the ridge so that they can be seen from the plain. But you've got to think this over. There's a possibility that what you see may be a shock. But on the other hand we can't take you back to Earth without doing some experiment like this. You ought to think it over."

"I have thought it over," said Gardner. "I want to go and I'll do anything that's necessary. I can't believe that there's anything around here would surprise me after all these years."

"Right, then. Now here's what we've got to do. I'm going to give the trundlebib to Levine, and you and he will go out to the perimeter. I'll hook up a three-way communication link, too. We'll be able to hear anything you say, if you don't go more than 30,000,000 miles out, and you'll hear what we say. Just wait out here while I lock onto you."

The engineer refilled his mug from the pot by the fire and carried it with him into the ship. The secondary power went on, and in a moment the three men heard his voice. It buzzed in their ears with a slight penetrating whine. Matsuki realized that the engineer must have tuned his output to resonate his hearer's teeth. "Now if Levine and Gardner would walk towards the perimeter . . . Any direction will do."

Matsuki watched them walk toward the pines. Around him buzzed a few gnats attracted by the camp fire. A few late summer leaves floated down from the lemon trees. The empty billycan over the fire rattled in the breeze."

Suddenly Levine's voice buzzed in his head. "We reached the perimeter."

"Now I want you both to go down about 20 yards."

"Right. We made it."

"I want Levine to place the danderglod on the ground facing up into the trees. Press it into the soil, that won't hurt it. And go and stand under the trees where it's pointing. From here on, Gardner must go alone."

"I'm quite used to that, if you don't mind, my boy," said Gardner.

"Please go cautiously. Just go about 20 feet."

There was a pause.

"I've done that," said Gardner.

"Now look back. What do you see?"

"Well, there's the line of pines, and under them's Mr. Levine."

"Now, raise your hand and lift your little finger and see if it will cover Levine."

"Uh-huh. It just about does — all but his head."

"All right, now move on down. Now go slow. I don't want you to move more than 20 feet, okay? Now look around you. What do you see?"

"Everything's pretty misty down here, of course. There's the three palms with the grape-vines on them, just as usual. Grapes could do with picking, I'd say. Nothing else."

"Everything look about the right size?"

"Sure thing. Mighty fine big grapes, though."

"Now look back towards Levine. See anything?"

"No. Fog's too bad at this level."

"Now, this is the important part. Keep looking towards Levine. I'm going to turn on the hubbleswope. Remember — everything may be a bit distorted."

There was silence and then suddenly a sharp intake of breath from the old man. "Quite a turn that gave me! Thought Mr. Levine was right on top of me for a moment, right next to me! But I see he's still under the pines. Looks big, though."

"I thought that would be the

effect. Hold up your finger and try to cover him up again."

"Well, that's kind of funny. I — let me see — I just can, well, 'cept for his head."

"Hmm. Well, walk a little further and we'll try again."

There was a long wait. "Don't go too far!"

"Hold your horses, young man," said Gardner. "There's something I want to do."

"I'm sorry," said the engineer. "Let me know when you're about ready."

There was a much longer silence, and Matsuki, looking up, noticed with a shock that the satellite's sun was dead above the trees. Their breakfast hand stretched right into noontime. Suddenly Gardner spoke again.

"I'm ready to look again now if you want to turn on the power."

"Here we go again, then."

Instantly they heard the old man scream hysterically, "Oh, God — he's like a —!"

The sentence ended in a choking groan. There was a grinding noise and a thump and then silence.

Matsuki sprang up and upset the coffee pot into the fire where it hissed and bubbled. The engineer came flying down the ladder in one jump. He was shouting, "Everyone stay where they are! Levine stay under the pines. Matsuki stay by the fire and make some coffee and get the liquor out of the ship. Above all, Levine, don't go down there!" He plunged through a thicket of light pink azaleas toward the perim-eter.

Well, there was nothing anyone could do. Levine said that after the old man had told the engineer to hold his horses, he'd set off much further into the plain until Levine had finally lost sight of him. If he'd fallen and hurt himself, we'd probably have never found his body. And if we walked down to him and he saw us coming it would just have made things worse.

They stood together on the perimeter near the spot where the old man had left Levine, and the engineer explained what it was the old man had seen and why. They left Matsuki looking out for the old man and the other two went back to the camp fire. Every two minutes Levine said over the telephone link, "Hullo, Mr. Gardner. Can you hear me? This is Levine. Please come up to the camp and I will explain."

Finally the old man answered. "I'll come out. Wait up there for me. I think I must have fainted."

When he came up the rampart Matsuki took his arm and helped him to the campfire. There the Earthmen gave him coffee laced with whiskey from their First Aid kit.

After a while he looked less pale. Finally he said, "It was the shock of seeing Mr. Levine — like a giant on the horizon — taller than your ship!"

"I believe it," said the engineer.

"I guess you found out something I ought to know." The engineer nodded glumly. "Something bad?" The engineer nodded again. "I can't go back to Earth with you?" Nobody spoke. "Tell me why, please."

Matsuki looked at Levine. The engineer looked into the fire. Levine took a deep breath. "I'll tell you," he said. He got up and stood opposite Gardner. "How big am I?" he asked.

"Say, five foot nine."

"Hold your hand out straight, and try and cover me with your little finger. Can you do it?"

"No."

"All right, I'm bigger than your finger." He walked several paces further off. "Can you do it now?"

"Almost."

"At this distance I'm almost smaller than your finger." He walked out towards the perimeter and stopped again. "Try now," he said.

"I can do it easily now."

Levine ran back to the fire, and took out a sheet of drawing paper. He sketched an avenue of trees marching back into the distance and disappearing at the horizon. In the avenue he put three figures, one in the foreground, one in the middle-ground and one a long way away. "That's me near," he said, pointing to the first figure. "I look big. And here's me further away, and here's me a long way away. You can cover me up with just the tip of your finger. Well, when you actually look at *me* I'm always the same size — I just *look* smaller or larger. But this picture of me, this one in the front, actually *is* larger than the one in the back. Do you see?"

The old man was not looking at Levine's drawing any more; he was gazing out miserably towards the line of pines on the ridge. He nodded slowly.

Levine made a sign to the others and the three Earthmen walked unhappily back to their ship. After a while the engineer said bitterly, "We will have to thank the Federation for their hospitality. They meant very well by bringing us down in a picture of Earth. We just never got around to realizing they'd include a picture of an Earthman."

"That's not all," said Tammy after a moment. "You haven't told what the old man did."

"That's really the sad part. I didn't want to tell you a sad story at bedtime."

"I know, Daddy, but it's part of the story, isn't it?"

"Yup, I guess so. Well, after a time the old man came up to Levine holding the sketch and said, 'And when you've finished with your picture you just put it away in its folder?' Levine nodded. The old man put his brown finger in the middle of the horizon. 'What happens back there?'

"We call it the vanishing point. All the lines in the picture are supposed to meet there and vanish."

"I'll head that way. I'm still a human being and I'd like to go out like one."

"I can't remember we found anything to say to that. He went off to do his work as usual, and the next morning he came in with a chicken and a couple of pineapples."

"A farewell present," he said. "I've a bit of everything out there. I'll do all right along the way."

"So sometime after breakfast we sort of all got up together and went out to the pines. And there we just all shook hands and he tucked his old striped cloth in his belt and picked up his staff and set off down the track. It was a fantastically clear day. For a long, long time the three men, Matsuki, Levine and the engineer watched him getting smaller and smaller."

"And that is all."

For a short time neither of the children spoke. Then Tammy opened her eyes.

"My picture, the teacher at school said it was very advanced, the way I'd made the people get smaller toward the back of the picture. She said most children don't do that because it's not the way it looks to most children. Well, it doesn't. I just drew it how you said it happened. Didn't I?" She snuggled down under the covers.

"Sure you did, turnip. Sure." After a moment or two he said, "Hey-ho, why don't you two fellows go to sleep, ho?" Neither answered, so he disengaged his hand from Hannah's moist fist, kissed them both on the tops of their heads, tiptoed into the hallway leaving their door ajar and ran down the stairs to look for his wife. **END**



THE HEAT RACERS

by L. D. OGLE

**Come along for a day's sailing—
with the sun filling your sheets
and the around beneath your keel**

The skipper's voice came softly over the intercom, "Easy does it fellows, let's not jump the gun."

We were at 1,500 feet, this was a bit higher than the pattern of the minimum of 1,000 feet required by the National Heat-Racing Club, but the skipper is a cautious person and didn't want to be disqualified by being too low when the starting gun sounded. The five-minute gun had already sounded and we were stooging around absorbing just enough heat to keep our craft under motion and maintain our altitude. Fred was concentrating on our radio, listening for the high-pitched bleep that would be the starting gun. The starting gun? Well this is a left-over from the old wind yacht days, when they used a chemical combustion weapon to signal the start of a race.

"Three seconds to go," said Fred quietly, "one, two, three."

The skipper swung the console around to bring us on course, and in the electronic deck below I saw the light flash ALL FULL. I trimmed my absorbers to take the shock of full power.

I heard the skipper say, "Damn," and looking through the starboard port I saw the *Thermo Queen* squeeze between us and the buoy. The *Thermo Queen* was our closest rival and there was no denying it, she was a beautiful ship. She was the very latest thing in heat-racing yachts. Her huge black heat-absorbing sails were the same size as ours according to the rules of the N. H. R. C.

Her sails were designed to pick up even the most distant rays and reflections of heat. I have seen her

sailing in the predawn rays of the rising sun, skimming along at minimum altitude to save her heat, and making me lose my heart to the beauty of her black sails contrasting with her chromalloy hull.

She is all self-contained and completely powered by heat-absorbing machinery as is required by the club. Her old-fashioned radio is powered by the body heat of the operator, and her skipper even had the foresight to get a rather fat man for an operator.

We kidded him about using some of his own heat to power the ship. Our ship the *Heat Ranger* is an old timer, as is our skipper, and the two were an almost unbeatable combination until the *Queen* was built two years ago.

Then this young skipper and his new ship started showing us his little black exhaust tubes and the after end of the *Queen*. The *Queen's* skipper used a new type console to steer and balance his ship. It was equipped with colored indicators to show the amount of heat being absorbed, whereas our skipper preferred the old type upon which he could place his hands and sensitive fingers on the plates on top of the console and feel just how much heat each sail was absorbing. The skipper had these plates tuned so fine that if we were absorbing too much heat the plates would burn your fingers. It was a real sight to see the skipper, sometimes with his eyes closed, passing his hands over those plates like a musician.

We are a good crew, the five of

us, and the skipper has complete faith in us. He never repeats an order twice.

The serious-looking fellow is Fred, our radio operator. He isn't as serious as he looks though, and can be a lot of fun at a party. He is rather thin and sometimes he has to run an extension to my body to reach some far-away station.

The big guy is Big George. He is our mainsail handler, he needs to be big to trim the port and star sails. He can spin the adjusting wheels as if they were spacephone dials.

To offset George's size and to work the little sails in the small parts of the ship we have Slim.

Just then the Air Guard came in strong over the air. "Air Guard Seven to all craft, all commercial and pleasure craft will clear the one- to two-thousand foot level in Sector Six for the National Heat Races."

