WORLDS OF IF

APRIL 1967 50¢

# SCIENCE FICTION

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by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

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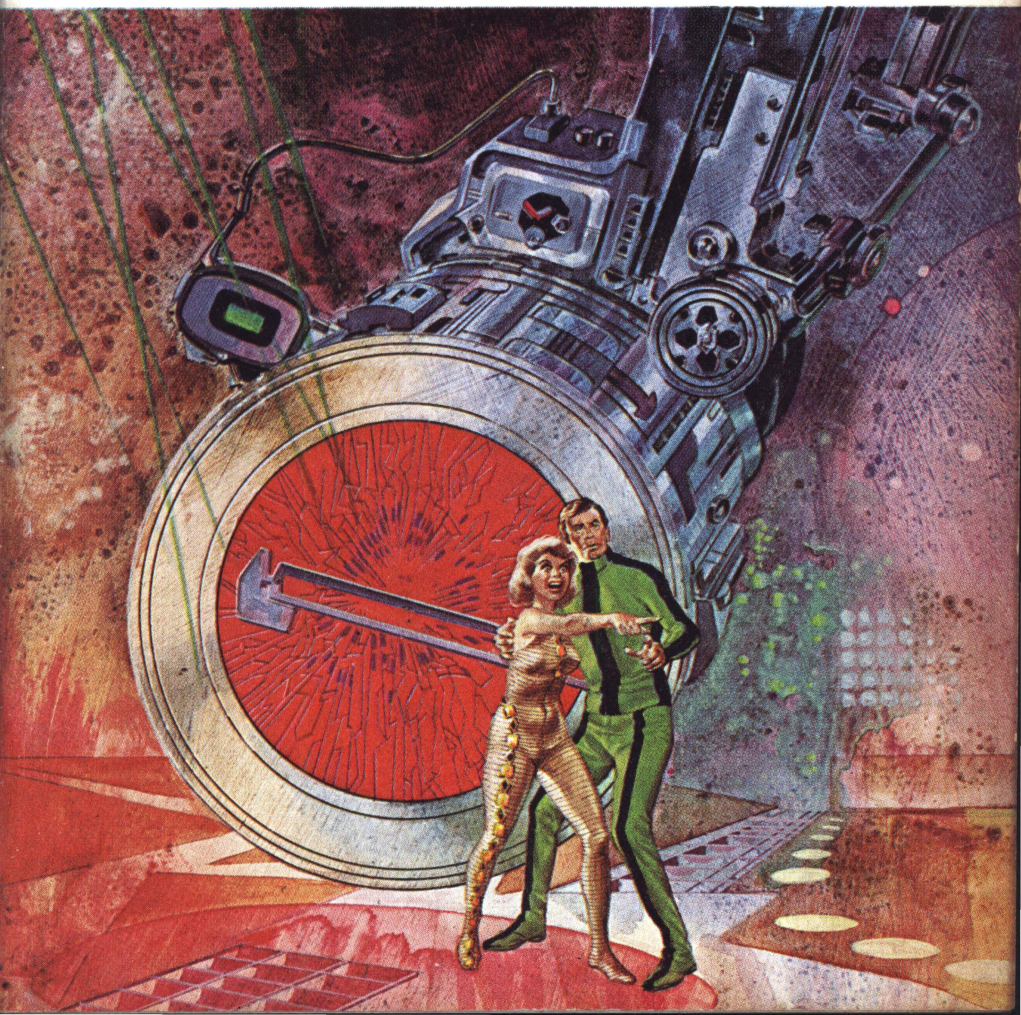

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APRIL, 1967
Vol. 17, No. 4
ISSUE 113

# WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES

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**Cover by MORROW from THE ROAD TO THE RIM**

IF published monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, President, Vol. 17, No. 4. Main Office: 421 Hudson Street, 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.  All material 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.

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# THREE BRAVE MEN

On the 27th of January, 1967, the space age had its first American casualties, when a flash fire, fed by the pure-oxygen atmosphere in the capsule, killed three astronauts as they were completing the pre-flight tests for the first manned Apollo launching.

We all knew that we could not conquer space for free. Even a new airplane usually takes a couple of lives in development — test pilots know this, and for that matter so do most seasoned airline passengers, because even civilian transports have bugs that sometimes are not detected until a planeload or two gets killed. (Witness the Comet, the Constellation, the Electra, the Boeing 727.) And space travel is not merely a more arduous form of flying. It is a reach into a new dimension, with every part of its propulsion systems, life-support equipment, even telemetry and control brand-new and hazardous.

Yet it was a shock, all the same, when these three died.

The fact of death is nothing strange in this world, of course. Hardly a newspaper comes out without death in its headlines: for every astronaut who has died, a thousand men have given lives in battle . . . and ten thousand or more have battered their silly brains out in highway accidents. But these men died in a way that is unusual and almost unprecedented in this year of 1967: they died for a purpose, and they died without an enemy. No one in this world wanted them dead, and no one profited by the accident that took their lives.

The space program will go on, of course. If there were no other reason, it should go on because we owe it to them. But there are bigger reasons: we (meaning the human race) have to conquer space because it is the next place to go, and we have to pay whatever price it costs to get there.

We have been very careful with the lives of our astronauts, and up until now we have also been very lucky. It is certain that these three are only the first to die, not the last. But it was a worthwhile death for them; and while we honor them and mourn them for it, it is likely that, every now and then, we may envy them a little for it, too.

— *The Editor.*

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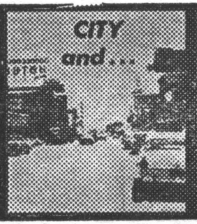


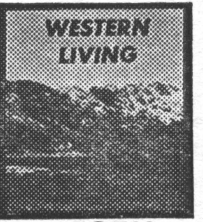


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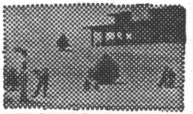

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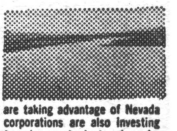

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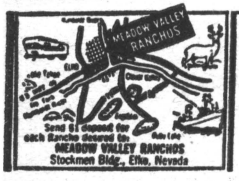


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# THE ROAD TO THE RIM

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by MORROW

*The ship was a ruin, the purser was preaching sedition — all in all, it looked like a fine trip!*

## I

His uniform was new, too new, all knife-edged creases and the braid and buttons as yet undimmed by time. It sat awkwardly upon his chunky body, and even more awkwardly his big ears protruded from under the cap that was set too squarely upon his head. Beneath the shiny visor his eyes were gray (but not yet hard); and his face, for all its promise of strength, was as yet unlined, had yet to lose its immature softness.

He stood at the foot of the ramp by which he had disembarked from the transport that had carried him from the Antarctic Base to Port Woomera, looking across the expanse of ochre sand to the spaceport, to the tall, silver towers that were the ships, interplanetary and interstellar, gleaming in the desert.

The westering sun was hot on his back, but he did not notice the discomfort. There were the ships, the *real* ships — not obsolescent puddle-jumpers like the decrepit cruiser in which he, with the other midshipmen of his class, had made the training cruise to the moons of Saturn. There were the ships, the starships, that span their web of commerce from Earth to the Centaurian planets, to the Cluster Worlds, to the Empire of Waverley, to the Shakespearian Sector and beyond.

*But they're only merchantmen,* he thought, with a young man's snobbery.

He wondered in which one of the vessels he would be taking passage. Merchantman or not, that big ship, the one that stood out from her neighbors like a city skyscraper among village church steeples, seemed to be a likely enough craft. He pulled the folder containing his orders from his inside breast pocket, opened it, read (not for the second time, even) the relevant page.

. . . *you are to report on board the Interstellar Transport Commission's* Delta Orionis . . .

He was not a spaceman yet, in spite of his uniform, but he knew the Commission's system of nomenclature. There was the *Alpha* class and the *Beta* class, and there were the *Gamma* and *Delta* classes. He grinned wrily. His ship was one of the smaller ones. Well, at least he would not be travelling to Lindisfarne Base in an *Epsilon* class tramp.

Ensign John Grimes, Federation Survey Service, shrugged his broad shoulders and stepped into the ground car waiting to carry him and his baggage from the airport to the spaceport.

## II

Grimes looked at the officer standing just inside *Delta Orionis'* airlock, and she looked at him. He felt the beginnings of a flush spreading over his face, a prickling of the roots of his close-cropped hair, and felt all the more embarrassed by this public display of his embarrassment. But spaceborn female officers, at this time, were almost as scarce as hens' teeth in the Survey Service; and such few as he had met all looked as though they shared a common, equine ancestry. It was all wrong, thought Grimes. It was unfair that this girl (this attractive girl) should already be a veteran of interstellar voyages while he, for all his uniform and commission, should be embarking upon his first, his very first trip outside the bounds of the solar system.

He let his glance fall from her face (but not without reluctance) to the braid on her shoulderboards. Gold on a white facing. So it wasn't too bad. She was only some sort of Paymaster or, to use Merchant Service terminology, only some sort of Purser.

She said, her clear, high voice almost serious, "Welcome aboard the *Delia O'Ryan*, Admiral."

"Ensign," corrected Grimes stiffly. "Ensign Grimes . . ."

". . . of the Federation Survey Service," she finished for him. "But

you are all potential admirals." There was the faintest of smiles flickering upon her full lips, a barely discernible crinkling at the corners of her eyes.

*Her brown eyes,* thought Grimes. *Brown eyes, and what I can see of her hair under that cap seems to be auburn . . .*

She glanced at her wrist watch. She told him, her voice now crisp and businesslike, "We lift ship in precisely ten minutes' time, Ensign."

"Then I'd better get my gear along to my cabin, Miss . . .?"

"I'll look after that, Mr. Grimes. Meanwhile, Captain Craven sends his compliments and invites you to the control room."

"Thank you." Grimes looked past and around the girl, trying to discover for himself the door that gave access to the ship's axial shaft. He was determined not to ask.

"It's labelled," she told him with a faint smile. "And the cage is waiting at this level. Just take it up as far as it goes, then walk the rest. Or do you want a pilot?"

"I can manage," he replied more coldly than he had intended, adding, "thank you." He could see the tally over the door now. It was plain enough. AXIAL SHAFT. So was the button that he had to press to open the door, but the girl pressed it for him. He thanked her again — and this time his coldness was fully intentional — and stepped into the cage. The door slid shut behind him. The uppermost of the studs on the elevator's control panel was marked *CAPTAIN'S DECK.* He pushed it, then stood there and watched the lights flashing on the panel as he was swiftly lifted to the nose of the ship.

When he was carried no further he got out, found himself on a circular walk surrounding the upper extremity of the axial shaft. On the outside of the shaft itself there was a ladder. After a second's hesitation he climbed it, emerged through a hatch into the control room.

It was like the control room of the cruiser in which he had made his training cruise and yet subtly (or not so subtly) unlike it. Everything — but so had it been aboard the Survey Service vessel — was functional, but there was an absence of high polish, of polishing for polishing's sake. Instruments gleamed, but it was the dull gleam that comes from long and continual use and matched the dull gleam of the buttons and rank marks on the uniforms of the officers already seated at their stations, the spacemen to whom, after all, uniform was no more (and no less) than an obligatory working rig.

The big man with the four gold bars on each shoulder half turned his head as Grimes came up through the hatch. "Glad to have you aboard, Ensign," he said perfunctorily. "Grab yourself a seat; there's a spare one alongside the mate's. Sorry there's no time for introductions right now. We're due to get upstairs."

"Here!" grunted one of the officers.

Grimes made his way to the vacant acceleration chair, dropped in-

to it, strapped himself in. While he was so doing he heard the captain ask, "All secure, Mr. Kennedy?"

"No, sir."

"Then why the hell not?"

"I'm still waiting for the purser's report, sir."

"Are you?" Then, with a long-suffering sigh, "I suppose she's still tucking some passenger into her — or *his* — bunk . . ."

"She could still be stowing some passenger's gear, sir," contributed Grimes. "Mine," he added.

"Indeed?" The captain's voice was cold and elaborately uninterested.

Over the intercom came a female voice. "Purser to Control. All secure below."

"And about bloody well time," grumbled the shipmaster. Then, to the officer at the transceiver, "Mr. Digby, kindly obtain clearance."

"Obtain clearance, sir," acknowledged that young man brightly. Then, into his microphone, *"Delta Orionis* to Port Control. Request clearance to lift ship. Over."

"Port Control to *Delta Orionis.* You may lift. Bon voyage. Over."

"Thank you, Port Control. Over and *out.*"

Then the ship was throbbing to the rhythmic beat of her Inertial Drive, and Grimes felt that odd sense of buoyancy, of near weightlessness, that persisted until the vessel broke contact with the ground; and then the still gentle acceleration induced the reverse effect. He looked out through the nearest viewport.

Already the ochre surface of the desert, streaked by the long, black shadows of ships and spaceport buildings, was far below them, with the vessels and the immobile constructions looking like toys and one or two surface vehicles like scurrying insects. Far to the north, dull-ruddy against the blue of the sky, there was a sandstorm. *If that sky were darker,* thought Grimes, *this would look like Mars,* and the mental comparison reminded him that he, too, was a spaceman, that he, too, had been around (although only within the bounds of Sol's planetary system). Even so, he was Survey Service, and these others with him in Control were only Merchant Officers, fetchers and carriers, interstellar coach and truck drivers. But he envied them their quiet competency.

Still the ship lifted, and the spaceport below her dwindled, and the land horizon to the north and the now visible sea horizon to the south began to display the beginnings of curvature. Still she lifted. And overhead the sky was dark, and the first bright stars, Sirius and Canopus, Alpha and Beta Centauri, were sparkling there and beckoning as they had beckoned for ages immemorial before the first clumsy rocket clambered heavenward up the ladder of its own fiery exhaust, before the first aeroplane spread its flimsy wings, before the first balloon was lifted by the hot, expanding gases from its airborne furnace . . .

"Mr. Grimes," said the captain suddenly, his voice neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"Sir?"

"We lift on I.D. until we're clear of the Van Allens."

"I know, sir," said Grimes, then he wished that he could unsay the words. But it was too late. He was conscious of the shipmaster's hostile silence, of the amused contempt of the merchant officers. He shrank into his chair, tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. The ship's people talked among themselves in low voices, ignoring him. They allowed themselves a period of relaxation, producing and lighting cigarettes. Nobody offered the ensign one.

Sulkily he fumbled for his pipe, filled it, lit it. The chief officer coughed with quite unnecessary vigor. The captain growled, "Put that out, please," and muttered something about stinking out the control room. He himself was puffing at a villainous black cigar.

The ship lifted, and below her the Earth was now a great sphere, three quarters in darkness, the line of the terminator drawn across land masses, cloud formations and oceans. City lights twinkled in the gloom like star clusters, like nebulae. In a quiet voice an officer was calling readings from the radar altimeter.

To the throbbing of the Inertial Drive was added the humming, shrilling to a whine of the directional gyroscopes as the ship turned about her short axis hunting the target star. The pseudogravity of centrifugal force was at an odd angle to that of acceleration, and the resultant was at an odder angle still. Grimes began to feel sick and was actually thankful that the captain had made him put his pipe out. Alarm bells sounded, and then somebody was saying over the intercom, "Prepare for acceleration. Prepare for acceleration. Listen for the count down."

The count down. Part of the long tradition of space travel, a hang-over from the days of the first, unreliable rockets. Spaceships still used rockets, but only as auxiliaries, as a means of delivering thrust in a hurry, of building up acceleration in a short time.

At the word *Zero!* the Inertial Drive was cut, and, simultaneously, the Reaction Drive flared into violent lift. The giant hand of acceleration bore down heavily upon all in the ship — then, suddenly, at a curt order from the captain, lifted.

Grimes became aware of a thin, high keening, the song of the everprecessing gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive. He knew the theory of it — as what spaceman did not? — although the mathematics of it were beyond the comprehension of all but a handful of men and women. He knew what was happening, knew that the ship, now that speed had been built up, was, as one of his instructors had put it, going ahead in Space and astern in Time. He felt, as he had been told that he would feel, the uncanny sensation of *deja vu,* and he watched the outlines of the control room and of every person and instrument in the compartment shift and shimmer, the colors sagging down the spectrum.

Ahead, the stars were pulsating spirals of opalescence; astern, Earth and Moon were frighteningly dis-

torted, uncanny compromises between the sphere and the tesseract. But this was no more than the merest subliminal glimpse; in the twinkling of an eye the Home Planet and her daughter were no more than dust motes whirling down the dark dimensions.

The captain lit a fresh cigar. "Mr. Kennedy," he said, "you may set normal Deep Space watches." He turned to Grimes. His full beard almost hid his expression, that of one performing a social duty with no enthusiasm. "Will you join me in my day cabin, Ensign?"

"It will be my pleasure, sir," lied Grimes.

## III

Handling his big body with easy grace in the Free Fall conditions, the captain led the way from the control room. Grimes followed slowly and clumsily, but with a feeling of great thankfulness that after his training cruise he was no longer subject to spacesickness. There were drugs, of course, and passengers used them, but a spaceman was expected to be independent of pharmaceutical aids. Even so, the absence of any proper "up" or "down" bothered him more than he cared to admit.

The shipmaster slid open the door to his accommodation, motioned to Grimes to enter, murmuring sardonically, "Now you see how the poor live." The so-called poor, thought Grimes, didn't do themselves at all badly. This deep-space sitting room was considerably larger than the day cabin of the Survey Service cruiser's captain had been. True, it was also shabbier — but it was far more comfortable. Its decorations, which would never have been approved aboard a warship, were obviously the private property of the master. There were a full dozen holograms on the bulkhead — all of them widely differing, but all of them covering the same subject matter. Not that the subject matter was covered.

"My harem," grunted the captain. "That one there, the redhead, I met on Caribbea. Quite a stop-over that was. The green-haired wench — and you can see that it's not a dye job, although I've often wondered why women can't be *thorough* — isn't human, of course. But indubitably humanoid and indubitably mammalian. Belongs to Brrrooonoooorrrooo, one of the worlds of the Shaara Empire. The local Queen Mother offered to sell Lalia — that's her name — to me for a case of Scotch. And I was tempted . . ." He sighed. "But you Service Survey types aren't the only one who have to live by regulations."

Grimes said nothing, tried to hide his interest in the art gallery.

"But take a pew, Ensign. Spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard — this is Liberty Hall."

Grimes pulled himself to one of the comfortable chairs, strapped himself in. He said lamely, "I don't see any cat, sir."

"A figure of speech," growled the captain, seating himself next to what looked like a drink cabinet. "Well, Mr. Grimes, your Commandant at the Academy, Commodore Bradshaw, is an old friend and shipmate

of mine. He said that you were a very promising young officer . . ." Like a balloon in a comic strip the unspoken words, "God knows why," hung between them. ". . . and asked me to keep an eye on you. But I have already gained the impression that there is very little that a mere merchant skipper such as myself will be able to teach you."

Grimes looked at the bulky figure seated opposite him, at the radiation-darkened skin of the face above the black, silver-streaked beard, at the fiercely jutting nose, at the faded but bright and intelligent blue eyes, the eyes that were regarding him with more than a hint of amused contempt. He blushed miserably as he recalled his brash, "I know, sir," in this man's own control room. He said, with an effort, "This is my first Deep Space voyage, sir."

"I know." Surprisingly the Captain chuckled and, as though to celebrate this minor scoring over his guest, opened the liquor cabinet. "Pity to have to suck this excellent Manzanila out of a bulb; but that's one of the hardships of Free Fall. Here!" He tossed a little pear-shaped container to Grimes, kept one for himself. "Your health, Ensign!"

"And yours, sir."

The wine was too dry for Grimes' taste, but he made a pretense of enjoying it. He was thankful that he was not asked to have a second drink. Meanwhile, his host had pulled a typewritten sheet from a drawer of his desk, was looking at it. "Let me see, now . . . You're in cabin 15, on D Deck. You'll be able to find your own way down, won't you?"

Grimes said that he would and unbuckled his lapstrap. It was obvious that the party was over.

"Good. Now, as an officer of the Survey Service you have the freedom of the control room and the engine rooms . . ."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just don't abuse the privilege, that's all."

*After that,* thought Grimes, *I'm not likely to take advantage of it, let alone abuse it.* He let himself float up from the chair, said, "Thank you, sir." *For the drink, or for the admonition? What did it matter?* "I'll be getting down to my cabin, sir. I've some unpacking to do."

"As you please, Mr. Grimes."

The captain, his social duty discharged, had obviously lost interest in his guest. Grimes let himself out of the cabin, made his way, not without difficulty to the door in the axial shaft. He was surprised at the extent to which one not very large drink had interfered with the control of his body in Free Fall. Emerging from the elevator cage on D Deck he stumbled, literally, into the purser. "Let go of me," she ordered, "or I shall holler 'rape!' "

*That,* he thought, *is all I need to make this trip a really happy one.*

She disengaged herself, moved back from him, her slim, sandalled feet, magnetically shod, maintaining contact with the steel decking, but gracefully, with a dancing motion. She laughed. "I take it that you've just come from a home truth session with B.B."

"B.B.?"

"The Bearded Bastard. But don't take it too much to heart. He's that way with *all* junior officers. The fact that you're Survey Service is only incidental."

"Thank you for telling me."

"His trouble," she went on, "his *real* trouble is that he's painfully shy."

*He's not the only one,* thought Grimes, looking at the girl. She seemed even more attractive than on the occasion of their first meeting. She had changed into the shorts-and-shirt shipboard uniform, and she was one of the rare women who can wear such a rig without looking lumpy and clumsy. There was no cap now to hide her hair — smooth, lustrous, with coppery glints, with a straight white parting, bisecting the crown of her finely shaped head.

She was well aware of his scrutiny. She said, "You must excuse me, Ensign. I have to look after the other customers. They aren't seasoned spacemen like you."

Suddenly bold, he said, "But before you go, what is your name?"

She smiled dazzlingly. "You'll find a list of all ship's personnel among the notices posted in your cabin. I'm included." Then she was gone, gliding rapidly around the curve of the alleyway.

He looked at the numbers over the cabin doors, outboard from the axial shaft, made a full circuit of that hollow pillar before he realized that this was only the inner ring, that he would have to follow one of the radial alleyways to reach his own accommodation. He finally found No. 15, let himself in.

His first action was to inspect the framed notices on the bulkhead.

*I.S.S. Delta Orionis,* he read.

*Captain J. Craven, O.G.S., S.S.R.* So the Old Man held a Reserve commission. And the Order of the Golden Star was awarded for something more than good attendance.

*Mr. P. Kennedy, Chief Officer.*

He ignored the other name on the list while he searched for the one he wanted. Ah, here it was.

*Miss Jane Pentecost, Purser.*

He repeated the name to himself, thinking that, despite the old play on words, this Jane was not plain. (But Janes rarely are.) *Jane Pentecost* . . . Then, feeling that he should be showing some professional interest, he acquainted himself with the names of the other members of the ship's crew. He was intrigued by the manning scale, amazed that such a large vessel, relatively speaking, could be run by such a small number of people. But this was not a warship; there were no weapons to be manned, there would never be the need to put a landing party ashore on the surface of a hostile planet. The Merchant Service could afford to automate, to employ machinery in lieu of ratings. The Survey Service could not.

Virtuously he studied the notices dealing with emergency procedures, ship's routine, recreational facilities and all the rest of it, examined with care the detailed plan of the ship. Attached to this was a card, signed by the master, requesting passengers to refrain, as much as possible, from using the elevator in the axial shaft, going on to say that it was essential,

for the good of their physical health, that they miss no opportunity for taking exercise. (In a naval vessel thought Grimes, with a slight sneer, that would not be a request — it would be an order. And, in any case, there would be compulsory calisthenics for all hands.)

He studied the plan again and toyed with the idea of visiting the bar before dinner. He decided against it; he was still feeling the effects of the drink that the captain had given him. So, to pass the time, he unpacked slowly and carefully, methodically stowing his effects in the drawers under the bunk. Then, but not without reluctance, he changed from his uniform into his one formal civilian suit. One of the officer-instructors at the Academy had advised this. "Always wear civvies when you're travelling as passenger. If you're in uniform, some old duck's sure to take you for one of the ship's officers and ask you all sorts of technical questions to which you don't know the answers."

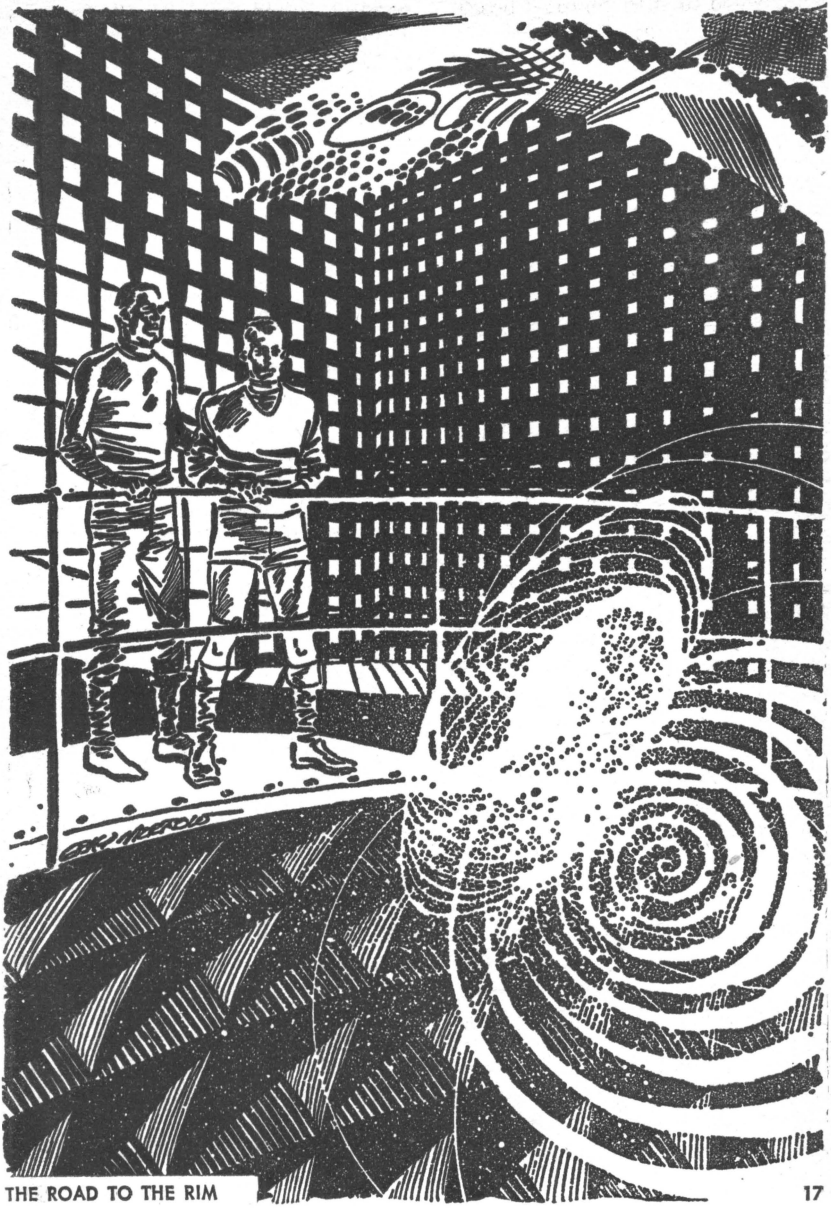
While he was adjusting his frilled cravat in front of the mirror the sonorous notes of a gong boomed from the intercom.

## IV

The dining salon was much more ornate than the gunroom of that training cruiser had been and more ornate than her wardroom. The essentials were the same, of course, as they are in any ship: tables and chairs secured to the deck, each seat fitted with its strap so that the comforting pressure of buttocks on padding could give an illusion of gravity. Each table was covered with a gaily colored cloth, but beneath the fabric there was the inevitable stainless steel to which the stainless steel service would be held by its own magnetic fields. But what impressed Grimes was the care that had been taken, the ingenuity that had been exercised to make this compartment look like anything but part of a ship.

The great circular pillar of the axial shaft was camouflaged by trelliswork, and the trelliswork itself was almost hidden by the luxuriance of some broad-leaved climbing plant that he could not identify. Smaller pillars were similarly covered, and there was a further efflorescence of living decoration all around the circular outer wall — the wall that must be the inner skin of the ship. And there were windows in this wall. No, Grimes decided, not windows, but holograms. The glowing, three-dimensional pictures presented and maintained the illusion that this was a hall set in the middle of some great park. But on what world? Grimes could not say. Trees, bushes and flowers were unfamiliar, and the color of the sky subtly strange.

He looked around him at his fellow diners, at the dozen passengers and the ship's officers, most of whom were already seated. The officers were in neat undress uniform. About half the male passengers were, like himself, formally attired; the others were sloppy in shorts and shirts. But this was the first night out, and some laxity was allowable. The women, however, all seemed to



have decided to outshine the glowing flowers of the vine that were such an essential part of the decor, those other flowers that flamed outside the windows that were not windows.

There was the captain, unmistakable with his beard and the shimmering rainbow of ribbons on the left breast of his blouse. There were the passengers at his table: the men inclined to portliness and pomposity, their women sleek and slim and expensive looking. Grimes was relieved to see that there was no vacant place — and yet, at the same time, rather hurt. He knew that he was only an ensign, a one ringer, and a very new ensign at that — but, after all, the Survey Service was the Survey Service.

He realized that somebody was addressing him. It was a girl, a small, rather chubby blonde. She was in uniform: a white shirt with black shoulderboards, each bearing a narrow white stripe, and sharply creased, tapered black slacks and black, highly polished shoes. Grimes assumed, correctly, that she was a junior member of the purser's staff. "Mr. Grimes," she said, "will you follow me, please? You're at Miss Pentecost's table."

Willingly he followed the girl. She led him around the axial shaft to a table for four at which the purser with two passengers, a man and a woman, was already seated. Jane Pentecost was attired as was his guide, the severity of her gold-trimmed black and white in pleasing contrast to the pink and blue frills and flounces that clad the other woman, her slenderness in still more pleasing contrast to the other's untidy plumpness.

She smiled and said pleasantly, "Be seated, Admiral."

"Admiral?" asked the man at her left, unpleasantly incredulous. He had, obviously, been drinking. He was a rough looking customer, in spite of the attempt that he had made to dress for dinner. He was twice the ensign's age, perhaps, although the heavily lined face under the scanty sandy hair made him look older. "Admiral?" He laughed, revealing irregular yellow teeth. "In what? The Space Scouts?"

Jane Pentescost firmly took control. She said, "Allow me to introduce Ensign Grimes, of the Survey Service . . ."

"Survey Service . . . Space Scouts . . . S.S. . . . What's the difference?"

"Plenty!" answered Grimes hotly.

The purser ignored the exchange. "Ensign, this is Mrs. Baxter . . ."

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," simpered the woman.

"And Mr. Baxter."

Baxter extended his hand reluctantly, and Grimes took it reluctantly. The amenities observed, he pulled himself into his seat and adjusted his lapstrap. He was facing Jane Pentecost. The man was on his right, the woman on his left. He glanced first at her, then at her husband, wondering how to start and to maintain a conversation. But this was the purser's table, and that was her responsibility.

She accepted it. "Now you're see-

ing how the poor live, Admiral," she remarked lightly.

Grimes, taking a tentative sip from his bulb of consomme, did not think that the self-styled poor did themselves at all badly and said as much. The girl grinned and told him that the first night out was too early to draw conclusions. "We're still on shoreside meat and vegetables," she told him, "and you'll not be getting your first taste of our instant table wine until tomorrow. Tonight we wallow in the unwonted luxury of a quite presentable Montrachet. When we start living on the produce of our own, so-called farm, washing it down with our own reconstituted plonk, you'll see the difference."

The ensign replied that in his experience it didn't matter if food came from tissue-culture vats or the green fields of Earth — what *was* important was the cook.

"Wide experience, Admiral?" she asked sweetly.

"Not very," he admitted. "But the gunroom cook in my last ship couldn't boil water without burning it."

Baxter, noisily enjoying his dinner, said that this preoccupation with food and drink was symptomatic of the decadence of Earth. As he spoke his knife grated unpleasantly on the steel spines that secured his charcoal broiled steak to his plate.

Grimes considered inquiring if the man thought that good table manners were also a symptom of decadence, then thought better of it. After all, this was not *his* table. Instead, he asked, "And where are you from, Mr. Baxter?"

"The Rim Worlds, Mr. Grimes. Where we're left to sink or swim, so we've no time for much else than keeping ourselves afloat." He sucked noisily from his bulb of wine. "Things might be a little easier for us if your precious Survey Service did something about keeping the trade routes open."

"That is our job," said Grimes stiffly. "And we do it."

"Do you hell! There's not a pirate in the galaxy but can run rings round you!"

"Practically every pirate has been hunted down and destroyed," Grimes told him coldly.

"'Practically every pirate,' the man says! A few small-time bunglers, he means!"

"Even the notorious Black Bart," persisted Grimes.

"Black Bart!" Baxter, spluttering through his full mouth, gestured with his laden fork at Grimes. "Black Bart! He wasn't much. Once he and that popsy of his split brass rags, he was all washed up. I'm talkin' about the *real* pirates, the ones whose ships wear national colors instead o' the Jolly Roger, the ones that your precious Survey Service daren't say boo to. The ones who do the dirty work for the Federation."

"Such as?" asked Grimes frigidly.

"So now you're playin' the bleedin' innocent. Never heard o' the Duchy o' Waldegren, Mr. Ensign Grimes?"

"Of course. Autonomous, but they and the Federation have signed what's called a Pact of Perpetual Amity."

"Pretty words, ain't they? Suppose

we analyze them. Suppose we analyze by analogy. D'yer know much about animals, Mr. Ensign Grimes?"

"Animals?" Grimes was puzzled. "Well, I suppose I do know something. I've taken the usual courses in xeno-biology . . ."

"Never mind that. You're a Terry. Let's confine ourselves to a selection of yer own Terran four-footed friends."

"What the hell are you driving at?" flared Grimes, losing his temper. He threw an apologetic glance in Jane Pentecost's direction, saw that she was more amused than shocked.

"Just think about a Pact of Perpetual Amity between an elephant and a tom cat," said Baxter. "A fat an' lazy elephant. A lean, scrawny, vicious tom cat. If the elephant wanted to he could convert that cat into a fur bedside rug just by steppin' on him. But he doesn't want to. He leaves the cat alone, just because the cat is useful to him. He does more than just leave him alone. He an' his feline cobber pull out their pens from wherever they keep 'em an' sign their famous Pact.

"In case you haven't worked it out for yourself, the elephant's the Federation, an' the tom cat's the Duchy of Waldegren."

"But why?" asked Grimes. "But *why*?"

"Don't they teach you puppies any interstellar politics? Or are those courses reserved for the top brass? Well, Mr. Grimes, I'll tell you. There's one animal that has the elephant *really* worried. Believe it or not, he's scared o' mice. An' there're quite a few mice inside the Federation, mice that make the elephant nervous by their rustlings, an' scurryings, an' their squeaky demands for full autonomy. That's where the cat comes in. By his free use of his teeth an' claws, by his very presence, he keeps the mice quiet."

"And just who are these famous mice, Mr. Baxter?" asked Grimes, innocently.

"Don't they teach you nothin' in your bleedin' Academy? Well, I'll tell you.

"In *our* neck o' the woods, the mice are the Rim Worlds, an' the tom cat, as I've already made clear, is the Duchy o' Waldegren. The Duchy gets away with murder — murder an' piracy. But accordin' to the Duchy, an' accordin' to your big, stupid elephant of a Federation, it's not piracy. It's — now, lemme see, what fancy words have been used o' late? Contraband Control. Suppression of Espionage. Violation of the Three Million Mile Limit. Every time that there's an act of piracy, there's some quote legal unquote excuse for it, an' it's upheld by the Federation's tame legal eagles, an' you Survey Service sissies just sit there on your big, fat backsides an' don't lift a pinkie against your dear, murderous pals, the Waldegrenese. If you ever did, they'd send you screaming back to Base, where some dear old daddy of an Admiral'd spank your little plump bottoms for you."

"Please, Mr. Baxter!" admonished Jane Pentecost.

"Sorry, Miss. I got sort of carried away. But my young brother was Third Reaction Drive Engineer of the old *Bunyip* when she went missing. Nothin' was ever proved, but the Waldegrenese Navy was holdin' fleet maneuvers in the sector she was passin' through when last heard from. Oh, they're cunnin' rascals. They'll never go for one o' these ships, or one o' the Trans-Galactic Clippers; it'll always be some poor little tramp that nobody'll ever miss but the friends an' relatives o' the crew. An', I suppose, the underwriters, but Llyold's make such a packet out o' the ships that don't get lost that they can well afford to shell out now an' again. Come to that, it must suit 'em. As long as there're a few 'overdues' an' 'missings' they can keep the premiums up."

"But I still can't see how piracy can possibly pay," protested Grimes, staunchly.

"O' course it pays. Your friend Black Bart made it pay. An' if you're goin' to all the expense of building an' maintaining a war fleet, it might just as well earn its keep. Even your famous Survey Service might show a profit if you were allowed to pounce on every fat merchantman who came within range o' your guns."

"But for the Federation to condone piracy, as you're trying to make out . . . That's utterly fantastic and out of the question."

"If you lived on the Rim, you might think different," snarled Baxter.

And Jane Pentecost contributed, "Not piracy. Confrontation."

## V

As soon as the meal was finished the Baxters left rather hastily to make their way to the bar, leaving Grimes and Jane Pentecost to the leisurely enjoyment of their coffee. When the couple was out of earshot, Grimes remarked, "So those are Rim Worlders. They're the first I've met."

"They're not, you know," the girl told him.

"But they are. Oh, there are one or two in the Survey Service, but I've never run across them. Now I don't particularly want to."

"But you did meet one Rim Worlder before you met the Baxters."

"The captain?"

She laughed. "Don't let him hear you say that — not unless you want to take a space walk without a suit!"

"Then who?"

"Who could it be, Admiral? Whom have you actually met, to talk to, so far in this ship? Use your crust."

He stared at her incredulously. "Not you?"

"Who else?" She laughed again, but with a touch of bitterness. "We aren't all like our late manger companions, you know. Or should know. Even so, you'd count yourself lucky to have Jim Baxter by your side in any real jam. It boils down to this. Some of us have acquired a certain veneer. Some of us haven't. Period."

"But how did you . . .?" He groped for words that would not be offensive to conclude the sentence.

"How did I get into this galley?

Easily enough. I started my space-faring career as a not very competent Catering Officer in *Jumbuk,* one of the Sundowner Line's more ancient and decrepit tramps. I had to pay off sick in Elsinore. Could have been my own cooking that put me in hospital. Anyhow, I was just about recovered when the Commission's *Epsilon Serpentis* blew in, and she landed *her* purser with a slightly broken leg. She'd learned the hard way that the Golden Rule — *stop whatever you're doing and secure everything when the acceleration warning sounds* — is meant to be observed. The doctor was luckier. She broke his fall . . ."

Grimes was about to ask what the doctor and the purser had been doing, then was thankful that he had not done so. He was acutely conscious of the crimson blush that burned the skin of his face.

"You must realize," said the girl drily, "that merchant vessels with mixed crews are not monastic institutions. But where was I? Oh, yes. On Elsinore. Persuading the master of the *Snaky Eppy* that I was a fit and proper person to take over his pursering. I managed to convince him that I was at least proper; I still can't see what my predecessor saw in that lecherous old goat of a quack, although the Second Mate had something . . ." Grimes felt a sudden twinge of jealousy. "Anyhow, he signed me on, as soon as I agreed to waive repatriation.

"It was a long voyage; as you know, the *Epsilon* Class ships are little better than tramps themselves. It was a long voyage, but I enjoyed it — seeing all the worlds that I'd read about and heard about and always wanted to visit. The Sundowner Line doesn't venture far afield, just the four Rim Worlds and now and again the Shakespearian Sector and, once in a blue moon, one of the drearier planets of the Empire of Waverley. The Commission's tramps, of course, run *everywhere.*

"Anyhow, we finally berthed at Woomera. The Old Man must have put in a good report about me, because I was called before the Local Superintending Purser and offered a berth, as a junior, in one of the *Alpha* Class liners. *Alpha Centauri,* if you must know. She was on the Sol-Sirius service. Nothing very glamorous in the way of ports of call, but she was a fine ship, beautifully kept, efficiently run. A couple of years there knocked most of the sharp corners off me. After that, a spell as Assistant Purser of *Beta Geminorum.* Atlanta, Caribbea, Carinthia and the Cluster Worlds. And then my first ship as Chief Purser. This one."

One of Jane's girls brought them fresh bulbs of coffee and ampoules of a sweet, potent liqueur. When she was gone Grimes asked, "What are the Rim Worlds like?"

She waited until he had applied the flame of his lighter to the tip of her long, thin cigar, then answered, "Cold. Dark. Lonely. But . . . They have something. The feeling of being on a frontier. *The* frontier. The last frontier."

"The frontier of the dark . . ." murmured Grimes.

"Yes. The frontier of the dark. And the names of our planets. They have something too. A . . . poetry? Yes, that's the word. Lorn, Ultimo, Faraway and Thule . . . And there's that night sky of ours, especially at some times of the year. There's the galaxy — a great, dim-glowing lenticulate nebula — and the rest is darkness. At other times of the year there's only the darkness, the blackness that's made even more intense by the sparse, faint stars that are the other Rim Suns, by the few, faint luminosities that are the distant island universes that we shall never reach."

She shivered almost imperceptibly. "And always there's that sense of being on the very edge of things, of hanging on by our fingernails with the abyss of the eternal night gaping beneath us. The Rim Worlders aren't a spacefaring people; only a very few of us ever get the urge. It's analogous, perhaps, to your Maoris. I spent a leave once in New Zealand and got interested in the history of the country. The Maoris come of seafaring stock. Their ancestors made an epic voyage from their paradisiacal homeland to those rather grim and dreary little islands hanging there, all by themselves, in the cold and stormy southern ocean, lashed by frigid gales sweeping up from the Antarctic. And something — the isolation? the climate? — killed the wanderlust that was an essential part of the make-up of their race. You'll find very few Maoris at sea or in space, although there's no dearth of Polynesians from the home archipelago aboard the surface ships serving the ports of the Pacific. And there are quite a few, too, in the Commission's ships . . ."

"We have our share in the Survey Service," said Grimes. "But tell me, how do you man your vessels? This Sundowner Line of yours . . ."

"There are always the drifters, the no-hopers, the cast-offs from the Interstellar Transport Commission, and Trans-Galactic Clippers and Waverley Royal Mail and all the rest of them."

"And from the Survey Service?"

The question lifted her out of her sombre mood. "No," she replied with a smile. "Not yet."

"Not ever," said Grimes.

