

WORLDS OF



JULY 1966

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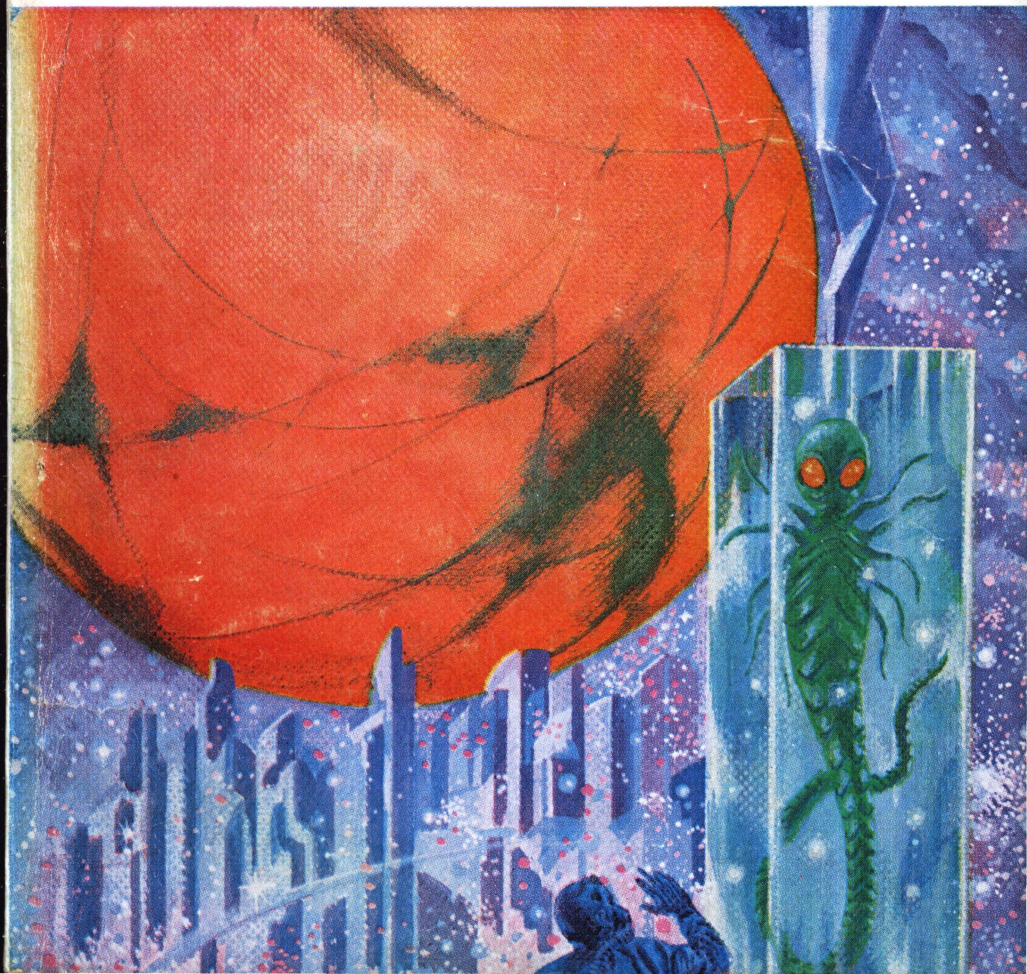
SCIENCE FICTION

DON'T MISS THIS

Thrilling new story of the strangest
space voyage in science fiction —

THE HOUR BEFORE EARTHRISE

by **JAMES BLISH**



Could you write for television?

By Max Shulman

Frankly, I don't know. But this I *do* know: when I was running the *Dobie Gillis* show, I often paid \$2,500 and more for scripts turned out by people who should have been arrested for impersonating writers.

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WORLDS OF



SCIENCE FICTION

**JULY, 1966
Vol. 16, No. 7
ISSUE 104**

**ALL NEW
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Cover by MORROW from THE HOUR BEFORE EARTHRISE

IF published monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, President, Vol. 16, No. 7. Main Office: 421 Hudson Street, New York, New York, 10014. 50c per copy. Subscription 12 issues \$5.00 in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America and Central America and U. S. Possessions, elsewhere \$6.00. Second-class postage paid at New York, New York, and at additional mailing offices. Copyright by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, 1966. All rights, including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Printed in the U. S. A. by the Guinn Company, New York, N. Y. 10014

CHEER UP, FELLOWS!

Readers, you're exempted from reading this editorial — you needn't take notes and there will be no quiz. It's the writers we'd like to talk to this time.

Fellows, how about if in our peering into the crystal ball that we use for a typewriter, we try to see something a little more interesting and constructive for a while? After all, we're not limited to the probable future. Anybody can write about that. Heaven knows it's a temptation to look at the going population trends and come up with a world of a trillion people breathing in each other's armpits, eating pressed algae and dreaming of the annual vacation when they can hope to have a sight of a real tree. Or the arms race and the rumblings of war can make it rather likely that underpopulation is more likely to be a problem than over, and it's pretty easy to project a world where bearded savages howl in the crumbling canyons of Wall Street.

We're not suggesting that science-fiction writers should stick their heads in the sand and write a sort of 28th-century Pollyanna. We're suggesting something quite different.

We're suggesting that if you don't like the looks of the future, a very good kind of story to write — and one that we get all too seldom — is the story of how the people of day after tomorrow learn how to avoid, prevent, terminate and/or cure whatever we think is going to be wrong.

John R. Pierce says: There is only one future when it comes; the only chance we have to consider alternate futures is now, when we're still not sure which one will turn up.

It's even possible that by seeing the disasters that lie ahead — and by showing what can be done about them — a few people today can take some sort of part in helping to avoid them. Maybe even a few science-fiction writers!

And if that's too much to ask — well, at least it will be more fun for all of us if we think in terms of what can be done, rather than what will be done to us.

All right, readers, you can come back in now.

If you've been paying attention, you've noticed that *If* tries to avoid the Gloom & Doom kind of story . . . not because we don't understand Great Art or because our middle name is Pangloss, but simply because most of them strike us as being inordinately dull. We don't demand happy stories. Some of our favorites have wound up with the characters we loved best either dead or doomed. But there's a great difference between drama and despair . . . and so many of the stories we read (and reject!) are simply despairing.

If that's Great Art — we'll take *The Master Mind of Mars!*

— The Editor

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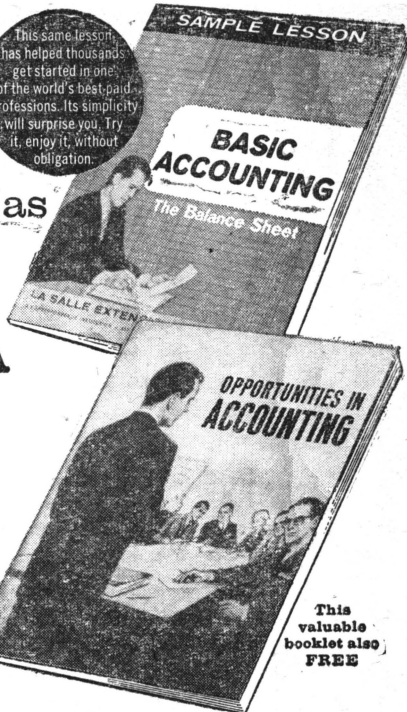
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THE HOUR BEFORE EARTHRISE

by JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by MORROW

*Dolph always wanted to go to Mars.
Now he had a vehicle that could
take him there — his tree house!*

I

THE TREE HOUSE

Dolph Haertel — even now that he was eighteen, nobody who knew him risked calling him Adolph,



except his father — took a quick last look at the free-floating needle in the middle of the table. Then he launched himself across the floor of his packing crate to the porthole, for his first close view of Mars.

The view wasn't particularly good. For one thing, the bullseye was double. He had bought it originally as raw material for a telescope mirror, and because the walls of the packing crate were also double, he had been forced to use both blanks to make a single porthole. The result was rather like looking down at Mars through a short tunnel, six inches in diameter, with an inch-thick pane of slightly scratched crown glass at each end.

In addition, the glare was blinding. Even at only a little beyond one hundred miles above the planet's surface, Dolph was still effectively outside the Martian atmosphere, and between the sharp steel-blue glare of the gas horizon and the red-tinged lemon shimmering of the noonday desert, details were almost as washed out as they were in the best Palomar photographs.

Nevertheless, as Dolph fell slowly toward the desert south of the area called the Sinus Sabaeus, a regular triangle of dark blue-green streaks, narrowing from the Sinus through the desert toward the "oasis" named (most fancifully) Arabia, gradually took on better and better definition. He watched them grow, hardly daring to breathe. These dark, impossibly straight lines were major examples of the Martian mystery long referred to as "canals,"

though nothing could be more certain than that they were not canals in any Earthly sense. Were they volcanic fault lines? Animal trails? Something made by intelligent life, perhaps millions of years ago? Or just illusions, put together from tiny details by an eye straining for a regular pattern across millions of miles of space emptiness?

But these canals were not fading away as the packing crate settled. On the contrary, they were becoming sharper every minute. From up here — for Dolph was close enough to think of the diminishing gap as a height, rather than a distance — his eye could already resolve details smaller than fifty kilometers across, so that he could have seen a Sicily or even a Long Island, had Earth's areographers been whimsical enough to put one on the map of Mars. And still the canals showed no signs of dissolving into a welter of background markings, as a proper optical illusion should. Instead, their linearity became steadily more definite, their edges sharper and more inarguable as he descended.

No, the canals of Mars were real. And before the next hour was over, Dolph Haertel was going to become the first human being in history to know without doubt just what they were.

Dolph touched a bared copper end of a wire to a B battery terminal and watched the needle floating above the center of the breadboard rig begin to turn slowly and uncertainly. Outside his tree-house, spring winds moved gently in

the Iowa night, but the needle paid as little attention to them as it did to any other force of the massive and turning Earth. For the needle, the breadboard was all of the universe that there was.

At the age of eighteen, Dolph Haertel had discovered anti-gravity.

Dolph was wholly aware of the fantastic importance of what he had found, but the discovery did not seem as unlikely to him as it would have to, say, his father — or for that matter, to a theoretical physicist who had spent a lifetime studying the mysterious metrical frame of space-time, that invisible, tyrannical grid which confined the courses of spiral nebulae and falling stones alike. Indeed, the discovery seemed inevitable to him now, at least in-the light of hindsight.

At the very least, better than half a dozen accidents seemed to have conspired to lead him toward it. And for seeing it when he at last happened upon it, he was fully prepared to take credit if asked, for a great deal of reading in the history of science had convinced him of the truth of Pasteur's first law of research: "Chance favors only the prepared mind."

The preparation had inhered first of all in a natural bent for mathematics — part of it doubtless only that gift that exists in every child until it is suppressed or poisoned by the schools; part of it perhaps inherited from his mother, who was a government bacteriologist at NASA's Center for Xenobiology at the State University of Iowa in nearby Iowa City. Certainly little of it could have de-

scended from his foster father, who was a grain-elevator salesman whose "head for figures" — to use Mrs. Haertel's affectionate description — "comes to a point at business arithmetic."

Then, too, there had been the fact that his natural bent was rather solitary. Even outdoors it leaned toward hikes and fishing rather than team sports like baseball, which he found acutely dull. This was furthered by a boyhood isolation imposed from outside. His foster father spent much of his time "on the road" — which was as likely to take him to Manitoba or the Punjab as it was to any of the American bread-basket states — and as a government worker in the space sciences his mother was subject to transfers of base upon short notice, or no notice at all. Hence, although the suburban house in Iowa's low, rolling green hills was spacious and the countryside altogether pleasant, Dolph never was tempted into the mistake of thinking of it as "home". He had never had one, and did not particularly feel the lack; and he had never been thrown among any group his own age long enough to form a firm friendship which might have drawn his attention outward from his own thoughts and the reading which chiefly nourished them.

Lately, it was true, he had taken more and more to noticing that the human beings in the world were divided into two sorts, one of which seemed softer and inarguably was more difficult to talk to than the other. One of these, a disturbing Canadian blonde — black hair and

blue eyes — named Nanette Ford, had even shown an astonishing comprehension of what Dolph was up to now, so much so that for a while he had hoped she might share the grand adventure itself. But more and more it had come to seem to him that the risks were too great. Besides, in a venture with so many unknowns, the including of a second party — and that a girl! — would be the least manageable unknown of all, and the most avoidable.

The final and most crucial stroke of luck had come when he was fourteen, and already beginning to turn himself, without being aware of it, into an attic inventor — perhaps one of the last of the breed, in a world dominated by team research costing sums only governments could afford to risk or could hope to raise. (The attic itself was out, for despite his mother's intervention, Rolph's foster father could not be swayed from the notion that all forms of experimentation involved explosions, or at least a risk of fire. But he was allowed to work in the top of the garage. Dolph carefully did not point out that when both cars were in it, the garage was almost as costly an edifice as the house. His conscience was quite clear about it, since his plans included no explosions, nor even so much as a lighted match.)

Instead, he had four years ago blundered upon a brief mathematical paper in *Nature*, that most British and yet most universal of all scientific journals, which had turned

out to have a bearing on the mystery of gravity — a mystery abandoned by most physicists long ago, since the prevailing Einstein cosmography ruled firmly that nothing could be done about gravity but endure it, time without end. Since at fourteen Dolph had not yet had enough time to decide that any scientific question could be closed or any theory sacrosanct, he set out to run down all other existing papers on the subject, and to keep his eye out for new ones.

His motives for this were not entirely imbedded in intellectual curiosity. Through his mother, he was closer than most laymen to the U. S. space effort, and better able to see — as he did without difficulty — what an enormously expensive blind alley it was becoming. Project Apollo, the American effort to make a manned landing on the Moon, had already consumed billions of dollars and still was utterly bogged down, its timetable advanced again and again and becoming more difficult to believe with each postponement. Even simple unmanned rocket shots did not seem to be gaining much in reliability, though they certainly never failed to be more costly than their predecessors. Wasn't there some more sensible way to go about the whole thing?

Apparently not. And yet the spectacle offended Dolph. He was wholly susceptible to the vast romance inherent — though not yet realized — in space travel, and it seemed to him that the way the world was going about prosecuting it was crazy; or, at least, that the people in

charge had lost sight of the primary goal, which was to get out into space. Instead, the whole world seemed to be spending itself blind on more and more expensive rockets — not because these brute-force engineer's toys were the best way to cross interplanetary space (that question apparently hadn't even been raised), but because it was a useful substitute for the arms race that had kept the now-obsolete Cold War going. Apparently taxpayers could still be sold spaceships — even dud ones — where they could no longer be sold missiles.

All right. Dolph knew he wasn't competent to question the politics of it, nor indeed was he much interested in that side of it. He was interested in space travel itself, and he was too young to be convinced that rockets were the only possible devices that could free man of the Earth. It occurred to him that if gravity was the chief enemy of spaceflight, then something might be gained by studying the enemy, no matter how hopeless Relativity declared such a study would turn out to be.

The outcome was that at eighteen Dolph had become an amateur expert in a field so new that few physicists even knew it existed, and most would say could not exist.

For all its formidable reputation, Relativity had turned out to be absurdly easy to master — a discovery which had been made over and over again by everyone with any feeling for the poetry of math — and full of absurdly large holes in

both its reasoning and its appeals to evidence. British scientists in particular, it turned out, had been shooting holes in poor old Einstein for more than a decade. One especially drastic English astronomer, a mystical don named Milne, had produced a competing form of Relativity that swallowed Einstein's like a goat. Milne had died nearly twenty years before Dolph's birth, but he was not forgotten — not in a suburb of Iowa City, anyhow.

Dolph doodled with Milne, and Dingle, and the pitifully few others who had had the courage to keep on thinking about gravity, and, having been born into precisely the right moment, and having brought precisely the right mind to the right opportunity, fell into the fundamental discovery that although gravity is (as Einstein had maintained) a condition of space rather than a force like electricity, it has polarity (which Einstein had broken his heart trying to disprove).

It followed naturally that it could be manipulated, probably without too much work. Since it was a weak field to begin with, and worked best only over very long distances, only a little effort should be required to produce desirable vector effects —

Or, that is, working *with* gravity rather than against it could probably be done in a garage, with only a few dollars. For example: A model space drive, capable of lifting perhaps a hundred pounds or more of dead weight, should be easy to assemble from standard television set parts and other components.

With Nanette's rather distracting help, he had assembled a small breadboard rig to test at least a few small margins of the notion. The rig worked only too well. It turned out to be well over a hundred times as efficient as he had dared to hope. In an eternal moment of groaning boards and squeaking nails, it had cut a whole garage off from the Earth and lifted it, both family cars included, a good inch off its foundations.

The instant when the power cut off and the whole mass thudded back into place was even more alarming, but it was all that had saved garage, Nanette and Dolph. He had had the rig plugged into a light socket, and the feeder line had parted before the frame building had pulled quite free of its concrete bedding.

Nanette had been frightened, but it hadn't occurred to Dolph to be genuinely alarmed until a day later, when some of the implications of the test began to pile up in his imagination. After all, despite his miscalculation there had never been any real danger that the garage would take off for the clouds. It was too massive a load for the available power. Hoisting it and its content far enough to snap a BX cable was quite incredible enough, without imagining consequences the breadboard rig could never have brought about.

But there were things the breadboard rig could do. One of them, he realized, was to make possible a small but genuine spaceship — so small that he could build it himself

in the back yard, but fully functional all the same.

When that idea came to the surface, he was scared.

And yet — why not? Obviously the first manned space journey, even to so nearby a target as the Moon, was still decades in the future for the money-happy engineers, their brute-force rockets and their professionally heroic "astronauts." Dolph could see no good reason — no good technical reason, anyhow — why the breadboard rig should not take him to Mars some time within a year, provided that he could somehow scrounge about two hundred dollars . . . well, call it three hundred to be on the safe side . . . and could find the time both to do the building job properly, and to make the round trip before somebody caught him at it and forbade his trying it at all.

It was primarily out of the need for disguise that the tree house had evolved, much to the satisfaction of Mr. Haertel, who though he used the outdoors for nothing more strenuous than business golf himself, liked to see his adopted son get his nose out of books and tackle something, anything that was properly boyish and outdoorsy. The ancient pear tree in the back yard would have been absurdly easy for anyone to climb, except possibly for somebody who had to try it in a wheelchair. But the very fact that the tree house was up off the ground made it unlikely to be blundered into by adults who might find what was inside it unexpected enough to

prompt questions. As for kids, well, there was nobody around of Dolph's own age who would think a tree-house anything but too juvenile to be worth noticing, except Nanette. Younger children could invade it whenever they liked, as far as Dolph was concerned — there would be nothing in it complex enough for them to damage, and nothing for them to see that they could report to older people in any terms which would make sense.

He made a model ship of his first packing case, in the ravine with which the parcel of land ended at the back. He caulked it as carefully as though it would some day actually need to hold breathable air against the malice of a hard vacuum — though his limited resources prevented his giving it a double hull or any insulation — and equipped it with his first breadboard rig. One night, far past midnight, he lifted it silently a hundred feet into the moonlit air, and just as silently set it down again except for a faint grating noise as its bottom resettled among the heather-hazed rocks of the dry stream bed.

Nobody saw the boxey specter as far as he could tell — although the neighbor's dog, a pure-bred cocker spaniel with nerves of purest Jello, howled all the rest of the night — and a week later he felt sure enough of the safety of the model to take Nanette along for a second cautious night ascension. She was breathless with excitement, but he took great care to make the "flight" as slow and solemn as that of a tethered balloon, and to avoid even the faint-

est hint that there might be more to be done with the anti-gravity field than this. (And he swore her to secrecy on even that much of it.)

The tree house was not much larger than the model, but it was altogether more elaborate. He meant it to take him into space, and to bring him back; he had no intention that it should kill him instead, if he could possibly avoid that.

The floor of the exterior crate went into the tree first, as a platform (which, like the sides, had been sprayed with five layers of epoxy resins over the basic caulking — a horribly expensive procedure because he had been forced to buy the spray in household-size aerosol cans from the local supermarket, for the sake of secrecy). Then the interior crate, similarly caulked, had been bedded on the platform in a nest of rock wool, the best he could do in the way of insulation (it would at least preserve some heat balance in space, though against hard radiation it would be worse than useless), and set about preparing his entrance lock and his porthole.

The problems of supply had to be ducked, for the most part. He could not afford to buy, and he would not have the space to carry, more than a token ration of food, water or oxygen — especially oxygen, which came in expensively heavy steel bottles which had to be cracked by expensive heavy apparatus. Instead, he bought his oxygen by the 22-liter flask from the local drug store, in the form of a gaseous patent medicine put on the

market for hypochondriacs who were nervous about smog. Again this was a sinfully expensive way of attacking the problem at hand, but no other was open to Dolph if disguise was to be maintained.

There was no solution to this logistic problem, nor to the menace of cosmic rays and the solar wind, but that of time.

The dinosaurs of power and money might afford to tackle them directly — though they'd been doing badly at it up to now — but for Dolph only speed, evasiveness, foreplanning and penury could serve. Those were precisely what the anti-gravity drive made possible, otherwise the whole notion of the trip would be no more than a nocturnal fantasy.

The new rig was no longer, strictly speaking, a breadboard-chassis improvisation, though it was spaced out almost as much for ease of access. The components, all transistorized except for a power tube, were now fixed on a heavy table, which in turn was firmly bolted to both the floor and one wall of the crate, and under which was slung the most capacious truck battery Dolph had been able to buy from Sears Roebuck. The small, heavy torus which was the source of the field was mounted on a post precisely at the crate's geometrical center, on gymbals from a Navy-surplus gyroscope compass.

The supplies were in; the tree house was tight; the rig was working; his course was plotted. There was no longer any reason to hang

back. Even his time was accounted for, closely enough so that in a little while it would start running out. There was a four-day weekend coming up, and through the medium of his shopping — which had been too extensive to be hidden, though it could be disguised — Dolph had let it be known that he planned another solitary camping trip, which would run at least one more day than the official holiday. Since he had accumulated the extra day off from school and his marks were mostly up to snuff, the plan aroused no unusual attention.

Of course Nanette would suspect something like the truth when she saw the tree house gone, but he counted on her to keep her own counsel about it. As for the adults, what they would think of that couldn't be helped. But he was pretty sure their guesses would be wide of the mark. It would probably take them two days to look up far enough to notice that the packing crate was missing — a tree without a crate in its branches being so much more ordinary a sight than a tree with one — and probably they would then assume that he'd disassembled it and set it up at a distance.

His foster father, in fact, was almost sure to say: "After all, it couldn't very well have flown away by itself, could it?"

So that was that. Late that Thursday night, with no more than a minimum shower of pear leaves and a yap of stifled terror from the distant cocker, he edged the crate out of the ancient tree.

And promptly at 2207 Sidereal

Time, as the calculations required, the packing crate silently became a spaceship and vanished, Dolph and all.

II

THE SEA OF STREAMS

No amount of reading of the synthetically excited copy about orbital flights poured out by the popular press — most of it written by reporters who had been mocking the very notion of space flight as “that crazy Buck Rogers stuff” even after the launching of Sputnik I — had prepared Dolph for the immense fullness of space.

He had expected it to be lonely. Even the most cursory knowledge of the distances which stretched around the planets would have forewarned him that the universe of night is vast beyond all hope of understanding. When the idea of making a crossing to Mars had first come to him, one of his first thoughts had been the sober realization that Columbus in his fragile bark had been setting out to jump a local puddle compared to the audacity of setting sail for Mars in a packing crate.

The Earth itself was only barely large enough a vessel to risk in space, as the eternal lifelessness of the Moon preached graphically. The stars were suns, but their planets only motes in their eternal light.

But that space itself should truly be a sea, unappeasably in motion everywhere and charged to bursting with restless particles and energies

in every millimeter of its measureless reaches, was a concept he had never encountered (though he might have been warned by the physicists' word for the phenomenal universe, “plenum”, which means “the fullness”). The impact of the experience itself, piled atop the shock of actually seeing the Earth become just another point of light, lost amid millions of others — for since Dolph chanced to be travelling in the Galactic plane, and the position of Mars at the time was on the other side of the Earth from Shapley Center, the heart of the Galaxy, the Earth for him quickly was swamped out in the general glitter of the Milky Way — was a complete shock, and a blackly frightening one.

In his first hour beyond the atmosphere, after he had finished his first checkout of his crate and his course, he became grimly aware that if he were to turn back now he might just barely have the great good luck to come home alive — and never mind the catastrophic nonsense of even dreaming of reaching Mars.

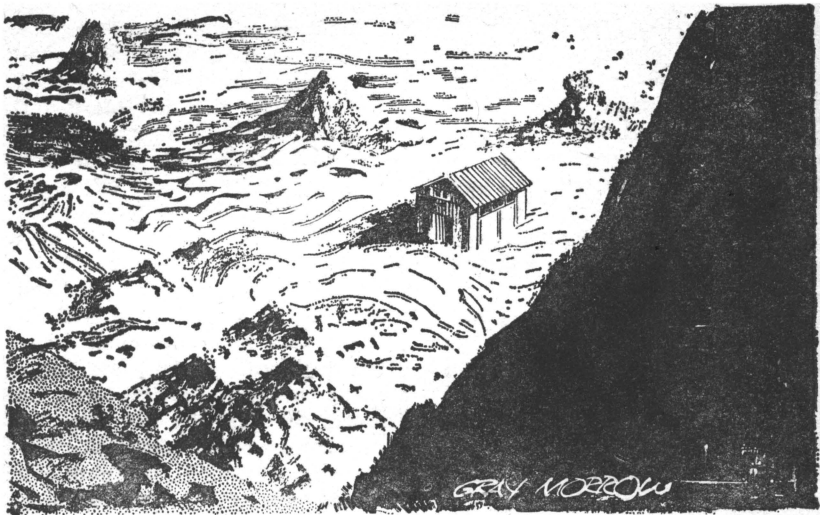
Nothing but luck could explain his having stayed alive this long. Outside the packing crate, mostly invisible and beyond the detection of his few toy instruments, the currents of space raged in a storm that had been going on for fourteen billion years — if indeed it had ever had a beginning — and might go on raging for another fourteen billion, or forever. Sun and starlight glared off the aluminum-painted hull of his absurd shell, charring



the wood underneath steadily and implacably, molecule by molecule. The solar wind — that torrent of atomic fragments which extended the Sun's atmosphere out as far as Jupiter — seethed and roiled in the magnetic field which was secondary to his miniature gravitational pattern. X-rays from the hearts of exploding stars poured through the ship, and its pilot too. Cosmic rays — the stripped cores of atoms, driven at near-light velocities from the ultimate synchrotrons of spiral galaxies. — bulleted past him, most of them luckily deflected by his field, missiles against which any physical shield would have been worse than useless. Micro-meteors, some few as big as grains of sand, scored the paint and pitted the porthole; these too were slowed and

veered away by his shield, and those few that got through his outer hull were trapped by his insulation (although nothing could be done about the minute slow leaks these produced).

He had known about most of these things in advance, at least in the abstract, and had tried to take them into account. He had chosen for the flight a period of clear solar weather, in a trough of the pulsation cycle when no flares were expected (though there were no guarantees against them, either). Against other radiation he counted mainly on the protection of speed, to keep his dosage down to safe levels, since shielding was out of the question. With meteors he was willing to take his chances. They



were not very common beyond Earth's immediate gravitational envelope, and one capable of killing him — one, say, as big as a fleck of gravel — would find him a small and gravitationally unattractive target. As for the air, the drug-store oxygen bottles were equipped with their own masks which he could don if the oxygen tension became dangerously low — though for loss of pressure in the cabin, there was no effective precaution but speed of transit.

It had all seemed at least possible, if not very reasonable, back in the safety of the garage and the Iowa spring. In the raging sea of streams which was the reality of "empty" space, it was death, not pear-leaves, that whispered every second just outside the crate.

But he was not going to turn back now — and most especially if he might not make it home alive even if he did.

He had firm objections to being killed, but above all he was not going to let himself be knocked out of the sky for a project he'd already given up. All right, he'd obviously made a mistake, and a fat one — quite big enough to kill him. But he'd made it, and he was on his way. And that was definitely that.

He tried to keep his mind off the universe of whispering blind hostility just outside by concentrating on the mechanics of his journey, but there was really very little to do. His flight plan had been the ultimate in simplicity, thanks to the fundamental nature of the

discovery which had made it possible at all: the discovery that gravity is not only a structural condition in space, as Einstein had postulated, but at the same time a part of the general field which included electricity and magnetism as its other aspects (as Einstein had never succeeded in proving) and hence has polarity — can have its own peculiar forms of negative and positive poles.

Knowing only this much — and given the slight vector thrust to turn it to account — Dolph could sling himself and his tree house away from the Earth with all the initial velocity he could glean from Earth's own centrifugal force, simply by shielding himself from his planet's own gravity. He had only to be careful how suddenly he did it. Once free of the last clinging wisps of Earth's air, he could add with the snap of a switch an acceleration of two gravities — another sixty-four feet per second, every second. He would in effect give the packing crate a "like charge" to that of the Earth; this on top of a velocity imparted by coming off the end of a four-thousand-mile-long sling which all his life had been whirling him through space at the rate of not much under a thousand miles an hour (and had he started from the equator, it would have been greater still).

Two gravities would not have seemed like much of an acceleration to the rocket masters at Cape Kennedy, who were accustomed to sweat blood (and money) to crack their vehicles up past nine. But two

gravities applied over several hours can build up a much more respectable end-velocity than can nine gravities achieved in the three or four minutes before a rocket blurts out the last of its reaction-mass and becomes just another one of the universe's helplessly falling or coasting objects. And for Dolph, this much was for free, or so near to it as made no difference. If he wanted to add more to it, he could reject the Sun's gravity as well, at no extra cost but some much more complicated calculations. But for a crossing as short as the one he planned, the gain did not prove to be worth the extra brainwork.

Steering, of course, was none too easy, but here again a little vectoring returned large dividends. Once the Earth's field was screened out and the crate rode free in the sea of streams, retreating from the Sun, a faint softening of the lines of force on the side of the crate toward Mars let in a faint tendril of the red planet's own distant tug. Not much, only a sort of an urge, but enough to start him into a long curving fall toward the fleeing world. For him, after all, there was no place else to fall to.

The moment the meters first registered that tug, Dolph was able to step it up. To double it, in fact. By the middle of his second day in space he was already slightly more than halfway there, and beginning to stop the Martian attraction back down and use the Earth as a drag-anchor.

It was just as well, too. The air

in the crate was already thin and a little foul, and Dolph was beginning to feel quite chilly. In addition, he felt a little feverish, which he hoped was due solely to the fact that he had had no sleep, and that he hadn't bothered to provide his crude vessel with plumbing. If the odd feverishness also meant that he had gotten a higher radiation dose than he had planned on, there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He was lucky — though he tried hard not to think about it — to be still alive at all.

But now his stern chase of Mars was beginning to show fruits. The red spark was getting fatter — not larger, exactly, but markedly brighter. From here on out the ballistics of the trip would be even simpler. He had only to fall, as mindlessly as Newton's apple, and let natural law do the rest until it was time to slow himself down to a leaf-fall speed.

Not that it would do to allow carelessness or neglect to cancel out everything the sea of streams had been unable to sweep away from him. He had to land safely on Mars; he had to live there, for an hour or so at the least; and he had to get back, with proofs. Otherwise he had risked not only his own life for nothing, but also all the love and care that had brought him into the world, and kept him alive and happy until that moment a few months ago when he had decided to leave it for a while. Even here he was not really alone.

He had brought with him years of devotion, centuries of history, ages of evolution; and out here, he

stood for them all, he and his scraps of Earth wood and paint and metal, of life and curiosity and knowledge. He was custodian of all these things, not just of his own life.

Stub of pencil in hand, he studied his instruments with minute care, and scribbled calculations on the wall of the crate. Mars got fatter. The crate got colder.

By "morning" — though he still had been unable to sleep — the air was very bad. He had to don the oxygen mask, after a last gulp of his rations and swallow of water. The gas made him feel more alert, and a little warmed, too, though he knew that that part of it was an illusion. Inside the crate the light was now quite orange, cast in a truncated cone from the porthole from the surface of Mars.

Now he *had* to look down, come what may. He took a last quick measurement from the free-floating needle in the middle of his instrument table, and then launched himself across the floor of the crate to the porthole. He was already so used to the effects of free fall that he arrived without banging his nose more than slightly.

The view, disappointingly, was not good. For one thing, the micro-meteorite scratches on the outside bull's eye had gotten worse; and the glare was blinding, especially after so many hours of star-hazed blackness. But slowly, he got used to it.

And slowly he began to realize what it was that he was seeing: the canals. They were not dissolving, but becoming more definite as he descended. He drew in a sharp breath.

The canals of Mars were real — and before the next hour was over, he was going to become the first of all human beings to know without doubt just what they were.

Always providing, of course, that he lived through the next hour.

III

DOWN . . . AND OUT

The oasis toward which he was settling, in the heart of the sub-desert called Aeria, was shown on his Pic du Midi map but not given any name — probably because it was one of those Martian features which failed to show up from time to time, as even larger green areas failed to do some summers. It was an oval blotch about thirty degrees south of the equator, and perhaps five hundred miles off the eastern "shore" of Syrtis Major.

It was certainly showing nicely this summer. At a guess, Dolph would have said it was as big as Rhode Island. Five canals converged on it, and more were becoming visible, like railroad lines converging on a city, animal trails leading to a water hole — or spall-marks around a bullet hole in shatterproof glass.

Dolph resisted that last comparison until it was impossible to fight it any longer . . . until, in fact, he could see that it was very close to the truth. The nameless oasis was an impact crater, like Meteor Crater in Arizona, or the ringwalls of the Moon.

The discovery made his heart

sick, for it instantly made disastrous sense of the surface of Mars, map and landscape both. Was it possible that Mars, too, was a bombarded and blasted planet, as implacably lifeless and hostile as the Moon despite its blanket of thin air? True, it was not as obviously pocked and torn up as the lunar landscape, but that might only mean that the winds — and the gigantic sandstorms that they carried, often big enough to be seen all the way from Earth — had worn down the oldest and the biggest craters and mountain ranges, and smoothed off the others. The retreat of the North polar snows in the spring had revealed one mountain range, the Mountains of Mitchell; and recurrent sharp edges to the cloud-patterns had hinted at similar ranges elsewhere on the planet, even though no shadows of such peaks had been seen.

The roughly circular shapes of the northern deserts — Electric Eridania, Ausinia, Hellas, Argyre — also looked much like the circular maria of the Moon, as did such smaller southern ones as Isidis Regio. And here in the packing crate, from less than fifteen miles up, there was no longer any doubt that Mars at some time in its history had been the target of vast celestial missiles, some of them as big as asteroids. The major canals, the ones even old Schiaparelli had seen, were colossal straight faults in the very crust of the planet, where whole continental blocks of the surface had tilted like ice-floes and refrozen out of true to the main mass. The minor canals — the ra-

diating marks — were spalled cracks centered upon the impacts of smaller meteors, objects of the size that had so devastated the Moon.

Since the surface of Mars had not changed permanently since the invasion of the telescope, it seemed likely that no such cataclysm had hit Mars in more than three hundred years. But the same thing might be said of the Moon — which did not make Earth's sister world any less barren and hopeless. Whenever the bombardment had struck Mars, it had changed the planet decisively. In the sand sample that the first unmanned Martian probe had photographed there had been many microscopic shells, like those of Earthly *Foraminifera*, which showed decisively that Mars had once had seas. They were all gone now. The sands of their bottoms blew about the planet in the thin gales. Most of that water must have poured into the fissures opened when the great meteors struck, and boiled away, to go finally into combination with the rock in the form of limonite, the hydrated iron oxide which in powdered form made up the bulk of the Martain sands. Little enough was left to form the thin polar icecaps.

Had there been any highly organized forms of life on Mars then, they could not have survived the sudden remaking of their whole world. If life itself had survived at all, it had had to begin all over again. Any that survived there now, on this very ancient little world, must — paradoxically — be very primitive, and even genetically al-

most without memory of the age of oceans.

Mars was still not dead. But what life remained must be staging a last stand, quite as dramatic as Lowell had guessed . . . but with far fewer resources, and with even less hope.

Glumly, Dolph maneuvered his clumsy little craft down toward a landing in the middle of the nameless oasis, the blue-green spot of life created by the stony monster from space that had also helped to turn most of Mars into a permanent desert. He had not expected anything better, really, but he had had hopes. Now his hopes were limited to seeing just how high a form of primitive life could manage to hang on where properly there should be no life at all.

The tilted ochre tableland spread out beneath him, and the rim of the crater expanded like an opening mouth. From a mile above the desert surface he was able to see the shadows cast by the low rim. The inside of the oasis began to look first like a bowl, and then more like a shallow saucer.

It was mid-afternoon on the desert when the packing crate reached it, and the low domed peaks of the rim — so oddly like the hills of eastern Iowa except for their color — rose around him. As the floor of the crater came to meet him, however, he found himself in a sort of gentle blue-green twilight; the rays of the brilliant but shrunken sun did not reach the bottom at this hour.

At last the scene outside the port-hole became motionless. Cautiously Dolph cut off his field.

The crate dropped the last few feet with a soft, muffled *thunk*, as though it had fallen onto a mattress. Then there was silence.

He was on Mars.

The silence continued, indifferent and undisturbed. He had been used to it in space, because he had expected it; but here it was as though the planet, bent upon cherishing the last of its own life, did not even notice his existence. Well, why should it? In its long, slow, tortured life, Dolph was only the accident of an instant.

He shook off his depression and set to work. First, the outside temperature, and the air pressure.

The resulting readings were hard to believe. He took two more of each and could hardly trust them even after they agreed with the first. His equipment wasn't the best.

But it was the best he had, and it said that the temperature out there was twenty-five degrees Centigrade, or 77° on the obsolete Fahrenheit scale the English-speaking peoples clung to. That was outright balmy — nobody could fairly call it less. As for the air pressure — 200 millibars — it was about equivalent to what he would have encountered high in the Himalayas, far from breatheable even had it contained enough oxygen; but even so it was better than twice the pressure he could even have hoped to find up on the desert. On Mars, it appeared, it paid to be at the bottom of a deep, deep hole.

In short, he could go outside, wearing no more clothing than he had on right now, and with no protection from the air but the respirator. He buckled it on, followed by the canvas belt which held the twenty plastic vials which were for his samples, and loaded his pockets. Then he dropped to his hands and knees before the tightly caulked barrel which was his airlock.

A few moments later he was out. He lost about twenty per cent of the Earthly air in the crate in the process, but this did not bother him. He was not after all, planning to stay long. He got to his feet and looked about.

In the indirect sunlight, the vast circular valley was so still that it was like being on the floor of some long-untended aquarium or pond. Overhead, the sky was a deep violet, almost an indigo, in which he could see a scattering of stars, including several brilliant ones. He wondered if one of those could be the Earth. The idea gave him a distinct chill.

The horizon was near, but not bounded by the mountains of the ring-wall — in fact, he could not even see their peaks; the oasis was too big for that. Except for low, rolling hills, the crater floor stretched away evenly in all directions, an almost uniform blue-green, with a few chocolate spots.

He struck a wooden match against the crate. Nothing happened, of course.

The blue-green was vegetation; he got back down on his hands and knees to look at it, then

snatched his hands up again. The air was warm, all right, but the ground was bitter cold even through his gloves. He had forgotten that the midnight temperatures here probably hit 150 degrees below Fahrenheit zero during most of the year, and could not be much warmer even in high summer. Luckily his hiking shoes were heavy, and so were his socks, or he'd be risking frost-bitten toes just standing there.

The vegetation was curious stuff; he found it hard to think of anything to compare it with. In texture it was a little like loosely woven sponge, the filament either gray, greenish or the chocolate brown he had noticed, and looking rather tough. Interwoven with these were more delicate filaments of a lighter, more vivid green, which here and there were gathered into small knots or clumps within holes formed by the spongy matrix.

He pulled at it experimentally. It tore readily, a little to his surprise, and the fragment of it in his hand promptly seemed to shrink, forming itself into a rough ball. Similar balls, of varying sizes, were scattered about him, as though detached by a wind.

Up close the sponge had a speckled appearance, because both kinds of filaments bore tiny fruits or bladders, he could not decide which. Those on the tough filament were black or brown like their parents and were about the size of B-B shot; those on the green strands were bigger and elongated, like small beans, but were quite trans-

parent. Suspecting water or some sap, Dolph stripped off a glove and tried to break one of those sacs with thumb and finger nail. But though its pellicle yielded, it would not break.

Water on second thought was unlikely, since it would freeze in the Martian night. But what then was in the clear little bladders?

He was distracted from the question by a sign of movement on his bare palm. Startled, he looked closer. The skin seemed to be crawling.

It was crawling. He was reminded at once of what had happened in his boyhood when he had picked up a wounded robin chick, and had afterward discovered that his hand was covered with mites, an incident which had divested him of all sentimentality toward birds forever. These were not mites, but they were some Martian equivalent. They were about a quarter of an inch long, looked quite like some species of nematode or roundworm, and there were thousands of them. And yes, here and there among them were genuinely mite-like creatures, black arthropods, scuttling among the nematodes, or settled quietly on the backs of their necks, feeding . . .

He kicked away the sponge around him in a hurry until he had exposed a patch of powdery red soil, and scrubbed both hands in a handful of it, cold or no cold. Though he probably had no reason to be afraid of these tiny spots of Martian animal life, he was not going to take any of it back into the crate with him—and hence back to Earth—if he

could possibly help it. At least, not loose on his person or in his clothing.