We crossed the starting line neck and neck with the *Queen* followed by twenty six other racers hard on our heels.

The *Queen* immediately headed for a ground highway where the concrete at this time of day would be throwing up all kinds of heat. Our skipper headed for a small ridge which was going roughly in our direction and told George to adjust his sails for maximum B.T. U.'s on both port and star sails. We weren't going at top speed, but we did not have to fill our condensers with stored heat to keep from burning our sails — as the *Queen* must have been doing. We would save our condensers for later when we needed them. The skipper switched to

following a river and I had to put a few B.T.U.'s in the condenser bank.

We were passing over a patch of woods when the skipper told George to shorten sail a bit and let me use our banked heat.

We could see most of the fleet above and below us and quite a few ahead of us. We weren't too worried because many times before we had been dead last and had managed to come over the finish line first in a blast that would be at the very thermal limits of our sail.

Looking out of the port I saw below us some small crafts cruising about a large sandpit and called the skipper's attention to it. The skipper called the boys. "Heat Ranger to peanut fleet, can we use your thermos?"

"Peanut Commodore to Heat Ranger, be our guest, please. We haven't forgotten that you gave us your last year's sails. The heat range is from force twelve to fifteen, watch the middle it's a little strong there."

The boys pulled over to the side and watched as we swooped down over the sandpot humping up in the middle in order not to bank any heat as yet.

We came tearing right up through the middle of the fleet and we could hear the boys cheering us on their mini seta.

Soon after we were gaining on the *Thermo Queen* and were about to pass it when suddenly a big luxury boat came up. She was operating on transmitted power and hit us from below, damaging our spanker sail

and hull near the after section and shaking us up a bit. Nothing for us to do, but stop.

We dropped our magna anchor and used the heat from a large warehouse roof to keep us aloft while we inspected the damage.

Slim crawled aft. The spanker sail was easily repaired with growing plastic compound, but we could not repair the hull until we dry docked her.

The skipper put on his magnasuit and crawled outside to inspect the hull. We would be able to continue without being a menace to navigation, but the damage would slow our progress. We were happy to hear the Air Guard taking the luxury boat into custody for interference.

We were dead last now, and using what little heat I had banked only took us near the fleet, but not near enough.

We stayed low and searched for new reflections. The skipper found a small lake just chock full of sparkling reflections from the noon-day sun and we were tearing along at near top speed, banking a few B.T.U.'s in the condensers.

We passed the old *Hot Mama* and then the *Shamrock* and were behind and below the *Queen*. The skipper cocked a wary eye upward. "Watch him now," he said, "he'll duplicate our every move. If we can fool him we have the race."

"Slim, can the *Queen* see the port sail from where she is?"

"No," answered Slim.

"Okay, then George take in the port sail as much as possible, and

Slim you see if you can make the ship balance out with the spanker sail. Bill you give her all she's got."

We were gaining on the *Queen* very fast now, but I could see them spreading all the sail they could get out.

The *Queen* was absorbing too much heat and I could see from where I stood, the outer edges of her sails start to glow red from the heat, then white, and then I saw pieces of glowing sail drop off and fall to the earth. She was soon behind us.

"Stand by for the finish," said Fred and he switched the intercom on to the radio band. We stood silent for a few minutes and then we heard the long bleep that said we were over the finish line — first.

The old ship practically vibrated with our cheers. Then George said over the intercom, "Now Bill?"

"Now," I said.

I went up to the bridge to take over the ship while George and Slim put a paravane on the struggling and protesting skipper. They opened the hatch and threw him out of the ship at fifteen thousand feet. This was an old tradition from the wind ship days.

"Have fun," laughed George, "I

certainly hope you fall into something good."

I took the ship over to the mooring ground, dropped the magna anchor and put her away for the day.

"Now for the party, everybody come up to the bridge deck." I opened a small drawer in the console and took out the drinks, a tray full of drink tablets.

"What will you have, the clear ones are champagne, the frosty ones are gin and the amber ones are beer. I like the amber ones with the blue stripe, that's blue ribbon beer."

We were singing "What will you do with a drunken sailor," and doing very good at harmonizing, when the main hatch opened and there stood the skipper . . .

The skipper I knew did not drink and I thought, oh boy here's where we get it.

"Hello boys, excuse me for being so wet, I fell into a swimming pool. May I join your party?"

I dumped a couple of champagne tablets into a glass of water and had it in the skipper's hand before he stopped talking.

"Oh what do you do with a drunken sailor, what do you do with a drunken sailor, early in the morning." END

Coming Next Issue

THE REPLICATORS

A great new novelette of tomorrow's super-science
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In the February issue of *IF* — don't miss it!

RETIEF, GOD-SPEAKER

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

The Hoogans owned the planet — they said so themselves. But who were the creatures from underground who disputed their claim?

I

The Hoogan chamberlain was tall, black-clad, and high-shouldered. He had an immense dome-shaped head sloping on to his massive shoulders. His eyes were like freshly shelled oysters in a leathery face and he had long, dangling arms.

He turned to face the party of Terrestrial diplomats who stood

clutching suitcases under the lofty vaulted ceiling of the vast, dark hall. Shafts of eerily colored light filtered through stained-glass loopholes, which were high in the walls, shedding a faint glow on the uneven stone floor. The drab-colored murals and hangings depicted the specialities of the seven Hoogan Hells. The mouths of dark corridors radiated from the circular chamber

with helmeted and kilted Hoogan pikemen spaced between them, immobile as the gargoyles that peered from high niches.

"His Arrokanze the Pishop has graziously blaced at your dispozal these cozy quarters," the chamberlain said in a deep, hollow voice. "You may now zelect rooms on the floors above and array yourselves in the karments provided."

"Look here, Mr. Odom-Glom," Ambassador Straphanger cut in, "I've been thinking it over, and I've decided that my staff and I will just nip back over to our ship for the night."

"His Arrokanze will be egspectink you at the fete in the Ebiscobal Kardens in one hour's time," the Hoogan bored on. "His Arrokanze tizlikes to be kept waitink."

"Oh, we're all keenly aware of the honor His Arrogance has paid us in offering accomodations here in the Episcopal Palace, but —"

"One hour," Odom-Glom repeated, his voice echoing across the hall. He turned away, the symbolic chain attached to his neck clanking as he moved. He paused, turned back.

"By the way, you are instrugted to iknore any small ah . . . indru-zions. If you zee anything . . . un-usual, zummon a guard at onze."

"Intrusions?" Straphanger repeated querulously. "What kind of intrusions?"

"The balace," Odom-Glom said, "is haunted."

Four twisting turns of a stone staircase above the reception hall, Second Secretary Magnan tip-

toed at Retief's side. They went along an echoing corridor, past black iron-bound doors and mouldy tapestries which were dimly visible in the light of a flambeau.

"Quaint beliefs these bucolics entertain," Magnan said in a tone of forced heartiness. "Haunted indeed! How silly! Ha!"

"Why are you whispering?" Retief inquired.

"Just out of respect for the Bishop, of course." Magnan came to an abrupt halt, and clutched Retief's sleeve. "Wha-what's that?" he pointed.

Along the corridor, something small and dark slipped from the shadow of a pilaster to the shelter of a doorway.

"Probably just our imagination," Retief suggested.

"But it had big red eyes," Magnan protested.

"They're as easy to imagine as any other kind."

"I just remembered—I left my shower cap in my hold baggage. Let's go back."

Retief moved off. "It's just a few doors farther. Six, seven . . . here we are." He inserted the key Odom-Glom's aide had provided. The heavy door swung open with a creak that descended the scale to a low groan. Magnan, hurrying forward, paused to stare at the nearest wall-hanging which showed a group of Hoogans suspended head-down from spikes above leaping flames, while goblins of various shapes prodded them with long barb-tipped spears.

"Curious how similar religious art is from one world to another,"

he commented. Inside the room, he stared around in dismay at the damp stone walls, the two spartan cots and carved devils which stood in the corners.

"What perfectly ghastly quarters!" He dropped his suitcase and went over to prod the nearest bunk. "Why, my spine will never endure this mattress! I'll be a physical wreck after the first night! And the draft—I'm sure to catch a chill. And . . . and . . ." He broke off.

Magnan raised a shaky finger to point at the darkest corner of the narrow chamber where a tall, bug-eyed demon carved from pale blue stone winked garnet eyes.

"Retief! Something moved over there—it was just like the devils in the pictures! All fuzzy red bristles and eyes that glow in the dark!"

Retief opened his suitcase. "If you see another one, throw a shoe at it. Right now, we'd better be getting into costume; compared with an aroused ambassador, a few devils are just friendly pets."

Half an hour later, after having sponged off at a stone sink, Magnan's eyes were still rolling nervously. He adjusted the folds of his Hoogan ceremonial sarong before the tarnished, rippled mirror.

"I suppose it *is* just nerves," he said. "It's all the fault of that Odom-Glom fellow and his quaint native superstitions! I confess his remarks quite unnerved me for a moment."

Across the room, Third Secretary Retief was loading match-headed charges into the magazine of an inconspicuous handgun.

"Probably just his way of warning us about the mice," he said.

Magnan turned and caught a glimpse of the gun. "Here, Retief! What's that?"

"Just a quaint native cure for spooks—if they get too noisy." He tucked the gun out of sight under the Hoogan sarong. "Just think of it as a sort of good-luck charm, Mr. Magnan."

"A knife up the sleeve is an old diplomatic tradition," Magnan said doubtfully. "But a power pistol under the sarong . . ."

"I'll have it along in case something jumps out of the stonework and yells boo!" Retief said reassuringly.

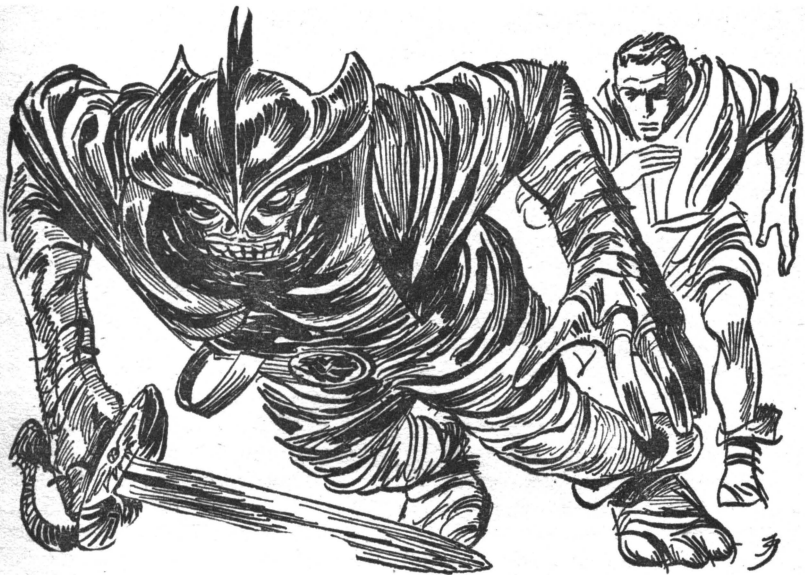
Magnan sniffed, admiring himself in the dark glass.