## VI

Once his initial shyness had worn off, and with it much of his Academy-induced snobbery, Grimes began to enjoy the voyage. After all, Survey Service or no Survey Service, this was a ship and he was a spaceman. He managed to accept the fact that most of the ship's officers, even the most junior of them, were far more experienced spacemen than he was. Than he was *now*, he often reminded himself. At the back of his mind lurked the smug knowledge that, for all of them, a captaincy was the very limit of promotion, whereas he, one day, would be addressed in all seriousness as Jane Pentecost now addressed him in jest.

He was a frequent visitor to the control room but, remembering the Master's admonition, was careful not

to get in the way. The watch officers accepted him almost as one of them and were willing to initiate him into the tricky procedure of obtaining a fix with the interstellar drive in operation — an art, he was told, rather than a science.

Having obtained the permission of the chief engineers, he prowled through the vessel's machinery spaces, trying to supplement his theoretical knowledge of reaction, inertial and interstellar drives with something more practical. The first two, of course, were idle and would be until the ship emerged from her warped Space/Time back into the normal continuum; but there was the Pile, the radio-active heart of the ship, and there was the auxiliary machinery that, in this tiny, man-made planet, did the work that on a natural world is performed by winds, rivers, sunlight and gravity.

There was the Mannschenn Drive Room; and, inside this holy of holies, no man need fear to admit that he was scared by the uncanny complexity of over-precessing gyroscopes. He stared at the tumbling rotors, the gleaming wheels that seemed always on the verge of vanishing into nothingness, that rolled down the dark dimensions, dragging the ship and all aboard her with them. He stared, hypnotized, lost in a vague, disturbing dream in which Past and Present and Future were inextricably mingled. And the chief Interstellar Drive Engineer took him firmly by the arm and led him from the compartment. "Look at that time-twister too long," he growled, "and you'll be meeting yourself coming back!"

There was the "farm," the deck of yeast- and tissue-culture vats which was no more (and no less) than a highly efficient protein factory, and the deck where stood the great, transparent globes in which algae converted the ship's organic waste and sewage back into usable form (processed as nutriment for the yeasts and the tissue-culture and as fertilizer for the hydroponic tanks, the Bio-Chemist was careful to explain), and the deck where luxuriant vegetation spilled over from the trays and almost barricaded the inspection walks, the source of vitamins and of flowers for the saloon tables and, at the same time, the ship's main air-conditioning unit.

Grimes said to Jane Pentecost, who had accompanied him on this tour of inspection, "You know, I envy your captain."

"From you, Admiral," she scoffed, "that *is* something. But why?"

"How can I put it? You people do the natural way what we do with chemicals and machinery. The captain of a warship is captain of a warship. Period. But your Captain Craven is absolute monarch of a little world."

"A warship," she told him, "is supposed to be able to go on functioning as such even with every compartment holed. A warship cannot afford to depend for the survival of her crew upon the survival of hosts of other air-breathing organisms."

"Straight from the book," he said. Then, puzzled, "But for a . . ." He hesitated.

"But for a woman, or for a pur-

ser, or for a mere merchant officer I know too much," she finished for him. "But I can read, you know. And when I was in the Sundowner Line, I, as well as all the other officers, was supposed to keep up with all the latest Survey Service publications."

"But why?" he asked.

"But why not? We'll have a navy of our own, one day. Just stick around, Admiral."

"Secession?" he enquired, making it sound like a dirty word.

"Once again — why not?"

"It'd never work," he told her.

"The history of Earth is full of secessions that did work. So is the history of Interstellar Man. The Empire of Waverley, for example. The Duchy of Waldegren, for another, although that's one that should have come to grief. We should all of us be a great deal happier if it had."

"Federation policy . . ." he began.

"Policy, shmolicy! Don't let's be unkind to the Waldegrenese, because as long as they're in being they exercise a restraining influence upon the Empire of Waverley and those bolshy-minded Rim Worlds . . ." Her pace slackened. Grimes noticed that they were passing through the alleyway in which she and her staff were accommodated. She went on, "But all this talking politics is thirsty work. Come in for a couple of drinks."

"Thank you. But, Jane . . ." (she didn't seem to have noticed the use of her given name) ". . . I don't think that either of us is qualified to criticize the handling of foreign and colonial affairs."

"Spoken like a nice, young, well-drug-up future admiral. Oh, I know, I know. You people are trained to be the musclemen of the Federation. Yours's not to reason why, yours's but to do and die, and all the rest of it. But I'm a Rim Worlder, and out on the Rim you learn to think for yourself." She slid her door open. "Come on in. This is Liberty Hall — you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

Her accommodation was a suite rather than a mere cabin. It was neither as large nor as well fitted as the captain's, but it was better than the chief officer's quarters, in which Grimes had already been a guest.

He looked with interest at the holograms on the bulkhead of the sitting room. They were — but in an altogether different way — as eye-catching as Captain Craven's had been. There was one that was almost physically chilling, that induced the feeling of utter cold and darkness and loneliness. It was of the night sky on some planet, a range of dimly seen yet sharply serrated peaks bisecting a great, pallidly glowing, lenticulate nebula. "Home, sweet home," murmured the girl, seeing what he was looking at. "The Desolation Mountains on Faraway, with the Galactic Lens visible in the background."

"And you feel homesick for *that*?"

"Too right I do. Oh, not all the time. I like warmth and comfort as well as the next woman. But . . ." She laughed. "Don't stand around gawking — you make the place look

untidy. Pull yourself into a chair and belay the buttocks."

He did so, watching her as she busied herself at the liquor cabinet. Suddenly, in these conditions of privacy, he was acutely conscious of the womanliness of her. The rather tight and rather short shorts, as she bent away from him, left very little to the imagination. And her legs, although slender, were full where they should be full, with the muscles working smoothly under the golden skin. He felt the urge which he sternly suppressed to plant a kiss in the delectable hollow behind each knee. She turned suddenly. "Here! Catch!" He managed to grab the bulb that was hurtling toward his face, but a little of the wine spurted from the nipple and struck him in the right eye. When his vision cleared he saw that she was seated opposite him, was laughing (at or with him?). "At," he suspected. A real demonstration of sympathy would have consisted of tears, not laughter. Her face grew momentarily severe. "Not the mess," she said reprovingly. "But the waste."

Grimes examined the bulb. "I didn't waste much. Only an eyeful."

She raised her drink in ritual greeting. "Here's mud in your eye," adding, "for a change."

In the sudden silence that followed they sat looking at each other. There was a tension, some odd resultant of centrifugal and centripetal forces. They were on the brink of something, and both of them knew it, and there was the compulsion to go forward countered by the urge to go back.

She asked tartly, "Have you never seen a woman's legs before?"

He shifted his regard to her face, to the eyes that, somehow, were brown no longer, but held the depth and the darkness of the night through which the ship was plunging.

She said, "I think you'd better finish your drink and go."

He said, "Perhaps you're right."

"Too bloody right I'm right." She managed a smile. "I'm not an idler, like some people. I've work to do."

"See you at lunch, then. And thank you."

"Don't thank me. It was on the house, as the little dog said. Off with you, Admiral."

He unbuckled his lapstrap, got out of the chair and made his way to the door. When he was out of her room, he did not go to his own cabin but to the bar, where he joined the Baxters. They, rather to his surprise, greeted him in a friendly manner. Rim Worlders, Grimes decided, had their good points.

It was after lunch when one of the purserettes told him that the captain wished to see him. *What have I done now?* wondered Grimes, and he answered his own question with the words, *Nothing. Unfortunately.*

Craven's manner, when he admitted Grimes into his dayroom, was severe. "Come in, Ensign. Be seated."

"Thank you, sir."

"You may smoke if you wish."

"Thank you, sir."

Grimes filled and lit his pipe, the captain ignited one of his pungent

cigars, studied the eddying coils of smoke as though they were writing a vitally important message in some strange language.

"Er, Mr. Grimes, I believe that you have been seeing a great deal of my purser, Miss Pentecost."

"Not a great deal, sir. I'm at her table, of course."

"I am told that she has entertained you in her quarters."

"Just one bulb of sherry, sir. I had no idea that we were breaking ship's regulations."

"You were not. All the same, Mr. Grimes, I have to warn you."

"I assure you, sir, that nothing occurred between us."

Craven permitted himself a brief, cold smile. "A ship is not a Sunday School outing — especially a ship under my command. Some masters, I know, do expect their officers to comport themselves like Sunday School pupils, with the captain as the principal; but *I* expect *my* senior officers to behave like intelligent and responsible adults. Miss Pentecost is quite capable of looking after herself. It is you that I'm worried about."

"There's no need to be worried, sir."

The captain laughed. "I'm not worried about your morals, Mr. Grimes. In fact, I have formed the opinion that a roll in the hay would do you far more good than harm. But Miss Pentecost is a dangerous woman. Before lifting ship, very shortly before lifting ship, I received a confidential report concerning her activities. She's an efficient purser, a highly efficient purser, in fact, but she's even more than that. Much more." Again he studied the smoke from his cigar. "Unfortunately there's no *real* proof, otherwise she'd not be sailing with us. Had I insisted upon her discharge, I'd have been up against the Interstellar Clerical and Supply Officers' Guild."

"Surely not," murmured Grimes.

Craven snorted. "You people are lucky. You haven't a mess of Guilds to deal with, each and every one of which is all too ready to rush to the defense of a Guild member, no matter what he or she is supposed to have done. As a Survey Service captain you'll never have to face a suit for wrongful dismissal. You'll never be accused of victimization."

"But what has Miss Pentecost done, sir?" asked Grimes.

"Nothing — or too bloody much. You know where she comes from, don't you? The Rim Worlds. The planets of the misfits, the rebels, the noncomformists. There's been talk of secession of late, but even those irresponsible anarchists know bloody well that secession will never succeed unless they build up their own space power. There's the Duchy of Waldegren, which would pounce as soon as the Federation withdrew its protection. And even the Empire of Waverley might be tempted to extend its boundaries. So . . .

"They have a merchant fleet of sorts, these Rim Worlders. The Sundowner Line. I've heard rumors that it's about to be nationalized. But they have no fighting navy."

"But what's all this to do with Miss Pentecost, sir?"

"If what's more than just hinted at in that confidential report is true


— plenty. She's a recruiting sergeant, no less. Any officer with whom she's shipmates who's disgruntled, on the verge of throwing his hand in — or on the verge of being emptied out — she'll turn on the womanly sympathy for and tell him that there'll always be a job waiting out on the Rim, that the Sundowner Line is shortly going to expand, so there'll be quick promotion and all the rest of it."

"And what's that to do with *me,* Captain?"

"Are all Survey Service ensigns as innocent as you, Mr. Grimes? Merchant officers the Rim Worlds want, and badly. Naval officers they want, and badly. Naval officers they'll want even worse once the balloon goes up."

Grimes permitted himself a superior smile. "It's extremely unlikely, sir, that I shall ever want to leave the Survey Service."

"Unlikely perhaps — but not impossible. So bear in mind what I've told you. I think that you'll be able to look after yourself now that you know the score."

"I think so too," Grimes told him firmly. He thought, *The old man's been reading too many spy stories.*

## VII

They were dancing.

Tables and chairs had been cleared from the ship's saloon and from the big, ornate playmaster throbbed the music of an orchestra so famous that even Grimes had heard of it — The Singing Drums.

They were dancing.

Some couples shuffled a sedate measure, never losing the contact between their magnetically shod feet and the polished deck. Others — daring or foolhardy — cavorted in Null-G, gambolled fantastically but rarely gracefully in Free Fall.

They were dancing.

Ensign Grimes was trying to dance.

It was not the fault of his partner that he was making such a sorry mess of it. She, Jane Pentecost, proved the truth of the oft-made statement that spacemen and spacewomen are expert at this form of exercise. He, John Grimes, was the exception that proves the rule. He was sweating, and his feet felt at least six times their normal size. Only the fact that he was holding Jane, and closely, saved him from absolute misery.

There was a pause in the music. As it resumed Jane said, "Let's sit this one out, Admiral."

"If you wish to," he replied, trying not to sound too grateful.

"Too right I wish to. I don't mind losing a little toenail varnish, but I think we'll call it a day while I still have a full set of toenails."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So am I." But the flicker of a smile robbed the words of their sting.

She led the way to the bar. It was deserted save for the bored and sulky girl behind the gleaming counter. "All right, Sue," Jane told her. "You can join the revels. The admiral and I will mind the shop."

"*Thank* you, Miss Pentecost." Sue let herself out from her little cage, vanished gracefully and rapidly in the direction of the salon. Jane took her place.

"I *like* being a barmaid," she told the ensign, taking two frosted bulbs out of the cooler.

"I'll sign for these," offered Grimes.

"You will not. This comes under the heading of entertaining influential customers."

"But I'm not. Influential, I mean."

"But you will be." She went on dreamily, "I can see it. I can just see it. The poor old *Delia O'Ryan,* even more decrepit than she is now, and her poor old purser, about to undergo a Fate Worse Than at the hands of bloody pirates from the next galaxy, but three . . . But all is not lost. There, light-years distant, is big, fat, Grand Admiral Grimes aboard his flagship, busting a gut, to say nothing of his Mannschenn Drive unit, to rush to the rescue of his erstwhile girl friend. 'Dammitall,' I can hear him muttering into his beard. 'Dammitall. That girl used to give me free drinks when I was a snotty nosed ensign. I will repay. Full speed ahead, Gridley, and damn the torpedoes!' "

Grimes laughed, then asked sharply, "Admiral in which service?"

"What do you mean, John?" She eyed him warily.

"*You* know what I mean."

"So . . ." she murmured. "So . . . I know that you had another home truth session with the Bearded Bastard. I can guess what it was about."

"And is it true?" demanded Grimes.

"Am I Olga Popovsky, the beautiful spy? Is that what you mean?"

"More or less."

"Come off it, John. How the hell can I be a secret agent for a non-existent government?"

"You can be a secret agent for a subversive organization."

"What *is* this? Is it a hangover from some half-baked and half-understood course in counter-espionage?"

"There was a course of sorts," he admitted. "I didn't take much interest in it. At the time."

"And now you wish that you had. Poor John."

"But it wasn't espionage that the Old Man had against you. He had some sort of story about your acting as a sort of recruiting sergeant, luring officers away from the Commission's ships to that crumby little rabble of star tramps calling itself the Sundowner Line . . ."

She didn't seem to be listening to him, was giving her attention instead to the music that drifted from the saloon. It was one of the old, twentieth-century melodies that was enjoying a revival. She began to sing in time to it:

*Good-by, I'll run*
*To seek another sun*
*Where I*
*May find*
*There are hearts more kind than the ones left behind . . .*

She smiled sombrely and asked, "Does that answer your questions?"

"Don't talk in riddles," he said roughly.

"Riddles? Perhaps — but not very hard ones. That, John, is a sort of song of farewell from a very old comic opera. As I recall it, the bloke singing it was going to shoot through and join the French Foreign Legion. (But there's no French Foreign Legion any more . . .) We, out on the Rim, have tacked our own words on to it. It's become almost a national anthem to the Rim Runners, as the people who man our ships — such as they are — are already calling themselves.

"There's no French Foreign Legion any more, but the misfits and the failures have to have somewhere to go. I haven't *lured* anybody away from this service, but now and again I've shipped with officers who've been on the point of getting out, or being emptied out, and when they've cried into my beer I've given them advice. Of course, I've a certain natural bias in favor of my own home world. If I were Sirian born I'd be singing the praises of the Dog Star Line."

"Even so," he persisted, "your conduct seems to have been somewhat suspect."

"Has it? And how? To begin with, *you* are not an officer in this employ. And if you were, I should challenge you to find anything in the Commission's regulations forbidding me to act as I have been doing."

"Captain Craven warned me," said Grimes.

"Did he, now? That's his privilege. I suppose that he thinks that it's also his duty. I suppose he has the idea that I offered you admiral's rank in the Rim Worlds Navy as soon as we secede. *If* we had our own navy, which we don't, we might

just take you in as ensign, acting, probationary."

"Thank you."

She put her elbows on the bar counter, propping her face between her hands, somehow conveying the illusion of gravitational pull, looking up at him.

"I'll be frank with you, John. I admit that we do take the no-hopers, the drunks and the drifters into our merchant fleet. I know far better than you what a helluva difference there is between those rustbuckets and the well found, well run ships of the Commission and, come to that, Trans-Galactic Clippers and Waverly Royal Mail. But when we do start some kind of a navy we shall want better material. Much better. We shall want highly competent officers who yet, somehow, will have the Rim World outlook. The first batch, of course, will have to be outsiders, to tide us over until our own training program is well under way."

"And I don't qualify?" he asked stiffly.

"Frankly, no. I've been watching you. You're too much of a stickler for rules and regulations, especially the more stupid ones. Look at the way you're dressed now, for example. Evening wear, civilian, junior officers for the use of. No individuality. You might as well be in uniform. Better, in fact. There'd be some touch of brightness."

"Go on."

"And the way you comport yourself with women. Stiff. Starchy. Correct. And you're all too conscious of the fact that I, even though I'm a mere merchant officer, and clerical branch at that, put up more gold braid than you do. I noticed that especially when we were dancing. I was having to lead all the time."

He said defensively, "I'm not a very good dancer."

"You can say that again." She smiled briefly. "So there you have it, John. You can tell the Bearded Bastard, when you see him again, that you're quite safe from my wiles. I've no doubt that you'll go far in your own Service, but you just aren't Rim Worlds material."

"I shouldn't have felt all that flattered if you'd said that I was," he told her bluntly; but he knew that he was lying.

## VIII

"Yes?" Jane was saying. "Yes, Mr. Letourneau?"

Grimes realized that she was not looking at him, that she was looking past him and addressing a newcomer. He turned around to see who it was. He found — somehow the name hadn't registered — that it was the psionic radio officer, a tall, pale, untidily put together young man in a slovenly uniform. He looked scared; but that was his habitual expression, Grimes remembered. They were an odd breed, these trained telepaths with their Rhine Institute diplomas; and they were not popular, but they were the only means whereby ships and shore stations could communicate instantaneously over the long light-years. In the Survey Service they were referred to, slightingly, as Commissioned Tea Cup

Readers. In the Survey Service *and* in the Merchant Service they were referred to as Snoopers. But they were a very necessary evil.

"Yes, Mr. Letourneau?"

"Where's the old man? He's not in his quarters."

"The Master — " Jane emphasized the title "— is in the saloon." Then, a little maliciously, "Couldn't you have used your crystal ball?"

Letourneau flushed. "You know very well, Miss Pentecost, that we have to take an oath that we will always respect the mental privacy of our shipmates. But I must find him. Quickly."

"Help yourself. He's treading the light fantastic in there." When he was gone she said, "Typical. Just typical. If it were a real emergency, he could get B.B. on the intercom. But no. Not him. He has to parade his distrust of anything electronic and, at the same time, make it quite clear that he's not breaking his precious oath. Tell me, how do you people handle your spaceborne espers?"

He grinned. "We've still one big stick that you people haven't. A court martial followed by a firing party. Not that I've ever seen it used."

"Hardly, considering that you've only been in space a dog watch." Her face froze suddenly. "Yes, Sue?"

It was the girl whom Jane had relived in the bar. "Miss Pentecost, will you report to the captain in Control, please. At once."

"What have I done now?"

"It's some sort of emergency, Miss Pentecost. The chief officer's up there with him, and he's sent for the doctor and the two chief engineers."

"Then I must away, John. Look after the bar again, Sue. Don't let the admiral have too many free drinks."

She moved fast and gracefully, was gone before Grimes could think of any suitable repartee. He said to the girl, "What *is* happening, Sue?"

"I don't know, Ad . . ." She flushed. "Sorry. Ensign. And, in any case, I'm not supposed to talk to the passengers about it."

"But I'm not a real passenger," he said — and asked himself, *Am I a* real *anything?*

"No, I suppose you're not, Mr. Grimes. But you're not on duty."

"An officer of the Survey Service is *always* on duty," he told her, with some degree of truth. "Whatever happens on the spacelanes is our concern." It sounded good.

"Yes," she agreed hesitantly. "That's what my fianc — he's a Lieutenant J.G. — is always telling me."

"So what's all the flap about?"

"Promise not to tell anybody."

"Of course."

"Mr. Letourneau came wandering into the saloon. He just stood there staring about, the way he does, then he spotted the captain. He was actually dancing with me at the time." She smiled reminiscently and added, "He's a very good dancer."

"He would be. But go on."

"He came charging across the dance floor — Mr. Letourneau, I

mean. He didn't care whose toes he trod on or who he tripped over. I couldn't help overhearing when he started babbling away to Captain Craven. It's a distress call. From one of our ships — *Epsilon Sextans*." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And it's piracy."

"Piracy? Impossible."

"But, Mr. Grimes, it's what he said."

"Psionic radio officers have been known to go 'round the bend before now," Grimes told her, "and to send false alarm calls. And to receive nonexistent ones."

"But the *Sexy Eppy* — sorry, *Epsilon Sextans* — has a cargo that'd be worth pirating. Or so I heard. The first big shipment of Antigeriatridine to Waverley."

Antigeriatridine, the so-called Immortality Serum. Manufactured in limited, but increasing quantities only on Marina (often called by its colonists Submarina) a cold, unpleasantly watery world in orbit about Alpha Crucis. The fishlike creatures from which the drug was obtained bred and flourished only in the seas of their own world.

But piracy . . .

But the old legends were full of stories of men who had sold their souls for eternal youth.

The telephone behind the bar buzzed sharply. Sue answered it. She said, "It's for you, Mr. Grimes."

Grimes took the instrument. "That you, Ensign?" It was Captain Craven's voice. "Thought I'd find you there. Come up to Control, will you?" It was an order rather than a request.

All the ship's executive officers were in the Control Room, and the doctor, the purser and the two chief engineers. As Grimes emerged from the hatch he heard Kennedy, the Mate, say, "Here's the Ensign now."

"Good. Then dog down, Mr. Kennedy, so we get some privacy." Craven turned to Grimes. "You're on the active list of the Survey Service, Mister, so I suppose you're entitled to know what's going on. The situation is this. *Epsilon Sextans*, Marina to Waverly with a shipment of Antigeriatridine, has been pirated." Grimes managed, with an effort, to refrain from saying, "I know". Craven went on, Grimes managed, with an effort, to refrain from saying, "I know". Craven went on, "Her esper is among the survivors. He says that the pirates were two frigates of the Waldegren Navy. Anyhow, the Interstellar Drive engineers aboard *Epsilon Sextans* managed to put their box of tricks on random precession, and they got away. But not in one piece."

"Not in one piece?" echoed Grimes stupidly.

"What the hell do you expect when an unarmed merchantman is fired upon, without warning, by two warships? The esper says that their Control has had it, and all the accommodation spaces. By some miracle the psionic radio officer's shack wasn't holed, and neither was the Mannschenn Drive Room."

"But even one missile . . ." muttered Grimes.

"If you want to capture a ship and her cargo more or less intact,"

snapped Craven, "you don't use missiles. You use the laser. It's an ideal weapon if you aren't fussy about how many people you kill."

"Knowing the Waldegrenese as *we* do," said Jane Pentecost bitterly, "there wouldn't have been any survivors anyhow."

"Be quiet!" roared Craven. Grimes was puzzled by his outburst. It was out of character. True, he could hardly expect a shipmaster to react to the news of a vicious piracy with equanimity; but this shipmaster was an officer of the Reserve, had seen service in warships and had been highly decorated for outstanding bravery in battle.

Craven had control of himself again. "The situation is this. There are people still living aboard *Epsilon Sextans*. Even though all her navigators have been killed, I think that I shall be able to find her in time. Further more, she has a very valuable cargo and, in any case, cannot be written off as a total loss. There is little damage that cannot be repaired by welded patches. I have already sent a message to Head Office requesting a free hand. I have salvage in mind. I see no reason why the ship and her cargo should not be taken on to Waverley."

"A prize crew, sir?"

"If you care to put it that way. This will mean cutting down the number of officers aboard my own vessel; but I am sure, Mr. Grimes, that you will be willing to gain some practical watch-keeping experience. All that's required is your autograph on the ship's Articles of Agreement.

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me. I may be thanking you before the job's over and done." He turned to his Chief Officer. "Mr. Kennedy, keep in touch with Mr. Letourneau and let me know if anything further comes through either from *Epsilon Sextans* or from Head Office. The rest of you — keep this to yourselves. No sense in alarming the passengers. I'm sure that the doctor and Miss Pentecost between them can concoct some soothing story to account for this officers' conference."

"Captain Craven," said Jane Pentecost.

"Well?"

"The other man at my table. Mr. Baxter. I knew him out on the Rim. He holds Chief Reaction Drive Engineer's papers."

"Don't tell him anything yet. But I'll keep him in mind. Now, Mr. Grimes, will you join me in my day cabin?"

## IX

The holograms were all gone from the bulkheads of Captain Craven's cabin. To replace them there was just one picture: a woman, not young, but with the facial bone structure that defies age and time. She was in uniform, and on her shoulderboards were the two and a half stripes of Senior Purser. The shipmaster noticed Grimes' interest and said briefly and bitterly, "She was too senior for an *Epsilon* Class ship; but she cut her leave short, just to oblige, when the regular purser went sick. She should have been back on Earth at the same time as me,

though. Then we were going to get married . . ."

Grimes said nothing. He thought, *Too senior for an* Epsilon *Class ship?* Epsilon Sextans, *for example?* What could he say?

"And that," said Craven savagely, "*was* that."

"I'm sorry, sir," blurted Grimes, conscious of the inadequacy of his words. Then, foolishly, "But there are survivors, sir."

"Don't you think that I haven't got Letourneau and his opposite number to check? And have *you* ever seen the aftermath of a Deep Space battle, Mister? Have you ever boarded a ship that's been slashed and stabbed to death with laser beams?" He seemed to require no answer, pulled himself into the chair by his desk, strapped himself in. He motioned to Grimes to be seated. Then he pulled out from a drawer a large sheet of paper, which he unfolded. It was a cargo plan. "Current voyage," he grunted. "And we're carrying more to Lindisfarne than one brand new ensign."

"Such as, sir?" ventured Grimes.

"Naval stores. I don't mind admitting that I'm more than a little rusty insofar as Survey Service procedure is concerned, even though I still hold my Reserve Commission. You're more familiar with fancy abbreviations than I am. Twenty cases RERAT, for example . . ."

"Reserve rations, sir. Canned and deydrated."

"Good. And ATREG?"

"Atmospheric regeneration units, complete."

"So is *Epsilon Sextans*' 'farm' has been killed we shall be able to manage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you'd be able to install an Atreg unit?"

"Of course, sir. They're very simple, as you know. Just synthetic chlorophyl and a UV source. In any case, there are full instructions inside every container."

"And this? A double M. Mark XV?"

"Anti-Missile Missile."

"And ALGE?"

"Anti-Laser Gas Emitter."

"The things they do think of. I feel more at home with these AVM's, although I see that they've got as far as Mark XVII now."

"Anti-Vessel Missiles," said Grimes. A slight enthusiasm crept into his voice. "The XVII's a real honey."

"What does it do?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Even though you are a Reserve Officer, I can't tell you."

"But they're effective?"

"Yes. Very."

"And I think you're Gunnery Branch, Mr. Grimes, aren't you?"

"I am, sir." He added hastily, "But I'm still quite capable of carrying out a watch officer's duties aboard this vessel should the need arise."

"The main thing is you're familiar with naval stores and equipment. When we find and board *Epsilon Sextans,* I shall be transhipping certain items of cargo."

"Rerat and Atreg, sir?"

"Yes. And the others."

"But, sir, I can't allow it. Not

unless I have authority from the Flag Officer Commanding Lindisfarne Base. As soon as your Mr. Letourneau can be spared, I'll get him to try and raise the station there."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, Mr. Grimes. In view of the rather peculiar political situation, I think that the answer would be 'No.' Even if it were 'Yes,' you know as well as I how sluggishly the tide flows through official channels. Furthermore, just in case it has escaped your notice, *I* am the master."

"And I, sir, represent the Survey Service. As the only commissioned officer aboard this vessel *I* am responsible for Survey Service cargo."

"As a Reserve Officer, Mr. Grimes, I rank you."

"Only when you have been recalled to Active Service. Sir."

Craven said, "I was rather afraid that you'd take this attitude. That's why I decided to get this interview over and done with, just so we all know where we stand." He put away the cargo plan, swivelled his chair so that he could reach out to his liquor cabinet. He pulled out two bulbs, tossed one to Grimes. "No toasts. If we drank to law and order we should mean different things. So just drink. And listen.

"To begin with, *Epsilon Sextans* doesn't know where she is. But Letourneau is one of the rare telepaths with the direction finding talent, and as soon as he's able to get lined-up we shall alter course to home on the wreck. That's what he's trying to do now.

"When we find her, we shall synchronize and board, of course. The first thing will be medical aid to the survivors. Then we patch the ship up. And then we arm her. And then, with a prize crew under myself, we put ourselves on the trajectory for Waverley, hoping that those Waldegrenese frigates come back for another nibble."

"They'd never dare, sir."

"Wouldn't they? The original piracy they'll try to laugh off by saying that it was by *real* pirates — no, that's not quite right, but you know what I mean — wearing Waldegren colors. The second piracy, they'll make sure that there are no survivors."

"But I still can't see how they can hope to get away with it. It's always been an accepted fact that the main weapon against piracy has been psionic radio."

"And so it was — until some genius developed a jamming technique. *Epsilon Sextans* wasn't able to get any messages out until her crazy random precession pulled her well clear."

"And you hope, sir, that they *do* attack you?"

"I do, Mr. Grimes. I had hoped that I should have a good gunnery officer under me, but . . ." he shrugged his massive shoulders ". . . I think that I shall be able to manage."

"And you hope that you'll have your weapons," persisted Grimes.

"I see no reason why I should not, Ensign."

"There is one very good reason, sir. That is that I, a commissioned

officer of the Survey Service, am aboard your vessel. I insist that you leave the tracking down and destruction of the pirates to the proper authorities. I insist, too, that no Survey Service stores be discharged from this ship without my written authority."

For the first time the hint of a smile relieved the somberness of Craven's face. "And to think that I believed that Jane Pentecost could recruit *you*," he murmured. Then, in a louder voice, "And what if I just go ahead without your written authority, Ensign?"

Grimes had the answer ready. "Then, sir, I shall be obliged to order your officers not to obey your unlawful commands. If necessary, I shall call upon the male passengers to assist me in any action that is necessary."

Craven's bushy eyebrows went up and stayed up. "Mr. Grimes," he said in a gritty voice, "it is indeed lucky for you that I have first hand experience of the typical Survey Service mentality. Some masters I know would, in these circumstances, send you out on a spacewalk without a suit. But before I take drastic action, I'll give you one more chance to cooperate." His tone softened. "You noticed the portrait I've put up instead of all the temporary pepsies. Every man, no matter how much he plays around, has one woman who is *the* woman. Gillian was *the* woman as far as I was concerned — as far as I *am* concerned. I've a chance to bring her murderers under my guns, and, by God, I'm taking that chance, no matter what it means either to my career or to the somewhat odd foreign policy of the Federation. I used to be annoyed by Jane Pentecost's outbursts on that subject — but now I see that she's right. And she's right, too, when it comes to the Survey Service's reluctance to take action against Waldegren.

"So I, Mr. Grimes, am taking action."

"Sir, I forbid you . . ."

"*You* forbid *me?* Ensign, you forget yourself. Perhaps this will help you remember."

*This* was a Minetti automatic that had appeared suddenly in the captain's hand. In his hairy fist the little, glittering weapon looked no more than a toy; but Grimes knew his firearms, knew that at the slightest pressure of Craven's finger the needlelike projectiles would stitch him from crown to crotch.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Grimes." As he spoke, Craven pressed a button set in his desk with his free hand. "I'm sorry about this. But I realize that I was expecting rather too much of you. After all, you have your career to consider. Time was," he went on, "when a naval officer could put his telescope to his blind eye as an excuse for ignoring orders and get away with it. But the politicians had less power in those days. We've come a long way — and a wrong way — since Nelson."

Grimes heard the door behind him slide open. He didn't bother to look around, not even when hard hands were laid on his shoulders.

"Mr. Kennedy," said Craven,

"things turned out as I feared that they would. Will you and Mr. Ludovic take the Ensign along to the Detention Cell?"

"I'll see you on trial for piracy, Captain!" flared Grimes.

"An interesting legal point, Ensign — especially since you are being entered in my Official Log as a mutineer."

## X

The detention cell was not uncomfortable, but it was depressing.

It was a padded cell — passengers in spacecraft have been known to exhibit the more violent symptoms of mania — which detracted from its already inconsiderable cheerfulness if not from its comfort. However, Grimes was not mad — not in the medical sense, that is — and so was considered able to attend to his own bodily needs. The little toilet was open to him, and at regular intervals a bell would sound and a container of food would appear in a hatch recessed into the bulkhead of the living cabin. There was reading matter too, such as it was. The ensign suspected that Jane Pentecost was the donor. It consisted of pamphlets published by some organization calling itself The Rim Worlds Secessionist Party. The almost hysterical calls to arms were bad enough, but the ones consisting mainly of columns of statistics were worse. Economics had never been Grimes' strong point.

He slept, he fed at the appointed times, he made a lengthy ritual of keeping himself clean, he tried to read; and, all the time, with only sounds and sensations as clues, he endeavored to maintain a running plot of the ship's maneuvers.

Quite early there had been the shutting down of the Mannschenn Drive and the consequent fleeting sensation of temporal disorientation. This had been followed by the acceleration warning — the cell had an intercom speaker recessed in the padding — and Grimes, although it seemed rather pointless in his sponge-rubber environment, had strapped himself into his couch. He heard the directional gyroscopes start up, felt the effects of centrifugal force as the ship came round to her new heading. Then there was the pseudo-gravity of acceleration, accompanied by the muffled thunder of the reaction drive. It was obvious, thought the ensign, that Captain Craven was expending his reaction mass in a manner that, in other circumstances, would have been considered reckless.

Suddenly, silence and Free Fall, and almost immediately the off-key keening of the Mannschenn Drive. Its note was higher, much higher, than Grimes remembered it; and the queasy feeling of temporal disorientation lasted much longer than it had on previous occasions.

And that, for a long time, was all.

Meals came and were eaten. Every morning, according to his watch, the prisoner showered and applied depilatory cream to his face. He tried to exercise; but to exercise in a padded cell, with no ap-

paratus, in Free Fall, is hard. He tried to read, but the literature available was hardly more interesting to him than a telephone directory would have been. And, even though he never had been gregarious, the lack of anybody to talk to was wearing him down.

It was a welcome break from the monotony when he realized that, once again, the ship was maneuvering. This time there was no use of the directional gyroscopes, there were no rocket blasts, but there was a variation of the whine of the Drive as it hunted, hunted, as the temporal precession rate was adjusted by tens of seconds, by seconds, by microseconds.

And then it locked.

The ship shuddered slightly — once, twice.

Grimes envisaged the firing of the two mooring rockets, one from the bow and one from the stern, each with the powerful electromagnet in its nose, each trailing its fathoms of fine but enormously strong cable. Merchant vessels, he knew, carried this equipment, but unlike naval ships rarely used it. But Craven, as a Reservist, would have seen and have taken part in enough drills.

The ship shuddered again heavily.

So the rendezvous had been made. So *Delta Orionis* and *Epsilon Sextans*, their Drives synchronized, bound together by the rescue ship's cables, were now falling as one unit through the dark immensities.

So the rendezvous had been made, and already the survivors of the wreck were being brought aboard the *Delia O'Ryan*, were being helped out of their stinking spacesuits, were blurting out their story to Craven and his officers. Grimes could visualize it all, almost as clearly as though he were actually watching it. He could visualize, too, the engineers swarming over the wreck, the flare of their burning and welding torches, the cannibalizing of nonessential plating from the ship's structure for hull patches. It was all laid down in the Survey Service's Damage Control Manual; and Captain Craven, at least, would know that book as thoroughly as did Grimes.

And what of the cargo, the Survey Service stores, *Grimes'* stores? A trembling in the ship's structure, a barely felt vibration, told him that gantries and conveyer belts were being brought into operation. There would be no great handling problems. Lindisfarne was *Delta Orionis'* first port of call, and the Survey Service consignment would be top stowage. But there was nothing that Grimes could do about it — not a thing. In fact, he was beginning to doubt the legality of the stand he had made against the master. And he was the small frog in this small puddle, while Captain Craven had made it quite clear that he was the big frog. Grimes wished that he was better versed in astronautical law, although a professional lawyer's knowledge would be of no use to him in his present situation.

There was nothing that he could do about it.

So, with some hazy idea that he might need all his strength, both mental and physical, for what was to befall him (but *what?*) in the

near future, he strapped himself into his bunk, did his best to forget his worries in sleep. He was well enough acquainted with the psychiatrists' jargon to know that this was no more than a return to the womb but, before dropping off into a shallow slumber, shrugged. *So what?*

He jerked into sudden wakefulness. Jane Pentecost was there by his bunk, looking down at him.

"Come in," he said. "Don't bother to knock. Now you see how the poor live. This is Liberty Hall; you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

She said, "That's not very funny."

"I know it's not. Even the first time that I heard it aboard this blasted ship, I was able to refrain from rolling in the aisles."

She said, "There's no need to be so bitchy, John."

"Isn't there? Wouldn't you be bitchy if you'd been thrown into this padded cell?"

"I suppose I would be. But you asked for it, didn't you?"

"If doing my duty — or trying to do my duty — is asking for it, I suppose that I did. Well, and has our pirate captain cast off yet, armed to the teeth with the weapons he's stolen?"

"No. The weapons are still being mounted. But let's not argue legalities, John. There's not enough time. I . . . I just wanted to say goodby."

"Good-by?" he echoed.

"Yes. Somebody has to do the cooking aboard *Epsilon Sextans,* and I volunteered."

"You?"

"And why the Hell not?" she flared." Captain Craven has been pushed over to *our* side of the fence, and it'd be a bloody bad show if we Rim Worlders weren't prepared to stand by him. Baxter's gone across to take over as Reaction Drive Engineer; the only survivor in that department was the Fourth, and he's only a dog watch in space."

"And who else?"

"Nobody. The *Sexy Eppy's* chief, second and third Interstellar Drive Engineers survived, and they're willing — anxious, in fact, now that their ship's being armed — to stay on. And the psionic radio officer came through and is staying on. All of our executive officers volunteered, of course, but the old man turned them down. He said that, after all, he could not hazard the safety of this ship by stripping her of her trained personnel. Especially since we carry passengers."

"That's his worry," said Grimes without much sympathy. "But how does he hope to fight his ship if those frigates pounce again?"

"He thinks he'll be able to manage — with remote controls for every weapon brought to his main control panel."

"Possible," admitted Grimes, his professional interest stirred. "But not very efficient. In a naval action the captain has his hands full just handling the ship alone, without trying to control her weaponry."

"And you'd know, of course."

"Yes."

"Yes, you've read the books. And Captain Craven commanded a light

cruiser during that trouble with the Dring, so he knows nothing."

"He still hasn't got four hands and two heads."

"Oh, let's stop talking rubbish," she cried. "I probably shan't see you again, John and . . . and . . . Oh, Hell, I want to say good-by properly, and I don't want you to think too badly about either the Old Man or . . . or myself."

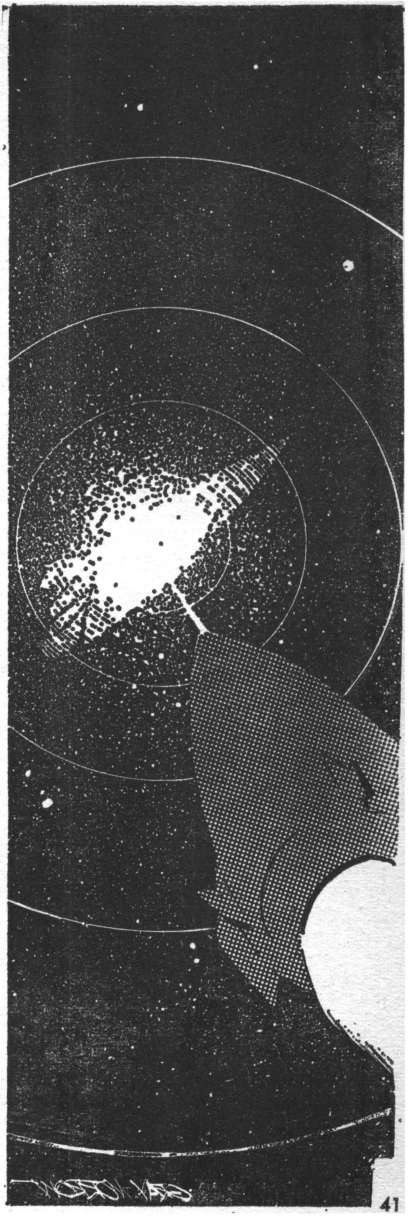
"So what are we supposed to do about it?"

"Damn you, Grimes, you snotty-nosed, stuck-up space puppy! Look after yourself!"

Suddenly she bent down to kiss him. It was intended to be no more than a light brushing of lips; but Grimes was suddenly aware, with his entire body, of the closeness of her, of the warmth and the scent of her, and almost without volition his arms went about her, drawing her closer still to him. She tried to break away, but it was only a half-hearted effort. He heard her murmur, in an odd, sardonic whisper, "Wottthehell, oh wotthehell . . ." and then, "toujours gai . . ."

It made no sense at the time; but, years later, when he made the acquaintance of the twentieth-century poets, he was to remember and to understand.

When it was over, when, still clasped in each others' arms, they drifted in the center of the little cabin, impelled here by some old resultant of forces, their discarded clothing drifting with them, veiling their perspiration-moist bodies, Grimes was reluctant to let her go.



Gently, Jane tried to disengage herself.

She whispered, "That was a warmer good-by than I intended. But I'm not sorry. No. I'm not sorry . . . ." Then, barely audibly, "It was the first time for you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm all the more glad it happened. But this *is* good-by."

*"No."*

"Don't be a bloody fool, John. You can't keep me here."

"But I can come with you."

She pushed him from her. Somehow he landed back on the bed. Before he could bounce he automatically snapped one of the confining straps about his middle. Somehow — she was still wearing her sandals, but nothing else — she finished up standing on the deck, held there by the contact between the magnetic soles and the ferrous fibres in the padding. She put out a long, graceful arm and caught her shirt. She said harshly, *"I'm* getting dressed and out of here. *You* stay put. Damn you, Grimes, for thinking that I was trying to lure you aboard the *Sexy Eppy* with the body beautiful. I told you before that I am not, repeat not, Olga Popovsky, the beautiful spy. And I'm not a prostitute. There's one thing I wouldn't *sell* if I were offered the services of the finest gunnery officer (which you aren't) in the whole bloody galaxy in payment!"