But he did want samples. The vegetation alone was a discovery worth the trip. The unmanned probe had brought back no life but a few unexciting species of bacteria, and some spore-like things, which had refused to germinate on Earth. This spongy stuff was evidently a kind of lichen—half fungus, half alga—highly developed to wring from the inhospitable soil, air and sunlight what little nutrient and energy they offered. Its tendency to break into balls when it reached a critical size, furthermore, meant that up on the surface it must travel with the winds when the summer air circulation set in—thus explaining the mysterious “wave of darkening” which swept down from the polar icecap when it melted, and explaining as well why the dark maria could never be permanently covered by the sandstorms. It was lichen, but it had adopted the spawning habit of the tumbleweed.

Where did it get water? Surely there wasn't enough water vapor in the air to be worth bothering with—certainly not enough to support the acres and acres of life about him and, by extension, over all the dark areas of the planet. After a moment's muzzlement the answer came to him. The fungal strands probably broke it chemically out of the sand, for every molecule of limonite carries with it, in chemical combination, three molecules of water. That way, the plant could get all its water

without ever touching or needing a drop of water in the liquid state. At high noon, some of those water molecules would break free at the urging of sunlight and scurry for new positions, carrying other essential chemicals with them by loose bonding rather than in any sort of conventional solution. Some Earthly desert plants, the xerophytes, had the rudiments of a similar system for using bound water; it was what occasionally made specimen cactuses in museum cases suddenly sprout after decades of apparent lifelessness—and what kept alive grains of wheat which, buried thousands of years ago with the Pharaohs, sometimes astonished biologists by germinating. Here on Mars it was not an oddity, however, but a basic mechanism of life.

Feeling a little dazed, Dolph carefully stuffed fragments of the sponge into four of his vials, scrubbing his hands again afterwards—and the outsides of the vials, too. If his guess was correct, at least some of the material would be alive when he got home.

After a last look at the sky he went back inside the crate, where he transferred samples from one of the vials onto several prepoured agar plates. He doubted that they would take hold, but there was no harm in trying. With his oxygen mask off he found the task, light though it was, a little tiring. A check with the barometer showed that his cabin pressure was down to an Earthly equivalent of eight thousand feet—doubtless due to losses through the airlock. Well, if Andean Indians could

live and do heavy labor at that altitude, so could he, he hoped, at least for a while.

And now what?

It might be worthwhile lifting ship and taking a look at some other spot. On the other hand, there was no reason to suppose than any other vegetated area would differ significantly from this one, despite its isolation. Searching for possible ruins, like mapping or any other form of protracted exploration, was out of the question—it was beyond his equipment and his available time. After all, this trip was essentially only a stunt, and it would be sensible not to forget it.

All the same, he could see no special reason why he should not levitate a mile or so above the desert—which would certainly put him above any possible mountains—and let the planet turn under him for a while, just to make a quick survey in the hope of seeing something interesting. If he stayed aloft only a few hours he could traverse as much as a sixth of the planet westward, crossing Syrtis Major and probably Isidis Regio too, and perhaps reaching the eastern marches of Aethiopia, where there was a chain of oases all far bigger than this one.

Well, after all, why not? He could spare four hours before he had to leave for home; that would even leave him a margin for error. He secured everything—quickly, though, because the afternoon was fading and he wanted to drift west in remaining sunlight, trusting to the long shadows to betray anything really striking on the surface. Keep-

ing this idea in mind, he fed power into the rig.

Nothing happened.

Alarmed, he checked the leads, but everything was tight. The coil was intact, too, and shorting the battery produced a nice, fat spark-shower.

Yet the crate simply refused to lift.

Baffled, Dolph set about running a component-by-component check, grimly doing his best to keep his breathing even and shallow and his hands steady. The shadowless semidusk outside was becoming slowly but steadily dimmer, and above all he did not want to be caught on Mars over night.

It did not, in fact, take him very long to find the trouble. It was in the one logically vulnerable spot in the system, and the one about which he could do precisely nothing: the 6BQ5 power tube. It was, without question, burned out.

Of course, he should have brought a spare; he realized that now. It wouldn't have taken up much space.

But he hadn't.

Almost any other failure in the rig, Dolph could have repaired. It was otherwise not much more complicated than a crystal radio. But this one was fatal. The tube had been brand new, and had tested out perfectly the day before he'd left Earth, but that was no comfort now. Once a tube goes, it is gone, regardless of age.

This one was dead, and that was that.

And Dolph was marooned.

A LITTLE DETECTION

Though it was small consolation to Dolph, he could reflect — and it looked like he might have plenty of time for that — that part of his trouble was rooted in the early discovery of the transistor, found before the vacuum tube — or “thermionic valve” — had had a chance to come of age. Even in its heyday, now a decade gone, tube design had been more of an art than a science, depending almost as much upon a feeling for shapes and flows as on calculations of the mean free paths of electrons. As a result, a well designed tube might function perfectly in any of a hundred uses for thousands of hours — or it might fail an hour after having passed its final tests at the factory, and not even its designer could tell the successes from the lemons. Dolph’s solitary and crucial 6BQ5 had evidently been a lemon.

But the real failure, he knew very well, had been in his own foresight.

Yet there was no time to be wasted in self-reproaches or in idle detective work. Dusk was falling fast, and the temperature even faster. At this rate it would be freezing outside by sunset. Yet, too, there would be no point in lurching about inside the packing crate in a panic. He could not afford the loss of a drop of water, a cubic centimeter of oxygen or an erg of energy in waste motion. He needed first of all to run an inventory of

what he had — and then to think about how he might best use it.

And it had to be a detailed inventory — right down to the last thread. He could depend upon Mars for nothing, this early. He could not even hope.

Oxygen first. He had started with five flasks, totaling 110 liters or 45 gallons at Earth-normal pressure, stored at 300 pounds per square inch. One flask was probably almost gone, and the drugstore gadget had no gauge to tell him how much was left. Undoubtedly his total store would last him the night, but he had to hope for much more time than that. He scribbled furiously on the walls of the crate.

Ideally, he might seal the crate well enough to keep the air pressure inside at about one half of one Earth atmosphere, using Mars’s own nitrogen to pressurize the room if he could rig a way to pump it in enough of a hurry. But if he did that, he would need an oxygen volume of 40 per cent — twice Earth’s — in order to keep up the necessary oxygen pressure of 160 mm. of mercury, and his supplies simply wouldn’t permit it, even over a short term. On the other hand, if he tried to maintain full Earth air pressure in the crate, he would need a lot of power, and that was in short supply too — no more than what remained in his battery.

No immediate solution was obvious. All right, shelve it for now.

Water: Possibly not a real worry yet. He had three 17.5 gallon drums of it — storage drums from the Civil Defense craze of 1962. The

drums were each 22¼" high and stacked one on another in one corner of the crate, leaving him four inches of headroom for unstacking them. Each had a plastic bag liner assembly with a spout which folded under its cover; one could be used as a commode by cutting the mouth of the liner and folding it around the top opening of the drum. When about seven-eighths full, the liner could be sealed with a wire tie — and saved, he thought with a grimace that left him no room to be squeamish, for fertilizer or half a dozen other easily imaginable uses, plus others that would doubtless occur to him if he lived long enough.

He was not foolish enough to believe that 52.5 gallons could be called a lot of water. In the desiccated airs of Mars he would have to consume a minimum of a gallon a day, not counting probably that much again lost by evaporation — probably being lost right now, right through the plastic liners. But there was life on Mars, and that meant there was water too. He thought that he might find enough to use in the three weeks to a month that the contents of the drums should give him.

Now, food! He had a small case of K rations, what the specifications advertised as a two-week's supply, which meant that it could be stretched as long as the water in the drums would. Thereafter, he would again have to see what he could find on Mars — and face the excellent chance that all the life here would prove poisonous to him.

He also had a small packet of agar-agar and a jar of Bovril which he had brought along as food for cultures of Martian microorganisms, but he was sure he would have no objections to beef aspic for himself instead — again, for so long as there was water to make it with. That might keep him alive another week. What else? Oh yes: six cans of evaporated milk, and two ounces of salt. And . . . one month's supply of multivitamin capsules, if he stretched it to the utmost. Where might he get more? That any life-form on Mars might contain any vitamin that he needed, let alone all of them, was close to impossible.

All right, shelve that too. He had to hope.

Power? The truck battery, possibly rechargeable. Surely something could be done about that. Something had to be done, for he would need power to keep up the air pressure, and probably also to generate oxygen by electrolysis of water if he could find water, and certainly to generate heat if he could think of no way to store heat during the day. The only other stored power he had with him was a small can of Sterno, which he did not dare even think of lighting until his oxygen problem could be made less acute. Nothing else was available but muscle power, which would not last long if Mars could not be made to refuel it.

His clothing, counting what he had on, consisted of three pairs of long, heavy wool socks; two T-shirts; two pairs of boxer shorts and one of athletic shorts; two flannel shirts;

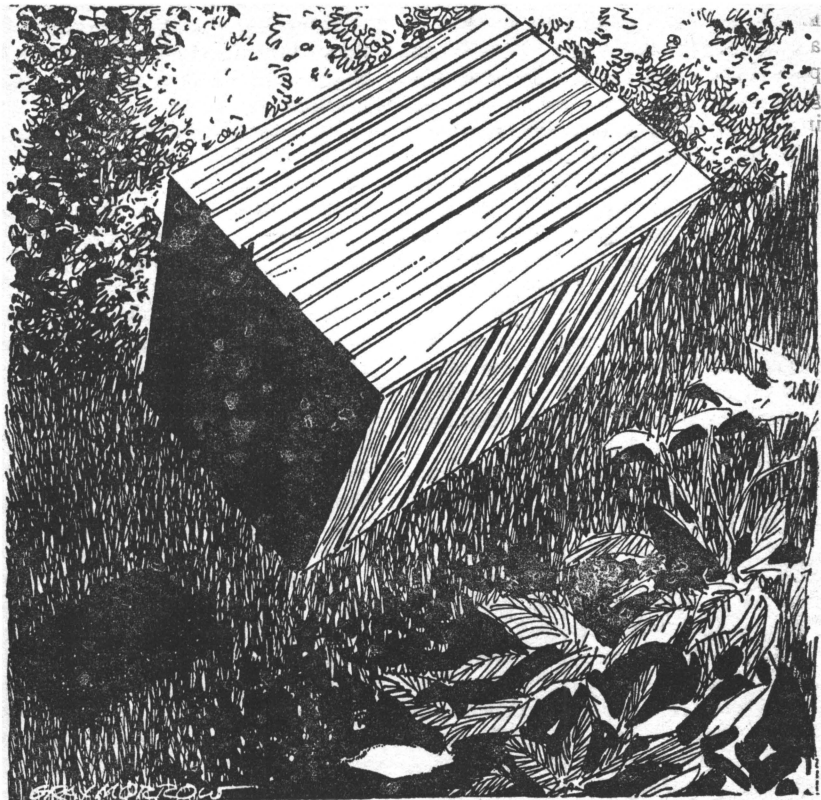
one pair of heavy slacks; a pair of hiker's shoes; a pair of heavy gloves; a racing driver's helmet liner and a pair of heavy, padded, tinted goggles; a thick jacket, and a voluminous wool muffler. Not bad in terms of the warmth needed, but he had to remember that all of it would wear rapidly on this harsh world — and rot rapidly, too, because he would be unable to wash any of it, let alone himself.



But he could patch. This thought moved him to add to this part of his inventory his blanket roll — two very ancient blankets, a torn sheet, a polyethylene garment-bag and the five feet of clothesline they were tied up with — and his belt, plus a spool of heavy-duty thread with a veritable whaler's needle stuck into it, an old single-edged razor blade, and the canvas floor covering of the crate. Oh yes, his Scout knife, too. It had an awl in it, which would pierce canvas or leather.

That seemed to cover tailoring and shoemaking. Nothing could be done now about the fact that he was totally ignorant of both trades. While the oxygen lasted, he would have to try to learn.

The notation of vitamins reminded him that he was going to have to be sick some of the time — or perhaps even much of the time. But he did not even look into his first-aid kit to know how inadequate it was. Aspirin, PVP-iodine, Band-Aids, about a dozen capsules of some antibiotic left over from an illness two years ago and hence probably halved in potency, a semi-squashed tube of anesthetic ointment; that was all. Were he to be seriously ill, he would die, and that would be that. In view of the immediacy of the oxygen problem, the medical one did not alarm him much, however. Though he was scared, he felt the basic strength of his youth, and in addition a reassuring doubt that any Martian germ could be a real menace to his Earthborn body.



Good thing he wasn't a girl, at least.

What about equipment — to build a pump, to charge the battery, to construct every possible needed device in the few minutes Mars would probably leave him between noticing the need and finishing the machine? Nothing that he saw in the cabin was reassuring, but he noted every item on the wall all the same: One table; one breadboard rig(with dead tube), a small soldering iron, with solder and flux (if

there would be power for it); six Ehrlenmeyer flasks, once intended for specimens; six feet of glass tubing, in three 24" lengths; a blow-pipe; a glass file; twin tubes of epoxy glue; a small tripod; a roll of friction tape; a coil of copper wire, length unknown, but obviously no more than five feet and probably less; and *mirabile dictu*, an axe, newly sharpened. In addition — for though they were less obvious, they too were tools — he had two pencils, a ball-point pen, a drawing

compass, a protractor, a pocket compass, a wristwatch, a pair of binoculars, two star charts, an ephemeris and the Pic du Midi map of Mars (the most recent one, revised from the photographs sent back by the unmanned probes).

After a moment's thought, he added to the list of tools a sub-class for Chemicals, but it did not consume much space: the salt, the agar, a small box of lye, six ounces of absolute alcohol and four of formalin. What about his mess kit, and the canteen and canvas sling? Well, call those tools, too. At least the kit contained a spoon with fork prongs and a cutting edge.

He looked slowly around the cabin, which he had now to begin to think of as his home. He could see nothing that he had missed listing. That meant it was time to empty his pockets, which he did onto the table which bore the dead rig.

When he was through, he had a bandanna; an extra pair of rawhide shoelaces; a pocket notebook; a few loose coins (to call home with?); his matches (in, ironically, a waterproof case); his wallet, containing four dollars and assorted cards (plus a snapshot of Nanette in the patented secret compartment); a key-ring on a snake chain with eleven keys on it, all of them now as useless as six of them had always been mysterious; and finally, his class ring (which he had almost given to Nanette, and might just as well have, for all the good it was likely to do him on Mars).

And that was absolutely all. No, not quite. There were eight small

paper-clips and one middle-sized one marking pages in the ephemeris; and thrust into the wall, holding up the charts and the Pic du Midi map, fourteen push-pins.

No matter how he looked at it all, it was not much of a survival kit. For anything else, he would have to depend upon Mars — and upon luck, who had abruptly already stopped smiling on him.

What now? Think!

But he could think of nothing, except that he was suddenly thirsty.

When the goddess of luck stops smiling, she is often likely to be thorough. Although Dolph had no way of knowing it, when she had run out on him on Mars, she had simultaneously deserted him forty-eight million miles away.

Nanette had noticed that the tree-house was missing, on the very morning of its departure.

Though she had taken sporadic care to disguise it around Dolph, Nanette's mind was quick as well as gifted, and relentlessly logical as only the feminine mind can be without formal training. In addition, she had a strong visual imagination — so powerful, in fact, that she was still wavering between wanting to be a painter, her first dream, and to be a scientist, a notion sparked by Dolph — and that midnight trip into the silent skies in Dolph's first test crate had put her emotions into a secret ferment she hadn't yet admitted.

It would have taken a dull brain indeed to have failed to respond to the moonlit wonders of that

silent ascent, and since she already knew in general knowledge the vastness of the problem Dolph had been nibbling at, she had not been slow to imagine what an audacious mind might do with a solution for it — a solution that Dolph obviously now had, at least in large part. If anti-gravity was achievable at all, ninety per cent of the work was done. Everything else was technicalities, to be worked out in detail by any dim-witted engineer, or maybe even by a household electrician.

Anw now the tree house was gone — and not a footprint below it to show that it had been carried any place else on Earth. It had been an elaborate and heavy tree house; it couldn't possibly have been just wafted away —

— unless, of course, it had done precisely and only that. It could not have vanished in any other way *but* that.

She questioned Dolph's mother cautiously. That was difficult, for the two women liked each other, and it was impossible for Nanette to disguise the fact that she was troubled. Luckily, Dolph's cover story was good enough to give her reason to be troubled. Had he really gone camping without even letting her know he was going, she would have had good reason to be furious, and Mrs. Haertel drew that conclusion and commiserated with her on male thoughtlessness. Nanette withdraw unscathed but shaky, and now furious indeed, though for quite different reasons.

Given the additional facts in her

possession, she saw at once that the cover story was full of holes, and only a little more elementary detective work among the tools, scraps, shavings and last-minute discards that Dolph had left was enough to confirm the conclusion she had been trying all morning not to have to draw.

She climbed into the loft-space of the garage and hunkered down in the only part of it that had a floor, a dark and filthy corner where Dolph — years earlier, before they had met — had abortively kept pigeons, all of which had died of some fungus disease Mrs. Haertel had said was dangerous to people, too.

"The bum," Nanette said bitterly. "That steaming, no-good, sneaky, runaway bum."

She was not at all surprised to find herself crying. She did a thorough job of it, though silently enough so that someone passing the garage would have heard from the abandoned cote only an occasional, ghostly coo. When it was over, half an hour later, she felt quite washed out — still furious, to be sure, but ready to cope with male perfidy on any scale the situation required. Wiping her nose on the inadequate tail of her skirt, she crunched back down the unsafe stairs to examine, first, Dolph's work-bench, and then the abandoned test crate.

"The bum," she told the crate.

"I'll show *him*," she said, poking at half a bucket of glass-hard pitch.

"Run out on me, will he," she growled at an uncrumpled wiring diagram from the waste can.

1. "And besides," she said to last year's ephemeris, "he's sure to be in trouble."

2. With an unexpected and uncontrollably loud snuffle, Nanette strode toward home in search of a soldering iron, constructing in her head as she went the rudiments of a cover story for herself. Though she had never before needed a really good one, she was grimly confident that she could make a better job of it than Dolph had. Constructing cover stories and passing them off with a perfectly bland countenance is another of the instinctive feminine arts for which no practice is needed (though sometimes it helps).

It was not Nanette's fault that this story — for her, for Dolph and for all the world — needed to be longer, wilder and more portentous than any told since the Viking longboats groped toward an unknown Greenland. After all, she was only trying to nail down her man, with the same weapons that had served woman beside the brooks of Swanscombe in 250,000 B.C.

"You in-ter-plan-et-ary hobo," she muttered across 48 million miles of storming space. "I'll show you."

V

MORNING ON MARS

Dolph awoke slowly, stiff with cold and from the boards under his blankets. His mouth was parched, his lips cracked, his lungs wheezing. He felt half suffocated; and when he sat up, with a great start of alarm, he became so dizzy

that he fell back with a gasp, wondering where he was and what was wrong with him.

Then he remembered.

Without sitting up, he looked about cautiously. A hard beam of bluish sunlight, as sharp and merciless as a laser ray, struck horizontally across the cabin from the port-hole but did not seem to reflect off anything; the rest of the enclosure was as dim as a cave. He tasted his dry lips with a swollen tongue, which made him cough, and at once he became conscious of being imbedded in an enormous silence. Even the cough sounded remote and feeble in his own ears, and when the silence flowed back it was as enormous as the bottom of the sea. Now he realized what had awakened him: a non-noise — the end of the last hiss of his first oxygen bottle.

He struggled to his feet. The dizziness returned, but it was not as severe this time, and slowly passed. He wondered if he should worry about it, but he was almost certain that it was an effect of gravity — after all, he weighed only 48 pounds here, and it would take his heart and blood vessels time to get used to the lightened load.

Oxygen was what counted now. He could allow time for nothing else until that need was met. And he had to face the fact that he would have to consume a good deal to provide for the possibility of more. He cracked open the second flask and got to work.

First of all he ate, and then, from the traces of fat left in the K-ration container and a few crystals of lye,

he made a weak soap solution. A small loop of wire gave him a passable bubble-pipe, and with the floating bubbles he had no trouble in locating three leaks in the walls of his cabin, two of them large enough to be critical. He marked them. There was bound to be minor seepage too, but he could worry about that later, when the interior pressure was high enough to make detecting it possible.

Next, an electric motor. That was a simple enough proposition, requiring only two bits of metal and some wire, plus a frame which he delayed building until he could be absolutely sure of how he wanted to use the machine. He was already sure that the motor itself was too small, no matter how he would want to use it; but it was as big as he dared to build it with what he had on hand, and that would have to be that.

For now, he wanted it as the heart of a pump, of a simple design he remembered seeing once in an advertisement in a technical magazine. It was a pump that would never get wet, no matter what it pumped, because it consisted of nothing but two rollers continuously squeezing a few inches of soft rubber tubing. The input end would go through the largest of his leaks to the Martian atmosphere; the output would open into the cabin.

But what was he going to do for rollers? That was easy — two brief lengths of glass tubing, fused onto nails as axles with the aid of the Sterno can and the blowpipe. But he had to burn up the oxygen even

more to get the Sterno to burn at all, and even so, his air was almost pure poison by the time the operation was done. At home it would not have cost him half an hour. Here, it was as hard work as heaving coal.

At last, however, the motor was connected to the battery, and humming fairly smoothly. The little poot-poots of air that came out of it could hardly be felt, but he could only hope that they would add up to a sizeable increase in pressure before too long. He had used the Sterno heat simultaneously to soften a gob of pitch, with which he now closed the remaining leaks in the hull. Then, after five minutes of rest — it was not nearly enough — he valved the oxygen back down to a trickle.

While he rested, he became conscious of a kind of whispering, which at first he could not identify. Then he thought it might be wind, although such a thing seemed impossible in the near-vacuum outside. Or was it? After all, many an astronomer had seen sandstorms sweeping Mars — seen them, and often cursed them for obscuring the view at a crucial opposition. Dolph got up and peered out.

It was wind, all right. Gentle, almost imperceptible waves were moving along the surface of the ground-clinging vegetation, which as he watched became obscured by a faint haze, as though some invisible housekeeper was dusting them.

After only a few moments, the whispering had become a sighing, and then the sighing developed a

soft but definite whistling edge around the packing crate. The haze roze, and the far wall of the crater became dim. Soon it had vanished completely, and the air had become quite dark. Though it was still obviously day, there was no longer any direct sunlight visible — it was as though the sky had become overcast. For a wild moment, Dolph wondered if it were going to rain.

But of course it didn't. The air simply continued to become darker with flying dust and fine sand. It was a good thing that his pump design didn't allow any access of the air to its moving parts, for the machine was far too fragile to stand much abrasion. As it was, he'd do well to slap some kind of filter over its input hole — and change the filter daily, if this kind of flurry happened every morning.

If this was just a part of a general sandstorm, of course, the adventure was over. He would be buried, and that would be that.

In half an hour, however, the whistling began to abate, and the day began to seem lighter once more. By the end of an hour, the crater was as still and brilliant as it had ever been; the thin air couldn't carry even impalpable dust long without any current to keep it in motion. The whole thing, Dolph supposed, was just a local gust, probably caused by the heating of the valley when the sunlight struck it after the Hyperboreal night.

He hoped so; for if the little storm were a regular occurrence, he could use it; in fact, it would solve one of his most pressing problems —

the problem of how to keep his battery charged. There was power for the taking out there. All he had to do was build a small generator — a slightly larger version of his motor, with a thoroughly hammered piece of soft iron for a rotor, would do nicely — and a windmill. He could probably cut the sails for the windmill from his canvas. The stuff was rather heavy for the thin air, but on the other hand the gusts seemed to have plenty of energy behind them. Only 'experiment would decide what the best sail design would be, though.

His watch said that it was now near noon; the sun didn't agree. The disagreement would grow as the slightly longer Martain day expanded, and as more days followed. He could of course open the back of the watch and retard the mechanism's governor as far as it would go, but he doubted that it would prove to be enough. It would be better to keep Martian time, approximately, and use the watch only for timing short operations, as the need arose . . . and not risk exposing the watch's innards to the dryness and the dust. Its sealed interior probably still preserved something quite close to an Earth-normal atmosphere, and he decided against sacrificing that for an experiment in collimation which was probably too delicate to come off anyway.

But the reminder of noon reminded him also that at home he would be coming up on lunch time. Here on Mars, he would have to give it another title: No-Lunch

time, or perhaps some title that didn't mention food at all. Medieval man, after all, had gotten along handily on two meals a day, and animals — carnivores, anyhow — only had to be fed once. Until further notice, he was going to have to be an animal. All the same, if he had, say, a stack of blueberry pancakes about seven inches high, and a pitcher of cold buttermilk, and . . .

No more of *that* nonsense, he told himself grimly. You get six ounces of water — and then back to work.

What was next? Potentially he had air pressure; and even more potentially, he had power. But he still did not have oxygen — only a means of conserving it slightly, not of replenishing it. He had to have a source.

Was the clear fluid in the Martian plants water — or something that was mostly water? If so, that would solve his oxygen problem too, if he kept busy enough, for he could always crack it by electrolysis — and burn the hydrogen produced after the Sterno ran out, if he could figure out a way to store the hydrogen. He seriously doubted that he could, for the universe's lightest gas is elusive stuff even under Earth-normal pressures, and he certainly couldn't hope to pump it successfully through rubber tubing — you might as well hope to pump water through tubing made of sponge.

He shook his head savagely. Hydrogen wasn't his problem. The thinness and impoverishment of the air was blurring his thinking — that,

and the fact that he was hungry, though as yet the hunger was probably mostly in his imagination. Oxygen was what he needed — not hydrogen, oxygen!

He opened one of his specimen bottles cautiously and looked at the ambiguous plants inside it. They did not seem much withered; well, maybe the denser, damper air inside the cabin was a feast to them. The little transparent sacs were stiff and glistening, as though they were nearly ready to burst. How to tell if that stuff was water?

He popped one experimentally. To his intense disappointment, nothing came out of it — nothing at all. Inside it was bone dry. He popped another, with the same result. If the sacs didn't store sap, then what could they be for?

While he was puzzling about that, he pinched another sac, which promptly confused him by spurting cold liquid into his face, in a fine spray which dried instantly and left him feeling sticky and taut, as though he had just dried off after coming out of the ocean. No doubt about that one — that had been sap of some sort, containing salts in solution, and probably sugars, too. But what was the solvent?

He still could think of no simple chemical test which might answer this question. Yet, after all, what other answer could there be? There is only one universal solvent — or at least, only one which is stable at the temperature ranges prevalent on Mars. On Jupiter, liquid ammonia might do nicely — but luckily, he wasn't on Jupiter. Mars was

quite bad enough. It had to be water. It just couldn't be anything else.

What about the substances that were dissolved in it? They might well be poisonous. He didn't dare take the chance that they weren't — at least, not yet, not until his food ran out. He would have to distill the sap after he collected it — more heat needed for that, but perhaps not heat which would consume oxygen; he might power a still from the sun, with an arrangement of burning glasses and mirrors. Come to think of it, a simple mirror arrangement might help warm the cabin during the day, too.

Speaking of the sun, what had happened to it? The cabin was getting dark again. Automatically he looked at his watch: 4:38. He had been on Mars just a little past one full Earth day. It would not be dusk yet up on the tilted plateau — only mid-afternoon — but the floor of the oasis would get no more direct sunlight today, and the temperature would already be dropping. Would there be another brief standstill shortly after full dark? Probably — but with luck he would sleep through it.

With luck he would sleep through a great deal more than that. In general, the less activity, the better, beyond what was absolutely necessary to keep himself alive, until —

Until what?

He discovered that he did not know. Rescue was out of the question; just to begin with, nobody

knew where he was. He supposed it would be possible, once his wind-mill-generator was set up, to build a spark-gap radio transmitter and to make it heard, for he remembered having read somewhere that the amount of power required for effective interplanetary radio was astonishingly small. But that would do him precisely no good at all, for a spark-gap transmitter can send nothing but bursts of noise — dots and dashes, long noises and short ones — and he did not know any code, Morse or otherwise, except, ironically, . . . - - - . . . for "help!" and . . . - from the Beethoven Fifth Symphony, which his father somehow knew was Morse for "v" — also useless.

In fact, the spark would do him no good until the first manned formal expedition to Mars was actually in the sky above him. Then he could use it to draw attention to himself, and, come to think of it, the expedition could triangulate on the signal and locate him precisely. Until then, he had many better uses for electricity than producing arbitrarily patterned bursts of radio noise.

And the first manned formal expedition to Mars was a long way off yet — a *long* way off. At the thought, he sat down on the floor and began to batter one fist slowly, mechanically into the palm of the other hand. Up until now, when he had considered the matter of survival of all, except in the minute-to-minute basis of actually working at it, he had thought in terms of months. But survival *and* rescue?

That was going to be a matter of years . . . and perhaps a matter of decades.

No stretching of rations would carry him through that. If he lived at all, he was going to have to live off the land — off the most alien, the most bitter, the most inhospitable land ever to feel the impact of a human foot.

If only he had thought to bring a spare tube — the *only* component in the breadboard rig whose failure could not be compensated for by any sort of improvisation! If only, in general — since in fairness to himself he would not have asked anyone's forethought to be quite so specific — it had occurred to him that *something*, no matter what, might happen to make his stay longer than his plans had called for! There were twenty small articles he might have brought with him, all without overloading his craft in the least, that would have increased his chances of survival many times over twenty-fold.

But it was too late now. He was on Mars for ten years to come, and quite possibly for life.

Suddenly he realized that it was pitch black in the crate. Where had the day gone? He hadn't accomplished a fraction of what needed to be done.

In the darkness he could hear his air-pump running. For a moment the sound was obscurely comforting — at least he had gotten that much done — until he noticed that the pump's cycle seemed to have developed a slight irregularity; he'd have to check that, first thing

in the morning. Quite possibly there was some grit lodged somewhere in the tubing which was throwing the thing off stride. If the obstruction got any bigger it might break one of the glass rollers.

In the meantime, through the cold blackness of the Martian night it whispered to him steadily:

Forlife forlife forlife forlife forlife forlife forlife . . .

VI

EVENING ON MARS

It was not strictly true, of course, that no one knew where Dolph was. But for all the good it did him — or was going to do him in the foreseeable future — it might just as well have been true.

Nanette now knew where he was with some specificity. A discarded map of Mars torn out of a book — discarded apparently because it was a Flagstaff map, out of an observatory where astronomers had been letting their imaginations abet their eyes about the red planet ever since the days of Lowell — a scribbled ellipse enclosed the Syrtis Major; and common sense told her that Dolph would most likely have stuck to that planned landing area, simply because so large a green spot, so near the equator, would be almost guaranteed to be the most livable area on Mars, particularly in high summer. That the marked area was at least as big as Alaska did not daunt her at all, since it never occurred to her. Even more than Dolph — probably be-

cause she was younger — her thought processes were a mixture of sheer brass, naive and hence astounding ingenuity, and glorious inattention to niggling but crucial details which would have scared any adult green — any adult, that is, who like most could no longer recall the contradictions that had made up his own brain as a teen-ager.

Nanette also knew, even more specifically, how Dolph had gotten where he was, and how she was going to get there after him. On this latter count, quite a bit of the work had already been done for her, in the form of Dolph's first flying model — the one he had taken her aloft in, thus putting the essence of his secret in her hands — which still stood on the floor of the garage. With the aid of the wiring diagrams she had been able to check the rig — which, being the original, was even simpler than the one which had actually taken Dolph away — and, with her soldering iron, to repair the few places in the circuit Dolph's voltmeter showed had failed, or might fail under a work load. The bucket of pitch had suggested to her the necessity of caulking her proposed craft (she might, it must be confessed, not have thought of it without some such hint), and in general, once she knew the category in which she needed to be thinking, other clues, hints and helps popped out at her not only from all over the garage, but from memory and from reading, in bewildering profusion.

She could not take advantage of all of them. For one thing, she was

dead certain that she was in a hurry — and even under normal circumstances she was not much inclined to be patient. Second, she had not accumulated any money for the venture, and even at the best would have had fewer sources to call upon than Dolph had had. Finally — and most crucially — she did not think of everything.

But in one major respect she kept her head. She left a note. It read:

Dear Mom and Dad, and Mr. & Mrs. Haertel,

You won't believe this but, you simply must, because it's absolutely true. Dolph has not gone camping. He has gone to Mars, and I have gone after him.

I know how this sounds but maybe if we do not come back for a while and you don't find us anywhere else you may think of it again. We haven't eloped or run away or anything stupid like that. It's just that Dolph has discovered some kind of anti-gravity which is *very* simple to build and run. He took me for a short run in it and then he built a sort of spaceship in his tree house and went to Mars in it on a junket. I know he didn't plan to stay long because he didn't take enough supplies and things with him, but he's not back yet and I have to go because he probably needs help.

He marked a place called Syrtis Major on a map of Mars and I'm pretty sure he's stuck somewhere there, so that's where I'm going too. I will

bring him back if everything goes right. If it doesn't then we really will be in a pickle, but please don't worry.

Love and things,
Nanette

She carefully enclosed the map in the envelope — but none of Dolph's wiring diagrams, or his calculations, or his notes, or anything else that might have helped anyone to rediscover Dolph's anti-gravity, let alone put it immediately to useful work. All these she packed neatly into a manila envelope for Dolph, on the chance — which she thought good — that he might have left some one of them behind by accident, and would now be needing it.

Then she heaved and tugged her own small vessel onto an old sled, hauled it out of the garage into the road and took off — in darkness, as Dolph had gone. With her went the priceless and useless envelope of paper — useless to Dolph, and certainly to her; and priceless because, left on Earth, they would have been Dolph's and Nanette's last hope of rescue. The darkness swallowed her with its usual indifference, leaving behind only the heart-stopping, icy flame of a summer night in Iowa, where hardly anyone ever looks up at the eternal stars except the young who love them.

As for Dolph, he was making a wine press, and finding it a harder job than his preliminary sketches had made it seem. Had

he had nothing but grapes to think about, he would have given it up at once; but it was his own life he was trying to squeeze.

He had yet to discover what else besides water was in the sap-sacs of the tumble-lichens; but when the fiery, itching dryness of his mouth, throat and nose in the mornings was complemented by nosebleeds and a hacking cough, he realized belatedly that he had to keep his cabin air moist, or die of dehydration of the respiratory system. A wick of torn cloth dipped into a Petri dish seemed the logical answer to that — and yet he hated to use his bottled water for any purpose besides actually drinking it.

The obvious solution was to use sap squeezed out of the plants. There was a dividend of sorts to be gained in the process, too. In the course of aimlessly popping the apparently empty sacs and wondering what they contained, and what they were good for if the answer was "nothing," he had thought to pop one near a match-flame. The match had produced a brief, tiny, but quite definite increase in brightness. The "empty" sacs, in short, contained oxygen—perhaps not the pure stuff, but close to it.

Both discoveries made sense. There was not enough water vapor or oxygen in the Martian atmosphere to sustain a plant so much like an Earthly one as this was. The tumble-lichen obviously had to crack both out of the basic limonite sands in which it grew. And to maintain sufficient vapor pressure and oxygen tension to support life in its

cells, it had to maintain both inside itself—in that part of the environment the famous physiologist Claude Bernard had called the *milieu interieur*—since both were denied it on the outside.

Hence if Dolph were to squeeze water out of the plants inside his cabin, he would pick up some oxygen too. Probably no more than a small fraction of what he needed, but every extra molecule was a gain. The cake that was left over after the pressing operation could be piled outside the packing crate, against the time when he might need it for bedding, for insulation, for fertilizer—he really had no idea what it might eventually be good for. He did already know, however, that for him the first law of survival was *Save it*—no matter what “it” might be. (And many New Englanders might have told him the second and third laws, which were *Use it up* and *Make it do*; but he had in fact already arrived at them, although he hadn’t put them to himself quite so tersely.)

When the wine press was completed, it looked quite like a bellows-frame without its collapsible sides (or what a health-food addict would have called a juicer). The next step he had planned was to begin to make a still from some of his available glassware, while he still had enough oxygen to insure finishing the job—and before time had insured that he would need still more oxygen to complete it, by providing accidents to break some of the glassware.

But the day was already waning

—he had long since given up really believing that Martian days were actually longer than Earth days—and he did not want to break off making the still in the middle. Instead, it seemed like a useful idea to give the press a try. That would take him outside to gather tumble-lichens. He had not been outside for two days, and needed the exercise before he became both too stiff and too weak to move. The cramped quarters, the cold nights and the low gravity were conspiring to rob him of strength.

He attached to his belt a length of rope to bale up the plants with, donned his heavy clothes and his respirator, and crawled out onto the powdery sands. He was just in time for the evening dust-up, which nearly froze him before he could get into the lee of his ship, but it was quickly over and seemed to have done him no permanent damage. He resolved, nevertheless, to check on how close dusk might be before venturing outside again; there would be no harvesting for him this evening.

Before starting back, he indulged a glance at the sky.

It was quite black at the zenith and almost all the way to the horizons, though there was a remaining glow of steel blue along the edge of the crater behind which the small sun had set. The stars were brilliant, and there seemed to be thousands of them, many more than had ever been visible in the Iowa skies even during the best conditions of seeing. He doubted that Mars would ever allow him the time to relearn to

pick out the constellations, although their shapes could not be much changed here.

All the same, there were two unusual objects in the sky right now. One was a dim spark of light skimming over the northern edge of the crater. It had to be one of the two satellites—nothing else in the Martian sky could move visibly—and of them, the choice was probably Deimos, the larger and farther out of the two; he was almost surely too far south on the planet to be able to see Phobos, even from up on the plateau. Even Deimos was only a dim spark, very far removed indeed from the low-hanging, looming Deimos of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Mars. Had it not been moving, he would have been unable to pick it out from many stare more brilliant.

But the other unusual object was something about which there could be no argument, though Dolph had never seen it before in just this way. It was a star as brilliant as Rigel or Sirius, and—though none of the Martian stars twinkled, for the atmosphere was far too thin for that—with a steady intensity which marked it as not a star at all, but a planet. Furthermore, though it glared as blue-white as any of the stellar giants, there was also a greenness about its light shared by no star Dolph had ever seen, then or now.

Looking up at it, Dolph felt himself slowly drowning in an invisible sea of homesickness. He would not have believed it possible that anyone could feel his whole heart and soul so drawn toward what seemed

to be no more than a point of light . . . brilliant and beautiful, to be sure, but only one among so many.

Then the Earth went out.

For a moment he thought his eyes had failed him, and brushed one glove across his goggles. In the next, a sudden shocking suspicion of disaster hit him, one of those nightmares with which everyone has lived since Hiroshima. But if the Earth had blown up, then—

He was left no more time for guessing, for other stars around where the Earth had been were going out too—and then, just for a second, there flashed in the black space near the zenith a sort of lozenge of reddish-yellow light, like one side of a falling box.

It was a falling box, which had briefly caught the last of the sunlight before sinking below the lip of the crater. Now he could no longer judge its fall except by the spreading area of starlessness above him. It was—it had to be, there was no other possibility—another crate like his own. It was heading straight down for him, and it was coming far too fast.

He knew that it would do him no good to run. He might just as well die under it, as be in the clear if it were going to smash his own home. He stood rooted to the freezing ground, watching.

The area of blackness grew. Then suddenly it seemed to stop growing for a moment, and veer off to the northwest. In the next instant, it was no longer between him and the stars, and was lost in the night.

Then there was nothing.

Had he imagined the whole thing? He almost hoped so. He had already guessed what crate the new one had to be—for surely any real attempt at rescuing him would have equipped itself with something bigger, not smaller, than his—and he also had a horrified suspicion as to who might be in it. Better a moment of nightmare, brought about by loneliness and oxygen starvation, than that his guesses should turn out to be right!

A long, rending smash tore through the blackness, long seconds after the count-down in his unconscious mind had told him to expect it. Its extraordinary loudness in the tenuous air told him that it must be very close. Snarling into his respirator fragments of phrases his father would have whaled him for—though that was probably where they had come from, on some remote occasion when the boy was supposed to be safely out of earshot—Dolph began to run.

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FEODAR'S BOX

by ROBERT E. LORY

When Feodar was lost, it was an accident. But when he was found again — it was a total disaster!

The thick-spectacled man was unimpressive to look at. He was in his fifties, small, slight of build; his appearance could be described as unkempt. Yet when he showed up suddenly in Room 109 carrying a little black box, eyelids clicked open and voices halted in midsentence.

The reaction was justified. Nobody was supposed to know about Room 109 — nobody, at least, who wasn't specifically cleared by the Prime Minister. And those cleared were very few and very well known to each other.

And nobody in Room 109 knew the slight, unkempt man with the little black box.

Chief secret agent Chlebnik sprang into action. Springing wasn't easy for Chlebnik—he weighed two

hundred seventy-seven pounds. Nonetheless, he jumped from his chair, directed two office workers to latch onto the uninvited newcomer and, seeing his order accomplished, quickly passed through the three doors and dim hallway to Room 109-J, the existence of which was known only to himself, Palakov and the Prime Minister.

When he swung open the door to Palakov's office, Chlebnik was surprised to see his superior had a visitor.

The visitor's figure contrasted sharply to that of Palakov, whose rolls of fat made even Chlebnik look lean.

The visitor was a slight, unkempt man wearing thick spectacles and holding a little black box.

Steel-black eyes greeted Chlebnik. "How do you explain *this*?" Palakov said icily.

Chlebnik did his best. "But . . . but I left this man in 109, well guarded. I came here to report his presence to you."

"And he reached here before you? How is that possible? And how did he get into 109 in the first place? How did he get past the locks, the outside guards, the inside guards?"