"I was rather relieved when the ambassador insisted on native dress for the staff instead of ceremonial nudity for tonight's affair." He turned to study the hang of the uneven hemline that exposed his bare shins. "One of his finer moments, I fancied. He *does* cut an impressive figure, once his jowls get that purplish tinge. Not even Odom-Glom dared stand up to him. Though I do wish he'd gone just the one step further and demanded the right to wear trousers—" He broke off, his eyes on the black drapes covering the high, narrow window.

The heavy cloth twitched.

"Retief!" he gasped. "There it is again!"

"Shhh," Retief watched as the curtain moved again. A tiny red-glowing bead appeared at its edge, a foot above the floor; a wire-thin



leg emerged, and then another. A body like a ball of reddish fluff came into view, its red-bead eyes on two-inch stalks which tilted alertly to scan the chamber. Its gaze fixed on Retief; it moved clear of the curtain, paused, then started toward him on skittery legs —

With a yell, Magnan dived for the door and flung it wide. "Guards! Help! Goblins! Spooks!" His voice receded along the hall, mingling with the clank of accoutrements, and the slap of wide Hoogan feet.

The intruder hesitated at the outcry, dithered for a moment, then, emitting a cry like a goosed fairy, fumbled with two of its limbs at something attached to its back.

Beyond the door, Magnan's voice

supplied a shrill counterpoint to the rumble of Hoogan questions.

"Then get someone who speaks Terran!" he yelled. "At this moment my associate is being savaged by the monster!"

Retief crossed quickly to the window, pulled the drapes aside and unlatched a panel, letting in a draft of damp night air.

"This way out, fellow," he said. "You'd better get going before the cops arrive."

The fluffball darted across the room and came to a shaky stop before Retief. He made quick, nervous motions. A folded square of paper fell to the floor at Retief's feet. Then the creature sprang for the opening and was gone as Hoogan feet clumped at the door.

"Where Spism?" a heavy voice

demanding in thick Terran. A conical Hoogan head in a flaring helmet swivelled to scan the room.

Behind the guard, Magnan craned for a view. "Where is the beast?" he shrilled. "It was at least four-foot high, and its tusks were four-inches long at the very least!"

The Hoogan advanced into the room. He pointed to the open window with his broad-headed seven-foot pike.

"It was a mouse after all," Retief said. "It got away."

"You let Spism ko?"

"Shouldn't I have?" Retief inquired mildly, pocketing the paper.

"Spism bad imp from nether re-chions; might bite Derry, get blood boizonink."

"I think you're being impertinent," Magnan said sharply. "Biting Terrans is perfectly safe—"

The Hoogan turned to him, his pike lowered ominously.

"**Y**ou will come with me," it ordered. "The benaldy for consortink with minions of Unterworlt is poilink in oil."

"Here," Magnan said, backing up. "Stand back, my man—"

The Hoogan reached for Magnan with a long, snaky hand; Retief stepped up behind him, selected a spot, and struck a sharp blow with bunched fingertips. The guard stumbled, fell past Magnan, and hit chin first with a resounding slam. His pike shattered against the wall.

"Retief!" Magnan gobbled. "What are you thinking of? You've laid hands on a member of the Episcopal Guard!"

"I had the distinct impression that this fellow hooked a toe on the rug and fell down. Didn't you notice?"

"Why, you know very well—"

"Just before he reached you, Mr Magnan."

"Ah . . . why yes, now that you mention it, he did trip," Magnan's tone was suddenly brisk. "Nasty fall. I rushed up to support him, but alas, too late. Poor fellow. Served him right, the brute. Shall we go through his pockets?"

"Why?"

"You're right; there isn't time. That crash was doubtless heard throughout the palace."

A second Hoogan appeared at the open door, his helmet bearing the fanged angel, which was indicative of officer rank. He eyed the fallen pikeman.

"You addacked this one?" he demanded.

Magnan glanced at the victim as though noticing him for the first time. "He seems to have fallen down," he observed brightly.

"Against rules to kill Hoogan," the captain said ominously.

"He . . . ah . . . broke his spear," Magnan pointed out helpfully.

"Very bad crime, defile ceremonial spear," the captain said sternly. "Require burification zere-mony. Very expensive."

Magnan fumbled in a money pouch at one hip. "I'd love to contribute a little something."

"Ten Hoogan grebits, forget the whole thing. For extra five dizpose of body."

The felled Hoogan stirred, mumbled, sat up.

“Ha!” the captain said. “Look like no teal. But for another extra five —” he lifted a short, ugly club from his belt, “— finish off unfortunate victim of Derry violence.”

“Stop!” Magnan yelled. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Inzult to overseer castle briest cosd you two more grebits. For you I mage zpecial brice, three for five.”

“Bribery?” Magnan gasped. “Corruption?”

“Three it is,” the Hoogan nodded. “How about you?” he turned to Retief. “You sbort like other Derry?”

“Look here, I’m paying you nothing!” Magnan barked. “Just assist this unfortunate chap out of here, if you please, and we’ll get on with our dressing!”

“Small religious contributions fine old Hoogan gustom!” the overseer protested. “You want to fiolate local tapoos?”

“We Terrans have a few customs of our own,” Retief put in smoothly. “We feel that graft should only be paid voluntarily.” He offered a note which the officer palmed deftly. The guard was on his feet now, swaying. The captain barked an order, his subordinate gathered up the spear fragments, shot Magnan a poisonous look and departed, followed by the captain.

Retief closed the door behind the departing visitors, fished out the scrap of paper dropped by the fleeing Spism and opened it.

BY THE OGRE FOUNTAIN AT
SECOND MOONRISE; WEAR A
YELLOW DUNG FLOWER.

RETIEF, GOD-SPEAKER

Magnan, busy at the mirror again, heaved a deep sigh.

“Hardly an auspicious beginning,” he commented. “Heavens! It’s twenty-thirty! We’re late!” He gave his sarong a final tug and smoothed a thinning lock across his forehead.

He led the way along the echoing hall and down a spiral stair to an archway debouching onto wide steps above a ragged lawn. Blue lanterns hanging in the branches of skeletal trees shed a wan radiance on the fungus-like ornamental plants. Sculptures representing souls in torment, were placed near wide tables laden with Terran delicacies hastily unloaded from the Corps transport for the occasion. A dozen grotesquely shaped fountains spread a fine mist and an odor of sulphur across the festive scene.

Beyond the high spike-topped wall, the ominous shape of an immense brass-colored idol reared up half a mile away. Its ferocious sculptured grin glowing in the glare of spotlights, its right arm raised in the Hoogan royal salute — elbow straight out, forearm pointing upward with fingers spread, the left hand gripping the right biceps.

Magnan shuddered.

“That beastly idol — it’s sub-Hoogan,” Magnan commented. “Isn’t that smoke coming out of its nostrils?”

Retief sniffed. “Something’s burning,” he agreed.

II

A dark figure stepped from dense shadow at Magan’s elbow.

"Only old newsbabbers you scent," it rumbled. "Our Hoogan Kods are uzeful; they serve as gommunity in-zinerators."

"Odom-Glom! You startled me!" Magnan chirped. He slapped at an insect that buzzed about his face. "I do hope the evening is a big success. It was so thoughtful of his Arrogance to allow the Corps to act as host tonight; such a gesture of acceptance — sort of."

"Reverze hosbitality iz an old Hoogan gustom," Odom-Glom said. "It would be a kood itea to know all our old Hoogan gustoms, zo az not to end up lige the lasd Derran Tiploamat."

"Yes, it was unfortunate about Ambassador Straphanger's predecesor getting excommunicated, and all. But really, how was he to know he was supposed to fill the Episcopal begging bowl with hundred-credit notes?"

"It wasn't zo much not contribut-ink; but pourink the canned beans in spoiled the bill His Arrokanze had planted as a hint."

"A bad scene," Magnan agreed. "But I'm sure this evening will smooth everything over."

The orchestra began tuning up and lugubrious notes groaned across the lawn. Armed Episcopal guards were taking up their posts, and sarong-clad diplomats were forming a receiving line by a stone arch opening through which the dignitaries would arrive.

"I must hurry alonk now and zee to the kun emplazements," Odom-Glom said. "One lasd suggestion: wordly goods of course mean noth-

ing to His Arrokanze, but the deadliest of the zinz is Ztinchinezz. His Arrokanze detests a tightwad." He moved off, chains clashing.

"The ambassador's not out yet," Magnan noted nervously. "Gracious, I hope he puts in an appearance before Bishop Ai-Poppy-Googy arrives. I dread the prospect of having to engage His Arrogance in light chit-chat."

"According to the Post Report, dealing with the Bishop is very simple," Retief said. "Just give him everything in sight, and if that doesn't satisfy him, give him some more."

"I can see that you're finally getting the hang of diplomacy, Retief," Magnan said approvingly. "Still, I'm worried."

"Since it's your job as protocol officer to soften up difficult guests," Retief said, "why not meet the Bishop at the gate and try out a few racy stories on him?"

"I hardly imagine that the Chief of State of a Theocracy would react to biological anecdotes," Magnan said stiffly.

"Oh, biology is a perfectly clean subject here on Hoog; but don't bring up cooking in polite conversation. According to the handbook, there's an unspoken agreement among the cultured element that the stork brings the goodies."

"Really? Heavens, and all the cookies are stamped 'Made in Hong Kong!' I'll have to tell the cook to substitute blintzes. While I'm attending to that, you'd best take your post at the gate. You'll handle the

first shift tonight. I'll send String-whistle along to relieve you in an hour."

"I could delay the Bishop a few minutes for you," Retief offered, as they crossed to the gate. "Suppose I start by demanding to see his invitation."

"None of your ill-timed japes, Retief! After the last mission's fiasco, establishing a friendly rapport with the Bishop tonight could mean promotions all around."

"I think the traditional lawn party is a little too subtle for a fellow like the Bishop. We should have used a simple symbolism—like a few rounds of heavy artillery lobbed into the palace grounds."

"Hardly the diplomatic approach," Magnan sniffed. "For centuries now it's been understood that if enough diplomats go to parties, everything will come right in the end."

"I wonder if the Hoogans understand that tradition?"

"Certainly; after all, we're all fellow beings—brothers under the skin, as it were."

"In this case, the skin is an inch thick and tougher than armorplatt. I'm not sure we can penetrate to the brotherhood layer in time to stop bloodshed."

"Actually, I rather look forward to matching epigrams with His Arrogance tonight," Magnan said loftily, turning to scan the gardens. "As you know, I'm always at my sparkling best with high-ranking guests—and, of course, mere size and strength fail utterly to intimidate me."

Magnan turned at a sound behind



him, uttered a strangled yelp, and trampled a Hoog waiter's foot as he leaped back from the spectacle of a seven-foot high, six-foot wide Hoog wrapped in cloth of gold. The monster's gilded features included one-inch nose holes, huge, watery, reddish eyes and a wide mouth set in a formal grimace to display polished gold-capped teeth. Two clusters of ringed fingers gripped the hilt of an immense two-edged sword.

“Somethink smells pat!” the apparition bellowed. He leaned forward, sniffed vigorously at Magnan and snorted.

“Horriple!” he announced, elbowing Magnan aside. “Ko away, vel-low! You're invested with an acute P.O.!”

“Why, Your Arrogance — it's just a touch of skin bracer in back of my ear.”