"You're beautiful when you flare up like that," said Grimes sincerely. "But you're *always* beautiful." Then, "Jane, I love you."

"Puppy love," she sneered. "And I'm old enough to be your . . ." A faint smile softened her mouth. "Your maiden aunt."

"Let me finish. All right, it's only puppy love — *you* say. But it's still love. But . . ." He was extemporizing, convincingly, he hoped. "But my real reason for wanting to come with you is this. I can appreciate now what Captain Craven lost when *Epsilon Sextans* was pirated. I can see — I can *feel* — why he's willing to risk his life and his career to get his revenge. And I think that it's worth it. And I want to help him."

She stood there, her shirt half on, eying him suspiciously. "You mean that? You really mean that?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a bloody liar, Grimes."

"No," he said slowly. "No. Not altogether. I want to help the Old Man, and I want to help *you.* This piracy has convinced me that you Rim Worlders *are* getting the dirty end of the stick. I may not be the finest gunnery officer in the whole bloody galaxy, but I'm better acquainted with the new stuff than Captain Craven is . . ."

Her grin was openly derisive. "First it's fellow feeling for another spaceman, then it's international politics. What next?"

"Where we started. I *do* love you, Jane. And if there's going to be any shooting, I want to be on hand to do the shooting back on your behalf. I'll admit that . . . that what's happened has influenced my decision. But you didn't buy me, or bribe me.

Don't think that. Don't ever think that." There was a note of pleading in his voice. "Be realistic, Jane. With another officer along, especially an officer with recent gunnery training, you stand a damn' sight better chance than you would otherwise."

"I . . . I suppose so. But I still don't like it."

"You don't have to. But why look a gift horse in the mouth?"

"All right. You win. Get your clothes on and come and see the old man."

## XI

Jane Pentecost led Grimes to the airlock. The ship seemed oddly deserted, and he remarked on this. The girl explained that the passengers had been requested to remain in their accommodation, and that most of *Delta Orionis'* personnel were employed in work aboard *Epsilon Sextans.*

"So I haven't been the only one to be kept under lock and key," commented Grimes sardonically.

"You're the only one," retorted the girl, "who's been compensated for his imprisonment."

There was no answer to that, so the ensign remained silent. Saying nothing, he inspected with interest the temporary tunnel that had been rigged between the airlocks of the two ships. So *Epsilon Sextans'* pressure hull had been made good, her atmosphere had been restored. That meant that the work of installing the armament had been completed. He hoped that he would not have to insist upon modifications.

The wreck — although she was a wreck no longer — bore her scars. The worst damage had been repaired, but holes and slashes that did not impair her structural strength were untouched, and spatters of once molten metal still made crazy patterns on beams and frames, stanchions and bulkheads. And there were the scars made by Craven's engineers — the raw, bright cicatrices of new welding.

Forward they made their way, deck after deck. The elevator in the axial shaft was not yet working, so Grimes had time and opportunity to appreciate the extent of the damage. They passed through the wreckage of the "farm" — the burst algae tanks, the ruptured vats in which yeast and tissue cultures were black and dead, frostbitten and dehydrated. They brushed through alleyways choked with the brittle fronds of creeping plants killed by the ultimate winter.

And then they were passing through the accommodation levels. Bulkheads had been slashed through, destroying the privacy of the cabins that they had once enclosed, destroying the privacy and the occupants. There were no longer any bodies; for this Grimes was deeply thankful. (He learned later that Craven's first action had been to order and conduct a funeral service.) There were no bodies, but there were still stains. Men and woman die quickly in hard vacuum — quickly and messily.

Captain Craven was alone in the control room. He was working,

rather slowly and clumsily, wiring up an obviously makeshift panel that was additional to the original one installed before the master's acceleration chair. It was obvious that it was the remote controls for the newly fitted weaponry. Grimes said quietly, "There's no need for that, sir."

Craven started, let go of his screwdriver, made a fumbling grab for it as it drifted away from him. He stared at Grimes, then growled, "So it's *you,* is it?" Then, to Jane, "What the hell do you mean by letting this puppy out of his kennel?"

"Captain Craven," she told him quietly, "Mr. Grimes wants to come with us."

"*What?* I warn you, Miss Pentecost, I'm in no mood for silly jokes."

"This is not a silly joke, Captain," said Grimes. "I've had time to think things over. I feel, I really feel that you have a far better chance if there's a qualified officer along to handle the gunnery."

Craven looked at them, from the girl to Grimes, then back again. He said, "Ensign, didn't I warn you?"

"It's not that way at all, sir," Grimes told him, flushing. "In fact, Miss Pentecost has been trying hard to dissuade me."

*"Oh?"*

"It's true," said Jane. "But he told me that we couldn't afford to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"I don't know what's been happening," rasped Craven. "I don't want to know what's been happening between the two of you. This change of mind, this change of heart is rather . . . sudden. No matter. One volunteer, they say, is worth ten pressed men." He glared coldly at the ensign. "And you volunteer?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I believe you. I have no choice in the matter. But you realize the consequences?"

"I do."

"Well, I *may* be able to do something to clear your yardarm. I've still to make my last entries in the Official Log of *Delta Orionis,* before I hand it over to Captain Kennedy. And when it comes to such documentation, nobody cares to accuse a shipmaster of being a liar. Not out loud." He paused, thinking. "How does this sound, Miss Pentecost? Date, Time, Position, *etc., etc.* Mr. John Grimes, passenger, holding the rank of ensign in the Federation Survey Service, removed by force from the vessel to *Epsilon Sextans,* there to supervise the installation and mounting of the armament, Survey Service property, discharged on my orders from No. 1 hold, also to advise upon the use of same in the subsequent event of an action's being fought. Signed, and witnessed."

"Rather long winded, sir. But it seems to cover the ground."

"I intend to do more than advise!" flared Grimes.

"Pipe down. Or, if you must say it, make sure that there aren't any witnesses around when you say it. Now, when it comes to the original supervision, you see what I'm trying to do. Will it work?"

"After a fashion, sir. But it will work much better if the fire control panel is entirely separate from maneuvering control."

"You don't think that I could handle both at once?"

"You *could*. But not with optimum efficiency. No humanoid could. This set-up of yours might just work if we were Shaara, or any of the other multilimbed arthropods. But even the Shaara, in their warships, don't expect the Queen-Captain to handle her ship *and* her guns simultaneously."

"You're the expert. I just want to be sure that you're prepared to quote, advise, unquote with your little pink paws on the actual keyboard of your battle organ."

"That's just the way that I propose to advise."

"Good. Fix it up to suit yourself, then. I should be able to let you have a mechanic shortly to give you a hand."

"Before we go any further, sir, I'd like to make an inspection of the weapons themselves. Just in case . . . ."

"Just in case I've made some fantastic bollix, eh?" Craven was almost cheerful.

"Very good. But try to make it snappy. It's time we were on our way."

"Yes," said Jane, and it seemed that the Captain's discarded somberness was hanging about her life a cloud. "It's time."

**TO BE CONCLUDED**

# THE FANTASQUE

by JAMES McKIMMEY

*Why bother to live — when there is so much more to get from illusion?*

Homer Bemoth had read about the Fantasque; an eight-million-dollar magazine campaign can hardly be ignored by anyone save possibly the illiterate, prisoners, monks, the insane and those hermited into outer space. The campaign had been given an additional thrust by the formation of the conservative-based OTDF (Outlaw The Dirty Fantasque), whose devout members had long ago given up their ancient fights against fluoridation, pornographic literature, Liberal Episcopalianism and LSD . . . as well as the One Planetary System, which had never captured much fervor because it was still on the drawing board.

Homer recalled a fire-eyed OTDF member placing in his hand a pamphlet which had read:

"The Fantasque is the most nefarious scheme ever to be devised by the Ugly Mind in order to jelly the spine of resistance and contaminate, infiltrate and corrupt the brains of those who stand for one hundred per cent Hemispherism. It must be outlawed at once, to protect our Hemispherian way of life! Do not listen to the hogwash propaganda of the Ugly Mind behind this deadly conspiracy. Sign the petition now and put your Hemispherism where your mouth is!"

Homer had asked, "Who is the Ugly Mind?"

The incredulous member had shouted, "Them!"

The OTDF effort was immediately neutralized by the liberal-based group formed in retaliation and calling itself HFFOTF (Hemispherians For Freedom Of The Fantasque), owning a charter committee created of two prominent scientists, one Independent of the Hemispheric Senate, three well known sculptors, an actor and an actress known internationally and ten famous writers including the recently celebrated

Camubald Jones, author of *Would You Invite a Martian to Dinner, Mother?* — a work that had immediately climbed to the top of the best-seller charts, despite the fact that the first exploratory shot to Mars had failed to indicate any intelligent life on that planet.

The HFFOTF fight to shelve proposed outlawing legislation was entirely successful, and sales of the Fantasque expanded despite the near-prohibitive cost of the machine. A caustic columnist had gone to the trouble of checking sales records of Fantasque Incorporated to discover that no members of either the OTDF or the HFFOTF had purchased a model, or even tried one out, and reported the fact in a syndicated column. The response from both sides was that it was not the point.

Homer Bemoth, in his San Francisco Brindlehoffen house constructed by seating a preconstructed aluminum rectangle on a power-rotated foundation, had never allowed himself the indulgence of even considering a Fantasque. Homer had never been a tearing success at much of anything, during his forty-three years; he couldn't afford an Alexis Mobile Street-Jumper, let alone the luxury of a $20,000 Fantasque. Too, his wife Grace had become a member of the OTDF.

"Why, for God's sake?" Homer asked. "You don't know anything about it!"

"That doesn't matter!" Grace replied, tapping a sheaf of OTDF literature. "It's a dirty invention of the Ugly Mind."

"Well, who in the hell is that?"

"Them!"

Grace had felt the dull sorrow of a marriage gone wrong for a number of years. She'd had long hopes for Homer, in the beginning; but he had simply washed out in his efforts. He'd tried perhaps fifty ways of making a living and had never possessed the sense or conviction of intent to stay with any one of them. Instead, he skipped from one job to another in a frenzied desire to accomplish everything and had, as it turned out, accomplished nothing.

Currently Homer was employed as an aide in the engineering department of a firm manufacturing Swirley's Shape Slax. The job was an embarrassment to Grace, who could not bear to tell her friends that her husband spent five days a week running about a room doing inconsequential things for a group of engineers whose total purpose was to improve lines in women's slacks containing fake posteriors. Before moving to San Francisco Grace had been brought up in the severe and austere fashion of North Pole frontier life, where the rigorous moral code was law. Godliness, cleanliness, decency and thrift guided Grace's ship of life. It was fortunate that she knew something about the last, because Homer brought home just enough money to make it from Friday to Friday.

Grace had seriously considered divorcing Homer — an action not in conflict with her upbringing. But the short-lived Church State had left a piece of compromise legislation not yet repealed. A partner seeking di-

vorce automatically waived all material possessions of the marriage. The law had curtailed a ballooning divorce situation; but it had not, Grace considered bitterly, lightened the burden of finding yourself in a barrel with a sour pickle.

It was not that they owned much. But she did love their Brindlehoffen house, blue china, Oriental rug and the three-wheeled jet-cart which she drove to the market daily. Those things were enough to keep her in Homer Bemoth's bed; but she was rankling under dissatisfaction, hoping desperately that the legislation might be repealed.

Then a letter arrived.

Grace, who never opened Homer's personal mail, looked at the lawyer's return printed on the flap of the envelope and waited impatiently for Homer's return that evening. When he had settled into his floater chair with a bourbon and water, he finally opened it.

"What does it say?" Grace demanded.

"Uncle Forbes blinked out."

"Died?"

"You bet your astro. He laid seventy-five thousand on me!"

"Great heavens!" Grace said in shock.

Homer blinked, then his round and ruddy face crinkled with a satyrlike grin. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do first."

"What's that?"

"Tell those asses what they can do with that phoney-fanny job!"

As Homer got into his pajamas, Grace lay trying to become convinced of the reality of it. "We're going to have to study investments. Good, solid, sensible investments!" Then she noticed that Homer had turned the rotator of the foundation so that the window he was peering through faced next door where a young wife often failed to draw her bedroom drapes. "Homer!"

"That girl's absolutely leafless."

"*Ho*mer!" And, when he'd finally gotten into bed, she said, "Did you hear me about the investments?"

"Sure."

"Do you really think you should quit your job? I mean, after all — "

"Tomorrow morning I tell them to stick it."

She tried to console herself with the thought that once the novelty of the inheritance wore away she could perhaps convince him to find new employment. $75,000 was an awfully lot of money, but it was not enough on which simply to give up — she was certain of that.

"Let's celebrate," Homer said hopefully.

"Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Maybe tomorrow night."

When the legal work was completed and the money collected, Homer concentrated on his retirement. He bowled, fished, sang, went to the amusement park, watched movies and television, stood on a downtown corner smiling at girls, night-clubbed, hummed and even tried advanced air skiing by renting the use of a small piloted pull-plane and propulsion skis. Near the end of the first month Grace found him on the back stoop, whittling.

"Why are you doing that now?"

"I'm going to become the best whittler in town!"

The next day, when Homer had forgotten about that, Grace said desperately, "We can't just let the money sit in the bank on that lousy interest. If you're not going to get another job — "

But Homer was shuffling through the mail. "By God, look at this."

Grace took a letter and started to read:

Dear Mr. Bemoth:

We are extraordinarily pleased to inform you that you have been personally selected to try our latest model of the Fantasque. As you undoubtedly know, Fantasque is the greatest pleasure innovation since the invention of the psychotrode. Please understand that we do not extend this invitation to everyone. We say only that you have been placed high on our list as the result of your extraordinary reputation. At your convenience, please stop at our studios.

Grace looked up, eyes clouded with indignation.

"How about that?" Homer said.

"The dirty thing!"

"You don't know anything about it!"

"I belong to the OTDF!"

"Fantasque doesn't ask just *anybody*!"

"They heard about your inheritance!"

"They heard about my *reputation!*"

That afternoon Homer walked into the sleek Fantasque studios where a youngish man with shining black hair and a flashing smile stepped forward to shake his hand.

"Homer Bemoth here."

"Not really!" said the salesman, putting a genuine note of disbelief into his voice.

Moments later he was escorted into a room where he looked at a silver metal cubicle with a small door.

"I thought it would be bigger."

"It's quite compact," said the salesman.

"Where do you put the darn thing?"

"Into the garage, if you've got an outlet there. Just plug in. Simple as that. Give it a whirl?"

"As long as I'm here."

The salesman opened the door to the interior which contained a control panel and a leather-cushioned chair upon which rested a white helmet sprouting wires. "The helmet contains the psychotrode connections. That is the heart of the accomplishment — they tune right into your imagination, you see? Couple you up with the computer. That's what makes it absolutely real."

"No screens?"

"No, *sir*. It goes on inside your brain, because of those sweet little psychotrodes. You are *there!*"

"Won't it drive you nuts?"

"Fantasque has been tested by over a thousand persons, in its home laboratory. It is absolutely one hundred per cent safe for any man's brain — especially, I might add, one owned by a person of your caliber."

"I'll be damned."

"Behind the control panel is the computer. Into it has been fed every sort of piece of information concerning any given target selected. All you do is start with Indicator 1 and turn it to the first letter of the name of your target. You work over until you've spelled it out. Say you wish to travel to New York City. Bang. You're looking at the city. If you wish to become more specific, keep on spelling — Manhattan, or, if you will, Empire State Building. You'll be there."

"Hard to believe."

"Those are just general instructions, for the beginner. But if you wish to go into a specific store, say, then you get into more experienced handling. You take hold of Knob X and Knob A and fly, as it were, with the Fantasque. It takes some concentrating, letting the imagination go to work. But those controls, coupled with the psychotrodes, will send you right where you want to go. Climb in. Put on the helmet. Take a shot at it."

The salesman watched Homer make his way inside to sit down on the chair and place the helmet on his head.

"What'll it be, Mr. Bemoth?"

"The new, expanded Disneyland! I've never been there."

"Spell it out!"

Homer set the indicators. Then he sat immobile. Suddenly his hands jumped forward to grasp and X and A knobs. He let out a yelp and looked around, wide-eyed. "By God!"

"There, you see, Mr. Bemoth?"

"You bet! A kid was licking a cone right by my ear! So I saw this place I wanted to go into. I grabbed the knobs. But I landed in a river staring a damned crocodile down the throat!"

"You have to take it easy at first, Mr. Bemoth. Don't try to do everything at once. It's like an electric organ you've never played before. You want to try the simple melodies with one hand, then the pedal notes, then the second hand, then the drawbars, the vibrator tabs, the whole business. But it takes time and practice. Where next?"

"Bismark, North Dakota. My old home town!"

"See that lighted red button? Press it. That cancels out your previous target."

Homer pressed; the light went out.

"Spell, Mr. Bemoth."

Homer rapidly punched letters. Then he sat rigidly. Suddenly his hands jumped again. A forefinger jabbed at the indicators. He yelled out happily.

The salesman was wagging his head disapprovingly as Homer turned around, perspiring and joyful.

"Now you see, Mr. Bemoth — "

"I was in Bismark! Then I punched out Little Rock. There was Bismark in back, Little Rock in front — !"

"But it's much better to stay in one place at one time. We've done extensive experimenting on that. Remember you're using psychotrodes. You're dealing with dimensional processes as well. While we guarantee the absolute safety of the machine

when properly used, we don't advise anyone to tax his brain too greatly. Let's stay on one target at a time, shall we, Mr. Bemoth?"

"Right!"

"Where next?"

"Saskatoon!"

After a dozen flights, Homer pitched out of the machine excitedly. "By God!" he whooped. "That son of a gun!"

The salesman led Homer to a table where he handed him a leather-bound book. "The official manual. Instructions for every conceivable performance the machine is capable of handling. I'll guarantee they're limitless."

Homer opened the book.

"Illustrated there, for example, are your color plungers. As you tested it, the machine was simply set on Color-General. With these, you can shoot for perfection. Here are your dimension sticks. Your level indicators. Your temperature guides. Your time bars."

"*Time* bars?"

"As I said, Mr. Bemoth, no limit. Once you learn to handle these, you can shoot back and look in, for instance, on the Boston Tea Party. The entire affair has been fed into the computer. You'll be there December 16, 1773, when the colonists dumped tea into the harbor."

The saleman talked on, edging an order contract toward Homer, who said, "Probably isn't a real point, understand. But I was just curious."

"Certainly."

"How much has been shot into that computer?"

"The world, Mr. Bemoth."

"Mind you, I wouldn't think of wanting to do it myself. But say some dirty-minded old man came in and bought one of those machines and tuned himself in on undressing time for, oh, Marie Antoinette, right there in the boudoir."

The salesman's face blanched. "Mr. *Be*moth!"

"I didn't say *I'd* want to do it. But I was just thinking — "

"It's that damnable organization, OTDF! Be honest, Mr. Bemoth. You've read their propaganda, haven't you?"

"They slipped me a pamphlet or two, yes. But — "

"Filthy lies! That computer is as clean as the purest snow! Not one single item remotely associated with the prurient has ever been fed into one of our computers! The Fantasque represents the cleanest entertainment since checkers! Yet," the salesman went on in a breaking voice, "those damnable OTDF people — "

"I'm sorry I brought it up," Homer said.

"I'll get hold of myself in a moment."

The salesman got out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "Do you wish to sign the order, Mr. Bemoth? We have excellent financing terms, of course."

"Cash, if you don't mind."

When Homer told his wife she swept into violent hysterics. "Twenty thousand dollars!"

"Plus tax."

"For that dirty thing!"

"Lies. That machine's as clean as the purest snow!"

"The neighbors'll see it delivered!"

"They deliver in a plain brown box!"

When it had been, Grace would not go into the garage and look at it. Instead she howled, screamed and poured forth an incredible amount of tears. Homer closed himself away inside the machine.

After that, he spent most of his waking time there, traveling from Tripoli to Odessa to Trinidad to Kalgoorlie to Dublin; he joined Hannibal crossing the Alps, Stephen urging the Children's Crusade, Charlemagne invading Italy, Columbus sighting San Salvador Island, Michelangelo carving *Pieta*. He explained the machine's operation precisely to Grace. But she insisted that it was an evil instrument, creating an unreal world only to titillate the senses; she wouldn't go near it. Homer gave up on her and continued his travels, tearing wildly across continents, plunging back and forth in time. He appeared outside only to sleep, eat and read the newspapers in order to find ideas for fresh journeys.

It was during a newspaper interval that Grace stared at him with reddened eyes and said, "You love that dirty thing more than me!"

Homer listened vaguely, deciding that he would finally blast off on his first space shot — he'd willed himself to save that one.

Grace's face flushed. "What's happened to our sex life?"

Homer looked up in astonishment. "*Sex* life!"

When he returned to his newspaper, he noticed a small classified ad, feeling his heart quicken its beat.

A week later, Grace's sense of cleanliness forced her to the garage to sweep. She kept her eyes away from the silver metal cubicle as she did. He was in there, as he always was; and, she thought, he could stay in there the rest of his existence. She shifted some empty cartons. Then she saw another which she could not remember. It was empty except for a printed sheet of paper. She drew that out and read:

"Welcome to your Jing-Jang Adapter! Follow the simple instructions to install this delicious addition to your machine. Then SEE, The Way You Like It: *Cleopatra Up The Nile. Pocahontas Under The Waterfall, Lady Godiva On Her . . . .* " Grace read the other seven titles and threw the paper down in fury.

Quivering, she strode to the Fantasque and yanked the door open. She gasped, staring inside.

Homer's clothing and shoes lay in a loose pile around the chair upon which rested the white helmet.

"*Ho*mer!" she said sharply, then realized the foolishness of that; he simply was not there.

She remembered that only an hour ago he'd walked aloofly past her in the kitchen, and come down.

She checked the large garage doors; they were locked from the inside. So were the windows, as well as another small door. There was no way that he could have gotten out.

Pulse beating, she considered it. She recalled all that Homer had told her about the machine. Grace was not an adventurer in abstract thinking, but she wasn't stupid either.

She hurried to the telephone, and, in a few minutes, was connected to the Fantasque studios. She said to the salesman, "I was wondering something about your machine."

"Of course."

"Suppose somebody got going with it."

"In what way?"

"Say he got excited and tried to be in several places at the same time. Maybe ten different places, at the same time."

"That would not be recommended, madam!"

"Could he just disappear? Split up in all directions? Fade out in other dimensions? So there isn't anything left but his clothes?"

There was a startled pause, then the man said, "This isn't someone from that damnable OTDF, is it?"

"I was just wondering if you'd ever had anything happen like that?"

"Madam, that is utterly absurd! Our machine has been thoroughly tested."

"But you couldn't test mice, or even monkeys, with that dimensional business and the psycho-thingajigs, could you? I mean, animals don't have brains like humans. And every human brain is different."

"There is the psychological to consider, of course. And dimension is certainly involved. Yet the postulation is ridiculous. But — if anything might have gone wrong, please tell us who you are. We'll immediately send our best men over to — "

"What would you do if *had* happened? Pull the plug?"

"My God, no! That would break all connections! Leave the poor devil in limbo — maybe a ten-way limbo! I mean . . . Madam, if you'll just — !"

She hung up and began humming as she returned to the garage. She was thinking that she would wait a few days, then report him missing. The divorce legislation also covered desertion; in six months all of their possessions would be wholly hers. Then she could sell that machine and really get started with her investments.

She opened the door of the Fantasque and removed his shoes and clothing from it. Then she pulled the plug.

END

# RETIEF, WAR CRIMINAL

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*Retief didn't mind the eons-dead heroes of this world—but they wouldn't stay dead!*

I

An evening breeze bearing the fragrance of ten-thousand year old Heo trees in bloom moved across the Embassy dining terrace. In the distance pipes sounded softly, picking out a haunting melody, like fairy feet retracing a forgotten path through an enchanted forest. The setting sun, vast and smoky red, cast crimson shadows along the leaf-shaded streets below.

"A pity all this is dying." First Secretary Magnan of the Terran Mission to Sulinore waved a hand toward the fragile, crumbling towers silhouetted against the dusk. "In spite of a million years of civilization and a reputation for immortality, the Sulinorians seem impotent to stem the population decline. I suppose in a century or less they'll all be gone."

"With ninety-nine per cent of the planetary surface devoted to cemeteries, historical shrines and monuments to the past, there's not much

room for the living," Second Secretary Retief commented. "And you can tie up a lot of minerals in a planet-wide graveyard."

"I suppose you're referring to their belief that the world's supply of Divine Effluvium is exhausted," Magnan sniffed. "Mere folklore, of course. Still, one might almost be tempted to look into the matter of depletion of essential elements — except that Corps policy forbids poking into local religious doctrine. And in any event, they won't permit any deep-mining operations which might disturb the hallowed dead — or the sleeping heroes, as they prefer to put it."

Magnan cocked an eye at the small humanoid waiter standing at a discreet distance, apparently lost in thought. "One can't help thinking that the modern Sulinorian is a far cry from his legendary ancestors," he said behind his hand. "Just compare these civilized little chaps with those ghastly statues you see everywhere."

The local turned, approached the table, a polite expression on his elfin features.

"You wished something, sir?"

"Why, ah, tell me." Magnan cleared his throat. "How does the Sulinorian in the street feel about all this? Wouldn't you be willing to see a modest rock-mining operation set up here to unlock some of those scarce elements that are tied up in the planetary crust?"

"Modest, my lord? The figure I heard was a million metric tons per day per unit, and Great Tussore knows how many units." He looked toward the ruin-crowned skyline. *"Rather the easy erosion of eons/ than eaten by industry's engines insatiable,"* he quoted. "At least that's what the poet Eulindore said a couple of millenia ago. Me, I wouldn't know."

"But what about importation?" Magnan persisted. "Why, your Administrative Council turned thumbs-down flatly on the CDT proposal that we haul in a few million cubic miles of useful minerals and establish raw material dumps that all could draw on freely!"

"I guess we'd rather look at the landscape the way it is, sir," the Sulinorian said. "And besides, rooting in a dump isn't our style. You know, a race of heroes and all that." He flicked an imaginary crumb from the table. "How about another flagon of ancient wine, my lords? Laid down by Yodross in the year 574,-635. That would be about 3600 B.C., old Terry reckoning."

"I think not — " Magnan broke off as the table-side P.A. unit pinged and lit up. The plump features of Ambassador Shindlesweet snapped into mirror-bright focus on the one-way screen.

"Ah, gentlemen," the portly diplomat beamed. "It's my pleasure to inform the staff that the Blug delegation has, after all, been prevailed upon to be present at the Peace Conference here on Sulinore."

"What, *those* bloodthirsty little killers?" Magnan gasped. "With their armor and their opaque atmosphere helmets and their sneaky ways? Why, everybody knows they're the Groaci's

proteges, and responsible for all the fighting!"

"At least that's a dozen or so Blugs that won't be off plundering somewhere — as long as the conference is on anyway," Retief pointed out.

". . . a gesture which reflects their sincere desire to see peace restored to the Sector," Shindlesweet was rumbling on. "And with all due modesty, I think I may say — "

A pale visage sporting five stalked eyes crowded onto the screen, thrusting the Terrestrial ambassador aside.

"As you're perhaps aware," the Groaci ambassador whispered in his faint voice, "it was through my efforts as co-sponsor of the present talks that this happy eventuality was brought about. And — "

"Look here, Mr. Ambassador," Shindlesweet muttered from the side of his mouth, turning a glassy smile to the camera. "I was on the air first!"

"Hogging the limelight, as usual, George," the Groaci hissed. "An unfortunate habit of yours. But as I was saying," he addressed the screen, "I was able, through deft handling of a number of sensitive issues — "

"Now just a minute, Shith!" The Terran forced his way back to center screen. "When I agreed to lend the weight of Terran participation to your confounded gabfest, I — "

"Ha! You begged me on bended anterior ginglymus joint to be permitted to crowd in!"

"Why, you little — "

"Ah-ah," Ambassador Shith admonished. "No racial epithets, George. Open mike, remember?"

Retief and Magnan had a last quick glimpse of Shindlesweet's rage-flushed features as he reached to blank the screen.

"Well, the peace talks are off to a rousing start," Retief said cheerfully. Magnan shook his head, looking grave.

"I foresee no good to come of this gathering." He rose and looked at his watch. "We've time for a constitutional before dinner, Retief. And if we're to dine cheek by mandible with our Groaci colleagues at tonight's banquet, I for one have need of a hearty appetite."

## II

A block from the renovated palace housing the Terran Chancery, Magnan plucked at Retief's arm.

"Look there; another party of Groaci Peacekeepers, in full armor. You'd think they were expecting full scale rioting to break out at any moment."

A block away, a squad of constabulary, in grotesque flaring helmets and black hip-cloaks, side-arms at knobby hips, minced briskly along the empty avenue.

"Shith was quite insistent that the Groaci be assigned responsibility for the security arrangements for the Conference," Magnan muttered. "They have the only guns on the planet."

"For alleged police, those fellows have a suspicious look of regular infantry about them," Retief said.

"Good lord, you don't imagine they're planning anything foolish?" Magnan gasped. "Everybody knows the Groaci secretly covet Sulinore. They've even tried to have it officially declared a deserted world, open to colonization."

"It's a little hard to see how they could swing it, with a full squadron of CDT Peace Enforcers standing by off-planet," Retief said.

"You're right. We're imagining things." Magnan shook his head briskly. "A few dozen blasters can't take over a world. Still, I'd as soon avoid these bravos. In their arrogance they might attempt some sort of harassment." He angled across toward the entrance to a side street.

"That's the route to the Forbidden City, off-limits to foreigners," Retief said. "How badly do you want to miss the fuzz?"

"Not that badly." Magnan shuddered, veered in the opposite direction. "If even half the stories are true, not even our gnawed bones would ever be found."

Fifteen minutes later they were in a narrow, crooked street where age-weathered carved griffins, satyrs and nymphs adorned the steep facades of the deserted buildings lining the way.

"This isn't the most cheerful route for a stroll," Magnan commented uneasily. "At least not after sundown." He cocked his head. "One almost imagines one can hear stealthy footsteps behind one."

"Not so stealthy at that," Retief said. "They've been getting pretty careless the last five minutes, as if they didn't care whether we heard them or not."

"You mean someone's really following us?" Magnan turned to stare back along the shadowy late-evening street.

"Two someones," Retief corrected. "Non-humans, I'd say, weighing in at under a hundred pounds, and wearing padded shoes."

"That could mean anything! There are forty-six non-human species on-world this week for the conference, and I can think of at least ten of them that wouldn't be above assaulting a pair of peaceful Terran diplomats for their own nefarious ends."

"Or for the iridium in their teeth," Retief amplified.

"I think I recognize the street ahead," Magnan muttered. "Coriale's Comestible Counter is just around the corner. I was there last week — in daylight — making some arrangements for the Reception. We can nip inside and 'phone the Embassy for transportation back . . . ." He broke off as they came in view of a high, narrow shop-front displaying the cranium and crossed thighbones, the Sulinorian symbols of a caterer's establishment. Beneath the deeply incised device, the windows were dark, the massive stonewood door shut tight.

"It's closed!" Magnan put his nose against the glass "But there's someone inside. I head a sound."

Retief tried the heavily patinaed bronze door latch, cast in the form of fanged jaws clenched on a leg.

"Perhaps — great heavens, Retief! What are you doing?" Magnan blurted as Retief gripped the knob

in both hands and twisted hard. There was a sharp tinkle of breaking metal.

"Retief, stop!" Magnan gasped. "You can't — "

"I think it might be a good idea to get in off the street — now!" Retief thrust his protesting senior through into the gloomy interior, whirled to ease the door silently shut.

"We found the door unlocked," he said briskly, looking around the room. "And stepped inside to see if everything was okay."

Magnan peered from the window, made a choking sound. "Two Sulinorians in artisan's headdress just came around the corner! They'll find us here!"

"Let's check the back room." Retief led the way past tables heaped with displays of Sulinorian pastries, stuffed fowls and candied nutmeats, thrust aside a curtain. The dim shapes of stacked cartons bulked in the darkness. He sniffed the air, took a tiny handlight from his pocket, played the pencil-thin beam across the floor.

"What's that?" Magnan hissed, pointing. From behind a wall locker, a pair of narrow high-arched, long-toed feet protruded. Retief went across, flashed the light on a small, crumpled body. The bright robes were bedraggled and torn. A wound in the narrow chest oozed ochre blood.

"A Sulinorian," Magnan breathed. "He's been shot!" His lips moved in a faint whisper. Retief knelt beside him.

"Who did it?" he asked urgently. "Why?"

"He was not . . . what he seemed." Retief caught the whispered words. Then the luminous eyes closed; the last tinge of vital color drained from the small face, leaving it an unattractive shade of waxy green.

"It looks like Coriale, the caterer," Magnan groaned. "How terrible!"

"Listen!" Retief raised a hand. From the far corner of the storeroom a faint rustle sounded. He motioned Magnan to the left, started around the right side of the stacked boxes. There was a hurried scuttling sound.

"Why — *there* you are, Coriale," Magnan's voice squeaked. "We, er, just stepped in to increase our order. We'll have twelve gross of the bean and kidney pies and six dozen jellied bramble-hens — under glass, of course . . . ." Magnan backed into view, keeping himself between the small local and the body in the corner. The Sulinorian pulled free of Magnan's grip on his elbow. His bright eyes flicked around the room.

"But if you're busy," Magnan went on hastily, "we'll just toddle along now . . . ."

"Ummm. You are Terrestrials, isn't it?" the alien piped in a piercingly high voice.

"I'm, er, why, ah . . . ." Magnan swallowed audibly. "I was here just the other day, Mr. Coriale. Don't you remember me?"

"Yes. Quite so, I recalled now." The Sulinorian moved toward the door. "Six dozen jellied kidney-beans and glass hens under mud, I'll make notes of it. And now, you wish

to leave, are you? To be sure. Good-by quickly, please."

Magnan reached the door ahead of the local, fumbled it open. "Well, it was jolly seeing you, Coriale. By, now . . ." He tugged at Retief's sleeve. "Come along!" he hissed. "We're in a frightful rush, remember?"

"I'm not sure Mr. Coriale got the order just right." Retief eased Magnan aside, glanced out the door. The dark street was empty. Pale flames burning in blue glass globes high on the walls cast wavering shadows along the ancient cobbles.

"It doesn't matter! I'm sure he can cope." Magnan's voice faltered as his eye fell on the Sulinorian, from whose nostrils brown smoke was filtering.

"Say, isn't that brown smoke filtering from your nostrils?" he blinked. "I didn't know you Sulinorians smoked."

Coriale edged sideways, eyeing the door. "A new vice, acquiring this week only. And now, reluctance, farewell."

Magnan frowned. "Curious," he said. "A few days ago you spoke perfect Galactic."

"Duck!" Retief snapped and dived past Magnan as the undersized alien made a lightning-fast motion.

Something flashed in his hand; a plate of hors d'oeuvres beside Magnan exploded in a shower of antipasto. With a yelp, Magnan leaped sideways, collided with the alien as the latter bounded aside from Retief's charge.

For a moment, there was a wild tangle of threshing limbs. Then Magnan staggered back, sat down hard. His head wobbled. He fell sideways and lay still.

The Sulinorian had whirled, bringing the gun up —

Retief swept a pie from a table, slammed it full into the pinched faced. The alien shrieked; the gun barked sharply, twice. One slug ripped the gilt epaulet from the shoulder of Retief's wine-red mid-evening semi-official blazer. The second *thunk!*ed into a pewter tureen; thick purple soup spurted from paired holes. Then Retief was on the gunner. He twisted the alien's gun-hand behind him, reached to seize his quarry's other arm . . . and felt the room expand suddenly to three times its former size.

He snorted hard, held his breath, threw the alien across the room. His legs felt like piano wire. He grabbed at a table for support, sent it crashing over on its side.

Magnan sat up, spluttering, as a cascade of icy green punch sluiced over him.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming, Mother," he gasped.

To Retief, Magnan's voice seemed to be filtered through an echo chamber. As in a dream, he saw the other totter to his feet.

"Wha . . ." Magnan gobbled. "What happened?" His eyes focused on the room, took in the smashed crockery, the overturned furnishings, the spilled viands — and the crumpled figure against the wall.

"Retief — he isn't . . .?"

Retief shook his head to clear it. He went across to the fallen alien.

The creature lay on his back, eyes wide open, glassy. A great shard of broken punch-bowl protruded from his chest. His dead face was a livid purple.

"Coriale!" Magnan choked. "Dead again!"

"We'd better get out fast," Retief said. "And sort out the Coriales in the morning."

"By all means!" Magnan whirled to the door, pulled it wide — and backed into the room, prodded by the gleaming barrel of a crater gun in the hands of a spindle-legged Groaci in the uniform of a Peacekeeper.

"To make no move, vile miscreants," the helmeted and greaved Shore Patroller hissed in his native tongue as his five stalked eyes scanned the shambles. "To have you red-handed this time, Soft Ones."

"You're making a frightful mistake," Magnan choked as half a dozen more Groaci pushed into the shop, all with levelled weapons. "We didn't — that is, I didn't — I mean, Retief only — "

"Ah, Mr. Magnan, is it not?" the Patrol captain whispered in his faint voice. "The acceptance of your complete innocence, of course, dear sir. Provided only the testimony against the true criminal!"

"True criminal?" Magnan stuttered. "You mean Retief? But — "

"What other?" the Groaci inquired in a reasonable tone.

"But . . . but . . . ."

"To have no need to make a statement now," the captain soothed. "To come along quietly and to leave us to deal with the killer." He motioned sharply and his subordinates closed in, hustled the protesting Magnan away. Then the Groaci turned to Retief.

"To remember me, perhaps, Retief? Shluh by name, formerly of the Groacian Planetary Police, once deeply wronged by you. Tonight, in the cells of a Groaci prison, to even at last the bitter score."

## III

The jeweled eye-shields of Captain Shluh gave back brilliant glints from the dazzling white Interrogation lights rigged at the center of the dusty room.

"Once more, my dear Retief," he whispered in accent-free Terran. "What was your motive for your atrocious crimes against the peace and order of Groac? Or Sulinore, if you prefer. Was it perhaps your plan to introduce subtle impurities into the provender to be supplied to the delegates? Or did your schemes run deeper? Was it you full intent to secrete illegal monitoring devices in the serving vessels — devices of the kind which I will testify were found on your person when you were searched?"

"A couple of years pounding a beat have done wonders for you, Schluh," Retief said conversationally. "You've lost that fat-behind-the-ears look. Unfortunately, you still sound about the same."

"And you, unlucky Terry, still indulge your penchant for flippancy! It will be amusing to watch the evolution of your japes into pleas for mercy, as our acquaintance ripens."

"You Groaci must be planning something a little more elaborate than usual," Retief mused aloud. "Conning Ambassador Shindlesweet into lending CDT backing to these phony peace talks took a lot of time and groundwork — and you lads don't waste credits on empty gestures."

"You imply that our motives are less than selfless?" Shluh inquired in a careless tone. "Ah, well, what matter your thoughts, Soft One? You may share them freely with your executioner."

"Let's look at it analytically," Retief went on. "What have you accomplished with all this effort, other than getting representatives of every important world in a CDT dominated sector of the Arm together in one room? But maybe that's enough, eh, Shluh? If some unfortunate incident occurred and wiped out the lot of them, whoever was responsible would find himself in a most unenviable position, public-relations-wise. And I have a feeling it wouldn't be you Groaci who'd be left holding the satchel. Which leaves the CDT, the other sponsor of the gathering."

"Enough, presumptuous Terry!" Shluh's eyestalks were whipping in an agitated manner. "In your panic, you rant nonsense!"

"And with the CDT discredited," Retief continued, "Groac would have to step in to straighten out the confusion; and they just might find it necessary to call on someone like their friends the Blugs to help keep the peace during the emergency. And maybe, before things got back to normal, the few remaining Sulinorians might just sort of go into a decline and die off, leaving an empty world for an enterprising power like Groac to latch onto."

"What fever fancies are these?" Shluh hissed. "It is known to all that you Terries, ever suspicious of the pure motives of others, have installed Mark XXI surveillance devices at the port and throughout the Conference rooms, thus making impossible the introduction of any weapons other than the handful alloted to my Security patrols!"

"A good point, Shluh. The Mark XXI's will frisk every attender from socks to hair-piece. Of course, a little poison in the caterer's salt-shaker wouldn't trip the detectors, but the metabolic monitors would catch that on the routine analysis that's run on food to be sure it's safe for alien consumption. So the Borgia approach is out, too."

"I tire of your theorizing!" Shluh was on his feet. "Think what you will! I tell you in confidence: Even now your Chancery is surrounded by my troops — ostensibly as honor guard — but none can leave or enter! By this hour tomorrow no Terry will dare to show his naked face in any capital in the Sector — "

"Tomorrow, eh?" Retief nodded. "Thanks for giving me your timetable."

"Have done, infamous meddler in the destinies of Groac! But before you die, tell me the name of the spy who sold you our secrets, and I shall personally supervise his impalement on the wall of one thousand hooks!"

"Secrets, eh? I guess that confirms my guesswork," Retief said. "One more question: What pay-off do the Blugs get — "

"Silence!" Shluh keened. "Be assured your brief remaining hours will be devoted not to questioning matters of policy beyond your grasp, but to supplying detailed answers to a number of queries of my own!"

"Wrong again," Retief said and took a step toward the desk on which the police officer leaned, shaking a gloved fist. Shluh jumped back, motioned to the armed guard standing by, who swung his power gun to the ready, aimed at Retief's face.

"Haven't your lads been told that you can't fire a blaster in an enclosed space like this without incinerating everything in it, including the shooter?" Retief asked casually, and took another step. The guard lowered the gun hesitantly, his eyes twitching in confusion.

"He lies, cretinous hive-mate of broodfoulers! Fire!" Shluh screeched, and ducked to snatch at an open drawer. Retief reached him in a bound, caught the unfortunate captain by the neck, sent him skidding toward the guard as a belated shot lit the room like a photoflash. As the two Groaci went down in a heap, Retief caught up the dropped gun.

"Well, another myth exploded," he said. "Shluh, take off your belt and strap him up." With the gun covering the two aliens, he seated himself at the desk, flipped up the OUT key on the desk field-phone, punched in a number. A moment later, the glum face of Counsellor of Embassy Clutchplate appeared on the screen. He gaped.

"Retief! What — how — Do you realize — ? Did you actually — ? How could you have . . . " his voice faltered as he took in the scene in the background. "Isn't that Chief Shluh? What's he doing?"

"He just ran into an old acquaintance," Retief soothed, ignoring a sharp rap at the door. "Mr. Clutchplate, how far along are the arrangements for Blug participation in the Conference?"