Difficult questions. But Chlebnik had answered difficult questions before. At the university he'd been an accomplished practitioner in language, logic, debate and dialectic. But it seemed impossible to handle Palakov's questions in terms of Capitalistic Oppression of the Masses. So Chlebnik said nothing and simply stared at the little man with the box in his hand.

"Perhaps—if I might attempt an explanation?" the little man offered timidly.

"By all means, attempt." Palakov directed his visitors to chairs with a gesture of his fleshy hand.

The little man cleared his throat. "The loyal party member and servant of the state who sits before you is named Feodar Rodumetoff. In recent years I've been under assignment to the Prime Minister himself, working on a special device—this box, which—"

"One moment," Palakov broke in. "Rodumetoff, you say? Strange, I recall nothing of you." He motioned Chlebnik to a large steel filing cabinet across the room.

"I assure you, Feodar Rodumetoff is the only name by which I've been

known since birth. But perhaps you don't recognize me because you're new here."

"New?" Palakov reared back at the use of the word in connection with his term of office. After all, he'd held this post five years—a long tenure considering the political setbacks his country's statesmen were often exposed to. "New?"

"What I mean is, you weren't here when I last was—when I received the assignment from Premier Stalin and—"

He was interrupted at the same instant by both listeners. "Stalin?"

Beads of sweat covered Palakov's face. "Exactly when did you receive this . . . assignment from—Premier Stalin?"

While Feodar considered the question, Chlebnik fingered frantically through the files.

"Directly after the war, I believe. At that time I was working on—" He adjusted his glasses and surveyed Palakov warily through the thick lenses—"on another project. I should hazard a guess that it was around 1946 or 1947. Sometime around there, I'm sure."

"And you've been working in isolation since then?"

"Rodumetoff, Feodar!" Chlebnik roared triumphantly, pulling a large blue card from the files and laying it on Palakov's desk.

"Isolation? Well, you might call it that, I don't suppose I did get out of my workshop too often."

Palakov looked up from the card. "But what about the radio, *Pravda*, *Izvestiya*?"

"No time for that sort of thing."

My subscriptions to the scientific journals even lapsed. The immediate work at hand occupied my mind entirely."

Palakov looked back at the blue card and reread the statement that Feodar Rodumetoff had been executed for the good of the state in one or another of the purges that followed discovery of Stalin's treasonous activities. Thinking to himself that somebody was going to pay heavily for such stupidity, he smiled good-naturedly at Feodar.

"Well, then, Comrade Rodumetoff. I trust that so much time dedicated to our people's good has been fruitfully employed?"

"Indeed yes," Feodar said enthusiastically, waving the little box. "This device will *revolutionize*—" he noticed the startled faces of Palakov and Chlebnik — "er, will be of tremendous value in both war and espionage."

"And just what does it do?" Palakov asked.

In answer, Feodar turned a knob on the top of the box. A slight humming sound began, and then disappeared.

So did Feodar Rodumetoff.

"God!" Chlebnik exclaimed.

"Comrade *Chlebnik!*" Palakov said sternly.

"Excuse it, comrade, a slip of the tongue."

The telephone rang then. Palakov answered, listened and placed the receiver back on the hook slowly. His face went white.

"That," he said, "—that was Feodar Rodumetoff, calling from *your office*."

Chlebnik had been sent back to his duties in Room 109. In 109-J Palakov listened in fascination as Feodar explained the workings of the miraculous box, he held securely in his hands.

"So you see—a slot and two knobs. The holder of the box becomes invisible if he inserts his finger in the slot. When this knob is turned, your body dematerializes and can pass easily through solid structures—walls, for instance. To materialize again, you simply turn this second knob."

"Unbelievable! The possibilities of the thing are astounding," Palakov said, his jowls suddenly frowning. "Tell me, who else knows of your project?"

Feodar smiled proudly. "No one. I worked quite alone. It was all very secret and, besides that, there are very few with technical knowledge of the sort necessary to aid in the box's construction."

"And where are the other models? I'm rather concerned for their safety."

"There are none. This is the only one of its kind."

"The plans for it, then—where are they?"

"Here," said Feodar, tapping his forehead. "Adequately safe from theft."

"Excellent. In that case, if you'll hand that box over to me, I'll keep it here under strict security. And now, comrade, leave your address with Chlebnik and return home until you get word from me. It will be soon, I assure you."

True to his word, immediately af-

ter Feodar left the office, Palakov telephoned orders to Chlebnik.

"Our records show him as dead. Aside from considering the danger to the state that the man represents, we must keep our records accurate," he told his subordinate.

Palakov then made a second call and arranged for Chlebnik's liquidation. He had to be removed, of course—he knew about the box.

The box. Palakov touched it admiringly with his meaty right hand. "The possibilities are astounding," he'd told Feodar. And they were. Soldiers carrying the box would be invincible. Bullets would go right through them, harming nothing. An entire city equipped with the device could withstand even atomic attack. And espionage. Where couldn't spies go, what couldn't they do? What possibilities! Naturally the device would have to be tested thoroughly.

He drew his poised finger back quickly and looked self-consciously over his shoulder.

Well, why not? he asked himself. *Somebody* had to do the testing. The pudgy finger poised again and entered the slot. He was invisible.

He turned the first knob. He was dematerialized.

Weightless, nothingness—what a wonderful feeling! Strange, he almost thought he'd sink through the floor. But of course—weightless, he had nothing for gravity to act upon. But he could direct his body, he found. There, through the wall—actually *through a wall!* And another one.

He was out in 109 now. Chlebnik

sat dumbly happy at his desk. Poor Chlebnik, soon to be a state sacrifice. Ah, well—*ah!* Now, how was it Palakov never noticed that shapeless file clerk before?

He chuckled. A little pinch, perhaps? Surely, what was a little pinch between comrades? There.

No reaction?

Of course. He was dematerialized completely. He'd have to give the second knob a little turn.

Odd. The second knob was just to the left of—

When he realized there was no longer a second knob, Palakov screamed. Of course, nobody could hear him.

In his dusty workshop, Feodar Rodumetoff took a small knob from his pocket and screwed it in the top of one of the sixty boxes in neat rows on a long lab table.

Admiring the completed device, he checked to make sure he'd forgotten nothing. Yes, he'd given Chlebnik an incorrect address. Yes, he'd sent the coded message to Norway that "P" was no longer a problem. Yes, he'd stolen the blue identification card that labeled him dead.

Dead, was he? How well he remembered the night they tried! How lucky he was that he'd perfected the first working model of his invention. He'd made up his mind then and there how he'd get even.

He hefted the new box and headed for the door. He stopped short, a strange look coming over his face. He'd have to check his maps again. He'd forgotten the Prime Minister's room number.

END

BIRCHER

by A. A. WALDE

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*The police methods of tomorrow
always work — except this time,
when the victim did not exist!*

I

It started innocently enough. No, strike that. Innocence was long gone. It started the usual way for me; I was sent for.

Did that sound strange? I suppose it was. There were very few of us, at least of those of us who had jobs worth having, who went to their work instead of having it come to them. I had to put up with it, though. A policeman's lot was not a happy one.

My bedroom alarm sounded. My sleeping accommodations were strict-

ly solo, even though the room was full sized. RHIP. "Rank hath its privileges," as the ancients used to say. I did have rank. The alarm was quiet; I woke easily. That is, it was easy for whoever or whatever woke me, but on me it was murder.

When I was waked at night, it usually was.

I didn't stop for details, just the place. There were few reliable witnesses, and I gave up listening to gory details when a ravishing and ravished blonde turned out to be a middle-aged male heart-attack victim.

My police bug looked just like a heli-cab, but it was a quick animal of metal and plastic with more horsepower than standard. That didn't show. It also had manual controls and fuel cells, so I could leave the roadways. I never needed to. I was really not the adventurous sort.

The robot traffic controls phased me through non-stop. I got there fast, and most of the time that was enough. Either the killing was a spur of the moment thing, and thereby either very quick or very difficult, or somebody was so extremely clever as to tie a noose around his own neck. A figurative noose; we didn't use the real thing any more. There were more humane ways of ultimate disposal, and in most cases restraining was a better solution, socially. That was not my worry.

This was going to be different. I knew it immediately, I felt it in my bones. Different, and a new kind of torment.

It could have been a sex crime. They're always bad, but this smelt worse. The victim was male, I guessed his age at seventeen, possibly nineteen. He was either nude or naked, depending on whether he wanted to be that way. *Had* wanted to be that way. He lay on his right side, legs bent up acutely. It did not look like a foetal position; for one thing, his trunk was bent back rather than forward. One of his arms was under him, the other thrown back with the elbow bent in a way unbroken bones could not manage. He was heavily bruised, and his face was bloody.

His scalp had been shaved smooth. Bald.

I looked up. Cabs passed a few feet overhead, two or three going by within a few seconds. It was going to be interesting, finding out which of them had carried him here. I would have bet willingly that the corpse had been pushed or rolled over the railing of a taxi.

The stars, far beyond, twinkled at me, laughing.

I turned back to the boy. That's all he was, that's all he had been, a boy. He had been dead long enough so that rigor mortis had come and gone. The robosurg would find out quickly how long. His fingertips would tell who he had been. Then, a canvass of his family, his friends, his credit card account, that would be it. There would be questions to answer, of course.

I wondered how he had been killed. Oh well, the robosurg would find that out, too, and maybe give a clue about where. I wondered if he waited long to die. The expression on his face told me that he had known that he was being had. Many go limp, others stay stiff.

I wondered who had killed him. How could the murderer ever believe that he could get away from us, from me?

As the robots moved in and picked him up, I saw something. A wound in his abdomen, about twenty-five millimeters long, and narrow. A stabbing. I hadn't seen one of those in — how long? — fifteen years.

He hadn't necessarily died of it. The opening was small, and we didn't have an awful lot of knives

around with long, narrow blades. It was too low to have been aimed at a vital spot, anyway. It might have penetrated only into the flat belly muscles and done no important damage except cause bleeding. And pain.

There was little external blood. Either he had been washed, or he had been practically dead when he was stabbed.

The meat wagon lifted him away and I examined the alley again. We were outside the dome area of City proper, in the almost deserted warehouse storage sector. There was an amusement park near here—an amusement park in the new sense—and that accounted for the volume of cab traffic overhead.

It might also account for the murder. The unwritten law was repealed, but now and then it was still enforced. A post thirty-five husband still could easily take exception to his wife's housebreaking a teen-age boy in the fashion that is as old as mankind, and, for that matter, most of the other high mammals.

Over the past twenty years, human feet had probably walked in this alley ten or twelve times, very likely less than that. I might have been the second. It was a robot area, a working place, not like the stevedore stages where the descendants of men whose muscles had once provided necessities for them and their families still play-acted the earning of a living.

A robot found the body, its sensors identified it as possibly human (confused, no doubt, by its failure to radiate heat) and it had

requested a management decision. Management decisions were furnished by watchmen (custodial specialists) who responded to such calls—when, as and if there were any.

I would have to get a statement from the man. In the meantime, I went through the alley again. If I were asked what were the most important differences between human beings and robots, my profession would have forced me to say, "Robots are neat."

Not always, but exceptions were accidental: leaking oil, possibly paint scraped off going around a corner where specified clearances did not obtain and the like. But essentially they were neat. They didn't leave litter, like cigarette butts, nor were they careless. Nor stupid, if they were properly programmed.

My runner was parked at the end of the alley. It couldn't enter unless I used my overriding controls, because there were no guide tracks here. I was hardened to such things by my occupation, and I didn't mind a walk of a couple of hundred meters. (My secret was, it was easier to move around on the job than to spend time in a gymnasium—and much more productive.) I wanted light, so I went back to the bug and removed one of the headlights (that was another extra on a police machine) and carried it back on its extension cord.

The alley was bare and clean. The sheet metal roof of one of the low buildings was crushed where the body had fallen on it. In giving, it had protected the corpse, so I was grateful.

There was a fourteen month old fax sheet that I tonged up; most likely just wind-blown debris. I was ready to leave when I saw something else, lying near the spot where the corpse had been. It hadn't been there when I came in, I had looked that area over carefully, so it might have been in or on the body, and dislodged when it was removed. It could have come from the murder scene. I tonged it.

A piece of paper. No, cardboard. About three or four millimeters wide, less than half that thick and some twenty millimeters long. One end was burned, the other had been torn. Far too small to carry a meaningful fingerprint, and the odds were that any fragments would be, at best, blurred. What manner of thing was it?

I directed routine autopsy and identification procedures, and advised that I would not want the results before ten the next morning. I went home and back to bed. On the way, I also directed that the alley be sealed off, and that robot cleaners be sent in with directions to turn over anything not necessarily found in such a place to my office. Which meant me.

Last, I left a "first-thing" call for my secretary. I didn't know why, but I had a bothersome feeling. Call it a premonition, call it a male manifestation of the old maid syndrome (after all, I was a bachelor; at the age of forty-seven, a professional bachelor), call it anything you want, but as for me, it warned me to leave no tern unstoned and save up bricks for the seagulls, early in the game.

I went back to bed, but I couldn't sleep. Perhaps I would have, but I couldn't get my mind out of that alley, away from that boy.

Somebody once told me that I was a misogynist, a woman hater. I pretended to think about the idea, then announced that it was false, untrue, even libelous. I was impartial. I was not a misogynist, I was a misanthrope. I hated everybody.

I did. I hated people. Not persons, people, the milling, filthy mobs. There was so much good in the worst of us, and all that. But that part wasn't in control when we got together in groups.

I never understood why the machine picked me for my job. In one way I did, of course. Who was better qualified than I to catch a murderer? But there were others who were cleverer, more quick witted and nimble tongued, better persuaders, with pleasanter personalities. Was it only because I was me, because I learned the lesson that I was diminished in the loss of any of my fellow men? Because I had had to learn that lesson?

Why did I so fear and hate all death — except my own?

I lay on my bed until dawn lighted my room. My apartment was my only ostentation. Larger than I needed, although by no means as large as my position entitled me to, high in the city above dome level and open to the morning sun. I had three full rooms. my four meter by three meter bedroom. my office (five meters long) and my "other" room for necessary social functions, decorated as an old-fashioned living room.

The other paraphernalia beloved by my forerunners was disposed of. M'Pher, who had the position briefly just before me, actually had a human operate his bug—and that a special, oversize monster he called an “official limousine.” I did not have to add to my own honor and prestige, and therefore I reduced such things in keeping with my having work to do.

Besides, I was fat and forty—and bald. Such things merely made me look ridiculous. Amend that. *More* ridiculous.

II

I was sitting on the side of my bed, trying to decide whether to give up my pretense and admit that I was awake, or force myself to lie down again, when the 'vise chime sounded. It would have to be Betty, answering my call. I said “Hello” and she came on. There was no picture; I didn't hold with having a 'vision pickup in the bedroom. Primarily because I let myself go to seed. I was no vision, just a sight.

Her voice was bright, cheerful, stimulating and therefore altogether an obscenity at that hour. “What's up, boss?” she asked, as if she damned well didn't know. This time I'd fix her, her and her antique mania. I'd gone through the same phase myself, a long time ago, and I remembered the perfect phrase:

“We've got a live one.” Ideal, mid-twentieth trite verbiage.

I could almost hear her strip gears mentally, whatever that meant (it was another of those expressions,

having to do with putting a machine *hors de combat* somehow). Of course, she was a person. *Her* secretary was a robot. She boggled at the expression I used, then recognized it as indicating that we had a critical emergency.

An emergency, naturally, was any situation which required immediate correction. A critical emergency was one where things would get worse rapidly, while a non-critical did not promise further decay.

“What sort?”

I did like her. She was smart, reliable, flexible and even quite attractive. Luckily, she never found out how to make the most of her good points. Homicide department was no place for happily married people. Homicide department was no place for happy people. At least, we never had any.

“Kid. Boy, specifically. Post puberty, pre full physical growth maturity. Estimated age, seventeen, plus two minus one. Violent murder. Abdominal stab wound, marks of beating. Precise cause of death undetermined. Found by robot in warehouse area.”

“No chance of accident?”

“He had been stripped as naked as a peeled egg. Not a stitch on him, no trace of his clothing. Dumped from a copter. Oh, yes, his head was shaved. All his hair, except his eyebrows.”

“Just his head?”

I thought back. “Yes.”

A long pause, while she thought Freudian thoughts. I knew she would come to the same conclusion I had when he shaw the body.

When she was ready, I continued, "I asked for a report at ten, but it's probably finished now. I ordered a quick freeze until the next of kin can take the delecti off our hands, of course." She didn't need to answer, so she didn't. What I was describing was as routine as eating breakfast.

I left her there and went into the bath. The shower came on as she spoke to me again, but the 'phone compensated by increasing volume. Naturally, I didn't have a 'vision pickup in the bath, either. Many did. "Any ideas?" she asked.

"Only the obvious, and it's still quite possible." A jealous husband, or more likely boy friend. A man whose woman was cooling off, and who resented finding out why. But why the beating? Ninety per cent of the time, anyone caught with another male's female just runs.

It might have been that he had no way to escape. Or he could have made the mistake of getting caught with his pants only half off. If there were a fight, that kind of fight, though, it shouldn't have lasted long enough to account for all the damage. He looked as if someone, or some two or more, had kicked him around while he was helpless.

Betty didn't say another word while I washed and shaved. When I entered my office, her full-length image was on the screen. She didn't look at me. She faced me, but she had dialed a different picture and now she manipulated a hand control so that she could turn the subject around and examine all sides, all features.

Finally she switched it off. "I go along with everything you said," she agreed. No mean admission. She meant what I had thought as well as what I had spoken. I had four secretaries before I found one who would fight with me to my satisfaction. Not physically, of course; we rarely see each other personally.

The last commissioner of homicide, M'Pher, had had a mammoth organization. Mammoths couldn't have been too well organized — they were extinct. So when I was pulled in from the outside I made changes.

Where there had been at least twenty persons reporting directly, there was now one secretary. The number of people in my department, compared to the wildest dreams of a commissioner in the early days of scientific investigation, would not have been believed. And in the fact that I had managed to reduce the administration materially — well, that hadn't happened since Gideon.

I had the same kind of artillery Gideon had.

I hadn't let anyone go. Good men were hard to find and dedicated men almost impossible. That was the truth, even with twenty-five or thirty to apply for every valid job that opened. Here was I, in a real position, and I didn't even ask for it! Hah!

The number of cases per capita of population wouldn't have been believed a few years back, either. It was *small*. Murder was not popular, these days. There were a good number of reasons. One of them was that murder wasn't easy to get away with any more.

There was a time, say in the troubled twentieth, when many killings simply weren't recognized. That was practically ended when a trained post-mortem of body and surroundings was made for each and every death. There had to be some kind of use for all the surplus manpower.

Investigation was improved, step by step. Robots were handy; they could pick up a specimen without contaminating it with their own life processes. In this case, except for the watchman who confirmed the finding of the body and checked to insure that it was probably dead, no human hand had touched the corpse since the murderer pushed it out of his cab.

I assumed that he did have a cab, but that was safe. The number of private machines in this part of City was so small as to be negligible, not more than twenty or thirty thousand, including those like mine that were official duty cars, used by servicemen or inspectors for the various public systems.

City was a big place. The northern extreme was called Bangor, the other end Key West. It wasn't continuous, of course. The segment that was my beat covered what used to be northern Rhode Island and eastern Massachusetts, centering more or less over Taunton.

We had many domes, not one. Everything from Warwick through the Attleboros came under one patchwork monster, and an irregular trail staggered off northward to the Boston complex, while another hooked east over Taunton to Fall River, New Bedford and parts of Cape Cod.

All this was my beat. I was commissioner. I investigated every murder that took place, up to a dozen a year.

Only a dozen. Two hundred years ago, when the population was a third of what I had, there might have been two or three dozen a year just in Boston.

There was more to the reduction of homicide than just having plenty of policemen. Part of it was, well, public relations. Press agency, they used to call it. "Murderers get caught." The lesson started in grammar school.

"Killers can't get away." Oh, some still tried, and any kind of investigation was less than perfect. But if somebody did manage, he certainly couldn't go around bragging.

That was what I did with my excess personnel. Training. Visiting schools, athletic clubs and any and every place where the young held out. When an adult needed retraining, he'd be turned over to someone perhaps more forceful than I. He was restrained very effectively. Right from scratch.

Just as I was.

I set my department up on a cell basis. Most cases I didn't deal with myself, except to meddle around at the start. There was an old question: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?* I did. The machine watched me. I didn't care who watched the machine.

III

I had been sitting back, watching Betty. Let us be frank: she was an old maid. I was an old bachelor,

which sounded a lot nicer, but to all practical ends added up to equivalents. Betty and I understood each other. But just the same we liked each other, so I imagine we were friends.

She'd never had a man. Certainly not full time, and I suspected never at all. She was no prude, however. If she had been neo-Vic, she wouldn't have been able to take the hard knocks her job gave her. That "modesty" nonsense that was so dominant in public thinking was, to us, for the birds.

She had been examining our customer. I was curious to find out what she had noticed that I hadn't, how her opinions agreed with mine and where they differed. As I said, she was strong-willed, and if she didn't see things the same way I did, she'd let me know. Quickly, sharply, and without any pretense of respect. I could have loved her. I probably did, but I needed her too much to admit it.

I watched her, not him. I had seen him, even though he hadn't been set up for display then. I had seen him as he had been found, and I didn't want to change my mental picture until I had extracted all the data from it that was to be had.

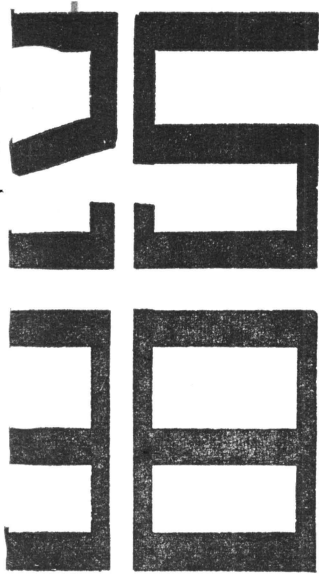
I hadn't touched the body. I didn't expect to, for all of that. Most likely, no human hands would ever contact it again.

Betty switched to me and asked, "Do you want me to punch in my own description?"

Of course I did, and she knew it. She was doing so.

Her asking was an apology for not





BIRCHER

speaking to me immediately. I was perfectly content to wait. I punched the order-transmit stud and asked for the identification of the body.

The green light on my wall that meant the computer was operating flashed, and the datascreen lighted. The words appeared, "Subject not registered." I pushed *Cancel*, then *Query*. Was it a malfunction?

The reply to *Query* came immediately. The datascreen lighted again, this time with "Functioning normally."

I ordered a new identification search, and waited. Before, the time needed had varied between barely perceptible and a half second. Now it stayed on in the green. Ten seconds, twelve, fifteen. After twenty-two seconds, the screen lighted again. "Subject not registered."

"Subject not registered." That meant there was no record anywhere on Earth, accessible to the computer, of the person who had become our dead body. No birth certificate (which would have carried fingerprints), no school records, no credit cards, nothing.

Betty watched her screen, too. They were hooked up in parallel when we talked, so that both would have the same supplementary information. Her face was pale. Mine was probably white.

"Data request, all missing persons who come within ninety per cent of characteristics of subject." In other words, how many people were there whose whereabouts we didn't know, who might have been mistaken for the dead boy? That would take a few seconds. It did. Seven. The list

of names ran up the screens, and the machine had been generous. After each name, a per cent. The first was ninety-seven point thirteen; the last ninety point zero one.

"Betty, this time we earn our keep. Oh, yes, under the circumstances, I think I'm justified in putting our wonder boy — or boy wonder — under permanent hold." I did. I didn't do it often — never if the identification were quick unless there were something that looked strange, or some data that might be needed.

After all, cemetery space was scarce. It certainly wasn't fair for a person to lock up almost a hundred kilos of perfectly reusable biological materials after he was done with them. Normal disposal was by cremation, with the ashes turned over to the next of kin if he wanted them. That way, most of the substance was reclaimed from the exhausted gases. Most of the time what was left wasn't wanted either, and the whole thing was recycled.

When there was a question, though, it was a good idea to keep the evidence on hand.

The work and expense of embalming were substantially lessened. It was once a difficult, expensive and time-consuming process, and the structure and mechanics of the body were so extensively changed that the advisability, from a practical standpoint, wasn't great. Anciently — very anciently — processing the remains took over a month. All the internal organs were removed and the entire thing was treated with bitumen. (The word "mummy" meant pitch. Did you know?)

By early modern times, say the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, this treatment was faster and better. So much better that a post-mortem performed on John Paul Jones a century after his death verified the original physician's opinion. It was still rare for a body to be treated this way and quite expensive. It would be honest also to say that it was rare for the treatment to be that effective.

For us it was very fast and cheap. A coffin was taken from stock, a glass tube, open at one end and a flattened ellipsoid in cross section. The corpse was put inside, the tube filled with salt water and its open end sealed with a glass plate fused in place.

The specimen was irradiated, not in a pile but in a high voltage electron gadget, so that body, supporting fluid and transparent coffin were sterilized. Glass was impenetrable by microorganisms, and the boy would not require further attention until he were removed for incineration, or the glass broken.

I turned to Betty. The list of names still glowed on the datascreens. "Well?" I asked. She looked at the list, then back at me. She weighed facts and considered alternatives, including resignation. She gave in.

"Suppose I take half," she volunteered.

"Good girl." It wouldn't be fun. She'd be 'vising people, telling them that, although according to the computer it couldn't be their son, brother or sweetheart we had, we were establishing identity for a body, and

would they care to make a positive identification, either negative or affirmative? It would not be true to say that tact was required. Tact wouldn't be enough. A strong stomach would be necessary.

I took the top half of the list. They'd be closer misses, since the descriptions more nearly tallied.

In a few minutes the body would be ready. I waited for the door chime. (Yes, I was keeping it in my apartment. Where else?) I set it up so that the scanners viewed it up from about the diaphragm. If it had been female, I'd have dollied in on the upper shoulders.

My predecessor, old M'Pher, had been neo-Victorian, or at least he let the neo-Vics run him, and he had any bodies that were bottled dressed first. I didn't. Not to save the cost of clothing, but because there might be an injury, a scar or a birthmark that clothing would hide. A couple of centuries back, a spy—in case the word is strange, it means a kind of political criminal—was caught because he tried to substitute for a person who had been circumcised. The spy hadn't.

The kid wasn't pretty in the tube. His face still showed stark terror. He must have waited, expecting death, perhaps for hours or even days. He was ugly with bruises, from one of his eyes that had been blackened on down to his wrists and ankles that were rubbed raw. He had been gagged, too.

It was a shame. Not for what he was—I never believed that he was first class citizen material—but for what he might have been.

He floated in the water. It was somewhat salty, to match his natural blood chemistry. That way there wouldn't be any tendency for water either to seep into the body or leach out. We didn't want him swelling or shriveling. There wasn't any chemical need for water, but it supported him. If he were left lying in an empty tube, his weight would flatten tissues, change his appearance. That doesn't happen to living people, because they don't really stay still in one posture long. But he would.

As soon as Betty was tied in, so that she could project the same picture of him that I showed, I asked for the names and 'vise numbers of the next of kin. It was just as bad a job as I was afraid it would be. There were altogether too many who wanted to believe the worst.

There were even more who were too curious, who wanted to take over the remote pickup and run their own examinations. I didn't dislike persons, but I hate people. I was not squeamish. I didn't care if I embarrassed every neo-Vic in the country; if it would have helped me find his killer I would have showed his bare backside and equally naked frontside to every man, woman and child in Greater North America. But I still didn't like either the carelessly inquisitive nor the sensation seeker.

In the end, it was negative. I asked for the next ten per cent, but these I took in groups, with a conference bridge on the 'visor circuits. It meant that I couldn't see faces, but there were other benefits to be realized from it.

There is a distribution curve, a "bean" curve, that meant that as the number of percentage points of similarity decreased, the number of possibilities — missing people — would increase rapidly toward a peak. From seventy per cent down, we sent postcards, with three dimensional photographs. We kept right on going down to cellar level, covering every person missing on planet Earth for the last hundred fifty years. I even got one.

I sent a note to the Asteroid Legation, as well. It shouldn't have been possible for him to be an off-worlder, a Moon boy or conie, because we should have received records of his coming in, with passport photos and ID prints, but I couldn't reject mere improbabilities. After all, we were supposed to be unstoppable.

It would be plenty bad if we didn't find the killer; but if we couldn't even find out who the victim was, it'd be much worse. I wouldn't have to worry about it long. At least not professionally, because it'd be someone else's problem. I wouldn't be commissioner any more.

I knew someone who would like that very much.

The department would be hit where it would be hurt the most, in the reputation. Our success in preventing crimes was responsible for much of our success in solving them. The last time a murder had gone detected and unsolved, it had started a landslide with thirty-three separate removals in a single year.

"Removals" was a euphemism.

One factor that made it difficult to hide a crime was our speed and efficiency in identification. A per-

son's fingerprints were recorded at birth. Then they were checked every six months when he turned in his credit card. At the ages of five, seven, ten, fourteen, eighteen, twenty-two, twenty-eight, thirty-five and fifty, his Bertillon measurements were recorded for statistics.

Money was a commodity most people, except antique nuts, never heard of. The reason was that our society was too rich to afford it. We had something better.

True enough. Go way back when — say to medieval or renaissance times. People were poor. The way we looked at it, even the rich were poor. The Borgia and Medici families couldn't afford strawberries in January. The amounts of gold and silver available were almost constants. The accumulation from year to year was tiny. Back then, with people generally without wealth, it was feasible to melt down the metals and make money — tokens of value — from it.

Actual wealth increased year by year, faster than the people to share it. It came partly from exploitation of new sources, partly by profit realized on past investments, partly from better use of man's muscle and brain power. Ships, for instance, sailed faster, were more likely to reach port and carried larger cargoes. The greater profit encouraged heavier investments.

With wealth increasing, the need for symbols of value overstepped the availability of precious metals. Substitutes were found, sometimes even produce like tobacco, but paper was the first adequate replacement. By the twentieth century it pushed gold

out of circulation. By then silver had become too useful for such a valueless purpose.

Paper money had started on its way out before it was really in, replaced by a couple of new inventions applied to something older than the Merchant of Venice: credit. The computer could do the work of uncountable clerks, do it fast, do it cheap and do it with little likelihood of error. Especially when credit cards were used.

Credit cards. They became the universal symbol of worth. An unsung genius started using them to print with magnetic inks, so the computers could read them without human assistance and error.

Once they were issued by practically every company, just as once almost any bank had printed its own money. With a credit card for each purpose, for use in a single store or to purchase auto fuel from a single chain of vendors, they multiplied unchecked until one person might carry a dozen or twenty of them.

Then they became a Government monopoly, and our prime weapon, outside of the people on our staff. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, except maybe the birchers and stil-yegi (that was during their time). Now each person carried one. It was purposeless to steal one, because for any purchase of value it was still necessary to scrawl a signature, and the life of the card was limited.

The cards weren't all the same, by any means. Mine was blue and yellow. Depending on the way I put it in the slot, I could charge purchases

either to my own account or my department. Others had the same feature, but their charges were reviewed by their superiors.

Most people had the plain green cards of the private citizen, or the red of restricted credit, and there were the yellow of the pensioner and the white of the minor child.

They were handy for us. Whatever you — anyone purchased, in services or material objects, was charged by them. A person couldn't view a fax sheet outside his home, mount a walkway, take a cab or buy a disposition without a card. That meant he couldn't make a getaway or disguise himself without leaving a printed record.

Unlike taxis, there was no charge for walkways. But safety's sake required limited access, and before a person could get on the moving belts, he had to slip his card into a slot. That way the computers know just how many people there are on each route, so they can adjust speeds and directions to prevent traffic problems. True?

There were violet credit cards, that were used by machines to make purchases.

The credit card was the real weapon against the criminal.

Incidentally, when I said "criminal," I meant murderer. I was a specialist.

IV

My admission chime sounded from the front door. "Open," I ordered, and Betty came in. This was the third time that she had been

in my apartment office in the fourteen years she had worked with me, and the fifth time we had met face to face.

I was expecting her. I figured she was as bothered as I was.

She walked to the boy. His tube coffin was standing in the corner of the room, away from the wall. It was on a bearing so that it could be turned freely, and she pushed it to start it revolving. "Pity," she said, her first word since she entered.

I wondered why. Did she, like me, resent the world losing the possible benefits he might have brought, had he lived out his life? Did she feel sympathy for the boy's parents, his possible brothers and sisters, or his probable girl friend? Or was it the evidence of sadism, the inflicting of pain and injury on him because it was sweet to his torturer?

I wouldn't ask. I was afraid that it might be simply the loss of a male, of the affection and sex she might never have known, when she could have made such pleasant use of them.

I did not criticize her hunger. We who worked for homicide were miserable, wretched people, sick of the world and sick with the world. Was I in my own heart afraid that if I were not so twisted as I was, I would no longer know happiness? I was too full of the milk of human kindness, and in me it had gone sour.

She stepped back. "He was bound and gagged while he was still alive."

Not only that, he had fought to get loose. His wrists were raw and bloody, and his ankles were bruised from struggling, and the gag had torn his mouth. He might have been

unattended for some time after his capture.

His body had been washed. He had been at least partially covered some time during his torture, because the traces of blood over his abdomen showed a curious weave pattern where it had glued material to his body. It could have been a tarp or something of the sort, instead of clothing.

The wound was over eight centimeters below the navel. Whether or not it was made to kill, it was made to cause pain, so it was kept well away from the critical areas, such as the heart. He must have been lying flat on his back, because the blood had run down to the crotch and then down again to whatever surface he had been lying on. In back, he showed red all the way up to the nape of the neck.

His scalp was shaved. That was curious. No—I was curious, that was strange. Betty confirmed my thinking. "Possibly a symbolic castration."

"Um," I agreed, then, "I wonder why the symbolism? There was nothing at all preventing the real thing." True. He had been gagged, and therefore unable to scream any more in agony than in terror. He had been bound, and could neither fight nor escape. He had undoubtedly tried all three.

I ordered a credit-card check of all copters that had crossed the warehouse area less than two days before the body was found, against a list of the relatives, friends, etc., of missing people. That would take hours of computer time, but it was a must.

The key to the problem was the identity of the victim. I wrote off my first guess, that it was a sex-linked crime.

If the corpse were supposed to remain an unknown, the clothing might have been removed because it would tell too much. It would not have been possible to provide other raiment, because the purchase would be traceable. Credit cards were used for everything from bubble gum to asteroid ships, and it was impossible to buy anything and not leave a record of who bought it.

I was bothered by something, bothered very much. I had come to a conclusion, made a deduction from valid facts. What annoyed me was that I didn't know what it was.

What was I hiding from myself? And why was I hiding it?

I was the introspective sort. I knew that, it made my life a hell on Earth. The only thing I really knew right then was that I was getting a world's record headache. A jim-dandy skull splitter. The description occurred to me, and gave me another source of wonder. Why was I starting to spout these ancient gems of hackney? I had outgrown my own antique mania twenty-five years ago.

I must have looked tired, because I hadn't slept. I skipped breakfast, too, but that was nothing. I missed a lot of meals and still stayed fat.

The fax dispenser chimed and started to read out. The chime meant that information of interest to me was included; other than that, I'm keyed for random read-outs, since I am heavy on coincidences and long chances (except gambling).

I didn't look at it. It was already mid-afternoon, and there was so much that I hadn't done. There was a report on the body to read; I was trying to find a murderer without knowing what had killed the victim, and when. The fax sheets could be of no interest. There was only one thing of importance to me in this bitter world, and that was to get my man.

Or to have him gotten. I released the case to the entire department. If I were a telepath, I could have felt the sigh of relief and the salivation of eagerness from the dozen or more warped souls who were the artillery of homicide. They were like me; there would never be rest while the job was to be done.

I was the commissioner. It was my right to take over a case when it interested me, or to let whomsoever I would have the joy. That was about the only pleasure that any of us felt, ever, the thrill of the chase. I wondered, casually, what the German word would be for the pleasure of the hunt. Something incorporating *Jagt*, I suppose, and *Lust*. *Jagt-lust*," most likely.

Now I gave the puzzle to everyone. Immediately the datascreen showed me that one, two, an undetermined number, were picking up the reins. The body started to turn as eager eyes began their examination, hoping that there was some mote of a clue that had escaped the old man.

The restrictions on the observations of outsiders hardly applied to department members. I hoped, for the sake of the boy, that there were

no remnants of modesty. Somehow, and I wished I knew why, I was quite sure that, even alive, no one would have called him shy or expected any kind of treatment to embarrass him—or hoped to find any other decency, either.

Betty went to my other room and got me a drink, probably one of those mid-twentieth horrors that were so popular again, a martini or screwdriver or something. I didn't know what, but it was big and had a high proportion of alcohol. I wasn't a drinking man. Ordinary vices didn't entertain me, nor did I retain my fondness for antiques.

I didn't suppose Betty drank much, either, but she was enamored of relics of days gone by, as well as the hope of some day having a male of her own. This that she gave me was big and cold. She called it a "zombie."

I supposed that I looked dead enough to qualify—but it wouldn't have been a department matter since I hadn't been killed. Not that there wasn't somebody willing.

I drank and in a few minutes went to sleep in a chair. One reason why I didn't often use alcohol was because I reacted to it as to any other anesthetic.

I dreamed. The corpse there in my office was laughing at me. No, he didn't come to life or anything, but I knew he was laughing. I recognized him both as a type and as an individual. He represented a class that I didn't care for, a specific brand of young hood, but like all the rest of the genera, cheap, vile and

violent, without respect for the person and property of another, with regard only for the immediate gratification of his own desires.

I was almost glad he was dead. Of all the people I hated, his was the kind I despised most of all. My kind. As I had been, not as I was.

He was more than just a type, though. He was an individual, and I knew him. I knew him and he knew me, and he floated there, laughing at me.

I knew more about him than Betty did, even though she had all the information I did. There was something specific that led me to understand the dead boy. The only trouble was, I didn't know what it was.

I didn't know.

I dreamed, and in my dreaming I went back to the alley where he had been found. I looked up, and far away the stars laughed at me. Even then, I knew, I could have turned to the corpse and said, "He's—." I wanted to laugh back at the heavens, because even then I had penetrated their secret, I had known what they knew.

What was it I knew?

I didn't know. The corpse wouldn't tell me. The stars wouldn't tell me.

"Mica, mica, parva stella; Miror quatenam sis tambella; Splendens eminis in illo; Alba, vaelut, gemma caelo." Was that it, the secret of the stars? No, scarcely. After all these years, my Latin wouldn't even have been correct, anyway. And that was about the first thing I learned, thirty-odd years ago, in English, it went, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star—." I knew it in that language.

I woke. Betty was gone. I walked over to the subject and stared at him, eye to eye. I would be damned if I'd let him beat me. It would please him for me to lose at my little project of finding his killer. I had the sneaky feeling that he and I had less than sympathy for each other. Amend that. Would have had.

The pain, the torment and fear, the agony of his dying were still written in the contortions of his face, in his clenched fists and staring eyes.

I punched the key for the robosurg's report, and let it run once across the datascreen without any pauses.

On the second trip, I went through each item carefully, looking for something there that bothered me. It had found its way into the back of my mind and joined the other facts that were assembled, and added its voice to the Greek chorus that was there, laughing at me.

They were laughing along with the stars, and the corpse, and his killer.

I would be damned if I'd let them beat me, any of them. I'd be replaced as well; that was nothing. The honor and prestige of my job did not taste good to me, I had them too long. I lied. How I lied. The department had become my life.

The fax sheet was what I was afraid it would be. Headlines from one side to the other, "Mystery Body Puzzles Police."

I told myself that it was really high praise. We were expected now, as a matter of course, to have the solution in only hours. This was al-

most a day old! I wondered why the fax sheets seemed almost to ignore the dead boy, in order to heap calumny on my head.

They could keep it up for weeks, too. It wasn't often that they got any kind of story, and in homicide it had been years since the report of an elimination had not been released within minutes of the arrest of the criminal. There was another factor, too. The editor was a man who did not love me. He was M'Pher, who had been homicide commissioner for only a few months when the machines removed him and inserted me.

My memory flashed back to grammar school days. That was something the years changed little, the children assembling away from their homes for classes. The system would have been cheaper abandoned, but the results would not be good. People had to learn to live together, and the schools were the only place that taught that.

Automation had brought back what was once known as "cottage industry," except that we didn't have enough cottages to be worth counting. A man's apartment was his castle, and also his workshop, whether he put words on tape or performed microrepairs on one-of-a-kind electronics circuit. Or tied dry flies for fishing, for all of that.

A child was brought into the world through the affection, intention or negligence of its parents, and lived with them alone until it was six years old. It played in supervised areas perhaps, and went with

its mother or father shopping sometimes, and that was all. (At that it was lucky, compared to earlier generations where father was just a strange commuting creature who came home after dark, left to catch a train before dawn and slept with mother.)

I thought about my own indoctrination lectures. The homicide commissioner then was many steps farther back than M'Pher, and his picture decorated the hall. We were told stories about the department's cunning, perseverance, craft and perspicacity.

We were taught very carefully how important it was that we respect other people, and not do them damage either willfully or through negligence.

We were taught that the one real crime was not asking for help if we needed it, failing to recognize the shortcomings—quick temper, exaggerated responses, vindictiveness—that meant that we needed psychiatric aid, to prevent our wanting to kill or maim. We were taught that, if we would not live with our fellow men, perhaps we should live away from them, say beyond the asteroids.

I was one in whom the lectures did not bear fruit. Betty was another. I knew where there was a third, close to me, laughing at me.