“It smelts like pargain night in a choy house. Where's Ambassador Hapstrinker? I drust you have blenty of food reaty. I unterstant you Derries take a kreat interest in gooking.” The Bishop winked a damp, pink eye, rammed Magnan under the ribs, and guffawed comfortably.

“Oof!” Magnan said. “Why, Your Arrogance!”

The Bishop was already striding toward the nearest table, his escort of armed and helmeted guards trailing behind, fingering scimitars and eyeing the diplomats suspiciously.

“I . . . I think I'll just scoot along and see to the refreshments,” Magnan bleated. “Retief, you accompany His Arrogance and keep him amused until help arrives — I mean,

until the ambassador puts in an appearance!” He fled.

The Bishop dipped a boneless finger into a large crystal container of cheese sauce, studied it at arm's length, sniffed it, then, with a flick of a limber wrist, spattered it across the ruffled shirt fronts and glassy smiles of the diplomats strung out in the receiving line.

“Who are these loavers?” he demanded loudly. “Bropaply relatives, waitink arout for handouts. I have the zame proplem. Or had the zame proplem, I should zay. Two weeks ako was Zelf-Denial Fesztival. I made the subreme sagrafize ant offered the entire lot to the anezstral spirids.”

“Giving up your relatives for Lent is quite an idea,” Retief said. “It could catch on.”

The Bishop picked up a plate of dainty sandwiches, spilled the food off, sniffed the plate, and took a small bite. “I've heard a kreat teal about Derran tishes,” he said, chewing noisily. “A bit too crizp, but not pat.” He took a second nip from the thin porcelain and offered it to Retief.

“Have a bite,” he invited genially.

“No thanks, I filled up on a beer bottle just before Your Arrogance arrived,” Retief countered. “Try the dinner plates. They're said to be an epicure's delight.”

There was a sudden stir from the vicinity of the wide terrace doors. Ambitious diplomatic underlings sprang to positions of eager anticipation, their delighted smiles ready. The squat figure of Career

Minister Straphanger, Terrestrial Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Hoog waddled into view, stylishly decked out in a short but heavily brocaded Hoogan longhi, a brilliant red sash which all but dragged the ground, and jeweled sandals. At his side puffed a companion of almost identical build and garb, distinguished only by a mop of vivid orange hair. Magnan trailed by two yards.

"Ah, the ambassador is twints?" the Bishop inquired, moving toward the approaching pair.

"No, that's Mrs. Straphanger," Retief said. "If I were Your Arrogance I'd ditch that saucer; she's fierce when aroused."

"Ah, the edernal female, ever concerned with food konzervation." The Bishop tossed a crust of the plate in back of a flowering bush.

"Ah, there, Ambassador Strak-humper!" he bellowed. "And your charmink cow! She will be litterink zoon, I trust?"

"Littering? How's that?" Straphanger stared around in confusion.

"I azzume you keep your cows pregnant?" the Bishop boomed. "Or possibly thiz one is over-aged. Bud no matter; doubtless she waz a gread broducer in her day."

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Straphanger snapped, bridling.

"By the way," Ai-Poppy-Googy went on, "I hate to disguss finanzas over food, zo I suggesd we deal with the broplem of an abbrobriate kift ad onze. I am of gourse quite brebared to vorget the drivial mis-unterstantink with the former ampassator ant agecpd any zum in eg-

zess of one million greidits without quibblink."

"One million credits?" Straphanger babbled. "Gift?"

"Of gourse, if you wish to avoid aquirink a reputation az a piker, an egstra million would not be taken amiss."

"A million credits of Corps funds? But . . . but whatever for?"

"Ah, ah," the Bishop wagged an admonitory tactile member. "No pryink into Hoogan internal matters!"

"Oh, no, indeed, Your Arrogance! I only meant . . . what's the occasion? For the gift. I mean."

"It's Tuesday."

"Oh."

The Bishop nodded placidly. "Luggy you didn't throw thiz affair on Wentsday; thad's douple gifd day." He plucked a glass from a tray offered by a bearer, emptied the contents on the lawn and nipped a chip from the edge with his polished metallic teeth, munching thoughtfully.

"Lackink in flavor," he commented.

"My best crystal," Mrs. Straphanger gasped. "All the way from Brooklyn, yet, and like a goat he's eating it!"

"A koat?" The Bishop eyed her suspiciously. "I don't believ I know the term."

"It's a . . . a sort of gourmet," Straphanger improvised. Sweat was glistening on his forehead. "Known for its discriminating tastes."

"Now, about the matter of a bension," the Bishop continued. "I

zee no neet of oztentation. A mere thousand a day would suvvice as a token of Corps ezteem."

"A thousand what a day?" The ambassador inquired around a frozen diplomatic grin which exposed old-fashioned removable dentures.

"Gredits, of gourse. And then there is the matter of zupzidies to Hoogan industry; zay vivty thousand a month. Ton'd give a thought to atminisdration; just make the cheggs payable to me perzonally—"

"Hoogan industry? But I was given to understand there are no industries here on Hoog."

"That's why we require a zupzidy," the Bishop said blandly.

Straphanger hitched his smile in place with an effort.

"Your Arrogance, I'm here merely to establish friendly relations, to bring Hoog into the mainstream of Galactic cultural life—"

"What coult be frientlier than money?" the Bishop inquired in a loud, final-sounding voice.

"Well," Straphanger conceded, "we might arrange a loan —"

"An oudright krant iz zo much zimpler," the Bishop pointed out.

"Of course, it would mean extra staff, to handle the administrative load." Straphanger rubbed his hands together, a speculative gleam in his eye. "Say twenty-five for a start."

The Bishop turned as a medium-sized Hoog in tight, black and silver vestments came up, growled in his ear and waved a rubbery arm toward the house.

"What?" the Bishop exploded. He swivelled on Straphanger. "You are harporink tapoo greatures? Givink

aid and gomfort to untesirable elements? Sharink your substanze with minions of the opposition?"

"**Y**our Arrogance!" Straphanger's voice quavered against the rising roar of the outraged cleric. "I don't understand! What did that fellow say?"

The Bishop bawled commands in Hoogan. His escort scattered and began beating the bushes which rimmed the garden. The ambassador trotting at his side, the guest of honor strode to the laden refreshment tables, and began stuffing in fragile china, muttering to himself.

"Your Arrogance," Straphanger panted. "If I could just have some explanation! I'm sure it's all just a ghastly mistake! What are these men searching for? I assure you —"

"Out of the gootnezz of my heart I welgomed you to Hoog!" the Bishop roared. "As a great gompliment to you, I abzorbed your language! I was even ready to agzept cash, the zubreme chesture! And now I find that you openly gonzort with the enemies of the Kods!"

Standing on the sidelines of the verbal fray, Retief glanced around the garden. He spotted a fountain in the shape of a two-headed Hoogan dwarf with oversized teeth and belly, and moved over to it.

There was a tug at his sandal lace. He looked down. Two bright eyes at the ends of wirelike stalks stared up appealingly from a clump of grass. He glanced around — all eyes were on the Bishop.

"Are you looking for me?" Retief asked softly.

"Right!" a squeaky voice piped. "You're a hard man to have a quiet chat with, Mr. . . . ahh."

"Retief."

"How do, Retief. My name's Jackspurt. The boys appointed me spokesman to tell you Terries about what's going on. After all, I guess us Spism's got a few rights, too."

"If you can explain what's going on in this filbert factory, I'll be forever in your debt, Jackspurt. Speak your piece."

"It's the Hoogans; they don't give us a minute's peace. Talk about persecution! Do you know those psalm-singing hippos are blaming us for everything from sour milk to loss of potency? It's getting where it's not safe to take a stroll after sundown."

"Hold on, Jackspurt. Maybe you'd better fill me in on some background. Who are you? Why are the Hoogans after you? And where did you learn to speak Terran with that flawless enunciation of consonants?"

"I used to be a mascot on a Terry trader; I stowed away when she landed here for emergency repairs. It was a great life; but after a while I got homesick for good old Hoog — you know how it is —"

"You're a native of this charming world?"

"Sure — us Spism's have been around longer than the Hoogs. And we got along for thousands of years with no trouble. The Hoogs took the surface, and we settled in nice and comfy underground. Then they got religion and it's been hell ever since."

"Hold on, Jackspurt. I always heard that religion exercised a beneficent influence on those fortunate enough to possess it."

"That depends on which side you're on."

"That's a point."

"But I haven't given you the big picture yet. These Hoogan priests launched a full-scale propaganda campaign — painted up a lot of religious art with pictures of Spisms poking pitchforks at Hoogs, and pretty soon it got so even the average Hoog in the street started jumping and making X's in the air and mumbling spells everytime one of us came up for a breath of fresh air. The next thing we knew, it was full-scale war! I'm telling you, Retief, us Spisms are in bad shape — and it's gotta get worse!"

A guard was working his way toward the ogre fountain.

"Jiggers, the gendarmes," Retief said. "You'd better get out of sight, Jackspurt. They're beating the bushes for you. Why don't we continue this later."

The Spism whisked back under cover. "But this is important, Retief!" Jackspurt's voice emanated from the brush. "The boys are counting on me."

"Shh! Watch me and take your cue."

Magnan had turned and was eyeing Retief suspiciously. He stepped to his junior's side.

"Retief, if you're mixed up in this mix-up . . ."

"Me, Mr. Magnan? Why, I just arrived this afternoon the same time you did."

"Magnan!" Straphanger's voice cut through the hubbub. "The Bishop informs me that some sort of demonic creature was seen here on the Embassy grounds this evening! Of course we know nothing about it, but His Arrogance has drawn the unfortunate implication that we're consorting with denizens of the netherworld!" He lowered his voice as Magnan drew close. "Superstitious poppycock, but we've got to play along. You and the others spread out and go through a show of looking for this mythical imp. I'll pacify His Arrogance."

"Certainly, Mr. Ambassador. But . . . ah . . . what if we find it?"

"Then you're an even greater idiot than I suspect!" Straphanger twisted his working smile into position and turned back to the Bishop.

"Retief, you start along there," Magnan indicated the front of the house. "I'll go poke about in the bushes. And whatever you do, don't turn up anything—like that ghastly creature we encountered upstairs." A startled look spread across his face. "Good Lord, Retief! Do you suppose—?"

"Not a chance. I picture something more like a medium-sized dragon."

"Still . . . perhaps I'd better mention it to the ambassador."

"And confirm the Bishop's opinion? Very courageous of you. Mind if I stick around and watch?"

"On the other hand, he's a busy man," Magnan said hurriedly. "After all, why bother him with triv-

ia?" He hurried off to take up a position near the Bishop and make a show of stooping and peering among the conifer-like hedges.

Retief sauntered back to the table, deserted now except for a lone Hoogan bearer at the far end gathering empties onto a wide tray and tossing damp paper napkins into a capacious waste-paper receptacle. Retief picked up an empty sandwich plate, said "hsst!" The Hoogan looked up as Retief tossed the plate, dropped the big paper bag and caught the tossed crockery.

"Here's some more," Retief offered helpfully. He gathered up and handed over a pair of saucers, three empty glasses and a couple of cheese sandwiches each minus one bite. "You'd better hump along now and police up behind His Arrogance," he suggested. "He's leaving a trail of saucer rims behind him—doesn't seem to like the floral design."