"Why, their delegation will arrive within the hour. The convoy just 'vised Port Authority for landing clearance. But see here — "

"Convoy?" Retief glanced up as pounding sounded at the door.

"Just fifty first-class cruisers; as escort for the transport. The Blug never travel unarmed, you know. But — "

"See if you can get the ambassador to turn them down," Retief rapped. "Failing that, meet 'em with an armed guard and — "

"Mr. Retief!" the counsellor barked. "I don't know what mad scheme you've embarked on, but it won't work! I know how you feel about the Blugs, and the Groaci too, for that matter. But taking the law into your own hands — "

"No time for any long discussions, Mr. Clutchplate," Retief cut in as a heavy thud rocked the door. "I'd ask you for a squad of Marines if I knew where I was, but — "

"Turn yourself in," Clutchplate blurted. "It's the only way. You

can plead guilty due to temporary insanity brought on by outraged political convictions, and get off with no more than half a dozen years on a penal satellite."

"It's an interesting proposal." Retief ducked as splinters of door whined past his head. "What am I guilty of?"

"Murder, of course," Clutchplate yelped. "Two Sulinorians, remember?"

"It slipped my mind," Retief said. "But see if you can hold the charge open a little longer. I may have a few Groaci to add to it." He flipped off the screen as the door shuddered and bulged inward.

"Time for you to talk fast, Shluh," he said crisply. "I've decided to slip out the back way to avoid the autograph hounds. There are three doors I could use. You'll tell me which one's the best route."

"Never!"

Retief fired a bolt from the hip past the Groaci.

"On the other hand," Shluh hissed quickly, "what matter if you temporarily elude my overzealous troops? Our plans will proceed — and the measures you sought to set in motion will avail naught to stop them!" He darted to a side door, keyed it open.

"Go, then, Retief! But take what path you will, a dreadful end awaits you!"

"In that case, you'd better go first." Shluh hissed and tried to dart aside, but Retief caught him, propelled him ahead with a foot in the seat. He slammed and barred the panel behind him, as the outer door fell in with a crash.

## IV

They followed dim, dusty passages, ascended winding stairways, moved silently along dark, lofty halls lined with ancient armor and hung with rotted banners. Half a dozen times. Retief eluded Groaci search parties by a hair's breadth. In a wide room decorated with painted murals showing centauroids cavorting on purple grass, Shluh gestured toward a high-arched, doorless opening through which pale moonlight gleamed.

"There is your exit to the night, Retief!" he keened sardonically. "Make what use of it you will! The way is clear!"

Retief crossed the room, stepped out onto a tiny balcony, thick with the droppings of the tiny bat-like creatures that wheeled and *skreel*ed at his appearance. Ragged vines grew over a low balustrade, beyond which darkness spread to a skyline of tower-encrusted hills. He looked down. The wall dropped sheer into inky shadows far below.

"Thanks for everything, Shluh." He threw a leg over the stone railing. "I'll see you at your trial — if your bosses let you live that long, after the way you've botched your assignment."

"Stop, impetuous outworlder!" Shluh keened, as Groaci feet clicked in the room behind him. "Even should you survive the descent, you know not what you do! Not even you would I urge on to what waits in the darkness below!"

"You mean your short patrols?"

"Not my patrols, nor the Marines

of your own embassy which even now seek you, warrant in hand, will ever find you, if once you set foot in those demon-haunted byways!"

"So *that's* where you set up your jail-house?" Retief looked thoughtful. "Still, I'd rather mingle with spooks than go back to your little party. Ta-ta, Shluh. Stay as sweet as you are." Shluh hit the deck as Retief raised the gun and fired a burst toward the approaching search party, slung the blast rifle over his shoulder and started down toward the silent streets of the Forbidden City.

It was an easy climb. Once a pair of Groaci heads appeared over the balcony rail above, but they drew back quickly. The wall was deeply carved, and the stout vines provided ample hand- and foot-holds. It was less than ten minutes before Retief swung down and dropped the last few feet into a mass of unpruned shrubbery from which he emerged on an avenue of marble mansions like abandoned funeral homes. The two pale moons of Sulinore came from behind a cloud and shone down ghostly white. Something small and dark flitted overhead, emitting thin cries. Far away, a mournful wail sounded. Retief set off at a brisk walk, his footsteps echoing hollowly on the worn mosaics that paved the way.

Ahead, a lofty obelisk reared up. The inscription, nearly effaced by time, seemed to commemorate a battle fought with giants. At the next corner, the carved heads of ogres peered blindly down at him from an ornate cornice. He passed a fountain, dry and silent, where finned and tailed maidens of stone disported themselves amid marble waves. The dank wind blew dead leaves along the street. As Retief paused, a sound as of small feet pattered for a moment, then fell silent.

"Come on out," Retief called. "There's some news you ought to hear."

There was a ghostly laughter — or perhaps it was only the wind, searching among the fluted columns of a temple. Retief went on. Rounding an abrupt angle, he caught a glimpse of movement — a darting shape that disappeared into a gaping doorway. He followed, found himself in a hall, open to the sky. From its walls, giant frescoed figures stared down with empty eyes.

"I need a guide," Retief called. "Any volunteers?"

"Tears . . . tears . . . tears," the echoes rolled back from every side.

"There's a small matter of an invasion to deal with right now."

"Now ... now ... now ..." the sound faded and died, and as if the word were a signal, a creak sounded from the high doors through which Retief had entered.

He spun in time to see them clash shut with a dull *boom* that echoed and re-echoed. He went to them, found them jammed tight, immovable. He turned back to the interior of the roofless room. A wide passage was visible at the rear. Skitting a black pool that reflected a shattered moon, he entered the passage, emerged after twenty paces on a terrace above a flight of wide, shal-

low steps. Below, a dark and wild-grown park spread out, a wilderness of untrimmed shrubs and lofty, black-leaved trees.

He descended to the foot-high sward; soft rustlings from the shadows retreated as he advanced along a weed-obscured path winding among the buttressed trunks of patriarchal trees. Carved faces leered at him from the shadows. The eerie shapes of stone monsters gleamed through the unpruned foliage. He emerged onto a broad mall along the center of which a double rank of what appeared to be painted statues of heroic size were drawn up along an aisle that led away into the night. Near at hand, a small collonaded shrine was almost hidden among the low-sweeping boughs of a giant conifer. Silently, Retief approached the building from the side.

Through a latticed opening, faint moonlight fell on the vine-entwined effigy of an oversized Sulinorian in the armor of an ancient warrior. In the darkness behind the graven hero, something moved minutely. Retief tossed a pebble through the window, flattened himself against the wall by the doorway. A moment later, a head poked cautiously from the entry — and Retief's hand clamped on the slender Sulinorian neck.

"Pardon my interrupting the game," he said. "But it's time we had a talk."

## V

"The price of entrance into the Sacred Grove of Heroes is death, Terran!" the tenor voice of the alien shrilled.

"So I understand," Retief said, holding his catch at arm's length to avoid the wildly kicking feet. "However, my little intrusion is nothing compared with what the Groaci have scheduled. Maybe you'd better listen to what I have to say before you carry out the sentence."

"Tomorrow is nothing; the past is all," the Sulinorian declaimed. "Why struggle against Destiny, outworlder?"

"We can give destiny a run for her money if you'll spread the word that I need a few hundred able-bodied Sulinorians to distract the Groaci patrols long enough for me to get through to the Terry Embassy — "

"Offer your final devotions to your gods, man of Terra," the Sulinorian cut in. "Your fate is sealed."

"You're consistent, I'll concede that," Retief said. "It looks as though I'll have to look a little farther for a public-spirited citizen." He released the native, who jerked his varicolored toga straight and faced him defiantly.

"Not so, Terran!" The local folded his knobby arms. "Never will you leave these hallowed precincts!"

Rustlings sounded behind Retief. He turned. From every shadowed clump of shrubbery, a Sulinorian emerged; light winked from the foot-long stilettoes in their hands. Silently, the ring of aliens closed in. Retief backed to the shrine, unlimbered the blast rifle, swung it to cover the throng which halted, facing him.

"Welcome to the party," he said.

"Now that we've got a quorum, maybe we'll get somewhere."

"You outrage the glorious past, Terran," a wizened Sulinorian quavered, staring up at Retief. "You heap outrage on outrage!"

"The outrage the Groaci are planning is the one I'm concerned with," Retief said. "You people don't seem to care much, but from the Terry viewpoint, it might set an unfortunate precedent for other budding empire-builders."

"Terry, gone are the days when we of Sulinore were mighty warriors. If now it falls our lot to die, we face our fate in dignity."

"There's nothing dignified about being scragged by the Groaci, or strung up by the heels by a platoon of Blugs," Retief cut in. "I hear they have a curious sense of humor when it comes to dealing with anyone who's proved his inferiority by getting conquered by them."

"Kill this alien at once, isn't it?" a scratchy-voiced Sulinorian in the front rank called. "After, everybody die nicely, as scheduled."

"Enough talk," the elderly Sulinorian declared. "Let the disturber of the sleep of heroes suffer the penalty!"

The Sulinorians eyed the gun in Retief's hands, shuffled their feet. No one advanced.

"Maybe you'd better call the penalty off," Retief suggested. "Then you can divert your righteous indignation into doing something about the invasion."

"Hmmmm." The elderly spokesman beckoned to a couple of his fellows; they put their heads together.

"We have decided," the oldster stated as the conference ended, "that the matter must be referred to the Old Ones for decision." He raised a trembling hand. "Not that we fear to fall under your murderous weapon, Terran — but it is a death which lacks elegance." He waved a hand and an avenue opened up through the dense ranks of armed locals.

"Terran, I give you temporary safe-conduct and the honor of confrontation with the Ancient Lords of Sulinore, who will themselves dispose of this case. Come, if you fear not!"

"Fair enough," Retief said. "When you want fast action, there's nothing like going direct to the top brass. Where do we find them?"

"Behold the Lords of Sulinore!" the ancient piped feebly. The locals made sweeping bows to the ranks of still figures about them. Retief inclined his head respectfully.

"They cut an impressive figure," he said. "I'll be interested to see how they go about dealing with the problem at hand."

"Simplicity itself," the old Sulinorian said. "One waft of the sacred incense, and a faint shadow of their vanished vitality will energize them. Then will they hear our pleas and hand down justice in the ancient way."

Retief walked slowly along the row of motionless effigies, noting the worn trappings, the realistically scarred limbs and fierce visages, the tarnished armor of the ancient warriors. In spite of their size and

varied forms, all bore some resemblance to the shrunken Sulinorians who followed, silent and awed.

"Once the races of Sulinore were many," the ancient said as he noticed Retief's questing gaze. "And mighty was their prowess.

"There stands Zobriale the Intense, Requiter of Wrongs. Beyond, we see proud Valingrave, victor at Har and Jungulon and Spagetwraithe. Here — " he indicated the modest crypt "-- behold the shrine of Bozdune the Restial, known also as Bozdune the Baresark, of ferocious memory. And there — " he pointed to a four-legged, barrel-chested creature with a typical Sulinorian torso and head "— stand the mortal remains of Great Tussore, he who single-handed vanquished the hordes of Doss, on a world so distant that even now the sunlight of his day of battle has not yet reached the face of Sulinore!"

"He looks like a tough boy," Retief commented. "Too bad he's not still around. He might take a dim view of the way things are going."

"Did I not say Mighty Tussore would give his judgment? Aye, and Cranius the August, and Maglodore the Swift, and Belgesion, and Vare, and High Pranthippo, King of Kings — "

"A most august assemblage," Retief conceded. "But they seem a rather taciturn group."

"You jape at the Lords of Sulinore, Terran?" The oldster drew himself up, made an imperious gesture. A pair of locals nearly as old as himself came forward, bearing a large case which they placed on the grass, opening the lid. Inside was a cylindrical tank fitted with valves and a coil of flexible plastic tubing. The dodderer lifted the nozzle of the hose, advanced to the pedestal on which the centauroid stood.

"Awaken, Great Tussore!" he cried in his cracked voice. "Rouse from thy long dreams to render judgment on one who comes unbidden to the Place of Heroes!" He raised the hose and waved it under the flared nostrils. Retief heard a faint hiss of escaping gas.

"Give us of thy ancient wisdom as in days of old, O Tussore," the old fellow exhorted. He shoved the hose closer. "Almost is the sacred effluvium exhausted," he muttered. "I'll bet a pretty some of these backsliders have been tapping it on the sly."

Suddenly one pointed ear of the statue twitched. The flared nostrils quivered. The eyelids fluttered. As Retief watched, the lips parted.

"Glop," the mighty figure said, and fell silent.

"Drat it, what a time for the tank to run out," someone beside Retief muttered.

"How does he work it?" Retief inquired softly as the Keeper of the Sacred Fumes waved the hose agitatedly, vainly invoking the unmoving demigod.

"We work nothing, interloper," the Sulinorian said sullenly. "A good shot of sacred gas, and their metabolism starts ticking over fast enough to start them talking, that's all."

Abruptly, Tussore stirred again.

"The devil take the blackguards," a deep voice suddenly rumbled from his chest. "Where's my greaves? Where's my fetlock powder? Where's my confounded mace? Blast that butter-fingered squire . . . ."

"Great Tussore, wake from thy dreams!" The hosewielder redoubled his efforts. "Hear me! Even now there stands in our midst a stranger who violates the honored rest of the Lords of Sulinore with his presence!"

"Oh . . . it's you, Therion," Tussore mumbled. His eyes were open now, bleary and dull. "You look terrible. Been a long time, I guess. And it's not the stranger who disturbs my rest — it's you, with your infernal babbling!" He reached, plucked the hose from the oldster's hand, jammed it under his nose, drew a deep breath.

"Ahhhh! That's what the doctor ordered."

"Even so, Great Tussore!" The Sulinorian proceeded to relate the circumstances surrounding Retief's presence. Halfway through the recital, Tussore's eye-lids drooped. The hose fell from his hand. He snored.

"So the problem, Great One, is how to administer the prescribed rituals without suffering the indecorum of being mowed down like ripe beer-corn by the condemned one," the oldster concluded. "Great Tussore? Mighty one?" He waved the hose frantically, but his efforts this time were unavailing. The still figure stood, unmoving as a sphinx.

"So much for the wisdom of the ages," Retief said. "Nice try, Therion, but it looks like the oracle's not interested. Let's go."

"Make silent this one, plenty quick!" a small Sulinorian rasped — the same one, Retief thought, who had spoken up earlier. "No more time for pulling string on wooden god! Cut away the head of this Terry, yes! And soon after, fates proceed on schedule!"

"Silence, impertinent oaf!" Therion rounded on the speaker. "Your cacophonous squeakings impugn the majesties of Sulinore! Give me your name, for later disciplining!"

The one addressed backed away, looking flustered, as if suddenly conscious of being conspicuous. Retief studied his face.

"Well, if it isn't my old friend Coriale," he said. "You ought to be an expert on the subject of dying. Seems to me I've seen you expire twice already this evening."

The Coriale-faced alien whirled suddenly, plunged for the rear rank.

"Seize him!" Therion called. The quarry ducked, dodged, dived through a gap in the suddenly surging ranks, scuttled sideways as his retreat was cut off, made a dash for the shrubbery. The chase pounded off into the underbrush. Retief seated himself on a convenient pedestal and lit a dope-stick. Five minutes passed before the crowd again surged into view, the darting quarry still in the lead. He put on a sprint, scuttled to the shrine, dived inside.

"His impiety passes all bounds!" Therion puffed, coming up to Retief. "Now the mad creature seeks shelter in the very crypt of Bozdune!"

"Let him be fetched out and dealt with!" someone shrilled.

"Stay!" Therion piped as the aroused crowd closed in. "We'll not bring dishonor to the hero by scuffling about his feet. Come! Let us withdraw and leave this fevered maniac to regain his senses among the shadows of the greatness which was his race's!"

Retief took out his pocket light and played the beam between the columns of the refugee's hiding place. Between the great steel-toed boots of Bozdune, a smaller pair of feet was visible. He directed the light higher.

"Correction," he said. "Not *his* race's; that's no Sulinorian. Look." The light revealed a cloud of brown mist coiling upwards around the rigid features of the preserved hero. "The meeting's been infiltrated by a masquerading alien — an alien who exhales brown gas when he gets excited."

"What's this? Brown gas — ?" Therion's question was interrupted by a startled cry from a Sulinorian near the temple entry, followed a moment later by a snort like a teased bull.

"He stirs! Bozdune rouses!" Suddenly Sulinorians were running in every direction. Retief caught Therion's arm as the elder turned to follow the general flight.

"Unhand me, fellow!" the oldster screeched as a bellow sounded from the shrine. "Death I face with a proud smile — but there's something inappropriate about being ripped limb from limb by an ancestor!"

"Is that the kind of fellow you make a hero of?" Retief inquired as smashing sounds emanated from the crypt, followed by the hurtling body of the Coriale double, which skidded to Retief's feet and lay moving feebly.

"Unfortunately Bozdune lost his wits as a result of three month's exposure to the Tickling Torture at the hands of the infamous Kreee," Therion explained hastily. "He's prone to rages, when suddenly aroused, and prudence demands my swift removal hence!" He pulled free and bounded away with an agility remarkable in a being of his age. Retief turned as a rumble of falling stone sounded from the shrine. A mighty figure had appeared between the columns, stood with hands pressed against them. Great cords of muscle stood out on his neck; his biceps bulged; his *latissimi dorsi* strained. The column buckled and went over, bringing down a section of the architrave. Bozdune roared as the marble slab bounced from his back. With a final thrust, he toppled a second column, stepped forth as stone collapsed behind him. Eight feet high, massive as a buffalo, he stood in the moonlight, snarling. His wild gaze fell on Retief.

"Kreee!" he bellowed. "I have you now!" and charged the lone Terran.

## VI

Retief stood his ground as Bozdune closed in.

"You've got me confused with someone else, Bozdune," he called. "I'm just a Terry doing a little job of planet-saving."

With a bellow, the ancient fighter thundered past the spot where Retief had stood a moment before. He fought his way clear of the underbrush into which the momentum of his dash had carried him, rounded on his elusive prey.

"And in that connection, I'd like to ask a little favor of you," Retief continued. "A group of opportunists called the Groaci are planning to massacre all the foreign diplomats in town — "

"Arrrrghhh!" Bozdune roared and closed in swinging roundhouse swipes sufficient to decapitate a horse. Retief leaned aside from one wild swing, ducked under another, planted his feet and drove a solid left-right to the giant's stomach, an effect like punching a sea-wall. He jumped aside as Bozdune grunted and made an ineffective grab, landing a blow in his own midriff that staggered him.

"Now, the Groaci have the streets cordoned off," Retief went on. "And since it's important that I get through to the Embassy with the news, I'd like to ask you to lend a hand." He stepped back as Bozdune ripped his six-foot blade from its sheath, whirled it overhead. Retief tossed the last rifle aside, plucked a wristthick spear from the grip of a horned warrior which loomed immobile beside him. Bozdune made a bound, brought the massive claymore down in a whistling arc that cleaved air an inch to Retief's right as he faded aside.

"Now, if you'd just say a word to your descendants, I think they might consent to lend a hand." Retief poked the spear hard against Bozdune's breastplate. "How about it?"

Bozdune dropped his sword, grabbed the spear shaft with both hands, and gave a prodigious pull — and as Retief let go, tottered backward, tripped over a fragment of shattered column and went down like a fallen oak. Retief heard the dull *thonk!* as his head struck the marble steps of his erstwhile shelter. He stepped quickly forward, used the warrior's own harness straps to bind his wrists together, then his ankles. At that moment, the bushes parted and Therion's aged face appeared.

"What transpires?" he piped. His eye fixed on the prone giant. "What, Bozdune the Bestial, felled by a mere outworlder?"

"I'm afraid I can't claim the glory," Retief said. "He ran out of gas." He glanced toward the spot where the false Coriale had lain. "But if you can find the ringer, I may be able to remedy that."

"He's here, the infamous dastard," a Sulinorian called, dragging the unfortunate imposter from a clump of gorse. Retief got a grip on the captive's collar, assisted him to Bozdune's side.

"Breathe on the nice man, Shorty," he ordered.

A great gout of brown gas puffed obediently forth.

"Again."

The prisoner huffed and puffed, exhaling the vapor past the fallen fighter's snoring visage. In a moment, Bozdune twitched, jerked and opened his eyes.

"You're still here, eh?" he said to

Retief. "I thought I dreamed you." He sniffed again.

"Gadzoons, first good air I've breathed in a couple hundred years. More!" He raised his voice as Retief withdrew the pseudo-Coriale.

"Not unless you agree to lend a hand," Retief countered. "Then I promise you all the sacred essence you want."

"Are you kidding? Just let me get my hands on these Gruckles or whoever they are that think they can carve my home town up, and I'll grind them into library paste!"

"It's a deal. Retief turned to Therion. "How about it? You in or out?"

"If Bozdune approves the enterprise, then who are we to demur?" the oldster inquired of the cool night air. "Rise, loyal Sons of Sulinore! For this night at least, the ancient glories live again!"

Retief gave Bozdune another shot of gas, then passed the captive to Therion.

"Don't squeeze him too hard," he cautioned. "We've got to make him stretch as far as we can; if this caper's going to succeed, we'll need all the ancient glory we can muster."

From a shadowy arch half a block from the carved gates of the Terran Embassy, Retief, seated astride Tussore's broad back, watched as the fifty-Groaci guard detail sauntered past, their stemmed eyes scanning the street alertly, their blast rifles ready at port arms. Behind him, the tread of booted Groaci feet approached relentlessly.

"Get ready," he said softly. "Another ten seconds . . . ."

There was a chorus of weak shouts from the rear, a slapping of running feet, the *buzzzz-whapp!* of power guns firing; then a pair of Groaci troopers appeared, pelting along in advance of a mighty figure in ancient armor. In full stride, he overtook them, snatched them up by their necks and tossed them aside. Behind him, a crowd of Sulinorians, toga skirts hitched high, brandished their ceremonial knives as they followed their massive leader toward the gate. A moment later, the giant was among the patrollers, flailing with a spike-studded mace before a gun was fired.

"Let's go!" Retief kicked his heels into Tussore's sides, and the mighty centauroid bounded forward. In an instant, they were in the thick of the melee, Retief swinging a yard-long club as Tussore reared and struck out with iron-hard hooves.

"Cut your way through!" Retief called to his mount. We can mop up later, after we've taken care of the main event!"

"Aiii! What a lovely squishing sound these Gruckers make beneath my hooves!" the old warrior yelled, but he wheeled and charged the gate. Half a block away, Retief caught a glimpse of Bozdune, tossing Groaci troopers aside like straw dummies. From every dark alleymouth and byway, Sulinorians were pouring. A lone Groaci in the gatehouse brought up his blast-rifle, loosed a round that missed by inches; then Retief's club felled him, and they were through, crossing the lawn toward the lighted entry at full gallop. A startled Marine guard let out a yell

and reached for the lever which would slam the grill in the faces of the invaders, but a sweep of Tussore's arm sent the sentry sprawling. Inside, Retief swung down, started up the grand staircase, five steps at a time. Suddenly Counsellor Clutchplate appeared on the landing above.

"Retief!" His eyes took in the massive, sweaty, horse-bodied Tussore, helmed and sword-girded, the motley horde of Sulinorians swarming behind.

"Good lord! Treason! Treachery! Hallucinations!" He whirled to run as Retief caught him, spun him around.

"Has the banquet begun yet?" he demanded.

"J . . . j . . . just starting now," the counsellor choked. "It happens I don't like Groaci iodine chowder, so I just stepped out for a breath of air." He stumbled back as Retief dashed on.

At the high double doors to the banquet hall, a Marine in dress blues, polished helmet and chrome-plated ceremonial .45 departed from his rigid position of attention sufficiently to roll his eyes as the newcomers surged down on him. At what he saw, he grabbed for the holster at his hip. Retief slammed a side-handed blow at his wrist. "Sorry, son," he snapped and sent the doors flying open on the roomful of startled diplomats. From both sides of a long U-shaped table, oculars of every description goggled at the spectacle that burst upon them. Retief pointed to the impassive Sulinorian servitors standing behind the diners, spaced all along the room, one to a customer.

"Get 'em" he commanded and reached for the nearest as the troop at his heels boiled past to carry out his instruction.

## VII

"You've gone out of your mind, Retief!" Counsellor Clutchplate gazed, white-faced and shaken, from the broken doorway at the scene of carnage after the capture of the last of the servitors. "What can it mean, leading this party of dacoits to violate the Embassy? I must protest, even at risk of my life, whatever atrocities you plan to visit on these poor chaps! They're under CDT protection!"

"They'll survive — some of 'em," Retief said, and plucking a steak knife from the table, he stooped over one of the fallen waiters and with a quick stroke, laid him open from chin to navel. Clutchplate uttered a strangled yelp; Ambassador Shindlesweet turned pale and quietly collapsed under the table as Retief reached, extracted a limp, two-foot-tall creature resembling a shelled lobster from the interior of the pseudoflesh costume.

"They're not Sulinorians; they're Blugs." He reached again, pulled out a small pressure-tank. "This is his air supply; liquid nitrogen."

"Blugs?" Clutchplate gaped at the unconscious creature, from whose breathing orifice a brown exhalation now was issuing. "But what — how —? See here, Retief! even if these are, er, Blugs, what harm

could they have done unarmed, which would warrant your outrageous behavior?"

"Blugs are rock-eaters," Retief explained. "And they seem to have a remarkable degree of control over their metabolism. Normally, they exhale innocuous gases; under stress, they start exhaling nitrogen trioxide. But when occasion demands, they can switch to production of any one of three or four poisonous oxides of nitrogen. Here in this closed room, all it would have taken was one good whiff down each guest's neck, on signal, and bingo! Clean sweep."

"But why?" Clutchplate wailed.

"I have an idea Ambassador Shith can tell us how they happened to be here, instead of Coriale's regular table-waiting staff," Retief suggested.

Shith, still dangling in Tussore's grasp, emitted a harsh bleat. "Gloat while you can, Mr. Retief!" he hissed. "True, every word! I commend your cleverness! But while you spent your efforts in thwarting this feint — yes, feint! — the squadron of Blug warships which you Terries so naively permitted to pass your blockade were discharging fifty thousand picked troops, the cream of the Bluggish navy! Even now these diminutive but doughty doughboys are spreading out over the town, breathing their deadly halitosis on every living creature in their paths! By morning, no Sulinorian will be alive to dispute the Groaci claim to planetary ownership!"

"Shith — have you taken leave of your senses?" Shindlesweet had revived sufficiently to crawl forth, spluttering. "When this is known you'll be hauled before a Galactic tribunal and dealt with in a manner that will make the name of Groac a byword to replace that of Doctor Mush!"

"Mud," Shith corrected. "Permit me to contradict you, my dear George! Not one word of the coup will be noised abroad. My constabulary have already taken the precaution of securing the only communications facilities on the planet capable of contacting CDT naval forces; in a matter of moments my chaps will arrive to put an end to your illusions of success! Don't fret, however. I promise you a swift and painless demise." He paused, aiming several eyes at Retief. "Why do you shake your head, sir! My scheme is flawless! My invasion is an accomplished fact!"

"True — but you missed one small point," Retief said. "The Sulinorians were gradually fading off the scene due to the exhaustion of the planet's supply of a certain element vital to their well-being. But instead of dying, after about the age of five hundred, they'd drift off into a comatose state. You and your nitrogen-fixing Blugs have changed all that, Mr. Ambassador. Thanks to you, Sulinore has a new lease on life."

"You seek even in the eleventh hour to delude yourself!" Shith hissed. "Hearken! Even now my occupation forces approach the door!"

There was a noisy clump of feet from the hall outside.

Then the mighty figure of Bozdune the Bestial, broad and bronzed,

appeared in the entry. He plucked a shattered door from its hinges with one hand and tosssed it aside.

"Nice going, Retief," he boomed. "I don't know how you worked it, but the place is swarming with those lovable little guys you called Blugs. All the boys are catching 'em and making pets of 'em. I've got one in my pocket, and he's keeping me supplied like a tall glunthound!" The behemoth's ochre eyes fell on the laden table. "Chow!" he bassooned. "I haven't had a square meal in eight hundred years!"

"Then — this means my invasion has failed?" Shith wailed. "My someticulously planned invasion, spoiled in the eleventh hour by one trivial oversight?"

"Oh, your invasion is a huge success," Retief said comfortingly. "But this time the invadees are the winners."

## VIII

"I really must protest this flagrant interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign world, George," Ambassador Shith whispered vehemently from his position on the platform where the group of local and foreign dignitaries stood, awaiting the appearance of the parade organized by the Sulinorians to celebrate the invasion. "I demand the immediate return of the impounded units of the Blug navy and the repatriation of all Blug nationals!"

"Spare me your threnodies, my dear Shith." Ambassador Shindlesweet raised a remonstrative hand. "We'd have a sticky time of it were we to attempt to dislodge the Blugs now. You're aware, I'm sure, that as their breathing tanks ran low, they escaped their captors and burrowed their way down half a mile to a nitrogen-rich stratum and are busily digesting rock and releasing free radicals — that, and reproducing. I think you might be said to be fortunate to be sharing the honors today as co-sponsor of the Blug Immigration Plan, rather than languishing in the VIP suite of a CDT brig, awaiting trial."

"Pah!" the Groaci envoy vibrated his throat-sac in indignation. "In that case," he changed tack, "I see no reason why Groac should share credit for this enlightened program under which, at no cost to these ungrateful locals, their atmosphere is being so rapidly renewed!"

"Really, Shith," the Terran chief of mission said in a low voice, "it's only the fact that a full disclosure of the events leading up to the present *rapprochement* might tempt certain petty critics at Sector to the faulty conclusion that I had been in some way remiss, that prevents me from releasing the transcript of

the rather excited pronouncement which you so providently delivered into the recorders set up to capture the after-dinner speeches . . . ." He cupped an ear as distant bugles sounded. "Gentlemen, I think I hear them coming now."

Along the ancient street, a procession was advancing, banners awave. In the front rank were Tussore and Bozdune, grim and gigantic, CDT-supplied nitrogen Tanks slung at their hips, their armor sparkling in the red rays of the swollen sun.

Behind them, rank on rank, marched the revived immortals of Sulinore, a column that stretched away out of sight along the shadowy street.

"This matter of allowing these chaps to seize the Blug ships as spoils of war and set off on a raiding expedition is an irregularity that I'm going to have difficulty glossing over in my report," Shindlesweet said behind his hand to Therion. "But off the record," he added, "I suppose I'll manage — so long as you're sure they'll do their raiding in Groacimandated territory."

"Indeed, I hope you'll interpose no obstacles to the ruffians departing Sulinore as expeditiously as possible," the elder whispered loudly.

"We're well rid of the smelly brutes. They have no conception of the dignity appropriate to legendary heroes."

Tussore, catching sight of Retief, broke ranks and cantered over to the group, puffing smoke from the cigar clamped in his mouth.

"Well, we're off," he called heartily. "And glad to be going! The old place isn't the same any more. I can't even step on the grass without some whisk-broom handler jumping out and giving me a hard time. And that dying sun! Paugh! It gives me the Deep Willies!" He puffed out a great cloud of smoke, raised an eyebrow at Retief.

"Say, why don't you change your mind and join us, Retief?" he demanded. "We'll have a lot more fun out there chasing across the universe than you will staying back here with these stick-in-the-muds."

"It's a temptation," Retief said. "Maybe some day I'll take you up on it. I have an idea your trail will be easy to follow." END

# IT'S NEW YORK IN '67!

by LIN CARTER

*Where to go next Labor Day to meet the elite of sf!*

Every year the science-fiction world gets together in a different city and has itself a World Convention. And, every year, at this convention they decide which city will be the convention-site for *next* year.

The 1966 convention was in Cleveland, Ohio; there, the delegates voted New York to be the home of the 1967 World Science Fiction Convention. Since I live in New York, this was naturally good news to me. But it's also a historic choice, because twenty-eight years ago, way back in 1939, New York was the site of the first science-fiction convention ever, the famous "Nycon."

This convention will also be called the "Nycon" — Nycon III, because there was a second convention in N.Y.C. during the 1950's. This year's convention promises to be the best, and biggest, and liveliest ever . . . and if you missed the Tricon in '66, start planning now to visit Nycon III in '67!

**When and where — and how to join**

The Nycon will convene over the Labor Day weekend at the Hotel Statler-Hilton here in New York. Labor Day in September is the traditional convention date, because the long holiday weekend gives out-of-town visitors extra time for convention-going and sight-seeing. As for the Statler-Hilton, it's one of the biggest and most glamorous hotels in a city filled with big, glamorous hotels, and it's centrally located in Manhattan, convenient for in-coming tourists.

I interviewed the two chairmen of the 1967 Nycon, two chaps named Ted White and David G. Van

Arnam, both members of the big New York fanclub, the Fanoclasts, and both very active in national fandom. (Both, incidentally, are breaking into the professional ranks as science-fiction writers.)

Even though you'll have to wait till September to actually attend Nycon III, there's no reason why you can't become a member of the convention right now. To do so, send your check or money order for $2.00 to Box 637, Gracie Square Station, New York 10023. You'll be a registered member of the 1967 World Science Fiction Convention and will receive occasional Progress Reports which will fill you in on the program, the guests and the entertainments as the program gradually shapes up.

#### The Program Book and "Nycon Comics"

Nycon Comics goes out to all paid members. This is a special comic-book drawn by Jack Gaughan — you've seen his work in *If* many times. The first issue of Nycon Comics, which is neatly photo-offset printed, has already been distributed. #2, 3 and 4 have yet to appear.

There's literally nothing I can say about Jack Gaughan's comic book, except that it's one of the funniest things I've seen in years. The wild and woeful misadventures of a little band of heroic space-pioneers, struggling frenziedly to get the Nycon going (despite evil influences from Ploor) have to be seen and chuckled over to be understood.

Every convention has a Program Book and sometimes a more elaborate Memory Book of the convention as well. Nycon hopes to produce a mammoth combination Nycon Program and Memory Book, which will include lots of other features beside just the program listing. They hope to include special articles by major speakers (including the Guest of Honor, but I'll get to him in just a moment) and lots of other extras.

#### Two Guests of Honor?

Every year, the convention singles out one particularly popular science-fiction writer to boost as Guest of Honor. Last year in Cleveland as you may remember, the GoH was none other than L. Sprague de Camp himself.

Well, this year . . . (biggest and best yet, remember?) . . . there will be not *one* . . . but *two* Guests of Honor! Or is it "Guest of Honors?" Well, you know what I mean. Anyway, the Nycon will have two of 'em, a Fan Guest of Honor and a sf professional GoH.

The latter is to be Lester del Rey. Lester came into the field back in the "Golden Forties" when John W. Campbell was collecting and/or discovering a circle of brilliant writers with which to adorn the pages of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Lester was one of a group that included Robert Heinlein, A. E. Van Vogt, Henry Kuttner, L. Sprague de Camp, Isaac Asimov, Clifford Simak, Murray Leinster, L. Ron Hubbard and others.

You will easily remember a number of very fine stories with the

name of del Rey fastened to them . . . "Helen O'Loy" is a much-anthologized classic; so is the taut, suspenseful "Nerves"; my own favorite comes from one of the earliest issues of *Galaxy* — "The Wind Between the Worlds."

The Fan Guest of Honor is good old Bob Tucker, a tall, cheerful guy with a crewcut, whose sense of humor has made him one of the best-liked men in science-fiction fandom. For quite a few (but not enough) years he published a fanzine called *Le Zombie* that was very big, very popular, very funny. (When I say "big," I mean, well, like *Hannes Bok* used to draw covers for it, you know what I mean?)

Since then, Bob Tucker went into the writing game himself, with a slew of hardboiled detective mysteries, starting with one called *The Chinese Doll,* which set fandom back on its heels, because Tucker named some of his characters after science-fiction fans, from the sheriff and the undertaker down to the suspects . . . Well, quite a few novels followed that one, including six or eight science-fiction novels, like *The Long Loud Silence* and *The Lincoln Hunters.* Despite all this, Bob remained a fan at heart, and the Nycon Committee is looking forward to welcoming him to New York in style.

#### What's on the program?

There will be a banquet, of course, only for this one the Nycon has asked Harlan Ellison to be toastmaster. Ellison is the only toastmaster I know who doesn't really need a microphone. There will also be another "Galaxy of Fashion" show, sponsored by *Galaxy* magazine. The first of these futuristic fashion shows was at the Tricon in Cleveland; the Nycon folks thought it was good fun, so New York will have another.

Most of the convention program is fairly traditional — an auction of rare books, magazines, original cover paintings and illustrations from the prozines. And the Fan Art Show, which will be run by Bjo Trimble, who has been putting these shows together for the past few conventions. If you would like to enter some drawing or paintings of your own in the Fan Art Show at Nycon III, you'd better contact the Nycon Committee for details. And by the way, a special innovation at this year's convention will be included in the Nycon Program & Memory Book: a special folio of winning artwork from the Fan Art Shows of earlier conventions.

Another innovation is scheduled. The Nycon will feature a running series of "Dialogues" scattered throughout the three-day convention program. These dialogues will be public conversations between two prominent science-fiction celebrities chosen for their gifts of conversational ability and the talent for thinking on their feet that makes all the difference between dull chitchat and pungent, meaningful talk. Dialogue partners will represent opposing points of view on the several questions rife in the fan and pro worlds right now . . . the program has not

yet "firmed" to the point where I can list the topics to be discussed, but one that *may* go over will be between two well-known writers (whom I've been asked *not* to name). One represents the new slick-magazine "avant garde" type of science fiction, and the other stands for the old style "story-telling" brand of fiction. A battle of wits between them should be stimulating.

There will be several such Dialogues on the program, as well as another innovation: a series of interviews in which a well known science-fiction writer will be interviewed in depth, to draw out his thoughts on the field, on his craft, on his peers and contemporaries, his writing problems, personal background, likes and dislikes — in short, a regular "profile." And there will be a big fan-meet-pro party at which free drinks will be served and at which you are invited to meet and mingle with and get to know some of the science-fiction celebrities whose work you have been admiring for years, in relaxed informal surroundings.

And then, of course, there will be the voting on and awarding of the coveted Hugo Awards. This is always one of the most exciting events of any convention — the chance to vote for a book, story, artist or magazine you especially admire, as "best of the year." And there will be, I suppose, the customary costume ball. These are incredibly lavish affairs, and you should see the inventive, imaginative, elaborate costumes some people come up with! My wife Noel and I are fond of costume parties, and are already working on ours. How about you?

END

# THE ETHICS OF MADNESS

by LARRY NIVEN

Illustrated by CASTELLON

*What's the right punishment when a madman commits murder — if his lunacy is entirely his own fault?*

I

Tau Ceti is a small, cool yellow GO dwarf with four planets. Strictly speaking, none of the planets are habitable. Two are gas giants. The third inward has no air; the innermost has too much.

That innermost world is about the size of Venus. With no oversized moon to strip away most of its air, it has an atmosphere like Venus's: thick and hot and corrosive. No human explorer would have marked it for colonization.

But the ramrobots were not human.

During the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries, the ramrobots explored most of what later came to be called Known Space. They were complexly programmed, but their mission was simple. Each was to find a habitable planet.

Unfortunately they were programmed wrong.

The designers didn't know it, and the UN didn't know it; but the ramrobots were programmed only to find a habitable point. Having lo-

cated a world the right distance from the star to which it was sent, the ramrobot probe would drop and circle until it found a place at ground level which matched its criteria for atmospheric composition, average temperature, water vapor, *et cetera.* Then the ramrobot would beam its laser pulse back at the solar system, and the UN would respond by sending a colony slowboat.

Unlike the ramrobots, the man-carrying slowboats could not use interstellar ramscoops. They had to carry their own fuel. It meant that the slowboats took a long time to get where they were going, and there were no round trip tickets. The slowboats could not turn back.

So We Made It was colonized, because a ramrobot elected to settle in spring. Had it landed in summer or winter, when the planet's axis of rotation points through its primary, Procyon, it would have sensed the fifteen-hundred-mile-per-hour winds.

So Jinx was colonized. Jinx, with a surface gravity of 1.78 and two habitable bands between the ocean, where there is too much air, and the Ends, where there is none at all. Jinx, the Easter Egg Planet, home of men and women who are five feet tall and five feet wide, the strongest bipeds in known space. But they die young, of heart trouble.

So Plateau was colonized. For the innermost world of Tau Ceti is like Venus in size and atmosphere, save for one mountain. That straight-sided mountain is forty miles tall, and its nearly flat top is half the size of California. It rises out of the searing black calm at the planet's surface to the transparent atmosphere above; and that air can be breathed. Snow covers the peaks near the center of the Plateau, and rivers run lower down, rivers which tumble off the void edges of the Plateau into the shining mist below. The ramrobot landed there. And founded a world.

There was a time on that world when a murderer sought escape.

Up from the Plateau on Mount Lookitthat came Douglas Hooker, rising like a star. He was the only occupant of a four-man exploration craft. Fifteen years ago he had stolen that ship from the UN, the government of Earth, and taken it to Plateau. He didn't dare return it. The laws of Earth were far stricter than those of Plateau.

And he couldn't stay on Plateau, that was certain.

Plateau would not have complained. Hooker was a cured maniac, a guaranteed model citizen. An autodoc had adjusted the chemistry of his body, canceling the biochemical cause of his insanity. Two years of psychoanalysis, hypnoanalysis and conditioning had attacked his memories, altering them in some cases, reducing or enhancing their importance in others. Conditioning had seen to it that he would never remain far from an autodoc; his chemistry would never again have the chance to go haywire in that particular fashion.

But he'd done a terrible thing on Plateau. He couldn't stay.

He couldn't bear the thought of someday facing Greg Loeffler.

The world below changed from a vast white plain to a round white ball. Hooker's fusion drive glowed hotter and bluer than any sun. He was using the hydrogen in his tank. Though his ship carried a model of mankind's first "safe" ramscoop, he was not yet moving fast enough to use interstellar hydrogen for fuel.

When Plateau was in danger of being lost against the stellar background, he turned the ship toward Wunderland. He'd decided on Wunderland months ago, when he really began to believe that he would be well someday. Wunderland was small, of light gravity; a nice world, but distant from Earth. Wunderland's technology was always several decades behind the times. The Wunderlanders would appreciate an extra spaceship, especially one as modern as Hooker's.

They might jail him — though he had served a term on Plateau, concurrently with his cure. But they wouldn't kill him. And Hooker could wait out a jail sentence. His health was perfect. Though he was eighty-seven years old, he might have been twenty. Earth's medical sciences had become very good indeed. Men and woman walked the Earth in places they had trod three centuries earlier; and the medicine of their time was long obsolete.