He laughed the louder at that. No, not him. *I* was laughing. It was my own amusement, my own sarcasm, my own bitterness, that I was imputing to the corpse. He hadn't felt anything, anything at all, in days. Had he? What was so important about that question?

I ran through the report again, looking for something. Yes! A paragraph, starting with the comment that there was some indication of recent sexual activity—scarcely news, when a healthy male dies violently, he often has an ejaculation—but semen reserves were not depleted. Then the kicker, three words that should have been in flickering red, "sperm motility—zero."

I laughed now, at my unconscious. So that was his secret!

The fax sheets had a time with me. Within three days they were calling for my "voluntary" resignation. After a week, they dropped the voluntary part of it, and in ten days they had forgotten about resigning. Had M'Pher forgotten that that was the only way my job can be vacated? Scarcely, because he wasn't machine-picked, and he was ousted by the computers.

M'Pher was a political appointee. He had his place only while the person the machines wanted wasn't available.

Retraining wasn't an overnight deal.

It was a week before the idea penetrated to some creep that if one person could get away with murder, two could. He either wasn't as smart or as lucky as my unknown killer. In his case the announcement of the apprehension of the killer was made within seconds of the news of the crime.

It gave the fax sheets more ammunition against me.

They were altogether too violent. M'Pher was editorializing on the

front page about my incompetence, and the inability of a machine to pick the right man for such an important job.

The fax sheets dropped below decent minima. I had ceased reading them, just let the ribbons of plastic issue from the slot and disappear into the waste box.

With all the weapons the department has, such as free and unlimited access to computer data and systems, to the records compiled all over the face of the Earth during the last fifty years, to the fussy analysis equipment and examination procedures that almost pick the memory of a single molecule, the most important single factor went completely unnoticed.

That factor was the people manning the department. The unhappy, twisted, tormented satires of humanity who made it their life to track down the broken vessels who shatter the lives of others. We ran, night and day, without pause. We hated each other, we hated humanity, and all because we, each of us, hated ourselves.

Hate was the tension that made us go. It was the force that propelled us, as a stressed mainspring had once driven the movement of a watch. Or better, as the Romans had once twisted to drive the catapults, the ballistas and onagers that were their weapons of war against fortified cities. What was the name applied to all kinds of throwing devices powered that way? I forgot. No, I didn't, either. The word was "torquati."

But that's what we were, the ar-

tillery of homicide department.

Run, killer, run. You're a person, and we're only machines. Run, killer. Run. We'll still follow.

Run, killer. We hate you.

Now the fax sheets hated me. They hated me so much less than I hated me, they could scarcely matter.

Run, killer! You give us something to live for. Run!

Time was to be. I was patient, my customer, was patient. His sympathy may not have been with me, nor mine with him, but he would be satisfied. If not, let him tell me. There was no point in premature action; I had a trail to uncover, and it was pleasant not to fight time.

Beside, I was amused at my department. The trick perspective played on them was strange.

The usual reason for dumping a body was because it could not be hidden. Not so this time! Disposing of a person's remains was not easy. But it could be done. I had done it myself, a half dozen times or more. It was my hobby, trying to outguess the computer, and I was no amateur. Three times I succeeded.

Well, why not? We'd had the bodies in permanent hold a half century or more. The odds were that the killers had gone to their own rewards, and there was certainly nothing to be gained by keeping the clay of their victims around. Our reputation for efficiency was a lot older than our efficiency was.

Time drew near. The brief was drawn up, the warrants prepared and filed under "tentative, hold"

and the court trial was scheduled. A summary was ready to be dropped in the hands of the district attorney. There was only one trouble. The murder for which the trial was the result hadn't been committed. The killer I would have prosecuted hadn't killed. His victim still breathed.

That was an awful problem for a homicide commissioner, but I solved it manfully.

I also scheduled the murder, and I was ready to provide the victim.

Time had come. I stood before the corpse and laughed in his face. Then I issued my invitations.

That was social usage. It certainly wasn't normal for one to go to another's home; the 'vision screens were as good as personal confrontation, or even better. If a person were a nuisance, he could be shut off. This, on the other hand, would be easier on me, and private, as well.

My datascreen lighted; it was signalled by an amber light. The machine was taking action on its own, and my heart stood still. I looked at the panel. "Disapprove your actions." That was simple.

I punched in, "Will you stop them?"

"Reply withheld."

I knew what expression was written on my face—hatred—but I felt relief trickle through and melt the horror that I had felt. Perhaps I was a pawn of the machine, myself, but I, too, was a player in this game. I would lay my wager!

The stage was set. My other room

was redecorated. I would continue my play.

The three of them came at the appointed time. Betty, my secretary; his honor, O'Moore, the high mayor; and M'Pher, my predecessor, the editor. They sat down and looked around and stared at each other.

Betty's eyes widened in surprise at the changes in the room, just as they had narrowed in hatred at the sight of thin, ascetic M'Pher. M'Pher was most astounded. "I never dreamed you had such good taste," he admitted.

I only whispered thanks. By his standards, I didn't have good taste. To me, antiques were merely items wrongfully spared destruction. The room was furnished in what, two centuries ago, had been called "American Colonial." It was mid-twentieth phony. The furniture was supposed to look as if it were made of wood, light colored maple, and the upholstery resembled printed textiles. M'Pher sat by a table where an antique flintlock pistol lay.

"Be careful of that, will you? It's functional."

"You mean, you could load and fire it?" When he looked at me, I could see the four "F's" in his eyes. Forty, fat, feeble and foolish. I admitted to all of them—at least the appearance. I had been commissioner for sixteen years, however. I had had more than one adversary.

"It's already loaded."

"Oh." He recoiled slightly, then examined it closely, but without touching it. He was mesmerized, like the mythical bird hypnotized by a serpent.

I wasn't sure whether he believed me or not. I cared less. He had had the pistol drawn to his attention.

His honor sat opposite me, and Betty was at my right hand. That was fitting and proper. "*Dulce et decorum*," I thought, and smiled at the rest of the quotation.

The only set of circumstances where it was proper to invite one's superior to a home was to tender a resignation. It was neither necessary nor proper for M'Pher to be present, but I would bend propriety into a pretzel this night. M'Pher was so happy of the chance to rub salt in a wound, he accepted eagerly.

When my guests were seated, I brought refreshments. That was not customary; it was poor taste for a person's boss to accept his hospitality just as the rug was being pulled out, but O'Moore took the glass. He and I had always gotten along; he didn't like me, but I did a good job always until now, and I wasn't a politico, trying to spring-board from my place to his.

While they still had their glasses up, I excused myself and left the room. I went back pushing a tube. I was sorry to ruin their appetites that way. I didn't realize than anyone, especially not a former commissioner, could be so squeamish.

"He's naked!" M'Pher snapped, looking at Betty.

She was innocence. "Why, sure enough, he is. Until you said so, I hadn't noticed."

M'Pher blushed. The red color was not becoming, his regular gray suited him much better. So he was

neo-Vic. I wondered why. That prudish act was very common, as well as the mania for antiques. Neither one was comprehensible. I wondered if M'Pher cultered up his apartment with chain mail.

He had his chance to dominate the conversation, and let it go. It was my turn again. O'Moore looked sick.

I said, simply enough, "I am sorry to go on record as stating that the killer of this boy will not be brought to trial."

"If you hadn't been such a bungling jackass," M'Pher snapped at me, "he would have been caught. I'm glad you're man enough to announce your incompetence."

I stared at him. I had practiced the expression of blankness with an admixture of incredulity and a seasoning of curiosity. I said, "I beg your pardon?"

His expression was just as readable, but scarcely prearranged—open, utter hostility and burning hate. "I said, I'm glad you admit your incompetence! My readers will be glad to know that the homicide department is changing its head."

Who hated me more, he or I? He put a great deal of value on the position I took away from him, far more than was justified, and after all these years he'd never have a chance to get it back.

"I am very sorry." I still had to be meek and mild. "I made no admission of the sort. I merely stated that the killer of this boy will not, can not, be brought to trial."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"By no means. It's simply that the

killer is outside our jurisdiction. He's dead himself."

Betty was fastest on the uptake. "You've caught the killer!" Her face was eager, alert, happy. She was a good one. She was happy for me in success, and eager to support me in my difficulties.

"Sorry." I kept my blank expression. Then, quietly, "But I know who he was. Rather, who one of the killers was."

The four faces in front of me showed four expressions. Betty's, simple joy; O'Moore was incredulous, and happy too. M'Pher showed pained astonishment, as if he just discovered that he had swallowed his cigar. The other face showed only the pain that was the last thing it was ever to record.

M'Pher suddenly wanted to change the subject. "Can't you get that thing out of here?" He meant the corpse. This neo-Vic modesty was a strange phenomenon, just as complicated and unrealistic as the real thing back during the late eighteen hundreds and very early nineteen hundreds.

During the original Victorian period, the word "leg" was never breathed; for people, "limb" was substituted, and for poultry "drumstick." A "chair" became a "seat," because it drew attention to the portion of the anatomy that rested on it to refer to it so crudely.

Nevertheless, public buildings were decorated with statues of young men (but not young women)

with not even a fig leaf brief, and boys went swimming in neighborhood rivers in the same unconfining natural costume.

"Why?" I asked, as ingenuously as Betty. I saw that what bothered M'Pher was her presence. She saw it too, and started to push back toward the corner where she would have been less obviously present. But I stopped her with a subtle gesture—she knew me well. "He's not embarrassed. I don't think he'd blush even if he were alive — which he hasn't been for some time."

"That's impossible," Betty objected. "There was almost no decomposition."

I nodded. "True. I took a different angle, though. What bothered me most was why his scalp had been shaved. It was inviting to presume that he was caught in the act of love and killed by a husband, brother or boy friend.

"The trouble was, he was dead before he was stripped. There are traces of blood on his abdomen, which acted as an adhesive between his skin and his covering. When the material was pulled away, a pattern was left which we can still see. Incidentally, the material was a very rare plastic."

The three of them looked to me for an explanation.

"When he was stabbed, the knife also carried fibers into the wound, where they were found during the autopsy. He was dressed in cotton."

"Cotton? Isn't that a plant product, one that is used in some kind of industry?" O'Moore had recovered his stomach and become curious.

"Nowadays it is just an industrial raw material. It has a plant origin, but it is a plastic. A natural plastic, rather than synthetic. This particular cotton was doubly unusual. It was what was called a 'stretch fabric.'

"Up to about seventy-five years ago, cotton and wool were processed mechanically into fabrics which were woven as cloth and made into apparel. Really cheap disposable plastic and paper clothes ended that, along with laundries."

"I see."

I continued, "Fibers from his clothing adhered to his skin, as well. He was washed after his death, to loosen his coverings primarily. That's why his chin and hands were left bloody. However, microscopic traces remained."

"So what," M'Pher blustered.

"In itself, nothing. There was even a cotton warehouse near where he was found. But the fibers on the corpse did not match any there, so he had not been in that building."

I paused. It was still not time to move quickly. This was not the time nor the place for a confrontation and accusation. My victim would not be bullied. "That was strange. He had had natural fiber clothes. That's worn only in the asteroids. His lower legs and feet showed dust from tanned leather, but they don't wear leather shoes or boots even there!

"His clothes must have been taken because they could be identified. That raised another area for speculation."

M'Pher interjected an explosive opinion about wild guessing. I let him talk, but ignored him otherwise as did the three other watchers. No, we did not really ignore him. Nobody had glanced my way in some time.

Recounting the chase, I felt my own pulse racing with remembered excitement as my trail warmed for me, and I felt that three of the four others felt the same stimulation. The fourth didn't respond to me at all. He just watched M'Pher accusingly, as I had set him up to do, without moving a muscle.

"Why was his head shaved? It could have been psychological castration. Back when we had wars, girls who fraternized too much or too profitably with invaders were sometimes punished after liberation by having their heads shaved. They were symbolically de-sexed.

"On the other hand, why bother with symbolism? There was no need for substitute. He was a total prisoner. He was completely helpless.

"He was gagged, he could neither shout nor scream.

"He was tied down hand and foot, he could neither fight nor run.

"He was without food or water about two days. There was no shortage of time or opportunity.

"Judging by the evidence, he lay on his back, his hands and feet bound together and lashed down to ring bolts. Would that be about right, M'Pher?"

He looked at me, his eyes wide and bright. My prey knew whom I hunted. "Why ask me? How should I know?"

"He was tied with fiber ropes, rather than wire or plastic. He was beaten, but likely that was what he expected if he were caught. He may well have participated in the same sort of thing himself."

M'Pher interrupted, "How can that be? We don't have that kind of murder any more."

"Oh? You know what kind of killing it was?" The room was so quiet, aside from my words, that all five of us seemed to have stopped breathing.

"I—oh, of course not! How could I? Do you think I did it?"

"Scarcely." I smiled. "I'll write you off as fully exonerated in his death."

"Getting back to his haircut, I asked myself one thing more. If his hair also were removed because it



would aid in identification, what characteristics could it have that would be a revelation?"

Betty answered, "I don't see what, unless it were green. Or—" Her eyes widened.

I walked to the upright coffin. "See his scalp. Notice the suntan." The mayor and Betty looked; M'Pher didn't leave his chair.

Betty turned to me and said one word: "Bircher."

I nodded yes. A bircher.

VII

Not a member of the John Birch Society. That had dried up and blown away during the Sino-Soviet war. But the name lived on, just as the Cosa Nostra, the Black Hand Society (Mafia) of Sicily had been

turned from a defense purpose to terrorist ends, just as the Ku Klux Klan had been subverted by a self-interest second generation.

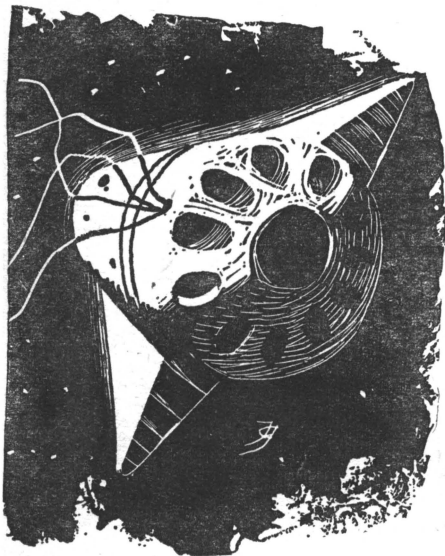
Birchers and stilyegi. Over a hundred years ago. The gang war that rocked America and shook the world, and resulted in the reaction that gave us our present stability and peace. "Wanna fight? Go to the asteroids and take on Mother Nature's homicidal deep space sister!"

The stilyegi. A Russian word, given to an American group. The descendants of the best generation, the great-grandchildren of the zoot-suiters; their trademark an unshorn head, their emblem a switchblade knife.

They were the owners of the narcotics trade, and the proprietors of almost every house of ill fame in the country. Those that they didn't own were small-time hick affairs.

The birchers. They were the rivals of the stilyegi, neither better nor worse but the same, hoodlums and hooligans. They had to be different, so they specialized in hi-jacking and armed robbery. They shaved their heads except for a single, very narrow stripe of hair that ran straight back from the forehead, a fashion that was once worn by some native Americans, some tribes of warlike Indians.

They claimed to be American Indians. More than that, they shouted of their bravery, their virtue, their loyalty, how they protected the country from alien without and corrupter within. They lied. They were no more protectors of the country



than crows were guardians of the cornfields.

Where the stilyegi wore a sloppy uniform of jeans and sweatshirt and considered it unsmart for either to be clean, and carried their sharp knives in their pockets, the birchers wore leotards, skin tight coverings of a single layer of stretch fabric, as many square inches as possible translucent, and short military jackets. They carried their weapons, bayonets, openly in sheaths at their waists and wore heavy field or engineer boots.

All were thugs. If they had eliminated only each other their war would have been without significance.

The corpse in the tube had been a bircher. His scalp was suntanned except for a band about twenty millimeters wide. He had been knifed, so he may have been the victim of a stilyegi assassination or the executed captive from a battle. He may have been killed by an initiate stilyegi, who thereby got his hands so dirty that the clan would never fear his going straight.

"The knife did not kill him." That had been the opinion of the robosurg, with a proviso that he would have died from the wound in minutes, had something else not finished him. The robosurg didn't know what did kill him. It had not been a natural cause of death, the failure of one of his vital physiological systems.

I continued, "I imagine that the knife was just another torture by his captors. He was tied, and the blade may have been pushed into his belly

and left for him to cut his way free. If he could figure out how. He couldn't."

Betty, O'Moore and the boy waited for me to continue. M'Pher's eyes opened at my guess. It was a pity, in a way; he had been telling the world so long that I was a helpless, bumbling booby, that he had come to believe it himself. Oh, that my enemy would always so underestimate me!

"What killed him, then?" Betty was curious. Even the corpse seemed to be listening to my words.

"Same thing that preserved him, of course." I wanted to be opaque for a few more minutes.

M'Pher's expression didn't change. The other two brightened.

"He had a girl friend. More than that, she was pregnant by him. He didn't tell her where he was off to, only that he had an idea how they could make a real killing." I smiled. "A killing was made, but not what he anticipated. He never came back, and of course they were never married.

"She carried his child, and kept faith in him. Judging by the records again, she was the only one who did. Nevertheless, she refused to give the child up for adoption. The son grew to maturity, and when in due course of events she passed away, the only legacy their child inherited was having his name listed as next of kin for a long-vanished bircher.

"Their granddaughter inherited no more, nor did I, their great-grandchild." I looked deep into M'Pher's eyes. "I wasn't surprised to receive

a card from the bureau, asking if I would care to make an identification, but it did start me thinking." I poured myself a drink, and stood beside my ancestor. "It always bothered me, that I recognized him when I looked at him, but I never knew who he was. I got to wondering how would he look say thirty years older than he was. I was thinking that way when I looked into a mirror."

"He is—was—skinny and eighteen. I am fat and forty-seven. I felt their eyes going back and forth between us, adding up the similarities in color, in facial features, in general build.

"I don't know if he got into this on his own, or if he walked into a trap. The stilyegi were supposed to have a blood initiation sometimes, and this might have been a handy way to get the blood." I shrugged. "Maybe my ancestor found a key that would get him into a space module and got caught prowling.

"You know what happened. We don't use that kind of ship any more at all. They weren't used very long, but they were handy. The cheapest kind of space travel ever developed." They had seen the pictures; the ships were only long tubes, some three meters in diameter, with wide noses and wide sterns. The robot controls were in the fore cone, the drive machinery in the tube and the tail only supported the craft on the apron. Cargo came in individual containers each shaped like a wedge of cake. A wedge with a bite taken from the point, to conform to the core tube.

They were wonderful economi-

cally. The trouble was, when they fired up, the engines irradiated the modules and junked too much cargo. Just as the laboratory irradiating equipment preserved a stiff in a tube. The ships also had a tendency, once in a while, to fry personnel. Even personnel in protected bunkers quite a way away, although that was rare.

"But — you mean he's been in space all this time?" Betty asked.

"That's right. Protected against dehydration by a blanket of frozen air.

"The stilyegi had some red-hot contraband, including some weapons that may have been connected with crimes, and some loot that had so many people looking for it that it wasn't safe to dispose of.

"They got to somebody in controls and fouled up a robot so that instead of heading for Mars, it looped out in a long orbit past Jupiter. I know who, but he's dead.

"Either the boy here was just looking for loot, or he somehow got the idea that there was something going on. Maybe they set a trap for him, to bloody the hands of a couple of their apprentices. Anyhow, the stilyegi got him. Probably violently. The robosurg reports that he got a concussion somehow in the back of his skull that must have resulted in temporary unconsciousness.

"They had access to a cargo modulus, where they had stashed their stuff. They couldn't let him go, because he was a bircher. He'd either try to arrange a hi-jack, or even go

to the police. Either way the stilyegi were out. Some of them could wind up getting hanged.

"Somebody had an idea, so they tied him down in the pod and put the knife into him. Before or in between, they worked him over. Then they left him there. He was awake when he died. He was probably awake while he was being beaten, too, but that's neither here nor there. Incidentally, he died one hundred and eighteen years ago."

VIII

Betty's eyes expressed a blank, and his honor was trying to think of a way to word the question he felt.

I had to finish explaining. "There was no need for the crime to be discovered. Well, yes, there was. But it was a psychological need rather than physical necessity. If a person dies now, it's practically impossible to conceal the fact—because of credit cards.

"If a person goes too long without any charges, we take a look-see. Also, every six months, everybody has to turn his card in and get a new one. When he does that, his fingerprints are recorded.

"Besides, there's no way for the average person to dispose of a body. Dead human beings don't keep very well. After a while they start to smell. Apartments haven't had food preparation centers now for almost a century, and people simply don't have the large deepfreezes that were once common, where flesh could be stored indefinitely.

"A person can't even chop a corpse up and flush it down the water closet. The sewage outflow is monitored for just such contingencies.

"This corpse didn't present that problem. It was in a state of preservation, lying in a shipment module at about absolute zero in a spaceship theoretically lost in space. Somebody couldn't let things go on that way.

"I suppose I'm naive, but I had thought that the stilyegi were gone. That they vanished at about the same time as the birchers. That wasn't the truth, however. This body was brought home to haunt me by a living stilyegi. A hundred years ago, the birchers got the upper hand. They were in the majority, to begin with, and they had an advantage, more sympathy from the public and the police.

"When the handwriting was posted on the wall, a group of the stilyegi took action. They acted smart. They got haircuts, and they bought better fitting suits. I suppose some of them joined the birchers, even. Without its brain trust, the stilyegi—that is, the visible stilyegi—ran out of steam and folded.

"With the stilyegi gone, the birchers found themselves up against it. Perhaps they were not as clever. Maybe the top ranks were absorbed into the underground that the others left. Anyway, the birchers had nobody to protect America against—and they had the entire population, and now the police too, down on them.

"They had, before, had some sym-

pathy from the citizenry and the police, but that was really all revulsion against the stilyegi. With them only a memory, the birchers couldn't stand up too long against a united population.

"The stilyegi weren't gone. They were underground. In a disguise of respectability, they passed on their gains from one generation to another, and added to them with stealth and cunning—but with no more respect for others than they had ever had.

"They bought themselves positions of respect and honor. Public jobs, where they were the trusted. One of them almost made the grand coup, the one job in this sector that would have given them a literal license to kill, but the machine wouldn't hear of it and put its own man in the post." I stared at M'Pher, letting him know that each additional word that I spoke, now, would be a stone added to the anchor I was tying to his feet.

There was just one difficulty! He was immune to me. He had never killed.

The mayor spoke again. "But there are still stilyegi?" He was shocked just as I had been.

"That's how the freighter got retrieved. The boss of the original job had a record of what he had done. The ship was in a long orbit, it would not be back conveniently close to Earth for more than a century, but that was all right. It would give the weapons and the loot a chance to cool off.

"He passed the information on

to his son, eventually his grandson and finally his great grandson got the word. He had access to a ship, and had a hand-picked crew of three. They intercepted the freighter and remote-guided it down to an undeveloped area on the far side of the moon.

"Not the moon of Earth, Phobos of Mars. They triggered the warming equipment, so they wouldn't have to thaw out the cargo, and after a couple of hours entered. I presume they were surprised to find the body. I don't know what thoughts ran through the mind of the leader of the salvage group. Maybe he subconsciously detected the resemblance between my ancestor and me.

"The opportunity was too good to miss. It was a golden chance to discredit me, because obviously I would never be able to identify the corpse. Neither could I find the killer. He was dead himself! The body was thawed with the rest of the capsule, so they wrapped it in a tarp, fused the edges to keep out microorganisms and moved the body into their own ship.

"Then they dumped the body, warmed up their scriptwriters, and waited for things to run their course."

They were staring at me, now, quietly. Except for one; his eyes never left M'Pher.

"Oh, yes. I have excellent relations with the asteroid people. The conies. Their homicide inspector is a relative of mine. And of his." I nodded at the corpse. "He doesn't have as many murders as I do, so he has plenty of time to meddle in other

things. Just as, here, I am guilty of trespass.

"He found the ship. One pod had been opened, and in it, along with the remainder of the loot, he found a bloody floor, a stilyegi knife and the clothing that had been removed from the corpse. He found a cargo manifest under a crate. It was signed by a 'MacPherson.' Your ancestor?"

M'Pher stared at me. It was a captive stare, and I didn't like it. I like the chase, not the capture. Wasn't he going to fight me? No wonder the machine hadn't changed my plans.

"You gave yourself away," I told him. "You attacked me in your paper with altogether too much virulence. You've never made any secret of hating me, I was the one who stood between you and the power you've coveted. You must hate me even more than I do."

When he made it clear that he would not reply, I drove another nail. "As soon as it dawned on me that this wasn't a recent crime, I started to wonder who was profiting. By the third editorial, I was so curious about you that I checked the trip recorder of your private car, your new limousine. I was quite surprised to find you, of all people, visiting the amusement park the night before our friend was found. And that was the only recorded trip where you ordered your machine to fly low and slow.

"There was another thing, too. I suppose you washed the boy in part to prevent his dirtying the car. Fine, but you didn't wash the car.

"Along with your other antique

pursuits, you smoke those vile cigars. You light them with paper matches." I held up the tiny piece of cardboard I found in the alley. "When you pushed him out the door, his hand scraped this up from the floor or seat."

His lips moved, he swallowed. My heart beat wildly. Perhaps the machine was wrong.

He snatched the ancient pistol, pulled back the hammer, pointed it and fired. But not at me!

He aimed at the boy his great-grandfather had helped kill.

The gun exploded, chopping off his hand, as I had made sure it would do. The shattered tube of steel that had been the barrel threw itself across the room like an orchid made of metal and smashed the glass tube into splinters, throwing the corpse out onto my carpet.

I put a tourniquet around the pulped stump of M'Pher's arm, and Betty sent for a medic, but there wasn't enough time. M'Pher lived only a couple of minutes. He wanted to die. I wasn't sure why, but I felt that he would rather not live than go on knowing he had been beaten by someone for whom he had expressed such profound contempt.

I had wanted to die. I had tried, again, to be killed, but the machine had beaten me one more time. Beaten me, but not all the way. The victory was not unmixed. I felt something of myself expire, become no more a part of me, deep inside.

How ironic! I had wanted to kill myself, and all I succeeded in destroying was my will to die! **END**

THE MAN FROM WHEN

by DANNIE PLACHTA

*He came out of nowhere —
and could never go back!*

Mr. Smith was about to mix a moderately rationed Martini for himself, when a thunderous explosion quaked through his house, upsetting the open bottle of Vermouth. After applying a steadying hand to the gin bottle, and while the ice cubes still tinkled maniacally in their shuddering bowl, he sprinted outside. An incandescent glare a hundred yards from the house destroyed the purple sunset he had been admiring not five minutes earlier. "Oh, my God!" he said, and ran back in to phone the state police.

As Smith was procuring a heady draught of gin directly from the bottle, he was further alarmed by

a steadily gushing hiss from beyond his open front door. When the sound persisted for a full minute, he went cautiously to the porch to find an intense mist rising from the area of the fiery thing he had viewed moments earlier. Somewhat awed, and thoroughly scared, he watched and waited for about five minutes. Just as he was about to go inside for another belt of gin, a man walked out of the fog and said, "Good evening."

"Good evening," said Mr. Smith. "Are you the police?"

"Oh, no," answered the stranger. "I'm from that," he said, pointing a finger into the mist. "My cooling equipment finally kicked into high."

"You're a spaceman," Smith decided.

"I only came a few hundred miles," shrugged the stranger modestly. "Mostly, I'm a time traveller." He paused to light a dark cheroot. "The one and *only* time traveler," he added, with a touch of pride in his voice.

"The real McCoy, eh? Well, come on in and have a drink. Vermouth's all gone, but I saved the gin."

"Be glad to," said the stranger, as they walked in together.

"Past or future?" wondered Smith, handing the bottle to his guest.

"From the future," replied the time traveler after a satisfying pause. "Hits the spot," he smiled, returning the bottle.

"Well," said Smith, sitting down and making himself comfortable, "I guess you'll want to tell me all about it."

"Yes, thank you, I would."

"Feel free," said Smith, passing the bottle.

"Well, I had my final calculations, with the usual plus or minus" He paused for another sip of gin. "And of course it was the minus that had me a little worried."

"But you took the chance," interjected Smith.

"Naturally. And as it happened, there *was* some minus. Just enough to destroy the world."

"That *is* too bad," Smith commented, reaching for the bottle.

"Yes. You see, there was such an expenditure of energy that it completely wiped out the Earth of my time. The force blasted me all the way through space to this spot. By the way, I *am* sorry if I disturbed you."

"It was nothing, nothing at all. Forget it."

"Well, in any event, I took the chance and I'm not sorry. A calculated risk, but I proved my point. In spite of everything, I still think it was worth it. What do you think?"

"Well, as you said, you took the chance; you proved your point. I suppose it *was* worth it." Smith took a final drink, saving a few glimmering drops for his guest. "By the way, how far from the future did you travel?"

The time traveller grabbed the gin bottle and consulted his watch. "Eighteen minutes," he replied.

"It wasn't worth it," said Smith.

END

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CYBERNIA

by H. H. HOLLIS

Illustrated by LUTJENS

*She was an Old Martian, anyone
could see that. But there had
never been any Old Martians!*

I

I was in Mexico City in November, ,taping the bull fights for next summer's microwaves, when Gallagher stumbled on me. If you like black beer, Restaurant Prendes is the place for you; so I was there.

Prendes flourished while Porfirio Diaz was dictator. It has survived the earthquake which attended Madero's triumphal entry, the civil convulsions of the revolution, the stormy session of the United Nations

and fifty years of U. S. tourists. Prendes's tap beer was the best in the world when Diaz ruled. It still is.

I was on the second stein when Galeg backed around the glass screen that masks the entrance. I would have known that rusty neck in hell; and I rose and collared it. "Tiene usted," I asked, "un fosforo, Senor?"

Without a word, he extended a five hundred peso note backward at me.

"Many thanks. This'll keep that tap pouring for a week."

He retrieved the bank note just as I was sitting down, and flagged a mozo with it. "Two more of these," he ordered, pointing at my beer, "and a plate of huachinango Veracruzana for me. Are you eating?"

I had, so I sat watching while he put away the fish and slanted a bold eye at me between gulps of the Modelo. As he was finishing, I lit a cigar and dug the needle into him. "So you're on the dodge again? If you'd like me to put in a good word with the police . . ."

"Never fear. It's not the police that's worrying me. It's a female."

"Relax," I told him. "What woman would pursue a great gowk of a fellow with a permanent Mars-burn?"

She probably mistook you for an uncle, and a few words will clear up the whole—"

"A few words! That one expects me to tell her all the secrets of heaven and hell and join her in a new wave of evolution. It's all Cybernia's fault, Cybernia, where are you?"

"Who is Cybernia, what is she, that all the swains her praises sing?"

The Old Galeg looked at me suspiciously. "There was a Swayne in it, all right. You've heard already, have you?"

"Only what everybody's heard: how you shot your way out of the boudoir, the doxie on your arm—"

"Phoo!" Now his self-confidence was restored. He no longer kept a corner-eyed watch toward the door. "Look here, I've nothing to do for

the afternoon. Switch off that methylated pickup to your tape, and I'll give you the true orbit about Cybernia and Dona Luisa out there."

I signaled el mozo to keep the lubricant flowing free, and Gallegher began reflectively:

Fortune telling, fake or for real, always fascinated me. I was born under a caul, my mother told me, and it may be I have a little of the power myself. I'm not telling.

Last spring I had an argument with the big jet at Dome One on Mars. There was some fool talk about a few liters of high Geiger concentrate missing out of my last few loads, and it ended with me walking out on him just before his fuel tank exploded. I knew he was due to be rotated to earth and I forgave him his nerves, for I'm the forgiving sort. I wouldn't like to spend three straight years on Mars myself.

There I was, then, with no job and about a thousand sparks in my pocket—and on Mars. The twenty-five thou that passage to Earth cost might as well have been a million. So I went to the carnival.

It was just as wild as it always is. I mean, Mars ain't the same moral climate as here . . . if you understand me. But it wasn't kicks from the "dancing" girls I was looking for. It was a stake. I wandered along past the Sacred Marriage Rites of the Bird People from Arcturus and the Awful Octopi from Alpha Centauri. Who knows better than a jet jockey that we haven't even got to Pluto? Arcturus!

Well, it was a partner I was hunting, you understand. I can get all the lone wolfing I want in space, with just me and the flame and the cargo, hoping the techs taped a true course for me and the pipe. When I'm on dirt, I like somebody back to back with me. What I was really looking for was a three card monte layout. I figured to beat it for a thousand or so just to show I knew where the pips on the cards were, and then join up with the operators on a little faster operation.

There was a big crowd milling around to get in and see the Mat-ing Dance of the Amazons—in four dimensions—and as the last stragglers rushed the ticket taker, I saw what I wanted: a little monte store. I wandered over like a yokel and asked if they could tell me when the Amazons would mate again. They could, and they did, and it was just time enough to run the cards a few times.

Well, I picked the Queen a couple of times, and missed her a couple of times, and a little crowd gathered, the way they will, and pretty soon the roper got me off to one side and began to explain to me how he was going to mark the Queen. (You know the gaff, don't you? On the last big bet, the marked card turns out—surprise!—not to be the Queen. The only way out is to mark the Queen yourself for the last bet; but you've got to be as quick as the man who kissed the ostrich, or none of 'em will be the Queen.)

I meant to listen. But right in the middle something began to

tickle my neck — and it wasn't the roper's breath, though he had one that would fuel a rocket. I had to look around. Sure enough, when I did I saw this ratty little tent down a kind of cul-de-sac off the mid-way.

There wasn't much bally to it: just a canvas sign, "MARTIANA", and underneath, in smaller letters, "Past. Present. Future. What may be, can be."

I was hooked. I was ahead maybe twenty credits on the Monte game, and I shook the roper off and headed straight for the fortune teller. The tent was bigger than it looked, somehow, when you got up close, and an ugly character in a beard and a stench was guarding the door.

"How much?" I asked him.

He got a kind of sly look on his face and told me it wasn't a commercial enterprise; that a contribution was expected in accordance with the help one got; that the "personage" inside—he hesitated over that—was a Martian, endowed with senses unknown to man.

Now, I know as well as you do there wasn't no Martians when de Camp first got there except the lichens and the two-inch oaks. But this guy's manner had my jets rumbling. He somehow acted as if he didn't want me to come in. I was hot to get by him.

Finally, he sighed in his beard and played his trump card. "You'll have to take off your shoes."

Anybody who runs the risk of being caught without shoes on



Mars is an idiot. The sand of Mars is one big sponge; and in a hundred steps, it'll suck out all the water in your body. There's a mummy in the Mars museum who was the first rocket kicker who found out what the sand is.

So I kept my shoes in my hand. I didn't even take them off until I was on the flooring of the tent. Beard boy tried to grab them, but I ignored him. Right inside the tent, of all things, was a door. Everything else on Mars is sphincters or pressure valves. The handle of the door was hard as hogan to turn, and it pinched my finger when I did move it.

Behind that door was a three-D projection of the solar system as the sweetest, the smartest and the most innocent baby alive might imagine it. The sun didn't burn, it just flashed gold. All the planets looked like Earth, green and gorgeous. The firmament, instead of the fire and ice that it actually is, was got up in the color of a summer sky—that fresh-washed blue, you know—and a few cottony clouds drifting through it.

It took my breath away. A chair walked up behind me, and I sat down in it to watch and worship that gay sun and his friendly planets. The place was pressurized too. It smelled like a spring morning on earth, and there was a kind of faint, far away birdsong.

This went on for all of a minute with me drinking in that beauty, and then it was gone. That beautiful projection shrank to the size of a reactor pellet surrounded by a

dead black void, and then it exploded!

A real nova couldn't have been brighter. I felt as if my eyes had been put out. I knew they were closed, but they couldn't shut out that light. I don't know how long I was blind, sitting there holding my shoes in my lap and waiting for God-knows-what; but after a while I could sense a pulse in the light, and between pulses I could see patterns: wild colors, startling figures, and bright spirals like polished platinum coils. Then the light began to separate into flashes, and between flashes I could glimpse the real inside of the room I was in.

It was a little dome. All around were lighted disks in different colors, forty or fifty, and different sizes, all blinking at different rates. To one side, where I could barely see it, was a bank of lights—twenty-four, I made it—flashing a dozen times a minute in a different pattern every time.

Except for the colored blinkers and the bank of lights, there wasn't any other illumination. The flashes were too bright to see by, and they made me blink, too, so I couldn't see anything except the patterns of veins in my eyelids . . . so it was some time before I caught what was right in front of me, about ten feet away.

It was the Martian.

You never saw a creature like that.

Nobody else did, either. Not outside that tent.

It had eight legs, jointed and stiff like a spider. The head was a great, gleaming, silvery sphere, with two

dark blue-green spots that weren't eyes. They slid and slipped around the surface, changing size and their relation to each other every instant.

In between that spherical head and those spidery legs, it was a woman. From neck to navel, she was as naked as a star, and a million times as beautiful.

II

You can get the picture, can't you? Me in that dark room, surrounded by flashes and pulses of light and color, facing that Martian sphinx. I was as unoriented as the primal atom. If there were flies on Mars, I could have caught a colony, my jaw was that slack. The hackles of my neck stood up like a dog's, and I just stared.

The flashes had stopped but the blinking was still going on, and off to the side that bank of lights was still running off patterns, when the Martian spoke. It wasn't the voice that woke me—though it was a musical sound, kind of barrel-organ music, none of your chamber stuff; a real lilt in it—no, what woke me was the movement that accompanied the voice. It was a delicious kind of ripple in that lovely flesh, and seeing it brought me to full consciousness at once. The patterns in the bank at the side began to run and crackle almost faster than I could notice, and all the colored disks began to blink more rapidly. The silver globe was spinning with the two dark spots sliding around.

"What would you know?" was the first thing the Martian said.

I got hold of myself. "Who am I?"

And the Martian told me. Called me by the name my mother did, which you shan't hear. Gave me my blood type, star number, weight, height, home town, the amount of money in my wallet and the hour and minute I had walked off the job. "What would you know?"

I asked, "Who are you?"

"A child of the stars. Ask not of my Star, or I reply no more. What would you know?"

I gave up on that. Those ripples were making me sweat, so I rushed it up. "What am I going to do in the next week?"

"You will succeed in a great undertaking, but you will humble yourself to do so. Above all, remember this: from this moment, you can . . . succeed . . . only . . . with . . . the help . . . of . . . MARS!"

I asked what that meant, but all the lights went off. There was a faint luminescence from the silver globe, spinning, spinning, and all was darkness. The voice sank in the distance. "Return tomorrow. Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . return . . ."

The chair turned me around and helped me to my feet. The door opened, and there I was with my shoes in my hand and Black Beard in my nostrils. He looked at me with accusation and said, "The contribution bowl is at your left."

It took some rooting around, but I managed to find a one-credit note in my roll. He looked at it contemptuously and blocked my way. That was all I needed.

I hit him right in the center of

the stubble, with all the frustration and fear that thing inside had left in me. I might as well have hit an old-fashioned jack-o-lantern. His face just kind of *squished*, and the next thing I knew, he was rolling on the sand and the face was slipping off. I grabbed the hair and had the whole thing in my hand.

It was a mask of plastic flesh. The head underneath it was as featureless as an egg. The only breaks in the smoothness were a spreading ugly bruise where I'd caught him, and two slits where his eyes were closed.

About that time, something caught *me*. Have you ever been kicked in the back by a woman who really meant it?

When I picked myself up, she had a little, old-fashioned solid projectile gun aimed at me, and old egghead was sitting up, shaking his head hard enough to addle it. She handed him the mask.

"Put it back on, Swayne. Then run through this fellow's pockets. He's got better than a thousand sparks in a pigskin wallet."

"Go ahead, honey," I told her. "Tell me my weight and my blood type again." Of course, you can't see what a woman looks like when she's dressed for out of doors on Mars, and her voice didn't sound the same as it did through the machine, but it stood to reason. She had to come out of the tent to get me the way she did, and she knew to the spark how many credits I had in my tank.

"Just tell me one thing," I said, as I stood and gracefully revolved

to bring my wallet pocket into Swayne's reach. "Say that wasn't a mask on you."

She laughed. I never thought much of freckles before, but somehow the sprinkle of them across her nose put a whole new content into the concept of freckles. "Rocket, you're okay," she told me then. "No hard feelings, I know. You can't spark out. Nobody gets paid better than you lightning jokeys. If you're broke, all you have to do is grab a hot pipe back to Earth. I told you to humble yourself."

I turned the other pocket. "Egg," I told the barker, "there's a few credits in a money clip you missed."

She cocked the little old pistol. "Nobody makes any funny remarks about Swayne. He got burned in the high Geiger mines, and he's getting a new face grown on him. You think that's funny?"

Maybe you think freckles can't reflect emotion. You're wrong. I was looking at the little constellation of them on her nasal bridge, and each one looked like another model of that popgun she was holding.

"Mrs. Swayne, I apologize. And Mr. Swayne, if you'll lend me a hundred of my own credits, I'll buy you a drink. I'm down and out myself, but you've made me feel like an oxygen thief and the luckiest man alive all at the same time. I heard about guys getting caught in flash fissions before, but you're the first I ever saw. I apologize again."

You can't tap a foot in the Martian sand very well; but she was

switching the muzzle of that little old pistol in the air with the same rhythm. "You say you're down and out, but you're not. All you have to do is go apologize to the Super at Dome One, and you'll be riding a flame to Earth's space station tonight."