"You dry dell me my chop?" the Hoogan demanded truculently as Retief fumbled a spoon and let it drop to the grass just under the edge of the hanging table cloth.

"Certainly not, old boy," Retief reassured the glowering local. He stopped for the spoon, caught a glimpse of an eye peering from the shadows.

"Get in the bag," he hissed from the corner of his mouth.

"Who you talg to?" the servant ducked and stared under the table. Behind him, the paper-trash container rustled softly as the Spisma whisked into it.

"Just addressing a few words to the spoon god," Retief said blandly. "Bad luck to drop a spoon, you know."

"Yes?" the Hoogan said. He leaned against the table, got out a much-used toothpick and began plying it on his unpolished teeth. "You voreigners kot grazzy iteas. Efrypoty know kood lug trob soon, bat lug trob forg." He carefully examined the tip of the toothpick.

"Back home, falling from a ten-story building is considered an inauspicious omen," Retief rambled on, watching the armed Episcopal Guards as they worked closer. One came over to the table, gave Retief a sharp look, thrust his head under the table, and then reached down to check the paper-trash container.

"How about a little refreshment?" Retief picked up a cup, dipped it full from a bowl of thick purple punch, took a step toward the warrior and seemed to trip; the sticky fluid struck the Hoogan just below the clasp holding the rainbow-hued cape, spread out in an interesting pattern across his polished breastplate. The bearer grabbed up his tray and bag and backed off hurriedly as the spluttering guard slapped limber fingers at the purple mess.

"Itiot! Clumpsy oaf!" he choked angrily.

"What? Boozink on tudy?" a vast voice boomed. The Bishop bellied past Retief, planted himself before the confused Hoogan. "The benalty is booilink in oil!" he roared. "Take him away!"

Other guardsmen closed in and grabbed their unfortunate fellow.

"That was my fault, Your Arrogance," Retief started. "I offered him —"

"You would inderfere with the Ebiscobal administration of justize?" the Bishop bellowed, turning on Retief. "You have the demerity to suggest that the Ebiscobal judgment is fallible?"

"Not exactly; you're just wrong," Retief said. "I spilled the punch on him."

The Bishop's face purpled; his mouth worked. He swallowed.

"It's ben zo long zinze anyone condratricded me," he said mildly, "that I've vorkotten the bunishment." He waved two fingers in blessing. "You are apzolved, my zon," he said airily. "In vact, I apzolv you for the whole weekent. Have fun; it's on the house."

"Why, isn't that gracious of His Arrogance," Magnan chirped, popping up beside the Bishop. "What a pity we didn't find the demon; but I —"

"That reminds me," the Bishop said ominously. He fixed an eye on Ambassador Straphanger as the senior diplomat came up. "I'm still waitink for results!"

"Look here, Your Arrogancel! How can we find a demon if there's no demon here?"

"That's *your* problem!"

There was a yell from the gate. Two guards were man-handling the bearer with the waste-paper bag,

who jerked away, making indignant noises. The bag fell, split open, spilling garbage from the midst of which the fugitive Spism burst, sending scraps flying in every direction.

With a bound, it was past the astonished guards and heading for the rear gate. More guards appeared in its path, jerking long-barrelled guns from tooled holsters. A shot seared a long gouge in the deep grass, narrowly missing other Episcopal retainers dashing up to get a crack at the action. The Bishop yelled, waving his boneless arms.

Cut off, the Spism veered, dashed from the house, but was met by a squad charging out from inside. A near-miss smashed dishes on the table behind Magnan, who yelled and hit the dirt.

The Spism skittered, took evasive action, headed for the flower-decked gate letting out onto the drive. The guards were all behind it now, the way clear. With a tremendous yell, Bishop Ai-Poppy-Googy whipped his giant sword out and leaped to intercept the fleeing creature. As he bounded past Retief, the latter pivoted, and thrust out a foot. He hooked the Episcopal leg just above a flare-topped, bejeweled pink leather shoe. His Arrogance dived forward, struck medals-first, and skidded on his face under the table.

"Why, hi there," Magnan's voice piped under the muffling canopy of the drooping tablecloth. "Just a minute, and I'll scroonch over —"

The Bishop roared and rose up, the table lifting with him; dishes, glasses, and food cascaded off on

Magnan, who was still crouching on the ground. With a surge, the Bishop hurled the board aside and roared again, while whirling to confront the dancing figure of Ambassador Straphanger, who flapped a napkin at the mud on the ornate conicals of the guest of honor.

"Treason!" Ai-Poppy-Googy bel-lowed. "Azzazzint! Murderers! Ach-ents of the Unterworlt! Obstructors of chustist! Heretics!"

"Now, now, Your Arrogancel Don't get upset —"

"Upzet! This iz maybe a choke?" The Bishop dashed the muddied cloth from Straphanger's hand. He bent down, snatched up his sword and waved it overhead. The Episcopal Guard was closing in quickly now.

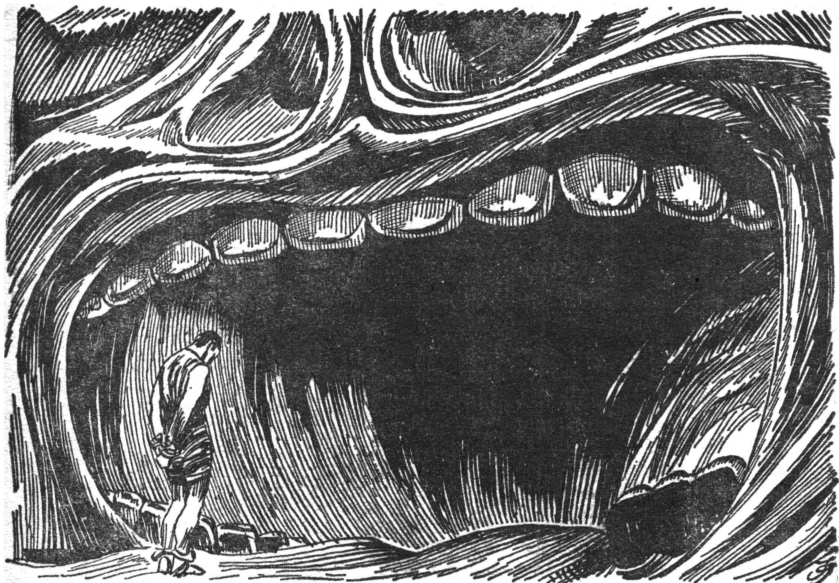
"I hereby eggsgommunicate the lot of you!" the Bishop yelled. "No food, no water, no bolice brotection! Alzo, you will be puplicly egg-secuted! Boys, round zem up!"

Guns were suddenly leveled at the huddle of diplomats surrounding the ambassador. Magnan yelled. Straphanger's wattles quivered.

"Ton'd miss this one!" Ai-Poppy-Googy indicated Retief. "It was his foot I fell over!" A guard poked a gun into Retief's side.

"Ah, I think Your Arrogance is forgetting that Mr. Retief has an Episcopal dispensation," Straphanger said brightly. "Retief, if you'll just run along to my office and send out a code two-oh-three — or is it three-oh-two — or — any-way, a call for aitch ee ell pee —"

"He'll ko along with the rest of



you scoundrels!" the Bishop yelled. Half a dozen armed Hoogans were herding the remainder of the staff up to join the group now.

"Any more insite?"

"No, Your Arrostants," the captain of the guard reported. "Only a few zervants."

"Poil them in oil for azzociatink with azzazzints! As for the rest of you —"

"Your Arrogance," Straphanger spoke up. "Naturally, I don't mind dying, if its Your Arrogance's pleasure, but then we won't be able to give you the gifts and things, will we?"

"Tamn!" Ai-Poppy-Googy threw his sword down, narrowly missing Magnan's foot. "I forgot about the gifts!" He looked thoughtful. "Look, suppose I make arranchmends for

you to write a few chegs in your zell before the eggzecution?"

"Oh, I'm afraid that wouldn't do at all, Your Arrogance. I need the Embassy seal, and the check verifying machine, and the code books and —"

"Well . . . bossibly I might make an egzeption; I'll defer punishment until the cash arrives."

"Sorry, Your Arrogance, but I wouldn't ask you to deviate from tradition just to accommodate me. No, we're all excommunicated, so I suppose we may just as well get comfortable and start starving—"

"Holt it! Don't rush me! Who's doing the eggsgommunicatink, you or me?"

"Oh, you are."

"Brecizely! And I zay you're not eggsgommunicated!" The Bishop

stared around truculently. "Now, about the gifd! You can deliver the two million immediately; I jutz happened to pring an armored gar along —"

"TWO million? But you said one million!"

"This is touple-gift day."

"But you said Wednesday was double-gift day. This is only Tuesday."

"**I**t's now Wentsday, by Ebiscobal decree," the Bishop said, raising his sword.

"But you can't — I mean, how can you?"

"Calendar reform," Ai-Poppy-Googy said. "Lonk overdue."

"Well, I suppose it could be arranged."

"Kood! I herepy grant you an Ebiscobal rebrieve. Put that doesn't inglude the resd of these untesire-ables!" the Bishop waved a hand. "Dake them away, poys!"

"Ah . . . I'm grateful for the pardon, I'm sure," Straphanger said, gaining confidence rapidly; "but of course I won't be able to process the paper work properly without my staff."

Ai-Poppy-Googy glared with large, damp red eyes. "All right! Keep them! They're all rebrieved egzebd thad one!" He aimed a finger at Retief like a gun. "I have sbezial blans for him!" the guards shifted their attention to Retief ringing him in with aimed guns.

"Maybe His Arrogance would be just a teeny bit lenient this time," Magnan suggested, dabbing at a smear of liver paste along his bare

arm, "if Mr. Retief apologized and promised never to do it again."

"Do whad akain?" the Bishop demanded.

"Trip you," Magnan said. "You know, like he did just now."

"He dribbed me?" Ai-Poppy-Googy choked. "On burpose?"

"Why, ah, it must have been a mistake —" Straphanger started.

"Your Arrogance has such a keen sense of humor, I'm sure you'll see the comic aspect of it, if you just think about it," Magnan offered.

"Retief! Did you — I mean, surely you didn't." Straphanger choked.

"Well!" Magnan said indignantly. "I was lying right there."

"Zearch him!" the Bishop bel-lowed. Guards jumped forward; busy hands grabbing at Retief's kilt-pockets, almost at once came upon the folded paper the Spism had dropped as it fled his room.

"Ah-hah!" the Bishop pounced. He opened the paper and read the message.

"A gonsbirazy!" he yelled. "Un-ter my very nose! Put the ironts on him!"

"**I** must protest!" Straphanger spoke up. "You can't go about chaining up diplomats every time a little indiscretion is committed! Leave the matter to me, Your Arrogance; I'll see that a sharp entry goes in his record."

"The Kods will nod be denied their tue!" Ai-Poppy-Googy roared. "Domorrow is the Krant Vestifal of Wentstay —"

"Tomorrow's Thursday," Magnan interjected.

"Domorrow is Wentstay! Today is Wentstay! I herepy teclare a whole weeg of Wentstays, plast it! Now, as I was sayink — this Derran will bartizibate in the vestifall! Zuch is the holy will! No more ar-kuments!"