(Yet . . . look again. Twenty? Never. He acts *scarred*. Neither years nor scars show in the flesh, nor around the eyes, nor in them. But behind the eyes, there are scars. It takes decades to form scars so deeply in the crevices of the brain that they show through to the surface.)

Hooker turned toward Wunderland and set the autopilot. His motions were quicker and surer than they had been for a long time. He was leaving Plateau, and he left a weight behind. Now he could begin to forget.

Hours later, a second star rose from the Plateau on Mount Lookitthat. It turned slowly, questing, like a hound sniffing out a trail. Then it fixed on Wunderland and began to accelerate.

## II

October, 2514 A. D., San Francisco.

He took the news as if he'd expected it. He looked at the human doctor for a long moment after she had stopped talking; and then he slumped, back and shoulders dropping, chin nearly touching his chest. He mumbled, "I always knew I was different."

"Is that a crime, Doug?" Dr. Doris Hahn might have been any age beyond thirty. She was small and oriental, and she had had that look of great wisdom long before she acquired the wisdom itself.

"Seems it is," said Doug Hooker. He was eighteen years old, thin, with blue eyes and straw-colored hair. "I can't do anything about it, can I?"

"Sure you can! Why, you need never know you've got it, any time during the rest of your life. There are millions of potential paranoids walking this world and others. And diabetics, and epileptics, and schizo-

phrenics. Nobody knows the difference."

"*They* know."

"Well, yes."

Doug looked the doctor in the eye. "Why? If they need never know, why tell them? How will this affect me, doctor? What am I supposed to do about it?"

She nodded. "You're right, of course. It will affect you in two ways.

"First, the Fertility Board will probably not pass a potential paranoid. If you want to have a child, you'll have to do something so spectacular that the Board itself must recognize you as a genius. Something like inventing hyperdrive."

Doug smiled at that. Hyperdrive was "The Moon on a platter."

"Second," she said. "You must never be out of reach of an autodoc for more than a month, for the rest of your life. Do you understand? Up to now your parents have had this responsibility. Now you're an adult. You must get to a 'doc every month so that it can stabilize your metabolism. Your body is chemically unstable. Without antiparanoia substances you can go insane."

"That's all?"

"That's all. Best go every two weeks to give yourself some leeway."

"I will," said Doug. He wanted to leave. The news had been as bad as he had expected, and he'd expected it for years. He had been born into a paranoid body. It was a thing he couldn't tell even to Greg. He wanted to leave, to hide somewhere, to lick his wounds. But —

"How bad is it, Doctor? I mean, what would happen to me if I missed six weeks instead of a month?"

"The first time, very little. Your thinking processes would change a little, not enough to notice. When the 'doc readjusted you, you wouldn't notice that change either. But the second and third times would be worse. You see, Doug, a large part of being insane is having been insane. If you were paranoid for a year, a 'doc couldn't cure you. Your year of insanity would have formed habits. The 'doc would change your metabolism without changing your paranoid habits of thinking. You'd need a human psychotherapist."

Doug wet his lips. He thought the question: What is it like to be paranoid? How does a paranoid think?

He didn't want to know. He said, "'By, Doctor." And he got up and left. He thought he heard Dr. Hahn call something after him, but he wasn't sure.

June, 2526, Kansas City.

At the age of thirty, Douglas Hooker thought he knew himself pretty well. He had long known that he was a man of habits; and so he had trained his habits. Each weekday he entered his office at just ten o'clock, and the first thing he did was to use the desk 'doc.

He came in that Thursday morning at just ten o'clock, still wearing the smile with which he had hailed his good mornings at the other employees of Skyhook Enterprises. He hadn't seen Greg; but Greg was always early or late, usually early. Probably at work already. Doug

sat, opened the panel in his desk, and inserted his hands.

There were twin pricks in the balls of his middle fingers. The 'doc was taking a blood sample. Doug waited until the green light came on, then removed his hands. His nails gleamed.

The desk 'doc was small; its repertoire was limited. It could not repair injuries or exercise small unused muscles, as could a full sized drugstore 'doc. It could detect infections and fight them with wide-spectrum antibiotics; it could supply needed vitamins; it was a fine manicurist. It could stabilize Doug Hooker's unusual metabolism, using two phials of biochemicals stored in its innards. If it ran out of something, or if it sensed the presence of some medical anomaly which should be treated, it would flash a red light.

Doug frowned at the papers in his In basket, then sighed and went to work. There was no sound from beyond his office; there was nothing to distract him. Yet he worked slowly. He couldn't concentrate. It was not spring fever; city men didn't get spring fever, living in a world which was mostly city. It was the feel of something impending.

It came at noon, with Greg Loeffler's voice in the intercom.

"Doug? It's here. Drop whatever you're doing and come over."

Doug put down half a sandwich and went out, walking fast. The bright morning sunlight made him blink. He took one of the carts in front of Admin and drove it across to Design. He was about to park in front when his eye caught a shadowy bulk standing four stories tall around to the side. He drove over.

Greg stood waiting for him leaning one-armed against the huge truncated cone, grinning like a proud papa. "Isn't she gorgeous?"

"No," said Hooker, for it was not. "Will it work?"

"We'll sue if it doesn't. But we can't test it here. We'll have to ship it to the moon."

"And then?" Doug felt adrenalin flooding his veins. All the decisions had been made two years ago; yet here was the tangible result, four stories tall, a decision on the verge of proving itself. And an ancient dream.

The safe ramscoop.

For centuries the ramrobots had been exploring space at just less than the speed of light, limitlessly fueled by hydrogen scooped from between stars in conical electromagnetic fields two hundred miles across. For centuries men had followed at a quarter of the speed of light, carrying their own fuel. A ramscoop's magnetic field would kill any chordate organism within three hundred miles. No shield had ever been developed which would protect a chordate and still let the ramscoop work.

Until two years ago, when Moscow Motors had built — this.

There was a "dead pocket," a bubble in this generator's ramscoop field. A ship could be built into that bubble, and that ship would go anywhere, with a limitless fuel supply.

Two years ago Skyhook Enterprises had bought the contract to

build that ship. It was a UN project, with all the wealth of Earth behind it. Doug Hooker's father was still president when that decision was made; only a year ago he had turned the company over to Doug and gone off to become a Belter. For a year the ramship had been Doug's responsibility. He had given Greg Loeffler a free rein, not for the sake of a friendship fifteen years old but because Greg was a genius at design.

"And then we fit the ramscoop to the ship and take her for a trip. The ship's been ready for months. That's what I was doing in April and May, Doug. On the Moon, examining the ship. It's ready. All you have to do is get the ramscoop there."

Doug nodded. For a moment he almost envied Greg. The ship was Skyhook's project, Doug Hooker's project; but it was Greg's ship. Top to bottom. If it was successful it would conquer all of nearby space.

He said, "How's Joanna?"

Loeffler grinned proudly. "Out to here, and beautiful. Another month and she can go back to playing tennis. How's Clarisse?"

"Fine, fine."

"We haven't gotten together in awhile. How about dinner tonight? To celebrate the ramscoop."

"Good. Where?"

"Our place. You haven't even seen our new house."

"That's true," Hooker said vaguely. He was not at his best in a social situation. He was uncomfortable in crowds and with people he didn't know. With Greg and Joanna he could relax; but not during work hours, not even with them.

"Doug?"

"Yah?"

"You and Clarisse were married long before I was. Why haven't you had children yet? Waiting for Joanna and me to pioneer the field?"

Hooker was tempted to say, *Yah, why not let you take the risks first?* But then he'd be asked again. So he told the truth. "The Fertility Board turned me down."

"Oh?" Loeffler wasn't about to ask why, but he'd left the door open if Hooker wanted a sympathetic ear.

"Guess I'd better get to work," said Doug. "Will you be going to the moon to supervise the tests?"

"If Skyhook pays the fare."

"Slip me a requisition. And we'll see you tonight."

## III

Year 2557 A.D., The Rockies.

They lay in full sunlight beside the pool, under Greg's weather dome. All three were wet, with water running off their bodies to form pools around them on the red tiles. The woman, Joanna, was a tall, solidly built brunette with lovely legs. Of the men, Doug Hooker was still too thin for his height, and not well muscled; whereas Greg Loeffler had gymnasium muscles and a loafer's tan. They lay exhausted after the race across the pool.

Outside it would be cold, though not yet freezing. In winter snow would surround the house and run melting from the weather dome. Greg's house was high in the Rockies, halfway up a cliff. By its de-

sign it seemed to have grown as an organic part of the cliff. A good part of it was inside the rock.

Idly, with wistfulness but no pain, Doug thought Clarisse into existence alongside him. Golden hair in a stiff complex hairdo, deep all-over tan, she would have fallen asleep by now in the sunlight burning through the transparent weather dome. He hadn't seen her in ten years. She had remarried right after the divorce. Two years later she had been twice a mother.

Wistfulness, but no pain. She'd got no alimony, but she'd tried, and that had canceled the pain of losing her. Her ghost-image died, and Doug turned over on his back.

"We'll be leaving in a month," said Joanna. There was a touch of regret in her voice.

"You're out of your minds," said Doug.

Greg got up on an elbow. "Not at all. The future isn't on Earth any more, Doug — "

"Where is it, on Plateau? Any other world, I'd still say you were crazy. But teeny little Plateau? In five generations it'll be as crowded as Earth!"

"Then you admit Earth's crowded."

"Well, yah, but that's the price you pay for civilization."

"I won't pay. I'm leaving." Greg was enjoying himself. He had rehearsed the argument over and over in past months. "By the time Plateau gets really crowded, there'll be so many colony planets that anyone can take his pick. Meanwhile, Plateau is a nice place to be."

"Suppose they're hoked?"

"They aren't."

"And why risk it anyway? A dozen light-years in a four-man ship! Suppose a meteor — "

"Suppose a goblin? For Pete's sake, Doug! I designed these ships myself. They're foolproof."

Doug turned on his belly, scowling. Even he didn't know why he kept fighting a lost cause. Greg was going, and Joanna was going; their oldest daughter, Marcia, was going, with her husband. The only reason Greg kept up his side of the argument was the hope that Doug would change his mind and come along. Which Doug would not.

But the thought of Greg and Joanna leaving filled him with nameless dread.

"Is the ship ready yet?"

"Yes. Since yesterday. We could leave any time."

"Not until I inspect it," said Doug. "You promised."

"So I did. How about tomorrow? I'll give you the key."

"Good."

Skyhook Enterprises had built that ship. By now hundreds like it were scattered across the sky, anywhere within fifteen light-years of the solar system. Which meant that Earth's information was up to fifteen years out of date; but as far as anyone knew, no Skyhook ramship had ever failed. Skyhook was now designing a bigger ramship, big enough to carry a thousand colonists in stasis. But the four-man Skyhook exploring model was the only ramship now flying.

It came in three parts, easy to connect or to disconnect for inspection. Ramscoop, lifesystem, drive. And boosters, but boosters didn't count. They didn't count because they had been used for centuries. Rockets they were, containing helium compressed to within an inch of its life. Autopilots would guide them down after they had lifted Greg's ship to where he could safely use the fusion motor. Hooker ignored them, as he would have ignored a bicycle in the cargo hold. Too simple, too foolproof.

He ignored the ramscoop because he wouldn't have understood it. He ignored the fusion drive for both reasons. If there were a flaw in either of them, he would not find it.

His only chance was in the lifesystem.

It was big and roomy, that lifesystem, even for four people. Most flatlanders did not have that much room in their homes. But a claustrophobic ramship passenger could not step outside for a breath of air. The lifesystem was a cylinder with the central core running through it, the central core which joined the ramscoop to the fusion drive. Somewhere in the control panel were emergency switches which would blow the core apart to release the lifesystem as a separate unit, to fall through space awaiting an unlikely rescue.

There were two master bedrooms, soundproofed, with locks, very private. There was a gymnasium with muscle-stretchers for use in ship's gravity or in free fall, with sunlight tubes and masseur couches and a steam bath. There was a small dining room with the kitchen controls set in one wall.

Hooker walked the ship as if he were afraid of it. He was. He still wasn't sure why.

There was the autodoc, the most complex ever built. It would replace its own biochemicals, its own plastiskin, its own artificially grown organ replacements; all this automatically, from materials culled from the ship's waste collectors. It could cure anything. In theory it could keep a man young and healthy indefinitely. Skyhook Enterprises had not built this beauty. Moscow Motors, that industrial giant subsidized by the substate USSR, had taken that contract as part of the deal that won Skyhook the ship contract.

Hooker knew autodocs. He inspected the coffin and the machinery that fed it and found no flaw.

He went through the kitchen, as much of it as he understood. This too turned waste into food. The processes were infernally complicated; but any chemical process can be reversed, given sufficient sophistication and sufficient power. The ship's power came straight from a fusion drive with unlimited fuel.

The air plant was the simplest part of the ship. Hooker didn't even look at it. By the time he got around to it he was bone tired. He flopped on one of the beds and stared at the softly glowing ceiling.

As far as he could tell, there was nothing wrong with the ship. Nothing. What was the point in looking?

Any flaw Douglas Hooker, the executive, could recognize, could probably be fixed in five minutes.

They were going; they were practically on their way now. Greg, and Joanna, and Lisa, and — he'd forgotten the name of Lisa's husband. But why should he try to stop them? He had plenty of other friends. Didn't he?

He had conjured up eleven names and was trying hard for a twelfth, when it occurred to him that all eleven were people he had met through Greg and Joanna. All but two, and he hadn't seen them since Clarissa flew to Vegas, leaving him a wedding cake on which the wax bride and bridgegroom stood facing outward on opposite sides of the bottom layer. Nine people, then, whom he saw only at Joanna's parties and "talk nights."

He had never made friends easily.

Strangers made him uncomfortable. He kept wondering what they thought of him.

Even friends — there was a barrier between him and everyone else, and the barrier was a secret. As far as he knew, two people on Earth knew that Hooker was a potential paranoid. There had been three; but his father had gone to the Belt to start life over, probably thinking that the more lenient Belt fertility laws would permit him to have a second child after seven years had made him a citizen. He had lasted two years. He had smoked, and his dashboard included an ashtray. One day, during the last seconds of a landing approach to some unnamed rock, he had somehow used the attitude jets in such a way as to spill ashes out of the tray and into his eyes. The rock had smashed his sight bubble and his faceplate. And now there were two people who knew Doug's secret, but both were doctors. Clarissa had not known. She would have talked.

His secret stopped his mouth and slowed his conversation and made it innocuous. It kept him from getting drunk, for he feared his tongue would loosen. No man knows his fellow until he has seen him drunk; and no man had seen Doug Hooker drunk.

He tried to face it squarely. Doug and Joanna were taking his social life with them, to Plateau.

Why not regard it as a challenge?

Hooker rolled off the bed and left the ship. He would tell the Loefflers that it was perfect — foolproof. When they were gone he would make new friends, create his own social world. He had wrapped himself around his work for far too long.

But he was sixty-one years old, and his habits were developed.

August, 2570, Kansas City. It happened thus:

Every six months a man came to service Douglas Hooker's desk 'doc. Paul Jurgenson was his name. He had been servicing 'docs for most of his life; 'docs of all kinds, from the huge multiple-patient emergency 'docs at aerospaceports to the desk-sized 'docs installed in planes and short-hop spacecraft, used by executives the world over. The work never bored him, for Jurgenson

was not overly bright; but he was good at his job.

He came on a Thursday, the last day of the working week, and the last Thursday of August. As usual, Doug Hooker went home at noon, to give him room to work. Jurgenson took the 'doc apart and began to examine the parts. He shook his head sadly when he found both of the two special-mix vials *that* close to empty. Hooker didn't know it, but Jurgenson was the third man on Earth who knew his secret. He had only guessed it, of course, but the guess was close enough to a certainty. You can't hide baldness from your barber.

Jurgenson filled the vials, still saddened. Mr. Hooker always sent him a twenty-five mark bill for a Christmas present. (A firm handled Christmas presents of that nature for Hooker, remembering for him, but Jurgenson didn't know that.) Now it seemed that Mr. Hooker was using more antiparanoia than ever. That meant trouble in his life. Jurgenson knew that from long experience. He wished he could do something.

He replaced the hypo needles as usual, and the vials of pure alcohol, and the vitamin ampoules and the testosterone. He checked various circuits and replaced two wires; not that they were really ready to fail, but you never know. The manicure implements were self-replacing. Jurgenson frowned at the 'doc for a moment, listening to an instinct he trusted. It must have told him right, for he closed the 'doc. Then he unscrewed the red and green bulbs to look at the dates on their bases.

They were ten years old. In those days men built to last. There were laws. But ten years was old enough, even for bulbs which might last thirty. Jurgenson dropped them in the waste shute and replaced them from his kit. He tripped appropriate relays and saw that both bulbs lit.

He left, waving to Mr. Hooker's personal secretary. They had known each other for close to half a century and never done more than say hello and good-by to each other. Miss Peterson was a beauty. But Jurgenson thought his wife was too good for him and had long feared she would find out. He never philandered.

December, 2570.

Hooker entered the outer office. "Hi, fans," he said, as he had said each working day for . . . he didn't know how long. The answer, from several people at once, was a jumbled chorus. Hooker entered his own office at just ten o'clock.

The In basket was full. Hooker frowned at it as he shoved his hands into the 'doc. Was he making a mistake, cutting down on Skyhook's commitments? It made paperwork simpler, and thus saved money. But — sometimes Hooker felt that Skyhook was stagnating.

Other than the colony model ramships, a few of which were now in use for the UN, Skyhook had not pioneered anything in nearly twenty years.

The Loefflers must be on Plateau by now. Had they sent him a laser message? If so, it would not get here for twelve years.

What was wrong with the 'doc? It should have released him by now.

Doug withdrew his hands. There was no resistance; no fluids dripped from his fingers; his nails shone. Oh, nuts, he said subvocally. The green light's burned out. He made a mental note to call Jurgenson.

But he never did. It had never happened before; there were no habits to help him. And Jurgenson would be here in February. Hooker simply got used to the absence of a green light. He knew to within seconds when the 'doc was through with him.

It was the red light which had failed. The red bulb's filament had been dead for months. It had snapped and died when Jurgenson clicked it off.

## IV

February, 2571.

The change came slowly. At first Doug noticed nothing. Then, as weeks passed, it seemed to him that his thinking was becoming clearer. He didn't know why, but he was becoming more intelligent. These things that troubled him . . . they had one linking cause. Of course they must. All he had to do was find it.

His employees came at ten and went home at four, usually with Doug Hooker striding with them toward the parking lot, trying to look anonymous, returning good-bys if they were given. On Thursday the first of February Hooker did not leave. He nodded when his personal secretary told him it was after hours; he smiled emptily at her when she said good night. And then he sat.

The world did not intrude. The office was soundproof; its light did not depend on the sun; its false windows looked upon alien worlds, and on each a Skyhook ramship was landing. Impressive, for visitors. So Hooker could ignore the passage of time.

He thought of things that had gone wrong with his life.

He had no friends.

He had no hobbies. He'd thought of taking one up; but it turned out that he hated games. Losing irritated him, and he always lost interest before he could become good enough to win.

His life was his work and the Palace. The Palace was a house of ill repute, with a reputation for being very good and very expensive. If only Hooker had had the ability to play . . . but that he had never had. He went to the Palace when his gonads told him to, and he left when they quieted. Most of the girls could not have told you his name.

His work was all habit. He slid through life as in a dream, and the dream was a dull one of easy defeat. For a long time it had been that way. It had started . . .

When Clarisse left him? His teeth bared in savagery. If she were the cause he would track her down wherever she hid! And the children for whom she had deserted him . . . No. He could remember periods of enjoyment, brief flashes of sunlight in his life, and some of them had happened since Clarisse.

That Christmas party at the office, decades ago? Someone's idea had

sparked them all, and they had stayed until three in the morning, using plant facilities to build a robot. The body had been built of emergency foam plastic from the failsafe systems in a ramship. It couldn't have weighed more than twenty pounds, excluding another twenty pounds of motors, but it had stood twenty feet tall, blank-visaged and horrifying, with huge flat feet. Yes, it had been Greg; his idea, and mostly his suggestions. They had turned it loose on 217th pedwalk downtown, walking east in the westbound lane, so that it stood in one place, marking time. Skyhook employees had waited four hours for the seven o'clock rush hour, in an automated restaurant above the walk. The panic had been a beautiful thing.

Loeffler?

Sure, Loeffler! He'd waited until Doug's dependence on him was complete. Then he had left. So diabolically simple. Doug had not had a moment of real enjoyment since.

Hooker's lips pulled back and away from his teeth. His nostrils flared and turned white. So simple! Why hadn't he seen it before? Since high school it had always been Loeffler, blocking every chance he'd ever had to make his own friends and his own way of life. A decades-old plot which had not come to fruition until Doug was sixty-one years old. Now, now that he was finally alert, Doug could see the bones of the plan. The ramship had been part of it; it made the business so rich and so complex that it took all of Doug's time to handle it. A very neat trap. Had Clarisse been involved? Perhaps. There was no way to tell. But — Greg had introduced him to Clarisse, hadn't he?

Doug settled back in his chair. His face became almost calm. Clarisse, wherever she was, did not count. She had been a pawn; but Greg Loeffler was the king. Greg Loeffler must die.

It was midnight before Doug decided what to do. His secretary was long gone; which puzzled him until he realized what time it was. But he could do the work himself. He knew how to handle a tape. He dictated an application to buy one ramship at standard prices. Purpose: to leave Earth. (No point in saying where he intended to go. Loeffler might have left spies anywhere.) He put the tape in an envelope and dropped it in a mailbox on his way home.

Greg had had his answer in three days. By Monday, Doug would own a Skyhook ship. And then...

"Hi, fans," Doug Hooker called as he entered the outer office. Ranks of secretaries returned the greeting. They noticed nothing odd about him. He always walked that way, eyes straight ahead, walk fast and slightly hurried, rebuffing friendship before it was offered.

He entered his office, put his hands in the 'doc, waited for an estimated two minutes, withdrew them. Have to call Jurgenson, he thought, and then sneered at the triviality of the thought. He had better things to do. Where was that UN envelope?

There. He opened it, took out the credit-card-sized tape and inserted it in his desk player.

The refusal jarred him to his bones. He played it again, refusing to accept it; and again. It was true. He'd been turned down.

The implications were terrifying. Doug had had three days to think things over. With every hour the nature of Loeffler's plot had become clearer . . . and had involved more people. Loeffler must have had an enormous amount of help.

But Doug had never dreamed that the UN was part of the plot!

He'd have to be very careful. He might have given himself away already.

February 26th, East New York. Somebody had stolen a Skyhook ramship.

The call came shortly after noon, from a lovely, frightened woman who said she was the president's personal secretary. "It was Mr. Hooker's ship," she explained. "He was thinking of designing an improved model. He ordered a complete working model of the ship they're using now. This morning it was gone!"

Loughery asked, "Did the model have gas boosters?" He was thinking, *Of course it had boosters. It couldn't take off without them, not without fusing Kansas City. But maybe a truck hauled it away?*

"Yes, it had boosters."

"Why?"

"Mr. Hooker wanted it complete in every detail."

"Oh, Lord." Loughery rubbed the back of his head. *The idiot! Wanted a complete model, did he?* Now there was a fusion ship loose somewhere in the solar system. Cut a few safety relays, turn off the fusion shield, and any fusion ship becomes an exploding fusion bomb. "We'll send someone over right away. Is Mr. Hooker there?"

"He didn't arrive this morning."

"Well, give me his home address. And if he shows up, have him call here immediately."

The pieces began to fall together.

First, Skyhook. The area was well guarded; it would have been difficult for anyone to get in without being spotted. There was no human guard, but any unauthorized entry would have been photographed a dozen times. There would have been alarms.

Second, the Belt called. Several million people owned most of the solar system and a political power equal to that of the UN. They were furious. A fusion ship had left Earth without proper notification and was now boring through space toward the system's edge, paying no attention to laser calls. Loughery promised payment of damages. It was all he could do.

Nobody found Hooker. If he was at home, he wasn't answering phone calls.

The gas boosters found their way home. Loughery's men took charge of them immediately, inspecting them for clues. Re-entry had not burned the fingerprints off their shiny surfaces. The fingerprints were Hooker's, some of them.

Loughery filed a request for a warrant to search Hooker's house. It began to look as if Hooker had stolen his own ship.

On the afternoon of the twenty-seventh, somebody found Hooker's

request to buy a ramship. It had been turned down for several good reasons. For one, Hooker had named neither destination nor purpose. For another, the UN was careful about passing fusion drives out to anyone who might ask; whereas Hooker —

Loughery felt the hair stir on the back of his neck.

Hooker was a potential paranoid.

Jurgenson called that evening.

By then Loughery was in Kansas City. He went right over to interview Jurgenson personally.

"He was using too much of this guck," said Jurgenson. He indicated two phials, both bone dry. "That's bad. I got other people who use stuff like this, people who need special guck or something goes wrong in their heads. When they got troubles, they use more guck than usual."

"But there's a warning light."

Jurgenson wrung his hands. "It's my fault. I put in a bad light. It worked when I tried it. I can't understand why it went bad."

"Who was Hooker's doctor?"

"Human? I don't know. Miss Peterson might."

Loughery asked Miss Peterson.

By then the search warrant had come through. What privacy there was on a crowded Earth was highly regarded; search warrants were not passed around like advertising posters. Hooker's home turned out to be the top of a skyscraper in downtown Kansas City.

Hooker had left a note, a long one. It said that, since Hooker had no friends and no particular purpose in life, he had decided to spend the rest of his life in a project all his own. He was going to try to reach the edge of the universe. He did not expect to succeed. The ramship would keep him alive indefinitely, but indefinitely was not forever. Yet he intended to try.

It was a sanely spoken tape. Syntax was in order; Hooker's voice seemed calm. Hooker's expressed purpose was the only crazy thing about it. But Hooker was guaranteed crazy, wasn't he?

Loughery called the Belt again. Hooker's ship was well out of the inner system, far enough so that the Belt could stop monitoring him; there was little chance of his deadly drive flame crossing anyone's path before it dissipated. Yes, he was headed roughly toward the galactic rim.

It checked, thought Loughery. Hooker would have been better advised to head straight out along the galactic axis; there was less junk to get in his way. But perhaps he hadn't thought of that.

The excitement began to settle. Loughery had other problems. But there was one last thing he could do about the Hooker problem, and eventually he thought of it.

"Keep a monitor on Hooker," he told the Belt Political Section. "We'll pay the standard fee. We want to know if he turns back, or if he changes course toward some inhabited world."

And that would do it, he thought. Eventually Hooker would use the ship's 'doc. That simple. It would cure him. Then he would either turn back to Earth, to face a charge of

stealing a fusion motor, or he would move on to one of the colonies. Probably the latter; stealing a fusion plant was a capital crime on Earth. But they could deal with him, offer him amnesty for the prompt return of the ship.

Three weeks later the word came. The actinic spark that was Hooker's drive had definitely shifted toward Tau Ceti.

Loughery had to admit that Plateau was a good choice.

Plateau had suffered badly from the organ bank problem, in the two centuries before alloplasty, the science of putting foreign materials in the human body, had overtaken the techniques of organic transplant. All the inhabited worlds had gone through that stage. Its worst feature was that there was only one way to get the most important organic transplants.

On Plateau a small ruling class had held the power of life and death over its citizens. Life, because with unlimited access to the organ banks one could live centuries. Death, because any crime could be made a capital crime whenever the organ banks ran short. The citizens would not complain. They wanted to live centuries.

Then alloplasty had caught up. Now there were no organ banks at all on Plateau, and no capital punishment.

Loughery sent a laser to Plateau, warning them that a stolen ship was due to land there. He wasn't sure which would get there first, the laser or the ship. After all, Ramships were fast.

## V

March, 2571 A. D., ship's time. The ship flew itself, of course. All Doug had to do was take it below the plane of the Belt, leave it alone for a couple of weeks, then aim for Tau Ceti. The two weeks were misdirection. With the note he had left, they might convince the police that he was going off to nowhere and would never bother them again.

He kept busy, watching for goldskin ships — Belt police; reading instruction booklets over and over, getting familiar with his machines; and it wasn't until he had passed Pluto's orbit that he began to relax.

Nobody was after him, as far as he could tell. Not that they could have done anything; you can't stop a ship in space. You can only destroy it. But he was reassured. He had broken free of his long bondage. And now . . . the long wait. Tau Ceti was eleven point nine light-years away. It would take less subjective time than that, with the velocities he would eventually reach; but still . . . .

He frowned. He hadn't been in a 'doc in some time. It would be stupid to get sick and die just when vengeance was within his grasp.

He climbed into the 'doc tank and went to sleep.

The 'doc found it necessary to make drastic changes in his metabolism. Hooker felt very strange when he woke. The strangeness seemed to be in his thinking, and that made it horrible. He felt slow, stupid. He could no longer remember

why he wanted to kill Greg. He remembered only that his lifelong friend had done him a great wrong.

He thought of turning back. But he couldn't do that; he'd end in the organ banks for stealing this ship.

Should he try another colony world? It was a confusing question. His mind was full of confusing questions. But it was obvious that Mount Lookitthat was his best bet, regardless of what happened when he got there. Plateau was the only world of Man which did not impose the death penalty. If they decided he'd committed a crime, he'd get medical treatment.

His head buzzed. Perhaps he needed medical treatment? But the ship's 'doc could do anything.

He went on.

And as the weeks passed, a strange thing happened. He remembered his grudge against Greg Loeffler. And he realized something that sent cold chills of rage through him. They'd booby-trapped the 'doc!

No, it was worse than that. Somehow, long ago, Greg Loeffler and his minions had managed to booby-trap every 'doc on Earth. For all of his life, Hooker had been using the 'docs. And each time he did, the 'docs had made alterations in his mind and body to keep him docile.

What could he do? His very life depended on the 'doc!

It took him a few days to get over his sense of panic; or perhaps he merely got used to it. Then he went to work. There was a thick instruction booklet for repairing the 'doc. Hooker memorized it. When he felt he was ready, he began to disconnect things. It was difficult to decide what to cut out. Finally he tackled it from the other direction. What to leave running? Anesthetics, of course, and the luxuries: manicures, haircuts, massage. Vitamins, antibiotics, all diagnostic machinery, surgical repair . . . except in the region of the head. He didn't dare leave that! Anticholesterol, synthetic blood components, alloplasty components and insertion tools . . . .

He finished in two months. The 'doc should be incapable of anything that could damage his mind. But still he was afraid of it.

He tried it anyway. He was insane, definitely; but not stupid.

When he woke up he knew that the 'doc was safe.

Year 2583.8 A.D., Plateau.

Plateau was a silver ball hanging serene in the heavens. Hooker stopped nearby, not too near, and not in any particular orbit. He began to scan the surface.

Where was Mount Lookitthat?

He couldn't find it. He turned ship to circle the planet . . . an irritating delay for an impatient man. Then he thought of turning on his radio. He'd turned it off because Plateau's voices of authority kept trying to tell him what to do. Now he could use their directional signal.

" — Calling Douglas Hooker. Douglas Hooker, will you please answer? Do you need help? The United Nations claims you are flying a stolen ship. Is this true? You will need re-entry craft to land. Are you able to establish an orbit so that


NG.

they can find you? Douglas Hook—"

Hooker frowned down at the silver field in his 'scope screen. That was where Mount Lookitthat ought to be, according to his directional finder. So where was it?

Overcast, of course. By water vapor. There must be fog there, or rain.

Hooker smiled and moved in.

He dropped fast into the mist beyond the void edge. If there were finders on him he was caught; but what could they do about him? They couldn't approach him with anything manned. His ramscoop field was as deadly as earlier models, save for that "dead pocket." All he had to do was turn it on.

He heard nothing on the radio. They weren't sending in his direction. Good.

And he was somewhere off the void edge of Mount Lookitthat.

He'd passed through Loeffler's laser message just about a year ago, ship's time. It was mealymouthed friendliness, all of it, obviously designed to lull Hooker's suspicions. All the same, it was a bad mistake on Loeffler's part. It included pictures of his house and environs.

Loeffler's house resembled his old home on Earth. It was large, almost ostentatiously large, and it seemed designed to fit its surroundings, as if it had grown from the land. Loeffler no longer lived on a cliff. He had chosen a spot in hilly country, set a few hundred feet back from the void edge in one direction and from a river in another. The river had etched itself a canyon which led to the void edge.

Hooker kept his ship submerged in the mist. His drive must be giving off a hellish glow, but he hoped he was far enough down for the mist to hide it. He angled his ship toward the invisible Mount Lookitthat and moved slowly in that direction.

Look for a waterfall.

It might not show at this level. It might turn to spray and evaporate high above.

Something black and formless loomed in the lesser blackness. Simultaneously, Hooker's radar beeped. Something black and huge, indefinitely huge . . . . Hooker backed ship and raised the thrust. The ship shot up. Up and up, and the mist began to thin . . . and Hooker had his first look at the side of Mount Lookitthat. It seemed infinite. It went on and on, up and down and sideways, like the surface of a world tilted from horizontal to vertical.

(After four hours of hopeless searching, the pilot of Plateau's first colony slowboat had seen Mount Lookitthat rising suddenly out of an endless white furry plain. "Lookitthat!" he'd said, in the voice of one punched in the stomach, four hundred years ago.)

Hooker took his ship straight up the fluted side. Mist boiled and churned below him. Now he got his first look at Plateau's big, soft sun. Tau Ceti was smaller and cooler than Sol, so that Plateau had to huddle closer for warmth, making the star look bigger from Plateau's surface. But Hooker had been traveling for more than four years of ship's time. He'd all but forgotten what a sun looked like.

Above and to the left, a waterfall. He angled that way.

The ship shot past the void edge. Suddenly most of Plateau was below him. Doug cut his thrust and looked around.

He snarled. He'd picked the wrong waterfall.

There were no spacecraft; but he could see cars all across the land, all colors, most of them staying near the ground. There were houses, and all were large. Loeffler's house must be about average in size. *Sure,* Hooker rebuked himself. *They've got more room. Did he plan that too? Hiding from me . . . .*

*Could that be it?*

Hooker dropped. It was a great rounded house, like an enormous boulder with picture windows built into it. There was a river . . . and it was close to the void edge . . . .

That was it.

But was Loeffler there?

It didn't matter. Hooker back-angled his ship and came to a stop over the house. His drive licked down.

The house erupted in flame.

Hooker laughed. He shouted, "You won't use *that* as a hiding place! Are you dead, Greg? If you're not, I'll find you wherever you hide!" Still laughing, he increased thrust and rose into the sky. Below him was a boiling lava pit.

He needed a city. A city would have records. He could search them to find where Loeffler was now.

But he'd have to be careful. Loeffler had taken over Earth. Hooker didn't know how long it had taken him. But he'd been on Plateau more than twelve years; he must have made some progress here.

Hooker's radio sounded.

It was a sound Hooker had never heard before. It was very loud, and very terrible. Hooker reached to turn off the radio. His arms stopped halfway. He couldn't move them. He settled back in his seat. A strange, peaceful expression spread across his face. Presently a voice began to give orders, and Hooker obeyed.

"Lucky he had his radio on." The second man nodded. "He could have wiped out this whole world. Land him, will you? I'll call the hospital."

"Whose house was that?"

"I don't know. Let's hope nobody was in it. Will you *please* get him down? If it wears off he'll turn off the radio, and then where will we be?"

Year 2584.4 A. D., Hospital, Plateau.

They quit work at five o'clock. Hooker was exhausted. The chain gang had been planting trees where a generation of special mold had made sufficient soil to support them. Machines did some of the work; but mainly the chain gang used their hands.

Planting trees gave Hooker a feeling of accomplishment. Even as president of Skyhook he had never felt so useful.

He was bone tired until dinner arrived, and then he was ravenous. By the time he finished dinner he was no longer tired. He went to his room and read until eight o'clock.

Psychotherapy was to be at eight.

"I've been thinking," he told the doctor. "I want to know if I killed anyone."

"Why?"

Words formed a bottleneck in Hooker's throat. It had stopped him before. He never knew how to answer that particular question. This time he forced some kind of an answer out.

"I want to know how guilty I am!"

"You know what you were trying to do. Whatever you did is done. How will feeling guilty help anything?"

"I don't *know*. But if I'm not supposed to feel guilty, why am I in prison? And don't tell me it's a hospital. I know it's a hospital. It's also a prison."

"Of course it is."

He'd killed four people. He'd killed Joanna Loeffler, and her daughter and son-in-law and grandson. Greg Loeffler had been elsewhere. They waited a year to tell Hooker.

## VI

Year 2585.7 A. D., between stars.

"Doug!"

Hooker jumped.

The radio yelled, "Doug, this is Greg. Answer me!"

Hooker hesitated only a moment. This was what he had dreaded. Loeffler must have a com laser on him, with a directional signal in it. Hooker told the autopilot to follow it back.

The radio didn't wait. "Answer me, damn you! You know what I want!"

What was with Greg? How could he possibly expect Hooker to answer immediately? It would take hours for Hooker's com laser to cross the gap to Plateau. Hooker shifted nervously. The autopilot beeped, and he said, "I'm here, Greg. I didn't want to talk to you. I left Plateau because I couldn't face you. You must know how sorry I am for what happened."

Greg's voice didn't wait. "Doug! Why don't you answer? Is it because you think I'm going to kill you?"

Hooker came bolt upright in his chair. *Oh!*

Suddenly it was appallingly clear. Loeffler, shouting into a com laser, forgetting the lightspeed gap, was not a sane Loeffler.

Tau Ceti was a white flare in the stern scope. Wunderland's sun was too dim to see from here. Hooker turned on his ramscoop field: a complex process, most of which would be handled by the auto-pilot. Then he got up and began to pace.

"You cowardly, murdering — " Loeffler's speech turned profane. His accusations, justified at first, became wildly imaginative. Hooker listened, trying to gauge the depth of Greg's insanity. It was one more item on his burden of guilt.

Why didn't somebody stop him? A com laser was too powerful not to leak. Plateau radios must be picking this up.

And where had he gotten a com laser? The Plateau station was closed

to all but qualified personnel. But Greg owned a ship with a com laser . . . .

A ship just like this one.

Almost calmly, Hooker sat down at the control board. He connected the autopilot screen to the stern scope. Tau Ceti glowed brightly off center. Hooker centered it, then began to enlarge it. The screen turned yellowish-white, with a blue point moving off-screen near the top. Hooker centered that, enlarged it.

A deep blue flare with a black dot in the center.

Loeffler was coming after him.

Loeffler's hoarse voice stopped suddenly. Then it giggled. "Tricked you," it said, suddenly calm.

The stern scope turned deep red.

*Damn,* thought Hooker. *He did trick me.* The scope screen would not transmit more light than human eyes could bear; but there was a dial to register the light falling on the scope. That dial registered maximum. Loeffler was using his com laser as a weapon. At maximum power it could easily have blanketed Earth's solar system with a clearly read signal. But Loeffler was firing it at an object only light-hours distant.

*He could kill me,* Hooker thought. *He could do it.*

It would't be fast. Loeffler was firing from behind, at that part of Hooker's ship which was built to stand fusion flame applied for years. But eventually things would melt.

Greg was jubilant. "I'm going to burn you, Doug! Just like you burned Joanna and Lisa and Tom and little Greg! But slower! Slower, you — " And there was more profanity.

Needles were rising. Hull temperature indicators, power consumption meters, climbed toward pink zones nobody had ever expected them to touch.

Doug Hooker rubbed his eyes. He waited for an inspiration, and none came. Needles touched their pink zones. Bells rang, and Doug turned them off. After a bit he left the control room and went downstairs and lay down in the masseur couch.

*He's going to kill me.* The thought seemed far away, drowned in the groaning comfort of the massage.

*All I wanted was a new life. I wanted to go away and start over.* The couch was a hard, enveloping caress.

*He won't let me. He wants to kill me. And who has a better right?*

*Let him kill me.*

*No.*

It was difficult to struggle out of the couch, for the couch was not finished with him. During a massage one must be in a defeatist frame of mind. Otherwise one tenses; one's automatic defenses take over. But somehow Doug pulled himself free of the gentle, grasping embrace, and somehow he got upstairs to the control room. He was still covered with massage oil.

*A man attacked has the right to defend himself. I paid for my crime.*

Doug sat down in the control chair, used a key to unlock a panel. There were override switches under-

neath. One turned off the ship's alarm bells; one allowed excess power in the ship's circuitry; three others set up the sequence that would blow the ship apart if the drive or the ramscoop failed. Everything under the panel was an override switch for the ship's automatic safety precautions. Doug flipped one switch and closed the panel. Then he twisted a dial hard over, as far as it would go.

His com laser was already fixed on Loeffler's ship. Now it would burn.

Hooker turned off his fusion drive to reduce the heat pouring in at the ship's stern. Now he had a good chance. He was firing his laser at Loeffler's nose, where there was less protection. The massive, almost invulnerable bulk of the ramscoop would absorb most of the beam; but the lifesystem was wider than the ramscoop, and it would catch a lot of light. Eventually its walls would melt.

Hooker would kill Loeffler before Loeffler could kill Hooker.

Doug went back to the masseur couch. He felt very tired.

The lifesystem became hot. Unbearably hot. When Doug felt he could stand it no longer he went upstairs to throw another override switch. When he had done that the cooling equipment would get more power, and his lifesystem would be cool until relays or busbars burned out.

At the control panel he found that it wasn't necessary. The ruby glow was gone from the rear scope screen. Loeffler's laser had burned out or lost its target.

Loeffler's ship was still there, still following. Hooker started his drive and turned off his laser. He was on his way to Wunderland, with Loeffler following.

Year 2587.2, between stars.

Turnover. Loeffler was still behind him. Hooker had long been convinced that Loeffler's com laser was burned out. He had used his own com laser, but Loeffler never answered.

And now he used it again.

"Greg," he said. "You've been following me for three and a half years. I assume that you want justice on Wunderland. You're entitled to state your case there. But now it's turnover time, in case you hadn't noticed, and I'm turning around. Please do the same."

And he used the gyros to swing the ship.

He was as nearly sane as a 'doc could make him. In three and a half years he had almost forgotten about Loeffler, or at least to accept him as an endurable evil. And there was this: Loeffler had a 'doc. He must have used it. A 'doc would not keep a man sane under undue stress, but Hooker could at least hope that Loeffler would use the law instead of weapons. The law might punish Hooker, despite double jeopardy laws, but it would also protect him.

He fell tail first toward Wunderland.

Now a point of light showed in the front scope. Hooker watched for it to turn. It was small, that

dot of light; for Loeffler had fallen far behind in the race toward Wunderland. Hooker's ramscoop was taking part of Loeffler's fuel, since Loeffler was in his shadow.

Hours after turnover, the point of light moved. Loeffler had gotten his message . . . or seen him turn. The point of light became a line of light, then swung back to a point.

It still had a dot in the center.

"No," said Hooker.