I explained to her why I didn't think that was possible, and why I couldn't apologize to the Super with the same sincerity I had to them. Then I couldn't resist digging her. "How come you can't read me out here? Inside that fake tent, you knew every bump in my brain."

She grinned. "That's just it. Out here I haven't got my electronic fingers on your skull. Give him two hundred, Brud, and let's get that drink. I'd give it all back, Rocket, but we need it for the hospital."

"Is it Mr. and Mrs. Brad Swayne?" I asked. "Or what?"

"Brud," she said, "Brud, Brud! Bruddie! Swayne's my brother, not my husband. Still game for that drink?"

"Lady," I replied, "did anybody ever tell you you have cute freckles?"

After we had absorbed a few high-volatile cups, we all switched in our reserve air tanks, you might say. I was pleased that she hadn't ordered any of that sweet Venusian bubble-juice; and a few jolts of sour mash Carbon-14 always loosens everybody up.

They were in tough shape, for sure. Pushing the hot pipes is tough, but picking the high G ore out of Mars's old rocks is the toughest

racket in the cosmos. She had thrown up a good job in the London School of Electroencephalography to get right out to him when it came through that he was burned. If she hadn't, he never would have survived. Just knowing she was on the way gave him something to hang on to during the first months after his burn.

After she kept him alive, they were stuck. Broke, and with an expensive course of bio-plastics on the books to get him a new face. No compensation, either. Those ore pickers are all independent contractors. The first good break came when an experimental type of rocket blew up almost on top of their living dome, so they were able to beat the caterpillar salvage guys to the loot. Instead of selling it, she had built the first installation of that tent. The bank of lights was an automatic analyzer, and the stiff handle took a blood sample when it pinched you. The shoes had to come off to ground you into the feeler circuits built into the floor.

She was way over my head talking about the still unsolved mystery of thought itself; but I got that she could reach random information and surface thought in a brain and get enough character to go on from there with a regular old-time fortune teller's act.

The "come back" routine was designed to increase the take. If a customer came back, he was hooked, and the second look at his brain surface gave her a real handle on him.

Still, they weren't making money,

because Swayne's treatments cost a lot, and living's not cheap on Mars, even in the slums. They might never get off the rusty planet, and we all got a little bitter and cynical about it.

Until the brainstorm hit me.

I laid it out on the table, and we kicked it around a little. Finally she ordered a round of straight caffeine and we examined it again, on the alert. It still looked good.

III

My idea was, if she was going to fake, why not fake something worthwhile? The techno psychs are all over the place, but everybody knows (it's never admitted in your tapes, but it's true) that there are plenty of minds slightly off orbit. What the techno psychs do, you know, is to throw the whole system out of balance to compensate the aberration of the moment. Then a few months later, they give it another twist. Your circuits always feel smooth, but they're always a little out of phase.

It's been a long time since anybody tried to straighten up a whole system. We've got used to everybody's being a little off target, and we get along with it, without liking it. My idea was to rebuild her device into a machine for *general* psychic adjustment. That way we could get it off the midway and turn it into a real racket. Anybody who can promise to *make* fortunes instead of just to *tell* fortunes is going to be swimming in credits . . . 'til they catch up with him.

The trouble was that she had ethics.

Everyone from the London School has, she told me; basic conditioning in the first year. But she looked as if she'd like to cry when she told me, and I finally dug it out of her that she'd evaded her conditioning to break away and come up to Mars when Swayne got burned, and the conflict she'd generated was still bubbling in her.

Well, I talked to her, but what's talk? She saw through my every gambit, and for a couple of hours, it kept looking like a worse and worse idea. I told her the truth; fuel your own tank first is still the basic human ethic, never mind what it's going to be someday; and she said I hadn't any ethical standard at all, and didn't understand even what the words meant.

All of a sudden, we both realized her brother hadn't kept on with the conversation. When we looked at him, his face — the one on the mask — was all out of shape. I didn't realize what was happening, but she did. He was crying inside his mask, and it had slipped.

That turned the trick. There was a lot of blubbery confirmation, but as soon as she looked at me over his shoulder, I knew the same deeper compulsion that broke her conditioning before had broken it again.

The essence of a good swindle is planning. Performance is just the icing on the cake. It helps to have a trained crew, but her formal training and mechanical knowledge were enough, with the experience she'd had in her tent.

We cooked it up pretty good the next day. The first thing we had to do was to get some big shot into the tent. We couldn't afford the rental on the main strip of the carnival, and it was a thousand chances to one that we'd ever get one of the big 'uns to turn that shabby little corner, as I had.

We finally worked it out neatly. I was to snatch one.

It isn't as risky as it sounds. On Mars, the conditions of society are such that everybody is accessible. It's just too tough to be otherwise; and besides, no one can forget Rocky Halloran's dying in Dome One thirty seconds after he reeled off the coordinates of the first big high G strike. Nobody wants to miss it if some other rock-knocker wanders in with another hot location on the tip of a tongue about to wag its last.

I wore a disguise; Swayne's face. With my features inside to distort it, it didn't look like Swayne. And it sure didn't look like me.

About seven o'clock, just before quitting time, I skimmed into Dome One and around to the big jet's office. It was all thinned out of people, and he was just fitting on his air when I slid in and showed him two things: Cybernia's antique popgun and a note to precede me quietly.

I tried to smile to calm him, but it must have made that face look worse. He turned as white as you, but he managed to walk.

After hours, nobody cares a hot hagan for protocol on Mars, so no-

body paid any attention as we strolled out of Dome One. We headed off toward the carnival, and he began to argue, quiet like. I had my hand inside his arm, as if we were old buddies, and I let him feel that little old hand-cannon like a finger in his ribs. After that, he didn't make a sound.

He did cuss once when the door handle took its blood sample. We had figured he would balk at taking off his shoes, so we just sat him in the chair, and Cybernia hypnotized him. She hypnotized me too, even though I knew the gaff. It was comical, the way her shape sagged and lost its appeal, when I thought about it later on. She said she didn't want to have to keep damping down my impulses, so she just hypnotized us both.

Then her ethics got her by the throat again. She left poor old rotation bait sitting in the chair, blind and deaf to everything real, and got up and came over to me. I objected when she started pulling on a jersey, but she said, "Don't worry. He still thinks I'm there. What do you think he's staring at? But Galeg, we can't do it. If you could understand what the analyzer is showing on the inside of that silver dome, you'd realize. He's so far gone I'm afraid to touch anything."

Well, she cried and she cried, but she wouldn't do it. She sobbed that he might end up an idiot. When I said he already was, she said that was just like a man. I tried to get her back in my arms, and she beat on my chest. Then she cried on it some more.

By this time Mr. Dome One was groaning and sweating. It was just the natural male reaction to about ten minutes of watching those ripples, but it irritated her again. She began to yammer about men being all sensual brutes, and she hit me two or three times more, but by that time her tears and all that belting on my casing had bled off her overcharge, and she crawled back inside the silver globe and went to work.

Lord only knows what he thought was happening to him, but he quit groaning and began to purr. Then *he* burst into tears. I never heard a man cry like that. After a while he quit crying. Then he straightened up out of hypnosis and out of the chair, put on his air and his shoes, and walked out of the place without looking right or left.

I just looked at her. She looked at me the way a girl does, you know, when she's done something wrong, and then she told me what she had done.

She hadn't treated him at all. She had just induced a euphoric feeling in him toward me. "It won't wear off until about this time tomorrow," she told me. "So you're going to go wangle passage for your wife and brother-in-law and a job for yourself." I must have looked a little startled when she said "wife", for she withered me with a glance and said, "Don't worry. All we want out of you is green hills, and you can go to hagan." She made me think she meant it, too.

Wangle is no word for what I

did. If my native modesty and good sense hadn't prevented it, he would have installed me as commodore of the freight fleet. He didn't have the power, but for me he would have assumed it. The only regret he had was that my job would take me away from him. He made me promise to come back and to stay with him for several weeks when I did.

You ain't interested in my trip. You can make up better ones. I beat her and Brud back by weeks, and I was waiting at their landfall.

I have received severe frostbites in space, but none to equal the one I got that day. When they were half-way home, the berth officer was making his daily check to see that everybody was taking the nerve tone-pills and flexing the large muscle groups. He had run the scanner by her cubicle every 25 hours, of course, but one day he suddenly saw the way her name was spelled (Mrs. Gallegher, you see?) and asked her if she knew me. Then he had to go and tell her that old story about that crazy woman at Dome Four. Well, it was later proved that woman was entirely mistaken, you know, about the whole thing. Not only was the ancient Martian marriage ceremony not performed on that occasion, there is no ancient Martian marriage ceremony. It was all a big mistake.

But trust this leaky-skulled berth officer! That little cathode ray had cooked his brains, if you want my opinion. We had drunk a million liters of rocket fuel together in one deadfall or another, and he thought

he was pulling a big joke, I guess. She should have had sense enough to know that he was just selling shares in the waxworks on Mars, but women never know when they're being kidded, especially about somebody they're really interested in. That's how I first knew she really *was* interested in me, she was so mad about that old Dome Four party.

But she was mad! I couldn't let her walk off: I had to hold on to her until we could make enough money to square up those passages. The boss might get rotated home, but they don't rotate bookkeeping entries.

Old Brud came through for me, bless his blubbery psyche, when I reminded her how *quick* we could raise the money for his skin sculpture. I don't know what I'd have done if it hadn't been for old careless — yes, and I don't know what I'd have done if I'd *been* him, either. You're right, but don't look down your nose at me.

We scrounged up enough second-hand parts to open up a little more sophisticated version of MARTIANA. I thought up the name CYBERNIA, and it sure pulled in the suckers that always think a machine can do things better than a person. I call people like that "punch brains." Most of 'em would have been scared to death if they'd realized a 118 pound girl was kneading up their brains and baking them over, but when they were conned into thinking a computer was doing it, they were in heaven.

We set up a learning machine to keep them distracted, with levers to pull and buttons to push and the damndest set of irrelevant questions and answers the hagan you ever saw. The motive power for the learning machine was supplied by two metal treadles. Ah, you guessed it, did you? That's how we kept their bare feet grounded into the system, and the very first lever they pulled or button they pushed got our blood sample for us. After Cybernia explained to me what she was doing, all the information gathering was simple. You'd be surprised what your blood fractions tell about where you've been and the kind of life you've led. Hoo-eee, boy!

With me running the ballyhoo, we were rocking right along, sweet as a train in a tube, paid off the passage money, buying Bruddie Swayne a better-looking face than the one he'd been born with, and I'm actually beginning to think about marriage, the genuine, ancient Earthman, Me Tarzan You Jane This Our Tree ceremony; and I know Cybernia is too, because she'd josh me about Dome Four and that crazy dame, the way a woman will, you know, when she knows she's got the key to your air supply.

Money's a terrible thing. We got to where we were taking in more than we could spend, even paying up ahead for Brud's operations and treatments. Her conscience was easy because she really was doing a pretty good job on the lackwits we were pulling in. We were getting away with it; then it was our misfortune to get a really big chance.

I tell you, rich won't describe it. Plutonium strikes on Mars ain't in the same orbit. A man who owned all the patents on rocket propulsion would have had just the ante in this game.

I knew it was too good to be true. Like when you first start on the run to Mars and you think the techs have given you a perfect tape because you can see Mars about the fourteenth week, and you keep on seeing her, but you don't stop to think that means you're undershooting until the rescue rockets start buzzing around you, throwing grapplers and missing, and cursing you for every son of a march they can lay tongue to. No, believe me, when things look too rosy, that's the time to break gravity and set a no orbit course, if it takes every gram of fuel you've got.

If I'd lit the tube when I first saw that woman . . . oh, not Cybemia! The rich one. Rich one! What a pale way that is to describe Dona Luisa. Richest one, that's more like it. Squared rich, that's better: her money didn't just breed like some ordinary rich millionaire's, her money cubed itself every twenty four hours.

And the analyzer couldn't read her!

Unprecedented, say you? Right you are, says I, but that's another pale pink word for what was a raw red reality.

One of our suckers brought her in. They'd been on a wild orbit for three or four days, it looked like, and both needed an hour of breath-

ing CO₂ and then about twenty-three more on straight oxygen. Cybemia was a little contemptuous of our clientele by this time, and these two just fitted her feelings like a pigskin glove with the bristles inside. She had built a permanent hallucination of herself into the machine so she didn't have to be anywhere near it, at least not while the preliminary trepanning was going on.

We were in the office, counting money. Brud's new face was paid for, and almost grown onto him, too. She was thinking about closing down and going back to school, she that had cozened more cerebellums into involuntary sanity than you could shake a garlic bulb at; and I was trying to work myself up to the "Barkis is willin'" routine. Not for the money! What's money? So many jets to your credit— it's like fuel in a tank, not worth a hot hogan 'til you burn it. I been rich before and I'll be rich again. It's separating the grabbers from their gelt that I enjoy. The intellectual pleasure is just about balanced by the emotional suspense. No, it was the girl. When she was in the same room, I itched all over; and when she wasn't, I twitched steady.

I didn't know these two drunks were any different from our regular run of glue sniffers when they came in. And he wasn't; she was.

"Here's my friend, Dona Luisa, the richest old bat in Mexico," he giggled (talking to the illusion, you see). "Her problem is that she thinks like a man, Cybemia. Be a sweet and reprogram her in the right direction, won't you?"

Cybernia snorted. "Well, that's not his problem anyway."

I laughed and got out of her way, because it wasn't really like her to be unsympathetic to a sucker (she always thought of them as patients, you see?), so I knew she was out of sorts.

I should have stayed. Still, I don't know what I could have done. The worst happens when you least expect it. It was just Fenagle's Law in full, subtle operation.

I did see the woman on the screen. She was a really theatrical brunette, with just the first streak of gray in her hair. You wouldn't see the gray when it was done right, but now it was all in wild disorder, and she was swaying, not like a drunk about to fall over, but with her feet planted wide, like a votary in torment. She had a Zapotec kind of face (like the smiler with the crown, you know); but she didn't look Zapotec. That lovely Indian face was all twisted with some sort of inexpressible pain. She had on a brocaded dress in gold and silver that was snagged and ripped and half off, off far enough that you could see the figure was genuine: a real armful of woman!

Far gone. She was far gone. Cybernia's "globe" voice told her to take off her shoes, and with two gestures, she took off every stitch she had on. That got her 'Bernie's full attention . . . and mine too. You take a surface car round to the old Ministry of Transportation Building today after siesta and look at *that* figure Zuniga did of the woman with the sheaf of corn on the door

post by the plaza. That'll give you an idea . . . only think of that face, ravaged with sorrow and streaked with tears, and that body racked with sobs, begging for help.

With one hand, 'Bernie hit the switch that shut off the tell-tale board so I couldn't see what the machines were producing, the switch to the screen with the other, shot me out the door with a phrase I didn't know she knew, and slid out the other door and into her globe — all while that brocade dress and its underpinnings were still in the air. She had *work* on her hands.

I should have stayed . . . but I don't know what I could have done. As I say, Dona Luisa defied the analyzer. She did what she was told, and there was no conscious resistance. Couldn't be, anyway. You can't resist what you don't know is happening. She just didn't come through.

Cybernia told me it was like looking at her "Martian" self. You *know* there's a body behind those mirrors, you *know* the mirrors are there, but still you can't *see* anything but the illusion.

Only in this case, for somebody as used to walking around barefooted in other people's brains as 'Bernie, it was even weirder. Blood pressure, temperature, pulse, respiration, bile dripping out of the liver (overworked with all that aged tequila), sweat glands, kidneys, all the *physical* activity was there on the board, she told me. But the mind! Nothing. Worse than nothing.



Static. The *physical* activity of the brain was there, all upside down and inside out, but nothing she could do to it would make it add up to a mind, which after all is something wholly different from the physical activity in which it's embedded.

She took her head out of the globe and went over and *looked* at the woman, Cyberrnia told me. *Looked* at her, and there she was, pumping away at the treadles, pulling, pushing, mouthing her answers, sweat pouring off her with effort. And back inside the globe, nothing. Just a jumble.

Cyberrnia was in a research worker's heaven . . . and hell at the same time. *What* could be causing this woman to louse up the machine this way? A happy lifetime of a great researcher might go into just formulating the right questions. Michelson didn't leave his mark for precision experiments, you know . . . it was for asking, "If the ether's there, why doesn't it slow down this light beam?"

But on the other hand, she couldn't talk to a soul in her field. What, and admit she was a party to the engaging fraud I had set up around her ideas? She was afraid they would form a hollow square of professors and snip off her Phi Beta Kappa key, or her — something, I don't know.

Meanwhile the sucker was getting sicker. 'Bernie was so fascinated by the problem, the invisible brain, so to speak, that she quit watching the money; but Mrs. Gallagher didn't raise no idiot children,

and I was raising the ante every time our rich lady showed up. There didn't seem to be any figure I could name that would make her winee.

She was always gassed. Maybe that's why. My own catwalk diagnosis was that she was going to be ignited by some stray spark from our machine before we could cure her. I don't know why she came back. We weren't doing her as much good as a rust spot in a rocket tube, and there are more limits to hypnosis than you may know. In credits, we had to charge her all the thrust her engines would stand, though, because 'Bernie had cured every other customer we had and run them all off with a bad taste in the mouth; as if she made them feel that when they realized how outrageous our bills were, then they were well.

No head for business. She was only interested in that invisible brain. Bruddie got his certificate, gave his new photo to Social Security to match his old fingerprints, and shipped right out to old Rusty.

He still thought he was going to hit it big in those old high Geiger hummocks.

She hardly knew he was leaving. This whole thing grew up out of her affection for him, and now she gave him a kiss and a "Be careful" and sent him right back out to be cooked whole next time, like as not.

And heavy as I was drawing on Dona Luisa's fuel, don't you think Cyberrnia was flaming it faster than I could pump it? Between new ma-

chinery, engineering checks on the old, and restructuring the analytical elements, we ran up bills that would have exhausted the Federated U.N.'s credit, and they nearly used up ours. I tell you, we were as rich as a Martian who's found a good, cheap substitute for water.

As bright as 'Bernie is, still she's logical; and I don't think she ever would have solved the problem if Dona Luisa's brother hadn't come to rescue her from us. He was a business man, polite as Charles Vee, you know, and just as tough. He came in with a little reel of punched tape from Banco Longoria's Mexico City branch.

I knew what was on it: the record of his sister's payouts to us. Every inch of that tape would have bought Tenochtitlan ten times over the day Cortez first saw it.

What could I say: "Don Hermano, I'm keeping your sister crazy so my girl can have some fun?" or, "Say, did you know your sister's head is hollow?"

And it was sure no use to try the mystery religion angle on him. He looked as if he'd been there when the water burns and the serpants talk and hadn't been a hot hagan impressed. He had the other Zapotec face, big beak nose and sharp chin, but still a brother's resemblance to Dona Luisa. Somehow he looked more familiar than that to me, but his hair was that shiny silver, and I kept trying to see it raven wing black, and couldn't.

He said, very politely, that he wanted to see his sister. I had opened Cybernia into the conver-

sation as soon as he ID'd himself, and she put on quite a little show. By that time, she had the equipment to start her own creation, pretty near, and she cracked about a forty-thousand volt streak of lightning through the office. Then while we were still fighting the ozone, she doused all the lights and made the door to the tank creak away like a grave opening itself.

He was tough, though. It never shook the ash off that Orizaba cigar he was smoking.

We went out into the tank, and there was his sister, peddling away on those treadles, and working that learning machine like crazy. (Ha ha.) Of course my sweetie transfixed him as soon as she caught his eye. We never improved on that original ripple technique. It always got attention.

When she had his shoes off and put him to work on the treadles, Dona Luisa got a rest and in a minute, Cybernia came swarming out of the globe and woke me up. She was all excited, but she remembered to apologize for hypnotizing me too.

She jerked me in the office and switched on the repeaters, and just stood there, hands on her hips. "Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

I hated to admit to her I couldn't read her dials and pen squiggles. I can read tape and punches like everyone, and I do a pretty good job of hearing when it's just simple machines talking to each other. I never walk into a door at a posh restau-

rant, because I can hear the scanner ordering the servo mechanism, whether it's Open Sesame or Shut Says-me. But her stuff was just too much for me.

She hit me a couple of times on the chest to relieve her tension and then pointed to the whole board. "He's not there either!"

Well? Mean anything to you? It didn't to me either, until we got to talking it over. First she'd cut one of them in, then the other. Finally she wheeled in another learning machine and kept them both at it, walking forty miles a day sitting down.

I'll say this much. That long a course with 'Bernie would sure put somebody in shape. Dona Luisa had the figure of a once-handsome woman when she came to us. Now there was no more once upon a time about it. She was a magnificent incarnation of Indian beauty. Of course, 'Bernie didn't work her in the altogether any more (prudish), but I saw her striding in and out. The exercise was bringing the rose up under the olive in her complexion and the lines were dropping out of her face. If she'd ever looked at herself, she'd have been well. But we didn't even know what it was that obsessed her so passionately, because she was invisible in the only way that counted.

First we asked, Could it be all Mexican brains are invisible? Didn't make sense. No basic psychologic function has ever been found to be *ethnically* determined, let alone *nationally*. Then we asked, Could this be cultural? And again we said no,

Mexico hasn't got that kind of homogeneous culture . . . and there was our answer, in reverse. Mexico has made the preservation of her separate Indian cultures a *national passion*; and these two people weren't like from Acapulco and Chihuahua, one a Nayarit and the other a Tarahumara. They were from the identical culture. So there was our answer, and we just needed a few more Zapotecs as controls to demonstrate it.

Only it wasn't. They didn't. All the other Zapotecs we tested showed up on the dials as well as I did.

V

In the end, I solved it by being clumsy.

Cybernia thought she had spotted a pattern of significance and wanted to run the tape back and see it on the dials again. The takeup reel stayed on slow when she reversed, and there was a big pile-up before she noticed it. I charged in to un-snarl it, and tore the tape. In the end, the simplest way out was to tear off the whole snarled section, splice it back in and get it wound at the right speed.

Cybernia was transfixed. The splice took about three minutes to run, and she never said a word. Then she had it back. Then she had it back again. Finally she belted me on the shoulder. "What did you do?"

I looked and turned sick. Here she thought she had something, and I had just switched tape ends when I spliced it. She was seeing all the

readings backwards . . . and upside down, you might say. I showed her the dark line on the tape was on the wrong edge, and kind of ducked. I figured she'd hit me with something more than her fist. That little old gun, maybe.

Instead, she just played the tape back one more time. Then she looked at me, dead serious, and said, "It's the mark of genius to recognize the implications of your work, even when you didn't expect them. Everything I've done has shown me that human beings are an infinite variety. 'Normal' to these machines is such a wide spread that it wouldn't be tolerated in a factory that manufactured toy rockets. Human beings must be a still evolving, still mutating species. Here's the living proof that there is no abnormality in electroencephalography that isn't 'normal' for somebody."

She started cutting switches and turning on the hypno-tape that sent our sibling subjects out and brought them back the next day like a pair of flatworms rising to the sun.

"These two people — brother and sister — I'll bet it's a family trait — dominant, got to be, they've both got it — they're just polarized — something — the reverse of everybody else in the world. It'll only be a few days' work with Dona Luisa now that I can see her."

So it was; but you don't take somebody through the valley of the shadow the way we had la Senora without arousing their human dependence. Dona Luisa was the most converted convert in the history of psychic technology. It wasn't the

conditioning, after a little; I mean, not the conditioning Cybernia had given her. It was the deep human urge to lean on somebody, or *something*. Seemed like la Senora wasn't sure whether it was me or Cybernia she owed her sanity to.

Then the air gave out. What do I mean? I mean disaster struck. The reactor blew up. Put it any awful way you want: the universe collapsed into the primordial atom and then blew up . . . only I'm still alive and in chaos.

Cybernia unpeeled the inside of Dona Luisa's skull to the very trauma that had crippled her . . . and don't you think it turned out it happened on a trip she made to Mars as a girl? When Cybernia found *that* out, she fixed Dona Luisa's dependence on me as tight as the rocket jockey's suit in the story, and she disappeared like liquid oxygen on a spring morning. I trailed her to London, but they said she had come here, so here I am . . .

He drew deep on the taro of beer in his rusty fist.

"But, Galeg," I said, "what has a tourist trip to Mars got to do with you?"

At that moment, a giggling troop of the professional street urchins the government pays to hang around the tourist section up on Avenida Juarez erupted around the glass screen at the door, piping, "*Senora! Aqui! Aqui!*" Gallagher got purposefully to his feet.

"Hold 'em off 'til I can get out through the kitchen, won't you?"

Why, it seems Luisa was married on Mars. She was a blonde then. That's why I thought I recognized Don Hermano, and didn't recognize her. You guessed it: she was wedded in the ancient Martian marriage ceremony. She believes it's her destiny to lay the egg that'll start up Martian evolution again. Crazy, no? Pay the tab. I'll square up at your hotel."

Just as I was about to remind Gallagher that he didn't know where I was staying and that, in point of fact, it was a guest house near the

bull ring, his Martian tan paled visibly and he vanished behind the ice counter where Prendes displays its fresh red snappers. I heard a mellow voice cry, "Ah! Ah! My Lizard Prince, I am coming! All Mars awaits our heir!"

As I turned to see, I am sorry to say a magnificent woman with a rosy olive complexion and a wild, rolling eye tripped over my foot in the aisle. I didn't wait for the waiter to bring me change. There wasn't time!

END

Next month in *If*!

One of everybody's all-time favorite
science-fiction writers returns to *If* —

THE FOUNDLING STARS

by Hal Clement

(Author of *Ice World*, *Needle*, *Mission of Gravity*, etc.)

A Complete Short Novel

PEACE CORPS

by Robert Moore Williams

And continuing the thrilling new serial

THE HOUR BEFORE EARTHRISE

by James Blish

Science Fiction's Holiday

by LIN CARTER

*What sf fans do at the end
of every summer — and why!*

ONCE a year the science-fiction world gets together and has itself a sort of birthday party. Technically this shindig is termed The Annual World Science Fiction Convention, but this stern, imposing label conceals a good excuse for science-fiction people — both fans and the professional writers, artists and editors alike — to have themselves a big party.

The "Con," as informal usage has it, has been around for more than a quarter of a century now, and it's the annual high-point of the fannish year. It gives people like us a chance to visit a new city every year, and hobnob with people we know by repute, or through their work. Every year the convention moves to a different city, on a rotation system that decides the *area* but not the *city*.

Hmm. I can see I'm going to have to elucidate. Okay: it's agreed the Con will be held "somewhere" in the midwest one year; then on the east coast the next; then on the west coast; then back to the center of the country again. The

different cities in each region may submit a "bid" at this year's Convention. If chosen, the winner of the bid is host at next year's Con. Naturally, only those cities with a healthy, active fan club make a bid — or sometimes (as is the case this year) two or three smaller clubs in nearby cities will sort of consolidate to present a stronger bid.

How did all this get started?

There had been "local" conventionettes just about from the very beginnings of science-fiction fandom. These were an afternoon long, or even lasted a full day, and attracted fans and pros in their immediate region. But back in the late 1930's, one such little con in Newark, New Jersey, attracted such a large and enthusiastic gathering that it was only a matter of time before the idea caught on. This particular get-together called itself "The First National Science Fiction Convention" and could boast of no less than 125 attendees! Gosh wow. The fan world was agog. And then

— lo and behold — one group put on the *First World Science Fiction Convention*.

The year was 1939. Naturally, the place just had to be New York, the city where so many major features of the fannish "way of life" were inaugurated. The Con had a stellar line-up of major speakers: famed cover artist Frank R. Paul, Ray Cummings (author of *The Girl in the Golden Atom*), John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, and others. An announcement was read, reporting the establishment of something called Arkham House and the forth coming publication of some sort of a memorial volume dedicated to the late H.P. Lovecraft and titled *The Outsider and Others*. Attendees were urged to support this venture and place orders on the spot, the price being \$3.50. (Yes, 1939 was quite a while ago, wasn't it? Today you'll see *The Outsider* offered for sale by rare book dealers at prices like \$150.00!)

Something like 150 people attended this first of all Cons. Many were famous celebrities of science fiction of the day. Jack Williamson came from New Mexico. Forrest J. Ackerman hove into port from distant California (and among his entourage was a young fan named Ray Bradbury). Isaac Asimov and Eando Binder were on hand. Despite some feuding and disturbances, it was a whale of a Convention and everybody had a jolly time . . . so much so that it became a regular thing.

Cons were held thereafter, at dif-

ferent cities like Denver and New Orleans and Los Angeles. Since fans have a happy habit of inventing slangish neologisms galore, this first New York convention was labelled "the Nycon." Other Cons followed suit: we had the "Denvention" and the "Nolacon" and even a "Pacifi-con" at the places noted above.

The annual Con has been held every year (except during World War II, when things got disrupted and a few years were skipped over). This year's Con will be 24th World Science Fiction Convention.

What happens at a World Con, anyway?

All sorts of things. Tradition demands there be a Guest of Honor — or "GoH" (remember what I said about slang?) at each. This gives the science-fiction world a chance to honor its most important members. Usually these are writers, people like Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Murray Leinster. Said GoH makes a major speech which is often printed later in one of the fanzines.

Quite often there's a banquet — sometimes with entertainment. One such that I attended had Theodore Sturgeon whangin' away on his guitar during the meal.

Two staples, but rarely omitted from the Con program, are the *auction* (where everyone has a chance to bid for things like rare books, original paintings used on science-fiction magazine covers, autographed manuscripts and such like, including items like clothbound sets

of *Unknown Worlds* complete) and the costume ball (where one may encounter Martians, robots, Bug Eyed Monsters, and a fantastic pageant of spectacular creatures).

And — ever since the 11th Convention, in Philadelphia (yclept the “Philcon”) — there’s been the annual “Hugo” awards. This silver spaceship, named in honor of Hugo Gernsback, who founded the first professional science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, is awarded every year. Actual award categories fluctuate a little from Con to Con, but it’s generally given to the year’s best science-fiction novel, novelette, short story, illustrator, professional magazine, fanzine and (sometimes) to the most promising new writer and best dramatic presentation. The “Oscar” of science fiction was thought of by one Hal Lynch, who first suggested the idea of an annual award. Hal is, of course, a fan from New York.

Sometimes the Con has a special feature. Like the science-fiction ballet at the Newyorkon in 1956. Or the “genuine” dianetics demonstration at New Orleans. Once in a while (and not half as often as I’d like), the Con resurrects a classic fantasy movie for the delight of Con-goers.

All this formal program stuff to the side, gang, the World Con is really just an excuse for a week-end-long party. Oh, sure you see and meet and mingle with science-fiction celebrities (and sometimes outside celebrities: cartoonist Al Capp was at the Newyorkon, and horror movie star Christopher Lee stalked about

at last year’s Con) — but the most fun is had *after* hours, at the epic parties. Conventions, you see, are held at large hotels, and out-of-towners take suites and rooms in the Con hotel — perfect for throwing all-night gabfests and holding week-end-long parties.

And the things you’ll remember most of all, after the Con is over and you’re back home again, back to the humdrum job or classroom, are not the speeches and banquets, but the little things that happened: the chance meetings, the new friends made, the old friends met, the talks you’ve had with people you’ve wanted to talk to for years. The two things I most remember about my first Convention, after a dozen years or more, is having martinis with Cyril Kornbluth and trading clerihevs and limericks, and a hilarious two hours over a breakfast table shared with Robert Bloch (years and years before he wrote *Psycho* and got to be a Real Celebrity).

Last year, the World Convention was in London. (England, that is, not Connecticut.) The Guest of Honor was one of Britain’s newest and most brilliant science-fiction writers, Brian W. Aldiss. The fans of America were pretty well represented, and, of course, the science-fiction people from England, Ireland and Scotland were out in force. One thing that makes Cons fun is getting a good look at a city new to you, and the conventioners from the U.S. had an exciting time seeing Piccadilly Circus, Buckingham Palace and Big Ben.

**This year in your town,
next year in mine**

I've mentioned the rotation system; now let me explain. According to this system, eligibility as a Con-site shuttles back and forth between the east, west and middle states. Any foreign city can make a bid at any time. If they win, the rotation system is merely *suspended* for that year, and resumes when next year rolls around. While most Cons are situated in the United States (which has more fans *per capita* than countries overseas, and more active and numerous fan clubs), the Con is, of course, a *World* Convention. London has been the Convention city twice now, and Toronto, Canada, has also been host to the science-fiction world.

This year (according to the rotation system), the midwest gets the Convention. Then, in 1967, it will be one of the larger cities on the East Coast. 1968 will see a World Con somewhere along the Pacific. But let's get back to *this* year.

**Where'll you be this
Labor Day Weekend?**

This year the science-fiction world salutes Cleveland, Ohio, and fans and professionals from all the fifty states and several European countries will be gathering there for the 24th World Science Fiction Convention.

The place: the Sheraton-Cleveland Hotel on Public Square. Very convenient for out-of-town travelers. It's located right *above* the Cleveland railway terminal; and it's the

first stop for transportation if you're coming from the airport. There are *five* restaurants in the hotel, no less, and one of them is happily open 24 hours a day, so you can have some hot coffee after one of those all-night-long parties. The time is the Labor Day "long" weekend — September 2, 3, and 4, not to mention 5. Information about the Convention can be had by writing the 24th World Science Fiction Convention, Box 1372, Cleveland, Ohio, 44103.

There'll be a costume ball and a banquet. Prizes will be given for the Most Beautiful (*costume*, that is, not the person inside it), Most Authentic (that is, if you want to come as Gandalf the Gray or Conan the Cimmerian or Captain Future, make sure you've got the details straight), and several others. One possible category is Best Presentation: that is, if you want to appear in a cloud of smoke or plan to enter the ball hall (well, what else can I call it?) being chased by a dinosaur — you've got a good chance of copping *that* one. People planning a costume appearance with special effects are begged to consult the costume ball administration (care of box number above) for official cooperation.

There'll be tables for hucksters, too. That is, people wanting to sell books, magazines, original cover art, science-fiction curiosities, fanzines and other stuff. So bring plenty of loose cash.

Guest of Honor at Cleveland's Convention will be L. Sprague de Camp, who has been writing fantasy and science fiction since the

1940's. You've seen his name on a shelf or two of your favorite books — *Lest Darkness Fall*, *The Incomplete Enchanter*, *Land of Unreason*, *An Elephant For Aristotle*, and a couple dozen more. Mr. de Camp is a globe-trotter who intersperses writing science fiction and fantasy with some marvelous historical novels and non-fiction books on archeology and ancient history. He is about nine feet tall, bearded as a Viking god, speaks forty-seven languages (including those of Lost At-

lantis and Sunken Lemuria), and is one of the most witty, urbane and entertaining speakers you could ever wish to meet. *He* usually appears in a cloud of smoke, and I hope the costume ball administration has warned everybody.

This Con is to be known as "the Tricon," by the way. Reason is, three cities — Cleveland, Cincinnati and Detroit — consolidated their convention bids.

So . . . will we be seeing you there? END

What's New in Freezing?

A symposium on the latest word on immortality through freezing and revival, with Robert C. W. Ettinger, Long John Nebel, Victor Borge, and others — plus many other science-fiction and science-fact stories and features — all in the new *Worlds of Tomorrow*. Watch for it!

EARTH BLOOD

by KEITH LAUMER & ROSEL G. BROWN

Illustrated by WOOD

*Roan battled his way back to
the Earth across a galaxy that
swarmed with aliens — for what?*

XXXII

Roan and his three men walked, guns in their hands, along the echoing corridor. No one challenged them.

"Why don't we pull out now, chief?" Sidis demanded. "We can take our pick of the tubs on the ramp."

"That isn't what I came for," Roan said. "I have unfinished business to take care of."

"Why bother knocking off any more of these Terries?" Askor queried. "Not much sport in it, if you ask me."

"I didn't!" Roan snapped. "Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open! We're not in the clear yet."

What Has Gone Before . . .

Roan Cornay, a human born in mysterious circumstances on the outworld Tambool, grows up among aliens and is kidnapped by a traveling Extravanzoo. The 'zoo's ship is destroyed by the pirate Henry Dread, whose band Roan joins. Henry's own ship is destroyed in an encounter with a Niss vessel and Roan shoots Henry in an argument. Roan then assumes command of a lifeboat, boards the Niss ship, finds it long deserted; but it contains a captured Imperial Terran Navy ship which Roan and his crew take over. Roan, seeking his true origin and fabled Terra, heads for Tambool and finds the old family slave, T'hoy hoy, who can tell him of his origins only that he is pure blood human and that he was bought as an embryo at the Thieves' Market.

Roan finds the sleazy agency dealing in embryos and forces the ancient being who sold him to show him his record, which reveals that Roan originally came from an experimental station on Alpha Centauri and was the only survivor of a shipment of embryos. Roan heads for Alpha Centauri, Rim Headquarters for the Imperial Terran Navy, turns his ship over to one of the crew and goes with only his three toughest, most loyal men toward the Imperial Terran Navy headquarters on second from Centaurus. As Roan, Askor, Sidis and Poion approach ITN headquarters, their lifeboat is boarded by Imperial Terran Navy men. Roan tricks the ITN Commander into turning over his vessel to him, and takes the ship into Rim Headquarters.

Roan is then entertained at a luxurious dinner party by Commodore Quex, a cruel, decadent humanoid who tells Roan, at knife point, that it was he who stole the batch of human embryos from Starbird's keeping, and that in turn the embryos were pirated by the Shah of the Gallian planet, who was at that moment deposed and the embryos stolen again and at that point were brought to the Thieve's Market on Tambool. Roan and his three men overcome a murderous attack by Quex and his crew, and Roan kills Quex, who requests an honorable death.

Trishinist wasn't at the party — or any of his men."

A thunderclap racketed along the corridor. Roan spun, went flat.

"Hold your fire!" he roared. Trishinist tittered and stepped out of the half-open door that had concealed him. There was at least a

dozen more men, emerging from the shelter of tattered drapes and chipped marble columns, peering down from a wrought-metal gallery, guns ready.

"I heard the, er, sounds of celebration," the Terran confided. "It seemed wise to have a chat with

you before you, ah, continue with what you're about."

"We've already talked," Roan snapped. "Tell your Terries to put their guns away before my men get nervous and shoot them out of their hands."

"Umm. You Geeks *do* look efficient. Still, I daresay one or two of my chaps would live long enough to dispatch the four of you. So perhaps we'd best call a truce."

Roan got to his feet. His men stood, facing outward in a tight circle.

"I have an appointment with Admiral Starbird," Roan said. "Or have you forgotten?"

"I remember," Trishinist said quickly. "You haven't, um, changed your plans?"

"Why should I?"

"I thought perhaps — after all the excitement of the banquet —"

"You knew about Quex's plans for the evening?"

"I suspected something of the sort might take place. After all, strangers . . ."

"Thanks for letting me know."

"Well, if you couldn't handle that group — what good are you to me, ummm?"

"We're going on now," Roan said.

"Just so," Trishinist agreed. "But leave the guns."

Roan looked at Trishinist. There were small bubbles at the corners of his mouth.

"All right," he said. "Put 'em down, men."

"What for, Boss?" Askor inquired.

"Sidis still has his knife. That's all he needs."

Trishinist shuddered. Roan tossed his gun aside. The others followed suit.

"Now what, Chief?" Sidis asked.

"Now we get on with the job," Roan turned on his heel and started toward the apartment of Admiral Starbird.

It was silent on the corridor. The guards on the admiral's door were gone. Roan stopped, faced Trishinist.

"Send your Men away," He said. "You can stay. Keep your gun, if you feel like it."

Trishinist lifted his lip to show his pearly teeth. "You're giving *me* orders?" he said in a wondering tone.

"You want them to see it?"

Trishinist started. "I see," he murmured. He turned, gave crisp orders. All but four of the Men turned, formed up in a squad, marched away.

"They'll be waiting," Trishinist cooed. "Now —"

The door behind Roan clicked and swung in. Admiral Starbird stood in the opening, a gun in his hand. "Ten — *shun!*" he commanded.

Trishinist's Men instinctively straightened and in the instant's pause, Askor, standing nearest them, swung and brought his hand down like an axe across the neck of one, caught his gun as it fell, swiveled on the next as he brought his gun around and the two weapons fired as one. The guard spun, falling, his gun still firing. A vivid scar raked the wall and door jamb and caught Admiral Starbird full in the chest.

The old man slammed back against the wall. He fell slowly, sprawling full length in a growing stain of brilliant crimson.

Trishinist made a noise like repressed retching and stumbled back. Askor brought his gun around as the remaining two guards backed, white with shock but with guns leveled on Roan and his crew.

"You've killed him," Trishinist gasped. "The Admiral is *dead!*"

"I can nail the pair of youse, easy," Askor grinned at the gunners. "Who's first?"

Roan knelt at Starbird's side, ignoring the confrontation of guns.

"Admiral." He tried the pulse at the corded veins of the wrist. There was a faint flutter. "Get your doctors, Trishinist!"

"Yes . . . yes . . . Fetch Surgeon Splie, Linerman! Hurry!" A man turned and darted away.

Starbird's eyes opened. He stared at the men holding guns aimed at Roan. "At ease," he said, and died.

"You killed the admiral," Roan said slowly, looking up at Trishinist.

"Not I," Trishinist gasped, backing. "It was an accident. I won't have that on my conscience. It was them!" He pointed at the two guards. "Blunderers!" he croaked. "You've killed a man of the True Blood!"

"Not me, Captain! Strigator was the one!" The guards looked shaken, still covering Roan and Poion while Askor covered them.

"Shall I kill 'em?" Askor asked.

"Cover Trishinist." Askor's gun flicked to point at the small Man's chest. Poion licked his lips and eyed the gun on the floor.