"Oh, he'll be taking part in a ceremony!" Straphanger said in a relieved tone. "Well, goodness, I suppose we can spare him long enough for that." He offered a small diplomatic chuckle. "The Corps is always ready to promote worship in whatever form, of course."

"The only drue Kods are the Hookan Kods, py the Kods!" the Bishop boomed. "Any more of your Derran heresy and I'll referse my tisbenzation! Now dake thiz one to the demple and brebare him vor the rides of Wentstay! The resd of you will remain unter arresd, undil the will of the Kods is known!"

"Mr. Ambassador," Magnan quavered, tugging at Straphanger's arm, "do you think you should allow them —"

"Merely letting His Arrogance save face," Straphanger said in a confidential tone. He winked at Retief. "Don't worry, my boy; good experience for you. You'll get an inside view of the Hoogan religious concept at work."

"But — but, what if they . . . I mean, boiling in oil is so *permanent*," Magnan persisted.

"Quiet, Magnan! I'll have no whiners in my organization!"

"Thanks for thinking of me, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "I still have my good-luck charm."

"Charm?" Magnan looked blank.

"Witchgraft?" the Bishop boomed. "I zuzbegted as much!" He turned a large, red eye on Straphanger.

"I'll pe zeeing you at the zere-mony! Ton'd pe lade!" He eyed Retief. "Are you goming beazevully?"

"In view of the number of guns aimed at me," Retief said, "I sincerely hope so."

V

The cell was narrow, dark, damp, and unfurnished except for a plain table with a bottle of bitter-smelling wine and a narrow bench on which Retief sat. His wrists were chained together, and he was listening to a muffled tapping which sounded faintly from beyond the walls. It had been going on now for twelve hours, he estimated — long enough for the Hoogans to have completed their preparations for the religious ceremonies in which he was to play a part.

The tapping abruptly changed tone and sounded louder, nearer. There was a light clatter, as of pebbles tossed on the floor. A moment later, there was a soft scraping sound, a rasping like fingernails on a blackboard; then silence.

"Retief, are you there?" a thin voice chirped through the pitch darkness.

"Sure, Jackspurt! Come on in and join the party. I'm glad to see you eluded the gendarmes."

"Those slobs! Hah. But listen, Retief, I've got bad news."

"Press on, Jackspurt; I'm listening."

"This is Festival Day — and Old

Googy's scheduled the big all-out push for today, to tie in with the mumbo-jumbo. The Hoogs have been building this king-size fumigator for months — stacking it full of rubbish, old rags, worn-out tires, and what not. At the height of the big ceremony they set the stuff on fire and start the smoke-pumps going. They got a system of pipes laid out leading into the burrows, see? There won't be a safe spot for Spisms for miles around. Our boys will come stampeding out of their hideaways, some of which have been in the family for generations, and zowie! the Bishop's troops lower the boom! It'll be the finish of us Spisms!"

"That's a heart-rending story, Jackspurt — or it would be, if I weren't in such a heart-rending position myself at the moment."

"Yeah, the Wednesday Rites. You scheduled for the matinee or the big evening spectacular?" Jackspurt broke off as clankings sounded from beyond the door.

"Holy Moses, Retief! Time's up! They're here! Listen, I was supposed to brief you in, like, but it took longer'n I figured tunneling through that wall, and then I got to yakking —"

A key scraped in the keyhole.

"Listen! Did you drink any of what's in the bottle?"

"No."

"Good! It's doped! When I leave, dump it! You'll have to pretend you can't talk or the jig's up! Put on a kind of zombie routine, see? Whatever they tell you — do it! If they get the idea you're putting some-

thing over, it's zkkk! for every Terry on Hoog! And remember! Keep your head down and your arms and legs tucked in —"

The lock turned with a rasp of rusty tumblers.

"Gotta go! Good luck!" Jackspurt scrambled and was gone.

Retief took a step, grabbed up the bottle, poured it down the three-inch hole through which his visitor had fled.

Light blazed as the heavy door swung inward. Three hooded Hoogan pikemen came into the cell, followed by a black-robed priest. Retief stood holding the empty bottle, his body concealing Jackspurt's escape route.

"How to you veel, Derry?" the priest inquired, looking Retief over. He stepped in, thumbed Retief's eyelid up, grunted, and took the empty bottle from his hand.

"Goked to the eyeprows," he stated.

"Are you zure?" a pikeman challenged. "I ton'd drust these voreigners."

"Nadurally I'm zure; the hypervasgulations of the subraoccibital whatchamagallids is dypical; a glasic gase. Dake him alonk."

Hemmed in by pikes, Retief followed along a torch-lit passage, up winding stone stairs, to emerge abruptly into blinding light and the susurrus of a multitude of voices, above which one rose like the boom of surf:

". . . azzure you, my tear Ampasador Hipstinker, our brinzibal tiety, Uk-Ruppa-Tooty, is nod only a

hantzome degoration and a gonstand reminter to the bobulaze that the nexd tithe is tue — he also broduzes oragular stadements rekularly effry Wentstay at one B. M. Of gourse, it is nod always kiven to us to untersdant whad he's dalkink apout, bud the evveg on the beasandry is most zaludory."

Squinting against the sudden sunlight, Retief made out the resplendently robed figure of the Bishop, seated under a vast parasol on a massive throne of dark wood carved with designs of intertwined serpents. He was flanked on the left by the Terran Ambassador and on the right by a huddle of lesser diplomates. The group was ringed in by stony-faced Hoogan guards with bared scimitars.

The priest who had accompanied Retief bowed unctiously before the Episcopal throne. "Your Arrokanze, the Zoon-to-pe-Alefated One is here," he indicated Retief with a wave of the hand.

"Is he . . . ah . . . ?" Ai-Poppy-Googy looked inquiringly at the escort.

"A glassig gase of hypervasculations of the thinkamapops," a pike-man spoke up.

"Poil thad one in oil," the Bishop said, frowning. "He dalgs doo mudge."

"You appear a bit peaked, Retief," Straphanger commented. "I trust you slept well last night? Comfortable quarters and all that?"

Retief stared absently past the ambassador's left ear.

"Retief, the ambassador's addressing you," Magnan said sharply.

"Probably he's losd in metitations," Ai-Poppy-Googy said hastily. "On with the zeremony."

"Perhaps he's sick," Magnan said. "Here, you'd better sit down."

"Ah-ah," Ai-Poppy-Googy held up a limber hand. "The mosd imbortand bortion of the zeremony yed remains to pe zeleprated."

"Ah, yes, of course," Straphanger sat back. "I'd quite forgotten, Your Arrogance." He glanced around. "We'll have a magnificent view of the proceedings from here."

At a prod from an Episcopal Guard, Retief turned — and found himself staring directly into the vast brass smile of the Hoogan idol.

From Retief's elevated viewpoint atop the two-hundred foot high ziggurat, the head of the god reared up another fifty feet. It was an immense stylized Hoogan face of polished yellow metal, the vast hand upraised beside it. The eyes were deep hollows at the back of which a sullen red glow gave an impression of malignant intelligence. The noseholes, a yard each in diameter, drooled a thin trickle of smoke which coiled up past soot-streaked cheeks to dissipate in the clear air. The mouth which split the massive head, gaped in a crocodile smile set with spade-shaped teeth with spaces between them beyond which was visible a curve of polished esophagus agleam with leaping reflections from inner fires below.

Two lesser priests stepped forward to hang assorted ornaments on Retief's shoulders and neck. Another taking up a position before him,

intoned a repetitious chant. Somewhere, drums commenced a slow tattoo. A murmur passed over the crowd packing the slopes of the ziggurat and the plaza below. Standing at ease, apparently ignoring his surroundings, Retief noted a two-foot wide trough cut in the stone platform at his feet, deepening and slanting down as it ran to the abrupt drop-off ten yards distant. An acolyte was busy pouring oil into the hollow and spreading it with swipes of his hands.

"Just what does this phase of the ceremonial involve?" Straphanger inquired in a tone of synthetic diplomatic interest.

"Waid and zee," Ai-Poppy-Googy said shortly.

"Mr. Ambassador," Magnan whispered hoarsely. "His hands are chained!"

"Part of the ceremony, no doubt."

"And that groove," Magnan went on. "It runs from Retief right over to the edge . . . just above that horrible ig-bay outh-may."

"Yes, yes, you needn't play the part of a tourist guide, Magnan. By the way," Straphanger lowered his voice, "you didn't happen to bring along a hip flask, I suppose?"

"Why, no, Mr. Ambassador. I have a nice antiviral nasal spray, if that would help. But about that chute —"

"Warm, isn't it, Your Arrogance?" Straphanger turned to the Bishop. "A bit dry, too."

"You ton'd lige our Hoogan weather?" the Bishop asked in an ominous tone.

"No, no, it's fine. I love it when it's nice and hot and dry."

"Ah, Your Arrogance," Magnan spoke up. "Just what is it you have in mind doing with Retief?"

"Iz kreat honor," the Bishop said.

"I'm sure we're all delighted at this opportunity for one of our group to get an inside view of the Hoogan religious philosophy," Straphanger said sharply. "Now kindly sit down and stop that infernal chattering," he added behind his hand.

The Bishop was speaking quickly in Hoogan; the attendant priests urged Retief forward a step, grasped his arms and deftly placed him face-down in the oiled channel. The rattle of the drums rose to a crescendo. Flabby Hoogan hands shoved Retief forward down the steepening slope.

"Mr. Ambassador!" Magnan's voice rose to a shrill bleat. "I do believe they're feeding him to that monster!"

"Nonsense, Magnan!" Straphanger's suety voice countered. "It's all symbolic, I'm sure. And I might point out that you're hardly conducting yourself like a seasoned diplomat."

"Stop!" Retief, sliding rapidly toward the edge, heard Magnan's yelp and the scuffle of rapid footsteps.

There was a wet splat! and bony elbows slammed against him. He twisted, caught a glimpse of Magnan's white face, open mouth and clutching hands as together they shot over the edge and out in a graceful arc toward the waiting jaws of Uk-Ruppa-Tooty.

Kee*p your arms and legs tucked in*, Jackspurt had said; Retief had time to grit his teeth — then he was hurtling past the tombstone-sized fangs, Magnan's hands still clutching his legs. They dropped down into a blast of searing heat and light, then suddenly, stunningly, they slammed against and through a yielding, shredding network of filaments as fine as spiderwebs. Retief came to a stop, rebounded, caught at a heavier cable that brushed his hand, and was clinging to a coarse rope ladder, Magnan's weight dangling from his heels.

"Bullseye!" a tiny voice screeched almost in his ear. "Now let's get out of here fast, before they dope out what happened!"

Retief found a foothold in the snarl of rope, reached down and hauled the rag-limp second secretary to his side. The heat from below was scorching, even here in the shelter of a bulge in the god's throat.

"Wha-what-bu-bu —" Magnan babbled, groping for a handhold.

"Hurry up, Retief!" Jackspurt urged. "Up here by the tonsils! It's a secret passage!"

Retief assisted Magnan in scrambling up. He boosted him into the narrow, circular burrow that ran back through the solid metal. The Spism in the lead, they moved hurriedly away from the sound of priestly voices raised in puzzled inquiry, reached a set of cramped steps leading down.