A black dot in the center of a blob which showed mostly blue.

"No. You're going the wrong way. Turn around, you idiot!"

The ships were diving nose-on at each other.

Hurriedly Hooker swung his ship around. *I should have known,* he told himself. *Loeffler wants to ram. When I accelerate to the side, so does he, because otherwise I might get around him. But he won't let me slow down.*

*If I get within three hundred miles of his ramscoop . . . .*

It was a stalemate. Loeffler couldn't catch Hooker, and Hooker couldn't escape Loeffler. But only Loeffler had the power to give up the game.

Year 2590.0 A. D., Plateau.

Loughery came to Plateau in a colonist ramship. It was a common practice in those days for Earth to finance one-way trips to the colony worlds, simply to get them off the planet. On the sixtieth birthday Loughery, having had enough of being a UN official, took the UN up on its offer.

He could have chosen any of the colony worlds. He chose Plateau because the social structure fascinated him. When he had learned enough he intended to become a lawyer.

"That won't be easy," the mountaineer cop told him. Loughery had braced the guy as he was coming off duty and offered to buy him drinks and dinner in return for information. "The mountaineer laws aren't as difficult as Earth's, at least from what I hear, but you may have trouble understanding the ethics behind them."

"I gather a mountaineer is a Plateau dweller."

"Right. Like a crashlander comes from We Made It and a flatlander comes from Earth."

"About the ethics."

"Hmmm." The cop scratched the back of his head. "Tell you what. The records building is still open. Let's walk over, and I'll find you a few examples."

He had to use three electronic keys to get to the files. Once inside, he looked around him, lips puckered judiciously. "I'll start you with an easy one," he said. And he pulled a tape out of a drawer filled with similar tapes. "Let's run this."

They played it.

"Hooker," said Loughery. "I remember him. Dammit, I'm the one who sent out the warning. I thought the 'doc had cured him. I'm as guilty as he is."

The cop looked very coldly at Loughery. "Could you have stopped him?"

"No. But I could have stressed the warning."

"As long as there was a warning.

Now, do you understand the logic behind Hooker's sentence?"

"I'm afraid not. He got two years imprisonment for negligent homicide, with simultaneous psychotherapy and conditioning. Psychotherapy is a lost art on Earth, by the way. I don't question why he only got two years, but why negligent homicide?"

"There's the crux. He wasn't guilty of murder, was he?"

"I'd say yes."

"But we say he was insane. That's a legitimate plea."

"Then why was he punished?"

"For letting himself become insane. He knew he was a potential paranoid; all he had to do was stay in reach of a working autodoc. And he didn't. Four people died. Negligent homicide."

Loughery nodded. His head was spinning.

"What isn't here on the tape is the follow-up. Loeffler tried to kill Hooker."

"Oh?"

"Hooker left in a ramship. Loeffler went after him. They had a big duel with com lasers. Now, let's suppose Hooker had won that battle and killed Loeffler. What then?"

"Self-defense."

"Not at all. Murder."

"But why?"

"Loeffler was insane. And he was insane as a direct result of Hooker's crime, not through Loeffler's own negligence. Hooker could run or hide or yell for help or talk Loeffler into accepting treatment. He could not strike back. If he'd killed Loeffler he'd have gotten fifty years for murder."

"Maybe I should be a farmer. What did happen?"

"I wouldn't know. Neither of them ever came back to Plateau."

## VII

Year 120,000 A. D. approx.

Fifty years?

The flap of a gnat's wing.

The long chase was nearing its end. At first Hooker had gained on his pursuer, for Loeffler's ramscoop was not getting as much hydrogen as Hooker's. Loeffler's ship was in the shadow of Hooker's. At one time they had been light-years apart. But now Loeffler's ship was gaining. For Hooker's ship had reached terminal velocity.

There had to be a limit on the velocity of a fusion powered ramship. It was this: when the exhaust velocity of the fusion drive was no greater than the velocity of the interstellar hydrogen hitting the ramscoop, the ship could go no faster. Hooker had reached that limit tens of thousands of years ago. And so had his pursuer.

But Loeffler's ship was using hydrogen which had slipped through Hooker's ramscoop. The hydrogen wasn't hitting Loeffler's ramscoop field as hard. It had absorbed velocity from Hooker's.

Loeffler was close behind.

The chase could end within decades.

Once upon a time Hooker had hoped Loeffler would give up and turn around. Surely he would realize that Hooker could not be

caught! But the years had stretched to decades, and every year Loeffler waited meant four years trying to get back to Wunderland. He'd have had to decelerate before he could begin the long flight home, and deceleration would take as many decades as he had spent fleeing. And so Hooker had spent two hours a day before the scope screen, watching the stars crawl past year by year, waiting for Loeffler to turn around.

The years had stretched into centuries, and still Hooker spent two hours a day watching the rear scope screen. Until there were no more stars ahead, but only the distant muddled dots of galaxies, and the stars behind were taking on a vagueness like curdled milk. And when the centuries had become millenia, Hooker no longer believed his enemy would let him go. But still he spent two hours per ship's day before the scope screen, watching the galaxy drop away.

He was totally a man of habits now. He had not had an original thought in centuries. The ship's clock governed his life in every detail, taking him to the autodoc or the kitchen or the gym or the steam room or the bedroom or the bathroom. You'd have thought he was an ancient robot following a circular tape, no longer able to respond to outside stimuli.

He looked more like an aged robot than an aged man. From a distance he would have looked twenty. The 'doc had taken good care of him. But there were things the 'doc could not do. The oldest living man had been short of four hundred years old when that machine was made. Moscow Motors had had no way of knowing what a man would need when his life could be measured in tens of thousands of years. And so the face was young; but the veneer was cracked, and the muscles no longer showed any kind of expression, and the habit patterns of the man were deeply grooved into the DNA memory processes of the brain.

By now the chase meant nothing to Hooker. In any case he would have been incapable of original thought.

They had come up along the galactic axis. Hooker, looking into the scope screen, saw the galaxy face on. It was not bright, but it was wide. The galaxy showed like varicolored dyes poured into viscous ink, red dye and yellow and blue and green, but mostly red, and then the whole mass swirled around the center of the pot. So that the center glowed all colors, a continuous mass of stars packed so closely as to blot the blackness behind; but it was not bright. There is dust even in intergalactic space. Nearly one hundred thousand light-years of dust shaded the galaxy from Hooker's view. The arms were almost black, the glowing areas spotted with black gaps and dust clouds. Everything was reddened and dimmed by Doppler shift.

He could not see Loeffler.

Habit used his fingers to magnify the view, slowly. The galaxy, already wide enough to fill the scope screen, expanded. In the core, individual red giant stars appeared, bigger than

anything in the arms. And a blue-white spot appeared, and grew.

It grew until it filled the screen. There was a black dot in the center.

Hooker had watched for nearly an hour before the thought stirred in his brain. That hadn't happened for a long time, but it did happen. Hooker's memory capacity was nearly full. But his brain was in good working order; he was guaranteed sane.

*I wonder what damage I did?*

The thought threatened to slip away, but he grabbed for it, sensing somehow that it might be important. *I held my com laser on him for hours. I may have damaged him. I've never seen him broadside; I'd have no way of knowing. But if his ship is badly hurt, I could finish the job with my laser. Mine never burned out. His did.*

He'd have to wait until Loeffler got closer. The thought slipped away . . .

. . . And returned two days later. *I wonder how much damage I did? How would I find out?*

Every day he remembered the problem. A month and a half after he had first thought of it, he thought of the answer.

He could turn the ship sideways to fire the fusion drive laterally. Loeffler would imitate him to keep him from sneaking past and home. That would put Loeffler broadside to him.

He had done it once before, trying to make turnover for Wunderland. But Loeffler had been too far away for the scope to show details. If he did it now . . . . He did.

Then he focused one of the side scopes on Loeffler, enlarged the image and waited.

The time came when he should have gone to the steam room. He was half out of his seat; but he couldn't leave. Loeffler hadn't turned yet. The ships were light-hours apart. Hooker forced himself to sit down and to stay down, gripping the arms of the control chair with both hands. His teeth began to chatter. He shivered. A deadening cold spread through him. He sneezed.

The shivering and the sneezing continued for a long time, then passed. Steam room time was over.

Loeffler began to turn.

And Hooker knew why he had never turned for home.

There was no lifesystem at all. The lifesystem had always been the most fragile part of the ship. Eons ago Hooker's laser had played over Loeffler's lifesystem and melted it to slag. Nothing was left but tattered shards, polished at the edges by gas molecules slipping through the ramscoop shield.

Loeffler hadn't died fast. He'd had time to program the autopilot to arrange a collision course with Hooker's ship.

Loeffler might have given up the chase long ago. But the autopilot never would, never could.

Hooker turned off his scope screen and went down to the steam room. His schedule was shot to hell. He was still trying to re-adjust when his enemy's ramscoop field swept across his ship. Then both ships were driving toward the edge of the universe, alone.

END

# It Takes All Kinds

by BRUCE W. RONALD

*The big board flashed its numbers — and each one was a sentence of death!*

Terry Gordon sat on a simulated chrome bench in the great East City waiting hall and watched his future fading on the huge board that covered the entire square-mile roof.

Few of his high school friends would recognize Terry as he sat sulking. The short muscular young man was known for his engaging ear-to-ear smile. Terry Gordon was not smiling now as he looked unblinkingly upwards at spot 5,329,462. Spot 5,329,462 was Terry Gordon. Right now, anyway.

True, Terry realized, he was a lot better off than most people. Of the 59 million twenty-year-olds who took the test, very few would ever make the board at all. But that wouldn't be enough. Only ten per cent would pass, and Terry knew his odds were slim.

And they kept getting slimmer.

Since East City was headquarters for the test, his number had been posted quickly. In fact, he had ranked briefly in the first million as the board began its posting. But, as other computers around the world tied into this central board, his rank dropped.

And dropped.

And dropped.

Now he was number 5,329,462, and the tests were only 91% tabulated. On a straight percentage basis he was all right, but Terry knew it didn't work out that way in practice.

An inhuman voice intoned, "ninety-two," and the roof swam as the figures were adjusted to accommodate the test results of more than half a million human beings. Terry

got up and walked down the line, straining his thick neck backwards to spot his new position. Once he had spotted his 14 digit person-identification code unaided, but this time he could not. He punched his ID code into a wall stand. A half second later, he walked away with a strip of paper punched 5,397,949.

As the sturdy, black-haired Terry Gordon walked to his new position, he heard a shot and several screams from the Losers' Corner as someone committed suicide. *Not me,* thought Gordon. Quickly he tried to evaluate the new results. *It isn't good,* he thought. *I'm still ahead of straight percentages but not by anywhere near as much.*

The population explosion and the technological explosion mushroomed together, and Terry, along with 59,000,000 other twenty-year-olds all over the world, was a victim of the crossfire. Too many people, not enough jobs. They tried reducing the workweek, but that didn't work; eliminated jobs were manual or supervisory in nature. The jobs which remained require a lot of time at work.

The world went on a double shift. That helped — but not enough. Service jobs increased. Again not enough, and the computers and their lesser brothers took over most of these.

It was decided that all jobs would require a college education. Without exception. College was made free, but enrollment limited to those most deserving. At first, the top one-third of a high school class was eligible, with room left over for the duller sons of those who could afford the fantastic freight of seven years of extra schooling. Then it became 25%, and nobody could get in just with money. Twenty — fifteen — and now ten per cent. The world had finally taken birth control seriously, but Terry Gordon would suffer what the label-loving historians had termed "the Blind Decades."

None of this was fair, obviously, but it worked.

Terry Gordon wanted to pass the test. He had to pass it. Since childhood he knew that he had to be not one of the 900 but one of the ten. His class psychiatrist had said he had a "good little kid" syndrome. "I must be good. I must be right. I must be in complete control." The only way to keep in control of anything was to pass this test.

"Ninety-three."

Terry didn't bother to look for himself. He stood in line and used the PIC tracer. He'd been bumped less than 62,000 spaces, about three thousand more than straight percentage. *If it doesn't get any worse than that I can make it.* He tried to smile and realized it was only a grimace so he quit. Someone — a girl, Terry thought — threw herself off a railing. *Too dangerous in that corner. Even if my number — even when my number,* he corrected himself dryly, *gets over there I'm not going to stand under it. There are no rules that say I have to stand there.*

He was now in front of a Boozer. He stared at it for a few minutes until he realized that he was now qualified to order a drink. He

stepped up before the machine and inserted his credit card, establishing automatically his right to drink.

The machine flashed back, "What's your pleasure, Mr. Gordon?" and Terry froze, unable to think clearly. *What's that drink they're always having on TV? Oh, yes.* He pressed the Martini button.

After one sip a pretty blonde girl bumped into him, spilling his drink. "I'm sorry," she stammered." I was looking for my number. You want to hit me?"

"I don't care what they say," Terry replied gallantly, "I don't believe in hitting girls. Especially pretty ones."

The tall blonde girl giggled, but not objectionably. "Then I'll buy you a new drink. What were you having?"

"Martini," Terry said it as if he'd been drinking for years. "But that's all right."

"It was my fault you spilled yours. Besides, I've never ordered a drink before. I think I'll have one, too."

She punched the Boozer's Martini button, but forgot to insert her credit card. Gordon helped her like an old hand. When she received the first drink, she handed him one of the disposable plastic glasses. "I'm Nova Dale." She had dimples when she smiled.

"Terry Gordon," replied the stocky young man. "What's your standing?"

"I'm not quite sure . . . . "

"Ninety-four," said the computer. It said the "four" badly.

"Let me have your ID card a second. Here, hold this." He traded her the drink for her card and copied her PIC number on a piece of paper (since it was in poor taste to hold onto another person's card), then walked over to the tracer. She turned out to be in a slightly better position than he. "You're 5,509,999," Terry said. "I'm not doing that well. I'm 5,524,322." He was trying to be pleasant.

Unsuccessfully.

"Why are the last percentage points so high in acceptances?" she asked.

"Rich kids. Tutors." He gulped at his Martini and instantly regretted it.

"I hope we both make it," she said.

"If it goes on like that last percentage, you'll make it and I won't."

Nova Dale tried to be helpful. "What'll you do if you don't?"

"I've got to."

"But . . ."

"I've just got to."

"I didn't think being an Also Serve was so bad."

"The hell you say."

She pouted.

"Ninety-five," announced the computer.

"We're getting down to the short hairs, Nova." He took his place in the tracer line as a young man went berserk in the losers' Corner and had to be shot down by the police. He returned to Nova with a grin from ear to ear. "They only got their share," he yelled to her. "I'm 5,583,264 and you're 23 thousand places better." Suddenly he realized he was holding Nova's arm. He re-

leased her but continued to bubble, "Straight percentages, Nova. Only five per cent more to go, and there are 317,000 places left. I may — I just might — make it!"

"Wonderful."

"Let me buy you a drink. You're very pretty, you know." It was very true, but he still didn't know quite why he said it.

"Thank you," she said, replying to the compliment. She tried to tell him she didn't want a drink but he was already marching toward the Boozer. She took a deep breath and drained her glass. "Adult," she muttered as Terry returned.

"What?"

"Nothing."

They walked to a spot where they could visually spot their numbers overhead but Terry suggested they go no further.

"Why?" she asked.

There was a burst of flame from the Losers' Corner, making the question academic. Nova Dale considered the incident, took another sip and announced, "I guess our educational system does produce a lot of pressure."

He nodded gravely.

A human voice usurped the computer. "There have been a large number of score results reported within the last minute. We will skip a report at 96 per cent and go directly to 97 as soon as the information is digested. Hang on — stay loose — keep cool. This public service message is brought to you by God and His representatives in your friendly neighborhood church or synagogue."

Nova sipped at her drink, made a sour face, then smiled at the intense young man. "I'm glad the results are coming in quickly now. I hate suspense — except on TV of course. I 'member, in my TV drama watching class, they told us suspense was the agonizing wait for the inevitable . . . . You know, without my heels you'd be as tall as I am."

Staring up at the ceiling, Terry Gordon replied, "Yeah, I guess I would be. Hey, there's my number."

"I think I'll take off my heels." She did.

"Your number is about 20,000 that way."

She stood up directly in front of him. "You trying to get rid of me?"

"Gosh no, I like you."

She started to say something, stopped, then blurted out, "You going to shack up with somebody tonight?"

"No," he answered. "I know we're entitled to, graduating to adulthood and all, but I — ah — well, I didn't want to apply for a trial marriage right away and . . . ." Terry Gordon realized his dark face was turning red. "Well, college starts in three days, you know."

"Did you know they only used to teach school nine months a year?"

"I heard that. Those old kids must've never learned anything." He took a big swallow of his Martini. "Ah, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Shacking up?"

"Well, there is this boy . . . ."

"Ninety-seven," said the inhuman voice.

"Moment of truth," he yelled and

ran for the tracer, leaving Nova in mid-coquette. He was one of the first in line and returned quickly.

"How was it?" Nova Dale asked.

"Worse. You've got it made."

"I don't suppose we could trade rankings?"

Terry snorted, "Don't be an ass."

Hurt, she fumbled, "I was only trying to help. It doesn't mean that much to me. Really."

"I wish we could. You're only 5,668,104; I'm 5,713,832. You know what that means? I'm only a lousy ten thousand or so better than straight percentage. I'm not going to make it."

"There's still a chance. There's only four more per cent to go."

"Three."

"I never was very good at math."

"Who's the guy?" Terry asked.

"What guy?" Nova Dale tossed her long blonde hair from side to side and drained her glass.

"The one you're doing the trial marriage with."

"Just a guy. I met him in high school in a Luke Short course. He's pretty nice and, after all, I figured it was time I knew something about sex. You know what I mean?"

He nodded.

"I mean, why would they give us all those courses if they didn't want us to experience life's greatest social experience?"

"Yeah, I know. There was this one girl I might have — ah — tried, if that's the word."

"It fits our generation," she answered with the air of someone who has just said something profound. "She didn't want you?"

"I never asked." The burly man was blushing again.

"Gee, you should have. I bet you'd be very proficient."

"Thank you," he said solemnly.

"I'll buy you a drink this time," Nova said.

"Let me."

"It's my turn."

While the tall blonde was getting a round from the nearest Boozer, the computer announced the arrival of the latest figures. Terry Gordon checked the results and found that he was now at position 5,776,834, while Nova was a safe 5,725,399.

*Two more percentage points to go,* he thought. *And if it keeps going up like that, I've had it. I'll miss out by a couple of thousand. Boy, it's hot in here.*

Nova returned with the drinks. He accepted his and blurted out gallantly, "For a tall girl, you've got a real great figure."

"Thank you." She smiled and held the smile for a full three seconds. Finally, "How did you make out?"

"It's going to be close as hell. I'm only a little better than straight percentages. If the next two percentage points get 62,000 each, I've had it."

"It isn't fair. You want to go to college so badly and you may not make it; I don't really care and I probably will. It isn't fair.

"I've read that just coming from a worker's family gives a person a much better chance on the tests. Intellectual stimulation at an early age, they say."

"What's your father do?"

"Insurance estimator."

"Gee, that's a pretty good job. The most I really hoped for was fireman or subway emergency actuator or bellhop or something like that. You know, you're the nicest sexy girl I've ever met."

"You know, for a short man, you show no predisposition to plumpness."

"Thank you. I played a lot of football in high school. First string tackle."

"I thought so." Nova took a good swallow without grimacing. "And, for an intense young man, you're very polite. I know what you must be going through."

"I wish I'd met you before that other guy did. I'd like to be married to you tonight."

"I would have liked that, too."

"Ninety-nine."

Terry Gordon's knees jellied, and Nova had to go to the tracer with his PIC number.

*It's not fair,* he thought as he sat down on a pink bench, *not fair to drag it out like this. I'm going to lose. Why couldn't my father have been a worker?* He took a good swallow from his new drink. *No, I can't blame anybody else — that's cheap. Why didn't I study harder?*

Nova Dale returned. "You're 5,840,943. Is that good?"

He shook his head. "Less than 60,000 places left. I've had it."

Nova sat on the bench beside him as there was a flurry of gunfire from the Losers' Corner. She put her arm around him. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"No, but I sure as hell feel like it."

"If the percentage holds, you'll make it." She gulped at her Martini. "Besides, if you've done your best . . . ."

"I have to be in control. My psychiatrist told me so."

"Are you angry with me because I have a higher score?"

He shook his head again. "I'm just mad at myself for not doing better. Somebody once said 'Ninety per cent of everything is junk.' " He smiled, as though it hurt his lips. "Actually 'junk' wasn't the word. He ate his pseudo-olive. "I've got to make the ten per cent, don't you see?"

"I see." She nodded gravely, stroking the back of his head.

"No, you don't, but I think I love you."

She kissed him.

"It's against the law to kiss anybody in public, but thank you."

"Ninety-nine point five." The computer voice seemed to enjoy the torture.

"I'll go get the results," he offered. "I think I can walk this time."

"And I'll get us another drink. These things aren't bad after you get used to 'em."

After a few minutes he returned to accept his fourth Martini and tell her, "You're in. I've had it; I'm 5,873,450."

"You still have a chance."

"Yeah, but it's a slim one. More than a quarter of a million people are trying to get in, and there are only 26,550 places left. If I make

it," he said, staring down at the floor, "would you marry me for three days?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Nova replied.

A human voice announced to the waiting crowd, "Final results are in. They'll be processed and announced in one minute."

There was a scream from the Losers' Corner.

"Here's to higher education and the 5,900,000 people who enter college in three days. I hope I'm one of them."

"I hope so, too," Nova answered.

"And here's to our marriage."

"Yeah, that too. You will be kind?"

Terry Gordon nodded, wondering why the room seemed to turn slightly when he closed his eyes. "I've got to make it," he repeated. "I mean — I don't think I could get married unless I get accepted. You know what I mean? The sus — suscess —"

"Successful."

"Yeah. Sussessful Sexual Adjustment Class. I did real well on my final in that course."

"Me too. And I do understand, Terry. I mean, I guess I love you. Funny isn't it?"

"Sure is."

"I mean we just met and all."

"Yeah."

"Do you suppose we're drunk?"

"I guess so. I didn't think it'd be like this."

Nova Dale smiled and tossed her long blonde hair from side to side. "But it is sorta nice to be grown up and able to drink and get married and all."

"Yeah."

"You don't want to talk much now, do you?"

Terry Gordon took her free hand in his. "You're not only burriful, you're unnerstanding."

"Here is the posting of the final results," announced the computer in what Terry thought to be a compassionate, if inhuman voice. He sprang to his feet, and he and Nova joined the jostling crowd around the tracer. He shoved her ahead of him. Their plastic Martini glasses splashed, then spilled and fell on the floor.

She filed her 14 numbers into the machine. Instantly, she had her answer: 5,838,832. "I'm in," she screamed.

Terry Gordon was in front of the tracer now. He made a mistake and cleared the machine. His hands would not obey his mind. Finally with a dozen other aspirants threatening his life if he didn't hurry, he entered his PIC number.

And received in return: 5,900,001.

"Somebody has to get that number," Nova tried to console the ex-high school football star.

"I only needed one more. Just one." He sat on an orange bench with his head in his hands. "There's no prize for second." He pulled a folder from his pocket.

"Does this mean . . . . "

He stood up and faced her. "Nova, I love you and I'd still like to marry you tonight, but . . . ."

She pouted.

"You know, in my state, I'd be using you."

"That's all right," she said. "Some

masochism is pleasant and perfectly within the boundaries of so-called normal experience, according to my teacher. I wouldn't mind, if you'll just be kind."

"I'll use you kindly."

"I'll call that guy; chances are he can still find a girl for tonight. I'll call my father, too, and tell him about my change of plans. I hope we can find an apartment at this stage of the game." She began dialing on her communicator.

Terry Gordon just stared at the pamphlet explaining the test. *There must be a loophole somewhere.* But he couldn't find it. "After the completion of the test," he read aloud, "5,900,000 winners will be chosen for seven years of basic higher education. Those who successfully complete the seven years will be assigned employment consistent with their abilities and, as is possible, consistent with their inclinations as well." *Officialese.*

Losers' Corner was bedlam. A few shots were heard; screams and shouts of anger filled the air. Suddenly a bullet ricocheted off the side of the near-by tracer and pranged into the bench beside Terry. Its velocity nearly spent, it probably couldn't have done much damage, but it did wake Terry out of his lethargy. *A man could get killed here,* he realized.

"Terry," Nova announced, "my Daddy wants to talk with you."

Nova was surprised when Terry practically grabbed her communicator. "How do you do, Mr. Dale." Pause. "Yes, I will be kind and I want to talk with you . . . . "

"What do you want?"

Chief Testing Officer Raymon Bristow was six feet four inches tall and weighed 240 pounds. Some people said he got the job because he had the physique for it. Administering the test was bad enough, Bristow had told his friends, answering the complaints was much worse. He stared across the twelve-by-twelve office just one floor above the great waiting hall and glared at the couple who had managed to reach him.

"Unusual enough to see a couple here, what do you want?"

Nova cut off Terry's prepared opening. "We're going to be married just as soon as he convinces you."

"Nobody convinces me of anything. We don't accept changes because order, no matter how rotten, is preferable to chaos, no matter how noble."

"Yes, sir," Gordon blurted out. "The Roman Empire and the Dark Ages."

"I was thinking more of the old California educational system. Now, get to the point so I can throw you out. You're not here to kill me because you volunteered for a probe and you're clean. You're not here to complain about the system or the test, either."

"Did the probe tell you that?"

The huge man snorted, "Kids come here to kill me, adults to scream of injustice. I don't know why you're here. He lit a huge round cigar. "Now, for Freud's sake, talk."

"I'm Terry Gordon and I was 5,900,001."

Chief Testing Officer Raymond Bristow choked on his cigar and turned his back on the couple, "So? Somebody has to be the first to lose. You're no more pitiable than the loser at 59,000,000. I'm sorry for all losers, but I can't do anything about it. Now get out."

"I haven't explained why I have a right to go to school."

"All right." Bristow turned, his face composed now. "Explain it and *then* get out."

"Fifty-nine million people took that test today."

"About that," Bristow hedged.

"About that? Because if 59,000,-010 took the test I'm entitled anyway."

"Kid, ten per cent is a guideline. The rule specifically states 'After the test is completed, 5,900,000 winners will be chosen for seven years of basic higher education.' Those are the rules, not some stuff about ten per cent. Besides there were less than 59,000,000 who took the test. Good-by, kid."

"I'm not through."

"Kid, I'm getting anxious to meet some irate parents. At least they get to the point."

"Will you grant that almost all who took the test were twenty years old?"

"How old are the two of you?"

Nova missed irony and answered.

Gordon pressed on, "Now, Nova's father is an insurance man . . . . "

Bristow interrupted, "Have him sell me some; I don't think I'll live."

"He says, out of ten million twenty years olds, 217,300 won't last the year."

"It's the same rate as 1958, Daddy says," Nova contributed. "Medical science and the banning of private cars have kept the death rate down in spite of hyper-population."

"It's a fine lecture," grunted Bristow, "but it changes nothing."

"Would you agree a person has to be alive to go to college?"

Bristow glowered at the couple. "I see what you're driving at — somebody may die before college starts. Sorry, Gordon, the rule doesn't say we deliver 5,900,000 bodies, it says we pick that many."

"Nova, darling, he said it!" He jumped up and down, embracing her.

"I said what?" Bristow demanded.

"You said you pick that many. Now you can't pick a dead man."

The big man exhaled a huge cloud of smoke. "Let me try being very direct: what the hell do you mean?"

Terry took a deep breath. "The test was over at four o'clock. The test results weren't finally announced until ten p.m."

"So?"

"So, I figure about eighty-five people ahead of me in the listing are dead. They don't need their spots, and I do. And, the way the rules are set up, I'm entitled to one of them."

Nova looked at Terry. "Eighty-five?"

"Sure. Figure it out for yourself. Per ten million you have 217,300 fatalities yearly — that's a little less than 130,000 for 5,900,000. Divide that by the number of days in a year, and it's about 350, or more than fourteen per hour."

"And you can't choose a dead man to go to college. It's not copesetic." Since the Chief Testing Officer was staring at her, she amended, "It's not fair."

"Fairness," stated Bristow, moving to the computer imput which took up one of the twelve-foot walls, "has nothing to do with it."

"It's not right," Nova said, beginning to cry.

"Ditto," said Bristow, typing on the computer keys.

"It's not *defensible*," Terry Gordon stated flatly.

The computer sprang to life and file cards spewed from the output orifice. "Now that," said Bristow, is probably the smartest thing you've said tonight." He picked up the cards and flipped them in his hand. "Your mortality tables aren't too accurate over a short span of time. Actually almost one hundred winners have died." He flipped a switch and announced into the microphone. "Attention. Since 97 people who have qualified for college died before test results were completed and posted, we are revising the results. This will admit the first 97 people over the 5,900,000 rating." Bristow flipped the cards into the machine, typed *cancel these cards* and revise the list accordingly to 5,900,000.

"You're lucky," Bristow said, "that this machine is tied into payroll. We knew the deaths immediately."

"Thank you," Terry Gordon said, his knees weak with wonder. "We did it, Nova. I'm not junk."

"Where are you two shacking up tonight?"

"We don't know."

The Chief Testing Officer dug into his pockets. "Here's my key and location finder. I won't be using my place tonight. After I get done listening to 5,900,098's sad tale and a few thousand parents I'm going to get very drunk."

Nova and Terry both thanked him.

Profusely.

"I'm not doing this for you, kid. I'm doing it for Edison."

The couple paused for a moment at the door.

"Edison and all the world's other great men who wouldn't have passed this damn test. You've got guts, I'll say that for you. You damn well better put 'em to good use."

It was three in the morning when Terry Gordon and the three-day Mrs. Gordon reached the Chief Testing Officer's beautiful apartment. In front of a pseudowood fire, the couple drank a glass of champagne Nova had purchased while Terry picked up the license.

"You know," Terry said, "I've been thinking about what Mr. Bristow said. I have a hell of a responsibility. For all those people who didn't make it."

"You'll live up to it, Terry," Nova said. "And besides that, you will be kind."

"I will."

He was. END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

# THE ACCOMPLICE

by VERNOR VINGE

*Somebody was stealing computer time . . . but for what purpose?*

There was a thief on my staff. Hell. It was someone I trusted, too; it had to be.

Arnold Su grinned enthusiastically as he laid the proof on my desk. "Computer time is expensive, Mr. Royce," he pontificated. Now *that* was a discovery. "And someone has embezzled more than 70 hours on our 4D5 during the last year."

I raised my eyes prayerfully to the mural that covered three walls of my office. The holograph gave the three-dimensional illusion that we were perched among tall conifers somewhere in the Canadian Rockies. You'd never guess that my office is buried under the Royce building in Greater San Diego.

"God preserve me from your efficiency, Arnold. Seventy hours on the 4D5 computer is worth $400,000. You're an extraordinary security officer; it only took you a year to discover that someone is robbing us blind."

Su was pained by my unjustified criticism. "It's someone with a private computer readout."

"You're pretty good at the obvious." Most computers, especially the really big ones like our 4D5, can be programmed by remote consoles in the offices of favored company researchers. Such use is automatically recorded for later review.

"So it must be someone highly place in the company. Someone smart. Chief, he actually programmed the computer to cover up for him. The 4D5 has been "keeping two sets of books" to conceal the embezzlement from our weekly checks."

Of course there have been cases of computer-camouflaged embezzlement (usually of money) in the past — that's one reason why CPA's are computer technicians. However it takes a real expert to thoroughly cover his tracks. Evident-

ly we were up against an expert. "How did you discover the theft, then, Arnie?"

Arnold's grin spread even further across his face. This was the question he had been waiting for. "Boss, you really don't appreciate me. I've been expecting something like this for a long time. My section has an agreement with Control Data Corporation. Every year we audit their computer complex with ours, and vice versa. That way the problem is reduced to a battle of the computers, and we can detect this sort of automated deception. But the crook started embezzling, something after the 1992 audit, so he wasn't discovered until yesterday."

I picked up Arnold's report. "Any idea who the culprit is?" Four million dollars, I thought. If I never got my hands on the crook who — no wonder our general efficiency had fallen off in the last year.

"Not the vaguest," Su replied, "except that he's a company VIP with computer privileges. Now if you had just let me bug the executive offices and washrooms . . ."

"You know, Arnie," I said slowly, "sometimes I think you would have been just as comfortable on Herr Himmler's staff as you are here."

Arnold turned red. "Sorry, Boss, I didn't mean — "

"Never mind." Su is a good man, the graduate of one of this country's best schools of business administration. It's just that he's an incurable snoop, which makes him, properly supervised, an excellent security officer.

Su continued, subdued, "We can't even reconstruct what sort of problems the computer was doing during those 70 hours. The thief did a magnificent job on that computer."

I looked down the valley in the mural. Someone I trusted had sold me out. I'd worked twenty years to make the name Royce synonymous with computers and to make Royce Techonology, Inc., competitive with IBM and CDC. In that time, I've collected a lot of good men under one corporate roof. They are the backbone of Royce, more than I, with my high school diploma, ever was. And one of them was rotten. Who?

There was one individual who might be able to find that answer. I got up and started for the door. "We're going to see Howard."

"Prentice?" asked Su. He grabbed his report off my desk and followed me. "You don't think he's responsible?" Arnold was genuinely shocked.

"Of course not," I said, locking the door to my office.

When we were out of earshot of my secretaries and their recording equipment I continued. "Whoever we're up against obviously knows computers inside and out. We can't catch him with old-fashioned automation techniques. We're going to have to get him by exploiting the human angle. Howard Prentice has been kicking around longer than both of us put together. He knows human nature, and he knows more ways to skin a sucker than we'll ever imagine. He makes the perfect investigator." I noticed the hurt look

on Arnold's face and added quickly; "On a unique case like this."

It's only five minutes by aircar from Chula Vista to the Royce Research Labs at Oceanside. In fifteen minutes we were standing in the hall outside Prentice's lab. I prefer to see people in person rather than by phone — I get more out of them. But this time it backfired: Prentice wasn't in his lab, which was locked. I was starting back to the parking lot when Su stopped me.

"Just a minute, Boss." He produced a flat, metal plate and inserted it in the lock. "Master key," he explained confidentially. "Now we can wait for him in here."

I was too surprised to bawl him out for this latest invasion of privacy. Besides, he'll never grow up.

The room lighted up as we entered. Packed against one wall were the usual programming typers and TV screens. I also recognized a high-resolution video tape recorder and a picture reader. Stacked in orderly rows along the work benches were hundreds of Prentice's oil paintings. Sometimes I wondered whether he considered himself an artist or a scientist — though I didn't care what he did with his time as long as he completed assigned projects. Su was already rummaging among the paintings — admiring them I think.

Prentice couldn't be out for long. As a section chief he was in charge of thirty different computer labs. And right then his section was busy designing the optical and communications system for that probe NASA wanted to boost out toward Alpha Centauri A next year.

I sat down in the chair before the computer console and tried to relax.

The holograph on his desk caught my eye. It was a color pic of Howard and Moira taken on their diamond wedding anniversary. Moira must be more than ninety years old. Only one woman in a billion could look even faintly attractive after a haul like that — but tall and slim, somehow Moira managed it. She was holding Howard's arm like a fifteen-year-old who's just discovered boys. Quite a gal; quite a man she had, too. Howard must be pushing 95. You know, he personally worked for Thomas Edison? Fact. The man's like history. When the 1929 depression came he was a top executive for some oil company out East. The depression apparently soured him on industry. He spent the next forty years — an ordinary adult lifetime — in Greenwich Village as an artist-bum, a beatnik. Then, some time around 1970, he changed careers again. *He entered college.* If you're old enough, maybe you remember the headlines: 75 YR OLD FROSH VOWS HE'LL GET Ph.D — in math, no less. And he did it. Howard's been with me for fifteen years.

One of my best men. I tapped an impatient tattoo on the arms of the chair. But where the devil was he now?

"Boss, this stuff is tremendous!" I stood up to see what Arnold was talking about. He was pointing at several paintings he had pulled out from the bottom of the pile. Su is quite an art and film fan. He has a tape collection of all films made

since 1980, as well as a very large collection of paintings from all periods.

He had reason to admire Howard's paintings, though. Prentice is an excellent, maybe a great painter. Though he's done many traditional abstractionist pieces, Howard has been a neorealist ever since I've known him. Take the paintings in the lab; they were all clear and unambiguous as far as execution went. There were landscapes, portraits, interiors. But the landscapes were from no area in the real world. And the portraits were expressionless mug shots: face on, quarter face, profile. Not all of the subjects were even human. Every canvas was the same size. Over the years I often asked Howard about this, but he always answered with some line about artistic profundity. I don't think he even let us see everything he did.

Arnold had called me over to see three landscapes he had discovered. When he placed them side by side it was like a composite photo — a panoramic view. It was one of the most spectacular things I'd seen by Prentice.

When I looked at it, the lights in the room seemed to dim a little. In the picture it was night. A sickle moon lit a deep valley or mountain pass. Our viewpoint was halfway up the side of the valley. Scrubby brush and volcanic slag were visible nearby. Far away, down in the center of the valley, was a castle or fortress, its immense black structure outlined by the moonlight. Though vast and strong, somehow it was also decayed and diseased — a skull rotting in the earth. Around the castle were fields of purple flowers glimmering faintly with their own light (fluorescing paint?). But the flowers weren't beautiful — even at this distance they were fungus growing on death's decay.

I pulled my attention away from the landscape. It was the most hostile I'd seen by Prentice. And somehow it was familiar. I often got that "seen-before" feeling with Howard's stuff — though usually his landscapes provoked awe rather than fear. The picture would have been even more impressive if it had been painted on a single canvas rather than split up on separate ones.

Then I noticed the picture reader at the end of the bench. We use pic readers to program images directly into the logic of a computer. This is an expensive procedure since it preempts a lot of the computer's circuits. It's usually simpler to keep pictorial information on tape, but sometimes we want the computer to operate directly and continuously on information in a picture — to alter a perspective, say — and we have to use the reader.

A horrible suspicion was forming in my mind. I picked up one of the paintings and laid it on the flat glass plate at the top of the reader. It fit perfectly. Now I knew why all the paintings were the same size.

Forgetting Su, I reached up and pulled a heavy notebook off the shelf above the bench. I had to snoop. I had to find some legitimate excuse for the man I now suspected.

The notebook was a motion study.

We use them when we have to program the computer on changing spacial relations — as with complicated machinery; the computer has to know the position of every part of the machine at every instant in order to predict performance and detect bugs. The interior page was titled: Vol. XIX — Hand Technik. I riffled through the pages. There were thousands of rough sketches showing the human hand in every position. Beside each sketch was a numerical description of the motion from that position to the next.

Volume XIX? Why, Prentice, must have a separate notebook for facial expressions, a notebook for every class of motion! And it was all set for programming. His project — whatever it was — was huge. He must have been planning this for years. From the evidence in the lab it was certainly big enough to cost 70 hours of 4D5 time. Prentice was the rat all right. But why had he embezzled the time? And what had he done with it?

There was a noise from the doorway. Arnold looked up from the picture he had been admiring and said cheerfully, "Hi, Howard!"

"Hello." Prentice set his briefcase on the bench and hung up his jacket. The he turned to look at me. "This is my private office, Bob," he said mildly.

I didn't bite. I was too mad for subtlety. "Prentice, you've got some explaining to do." I gestured at the paintings and the picture reader. "Someone's been stealing 4D5 time, and I think it's you."

Prentice glanced at Su. "So you finally ran a cross-audit, eh, Arnold? Well, I knew I wouldn't have more than a year. I got what I gambled for."

Su looked even more surprised than I felt. Prentice had spent a whole year concealing the fraud, and now he was calmly confessing.

"Just what was worth $4,000,000 of Royce time?" I snapped.

"Would you like to see?" He did not wait for an answer. "I've got one of the last tapes right here." He reached into his brief case and pulled out a TV tape cartridge.

"Moira and I have always been appalled by the fact that so many art forms are beyond the means of a single artist. Take the film industry: most movies cost many millions of dollars and require the services of hundreds of artists — actors, directors, photographers." Prentice threaded the tape through the multiple head of the video tape recorder. You'd think he had invited us over for home movies. The gall of the man. I didn't stop him though. I suppose I was curious. What could be worth a ruined career to Prentice?

"Anyway," he continued, "back around 1957, I saw a way to give film-making to the individual artist. Since then, everything Moira and I have done has been directed toward this goal. At first we didn't realize how complicated the job was and how far computers had to go before they could help us with what we wanted. But I got my degree, and we kept at it."

He hooked the tape into the recep-

tion cartridge and snapped the cover into place. "With the aid of the 4D5 we've animated one of the great novels of this century."

"You've used the 4D5 to make a cartoon!" Arnold was obviously fascinated by the concept. He had completely forgotten that Prentice was talking about a crime.

For the first time since he had entered the lab, Prentice seemed annoyed. "Yes, I guess it is a cartoon — like da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is a doodle. Cut the lights, will you, Arnold?"

The lights went out, and Prentice turned on the recorder. The TV screen on the wall came alive. I gasped. *Night. The landscape with the purple flowers.* But what a difference. This was a window on another world. If I had felt uneasy looking at the paintings, I felt terror now. Three tiny figures struggled up the side of the valley. Suddenly I knew why this scene was familiar. Prentice had animated Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings!* If you've ever taken high school English (and if you haven't, I'll hire you — my ego needs someone in this outfit with less education than I have) I'm sure you've read Tolkien's book. We were watching the scene where Frodo, Samwise, and Gollum come up the stairs to Kirth Ungol past the fortress Minas Morgul — the skull thing in the valley. Prentice's version was much more realistic and fearsome than anything I had ever imagined.

I realized Prentice was still talking.

"Moira and I worked thirty years on the paintings, the motion studies, the script, the sound track; but without the 4D5 to integrate what we had created, we'd be left with a warehouse full of paintings and notebooks."

The three figures stopped to rest. Our viewpoint moved in for a close-up. The three were arguing in low, frightened tones. Now I knew why Prentice's portraits were expressionless; they were the patterns on which Prentice, through the 4D5, imposed emotion and movement.

This was no cartoon. The figures were fine portraits, come alive to argue in whispers. I could see Frodo's blank resignation, the fear in Samwise, the glittery green of Gollum's eyes as he fought with the other two. Yet it was all a synthesis of oil paintings and motion studies — the product of Howard's genius and the 4D5's analysis. Without a break in continuity, the "camera" dollied back to reveal the ancient stone stair that stretched high into the mountains. The three stood up and continued their long climb toward Shelob's Lair.

*Click.* The tape ended. Prentice turned on the lights. I sat dazed for a second, trying to bring myself back to the real world.

"That tape is just five minutes long," said Prentice. "The whole animation is more than four hours."