"Don't try it," Askor rumbled.

"You have no chance," Trishinist said weakly, his eyes on the gun in Askor's hands. "Surrender and I'll deal leniently with you."

"Give us a ship," Roan said. "We'll go quietly."

"You with the gun, Trishinist addressed Askor. "Give up that weapon and you'll go free."

"What about the Cap'n and these two lunkheads?"

"You'll go free. Never mind about them."

Askor grinned, holding the gun steady.

"Very well, then. There's been enough bloodshed. You'll all go free."

"I'll keep the gun," Askor said.

"But I won't use it unless I have to. How about that boat now?"

"Certainly." Trishinist licked his lips. "I'll give the orders. But only after you surrender the gun." Sweat was trickling down the small Man's face.

"What about it, Cap'n?"

"Do I have your word as a Man?" Roan asked. "A ship, and no pursuit—for all four of us?"

Trishinist nodded quickly. "Yes, of course. My word on it."

"All right, Askor," Roan said.

"Wait a minute, Boss!"

"Don't do it, Chief," Sidis barked. "Askor can get the both of 'em while they're shooting us! Then him and you can take fancy-pants here fer a hostage—"

Roan shook his head. "Put the gun down."

Askor made a jabbing motion to-

ward Trishinist, and the Captain jumped back. Askor laughed and tossed the gun aside with a clatter. Roan faced Trishinist.

The Man took out a handkerchief, mopped at his face.

"Very well," he said. He made a curt gesture to the two armed men. "Take these stupid pigs to D level."

With a bellow Poion jumped. The guard's gun shrieked and spouted blue lightning, and Poion whirled and fell, smoke churning from a gaping, blackened wound in his chest. He groaned and rolled on his back, and charred ribs showed before the blood welled out to hide the sight.

"Askor! Sidis!" Roan snapped. "Stand fast! That's an order!"

Roan looked at Trishinist, smiling. "You surprise me, Captain," he said. "I didn't think even a traitor like you would disgrace his Manhood in front of a couple of cross-bloods."

Trishinist tore his eyes from Roan's. "There's been enough killing. I'm ill with killing. Take them away—alive." He turned back to Roan. "I have every right to execute you—all of you—out of hand. I'm sparing your lives. Consider yourselves lucky. You'll be questioned, of course—later." He turned and stalked away.

"Poion," Roan called. "Are you . . . can you . . .?"

"I have taken my death-wound, Captain," Poion gasped. "How strange . . . that so many years of life . . . can end in such . . . a little moment . . . and the worlds go on without me . . ."

"So long, Poion," Sidis said. "Take

a pull at the Hell-horn for me."

"Nice try, old pal," Askor said hoarsely. "I think maybe you're the lucky one."

The Man who had gone for the doctor came up with a short fat Man in tow. He glanced at the Admiral, shuddered, shook his head.

"What about him?" A guard pointed at Poion. The doctor pursed his lips at the wound. "No chance," he said and turned away.

"Surgeon—have you . . . no medicine to cure the pain of living . . ." Poion whispered.

"Hmmpfh." The doctor opened a small case, took out a hypospray, pressed it briefly against Poion's laboring chest. A breath sighed out and then there was silence.

"Let's go," the guard said.

XXXIII

Askor reached up and gripped the chain that linked the manacle on his left wrist to a ring set high in the concrete wall. He pulled himself up high enough to see through the foot-square barred opening in the cell wall. He grunted and dropped back.

"Nothing, Cap'n. Some kind of tunnel, I guess. We're fifty feet underground anyways."

Sidis squatted at the end of his tether near the door, angling the blade of his polished machete through the bars to catch the faint light from along the corridor.

"They's a guard post about thirty yards along," he said. "One Terry with a side-arm."

"You shoulda let us jump 'em

Cap'n," Askor said. "It woulda been better than this crummy joint. It stinks." He wrinkled his wide nose to dramatize the odor.

"I can smell it," Roan said. "And as long as we're alive to smell things we still have a chance."

Sidis was eyeing the barred door. "Them bars don't look so tough," he said. "I bet I could bend 'em — if I could reach 'em."

"What do you figure'll happen, Chief?" Askor said.

"As soon as Trishinist recovers his stomach, he'll be along to find out who sent us and why,"

Askor guffawed. "That'll be a laugh," he said. "He'll twist and slice us till he makes a mess a mud-pig would puke at, but we won't tell him nothing. We can't. We don't know nothing! That'll gravel him."

"If we was to bend them bars," Sidis said, "one of us could slide out and get to the joker with the blaster. Then he could come back and burn them chains off."

"Wise up," Askor said. "You got to get the chain off the first one first."

Sidis hefted his machete. "They left me this," he said thoughtfully. "Them crazy Terries. I guess they're so used to guns they forgot a knife's a weapon too."

"So what? It won't cut chromalloy."

Sidis backed from the wall until the six-foot chain attached to his wrist came taut.

"How much time you think we got, Cap'n?" he asked.

"They'll be along soon."

Sidis licked his lips. "Then I bet-

ter get moving." He brought the machete up and with one terrific stroke severed his left hand.

They stood in a dark room, amid a jumble of piping and tanks.

"Smells like a derelict's bilge," Askor snorted.

"Dead end," Sidis grunted. His stump was bound in rags torn from Askor's shirt and there was a tourniquet around his massive upper arm. His face looked pale and damp.

Roan went to the center of the room, studying the floor. "Maybe not," he said.

Askor came up. There was a three-foot metal disk set in the floor, with a ring near its edge.

Roan gripped the ring and lifted the lid, exposing a dark hole and the rungs of a corroded ladder. Water glistened at the bottom.

The voices outside were suddenly louder. Askor stepped to the door, looked out. "Oh-oh. They're right on our tail."

"I hope they get here quick," Sidis said. "I don't want to miss nothing."

"Are you well enough to travel?"

Sidis nodded. "Never better, Chief." He took a step, staggered, then stood firm.

"Askor, you go first," Roan said quickly. "Sidis, you follow him."

"Too bad we had to burn the door. We could maybe of foxed 'em." Askor started down the ladder. "Come on, Sidis. Shake it up."

"I'll stay here," he said. "They got to pass the door one at a time, and Gut-biter'll get all the action he wants."

"Down the hole," Roan snapped. "Fast!"

"Cap'n, I ain't —"

"That's an order!"

Sidis started down, awkwardly, one-handed.

"Hey, Chief, wonder where this thing leads to?" Askor's voice echoed from below.

Roan knelt at the manhole. "If you're lucky, it will take you out to a drainage ditch in the open."

Sidis turned his tattooed face up. "What's that mean, Boss? If *we're* lucky?"

"I'm covering you," Roan said. "I'll give you a ten minute start and then follow."

Sidis started back up. Roan put out a hand. "If you get clear, wait for me ten minutes. Maybe they'll miss the door."

Below, Askor was shouting: "Hey, what's that? What's Cap'n saying?"

"Shut up and get moving. If you get through, come back and get me. With our cruiser you can blow this place wide open."

"We ain't going without you, Cap'n. You know better'n —"

"They won't kill me," Roan said. "I'm Pure Strain, remember? They'd burn you two down on sight."

"We come this far, we ain't —"

"Did you ever hear of discipline?" Roan said harshly. "This is our only chance. If I've tried to teach you anything, it's how to follow orders like Men instead of behaving like a bunch of Geeks!"

Sidis looked at Roan. "If that's what you want, Cap'n. But we'll come back. You stay alive, Cap'n."

"I'll stay alive. Get going!"

When they were gone, Roan slid the manhole cover back in place and turned to face the door.

Captain Trishinist lounged behind the wide desk in the office recently vacated by Admiral Starbird.

"Why?" he repeated sourly. "Seventy-two hours, holed up in a filthy sewage pumping room, without food, drink or sleep, aiming a gun at the door. Why? You must have known you'd be taken in the end."

Roan blinked at the fog before him. His head ached and his throat was like dried husks.

"Was it just for that precious pair of animals?" The captain's eyes seemed to glitter as he stared at Roan. "What hold had they on you?"

"Did they get clear?" Roan asked. His voice was blurry with fatigue.

"You're a fool," Trishinist said. "But you'll talk to me in time. There are methods for dealing with recalcitrants — effective methods."

"I'll bet they got through," Roan said. "Your kind couldn't stop them."

"Oh-hoh, you think to tempt me to angry disclosures!" The captain smirked. "How really quaint."

"You're so quaint you stink," Roan said. "But you can't touch me. You're afraid to. You'd gut your own grandmother and make bonfires out of children, but you can't kill a real Terry."

Trishinist glowered. "Don't press me too far, spy!"

Roan laughed aloud. "You're a

poor half-breed with pretensions, Trishinist. You're pitiful. Even my poor Gooks got past you."

Trishinist was on his feet, shaking with rage. "Your wretched creatures died in unspeakable agony an hour after you saw them last!"

"You're a liar," Roan said.

Trishinist spewed saliva and fury. "Dead!" he screeched. "I took them and stripped the hide from them alive!"

"Prove it. Show me the bodies."

"I'll show you nothing! Slave! Traitor! Spy! What need have I to prove —"

Roan laughed in his face. "Good for Askor. I knew he'd get through. I hope he stole one of your better ships."

"Take him away!" Trishinist screamed. "Put him in the Hole. Let him rot there!"

The Man holding the rope looped around Roan's neck jerked it, and Roan stumbled and almost fell.

"And when you're ready to tell me your heart's secrets, beg. And perhaps! Perhaps! I'll find time to listen!"

Trishinist was still fulminating as Roan was led along the corridor. The rope urged him roughly through a small door into a paved court, across it and out onto dry hard-packed dirt. The air was cold here, and the sparse stars of the Rim gleamed through mist. Roan stumbled on, determined not to fall.

The tugging at the rope stopped at last, and a rough hand shook him.

"Don't go to sleep standing up, you. Grab the rope — unless you want to hang!"

He took the slack rope on his hands, looping it around his forearms, and a blow on the back sent him reeling forward. And then he was falling, and his arms felt as though they had been torn from their sockets as he brought up short. He felt himself descending, the taut rope trembling in his grip. Above, the circle of dark-glowing sky dwindled. Down, down —

He slammed the mucky bottom with a force that knocked him flat. There was a whistling, and the coils of rope fell down about him. Far above, someone called:

"Trishinist won't kill ye, maybe, bucko! But if you die on your own, that's yer privilege!"

At first, Roan was hungry all the time. He was so hungry he chewed on the rope, and so thirsty he licked at the water that dripped everlastingly along the muddy circumference of the pit. And he tried, again and again, to climb the slimy sides of the hole. He scraped hand and foot holds with his fingers, even after his nails had broken off, and always the crevices he made oozed away. And once, when he'd gotten several feet up, someone flashed a light in to watch him, and laughed when he fell. Roan lay where he'd fallen, listening as the laughter echoed down the hollow hole.

One evening the old Man threw down the bread and then something else, something alive and bristly that struck Roan on the arm. As it leaped across his hand it bit him. It was hard to make out the shape of the thing in the dim twilight of the hole,



but it had red eyes that glittered and it seemed to be bigger than Roan's foot.

Its frightened bite made a vicious, screaming kind of pain and Roan could feel the blood oozing from his hand. He found the bread and then sat in the dark, his back against the cold, wet mud of the wall that soaked into the tatters of his clothes, and ate. He no longer longed for a bath, just as he no longer felt hungry all the time. He watched the red eyes glitter in the dark, listened for the scrabble of its claws. It leaped at the walls again and again, and fell back with a thud and a splash. Once in its panic it ran over Roan's lap and then leaped at the slime of the wall again.

Then, finally exhausted, it stopped, and crouched across the floor from Roan, panting horribly, loud as a Man. The panting slowed, and Roan watched, his hand aching, thinking of ways to kill the thing—later, when he felt better . . .

Roan awoke with a start. The rodent had crept to his foot, attempted to gnaw his ankle. He kicked out, cursing. The rat retreated a few feet, sat watching him, sensing his weakness.

Roan felt the gashed skin of his ankle, the slippery blood. The bite on his hand ached, a swelling, throbbing ache. He was dizzy and hot now and wiping his forehead, Roan realized it was dry, feverish. He shut out from his mind every thought except the need to survive. He wasn't going to be eaten alive by a rat at the bottom of a dark hole. Somehow, he was going to escape, and

get to Terra. And if it was impossible, he'd do it anyway.

“Ye still alive, boy?” came the voice.

Roan, startled, came out of his sleep. He saw the head silhouetted against the dark sky above.

“Yes, curse you. I'm still alive and so is the rat. Double the rations.”

The old Man laughed. “Got no orders to double the ration.”

The bread struck one side of the hole, bounced to the other and the rat ran out, went for the crumbs that the bouncing had dislodged.

Roan stood, shakily, pulled off his heavy metal-linked belt, tied his trousers in a knot at the top. They were inches too wide for him now, and the blades of his hips jutted out like knives. His dizziness turned to nausea whenever he moved. His strength had gone out of his body and into the earth . . .

Roan held the belt by one end, walked toward the rat, then swung with all his strength.

He caught the rodent as it turned to dart away and it screamed a woman's scream, kicking in the mud, filling the already fetid air with its smell of fear. Roan felt his knees going. He fell, lay in the mud, listening to the death struggle. Roan was afraid to believe it even when he could feel the death in it, so he strangled it again with his hands.

And knowing his weakness and starvation were probably going to kill him, feeling half insane but knowing he must have nourishment, he skinned the rat with the sharp edge of his belt buckle, and ate it.

It was three days and nights before the fever went away; Roan tried to rebuild his strength by pacing the circumference of the hole and swinging his arms, but he found it harder to exercise his mind, and sometimes all day would go by and it would seem like a minute, and other times a night would seem like centuries and the only time anything different happened was when it rained and the water rose knee-deep before it drained away. And time passed . . .

Then, one evening the old Man didn't come with the bread. Nor the next. And Roan could do nothing but wait, wait eternities. The stars came and went and came again, and Roan, trapped for so long in the dark, slimy pit, wondered if indeed he had died and this was what death was—an aching and a waiting forever and all of the world a circle of changing sky fifty feet above. Roan lay in one spot against the wall and ignored the pain in his stomach. He tried to sleep, and perhaps dream of Stellaraire and of food. Stellaraire bringing him food, feeding him the delicacies of a hundred worlds washed down with ancient Terran wines, Stellaraire smiling . . . and fading. The food disappeared and Gom Bulj was yelling and Henry Dread was yelling and . . .

Someone was yelling, up above, a head silhouetted against dark sky.

Roan saw the rope dangling in front of him. Was it real? For a long time it didn't seem worth the trouble of reaching up to find out. He had waited so long . . .

But he did reach up, almost without hope that it was a real rope, real people calling him to loop the rope around his waist. But he complied, and the rope pulled, lifting him, and it hurt, and he grabbed the rope, thinking he would never reach the top. Probably there was no top.

Then hard hands were on him, lifting him up, and a broad, ugly face was bending over him, and he saw the glint of light on filed steel teeth.

"Gee, Boss," Sidis said. And Roan had the strange thought that it must be raining, because there was water running down the leathery face.

"You Gooks . . . took your time . . ." Roan said. And then Askor was there, grinning a meat-eating grin, and their faces were prettier than any faces Roan had ever seen. He smiled.

Smiling, he let it all go and whirled down into the bottomless soft night.

"E at slowly," a testy voice said from somewhere; Roan's eyes were almost shut against the bright light. "And not too much."

Roan sipped a brothly soup, the bowl trembling in his hands. After the soup the doctor poked him, shone lights in his ears and mouth and whistled. "I'm giving you a walloping shot of vitastim," he said. "You'll feel human in about an hour. But don't overdo it. Unless, of course, you want to," he added.

Askor and Sidis hustled him into a hard shower, gave him a brush to scrub with. Then they let him sleep. By the time Roan had on a uniform

which almost fit his bone-thin body, he'd come back to himself. The face that looked back at him from the mirror was a stranger's. A gaunt, old-looking, deep-eyed stranger. And the hair above his ears had silver streaks in it. But Roan grinned at the reflection.

"We're alive," he said. And behind him, Askor and Sidis smiled, too.

"Let's go, men," Roan said. "There's nothing more here for us."

Aboard the stolen light cruiser *Hell's Whore* with an hour's run in space, Roan relaxed in the big padded First Officer's chair, studying the pattern of lights on the screen.

"I'm glad you two showed up when you did," he said. "But it was pretty stupid of the two of you to try it alone."

"We wasn't alone, Boss," Sidis corrected. "We had their best bucket here. Tough we had to wait around out there on Four for three months to get a crack at her, but you know there wasn't much left of the old *Rage of Heaven*."

"Nice work, taking a cruiser with that hulk," Roan said. "Maybe you're learning after all."

"Nothing to it. They thought they was taking us."

"I wish I'd been there — instead of where I was."

"You didn't miss nothing." Sidis flashed his teeth and examined the tip of the steel toothpick with which he had been grooming them. "It was kind of pitiful, them bums pulling guns on us."

"And that's what they call the Imperial Terran Navy," Askor snickered. "Them nancies —"

"Those weren't real Terries," Roan said. "That was just some sort of rag-tag gipsy outfit using the name. The real Terries are on Terra."

"I heard of it," Sidis said doubtfully. But I thought — Hey, Captain, we ain't going *there*, are we?"

"Why shouldn't we go *there*?"

"I dunno. I figured maybe you was still looking for the ITN like Cap'n Dread."

"I've seen enough of the ITN for now," Roan said shortly. He rose and picked up the folded garments of blue and silver polyon which he had replaced with the old familiar ship-clothes, tossed them to Sidis.

"What'll I do with this stuff?" Sidis asked, holding the Terran uniform.

"Burn it," Roan said.

XXXV

Sol was a brilliant jewel to starboard of *Hell's Whore* and now the tiny, faint points of lights that were Sol's planets could be seen. Roan tried to pick out the one that might be Terra. But he couldn't be sure. It was a double planet, Starbird had said, but the faint companion, Luna, would be too dim to see at this distance.

There was the usual buzz of interstellar noise as he switched the receiver on, but nothing else. He took the microphone and began transmitting. "Imperial Terran Cruiser *Hell's Whore* calling Niss headquarters . . ."

"What makes you think they speak Panterran, Boss?" Sidis asked nervously. He had been nervous ever since they sighted the great, silent Niss ship.

"They did five thousand years ago," Roan said.

"How long's it been since anyone tried to run the blockade?" Askor inquired.

"Four hundred years," Roan said. "They didn't make it."

"Swell," Sidis muttered.

"We ought to be in detector range now," Roan said calmly. He adjusted controls; a meteorite flashed around the repulsion field of the ship's hull. The image grew on the screens.

"She's a big baby," Sidis said.

"No bigger than the last one," Askor pointed out.

"Yeah — it was dead," Sidis conceded. "But what if this one ain't?"

"Then we'll get blasted into the Nine Hells. Why?"

"Just asking," Sidis said, and then they watched the screen in silence.

Up close, the Niss ship looked familiar, even to the characters sprawled across the dark curve of the hull. It was a twin to the dreadnaught they had boarded after Henry Dread's death, so many years before. Immense, ancient, dead.

It took an hour with a cutting torch to force an opening. Dead air whistled, stilled. Inside, sealed in their atmosphere suits, Roan and his men walked along the narrow, empty, dim passageways, remembering the route, passing the little piles of dust and fish bones that had been Niss warriors.

In the control room there was an ancient, abandoned-looking uniform jacket hanging over the back of the pilot's chair — the first garment they had seen. Roan came closer to the control board.

"Terran!" an echoing voice said. "Stand where you are!"

Roan slipped his power pistol from its holster.

"Drop your weapon!" The voice was hollow, alien as not even a Geek's voice was alien, and filled with an inexpressible weariness.

Roan stopped breathing for a moment. Askor and Sidis stood behind him, silent.

"Never mind," the voice came again. "Keep your gun, Terran. I cannot keep this up. And I am dying, so there is no need to shoot me." The chair moved, swung around. In it was draped a creature that looked like a long, crushed polyon bag with something rotten in it. The part that moved, Roan decided, must be the mouth.

"My form shocks you," the voice said. "It is because my energy level is so low. But how did you come here? Where are my people?"

Roan made his voice sound. "You are the first Niss I've ever seen."

"I am Over-great-one Thstt, Commander of Twelve Hordes. The alarm energized my forebrain and I came awake, here, in the stink of loneliness. I called, but none answer. Only you, Terran."

"I've waited years for this," Roan said. "I always thought it would be very satisfying to kill a Niss. But now I don't seem to care."

"Did the armies of Terra arise

then and destroy us? I see our dreadnaughts all in station, orbiting the enemy home-world. But no one answers my signals. And when I tried to call my home planet, I got only . . . listen."

The Niss floated out a portion of his polyoid body, threw a switch. "Listen!"

Roan could hear nothing. But out of the receiver came a swirl of purple smoke. No. Not purple. Some inconceivable color. It writhed into the room and disappeared without dispersing.

Thstt screamed, and his scream turned finally into a smoke of the same color as that coming out of the receiver. The Niss' odd, formless body twisted and swelled, pulsating and then shrank, slacker than before.

Roan stepped over, switched off the microphone. "I don't know what that means," he said in a shaken voice.

"It's the sound of desolation," Thstt said. "Don't you see? There is no one left but me. We had planned to seize your Galaxy because our own was infected with a parasite that consumed Niss vital energies. But we have lost. And so we died — all but me, waiting here in alert statis . . ."

"The Niss were never conquered," Roan said. "They just disappeared, as far as anyone knows. And the machinery has run down, over the eons."

"And so I, too, die," said Thstt. "And with me the ancient and mighty dream that was the race of

Niss. But do not shoot me, or I will implode and you, too, will die. There is no need to watch me. It is not pleasant. We Niss are strong, and strong is our hold on that mystery we know as life . . ."

But Roan did watch. The polyoid body first grew, expanding as high as the ceiling and half as wide as the room, exchanging an alien rush of terrifying colors within itself. Fascinated, Roan found himself hypnotized by the horror of the colors and by something else, as though the death agonies of this alien were being breathed into his own nostrils, stuffed into his own ears, touching nerve endings . . .

Thstt began to shrink now, the colors becoming denser and slower and coagulating into painful scabs. Roan felt himself grasping painfully for breath and his mind reeled at the horror he felt.

Then, suddenly, it was over. Roan let out his breath in a long sigh. He went to the crumpled polyon on the floor, and when he picked up the shrunken, pathetic thing, something clanked inside of it, like bones.

"Gee, Boss," Sidis spoke for the first time.

Askor wiped his face with a horny hand. "Let's get out of here, Chief."

Roan nodded, silently and turned away, feeling a strange loneliness, as though a part of his life had died.

Even from a hundred miles up it was beautiful. At twenty miles the night side was misted with lights and the day side was a soft harmony of blue and green and russet. Roan could feel the leap of his

heart, the shine in his eyes. Terra. Home. If only Henry Dread could have seen it like this.

Roan dropped deeper into atmosphere, and his men leaned close, scanning the scene on the high mag screen.

"Look, Boss," Sidis pointed. "They're coming up to meet us. Maybe we better arm a couple batteries."

Roan watched the atmosphere planes, flashing their wings in the sun, far below.

"They're coming to meet us, as you said," Roan pointed out. "Not to shoot at us."

A jet flyer barreled past, rolled like a playful fish, then shot away toward the west.

"Hey!" Askor was studying the charts and comparing them with the screens. "That there is Americana. Only it's upside down."

Sidis keyed the communicator and called, for the twentieth time. There was no answer. The jet was back, circling, then streaking away again.

"He wants us to follow," Roan said. He altered course, trailed the tiny ship. It led them over a dazzling blue and green coastline, across green hills, over a sprawling city, down to a wide paved field as white as beach sand. Roan lowered the ship carefully so as not to disturb the wide bands of colored plants massed beside the ramp. The ship grounded gently, and the rumble of the drive died.

Roan stood, feeling his mouth dry, his knees trembling slightly. It wasn't like fear. It was more like the feeling he'd had the first time he saw Stellaraire: Wanting her, and

afraid that somehow he'd do some small thing wrong, and lose her.

Askor was buckling on his guns.

"Leave 'em here," Roan said. "This is home. You don't need your gun at home."

"Us Gooks got no home, Cap'n," Sidis said. "But maybe we can pretend."

Roan took a deep breath. "Maybe we'll all have to pretend a little," he said.

XXXVI

They descended from the ship into a world flashing with sunlight. Beyond the flower beds were trees that fluttered silver when the wind blew, and the air smelled of a thousand perfumes. It was so familiar to Roan's dreams that tears came to his eyes.

"Where's all the Terries?" Sidis wondered aloud.

Faint but pervasive, as though sounded by the motion of the air, came a gentle music.

"Come on." Roan led the way across the glass-white concrete, past Terran planes, blind and closed, past a row of empty, bright-colored buggies, used no doubt to convey passengers from the long-range planes to the building ahead where helicopters waited on the roof.

There was a wide, color-tiled walk between whispering, silver-leaved trees. Roan followed it and bumped into the door before he saw it. It was absolutely translucent glass, as was the wall. Only a faint line showed where the glass door joined the glass wall, and beyond it was a gar-

den of thin-petalled flowers. Within he could see solid panels, walling off rooms, and more flowers and streams and fountains.

But no people.

Roan thought for a panicked moment of Aldo Cerise, of the beautiful, sad, dead city and the woman who was only a statue. But no. There were obviously people here. People? Could it be that the Niss had taken it over, that there were now only Niss?

He pushed at the door, but it didn't open and there wasn't a handle.

He heard running steps and through the trees came a child, a human child, and after the child a large white animal that Roan recognized as a dog, from the picture-book he'd seen as a child.

"Paulikins! Paulikins!" called the dog, and then barked wildly, seeing them.

The child stopped before Roan, rocking a little after the run. He stared mercilessly, a beautiful pink and gold child with round blue eyes.

The dog ran up, panting, and cringed with his tail between his legs. "It's only a child, sirs," he said and trembled all over. "A youngling. I don't know how he got loose."

"It isn't old Niss," the child said. "It's just a funny man. Look at his funny hands. See, Talbot?"

"Of course we're not Niss," Roan said, and patted the child on the head. "We're human, like you."

Talbot was sniffing the air, and edged closer, trying to sniff at Roan without seeming to. His eyes rolled

to take in Sidis and Askor, standing silently by.

"Is it a Mama or a Daddy?" Robert asked. "It smells funny."

"There's been a mistake, sir," Talbot said. He had lost his fear and sat on his hunches, looking serious. He was a big woolly white dog, spotlessly clean, and Roan could imagine that Paulikins rode on his back and afterwards curled up on the grass and rested his head on his furry stomach.

"I see," Roan said. "We landed in a spaceship and naturally everyone would think we were Niss."

"If you could wait here a moment, sir, I'll inform the Culture Authorities. You see, they're fetching a Niss scholar. They didn't want anyone else to greet you."

"We'll wait," said Roan.

A helicopter hesitated and lighted easily as a fly on the roof. Askor and Sidis got up from where they had been sitting under a tree, smelling flowers they had picked. Roan was pacing under the trees, practicing Terran in his mind. The dog's accent had been smoother, much more precise than his own. Many of the words Roan had had to strain or guess at. Also, there was a rising inflection that Roan's language lacked.

The woolly dog was back and made a deferential noise in the back of its throat. "If you would come this way, Sir, so that you can be properly received."

Roan turned to follow the dog and Askor and Sidis fell in beside him. He waved them back.

"You two wait here," he said. "I'll handle this."

"How come, Chief?" Askor frowned. "Up to now we always stuck together."

"I don't need a bodyguard here," Roan said. "And I don't want the sight of you two to scare anybody. Just stand by."

The glass door opened silently at a touch. Roan followed the dog into a paneled-off room which looked as translucent from the inside as the glass door had looked from the outside. The room was planted with a lush, green lawn that sprang softly under his feet. A breeze blew through the room, though there were no openings in the one-way glass.

A door slid open soundlessly across the spacious room, and a handsome young woman—no, a handsome young Man with bright brown hair that curled around his head like a cap stepped through and smiled. A dog followed, silent and watchful.

"I am Daryl Raim, the Niss expert," the Man said. His voice was low and controlled, as though he tuned each phrase before he spoke it. Roan felt his face looking angry.

"I'm no Niss," he said in a voice that sounded harsher than he intended. "I'm a Man."

"Of course. I see you are not Old Niss."

When Daryl smiled, a dimple broke in the smooth, white skin of his left cheek. Roan found himself for the first time a mixture of embarrassing emotions and to his horror, he blushed. There was something feminine and appealing about

the dimple, and the smooth white skin glowed as though it wanted to be touched.

Daryl sat down gracefully, motioned Roan to a chair entwined with trumpet-vines.

"I..." Roan didn't know how to begin. How to explain who he was. "I am a Terran," he said finally.

Daryl nodded, smiling encouragingly. Roan felt foolish. Always before, "I am a Terran," had been an impressive thing to say.

"Of course," Daryl said. "I assume you have some important message from Old Niss?"

Roan's mouth opened and closed. His face hardened. "No," he snapped. "I'm a Terran, coming home. The Niss are dead."

"Oh?" Daryl's voice was uncertain. "Dead? I'm sure this news will interest many people. But if you're not from Old Niss..."

"I was born on Tambool, out in the Eastern Arm," Roan said. "Out there, Terra is a legend. I came here to see if it was real."

Daryl smiled apologetically. "Geography was never a hobby of mine."

"Tambool is another world. It's half a lifetime away. Its sun is so far away you can't even see it in the sky from here."

Daryl smiled uneasily. "You've come from Beyond? You've really...returned from the dead?"

"Who said anything about the dead?"

"I can't believe it." Daryl seemed to be talking to himself now. "But you *do* look—and your ship is like—and—and I've seen your face

before — somewhere!" He finished up with his voice almost on a note of fright. Roan thought he shuddered — but the smile never left Daryl's face. He held out his arm. "Look. Goosebumps!"

Roan got to his feet. The chair was too comfortable, the conversation too unreal. He looked around at the perfect lawn, the perfect invisibility of the walls, the perfumed and curled Man.

"Don't you realize what this means? The Niss blockade is over. Terra's an open world again!"

Daryl took out a thin golden cylinder, drew on it, blew out pink smoke through delicate nostrils. He rearranged his body with a subtle excitement.

"I haven't felt such a thrill in years," he said. "I half believe you really did come back from Beyond." He stood, a smooth, flowing motion. "I want you to come with me, talk to me. I promise you such a night as you've never experienced on either side of the grave. My equipage is waiting. Come along to my place." He put a slender hand on Roan's arm. Roan knocked it away.

"Just tell me where to find your military leaders," he said harshly. He pushed past Daryl, who shrank back, his painted eyes wide. Roan groped, looking for the door. He slammed against the invisible wall, cursed, felt his way along it, banged his knee at an invisible corner. He whirled on Daryl.

"Get me out of here!" He roared. "Where in the Nine Hells are the people who ought to be out here

to hear what I have to tell them!"

Daryl huddled against his chair; Roan stared at him, feeling the anger drain away as suddenly as it had come.

"Listen — Daryl," he said, forcing his voice low. "I grew up among aliens, fought my way through aliens to come here. I've gotten what I've had out of life by force, by guile, by killing. Those are my methods — the way you survive on the worlds out there." Roan rammed spread fingers at the sky, accusing the worlds, accounting for himself. "I'm sorry if I hurt you," he finished.

Daryl smiled through glistening tears. He rose, all assurance again, touched his hair.

"You're quite wonderful," he said. "And of course you'll want to meet — oh, ever so many fascinating people."

"The place looks deserted," Roan said. "Where is everybody?"

"They're a little shy. You understand. We weren't just sure about Old Niss."

"You didn't seem to be afraid of me — at first," Roan said bluntly.

"Afraid? Oh, I see what you mean. No, of course I wasn't afraid. The restrainers are focused on you."

"What's a restrainer?" Roan said in a tight voice.

Daryl giggled. "They're trained on your two — associates, too," he said. "Shall I give you a demonstration?"

"No!" Roan looked out across the flowerbeds beyond the glass. Askor and Sidis were standing together, squinting up at the strange blue sky of Terra.

"We need a place to stay," he said. He was looking around the room now, trying to pick out something that looked like a restrainer.

"Oh, you'll find many charming compositions to choose from," Daryl said. "But why don't you accept my invitation? It would be such a coup to have you all to myself this first evening."

"What about my friends?" Roan demanded.

Daryl arched his neck gracefully to look at them. "Such strange looking, er, persons," he said. "If you don't mind my saying so."

"Why should I mind?" Roan snapped. "It's true enough, I guess. But there are a lot stranger, out there." He waved at the sky.

"They'll be quartered wherever you choose," Daryl said stiffly. "So long as you're sure they're not... Lovers..."

Roan rounded on him. "No, damn you! They're my friends!" And he hated the reluctance he felt in claiming them.

Daryl frowned. "Your manner is somewhat abrupt," he said stiffly.

"Too bad about my manners," Roan snapped.

"But I suppose you forget such things, Beyond." Daryl led the way out through panels that opened before he touched them to the accompaniment of musical tones that shimmered in the air like soap bubbles. Outside, Roan beckoned Askor and Sidis over.

"This is Daryl," he said. "He's fixing us up with a place to stay."

"Boss, did you say *he*?" Sidis grinned.

But Roan was staring at the heavy-maned, two-legged animals that pulled the open chariot. The chariot itself was a work of art—a series of airy, fluted columns that supported a latticed roof. The columns were gold and the latticed roof seemed to be of glass or a plastic and changed color constantly, always glittering. The chariot had large wheels of gold, spoked with the same glittering lattice work, whose convolutions suggested . . . something like the forms of half remembered dreams. And Roan would have stood puzzling over the lattice, except that his eyes kept going back to the heavy-maned draught animals . . .

"They're Men!" he cried suddenly, watching the dog adjusting their harness neatly. "Terrans, pulling your chariot!"

"Only Lovers," said Daryl. "You wouldn't have dogs do it? My charioteers are very well treated. Come, give them a sweet and see how happy they are." He smiled benignly, went over and took something from the pouch at his waist.

Roan watched, feeling something in his heart rip. Terrans! The magic that word had been, all across the universe. Askor and Sidis gaped, mouths open.

Daryl handed a square, white bit of food to one of the hairy Terrans. "Here, Lenny. Good boy."

Lenny took the candy and popped it into his mouth, then grinned happily. "Good, Master!" He almost jerked the chariot over as he got down to kiss Daryl's sandaled foot.

"Now, now, Lenny," Daryl re-

proved softly. "Such a good boy," he said, turning to Roan. "Would you like to give the other candy to Benny?"

"No, damn you!" Roan roared. "I'd . . ." and then stopped in shock when Benny — the other draught-human — burst into tears.

Daryl started to say something to Roan, sighed, and gave Benny the candy himself. "Roan is not familiar with our customs," he told Benny, patting him on the shoulder. "Good Benny. We all love Benny. Benny is pretty. Roan, *could* you tell Benny he's pretty?"

Roan bit his lip. Benny looked at him in agony, holding the sweet and too upset to eat it. Benny had wide, innocent eyes that went oddly with his square beard and intricately plaited mane.

"Benny is pretty," Roan choked out. Lenny was watching, looking confused and frightened.

"The slaves on Alpha Two at least hated being slaves," Roan said. "And they weren't even human."

"Hmmm," Daryl mused. "You feel that because Benny and Lenny have the same basic form as you that they should be in all ways the same as you? Whereas if they were a different shape . . .?"

"I don't know," Roan cut him off. He avoided the eyes of Askor and Sidis. "Come on, load up," he snapped.

"In this play-pretty?" Sidis growled.

"Unless you want to walk!"

"Yeah," Askor said. "We'll walk."

"I guess we can walk as fast as Benny," Sidis said.

"And Lenny," Askor added.

"Then walk."

The cart moved off.

"You'll need a dog, of course. I'll see to it as soon as I have you situated. You'll have time for a bath and a nap." Daryl gaily flicked the flower decked reins over the broad tan backs. "And then — but you'll see for yourself — tonight!"

XXXVII

Roan woke in utter darkness, and his sleep had been so deep it was still heavy on him, like a weight of blankets. For a moment he strained his ears for noise, hearing only the silence that crowded his own heartbeat into his ears.

Then he remembered. He was on Terra, in a room like a garden with flowers, high in a glassy tower. In the darkness, a breeze was blowing from somewhere and it smelled like a drowsy afternoon.

Then suddenly the darkness lightened and Roan looked up to see a large, short-haired brown dog which nodded politely.

"Good evening, Master. I am Sostelle. I am to be your dog — if you approve, sir."

Roan grunted, sat up. "My dog," he said. He had never owned a living creature before.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Master — but Master Daryl was emphatic about the party."

"That's all right. I'm hungry. Can you get me something to eat?"

Sostelle moved gracefully on his over-long hind legs, trotted to the wall, pushed a button, and a tray of

hot, glazed fruit came out. He pulled the legs down on the tray and rolled it over to Roan, pulling up a chair for Roan to sit on. He had hands like a Man's.

"Is this all there is?" Roan asked.

"It's usual," Sostelle said. "But I'll get you something else, if you wish."

"How about meat and eggs?"

"Dog food?" Sostelle looked as though he didn't know whether to frown or laugh.

"I can't live on candy," Roan said.

"I'll do my best, Master," Sostelle said. "Cutlets in Sun Wine and pheasant eggs Metropole?"

"Okay," Roan said. "Anything."

"And shall I prepare a bath, Master?"

"I had one yesterday," Roan snapped.

"Still — it's customary . . ."

"All right." Roan looked at the dog. "I'm pretty ignorant, Sostelle. Thanks for trying to help me."

Sostelle's tongue came out in a canine smile. "I am sure that you will be a great master. I sense it. If you'll forgive a dog's foolish fancy, Sir."

"Keep me from looking like an idiot in front of these pretty creatures and I'll forgive you anything."

The fete was held in a vast, silver-and-glass walled space where fragile columns as slender as reeds ran up to arch out and meet in a glitter of jeweled-glass panels high overhead. The floor was a polished expanse of deep violet glass. The music was as stirring and as lovely as a flight of swans, as martial as

the roar of lions, as gay as carnival.

To Roan's left and behind him, Sostelle stood in his stiff formal jacket, quite graceful on his hind legs, and whispered. "Hold your glass with one finger, Master, not with your whole hand."

Roan nodded, feeling awkward and almost naked, for Sostelle had depilated him and dressed him in a silky, green and gold garment that folded and tied together and felt as though it might fall off if you moved too quickly in it. The guests carefully avoided staring at him. Sostelle pointed them out as they whirled past, their dance a dainty posturing in which neither partner touched even the fingertips of the other.

Roan watched, overwhelmed by the blaze of light, of color, of movement across the vast expanse of multitiered glass-clear floor that made the throng of fancifully gowned men and women appear to be floating in the air. He finished the drink and another was there at once. Daryl appeared, transformed in a pink garment, silver-dyed hair, and feathery wings attached to his ankles.

"Roan — how marvelous you look." He glanced at Sostelle.

"And Sostelle — didn't he offer you a choice of hair tints and scents? And what about decorative touches?"

"He offered them," Roan cut in. "I didn't want them. Look, Daryl, I can't afford to waste any more time. When will I meet your governmental leaders, your military men?"

A small crowd was gathering in Daryl's wake, watching Roan curiously. Someone tittered.

"Waste time?" Daryl's nose got a pinched look.

"I seem to have offended everybody again," Roan said in the silence. "Didn't you warn them I'd forgotten my manners?"

A nervous laugh went through the group.

"Is that what it means to you?" he almost shouted. "Manners? Don't you care that Terra's a free world again—that the Galaxy is open to you?"

Daryl put a hand on his arm. "No one here is much on mythology, Roan. They—"

"Mythology, Hell! I'm talking about a thousand worlds—a million of them—and once Terra ruled them all!"

A ripple of applause broke out.

Daryl joined in. "Charming," he said "So spontaneous." He flicked his eyes at the others. "Roan's going to be wonderful," he said.

A girl was looking at Roan. If she had been done by a bad artist in brass, she would have looked like Stellaraire. She was the statue in the garden on Aldo Cerise, but her body was warm human flesh instead of cold stone, and her mouth by its very existence begged to be kissed. She had smiled when the others laughed. Her lips barely curved but her green eyes seemed to tilt up at the corners.

"I'm Desiranne," she said. "I don't understand what you've said—but it's exciting."

"Desiranne will entertain tonight," Daryl said. "It will be the high point of the evening." His eyes moved over her like a lecherous hand.

"Look," Roan said to the girl. "It's nice about the party and you're so beautiful a man almost can't endure it, but someone's got to listen to me. This is the biggest thing that's happened to Terra in five thousand years. But before long the ITN is going to realize the blockade is over. There's a fellow named Trishinist who'd give his hair to be the one to lead an invading force in here. They think of Terra as one big treasure house, ripe for looting—the richest prize of all."

Daryl laughed with a mouth full of smoke and ended up choking. Sostelle came immediately with a glass of water and a scented, gossamer tissue. People were turning away, already looking bored.

Daryl smiled knowingly, took out a cigarette. "I wouldn't," he said. "Not so soon. I'm sure you'll become a great Favorite, but if you try to push yourself forward right away, people will resent it."

Roan growled and Daryl jumped. "Really," he said almost sharply. "You'll have to learn a few of the graces. And I'd also suggest you let your fingernails grow out a bit more gracefully and a few things like that which Sostelle will advise you about." He rose in a smooth ballet movement.