"We're okay now," Jackspurt

said. "Take a breather, and then we'll go down and meet the boys."

Later they were in a cavern floored with rough masonry, and lit by a burning wick afloat in a shallow bowl of aromatic oil. All around, twitching Spism eye-stalks stared at the intruders; the close-packed red goblin-forms of Jackspurt and his clan moved restlessly, like giant fiddler crabs on some subterranean beach. Behind them, tall, pale-blue cousins poised on yard-long legs, watched from shadowy corners. In niches and crannies in the walls, tiny green Spisms and sluggish orange forms with white spots clung, gazing. Dark purple Spisms, dangling from the ceiling like tumorous stalactites, waved their free legs hypnotically, studying the scene.

Magnan's fingers dug into Retief's arm. "G-great heavens, Retief!" he gasped out. "You — you don't suppose we've died and that my Aunt Minerva was right all along?"

"Mr. Retief, meet the boys," Jackspurt clambered up to perch on a ledge overlooking the gathering. "A lot of them are pretty shy, but they're a good-natured bunch, always a thousand laughs. When they heard you was in trouble, they all joined in to help out."

"**T**ell them Mr. Magnan and I said thanks," Retief said. "It was an experience we wouldn't have missed. Right, Mr. Magnan?"

"I'd certainly never miss it," Magnan swallowed audibly. "H-how is it you can talk to these hobgoblins, Retief?" he hissed. "You haven't . . . ah . . . made some sort of pact

with the powers of darkness, I trust?"

"Hey, Retief," Jackspurt said. "Your friend got some kind of race prejudice or something?"

"Heavens, no," Magnan said in a strangled voice. "Some of my best friends are fiends — I mean, in our profession, one meets —"

"Mr. Magnan is just a little confused," Retief put in. "He didn't expect to be playing such an active role in today's events."

"Speaking of active, we better get you gents back to the surface fast," Jackspurt said. "The pumps will be starting up any minute now."

"Where are you going when the fumigation begins?"

"We got an escape route mapped out through the sewers that ought to bring us out in the clear a couple miles from town. We're just hoping the Hoog don't have the outfall staked out."

"Where are these smoke pumps located?" Retief asked.

"Up above — in Uk-Ruppa-Tooty's belly."

"Who's manning them?"

"A couple of priests. Why?"

"How do we get there from here?"

"Well, there's a couple passages — but we better not waste any time sight-seeing."

"Retief, are you out of your mind?" Magnan blurted. "If the priests see us, our goose will be cooked, along with the rest of our anatomies!"

"We'll try to make it a point to see them first. Jackspurt, can you get a couple of dozen volunteers?"

"You mean to climb up in that brass god? I don't know, Retief. The fellas are pretty superstitious."

"We need them to make a diversion while Mr. Magnan and I carry out the negotiation —"

"Who, me?" Magnan squeaked.

"Negotiation?" Jackspurt protested. "Jumping Jehosophat, how can you negotiate with a Hoog?"

"Ahem," Magnan cleared his throat. "That, Mr. Jackspurt, is after all one's function as a diplomat."

"Well . . ." Jackspurt buzzed briefly to his fellows, then hopped down from his perch as a dozen Spisms of assorted sizes and colors came forward.

"We're game, Mr. Retief. Let's go!"

The dull gleam of the metal walls of the vast chamber that was the interior of the god Uk-Ruppa-Tooty loomed out of dense shadow where Retief and Magnan crouched with their hobgoblin crew. At the center of the gloomy chamber, low-caste Hoogans labored before the open door of a giant, red-glowing furnace, tossing in armloads of rubbish, old shoes, bundled magazines, and broken plastic crockery. A layer of harsh, eye-watering smoke hung in the air. Jackspurt snorted.

"Boy, when they start pumping that stuff into the burrows . . ."

"Where are the priests?" Retief inquired in a whisper.

Jackspurt pointed to a small cubicle at the top of a flight of steps. "Up there, in the control room."

Retief studied the layout. "Jackspurt, you and your men spread out

around the room. Give me five minutes. Then take turns jumping out and making faces."

Jackspurt gave instructions to his crew; they faded away into the darkness.

"Maybe you'd better wait here," Retief suggested to Magnan.

"Where are you going?"

"I think I'd better have a chat with the ecclesiastics up in the prompting box."

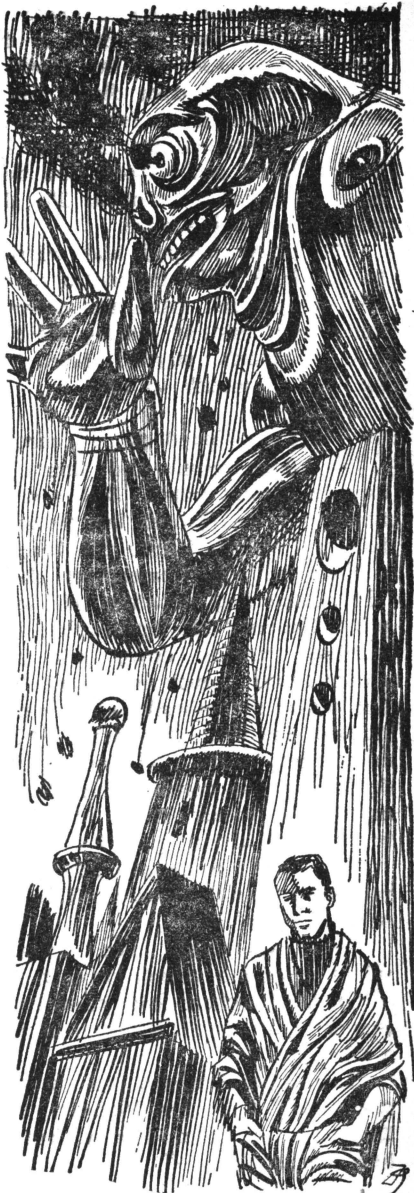
"And leave me here alone, surrounded by these ghoulish Spisms?"

"All right, but keep it quiet or the smoke of burning diplomats will be added to the other fumes."

Fifty feet above the floor, Retief gripped narrow handholds, working his way around to the rear of the control box. Through the dusty windows a blue-robed Hoogan priest could be seen lounging in a bored attitude, studying a scroll. A second Hoogan, in the familiar black, stood nervously by. Suddenly the silence below was broken by a mournful wail.

"What's that!" Magnan jumped, slipped and grabbed for a secure grip on a projecting angle-iron supporting a narrow catwalk.

"Our co-workers going into action." Retief said softly. Beside the furnace door, the Hoogan workers were staring around nervously. There was another doleful moan. One of the Hoogans dropped his shovel and muttered. Retief ducked back as the blue-robed priest came to the window and peered down below. He then motioned to the other, who went to the door of the tiny chamber, opened it, stepped out on



the catwalk and shouted down to the workers. One answered in defiant tones. Two of the workers started toward a door dimly visible at the far side of the furnace room. The priest shouted after them; as his bellow faded and echoed, the thin hoot of a Spism sounded, like the last wail of dying hope.

The priest jumped and whirled to dart back inside the control room. He slipped, fell from the catwalk and found himself staring directly into Magnan's startled face. He opened his mouth to roar—

Magnan whipped off his mauve cummerbund and thrust it into the gaping mouth. With a muffled grunt, the Hoogan lost his grip, fell, and slammed into the heaped rubbish with a tremendous slam. The stokers fled, shouting. The lone priest flattened his face against the window, peering down into the gloom. With a quick movement, Retief gained the catwalk, and stepped through the door. The priest whirled and leaped for a microphone-like device on the corner table. Retief eased the power pistol from his sarong and aimed it at the priest.

"I wouldn't make any announcements just yet," he said. "The results aren't all in."

"Who are you?" The Hoogan sidled toward a corner cabinet.

"If that's where you keep your prayer books, better let them lie for a while yet."

"Look here, berhabs you are unaware thad I am His Voracity, the Deacon Um-Moomy-Hooby, ant I have gonnegtions—"

"Doubtless. And don't try for the door; I have a confederate out there who's noted for his ferocity," Retief said.

Magnan came through the door, panting. Um-Moomy-Hooby backed away.

"Whad — whad do you wand?"

"I understand the god is about to utter oracular statements, as the high point of the Wednesday services," Retief said.

"Yez — I waz just goink over my sgribt. Now if you'll eggsguze me I have to —"

"It just happens that it's the script we want to talk about. There are a couple of special announcements I'd like to see inserted."

"Whad? Damper with holy sgriture?"

"Nothing like that; just a good word for a group of associates of ours and possibly a short commercial for the CDT."

"Plasphemy! Herezy! Refashionizm! Nefer will I pe a barty to zuch zagrilechel!"

Retief clicked off the pistol's safety catch.

"— Put, on the other hant, bossiply somethink gould pe arranch-ed," the Deacon said hastily. "How much did you hafe in mind offer-ink?"

"I wouldn't think of attempting to bribe a man of the cloth," Retief said smoothly. "You're going to do this for the common welfare."

"Jusd whad is it you hafe in mind?"

"The first item is the campaign you've been waging against the Spisms."

“Ah, yez! And a wontervul jop our lats hafe peen toink, doo. Uk-Ruppa-Tooty willink, zoon we will zee them ztambed oud endirely, and virtue driumvant!”

“The CDT takes a dim view of genocide, I’m afraid. Now, my thought was that we could agree on a reasonable division of spheres of influence.”

“A teal with the Bowers of Tarknezz? Are you oud of your mind?”

“Now, now,” Magnan put in, “a more cooperative attitude would do Your Voracity greater credit.”

“You zugheshd that the jurch should gombromize with zin?”

“Not exactly compromise,” Magnan said placatingly. “Just work out a sort of peaceful coexistence plan.”

“Nefer will I, as deacon, come oud in vafor of dogetherness with Zatan’z Impz!”

“There, there, Your Voracity; if you’d just sit down across the table from them, you’d find these impz weren’t bad fellows at all.”

There was a soft sound from the door. Jackspurt, a jaunty, two-foot sphere of red bristles, appeared, waving his eyestalks exultantly. A looming blue Spism behind him.

“Nice going, Retief!” he called. “I see you caught one. Pitch him down after the other one, and let’s clear out of here. This little diversion will give us time to get clear before the smoke starts.”

“Jackspurt, do you suppose your fellows could do a fast job of shifting a few hoses around? You’ll have to block off the sewers and feed the smoke off in some other direction.”

“Say, that’s an idea!” Jackspurt agreed. “And I think I know just the direction.” He gave instructions to the big blue Spism, who hurried away.

The Deacon had retreated to a corner, eyes goggling, his hands describing mystic passes in the air. More Spisms were crowding into the room now, tall blue ones, tiny darting green ones, sluggish purple varieties — all cocking their eyestalks at the prelate.

“Help!” he croaked weakly. “The minions of the netherworlt are ubon me!”

Magnan drew out a chair from the table. “Just have a seat, Your Voracity,” he said soothingly. “Let’s just see if we can’t work out a *modus vivendi* suitable to all parties.”

“Come to termz with the enemy? Id will mean the ent of the jurch!”

“On the contrary, Your Voracity; if you ever succeeded in eliminating the opposition, you’d be out of a job. The problem is merely to arrange matters in a civilized fashion so that everyone’s interests are protected.”