Su recovered first. "My God, Howard. That's tremendous. It's the greatest advance in art technique in fifty years."

"At least," agreed Prentice. "Now, anything a writer or painter can imagine can be staged."

"Sure," I said sarcastically, "as long as the painter is willing to steal $4,000,000 of computer time."

Prentice turned to me. "Not really, Bob. Computer time is only expensive because of the scarcity of 4D5- class computers and the number of problems that can't be solved except by the 4D5. On the basis of past progress, I'll wager that in five years you'll be selling computers as good as the 4D5 for less than $10,000. Anybody who really wants an animator will be able to have one."

"And you just couldn't wait."

He smiled, "That's right. I've waited thirty years. I don't know if I'll be around for another five."

"Well, I'm going to make you wish you'd taken the chance. When I get done with you, there'll be nothing left for the Tolkien estate to pick over."

Arnold broke in, "Just a second, Boss — "

I turned on him angrily, "Look Su, can't you understand? Prentice has *stolen* $4,000,000 of *my money!*" My voice rose half an octave.

"It's your money I'm talking about, Chief. Did you ever see *Fantasia* or *Magica?*"

"Disney's feature length animation? Yes."

"Do you have any idea what they cost?"

"Don't play games, Arnold. I know you're an expert. How much?"

"*Fantasia* was made way back in 1940. It cost Disney more than $2,000,000. But when they got around to *Magica* 35 years later, the price tag had risen to $27,000,000, even though *Magica* is a much poorer job. Nowadays, almost any main-guard picture — whether animation or with real actors — costs more than $10,000,000. Howard's actually discovered a *cheap* way of making films."

"Why didn't you just ask for the time, then?" I asked Prentice.

Howard looked stubborn. He has his own peculiar brand of integrity. "Bob, do you honestly believe you would've said yes? I'm an artist. I may be a good researcher, but that was a means to an end. Moira and I had to do this, even though I knew it'd hurt Royce in the short run."

"Chief, it doesn't matter whether Howard planned this to help you or not. The point is, he's dropped a fortune in your lap."

When Arnold put it that way . . . Four million dollars wasn't too bad for a topnotch movie, and if Howard had had organized help, besides his wife, it might have cost a lot less. It would be at least eight years before we miniaturized computers like the 4D5 for the consumer market. Until then, film-making would remain the prerogative of the large organization. It had taken Howard years to perfect this technique, so we were way ahead of potential competition. Figuratively speaking, we were standing on the ground floor of a whole new industry.

Su saw that I was swayed. "Well?"

"Well," I said grudgingly, "I guess we're in the movie business." I didn't realize how true I spoke till we got that first Oscar. END

# THE PURPOSE OF IT ALL

by W. I. JOHNSTONE

*What lovely people the Earthlings were! They were utterly delicious!*

The Snick approached the Earth at 86,000 miles per second, detected the atmosphere and slowed up. A little closer in he sensed a masterhost and almost forgot to slow up for the hydrosphere. And then he lost it.

The Snick was wise with its million years. Although he had never before found a masterhost except in the water, he knew exactly what to do. Retracing his path up to where the sense had been the strongest, he homed on it and shot westward. Three minutes later he was hovering above New York City.

The Snick hesitated for only a moment, struck by the unexpected form the masterhost had adopted throughout the entire city. Then he dived, the final test.

The people saw him coming. They shouted and pointed at him. A few began running. He felt the building emotion as he darted straight at a small group. This could be the home the Snicks had sought for almost a thousand years in an empty galaxy.

He hit the first man in the middle of the back and went giddy with pleasure as the ecstatic burst of emotion flared around the masterhost. Drunk with celebration he cut through man after man until his rapture was so extreme he glided to the street in a stupor. Along the street thirty bodies lay as they had fallen while twenty-one hundred per-

sons stared from every conceivable place of hiding at the little metal cylinder that looked too much like a bomb.

An hour later the Snick woke. The bodies had been removed and the watchers had all disappeared. For four blocks in every direction the city had been deserted. Beyond that was a military cordon not even a rat could have slipped through. The Snick lay alone and thought.

He had found a new masterhost. Certain features had not fit the universal pattern but they probably did not matter. Nowhere before had he encountered a masterhost that did not dwell in water. Nor did he have any memory of any masterhost whose individual entities all possessed an almost identical pseudoform, continually. In fact, he would have thought it impossible until today. But the final test had been conclusive. The test was what the Snick lived for.

A million years ago the first masterhost had taught the newly created Snick to dive through the masterhost's protoplasmic body and tickle the insides with a small electric shock. To the amebic masterhost this was the supreme ecstasy, and the Snick thrived on the emotional output. But after 700,000 years the masterhost died out and the Snicks had gone into space to find another.

They found several, but all in the final stages of extinction, and when they were gone the Snicks spread again into space. And here, after a thousand years of drifting he had found a new masterhost, young and numerous. Gathering together all the strength from his recent emotional rapture the Snick sent a directional come-home thought code of success to three million brother Snicks drifting in the void. It would take months for them all to assemble from throughout the universe, even on a thought code, but the first would arrive within days.

The Snick must now make contact. The opportunity came immediately.

A demolition squad came up the street in a heavily armored car. Two TV mobile units detached themselves from the car and approached, scanning the Snick from every angle. After several minutes a masterhost in thick protective shielding came toward him. This was contact.

The Snick was built like a rounded and sealed metal cylinder, twelve inches long and three inches in diameter, with a ten-inch spike protruding from the head end along the central axis. The spike had two purposes, the first was to promote easy entrance into the protoplasmic bodies of the masterhost, the second, contact. Shooting off the ground, the Snick hit the masterhost full in the face and stopped, the spike through the middle of the contact brain. For an instant he felt the ecstasy and giddiness return, but because it was the brain there was something else.

Deep within the contact, almost unnoticable to the Snick, was a fear and a hate and a hurt. And there was something more he couldn't quite catch as it flickered away and the masterhost crumpled.

The ecstasy was gone, and the Snick felt the emptiness of the void. He did not understand. He had tried to make contact and had felt the emotional climax. But then . . . . The Snick withdrew from the crumpled masterhost and turned toward the car.

The blast hit him without warning and knocked him against a building. Before he had time to rationalize a second exploded beneath and sent him hurtling through the air. Immediately he raced skyward and two more missiles exploded where he had just been. Then he was out of sight of the city.

The Snick flew west, its thoughts confused. The masterhost did not seem to want contact and yet the ecstasy had been real. Just to be sure he dived at every town and tested a group of people. It took him only a short while to learn that the climax came when he hit them in the middle of the upper part of the body or in the head. Several times he had hit just an arm or leg and had felt no rapture. He had gone back to those persons and hit them again, effectively, but the emotion had an undertone that frightened him. He learned too that the bodies were not protoplasm. They were more or less solid and contained a rigid internal structure of limestone.

It wasn't until he reached the west coast that he thought of the second test. With three million Snicks on the way he must be certain.

At the beach just north of Conception Point he made the test. Twelve masterhosts were on the beach. He hit all twelve, then sank into the sea. The emotional rapture he drew from the twelve, added to the ecstasies of his flight west, nearly sent his mind into blissful oblivion. Half of his thoughts wished there had been just two more masterhosts, That would have done it. The other half told him that then he would not have been able to complete the second test. He allowed himself plenty of time to cool off, just to be safe, then jumped back into the air and again raced toward the twelve on the beach.

No masterhost moved. No preclimactic emotion reached toward him. Almost fearfully he hit the first masterhost, crumpled on the beach as the contact had been. There was nothing. There was the void.

Shocked, then saddened as reality dawned, the Snick stopped to look at his victims.

Victims! The thought and blame began to sear. He knew now that these beings were not the masterhost, that none of the ones he had encountered had experienced the ecstasy before, and that none would experience it again. He recognized then the fleeting glimpse of the something leaving the contact.

Three million Snicks were eagerly heading Earthward. It would take months for them all to gather, but the first would arrive within days. The last Man would be gone before the last Snick had heard the call.

END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

# The Iron Thorn

by ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustrated by MORROW

*He had dreamed of Earth all his life. Now he was there — and the dream had spoiled!*

## What has gone before -

*Honor Jackson used to be an ignorant, graceless savage, fighting Amsirs and hating farmers on the ruddy wastes of Mars. But all that has changed, now; Susiem, the cybernetic spaceship he has stolen from the Amsirs, has given him a Bachelor of Arts degree from Ohio State.*

*Now Jackson knows enough to wear clothes, and enough to understand how he came to be a child of the Iron Thorn. The Thorn is a towering climatological control device located in the center of a Martian crater. A small tribe of humans had managed to make its home there, and, as long as they didn't stray too far from the Thorn, could go on living long enough to procreate not*

*only their own kind but the whole batch of half-truths and legends which, a thousand years since Susiem was stranded on Mars, Jackson has now learned to scorn.*

*Obviously, Mars was the site of some sort of experiment run by Associated Midwest Universities. Much closer to where Susiem stood was another Thorn, around which flock Amsirs — humans genetically modified to breed true in the form of winged, armored, lichen-eating creatures. The experiment had been running for a thousand years now.*

*With the passage of time and the accumulation error, the experiment had become completely misunderstood both by the barbaric Amsirs and the neolithic human control group, resulting in a situation Susiem couldn't understand. Not understanding, and out of touch with Earth, she persistently did nothing. But by simple force of native talent, Jackson managed to outwit not only her, but, before that, his own kind, and the Amsirs.*

*He did not quite blunder aboard Home Free. With him came Ahmuls, an Amsir sport with soft skin, not much brains, but very fast reflexes. It had been Ahmuls's job to kill Jackson if he tried anything funny with Susiem. But part of Jackson's computer-implanted university training had included a course in unarmed combat, and Ahmuls was sullenly cowed by the time Susiem, Jackson and he reached Earth, after he had had his damages repaired by Susiem's doctor, and Jackson had been ministered to for various scars and hurts inflicted during his adventures.*

*The newly sophisticated Jackson feels responsible for Ahmuls, and frets over what will happen to him once Susiem docks at the Associated Universities facilities.*

*But a thousand years have gone by since Susiem's last up-dating. She lands on a grassy plain, with nothing visible except an occasional distant white villa, and a smoothly pastoral landscape. She is immediately disassembled by self-propelled, miniaturized units — some flying, like insects, and others burrowing, like insects — and her components are either carried away for salvage or buried in the ground, presumably to restore something of the organic balance of nature. Ahmuls and Jackson are left standing there, Ahmuls naked and unashamed, Jackson dressed in captain's coveralls and rather nonplussed, as the naked inhabitants of Earth approach.*

## XXII

He was very heavy in the limbs. wasn't slumped like Ahmuls, but he was very heavy in the limbs. And Ahmuls was right — they didn't have any clothes on.

They were a bunch of men and women, about thirty of them altogether. The first one of them — a man, with long, clean limbs, and much more smoothly and heavily muscled than anyone Jackson had ever actually seen — gracefully walked up into sight from a hidden hollow nearby and stood in ankle-deep grass, looking at the two of them. Then he half turned, and motioned behind him, and the rest of

them came up. They were all adults, and they moved with a kind of confidence that reminded him of Amsirs. They had apparently been doing something together down in that hollow, out of sight, and that was how they had managed to surprise him. For the nearest villa was much too far away for anyone from there to have made it this far in the little space of time since Susiem had landed, died and been buried.

He felt heavy, and he felt surprised.

Looking at them, he knew something of what they were. They were people who had eaten right all their lives; lived right, had the right kind of doctoring. They were the people sprung from the kind of person he himself had been when he "was" at Ohio State. One of the things he had learned from "being" at Ohio State was that bio-transmitted memories were convincing, reliable and in some ways utterly irrelevant.

He even knew how to look at himself. He was undersized, too gangling, too long of leg, too hollow of stomach. His skin was like seamed leather; his eyes were pits, icy blue without a trace of melanin, their whites as white as smooth, wet bone. His hair was a short, raggedly cut thatch of brittle straw. In his borrowed coveralls, he was a parody.

Their men were too big; their women were too smart. They came walking in toward him and Ahmuls as if none of them had ever stepped on a cockleburr.

Well, what was he going to do? He couldn't even rip off the coveralls and be himself. For one thing, it would be completely gauche, to realize so late that he had landed here in a cyberneticized, landscaped paradise; in a world a thousand years younger than he was even when he was young enough to worry about being gauche, and educated enough to know what being gauche felt like.

"See? Told you — no clothes."

"Right. My apologies, Ahmuls."

"Your what?"

"I mean I'm sorry."

The buzzing of the insects had stopped. Now he could hear the murmur of the soft wind through the pliant grass and take time to feel the warmth of the wonderful sun on his face and hands. He could even remember what it had been like strolling along the shade-dappled groves of State, and the slumberous delight of baking for hours in the sun of Jackson Park beach when he was at Chicago. I'm home, he thought, I'm home where I've never been, and I have to state my claim to it.

As he began to feel the onset of oncoming voices, their murmuring as the people spoke between themselves, he shook his head to clear it, feeling the knots growing in the muscles of his neck.

They had reached him. Some of them were raising their hands in casual greeting, and smiling. They were all taller than he was. One of the men said: "Hello, there. Comp tells us you're from that genetic experiment on Mars, both of you. Tell you the truth, the Comp had never told us about the experiment before. There was a great range of new data when that spaceship came down with

you and prompted us to ask about it. Biggest thing in years. It's great. Welcome."

Their accent was a bit far from the Midwest he knew. But it wasn't unintelligible. He could could already feel himself sorting it out properly.

Comp would be Central Control; the thing that guided the insects, that determined the fate of spaceships, of specimens from the genetic experiment on Mars, of the landscape which no longer needed more than a minimum of serviceable features. It had happened here, some time after Susiem left. They had gotten their machines properly centralized under one control, and here he was, among the people it serviced. But I'm one of you, he thought. My body wasn't born among you, but my mind was.

"I'm glad to meet you," he said honestly. "This is Ahmuls, and I'm — " A wicked little relay closed inside his mind. He grinned. "I'm Jackson Greystroke. I was raised by jungle beasts."

He had said the right thing. They were all smiling. Two of the girls pursed their lips like ripe plums.

"Marvelous!" the man said. "Come and have breakfast with us," he said. "My name is — ah, Kringle. These are my sons; Dasher, Comet and Cupid. My daughters, Dancer and Vixen. My other sons; Donder, Blitzen, and Prancer. I'll let these other people tell you who they are — I wouldn't presume to. At any rate, come on, let's all grab a bite, and we can talk."

It was amazing, being with people who could pick up like that. "Come on, Ahmuls," Jackson said, feeling better and better, lofted on a cloud of names as the remainder of these people made introductions for themselves — Cincinnatus, Columbus and Elyria — Perry, Clark, Lois and Jimmy — Fred and Ginger — Lucky, Chester, Sweet, Home and Piedmont (who was glanced at with some disappointment by some of the others when she gave her name) — Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborne. He found that he got them all straight, and kept them all straight. They all fit. Even when Piedmont said, shamefacedly: "I goofed. I should be Pall."

"I'm hungry," one of them said from the back of the group.

"We're ready," Jackson smiled. "And thank you for the invitation. Let's go," he said again to Ahmuls.

"Don't want to eat with you," Ahmuls said. "Don't want to eat with these people."

Jackson felt the tiniest flutter of air. A voice spoke in his ear. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of something bright, metal and hovering. "This is Comp," the voice said. "He needn't worry. There'll be food of his kind too."

Ahmuls said: "What did it say?"

"He said he loves you. Come on."

Some of them were already beginning to walk away, back toward the hidden hollow. Jackson took a step to follow them, stopped, frowned at Ahmuls, turned his head back to watch them go, looked back at Ahmuls. "Come on!" He moved his hand quickly, and it felt heavy.

Ahmuls' eyes darted to follow his hand. "Don't." He got himself into motion, one hand to the right side of his face, holding his eyelid so he could watch Jackson from the farthest corner.

The group of them walked over the grassy rise of ground. Durstine murmured, her perfume very near to Jackson: "I wish I'd brought some clothes." Jackson stopped looking at Ahmuls and grinned at her. She raised one eyebrow back, touched her glistening upper lip with the tip of her tongue, and laughed.

## XXIII

It was a fine morning. Their breakfast things were set down in the grass, on a cloth — doubtless woven on the spot by bees — and the graceful cups and dishes were of earth colors, delicately shaped. Shaped delicately enough, it occurred to him, to be attractive not only to man but to insect as well. He breakfasted on tamales, Riesling and conversation, while Comp's bees brought Ahmuls lichen. They made no dishes for him. Either Comp felt that Ahmuls's hands would break chunks from any utensils the bees might make, or Comp was disinclined to produce anything clumsy enough to be sturdy enough.

Jackson's senses were much occupied with the vivacious scent of women, with the sound of words sung, not grunted or cawed, with a sky of perfect blue, Thornless. If he watched Ahmuls, it was infrequently and from the corner of his eye.

"So it's really not much different from the way you remember it," Kringle was saying. "I imagine you've got the picture. Comp reached the serviceability threshold shortly after the Martian experiment was started. And at that point it became unnecessary for people to concern themselves with management.

"But we still have the same old services; food, clothing — or the control of factors that normally make clothing necessary — and shelter. Well, in actual fact the distinction between clothing and shelter has disappeared, with the distinction between genial and hostile environment. But it's really, about the same. There aren't as many of us. Frankly I feel that a great deal of the procreative urge is actually a reflection of panic or boredom. We have very little of either. So that's all to the good. And, well, it's a ball. As I've said, welcome!"

He was so self-possessed, so obviously independent of anything what used to be called "the world" could do to him, that Jackson could really, strongly, feel how fortunate it had been that he had found a way to communicate immediately with this sort of person.

Jackson thought — with all his customary speed — that all the same instincts that had made him such a fast and agile killer, such a self-possessed hunter, so obviously not one of the ordinary run around the Thorn, still served him in this new world. It was marvelous — not faggoty marvelous; it was, truly, a marvel, and of marvels, and replete with marvels (how quickly his mind responded to the stimuli of education!)

— that all his life, no matter where he had been, or what he had been doing, he had possessed the qualities necessary to be able to sit here at breakfast with these superb people.

He began to chuckle, watching Ahmuls with lichen in his mouth and bees darting at his face. My God, my God, Jackson thought, who would believe it? Where are the Amsirs, and where are all the people who believed in Ariwol? I made it. I made it by being me. I made it by not holding still when they wanted to make me stay; when they were afraid I'd prove what they were.

And yet, in looking back, he couldn't honestly say that he had ever told himself that there was something better. He had only never ceased to feel that there was something terribly wrong. And he had never even tried to change them. He had only had the wit not to let them change him.

What a great deal of wit that was! Pure instinct, pure sense of self had saved him from missing this reward of being here.

He began to laugh even louder as it occurred to him what an incredible, marvelous, wonderful thing he'd done. He was here by right. He was one of them.

Watching him laugh, they smiled. Little Pall held out a cup of wine. Her large brown eyes were twinkling again, as they had no doubt always been intended to. "It *is* nice, isn't it?" she said. "It must feel good."

It was beyond his wildest dreams. He sat on the grass with his knees drawn up, sipping wine and feeling the heavy familiar touch of Earth upon him. "So, as I understand it," he said to Kringle, delightedly continuing their conversation, listening to the concepts roll trippingly from his tongue, "there's really no further need to take time in accumulating credit toward necessities. In that event, what do people do to fill the day's time?"

Kringle looked a little nonplussed. "That's a factual question," he complained.

One of the tiny silver bees detached itself from the swarm around Ahmuls, zipped over to Jackson and said:

"This is Comp. The people you're with are members of the most populous class of individuals. That is to say, the naturalists. Naturalists practice the living of pure life. This human preoccupation is, of course, a new one, in the sense that there had never been individuals totally free of managerial concerns. As you can guess, this is the first type of individual capable of disregarding his own true physical situation or the estate of his factual accumulation. Accordingly, these people have no thought and perform no action which is not straightforwardly derived from the impulses of the psyche.

"Since psychical development is conditioned by stimulus, and all stimuli to this class of individual are autistic, there is reason to believe that the minds of this class are qualitatively different from any mind previously attainable by the physical interactions of the human brain. So at some finite point in time this class

of individual will represent a humanoid, but non-human, true-breeding race native to this planet. We will then see the phenomenon of a new *genus* created entirely by mechanical manipulation of the environment — that is to say, by the exercise of my facilities.

"In other words, we're talking pure Lamarck. I find the entire concept fascinating.

"The second major but far less populous class is composed of individuals who are to a large extent concerned with me. That is to say, the technophiliac type, who normally cling somewhat closer to home — that is, to a conservative pattern of movement about the face of the Earth — and with whom I maintain close liaison. These receive a running thorough education in all branches of technology and neurophysiology bearing on my construction, operation and maintenance.

"The principle here is that individual intelligences are theoretically open to flash error. That is to say, considering the speed of neurophysiological interaction, and the complexity of the structures involved, it is possible for a brain to be thoroughly sane at any given point of time, to have then made one minor error a millisecond beyond that point, and to have then reached a point of extrapolative total error — that is, insanity — within a matter of microseconds subsequent to the initial point.

"Therefore, it is of advantage to me to maintain a pool of individual intelligences with whom I can maintain meaningful intercommunication. From my point of view, the purpose of supporting such a class of individuals is the availability of an emergency correction and repair device independent of my own neurophysiological system.

"From the point of view of the individuals concerned, the value lies in giving them something to think about, and an eventuality to plan for.

"The odds against an error on my part involving not only my primary systems but my backups, and my repair and auto-psychiatric circuitry, are astronomical. That is, they are finite, but rather large. Not once, since my primary circuits crossed the threshold into complete managerial awareness, has there been any need for any intelligence other than my own to supervise my intelligence and capabilities. Nevertheless, at some point during a finite though large number of years, such a need — theoretically — will arise. I say, 'theoretically.' In any event, it's a great comfort to both parties in this arrangement.

"There are a number of other categories, but they are all essentially similar. They are the category of individuals who have institutionalized various aspects of creativity. For example, sports and the arts. The chairman of the Toxophilite Society is currently working on the fourteenth volume of his compendium on the subject. He has furnished me, each month, with the latest updating of the rules for performing various evolutions of the limbs and torso required to flight an arrow at approved targets in regulation style. It keeps him happy, so why should

I care? And he has a great number of assistants and fans who are also kept happy.

"That's essentially the picture. Nobody ever gets hurt, statistically speaking. And there's no problem to repairing an occasional accident to either the body or the mind of any individual. Personally I find it all rather fascinating. And I'm sure that you, with your relatively naive viewpoint, will find it the same.

"I think you might as well forget about asking broad-spectrum questions of any individual in this group, or in their class, because they rather expect me to handle that sort of thing. If you persist, you might even be considered gauche. I realize it's hard not to occasionally appear gauche in unfamiliar company. You can avoid that, if you'd like. I can have a thorough education delivered to you, more or less the same way as the academic credits Susiem gave you. Just say the word. But, if I were you, I'd first wait a while, and explore around a bit. You might not care to be thoroughly indoctrinated in any one set of mores so soon. You've only been here an hour or so; there's plenty of time left to decide which way you really want to swing. Meanwhile, just play it cool, and have a ball."

## XXIV

Well, all right. It would be very interesting, living the rest of his life with a gimmick that would murmur softly in his ear whenever he wanted a question answered, or confer another degree upon him whenever he wished to master a subject.

He noticed that these people seemed to have no problems in dealing with social situations this could create. They had simply ignored him politely while he sat listening to Comp, and had turned their attention to watching Ahmuls instead.

Ahmuls was fidgeting, and swatting at the flying things around him. "No," he said. "I don't wanna eat this way. Fly away." Comp's exteroaffectors danced out of his way.

Comp said to Jackson:

"Is there anything you can do to make your friend less of a social liability to himself?"

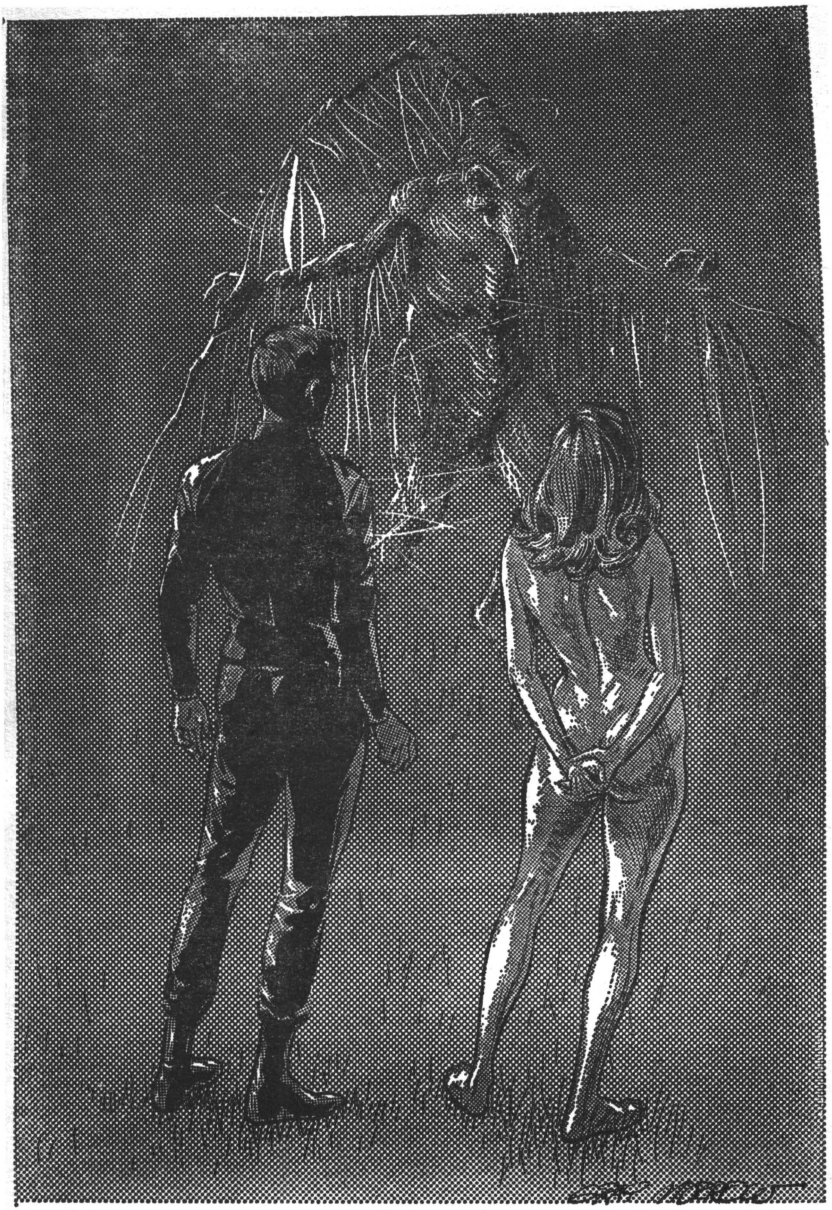
"I can't even get him to like me."

Ahmuls caught a bee. Durstine gasped: "He's so fast!"

Ahmuls rolled the silvery exteroaffector between his fingertips. He grinned, one-handed. "Hard," he said, "but little." He flipped the bee to one side. He grunted at the breakfasters. "This is a crumby place. You don't fly, you don't fight. You got fliers, but they're little. You don't eat like you should." He got to his feet, pushing and straining, drooping. The insects still hovered around his face. When he was standing erect, Ahmuls was able to swat at them again. Durstine began to giggle.

"It's not funny. Knew I shouldn't come here with you crazy people," Ahmuls said. "I'm goin' away; gonna find a better place." He turned, rippling turgidly, and began to move off.

Kringle smiled. "I wonder where he'll find it."



There was nothing out there but grass and white Walt Disney houses and exteroaffectors. "Hey! Wait! Hold on!" Jackson said, standing up. "Don't just go out there like that!"

Ahmuls turned his head, holding his face. "What's it to you? Never gonna bother you. Just gonna go away, look around."

Where was he ever going to find a place that was going to love him? Jackson took a couple of fast steps and caught up with him. He put his hand on the doughy shoulder. "Oh, now — just wait," he found himself pleading. "Look, we just got here. You got to give it a chance. You've got to give yourself a chance. I mean, these people are happy this way. And I'm going to be happy here. You could — "

"I'm not like you. I'm not like them."

"Say . . . . Man to man on the prairie's endless waste, the sinewy Jackson Greystoke and his monstrous adversary faced each other," Chester remarked behind him.

Durstine chimed in: "The battle of two superb physical machines trembled on the brink of being joined. Here in this peaceful glade that had seen no violence in a decade of centuries, suddenly there was a reawakening of Earth's age-old heritage of struggle between brute strength and trained intelligence."

Donder declaimed: "A still hush settled over the land, as Nature herself seemed to draw breath in anticipation of the awful onslaught."

"What? What are they talkin' about?" Ahmuls muttered.

Jackson looked over his shoulder. Kringle, Durstine and some of the others were staring toward him and Ahmuls, laughing-eyed. Some of the others were just plain eating, gracefully sipping and nibbling. All of them were lounging about, relaxed. Pall seemed a little interested. But people with large, moist eyes frequently seem emotional when in fact they are merely displaying a phenomenon of physiology. "Never mind," Jackson sighed. "You just go on and do what you want."

Ahmuls said: "Should have said that to start with." He trudged up the slope of the hollow, was silhouetted massively against the pale horizon of late morning, and began to diminish from the legs up as he lumbered down the other side of the slope and out of Jackson's line of vision.

"Comp," Jackson said, "you'll be keeping track of him, right?"

"Oh, I always know where everybody is, of course," Comp said. "And I rather think I can predict where he'll end up. Just as well. I can have permanent feeding facilities for him there, and I expect he'll be happy. It's a little tricky with an uneducable, as I imagine you know. But it's rather exciting for me, having what you might call a random factor to deal with."

"Well, he's not educable in human terms. But you're not limited to Susiem's resources. Surely there's something you can do for him beyond simple maintenance," Jackson said. He walked back toward the breakfast group.

"Don't see the need," Comp said.

"He has no history, and no future. All his yearnings are self-contained. He needs no further education on that."

Comp knew when a point was made. The bee flew away from beside Jackson's ear.

"Looks like your faithful companion has left you, Masked Rider of the Plains," Kringle remarked as Jackson sat down again.

"The only person he was ever faithful to is back on Mars," Jackson said. "That's if they haven't put somebody over him for the way he mishandled me." In the midst of all this, Jackson did wonder how the Amsir Eld was making out.

"Well," Durstine said, "neither of you ever has to worry about that place again."

"I suppose not," Jackson said. Her hand was petal-soft where her fingertips touched his as she passed him a tamale. Tamales were clad in pastry a lot like rough bread. Around the Thorn, though, when a woman gave a Honor rough bread, she gave him rough fingers too.

## XXV

At the end of breakfast they stood up and left everything for Comp to clear away. Little silvery things came out of the grass, nibbled swarmingly, and the cloth, the dishes and the leavings disappeared, bit by bit, lightning fast, into the earth from which they were sprung.

Jackson grinned watching it, enjoying it. "Handy," he said. Durstine followed his glance.

"Oh, the services, you mean. Yes."

"Well," Jackson said, looking around. "What do we do now?"

"Actually," Kringle said, "that depends pretty much on you. What would you like to do?"

Pall said to Jackson: "I think we've been hoping you'd tell us a little bit about what your life was like."

Durstine smiled. "Among the jungle beasts."

"Well, I imagine Comp's told you how it all began. There was a period of time when it seemed like a good idea to produce gentically modified humans capable of living comfortably in hostile environments. A site was prepared on Mars, and a program of genetic manipulation was begun. The initial modified type, miscalled the 'Marser,' was created capable of surviving unaided on the Martian surface for extended periods of time, provided it had a base genial environment to which it could return periodically. This completed Stage One of the program.

"Stage Two would have either produced a true Marser capable of full-time survival in the natural environment, or alternatively the Stage One type would have been given the technological capability of transforming the environment to the relatively slight degree required for its survival.

"The crucial question was a political one. That is, whether the bioformed inhabitants of Mars should retain a psychic dependence on Earth and its history, or whether they should be made truly independent. The point being, they couldn't be made truly independent of the en-

vironment without also being truly independent of the universities which had put them there.

"Well, there was considerable discussion back and forth about that, and a little trouble about getting next year's grant from the National Institute of Health. There was a cutback in the program. The human technicians on the site were told to establish a semipermanent base for themselves while the whole thing was being thrashed out. And so there came to be two adjacent Thorns."

"We know all that," Donder said with restraint. "Comp told us. The whole thing became academic anyhow, when Comp took over the services. You've got two equally intelligent races with essentially equal facilities, competing with each other in an uncontaminated environment. Clear-cut, educational. Like an ant farm. Comp explained it. All sorts of data bound to result from it, for anybody who wants experimental data on social evolutionary factors. But, man, we don't want to hear any of that dry stuff. I mean, what was it like? What's this buiness about killing off what-is-it-you-call-them — Amsirs? I mean, what kind of hunting is that?"

"Yes," Durstine said, "show us!"

Mmm, Jackson thought, looking at her, she'd like that. "Well," he said, "I'm a little short of the necessary tools." He held up his empty hands. "A little short of Amsirs, too."

A voice said in his ear, "This is Comp. I can arrange that. Listen, I'd love to make a popular actuality of this."

"A what?"

"An actuality. It's no problem; I could make an Amsir for you — excuse me; a Amsir — and a throwing stick and a couple of darts. I have some very good footage of the Martian terrain from my orbiters up there."

"Orbiters? You mean you've got eyes on Mars?"

"Certainly. Quite a number. Our space exploration's quite sophisticated these days, compared to what it was when the primary system component was humanoid. But what I'm saying is that I have plenty of stock background, so you go ahead and hunt your Amsir. And the audience will see it with proper background and lighting. And perfect dubbing of the terrain. I am sure we can get you one hell of an audience for it. Wait one — I'll ask around."

"Great response," Comp said to him a moment later. "We have over four hundred thousand lookers-in; thirty-eight per cent of the potential audience."

"I don't think I understand. Thirty-eight per cent of the audience for what?"

"The audience for your actuality, man. Look, the number of the audience and the number of the world population are theoretically congruent, right? In practice there are always some individuals asleep and some urgently occupied otherwise. So there's never been a hundred per cent audience for an actuality — not the live version, at any rate. The record is eighty-three per cent or thereabouts, but that was for the

competition between Melanie Altershot and Charles Dawn, and a very long time ago. Well, I queried the population for interest in a Amsirhon, and they're all waiting — thirty-eight per cent of them are waiting now, and a number of others have expressed serious interest in taking on the delay. It hinges now on whether you're willing. But I think you should know there hasn't been a thirty-eight per cent audience in quite some time."

"You know, we don't have all day," Donder said.

"Well, I'd like to do it," Jackson said. "Right here, huh?" Besides the impatience on Donder's voice, he had also noticed Vixen and Batten. The two of them now had some kind of flying toy they'd had Comp do for them.

It was elfin; translucent lavender. It caracolled back and forth between them as they stood some distance apart from each other and flew it from hand to hand. The object seemed to be to make a pattern, for the marvelous toy trailed a feathery lavender wake which hung in the air briefly and then disintegrated into dusty filaments, crossing, criss-crossing and intertwining.

They had begun this game while Comp was explaining actualities and Jackson was busy listening. One or two people in the group had stopped watching Jackson and had started watching the flight; from being a tight group around Jackson, these people had begun to spread toward Batten and Vixen, attenuating. "Sure," Jackson repeated. "Provide me with the tools and a Amsir."

"Good!" Durstine and Comp said simultaneously. Pall smiled. Jackson smiled back at her. "I know what it is," she said. "You never realized you'd get a chance here to do something you must have enjoyed so much."

"Pall, darling," Old said, "one of the reasons I want to watch this is because it's done in a place where people do things they don't enjoy."

Pall put her fingers to her mouth. "Oh, Jackson, I'm sorry," she said.

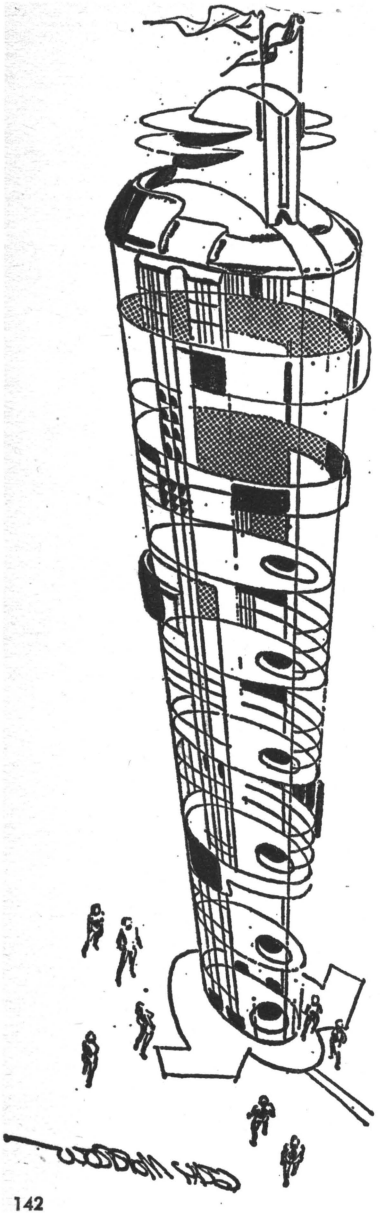
## XXVI

In this world, Amsir bones were made by insects. They came whipping in over the tops of the soughing grass stems, in a swarm far smaller than the one that had devoted itself to Susiem, each carrying a little white speck. They buzzed, they grouped to some efficient shape, and in a thrice there was the stick. The place that would serve as the handle was properly reshaped as if by patient sanding; the hinge was neatly fitted, the nock for the dart's butt properly incised. Jackson picked it up and admired it.

"It's very much like my own, Comp. Those are good scanners you've got."

"How about the darts?"

The short, bluntly tapered hafts had been produced the same way the throwing stick had been. The head was done by burrowing exteroceptors, who came spilling up out of the ground, clustered at the head of each dart as bees held it in place, and withdrew leaving cooling, jaggedly pointed silicate heads fused into



the cups that had been made there to receive them — each, for all Jackson knew, already freighted with its dab of synthetic Amsir-hide glue. He picked them up and bounced them in his palm. He rolled them around with his fingers. "Good," he said. "Good, fine."

He walked up the slope of the hollow and looked around. The landscape rolled away from him, empty. There was no sign of Ahmuls, or of anyone else. But there were a great many receptor bees clustering in the air up there.

"Look to your left," Comp said. "I am starting your Amsir."

About seventy-five yards away the exteroaffectors attacked the grass. They darted down to catch stems being hurled up to them by cutters on the ground. They seized them and pulled them up into position. They moved with great rapidity, dexterity, and economy — it was as if the grass had freed itself of compliance to the breeze and had decided to bend its own way. It bent in all directions toward a common center as the exteroaffectors took it, but as it bent it hurried forward rootless, and when it reached the center it fountained up, urged by splashes of buzzing silver, and there before Jackson's eyes they wove a Amsir's bones.

Toe and tarsal, leg and knee, thigh and hip, they wove him from the inside out; spine, collarbone, shoulder joints, arms, elbows, forearms, hands — he watched the little finger extend itself like the shootings of a magic shrub. Neck and skull matted themselves into structural

compactness. Now, flesh; fibrous strands wrested into place upon the green bones. In a moment, he was all hooked up together. Then they clad him; hide was fitted, bubbles swelled. Beak and talons, crest and wings; lace, fluttering . . . fluttering pale; as he stirred there, with exteroaffectors burrowing nimbly between the fibers to give him life, he bleached.

An army of burrowers came running forward, and fused the glistening fragments of his javelin. They tossed it upward; a low cast, but his wing rippled as his right hand swooped down to seize it, and hollow-eyed he straightened to turn his head and look at Jackson.

"Comp, your name is miracle," Jackson said.

"My name is Comp."

Jackson opened down the Velcro of his coveralls and shrugged out of them. Immediately, exteroaffectors clustered around him. He winced as they plated his body everywhere with themselves. But the touch was gentle, and they were gone again in the blink of an eye. "Sunburn lotion," Comp explained.

"Oh. Yeah, makes sense."

He looked around to see what the breakfast group had made of all this. But there were none of them near him. They were all down in the hollow, sitting or stretched out gracefully, each with an exteroaffector on each eye, at each ear, on each hand. A little string of them, like a girdle of small jewels, lay across each stomach just below the navel. Jackson looked over at the grass Amsir standing alert in the middle of his patch of stubble. Jackson bent down, picked up the throwing stick and the two darts. The coveralls were gone, dissipated.

"Ready any time you are, friend," he called to the Amsir.

"Ready," Comp said in his ear, and withdrew.

The Amsir waved its javelined hand to him. Jackson took a few quick steps; running on grass was different, but he remembered. Remembering it gave him Ohio feet instead of Thorn feet, but at least it gave him feet. He tried a few dry casts of the stick, slapped the spare dart up into him armpit and was off.

He was playing it about the only way he could; as if he and the Amsir had each turned a shoulder of a dune at the same moment and had spotted each other at a distance. He ran away at an angle, down and across the slope of the land, picking up speed, ready to dive and roll straight downhill if the bird cast its javelin.

The Amsir was turning. A thousand or ten thousand exteroaffectors shifted its weight, raised its arms, cocked its hips, raised its leg. It tipped forward, planted its leg, raised the other, and was running like the wind, lace streaming, wings unfurled. It ran down and across the slope of the land, diagonally away from him, cutting back across his line of flight, putting him in a position where he'd have to throw in the direction opposite to the one he was running in.

Damn! Jackson thought. I forgot how smart they were. He looked back over his shoulder. The dark,

wide, empty eyes were looking along a wing at him. Jackson got his legs out in front of him and set his feet. He was sliding to a stop. The Amsir grinned, spread his wings and hung stock-still in the air, legs free of the ground. His knees bent; one wing dropped, the other rose. He landed faced round on a dime, claws sunk in the tough grass, javelin poised. His legs began to scissor. He came on ' an ostrich, straight for Jackson, eating up distance between them, confident he could duck.

For Jackson to get up any momentum to reach the Amsir with a dart, he would have to run straight toward him, now. If he ran to either side, the Amsir would have a clear shot. And the best Jackson could do would be to try something sidearm. If he ran away, the Amsir would run him down.

Oh boy, Jackson thought. All right, let's try one on you. He took three steps forward, simultaneously loading the stick, and then with the fourth step he fired.

Jesus, there was nothing on the throw. It was straight enough, but there was no whip to it; it was like throwing straight up. Or throwing with a sick arm.

I'm made of gruel in this place! he thought. The dart might reach the Amsir, but he was a fool if he bothered to break stride long enough to duck. It would never get through his hide. It would hang tangled in his lace. Even if it happened to stick into him a little, it would have no stopping power.