"And now, I think Desiranne and I—"

"She'll dance with me," Roan said roughly. He finished his wine with a gulp, tossed the glass aside, walked past Daryl to the girl's side. She looked around, wide-eyed, as Roan took her in his arms. She was as light as a handful of moonbeams,

Roan found himself thinking, suddenly struck dumb by her fragile loveliness.

But there was no need for talk. He was suddenly aware of the music, swelling louder now. There was a deep, booming throb that matched the cadence of the human heart, and a dazzling interplay of horns that repeated the rhythms of the human nervous system, and an intricate melody that echoed forgotten human dreams. Stellaraire had taught Roan how to dance, long ago; he had not forgotten. All around, the Terrans had drawn back. Now they stood, watching, as Roan responded with a lifetime's pent-up emotion to the call of the music and the girl and the strong wine of Terra.

And then the music ended on a fading susurrant of cymbals and the high wail of brass. Roan swept Desiranne almost to the floor. For a moment he held her there, looking into her perfect, half-frightened, half-enraptured face.

"I think I know now why I came here," he said. "I think I knew I'd find you. Now I don't think I'll ever let you go."

There were sudden tears in her eyes as Roan set her on her feet. "Roan," she whispered. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

Then she turned and fled.

Suddenly there was deafening applause. Shouts of *bravo!* and *splendid!* rang out. Everyone seemed to be staring at him with eyes that were bright with . . . fear?

They came toward him almost cautiously, as though approaching a

tame beast, led by a small, lithe brunette with long hair done into such a complex system of plaits and curls that her head looked too heavy for her small body. She had a sinuous, elongated walk, and her dress was the color of . . . of air with sunshine in it.

"Mistress Alouicia," Sostelle whispered to Roan, "a dancer, and a very clever woman."

"Marvelous," she said. "Such a spectacle of primitive savagery! For a moment I thought you were going to lose control and kill her, tear her throat out with those great strong teeth." She shuddered, showing Roan a smile that was just a little long in the tooth.

"I'd never understood ancient music before," a man said. "Now I think I do."

"The way he sprang at her!" someone else offered. "And then putting his hands on her that way. It was intended to represent a tiger seizing his prey, wasn't it?"

"No, it was just a dance," Roan said, and turned to Sostelle and asked in a loud voice, "It's all right, isn't it, to say what you mean instead of making people guess?"

Sostelle, knowing this wasn't to be answered, kept a discreet silence and straightened the folds in Roan's chiton.

"Does everyone dance in that way in your homeland?" Alouicia asked, smiling a bit stiffly now.

"On every world there are different dances. Once I was with a circus and my girl did erotic dances in several different cultures."

"Erotic? How interesting."

Roan was glad to have found a subject of interest. He was feeling the wine, wanting to put everyone at ease, and then go find Desiranne.

"It frequently led to public copulation," he added.

"To . . . to . . . what *did* you say?" Alouicia's eyes widened.

"What does it mean?" a high voice whispered loudly.

Someone giggled. "Like Dogs. Imagine!"

"Really! What sort of . . . animal . . . would perform such a dance?"

"She was beautiful," Roan said, remembering Stellaraire, and feeling that something should be said out of loyalty. "I loved her."

"He's not merely a savage," a voice said loudly behind him. "I do believe he's a Lower."

Roan turned. A tall, wide-shouldered Terran stood looking at him with an expression of distaste.

"Master Hugh, the famous athlete," Sostelle murmured.

"Hugh!" Alouicia said, her voice carrying the faintest edge of shrillness. "What an exciting confrontation! The strongest man on Terra, with your interest in the ancient athletic arts — and this . . . elemental man from — wherever he's from!"

"Please," Daryl said, putting a hand on Roan's arm. "I think —"

"Never mind," Roan said. "I'm not very good at remembering all the things that are too ugly for you pretty people to talk about. I'm a man; I sweat and bleed and eat and excrete —"

"Roan!" Daryl said. Alouicia drew away with a small cry. Sostell gasped.

"Go away," Hugh said. "I don't know who brought you here. You're not fit for the society of civilized people!"

"There's nothing civilized about the ITN," Roan said. "What would you do if *they* showed up? If they came storming across those pretty gardens and in through the pretty door; what would you do?"

"I'm sure that thirty thousand years of culture have prepared us to deal with whatever a barbarian might do," Daryl said uneasily.

Roan doubled a fist and held it before him. "Do you know what this is?"

Hugh eyed the double knuckles. His nose wrinkled. "Of course. The dawn-men — Romans, I think they were called — had a primitive sport in which they flailed one another with their hands held in that way. This was done in a coliseum called Madison Square Garden, and the winner was awarded a fig-leaf, or something of the sort."

Roan drew back his fist and hit Hugh square on the nose, taking care not to put too much power back of the blow. Hugh went down, blood streaming down across his lip and into his mouth. He cried out, dabbed at his face, stared at the crimsoned fingers. There were little shrieks all around.

"You *brute*!" Hugh said.

"All right," Roan heard himself shouting. "What do you do, with your thirty thousand years of culture?"

Hugh came to his feet. All round, people stared, eyes bright, lips part-

ed. Roan stepped to Hugh and hit him solidly on the side of the jaw. Hugh fell down again, his mouth open and a look of utter amazement on his face.

"You're supposed to be an athlete," Roan said. "Get up and fight back."

Hugh got to his feet. He folded his fingers over his palms and held them in front of him; then he stepped up to Roan and struck out with an overhand blow. Roan casually brushed Hugh's arm aside and hit him in the stomach. As Hugh doubled over, Roan planted a left and right to the face. Hugh sprawled on the floor and began to cry.

Roan reached, caught his garment by the shoulder, hauled him half erect, slapped him across the cheek.

"It may surprise you," he said. "But members of an attacking army don't stop when you cry. They just laugh at you. And they don't fight nicely, like I do. If you're on the floor—" he let Hugh drop — "they kick you. Like this." And he planted a solid blow in Hugh's ribs with his toe. Hugh scrambled back, tears streaming down his face. He was sobbing loudly.

"Get up!" Roan said. "Get mad! That's the only thing that will stop me!" He followed Hugh, dragged him to his feet, hit him in the eye, then, holding him up, punched him in the mouth. Hugh's face was a bloody mask now.

"Fight!" Roan said. "Hit back!"

Hugh broke away, stumbled back against the watching crowd. They thrust him back toward Roan. He saw their faces then, for the first

time. They were like hungry charcons, waiting for an old Gracyl to die.

"Kill him, savage!" a man called. Saliva ran out of his mouth and down into his perfumed, pale blue beard. Aloquicia held out her hands, the gold-enameled nails like raking claws. "Bite his throat!" she shrilled. "Drink his blood!"

Roan dropped his hands, feeling a thrill of horror. Hugh broke through the ring and ran, sobbing:

"Master," Sostelle said. "Oh, Master . . ."

"Let's go," Roan said. "Where's my crew?" He staggered, feeling the room tilt under his feet. Terran wine was made for Terran nervous systems; it hit hard.

"Master, I don't know. But —"

"Find them!" Roan shouted. People scattered before him.

He was out in the wide entry hall now. The polished black floor threw back reflections of chandeliers and of the stars above the glass-domed ceiling. Sostelle hurried ahead, bounding on all fours. Two tall, wide shapes stepped from the shadow of a slender supporting rib ahead, stood silhouetted against the sweep of glass front.

"Askor," Roan called. "Sidis!"

"Yeah, Boss." They came toward him. They were dressed in their soiled ship clothes. Sidis wore a pistol openly at his hip.

"Thought I said . . . no guns," Roan said blurrily.

"I had a hunch you might change your mind," Sidis said. His teeth gleamed in the gloom.

"You did, eh?" Roan felt an unreasoning anger rising in him. It was almost like joy. "Since when did you start doing my thinking for me?" He took a step, swung what should have been a smashing blow to the Minid's head, but he missed, almost fell. Sidis hadn't moved.

"Gee, Chief," Askor said admiringly. "You're drunk!"

"I'm not drunk, damn you!" Roan planted his feet, breathing hard. "And what are you doing here in those rags? Why haven't you washed your ugly faces? I can smell you from three yards away!" He could feel his tongue slurring over the words, and this made him angrier than ever. "You trying . . . 'sgrace me?" he roared. "Get out of here and don't come back . . . till you look like human beings!"

"That could be quite a while, Chief," Askor said. "Look, Cap'n, let's blow out of this place. It's creepy. I can hardly keep my hands off these Terries of yours."

"They're not mine," Roan yelled. "And I'll say when we leave!"

"He's right, Boss," Sidis cut in. "This world ain't good for us. Let's shove off, Cap'n. Just the three of us, like before."

"I'm Captain of the bloody menagerie!" Roan yelled. "When I'm ready to lift ship, I'll tell you. Now get out of my sight! Get lost!"

"Master," Sostelle whispered.

"You, too, you freak," Roan staggered, wiped a hand across his face. It was hot, feverish. Everything seemed to be spinning around him; his mind seemed to be floating free of his body, like a captive balloon.



Then skyrocketers came shooting up in a fiery shower and when they shimmered away into darkness there was nothing . . .

XXXVIII

Roan sat up and looked around. Noise roared in his ears. A face swam mistily before him.

"Ah, he's awake!" someone called. Someone else thrust a thin-stemmed glass into his hand. He drank thirstily, let the glass fall. Daryl was there, looking at him eagerly with painted eyes.

"Roan! You looked so lovely sleeping, with your mouth open and sweat on your face."

"Where's Desiranne?" Roan said. His head ached but he could speak clearly now.

"Eh? Why she's preparing for her performance, later in the evening—but—"

"I want to see her." Roan stood and the table fell over. "Where is she?"

"Now, Roan." Daryl was at his side. "Just be patient. You'll see her." He laughed a high, tight laugh. "Oh, my, yes, you'll see her. You liked her, didn't you? You . . . you lusted after her?"

Roan took Daryl by the shoulder, lifted him from the floor. "Keep away from me," he snarled, and threw the Terran from him. His vision seemed cloudy, as though the room were full of mist. There were other people around him, but their faces weren't clear. Sostelle was there, his face worried and homely and familiar and dependable.

"Where is she, Sostelle?" Roan said. "Where did she go?"

"Master, I don't know. This is not a matter for dogs." His voice was almost a moan.

"Sure, I liked her," Roan said loudly. "I loved her!" He kicked a chair from his path, started across the floor. "She liked me, too, didn't she?" He rounded on the dog. "Well, didn't she?"

Sostelle's face assumed an unreadable canine expression. "Her interest in you was unmistakable, Master."

"You think so?"

"Certainly. She is a lovely lady, Master. Worthy of you." But there was something about his tone; something Roan didn't understand.

"I've got to find her. Can't leave this mad house until I find her." He started on. The people before him flitted backward, just out of reach, just out of vision. The noise was like an avalanche of sound—a wild, screaming sort of music that seemed to tell of great birds of prey swooping to a feast.

"I will help you, Master," Sostelle said. "I will help you all I can."

"You're a damned good dog, Sostelle. Hell, you're the only friend I've met here."

"Sir!" Sostelle sounded shocked. "It's not done, Sir, to call a dog a friend."

Roan laughed harshly. "I guess I'll never learn the rules, Sostelle. I came too late—for all of us."

"Master. Perhaps you should go now—and take me with you."

"You, too? What is it, a conspiracy? I've told you, damn you, I'm

not going until I find her!" There was a table in his path and he kicked it savagely aside.

"Roan, Roan," a quavering voice called. He stopped, steadied himself against a table, peered through the mist. Daryl darted up to him, his carefully coiffured hair awry. A smile flicked on and off like leaf shadows playing on water.

"It's Desiranne you want to see. I promise you, you'll see her. Just wait. But now come along with me. The party's just begun. We have wonderful things planned, and we *must* have you! It will be the greatest affair of the century — of a lifetime! And at the end — Desiranne!"

"Sostelle, is he lying?" Roan stared at the Terran, who was quivering with eagerness, like an Alphan slave awaiting a kick or the dregs of a wineglass, not knowing which it would be.

"Master," Sostelle whined, "Master Daryl speaks the truth."

"Then I'll come."

"You'll be glad, Roan," Daryl gushed. "So glad. And —"

"Never mind that. Where are we going?"

"First, we'll dine. After the dancing and the . . . excitement . . . we need to nourish ourselves, don't you think?" He giggled. "And then — but you'll see. There will be marvelous things. All the pleasures of Terra are waiting for you tonight!" He danced away, calling to others. Roan started after him, then turned back to Sostelle with a quick thought.

"Pleasure," he said, "is what you go after when there isn't anything else left."

The cold night air cleared Roan's head. He looked down from the open flyer in which he and Daryl and two women and their dogs sat on silken cushions, drinking from small, thin-necked bottles of spicy liquor. There were other airboats around them, darting in and out like a school of playful fish. Over the rush of air, thin cries of excitement mingled with the chatter of many voices talking at once.

The dog piloting the craft dropped it to the tip of a tall spire of glowing yellow glass. Roan followed the others through an entry that looked like solid glass, but parted before him with a tinkle of cold crystals. Flushed, bright-eyed faces swarmed around him, but none of them were Desiranne. A tall girl with heavy golden hair came up to Roan, her bare arms ivory-white. She looked at him with her eyes half shut, her lips parted, her tongue showing. Roan showed his teeth and reached for her, and she shuddered and shrank back. Roan laughed and pushed through to follow Daryl.

He was trying hard to remember where the table was, how he had come there. He couldn't. There had been so many tables, so much noise, so many of the little bottles of spicy wine. He felt very sober, though, and his mind seemed to be working unusually clearly.

Neatly dressed dogs were serving food. Roan ate with voracious appetite while his companions nibbled and watched. Roan hardly noticed them. Once he looked up to see the blonde girl sitting across from him.

"You Terries know how to make food," he said. "This is better even than blood."

The girl—Phrygette, Roan remembered her name—looked sick and excited at the same time. She put out her hand as though to touch the hair on Roan's arm, then drew it back.

"You're strange," she whispered. "I wonder what you think about."

"I think about many things," Roan said carefully, wishing the hot feeling and the humming in his ears would go away. "I think about the Niss, and how Man killed himself fighting them, and how they died alone, then, and how their ghosts haunted the Galaxy for five thousand years."

"Old Niss," Phrygette said, boldly touching Roan's arm now. "I always thought he was a silly superstition."

"I did a terrible thing when I ran the Niss blockade," Roan said. "I didn't free Terra. I shattered the myth that had held the universe out for five thousand years. Now she's exposed to the sharks: Trishinist, and after him, others, until Terra is no different than Tambool."

Phrygette was looking around for her dog, Ylep, to come and fix her make-up.

"A new navy, that's what you need," Roan said. "Trishinist can muster fifty thousand men, and he has the ships to transport them. You have ships, too—underground, waiting. You need to issue weapons and learn how to use them, prepare tactics to meet an enemy landing party."

Phrygette frowned at Roan. "Real-

ly, for someone from Beyond, you talk about the strangest things. Tell me how it feels to kill someone, Roan. Tell me how it feels to die."

"You'll find out soon enough," Roan said roughly.

Suddenly he felt very bad. His heart was trying to climb up his throat, and his head hurt terribly. He swallowed more wine, put his head down on the table. Phrygette got to her feet, wrinkling her nose.

"I'm afraid he's becoming a bore," she said to someone. "Let's go on to the theater, Daryl. They've probably already started—without us!"

"They wouldn't dare!" Daryl said, sounding alarmed. "Not after I planned it!"

"They might."

"Roan!" Daryl was shaking him. He raised his head and saw a crowd all around him, faces staring out of a blackish haze.

"Come on, Roan!" It was Daryl, catching at his hand. "You went to sleep again, you foolish boy, but now we're all ready to go to the Museum!"

"Go where?"

"To the Museum of the Glory of Man! Come on! Oh, you'll be thrilled. Roan! It's an ancient, ancient place—just at the edge of the Lower Town. All sort of shuddery and dim—but marvelous, really! It's all there—all Terra's history. We've been saving it for a special occasion—and this is certainly the perfect night!"

"Funny place . . . for a party . . ." Roan said, but he got to his feet and followed the laughing, chattering crowd.

Out on the roof, the dogs jumped up, handing their masters and mistresses to their places in the waiting flyers, some of which hovered, waiting their turn. Roan felt as though he were moving in a dream imbued with a sense of terrible impending. The dogs' eyes looked wide, afraid. Even Sostelle was awkward, getting the flyer's door open. Roan's hand went to his belt, feeling for a gun that wasn't there.

"Askor," he said suddenly. "And Sidis. Where are they?" He half rose, sat down suddenly as the flyer jumped forward.

"They'll trouble you no more," Daryl said. "And now, Roan, just think! Objects that were held sacred by our ancestors, five thousand — ten thousand years ago —"

"What do you mean," Roan said, feeling tightness in his chest. "Where are they?"

"Roan — don't you remember? You sent them away yourself."

"Sostelle!" Roan felt a sudden weakness as he tried again to rise. Blackness whirled in, shot with fire.

"Master, it is true. You ordered them to leave you. They laid hands on you, to drag you with them, but you fought, and then . . . then Master Daryl was impelled to . . . to call for the Enforcers."

"What are they?" Roan heard his own hoarse voice as from a great distance.

"Specially trained dogs, Master," Sostelle said in a tight voice. "Led by Kotschai the Punisher."

"Are they — did they —?"

"Your companions fought might-

ily Master. They killed many dogs. At last they were overwhelmed, and restrainers were focused on them. Then they were taken away."

"Then they're alive?" The blackness broke, flushed away.

"Of course, Master!" Sostelle sounded shocked.

Roan laughed harshly. "They're all right, then. They've been in jail before. I'll bail 'em out in the morning."

They had landed on the wide roof of an ancient palace. Roan tottered, felt Sostelle's hand under his elbow.

"I'm sick," he said. "I've never been sick, since I was burned when Henry Dread shelled the Extravaganzoo. There was a Man doctor there; he cured me. He couldn't cure Stellaraire, though. She was crushed by a cromalloy beam, and then . . . burned . . ."

"Yes, Master," Sostelle soothed.

"Gom Bulj died from the acceleration. But I killed Ycth. And I killed Henry Dread, too. You didn't know that, did you Sostelle? But Iron Robert — he died for me"

They were inside now. The voices of the others were like birds quarreling over a dung heap. Their faces were blurred, vague. All around, tall cases were ranged, faced with glass. Someone was talking urgently to Roan, but he ignored him, walked to the nearest display, feeling as though he were toiling up a hill.

"This is a collection of famous jewel stones, Master," Sostelle was saying. "All natural minerals, found

here on Terra, and treasured by Men for their beauty and rarity."

Roan stared down at rank on rank of glittering, faceted crystals — red, green, blue, violet, clear white.

"There is the Napoleon emerald," Sostelle said. "Worn by an ancient war-chief. And beyond is the Buddha's Heart ruby, once the object of veneration of five billion worshippers. And there, just beyond — the Iceberg diamond, said to be the largest and finest ever found in Antarctica."

"Look, Roan," Daryl called. "These are called monies. They're made of solid natural gold, and in early times they were traded back and forth in exchange for oh, other things," he finished vaguely. "Rather a bore, really. Come along to the next room, though. There are some fabulous things . . ."

Roan followed, stared at looming walls decorated with objects as baroque and primitive as the crude weapons of the wild men on Aldo Cerise, others of a powerful, barbaric beauty, and still others of a glittering intricacy that his mind could not comprehend. There were more cases — miles of them, each glowing with its own soft light, each with its array of objects of metal, stone, wood, glass, fabric, synthetic.

"Look!" Daryl was poking Roan. "Those clothes were made from fibers that grew from the dirt. They scraped them clean in some way, and then worked them all together, and colored them with — with fruit juices or something. Then they sawed out pieces and looped them to-

gether with little strings. That was called sowing — "

"No, that was when they made the plants that they got the fibers from," someone interrupted. "But aren't they funny?"

Roan gazed at the display of old uniforms. Some were shapeless and faded, brown with age, curled with time, even protected as they were by the vacuum of the display cases. Others, farther along, were more familiar.

"You see those long, sharp things? They used those to stick into each other," A high excited voice called. "And these odd-shaped objects made some sort of lightning and tore holes in people. There must have been a great deal of blood."

Roan stopped, staring at a tunic of brilliant blue, with narrow silvery-gray trousers, and a belt with a buckle bearing an eagle and the words *Terran Space Forces*.

"It's like the ITN uniform," he said to no one. "But it was made before there was an empire . . ."

Daryl was beside Roan, his face puckered in thought. He looked up at Roan, his eyes snapping wide.

"You!" he said in a strained voice. "I know where it was I saw your face. Look, everybody, come with me!" He turned, ran off.

"What's the matter with him?" Roan growled, but he followed.

In a small room off the main hall, a crowd clustered around a lighted case. They looked around as Roan came up, gave way, staring at him, silent now. Roan halted before the high glass panel, stared

at a hazy scene, bright lit. He blinked, cleared his vision.

The figure of a man stood before him, clad in a uniform like the one he had just seen, leaning against the flank of a ship of quaint, primitive design. The eyes, blue like cool fire, looked into Roan's from across the centuries. The deep red hair was hacked short, but its stubborn curl still showed. A deep, recorded voice spoke from a slot beneath the display:

"This was Vice-Admiral Stephen Murdoch, as he appeared in his last solido, taken only moments before he embarked on his last, heroic mission. Admiral Murdoch is renowned as the hero of the Battle of Ceres and of the Siege of the Callistan Redoubts. He was lost in space in the year eleven thousand, four hundred and two of the Atomic Era."

"Master," Sostelle said in the silence. "It's you!"

Roan turned, looked at Daryl. "How . . . ?" he started. He put his hands on himself as though to assure himself that he was Roan Cornay, alive here and now. But Daryl and the others stared back at him as though he was himself a thing from out of the remote past, like the figure in the case.

Roan laughed suddenly, wildly. "I wanted to know who my father was," he said. "But I never suspected he was sixteen thousand years old."

"He . . . really . . . is . . ." Daryl said, and licked at his lips. He whirled to the others. "Don't you understand? He really *did* come from Beyond, just as he said! He's returned from the dead!"

"No," a loud voice said. It was Hugh, his face raw and cut from the beating Roan had given him. "He's a dirty Lower, and he should be turned over to the dogs."

"He's returned from the dead!" Daryl screeched. "Come along! It's easy enough to prove!"

"The genetic analyzer!" someone called. "In the next hall . . ."

"Roan, this will show them all," Daryl said breathlessly. There was a strange light in his eyes. "And then — you'll tell me how it feels to be dead, and rise again!"

"You're insane, Daryl," Roan said. "You're all insane!" he shouted. "I'm the most insane of all, for being here, where I don't belong!" He broke off. "Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow I'll leave here. With Askor and Sidis. They're my kind. I understand them. They're not pretty, but they've got the beauty of reality about them . . ."

"And you'll take me, Master?" Sostelle whispered.

"Sure, Man's best dog is his friend, eh?" Roan stumbled, almost fell. He was hardly aware of walking, Sostelle at his side, Daryl trotting ahead, under a high arch with a flame burning under it in a metal tray, on into an even bigger room that echoed with the bat-like cries of the Terrans.

" . . . classify persons wishing to contribute to the germinal banks," Daryl was saying. "Here in the Hall of Man, all the records were kept —"

"My genetic patterns won't be here," Roan said, almost clear-headed for the moment.





"He's afraid," Hugh said. "Will he confess his pretensions now?"

Roan looked around at gleaming equipment, towering metal panels, winking clinical lights.

"Put your hand here, Roan," Daryl urged. He indicated an opening, guided Roan's hand to it. He felt a sharp tingle for an instant, nothing more.

There was a soft hum and a plastic tab extruded from a slot in the face of the genetic analyzer. Daryl snatched it, looked at it, then whirled to face the others.

"It's him! It's Stephen Murdoch, returned from beyond the crematorium!"

XXXIX

He didn't remember again then; not until they were in a vasty room with ancient flags hanging from age-blackened rafters.

"... minster Hall," an excited voice was saying. "Over thirty thousand years old. Think! Of the toil, the human tears and sweat and heartache that went into building this, so long ago, to preserving it down through the ages, to bring it here — for us!" The voice went on, excited, rapturous.

"What's it all about?" Roan asked. "What's this old building? It looks like something on Tambool."

"It's very ancient, Master," Sostelle said. Somewhere a bright light was flaring in the gloom.

"... took them so many ages to create, with all its traditions and memories — and we, us! Yes, in a single night! A single hour! We

can destroy it all. Thirty thousand years of human history end — now!" Roan watched as a slender man in flowing garments ran forward, applied the torch to the base of a hand-hewn column. Fire licked upward. In moments it had reached the faded pennants; they disappeared into smoke. Fire ran across the high peaked ceiling. Voices shouted as the crowd pushed forward. Suddenly a woman whirled madly, striking out at those around her. They fell back yelping, and the frenzied girl tore at her garment, stripped it off, threw it at the fire. Roan saw with a dull shock that there was no hair on her body.

"Give me something sharp!" she screamed, then plunged, caught up a jagged fragment of smoking wood, scored it down the creamy white of her chest and stomach. Blood started. The woman staggered back, wailed faintly, fell, and dogs started forward, bore her away.

"Get back!" Someone was calling. The ceiling was a mass of boiling smoke and flame. Each massive timber supporting the rafters blazed, crackling. Roan backed away, then turned and ran.

Behind him, the roof fell with a great thunder. A blast of scalding air struck at him, and sparks flew all around . . .

Later, he stood at the top of a broad flight of marble steps, where a group of men wheezed under the weight of a black stone statue of a man with a wide head-dress and a straight-ahead gaze.

"See him, Roan?" Daryl called. "Isn't he wonderful? The labor, the

hopes that went into that image. And now . . . "

The Pharaoh Horem-heb went over with a resounding smash, tumbled down head over throne, pulverizing the steps as it struck them. The head flew off, struck a man standing below, who fell screaming, and a crowd closed around him like fish after a bait.

"Master, you're not well," Sostelle was saying. "Let me take you home!"

"Wait! Have to see Desiranne." Roan shook his head, started down the stairs. Daryl skipped ahead, dragging a picture in a heavy frame. At the foot of the stairs, he raised it high, brought it down on the bronze figure of a girl with a water jar; it burst into a cloud of dry chips.

"The Mona Lisa," he caroled. "The only one in the world — and I destroyed it!" He spun on Roan. "Oh, Roan, doesn't it give you a wonderful feeling of power? Those old ones that conquered the Universe — they treasured all this! And we have the power to do as we like with it. They made it — we finish it! Doesn't that make us their equals?"

Roan stared past him at a bigger-than-life white marble of a thick-bodied woman with her garment down around her hips. She was chipped and her arms were missing.

"Shame," Roan mumbled. "Shouldn't break . . . old things." He felt as though he were falling.

"I didn't do that one," Daryl said. "Someone else . . . but I'll finish it!" He ran to the statue and pushed. It didn't budge. Daryl made a face and ran on to pull down a painting of a man with one ear missing.

"It's hot in here," Roan said aloud. The walls were sailing by, going faster and faster. He groped for support, sank down on the steps. All around, people were running like Gracys in moulting time, carrying things that smashed, or broke, or were torn apart. Someone started a blaze in the center of the floor, and pictures went flying into it. The floor shook as heavy marbles toppled.

"Get a cutter," a girl screamed, "to use on the bronzes!"

"What a night!" Daryl exulted. "We did the Louvre long ago, and the Grand Palais e'Arte, and the Imperial Gardens. We were saving this one for a special occasion. And your being here — it's just made it perfect!"

Roan got to his feet, fighting the blackness. "I can't wait any longer," he shouted over the din. "Where's Desiranne?"

"Roan, Roan! Forget her for now! There's her Performance coming! There's lots of luscious sport to be had before then —"

Phrygette was there tucking back a strand of corn-yellow hair with a white arm smudged with soot.

"I'm bored," she said. "Daryl, let's get on to the Performance."

"But there are still lots of things to do," he cried, dancing round her. "The books! We haven't even begun

on the books — and the tapes, and the old films, and . . . and . . ."

"I'm going," Phrygette pouted. She looked at Roan. He stared back, seeing her face dancing in fire.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "You look so peculiar!"

Roan took a deep breath and held one part of his mind away from the whirling dizziness that enveloped him. He produced something that could be defined as a smile.

"If you were a sixteen thousand year throwback, you'd look peculiar, too." He seemed to be watching everything through a view-screen now; Daryl looked tiny and far away, and all around the floor curved upward. A wild singing whine rang in Roan's ears. His face felt furnace-hot. "I want to see Desiranne now," he said.

"Oh, all right." Daryl gave Phrygette an icy look. "Spoilsports!"

They were in a mouldy velvet and chipped gilt room lit by tiny lights glaring down from above like stars as seen in Deep Space, set in a ceiling that slanted away toward a small, bright-lit platform below. There were seats ranked beside Roan's and more rows lower down, and others swinging in wide sweeps farther up, and still more, perched like tiny balconies just above the stage, and all of them were filled with slim-necked, soot-streaked Men and Women.

"In all that you've told me of other worlds, Roan," Daryl said in a low, vibrant voice, "there has been nothing to equal what you will see Desiranne do here tonight."

"What will she do? Play some instrument? Sing?" The thought of seeing her again made his pulse throb in his head, driving back the sickness. He remembered Stellaraire and her erotic dancing. Surely Desiranne wouldn't do anything like that . . .

"Master," Sostelle whined at Roan's side. "Please let me bring the doctor to see you now."

"The stuff you gave me is working," Roan said. "I feel better."

A blue mist blew across the stage. Out of it, a little blue and silver dog merged, singing an eerie, piercing little song in a register so high it was barely within hearing. The blue color faded, and now there were pale pastels — mauve, bluish pink, sunshine-yellow, rain-gray — swirls, clouds, blown foams. The blue dog's song ended in a tiny yelp, and behind Roan, Sostelle winced. Roan could make out another figure in the mist now, dressed in diaphanous robes, swathed from head to foot. It came forward and the scarf blew from its head. It was Desiranne and her pale hair swirled down about her shoulders.

The music was low and gentle, almost a lullaby, and Desiranne ran gracefully, girlishly about in the mists, playing. Then, by degrees, the tempo changed and a drum began to beat — an insistent, commanding beat. Roan began to be aware of Daryl's breathing beside him and he also remembered the fearful beat of the drums that night he stood frozen with fear by the high wire on Chlora, when he was with the circus.

Was that it? Was that what was making the small hairs on his arms prickle, and bringing the smell of danger and the cold sweat in his stomach? Something . . . he turned to Daryl to tell him to stop the show. Whatever it was going to be, Roan could feel it beginning to stink. Something was wrong. Something . . .

But Daryl was smiling expectantly and proudly at Desiranne.

"By the way," he said. "Did I mention that she is my daughter?"

"Your daughter?" Roan repeated dumbly. "You're not old enough," he blurted.

Daryl looked astonished. "Not old enough" A strange expression crossed his face. "You mean — you're . . ." he gulped. "I remember learning once that long ago, men died like dogs, after only a moment of life. Do you mean, Roan, that you — that you . . . ?"

"Never mind." On the stage, Desiranne had begun a slow, sensuous strip tease. The music became more and more insinuating, erotic, then slowed as Desiranne removed her last wisp of garment. As she pirouetted, all pink and gold in the lights, the little silver and blue dog came mincing out onto the stage with something sharp that glittered silver where the light caught it.

It was a knife, long and leaf-thin and sharp. Desiranne dipped in her dance to pluck the stilleto from its cushion, danced away, and now a savage tempo took over. An animal music. It went straight to some dark, forgotten part of Roan's mind and again fear began to swell in him

insistently. He came to his feet —

Desiranne stopped, stood poised. She held the scalpel-keen blade in her right hand and with great grace and sure slowness, cut off the little finger of her left hand.

A terrible cry tore itself from Roan's throat. He plunged down through the crowd, not even aware of the screams and the smash of his fists on anything that impeded him. With a leap he was on the stage, snatching the knife from Desiranne's hand as she moved to stroke it across her wrist. He caught her, looked into eyes as vacant and dead as the glassless windows of a ruined city.

"Why?" Roan screamed. "Why?" Blood ran down Desiranne's arm. For a moment her eyes seemed to stir with returning life; then she wilted. Roan caught her up, whirled on the others who had crowded around the stage now, all shouting at once. The air reeked of blood; it was a taste in the mouth.

"Get a doctor! She'll die!"

Daryl's livid face was in front of him. He shook his fists over his head. His mouth looked loose and wet.

"Your daughter!" Roan said hoarsely, looking down at the small, gentle, beautiful face. "Your own daughter!"

"She felt nothing! She was drugged! Do you realize that her one chance for a perfect Death Performance is ruined forever? That this is all she has lived for and now she will never have it? I reared her for this, trained her myself! All

these years I've kept her perfect, waiting for the one, the ideal occasion — and now — "

Roan snarled and kicked him brutally, and Daryl doubled over, mewling, coiled on the bloody floor.

"Sostelle — get a Man-doctor!"

Roan jumped down, ran toward the rear of the theater. Desiranne hung limp in his arms, her face as pale as chalk.

In a vast gilt room. Desiranne lay on a narrow couch of pale green silk with curved legs wrought of silver and ivory. A small crowd of eager-eyed Tergans stood by, watching. The doctor, a scrubbed-looking dog carrying a pouch, clucked and sprayed something from the pouch over Desiranne's stumped finger, looking over at Roan.

"She will survive. The tourniquet saved her from excessive bleeding. A pity. So fair she was. But you, Sir; you don't look well. Sostelle tells me — "

"Never mind me! Why doesn't she wake up? Are you sure she isn't going to die?"

"She won't die. I'll see to a bud implant from self-germinal tissue, and in a year or two, with the proper stimuli, she'll be as good as now. Now I must insist, Sir. Let me have a look at you."

"All right." Roan sank down in a high-backed chair. The doctor applied smooth, cold metal objects to him, muttered to himself.

"You're sick, Master," he said. "Temperature over one hundred and four; blood-pressure — "

"Just give me some medicine,"

Roan interrupted. "My head aches."

"I've heard a bit of your back-ground, sir," the doctor said as he rummaged in his bag. "I think I see what's happened here. You've no immunity to the native diseases of Terra. And, of course, they find in you a perfect host. Now —"

"I've never been sick," Roan said, "not like this. I thought it was just the wine, but . . ." He tottered in the chair as a wave of dizziness passed over him.

"Master!" Sostelle was at Roan's side, "They are coming — Master Hugh and many others — and with them are the Enforcers. Kotschai himself!"

"Good!" Roan snarled, showing his teeth. "I need something to fight! Terrans are no good — they just fall down and cry."

"Please, Sir," the doctor said sharply. "You must stand still if I'm to administer my medicants!"

"Doctor," Sostelle whimpered. "Give him something to bring back his strength. See how he faints!"

"Ummm, yes, there are stimulants — dangerous, mind you, but —"

"Quickly! They come! I smell them! I smell the odor of human hate!"

"The scent is thick here in this room," the doctor grunted. He sprayed something cold against the inner side of Roan's elbow.

"Master, you must flee now." Sostelle took his arm.

Roan shook him off. "Bring 'em on," he yelled. "I want to crush the life out of something! I want to pay them back for what they did to Desiranne!"

"But, Master, Kotschai is strong and cruel and skilled in inflicting pain —"

"So am I," Roan shouted. Ice seemed to be pumping through his veins. The ringing in his head had receded to a distant humming. Suddenly he was light, strong, his vision keen; only his heart seemed to pound too loudly.

"Oh, Master, there are many of them," Sostelle cried. "You cannot kill them all. And you are sick. Run quickly, while I delay them!"

"Sostelle — go and find Askor and Sidis. Get them and bring them to the ship."

"If I do as you command, Master, will you make your escape? The door is there; it leads by a narrow way to the street below."

"All right," Roan let his breath out in a hiss between his teeth. "I'll run. Just get them and send them to me — and take care of this poor girl."

"I will, Master!"

"Good-bye, Sostelle. You were the best Man I found on Terra." He opened the door and stepped through into dusty gloom.

The street was not like the others Roan had seen on Terra. It was unlit, with broken pavement through which rank weeds grew. He ran, and behind him dogs yelped and called.

There was a gate ahead, a stark thing of metal bars and cruel spikes. Roan recognized it from Daryl's description. Beyond it he saw the ominous darkness, smelled the filth and decay of the Lower Town. Without pausing, he leaped up,

pulled himself to the top, and dropped on the other side.

XL

Roan didn't know how many hours later it was. He had run — for miles, it seemed — through dark, twisting, ancient streets, empty of people, with the police baying at his heels. Once they cornered him in a crumbling courtyard, and he killed two of them as they closed in, then leaped up, caught a low-hanging roof's edge and fled away across the broken slates where they could not follow.

Now he was in a street crowded with faces that were like those remembered from evil dreams. Terrans, with scars, pock-marks, disease-ravaged faces and starvation racked bodies. Women with eyes like the sockets in a skull held out bony hands, quavering pleas for bread and copper; children like darting brown spiders with oversized eyes and knobby knee joints trailed him, shouting in incomprehensible language. A vast, obese man with one eye and an odor of old sickness trailed him for two blocks, until Roan turned, snatched up a foot-long knife from a display before a tumble-down stall and gestured with it.

There were no dogs here, only the warped, crooked people and the evil stench and the glare of unshielded lights and the sense of age and decay and bottomless misery. Roan could feel the strength going from his legs. He stumbled often. Once he fell, and rested a while on hands

and knees before he could stand again, shouting to scatter the ring of glittering-eyed people who had closed in on him.

He felt a burning, terrible thirst, and went toward a smoky, liquory, loud-smelling bar. Inside it was hot, steamy, solid with noise that sawed at him like ragged knives. He sank down at a wobbly table. A green-toothed female slid into the seat beside him and elbowed him invitingly. Roan made a growling sound and she went away.

A huge, big-bellied Man was standing before him.

"What'll it be?" he growled in very bad Terran.

"Water," Roan said in a dry whisper. "Cold water."

"Water costs too," the man said. He went away and came back with a thick, greasy tumbler, half full of grayish liquid.

"I have no money," Roan said. "Take this." He fumbled the golden clasp from his garment, tossed it on the table.

The barman picked it up, eyed it suspiciously, bit into it.

"Hey," he grunted. "That's real gold!"

"I need . . . a place to rest," Roan said. The sickness was back in full force now, washing up around him like water rising in a sinking ship. "Get me a doctor . . ."

"You sick, huh?" The Man was leaning toward him, leering. His eyes swelled until they were as big as saucers. Roan forced his eyes shut, then opened them, fighting to hold onto consciousness.

"I know . . . where there's more

... " He could feel his mind cutting loose from his body again, ready to float away into a tossing sea of fever fantasies. But he couldn't — not yet. He tried to get to his feet, slammed back into the chair. The glass clashed against his teeth.

"Drink up, buddy." the thick voice was saying. "Yeah, I'll get a doc fer yuh. You know where there's more, eh?"

Roan gulped. The warmish, stagnant-smelling liquid gagged him. The man brought more water, cold this time and in a slightly cleaner glass, as though he had wiped it on his shirt.

"Look, Bo, you take it easy, huh? I'm Soup the Insider. Sure, I'll fix yuh up with a room. Swell room, bed and everything. Private. Only look around good before yuh close the door. Yuh can never tell what yuh might be locking yourself in with." He guffawed.

"Got to have rest," Roan managed. "Be . . . all right in the morning. Find my friends. Hope Desiranne is all right. Then get out . . . this filthy place . . ."

"You just take it easy, Bub. I'll fix yuh up good. Then we'll talk about where to get more of these little knick-knacks. And you don't talk to nobody else, see?"

"Get me" Roan gave up trying to talk and felt the big man's arm-under his, leading him away.

He fought his way up from a nightmare of heat and pursuit and blood and cruelty. He opened his eyes.

There was a spotted glare panel set in a blotched ceiling, casting a sick light on a threadbare velvet wall with nauseous-looking stains. An ancient, withered Man stood beside the bed, blinking down at him with eyes that were polished stones set in pockets of inflamed tissue.

"Sick ye are, true enough, lad. Ye've caught every ailment I ever heard of and six or eight I haven't, you."

Roan tried to sit up. His head barely twitched, and pain shot through it like an axe-blow. He lay, waiting for the throbbing to subside. His stomach ached as though it had been stamped by booted feet, and a sickness seemed to fester through his body like sewage bubbling in a cesspool.

"Sore, hey?" the oldster cackled. "Well it might be. Ye've tossed up every meal ye've et since ye learned to guide spoon to lip, you."

Through the wall Roan heard an angry scream and a slap. "For half a copper I don't even smile!" a female voice shrilled, and a door slammed.

"Got to get out," Roan said. He tried to throw back the rough blanket, and the blackness swirled again.

" . . . him something to make him talk," the thick voice of the big man was saying.

"Whatever ye say, Soup. But it'll kill him, it."

"Just so he talks first."

Roan felt a cold touch on his arm, a sharp stab of pain.

"Where's the loot, Bo?" Soup's thick voice demanded.

"Ye'll have to wait a little hour, Soup. First he'll sleep a bit, eh, to get back the strength to talk, he."

"All right. But if you let him die before he spills, I'll squeeze that scrawny neck of yours."

"No fear o' that, Soup."

Time passed, like a storm of yellow dust that choked and harried and would never cease. Sometimes voices stabbed at him, and he cursed them and struck out. Again he was running, falling, and far away on the floodlit stage the knife was cutting into Desiranne's white flesh. He fought his way toward her, but always the sea of mad faces blocked his way until he screamed and clawed his way out of the dream.

" . . . tell me now, before the blasted glutton comes back, he," a scratchy voice was saying. "Then I'll give ye more nice medicine, and ye'll sleep like a whelp at a bitch's teat."