“You may hafe somethink there,” Um-Moomy-Hooby seated himself gingerly. “But the nevariouz agiftities of these goplins musd pe kept unter sdrigd gondrol — Ebiscobal gondrol, thad is.”

“Look, my boys got to make a living,” Jackspurt started.

“Zellink a vew love-botions, zerdainly,” the Deacon said. “And the jurch is willink to zmile at a modezd draffic in aphrodisiags,

dope, and raze-drack tips. But bed-dling filthy menus to teen-agers, no!

"The zame goez vor sdealing without a lizenze, and the zale of alcoholic peferaches, with the eg-zebtion of small amounts of broberly aged smuff for medicinal use py the glerchy, of gourse."

"Okay, I think we can go along with that," Jackspurt said. "But you priests will have to lay off the propaganda from now on. I want to see Spisms getting better billing in church art."

"Oh, I think you could work out something lovely in little winged Spisms with haloes," Magnan suggested. "I think you owe it to them, Your Voracity, after all this discrimination in the past."

"Tevils with winks?" Um-Moomy-Hooby groaned. "It wiM blay hop with our zymbolizmz — put I zub-boze it can pe done."

"And you'll have to have guarantees that everything from two feet under the surface on down belongs to us," Jackspurt added. "We'll leave the surface to you, and throw in the atmosphere, just so you dedicate a few easements so we can come up and sightsee now and then."

"Thad zeems egwidaple," the Deacon agreed. "Supchegd to vinal abbrofal py His Arrokanze, of gourse."

"By the way," Jackspurt asked casually, "who's next in line for the Bishop's job if anything happens to Ai-Poppy-Googy?"

"Az it habbenz, I am," Um-Moomy-Hooby said. "Why?"

"Just asking," Jackspurt said.

A loud thumping started up from the wide floor below.

"What's that?" Magnan yelled.

"The pumps," the Deacon said.

"A bity so many Spisms will tie, but it is manivezdzly the will of Uk-Ruppa-Tooty."

"I guess old Uk-Ruppa-Tooty had a last-minute change of heart," Jackspurt said callously. "We shifted the pipes around to feed the fumes back up into the city plumbing system. I guess there's black smoke pouring up out of every john in town by now."

"Touple-grozzer!" the Deacon leaped up, waving his arms. "The teal'z off —"

"Ah, ah, you promised, Your Voracity," Magnan chided. "And besides, Mr. Retief still has a gun."

"And now, if you'll just pick up the microphone, Your Voracity," Retief said. "I think we can initiate the era of good feeling without further delay. Just keep our role quiet, and take all the credit for yourself."

VII

“A pity about poor Ai-Poppy-Googy falling off the zig-gurat when the smoke came boiling out of Uk-Ruppa-Tooty's mouth,” Ambassador Straphanger said, forking another generous helping of Hoogan chow mein onto his plate. “Still, one must confess it was a dramatic end for a churchman of his stature, shooting down the slide and disappearing into the smoke as he did.”

"Yez, already the canonization papers are peing brebared." His newly installed Arrogance, Bishop Um-Moomy-Hoopy, shot a nervous glance at the Spism seated beside him. "He'll pe the batron zaint of rehabillidated tevilz, impz, and kop-fins."

"A pity you missed all the excitement, Magnan," Straphanger said, chewing. "And you, too, Retief. While you absented yourselves, the Hoogan philosopny underwent a veritable renaissance—helped along, I humbly assume, by my modest peace-making efforts."

"Hah!" the Bishop muttered under his breath.

"Frankly, what with all the smoke, I hadn't expected the oracle's pronouncement to be quite so ludicrous," Straphanger went on, "to say nothing of its unprecedented generosity —"

"Chenerosity?" interrupted Um-Moomy-Hoopy, his heavy features reflecting rapid mental recapitulation of his concessions.

"Why, yes, ceding all mineral rights to the formerly persecuted race here on Hoog—a charming gesture of conciliation."

"Mineralts rightz? Whad miner-ts?"

Jackspurt, splendid in the newly tailored tunic of Chief Representative for Spismodic Affairs to the Episcopal court, spoke up from his place along the table set up on the palace terrace.

"Oh, he's just talking about the deposits of gold, silver, platinum, radium, and uranium, plus a few boulders of diamonds, ruby, and so

forth that are laying around below ground. The planet's lousy with the stuff. We'll use our easements to ferry it up to the surface where the freighters will pick it up, so we won't put you Hoogs out at all."

The Bishop's alligator-hide features purpled. "You—you knew apout these mineralts?" he choked.

"Why, didn't His former Arrogance mention it to you? That was what brought the mission here; the routine minerals survey our technical people ran from space last year showed up the deposits."

"Ant we puilt our Brincible Kodoud of prass—imborted prass at thad," the Bishop said numbly.

"Too scared of a few Spisms to dig," Jackspurt said in a stage whisper.

There was a flicker of lightning in the sky to the east. Thunder rolled. A large raindrop spattered on Straphanger's plate, followed by another.

"Oh-oh, we'd better head for cover," Jackspurt said. "I know these flash squalls; lightning out the kazoo —"

A brilliant flash cast the looming figure of the god Uk-Ruppa-Tooty into vivid silhouette against a blue-black sky. Dishes rattled on the table as sound rumbled across the sky on wooden wheels. The Bishop and his guests rose hastily, as a third jagged electrical discharge ripped across the sky—striking the giant idol full on the shoulder.

A shower of sparks flew; the Hoogan gesture of salute, pivoted

slowly at the elbow. The yards-wide hand, seen edge-on with the fingers extended, swung slowly in a great arc, came to rest with the extended thumb resting firmly against the snub nose. Sparks flew as the digit was welded firmly in place.

The Bishop stared, then tilted his head back and looked up at the sky, long and searchingly.

"Chusd pedween uz men of the wort," he said hoarsely, "do you zubboze thad phenomenon haz any sbezial zigniviganze?"

"I think if I were you, Your Arrogance, I'd watch my step," Jack-spurt said in an awed tone. "And, uh, by the way, on behalf of the Spisms, I'd like to make a contribu-

tion to the Episcopal treasury."

"Hmmm. Have you ever thought about tagink inzdruction?" the Bishop inquired. "I'm sure it could be arranged, and as for the little contribution you sboge of, dwenty bercent of the take would zuvvice."

They strolled off along the corridor, deep in conversation. Ambassador Straphanger hurried away to prepare his dispatches to Sector HQ, Magnan at his heels.

Retief stepped back out onto the terrace and lit up a dope-stick. Far away, Uk-Ruppa-Tooty loomed, solemnly thumbing his nose at the Episcopal Palace.

Cheerfully, Retief returned the salute. **END**

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The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet...

Dear Editor:

I have several comments to make on the December issue of *If*.

1. The cover work was phenomenal. Please let's have some more like it.

2. *The Hounds of Hell* was excellent again. Please, more Laumer!

3. Now comes the complaint: When is Doc Smith coming? You've been promising to have *Skylark DuQuesne* soon for months. This was my original reason for subscribing (although Heinlein, Laumer and Van Vogt are good reasons too!) and it still is what I am waiting for!

4. *The Killing Machine* by Jack Vance has just been published by Berkley Medallion — now you are planning to serialize it. WHY? Mags should have stories *before* they come out in book form, not after!

You noticed no complaints on quality of your stories. I tried — but I couldn't find anything to complain about! Please keep up the good work on the stories and keep Morrow for cover illustrations. —

Martin Massoglia, 434 West McDonel, Michigan State University, East Lansing Michigan.

● Re Doc Smith: The first draft of *Skylark DuQuesne* was completed last spring, and it's a winner, too. One complication arose to prevent Doc from completing the revision on schedule: a little matter of some major surgery. The operation was one of those all-day jobs that take a team of surgeons working at top speeds, and average recovery time for a young adult usually runs to a matter of months . . . but Doc Smith, who is just beginning to get his second wind at 74, was up and out of the hospital in a week, back at work a few days later, and is now finishing up the rewrite. An amazing young fellow is this Doc Smith! We're chary of predictions more than one issue ahead — sometimes even those go astray, as you see with Jack Vance's story! — but as of this writing we fully expect to bring *Skylark DuQuesne* into the April issue.

An re *The Killing Machine*: We agree with every word you say . . . and that's why the serial beginning this month is *Starchild*. When we bought *The Killing Machine* it was with the clear understanding that there would be no book publication for at least a year. Somewhere, somebody, somehow failed to get the message — the book edition came out — and at the last possible moment we had to pull the story out and replace it. (If you look closely at the cover you can see where the type was cut out and changed. In fact, the cover painting was made for *The Killing Machine* in the first place. Coincidentally, it happens to illustrate a scene in *Starchild* as well, proving that not all accidents are unlucky.) We liked *The Killing Machine* . . . but we won't be running it here . . . because we *don't use reprints*. Not even accidental ones.—

* * *

Dear Editor:

That last serial that appeared in your magazine — *The Hounds of Hell* by Keith Laumer — is the most disgustingly ridiculous story you have ever printed. If one could forgive it for having almost no plot one still could not forgive it for being chock full of stock situations and incidents which appear over and over again almost word for word in various other stories. I mean, where is the author's creativity? And why does he insist on cluttering up the story with trite sentences?

The story read like something written in the thirties (or maybe the twenties). It was stocked with such antiquities as the Superman Hero,

the Secret Laboratory and the one-man-band type of character who did the surgery on the hero to make him superhuman.

This is not the type of story that makes *If* the high quality magazine that it is. Please avoid cluttering your future issues with stories like this one — especially if they take up as much space as this one did! — Robert Heitman, 113 South 37th Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104.

* * *

Dear Editor:

The Silkie was even better than Van Vogt's last, *The Expendables*. Please keep Van Vogt coming!

Kagan is a find — hope to see more of him. Where has Sturgeon gone? And — I hate to say this, but the only story in your all-Smith issue that was worth beans was *The Imperial Stars*. But its quality made up for the other three.

Would you accept an "IFirstory" that would have to be published as a serial? — Jack Baldwin, 905 North Alison Street, Santa Barbara, California 93103.

● Yep. — *Editor*.

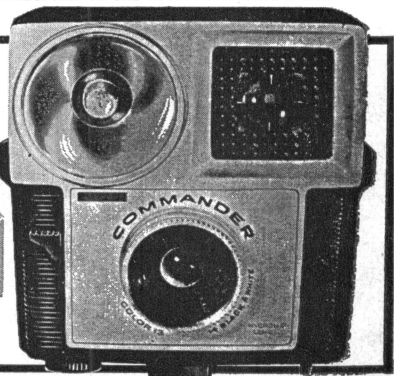
And that's about it for another issue. Our first for this issue is L. D. Ogle of Muskegon, Michigan. Next issue we're going to try to squeeze in an extra page or two of *Hue and Cry* because the letters are beginning to pile up . . . but come to think of it, we've got a serial installment, a long Van Vogt and a couple of other items that may get in the way . . . well, keep the letters coming anyway! We'll do the best we can. — *The Editor*.

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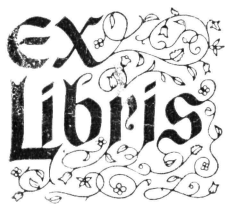
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