The dart reached the Amsir, who swayed clumsily to get out of its way. But he'd miscalculated. He ran right up on it. It took him in the chest, on the lower left, and it just seemed to keep going in past all reason. It went in up to the butt, with the sound of shocked fibers. The Amsir's legs went out from under him. He spread his wings for balance, dropping the javelin.

"The dart. Give him the other dart!" Comp said quickly in Jackson's ear.

"Right." The Amsir was all spread out, and had no traction. Jackson fired the second one, and this time he had enough practice to really step into it. He could feel it all up and down his arm and across his back, clear down to the sole of his foot, like a rope of electricity. He threw that dart harder than he had ever thrown in his life, and to reward him it took off feeling about half as good as it should have. But it got to the grass Amsir all right; it went in below his right collarbone, and it came out the other side, carrying about two or three yards beyond him, tumbling, looping down and bouncing on the ground, with a trail of torn grass floating out in the air behind it. The Amsir's right wing folded back as if the hinge locks had failed on a carrier-based aircraft. He ground-looped around the surface of his left wing and nosedived heavily to the prairie. You could hear his neck pop.

"He's dead," Jackson said.

Comp said, "Listen."

The sound was incomprehensible. It sounded like what you might hear if you ran as fast as you could, dragging a spear point-down through

rough sand. "What the hell is that?"

"That's applause, Jackson. That's the applause of thirty-eight per cent of the world's population. I've got the gain turned down, some."

## XXVII

Jackson walked over to the dead Amsir. It lay sprawled where he had dropped it, all broken, Jackson's first dart just peeping out of its chest. There was a rustling and a shaking; it slumped, its tissues separating. The little metal insects came out of its fibers, and each took its little bit of dead grass away. Others came popping up to join them. The Amsirs's wings became insubstantial; its body flattened. Its skull uncurled, and quick as that the burrowing exteroaffectors were scurrying off with its components, a straw-and-metal wave, still roughly in the shape of a fallen Amsir's silhouette, hurrying through the grass, back to the stubble patch, there to return its elements to the soil. A buzzing cluster chew through the javelin and the darts; Jackson dropped the throwing stick into the midst of them, and they snapped it up.

The breakfast group came up over the crest from the hollow, their faces flushed, their eyes sparkling. Dancer broke into a sprint toward Jackson, and as soon as one of them had done it, the rest of them followed suit. They came springing up to him, laughing, delighted with him. Jackson was watching the stubble patch, where clear droplets of water were forming on the clipped stems.

Kringle threw his arm around Jackson's shoulders and hugged him. "Terrific!" he said. "Just great!"

"You were fine!" Durstin gasped. "Unbelievable!"

They crowded around him, their bodies warm. "Wouldn't you like to see it?" Pall asked.

"Yes! He ought to see it!" Jimmy agreed, and the rest of them took that up, smiling and laughing, pressing some sort of feast upon him.

Comp said: "Here — "

Exteroaffectors landed like butterflies at his ears and eyes. They touched his palms and his belly.

"All that's involved is my getting in phase with the appropriate sectors of your central nervous system," Comp explained. "Just relax. Many people prefer to sit or lie down, but it's not necessary."

They were all around him. Jackson had never had that happen to him before; all of them were radiating at least ninety-eight point six degrees Fahrenheit. At that temperature, they were creating all kinds of ranges of evaporation at their bodily surfaces, and none of them were insulated, nor was he. All kinds of effluents were being volatilized in close proximity to his olfactory receptors and the thermesthetic components of his own system. He sank down to the grass, hugging his knees. They sank down with him, all around him, smiling encouragingly and watching him. He closed his eyes. "That's right," Comp said. "Now here we go . . . ."

The desert faded in. First there was a long shot of the two craters and the two Thorns, from a high

altitude. The edge of the planet curved, nearly undiffused, against star-filled space. Then his point of view transmitted into tighter and tighter focus on the human crater, until it was a tight shot of the desert at dawn, reddish-purple, rolled up into dunes, with the harsh light of morning upon it.

The point of view pulled in even tighter, until all there was to see was a flat, featureless, uniformly granular, unmarked field of desert-color. That point of view held for a beat; then an Amsir's white claw flashed down into the middle of it, thrust with a thump in running stride across the granules, scattering them. It flashed up and forward, out of the point of view, and was gone, leaving everything as before except for the pit of its print, whose sides began to crumble and flow. Light sparkled from one granule, and Jackson's attention followed it as it slid down the side of the footprint. It had not touched bottom before, with a *thump!-thump!,* human running feet crossed quickly from right to left, kicking the Amsir-print out of existence, leaving their own.

The point of view shifted up, and he caught a glimpse of a running, naked Honor, and then, ahead of him, the bobbing form of an Amsir.

There was a jump cut, and the Amsir was running toward the point of view, grinning straight ahead.

Another jump, and now it was Jackson running by himself; for the first time, Jackson could be sure it was him and not a piece of stock footage, for he could see the scar on his shoulder, and then the profile of the uncapped face. His lips were drawn back. His teeth were white and wet; the point of view filled with the side of his face, squinting, then the eyes snapping wide open — every pore, and every delicate blond hair growing whitely at the tops of his cheekbones above the line of his beard. The cut this time was to a medium down shot of the two of them. Jackson was running, his head turned to look back over his shoulder. There was a shot of his feet jamming to a halt in the sand, fighting for purchase.

Now the Amsir, braking in mid-air, changing direction.

Now, Jackson's first shot. The dart slapped into place on the stick. There was a beautiful slow-motion study of the muscles working in time, taken from behind him as he made the recovery from his stop and worked the cast of his stick. His arm flowed the throwing stick upward, the dart in its nock, poised, head sparkling. The motion began to speed, until as the dart came into line with the Amsir and he snapped it free the motion went into overspeed. The muscles of his right arm and of his stomach twanged with force as he shot the dart, which whipped through the air and sank into the Amsir's chest. It came in so fast that the bird didn't even begin to duck until after he'd been hit.

Now the Amsir hung in the air for a split second, in mortal trouble, wide open. The point of view jumped around Jackson like a carousel; he could see every move of his feet and legs, every twist of his torso, the tight strain of his left hand as he

whipped it down, the flow of his right arm. There was an extreme closeup of the second dart as it whipped back across and below the horizon, then whipped forward again, as if the dart were motionless and the world were spinning. And then there was a medium long shot of the Amsir taking the second dart and breaking his wing — actually seen in extreme closeup, reflected in the dilated pupil and the bottomless iris of Jackson's left eye. The background music, which had built up and over the sound of Jackson's forced breath with a crescendo of wood-block slaps, cut off. Jump cut to the Amsir's head impacting on the sand, MEDIUM LONG SHOT over Jackson's shoulder. SOUND: Neck breaks. (Hold long shot; DUB extreme close SOUND).

There was a medium closeup, facing Jackson, of him standing there, the empty stick dangling in his hand, his shoulders slumped. He was wiping his face and taking a deep breath. Then the point of view pulled back and up; there was a long shot, still trucking back, of Jackson looking toward the Amsir lying all crumpled up on the terrain, dwindling as the shot pulled back far enough so that the planet's horizon came back into view again. The camera panned to the stars, toward the Sun, became filled with hot white light, and then, on an accent clack from the wood blocks, cut out to APPLAUSE.

They were all around him; he opened his eyes, and they were sitting there right on top of him, damn near, touching him, grinning, laughing, saying: "Didn't we tell you! Great! Absolutely great!"

Kringle said: "I'd had no idea of how it was. It's never really possible to reach an intellectual grasp of a totally alien environment. That's why actualities are so superbly fitted to the didactic purpose. It's all very well to be given a series of facts for the brain to digest, but when you want to convey the immediacy of a situation, you've got to hit 'em right in the guts. Only way to do it. And I don't mind telling you, I've been hit."

Vixen said breathlessly: "I feel as if my entire life's been changed." She was hanging onto his arm. Well, people never believed a thing until they touched it.

"Hey, Comp," Jackson said, "why didn't I understand that thing? Was that supposed to be a Amsir hon?"

"I don't — oh. Yes I do. You're talking about the editing and the direction. I should have realized; yes, I imagine it does look quite different in the finished version from the way it feels to you while you're performing the action. But you have to realize that the way it feels to you is made up of experiences, whereas to them it's made up of appearances. It would be dull as ditchwater if I were to simply present a running record of the action from a fixed point of view. No, in order to give these people the feeling of what it's really like, considerable skill must be exercised in arranging the patterns of action in a way that will be meaningful to them. And it is meaningful; look at them reacting!"

"Full of tricked-up dub-ins, and shots jumping around like a nut?"

"It's what they need in order to be able to feel it. Believe me, a great deal of skill and intuition went into that production, and none of the effects were selected lightly. You want to remember, Jackson, that all you had to do was react naturally. *I'm* the one who had to manage it from scratch."

"I suppose that includes the dumb way I was able to kill that fake in the first place."

"If you're referring now to the Amsir's dull reactions at the crucial moment, you want to bear in mind that your reflexes and capabilities aren't yet coordinated with the physical properties of this environment." Comp chided him: "We couldn't very well have the Amsir hon *you* to death, could we?"

Jackson shook his head. The people were milling around excitedly, listening to exteroaffectors, getting all worked up about something new.

"What are you telling them now, while you're talking to me?"

"Oh, there's been a world-wide reaction to the actuality. I'm running a great number of relays to individuals who've been clued in by the live audience. Your total's well over fifty per cent at this point, and accelerating. You're getting great word-of-mouth on this piece."

Pall took his hands. Her eyes were shining. "Jackson, Jackson, do you know what we're going to do?"

"'Fraid not." He said it pretty gently.

"We're going to have an — oh, excuse me! — *a* honing party!"

Jackson turned to Kringle: "You're going to have a what?"

Kringle's eyes were twinkling. "Watch!" He waved his arm, and the babble of cross-exclamations that had burst out among the breakfast group fell away to a background murmur. "What do you say? Shall we have a Thorn?"

*"Yes!"*

"Comp . . . ." Kringle said.

Oh, the sweet, passionate smell of them!

A dozen buzzings trembled faintly all around the horizon. Jackson turned to look. There were shimmerings around the low white houses, under the trees. The trees themselves were glinting, and then trees and houses had disappeared in a silver mist, and the air shivered with the sound of flying. Jackson kept turning, watching. Kringle chuckled.

The grass quivered everywhere, as if someone hidden under a bed had reached up and begun to pull on the blanket.

"I'm going to have to move you for a few minutes," Comp said. "If you'll just step on board . . ."

Durstine tugged on his hand. "*This* way."

Not all of Comp's exteroaffectors in this area were devoting themselves to the trees and the white houses. Behind Jackson's back, some of them had put together a webwork of metal, its struts and stanchions curving and curlicuing every which way, with hammocks and canopies extended from it, tassels swaying enticingly, fountains sheeting crystalline auroras from pool to lower pool to

lower pool, step by step, to the accompaniment of delicately chiming music. It all made an insouciantly variform cloud of nooks and crannies-within-crannies, yet open enough within itself so that the breakfast group's members could call back and forth and laugh to each other as they clamored about within it. Durstine tugged him inside, and the cloud lifted away from the surface of the prairie, drifting off to one side as it gained altitude, until they were all perched a hundred yards up in the air, reclining, clambering, joking back and forth, whispering excitedly. A pleasant breeze swept through the structure. Droplets from the fountains tickled Jackson occasionally. Pall's upturned face peeked out from between two curling metal leaves farther down within. She wrinkled her nose at him and waved.

Meanwhile, Comp was making a party Thorn.

The cloud drifted languidly above roaring torrents of exteroaffectors. They swirled through the air, rushing in from all directions, converging. Where they met, some swirled into subsidiary pools, other bloomed upward in flashing combers, with little flecks of a kind of spray flashing away from their tips as they delivered their freight and went flitting away for another load. The fabric of the cloud thrummed to the cataract sound; parts of it — leaves and flowers — began to chime in counterpoint to the fountain music.

"Look! Look!" Durstine breathed, her upper arm across his shoulders from a little behind him, her forearm bent to lie down across his biceps. Her voice was in his ear.

The exteroaffectors pulled away from the plain below. Only a conical, thick cluster of them, a hundred feet across, hung in the air above the plain, and then these unwound in a spiral from the bottom. As they unwound, Jackson could see that they were finishing the upper stretches of the Thorn. Down on the ground, in a gay, fluttering circle, pavilions, bountifully striped and decorated, circled around the Thorn between a turf running track and beautiful fields delimited by clipped green hedgerows. He looked again, and the Thorn was done; straight, tall, shimmering, with flags in its antennas.

"It's gorgeous," Jackson said.

The cloud sank down to the turf between the Thorn and the pavilion houses, and everyone ran off to drink from the fountains. The fountains were spotted around its base, where he remembered taps. Pall was bent, hair falling about her cheeks in two short, sculptured wings, sipping from her cupped wet hands, where he remembered Petra Jovans.

## XXVIII

The Thorn was warm, and gently yielding when he touched it. He couldn't make up his mind what color it was; in some places it was off-black, with wine-dark highlights. As he shifted his gaze, he could see places where it was as green as a fly. He stood back, gawking like a tourist, his head going from side to side, admiring the way the flagged antenna raked against the pure blue

sky. He crossed his arms across his chest, cupping his elbows.

"Oh, it's going to be such a great time!" Pall exclaimed, running up wet-lipped. "Just everyone will be watching the actuality of it!"

Jackson nodded. "I believe it." Then he smiled, looking at her. What the hell — I mean, he thought, if she looked like a kid, you'd watch your mouth, wouldn't you? He felt a touch on his arm. This Durstine, now . . . .

"Let's go inside," she was saying. "Wouldn't you like to look around in there?"

" 'Scuse us, Pall," Jackson said.

"Oh, that's all right. I have to go change anyhow, and I want it to be a surprise!" She ducked off toward one of the pavilions.

"I'll be changing, too," Durstine said. "But we have a moment."

He followed her into the Thorn through a wide, elaborate doorway, and it was like slipping into a sea of jewel soup.

The Thorn was hollow inside, all the way to the top, but webbed by crystal filaments that spun themselves glittering in swaying curtains and loops, on up to disappear in the soft shadows overhead. Through the translucent walls of the Thorn came light, and the walls of the Thorn were all colors; green and gold, red and violet, blue and rust. The colors swirled and swept about each other in a pattern different from the not-quite-random swirlings of the inner webwork, which took what it pleased of them and threw it back to Jackson and Durstine in a shower of shifting pinpoints. He looked at her, and she was mottled with glory.

She laughed and tossed her head, then stood motionless, looking at him between the lashes at the corner of one eye. "Welcome to Earth," she said. "I wanted you to see this." She turned gracefully, on tiptoe, raising one arm in a gesture that swept around the interior of the Thorn. It was hard to tell whether she meant the Thorn, or herself, or both. "I'll see you here again, a little later. I'm going to go change . . . you might not recognize me, gowned. Ordinarily. But you will this time, at least. I promise. I promise with all my heart." She laughed gaily, secretively; her hand flashed out. Her fingernails trailed down his upper arm lightly enough, but by the time they reached his elbow they left a mark, and her middle finger drew a drop of blood.

She touched it to her lips, kissed him on the mouth and walked away, looking back over her shoulder for a moment.

People were beginning to come in to the Thorn; bees were listening to them, and exteroaffectors were beginning to pelt about, making and bringing whatever was wanted. There began to be music.

Jackson noticed that they weren't especially dressed. Oh, Elyria wore hoops of fine-spun wire around her neck, in a golden cascade, and Donder had on a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses with flat window-pane lenses. Lois had clad one arm in silvery chain mail to the shoulder, and so forth. But it was the light that decorated them. As they

shifted back and forth, talking, gesticulating, beginning to warm up to the occasion, they gained and lost patterns that shifted over their skins. They weren't eating or drinking, much. They were talking mostly. In fact, some of them were sitting very still, eyes half closed, heads bent, as if completely lost in private worlds. Often enough, one or another of them would smile at him, raise a hand, and look friendly and delighted to have him here. But none of them were really getting into conversation with him. They were much more interested in whatever it was that went on in their heads while they waited for a party to start swinging.

It was Vixen who started the ball rolling. Standing a little off to one side, she'd have been frowning and swaying her body just slightly. Jackson had been watching her curiously, while he stood around waiting to see what would happen when Durstine — and Pall, too — came in. He happened to be watching when she suddenly snapped her fingers and said delightedly: "Got it!"

"What? What do you have?" Ginger asked, and as Vixen grinned, heads began to turn.

Vixen took two or three steps forward, walking in a peculiar way. As she moved, she seemed to gain confidence; her movements became more pronounced and regular, and a little smile played around the corners of her mouth. She walked that way to the center of the circle made by the Thorn's floor. She had everybody's attention, now, and the light began to change. A glow began to come over the crystalline draperies, and soft, golden light began to grow in a dome, starting at the Thorn's floor, and working its way up the interior walls, until they were all standing in a crystal-clear bath of it.

"Jackson! Jackson — look!"

Vixen came walking toward him, one hand on her hip, the other extended in a graceful arch over her head, palm flat, fingers up. She smiled at him and reached with the other hand, and lifted something imaginary from the top of her head. She bent slightly at the waist, holding out her hands. "Water, Honor?"

The party burst into applause. Vixen smiled shyly, laughed a little, and retreated. Apparently, it had been intended to be some kind of pantomime. But that wasn't how you carried water; you cradled water in your arms.

"Well! That was a good beginning, wouldn't you say?" Kringle said, slapping him on the back. "I'd say she really conveyed the idea, wouldn't you?" He peered a little more closely at Jackson's face. "No? Well, perhaps there were certain minor crudities in her performance." A little knot of Vixen's particular friends was clustering around her, congratulating her. "But it was certainly good enough for a beginning," Kringle said.

Donder stepped forward. He stood in the center of the floor, and raised his hand negligently. A hush fell over the crowd. Donder took a breath and began to speak:

*"Die.*

*Be born, be loud, be running, but*

*die. Those of us born*
*Thorn-children suck that in our milk.*
*Hey, Thorn:*
*We spit your word on you."*

He bowed to Jackson, flushed, a sheen of sweat across his brow.

They started to applaud. Then one of them remembered something, and began to snap his fingers. The inside of the party Thorn crackled with the odd sound of it.

"How 'bout that, Jackson?" Donder called out to him. "Sort of puts it all in a nutshell, doesn't it?"

Jackson asked Kringle: "Does he mean, the way people feel about the Thorn? I mean, does he feel that way about the thing that keeps him alive?"

A very slight frown appeared between Kringle's brows again. "I think if you examine your internal processes, you might find he came somewhat closer than you might be ready to admit." He raised his voice and called to Donder: "Beautiful, son! Now, gang," he called out to the assembled company, "we all want to remember that our guest isn't completely familiar with our customs. But we all know he's going to catch on in no time."

Comp said in Jackson's ear: "Listen, they need the feedback of your approval, or the party's going to lose its impetus."

"Oh," Jackson said.

"Look! Here's Pall!" Clark pointed at the entrance.

She came in shyly, holding her hands folded in front of her. Hanging around her waist was a ragged white drape of fabric; scant, pure unblemished white, high on one hip and low on the other, the loose, torn threads of its hem brushing her at mid-thigh at its lowest point. She came walking up to Jackson, looking at the ground. As she got closer to him, Jackson could see that there were grains of sand worked into her hair, and streaked smudges from it on her body. The smudges had clearly defined edges, and they weren't any darker at the knees; there weren't little rings of it in the skin around her wrists, and there wasn't a deeper smudge of it at the base of her neck, in the hollow where perspiration would have washed it in the course of the day.

But by now, Jackson had the idea.

"Welcome home, Honor," she said submissively, and the Thorn seemed to fill with the sound of the group's approval — a great appreciative roar that was compounded of applause and outcries of admiration.

"Tremendous!" Kringle said.

"Look at her, Jackson!" he lowered his voice. "My dear — was that truly an original thought of yours? That's marvelous. Marvelous. Jackson, you do see it, don't you? She's made a work of art of herself! This is doubly exciting: our little Pall . . . ."

Pall was blushing. "Thank you so much, Kringle." She didn't quite know what to do with her hands; obviously, it was the first time in her life she'd ever gotten a compliment for her creativity. "Actually," she said, "you see, I'm such a naive person, really — oh, Kringle will tell you I'm not, but he's just being

polite — I finally thought to myself: 'Well, if you're naive, and there doesn't seem to be anything you can do about it, you might as well do something constructive with it, wouldn't you think? Why don't you — ' So I did! That's really all there was to it. I just did, that's all. I said to myself, the thing to do is take what you have, and use it!"

"I think you did fine," Jackson said. "I think the subtle touch of presenting yourself not only as a work of art, but as a work of art with a duality of meaning, is an example of the vitality inherent in the natural response." He smiled at her, and touched her lightly on the shoulder. The Thorn broke into fresh applause. "It's of course the hard underlying base of the subtle but primary implication that really makes it work," he said, looking sincerely into her eyes as they sparkled with fulfillment. Suddenly those eyes brimmed over, and two perfect tears flowed down her cheeks.

"Thank you," she breathed so softly that the nearest sound receptor had to dart in a little closer, and hovered like a humming bird at her lips.

Pall was circulating among the people, being congratulated by everyone, not just her particular friends. She walked like a debutante.

Jackson stood rubbing his left elbow.

Perry had been working at something, behind a bunch of other people. "Hey, look at what Perry's got!" they began to exclaim, crowding in behind them.

"Hold on, now! Everybody'll get a chance to see it!" Perry growled in a guff, good-natured way.

Exteroaffectors carried it out to the middle of the floor for him, and put it up on three graceful, thin metal legs. High above, a rope of light kindled itself among the higher traceries of crystal, and concentrated its beam upon the painting.

"Jackson! Come forward, Jackson!" Perry motioned urgently from beside the painting. "I dedicate this to you."

Oh Jesus. But Jackson got himself moving, his legs sucking up through glue, and went to look at it.

It had been done in wide, sometimes apparently labored, sometimes apparently glib strokes. It was full of all the wrong colors. What it showed was Jackson's Thorn, in the distance, with the pale Sun behind it. Huddled at the base of the Thorn were square, nearly featureless blocks that you could tell were houses, because here and there there was a light in a window. In the foreground of the painting, mostly in silhouette, with only a few details picked out here and there, was an Amsir lying on the blind slope of a dune, his head raised just enough so he could watch the Thorn and the houses. And off to one side, watching the Amsir, was the figure of a Honor, also blocked out crudely. You could tell it was a Honor because it was wearing something on its head that looked like a cross between the German army helmets of World War II and the Franco-Prussian War, which was intended to be a honning cap, Jackson supposed.

You couldn't really fault it for skill. The guy had obviously done work of this kind before. You could maybe criticize the composition, but you had to do it on professional grounds. You had to give him that much. But, Jesus Christ, Comp had the right facts on file; they were there to be dug out. All you had to do was look for them.

"What do you think of it?" Perry asked, through the rising sound of applause as the other people crowded around. Then he said: "Of course, you want to feel free to use any terms you want — you don't need to confine yourself to the technical terms of the graphic arts." There was an understanding little smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "After all, many of my other friends here would have to use layman's language too."

Jackson opened his mouth, then closed it. He could feel the tip of his tongue rubbing against the inner faces of the teeth on one side of his lower jaw.

"Go ahead," Perry said.

"Comp," Jackson said, "I need an easel, a backing board, a sheet of charcoal paper and some charcoal. Right away, now."

Perry looked nonplussed. The crowd around them grew quiet. The exteroaffectors worked quickly.

Another beam of light focused down, on the blank sheet at Jackson's easel. He held all but one of the sticks in his left hand, and bounced the other in his right for a minute as he stepped back and look-

ed around at the people. He sucked at his front teeth once, sharply, and stepped into his work. He touched the tip of the stick to the paper, and he drew them a Amsir, fanatical and brave, with a dart rattling loose in the hole punched through one of his main bubbles, trying to get one hand up and bent around enough to hold its fingers over the hole, while it marched a Honor dressed in human skin and sucking on an air bottle toward the rim of the world.

When it was done, it was done. He didn't know exactly how long he was at it. Nobody interrupted him.

Looking at it, he could see it was all right; he had it right. His left hand was black and empty. He dropped the last stick on the floor, at Perry's feet. "That's what I think of your painting," he said. "Technically."

There was a gasp from several of the people behind him. Perry frowned and stepped around to look at the drawing. He stood scratching his chin, cocking his head back and forth. "I'm . . . afraid I don't understand. What are you trying to say with this?"

There was a rising murmur of assent around the two of them. "Yes. What does that prove?"

"Better let me have a look," Kringle said, pushing forward. He stood beside Perry; Jackson had to step back to give him room. "Well, are you trying to equate charcoal with oils?" Kringle said. "It's very difficult to judge between media, you know."

"What I don't understand," Perry said, "is why he felt he had to be so hostile about it. I see what he's done here, and it's another scene entirely. How could one arrive at a basis for comparison?"

Donder said: "Well, I think it's a hell of a note, any way you look at it! I mean, here Perry dedicated it to him, at *his* party — we're all taking part, here, for him. What does he want to ace like this for?"

## XXIX

Just to make sure, Jackson took one last look at the difference between Perry's daub and his drawing. Then he turned around and worked his way out of the crowd. Many of them were trying to push forward and look at the twin centers of attention anyhow. The others glanced at him uncomfortably. Some of them looked at him a little distastefully, and others looked as if they didn't know what to do, so he was able to get out from among them without coming into any kind of contact. He wiped the sweat off his face, and then, looking at his wet, half-clean palm, he realized he'd probably messed up his face pretty good. He walked out through the entrance and stood looking out at the pavilions, whose sides were responding gaily to the breeze.

"Comp, I want a ship."

"That's impossible. It would be disastrous. You know enough about experimental discipline to understand that. Look," Comp soothed, "you're in a mood of despair, at the moment, but after all, you don't *have* to relate to these particular people. I told you they're not the

only class within the population. Relax. Knock around a little. Learn what suits you best. Meanwhile — here — " Exteroaffectors settled on him momentarily, and were gone. He was clean again, fresh-minted. His skin glowed. He rubbed his elbow. Maybe some day he'd be all hollow inside?

"You mean, I can teach Throwing Stick? How about art? I mean, I could do something, and then you could have an election and see if it was any good or not. Maybe a simple majority vote would do, and then I could open up a school."

"Well, no, I don't think you'd be comfortable, do you?"

"That leaves becoming a Comp technician, doesn't it?"

"The number of things to be learned there is finite, but very large," Comp said. "I assure you, it's a lifetime's occupation, and a constantly expanding field of knowledge. Right at the moment, for example, the telemetry involved in sending exteroceptors across interstellar distances represents a fruitful — "

Jackson grinned, the way he had seen the Eld grin. "And when you die, I can be you."

"Heavens, no! I will never die!"

"That's what they all think." Jackson sighed: "What's Ahmuls doing?" He felt pretty lonely.

"Ahmuls is quite contented. Here — " Exteroaffectors kissed Jackson's eyelids.

At first, he thought what he saw was a streamlet, running brown liquid, swirling amidst stones. Then he realized it was an aerial view of a vast plain. The point of view dropped like a skooping hawk, and he plunged down toward a herd of tossing, shaggy brown animals, massive of head, high of shoulder, red-eyed, horned and hairy. Exteroaffectors nuzzled behind his ears, and he heard the thunder of the buffalo.

Behind them, bounding and lurching, came Ahmuls, silent and purposeful. He ran in a way that told Jackson he was straining everything he had, but my God how he ran, his flesh bagging out behind him, away from his face and shoulders. His mouth was wide open, and the tip of his tongue was in the corner of his lips.

"This is the Mid-American Game Preserve," Comp said. "You'll notice the landscape has been trivially modified to suit his requirements."

Indeed, there was plenty of lichen on the granite outcroppings that now split the herd into segments as it milled around them, and again funneled it into one cohesive mass before Ahmuls's pursuit startled it again. As he ran by one of them, Ahmuls threw out a hand, scooped off a clump and stuffed it into his mouth. It was impossible to tell whether he was trying to catch the animals so he could kill them, or whether he was merely attempting to join them. But in the milling and stampeding, there were almost as many behind him as there were ahead, and once or twice, panicked bulls, clattering and snorting out of tight places between the rocks, almost ran him down.

"What'll you do if he gets pounded flat?"

"Oh, there is no problem about that. He'd get medical attention immediately."

"For the rest of his life."

"That's my obligation. Accidental factors cannot be permitted to interrupt something's running its course." Ahmuls disappeared from this particular exteroaffector's sight as he ran behind an outcropping. "Do you want me to shift point of view, or do you want to look at Durstine now?"

Jackson opened his eyes, as he heard her say from in front of him: "I wondered how long it would be before you came looking for me."

It was hard shifting from the actuality to something he could see with his own eyes. It took a moment to organize his brain. He saw she was wearing some sort of crested helmet whose front part was a pale, sharp-edged mask over the upper part of her face, leaving only the chin and red lips bare. Then he saw she was, in fact, gowned, unlike the decorated people inside. She stepped back, her body clad in swirling off-white gauzeries which might even have been individual motes of pigment suspended in the air, or might have been some wonderful fabric.

Either way, it was swirled around her body at the waist, caught again at the shoulders and the elbows. She laughed and sprang to tiptoe, her arms out straight from the shoulders, but bent forward at the elbows to point toward him. The movement of her body scattered out her garment in lacy strands, upraised the crest of her mask, and flung wide her white wings. She laughed in a silvery tinkle of joy. "See? I knew exactly what you wanted! I'm yours, yours!" she cried, lissomely throwing herself at him.

He could just about get his hands up to catch her shoulders, and he felt himself wince when he touched them.

"You've got that just exactly backwards," he said, marveling at their capacity. "I've got to admit, it's an accomplishment."

"What? What?" She was jerking and tossing against his hands. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's either you or me," he admitted, swinging her around to push her backward through the doorway, trying to see to it she got where she belonged. Now, what would Elmo Lincoln do in a case like this? "Go. Go, manganil" he burst out, pushing explosively, flinging her backward in a swirl and smother of garb. He was shaking with rage; he could hear Comp giggling.

He glared around him. There was nothing in sight but fake, and blue sky full of receptor glints. Never, never in his life had he been so angry, and Comp wouldn't stop giggling at him. He swatted at a darting bee. He wasn't as fast as Ahmuls.

He crouched facing the doorway. Whoever came out of there first was in terminal danger. He could see red mist edging his field of vision, and at the same time there was this terrible, wonderful clarity about how he felt. It was an excuse for anything. A man brought to this feeling was as much a monarch as Tyrannosaurus Rex had ever been.

He prowled, his thighs flexed, his arms like bridge cable.

Pall came shyly and diffidently out of the Thorn tent. "Don't be mad, Jackson," she said. "I know you're upset." She stretched out her hand and touched his fist. "I know how it is. They used to treat me that way. But I just learned to ignore it. And I didn't give up; I kept trying to improve myself, and one day — " Her eyes dropped. "Well, you saw how they finally admitted I was as good as them. Let me stay with you. I'll be good for you."

Jackson looked up at the spiraling glints. "You see that?" he asked. "You hear?"

"Certainly. Would you like to see an actuality of Petra Jovans?"

Jackson shivered. "No. Don't ever show me Petra Jovans. If I ever want to see her I'll go look for myself." He added, looking at Pall, "And touch."

Pall was touching his hand to her mouth. "Please, Jackson," she said, "I really do understand you."

Sweet Jesus, he thought, where and when are you ever —

"Oh, come on," he said, turning away from the tent, holding her wrist.

She trotted gracefully beside him. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know. Might find it, though." He got them out between the pavilions, and onto the fields. There was some kind of path through the hedgerows, and he followed that. Exteroceptors were keeping pace with them. "This is great stuff!" Comp was saying. "Setting out for the New Eden! Man and his mate, on the endless journey to — "

"Amsir urine," Jackson said.

Pall stared at him. "What was that for?"

What was it for? It always had to be for something, right? Jackson shook his head. She didn't see. She couldn't hear. But maybe he could make her.

And maybe that was the one thing that would be worth his while to do in this place. He said:

"You really want to know?"

She nodded. "Very much."

All right. Why not? If it didn't work it would pass the time, if it did he could — he could —

He could do something that nobody had ever done before, was what he could; so he began:

"The floor of the world is rippled like the bottom of the ocean, running out to the edges, Those edges are high, and they're cruel. At sunset, the eastern horizon is the far wall of the crater. It's black. Blue-black. The sunlight catches the top edge of the crater, and that's rust color. It makes a long, rust-colored arc that seems to dip down to left and right like a wall, or a bow, or the trail of something that shot by without your noticing it, and all you can see is the trail it left. There are rocks standing on the crater floor, and the sunlight hitting them, just before it dies, turns them orange, too. The stars hang up there, hard and sharp.

"That's where you head for when you're honning Amsirs."

"In the beginning, I was running after this bird . . . . "

END


Dear Editor:

I have a suggestion. You have displayed extensive interest in developing new writing talent; I refer to such activities as editorials in your magazines, letters to the SFWA journal and of course, your monthly "first" story in *If* (a most commendable institution since it was my birthplace). Why not allot a small box-like space in one of your magazines for an "idea mart?" The feature could be epigrammatic in character. The following examples are given for purposes of illustration only — no claim is made for their brilliance or originality.

1. Consider a planet where there are extensive geological structures of crystallized virus.
2. It is everyone's patriotic duty to delay the thermodynamic heat death of the universe.
3. Title: *Not Responsible for Lost Articles.*
4. A story whose elapsed "real time" is, say, 10 seconds. $10^{-6}$ seconds?

Contributions could be either readers who would like to see a particular idea developed or writers who have an idea which they feel is just not their dish of tea.

Now, of course no writer can live professionally by feeding exclusively on the ideas of others, but a beginning writer or someone lying becalmed on the sea of literary endeavor might pick up just enough momentum from a timely suggestion to start his own gears grinding.

Naturally, the purpose of your editorial labors is to prepare a product that will appeal to *readers* — not to conduct a writers' symposium. However, I feel that such an idea mart would in fact exert its primary appeal to readers. You might not increase paid circulation because of it, but you'd probably have the best-thumbed SF magazine on the newsstand! — W. I. McLaughlin, 1096 Sixth Street, Albany, California.

● How about that? If anybody has ideas for the "Idea Mart", send them along and we'll print the best of them. Everybody understand the rules? Once they're printed they belong to anybody who wants to use them. A good way to start might be with, "Say, why doesn't somebody write a science-fiction story that —" . . . and then go on from there. Who knows? The Hugo-winner of 1969

may come from your suggestion! — *Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

Did you know that you are contributing to the breakdown of my mental health?

At one time I was of the opinion that a certain other SF Magazine was the most outstanding magazine to come down the pike in many moons.

But the last year has been driving me around the bend. Such stories as *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress, Dam Nuisance, Earthblood, Arena, A Relic of Empire* and *Starpath* have caused me to undertake a serious re-evaluation of the number one position.

Now the other magazine is still very good, but the choice between the two of you is very difficult to say the least. This is my dilemma. My loyalty to the previous leader is conflicting with my anticipation whenever I see the new issue of *If* on the stands. Loyalty says nay, but anticipation says yea.

So I guess I'll just have to learn to live with it. And, if you continue to maintain your high level of fiction, I know I shall. Thank you, gentlemen, for much pleasure! — Joseph J. Miller, 410 East 12th Street, Okmulgee, Oklahoma.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Why are so many people turned off to science fiction? . . . Must be some way to turn them on. Any ideas?"

I'm glad you asked.

I started my love affair with science fiction back in the last half of the 1930's. The Crescent Department Store in Spokane, Washington, was the only place in town that I knew of where I could be fairly sure of finding s-f magazines or, rarely, a book. The s-f stuff was right out on the stands in plain sight, but the saleswoman tended to look slightly embarrassed when they took my 15c or 25c (or $2.50 for a book), and they carefully wrapped up my purchase (though *Saturday Review* or *Atlantic* left the store nude) so that I could hide my shame. In short, a nice girl simply didn't parade her poor taste . . . or possibly her poor intelligence. S-f was something like the family idiot; you might sympathize and sell the family food and clothing for the poor thing, but they bought anonymously and kept the creature decently locked in the cupola room.

But I persisted. My addiction finally became respectable, even admirable in some quarters. When my husband and I went to Richland (the residential town by Hanford atomic works) where we counted some half-dozen or more Ph.D.'s to the block, we took the last step: a taste for s-f was a "doesn't-everyone?" thing.

I still buy magazines and books and haunt libraries, but frankly I see few stories that are up to those of the 1940's and 1950's. I've been reduced to re-reading from my own library. Take a look at the stories of those times.

A simple secret: The authors *had a story to tell,* built up by extrapolation, *around characters* who seemed "real" and *with whom the reader could identify.* The authors *might* be "drawing a moral to adorn a tale": as in *Space Merchants* . . . whither are we wending in a society so ruled by Madison Avenue techniques and trends? Or in *Caves of*

*Steel* . . . what will be the ultimate problems of our growing megaloplitan culture? Or in *Search the Skies* . . . will the time come, with increasing population, that gene drift in an increasingly in-bred world will make earth-population monstrous? But moral or not, *the story was paramount.* The authors were not mounting soap-boxes as professors suffering from suppuration of the typewriter.

Too many of the books (not to speak of the short stories which tag along in the footprints of their betters) seem to me to be busily selling the author's latest fixation. The Heinlein who could write (and did write) *Day After Tomorrow* (Sixth *Column*) or *Puppet Masters* or *Door Into Summer* is the same Heinlein who now turns out *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress,* or that book whose name slips my mind about the family that is plunged into a parrallel world by an atomic bomb where a colored race breeds plump little white maidens for dinner. In both the last two named, Heinlein seems more busy being sociology professor than a story-teller.

I enjoy studying. While I've taken no graduate courses in the past 10 years, we will have ten or twelve professional journals of one sort or another coming to our home, and I read those and a good deal of material that would qualify as "think-pieces." But when I totter off to bed after a day of housework, being chauffeur to kid-and-husband contingent, and maybe even a bit of writing, I want to read *a story* until the rest of the family beds down. I don't want to be *educated* in someone's idea of the way new sociological standards or psychological patterns could create the best of all possible worlds. Especially I don't want to read a treatise masquerading as a story with characters who seem not at all like anyone I've ever known or could ever myself be. It's a pity, but when the author tries too hard to teach, he ceases to interest me. To be trite, if he wants to send a message, let him use Western Union.

Nor do I want to read of weirdies of the Van Vogt school or purely imaginary-type fantasy planets around a purely-maybe sun. I may not be able to *be* the characters I'm reading about . . . I howled like a lost pup all through the required math and statistics courses in graduate school, so how could I be a fabulous scientist? But not every little girl who thrilled over Cinderella was either pretty enough or charming enough to *be* a Cinderella nor every little boy who read big-eyed of Robin Hood could beard and defeat the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham. Still, Cinderella was a girl, wasn't she? And Robin Hood was once a boy? And the Once and Future King Arthur was once a boy who was pretty small potatoes around the court. I do not, you see, rule out all magic (or for the S-F stories, all future science). But I want it to be believable, possible if not completely probable . . . and I want it to SOUND probable, which is the test of the efficiency of the extrapolation of the author.

I realize the problem of the writer is becoming harder and harder as the boundaries are pushed outward. He can't lay a story on Mars now with every possibility of a satellite "proving" that there isn't enough air or water to keep a lichen alive . . . and maybe proving it before the story can hit the newsstands.

I wrote a story once which I never tried to sell (because it wasn't up to Kornbluth & Pohl or Heinlein or Asimov) and ran across the manuscript the other day. It really wasn't bad . . . not, at least, compared to most of the stories of the past few years. But it was laid on Venus (or most of it was); and Venus, according to our probes, has something like high enough heat to melt lead. It rather looks as if the writer today has to depend on FTL and nucleophoresis to shunt his characters clear out of the solar system. OR he can extrapolate and lay his stories in the far future of the Earth like *Space Merchants* . . . and believe me, he could do worse.

But if the author takes that line, what can he write about? *Door Into Summer* and *Immortality, Inc.* pictures the scientific future, *Space Merchants* shows the Madison Avenue future carried to a reasonable conclusion, one whose name slips my mind shows a future completely "insured". Well, that's the problem. Someone has written of a time when overcrowded mankind has taken to the ocean, and if someone hasn't yet done so, someone can write a story of the seabottom dwellers (I think I've read a story about that.) But the field is limited by the expansion of space information, and the space flight so soon to come.

After all this long letter, I've only said what I feel is wrong. I have offered no solution.

I haven't seen a new Asimov, Pohl or Brackett story for ages. Heinlein and Blish and Clarke have slid off the tracks of the type of book where the story comes first.

Maybe the solution is to call all the old hands into a building, lock the door after supplying them with the good old stories they used to write, and then say, "Pals, read these. Then go and do it again. A manuscript with the *story first* is your key to freedom." And then hope for the best.

But what'll happen?

You know: they'll write some educational tome with so much science or so much sociology or so much psychology in it that you can't find the story with a microscope and a fine filter. And with nothing else available, by golly, somebody will publish the tome and the ½% of the population that would "read patent medicine bottle labels if nothing else offers" will buy it, read it. And weep.

Sorry to be so unhelpful. WRITE A GOOD BOOK FOR US yourself, and stop asking us why the readership is falling off or, at least, not growing as it should. Some first-class Pohls could turn the tide! — Alma McCormick, 330 Pat Mell Road SW (B-3), Marietta, Georgia 30060.

● Thanks for a good letter, Mrs. McClintock — and thank all of you, for that matter. Seems to us the mail has been unusually interesting lately, which is why we squeezed out a little extra space this time and will try to do so again.

Let's see. This month's "First", as you will see, is W. I. Johnstone's *Family Loyalty.* Next month we start a new Keith Laumer serial, *Spaceman!* — not a Retief story (but we have some of those on hand to print shortly thereafter). And our next few issues will include Philip Jose Farmer, Samuel R. Delany, Andre Norton, Lester del Rey, Fred Saberhagen's Berserkers . . . yes, some first-rate stuff, we think. Join us and see! — *Editor.*

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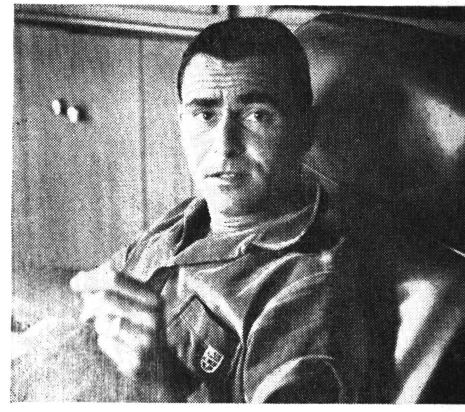

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