"Get . . . away . . . me . . . " Roan managed. "Got . . . go . . . "

Something sharp and painful poked his throat.

"Ah, ye felt that, then, lad? Good. Now speak once more, tell old Yagg where the pretty treasures lie. Not in Upper' City, eh? For the dogs would tear a man to bits if ever he ventured there. Where, eh? Is there some house that's been missed?"

There was a great smash, and a bull roar.

"So! Yuh'd cheat Soup, would yuh? I'll rip your head off!"

"Now, Soup — you misjudge me, you! I was just trying to find out for you. No harm, what?"

There was a growl and a sound of two heavy blows and a squeal. Then Soup's wide face loomed over Roan, breathing foul breath and flecks of spittle.

"All right, give, Bo! You ain't going to die and not tell Soup, not after he give yuh a place to die in!"

Roan croaked, and his hand moved feebly. "Tell . . . you . . . later . . . " The face faded and Soup's voice mumbled, drifted off into the insistent clamor of fever images.

Light again, and sounds.

" . . . didn't you send for me sooner?" a tremulous voice was complaining. "That quack Yagg like to killed him, with his poisons! He's full of disease! Look at those sores — and see the swelling here. He'll die. Mark my words, he's a goner. But we can do our best."

"Yuh better."

Stellaraire was standing by the bed, looking down at him. Her hair was burnt off and her face was scarred and blistered.

"Come with me, Roan," she said urgently. "We'll leave this 'zoo and go so far away they'll never find us. Come! Then she was running away, and Henry Dread was shooting after her, the blaster bolts echoing along the steel corridor, echoing . . .

Henry Dread holstered the gun. "Damned Gooks," he said. "But you and I Roan. We're different, We're Terries." His face changed, became small and petulant. "I trained her," Daryl said. "What higher art form can there be than

destruction? And the destruction of one's self is its highest expression" Deftly, Daryl fitted a noose about his neck, hoisted himself up. His face became black and twisted and terrible. "You see?" he said pleasantly. He went on talking, and many voices chimed in, and they cheered and the dust cleared away and Iron Robert held up his arms, melted off at the elbow.

"Iron Robert born to fight, Roan," he said. "Can't fight, now. Time for Iron Robert to die." He turned and the iron door opened and he walked into the furnace. The flames leaped out of the open door, scorching Roan's face. He turned away, and rough hands pulled him back.

"Yuh can't die yet," Soup's voice said. "Yuh been laying here for two days and two night, yelling to yourself. Now talk, damn you, or I'll choke the life out of yuh!" Hands like leather-covered stone-crushers closed on Roan's throat —

There was a terrible growling, and then a scream. And suddenly the hands were gone and there were awful sounds of tearing flesh and threshing limbs.

And then Sostelle's face was leaning over him, and there was blood on the dog's jaw.

"Master! I came as quickly as I could!"

Roan cried out, turned away from the phantom.

"Master! It's your dog, Sostelle! And I have another with me. Look, Master!"

A cool hand touched Roan's forehead. There was a faint odor of a

delicate perfume, almost lost in the stench of the foul room. Roan opened his eyes. Desiranne looked down at him. Her face was pale and he could see the faint blue tracing of the veins in her eyelids. But she smiled at him.

"It's all right now, Roan," she said softly. "I am with you."

"Are you . . . real?"

"As real as any of us," she said.

"Your hand"

She held it up, swathed in bandages. "I'm sorry I'm no longer perfect, Roan."

The dog doctor appeared, looking concerned. He talked, but Roan couldn't hear him for the thunder in his ears. He lay and watched Desiranne's face until she faded and dissolved in mist, and then the mist itself faded into darkness shot with lights, and the lights twinkled like distant stars, and then went out, one by one.

Roan was sitting up in bed. His arm, resting on the patched blanket over his knees, was so thin that his fingers met around it, and it was scarred with half-healed pock marks. Desiranne sat by the bed, feeding him thin soup.

Her face was thin and paler than ever, and her hair was cut short, held back by a simple scarf of clean cloth. Roan lifted his hand, took the spoon.

"I can do that now," he said. The spoon trembled, spilling soup; but he went on to empty the bowl.

"I'm stronger now," he said. "I'm getting up."

"Roan, rest a few days more."

"No. We've got to get to the ship now, Desiranne. How long has it been? Weeks? Maybe Askor and Sidis will be there, waiting for me. We'll leave this poisoned world and never come back." He had thrown back the blanket and put his feet down on the floor. His legs were so thin that a choked laugh grunted from him.

"I look like old Targ," he said. With Desiranne's hand under his arm, he stood, feeling his senses fade in vertigo from the effort. He took a step and fell, and Desiranne cried out and then Sostelle was there, helping him back into the rags of the cot.

It was a week later. Roan sat in a chair by the window, looking out at the decayed roofs and tottering walls of Lower Town. There was a sickly plant in a clay pot on the windowsill, and a fresh breeze brought odors of springtime and corruption.

Sostelle came in, carrying a patched cloak.

"This is all I could get, Master."

I told you never to call me 'Master' again," Roan snapped. "My name is Roan."

"Yes . . . , Roan. Here is a garment. But please don't go. Not yet. The dogs are about again today."

Roan stood, ignoring the dizziness. "We're going today. Askor and Sidis are probably waiting for me, wondering what happened. They probably think I'm dead." His fingers fumbled with the chipped buttons.

"Yes, Mas — Roan." The dog

helped him with the cloak. It was a faded blue, of a rough weave that scratched Roan's pale skin. Desiranne appeared at the door.

"Roan — you're so weak."

"I'm all right." He forced himself to smile gently at her, to walk without staggering across to her. "It's not far," he said. "We can do it."

They went down patched stairs, ignoring the eyes that stared from half-concealment at the dog who had torn the throat out of the formidable Soup, and the pale Upper woman, and the sick madman. Out in the sun-bleached time-eroded street other faces, weather-burned and life-scarred, watched as they passed. When one of the watchers ventured too close, Sostelle bared his fangs and they drew back.

After half an hour, Roan and his escort stopped to rest at a dry fountain with broken carvings of Men with the tails of fish. Roan looked at them, and wondered on what world they lived. He and Desiranne sat on the carved stone top of the monument, feeling the warmth of the sun, while Sostelle paced up and down, his human-like hands hooked in his leather belt. When Roan had rested, they went on.

It was late afternoon when they reached the raised avenue that ran past the port and on to the bright towers of Upper City. Roan shaded his eyes, staring past the orderly trees and the banked flowers in the distance.

"Where is it?" he said. "I don't see the ship." There was a new sick feeling in him now, not the fever

of pain and infection, but the hollow sickness of terrible loss. He scrambled up the embankment, led the way along under the gentle trees. He could see parked flyers, the flash of color of moving chariots, the tiny figures of dogs at work; but *Hell's Whore* was gone.

"Perhaps the people, sir," Sostelle said. "Master Daryl and the others may have moved her."

"They couldn't have," Roan said in a voice that almost broke. "Only Askor and Sidis knew how to open her ports — how to lift her."

"Roan — we must go back now." Desiranne's hand was on his arm. He touched the thin fingers, looking at Sostelle.

"You knew," he said.

"Roan — I could not be sure — and how could I have told you?"

"It's all right." Roan tried desperately to hold his voice firm. "At least they got away. I knew those pansies couldn't hold them."

"Perhaps one day they'll come back, Roan," Sostelle said. "Perhaps —"

"No. They're gone, back to where they belong — out there." Roan tilted his head back, looking up into the bottomless blue of the deep sky. "I sent them away myself," he said. "I betrayed them to their enemies and then turned my back on them. There's nothing for them to come back for."

XXI

Roan sat with Desiranne and Sostelle at a small table in the bar that Soup the Insider had once

owned. It was evening. The room was filled with yellow light and the last of the day's heat. In one corner, a Man with magic fingers caressed a stringed instrument that mourned for love and courage and other forgotten things. A one-eyed Man came in silently from the street, crossed to their table.

"I seen another patrol," he said accusingly. "You and yer woman and yer dog better pull out to-night."

Roan looked at him with an expression that was the absence of all expression.

"Yer calling 'em down on us," the Man said, his lips twisting with the hates that ate at him like crabs. "When the dogs get on a Man's trail, they don't never quit. And long's they're here in the Town, ain't nobody safe."

"They're not looking for me," Roan said. "Not after a year. I'm not that important."

"A year — ten years. It's all the same to dogs. They ain't like a Man. They're trained to hunt — and that's what they're doing."

"He's right, Roan," Sostelle said. "Kotschai will never forget the Man who shamed him by escaping him. Perhaps we'd best leave now, and find another place."

"I'm not leaving," Roan said. "If they want me, let them find me." He looked at the one-eyed Man. "If you fought them — if we all fought them — we could wipe them out. There are only a few hundred of them. Then you could leave this pest-hole. You could spread out into the countryside, start new villages—"

The Man shook his head. "You was lucky," he said. "You got clear of 'em. But that was because you was in Upper Town, where they wasn't expecting no trouble. When they come down here, they come in packs, with nerve guns and organization. Nobody's going to jump that kind of force. And neither are you." He straightened, showing his teeth. "You're going to get out, like I said — or you ain't going to live long."

Roan laughed at him. "Is that a threat? Is being dead worse than living in this ghetto?"

"You're going to find out pretty soon, you and your . . . friends." He swaggered away.

"Roan," Sostelle started. "We could leave by night, make our way to —"

"I'm going out." Roan stood. "I need fresh air."

"Roan! You're challenging the dogs — and the Men as well!"

Desiranne caught at his hand. "They'll see us."

Roan pushed her gently back. "Not us. Just me. Let *them* beware."

"I'm going with you."

"Stay here with Sostelle," Roan said flatly. "I've hidden from them for a year. That's long enough."

As he walked away, he heard Sostelle say: "Let him go, mistress. A Man like Roan cannot live forever as a hunted slave."

The rumor ran ahead of Roan. People stared, made mystical signs, then darted out to follow as he strode along, taking the center of

the hut and garbage-choked street. Others slipped away into decay-slimed alleyways to spread the word.

The last of sunset faded. The few automatic polyarcs that still worked came on, shedding their tarnished brilliance on broken walks, cracked facades and Roan, walking the night with his shadow striding ahead.

"They're close," someone called to Roan from a doorway. "Better run quick, Mister Fancy-talk!"

He was in a wide avenue with a center strip of hard-packed dirt where flowers had once grown. At the far end was the wide collonaded front of a building white in the glare from a tall pole-mounted light. Tall weeds poked up among marble slabs there. Rude huts grew like toadstools in the shadows of the chipped pediments.

A dog appeared on the broken steps, standing tall, curve-shouldered, cringe-legged, cruel-fanged, wearing the straps and sparkling medallions of the police. Roan walked toward him, and the trailing crowd fell back.

"Stop there, red-haired Man!" the dog yelped. He drew the curiously shaped gun strapped under his foreleg and pointed it at Roan. "You're under arrest."

"Run," Roan said in a strange, flat voice. "Run, or I'll kill you."

"What? Kill *me*? You're a fool, Red-hair. I have a gun."

Roan broke into a run straight toward the dog. The animal crouched and fired. In the sudden shock of pain Roan felt his legs knot and cramp, and he fell. The dog

stalked up to him, waving back the gathering crowd.

It's only pain, Roan told himself. He rested on hands and knees. Pain is nothing. Dying without feeling his throat under your hands is the true agony.

He rose to his feet in a sudden movement, and the police dog whirled, reaching for the gun. But Roan's swing caught him below his cropped ear, sent him spinning. With a growl, the dog scrambled to all fours, and Roan's foot met him under the jaw with a solid impact.

The shaved body rolled aside and lay still. Roan stooped, picked up the gun, as a mutter of alarm swept across the mob.

"You see?" Roan shouted. "They're dogs — nothing more!"

"Now they'll kill you for sure!" a gaunt woman yelled. "Serve you right, too, you trouble-bringer!"

"Here they come!" another voice screeched. Two more dogs had appeared from the ruin, coming on at a relentless lope. Roan took aim and shot one. It fell yelping and kicking out, and the other veered aside and dashed for safety. The crowd shouted now.

"But these are just ordinary dogs." The one-eyed Man had come up close to Roan. "Wait until you meet Kotschai, face to face. Then you'll learn the taste of honest fear."

"They say he's three hundred years old," a short, clay-faced man said. "His masters have given him their magic medicine to make him live long, and with every passing year he's grown more wise and evil.

My gran'fer remembered him — "

"He's just a dog," Roan shouted. "And you're Men!"

Across the square a squad of uniformed dogs burst into view, fanned out, halted, facing the crowd, which recoiled, leaving Roan to stand alone.

Then an avenue opened through the police and an immense dog paced through. In silence he advanced across the plaza, skirted the injured dog which was crawling painfully, whimpering. A dozen feet from Roan, he halted.

"Who dares defy Kotschai the Punisher?" he growled. He was taller than Roan, massive-bodied, with the thick, sinewy forelegs of a tiger and jaws like a timber-wolf. His body had been shaved except for a ruff around the neck. His pinkish-gray hide was a maze of scars. He was dressed in straps and bangles of shiny metal decorated with enamel. There was a harness studded with spikes of brass across his chest. Above his yellow eyes was a brass horn that seemed to be set in the bone of his brute-flat skull. His tail had been broken and badly set. It swung nervously, as though it hurt all the time.

"How does a dog dare to challenge a Man?" Roan demanded.

"It is the order of my Master." The wicked jaws grinned and a pink tongue licked black gums.

"Can you fight all of us?" Roan motioned toward the silent mob.

"They do not count," Kotschai said. "Only you. I see you have a gun, too. But my dogs have more."

"You and I don't need guns," Roan said. "We have hands and teeth for fighting."

Kotschai looked at Roan with his small, red-circled eyes. He lifted his muzzle and sniffed the air.

"Yes," the dog said. "I smell the odor of human blood-lust." He seemed to shiver. "It is not a scent I love, Master."

"Then you'd better learn how to crouch on all fours and heel on command dog," Roan said loudly, so that everyone could hear.

"I have never learned such lessons, Master," Kotschai said.

"You haven't had a proper teacher, dog."

"That may be true." Kotschai motioned his dogs back. He unbuckled his gun harness, threw it aside.

"It is said that once Man was Terra's most deadly predator," he said. "I have wondered long how it was that the pretty creatures I call Master made the dogs their slaves. Perhaps in you I see the answer."

"Perhaps in me you see your death."

Kotschai nodded. "Perhaps. And now I must punish you, Master."

Roan tossed the gun to a Man, reached to his shoulder, ripped loose the clasp that held his garment, wrapped the ragged cloth around his left forearm.

"Now I'll instruct you in courtesy, dog," he said, and Kotschai snarled and charged.

Roan's padded arm struck into the open jaws as the dog's bristly

body slammed against him. He stumbled back, twisting aside from the horn that raked his jaw. He locked his free arm around the dog's shoulders, keeping his face above the viscous chest spikes, and together Man and dog fell. Roan locked his legs around the heavy torso. Kotschai snarled, raking with all four limbs as Roan locked arms and legs crushed, crushed —

With a frantic effort, the dog wrenched his jaws half free of Roan's strangling forearm. He lunged for a better grip with his teeth, and Roan struck with his fist, kicked free, hurled the animal from him. Kotschai scrambled to his feet, jaws agape, the stubble along his spine erect. Roan faced him, blood on his arm, teeth bared in an ancient defiance. All around, dogs and Men stood silent, gaping at the spectacle of Men pitted against beast.

The dog charged again. Roan slipped aside, dropped on the broad back, locked ankles under the dog's belly, wrapped his arms around the thick neck, pressing his face close to the mightily-muscled shoulder. Kotschai went down, rolled, and Roan held on, throttling the breath in the dog's throat. Kotschai reared high, tottering under the weight of the Man on his back, throwing his horned head from side to side. Roan's grip loosened —

At once, the dog twisted, the great jaws snapping a hair's breath from Roan's unprotected shoulder. Roan doubled his fist, struck a smashing blow across the dog's face, but the jaws snapped again, and this time

they met hide and muscle. Roan found a grip on the corded throat, forcing the fanged head back. He felt the locked teeth tear his flesh.

The garment wrapping Roan's arm had slipped down. It flapped in in the dog's face, and the animal snapped at it. In the instant's diversion, Roan ripped free; but even as he retreated a step the dog was on him, and again the rag-snarled fist was thrust into the yawning jaws, and again Roan fell, and now Kotschai was above him, snarling and worrying the impeding gag, struggling to find a clear thrust at Roan's throat, while Roan fought to hold the fighting body close . . .

A minute that was an eternity passed, while the two antagonists contended, chest to chest, their agonized breathing the only sound in all the wide plaza. And slowly the jaws grew closer.

Roan's grip loosened. He looked into the yellow eyes, and felt the hot, inhuman ferocity that burned an inch from his face now. And then he saw another face, above and behind that of the dog — the features set and pale, the one eye glaring —

There was a shock, and the pressure was gone. Kotschai kicked convulsively, growling. The growl became a howl, choked off. Roan thrust the two-hundred pound body from him, got to his knees, then to his feet. Blood was running hot across his chest from the wound in his shoulder, and his breath was raw in his throat.

He was aware of the Man standing before him, looking half-tri-

umphant, half afraid, and of a roar from the mob of humans, and of the dogs starting forward uncertainly, guns ready. Roan shook out his torn and bloody tunic, pulled it on.

"Thanks," Roan said, then yelled and charged the advancing dogs.

He felt the wash of fire as the field of a nerve gun touched him, and then he was on the nearest dog, feeling the solid smash of his fists on hide, and then the shouting was all about him and the ragged horde leaped past him, howling out their long-pent fury. The dogs fought bravely. But as quickly as one Man fell another leaped his body to grapple his antagonist. The police fell back almost to the broken marble steps of the ruined building before whistles and barkings sounded from a side way.

Now more dogs arrived, long pink tongues hanging out, stub tails whipping, firing as they came; and still more Men scrambled to join the fight which had spread all across the square now.

The one-eyed Man was beside Roan. His face was bleeding from a dog bite but his single eye gleamed with life.

"I killed three of 'em" he yelled. "Got one by the throat and choked him till he died!" He ran on.

The dogs had formed a tight phalanx, guns aimed outward to sweep the crowd, and they retreated slowly as Men rushed at them, shouting curses, leaping the bodies of the fallen, striking out with clubs, knives, fists. Now the dogs reached a narrow way, and more Men fell

as the enemy retreated, leaving a trail of casualties behind them. They reached a gate, and slipped through it and it clanged behind them. The Men tried to climb it, but the dogs shot them down, and they fell, all but one who hung, impaled on spear-points.

But a wild yell was echoing along the street, across the plaza, Men and women danced, screaming their triumph. The one-eyed Man was back, seizing Roan's arm, pumping his hand.

"We beat 'em! he was shouting at the top of his lungs.

"They'll be back!" Roan shouted. "We'll have to collect the weapons, set up a defensive position . . ."

No one was listening. Roan turned to another Man as One-eye darted away, tried to explain that the dogs had retired in good order for tactical reasons, that they would renew the assault as soon as reinforcements arrived with heavy weapons.

It was useless. The Lowers capered, all yelling at once.

Something made Roan look upward. A point of brilliant light sparkled and winked against the night sky, and Roan felt the clutch of a ghostly hand at his heart.

"A ship!" he said aloud, feeling his voice choke.

"Roan!"

He whirled. Sostelle was there, unruffled by the frenzy all about. "The Lady Desiranne commanded me to come."

Roan clutched at him. "It's a ship!" he said hoarsely, pointing.

"Yes, Roan. We saw it from the roof top. Or, Roan! Is it your ship?"

A great searchlight lanced out from the port area. The finger of chalky bluish light glared on low clouds, found the ship, glinted on its side.

"No," Roan said, and the ghostly hand gripped even tighter. "It's not my ship. It's a big one. A dreadnaught of the line. It's Trishinist and his plunderers of the Imperial Teran Navy."

XLII

Roan and Sostelle watched from the shelter of the causeway as the mile-long vessel suspended itself five miles over the city, like an elongated moon ablaze with lights from stem to stern. It's pressor beams were columns of pale fire bearing on smoking pits, spaced at hundred yard intervals across the flower beds and glassy pavement of the landing ramps. Three smaller shapes of light had detached themselves from the mother vessel, dropping quickly toward the Earth.

"They're landing about three hundred Men," Roan said. "How many fighting dogs are there?"

"I don't know, Roan. Perhaps as many, perhaps more. But look there!"

From the Upper City, a flock of flyers had appeared, moving swiftly toward the port. Roan could see the crossed-bones insignia of the police blazoned on the sides of the grim, gray machines. The landing craft from the ITN battleship were settling to the broad pavement now. Ports cycled open. A cascade of men poured out of each, formed

up in ragged columns. The police flyers closed ranks, hurtling to the attack at low altitude. Something sparkled from the prow of the first landing craft in line, and the lead flyer exploded into arcing fragments with a flash that lit the landscape for two miles around in dusty orange light. The other police vessels scattered, screaming away at flank speed, hugging the ground, but not before an aerial torpedo got away to burst near an ITN column, sending half a dozen men sprawling.

"The dogs are brave enough," Roan said. But they don't know how to fight a force like Trishinist's. The ship won't fire. He'll want the city intact to loot. But the ground party will walk through them to take the city, and then they'll come on to Lower Town, and from here they'll go on to the next city, and when they're finished there'll be nothing left but ashes."

"Perhaps if the Lowers joined with the dogs —"

"No use. They're just a mob, drunk on a taste of victory."

"Why, Roan?" Sostelle whined. "What do these Men seek here? Surely in the wide skies there must be worlds enough for all creatures."

"They destroy for the love of it — like Daryl and his friends. Poor Terra. Her last, forlorn hope is gone now."

The landing force had advanced across the ramp to the reception buildings. A detachment broke off. Roan saw the wink of guns as they smashed their way into the glass-

walled lounge where he had met Daryl that first day, so long ago. The dogs, meanwhile, had grounded their flyers and were advancing in open order across a wide park to intercept the invaders at the causeway.

"Terra's own lost, wandering sons — returned to deal her her death-blow," Sostelle whispered. "In a sad world, this is the crowning sadness."

Roan was studying the advancing ITN column. Even from the distance of half a mile he could make out the hulking forms, the shambling gaits of the mongrel humans in the blue and silver uniforms. Two large Men marched at the head of the column, a smaller figure between them."

Sostelle raised his nose and sniffed.

"Look there!" Roan said.

"My eyes are not as keen as those of a Man, Roan."

Roan was on his feet. His heart beat in his throat, almost choking him. Then he was running, sprinting across a stretch of open grass, leaping up the embankment to the causeway. He heard Sostelle at his side.

"Roan, you'll be killed! Both sides will fire their guns at you!"

But Roan ran on toward the approaching ITN detachment. The leader — a huge figure in ill-fitting blues — held up a hand, halted the column, brought a short-barreled power gun around . . .

Then he threw it aside.

"Roan! Chief!" he bellowed.

"Askor! And Sidis!"

They came together and Roan seized the Minid's broad shoulders in a wild embrace, shouting while Askor grinned so widely that everyone of his twenty-eight teeth showed.

"Chief, we knew we'd find you," he roared out. Sidis was looming then, his steel teeth glittering in the polyarc light.

"Askor and me come in here ready to blow this dump apart if we didn't find you okay." He clapped Roan on the back with his steel hook and Roan seized him, danced him around, while the troops standing by at the ready gaped and grinned.

"I told that lunk-head you was okay." Askor gripped Roan's arm and pounded his back with a great, horny hand.

"Gee, Boss, you look different," Sidis said. "Your hair's got gray and you got lines in your face . . . and you ain't been eating good, neither. But to the Nine Hells with it! We're together!"

Roan laughed and listened to both men talk at once. Then other crewmen were crowding forward, and Roan caught a glimpse of a once-familiar face, now thin and dirty and streaked with tears.

It was Trishinist. There was an iron collar around his neck to which a length of heavy chain was welded.

"I knew you big plug-uglies would come back," Roan said. Sostelle was by his side, his tail wagging. "Didn't I, Sostelle?" Roan demanded, blinking back an annoying film in his eyes.

"Yes, Roan," the dog said. "You knew."

"Chief, I guess maybe we better take a few minutes to straighten out these fellows coming out from the city," Askor said. The dogs were marching across the causeway now, four abreast, advancing in defense of their masters.

"Sostelle — can't you stop them?" Roan asked.

"No," the dog said almost proudly. "The dogs will fight."

Then Askor was away, bawling orders, and Roan stood with Sidis under a tree that drifted lavender petals on them as the two columns met in fire and dust.

Sunlight shifted suddenly past a shattered beam and waked Roan. "It's quiet," he said to Desiranne, who stood at the edge of the cavernous ruin of the old house, looking toward the city. She looked around, smiled, the sunlight misting in her hair.

Askor appeared around the edge of the wall. "Looks like it's over, Chief."

"That's Sami!" Desiranne cried, pointing toward a dog that limped across the ruined square toward them. "It's . . . it was a dog I knew."

"My animals are overwhelmed," Sami said. "Only twenty-three survive, and all of those are injured. We can no longer fight." His fur was singed and there was blood clotted at the side of his head, but he stood straight.

"You put up a good scrap," Askor said approvingly. "You knocked

off a couple dozen ITN's and even nailed one or two of my boys."

"I request one hour's time to permit my dogs to clean themselves and polish their brasses before we are put to death," Sami said. "They wish to meet their end in proper fashion, and not as Masterless curs."

"Huh? Who said anything about killing you?" Askor said.

"But we are sworn to defend to the death . . ."

"No," Sami," Desiranne put in softly. "I know your training, your loyalty. But the world is different now. I am different. So are you. Men and dogs must change or both be lost."

"What would you say to joining up," Askor said.

"Joining . . . ?"

"The ITN," Askor explained. "I need good fighters." He looked at Roan. "Sorry, Chief. I guess this last year I kind of got a habit of talking like it was *my* show."

"It is," Roan said. "You've earned it."

"If we hadn't found *Archaeopteryx* and our old crew cruising around near Alpha Four looking for us, we never would of made it. But what about signing up the dogs, Chief? You like the idea okay?"

"Sure. They're Terrans too, aren't they?"

The dog's eyes gleamed. He straightened his back even more. "Sirs! My dogs and I accept your offer! We will fight well for Terra, Sirs!" Sami saluted and limped away.

Sidis came up. "Boss, uh, the boys is kind of looking around a

little in the city, if that's okay. They been a long time in space, and, uh . . ."

"No unnecessary killing or destruction," Roan said. "I leave it to them to decide what's necessary."

"Them poor Terries in the dump town," Askor said. "They look worse than the Geeks back in that place, Tambool, Chief. We give 'em some food and blasted down the gates so's they could help themselves to some of the stuff that's laying around in the fancy part of town. I got a idea we could sign on a few of them, too, after the fun's over."

"Yeah, Boss," Sidis said eagerly. "With a couple hundred of Trish-inist's Gooks, and the dogs, and now those Terries, we got a nice-sized little navy shaping up. We could maybe even man two ships. What you got in mind for our next cruise?"

Desiranne put her hand on Roan's arm, and looked up at him anxiously. Roan covered her hand with his, covering the old finger wound. He shook his head. "I'm staying on Terra," he said.

Askor and Sidis stared at him.

"This world needs every Man it can get," Roan said. "The old equilibrium's been shattered. If we leave them to their own devices they'll die. The Lowers outnumber the Uppers a hundred to one — but they don't know how to run a world. And if the automatic machinery isn't properly tended, they'll all starve. They'll starve soon, anyway, when the system breaks down completely. But I can help. I have to try."

Askor nodded. "Yeah . . . from

what I saw, there ain't much hope for these Terries on their own."

"There still life in the old world," Roan said. "Now that the blockade is broken, the word will spread. They'll be coming, to get in on the spoils. But with a little time and luck, I can organize her defenses — enough to give her a chance."

Askor frowned. "Defenses? What about *Archie*? There ain't many tubs in space can take her on."

"I can't ask you to stay here," Roan said. "For me, it's different. I have a wife now. And in a few months I'll have a son . . ."

Askor and Sidis looked at each other. "Uh . . . you know, Boss, it's a funny thing," Sidis said. "I feel at home here myself." He waved a thick-fingered hand. "The air smells right, the sunlight, the trees — all that kind of stuff. I been thinking —"

"Uh, Chief," Askor broke in. "I'll be back."

Roan looked after him. "I guess I'm a great disappointment to him. Married, settled down, no more raiding the spaceways . . ."

"It ain't that, Boss." Sidis snapped the top off a tall wine bottle and occupied himself with swallowing. A big Gook named Gungle appeared at the door, grinned across at Roan.

"Hey, Cap'n, what do you want to do with this Terry Admiral we got here? Askor said bring him along from Alpha for you to roast over a slow fire if you wanted to." He tugged the chain in his hand and Trishinist stumbled in.

"Roan! Dear lad," he babbled. "If you've a heart, surely you'll take a moment now to instruct these animals to release me."

Gungle jerked the chain. "Talks funny, don't he, Cap'n?"

"Maybe we should find a nice deep hole to put him in," Roan said thoughtfully, studying the former officer. "But somehow the idea bores me. You may as well just shoot him."

"Roan — no! I'm far too valuable to you!"

"He's all the time talking about something he knows, Cap'n," Gungle explained. "Said you wouldn't never find out if we was to blow a hole in him."

"Yes, Roan," Trishinist gasped. "Only set me free — with a stout vessel, of course — one of the flagship's lifeboats will serve nicely — and an adequate supply of provisions — and perhaps just a few small ingots of Terran gold to help me make a new start — and I'll tell you something that will astonish you!"

"Go ahead," Roan said.

"But first, your promise."

Gungle gave the chain a sharp tug. "Tell it," he growled.

Trishinist bleated. "Your word, Roan —"

"I guess I might as well go ahead and plug him, Cap'n," Gungle said apologetically, tugging at his pistol. "I shudn't of bothered you." He turned on the cowering man.

"I'll speak!" Trishinist bleated. "And throw myself on your mercy, Roan. I have faith in your sense of honor, dear lad!"

Roan yawned.

"You're a Terran!" Trishinist screeched. "Yes, of the Pure Strain. The ancient strain! There was a ship — oh, old, old, it was, Roan! Hulled in Deep Space by a rock half as big as a lifeboat, and drifting through space and centuries — until I found it. There was the body of a Man, frozen in an instant as the rock opened her decks to space. They took from his body the frozen germ cells, and at my order — my order, Roan — our finest technicians thawed them, and induced maturation! And then — but the you you know . . ." He stared at Roan, his mouth hanging open, his eyes pleading.

"His name was Admiral Stuart Murdoch," Roan said. "He died sixteen thousand years ago."

"Then — you knew it." Trishinist's face went gray.

"I didn't know the whole story. Tell me, Trishinist, if I let you go, will you settle down here on Terra and live a useful life?"

"Live? Life? the former Admiral straightened. "Roan, I'll be a model citizen, I swear it. Oh, I'm tired, tired! Of killing, and struggle, and hate! I want to rest now. I'll till a plot of land — Terran soil — and marry a Terran woman, raise a family. I want . . . I want to be loved.

"Cripes," Gungle said.

"Perhaps he does," Desiranne said. "We're all having a new birth now." She leaned heavily on Roan, reminding him of the new life within her.

"Get out," Roan said to him. "And if you betray me, I'll find you. Wherever you are."

"Gee, Cap'n," Gungle said disgustedly. He dropped the chain and Trishinist caught it up, darted from the room. Roan heard a yell, then the scamper of retreating feet. Askor came in, grinning.

"I figured you'd let him go, Chief. And, uh, now I got something to show you."

He turned, beckoned. A girl appeared in the doorway, smiling shyly. She was small, pretty, obviously Terran. She was dressed in soft-colored garment from the Gallian World, and she held a baby in her arms. Askor went to her, put a protective hand on her shoulder, led her to Roan. A fat, three month-old face looked up at Roan, suddenly smiled a half-familiar smile.

"My kid," Askor said proudly.

Roan blinked.

"Me and Cyrillia," Askor went on, grinning. "I, uh, kind of took her along when me and Sidis left here, Chief. We was in kind of a hurry, but I seen her and you know . . ."

"You took her with you?" Roan took the baby. He was solid, heavy, with the round face of a Minid and the pert nose of his mother. "Then — this means —"

"Yeah," Askor said. "I guess that proves even a Gook's got a little Earthblood, huh? I want to stay here, Chief. With you." And the rest of the boys too. You need us here. Terra needs us to start her new navy. And ever since Roan was born — " Askor blushed.

"We named him for you, Sir,"
Cyrillia said in a soft voice.

"Hell's hull, Chief — all the boys are tired of this shipboard life. They all want to get a nice Terrie gal and settle down. We'll keep Archie ship-shape."

"There are plenty of ships," Roan said, through a smile that felt as large and silly as Askor's"

The first star came out. But it wasn't somewhere to go. It was just a decoration.

Roan held Desiranne's hand in his and saw that she was looking down the grassy hillside to the city, where fire winked and glimmered among the dark buildings. Echoes of grating laughter, shouts, the tuneless counterpoints of drunken looters sounded.

"Tears for your city?" Roan asked his wife, feeling them fall on his hand.

"Only for the strangeness of it all, the difference," she said softly, and then almost shouted, "No! Let them destroy it, root out all the evil. And then we start over."

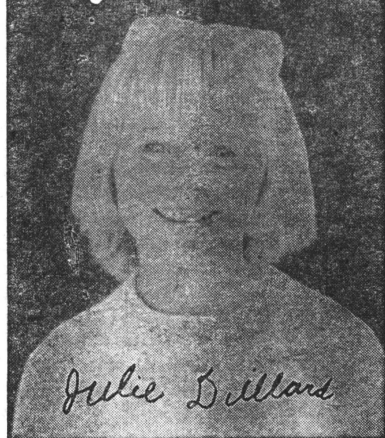
"Still . . . I could weep myself for all that history. The ancient things burning there, the treasures of Terran art, the heritage of Terra's greatness."

Desiranne touched his cheek. "Oh, Roan, how you must ache for it! The Terra you came so far for, that you spent your youth to find. The Terra that no longer existed."

"No." Roan helped Desiranne to her feet, looking out with her over the city, into the night. "I learned something. If what you want doesn't

exist, you create it. Terra's past is lost forever. Now she has only the future. We'll make the future. You and me — and our friends out there!"
END

*I'm cured
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Dear Editor:

Congratulations! You have just received my nomination for the best science-fiction magazine of 1965 (or any other year, for that matter).

Anyone who can publish in the same issue the conclusion of Heinlein's best novel yet, the beginning of another world-beater serial, PLUS the best collection of short stories and novelettes anywhere deserves the Hugo. Maybe they should create another category, the editor who has done the most to promote better science fiction. If they do, the only person who could honestly accept it would be you, Mr. Pohl.

On the minus side however, is the juvenile artwork displayed on the covers of your magazines. So far, only *Galaxy* has had any decent covers. The ones on *W. O. T.* and *If* give the prospective buyer a false impression of what sf is about. I feel that the cover artwork should be equal to, if not better than, the interior artwork.

Now for the analyzation. Starting with the past three issues (February). The Heinlein serial was, of course, the best part of the entire magazine. Coming in second, was C. C. MacApp, who I must admit I'm partial to. For the short, short story

of the new year, *Build We Must*, takes the prize. Next, R. A. Lafferty with the *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*. Please give us more of Lafferty's work, which, although it is not very popular, is some of the best weird-type fiction written. Booby prize goes to *Not by Sea* which never should have seen print.

In the March issue, once again the Master comes thru with the No. 1 story, followed closely by *Dam Nuisance*. One of my favorite authors (you have a different one of them every issue) John Brunner came through with a rousing good story, with a feminine hero for a change. Neither of the short stories were worth the time it took to read them.

I hate to seem monotonous but once again the writer who must be the best all-time writer of sf ever, came through with the Hugo winner for '66 for long fiction. I am referring to *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. The new serial by Laumer and Brown (just who the heck is Rosel G. Brown, anyway?) was good and promises to be consistently so. *Castles in Space* was unusual and was very enjoyable. E. Clayton McCarty who writes like no one else, with tenderness, understand-

ing and warmth, (plus a typewriter) came through with another enjoyable tale, his third in a row for you. No comment on Garrett Brown's story, let's just say that you must have had very poor pickings that month. To sum it up, at least five were very goods, three goods and about two strike-outs. A very commendable record.

Before I end, I would like to air one of my biggest gripes that I have about your group of magazines. You, Mr. Pohl, are one of the finest writers of this generation. Yet in the last two or three years, you have not written anything that would be considered even fair for a writer of your calibre. The works of yours that I have read are all reprints. Perhaps it is the fact that you have three magazines to edit that prevents you from garnering the yearly crop of Hugos. I do wish that you would find time to write some more stories that are the sequel of say, *Space Merchants*, or a novelette like *The Abominable Earthman*.

Keep up the good work. — Drake Maynard, 2509 Columbine Lane, Burlington, North Carolina. 27215. P.S. A while ago, someone read one of my letters and wrote to me. I seem to have lost his address and would appreciate it if you would publish this letter so he could write me again to send me his address.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I have noticed in your recent issue of *If* some comments on the desirability of advertisements in your magazine. Unfortunately, science-fiction fans have a poor understanding of the advertising business. I have been in the advertising business for over twenty years and

perhaps I can straighten out their misconceptions.

First of all, science-fiction fans think it is impossible to get advertisements from technical and scientific firms in science-fiction magazines. It is not possible. It is true that a few gimcrack outfits will advertise in s-f magazines, but authentic scientific firms do not need to. The reason is simply that most of these firms advertise in professional publications where they are assured that their ad will be read by the person for whom it is intended. There are almost twenty thousand of these publications, and none of them ever appear on the newsstands. Some of them are issued every two weeks and many of them are an inch thick. They also deliver up-to-the-minute news on the profession at which they are aimed. In other words, they are everything that the professional man needs.

I realize that s-f fans want such ads in s-f magazines to add a touch of dignity while bringing in enough money to make the magazine better. And this brings up the question of whether they consider dignity more important than a better magazine. I am inclined to believe that they do. However, you cannot eat dignity. The writers and artists for the magazines can make more money if the magazine has advertising revenue. Obviously, with more money coming in, the publisher can afford to pay more. It is equally obvious that a magazine with an assured advertising income could eventually lower its cover price. All of these would be good things. But you can only get them if you are willing to accept the presence of consumer advertising in the pages of the magazine. That means liquor ads,

cigarette ads, chewing gum ads, etc. You use there products, so why detest the need for advertising them?

This brings us to the ever-present problem of display space. The advertiser is just as concerned about this as the publisher of s-f magazines. The advertiser needs room to show his product, and there just is not sufficient room in the present digest size s-f mag. To correct this problem, I suggest that the s-f mags give serious consideration to the possibility of increasing their size to that of the *Playboy* type magazine. Large sizes have been tried, as I stated in my last letter. However, expense was not given enough consideration. It was assumed by those who tried it that the large size might automatically bring in enough readers to support the magazine in that size printed on slick paper.

From my point of view, a slick paper magazine in the s-f field is not worthy of consideration, because it could never pay for itself. I suggest an approximately 8"x10" format, saddle stitched and printed on pulp paper. Half-page inside illustrations would be sufficient and the cover illustration need not cover the whole page. A publication of this size would be more attractive to the potential advertiser than the present size. S-f magazines have changed their formats three times in the past forty years. There is no reason why they cannot change again. — D. Bruce Berry, 4554 North Malden Street, Chicago, Illinois 60640.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Several of my friends and I were wondering about NICAP — where is

national headquarters, how does one join and related information. Could you at *If* do an editorial on NICAP? — Leroy M. Webb, P.O. Box 178, Yelm, Washington.

● The National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena, largest (and most easily comprehended!) of the groups interested in UFOs, is located at 1536 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington 36, D.C. Far as we know, membership is open to any interested party. Their principal function is to serve as a sort of clearing house for reports of unexplained sightings; they also publish books and periodicals about them, attempt to investigate as many sightings as possible, etc. — *Editor*.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Anyone who had a rejected science-fiction story sent to a publisher, and anyone who would like to write a story or has some good ideas for stories, should write to me if they would like to join the club called the S.F.W.O. (Science Fiction Writers Organization).

Anyone who is interested, write me a letter and I will send them a letter on what it is all about. — Larry Paschall, Route #1, Cushing, Minnesota.

● That's about it for another month. This month's "First" is A. A. Walde with — we think you'll agree! — an unusual contribution, not only because of its story qualities but because of its length (Most beginning writers stick to very short pieces — but as you see, it's not essential!)

Next month? Hal Clement's back, with a story called *The Foundling Stars*. Need we say more?

— *The Editor*

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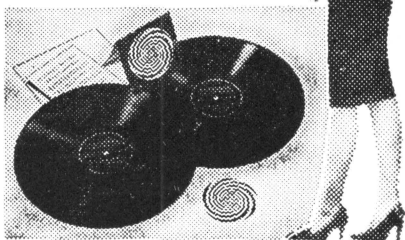


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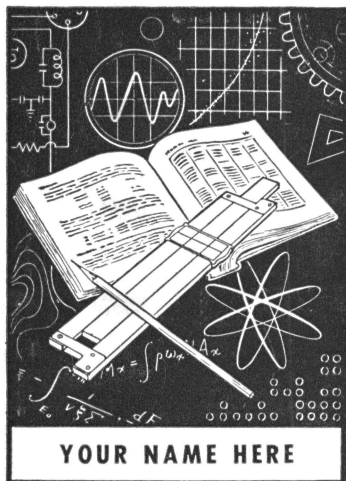
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